

A CROSSROADS™ ADVENTURE


in the World of
**PIERS ANTHONY'S
XANTH**

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF XANTH



by
Jody Lynn Nye

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Jody Lynn Nye



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF XANTH

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INTRODUCTION

by Piers Anthony

THE LAND OF Xanth is a magic realm with some mundane roots. Some of you may have read my novels of Xanth, and be familiar with its conventions and geography; others may be approaching this from the perspective of gamesmanship and not know the local situation. I'm not sure I can please both groups here, so maybe I'll see if I can alienate both groups instead by providing a lot of background detail that isn't immediately relevant to either the novels or this game.

You see, my life is hopelessly mundane. As I write this, I'm recovering from a mild bout of the flu, or some fellow-traveler ailment, and am beginning to feel as if I'm coming down with a cold. Outside it is spring in Florida, which means that the various and anonymous pollens to which I'm allergic are vying with each other to see which one gets next crack at my sore nose and itching eyes. New plants are growing, and naturally I discovered the hard way that some have a disposition like that of a Portuguese Man-of-war, which is a jellyfish that is no jellyfish when it comes to asserting itself. My hand stung for four hours after I inadvertently touched one of those plants. Caterpillars are out in force, consuming the tender little leaves of our cluster

of live oak trees; their droppings fall with a constant potter, er, patter like that of light rain, day and night. As I walk under those trees to reach my study, sometimes I feel that patter on my head. As I climb the stile to enter the pasture, my hand lands on caterpillars who mistook the stile for something edible. Caterpillars hang suspended by invisible threads in the dark recesses of the path at face level; this, too, I have discovered in my simplistic fashion, face-first. Most look villainous, resembling little trailer-trucks, their cabs glowing red with CB antennae extending up and out to either side, their bodies humped and bristly, their tails projecting like those of scorpions, the colors of their chassies ranging from poisonous yellow to deadly green or ominous gray, with speed lines along the sides. I haven't counted the legs, but these things are eighteen-wheelers, at least. Wouldn't you know it: the one that stung me was dull brown/black without distinguishing marks. The wound hurt for two days, and the welt is fading slowly after a week. The more colorful caterpillars are harmless.

Thus my mundane life of the moment. No one would envy it. *I don't!* But a small translation can do wonders. Suppose we exaggerate the problems slightly, and attribute them to magic. Thus instead of stinging or hanging caterpillars we have something called wiggles, who zzapp through anything in their paths, leaving wiggle-diameter holes. Instead of sneezy or stinging plants we have vegetation that simply grabs and eats. In fact, instead of helpless live oaks we have the dread tangle trees. One of the things I've always liked about animated cartoons is that when some character goes fishing, the fish are apt to fight back, perhaps climbing

the fishline and swallowing the fisherman. So I made a land where the innocent creatures may fight back, whether they are humble centipedes, who in Xanth are nickelpedes, five times as fierce, who can gouge out nickel-sized disks of flesh, or solitary cacti, who in Xanth may fire their needles at molesters. Many of these things derive from the mundane origins I see around me, while many others, such as the shoe trees that grow all manner of shoes, derive from puns. The puns, too, are mundane, so as I said, it is all pretty mundane when you understand it.

Now here we have a game based on Xanth. You can if you wish think of it as a mundane thing, with the pages of a book, and dice to throw, and simple choices to make along the way. But I think you might enjoy it more if you exercise the same kind of imagination I do, and look for the magic in it. Put yourself into Xanth itself, where just about anything can happen, and know that if you are careless enough to take that nice little path that leads under the drooping shade-tree, you are apt to get grabbed by the tentacles and drawn into the great wooden maw of the dread tangler. Try telling that hungry tree: "But it's only a game!" It's only a game *in Mundania*. For those with imagination, which of course means you, it's adventure.

Xanth has a suspicious resemblance, geographically, to the mundane state of Florida. In fact, their outlines match almost exactly. Perhaps this is not coincidence; it could be that some magic seeped through and caused Florida to conform itself to the exact shape of Xanth. There is a great fault that crosses its center called the Gap Chasm that somewhat resembles the Grand Canyon; the dread Gap Dragon forages within it, catching

anyone foolish enough to enter. For eight centuries a powerful forget spell was on the Gap, so that nobody could remember it existed. The spell is now wearing off in Xanth, but remains effective in Mundania, so the Gap still doesn't appear in mundane maps, and indeed many mundanes will swear it doesn't exist. They also deny that the great fresh-water Lake Ogre-chobee in the south was the original home of the ogres, or that the present Ogre-Fen-Ogre-Fen in the north is where the ogres now live. There's really no point in arguing with people who don't believe in magic! Xanth has a history that goes back many hundreds of years, beginning when the Demon X(A/N)th settled in a cavern beneath it, and some of his magic leaked into the environment. Gradually the magic spread throughout Xanth, and magic creatures evolved. Some were crossbreeds, like the centaurs (it's not nice to discuss what occurred between people and horses in the early days) and harpies, while some were more classical, such as the rocs or dragons. There were a number of so-called Waves, which were invasions from Mundania that wreaked great havoc, but helped populate the land with human beings and their relatives, such as elves, ogres, and nymphs. Not only can just about anything happen in Xanth, it already has. So you should be prepared for anything as you step into this land of magic.

Every human person in Xanth has a magic talent. Some talents are minor, such as the ability to make a colored spot on the wall, while others are major, such as being able to point the direction of anything. Those who have the best talents, such as the power to transform people into trees or other creatures, are considered Magicians, and only a Magician can be King of

Xanth. This kingdom is sexist in the good old fashion, so there can be no ruling Queen. But it is possible to get around that by a technicality: a woman can simply become King and, indeed, that has happened on occasion. At one time, any person who could not show a magic talent by age twenty-five was exiled from Xanth. Even after this custom stopped, a person without a talent was sometimes regarded as a second-class citizen. What would you do if someone you loved didn't have a talent? Well, you'd set out to *find* a talent for him or her.

Someone will explain the rules of the game, if you don't already know them. I wish you luck, because if you really want to survive this quest, you can't have enough of it.

INTRODUCTION AND RULES TO CROSSROADS™ ADVENTURES by Bill Fawcett

FOR THE MANY of us who have enjoyed the stories upon which this adventure is based, it may seem a bit strange to find an introduction this long at the start of a book. What you are holding is both a game and an adventure. Have you ever read a book and then told yourself you would have been able to think more clearly or seen a way out of the hero's dilemma? In a Crossroads™ adventure you have the opportunity to do just that. *You* make the key decisions. By means of a few easily followed steps you are able to see the results of your choices.

A Crossroads™ adventure is as much fun to read as it is to play. It is more than just a game or a book. It is a chance to enjoy once more a familiar and treasured story. The excitement of adventuring in a beloved universe is neatly blended into a story which stands well on its own merit, a story in which you will encounter many familiar characters and places and discover more than a few new ones as well. Each

adventure is a thrilling tale, with the extra suspense and satisfaction of knowing that you will succeed or fail by your own endeavors.

THE ADVENTURE

Throughout the story you will have the opportunity to make decisions. Each of these decisions will affect whether the hero succeeds in the quest, or even survives. In some cases you will actually be fighting battles; other times you will use your knowledge and instincts to choose the best path to follow. In many cases there will be clues in the story or illustrations.

A Crossroads™ adventure is divided into sections. The length of a section may be a few lines or many pages. The section numbers are shown at the top of a page to make it easier for you to follow. Each section ends when you must make a decision, or fight. The next section you turn to will show the results of your decision. At least one six-sided die and a pencil are needed to “play” this book.

The words “six-sided dice” are often abbreviated as “D6.” If more than one is needed, a number will precede the term. “Roll three six-sided dice” will be written as “Roll 3 D6.” Virtually all the die rolls in these rules do involve rolling three six-sided dice (or rolling one six-sided die three times) and totaling what is rolled.

If you are an experienced role-play gamer, you may also wish to convert the values given in this novel to those you can use with any fantasy role-playing game you are now playing with. All of the adventures have

been constructed so that they also can be easily adapted in this manner. The values for the hero will transfer directly. While fantasy games are much more complicated, doing this will allow you to be the Game Master for other players. Important values for the hero's opponents will be given to aid you in this conversion and to give those playing by the Crossroads™ rules a better idea of what they are facing.

THE HERO

Seven values are used to describe the hero in gaming terms. These are strength, intelligence, wisdom/luck, constitution, dexterity, charisma, and hit points. These values measure all of a character's abilities. At the end of these rules is a record sheet. On it are given all of the values for the hero of this adventure and any equipment or supplies they begin the adventure with. While you adventure, this record can be used to keep track of damage received and any new equipment or magical items acquired. You may find it advisable to make a photocopy of that page. Permission to do so, for your own use only, is given by the publisher of this game/novel. You may wish to consult this record sheet as we discuss what each of the values represents.

STRENGTH

This is the measure of how physically powerful your hero is. It compares the hero to others in how much the

character can lift, how hard he can punch, and just how brawny he is. The strongest a normal human can be is to have a strength value of 18. The weakest a child would have is a 3. Here is a table giving comparable strengths:

Strength	Example
3	A 5-year-old child
6	An elderly man
8	Out of shape and over 40
10	An average 20-year-old man
13	In good shape and works out
15	A top athlete or football running back
17	Changes auto tires without a jack
18	Arm wrestles Arnold Schwarzenegger and wins

A Tolkien-style troll, being magical, might have a strength of 19 or 20. A full-grown elephant has a strength of 23. A fifty-foot dragon would have a strength of 30.

INTELLIGENCE

Being intelligent is not just a measure of native brain power. It is also an indication of the ability to use that *intelligence*. The value for intelligence also measures how aware the character is, and so how likely he is to notice a subtle clue. Intelligence can be used to measure how resistant a mind is to hypnosis or mental attack. A really sharp baboon would have an intelli-

gence of 3. Most humans (we all know exceptions) begin at about 5. The highest value possible is an 18. Here is a table of relative intelligence:

Intelligence	Example
3	My dog
5	Lassie
6	Curly (the third Stooge)
8	Somewhat slow
10	Average person
13	College professor/good quarterback
15	Indiana Jones/Carl Sagan
17	Doc Savage/Mr. Spock
18	Leonardo da Vinci (Isaac Asimov?)

Brainiac of comic-book fame would have a value of 21.

WISDOM/LUCK

Wisdom is the ability to make correct judgments, often with less than complete facts. Wisdom is knowing what to do and when to do it. Attacking, when running will earn you a spear in the back, is the best part of wisdom. Being in the right place at the right time can be called luck or wisdom. Not being discovered when hiding can be luck; if it is because you knew enough to not hide in the poison oak, wisdom is also a factor. Activities which are based more on instinct, the intuitive leap, than analysis are decided by wisdom.

In many ways both wisdom and luck are further connected, especially as wisdom also measures how friendly the ruling powers of the universe (not the

author, the fates) are to the hero. A hero may be favored by fate or luck because he is reverent or for no discernible reason at all. This will give him a high wisdom value. Everyone knows those "lucky" individuals who can fall in the mud and find a gold coin. Here is a table measuring relative wisdom/luck:

Wisdom	Example
Under 3	Cursed or totally unthinking
5	Never plans, just reacts
7	Some cunning, "street smarts"
9	Average thinking person
11	Skillful planner, good gambler
13	Successful businessman/Lee Iacocca
15	Captain Kirk (wisdom)/Conan (luck)
17	Sherlock Holmes (wisdom)/Luke Skywalker (luck)
18	Lazarus Long

CONSTITUTION

The more you can endure, the higher your constitution. If you have a high constitution you are better able to survive physical damage, emotional stress, and poisons. The higher your value for constitution, the longer you are able to continue functioning in a difficult situation. A character with a high constitution can run farther (though not necessarily faster) or hang by one hand longer than the average person. A high constitution means you also have more stamina, and recover more quickly from injuries. A comparison of values for constitution:

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Constitution	Example
3	A terminal invalid
6	A 10-year-old child
8	Your stereotyped "98-pound weakling"
10	Average person
14	Olympic athlete/Sam Spade
16	Marathon runner/Rocky
18	Rasputin/Batman

A whale would have a constitution of 20. Superman's must be about 50.

DEXTERITY

The value for dexterity measures not only how fast a character can move, but how well-coordinated those movements are. A surgeon, a pianist, and a juggler all need a high value for dexterity. If you have a high value for dexterity you can react quickly (though not necessarily correctly), duck well, and perform sleight-of-hand magic (if you are bright enough to learn how). Conversely, a low dexterity means you react slowly and drop things frequently. All other things being equal, the character with the highest dexterity will have the advantage of the first attack in a combat. Here are some comparative examples of dexterity:

Dexterity	Example
3 or less	Complete klutz
5	Inspector Clousseau

6	Can walk and chew gum, most of the time
8	Barney Fife
10	Average person
13	Good fencer/Walter Payton
15	Brain surgeon/Houdini
16	Flying Karamazov Brothers
17	Movie ninja/Cyrano de Bergerac
18	Bruce Lee

Batman, Robin, Daredevil, and The Shadow all have a dexterity of 19. At a dexterity of 20 you don't even see the man move before he has taken your wallet and underwear and has left the room (the Waco Kid).

CHARISMA

Charisma is more than just good looks, though they certainly don't hurt. It is a measure of how persuasive a hero is and how willing others are to do what he wants. You can have average looks yet be very persuasive, and have a high charisma. If your value for charisma is high, you are better able to talk yourself out of trouble or obtain information from a stranger. If your charisma is low, you may be ignored or even mocked, even when you are right. A high charisma value is vital to entertainers of any sort, and leaders. A different type of charisma is just as important to spies. In the final measure a high value for charisma means people will react to you in the way you desire. Here are some comparative values for charisma:

Charisma	Example
3	Hunchback of Notre Dame
5	An ugly used-car salesman
7	Richard Nixon today
10	Average person
12	Team coach
14	Magnum, P.I.
16	Henry Kissinger/Jim DiGriz
18	Dr. Who/Prof. Harold Hill (Centauri)

HIT POINTS

Hit points represent the total amount of damage a hero can take before he is killed or knocked out. You can receive damage from being wounded in a battle, through starvation, or even through a mental attack. Hit points measure more than just how many times the hero can be battered over the head before he is knocked out. They also represent the ability to keep striving toward a goal. A poorly paid mercenary may have only a few hit points, even though he is a hulking brute of a man, because the first time he receives even a slight wound he will withdraw from the fight. A blacksmith's apprentice who won't accept defeat will have a higher number of hit points.

A character's hit points can be lost through a wound to a specific part of the body or through general damage to the body itself. This general damage can be caused by a poison, a bad fall, or even exhaustion and starvation. Pushing your body too far beyond its limits may result in a successful action at the price of the loss of a

few hit points. All these losses are treated in the same manner.

Hit points lost are subtracted from the total on the hero's record sheet. When a hero has lost all of his hit points, then that character has failed. When this happens you will be told to which section to turn. Here you will often find a description of the failure and its consequences for the hero.

The hit points for the opponents the hero meets in combat are given in the adventure. You should keep track of these hit points on a piece of scrap paper. When a monster or opponent has lost all of their hit points, they have lost the fight. If a character is fighting more than one opponent, then you should keep track of each of their hit points. Each will continue to fight until it has 0 hit points. When everyone on one side of the battle has no hit points left, the combat is over.

Even the best played character can lose all of his hit points when you roll too many bad dice during a combat. If the hero loses all of his hit points, the adventure may have ended in failure. You will be told so in the next section you are instructed to turn to. In this case you can turn back to the first section and begin again. This time you will have the advantage of having learned some of the hazards the hero will face.

TAKING CHANCES

There will be occasions where you will have to decide whether the hero should attempt to perform some action which involves risk. This might be to climb a

steep cliff, jump a pit, or juggle three daggers. There will be other cases where it might benefit the hero to notice something subtle or remember an ancient ballad perfectly. In all of these cases you will be asked to roll three six-sided dice (3 D6) and compare the total of all three dice to the hero's value for the appropriate ability.

For example, if the hero is attempting to juggle three balls, then for him to do so successfully you would have to roll a total equal to or less than the hero's value for dexterity. If your total was less than this dexterity value, then you would be directed to a section describing how the balls looked as they were skillfully juggled. If you rolled a higher value than that for dexterity, then you would be told to read a section which describes the embarrassment of dropping the balls, and being laughed at by the audience.

Where the decision is a judgment call, such as whether to take the left or right staircase, it is left entirely to you. Somewhere in the adventure or in the original novels there will be some piece of information which would indicate that the left staircase leads to a trap and the right to your goal. No die roll will be needed for a judgment decision.

In all cases you will be guided at the end of each section as to exactly what you need do. If you have any questions you should refer to these rules.

MAGICAL ITEMS AND SPECIAL EQUIPMENT

There are many unusual items which appear in the

pages of this adventure. When it is possible for them to be taken by the hero, you will be given the option of doing so. One or more of these items may be necessary to the successful completion of the adventure. You will be given the option of taking these at the end of a section. If you choose to pick up an item and succeed in getting it, you should list that item on the hero's record sheet. There is no guarantee that deciding to take an item means you will actually obtain it. If someone owns it already they are quite likely to resent your efforts to take it. In some cases things may not even be all they appear to be or the item may be trapped or cursed. Having it may prove a detriment rather than a benefit.

All magical items give the hero a bonus (or penalty) on certain die rolls. You will be told when this applies, and often given the option of whether or not to use the item. You will be instructed at the end of the section on how many points to add to or subtract from your die roll. If you choose to use an item which can function only once, such as a magic potion or hand grenade, then you will also be instructed to remove the item from your record sheet. Certain items, such as a magic sword, can be used many times. In this case you will be told when you obtain the item when you can apply the bonus. The bonus for a magic sword could be added every time a character is in hand-to-hand combat.

Other special items may allow a character to fly, walk through fire, summon magical warriors, or many other things. How and when they affect play will again be told to you in the paragraphs at the end of the sections where you have the choice of using them.

Those things which restore lost hit points are a

special case. You may choose to use these at any time during the adventure. If you have a magical healing potion which returns 1 D6 of lost hit points, you may add these points when you think it is best to. This can even be during a combat in the place of a round of attack. No matter how many healing items you use, a character can never have more hit points than he begins the adventure with.

There is a limit to the number of special items any character may carry. In any Crossroads™ adventure the limit is four items. If you already have four special items listed on your record sheet, then one of these must be discarded in order to take the new item. Any time you erase an item off the record sheet, whether because it was used or because you wish to add a new item, whatever is erased is permanently lost. It can never be "found" again, even if you return to the same location later in the adventure.

Except for items which restore hit points, the hero can only use an item in combat or when given the option to do so. The opportunity will be listed in the instructions.

In the case of an item which can be used in every combat, the bonus can be added or subtracted as the description of the item indicates. A +2 sword would add two points to any total rolled in combat. This bonus would be used each and every time the hero attacks. Only one attack bonus can be used at a time. Just because a hero has both a +1 and a +2 sword doesn't mean he knows how to fight with both at once. Only the better bonus would apply.

If a total of 12 is needed to hit an attacking monster and the hero has a +2 sword, then you will only need to

roll a total of 10 on the three dice to successfully strike the creature.

You could also find an item, perhaps enchanted armor, which could be worn in all combat and would have the effect of subtracting its bonus from the total of any opponent's attack on its wearer. (Bad guys can wear magic armor, too.) If a monster normally would need a 13 to hit a character who has obtained a set of +2 armor, then the monster would now need a total of 15 to score a hit. An enchanted shield would operate in the same way, but could never be used when the character was using a weapon which needed both hands, such as a pike, longbow, or two-handed sword.

COMBAT

There will be many situations in which the hero will be forced, or you may choose, to meet an opponent in combat. The opponents can vary from a wild beast, to a human thief, or an unearthly monster. In all cases the same steps are followed.

The hero will attack first in most combats unless you are told otherwise. This may happen when there is an ambush, other special situations, or because the opponent simply has a much higher dexterity.

At the beginning of a combat section you will be given the name or type of opponent involved. For each combat five values are given. The first of these is the total on three six-sided dice needed for the attacker to hit the hero. Next to this value is the value the hero needs to hit these opponents. After these two values is listed the hit points of the opponent. If there is more

than one opponent, each one will have the same number. (See the Hit Points section included earlier if you are unclear as to what these do.) Under the value needed to be hit by the opponent is the hit points of damage that it will do to the hero when it attacks successfully. Finally, under the total needed for the hero to successfully hit an opponent is the damage he will do with the different weapons he might have. Unlike a check for completing a daring action (where you wish to roll under a value), in a combat you have to roll the value given or higher on three six-sided dice to successfully hit an opponent.

For example:

Here is how a combat between the hero armed with a sword and three brigands armed only with daggers is written:

BRIGANDS

<i>To hit the hero: 14</i>	<i>To be hit: 12</i>	<i>Hit points: 4</i>
<i>Damage with</i>	<i>Damage with</i>	
<i>daggers: 1 D6</i>	<i>sword: 2 D6</i>	
<i>(used by the brigands)</i>	<i>(used by the hero)</i>	
<i>There are three brigands. If two are killed (taken to 0 hit points) the third will flee in panic.</i>		
<i>If the hero wins, turn to section 85.</i>		
<i>If he is defeated, turn to section 67.</i>		

RUNNING AWAY

Running rather than fighting, while often desirable,

is not always possible. The option to run away is available only when listed in the choices. Even when this option is given, there is no guarantee the hero can get away safely.

THE COMBAT SEQUENCE

Any combat is divided into alternating rounds. In most cases the hero will attack first. Next, surviving opponents will have the chance to fight back. When both have attacked, one round will have been completed. A combat can have any number of rounds and continues until the hero or his opponents are defeated. Each round is the equivalent of six seconds. During this time all the parties in the combat may actually take more than one swing at each other.

The steps in resolving a combat in which the hero attacks first are as follows:

1. Roll three six-sided dice. Total the numbers showing on all three and add any bonuses from weapons or special circumstances. If this total is the same or greater than the second value given, "to hit the opponent," then the hero has successfully attacked.
2. If the hero attacks successfully, the next step is to determine how many hit points of damage he did to the opponent. The die roll for this will be given below the "to hit opponent" information.
3. Subtract any hit points of damage done from the opponent's total.

4. If any of the enemy have one or more hit points left, then the remaining opponent or opponents now can attack. Roll three six-sided dice for each attacker. Add up each of these sets of three dice. If the total is the same as, or greater than the value listed after "to hit the hero" in the section describing the combat, the attack was successful.
5. For each hit, roll the number of dice listed for damage. Subtract the total from the number of hit points the hero has at that time. Enter the new, lower total on the hero's record sheet.

If both the hero and one or more opponents have hit points left, the combat continues. Start again at step one. The battle ends only when the hero is killed, all the opponents are killed, or all of one side has run away. A hero cannot, except through a healing potion or spells or when specifically told to during the adventure, regain lost hit points. A number of small wounds from several opponents will kill a character as thoroughly as one titanic, unsuccessful combat with a hill giant.

DAMAGE

The combat continues, following the sequence given below, until either the hero or his opponents have no hit points. In the case of multiple opponents, subtract hit points from one opponent until the total reaches 0 or less. Extra hit points of damage done on the round when each opponent is defeated are lost. They do not carry over to the next enemy in the group. To win

the combat, you must eliminate all of an opponent's hit points.

The damage done by a weapon will vary depending on who is using it. A club in the hands of a child will do far less damage than the same club wielded by a hill giant. The maximum damage is given as a number of six-sided dice. In some cases the maximum will be less than a whole die. This is abbreviated by a minus sign followed by a number. For example, D6-2, meaning one roll of a six-sided die, minus two. The total damage can never be less than zero, meaning no damage done. 2 D6-1 means that you should roll two six-sided dice and then subtract one from the total of them both.

A combat may, because of the opponent involved, have one or more special circumstances. It may be that the enemy will surrender or flee when its hit point total falls below a certain level, or even that reinforcements will arrive to help the bad guys after so many rounds. You will be told of these special situations in the lines directly under the combat values.

Now you may turn to section 1.

RECORD SHEET

ALISTER

Strength: 14

Intelligence: 12

Wisdom/Luck: 13

Constitution: 16

Dexterity: 11

Charisma: 14

Hit points: 21

Age: 14

Magical Items:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Weapons carried:

1. Walking Staff

2. Dagger

3.

4.

Other items carried:

1. Knapsack

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

Special: Alister is a citizen of Xanth. His special talent is finding. When he concentrates, he can find almost anything he sets his mind to. He doesn't need to have seen his objective before.

* **1** *

“Marbles, we found it!”

Alister pushes through the heavy foliage of a blanket tree and lets the branches swing unnoticed against his back. Good Magician Humfrey’s Castle at last! It has taken him a few days to find it, since every road he has tried has taken him in the wrong direction. His friends back in the Gap Village said he would never be able to reach it because the way there is horribly dangerous. Not so dangerous, really, if you stay on the enchanted paths which are spelled to repel monsters and harmful magic. And, besides, Alister can’t help finding the castle—or anything else—not if he really puts his mind to it. His talent is finding, and nowhere and at no time in the long history of Xanth has there ever been a finder like him. He can find pets, objects, ideas, anything lost. But he has never been able to “find” the answer he wants by using his magic. Until his question is answered, the answer can’t be lost because it does not exist yet. Everyone has told Alister that Humfrey is the person to ask. *He* can answer any question.

Alister wants to know if it is possible to find magic for someone who doesn’t have any. In particular, he wants to find magic for his father. Mitchell, a Mundane soldier, was brought to Xanth by then-Evil Magician Trent to supply new blood for the human population of

Section 1

Xanth. He has never been concerned about his own lack of magical talent or shown anything but pride for his talented wife and son. It was these sorts of qualities which recommended him to Trent when the Magician was looking for a responsible, intelligent leader for his invasion of Xanth. Since the invasion, both his fellow Mundanes and the longer-established citizens of Xanth have come to respect Mitchell.

Alister's rock hound, Marbles, snuffles his way over the roots and rubs his stone snout against his master's leg. Alister glances down at him fondly and bends to pat him. Marbles quivers with pleasure and digs idly at a magical mole hole. The boy straightens with a grimace, realizing the muscles in his back are sore, and wipes sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. There must be sweat gnats around here somewhere. He hasn't been exerting himself that much.

Marbles says nothing. Sweat gnats never trouble him. But he does have to wear a specially spelled collar against stone-borers and landlord fleas. They can really wring blood out of a stone.

Alister knows that the other Thirteenth Wave soldiers are of the same solid, decent mettle as his father. It has always bothered Alister that such good men don't have simple talents like the rest of the ordinary Xanth citizens. He didn't change his opinion a bit when his centaur teacher, Charl, carefully explained about Mundania. Mitchell is his father. He is here now, not back in Mundania. Alister feels ashamed when the other children make fun of him for having an untalented parent. It is almost as bad as being untalented himself.

His father doesn't seem to mind. He has taught

Section 1

Alister how to track and hunt, how to tell stories and follow paths, how to know when to plant crops; all useful skills Mitchell considers a man needs to know. Alister accepts the lessons, but feels that they are a poor substitute for common protective magic.

It is inevitable that one day Alister will go looking for Good Magician Humfrey to ask him what to do. If he can find a proper talent for Mitchell, that will shut up the local bullies for good. Alister knows that his Question will cost him dearly, but he doesn't know what the price will be. Nobody in the Gap Village has ever actually gone to Humfrey for advice. They live with their problems, or they forget about them. Forgetting is easy there, since an enormous forget spell was detonated centuries before in the Gap immediately to the south of the village. Most Xanthans have forgotten the existence of the Gap itself, but not those who live right on its edge. To make up for remembering the Gap, they forget about other things.

It is only logical that a talent such as Alister's has evolved right there, since folks misplace things so easily. An object lost magically requires a strong magical finder to locate it, and Alister is extremely good at his job, for all that he is just fourteen years old.

It is said that Humfrey magically misplaced his castle on purpose for he considers all visitors unmitigated pests. Discovering his whereabouts is a challenge, but Alister enjoys having his talent tested.

He is somewhat hurt that none of his friends have come with him to see Good Magician Humfrey. Only Charl has offered to accompany him. Charl is a tough teacher, just the sort of master that the Gap brats need, but, even so, he and Alister get along reasonably well.

Section 1

Unfortunately, the night before Alister was to leave, the centaur received an urgent message from his sister Cherie, who lives near the North Village, asking him to come immediately. Alister set out gloomily the next morning, accompanied only by Marbles.

Alister has never actually seen a castle before, only heard of them in stories. His mother, Lily, comes from the North Village. On his mother's side, Alister is related to the first eight Waves of colonization and has several Magicians in his family tree. The old castle stood near there, occupied only on state occasions by King Trent and Queen Iris, who prefers living in Castle Roogna. Lily has promised Alister often that they will visit the North Village and see it, but like so many things in the Gap Village, those promises have been forgotten.

With a sigh Alister turns his thoughts to the castle before him. It does not meet his expectations. He hoped for straight, shining towers reaching toward the sky and colorful banners flying from every high point. What he sees is a dull gray complex formed haphazardly out of pomegranate stone. It looks as if it will fall down in a high wind. A dirty-looking moat encircles it. And there is not even a drawbridge. Sand crumbles from the battlements and settles in heaps at the castle's foundation.

Alister walks around the castle using his talent to seek an entrance. When he returns to his starting place, he realizes that according to his talent, it is the best place to cross. But how? Do visitors swim the moat?

As if it has heard his unspoken question, a flat black boulder rises from the moat just before his feet. Cautiously Alister extends his walking staff and taps it. It

Section 1

sounds real and most solid, so it is probably not an illusion, though you can never be sure. He steps onto it, and another surfaces just beyond it. When he is safely aboard the second rock, the first submerges. He turns toward the castle to see a third rising just within reach.

Marbles paces along the shore, growling. He doesn't mind the water, but is highly suspicious of these odd rocks and uncomfortable with the idea of his young master essaying them, since Alister has never been very good at essays in centaur school. His master tries several times to coax the little black dog to jump to him, but Marbles backs away, unwilling to try. Exasperated, the boy wants to return to the shore, but the first boulder does not reappear.

"All right, Marbles. I can't get back. It's one way. You stay there. I'll be out soon."

The rock hound blows through the stone fibers that serve him for whiskers and sits down on the ground with a thump. Alister turns his attention to crossing the moat safely. As he steps onto the third rock, the fourth appears and so on to the fifth and sixth.

When he steps onto the seventh rock, he looks back toward the outer bank. He is now precisely in the middle of the moat. Little eddies on its surface tell him that this ring of filthy water is not uninhabited. He will be grateful when he reaches the other side. He has no wish to encounter anything that could live in this slime. But no eighth stepping stone appears.

Alister kneels and probes the water with his walking staff, feeling for the next black stone. Nothing there but deep, murky green water. No, wait, there is something. Wavelets lap around the edge of his rock, echoing movement below. He gets to his feet to wait. Something

Section 1

blunt and round—like the stones—emerges from the depths, but this is green and white and has long, sharp fangs. And it is huge.

“A python!” Alister shrieks.

Five or six feet of the enormous snake surfaces and sways before him. More of its length coils around the base of the rock. Its tongue flicks in and out just under Alister’s nose, testing to see if this prey is edible. Its skin is light green with white patches, except for a pattern of concentric rings of red and gold in a curious pattern under its jaw. Alister stares at it fascinated. It looks just like a target, he thinks. Obviously, it draws the eyes of an attacker. Then as the python leans toward him and snaps, he has to hurry to guard himself.

PYTHON

To hit Alister: 12 To be hit: 10 Hit points: 12 (total for all forms)

Damage from bite: 1 D6

This is a magical creature which shapeshifts into something completely different every two rounds. At the end of every second (even numbered) round, go to the next shape’s statistics. Hit points are treated as usual and remain lost regardless of the shape changes.

Alister’s staff does 1 D6 points of damage against all forms.

HIPPOCAMPUS

To hit Alister: 14 To be hit: 13

Damage with hooves: 1 D6 +1

Section 2

FIRE-BREATHING CROCODILE

To hit Alister: 11 To be hit: 9

Damage with fire breath: 2 D6

MANSHARK

To hit Alister: 10 To be hit: 13

Damage from bite: 2 D6

SEA-COW

To hit Alister: 0 To be hit: 5

It will not attack and offers no resistance.

If Alister survives until the beast becomes a sea-cow, turn to section 2.

If he manages to defeat the monster before it becomes a sea-cow, turn to section 3.

If he is killed, turn to section 4.

* 2 *

The python arches its spring-colored coils, looping loosely around the rock. Alister hefts his walking staff and prepares to defend himself. He wishes he had his quarterstaff with him instead. That weapon can split lengthwise into four pieces, each of which magically fights by itself and so does four times as much damage as the one he holds now does. Without it, he can give no quarter. He can tell that the snake intends to constrict

Section 2

its coils and squeeze him, and probably eat him once he is dead, though he can't tell how it can manage to swallow a sturdy farm boy.

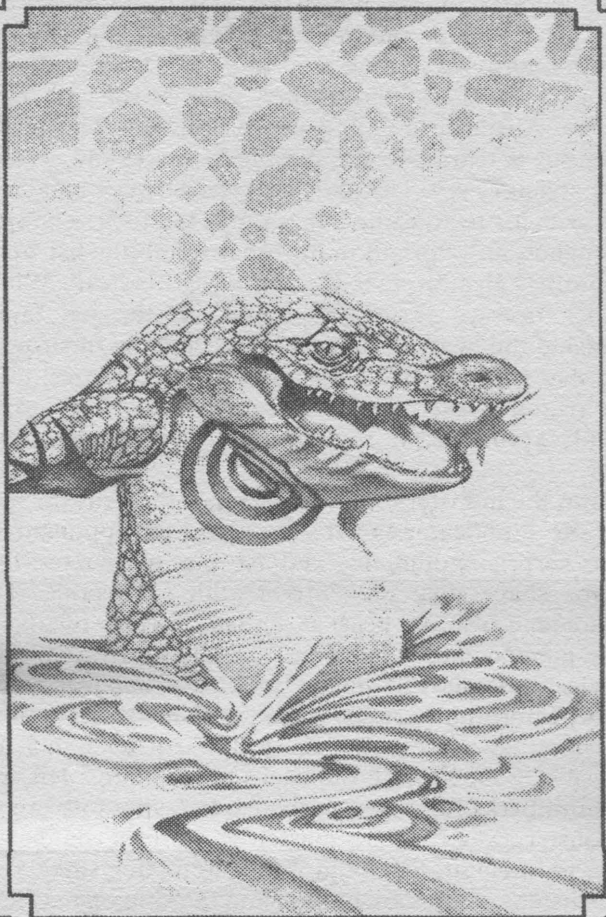
The python's lower jaw unhinges and drops open wide enough to swallow an ogre. It hisses fearsomely. Alister gulps.

The head twists around him, trying to find a vantage point from which it can lunge. All Alister can do is hold his staff in readiness, keeping it in line with the snake's sway. His father's advice rings in his mind: "Watch your enemy's eyes. They'll tell you where he's aiming." The serpent strikes, fangs aiming for Alister's neck.

