What follows are two hypothetical scenarios, testing [these rules right here](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1ID4MBs2dM9Kbmo4d_8qCm9JdVmk0u0YBweOLUVdrqFE). The characters are roughly based on the PCs in my home Stonetop game, and I’m trying to imagine what the actual players would do. This is not an actual play… this is me thinking through how these moves would (or should) work in conjunction with the rest of the Stonetop and DW moves. I did actually roll for each of the moves, and used the PCs stats as much I could. (Note that the characters are all 2nd-4th level, so they’ve got some moves that starting PCs might not.)

Apologies to anyone reading this… these are my personal notes. I haven’t edited them, and there’s probably a LOT of assumed knowledge, backstory, and assumptions that I’m making.

# A Short Journey

So, let's say the PCs decide to go kill the bears in their den. It's the middle of winter and the town is short on food. They **chart a course** for the bear's cave, following the cliff-face south until they find it. I tell them that:

* You need to bring *warm clothes*, or suffer the consequences
* You need to watch out for *crinwin or other dangers of the Wood*
* You risk drawing the attention of *the bears*
* It'll take at least a half-day to get there, and another half-day to get back

And ask them "what do you do?"

They Outfit, and they're sure to pick *warm* gear all around. Good on them. They head out!

I describe the Great Wood at winter: the deathly stillness, the shocking contrast of white snow against the dark grey and brown and red of the trees, the crunch of snow underfoot, the steaming breathe. We've established already that the scent of lilac is said to keep the crinwin at bay, and that they raided the town's granary the fall before last. But there are other things I haven't asked… I ask them now!

Seeker: what do the crinwin seem to covet more than anything? *Good tools of iron or steel*.

Ranger: what's the surest sign that they've been nearby recently? *A broken tool or other worn-out work of humanity, discarded for whatever reason, tossed down from the trees.*

Okay, cool! I ask them how they're travelling: all together, or with someone scouting ahead, or what? The ranger sends her (*cunning, stealthy*)cougar to scout ahead. She's **doing her thing**, and there's a definite chance that something could go wrong. The cougar rolls +Quality. 11! Nice.

After they're an hour or so out of town, the cougar slinks back to the party. She seems agitated, and is carrying something in her mouth. It's a pitted, rusted-through spade with a broken shaft--exactly the kind of thing crinwin sometimes toss aside! The ranger (who has Wild Speech) is able to get some info from the cougar. We actually do this as a retro-active Discern Realities (since *a cunning* follower can roll +Quality to DR on your behalf). An 8, and the ranger asks *what should I be on the lookout for?* The cougar gruffly says that she didn't see any crinwin about, but she smelled them, not right there but nearby. If they want to keep going that way, they'll need to sneak through or they'll certainly be dealing with crinwin. Or they could circle around, cutting deeper into the Wood--which would take longer and pose its own risks.

The PCs discuss their options. They could probably sneak through, yeah. But if they take care of the bears, they'll have to come back this way. So maybe they need to deal with the crinwin now? Maybe set a trap for them? Someone else suggests that they sneak through, deal with the bears, and then scale the bluff and return to Stonetop from the top of the bluff.

"Is that an option?" the ranger asks. "Do I know about the terrain near the bear cave well enough to know if there's a way up from around there?" I dunno, do you? Sounds like you're Spouting some Lore. Gets a 7, so something interesting. I say that she probably hasn't spent much time around there, but she recalls the cliff face being pretty sheer in that area. A skilled climber could probably get up there, but there's not like a path or anything. And if you all *did* get up there, you'd end up trudging through waist-deep snow all the way back to Stonetop. What do you do? (I'm using this answer to **tell the consequences and ask**.)

They decide to try to sneak past the crinwin, but go in with weapons ready. I ask them how they're doing it. "What's that look how? Are you all together, or spread out, or what?"

They have the cougar scout ahead again. The ranger leads the rest of the party: seeker, blessed, and heavy taking up the rear with his crossbow drawn. They're spaced out, maybe ten or fifteen feet apart, following the ranger's steps so that they don't make any noise. The ranger says "I'm looking for the path with the firmest, quietest ground. There's no point in trying to hide… they could spot us from too many directions. Our only chance is to move quietly and hope no one's looking."

This sounds like Teamwork to me! I think everyone's rolling +DEX, because they're moving with precision. "Does the cougar need to roll?" If she's scouting ahead, I think not. She's *a* stealthy cougar… not something the crinwin would typically mess with. "We'll actually say that she's aiding you, ranger! Take +1 to your roll."

Here we go!

* Ranger rolls DEX (+2) +1 for the cougar's aid, +1 for following up on Discern Realities: 14!
* Seeker rolls DEX (+0): gets a 4!
* Blessed rolls DEX (+0): gets a 7.
* Heavy rolls DEX (+2): gets 11.

So, the Seeker finds himself in a spot, and tells us how he got there. "My gear isn't stowed right for this sneaky stuff, and my pack gets snared on some brush. There's this distinctively metal CLANK for just a second as it pulls tight, but then I stop. I'm snagged on a branch, a pouch strapped to my pack is like suspended up like so. If I move even a little, it's gonna fall and make a terrible racket."

The heavy and the ranger both got a 10+, so they can fish him out of trouble if they tell us how. "Did anything seem to stir at that clanking noise?" the ranger asks. "Any sign of crinwin?" I'm honestly not sure, so I ask the seeker to roll a die of fate! 5-6: nope, nothing; 3-4: sounds of something in the distance; 1-2: something stirring nearby. A 3! "You all just freeze when you hear that clanking noise. There's this pause, it just draws out, waiting. You realize you're holding your breathe, all of you. And then just as you're about to exhale, you hear a "CLANK" echoing back at you from the distance. And then another one. And another. Definitely crinwin, a ways off, but almost certainly heading towards you. What do you do?"

The ranger still has the rusted, pitted shovel that her cougar brought back, and she hurls it into the woods, back towards the way they came but angled further into the woods. "I'm hoping it'll hit another tree and make a clanking noise on its own!" she says. I consider making her Defy Danger with +DEX or +STR, but this is her "fishing someone else out of a spot" so I just say "Yeah, that totally works. It flies maybe 30 yards into the woods and it must've hit a rock or something, cuz it makes this CLANG that just echoes super loud. You hear mimicking noises like before calling out in reply. You're not 100% sure, but you think it worked and they're heading towards where it landed, what do you do?" She slinks back to the seeker, unhooks his bag from the brush it was caught on, silently, and gives him a dirty look. Then she leads them onward.

