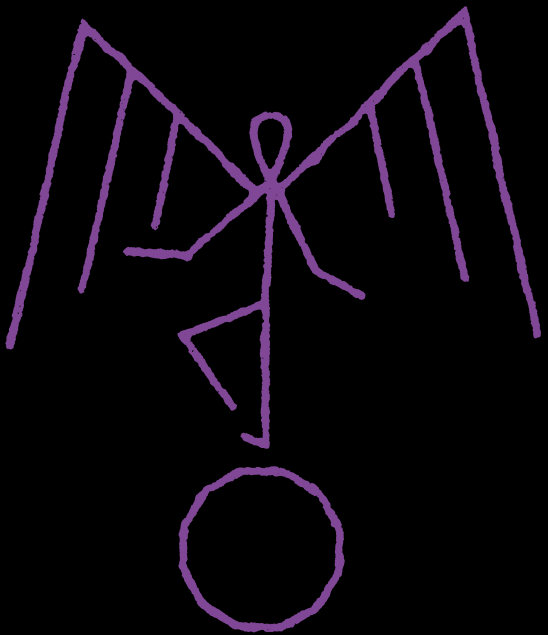
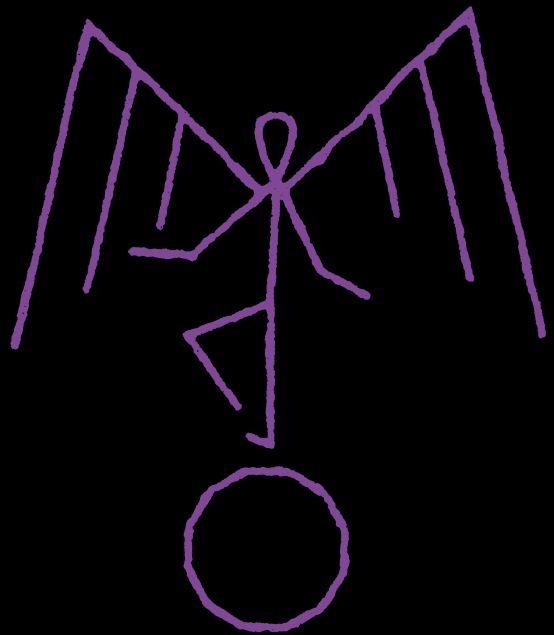


Ring of Thieves



by S. John Ross



Ring of Thieves
by S. John Ross

Ring of Thieves

A Fantasy Solo Adventure for
Risus: The Anything RPG

by S. John Ross

CUMBERLAND
Games & Diversions

Special Thanks: Many picky friends and playtesters have provided valuable commentary on the various stages of this adventure's evolution, including: Tim Driscoll, Marty Franklin, Dan "Moose" Jasman, Demian Katz, Bob Likins, Robert Colby Perkins jr., Hobbie Regan, Ron Wiltshire, and the old gang at *All of the Above* (particularly Scott Maykrantz and Spike Y. Jones), where the first public version of this story appeared.

Ring of Thieves is Copyright © 2000,2011 by S. John Ross. **Risus: The Anything RPG** is Copyright © 1993-2001 by S. John Ross. All Rights Reserved for all rights claimed. **Risus: The Anything RPG**, Cumberland Games & Diversions, the distinctive logos associated with each, along with character and place-names unique to this work, are trademarks of S. John Ross. Text Version 3.00

How to Read This Story

Ring of Thieves is a solitaire adventure for **Risus: The Anything RPG**. It's a way of playing Risus by yourself, using this story as the "GM." The result is part adventure story, part game. Solitaires are similar to the "pick-a-path" books popular with kids in years gone by, with the addition of game rules to make things more interesting. To play the game, simply begin at the section labeled "Lucas' Tale," then read the numbered sections as instructed, making decisions and die-rolls as the story develops. Every time you play, the adventure can be different, because Lucas Marks isn't just the hero – he's *you*, and there's more than one path through the story's "maze."

About Risus

Risus is an extremely simple set of roleplaying rules, suitable for beer-and-pretzels gaming and (in this case) solo play. You'll need to read a copy of **Risus** to play, but don't worry: It's only a few pages long (there's a copy of **Risus** in the back of this book). To download the latest version, and find links to the growing **Risus** fan-community, visit www.cumberlandgames.com on the Web, or use the keywords **RISUS RPG** in a search engine. Once you're up to speed on **Risus** (and you've got paper, pencil, and some dice handy), you're ready to play!

Lucas Marks

Description: A curly-haired, green-eyed Halfling with a confident gaze and a boyish grin. Popular with the ladies despite his minute stature, Lucas is a stubborn, gently sarcastic, fun-loving adventurer with a fondness for warm weather and thick ale. He's a thief, but he gets his money through honest mercenary work when possible.

Clichés: Fun-Loving Mercenary (3), Halfling Burglar (4), Ladies' Man (2), Outrageous Story-Teller (2)

Hook: Lucas is rotten with anything mechanical; he operates at *half-dice* when dealing with locks or traps.

Tools: Clothing, cash, shortsword, belt pouch, a gold coin enchanted to shine with light (kept in his pouch until needed), lockpicks, and a few meals' worth of dried rations.

Lucas' Luck: Lucas is a standard 10-dice **Risus** character, with two extra dice for having a Hook and a Tale. He spent one of his extras increasing his "Ladies' Man" cliché from (1) to (2) . . . but he spent the other die to buy three Lucky Shots. one of the rules options described in greater detail in the pages of the **Risus Companion**. Here's all you need to know about Lucky Shots: whenever you need a boost of extra luck, you can use *one* of Lucas' three Lucky Shots. Using a Lucky Shot lets you roll a single extra die for just one roll of the dice (either a single attack or defense in combat, for example, or a single Difficulty-based test). Make a note whenever you use a Lucky Shot, since you have only three of them for the course of the adventure.

Customizing Lucas: This simple solitaire requires Lucas to have the clichés listed for him, but advanced players may wish to rearrange his allotment of dice to suit their tastes and playing style. The adventure is designed to account for this – there's no one "best" balance between the clichés (though some will be more useful than others). You can even opt to discard the Lucky Shots, putting all 12 dice into Lucas himself. No single cliché may be raised beyond (4), however, and you may have no more than a single batch (of three) Lucky Shots for Lucas.

Lucas' Tale

In ***Ring of Thieves***, you control the destiny of Lucas Marks, young Halfling rogue, mercenary, and partner in crime with Patricia Meadows, a 22-year old human adventuress. *You* are Lucas, and Patricia is your partner. The two of you have been together for three years, and you've seen the strangest corners of the world. Your unlikely association began in the city of Chamlek, when you tried to pick one another's' pockets in the streets . . . After some embarrassing laughter, the most important friendship of your life began. With each passing season, your friendship grows stronger, a relationship built on mutual admiration.

Our story finds you both in the great northern city-state of Hultog, in the midst of a cruel winter. You arrived just a week ago, seeking a new source of revenue (and shelter from a blizzard) here in the mighty river-city. Unfortunately, you've found only uncaring crowds, cold winds, and the tireless presence of the Merchant Oligarchy's finest lawmen . . .

Until yesterday.

While perusing the dockside curiosity shops for foreign tidbits, you were ambushed. Five men, dressed in identical grey cloaks and wielding long knives, demanded money and jewelry. You were prepared to run for it, to lose them in the twisting alleyways . . .

(continued)

But Patricia was in a *testy* mood. Her shortsword leaped from its scabbard like vengeful lightning, and two grey-cloaks were bleeding and screaming before the others could react. The grim melee that followed was a good deal less clean, but no less decisive: two more grey-suits down (one by your blade, the other by Patricia's), with the last one running for dear life.

You're not sure if it's safe to say that you love Patricia. You certainly *do*. You're just not sure if it's safe to say it.

You gathered their purses and vacated the alley, making a celebratory supper at the Cup and Talon (a small hostelry in the north canal district). When you examined your spoils, you were shocked to find a magical ring amid the coins – a simple band of brass, gleaming with purple radiance!

Clearly, the grey-suits had been very greedy to go for a second job in a single day, especially after such a rich haul, but their loss was your gain. With the coinage spent on your feast and a bed for the night, and the ring tucked in the side-pocket of your shoe, you've settled into bed with Patricia for a well-deserved rest. After grumpily fighting over the covers, sleep finally comes, and the icy, river-scented air creeps in past the shutters.

As the adventure begins, it's the following morning. When you are ready to play, begin at the section numbered **1**.

Let's Begin!

I

Upon awakening, the first thing you notice is the open window of your room. The shutters creak slightly, swinging listlessly in the dawn, and the icy breeze raises goosebumps on your skin. Outside, a few lonely snowflakes drift silently over the rooftops.

The second thing you notice is that Patricia is gone. Her side of the bed is empty – and you know you didn't go to sleep with the window open! You sit upright in surprise, and meet a wave of nausea. You collapse, straining for breath, back into your pillow. The bed is empty. Patricia is gone. Your head hurts. The window is open.

You're having the worst hangover of your life, but you didn't touch more than a single flagon last night. Very little is making sense.

And Patricia never gets up before midday unless you make her. You're genuinely worried. If she's got in any sort of mischief ... You fight to make sense of the world through a wall of pain.

Roll against either your *Ladies' Man* or *Fun-Loving Mercenary* cliché to fight off the effects of your "hangover." The Difficulty for either cliché is 10. If you succeed, go to **8**. If you fail, go to **20**.

2

There's only one real choice. A fellow like this won't listen to anything you have to say; the circumstances are just too incriminating. You draw your sword and the man responds by letting go of your shirt and laughing at you!

You aren't laughing at all – you're dropping like a rock. You toss the sword aside [remove it from your character record; you only have one, now] and reach out for a ledge!

Roll against either your *Fun-Loving Mercenary* (Difficulty 15) or *Halfling Burglar* (Difficulty 10) cliché to grab the icy ledge. If you fail, go to **134**. If you succeed, go to **104**.

3

The Hultog docks are busy day and night. Even now, in the midst of one of the cruelest winters in years, sailors and merchants busy themselves amid the snowdrifts. Merchants from as far as the Chasm Sea and the southernmost reaches of the Tulral crowd at the quayside to sell and buy, haggling with the warehouse-owners and the tax officials of the Oligarchs.

The ice on the cobbles is already melted by the passage of feet, or sanded over by the merchants and tavernkeepers. The mass of humans and others swirls about you in a busy cloud of white breath and shouting voices. The crates and barrels form miniature cities unto themselves, and you twist between them to avoid being overtaken by the throng.

If you've learned the name of a dock to visit, you can go there at **24**. If you've learned the name of a tavern to check out, you can try it at **39**.

If you have neither lead to follow, you are wandering aimlessly on the docks; you must go to the Alchemist's instead. Go to **25**.

4

The tavern of the Iron Keel sits on a street corner, commanding a good view of both the adjacent streets and the river harbor.

You approach the door and grab the cold latch, when a disturbing flapping of wings sounds out behind you. A large river gull, grey with blue-black tips on its wings, lands on a nearby post and stares intently into your eyes. You wave at it to go away, but it seems to watch you even more closely!

The birds of the city are tame, but this is the middle of winter, and snow is still falling! This gull, if it should be here at all (you doubt it), should certainly be nested.

If you ignore the bird and enter the tavern, go to **59**. If you swat it with your sword to chase it off, go to **26**.

5

You open your belt-pouch, and draw out your magic light-coin (coins enchanted with a light spell are a tried-and-hackneyed dungeoneers' tradition of many centuries, and Patricia gets the spell refreshed every few weeks).

You've come to a square chamber, a small room with the roof only a foot or so above your head – a human would have to crouch or kneel, here. Earlier in the tunnels, you had gained dim light from openings in the ceiling, but here the darkness is total. You'll need the coin in hand from now on. You look around you, and see many "exits," many of them so small that only a rat could navigate them!

You are about to head for one of the Halfling-sized ones, when you hear the sound of running footsteps down the largest. You cannot tell whether they are running toward or away from you.

If you wish to pursue the sound, go to **28**. If not, go to **43**.

6

You pass through several tunnels, some of which are so small that you must crawl to navigate them. You know that you're getting closer to Patricia, and that thought keeps you going, ignoring the pain of your complaining knees and hands.

After a time, you come to a large corridor, with the connecting tunnel drawn on your map in decidedly recent ink. You've found the mark of the Red Djinn! More than that, the odd tunnel is illuminated by sorcerous radiance, and has been swept clean. You draw your weapon, and walk to **31**.

7

A grey-suited thug gets in a few lucky shots, and you go down.

You can't help but notice that Xim was taking that moment to rise out of the floor, which means the Red Djinni was in trouble! Patricia just might make it out alive. But you won't.

The End.

8

With a Herculean effort, you shake free of the fog of sleep and nausea. You stand uneasily, and it feels as though the room itself is bucking angrily beneath your feet. You try to make out details, and your eye catches a small piece of paper on the windowsill ...

The paper is ready to fall, tipping in the breeze. It bumps along the sill and then sails up into the air, heading right for the Hultog rooftops!

Roll against either your *Halfling Burglar* or *Fun-Loving Mercenary* cliché (Difficulty 20 in either case!) to snag the paper quickly. If you succeed, go to **34**. If you fail, go to **51**.

9

Clutching your nightshirt in one hand and steadying yourself with the other, you climb through the window and onto the roof of the inn, nearly slipping on the thin coating of ice. Even the leathery soles of your shoes, combined with the equally leathery soles of your feet, aren't protecting you from the intense cold. You feel your toes going numb.

The note, meanwhile, has sailed over to the next rooftop, and rests on the edge of a smoking chimney. You'll have to jump for it.

If you decide not to risk it, go to **68**. If you want to go for the note, go to **82**.

10

You press your ear to the window and try to hear a little better, and you grab the wall for some support.

"I think," says one voice (a small, whining one) "that the men down at the boat should hear about this. This has happened before, and if you don't tell Wolheim, I will!"

You hear a feminine voice begin to say something, but the third voice, a booming bass growl, cuts her off.

"Listen worm," he begins, in a yell which he quickly brings to a murderous whisper, "I don't think you have the –"

And then there is silence. Cold, deadly silence. You can hear your heart beat.

Roll against your Halfling Burglar or Ladies' Man cliché (Difficulty 10 for either; as a Ladies' Man, you've had to hide from irate husbands before) to stay quiet. If you succeed, go to **94**. If you fail, go to **36**.