Surprising himself with his speed, Alister brings up his staff and knocks the broad jaw closed from below. The snake's head snaps backward a few feet, and it recoils, looking angry. It swoops in, trying to catch him off guard. Swiping at it with his staff, Alister staggers on the rock's slippery surface. With a wary glance at the dirty moat water below him, he manages to fetch the snake a clip where its right ear would be, if it had any ears. Infuriated, it hisses and goes fuzzy around the edges. In a moment it is transformed from a serpent into a hippocampus. Gigantic webbed green hooves paw at the air, and it blows steam from its nostrils.

Alister is even more frightened now. The monster has the power of shape-change. Who knows what deadly form it can assume? Its coloring and markings seem to remain the same. It is still green and white with a target under the jaw . . .

Wait, that is it! Obviously all he has to do is strike it in the center of the target and defeat it that way. But would Good Magician Humfrey make the challenge so



Section 2

easy by marking the monster's weak spot? Alister will just have to fight and hope that is indeed the case.

An enormous flailing hoof hits his shoulder, driving him to his knees. The rock is now awash with moat slime. Alister grunts and nearly falls off. The hippocampus is rearing again, tossing its mane and screaming a victory cry. The pain weakens Alister's hand, and he grits his teeth as he hangs on to the rock. The staff, somehow still upright in his other trembling fist, keeps the other gigantic foot from striking his head. With a quick upward thrust, he scores on the red target, causing the beast to backpaddle, coughing in surprise. So that marking *is* the key to beating it, Alister thinks in triumph. He regains his feet, holds his weapon ready, trying to ignore the agony in his bruised shoulder.

But the monster fools him again. It discards the form of the hippocampus—it's too easy an opponent for this surprising human—and assumes a far more fearsome shape: that of a fire-breathing crocodile. This Mundane-seeming beast is actually a close relative of the giant metal-scaled dragons. The green and white scales shine wetly in the sun, looking as impermeable as any armordillo's armor. A gust of flame flicks between its long jaws, scorching the top of Alister's staff and blistering the skin on the backs of his hands. His rock hound barks furiously on the bank, trying to scare the monster away from his master. If Marbles could swim out to attack it, he would, but a stone dog sinks.

Alister's sleeves are on fire, and the skin on his face is blistered and taut when the flaming crocodile gives way to a manshark. This horrible creature has a gaping maw

Section 2

and two hands to feed it. Multiple rows of teeth glint at Alister, and he quakes. It reaches for him, growling. Alister just closes his eyes and waves his staff, hoping that he will hit something soft.

His first blow hits the teeth and the jaws close on the end of the staff, loudly splintering the wood. Alister is grateful that no part of his anatomy is close to those devastating dentures. He wrenches the staff loose and brings up the other end, aiming for the mouth. The feel of the staff against bone and flesh tells him he has succeeded. Opening one eye a crack, he watches the beast change again.

"Pshaw," it complains, working its jaws, and reforms from a shark into a sea-cow. Alister's own jaw drops in astonishment, but he stays on guard until he is convinced that the thing really has changed into something harmless.

It moos, paddling through the water with hooflike flippers until its back is parallel with the rock upon which Alister stands. He stares at it. Rolling big innocent hazel eyes, it gestures with its muzzle until Alister asks, "Am I supposed to ride you?"

The bovine head bobs up and down.

"How can I trust you? You just tried to kill me four times!" Alister's eyes narrow.

The monster has no answer for that. It just keeps its chin pointed toward its withers, which cannot possibly be a comfortable position for it. At last, Alister gives in. He douses the smoldering end of his staff in the moat water and climbs aboard the sea-cow. Marbles yips and Alister looks back at him.

"I have to do it this way," he calls. "I'll be all right

Section 2

now." Marbles resumes his pacing on the bank, unconvinced.

Another trial awaits him on the far side, but it seems Humfrey expected the moat monster to weed out most of the insincere querists. This test is as easy as A B C. He has to choose which of eighty-eight keys fits the musical lock on the castle's front door. Fortunately there is a discarded note on the ground which matches the markings on the cleft of the middlemost one.

"I C," sings Alister, inserting it into the lock. It turns, giving him no treble at all. The door swings open, creaking musically, and he is in the castle. A horrible monster bores down upon him just as the door booms inexorably shut behind him. It is a woman with no face, just masses of snakes writhing around the invisible place from where her voice emerges. Alister cringes against the enormous wooden door.

"Now, now, don't be afraid," the voice says, sounding incredibly sweet and not allaying his fears one jot. "You've been through enough. The trials are over. Humfrey will see you soon, but not until you've been cleaned up. Monty was in rare forms today, wasn't he?" While she talks, the strange woman pulls various cleaning spells out of a basket, and in no time Alister is tidied, mended, and bandaged. His walking staff is polished, and little dressings are applied to the soles of its tiny feet. "There. Now you may go in. Please make haste. He's a very busy man. Through that door." And the woman points the way.

Alister knocks timidly on the lintel post.

"Come in!" a voice roars from within.

Turn to section 10.

* 3 *

The python arches its spring-colored coils, looping loosely around the rock. Alister hefts his staff and prepares to defend himself. He wishes he had his quarterstaff with him instead. That one can split lengthwise into four pieces, each of which magically fights by itself, doing four times the damage as the one he holds now does. Without it, he can give no quarter. He can tell that the snake intends to constrict its coils and squeeze him, and probably eat him once he is dead, though he can't tell how it can manage to swallow a sturdy farm boy.

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Surprising himself with his speed, Alister brings up his staff and sticks it upright between the jaws. The snake's head jerks backward a few feet, and it looks furious. It tries to spit out the staff, but only damages its own gums, making them ooze thin purple blood. The next time the head comes in reach, Alister catches hold of the staff, twists and yanks it out of the mouth.

Section 3

Suddenly deprived of the prop, the jaws crash together. The python roars in frustration and tries to swipe Alister off the rock with the side of its head. With a wary glance at the dirty moat water below him, Alister manages to fetch the snake a clip where its right ear would be, if it had any ears. Infuriated, it hisses and goes fuzzy around the edges. In a moment it is transformed from a serpent into a hippocampus. Gigantic webbed green hooves paw at the air, and it blows steam from its nostrils.

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Alister ducks as the lance of flame shoots toward him. He cowers on the rock, clutching the staff to him. The beast will barbecue him and eat him right there, and he can do nothing to stop it. Blood is dripping from his shoulder and mixing with the green water staining his clothing. The crocodile watches the tasty stream flow and slavers.

Something in the confident attitude of the croc infuriates Alister into forgetting his self-pity and he arches up, striking the scaly beast right in the gold with his walking staff. It windmills, batting at the staff with its claws. Alister sweeps the staff out of reach and smites the monster again, smack in the center of the target. As the croc's form starts to go fuzzy, signaling another change, the boy hits it over the head with all of his strength. It sinks unconscious into the sickly green water, halfway between the crocodile form and the next, and disappears into the depths.

Alister sits on the wet boulder and shakes. When his nerves have recovered somewhat, he prods the water again, feeling for the monster, but it has given up the

Section 3

fight. "It is *hiding* from me!" he shouts in triumph, then leaps into the moat and swims to the castle gate.

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Section 4

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Section 4

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Alister looks at his arm and feels weak. The blood is running far faster than he feels is safe. If he does not find a healer in a very short time, he is doomed. And there does not seem to be one anywhere on the surface of the moat. He glances back up at the giant crocodile, which is changing shape again. The jaws become more pointed, the eyes move along the sides of the head, and gills sprout along the shoulders. The claws become hands, and the arms lengthen. Alister's eyes nearly start out of his head. It is becoming a manshark.

The creature smiles at him, displaying fourteen rows of shiny pointed teeth. With the last of his strength, Alister swings the staff at the monster's mouth. He has the satisfaction of seeing dozens of the teeth break before the shark seizes the staff from his hands and flings it away. Standing tall, Alister puts up his fists in a brave last defense. The shapechanger laughs at him.

Alister screams in pain as the shark grabs his

Section 4

wounded arms and drags him toward the toothy maw. The rows of fangs sink into his shoulder and neck. He pounds at it with both fists, but his strength is failing.

He kicks at the thing's belly as his arms grow limp. "I hope you get indigestion from me, you obscene monster," he whispers, and then everything goes dark . . .

Everything hurts. His arms hurt. His legs hurt. His face hurts. Even his hair hurts. There are interesting noises going on around him, arousing his curiosity. He forces one painful eyelid open. The light floods in, sticking an icicle of pain into an already overtaxed nervous system. Something cool and soft touches his face, and the light goes away. After a moment, so does the pain.

When his eyes open again, Alister finds that he is lying atop the finial of a large marble post. It is not an uncomfortable couch, as the stone is carved into a trough almost cradlelike in shape. He creeps to the edge of the depression to see where he is and blanches. His perch is some fifty feet above the floor. Sinking back into the very center of the finial, he wonders in some panic how he will get down. And then he notices the lady.

She is hovering in midair on a wonderful carpet. Her body, what he can see of it outlined by her dress, has exactly the sort of configuration a nymph would have if she ever grew past the appearance of delightful adolescence. Alister is not supposed to know about that sort of thing yet: he has been nicely brought up, but he and his friends often spy on the dryads and naiads who inhabit trees and pools nearby. This lady must have been some looker in her youth. But she could not have

Section 4

been a looker; she has no face. She does not even seem to have a head. Snakes hiss and weave patterns around the space where it ought to be.

"Are you feeling better?" A solicitous voice issues from among the snakes.

"How can you talk?" Alister asks, letting curiosity overpower good manners.

The voice laughs delightfully, a tinkling sound that matches the body well. "My face is invisible, young man, not nonexistent. You were very badly wounded. I thought you wouldn't survive for a while there, but a few good healing spells, plus the magic of this pillar, helped you to recover fully. I must speak to Humfrey about Monty. He isn't usually this vicious. But he was in rare forms today, wasn't he? Also, I've fixed your clothing. You'll be able to see the Good Magician soon."

"I don't want to see him now," Alister sputters. "He tried to have me killed."

"Now, now," the voice says, sounding incredibly sweet. "You were only a little dead. The trials are over. Humfrey will see you soon, but not until you are cleaned up." While she talks, the strange woman pulls his missing garments out of a basket, and in no time Alister is tidied, mended, and bandaged. His walking staff is polished, and little dressings are applied to the soles of its tiny feet. "There. Now climb out onto the carpet. Please make haste. He's a very busy man." Obediently the boy boards the carpet, and they sink slowly to the floor of the room. He stares at the tall pillar, which is streaked with dark colors.

"What is that? You said it took away my pain," Alister asks, pointing at it.

Section 5

"Agony column," the woman says simply. "There you go. Through that door. Good luck."

Alister walks over and knocks timidly on the lintel post.

"Come in!" a voice roars from inside.

Turn to section 10.

* 5 *

With a superhuman effort Alister goes faster and ducks under the nooses that are reaching for him. One especially long vine latches on to the back of his tunic as Alister charges away. It succeeds only in tearing off a piece of cloth, which it waves after him from one tendril like a farewell handkerchief.

At last his speed exactly matches that of the swiftly moving Flee Market, and as if in confirmation that he is in the running, a man at the gate looks up, smiles at him, and gestures him in.

With a terrific bound, Alister leaps off the road through the gate and lands with a thud on the ground. The landscape to his right reverses and gallops back toward the way he came. Marbles leaps in after him and licks Alister's face in congratulations. They have made it into the Flee Market!

Turn to section 26.

* 6 *

The constricting vines drag him close to the bole of the tree. The ones securing his feet lift higher and higher until he is hanging head down several feet off the ground. The killing noose continues to form: ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen knots.

The loop flips sideways and waits as the vines lower Alister into it headfirst. Since he isn't struggling, the vines are paying no attention to his hands. He slowly brings his arms up toward his waist. He has to be careful. His neck is now clear of any obstruction, and the tree will have him nicely hanging if he doesn't hurry up. There is a quiet *pop* as Alister undoes the catch of his belt and slides it free. Keeping the blade hidden against his wrist, he lets his arms flop down. The tree pays no attention and goes on with the operation.

Just before his head enters the noose, Alister sweeps up his hands, catches the vine, and slashes through it with the steel blade. Magical trees hate steel; anything iron interferes with their abilities. He can see the marks of two horse-shoes imprinted in the bole of this one. Farmers put that kind of half circle on all their own beasts' hooves so that no one else will steel them. It is a special kind of protective magic.

The tree retaliates by whipping his back with thin vines and closing the taut loops around his legs even more. Alister will soon lose circulation in his feet if he doesn't get away. He sets to work severing all the tendrils he can reach, starting with the ones around his

Section 6

wrists. The loop ascertains his intention, and limb-wrestles him to protect itself. One tiny filament winds itself around his nose and starts to squeeze. Alister gasps, his eyes filling with tears of pain. Two more capture his ears and subject them to the same treatment. Ignoring the discomfort, he twists his hand around and slashes through the vine on one wrist, then changes the blade over to free the other. A fourth little vine surrounds his chin and pulls. He turns his blade on it.

As he saws at the wirelike tendrils, a huge noose opens near his feet and slides down the length of his body, trapping his elbows against his chest. It squeezes his ribcage like a feather boa, only the surface scrapes against his skin instead of tickling. He struggles against it, trying to loosen the pressure on his knife hand. The vines holding his ankles give way suddenly. The tree hopes to use his own weight to break his back.

Alister bounces. As the rough fibers halt his fall they cut the skin on his arms and dig into his chest. On the second bounce, the noose slips upward and closes on his belly instead. That really squeezes the air out of him. When he reaches up to saw at the vine, another loop closes over his left ankle. Abandoning the big vine for a moment, Alister bends almost in two so he can cut the new menace away. Unfortunately his position leaves his neck vulnerable. The noose-loop senses the opportunity and drops another lariat over his head. Instantly he releases his foot and tries to jam fingers inside the noose to keep from being strangled. The tree throws a fresh loop around his remaining free ankle and pulls his feet one way and his head the other. Alister's lungs are bursting as he tries to take in one

Section 7

more breath of air. He tries to sever the strand around his neck, but his vision is dimming quickly, turning the red of blood, and then black. He lets out a final anguished gasp managing to form the word of Humfrey's spell.

Turn to section 29.

* 7 *

"I want the red book," Alister says. "I'm sure that Magician Humfrey wanted every word ever written about Xanth in his library. That must be the one."

"Very well, young man," Glim says, handing over the red-bound tome. "A fine choice. You may inspect it now."

Alister seizes it and turns to the title page. But instead of the *Encyclopedia of Xanth*, what he sees printed there is *The Dictionary of Xanth*. "Wait a minute," he demands angrily. "This isn't what I wanted."

"It is precisely what I said it was," Glim says, unconcerned. "Every word that has ever been written about Xanth is in it. In alphabetical order. And you chose it, so it's yours."

"Which one is the real *Encyclopedia*?" Alister asks.

"Will you agree to my price?"

"I suppose I have to," the boy says gracelessly. "What do you want for the right books?"

"I'm writing a book on free will," Glim says. "I want all your unused choices. Just put them in a bag for me

Section 7

and drop them off when you can. It will mean that once you make a decision, you can't change your mind. If you do that for a year, I'll let you take the *Encyclopaedia*."

Alister thinks about it for a while. "Why do you want them?"

"I have a theory that when a man has the power to decide for himself, the fewer restrictions he has on him, the more careless he becomes in his actions. My requirement may enable you to employ more caution in your journeys as well. I will even supply you with the bag. Incidentally, you can put the books in the bag, too. It has nearly infinite capacity but no weight to speak of. It's woven of a fiber called bottomless pith." Glim draws a worn-looking cloth sack from under the table and lays it in front of Alister. On top of it he sets the two brown books. "Here. Volumes two and four of the *Encyclopedia of Xanth*."

"These?" Alister says. "But you said these were an incomplete listing of oddities."

"Of course I did. I have only two of a five-volume set, so naturally it is incomplete, and the wonders of Xanth are nothing if not odd. You have to find the other three yourself. I came across these up north, near the North Village. Well, good luck, Alister, and don't forget our bargain."

They shake hands. Alister shoulders the sack and goes toward the exit, Marbles at his heels.

Turn to section 8.

* 8 *

The terrain Alister can see is moving even faster than it was when he entered. The Market flies along a flat river plain, heading for a forest. With no geographical features in its way to hamper it, it can speed up.

"How do I get out of here?" Alister asks the gatekeeper.

"Through there, same as you came in," the man answers, smiling. "Only one exit."

"But we're going so fast!"

"Not as fast as I've seen some days," the man says contemplatively, staring out the gate. "I remember when we raced a rainbow. We touched the end of the meadow before it did. Now that was fast."

Alister privately agrees. A rainbow can shoot its colored sprays faster than the eye can follow. Only a cupid's bow is faster. "But I'll get killed if I jump out now."

"Then don't jump."

Alister glances at Marbles. The little dog has his tongue out, eager and willing to try. Alister makes his decision. "I will jump, but not until the Market enters the forest. It has to slow down until the footballs trample it a road."

The forest approaches at speed. Alister bends one knee, crouches in starting position, his arms held straight out behind his hips, preparing to throw himself clear at just the right moment. A-one, a-two, a-three, now! *Jump!*

Section 9

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is less than or equal to his Dexterity value, turn to section 19.

If greater, turn to section 22.

* 9 *

Alister's impulse is to move toward the north. He can tell that his objective is a long way from him, but he isn't sure he has the strength to get that far. He whistles for Marbles to follow him and moves lethargically in the direction in which his talent pulls. With a huge effort, he manages to get the knapsack on his back and loops the cord of the cloth sack around one wrist.

They trudge on, avoiding one tangle tree after another. "This is a very dangerous area, Marbles," Alister says, narrowly avoiding the deadly embrace of the trees' sticky tentacles. Talking makes him cough. Coughing fills his mouth with fluid, and he spits it out on the ground. Blood. There is blood in his lungs. He has to find a healing spring in a hurry.

His talent tells him that he can find help to the northeast. He changes direction and stumbles along. Marbles is suddenly a long way ahead of him, his barking echoing strangely in Alister's ears, and getting dimmer and dimmer. Something jars against his knees. Alister looks down and discovers that it is the ground. He has stumbled without feeling it. He spits more blood. From his knees, he falls full length in the



Section 10

grass. Little blades tickle his nose and cheeks as they attach themselves in his flesh. Carnivorous grass! But he is too weak to pull himself away. He gives up trying, and as his eyes close he murmurs Humfrey's spell.

Turn to section 29.

* 10 *

As Alister enters the room the gnome seated behind the table peers at him and closes the hide-bound book he has been reading, laying a heavy silk marker in between the pages. The boy notices that the entire room is lined with shelves filled with similar volumes, all ponderously important-looking, nearly as tall as the Good Magician himself. Humfrey is nothing much to look at: a face full of wrinkles, indifferently bordered by wisps of wild white hair and fixed with a permanent expression of distaste. "Well, you've been a lot of trouble, young Alister," Humfrey snorts, sizing him up in his own fashion.

"Me?" Alister demands indignantly.

"Yes, you. Aren't you the one who misused my moat monster?"

"But it tried to kill me!"

"Wasn't supposed to do that," the little man muses. "I'll have to give it another talking to about a proper attitude. All right, what's your Question?"

"Wh—who was that woman?" Alister chokes out, still a little puzzled about the goings on in this strange place.

Section 10

The little man's brows lower, wrinkling his face still more. "That your Question? Wasting my time . . ."

"Er, no, not actually."

"Well, free information is hardly my forte," Humfrey says. "But since you're bound to see her again before you leave, she is the Gorgon. Now what *do* you want to ask?"

"I want to know if it's possible to find a magical talent for my father." Alister looks a little shamefaced. "I know it's a broad question, but . . ."

"Leave me to ascertain whether your Question is too broad to be contained in a single Answer." Humfrey hops off his high stool and drags one of the tall books off a shelf. He runs a horny finger down a page, slams the book shut, and consults a table of mystical-looking symbols, a calendar, and a sundial. Alister watches him in fascination, trying to figure out what all these divinatory devices have to do with his Question. At last, Humfrey looks up. "I'm not going to tell you your Answer yet."

"Why not?" the youth demands, feeling cheated.

"Because the oracles say that what I've divined won't mean enough to you to be of value to you now. But since I have determined what you wish to know, I shall expect payment all the same. I will give you the Answer at the end of your year's service with me. Then you will appreciate it and act accordingly."

"A year?" exclaims Alister in surprise. "But that's forever!"

"Not at all," Humfrey says, giving him a wintry smile. "Not unless you're going to die at the end of it. Then a year *would* be forever for you."

"Am I?" the boy demands, aghast.

Section 10

"You want to invest another year in the Answer?" the Good Magician returns, his wrinkled face smirking horribly.

"Well, no . . ."

"Then be quiet. I will accept less than a year in service if you agree to find something for me. Should be well within your capabilities, eh?"

Alister is instantly suspicious. "What do you want?"

"I want you to get out of my sight and stop pestering me. After that, you can locate something I want. The Zombie Master and I were talking shop, and he mentioned something which interested me deeply. There was a set of books once in Castle Roogna, the *Encyclopedia of Xanth*." The gnome's eyes gleam in anticipation. "A marvelous source of knowledge and information, lost these many centuries. They may have been stolen, or they may have walked away on their own. Books constantly seem to be walking out of libraries. I consulted my magic mirror as to where to find them, and I got your picture. Yes, it was you, all right. Rust-colored hair, freckles, scar on left instep, blue-green eyes. You locate the *Encyclopedia* and bring it back here, and we'll consider your service completed."

A set of encyclopedia? Alister shudders at the thought of a whole lot of hideous one-eyed, one-footed things full of knowledge. He can't imagine being capable of herding them back all this way.

"Don't look at me like that, young man. If it wasn't within your capabilities, I'd be wasting a commodity which to me is worth a year's service."

Alister has faith in his talent, he can find anything, but is suspicious of Humfrey. The Magician's talent for

Section 10

information is famous. Why didn't he just use that talent?

"Then why don't *you* go get it?" the red-haired boy asks, watching as the wizard replies.

"Information is my talent. Finding is yours. I didn't say it'd be easy; just that you may be able to accomplish it." The Magician seems sincere. He does appear terribly busy and Alister's talent is finding things which are lost. Humfrey is right, maybe he can find it.

May! Humfrey hasn't said he can, only "you may be able to." Alister sighs inwardly, but a bargain is a bargain and it is better than a whole year of serving a grouchy magician. "Okay. But not alone. Marbles goes with me."

"Why?"

"Well, he's my dog! We've been together a long time."

"He's not working for me. Send him away. I'm not keeping a rock hound for sedimental reasons."

Alister thinks quickly. "But you'll have two servants for only one Answer this way. Besides, you won't be keeping him, he'll be with me. If not, I'll have to leave him here."

"Hmm. Oh, very well. Now get out of my study. The next time I want to see you is when you're holding those five books. I'll give you a map of Xanth, so you can find your way back here. And here is a spell." The little man whispers a word in Alister's ear. "Even if you lose the map, you'll have the spell. Use it only in dire circumstances—it only works once. You just have to say it."

"What does it do?"

"Is that another Question?"

Section 10

“No!”

“Good.” Humfrey thrusts a rolled-up parchment at him, then uncorks a bottle, and a fearsome purple djinn slowly emerges, his cloud fizzing indignantly at his having been disturbed. As it solidifies, Alister stares in amazement. He’s never seen a slow djinn fizz before.

“Your wish is my command, master,” it intones, surreptitiously secreting a bath towel behind its vaporous form. It is man-shaped from the waist up, but a tapering column of smoke from there down. The bubbles in the smoke tickle Alister’s arm.

“Put ’im out,” the Good Magician commands and the purple smoke slowly envelopes the youth, fizzing frantically. The next thing Alister sees is the road he walked earlier, but this time he is facing away from Humfrey’s castle. There is no sign of the djinn, but Alister is just as glad as one slow djinn fizz is all he can handle. Marbles comes running up to him, barking with glee. The little dog nearly bowls the boy off his feet by leaping up to lick his face. Alister kneels to hug his pet and explains the situation to him. Marbles listens carefully, with an intelligent look on his face, but offers no comment. Alister unrolls the map and traces the line depicting the road he is on. All the enchanted paths are shown, but there is a lot of blank space beyond and all around them.

“Where should I go to find the Magician’s information book?” Alister muses, walking through the forest.

“Are you asking me?” a tall, yellow-leaved tree answers.

“What would you know about it?”

“I’m a direc-tree. May I be of assistance?”

Alister considers it for a brief moment. Nothing is as it seems in the wilds of Xanth. This harmless-looking tree might want a pint of his blood or something for answering his question, not too far off what Magician Humfrey has just demanded, he reminds himself, chuckling. After dealing with the Good Magician, Alister is chary about agreeing to anything that sounds like a favor.

"What do you ask for the service?"

"I'll answer any question within my ability for a quarter."

"A quarter what?" Alister asks.

"A quarter of anything. I'm not picky. A quarter of a sandwich, a quarter of an hour, a quarter of a game . . ."

"Oh, I see." Alister takes a piece of bread out of his knapsack and tears it into four segments of approximately equal size. Choosing the largest, he tucks it into the ground between the tree's roots.

"Thank you," says the tree. "And your question is?"

"Where would I go to find a book?"

"What kind?"

Alister scratches his head and ponders how best to describe it. "Oh, one that's important to a magician."

"Well, there's books in running brooks, but those are usually the sort mermaids read. There's books that are made on horses, but those tend to be runaway best-sellers. But there are all sorts of books to be had at the Flee Market. It ran by here about five days ago."

"Flee Market?"

"See the picture on my leaf?" The tree rustles one branch, and Alister goes to examine it. The papery

Section 10

yellow leaf depicts rows of tents and tables, all crammed with useful and interesting merchandise. Several of the booths have books galore for sale.

"That's just exactly what I want," Alister states. "Where is it?"

"Well, that's hard to say," the direc-tree answers. Its limb stretches up to scratch its top knot. "It doesn't stay in one place. Once you catch up with it, you are caught up in it, so to speak. But it runs along the roads. All you have to do is follow one of them, and you'll encounter the Flee Market sooner or later. It jumps around."

Alister isn't too satisfied with this answer, but it will have to do for now. He bends his magical talent to finding the stretch of road upon which he will meet the Market. He thanks the tree absently and goes on.

The day is warm and promises to become hot by noon. There are no clouds overhead. Alister looks around for a parasol plant because sometimes the bruised leaves provide an elixir which is a sunshade more suitable for a boy than a frilly parasol. His talent tells him that to the right of the path there is the right kind of tree. He eyes the unfamiliar plant life to that side with caution. This area is far away from his usual stomping grounds. In fact, he can't hear a sound, let alone the usual loud footsteps. Almost any dangerous plants or creatures could be down there. Leaving the magically protected roads can land him in unnecessary trouble. Still the back of his shoulders and head are already uncomfortably hot. Besides, he realizes that he can't use his talent to find the Flee Market as it isn't really lost, just constantly moving. With no idea how long he'll be hunting for the Flee Market, he decides to

risk pushing into the unknown forest for parasol balm, called pa ba for short by Xanth citizens. Pa ba keeps well for a long time. If he finds some here, he won't have to go looking for it again. He feels that it will also be a good time to pick some provisions. The coming of midday reminds him of lunch.

"Stay," he commands Marbles and parts a pair of photogra-ferns, who snap away at him and shoot seed bulbs off in his face. Alister shields his eyes and forges through. "Bark when I call, so I can find my way back," he yells. The rock hound looks after him reproachfully, shrugs, and settles down to gnaw on a handy stone.

Rubbing his eyes while he blunders through the bush, Alister seeks to dispel the light-haze the ferns flash at him. His eyes clear just in time for him to duck. A pitcher plant is throwing fast lobbs at a fly-catcher plant. One of the high flies buzzes angrily as it sails past him, smack into the fly-catcher's mitt-shaped cup.

"Hey!" he shouts angrily, ducking a bean-ball. The pitcher plant turns its leaves around, too. Nobody has invited the has-bean to the game. Alister and the pitcher glare at it.

"Well, I coulda' bean," it grumbles. The game resumes.

Alister hunts around the bean patch to see if there are other varieties growing nearby. His father's training helps him to move safely between the plants. He is looking for a kind that keeps growing and producing even after it has been uprooted, so long as it is kept moving: a carribean. First, he discovers a varigated jelly bean plant, an offspring of jelly-barrel trees and bean shoots, and samples several flavors. Next, there is an ascamya plant, a useful shrub that stands just under

Section 10

knee height. This one has a couple of ripe sausages on it, each of which have a round cross-section bigger than his palm. The meat is light pink and mildly spicy. Taking out his knife, he severs the top of the stem, detaching both sausages. Immediately the top of the plant grows back, a pair of tiny chubs growing in place of the sausages he holds.

Delighted, Alister hacks the bush off just two inches above the ground. It springs back up to its original height in full leaf within a minute. "How about that," he says aloud. "No matter *how* you slice it, it's still just below-knee."

Carefully he grafts the plant he holds onto the new shrub. The sausages go into the knapsack, and he walks away chuckling at his new discovery.

Crab apples and crab grass snap at him as he passes by. Their little faces with the stalk eyes look too mean to live and too ugly to eat. His mother makes crab-apple jelly, and though it tastes good, it affects everyone's mood for the rest of the day. Better to stick to the kinds that can be found in jelly-barrel trees.

"Now there's a useful food plant," Alister says, admiring his find. A breadfruit tree has been budded with a butternut, so that the ripe loaves are never far from new butter. He picks some of the white-shelled butternuts, but no bread is ready for harvest. Regretfully he has to settle for the unripe pippins, the hard, crunchy breadsticks.

This tree, or one of its remote ancestors, was probably adapted to its present state by King Roogna, whom Alister remembers vaguely from history lessons in centaur school. Roogna's talent was the power of adapting magic to suit his own purposes, a strong and useful

talent. Alister knows that his own ability isn't quite up to Magician caliber, though the Village elders say it only just misses. Then he remembers sadly that his father has no talent at all. With a mental apology to all the Magicians in his family tree, he settles for just having unique magic—like every other talented person in Xanth.

Some very small pasties culled from a young pie tree finish his foraging, and he wants to get back to the pathway. Wrapping the foodstuffs carefully in young blanket leaves, he places them in his pack and attempts to get his bearings. The parasol tree is nearby, beyond a stand of bushes. Its ruffled blooms twirl prettily in the breeze. Alister plucks handfuls of its leaves and rubs them on his face and hands. His skin feels cooler instantly.

"Marbles!" he calls. "Bark so I can find you!" Alister stands very still, listening carefully. No sound. "Marbles!" He whistles through his teeth. "Where are you?"

Very faintly in the distance now, he hears barking. It doesn't sound like Marbles, but then there is a lot of plant life between him and his dog. The sound stops, and then begins again, sounding anguished. If it is Marbles, something is very wrong. Is he being attacked?

If Alister decides to seek the source of the barking, turn to section 18.

If he should go to where he thinks the path is, turn to 13.

* 11 *

Alister turns his head to see what is making the rustling sound, but the dogwood whimpers so sadly that he turns back to his first aid. He packs the wound and is binding it with repellent plants when the noise comes again, closer. Turning his head, he is just in time to see a large brown bird rifling through his discarded knapsack. Its clever black eye winks at him. With a flick of its claw, it throws back the flap and pulls free Good Magician Humfrey's map.

"Drop it, bird!" he commands. The bird ignores him. With the map in its claws, it takes to the air with a saucy flutter of its wing. As it circles overhead just out of reach, Alister can see the telltale red breast of the would-be burglar. "It figures," he says in disgust. "One of the most notorious hoods in the forest: a robin. Get out of here. Go rob a crow's nest."

The bird, a male, disdains the advice and cockily flies away, haranguing Alister saucily. No doubt he is more interested in young pigeons than old crows. Alister is furious. He has lost his precious map. He chases the bird partway into the forest, but it is out of sight before he can catch up.

He returns to the dogwood. He's done a good job. The tree, obviously cured of pain, is beside itself with gratitude and ecstasy. Alister has a sudden double image of the dogwood and feels a little dizzy at the sight of twice as many doggy faces. He shakes a root, pats it on the bole, and walks away with the sound of its joyous barking in his ears.

Once away from the dogwood, he can hear Marbles still barking.

"I'm coming, Marbles! Don't stop!"

Turn to section 15.

* 12 *

The constricting vines drag him closer to the bole of the tree. The ones securing his feet lift higher and higher until he is hanging head down several feet off the ground. The killing noose continues to form: ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen knots.

The loop flips sideways and waits as the vines lower Alister into it headfirst. Since he isn't struggling, the vines are paying no attention to his hands. He slowly brings his arms toward his waist. He has to be careful. His neck is now clear of any obstruction, and the tree will have him nicely hanging if he doesn't hurry. There is a quiet *pop* as Alister undoes the catch to his belt knife and slides it free. Keeping the blade hidden flush against his wrist, he lets his arms flop down. The tree pays no attention and goes on with the operation.

Just before his head enters the noose, Alister sweeps his hands up, catches the vine, and slashes through it with the steel blade. Magical trees hate steel; anything iron interferes with their abilities. He can see the marks of two horse-shoes imprinted in the bole of this one. Farmers put that kind of half circle on their own beasts' hooves so that no one else will steel them. It is a special kind of protective magic.

The tree retaliates by whipping his back with thin

Section 12

vines and closing the loops around his legs even tighter. Alister will soon lose circulation in his feet if he doesn't get away. He sets to work severing all the tendrils he can reach, starting with the ones around his wrists. The loop ascertains his intention, and limb-wrestles him to protect itself. One tiny filament winds itself around his nose and starts to squeeze. Two more capture his ears and subject them to the same treatment. Ignoring the pain, he slashes through the vine on one wrist and changes the blade over to free the other. A fourth little vine surrounds his chin and pulls. He turns his blade on it.

As he saws at the wirelike tendrils, a huge noose opens near his feet and slides down the length of his body, trapping his elbows against his chest. It squeezes his ribcage like a feather boa, only the surface scrapes against his skin instead of tickling. He struggles against it, trying to loosen the pressure on his knife hand. The vines holding his ankles give way suddenly. The tree hopes to use his own weight to break his back.

Alister bounces. As the rough fibers halt his fall they cut the skin on his arms and dig into his chest. On the second bounce, the noose slips upward and closes on his belly instead. That really squeezes the air out of him. He pumps his legs backward and forward until his feet touch against the trunk of the tree. Then he kicks himself toward Marbles who wiggles eagerly and yips at him.

"Chew on the big vine, and I'll cut the one around you," Alister shouts, catching hold of Marbles and swatting away small loops that threaten to close on the hound's legs. He has to kick hard to keep other nooses from getting near enough to seize his own feet. He has to sever a few more vines as the tree tries to recapture

its intended meal, but the battle is over. Almost simultaneously, he and Marbles fall to the ground, the nooses holding them parting from their vines.

"Roll away!" Alister shouts.

One especially long vine latches on to the back of Alister's tunic as he throws himself out of reach. It pulls away a strip of cloth like a party streamer. Alister makes faces at the tree from across the road. Marbles growls at it from a safe distance.

"Come on," his master calls. "We got to catch up with that Market." Turning his back, Marbles scrapes a footful of sand at the tree, and then follows Alister up the road.

