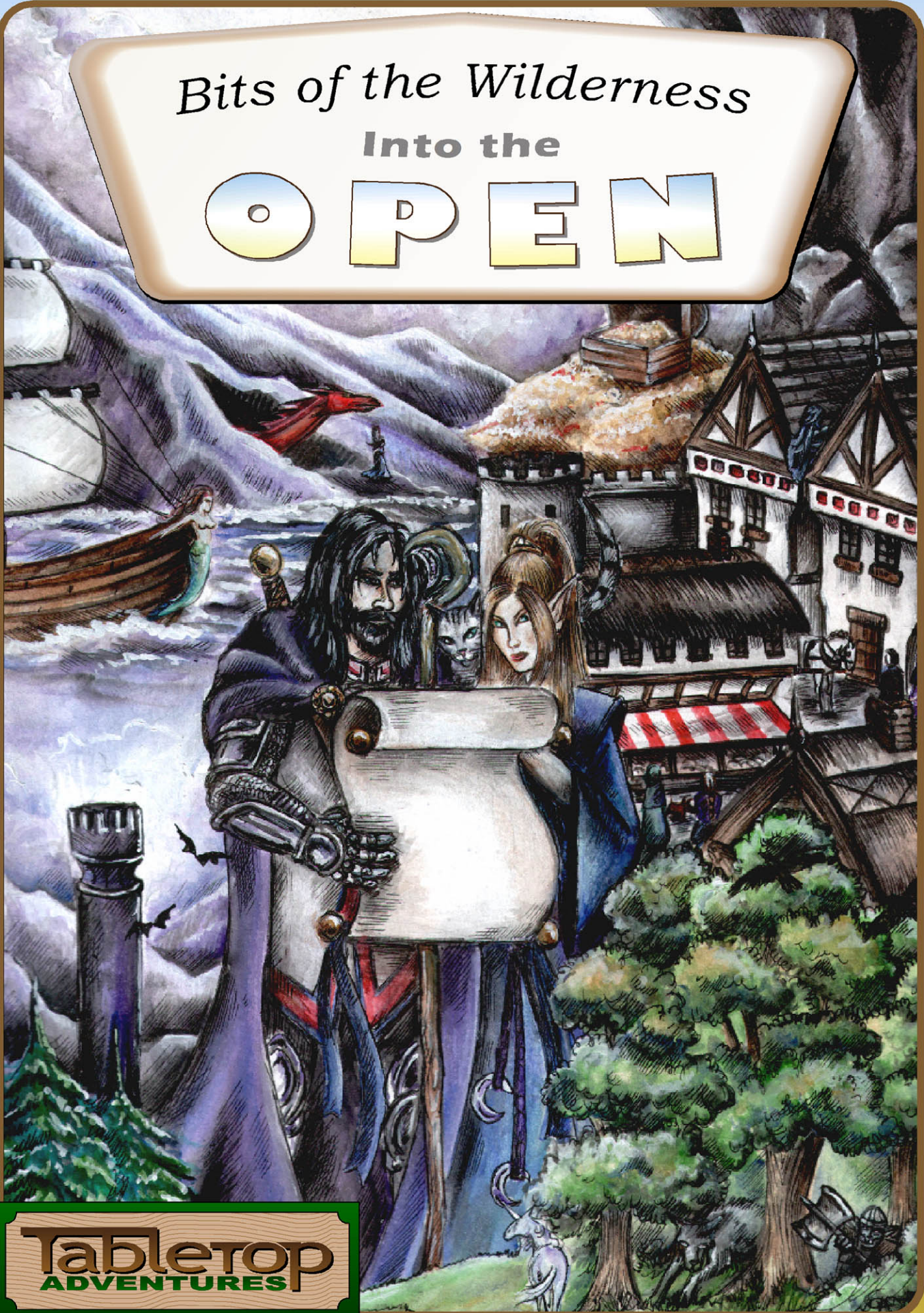


Tabletop Adventures presents

Bits of the Wilderness

Into the

O P E N



Tabletop
ADVENTURES



*Bits of the Wilderness*TM

Into the Open

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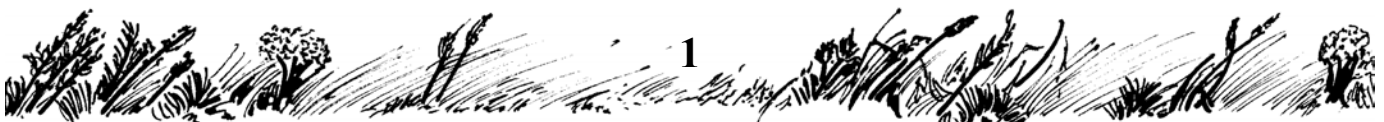
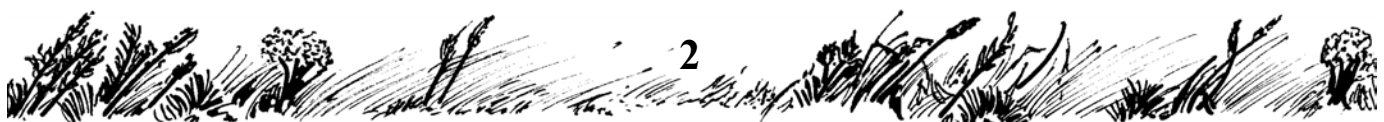




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Introduction

Welcome!

Welcome to “Bits of the Wilderness™: Into the Open,” Tabletop Adventures’ book of, believe it or not, plains descriptions. What is there to describe about a plain, other than lots of grass? We hope to show you that here. With this product you will never again have to say, “Nothing special, just more open terrain.” Now you can make those long trips through the wide open spaces more interesting and memorable for your players. Our writers, with a broad range of writing experience and gaming expertise, have provided pieces giving realistic or fantastic detail above and beyond the stereotypical idea of flat and grassy.

We have taken care to provide descriptions that can be used in virtually any game that takes place in a quasi-European medieval fantasy setting without “clashing” with the feel or setting of your existing campaign. However, in those rare cases that something seems out of place, either discard the description or change it as you have need. These descriptions are for your use in your game and you are free to modify them to keep your game fun and exciting for you and your players. I hope that you can find plenty of material here to augment your players’ imaginations and to stimulate your own ideas for adventures.

Harried Game Masters, or How We Came to Write This Book

So, I hear you ask, “Why write a book like this?” Well, I’m glad you asked. We wrote it for all those Game Masters who have ever lamented not having the time that they wanted to spend on their game because those unforgiving intrusions to gaming (life, work, family, school) interfered. We wrote it for all those game masters who have come home from a hard day of work or just

finished a grueling finals week and had friends call up and say, “Hey, let’s play tonight. I had a rough day and I want to kill something.” For all of you who need more than 24 hours in a day, welcome to Tabletop Adventures’ line of products for the Harried Game Master.