11

You explain that you are a thief of some skill and experience, and that you would be very interested in adding your talents to theirs. The woman smiles at you. Success!

"You certainly sound confident enough," she says, thoughtfully. "Go to the Iron Keel on Quayside Street – near the docks – and ask the barkeep to see William. The password at the lamp-door is *Rakarva*. They will tend to you there."

You beam with joy. The den of thieves!

"And," Myra says, tensely, "be prepared for anything."

You nod, patting the blade at your side, and thank her.

Go to **95**.

I2

The alchemist snatches up your gold like a greedy child and hands you the “healing potion.” It’s a tiny glass vial full of blue liquid with tiny white lumps in it. You feel sick at the thought of drinking it, but place it carefully in your pocket.

This potion, if imbibed at a time when you are not in combat, will heal any one cliché completely (to its normal score). The potion has only one dose.

Go to **14**.

I3

You press your way toward the back room, fending off the advances of a drunken woman as you do so. You pass under a heavy dividing curtain, and find yourself in a room much darker and quieter than the main feasting-hall. Several men, all wearing grey cloaks, are here playing dice.

Your blood freezes as every eye in the room turns toward you. Luckily, not a single one shows any signs of recognition; they return to their games and plotting.

You stride with purpose toward the end of the room where a large lamp is affixed to the wall. You rap sharply on the boards, squinting in the blinding glare of the lamp, and the panel swings open. A hand grabs you, yanking you into pitch darkness ...

Go to **76**.

I4

You thank the alchemist and leave the shop, your shoes crunching on the midday snow. You notice something strange – now that you’re back outside, the cold air is again ringing with the noise of the city. Inside the alchemist’s shop, however, the silence was complete. You turn back to look at the thin walls of the ramshackle building, and see that the placard that once said “enter” now says “closed.” You rub your eyes in bafflement.

Your mind on magic again, it travels back to the strange ring that got you and your partner into this.

Walking swiftly through the alleyways, you pull the offensive item of ensorcelled jewelry from your pocket.

“Lucas,” says Xim, rising from the ring and tapping a petulant foot on the brassy skin of its home, “be reasonable. I do not want to be returned to the hands of those men.”

That’s a laugh. “You’re just as evil as they,” you say, getting ready to thrust the ring back into your pocket.

“No, Lucas,” Xim says. “I am sorry for my earlier words,” the spirit says, its tiny hands palms-forward in an apologetic gesture, “but I sought to control you in order to return to the thieves and wipe out the Red Djinn.” Its voice booms with less strength than before.

Go to **121**.

I5

As you approach the large man, you notice that his “tattoos” are actually stains. You take a deep breath, instantly regret it, and take a seat at the bar, smiling a frozen, slightly ill smile.

“What?” he says, rubbing a glass clean with what looks like some species of footgear.

You ask to speak to William.

“Oh,” he says, frowning soberly. “Sure. Go inna back room, and knock on da panel witta lamp on it. Da door will open up, and you can go right in. Don’t forget ta use’a password ...”

You nod, and toss the man a coin for his trouble. Go to **13**.

I6

Throwing caution (and intelligence) to the wind, you leap and draw your blade! You lunge across the polished wood of Grey's desk, your sword aimed right at his heart. Grey, astonished, dodges clumsily in his seat. You miss his vital organs, but still wound him deeply.

He cries out, knocking you to the floor angrily with one hand and clutching his bleeding wound with the other; you're impressed with both his speed and strength! This could be dangerous ...

Grey draws his blade – a shortsword, glowing softly with green light! The man from behind the black curtain enters as well, knife drawn.

Go to **125**, but note that William has already lost one of his cliché dice (subtract it when you get there), due to your mad tactic!

I7

You fight like mad, the thought of Patricia providing ample inspiration. The likes of these men are not about to prevent Lucas Marks from succeeding! Three fall in rapid succession, and one is left. Blood spattered across your face, you stare at him, waving your weapon eagerly.

He runs into the street, knocking aside a cart of clay bells as he does so. You follow, leaping over the mess and sliding madly on the icy streets! He ducks into another alley, and you scramble to your feet and chase the bastard down.

The alley is empty.

You see three possible exits. One leads north to a dead end and a climbable wall. The second leads west toward an open window and the third twists away to the east; turning quickly again beyond your field of vision.

If you go north and climb the wall, go to **77**. If you go west into the window, go to **42**. If you prefer to follow the curving alleyway, go to **62**.

18

You lean over the corpse for a better idea of what killed it. You can find no wounds of any kind on the body, limbs or head, and its clothes are not noticeably blood-stained. He wasn't stabbed to death, and he probably wasn't beaten. Then you see what happened.

His neck is punctured neatly in two places. His face, now that you look closer at it, seems to bear a faint expression of helpless fear. You have no doubt that there is not a drop of blood in his body. You shiver, not from revulsion at his death, but at the thought that there is a vampire in the tunnels with you ...

You stand quietly and walk away from the corpse. You decide it's best to move on immediately.

Go to **89**.

19

Another half-hour of slow walking, and no further difficulties plague you, despite the many things that the map seems to think you have passed (judging from the number of odd symbols marking your route), and many tempting crossroads. Depression floods over you – if the map is correct, you aren't even halfway to the chambers marked with the Glyph of the Red Djinn.

You collapse for a moment to rest. You are cold and tired, and you realize that you haven't yet eaten today. You permit yourself a weak grin – Patricia wouldn't believe *that* even if you told her! You pull some rations from your pouches and make a quick meal as you rest to tend your wounds (if any of your Clichés have been reduced by Combat or other distress, they are healed, now, to their original levels).

You feel that something big is due to happen tonight, and you'd like to be awake and in Tricia's company for it. You think for an instant of pulling the ring from your pocket, but decide against it. It would be too easy to just sit in this tunnel and talk to Xim, and you don't need distractions right now.

Go to **131**.

20

You try to stand, but the waves of sickness knock you back into your pillow. Your eyelids are pressing down into your face like lead weights, and the haze of sleep threatens to send you sliding back into unconsciousness. Your skull feels like it's slowly cracking. You crawl gently out of bed, easing yourself downward, and slowly achieve a standing position.

Go to **68**.

21

Trembling in the cold air, you shake off the last of the strange sickness and search your room more closely.

Under the bed, you find a tiny glass vial. It's empty, but traces of yellow fluid still line it.

You retrieve it gently, and sniff. Dear God! The stench is overpowering, and you feel your mind filling with sticky cotton and your stomach convulsing with fresh nausea! You rear back and run to the window, taking painful gulps of cold, fresh air.

Certainly, this is how all of this was done without waking you or arousing Patricia's vengeance. Alchemy! You tip the bottle gently on its side as the last of the vapors escape it. Whoever did this was careless; they left the label on! It reads:

*Grymrag's Apothecary and Potion House,
Number 15 Short Alley. Prices reasonable.
Safety Assured.*

You sigh at the irony of the last line. It certainly wasn't safe for you or Patricia! You feel your heart clenched with fear for her well-being.

If you've read the note on the windowsill, go to **52**. If you haven't, go to **35**.

22

You edge out into the cold air and lay a foot on the icy roofing. The morning sun has edged above the city wall squatting on the horizon, and the falling snow glitters. The rooftops stretch to the horizon, laid out like a robber's street-map, gleaming with ice and full of twisting columns of chimney-smoke. You sniff the air – even the bitter cold can't stifle the strange blend of smells that lives eternally above Hultog.

To the north and east, the city slopes upward slightly, and to the southwest you see the docks and the river, with a dozen or more long boats loading cargoes for morning sail. Even in winter, the docks of the Oligarchs do not lie fallow.

Unfortunately, this grand scene provides little in the way of advice. The snow on the roof shows no signs of disturbance that you could reasonably attribute to kidnappers.

You could circle the roof of the hostelry once to see if any other windows have been disturbed (go to **53**) or you could go back in and head downstairs to the tavern to ask around, at **90**.

23

You are crushed instantly by tons of ancient masonry falling from the ceiling above. Fortunately, you aren't even granted an instant to reflect on your failure to help your partner.

The End.

24

Gaffrey's Docks is a small warehouse and a single dock structure extending into the river, its roof sagging from a dangerously thick crust of snow. Aside from this one notable flaw in maintenance, it seems well-kept, clean, and busy. It hardly seems like a hangout for a ring of thieves ...

The gambler, you recall, was old. Perhaps he was in error?

The master of the dock (Dockmaster Armenius Gaffrey, if the painted sign on the warehouse is to be trusted), stands nearby. He's smiling broadly in the cold morning air, ordering several crates to be taken into the hold of a very small and very old vessel. You have nothing to lose by approaching him and asking a question or two. You step up to the stout gentleman and explain whom you are searching for.

"Yes, small one," he says, chewing energetically on a large horn pipe. "Those men were trying a game of treachery on me, threatening to chase away business," he grins, "but I ran them off when I began to bring the Watch about!" He smiles triumphantly. You were right – he is an honest businessman.

(continued)

You ask the man if he knows where they might be found, and he grinds his pipe in thought. "I am unsure, these days – I don't follow them much since they've left my place alone ..." then he brightens. "But I do remember that they use to deal with that foul alchemist on Short Alley – Grymray's. And I know that they've been known to drink occasionally at the Iron Keel on Quay-side Street – the owner is scum, himself. He might let them sharpen their blades there, in private." He shrugs. "But that's all I know."

You thank the man, and wander back into the crowds. You already knew about Grymray's – but the thought of the tavern worries you. If it's really serving as a meeting-house, then you won't likely be able to get in (or out) with any degree of safety.

On the other hand, that might be where they're keeping Patricia ...

If you opt to follow up on the alchemist lead, go to **25**. If you head for the Iron Keel, go to **39**.

25

You head in the direction of Short alley, a winding, filthy road connecting on the east end of Quayside Street. You are worried about Patricia – and now you’re worried about the ring, too. In your experience, sorcery of that kind always brings trouble. You recall the words of an old friend: *magic is a poor servant and a stubborn master ...*

Short Alley is not really an alley. It is wide enough for horses double-file, a buckling cobbled street. The old wooden houses of the poor burghers who live here lean out over the street and cast grey shadows on the dirty snowdrifts. Icicles drip slowly as you pass, and the crowd is sparse.

You nervously slip by two city watchmen patrolling on horseback. While your intentions are nothing but honorable, you know that you might end up breaking a law or two before the day is out. The watchmen don’t give you a second look, and you arrive at your destination.

(continued)

It’s a two-story wooden building, half broken-down and of little interest from looks alone. The faded sign swinging over the door proclaims:

Grymray’s Apothecary and Potion House
Number 15 Short Alley

In stiff writing beneath a painted picture of a smoking vial, clearly intended for the illiterate masses. The sign is topped with an inch-thick layer of snow, and creaks in the cold breeze. The door is ornate and has a glass window, tinted deep green. A small placard says “enter.” Go to **58**.

26

That bird is annoying! You pull your blade and wave it at the gull; it stands and arches its wings slightly, then settles down again. It cocks its head to one side and continues to watch you.

This time you swat at it with the flat of your blade, and it falls, screaming loudly, and then takes to flight. You watch as it circles upward, keening, into the swirling snow.

Satisfied, you enter the tavern. Go to **59**.

27

You stride again into the cold alleyways, but your trip is a short one. Just as you are passing through a short-cut alley behind the Cup and Talon, four men, dressed in Grey Robes and wielding daggers, drop from the rooftops in front of you.

The leader smiles at you. "There it is," he says. "Kill it."

Fortunately, you are in a narrow alley, so only two of them can fight you at once (they don't form a Team; they'll attack you individually). As soon as one goes down, the next takes his place. Fight them in order, using your *Fun-Loving Mercenary* cliché.

#1 Grey-Suit:Nameless Thug (1)

#2 Grey-Suit:Nameless Thug (2)

#3 Grey-Suit:Thug Named Otis (3)

#4 Grey-Suit:Nameless Thug (2)

If your cliché drops to zero dice, go to **85**. If you put three of them down, go *immediately* to **17**.

28

You climb into the large tunnel and begin to run down it. It is long, straight and dark, and your coin's light seems unable to penetrate the gloom. You are certain, however, that the footsteps came from this direction.

You pause to listen, and the footfalls are still there. They're walking, now, not running. You think for a moment of calling out a "hello?" but decide it would be foolish. You creep ahead, certain that the sound is nearby.

As you grow closer, it seems that there is more than one set of footsteps, and some are scraping along in a rather unpleasant manner. You try to look beyond your circle of dim light, but you can see nothing. The flow of air tells you that there is another chamber just a few feet in front of you, and you can no longer hear the footsteps. In fact, you hear breathing ...

If you enter the room and shine the light on whatever it is, go to **63**. If you decide just to go on back and take the other route, scramble fearfully to **43**.

29

Roll against your current *Halfling Burglar* or *Fun-Loving Mercenary* cliché (your choice), against a Difficulty of 10. If you succeed, you manage to duck through a rotted barrel and scurry past your attackers and into the crowded streets beyond the alleyways (go to **105**, where you can continue your journey to the Iron Keel). If you fail, you only succeed in dancing away from the fight for a few seconds. Return to **57**, where you must finish the fight – either victorious or defeated.

30

You pick the right-hand tunnel. Bringing your cloak about you for warmth, you begin your trip, hoping nearly to the point of prayer that there aren't any traps along the way. You've just never gotten around to learning about traps. That was always Tricia's department ...

Go to **65**.

31

The walls of the old tunnel glow softly, and you would estimate that the masonry here is less than two years old. You wonder where you are in relation to the Imperial Palace? You also wonder where a ring of thieves would get the funding for this kind of secret construction! Wizards and Djinn aside, they seem to be just a bunch of murderous thugs, so far ...

In your pocket, the magic ring is nearly trembling in anticipation. You aren't sure to what extent to be comforted by the presence of Xim, and to what extent to be concerned ...

The tunnel is straight, and goes for another 30 or 40 feet before coming to a large door. The door is oak, and looks extremely heavy. A small grate is in the door, perhaps 5 feet from the ground, and beyond it you see the back of a guard, leaning against it. Noise comes from the inside. You can't help but notice the color of the guard's raiment: grey.

The back-stab seems obvious, but what if other guards await on the opposite side? This could mean trouble. You sneak close to the door and put an ear to it.

Roll against your *Halfling Burglar* cliché (Difficulty 10) to listen quietly. If you succeed, go to **46**. If you fail, go to **66**.