The footballs have stomped their way through a swath of marsh, so Alister and Marbles have to hop from patch to patch of the reeds which float on top of the mire as they follow the track. The boy looks longingly at a clump of sweet marsh-mallow plants just twenty feet to his left and sighs. He promises himself he'll find the place again when his time is his own to command once more. Marbles falls far behind in the swampy terrain. The reeds are high, and he has to jump carefully or he will sink forever in the thin purple mud.

The two make it to the other side without incident, though both of them are purple from the middle down. By now, the Market is long out of sight.

"We've just gotta find that place again!" Alister says, brushing viscous mud out of Marbles' coat. Mud hens with their chicks wander out of the brush and snap up the particles of dirt which he and Marbles have shed. "I'll find something to get us there." He concentrates, wandering across the damp ground.

Turn to section 24.

Section 13, 14

* 13 *

He forces himself not to panic. That sound doesn't have to be Marbles. There are plenty of things in the Xanth forest that bark. All the trees have a good bark now and again, when they aren't nibbled by predators. Instead, Alister concentrates on finding Marbles.

In a short time, he realizes he is heading away from the anguished yelps. It wrenches his heart to listen to the cries; it can be anything, even a firedog that has been accidently quenched, and it might prove dangerous.

Once he is out of earshot of the pitiful sound, he can hear Marbles' barking.

"I'm coming, Marbles! Don't stop!"

Turn to section 15.

* 14 *

"I want the blue books," Alister says. "I'm sure that Magician Humfrey told me that the *Encyclopedia* included everything that happened in Xanth up to the reign of King Roogna, when it was written. And it was a five-volume set. That must be the one."

"Very well, young man," Glim says, handing over the top blue-bound tome. "A fine choice. You may inspect them now."

Alister seizes the book and turns to the title page. But instead of the *Encyclopedia of Xanth*, what he sees printed there is *The History of Xanth*. "Wait a minute," he demands angrily. "This isn't what I wanted."

"It is precisely what I said it was," Glim says, unconcerned. "It contains brilliant exposition on all the really important things that happened in Xanth during the period which I mentioned. And you chose it, so it's yours."

"Which one is the real *Encyclopedia*?" Alister asks.

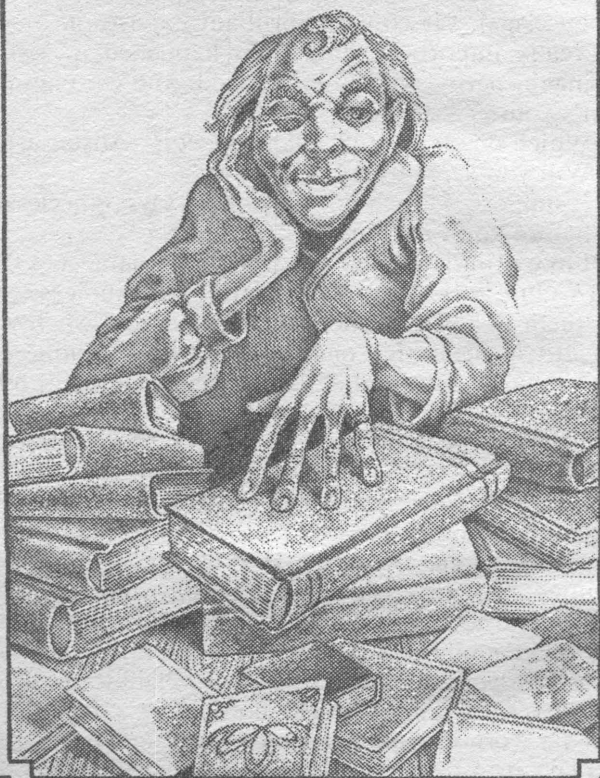
"Will you agree to my price?"

"I suppose I have to," the boy says gracelessly. "What do you want for the right books?"

"I'm writing a book of my own, on the subject of free will," Glim says. "I want all your unused choices. Just put them in a bag for me and drop them off when you can. It will mean that once you make a decision, you can't change your mind. If you do that for a year, I'll let you take the *Encyclopedia*."

Alister thinks about it for a while. "Why do you want them?"

"I have a theory that when a man has the power to decide for himself, the fewer restrictions he has on him, the more careless he becomes in his actions. My requirement may enable you to employ more caution in your journeys as well. I will even supply you with the bag. Incidentally, you can put the books in the bag, too. It has nearly infinite capacity but no weight to speak of. It's woven of a fiber called bottomless pith." Glim draws a worn-looking cloth sack from under the table and lays it in front of Alister. On top of it he sets the two brown books. "Here. Volumes two and four of the *Encyclopedia of Xanth*."



Section 15

"These?" Alister says. "But you said these were an incomplete listing of oddities."

"Of course I did. I have only two of a five-volume set, so naturally it is incomplete; and the wonders of Xanth are nothing if not odd. You have to find the other three yourself. These are the only ones I came across. I found them to the north, near the North Village. Well, good luck, Alister, and don't forget our bargain."

They shake hands. Alister shoulders the sack and goes toward the exit, Marbles at his heels.

Turn to section 8.

* 15 *

Alister breaks through the bushes and stumbles out onto the road. Feeling to make sure his knapsack has not fallen open, he hurries over to Marbles, who still sits with his nose pointing heavenward, howling.

"Marbles! You can stop now," Alister says, dropping to his knees next to the rock hound. "I was so worried about you."

The look Marbles gives him clearly displays disgust for his human's foolishness. Isn't he here? Isn't he safe? He isn't the one who went off into the wilderness.

"See what I have." Alister displays his findings. The tendrils of the caribbean have wound around the straps of his knapsack, making it look festive. Tiny yellow beanflowers peer around at their new surroundings, and then turn their petals to the sun. Marbles is unimpressed. He is far more interested in the below-

Section 15

knee sausage and even deigns to play fetch with a breadstick or two.

Alister has a good meal and amuses himself throwing crumbs to little birds. He watches out for larger, more predatory species that might follow the little ones to easy food sources. He once saw a great big nightbird fly into the Gap Village in pursuit of the songbirds the neighbor fed. It had huge orange eyes, a head that swiveled almost all the way around on its neck, and a pair of tall sharp horns on the top of its head. It favored the dumbfounded Alister with an owl-knowing gaze and wisely flew out of the town before the Elders could drive it away.

The sound of galloping interrupts his reverie. Alister just has time to leap out of the way as a line of footballs hurtle toward him. The spheres of feet—human feet, hawk claws, cat pads, centaur hooves, insect feet, crawfish pincers—hurtle along. They leave a track as wide as a country lane. From the direction they came there is a huge cloud of dust and cacophony bearing down on him like a thunderstorm. Inside the dust, he sees, to his amazement, citizens of Xanth, human and nonhuman alike, calmly going about their business, buying and selling merchandise displayed in tents and on tables. The smell of sweat and aging canvas, paper from paper wasps, soda from soda poppies, and grease from countless elbows flavor the air. The patrons and sellers act as though they are unaware that they are traveling many miles per hour through the countryside.

“The Flee Market!” Alister cries as it charges by. “Come on, quick! We have to catch up with it.” Marbles runs beside it, barking.

Section 15

They pant down the newly trampled path after the mobile fair. Vines and branches reach down at them, tearing at Alister's clothing. He ignores everything except the slowly shrinking cloud of dust up ahead.

"There's a river up there," Alister huffs out. "It'll have to slow down to cross it. At least, I hope so."

He puts all the strength he has into one spurt of speed, leaping over flattened marsh reeds and tree boles that have been unfortunate enough to have been in the way of the footballs. Marbles runs after him, barking furiously.

As Alister predicted, the Flee Market slows somewhat when it encounters the stream. He can see it over the leaves of a wild hot mustard patch it plowed through, and steam is still rising from the trampled plants. Almost like a living thing, the market vacillates from side to side, bulling left and bearing right before deciding which way to go. The diversion gives Alister and Marbles enough time to catch up with it. As it turns and speeds away to the right, the boy and hound cut the mustard to intersect with it. A broad entrance-way is visible close to the back of the fair in the side nearest Alister. He runs toward it, coming closer and closer. Out of the corner of his eye, he notices that he is heading toward a huge noose-loop tree. Its brown vines are twisting and binding into hangman's knots and granny squares in ravenous anticipation of the choice meal hurrying toward them. How to avoid its sticky coils?

If Alister decides to slow down and veer away from the noose-loop tree, turn to section 25.

Section 16

If he decides not to slow down, roll 3 D6.

If the total is less than or equal to Alister's Dexterity value, turn to section 5.

If greater than Alister's Dexterity value, turn to section 17.

* 16 *

"I feel a very strong urge to go that way to find more of the *Encyclopedia*. Come on." Alister discovers some candytuft moss on a tree as they walk. It is on the opposite side from which they are approaching, so he decides they must be going north. He plucks some of the moss and eats it while they walk.

It is getting dark now, and Alister has no wish to lose himself in the jungles of Xanth at night. Enchanted paths or no, there is danger about after dark. They settle down in the hollow of a rock. Alister eats some of the food out of his knapsack, augmented with a hot meat pie plucked from a nearby pie tree, while his petrographic pet eats gumbo soil and puddingstone with just a sprinkle of ba-salt. They sleep well satisfied.

Early the next morning Alister has a hearty chicken pot pie off the tree for breakfast. He wants some water to wash down his meal.

There is a spring nearby which smells wonderfully fresh, but he is afraid to drink from it; such pools are often love springs, and he doesn't want to get involved with a female of any species right now.

Section 16

A thin-winged doe staggers to the pool and falls. The animal's head sags to the ground barely in reach of the water. Without moving anything else, it puts its tongue out to drink. Alister hides behind a jelly-barrel tree. He doesn't want a bawdy ol' doe looking for him. But after the deer has swallowed some of the water, it is suddenly able to stand and begins to graze.

"A healing spring!" Alister exclaims. What a lucky find. He has been acquiring aches and pains from the time he set out to find Humfrey's castle to this morning when he woke with a stiff neck. He takes a deep draught of the water. "Hey, Marbles! Come and have a drink!"

The rock hound comes trotting up and joins his master at the spring. He tastes the water with his tongue, and then splashes joyfully into the shallows, barking with pleasure. As Alister watches, all the little nicks and scratches close up without leaving a mark.

Restore all of Alister's hit points to the record sheet.

"Now, we have to figure out where we are," he says.

Marbles follows his master until they come to a crossroad. The soil grumbles a little under their feet. Alister stands, listening to his talent at each of the three possible turnings. One is an old trail that looks as if it has been trampled flat by centaur hooves. The middle path is hardly more than a gap between the trees. The right-hand turning is a graveled lane, looking more formal but no more inviting than either of the other two.

"It feels to me like we could find the books along any one of these ways. Not one of 'em feels better than the others do. That means that I just have to pick one of

Section 17

them and follow it. My talent doesn't ever go too far wrong. Up 'til now, of course. Can't predict for sure."

If Alister chooses the left path, turn to section 32.

If he elects to follow the middle path, turn to section 35.

If he takes the right-hand path, turn to section 31.

* 17 *

With a superhuman effort Alister goes faster and ducks under the nooses that are reaching for him. One especially long vine latches on to the back of his tunic as Alister charges away. It slows him down and a few other tendrils attach themselves to him. Rough, fibrous nooses close around his hands and feet and yank him off the road toward its bole. Marbles rushes in barking to attack the tree. A lasso seizes the hound and sweeps him off the ground, where he hangs, yipping but helpless. It may not consider rock hounds good to eat, but it hates to be disturbed during meals. Noose-loops are like tangles; both trees are carnivorous, but the tangler likes its prey alive and kicking. From the hangman's coil knotting itself ostentatiously before his eyes, Alister deduces that this tree likes them dead.

NOOSE-LOOP TREE

To hit Alister: 10 To be hit: 9 Hit points: 9

Damage from strangling: 1 D6

The tree attempts to strangle Alister. If he runs out of hit

points, it will succeed. If it runs out of points, he has freed himself.

If Alister successfully defeats the tree, turn to section 12.

If not, turn to section 6.

* 18 *

Alister concentrates on finding the source of the noise. With no thought for his own safety he hurries along, ducking tree branches and skirting water holes. A chipmouse conjures itself out of his way and appears, alert and scolding, on a big rock nearby.

"Sorry, little one," Alister pants.

The barking grows louder, as if the controversy, whatever it is, has grown worse. What can be bothering Marbles like that? A land-walking stone-fish? Marbles cornered one of those when he was a puppy, and his paw swelled up from the nasty bite the thing gave him. A canine *yipe* splits the air, and Alister runs even faster.

He emerges into a clearing. It doesn't look like the place where he left Marbles, but then he does not know this area. He might simply have come around the other side. But where is his dog?

"Bark, bark!" comes the voice again, from directly behind. Alister spins. There is a big dogwood tree standing there, its multiple puppy faces gazing at him with friendly interest.

"What—?" he sputters. "Where's Marbles?"

Seeing that the nice human boy is angry, the dogwood's leaves droop, and it whines pathetically.

Section 19

“Aw, I’m not mad at you,” Alister says, scratching the tree’s bole. The bark makes happy little yipping noises, and the tails of the branches switch back and forth with enthusiasm, narrowly missing Alister. “But why did you yell? I heard a yelp.”

A root raises itself. The finial resembles a long dogleg, much as has been described in the Mundane game of golf, with ending claws very similar to Marbles’. Just above them is a deep bite, still running with ruddy sap. It shakes, and the dogwood makes a mournful sound.

“Poor fella,” Alister says. “Who did that? Let me help you.” He soon finds what he needs: soft spongemoss, which will absorb the sap and seal the injury until it heals, protecting it even against mosquitoes, vicious lichenous parasites which thrive on sap and bloodroot. As he works on the dogwood, he hears a rustling behind him.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is less than or equal to Alister’s Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 21.

If the total is greater, turn to section 11.

* 19 *

Alister flies through the air and hits the ground rolling. He lands smack in a patch of maidenhair fern, which shrieks and smacks at him with shepherd’s purse until he gets out.

Section 20

"Sorry, ma'am," Alister says, for he has been raised to have good manners. It sniffs and ignores him. Marbles takes offense at this and lifts a leg to water the patch. This action is met with more shrieks and batings, until the boy and dog flee some distance away from it.

"Well, Marbles," Alister says, affectionately patting the stone dog, who waggles his tail. "We're out of the Market, but where do we go now? Let me concentrate. 'Cause I don't know where we are." Dropping the book bag and his knapsack to the ground, Alister stands up and turns first one way, then another, staring into the thick forest, until he has a fix on his objective.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total number rolled is even, turn to section 16.

If the total number rolled is 13, turn to section 20.

If any odd number except 13 is rolled, turn to 28.

* 20 *

Even if Alister doesn't know where he is, other creatures have no trouble finding him. His only warning is a sort of metallic clashing, like coins jingling. Then he feels a sharp pinch in the vicinity of his ankle.

"Nickelpedes! We must have fallen into the Gap!" Alister cries as he tries to stamp on the little pest. His first thought is how lucky they have been. He and Marbles could have plummeted to their deaths. In

Section 20

some places the Gap is a thousand feet deep. This is one of the shallower parts. But it has the same hazards as the rest of its dangerous length. The nickelpede retreats, having gouged out the first disk of flesh. Marbles runs off after it, barking. The nickelpede can move quickly when it wants to. Marbles' hunting cries can be heard moving farther and farther away. Alister calls for him to come back, but the dog doesn't seem to hear.

His leg is bleeding copiously, which attracts more monster bugs. There are five in all, and no bug repellent plants are growing anywhere in sight. He raises the staff and strikes at the nickelpedes. They scuttle around his feet, looking for openings. He will have to kill them all to escape. Otherwise, they will attack him until his ankles are nickeled away, then they'll eat the rest of him.

NICKELPEDES (5)

To hit Alister: 14 To be hit: 10 Hit points: 3

Damage with pincers: 1 point per hit. Alister does 1 D6 of damage with his staff.

All surviving nickelpedes will attack each turn.

If Alister loses, turn to section 23.

If he wins, turn to section 34.

* **21** *

Alister turns his head just in time to see a large brown bird landing on his discarded knapsack. Its clever black eye winks at him, and it boldly continues to undo the fastening. With a flick of its claw, it throws back the flap and proceeds to investigate the contents.

By that time, Alister has forgotten his first-aid endeavors. The tree whimpers sadly behind him. He leaps toward the bird, just as it is pulling free Good Magician Humfrey's map.

"Drop it, Bird!" he commands.

Squawking, it complies. As the map falls away, Alister can see the telltale red breast of the would-be burglar. "It figures," he says in disgust. "One of the most notorious hoods in the forest: a robin. Get out of here. Go rob a crow's nest." The bird, a male, obviously disdains the advice and cockily removes himself from the premises with a saucy flutter of his wings. No doubt he is more interested in young pigeons than old crows. Alister doesn't care if he has offended the bird. What matters is that he has saved his precious map from being stolen. He must be more careful where he throws things in the future.

He finishes tying up the dogwood's wound and places leaves from several repellent plants about its roots to prevent another such attack on the harmless tree. Some are repellent even to himself, bounding away from his hands when he bends to pick them up. He solves that problem by popping his knapsack over them. When

Section 22

they take their knap, he is able to carry them to the dogwood without difficulty.

The tree is beside itself with gratitude and ecstasy. Alister sees a double image of the dogwood and feels a little dizzy at the sight of twice as many doggy faces. He shakes a root, pats it on the bole, and walks away with the sound of its joyous barking in his ears.

Once away from the dogwood, he can hear Marbles still calling for him.

"I'm coming, Marbles! Don't stop!"

Turn to section 15.

* 22 *

Alister flies through the air and hits the ground rolling. He lands smack up against a large boulder and flops down, groaning. Marbles skids across trampled ferns and reeds and hits the rock beside him, gouging out long slashes in the stone with his claws.

"Are you okay, fella?" Alister says weakly.

Marbles whimpers in reply. He totters to his feet and sits down to scratch at his left ear, which now has a chip in it. Alister pulls himself up and props his back against the boulder.

"I hurt, too. I'm gonna find a healing spring later. I bet you'd like that, too. We're out of the Market, but where do we go now? Let me concentrate. 'Cause I don't know where we are." After setting the book bag and his knapsack next to him on the ground, Alister draws himself painfully to his feet and turns first one way, then another. His shoulder aches, and so does his

Section 23

back and left leg. He stares into the thick forest, until he has a fix on his objective.

Roll 1 D6, and subtract from Alister's hit points.

If he has run out of hit points, turn to section 9.

If not, roll 3 D6.

If the total number rolled is an even number, turn to section 16.

If the total number rolled is 13, turn to section 20.

If it is any odd number except 13, turn to 28.

* 23 *

Alister raises his staff and brings it down on the mass of nickelpedes rolling around his feet. They elude the blow, scattering swiftly on their many legs. Seeing one about to strike, Alister has to dance to avoid having a nickel-sized gouge taken out of his other ankle. Those little monsters hurt!

Instead of running away to eat its prize, the nickelpede drops the disk-shaped bit of flesh in the calf-high grass and rejoins its comrades. They aren't just going to eat and run, Alister realizes. They mean to bring him down and use all the flesh—his flesh!—for food. Probably they have a nestful of young 'pedes to feed. And here is a stupid, helpless, easy source of food that just dropped out of the skies for them.

Section 23

He thumps one of them solidly with the staff's end. It doesn't move, so he sweeps the stick underneath it and pitches it into the nearby brush. There is a commotion and rustling of leaves, followed by a loud crunching. Perhaps the nickelpede has met something bigger and hungrier than it is. The Gap is full of predators.

He scans the edge of the cliff far above him. If there is even a remote chance that he can attract someone's attention, especially someone from his village, he wants that chance. The villagers patrol the Gap perimeter in case someone falls into the crevasse. The Elder Waya's talent is an invisible fence, which prevents small children and animals from wandering too close to the danger zone, but there is always the odd casualty: someone stupid winning a bet, or someone in trouble, like himself. Patrol, where are you?

"Ow!" While his attention was turned upward, a nickelpede clambered onto his boot and chomped him. Now he is bleeding in three places. It skitters away, but not fast enough. He strikes it with one end of the staff, crushing it into a pulp of entrails and legs. The long stick whirls in the air, and the other end brushes a nickelpede off the side of the other boot. Two down, one flung away. Where are the last two?

As if in answer, he feels agonizing pain shoot through the backs of his legs. The two remaining insects have sneaked around him in the grass and into his boots. He drops to his knees. The little monsters have each taken a bite out of the tendons at the backs of his ankles. He can't stand up!

The third nickelpede appears out of the brush in front of him. It skirts the pounding staff and nicks out a bite from the front of his thigh. Its fellows gouge him,

too, and run around for another chomp. He swings the staff around, always seeming to miss where they are. Their mandibles click sinisterly.

His hand drops for a moment, and a nickelpede grabs onto his wrist. Before he can brush it off, it has taken its disk of flesh out, severing the tendon. He is no longer able to clench his hand. The end of the staff skips along the ground, missing the insects.

He has to escape. Throwing away the staff, he attempts to crawl away from his attackers. The three nickelpedes, appetites not yet satisfied, follow his creeping progress. His gouged knees catch on roots and sharp grasses. He falls to his belly and tries to pull himself forward with his hands. His disabled wrist folds when he presses it against the ground. A nickelpede runs past his face toward his neck. He shoots out an arm to bat it away, but it has already taken hold of the flesh just under his ear. It bites down, causing great pain. Alister shrieks the word of Humfrey's spell.

Turn to section 29.

* **24** *

"There!" Alister shouts. "That's perfect. Come on, boy." And he dashes over to a lonely clump of pogo trees, which are playing possum in the shallows of the swamp land. Marbles dashes over to see what his master has found and stands shaking his head.

"We have to," Alister says, cutting a stout stick with

Section 24

his knife. "I'll tie you over my shoulders. Come on. It'll be fun."

Marbles backs away, but Alister holds out a piece of rock candy, coaxing him. The dog sighs and trots over. He can never resist rock candy. He chews on the peace offering, sadly watching his master work.

With a long piece of vine, Alister cuts a cross piece and ties it close to the bottom of the pogo stick. He secures a much-protesting Marbles across his back in a sort of vine harness, and hops off down the road, his progress punctuated by squishes and yips.

The mucky terrain has done much to slow down the Flee Market, too. In a hundred or so leaps, Alister sights his quarry. In another hundred, he is beside the entryway, matching its speed. His arms are tiring, and his back is sore from the two hundred or so times Marbles has bounced against it. At last he is sure he has the speed matched exactly, and as if in confirmation, a man at the gate looks up, smiles at him, and gestures him in.

With a terrific bound, Alister leaps off the road, through the gate, and lands with a thud on the ground. The landscape to his right reverses and gallops back the way he came. Marbles frees himself from the harness and runs around to lick Alister's face in congratulation. They have made it to the Flee Market!

Turn to section 26.

* 25 *

“Whoa!” Alister cries, his mind at last registering the presence of the tree. “Marbles, stop, quick!”

His dog responds faster than Alister does, skidding to a halt almost instantly. The youth stumbles within inches of the tree’s eager slipknots, trips and rolls into a somersault, just evading the ropy branches. The somersault, a little white globe, explodes, peppering him, Marbles, and the tree with sparkling white crystals. The tree recoils, its vines caked. Coughing and spitting, Alister claws at his wildly tearing eyes, which are rimmed with bitter little granules. When his eyes clear, it is just in time to see the puff of dust that is the Flee Market disappear down the freshly trampled road.

“Ah, nuts.” Thoroughly a-salted and battered, the boy leaps up and sets out in fresh pursuit of the errant Market. The tree’s running knots snatch out for him, but they are too slow with salt on their tails.

The footballs have stomped their way through a swath of marshland, so Alister and Marbles have to hop from patch to patch of the reeds which float on top of the mire. The boy looks longingly at a clump of sweet marsh-mallow plants just twenty feet to his left and sighs. He promises himself he’ll find the place again when his time is his own once more. Marbles falls far behind in the swampy terrain. The reeds are high, and he has to jump carefully or sink into the thin purple mud.

The two make it to the other side without incident,

Section 26

though their legs are purple. By now, the Market is long out of sight.

"We've just gotta catch up with that thing!" Alister says, helping to brush viscous mud out of Marbles' coat. Mud hens with their chicks wander out of the brush and snap up the particles of dirt which he and Marbles have shed. "I'll find something to get us there." He concentrates as he wanders over the damp ground.

And, within minutes, his talent has turned something up.

Turn to section 24.

* 26 *

"Welcome, young man," the gatekeeper says. "What's your pleasure today? We have sweetmeats and amusements, oddities, artifacts from Mundania, and treasures from all over Xanth. A cleaning spell, perhaps?" The man runs a quick eye over the boy's apparel.

"Do you have books?" Alister asks, getting to his feet and brushing the dust off his clothes.

"Books, books, do we have books?" the man demands, extending a palm to the skies in supplication, deploring Alister's denseness. "This is the Flee Market. We have everything. Everything is here somewhere. But don't take my word for it. Explore. Examine. Enjoy."

Alister and Marbles walk down the aisles, peering curiously at the goings on in the fast-moving fair. Just beyond the edge of the last row, the scenery is running

swiftly by. It feels like they are falling, Alister decides, only sideways.

He watches several barterers completed, mostly for things or services that the purchaser's magic can provide. One particularly large centaur whose magic is music, coming out of a sweet silver flute floating by his head, receives a pot of honey, guaranteed straight from a honeymoon, literally for a song. A grouchy looking man sits in a tent all alone, magically sharpening swords by speaking angrily to them. Alister tiptoes past him, trying not to attract his attention. He doesn't want to get the rough edge of the man's tongue.

One woman has a fine selection of crockery displayed, but no table underneath it. Every bowl, plate, and cup is hanging in place with no visible means of support. "It's my talent," she says, to Alister's amazed glance. "I make dishes hover in the air. Ideal for parents with babies who throw their bowls on the ground. And they dry beautifully after washing. No need to use a spell; they drip dry."

"That's a very useful magic," Alister says, meaning it. One of his younger brothers is still just a baby and throws his dishes around at every meal, to the despair of their mother. He lifts a bowl and is surprised by its lightness. Out of the corner of his eye he notices a table laden with books. A faun and a nimble little man are moving around it, carrying on a lively discussion about the wares displayed thereupon. Alister puts the dish down on air and goes to join them.

The nimble man proves to be the owner of the book-stall. "Glim's my name," he says, his brilliant light blue eyes and white teeth sparkling in a dark brown-skinned face. "This is my friend Fairulter. What can I do for you? You want a book? Can you read?"

Section 26

"Yes," says Alister. "I went to centaur school. In the Gap Village."

"Ah, a scholar. And what was your best subject?"

"Geography," he answers. "Do you have . . ."

"So you travel around, learning more about this very interesting land of ours, eh?" Glim asks, rubbing his narrow hands together.

"Not exactly. I'm looking . . ."

"Good! Take your time. Look around. Look around! Is this your rock hound? What a fine-looking creature. Would you like a petrified bone, good fellow? I have one right here." The bookman holds up a bone for Marbles, which does indeed tremble at the thought of being chewed by the dog. Marbles accepts it and lies under the table to gnaw contentedly if noisily.

"Can I get . . . ?" Alister starts again, beginning to feel exasperated at this little man.

"It won't spoil his appetite, will it?" Glim asks, peering sideways at the boy. "I do so love to give treats to young folk. I'm just a softy, I expect. Would you like a drink? We have a tame soda poppy growing in a planter."

"Why do you keep interrupting me when I try to tell you what I want?" Alister explodes at last, his patience gone.

"Because that is my job. This is a book-stall," Glim explains, his face growing sad. "If I let you tell me that you want to buy a book, you might buy one and take it away with you, and then I'd never see it again. I do so love my books." He sniffs miserably. Tears run out of the corners of his eyes, and he collects them with a small handkerchief. "But I suppose they have to go sooner or later. Why not to a fine young man like you?"

"Good," Alister says. "I'm looking for something really old."

"How about this?" And Glim produces a set of small stone tablets with pictures engraved on them. "It's a treatise on raising dinosaurs for fun and profit. But the price is a saur point with me, I'm afraid."

"No, not that old. I want the *Encyclopedia of Xanth*. Do you have it here?"

Glim drums fingers against his lower lip. "Hmm. Perhaps. Perhaps. But we'll see if you can identify that for which you have come. What's your talent?"

"I find things. I knew that if I came here, I would find the *Encyclopedia*."

"You find things, but do you know what you've found when you've found it?" The brilliant blue eyes flash, and then turn away. "I have here three sets of books. If you can correctly identify the one you seek *without* using your talent, you can take it away with you. Otherwise, you must do a service for me."

"I can't do that," Alister says. "I'm bound to Good Magician Humfrey for a year, or until I bring the books back to him."

"Don't worry. I won't interfere with that contract." Glim assures him. He sets several books before Alister. One is a large volume bound in red leather. Next to that is a stack of five books, each bigger than the first, also leather-bound, but blue in color. Alister's heart jumps for joy when he sees those. Then there are two books covered in brown leather. All seem approximately the same age and state of wear; all are musty and important-looking; all have silver and gold stamping on their covers.

"Now," the bookman says, fondling the red leather

Section 27

cover. "This first book contains every word ever written about Xanth. This set"—he gently opens and lets fall the front cover of one of the brown volumes—"is an exhaustive but incomplete listing of the oddities of our land. For example, it talks about tangle trees, but neglects to mention carnivorous grass. This last is a complete overview of everything that happened in Xanth up until and including the reign of King Roogna. There are marvelous accounts of the Frist Wave, of the building of the stockades, and so on," Glim says, thin fingers stroking the blue leather binding. "Which of them do you want, young man?"

Alister looks at the three selections before him and thinks hard before he opens his mouth. He isn't used to going without his talent's reassurance. It is a hard choice, but a very important one. He needs to give the correct answer. But which is right?

If Alister chooses the red book, turn to section 7.

If he chooses the brown books, turn to section 27.

If he chooses the blue books, turn to section 14.

* 27 *

"I want the brown books," Alister says. "I'm sure that Magician Humfrey said that the books tell all about Xanth and those sound like the right set. That must be the one."

"Very well, young man," Glim says, handing over the

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brown leather books. "A fine choice. You may inspect them now."

Alister seizes the top book and turns to the title page. "*Encyclopedia of Xanth*, Volume Two," it says in finely calligraphed letters. Success! The second book is volume four. "But where are the other books?"

Glim shrugs. "I have never seen them. You have to find them yourself. These are the only ones I came across. I found them to the north, near the North Village. Those are weighty tomes, both inside and out. Allow me to give you a bag in which to carry them." Glim draws a worn-looking cloth sack from under the table and lays it in front of Alister. "It has nearly infinite capacity but no weight to speak of. It's woven of a fiber called bottomless pith."

The boy accepts it gratefully and puts the books inside the bag. It remains nearly flat. He pokes at the sides, but can barely discern the forms within.

"Well, good luck, Alister." Glim seizes his hand and pumps it up and down. "Come back again."

With a jaunty wave, Alister shoulders the sack and makes for the exit with Marbles at his heels.

Turn to section 8.

* 28 *

A harsh sound attracts Alister's attention, and he runs for cover. A harpy is flying by! He knows that they sometimes eat human flesh, and he has no wish to be taken to dinner by stinking bird-women. Much better

Section 28

to have the advantage by concealing himself. But he is grateful to the harpy for one thing: it is likely that she lives in the harpy den right across the Gap from Gap Village. He crouches behind a pillow bush, hoping that she'll fly close enough so he can identify her. Yep, it is Henrietta Harpy, the ugly buzzard, an old "playmate" of his. The Flee Market has dropped him south of the Gap, not too far from where he climbed aboard. He feels around for a stone.

"Hey, buzzard breath!" Alister shouts. The harpy, taken by surprise, squawks, shedding a few feathers and a dropping. Alister throws the stone, missing by a mile, but it is worth it for the effect. The angry bird turns her head every which way, almost falling out of the air, as she tries to discover her assailant's hiding place. Laughing like a maniac, Alister ducks again, looking for something else to throw. He finds a stinkbug resting underneath a cowslip, plucks a camisole-shaped leaf, and wraps it up.

"Hey, bird legs! I found you some nice underwear!" And tosses the yellow silk bundle at her.

Curiosity rather than intelligence prompts her to catch the package in one claw and unwrap it. The stinkbug, suddenly exposed to sunlight and an awful smell that rivals its own, releases a stench. The harpy screams and drops it, but too late; she is well and truly sprayed. She explodes into a fit of bad language which causes a patch of cat's ear to perk up and a primrose to wilt in shame. "I know where you are," the harpy yells. "And I'm going to kill you. I'll sauté your liver, I'll rip out your heart! You can't get away, you little Gap brat!"

Oops, maybe he's gone too far with his little trick. Harpies are not the most aerodynamically sound fliers,



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but they are vicious fighters. One wonderful day when he was ten, Alister and his best friend Brida were hiding under the leaves of a trumpet vine, watching two harpies battling in midair. The loud trumpeting of the proud orange flowers covered up the hysterical laughter and shouts of the two children. Some of the dirty tricks the bird-women used on each other were things that even locoberry-stoned humans wouldn't do. As a matter of fact, one of those two was Henrietta Harpy. Alister starts looking for a means of escape.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is less than or equal to Alister's Intelligence value, turn to 30.

If greater, turn to section 33.

* 29 *

As Good Magician Humfrey and the Gorgon are talking in his study, the Magician becomes aware that Alister is in trouble. The lad has used the spell. Quickly the gnome turns to his book, which magically narrates everything happening in Xanth. Yes, the poor boy has come to a messy and untimely end.

"Oh, he's dead," cries the Gorgon who has been reading over the little man's shoulder.

"No, he would have been, but the spell he invoked reverses any damage done by magical means or a magical creature."

"Then he's all right!"

"No, I have no patience with bunglers."

"But what then—?" The snakes weave around her head as puzzled as she.

"The spell also put him out of Xanth, into Mundania. He won't find his way back. A good thing too, since all those injuries would return if he did."

The Gorgon sighs. It seems so harsh that Alister has to spend the rest of his life in drear Mundania.

Humfrey shuts the book with a thump. "Just don't mention the word 'Encyclopedia' to me for at least a hundred years."

She nods quietly and leaves the room.

Alister's adventure has ended badly for him. If you want to try once more to retrieve the Encyclopedia of Xanth, turn to section 1 and start over.

* **30** *

Alister needs a distraction, something that will keep Henrietta busy while he gets away. Some interesting noise or disgusting display that she can't resist. Crawling with his nose almost to the ground, he signals for Marbles to follow him and prowls among the plants growing in the shelter of the taller shrubs. Here and there, a Cretan dittany sings its stupid ditties, but they aren't bawdy enough to fascinate a harpy. He begs his talent to lead him in the right direction.

"Eyugh!" His hand lands right in a clump of loves-
lies-bleeding. It splashes him all the way up to his

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elbow. When he wipes the plant's blood off on some handy grass, the grass protests loudly.

"What a nasty mess! What on Xanth do you think you're doing?" it demands prissily. Bad luck, Alister thinks. Myrtle grass. No, perhaps the luck is in his favor.

"My apologies, Myrtle. Have you any friends around here?" he asks conversationally. "I've got a little time, and I'd like to chat with a nicely brought up plant or so."

