


IZIRION'S ENCHIRIDION OF THE WEST MARCHES



A CAMPAIGN GUIDE TO THE PERILOUS WILDS
Dom Liotti & Sam Sorensen



**IZIRION'S
ENCHIRIDION
— OF THE —
WEST MARCHES**

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A Goat's Head game

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On the Cover

Matt Cowdery illustrates the kobold scribe Zadrok cowering from the fearsome dragon-tyrant, Izirion the Black Dread, as he lords over the ruins of a once-mighty empire.

Disclaimer: We, Dom & Sam, are not to blame when player characters die horribly at the hands of random encounters, unexpected boss crits, or from ignoring clear dungeon telegraphing. Furthermore, we are not responsible for player character deaths incurred by freezing weather, wild beasts, very long drops, wandering too far from home, making deals with dragons, mishearing lore, or bringing only one waterskin.

*Dedicated to all those who raised a glass at
the Last Chance Inn & Taproom.*

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SAFETY TOOLS

Playing a tabletop roleplaying game is usually fun, but there can be moments of stress and fear and uncertainty. These can oftentimes be good: tension is good for any story, and moments of difficulty will make your game a more rewarding experience.

That said, it's important that you, both players and GMs (and audience members, if you have them), all feel safe at the table. Making certain that everyone still feels comfortable and secure—even during those moments of intensity—is more important whatever game you're playing.

We have two main safety tools to recommend; there are many more out there and we encourage you to do your own research, but these two are robust and reliable.

Lines & Veils

Lines & veils are two kinds of limits in the game.

Lines are not to be crossed: anything designated as a line will not come up in game. They are places and topics that the game will not go.

Veils are things that, while they can come up in-game, will be “panned away” from, or “fade-to-black” moments. Veiled moments are things that happen in the story of the game, but don't get a spotlight or significant screentime. They can be dealt with, but avoid graphic details.

Lines and veils both should be discussed before play begins: give all players at the table a chance to declare them before the moment might arise. It's a chance to let everyone decide how comfortable they are ahead of time.

The X-Card

The X-Card is an optional tool created by John Stavropoulos that allows anyone in your game (including you, the GM) to edit out any content anyone is uncomfortable with as you play. Since most RPGs are improvisational and we won't know what will happen until it happens, it's possible the game will go in a direction people don't want. An X-Card is a simple tool to fix problems as they arise.

To use, at the start of your game, simply say:

“I'd like your help. Your help to make this game fun for everyone. If anything makes anyone uncomfortable in any way... [draw X on an index card] ...just lift this card up, or simply tap it [place card at the center of the table]. You don't have to explain why. It doesn't matter why. When we lift or tap this card, we simply edit out anything X-Carded. And if there is ever an issue, anyone can call for a break and we can talk privately. I know it sounds funny but it will help us play amazing games together and usually I'm the one who uses the X card to protect myself from all of you! Please help make this game fun for everyone. Thank you!”

CONTENT WARNINGS

The content of the West Marches as a format does not significantly deviate from that of the base game. There will be wilderness to explore, dungeons to delve, monsters to slay, friends to acquaint, and treasure to be unearthed.

It's likely, however, that the West Marches will be perhaps more grim than an ordinary game. Friends will likely be fewer and farther between, the wilds will be more precarious, and the chances of losing allies will be higher. Violence, stress, certain horrors, and foul language are quite common.

If any of that is likely to make you or your players uncomfortable, it's worth having a frank discussion ahead of time about expectations for the game. Using the aforementioned safety tools will certainly help, and a GM can certainly bend and shift the tone of the game, but it will not be easy.

If it turns out that someone at the table doesn't want to play given the content of the game, that's fine! Far better to have them realize that a game is not for them and be able to make a graceful exit than to get in deep and have to back out.

If you realize that this game isn't for you, don't feel bad for a moment about not playing. The West Marches is a very specific game, and is certainly not for everyone

RACISM & COLONIALISM

Since its inception in the '70s, the base game itself has had profound issues surrounding racism and the colonialist mindset. Fifth Edition has done little to mitigate these issues, and if anything, the West Marches only make the longstanding rot more visible.

What does it mean to have a colonialist mindset? Consider, for a moment, the basic act of an adventure. You, the adventurer, travel far from home, break into a fortified location, kill or drive out its inhabitants, and then take everything of value they own. Afterwards, you return home, rich and wealthy, and are lauded as heroes.

You see how this might be an issue? It's only compounded by the fact that the game's reward systems inherently push you towards this sort of behavior: by default, the most prominent means to advance your characters are through combat, where you must defeat creatures, typically by killing them.

Now, granted, it's one thing to fight off dragons, beasts, and demons. They are more or less universally villainous, and the players can usually observe them being greedy, heartless, murderous monsters.

However, it's entirely another when the villains are people. Consider drow, duergar, orcs, goblins: the standing mythology that the game is built on presents them as fully sentient, and often organized into fully-fledged societies. Whether or not your specific style of managing the game as a GM explores the marginalization of these societies in thought-provoking play, the mechanics and language that comprise the fiber of the game itself presents them as villains. Reading the rules as they are laid down, the game generalizes villainy and evil to entire groups of people, and that their murder and conquest is most always justified.

This is racist.

A good GM can solve a lot of this, yes. They can remove racial stat modifiers, they can build a complex and nuanced world with myriad people, and they can emphasize empathy, compassion, and community-building.

The challenge is that the rules, as written, will be fighting that GM at practically every turn along the way. It's impossible not to acknowledge the damaging, dehumanizing elements of the game as it is currently written. The game is one that analogs existing racist attitudes in real life; though this isn't a problem in itself, by the nature of its construction it rewards those that take these exploitative and colonialist behaviors to the extreme.

All that said, the game is extremely fun. It brings a great deal of imagination, creativity, and joy to thousands—if not millions—of people. You can and should continue to enjoy the game, even with all of its flaws. But you must acknowledge those flaws.

In the West Marches, you will travel to a distant, uncharted land in search of fame, glory, and riches. Even if the Marches are solely inhabited by the most despicable of all creatures, foul devils and shambling undead and otherworldly aberrations, characters in the West Marches are not inherently heroic.

True heroism comes from reforming and advancing the existing systems of society to make significant changes that benefit everyone, including the marginalized and oppressed. Slaying dragons and looting tombs is fun, but don't make the mistake of allowing the spirit of adventure to dull your sensibilities to the deeper questions that prod endemically at the seams of the game.

Greetings and Salutations,

My name is Izirion, the Black Dread, and here in your hands you hold my Enchiridion, the sum total of all my knowledge of my domain. In your tongue, this region is known as the West Marches, and it has been the object of desire for many a hero.

All the tales you have been told are true: the Marches are harsh, brutal, unforgiving, callous, and filled with riches beyond your wildest dreams. This was once a land of gods and heroes, and now it lies in ruins.

Every adventurer, every treasure hunter, every hopeful hero that has come to the Marches has failed. Frozen, starved, drowned, decapitated, boiled, dissolved, petrified, cursed, infected, torn to shreds, or stabbed in the back by a comrade—every single adventurer meets their fate.

For the past few centuries, I enjoyed my easy dominance, my unquestioned conquest. But now, as I grow older and wiser, I seek a new challenge. Idle wanderers and foolhardy crusaders grow weary, as do petty scholars and wayward scavengers. I have slain and tortured each ten times over, and now I grow bored.

It is for this reason that you now see my Enchiridion before you. It is here to instruct you, to train you, to guide your hands and eyes in the ways of the Marches. I have a need of a new class of hero, one forged in blood and steel, a hero that can match the ferocity of the Marches.

It is my hope that, in time, you will rise to the occasion. That you will climb bitter peaks and crawl overgrown valleys. That you will delve into the ruins, uncover lost secrets, and slay mighty beasts. That you will not merely survive in the Marches, but will truly come to thrive within its wild heart.

And that one day, you will come and face me, that I will finally have a worthy foe whose skulls I will take no small pleasure in boiling.

—Izirion, the Black Dread

Hello!

You've already read the Big Guy's introduction, that's good! My name's Zadrok, and I'm the Big Guy's personal scribe: it's my job to write down everything he says for the shiny new Enchiridion.

Of course, as a right proper scribe, it's also my job to make sure that the meaning is clear, so I've left lots of helpful commentary throughout in addition to the Big Guy's notes. After all, we kobolds have a somewhat different outlook on life than dragons.

Still, I hope—both for your sake and mine—that you find the words written inside the Enchiridion both instructive and helpful. If they're not, the Big Guy will get angry, and then boil the skin off of my skull instead. And that wouldn't be very much fun at all.

Anyhow, just wanted to introduce myself and make sure you knew who I was. Bye now!

—Zadrok the Scribe

Blue Sidebars

Blue sidebars are here to explicate topics further; they're a chance for us, Dom & Sam, to say "here is exactly what this means and why we did it." They're usually around tricky or unusual concepts, or else trying to explain some particularly decision we made in the design process.

You should read them your first time through.

Green Sidebars

Green sidebars exist to give suggestions and advice on making the game your own. They offer possibilities for hacking, adjustments, and modifications to the game; green sidebars are us, Dom & Sam, saying "if we were going to change the game, here is how we would do it."

You should read them as you build your Marches.

Red Sidebars

Red sidebars are direct advice to you, the GM. They're suggestions, guidance, rules of thumb, and hard points you need to be sure to do or not do. Red sidebars are us, Dom & Sam, telling you "here is something that you absolutely should make sure to do (or not do)."

You should read them as you get ready to run at the table.

WHAT IS THIS BOOK?

Izirion's *Enchiridion of the West Marches* is a book that provides you and your table with all of the tools necessary to run a game in the style of the West Marches, which is a close variant of the West Marches, originally devised by Ben Robbins around the year 2000.

Within this book, there are rules to add into your game: systems for governing weather and travel and special NPCs and more. It's important to note that these systems are not content. They aren't encounters or monsters or scenarios, but rules that adjudicate parts of the game that previously lacked mechanical detail. The rules that deal with wilderness survival, for example, add complexity and depth such that players must now make critical decisions while weighing risk and reward when travelling, much as they would in combat.

These rules are GM-facing; they'll affect the players for sure, but will most often take the form of systemic challenges that players will have to react to or overcome rather than deploy directly. It's helpful for players to know, and it's encouraged for players to familiarize themselves with the broad strokes of these rules, but you should feel free to teach them as play occurs, rather than beforehand.

In addition to rules, this book contains a number of guidelines, principles, and toolsets for creating content. A lot of this content is built into the world: regions, dungeons, NPCs, encounters, that sort of thing. For creating these, this book contains numerous tables, charts, and step-by-step guides, so you can easily create excellent content for your players.

Some of the guides, however, are a little less tangible. They cover more philosophical and theoretical content, delving into narrative, design, emotion, aesthetics, and more. These have less concrete step-by-step instructions, and instead provide you with insight and advice to weigh and consider.

Finally, the book also includes a collection of suggestions, rules tweaks, and modifications from the base game to the West Marches. This tackles stuff like encumbrance and carry weight, making mess kits actually helpful, and sorting out vague background features. It also includes a little player-facing content, like new feats!

In many ways, this book is primarily for GMs, but it has a fair amount of player-facing rules as well. You can expect to use it as such.

HISTORY OF THE WEST MARCHES

Around the year 2000, a game designer by the name of Ben Robbins began running a game of 3rd Edition called the West Marches. It was, in his own words, the diametric opposite of an ordinary game. It had no set meeting time, no regular party, and no regular plot.

Instead, there was a pool of about 10-15 players, they formed their own parties and set their own times, and they explored where they chose. It was dangerous, gritty, and harkened back to the old days of the game, back to B/X (despite playing Third Edition), when things were a little less heroic and little more deadly.

Since then, the West Marches as a format has always been popular among the community. Thousands of games in the style have been attempted, and significantly fewer have actually succeeded in doing so. Not none, certainly, but fewer than the number attempted.

Our hope is to provide a baseline from which campaigns can grow.

TWO WARNINGS

Before you embark on a game set in the West Marches, there are two important pieces of information, two warnings, you should know:

First, a West Marches game is a lot of work. For the GM and players alike, more effort will be demanded than in an ordinary game. For the GM, the Marches demand a layered and complex history, in-depth maps and environment design, myriad dungeons and encounters, and a flexible schedule for missions. For players, the Marches demand critical thinking, map-making, note-taking, risk analysis, social organization, and a level of proactive engagement most tables do not ask for.

Second, a West Marches game excludes certain kinds of campaigns. Intensely political campaigns, for example, will struggle, as royal courts and cunning advisors are far and few between in the wilderness of the Marches. Likewise, any campaign set in the Marches will involve a large amount of exploring, travel, resource management, and rough-and-tumble gameplay. If this does not sound like your kind of game, you'd best look elsewhere.

If either of these turn you off, that's perfectly okay! Once again, it's far better to realize that before the campaign begins and make an informed decision—if you commit too far, leaving becomes all the messier.

Likewise, the Marches are not all that Fifth Edition or any other game has to offer! Many campaigns would have absolutely no use for the rules, guidelines, and content found here, and that's fine.

WHY PLAY?

There are three reasons to run a game in the style of the West Marches:

Increased Flexibility

In the West Marches, parties for specific sessions of play are taken from a larger player roster. That means that not everyone has to play at the same time. No cancelling sessions because a player or two can't make it, and no guilt from only being able to play on an irregular basis.

Since each individual player is not necessarily meant to go on every adventure, the responsibilities of scheduling sessions and determining who will play in them are largely shifted onto the players themselves. Provided that an open channel of communication is available between the GM and all of the players in the roster, much less coordination is required to find time to play than a traditional campaign setting demands.

Emergent Narrative

The stories you can tell in the Marches are like no other in tabletop games. As you, the players, play the game, the impact of your actions will be felt far and wide. They will affect the NPC and factions, certainly, but they also will spread to the other players as well. There is something truly magical about stumbling upon the site of a battle, corpses and burn marks scattered around, only to discover the telltale evidence that this was your allies' doing, rather than your enemies.

The narrative of the West Marches is intrinsically tied to the mechanics of the game: where you go and what you do as players is the story. The GM has no preset plot: your fate lies in your hands. Once you grasp the liberation that comes from wholly determining your own story, there is nothing else like it.

The Game At Its Fullest

The West Marches are, in many ways, a more complete fulfillment of the promise of the game. Many spells, abilities, and features that seem weak or lacking in the base game blossom in the Marches. When you must carry all of your gear on your back, for example, Strength is vitally important. Likewise, even the most basic of cantrips, say, mending, become vitally important: when your rope snaps thirty miles from town, being able to ensure that it holds secure can become tantamount to survival.

In a lot of ways, the West Marches harken back to the older days of the game, and embrace its vision more wholeheartedly. This is not to besmirch more modern attitudes found in Fifth Edition, just that there perhaps might be something lost in the more bombastic, spectacular games of today. If you yearn for ancient tombs and bloodthirsty beasts, for sweeping mountains and haunted woods, for true risk and breathtaking danger—the Marches are the place for you.

*Do everything my *Enchiridion* says and keep your wits about you, and you shall find that there is absolutely no need for luck. The West Marches are a place of gritted teeth and bloody knuckles: do not give in to superstition.*

If you do manage to survive the Marches, make sure that you thank us when you meet us. Good luck out there — you'll need it!



CHAPTER I

— INTRODUCTION —



OVERVIEW OF ELEMENTS

THE GROUP

Unlike an ordinary game, the West Marches have no set party. Instead, there are a collection of players, referred to as the “player pool.” Each of these players plays a character, all of these characters together are called the “character roster.” Finally, each individual mission that goes out will be composed of a party; these are called “mission parties.”

Unlike an ordinary party, there can be well over six players in a West Marches game. It can easily reach ten, fifteen, even twenty players; the more players, the more demanding the game, but it is entirely doable. As a rule of thumb, you should expect to run about one session for every five players, per week. Ten to twelve players is a good starting number.

The Player Pool

The player pool is the group of players that play in your West Marches game. The player pool is where mission parties come from. If your player pool has, say, a dozen players, only a fraction of those will be going out on individual missions, but all dozen are players within the West Marches game as a whole.

The player pool is, like all tables, a social group. People gather together to play a game, yes, but at the end of the day, the game is a social function.

More so than an ordinary game, a West Marches game has intricate, complex social dynamics. At a regular table, there is a scheduled meeting time with a standard group of people, making it easy for players to find their place. It might take a few sessions, but there is a reliable social structure to fall back on, and thus most every player will find their particularly social niche.

This is not necessarily the case in a West Marches game. Players will be at different levels of experience with the game, different levels of familiarity with players, and different levels of power as characters. Because mission parties are self-decided, it's possible that some players will feel sidelined, overlooked, or left out.

The Marches are a complex beast. As GM, you should keep an eye on the proceedings; it's impossible to ensure that everyone is happy all the time, but there are things you can do to help. If one mission party is playing together all the time, break them up; if one player is domineering all missions, have them sit out; if there are serious complaints, take the time to listen and respond. Remember that the comfort and wellbeing of players always takes precedence over the game at the table.

The Character Roster

The character roster is the collection of player characters that are the main adventurers in your West Marches game. Where the player pool is the group of players, the character roster is the group of characters. Mission parties draw from the character roster, just as they draw from the player pool.

Ordinary parties of adventurers are united bands of heroes, bound together by common cause. A character roster can and often does share a similar unity, but this isn't always the case. Everyone in the roster is an adventurer, yes, and they all do traverse out into the wilds of the Marches, yes, but their reasons for doing so vary wildly.

Some adventurers in the roster are treasure-seekers and fortune-finders, out for gold and riches; some are questing individuals, looking to achieve some lofty aim or goal; and some others are refugees or outcasts, come to the Marches with nowhere else to go.

This disunity, while it can cause contentions, is usually an asset. It drives characters and missions in different directions, sparks unusual tensions, and pushes good interpersonal drama. The West Marches are a strange and varied place, and so it fits that its explorers would be equally strange and varied.

Mission Parties

As missions are decided, parties to achieve those missions will be formed. Generally, a mission party should be no less than three people, and no more than six. If you're confident in your GM'ing ability to provide fun, engaging, and functional play outside those bounds, feel free to expand them—but three to six is a good baseline.

How and why mission parties are formed is wholly up to the players. Perhaps they're choosing their friends and close confidants for a tightly-knit group; perhaps they're choosing the most effective and uniquely-suited characters for an efficient party; most likely, though, they'll choose whoever can play at the same time they can.

If you, the GM, notice that a particular subset of your player pool has spent several missions in a row together, encourage them to fragment, to find other players to go out with. Variety is the spice of life, and so encouraging your players to swap around their mission parties will keep things interesting.

Once a mission party has been formed, it progresses much like an ordinary party at an ordinary table. They have different classes and roles, and have to work together to succeed.

Non-Fifth Edition Systems

While the *Enchiridion* is written with Fifth Edition in mind, it is still largely compatible with most fantasy tabletop roleplaying games—particularly OSR games, which share much of their blood with Fifth Edition, and even more with its antecedents.

Whether you're a fresh beginner to Fifth Edition or a veteran OSR player, we encourage you to broaden your horizons. Read other systems, take your favorite bits and pieces from them, and then add them to your game. The *Enchiridion*, like most OSR and OSR-adjacent books, is meant to be hacked and modified. You can and should adjust, tweak, and alter the rules and content found here to be more fitting for your table and your own Marches.

A more thorough guide to converting Fifth Edition to common OSR systems can be found in Appendix VI, on page 106.

THE EDGE OF THE MAP

The West Marches themselves are a vast stretch of territory located to the west of the known world. They are off the edge of every known map, and are rumored to hold great riches, horrifying monsters, and ancient ruins. Almost anyone who has ever ventured into the Marches has not returned.

At the eastern edge of the Marches, at the end of the westernmost road, there is a town. This is where the adventure starts, and this is the place to which every mission will return. The town itself is small, quiet, and rather boring—there is no adventure there.

To the east lies the Empire: vast, all-encompassing, and civilized. How your players' characters lived in the Empire before they came to the Marches does matter, but don't waste your time drawing maps or writing lore. Players will fill in the details they need about the Empire, but it shouldn't be a point of interest. All that matters is that to the east lies boredom and retirement, so every adventurer should be looking west.

While nearly everyone who has gone into the Marches has not returned, there is one exception: about a hundred years ago, a group of adventurers did manage to survive, and found riches in the process. These adventurers are all dead or gone now, as is their map, but their legacy endures—the townsfolk might remember them, and their bodies and equipment might still lie somewhere in the west.

Still, the West Marches are extremely dangerous. Anyone who ventures out without planning or preparation will surely perish, and thus any adventurer that wishes to be successful must be clever, resourceful, and willing to take risks. For those who can manage this, however, the Marches are full of discovery, wealth, and secrets.

Remember, the West Marches are at their best when players are in over their heads.

Understand the Base Game First

Before you go any further, you should know the base game, regardless of which system you're using. Read the core books. Understand the mechanics. Play in a campaign. Learn how the dynamic of the table works. Make some dungeons and adventures. Be able to design monsters and magic items from scratch. Run a few sessions. Gain experience.

While we will occasionally tweak, alter, or replace existing rules in the base game, the vast majority of the content here builds on the core content of Fifth Edition or whatever other system you're using; this is in no way a wholesale replacement for those rules.

Make sure you go and read those rules, and know them well. This book will still be here when you're done.

THE TOWN

The town is one of the central constructs in a West Marches game: it is the safe haven that players both leave from and return to. Every mission begins in the town, and every mission ends at the town. It's where characters can safely rest, talk, re-equip, make plans, and decide missions.

The Town's Safety

The town is always safe. Whether this comes from thick walls, a secluded location, magical wards, or some other means, it must be true. When the characters return to town, they must know that no harm may come to them.

Don't over-worry yourself with the narrative behind this, and don't create some highly convoluted reason for it. In all likelihood, the town is so small and inconsequential that any threat big enough to pose a threat to the town has no interest in it. Sure, a band of cut-throats might try the walls every once in a while, but a dozen guards and a stout barricade will make short work of idle bandits.

If your players ask lots of questions about the town's defenses and the narrative consequences therein, take a moment to explain the mechanical reasoning behind the town's safety. It's important for the adventurers to have a place to return to, and to undermine that place's safety will throw the game's rhythm and progression out of balance. The town is where they level up, where they resupply, and where they can plan. Don't threaten that.

NPCs

In town, there will be a number of friendly NPCs around. At bare minimum, they should cover the necessities for adventurers: an innkeeper to pour drinks, a blacksmith to forge weapons and armor, a priest to heal and sanctify, and a mage to identify strange magic.

Depending on the size of the town, there might well be more beyond this; ordinary civilians, other craftspeople, local guards, travelling merchants, and more. How many NPCs in town exist beyond the basics are up to you.

It's also worth noting that the NPCs in town might change; they might move on and return to the Empire, the players might recruit NPCs from the wilds, refugees might find their way to the town, and more. While the town itself is rigid, those that come to it can vary. For more on creating NPCs for the Town, see page 33.

Nothing Wagered, Nothing Gained

It's vital that there be no adventure to be had in town. Players are naturally risk-averse; if there is an option to gain similar rewards for lower risk, they will take it. If there is adventure to be had in the safety of town, they will do that adventure—the relatively safe, close-to-home adventure of the town—over exploring every time. To push them to explore, it must be absolute that there is nothing to gain from staying in town.

If there ever were to be adventure in town, the town would be dangerous by definition. If their one 'safe' spot isn't actually safe, why should the players trust anything the GM says again?



THE WILDS

Everything outside of town is considered to be the uncharted wilds. Sprawling plains, deep forest, soaring mountains, endless tundra, craggy hills—all this and more make up the wilds. Here and there the players may encounter pockets of civilization or communities of individuals that aren't hostile, but these are considered wilderness nonetheless. The wilds are dangerous, difficult, and the source of all adventure.

Regions

The Marches themselves are not one singular area, but rather are composed of a number of distinct environments and territories. These distinct sections are collectively referred to as "regions." A region is the basic unit by which the Marches themselves are divided; each region will have its own name, terrain, features, and challenge. When players cross the border from one region to the next, it should be clear.

Regions are covered in more detail on page 36.

Dungeons

Taken literally, a dungeon is a prison located beneath a castle. In the West Marches (as in many fantasy roleplaying games), a dungeon simply refers to an isolated series of chambers or areas that contain encounters and challenges. Many dungeons are literal dungeons, meaning they are literal prison systems beneath castles, but they might also be temples, fortresses, mines, or many other sorts of things.

Dungeons are where most of the monsters, treasure, and significant challenge can be found in the West Marches. Dungeons are covered in more detail on page 50.

Danger Level

Within a given region or dungeon, it's important that most encounters and challenges are of roughly the same level of danger. For combat, this means that the enemies are of appropriate challenge rating and number; for exploration, this means that the area is traversable and survivable given the characters' resources; for interaction, this means that the challenges presented are solvable with regards to players' capabilities and tools.

This is not to say that everything must be "balanced." Dungeons often can and should be more dangerous than their surrounding regions, and having an uneven spread of difficulty across adjacent regions makes for interesting exploration. A spread of plains can be quite safe for a party of level 4 characters, but the mountains a few miles northwards might be deadly.

What is important, however, is to ensure that encounters inside a dungeon or region are of equivalent danger: if the characters can easily best the first encounter, they should be confident they can handle the rest. If the first encounter nearly destroys them, by contrast, it would feel cheap to have every subsequent encounter be effortless.



MISSIONS

At an ordinary table, players come together each week to play; what they do during that session is variable, without specific structure beyond game mechanics. In the West Marches, this is a bit different: each session comprises one mission, which is a specific objective the player characters set out to achieve.

Each mission begins with the party leaving town, and each mission ends with the party returning to town, and entails the party travelling to some location in the Marches.

Objective

Each mission has its own objective which the player characters attempt to accomplish. A successful mission is one that succeeds its objective; a failed mission is that fails it. Deciding mission objectives is wholly the players' choice; the GM can veto the players' mission choice if they feel it is not going to be sufficiently adventurous, but otherwise mission objectives are solely under player control.

The best missions are ones with a clear, tangible goal. This includes objectives like “slay the green dragon Skorenag” or “recover the cursed blade Wormwood,” but it might also include less one-and-done objectives. “Scout the Isle of Redthorn” and “explore the tunnels beneath the Lakeside Fortress” are both valid mission objectives; neither has a strict endpoint, but substantial progress can be completed in a single session, with the players deciding when to return to town.

What is not a good objective is one that is dependent on the presumption of adventure without certainty. “Go to the Howling Hills and explore the first cavern we see” is a bad objective because there may or may not be caverns in the Howling Hills. Even if the players knew there were caverns in the Hills, it would still be a poor mission objective because there is no way for the GM to know which cavern the players are going to. The GM creates content on a mission-by-mission basis, and thus “explore the first dungeon we see” is asking the GM to come up with all possible dungeons. There is an implicit promise made when choosing an objective: the players will work to complete that objective, and not stray off the path unless the GM says that doing so is alright.

Instead, there is a rhythm to missions: players scout out a region or two and find ‘hooks’ for adventure—things like camps of bandits, ancient ruins, or monster lairs—but do not directly interact with them. Then, after returning to town, all players are informed about the various hooks, and individual missions can be scheduled to deal with each in turn. After completing most of the dungeons within a region and accruing more power, players scout the next region, and the cycle continues.

*Gotta think on your feet in the Marches,
or you'll be dead before you can finish
saying “is that a giant spider?”*

Time

Missions take time, the question is how much. Early on, when dungeons and adventure are closer to home, missions will be shorter. As the player characters explore, they will go further afield, and missions will take longer. While a group of player characters are out on a mission, they may not go on other missions, and they may not interact with characters in town.

How time is tracked at your table will influence how long missions tend to take. In some games, the GM decides when time is advanced; thus, it's in the interest of the players to synchronize their missions and return at roughly the same time. In some other games, time advances on a per-mission basis; it's assumed that all player characters remain in town while an adventuring party is out, and thus missions can be scheduled in any order. And in some games, time is tracked according to real-time, and thus players must wait days in real life to plan their missions.

In the words of Gary Gygax: “You cannot have a meaningful campaign if strict time records are not kept.” Regardless of how you decide to advance time in your game, you must be certain that the players know how the rules operate, and then you must abide by those rules.

As your players grow used to the passage of time in the game, there may be special timed events: a cult must perform a ritual before the next full moon, for example, or an ancient tomb only reveals itself on the solstice. Adding these events in adds a sense of reality and urgency to the game, one that forces players to meaningful action.

See Appendix C on page 112 for information on playing the game in real time.

Scheduling

Along with deciding their own mission objectives, players are responsible for scheduling when to meet in-person to play the game. The GM should provide a rough schedule ahead of time to the players, but after that, all scheduling is the duty of the players.

Why Players Schedule Their Own Sessions

The answer is twofold: first, because players are the ones who decide their own missions. It's important they coordinate the players they need, the abilities and features the mission requires, and the plan of attack for the mission itself. If the GM was scheduling, it would deprive the players of some of the freedom to choose their own parties and missions.

Second, the GM will already have their hands full with planning the Marches, and the players should take some responsibility for the game.

THE MAP

The Marches are vast, wild, and wholly unknown. Because of this, players are responsible for drawing their own maps of the wilderness. At each session, players should have a real, paper map in front of them, which they can alter as they choose, provided they have at least one character who is mapping while travelling. This map is then carried from session to session; different players can and should work on it. From time to time, the GM should digitally copy the map, through photo or scan, and put it somewhere that all players can see.

By default, the map should be a blank piece of unmarked paper. Players are responsible for the scale, accuracy, and detail of the map, using their own wits. If a player character is proficient with cartographer's tools, the GM may provide them with graph- or hex-paper and a ruler, but that is at the GM's discretion.

As the Marches are explored, the map will likely expand; when this happens, staple or tape additional pages onto the map, as needed.

When navigating, players must use objective descriptors, such as "we travel northwards" or "we walk towards that tower we can see." They may not simply point to a location on their map and say "we travel here." Likewise, the GM should never refer to the map, nor should they directly confirm locations on the map. NPCs might, from time to time, make reference to the map or offer suggestions, but this is a rare occurrence.

Navigation is covered in more detail on page 18.

The Shared Subjectivity of the Map

Nothing on the map should ever be confirmed by the GM on the map. It should remain uncertain, based only on what the players know. Any player can edit the map, and players are free to erase or draw over what already exists on the map.

In some cases, the map can serve as a kind of shared record or log. Players might find it helpful to leave notes, diagrams, or annotations to the map; all of these are fine. Whatever the players want to add to their map, they can. Frankly, other than bringing it from session to session and uploading the map once in a while, the GM should never touch the map.

A good map is more important than any sword. Unless you have wings, of course. Then it's utterly worthless.

EMERGENT NARRATIVE

By default, there is no preset "story" to the West Marches. There is no plot, no inciting incident, no direct narrative arc. Rather, the story that is told over the course of the campaign is that told by the player characters' actions, and their corresponding consequences.

NPCs might ask the player characters to complete tasks for them, ancient scripts might point to secret treasure, and villainous monsters might seek to end the world, but the player characters themselves are under no obligation to complete these. Because of this, the narrative of the Marches is far more systemic, far more mechanically-driven than most campaigns. In time, however, story beats will emerge: factions will war, adventurers will find causes, and drama will be found around every corner.

However, if you, the GM, attempt to create some overarching plot, some distinct series of events the players must participate in, you will ruin the narrative. The Marches are there to empower players and to make their choices real, and if you have a pre-decided story you want to tell, you will quash this power. The narrative should be drawn from the system and from the players, and naught else.

More on emergent narrative can be found on page 67.

HACKING THE GAME

You may use as many or as few of the rules found in this book as you please, and you may and should alter and adjust them as you see fit. If you are running a campaign in the traditional style—that is, a non-West Marches game—you will probably want to alter some of these rules, as they are designed specifically for a West Marches game.

However, if you are running a West Marches game and are considering altering what's found here, we encourage you to try these rules out in their entirety first. It may seem like there are some unusual rules or questionable guidelines, but these systems have been designed to fit together and with the base game deliberately. If you play for a while with these rules and still feel like you want to alter them, by all means, go ahead. Make the rules work for your game, not the other way around.





CHAPTER II

— SURVIVAL & TRAVEL —

TRAVEL

In the wilderness, there are often great distances that must be traveled to reach destinations, covering huge swaths of myriad terrain. Most journeys should take several days, but some are shorter or longer. This section will cover the rules for adventurers as they traverse the wilds.

WATCHES

Most activities and events conducted during a day of travel can be divided into **watches**, a standard unit of time used for longer-term play. In an ordinary 24-hour day, there are six watches, each equivalent to about four hours. Watches are kind of “exploration turn,” and are used in navigation, travel activities, weather patterns, and more.

An ordinary party can travel for two watches, or eight hours. Likewise, to complete a long rest, a character needs two watches of sleep, or, again, eight hours. This leaves another two watches during which other activities can be conducted, such as fighting monsters, delving into dungeons, or foraging for supplies.

It's important to note that watches do not necessarily synchronize perfectly. Watches used in weather patterns do not change at the same time a travelling party's watches do. Think of watches less as strict locked units as much as a useful shorthand for gauging occurrences and states over longer lengths of time.

TRAVEL ACTIVITIES

While characters are journeying, there are a number of activities that they can undertake in addition to walking. A character can only engage in one travel activity at a time. A character decides which activity they are engaging in at the start of each watch that they are travelling. Most travel activities are done passively while travelling, and thus can be stopped or started at any time; foraging is the exception: a character must spend the full watch foraging in order to find food or water.

watch foraging in order to reap any benefits. If the party stops travelling and has no pressing activities, a character could simply continue foraging for their remaining time.

A party member may engage in one of the following activities during a watch:

Notice Threats. A character can keep an eye out for danger and threats as the party travels, making it more difficult for enemies to ambush them, or traps to take effect. A party member that is noticing threats can use their passive Wisdom (Perception) score to notice threats.

Search. A character can be searching for a specific object or location as the party travels, such as a cluster of ruins or rare kind of tree. A party member that is searching uses their passive Wisdom (Perception) score, against a DC determined by the GM.

Navigate. A character can try to prevent the group from becoming lost as they traverse the wilds. A party member that is navigating can make Wisdom (Survival) checks to navigate. A party member can assist the navigator, provided that they are proficient in Survival.

When an adventurer can tell cardinal directions, such as a character with the Keen Mind or Explorer feats, they always have advantage made on Wisdom (Survival) checks made to navigate.

Forage. A character can search for food, water, and other resources, potentially gathering useful supplies as they travel. Rules for foraging are found on page 22.

Track. A character can follow a trail or set of tracks while pursuing a creature or group of creatures. Rules for tracking are found on page 18. Generally speaking, a party does not need both a navigator and a tracker.

Draw a Map. A character can draw a map, helping the party be aware of their position. No check is required.



Seasoned adventurers
say to watch the skies.
It won't save you.

Altering Travel Activities

The travel activities listed here are meant as a baseline, a starting point from which to leap off of. They are the most common activities adventurers perform while adventuring, but there certainly can and will be others.

When your players begin asking for other travel activities, you should typically say yes.

If they are a simple variation on the existing travel activities, such as foraging for a rare kind of poisonous mushroom that grows in the region, you can simply adjust the DC of the ability check as you see fit.

If the travel activity is more complex or divergent from the options listed here, you might call for a different kind of check. If a character wants to, say, attempt to commune with strange stars only they can see, you might call for an Intelligence (Arcana) check; if they want to guide their beloved pony across treacherous crags, you might call for a Wisdom (Animal Handling) check.

It's also possible that, through magic items or other sources of unusual power, new travel activities might be added. If a character has a magical item that lets them, say, know the exact distance of each of their footsteps, they might spend their travel time gauging exactly how far they've travelled over the course of the watch.

In general, travel activities are not dissimilar from ordinary ability checks, just stretched over a longer period of time and distance. Let players use their imagination.

Helping While Travelling

Generally speaking, any activity undertaken by a character while travelling can be assisted by another character, granting advantage on the check. In certain cases, such as when navigating or tracking, there are certain requisite skill proficiencies or other features a character must have before they can help.

Features, spells, and other effects that grant a specific bonus to a check, such as a cleric's *guidance* spell, can be used during travel activities. If the effect requires an action, such as with *guidance*, the character granting the effect must use their entire travel activity to do so. If the effect is passive, such as from a magic item, the effect is simply enacted as on a normal check.

TRAVEL PACE

While adventuring, characters may sometimes wish to travel at a faster pace, and other times at a slower one, depending on a variety of factors.

While travelling, a group of adventurers can move at a normal, fast, or slow pace, as shown on the Travel Pace table. The table states how far the party can move in a period of time and whether the pace has any effect. Travelling at a fast pace makes characters less perceptive and unable to focus on anything but the road, while a slow travel pace makes it possible to sneak around and to traverse the area more carefully.

Characters can travel for 8 hours—two watches—per day normally, incurring no penalties. However, a party can push beyond this limit, at the risk of exhaustion. For each additional hour of travel beyond 8 hours, the characters cover the distance shown in the Hour column for their pace, and each character must make a Constitution saving throw at the end of the hour. The DC is 10 + 1 for each hour past 8 hours. On a failed saving throw, a character suffers one level of exhaustion.

Travel Pace

Pace	Distance per Hour	Distance per Watch
Fast	4 miles	16 miles
Normal	3 miles	12 miles
Slow	2 miles	8 miles

Fast Pace. At a fast pace, characters suffer a -5 penalty to passive Wisdom (Perception) scores, a -5 penalty to Wisdom (Survival) checks made to navigate or track, and cannot engage in travel activities other than noticing threats, navigating, or tracking.

Normal Pace. A normal pace has no additional effects.

Slow Pace. At a slow pace, characters are able to travel stealthily, and gain a +5 bonus to Wisdom (Survival) checks made to navigate or track.

Mind how you go now! Drop too far behind, and you might run into something really nasty!

SHELTER & SLEEPING

When making camp for the night in the wilds, there are three critical factors: how cold it is, how wet you are, and how exposed your campsite is. If any of these factors are not accounted for, you open yourself to the risk of all sorts of hazards, ranging from mere unpleasantness to potentially life-threatening diseases.

Warmth

With the exception of temperatures above 70 degrees Fahrenheit (commonly experienced only in arid climates or the hottest summer months), some additional source of warmth is required at night beyond basic adventuring clothing.

If a character sleeps with a blanket or bedroll, they suffer no ill effects; if a character sleeps next to an open campfire or other large source of heat, they will similarly suffer no ill effects. These two are the most common means of maintaining warmth at night, but there might be other ways to do so.

Wetness

While it is quite common for adventurers to swim in lakes, wade through rivers, and dive into dungeon pools—and thus become thoroughly soaked—it can be quite dangerous to go to sleep while still wet. Characters might also become wet from travelling in the rain, interacting with exceptionally watery creatures, bathing, or other activities.

A wet creature will dry off over the course of one hour, so long as they stay dry the entire time. If that creature is near a significant source of heat, such as a campfire or stove, that time is cut in half. Likewise, there may be additional means to quickly dry off.

Exposure

Beyond simple rain and snow, other forms of exposure, typically wind, can sap away at a character's strength. The simplest way to avoid exposure is through shelter, which shields a party from the outdoors.

Shelter is any structure or formation that has at least three walls and a roof. The most common sources of shelter in the wilderness are tents, caves, and ruins, but there may be others.

Sleeping

In order to avoid ill effects while resting, characters must satisfy all three conditions: they must stay warm, they must stay dry, and they must stay sheltered.

Over the course of a long rest, if a character does not satisfy any of the above conditions, they must make a DC 10 Constitution saving throw at the end of their rest or suffer a level of exhaustion.

For each additional condition a character does not satisfy, the DC increases by 5, and the character suffers an additional level of exhaustion. For example, if a character is both cold and exposed to the wind during their rest, they must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or suffer two levels of exhaustion. Creatures with resistance to cold damage have advantage on these saving throws; creatures with immunity to cold damage automatically succeed.

The Details of Sleeping Conditions

In short, to defeat these three conditions, adventurers need to have a tent and a bedroll—not a high ask, in the grand scheme of things. There's an argument that these rules could be simplified, into a simple "if you don't have a saving throw, make a Constitution saving throw or suffer exhaustion."

The reason we have these rules with this level of nuance, of complexity, is because in the times when the adventurers *don't* have a tent or bedroll, the details suddenly matter. If their equipment gets stolen, or if they drop their tents to carry more loot, or if they just plain forget their gear—suddenly, the details of how exposed, wet, and cold they are matter very much.

For much of play, all three of these conditions can be treated as one large entity, but when dire situations call, the details are ready.

Tell me this: if one of your minions had used a prized wand, only just gifted to them, to sever the limbs of another of your minions, what would you have done? I feel as though I was relatively merciful to Zadrok, all things considered; he should count himself lucky that he still has four limbs.

TRACKING

If a character wishes to track another creature or group of creatures over long distances, they must make a Wisdom (Survival) check for each watch they wish to spend tracking.

The DC varies, depending on the terrain, weather, and creature.

If a character is tracking an army's passage over muddy terrain on a clear day, no check is required. However, a single individual moving across bare stone floor in a dungeon may prove much harder.

Another player that is proficient in Survival can assist a character tracking, granting them advantage on the roll. If a character has some other means of tracking a creature, such as by magic, they may also assist a tracking character.

The Tracking table provides some example DCs and modifiers, those these may be altered at the GM's discretion, depending on the circumstances.

Tracking Difficulty

Condition	DC
Soft surface, such as mud	10
Dirt or grass	15
Bare stone	20
Each day since the creature has passed	+5
Creature left a trail, such as blood	-5
Tracker is travelling at a slow pace	-5
Tracker is travelling at a fast pace	+5

NAVIGATION

There are two basic modes of navigation when travelling the wilderness: directional and landmark. Landmark navigation depends on nearby landmarks, locations, and structures to provide the path, while directional navigation occurs when the party is travelling based on their own sense of direction.

A party decides which mode they will be navigating by on a per-watch basis, at the same time that they decide travel activities.

Landmark Navigation

Landmark navigation occurs when the party has a clear, visible destination in view: the snowy cleft mountain, the massive black tree on the hill, or the ruined fortress looming ahead. So long as the landmark is clearly in view, the party does not need to make checks to navigate to it.

If the party's view is not always clear, such as when obscured by intermittent fog or dense jungle canopy, the party must have the landmark in clear view at least once every watch. If necessary, the party may stop to get a better view, such as by climbing a tree or using magic to levitate themselves. At the GM's discretion, a Wisdom (Perception) check may be necessary.

Landmark navigation can also be used for continuous landmarks or terrain features, such as following a river, cliffside, or coastline.

If the party wishes to travel to a landmark that is large or non-specific, such as a range of mountains, it is the GM's discretion where exactly the party ends up; the broader the landmark, the more variance in the party's eventual location.

Once, the Big Guy got mad at me and made me sleep in the snow. My tail froze solid overnight! Cracking like an icicle, it was!

Visibility

By default, the horizon is approximately 3 miles away, meaning anything without significant size or elevation cannot be seen past the 3 mile limit. However, larger objects typically can be seen from a greater distance, meaning that navigating by landmarks further than 3 miles away is possible, provided there are no obstructions in the way, like trees, hills, or buildings.

As a broad rule of thumb, a given landmark is visible from 3 miles away, plus one extra mile for every 100 feet the landmark rises above the surrounding terrain. Thus, a mountain range rising 8,000 feet above the surrounding land would be visible from 80-85 miles away. However, an individual mountain peak of 8,000 feet surrounded by mountains terrain 7,500 feet high would only be visible from 8 miles away while viewed from within those mountains.

The GM may call for a Wisdom (Perception) check to attempt to spot particular landmarks in areas where visibility may be uncertain. If a player wishes to gauge distance between two locations, the GM should call for an Intelligence (Perception) check.

In an area that is lightly obscured, visibility is reduced to 1 mile. In an area that is heavily obscured, visibility is so low that landmark navigation becomes impossible.

Directional Navigation

Directional navigation occurs when the party has no clear visible destination, but is instead travelling based on their own sense of direction, instructions off a map, or directions from some other source. Under directional navigation, the party chooses a navigator, and the navigator chooses a direction for the group to travel.

When choosing a direction, the navigator may do so with absolute directions, e.g. "I would like to travel north." They may also do so with relative directions, e.g. "I would like to travel rightward of our current facing." If the navigator has means to know cardinal directions with certainty, such as the Keen Mind feat or through a compass, they make all directional navigation rolls with advantage.

What a navigator may not do is travel to locations known only by memory, e.g. "I would like to travel to that ruined temple we found two weeks ago," nor may the navigator simply point to the party's map and declare that they are travelling there.

Once per watch, the navigator must make a Wisdom (Survival) check to ensure the party is still travelling in the correct direction. The DC is determined by the terrain type that the party is currently travelling through; to figure out the typical DC for a given area, see page 50.

If another party member wishes to assist the navigator, they may do so, provided that they are proficient in Survival or have access to cartographer's tools. This grants the navigator advantage on navigation rolls, though the assisting party member counts as spending their travel time navigating as well, meaning they cannot be on guard for danger or conducting other travel-time activities.

If the party is travelling at a slow pace, the navigator gains a +5 bonus to the navigation roll, and travelling at a fast pace imposes a -5 penalty. If the region the party is travelling through is lightly obscured, such as by fog, the navigation DC increases by 5. If the region is heavily obscured, such as by a storm or the cover of darkness, the navigation DC increases by 10.

Objective Navigation

When the players are navigating, it is essential that you remain objective in your descriptions, and that they remain objective in their directions they give you. If you start letting them navigate by inexact directions or landmarks—"the crypt we went to yesterday" or "this tower we have on the map"—the challenge will evaporate.

Navigation is difficult because their map and their memories are unreliable, but the world itself is fixed and always reliable. The challenge, the fun of exploration, comes from that interaction, the discrepancy between what they believe to be correct and what is actually correct.

Do not let your players navigate by subjective locations or details. Demand absolute directions, relative directions, or landmarks. To do otherwise will make your game worse.

Getting Lost

If the party navigator succeeds on their roll against the navigation DC, all is well, and they continue in their intended direction. If the navigator fails the roll, however, the party begins to go astray. If the navigator fails the roll by 5 or less, the party goes slightly astray. If the navigator fails the roll by more than 5, their travel route has gone significantly awry. In either case, the party will likely travel in a direction that is not their intended direction. The GM secretly rolls 1d12 and consults the Slightly or Significantly Lost tables, respectively. All new directions are relative to their intended direction.

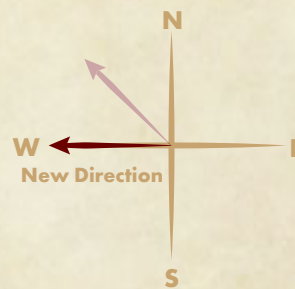
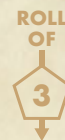
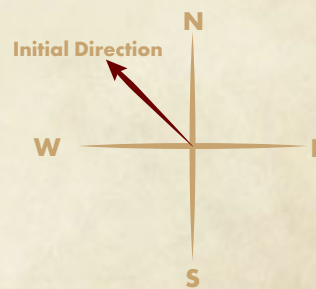
Slightly Lost

1d12	New Direction
1-4	Diagonally to the left
5-8	Straight ahead
9-12	Diagonally to the right

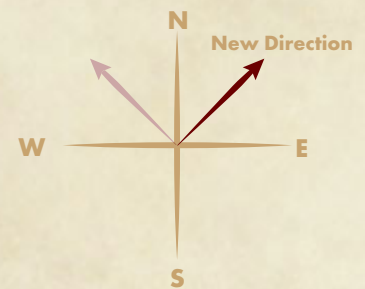
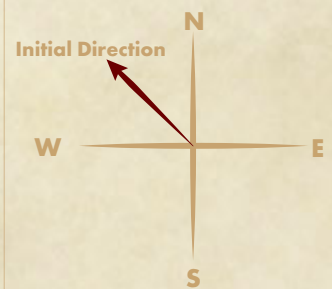
Significantly Lost

1d12	New Direction
1-2	Directly left
3-5	Diagonally to the left
6-7	Straight ahead
8-10	Diagonally to the right
11-12	Directly right

Slightly Lost



Significantly Lost



My buddy, Skreekeris, went out looking for mushrooms once. She got lost; when she came back, the mushrooms had grown on her legs!



WEATHER

The skies are unpredictable and wild, and often treacherous to explorers. Weather has the potential to change on each watch, but won't necessarily do so. The weather on a given watch has three basic components: precipitation, wind speed, and temperature. Each of these is randomly determined each watch, based on different factors. The GM may also select an option directly in certain scenarios.

PRECIPITATION

Precipitation has three modes: no precipitation, a clear day; light precipitation, such as a shower or flurry; and heavy precipitation, such as a downpour or whiteout. Each of these modes has, at the turning of the current watch, a chance to change to one of the other modes. Each mode has its own chances for determining how the weather changes.

The chance to determine which mode will occur next are as follows. You should feel free to alter these if your Marches are set in a non-temperate climate. Likewise, if your Marches have large swings in precipitation from rainy seasons to dry seasons, you should adjust this chart as well.

Precipitation

	Clear Skies	Light Precip.	Heavy Precip.
Clear Skies	1-16	17-19	20
Light Precipitation	1-9	10-17	18-20
Heavy Precipitation	1-6	7-13	14-20

For example, the hours of 4:00 to 8:00 a.m. were clear. The GM rolls 1d20, and it comes up a 9. Therefore, the next watch, from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., will be clear. At 12:00 p.m., the GM rolls again, and it comes up a 17. The next watch, 12:00 to 4:00 p.m., will be lightly precipitous. If the GM were to then roll another 17, heavy precipitation would begin.

Precipitation has one unusual aspect, however, which is that the temperature of the watch where it is occurring may have an effect. Specifically, if it is below freezing, precipitation will come down as snow, rather than rain. Given this, there are individual effects for snow and rain. However, you still determine them in the same fashion, and it is possible to have snow during the night and rain during the day, and vice versa.

The effects for each mode of precipitation are as follows:

- Clear Skies**
 - No additional effects.
- Light Rain**
 - Disadvantage on ability checks to climb or scale objects and ability checks made to maintain balance or keep one's footing.
- Light Snow**
 - The area becomes lightly obscured.
 - Advantage on Wisdom (Survival) checks made to track creatures.
- Heavy Rain**
 - Disadvantage on ability checks made to climb or scale objects and ability checks made to maintain balance or keep one's footing.
 - The area becomes lightly obscured.
 - Open flames are extinguished.
 - Disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks relying on hearing or scent.
 - Disadvantage on Wisdom (Survival) checks to track creatures.
 - Advantage on Wisdom (Survival) checks to forage for water.
- Heavy Snow**
 - The area becomes lightly obscured.
 - Advantage on Wisdom (Survival) checks to track creatures.
 - The area becomes difficult terrain.
 - Wisdom (Survival) checks to forage for water automatically succeed.

If I'm being entirely honest, storms frighten me. They're all so large and loud and crackling! And it's not even a spell or something — it's just the sky itself being furious with the land. What's a kobold like me supposed to do against that? You can be clever as anything, and lightning'll getcha anyway.

You want to know what real power feels like? Soaring above a stormcloud, higher and mightier than the greatest thunderbolt. There is no better feeling, and it is reserved solely for gods and dragons.

WIND SPEED

Wind Speed, like precipitation, has three basic modes: no wind, low winds, and high winds. Each of those modes changes at the end of the current watch, and have varying chances based on the current mode.

The chance to determine which mode will occur next are as follows. As before, if your climates are more windy than temperate ones, or if there are seasonal changes, feel free to alter these rolls.

Wind Speeds

	No Wind	Low Winds	High Winds
No Wind	1-14	15-18	19-20
Low Winds	1-10	11-17	18-20
High Winds	1-8	9-14	15-20

When there are high winds occurring simultaneously with heavy precipitation, a serious storm results. Storms have additional effects that occur in addition to all other effects.

The effects of wind speeds are as follows:

No Wind	<ul style="list-style-type: none">No additional effects.
Low Winds	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Clears light fog, smoke, or fumes.
High Winds	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Disadvantage on ranged weapon attacks.Clears all fog, smoke, or fumes.Extinguishes open flames.Disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks relying on hearing.Medium and smaller creatures with a fly speed must return to the ground at the end of their turn, or fall. Creatures with a hover speed have their speed halved.
Storm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">The area becomes heavily obscured.The area becomes difficult terrain.

TEMPERATURE

Temperature changes on watch as the day progresses, like the other components, but unlike the others, it is based far more on the time of day and season.

In a stereotypical temperate climate, weather in the summer typically gets to about 80-100 degrees Fahrenheit, and in the winter drops to 0-20 degrees Fahrenheit. This has a fair degree of leeway, obviously, so you should adjust that to match your Marches.

There are, broadly speaking, four basic levels of temperature that matter: “regular” weather, which spans roughly 32 degrees Fahrenheit to 100 degrees Fahrenheit; freezing cold, which occurs between 32 degrees Fahrenheit and 0 degrees Fahrenheit; extreme cold, which is anything beneath 0 degrees Fahrenheit; and extreme heat, which is any temperature above 100 degrees.

Regular and freezing weathers’ key distinction—below 32 degrees Fahrenheit, water freezes and precipitation occurs as snow, and above that mark precipitation comes down as rain instead. Other than that, there are no mechanical differences.

Extreme heat and extreme cold require additional precautions and safety measures from adventurers, and is covered on page 26.

There are many means by which you can determine temperature, but three core principles apply across them all. One, nights should be colder than days, usually by about 20 degrees Fahrenheit; two, every

month should increase or decrease the average temperature, typically by 10-20 degrees Fahrenheit; and three, individual weeks should vary significantly, by as much as 20-30 degrees Fahrenheit.

How exactly you extrapolate temperature after that is up to you. Some methods call for randomized rolls down to the watch, some simply declare an average temperature for the month, and the GM adjusts individual weeks’ and days’ temperatures at their whim.

The choice is yours, but be conscious of your decision and how it will affect gameplay. At least some randomization is highly encouraged, to preserve the systemic nature of the game itself.

Hazardous Weather

Obviously, there are challenges presented here as a direct result of the weather, but there might well be additional effects. Some of these—dense fog, hurricane-level winds, and others—are covered in the section on Hazards, on page 26.

However, there might be other, more complicated effects beyond these, ones that can’t be predicted ahead of time. Gullies and crags are prone to flooding, once-firm ground can turn to quicksand, and trees can collapse and crush someone.

These kinds of challenges can’t be systematized well, so we encourage you to maintain an open mind and consider the surroundings of the adventurers as they explore. What kind of terrain makes up their environment? What around seems unstable or prone to damage? How might a sudden influx of wind and water affect the current situation?

These kinds of sudden, unexpected physical changes due to weather can create some of the most perilous, exciting adventures around. You can and should expand the effects of these weather tables to affect more than what is simply listed here.

I wonder, if I got a big enough sheet and stretch it out, could the wind carry me?



FOOD & WATER

Folk accustomed to the markets and taverns of cities will find the Marches deeply inhospitable. Inns are far and few between, if at all, and markets are found only in wayward peddlers and strange dealers of curios. And yet, to those with the correct knowledge and skill, the Marches provide a bounty of resources: you just need to know where to look.

SURVIVAL

Characters who don't eat or drink suffer the effects of exhaustion. Exhaustion caused by lack of food or water can't be removed until the character eats or drinks the full required amount.

Food

A character needs one pound of food per day, and can make food last longer by subsisting on half rations. Eating half a pound of food in a day counts as half a day without food.

A character that goes a day eating less than half a pound of food must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or suffer one level of exhaustion.

A character can survive a number of days without food equal to 3 + his or her Constitution modifier (minimum 1). If a character would suffer a 6th level of exhaustion from lack of food before they have reached this number of days, they instead remain at 5 levels of exhaustion, but automatically suffer the 6th as soon as they reach their last day.

Each day of normal eating removes one level of exhaustion.

Water

A character needs one gallon of water per day, or two gallons per day if the weather is hot, typically above 100 degrees Fahrenheit. A character who drinks only half that much water must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or suffer one level of exhaustion at the end of the day. A character with access to even less water automatically suffers one level of exhaustion at the end of the day.

A character must split their water consumption into at least two watches; that is, they cannot drink an entire gallon at one time and nothing else.

If the character already has one or more levels of exhaustion, the character takes two levels in either case.

Each day of normal drinking removes one level of exhaustion.

FORAGING

When spending lengths of time in the wilderness, explorers often prefer to forage and hunt for their food, rather than lug around rations.

Over the course of a watch, a character can forage for food or water; if the party is travelling, this can only be done while travelling at a slow or normal pace. At the conclusion of watch, the character makes a Wisdom (Survival) check, with the DC determined by the region the party is travelling through. If the party travelled through more than one region over the course of a watch, use the DC for whichever the party spent the most time in.

On a failure, the character finds nothing. On a success, the character finds an amount equal to 1d6 + Wisdom modifier, either in pounds (for food) or gallons (for water). The sources of food and water are determined at the GM's discretion, based on the region the party is travelling through.

Most food found is either raw meat from hunted animals that must be cooked, or readily-eaten plant matter, such as nuts and berries.

If a character would like to find certain kinds of food only, typically to avoid the need to light a fire, they suffer disadvantage.

Water collected while foraging generally has a higher risk of being unclean, and as such has a cleanliness DC of 10.

Fishing

If a character would like to fish for their food, typically when travelling over water instead of land or when near a body of water, they must have a set of fishing tackle. Fishing otherwise follows the same rules as normal foraging.