32

This, you think, is the time to see if that alchemist was worthy of your trust and gold. You pull out the vial of green syrup, pinch your nose, and down it!

The syrup tastes of strong anise, and feels warm and vital. It's like a living thing coursing through your body. This is great stuff! If you have been injured, you are healed completely. You also feel tougher, faster, stronger, and more alert! You gain an *additional die* to the cliché of your choice. This lasts for the remainder of this adventure!

Return to your original passage.

33

You step towards the door, just as a large block of stone crashes beside you. Tricia kicks the door in and you leap into the anteroom, sword at the ready. Nothing. The dead guard is still dead, and the next room stands open. All the guards in it are dead, too!

It doesn't look good for the grey suits.

The corridor back into the sewers has collapsed. Patricia motions to the room full of dead guards. The stair is still clear! You both run for it, and come up into a wide chamber. You can see a wooden floor above you, cracked and splintered, but still holding. You can also feel the heat of a fire and smell smoke. The room you are in had several exits a few minutes ago, but only the stone stairway up exists now.

Between you and the stairway stands a group of armed grey-suits and a man in white and green robes. The bodies of two other guards are sprawled messily on the floor in pools of their own blood. The robed man shouts, "It is they! The ring-stealers! Kill them and we will have our revenge!"

Go to **122**.

34

You reach out, fighting the fierce pain that shoots through your arm. Your fingers nimbly grasp the edge of the paper before it can sail away over the city. You unfold it and read:

*The ring is ours. We'll be back tomorrow to
take it. If you cooperate, the woman might live.
— W. Grey, Guild Master.*

Guild Master? Hultog has never had a real “thieves’ guild” that you know of. A few little gangs here and there, of course, but the Oligarchy guard is tough on attempts to really organize – at least that’s what you’ve heard. That’s why you’ve been operating elsewhere when you bother to actually steal for a living.

You read the note a few more times. You aren’t about to just sit around and trust these guys!

Go to **68**.

35

This is too much. Patricia gone, place sacked, foul alchemy still playing havoc with your head. But why? And who would dare?

Then you remember the ring.

You prop yourself against the bed and loose your left shoe. The ring falls to the floor, and you retrieve it. Its strange gleam is still apparent, but offers no clues to its nature.

Obviously, they wrecked the room searching for it, and when they didn’t find it, they decided to kidnap one thief and scare the other – you – into giving it up for ransom. You wonder for a moment why they chose to steal your partner instead of you, and then regret the thought. A bunch of cutthroat bastards would certainly prefer the company of a drugged Patricia to a drugged Lucas.

Okay, so they want the ring. How do they expect you to deliver it? If they’re an organized band, there has to be some way to contact them ...

(continued)

You'd have no trouble giving up some absurd trinket – no matter how valuable – for Patricia's safety. But you're not so stupid as to trust this scum.

You pause for a second – how are they so organized and still operating? No one has ever succeeded in forming a Hultog thieves' guild, and anyone trying is doomed. These men are clearly either very smart or very stupid.

You hope for the latter, and resolve to find them and get Patricia on your own. You only hope that she's still alive when you get there.

Go to **69**.

36

You hear nothing for seconds that stretch on like decades, and you suddenly feel much, much colder. You grip the wall tightly and don't make a sound – until your foot slips slightly, and your head taps (ever so gently) against the black shutters of the window.

The shutters fly open, smacking you firmly in the face (lose 1 die from your *Halfling Burglar* cliché for your injury!) and sending you stumbling backward – towards the alley beneath the icy ledge!

The great bearded face before you wobbles slightly in your distorted, stunned vision. It doesn't seem at all happy.

It does, however, seem to be getting more distant as you tip backward with the breeze.

Roll against your *Halfling Burglar* cliché (Difficulty 10). If you fail, go to **102**. If you succeed, go to **113**.

There is nothing like one of your own to converse with in a city of strangers, and this fellow looks like a gentleman adventurer, as well! You will have everything in common, then. You approach.

And wish that you hadn't.

"Lucas!" the Halfling says, pocketing his gold and turning to you with a wide, toothy grin. "Lucas, my old chum! My comrade! My lifelong friend! How are you?"

He lets his smile fall a notch. "Why are you here, lifelong friend?"

You manage a stiff grin. It's been a long-time dream of yours to punch this fellow very hard in the mouth. You smile sourly at the all-too-familiar features of Josef Kettlebroth, a competitor from Vastaga. You believed that you had lost him at your and Patricia's last venture near Kestaban.

(continued)

"Josef, are you really following me, or do we just think alike?" You don't bother masking your sarcasm.

Josef is unperturbed. "I could ask the same of you, friend Lucas! I remember just a season ago, in the lands west of ... *Kestaban*, wasn't it? When Patricia and yourself tried to take what was my own legitimate find in the caves at Mount Kojahr . . .?"

You haven't the time to argue, and it is impossible that he would have anything useful to tell you. You attempt to disentangle yourself, but Josef won't quit. "And where is Patricia ... your lovely-if-gigantic partner?"

Angry now, you turn slowly and say "Just fine. Thanks." and disappear into the crowd as Josef lets out an offended "Humph."

Go to **95**.

38

You explain, without revealing too much of the details, that they have wronged you and that you seek to undo the wrong – peacefully, if possible.

Myra thinks about and nods. “I would very much like to see you succeed, then. Go to the Iron Keel on Quayside Street – near the docks – and ask the barkeep to see William. The password at the lamp-door is *Bokoru*. This will get you into their secret meeting-place.”

You beam with joy. The den of thieves!

“And,” Myra says, tensely, “be prepared for anything.”

You nod, patting the blade at your side, and thank her.

Go to **95**.

39

Quayside Street, you know, starts halfway across this part of the city, and you quickly abandon the crowded docks for the quick and private passage of the alleyways and back-streets of Hultog. You half-run, skidding occasionally on patches of ice and leaping over stray cats and frozen laundry (stopping occasionally to feed the former some of your rations).

And then you notice that you’re being followed.

You nearly hit yourself for stupidity. Naturally, the grey suits would have left men to watch the tavern; they wouldn’t trust you anymore than you trust them. Especially if they believe that you intend to keep the ring and abandon your partner ... you reflect for a moment that, on matters of honor, people tend to assume their own example in others.

The pursuers are definitely grey-suits, and you zigzag and dodge through the alleys in an attempt to lose them, but they’re persistent, and won’t be lost that easily.

If you confront your pursuers directly, go to **57**. If you just keep heading for the Iron Keel, go to **96**.

40

The dark, thin man rises out of his seat, and his eyes grow larger and sharper in the cold gloom. “Little man,” he says, “I am not responsible for the uses to which my art is put, any more than a sword-maker is responsible for a life taken with his sword.”

“No, no!” you say “It isn’t that at all. I just want to know about the gentlemen to whom you sold this, that I might meet with them.” You think quickly. “I am... alike in profession.”

The large eyes seem to dim as the thin, withered face presses near your own. “You are seeking allegiance, then?”

“Um. Yes, that’s right.”

The alchemist licks his dry lips and draws them into a tight smile. “They are regular customers of mine. I *like* doing business with them.”

You wince at the thought of anything this creature might “*like*,” and stand, waiting. He watches you for a second, his face still pulled taut in a mockery of a smile.

“They ask me constantly if I know of any new recruits for them, and I am always willing to help my customers. Of course, I must be certain of your sincerity ...” The smile slacks slightly, and it looks as if the face might never recover.

Roll against your *Outrageous Story-Teller* cliché (Difficulty 10). If you succeed, go to **86**. If you fail, go to **75**.

41

As you approach the large man, you notice that his “tattoos” are actually stains ... You take a deep breath, instantly regret it, and take a seat at the bar, smiling a frozen, slightly ill smile.

“What?” he says, rubbing a glass clean with what looks like some sort of footgear.

You explain what you are looking for.

“Oh! Har, Har!” the huge face smiles. “Yeah. Go inna back room, and knock on da panel witta lamp on it. The door will open, and you just go inside.” He leans closer, and his breath nearly knocks you backward as he whispers “Da password is *Natoori*.”

You toss a coin on the bar-top and thank him. Go to **13**.

42

You had better try the open window while there is still a chance to catch him in the next room! You approach it. It is large and there is a flapping curtain rising out of it. You peer inside. Soft light and sounds assail your senses, and you stare in shock as you see a woman, two men and a schnauzer, gently caressing a -

Oops. You've stumbled onto a brothel. Red-faced, you go back to try another route. Go to **88**.

43

You follow the small tunnel for another hour before finally emerging into a larger one.

You've found an active sewer line; you're on a walkway at the edge of a flow of dark water. You scan the area for anything important, and find it!

A corpse, a grey-cloaked, human body, lies less than 10 feet away. Its arm is dangling over the edge of the walkway, dragging in the murky stream, and the head is twisted at a painful angle from its shoulders.

You edge closer. Without question, it's one of the grey-suited thieves that you've been in contest with all day! But you didn't kill him. Who did?

You draw your blade and poke the body until it rolls over. A piece of dirty parchment, rolled and crushed, falls out of the cloak, and you knock it away from the corpse and pick it up.

It is a map of the local sewer networks, both new and old. You have no way of knowing how complete it is, but you find yourself able to trace your own recent paths! You pocket the map; make a note of it on your equipment list.

Again you turn to examine the body. If you have visited the alchemist, go to **78**. If not, go to **18**.

44

You're not moving. Uh-uh. Nope. You are going to stay right here and as long as your foot stays down you'll be safe, and so as far as you're concerned you can stay put forever.

Or, at least until you get tired.

Or until they kill Patricia ...

Or until the ring-spirit decides to control you ...

Minutes pass. The grinding noise has long since stopped.

It's time to get off the flagstone; you can't just *live* here.

If you leap forward, go to **64**. If you leap backward, go to **79**. Or, if you prefer to use your skills as a burglar to get out of this, go to **133**.

45

The rats, in a frenzy of starvation, tear you to shreds. Already weakened by the day's harrowing events, you didn't stand a chance against three opponents. Your death is not swift, and the rats begin to feed before you lose consciousness. Your last thoughts are of your own failure – and of the one you have failed.

The End.

46

You inch closer to the door, and the guard doesn't move. Good. You lay an ear carefully against the wood and listen to what is beyond.

Roll against your *Halfling Burglar* cliché (Difficulty 10). If you fail, go to **91**. If you succeed, go to **110**.

47

You can barely contain your excitement. You are freezing, exhausted, and you haven't had a hot meal all day, but you feel better than you have in years! Tricia's alive!

But ... How to get to her without her making noise? You know her pretty well, and she's just the sort to start shouting derisive comments to any guard who opens the door, even if the "guard" is you! Or maybe not; if she hasn't yet been able to escape on her own, she's surely expecting you to show up any minute. She's smart (smarter than you, as she often points out), so you can probably count on this.

If you try to whisper to her, go to **130**. If you prefer to just open the door and hope she's silent, go to **136**.

48

This, you think, is the time to see if that alchemist was worthy of your trust and gold. You pull out the vial of green syrup, pinch your nose, and down it!

The green syrup feels like a lump of molten lead in your gut. You are suddenly sick and weak. Roll dice against your *best* cliché, with a Difficulty of 10. If you fail, you die!

If you survive, you lose a single die from *every cliché* (no cliché drops below a single die, however). This will last for the rest of the adventure, and can't be healed by any means (it will require several weeks of convalescence, and the work of a friendly sorcerer, to get rid of the poison).

If you're dead, **The End**. If you aren't, it's only a matter of time; return to your original passage.

49

Patricia grips her weapon with confidence, but you have a better idea what might be going on, and you're a little shaky. As if to confirm your fears, the screams of several men rip through the air, freezing your blood. A roar follows them and the wind grows hotter and more swift. The ring in your hand is shining like a hellish beacon, and the form of Xim is growing to the size of a man!

The Red Djinni. No question.

"LUCAS!!!" the voice of Xim thunders through the room, **"WEAR THE RING! TOGETHER WE ARE INVINCIBLE!!!"**

You are frozen with fear. You haven't the slightest idea what to do, or whether you can move, or anything. Light seems to be filtering through the cracks in the ceiling, and Patricia is yelling something, but you can't hear her.

"LUCAS! WEAR THE RING!!!"

The shadowy, purple form of Xim is now pulsing with black, his eyes a deep crimson. He towers six feet above you, crackling with power, but with pleading eyes. Make your choice.

If you wear the ring, go to **81**. If you choose to let Xim fight his own battles, go to **92**.

50

All of the guards lie dead on the stone floor, as smoke rolls downward from the wooden building above. Time to go! You look for the wizard, but he's already fled.

You run upstairs. Your eyes are watering and you find it difficult to breathe, but you can see what happened to the wizard. What is left of him is scattered around the room – a room that you now see is a pottery shop. There are scattered tables and fallen shelves, filled with broken earthenware and pottery and glass. Dead bodies cover the floor, and above them stands two mighty figures.

Xim, somehow risen from the rubble below, is facing off with a large creature that looks like a demon. Its skin is bright orange and pulled tight over huge muscles, and it wields a flaming sword, thrusting skillfully at the dodging, laughing Xim.

If you stay and watch the fight, go to **119**. If you take this opportunity to leave, go to **112**.

51

You dive for the paper, but it sails just beyond your reach, out over the city! Your head throbs with pain as you hang out over the alleyway, your stomach resting on the sill. You curse your lack of speed as you watch the note flip playfully away amid the falling snow.

If you want to follow it and try to catch it, go to **9**. If you let the paper go, go to **68**.

52

You prop yourself against the bed and loose your left shoe. The ring falls to the floor, and you retrieve it. Its strange gleam is still apparent, but offers no clues to its nature.

Obviously, they wrecked the room searching for it, and when they didn't find it, they decided to kidnap one thief and scare the other into giving it up for ransom. You wonder for a moment why they chose to steal your partner instead of you, and then regret the thought. A bunch of cutthroat bastards would certainly prefer the company of a drugged Patricia to a drugged Lucas.

You'd have no trouble giving up some absurd trinket – no matter how valuable – for Patricia's safety. But you're not so stupid as to trust this scum. You look back over the note; if thieves' guild of some sort really has been formed, they have to have some way to be contacted. You can use that to pin them.

Go to **69**.

53

You begin to slink around the rooftop of the Cup and Talon. You wish Patricia were with you – she's the better climber! The windows of the other rooms are unremarkable. Some are shuttered, some are paned with oiled parchment (a practice more common in Nairelun, you think to yourself), but none are open to the cold morning air, or show any signs of mischief.