"But of course," it says cordially, once correctly addressed. Myrtles are stick-in-the-muds about politeness. "We were all raised properly. There's Rose of Sharon, Virginia Creeper, Calla Lily, Sweet Cicely, Jack in the Pulpit, and, of course, Sweet William." Here the shoots turn a more delicate shade of green. She must think he is sweet on her, Alister decides.

"Will you kindly introduce me?" he asks, keeping his voice low. "But if you would, please speak up. I'm a little hard of hearing."

"Naturally." The grass begins to address other plants around the clearing in a loud tone. Soon, the area is abuzz with floral chatter. Alister creeps away on elbows and knees.

The harpy isn't fooled by the feminine voices of Rose, Virginia, Myrtle, Cicely, and Lily. She continues to hover around the pillow bush, watching for twitching leaves or branches that would betray her prey. But when Jack and William join the conversation, she swoops away from the bush and flies from one patch to the other, screeching in frustration at having let Alister get away. Henrietta's confusion causes much merri-

ment among the plants. With typical harpy malice, she tears up a tall Jack in the Pulpit.

"I'll pulp you, Jack!" she rasps, ripping his leaves off.

"Go pick on sermon your own size," he rejoins and dies in hopes of becoming a glorious resurrection plant.

By now, Alister is out of the clearing. With a last glance over his shoulder to make sure the harpy is well occupied, he races after Marbles, down the path that leads to the bridge over the Gap. More friendly plants border this lane. Motherworts gather their young under their leaves as he runs by; harebells and bluebells ring cheery greetings. Sage nods gravely at him, disturbed momentarily from its deep meditation.

The road leads to the main bridge, but Alister knows that the invisible bridge is closer. He can find it easily, though few others can. Most of them are afraid to step out into seeming nothingness. Alister used to lead his friends in the Village across the bridge at full speed, frightening off larger foes, who invariably stopped at the edge, felt at the bridge with a toe, and then proceeded with the chase. The children were always far away and safe before then.

Alister walks out onto the unseen boards, feels them sway under his weight. With a cautious hand, Alister feels for the waist-high guide rope and clutches it as he goes along. He hears creaking under his feet. The invisible bridge is old. Its magic is the only thing keeping it from decaying and falling down into the Gap. He dares a glance down between his toes. The wild and dangerous denizens of the Gap mill around down there, under the thick vegetation so curiously mutated because it grows in the Gap. People would

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never know that the bridge was out until they fell into the maw of one of these monsters. Marbles sniffs uncertainly at the south end of the bridge and doesn't lift his nose until they walk off the north end.

"That's better," Alister says, shrugging his knapsack into a more comfortable place on his back. "Now I have to figure out just where we are and where we're going."

Turn to section 16.

* 31 *

"We'll go this way," Alister decides at last, pointing toward the right. "Least we'll have dry feet. Those other paths are damp."

Marbles, who has been sniffing curiously up and down all three ways, yips his approval and follows Alister onto the graveled strip.

"I definitely think we're on the scent, fella," the boy says, raising his freckled nose to the wind. "It feels just the same to me as it did when I got close to those first two volumes of the *Encyclopedia*. But not as strong. Of course we aren't close enough yet."

The road twists to avoid a tall, old horse chestnut. The tree whinnies, but both boy and dog keep moving. If it could, it would keep them there forever, telling them boring stories, dropping one old chestnut after another until Alister felt like sawing logs. And they are notorious liars. None of a chestnut's stories are ever true. Even the nuts it produces look exactly like a

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centaur's droppings—a description of blatant untruth in Alister's neck of the woods.

There is a grassy hill ahead of him among the trees. The banks on the sides of the road seem to be getting higher and higher until Alister notices that it is the path itself which is sloping downward. Grass to either side is knee high, then chest high, and finally at eye level. The steep sides of the rampway are plain packed earth with neither plant life nor decoration on them. Glow-worms creep along the walls, providing a weak green illumination as Alister and Marbles follow the path under the hill.

After the glare of the sunshine, it is frighteningly close and dark in the narrow cavern. Alister begins to feel as though he is trapped in a bad dream brought by a night mare. Such dreams have always brought him screaming awake; being trapped in a small, lightless place is one of his greatest fears. His father has taught him how to get along underground: never to shout, for fear of bringing the roof down; to keep one's head and remember the way in; and always to be polite to those who lived there. Goblins are touchy about their subterranean homes and will kill anyone who insults them. It isn't grouchy goblins Alister is afraid of. It is the dark. Things can jump out at you, and you never know they are there. But it is a matter of pride to him to never let anyone know. He doesn't want his friends to call him a baby.

When he turns back he can no longer see daylight at the tunnel's entrance. The path's edges are now lined at waist height with moonstones, little pocked globes that shine silvery green like the great cheese in the sky. This is the time of the full moon, so the little

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stones reflect a whole circle. Marbles points his nose at one of them and howls mournfully.

Alister hears a sinister rattle in the roof of the chamber, and makes him stop. Marbles gives him a hurt look. His howling is appreciated back in the Gap Village. He and Brida's cerberus, Fates, sing together in a barkershop quartet. "You'll bring the roof in on us if you do that down here, Marbles," Alister explains in a softer tone. Marbles is nonplussed. They *always* bring the house down.

At the end of a long, steadily narrowing corridor, they come to a T-junction. They have to turn right or left. Alister looks around. "There must be a clue here somewhere that will tell us where to find the books."

As soon as he says the word "clue," shimmering words appear before him on the wall: SOLVE THE RIDDLES TO SOLVE THE MAZE.

"A maze?" Alister cries. "I'm no good at this kind of game." A single word appears below the first phrase: TRY. "Okay," he agrees reluctantly. "What's the first one?"

WHAT, the words spell, IS BIG AT THE BOTTOM, LITTLE AT THE TOP, AND HAS EARS?

To the left side, an arrow forms pointing left and over it is the word CORN-UCOPIA. To the right side, another arrow appears under the word MOUNTAIN.

If Alister thinks the left-hand answer is correct, turn to section 73.

If he thinks the right-hand one is correct, turn to section 36.

* 32 *

"Let's go this way, Marbles," Alister says, pointing to the centaur trail off to the left. "At least, if we find the centaurs we can ask directions. They have all kinds of knowledge."

Marbles trots obediently at his side. The grass grows thicker on either side of the path, but the road itself is trodden to bare dirt. This must be a well-used road.

Along the side of the road, many of the plants Alister sees are the sort that centaurs like to have around: wild oats, which lash out at his legs; corn lilies growing tall and golden; and buckeye, which the centaur folk use as a mild intoxicant. Alister's teacher Charl says it has quite a kick.

They come to a fork in the road, the oats and lilies following the right-hand path. Alister concentrates and finds that their objective is down the track to the left. Christmas pines grow on both sides of the path. Alister and Marbles walk on, careful not to knock any of the ornamental cones off the trees.

It is suddenly much colder and a persistent humming grows in their ears. Alister feels such a chill; he checks his clothing to make sure that no burrs have attached themselves. None there, but plenty of the cold little parasites are growing among the nearby trees. There has to be another reason for the drop in temperature.

A proliferation of cold-loving vegetation grows in this woods. Ice plants glitter in the sun, side by side with snowdrops. He recognizes Christmas cherry, the

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fragile red fruit decorated around its circumference with stripes, stars, and spots. Wintergreen stands in decorative clumps, breathing an icy mint aroma that reminds Alister of the sore throats his mother has cured with this plant. Here and there the gloom of the pines is alleviated by bright Star-of-Bethlehem flowers, which shine over the carefully arranged rows and beds. Clearly some planning has gone into the arrangement of plants here. It is a veritable winter garden.

Alister tastes a white snowberry growing on its tree in the center of the garden. It is refreshingly cold and tart and melts away on his tongue in an instant. He samples a few more, the sweet-sour taste cutting the dust in his throat and quenching his thirst. Marbles refuses any berries, contentedly munching powdery blossoms off a snowball bush.

The arrangement of plants extends quite a bit farther into the grove. Alister can see a hedge of Christmas dagger fern bordering one side of the garden, and such a quantity of Star-of-Bethlehem that the light is almost blinding. In fact, the humming is coming from that direction, and his talent informs him that the *Encyclopedia* is to be found beyond the lights.

As they approach the fern hedge a dark figure hunches through a gap and bars their way. It is a huge black cerberus, tail lashing and wide awake. Two canine heads, mouths full of sharp teeth, slaver, while the middle one addresses them.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"That way," Alister points. "There's something there I need to get."

"No, you don't," the cerberus says, and the two side heads shake threateningly from side to side.

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Alister eyes the beast, measuring it. It is big and strong, but it is only flesh and blood. He has his staff and his knife and knows how to use them. Marbles is a good fighter, too, and he doesn't wound easily or bleed at all. The cerberus is intelligent and ought to have figured out the odds for itself. After all, it has three brains to think with. But he is going through there, whether or not the cerberus wants him too.

If Alister decides to fight the cerberus, turn to section 77.

If he decides to reason with it, turn to section 37.

If he decides to find another way past, turn to 84.

* 33 *

Alister needs a distraction, something that will keep Henrietta busy while he gets away. Some interesting noise or disgusting display that she can't resist. Crawling with his nose almost to the ground, he signals for Marbles to follow him and prowls among the plants growing in the shade of the taller shrubs. Here and there, a Cretan dittany sings its ditties, but they aren't bawdy enough to fascinate a harpy. He begs his talent to lead him in the right direction.

"Eyugh!" His hand lands right in a clump of loves-
lies-bleeding. He wipes the plant's blood off on some
handy grass, but it protests loudly.

"What a nasty mess! What do you think you're
doing?" it demands. Bad luck, Alister thinks. Myrtle

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grass. That persnickety stuff can and will talk your ears off.

"Shh!" he begs it. "There's a harpy up there, looking for me."

"What's that to me?" it shrieks. "You have soiled my blades. Plants, there's an intruder here. A *messy intruder*."

"Now, wait. I didn't mean . . ." Alister begins, but he has to shout to make himself heard over the din. "I didn't *mean* to bloody your blades!"

"Aha!" screams Henrietta, appearing suddenly overhead. "There you are, you nasty brat!" She swoops down at him, talons outstretched.

HENRIETTA HARPY

To hit Alister: 11 To be hit: 11 Hit points: 14

Damage with talons: 1 D6. If Henrietta falls below half her hit points, she will flee.

Alister does 1 D6 points of damage with the bolster.

If Alister is victorious, turn to section 79.

If Henrietta wins, turn to section 42.

* 34 *

Alister raises his staff and brings it down on the mass of nickelpedes roiling around his feet. They elude the blow, scattering swiftly on their many legs. Seeing one about to strike, Alister has to dance to avoid having a

nickel-sized gouge taken out of his other ankle. Those little monsters hurt!

Instead of running away to eat its prize, the nickelpede drops the disk-shaped bit of flesh in the calf-high grass and rejoins its comrades. They aren't just going to eat and run, Alister realizes. They mean to bring him down and use all the flesh—his flesh—for food. Probably they have a nestful of young 'pedes to feed. And here is a stupid, helpless, easy source of food that just dropped out of the skies for them.

He thumps one of them solidly with the staff's end. It doesn't move, so he sweeps the stick underneath it and pitches it into the nearby brush. There is a commotion and rustling of leaves, followed by a loud crunching. Perhaps the nickelpede has met something bigger and hungrier than it is. The Gap is full of predators.

He scans the edge of the cliff far above him. If there is a remote chance that he can attract someone's attention, especially someone from his village, he wants that chance. The villagers patrol the Gap perimeter in case someone falls into the crevasse. The Elder Waya's talent of an invisible fence prevents small children and animals from wandering too close to the danger zone, but there is always the odd casualty: someone stupid winning a bet, or someone in trouble, like himself. Patrol, where are you?

"Ow!" While his attention was turned upward, a nickelpede clambered onto his boot and chomped him. Now he is bleeding in three places. It skitters away, but not fast enough. He strikes it with one end of the staff, crushing it into a pulp of entrails and legs. The long stick whirls in the air, and the other end brushes a

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nickelpede off the side of the other boot. Two down, one flung away. Where are the last two?

He feels a tickling sensation at the backs of his legs. He kicks up his feet in what under other circumstances would be a very funny dance. Two nickelpedes, the missing assailants, fall to the ground. They've been clinging to the backs of his boots.

"Sneak attack, eh?" he snarls, sneering at them. "Well, it boots not. That's for you, and *unh!* that's for you." With two heavy blows of his staff, Alister squashes both nickelpedes. The last 'pede comes scuttling out of the grass, sees Alister standing over the bodies of three of its fellows, and turns right back around again. Alister laughs until his sides hurt. He sits down to bandage himself up.

In a little while, Marbles comes marching back. With an expression of pride, he spits something at Alister's feet.

"Yuck!" Alister says, jumping back. It is the first nickelpede, in much worse condition than he last saw it. Marbles looks hurt. He has just made a successful hunt. He expects some applause. Alister kneels beside him and ruffles his stony fur. "Oh, I'm sorry, boy. You did good. Those aren't easy to kill. See?" He points at the three bodies lying in the grass. Marbles immediately looks ashamed. His master has been left alone with monsters and he has gone running off! "It's all right," Alister assures him. "You kept the other one from informing the nest, right?"

Marbles perks up.

"Right," agrees Alister. "Now, let's get out of here."

With difficulty, they locate a root system growing out

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of the Gap wall. It is a good fifty feet almost straight up to the edge. By clambering hand over hand, Alister is able to pull himself up. Marbles has to ride with the carribean over Alister's shoulders. He lets out little whimpers of complaint. "Quiet, Marbles, you're making me nervous, too," Alister says, sweat breaking out on his forehead. Marbles closes his eyes tightly.

Alister braces his feet against the Gap wall and climbs up partway holding onto a long root. He grabs for another when his handhold starts to slip, but the new one isn't very strong. He can feel it pulling loose. Terror lends him speed as he scrambles for a better handhold. They are almost forty feet above the Gap floor. Marbles, who has obediently remained silent, lets out a tiny whine. "It's okay, Marbles. You can whimper now." Panting, Alister hauls them both the rest of the way up.

"Well!" Alister breathes, wiping his face. "Now, I just have to figure out where we are, and where we have to go."

Turn to section 16.

* 35 *

"How about the middle road?" Alister suggests. "Since I can't choose the one that's the best, we'll take the one that's staring us in the face. C'mon." He leads the way, stamping down the lightly trodden grass and plants directing them to a gap between two large trees.

Beyond the trees, a path of sorts continues. It is so narrow that branches brush Alister's shoulders on both sides, tearing at his sleeves. Whippy shoots smack him in the face, and roots nudge up under his feet, making him stumble. The lad hears his rock hound grumbling as he plows through wild grass that tickles his nose.

Ahead, Alister can see the glint of a brook or stream in the bright orange of the setting sun. Evening is drawing near, and he wants to settle down in a safe place for the night. He shoulders his way through and finds that there is quite a nice flat clearing around the bank of the stream.

"Marbles, I want to make camp here, if it's safe. I don't think this is one of the enchanted paths. Sniff around and see if there're signs of any dangerous creatures."

His dog immediately puts nose to ground and disappears into the plants at the perimeter of the clearing. In a short time he is back. "Any trouble?" Alister asks. Marbles sits up on his hind legs with his tongue out. "I guess not!" His master laughs, rummaging in the pack for a treat. "Here you go, pal. A nice chunk of rock candy."

Marbles holds the treat down with both front paws and gnaws at it. Alister sifts through the pack, looking for his own meal. The pickings are unappetizingly slim. He looks around the clearing for food trees, but there are none immediately within sight. "Okay." He sighs, levering himself to his feet. "Talent, get to work. I'm hungry! I want things that are nutritious and safe for me to eat."

He is soon directed toward one end of the clearing. Stepping carefully over a brightly burning Chinese-lantern plant, he lets his talent lead him to a pair of trees growing close together just out of the merry-colored lights.

"Well, I know what that one is," he says, scrutinizing the fruit of one tree. "That's a sasquat. I don't want to eat those just before going to sleep. But they'll make a decent breakfast. That is, if I don't meet anyone during the day tomorrow." Sasquats are roughly the size and shape of a foot, a big foot, and they make one behave in a sassy manner. More than one pupil of the centaur school who has tried to use the big fruit as an excuse for discourtesy to the centaur teachers have done penance for days on end. Once you know the edible plant forms you are expected to use discretion in eating the ones with known side-effects. Sasquats also give one nightmares about big white hairy monsters and snow. He turns instead to the other plant.

He doesn't know what it is, but it smells delectable. The leaves look very much like those of the palm plants, with sharp green hand-shaped fronds waving around the little oblong fruits growing in clusters close to the trunk. It can be dangerous to eat untested foods in the jungle of Xanth, but he is very hungry.

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If Alister chooses to eat the fruit, turn to section 63.

If he chooses not to, turn to section 60.

* 36 *

"Mountains are like that," says Alister, staring at the riddle and its answers. "All the ones I've ever seen are bigger at the bottom than at the top, and they have mountain-ears, though they don't look like ordinary ears. They look like little people with ropes and picks." He waits for something to happen. "You don't tell me. I just go ahead and find out if I'm right, right?"

RIGHT.

"Okay," Alister says amiably. "C'mon, Marbles." He shoulders his pack and marches off to the right.

The lines of moonstones continue, giving Alister the barest comfort of guidance through the dark passageway. He is no longer so nervous, but he is curious. What is the *Encyclopedia of Xanth* doing down here? He gives a little shake to the sack tied to his wrist which contains the other volumes he found. He can barely feel their outlines, since the magic of the sack makes it possible to keep an almost infinite quantity of things in it. He wonders if Humfrey will let him keep the sack after he has finished his service to the Good Magician. His mother would love it, especially around spring cleaning time. Or perhaps he'd give it to his father. It is a good thing for going hunting. He bets the hot peppers his father likes to gather wouldn't burn through the magic fibers of this sack. What his mother said the last

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time Mitchell appeared with a bag of peppers over his shoulder and burn marks on the back of his shirt. . . .

The corridor turns to his left and goes even deeper below ground. Alister is sure that he has guessed the correct answer to the riddle so he knows he is on the right path.

Turn to section 76.

* 37 *

Alister stands back for a moment to think. What would his father do? Kill it, or talk to it? Mitchell believes in never starting an unnecessary fight.

Marbles watches him warily, waiting for instructions. Will they attack this uppity cerberus or not? He growls under his breath, suggesting battle to Alister, in case his master has forgotten what a good fighter he is. There isn't a dog-fight he hasn't won nor a dog-creature who ever challenged him who's forgotten that. His master's hand touching his back tells him to be quiet. He lets the growl die away with the edge of threat in it to the very end.

Alister addresses the cerberus. "How can we get past you?"

"You have a ticket?" the beast asks.

"No. What do we need a ticket for?"

"To get under the Big Top, you need a ticket. Everyone knows that."

"I didn't."

"That's your problem," the cerberus says smugly.

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"How do I get a ticket?" Alister asks, unperturbed.

"I can sell you one. I'm the barker." It throws back its head and gives a deafening sample of its qualifications. "Step right up," announces one of the heads. "See the freak show," proclaims the second head. "Chance of a lifetime, a thrill a minute!" shouts the third head.

Alister claps his hands to his ears. "I understand. What does it cost for tickets for both of us?"

The cerberus eyes them. "Whaddaya got?"

Alister looks in his knapsack.

If Alister has the map and chooses to offer that, turn to section 104.

If not, turn to section 91.

* 38 *

"Aaah!" Alister screams, missing the cactus by inches as he flies through the air. The needler, a vindictive plant by any standards, throws a few spines at him as he passes, just for disturbing it. For good measure, it flings some at the id, but its skin is so thick it does not notice.

Alister lands on a soft clump of bladder wort, which collapses with a chorus of rude noises. The needles have caught him in the right arm, leaving a neat pattern like the floor of a tiger trap. He's never seen a tiger setting one, but it looks much like the picture in the book. He pulls out a handful of spines and nearly faints

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from the pain. With watering eyes, he inspects a few and discovers that every one is as long as his fingers and barbed for a good inch from the point down. What a mean plant! Nobody with any brains messes with needlers, and he can see why. Very cautiously, he plucks the rest of the spines out one by one.

He eyes the id, considering whether to try again to get it to swallow him. It has forgotten all about him and is settling down for its nap. If it takes a real dislike to him, he might not miss the needler next time. He wants to get the *Encyclopedia*, but is it worth risking his life?

If he decides to try again, turn to section 74.

If he decides not to, turn to section 41.

* 39 *

“That’s easy,” Alister says, turning immediately to the right and walking into the corridor. “A lady’s-slipper plant hasn’t got any hands. She can’t take her shoes off, so of course she sleeps with them on.” Alister often tagged along with his mother when she picked out new shoes. She wasn’t the fastest chooser, so it left him with lots of time to look for interesting plants and animals. Lady’s-slippers cringe in the presence of little boys, fearing them all as destructive menaces, so Lily let him wander off. Otherwise, the plant tends to drop unripe shoes nervously, sometimes missing Alister’s mother, sometimes not. If it let go of half of a pair, you never knew when the other shoe would fall. Once a handsome

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spike-heel fell on her hand after Alister made a loud and sudden return. He was punished on the spot: paddled with a sequined dancing-slipper, which did a tattoo on his backside.

The corridor turns left, then doubles back on itself in a series of ever shortening switchbacks. The passageway itself grows narrower, too, until he has to slip through almost touching the moonstones. He counts the number of turns he makes until he and Marbles squeak through a left turn leading into a wider corridor at the end of the tenth switchback. With relief, he notices that the moonstones recede to a more comfortable distance from him.

Another left, and he marches down the passage. This one comes to an end just out of sight of that last left turn. He feels the wall, hoping that there is an opening somewhere. Otherwise he'll have to turn back. So lady's-slipper couldn't have been the right answer. Hmm. Well, yes, they wouldn't sleep with their shoes on if someone picked them all, whereas night mares couldn't take theirs off. He made the wrong choice.

A roar behind him makes him spin around. He squints at the humped forms coming toward him. Marbles growls low in his throat, and the shapes roar back. Alister gawks at the forms, which are becoming more familiar the closer they get to him. Ant lions! Insect menaces fully the size of Marbles. They are coming out of an opening low in the wall just past the corner he has turned. Their eyes glow deep gold in the dark.

Now in the light of the moonstones, he can see their little sharp fangs bared as they pad closer. The leader tosses his mane, scuttles nearer to Alister on its six

Section 40

black legs, snarling ferociously. He is obviously hungry, and Alister will make a good meal. One of them is almost nose to nose with Marbles, but the leader and the other two ant lions are definitely interested in him.

ANT LIONS (3)

To hit Alister: 12 To be hit: 10 Hit points: 5

Damage from bite: 1/2 1 D6 (roll 1 D6 and divide by 2, rounding up).

Since they can also walk on the walls, all three ant lions can attack at once.

Alister does 1 D6 of damage.

If Alister defeats the giant insects, turn to section 40.

If he loses, turn to section 57.

* 40 *

Alister backs up until his pack is pressed against the walls. Still no passageway opens behind him. His talent definitely tells him the *Encyclopedia* is farther into the hill. He works the cloth sack containing the volumes he's found so far off his wrist and drops it unobtrusively to the floor, drawing his knife with his now-free hand. He braces the other hand on his walking staff. The ant lions move closer, growling and scrabbling their little feet nervously on the stones.

Out of the corner of his eye, Alister can see Marbles

Section 40

circling round and round with the fourth ant lion. They wear matching snarls on their faces and are exchanging vulgar insults in the common cant of animal fighters. The three facing Alister bare their teeth and lunge forward.

Teeth snap within inches of his fingers as Alister throws his hand up, out of the way. The ant lion falls to the ground and springs again to its feet, undaunted by its miss. With a rattling growl, it tears into his left leg, just above his boot. Alister yells and attacks it with the end of his staff. His shin is lacerated and bleeding, and the monster hangs on to it, little claws digging at the flesh so it can get more delicious blood. The pain is almost enough to make Alister black out, but he keeps fighting.

The other ant lions, smelling torn flesh, fight to get close to the dripping wound. Alister thumps one after another with the staff, but they are very hard to quell. Possibly the chitin which protects their black bodies is also under the tawny yellow poll of the head. He manages, after several tries, to catch the one on his leg in the mouth with the staff's end. Sprinting forward like a man trying to batter down a door, he carries the ant lion to the far end of the corridor, where he dashes the lion against the wall, breaking its skull. It slumps down and lies unmoving on the floor against the wall, a thoroughly dashed lion.

Yelling his triumph, Alister turns to face the other two ant lions. They have pursued him up the short hall and launched themselves at him. One worries his right leg, and the other leaps again and again at his knife hand. Alister flips the knife point downward to stab

Section 40

and waits for an opportunity to hack at the creature. It eludes him, zigzagging. One jump carries it a little too close to the wall, and its descent carries it almost directly into the path of Alister's knife. He slashes at the slender thorax, severing it. It falls dead in two pieces.

"I'm sorry," Alister says to the leader, the only one of his attackers still alive. "But the lion has been disconnected."

The leader appears never to have heard of Belle, the mother of communication magics, and drives at him with a hostile growl. Alister sheathes his knife and, with both hands, sweeps the staff under the lion, overturning it, and brings it down with a heavy thud on its back. It doesn't move again.

Marbles trots up to him, tongue hanging out happily. Alister looks back to where the rock hound has been standing his ground. Pieces of ant lion litter the floor. The thorax has some of its six legs still attached, and one twitches fitfully.

"Good boy!" Alister tells him. Marbles dances around him happily. "Let's retrace our steps."

Turn to 64.

Section 41

* 41 *

No, of course not. If Magician Humfrey isn't happy with the books he brings back for him, then to the swamps with him! But wait, what about Marbles? Maybe he'd better reconsider.

He approaches the id and plants his hands on his hips. "Hey, dum-dum!" Alister shouts. The id snorts in its sleep and scratches at its side with its fingers. "Wake up!"

"No."

"If you don't wake up, I'll make you!"

The id can't refuse a challenge like that. Coming alive all at once, it bellows at Alister, "Nobody tells me what to do you can't make me!"

"I just did," Alister smirks.

"No!" screams the id. "I make up the rules my game!" It lumbers to its feet, blubbering. In its pique, it stomps the pillow bush into a cloud of puffy fibers. Choking, Alister swipes at the swirling mess.

"Hey, come back!" The id, rubbing a mournful fist into one eye, waddles away into the forest. Alister sets off after it, cursing. Clumsy as it is, the id can move at a pretty good pace. After he loses sight of it, Alister follows it by the sound of its sobbing. It has also left a path about eight feet wide in the bracken.

The id's progress eventually takes it to a grove of hop trees. It disappears into the midst of the bouncing forest. Sprightly music emanates from a box tree playing poplar tunes, urging the trees to even more impres-

Section 41

sive feats of terpsichorean frenzy. Alister pursues the green creature through the jumping trees. It slips around a pair of young saplings dancing leaf to leaf and blends in completely with the local color. Alister gives up chasing it and dejectedly settles for finding his way out of the hop.

As Alister concentrates on finding the most direct path back to the crossroads, he wonders how Marbles is doing in the belly of the jelly green giant.

The quickest way back is through the glade. He acknowledges the snortings and whufflings of the noses with nods and smiles. Toma-toes pirouette around him and blush prettily from green to red when he applauds their dancing.

He gathers a meal for himself out of the branches of the breadfruit tree. There is a beautiful brown loaf just ripe hanging about his eye level, right next to a cluster of handsome butternuts. He sits down to eat them but he finds he has no appetite. He has failed to get the part of the *Encyclopedia* that the id guards, and he's lost Marbles, too. His best friend.

Cheery barking catches the edge of his hearing, and as it grows louder, he stands up, looking around for the source. Not a dogwood, he thinks, unless he has just been unaware of the sound until now. It can't be Marbles, can it? Yes, it can! It is!

The little black dog breaks into the clearing and jumps up at his master's knees, reaching a paw up for him. Alister snatches him up and dances around the clearing with him. Usually the rock hound's surprising weight makes Alister think twice about lifting him, but now he is too glad to have him back! His appetite returns with a rush.

Section 42

Marbles graciously accepts some bread and butter, and then goes to dig up a few tasty rocks for his own meal.

“How’d you get out, Marbles?” Alister asks him. “Did it go back to sleep? Or did it trip on something? It was pretty clumsy.” Marbles rolls over on his side and waggles his legs, which Alister takes to mean that the id fell over. He sighs. “If I’d been able to keep up with you, I’d have been able to get another book. Oh, well. I hope Humfrey is happy with the volumes he gets.”

They finish their meal and make their way back to the crossroads.

If Alister has now tried all three paths, turn to section 46.

If not, turn to 50.

* 42 *

Alister rolls under the pillow bush to avoid the harpy’s grasp. His staff is no longer within reach, so he pulls an over-ripe bolster off the bush and springs to his feet. Swinging the hard pillow with both hands, he knocks Henrietta flying to one side and she slams into a dogwood tree. The tree barks furiously as the harpy slides heavily to the ground. Her filthy wings spread wide, and she is airborne again.

Marbles joins the fight, leaping from pillow to pillow and snapping at Henrietta. After one attempt to gouge out the rock hound’s eyes, she stops attacking him. Shaking one foot whose talons have been substantially

blunted on the dog's skull, she turns in midair to swipe at Alister, who is sneaking up on her with the bolster. He strikes anyway, but misses. She backwings and flies at him, claws out. The smell of her feathers alone is enough to make him gag, so he pulls some sweet woodruff out of the ground and flings the ruff in a neat arc. It lands around her neck, distracting her into looking down.

"Now you smell better, Henrietta," Alister taunts, taking advantage of her inattention to hit her again with the pillow. The rock-hard bolster is beginning to leave its marks on the harpy. Her reactions are slower and she moves as if it hurts to do so. She is bleeding from a few small wounds caused by the stem end of the cushion, and there are bruises on her breasts and neck.

She screams and turns on him fiercely, knowing her advantage in this fight is waning. Her wings bat away the bolster while one claw grabs onto his tunic front and the other rakes down his chest.

The pain shoots through him like a lightning stroke. Alister gasps, his arms falling to his side. Henrietta cackles in his face. She rattles her smelly feathers and claws him again. The talons close in the flesh of his belly. "Such sweet blood, such a delicious meal for me and my sisters," Henrietta coos, her rasping voice filled with satisfaction. "You won't throw rocks in our nesting places again, will you?"

"I'll give you indigestion, you old crow!" Alister kicks upward with his knee. The movement dislodges the harpy, but she tears out a chunk of flesh when she falls away. Alister lifts the bolster over his head and brings it down on her. Marbles leaps toward her, catching the edge of Henrietta's wing in his shiny teeth.

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He growls and worries it. She screams and pulls away, displaying two deep dripping gouges in the wing. Marbles spits out the feathers with disgust and leaps again.

Alister watches the fight between his dog and the harpy with amazing detachment. It is as if he is seeing it through someone else's eyes. Marbles fights bravely, but his growling is getting softer and softer. Alister has to strain to hear it. He decides that it is too much trouble to watch the battle. Better to sit down against the soft pillow bush and go to sleep. The ground is all wet with his blood. So are his tunic, pants, and boots. He slumps into the middle of the puddle and lets his hands fall limply to his sides. It is almost too much trouble to whisper Humfrey's spell.

Turn to section 29.

* 43 *

“Aaah!” Alister screams, striking the cactus back-first. Hundreds of sharp spines pierce his sides and back. He drops to his hands and knees and reaches behind to pull the needles out. The crippling pain makes his fingers tremble, and he nearly loses his grip. The cactus has given him everything it has. There is an Alister-shaped bare patch in the middle of the needler, stripped of the thick clusters that now decorate him. He pulls out a handful of spines and nearly faints from the pain. With watering eyes, he inspects a few and discovers that every one is as long as his fingers and

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barbed for a good inch from the point down. He'll never get all of those out by himself.

"Dolly no fun," fumes the id, watching him creep slowly toward the pillow bush. If Alister lies down on a firm surface, he might be able to work on the spines a few at a time. Marbles leaps and jumps, trying to reach the id's mouth from the inside. His master is hurt! He should be there to help him. "Don't want you here go away no fun at all," the id insists. It grasps him right around the torso and picks him up.

Thousands of sharp needles are driven even deeper into Alister's body. The pain is white hot, and he gasps to draw breath. The green face of the puzzled id spins above him, edged with a thickening band of black. It is harder and harder to breathe, but he wheezes out the one word of Humfrey's spell.

"Dolly broke," says the id.

Turn to section 29.

* 44 *

Alister is grateful for the warning of the stoned Eye Queue vine. Now it is vital that he not turn around for any reason. If he accidentally looks the basilisk in the eye, he'll be a statue standing here forever in this strange clearing. Behind him, it sounds as if Marbles has liberated a mouthful of feathers and scales from the basilisk's side, because the creature is squawking and carrying on like a bag of hysterical chickens. If it can't

Section 44

turn the hound to stone, then it has already lost the fight. They aren't strong, they aren't big, and they aren't smart. Basilisks and cockatrices, their cousins, have only the one trick. Well, you can't call them cousins, because a cockatrice is pretty much the same thing as a basilisk. Maybe kissing cousins, although no one has ever seen a cockatrice kiss a basilisk. They'd both be turned to stone by the other's magic. Besides, since each is hatched from an infertile egg by male animals of different species, they aren't really related.

There isn't much light left. If he and Marbles can hold the basilisk off until nightfall, it will be helpless, and they will be able to kill it without danger.

When Marbles barks sharply at him, Alister realizes that he has been sitting, muscles tensed, with his eyes squeezed shut. In a moment, the hard body of his pet backs against him and slides around. Marbles is leading the basilisk past him by keeping its attention focused on himself. Alister lets one eye open to a slit and finds that it is now full night, and the creature, now powerless, is probably wishing it could slip quietly away into the brush. Alister turns and strikes at the next thing that touches his leg.

The basilisk screams as the knife penetrates the back of its neck. Alister feels the body drop to the ground and withdraws his knife. He carefully wipes the beast's blood off on the grass. "Good boy, Marbles," he says in an awed whisper. "That's as close as I ever want to get to someone wanting to make a statue of me." He heaves the body away from him and hears it crash in the bushes. Moving within range of the gentle warmth of the Chinese lanterns, he falls asleep.

In the morning, Alister crawls toward a handy bush

Section 45

to take care of nature's call. As he does so, he notices that his lost vision is returning slowly. It is entirely back within a few moments. Relieved in more ways than one, he and Marbles seek out breakfast.

He tells his talent to find them a ripe breadfruit tree. No more taking chances with fancy fruits for him! His magic points one out to him farther up the trail the two of them are taking anyhow. "Come on, Marbles. I'm hungry."

Marbles barks in enthusiastic agreement.

Turn to section 66.

* 45 *

"Sure, a hungry enough vampire will go on until he finds someone who will invite him in," Alister says, staring at the letters. He looks at the passageway beyond the answer. He is gut-sure that the maze will eventually lead him to the *Encyclopedia*, and what is more typical of this kind of puzzle than to steer him in the opposite direction before taking him the right way? He sets off down the path, Marbles at his heels.