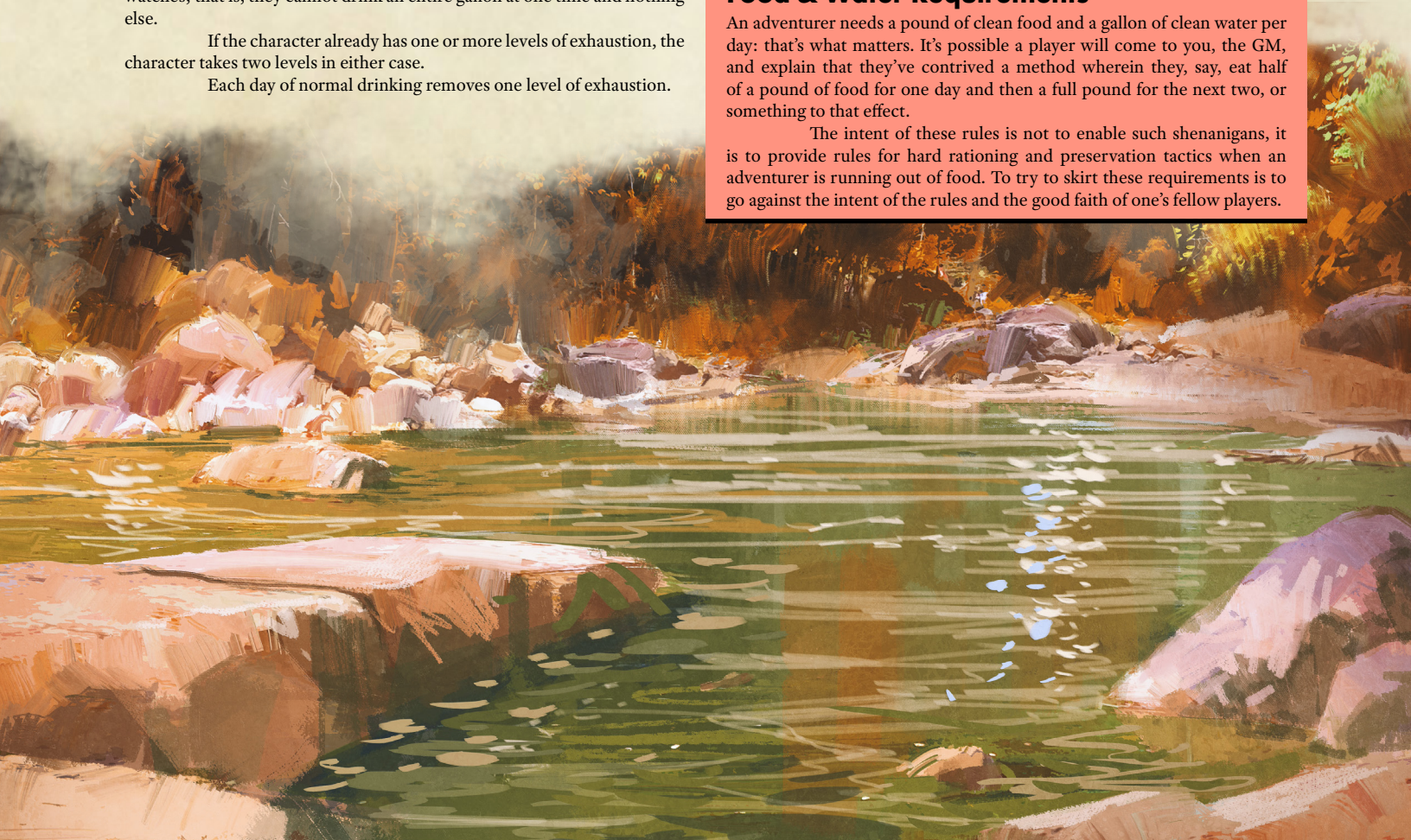
Foraging for Resources

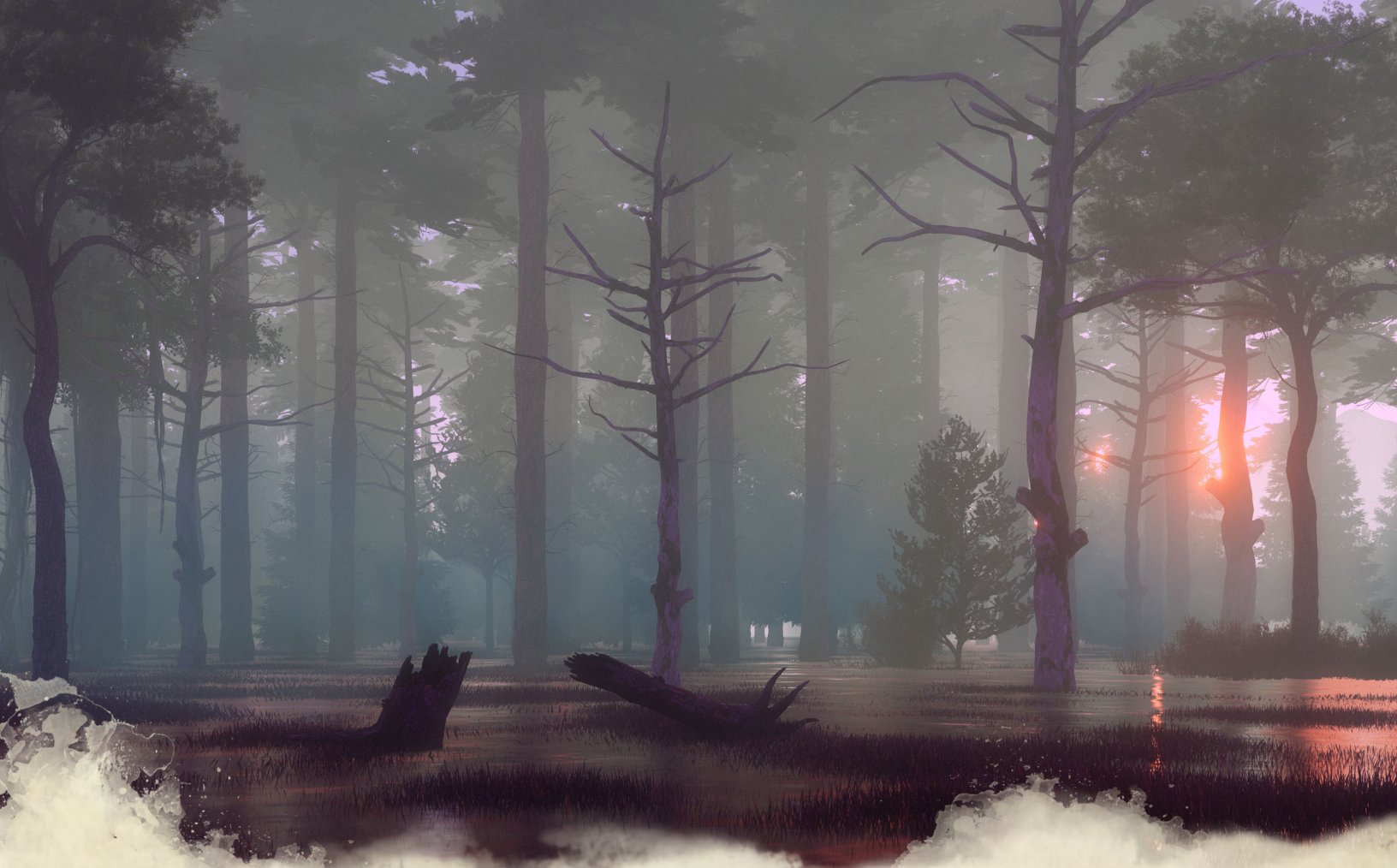
If a character would like to fish for their food, typically when travelling over water instead of land or when near a body of water, they must have a set of fishing tackle. Fishing otherwise follows the same rules as normal foraging.

Food & Water Requirements

An adventurer needs a pound of clean food and a gallon of clean water per day: that's what matters. It's possible a player will come to you, the GM, and explain that they've contrived a method wherein they, say, eat half a pound of food for one day and then a full pound for the next two, or something to that effect.

The intent of these rules is not to enable such shenanigans, it is to provide rules for hard rationing and preservation tactics when an adventurer is running out of food. To try to skirt these requirements is to go against the intent of the rules and the good faith of one's fellow players.





CLEANLINESS

Adventurers to the Marches are hardy folk certainly, but even still, consuming food or water found in the Marches can be dangerous. Hunted game can carry plague or maggots, fruits and vegetables may be rotted through, and water can carry foul disease. If counteractive measures are not taken, these can lay even the mightiest of adventurers low.

Unclean Water

Water encountered in the wilderness sometimes has diseases or impurities running through it, or is otherwise unsuitable for drinking. Well-water, rainwater, water from streams or rivers, and lakewater are all safe to drink.

All other sources, such as stagnant swamp water, water found in puddles or in plants, pooled water underground, or other, less savory sources, is unclean. Water can be purified through the purify food and drink spell or similar, or by being boiled for 1 minute.

If a character drinks water that has not been purified, they must make a Constitution saving throw one hour after ingestion. The DC of the saving throw is determined by the source of the water: the purer the source, the higher the likelihood that the water is clean.

Water Cleanliness

Source of Water	DC
Puddle or Plant	10
Swamp or Brackish	20
Salt Water	30

On a failure, the character immediately suffers one level of exhaustion. If a character fails the saving throw by 5 or more, they suffer two levels of exhaustion instead.

If you run out of food, you might just have to eat your horses! Think about that, all big and stringy, and hoofy — tasty!

Unclean Food

While rations are the classic sustenance of adventurers, many prefer a break for something less bland, or else don't wish to be bother carrying the rations. Ordinary food, however, will eventually rot, increasing the risk of disease. Similarly, consuming certain uncooked foods also carries a chance of disease.

Generally speaking, most food rots after one week; foods like grains, tropical fruit, most vegetables, and most cooked dishes. Raw meat of all varieties rots after 24 hours, as do most dairy products. Spells such as purify food and drink will remove any spoiling and potential diseases from rotten food, but it will not restore food matter that has rotted away.

Some foods can go longer without rotting, and a few rare types of foodstuffs, like certain cheeses, do not rot at all. Furthermore, many foodstuffs can be preserved, typically either through airtight storage or heavy salting, which extends the amount of time before the food spoils. These items and effects are determined at the GM's discretion.

If a character consumes food that is unclean, they must make a Constitution saving throw one hour after ingestion. The DC of the save is determined by the source of food: the more rotten the food is, the higher the likelihood of disease.

Creatures that have natural adaptations against food sources that would normally carry the risk of illness, such as Lizardfolk eating raw meat, automatically succeed on appropriate Constitution saving throws from eating unclean food.

Food Cleanliness

Source of Food	DC
Raw Meat	10
Rotten Meat or Dairy	25
Rotten Food (grains, fruit, vegetables, etc.)	20

On a failure, the character immediately suffers one level of exhaustion. If a character fails the saving throw by 5 or more, they suffer two levels of exhaustion instead.

And if you don't eat them, I will.

SURVEYING & HUNTING

When deep into the Marches, player characters may find themselves wondering exactly what a new region holds: the dread beasts, fell monsters, and ancient evils. Once those are known, it is naturally the first instinct of adventurers to follow those creatures to their lair, and put an end to them.

SURVEYING

When in a region of the Marches, an adventurer can spend time in the wilds, searching for signs of local creatures, so as to ascertain what dwells in the region.

Over the course of a watch, a character may survey an entire region to determine what sorts of creatures dwell there. At the end of the watch, the character makes an Intelligence (Nature) check: they discover evidence of each creature based on its Survey DC.

Another character can assist in surveying, provided they are proficient in Nature.

Characters may not survey while travelling, but a watch spent surveying still counts toward overall travel time for the day.

Survey DC

The Survey DC reflects the overall difficulty of finding evidence of a creature in a given region. When a character succeeds to survey, it doesn't mean that they have specifically found that creature, merely that they have found evidence that the creature lives in that region.

While there may be specific subsets of creatures within a given group, such as a Hobgoblin Captain leading a group of Hobgoblins, the Survey DC reflects the group as a whole, and as such should use the stat block of the most common monster in the group.

The Survey DC for a creature begins at 10, and the Survey Difficulty table provides modifiers and adjustments to each creature's Survey DC. The GM may adjust these further at their discretion, in the case of rare or unusual protections against being noticed.

Survey Difficulty

Modifier	DC
Default	10
Creatures with a climbing speed	+2
Creatures with a flying speed	+5
Creatures with a swimming speed	+5
Creatures with a bonus to Dexterity (Stealth)	+creature's stealth bonus
Creatures smaller than medium	+2 per size smaller
Creatures larger than medium	-2 per size larger
Creatures rare or small in number	+5
Creatures common or large in number	-5

For example, consider the Howling Hills. The Hills' inhabitants include wild elk, a band of goblins, a colony of giant spiders, and a pair of wyverns.

The elk Survey DC starts at 10. They have no climb, fly, or swim speed, and thus their DC is unaffected. They have no stealth bonus, nor are they larger or smaller than medium, and thus their DC still unaffected. They are quite common in the Hills, and thus their DC is lowered by 5. In total, the elk Survey DC is 5.

The goblin Survey DC starts at 10. They have no climb, fly, or swim, and thus their DC is unaffected. They have a stealth bonus of +6, and thus their DC increases by 6. They are also small, one size smaller than medium, and thus their DC increases by 2. There is a band of them, which, while more than a handful, is relatively small compared to the overall hills, thus not affecting their DC. In total, the goblin Survey DC is 18.

The giant spider Survey DC starts at 10. They have a climb speed, and thus their DC increases by 2. They have a stealth bonus of +7, and thus their DC increases by 7. They are large, one size larger than medium, and thus their DC decreases by 2. There is a colony of them, making them quite common, thus decreasing their DC by 5. In total, the giant spider Survey DC is 14.

The wyvern Survey DC starts at 10. They have a fly speed, and thus their DC increases by 5. They have no stealth bonus, and thus their DC is unaffected. Wyverns are large, one size larger than medium, and thus their DC decreases by 2. There are a pair of wyverns in the Hills, which is quite low for a whole region, thus their DC increases by 5. In total, the wyvern Survey DC is 18.

If a character were to survey the Howling Hills, they would need at least a 5 to find evidence of elk, a 14 to find evidence of giant spiders, and an 18 to find evidence of both the wyverns and the goblins.

The Purpose of Surveying

Surveying is meant to allow players to examine an area's inhabitants in some detail, provided they are willing to sink not-insignificant time into doing so. Without surveying, the only methods by which players can discover a region's inhabitants are by random encounters or by stumbling onto their lairs. This is, of course, fun and valid, but if players are searching for a specific monster—say, a chimera, or a higher vampire—being able to search regions for indications of those monsters is very valuable.

It's important to note that surveying that doesn't reveal where within a region a creature dwells or how many of those creatures there are, nor does it imply that an adventurer has physically found such a creature. It simply gives the players the list of creatures that dwell within a region whatsoever, provided they rolled above its DC. Surveying is searching for evidence and indicators, not the creatures themselves.

In complete honesty, I can't imagine what it must be like to search for your prey on foot. What a miserable existence you human-kith must have.

HUNTING

After a region has been surveyed, there may come a time when adventurers would like to hunt down a creature they know dwells in the area, whether to exterminate it, to collect the natural resources its body holds, or perhaps just to talk, for instance.

A character can only successfully hunt a creature that is known to make its home in the region, whether that knowledge was gained from surveying the region or not. Over the course of a watch, a character may attempt to hunt a creature to its lair or other resting spot. At the end of the watch, the character makes a Wisdom (Survival) check against the creatures' Survey DC. On a success, the character finds the lair, resting place, or home of the hunted creature.

A character may assist another in hunting, provided they are proficient in Survival.

Characters may not hunt while travelling, but the watch spent hunting still counts towards overall travel time for the day.

While hunting normally leads to the central lair of a given group of creatures, such as the goblin's camp or spider-queen's nest, in the case of highly widespread creatures, such as elk, it leads to only one such lair. Hunting elk, for example, might lead to one clearing with many sleeping elk, but there will still be other elk in the region. By contrast, hunting down the single pair of wyverns leads to those particular wyverns' lair, as they are the only in the region.

HARVESTING QUARRY

The carcasses of monsters in the West Marches often contain powerful reagents: the magic-reflecting shell of a great, ancient snail, or the nigh-impenetrable carapace of a tarrasque, for instance. When a character successfully hunts prey, they might choose to harvest these reagents for use in crafting magical items, armor, and weapons.

A single unit of material harvested from a creature can be used in the crafting of a single item. For more on the rules of crafting, see page 42 in the Town section.

A character can make an Intelligence (Nature) check to harvest parts from the corpse of a monster. The amount of usable material that can be harvested successfully is based on the creature's size, as well as the result of the check that the player makes to harvest it. Refer to the Harvestable Parts by Size table to determine the base number of units of material that can be harvested from a single creature. The maximum number of units of harvestable material on a single monster is equal to that number plus 1 for every 5 CR of the creature. For example, the maximum number of harvestable units of material on an ancient black dragon is 9, since it has a base of 5 and its CR is 21.

Then, refer to the Harvest Difficulty table to determine what fraction of the maximum units of harvestable material could be recovered from the creature based on the player's skill check.



So many of these would-be "predators" are little more than claws and intestinal tracts. They lack poise, grace — they lack majesty.

Harvestable Parts by Size

Modifier	Base Units of Material
Tiny	1
Small	1
Medium	2
Large	3
Huge	4
Gargantuan	5

Harvest Difficulty

Percentage of Max Units of Material	DC
0%	0
20%	5
40%	10
60%	15
80%	20
100%	25

A check doesn't need to be made to determine the amount of edible material that is harvested from small animals like rabbits or game like elk. It's assumed that adventurers know how to clean commonplace animals for the purposes of hunting for food.

As GM, you should use your discretion when determining the weight of a unit of material harvested from a creature. A unit of material does not necessarily equate to a single amount of pounds of that material, but rather that unit of material's utility in terms of crafting. A chunk of a purple worm's spine could weigh 80 pounds, and the wing of a fairy could weigh practically nothing, but both could represent a single unit of material.

I like big cats, honestly. Big dogs, too. There's something so soft and fuzzy about their fur. Much cuddlier than scales.



HAZARDS

Pools of bubbling lava, layers of leaves hiding treacherous quicksand, a frozen lake cracking beneath iron boots, a mountainside collapsing onto the path, sand kicked up in a maelstrom that rips and tears - all of these may be encountered while traversing the wilds, and none of them are bode well for any traveller coming by.

These dangers are meant to be used to craft dynamic, interesting locations and encounters. They should complement the region the player characters are travelling through, to serve as a reminder of its unique and individual dangers.

WEATHER HAZARDS

In addition to ordinary weather patterns—which can pose a challenge all on their own—there are rarer, more dangerous kinds of weather or climate patterns that might pose fresh hazards to players exploring the wilderness.

These hazards often vary with the seasons: extreme cold and icy waterways are highly dangerous in winter, but sandstorms and extreme heat might rarely occur outside of the summer. Use them as you see fit.

Extreme Cold

It is assumed that the ordinary clothing and gear adventurers carry with them can withstand normal temperature swings of cold winters. However, when the temperature drops with severity, simple exposure can be deadly. When a creature is exposed to temperatures below 0 degrees Fahrenheit, they must make a DC 10 Constitution saving throw at the end of each hour or suffer one level of exhaustion.

If a creature has resistance or immunity to cold damage, is naturally adapted to cold-weather climates, or is wearing cold-weather gear, they automatically succeed on this saving throw.

Extreme Heat

As with cold weather, it is assumed that an adventurer's ordinary gear is sufficiently light (or can be taken off with enough ease) to deal with ordinary heat swings of summer. That said, severe heat can still be deadly. When a creature is exposed to temperatures above 100 degrees Fahrenheit, they must make a Constitution saving throw at the end of each hour or suffer one level of exhaustion. If a creature has not had sufficient drinking water, they have disadvantage on these saving throws. The DC begins at 5, and increases by 1 for each additional hour.

If a creature has resistance or immunity to fire damage or is naturally adapted to hot-weather climates, they automatically succeed on this saving throw.

Extreme Storms

Occasionally, extreme winds will combine with heavy rain or snow to form an extreme storm: a cyclone, hurricane, tornado, or worse. Inside the storm, all movement speed is halved, the area is heavily obscured, all creatures automatically fail all Wisdom (Perception) checks relying on sight, sound, or smell.

Any creature or object weighing less than 300 lb. must make a DC 20 Strength saving throw at the end of each round or be thrown 6d10 feet in a random direction, suffering 6d6 bludgeoning damage on impact with any other object or the ground. Creatures that weigh less than 150 pounds have disadvantage on these saving throws.

Fog

There are two basic kinds of fog: light fog and heavy fog. An area covered in light fog - such as a mist-clad mountainside—is considered lightly obscured. An area covered in heavy fog - such as a shrouded ghost town—is considered heavily obscured.

Fog is somewhat irregular compared to ordinary weather patterns, but is most prevalent early in the morning, around dawn, and is more common in autumn than other seasons.

Sandstorms

In especially arid environments, high winds can kick up huge storms of sand, dust, and gritty dirt. Sandstorms follow the same rules as regular storms, but with the addition that each exposed character must make a DC 10 Constitution saving throw at the end of each minute or suffer 1d10 slashing damage.

Frigid Water

When submerged in water that is 40 degrees Fahrenheit or less, a creature can spend a number of minutes equal to its Constitution modifier without issue.

After that, at the end of each minute, the creature must make a DC 10 Constitution saving throw or suffer one level of exhaustion.

If a creature has resistance or immunity to cold damage or is naturally adapted to living in frigid waters, they automatically succeed on this saving throw.





Slippery Ice

When a creature moves across slippery ice, they must succeed on a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw or be knocked prone.

If a creature moves at half speed while on the ice, they have advantage on the saving throw. If a creature dashes while on the ice, they have disadvantage on the saving throw.

Thin Ice

A given 10-foot patch of thin ice can hold approximately 3d10 × 10 pounds. As soon as more weight is placed on the patch, the ice shatters.

Thin ice almost always has frigid water beneath.

TERRAIN HAZARDS

Some hazards are built right into the terrain of a region. They're naturally-occurring, difficult to predict, and often deadly. These hazards rarely change with the seasons, instead being present all year round.

Geysers

If a creature stands within 20 feet of the geyser's vent when it erupts, the creature immediately takes 6d6 fire damage as they are scalded with boiling water. If a creature stands directly over the geyser's vent when it erupts, they immediately take an additional 6d6 bludgeoning damage and must succeed on a DC 20 Strength saving throw or be pushed back 10 feet and knocked prone.

Lava

When a creature first enters lava on its turn, the creature immediately takes 10d10 fire damage, and takes an additional 10d10 damage at the start of each of its turns while standing in or otherwise touching the lava. If a creature is fully submerged in the lava, they take 18d10 fire damage at the start of each of their turns.

Rockslides & Avalanches

When a rockslide or avalanche begins, roll 1d10, or 2d10 if it is exceptionally large.

A creature within the path of the rockslide or avalanche must make a Dexterity saving throw with a DC equal to 10 + the previous number rolled. On a failure, a creature suffers 1d10 bludgeoning damage per number rolled and is knocked prone. If the creature failed the saving throw by 5 or more, they are restrained, and must succeed on a DC 20 Strength check to free themselves.

If a creature is restrained in this way by an avalanche, they cannot breathe (see *PHB* 183 on rules for suffocation).

Quicksand

When a creature enters an area of quicksand, they immediately sink 1d4 + 1 feet into the quicksand, and are restrained. At the start of each of the creature's turns, it sinks an additional 1d4 feet deeper into the quicksand.

While a creature is not completely submerged, it can attempt to escape by using its action to make a Strength check with a DC equal to 10 plus the number of feet the creature has sunk into the quicksand. A creature outside the quicksand can attempt to pull another creature out of the quicksand by making the same Strength check.

If a creature is completely submerged, it cannot breathe (see *PHB* 183 on rules for suffocation).

Combining Hazards

Hazards rarely are isolated from each other. Trapped in a blizzard, for example, might well entail bitter cold, hurtling winds, and black ice every which way. Similarly, a trip through the desert could easily involve both scorching heat and wild sandstorms. These hazards go naturally together.

That said, hazards grow even more interesting as soon as you get creative with them: it frigid tundra to the north, a storm might bring wind and ice, but also kick up thin layers of arctic silt, creating a would-be sandstorm. An enchanted dungeon might feature heat blasting down on a once-frozen underground lake, rendering the ice thinner and thinner as time goes on.

You can and should combine these hazards in interesting, complicated ways, ones that force your players to think on their feet and plan in the midst of chaos.

One time, we stuck a rowboat on top of a geyser and waited for the blast. Sent us twenty feet into the air, shattered the boat, and boiled half of Dorskan's face. Such fun!

HAZARD OCCURRENCE CHANCE

As you build regions (see page 36), you can and should assign hazards to the region, like you would other modifiers and adjustments. This table provides a rough outline of the chances of each hazard existing in a given environment type.

Critically these tables do *not* indicate the chances of each of these hazards occurring as an encounter—they are simply that a region features that hazard whatsoever. If you determine that a region *does* have a given hazard within, assign that hazard onto your random encounter tables as you would any other encounter (see Appendix II, page 77).

I once found a mammoth trapped beneath an avalanche, still alive. Her death was enjoyable for me, slowly melting away at both snow and flesh, inch by inch. Such a convergence of life and death, nature and artifice—it rarely occurs, and must be cherished appropriately when it does.

Hazard Occurrence Chance by Environment

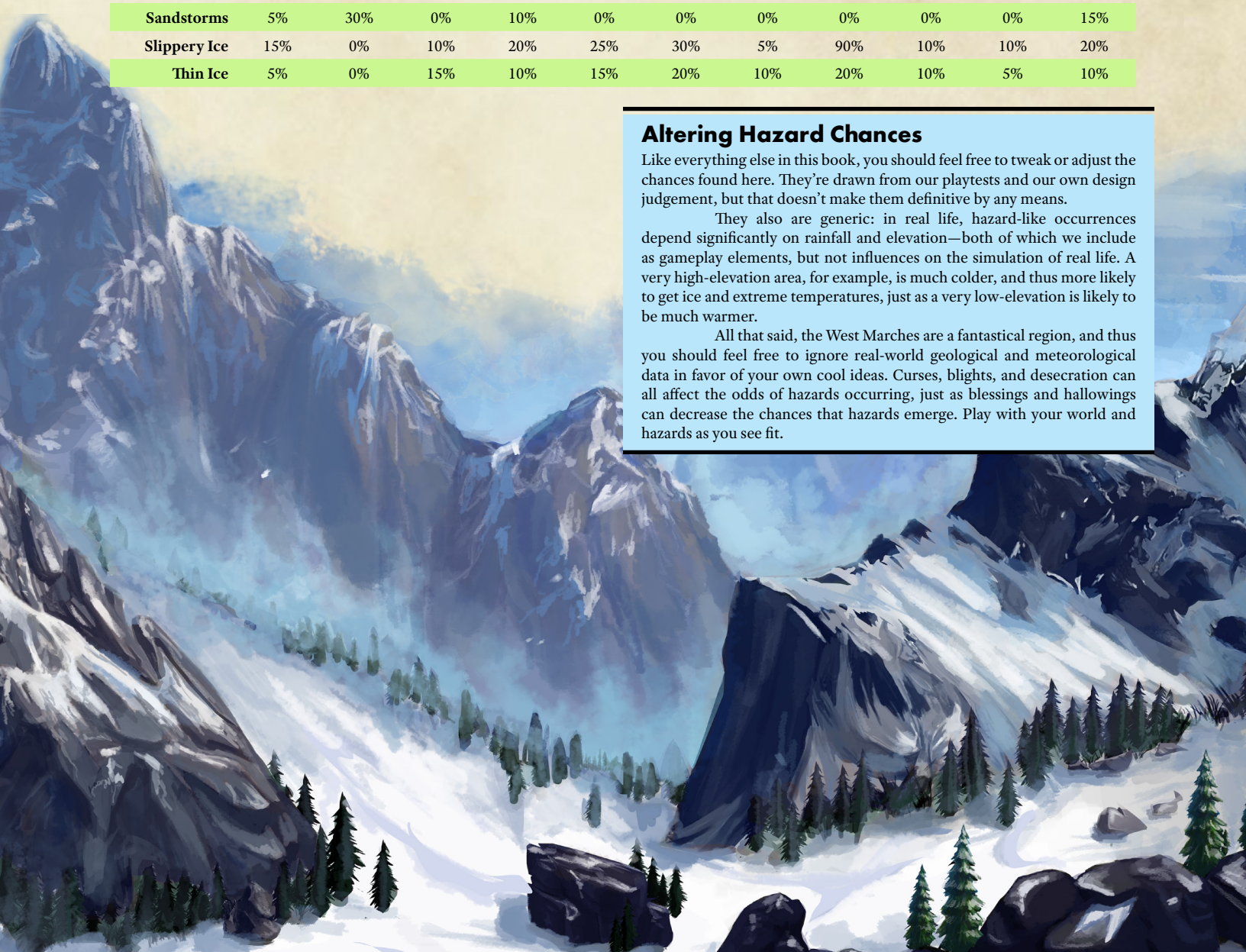
Name	Coast	Desert	Forest	Grassla.	Hills	Mtns.	Swamp	Tundra	Undergr.	Urban	Wastela.
Avalanches	5%	0%	5%	0%	20%	75%	0%	30%	5%	5%	5%
Extreme Heat	15%	95%	5%	20%	10%	5%	25%	0%	40%	5%	50%
Extreme Cold	15%	30%	20%	20%	30%	60%	5%	95%	20%	10%	50%
Extreme Storms	50%	5%	10%	10%	15%	20%	15%	25%	0%	5%	25%
Frigid Water	25%	0%	10%	5%	5%	10%	5%	95%	20%	5%	50%
Fog	40%	5%	5%	5%	5%	20%	10%	20%	0%	10%	30%
Geysers	10%	5%	5%	5%	10%	15%	5%	5%	10%	5%	10%
Lava	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	15%	0%	5%
Quicksand	10%	10%	10%	0%	0%	0%	20%	0%	5%	0%	20%
Rockslides	10%	0%	5%	0%	20%	40%	5%	5%	60%	10%	10%
Sandstorms	5%	30%	0%	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	15%
Slippery Ice	15%	0%	10%	20%	25%	30%	5%	90%	10%	10%	20%
Thin Ice	5%	0%	15%	10%	15%	20%	10%	20%	10%	5%	10%

Altering Hazard Chances

Like everything else in this book, you should feel free to tweak or adjust the chances found here. They're drawn from our playtests and our own design judgement, but that doesn't make them definitive by any means.

They also are generic: in real life, hazard-like occurrences depend significantly on rainfall and elevation—both of which we include as gameplay elements, but not influences on the simulation of real life. A very high-elevation area, for example, is much colder, and thus more likely to get ice and extreme temperatures, just as a very low-elevation is likely to be much warmer.

All that said, the West Marches are a fantastical region, and thus you should feel free to ignore real-world geological and meteorological data in favor of your own cool ideas. Curses, blights, and desecration can all affect the odds of hazards occurring, just as blessings and hallowings can decrease the chances that hazards emerge. Play with your world and hazards as you see fit.





CHAPTER III

— WORLDBUILDING —

THE TOWN

The Town is the place in the West Marches where characters spend their time when they're not venturing out into the wilderness of the Marches. The Town might not be an actual town, but rather a single building, or even a sizeable village with multiple amenities. It is the adventurer's home base, where they always start from and return to.

PRINCIPLES OF THE TOWN

It is up to the GM to decide the exact parameters of the Town, but no matter what form the Town takes in your game, consider the following to be the fundamental principles of any Town:

Eye of the Storm

No matter what, no danger from the Marches may penetrate the physical or metaphorical walls of the Town. Even factions that seek the player characters' destruction will not pursue them there; perhaps there are magical wards surrounding the Town, or a fey contract binds it to peace.

This does not mean that non-player characters cannot enter the Town at all; in fact, the Town itself can be home to many NPCs with various utility, and agents from the Marches at large might sparingly come to convene with the players themselves without the pretense of combat. The absence of violence does not indicate the absence of tension.

All that said, the player characters are always safe within the Town.

Directional Expansion

The Town should be situated at an extreme of your map: this book has assumed thus far that your Town is situated on the easternmost edge of the region of play, but it could be any of the other four cardinal directions or somewhere in between. It could be at the very center of the map, with the players expanding outwards. It could be that the Town sits quite literally atop the wilds, and so the characters must delve downwards into the earth.

No matter where your Town lies in relation to the rest of the region of play, the critical detail is that players and characters alike must be able to look back someday and understand how far they have come. Limiting expansion to single direction also makes it easy for players to make reasonable estimates about the difficulty of tasks as they get further from the Town. Generally speaking, the further the characters get from the Town, the more treacherous the wilds should become.

Nothing Wagered, Nothing Gained

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No matter where your Town lies in relation to the rest of the region of play, the critical detail is that players and characters alike must be able to look back someday and understand how far they have come. Limiting expansion to single direction also makes it easy for players to make reasonable estimates about the difficulty of tasks as they get further from the Town. Generally speaking, the further the characters get from the Town, the more treacherous the wilds should become.

Attacks on the Town

While we by default to suggesting that the Town be a permanent safe haven, some players and GMs are interested in having the Town be more vulnerable. While this is something that certainly can be done, we recommend taking the following measures beforehand:

First, have an out-of-character discussion with your players. Make sure that everyone is comfortable with removing the guaranteed safeguard of the town. Losing their sole point of light in a hostile world can make the game dramatically more stressful for the players.

Second, before any attacks on the town are launched, telegraph frequently and obviously. Give the adventurers many chances to ward off the attacks before they arrive.

Third, when the attack does it, pause time and give everyone a chance to participate in the defense. This might be a larger-than-normal raid session, it might be multiple asynchronous sessions, it could be something else entirely. Whatever you choose, make sure that all players get a chance to participate; attacks on the Town are high-risk for the entire roster as a whole.

Attacks on the Town can be a source of great drama and tension, but because the consequences are so high, it's critical that you are certain that your players agree to the process as a whole, and that you make as much information as possible available to them.





THE TOWN ITSELF

The physical town says a lot about your West Marches; your Town should reflect the style and nature of the Marches themselves. A strange, arcane Marches will likely have a Town buzzing with wizards and magic, while a bitter, hardy Marches will bring a Town filled with scouts and explorers. Let your Town be a stylistic microcosm of the Marches as a whole.

Town Types

d20 Town

- 1 Shipwreck of a prison boat.
- 2 Imperial colony or military outpost.
- 3 Industrial boom town, where the Marches' natural resources are gathered.
- 4 Settlement built around a mysterious magical beacon.
- 5 Temple dedicated to long-dead gods.
- 6 Camp within a sacred forest grove.
- 7 Hamlet built into a monstrous landmark, such as a massive footprint or ancient skeleton.
- 8 Remote magical research station.
- 9 Large cave in the side of coastal bluffs.
- 10 Settlement constructed around natural hot springs.
- 11 Ruins of a once-great fortress.
- 12 Wagon train now permanently in place.
- 13 Underground network of tunnels and shafts.
- 14 Waterborne web of rickety ships and rafts.
- 15 Grand, ramshackle manor, all ancient halls and forgotten wings.
- 16 Village built on the remains of an overgrown graveyard.
- 17 Enclave built around a huge otherworldly rock.
- 18 Camp in a high mountain pass.
- 19 Small pocket dimension beneath the roots of a great tree.
- 20 A single decrepit inn.

On top of the overall style of the Town, there are the buildings within the town itself. Not every Town will have all of these, but it's a good place to begin. These buildings might not be literal buildings—they could be wings of an ancient manor, rafts on a floating camp, or caverns in a tunnel complex. Likewise, different Towns will have additional buildings; a camp built on hot springs, for example, will have a bathhouse, while a military outpost will have a proper armory and training yard.

Town Buildings

d20 Building

- 1 Bunkroom, dormitory, or barracks.
- 2 Smithy or armory.
- 3 Larder, storehouse, or granary.
- 4 Tanner, leatherworker, or furrier.
- 5 Saloon, taproom, or bar.
- 6 Tavern, mess hall, or canteen.
- 7 Tailor, mercer, or cobbler.
- 8 Cooper, carpenter, or woodworking shop.
- 9 Masonry, roofer's shop, construction yard.
- 10 General store.
- 11 Butcher, fishmonger, or bakery.
- 12 Medical ward, doctor's office, or barbershop.
- 13 Church, shrine, or temple.
- 14 Library, scribery, or bookseller's.
- 15 Town well, reservoir, or aquifer.
- 16 Docks or stables.
- 17 Alchemy shop or apothecary.
- 18 Magic or curio shop.
- 19 Communal gardens or green.
- 20 Stone wall or wooden palisade.

Certainly, built what you please. It will only make your pitiful towns all the more enjoyable to raze.



MAGIC ITEM CRAFTING

While ordinary equipment can usually be bought from a general store, magical item crafting is a more involved process. It takes years of study and experience that can typically only be acquired through a lifelong dedication to the art. Eking out the inherent magical properties from powerful artifacts, metals, monster parts, and other materials requires both a highly trained hand and a willing supplier of these items of power. Given proper motivation, the adventurers that comprise your players' party will be more than happy to delve into dangerous locales in search of them.

Components & Catalysts

The two main materials required in nearly all magical items are the component and the catalyst. Both are magically-charged objects or substances, usually body parts of a monster, or other innately magical being. Dragon's blood, elemental cores, and vampire's hearts are all classic examples.

- The **component** determines the use of a magical item; that is to say, the unique powers and functions of the magical item to be crafted are based solely on the component used. For example, to craft a flame tongue sword, a craftsperson might make use of the core of a fire elemental, or the powdered bones of a fire giant—but those same components could also be used to make a set of flame-resistant armor. The use of the magic item to be created from either of these components arises from the basic inclination to the primordial element of flame held within the component.
- The **catalyst**, by contrast, is not linked to the use of the item; instead, the catalyst serves as a physical medium through which the power of the component can be made to flow. A powerful catalyst, like bark from the heart-center of a primal archspirit, can take a relatively weak component and make it strong; alternatively, a weak catalyst, like the tusk of a dire boar, will impede the tides of magic that a mighty component emanates, rendering it lackluster.

The component and catalyst must always be separate items: you cannot use two identical items (say, two gallons of dragon's blood, or two eyes off a many-eyed deep one) for the same magical item.

Both catalyst and component can be interchangeable: the naturally magic-laden feathers of a roc are useful as the component for an item which expresses a basic element of flight, the sky, or some other aspect that the roc itself embodies. This makes it an effective component for a cloak of flying, for instance. However, roc feathers could be equally useful as a powerful catalyst for a different item.

Which of these two types of material a specific item or ingredient falls under is solely contingent on the final effect that the item should have. A magical craftsperson will alter their approach to the task of synthesizing a piece of equipment accordingly; they might produce two completely different items from the same raw materials simply by changing which of them is treated as the catalyst.

Additional Materials

In addition to the catalyst and component, many magical items require some other materials as well—weapons and armor require metals, cloaks and robes take cloth, and so on. The exact quantities of these additional materials vary, and you as GM are encouraged to consider each on a case-by-case basis.

A list of possible weapon and armor materials can be found in Appendix V (page 103).

Enchanting

A question quickly arises in magical crafting: what about enchantments? Can craftspeople simply enchant an item to have a magical effect directly, rather than having to create something entirely new?

On the one hand, this is probably fine. Using a component and catalyst to simply enchant an existing weapon with a magical effect is quite similar to creating original items, and is unlikely to introduce any problematic imbalance. That is, of course, assuming a maximum of one enchantment per magical item, and that already-magical items cannot be enchanted further; if magical items can have more than one primary effect, the door swings wide open for shenanigans of all varieties. (We don't recommend this, but if after careful consideration an extremely high-powered game sounds appealing, don't let us stop you).

It is also worth considering the impact that the implementation of enchanting in your game can have on magical crafting. Simply upgrading an existing item is somewhat less exciting than an entirely new one. It also means that, for items that require additional materials beyond catalyst and component, the barrier to creation is somewhat lower. Additionally, the capacity to upgrade existing items trivializes an aspect of decision making in outfitting a character with gear: for instance, if a character can either commission new boots to confer a boon to their dexterity, or they can simply upgrade their already-magical cloak for the same effect, they will never have to make a decision as to whether they'd rather wear their cloak or attune to their new boots, for instance. Decisions like these, despite their seeming inconsequential or even pointless, coagulate to form the fabric of your game. If you're using many of the rules from this book, which give way by and large to a more systemic experience filled with these sorts of decisions, you may want to consider disallowing enchanting or upgrading existing items and equipment.

Either option can work; the important thing is to be confident in your decision and then communicate it clearly to your players.

Once, an enchanter came to the lair offering to make some of the Big Guy's loot even more fancy. Then it turned out they were just a thief, so the Big Guy boiled them alive.

Gold in Magic Item Crafting

The basic component-plus-catalyst system described here does not immediately require spending any gold. If the adventurers have a craftsperson who is friendly (or in debt) to them, they could conceivably require only the raw crafting materials, and little else.

Most of the time, however, there will still be some gold required: for the labor of the craftsperson, primarily. Exactly how much gold will vary based on the level of treasure you give out, but it should be a level that is significant, but not a fortune.

Furthermore, it's possible that some craftspeople, particularly those in the wilderness, might already have some magical materials available for sale, which the adventurers could buy. These materials should be very expensive—if they aren't, why would the players ever be motivated to go adventuring?

CRAFTSPEOPLE & ARTIFICERS

The Town is home not only to adventurers, but also to wayward souls, pioneers, refugees, artisans, storytellers, and more. Though not all of the inhabitants of the Town need to have talents that your players can make use of, consider populating the Town with some skilled craftspeople: non-player characters with specific abilities that the player characters in your game can take advantage of to craft items, gain intelligence, and develop the Town.

It is up to you to determine the motivations and dispositions of the Town's craftspeople; it is through them that the player characters will develop a care and appreciation for the Town and the world of the Marches as a whole, and it is only with their help that the Town will grow and prosper.

Creating a Craftsperson

On top of your personal methods of creating an NPC, create a special craftsperson by picking one to three of the Craftsperson Features, described on the next page, which describe the craftsperson's expertise and detail the specific goods and services that they are able to provide for the Town and the player characters.

Consider the craftsperson's background. Remember that normal people do not come to the West Marches. Why is this craftsperson here? Why would they offer services to the player characters? What do they gain from their relationship to the Town?

Craftspeople in the World

It is entirely possible for craftspeople with some or all of the features listed below to exist in the world outside of the Town. These might be ancient smiths, powerful magi, or wandering tinkers, to name a few examples. These craftspeople might innately be of a higher rank than those in the Town, so as to incentivize players venturing to meet them when they have need of more potent services.

If these outland craftspeople exist in your world, it is recommended that you bely upgrading craftspeople within the Town, and refrain from allowing player characters to convince these outlanders to take up residence in the Town. Remember: nothing wagered, nothing gained. Make special craftspeople feel special. An adventure to find the ancient giants of the cloud-city and beseech their smith to forge a weapon capable of felling a god, for instance, is a strong hook that's enabled by the placement of a legendary craftsperson in the world outside the town.

Why Adventurers Don't Craft

The rules presented in this section are designed with the intent that the adventurers themselves do not actually do the physical crafting themselves. They collect the necessary items and gold and find the right craftspeople, but they themselves don't build the literal objects.

Why?

The reasons are threefold: first, because crafting is slow and non-dangerous. If players can get loot by simply spending lots of time in town instead of risking their necks in a dangerous hole in the ground, they'll do that every time. If players can craft, they'll start skipping out on missions to stay home, and that's no fun for anyone.

Second, because the base game is geared for combat and adventure, not crafting. There are almost no extant crafting systems or mechanics; class features almost never provide benefits to crafting, nor do nearly any spells and abilities. Creating a fun crafting system would be doing so almost entirely from scratch, and would likely just end up feeling bloated or unnecessary in the context of the larger game.

Third, and perhaps most critically, there is not a strong thematic or narrative basis for craftspeople adventurers. In the stories that fantasy games draw from—modern fiction, historical accounts, and ancient mythologies—it is very rare to find heroic figures that craft their own weapons. They *wield* magic weapons, certainly, and they often must undertake dangerous journeys to find someone to make them, but it's exceedingly uncommon for the hero to literally make their own weapons.

If it feels like the crafting rules aren't really crafting rules, just rules to have special weapons made, it's true. These rules are designed to get players out and adventuring, where the fun is, while still preserving the feeling of creating some hard-won new tool.





CRAFTSPERSON FEATURES

Choose a number of these features to grant to each craftspeople within and outside the Town; these will define their expertise as well as their role in the Marches as a whole.

Item Craftspeople

Craftspeople are generally broken by the type of item that they make; a craftspeople might overlap in these categories, or perhaps only make one specific subset of items in a more general category. In addition to materials, craftspeople require a set of tools fitting their craft; in some cases, they may require a full workshop or other space, such as an alchemy lab or smithy.

These items are common adventuring items, both magical and non-magical, the kind of things that adventurers would carry on their person into the wilds.

Armor & Shield Forging. The craftspeople is able to fabricate armor and shields. In addition to a magical component and catalyst, magical armor and shields require raw material to be made from; this could be basic steel, leather, or wood, but could also be more exotic materials (see Appendix V, page 103).

Clothing, Cloak, and Robe Sewing. The craftspeople is able to fabricate clothing, cloaks, and robes. In addition to a magical component and catalyst, magical clothing, cloaks, and robes require cloth as a base.

Potion Brewing. The craftspeople is able to fabricate magical potions.

Ring & Jewelry Making. The craftspeople is able to fabricate rings and other jewelry, such as amulets or talismans. In addition to a magical component and catalyst, magical rings and jewelry typically require precious metals, such as gold or silver, and a gemstone, such as a ruby or garnet—sometimes both.

Rod, Staff, and Wand Carving. The craftspeople is able to fabricate magical rods, staves, and wands.

Scroll Scribing. The craftspeople is able to fabricate spell scrolls. Rather than an ordinary magical catalyst, spell scrolls require magical paper and inks on top of a magical component.

Weapon Smithing. The craftspeople is able to fabricate weapons. As with armor and shields, magical weapons require raw material to be made from on top of a magical component and catalyst; this could be simple steel or wood, but could be more exotic (see Appendix V, page 103).

Wondrous Item Artificing. The craftspeople is able to fabricate wondrous items, that unique branch of magical items that don't neatly fit into any other category. Wondrous items may require additional materials beyond a magical catalyst and component, but this should be decided on a case-by-case basis.

Crafting is Not Required

These rules are complicated. There's a fair bit to them, and they require an extra level of thought and detail from you as the GM, in how you distribute both monsters and rewards. Plus they have to be communicated to your players, who then have to engage with them.

If that's all feeling like too much, you officially have our blessing to ignore all of these pages, and just have players earn magic items the old-fashioned way: by going into a dungeon, killing everything inside, and prying the loot from monsters' cold, dead hands.

Mounts & Vehicles

In addition to ordinary items, the town might also have craftspeople skilled in other areas beyond basic adventuring weapons and gear. These items are typically non-magical, and do not follow standard magical item creation rules.

Land Vehicle Constructing. The craftspeople is able to fabricate land vehicles, such as carts, wagons, or sleds. They can create any land vehicle described in the Mounts and Vehicles section (*PHB* 157) among possible others, provided that they are given the requisite payment and time to build the vehicle.

Mount Husbandry. The craftspeople raises animals used commonly as mounts for riders, such as horses, donkeys, or mastiffs. The exact mounts for sale will depend on the geography and resources of the Town, but the animals described in the Mounts and Vehicles section (*PHB* 157) are a good place to start.

Shipwrighting. The craftspeople is able to fabricate sea vehicles, primarily ships. They can create any sea vehicle described in the Mounts and Vehicles section (*PHB* 157) among possible others, provided that they are given the requisite payment and time to build the vehicle.

Magical Services

Some craftspeople in the town provide services, more than they do explicit goods or items.

Healing & Cursebreaking. The craftspeople is capable of casting spells from either the cleric or druid spell list, which they will do as a service for a cost of 50 gp \times the level of the spell to be cast.

Identification. The craftspeople can cast the identify spell to identify the properties of a magical item for the price of 50 gp per item.

Material & Ingredient Appraisal. The craftspeople can identify metals, plants, animal parts, and other substances. If the craftspeople spends 1 hour examining a sample of an unknown substance, they are able to identify it; if not by name, then by its specific properties and uses in crafting items. The exact cost of this service varies depending on the rarity, quantity, and use of the substance in question.

MATERIAL & CRAFTSPERSON TIERS

You won't have much luck crafting an item capable of moving mountains out of the tusk of a boar, and not all craftspeople are capable of working with the most powerful of materials. Formidable magical items require powerful materials and a powerful craftspeople in kind. Exactly how powerful an item, material, or craftspeople is can be generalized to tiers.

Tiers

Tiers are based on the rarity of magic items; from least powerful to most: common, uncommon, rare, very rare, and legendary. Common magic items include healing potions and unbreakable arrows, while legendary items include cubic gates and vorpal swords.

To create an item of a given tier, a component and catalyst must be provided, and a craftspeople talented enough to create the item must be employed in its fabrication. Generally speaking, the rarer and more dangerous a creature is, the more powerful the material components that can be harvested from its corpse become. By the same token, natural resources like herbs become more powerful the rarer they are or the more dangerous they are to find or recover.

Material Tier by Challenge Rating

Monster CR	Material Tier
1–4	Common
5–10	Uncommon
11–17	Rare
18–23	Very Rare
24–30	Legendary

To determine the material tier of herbs, metal ores, or other substances from nonliving sources, consider the danger level of the region in which those materials can be found. The rarer materials that can be found in your world should only be located in its most dangerous areas.

Early on, materials will likely be harvested through a simple Intelligence (Nature) check, while more advanced materials might require a series of checks, tasks, or even their own specific magic items required to harvest them.

To read more on hunting and material harvesting, see page 25.

Craftspeople Tiers

As part of the process of designing the craftspeople that will inhabit the Town and beyond, you should consider which tier each craftspeople falls into. The more talented the craftspeople, the more powerful the materials they are capable of working. It's recommended in any case to have the craftspeople of the Town to fall into either the common or uncommon tiers, at least to start.

Craftspeople can become better at their trade over time if the player characters facilitate their growth. Recovering special tools of the trade, artifacts, or other means of power and granting them to a craftspeople in the Town might allow that craftspeople to realize a fuller potential. When this happens, convey the heightened potency with which a craftspeople executes their trade by increasing their tier. For instance, the town cursebreaker might gain the ability to cast the greater restoration spell if they are given the amulet recovered from the depths of a forgotten shrine, or the mundane smith might gain the ability to work magical metals if given access to a magical source of heat, like the heart of a fire elemental.

Design your Town's craftspeople with upward mobility in mind. When you do, you incentivize the players to become invested in the Town, as well as give them another opportunity to take control of their priorities as a party.

Components & Catalysts of Different Tiers

In the case of components and catalysts of the same tier, the task of determining how powerful a craftspeople is required for their synthesis is simple. However, there may be cases where the only materials available vary wildly in power levels. For example, consider an item where the component is the spine of a salamander (uncommon range), but the catalyst is the horn of a pit fiend (very rare range).



In this case, you should take the rough "average" of the two items. In the case of the salamander tongue and the pit fiend horn, this would come out to a rough average of a rare item. This is an inexact science, but it's straightforward enough that players can understand the consequences of mismatching their material tiers when commissioning magical items.

Consumable Items and Tiers

Consumable items are those items that can only be used a limited number of times; scrolls and potions primarily, but also some wands, staves, and jewelry.

For these items, consider upping the power of materials relative to the item's rarity. That is, for example, materials at the upper bound of the uncommon tier could easily make rare-strength potions. For permanent upgrades, like weapons and armor, more dangerous materials should be required, but for single-use items, be generous in their power range.

Artifacts

Artifacts are a class all on their own: the most unique and potent of all items, created by the gods when the world was young.

Under these rules, artifacts cannot be crafted. That's not to say that the heroes will never be involved in crafting an artifact—one could imagine the gods assigning such a task as the requisite to enter Elysium, or something similar—just that the rules presented here do not cover items of such power. It should take significantly more than mere monster parts and magic metal to create an artifact.

Likewise, these rules aren't meant to create the most powerful, world-altering magic items, like the fabled Deck of Many Things. These items are simply too influential and too campaign-shattering to be idly created by players.

Designing Additional Materials

Many magic items require additional materials beyond a simple component and catalyst—weapons and armor need metals, scrolls need paper and ink, cloaks and clothes need cloth, and so on.

Generally, there are two basic methods for making interesting materials along these lines: where the material comes from, or who made the material in the first place.

For the first method, think of extraordinary places: the lands of the fae, the vale of shadows, the elemental planes, and so on. Sacred trees, planar mountains, astral waters, infernal volcanic rock, divine flesh—all of these are from inherently magical places or things, and thus can be used in crafting magical items.

For the second method, think of unusual peoples: dwarves, elves, giants, faeries, ghosts, angels, demons, spirits, elementals, and all the many more. Dwarfish bronze, giant's steel, demonic leather, elemental cloth—they might be working with ordinary materials, but by simple dint of being supernatural, these peoples create supernatural items.



REGIONS

The West Marches are vast and sprawling, stretching further west without end. However, within the Marches themselves, chunks of similar terrain can be divided up into regions—a section of territory that shares similar qualities, inhabitants, and features.

PRINCIPLES OF REGIONS

The principles of designing regions are thus: make them discrete, make them unique, and make them dangerous.

Discrete

It should be obvious to players when they cross the threshold from one region to the next. Communicating these differences matters both because it lets them make their map more accurately and signals that this is a new region to scout, but also because it warns them of potential danger. When players travel into a new region, they should be alert for threats.

The most straightforward way to distinguish two regions is to make them two separate environments: forests and plains, mountains and coastline, hills and the underground. Conversely, this means that within a single region, there should not be more than one environment. A single hill in the plains or a forest lake is fine, but if a single region combines two environments, players' expectations will come into conflict with the reality of the game. This is in part because the distinctions between regions also mean that a region's effects, such as poisonous flora or constant rainstorms, should be confined to that region; as soon as these cross region lines, the lines become confused, and so too will your players.

If you must have two of the same environments next to each other, be certain to leave other clues: coniferous trees change to deciduous, for example, or rolling hills turn to rocky crags. These varied descriptions should signal change to your players, even if the environment itself does not overtly transform.

Another useful way to distinguish environments is via natural or artificial barrier: perhaps a river runs between the hills and the desert, or a cliffside marks the shift from mountains to coastline, or an ancient road cuts through the eaves between mountain and plain, or a mystical barrier

of force divides the great forest in two. These kinds of barriers are clear markers to players; if the barrier is harder to cross, such as a lava flow or towering cliffside, it can also serve as an indicator of the challenge of the region beyond.

Unique

Each region should feel like its own special location, unlike anywhere else in the Marches. This is done for both gameplay and thematic reasons: from a gameplay perspective, this keeps things fresh and exciting and engaging, and incentivizes expansion. No player wants stale content, and so it is important that each region has its own unique draw. From a thematic perspective, the Marches themselves should get wilder and stranger the deeper the players explore; making each region special reinforces the wild and untamed nature of the Marches.

Because there are limited numbers of total environments that exist, even in a fantasy world, the key to making each region unique is to begin adding other factors. This might be strange inhabitants, unusual magical effects, bizarre weather patterns, ancient structures, or something else entirely. These, when compounded with the normal variations in environments, will help to make individual regions unique.

On top of this, each region should be memorable; with only a brief description, players should start recognizing areas they've been to before. In order to best achieve this, each region should have a key phrase: a short, descriptive phrase that is used every time that region is visited. For a relatively ordinary forest, the phrase might be "narrow grey pine trees." For a range of haunted hills, the phrase might be "jagged crags dusted with mist." For an ancient battlefield, this phrase might be "ashen soil hiding shattered bones."

When players enter this region, you should work the key phrase into your description of the region itself. You can and should expand the description beyond the key phrase alone, but it is critical to include it. As players hear the key phrase used over and over again, they will associate it with the region; as soon as they enter that region, even if lost, they will know where they are.

You may think yourself safe, but it matters not. No matter where in the whole of the Marches you are, I will find you, I will hunt you down, and I will boil your flesh from your bones.

Dangerous

Danger unites. If a region is not dangerous, players will not work together and quickly grow bored. The Marches are the most feared and unknown territory in the world, and your regions should reflect that. Do not be afraid to have random encounters that are extremely dangerous. Present great difficulty to your players in the terrain. Have clever, aggressive monsters abound.

That said, be certain to telegraph all of this information ahead of time. Leave tracks and trails for the players to stumble across; have NPCs warn the players of a region's danger; place natural formations that hint towards greater danger.

In designing a region's difficulty, there are two main guidelines to follow: first, the farther from town, the more dangerous the region. Second, a region's difficulty should be consistent within itself.

Both of these are somewhat flexible. While the difficulty curve of regions should generally get higher the further they are from town, it can be a good idea to have a few more dangerous regions closer to home. It lets players experiment and make riskier missions, and it also helps to ensure that they stay on their toes; if there's a region close to home that's dangerous, who knows what might lie further beyond?

Within a region itself, it's important the random encounters are all roughly of the same difficulty. Players will use random encounters as a metric for the overall challenge of the region, and so it is important to keep them of consistent difficulty. That said, so long as they are well-telegraphed, a few specific spots of increased difficulty can be beneficial. Stray too close to the dragon's mountaintop lair, for example, and the dragon is more likely to descend. Players can see the dragon from a distance, and so have ample opportunity to not run afoul of the beast itself. In general, however, random encounters should maintain similar difficulty to allow players to get a gauge of the region as a whole.

As an overarching rule of thumb, the more difficulty deviates from the established, expected difficulty of the region or broader area, the more telegraphing is required.

DANGER LEVEL

When you design a region, you should decide on one danger level for the region as a whole. The simplest way to start designing a region is by determining what level of adventurer the area is suited for. An average combat encounter in the region should be of medium difficulty for five adventurers of that level, according to *DMG* 81.

Once you decide on a danger level for the region, you should adhere to it. Some encounters might be a little harder, some might be a little easier, but by and large it should be safe to assume that encounters in the region will be of that danger level. Dungeons or specific locations can be of higher danger, but abrupt changes in the level of danger that the players can expect from an area should always be well-telegraphed.

There are plenty of other ways to add nuance to the amount of danger posed by a region. Perhaps food is scarce there, or the natural environment is extremely inhospitable. When you add these extra danger factors into a region, consider adjusting the difficulty of combat encounters proportionally so that the level of danger in the region does not compound too unpredictably.

Why Have Danger Level?

There is a not-unreasonable argument to be made that these are the Marches, and thus consistent danger levels across a region should not exist. There's some truth to the sentiment: the Marches are designed to be wild and unpredictable, and having consistent danger levels across a region undermines some of that unpredictability.

That said, a core aspect of the West Marches, as a format, is slowly moving outwards, away from the town and into the wilds. While regions can and should vary in danger levels, having wildly varying encounter levels would undermine the gradient of danger. If the first encounter out of town was a dragon only to have the second be a half-dozen bandits, the Marches as a whole will feel as though something's gone awry.

Furthermore, players should have *some* sense of how much trouble they're getting themselves into before they do it. Diving into a dungeon that's just a bit more dangerous than expected is tense and exciting, but diving into a dungeon that instantly crushes the party is not.

It's also important to bear in mind that while the danger level inside a region should maintain some level of regularity, overall danger levels across regions can and should be quite different. Crossing the thresholds from the splintered hills to the haunted wood to the barrier mountains signals a shift in difficulty, which should be embraced.





ENVIRONMENT

The environment of a region refers to its geological and ecological makeup; examples include forest, hills, mountains, or desert. Environment will determine a region's travel speed, availability of food and water, difficulty to navigate, and will play a large part in the inhabitants of the region.

These are expressed as a region's travel speed, food DC, water DC, and navigation DC. The following list provides a general guideline for environments. You can and should feel free to adjust these as fits your game: an exceptionally lush mountain range might have a lower food and water DC, for example, while a highly dense forest might have a higher navigation DC.

Environments

Environment	Travel Speed	Food DC	Water DC	Navig. DC
Coastal	½ speed	10	15	13
Desert	No effect	18	20	13
Forest	½ speed	10	10	15
Grassland	No effect	10	13	10
Hills	½ speed	13	10	15
Mountains	¼ speed	15	15	18
Swamp	¼ speed	13	10	18
Tundra	No effect	15	13	10
Underground	½ speed	18	18	18
Urban	½ speed	15	13	13
Wasteland	No effect	20	20	10

Combining Environments

Many regions are comprised of more than one environment, such as forested mountains, desert hills, or a coastal swamp. When this occurs, use the slowest travel time, the highest navigation DC, and the lowest food and water DCs.

For example, consider an icy range of snow-covered mountains. Being arctic mountains, they have a travel speed of ¼ speed, food DC 15, water DC 13, and navigation DC 18.

Combining environments can often be a good way to vary regions, to make them feel unique and special. Because the Marches are a fantasy world, do not be afraid to combine environments in unusual ways: a swampy desert might be the result of some ancient curse, or underground grasslands might be due to druidic influence.

More Environments

These environments are a good baseline, but they do not cover all possible variations or options. A forest of giant fungi, for example, might have a lower food and water DC, but be more difficult to navigate due to mind-altering gases. A series of floating mountains might be nigh-impossible to find water on, but easily navigated due to their great height.

Use these environments as a framework to jump off from, to indulge your wild fantasies and your most far-flung regions. The Marches are a strange and wondrous place—do not be afraid to use your imagination!

Generating More Environments

As you build your Marches, you may find yourself running out of concepts to make regions out of, even after combining the different environments. This is normal; it happens to everyone.

When this does happen, one of the best ways to continue generating interesting, evocative regions is to begin tweaking small details, and then expanding from there. Consider, for example, a forest where the trees are made of stone. A relatively simple change, but it has wide implications: what do the animals eat? How do birds nest in stone trees? Can you still cut them down for logging materials? Do leaves fall? Answer these questions, and you'll have an interesting region.