Okay! They slip past the crinwin, though the creatures are clearly on alert now and investigating that shovel. Will they notice the PCs trail and follow? I decide no (the PCs succeeded after all), but I make a mental note that they're on alert and might be moving about.

Time passes and they get closer to the bear den, still moving quietly to avoid the crinwin. The next thing they must deal with: they risk drawing the bears' attention.

I tell them that they've been in the woods about three, three-and-a-half hours now. They must be getting close to the den. They'll need to keep a sharp lookout for the den, and be careful to avoid alerting the bears to their presence. How are they approaching? What's the plan?

The ranger says "Wouldn't they be hibernating and asleep in their den? Why do we need to be so careful?" I say "it sounds like you're unleashing your accumulated knowledge on this subject, yeah? Spouting Lore?" Sure, she agrees. Gets a 5! Oh noes! (But, hey… mark XP.)

"Hah! No way, not these bears. They spend a lot of time in their den during the winter, but you know they come out from time to time. And they can be roused pretty easily." (**Reveal an unwelcome truth.**) "In fact, who do you know--or maybe, who *did* you know--who ran afoul of these bears during winter a few years back?" One of the older hunters, she says. Ulwin. He had a catch and ran into them, got mauled, but managed to drag himself back home. Never went back into the woods, though.

So… they know that they need to be cautious, and move quietly. "You need to worry about your scent, too," I tell them. "The wind tends to blow from the east, which means it'll quite possibly be wafting into their den." (more **unwelcome truths**)

The Blessed has a thought: he could use Wards and Bindings to make a magical trap for the bears. They could lure them out and into the trap, and then pick them off with arrows and spears. "How would you lure them out?" The Heavy suggests that they gather up some brush and *smoke* them out. If the wind is blowing into the cave, they can use that to their advantage.

"You'll still need to try to avoid their attention while you set it up," I remind them. "And it's possible that one of them is already out and about. What do you do?"

They decide to have the ranger and her cougar slink ahead and look for signs of the bears being out and about. I call for a Defy Danger with DEX to have her get close, but her cougar can aid. She rolls a 10, so no problem. She slinks forward and find the bear den, maybe 20 minutes away from the rest of the party. She doesn't make any notable noise on the way.

The cave entrance is up a steep rise, maybe 20 feet above where she's at. Smaller, skinnier trees sprout on the slope, but there are bigger, massive old-growth trees down here. The entrance definitely has seen some activity… the snow in front of it is packed down and muddy. (**changing the environment**). "What do you do?"

She stays very still and closely studies her surroundings. Discern Realities, rolls a 9. "Do you want to have your cougar scout around for you, too? And aid? If so, she'll have to roll +Quality." No, the ranger decides. She should stay put.

She wants to know if the bears are in their den, so she asks "what happened here recently?" I haven't decided yet, so I ask her for a die of fate. 4-6: nothing, and that means the bears are likely in their den. 1-3: a bear has left recently but not yet returned, so watch out!

It's a 3! I tell her that she spots tracks of a bear, probably the bull, having left within the last day or so, but no such trail leading back. So there's probably a big old bear roaming around. "Could I follow its tracks?" she asks. Of course (she's got Hunt and Track). But doing so with your companions will be tough… they'll almost certainly make enough noise to draw it's attention if you try to hunt it down. The seeker will, at least. Probably the blessed, too. The heavy could maybe sneak with you.

She opts to send her cougar back to the party, to get the heavy. "Just him," she tells her friend. "The other two should stay put."

The heavy sneaks forward as well, Defying Danger with DEX. Nails it (12). They decide to track this bear down and kill it themselves.

Ranger rolls +WIS to hunt and track. 11, so she asks for a useful piece of info about her quarry. I stop and think, and can't think of anything *about* the bear that'd be both useful and discernable from its tracks. But! Maybe about where it is? Yeah! "The tracks are remarkably direct, no sign of it dawdling or anything. It's heading very purposefully in a particular direction, and you realize that it's come this way often before. The Stream! It's heading to the Stream to hunt those creepy things that sometimes dart around in the water. And as you get nearer, you realize that if it's busted through the ice, the sound of the stream will probably cover your approach. And you're downwind of it, which is great!

"Should we get the others?" the heavy asks. "No," says the ranger. “They might be useful after the fact, but they'll just be liabilities when we're hunting this thing.”

They creep up cautiously (I don't make them Defy Danger, because of the noise of the stream) and I tell them that, yup, there it is, pacing at the edge of the Stream, occasionally pawing at the water. There's a small pile of silvery things near the edge. Those creatures, you realize. It's collecting a bunch of them to take home! It doesn't seem to have noticed you. (**Offer an opportunity**.) What do you do?

The ranger and the heavy split up. The ranger moves in a little closer, and the heavy holds back a bit. He draws his longsword and leans it up against a tree in easy reach. The ranger has her cougar slink off and get ready to flank the bear once it’s distracted. It should spring, do some damage, and then bolt.

The heavy goes first, drawing a bead with his crossbow. Volley! BAM! 13! He rolls his damage, for 8! SHUNK right in the thing's flank, deep in there! It rears and bellows, wheeling in your general direction and looking for what just hurt it. *(It's got 16 HP and 1 armor, so it's down to 9 HP.)*

"I shoot it!" says the ranger. (Who does *not* have Call the Shot.) Volley! 7. She opts to expend 1 ammo of her steel-tipped arrows, taking a few shots. Rolls her damage, gets an 8 with 1 piercing! A number of arrows go flying, and SHUNK SHUNK a few of them sink into it. It's howling, frothing with rage now, and charges towards the ranger, holy shit it's fast, it's gonna be on you in a moment, what do you do? (**monster move: move with surprising speed and grace**).