In a very short time, he comes to a right turn. The path jogs left and comes to a swift halt fifteen paces farther up. Alister feels around for an opening, and to his surprise, the end panel slides aside. All is dark inside. No moonstones light the passage past the door. Even when he strains his eyes he can not see anything in there. A light breeze whisks upward from the invisible floor to the unseen ceiling.

Section 46

If Alister decides to go in, turn to section 71.

If he decides not to, turn to section 53.

* 46 *

Alister hefts the bag containing the *Encyclopedia*. "This has got to get back safely to the Good Magician," he tells Marbles. Removing his knapsack, he ties the sack to his shoulder straps and puts it back on. The caribbean waves gaily next to his head like a victory banner. "We've done our best. I hope he's satisfied."

Marbles snuffles, a derogatory sound aims at Magician Humfrey.

"You're right. He won't be, not if we brought him every book in Xanth. I wonder if the gloomy little gnome ever smiles. Well, it's a long way back."

They start walking south to the bridge over the Gap. It is beginning to rain. Alister squints miserably through his plastered-down hair at the thunderheads, which have mean smiles on their faces and lightning bolts for teeth. They can see this human being down on the ground, and they want to have a little fun with him. He sighs. If he is lucky enough to find another parasol tree or an umbrella bush, he can shelter there until the rain goes away. He knows it is futile to chant the clouds away. They are pretty vindictive. They always do exactly what you don't want them to do. His father calls it "reverse psychology," and he used it a lot on Alister when he was a little boy.

Hey, maybe that will work. "Look, Marbles, rain!



Section 46

Isn't that terrific?" he shouts, loud enough to be heard over the splattering rain drops. He sneaks a glance upward to see what effect his words are having.

It isn't what the clouds expect to hear, especially that big fellow in the middle, the black cloud with the crown of lightning bolts around his thunderhead. The clouds *want* to make trouble. He is spoiling their pleasure. "I'm going to enjoy walking along in the rain here. I hope it rains all the way back to the Gap Village. It'll just about drain all these nice clouds dry, but it'll be worth it. Nice, cool, refreshing rain!" He parades ostentatiously down the pathway, back straight, shoulders high, peering mischievously through wet red spikes of hair.

That does it, especially the part about being drained dry. The rain stops, and the clouds scatter to the four corners of the sky. The king cloud blasts a few lightning bolts his way out of pure spite, but he is utterly scandalized when Alister yells thanks up to him at the top of his voice. The cloud flees north, rumbling furiously. Alister smiles in secret satisfaction. His father is one clever man! Reverse psychology works just about every time, just like . . . magic.

Magic? That makes Alister stop right in his tracks. Everything his father has ever taught him works well. He suddenly feels gloomy, as though he's stumbled into a whole garden full of moroses. All this time he has been guilty of the very same crime as the children in the village. Instead of seeing his father as a strong, whole man, an elder who has a lot to teach a young boy, he's been seeing only his lack of magic. His father is far wiser than he. Mitchell knows that he can get along even in a magical country on good sense, willingness to

learn, and courtesy toward others. Mitchell is truly happy just the way he is. If there has been something missing, it is from Alister himself. He has failed to see what is really important.

"I feel like a dummy, Marbles," Alister says dejectedly. "If I'd gone on a trip by myself without a quest from Magician Humfrey, I'd probably have figured the same thing out by myself, without risking my neck for some moldy old books. Dad might have told me himself a thousand times, but I wouldn't have believed it before. I've been tracking and gathering food, just like Dad taught me. I got out alive from fights I would have lost if he hadn't shown me how to gauge an opponent. But I'm keeping my word to Humfrey, 'cause that's something else I learned from Dad, even though now I know I've wasted a Question." He hoists the pack farther up on his shoulders.

"Nothing is ever wasted, young Alister. Experience is a powerful teacher." Alister whirls at the deep, melodious voice breaking in on his soliloquy. His teacher Charl Centaur stands smiling at them, his own traveling bags thrown across his withers. He is a magnificent dark bay stallion, with black hair and a deep chest to match his voice. He doesn't look much like a schoolmaster, but he is just the right kind for the unruly human pupils of Alister's stockade, patient but nonsensical. "You're surprised to see me? I'm on my way back to the Gap from the North Centaur Village. I've seen my sister Cherie and her mate. They're expecting a foal next spring, as it happens."

"Congratulations," Alister says, recovering from surprise.

"Thank you. May I give you a lift home? I don't want

Section 46

you to expect it as a precedent, but for one who has just experienced as great a revelation as you have, allowances can be made."

"Oh, yes!" Alister exclaims. Then, "No, I'm sorry, I can't. I have to go back to Good Magician Humfrey right away."

Charl smiles. "You have a promise to keep. No problem. I'll take you there first." Alister scrambles onto Charl's back. The centaur hoists Marbles up and twists lithely to deposit him in Alister's outstretched arms. "Grip tightly with your knees, and we're off!"

"Well, have you fulfilled your assignment?" Humfrey asks, regarding Alister myopically from behind an astonishing pair of spectacles. They magnify the Magician's eyes so much he looks like an insect. "Do you have the *Encyclopedia*?"

"Right here," Alister says, putting the bag on the desk.

If Alister has all five books, turn to section 106.

If not, turn to section 94.

* 47 *

"Who are you?" Alister asks again.

"You'll never know."

"What are your names?"

"That's for us to know."

"I bet you don't know. I'll bet you don't have any at all," Alister sneers, looking for the voices' source.

Now the voices are on the defensive. "That isn't true," the first voice says. "We just won't tell you."

"We know, but you don't," the second says tauntingly.

"Oh, yes, I do. You're nameless dreads, that's what you are. But I know how to get rid of you. I name you! First voice, you're Sally. Second voice, your name is Aloysius. Third voice, you're called the Great Fritizini!" Alister folds his arms with an air of finality.

"No!" wail all three in unison.

"Yes! If you have names, you lose your power. How can anyone be afraid of a voice called Aloysius?" he finishes smugly.

"We're afraid now," cries the Great Fritizini.

"That's because you're powerless. Go away!" Alister jumps up and bats his hands at the air dismissively. "Get lost!"

"I don't want to be lost," Sally whimpers.

Alister sits down, wraps his arms around his knees, and waits. "You have no choice," he says.

"But the id is coming," Aloysius snivels.

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"I don't care." And he turns up his nose and ignores them.

In a little while the voices, still complaining in fearful whispers, fade into the distance. He strains to hear in case they are coming back, but the nameless dreads have truly receded. Instead, he hears a loud pounding, almost like giant footsteps. A shadow comes between him and the sun. Startled, he looks up.

Turn to section 62.

* 48 *

The id, hearing a noise, looks up and down for whoever addressed it. Alister jumps up and down, waving the carry sack.

"Down here, you lime-flavored dope!"

"Dolly my dolly pretty come here we'll play a game!"

"I don't want to play a game with you," Alister taunts. "You're dumb."

"No I want to play let's do it my way okay I won't if you don't do what I say," the id insists, its tongue lolling out foolishly.

What a selfish, immature little brat, Alister thinks. I hope I never said anything like that to my friends. But a moment's consideration brings back recollections as clear as those in the memory crystal. He pushes them away angrily. Well, I won't ever do it again, he thinks firmly. "Come on, stumblefoot! Catch me if you can!" Thumbing his nose and sticking out his tongue, he sprints through the underbrush, never moving so fast

Section 49

that the id can't easily catch up with him. "Nyah nyah nyah nyah nyah," he chants. By eluding it, he makes it want to possess him even more.

"Gimme!" The giant hand scoops him up. Before he can say "green thumb," he is between one and a similar forefinger, and heading for the open mouth. "Mine!" the id exclaims in a deafening shout. "All mine!"

It shoves Alister into its mouth and holds both hands over its lips to keep him from sneaking out again. Alister clings to its only bottom tooth, gawking at the collection of sharp junk inside the id, and mutters a short prayer against broken bones. He lets go.

Turn to section 80.

* 49 *

"When it's dead, of course," Alister says, scoffing at the easy question. He turns to the left and walks along the passageway. Marbles follows at his heels.

He has hardly gone twenty feet before he hears a tremendous crash just behind him. He jumps, shaken almost out of his skin. "What was that?" he cries. Turning around, he sees that a huge gate has fallen between him and the last riddle. "What is going on? Let me out!" Alister shakes the bars of the gate, which appear to have been grown out of massive stalactites. "Help!"

SORRY. The writing appears on the wall next to him. THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO. YOU ANSWERED THE RIDDLE WRONG. IT WAS SO EASY.

Section 49

Alister flings himself away from the gate and runs along the new corridor. It comes to a dead end just a few feet beyond. "But how can I get out?"

YOU ASK THE WRONG QUESTION. CAN YOU GET OUT?

"*Can I get out?*" Alister echoes aloud, miserably. "It's so dark down here."

NO. More words materialize below. BUT WE CAN PLAY THE RIDDLE GAME WHILE YOU WAIT.

"Wait? How long do I wait here?"

AS LONG AS THERE IS TIME.

Alister begins to throw himself against the stalactite gate, bruising his arms and shoulders. Marbles digs at the stone with his hard little claws. Neither of them has any effect on it. They are trapped here forever. He hears the ominous rumbling of shifting rock high in the stone ceiling. It is getting louder. As the ceiling falls, Alister shouts Humfrey's spell.

Turn to section 29.

* **50** *

Alister surveys the crossroads. His talent urges him on. There must be a single volume at the end of each path.

Try each path only once.

If he hasn't yet taken the left-hand path, turn to section 54.

If he hasn't been down the center path, turn to 55.

If he hasn't been along the right-hand path, turn to 56.

* **51** *

The scream bird lets out another deafening shriek when it sees the boy and dog leaping toward it. It spreads its wings again, but too late for escape. Alister claps his arms around the bird's body and holds the wings closed. He is surprised to find that there isn't much to its frame under the feathers. All of its surplus weight must be in the huge yellow eyes, which are now glaring furiously at him. The beak opens to emit a siren wail that would have made the Gorgon's sister, the Siren, proud. Marbles' teeth close on one of the scream's long legs while Alister fumbles for his knife.

The scream bird pecks madly at Alister's legs and back, since it can't reach his face, and Alister has to

Section 51

keep moving his knife hand to keep the serrated edges of the bill from closing on his wrist. It is a vicious fighter for such a scrawny bird. Alister can feel its ribs under the stiff feathers. He loosens his grip a little out of sympathy.

In a flash, the bird feels the slack around its body and has wiggled loose. The wings flap in Alister's face, blinding him and knocking his knife flying. It pecks at his face, scoring on his forehead. Alister is thankful that he's managed to get his hands over his eyes. He bumps at the flailing wings with his elbows.

Unable to aim for its assailant's eyes, the bird shoots its beak into Alister's stomach, letting out a steam-whistle scream that rings around the glade. The boy bends double as the sharp bill drives deep into his guts. He bats at the scream's long neck, but it has gained speed from fury now, and he can't connect.

The scream bird backs away from Alister and trips flat on its tail. Marbles is still holding on to its leg and refuses to let go. Doubling over, the bird raps its beak uselessly against Marbles' stone coat. It shrieks in frustration. Marbles drags the struggling bird over to a patch of carnivorous grass next to the eyebright patch and holds it there until the little green threads have fastened themselves securely into the bird's torso. He trots back to Alister, who is leaning against a tree holding his stomach. Whimpering, he sits against his master's leg. Alister pats him with a weak hand.

"Marbles, I don't have any healing potion. I can only make it if you find something to plug up this wound for me."

The little dog is off like a shot. Alister watches him go, wishing him luck.

Section 52

A short time later, Alister opens his eyes. He hears Marbles whimpering urgently. The little dog has a paw on his knee, and when he sees his master open his eyes, drops a mouthful of herbs there.

“Quack grass?” Alister says. Marbles looks crestfallen. Lots of Gap Villagers believe in quack grass as the all-purpose cure. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn’t. Right now, he has to try it and hope.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is less than or equal to Alister’s Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 108.

If greater, turn to 69.

* 52 *

Alister is grateful for the warning of the stoned Eye Queue vine. Now it is vital that he not turn around. If he accidentally looks the basilisk in the eye, he’ll be a statue standing immobile forever in this strange clearing. Behind him, judging by what he can hear, Marbles has liberated a mouthful of feathers and scales from the basilisk’s side. The creature is squawking and carrying on like a bag of hysterical chickens. If it can’t turn him to stone, then it has already lost the fight. Basilisks aren’t strong, they aren’t big, and they aren’t smart. Basilisks and cockatrices, their cousins, have only the one trick. Well, you can’t call them cousins, because a cockatrice is pretty much the same thing as a basilisk.

Section 53

Maybe kissing cousins, although no one has ever seen a cockatrice kiss a basilisk. Alister wonders if they'd both be turned to stone by the other's magic.

There isn't much light left. If he and Marbles can hold the basilisk off until nightfall, it will be helpless. Then they can kill it without danger.

When Marbles barks sharply at him, Alister realizes that he has been sitting, muscles tensed, with his eyes squeezed shut. In a moment, the hard body of his pet backs against him and slides around him. Marbles is leading the basilisk past Alister, keeping its attention focused on himself. Brave friend!

Alister turns and strikes at the next thing that touches his leg.

The basilisk screams as the knife penetrates its neck. It struggles under the blade, but it is badly wounded. Alister lets one eye slide open. The creature is dying, and he has it all but pinned to the ground.

In its dying rage, it snakes its scrawny little head around, and its gaze meets Alister's for one brief, fatal second. Alister throws up his arm to shield his eyes, crying out the word of Humfrey's spell.

Turn to section 29.

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Alister starts to put a foot beyond the threshold of the mysterious doorway and draws it back almost instantly. With a trembling voice, he orders Marbles back. It bothers him that it is entirely dark in there. His

childhood fear comes back in full force. He decides that if the way to the *Encyclopedia* is this way, he has failed. There are certain facets of luck he won't trust. Drawing a deep breath, he turns back to the other corridor and strides down it, hoping that he looks confident. He certainly doesn't feel that way.

Turn to 59.

* **54** *

Marbles trots obediently at his side as he turns to the left and follows the centaur trail. The grass grows thicker on either side of the path, but the road itself is trodden to bare dirt. This is a well-used road.

Many of the plants Alister sees at the side of the road are the sort that centaurs like to have around: wild oats, which lash out at his legs; corn lilies growing tall and golden; and buckeye, which the centaur folk use as a mild intoxicant. Alister's teacher Charl always says it has quite a kick.

They come to a fork in the road, the oats and lilies following the right-hand path. Alister concentrates and finds that their objective is down the track to the left, which is lined with Christmas pines. Careful not to knock off any of the ornamental cones on the trees, Alister and Marbles walk on.

It is suddenly much colder and a persistent humming grows in their ears. Alister is taken with such a chill; he checks his clothing to make sure that no burrs have attached themselves to him. None of the cold little

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parasites have. There has to be another reason for the apparent drop in temperature.

A proliferation of cold-loving vegetation grows in this woods. Ice plants glitter in the sun, side by side with snowdrops. He recognizes Christmas cherry, the fragile red fruit decorated around its circumference with stripes, stars, and spots. Wintergreen stands in decorative clumps, giving forth an icy mint aroma. Alister remembers it from the times his mother has cured his sore throats with this plant. Here and there the gloom of the pines is alleviated by bright Star-of-Bethlehem flowers, which shine over the carefully arranged rows and beds. Clearly some planning has gone into the arrangement of plants here. It is a veritable winter garden.

Alister tastes a white snowberry growing on its tree in the center of the garden. It is refreshingly cold and tart and melts away on his tongue in an instant. He samples a few more, the sweet-sour taste cutting the dust in his throat and quenching his thirst. Marbles refuses any berries, contentedly munching powdery blossoms off a snowball bush.

The arrangement of plants extends quite a bit farther into the grove. Alister can see a hedge of Christmas dagger fern bordering one side of the garden, and such a quantity of Star-of-Bethlehem that the light is almost blinding. In fact, the humming is coming from that direction. His talent informs him that the *Encyclopedia* is to be found beyond the lights. His curiosity aroused, he decides to investigate.

As they approach a break in the fern hedge, a dark figure hunches forward and bars their way. It is a huge black cerberus, tail lashing while two canine heads,

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mouths full of sharp teeth, slaver, and the middle one addresses them.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"That way," Alister points. "There's something I need to get."

"No, you don't," the cerberus says, and the two side heads shake threateningly from side to side.

Alister eyes the beast, measuring it. It is big and strong, but it is only flesh and blood. He has his staff and his knife and knows how to use them. Marbles is a good fighter, too, and he doesn't wound easily or bleed at all. The cerberus is intelligent and ought to have figured the odds out for itself. After all, it has three brains to think with. But he is going through there, whether or not the cerberus wants him to.

If Alister decides to fight the cerberus, turn to section 77.

If he decides to reason with it, turn to section 37.

If he decides to find another way past, turn to 84.

* 55 *

"Shall we try the middle road?" Alister suggests. "It's staring us right in the face." Marbles nods, pink tongue out. "Okay, boy," Alister chuckles. He leads the way, stamping down the lightly trodden grass and plants directing them to a gap between two large trees.

Beyond the trees, a path of sorts continues. It is so narrow that branches brush Alister's shoulders on both

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sides, tearing at his sleeves. His knapsack and bag catch many times on bracken and thorns. Whippy shoots smack him in the face and roots nudge his feet, making him stumble. He cannot see Marbles behind him, but he can hear the rock hound grumbling as he plows through long wild grass that tickles his nose.

Ahead, Alister can see the glint of a brook or stream in the bright orange of the setting sun. Evening is drawing near, and he wants to settle down in a safe place for the night. He shoulders his way through the undergrowth and finds that there is a nice flat clearing on the bank of the stream.

“Marbles, I want to make camp here, if it’s safe. Sniff around and see if there’re signs of any dangerous creatures.”

His dog immediately puts nose to ground and disappears into the plants at the clearing’s perimeter. In a short time he is back. “Any trouble?” Alister asks. Marbles sits up on his hind legs with his tongue out, panting. “I guess not!” His master laughs, rummaging in the pack for a treat. “Here you go, pal. A big chunk of rock candy.”

Marbles holds the treat down with both front paws and gnaws. Alister sifts through the pack, looking for his own meal. The pickings are unappetizingly slim. He looks around the clearing for food trees, but there are none immediately within sight. “Okay.” He sighs, levering himself to his feet. “Talent, get to work. I’m hungry! I want things that are nutritious and safe for me to eat.”

He is soon directed toward one end of the clearing. Stepping carefully over a brightly burning Chinese-lantern plant, he lets his talent lead him to a pair of

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trees growing close together just out of the merry-colored lights.

"Well, I know what that one is," he says, scrutinizing the fruit of one tree. "That's a sasquat. I don't want to eat those just before going to sleep. But they'll make a decent breakfast. That is, if I don't meet anyone during the day tomorrow." Sasquats are roughly the size and shape of a foot, a big foot, and they make one behave in a sassy manner. More than one pupil of the centaur school who has tried to use the big fruit as an excuse for discourtesy to the centaur teachers has done penance for days on end. Once you know the edible plant forms you are expected to use discretion in eating the ones with known side-effects. Sasquats also give one nightmares about big white hairy monsters and snow. He turns instead to the other plant.

He doesn't know what it is, but it smells delectable. The leaves look very much like those of the palm plants, with sharp green hand-shaped fronds waving around the little oblong fruits growing in clusters close to the trunk. It can be dangerous to eat untested foods in the jungle of Xanth, but he is very hungry.

If Alister chooses to eat the fruit, turn to section 63.

If he chooses not to, turn to section 60.

* 56 *

The road twists to avoid an old horse chestnut. The tree whinnies to attract attention, but the boy and dog keep moving. If it could, it would keep them there forever, telling them boring stories, dropping one old chestnut after another until Alister felt like sawing logs. And they are notorious liars. None of a chestnut's stories are ever true. Even the nuts it produces look exactly like a centaur's droppings—a description for blatant untruth in Alister's neck of the woods.

There is a grassy hill ahead of him among the trees. The banks on the sides of the road seem to be getting higher and higher until Alister notices that it is the path itself which is sloping downward. Grass to either side is knee high, then chest high, and finally at eye level. The sides of the rampway are plain packed earth. Glow-worms creep along the walls, providing a weak green illumination as Alister and Marbles follow the path under the hill.

After the glare of the sunshine, it is frighteningly close and dark in the narrow cavern. He begins to feel as though he is trapped in a bad dream brought by a night mare; being trapped in a small, lightless place is one of his greatest fears. His father has taught him how to get along underground: never to shout, for fear of bringing the roof down; to keep one's head and remember the way in; and always to be polite to those who live there. Goblins are touchy about their subterranean homes and will kill anyone who insults them. It

isn't grouchy goblins Alister is afraid of. It is the dark. Things can jump out at you, and you never know they are there. But it is a matter of pride that he has never let anyone know.

Soon his eyes become accustomed to the little lights of the worms. He realizes the feeling of discomfort is caused by the heavy moisture of the air below ground. The path's edges are now lined at waist height with moonstones, little pocked globes which shine silvery green like the great cheese in the sky. From this distance they seem even to be of the same size as the moon. Marbles points his nose at one of them and howls mournfully.

Alister hears a sinister rattle from the roof of the chamber and makes him stop. Marbles gives him a hurt look. His howling is appreciated back in the Gap Village. He and Brida's cerberus, Fates, sing together in a barkershop quartet. "You'll bring the roof in on us if you do that down here, Marbles," Alister explains in a softer tone. Marbles is nonplussed. They *always* bring the house down.

At the end of a long, steadily narrowing corridor, they come to a T-junction. They have to turn right or left. Alister looks around. "There must be some clue here somewhere that will tell us where to find the books."

As soon as he says the word "clue," shimmering words appear before him on the wall: SOLVE THE RIDDLES TO SOLVE THE MAZE.

"A maze?" Alister cries. "I'm no good at this kind of game." A single word appears below the first phrase: TRY. "Okay," he agrees reluctantly. "What's the first one?"

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WHAT, the words spell, IS BIG AT THE BOTTOM, LITTLE AT THE TOP, AND HAS EARS?

To the left side, an arrow forms pointing left and over it is the word CORN-UCOPIA. To the right side, another arrow appears under the word MOUNTAIN.

If Alister thinks the left-hand answer is correct, turn to section 73.

If he thinks the right-hand one is correct, turn to section 36.

* 57 *

Alister backs up until his pack is pressed between him and the end of the corridor. His talent tells him definitely that the *Encyclopedia* is behind him. He works the cloth sack containing the volumes he found so far off his wrist and drops it unobtrusively to the floor, drawing his knife with his now-free hand. He braces the other hand on the walking staff. The ant lions move closer, growling and scrabbling their little feet nervously on the stones.

Out of the corner of his eye, Alister can see Marbles circling the fourth ant lion. They wear matching snarls on their faces and are exchanging vulgar insults in the cant of animal fighters. The three facing Alister bare their teeth and lunge forward.

Teeth snap within inches of his fingers as Alister throws his hand up. The ant lion falls to the ground and springs again to its feet, undaunted by its miss. With a

rattling growl, it tears into his left leg, just above his boot. Alister yells and hits it with the end of his staff. His shin is lacerated and bleeding, and the monster hangs on, little claws digging at the flesh to get at more of the delicious blood. The pain is almost enough to make Alister black out, but he keeps fighting.

The other ant lions, smelling torn flesh, fight to get close to the dripping wound. Alister thumps one after another with the staff, trying to get them to let go, but they are very hard. Possibly the chitin which protects their black bodies is also under the tawny yellow poll of the head. One of them keeps leaping for his knife hand, teeth gnashing closed on air again and again. He keeps moving his arm to elude it, but he forgets about the third lion. It sets its teeth into his hitherto undamaged knee. The pain startles him and he looks away. The ant lion, now hanging on the wall, catches his wrist in its jaws. With a yell, he drops the knife and swings his arm against the wall, hoping to smash the lion off. It holds on fast, setting its teeth even farther into the tendons of his arm.

The two lions attacking his legs have let go of his shins and refastened their teeth in the uppers of his boots. They surge forward, pulling against his weight. Alister laughs at them, such tiny creatures trying to carry him away, until he tries to shake *them off*. Ant lions are surprisingly strong for their size. They give a mighty tug, and Alister falls over backward.

That is the opportunity the third lion is awaiting. It lets go of his arm and scuttles up his body. Alister stabs at it, but it is more agile than he in that position. It bares its teeth and dives for the neck. Panicking, Alister tries to dislodge it. It snarls and chews into the flesh of

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his throat. The other two lions drag him slowly down the hall, moving toward the lair Alister can now see just underneath the line of moonstones near the head of the corridor. But before they carry him through the entryway, the lion at his neck bites into his neck, closing the windpipe and severing the blood vessels. Just before Alister loses consciousness he manages to croak the word of the Good Magician's spell.

Turn to section 29.

* 58 *

A patch of hart's-tongue stops talking to the neighboring cat's-ear when the latter swivels away to listen to the strange footsteps as Alister and Marbles go by. Lamb's-tongue baas plaintively from a brake, and sassafras makes fun of it. Black-eyed Susans wink provocatively from behind their leaves.

Alister hears honking and peers around. A troop of noses hops into view: human noses, black cat noses, oink snouts, and dozens of others. A dragon snout appears, steam pouring from its nostrils. The other hooters cluster around it, honking, until the dragon snout reluctantly agrees to quit smoking. Being only noses, they are especially sensitive to noxious emissions.

He wonders how they have come to be here without the beings they had once been attached to. Perhaps this is one of the places where senses go when they are lost. He doesn't want to lose his eyes or his ears. He'd better

look sharp and listen closely in a place like this, or he might be rendered senseless.

The noses soon nose out Marbles, and he and they are happily sniffing at one another in no time at all. A pair of identical upturned human noses approach Alister, honking genteelly. They offer him little pink candies, shaped exactly like themselves. With misgivings, he tries one. It tastes odd. After a minute his head feels like it is expanding sideways and upward. It is very strange.

Fortunately the effect wears off very soon. Honking, the noses hop up and down around him. He turns down further offers of nose candy, to the double features' obvious disappointment. He doesn't like the way he feels under its influence.

A small mouth organ plays near the bank of a babbling brook overhung with lip-fern and mother's-in-law-tongue having it out over some petty matter. Other identical pairs of features roam around, including some adolescent eyes so listless that they seem to be suffering from sensory deprivation. Alister gives them a hurried glance. He has no time for gossip. He is more concerned that he has lost the path. Never very wide or clearly delineated, it has now disappeared entirely. Enchanted paths are not supposed to vanish. They are magically placed so that Xanth citizens can find their way around easily and without peril. Thinking back to the basilisk that wandered into their campsite on the path, he judges that perhaps this one is not a regularly maintained roadway. Well, never mind. He will invoke his talent to help him get back on the trail of the *Encyclopedia*. He pats the bag on his wrist, confident that he will soon have more books to put in it.

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His talent tells him to go through the copse of hazels to his left. He whistles for Marbles to follow him. He can see several big red-breasted birds in the hazy branches of the trees and has no wish to play copse and robins with them. He has nothing with him he can afford to lose. It is wise to keep a close eye on these woodland thieves.

Immature wands from all directions switch at his legs, hazing him thoroughly. It is impossible to see very far around a hazel. Their fog is their magical trait. Even though the day is hot and dry, the obscurity doesn't dissipate. They prefer to remain mysterious, never revealing witch hazel is witch.

Something bright catches his eye. He hurries out of the copse toward the glitter. It looks like crystal and keeps bobbing farther away, the tantalizing sparkle just out of reach.

Marbles runs past him and, after a brief tussle, stands barking over an object half his own size. Alister looks down at his dog's catch.

It *is* a crystal, perfectly round in shape. Its inside seems to be faceted though. Alister cannot see how it has been cut. Daylight catches the sharp edges of one facet, and he finds himself looking at an image of his home.

The little cottage was built by his father out of live boxwoods and walnuts a long time before Alister was born. His own room is a small boxwood at the back of the house. As he grows, so does his boxroom, and he has plenty of space in which to play. As he watches, his parents come out of the house and lovingly smile down at him. He feels as though he is small once again. His father has his hands behind his back, trying to hold something concealed which squirms and wiggles.

Alister recognizes the scene with a shock. It is the day they gave him his rock hound puppy. With a sideways glance at the grown-up Marbles, he moves around the crystal so he can look behind his parents at the surprise puppy.

As he moves, he loses sight of the scene. With a pang of regret, he searches the heart of the crystal. Another glint catches his eye, and he is looking down at the ground from a long way up a rock maple tree.

Next to him is Brida, his best friend. She has assumed her were-shape, which is that of a huge striped tabby cat. Lycanthropy usually demands conservation of mass, a magical principle which Alister only vaguely grasps, so Brida becomes a cat that weighs as much as the ten-year-old girl does. When she is a human being, her hair is striped orange and gold, and her teeth are a little pointier than normal for a human. But it is a good talent. She can see in the dark, she can run very quickly and silently, and she can climb a tree faster than anyone else in the Village.

She envies his talent. This day was the one when she insisted he find somewhere that the adults would not look for them. His talent took a while to reason this request out, and eventually led them to the rock maple right in the middle of the stockade. No adult needed to look for them, because they had all seen them climb the tree and knew where they were. He turns the crystal slightly and sees another time. It was evening and he stood at the foot of the rock maple, hauling an obstinate Marbles away from the trunk. The dog was leaping wildly and barking. Brida, hunched in the tree, claws firmly fixed into the wood, was trembling and snarling.

Alister and his father had been away all day, hunting

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snarks, leaving Marbles in the Village. Not long after they left, Marbles caught Brida in her were-cat shape and chased her up the big tree. When she wouldn't come down, he sat there patiently waiting, like the stone he was. Her cat brain was too frightened to let her human soul take over and change back. By the time she was rescued, Brida didn't have a good thing to say about him or Marbles, or to him, for that matter. She hasn't really spoken to him since. Alister feels sad and tries to remember something nicer.

"There was nothing nicer," a voice says in his head.

"Everything that you think is good in your life hurts someone else," another voice assures him.

"They all think you're a fool." A third voice joins the other two.

"Who is saying that?" Alister cries, looking around.

"Who's there?"

"No one. You're going mad."

"Completely crazy. You've always known that. It's because you're half Mundane. There's something *wrong* with you."

"No, there isn't!" By now, Marbles is looking around, too. He can hear the voices, but it is evident even he can't smell their source.

"You're afraid they'll exile you from Xanth because your father is weird."

"No, I'm not!" he tells the voices indignantly.

"Yes, you are. And you're right! They will. They'll send you away!"

"Your parents never loved you."

"There are things in the dark, and they're going to get you tonight. If you go to sleep, you'll die!"

"I won't!" Alister cries.

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"You can't stay awake forever."

"The id is coming."

"Who are you?" Alister asks the air.

"You'll never know. Ha ha ha ha ha ha . . ." The horrible laugh rings in the air.

"Dread," says the first voice.

"Dread."

"Dread."

Alister feels like running away. He wants to hide somewhere. How do these voices know about his fear of the dark?

"Your father told us. He hates you for being a coward."

"It isn't true!" Alister yells, twisting around, looking for the source of the voices.

"Dread."

"It isn't true!" he insists.

"Dread."

"Dread."

"Dread."

Roll 3 D6.

*If the total rolled is less than or equal to Alister Wisdom/
Luck value, turn to section 47.*

If greater, turn to 65.

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* 59 *

The passageway is very long and widens out just before it comes to another zigzag. Squinting at the ceiling suspiciously and thinking about gates, Alister and Marbles tiptoe along. A final right zig, and the corridor straightens. Several paces more, and the passage gives way to a huge room.

Alister notices a big cylinder on a mound of some sort. It is nearly the size of the house in which he and his parents live. This one is divided into ringlike segments, and the nearest one has a pair of sticks stuck into its top. Alister wonders what they are for. Then they move. He realizes he is looking at a giant glow-worm, or a cat-terpillar with the head of a bread-and-butter-fly. It gleams purple with gold and red spots. Suddenly the moonstones increase their light, and the room is as bright as day. The gigantic black eyes turn toward him.

Alister turns, calling for Marbles to follow him. They are out of the room and heading down the corridor when more words appear on the wall of the first left turn, tracking him frantically as he runs.

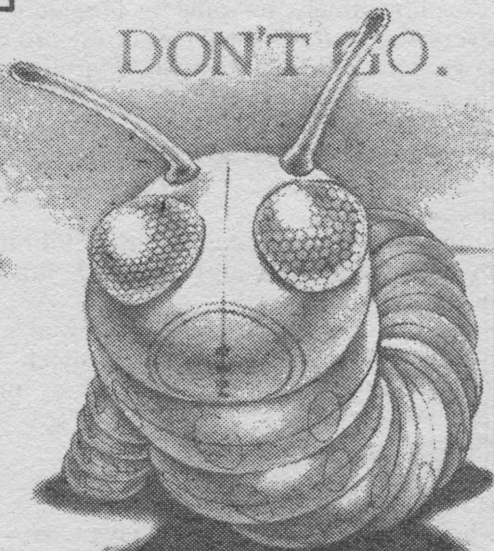
DON'T GO.

"Why not?" Alister cries. "There's a monster in there."

I'M SORRY I SURPRISED YOU. I DON'T GET MUCH COMPANY.

"You mean, that's you?" Alister asks, astonished. He stops running. "I mean, the words come from you in the big room?"

DON'T GO.



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THAT IS CORRECT. PLEASE COME BACK.

His feet drag unwillingly, scraping his toes along the floor with every step, but Alister forces himself to turn around and go back into the chamber. Marbles stays very close to his master's ankles.

The words follow him and display themselves on the wall opposite the doorway. IF IT WOULD MAKE YOU MORE COMFORTABLE, YOU CAN READ WHAT I SAY HERE. YOU WON'T HAVE TO LOOK AT ME.

"If it's all the same to you," Alister says, "I'd rather not have my back turned to you. No offense. I'm just the nervous type, I guess."

OF COURSE. The messages slide along the wall until they are next to the great form. Little mock legs adorning the creature's underbelly twitch as more words appear. TELL ME, WHAT IS YOUR NAME, AND WHY HAVE YOU CHANCED MY MAZE?

"Your maze?"

OF COURSE. A brief flicker of the letters tells him the sentence is being repeated. I BUILT IT. I LIVE HERE. I AM THE BOOKWORM.

"Well, my name's Alister, and this is my dog, Marbles. He's a rock hound. I'm on a quest to find the *Encyclopedia of Xanth*. My talent is finding things, so I know that it is here."

AH. I SEE. I HAVE GOT ONE VOLUME OF IT HERE.

Alister glances around cautiously, hesitant to take his eyes off the large creature for even a few seconds. "Are you sure?"

OH, YES, I AM SURE. I KNOW INTIMATELY EVERY BOOK IN MY DOMAIN.

"Would you give it to me?"

WHY?

He bites his tongue, thinking. "Because I asked the

Good Magician Humfrey a Question, and the *Encyclopedia* is his fee for my Answer."

WHAT QUESTION DID YOU ASK HIM? The pair of sticks twitch a little toward him.

"I asked him if I could find magic for my father. He's a Mundane, and was born without a talent."