In making these tweaks, consider topography, materials, colors, behaviors, weather patterns, ambiance, sound, diet, and the barriers between planes. A steppe of pink grasses, mountains shrouded in total silence, a marsh that freezes over every night, a beach where the tides don't flow—all of these are provocative, engaging regions, ones that will beg your players to investigate further. Use these simple tweaks to your advantage.

CLIMATE

Consider the general climate for the whole of the Marches. Where are they on the overall map of the world? While the Marches are most commonly thought of as being on the western edge of the Empire, this isn't necessarily the case. The South, North, and East Marches are all equally viable—as are, perhaps, the Upper and Lower Marches, or even the Inner and Outer Marches.

Whichever, decide on a rough, general climate for the region as a whole. This is a fantasy world, however, and thus climates may vary more than they would in the real world. It is entirely feasible that the southern reaches of a sub-equatorial Marches are frozen entirely solid in ice, while the northern, only a couple hundred miles away, are sunny and balmy. Likewise, if a specific region is unusually warm or cold, do not worry overmuch—magic has many strange effects, not the least of which is altering climate.

You can use the following table as a baseline for a region's climate, but do not be afraid to expand further.

Climates

d6	Climate
1	Tropical; hot and wet
2	Subtropical; warm and wet
3	Arid; warm and dry
4	Temperate; cool and wet
5	Subarctic; cool and dry
6	Arctic; cold and dry

LANDFORMS & STRUCTURES

In addition to a region's environment, part of what makes it unique is its landforms and structures. Many regions contain castles and temples, villages and hamlets, streams and hills, clearings and gullies—while yes, these are technically landforms and structures, they are not enough to distinguish a region. To do so, they must be defining; they must be the focal point of the entire region, or at bare minimum a critical aspect of it.

These set-piece landmarks will make the region distinguishable and unique, yes, but they will also serve your players in forming an understanding of the region's place in world's layered history. Consider the following as you design your landforms and structures: How do they help players contextualize their surroundings? Can they be used to navigate? Do they house a dungeon? Do other factions or monsters know about them? For structures, what are they there for, or what were they before falling into ruin? How do they tie in with the Marches' ancient past, if applicable?

Landforms and Structures

d10 Landform

- 1 Bluffs, extreme cliffs, or a chasm.
- 2 Massive mountain peak.
- 3 Volcano.
- 4 Huge tunnel or pit.
- 5 Enormous tree.
- 6 Web of lakes and streams.
- 7 Ruined fortress.
- 8 Ancient road, bridge, or stairs.
- 9 Faction stronghold.
- 10 Huge river or waterfall.

Landforms and Structures as Telegraphing

In many situations, these landforms and structures can be used as the barrier between two regions. If you do so, consider the implication of the landform or structure itself: if the entirety of the Marches thus far have been wholly uncivilized, for example, an enduring road will serve as a marker of more dangerous inhabitants. Sharp contrast to the existing regions and the previously-known area of the Marches will register as danger to your players.

Likewise, because these landforms and structures are often significantly more visible than the surrounding region, they can serve as an easy marker of threat. If a huge mountain has a dragon circling it, players know to stay away; if an ancient stronghold flies banners of an enemy faction, players know to be wary; if a volcano still flows, all players will exercise caution.

Landforms and Description

When you describe a landform or structure, it's important to use similar language each time. Obviously, if the landform's changed, such as if a volcano erupts, you change the description, but for the same landmark, use the same language.

"A square of crumbling, decrepit walls, overgrown with ivy; there are collapsed turrets set at each of the corners" and "a ruined castle, little more than four broken walls and towers" could feasibly describe the same place. To your players, however, those descriptions will feel fundamentally different.

Just as you use key phrases to describe regions, you should do the same for those regions' important landforms and structures. Landforms should be reliable, regular, and able to be used as signposts. Ensure your players can actually make use of them.

Castles are for those who cannot defend themselves otherwise.

In other words, weaklings.

For those of us not as tough as the Big Guy, though, castles can be a very good idea indeed! Just watch out for traps!

Landforms and Structures in Narrative

Players are drawn to that which stands out. If they see something large and strange and enticing, they will go towards it—in a campaign with few pure "plot" hooks, curiosity will always drive players. Because of this, major landforms and structures are a good place to locate key pieces of lore and information.

In a basic sense, players are more likely to go to large, obvious structures, and thus more likely to learn whatever information you place there. In a more nuanced capacity, however, the major landforms and structures of a region can be used to illustrate broader points of the history of a particular region.

In a region that was once the site of an ancient battle now turned to barren wasteland, a still-active volcano might have been summoned by the winning side. In a spreading cursed forest, a towering single tree might hold the heart of a vengeful druid that laid the curse on the whole wood. In a water-ridden marshland, the enormous whirlpool in the center might be why the region was abandoned by its former people.

The major landmarks of a region should define the region, and thus its lore. Link these together, and your region will be all the more excellent.

Bigger is Older is Badder

A mountain that pierces the clouds; a bridge that crosses an ocean; a pit that pierces the earth's crust. All of these things are huge, and all of them will register as very old and very dangerous to your players. Fantasy is built on the themes of ancient civilizations now gone, and impossible architecture and colossal structures are a fantastic method of reinforcing that theme.

If you want to awe your players and instantly pique their curiosity, place a huge structure, natural or otherwise. It drives exploration, captures imagination, and builds resonance.

Likewise, if you want to inspire fear in your players, describe something gargantuan and ancient. To wake things best left sleeping is a deep fear, and the older the sleeper, the worse.

Big things are old things, and old things are dangerous.

You can always see the Big Guy's lair, no matter where you are—just look for big black mountain, the pools of acid, and the screams of people he doesn't like very much.



MODIFIERS

While regions are composed of environments and landforms, they also are often affected by other, stranger forces. In many cases, these are more natural: wildlife behavior, weather patterns, or flora growths. In others, it might be magical: curses, enchantments, or long-lasting invocations. Whatever the cause, these kinds of additional effects within a region are referred to as modifiers.

Early on, as the players are first exploring the Marches, modifiers should generally be less present, or if they are present, less impactful. The regions closer to town are more about letting players learn the rules of the game, get a sense of what the Marches are about, and find their footing in general. Layering heavy modifiers on top of early regions is more likely to confuse players than it is to make for a better game.

As the players explore farther from town, however, modifiers can and should grow more common and more extreme. At the farthest reaches of the Marches, there very well could be no regions left without intense modifiers.

Region Modifiers

d20 Modifier

- | d20 | Modifier |
|-----|--|
| 1 | Anyone who spends the night in the region is aged magically by 1 year. |
| 2 | Every few hours, sudden lightning strikes near the party |
| 3 | Weather ranging into extreme heat or extreme cold in sudden shifts. |
| 4 | A ghostly whispering suffuses the region; anyone there is unable to escape it. |
| 5 | Fey magic abounds, meaning there is a small chance travellers will be transported elsewhere. |
| 6 | As night falls, the quantity of monsters increases threefold. |
| 7 | Pockets of quicksand dot the region, sometimes obvious and sometimes hidden. |
| 8 | Rockslides and avalanches are very common. |
| 9 | Misleading waystones and road-signs abound. |
| 10 | Any food consumed is unsatisfying; hair and nails grow at a rapid rate. |
| 11 | Unease and discomfort suffuse the area; relaxation is impossible. |
| 12 | Murders of crows follow travellers, marking them for unfriendly eyes. |
| 13 | Unending storms and fell weather wrack the region. |
| 14 | Each morning, there is a high chance heavy fog has rolled in overnight. |
| 15 | Geysers burst through the earth often, and in unpredictable locations. |
| 16 | Any blood spilt quickly draws in ravenous beasts. |
| 17 | Flash floods sweep through the regions irregularly. |
| 18 | Any metal left in the region overnight quickly begins to rust and decay. |
| 19 | The region is riddled with cliffs, gorges, and gullies, slowing travel. |
| 20 | Volcanic eruptions alter the terrain near-constantly. |

*We once saw a bird as large as a house!
It was exciting, but terrifying — we had
to go get the Big Guy to scare it off!
Nearly ate Kezzi, too, heehee!*

Modifiers' Difficulty Level

These region modifiers are presented primarily without specific mechanical difficulty attached. This is done because a region's modifier should vary with the region's difficulty level on the whole. In a low-level region with the modifier that "spilt blood draws hungry beasts," the beasts might be simple animals, and it takes them a few minutes to arrive, giving the players time to flee or prepare. In a high-level region with the same modifier, the "beasts" might be bloodthirsty vampires that teleport in to a scene the moment blood leaves the body.

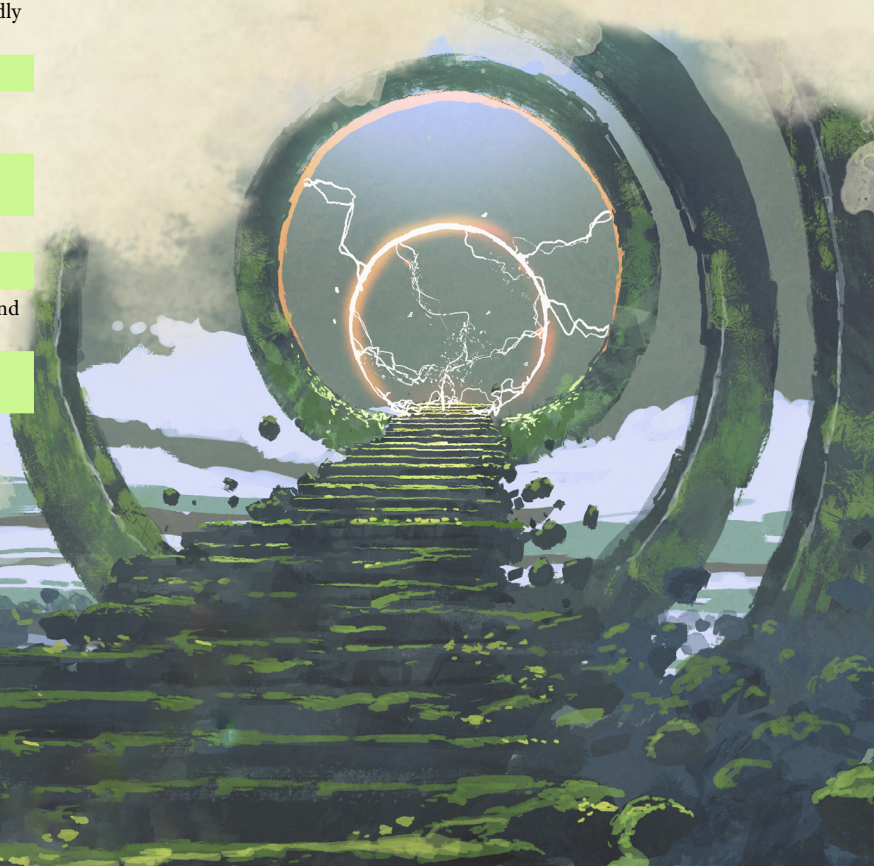
As you design regions, be careful in which modifiers you apply and how. As always, the list above is suggestion; you can and should feel free to expand beyond these. Shifting each individual factor in a region's modifier—time, severity, resource drain, frequency, DCs, and others—will allow you to settle on the region's difficulty in more detail.

Modifiers as Narrative

As with landforms and environments, the modifiers to a region can directly inform the narrative of that region as a whole. Consider what causes the modifier to even exist in the region in the first place: is it an ancient curse, laid down by a necromancer? Is it due to the region's location between two mountain ranges? Is it due to the existence of a portal to another realm?

In many cases, the modifier has some variety of magical origin, often a very old or obscure one. Despite this—or perhaps because of it—a region's particular modifier can often be illuminating to the region's broader history. Modifiers are often what players notice early when exploring a region, and thus more present when they attempt to uncover a region's narrative.

A region's modifier does not reveal or explicate the region's broader narrative so much as it does show its aftereffects. A region haunted by ghostly soldiers might once have been the site of forgotten battles; a region where the rain runs red with blood might house a mage practicing profane rituals; a region where the water is poisonous might be inhabited by bands of venomous reptilian humanoids. Seeing the modifier does not make the region's broader narrative immediately obvious, but rather reinforces its impact on the whole.





INHABITANTS

The inhabitants of a region are comprised of all living things that dwell within the region: animals, people, and monsters. In most cases, the inhabitants of a region will be determined by the region's environment: forests, mountains, plains, the underground—all have different natural inhabitants. As you design your region, consider what manner of inhabitants, if any, dwell within.

If you are struggling to think of what might dwell in a region, consult *DMG* Appendix B, which contains lists of creatures sorted by environment.

Settlements

Settlements in the Marches are far and few between. They are well-defended and well-hidden; any settlements that aren't will surely perish. Most settlements are hostile to outsiders, and thus will be to any adventurers that come knocking.

The rare few that allow outsiders in should be a place of temporary respite, where adventurers can grab a safe night's sleep and resupply, but little more. As with the town, if there is adventure to be had in areas that are less dangerous, players will do everything in their power to stay there.

Hostile settlements should be placed at key barrier locations between regions: a narrow mountain pass, a strip of land between two seas, or the only road through the forests. These hostile settlements can be used in the same way as key structures and landforms for telegraphing: a group of low-level players will balk at a fortress full of hobgoblins, informing them to keep away until they've reached a certain level of power.

The few friendly settlements that exist should be in out-of-the-way locations; place them too close to prime dungeons and unexplored regions, and they will become a way-stop for every mission. This lowers the difficulty of nearby dungeons and regions, as it provides player characters with an easy place to both launch from and retreat to. Force your players to commit; don't put friendly settlements in convenient locations.

Earning Inhabitants' Evil Status

As you build your region and begin adding in its humanoid inhabitants, be cautious and thoughtful. The inhabitants can and should be mostly villainous, but you should take care to accurately paint them as such.

"They're orcs" is not sufficient reason to be villainous, for example. Bloodthirsty marauders or zealous cultists or raiding cannibals are all perfectly good villains—and they may well be orcs—but labeling an entire race as monstrous is wrong. Take the time to ensure that your evil inhabitants have earned that evil by dint of actual villainy.

Imagine not being known as the mightiest evil in all the Marches. I've held that title since I could first spread my wings, I cannot fathom what life would be like without.

Inhabitants as Narrative

As with all parts of a region, the inhabitants of a region contribute to the overall narrative and history of the region. In the case of animals and non-sentient monsters, they should be used to reinforce the particular narrative of the region as a whole. Lycanthropes might prowl a region overseen by an accursed king; sentient plants dwell in a region close to the Fey; fiends hunt in broad daylight when a portal is nearby.

As with modifiers, monstrous inhabitants of a region are less explanatory of the narrative of the region itself as much as they reinforce it. They demonstrate the current nature of the region—and thus the end result of the region's history—firsthand, rather than provide direct explication.

Humanoid inhabitants of the region should be treated with care. For more detail about NPCs and their relation to world lore, see page 66.

Legendary Monsters

In addition to the more ordinary inhabitants of a region, consider adding in a legendary monster—a beast of tremendous power, the showstopper of the region. Legendary monsters are often far more dangerous than the surrounding region, but compensate by being significantly more obvious. Legendary monsters should be able to be seen coming from far away, giving low-level players plenty of time to escape. When they do go to fight the monster, make sure it's their direct intent, not just some chance encounter.

Legendary monsters, while impressive on their own, should be built up by the surrounding regions' inhabitants. Players will undoubtedly be curious about the legendary monsters, and will dig into any and all information about them. Because of this, legendary monsters are a prime focus for the region's (or even several regions') narrative. As players increase in power by completing dungeons and other missions in the legendary monster's region, they should be uncovering more and more lore and information about it.

For more detail on conveying information through terrible foes, see page 55.

Legendary Monsters

d10 Monster

- 1 A great sentient tree, slowly drifting across the world.
- 2 A dragon turtle large enough to be mistaken for an island itself.
- 3 An undersea leviathan or kraken.
- 4 A three-headed purple worm.
- 5 A long-dead tyrant, brought to life through profane ritual.
- 6 A conclave of many-eyed deep ones.
- 7 A demon lord seated atop a throne of contempt.
- 8 An avenging angel of flame and light.
- 9 A mechanical colossus the size of a mountain.
- 10 The tarrasque itself.



ENCOUNTERS

As player characters travel through a region, they will tangle with the region's inhabitants, hazards, and other dangers. These dangers are all broadly referred to as "encounters," meaning any sort of situation or scenario that puts the player characters at risk and has the potential to drain them of resources.

These regional encounters are separate from the encounters within a dungeon. They follow different guidelines and are more randomly determined, as opposed to a dungeon's more constructed, scripted encounters.

Regional encounters have a chance to occur every watch—once every four hours. At the beginning of each watch, roll 1d100 to see if an encounter will occur during that watch; when the encounter occurs within that watch precisely is up to you.

Encounter Tables

Once it has been determined that an encounter will occur, roll on the region's encounter table. These tables are composed of monsters that inhabit the region that the party is likely to run across, as well as naturally dangerous encounters—rockfalls, quicksand, lava flows, and the like.

You should compile your encounter tables from the inhabitants of the region. In general, encounters should only be with dangerous monsters of the region—an encounter with a herd of deer is not particularly dangerous, and thus not conducive to good gameplay.

Your encounter table should be random. In some cases it can be better to simply decide which encounter will happen—such as if the party is camped very close to a hostile encampment—but most of the time, randomly determining the encounter better represents the region.

As a rule of thumb, each region should have between five and eight varieties of common monsters to encounter; fewer will feel repetitive, but too many more and the region might be too unpredictable. The table itself should be based on a standard die roll; any die between a d8 and a d20 will work well. Bear in mind that the chance of encountering each monster does not need to be equal; more common monsters should be more common on the roll.

In addition to the region's own monsters, encounter tables should include one or two monsters from neighboring regions. These should be low-chance encounters; it's uncommon for monsters to wander in from a nearby region, but it does happen.

Finally, an encounter table should always have a slight chance of two encounters happening simultaneously—an owlbear tussling with a band of orcs is suddenly a complicated situation, as is the party and opposing basilisks all sinking into quicksand together.

Encounter Danger

The danger of each encounter on your region's encounter table should be fixed. There is a tendency in the base game to have encounters be something along the lines of "1d4 bullettes" or "3d6 sahuagin." This is not good design for the West Marches. One bullette is a dramatically different fight from four bullettes, just as six sahuagin compared to fifteen sahuagin is entirely unlike. If encounters swing wildly, players won't be able to accurately gauge the region's danger—as that region will not have a reliable danger level.

Most of the time, it is perfectly acceptable to simply say "2 bullettes" or "10 sahuagin." If these encounters happen to repeat a lot, players might start to notice, but this is unlikely, and even if they do, little harm will come of it. The Marches are a fundamentally different experience to the base game, and your players will appreciate the reliability.

If you must add in randomization to each encounter, consider mitigating the randomness. "7+1d6 sahuagin" ranges from eight to thirteen, which is still a sizeable difference, but is no longer as dramatic a swing in danger level, and still averages ten or eleven, as does 3d6. Do not be afraid to use a 1d4, 1d3, or 1d2.

If you walk in the woods late at night, don't whistle. Grokezz did that once when he was out on patrol, and three days later we found all that was left him: his eyeballs on a stick. Poor, poor Grokezz; least we could give his mum his eyeballs.

Adventurers love to settle in for the night before facing
down a dragon in the morning.
Dragons love adventurers to settle in for the night, too;
prey's much easier to kill when it can't see you coming.

Encounter Chance

By default, a region has a 10% encounter chance. This means an encounter will occur on average about once every ten watches, or roughly every day and a half. However, there are a number of factors that can affect this chance: on a very basic level, a more dangerous region should have a higher chance, and a less dangerous region should have a lower chance. As a good rule of thumb, encounter chance should never decrease to lower than 5%—the Marches are simply too unpredictable, and the chance of danger is always present.

The following factors might also come into effect when considering encounter chance. Bear in mind that these are not universal, and should be determined on a region-by-region basis, as well as the current situation at the start of the watch. These aren't all of the factors that might play into determining the encounter chance in a region. If there is a circumstance not listed that you as a GM feel should come into play, you should reserve the right to impose it at your discretion.

Night. Many regions have nocturnal predators, thus increasing the chance of an encounter during night-time watches.

Weather. As the weather grows worse, visibility and other senses decrease in effectiveness, thus reducing the chance of an encounter.

Fresh meat. If the party is carrying freshly-killed meat, such as from foraging for food, predators are more likely to be drawn to camp.

Trail. If the party leaves an obvious trail, such as from blood, the chance of a predator tracking them increases.

Light. Light attracts the eye, and thus attention, especially at night. Keeping open flames increases the chance of an encounter.

Noise. As with light, loud noises attract predators. Playing music, raised voices, or other sources of high volume draw attention, increasing the chance of an encounter.

Hidden. If the party has taken the time and effort to hide their camp from prying eyes, the chance of an encounter decreases.

Proximity. If the party is close to a hostile lair or encampment, they are more likely to run afoul of the locals, increasing their chance of an encounter.

Magic. Depending on the kind of magic, this can increase or decrease a party's chance of encountering danger; benevolent magic might hide them, while fell curses might draw even worse dangers.

Encounter Chance Conditions

Condition	% Chance Mod.
Default	10%
Dangerous region	Up to +20%
Safe region	Up to -10%
Night	+10%
Light rain or snow	-10%
Heavy rain or snow	-15%
Storm	-20%
Fresh meat	+5%
Obvious trail	+10%
Bright light	+15%
Loud noise	+10%
Hidden camp	-10%
Proximity to hostiles	Up to +20%
Magical effects	Up to +/-30%

You can and should feel free to adjust these modifiers as you see fit, and should add in additional modifiers as necessary. These should serve as a baseline to work from, rather than the end-all be-all.



FACTIONS

The factions within the Marches give it life and provide much of the more complex conflict in a West Marches game. Typically, factions are composed of sentient beings with goals and intentions; there is a reason that the faction is situated in the Marches, and more times than not that reason brings them into contact (and potentially conflict) with the players.

Understand the factions that are present in each region, and use the players' engagement with those areas to explore their inhabitant factions' disposition toward the player characters. Know how the factions in your game fit into the layers of history within your world. How old is their legacy? What powers do they answer to? Also consider their day-to-day operations. Do they have scouts? How do they feed themselves and deal with the normal threats within the Marches?

Be judicious in your creation of factions. Having several factions is good, as it lends a layer of narrative and political complexity to the game, but adding too many factions can make the Marches feel too civilized.

PRINCIPLES OF FACTIONS

Why have factions at all? Why not just have a wilderness full of individual dungeons and isolated pockets of people?

The answer is pacing. Even a monstrously large, tremendously brutal dungeon will still likely take less than ten sessions to complete. With factions, however, there can be narratives and conflicts that grow and build over the course of months, with light interactions and skirmishes over the course of dozens of sessions. As players learn more about a faction and get closer to reaching a resolution, tension will grow; when they eventually face off against their final challenge with the faction, be it armed conflict or not, the payoff will be huge.

Without these kinds of longer-reaching groups and chances for story to develop, it can be difficult to have any kind of cohesion or connection across the Marches as a whole.

With that in mind, there are three key principles to designing the factions of your Marches: keep them primarily villainous, keep them connected to the Marches, and keep them from being all-powerful.

Villainous

The West Marches are a brutal, unforgiving place; they've never been breached by the Empire with any amount of success, and you should demonstrate that to be true. Beyond that, however, if players discover a faction that is primarily friendly to their cause and is significant, they will likely try to form an alliance or even directly join that faction.

The player characters, as a group, should be independent. While they may owe debts or favors to factions, simply joining another extant faction shifts the priorities of the game. Even worse, it's possible that some players will want to join an existing faction and others won't, and the group will threaten to splinter.

Therefore, you should keep the factions of the Marches villainous. They don't need to necessarily be strictly evil, but they should be antagonistic towards the player characters.

This means that if you're making a primarily-humanoid faction, you need to give them clear reason to be evil; "they're orcs, they deserve to die" is both poor writing and profoundly bigoted. Humanoids can and often will be evil, but this should be proved through actions and deeds rather than genetics. Cultists, zealots, conquerors, necromancers, pirates, brigands—all are good examples of villainous humanoids whose evil stems from a more real and complex place than their race.

Keep your factions primarily evil. They can still make deals and interact politically with the player characters, but they should do it from a position of intent to conquer or destroy.

Connected

The West Marches are old; they're covered in ruins and ancient sites, with all manner of history lost to time. Uncovering that history bit by bit, discovering whatever's left, and piecing together the story of what happened before—all are essential parts of the Marches.

The factions within the Marches should reflect this. Factions should have, in purpose or makeup or history, an intrinsic connection the history of the Marches. They should be connected to the broader lore than the players are actively seeking to uncover.

How exactly this connections manifests is up to you. In some cases, a faction might inhabit the ruins of a predecessor nation, and thus take on some half-forgotten elements of that nation. In others, a faction might share the same goal as the players—to uncover and divine a specific piece of history, potentially one that might grant them power. In still others, a faction might be composed of living remnants of a bygone civilization. Whatever you choose, tying a faction to the Marches' history will solidify its cause and importance.

Limited

The West Marches are difficult to thrive in, nigh impossible. Individual packs of monsters might thrive, but no group of sentient beings can do more than scrape by. That harsh, unforgiving reality is a central tenet of the Marches.

Because of this, if any one faction were to rise significantly in power, the question would be asked: why haven't they taken over the Marches yet? Factions control turf, possibly even whole regions, but none can wholly control the Marches. If they did, the West Marches would cease to be.

This is not to say that you should make the factions of the Marches weak; by no means is this the case. Factions should be dangerous and powerful, certainly—they just shouldn't be unstoppable in power. A dragon or two with a cult full of kobolds is a powerful faction, but not powerful enough to take the whole of the Marches; an entire council of a dozen dragons might well have enough strength to dominate whole countries. There's a balance to it; both examples are extremely dangerous, but one might threaten to upset the logic behind the world as a whole.

Furthermore, like most content in the Marches, on a meta level, factions exist to be overcome as challenges for the players. Yes, you can and should have factions powerful enough to scare off players, but at a certain point, the players should stand some kind of chance against every faction.





TERRITORY & INFLUENCE

Part of what makes factions distinct from, say, a simple full of enemies, is that factions are spread out. They have outposts and holdings in multiple locations, they're spread out over miles of territory, and often lay claim to large chunks of wilderness as their own.

Factions should, in nearly all cases, control multiple key locations. These could be caches of natural resources, important ruins, strategic strongholds, or other valuable sites. The territory between those key locations should, in most cases, be broadly considered to be under the control of that faction. The faction will use the land to their benefit, set up further outposts and structures, and take notice of interlopers.

That's not to say that factions should know everything that occurs in their territory always, or even that their territory is at all built up. A faction of fey, for example, might deliberately eschew artificial structures, just as a faction of underground dwarves might not notice everything happening on the surface. Factional control is porous, and keeping close tabs in medieval wilderness is difficult at best.

Regions' Influence on Factions

As you design a faction, take stock of where they are located, what terrain surrounds them, and what territory they lay claim to. The region that a faction is located in can determine all manner of details: their equipment, their transportation, their holdings, their language, their outlook. All of these and more can and should take cues from their surrounding region. A faction that dwells in a rich, lush valley is going to be far more friendly and open than a faction that resides in a demon-bitten wasteland.

Likewise, certain groups of creatures are native to certain biomes, or else have preference for them. As a very obvious example, mer-people are typically found exclusively underwater, and are among the very few types of humanoids that can successfully dwell there. As another, winged creatures of all varieties find more success in mountainous regions, where their ability to fly allows them to surpass much of the otherwise-treacherous terrain of the mountains.

Certain factions trend towards certain regions, and all factions take some level of influence from the regions they dwell within.

Regions' Influence on Factions

Just as the region a faction occupies can alter how it behaves, so too can a faction alter its own territory. On a very basic level, most factions construct some manner of structure, be it temples or castles or villages, which in turn alter the landscape they dwell on. Similarly, most factions mark territory in some way, even with something simple as flags or paint, which delineates their borders.

On a slightly more complicated level, factions influence other creatures within a region. If, for example, a faction of lycanthropes takes up residence in a forest and begins to grow, it's very likely their food sources—wild game of all varieties—will start to dwindle after hunting. This holds true for all carnivores, but also extends to other factions, hated enemies, natural resources, and essentially anything else a given faction might acquire or consume.

If a faction possesses significant magic, their ability to alter their territory only grows further: magic can build structures with ease, inscribe wards and enchantments, alter weather, and more. As magical influence grows, planar portals might be opened, undead might begin to roam, strange effects might manifest, plants might awaken, and all manner of other strange phenomena might spring into existence.

Factional influence over their territory is a powerful narrative tool, as well as a mechanical one. If human bones are hung from trees, it will signal to players to be wary of hostile factions. Find the harmony between territory and faction, and use it.

Tools, Not Rules

As with nearly everything presented in these chapters, all of the content and guidelines here are tools for you to use in your game. They are not binding, nor are they designed to be. Whenever you see a table or possible suggestion, you should feel free to use it, but also to adjust, modify, and expand those suggestions.

Factions in particular deserve this being reinforced, because where dungeons and regions are structures and places, factions are *people*. Only you can determine what fits for your game, and you should take special care in ensuring your factions fit the game well.

Territory? No need for the term. I am the lord of all I see.



THEMING

Each faction should have a unique theming that conveys their design, disposition, and goals. Their territory should inform their feel in this respect, and their main base is often a visually-impactful set piece.

As you build a faction, try to nail down a single word or small phrase that foundationally characterizes the faction you are trying to create. If the term is too similar to another faction's, think of a different one; push yourself in previously unthought-of directions. This will help all of your factions to feel completely unique, their motivations and dispositions will vary in more compelling ways, and ultimately your players will have a more colorful and diverse set of ideals to contend with.

Use easy visual hooks to draw the players in, encouraging them always to explore new areas and make contact with new factions. As they interact with a faction in more detail, show different and angles on their reigning theme; let other elements of the faction be influenced by their theme.

Faction Themes

d20	Theme
1	Fears.
2	Nature.
3	Mysticism.
4	Impartiality.
5	Otherworldliness.
6	Judgement.
7	Materialism.
8	Knowledge.
9	Conquest.
10	Industry.
11	Forsakenness.
12	Madness.
13	Majesty.
14	Nomadism.
15	Draconism.
16	Sordidness.
17	Servility.
18	Dysfunction.
19	Primality.
20	Ancientness.

Theming and Culture

Groups of people always have a shared culture; it is inescapable that shared modes of behavior will spread between people and eventually begin to coalesce. This is a good thing! Giving factions distinct culture will make for interesting drama, meaningful stories, and verisimilitudinous worlds.

In many ways, a theme and a culture are indistinguishable; both govern basic behaviors and common customs. They diverge, however, in implementation: themes are abstract, removed, somewhat isolated concepts. Theming resides more in the design ethos and the intended feeling of the players, where culture is more actively present. Culture pervades the people of a given faction, and is largely determined by the behaviors of those people.

Where themes exist to provide a guideline and intention for you as designer, culture exists as its own narrative component of a faction, born from the emergent social characteristics of the faction itself.

Themes as Themes

A faction's themes are more than just their individual aesthetic, guiding principles, or core elements. They are that, yes, but a faction's themes are also serve as a guide in determining a faction's larger, deeper questions.

These are themes in the classic literary sense: fictional elements that ask questions, ones that the reader—or in this case, player—can in turn reflect on. Themes can provide a possible answer, or they can simply state the question and let the audience make their own judgements.

Take, for example, the theme of madness. A faction with this theme would likely involve several of its members being afflicted with madness. In this case, questions that might arise could include "How can we be certain that our perceptions of the world are accurate?" Alternatively, the question: "If someone is imitating madness to the point of being impossible to tell the difference, is that different than true madness?" Or more harshly: "At what point do we acknowledge that our leaders are incapable of making rational decisions, and what happens then?"

These kinds of questions are ones that humans have been pondering since the beginning of art. However, because you are designing and running a game, rather than writing a drama or painting a portrait or whatever else, these questions should be asked through the lens of interactivity design. As players interact with factions, put them in positions where they can first observe these questions at play, and then put the players in positions where they can make their own judgements.

To return to the madness example, imagine a scenario in which the adventurers are randomly encountered with a band of cultists, ones that gibber in strange languages and adorn their bodies with strange symbols. But, midway through the encounter, several of the cultists seem to snap out of it, speaking in ordinary languages and appearing fully cognizant. Your players will begin to question whether or not these cultists truly are mad, and in turn ruminate on the question of what properly defines madness.

By building factions with solid thematic cores and then presenting them to your players, you can delve into deeper, larger themes, all while maintaining an interesting and engaging game.





The Big Guy sometimes says that he is the lord of all he sees. One time Dorskan asked if that included the latrines behind the galley. We had to pour what was left of Dorskan down those latrines after the Big Guy was done with him.

BASES

Every faction needs a good base of operations, the location that serves as the center of the faction's territory as a whole. Depending on the faction, these bases can vary a great deal, but every faction needs one.

Bases should be impressive. They should be large, striking centerpieces, structures that convey the theme and purpose of a faction. When players see them in the distance, they should feel fear and awe.

Faction Bases

d20 Base

- | d20 | Base |
|-----|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Hidden forest outpost. |
| 2 | Underground catacombs. |
| 3 | Grand cathedral. |
| 4 | Enormous shadowy pit. |
| 5 | Floating cloud castle. |
| 6 | Underwater caverns. |
| 7 | Gilded palace. |
| 8 | Mystical tower. |
| 9 | Sealed vault, tomb, or crypt. |
| 10 | Ancient labyrinth. |
| 11 | Volcanic forge. |
| 12 | Artificial island. |
| 13 | Skeleton of a gargantuan beast. |
| 14 | Hollow mountain. |
| 15 | Sprawling ruins. |
| 16 | Always-moving caravan. |
| 17 | Secluded monastery. |
| 18 | Massive warship. |
| 19 | Impenetrable fortress. |
| 20 | Demiplane. |

Bases and Narrative

As mentioned, factions should be inherently tied to the Marches, and there is no better way to demonstrate that connection than through a faction's central base. As you design a faction's base, consider how the original structure came to be in the first place. In some cases, the faction themselves might have built it, but this is uncommon. The Marches are full of ancient ruins and half-rotted lairs—far more likely that a faction found an already-existing site and repurposed it for their own.

Regardless of where the base itself came from, consider how and why a faction utilizes it as their base. Is it practicality? A defensible location? A powerful magical site? A particularly fearsome position to look down from? Whichever, be thoughtful in what a faction's base says about a faction as a whole. Because bases are often the first thing that adventurers see of a faction, it will significantly influence how players think of that faction as a whole.

Beyond this, a faction's base can very well serve as the lynchpin to their overall connection to the Isles. A band of cultists residing in a maze of catacombs, for example, might have their origins tied to a god formed in the wake of a tremendous battle—a battle whose fallen now reside in those catacombs. Centering a faction, physically and narratively, around their base will build powerful resonance.

Bases, Territory, and Landmarks

Imagine, for a moment, the tallest mountain in a range of mountains, tipped in a bronze tower that occasionally spits out lightning at other mountaintops. This is a landmark, since it's quite distinctive; a marker of territory, since the lightning can strike anywhere in the range; and a faction base, since the tower itself is a veritable stronghold.

As you construct a faction and the region or regions they occupy, consider the natural landmarks and structures that make up the region. You can and should bind a faction to those, and thus infuse the region's features with elements of political control and dominance.

MOTIVATION

A faction's motivation defines its reasons for existing in the Marches. Factions in the Marches should all have a motivation, a drive that both informs and is informed by their base theme. Consider creating both short and long term goals for the faction, and come up with a plan for how the faction intends to reach those goals. As part of that process, consider how the player characters fit into the faction's goals. Will leaders of the faction see the player characters as a potential ally? An obstacle to be overcome? Perhaps an asset to be taken advantage of?

Likewise, examine potential player goals in relation to a faction's motivation. If a faction's and players' goals align, they might serve as uneasy allies; if a faction's goals stand in direct opposition to the players', they will surely be enemies.

Faction Goals

d20 Goal

- 1 Obey their leader's wishes.
- 2 Restore a broken artifact.
- 3 Dominate all life.
- 4 Protect a sacred location.
- 5 Reclaim lost territory.
- 6 Convert others to their beliefs.
- 7 Avenge an ancient wrong.
- 8 Resurrect a dead power.
- 9 Learn forgotten secrets.
- 10 Control a source of resources.
- 11 Seek the chosen one.
- 12 Create a legendary object.
- 13 Slay an unstoppable monster.
- 14 Free an imprisoned being.
- 15 Escape an impending doom.
- 16 Prove themselves worthy.
- 17 Destroy an accursed site.
- 18 Bring everything to their level.
- 19 Open a planar portal.
- 20 Earn a single *wish*.

Telegraphing Goals

By and large, a faction's goals should be either very obvious or highly mysterious. A faction that seeks to conquer the whole of the Marches, for example, will make that known to anyone and everyone by simple matter of it involving everyone. By contrast, a faction seeking to return a dead god to life by means of profane ritual will, in all likelihood, strive to keep that goal a secret as long as possible.

Both are engaging and interesting options for players to deal with. In obvious cases, it presents an immediate challenge to be dealt with, granting the players a measure of freedom and agency in how they go about interacting with the faction. In mysterious cases, it lends an air of uncertainty and the unknown to the entire faction, which will pique players' curiosity and drive them to know more.

Whichever the case, make sure the players know it. It does no good for players to think they have an entire faction figured out only to suddenly realize they don't, just as it's frustrating to believe a faction to be cloaked in mystery only to have the rug pulled out from under them. Blatant or secretive, make a faction's relationship with their goals known.

Achieving Goals

Because the West Marches are a place of ruin, most factions will never achieve their goal. They make steps or advances, certainly, but actively achieving a goal is rare.

If a faction is progressing significantly towards achieving their goal, make it known to the players. Drop hints wherever you can, put visible signals of that advancement around the surrounding regions, and have NPCs make mention that something unusual is happening. There is no feeling worse for players than a sudden shift in the status quo without them realizing it or ever being able to influence it. Give the players ample opportunity to stop (or possibly aid) the faction in reaching their endpoint.

That said, if, after giving plenty of opportunity to be halted, a faction reaches their goal, make it a big deal. Lights in the sky, fire in the night, blood in the streets—the works. Let a faction achieving their goals change the entirety of the Marches.

If you feel the urge to resist this change, don't. There isn't a storyline to wreck, there aren't critical plot points to hit, there are no key NPCs that need to live. If you've given the players a dozen chances to hit the Cult of the Sleeping Depths, for example, and they haven't, despite clear telegraphing? Summon the kraken.

Remember, the West Marches are at their best when players are in over their heads.





POPULATION

The exact population of a faction, the people and creatures that make it up, largely are determined by a faction's territory, theming, and goals. Faction populations that don't fit their region will likely not survive; a band of cold-blooded lizardfolk, for example, would very likely freeze in frigid mountains, just as a group of humans would not fare well in a swamps that flood regularly.

Because of this, you should let the population of a faction be more deterministic; choose what makes sense for the faction as a whole.

Faction Population

d20	Population
1	Cultists or clergy.
2	Faeries or fae-folk.
3	Mages or witches.
4	Monsters or beasts.
5	Pirates or brigands.
6	Soldiers or warriors.
7	Travelers or nomads.
8	Knights or heroes.
9	Monster hunters.
10	Extraplanar beings.
11	Machines and automata.
12	Seafolk or mer-people.
13	Scholars or academics.
14	Artisans or craftspeople.
15	Marauders or raiders.
16	Undead or necromancers.
17	Draconids and their minions.
18	Plants and animals.
19	Giants or their kin.
20	A single linked mind.

Faction Hierarchies

After settling on a faction's population, consider the hierarchy and social structure within that faction as a whole. What ranks, classes, or divides exist among its society? How do they determine leadership, or whether there are leaders at all? How does the faction operate on a moment-to-moment basis?

All of these questions need to be answered, and the population breakdown of a faction will strongly influence that. As you go about designing a faction's population, keep all of them in mind, and think about their relevance to the players. The exact rankings of a hobgoblin legion, for example, probably don't matter, but the fact that the legion is highly rigid in its structure does very much matter. Don't waste time and effort building in unnecessary details; focus instead on the core social structures that define the faction.

DEVELOPMENT

Factions, like the rest of the Marches, are highly emergent; there are no preset beats they will hit or storylines they will follow. Instead, they should behave more systemically, reacting to changes and stimuli as they go. These changes will likely come from the players, but they might also be drawn from other factions, or possibly some long sequence of chain reactions born over time.

Early on, it's not a bad idea to have more random developments. We have several presented here to consider, but after a time, you might find them unnecessary; drama and tension will grow between factions and players on their own, and so developments will occur based on what happens in the game.

Faction Development

d20	Development
1	The faction recovers an artifact that the player characters were searching for.
2	There is an abrupt change in the faction's leadership.
3	The faction suffers heavy losses to a monster or another faction.
4	The faction claims a ruin or other strategic location.
5	The faction fortifies their base.
6	Members of the faction are captured by another.
7	An unexpected element discovers the faction's base.
8	A splinter group breaks away from the faction.
9	The faction loses control of one of their outposts.
10	Natural disaster strikes the faction, at their base or elsewhere.
11	The faction unearths lost knowledge or ancient secrets.
12	The next step in the faction's grand master plan is executed.
13	The faction lures the player characters into a trap.
14	A contract or agreement is made between two factions.
15	A covenant between the faction and another is broken.
16	The faction moves to war against another.
17	A once-lost source of power, such as an ally or artifact, suddenly reappears.
18	The faction's rank-and-file members grow displeased.
19	The faction triggers a long-forgotten curse or malediction.
20	The faction is contacted by denizens of another plane.

If I see fit to expand my domain, I shall do so. If a faction holds a fortress, I shall claim it. If a wizard studies within a tower, I shall seize it. Any who oppose me will be boiled down into bones and slag.



DUNGEONS

Throughout the West Marches, relics of the past and visages of present horrors seed the land with darkness and mystery. Ruins of long-lost civilizations, camps of terrible monsters, convents of maleficent beings, and more all comprise a tapestry of challenges that bind the world together. These are the dungeons of the West Marches, the places and structures that serve as strongholds for the player characters in your game to conquer.

In the context of your West Marches game, “dungeons” refer to any isolated series of areas that contain hostile enemies or challenges. Often, this is a literal dungeon beneath a castle, but it might also be a ghost town, abandoned temple, monster hive, or something else similar.

PRINCIPLES OF DUNGEONS

The principles of creating dungeons fall around three essential questions: First, what’s the hook? Second, how is difficulty telegraphed? And third, what do they learn? As you create dungeons, ensure that you can answer each of these questions for the dungeon itself.

The Hook

The West Marches are vast, cluttered, and full of things for adventurers to do. This means that, for an average dungeon, there is a lot of competition. Your players will not be able to do everything, and thus will have to prioritize. The hook, then, is that which draws the player in; the obvious, noteworthy, easily-visible thing that captures the players’ attention.

Hooks come in a variety of forms. The most well-known is the quest hook, in which a quest, usually given by an NPC, directs the player characters towards the dungeon. Another common hook is that of simple curiosity: if a mine entrance glows red at dusk or a graveyard emanates strange song, players will come simply to satisfy their own curiosity. Another hook is more monstrous: if players observe a monster going to or from a location, they’ll be drawn to it with the promise of treasure. Dragons are most well-known for this, but there are other hoarders in the Marches.

Whatever the hook for your dungeon, it should be intriguing, noticeable, and mysterious. The hook is to lure players to the dungeon, to tempt them with dangers and riches within, and to keep it on their minds when planning missions.

Telegraphing Danger

When players first encounter a dungeon, they will be uncertain about it. If they are clever players, they will poke and prod, looking for a sign of how challenging the dungeon will be. If they are foolish players, they will charge straight in, risking life and limb in pursuit of glory.

Whichever the case, it is important that a dungeon telegraph its difficulty, and do it early. This means that, before the dungeon begins in earnest, there must be a way for players to determine its overall difficulty, to gauge their own strength relative to the dungeon’s. If you don’t telegraph a dungeon’s difficulty, players will either get in far over their heads far too quickly and die a grisly death, or else will be afraid of dungeons, and thus consistently over-leveled for the dungeons they do complete.

The most straightforward way to telegraph danger in a dungeon is to have an encounter that players can easily retreat from. Often, this is the guardian of the door of the dungeon or the first encounter of the dungeon itself. Players have yet to go deep into the dungeon proper, and thus are able to retreat early if things awry. While locking players in dungeons might seem an exciting challenge, it is arguably the most dangerous trap of all, as it means that if they misjudged the dungeon’s overall danger, they are doomed.

Other ways to telegraph danger include: locking the key the dungeon behind another encounter (or entire dungeon), thus requiring players to defeat that initial encounter to begin the dungeon; being warned of the dungeon by reliable NPCs, ones that the players can trust the word of; placing the dungeon in a hard-to-reach location, such as the top of a cliff (requiring flight) or deep underwater (requiring water breathing).

However you decide to do so, it is vital to telegraph the danger of a dungeon before the players fully commit. Doing otherwise will get them killed or make players far too skittish, and make the experience worse for everyone.

Information Learned

Along with experience and treasure, information is one of the great currencies of the Marches. Initially, the players will have absolutely no idea what is happening the Marches; they will have fragments of lore and snippets of history, but will always be seeking more knowledge. Because of this, dungeons should not only pose challenge and reward loot, but also illuminate secrets.

As you create your dungeon, consider what information is implicit in its physical creation: worked stone bears different significance than raw earth, which bears different significance than overgrown flagstones. Players will take notice of even the smallest details, and so you should be deliberate in your choices. The garb of enemies, the make of treasure, the languages used, the architecture of the space—all and more carry implicit information, and thus should be carefully accounted for.

Beyond the implicit information, many dungeons can provide other, more direct sources of information. Scrolls and writings, reliefs and carvings, prophecies and decrees—all can be found in dungeons, and thus all can provide insight into the world. NPCs can do the same, though they require more caution and restraint. For more information on lore and incorporating it elegantly into your game, see page 63.

More than the literal information conveyed, however, it’s important that dungeons convey that knowledge in the first place. If players complete a dungeon and there is absolutely no new insight to be gleaned, they will feel cheated. That said, if players complete a dungeon in a region they’ve outclassed and only find information they already know—that is good dungeon design. Information, like loot and experience, should always be pushing players further out, deeper into the Marches.

Mind you don't go looking too hard now, though! There might be secrets out there you realize you don't actually want to know.

TYPES OF DUNGEONS

Very few dungeons are built as a series of encounters for a band of adventuring heroes to overcome. This may be obvious to you, but it cannot be forgotten. Dungeons were made, in their original incarnation by their original creators, for some explicit purpose, or perhaps multiple purposes. A literal dungeon is built to hold prisoners, a temple is built for worship, a vault is built to protect treasures, and so on.

Often, the best starting place in designing a dungeon is to consider the dungeon's original purpose, which may still be its current purpose. This in turn informs how the dungeon itself should be designed.

These common, overarching purposes across dungeons lend some level of similarity across dungeons with the same original purpose: similar layouts, enemies, encounters, and narratives. This general lumping of commonalities is collectively referred to as the dungeon's basic type.

Dungeon Types

d20 Dungeon

- 1 Fortress.
- 2 Temple.
- 3 Catacombs.
- 4 Caverns.
- 5 Death Trap.
- 6 Forge.
- 7 Manor.
- 8 Shrine.
- 9 Library.
- 10 Laboratory.
- 11 Maze.
- 12 Nest.
- 13 Tomb.
- 14 Palace.
- 15 Vault.
- 16 Mine.
- 17 Sewer.
- 18 Lair.
- 19 Mountainside.
- 20 Planar Gate.

Obviously, there are many more types of dungeons than these, and many variations of these dungeons not mentioned. The ones listed here are meant ultimately to kickstart your imagination by contextualizing the concept of dungeons from within the reality of the Marches. These so-called dungeons are, after all, the touchstones through which your players will be able to narratively access the history and legacy of your setting.

LAYERS OF DUNGEON HISTORY

As with all things in the West Marches, dungeons are layered in history (for more on layers of history in general, see page 64). Nothing simply just exists; everything in a dungeon must come from somewhere. In the case of dungeons, layers of history might very well refer to actual, physical layers, built of wood and stone and blood.

Given that the West Marches are ancient and much-forgotten, there is a high chance that many existing dungeons are built on the remnants of older, forgotten dungeons. A goblin camp, for example, might be made in the ruins of a temple to a forgotten god, which in turn is built on the site of an ancient tomb. A cult might take up residence in an abandoned fortress built by giants, which was likewise situated atop an age-old mining shaft. A dragon might make its lair in a fortress built by dwarves, itself designed around the tunnels dug by a purple worm. Layers upon layers upon layers.

Building in layers to dungeons is the best way to demonstrate the depth and complexity of your Marches, of all the history and knowledge that players might uncover.

Layered Exploration

As player characters explore a dungeon, they should explore not only the most recent elements of history, but also the history that might be found there. In most cases, the deeper history of a dungeon is a prize for inquisitive players: inobservant and overeager players might miss such hidden secrets, but players that dig deep should be rewarded with knowledge.

Because of this, it can be a good idea to hide answers to longer, overarching questions concerning lore and history beneath a layer of history. Orcs dwelling in ancient catacombs pay no mind to the inscriptions on dead kings' tombs, but for adventurers in search of secrets, those tombs may be a treasure trove. However, given that the orcs do not directly guard the tombs, players are unlikely to view them as treasure inherently; it takes a curious eye to realize their value.

Exploring through the various layers of history present in a dungeon can, in many cases, be as rewarding as the combat and physical challenges of the dungeon itself.

Mechanical Layers

Ancient things are dangerous; every adventurer worth their salt knows this. If players descend into a region of the dungeon that suddenly shifts towards the very old and long-forgotten, they will know to be on their guard.

You can use this to your advantage: the layers of history in your dungeon can very easily become layers of challenge as well. Consider, for a moment, the passage deeper into catacombs marked with a forgotten tongue, carved in an unusual fashion, as if by flame. This will draw the curiosity and fear of all players; this is a good thing. Layers of history will lure players ever deeper into the Marches, but it will bring with them challenge. Ancient things are dangerous; make this true in the Marches.

For more information are tiers of danger in dungeons, see the next section.



DANGER LEVEL

Dungeons should, above all, be dangerous. Dungeons are where monsters thrive, foes build in strength, and evil constantly lurks. It's entirely possible to have a series of rooms, underground, that were once used as a prison—this is a dungeon, yes, but without monsters and challenge, it is no true dungeon.

Baseline Difficulty

By default, dungeons can be a higher difficulty than the surrounding regions. This is not to say that every dungeon should be more dangerous, just that players are far, far less likely to stumble by chance into a dungeon than they are an entire region. Because of this, dungeons have the option to be significantly beyond the region's power level: players only willfully go into dungeons, so if they choose something beyond their power, that is on them.

That said, like regions, dungeons should maintain the same level of difficulty across the encounters. Some can be considered “medium” difficulty and some “hard” difficulty, but overall, the encounters should be appropriate across a single level of challenge. To do otherwise will, as with other areas of the game, unfairly kill players or make them far too skittish.

Dungeon Tiers

In some cases, it can be appropriate to have different “tiers” of dungeon built into the same overall structure. Consider an abandoned seaside castle: the top levels have been taken over by bloodthirsty sahuagin, but the lower levels may be infested with angry water elementals. The top half of the castle is one level of danger, the lower levels are another.

This sort of dungeon design allows you to effectively roll two dungeons into one, and there are all manner of interesting narrative beats that can derive from having tiered dungeon threat levels in this way. It is important, however, to clearly demarcate the levels of dungeon if you do this; if the next room in a dungeon suddenly jumps in difficulty with no warning, your dungeon has poor design. Be sure to make your telegraphing extra clear ahead of time, and to have the first encounter or two be easily backed-out of.

Attrition

More than anything, Fifth Edition—and nearly all of the original game's descendants—is a game of attrition and resource conservation. If fully rested, a party can take on nearly any encounter, regardless of the supposed danger. On the flipside, if a party has been through a gauntlet of encounters, even once-easy fights can rapidly grow difficult, even for a high-level party.

Because of this, while the danger level of a dungeon is influenced by its average encounter level and the like, it is also strongly determined from the sheer number of encounters in the dungeon. More specifically, difficulty is influenced by how many encounters must be completed before the party is able to rest. If a party can take a short rest between every encounter, they will have little difficulty with a dungeon; if a party can take a long rest between every encounter, they will crush the dungeon with impunity.

As you design dungeons, be careful to take into account how many encounters there are and the ability of the party to rest—more than the encounters themselves, this will determine how the dungeon fares.



ON RETURN

Players leave dungeons unfinished for many reasons. Sometimes, players will attempt a dungeon, defeat one or two encounters, realize it is too difficult for them, and retreat. Sometimes, players will find a massive sprawling mega-dungeon, teeming with enemies, meaning they must deal with the dungeon in chunks. Sometimes, players will clear the majority of a dungeon, but find a single treasure room that is too well-guarded for them, and so must return later. And sometimes, players will delve into a dungeon, lose a party member or three, and be forced to flee for fear of death.

All of these are perfectly fine! It's alright for player characters to clear part of a dungeon on a mission, retreat and return home, and then schedule another mission to finish it off at a later date. This sort of backtracking allows players an opportunity to form personal goals and a stronger relationship to the fixtures within the Marches.

Allow players to prioritize their dungeon excursions in this way. Remember, players should be able to create their own goals and pursue them without explicit direction from non-player characters. In a traditional game, it might be expected that once the party enters the dungeon, they will either emerge in victory or defeat, never to return regardless of the outcome. In the West Marches, however, the framing devices and system-driven nature of these rules and tenets affords the game a capacity to explore the grey areas between winning and losing, between frustration and satisfaction. By creating dungeons that must be returned to later, you diverge from this traditional format, and can unlock the possibility of more interesting conflict than the game is traditionally capable of bringing out.

Locked Doors

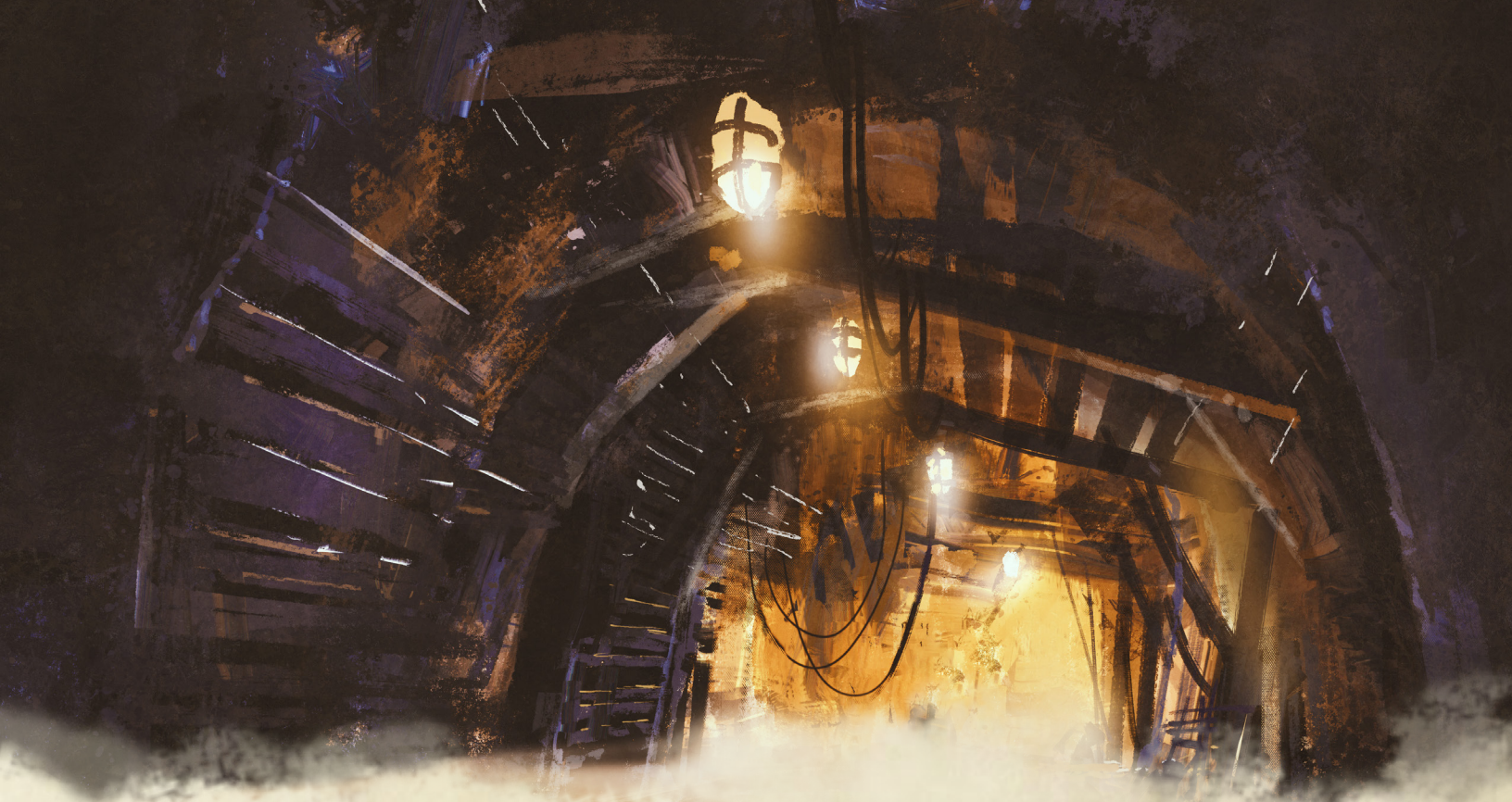
In some dungeons, there will be doors, barriers, walls, and other such blockages that, in order to pass, demand some token. This might be a key, a pass-code, a magic item, a certain bit of knowledge, or something else that can only be acquired elsewhere. In essence, these kinds of locked doors require something that can only be gotten outside of the current dungeon, and thus demand that players return. (Obviously, enemies will sometimes just lock doors, to be picked or broken or magically breached. These are fine, and a good gameplay challenge. This refers to “locked doors” in a more metaphorical sense, as obstacles that demand a later return to the dungeon.)

On the one hand, these can present a fun mystery for players: they will wonder and grow curious, and seek the necessary solution to the locked door. It can drive them to further exploration, to engage with more of the world.

On the flipside, these locked doors can be frustrating. All players have the instinct to complete everything presented, and so to be presented with an impasse can sap their overall enjoyment of a dungeon. It means that they cannot simply be done with this dungeon, and that they must return at a later date. Viewed in a certain light, a locked door is a dictate from the GM—“You must do this to advance.”

Because of this, use these locked doors sparingly. When built up to and presented well, they are a compelling and exciting prospect, but when placed without forethought, they are nothing more than an aggravance.





DUNGEON ECOLOGY

Dungeons are not just fixtures for the player characters to enter, pillage, and forget about. They can serve as the perfect clime for rare plants, a habitat for roaming monsters, or even an advantageous position for enemy factions to set up a base. When a dungeon is left alone for long enough, consider changing the terms of engagement with it unexpectedly; this is a fantastic way to breathe life into the world of the Marches, and adds variety to the experience of returning to a dungeon.

Different kinds of change can happen when the player characters leave a dungeon. A breached dungeon poses a special opportunity to certain external forces that might make it their home, clean up the player characters' mess, or cash in on a detail that the player characters missed. Otherwise, if the dungeon's inhabitants are left to their own devices, or the dungeon's overlord is left undefeated, the dungeon's current dwellers might execute plans of their own.