Roll against your *Halfling Burglar* cliché (Difficulty 10) to snoop around. If you succeed, go to **70**. If you fail, go to **83**.

54

You begin a long and absolutely truthful explanation of your actions. You go into detail about your long relationship with Patricia. You describe your concerns; you tell him that it would kill you if she came to harm. You ramble endlessly about the virtues of faithful alliance, the value of friendship, and the nature of honor.

You recite a brief history of the concept of honorable partnership as it pertains to the various human religions that you are familiar with, in the hopes that your captor might be a pious man.

You even (sobbing heavily) explain that, despite your early vocation, you never really actually steal that much and that you're far too young to go to an early, wasteful end in a Hultog alley. And you apologize profusely.

The large man frowns. He sets you gently on the icy roof.

He closes the shutters, yawning loudly.

Apparently you bored him. Go to **83**.

55

After politely waiting for his current customer to depart, you approach the table of the gambling sailor, and hop into the chair across from him.

An old man, he works nimbly with his coins and clears them away at your approach. He smiles a toothless grin. "Mornin', friend. What's your game? Haycross? Draughts? Centaur? Black Rum?" He shuffles a pack of painted cards, and beside him is a bowl of dice and other gaming implements.

Do you engage him in a game and then "ease in" the subject of the grey-suited men? If so, go to **73**. If you prefer to just bring up the subject (perhaps with a bribe, if it seems necessary) then go to **84**.

You brace yourself for the cold winter air, walking towards the tavern door. But a voice beneath you stops you in your tracks!

“Halfling ...”

You whirl around, hand on the hilt of your sword.

No one is there, and a few of the tavern’s patrons give you a disgusted look. The voice, which was very loud, seems to have gone completely unnoticed!

The back of your neck tingles with fear. Madness? Delusion? Sorcery?

Whenever put to the test, you are inclined to blame the latter first. But who would cast such a spell just to annoy you?

“Lucas...”

The voice has returned. Looking downwards, you see that the ring in your pocket is shining with a sickly, purple radiance, so bright that it’s shining through the cloth of your pocket!

Quickly covering the light with your hand, you open the door and step onto the street. Slipping briefly on the ice, you hurry into a nearby alley to examine the problem in private.

(continued)

Safe in the shadows, you remove the ring from your pocket and hold it before you.

The ring still glows, and standing on its metal surface is a tiny, winged creature formed of the ugly purple light. It has both hands on its hips, and is staring at you with white, impatient eyes.

“What are you?” you demand, in a whisper.

“I am Xim, the spirit which dwells within this ring,” the creature says, bowing. “I am the most powerful of the ring-spirits and the protector of any who possesses the ring. I am the sworn foe of the Red Djinn.” It finishes with another bow and a flourish of its tiny arm.

You stare at the miniature creature in wonderment. This, no doubt, was why the grey suits were so keen on getting the ring back. This is something powerful!

Xim’s eyes flare green for an instant. “Put me on your finger.”

You know better than to deal so hastily with unknown sorceries. You shake your head. “It wouldn’t be very smart to try to sneak around with a glowing ring on my finger,” you point out.

The ring stops glowing. Xim grins.

(continued)

“No,” you say. “I can’t trust you.”

“Then I,” says the spirit, icily, “cannot protect you.”

“I’ve done fine so far.”

“I know of your goals,” Xim says, smiling peacefully.

“I know about Patricia ... I know about your *feelings* for her.”

You count softly to three. “Patricia and I are partners, and the very best of friends. That, I can assure you, is all.”

Xim nods knowingly. “I can change that, Lucas. You know you want me to.”

You shove the ring into your pocket, disgusted, and the light blinks out. What a foul, manipulative little creature!

You have a partner to rescue. Go to **115**.

It’s better to take the cutthroats on in your own time than to wait for them to toss a knife into your back. And if that would happen; they’d have the ring, and no reason to let Patricia live.

To avoid possible interference from the city patrols, you change course into an empty and narrow alley, two turns away from the nearest major street. Then you draw your shortsword and wait.

They oblige you quickly, slipping down from the shadows with gleaming knives. They look like they really enjoy their work.

You are in a deadly combat. Since you are in a narrow alley, you can prevent your opponents from flanking you or teaming, while you have plenty of room to dance around. Fight them one at a time, in order, using your *Fun-Loving Mercenary* cliché.

#1 Grey-Suit:Nameless Thug (3)

#2 Grey-Suit:Nameless Thug (2)

If your cliché drops to zero dice, go to **85**. If you defeat them, go to **74**. If at any time you decide to run from the fight, go to **29**.

You push open the wooden door, and a tiny bell announces your arrival as your eyes adjust to the gloom.

The shop is oppressively atmospheric. Shelves are loaded down with dusty bottles, jars, and boxes filled with powders or scales or worse, along with hundreds of tiny labeled vials made of metal, baked clay, and glass. Weak shafts of light pierce the dusty air and paint the floor from narrow windows near the ceiling. And it's nearly as cold here as it was in the streets ...

At the far end of this macabre display of sorcerous canned goods, a pair of owl-like eyes stare into yours and burn. The eyes are framed by the face of an ancient, withered man sitting quietly behind a lamp.

"Sir," he says, "how may I help you, sir?" He does not move when he speaks, only his lips articulate. He reminds you of some wicked predator, frozen until the prey is within reach.

(continued)

"I," you begin, pausing to recollect your voice, "I am looking for the alchemist who made this." You walk to his desk and lay the empty vial in front of the lamp. A thin hand is extended and snatches the tiny object as if to save it from the light. His large eyes are momentarily diverted as they rake over the bottle, then they return to you.

"I made it," he says. "Was its performance unsatisfactory?"

Your instinct is to grin with sarcasm, but you find that you can't manage it. "It worked well," you say, "but it was used against me."

Go to **40**.

59

You pull the heavy latch and release the muted noise and smell of the Iron Keel. A wall of heat washes over you, and you loosen your coat for comfort.

The place is horrid. Cheap food and drink is spilled carelessly on the tables, the floor, and many of the patrons. The walls are splintered, nicked, and burned in many places, apparently by a long series of fights or possibly minor wars. The customers represent the very worst of humanity: drunk and bellowing, they are genuinely offensive, and the equally drunken and toothless barmaid seems to be in a daze as she is pinched and fondled by the foul clientele.

The tavernkeep stands alone behind the bar – a great, brawny fellow scarred and tattooed beyond racial distinction. You approach the bar and present him with your problem.

If you know who to ask for, then go immediately to **15**.
If you just ask the barkeep if you can meet the grey-cloaked men, then go to **41**.

60

You never really had a chance. Two men, one with a magic sword. The battle is swift and bloody. The ring is theirs, and Patricia is doomed.

The End.

61

The knife flashes across your throat before you have a chance to react. Your hopes of ever saving Patricia are gone. You are no longer among the living.

The End.

62

The east alley is heavily iced, and you have trouble running along it without grabbing for walls on occasion. It twists off to the north and then hits a dead end, with nothing but some trash on the ground and a few boarded-up windows. You search for secret openings at the windows and clues among the trash, but find none. Cursing, you go back to try another route. Go to **88**.

63

You take a deep breath, and calm yourself. You step into the chamber ahead, being careful not to fall. You bring your coin in front of you and shine your light on ...

A dog. And a dog in distress, to boot. Its rear legs have been affixed with twine to a pair of small boards!

Obviously, this is some child's idea of fun – bind the poor dog's legs and drop it into the sewers. If you could grab that little brat, you'd ... well, that's not important. You have pressing business to attend to.

You approach the dog slowly, speaking in as soothing a tone as you can manage. The dog, trembling in the cold air, lets you untie it from the boards. It licks you happily and then runs off into the tunnels before you can stop it to see if it is hurt. Shrugging, you head off into another tunnel. Go to **43**.

64

Clenching your light-coin and map tightly, you kneel, close your eyes, and leap!

The ceiling above the plate comes down in a solid block of stone, heavy enough to crush a house! And more of the ceiling is following it!

Roll against either your *Halfling Burglar* (Difficulty 10) or *Fun-Loving Mercenary* (Difficulty 15) cliché. If you succeed, go to **100**. If you fail, go to **23**.

65

It seems that you are definitely in one of the older parts of the sewer line. The walkways and flow-bed are both cracked and worn smooth by the passage of tons of sewage and (at least) a hundred years. The darkness here is complete.

The city, you know, is nearly 800 years old, and you had always wondered what the old tunnels were like. You've been to Hultog in the past, but have never had a reason to explore beneath the city.

Not that you would have, anyway. The dangers of the sewers, while probably overstated, are well-known among rogues like you.

"Think of a devil," you remark, "and in he'll walk." You curse yourself for dwelling on the rumors of the tunnel's hazards, because you can see movement, up ahead.

(continued)

You place your light-coin in your teeth and draw your sword, moving to investigate. It's another corpse, this one not as fresh as the one killed by the vampire. It's human, at least what remains of it. Feasting on these remains are three enormous rats, as large as dogs! They turn to face you, their snouts moving in a strange circular motion, their whiskers twitching. These creatures know live meat when they sense it, and they move to attack.

You are in a fight to the death with three giant rats. They are much faster than you; you have no chance of escaping. Fight all three of them at once, as a single foe, using your *Fun-Loving Mercenary* cliché:

Big, Creepy Rats: Monster Horde (3)

If your cliché is reduced to zero dice, go to **45**.

If you win, go to **80**.

66

You inch closer to the door, being careful that none of your gear moves too much, but you drag a careless foot on a flagstone, releasing the tiniest of scraping noises. It echoes like thunder in your ears, and you freeze.

The guard spins around, and you hear the scrape of a blade being drawn. he yells a warning, and the door flies open. A few seconds later, another door opens in the masonry just behind you! More grey suits come running, and you are overtaken in no time. You have failed your partner.

The End.

67

Patricia is expert with a shortsword, and you turn to see the last of her foes sliding peacefully from her blade. You like to lie to your friends and claim that you taught her how to fight; it gets her really angry ...

Go to **50**.

68

The room is a wreck. Debris is scattered everywhere: clothing, belts, pouches, and all of your “professional” gear. The place has been ransacked! Now you’re really worried.

Go to **21**.

69

One last look around the room – time to go. You gather up your important gear and leave the rest. *Note:* this is the equipment listed with your character description.

You are surprised to discover that, despite making a mess, the thieves left all of your belongings – and Patricia’s! You grab her shortsword and belt it on, too (add this to your list) she’ll probably need it before this is over.

Now ... how to pursue them? It certainly looks like they might have come in through the window. You could go out and scout for a trail (go to **22**) or you could head down into the tavern and ask around for leads (go to **90**).

70

Slinking stealthily past a window, you hear voices from the inside: Two men, from the sound of it – and a woman! If you listen in, go to **10**. If not, go to **83**.

71

It is common knowledge among adventurers that those with knowledge sit in taverns alone, usually with cowls over their heads and deep, mysterious voices. It's as certain as rain falling downwards!

And this one is wearing grey robes ... You decide to exercise a little extra caution; you've encountered more dangerous coincidences before.

You go first to the bar and order a mug of small beer, cursing the tavernkeep for reciting a Halfling slur at the request. You pay the offending man, and – armed with beverage and mild desperation – you wedge through the crowd and plop down at the table with the tall, robed fellow.

Who, as it turns out, isn't a fellow at all. It is a woman, and she's very obviously blind. You blink in surprise. Her cowl hid her features, as did the glare from the open windows. She turns her face to you, sensing your presence. "Hello?"

You rethink your options. The only information you have about the thieves is their description – what would a blind woman know? If you wish to apologize and excuse yourself, go to **95**. If you take this option, this did not count as a "visit." You may still speak to both the Halfling and the Sailor, if you haven't already. If you wish to speak to her, anyway, go to **103**.

72

You pick the left tunnel. Bringing your cloak about you for warmth, you begin your trip, hoping nearly to the point of prayer that there aren't any traps along the way. You've just never gotten around to learning much about traps. That was always Tricia's department ...

You check the map again, and it seems to be getting less accurate by the minute. According to this, you are near one of the major marked sites along the route, but nothing is out of the ordinary. Floor, walls, and ceiling are all packed earth and stone.

You take another step forward, and a loud **CLICK!** snaps its way testily around the tunnel walls. You hear Xim's tiny voice in your pocket "Ah, me. Pressure plate trap. I hate those, don't you?"

You hear a terrible grinding noise from all around you; you have yet to move your foot from the shifting flagstone.

If you keep your foot on the plate, go to **44**. If you leap forward, go to **64**. If you leap backward, go to **79**.

73

You think for a moment and then declare "Black Rum it is!" You were a fair hand at the Lenthian card-game in your youth, and you might lose less money by gambling with him than you would with a bribe ...

The old man shuffles skillfully and begins a humorous patter, dealing as he does so. You engage in a few hands (winning one, losing two) before bringing up the object of your search.

The old sailor reacts with a gambler's indifferent expression. "Aye, young sir. I know of a few that meet your description. They gather, sometimes, near Gaffrey's docks, and are good at avoiding the eye of the city's lawmen." He sighs. "I'm no one to be the hero and report their activities."

The gentleman seems sincere, and you remember what he has told you (you might want to jot it down in your notes). You close your game and thank him.

Go to **95**.

74

You've fought much tougher thugs in your day – and the restrictive alley was your winning advantage. If you want, you may take their Daggers (they had nothing else of real value, and had one blade each). Your anger subsides as you head off through the side-streets for the Iron Keel, knowing now, at least, that you will not be molested on the way. Go to **105**.

75

You think quickly. It would be best if you acted a little more sinister yourself. You square your shoulders and hiss a bit, as you speak. "Would you call me a liar, alchemist?" you demand, evil glinting in your eye.

The alchemist giggles.

"Erf ..." you say.

"I see," says the man, grinning a leathery grin. "You were kidding. Such wit." He turns and adjusts the lamp. Brighter light issues from it, taking away much of the atmosphere of the musty place, and – with it – your chances of getting any further information.

"Are you here to purchase something, then? I have some fine healing draughts, not too expensive, and a protective elixir I have designed myself."

Crestfallen as you are, it might still be a good idea to buy a few potions. You look into your pouch, and then at the alchemist's prices. You only have enough for one.

If you buy the Healing Potion, go to **12**. If you buy the "Protective Elixir," go to **97**. If you decide you don't trust the alchemist enough to buy either, go to **14**.