YOU ASKED THE WRONG QUESTION. *SHOULD* HE HAVE MAGIC?

"Of course he should! He's my father!"

BUT WOULD HE USE IT? DOES HE WANT IT? I HAVE READ THE HISTORY OF XANTH, AND ACCOUNTS OF ALL THE WAVES OF COLONIZATION. HE MUST HAVE GOOD QUALITIES OF HIS OWN, OR HE WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ALLOWED TO SETTLE HERE.

"But my friends tease me about having a magicless father," Alister says miserably.

AH. THEN PERHAPS YOU ARE THE ONE WHO NEEDS MAGIC, NOT YOUR FATHER.

"But I have magic! He's the one who doesn't have any."

BUT THEY ARE NOT TEASING HIM.

Alister thinks about the way the other fathers behave with Mitchell. They don't seem to act as though they mind having an untalented Mundane in their presence. Why, he is the one who killed the owltiger that was raiding the village. . . .

"Well, they wouldn't tease him. They're only kids."

PERHAPS THE ADULTS UNDERSTAND SOMETHING THAT THEY, AND YOU, DO NOT YET.

He feels himself growing impatient with these calm, silent messages. "Will you give me the book, so I can fulfill my obligation to the Good Magician?"

WHAT WILL YOU OFFER ME IN RETURN?

Alister remembers his father's words about under-

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ground dwellers. "Only my respect, because I haven't got anything else you would want, I think." An idea blinks into his head. "And if you do, I will tell the Good Magician about you and your, er, ptomaine."

DOMAIN, the letters correct gently.

Alister blushes. "Whatever. Maybe he'll exchange books with you. He's always looking for new information. That's his talent: information."

I KNOW. I HAVE READ OF HUMFREY. LET ME CONSIDER.

With all his fingers and toes crossed, Alister waits for the giant worm to make its decision. He finds he is holding his breath, and lets it out with an explosive noise, just as the words on the wall change again.

I AGREE. TELL HUMFREY HE WILL BE WELCOME. IT IS RATHER MORE DIFFICULT FOR ME TO VISIT HIM THAN FOR HIM TO COME HERE.

"I'll say!" Alister agrees, remembering the python and the Gorgon.

The huge form of the bookworm inches off the mound in the middle of the room. YOU MAY HELP ME FIND THE ENCYCLOPEDIA.

Alister discovers that the hill upon which the bookworm has been resting is hundreds and thousands of books, heaped and strewn every which way. He expects that they would be ruined by the weight of the worm, but to his surprise finds that they are one and all in perfect condition. He turns one around in his hands, admiring the delicate purple stitching holding the pages together.

I SPIN NEW BINDINGS FOR THEM WHEN THEY WEAR OUT, the worm writes, guessing his thoughts.

"What do you eat down here?" Alister asks, nervously looking around for a source of food.

LEAVES, OF IRREPAIRABLE BOOKS. I CONSUME VORACIOUSLY ALL TYPES OF ESSAY, LITERATURE, AND NONFICTION. I BELIEVE MY CUSTOM HAS MADE ME A RATHER WELL-ROUNDED INDIVIDUAL.

Alister, glancing at its plump rings, privately agrees.

They dig through the heap, classifying the books and putting them in various stacks as the bookworm directs. Marbles carefully carries to one side books that Alister and the bookworm discard and places them in a neat ring around the two of them. The boy can't at first see the marks by which the worm determines what should go where, until it is pointed out to him. Tiny beaded droplets shine in the eerie light like moisture on flower petals, dots arranged in arcane symbols the meanings of which Alister can only guess.

DEWY DECIMAL SYSTEM, the words tell him.

Underneath a shower of little blue pamphlets, Alister finds a brown leather-bound tome which precisely matches the others he has in his sack.

"This is it," he says, opening it to the title page. "Volume five."

TAKE IT.

Alister tucks it into the sack and feels its outline through the fabric next to the others. "I'm very grateful. I don't know how to thank you."

KEEP YOUR PROMISE, the letters say. AND THINK ABOUT THE APPROPRIATENESS OF YOUR QUESTION.

"I will," Alister vows. "Um, how can I get out of here?"

TAKE THE STARES.

An arrow appears under this direction and slides along the wall to point to a statue of a basilisk. Shrugging, Alister walks over and looks deep into the

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stone lizard's little beady eyes. To his surprise, he feels himself moving upward. "Hey!" he cries. Marbles floats next to him, barking at the basilisk.

When the first statue is too far away for him to make eye contact, Alister notices another just above: a griffin. He matches its stare and is swept upward to a stone goblin, a marble nymph, and finally a crowned rocking horse in a rock garden. They are above ground; in fact, on top of the knoll they saw from the path. Alister looks around for the opening, and the other statues, but none is visible except the last.

They stump down the hill, looking for the ramp by which they entered. It is nowhere to be seen. It seems to have been filled in and overgrown, and is no more in sight than the exit. He finds the path which led him to the maze, but there is nothing at the end of it.

"That bookworm sure likes his privacy," Alister says and leads Marbles back to the crossroads.

If he has been down all three paths, turn to section 46.

If not, turn to section 50.

* 60 *

"It smells good," Alister says, trying to convince himself to try one of these square little fruits. The surface is waxy-sticky. He brings his fingers to his mouth to lick off the stickiness and stops just before his tongue touches his hand. Instead, he wipes the juice off down the front of his tunic. "Well, Charl Centaur always says

that a small taste usually won't hurt." He plucks one of the fruits from the tree and bites off the smallest bite he can manage. The heady fragrance is reflected in the fruit's rich flavor. These things are delicious. He licks the residue off his front tooth. If only they aren't poisonous or otherwise harmful—He waits several minutes. The sun is going down quickly now, and it is becoming harder to see.

"No, I won't," he decides, throwing down the little fruit. It is hard for him to think of going hungry. Usually finding food is the least of a Xanth citizen's problems. He is more concerned about keeping from being something else's food. He makes his way back to the clearing, wiping his hand again on his tunic.

He is having a little trouble seeing. The sun isn't going down so fast that he can chalk it off to natural darkness. He stares at the scarlet Chinese lanterns, listening to their singsong jingle. Yes, he is sure they were brighter before. Could it be the fruit? He is doubly glad now that he didn't eat any more of it. He tries to content his grumbling belly with the last of the jelly beans, a few caribeans, and a stale breadstick. Plumping up the knapsack under his head, he tries to go to sleep.

Marbles, cuddled up against his back, suddenly springs to his feet and begins growling fiercely. "What's the matter, boy?" Alister whispers frantically. The snarl increases in volume. That can mean only one thing. There is a predator of some kind entering the clearing.

He draws his knife and waits, listening. Marbles, by the sound of it, is entering into battle with a creature about his own size, which squawks and clucks and

Section 61

hisses. What in Xanth can it be? He doesn't want to move suddenly and attract attention to himself, but if Marbles needs help, he wants to be ready.

There is a thudding sound in the grass near his feet. He feels his way gingerly, until his fingers touch a stone carving of leaves and balls on a ligature of some kind. No, wait, that is an Eye Queue vine, turned to stone! The monster Marbles is fighting must be a basilisk. That half-fowl, half-lizard, unnaturally hatched from a yolless egg by a toad, has the power to turn its enemies to stone statues with a glance. It can't harm Marbles; he is stone already. The one who is in the most danger is Alister himself. And he can't even look at his opponent.

BASILISK

To hit Alister: 18 To be hit: 11 Hit points: 7

Damage from eyes: To determine if the basilisk makes eye contact (a successful hit) with Alister, roll 3 D6.

If the total rolled is less than or equal to Alister's Constitution value, turn to section 44.

If greater, turn to section 52.

* 61 *

Alister muses over the answers for a moment. "No, if he's smart, a hungry vampire will wait outside for a victim to come by if no one invites him in. They can't wait too long for meals. The right answer must be a

road." He peeks around the corner at the passageway. The rows of moonstones continue so far into the distance that the lines seem to converge. He feels nervous about going down that far. After the crashing finality of that gate descending just a few minutes before, he realizes that he might not be able to get out of this maze alive. He is afraid.

Well, he better get moving. Those moonstones don't get any closer if he stands still.

Turn to section 59.

* **62** *

It is shaped almost like a baby, and it has just two teeth, one on top and one on the bottom gum. The creature is green, and it doesn't seem to be solid clear through. The whole form is transparent, a hollow being made of living glass a handspan thick. But it moves, quickly and supplely, its fat hands reaching down toward him. Drool drips out of the corner of its thick-lipped mouth.

"Mine!" it shrieks in a voice that rivals the scream bird's. "Mine mine mine mine mine! Oh Daddy I want it!"

The giant hand tips Alister over, reaching for the memory crystal. Cradling it in both hands, it looks suspiciously at the boy, and then pops the sphere into its mouth and chews. The glass ball falls down inside the hollow transparent body, crashing into a heap of other things which Alister cannot quite distinguish,

Section 62

shadowy shapes of every size. This must be the id that the voices talked about. What a horrible being. It eats whatever its greedy heart wants.

The beady green eyes fasten onto Marbles. "Mine!" it crows triumphantly, shuffling over toward him. "Mine!" It reaches down.

"No!" Alister shouts, slapping the id's hand away. "He's not yours!" Marbles crouches down and growls at the giant baby, back legs dancing him away from its grasp. It howls at both of them, tears of rage welling up in its eyes.

"You never let me have anything I want I don't get to have any fun ever I hate you!"

The id smacks Alister again with the back of its fat hand. It is like being hit with a wet towel filled with jelly. He falls flat on his back and rolls to one side to avoid a huge green foot. Scrambling to his feet, he wraps his arms around the id's wrist.

It shakes him off easily. "Mine!" it reiterates, seizing Marbles. The little dog scratches and bites, but the id doesn't seem to notice. Its flesh is so thick and soft that he is nearly smothered in its clutch. It draws him toward its mouth.

On the ground, Alister is frantically trying to get its attention. He draws his knife and slashes at the id's legs, but the wounds heal nearly before the knife finishes making them. He kicks angrily at the id's ankles. It notices him and starts to cry.

"Gimme back my Marbles, you baby!" he shouts, overpowering the id's baby howls by sheer volume. What a nuisance! It cries even when it has what it wants.

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“Doggy!” it shrieks happily. “I wanna doggy ooh Mommy can I keep him huh huh?”

“Grrrrrrr!” intones Marbles, now at a level with the id’s eyes. It ignores his displeasure and pops him into its mouth. The lips chew, but no teeth close on Marbles. It has no back jaws or digestive apparatus. The monster only goes through the motions of eating. Marbles falls down inside and lands uncomfortably in the heaps of things which fill both the id’s legs and half of its bulgy torso.

“Marbles!” Alister cries, hacking at the id’s belly. Marbles sees him and leaps again and again at the inner wall, trying to scratch his way through with his blunt stone claws. Alister can see the rock hound’s mouth moving, but no sound reaches him through the thick body wall. His knife has no more effect now than it did before. He redoubles his speed, trying to outrace the id’s natural healing properties. The knife still has no lasting effect.

“Dolly!” And now the big hand is reaching for him.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total rolled is less than or equal to Alister’s Dexterity value, turn to section 68.

If greater, turn to 67.

* 63 *

“It smells good,” Alister says, trying to talk himself into trying one of these square little fruits. The surface is waxy-sticky. He brings his fingers to his mouth to lick off the stickiness and stops just before his tongue touches his hand. Instead, he wipes the juice off down the front of his tunic. “Well, Charl Centaur always says that a small taste usually won’t hurt.” He plucks one of the fruits from the tree and bites off the smallest bite he can manage. The heady fragrance is reflected in the fruit’s rich flavor. These things are delicious. He licks the residue off his front tooth. If only they aren’t poisonous or otherwise harmful—He waits several minutes. The sun is going down quickly now, and it is becoming harder to see.

“Oh, what the heck,” he says at last. Pulling several squashy fruits from the tree, he shoves them into his knapsack and hurries back to the clearing. On the way, he eats the one in his hand. It is very tasty. He can hardly wait to eat the others. That and fresh water will make a light but decent supper. He’ll hunt up other food tomorrow.

He wolfs down the tasty fruits, pausing only to spit out the hard seed in the heart of each. He tosses a seed at one of the Chinese lanterns. The frenzied jingle tells him he’s scored a hit, but he can not see on which. In fact, he can’t see the lantern at all. Alister looks wildly around, squints at the sun. It isn’t even below the

horizon yet, but even so it is as dark as though it is already night. Could it be something in the fruit?

"Marbles, come here, boy. Marbles." He groans, feeling the familiar stone fibers of his pet's fur. "I'm blind." He knows what those fruits are now: blind dates! His older buddies always told him to watch out for them. Now he knows what they meant, and it is too late. He'd have been better off eating the sasquats. At least he knew what those do.

Marbles' whimper of sympathy suddenly changes into a fierce growl. "What's the matter, boy?" Alister whispers frantically. The snarl increases in volume. That can mean only one thing. There is a predator of some kind entering the clearing, and Alister, blind, is helpless.

He draws his knife and waits, listening. Marbles, by the sound of it, is entering into battle with a creature about his own size, which squawks and clucks and hisses. What in Xanth can it be? He hears a yelp from Marbles, followed by a thudding sound in the grass near his feet. He feels his way along, until his fingers touch a stone carving of leaves and balls on a ligature of some kind. Was Marbles' opponent wielding a weapon?

Something brushes his leg. He reaches down to touch, finds Marbles' fibrous fur under his fingers. The rock hound is backing past him, bringing his prey within striking distance of Alister's knife. That means that it is either a soft-scaled or furred creature. Alister waits until another body touches his leg and strikes downward. He is rewarded with a fearful crowing, cut off suddenly as the hilt thumps into the unseen creature's back. It stops breathing in a moment, and Alister

Section 63

cautiously searches the body with his fingertips. It is scaled and feathered and has a puny neck and head. His hands are sticky with its blood. He wipes them on the grass, not wanting to get any on his clothes. In size, the creature is actually much larger than Marbles, but the two flopping legs tell him that there is not much muscle holding it up. Obviously it must have had magic with which to defend itself; magic which had no effect on his dog. He heaves the body away from him and hears it crash in the bushes. Moving within range of the gentle warmth of the Chinese lanterns, he falls asleep.

In the morning, Alister crawls toward a handy bush to take care of nature's call. As he does so, he notices that his vision is returning. It is entirely back within a few moments. Relieved in more ways than one, he and Marbles seek out breakfast.

He tells his talent to find them a ripe breadfruit tree. No more taking chances with fancy fruits for him! His magic points one out to him farther up the trail the two of them are taking anyhow.

As they walk out of the clearing, Alister notices a birdlike claw protruding between the twigs of a thick beataranda bush. Aha, probably the beast that they killed last night, Alister thinks. He hauls on the leg and pulls the creature into view.

His hands lose their strength and drop, as does his jaw, when he sees what the monster is: a beady-eyed basilisk. This half-fowl, half-lizard, unnaturally hatched from a yolkless egg by a toad, has the power to turn its enemies to stone statues with a glance. No wonder it didn't harm Marbles; he's stone already. It was just blind luck that he wasn't stoned by the basilisk. Its silly head lolls to one side, the weak little

Section 64

beak and scrawny neck belying its very powerful and dangerous magic. Repulsed, Alister throws the body back into the bushes. He looks into the clearing, remembering the stone thing which fell next to him last night. He can see it now: an Eye Queue vine, which made eye contact with the basilisk and now is permanently stoned. He swallows, hard.

"Come on, Marbles. That thing almost made me forget I'm hungry."

Turn to 66.

* 64 *

The writing says, WHEN IS A GOBLIN NOT A GOBLIN? To the left is the answer: WHEN IT'S DEAD. To the right is: WHEN IT'S ON A DIET. Alister is getting tired by now, but he knows that old joke. It might have come off the horse chestnut tree he passed on the way in.

If the correct answer is on the left, turn to section 49.

If the correct answer is on the right, turn to section 72.

Section 65

* 65 *

“Who are you?” Alister asks again.

“You’ll never know.”

“What are your names?”

“That’s for us to know.”

“Why won’t you tell me?” he asks. “How do you know so much about me?”

“We hear everything about you. And it’s all true. Everything you have ever done is bad.”

“No, it isn’t true. Look, here in the crystal! All these things have happened to me in my life. They were helpful, beneficial. I’ve done good things for my friends and my family.”

“All lies.”

“All lies.”

“No! They aren’t lies!”

He leaps forward, embracing the big crystal, looking for a happy memory. Where was the one day when King Trent and Queen Iris visited the Gap Village. The King of Xanth and his father, Mitchell, talked about old times. None of the other kids made fun of him after that for a long time. Where was that? Where was the day he captured his first thunder lizard? He clings to the memory crystal, gazing into it. A large shadow passes between him and the sun, blocking the light into the facets. He ignores it, weeping over the hard cold surface, as the voices drum into his ears.

“It’s the id.”

“The id.”

"The id."

The big form smacks into him, shoving him roughly aside. Alister tumbles head over heels across the grass. When his head stops humming, he finds that he is looking up at a giant being, the likes of which he has never seen before. The id.

Roll 1 D6.

Subtract from Alister's hit points. If he has run out of hit points, turn to section 107.

If not, turn to section 62.

* 66 *

The breadfruit tree is another of those excellent cross-breeds they found before, with butternuts growing on branches springing from the same trunk. The soft yellow butter glides over the surface of the warm, ripe loaves, melting and sinking deep. Alister's eyes travel heavenward at the aroma, and he lets out a *sigh of pure pleasure* as he bites into his share of the delicious fresh bread. Marbles is too busy with his own to do more than grunt happily.

When they have eaten their fill, Alister picks clusters of rolls from the lowest branches and stows them away. A little more looking around brings to light a shirt tree, with a breech tree nearby. He is glad to see these useful shrubs; his own clothes are now well worn out.

The first shirt he reaches for proves to be a soft white

Section 66

and brown tunic that moos moodily when he puts it on. The brown markings on the front form the picture of a sphere made entirely of feet, not a bad representation of the ones attached to the Flee Market. "A football jersey," he says, in satisfaction. "I'll get a lot of wear out of this one."

He is disappointed in the fruit of the breech tree. Most of the pants growing on it are slacks, which have a loose and apathetic fit. He is lucky enough to find a single pair of decent pants beneath a pair of white ducks, which flap in his face shedding pinfeathers, and to avoid a set of rotting dungarees, which smell like nobody's business, and probably has been on the tree forever.

A shoe tree provides him with a nice mated pair of mock-asins, which at first fools him into thinking they are mules. But, since he knows that mules never mate, he figures out what they are and picks them. None of the boots are ripe, but the mock-asins do their best to imitate boots for him. He straps on his baggage and proceeds onward.

He notices a heavy growth of Eye Queue vines overhead, so he is more careful about which trees he walks under. Eye Queue vines make you more intelligent, although some of his centaur teachers insist that the boost is illusory. That extra augmentation of his thinking processes might toss in such unwanted things as logic or reason, and Alister doesn't want to be bothered with those. All he wants is to finish his quest and go home.

Not only is there a preponderance of Eye Queues, but eyebright herb starts appearing in the grass, as does buckeyes, irises, papayas, yellow-eyed grass, and eye-o'-

Section 66

the-day flowers. All of them look with fascination, or at least without blinking, at Marbles and Alister as they go by.

“Shh!” Alister gestures to Marbles with a peremptory hand and points to their right. The dog turns his head with exaggerated care and nods vigorously to his young master. A scream bird is plucking eyebright from its sheathed sockets and swallowing the bleeding shoots whole. Scream birds are notoriously mean and cruel, favoring their victims with a cold eye before disemboweling them with long sharp bills. Those cold eyes, though, are a delicacy known throughout Xanth: rich and sweet. Genuine eye scream is hard, if not downright dangerous, to get. With exchanged nods of agreement, Alister and Marbles are ready to try for some right now.

The bird finishes its meal and prepares to take off, presumably in search of something else to eat. It screams piercingly, causing several sensitive plants to curl up and die. As it lifts its wings, Alister yells, “Now!”

SCREAM BIRD

*To hit Alister: 17 To be hit: 9 Hit points: 4
Damage with bill: 1 hit point*

If Alister wins, turn to section 70.

If Alister loses, turn to section 51.

* 67 *

Alister scoots out from under the id's hand as it bends to pick him up. It overbalances slightly and ends up braced on hands and feet. Alister runs between its arms and resumes cutting operations on its belly to free his dog. The monster's gaze follows him, complaining vigorously. "Hey you weren't supposed to do that why can't we play it my way nobody loves me." Alister picks up a handful of sand and flings it into the jelly green eyes. "Aaaaah that hurt I'm gonna tell Mommy on you." It lifts its hands to scrub the dust out of its eyes and loses its balance. Alister moves out of its way in a hurry. All the things inside it leap up and drop again as the id hits the dirt. Through the open mouth, Alister hears a yelp from his dog amidst the clatters, crashes, and booms. Momentarily forgetting about Alister, the id is beating its fists and kicking the ground in a gigantic infantile tantrum.

Marbles is busy inside, digging through the eclectic collection of junk in the id's innards for an escape route. He jumps joyfully when he sees Alister.

"I'm going to go for help!" Alister shouts, mouthing the words elaborately and hoping the dog can divine the meaning. "You'll be okay! I'll be back soon!"

Marbles sits down on a marble statue, green in the light, and barks twice. Alister takes that to mean he understands and starts out of the clearing.

"No!" cries the id behind him, getting to its feet. "Dolly come back you're mine don't leave me!"

Alister takes a quick look over his shoulder at it and

runs. A few of its long paces and it catches up with him. He dodges around its feet.

His talent keeps interrupting his concentration. When at last he pays attention, it tells him that the *Encyclopedia* is very close by. At last! He circles around to the left, avoiding the id's grab for him, and dashes a little way into the underbrush. The id howls in fury, batting away at the foliage behind him as it crashes forward. Abruptly he loses the scent of his objective. Crouching in the hollow center of an idola-tree, he concentrates again on the location of the *Encyclopedia*. It is behind him. The id blunders through the bushes after him, wailing. As it passes him, Alister's talent points forward. The *Encyclopedia* is inside the id! Now he *has* to attract its attention and get swallowed. Otherwise, how can he retrieve it and Marbles?

He steps out past a pillow bush into plain sight and yells at the id. "Hey, green and ugly!"

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is less than or equal to Alister's Charisma value, turn to 48.

If greater, turn to section 78.

* 68 *

Alister scoots out from under the id's hand as it bends to pick him up. It overbalances slightly and ends up braced on hands and feet. Alister runs between its arms and resumes cutting operations on its belly to free his

Section 68

dog. The monster's gaze follows him, complaining vigorously. "Hey you weren't supposed to do that why can't we play it my way nobody loves me." Alister picks up a handful of sand and flings it into the jelly green eyes. "Aaaaah that hurt I'm gonna tell Mommy on you." It lifts its hands to scrub the dust out of its eyes and loses its balance. Alister sees it waver, but guesses wrong as to which way it will fall. He dashes to the right, only to see the big glassy belly thump to the ground in front of him, scattering gravel and dust in the air. Alister coughes and digs at his own eyes.

"My dolly!" the green giant crows with glee. Alister turns to run away, but the flabby hand scoops him up. Grunting, the id sits up and examines its prize. The idiotic smile on its face disgusts Alister thoroughly. He stands up with his back underneath the fingers, bracing his feet against the palm. Slowly he manages to pry the hand open. The id grunts, attempting to shut its fist again. Alister squirms out and stands on the fingertips, ready to dive to the ground, when the other hand claps over him, shutting him into a low green sphere. He chops furiously at the fingers, raking long slashes out of the flesh, but there is still no effect. He senses movement. Through the transparent flesh, he sees that he is getting closer to the horrid maw. The id is going to eat him, too!

Popping Alister between its lips, the id holds both hands over its mouth to prevent him from getting out again, looking for all the world like a two year old keeping a secret. It giggles stupidly, the vibrations of its voice jarring Alister, who is clutching the id's lower tooth. His talent keeps interrupting his concentration. When at last he pays attention to it, it tells him that the *Encyclopedia* is very close by. At last!



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He lets it prompt him while he hangs on, twenty feet over the id's internal junk pile. Marbles barks at him from atop a dead tangle tree. His talent tells him that the *Encyclopedia* is straight down. It is in here with them!

With a short spell against broken bones, he lets go.

Turn to section 80.

* 69 *

Alister applies the grass to his side and waits. Marbles' ears are perked to the sharpest point they will go.

"It's not working, Marbles," Alister says sadly. The blood is running out of his side more quickly now, and he feels himself getting weaker. He undoes the string to the sack from his wrist and loops it around Marbles' neck. "You take this to the Good Magician. If he can find magic for Dad, it'll be worth it to me." Marbles whines, pawing at the sack. "I can't make it, fella. You take it. Go on. Go. You're my best friend, Marbles. Don't fail me."

Looking over his shoulder every other step, Marbles trots uncertainly out of the clearing, dragging the sack of books with him. Alister waits until he he has gone, then he lets himself relax. He has done everything he can. Then he remembers the spell Humpfrey taught him and speaks the word.

Turn to section 29.

* **70** *

The scream bird lets out another deafening shriek when it sees the boy and dog leaping toward it. Distracted, it spreads its wings again, but too late to escape. Alister claps his arms around the bird's body and holds the wings closed. He is surprised to find that there isn't much to its frame under the feathers. All of its surplus weight must be in the huge pale yellow eyes, which are now glaring furiously at him. The beak opens to emit a siren wail that would have made the Gorgon's sister, the Siren, proud. Marbles' teeth close on one of the scream's long legs while Alister fumbles for his knife.

The scream bird pecks madly at Alister's legs and back, since it can't reach his face, and Alister has to keep moving his knife hand to keep the serrated edges of the bill from closing on his wrist. On command, Marbles tugs on the bird's leg, distracting it. When it twists around to peck at the rock hound, Alister plunges in the knife. The bird gives one more ear-ringing squawk and expires.

Alister feels it all over, to see if there is any meat worth taking from the noisy thing's carcass. It is nearly all lungs, legs, and eyes, as if whatever it ate went to those three extremities. It certainly could scream. He removes the eyes and gives the body to a patch of carnivorous grass he spots nearby.

The boy isn't sure his hearing has quite returned when he finds two handy pine cones and plops the pleasantly cold scream's eyes into them. He puts one

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down on a leaf for Marbles and laps at the other with great gusto.

Ummm. Eye scream deserves to be called a delicacy. Usually the Gap Village children get eye of smilk bird, which is more readily available and easier to kill; and that only on very special occasions. The pine cones have a strong aroma of resin, but they are crunchy and go well with the cold eye scream. Marbles finishes his first, pink tongue rasping last drops off his chops and looking for more.

“Sorry, boy, that’s all,” Alister says, standing up and brushing his hands off. Wait until he tells the others back in Gap Village. They’ll be jealous of his adventures for certain, now.

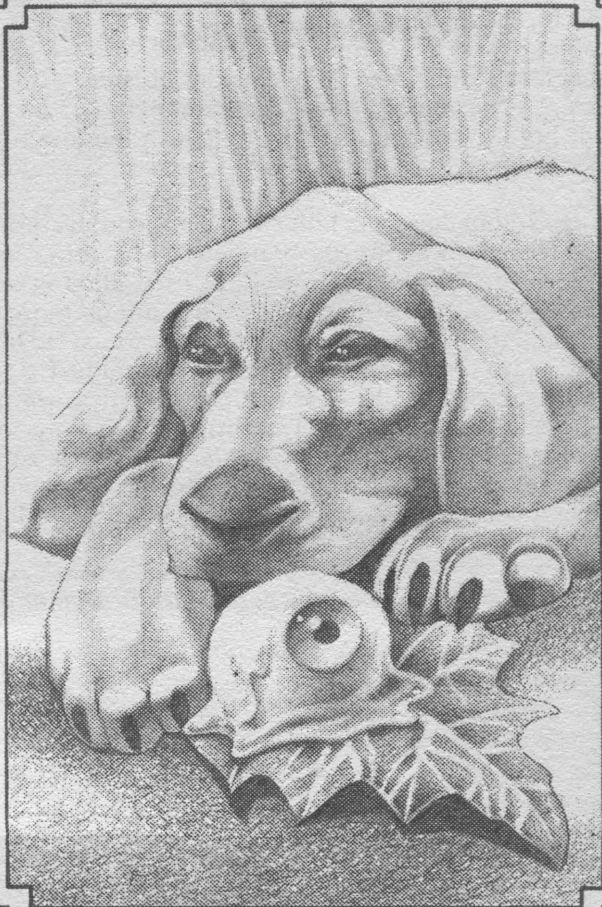
Alister and Marbles continue on.

Turn to section 58.

* 71 *

Swallowing his fear, Alister stammers out a word of command to Marbles, and the two of them step into the dark room. The door slams behind them. Startled, Alister claws at it, trying to pry it open with his fingernails. He is wrenched abruptly away from it, wrenched *upward*. He and Marbles shoot upward like lava out of a volcano. His scream is left behind him as quickly as his stomach is. Before he can catch his breath, he is on the crest of the hill in broad daylight. His eyes run with tears from the light.

Marbles runs around in circles, trying to judge by



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smell where they are. Once he can see again, Alister looks for the opening from which they were expelled. It is not anywhere underneath them. Alister scrabbles through the thick vegetation on the hillside. "It was magic," he decides. "I don't know what kind of spell it used. Let's try to find the way we got in the first time and start over. I know the right answers to the riddles now."

They stump down the hill, and then spend the rest of the afternoon walking its perimeter. The ramp and entrance to the maze seem to have been filled in and overgrown in the last few hours. They are no more in sight than the exit was. He finds the path which led him to the maze, but there is nothing at the end. It stops smack against the hillside. Hours more fruitless searching doesn't help him at all. The entryway has vanished. His chance to find the *Encyclopedia* that way is gone. Depressed, they retrace their steps to the crossroads. Alister hopes that Good Magician Humfrey will be happy with a partial set of books.

If he has been down all three paths, turn to section 46.

If not, turn to section 50.

* 72 *

"When it's on a diet, of course," Alister says, scoffing at the easy question. He turns to the right and walks along the passageway. Marbles follows at his heels.

He has gone hardly twenty feet before he hears a tremendous crash just behind him. He jumps, almost

shaken out of his skin. Marbles lets out a frightened yelp. "What was that?" Alister cries. Turning around, he sees that a huge gate has fallen on the other side, beyond the other answer to the riddle. "That could have fallen on me!"

NO, says the glowing words, appearing next to him. PENALTIES ARE NOT EXACTED FOR CORRECT ANSWERS. YOU ANSWERED CORRECTLY.

"I know," Alister says. "A goblin can't gobble in his customary way when he's dieting, because that involves eating less. A goblin is still a goblin when he's dead. That's an old joke."

TRUE.

He starts walking again. A feeling of dread is creeping around in his stomach like the glow-worms moving on the walls. There are more of the external ones as well as the internal as he progresses through the maze. In fact, it is as light down here now as it would be if there were windows. He wonders if the sun is still up. He also wonders who is behind the mysterious glowing words that appear on the walls. That unknown mind exacts a tough price for missing the answers to the riddles. He bets himself that not many beings get as far as he has. He hopes his luck will hold. The *Encyclopedia* is closer now, somewhere to his right.

Suddenly the passage angles to the left. Alister pounds on the right-hand wall and retraces his steps several yards to see if he's missed a turning. There are no other openings, floor, ceiling, or walls. He is unable to get through to where his talent tells him to go. Puzzled, he follows the passageway on.

In a little while, he has to make two left turns, which take him once again in the correct direction, but it isn't long at all before it veers off to the right again. Then it

Section 73

goes left, then right again, then left, zigzagging its way toward the *Encyclopedia*, but in the most indirect route possible.

Abruptly the passage makes another switchback and sends him off in the opposite direction again. Frustrated, he breaks into a run and soon comes upon more green words: a fourth riddle.

WHAT, they ask, GOES FROM HOUSE TO HOUSE AND NEVER GOES IN? On the corner straight ahead, it says, AN UNINVITED VAMPIRE. And to the right, it says, A ROAD.

If he wants to go straight ahead, turn to section 45.

If he wants to go to the right, turn to 61.

* 73 *

“Corn-ucopia are like that,” says Alister, staring at the riddle and its answers. “They have ears of grain and are generally poised on the big open end of their horns so that the bounty falls out instead of being kept in. In fact, it couldn’t balance on the other. The small end is pointed.” He waits for something to happen. “You don’t tell me. I just go ahead and find out if I’m right, right?”

RIGHT.

“Okay,” Alister says amiably. “I’ll find out for myself. C’m on, Marbles.” He shoulders his pack and marches off to the left.

The lines of moonstones continue, giving Alister the barest comfort of guidance through the dark passage-

way. He is no longer so nervous, but he is curious. What is the *Encyclopedia of Xanth* doing down here? He gives a little shake to the sack tied to his wrist which contains the other volumes he found. He can barely feel their outlines, since the magic of the sack makes it possible to keep an almost infinite quantity of things in it. He wonders if Humfrey will want to keep the sack for himself. Alister wants to take it home with him. His mother would love it, especially around spring cleaning time. Or perhaps he'd give it to his father. It is a good thing for going hunting. He bets the hot peppers his father likes to gather wouldn't burn through the magic fibers of this sack. What his mother said the last time Mitchell appeared with a bag of peppers over his shoulder and burn marks on the back of his shirt. . . .

A glowing, pale green face appears and rushes toward him out of the darkness, growing bigger and bigger, until Alister can see every sharp tooth.

"AAAAGH!" he screams, backing up against the wall of the corridor and throwing up his hands to protect himself.

The face vanishes abruptly. It is replaced by a simple line drawing of a human face, with a smile on its lips. HA HA HA! the words say. SORRY. JUST HAVING A LITTLE FUN.

"Well, I don't think it's funny," Alister says huffily. He negotiates a right turn as the corridor angles, then a quick left, another right, and another left. He feels a little punch-drunk by the time he comes to the end of the hallway. It is a dead end. With his fingertips, he traces the walls as far as he can, standing on his toes to reach the ceiling. There is no way out from here.

With only a little squirm of panic in his stomach, he

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speaks aloud to the darkness. "All right. So I made a mistake. Corn-ucopia was the wrong answer. I'll go the other way."

He retraces his steps, past the faintly lit rampway down which he first came. Marbles stops before it, his ears asking: Should we go back out?

"No," Alister answers his pet rock's unspoken question. "If the *Encyclopedia* is down here, we have to find it. Come on." He strides down the right corridor, fingertips touching the still-glowing word, MOUNTAIN. The smiley face appears on the wall as he passes.

Turn to section 76.

* 74 *

Yes, of course it is. He has made a bargain to bring back those books. There is no one who can say Mitchell's son ever went back on his word of honor. That is very important to his father: honor is dearer than life. And of course he has to do something to try to free Marbles. Swallowing hard, he passes the needle cactus and approaches the id again.

"Hi, there!" he calls brightly.

"Go 'way."

"I'm a dolly, the best dolly you can imagine. There's only one of me in existence. If I was your dolly, no one else anywhere ever would have one. Think of that!" Alister smiles his widest smile and speaks very slowly, hoping the id understands the idea of exclusivity. It screws up its green face and appears to think.