The ranger says that she turns and runs, but her cougar pounces on the thing. I ask her to Defy Danger with DEX to escape it, really playing on that surprising speed bit. We'll have the cougar do its thing after that. She rolls a 12, so she books it the fuck out of there! Her cougar pounces, rolling +Quality for a 7. Whoo boy. The cougar comes in and does 4 damage, which is enough to bring the bear down. But the bear gets to swing back, lashing out in its death throes (**rend, maul, crush**) with d10+3 *messy, forceful* damage. WHOO, rolls a 1! So the cougar just takes 4 damage and gets a nasty gash down her side, getting tossed away and landing in a bloody heap.

The bear is down, but the ranger is worried about her companion. She rushes up to it and tries to calm it, applying bandages from her pack. I tell her the wounds are bleeding pretty badly, and she'll need to expend 1 use just to stop them, and another to heal any HP. And the cougar's Loyalty is reduced by 1, not because she's mad but because she's bruised and in pain. (**use up their resources)** The ranger bandages her up good. Mummy cougar!

Okay, 1 bear down! I switch the spotlight back to the Blessed and the Seeker.

They've been left together in the Wood, alone, for some time now. It was about half an hour since the ranger first snuck out on her own, and what seems like another half hour since the heavy went off to join her. I opt to ask some questions.

"The cold wasn't so bad when you were moving, but just standing here in the cold… jeepers it’s cold. What are you doing to stay warm?"

They agree that they're standing near each other, not quite huddling together but certainly hunched in their cloaks and furs. "The wind has been picking up," I say. "You both start shivering all over, and your hands and feet are going a bit numb." (**signs of an approaching threat**)

The seeker (who carries the Azure Hand) starts thinking about ways he could gather the elemental force of the wind around the Hand. Before the seeker can act on this potentially disastrous course of action, the blessed asks if there's any place they can shelter, like the hollow of a tree or anything like that. I figure there might be, but I'll leave it up to the dice. "Nothing's obviously apparent. Do you want to look around a bit and Discern Realities?" Yes! He rolls it and gets a 6. Uh-oh! The seeker asks if he can help, by using his ability to sense the flow of energy through the Hand. Sure, I say! Aid with INT (exploiting a pertinent detail). He gets an 11, so no problem! That pops the blessed up to a 7, so he gets to ask *what here is useful or valuable to me*.

I tell them that a little ways inwards into the wood, there's a huge tree with mighty roots forming a sort of lean-to. The seeker can sense how the wind is just flowing right over it, and the pocket under it is still and largely free of snow. They quietly make their way to it and huddle together. The seeker breaks out a flask of fine whisky and they share a draught.

Now is a good time for more questions! I ask what they talk about, huddled there, if anything. I ask the blessed what he thinks about the seeker, and his propensity for meddling with ancient secrets and the elemental forces. I ask the seeker (cold, shivering, huddling under a root) what he misses most about "civilized" life down south. I ask the blessed who he lost to the Wood. I ask the them both: of all the stories of Wood, which ones scare you the most?

After a while, I decide to both **introduce a new type of creature** and  **give an opportunity fitting a class's abilities**. I tell the blessed that he hears a shift in the wind, from the usual blowing and howling to an almost childlike giggling. And a gust of snow blows over the roots, but it's more a whirlwind than a drift, spinning and almost dancing about the woods in front of them.

"What spirits are present and active here?" asks the blessed. I tell him it's a playful wind spirit, an andalau. "What do I know about them?" he asks. Spout Lore? Sure! He gets a 9, something interesting. I tell him that they're air elementals, fickle and restless and easily bored, and that they often travel in flocks. Or maybe not flocks… maybe they just split themselves and merge with each other, so freely that they seem like flocks, and it's hard to say where one such spirit ends and another begins, or even what "one" such spirit is. "Do you tell the seeker about any of this?" I ask. He does! He nudges the seeker and points out the zephyr, "andalau," he says.

The seeker asks what he knows about these things (spirits of the wild don't fall in his Steeped in Lore). I tell him he can Aid the blessed's roll if he'd like, rolling +INT. Nails it! I tell him that he's heard of sorcerers using andalau as servants and messengers. They can be tempted into short service by giving them something interesting and unusual to play with, or bound into service by capturing them in some sort of vessel, bullying them into revealing their true name, and then using that to compel them. The true name keeps them from losing themselves in other such spirits, but this (and their generally flighty nature) makes them resentful and surly servants.

The andalau (or maybe the pack of them) continues to frolic nearby, but it’s drifting further away. What do you do?

The blessed decides to talk to them. They might be useful or helpful in the immediate future, either with the bears or getting back past the crinwin. I ask how he tries to get their attention, reminding him that they're supposed to be staying quiet. "I whistle," he says. "Low and long, like a wind over a bottle." Works for me!

The andalau shift their course and head back that way. This leads us into an interesting scene where the andalau are talking to the blessed. They refuse to speak to him while he hides in such a sheltered spot, so he steps out and lets them wash around him. It's super cold but super exhilarating! He asks what news they bear from deeper in the Wood, and they tell him of fine powdery snow high in the canopy of evergreens, smelling of pine and juniper. And of a great rumbling storm forming many days behind them. They ask why the blessed does not join them in their play and come run to the north and see the mountains! The blessed declines, but asks them if they might stay here and play with him for a while, perhaps do him a favor. Why would they do such a thing, no, fly, fly with us, they say. I tell him that he'll need to tempt them something special to play with. They won't do it just because.

<Okay, so I'm quite happy with how this is playing out. I need something bigger, longer-term.>

# A Long Journey

Spring comes, and the PCs decide that they need to go to Three-Coven Lake and seek out the Vault of Azm Qadir. Why? Let's say that the Seeker believes it holds the secrets to a powerful spell of preservation, which could make the granary much more useful and have a whole bunch of other uses.

They **Chart a Course**, and I tell them:

* You must first travel to *the northern edge of the Steplands via the Highway*, and from there to your destination
	+ It'll take at least 4 days
	+ You'll need to watch out for the *nosgolau*
* You need a knowledgeable guide
* The way is perilous, plagued with dangers
* You risk getting lost
* The way will be hard and grueling; you risk exhausting yourselves or your resources
* You risk drawing the attention of *the Hillfolk, who don't think you should go there*
* It'll take at least 3 days (from the edge of the Steplands)

The first order of business is to find a guide. "Does anyone know the way to Three-Coven Lake?" they ask each other.

The seeker and the heavy are both from down south, but neither has cause to have been there. The ranger isn't very widely travelled; she hunts the Great Wood and knows the Flats, but not the Steplands. The blessed is a local kid.