External Forces

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Current Dwellers

If adventurers delve into a nest of giant spiders and only breach the first three rooms, the spider queen still dwells within, and thus her brood shall spread once more. In many dungeons, if the source of the evil within is not extinguished, it is highly likely that whatever evils once dwelt in the dungeon will return.

In some cases, as with our spider queen, these may natural: beasts breed, soldiers recruit, and plants regrow. In other cases, as is more likely, the cause is more unnatural: monsters spawn forth from pits, necromancers raise undead anew, and more beings from the planes are summoned. On top of this, physical artifice is employed as well, regardless of the source of the evil: walls rebuilt, traps reset, and defenses reinforced.

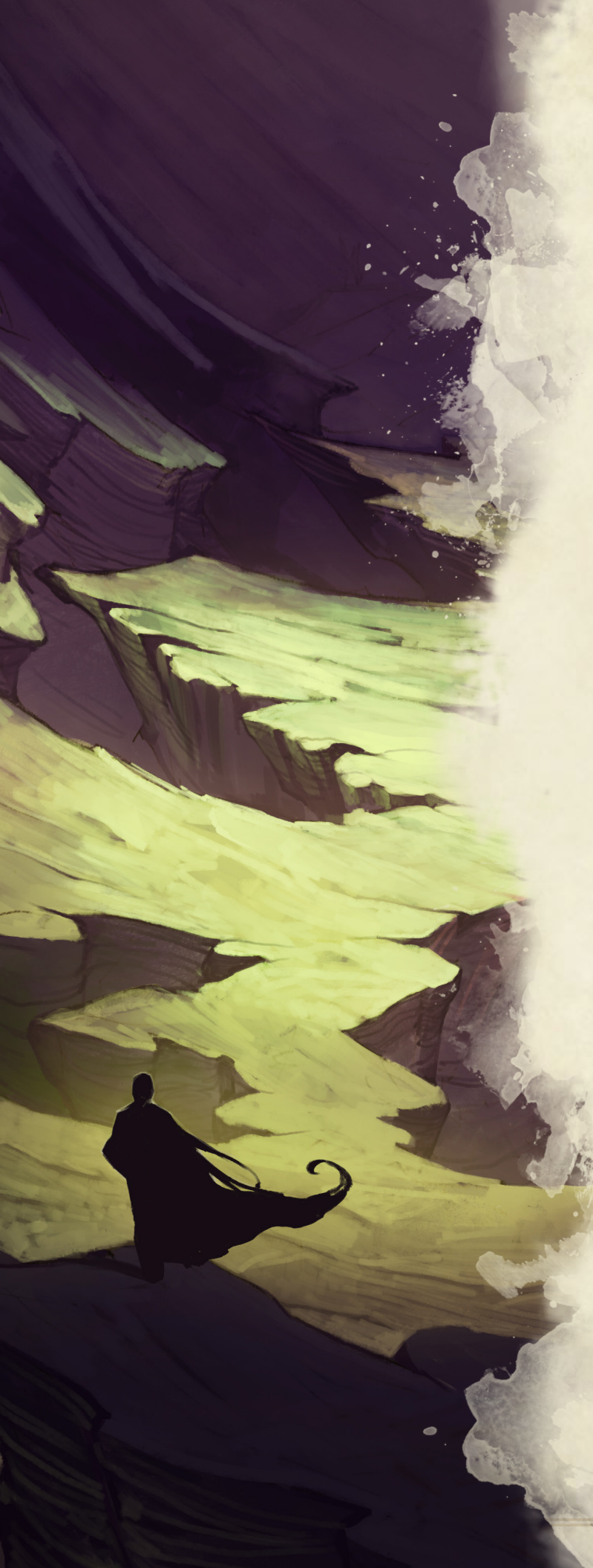
Unlike external forces, current dwellers in dungeons are less likely to alter the nature of the dungeon overall in a dramatic fashion. Instead, they tend to redouble their efforts, adding further strength to their existing methods. Because of this, players returning to unfinished dungeons will likely have a clearer idea of what to expect.

However, just as player characters learn more about a dungeon by delving into it, wily and cunning enemies learn more about the adventurers that come to their door. If, for example, adventurers storm a mage's tower and then retreat, a learned mage will remember them and their methods, and thus be more prepared. Traps might be set to ensnare specific characters, spells will be prepared to counter those already used, and clever enemies will shift their tactics to exploit the players' weaknesses.

It's also worth considering factions, and their behavior around half-finished dungeons. Bold and proud factions tend to reinforce dungeons that have been partially cleared, but more skittish factions might abandon them. Likewise, nearby factions should take notice if a rival's base of operations has been cleared, and will act according to their own methods. For more on factions and their behavior, see page 49.

Always fun, raiding a camp after everyone in it's been killed by the Big Guy. Makes it much easier to keep track of everything you steal off the bodies.

It's good to have kobolds for just such purposes. Sorting gold and jewels by hand is just so tedious.



Persistent Dungeons

The point of systemically encouraging dungeons to change while the player characters are out is to layer a sense of persistence onto them. If players are made to understand that the actions they take (or don't take) to affect the spaces in your world are meaningful or have unintended consequences, your world will feel more whole as a result. Changing a dungeon in this way is yet another tool in your arsenal as a GM to convey the power of the players' actions.

If you need to quickly come up with a way to mutate the terms of engagement for a dungeon to signify the passage of time in your game, roll on the table below. Consider creating tables specific to the details of your world, or even to those of specific dungeons:

While You Were Away...

d20 Meanwhile...

- 1 Rooms or whole wings of the dungeon collapsed.
- 2 The main entrance was filled in, naturally or artificially.
- 3 The floor of the dungeon caved in, exposing deeper layers.
- 4 Underground-dwellers accidentally tunneled into the dungeon.
- 5 The dungeon was overtaken by a nearby faction.
- 6 All the traps and defenses in the dungeon were sprung.
- 7 A wandering fey has bewitched the denizens of the dungeon.
- 8 The dungeon's original creator or creators returned, at least temporarily.
- 9 A desperate thief or runaway stashed some new artifact in the dungeon.
- 10 Enterprising goblins have taken up residence in the abandoned part of the dungeon.
- 11 New layers of traps and riddles were added.
- 12 A family of owlbears moved into the dungeon.
- 13 A source of clean water has formed, through natural springs or rainfall.
- 14 A necromancer has begun plundering the dungeon for bodies.
- 15 A different band of would-be dungeoneers are in the midst of clearing the dungeon.
- 16 Corpse-eaters of some variety have begun infesting the dungeon.
- 17 A cache of natural resources, such as gold or rare mushrooms, has been found within.
- 18 Another entrance, natural or artificial, has opened into the dungeon.
- 19 Gelatinous oozes have begun consuming everything in the dungeon.
- 20 A portal to another plane opened within the dungeon.

Keep Telegraphing

Whenever you shift a dungeon, such as if a new faction moves in or a band of dwarves open a tunnel or a strange plague wipes out the inhabitants, be certain to telegraph it ahead of time, however you can. Leave signs, dead bodies, new objects, graffiti, whatever you need.

If you don't telegraph these changes, you set players up for a failure that they couldn't have avoided. If they show up to a dungeon expecting it to involve deep delves but instead it's flooded, there's not much they can do, and there was little opportunity to plan otherwise. But, if there are rumors of flooding, and they meet survivors who escaped the rising water levels, and a new stream flows down the mountainside from the dungeon doors, *then* they can plan ahead of time—and not doing so will be their own fault. Keep telegraphing changes, as much as you can.

Remember, set up your traps after you're already inside the dungeon, not before!

Boss is such an ugly term. I far prefer Great One, Tyrant, Dominus, Almighty, Prince, or even just a simple Lord.

DUNGEON BOSSES

In the context of Fifth Edition—and most games as a whole—a boss refers to a singular enemy that is in charge of an entire dungeon. This is the general that commands their hobgoblin legions, the necromancer that raises their undead, and the dragon that rules their kobolds. They are the biggest, baddest monster in the dungeon, and they know it.

In most cases, the boss of a particular dungeon is the final foe to be defeated, and thus guards the most valuable treasure. They are the most challenging single enemy, and they represent the dungeon as a whole. A well-designed boss fight can bring an entire dungeon together from a mechanical, narrative, and thematic perspective.

Boss Difficulty

Bosses should be dangerous, first and foremost. They should be a fight to remember, to cherish, to savor. A good boss fight will have players at the edge of their seats for the entire encounter; relief after a victory should be palpable.

That said, the difficulty of a boss encounter, like all combat in Fifth Edition, is based on attrition. If players have the chance to complete a full rest before facing the boss, they will crush them; if they have just fought through six nigh-deadly chambers, they stand no chance. Bosses should always have some fights between them and the past long rest; short rests are more variable, depending on the cleverness of the party.

Furthermore, if a boss is the single enemy in the room and is not equipped with legendary actions, they will be defeated. A party of three to six adventurers simply has too many actions and too many health pools for a single enemy to defeat. If the boss monster has legendary actions, that evens the score, but not entirely. If a boss is a single enemy and does not have legendary actions, they should always have some additional, lower-level enemies with them.

These lower-level enemies, their minions, serve myriad purposes: they soften up the party, they require more tactics to deal with, they even out the action economy of the encounter, they enable certain party- and boss-strategies, and they let the players feel good as they strive to defeat a challenging enemy. Minions are important in a boss fight, and should be included more often than not.

Why Have Bosses Scaled to Their Dungeons?

As with regions' difficulty, there is a not-unreasonable argument to be made that the boss of a dungeon should not necessarily be on the same scale of difficulty as the rest of its dungeon. Bosses are nastier than their minions, so why keep them on-level with the rest of the dungeon? The answer is that it feels bad for the players.

Simply put, it is a terrible feeling as a player to go through a dungeon, best its challenges, and then be utterly crushed by the boss. Players expect that, if they can best a few of the challenges of a dungeon and there are no obvious shifts, they can best them all.

This is, obviously, bowing to players' preconceived expectations, which is not always a good thing, but here we think it is the right decision. It's quite difficult to telegraph that a boss is dramatically more powerful than everything else, given that bosses are usually more powerful than their minions, but only just. Even if you can do that, there's few feelings worse for players than to clear most of a dungeon only to be told that no, they can't complete it now, they have to come back later.

Have a little mercy on your players—scale bosses appropriately.

Bosses as Narrative

Singular, powerful enemies capture the imagination. They are the focal point of an entire dungeon, and can often serve as the lynchpin to a dungeon's—or even whole region's—narrative. Consider the necromancer in a forest haunted by undead; they are the cause of all the evils, the source of all challenge, and the single recurring point across the region. Their allies and minions praise their name; their enemies curse them. Whether or not the players know their name, they will recognize that this particular necromancer has caused them a great deal of stress, and thus will aim to defeat them. Players set goals based on the challenges they face, and boss monsters are emblematic of that entire process.

While this is excellent narrative on its own, bosses can also serve as key pieces of the region's lore. Depending on how old the boss is, they may be a recent occupant, a weathered foe, an ancient evil, or an elder being long forgotten. In the case of all of the older bosses, they often serve as the last relic or remnant of a bygone age. Because the boss endures when others have fallen, they must contain answers, and so players will be drawn to them.

As you design the bosses of your dungeons, consider how they achieved such power, and what they must have done along the way. The more powerful the enemy, the longer their trail of ruin. Enemies of significant import should be mentioned, in hurried whisper and scrawled script, early and often. Their reputation, their legend, should be built over time. When players do face them, they will be all the more curious, and thus all the more driven to discover their secrets.



TREASURE ROOMS

One of the common types of challenge unique to the West Marches is the treasure room. A treasure room is a singular encounter, or perhaps short set of encounters, that is of significantly greater challenge than the rest of the dungeon, but contains significantly greater treasure. Most often, this is simply an exceptionally difficult combat encounter, but might also include a physical aspect, such as being underwater or across a huge gap.

Treasure rooms are an important draw of the Marches; they push dungeons towards the more unpredictable, more wild, more self-determined. When first encountering, say, an Iron Golem, the current party will be spooked, and decide to return later. Once they've returned to town and explained to the other characters that there is an Iron Golem guarding a treasure room, other players will start thinking, and start making plans.

This is good gameplay! Huge, specific challenges that can be taken on at any time are an excellent way for players to flex their creativity. They can devise their own schemes, plan in detail, and try to take on challenges significantly above their own level. Part of what enables the West Marches as a setting to work so completely is the flexibility and freedom to take on challenges at players' own pace.

With that in mind, however, it is possible to over-do treasure rooms. As mentioned with the aforementioned locked doors, players gravitate towards completing all available content. If they cannot do so, whether by being outclassed in power level or by heavily-blocked door, they will feel bad in the moment. Sometimes, this is alright; treasure rooms do have value. However, if there are too many treasure rooms, it will begin to feel as if every dungeon is impossible to complete, and players will lose motivation to continue. This is doubly true if the loot in the primary dungeon is weak or lackluster; nothing feels worse than having your accomplishments overshadowed.

Compartmentalization

Dungeons are compartmentalized. The monsters and enemies that dwell inside a dungeon, while they may have some influence over the region, do not often leave the dungeon. Monsters from other rooms might very well attack mid-dungeon, but it would be strange design indeed to have monsters from an entirely separate dungeon attack mid-dungeon.

The same holds true of treasure rooms. Treasure rooms should be compartmentalized; that is, they should be their own distinct challenge within the dungeon as a whole. If the huge, powerful monster that guards the treasure room attacks players elsewhere in the dungeon, that is not a treasure room, that is a boss fight. Treasure rooms need to stay confined, and their guardians should not attack players unless provoked.

Treasure Room Difficulty

As with boss fights, treasure rooms should be dangerous, first and foremost. However, as with bosses, the difficulty of a treasure room is dependent on attrition: the number of encounters players had to deal with beforehand, and thus how many resources they were forced to spend.

Due to the fact that treasure rooms are designed with the explicit goal of skipping them the first time and then returning, there is a high chance that players tackling treasure rooms will be fully rested. Because of this, you should not hesitate to have treasure rooms be exceptionally difficult relative to both the dungeon and the region as a whole.

Furthermore, treasure rooms are an excellent place to have encounters where players must juggle multiple factors all at once. A fight with a Sphinx is one thing; a fight with a Sphinx in a room that is missing three-quarters of its floor and is also slowly filling with deadly gas is entirely another. These additional factors must, of course, be telegraphed in detail ahead of time, but they make for excellent encounters. Because treasure rooms are observed before being tackled—more so than most dungeon rooms—it is more acceptable to have a large variety of challenges all built into one encounter. Players will see and record those to plan around, as a group; if they don't, that's their own fault.

Treasure Rooms as Narrative

As you build your treasure rooms, carefully consider how and why the narrative of that treasure room exists. Why is there a special section of the dungeon that's been separated? Why is there a single significant challenge guarding it? Why is the best loot in the dungeon only found in this chamber?

If not answered well, treasure rooms will feel arbitrary. They will feel too game-y, too unexplained, too placed there solely for the challenge. The best-designed treasure rooms are oddities, exceptions, and anomalies to the normal story of the dungeon. They should be strange, intriguing, unusual, and, above all, tempting. If players do not get a taste of what power lies beyond the deadliest threats, they will not return.

Expanding Treasure Rooms

The basic framework of a treasure room—an isolated chamber, guarded by a very dangerous enemy, holding greater valuables—can be applied outside of the context of a literal treasure room. Historically, treasure rooms were primarily found in tombs and crypts (hence why we call them that), but you can take the concept and use it in all manner of other contexts.

Dangerous secrets, external intrusions, ironclad prisons, hidden escapes, and all manner more causes can be used to create treasure rooms. All are treasure in some sense, yes, but they have different purposes and methods for protecting the valuables within.

Use the core concepts of a treasure room and expand it wherever and however you see fit.



My hoard boasts the treasures of a thousand fallen empires and a thousand slain kings. Would that I could know the true depths of their ruin.

ENCOUNTER DESIGN

Combat is at the heart of the game's rules. Most encounters involve combat, characters' power is measured in their ability to win combats, and most experience is earned through combat. Having challenging and engaging combat is a core component of an overall positive game experience.

Too often, it's easy for GMs to slip into simple fights in blank, 60' x 60' rooms, where the only goal is to butcher the enemies before they can kill you. These are boring combats; they do not make for exciting gameplay. To combat this, there are five factors to consider to make for good gameplay: darkness and visibility, water and other terrain, verticality, hazards, and focusing combat outside of pure damage.

Darkness and Visibility

Many, many monsters in Fifth Edition are equipped with darkvision or some other means to see without light. Many player characters are as well, but it is far less common; in most parties, there will be at least one character that requires a source of light to see. Any monster with even a bare modicum of intelligence knows this, and will use it to their advantage. (Also, remember the distinction between dim light and darkness, and how those rules vary!)

Fights that shift from being well-lit to being in sudden darkness are exciting. When half the party suddenly is blind, it demands solutions in the moment, often imperfect ones. Juggling weapons and light is stressful, but makes for tense, gripping fights, ones that will not be forgotten.

Even if the party is entirely composed of characters that can see in the dark, there are still ways for visibility to come into play. Fog, mist, smoke, sand, and steam can all obscure sightlines; many spells can summon these, too. Furthermore, many monsters have darkvision at ranges beyond ordinary player characters'—being peppered with arrows from a place you cannot see is a tough challenge, regardless of level.

Visibility forces your players to think of other means of detection, and changes the power levels of a fight with ease.

Water and Terrain

The archetypal dungeon has a floor made of worked, flat stone. This is a useful baseline, but gets boring fast. Likewise, many combats take place outside of dungeons, where terrain and footing is anything but certain.

A forest floor choked with roots and undergrowth; a craggy hillside, dotted with stones; a frozen lake, solid in places but weak in others—all are examples of terrain that suddenly shift the dynamic of a fight. They require attention, careful movement, and unusual, shifting strategies.

Likewise, water in any shape or form dramatically changes a fight. At its most simple, a combat that is entirely underwater follows different rules. However, there are many watery fights that are not so simple: a fight in a half-sunken marsh, or in a rickety rowboat, or in a room slowly filling with water. Each presents a different challenge for the players to tackle outside of combat, and allows a different set of abilities to shine.

Water and terrain hem movement and traversal, and demand rigor and tough decision-making from players.

Verticality

All creatures in the game have a walking speed. Some creatures in the game have a climbing speed; some fewer have a flying speed. Any monster equipped with either should make full use of it, and even many that do not. Any variation in height in a combat, be it from trees or cliffsides or floating buildings, is good.

Verticality makes ranges of spells and weapons more nuanced, adds in more dynamic movement in the fight, and introduces the threat of gravity. There is an assumption that verticality is beneficial only to ranged attackers, but this is untrue. Melee attackers have myriad more options, from pushing to climbing to dropping large objects; characters with strong physical statistics, for climbing and not falling, will find themselves at an advantage.

Verticality adds dynamism and an additional dimension to combat, and unlocks all manner of new strategies.

Darkness and Visibility

Nothing makes combat more exciting than additional threats from the environment. In a marshland, this might be pools of quicksand; in a volcanic region, this might be sudden geysers; underground, it is the threat of cave-ins. Hazards themselves are detailed on page 26.

In combat, hazards are both something to fear and something to welcome. Sudden rockslides can crush an ally, but if triggered with intent, they can also decimate an enemy. If a player knows that loud noises bring avalanches, they can wait until the enemy is the ideal position to bring down the mountain.

From a design perspective, hazards can sometimes be tricky to communicate well. Like all encounters, they must be telegraphed; this can be done on a region-by-region basis, but it is also good to remind players of it in-combat. One effective way to demonstrate a hazard is to have the first sign—such as ice cracking beneath weight or an oncoming flash flood—not affect the combat directly, instead striking somewhere a safe distance away. As the encounter or dungeon progresses, players will learn to spot the signs of such hazards, and will be able to turn them to their own advantage.

Focus Combat Outside of Damage

The most basic element of combat is the attack roll. It is the thing that is rolled most often, that deals direct damage, and can be said to have the most impact on a fight. However, if combat were only about dealing damage, there would be no need for any combat rules other than simple attack rolls; we would simply roll once or twice to see who fought better, and that would be it.

Combat is at its best when there is an additional goal to be had other than simply seeing the enemy slain. This can take on many forms: solving a puzzle, fleeing a chamber, carrying off loot, protecting a friend, breaching deeper into the dungeon—all are good goals to have outside of strict damage. It gives players a goal other than simply “dealing maximum damage,” and pushes them to new spaces of play and design.

It also adds tension to the fight. It's tough to defeat a Chimera, yes, but if you must do so while also attempting to complete a ritual to seal away an ancient curse, that is all the more tense. Other goals add ticking clocks, rogue elements, sudden contingencies, and more—all in service of good combat, and good drama.

Focusing combat outside of pure damage will allow players to shine in unexpected ways, and build the stakes and tension of combat on the whole.

Don't go near the deep waters. The Big Guy can swim for as long as he likes, but we can't. There are things that live down there, all wriggly and pale. They're very, very nasty.

LOOT

When players clear a tier of a dungeon, award them with treasure appropriate for that dungeon segment's tier. Much of the economy of the West Marches, including the price and availability of certain services offered by the inhabitants of the Town (see the Town section for details) as well as the internal exchange rate of goods and services that players can offer to one another, are contingent on the balance of loot. Since gathering treasure from dungeons is essentially the only way for players to gain wealth in the West Marches, and considering that that wealth is useless in the untamed wilderness except in the form of magical items that enhance the player characters' abilities to gain more wealth, and as capital with which to procure services from Townspeople, always consider balancing the contents of treasure rooms against what players can accomplish with the treasure they take from dungeons with respect to their own character development as well as the development of the Town.

Avoid tailoring magical items specifically for player characters in a West Marches game. This common practice, while it has its virtues at many tables, interferes with some of the most powerful aspects of the West Marches. Nothing erodes the facade of the world not having been made specifically to facilitate the player characters' success more quickly than an item that is all too conveniently placed.

That's not to say that player characters cannot succeed, of course, or that they cannot find items that they can make use of. It simply means that the GM of a West Marches game is responsible for placing the configuration of the world before certain conventional aspects of rewarding players.

For instance, a dungeon which rewards a *greatsword of dragonslaying* in the treasure at its completion because the party's fighter would like one is an underdeveloped reason for that specific item to have been rewarded. However, a dungeon that rewards a *greatsword of dragonslaying* because an ancient order of knights sealed it within the dungeon's vault as their final act before being overwhelmed by draconic forces in hopes that someday someone would find it and beat back the dragons that saw to their demise, or anything else equally steeped in history, is a much more compelling reward.

Treasure founded in the Marches' layers of history that exists without stepping on the players' ability to make decisions about that treasure that they recover allows them to take part in those layers of history, and thus become more engaged with the world.

Attach History to Things Players Care About

The very short version of this is "put your lore on their loot."

You should not assume, by default, that players will care very much about the lore and history of your West Marches. A few might, maybe, but they will likely be anomalous and not to be relied on. Because of this, if you want players to care about history (which you don't necessarily, but probably do) you need to attach it to things they *do* care about.

This comes in a bunch of forms—dungeons, monsters, bosses, the landscape itself, all of which they care about in some sense—but thing that players reliably care about most of all is loot. By attaching lore and history to their treasure, you place it directly in their line of focus, and so are far more likely to draw their attention.

This can take a variety of different forms: inscriptions, symbols, old damage, NPC reactions, magical connections, sentient items, and more. By adding in additional historical elements, you increase the likelihood the players will take notice.

If you want players to care about the history of the Marches, make that history manifest right in front of them.

Ah, gold. Is there any pleasure in life or death as great as first catching sight of that bright yellow glimmer? Or as satisfying a feeling as resting atop a mountain of your own wealth?

Connecting It All

Regions, dungeons, and factions are all parts of the same whole. They are the raw fabric of your game, the core of what your players experience, and the bulk of what you focus your energies as designer on. All three are interconnected, and all three define the central experience of your game.

They should all harmonize together; they should have strong, resonant links between them. Aesthetics, narratives, mechanics, themes—all should link the three together. As you design your regions, think of you the fortresses and inhabitants within its bounds; as you design your factions, think of their territory and their strongholds; as you design your dungeons, think of its outlying areas and its denizens. Regions impact factions which impact dungeons which impact regions, and vice versa.

Without a strong level of connection and resonance across these three foundational elements, your West Marches, and thus your game as a whole, will feel disjointed and disconnected. There will harsh leaps from one area to another as the reality, the verisimilitude, of the world begins to fade. Your players will notice this, and begin to doubt the veracity of your Marches as a whole.

To evade these issues, link all three—regions, dungeons, and factions—together, across all levels.



CHAPTER IV

NARRATIVE



MECHANICS & NARRATIVE

At the core of all roleplaying games lies narrative, and Fifth Edition is no different. In the West Marches, however, narrative takes on a different role: there is no preset story, no core plot line, and no specifics the story must fulfill. This chapter delves deeper into the theory of how stories are told in roleplaying games, and how to best adjust and fit those stories into the West Marches.

The story of the West Marches is the story of what the player characters do. What missions they take on, what quests they set for themselves, what history they uncover, and what deeds they accomplish. If the players hold something to be important to their story, it is; if they deem something useless to their narrative, it is as well.

You as the GM will set the stage, but it is the players who will act upon it.

Because the West Marches have no plot or central storyline, the primary tools left to tell a story are the mechanics of the game. You, the GM, can use the mechanics of the game, just as the players can, too.

Mechanics are the shared rules about how the world, and thus the story, operates. Dice are rolled when the outcome of a story beat is in question; the modifiers to a die roll reflect the conditions of the world. Things cannot happen in the West Marches simply because the GM or players want them to; they must be reflected in the mechanics. New mechanics can be written, certainly—that’s what this whole book is about—but things cannot be done just “for the story.”

PRINCIPLES OF MECHANICAL NARRATIVES

The principles of mastering mechanics and narrative in the West Marches are linked: the mechanics are the narrative, and the narrative is the mechanics. What this means is that everything that happens in terms of the mechanics—attack rolls, ability checks, saving throws—is reflected in the narrative, and that everything that happens in the narrative—travel, exploration, combat, social interaction—is reflected in the mechanics.

Mechanics are designed to describe specific elements of the narrative, primarily those revolving around uncertainty. Attack rolls describe the uncertainty of combat; one attack roll is one attack against an enemy. We do not describe the exact blows of combat or the precise ways in which the enemy is damaged: we abstract these into the attack modifier and hitpoints. This process is true of every other mechanic in the game: it represents something in the world, which we as players abide by.

Because of this, you should not—cannot, even—treat the mechanics and the narrative as two separate components. They are one and the same: the mechanics are the narrative, and the narrative is the mechanics. If you or any of your players ask what the “story” of the West Marches, tell them to look to what they do; exploring, fighting, interacting. The story of the Marches is that which your players tell through action.



DO NOT FUDGE DICE

There is a tendency among GMs of all manner of roleplaying games to “fudge” dice—that is, to change the results of their own (hidden) dice rolls. GMs do this to ensure particular story beats go as planned, to spare or damn their players, to build or reduce tension, and for myriad other reasons. Many GMs argue that fudging dice is good for the game, as it allows you to exercise finer control over the experience.

In the West Marches, do not fudge dice.

There are numerous reasons for this, but three stand out: it robs the players of choice, it undermines the unpredictability of the Marches, and it addresses symptoms, not causes.

Do not fudge dice.

Player Choice

The West Marches, as both a setting and a structure for the game, emphasize player choice. It is the players that decide where they go, what their goals are, what they do on a mission, and how they solve the problems presented. If the players do not decide to do something, it does not happen.

Part of what grants players this freedom is the promise that their actions will have real impact. As GM of a West Marches game, you are agreeing that it is by their determination that the game occurs, not some predestined plan. It means that you and the players both know what they do matters.

To ignore the results of dice is to override the rules of the game. It is a statement by you, the GM, that your word and decision matter more than the other players', who cannot change the results of their dice. It places your will higher than theirs, and thus denies them the chance to freely make choices.

Dice Rolls in Preparing vs. Running

While we (obviously) believe that you shouldn't fudge dice at the table, we also encourage you elsewhere in this book to take the content here and elsewhere and to make it your own. There are numerous tables in this book, but on the vast majority of them, it's totally fine to skip the dice and just pick your favorite, or whatever makes sense at the time. By contrast, for the tables use while actively running the game, like getting lost (page 19), you should be sure to follow what the dice say, and not deviate.

What's the difference? The distinction lies in the purpose of dice rolls. When planning as a GM, dice rolls are a good way to kickstart your creativity; you don't need to think about where to start or how to begin, you can just roll some dice and content will begin to emerge.

By contrast, at the table, dice are arbiters of fate; when we as players and GM cannot simply work out what makes sense to happen, or when there is uncertainty, we turn to the dice. In prep, dice are just handy tools; at the table, they're what decides how the game will go. In the former, ignoring the dice is fine; in the latter, it's depriving players of choice.

Unpredictability

The West Marches, in terms of mechanics, is system-driven. Much of the game is contingent on dice rolls to generate content: weather, navigation, hazards, combat—all hinge on the roll of dice. Because there are no pre-decided plot elements or rigid certainties in the courses of an adventure, the game instead turns to dice.

Dice are used because they are an agreement between player, GM, and designer on the basic tenets of how the world works. Rules are an expression of reality, and we use dice to simulate those parts of reality that we cannot perfectly control. In the Marches, there are a lot of parts that cannot be controlled, and so we use a lot of dice.

Part of the experience of the Marches is that success is, in large and small ways alike, contingent on chance. That unpredictability, the knowledge that sometimes the world will treat you well and sometimes treat you poorly, is essential to the game. It fuels the drama, the tension. When you fudge dice, you remove this drama; rather than the future being unknown, you make it known—but only to you, the GM.

Symptoms, Not Causes

Some GMs fudge dice because their encounters take an unexpected swing; some fudge dice because their players are about to miss some important content; some fudge dice because they want (or don't want) a specific moment to occur.

In each of these cases, fudging dice addresses the symptom of the problem, not the cause. Fudging dice is a patch, a band-aid, rather than truly getting to the root of the issue and solving that.

Combat taking an unexpected swing is either born of dice—in which case it's just an outlier, and not to be corrected—or it is because the fight was poorly designed, or worse, poorly telegraphed. Missing important content occurs when a region or dungeon isn't designed properly, as it directs players in a way other than that which the GM intended. The chance of specific moments occurring or not is to be embraced, rather than reviled.

In each case, fudging dice is not a long-term solution to design or methodological issues. Read your notes, think critically about your design, and revise constantly. Do not fudge dice.

VERISIMILITUDE

“Verisimilitude” can be reasonably defined as “the quality of appearing true.” It refers to things—people, places, events, and so on—that feel legitimate, correct, real. This is separate from realism, loosely defined as that “which resembles real life,” and simulationism, generally defined as the quality of things being “would they actually would be.” These are all a little rough-and-ready in terms of strict definition, but the distinction is important.

Realism is what resembles our world, real life, as it is. In a fantasy setting, realism goes out the window from the start. It’s a common argument that “fantasy doesn’t need to seem real, since there’s dragons and magic!”

This is wrong.

Yes, obviously, fantasy settings contain dragons and magic, but that does not excuse wild improbabilities, wild leaps of logic, or errant behavioral patterns. A core part of telling a story set in a fictional setting is establishing the rules of the setting, and then adhering to them. If you craft characters that should, by the rules of the setting, behave in a certain way but then do not, or if you build a region that claims to uphold strict laws yet then breaks them, the world will seem fake.

In creating a fictional world, you are asking the audience—in this case your players—to suspend their disbelief. The audience is willing to accept that, even though dragons aren’t real, this world contains dragons. Yes, this is “unrealistic,” but the audience has accepted it, it’s fine. Verisimilitude breaks when you ask the audience to accept something that thus far they have no reason to believe is any different than our world, yet is suddenly behaving in ways that wouldn’t make sense in ours.

As an easy example, imagine you, as the audience, see a character in one location in the world. Then, three days later, you see them again in a location that should, by all the established means of travel, take a week to get to. How did they travel so quickly? Because this is a fantasy context, the GM can simply explain that they teleported; you’d accept this, because this is a fantasy game. But now imagine that this character never teleports ever again, or casts any other spells, or otherwise demonstrates that they are a wizard of any kind. It strains the plausibility of the world—teleportation magic is only for very high-level wizards, and if this character isn’t one, something is amiss. Obviously there are explanations that could make sense—magic items, teleportation circles, and so on—but if such an explanation was never provided, the world would feel false.

You don’t need to make a world that is “realistic,” because fantasy worlds are deliberately unlike our own, but you do need to make one that can withstand scrutiny; not realism, but verisimilitude.

PLANNING & THE SANDBOX

There is a sentiment within certain design circles that you, as GM, should “plan for what the players will do.” This is impossible.

Obviously, on some level, you should plan. You should build regions and factions, craft lore and history, and design dungeons and encounters. All of that is good and necessary. But at no point in the process should you dictate how the player behave or what the players will do, nor should you try to imagine how the players will specifically act as you design the game.

Rather, you should design without the players in mind. When designing, say, a fortress, don’t build it to have pre-planned entrances or distinct methods of approach. Instead, just design as its original builders would have, present it honestly, and let the players figure out what they do. When you design a faction, don’t do it with the intent of players following a specific “plotline” or “quest chain,” instead just design the faction along the lines of how its members would actually behave, flaws and all, and let the players interact how they will.

Build the pieces as they’d exist according to the rules of your setting, and then let the players interact with them how they choose.

This, broadly, can be thought of as “sandbox” design. You aren’t building a rollercoaster for the players to ride, you’re giving them a sandbox to play in. It’s a shift towards the more open, the more non-linear, the more creative. It encourages players to think for themselves and take decisive action, rather than hunt for the next “plot hook” or otherwise try to figure out what you, the GM, want them to do.

Sandbox design is encouraged because it forces the narrative to rely on the mechanical. Within this less structured style of play, there can be no pre-planned narrative beats, nor can there be a distinct storyline the players are forced into following. Instead, the story that is created, the story told by a session of play, is that of the mechanical interactions.

Sandbox design means there are no stories created ahead of time, only the stories that the players tell using the mechanics of the game.

Communicate These Principles

Before you begin your campaign, and recurringly as you play sessions, you should make these ideas clear to your players. Emphasize that your role is primarily that of referee, rather than storyteller. Explain to them what it means to be a proactive player, and encourage them to take decisive action.

This may take some time. Players used to video games and more linear roleplaying games, or just unused to roleplaying at all, might struggle with these ideas. Be patient with them; player-drive, proactive play is great fun, but does require more work and effort on the part of the players than some games do.

As you go, trust between you and your players will build, and these principles will become habit.





LORE

Lore, as the term is used in role-playing games, refers to the collection of knowledge, history, and worldbuilding that exists in the larger world of the game's main stage.

It is all of the people, places, and events that have come before or exist elsewhere.

PRINCIPLES OF LORE

In many campaigns, lore is less relevant. There are events in motion at the center of the game's world, active and alive, that drive the players. The dusty histories and ancient legends matter less.

That is not the case in the Marches. The Marches are set in the ruins of bygone history, where the once great and mighty lie dead and buried, and scavengers pick over the vestiges. In this setting, where much lies still already, lore matters a great deal.

There are three core principles to crafting lore that is useful, rather than a hindrance: first, that story takes precedence; second, that history exists to be discovered; and third, that lore must be meaningful and relevant.

Story Takes Precedence

The real first principle is that story isn't lore. The story of the game is that which is told through mechanics; the lore is written by the GM, and is not active or current.

Many, many novice GMs go supremely overboard when writing lore. They write dozens, if not hundreds, of pages of history and documentation and stuff. Players do it, too, sometimes. It's an easy trap to fall into, to become so wrapped up in the sprawling timelines and maps that you miss the forest for the trees.

In every case, story takes precedence. The lore exists to serve the story. That is, when you write lore for your Marches, it should always exist to make the current, existing game more interesting. It should exist to build tension, to inspire wonder, and to fuel exciting, engaging play.

If you find yourself writing lore simply because "it's cool," or because you're excited to show off your characters to the players, curb your excitement. Lore exists to better the game, not provide you with fuel for your ego. If you want to write nothing but lore in isolation and never have anyone touch it, go write a novel.

This sounds harsh, and it is, but it's important to drill this into yourself before beginning; many a novice GM has found themselves swamped in lore before beginning a single dungeon.

"The West Marches are at their best when players are in over their heads" does not refer to being in over their heads in hundreds of pages of world backstory.

Lore is to be Discovered

In the Marches, information is a commodity. Missions provide loot and experience, yes, but they also provide knowledge, secrets, wisdom. There will be some players who, when presented with a mysterious ruined statue or an ancient arcane rune, will be unable to resist its siren song.

Discovering something long-buried, something secret and strange, is highly, highly enjoyable. Players adore feeling as though they are the first to learn hidden knowledge.

You should design the lore of your world with this in mind. Establish history, and then fragment it, break it, and scatter it about. Drop clues and hints and suggestions everywhere; let your players work to uncover the mysteries.

Lore Must be Meaningful

Information can only be a commodity if it provides meaning. On a very basic level, this means that every single item and unit of lore—places, names, people, events, monsters, everything—must provide some amount of meaning to the broader game as a whole.

Meaning comes in many varieties. On a very mercenary level, meaning can be the method by which greater treasures are acquired: if the inscriptions on the towers of the four tallest hills are all put together, they reveal the location of a dead king's hoard; if the name of a dead god is spoken while wielding a sword forged from silver, a dragon's weakness will be exposed. Lore can and should provide these kinds of mechanical bonuses and incentives: they provide direct impact on the game, and are easy motivators for players.

However, lore can also be meaningful in a narrative, thematic way. If players are searching for an ancient lost city but then discover that the city was deliberately hidden away, that changes their search. It means that rather than being heroic rescuers, they are instead actively going against the will of some other force. Lore contextualizes, alters perceptions, and challenges beliefs. It will force your players to think deeply and critically, to apply themselves to the narrative challenges of the Marches.

What's past is prologue. Regardless of what came before, I intend to dominate the future. How can some long-dead king compete with raw flesh and blood? How can ancient ruins and forgotten tombs stand against the might of a mighty beast such as myself? In every conflict, the here and now has crushed what once was.



LAYERS OF HISTORY

Fantasy is post-apocalyptic. Nearly every fantasy setting takes place in an age after the fall of a great civilization; civilizations like Númenor, or Atlantis, or Rome. Ancient ruins, magical artifacts, forgotten secrets—all imply the existence of a group of now-gone predecessors that were more powerful than what is known now.

However, history is more complicated than a simple collapse of a single civilization. Other groups emerge, ruins are built upon, names change. Eventually, those also turn to ruin, and are built upon in turn, and the cycle continues. Just as in real life, history comes in layers.

These layers of history define the landscape of the game, figuratively and literally. As players discover more of the previous ages and dig deeper into the mysteries of the game, they will have to sort through myriad layers to understand exactly what occurred.

Common Layers

For you, the designer, layers of history are most helpfully thought of in terms of time (rather than space, though that can be helpful, too). There are, generally, five layers of history to think through, growing broader in scope as they recede further from the present day:

The Current. The current layer of history is that which happens in-game: remnants that adventurers leave behind, signs of exploration and investigation—corpses and scorch marks, in all likelihood. The stories told here are known directly, experienced firsthand by the player characters.

The Recent. Going back, you have the most recent layer of history: that of recent growth and development, done by those peoples living in the Marches currently. It's older than that of the adventurers, since this recent layer may well include full towns and fortresses, but it's not so old as to be forgotten. This layer exists within the living memory of those who currently reside in the Marches; its stories are, unless deliberately obscured, well-known and likely true.

The Old. These are the histories of those who came not so long ago, but not so recently as to be known. This the layer of great-great-grandparents: people who are now dead, but may be remembered by the eldest of those still living. The structures, artifacts, and events of this layer are likely still affecting the modern day directly, still in use. The stories and tales of this layer are mostly true, but may have exaggerated or reduced elements—the greater the story, the greater the exaggeration.

The Historical. This is a much larger, longer layer of history. This is far from modern memory, only known through oral tradition, preserved texts, and weathered ruin. Whatever occurred in this layer is now known only in vague terms, without specific detail—and what is recorded may be untrustworthy. It's here that legends and myths begin to develop; it's here

that separating truth from fiction grows nearly impossible. The events, structures, and artifacts of this time are very rare and difficult to discern, but likely contain great power.

The Ancient. This is the layer of gods and heroes, one that subsists solely on doubtful myth and hazy legend. There are no written records, no clear traditions, and absolutely no one alive from this era. Strange elder beings—dragons, aberrants, and worse—might remember this time, possibly, but even that is clouded. The artifacts and structures of this era are immensely powerful, but impossibly rare.

These layers are, obviously, not binding. In a fantasy setting, it's entirely possible for people to live to be hundreds or even thousands of years old, and thus the layers can blur together. “Living memory” is a variable term, so be sure to think through your timeline in all of its steps.

Using Layers in Design

As you construct your Marches, across regions and dungeons alike, consider the history that has come before. Every structure, both natural and artificial, must come from somewhere.

Layers of history can inform your designs by clueing your players into key details. If they can discover that the goblin-infested cavern they're clearing is, in fact, the start of a dwarven mine, they will start looking for ways to access the mine, and the gold within. If they realize that the naturally-formed chasm they cross was actually carved in battle between a storm giant and a sorcerer-dragon, they will search for relics of that battle. If they understand that the corpses they find in the woods are actually accursed soldiers from a bygone empire, it will inform them what protective rituals to use to ward off the dead.

Furthermore, because players enjoy solving mysteries, unravelling the layered timelines of history will prove a fun challenge for them. As they explore more and more of your Marches, they will begin to understand how history flows, and that transition—from fear and uncertainty to mastery and understanding—is fantastically enjoyable.

Hard Timeline Math

Building out a timeline that remains coherent, yet mysterious, is among the most difficult tasks you will as a GM in building your Marches.

As a rough outline, here is some baseline math to work from in constructing the timeline:

The current time is just that, current. It takes place over the course of months or years as play progresses.

The recent is anything in roughly the previous 50-100 years. There are lots of people around, currently, who experienced the major events of this time period. As a historical example, consider the Cold War; recent enough that living people still remember it clearly, but old enough that the most recent generations don't.

The old is the past 100-200 years. No currently living (ordinary) humans were alive then, but the eldest of the current time might have heard stories from their elders back then. Long past living memory, but still recent enough to have many records and be broadly influential. To follow the Cold War example, this might be the Napoleonic Wars, or the wars of Latin American Independence.

The historical is anywhere from the past 300 years to the past 3,000 years. Primary sources exist, but they're rare and incomplete. No one living has any memory of this, and while folktales and legends get handed down, common knowledge is limited. In our own world's history, this might be the reign of the Yuan Dynasty or the Crusades.

The ancient, more than the previous layers, has a much stronger fantastical connotation. Our world has civilizations from thousands of years ago, yes, but we lack the old magic of fantasy. This is the historical realm of dragons, giants, and gods; let your imagination run free.

Of course, these broad breakdowns of years assume that you're tracking things in human generations; if your Marches feature a lot of long-lived peoples, like elves or dwarves, these numbers might need to adjust. While the exact numbers will change, the ratios should stay broadly similar; that is, the number of generations between each layer should remain roughly the same.

As you build your timeline, you should put roughly the same amount of effort into each category, meaning that the recent layers should get a lot more attention and detail on a per-year basis than the old ones.



ITEMS, ARTIFACTS, & TREASURE

While some players very well may be motivated by a simple desire for knowledge, that is not universal. Some players are motivated solely by power increases, garnered through the acquisition of treasure and loot. This is a good thing. Having myriad motivations within your player pool will make for a varied, exciting experience.

Still, the question remains: how do you draw in the less history-oriented players? How do you convey the mysteries of your lore to them?

The answer is loot; more broadly, the answer is to put the lore that matters on things that players will care about. Monsters, especially boss monsters, are an easy choice, but monsters are fleeting, as they will likely be slain by the player characters. Treasure, however, is much more permanent, and thus more likely to be examined closely.

Put the important lore in your game on the treasure the player characters will get. Let players examine it in detail, guess at its mysteries, and propose answers. If unsolved mysteries confront the players every time they swing their sword, they cannot ignore those mysteries. They will gnaw and worry at the players, and drive them to find solutions.

Obviously, you should still put lore elsewhere, but bear in mind that players examine that which they wield.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Rashomon, the landmark 1950 Kurosawa film, is highly instructive in how you can and should convey the lore of your setting. Over the course of the film, the audience sees the same event occur from a series of different perspectives; each time, the events that transpire are a little different, culminating in a finale that reveals the truth.

You should strive to do the same with your lore. Across people, factions, and layers of history, the legends and histories of your Marches should be tangled, nuanced, complex, and multilayered. With every major event, different people and records should offer different accounts of exactly what happened.

There are two reasons for doing this: first, it's an extra level of challenge and engagement for your players. They will have to cross-reference their notes and recollections, examine what they once held to be true, and push themselves to solve the riddles nested throughout the Marches. Second, however, is that it's truer to life: history is never as simple as textbooks make it out to be, and you should strive to emulate the nuance and complexity of real life.

It can be hard to keep track of all the things you know! One time, I forgot where I'd stashed some of the Big Guy's gold, and he hung me by my ankles for a week outside the lair!

LEGENDS & REALITY

The Marches are a place of myth; they stand at the western edge of the known world, and all manner of tales and stories whirl and circulate about them. This is a good thing; these tales provide a rich backdrop for adventure, and mean the players always have something to look forward to.

Matching these legends in reality, however, can be difficult. Players old and new know that would-be old wives' tales and strange stories uttered around campfires carry truth to them. They know to be watchful, to take notes and ask questions, and they know to examine stories with scrutiny.

Play a legend too close to its tales, and there will be no surprise, no wonderment. Play a legend too far from its myths, however, and the players will feel blindsided and disappointed. Both of these extremes are not good; the correct balance lies somewhere in the middle.

Consider these ideas while you craft the most powerful characters, artifacts, and places of your world. What myths and legends have less powerful individuals heard about them? How, and for what reason, did the legends diverge from the truth? What can players learn from comparing different sources of conflicting information? These are all powerful questions to keep in mind while you weave the tapestry of your Marches' history (and set up the context of its present).

Consider also how the players will interact with the legends that your world tells. Will they stumble across a forgotten crypt, filled with statues of the ancient gods? Will a knowledgeable goblin scholar convey a load of embellished tales? In any case, make sure you understand the way that the players will piece together the disparate information that comes forth through the design of your legends, dungeons, monsters, factions, and NPCs. Invite their misconceptions. Allow them to spin their wheels and act on false information. This might seem counterintuitive, but the less you as a GM forcibly guide your players, the more meaningful their victories will be, and the ringing of the bell of truth will be infinitely more satisfying to finally hear.



NPCs

NPCs occupy a tricky corner of the Marches: they're necessary and present, yet cannot hold all the answers. The slow reveal of information is critical to a satisfying campaign, yet if NPCs can simply explain everything, the mystery is lost.

Because of this, NPCs must be both useful and possessed of valuable information, but also not too forthcoming or too helpful. They must be present, yet not relied upon.

The "Lore Dump"

An often-mocked trope in roleplaying games is the "lore dump:" a conversation in which one or two NPCs explain, in great detail and at length, the current goings-on of the world of the campaign. It's a long, sometimes dreary, conversation, often dreaded by more active players.

Still, the lore dump is effective: it lets players ask questions, prod at the world, examine things in greater detail. By having an NPC who can explain the current state of the world accurately and effectively, it puts the players in a good position to take decisive action.

In the West Marches, you cannot and should not have NPCs dump lore on the players.

Obviously, it's bad storytelling: dumping exposition is unsubtle and bland and not at all engaging. It's also, however, a little more complicated: if the players meet an NPC who is forthcoming with all of the hidden information that the players do not know, they will do everything in their power to obtain that information. They will talk, coerce, and possibly even torture NPCs that they think hold valuable knowledge.

If you have an NPC that is available that has significant knowledge, the players will seek to obtain it.

In a video game or less open roleplaying game, it's easy to prevent players running wild with questions: dialogue can be limited, questions can be restrained, and lids can be kept on. Not so here; the game is inherently open-ended when it comes to discussion and questions, and thus it is difficult to prevent players asking infinite questions.

At all times, be wary of what your NPCs know, and be certain they cannot or will not explain overmuch.

Unhelpful NPCs

Because of this, NPCs in the Marches should be unhelpful. That's not to say they must needs be evil or cruel or unfriendly (though they may very well be), but that the amount of help they can provide to the player characters is limited.

Unless they are very special, NPCs in the Marches should have one or more of the following characteristics:

Uninformed. Certain NPCs will be as in-the-dark as the players, perhaps more so, and thus unable to help the adventurers. They're willing, potentially, but have no useful information to provide. The NPCs in the Town should be in this category.

Delusional. These NPCs are those that believe the world to be a certain way, or hold certain facts as true, and are unwilling to change. This delusion might be the result of magical enchantment, deliberate coercion, or simple conceitedness. Whatever it is, these NPCs believe they are helpful, but are not.

Villainous. These are NPCs that are well-informed about secrets the players would like to know, but won't tell them. They're enemy bosses, sly information-brokers, and callous foes. In some cases, these NPCs might even pretend to inform the player characters, but in fact be leading them astray, whether through pure deception or tactical omission.

Broken. Some NPCs do possess the information that the players want to know, but are incapable or unable of telling the player characters due to severe trauma or damage. This is often the result of dread curses or fell maledictions, but might also be more psychological in nature. In these cases, be sensitive and careful with your players; making light of trauma is a fast way to isolate your players and leave them ill at ease.

Dead. Many NPCs the players would like to talk to are dead. Some limited contact might be made through magic, but it's unlikely.

Remember, never trust a ghost! Or a goblin! Or a human! Or a fiend! Or a fae! Or an elf! Or a tree! Or a troll! Or even a dragon! Really, never trust anyone that isn't a kobold.

EMERGENT NARRATIVE

The West Marches, as Robbins famously said, have no story. There is no plot, no critical quest, and no overarching narrative plan. Everything is reliant on the players and their actions within the broader world. The story of the game is defined by player action and rolls of the dice.

This kind of narrative, one that is unplanned and driven by systems, is called emergent narrative. It grows and evolves based on the systems of the game, rather than anything preplanned—it emerges.

There are several places this kind of narrative can emerge from, which this section covers.

REGIONS, WEATHER, & ENCOUNTERS

On a very base level, one of the most impactful elements on the story that the players will end up telling is the landscape of the Marches themselves. This manifests in three key ways: the regions the player characters travel through, the weather and climate that affects them, and the random encounters that they run into along the way.

Regions

Most regions of the Marches carry some variety of core, underlying narrative: the source of the accursed undead, the cause of the poisonous rain, the reason for the unnaturally frigid weather. Because regional effects are nearly always present, players are exposed to them often, and thus they are very likely to affect the narrative of the adventure.

Furthermore, many regions culminate towards one larger endpoint, such as ending a magical effect or defeating a regional boss, which in turn the players will be pushed towards. Because the physical landscape is such a constant issue to be dealt with by the players, it will always affect the narrative.

Weather

Weather functions much the same as regions on a narrative level; the weather is omnipresent, and thus impossible to avoid in the telling of stories. A hike through the mountains in high summer is very, very different than a hike through the mountains in deep winter. It affects travel, food supplies, combat, sleeping, and nearly every other aspect of an adventure. Like regions, it is a constant challenge to overcome, and so molds all other narratives.

Encounters

Random encounters are, by their very nature, random; it's difficult to predict when and how they will occur. That said, there are some ways that players can affect their chances (see page 57), and that can affect their stories as time goes on.

More broadly, though, because random encounters are dealt with en route to a dungeon or other mission, they can dramatically affect that mission as a whole. Dealing with a dungeon fresh and ready to go is a wholly different experience than dealing with a dungeon while the rogue's halfway dead and the cleric's missing a third of their spells.

Random encounters introduce unexpected elements, and those unexpected elements in turn make the narrative to predict, and thus more emergent with the system.

What "Emergent" Really Means

"Emergent narrative" is one of those buzzwords that gets passed around quite a bit in game circles, and can sometimes get lost. Here, it simply means "meaningful stories that are driven by the game systems."

Technically, walking from the town to the woods to the mountains could be considered emergent narrative, in that yes, it was narrative that emerged from game systems, but that's not very exciting. Getting ambushed by a surprise pack of lycanthropes and barely escaping with your lives only to discover that one of your comrades has been bitten is exciting, and that's the kind of story that can emerge solely from gameplay.

Emergent narrative is the stories that aren't planned by the GM, or the players. They're the stories that emerge from mechanical systems interacting with both of those in interesting ways.

There is no greater feeling in all the world than swooping down onto a pack of feeble adventurers that least expect you. None whatsoever.



INDEXICAL STORYTELLING

Indexical storytelling can broadly be defined as the telling of stories through individual symbols, markers, or icons—called “indices.” Consider the dungeon chamber which holds a broken shield, a cracked sword, splatters of blood along the wall, and then a long trail of blood interspersed with huge bloody claw-prints.

Each of those is an index: what story do they tell?

It’s interpretable, but you probably thought of a story in which a monster entered a chamber, defeated a would-be dungeoneer, and then dragged them deeper within. It’s a simple story, but it’s one entirely told through artifacts of gameplay—indices. Humans as players are highly talented in coming up with possible solutions and through-lines for individual indices presented to them. It’s environmental detective work, all through the lens of game narrative.

There are two broad modes of indexical storytelling within the context of the West Marches: indices of the designer, and indices of the players. Each has its use, and both should be considered throughout the processes of design and play.

Indices of the Designer

As a designer and GM, you can use storytelling indices to great effect. Any item or symbol you place in an environment, like a dungeon or ruin, can be used to help craft a narrative. Carefully consider the elements you might find in a given area as you create them.

Consider the example of the bloody-clawed monster above; if you leave that in a dungeon, especially fresh, players will immediately be on the lookout. They will check every creature they see for claws and blood, and they’ll be on the lookout for other items left behind by the dead adventurer.

Compare this to if you simply had an NPC explain to the players that there was a monster within. It’d be bland, and boring, and trite. Players know there’s a hundred monsters within a dungeon any day of the week. To compel them forward, use indices; it engages their imagination and their critical thinking skills, and keeps them guessing.

As a designer of your game, you can and should place indices in locations players go to; it strengthens your narrative, encourages interaction, and betters play.

Indices of the Designer

When designing a dungeon, the indices you place there are remains of previous NPCs, monsters, and effects. They’re deliberate, they’re designed, they carefully maintained.

However, adventurers also leave indices: campsites, bloodstains, magical after-effects, dumped gear, scorch marks, footprints, open doors & chests, structural damage, chalk markings, and all kinds of other indices. These exist within the world of the game, as permanent markers of adventurer activity.

Keep track of these indices. Write them down in your notes, alter your maps accordingly, and then refer to them later.

For you, they provide fuel for future problems for players to solve: clever enemies will track the player characters by their indices; their structural damage might balloon in size; the fires they light might burn a whole forest. If you set up these problems correctly, so players can track them to their source, they emphasize the power and impact of players’ actions, which is always a good thing.

For players, they can also provide interesting and unusual mysteries to resolve. Because much of the core loop of the West Marches revolves around comparing incomplete information and returning to existing locations, the remains that other players leave behind can be highly influential. If player characters scrawl notes in chalk on the walls of a dungeon, for example, any future adventurers might well be able to refer to those notes. If they’re outside, however, they might get rained on and so blur, and thus create a new kind of mystery for the player characters to puzzle over.

Part of the wonder of the West Marches as a structure is in examining that which came before, specifically that which was brought about previously by players.

Wherever I travel, I leave behind only ruin, gouging the land with my claws and marring the earth with veins of acid. Trust me, when you encounter my domain, you shall know it.

SHOW, DON'T TELL

It's an old writing adage, that you should always show, rather than tell. In literature, it means that you should leave readers to make their own assumptions and draw their own conclusions, rather than simply tell them how things are.

That is doubly true in the West Marches.

Only ever describe to the players that which they know to be objectively true. Describe sensations, experiences, layouts—hard, descriptive terminology, things that can be examined empirically.

Do not tell them the names of locations. Do not use relative distances or descriptions. If they come up with clever (or, you know, “clever”) nicknames for people and places, do not use them. Once you start confirming things to be true, there stops being an element of unknown information, and instead simply an element of “get the GM to confirm what we think is true.”

Because the West Marches is such a fundamentally procedural style of play, it means that there is little room for the prescribed or predetermined; simply describe as they are.

In the case of mysteries, of puzzles, of indices, of anything that hints towards a larger narrative, do not describe that narrative. Describe the component parts that make up that larger narrative as they appear, and let your players in the details.

This is difficult, in more ways than one! It is a fundamentally different kind of storytelling, to rely solely on the existing mechanisms of what the player characters can perceive and what conclusions their players can draw. It's also simply difficult to construct evidence and indices of events and occurrences that have already happened, especially in such a way as to make them solvable for your players.

It's a challenge for sure, but do not give up. Start small, start basic, and remember to only describe what they experience, not the overall message you want your players to receive.

Why Tell Emergent Stories?

In this chapter, we go to great lengths to both teach you how to tell these kinds of unusual, systemic stories, and, more implicitly, to convince you that they're interesting stories to tell.

So, why tell emergent stories? Why rely on tables and dice and mechanical processes, rather than just writing a good story and having players run through it? The answer is threefold: because planning for a game like the West Marches is near-impossible; because these stories are unique to games and games alone; and because they are more thematically resonant with real life than prefabricated narratives.

Think about running an ordinary game, for four or five players, out of an adventure book. You can plan some, but then you'll have to improvise, and then adjust for the future. In an ordinary game, these happen or twice a session. In the Marches, you have three times the number of players or more, and the world is much larger and more open, and so those improvisations will have to get more and more elaborate. Start from the beginning with no set story in mind, and whatever ends up happening is fine. You've got no plan, so it's easy to lean wherever the players want.

Think about a book or movie: you, the viewer, might not be able to predict where the story will go, but someone planned it. To them, the story has lost its magic, its mystery, since they know it already. But in a game, where we leave the story up to dice and fate, the mystery exists on both sides, for everyone at the table. Neither GM nor player knows where the dice will fall, and thus the suspense will always exist. This kind of tension, these true unknowns, can only exist in games; cherish them.

Finally, think about real life. How often does it truly go according to plan? When can you know the future? All art, on some level, strives to better understand the human condition; it's high-minded for elf games, yes, but still relevant. In relying on fate, on tables, on the unknown, we nudge ourselves towards the questions that we face as people: how do we deal with an unknowable future? How do we react when fate deals us a twisted hand? What does it mean to not fully control your own life? Emergent play examines these themes in a way that no other media can. Embrace the meaning and truth that can be gleaned from uncertainty.

*Nobody knows what will happen tomorrow,
not even the Big Guy! Makes me a little
hopeful—maybe tomorrow, I'll strike gold!
Or maybe I'll be dead! Nobody knows!*

PLAYER NARRATIVE

The West Marches do not follow the archetypal story arcs of a fantasy story. There are very, very few fantasy stories in which the heroes depart into the wilderness, wander about lost for several days, get caught in a snowstorm, fight some kobolds on the side of the road, and then come home. Those protagonists face no personal moral challenges, no deep examinations of their psyches, and are not pushed into situations that demand character growth.

Players can sometimes feel lost without the common way-signs of fiction. This section will hopefully help guide you and them in finding threads to follow, and beats to hit.

ONGOING MYSTERIES

As players explore the West Marches, they will begin to uncover secrets and mysteries and lore—but they will do so at uneven rates, in different locations, at various times. Over time, there will develop a discontinuity of information across the player pool. Some players will know a lot, others know less, and no one player will know all of the information belonging to the patchwork knowledge base.

This is a good thing! It pushes players to work together, to write logs and accounts, to plan and discuss, and to share as much information as they can.