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"I go sleep now," it says. Its eyes close and it sinks into the pillow bush.

Well, if subtlety fails, he'll try a more direct method. "Hey, dumb-bell!" Alister shouts.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total rolled is less than or equal to Alister's Charisma value, turn to section 48.

If greater, turn to 78.

* 75 *

"That's easy," Alister says, turning immediately to the left and walking into the corridor. "A night mare can't take her shoes off, so of course she sleeps with them on." Alister once had a bad dream about being shut inside a boxwood tree, and when he woke up, there were round, pocked footprints like faces of the moon. His mother said they were the night mare's. His father suggested that Alister leave roats or some other grain for the night mare, and maybe she wouldn't bring him bad dreams again that night. Alister chose wood-ears, because they had a lovely grain, which showed especially when they were highly polished. Whether it was because of his father's advice or not, he'd been able to sleep soundly. In the morning, though, the grain was gone.

The corridor turns right and then left, then doubles back on itself in a series of ever-shortening switchbacks.

Section 76

The passageway itself grows narrower, too, until he has to slip through almost touching the moonstones on either side at once.

Just beyond the narrowest turn, the corridor widens out again, and he sees more of the familiar glowing green writing.

Turn to section 64.

* 76 *

Alister has lost count of the paces since the last time the corridor turned. He must be almost completely under the hill now. Marbles trots along next to him, his little whiffling sounds of doggy conversation resounding in the echoing silence. With a whispered word of command to the dog to be quiet, Alister halts and listens. Only a faint sound of dripping water and their own breathing keeps Alister from thinking that he is going deaf. He clicks his fingernails together next to his ear and smiles at the noise. With the tips of his fingers he brushes the walls. They are no longer packed earth, but rough-hewn stone with no mortar seams anywhere. He decides that the corridors must have been carved right out of the rock. It is unusual that such a clean, dry, well-constructed system of caverns would remain uninhabited in a land where there are so many types of intelligent subterranean denizens. Alister wonders who built it in the first place. And why?

This corridor comes to a halt at last, and off to his right, Alister can see more print glowing at him on a

Section 77

wall only paces away. He steps forward to examine it and discovers he is in another T-intersection.

This time the print reads: WHAT GOES TO SLEEP WITH ITS SHOES ON? To the left, the arrow reads, A NIGHT MARE. To the right, A LADY'S-SLIPPER PLANT.

If Alister decides the answer is a night mare, turn to section 75.

If he decides that it is a lady's-slipper plant, turn to section 39.

* 77 *

As Alister sees it, the odds favor him and Marbles against the cerberus. It might come out ahead in brains, but they can surround it and kill it. If they simply creep past, it might sneak up and kill them later. A cerberus has a fixedness of purpose which makes it an ideal guardian. It never wanders away from an assignment or gets lonely or bored. In a pinch, one can always put its heads together to come up with some sort of entertainment. It is the same for their style of fighting: one for all and three against one.

Alister drops back a little way from the hedge and beckons to Marbles. "The *Encyclopedia* is that way. We have to get that cerberus. Get ready, when I yell *now*." Marbles nods, grinding his teeth and looking fierce. He feels like getting into a good dog-fight. Alister sets both hands well apart on his walking staff and grips tightly. "Now!"

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They rush at the cerberus, which crouches to meet them, three gleaming white sets of fangs ready to defend itself.

CERBERUS

To hit Alister: 12 To be hit: 11 Hit points: 7 per head

Damage from a bite by one head: 1

Each head will attack independently each round. Alister will damage one head until it is destroyed and then start in on the next. All three heads must be defeated to win the combat.

Allister does 1 D6 damage with his staff.

If Alister wins, turn to section 89.

If Alister loses, turn to section 95.

* 78 *

"I am not my mommy loves me you're mean I won't play with you!" The id sits down heavily on the pillow bush, just missing the needle cactus beside it.

Alister thinks for a moment. This isn't working out the way he hoped. He wants to taunt the monster into picking him up.

"I'll play with you!" he offers.

"No don't wanna play you're mean going to sleep now." The id lets out a tremendous yawn and stretches

Section 79

its fists out, stiffarming a rock maple. Alister ducks the falling rocks and tries again.

“You can’t go to sleep now. We have a game to play.”

“No don’t like you you can’t tell me what to do.”

“Aw, come on,” Alister suggests, wrapping his arms as far as he can around one pudgy wrist and pulling.

“Let’s go play.”

“NO!” the id rages and flings Alister at the needle cactus.

Roll 1 D6 and subtract the number rolled from Alister’s hit points.

If Alister has run out of hit points, turn to section 43.

If not, turn to section 38.

* 79 *

Alister rolls under the pillow bush to avoid the harpy’s grasp. His staff is no longer within reach so he pulls an over-ripe bolster off the bush and springs to his feet. Swinging the hard pillow with both hands, he knocks Henrietta flying to one side and she slams into a dogwood tree. The tree barks furiously as the harpy slides heavily to the ground. Her filthy wings flap and she is airborne again.

Marbles gets into the fight, leaping from pillow to pillow and snapping at Henrietta. After one attempt to gouge out the rock hound’s eyes, she stops attacking him. Shaking one foot, the talons of which have been

Section 79

substantially blunted on the dog's skull, she turns in midair to swipe at Alister as he sneaks up on her with the bolster. He strikes anyway, but misses. She backwings and flies at him, claws out. The smell of her feathers alone is enough to make him gag, so he pulls some sweet woodruff out of the ground and flings the ruff in a neat arc. She looks at it as it lands around her neck.

"Now you smell better, Henrietta," Alister taunts, taking advantage of her inattention to swat her again with the pillow. The rock-hard bolster is beginning to leave its marks on the harpy. Her reactions are slower and she moves as if it hurts her to do so. She is bleeding from a few small wounds caused by the stem end of the cushion, and there are bruises on her breasts and neck.

A scream bursts from her and she lunges, fierce intent on her face. Her narrowed eyes show she knows her advantage in this fight is waning. She bats away the bolster with her wing while one claw grabs onto his tunic front and the other rakes down his chest.

The pain shoots through him like a lightning stroke. Alister gasps, his arms falling to his side. Henrietta cackles in his face. She rattles her smelly feathers and makes as if to claw him again. Quickly the boy shoves the bolster in front of him, catching her talons in the natural nubby fabric covering. Shrieking, she shakes her leg, trying to dislodge the pillow. Gagging at the thought of touching the harpy's filthy flesh, Alister lowers his head and butts her in the stomach. He can wash his hair later. She falls in a disorderly heap of feathers, the wind knocked out of her.

So, evidently, is the fight. As soon as she can, Henrietta takes to the air again, pushing Alister's face away with the edge of her wing. Peee-yew! She is

retreating. Relieved, Alister wipes the sweat and grime off his face, and brushes his hair back behind his ears. He throws down the bolster, which is losing its stuffing.

"I'll get you yet, you brat," Henrietta screams over her shoulder as she flies away, dripping blood and soiled feathers. "And your little dog, too!" Alister laughs and calls insults after her, and Marbles barks triumphantly.

"Come on, Marbles. We have to cross the Gap. It's getting late."

The road from the clearing leads to the main bridge, but Alister knows that the invisible bridge is closer. The Gap Village denizens know where to find it, though few of them care to use it. Most of them are afraid to step out into seeming nothingness, trusting something they can't see. Alister and his friends in the Village used to dash across the bridge at full speed, frightening off larger foes, who invariably stopped at the edge, felt at the bridge with a toe, and then proceeded with the chase. The children would be far away and safe before then.

He walks out onto the unseen boards, feels them sway under his weight. With a cautious hand, Alister feels for the waist-high guide rope and clutches it as he goes along. He listens to it creaking under his feet. The invisible bridge is old. Its magic is the only thing keeping it from decaying and falling down into the Gap. He dares a glance down between his toes. The wild and dangerous creatures of the Gap mill there, under the curiously mutated vegetation. People would never know that the bridge was out until they fell into the maw of one of these monsters. Marbles sniffs uncertainly at the south end of the bridge and doesn't lift his nose until they walk off the north end.

Section 80

"That's better," Alister says, shrugging his knapsack into a more comfortable position on his back. "Now I have to figure out just where we are and where we're going."

Turn to section 16.

* 80 *

Alister lands on a huge mushroom, scattering mush all over the id's insides. Marbles gallops over to him, licking his face happily, and he embraces the little dog.

"Marbles, the *Encyclopedia* is in here! Help me look for it!" After Alister brushes himself off, they dig through the collection of things that fill half of the id. It seems to be partial to heavy, shiny objects, or soft, dull ones. They are hampered in their task by a rush mat that rushes around them, occasionally getting underfoot and tripping them up, and also by the id, adding items to its collection. A whole pie tree joins them in their prison, splattering cream pies and meat pies and fruit pies all over. Alister tucks a few of the unbroken pastries into the sack and resumes digging.

At about knee level in the id's right leg, Alister thinks he feels something soft and leathery. Shoving aside a complete collection of eight tiny reindeer mosses, he catches a corner of a brown leather-bound book. He gives a heave that leaves him sitting down very suddenly, but he is holding on to what proves to be volume three of the *Encyclopedia of Xanth*. His shouts and Marbles' barks echo deafeningly throughout the id's

interior. With a satisfied smile, he stows the book in his carry bag.

"Well, now we've only got one problem," Alister says, sharing a warm meat pie with Marbles in the shelter of a chest of drawers that prevents anything the id swallows from falling directly on top of them. "How do we get out of here?"

Both of them make several unsuccessful attempts to climb the wobbly green walls, but the id's progress across Xanth is unsteady, and as often as not, when they have made it partway up, it would trip and send them plummeting down again. Marbles can't climb past the point where he is perpendicular to the ground, and Alister can't find a rope to tie to him.

Out of breath and inspiration, they sit down to watch the world through the id's green tummy.

"I don't know what else we can do, Marbles," Alister complains, chin in hand. "I might be able to climb out, but how do I take you with me?"

Marbles barks, as if to urge him to go ahead, but Alister waves the idea away. "No way. We're a team. Something will turn up."

In the distance, a cloud of dust moves along the horizon. It turns sharply and heads directly for them.

"It's a twister! Turn right! Turn left, you stupid thing!" Alister shouts at the id. He pounds on the inside of its stomach. "We'll all be killed!" Twisters are deadly storms, not unlike Mundane tornadoes, except instead of picking up houses and destroying them, Xanth twisters leave them wound into impossible corkscrews, often with the people still inside. It twists other things, too, and this soft, squishy jelly baby will be just the sort of thing it will love.

Section 80

"Turn! Get off this path! Move!" Alister shrieks.

The storm moves closer. In its wake, they can see trees braided unnaturally, including one huge tangle tree that has been cornrowed. The id is moving straight for it.

At the very last second, the id takes it into its empty head to veer to the right. "Oooh pretty! Mine mine mine!" it states, reaching for some jewelweed glittering in the sun. It grabs a handful and stuffs it into its mouth. Jewels clatter down on Alister's head. The twister passes by them, so close that the side of the id facing it stretches and ripples.

Alister and Marbles let out their breaths. They are safe from the twister. Everything is all right. They won't be suffocated in the id's interior. The next moment, every single object in the id is flying through the air. Alister clings to Marbles, and they huddle under the chest of drawers. The id rolls over and over. Marbles flies out of his master's hands, and they are bruised and jostled by the tumbling contents of the id.

"Owie!" screams the id. It thuds to the ground and opens its mouth to yell, beating its hands and feet on the ground. Alister rushes through its right arm to see what has hit them and is in time to watch their unwitting assailant disappear into the distance.

"The Flee Market!" Alister laughs. "It knocked the id over. The mouth's wide open. Let's get out of here!"

They sneak out of the mouth while the id has its eyes screwed up. Big green tears leak out of the corners and the fists pound petulantly, making the earth shake. "Not fair you sneaked up on me I'm telling it's not fair!"

They can hear it for a long way as they run back

toward the crossroads along the narrow track through the woods.

If Alister has now tried all three paths, turn to section 46.

If not, turn to 50.

* **81** *

The book hurtles upward, endlessly turning in the spotlight. It reaches the top of its arc and falls, spine first, toward the floor. Just before Alister's hand touches it, a chattering shadow bounds over his head and seizes the book. It is a little brown monkeyshine, hardly longer than the *Encyclopedia*. One of its skinny arms clutches the book to its chest. With an audacious flick of its long tail, it scrambles away.

Alister rages, his fingers closing on air. Forgetting all about the host of onlookers, he screams, "Gimme that!" at the little animal, and follows that up with a few choice invectives which make the audience gasp. With a shamed glance at them, Alister bites his tongue and resolves not to open his mouth again. The monkeyshine scurries up the ladder toward the aerialist's perch, using its hand-shaped paws to climb, stopping now and again to harangue him with a shrill chitter. Alister leaps to the ladder to pursue it.

He can follow it easily. The monkeyshine gleams with its own pale glow. Alister is catching up with it.

Below him, Alister hears a loud honking sound. He takes a quick peek over his shoulder. A massive bull

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seal, a mature one, to judge by the spread of horns on his forehead, has taken his place by the ladder, waiting for the monkeyshine to drop the book and signaling his willingness to catch it. Well, Alister isn't going to let that happen.

The monkeyshine pauses once more to chatter teasing insults at Alister, but he is ready for it now. He throws himself up a couple of rungs, barking his chin on one, and grabs the long skinny tail. The monkeyshine shrieks and drops the book to defend itself. With admirable speed, Alister lets go of the tail and claps the book to his own chest before it falls out of reach.

Applause echoes around him, drowning out the incessant hum of the Big Top. Red-faced with exertion and pleasure, Alister climbs carefully down the ladder to the congratulatory embrace of the ringmaster.

Turn to section 105.

* 82 *

Alister walks out of the ring and retrieves his walking staff and his knife. The crowd gasps as he returns, brandishing his weapons. The ringmaster speaks in a confidential tone only audible in the first ten rows of seats. "Now the valiant Alister is going to do battle to the death with Leonardo, the world's greatest lion-tamer. In his day, Leonardo tamed thousands of animals, hundreds of whom still bear the marks of his displeasure. Those, of course," the ringmaster finishes in a sinister voice, "who survived."

Alister gulps. Maybe he is taking on more than he can handle, challenging a big critter like Leonardo. He is about to open his mouth to say he has changed his mind and isn't going to fight when a pert little goblin miss in a very short skirt walks in and hands a whip to Leonardo. The lion-tamer accepts it and rises to his hind feet, towering a yard over Alister. Leonardo coils up the whip and lets it snake out, its end cracking sharply. He gathers it up expertly and recoils it. Alister swallows nervously once more. He has put himself in deep trouble. Suddenly his knife and staff look puny and useless.

"To the death!" announces the ringmaster, raising a scarlet handkerchief over his head. He opens his hand and lets it flutter to the ground. "May the best fighter win!"

LION-TAMER

To hit Alister: 12 To be hit: 11 Hit points: 15

Damage from Alister's knife 1 D6.

Damage from whip: 1 D6

Damage with claws: 1 D6

Damage from bite: 3 D6

The lion-tamer will first attack only with his whip. This will keep Alister at a distance. Before he can get close enough to attack with his knife, Alister must first grab the whip by successfully making two consecutive rolls of 3 D6 each totaling less than his value for Dexterity. He must do this instead of attacking with the knife. If he succeeds, he will catch and cut the whip, disarming the lion-tamer. Leonardo will fight thereafter with claws and

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teeth. Until Alister makes two consecutive successful Dexterity rolls, Leonardo will continue to use his claws and teeth and Alister will get no attack back.

If Alister wins, turn to section 87.

If he loses, turn to section 93.

* 83 *

They come across a scotch broom drunkenly sweeping the floor. It sways somewhat while it works, leading Alister to guess that it has already had a few today. "The *Encyclopedia o' Xanth*?" it muses, pushing its bristles dejectedly over a pile of dust. "Naiverrr hearrd o' it. Trrrry the Frrreak Show, eh?"

"Wherrrr's that?" Alister asks, fascinated by the way the broom talks.

"O'errr therre." It points to the archway. "Blue and yellow for curiosities. Dinna you know that?"

"No," Alister says. "I've always just been plain curious, myself."

The scotch broom mumbles dismissively and sweeps away.

Alister and Marbles keep going around the ring. Elephant ear vines flap contentedly, sending a mild breeze through the still, hot air. Their trunks snake around the boy and his hound, curious to discover what they are. Alister laughs and lets the vine travel up and down his body. It sniffs his nose. He sniffs back, startling it. The vines have a quick conference, and

then rub against him, more of a caress than anything else, to show that they are friendly.

"I know," Alister says amiably, scratching one huge gray leaf. "You're just inquisitive."

The leaves fan him gratefully for understanding. Most people jump when the vines touch them. They don't expect the fannish inquisition. He gives them one last pat and walks under the archway toward the blue and yellow lights.

Inside are long rows of cages and glass cases. Alister gawks into every one in turn. Here is a creature with the beard and feet of a unicorn, the back end of a lamia, and the body and head of a capricorn. It eats pieces of metal with obvious gusto. As they watch, it swallows its mouthful and picks up another shiny metal cylinder. The sign in front of it reads, "Goat; Mundane animal; can-ivorous. Do not put metal objects in cage."

A piggy-back plant is next. A horde of small children are all waiting for their turn on its back. The pink snouts of the blossoms grunt amiably and give contented snorts whenever someone pats or scratches them.

Beside it, a pool of clownfish have a host of admirers watching the foolish antics of the little orange and white fish. One of them swims around and around in a panic as its children are rescued from a sheaf of burning fireweed. Two male clownfish shoot water arrows from an ox-bow, and the fish's children are saved. Human and near-human children in the audience cheer.

Dozens of people are gathered around the next exhibit. It is a glass case with a metal base that has two slots cut into it. Behind the glass is the head of a

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woman swathed in scarves and a very peculiar blouse, white and baggy. She has a handful of cards, and as each person takes his place before her, she gathers up the cards, deals them out, and puts one down. Then, a little white square of paper appears out of the right-hand slot. A man takes the paper, reads it, and laughs. "It says, 'Watch out for dogs,'" and the crowd hoots.

"My turn," says another man, and he steps forward.

"What is it?" Alister asks a woman waiting her turn.

"Oh, my," she says, wiping tears of merriment out of her eyes. "It's a Mundane fortuneteller. Instead of telling you how much of a fortune you have, or where yours is, like a normal one, it says silly things like that! Mine says, 'Your friends see things you do not.' Of course they do! My best friend is a crystal gazer. She sees all sorts of things I never would. I enhance flavors. That's my talent. All my food tastes wonderful."

"A good one for a cook to have," Alister agrees, thinking of meals he's fixed for himself and friends, and the expressions on their faces—easier and safer to pick something from a tree. "I wish I could do that."

"'Your friends see things you do not.'" The woman walks away, shaking her head and chuckling. Alister watches her leave and notices a card on her back. It reads, "Kick Me." He dashes after her to tell her about it, but the crowd pushes between them, and she disappears out of the room. Another roar of laughter, and a young woman in front of the box takes her piece of paper out of the slot. She screams with laughter and chokes out the phrase written.

"Ah ha ha ha ha!" crows the first man. He backs away from the fortuneteller, heading for another exhibit. At that moment, Marbles trots over to point down the aisle. He poses, looking up at Alister, and the man

unwittingly tumbles backward and lands on the floor. "What happened?" he inquires, gazing around.

"You fell over my dog, sir," Alister says, helping him to his feet. "Are you all right? Did you bump your head?"

"Oh, my, no. Is he hurt?" The man looks down at Marbles, who has his tongue lolling out in a doggy smile.

"No, he's just fine."

"Oh, that's good. I thought for a minute there was something to this dumb fortune. 'Watch out for dogs,' it says. I always do. I wouldn't ever hurt one deliberately. I like dogs."

"No, sir. He's okay. He's a rock hound. Very solid, see?" Alister knocks on Marbles' side.

"Good grief! Amazing! I once had an Airedale, but he blew away. Thanks for helping me up, youngster." The man brushes himself off and strides into the next aisle.

"Now, what was that you wanted, Marbles?" Alister says, squatting down next to the dog. Marbles patiently points again.

"Terrific!" Alister exclaims. "Food!" He hurries down the aisle. Marbles lopes eagerly alongside.

A stand of refreshment plants stands at the end of this peculiar hall. It has been many hours since their last meal, and they rush hungrily over to see what is available. Alister chooses an ear of caramel corn and a strawberry soda poppy over tempting taffy apples or hot popcorn. They can also have slices of beefsteak tomatoes on their choice of fresh breadfruit or drum rolls. The beefsteak smells savory, and his stomach rumbles hopefully. Alister snares a drum roll, but changes his mind. He promises himself a good thick

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sandwich after they find what they are looking for. His quest is more important to him than his stomach. He vows to stick to his purpose, but he misses his mother's cooking an awful lot just now! He picks a few more snacks and lets his talent lead him around the hall again.

Marbles digs up some rock candy. The Big Top variety is sedimentary: a different flavor for every layer. The little dog happily eats the candy. When he finishes it, he knocks down a couple of smaller tomatoes for himself and tucks in. If Alister doesn't want any right now, he certainly does. The steak is rare, just right for a hungry dog.

"Marbles! Come here!" Alister beckons to him from across the hall. Marbles growls a little under his breath. He isn't finished with the second tomato yet. Alister gestures excitedly, and Marbles lets out an exasperated *whumph*. He leaves the remains of his meal on the floor and trots over to his master. The second he leaves it, the scotch broom whooshes in and cleans up the fragments of meat, grumbling all the while. "Tourrrrists naiverrr leave a place tidy. I don't know what's wrrrrong with th' worrrrld."

"Look!" In a long case marked ANCIENT KNOWLEDGE, two or three dozen books and other arcane regalia are arranged. The books are all opened to the title page, or to a page featuring an interesting illustration. One of the books is a fascinating children's story with moving pictures that show the action described on the facing page. Next to it, opened to the entry for ant lions is a brown book just like the ones already in Alister's carry sack.

"The *Encyclopedia*! There's just that one," he says.

"It must be volume one, since this page is about A's. But how do we get it out?"

"You don't," says a smartly dressed elf in a tunic, polishing away the fingerprints Alister has left on the glass of the case. It tucks the duster into a top pocket with almost military precision. "All displays stay as is throughout the season."

"How long is the season?" Alister asks.

"All winter long."

"But it's not winter now," he tells the elf.

"Of course it is."

"Not outside it isn't."

"It's always winter in the Winter Garden."

"Please." Alister holds up a beseeching hand. They are getting away from the subject. "I need that book for Good Magician Humfrey."

"The Magician of Information? Why doesn't he just come here and get it?"

Alister thinks it best not to offer a complicated explanation. "He sent me," he says simply.

"You have a note, or a spell from him to prove it?"

"Well, no. . . ."

"Sorry, human boy. It isn't possible."

"Are you in charge of the whole show?" Alister demands.

"No," says the elf.

"Then I'd like to talk to whoever is. I need that book."

"That'd be the ringmaster, then. Come with me."

With his hands held primly behind his back, the elf marches out of the Freak Show and back to the center ring. Alister follows closely, trying to imitate the elf's precise walk. They get the ringmaster's attention, and

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as soon as there is a break in the action in the middle of the arena, he comes clinking over.

"Ringmaster, this boy wants one of the books from the Ancient Knowledge case. Says it's for Good Magician Humfrey, but he has no papers. And he claims that the season is over."

The metal man fidgets with his fingers, unweaving some of the interlocking links and cleverly putting them together again like a puzzle ring. "I see. Well, lad, what's your name?"

"Alister, sir."

"Well, Alister, just how did you expect to get the book? It belongs to us. It's in our display of curiosities. You expected to accomplish this just by asking?"

"Well, yes, actually. But I'll do anything you want. I'll work. I can clean, or garden, or hunt . . ."

"Trusting, far too trusting." Two flat links which serve the strange being for eyelids lower halfway over the concentrically ringed irises. "Nothing's like that in show business, my boy. Tell you what I'm gonna do. You can have that book . . ."

"Thank you, sir!" Alister interrupts, overjoyed.

". . . if you can catch up with it," the ringmaster finishes.

"If I what?"

"I will release the book into the center ring." He gestures sweepingly. "And it will be taken by one of my performers, who will pass it on to another, in order to keep it away from you. Your object is to seize it when it comes into your grasp."

"That sounds easy," Alister says, looping the handle of the carrying bag and the knapsack around Marbles' neck.

“A deal! Step this way.”

Huge lights converge on Alister and the ringmaster as they step into the center ring. The ringmaster holds up a beringed hand. “Preeesenting in the center ring, the Great Alister! He will defy death, dismemberment, hyuuuumiliation at the hands of the cast of the Big Top, to retrieve this”—and suddenly, the big brown *Encyclopedia* is in his hand—“this venerable book, containing wisdom of all the ages, which is to be his prize. Let’s have a warm round of applause for the Great Alister!”

The crowd cheers, waving encouraging hands at him. Alister feels very embarrassed being referred to as the Great Alister, not to mention having all these people look at him. He is horribly self-conscious as he moves to the middle of the spotlight, conjured by a thin woman in gaudy makeup. She winks at him, and the light grows brighter. Alister feels himself blushing as red as his hair.

“Are you ready?” asks the ringmaster, projecting his voice so that it rings through the arena.

“Um, yes,” Alister stammers.

“Louder, boy! This is your public! They love you!”

“Yes!” he shouts.

“And begin!” With a flourish, the ringmaster throws the book straight up into the air. Alister leaps for it.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is less than or equal to Alister’s Dexterity value, turn to section 81.

If greater, turn to 86.

* **84** *

“Forget it, Marbles. We don’t have to stand here and listen to this.” Alister turns on his heel and stalks away from the cerberus, who immediately loses interest in them. Once they are out of the glare of the starlights, it won’t be able to see them.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” Alister whispers, dropping to his knees beside Marbles. “If we can find a gap in the hedge, we’ll sneak through it. That cerberus has three heads, but only one body. It can’t be in more than one place at a time.”

Marbles barks once to show he understands and runs away nose to ground, yelping encouragement to himself. Alister follows him, throwing an occasional glance over his shoulder to make sure the cerberus is ignoring them. Marbles stops between two Christmas cacti, barks sharply twice, and falls to digging. With a cautious eye for the needles, Alister hurries to help him. There is just enough room between the cacti for a boy to wriggle under, if he is careful. Strings of silver bell-shaped blossoms jingle on the cacti as Marbles, with his impervious hide, nudges them out of the way. Alister pronounces the hole big enough and, shoving the carry sack and his knapsack ahead of him, he lies down on his belly and creeps through.

Turn to section 96.

* **85** *

Alister turns his back on the lion-tamer and walks slowly and dignifiedly out of the arena. Once he is away from the spotlight's glare, he pounds past the ringmaster and Marbles and into the Freak Show. Alister remembers the very thing to lure a gigantic meat-eating beast is right there at the end of that hall: a beefsteak tomato, the particular tomato he wanted to eat himself. It is enormous, juicy, and smells heavenly. His stomach, rumbling in dissatisfaction, berates him for wasting it on the lion-tamer. "It's for a good cause," he tells it. "Be quiet." The tomato is so big that he needs both hands to pull it off the vine. He tucks it under one arm and hurries back, stopping only a moment to snatch the knife out of his knapsack.

When he returns to the arena, the spotlight meets him at the entrance to the ring. With his nose in the air, he parades around the inside perimeter, stopping deliberately about eight feet from his opponent. He flips his knife out of its sheath and holds it up by its point so the blade gleams in the bright lights. The crowd gasps in unison. The lion-tamer gives him a bored glance out of one eye and bends to wash his front paw with his tongue. So small a knife is no threat to Leonardo, the world's greatest tamer of animals.

With a precise slash, Alister brings down the knife and cuts the tomato in two. Savory juices dribble down his hands, and he lets the aroma waft over and tweak the lion-tamer's nose.

Section 86

Roll 3 D6.

If the total rolled is greater than Alister's Charisma value, turn to 101.

If it is less than or equal to his Charisma, turn to 90.

* 86 *

The book hurtles upward, endlessly turning in the spotlight. It reaches the top of its arc and falls, spine first, toward the floor. Just before Alister's hand touches it, a chattering shadow bounds over his head and seizes the book. It is a little brown monkeyshine, hardly longer than the *Encyclopedia*. One of its skinny arms clutches the book to its chest. With an audacious flick of its long tail, it scrambles away.

Alister rages, his fingers closing on air. Forgetting all about the host of onlookers, he screams, "Gimme that!" at the little animal, and follows that up with a few choice invectives which make the audience gasp. With an ashamed glance at them, Alister bites his tongue and resolves not to open his mouth again. The monkeyshine scurries up the ladder toward the aerialist's perch, using its hand-shaped paws to climb, stopping now and again to harangue him with a shrill chitter. Alister leaps to the ladder to pursue it.

He can follow it easily. The monkeyshine gleams with its own pale glow. Alister is catching up with it.

Below him, Alister hears a loud honking sound. He takes a quick peek over his shoulder. A massive golden bull seal, a mature one, to judge by the spread of horns



Section 86

on his forehead, has taken his place by the ladder, waiting for the monkeyshine to drop the book and signaling his willingness to catch it. Alister throws himself up the ladder, barking his chin on a rung and biting his tongue. He grabs the long skinny tail swinging just overhead and tugs. The monkeyshine shrieks and drops the book. Alister lets go of its tail.

He isn't in time to stop the plummeting volume. It sails past his outstretched hand and bounces to a stop on the bull seal's nose. Once, twice, three times, the seal tosses the *Encyclopedia* up in the air, until he has it well balanced on his upturned proboscis, and waddles away.

Alister hurtles down the ladder and chases the gold seal around the ring. He honks invitingly but manages to stay out of reach. Two other seals whomp into the ring. These are cows, big-eyed and gentle-looking, but just as impressively horned. One is white except for a broad dun spot on its back, and the other is a uniform shiny dark purple.

The two cows space themselves at the edge of the ring. The bull stops between them with the book wobbling on his nose just as Alister reaches the bottom of the ladder. He rushes toward the seal, but he flings the book over the boy's head toward the white cow. Alister finds himself facing the leveled set of horns. The bull waits a moment for the audience to react to the danger facing the boy. The crowd gasps satisfyingly. It raises his head to wink at Alister, to show there are no hard feelings.

Alister, out of breath with fear, stops just short of the horns and staggers backward. He stumbles and sits down on the sawdust in the ring, shielding his stomach protectively. The crowd loves that, too, and the ring-

master cracks his whip in amusement. Alister's ears turn an embarrassed red. The bull honks, tickled. This boy is such a greenhorn!

Now the white cow juggles the *Encyclopedia*, flipping her tail coily from side to side as she spins the huge book. She is a seasoned performer and knows how to milk the audience for the best response. Alister dashes toward her and makes a wild grab for the book. With a practiced pout for the roaring audience, she flips it to her tail and bats it across the ring to the purple cow, who stands next to the entrance to the ring.

Angry at being made the monkey in the middle of this game, Alister turns and charges toward her. When he is just steps away, she disappears! A magic talent! Oh, no, thinks Alister. I'll never get the book now.

A saucy honk comes from behind him. He whirls to see the purple seal nonchalantly flipping the book over and over on her tail. Before he can take a step toward her, she vanishes again. The bull barks merrily at Alister's bewilderment and claps his flippers together applauding the cow's antics. The crowd in the bleachers cheers.

Alister makes himself stop and think. If I were a purple cow, he muses, tapping his lower lip with a finger, where would I be?

If he thinks the seal will appear in her place in the ring, turn to section 97.

If he thinks she will hide behind the bull, turn to section 99.

If he thinks she will be outside the ring, turn to section 102.

Section 87

* 87 *

The trouble with fighting an opponent armed with a whip is that he can strike without being within your reach. Leonardo bows to the audience, whirls to face the opposite direction, and bows again. A real crowd-pleaser, Alister thinks, watching. Catcalls and howls of acclaim come from all over the arena. Leonardo accepts them all with a sweeping gesture of his huge yellow paw. He turns and bows to Alister. Alister bows back.

The whip cracks out, snapping just inches from the boy's left cheek. He can feel the air rush away as Leonardo draws the whip back and snaps it again. Alister jumps back and away, just in time to avoid getting the lash in his face. The snap-crack of the whip angers him. Dropping his staff on the ground, he waits until the next time the long leather quirt unrolls and claps his hands closed on it. His palms sting as though they are on fire. The lion-tamer pulls back to free his weapon, but Alister is holding on too tightly.

With a quick slash, Alister cuts the leather whip neatly in half. Leonardo throws down his now useless weapon and springs toward the boy. The crowd lets out a gasp. Alister flings away his half and holds his dagger up en garde. "Come on, pussycat!" he sneers.

The lion-tamer, taken aback by the insult, pauses to stare at the little red-topped human. He is a nicely brought up feline, and outright rudeness upsets him. Alister takes advantage of his distraction to leap in and

stab him, right above the belt buckle, or where it would be if he had one.

Snarling, the lion-tamer spreads his claws and swipes at the boy. Alister ducks and counters by slashing at the paws as they go by. He scores a small slash and rushes in to corps-a-corps with Leonardo. Drawing his arm back, he drives the blade as hard as he can into the lion-tamer's heart.

Leonardo bellows and rakes his claws across Alister's back. Alister can feel his knees start to give, but hangs on and stabs again, about a foot lower. He is rewarded with a spurt of hot blood that blinds him. The knife is slippery and he drops it. His back feels as if it has been torn off.

The lion-tamer has lost all interest in the fight. He ignores Alister and tries to stanch the blood fountaining from his abdomen. He is weakening fast. Alister has severed a major blood vessel.

Before Alister knows the seriousness of the wound he's inflicted on his opponent, he staggers hurriedly, blinded with pain and the lion-tamer's blood, out of the center ring. Once he has moved out of the *spotlight*, two elves in tunics run forward. One throws a blanket leaf around his shoulders, which makes him scream aloud. The other offers him a drink.

"Go on," the elf says. "It's water from a healing spring. It'll fix everything."

"Quick," Alister gasps, "give him some." He gestures toward Leonardo. The lion-tamer is on all fours again, coughing blood. There isn't another sound in the arena except for the humming of the Big Top itself. One second later, Leonardo collapses to the floor and is still.

"Sorry, human, he's finished. We could tell that the

Section 88

wound was mortal when he started bleeding like that. If we had Spring of Life water . . .” He shrugs. “But it was a nice impulse on your part all the same.”

“Thanks.” Alister hunches miserably into the blanket and tries not to think about it. He has just killed a living, breathing, *thinking* creature, and for what? For a book! But the healing water works quickly. His back is hurting less already.

The ringmaster waits until his staff has carried Leonardo gently away, and then picks up the *Encyclopedia*. “Ladiiiiiieees and Gentlemen, I give you—the Great Alister!” He gestures to the side, and the elves shove Alister into the light. The ringmaster beckons him over and presents him with the big brown book. The crowd explodes with applause.

Turn to section 105.

* 88 *

Right in front of them is a large yellow beast that has the fore part of an ant lion and the back part of a griffin. It holds in its paws a whip and a hoop, and has various dandelions and tiger lilies doing tricks. Some of the plants are dancing together, others balancing on balls, and one very large specimen is allowing the yellow beast to put his head in its mouth past two rows of incredibly sharp teeth. Alister gasps at its daring, but the lion-tamer manages to get his head out in one piece.