The would-be hero, though, is actually one of the Hillfolk. "So I know the way, right?" she asks.

Not necessarily. The areas around the lakes are sort of "forbidden zones." They're not exactly places people regularly go, and the bands that roam closest to them feel obligated to keep outsiders away. Plus, I don't know that you've actually *been* to that part of the Steplands, right?

Do you want to Spout Lore about it?

She agrees, and gets a 10+, so… yeah. She knows the way. "You definitely know the general area, and how to get near the lake. You also recall that there's this weird, finger-like spire of rock that supposedly juts up from near the lake, and sometimes the tip of it shines like an earthbound star at night. You can see it from most of the high points in Steplands. You keep heading towards that, and you'll eventually get there. But there's still plenty of chance that you'll get lost."

Okay, then! Guide is taken care of. The party starts preparing for the journey. They roll to **Outfit**. Uh-oh. They get a 4. They need trail rations, at least, so they opt for reducing Fortunes by 1 and taking 9 sets of dry porridge (45 uses total, 9 wt). There are 6 of them, and they're looking at 7 days minimum each way. So… shit, that's 42 rations *each way*. They'll need to forage on the way, and/or trade some of their existing gear. Sure enough, one of them has a flask of fine whisky that they trade to locals for another 9 sets of provisions (another 45 rations, 18 wt).

"Shit," they realize. "We've got bring the donkey, don't we?" Probably, yeah. I tell them that the donkey can (generally) graze. I also give them follower stats for the **Donkey: Quality +0 (*donkey-wise*, *hardy*), Quality +0 (*cost: yummy fruits & veggies*), instinct: to freeze up when uncertain, surprised, or frightened.** The donkey is carrying 14 load of rations, leaving the party to carry 13. No problem.

So they start out, heading south on the Highway. It's spring, so I describe the wet brown grasses of the Flats, the cold southerly breeze, the flocks of starlings in the skies and their perpetual chirping from the brush. I know the heavy and the seeker and the fox have all travelled this road before, so I ask some questions…

I know the heavy and the seeker knew each other down south. I ask if they came up here together, or what, and they give each other a shifty look and are like, yeah (they've got some backstory they've cooked up that I haven't got the details on). So I'm like, "Okay, cool. And I know you came up through Marshedge and got run out of town, but tell me about your third companion, and how you came to lose them on the road from Marshedge to Stonetop."

"Oh." They say. And then the seeker goes off on this story about Fenio, who was another southerner and part of the… group… they left to get away from. Fenio was always a bit too curious for his own good, and well, he saw something off the side of the road that got his attention, and he went to look at it, and well, got eaten. "Was this in the Steplands?" I ask, "or closer to Stonetop, on the Flats?" In the Steplands, still. "What was it that he saw? A ruin, a treasure, someone who needed help? What?" It was a rare plant! Like a silver gilliflower. They're known as a cure-all down south, but super rare there. And Fenio just rushed off the start collecting them, and didn't see it coming. "What got him?" I dunno, some kind of bug thing. I'm not sure if it'd been following us or what, but he like turns back to us with a handful of silver flowers and is like "hey guys, look at this!" and then SHUNK, he's skewered through the chest by this bony spike and hauled up the hillside by this weird bug-crab thing.

"That's terrible." Yup.

"Well then," I say. "What do you see on the road, here, that makes you think of him?" Oh, probably just being on the road itself. I share the story with the others, especially the blessed, make sure they know not to step off the road unless it's absolutely necessary.

Okay! I tell them that night passes and I describe the first wayside. We've talked about these before, on the way to Gordin's Delve. Looks like they're the first travelers to come through since winter.

I ask them about their rations. Are they eating provisions to start with, or cooking porridge? "Porridge," says the heavy. "If we're going to try to avoid the Hillfolk, we need to avoid fires. And that means keeping the stuff that doesn't need to be cooked for later." I nod. Smart.

Now there's the question of the nosgolau, the night-lights. On their trip to Gordin's Delve, we established that the seeker was inured to them, and the fox became so ("what's the big deal about these?"), and both the blessed and the would-be hero fended them off but were still susceptible. I ask the ranger if she's ever travelled the roads, and if so, why? "Yeah, she definitely has. She's been around a while. She'd have gone to the neighboring towns at least once or twice." Okay. Has she ever seen the nightlights before? Or are they just stories to her? "No, I don't think she's seen them." What about the heavy? If the seeker's inured to them, he must have encountered them. "Yeah, I think so. And I think he's inured to them, too. What with… what was his name, Fenio? Yeah, with Fenio having gotten killed by stepping off the road, and with the sort of stuff we got into down south, I think I'm pretty much steeled against that sort of thing."

Okay! That's 3 susceptible travelers, so I roll 1d6+3. A 9, so the nosgolau are definitely going to make an appearance. I'm not really sure when, though. I decide it's not the first night.

I ask the would-be hero for a die of fate, to see how this journey goes. She rolls a 4, so pretty average, on the good side. I tell them that the next couple days are bright and cheerful, sunny, with a cold wind but otherwise perfect weather. They get close to Titan Bones and I describe it (some of the characters have seen it, but not the players): a jagged hill popping out of the Flats, slowly slowly getting bigger as they approach. It's nearing sunset when they get there, and they see the half-excavated, giant-sized skeleton in the fading light. Also, the rough path leading up the side of the hill, splitting to go up to the bones and the other way to go around the back, eventually winding up to the top of the hill.

I ask if any of them who've come this way before (seeker, heavy, fox, ranger, would-be hero) stopped to investigate the bones. Seeker and heavy say no way, not after what happened to Fenio. Ranger says she knows better than that. Would-be hero says "no, the bones were taboo to her people." The fox, though, hell's yes he checked them out. And we've already established that he's prone to… *seeing things*. So I tell him that when he was poking around, he heard a whispering voice that seemed to know him, speak to him, and it told him something terrible and true about his future. "What did it tell you?"