This discontinuity generates interest in players; it draws them towards answering questions, solving mysteries, and filling in the gaps in their knowledge. It's likely that some of your players will eventually make this discovery process their primary source of narrative over the course of your game of West Marches.

Encourage this. A character driven by a quest for knowledge is a character that already has tension: there is uncertainty, there is challenge, and there is hard motivation to act upon. This is not uncommon; many players at many tables are motivated by a thirst for knowledge.

The key distinction that emerges in the West Marches is that, due to the incomplete nature of the knowledge being pursued, the exact questions and beliefs that emerge around that knowledge vary. Players will begin to take different stances, argue for different positions, and hold different beliefs. As time wears on, there will be new discoveries made, new knowledge gained, and new theories proposed. Individual players' characters will be forced into changing their positions, or else abiding by their older beliefs.

This tension—that of competing beliefs founded on uncertain truths—is a powerful one. It is resonant with the uncertainties of real life; it mirrors, on some level, that lack of knowledge we all face. Use it wisely, and this theme and carry your game.

PLAYER BACKSTORIES

There exists a tendency among certain players to build a huge, elaborate backstory, oftentimes constructed in a very silo-like fashion: isolated, distinct, and unrelated to other players'. Over the course of the campaign, these players intend to explore that backstory and have it culminate around them.

This is not good design for characters in the West Marches.

Because the Marches themselves are so unstructured, it means that if a character must have a specific event, enemy, or artifact exist—to hunt down their parents' killer, say—there is no reliable way to have that event or enemy occur. Because the GM does not decide what content the players see, they cannot guarantee that a player will have a certain moment that they need.

Characters can and should have backstory and history; they should arrive in the Marches in one way, and then grow and change over time. But they cannot rely on having key moments in their future planned ahead of time, nor can they expect to have strict control over the pacing and direction of their narrative.

The Marches are the harshest, cruelest, most brutal territory in the whole of the world. Anything you've done before doesn't matter; all that matters is what you do here and now, to prove your worth to whole of the Marches.

Conception vs. Perception

When a player first begins play with a new character, it's very common for them to have a set notion of who they believe that character is, and how they should behave. This is fine, it's normal: coming up with an idea for a character is expected behavior.

However, once that character sees play—when they fail unexpectedly and are faced with unplanned-for situations—that concept will not be met perfectly at every moment. A gap will begin to form between the player's conception of how they thought their character *would* be and the player's perception of how their character actually *is* in play.

If a player is particularly attached to an existing concept, they might find it frustrating that their character-at-the-table does not match the character-in-their-mind. However, this gap in expectations and reality is also fine and normal; it happens to everyone at some point. Players shouldn't feel discouraged that their character does not match the smooth, unflawed fantasy they might have previously had in their head.

Before play begins, players should strive to only have a loose conception for their character, and should avoid becoming overly attached to a specific vision. As GM, you should do your best to gently nudge players towards developing their characters as they exist at the table, to close the conception vs. perception gap as quickly as possible. Give characters their chances to shine, but feeding a hyperfocused fantasy is impossible to maintain forever.

Reactive Character Growth

Rather than have a mountain of lore to sit upon and then advance their character from, players instead should embrace a more variable, reactive narrative, one driven by uncertain events thrust upon them. This style of character development is far less predictable, and far more dependent on the events of a mission.

Consider, for example, a mission wherein the adventurers make it to a dungeon, press deep within its chambers, and defeat a large monster. That mission is, basically, a success. Then, consider an identical mission party and goal, but the party is caught in a sandstorm, run afoul of some undead, barely make it to the dungeon, and two characters are slaughtered in the first chamber. That mission is a failure.

Before dice hit the table, those missions were identical; once the session actually started, however, the primary narrative of each is dramatically different, all due to dice rolls. Embrace this unpredictability; let character growth stem from the events that actually happen to them, rather than a preconceived notion of how a character "should" progress.

INVESTMENT OVER TIME

There is a fear that emerges among players of the West Marches that, because there is no preset plot and no guarantee that their characters will do certain things, players will struggle to invest in their characters.

This, of course, is mistaken. Because of the degree of narrative freedom given to players, it's easier to invest in their characters: the decisions the characters make carry weight, and because of the brutality of the Marches, every moment is precious.

However, there does exist a common fault point in players developing their characters: a belief that it is only their interest in their character that sustains them. That is to say, a belief that so long as a player likes their character, nothing else matters.

This is incorrect. If the only player to character about a character is that character's player, they will eventually grow old. Sustained interest in a character comes not only from their creator's passion, but from care and interest from other players. When the player pool all cares about each other's characters, possibly even more so than their own character, significant investment will emerge.

While it occurs in all kinds of ways, one of the best ways to get other people invested in one player's character is to have that character change, especially if that change stems from interaction with another character. We, as humans, connect with more characters that struggle than characters that succeed. In roleplaying, there is no experience better than collaboratively telling the story of characters struggling, together.

I used to be a chef! But now I'm a scribe instead, and I like it even more.

A character with long, dark, braided hair and glowing blue eyes stands in a dark, dense forest. The character is wearing a red and white tunic and dark pants. They are holding a long, dark staff or wand in their right hand, which is emitting a bright blue, swirling energy. The forest is filled with dark, gnarled tree trunks and thick foliage. Several small, glowing blue lights are scattered throughout the scene, creating a mystical atmosphere. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greens, and reds, with the bright blue energy providing a focal point.

CHAPTER V

— APPENDICES —

APPENDIX I: PLAYER OPTIONS

The West Marches are not a place that normal go; dire circumstance or lofty ambition might drive a person to them, but the Marches are no place for ordinary folk. Though it is most likely that individual characters' time in the Marches will be violent and brief, they—the characters and their relationships to one another—remain the Marches' most integral part. Thus, the most important aspect of making a character intended for the West Marches is finding a central tension grounded in their reason for being there: reside in that tension, let it inform the way that your characters react to the world and to other party members' actions, use it drive your character forward in the face of adversity.

Making a successful character for the West Marches can be a more difficult task than for other campaigns or settings. It's crucial to think about what a new character can bring to the table, especially with regard to the survivalism rules outlined in the Wilderness Travel section. A character's utility outside of combat, role within a party of fellow adventurers, and ability to hold their own survival in survival scenarios: all are vital to making an effective explorer of the Marches.

Though it is possible to play a West Marches game with characters for whom ability scores were rolled, it is recommended that all characters in a West Marches game utilize the Point Buy rules for determining character ability scores, found on *PHB* 13. Given that West Marches games typically consist of a larger player pool, this recommendation is based on a need for consistency and predictability in the power level of all players.

Imperial Castouts

Characters in the Marches all have at least one thing in common: they have left the relative safety of the Empire and come to the West Marches.

The reason why a character left the Empire should be built into their central tension; the moment a character arrives in the West Marches with either the intent or a necessity to stay there, that character's life has been divided into a distinct "before" and "after." With that in mind, considering the choices and events that led a character to the Marches should give you a very clear lens into not only who they are, but who they might become.

Reasons for Leaving

d20 Reason

- 1 On the run from a powerful Imperial authority.
- 2 Revels in the lawlessness of the Marches.
- 3 Shipwrecked on the Marches.
- 4 Found Imperial life to be unconscionably dull.
- 5 Compelled to venture to the Marches in a vision from a god.
- 6 Seduced by the promise of treasure or lost secrets.
- 7 Hunting someone who has fled to the Marches.
- 8 Honorbound to cleanse the Marches of evil (or good).
- 9 Exiled from the Empire.
- 10 Abandoned in the Marches by family.
- 11 Desires territory, land, and conquest.
- 12 Ordered on a mission from the Empire.
- 13 Protecting someone else already going to the Marches.
- 14 Belief in a prophecy, real or otherwise.
- 15 Sentenced to the Marches as a penal colonist.
- 16 Escaping from the guilt of a past mistake.
- 17 Seeking a ruin, thought long lost.
- 18 Driven by raw ego to prove combat prowess.
- 19 Bound by some magical contract or covenant.
- 20 Lost en route elsewhere, with no means to return.

FEATS FOR THE WEST MARCHES

Characters that come to the West Marches are often hardened by survivalist tactics, finding an affinity with the elements and making a home in the unforgiving wilderness. Use the following optional feats to realize these aspects in your own character.

Explorer

Attuned to integrants of geography and the currents of history, you gain the following benefits:

- Your Intelligence or Wisdom score increases by 1.
- You gain proficiency in cartographer's tools.
- You always know which way is north.
- You have advantage on checks made to determine distance, checks made to spot distant or obscured landmarks, and checks made to determine the age of a location or object, such as an ancient ruin or the treasure within.

Iron Gut

Able to place your mind over matter where sustenance is concerned, you gain the following benefits:

- Your Constitution score increases by 1.
- You gain resistance to poison damage, and have advantage on saving throws made to resist being poisoned.
- You have advantage on saving throws to avoid disease or other ill effects from eating food or drinking water that is unclean.
- You only need half as much food and water as normal.

Nomad

Consumed by a wanderlust that drives your body beyond conventional limits, you gain the following benefits:

- Your Constitution or Wisdom score increases by 1.
- You have advantage on saving throws made to resist the effects of travelling for more than eight hours per day.
- When you take a long rest, you only need four hours of sleep. The remaining time can be spent performing light activity, such as keeping watch or reading a book. If you are a race that needs less than 8 hours of sleep to gain the benefits of a long rest, this has no additional effect.
- Over the course of one minute, you can examine the sky and determine what the weather will be for the next eight hours. You must take a long rest before using this ability again.

Sea Dog

Having learned the ebb and flow of the watery depths, you gain the following benefits:

- Your Strength or Constitution score increases by 1.
- You gain a swimming speed equal to your walking speed.
- The amount of time you can hold your breath underwater doubles.
- You have advantage on Wisdom (Animal Handling) checks made to interact with creatures with a swim speed.

Sharp Eyed

With the unyielding vigilance of the apex predator, you gain the following benefits:

- Your Wisdom score increases by 1.
- Your passive Wisdom (Perception) score increases by 5.
- While travelling, you can notice threats while engaged in another activity.
- You have advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks made as part of the Search action or to observe creatures within the immediate area.

Thicker skin? Stronger back? Why would anyone need that? We kobolds are skinny as reeds, and do just fine. Cleverness is all you need—and a little luck, of course.

Strong Back

The things you bear are more important than the body that bears them. You gain the following benefits:

- Your Strength or Constitution score increases by 1.
- You count as if you were one size category larger for the purpose of determining your carrying capacity.
- You have advantage on Strength checks made to push, lift, or pull objects.
- You have advantage on Strength (Athletics) checks made to shove a creature.

Survivalist

You speak with the land. You are the land. You gain the following benefits:

- Your Wisdom or Intelligence score increases by 1.
- When you succeed on a Wisdom (Survival) check to forage for food, you roll an extra d6 to determine how much you foraged.
- You have advantage on Wisdom (Survival) and Intelligence (Nature) checks made to harvest body parts from a creature.
- You have advantage on Wisdom (Survival) checks made to hunt creatures, as well as Intelligence (Nature) checks made to survey a region.

Thick Skin

Your body revels in the natural violence of extreme climates. You gain the following benefits:

- You gain resistance to fire damage and cold damage.
- You are immune to the effects of extreme heat and extreme cold.
- You have advantage on saving throws made to resist the effects of weather, such as sleeping while wet or exposed.

Wayfinder

Treacherous land does little to hinder your unrelenting advance. You gain the following benefits:

- You do not suffer penalties to rolls made to navigate while travelling at a fast pace.
- You ignore difficult terrain.
- When travelling, difficult terrain does not slow your group's travel.
- Your speed increases by 10 feet.

Windjammer

The sea is your home; the salty air speaks a language that guides you to your destiny. You gain the following benefits:

- Your Wisdom score increases by 1.
- You gain proficiency in navigator's tools and water vehicles.
- You do not suffer penalties to rolls made to navigate while traveling by water during inclement weather, including low visibility.
- Your proficiency bonus is doubled for any ability check you make that uses your water vehicles proficiency.

RANGERS AND GETTING LOST

The ranger's 1st-level feature Natural Explore states that a ranger "cannot be lost except by magical means."

This feature, which is already somewhat unclear, is antithetical to the design of the West Marches, which prominently features players having to navigate on their own wits. Getting lost is a natural part of exploration, and should be embraced!

Any time a feature states that a character cannot be lost, replace it with the following:

When you are in the wilderness, you can at any time retrace your steps exactly the way you came, until you return to the Town. Once you return to the Town, this ability resets.

This means that rangers can always find their way home, and can find their way to locations they've been to on the same mission. It's a powerful tool, certainly, useful for all kinds of expeditions. However, it doesn't extend past one mission, which means that after a ranger returns to town, they have to rely on their knowledge and the map, just like everyone else.

BACKGROUND FEATURES

Characters should select backgrounds for their characters as normal, and they gain all of the proficiencies, items, and languages as normal.

However, the majority of background features as they are written are meant for a campaign and style of play within an existing world, one with a more normal amount of wilderness, cities, villages, and other terrain features.

Given that West Marches takes place almost exclusively within uncharted wilderness, nearly all background features have minimal use, with the exception of a few, which are exceedingly powerful. This being the case, it is likely that the use of background features in your West Marches game will disproportionately push your players to choose these backgrounds, which will homogenize your player roster unnecessarily.

To avoid this, it is highly recommended that you simply ignore background features in their entirety. Characters still gain the other benefits from their background, such as skills, languages, and equipment, but the other features should not be observed.

EPIC BOONS

The West Marches, in stories of the Empire, are the forge where heroes are made. A character in the West Marches might earn one of the following features upon discovering a powerful artifact, being marked by an ancient deity, or completing a task that alters the course of the history of the Marches substantially.

Players should by no means expect to receive one of these boons over the course of a character's development, even at the highest tier of play; there are no preset paths or methods to earn these benefits. Nonetheless, consider granting boons from the Epic Boons section of the DMG when appropriate for your game.

MODIFIED EQUIPMENT

Along with an emphasis on wilderness travel comes the need for explication on the specific effects and usages of certain common survival tools. This section expands on the rules for some items found in the *Player's Handbook*. Equipment listed here as the same weight and cost as listed there, but with these additional or modified effects:

Bedroll. Keeps you warm at night, preventing the effects of cold weather while taking a long rest.

Blanket. Keeps you warm at night, but lacks the padding of a bedroll. While taking a long rest with a blanket prevents the effects of cold weather, when you finish a long rest during which you slept in only a blanket, you regain only one quarter of your spent Hit Dice (minimum of one die).

Cold Weather Gear. A set of thick, insulated clothing, designed for extremely cold conditions. Cold weather gear weighs 8 lb., and makes the wearer immune to the effects of extreme cold.

Mess Kit. So long as they are kept clean, proper utensils and cooking supplies allow a character to reduce the risk of foodborne illness. When eating with a mess kit, Constitution saves made to resist disease from unclean food are made with advantage.

Rations. Rations are made-to-last food wrapped in protective packaging. Rations never rot, can be submerged in water without issue, and are suffer no ill effects from extreme heat.

Tent. A tent provides shelter for two Medium or smaller creatures. Up to four Medium creatures can fit into a tent if necessary, but all creatures regain no spent Hit Dice upon finishing a long rest.

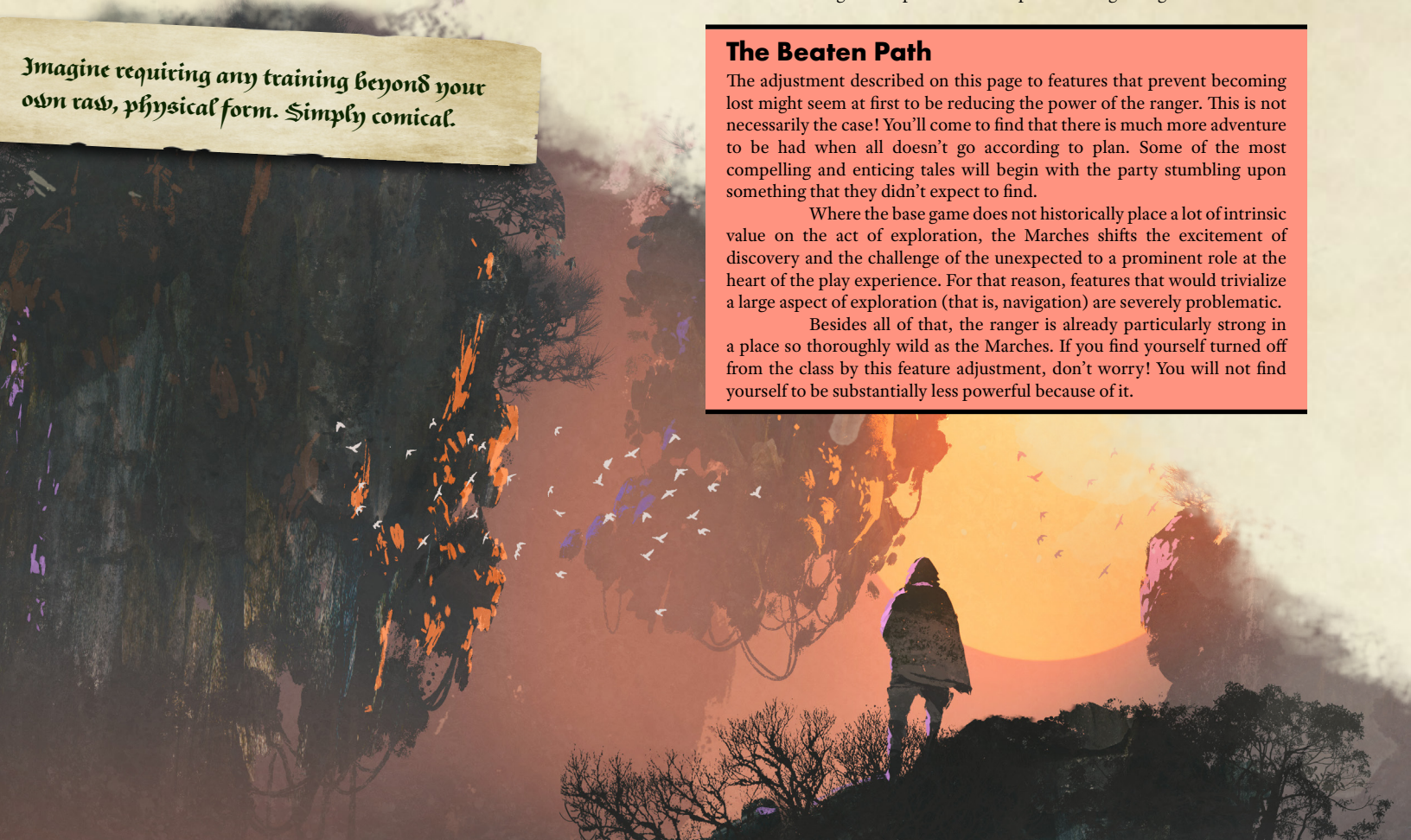
The Beaten Path

The adjustment described on this page to features that prevent becoming lost might seem at first to be reducing the power of the ranger. This is not necessarily the case! You'll come to find that there is much more adventure to be had when all doesn't go according to plan. Some of the most compelling and enticing tales will begin with the party stumbling upon something that they didn't expect to find.

Where the base game does not historically place a lot of intrinsic value on the act of exploration, the Marches shifts the excitement of discovery and the challenge of the unexpected to a prominent role at the heart of the play experience. For that reason, features that would trivialize a large aspect of exploration (that is, navigation) are severely problematic.

Besides all of that, the ranger is already particularly strong in a place so thoroughly wild as the Marches. If you find yourself turned off from the class by this feature adjustment, don't worry! You will not find yourself to be substantially less powerful because of it.

Imagine requiring any training beyond your own raw, physical form. Simply comical.



I do not respect my prey, but if there's one thing about adventurers I admire, it is their tenacity in walking. On my mother's wings, I cannot fathom how exceedingly strudgerous all that travelling must be. What do they do all day, walking along on their own two legs?

PROGRESSION OPTIONS

This section contains optional modifications to existing Experience Point based progression which serve to encourage good player behavior as well as productive engagement with the world of the West Marches and the other player characters in your game. Consider implementing some or all of these rules in your game:

CHARACTER TIERS

The West Marches are an extremely dangerous place. The creatures, people, and even the climates there are rarely friendly, if ever. Adventurers and explorers lead brief lives characterized by violence, trauma, and strife; their woes are many, and the road is long, but those who travel it reap unimaginable rewards.

The death of a character in the West Marches is impactful. It's highly recommended that you observe the following rule concerning the death of characters in your game:

Tiers of Play

There are four tiers that players can attain. The first includes characters of levels 1-4. The second, characters of levels 5-10. The third, 11-16, and the fourth, 17-20. When a character dies, their player's next character begins at the bottom of the dead character's tier; for example, Robin's character, Alphaeus, dies at level 3. Robin's new character, Belisaria, begins at level 1. Once Belisaria makes it to level 5, any character that Robin plays (for example, Corcoran) would begin at level 5, in the event that Belisaria dies.

EXPERIENCE POINTS

It is highly recommended that you utilize an XP-based progression system. Using XP allows expectations for the rate of progression of characters to be more manageable and concrete, in turn leveraging player discouragement that can arise from the use of less quantifiable means of tracking progression that the game has to offer.

Additionally, using valleys players to form educated judgments about the areas of the map that contain challenges that are appropriately difficult for their level, and encourages them to engage specifically with those challenges rather than remaining in regions for which they are over-leveled.

Reward experience points at the end of a mission, when the player characters return to the Town. Any experience earned from the mission (not including roleplaying and log-keeping experience, described below) should be split evenly among the party members that make it back to the Town alive after a mission.

In addition to an XP-based system for progression, consider employing the following extra opportunities for the players in your game to earn additional experience points outside of combat, bearing in mind that experience points gained by these means should also be split among the party members that return to the Town:

Discovery Experience

When players visit a new region or dungeon, meet an important character, or uncover a pivotal secret, grant them an amount of experience points that increases proportionally to the importance or significance of the discovery and the difficulty of the surrounding region. While the exact number of experience points granted for discovery should be largely at the GM's discretion, consider the values in the Discovery Experience table as a good general guide.

Discovery should be awarded to the entire party; that is, it is divided amongst the characters in the party when they return to the Town at the end of a mission. Only award experience once per discovery, even if characters that did not discover it themselves become privy to it for the first time.

Discovery Experience

Significance	Description	Experience
Insignificant	A discovery with no significant consequence; something obvious, or something that will not generally affect the way player characters approach any situation, such as the knowledge that elk inhabit a region.	Easy
Noteworthy	Something not immediately obvious which players would be well-advised to make a note of, such as the presence of a special monster in a region, meeting a significant NPC, or spying a significant structure from afar.	Medium
Important	Something hidden, new, or secret which has come fully to light. This includes visiting a prominent new area, meeting the leader of a faction, and delving into a dungeon for the first time, for example.	Hard
Pivotal	Something extremely important to understanding the fundamental fabric of the West Marches as a whole, such as the revealing of the true nature of a god, the discovery of an artifact, or anything else that will profoundly affect the way player characters will approach situations.	Deadly

Roleplay Experience

When player characters engage in any of the following behaviors during roleplay on a mission, award them with an amount of experience points equal to $200 \times$ that character's tier. If they engaged in the same behavior more than once during a mission, award them double that amount.

- You make a significant decision that is **influenced by your race, class, or background**.
- You make a significant decision that is **influenced by your personality traits, ideals, bonds, or flaws**.
- You make a significant decision that is **influenced by existing or past relationships with other party members**.
- You **learn or teach lore or knowledge** that is believed to be true and significant.
- You have a **gritty, verisimilitudinous scene** — a slice of life for the professional adventurer.
- You make a decision that affects **all of the roster, the Marches as a whole, or an entire faction**.

It's recommended that players make notes of instances on a mission where they fulfilled any of the above behaviors. At the end of the mission, each player in turn should report the behaviors they engaged in on that mission and award experience points as necessary, with the GM as final arbiter of which behaviors were impactful enough to warrant the reward.

Roleplaying experience can be granted to multiple characters for the same decision or scene, if it applies to more than one character.

Logkeeping Experience

If a player writes a thorough and complete log, in character, of a mission they were on, award them with an amount of experience points equal to $200 \times$ their character's tier.

Logs should be kept in a readily-available location, such as an online directory. Logs can be referenced at any time outside of session, but shouldn't be referenced in session.

Always be sure to keep a log! If I didn't write down logs of everything I or the Big Guy did, I'd forget it all in a day. I write about anything that catches my eye — like mountains or birds or gold — and every word the Big Guy tells me to note down.

On Playing in Real Time

In some social settings that allow the players in a West Marches game to be more consistently and regularly available for missions, such as on a college campus, it can be possible to run the game in real time: that is, for every day that passes in real life, so too does a day pass in game time. Playing in real time can make a world of difference in terms of how simple it is to keep track of where each player character is in the space of the game because it implicitly applies a temporality to the game world that has a real-world analog; one that we as players and GMs are inherently accustomed to.

It also means that it becomes possible to play the game at all times, in a way; for example, the GM might set up a mode of communication that players can use to have conversations with NPCs and with one another while in the Town without having to worry about how much time has passed in game as those conversations run their course. This could be a digital messaging platform, for instance. Many modern ones (as of the writing of these words) have support for user role assignment and multiple discrete chat channels for separating topics; these features can all be used to model different parts of a contiguous game. Perhaps chat server channels could directly model different sections of the Town and the conversations, transactions, and other scenes that transpire there.

Additionally, playing in real time opens the door for a blurring of the lines between the game world and reality; for example, the GM might create a dungeon that is only accessible to the characters on a specific cycle of the moon, an NPC that only appears once every two weeks in real time, or a deadline for a mission to rescue a character or deal to be fulfilled. Dated ultimatums like these implicitly carry a weight of urgency that transcends the construct of separation of player and character by virtue of their enforcement by the march of real time.

Playing in real time does not mean that players in a party on a four-day mission, for example, must play D&D for four days straight, though the mission is said to have begun on the day in real time on which the session was played. It simply means that when a party plays a session in which four days pass in game, the players whose characters comprised that party cannot interact with the game for four days of real time thereafter. By logical extension, things that happened on the second day of the mission in game are thought of to have happened on the day after the session was played in real time, and so forth.

Playing in real time can be fun, rewarding, and interesting. It poses a unique tabletop gaming experience that the versatility of a West Marches campaign is inherently well-suited for. If you have the ability to set up the infrastructure, technological or otherwise, that could facilitate a game run in real time, it is highly recommended that you do.

There are only a few additional structural things to keep in mind when you play in real time:

- A party that embarked on a mission that lasts three weeks, for example, cannot participate in the game at all for the 21 days for which their characters are on thought to be on mission in the game timeline.
- As a GM, you must take vigilant notes on the day-to-day events of multi-day missions. It may become relevant when multiple parties are exploring the wild concurrently in game time.
- While it is obviously possible for a party to happen to be in the same place at the same game time as another separate party whose mission was played out earlier in real time, it is highly recommended that you as a GM establish with your players that it is simply not conducive to an intelligible narrative for the two parties to interact. It's okay to fudge the timing on encounters like these in the interest of maintaining a coherent and linear game timeline.
- Encourage players to stagger their missions such that parties are not always comprised of the same players. This is something that can happen when multiple parties are able to be on-mission at the same time; one will arrive back to the Town, make a new plan, and re-embark before the other party returns, at which point the second party will return home and do the same. All of the characters in your game should have the opportunity to interact with one another.
- Ultimately, it is important for players and the GM to communicate extensively when playing in real time. Don't be afraid to create or adjust house rules at any point during the course of your game if something is causing friction out of character. Creating an atmosphere of trust and reliability is key to playing a West Marches game in real time.



APPENDIX II: STEP-BY-STEP EXAMPLES

This appendix contains a step-by-step guide to making an example faction, an example region, and an example dungeon. We'll be using content generated exclusively from the random tables we provide, but we'll be making slight adjustments and tweaks, just as you should do, too.

This appendix has a more colloquial voice, like a long sidebar.

EXAMPLE REGION

To start with, we'll work on a region. We'll go through its difficulty, environment, climate, size, landforms, inhabitants, and encounters. At each step, we'll cover our thought process and detail our methods.

Difficulty

This region is going to be close to the town. We recommend you build outwards, expanding in roughly-concentric circles away from the town. Ideally, you want to have regions planned approximately one circle outside of the furthest your players have gone, so that when they look to the horizon, you can tell them what they see. This is, of course, more difficult to do as time goes on, as your circles get bigger, but you'll also have to do it less frequently, since each circle will take more time for your players to get through.

Because this particular region is going to be relatively close to home, it should be relatively low-level. While randomly-determining the difficulty of a region can be interesting, having a more guided difficulty early on can be a good idea. In this case, we're just deciding that this region will be suitable for characters of about level 4. This is a little wiggly, so we might have encounters that will be a bit more or a bit less difficult.

Environment & Climate

We want to make something sort of rough and wild and untamed, so we're going to make a swamp. Swamps are among the toughest regions in the Marches: they're very slow to travel through and difficult to navigate, and while water is plentiful, it's likely brackish and not safe to drink.

Our Marches as a whole are going to be generally subtropical, so they'll be rich, green, and wet. We could roll individually for this region's climate, but in this case we've decided not to. For early on regions, it can be a good idea to not alter climate too drastically, so as to build a sense of what "normal" in the Marches looks like.

Size

The question of how big to make a region is always a difficult one. On some level, the Marches should be vast, spreading, wilds as far as the eye can see. On the flipside, the adventurers will have to walk everywhere they go, at least to start with, so huge regions will mean a lot of walking to and from missions.

While this isn't necessarily a bad thing, players generally don't like walking. Some of it is good, since it sets the tone and lets them talk and plan, but after a while, it gets dull. Furthermore, the more spread out landmarks are, the easier it is to get lost; it's easy to get lost anyway, even in tight spaces, and so vast wildernesses only make getting lost more likely. On a practical level, long walking journeys also eat time out of every session at the beginning and end.

Because of this, we recommend smaller, denser regions, but ones that rapidly escalate in difficulty and danger.

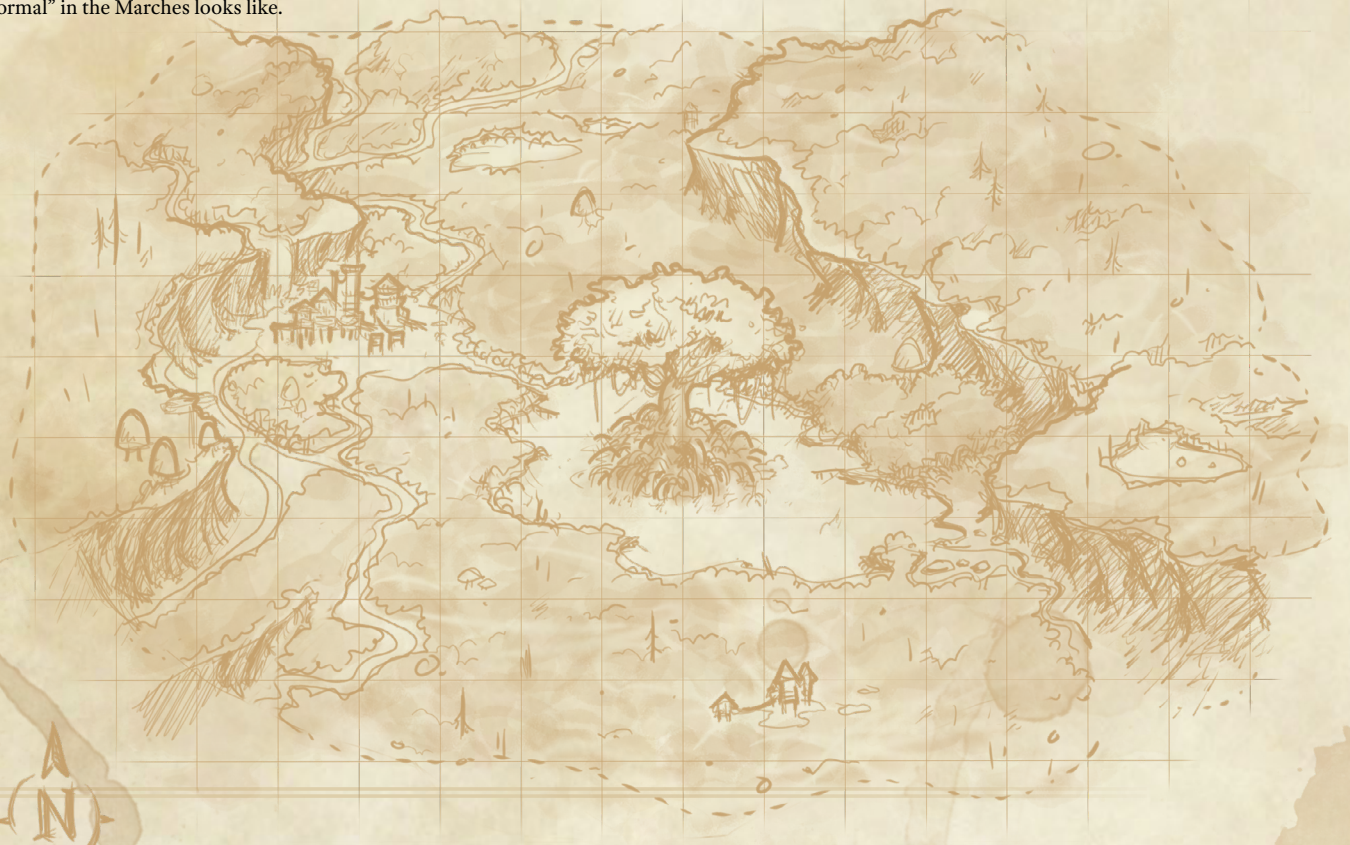
As a very basic rule of thumb, we recommend that regions be no larger than twenty miles in any given direction, and no less than about eight miles in any given direction. This will give you regions that take a few hours to cross at bare minimum, but can easily eat up days of travel time if players don't know what they're doing. As always, you can and should adjust these as necessary.

For our purposes, we'll say that this swamp is sort of oblong-shaped, about 15 miles the long way and 10 miles the short way. Not too big, not too small.

Structures & Landforms

We rolled on the Structures & Landforms table and got a 5, which means that somewhere in these swamps, there'll be huge tree rising up out of the waters (page 39). Given that this is a swamp, we imagine that this tree is a vast, spreading mangrove tree, with roots piercing the water, and great thick vines hanging from its broad crown. A proper marshland tree, one strange and evocative; it's a classic trope, really, but one that will serve us well enough.

It's not 100% obvious yet what this tree does or why it's here, but it'll be important and useful later, so we'll hang onto it as a signpost for future reference.





Modifiers

So far, we've got a big warm swamp with a giant tree that stands somewhere within it. Now, it's time to roll on the Region Modifiers table (page 40): we got a 12, which states that murders of crows followers any travellers through the swamp, marking them for unfriendly eyes.

That's interesting. It means that there's someone or something that these crows report to, and that someone or something intends to keep an eye on everything that goes on within the swamps as a whole. It adds a level of sentience and mystery to the swamp's inhabitants, whatever they may be.

We're going to roll on the Modifiers table again to get another one, just to add to the complexity of the region. Normally, keeping modifiers to a minimum in earlier regions is a good idea, but this is shaping up to be the kind of region that the players will venture into multiple times with ongoing mysteries, so adding another layer isn't such a bad idea.

On our second roll, we got a 9, which says that the region is full of misleading signs and waystones. In this case, they'll likely be deliberate, placed there specifically to fool adventurers into an early grave, or at least away from the swamp. This is especially good as a secondary modifier, since it's unlikely to lead to direct combat or otherwise purely harm the adventurers—just get them lost.

There's a narrative thread here: some reclusive being, possibly from within the tree, that has set up signposts to ward off adventurers, but even still, they employ watchers to keep an eye on things in the event the signs fail. It points to a wary individual, possibly paranoid—someone with secrets to hide and powerful means to do it.

The Mechanics of Modifiers

In our case, both of our modifiers are relatively straightforward: we have misleading way-signs, and we have murders of watchful crows.

These way-signs are common, they're all over the place; it'd be hard to miss them. We'll say that every hour (not every watch, but every hour) a party spends travelling, they have an 85% (or 5-in-6) chance of spotting a misleading way-sign. If they decide to follow it, it's guaranteed to be wrong. Later on, we'll add in a table of what those wrong way-signs might say, but as a baseline, they'll give the wrong cardinal direction.

There probably aren't that many travellers in this swamp, but the crows have a far amount of distance to cover, so we'll say there's a 65% (or 4-in-6) chance of there being a murder observing the party over any given watch. These crows are magical, probably, and so their communication magic can be interfered with, potentially. For now, we'll say that if attacked, the crows will fly off and return 1d4 hours later. Details like that might get changed in the future, but for now they're more than workable.

Inhabitants

Given the many safeguards of whatever being built the signposts and controls the crows, it's likely that the permanent inhabitants of this particular swamp—or at least the more human, non-bestial ones—are subjects, followers, or devotees of that particular being. Whether this out of respect, love, or fear is up for debate, but we can start to set out some of the basics of who might dwell in this swamp, and where.

In this case, we're going to decide that this swamp is inhabited with Lizardfolk, a large reptilian humanoid race, one with a taste for raw flesh. The group (or possibly groups) that live in this swamp are especially fond of raw flesh, ideally if it can be pulled from creatures still-living. They'll likely waylay any travellers they can to devour their flesh, and probably have some kind of horrible ritual way of doing it. They probably aren't a full faction unto themselves, just a few local clans or settlements, but we'll see.

On top of the Lizardfolk, we probably also have your usual roster of swamp-dwelling nastiness: crocodiles, overly large insects, will-o'-the-wisps, venomous serpents, endless mosquitoes, poisonous frogs, and some kind of fast-spreading mushroom.

We might also add some variety of faeries, some living plant-type creatures, some more mythical monsters like Basilisks, some swamp-dwelling elementals, or other, fouler things. All of this depends on where the narrative of our swamp region swings, and all of them would be too much, but we'll definitely add in at least one kind from those categories.

As for our trickster reclusive, the crow-keeper, it'll likely be some stripe of mage. Lizardfolk aren't particularly fond of interloping magicians, so their relationship is likely more driven by fear—or possibly mutual use—rather than obedience or friendship. We're going to hold off on deciding exactly who this mage is for now, as they're still developing over time.

Inhabitant Settlements

For now, we're going to give the Lizardfolk a handful of settlements scattered across the swamp. We don't need to flesh these out immediately, necessarily, but it's worth daydreaming a few concepts and thinking about how big each one is.

For our purposes, we'll say that each settlement has 30-60 (4d10+20, say) Lizardfolk within, and is ruled by its own local warlord, supported by a handful of loyal soldiers and maybe a priest. The rest of the population are a mix of hunter-gatherers, builders and artisans, and farmers of whatever fish or insects the Lizardfolk eat.

If players declare a mission that will take them to a village or very close to one, we'll flesh out a map of the village proper and start assigning names and things, but for now that's not necessary.

Watch out for the lizardfolks. They might seem like big leathery kobolds, but they're not. They're meaner — and hungrier.

Encounters

Given that we're aren't entirely finished with figuring out who's going to be in this region, our encounter table won't be quite complete, but here's an outline of what it might look like.

Bear in mind that this table will be rolled on every time the party runs afoul of a random encounter in the region, and is set for a party of 4-5 adventurers that are about level 4:

Swamp Encounters

d12 Encounter

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1 | 5 + 1d3 crocodiles, sitting on the surface of the water like so many dead logs. |
| 2 | 1d2 giant scorpions, scuttling amongst the twisted trees. |
| 3 | 1 + 1d2 wills-o'-the-wisp, hovering and flashing in the distance. |
| 4 | 1 + 1d2 swarms of venomous snakes, slithering out from the undergrowth. |
| 5 | 4 + 1d4 lizardfolk, hunting and foraging for one of their settlements. |
| 6 | 1 lizardfolk shaman + 1d4 lizardfolk, out to collect fungi and alchemical supplies. |
| 7 | 1d6 + 2 10 ft. circles of quicksand, formed from loose muddy earth and unseen currents. |
| 8 | 2 + 1d3 giant toads, sunning themselves and keeping an eye out for prey. |
| 9 | To be determined, probably something from a local faction. |
| 10 | To be determined, probably something from an adjacent region. |
| 11 | To be determined, probably something from a different adjacent region. |
| 12 | Roll twice on the table, and have both emerge simultaneously. |

For the time being, this will serve our purposes well. We might need to expand this table later, if there's a chance of other monsters drifting by, but for now, it's plenty to work with. Note that we added in loose earth, like a riptide; this kind of thing is common enough in swamps that it makes for a good encounter, even if the adventurers aren't strictly fighting anything. It's also important to note that while there are definitely denizens of the swamps, like poisonous frogs or bloodsucking mosquitoes, they aren't considered to be enough of a threat to be a full encounter. The adventurers might run into them for sure, but they aren't truly dangerous, so they don't get added.

Later, we might add more to this table: more hazards, perhaps, or more enemies. If we push much above this current number of enemy encounters, we might consider the region to have an above-average level of danger, and thus weight the default encounter chance higher, perhaps an additional 5% or 10%. (see page 43) It's also worth mentioning that if the adventurers are close to a Lizardfolk settlement, we might just declare that they run afoul of Lizardfolk, rather than roll on a table.

On top of this, there's that 65% (or 4-in-6) chance that, any given point, the party's being watched by a murder of crows, from our mysterious friend the crow-keeper. For now, we'll say the crows won't help a fight either way, but that might well change.



Moving On

For now, this is what we're going to leave this region with. There are, obviously, gaps and holes in our knowledge, but that's alright. Consider the following questions as we move forward:

- Who is the crow-keeper? How do they control the crows, and why do they ward off travellers?
- Where did the giant tree come from? What is inside?
- How do the Lizardfolk villages feel about the crow-keeper? How do they feel about outsiders? How long have they been here?
- What used to be here, before the Lizardfolk? What about before the crow-keeper? What about before the giant tree?

These questions don't need answers now, but you should keep them in the back of your mind as we proceed forward. We'll mull over the answers as we work on a faction and dungeon, and then knit all of them together.

EXAMPLE FACTION

Now, we're going to build an example faction. We'll go through its territory, theming, population, numbers, cultures, bases, motivations, and how the faction might develop. Along the way, we'll explain our thinking and how we arrived at each of the choices we did.

Territory

Factions are generally elevated to the position of faction by being able to have influence over more than region. If a faction has control over but a single region, they're not a fully-fledged faction: they're just locals, people for the adventurers to tangle with when they pass through, but little more.

While we say a faction controls a region, that control should be relatively limited. The West Marches are a harsh, brutal, unforgiving land, one that makes it exceedingly difficult to conquer or settle. After all, if this wasn't the case, the Marches likely would've been conquered by the Empire long ago.

Therefore, while factions certainly can have influence over a region, the area they strictly control is likely centered around their bases and strongholds, and not the interspersing wilderness. They have power, yes, but utter dominance no.

Exactly how much territory a faction controls depends largely on the nature of the faction, the kind of territory they control, and the raw strength of the faction as a whole. A council of dragons, for example, could control huge swathes of territory, but likely rule only in the lightest sense, that none will challenge them. By contrast, a factory of modrons will likely only control a few buildings at a time, but will run the inside quite literally like clockwork. Dwarves rule undergrounds but rarely above; centaurs claim whole forests, but are nomadic; a witch will claim an entire town, and have every resident under their eye. Territory is extremely relative.

For our purposes, this particular faction is going to stretch into the previously-detailed swamp, but also cover several areas to the north and west: some hills, some scrubby woodlands, and the base of some mountains. We might need to tweak that in the future, but for now it's good enough.



Theming

Themes govern both the broad design aesthetics of the faction, and the deeper questions that pervade a faction for your players to interact with. It's a more, vague abstract thing—a guiding principle or intent, rather than any kind of strict rule or facet. Still, we're rolling for the theme early, to get a sense of where this faction's going to end up.

Rolling on the Faction Themes table (page 46), we got a 13, which is the theme of "Majesty." Majesty, broadly defined, is impressive dignity, beauty, magnificence, particularly in the context of royalty or nobility. It's a theme that intersects with power, hierarchies, deference, tradition, and human perception. It pushes questions like "How are our perceptions of power influenced by the traditions we were raised in?" and "Is there a difference between actual power and merely the perception of power?" It's a juicy, dramatic theme, one with lots of good potential for players to run into.

On a practical design level, it makes for a faction that leans hard into ranks, castes, designations, levels of advancement—the monarch and their underlings—as well as one that directly tackles tradition, change, and the acquisition of power—the power of the monarch as emblem of tradition. It's a faction that pays lots of deference to a leader or small group of leaders, places importance on rank inside the faction, and has (or possibly plays at having) a rich tradition of power.

More than that, we don't know, but we'll figure it out.

Bases

The base of a faction should be striking, impressive, engaging—big and bad and eye-drawing. Given that our faction's theme is majesty, it's doubly important this location is impressive, or at least once was.

Rolling on the Faction Bases table (page 47), we get a 4, which is an enormous shadowy pit. It's a bit of an odd choice for a majesty-themed faction, as a big pit suggests more of a haunted or ruinous angle, but perhaps that could work? Maybe this faction is obsessed with hierarchy and glory specifically because their old establishment was destroyed? A kind of "reaching for the past-that-never-was" angle, pining for the good old days that never actually happened.

More broadly, it's worth thinking about the kind of faction that makes a big shadowy pit their base of operations. On a basic level, that means they're either highly devoted or creatures that can see and operate in the dark. On a little more advanced level, it suggests individuals that are willing to tolerate bad conditions, an oppressive atmosphere, a high level of creepiness in their environments. Because factions trend villainous, this pushes a kind of zealotry, a fanaticism to their cause and whatever majesty they still hold. It's a good angle for a group with cult-like tendencies, and makes for dramatic and expressive villains.



Population & Numbers

As with territory, how many creatures there are within a given faction is quite relative. If the faction is composed of giants, one or two dozen will be plenty, but if the faction comprises mere goblins, it will be almost nothing. Likewise, a host of elementals two hundred strong is unstoppable, while an orcish warband that size is quite standard. The relative strength matters more than the strict numbers—use your own good judgement.

In our case, we rolled on the Faction Population table (page 49) and got an 8, for knights or heroes. This tracks well with the majesty theme—knights are servants of a monarch, after all, and hero-worship fits well into the “fallen throne” imagery of a giant shadowy pit.

While knights and heroes are traditionally thought of in a positive sense, it’s not difficult to spin them towards villainy. Knights are enforcers of the status quo, servants of a higher authority—elegant and sometimes legendary soldiers, but soldiers still. If the faction centered around a fallen monarchy (like the kind that might lie at the bottom of a huge pit), these knights become zealous servants of a regime that no longer exists. Heroes, likewise, can be turned towards evil through their over-righteousness or over-willingness to serve their cause. A hero that believes so thoroughly in their own virtue that they are, ironically, totally willing to commit horrific acts. It’s a bit tragic, but that doesn’t stem from being evil.

As for exact numbers, that will depend a little bit on exactly how far this faction spreads and how big those regions are, but we can do broad strokes. The faction will be primarily humanoid, based on a mixture of the descendants of the fallen monarchy and more recent recruits. Knights and heroes suggest that, rather than strength being derived from pure numbers, the faction’s power instead is drawn from their training, equipment, and raw prowess. A few powerful individuals, rather than a mass of weak ones. Given that, we can say that, as a loose estimate, an outpost of this faction will have 5–10 individuals, a stronghold will have 10–30, and their main base of operations, the pit, will have north of 50. All told, probably between 100 and 200 people—not much for a humanoid faction, but still a steep challenge for players.

Motivation

As you can probably tell, the more charts you roll on, the more defined your faction becomes, and the less you’ll feel the need to roll on the next one. If you think you’ve got a faction nailed down and can just figure out the results from there, feel free to do it. Rolling on further tables can add twists and turns to the faction as a whole, which is good, but if you’re latched onto some concept, feel free to branch away from the tables. These are guidelines, not hard rules.

We rolled on the Faction Goals table (page 48) and got an 11, “Seek the chosen one.” This changes the arc of the faction, at least in part. Previously, as a band of knights obsessed with majesty and nobility living in a giant pit, it seemed their focus would be on resurrection or bringing back what was lost—a goal based on whatever fallen monarchy they were based around.

By getting a new goal of searching for some chosen one, that shifts the dynamic. It means that these knights are not, strictly, seeking to restore what used to be; rather, they’re searching for some prophetic individual that will instead make everything better. The focus is still on the filling the “majestic gap” as it were—as these knights probably lack a central figurehead—but it’s not direct restoration so much as fulfillment of prophecy. It’s not a huge shift, but it’s a shift for sure.

Culture & Hierarchy

So, we have a band of knights sworn to some kind of fallen throne or crown based out of a giant pit, searching for some kind of chosen one—probably an heir to said fallen throne. What do these people look like? How do they think? How do they approach life?

These are the questions of culture, organization, and hierarchy; on their face, they don’t seem particularly relevant for a game about exploring the wilderness and killing monsters, but making convincing cultures will add depth and meaning to your game. Culture forces more nuance and complexity, it changes enemies from “faceless goons to be cut down the second they’re spotted” to “people who are opposed to the player characters, but still possess humanity.”

What does the culture of our majestic knightly faction look like? Well, it’s probably quite stiffly-structured. Knights acquire ranks and

I like knights quite a bit. Always keen to charge straight at me and throw caution to the wind.

The armor also means their meat sizzles nicely, like some kind of metal crab. Scrumptious.

honors, and the others respect them; it’s militaristic, both by dint of being composed of martially-inclined people and because they have imperialistic ideals of majesty. What titles, sigils, honors, and medals a specific knight holds matters a great deal here, and so most of their group strive to earn more wherever they can.

If we lean harder into the “fallen kingdom” angle, there’s likely a cultural focus on that which came before—the people who imitate the stories and legends of what came before are lauded for it. Those kinds of stories, the glorious misty nostalgic ones, are the bedrock of this sort of group’s psyche. When they search for meaning and truth in the world, they look backwards, to the hazy past, where everything was good and just; or at least, that’s what the knights believe.

It’s this combination—the rigid military honorific-meritocracy and the pining for the glory days of yore—that builds villainy. These are knights who will do anything to win fame and honor, and they believe that they’re owed the entire world. It’s a nasty pairing, one that’s both ugly and vicious but also possesses a touch of tragedy. Perfect for the West Marches.

Further Development

For now, we’re going to leave this faction be. There’s still more work to be done, obviously, but we’re at the point where we want to start connecting this faction to the history of the Marches, the regions they inhabit, and their relationships with other factions. For now, consider the following questions as we move forward:

- What caused the former throne of majesty to fall? What used to be where the pit is now?
- How do the Knights interact with their neighbors? Do they believe in honorable deals and alliances, or is everything in their path just there to be conquered?
- How willing are the Knights to sacrifice in their search for the chosen heir? At what point is a mission too dangerous or costly to be worth it?
- Where are the Knights next planning to expand? Where are they next looking to search for their chosen heir?

Keep these in mind relative to our existing swampland region, and the dungeon we’re about to work on—a dungeon inside the swamps, but currently controlled by the Knights.

Linking Factions Together

The more that you can link factions together, the more interesting your game will be. Give them shared history, shared ideals, shared conflicts, and shared borders. Let the factions play into and against each other, whether their conflict draws from recent disputes or age-old feuds.

Linking factions across shared history also ensures that, when your players attempt to interrogate a member of a faction—which they almost certainly will do—they will never hear quite everything at once. A faction will have its own versions of history, and its members will explain events differently. It’s then on the players to piece together what the truth is, drawing from the different-but-related faction accounts.

Furthermore, tying factions together breeds drama: as factions quarrel, they will form alliances, hatch secret schemes, stab each other in the back, and make plays against each other’s holdings—all of which can and should include the adventurers. Building a series of isolated, sectioned-off factions means each will feel static and rigid; tying them together ensures messy, complicated drama will emerge.

I don't like knights very much. In the stories they're always very nice and kind and gentle, but the ones I've met in real life are real scab-eaters. Nasty, brutal, and instilled with a sense of self-importance that makes me want to gag.

EXAMPLE DUNGEON

Onto an example dungeon. For us, we want to combine our example faction and region, so this will be a dungeon location inside our swamp, currently occupied by our Knights (and possibly other denizens, depending). We'll cover its hook and premise, the basic layout and map, its dangers and denizens, some of the strategies players might employ, potential history of the dungeon itself, how the dungeon might change, and a treasure room within the dungeon itself.

Dungeon Type & Hook

To begin with, the basic dungeon type. With a roll on the Dungeon Types table on page 51, we can determine that this dungeon is a vault—a place where valuables are (or were) stored. The question immediately arises: what's being stored here? We don't know yet, but we'll get an answer soon.

For now, think about what this looks like from the outside: a vault is usually underground, and in the case of a swamp, it would have to be deep underground, so as to reach solid earth underneath all the muck and mire. That suggests some kind of basic above-ground structure, and then much more of the vault's complex itself underground.

As we proceed forward, it's worth considering the broader, overarching lore and history of the Marches. We aren't going to delve into that here and now, since that kind of scope would grow rapidly and be largely unhelpful, but these kinds of questions are important to dungeons like a vault. Most of the factions in the Marches lack the current resources to be building huge underground structures, so most dungeon complexes will be from some historical era (see page 64). We're going to refer to "an ancient civilization" or "the old kingdoms" here, but you should fill in those gaps yourself.

In our case, the hook will be the exterior structure, something weird and kind of foreign: a large dome, a polygonal prism, or something else architecturally significant. It's overgrown at this point, due to sitting in a swamp for a long time, but the core structure—and its deviance from normal design—is there. Unusual architecture is a very fast and simple way of communicating the age and wonder of a previous realm; if there are exceedingly difficult-to-make structures still standing, it implies that said previous realm had secrets and knowledge now forgotten. We might also pick some unusual building material, some odd metal or strange stone.

In addition to the physical dome itself, some Knights of our previous faction are camped outside. They've been here for some time, weeks or months, and so have basic buildings set up: lean-tos, big tents, fire pits, that kind of thing. Their smoke columns can be seen from a ways around, especially as Lizardfolk (the more common inhabitants in this swamp) don't use fire as much as other humanoids.

Layout

The basic breakdown of the dungeon is as follows:

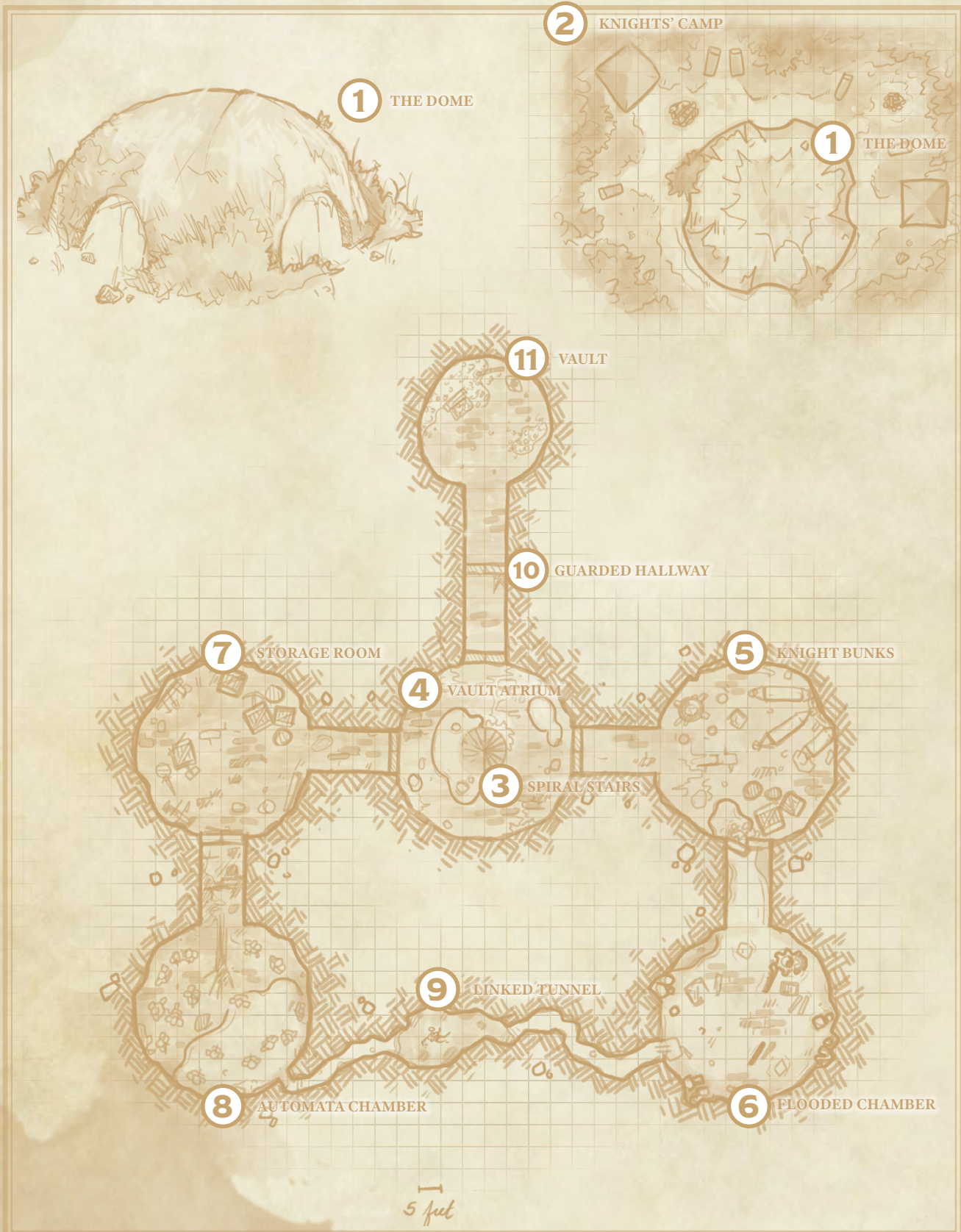
1. **The Dome.** The dungeon's main entrance is covered by a large dome of a strange copper alloy, now covered in verdigris. It is approximately 40 ft. in diameter and 20 ft. high. There are four semi-circular openings in the dome at each of the cardinal points.
2. **The Knights' camp.** The Knights have set up a semi-permanent residence outside of the Dome, with two large tents, a couple of cookfires, and a few other hasty amenities. Within the camp, there are 3 Knights, either lounging and cooking during the day, or sleeping at night. The tents hold ten cots in total.
3. **Spiral stairs.** In the center of the Dome, there is a 10 ft. diameter spiral staircase descending downwards; the stairs, walls, and central spire are all made of the same copper alloy as the dome itself. Lying next to the stairs is a roughly 400 lb. metal lid, which the Knights have moved away, but could be placed back onto the stairs. The stairs go down for approximately 40 ft. before reaching the main atrium.
4. **Vault atrium.** At the end of the stairs is a 40 ft. circular chamber with three passageways branching off of it, each of which has a closed copper door at the start. The chamber is made of the same copper alloy, but swamp water and muck have slowly seeped in over the centuries, giving everything a damp, rotted scent.