In a monkey puzzle tree to the right, puzzled monkeyshines are chattering and running from one branch

to another, to see if any of their companions have more of the puzzle assembled than they do. Alister knows that the tree isn't meant to be solved by monkeyshines. They aren't bright enough. What they need is a little more polish. He feels a little sorry for the dull creatures.

In the center of the auditorium, bear-back riders, elves by the look of them, ride their bears around and around a circular track set in the floor. And in the middle of the track, cracking a whip and shouting over all the noise, is a strange being, comprised entirely of round loops of metal stacked to form limbs, torso, and head. The ringmaster is calling attention to the high-wire grass, which grows stretched from one side of the enclosure to the other. A petite form with wings, a delicate blue fairy, prepares to step out onto it to perform some aerial feat. Alister watches her with his mouth open. She has terrific legs.

High above her head is the source of the humming noise. A vast child's toy, brightly colored and spinning on its point, shelters the entire place from the sky. "So that's the Big Top," Alister says, nodding. "I don't see anything that looks like the *Encyclopedia of Xanth* in here." He spots an archway, through which he can see blue and yellow lights. "Why don't we try in there?" Marbles snuffles an agreement.

They circle around the center ring, watching the performers with open astonishment. Alister could swear the fairy winked at him from her high-wire grass, but he doesn't dare wink back. She is sure cute, though. He concentrates harder on what he is there to do.

Turn to section 83.

Snap! Snap! Snap! The cerberus's three sets of jaws scissor closed, its hot breath making Alister's carrotty hair wilt. "That's just a warning, shorty," it snarls out of the right-hand mouth. "You going to back off?"

"No!" Alister snarls back. "I'm going to go right through you."

"You haven't got a cat's chance." It laughs nastily.

Marbles, who doesn't like all this talk of cats, lunges ahead and sinks his teeth into the cerberus's foreleg. It bends two of its heads to look, and Alister bashes the left-most with his staff, twirls and bashes the middle head with the other end. The third head seizes the stick between its teeth and tries to worry it out of Alister's grasp. "Leggo," it pants around the obstruction in its mouth.

"Not a chance," Alister says, gritting his own teeth.

The left-hand head joins in the fray, waiting for an opportunity and grabbing at the staff on the other side of Alister's hands. A split second before it manages to bite down on the wood, the boy whisks it out of reach. The middle head snaps at his arm, but he moves it away and twists the staff so that the third head has to let go.

The cerberus shakes Marbles off its front leg and leaps on Alister. He is knocked onto his backside. All three sets of the beast's eyes glare redly into his. In unison, they chomp at him. Alister throws up one arm

to protect his face and brings the staff crashing down on top of one of the heads.

He earns a yelp from the middle head, which shakes from side to side. There will be a good-sized lump there in a little while. Unfortunately the right head catches his shield arm and pulls it across his chest. He is unable to wield the staff effectively with his own arm in the way.

Thinking quickly, he turns around so his back is to the cerberus. The staff moves in a deft arc, smacking into the black beast's side. It yowls at that, and yowls again as he lifts a heel into one of its faces. He connects with a throat. It lets go of his arm, and he dances out of range.

The staff gives him the advantage of reach. He uses it to pummel the faces and windpipes of the cerberus while it is unable to do anything but charge and retreat from his blows. It is beginning to lose its steam. Marbles continues to worry at it, gnawing on an ear here, a leg there. The middle jaws close on Marbles' back, and to the cerberus's surprise, several of its teeth break off against the little dog's flesh. It has never met a rock hound before.

"What's this thing eat for breakfast, gravel?" the cerberus grates, spitting out blood and shards of tooth enamel.

"Sometimes," Alister says. The left-hand head closes its jaws on Alister's leg, gnawing deeply at the flesh. He gasps, kicking away at it. At last he manages to make it let go and falls back a pace. He hefts his staff again. Marbles, at a signal from his master, jumps up and takes a mouthful of the middle throat. He drops on his

Section 90

side, his considerable weight dragging the protesting cerberus down with him. Alister waits for his best shot and brings the staff smashing down on its spine just before it divides into the three crania. All three heads utter a despairing howl, and the cerberus falls limply to the ground. Alister has broken its back.

"Well, that's show biz," it says. The six red eyes droop slowly shut. Panting, Alister sets the end of the staff back on its little feet and studies the corpse sadly. He sighs.

"You okay, Marbles?" The little dog nods vigorously, sneezes, and extends the shake along the rest of its body. "Good. Let's go on in." Alister limps through the entrance.

Turn to section 88.

* 90 *

Alister holds out the hot steaks, hoping to tempt Leonardo into coming over to eat them. The lion-tamer's nose twitches. He isn't unaware of the treat offered to him. He is trying to decide whether that tiny snack merits moving so far. It does smell delicious. He has only just finished a meal, but he is such a big creature he needs a lot of food over the course of a day. Getting up means leaving that brown book unguarded. Does he want to do that and let the human boy win the contest? He looks up at Alister's face, smiling and hopeful. Oh, why not. He seems a nice young human creature, as humans go.

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Stretching luxuriously, Leonardo rises to his feet and extends his arms over his head, spreading out the pads of his paws. He looks down from his height of eight feet three at the boy. The child's face has suddenly gone white. What is the matter with him? Hasn't he ever seen a fellow stretch before? He walks lightly over to Alister and takes the steaks out of his nerveless hands. "Thank you," Leonardo says. "Those smell good."

"You're welcome," Alister manages to gulp out. Leonardo is huge! He is sure glad he hasn't tried to attack him. It would be suicide. "Uh, excuse me."

"Of course." Leonardo waits until the boy's back is turned and then gulps down the steaks.

Alister totters over to the *Encyclopedia* and picks it up. He clutches it to his chest as the audience starts jumping up and down, cheering his name. The ringmaster gestures him over, adding his own applause to the crowd's. Alister's confidence returns with a rush.

Turn to section 105.

* 91 *

Alister looks up at the cerberus. "Nothing," he says. "Just some food, my knife and my staff."

"Unless I want to play a long game of fetch, your staff's no good to me. Knife's no use. Whaddaya got to eat?"

"Jelly beans, breadsticks, carribeans . . ."

"No, thanks. I'm a carny-vore. I only eat circus food. Tell you what," the right-hand head says in a confiden-

Section 91

tial whisper as the other two look this way and that for eavesdroppers, "I shouldn't do this, but if you go around to the left, there, you can sneak under the hedge. Just watch out for the roustabouts. They'll bounce you if they see you doing it. Once you're in, there's no problem."

"Thanks!" Alister exclaims. "Come on, Marbles. Let's find it!"

Marbles barks once to show he understands and runs away nose to ground. Alister follows him with an occasional glance over his shoulder to make sure there are no roustabouts about. Marbles stops between two Christmas cacti, barks sharply twice, and falls to digging. With a cautious eye for the needles, Alister hurries to help him. There is just enough room between the cacti for a boy to wriggle under, if he is careful. He has also to beware of a row of pointy poinsettias, their red leaves armed at the tips with hidden thorns. Strings of silver bell-shaped blossoms jingle on the cacti as Marbles, with his impervious hide, nudges them out of the way far enough for his master to pass. Alister pronounces the hole big enough, and shoving the carriesack and his knapsack ahead of him, he lies down on his belly and creeps through.

Turn to section 96.

* **92** *

The troll eyes him scornfully. "Yeah, I can tell you. Try the Freak Show. Only next time, stay out from under the bleachers, huh?"

"The bleachers?" asks Alister. Bleach is a magical liquid his mother uses to turn fabric white. What do branches have to do with that? He looks down at his clothes. They have lost all their color. He turns an astonished face to the troll.

"Your hair, too," the creature says, grinning. "Haw haw haw! But don't worry. It wears off after a while. Freak Show's that way," he points with a blocklike hand toward an archway across the great room. Alister follows the gesturing digits and spots the yellow and blue lights shining through it.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it." The creature walks away.

Turn to section 83.

* **93** *

I don't have a chance, Alister thinks. Leonardo bows to the audience, whirls to face the opposite direction, and bows again. A real crowd-pleaser, Alister thinks, watching. Catcalls and howls of acclaim come from all over the arena. Leonardo accepts them all with a sweeping

Section 93

gesture of his huge yellow paw. He turns and bows to Alister. Alister bows back.

The whip cracks out, snapping just inches from the boy's left cheek. He can feel the air rush away as Leonardo draws the whip back and snaps it again. Alister jumps back and away, just in time to avoid getting the lash in his face. The snap-crack of the whip angers him. Dropping his staff on the ground, he waits until the next time the long leather quirt unrolls and claps his hands closed on it. The lion-tamer pulls back to free his weapon, but Alister is holding on too tightly.

Leonardo is no novice at whip-fighting. He pulls back with all the strength in one great arm, and Alister goes flying forward. The boy lands and somersaults half the diameter of the ring. He drags himself to his feet and unsheaths his dagger. Posing en garde, he sneers, "Come on, pussycat!"

The lion-tamer, taken aback by the insult, pauses to stare at the little red-headed human. He is a nicely brought up feline, and outright rudeness upsets him. Alister takes advantage of his distraction to leap in and stab him, right above the belt buckle, or where it would be if he had one.

Snarling, he spreads his claws and swipes at the boy. Alister ducks and counters by slashing at the paw as it goes by. He scores a small slash, but the hardened leather whip, at too close a range for cracking, slams into his back. The breath knocked out of him, Alister feels his knees nearly buckling. He tries to dive in for corps-a-corps, but Leonardo throws away the whip and spreads both sets of claws. As he moves into range, the huge claws rake down his chest, ripping into his belly. "Aaagh!" Alister screams, dropping the knife.

All around him, he can hear the crowd gasping and whispering. He is in so much pain that he can't feel his hands or feet. He knows that his eyes are full of tears because he is having trouble seeing. He has to concentrate to blink. Hazily he sees one huge yellow paw moving in slow motion toward his face. His arms start lazily moving up to counter the blow but, as if under water, they are too heavy to lift quickly. He is having trouble breathing. It hurts too much to try. He stops trying. The big paw hits him across the side of the head, and he feels himself flying very, very slowly in an arc, up, and then down. The lights in the Big Top spin before his eyes, and then they go out as he mutters Humfrey's spell.

Turn to section 29.

* **94** *

Humfrey opens the bag. "Well, well, well. Bottomless pith." He grabs the corners and upends it on his desk. The *Encyclopedia* falls out, followed by the remains of Alister's lunch, and a shower of assorted small items he doesn't recognize. Probably they belong to the previous owners.

"I got it from a bookseller named Glim," Alister says. "In the Flee Market. Volumes two and four came from his stall there."

Humfrey counts the books. "There should be five," he snaps. "Why aren't they all here?"

Alister sighs. "I couldn't get all of them. I did try."

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"Trying's not good enough, young man. I could deny you the Answer to your Question, if I wanted to. A bargain is a bargain!"

"I don't need your Answer anymore. I figured it out for myself. It doesn't matter if it's possible to find a magical talent for my father. He doesn't need one. I'm the only one who ever thought he did. I had a lot of time to think while I was looking for the *Encyclopedia*, and I used it."

"So you don't need the services of the gloomy little gnome, eh?" Alister feels his cheeks go bright red. Humfrey opens a book to a page upon which print is appearing even as he speaks. The newest line is: *Alister feels his cheeks go bright red*. "Yes, I kept an occasional eye on you. Very well. In that case, we can call off our business arrangement. I have given you nothing, so you owe me nothing."

"Then I can go home?" Alister is suddenly eager to see his father and tell him about his adventures. And his discovery.

"The sooner the better." Humfrey points a hand toward the door. "Get out. Oh, and Alister, the next time you want to come and ask me a Question . . ."

"Yes?" Alister stops with his hand on the knob and turns back to face the Good Magician.

"Don't!"

* 95 *

Snap! Snap! Snap! The cerberus's three sets of jaws scissor closed, its hot breath making Alister's carrotty hair wilt on his head. "That's just a warning, shorty," it snarls out of the right-hand mouth. "You going to back off?"

"No!" Alister snarls back. "I'm going to go right through you."

"You haven't got a cat's chance." It laughs nastily.

Marbles, who doesn't like all this talk of cats, lunges ahead and sinks his teeth into the cerberus's foreleg. It bends two of its heads to look, and Alister bashes the left-most with his staff, twirls and bashes the middle head with the other end. The third head seizes the stick between its teeth and tries to worry it out of Alister's grasp. "Leggo," it pants around the obstruction in its mouth.

"Not a chance," Alister says, gritting his own teeth.

The left-hand head joins into the fray, waiting for an opportunity and grabbing at the staff on the other side of Alister's hands. A split second before it manages to bite down on the wood, the boy whisks it out of reach. The middle head snaps at his arm, but he moves it away and twists the staff so that the third head has to let go, too.

The cerberus shakes Marbles off its front leg and leaps up on Alister. The staff flies out of the boy's grasp and clatters on the ground well out of reach. The two outer heads grapple on to each of his shoulders, and the

Section 95

middle head turns sideways to bite into his throat. Alister squirms, twisting his head from side to side to avoid it. With a tremendous effort, he breaks loose, his hands thrown behind him for support, but the jaws on either side rip out agonizing mouthfuls of flesh. He screams with pain. Marbles dashes in, worrying at one foreleg, then the other, trying to distract the cerberus from his master, but it never loses sight of its intended victim.

"I'll take care of you later, pipsqueak," it growls. One heavy paw plants itself in the middle of Alister's stomach and shoves him over backward. The other foreleg, bleeding copiously, knocks Marbles head over heels across the grass. "Right now, I'm gonna finish off this snooty human." Alister flips over and tries to scurry away. The cerberus grabs him by the nape of his neck. "Not so fast," it mumbles around his hair and shoves down on his spine with its nose. Alister falls flat on his stomach.

"You shouldn't talk with your mouth full," Alister says, kicking backward and connecting with the cerberus's belly. He turns over on his back and struggles upright. The left-hand head nips in and takes hold of his right wrist. The jaws shut, bringing Alister to his knees with pain. The right-hand head attaches itself to his shoulder, and the middle head looks him in the eye. "No more talking. I'm through with you." And it sinks its fangs into his throat.

The agony of teeth tearing through the flesh of his throat is unbelievable. Alister gasps, air whistling weakly through his crushed windpipe. The other heads no doubt still hold on to his wrist and shoulder, but he can't feel them anymore. Everything is going black and

numb. He gasps out the spell word. Suddenly, there is no more pain.

Turn to section 29.

* **96** *

On the other side of the hedge is a stretch of complete darkness. Alister stands up and brushes himself off while waiting for Marbles. The little dog emerges a moment later, bumping into Alister and nearly scaring ten years' growth out of him. He can almost feel himself getting shorter. "Aaghhh!" Alister exclaims. "Be careful, willya? They might have seen us." Marbles whimpers a low apology.

They are crouched under a low overhanging shelf formed of springy interwoven branches. Judging by the bouncing up and down of the shelf, someone or something is walking on them. The branches sweep all the way to the ground in front. Through the gaps in the branches, Alister can see brightly colored lights and shapes moving. The humming is louder now than ever before. He tiptoes up to a gap at eye level and has a look.

Not too far beyond their hiding place is a large yellow beast that has the fore part of an ant lion and the back part of a griffin. It holds in its paws a whip and a hoop, and has various dandelions and tiger lilies doing tricks. Some of the plants are dancing together, others balancing on balls, and one very large flowery specimen is allowing the yellow beast to put his head in its mouth

Section 96

past two rows of incredibly sharp teeth. Alister gasps at its daring, but the lion-tamer manages to get his head out in one piece.

In a monkey puzzle tree to the right, puzzled monkeyshines are chattering and running from one branch to another, to see if any of their companions have more of the puzzle assembled than they do. Alister knows that the tree isn't meant to be solved by monkeyshines. They aren't bright enough. What they need is a little more polish. He feels a little sorry for the dull creatures.

In the center of the auditorium, bear-back riders, elves by the look of them, ride their bears around and around a circular track set in the floor. And in the middle of the track, cracking a whip and shouting over all the noise, is a strange being, comprised entirely of round loops of metal stacked to form limbs, torso, and head. The ringmaster is calling attention to the high-wire grass, which grows stretched from one side of the enclosure to the other. A petite form with wings, a fairy, prepares to step out onto it to perform some aerial feat. Alister watches her for a moment. She has nice legs.

High above her head is the source of the humming noise. A vast child's toy, brightly colored and spinning on its point, shelters the entire place from the sky. "So that's the Big Top," Alister says.

"Hey, kid, what are you doing back there?" A loud raspy voice startles him. It is obviously attached to the pair of huge hands that reach through the branches and yank him off his feet. "We don't like trespassers in here."

He hangs in the air, looking down at an angry troll

who is holding him suspended, feet dangling loosely. Dozens of people sit on top of the bleachers, watching them as they are watching the rest of the show. Probably they think that Alister's sudden appearance is part of the act. The big creature holding him in the air doesn't seem amused, or acting.

"Um, I'm here to pick up the *Encyclopedia of Xanth*," Alister says hopefully. "Can you tell me where it is?"

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is less than or equal to Alister's Charisma value, turn to section 92.

If greater, turn to section 100.

* 97 *

Alister looks around at the ring and the two seals. It seems to him that the other two are waiting expectantly for something to happen. And they are far too experienced in this business to do anything which makes them look inferior, so the purple one won't reappear and hide behind her mate in fear. The audience would laugh. Nor will she appear anywhere outside the spotlight. She loves the way her public notices her. Therefore, he concludes with a cocky grin, she'll go right back where she started from. He strides confidently over to the spot in the ring where the purple cow started. A split second later, the seal appears with the book atop

Section 98

her nose. Before she can dispose of it, Alister grabs it with both hands and holds it aloft. His hands are slippery with sweat, so he tightens his grip until his knuckles are white. He is grinning so widely he can almost feel the corners of his mouth touch his ears. The crowd goes wild.

The ringmaster gestures him over. Draping an arm across his shoulders, he presents him to the audience. Alister hefts the book like a trophy.

Turn to section 105.

* 98 *

The Big Top hums uncomfortably loudly, and Alister covers his ears. They are tender and not precisely where he remembers them to be. His feet grow unsteady and slip out from under him. Alister falls to his knees, feeling horribly numb. He doesn't think that the troll has hit him that hard, but he can't seem to clear his head. Marbles is beside him, looking concerned. He tries to reassure him, but the words stop at the back of his throat. His mouth and tongue won't work.

The huge Top spins faster and faster, until it is only a blur. It hurts to look at it, with all its shimmering colors. Alister closes his eyes so he won't have to see it. The humming grows louder and louder in his ears, until it is a ringing shout, and then abruptly, it is silent. Alister falls forward into the dust on the floor, whispering Humfrey's spell.

Turn to section 29.

* 99 *

The bull seal whacks his great golden flippers together, applauding the purple cow's flamboyance. Alister eyes him suspiciously. He catches the bull glancing sideways, toward the place where the cow originally stood. It is obviously a false clue, to make Alister assume that that is where she will reappear. More than likely she will materialize in the safest place in the ring, right behind her bull. She assumes Alister won't dare rush at her with him between them to protect her. If he had the least choice in the matter, she would be right, but Alister has a quest to fulfill, and that involves getting the book she is playing with.

He moves swiftly toward the bull, whistling to show his utter nonaggressiveness. The golden seal, barely veiled amusement on its face, keeps watching Alister as he strolls around him and stands on the edge of the ring. Now what? his merry black eyes seem to ask. Alister folds his arms and tries to look nonchalant.

A split second later, the purple cow reappears in her place in the ring, not an inch from her original position. With a flick of her purple tail, she passes the *Encyclopedia* to the lion-tamer, who is lazily plodding into the ring on all fours. The spotlight moves to the lion-tamer as he takes the book carefully in his mouth and walks to the exact center of the ring.

Dismayed, Alister starts forward and jumps back again, wincing. "Yeow!" He's run smack into one of the bull seal's curved horns and cut his leg. He looks down. It is a superficial tear, nothing serious, but it is right in

Section 100

the middle of his thigh muscle, and it hurts a lot. He presses hard on the wound to stop the bleeding. The seal gives him an apologetic glance and stands aside. "Wasn't your fault, seal. I should have watched where I was going." The seal honks in a friendly manner.

Now he has a problem. The lion-tamer deposits the book on the floor and settles down, his front paws crossed demurely on top of it. He shakes his long shaggy mane and yawns, exposing a broad pink tongue and healthy white teeth. Alister walks over and holds out a hand. "Give me that," he demands.

Turn to section 103.

* 100 *

The giant humanoid shakes him so hard his teeth rattle in his head. "What am I, an information booth? You sneaked in, didn't you? Ain't you got no respect for rules?" He shakes Alister again, and the boy bites his tongue, completely by accident. "You been hiding under the bleachers. I can tell by your clothes."

My clothes? thinks Alister. He looks down at himself. His tunic and trousers have been dyed white. Bleachers must be what his mother gets bleach from. Bleach is a magical liquid that removes all color from any fabric.

"I oughta break every bone in your body, but I ain't got time," the giant troll says. "So just get outta here and don't lemme see your face until you got a ticket, right?" He sets the boy back on his feet.

"Uh, right," Alister stammers.

"Go on, get!" He backhands Alister across the side of

Section 101

the head. The boy staggers backward and falls down, and the troll walks away. His head ringing, Alister pulls himself to a sitting position. Everything is hazy for a moment, but his vision clears up quickly. His ear is probably going to be swollen, and his neck feels like it has been disconnected. Moving very slowly, he gets to his feet and steps around the perimeter of the center ring.

Roll 1 D6 for damage.

If Alister has now run out of hit points, turn to section 98.

If not, turn to section 83.

* 101 *

Alister holds out the hot steaks, hoping to tempt Leonardo into coming over to eat them. The lion-tamer's nose twitches. He isn't unaware of the treat offered to him. He is trying to decide whether that tiny snack merits moving so far. It does smell delicious. He has only just finished a meal, but he is such a big creature that he needs a lot of food over the course of a day. Getting up means leaving that brown book unguarded. Does he want to do that and let the human boy win the contest? He looks up at Alister's face, smiling and hopeful. What a fatuous-looking little turnip. There he stands, holding out two little titbits for the great Leonardo. How I hate being underestimated, Leonardo thinks.

Section 101

As Alister watches, dismayed, the lion-tamer yawns ostentatiously and closes his eyes. He lowers his massive head to his paws and goes to sleep, leaving Alister standing, ignored, with dripping halves of a beefsteak tomato in his hands.

The crowd waits for something to happen. Alister stares at the big yellow beast in disbelief. Why has he gone to sleep? "Hey," he calls. "Wake up. Don't you want this nice steak? Yoo-hoo, Leonardo?" No response. Louder, "Hey, pussycat, here's your din-din!" Still nothing. The audience is beginning to get impatient. Jeers and insults issue from the bleachers, and Alister feels his ears going red. He throws the steaks on the ground and stalks over to the lion-tamer. Crouching down, he tries to tug the *Encyclopedia* out from under the enormous paws. Leonardo stirs momentarily in his sleep, and his head rolls over toward the corner Alister is holding. Alister has to jump back to keep from having his fingers smashed. He walks around to the other side, but the big silky paws completely conceal the *Encyclopedia*.

By now the whole crowd is booing him. The ringmaster comes to his rescue, holding up his hands to still the noise. "Now, now, he's a good sport, isn't he, folks? Let's have a Big Top round of applause for the Great Alister!"

There are a few scattered claps, and the jeering dies away. "You'd better get out of here quickly, son," the ringmaster advises him in an undertone. "Don't wait around. Sometimes they throw things. Once an act dies, it's dead."

"But the book—" Alister stammers out.

"Sorry. We had a bargain, and you lost. Come again

sometime, see the show.” The ringmaster signals over Alister’s head to another metal man who resembles him almost exactly. “Nice try, though. Good-bye.”

The second metal man ushers Alister out of the spotlight. “Come on, son. Let’s get you some provisions and see you on your way.”

“Thanks.” He retrieves his luggage from Marbles and follows the man back into the Freak Show. The two of them collect provisions which Alister arranges in the knapsack. He never gives a second glance to the tomato vine, the aroma from which was tantalizing his nostrils. Right now, he hates beefsteak more than he’s ever hated anything in his life.

The metal man escorts him to the main entrance. “This is the way out. I’m sorry you didn’t succeed, but that’s show biz. Would you like free tickets to see the circus again sometime?”

“I’d rather not, thanks,” Alister says bitterly. “By the way, there’s a very close resemblance between you and the ringmaster—”

“That’s right,” the ringman says. “He and I own the Big Top. We’re brothers. He’s Barnum. My name’s Bailey.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you. Come back anytime, my boy. Safe traveling!”

Alister waves and turns away. He wanders through the winter garden, feeling melancholy. The books in the bag jounce against his hip. Well, that is one volume that Magician Humfrey can go get for himself. If he doesn’t like big cats, he’ll have to settle for an incomplete set of *Encyclopedia*. He and Marbles trudge all the way back to the crossroads.

Section 102

If Alister has tried all three paths, turn to section 46.

If not, turn to 50.

* 102 *

Alister eyes the bull seal, who is applauding the purple cow, whacking his great golden flippers together. Obviously, he approves. Alister catches him tossing a sideways glance at the place where the purple cow originally stood. As soon as the bull senses his scrutiny, he stubbornly makes eye contact with the boy, refusing to give him any more clues.

That is it, Alister thinks, he's going to keep my attention so the cow can reappear somewhere else. I bet she's outside the ring. Alister spins and walks out of the ring. The spotlight follows him out and around the edge of the stage. People point and whisper as he passes. He hopes he looks confident as he runs around to the spot opposite the ring's entrance and waits for the purple cow.

A second later, the seal reappears in her place in the ring and, with a flick of her purple tail, passes the *Encyclopedia* to the lion-tamer, who is lazily plodding into the ring on all fours. The spotlight moves to the lion-tamer as he takes the book carefully in his mouth and walks to the exact center of the ring.

"No!" Alister yells. He jumps over the side and runs toward the lion-tamer. The great beast deposits the book on the floor and settles down, his front paws crossed demurely on top of it. He shakes his long

Section 103, 104

shaggy mane and yawns, exposing a broad pink tongue and healthy white teeth. "Give me that," Alister demands.

Turn to section 103.

* 103 *

The lion-tamer looks up at him pityingly and shakes his head.

"Please give me that book?" Alister repeats, forcing himself to calm down and be more polite. He extends his hands palm up, very slowly and tentatively. The lion-tamer roars, and Alister snatches them back. "Okay," Alister says. "If you won't, I know what I have to do."

If Alister wants to fight the lion-tamer, turn to section 82.

If Alister wants to lure the lion-tamer away, turn to section 85.

* 104 *

Alister pulls out Good Magician Humfrey's map and unrolls it. "I have this. It's a map of Xanth. I can get along without it."

The barker sniffs it. "Is it any good?"

Section 104

"I haven't found any inaccuracies myself. There's a lot of blank spaces, but it's right so far as it goes."

"No, son, what *value* is there in a map of Xanth?"

"Well, I hear the Mundanes use pictures of people for money. This is the picture of a whole country. It should be a thousand times as good."

"Okay." The cerberus accepts Alister's logic and a pair of blue paper squares appear in the youth's hand. "These are your tickets. Don't lose 'em. No refunds. Have a good time. Go away, boy, you bother me."

It stands aside to let them pass. They walk through the hedge, and the light from the star flowers is cut off. The humming noise is now the dominant sound in the air. They pass through a short stretch of darkness, and into a brilliantly lit riot of color and movement. Alister twists his neck to see everything around him.

"Tickets, please, tickets," calls a huge round insect to their right. "You, sir, where's your ticket?"

Alister presents the blue squares to the insect, who closer inspection proves to be a tick. It ticks off their tickets and returns them, after punching a little hole in the middle of each with its mandibles.

"Thank you, sir. Step right in."

Alister accepts his tickets back and walks forward in a breathless state of amazement. "Marbles, it's wonderful!"

Turn to section 88.

* **105** *

"Congratulations, my boy!" the ringmaster says in ringing tones. "What a performance. If you should ever want a job here, just give them my name." He turns to the audience. "Wasn't that amazing! I give you—the Great Alister!" An elbow takes Alister in the ribs. "Take a bow, boy," he whispers sharply. Obediently he bends in the middle and hugs the precious book even closer to him. The bleachers shake with the vibration of excited acclaim. Outside the spotlight, Marbles barks his approval, too. Newshounds and newshens scurry around, writing down their impressions of the event. Shutterbugs take Alister's picture with blinding flashes of light.

Another metal man who looks exactly like the ringmaster steps forward and ushers Alister out of the spotlight. "Come on, son. Let's get you some provisions and see you on your way."

"Thanks!" He retrieves his luggage from Marbles and stows the book safely away in the carry sack. The two of them collect provisions which Alister arranges in the knapsack. He is particularly happy to see two thick beefsteak tomato sandwiches dripping with juice.

The metal man escorts him to the main entrance. "This is the way out. That was quite a neat show you gave. You might make your name in show business, you know."

"I'd rather not, thanks," Alister says. "By the way, there's a very close resemblance between you and the ringmaster—"

Section 106

"That's right," the ringman says. "He and I own the Big Top. We're brothers. He's Barnum. My name's Bailey."

"Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet *you*. Come back anytime, free admission. Safe traveling!"

Alister waves until they lose sight of the entrance through the trees. He skips through the winter garden, feeling like springtime. The book jounces in his bag against the others, and he is happy. He is really accomplishing something worthwhile. He strides light-heartedly all the way back to the crossroads.

If Alister has tried all three paths, turn to section 46.

If not, turn to 50.

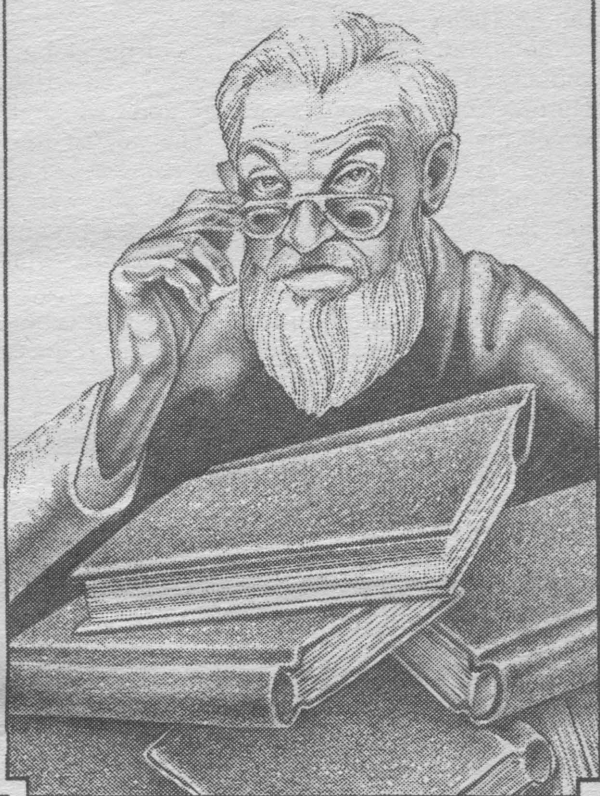
* 106 *

Humfrey opens the bag. "Well, well, well. Bottomless pith." He grabs the corners and upends it on his desk. The *Encyclopedia* falls out, followed by the remains of Alister's lunch, and a shower of assorted small items he doesn't recognize. Probably they belong to the previous owners. Whatever they are.

"I got it from a bookseller named Glim," Alister says. "In the Flee Market. Volumes two and four came from his stall there."

Humfrey counts the books. "Five. All here. Good. Are you ready for your Answer, young man?"

"Actually, I don't need your Answer anymore. I



Section 106

figured it out for myself. It doesn't matter if it's possible to find a magical talent for my father. He doesn't need one. I'm the only one who ever thought he did. I had a lot of time to think while I was looking for the *Encyclopedia*, and I used it."

"So you don't need the services of the gloomy little gnome, eh?" Alister feels his cheeks go bright red. Humfrey opens a book to a page upon which print is appearing even as he speaks. The newest line says: *Alister feels his cheeks go bright red.* "Yes, I kept an occasional eye on you, to make sure you were on the job. But you have performed the service I required of you, to find this." He taps the *Encyclopedia*. "Since you answered your first Question on your own, I will answer another Question for you. What'll it be?"

"Do I have to ask it right now?" Alister asks, taken off guard.

"Is that your Question?" Humfrey counters nastily. "It may interest you to know that the concept of honor didn't originate with you. It's a matter of pride with me. I don't have to do it, since the letter of our agreement was that I would provide the Answer to your first Question. It doesn't matter that you found an Answer that satisfied you yourself. I charge heavily for my labors, since I could have fools like you at my door day and night. But if you have one, spit it out. I don't have all day."

"Well, then," Alister begins, thinking deeply. "Is the Answer I came up with the same as the Answer you would have given me?"

"Is it that important to you?"

"I'm finding out that there is a lot I don't know. One of the things I intend to do more of is ask the advice of

Section 107

people who have got more wisdom than I have. Check my answers, sort of."

Humfrey peers at him over the tops of his spectacles and rubs his lip with a forefinger. "Good, good. Very well. My Answer to your Question is that you should learn to trust your own wisdom when you find any."

"That's my Answer? Not 'Yes,' or 'No'?"

"I should have said, IF you find any! Yes, that's the right Answer to your Question. 'Yes' or 'No' wouldn't have sufficed. I give good value for service. And now, since I have what I want, and you have what you came for, our business is at an end." He thrusts the now empty carry sack at the boy and opens the first volume of the *Encyclopedia*.

"Then I can go home?" Alister is suddenly eager to see his father and tell him about his adventures. And his discovery.

"The sooner the better." Humfrey points a hand toward the door. "Get out. Oh, and Alister, the next time you want to come and ask me a Question . . ."

"Yes?" Alister stops with his hand on the knob and turns back to face the Good Magician.

"Don't!"

* 107 *

As all grows dark around him, Alister gasps Humfrey's magic word.

Turn to section 29.

* **108** *

Alister applies the grass to his side and waits. Marbles' ears are perked to the sharpest points they will make.

"It's working!" he says in wonder. Marbles runs in circles chasing his tail and barking happily. Soon, Alister is able to stand. With a deep breath, he takes the now soggy weeds away from his stomach. The skin is re-forming, and he knows his internal workings are back to normal. "You're wonderful, Marbles. If I ever catch a scream bird, both eyes are for you." He looks over at the dead bird, but the carnivorous grass has eaten the eyes already. Everyone seems to like eye scream. Alister and Marbles continue on.

Turn to section 58.

ENTER THE ADVENTURE

"The Zombie Master said there was a set of books once, the Encyclopedia of Xanth." Good Magician Humphrey's eyes gleamed. "They may have been stolen, or they may have walked away on their own. You find the Encyclopedia and bring it to me, and I will Answer your Question." He then uncorked a bottle, and a fearsome purple djinn reluctantly emerged, his cloud foaming indignantly at his having been disturbed. Alister stared in amazement.

He'd never seen a slow djinn fizz...

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