We here at TTA believe that description is a very important part of game-mastering and that vivid descriptions can make a world or an adventure come alive. However, we have noticed that the more rushed or frazzled a GM becomes, the more mechanical the game tends to be. So we have written a book that we have always wished to have, one that would have made our lives easier over the years. Tabletop Adventures’ “Harried Game Master” products are designed to be products that you can buy today and play tonight. We have taken care to make them flexible so they can be used in virtually any campaign without changing its feel or details. They are to help you, the Game Master, make the maximum use of the limited time you have available.

This tool provides the GM with a way to stimulate the characters’ senses and the players’ imaginations without having to use game-changing information. The descriptions can give players a “feel” for a situation, a better image of what is happening or what their characters are experiencing without all of those experiences leading directly to combat or treasure. They are intended to enhance role-playing by encouraging character building, reaction, and interaction. These Bits of the Open, and all the accompanying material, are made for you, to ease the life of the Harried Game Master.

Enjoy, have fun, and create fun for others!

The good people at Tabletop Adventures,
and the Overlord.



How to Use This Resource

What are Shards and Bits™, Anyway?

Shards and Bits™ should be viewed as small pieces of an adventure. Think of the archeologist, collecting little pieces of pottery and then fitting them together into a fascinating whole. Bits are small pieces of description that can be thrown in anywhere to provide “color” or add a little excitement to what might otherwise be a dull spot. Shards are longer and more elaborate, meant to be selected rather than added randomly. They may describe a certain area or specific thing, or particular facets that do not fit well in a random table such as times or seasons.

One thing to remember in using this product is that we provide you products that will add a bit of drama to your game. Therefore, delivery is important. The way you choose to deliver the descriptions that are provided can have a tremendous effect on the subsequent playability of the situation involved. With proper use, our Bits and Shards can add greater depth to your gaming experience and make everything seem more “real” and exciting for your players.