5. **Knight bunks.** To the east of the atrium, down a 20 ft. hallway, there is another 40 ft. circular chamber, which the Knights have set up as a temporary resting space. Three hammocks are suspended from the walls, there are remnants of meals in a corner, and bits of armor have been strewn around. 1-2 Knights rest in their hammocks during the day, while all three sleep at night. At the south end of this room, there is another door from which slowly leaks more swamp scum; the Knights have boarded it over and clogged the cracks with cloth, but some still leaks through.
6. **Flooded chamber.** Through the leaking door of the bunkroom is a 20 ft. passage and 40 ft. circular chamber, all of which have been flooded with murky, sludgy swamp-water. As soon as the door is opened, the water will come rushing out. If the flooded chambers are investigated, 5d10 gold pieces can be found, along with a copper-and-amethyst necklace worth 75 gold pieces, and 2d12 copper machinery pieces, each of which weighs approximately 5 pounds and can be sold for 1 gold piece to a general store, or 10 gold pieces to a specialist, like a tinkerer. Additionally, the western wall of the flooded chamber has a large crack in it, leading towards the linked tunnel.
7. **Storage room.** To the west of the atrium, down a 20 ft. hallway, there is yet another 40 ft. circular chamber, which the Knights are using as a storage room. Digging supplies—shovels, buckets, pickaxes, and so on—are scattered everywhere, along with hodge-podge armory of weapons and ammunition. To the south, there is another door, which the Knights have boarded up, and covered with warnings to not enter.
8. **Automata chamber.** To the south of the storage room, down another 20 ft. hallway stained with blood, there is a 40 ft. circular room which contains 16 defensive automata (use the animated armor statblock), made of the same strange copper alloy. The front automata have slightly-damaged metal plating, and are stained with dried blood. The automata are dormant, but if someone enters the chamber, they will awaken and attack; if the way is clear, they will attack anyone and everyone inside the whole dungeon. Each automata contains a crystal inside its heart which can be sold for 5 gold pieces. At the eastern edge of the chamber, there is a wide crack in the wall, which leads to the linked tunnel.
9. **Linked tunnel.** Between the flooded and automata chambers, there is a narrow tunnel which links between them. The tunnel is about 2 feet in diameter, and runs 80 ft. long; the center is elevated from the two entrances, up about 20 ft., thus emerging from the floodwaters. At the top of the elevation, at the center of the tunnel, there is an ancient grimy skeleton, clutching a dagger made of desecrated bone, a pouch of 120 gold pieces (now very old and weathered), and a parchment note long since withered away.
10. **Vault door hallway.** To the north of the atrium is a 40 ft. hallway; in the center of it, 20 ft. in, there is what appears to be a set of double doors. In fact, these doors are two enormous metal shields, wielded by a stone golem, which is the main guardian of the Vault; the golem has orders to not let anyone through unless the pass-phrase is spoken, and obeys its orders to the letter. 1 Knight stands in front of the doors, sketching the passageway and mumbling to themselves about unbreakable doors. The "doors" have no handles, keyholes, or obvious means of entrance. If they are tapped or knocked upon, a heavy metallic voice will say, in draconic, "Pass-phrase, please." (The pass-phrase should be something of your determination, based on the outside lore of the world.) If the doors are attacked, rammed, pried apart, or otherwise damaged, the golem will attack, wielding the shields as weapons. 20 ft. past the golem is the Vault itself.
11. **The Vault.** The Vault is at the end of the north hallway from the atrium, past the door-golem. It's a 20 ft. circular chamber, made of mostly-untouched copper alloy; inscriptions in draconic line the walls, telling tales of ancient victories and defeats. The Vault holds 500 gold pieces, a ruby ring worth 250 gold pieces, a set of full plate made from orichalcum, a gambeson of gliding made from nimbus silk, and a variable staff made from wolfram.

You call that a vault? Don't make me laugh.

Gotta agree with the Big Guy here. This is the kind of small potatoes he'd send us to go and retrieve, rather than go himself. If you think this is real treasure, just you wait and see.

THE OVERGROWN VAULT





Hazards, Options, & Tools

The immediate outside of the dungeon is relatively straightforward—the Knights are cold and cautious but not immediately hostile. They’ll do their best to prevent anyone from getting inside, to the point of violence if needs be.

Above ground, there’s obviously sunlight during the day, but at night, the camp above is lit only by torches and campfires. The underground sections have torches and lanterns

Underneath the dome are the top of the stairs, and the large lid-plate that was previously covering them. The Knights have moved it to the side, but it could be moved back; it’d take a hefty Strength roll, but it’s doable. Once back on the stairs, it’d be extremely difficult to move from underneath—potentially sealing those beneath inside. Combined with water (or smoke, or something else), it could make for a deadly trap.

The inside of the underground space is lined with metal, but due to the age of the vault itself and the Knights’ activities, it’s grown weaker. If any of the walls sustain significant damage, they’ll begin to crack; a few rounds later, they’ll break open entirely. While the surrounding area’s terrain is not entirely water, the marshy soil is certainly liquid enough to begin surging in, flooding the underground sections. The vault itself will remain closed (unless it’s already been opened), but everything else will be filled with swampy sludge in a matter of minutes.

The two southern hallways have been sealed by the Knights, but if the barricades are broken or otherwise gotten-past, the adventurers could reach the copper automata or the flooded chamber. The automata’s orders are to protect the vault and drive out intruders (in that order), so while the immediate targets are the adventurers, with some clever maneuvering, the automata could be turned against the Knights. The flooded chamber could pose a useful distraction, and is far more controllable than simply smashing open one of the walls.

As with the automata, the stone door-golem if provoked, will attack any near it. This might be adventurers or Knights or both—it’s just a matter of who’s closest and who presents the largest threat. The door-golem is provoked by any significant damage, and then won’t stop until all intruders are dead or gone. It’s also worth bearing in mind that a stone golem’s swings could easily start damaging the walls, thus triggering the sludge flood from the exterior mid-fight.

Treasure Rooms

Because this dungeon is a vault, first and foremost, the main treasure room is obvious—it’s the vault itself, behind the golem.

The hidden linking passage is sort of a micro-treasure room; it’s more about the usefulness of being able to traverse from the automata chamber to the flooded chamber directly, but the dagger and money are an added bonus.

For a level 4 dungeon, a stone golem is a significant challenge, but, critically, it’s a very “brute force” challenge. A band of level 4 characters are unlikely to be able to beat a golem in a simple back-and-forth slugfest, but golems are not particularly bright, and are not very nimble either. A clever group of players could likely think of some way to trap or disable the golem without engaging it directly. Critically, because the golem is the door, they don’t even need to kill it—just keep it occupied long enough to get all of the loot of the treasure room, then make a run for it.

You should customize and adjust the loot in the treasure room to fit your Marches’ history. We’ve listed some items, but you should adjust them, modify them, make them yours. Remember, this place was constructed by some long-gone ancient civilization, and whatever they were storing here warranted significant protection. The loot should contain bits and pieces of the lore, and should start filling in small areas of history and uncertainty. Put the important history on the things they care about.

More Than Just Loot

Treasure rooms obviously contain treasure, but bear in mind that “treasure” doesn’t always have to be literal gold and silver, or even magic items. Treasure could be secrets, lore, keys to further treasure rooms, means of travelling quickly (like secret passages or teleportation circles), maps, an NPC to recruit, or something else entirely.

You should be sure to have literal treasure some of the time, but don’t feel constrained: treasure rooms can contain anything of value, no matter its precise physical form.

We always put traps out to guard our stuff. More traps means more kobolds means more loot. It's simple arithmetic, really.

Possible Dungeon Outcomes

Changes to a dungeon are almost never guaranteed; there are simply too many factors— from its inhabitants, its environment, and the adventurers who arrive—to say with any certainty how a dungeon will change over time. Still, it's worth thinking about broad patterns of how the dungeon may change, if certain possibilities come to pass. Think about the more-likely things that players will do, and work from there. Right now, we're going to go through some of the possible outcomes, and talk through how the dungeon might change as a result:

Outcome #1: The adventurers clear the dungeon wholesale. In this case, the adventurers come in, kill or defeat all of the Knights, trap or defeat the door-golem, and take all of the loot. The vault is still intact, just unoccupied. After this happens, the Knights will likely be hesitant about returning, and so the vault will turn over in control. Local Lizardfolk in the swamps might move in, another faction might take the opportunity to take control, the crow-keeper (watching via crow-vision) might take command, some local animals or monsters could use it as a lair, or some passing band of renegades might just set up shop. Whichever, the vault becomes occupied by another, likely weaker group or individual. Regardless of who it is, try to broadcast the shift in control—locals might talk, there might be territorial markings, there could be more smoke columns, that kind of thing. There's nothing worse for players than expecting a once-cleared dungeon to be empty, only to have it be filled with additional threats.

Outcome #2: The dungeon is cleared, except for the vault itself. This is much the same as the previous outcome, except that the door-golem still resides and the vault still holds its treasures. This means any future occupants can't provoke the golem or risk attack, but if word gets out, scavengers might come, and end up in the same situations as the Knights—not fully occupying the vault, but still in the general area.

In both of these cases, the Knights will eventually send a squad to investigate what happened to their comrades. Depending how many resources the order as a whole has, and how pressed they are elsewhere, they might possibly try to reclaim the vault, but this is unlikely—in the Marches, once a holding is lost, it's usually lost for good.

Outcome #3: Some, but not all, of the Knights are killed or driven out. Exactly what happens after this varies based on how many of the Knights are dead, but the broad strokes remain the same: the Knights send word to their next-largest outpost, who runs it up the chain of command, and either the Knights retreat from the vault or reinforce it. Because these Knights are deeply hierarchical and traditionalist—and because the secrets in the vault might well be important to their search for the heir—they will likely not retreat, instead choosing to reinforce the vault. Whenever the adventurers return, there will be more Knights than before, now keeping tighter guard. As before, this should be telegraphed: the surrounding areas might suffer more attacks, the Knights might set up defenses further afield, that sort of thing.

If, in the course of being half-defeated, the vault gets looted by the player characters (or anyone else, really), the Knights will likely relay that as well. This will increase the Knights' as a whole animosity towards the adventurers as a group, and likely mean any future talks will be on thinner ice than previously.

Outcome #4: The adventurers are driven off by the Knights. Here, the Knights probably still send word back to their commanders, and are lauded for the trouble. A note is made of the attack, and any identifying information about the adventures is put down. Otherwise, though, given their beliefs of their own superiority, the Knights would probably just congratulate themselves and keep going.

Outcome #5: The dungeon is flooded, sealed, or destroyed. If the dungeon is removed or inaccessible, the Knights might return once to examine their former outpost and see if anything can be salvaged; afterwards, they'll leave. It's possible that some distant future faction might return to the site, but otherwise, the dungeon is abandoned to the marshes.

Obviously, you don't need to come up with all of these possibilities for all of your dungeons, every time. These are just meant to be illustrative of how an example dungeon might change—when the players deal with a dungeon and depart, that's the time to think through the ramifications.

Moving Onwards

This dungeon's just about ready to go: you might want to make tweaks and adjustments, but it's playable as-is. As we proceed, consider the questions this dungeon poses (both to the players and yourself):

- Who built the Vault originally? What is the strange copper alloy they use in their designs?
- What significance does the loot inside the Vault hold for the greater world? Why was it sealed away?
- How did the Knights find out about the Vault? Why do they care about getting inside so much?

Moreso than with the faction or region, these questions are tied to the broader world and the history of your Marches. These aren't questioned to be answered in isolation—they should be informed by the lore of your world. Dungeons hold the keys of history; as designer, it means that your lore dictates your dungeons.



Where I strike, nothing remains. If you ever hope to stand equal to the beasts of the Marches, you must give no quarter and strike without mercy. Who knows, in time, you might find life's easier without morals.

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

We now have an example region, an example faction, and an example dungeon, more or less completed for play; from here, we're going to put the finishing touches on each, and link them all together. This means answering some of the questions we posed earlier, assigning names and titles, and finishing out any unfinished bits and pieces.

Critically, we won't be answering questions related to lore or history or mythology; those answers you need to decide yourself. Trying to write generic lore tends to feel, well, generic; because a high level of specificity and nuance is required, we aren't going to try and provide simple examples here.

Still, there's still quite a bit we can do.

Names & Titles

First off, we're going to name things; for more generic regions, this is a somewhat arbitrary process. Later on, you might want to name things in specific ways and follow certain conventions to reinforce lore and themes, but for now, we're just going to go with what seems cool.

Here are some names, some of which come from the Names tables in Appendix VIII (pages 118), and some of which we just came up with on our own:

- The swampland is called the Sidewinder Swamp, named for the venomous snakes that dwell within.
- The great tree in the center is called the Crowned Allmother. Crowned for the hanging branches, Allmother for its wide reach.
- The Lizardfolk settlements are named things like Mire's Reach, Fenhaven, and Bogtown.
- The crow-keeper is called just that, Crow-Keeper. Who they are and what they want remains to be seen.
- The Knights are called the Order of the Dying Moon. That dying moon probably has something to do with the former glory they're trying to reclaim.
- The Order's base of operations, the giant pit in the ground, is called the Maw of Perdition. Also probably has something to do with the dying moon, and their reclaimed glory.
- The chosen one the Order searches for, drawing on their name, is called the Lunar Heir.
- The Order keeps somewhat ordinary knight-naming conventions: at the top is the Grandmaster, followed by Elders, Paladins, Knights, Squires, and Neophytes.
- The Vault is called the Clandestine Sepulcher, as is written in draconic throughout its interior.

You can and should change all of these to better fit your game. They're merely examples, vague suggestions and possibilities; the more you fit them to your game, the better it will be.

Unknown Names

There is a very good chance that, as you play, players will not learn the names of things. Sometimes, this will be because they don't care or took poor notes, but in many cases they just won't know—this is very common in dungeons especially, where the original creators are long dead or gone. But, just because they don't know the names of things doesn't stop players from naming things, and thus you should expect lots of nicknames, placeholders, and stand-in names.

For example, if you create a dungeon called the Unceasing Caverns of Infernal Atonement, filled with demons and glimmering red crystals containing the souls of the fallen, your players will probably call it something like "demon crystal cave," or "the cave where all those weird red crystals were that sometimes screamed."

This is a good thing! It means your players are engaged, and are invested in keeping track of things. That said, remember to remain objective; if you use their terminology, they'll believe it's correct, even when it's not. Only describe places in ways that can be objectively observed—unless they're talking to an NPC, in which case you should use only the names that the NPC would know.

It's tricky, but keeping track of who uses which names and how will make your game far more immersive.

How Many of Each?

The question of "how big should the West Marches be?" is a common one. Narratively speaking, there's no real right answer; they need to feel vast yet also surmountable, totally unknown yet still able to mastered.

Mechanically, though, the answer is clearer: because players are risk-averse, there should be enough content of each approximate level to get them to the next level plus a bit of surplus, but not more. For example, to get from Level 1 to Level 2 requires 300 XP per player; if you have, say, 15 players, you should have enough content suitable for Level 1 characters to get all of them up to Level 2, plus a touch more. 15×300 is 4500, plus, say, an extra 20%, for a total of about 5400. This means that, across all of your Level 1 regions and dungeons, there should be approximately 5400 XP for them to earn, in encounters, exploration, and challenges. Obviously, this will somewhat imprecise—random encounters see to that—but that is the ballpark you should aim for.

Why do this? Why calculate to such a fine degree? The answer, as always, is that players are risk-averse. If there is XP available that requires minimal risk, even if they are far over-leveled for it, they will choose to earn that XP, rather than risk more for greater rewards. If they're all Level 6, and there are Level 4 dungeons available, they'll take the Level 4 dungeons, since even though it will take them far more dungeons to reach level 7, their chances of failure are much lower.

But, if there is appropriately-constricted amounts of XP available, players will be forced to venture further, to risk more, to brave the dangers of the Marches. This is good—challenge is *fun*, and so ensuring that players actually do have to face challenge will make your game better in the long run.

Coming Together

We're now going to answer whatever questions we can; it won't be all, but it'll be some.

The Order of the Dying Moon, by and large, is not friendly to any of the inhabitants of Sidewinder Swamp. They view the crows and their Keeper as a hostile force, and attack the crows on sight. They believe the Lizardfolk to be mere locals in the way of their greater purpose; while they know to directly attack the Lizardfolk on sight, they hold them in contempt. The Lizardfolk, in turn, won't hesitate to drive out the Order or keep a close eye on their scouts.

As the Order pushes deeper into Sidewinder, drawing closer to the Allmother, they grow increasingly weary and haggard. They're used to fighting in hills and on plains, not slogging through marshlands. While nearer the borders they're willing to fight and die, closer to the Allmother, deeper into the swamp, they're more likely to break and retreat.

The Crow-Keeper, the Allmother, and the ancient coppery ruins scattered throughout the swamplands (of which the Clandestine Sepulcher is merely one) are all linked together. They are the ancient and precursor beings, amidst the middling marshlands and Lizardfolk, and the newer incursions of the Order and the adventurers. You can envision how the layers of history might emerge from there.

As you develop more regions, factions, and dungeons—along with the lore of your Marches—you should continue to link them together. Unite factions along common history lines, use the geographical anatomy of regions to tell a story, have the lore of dungeons connect across space. Every question should have an answer elsewhere in the Marches.

Good Luck!

It's a daunting task, building the West Marches, and while these examples may feel overwhelming, don't fret. Build your Marches deliberately, consciously, with an eye for nuance and detail and subtlety; build your Marches to be exciting and dramatic and mysterious.

Don't get bogged down in lore or precise dungeon layouts or getting everything perfect; there is nearly always more space to explore, so if your first few regions and factions are crummy, don't despair. In the end, you will craft wonders and legends.

Why bother creating? Why not simply destroy everything you path, regardless of what it may be? What joys are there in creation that can be matched with the raw power of utter annihilation?

APPENDIX V: THE SISTERS GAUNT

The Sisters Gaunt are a trio of powerful hag sisters that dwell in a huge dead tree. They make for dangerous enemies, powerful allies, or both—hags are nothing if not fickle, so their allegiances can shift with the wind.

The Sisters are here both for you to use in your own Marches, and to serve as an example of how a boss monster (or bosses, as the case may be) could be constructed. As always, you can and should feel free to tweak, modify, and adjust the Sisters however you please; they're here for you to use.

PLACING THE COVEN

Where exactly the Sisters go in your Marches is up to you. They have a murky, swampy sort of aesthetic to them; they and their home, Rothollow, would go nicely in the Sidewinder Swamp, if you plan on using it. Otherwise, they could fit into any sort of forest, moorland, or marsh with almost no changes. If you're willing to tweak their flavor around a bit, you could easily fit them into craggy hills, arid badlands, silty coastlines, or somewhere else entirely.

The Sisters are a little unique in that while hags are villainous, they also can be uneasy allies. The Gaunt Coven has many goods and services available—food, potions, scrolls, artifacts, secrets—many of which the adventurers might have use of. The Sisters will be at their most interesting if placed in a position, both physically and politically, where the players can treat them as foes, allies, or something in between.

THE SISTERS

There are three sisters that make up the Gaunt Coven: Morgan, Gertrude, and Sybil. They shared one mother, Eugenia Gaunt, who originally planned to grow her coven beyond three; as soon as they came of age, the Sisters ousted her.

When they're united together, the Sisters are a force to be reckoned with. That said, it's rare that they're truly united on anything; the three of them squabble, bicker, and quarrel with each other near-constantly. Not a day goes by inside Rothollow without at least one minor argument breaking out between them, usually over some perceived slight (which may or may not have been truly intended).

Still, even one Sister alone is dangerous, and if something really threatens the Coven, they'll always side with each other over an outsider.

Shared Characteristics

All of the Sisters share some similarities: each has the ability to magically disguise themselves as someone else, each has some spellcasting abilities (though this varies), each has free passage throughout Rothollow and the surrounding marsh, each has a pair of razor-sharp claws, and each is cunning, sly, and cruel.

The Sisters are not above impersonating each other to outsiders, if it comes down to it, though they'd never do so to one another. Likewise, while each Sister schemes and plots individually, they do so against outsiders far more than to each other.

The Sisters share a loose command of their minions. Gertrude spends the most time organizing them and sending them out, but Morgan can always find one or two to run an errand for her. Sybil rarely, if ever, speaks or issues orders to the Coven's minions.

On the whole, the Sisters are more alike than they are different, really. They all lust for power, they all hate beautiful or lovely things, and they all share the same bitter guile.

Shared Spellcasting

While all three Sisters are within 30 ft. of each other, they can cast the following spells, but must share the spell slots among themselves:

- 1st level (4 slots): *identify*, *inflict wounds*, *ray of sickness*
- 2nd level (3 slots): *enlarge/reduce*, *hold person*, *ray of enfeeblement*
- 3rd level (3 slots): *bestow curse*, *counterspell*, *lightning bolt*
- 4th level (3 slots): *blight*, *polymorph*
- 5th level (2 slots): *contagion*, *geas*, *scrying*
- 6th level (1 slot): *eyebite*, *circle of death*

For casting these spells, each Sister is a 12th-level spellcaster that uses Intelligence as her spellcasting ability score. The spell save DC is 12 + the Sisters's Intelligence modifier, and the spell attack bonus is 4 + the Sister's Intelligence modifier.

Legendary Actions

The Sisters, as a Coven, have three legendary actions, choosing from the options below. Only one legendary action can be used at a time, and only at the end of another creature's turn. The Sisters regain spent legendary actions at the start of Gertrude's turn.

Melee Attack. One of the Sisters makes a melee attack.

Hidden Step. One of the Sisters immediately turns invisible, until she next attacks or casts a spell, or until her concentration ends.

Cantrip (Morgan Only). Morgan immediately casts a cantrip.

Into the Pot! (Gertrude Only). Gertrude immediately takes the Into the Pot! action, provided she has at least one target grappled.

Clarify Weakness (Sybil Only). She, Morgan, and Gertrude have advantage on their next attack roll, until the end of Sybil's next turn.

Coven XP

Each Sister individually is approximately CR 5, worth 1,800 XP. However, because the Sisters operate as a group and gain power when together, a Sister that is fighting as a part of the Gaunt Coven as a whole is approximately CR 7, worth 2,900 XP.

Put another way, each Sister is worth 1,800 XP, but once all three are dead and the Coven is destroyed, the adventurers gain an additional 3,300 XP.



Sybil Gaunt

Sybil, the youngest, is of middling width and height, and typically dresses in a collection of wrapped rags, cloth, and the like. Her hair is pure white, and goes in all directions. She carries a myriad of tools for reading fortunes: cards, sticks, dice, bones, runestones, and so on. She also tends to wear a blindfold, as she claims that it helps her second sight (whether this is true or not is up for debate).

Sybil possesses some powers of prophecy and prediction, and can see the future, sometimes. She sees glimpses of mortals' fates and pasts, and will sell you your future, for a price. For this reason—along with her own insistence—she is sometimes called “the Oracle.” If her minions ever pass by her, they usually refer to her as “Lady Oracle.”

Sybil herself is mostly distant and pensive. She spends a great deal of time alone, standing at the top of Rothollow or wandering the marshlands, half-lost in visions. When she does come back to her sisters, she's the quietest of the three, but also the most vindictive. Both Morgan and Gertrude are a touch more wary of antagonizing Sybil, as she is spiteful without limits.

If Sybil wanders fars from Rothollow, she takes on the appearance of a thin, waifish girl, dark of eye and darker of heart. She'll play at being lost, confused, or afraid, and then drown anyone who tries to help her. Sybil often says that haruspicy is best performed on victims who least suspected their fate.

Sybil wears her **Seer's Blindfold**, and carries her **Tome of Truth**.

Gertrude Gaunt

Gertrude, the eldest, is broad and heavy, and wears an enormous stained apron. Her hair is a foul reddish orange, which she keeps tied in a knot. She wields a meat hook and a butcher's cleaver; her apron pockets are always filled with meat, plants, and herbs.

Gertrude is a brewess and cook, and always keeps a huge black iron cauldron simmering at the base of Rothollow. Gertrude has deep and abiding knowledge of the natural world around her, and can make the most delicious (or the most foul) of meals, drinks, and tea. If any guests come to Rothollow, she's sure to offer them tea and biscuits, which are delicious—unless the guests ask about them, in which they're horrid.

For the most part, Gertrude is fairly genial to her minions, sisters, and any outsiders. She's the most likely to take in what she calls “lost

pets,” and does the most business with outsiders; most of her time is spent making food and drink, ordering the minions about, and ensuring that her Sisters' activities aren't causing too many problems. She likes to be called “the Brewmother,” which most of her minions are happy to do. That said, when her ire is piqued, Gertrude is a dangerous foe indeed..

Gertrude leaves Rothollow the least, and is the least likely to disguise herself when she does, but on the rare occasion she needs to, she disguises herself as a broad-shoulder warrior, clad in leather and chain, fiery of hair and temper. Most of the time, though, she's content to travel as her normal haggish self, revelling in misery and rot.

Gertrude wears her **Brewmother's Apron**, and carries **Thewcarver** and her **cookbook**.

Morgan Gaunt

Morgan, the middle sister, is the tallest and bone-thin. She dresses in long robes and a coat like a wizard, ragged and worn, plus a pair of hefty basilisk-leather boots. She is almost completely bald, but wears a very wide hat to cover it. She carries a gnarled staff and an ancient, yellowed spellcasting manual.

Morgan is a magician, a witch, and thus spends much of her time practicing spells, enchanting objects, and doing magical research. Because of this, she'll often send out the Coven's minions in search of magical materials, rare alchemical supplies, and arcane texts. When addressing her, her minions usually call her “Mistress Morgan,” which pleases her greatly.

Of the three Sisters, Morgan is the most brusque, the most-disliked by the minions. She's full of invective, referring to any incompetents by all manner of colorful insults and nicknames. Most of the time, she broods in her study, mulling over old volumes of magic, grumbling about whatever latest annoyance has plagued her. In some cases, Morgan might be willing to sell or trade for some of her trinkets and volumes, though she's always loathe to do so

When Morgan has to leave Rothollow to retrieve some tome or sample her minions couldn't, she'll sometimes wear the disguise of a witch—tall, imperious, and elegant, but still maintaining her haughty disinterest. If she encounters travellers that don't make an effort to bow and stoop, she'll blast them to pieces.

Morgan wears her **Big Hat** and **Bogstalker Boots**, and carries her **spellbook**.

Sybil Gaunt

Medium fae, neutral evil

Armor Class 18 (natural armor)

Hit Points 97 (13d8 + 39)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT
17 (+3)	17 (+3)	16 (+3)	16 (+3)

Saving Throws WIS +8, CHA +7

Skills Arcana +7, Deception +7, History +7, Insight +12, Perception +8, Religion +7

Senses blindsight 30 ft., darkvision 60 ft., truesight 10 ft., passive Perception 18

Languages Common, Deep, Draconic, Elvish, Giant, Primordial, Sylvan

Challenge 5 (1,800 XP) *see Coven XP*

Amphibious. Sybil can breathe air and water.

Innate Spellcasting. Sybil's innate spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 15). She can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: *dancing lights*, *minor illusion*, *vicious mockery*

Mimicry. Sybil can mimic animal sounds and humanoid voices. A creature that hears the sounds can tell they are imitations with a successful DC 17 Wisdom (Insight) check.

Precognition. Sybil has advantage on all Dexterity saving throws, and has a +5 bonus to initiative rolls. All attacks of opportunity made against her have disadvantage.

Actions

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 12 (2d8 + 3) slashing damage.

Illusory Appearance. Sybil covers herself and anything she is wearing or carrying with a magical illusion that makes her look like another creature of her general size and humanoid shape. The illusion ends if Sybil takes a bonus action to end it, or if she dies.

The changes wrought by this effect fail to hold up to physical inspection. Otherwise, a creature must take an action to visually inspect the illusion and succeed on a DC 20 Intelligence (Investigation) check to discern that Sybil is disguised.

Imposed Visions (Recharge 6). Sybil reaches out and touches a creature within her reach, filling their mind with visions of their own doom and destruction. That creature must immediately make a DC 16 Intelligence saving throw or immediately suffer 6d6 psychic damage, be knocked prone, and become stunned for one minute, suffering half damage on a success. At the end of each of the creature's turns, it can repeat the saving throw, ending the stunning on a success.

Clarify Weakness. Sybil blinks and sees a moment into the future. She, Morgan, and Gertrude have advantage on their next attack roll, until the end of Sybil's next turn.

Invisible Passage. Sybil magically turns invisible until she attacks or casts a spell, or until her concentration ends (as if concentrating on a spell). While invisible, she leaves no physical evidence of her passage, so she can be tracked only by magic. Any equipment she wears or carries is invisible with her.

Morgan Gaunt

Medium fae, neutral evil

Armor Class 17 (natural armor)

Hit Points 97 (13d8 + 39)

Speed 30 ft., swim 40 ft. (with her **Bogstalker Boots**)

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
17 (+3)	15 (+2)	16 (+3)	19 (+4)	14 (+2)	15 (+2)

Saving Throws INT +8, WIS +6

Skills Arcana +12, Deception +6, History +8, Perception +6, Stealth +6

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 16

Languages Common, Abyssal, Draconic, Goblin, Infernal, Primordial, Sylvan

Challenge 5 (1,800 XP) *see Coven XP*

Amphibious. Morgan can breathe air and water.

Innate Spellcasting. Morgan's innate spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 14). She can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: *dancing lights, minor illusion, vicious mockery*

Mimicry. Morgan can mimic animal sounds and humanoid voices. A creature that hears the sounds can tell they are imitations with a successful DC 17 Wisdom (Insight) check.

Spellcasting. Morgan is a 10th-level spellcaster. She can cast any of the spells that appear on the Coven's list, as well as any spells that are in her spellbook, but uses the Coven's collective spell slots. Her spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 16, +8 to hit with spell attacks).

Cantrips: *create bonfire, prestidigitation, thorn whip*

1st level: *comprehend languages, identify, shield*

2nd level: *crown of madness, mind spike, web*

3rd level: *fear, fireball, fly*

4th level: *arcane eye, black tentacles, wall of fire*

5th level: *scrying, telekinesis*

Actions

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 12 (2d8 + 3) slashing damage.

Illusory Appearance. Morgan covers herself and anything she is wearing or carrying with a magical illusion that makes her look like another creature of her general size and humanoid shape. The illusion ends if Morgan takes a bonus action to end it, or if she dies.

The changes wrought by this effect fail to hold up to physical inspection. Otherwise, a creature must take an action to visually inspect the illusion and succeed on a DC 20 Intelligence (Investigation) check to discern that Morgan is disguised.

Invisible Passage. Morgan magically turns invisible until she attacks or casts a spell, or until her concentration ends (as if concentrating on a spell). While invisible, she leaves no physical evidence of her passage, so she can be tracked only by magic. Any equipment she wears or carries is invisible with her.

Gertrude Gaunt

Medium fae, neutral evil

Armor Class 17 (natural armor)

Hit Points 110 (13d8 + 52)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
20 (+5)	13 (+1)	19 (+4)	16 (+3)	14 (+2)	15 (+2)

Saving Throws STR +9, CON +8

Skills Arcana +7, Animal Handling +6, Deception +6, Medicine +6, Nature +11, Survival +6

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 12

Languages Common, Draconic, Giant, Goblin, Orcish, Primordial, Sylvan

Challenge 5 (1,800 XP) *see Coven XP*

Amphibious. Gertrude can breathe air and water.

Innate Spellcasting. Gertrude's innate spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 14). She can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: *dancing lights, minor illusion, vicious mockery*

Mimicry. Gertrude can mimic animal sounds and humanoid voices. A creature that hears the sounds can tell they are imitations with a successful DC 17 Wisdom (Insight) check.

Actions

Multiattack. Gertrude makes two attacks, one with Thewcarver and one with her meat hook. If she has a target grappled, she can replace one attack with *Into the Pot!*

Thewcarver. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +9 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 12 (2d6+5) slashing damage.

Meat Hook. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +9 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 10 (2d4 + 5) piercing damage, and the target is grappled (escape DC 17). Gertrude can only have creature grappled at a time in this way.

Into the Pot! Gertrude moves within 5 feet of her cauldron, and attempts to place one grappled target into the pot. The target must make a DC 17 Strength saving throw, or immediately suffer 4d6 fire damage and be restrained and blinded. At the start of each of the target's turns, they immediately suffer an additional 4d6 fire damage, and can use an action to make a DC 17 Strength (Athletics) check to escape from the cauldron.

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +9 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 12 (2d8 + 3) slashing damage.

Illusory Appearance. Gertrude covers herself and anything she is wearing or carrying with a magical illusion that makes her look like another creature of her general size and humanoid shape. The illusion ends if Morgan takes a bonus action to end it, or if she dies.

The changes wrought by this effect fail to hold up to physical inspection. Otherwise, a creature must take an action to visually inspect the illusion and succeed on a DC 20 Intelligence (Investigation) check to discern that Gertrude is disguised.

Invisible Passage. Gertrude magically turns invisible until she attacks or casts a spell, or until her concentration ends (as if concentrating on a spell). While invisible, she leaves no physical evidence of her passage, so she can be tracked only by magic. Any equipment she wears or carries is invisible with her.

I've met the Sisters before! They're kind of, you know, weird? But they're nice.

When I met Gertrude, she gave me some of the most delicious stew I've ever had. No idea what was in it, but I loved it!

Morgan threatened to turn me into a slug, and Sybil I'd enjoy being a slug more, but they're still nice in my book.

The Coven is a valuable ally and a dangerous enemy. We've met several times in the past; Sybil's foresight is deeply useful. Still, at some point I may have to destroy them; it would be a shame, but some sacrifices are worth the reward.

ROTHOLLOW

Rothollow is a large, dead tree trunk, sitting on a small isle in the center of a sprawling, murky lake. It houses the Sisters, their workspaces and bedchambers, a few of their favored minions, a vast collection of trinkets and curios, a narrowboat, and a handful of oubliettes beneath the roots.

1. The Swollen Lake

The lake surrounding Rothollow, called the Swollen Lake, is filled with dark, cloudy water, swirling with silt and mire. Anyone who studies for a minute or two will see *things* seethe beneath the surface, roiling and churning amidst the murk.

If the all three Sisters agree and speak their secret pass-phrase, they can extend a knotty bridge of roots and vines, thus connecting Rothollow to the mainland, but otherwise it is impossible on foot.

The Sisters and their minions are free to swim in the Swollen Lake without harm, but anything else that tries—even naturally-inclined swimmers like Lizardfolk—will find themselves the subject of the Sisters' defenses. The Lake houses a large number of water snakes, piranhas, and bloodsucking leeches, all of which are eager to feast on creatures that do not have the Sisters' blessing warding them off.

On top of the smaller creatures, the Swollen Lake also houses a gigantic alligator, named Mister Lurk.

2. The Lecher's Daughter

In addition to Rothollow itself, the Coven also has a long narrowboat, a slow-moving river barge, called *The Lecher's Daughter*. The ship is rotted and mildewing, but still stays afloat, powered by old magic and spite. The Sisters can swim, but if the whole Coven ever wants to travel through the marsh as one, they take the *Daughter*—it's just not dignified enough to swim to an important meeting.

The *Daughter* doesn't have much in the way of special defenses or equipment, but is narrow and agile enough to navigate even the most treacherous of marshy river passages.

The Lecher's Daughter is captained by a surly redcap named Roscoe, along with a crew of bullywugs, collectively called the Suitors.

3. The Rotted Isle

The island that Rothollow proper sits on, sometimes called the Rotted Isle, is little more than a marshy outcropping, now overrun with roots and vines from the tree trunk itself. The soil is marshy, like as not suck your boots off your feet as you walk, and has a putrid, pungent smell hanging in the air.

The west side of the Isle has a small cluster of outbuildings and shacks, which house most of the Coven's immediate minions. Nearby is a small creaking jetty, where *The Lecher's Daughter* docks when not out in the marshes. On the opposite side lies Gertrude's garden, where herbs and vegetables grow.

The Isle is home to a dozen or so more of the Suitors, a sullen elven woman named Belladonna, a pair of sahuagin brothers called Left & Right, a half-ogre named Grashara, a handful of orphan humanoid children called the Ducklings, and a bewitched toad named Hortensius.

In all honesty, Rothollow might be the only place in the Marches whose beauty can rival my lair. The Sisters just fundamentally understand what makes a domain appealing; they know all the little details that make it intimidating yet comforting. Every time I visit the Rotted Isle, I'm reminded of some new change I must have Zadrok and the Kobolds make to my abode.

4. The Parlor

At the base of Rothollow is the parlor, the Sisters' main convening space. It is a wide, open chamber, with a door on both sides. The floor is filled with overstuffed rotten chairs and couches, small rickety tables, and shelves creaking with odds and ends. In the center of the room is a large hexagonal dining table, etched with the relief of a screaming face.

The Sisters use the ground floor as an all-purpose meeting room: they'll convene with each other, make deals with outsiders, issue orders to their minions, and hold family dinners. It's a busy common room for the most part, with minions often moving in and out through day and night.

Hortensius, the Coven's toad-herald, sits just outside the parlor, ready announce any visitors to the tree.

5. The Kitchen

Beneath the ground floor lie Rothollow's kitchen, where Gertrude holds court. In the center of the room is her great black iron cauldron, where stew eternally simmers, but throughout the room there are myriad other cookpots, stovetops, griddles, and roasting spits. The walls are lined with cabinets and shelves, filled with meats, vegetables, spices, and herbs.

The kitchen is hot, steamy, and busy. Rats scurry across the floorboards, picking up any scraps left behind (and Gertrude leaves plenty); there are nearly always one or two Ducklings and a handful of the Suitors tending to the kitchen. Better-known guests of the Sisters will sometimes be invited down to the kitchen to deal with Gertrude directly, rather than formally meet with her in the parlor.

The kitchen has windows along its upper walls, peeking out among the roots; these are used both as ventilation for steam, and so Gertrude can spy on approaching visitors while not leaving her cauldron.

6. The Oubliettes

The lowest level of Rothollow houses the oubliettes: 5 small, narrow cells, sunk into the floor. The oubliettes are waterlogged, ranging from ankle- to waist-deep based on the Swollen Lake; they're always cold, and never see sunlight.

The Sisters use the oubliettes primarily as holding cells; sometimes their deals will involve them capturing or acquiring individuals, who are then kept beneath the tree trunk and fed slop from the kitchen. Prisoners in the oubliettes have a low life expectancy, so it's not unheard-of to have the minions go down and treat a sickly prisoner—or even pull a prisoner up for a few hours, stuff them full of restorative stew, and send them back down.

The Sisters also use the oubliettes as a threat for the Suitors and Ducklings; from time to time, someone will be made an example of and be thrown into an oubliette for a day or two. "Listen to your Brewmother now, or I'll throw you in the oubliette!" is a common thing to hear from the kitchen during meal time.

7. The Library

Above the parlor is the library, which doubles as Morgan's workshop. The circular walls are lined with mildewing bookshelves; in the center of the room are several long trestle tables, where open tomes, scrawled notes, half-finished projects lie. While still damp, the library is a bit drier than the lower levels; rather than rot, the air is filled with the scent of must and old leather.

Morgan spends most of her time here, alone, tinkering and reading. Ducklings and Suitors are banned in the library, and the other minions are only allowed up by explicit permission. Anyone who breaks these rules is liable to be thrown into an oubliette, or else have some horrible curse cast on them by Morgan.

The exception to this rule are Madra and Gadhar, two smoky grey shadowhounds that Morgan keeps permanently summoned. They're loyal only to her, and are clever to perform most basic tasks while being vicious enough to tangle with most would-be foes. Their kennels are in the library, and when not out on an errand, they spend their time following at Morgan's heels.

It's true. I like the Sisters a lot, but every time the Big Guy visits them, it means that for the rest of us, we'll be spending the next week redecorating the lair again.

ROTHOLLOW



8. The Bedchambers

The top floor of Rothollow is where the Sisters sleep; three overripe four-poster beds sit up against the walls, and a mildering circular carpet lies in the center. Cracked paintings and moth-eaten tapestries hang from the walls; defiled tea sets sit on every bedside table.

Despite its would-be opulence, none of the Sisters spend much time in their bedchambers. They're usually too busy or preoccupied to spend much time truly lounging, and so generally only return to the bedchambers when they sleep.

Minions are allowed in the bedchambers, to wait on the Sisters or sweep up, except for the Suitors—their name still carries some weight, after all.

9. The Rooftop

From the broken bark of the Rothollow trunk peeks out a conical rooftop, accessible through a narrow trapdoor from the bedchambers. The roof is always wet, swept with wind and rain, and any paint that once adorned the shingles has long since worn off.

The rooftop houses a sentient scarecrow named Haybrain. He serves as watchman and spotter for Rothollow at large; anyone approaching will be seen by Haybrain, who then relays the sighting to the Sisters.

Other than Haybrain, Sybil is the only person that spends any kind of time on the rooftop, lost in a trance, murmuring to herself. She's known from time to time to leap from the rooftop, diving down into the Lake beneath.

If the Big Guy does decide to go to war with the Coven eventually, do you know why he's gonna win? Because they don't have a scribe! How're they supposed to coordinate all those minions of theirs if none of them can write orders? If it comes to a fight, the Coven's finished.

GAUNT COVEN MINIONS

Beyond Sybil, Morgan, and Gertrude, the Sisters keep a number of servants in their employ; they tend to the tree, help with meals and experiments, run errands, send messages, collect ingredients, retrieve items, scout foes, and otherwise perform any task the Sisters see fit to send them on.

Each minion's employment varies. Some, like the Suitors and Ducklings, are kept around primarily through manipulation and threats; some, like Left & Right and Grashara, are paid in food or gold or trinkets for their work; some, like Roscoe and Belladonna, owe a debt to the Sisters; and some, like Haybrain and Mister Lurk, stay with the Sisters because it's better than risking the wider world.

Belladonna the Elven Thief

Belladonna-Navarak, or Belladonna, is an elf indebted to the Sisters; she stole an artifact off a minion, and rather than risk reprisal, elected to work for the Coven instead. She works primarily as their thief and enforcer, recovering artifacts, stealing prizes from debtors, dealing with unwanted visitors, and threatening the lesser minions when they won't cooperate.

Belladonna herself is sullen, coy, and angsty. She spends most of her time sitting at the edge of the Swollen Lake, writing moody poetry or skipping stones. She's clever, certainly, and creative in her methods, but is easily insulted and spiteful. None of the other minions are friendly to her; Belladonna takes orders solely from the Sisters.

Belladonna is a **master thief**.

Master Thief (1,800 XP)

AC 16 HP 83 SPD 30' Prof. +3

S+0 D+4* C+2 I+0* W+0 Ch+1

Cunning Action dash, disengage, hide as bonus

Evasion on DEX saves

Multiattack: 3 shortwords.

Shortsword: *M W ATT* +7 1d6+4. **Sneak Attack** +4d6

L. Crossbow: 80'/320' *R W ATT* +7 1d8+4. **Sneak Attack** +4d6

Uncanny Dodge halve damage from one attack as reaction

The Ducklings

The Ducklings is the collective name given to a handful of humanoid children that have found their way to the Sisters. Some were kidnapped, some had their parents murdered, some were just found lost in the marsh. They perform many of household tasks around Rothollow: tending the garden, cleaning the house, helping with cooking, netting for leeches, and serving as guinea pigs for Morgan's experiments.

The Ducklings are almost never sent away from Rothollow, as they have an annoying tendency to try to escape, and then they must be punished. They're generally either a source of amusement for the other minions and thus liked, or are tolerated with silence. The exception to this are the Suitors, who view the Ducklings as their hated rivals, and constantly try to jockey for the Sisters' affections over the Ducklings.

When a Duckling reaches adolescence, they are either eaten by the Sisters or else try to escape, during which most die and then are eaten anyway.

The Ducklings are **commoners**.

Commoner (0 XP)

AC 10 HP 4 SPD 30' Prof. +2

S+0 D+0 C+0 I+0 W+0 Ch+0

Fist: *M W ATT* +2 1.

Grashara the Half-Ogre Apothecary

Grashara is a half-ogre half-orcish woman that works as an apothecary for the Coven. She, more than Gertrude herself, decides what grows on the Isle's garden, and it's her that tends to minions that are wounded or sick.

Grashara is a contracted employee of the Sisters; she works for room and board, plus her pick of ingredients for potions and salves. Even in the Marches, there aren't many places that will readily accept a half-ogre, and while the Coven isn't exactly kind, they're more welcoming of outcasts than most.

Grashara is generally cool and standoffish, but does care about her gardens and apothecary work; when she's with a patient, she's thorough and even-handed. Because Grashara has patched wounds or applied salves for just about everyone in or around Rothollow, she's well-liked by the other minions, or at least pleasantly ignored.

Half-Ogre Apothecary (450 XP)

AC 12 HP 30 SPD 30' Prof. +2

S+3 D+0 C+2 I+1 W+1 Ch+0

Healer use a healer's kit to heal 1d6+4 HP

Fist: *M W ATT* +5 1d4+3

Haybrain the Scarecrow Lookout

Haybrain is a living scarecrow, enchanted by Morgan to have some semblance of life within his straw-filled mind. Haybrain sits on Rothollow's roof all day and night, unsleeping and ever-watchful, ready to raise the alarm if intruders approach.

Because he was made by Morgan and because he does not possess great intelligence, Haybrain is content to do little more than watch. If anyone tries to talk to him, he has a mean, sneering attitude, like as not to mock and belittle before he approaches ordinary conversation.

Because Haybrain is so isolated and so aggravating to speak to, he's generally ignored the other minions. They leave him alone, and he leaves them alone.

Haybrain is a **scarecrow**.

Scarecrow (450 XP)

AC 11 HP 36 SPD 30' Prof. +2

S+0 D+1 C+0 I+0 W+0 Ch+1

Resist non-magic bludgeon, pierce, slash

Vulnerable fire

Immune poison, charm, exhaust, frighten, paralyze, unconscious

False Appearance as an ordinary scarecrow

Multiattack: 2 claws.

Claw: *M W ATT* +3 2d4+1, DC 11 WIS save or frighten for 1 turn.

Terrifying Glare: 1 creature 30' DC 11 WIS save or frighten and paralyze for 1 turn.



Hortensius the Toad

Hortensius is a fat, almost spherical toad, as big around as large grapefruit. He serves as Rothollow's herald, and so sits on a wooden post just outside the trunk's main entrance to the parlor. Anyone who approaches, be they Sister, minion, or outsider, is announced by Hortensius in an almost absurdly deep, booming, melancholic voice.

If someone approaches that Hortensius does not know, he will politely greet them, ask them their name, title, and business, and then announce them to Rothollow.

By and large, it is the Sisters who most like Hortensius; they find him oddly amusing. He's seen as a nuisance by the other minions, and is virulently hated by the Suitors, who see his position as herald as supplanting them, not to mention their similar froggy physiques.

Hortensius uses the **frog** statblock.

Toad (0 XP)

AC 1 HP 1 SPD 20', swim 20' Prof. +2

S-5 D+1 C-1 I-5 W-1 Ch-4

Amphibious

Standing Leap 10' long, 5' high

Left & Right the Sahuagin Hunters

Lifrusk and Raktusk, usually just called Left & Right, are a pair of sahuagin twins, the aquatic shark-people; hunters who specialize in ambush and murder. They're used primarily as mobile muscle by the Sisters, able to bring significant brute force to bear when subtlety and guile have failed. When not hunting down those on the Coven's hit list, the two also hunt game, bringing in most of the meat that the Coven consumes.

For the most part, Left & Right keep to themselves. They're feared by most of the minions for their ferocity and bloodthirstiness, and so are left well alone. From time to time, they'll work alongside Belladonna or Roscoe, so they maintain the bare minimum of cordiality with them, but otherwise they are distant creatures.

While the Sisters pay Left & Right well in meat, gold, and gemstones, they have the most transactional relationship; if a better employer were to come along, or the Sisters turned on the siblings, they'd have no issue abandoning the Coven.

Left & Right both use the **sahuagin baron** statblock.

Sahuagin Hunter (1800 XP)

AC 16 HP 76 SPD 30', swim 50' Prof. +3

S+4 D+2* C+3* I+2* W+1* Ch+3

Blood Frenzy adv. vs. creatures beneath full HP

Limited Amphibiousness needs to submerge once every 4 hours

Shark Telepathy magically command sharks up to 120' away

Multiattack: 1 bite, 2 claws or trident.

Bite: *M W ATT* +7 2d4+1.

Claws: *M W ATT* +7 2d6+4.

Trident: *M* or 20'/60' *R W ATT* +7 2d6+4 or 2d8+4 if two-handed.

Madra & Gadhar the Shadowhounds

Far and away Morgan's most successful experiment was the transformation of a pair of ordinary mastiffs into two shadowhounds: smoky black dogs infused with magic from the vale of shadows, able to blend into murk and shade.

Despite being dangerous and shadow-infused, the two dogs themselves are both quite friendly, at least when not ripping someone to shreds on Morgan's orders. Most of the time, they act like ordinary, cheerful dogs: they follow their mistress, they bark at strangers, they chase small animals (and usually catch them), they investigate strange new smells and sounds, and generally have free run of Rothollow.

For the most part, Madra & Gadhar are liked by the other minions; the Ducklings are a little bit intimidated at first but learn fast, Belladonna and Grashara find them good company, and Roscoe and Left & Right appreciate having companions that don't talk. The Suitors both fear and hate the shadowhounds, but know better than to ever tangle with them.

Madra & Gadhar are both **shadow mastiffs**.

Shadow Mastiff (450 XP)

AC 12 HP 33 SPD 40' Prof. +2

S+3 D+2 C+1 I-3 W+1 Ch-3

Ethereal Awareness can see ethereal creatures and objects

Keen Hearing & Smell adv. on relevant Perception checks

Shadow Blend while in shadow, become invisible as bonus action

Sunlight Weakness disadv. while in bright sunlight

Bite: *M W ATT* +5 2d6+3, DC 13 STR save or prone

Mister Lurk the Giant Alligator

While the Coven controls most living things in and around Rothollow and the Swollen Lake, there is one key exception: the gigantic alligator that drifts through the Lake, dubbed Mister Lurk.

Mister Lurk has but one goal: to eat as much as possible while exerting as little effort as possible. Because of this, the Sisters have found him more useful to keep around than kill or drive out. They share a kind of bloodthirsty symbiosis: Mister Lurk hunts any swimmers the leeches don't catch, and in exchange he's allowed to lounge and eat as much as he can of said swimmers, along with the occasional unlucky Suitor.

Such is the life of a giant alligator, and it is one Mister Lurk very much enjoys.

Mister Lurk uses the **giant crocodile** statblock.

Giant Alligator (1800 XP)

AC 14 HP 85 SPD 30', swim 50' Prof. +3

S+5 D-1 C+3 I-4 W+0 Ch-2

Hold Breath for 30 minutes

Multiattack: 1 bite and 1 tail.

Bite: *M W ATT* +8 3d10+5, grapple and restrain (escape DC 16).

Tail: 10' *M W ATT* +8 2d8+5, DC 16 STR save or prone.



Roscoe the Ship Captain

Roscoe is a surly, grouchy redcap, a kind of fae not unlike a burly, foul-mouthed gnome. He is the captain of The Lecher's Daughter, and rarely goes more than ten paces from his ship. For the most part, he ferries about the minions on whatever jobs they have been assigned, and brings invited outsiders across the Lake to Rothollow.

Roscoe serves at the pleasure of the Sisters; he lost a bet with them some time ago, and does years and years of servitude in repayment. While he obviously resents them for this, he also respects them; he knows that, were their positions reversed, he would do the exact same and still be justified for it. Such is the nature of fae.

Because Roscoe runs the Daughter with an iron fist, he's rather hated by the Suitors; otherwise, though, he's generally well-liked among the other minions. He's grumpy and cranky, but has an avuncular style that many—particularly the Ducklings—tend to like.

Roscoe is a **redcap**.

Redcap (700 XP)

AC 13 HP 45 SPD 25' Prof. +2

S+4 D+1 C+4 I+0 W+1 Ch-1

Iron Boots disadv. on Stealth

Outsize Strength counts as medium while grappling

Multiattack: 3 sickles.

Sickle: *M* W *ATT* +6 2d4+4.

Ironbound Pursuit: move up to speed, target makes DC 14 DEX save or 3d10+4 and prone.

The Suitors

The Suitors, as dubbed by the Sisters, are roughly two dozen bullywugs—preening and puffed-up frog-people—that serve the Coven. They perform maintenance tasks alongside the Ducklings: cooking, cleaning, ensuring Rothollow remains at the proper level of decay, and so on. Additionally, they also perform many of the tasks away from Rothollow: running messages, foraging for food, collecting ingredients, and serving as scouts (and bait) for potential enemies. Finally, they crew The Lecher's Daughter, under Captain Roscoe, who mocks and belittles them relentlessly.

Bullywugs are prone to petty rivalries and bitter envy, and the Suitors' position at the bottom of the ladder—other than perhaps the Ducklings—only exacerbates these feelings. Every Suitor is constantly putting on airs, striving to earn the approval of the Sisters, and doing anything they can to undercut their fellows. They are regularly bullied by Roscoe, Belladonna, and Haybrain; Left & Right and Madra & Gadhar have all learned that while murdering a Suitor will earn the Sisters' ire, frightening them for sport brings a laugh.

Still, the Suitors stay, both because their pride couldn't bear to abandon the chance for greatness and because a bullywug cannot outrun a shahuagin, a shadowhound, or—if it comes down to it—a hag.

The Suitors are **bullywugs**.

Bullywug (50 XP)

AC 15 HP 11 SPD 20', swim 40' Prof. +2

S+1 D+1 C+1 I-2 W+0 Ch-2

Amphibious

Speak with Frogs & Toads

Swamp Camouflage adv. on Stealth while in swamps

Standing Leap 20' long, 10' high

Multiattack: 1 bite, 1 spear.

Bite: *M* W *ATT* +3 1d4+1.

Spear: *M* or 20' /60' *R* W *ATT* 1d6+1 or 1d8+1 if two-handed.

Imagine running from a fight! None of us would ever do that. No indeed, no chance whatsoever. Kobolds are famous for their bravery and courage and willingness to stand and fight nasty foes, even ones that are ten times our size. Fearless in danger, that's us kobolds!

THE COVEN IN COMBAT

Taking on the Coven in open combat is a formidable task. Rothollow is quite defensible, and the myriad minions mean that any aggressive adventurers will be hard-pressed to reach the Sisters themselves without expending key resources. Once reached, the Sisters are dangerous opponents in and of themselves, with plenty of tricks and tools at their disposal.

The Sisters

The Sisters support each other as best they can; focused around Gertrude's cauldron. Each Sisters can vanish and reappear, making them wily and mobile fighters. Morgan can use her spells to damage groups of enemies at once; Sybil can impose visions of a target's doom to freeze up the most powerful targets. Weaker foes are easily grappled by Gertrude and forced into her cauldron, where they slowly boil to death.

The Sisters will defend each other over any minions, but if one falls, the other two will retreat, abandoning Rothollow. Mister Lurk knows not to attack them, and so they can easily vanish into the murky waters of the Swollen Lake. Afterwards, they'll bide their time, and then return in vicious counter-attack.

Minions

Because the minions have varying levels of loyalty and combat prowess, they treat a potential attack against the Sisters differently.

Belladonna will fight off any attackers—using the shadows and sneak attacks to her advantage—until one or more Sisters falls in combat. Then, she'll turn and run; if the *Daughter* is still around, she'll take that, otherwise she'll try to swim across the Lake.

The Ducklings will flee at the first sign of combat, taking shelter in their huts, in the kitchen, and any nook or cranny on the Rotted Isle; they then try to hide. If one of the Sisters dies, each Duckling has a 50% chance to make an attempt to escape; they'll stay in their hiding places otherwise. The Ducklings will try to flee on the *Daughter* if it's available; otherwise, they'll try to swim across the Lake.

Grashara won't retaliate against any attackers, but will defend herself if directly attacked. She'll tend to any wounded on the Isle that she can get to and bring them back to her hut. Once the combat's over, she will yield to the victor and tend to their wounds.

Haybrain, as a literal creation of Morgan, will fight to the death to defend her and her Sisters. He'll likely be among the first to raise the alarm, given his position. If Morgan dies, he'll freeze up,

Hortensius takes no sides, and instead will continue to announce anyone coming or going from Rothollow through the main parlor door, as well as proclaim great honors to the fallen. If the Sisters are defeated, he will serve the victors as loyally as he did the Coven.

Left & Right will fight off any attackers and defend the Sisters until either one of the Sisters falls, either of them drops below 1/3 HP, or they are made a significant offer of gold (or other valuables). If it's one of the former two, they will both flee the Isle by swimming; if it's the latter, they may ally with the attackers, depending on how good the deal is.

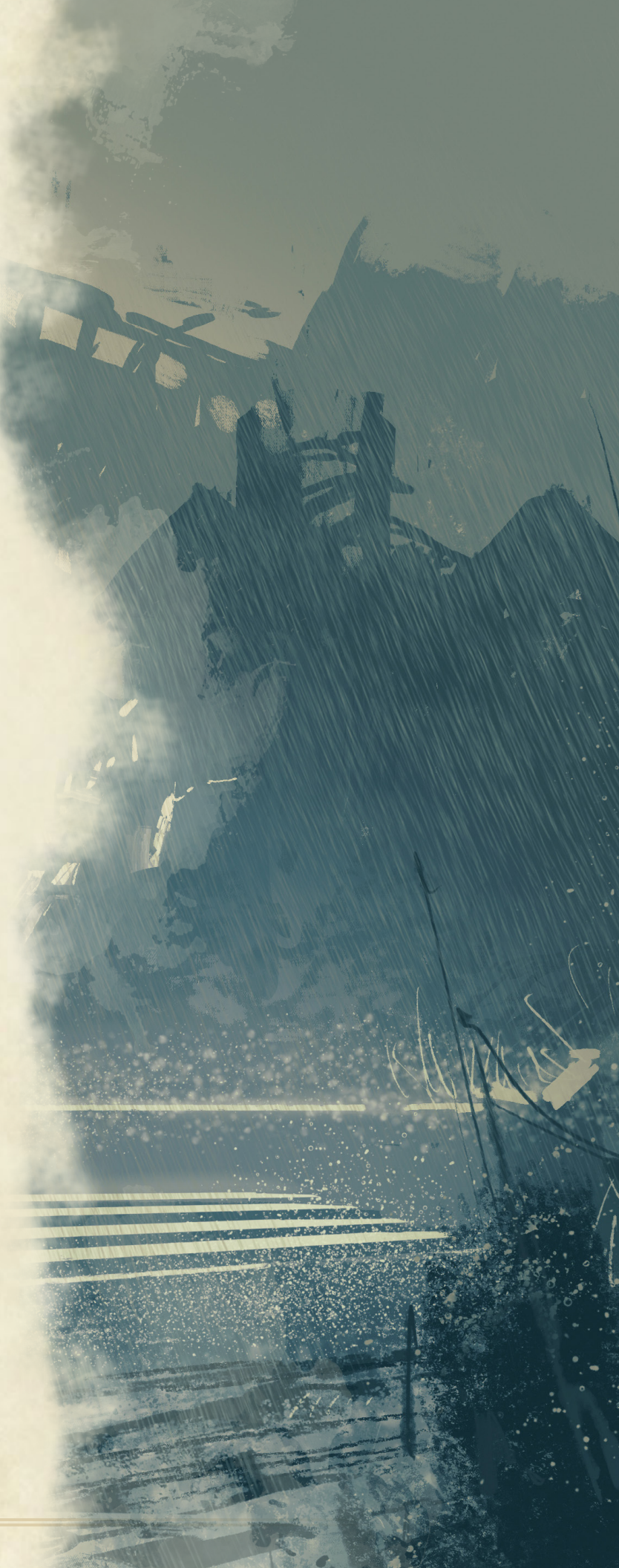
Madra & Gadhar, as creations of Morgan, will fight to the death to defend her and her Sisters. If she's slain in combat, they'll take on much more normal dog-like behavior, likely involving them vanishing and fleeing Rothollow.

Mister Lurk will attempt to eat any attackers swimming towards Rothollow, any dead bodies that float in the water or are near to the shore. Once the Sisters are defeated, he'll eat anyone in the water, regardless of who they are (or were, like as not).

Roscoe will fight to defend the Sisters against any attackers; if they come over the water, he'll bring the *Daughter* out to attack them on the Lake, too. If all three of the Sisters die, Roscoe will surrender, and explain that as a fae, he now owes a debt to the victors.