The fox's player demures (as he's wont to do), but I press him. Eventually he reveals that it told him he'd one day be left crippled and lame, basically helpless and unable to speak, left to the mercy of others. Oh, interesting! I ask a couple follow ups about how that affects him and the way he lives his life. He mostly tries not to think about it. I point out that being here, seeing the skull that whispered to him… it's pretty much impossible *not* to think about it. "When you're left broken and lame and mute," I ask him, "who do you think will care for you?" (I can do some more stuff here, like telling the other PCs that they notice the fox staring up at the bones, and asking them if they do or say anything about.)

The sun's getting low, and I ask if anyone wants to go up the hill and investigate the bones more closely. The blessed is tempted (being able to call up the spirits of a place, yo) but he waits until morning.

I decide that tonight is a good night for the nosgolau to appear. I roll a die and pick the ranger, she's on watch when they come. I describe the night getting cold quickly after sunset, but with the recent rains a fog forms about them. It's that thick sort of fog that makes sounds flat and travel far and seem to come from everywhere at once, that makes it so you can barely see more than a few paces in front of you. After a little bit, she thinks she hears the sounds of travelers coming up the road from the south, and sees what she thinks must be their lantern lights. "Roll +WIS," I tell her. 10! "Sort of with a start, you realize that the lights aren't coming from the direction of the road. They're off in the flats. This is some sort of trick! At the same time, though, you realize your cougar is slinking forward, tail flicking and butt wiggling, like she's going to pounce after them. What do you do?" She whistles and shouts for the cougar to come to her. The cougar has an instinct to *make mischief*, and chasing some lights in the dark seems right up there to me, so I think she's Ordering Followers. Rolls +Loyalty, and nails it. The cougar's ears, jerk back and she darts back around the ranger, rubbing against her put tail still flitting and eyes locked on the lights."

"I wake the others," says the ranger.

Before she starts, I ask the would-be hero, the fox, and the blessed to all roll +WIS. Uh, the hero gets a 6! The fox gets an 8. The blessed gets, oh shit, a 4! I tell the hero and the blessed to mark XP, and I'll get back to them in a sec.

I start with the fox. I tell him he wakes, surrounded in fog, and hears an all-too-familiar voice calling his name, the voice of the skull he heard so long ago. It's calling to him, calling, whispering that he has something to tell him, some way to avoid his fate, come, come see. "Do you go?" I ask the fox. "I'll give you an XP if you do." Hell yes! He slips out of camp silently and follows the voice. No one even notices him leave!

I switch to the would-be hero, and tell her that she comes to, not really knowing where she is. Everything's kind of blurry, but she sees someone holding a light a ways off, calling her name. It's someone she trusts, I tell her, and someone she hasn't seen in a long time, someone she misses. Who? "Oh, one of the kids from Gordin's Delve, one of the ones I tried to save." Yeah, her. You find yourself up and walking towards her. Her calling is getting more and more pleading, more desperate.

Next I tell the blessed that he starts to dream, the kind of spirit-dream he's had before when the spirits revealed things to him. He's in the Wood, and it's foggy and dark, but he senses a presence in the distance, and sees a witch-light dark between trees, whispering his name. He keeps seeing movement in the trees, and hearing his voice coming from the lights, and it sounds so, so familiar. And then he gets a glimpse of a face above the witchlights, pale and handsome and beautiful and fierce, with small antlers, and bright eyes that make him think of looking into a mirror. Could this be your father? You find yourself grasping forward into the wood, following this figure.

"What spirits are active and present here?" the blessed asks.

"Hold on, I'm not done. Ranger, you get the seeker and the heavy roused, but as you do you realize that both the others aren't in their spots! Just at the edge of the fog, you see a couple silhouettes walking slowly into the fog, away from the camp. What do you do?"

She tells her cougar to tackle the one on the left, the blessed, and she tells the heavy and seeker to grab the other (the would-be hero). Then she looks around for the fox, trying to see where he is or where he went. It's not immediately obvious, so I ask her if she's discerning realities, and if so, how. "Can I use Hunt and Track?" Not yet… it's dark, and foggy, and he slipped away from his bedroll, which was on the road-stones, and they sort of by definition don't get dirty… so there's nothing to track. You'd have to find where he left, and have a light, and maybe you could find tracks there… but none of that's apparent. What do you? "I dunno… I guess I go look for a light." There's a campfire, you could light a torch or a lantern there. She does that.

Meanwhile, I say that, yeah, the cougar is able to tackle the blessed and the guys are able to grab the would-be hero and start pulling her back, calling her name, etc. I tell the would-be hero that as she starts to move towards the child, the one who's calling her, someone grabs her by each arm and starts dragging her back. The child's voice gets more urgent and desperate, more afraid, more pleading. But she also hears other voices calling your name, much closer and somehow more *real*, and she starts to wonder if maybe she's dreaming or something. She remembers that she has Iron Will! She takes 4 damage and snaps out of the mind control!

The blessed, though, I tell him that as he's thinking about the witchlight and the face ahead of, before he can really do anything about it, something leaps on him from behind, oh shit, you think it's one of those giant spiders! What do you do? He tries to knock it off and roll free, and I tell him he's Defying Danger with STR. OF COURSE he rolls a 10 (even with his -1), and manages to toss the cougar off and scramble away from it. I tell him he sees it there, crouched, about to attack any moment, and he realizes he has his hatchet in hand, and hears that oh-so-familiar voice urging him to come, to run, to run to safety. What do you?

He asks if he can shake out of it, or tell what's really going on. I say that as far as he can tell, this *is* what's going on (he biffed the nosgolau roll, they're in his head, yo). What's he do? "I'll slowly put a hand in my sacred pouch, and then toss it into the air and use Danu's Wrath on the spider!" (That's clever… the player might be metagaming this, but it's what the blessed probably would do… we've established that these spiders are perversions of nature, and it's his best move against them… and the player knows that the cougar won't be affected, so… solid.)

I tell him not to roll just yet. I tell the seeker, heavy, and would-be hero that the hero just snapped out of it. "What's that look like, using Iron Will? You *did* take 4 damage." She says that it comes out like a boiling scream, righteous anger at her mind having been invaded like that. "Does that trigger Anger is a Gift?" Oh, yeah, totes! Her anger is triggered by bullying, slavery, and oppression, so that totally fits. She holds 2 Rage.

So I tell them that the would-be hero does that, and wrests free, but sure seems to have her wits about her again. And I tell them all that there's a scuffle to their left, and they see the cougar squaring off the with blessed, the blessed stepping back towards the edge of the wayside with a hatchet in his hand and another hand going towards that pouch of his. What do you all do?