76

You are blinded by the sudden lack of light. You feel yourself being drawn and held tight by a large man, and a knife is placed at your throat. A harsh voice hisses at you, "Password!"

You search your memory. If you say "Natoori," go to **87**. If you say "Rakarva," go to **98**. If the password is "Bokoru," go to **61**.

77

You run north, slipping once on the slick cobbles. The wooden barrier is short and smooth, and you see an open street beyond it – if he climbed the wall, he's lost in the crowd by now ...

Then you notice that, under the trash you are standing in is a source of warm air – and steam is rising upwards. A trapdoor!

It takes some work to brush away the trash; the cold wind seems insistent on keeping it piled against the wall. The latch to the trapdoor is open, and it looks like your quarry made it into the sewers! You pry open the door and look in.

An iron ladder, rusted and old, leads down to a narrow tunnel, which looks dry. The sound of receding footsteps can be heard, and you quickly descend to follow.

Go to **5**.

78

You look at the face and recognize it! This is the very same man you were chasing when you entered the sewers! And that was less than an hour ago! Who could have done this?

Go to **18**.

79

You take a deep breath, make sure that all of your gear is fastened tightly, and leap backward! The ceiling above the plate comes down in a huge block of crumbling stone. It crashes to the ground, and you dive for the ground as splinters of stone zip angrily over your head.

As the dust clears, you see that the corridor is now completely blocked. You have no choice but to take the other direction now, and hope that the same thing doesn't happen.

Go to **65**.

80

Fortunately, the rats are weak from starvation. The winter's pickings are small, and only under such circumstances would they stray so far from the normal sewers – or attack you! Your blade finds its mark again and again, until all of the beasts lie dead on the stone floor. You make a mental note to see a wizard or a doctor after this affair is over, in case these creatures carried some foul diseases.

You approach the corpse on which they were feeding. From the look and smell of it, it is nearly a week old. Its hands and feet are bound with cord, and whoever it was (you can't even guess at gender) was placed here either dead or doomed. You hope that the poor human didn't suffer long if the latter is true ...

There is nothing of value here. Go to **19**.

81

You place the ring on your finger, and the room goes black. You are suddenly thrust into some sort of hideous limbo, swimming in palpable darkness as you feel your control over your own reality slip through your hands like smoke. You try to look around, and you see Tricia staring at you with concern. You wonder what you look like, now. She seems distant and silent, as if seen through several veils. She points her blade to the door, and motions for you to follow. Looks urgent.

But you don't feel inclined to follow. You don't feel much at all. You have other places to go, things to do. You walk away. You walk away into a long, dark tunnel. You leave your life behind. Xim can have it, and he does. He has you, and everything you ever were. If he survives his battle, he even has Patricia.

If anything interesting happens, you won't be aware of it.

The End.

82

You steady yourself for the jump, but this isn't the sort of thing you're used to – you're more of an explorer than a second-story man! Patricia likes the rooftops; you've always preferred burglaries closer to the ground ... and the alley below looks hard. A stray cat, shivering and dusted with snow, looks up at you with interest, and sniffs the air. You're suddenly very aware of how short your legs are.

Roll against either your *Halfling Burglar* (Difficulty 10) or *Fun-Loving Mercenary* (Difficulty 15) cliché to make a strong jump. If you fail, go to **101**. If you succeed, go to **93**.

83

You continue along the icy ledge for a complete circuit of the building, and discover nothing further of interest. You are cold and not at all safe, so you deem it best to return to your room and head down to the tavern before someone summons the watch.

Go to **90**.

84

You politely refuse the old man's offer to gamble, and tell him what you are after. He smiles.

"I'm sorry, friend," he says. "I just came into port from the high mountains to the north, and I've no knowledge of Hultog thieves' rings! I am sorry," he shrugs.

He seems nice enough, but you have obviously wasted your time talking to him. Go to **95**.

85

Perhaps you could have taken *one*, on a better day, but *this* was too much. The fight is not a long one, and you are soon slipping into eternal darkness. Your last thoughts are of Patricia, who will soon suffer a similar fate.

The End.

86

You look the man in the eye, and the place seems to grow darker. You focus your thoughts on Patricia, and you find within yourself the intensity to impress the old man. Even you are surprised by the tone of your voice. “I mean what I say.”

The alchemist stiffens, his eyes seeming to dim. “Of course you do, sir.” He lowers the light in the lamp some, and his face is bathed in deep orange as he leans forward. “Go to the alley behind the pottery shop on Cooper’s Row. The door is there. Rap twice with your sword, and they will let you enter.”

You thank the man in a whisper, and then look about. As long as you are here, you might as well buy something. “What inexpensive potions do you have for sale?” you ask.

“I have some fine healing draughts, not too expensive, and a protective elixir I have designed myself.” You look into your pouch, and then at the alchemist’s prices. You only have enough for one.

If you buy the Healing Potion, go to **106**. If you buy the “Protective Elixir,” go to **117**. If you have second thoughts, and decide not to buy anything, go to **14**.

87

The man’s arm tenses. Go to **61**.

88

You have already lost time on error, but there is still a chance that he might have left some sort of a trail. You may try any of these that you have not tried already:

The window to the west? Go to **42**. The dead-end to the north? Go to **77**. The eastern alley, curving out of sight? Go to **62**.

89

You duck into the relative safety of a small alcove, and open up the map you found on the vampire's victim. It is dirty and smudged in many places, but surprisingly serviceable, considering its apparent age. Several additions have been made over the years, and each new cartographer has added his own signature to the list at the edge of the parchment.

If you read the note on the windowsill in the beginning of the adventure, or if you confronted the grey-cloaked leader at the Iron Keel, go to **99**. If not, go to **108**.

90

Shouldering your gear confidently, you head down the stairs into the noisy crowd of the Cup and Talon. The place has been well cleaned since the revelry of the previous night, and the customers are noisily engaging in some serious breakfast.

The crowd consists mostly of sailors or craftsmen; most other folk are either still asleep or already working. You peer upwards at the many bleary faces, and wonder if any of them could offer you assistance in finding the men in the grey suits ... You dodge nimbly to avoid being tossed underfoot by the oblivious humans. You need to find somebody that might know something about a new thieves' guild ...

Searching intently through the taller forms around you, you find the three people that might be of some use: An old sailor running a "a game of fortune" in a center table, a fellow Halfling sitting on a barstool counting money, and a tall man in grey robes, sitting alone by the windows.

If you wish to talk to the sailor, go to **55**. If you wish to approach the Halfling, go to **37**. If you prefer to speak with the grey-robed gentleman, go to **71**.

91

You strain but cannot hear a thing. You have no idea if there is anybody else beyond the door. You have no real choice but to take out the guard and hope he's alone.

Go to **128**.

You lift the ring to your finger. You stop.

In the back of your mind you find that you still don't trust Xim. He has his Djinni to fight, but you're here for Patricia. You try to toss the ring aside ...

And find that you cannot! Slowly, against your will, you are putting on the ring...

"No!" The voice is Patricia's, but it echoes the scream in your own mind. You see a flash of steel as Patricia brings her blade down and strikes your hand with the pommel. The ring flies downward, and bounces on the rubble. You are free again, and you feel a fog lifting from your brain.

The wind above shows no signs of abating. You are still in big trouble.

"What was that?" yells Patricia, over the howl and din about you.

"It was a very powerful spirit," you yell back. "His name is Xim. He helped me get here."

She shakes her head, and smiles. She raises her blade and touches it to yours. Her lips form the words "Partners," and a smile, but you can't hear her voice over the noise.

You nod and return the gesture. "Partners."

Go to **33**.

You hold your breath, crouch, and leap – reflecting for an instant that Halflings, on the whole, are not good jumpers. The icy wood beneath you blends in a whirl with the grey alleyway, the falling snow, and the pale light of morning. You slam against your goal like a sack of salt, and grip it for dear life. Your fingers tighten and grasp at the icy tiles.

A moment passes, and the world stops spinning. You lift your head to find that the paper still rests on the chimney. You reach out and grab it. You read:

The ring is ours. We'll be back tomorrow to take it. If you cooperate, the woman might live.
– W. Grey, Guild Master.

Guild Master? Hultog has never had a real "thieves' guild" that you know of. A few scattered mobs here and there, of course, but the local law is tough on attempts to really organize. That's why you've been operating elsewhere when you bother to actually steal for a living.

You read the note a few more times. You aren't about to just sit around and trust these guys! You make your way back across (much more slowly this time!) and reenter your room, shivering.

Go to **68**.

94

You hear nothing for seconds that stretch on like decades, and you suddenly feel much, much colder. You grip the wall tightly and don't make a sound – and the conversation resumes.

"Forget it," says the booming voice. "Come on down to the docks. Penelope, you too."

"Okay," says Penelope. And your heart sinks. It wasn't Patricia. You ease back from the window and continue onward.

Go to **83**.

95

You wander through the tavern some more, and look about. If you have already visited with two people, then you have taken a great deal of time, and should continue your search. Go to **56**.

If, however, you have only visited one, you can spare the time for a second, if you wish. If you wish to speak with the sailor, go to **55**. If you wish to approach the Halfling, go to **37**. If you prefer to speak with the grey-robed gentleman, go to **71**.

96

You decide to ignore them. It is unlikely that they'd attempt anything in broad daylight, and you are headed for their headquarters, besides! You turn into another small alley and head right for Quayside Street.

That's when they attack.

You are caught by surprise at first; one falls from the low rooftop above you and nicks your side – make a roll against your *Fun-Loving Mercenary* cliché, against a difficulty of 8 (the thug's attack roll). If you fail, you lose one die from injury.

You whirl about to see that you are facing three men! They wear grey cloaks (with no armor – thank God for minuscule favors), and are armed with gleaming knives. The odds don't look very good.

If you run for it, go to **116**. If you fight, go to **124**.

97

You pay for the “Protective Elixir,” curious and hopeful of a bargain. It isn't that you like the alchemist or who he deals with, but he seems to be a dedicated craftsman, and you wonder what he might come up with. You examine the contents of the vial through the glass, and see only a green syrup.

“It contains but a single dose,” says the alchemist.

When you decide to drink this potion (you can do it at any time), turn immediately to number **48** to find the results, but mark your place, as you will be required to return to whatever passage you came from when you drank it. ***No peeking!***

Go to **14**.

98

The man's arm tenses as you say the word, and then relaxes. You hear another voice, beyond him. "Let him in."

You are led beyond another curtain into a dimly lit room, and your eyes adjust, as the "doorman" returns to his post. A trap-door in the floor leads downward and (by the smell of things) to the sewers. Behind a huge desk made of yellow wood a small man sits and smiles. A placard in front of him (hand scrawled) says "William Grey." "So," he says, "I see that you've found us on your own. What delightful irony."

You aren't sure what he is implying, but you don't like his tone. Regardless, you have business to attend to ...

If you leap to the attack, hoping to get the element of surprise, go to **16**. If you play a lie, claiming to wish to join the grey-cloaks, go to **107**.

99

You recognize the name at the bottom of the list of new cartographers – W. Grey.

Go to **108**.

100

You hit the floor painfully as a spray of rock and earth flies over your head!

You wait, frightened out of your wits, with the thunder of crashing stone still echoing in your mind. You lie still for a while, catching your breath. After the echoes fade, you rise, brush yourself off, and assess the damage.

You can be certain that the grey-suits, or indeed anyone within living memory, did not place a trap of such destructive power in these ancient halls. You've heard rumors of large tunnel-networks beneath the city, but you have no idea why the early Hultog Mayors would care to build them. You would reflect further on this issue, but you have a partner to rescue!

Go to **19**.

101

You leap, hurling yourself out over the alleyway, but you land poorly. Your shoulder hits ice, and you scramble madly to hold your position!

You fail.

You plummet like a rock, and the nasty **crack!!** that you hear is your left leg, twisted painfully against the cobblestones beneath you. You fade into darkness, as the rough sandpaper-tongue of a cat touches your face. You may well survive, but you will be too late to help Patricia.

The End.

I02

The face, to your great relief, sinks rapidly out of vision, and whatever it yells at this point is mercifully garbled. In fact, the face is replaced by a rather pleasant, and equally merciful, cloudy morning sky.

With all of this mercy being spread around, none seems to have been left for the cobbles on the alley below. They split your skull neatly, and your death is – mercifully – a quick one.

The End.

I03

“Hello,” you say, smiling, and she smiles as well. You introduce each other. She is Myra, a potter who operates a shop down the street from here. She sits by the window because she can feel the light. You decide that you have nothing to lose by telling her who you are looking for, and, surprisingly, she has an answer!

“The men you speak of are, in fact, organizing a ring to eventually make a guild for the city. Why do you wish to contact them?”

Hmm. There is more to this woman than meets the eye! You could lie to her and say that you are interested in joining the ring as an operative (go to **11**) or you could tell her the truth (at **38**).

I04

You grab the ledge, swinging hard into the building, nearly knocking the wind from your chest as you do so! Your grip nearly gives out, and your vision is blurred again.

You've arrived next to one of the large shuttered stairway windows leading into the tavern proper. You ease your way gently in, and close the shutters behind you. Fortunately, it doesn't sound as if the large man is going to pursue you. You head toward the tavern; it's much safer in there!

Go to **90**.

I05

You head off in the direction of the Iron Keel. The grey-suits are playing serious hardball, now – they wanted to kill you to get the ring back! They're not just thieves (you rather *like* "honest" thieves), they're murderers.

Well, they can have the foul trinket. You just want your partner. Stomping angrily through the alleyways, you pull the offending piece of ensorcelled jewelry from your pocket.

"Lucas," says Xim, rising from the ring and tapping a petulant foot on the brassy skin of its home, "Be reasonable. I do not want to be returned to the hands of those men."

That's a laugh. "You're just as evil as they," you say, getting ready to thrust the ring back into your pocket.

"No, Lucas," Xim says. "I am sorry for my earlier words," the spirit says, its tiny hands palms-forward in an apologetic gesture, "but I sought to control you in order to return to the thieves and wipe out the Red Djinn." Its voice booms with less strength than before.

Go to **121**.

106

The alchemist snatches up your gold like a greedy child, and proceeds to draw a small object from within his desk. “A special potion, for my friends,” he smiles. The “healing potion” is a tiny glass vial full of blue liquid with tiny white lumps in it. You feel sick at the thought of drinking it, but place it carefully in your pocket.

This potion, if imbibed at a time when you are not in combat, will heal 1 die of damage done to a single cliché. It has one dose.

Go to **14**.