As with our previous products in the Bits of Darkness™ series, these Bits of the Wilderness™ have been numbered so that a GM can roll percentile dice or pick a card to randomly generate a dash of description for an adventure. An Index is provided in case a Bit is needed to fit a particular situation, and we have included many Shards for specific situations, conditions, or locations. These all can help you flesh out areas or give you an “instant” description for those occasions when your players go “where no-one has gone before” (and you don’t yet have a clue what is there because you didn’t expect them to go that way).

These descriptions need not be followed verbatim. As GM, you should feel free to adapt them so that you may use them to greatest effect.

In some instances they may even give you ideas for additional adventures for your players. These Bits are for whatever you want! If a piece sparks your imagination (or those of your players) and you want to build on it, then go for it.

Another thing to consider is that some of the Shards or longer Bits can be used a little at a time. Read one paragraph, let the adventurers move on a little further or ask questions, and then continue with the text.

A Bit About Weather

Another important feature you will find in our “above ground” products is pieces describing weather and events pertinent to different seasons. Weather charts, while perhaps realistic, can be cumbersome. Using the “weather” section in the Index, a GM can choose or randomly select weather for the day. If it seems inconsistent from one day to the next, congratulations! You have accurately depicted the weather of the plains.

Printing This Product

These pages can be printed out on regular paper. However, the final pages are formatted to be printed on card stock. As cards, they can be shuffled and drawn randomly during play or sorted ahead of time, with the GM selecting certain Bits for use and placing them with the appropriate map or other materials. Some GMs prefer to just roll randomly as needed, or write the appropriate number on the GM’s map and refer to it when the characters arrive there.

Other Products from TTA

TTA continues to bring you high quality products with lots of description to augment your imagination and enhance your role-playing experience. For more information visit our website at www.tabletopadventures.com Also look for our collaboration with Necromancer games, [The Mother of All Treasure Tables](#), due out in print in early 2007.





Bits of the Plains

General

01 It is hard to have a sense of distance here. You walk a hundred steps, a thousand steps, ten thousand steps, and yet the land seems unchanged. You pass over a hill and down the slope and up the next rolling hill but the horizon is the same. There are no features and no satisfactory ways to tell your progress. The sun rises higher, reaches its zenith, and then sinks westward but your travel is still between unchanging walls of stalks and leaves. The grasses wave in the breeze all the way to the horizon, as they did first thing in the morning. The sky is a great blue and white bowl overhead, the land barely more than flat in all directions under the encompassing dome.

02 A spray of colorful flowers interrupts the otherwise monotonous greenish-brown of the tall prairie grasses. The rippling petals range from a deep blood red to an almost glowing orange. A gentle intermittent buzzing sound alerts you to the presence of bees flitting around the stand of wildflowers. [If the PCs get close enough to smell the flowers:] **The flowers have an intense, tangy aroma, a smell that somehow evokes the taste of a strong fruit juice.** [The bees probably signal the presence of a nearby hive where the PCs could find honey. At the GM's option, the flowers could be poisonous, or useful in some way to herbalists.]

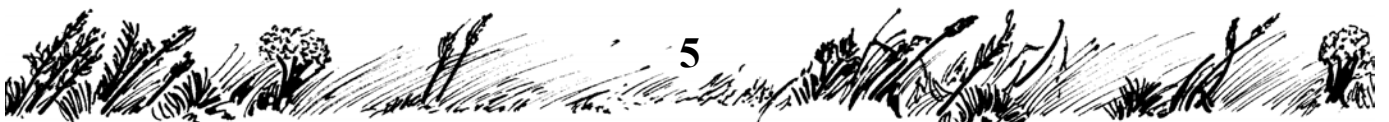
03 Single file is the only form of travel that makes any sense in the unbroken grassland. The first person forces the grass apart and begins the process of making a path. The farther back you are in the line the easier the going because the grass is more trampled when you get to it. The one in the lead finds it hard work in the relentless sun. There is little air movement where you stand surrounded by the tall grass, even though the wind makes the plant tops dip and dance, and you drip with perspiration. You have to watch your water because there are few streams. Behind

you the path you took lies as a conspicuous line across the plain.