The hero jumps in. "I spend 1 Rage to act suddenly, and tackle the blessed from behind, catching him off-guard!" Sweet, I say that works! I tell the blessed, though, that as he's about to cast his spell, another of the damn things pounces on him behind. It's trying to get at you, and you can't get your spell off, but you do have that hatchet handy, what do you do?

"I'll take a swing at it, I guess. Hack and slash?" Yup. Hero, you see that coming, you gonna let him do it? No, she Interferes. How? "I'll just grab on tight, and weather the blows, not really fighting back but not letting up no matter what happens." Cool, I'll buy that as a roll +CON. The blessed rolls a 7, the would-be hero gets an 8, so I tell that she'll also need to get rough with him and slap him around a bit to prevent his attack. "Nope! I'll take this opportunity to hit my Sacrifice drive!" I have the blessed roll damage (4), and ask the would-be hero what her "attack" looks like. "I'll grab the hatchet out of his hand and toss it aside! But I guess I get a gash from it." Yup. Now what do you do? You've got him disarmed, and you're still wrestling with him a bit, but he's still squirming like there's a giant spider on him!

The hero spends her last Rage to inspire the blessed to follower her lead. Huh, what's that look like? "I start yelling his name, telling him that they're in his mind, and he's got to snap out of it, please, snap out of it. I think I might be crying as I do it. He means a lot to me." Sweet! Yeah, that works for me. I tell the blessed that he hears this impassioned pleading, and the Woods flit out and for a moment he thinks he's lying on stones in the fog, with his friend on top of him yelling for him to snap out of it, but then WAM that's gone and he's back in the Wood wrestling with one of those spiders, and it seems so real, but there's that thread of doubt in his mind, what does he do?

"I focus on that image of my friend, and try to pick her voice out again, and I just visualize that and keep my mind focused on it." Cool, Defy Danger with WIS. 12! BAM! It works, and he shakes off the illusion and finds the would-be hero crying on top of him, pleading with him to come to his senses. They hug. It's touching.

Meanwhile, where did the fox go? Interesting… I now need to decide some stuff about the nosgolau, because one the PCs (the most insightful of them, really) is now going to come face to face with them. I look at the almanac, and see:



I'm vacillating between the first two, but I decide to go with the second one. These are BAD THINGs, and they *hunger*. I tell the fox that he finds himself halfway up the hill to the giant bones, and keeps hearing the thing's voice whispering to him. The mist has been clearing in front of him and he sees , vaguely, in the distance some dull glow. He hears some shouting, but its indistinct and doesn't seem very relevant to him. The bones are just ahead, promising to tell him how to escape his fate. What do you do?

(I'm giving him a little more agency here because he *chose* to come out here. I'm still messing with his perceptions, and he's already in deep trouble, so I'm just seeing how it plays out.)

He uses Eye for Danger and asks "Is there an ambush or trap here?" and I grin and say "oh, oh yes." He rolls +INT, but (awesome) gets a 6. "Don't mark XP, but nothing bad happens just yet." I smirk and ask "what do you do?"

He stops and cocks his head, looking up the path and listening to everything *but* the whispering voice from the bones, trying to focus on what's actually going on. Discerning realities, rolling +INT (because he's the Natural), for a 12, and asking 4 questions (because he's got Perceptive). Here we go…

* *What here isn't what it seems?* Yeah, this is clearly something messing with your head. That thing whispering in your mind isn't really the old bones… this is almost certainly something using your own memories against you.
* *What should I be on the lookout for?* You vaguely sense something ahead, something hungry and hateful. But you also sense something behind, a presence, and you turn and see someone coming up the trail behind you. It's the first person you ever murdered. Who was that? A bully from Marshedge, you say? What was his name? Crevan? How'd you kill him? (we keep going this way for a while, me trying to unnerve him). Well, he's striding up the path towards you, still bleeding from where you gutted him, this horrible grin on his face. And there are others behind him… that urchin who got caught and hung when you got away, the kid whose older brother you killed in the streets, the boney face of the thing from the Barrow Mounds, a chittering horde of mice… they're all coming up the path towards, palpable with hate, herding you up the path. "Are they, like, actual threats? Or just illusions?" Oh, they're very real. Plunging into that crowd would be suicide.
* *Um… what here is useful or valuable to me?* The Road. Too bad it's down the path, like down 30 feet of rocky, sheer drop.
* *What can I see that no one else can?* You get a glimpse of the reality behind these things! Just a flicker, really, but their forms give way from the horrors of your past to these hazy lights, only semi-there and vaguely human-shaped, with gaping maws in reality amidst the middle of the lights, with teeth and drool and long, flickering tongues.

And quick as you saw it, it's gone, and they're getting closer and you're getting closer to the bones and that hungering light and terrible presence up there. What do you do?

"I jump off the cliff." What? "Not like a swan dive. But I've gotta get out of here, and I like my chances tumbling down the cliff way better than I like my chances up here."

Okay. You're going to take d10 damage, and you'll be Defying Danger with CON to tough out the fall, the danger being that you break something important and debilitating. You sure? Yup. I'm trying to get away and back to the Road, so I get +1 forward from Discern Realities, right? Definitely! BUT DON'T ROLL JUST YET!

Ranger, you've got a torch lit and you're looking around the edge for the fox's tracks, when you hear a scrabbling sound, and some very fox-like grunts as he tumbles down the rocky hill. As you look up into the fog, you also see a bunch of lights floating out there in the mists, and you think you hear this howl of disappointed rage. They start moving down the hill, towards where you think the fox must be tumbling down the sheer rockface, and they're moving pretty quickly. If he hit his head, or twisted something, or just lost his breath, they might get to him before he can make it to the Wayside. What do you do? "I'm carrying a torch, right? I'll rush towards where he's landing and go help him." Sweet!