The Suitors will rush near the attackers and yell a lot about honor and glory, but won't make much in the way of actual attacks. If one of the Sisters, Roscoe, or Belladonna actively yells at them to fight, they'll push into the fray, but otherwise they hang back and avoid the fight. If one of the Sisters dies, or if multiple Suitors die in short order, they'll break and flee, swimming across the Lake.

Zadrok's only saying that because he knows—as do all of my servants—that if he runs, things will only be worse him upon his eventual return.





SERVICES FROM THE SISTERS

While the Coven might well end up as an enemy group to the adventurers, if they take a more peaceful tactic, the Coven has many powerful services available to those willing to pay the price.

Each Sisters offers something different: Sybil has her prophetic gifts, Morgan has her magic, and Gertrude has her meals. Each is valuable, and each is different.

The Sisters' Price

Generally speaking, the Sisters do not charge their clients in gold or silver. From time to time they may accept gemstones or jewelry, but for the most part, they trade in favors. Exactly what the Sisters are asking for varies, but: Morgan typically asks for the recovery of some rare text or artifact, Gertrude asks for some harvest of unusual flora or fauna, and Sybil asks for information and secrets belonging to someone else.

The size and scope of these favors depends on the size and scope of what the adventurers are asking for in return. Consider, for each service offered, how long it would take to acquire otherwise; this is your rough measuring stick. For example, a serving of Bogdweller Soup is roughly equivalent to a few potions of water-breathing; rare and valuable, but not absurdly difficult to acquire otherwise. Thus, in return, Gertrude might ask the adventurers to find her the stinger of a wyvern, or the four heads of a chimera. Weigh the tasks against the rewards as you might for any other.

However, because hags are notorious for their guile, try to have the tasks the Sisters assign be somewhat malevolent, ideally indirectly so. Harvested tree bark, for example, might come from a dryad queen's favored grove, causing her to wither without it; an ancient text on healing might stop a band of siblings from saving their diseased parents; a secret love affair between two youths might spark a war. Hags delight in cruelty and malice and ugly truths, so whenever they can, the favors they ask bring only ruin.

Prophecies & Portents

While Sybil is flighty and sometimes difficult to find, she is willing to read the future of the Guests of the Coven, for a price.

Sybil has two primary services available: the first is that she will take the palm of the client, and offer a piece of insight into some possible opportunity or danger in their future. When Sybil reads an adventurer's future in this way, the player rolls 1d20 and records it; any time in the next week, that player can use that foretold roll in the place of any attack roll, saving throw, or ability check made by the player or a creature they can see. Once Sybil has read someone's future in this way, she will not do another reading for them until they have used their current opportunity.

The second, and more traditional service, is a divination into the client's far future. This is a much hazier, less direct service, like as not to be obscured in metaphor and analogue as it is to be taken clearly.

Oracular Insights

d12 Reading

- 1 *Justice.* A court sentencing a murderer; secrets and lies exposed to the whole of a kingdom to know; the common folk rising against their oppressors.
- 2 *Safety.* A scouting party fleeing to their army; shelter found in the wilds from the rainstorm; arrows sinking into a shield on the battlefield.
- 3 *Evil.* A tyrant rising to power amidst crowing supporters and dead opposition; a dead friend, laid to rest, risen once more by ill magic; innocent lovers dragged from their bed.
- 4 *Trickery.* A forger layering cold iron coins with golden leaf; a dagger flashing beneath swirling cloaks and hooded faces; a lie told, bold-faced, to the world.
- 5 *Change.* Summer being cast aside in favor of a crisp autumn morn; a child growing to adulthood in a few heartbeats; a castle being worn down by footfalls and time.
- 6 *Return.* A prodigal child coming home to their house after years away; birds roosting in springtime after a winter away; a lost sock being rediscovered beneath a dusty bedframe.
- 7 *Loss.* Flames consuming a handed-down family home; disease stealing children from their parents' arms; a ship sinking into thrashing waves.
- 8 *Chaos.* Scrambling against an overwhelming current of nameless, faceless, desperate bodies; air suffused with ash from an unseen blaze; a sudden, unmistakable shuddering of the earth.
- 9 *Authority.* An army led by an iron fist sweeps across the land. There is no recourse, no chance for resistance; a shadow-figure in a blinding throne.
- 10 *Joy.* A coming-together of friends; an unexpected turn of undeniably good luck; a celebration of life after a brush with death.
- 11 *Control.* The somber interior of a war room; the client pushes an effigy across a large-scale map of an unknown place, and the gathered generals sob.
- 12 *Death.* Utter, inscrutable nothingness, a starless void; a crumbling, unreadable tombstone overgrown with vines; a huge black dog, ever-following and never-sleeping.

Magic & Trinkets

Morgan has numerous spell scrolls available for sale as well as a collection of strange magical trinkets. None of them can be trusted to behave as advertised, but they come cheaper and easier than their ordinary counterparts might suggest otherwise.

Morgan will only offer the barest explanations for the items and scrolls being sold; she always just says something simple like “it’s an old tea set,” or, “it’s a scroll that turns people into animals.”

When a player identifies one of the scrolls, they learn that it is the base spell and that there are some manner of additional or altered effects on the scroll, but not what those effects are.

Spell Scrolls for Sale

d12 Spell Scroll

- 1 *Fireball*, but any resultant flames reverse the effects of water & oil: oil extinguishes them, water causes them to spread further.
- 2 *Detect thoughts*, but any thoughts or feelings the caster tries to read are always the target’s worst thoughts and feelings about the caster.
- 3 *Major image*, but any illusory creatures created act on their own volition, spewing insults and making rude hand gestures.
- 4 *Charm monster*, but the charmed monster acts like a hyperactive puppy; aggressive, naive, needy, and desperate for attention.
- 5 *Polymorph*, but the target is transformed into the opposite creature than the caster intended: dogs into cats, elephants into mice, lions into sheep, and so on.
- 6 *Mirror image*, but the illusions created are of the caster’s fellow party members, instead of the caster themselves.
- 7 *Zone of truth*, but the targets can only lie; to the caster, they seem to be telling the truth.
- 8 *Water walk*, but the targets can only walk on the underside of the surface, underwater. Gravity pulls them towards the surface, regardless of which side they are on.
- 9 *Spirit guardians*, but the guardians appear as twisted fae, and the caster cannot control who is designated as friends or foes.
- 10 *Hideous laughter*, but while the target laughs, they suffocate.
- 11 *Create food & water*, but once someone takes a bite of food or sip of water, they must keep consuming until all the food and water is gone.
- 12 *Contact other plane*, but the spell contacts either Morgan, Gertrude, or Sybil, randomly determined; the caster does not know this.

Magical Trinkets for Sale

d12 Magical Trinket

- 1 A human eyeball floating in a jar of green fluid. It always looks at the closest living thing, even if that thing is invisible.
- 2 A bell that is silent to everything except rats; when rung it, all rats within 500 ft. will rush towards the bell.
- 3 A knife with two blades and no hilt. It is impossible to use without cutting one’s self.
- 4 A pair of dice carved from bone; they always roll a 7, even if you take one die away.
- 5 A small black notebook. Anything written in the notebook becomes twisted and warped over the course of a day, eventually turning into blasphemous insults.
- 6 A cracked and chipped tea set. Anything drunk from the set makes the ingester throw up violently five minutes later.
- 7 A preserved dwarf’s head. If someone holds the head upside by the beard for one minute, they can see through the dwarf’s dead eyes until they release the beard.
- 8 100’ of fine silk rope; if left unattended and unobserved for an hour, it will tie itself into a noose.
- 9 A knapsack that can hold 200 lbs. of gear while still weighing only 10 lbs. Anything placed inside that hasn’t been salted will be permanently eaten by the knapsack.
- 10 A carved wooden flute; it can only play in minor keys, and causes anyone who listens to think of a dear person that recently died.
- 11 A fine handheld fan; any wind blown by it takes on the smell of rotten eggs.
- 12 A wolverine skull on a length of twine; if held in front of you like a censer, it will swing towards the nearest bones.

Dishes

Gertrude’s stew cauldron is always brewing and her ovens are always hot. Unlike Morgan’s trinkets, Gertrude’s foodstuffs are usually either strictly beneficial or harmful—she makes them too frequently and in too large a quantity to properly spin each into strange directions.

Like Morgan, however, Gertrude is rarely forthright in what her dishes entirely do, preferring to sidestep and deflect when asked probing questions. All guests are freely offered a single bowl of stew, which will always be beneficial—unless they hesitate or imply Gertrude is attempting trickery, in which case the stew will become harmful.

Gertrude will also sell recipes from her cookbooks, much as Morgan sells her trinkets and Sybil her prophecies. Each dish has three principal ingredients, plus broth and whatever additional meats or vegetables the chef would like to add. (Gertrude most commonly makes hers with rat, crab, eel, turnips, beets, and onions; when she can get it, her preferred meat is that of humanoid children.)

If an adventurer wishes to cook a dish, they need the requisite ingredients, a workspace with an oven or cauldron, and one hour’s time. If they have any talent or training in cooking, no roll is required; otherwise, it requires a DC 10 Survival (Intelligence) or Survival (Wisdom) check.

The recipes listed provide enough food for two people; they must be consumed within 1 hour after the brewing is finished, and last for 8 hours.

1. Giant's Arm Stew +2 Strength

Ingredients

1. Liver of a giant
2. Owlbear's talons
3. Chestnut bark

Recipe

1. Chop the liver.
2. Powder the talons and the bark, together.
3. Stir all into broth. Add vegetables and seasoning as desired.

Effects

Makes you quite a bit stronger. Very useful when you need to throw someone out of the house.

2. Spark Wine Resistance to Fire

Ingredients

1. Salamander tongue
2. Fire beetle wings
3. Spicy peppers

Recipe

1. Crumble the wings over your preferred wine. White is best.
2. Crush the peppers, add them in.
3. Squeeze out the tongue into the drink.

Effects

Helps you deal with intense heat, if it comes to that. Don't drink it too fast.

3. Silvertongue Cut +2 Charisma

Ingredients

1. Heart of a fiend (a Devil is ideal)
2. One drow's eye and ear
3. Frog legs

Recipe

1. Mash the eye, ear, and the heart together.
2. Spread them over your preferred meat (mine is crab, usually).
3. Garnish it with fried legs.

Effects

Somehow, it lets you speak a little more clearly, a little more gracefully.

4. Finger-Melt Jello Resistance to Acid

Ingredients

1. Slice of a jelly (black or yellow)
2. Mimic flesh
3. Oranges

Recipe

1. Get the juices out of the oranges.
2. Seal the juice, flesh, and slice into a jar. Shake vigorously for 10 minutes.
3. Serve cold, and eat fast.

Effects

Acidic stuff, spitter juice and whatnot, will hurt you far less. Very handy.

5. Quickeye Pie Advantage on Initiative

Ingredients

1. Quickling feet
2. Piercer's eye (or a Roper, if you can get one)
3. Wings of a hawk

Recipe

1. Sear the feet and the wings. Batter them if you can.
2. Mix with veggies and croutons.
3. Stick the eye on a toothpick and serve.

Effects

Makes you just a bit faster getting up out of your chair.

6. Glowly Pudding Resistance to Radiant

Ingredients

1. Pegasus wing (if you can get unicorn horn, use that as garnish)
2. Deep cattle's head
3. Wild fireflies, not jarred

Recipe

1. Get a nice pudding; mash the fireflies and put them in.
2. Stuff the cattle's head with the pudding
3. Fry the wings, then dip them in the pudding.

Effects

Lets you cope when the angels and holy folks bring out their bright weapons.

7. Hardy Hash +2 Constitution

Ingredients

1. Troll hands
2. Flail snail flail
3. Crocodile hide

Recipe

1. Sear the troll's hands. More than they already should be, at least.
2. Crack the flail open, and spread the juices over the hands.
3. Wrap the whole thing in the hide. Serve hot.

Effects

Makes you tough. Tougher than basically anything.

8. Punch-o-Thunder Resistance to Lightning & Thunder

Ingredients

1. Blue dragon scales
2. Wood from a tree struck by lightning
3. Shrimp, ideally fresh

Recipe

1. Get the prawns grilling on a fire built from the tree.
2. Crush the scales as best you can; use magic if you have to.
3. Scatter the scales over the prawns; serve on skewers.

Effects

Little shocks will brush off you easy. Big shocks, too, sometimes.

9. Brainy Brew +2 Intelligence

Ingredients

1. Tentacles of an craniophagic deep-kind
2. Nose from a mage (any will do)
3. A good stout

Recipe

1. Dice the tentacles. Drain them best you can.
2. Sear the nose. Make sure it's nice and crispy.
3. Mix them in with the stout, leave it upside down in a cask for a week or two, then drink fast.

Effects

Helps the memory and thinking, all sorts of good for puzzles and games.

10. Bogdweller Soup Amphibiousness

Ingredients

1. Crocodile teeth (alligator will not do)
2. Fresh gill of sahuagin
3. Swamp-algae bloom, the more toxic the better

Recipe

1. Crush the teeth and algae using a mortar and pestle.
2. Once the teeth are a paste, soak the gills in the paste for a day.
3. To achieve the full effect, suck the tooth-algae mixture through the gills. The gills themselves need not be eaten, but don't let that stop you.

Effects

Grants the ability to breathe murky swamp-water for a time.

11. Astral Salad Resistance to Force

Ingredients

1. Elongated skull of an astral-person
2. Phase spider legs
3. Various greens, as fresh as you can

Recipe

1. Boil the skull, then saw the top off.
2. Dice the legs, then fry and batter them.
3. Mix your greens in the skull, and use the legs for croutons.

Effects

Sometimes magic you use to hit stuff likes to hit back—this helps with that.

12. Dollop of Grace +2 Dexterity

Ingredients

1. Tendrils of a flickering tentacle-panther
2. Pixie wings
3. Grasshoppers

Recipe

1. Powder the grasshoppers and the wings.
2. De-spine the tendrils, then fry them until they get juicy.
3. Dust the tendrils with the powder.

Effects

Makes you more lithe, more agile, and a good deal better at reaching under the bed when you lose your spectacles.

13. Splinter Whiskey Resistance to Psychic

Ingredients

1. Eyes of a many-eyed deep one (the more powerful, the better)
2. A handful of rats
3. A sharp whiskey, but not a scotch

Recipe

1. Carefully scoop out the brains of the rats.
2. Make them into a paste, slowly adding the eyes.
3. Dissolve the paste in your whiskey.

Effects

Helps to guard your mind, keep you firmly rooted in the here and now.

14. Owl Bake +2 Wisdom

Ingredients

1. One giant owl or owlbear, whole
2. A priest's tongue (doesn't matter which god they serve)
3. Stuffing, ideally with garlic and onion

Recipe

1. Pluck the owl(bear), and then stuff it.
2. Bake it for several hours, checking regularly.
3. Jam the priest's tongue into its beak. Serve whole.

Effects

Makes you a bit more put together, a bit more canny, a bit more aware.

15. Deathly Dish Resistance to Necrotic

Ingredients

1. Worm-spawn of a slumbering elder being (no carcass—just the worms)
2. A ghastr's belly-fat
3. Meat, with the bones still in it

Recipe

1. Clean the belly, then fill it with water and hot stones.
2. Boil your meat, keeping the bones in. Season as needed.
3. About a half hour in, drop your worms into the brew. Make sure the wriggling stops before you eat.

Effects

Makes you just a bit faster getting up out of your chair.

16. Rattlesnake's Pleasure Resistance to Poison

Ingredients

1. A wyvern's gland
2. Head of a poisonous great-toad (gold is the best)
3. A live rattlesnake

Recipe

1. Hollow out the head, and fill it with water.
2. Pour the Wyvern's juices in, let them boil then cool.
3. Drown the rattlesnake in the drink. Leave it in for one hour, then eat.

Effects

Helps with all of the venoms and poisons out there in the world.

17. Shepherd Pie Telepathy between those who eat it

Ingredients

1. Gnoll ears
2. A homunculus eye
3. A few pounds of flesh, taken from a shepherd (any kind of person with a flock will do, but shepherds are leaner than clergy)

Recipe

1. Melt the homunculus eye over a low flame. Be sure to scoop the pupil out first, or the ears will not stiffen up properly.
2. Line a bowl with the ears and drizzle in the melted eye.
3. Fill the ear-lined bowl to the brim with flesh. Smother in eye-melt.

Effects

Those who partake of the prepared dish share a psychic connection for a time.

18. Infernal Delight Always know a lie when heard

Ingredients

1. The flank of a deceased fiend (ideally a Demon)
2. Blood of a fire giant
3. A lump of volcanic rock

Recipe

1. Get the prawns grilling on a fire built from the tree.
2. Crush the scales as best you can; use magic if you have to.
3. Scatter the scales over the prawns; serve on skewers.

Effects

Lets you know a lie when spoken aloud, unless spoken by a true fiend.

19. Cloudtop Crumble Resistance to damage from falls

Ingredients

1. The feathers of a eagle-feathered kith
2. The spined tail of a manticores
3. Flour from wheat grown on a mountainside

Recipe

1. Powder the feathers up finely, mix half with the flour.
2. Hack up the manticore tail, fill in the crumble.
3. Bake, then sprinkle the other half of the feathers on top.

Effects

Helps the memory and thinking, all sorts of good for puzzles and games.

20. Chilled Bone-Loaf Resistance to Cold

Ingredients

1. Tail of a winter wolf
2. Yeti's gizzard
3. Assorted meats with the bones still on, for the loaf

Recipe

1. Dice the gizzard, mix well with the meats.
2. Shave the tail, stuff it in with the loaf. Keep the fur.
3. Bake the loaf, and sprinke the fur on top.

Effects

Grants the ability to breathe murky swamp-water for a time.

APPENDIX IV: MAGIC ITEMS

In this appendix, you will find descriptions of 20 items of power whose specific effects and abilities are particularly suited for a game in the West Marches. Their primary focus is in interacting with the wilderness, with information and discovery, and with developing character through play; these general ideas can also serve as a guidepost from which you can begin to think about additional existing magic items you may want to include in your game, or items you may want to create specifically for it.

You may be surprised to see that none of the items in this section are affixed with the +X bonuses to attack and damage rolls and that are commonly found on magic items. This is by design; you should apply a numeric bonus to an item for which it is appropriate as needed for your specific game. In addition, when you insert these items into your game, consider having them be made of one of the special crafting materials detailed in Appendix V (page 103).

1. Bogstalker Boots

Wondrous item, very rare (requires attunement), 2 lb.

A pair of stained crocodile-leather boots, permanently dripping with swamp mire. While attuned to the boots, you gain the following benefits:

- You gain a swim speed of 40 ft., and can walk on the surface of water at the same speed.
- You can breathe underwater, and do not suffer penalties from obscurity while underwater.
- While in swamps or marshes, if you stay completely still for 1 minute, you turn invisible until you move, attack, or cast a spell. If you turn invisible while underwater, you can move freely until you emerge, attack, or cast a spell.

A predator's greatest weapon is patience.

2. Boots of Cartography

Wondrous item, rare (requires attunement), 2 lb.

A pair of worn leather boots, lined with silken-soft fur. While attuned to the boots, you gain the following benefits:

- You ignore difficult terrain.
- You have advantage on saving throws made to resist or avoid being knocked prone, losing your footing, or being moved against your will.
- You can use an action to learn which way is north, your current elevation above or below sea level, and the number of days until the next full moon. You can do this again after completing a short rest.
- As an action, you can activate the Boots' mark, which lasts for 24 hours or until activated again. While the mark is active, you always know the precise distance and direction from yourself to the mark.

Why wonder when you can wander?

3. Boots of Leaping & Landing

Wondrous item, rare (requires attunement), 2 lb.

A pair of tough, cracked leather boots, lined with threadbare wool. While attuned to the boots, you gain the following benefits:

- Your jump distance triples.
- Whenever you take the dash action on your turn, you can choose to gain a level of exhaustion and triple your jump distance again.
- As a reaction, you can cast the *feather fall* spell targeting only yourself. After you have cast feather fall in this way three times, and you cannot do so again until you complete a long rest.

Equally good at both saving cats in trees and catching dragons by the tail mid-flight.

4. Brewmother's Apron

Wondrous item, legendary (requires attunement), 10 lb.

A heavy cloth-and-leather apron, permanently discolored. While attuned to the apron, you gain the following benefits:

- The apron's pockets can hold up to 100 lb. of flesh, meat, or body parts, but the apron never weighs more than 10 lb.
- Anything placed in the apron's pockets takes twice as long to rot.
- As an action, you can consume one body part weighing 10 lb. or more inside your apron. For 10 minutes, you gain one of the following traits of the creature from which the body part came:
 - One of your ability scores is replaced with the creature's score.
 - You gain one of the creature's senses.
 - You gain one of the creature's immunities or resistances.
 - You can read, speak, and write one of the creature's languages.
- You cannot clean your hands of blood or gore.

Some think a spattering of viscera across the chest is a symbol of strength. Seems more like a waste of shirts.

5. Deadking's Hammer

Magic weapon (any hammer), rare, weight varies.

A gigantic hammer, forged from dark iron; giant runes are written along the haft. The hammer provides the following benefits:

- Any hit scored against an object or structure automatically becomes a critical hit.
- When you destroy one object of Large size or larger, you gain one charge.
- You can hold a maximum of ten charges.
- You can expend one charge to cast *knock* without using a spell slot, or five charges to cast *fabricate* without using a spell slot.
- When you finish a long rest, any unspent charges are lost.

Wield the might and skill of the ancient fire giant king-smiths.

6. Distant Ubiquity

Magic weapon (handaxe), legendary (requires attunement), 2 lb.

A simple handaxe forged from a single piece of rusted metal; each side of the head has a twisting glyph carved into it. While attuned to the axe, you gain the following benefits:

- The axe's thrown range increases to a short range of 60 ft. and a long range of 180 ft.
- As a bonus action, you can cause the axe to freeze in place. While frozen, the axe will not move, even defying gravity. The axe can hold up to 10,000 lb., and a DC 30 STR check can move it, but otherwise nothing can make it move.
- As a bonus action or reaction, you can unfreeze the axe, at which point it will resume its previous movement, preserving inertia.

To the untrained eye, this beast is a junker. To the trained eye, however, this junker is a beast.

All of these treasures and more can be found in a true dragon's hoard. Even now, you piteous wretches yearn and lust for the meager coppers, squirreling them away like mewling goblins. Imagine my vault: riches as glittering as these, only ten-thousandfold.

7. Grappler's Dagger

Magic weapon (dagger), very rare (requires attunement), 1 lb.

A bright and shining dagger, wicked sharp. The hilt is wrapped in soft grey cloth. While attuned to the dagger, you gain the following benefits:

- When the dagger is not in your hand and is within 120 feet, you can use a bonus action to cause silk rope to appear from the last free hand that held it to the dagger. The rope is automatically attached to the dagger, and is wrapped tightly around the hand.
- When the rope is summoned, you can use a reaction or a bonus action to cause the rope to tighten:
 - If the dagger is simply loose, this causes it to return to the hand holding the rope, whereupon the rope vanishes.
 - If the dagger is embedded in a creature or object, either you are pulled to it or it is pulled to you. If it weighs less than you do, it is pulled 60 feet towards you; if you weigh less than it, you are pulled 60 feet towards the object.

There are one thousand and one things you can do with an ordinary knife—this knife can do one thousand and two.

8. Gambeson of Gliding

Magic armor (leather), rare (requires attunement), 13 lb.

A fitted leather gambeson, well-made and well-maintained. A fine layer of glimmering mesh connects the sleeves of the jacket to the waist, and the in-seam of the legs together. While attuned to the gambeson, you gain the following benefits:

- As a reaction while in the air, you can spread your arms to magically glide. While gliding in this way, you fall only 10 feet per round, and can move up to 60 feet laterally on your turn using your movement. When you touch the ground, you stop gliding, but take no damage from the fall. You can use a reaction or bonus action to stop gliding. If you bring your arms together or otherwise stop spreading them apart, you will begin to fall.
- As an action, you can magically launch yourself up to 120 feet in the air. Once you launch yourself in this way, you cannot do so again until you complete a short or long rest.

Sure, you look like some kind of overgrown squirrel, but you can also fly.

9. Hex-Dome Shield

Magic armor (shield), very rare (requires attunement), 8 lb.

A weighty brass shield, forged into an elongated hexagon. Its geometric device depicts a mountain beset by crashing storms. While attuned to the shield, you gain the following benefits:

- As an action, you can slam the shield into the ground, which creates a 15-ft. dome of shimmering golden hexagons. The dome can hold nine medium creatures if packed tightly. Creatures, objects, and magical effects cannot pass through the shield.
- As a bonus action, you can lift the shield back up again, dissipating the dome.
- The dome has 100 HP, AC 15, and resistance to all non-magical damage.
- Once the dome has been destroyed or willfully dissipated, it cannot be created again until you have taken a long rest.

Precision dwarven engineering.

10. King's Saviour

Wondrous item, uncommon, 1 lb.

A simple wooden spoon, with five holes cut in the main bowl of the spoon, to allow liquid to strain through.

If a container of liquid is stirred thrice clockwise and thrice counterclockwise with the spoon, any poisons, toxins, or diseases are removed from the liquid, rendering it safe to drink.

A bodyguard like no other.

11. Morgan's Big Hat

Wondrous item, rare, 2 lb.

A deep dusty blue witch's hat with an exceedingly wide brim, reaching nearly four feet in diameter. While you wear the hat, you gain the following benefits:

- You know the *prestidigitation* cantrip.
- You can read any text or writing held underneath the brim of the hat, regardless of language or available light sources.
- You have advantage on saving throws against being blinded.
- You will never get wet as a result of falling rain, snow, or other precipitation, and neither will anything held under the hat's brim.
- One small item weighing 10 lb. or less can be placed in a very small extra-dimensional pocket located in the cone of the hat; the hat never weighs more than 2 lb. If you store an animal in the hat, it can breathe and does not need to eat or drink while it remains in the hat.

Prized accessory of Morgan Gaunt.

12. Myriad Cloak

Wondrous item, legendary (requires attunement), 3 lb.

A shimmering, iridescent cloak, with every color on it somewhere. If you spend too long looking at a particular spot on the cloak, it changes colors within a flicker of light. Upon first seeing the cloak, you are struck with its intense, wondrous beauty, and are filled with an intense desire to go on a long journey. The inside of the robe is a simple grey silk, with a ten-pointed star stitched along the back in golden thread. While attuned to the cloak, you gain the following benefits:

- As an action, you can teleport to a location you have previously been to on your current plane of existence.
- When you teleport, you can hold the hands of two other people. They can each hold the hand of one other person, who can hold the hand of one other person, and so on. Every person in this chain is teleported with you.
- Each time you teleport, there is a 5% chance per person being teleported that you will all be teleported to a random location not on your current plane of existence. For example, if you are teleporting with two other people and yourself, there is a 15% chance of this occurring.

Lost from another world, never to return.



13. Ring of the Elder-Root Tree

Magic ring, very rare (requires attunement), 1 lb.

A twisted, gnarled ring, made of three strands of root woven together. As you wear it, roots slowly begin to grow up your finger and onto your hand, gently binding you to the ring over a course of weeks and months. While attuned to the ring, you gain the following benefits:

- You know the *druidcraft* cantrip.
- You can speak and understand the language of beasts and plants.
- Your skin takes on a polished wooden look and texture, and you are permanently under the effects of the *barkskin* spell.
- You can sense the distance and direction of bodies of water of at least 100 gallons within 1 mile of you.
- If you sleep within 100 ft. of one of those bodies of water, you regain all of your hit dice instead of half, you do not need to drink water the next day, and you wake up slightly damp.

The Elder-Root Trees are now lost, but a few relics of theirs still endure.

14. Seer's Blindfold

Wondrous item, very rare (requires attunement), 1 lb.

A ratty, crusty strip of cloth, worn from years of use. While attuned to the blindfold, you the following effects apply:

- You are blind.
- You gain blindsight to a range of 30 ft.
- When you cast a divination spell that has a chance for failure after a number of uses, such as *augury* or *divination*, you gain one bonus use per day that does not count toward the spell's cumulative chance for failure.
- When you finish a long rest, roll 1d20 and record the number rolled. You can replace any ability check, attack roll, or saving throw made by you or a creature that you can see with this foretelling roll. You must choose to do so before the die is rolled.

Sight has made you blind. Open your true eyes.

15. Sixth Tower Breastplate

Magic armor (breastplate), rare (requires attunement), 20 lb.

A steel breastplate etched with the designs of a city wall, cracked and split in a dozen places. While attuned to the breastplate, you gain the following benefits:

- When you reach 0 hitpoints, make a DC 10 Constitution saving throw. On a success, you may immediately spend one hit die to regain hitpoints; on a failure, you fall unconscious, as normal.
- Each time you fall unconscious, the DC increases by 5. The DC resets back to 10 after you complete a long rest.
- You gain a scar each time you reach 0 hitpoints, rather than each time you fall unconscious. Any scars you gain are particularly large, prominent, and gruesome.

When the great city fell, each of its towers were razed to the ground, one by one. The sixth tower was the last to fall.

16. Sworn Silence

Magic weapon (any sword), rare (requires attunement), weight varies.

A gleaming metal blade, with seven holes inset through the fuller. While attuned to the sword, you the following effects apply:

- The sword carries 7 charges. At dawn, it regains 1d6+1 charges.
- When you make a saving throw against being charmed or other mind-altering effects, you can expend 1 charge to give yourself advantage on the saving throw.
- When you hit a target with the sword, you can expend one charge to force the target to make a DC 10 Wisdom saving throw; on a failure, the target cannot speak. Casting greater restoration or similar ends the effect.
- You have advantage on checks made to determine if someone is telling the truth, or otherwise hiding or avoiding the truth.
- You cannot lie.

...then say nothing at all.

17. Thewcarver

Magic weapon (handaxe), uncommon (requires attunement), 2 lb.

A large meat cleaver, stained and nicked from years of use. While attuned to the cleaver, you gain the following benefits:

- The cleaver can hold 3 charges. When you reduce an enemy to 0 HP, you regain 1 charge.
- When you hit a target, you can expend 1 charge to deal an additional 1d6 damage, and the target must make a DC 15 Strength saving throw. On a failure, the target is knocked prone, and their speed is reduced by 10 ft. for the next hour.
- When you harvest a creature using the cleaver, you harvest twice as quickly, gain twice as much, and have advantage on rolls to do so.

From grave to table.

18. Tome of Truth

Wondrous item, legendary, 5 lb.

A weighty tome wrapped in leather; a dozen yellow eyes slowly open and close on the cover. The interior pages are blank.

You can write a specific question in the Tome, close it, and then re-open it: a truthful and complete answer will be written inside. When the Tome is next closed, both question and answer will have vanished.

After a year and a day has passed, you can write another question and receive another answer. If you permanently sacrifice 1d6 HP off of your maximum HP, you can reduce this waiting period to a week, until the next question is asked, at which point it resets once more.

Absolute power necessitates absolute sacrifice.

19. Variable Staff

Magic weapon, rare (requires attunement), 6 lb.

A heavy wooden staff, wrapped in layered cloth; both ends are tipped with metal. While attuned to this weapon, you gain the following benefits:

- The staff has the Heavy, Reach, and Two-Handed properties.
- The staff deals 1d10 damage; the damage type varies.
- The staff has 5 charges; as a bonus action, you can do one or more of the following effects (non-stacking), expending 1 charge per effect:
 - Transform the head of the weapon into the head of an axe, pike, glaive, mace, bardiche, bill, hook, scythe, or simple haft. The damage type changes between bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing accordingly.
 - Cause your next hit to deal an extra 1d10 damage.
 - Cause your next hit against an object or structure to count as an automatic critical hit.
 - Grant yourself +1 AC until the end of your next turn.
 - Remove the Heavy and Two-Handed properties until the end of your next turn.
 - Extend the weapon's reach to 15 ft. until the end of your next turn.
- The staff regains 1d4+1 charges after completing a long rest.

Handy in just about every dangerous situation, and then some.

20. Witch's Strongpot

Wondrous item, rare, 25 lb.

A small black iron cauldron with a lid, approximately 2 ft. in diameter; it can hold about 15 gallons of liquid. Small runes and glyphs are etched along the rim.

The cauldron can hold any liquid in its interior without damage, including otherwise-dangerous substances such as acid or lava. The cauldron maintains the liquid's temperature, but the outside is always cool to the touch; when the lid is placed on the cauldron, no liquid can escape.

If the cauldron is empty, you can spend 10 minutes circling the rim of the cauldron with a stick to generate a musical tone. After 10 minutes, the cauldron casts *lecanomancer's tiny hut*, but the hut's walls are always colored black, and it smells of soot inside. The hut is centered on the cauldron, and ends if the cauldron is moved.

Hot things hot, cold things cold, in things in, out things out.

Unfortunately, the Big Guy doesn't give me much magic, not after I accidentally severed all of old Shkerak's limbs with a wand one time. Oh, well.

APPENDIX V: CRAFTING MATERIALS

This appendix contains a list of 23 crafting materials for use in your game. These magical metals and innately powerful substances can be contorted into armor, weapons, and other useful tools; when determining appropriate loot to award your players, consider including weapons, armor, or tools fashioned from these materials. You might even choose to allow your players a chance to acquire the raw versions of these materials for use in specific crafting recipes.

There are three well-established magical metals that you may have encountered in your games before:

Silver

Weapons made from or plated in silver ignore the damage resistances of certain monsters. Additionally, a creature wearing armor forged from silver cannot be possessed, such as by a ghost.

Mithril

All objects made from mithril weigh half as much as their ordinary counterparts. Heavy armor made from mithril does not cause the wearer to suffer disadvantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks, and does not impose any penalties for sleeping in.

Adamantine

- All objects made from adamantine weigh about 120% what their ordinary counterparts; thus, an ordinary object that weighs 5 pounds would, if made from adamantine, weigh 6 pounds.
- While wearing armor or wielding a shield made from adamantine, a creature counts any critical hit against them as a regular hit instead.
- Weapons made from adamantine score automatic critical hits when attacking objects (but not creatures).

And here are 20 additional metals and other materials that you have likely not encountered before:

1. Quicksilver

A silvery metal that turns to liquid quickly easily, but has strange properties. Alchemists call it hydrargyrum or mercury; it is believed to cause madness in magicians, if used for too long.

- When left in extreme heat for more than 10 minutes, all objects forged from quicksilver will rapidly melt.
- When left on a flat surface or in a pool of water, weapons made from quicksilver will spin in place to point northwards, regardless of where they are.
- Armor made from quicksilver, due to its natural liquidity, only takes a single action to don or doff.

2. Electrum

In some regions, this alloy of gold and silver is used as currency. Elsewhere, it is known as eldergold or pale gold, and prized by princes and kings above all others. Each culture uses electrum differently, just as no two alloys are quite the same.

- All objects made from electrum are highly reflective, and can be used as a mirror. The reflection will be slightly discolored, but it is quite clear regardless.
- When dropped in a container of water, weapons made from electrum will slowly purify it of disease. Over the course of an hour, an electrum weapon can purify up to one gallon of water.
- Creatures wearing electrum armor cannot be magically aged.

So much finery, so many infinite combinations of metal, jewels, and raw ego. Sometimes, in the late hours of night, I take every delight in my hoard, scatter them, and then re-arrange them just so. Mark my words: without gold, you are nothing.



3. Orichalcum

Also called Atlantean iron or seasteel, orichalcum is mined from deep ocean caverns, where light has not shined in thousands of years. It's prized by aquatic rulers of all kinds, and famously worn by storm giant prophet-kings.

- Weapons made from orichalcum do not suffer disadvantage when fighting underwater.
- When a creature wearing orichalcum armor reaches zero hitpoints while underwater, they begin rising to the surface at a rate of 30 ft. per round.

4. Thunderbolt Iron

Known by many names—meteoric iron, sky iron, starmetal—thunderbolt iron is mined from fallen meteorites. It cuts fast and light through the air, and is claimed by lore-smiths to seek to return to the sky from whence it came.

- Weapons forged from thunderbolt iron automatically gain the thrown property, with a short range of 10 ft. and a long range of 20 ft. If the weapon already has the thrown property, its short and long ranges both increase by 10 ft.
- A creature wearing armor made from thunderbolt iron suffers only half damage from falling.

5. Wolfram

A strange and rare metal, much-debated: alchemists refer to it as tungsten or scheelite, while priests call it halo-iron or luminous steel. Regardless, wolfram is highly conductive of light, and is closely connected to the cycles of night and day.

- When a light effect—such as the light spell—is applied to an object made of wolfram, the radius of the light is doubled, and appears almost blindingly bright.
- If held up to the light of the sun, a weapon made of wolfram can be studied for one minute to learn the exact number of hours, minutes, and seconds until sunset.
- A creature wearing armor made of wolfram needs 2 fewer hours of sleep than normal, and suffers no penalties for sleeping in it.

6. Stygian Iron

Also called shadowsteel or hellmetal, Stygian iron is a composite metal of the lower planes, tempered in water from the River Styx. It is wielded most commonly by devils and demons, but is also favored by cultists, heretics, and blackguards.

- When in darkness, Stygian iron turns invisible; unless it is in direct light, it is impossible to see.
- When in light, Stygian iron casts no shadow.

7. Ignan Brass

Forged in the conflagratory smithies of the Elemental Plane of Fire, Ignan brass is eternally hot to the touch, and always glimmers a brilliant red-yellow. On the material plane, it's also sometimes called king's metal or sunsteel.

- All objects made from Ignan brass glow with dim light for a radius of 5 ft.
- Anyone wielding a weapon made from Ignan brass can use an action to strike it with another piece of metal to instantly start a small fire, as with a tinderbox.
- A creature wearing armor made from Ignan brass ignores the effects of extreme cold.

8. Terran Quartz

Collected from the fathomless core of the Elemental Plane of Earth, Terran quartz is dense and slightly translucent. Geomancers call it *krystallos* or *divine crystal*, and prize it for the construction of magical devices and artifacts.

- All damage dealt by weapons made from Terran quartz is non-lethal.
- A creature wearing armor made from Terran quartz has advantage on ability checks and saving throws made to resist being knocked prone or moved against the wearer's will, as well as ability checks and attack rolls made to knock prone or move an enemy against their will.

9. Sunken Ice

At the existential fringes, the Elemental Plane of Water turns bitter cold, and freezes solid. It is here that sunken ice can be chipped away, sliver by sliver, until it can be warmed and molded into something new. On the material planes, it is sometimes called *farfrost* or *brumal crystal*, and is believed to be an ill omen.

- A creature wielding a weapon made from or coated in sunken ice cannot be disarmed of the weapon against their will.
- When wearing armor made from or coated in sunken ice, a creature ignores the effects of frigid water, and will never break or fall through thin ice.
- Additionally, sharp, spiky objects—such as pitons—that are made from sunken ice, once hammered or thrust into place, will never come loose.

10. Seraphite

Sometimes known as angelic bronze or heavensteel, Seraphite is the metal forged by the upper planes. It is bright and pure, and cannot be made into alloys or composites of any kind. When gods bestow weapons, they are crafted from Seraphite.

- When dealing damage to undead or fiends, Seraphite weapons count as dealing radiant damage.
- A creature wearing Seraphite armor has advantage on death saving throws.
- Additionally, when a creature that is carrying Seraphite of any kind—such as weapons, armor, jewelry, or even just a trinket—dies, their soul will never go to the lower planes. At worst, it will return to the Wheel and begin anew.

11. Desecrated Bone

Harvested from the cadavers of powerful undead, desecrated bone is weird and accursed, known for permanently carrying the scent of rot. It's prized by necromancers, who refer to collections of it as "*pale ossuaries*," and use it for profane rituals.

- Meat hunted or harvested with a weapon carved from desecrated bone takes twice as long to rot as normal, but always tastes as if it has just gone bad—even if perfectly healthy and fresh.
- A creature that wears armor carved from desecrated bone only needs half as much food and water as normal to survive, but they will grow thin and gaunt nonetheless.

12. Lycanthrope Leather

Tanned *were-hide*, lycanthrope leather shares some of legendary hardness of *were-beasts*. Properly treating it takes years of experience and strange mutative magics, but tanners will be paid handsomely for their work.

- A creature wearing armor or clothing made of lycanthrope leather can walk an extra two hours per day without being required to make saving throws against exhaustion.
- Additionally, lycanthrope leather will never tear, rip, snap, wear down, or otherwise break or become damaged over time. It can be cut with a silver weapon, but will never simply break of its own accord.

13. Sylvan Bark

Either hatefully harvested by lumberers or freely given by a *dryad*, Sylvan bark is the bark of a sacred *Fae tree*. *Druids* hold it dear, as do all *faeries*; it is traditionally worn by *Fae nobility* at festivals of the passing of the seasons.

- A creature wearing armor made from Sylvan bark can speak to and understand the language of wild animals and plants.
- Chests, boxes, and containers made from Sylvan bark cannot be broken open or damaged by any worked tool, such as a lockpick or axe. Unworked objects, however, like claws or teeth, can still deal it harm.



14. Demigel

Nobody really knows where demigel comes from. It's a gelatinous, slimy, sticky material, and is clearly magically-imbued, but its precise origins are a mystery. It goes by different names—alchemical ooze, planar slime, starjuice—but scholars are quite uncertain of exactly what demigel is.

- Weapons covered with or made from demigel can always be drawn or stowed as a free action.
- Armor covered with demigel allows the wearer to fit through spaces one size smaller than them without suffering any penalties.
- Any weapon, armor, or tool coated in demigel protects the item from any monster effects that would permanently damage the item, such as from rust monsters or black puddings.

15. Titanium

Sometimes called giant's steel or bright-iron, titanium is extremely durable, and prized for making arms and armor. It is said to be made from the body of a fallen god, though no one knows for sure whether this is true.

- When a titanium weapon scores a critical hit, it deals an additional 1d4 damage on top of the ordinary critical damage.
- Creatures wearing armor made from titanium have advantage on Strength checks made to push, pull, or lift heavy objects.
- The DC to break or escape from manacles, chain, and restraints made from titanium is raised by 10.

16. Obsidian

Not strictly a metal, but rather a black glass, made in extremely high heat. For this reason, it's sometimes known as dragonglass or vulcan-stone, and is prized by sorcerers, occultists, and ancients.

- When placed in a small fire, such as a torch, campfire, or candle, an obsidian object instantly snuffs it.
- Weapons edged with or made from obsidian deal only piercing or slashing damage. Any damage dealt by obsidian weapons counts as magical for the purposes of overcoming resistance.
- A creature wearing armor lined with or made from obsidian ignores the effects of extreme heat.

17. Nimbus Silk

Spun from wind-worms farmed on the drifting sky-cities of the Elemental Plane of Air, nimbus silk is prized far and wide for its mysterious properties. It's known across the planes by many names—cloth-o'-the-cloud, thunder-thread, typhoon rope, and more—but is universally sought after as a luxury.

- Any length of nimbus silk will vibrate when a storm will occur in the next 8 hours.
- Weapons made from or strung with nimbus silk, such as a sling or longbow, ignore the effects of high winds, and can make attacks at their long range without suffering disadvantage.
- Nimbus silk rope is climbed at double the normal climbing speed.
- At their wielder's choosing, whips made from nimbus silk can be completely silent.

18. Dryftwood

The Astral Sea collects a great deal of detritus; whenever ordinary wood lands in its silver waves, the wood is slowly transformed to dryftwood. Dryftwood is mostly ordinary wood, but can contain huge amounts of water, stored seemingly nowhere.

- When placed in water, an object made of dryftwood slowly absorbs the water, at a rate of 1 gallon per hour. Dryftwood can hold a number of gallons equal to its weight without increasing its weight at all.
- As an action, a creature can release all of the held water at once, which sprays in every direction.

19. Clockwork

Created by the greatest manufactories of the Plane of Law, clockwork weapons and armor are made of thousands of spinning gears, hissing pistons, and churning engines. They, like their creators, are unceasingly tireless and perfectly engineered.

- Clockwork weapons and armor take 100 years and a day to create, and can never be repaired.
- An attacker wielding a clockwork weapon never makes attack rolls: instead, they add their to-hit modifier to 10, and use that as the attack roll.
- When any creature attacks a creature wearing clockwork armor, the attacker does not make an attack roll: instead they add their to-hit modifier to 10, and use that as the attack roll.

20. Metamorphic Matter

Metamorphic matter, when it appears, usually takes the form of an undulating, pulsing morass. It's literally impossible to work with, and takes random forms when it materializes. On the occasions it manifests as useful equipment, it is deeply strange and independent, and takes no accounting of its wielder or wearer.

- Weapons and armor of metamorphic matter cannot be created or destroyed, nor can they be altered in any intentional way.
- When an attacker wielding a weapon of metamorphic matter makes an attack roll, they hit if the result is even, and miss if the result is odd.
- When a creature attacks a creature wearing armor made of metamorphic matter, they hit if the result of their attack roll is even, and miss if the result is odd.



APPENDIX VI: OSR CONVERSION

While the Enchiridion is written for Fifth Edition, it is still broadly compatible with most OSR systems. The core ideas, advice, and theory are all system-neutral, so this section covers our tips and advice on converting the finer details.

This section is written specifically for an OSR table that wants to convert the Fifth Edition mechanics here; if you're running Fifth Edition, everything here should work as-written, with no changes needed.

While there are many, many OSR systems, this appendix is written with some of the more popular ones in mind:

- David Black's *The Black Hack*
- Goodman Games' *Dungeon Crawl Classics*
- Tom Moldvay's *Basic Dungeons & Dragons*
- Ben & Jessica Dutter's *Five Torches Deep*
- Arnold Kemp's *Goblin Laws of Gaming*
- Ben Milton's *Knave*
- Daniel Proctor's *Labyrinth Lord*
- Gavin Norman's *Old School Essentials*
- Stuart Marshall's *OSRIC*

There are, certainly, many more OSR systems, and many more that will work with the Enchiridion. The systems listed are simply ones that are both popular and easily convertible; others may take more tweaks and adjustments to be compatible.

HITPOINTS & LETHALITY

Player characters in Fifth Edition tend to have quite a lot of HP, relative to their OSR counterparts. Even weak characters in Fifth Edition will still be about earning 5 HP per level, where strong characters might well earn 10 HP or more per level. Because of this, Fifth Edition characters can take quite a beating and still survive; player character death varies by table, but is far less universal than it is at an OSR table.

Because of this, you might find that the damage quantities from hazards and other dangers are quite high; if a player character at an OSR table gets hit with, say, an avalanche, they are very likely to die. On the one hand, this might be too much, and you should consider reducing the damage; on the other, a high level of lethality is a staple at many OSR tables, and thus very dangerous hazards are to be embraced.

The Old School Renaissance

If you've never heard of the Old School Renaissance (sometimes called the Old School Revival), shortened to the OSR, here is a very brief explanation.

The OSR is a movement inside the broader fantasy RPG community to return to what is perceived as the gameplay values of old-school games, the ones played primarily in the '80s. These values typically, although not always, emphasize:

- Player ingenuity and creative problem-solving
- High lethality and a lack of strictly-balanced tactics
- Sandbox style play using exploration and random generation
- A lack of pre-written plot or storyline
- Simpler, less mechanics-heavy gameplay and characters
- A DIY aesthetic and mindset

Obviously, this is not all that the OSR is about, and many of the most popular systems and adventures break from one or more of those values.

If you want to explore the OSR, we encourage you to read through the systems we listed above, as well as some of the more popular adventures, settings, and supplements. OSR content is designed to be hackable; many books are not written with one specific system or ruleset in mind, but rather with a sort of guiding ethos and rough outline which can be adapted to other systems.

Because of the strong DIY streak in the OSR, much of the best content can be found in media with far lower production values than might be found in traditional RPGs: blog posts, zines, print-and-plays, shared files, or even stranger formats. The advantage to playing in the OSR style is that you always can and should be adjusting things to suit your table. In Fifth Edition, deviating from rules-as-written is seen as something to be avoided; in the OSR, playing at a table that wasn't hacking their game would be seen as quite strange.

If you want to branch further afield from Fifth Edition, either because you want something different or you because you like the old-school ethos or because you (justifiably) don't like Fifth Edition's creators, the OSR might be for you.





ABILITY MODIFIERS & DIFFICULTY CLASSES

In Fifth Edition, an ability score bonus of +3 or higher is relatively common; compounded with skills and proficiency bonuses, it's likely that at Level 1, a character will have a +5 bonus or higher in their specific areas of talent. By Level 5, this will likely have increased to around +7; by level 10, it will likely be +9; by level 20, it might be +11. Certain classes, like rogues and bards, have expertise, which increases their bonuses further: a rogue having +10 to sneaking by level 5 is relatively common.

Accordingly, the DCs for various checks—like navigation and foraging—might seem high at first glance, but succeeding at even a DC 18 check is not uncommon, particularly if characters have advantage.

For your OSR game, where ability scores and modifiers are much lower, we might recommend reducing the DCs by roughly 30%. Flat open grassland, for example, might have a navigation DC of 7 or 8, while deep mountains might have a DC of 13 or 14. This is obviously flexible, and you should adjust these DCs, along with all other DCs, accordingly. Think through the broad levels of difficulty, and decide, at a baseline, how likely you want success for each to be.

SAVING THROWS

In Fifth Edition, saving throws function very similarly to ability checks: they use the main six ability scores, but additional bonuses are sometimes applied, based on a character's class and items. Rather than use the specific saves common to OSR systems, such as a save vs. magic wand or save vs. dragon breath, Fifth Edition simply refers to Intelligence saving throws or Dexterity saving throws.

There is, unfortunately, no certain way to translate Fifth Edition's saving throws to the five commonly used in OSR systems. There are some commonalities—save vs. paralysis usually translates into a Constitution save, for example—but they are not guaranteed or reliable. Because of this, we recommend that you decide which save to apply at the table, based on the contextual narrative of the moment: look at the source of the save, what's forcing a player to roll, and make your best judgement based on the situation at hand.

CARRY WEIGHT

In Fifth Edition, carry weight is tracked by the pound; every item has a weight listed, and characters can carry a total of $5 \times$ their Strength score before becoming encumbered. Thus, a weak character could carry about 40 lb. of gear, while a strong character could carry about 80 lb. of gear.

If your OSR system uses inventory slots, we recommend a rough ratio of 1 inventory slot being equivalent to roughly 5 lbs. As always, you should use common sense and your good judgement to determine how much a character can carry.

CONDITIONS & EXHAUSTION

Fifth Edition has a number of conditions that can be applied to a creature, such as paralyzed or afraid. These can be applied as the Fifth Edition rules describe them directly, or you can use whatever your system supplies, or you can simply use your good judgement and apply what seems right: all will work well.

Exhaustion in Fifth Edition can be roughly equated to an additional HP track: as a character suffers levels of exhaustion, they suffer penalties and grow weaker, and eventually die. These are often applied from non-damage sources, such as the weather or travelling too long, and affect high- and low-level characters equally. We strongly encourage you to use exhaustion, or a very similar system in your game; Fifth Edition's exhaustion rules are easily applicable to most OSR systems with no changes.

A list of conditions and exhaustion effects can be found in Appendix VII, on page 108.

MONSTERS

While monsters in Fifth Edition do have hit dice, they are not used in the typical sense: the hit dice vary in size based on the monster's size, the quantity of hit dice grows variably and rapidly, and hit dice do not affect to-hit rolls or XP earned. Accordingly, monsters in Fifth Edition tend to have very high HP; we recommend roughly halving them to fit into a standard OSR bestiary.

In addition to HP and hit dice, however, monsters in Fifth Edition also have another rating to determine their overall power: Challenge Rating, or CR. This is ordinarily meant to be used as a GM-facing tool for building balanced encounters—with mixed success—but it can be used almost identically as hit dice would be ordinarily in an OSR game, to determine HP, to-hit rolls, and XP earned.

Unlike HP, monsters' ACs are not dramatically higher than they would be in most OSR systems; reduce them if you like, but they don't need to be lowered to be functional.

On the flipside, monsters do tend to have high to-hit bonuses relative to normal OSR player AC; even very low-level monsters will often have a +3 or +4 to-hit. We recommend just using a monster's (modified from stock Fifth Edition) hit dice as its to-hit bonus, as is common OSR practice.

Monster damage is slightly higher in Fifth Edition, but not much more so; feel free to keep it or change it. Most of the additional effects that monsters deal out can be used as-is from Fifth Edition with no changes.

*fear not: no matter how or where we find
each other, I shall be your doom.*

APPENDIX VII: CONDITIONS & EXHAUSTION

Blinded

- A blinded creature can't see and automatically fails any ability check that requires sight.
- Attack rolls against the creature have advantage, and the creature's attack rolls have disadvantage.

Charmed

- A charmed creature can't attack the charmer or target the charmer with harmful abilities or magical effects.
- The charmer has advantage on any ability check to interact socially with the creature.

Deafened

- A deafened creature can't hear and automatically fails any ability check that requires hearing.

Frightened

- A frightened creature has disadvantage on ability checks and attack rolls while the source of its fear is within line of sight.
- The creature can't willingly move closer to the source of its fear.

Grappled

- A grappled creature's speed becomes 0, and it can't benefit from any bonus to its speed.
- The condition ends if the grappler is incapacitated (see the condition).
- The condition also ends if an effect removes the grappled creature from the reach of the grappler or grappling effect, such as when a creature is hurled away by the *thunderwave* spell.

Incapacitated

- An incapacitated creature can't take actions or reactions.

Invisible

- An invisible creature is impossible to see without the aid of magic or a special sense. For the purpose of hiding, the creature is heavily obscured. The creature's location can be detected by any noise it makes or any tracks it leaves.
- Attack rolls against the creature have disadvantage, and the creature's attack rolls have advantage.

Paralyzed

- A paralyzed creature is incapacitated (see the condition) and can't move or speak.
- The creature automatically fails Strength and Dexterity saving throws.
- Attack rolls against the creature have advantage.
- Any attack that hits the creature is a critical hit if the attacker is within 5 feet of the creature.

Petrified

- A petrified creature is transformed, along with any nonmagical object it is wearing or carrying, into a solid inanimate substance (usually stone). Its weight increases by a factor of ten, and it ceases aging.
- The creature is incapacitated (see the condition), can't move or speak, and is unaware of its surroundings.
- Attack rolls against the creature have advantage.
- The creature automatically fails Strength and Dexterity saving throws.
- The creature has resistance to all damage.
- The creature is immune to poison and disease, although a poison or disease already in its system is suspended, not neutralized.

Poisoned

- A poisoned creature has disadvantage on attack rolls and ability checks.

Prone

- A prone creature's only movement option is to crawl, unless it stands up and thereby ends the condition.
- The creature has disadvantage on attack rolls.
- An attack roll against the creature has advantage if the attacker is within 5 feet of the creature. Otherwise, the attack roll has disadvantage.

Restrained

- A restrained creature's speed becomes 0, and it can't benefit from any bonus to its speed.
- Attack rolls against the creature have advantage, and the creature's attack rolls have disadvantage.
- The creature has disadvantage on Dexterity saving throws.

Stunned

- A stunned creature is incapacitated (see the condition), can't move, and can speak only falteringly.
- The creature automatically fails Strength and Dexterity saving throws.
- Attack rolls against the creature have advantage.

Unconscious

- An unconscious creature is incapacitated (see the condition), can't move or speak, and is unaware of its surroundings.
- The creature drops whatever it's holding and falls prone.
- The creature automatically fails Strength and Dexterity saving throws.
- Attack rolls against the creature have advantage.
- Any attack that hits the creature is a critical hit if the attacker is within 5 feet of the creature.

EXHAUSTION

Some special abilities and environmental hazards, such as starvation and the long-term effects of freezing or scorching temperatures, can lead to a special condition called exhaustion. Exhaustion is measured in six levels. An effect can give a creature one or more levels of exhaustion, as specified in the effect's description.

Exhaustion Effects

Level	Effect
-------	--------

1	Disadvantage on ability checks
2	Speed halved
3	Disadvantage on attack rolls and saving throws
4	Hit point maximum halved
5	Speed reduced to 0
6	Death

If an already exhausted creature suffers another effect that causes exhaustion, its current level of exhaustion increases by the amount specified in the effect's description. A creature suffers the effect of its current level of exhaustion as well as all lower levels. For example, a creature suffering level 2 exhaustion has its speed halved and has disadvantage on ability checks. An effect that removes exhaustion reduces its level as specified in the effect's description, with all exhaustion effects ending if a creature's exhaustion level is reduced below 1. Finishing a long rest reduces a creature's exhaustion level by 1, provided that the creature has also ingested some food and drink.

APPENDIX VIII: TABLES

TRAVEL & NAVIGATION

Travel Pace

Pace	Distance per Hour	Distance per Watch
Fast	4 miles	16 miles
Normal	3 miles	12 miles
Slow	2 miles	8 miles

Tracking Difficulty

Condition	DC
Soft surface, such as mud	10
Dirt or grass	15
Bare stone	20
Each day since the creature has passed	+5
Creature left a trail, such as blood	-5
Tracker is travelling at a slow pace	-5
Tracker is travelling at a fast pace	+5

Slightly Lost

1d12	New Direction
1-4	Diagonally to the left
5-8	Straight ahead
9-12	Diagonally to the right

Significantly Lost

1d12	New Direction
1-2	Directly left
3-5	Diagonally to the left
6-7	Straight ahead
8-10	Diagonally to the right
11-12	Directly right

Environments

Environment	Travel Speed	Food DC	Water DC	Navig. DC
Arctic	No effect	15	13	10
Coastal	½ speed	10	15	13
Desert	No effect	18	20	13
Forest	½ speed	10	10	15
Grassland	No effect	10	13	10
Hills	½ speed	13	10	15
Mountains	¼ speed	15	15	18
Swamp	¼ speed	13	10	18
Underground	½ speed	18	18	18
Urban	½ speed	15	13	13
Wasteland	No effect	20	20	10

WEATHER

Precipitation

	Clear Skies	Light Precip.	Heavy Precip.
Clear Skies	1-16	17-19	20
Light Precipitation	1-9	10-17	18-20
Heavy Precipitation	1-6	7-13	14-20

Wind Speeds

	No Wind	Low Winds	High Winds
No Wind	1-14	15-18	19-20
Low Winds	1-10	11-17	18-20
High Winds	1-8	9-14	15-20

Precipitation Types

Clear Skies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No additional effects.
Light Rain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disadvantage on ability checks to climb or scale objects and ability checks made to maintain balance or keep one's footing.
Light Snow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The area becomes lightly obscured. Advantage on Wisdom (Survival) checks made to track creatures.
Heavy Rain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disadvantage on ability checks made to climb or scale objects and ability checks made to maintain balance or keep one's footing. The area becomes lightly obscured. Open flames are extinguished. Disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks relying on hearing or scent. Disadvantage on Wisdom (Survival) checks to track creatures. Advantage on Wisdom (Survival) checks to forage for water.
Heavy Snow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The area becomes lightly obscured. Advantage on Wisdom (Survival) checks to track creatures. The area becomes difficult terrain. Wisdom (Survival) checks to forage for water automatically succeed.

Storm Conditions

No Wind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No additional effects.
Low Winds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clears light fog, smoke, or fumes.
High Winds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disadvantage on ranged weapon attacks. Clears all fog, smoke, or fumes. Extinguishes open flames. Disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks relying on hearing. Medium and smaller creatures with a fly speed must return to the ground at the end of their turn, or fall. Creatures with a hover speed have their speed halved.
Storm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The area becomes heavily obscured. The area becomes difficult terrain.

If you ever get really lost, just walk towards where the sun rises — eventually, you'll hit the Empire!