04 A dome of royal blue sky stretches overhead, as if a gigantic bowl has been set upon the rim of the earth. White and blue clouds rim the



horizon, alive with light and shadow; there will be no storms today. The grass carpet before you is emerald green with a relief of knee high grasses interrupting the smooth expanse. The patches of knee high grasses are a mixture of green and rust colored plants. A small band of wild horses grazes upon the low-growing emerald green patches, avoiding the rust colored plants for more succulent morsels. The breeze is fresh and clean on your face. [The wild horses will be almost impossible to catch unless the adventurers have a very skilled animal handler among them.]





05 You can see a low hill ahead of you with a strange shape on the top, a badly misshapen tree, possibly. As you near it, you see that your first impression was correct; it is a tree that has gone through some terrible accident. The tree is split down the middle; each half now hangs out from the base of the trunk as if the tree was struck with a giant axe. As you draw closer, you can see obvious charring along the bark and the interior wood. The smell of burnt wood is evident, but has faded into a faint tinge in the air. The lightning that destroyed this tree did so months ago.

06 Partially covered by the grass in front of you, a wagon lies on the ground. Its wooden struts have been mostly eroded by the wind and the rain yet the shape of the cart remains intact. A cart like this might have brought a family of migrants to a new and better life somewhere, yet there is no sign of any population in this vicinity. [The wood is too old to be of any use and the remainder of the wagon has long since rotted away.]

07 Without feeling like you have climbed a hill, you find yourselves descending into a broad, shallow valley. The soft swish of wind through

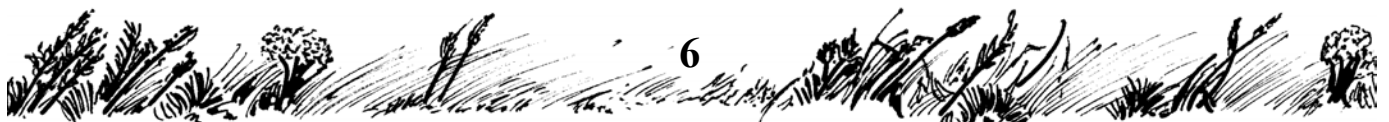



the long grass is quieter here, and as you walk [ride] into the valley, the small sounds of the open plain disappear behind you. The horizon disappears as well, replaced by the gentle curve of the hills around you. Tall grass stands out atop the hills, silhouetted against the clear blue sky. There is a bit of shade on the hillsides, and tiny purple flowers can be seen amongst the grass. As you pass through the valley, their sweet smell surrounds you whenever the wind picks up.

08 Lying beside the road is a set of leather armor. A full torso of tiny leather plates sewn together lies on the grass, still in a round shape with the straps closed, so it gives the eerie impression of still being worn, even though the wearer cannot be seen. The owner must have been a middle-sized man, quite broad-shouldered. You do not initially see the leg armor, but it is there, scattered in the grass, dispelling the illusion that anyone is in the body armor. No helm, weapons pack or shoes can be found, only leather armor. The armor is still supple and soft, although in some places grass is growing up through it. Grass grows fast and leather weathers quickly, so this cannot have been here long.

09 As you come out of a stretch of rolling hills, the grass goes from knee-high [for humans] to being much taller, three or four feet high in some places. It brushes against your clothes and skin as you continue walking [riding], and it is impossible to take a step without pushing sheaves of it aside as you go. The smells of the prairie—the faint sweetness of the different grasses, the occasional blush of flowers, and the dry smell of plants baking in the sun—are much stronger here, and the sound of grass brushing against grass is ceaseless. The wind blows paths through the high grass, sometimes making it look as though unseen animals are moving among the blades around you.

10 Amidst the clumps of grass, low hillocks, and long stretches of bare earth, you begin to see wildflowers appearing in little clusters. A bit further along, the clusters become more and more frequent, with many different kinds of flowers—tiny purple blooms, delicate stalks with bright yellow flowers along their lengths, and others. The wind has settled down, and as you walk [ride] the many smells of these flowers become stronger, until you find yourselves in an endless field of wildflowers. It quickly becomes impossible to walk [ride through] without crushing flowers underfoot, which only intensifies the smell.