Okay, fox… time to roll. How'd you take that fall? He rolls boxcars! That's a 14, but he rolls 8 damage. (Of course he does… it's a running gag in this game that the fox only ever takes damage from falling.) I tell him that there's that gut-wrenching feeling of falling, and then wam-wam-wam, roll, spin, the world keeps tumbling and jarring and scraping, and then WUMP, you stop, in a clump, everything's spinning and you ache like hell and there's a light charging towards you, yelling your name. What do you do? "Am I all in one piece? Nothing broken?" Not that you can tell. Just a bunch of scrapes and bruises. You got really lucky. "Can I tell that it's the ranger coming towards me?" If you take a moment to think about it, sure. "Yeah, I'll shake my head and step towards her, tell her I'm okay."

I tell the ranger that she sees the fox stepping out of the fog, bloodied and a mess but infuriatingly okay and telling her to calm down, but over his shoulder she sees a half-dozen figures scrambling down the rockface face-first, children and townfolk it seems, but horrific and dead and hideously ugly, and they look like they're about to pounce! What do you do? She grabs the fox by the arm and they run for it!

I invoke Struggle as Way, so they each roll +DEX to get away. The fox gets a 9, and the ranger gets a 13, so BAM, they get away clear! They make it to the Wayside with the horrors yapping at the heels. They fall back as the PCs cross onto the paving stones.

The other PCs have to come to the edge of the wayside to see if they can help. They don't need to, but the blessed and the seeker both a get a glimpse of these things. The blessed finally gets to ask "what spirits are present and active here?" and I'm like "There are a like a half-dozen hungry, hateful things out there in the mist, and more on the other side of the road, and something big and awful and terrible up the hill by the bones themselves. There's something familiar about them, too… from that vision you had when you first got your powers, that vision of the burrowing things encased in glass. This is them, you think… or the same type of thing, reaching out from their glassy tombs.." Well, damn. He says something to that effect out loud… "these are the burrowing horrors, the things encased beneath the Flats."

The seeker, then uses Steeped in Lore (*the Things Below*) to ask "How can we protect ourselves from these things in the future?" I think about it, and I decide that they don't need to. "You've all resisted their call, now. The three of you who were affected by it managed to see through it, and now that you have, they've no more hold over you. They might try to unnerve you, but as long as you keep to the Highway at night, they can't harm you. And they'll be gone in the daylight.

The blessed is a little weirded out, though. His vision implied something new, something changing. "Are the nosgolau a new thing?" he asks. "Or have they always been around?" I tell them there've long been stories about the nosgolau, his grandma and all the oldtimers told stories about them. But it sounds like you're consulting your accumulated knowledge, here? Sure, he says, I'll Spout Lore. Eek. A 6! (Mark XP.)

Unwelcome truth time. "Well, the stories are just stories, right. Someone goes wandering off from the roads at night and never comes back. Usually, the stories were just that people saw lights and maybe heard their names being called. But it was always stories about 'back in the day' where someone chased after them and never came back."

"This, though… this felt… different. Like, yeah, it was drawing you out there. But it wasn't just your name, right? It was full-on hallucinations. The only reason you *didn't* wander out there was that your friends were here to hold you back. And the fox only got out of there because, well, he's slippery as hell. And how often do smaller groups come through? So… either it's rare for travelers to see these things, or it’s way *more* common for people to see these things. And if they were pretty common, then you'd expect that the number of travelers on the Highway would be less. But it *hasn't* been less, right? Not noticeably so. And that gets you thinking… these things, they seemed… hungry. But also, more than that. Like… *yearning*. Anxious. That big thing up on the hill, especially, you sensed that it wanted *out*. *Freedom*. What it makes you think is… what if these things get people more often, and they don't make them *disappear*. What if they *fill them*, take them over. And maybe that happens when they're travelling with groups, and no one notices, because they just come back to camp and there you go… Bob's still here, no problem. Except it's not really Bob anymore. It's this thing, wearing a Bob suit. You already know they can get inside your brains, use your memories against you. It's this cold, dead feeling, as you realize that anyone who travels the Flats could be one of these things, possessed or even just an empty shell for one of these horrors."

"Well, shit." They don't get much sleep for the rest of the night.

The next morning, I ask if they want to investigate Titan Bones at all. "Hell no," they say. They keep going.

The next couple days pass uneventfully. The weather holds, and despite a couple uneasy nights, they make it to the northern edge of the Steplands. I describe the misty hills rising ahead of them as they get closer. I have them mark off 3 more days' worth of porridge (they're down 24 uses total, with 21 uses of porridge remaining and 45 uses of provisions). Both the fox and the would-be hero get enough rest over the next few nights that they regain their HP.

Which brings us to a decision point: the party could stick to the Highway for about 2 days and then head into the Steplands to reach the lake. Doing so would help them avoid the dangers of the Steplands and make the journey less grueling, but they're much more likely to cross paths with the Hillfolk. In fact, there's almost no chance that you *won't* draw their attention. Some of them, at least.

Alternately, you could strike off into the hills sooner than that, and maybe avoid the Hillfolk's notice, but you'd risk getting much more lost, and it'd be a much more grueling trail, with more time potentially getting in trouble with the beasties that live there.

*(I'm not thinking that this'll change the number of rolls. I'm thinking it'll change the consequences. There's still a chance of getting lost either way, but if they get lost with 3 days to go, it'll be a lot bigger of a deal… they'll need to find their way somewhere known, and then they'll have to try to navigate to the lake again. The tax on their resources will be significant… three days of hiking through the hills will make them extra hungry, or inflict debilities, and that's WITH good rolls. A day of that might simply require a good roll or two to alleviate.)*

They decide that the Hillfolk are actually the *least* of their worries. They can claim that they're heading towards Marshedge if they're confronted, and then sneak off the road when they're not being watched. Though the would-be hero (who was once a slaver among the hillfolk, and has lots of enemies and hostile family as a result) is less than certain about that. I smile to myself at that.

I also figure, it's spring, right? There's a decent chance that they'll pass someone coming from Marshedge towards Stonetop or Gordin's Delve. I decide that the party of travelers left Marshedge 1 day after the party did. Party's been traveling 4 days, and the other party has made 3 days of travel. The two towns are 10 days apart, so if the PCs keep to the Highway, they'll cross paths in another 3 days. But that's unlikely, because they'll need to leave the Highway sooner than that to get to Three-Coven Lake.