SURVIVAL & HUNTING

Food Cleanliness

Source of Food	DC
Raw Meat	10
Rotten Meat or Dairy	25
Rotten Food (grains, fruit, vegetables, etc.)	20

Water Cleanliness

Source of Water	DC
Puddle or Plant	10
Swamp or Brackish	20
Salt Water	30

Survey DC Modifiers

Modifier	DC
Default	10
Creatures with a climbing speed	+2
Creatures with a flying speed	+5
Creatures with a swimming speed	+5
Creatures with a bonus to Dexterity (Stealth)	+creature's stealth bonus
Creatures smaller than medium	+2 per size smaller
Creatures larger than medium	-2 per size larger
Creatures rare or small in number	+5
Creatures common or large in number	-5

Harvestable Parts by Size

Modifier	Base Units of Material
Tiny	1
Small	1
Medium	2
Large	3
Huge	4
Gargantuan	5

Harvest DC

Percentage of Max Units of Material	DC
0%	0
20%	5
40%	10
60%	15
80%	20
100%	25

Material Tier by Challenge Rating

Monster CR	Material Tier
1-4	Common
5-10	Uncommon
11-17	Rare
18-23	Very Rare
24-30	Legendary

THE TOWN

Town Types

d20	Town
1	Shipwreck of a prison boat.
2	Imperial colony or military outpost.
3	Industrial boom town, where the Marches' natural resources are gathered.
4	Settlement built around a mysterious magical beacon.
5	Temple dedicated to long-dead gods.
6	Camp within a sacred forest grove.
7	Hamlet built into a monstrous landmark, such as a massive footprint or ancient skeleton.
8	Remote magical research station.
9	Large cave in the side of coastal bluffs.
10	Settlement constructed around natural hot springs.
11	Ruins of a once-great fortress.
12	Wagon train now permanently in place.
13	Underground network of tunnels and shafts.
14	Waterborne web of rickety ships and rafts.
15	Grand, ramshackle manor, all ancient halls and forgotten wings.
16	Village built on the remains of an overgrown graveyard.
17	Enclave built around a huge otherworldly rock.
18	Camp in a high mountain pass.
19	Small pocket dimension beneath the roots of a great tree.
20	A single decrepit inn.

Town Buildings

d20	Building
1	Bunkroom, dormitory, or barracks.
2	Smithy or armory.
3	Larder, storehouse, or granary.
4	Tanner, leatherworker, or furrier.
5	Saloon, taproom, or bar.
6	Tavern, mess hall, or canteen.
7	Tailor, mercer, or cobbler.
8	Cooper, carpenter, or woodworking shop.
9	Masonry, roofer's shop, construction yard.
10	General store.
11	Butcher, fishmonger, or bakery.
12	Medical ward, doctor's office, or barbershop.
13	Church, shrine, or temple.
14	Library, scribery, or bookseller's.
15	Town well, reservoir, or aquifer.
16	Docks or stables.
17	Alchemy shop or apothecary.
18	Magic or curio shop.
19	Communal gardens or green.
20	Stone wall or wooden palisade.

Stone buildings are my favorite to dissolve into slag, I think, just because they're so strong normally. Then metal, then wood, then thatch. Thatch just doesn't melt properly.

My cousin Klagix went exploring out into the Marches, once, and we never saw her again. I do sometimes wonder what happened to her, out there. Maybe we oughtta go looking...

REGION BUILDING

Climates

d6	Climates	d6	Climates
1	Tropical; hot and wet	4	Temperate; cool and wet
2	Subtropical; warm and wet	5	Subarctic; cool and dry
3	Arid; warm and dry	6	Arctic; cold and dry

Landforms and Structures

d10	Landform
1	Bluffs, extreme cliffs, or a chasm.
2	Massive mountain peak.
3	Volcano.
4	Huge tunnel or pit.
5	Enormous tree.
6	Web of lakes and streams.
7	Ruined fortress.
8	Ancient road, bridge, or stairs.
9	Faction stronghold.
10	Huge river or waterfall.

Legendary Monsters

d10	Monster
1	A great sentient tree, slowly drifting across the world.
2	A dragon turtle large enough to be mistaken for an island itself.
3	An undersea leviathan or kraken.
4	A three-headed purple worm.
5	A long-dead tyrant, brought to life through profane ritual.
6	A conclave of many-eyed deep ones.
7	A demon lord seated atop a throne of contempt.
8	An avenging angel of flame and light.
9	A mechanical colossus the size of a mountain.
10	The tarasque itself.

Region Modifiers

d20	Modifier
1	Anyone who spends the night in the region is aged magically by 1 year.
2	Every few hours, sudden lightning strikes near the party
3	Weather ranging into extreme heat or extreme cold in sudden shifts.
4	A ghostly whispering suffuses the region; anyone there is unable to escape it.
5	Fey magic abounds, meaning there is a small chance travellers will be transported elsewhere.
6	As night falls, the quantity of monsters increases threefold.
7	Pockets of quicksand dot the region, sometimes obvious and sometimes hidden.
8	Rockslides and avalanches are very common.
9	Misleading waystones and road-signs abound.
10	Any food consumed is unsatisfying; hair and nails grow at a rapid rate.
11	Unease and discomfort suffuse the area; relaxation is impossible.
12	Murders of crows follow travellers, marking them for unfriendly eyes.
13	Unending storms and fell weather wrack the region.
14	Each morning, there is a high chance heavy fog has rolled in overnight.
15	Geysers burst through the earth often, and in unpredictable locations.
16	Any blood spilt quickly draws in ravenous beasts.
17	Flash floods sweep through the regions irregularly.
18	Any metal left in the region overnight quickly begins to rust and decay.
19	The region is riddled with cliffs, gorges, and gullies, slowing travel.
20	Volcanic eruptions alter the terrain near-constantly.

Hazard Occurrence Chance by Environment

Name	Coast	Desert	Forest	Grassla.	Hills	Mtns.	Swamp	Tundra	Undergr.	Urban	Wastela.
Avalanches	5%	0%	5%	0%	20%	75%	0%	30%	5%	5%	5%
Extreme Heat	15%	95%	5%	20%	10%	5%	25%	0%	40%	5%	50%
Extreme Cold	15%	30%	20%	20%	30%	60%	5%	95%	20%	10%	50%
Extreme Storms	50%	5%	10%	10%	15%	20%	15%	25%	0%	5%	25%
Frigid Water	25%	0%	10%	5%	5%	10%	5%	95%	20%	5%	50%
Fog	40%	5%	5%	5%	5%	20%	10%	20%	0%	10%	30%
Geysers	10%	5%	5%	5%	10%	15%	5%	5%	10%	5%	10%
Lava	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	15%	0%	5%
Quicksand	10%	10%	10%	0%	0%	0%	20%	0%	5%	0%	20%
Rockslides	10%	0%	5%	0%	20%	40%	5%	5%	60%	10%	10%
Sandstorms	5%	30%	0%	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	15%
Slippery Ice	15%	0%	10%	20%	25%	30%	5%	90%	10%	10%	20%
Thin Ice	5%	0%	15%	10%	15%	20%	10%	20%	10%	5%	10%

ENCOUNTERS

Encounter Chance Conditions

Condition	% Chance Mod.
Default	10%
Dangerous region	Up to +20%
Safe region	Up to -10%
Night	+10%
Light rain or snow	-10%
Heavy rain or snow	-15%
Storm	-20%
Fresh meat	+5%
Obvious trail	+10%
Bright light	+15%
Loud noise	+10%
Hidden camp	-10%
Proximity to hostiles	Up to +20%
Magical effects	Up to +/-30%

Swamp Encounters

d12 Encounter

- 1 **5 + 1d3 crocodiles**, sitting on the surface of the water like so many dead logs.
- 2 **1d2 giant scorpions**, scuttling amongst the twisted trees.
- 3 **1 + 1d2 wills-o'-the-wisp**, hovering and flashing in the distance.
- 4 **1 + 1d2 swarms of venomous snakes**, slithering out from the undergrowth.
- 5 **4 + 1d4 lizardfolk**, hunting and foraging for one of their settlements.
- 6 **1 lizardfolk shaman + 1d4 lizardfolk**, out to collect fungi and alchemical supplies.
- 7 **1d6 + 2 10 ft. circles of quicksand**, formed from loose muddy earth and unseen currents.
- 8 **2 + 1d3 giant toads**, sunning themselves and keeping an eye out for prey.
- 9 **To be determined**, probably something from a local faction.
- 10 **To be determined**, probably something from an adjacent region.
- 11 **To be determined**, probably something from a different adjacent region.
- 12 **Roll twice on the table**, and have both emerge simultaneously.

Cryptic Encounters

d20 Encounter

- 1 A black dog the size of a horse, friendly and slobbery, that leads you along the eventual road to Hell.
- 2 A white stag, only ever seen out of the corner of your eye; if caught it grants a wish.
- 3 A silvery lynx, languid and lithe; it offers hidden truths if you answer riddles correctly.
- 4 A towering figure clad in a heavy overcoat, searching morosely for one of their "lost sheep."
- 5 A ring of overgrown mushrooms; if you sleep inside the ring, you are transported to the court of a Fae Queen.
- 6 A brass lantern fastened into the nearest sturdy surface, warm and welcoming.
- 7 A series of enormous bear tracks that lead to a solid oak tree and then vanish; if you wait until nightfall, a huge ghostly bear visits and asks for honey and berries.
- 8 A silent knight, clad in rusty and battered mail; they will watch your campfire for the night and keep you safe while you sleep.
- 9 A stone that spins in place according to the sun; on the equinox, it points the way to a secret location.
- 10 A wandering tinkerer with a donkey; the tinkerer never speaks, but the donkey drives a hard bargain.
- 11 An intelligent talking mouse, courteous and brave, wielding a sword and shield; they are searching for their lost parent.
- 12 A procession of weeping ghosts, appearing when the moon is full; if you follow them, they lead you to an ancient religious site.
- 13 A band of over-confident minstrels; they always say they're going the same place as you, but always give the wrong directions.
- 14 A battered and nicked sword, once-fine but now rusted; when found, it is jammed into the nearest solid object that is not a stone.
- 15 A set of boot-tracks leading off the trail; if followed, you find a pair of empty boots walking about of their own volition.
- 16 A tree bound in rope, root and branch; if you cut it loose, it runs into the forest, cackling.
- 17 A pond or stream strewn with clothing, giggles resounding nearby; if the water is investigated, nobody can be seen.
- 18 A lonely shed, beaten-up and rundown; inside, there is a perfectly straight shaft, one mile deep.
- 19 A stranger clad in cowl and robe; they have no eyes or ears, but if you ask a question, they will answer it truthfully, and then vanish.
- 20 A field of flowers that bend away from the party's footsteps, even if encircled.



Imagine needing allies to assert your utter conquest of the Marches. Such a laughable concept, really.

FACTIONS

Faction Themes

d20	Theme	d20	Theme
1	Fears.	11	Forsakenness.
2	Nature.	12	Madness.
3	Mysticism.	13	Majesty.
4	Impartiality.	14	Nomadism.
5	Otherworldliness.	15	Draconism.
6	Judgement.	16	Sordidness.
7	Materialism.	17	Servility.
8	Knowledge.	18	Dysfunction.
9	Conquest.	19	Primality.
10	Industry.	20	Ancientness.

Faction Bases

d20	Base	d20	Base
1	Hidden forest outpost.	11	Volcanic forge.
2	Underground catacombs.	12	Artificial island.
3	Grand cathedral.	13	Gargantuan beast's skeleton.
4	Enormous shadowy pit.	14	Hollow mountain.
5	Floating cloud castle.	15	Sprawling ruins.
6	Underwater caverns.	16	Always-moving caravan.
7	Gilded palace.	17	Secluded monastery.
8	Mystical tower.	18	Massive warship.
9	Sealed vault, tomb, or crypt.	19	Impenetrable fortress.
10	Ancient labyrinth.	20	Demiplane.

Faction Goals

d20	Goal
1	Obey their leader's wishes.
2	Restore a broken artifact.
3	Dominate all life.
4	Protect a sacred location.
5	Reclaim lost territory.
6	Convert others to their beliefs.
7	Avenge an ancient wrong.
8	Resurrect a dead power.
9	Learn forgotten secrets.
10	Control a source of resources.
11	Seek the chosen one.
12	Create a legendary object.
13	Slay an unstoppable monster.
14	Free an imprisoned being.
15	Escape an impending doom.
16	Prove themselves worthy.
17	Destroy an accursed site.
18	Bring everything to their level.
19	Open a planar portal.
20	Earn a single Wish.

Faction Population

d20	Population
1	Cultists or clergy.
2	Faeries or fae-folk.
3	Mages or witches.
4	Monsters or beasts.
5	Pirates or brigands.
6	Soldiers or warriors.
7	Travelers or nomads.
8	Knights or heroes.
9	Monster hunters.
10	Extraplanar beings.
11	Machines and automata.
12	Seafolk or mer-people.
13	Scholars or academics.
14	Artisans or craftspeople.
15	Marauders or raiders.
16	Undead or necromancers.
17	Draconids and their minions.
18	Plants and animals.
19	Giants or their kin.
20	A single linked mind.

Faction Development

d20	Development
1	The faction recovers an artifact that the player characters were searching for.
2	There is an abrupt change in the faction's leadership.
3	The faction suffers heavy losses to a monster or another faction.
4	The faction claims a ruin or other strategic location.
5	The faction fortifies their base.
6	Members of the faction are captured by another.
7	An unexpected element discovers the faction's base.
8	A splinter group breaks away from the faction.
9	The faction loses control of one of their outposts.
10	Natural disaster strikes the faction, at their base or elsewhere.
11	The faction unearths lost knowledge or ancient secrets.
12	The next step in the faction's grand master plan is executed.
13	The faction lures the player characters into a trap.
14	A contract or agreement is made between two factions.
15	A covenant between the faction and another is broken.
16	The faction moves to war against another.
17	A once-lost source of power, such as an ally or artifact, suddenly reappears.
18	The faction's rank-and-file members grow displeased.
19	The faction triggers a long-forgotten curse or malediction.
20	The faction is contacted by denizens of another plane.

The Big Guy likes to forget about us, sometimes.



DUNGEONS

Dungeon Types

- | d20 | Dungeon |
|-----|---------------|
| 1 | Fortress. |
| 2 | Temple. |
| 3 | Catacombs. |
| 4 | Caverns. |
| 5 | Death Trap. |
| 6 | Forge. |
| 7 | Manor. |
| 8 | Shrine. |
| 9 | Library. |
| 10 | Laboratory. |
| 11 | Maze. |
| 12 | Nest. |
| 13 | Tomb. |
| 14 | Palace. |
| 15 | Vault. |
| 16 | Mine. |
| 17 | Sewer. |
| 18 | Lair. |
| 19 | Mountainside. |
| 20 | Planar Gate. |

While You Were Away...

d20 Meanwhile...

- | | |
|----|--|
| 1 | Rooms or whole wings of the dungeon collapsed. |
| 2 | The main entrance was filled in, naturally or artificially. |
| 3 | The floor of the dungeon caved in, exposing deeper layers. |
| 4 | Underground-dwellers accidentally tunneled into the dungeon. |
| 5 | The dungeon was overtaken by a nearby faction. |
| 6 | All the traps and defenses in the dungeon were sprung. |
| 7 | A wandering fey has bewitched the denizens of the dungeon. |
| 8 | The dungeon's original creator or creators returned, at least temporarily. |
| 9 | A desperate thief or runaway stashed some new artifact in the dungeon. |
| 10 | Enterprising goblins have taken up residence in the abandoned part of the dungeon. |
| 11 | New layers of traps and riddles were added. |
| 12 | A family of owlbears moved into the dungeon. |
| 13 | A source of clean water has formed, through natural springs or rainfall. |
| 14 | A necromancer has begun plundering the dungeon for bodies. |
| 15 | A different band of would-be dungeoneers are in the midst of clearing the dungeon. |
| 16 | Corpse-eaters of some variety have begun infesting the dungeon. |
| 17 | A cache of natural resources, such as gold or rare mushrooms, has been found within. |
| 18 | Another entrance, natural or artificial, has opened into the dungeon. |
| 19 | Gelatinous oozes have begun consuming everything in the dungeon. |
| 20 | A portal to another plane opened within the dungeon. |

Don't stay away from a dungeon too long, or me and the rest of the crew will come in and make it our new base! Always fun to re-decorate someone else's stuff.

GAUNT COVEN

Magical Trinkets for Sale

d12 Magical Trinket

- 1 A human eyeball floating in a jar of green fluid. It always looks at the closest living thing, even if that thing is invisible.
- 2 A bell that is silent to everything except rats; when rung it, all rats within 500 ft. will rush towards the bell.
- 3 A knife with two blades and no hilt. It is impossible to use without cutting one's self.
- 4 A pair of dice carved from bone; they always roll a 7, even if you take one die away.
A small black notebook. Anything written in the notebook becomes twisted and warped over the course of a day, eventually turning into blasphemous insults.
- 5 A cracked and chipped tea set. Anything drunk from the set makes the ingester throw up violently five minutes later.
- 6 A preserved dwarf's head. If someone holds the head upside by the beard for one minute, they can see through the dwarf's dead eyes until they release the beard.
- 7 100' of fine silk rope; if left unattended and unobserved for an hour, it will tie itself into a noose.
A knapsack that can hold 200 lbs. of gear while still weighing only 10 lbs. Anything placed inside that hasn't been salted will be permanently eaten by the knapsack.
- 8 A carved wooden flute; it can only play in minor keys, and causes anyone who listens to think of a dear person that recently died.
- 9 A fine handheld fan; any wind blown by it takes on the smell of rotten eggs.
- 10 A wolverine skull on a length of twine; if held in front of you like a censer, it will swing towards the nearest bones.

Oracular Insights

d12 Reading

- 1 *Justice.* A court sentencing a murderer; secrets and lies exposed to the whole of a kingdom to know; the common folk rising against their oppressors.
Safety. A scouting party fleeing to their army; shelter found in the wilds from the rainstorm; arrows sinking into a shield on the battlefield.
- 2 *Evil.* A tyrant rising to power amidst crowing supporters and dead opposition; a dead friend, laid to rest, risen once more by ill magic; innocent lovers dragged from their bed.
Trickery. A forger layering cold iron coins with golden leaf; a dagger flashing beneath swirling cloaks and hooded faces; a lie told, bold-faced, to the world.
- 3 *Change.* Summer being cast aside in favor of a crisp autumn morn; a child growing to adulthood in a few heartbeats; a castle being worn down by footfalls and time.
Return. A prodigal child coming home to their house after years away; birds roosting in springtime after a winter away; a lost sock being rediscovered beneath a dusty bedframe.

Spell Scrolls for Sale

d12 Spell Scroll

- 1 *Fireball*, but any resultant flames reverse the effects of water & oil: oil extinguishes them, water causes them to spread further.
Detect thoughts, but any thoughts or feelings the caster tries to read are always the target's worst thoughts and feelings about the caster.
- 2 *Major image*, but any illusory creatures created act on their own volition, spewing insults and making rude hand gestures.
Charm monster, but the charmed monster acts like a hyperactive puppy; aggressive, naive, needy, and desperate for attention.
- 3 *Polymorph*, but the target is transformed into the opposite creature than the caster intended: dogs into cats, elephants into mice, lions into sheep, and so on.
Mirror image, but the illusions created are of the caster's fellow party members, instead of the caster themselves.
- 4 *Zone of truth*, but the targets can only lie; to the caster, they seem to be telling the truth.
Water walk, but the targets can only walk on the underside of the surface, underwater. Gravity pulls them towards the surface, regardless of which side they are on.
- 5 *Spirit guardians*, but the guardians appear as twisted fae, and the caster cannot control who is designated as friends or foes.
Hideous laughter, but while the target laughs, they suffocate.
- 6 *Create food & water*, but once someone takes a bite of food or sip of water, they must keep consuming until all the food and water is gone.
Contact other plane, but the spell contacts either Morgan, Gertrude, or Sybil, randomly determined; the caster does not know this.
- 7 *Loss.* Flames consuming a handed-down family home; disease stealing children from their parents' arms; a ship sinking into thrashing waves.
Chaos. Scrambling against an overwhelming current of nameless, faceless, desperate bodies; air suffused with ash from an unseen blaze; a sudden, unmistakable shuddering of the earth.
- 8 *Authority.* An army led by an iron fist sweeps across the land. There is no recourse, no chance for resistance; a shadow-figure in a blinding throne.
Joy. A coming-together of friends; an unexpected turn of undeniably good luck; a celebration of life after a brush with death.
- 9 *Control.* The somber interior of a war room; the client pushes an effigy across a large-scale map of an unknown place, and the gathered generals sob.
Death. Utter, inscrutable nothingness, a starless void; a crumbling, unreadable tombstone overgrown with vines; a huge black dog, ever-following and never-sleeping.

Remember, if you can, stay on the Sisters' good side; do favors for Morgan, praise Gertrude's dishes, take Sybil's words seriously. Ingratiate yourselves with the Coven as a whole. Then, once you've proven your worth and that you uphold your end of the deal, turn on them and utterly destroy them. Show not an ounce of mercy; your dominion must be absolute.

DISCOVERY

Discovery Experience

Significance	Description	Experience
Insignificant	A discovery with no significant consequence; something obvious, or something that will not generally affect the way player characters approach any situation, such as the knowledge that elk inhabit a region.	Easy
Noteworthy	Something not immediately obvious which players would be well-advised to make a note of, such as the presence of a special monster in a region, meeting a significant NPC, or spying a significant structure from afar.	Medium
Important	Something hidden, new, or secret which has come fully to light. This includes visiting a prominent new area, meeting the leader of a faction, and delving into a dungeon for the first time, for example.	Hard
Pivotal	Something extremely important to understanding the fundamental fabric of the West Marches as a whole, such as the revealing of the true nature of a god, the discovery of an artifact, or anything else that will profoundly affect the way player characters will approach situations.	Deadly

PLAYER DETAILS

Reasons for Leaving

d20	Reason
1	On the run from a powerful Imperial authority.
2	Revels in the lawlessness of the Marches.
3	Shipwrecked on the Marches.
4	Found Imperial life to be unconscionably dull.
5	Compelled to venture to the Marches in a vision from a god.
6	Seduced by the promise of treasure or lost secrets.
7	Hunting someone who has fled to the Marches.
8	Honorbound to cleanse the Marches of evil (or good).
9	Exiled from the Empire.
10	Abandoned in the Marches by family.
11	Desires territory, land, and conquest.
12	Ordered on a mission from the Empire.
13	Protecting someone else already going to the Marches.
14	Belief in a prophecy, real or otherwise.
15	Sentenced to the Marches as a penal colonist.
16	Escaping from the guilt of a past mistake.
17	Seeking a ruin, thought long lost.
18	Driven by raw ego to prove combat prowess.
19	Bound by some magical contract or covenant.
20	Lost en route elsewhere, with no means to return.

Barbarian

d6	Activity
1	Patch your cloak with skins from local critters; the stranger, the better.
2	Sketch out a design for your next tattoo.
3	Comb, brush, and oil your hair (and/or beard, if applicable).
4	Find the biggest object in the immediate vicinity, and then climb to the top of it.
5	Try to lift the heaviest object you can find. You might need some help.
6	Challenge someone to an arm-wrestling (or just regular wrestling) competition.

Bard

d6	Activity
1	Recite a piece of poetry or sing a road-song about the current landscape.
2	Re-tune, re-string, re-tighten, and otherwise care for your instruments.
3	Make up an epic story about something in the immediate vicinity.
4	Tell a long, raunchy joke. The longer and raunchier, the better.
5	Rile another party member with playful (or not-so-playful) insults.
6	Tell the most elaborate lie you can think of about one of your past escapades.

Cleric

d6	Activity
1	Ponder the most recent passage of scripture you've read. Ask someone for help with your study when you get stuck.
2	Offer up some simple prayers of safety and wellbeing for the night.
3	Leave a symbol of your deity: a cairn of stones, for example.
4	Tend to the scrapes and bruises of your comrades; if there are any long-term injuries, check up on them.
5	Tell a story, mythical or otherwise, of your god.
6	Cook a meal for your compatriots; ask them for help in sourcing ingredients.

Druid

d6	Activity
1	Count the year-rings on the nearest fallen tree. If it's very young or very old, tell someone.
2	Examine and analyze the local soil composition.
3	Search for the nearest nest, burrow, or den, to make sure it's safe.
4	Seek the wisdom of the land itself. Listen to a stone or tree, and ask for help from the party to interpret its message.
5	Shift into a creature totally unnatural for the current terrain, and see how the local wildlife reacts.
6	Gaze at the skies above; attune to the patterns of wind and rain and stars.

Someday, I hope to visit the great eastern Empire that I've heard so much from my victims about. To destroy an entire city of thousands in but a single day... that is a pleasure that I have yet to experience. Another century, perhaps.

Some of these sound like so much fun! Normally when we have spare time, we just like to hunt down little bugs and then mash them into stew.

Fighter

d6 Activity

- 1 Re-oil your armor, adjust all the straps, and buff out the scratches and nicks.
- 2 Sharpen your blade; offer to do the same for everyone else's, too.
- 3 Exercise the muscles in your body that haven't had their fill today.
- 4 Challenge another party member to a sparring bout.
- 5 Work on your bow accuracy with some target practice.
- 6 Fell a tree for firewood. Enlist the less physically-inclined party members to help.

Monk

d6 Activity

- 1 Find the best spot for meditation; invite someone to meditate with you.
- 2 Weave branches, stack stones, smooth soil; order from disorder.
- 3 Practice your balance, stretches, and meditative positions.
- 4 Toil on an extremely small, intricate work of art; if you don't have a current project, start a new one.
- 5 Challenge another party member to a footrace. Be sure to blindfold yourself for a fair competition.
- 6 Explain a new insight you had into your mentor's teachings to someone else.

Paladin

d6 Activity

- 1 Skin animals, purify water, or dig a latrine; all the tasks your protection from disease makes easy.
- 2 Ensure the campsite and surrounding are free from undue influence.
- 3 Confess to someone a time when you were close to giving in to temptation.
- 4 Reflect on how well you fulfilled your Oath over the past day.
- 5 Perform a sacred ritual of physical purity, such as washing your body with oil. Encourage others to do the same, if they choose to.
- 6 Treat your fellow party members to a rousing sermon.

Ranger

d6 Activity

- 1 Fletch new arrows to replace lost ones; if anyone's missing any, make enough for them, too.
- 2 Plot out the best path for tomorrow, before you actually need to break camp.
- 3 Tell someone which part of the current landscape is your favorite and least favorite; ask them for theirs, too.
- 4 Create an elaborate camouflage for the camp. Enlist the party in gathering materials to do so.
- 5 Burn something symbolically in the campfire. State whether you actually believe it was useful to do so.
- 6 Clean animals carefully. Claim the best cuts of meat or the pelts for yourself.

Rogue

d6 Activity

- 1 Change the positions of all of the knives you keep on your person.
- 2 Count up your coin again; offer to do the same for everyone else.
- 3 Re-organize the gear in your pack; make sure you have enough room for all the loot to carry home.
- 4 Make a bet on something frivolous: spitting distance, say, or racing insects.
- 5 Get stinking drunk, and try to recruit everyone else to your cause.
- 6 Brood dramatically. If anyone asks why, give them a different reason each time.

Sorcerer

d6 Activity

- 1 Roam about, and see how the wildlife reacts to your presence.
- 2 Trim your nails, cut your hair, and check your body for unusual growths (or cultivate them).
- 3 Safely discharge any pent-up magic that remains in your bloodstream.
- 4 Perform an unusual rejuvenation ritual: place dirt on your eyes, paint your chest in sap, or lie facedown in the snow.
- 5 Create something beautiful: a carving of wood, perhaps, or a charcoal drawing. Then, destroy it.
- 6 Leave a symbol of your passage here; or, if you left one unintentionally, take care to remove it.

Warlock

d6 Activity

- 1 Make certain that whatever mark your Patron left you with remains hidden.
- 2 Prepare a simple sacrifice or offering to your Patron, such as animal bones or a rare flower.
- 3 Search the campsite for unusual plants, animals, or terrain features.
- 4 Try to interpret a new sign from your Patron (whether there is one or not).
- 5 Play "two truths and a lie" with your comrades. Offer to start.
- 6 Roll bones, cast sticks, or read entrails for omens. Describe your findings to the party.

Wizard

d6 Activity

- 1 Tend to your spellbook; touch up any pages that are damaged or lacking.
- 2 Take notes on the surrounding area; copy down any and all new information.
- 3 Teach someone in the party some piece of information they've never heard before.
- 4 Maintain your notes on the other members of the party. Ask someone for help on interpreting your own handwriting, or another member's behavior.
- 5 Create harmless magic for practice; conjure humorous illusions, simple objects, or colorful lights.
- 6 Prescribe an arcane ritual or esoteric poultice to ease another party member's ailments.

NAMES

Names can be ordered as descriptor then environment, such as “Bone Barrens,” or as environment then descriptor, such as “Barrens of Bone.” As always, these are inspiration, not prescription; tweak and adjust as you will.

Dungeon Names

d20	Descriptor	d20	Environment
1	Bone	1	Barrow
2	Buried	2	Catacombs
3	Butcher's	3	Caverns
4	Cruel	4	Chasm
5	Cursed	5	Crypt
6	Dead	6	Demise
7	Filth	7	Den
8	Flagstone	8	Forge
9	Flooded	9	Fort
10	Forgotten	10	Grave
11	Godless	11	Keep
12	Hatred	12	Labyrinth
13	Haunted	13	Sepulcher
14	Hidden	14	Shrine
15	Profane	15	Temple
16	Rotten	16	Tomb
17	Shadow	17	Tower
18	Shrouded	18	Warren
19	Stygian	19	Well
20	Unholy	20	Ziggurat

Faction Names

d20	Descriptor	d20	Organization
1	Anointed	1	Assembly
2	Burning	2	Band
3	Crucible	3	Clan
4	Dawn	4	Column
5	Divine	5	Company
6	Enlightened	6	Conclave
7	Enshrouded	7	Council
8	Fallen	8	Cult
9	Forsaken	9	Federation
10	Golden	10	Guild
11	Hell's	11	Horde
12	Immortal	12	Host
13	Ironclad	13	Kingdom
14	Last	14	League
15	Lunar	15	Legion
16	Pauper's	16	Monastery
17	Scarlet	17	Order
18	Sworn	18	Sect
19	Unborn	19	Synod
20	Undying	20	Throng

Town Names

d10	Descriptor	d10	Designation
1	Banished	1	Edge
2	Bitter	2	End
3	Empire's	3	Fort
4	Exile's	4	Fringe
5	Final	5	Hope
6	Forsaken	6	Prayer
7	Heroes'	7	Refuge
8	Outlaw's	8	Respite
9	Small	9	Rim
10	Western	10	Road

Coastline Names

d10	Descriptor	d10	Environment
1	Crab	1	Bay
2	Deep Blue	2	Beach
3	Driftwood	3	Coast
4	Emerald	4	Coves
5	Rippling	5	Firth
6	Serpent's	6	Lagoon
7	Stony	7	Seaside
8	Stormy	8	Shallows
9	Sunken	9	Shore
10	Tranquil	10	Wash

Desert Names

d10	Descriptor	d10	Environment
1	Bleached	1	Barrens
2	Bone	2	Basin
3	Dry	3	Desert
4	Dust	4	Dunes
5	Empty	5	Expanse
6	Endless	6	Quarter
7	Painted	7	Sands
8	Pallid	8	Sea
9	Scorched	9	Solitude
10	Shimmering	10	Xeroscape

Forest Names

d10	Descriptor	d10	Environment
1	Crannog	1	Copse
2	Crooked	2	Forest
3	Dappled	3	Glades
4	Gnarled	4	Green
5	Grey	5	Holt
6	Murk	6	Stand
7	Pine	7	Thicket
8	Raven	8	Timberland
9	Whispering	9	Weald
10	Witching	10	Woods

What is a name but a memory to ruin? A place can only be destroyed when it is forgotten.

Grassland Names

d10	Descriptor	d10	Environment
1	Arid	1	Fields
2	Sprawling	2	Flats
3	Dry	3	Glen
4	Jackal's	4	Grasslands
5	Golden	5	Heath
6	Verdant	6	Moors
7	Windswept	7	Plains
8	Vast	8	Prairie
9	Amber	9	Savannah
10	Trackless	10	Steppe

Hills Names

d10	Descriptor	d10	Environment
1	Boar's Head	1	Bluffs
2	Broken	2	Crags
3	Bulwark	3	Downs
4	Earthen	4	Highlands
5	Iron	5	Hills
6	Razor	6	Knolls
7	Red	7	Mounds
8	Rolling	8	Ridgebacks
9	Shale	9	Slopes
10	Stilted	10	Upland

Mountain Names

d10	Descriptor	d10	Environment
1	Falcon	1	Cliffs
2	Fury	2	Horns
3	Granite	3	Massif
4	Misty	4	Mountains
5	Rim	5	Peaks
6	Shattered	6	Range
7	Split	7	Sierra
8	Steepled	8	Spine
9	Sundering	9	Spires
10	Thunder	10	Teeth

Swamp Names

d10	Descriptor	d10	Environment
1	Black	1	Bog
2	Dripping	2	Marshes
3	Effluvious	3	Swamp
4	Fetid	4	Mire
5	Fungal	5	Sludge
6	Labyrinthine	6	Fen
7	Overgrown	7	Wetland
8	Stagnant	8	Estuary
9	Stinking	9	Quagmire
10	Swallow	10	Swale

Tundra Names

d10	Descriptor	d10	Environment
1	Biting	1	Depths
2	Bitter	2	Floes
3	Flaking	3	Frostworks
4	Frigid	4	Glaciers
5	Gelid	5	Sheet
6	Jagged	6	Shelf
7	Pale	7	Snowfields
8	Piercing	8	Taiga
9	Shivering	9	Tundra
10	White	10	Vale

Urban Names

d10	Descriptor	d10	Environment
1	Cobblestone	1	Borough
2	Old	2	Burg
3	Temple	3	Court
4	Thatcher	4	Fort
5	Rat's	5	Gate
6	Cinder	6	Point
7	Lamplit	7	Ring
8	Pike	8	Square
9	Languid	9	Village
10	Hunter's	10	Ward

Underground Names

d10	Descriptor	d10	Environment
1	Cascading	1	Burrow
2	Deeprun	2	Catacomb
3	Dripping	3	Caverns
4	Glittering	4	Crawlway
5	Gloomwork	5	Delve
6	Igneous	6	Grotto
7	Sculpted	7	Hive
8	Silent	8	Hollow
9	Skittering	9	Mine
10	Umbral	10	Warrens

Wasteland Names

d10	Descriptor	d10	Environment
1	Accursed	1	Badlands
2	Barrow	2	Blight
3	Corrupting	3	Desolation
4	Crawling	4	Heaps
5	Drained	5	No-Man's-Land
6	Forgotten	6	Scar
7	Grave	7	Scrublands
8	Last	8	Slough
9	Ochre	9	Wastes
10	Pestilent	10	Zone



GENERIC LORE

Ancient Beings

d10	This being was known for...	d10	But then was...	d10	And thus now is...
1	Hunting and eating children	1	Betrayed by a former ally	1	Transformed into a terrible beast
2	Bringing arcane magic into the world	2	Rebelled against by their mortal followers	2	Locked in an underworld prison
3	Raising mountains out of the sea	3	Seeking forbidden truths	3	Missing, simply vanished from existence
4	Splicing beasts together to make monsters	4	Struck by a falling star	4	Slumbering beneath the seas
5	Teaching humans how to work iron	5	Judged guilty in sacred court	5	Lost in an infinite labyrinth
6	Keeping the sun alight	6	Consumed with gnawing guilt	6	Reigning over a corrupted kingdom
7	Being completely, absolutely unkillable	7	Tricked by a lowly mortal	7	Fully descended into madness
8	Shattering the planar boundaries	8	Stripped of their magic	8	Hidden in a secluded private domain
9	Devouring the sky	9	Beguiled by a pretty face	9	Subsumed into the natural environment
10	Slaying legendary behemoths	10	Cursed by the moon	10	Permanently and irrevocably dead

Apocalyptic Cataclysms

d10	The apocalypse took the form of...	d10	Which occurred because...	d10	And so now...
1	A second, red sun appearing at night	1	The gods went to war against each other	1	The sky is blue, rather than red
2	Forests growing to choke out all other life	2	A cabal of magicians made an error	2	Humans can't breathe underwater
3	A tornado that spun the earth off its axis	3	A mortal king tried to ascend to godhood	3	The sun rises in the east and sets in the west
4	The moon falling out of the sky	4	A devil and an angel conspired together	4	Winter returns every year
5	Seas boiling over and dissolving	5	Miners dug too deep into the earth's heart	5	Great monsters roam the earth
6	A final battle betwixt the living and the dead	6	The holy priesthood was embracing sin	6	The heavens and earth are disparate
7	A string of linked unending volcanoes	7	A group of righteous people were enslaved	7	The moon pulls at the sea itself
8	An unstoppable all-consuming beast	8	A great secret was brought to light	8	Trees can no longer speak to humans
9	An unrelenting plague	9	An ancient hunger must be fed	9	The earth is filled with precious gems
10	An extraplanar army's unending advance	10	A petulant wizard lost their temper	10	Humans cannot cross the planes

Mythical Sites

d10	This site originally was...	d10	Made by...	d10	Which explains why...
1	A throne for a forgotten queen	1	The first humans, working together as one	1	Vultures always circle high above it
2	A fortress for a clan of giants	2	A god, on a whim	2	Anyone who sleeps near it has nightmares
3	A portal to the primal planes of existence	3	A giant king-smith, as a wedding gift	3	Trees and plants do not grow on the site
4	A prison for an outcast god	4	A wizard struck with mystical madness	4	The entire site is flecked with gold
5	A monument after a century-long war	5	The veil between planes wearing thin	5	Travellers and wanderers make offerings
6	A city of ten thousand faeries	6	The otherworldly lover of a dying mortal	6	It reeks of brimstone and rotting corpses
7	An artistic work of unknown genius	7	Extraplanar wanderers making landfall	7	Whispers hang in the air nearby
8	A suit of armor worn by a titan	8	A dragon, refusing to be forgotten	8	Its dwellers' appetites can never be sated
9	A vault to hold a hundred dragons' hoards	9	A retinue of untiring zealots	9	Fires grow rapidly and cannot be contained
10	A nest of a gargantuan monster	10	No one, it's always been there	10	The stars above cannot be seen above

Significant Artifacts

d10	The artifact is...	d10	And it's significant because it was...	d10	But currently, the artifact is...
1	A sword made from a dead god	1	Wielded in a cataclysmic duel	1	Shattered into a thousand pieces
2	An elixir of eternal life	2	Used to save the life of a dying loved one	2	Buried with its dead wielder
3	A crown forged from dragon's teeth	3	Offered up in sacrifice to a god	3	Embedded in the heart of a living monster
4	A gauntlet imbued with starlight	4	The symbol of a once-eternal dynasty	4	Still wielded by its most recent claimant
5	An amulet trapping a monster inside of it	5	The one weakness of an almighty being	5	Sealed away in an underworld vault
6	A ring with the mind of a king inside it	6	Collateral in a pact made with the Devil	6	Remade into a different, warped version
7	A tome hiding the true names of the gods	7	The focus of an all-knowing magician	7	Venerated by a cult of followers
8	A pair of boots that can walk across planes	8	Stolen from a celestial vault by a mortal	8	A trophy in the hoard of a dragon
9	A shield that blocks the passage of time	9	The only evidence of regicide	9	Powering the husk of a dying tyrant
10	A mask that conceals your immortal soul	10	Once gifted to a pauper who had nothing	10	Replaced by a facsimile, and thus lost

Legendary Events

d10	The event involved a...	and a...	d10	Who...	d10	Which in turn caused...
1	Single champion	Mighty dragon	1	Broke a sacred covenant	1	A torrential, bloody war
2	Conquering warlord	Hermitic scholar	2	Fell in love and produced a child	2	An unexpected golden age
3	Faerie trickster	Quiet shepherd	3	Betrayed and backstabbed each other	3	A new island to emerge from the sea
4	Noble god	Chaotic god	4	Fought a bitter, vicious duel	4	A huge scar to be rent across the land
5	Half-mad alchemist	Primal elemental	5	Allied together against a greater foe	5	The fall of a once-exalted god
6	Terrible beast	Resplendent city	6	Discovered a dangerous secret	6	The loss of a priceless heirloom
7	Eternal wanderer	Beguiling demon	7	Settled an age-old conflict between them	7	A cataclysm of apocalyptic proportions
8	Heavenly angel	Prideful emperor	8	Held a contest of riddles	8	An empire's people to flee in an exodus
9	Wise old tree	Wild blue sea	9	Committed untold heresy	9	A new dynasty to be born
10	Deep sea monster	Wily jester	10	Conspired to steal great riches	10	A forest to reject the changing of seasons

Faction Leaders

d10	The leader originally was...	d10	Who rose to power by...	d10	But now is...
1	A poor subsistence farmer	1	Earning the love and respect of their peers	1	Haunted by the ghost of a dead rival
2	An arrogant, swaggering noble	2	Murdering their superior and seizing power	2	Unable to escape their followers' obsession
3	A sage consumed by hunger for knowledge	3	Being openly chosen and blessed by a god	3	Vexed by a long-forgotten mystery
4	The secret child of two feuding houses	4	Ending an age-old conflict between factions	4	Cursed by an ancient relic gone awry
5	An orphan abandoned on a temple's steps	5	Fulfilling a prophecy, to the word	5	Publicly known as an oathbreaker
6	A raging, unstoppable warrior	6	Unlocking ancient mysterious power	6	Shirking their duties to enjoy themselves
7	A zealous pilgrim burning with faith	7	Slaughtering everything in their path	7	Consumed with worry and self-doubt
8	A great beauty, beloved by all who saw them	8	Vanishing when their enemies came hunting	8	Attacked on all sides by their enemies
9	A wandering minstrel and storyteller	9	Recovering an artifact of great strength	9	Slowly descending into madness
10	The seventh child of a seventh child	10	Inheriting their former mentor's mantle	10	More ambitious and brutal than ever

Wandering Strangers

d10	This person came to the Marches to...	d10	But then they...	d10	And now they...
1	Practice a heretical religion	1	Were possessed by an extraplanar being	1	Have retired to run a simple tavern
2	Study forbidden magic in private	2	Ran afoul of an accursed site	2	Study ancient curses and how to break them
3	Fulfill the tenets of a doomed oath	3	Fought a duel with an undead champion	3	Brew strange alchemical mixtures
4	Loot mountains of lost treasure	4	Became obsessed with a specific mystery	4	Forge exclusively with organic materials
5	Die a lonely exile's death	5	Were transformed into an animal	5	Build ships of enchanted wood
6	Discover the fate of a missing friend	6	Grew addicted to alchemical substances	6	Carve runes into any available surface
7	Pursue a hated rival who fled	7	Lost a bet made with the Devil	7	Whisper addled prophecies aloud
8	Find a body of long-forgotten wisdom	8	Accidentally freed an imprisoned monster	8	Raise dangerous monsters from birth
9	Join a demon-worshipping cult	9	Became indebted to a local god	9	Tinker endlessly with clockwork devices
10	Escape Imperial punishment	10	Fell in love with another Marches inhabitant	10	Cavort with a band of raucous compatriots

TITLES & EPITHETS

Generate titles for epic characters from this table by rolling 3d6 and reading the values from left to right as they fall.

Titles & Epithets

d666	Title	d666	Title	d666	Title
111	All-Conqueror	211	the Damned	311	Giantslayer
112	the Almighty	212	Dances-on-Graves	312	the Gilded
113	Angelblood	213	the Defiler	313	God's Executioner
114	Anointed	214	Demonspawn	314	Grave-Turner
115	Arco-Flagellant	215	the Demure	315	Greenskin
116	Banner-Bearer	216	Dirge-Caller	316	the Gutless
121	the Bastard	221	Dragonsbane	321	Half-Moon
122	Beloved-by-Bards	222	Drawn-and-Quartered	322	the Hammer
123	Bitterbite	223	Drinks-Deep-of-the-Wine	323	the Hanged One
124	of the Blighted Woods	224	Dropper-of-Eaves	324	Hardy-of-Liver
125	the Bloodhound	225	the Drowned	325	Head-Taker
126	the Bloody-Mawed	226	Duke of Nothing	326	the Headless
131	the Blue	231	Emperor-in-Exile	331	Heartstealer
132	Boilmonger	232	the Enlightened	332	Heavy-Handed
133	the Boisterous	233	the Everlight	333	the Heir Apparent
134	Bonemasher	234	the Exegetic	334	Hell's Hammer
135	Born-of-the-Forge	235	Exsanguinator	335	Hellfire
136	Born-Yesterday	236	Eye-Snatcher	336	the Herald of Ages
141	Brassmonger	241	Face-of-Boils	341	Heresiarch
142	the Brindled Boar	242	the Faceless	342	the Hook-Fingered
143	Broadstride	243	Fish-Stealer	343	Horsefaced
144	the Broken	244	Five-Pointed	344	the Hungry
145	the Bulbous	245	Flamestruck	345	the Imprisoned
146	the Burned	246	Flaming-Feet	346	the Invincible
151	the Chained	251	Flap-Eared	351	Ironpalm
152	the Chef	252	the Fleet	352	the Jackdaw
153	the Chimera	253	Flesh-Hangs-Loosely	353	Joyous
154	Cloudrender	254	Flesh-Sculptor	354	the Judge
155	Coldhearted	255	the Fleshbiter	355	the Keeper of the Inferno
156	the Collector	256	Forder-of-Seas	356	the Kingslayer
161	the Concealed	261	Forgotten	361	Knife-Thrower
162	Corpse-Speaker	262	the Frigid	362	the Last Scion
163	the Coveted	263	Frostblood	363	the Late
164	Crown-Snatcher	264	the Gangrenous	364	the Lawbringer
165	Crowsbane	265	Gatekeeper	365	Leatherback
166	the Cutup	266	Gazes-at-the-Horizon	366	the Left-Foot



Oooh, what if I was called "Zadrok Lion-Roarer," or "Zadrok the Faceless?" Those both sound real neat for me! What do you say?

I believe that "the Scribe" is suitable for now.

Titles & Epithets

d666	Title	d666	Title	d666	Title
411	Lion-Roarer	511	the Satirist	611	Threeskins
412	the Lonely King	512	Seeker of Truth	612	Thrice-Crowned
413	Long-Sought-After	513	Seeks-Many-Bones	613	the Thunderheart
414	the Longnailed	514	Serpent-Singer	614	the Tongue-Eater
415	Longshanks	515	Seven-Toad	615	the Toothless
416	the Lost	516	Seven-Toed	616	the Toothsome
421	the Maddened	521	Sharp-Wit	621	Tremorfoot
422	the Magpie	522	the Shifter	622	the Trickster
423	Man-Mangler	523	Silvertongue	623	Twelve-Lashes
424	Many-Eyes	524	Sky-Whisperer	624	Twice-Buried
425	Many-Knuckled	525	the Small	625	Twice-Struck-by-Lightning
426	Mead-Drinker	526	Smote-Upon-the-Rock	626	Two-Faced
431	Mirth-Maker	531	the Snarling	631	Two-Tongued
432	the Moldable	532	Spits-Upon-the-Weak	632	the Tyrant
433	the Moon's Breath	533	the Splendid	633	Unbidden
434	Mountain-Smasher	534	Squallwalker	634	the Unbound
435	Mournsong	535	Starborn	635	the Unbreakable
436	Nimble-Tongued	536	Stone-Thrower	636	Undulating
441	of Noble Brow	541	Stormborne	641	the Undying
442	of the Northern Wind	542	Sun's Light	642	Unquenched
443	Not Forgotten	543	the Sunken Lord	643	the Unthroned
444	the Old Guard	544	the Supple	644	the Vile
445	One-Eye	545	Sweat-Dripper	645	the Virulent
446	the Peacemaker	546	Sword of the Dawn	646	the Vitriolic
451	the Peacetaker	551	Sword-Swallower	651	Voice of Sorrow
452	the Pestilent	552	Teller-of-Truths	652	Walks-Upon-the-Moors
453	the Pious	553	of Ten Thousand Names	653	the Wall-Written
454	Priest-Hater	554	Tender-of-Groves	654	the Wart-Sucker
455	the Punctual	555	Tendertouch	655	Wise Fool
456	the Quick-and-Dead	556	Terror of the Lake	656	the Wish
461	the Ravenous	561	Terrorbane	661	Witchfinder
462	the Renegade	562	That-Which-Knows-Sin	662	Wolfshead
463	Returned	563	That-Which-Needs-Violence	663	the Xenolith
464	Runner-on-the-Plain	564	That-Which-Seeks-Blood	664	Yellowbellied
465	Rust-Maned	565	That-Which-Walks-in-Shadow	665	the Zealot
466	Salt-Upon-Wounds	566	the Thick	666	the Zetetic

APPENDIX IX: KICKSTARTER BACKERS

Giant

Robert “DM Bob” Brown

Legends

Aggrayday, Anonymous (2x), Astolpho, Benjamin Snead, Big Tyler, Brother Tom, Bryan Watson, Chip Inman, Chris B, Chris Cascioli, Clint Malcolm, Corey Raines, Curtis W. DeGidio, Dan Vehslage, Daniel Nagle, Dante Lyndell Johnson, Dante Sclafani, David “Throk” Joy, David Awesome COLE, David Simkins, Doug “Dhomal” Raas, Espen Borgen, Figment of Your Imagination, Fred Herman, Hamilton “Verdestrom” Spivey, Ian Barnes, James Garmson, JD Walsh, Jeremy “Jezza” Styles, Jesse & Olivia, John “johnkzin” Rudd, John Blau, John G. Snyder, Jon Rainey, Joseph Stecher, Juan “Zeromegas” Gonzalez, Justin Lopez, Kai Q, Kaleb Kronimus, Kay Schwenk, KOZ1K, Larry Norris II, Leonard Lee, Levity Studios, Lluew Grey, Michael “Al” Ross Remes, Nathan King, Owen “Dig” Crary, Philip W Rogers Jr, Robert Tankersley, Roel & Leah van Heusden, Rohit Kaushik, Russell Hoyle, Sam Belisle, samurguybri, Trojan Points, Ulf Lilienthal, William E. Staab, William Gallagher, and xaosseed

Heroes

Aaron Lloyd, Aaron Sweigart, Adam Longley, Adam Sebzda, Aeon, Art Braune, Brandon Szabo, Brian Mahoney, Bryan McEntire, Christopher, Cory Johns, Craig Earl, Currfuldán, Daniël Harmsen, Daniel Pye, Darcy van de Rijt, David Matz, Dennis Timm, Domenico Iovino, Egil Töllner, Evan Johnson, Fuzztastic!, Gary McBride, George Cummings, GK, Gregory A. Lusak, Jason Bostwick, Jeanne Frenken, Joe Field, Joe Yowell, John “Udono” Nakar, Jon Ferguson, Jonathan “Buddha” Davis, Joshua Miller, Juan Camilo Gomez, Karl Grette, Keith Davies, Kevin Freeman, Kory Beatty, Lane Abshire, Marcus S. Schuch, Mark Asteris, Martin M., Matt Cramsie, Michael Stevens, Moritz Boehm, Murray Shaw, Nicholas MacDonald, Nicholas Pharris, Obslin, Oddtwang of Dork, Paul Baker, Ralph Mazza, Rebecca Davis, Renata Fearn, Robert Thomas, Ross Aitken, Royal E. Frazier Jr, RunTheCastle, Rylan Kovach, Sam Costidell, Sascha Bay, Sean M. Cooper, Shannon Carl, Steven Roemer, StreetMonk, Thalji, The Pink Phantom, Thomas, Thomas Milazzo, Tim Saiers, Todd K., Tom Williams, VickyR, w. David Lewis, and Ward

Adventurers

Aaron F Stanton, Aaron Rhoads, Abigail, adam oedekoven, Adrian Eccles, Alan M, Alex Parker, Alex Toomey Westcott, Allan Rodda, Andrew Bahls, Andrew M, Andy Tri Nguyen, Anthony Campla, Anthony W, Bill Sundwall, Blarghedy, Brad McCullen, Brandon, Brandon Salisbury, Brian Fortunato, Brian Nugent, Brock Auston, Burzum, C. Edward Brown, Casey Rадalia, Casper Kirketerp-Helenius, Chris Swanson, Christian Torstensson, Ckalex, CLWeeks, Cody Blaschke, Colin Anders Brodd, Colin J, Connor Stokes, Conor Keane, Cora Neas, Crafts + Minis, Craig Hindle, Daigoro Oshita, dalmoz, Damian AdamsM, Daniel W. Bøgedal, David J Plamondon, Diogo Nogueira, Dorian Wright, Doug Hulsether, Douglas Meserve, Dylan Medici, Edgar Gonzalez, Edward Hogan, Eloise Bowyer, Eric Azama, Evan Jones, Fabian Reisner, Gaspar Quelhas Lima, Geoffrey Lloyd, Godu, Gord Sellar, Granby Limb, Grant Barbee, Grazul, Heel Turn Radio, J. Evans Payne, J.S. Majer, Jacob Blackmon, Jake Comer, James Hatchett, James Hopefl, James Powell, James W. Armstrong-Wood, Jamie Corfield, Jamie Walter, Jason Cree, Jennifer Patterson, Jeremy Esch, John B. McCarthy, John C. Randall, John Johnson, John R. VanBenschoten, John Wicker, Joshua Palmer, Joshua Wiebelhaus, Kevin B., Kiely Fickus, Lance Duncan, Lars Hovgaard Jensen, Lee Saferite, Loren Small, Louis G Pratt, Luca Lettieri, Luke Fabis, Luke Trevino, Majdi Badri, Marshall Miller, Martin, Martyn French, Matthew Jones, Matthew T. Ricks, Melissa Gibbs, Merrill Hebert, Michael Hansen, Michael Walker, Mike Musteric, Mike Ross, Morten Vesterager, Myr Stormcaller, Nate Whittington, Nicholas Kerr, nick fin, Nicolai Rerup Nielsen, Nils du Trag, Orgdrannof the Thief, Patrick Salemmme, Paul Vogt, Peter James Freeman, Ralph Morgan, RemasM, Robert Martin, Roger Rebisz,

Rosaria Thorne, Scott A. Adams, Scott Turnbull, Sean McGuirl, Seth Hutchinson, Simon Ward, Steffan Thomson, Stephen Green, Steven Kei Kenobi, Tad Duncan, The Weule Brothers, Thomas Sterchi, Thomas van Eijl, Tim Smith, Trent Laidlaw-Hall, Tyler S, Tyson Land, W. Gage Berry, Washington Laws, Wes Hilmeyer, Wilhelm Fitzpatrick, William J. Scott III, Zach Battista, and Zachary Pruckowski

Mercenaries

Aahron Yang, Adam S., AeonAGV, Alan Albano, Alan Cranston, Alexisaok, Alvaro Torres-Gomez, Amadan, Andrew Joubert, Andrew St Laurent, Arkanjil, Arseni Kritchever, Ash Monogue, Austin Flaherty, Autolycus, Ben Dutter, Benjamin Johnston-Leamon, Benjamin Nitti, Björn Prömpeler, Bloomington Adventurers For Hire, Bob Huss, Branden Gill, Bratwurster, Breon, Brigonos, Bryn Matthews, Cadithial, Cameron Youngs, Carey Williams, Castreek, Charles Summerhill, Chris Clary, Chris Shorb, Chris Walker-Bush, Christian Kuhn, Christopher Brown, Christopher Lytle, Christopher Villeneuve, Giernan, Cody Dent, Corinna Clanton, Craig Crossbard, Craig Dey, CW, D. Lybarger, Dariolink, David B. Semmes, David Edelstein, David Paul Guzmán, David Ruski, Dengt_Echo, Dexter Chu, DM Jefi, DoombeaR Cave, Douglas, Dr Jon's, Dr Ron Legere, Dragongunblade55, DrSbaitso, Dylan Carlson, Dylan V., Edward Batman, Edward Engquist, Edward G. Haggerty, Jr., El Jeffe, Eli Martin, Eugene Helm, Evan Bright, Evan W.J. Parson, Evii Paladin, Faye Wildes, Fearchar Battlechaser, Felix Chung, finalpride, Frank Filz, Frédéric Rating, Fredrik Brandberg, Freykeitschroud, greenwizard, Greg Lohman, Gregory Hicks, Guild of Appropriations, Tinkers, and Displacement, Gustavo Rocha, Hunter Brennan, Ian Wright, Icaro Santos, J Sprague, J. Tone, J. Weisser, J.H. Anthony, J.T. Dimino, Jack Kessler, Jack Smith, Jake Byrne, James Cole, Jason C Harris, jason e. bean, Jason Marks, Jeff Hosmer, Jeff Pierce, Jens Cramer, Jeremiah Tolbert, Jeremy Kear, Jerrod J Rose Jr., Jesse D., Jim “Wilmanric” Pacek, Jim Hackett, Jim Stoner, Joel MacRitchie, John Zhang, Jon G, Jonathan Black, Jonathan Chen, Jørgen Sætermo, Joseph Cook-Williams, Josh, Josh Pilachowski, Joshua Dougherty, Justin Sadosky, K.Horigan, Kamish Bhai, Kaytee Pappas, Kerri Coffey, Kevin C Johnson, Kevin R. Smith, Krister Persson, Krycek, Kutotsu, Kyle G. Crider, Len C, Leo Lin, Lilly Ibelo, Lorenzo Bonilla, Lukas Feinweber, Luke Haggard, Luke Swadling, Maarten Bukkems, Malcolm Coull, Maria Rowena Josephine Auxillos, Mark Buzby, Mark Eckenrod, Mark Finn, Mark Hanna, Mark Schumann, Marshall Mowbray, Martin Greening, Mathew McCarthy, Matilda Schlax, Matt Helms, Matt Schlotte, Matt Sinclair, Matty K, Matty Wilkerson, Max Kindred, Menachem Cohen, Michael Owen Hill, Miguel Tortosa, Mike Fennell, Mr., Jay, N. Guenther, N.O., NeonBuddha, Nigel McShane, Nils Werner, Norman F, NP, Oh SeungHan, Oniricsword, Oscar Lowry, Patricio Aguilera, Patrick P., Patrick Trapp, Paul Leary, Paul Lukianchuk, Paul S., Paul Schifferer, Peter Wood, ProfBeard, Purpose-Porpoise, Quillion Fellghast III, Ralph Holland, Rani Sharim, Red, Riccardo “Musta” Caverni, Richard Henning, Richard Moss, Richard Walls, Rick Barton, Robertl, “Jefepato” Dall, Robert Mohl, Rune, Russell Ventimeglia, RVH, Rye VanStry, Sam Brockelbank, Samantha Michaels, Scott Cook, SeaLandRay, Sean Kelly, Sebastian Müller, Simon O, Sister Anthea the Techno Nun, Stands-In-The-Fire, Steve Arensberg, Steve L, Steven “Sammo” Simmons, Tessara, Thaldon Magedrake, That Dutch Sir, Tim Czarnecki, Todd Stephens, Tomas Burgos-Caez, Tomas Wynne, Tony Fucina, Travis Palm, Trent Hergenrader, Trevor Hardy, Trip Space-Parasite, Tuomas Lempiäinen, Waylander, Will and Maura Barron, Will McConnell Simpson, William Brook, Z.Vanetti, Zahear, and zemesan

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And now my task is finished. Go, seek your fortune. I earnestly await our final, deadly confrontation.

Thanks for reading! Hope it helps your survive in the Marches just a bit longer! Good luck out there!

HEED THE CALL

Here, at the end of the road, there lie uncharted wilds, where courage of heart and the spirit of discovery still ring true. Here, beyond the edge of the map, relentless peril may crush the soul of the unworthy, yet it shall stoke the embers of greatness. Here, amidst the ruin and brimstone, awaits the forge of heroes, where legends are tempered in fire and blood.

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