11 Rolling hills rife with thin golden grasses lay at your feet. Yellow goldenrod is scattered here and there among the grasses. Every so often, you find a bunch of purple echinacea [or similar flower]. Overhead, flat-bottomed fluffy white clouds follow on, one after another, like a herd of wayward sheep. The clouds cast their shadows across the fields below, as they progress over the valley in a slow parade. The faint rivulets and tendrils of creek beds all are greener where the grasses have found some source of underground waters, yet there is no drinkable water to be found in any of these dry streams. A hawk [falcon, eagle] soars overhead, looking for today's meal.

12 Nestled in the tall grass you discover a broken-down wagon. The peeling paint on the wind-blasted sideboards reads 'McLellan's Traveling Mystical Emporium.' The rear axle is broken, causing the wagon to sag drunkenly to the left. The leather harnesses are rotting away, still connected to the shaft. The tattered canvas cover has been destroyed leaving the metal frame highlighted against the sky like the ribs of some great beast. The wheels have sunken into the prairie ground several inches. It would seem that the wagon was abandoned long ago. [If the adventurers search the wagon they find nothing of value.]

13 As you make your way across the plains you trip over something hidden beneath the dense growth. [If the adventurers investigate:] You find the rusted remains of what appears to have been a poorly made sword. It breaks in half as you pull it out of the grass that has grown over it during the years it has lain in this spot. Apparently it was cast aside, or dropped by someone in their haste. [The adventurers continue on:] After walking fifty paces, you stumble upon the skeleton of a man, lying facedown in the open field. The rotted remnant of an arrow shaft juts out of his ribcage. [If the heroes investigate they will find nothing of value. Any adventurer who can read will be able to make out the glyph for 'Vengeance' carved into the head of the arrow.

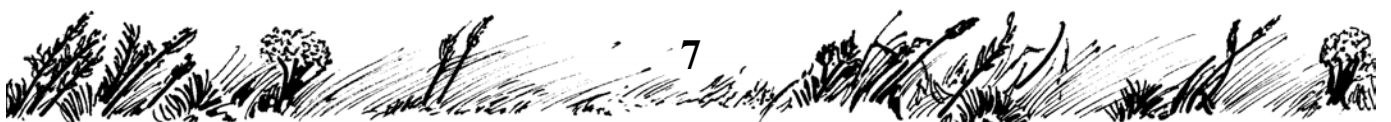
The dead man was a bandit whose crimes finally caught up to him.]

14 As you crest a small rise, you see ahead a large dark area of ground. The grass has been trampled and the soil churned to roughness. From a distance you see sticks protruding from the ground at crazy angles and twigs lying about. As you approach, you can see that what you thought were sticks are actually sturdy hafts of wood and that the twigs are instead bones. Drawing nearer you can see spears sticking into the ground, and the bones that are lying about are gnawed and cracked. Some sort of battle or attack was obviously carried out here, but the scavengers have disturbed things so much that you may never know what happened.

15 As you lift your head, you can smell dampness on the breeze. It has that heady mix of earth and moisture that comes before the rain. New grass is emerging green through the tan grasses of years past. At each rise, you see several rounded grassy peaks in the distance. There are ten of them when you stop to count,



but it would be several hard days travel before you would be within reach of those distant hills. The song of a meadowlark [thrush, warbler, finch] pierces the air. Several narrow [walking, deer] paths meander here and there, the pounded earth trails blatant to the naked eye.



Signs of Inhabitants

16 Your route is running along a small bluff. As you descend to the creek bed below, you spy a small doorway of sorts hollowed out of the bank of the stream. A faint path leads to the entrance, which is flanked on either side by berry bushes, their branches starting to grow over the opening. [Should someone investigate the opening, read the following:] Drawing nearer, you can see into the shadows, and it appears that a small table is present in the room. Poking your head inside, you see a small room made of logs covered with sod. The dugout appears to have been a dwelling at some time, but all that is left now is a rickety table and a rotting fur in the corner. [The GM could add a trap, or turn the dugout into an active dwelling if desired.]