107

You go into a routine of roguish foulness, attempting to make your way into his trust, but William cuts the act short.

“First of all, Halfling, you are very stupid for coming here. I do not keep my prisoners at this tavern.” He smiles, and your heart ices over.

“Secondly,” he says, drawing a shimmering green sword, “I must thank you for making my job easier. I can simply kill you and take the ring, which the gull tells me it could sense on you.” You back away to the side of the room as the doorman enters, also carrying a drawn sword. He looks happy as he eagerly fingers the pommel.

The gull? It must have been some sort of familiar; you suddenly wish you’d at least given yourself the satisfaction of cutting it’s damned head off ... You draw your weapon and prepare to defend yourself.

Go to **125**.

108

Your eyes devour every inch of the map. Without question, this is the one being used by the grey-suits.

You are pleased with yourself for acquiring it, even if the circumstances weren't entirely your doing. You note several lines marked near the emptying grates at dockside, and one important-looking mark right near the middle, but you have no idea what it means. It looks like some sort of magical glyph.

You stare at it. You turn the paper sideways and then upside-down, but it doesn't seem to be pictographic. It's entirely abstract, and you aren't that good with strange alphabets.

Before you can reflect further, however, a sickly purple light leaps from the floor, and you jump, hitting your head on the low ceiling of the alcove! You slump back, relieved. It's the ring, glowing again! You draw it from your pocket, and the tiny spirit, Xim, stands wide-eyed on the ring.

Go to **126**.

109

Those skeletons are dead, and that door is an obstacle to be overcome. Foolish notions otherwise are simply a side-effect of fatigue and hunger, and your stomach growls angrily to confirm this.

You swat away the skeletons with your sword and the strange mold falls away with them. No problem. You touch the door – and sunlight surrounds you!

You are standing on the banks of a grassy hill, with huge, towering clouds filled with battling gryphons above you. Around you is a party of dwarves. They don't look happy to see you.

The End.

(and a strange one)

III0

You listen and can hear only the distant tapping of the guard's foot. It sounds as though he's in a stone chamber, and alone. You have no doubt there are others nearby, however, that he could summon with a yell. You're going to have to risk a back-stab, and hope to take him out cleanly.

Go to **128**.

III

If Patricia is fighting with a dagger, go to **129**. If she is fighting with a sword, go to **67**.

II2

You tear your watering eyes away from the battle and run out through a fallen, burning wall. You run into a gathering group of observers, and wade through their groping hands and questions. You just need to get away from here!

From behind you, you hear a triumphant yell. It is Xim. But, the yell quickly fades to a faint echo, and is no more. You fear the worst for the spirit in the ring. A ball of flame erupts from the building, and the crowd screams, pressing back as the fireball rises into the swirling snow.

Go to **137**.

II3

The face, to your relief, begins to slip downward out of view, to be replaced by a more friendly view of the sky. The relief you feel quickly turns to horror, however, as it occurs to you that you are falling backwards! You instinctively place a foot back, which slides on the ice and sends you spinning towards Certain Pain on the cobbles below.

But the delay is just long enough for a rough hand to grab your shirt and yank you forcefully into the air. The wobbling, bearded face returns to your still-stunned vision, and stares at you with quiet malice. You can't help but wonder if the man finds your face as terrifying as you find his. You experiment briefly with a snarl, but it has no apparent effect.

"You," says the face, in a tone that balances impressively between unbridled rage and calm, efficient murder, "were spying on me!!!"

Do you explain the real truth to him (at **54**), make up a story (at **120**) or attack him (at **2**)?

II4

You slip the stone in *just so* ... pressing it down to prevent the flagstone from shifting back into position.

You count to ten, and gently step away from the stone, and then you *run*. Two seconds later, there is a horrible sound, and a rush of air, as the trap is sprung! Go to **100**.

II5

You reflect on this revelation. The grey-suited thieves are apparently dealing with some form of black magic ... a chill runs down your spine, unrelated to the cold air or shadows of the alleyway. The ring is a servant of some kind, but what of the “Red Djinn” that it mentioned? You pull the trinket again from your pocket, but the glow is faded, and no tiny spirit manifests itself. You return it to its place, and examine your options.

Your primary lead is “Grymray” – the alchemist who made the knockout gas. However, if you received any information about goings-on at the docks or quayside, that provides a second option.

If you follow up the alchemist lead, go to **25**. If you have information leading you to the docks, and prefer that path, then go to **3**.

II6

While your small legs do not match the strides of the three humans, you are smart enough to lose them quickly by ducking under a series of moving carts (sending some horses running wild, alas) and then heading northward. This leads you to think that it might not be wise to go right into their den!

If they were holding Patricia there, why would they chase you away from a possible trade for the magic ring? It makes no sense, but it probably means that Patricia is imprisoned elsewhere. If worse comes to worst, you will return to Quayside Street, but a quick glance around you reveals that your flight from the grey-suits has taken you very close to Short Alley. As long as you're in the neighborhood, you might as well investigate the alchemist.

Go to **25**.

II7

You pay for the "Protective Elixir," curious and hopeful of a bargain. It isn't that you like the alchemist or who he deals with, but he seems to be a dedicated craftsman, and you wonder what he might come up with. You examine the contents of the vial through the glass, and see only a green syrup.

"It contains but a single dose," says the alchemist.

When you decide to drink this potion, turn immediately to number **32** to discover what it does (you can do this at any time), but mark your place as you will be required to return to your passage. **No peeking!**

Go to **14**.

118

You down both men quickly and in admirable form. Clutching your own wounds, you search the bodies. You get some coinage, William's magical shortsword (a Bonus Die weapon that adds an extra die to any cliché when using it for combat), and the key to the trapdoor. *Make a note of these items.*

The murmur of voices and the sound of standing grey-suits beyond the curtain turns your eyes to the trapdoor. A sharp knock comes to the lamp panel, and you quickly unlock the sewer-latch before they realize that the door-man is gone.

The stench of the sewers rises up to meet you, and you drop down to the ladder and close the hatch behind you. You drop quietly to the passage below (carefully avoiding the water's edge), and run like mad, dodging down the confusing passages until you're sure that you've lost them.

Go to **5**.

119

You and Patricia stand transfixed before the awesome contest that occurs before you – but from a physical standpoint, you have little to observe. While the figures make all the motions of sword-wielding warriors, you can see that the true battle rages between the wills of the two magical creatures. A bright field of energy crackles and spits in the air between them, and it moves and shifts in color as the battle is joined!

It seems for a while that Xim has an advantage, but he cannot hold it. The Red Djinni wears him down bit by bit, and then his attacks begin finding their home. You watch in fear as the shadowy form of Xim is pierced repeatedly, and begins to fade in the growing firelight.

The fire! You had almost forgotten it, but Tricia is tugging your arm to get out of here. The place is burning to the ground!

Go to **112**.

I20

You dig deep into your repertoire of False Fronts, and can't find anything useful to explain the presence of a Halfling, armed and equipped, outside a hostelry window at dawn. No roofers would be here in this weather, this early, and it is extremely unlikely that you lost your way ...

You stammer; he glares. A lie is doomed. You will have to either fight (go to **2**) or tell him the real story (at **54**).

I21

The Red Djinn again?

"Tell me about it," you say, propping to rest against a nearby wall, "but make it quick; I have a partner to rescue."

"I was originally the property of a powerful Naelish sorcerer" it begins, and winks "one very close to His Imperial Majesty, Vestilles IV. I was stolen because my kind are the foes of the Red Djinn. They're terrible, deadly spirits – powerful and corrupt."

"Indeed," Xim admits, "we are by no means pure ourselves, but we exist to keep the Djinn in check. That is the truth."

"How does a ring of thieves come into this?"

"The thieves have a sorcerer in their employ, who has summoned up a Red Djinni to serve them. It has considerable power; they are using it to control the minds of important men," Xim whispers, emphasizing the word "important."

(continued)

The little spirit narrows his white eyes. “They are losing control of it. They killed my master and took me on the advice of their sorcerer, in order to have a metaphorical dagger to keep at the throat of their Red Djinni.”

You think about this. You’ve heard of stranger things, and it makes sense, in a twisted sort of way. But you aren’t about to wear a ring that has admitted that it wanted to control you!

Xim watches you thinking, and speaks. “I understand, Lucas,” he says, hanging his head. “I regret my former haste, but you are a person of considerable resources. I think you can get us to our goal on your own.” A thought strikes Xim, who brightens visibly. “We will work together, but independently of each other’s control! As ... partners, I suppose!”

“I’ve got one,” you say, bitterly.

“If you need help, you may summon me,” Xim says, ignoring you with a casual wave of a tiny hand. You pocket the ring in silence, and continue.

If you’ve just left Grymray’s Apothecary Shop, go to **27**.
If not, go to **4**.

I22

You consider for an instant pointing out that it was, in fact, *they* who robbed *you*, but decide that arguing that point won’t do any good. They are moving to attack, at the wizard’s command. This, you think, must be the idiot who summoned up the Djinni in the first place!

Grey-Suits:Nameless Thug Team (3)

You are in a fight with several guards; battle them as a single foe with your *Fun-Loving Mercenary* cliché. Half of the guards are attacking you; the others are fighting Patricia. After you’ve defeated yours, go immediately to **111**. If your cliché is dropped to zero dice, go to **7**.

I23

Curses upon yourself! You feel like a total idiot!

The guard spins around, and you hear the sound of a blade drawn. he yells a warning, and the door flies open. A few seconds later, another door opens in the masonry just behind you! More grey suits come running, and you are overtaken in no time. You have failed your partner.

The End.

I24

You draw your sword to fight. The odds are definitely against you, but nothing is going to stand in your way. If you try to run, the humans would catch you and kill you, anyway. And if that should happen, they'll have the ring, and no reason to let Patricia live.

You are in a fight to the death. Since you are in a wide alley, two of the thugs can attack at once. As soon as one goes down, the third takes his place. They will attack individually (not forming a Team). Fight them with your *Fun-Loving Mercenary* cliché.

#1 Grey-Suit:Nameless Thug(2)

#2 Grey-Suit:Nameless Thug(2)

#3 Grey-Suit:Thug Named Otis(3)

If your cliché drops to zero dice, go to **85**. If you defeat them, go to **74**.

I25

You are in a fight to the death with two men; William Grey and his bodyguard. You do not have any chance to escape (you could go for the trapdoor, but a quick glance reveals that it has a lock on it).

William Grey: Villainous Swordsman (3)

*Door-Man: Snarling,
Murderous Bruiser (2)*

Grey is normally just a Villainous Swordsman (2), but he has a magic sword! If your combat roll is ever better than Grey's by 7 or more points, you manage to disarm him as well as injuring him – he'll lose *two* dice that round, instead of one!

The men attack you individually (they do not form a team). If you defeat them both, go to **118**. If your cliché is reduced to zero dice, go to **60**.

I26

"The Red Djinni!" it shouts with a shrill squeak. It dances happily, shimmering with a pulsing violet glow. "That will be where they have taken the woman Patricia, and where I must go!"

"The Glyph?"

"Yes!" Xim says, and leaps from the ring in ecstasy. His tiny dance is cut short, however, as he is yanked sharply back to the surface of the ring by some unseen force. You don't like the look in its small eyes. You still aren't sure that you can trust this creature.

Xim stares at you, as if it can read your thoughts. "Lucas," it says, "had I truly wished to control you, I could have by now. I am not entirely powerless over you."

You aren't in the mood to be bluffed. "You said I had to wear you."

"I said you had to wear me *to be protected*," Xim says, and its eyes dim and redden.

(continued)

You think about this. “Alright, partner-the-second,” you say suspiciously, “which is the best route toward the Djinni-place? There are many markings along the route. They could indicate guardians, traps, or anything. Caches of money or weapons, even.”

This task, obviously, you can trust him with. He clearly wants to get to the Djinni, and he has everything to gain by helping you reach that destination safely.

Xim, nodding in a businesslike fashion, peers over the edge of the parchment. After a second or two, he begins to look genuinely dismayed. After a time, however, he points to a single, narrow passage that leads in a round-about way to the Djinn glyph. “This one,” he says, “has the fewest markings! It must be the safest!”

“That’s the best you can do?”

Xim shrugs. “Would you have decided any differently? Neither of us can read the coded symbols that the cartographers used.”

You nod and sigh. The spirit is right. Go to **132**.

You leave the chamber and pull out your coin again. You examine the map and find that you are very near your goal, and there seems to be a corridor at the last symbol along the way.

You shake your head in confusion. You checked that area as you passed it, and you found nothing. But this time, you think, you have a bit more incentive to look closely ...

The walls are rough here, and you believe that these walls could conceal a secret door fairly well. What you didn’t expect is for the door to reveal itself to you, sliding open silently on age-old hinges hidden in – or perhaps made from the rock walls.

Creepy!

Beyond the door is a narrower, smoother tunnel and the sound of flowing water. Your mind wanders back to the empty eye-sockets in the dwarfish skulls.

If you go through the door, go to **6**. If you return to the glowing room and force the iron door, go to **109**.

I28

You raise your blade to strike, and plunge it into the back of the guard.

You may roll against either your *Halfling Burglar* cliché (Difficulty 5), or your *Fun-Loving Mercenary* cliché (Difficulty 10). If you fail, go to **123**. If you succeed, go to **135**.

I29

You've taken yours out, but Patricia still has two on her! You decide that such odds are hardly fair, and throw a poke of the blade in the direction of one of her assailants!

Sure enough, he decides to face off with you instead, since (to your dismay) his associate is doing well enough with Patricia ...

Grey-Suit: Nameless Thug (2)

If you win, you'll find that Tricia has already killed the other one; go to **50**. If you lose, go to **7**.

I30

“Psst!”

You wait for an instant, and the feet stop tapping. Tricia’s shadow moves a bit.

“Psssst!”

After a second or two, she kneels to the floor, and lays down, parallel to you. You can see her staring, puzzled, at the door, but she can probably only see a shadow where you are. She whispers “Lucas?”

“Sshh!”

She nods, indicating that her hands are chained. That makes sense. You have no doubt that she tried to escape at least once! She’s pretty mean when she’s upset, too.

Go to **136**.

I31

The tunnel opens into a large chamber, covered in thick, almost shaggy mold. Ugh.

You cover your coin briefly, and confirm that the glow in the room is provided by the strange growth. You pocket the coin, and draw your sword, instead.