OKAY! First leg of the journey is done. They're at the northern edge of the Steplands. I show them some pictures, let them know what they're heading into: rugged hills of granite and limestone, covered in patchy, thin soil with grass or brush, plenty of bare stone. It's still morning as they head into them, and the low areas are dense with fog. The Highway is cut mostly into the sides of slopes, slanted slightly downhill to allow for runoff, with no curbstones on that end. Thick wood and brush tend to grow at the bottom of valleys, sometimes around thin streams of runoff. They also spot numerous caves, some that even seem to have been intentionally carved out.

Okay, since they're on the road for a couple more days, the first thing they'll need to worry about is drawing the attention of the Hillfolk. I consider asking for a Die of Fate, but I'm pretty sure that they'll notice the travelers. The question is: will they care? Given that they've got the would-be hero with them, I think they will.

A little backstory, dear reader: the would-be hero established that her backstory that she used to be a slaver, a "pledged drover of Aratis," and that it's pretty common for the Hillfolk to raid each other and take slaves. It's how they establish dominance, and that hierarchy is (according to them) Aratis's divine order. We've never really figured whether they keep any slaves, but we know they sell some to slave-hungry Southerners. It's also not clear whether all the bands do slave-taking, or just some, or what. The would-be hero left that life years back, tried to get away from it in Gordin's Delve, and is now driven to make amends and stand against slavery and oppression. What could possibly go wrong here?

So, first… I think it's time to ask the would-be hero some questions, do a little world-building. I describe what I know: I figured out once that there are about 2000 (!) Hillfolk (including kids and elders), divided up over a few dozen bands of 40-50 (a little less than half of them combatants). The bands are affiliated into 4 or 5 tribes.

"So, do all of the tribes and all the bands get into the slave-taking thing? Or are some set apart to do that? Or what?" Oh, yeah… they all do it. But not all the bands do. Each tribe has a band of "pledged drovers" taken from all the other bands. They're supposed to be the toughest, the baddest, and all they do is slave-taking and wrangling. "So it's not familial after all?" Not officially, but there are, like… *lineages*, right? The would-be hero comes from an established line. Her dad was the big drover for the tribe. That's how she got involved. "Men and women both, obviously? Yeah?" Yeah, always unmarried, too. Pledged to the life. "So how did your dad end up with you?" Oh, yeah… you can retire from the life, right? Most of them do, after a few years of droving. And then you're big status. "Ah, so your dad wasn't the head of the drovers while you were doing it. He was like one of those retired, big name sorta guys?" Yeah, definitely.

"Which part of the flats did your tribe generally run in? You said you did a lot of trade with the southerners…" Yeah, she was from the southern part, past Three-Coven Lake. They were generally the biggest drovers. The tribe in the northeast got into it, too, especially recently, as Gordin's Delve has been taking slaves. "How do the other tribes sell their slaves? The fox already told us that there isn't much of a market for it in Marshedge. And Gordin's Delve hasn't always had so much demand…" Oh, they don't sell them, mostly. That's kind of a new thing. Historically, they'd just take slaves from each other, and trade them into labor and shit for their own tribes. The would-be hero postulates that selling to the southerners… that was started by her father. And that's part of what got him wicked rich and powerful.

Okay! Now *that's* interesting. So, now I'm thinking about the Die of Fate, to determine *how bad* the encounter with the Hillfolk is going to be. I'm thinking 1: her old drover band, including at least someone who recognizes her. 2: another tribe's drovers, at least one of which recognizes her. 3-4: a band that she preyed on, including someone who recognizes her. 5: another tribe's drovers, but no one recognizes her. 6: another tribe's normal band, doesn't recognize her. She rolls, and gets a 6! Her lucky day.

I go back to narration. I tell them that their first day of travel through the Steplands goes well enough. But I ask for a Die of Fate roll for weather. A 2! Uh oh. A cold spring rainstorm moves in for the night, and things are just miserable. But otherwise, the night passes uneventfully.

The next morning, I ask for another Die of Fate. Another 2, so the weather stays shitty and cold and raining. I ask them if they press on, or wait it out? Either way will be miserable. They opt to press onward. I ask them who among them has *warm* gear (a cloak, furs & hides, etc.). I think all of them do? Well, not the heavy or the would-be hero, or the seeker. Oof. Well, this is how you learn, I guess. Anyone have any adventuring gear? Produce a blanket or something? Yeah, the would-be hero has a blanket (which isn't quite what you'd want, but better than nothing). The fox produces an oilcloth for the seeker, and the heavy produces an old wool cloak. "From down south?" I ask. "An old legionnaire's cloak?" Yeah, he admits. Pretty recognizable. Hmm.

I tell them that they'll be Struggling as One against the cold and the wet, and the would-be hero is -1 cuz she's just huddled under a blanket. "What if we wait it out instead?"Then it'll be kind of miserable, but you can huddle together for warmth and string up some shelter from the rain. They go for it. I ask for CON rolls around, and they get:

* Would be hero: 6 (after modifier)
* Seeker: 13
* Heavy: 9
* Ranger: 10
* Her Cougar: 9
* Fox: 6
* Blessed: 7
* Donkey: is fine (*hardy*)

The fox and the would-be hero get themselves into a spot. I ask them what that looks like. The would-be hero says that she's just soaked, super cold and miserable, plodding along but shivering visibly. She's gonna catch her death out here! The seeker chuckles heartily and takes off his oilcloth, gives it to the would-be hero. He also strips of his shirt and is like "better than getting chaffed nipples!" (not a big guy, the seeker, but he's tough like dry jerky). The fox *seems* fine, but by the end of the day of travel, he's similarly shaky and sneezing and miserable and getting sick. The ranger, helps him bundle up and stay warm near the fire, and uses up 1 remedies to ward off the cold he's getting.

(*I wasn't planning on the "grueling and exhausting part" coming as they travelled the road, but two 2s in a row for weather make it pretty clear that it's gonna be unpleasant*.)

I tell them that the rains (finally) let up a bit as they make camp, but tell the would-be hero that she hears an all-too familiar clop-clop sound coming from the hillside above them.

More questions! I ask the would-be hero about the tribes and bands in this area, the northern part of the Steplands. How do the tribes "name" themselves? Like, how are they divided up? By location? Some sort of totem?

**<More to come? Maybe? This is really long already, but I’d like to work through “the way is perilous, filled with dangers” and see how that resolves. But there’s quite of bit of fiction between here and there, and I got shit to do!>**