The room is full of skeletons. They aren’t human – they are closer to your own height. They could be goblins, you decide, or perhaps Dwarves. To your morbid romantic imagination, they are slave-workers of some ancient king, the builders of this tunnel, perhaps, who died here together singing the songs of their dwarfish ancestors while dying beneath the palaces of humanity.

You’ve always had a taste for that sort of irony. Patricia finds it disturbing. You sigh, missing her.

The problem is not the skeletons or the mold, however. The problem is that the skeletons and the mold cover the only doorway, a large iron door, black with rust, opposite the room. Two skeletons are slumped against it, and the strange phosphorescence makes your vision blur. You get a distinct feeling of dread at the thought of moving the skeletons. You know, somehow, that they don’t *want* to be moved.

If you go back along the corridor to search for another exit, go to **127**. If you move the skeletons aside and try to free the iron door, go to **109**.

I32

Carefully following the lines on the map, you come to the passage with the fewest markings. It is an abandoned line, dry and cold. The artistic efforts of hundreds of rogues and vagrants of years past cover the walls, with warnings of hideous fates or notes about where the best pickings are, depending on who the messages were intended for. None of them is any use to those living in this century ...

After nearly an hour of listening to your own footsteps echo, you come to a branch in the passage. You look at the map, and find the fork – but there is a smudge in the same general region. You groan.

Both of the routes that you can make out have an equal number of markings on the map, so you'd best just pick one and follow it. You estimate that it's mid-afternoon, by now – at least!

If you choose the left tunnel, go to **72**. If you choose the right one, go to **30**.

I33

You're a thief – you can handle this, right? Balancing carefully to prevent from shifting your center of gravity, you lower yourself to the ground, and brush your fingers under the edge of the flagstone you shifted. Sure enough, there's a heavy wire or cord running under a false floor to the wall to your right. If it's allowed to fall slack, bad things might happen. You grab a chunk of rock from the ground next to you, and angle it to shove it into the crevice. It won't hold forever, but if you place it *just right*, it should give you enough time to get away.

Roll against your *Halfling Burglar* cliché (Difficulty 5) to perform this simple task. But wait! Your Hook comes into play. Due to Lucas' difficulty with anything mechanical (especially something so delicate), roll against half the normal number of dice (round up). If you succeed, go to **114**. If you fail, there is a nasty rumbling sound, and you must leap for dear life to **79**!

I34

You make a good go at it, but the icy plane of roofing slips from your fingers as your momentum takes you over the edge. You plummet like a rock, and the nasty *crack!!* you hear is your right leg, twisted painfully against the cobblestones beneath you. You fade into darkness. It will be days before you are conscious again, and by then, your partner will be dead.

The End.

I35

The guard gurgles slightly and says something a lot like “Glurft” before slumping quietly to the floor. You clean your blade, and replace it carefully in its scabbard. As silently as possible, you open the door and enter the chamber.

The guard has nothing of value save a dagger; you may take it if you wish. He wears a pretty silly expression, and you catch yourself hoping that, when your number is up, you go out with a little more dignity. Succumbing to a brief flash of sympathy, you lift his jaw a bit. You nod to yourself, satisfied. He still looks *stupid*, but now he looks *serious*.

The chamber you are in is smallish, stone, cold, and dark – save for a torch mounted on the wall. There are two exits, but you can hear the voices of more guards through the one to your left. You opt for the other one. Peering under the door, you can see more flagstones, black iron bars, and feet, tapping listlessly. A voice is humming. You listen to it. You know it! That’s Tricia!

Go to **47**.

I36

You stand and press gently on the door, and you poke your head through the door. Patricia smiles a weary smile, holding up her chained hands.

You slip into the room and close the door behind you; find the keys, and free her of her bonds.

“Lucas, I knew you’d be here sooner or later!” she says, hugging you so hard you have to free yourself to breathe.

“Yeah,” you say. “It’s good to see you. I had one heck of a time getting here,” you begin, and pull the ring from your pocket. “You see, this is Xim...” But before you can catch up on the events of the day, a noise like the sound of a mountain being cracked in two shakes the tunnels. You hear distant screams and feel a hot wind on your face. If you have more than one sword, you hand one to Patricia. If not, make a note of this (she’ll have to use a dagger). You both stand in readiness as the stone ceiling begins to crack ...

Go to **49**!

I37

With the pottery shop collapsing in flames behind you, you slump into Patricia’s arms, and the two of you stop in a nearby alley to catch your breath.

“Lucas,” she smiles, “we’d better get going; we can use the crowd for cover.” She brushes your curls from your eyes, and you nod, exhausted. After a time, you manage to stand, stiffly, and begin walking towards the southern gate of the city.

“It’s a shame, though ...” you say, “about the ring. Or *maybe* it is. Xim had an awful lot of power. He might have made a useful ally.”

Patricia tightens her sword-belt and looks at you for a long time, an expression of obvious concern darkening her features. “I think, Lucas ...” she says at last, “that we do just fine without a third partner.” She smiles “I think we do just fine.”

You smile, too. You couldn’t agree more.

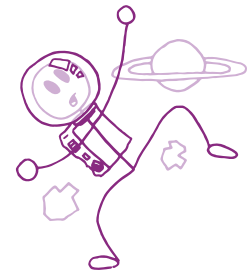
The End.



Welcome to **Risus: The Anything RPG**, a complete pen-and-paper roleplaying game! For some, **Risus** is a handy “emergency” RPG for spur-of-the-moment one-shots and rapid character creation. For others, it’s a reliable campaign system supporting years of play. For others still, it’s a strange little pamphlet with stick figures. For me, it’s *all three*, and with this edition, **Risus** celebrates not only two decades of existence, but two decades of *life*, bolstered by an enthusiastic global community devoted to expanding it, celebrating it, sharing it, and gaming with it.

Character Creation

The character *Cliché* is the heart of **Risus**. Clichés are shorthand for a kind of person, implying their skills, background, social role and more. The “character classes” of the oldest RPGs are enduring Clichés: Wizard, Detective, Starpilot, Superspy. You can choose Clichés like those for your character, or devise something more outré, like Ghostly Pirate Cook, Fairy Godmother, Bruce Lee (for a character who does Bruce Lee *stuff*) or Giant Monster Who Just Wants To Be Loved For His Macrame – anything you can talk your GM into. With a *very* permissive GM, you could be *all these at once*. Each Cliché has a rating in *dice* (the ordinary six-sided kind). When your character’s prowess as a Wizard, Starpilot or Bruce Lee is *challenged*, roll dice equal to the rating. Three dice is “professional.” One die is a putz. Six dice is ultimate mastery. A complete **Risus** character looks like this:



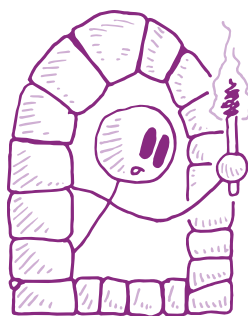
Grolfnar Vainsson the Viking

Description: Tall, blond, and grinning. Likes to drink and fight and drink and chase Viking women and fight and sail the high seas and raid. Wants to write great sagas about himself.

Clichés: Viking (4), Gambler (3), Womanizer (2), Poet (1)

To create Grolfnar, all we had to do was name him, describe him, and assign his Clichés. You get 10 dice to spend on Clichés, distributed however you like, on as many or few Clichés as you decide (but more than 10 would be odd, considering).

The first Cliché listed for your character (“Viking,” in Grolfnar’s case) is his *Primary Cliché* – the Cliché that most clearly expresses how your character *sees himself*. In general, new characters may not have Clichés rated higher than 4 dice, so Grolfnar’s “Viking” is maxed out for a beginning PC. Your GM might choose to expand, relax, or otherwise transmogrify such parameters for his game (ask if you’re not sure).



Powers, Tools, and Power Tools

Each Cliché implies a lot about a character, most crucially including his likely *abilities* and *equipment*. If you’re playing a Hirsute Barbarian (3), we can assume your character is comfortable with blades and battle. He’s probably a climber, a runner, and all-night reveler. He probably owns at least one sturdy hand-weapon and (hopefully, mercifully) a complete loincloth. If you’re playing a Psychic Schoolgirl (3), you probably have the power to sense (and be freaked-out by) the psychometric residue lingering at a murder scene,

and might own a cute plushy backpack filled with school supplies. If you’re playing a Roguish Space Pirate (3), you can do all kinds of piratey roguey space-things, and you probably own a raygun, and maybe a secondhand star freighter. When there’s any doubt about your character’s abilities or “Tools of the Trade,” discuss it with your GM.

Tools of the Trade come “free” as part of each Cliché, but they’re vulnerable to loss or damage, which can (sometimes) cripple or limit the power of the Cliché. A Roguish Space Pirate, stripped of his star freighter, loses *all* ability to haul booty to distant suns ... while a Psychic Schoolgirl loses *none* of her ability to be freaked out by murder scenes if her plushy backpack is stolen. A Hirsute Barbarian (3), forced into a pit-fight without his trusty blade, can still rely on his bare hands, but he’ll operate at *half-dice* – a mere Hirsute Barbarian (2) – until he’s once again properly armed. The backpack-deprived Schoolgirl might face similar penalties when it’s time to do her homework.

In the course of adventuring life, lucky explorers may discover enchanted and/or cutting-edge and/or otherwise *special* equipment. The most basic sort is called *Bonus-Dice Gear* (such items let you roll an extra die, or more, when using them) but there are other kinds of “special” to be found, in the form of alternate game mechanics (“With this experimental piloting software, you can reroll any 1s”), in-world powers (“Only a Stradivarius can be used to seduce a Vampire Prince”) or even mixed benefits and restrictions (“While wielding the Sword of Mercy, you always roll dice at *least equal* to your foe, but you *must* spare his life if you win.”)

The Game System

Whenever anybody wants to do anything, *and* nobody’s actively opposing it, *and* the GM doesn’t think success would be automatic, the player rolls dice. If the total rolled beats (equals or exceeds) the Target Number set by the GM, success! If not, failure! Target numbers follow this scale:

5: A cinch. A challenge for a schmuck. Routine for a pro.

10: A challenge for a professional.

15: An Heroic challenge. For really inventive or tricky stunts.

20: A challenge for a Master. Nearly superhuman difficulty.

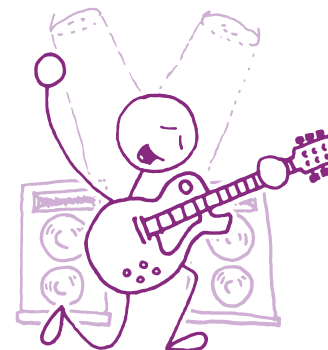
30: You’ve GOT to be kidding. Actual superhuman difficulty.

The Target Number depends on the Cliché, and anyone can *try* anything. Crossing a chasm by swinging on a rope or vine would be child’s play (automatic success!) for a Swashbuckler or a Lord of the Jungle, easy (Target 5) for a Pulp Archaeologist, and challenging but definitely doable (Target 10) for a Gymnast, Barbarian, or Cat-Burglar. Even a Wheelchair-Bound Eccentric Occultist could try it (Difficulty 15, but the wheelchair is lost unless the roll beats a 30)!

The Combat System

In **Risus**, “combat” is any contest in which opponents jockey for position, make attacks, bring defenses to bear, and wear down their opponent to achieve victory. *Literally or metaphorically*. Examples of “combat” include:

- **Arguments:** Combatants wielding logic, stubbornness and cheap rhetorical tricks to make their point.
- **Horse-Racing:** People on horses running around a dirty track, trying to get nowhere first.
- **Dogfights:** Pilots in airplanes or spaceships trying to blow each other out of the sky.
- **Astral/Psychic Duels:** Mystics/psionics looking bored or sleepy, but trying to rip each other’s ego apart in the Otherworld.
- **Wizard’s Duels:** Sorcerers using strange magics, trying to outdo one another.
- **Dueling Banjos:** Banjo players using strange melodies, trying to outdo one another.
- **Seduction:** One (or more) characters trying to score with one (or more) other character(s) who is(are) trying to resist.
- **Courtroom Antics:** Prosecution vs. Defense. The goal is victory. Justice is incidental.
- **Actual Regular Combat:** People trying to injure or kill each other.



The GM decides when a combat has begun. At that point, go around the table in rounds, and let each combatant make an attack in turn. What constitutes an “attack” depends on the nature of the fight, but it should always be roleplayed (if dialogue is involved) or described in entertaining detail (if it’s physical and/or dangerous and/or does/should involve contraceptives). The GM will determine what *type* of Cliché is appropriate for the fight. In a straightforward physical brawl, Clichés like Viking, Soldier, Swashbuckler, and Ernest Hemingway are equally appropriate, while Clichés like Hairdresser and Latin Lover are not.

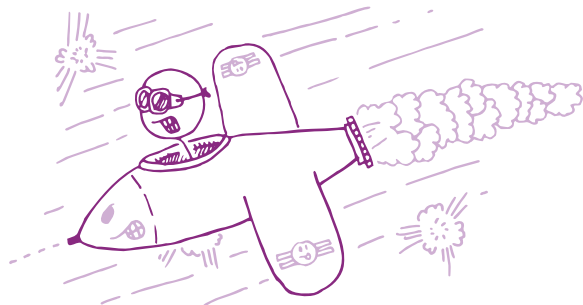
Attacks must be directed at an opponent. Both parties in the attack (attacker and defender) roll against their chosen Cliché. *Low roll loses*. Specifically, the low roller loses *one of his Cliché dice* for the remainder of the fight – he’s been weakened, worn down, demoralized or otherwise pushed one step towards defeat.

Eventually, one side will be left standing, and another will be left without dice. At this point, *the winners decide the fate of the losers*. In a physical fight or magical duel, the losers might be killed (or mercifully spared). In Courtroom Antics, the loser is sentenced by the judge, or fails to prosecute. In a Seduction, the loser gets either a cold shower or a warm evening, depending. While the GM will reject combat outcomes that make no sense in context (if you beat someone at tennis, you aren’t *normally* allowed to decapitate them and drag their corpse through the city square), the spoils of victory are otherwise down to the choice of the victor.

You needn't use the same Cliché every round. If a Viking/Swashbuckler wants to lop heads one round, and switch to swinging on chandeliers the next, that's groovy, too. However, anytime a character has a Cliché worn down to zero dice in combat, he's been *defeated*, even if he has other Clichés left to play with.

Dice lost in combat are regained when the combat ends, at a healing rate determined by the GM (based on the nature of the attacks involved). If the combat was in vehicles (space fighters, mecha, wooden sailing ships) then the vehicles themselves are likely damaged, too, and must be repaired. Sometimes, healing takes not only time, but *conditions* specified by the GM ("now that you've been soundly defeated, you can't even *look* at your banjo until your girlfriend assuages your ego").

There's no standard time or distance scale in *Risus*; everything depends on context. In a physical brawl, each round might represent just a few seconds ... while in a long-term fight between a married couple, each round might represent an entire day (Day One: Husband "accidentally" burns Wife's favorite dress in the oven, Wife "accidentally" feeds Drano to Husband's prize goldfish, and so on).



Inappropriate Clichés

As stated above, the GM determines what sort of Clichés are appropriate for the fight. Any Clichés left over are *inappropriate*. In a physical fight, Hairdresser is inappropriate. In a magical duel, Barbarian is inappropriate.

Inappropriate Clichés aren't *forbidden* from the fight. They can still be used to make attacks, **provided the player roleplays or describes it in a really, really, really entertaining manner**. Furthermore, the attack must be *plausible* within the context of the combat, and the genre and tone that the GM has set for the game (making this kind of attack more often useful in very pulpy/swashbuckly games, or very silly ones).

All combat rules apply normally, with one exception: if an *inappropriate* Cliché wins a combat round versus an *appropriate* one, the losing player loses *three* dice, rather than one, from his Cliché! The "inappropriate" player takes no such risk, and loses only one die if he loses the round. Thus, a creative hairdresser is dangerous when cornered and attacked unfairly. Beware.

When in doubt, assume the aggressor determines the type of combat. If a wizard attacks a barbarian with magic, then it's a magical duel! If the barbarian attacks the mage with his sword, then it's physical combat! If the defender can come up with an entertaining use of his skills, he'll have the edge. It pays in many genres to be the defender! But ... if the wizard and barbarian *both obviously want to fight*, then *both* are aggressors, and it's "fantasy combat," where both swords and sorcery have *equal* footing.

Teaming Up

Two or more characters may form a *team* in combat. For the duration of the team (usually the entire fight), they battle as a single unit, and may only be attacked as a single foe. There are two kinds of team: full-on *Character Teams* (for PCs, and sufficiently interesting NPCs) and *Grunt-Squads* (for nameless NPC hordes).

Grunt-Squads: This is just special effects. When a horde of 700 rat-skeletons attacks the PCs within the lair of the Wicked Necromancer (5), the GM probably won't feel like keeping track of 700 tiny skeletal sets of dice. Instead, he can declare them a Grunt Squad, fighting as a *single foe*: a Skeletal Rat-Horde (7). Mechanically, the Rat-Horde is the same as any single foe - except it sometimes has more dice (as many as the GM cares to assign it). Grunt-Squads stick together as a team until they're defeated, at which point some survivors may scatter (though at least one will always remain to suffer whatever fate the victor decides). Taken to logical (or whimsical) extremes, an entire ship's crew, or even whole forests, dungeons, cities or nations might be represented by a single Cliché.



Character Teams: When PCs (and/or NPCs worth the attention) form a team, the Team Leader is the character with the highest-ranking applicable Cliché (if there's a tie, the team must *designate* a Team Leader). Everybody rolls dice, but only the Team Leader's dice completely count. Other team-members contribute only their *sixes*, when they roll any.

Clichés joined in a team need not be identical, and (provided the GM can be convinced) they can even be a mix of "appropriate" and "inappropriate" for the fight (a group of warriors might be aided by their able minstrel, for example). However, they don't triple enemy dice-loss unless the *entire team* is equally inappropriate (which means the players get to explain to the GM exactly how a Hairdresser, a Parakeet Trainer, and a Life Coach are coordinating their talents to take Darth Viraxis to the mat!)

Whenever a team loses a round of combat, a *single* team-member's Cliché is reduced. Any team-member (Team Leader included) may "step forward" and voluntarily suffer this loss. If so, the noble volunteer is reduced by *twice* the normal amount (either two dice or six, depending), but the Team Leader gets to roll *twice as many dice*

on his next attack, a temporary boost as the team avenges their heroic comrade. If no volunteer steps forward, the Team Leader must assign the (undoubted) hit to a team-member, and there is no “vengeance” bonus.

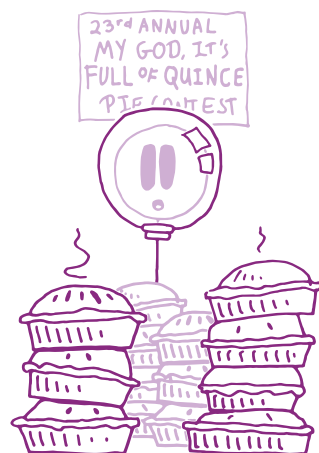
- ❖ **Victory & Defeat:** With teams as with individuals, the victor determines the fate of the loser ... but when the loser is part of a team, his fate is generally reserved until the *end* of the team’s existence (even if he’s defeated while the fight rages on). So, if his team *wins*, his team – not their opponent – gets to decide. There are some fights where this won’t be so, where the PCs are under such precarious circumstance that their fates must be resolved immediately. But, in most cases, being part of a team – especially a *winning* team – is excellent insurance.
- ❖ **Disbanding:** A team may voluntarily disband at any time between die-rolls. When disbanding, each team-member instantly loses a single die from the Cliché they’d been contributing to the team (equal to “damage” suffered in the fight itself). Disbanded team-members may freely form new teams, provided the die-loss from disbanding doesn’t defeat them. Individuals may also *drop out* of a team, but this reduces them to zero dice immediately as they scamper for the rear. Their fates rest on the mercy of whoever wins the fight!
- ❖ **Lost Leader:** If the Team Leader ever leaves the team for any reason (either by dropping out or having his own Cliché dropped to zero), the team *must* disband immediately, with consequences as above. They may immediately opt to reform as a new team (with a new leader) however, and if the old leader was removed by having volunteered for personal damage, the new Team Leader gets the double-roll vengeance bonus to avenge his predecessor!

Single-Action Conflicts

“Combat” depends on multi-round jockeying and wearing each other down ... but many conflicts are too *sudden* to be played that way (two characters grabbing for the same gun, for example). Such “Single-Action Conflicts” (SACs) are settled with a single roll against appropriate Clichés (or inappropriate Clichés, with good roleplaying). High roll wins. Note that, in nearly *any* case, the Game Master may jump between the three resolution methods (Target Number, Combat, Single-Action Conflict) to suit the pacing and mood. Sometimes, an arm-wrestling match works best as a combat ... sometimes it works best as a Single-Action Conflict, and sometimes (preferably if it’s against some kind of coin-operated arm-wrestling machine) even as a simple Target Number.

When Somebody Can’t Participate

Sometimes, characters find themselves facing a Combat or Single-Action Conflict where they simply have no applicable Cliché, even by stretching the imagination. Perhaps one character in the party enters a pie-eating contest with his Disgusting Glutton (2) Cliché, but the rest of the characters are astronauts or accountants, neither of whom traditionally engorge themselves on pie. In situations like this, the GM might grant *everybody* two free “brevet dice” to play with for the duration of the conflict. This means the Disgusting Glutton (2) would become, temporarily, a Disgusting Glutton (4), while everyone else would get a



Regular Person Talked Into a Pie-Eating Contest (2) Cliché “on loan” until the last crumb burps forth. The Glutton, naturally, retains his winning edge, but everyone else can still bury their noses in pie. This rule applies only to Combats and SACs, never to rolls against Target Numbers (since, with Target Numbers, the TN itself simply moves wherever it needs to, for *any* Cliché attempting *any* action).

Advanced Option: Lucky Shots

This option allows players to spend some of their 10 starting dice on something *other* than Clichés. A single Cliché-die can, instead, buy three *Lucky Shots* (spend two dice for six Lucky Shots, and so on). Using a Lucky Shot boosts any Cliché roll by a *single* die, for a *single* die-roll. Lucky Shots “reset” between game-sessions. Lucky Shots can represent random good luck, the favor of a deity, a streak of resourcefulness, etc.

Advanced Option: Hooks & Tales

With this Advanced Option, players can bargain for extra character-creation dice by giving their character a Hook and/or a Tale. A *Hook* is some significant character flaw – a curse, an obsession, a weakness, a sworn vow, a permanently crippling injury – that the GM agrees is *so juicy* that he can use it to make the character’s life more interesting (which usually means less pleasant). A character with a Hook gets an extra die to play with.

A *Tale* is a written “biography” of the character describing his life before the events of the game. The Tale needn’t be long (a page or two is *plenty*); it just needs to tell the reader where the character is coming from, what he likes and dislikes, how he became who he is, what his motives are. Some Tales are best written from the player’s omniscient perspective; others are more fun if written as excerpts from the character’s own diary. A character with a Tale provided before gameplay begins gets an extra die to play with.

Advanced Option: Pumps

Characters may *pump* their Clichés, expending extra effort at the cost of certain injury (loss of dice). A pumped Cliché receives a dice-boost lasting a single round of combat (or single significant roll, otherwise). After that round or roll is resolved, the Cliché returns to normal, then suffers immediate dice-loss *equal* to the boost. Such loss is comparable to combat losses, and must heal.

Example: Rudolph the Ninja (3) is attacked by a Monster (6)! Rudy doesn’t have much of a chance against such a powerful foe, so he opts for a tricky tactic: since the Monster is attacking physically, Rudolph decides his first-round response will use his skills as as a Cajun Chef (3) – a decidedly *Inappropriate* choice! He also opts to *pump it by two dice* to Cajun Chef (5), putting his all into his cooking!

On round one, the Monster rolls six dice, and Rudy (quickly whipping up a tempting Gumbo spiked with Ninja sleeping drug and offering it to the Monster) rolls five. If the Ninja loses, he’s instantly defeated: his Cajun Chef Cliché would drop to Cajun Chef (1) for the pump, then to Cajun Chef (zero) for losing the round. The Monster would eat Rudolph instead of the Gumbo. If the Ninja *wins*, however, the Monster (6) drops to Monster (3), and Rudy’s Cajun Chef (3) drops to Cajun Chef (1). In round two, Rudolph can switch back to Ninja (3), where he’ll be on equal footing with the groggy, well-fed Monster.

Pumps are legal for any kind of Cliché roll, provided the GM agrees that “pushing it” fits the action involved.



Double-Pump Clichés: If permitting pumps, the GM might also allow *double-pump Clichés*, which take only “half damage” from pumping. Thus, a Sorcerer (5) could roll eleven dice for a single combat round (six extra dice!) but take only *three* dice of loss from the extra effort. Double-pump Clichés cost twice as many dice to buy during character creation, and are especially appropriate for Clichés representing supernatural abilities (in fact, some Game Masters may *require* that supernatural Clichés be purchased this way). The use of (square brackets) instead of (parentheses) indicates a double-pump Cliché.

Advanced Option: Character Advancement

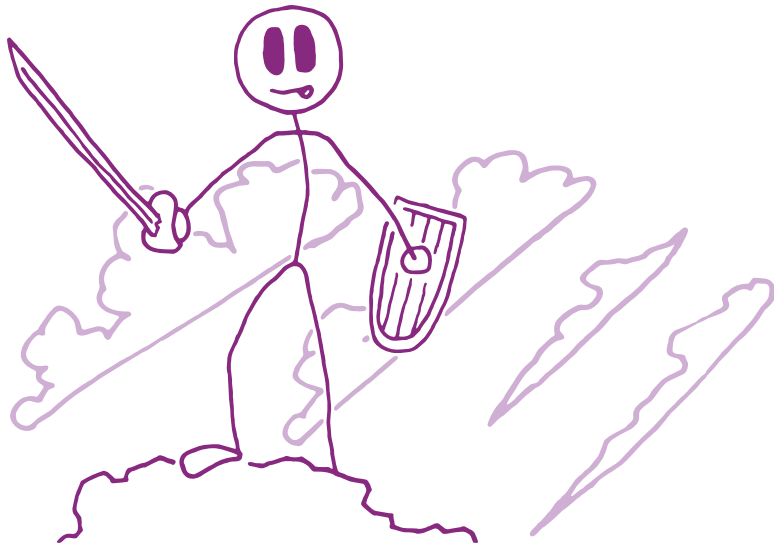
At the end of each adventure, each player rolls against each Cliché *challenged* during the course of play (ignore lingering “injuries” for this purpose; roll as if the Cliché were *whole*). If the dice land showing *only even numbers*, the Cliché advances by a single die (increasing it permanently). No Cliché advances past Cliché (6).

- ❖ **Midgame Leaps:** Anytime you do something *really, really, really spectacularly entertaining that wows the whole table*, the GM may allow you to roll instantly (in the middle of the game) for possible advancement, in addition to the roll(s) at the end of the adventure.
- ❖ **Adding New Clichés:** There may come a time when a character has grown and matured enough to justify adding an entirely *new* Cliché to his character sheet. If the player and GM *agree* this is the case, *and* agree on what the new Cliché is, the player rolls for advancement as usual, but new dice earned for that adventure may be put toward the new Cliché instead of the ones that earned them. This can also be applied to “in-game” improvements, if the situation warrants it!
- ❖ **Long-Haul Variant:** Instead of rolling against *every* challenged Cliché, roll against a *single* Cliché of your choice.

Credit Where It's Due

Risus grew from inspirations provided by the sadly out-of-print classic, **Ghostbusters** (1st Edition, West End Games), sparked against an idea from Mayfair's **DC Heroes**. Other noteworthy influences have included **GURPS**, **TWERPS**, **Fudge**, **Tunnels & Trolls**, **Over the Edge**, and **DragonQuest**. The list of *people* on whom **Risus** depends is too long to even contemplate in a space so tiny, but I'd be remiss if I didn't mention a few of them: Guy Hoyle, Spike Y. Jones, Dan “Moose” Jasman, Frank J. Perricone, Jason Puckett, David Pulver, Sean “Dr. Kromm” Punch, Liz Rich, Dan Suptic, Brent Wolke, René Vernon, and the thousands of cool gamers, old and new, who've populated and enlivened the **Risus** community.

Risus: The Anything RPG is S. John Ross' trademark for his Anything RPG. This is **Risus** Version 2.a, Copyright ©1993-2013 by S. John Ross, All Rights Reserved. Permission granted to make unlimited copies for private, non-commercial use, and remember: *There's No Wrong Way To Play!*



CUMBERLAND
Games & Diversions
Creativity, Unbound (Most of The Time, Seriously)