17 A horn call off behind you makes you all turn to see what it is. It is a hunting horn or a military horn, blown with authority. You look



but there is nothing to see. The plain stretches out with no visible people or animals: just the tops of grasses, blowing softly in the wind. Again you hear the horn: distant but

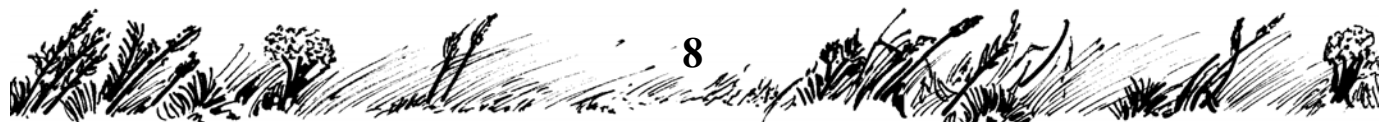
clear, with some kind of urgent messages, it calls you to come. But you can see no one and nothing to respond to. A third time it blows, with a somewhat desperate sound, but other than determining its direction you cannot locate the source. The horn does not sound again, though you listen for it.


18 A group of dots appear on the horizon to your right. They gradually get larger, moving steadily across the grassland toward you. When the distance is reduced enough, you can see there are five natives [bandits, barbarians, mongols] on horseback. The passage leaves a

line in the grass where it was disturbed. They ride to the top of a small hill where they stop and sit on their horses, watching you. It looks like a hunting or raiding party: five strong young riders, dressed in painted leathers, armed with—as best you can determine—bows and spears. Their horses are compact, small and well muscled. The whole group rests on the windy hilltop, alert but at ease. They mark your passage from beyond arrow range for a while, then turn and ride back the way they came, presently vanishing over the horizon.

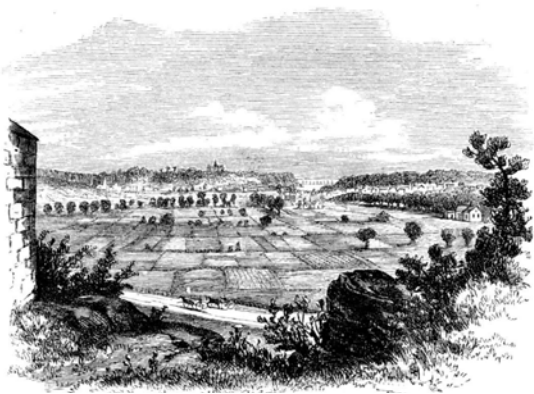
19 You seem to smell bacon and fresh bread. The sky is cloudless and the grassland looks the same as it did yesterday and the day before. There is nothing unusual but a low grassy hill, from which the smells of bacon and baking bread seem to come. And then you spot a metal pipe. It sticks out of the ground about knee high, with a small metal roof on top. It is surely a chimney. But there is no house to be seen. The smell lingers, so presumably, somewhere way down in the earth, someone is in a kitchen making a meal. There is no sign of any disturbance or habitation visible anywhere. [Perhaps, dwarves, gnomes, or miners built it so long ago there is no trace left, or they have some very long tunnel vents here.]

20 You are passing through grazing land. The trail cuts through the open range and all about you the grass has been chewed low by sheep and cattle. Their dung is visible and its smell ever-present. The areas around the streams are denuded of plants and the bare edges of ponds are mires of deeply pitted mud. At intervals you see the herds. There are long-haired, long-horned sheep, some black and some white, with each herd usually a mix of both colors. The cattle are red, reddish brown or black, often with irregular white spots. They are lean and have an edgy look as if they would run or charge if at all disturbed. Most herds are attended by herdsmen and dogs. Sometimes the men are mounted but mostly they walk beside the flocks. They wave greetings as you pass by.






21 A winding dirt track brings you into a region where the land is cultivated. You see a small hamlet at a distance and the fields lie on both sides of the narrow pitted road. The sky is clear blue with small clouds and a light breeze, and sun beats down on you and on the crops. Thick green fields of peas alternate with taller, paler wheat fields, separated by walls of piled gray stone. Bushes and vines grow along the walls. Small groups of people in plain work clothes, their heads covered by floppy hats or scarves, hoe the weeds. Mostly they seem like family groups: women and children, with the occasional man. If they notice you, they stand, hoes stilled, and stare across the field at you. [Only occasionally will they return a wave.]



22 About twenty-five cows are grazing on the grasslands within a stone's throw of the road [your path]. They are lean enough that you can see ribs, but not gaunt. They are black or a mixture of black and brown; a few have white spots. The cows' horns have been sawn off to make blunt stumps. With them are half-grown calves, long-legged and jumpy. One all-black calf follows a larger, brown and white cow. Then it suddenly veers off, kicking up its hind legs as it dashes through grasses almost as tall as it is. Abruptly, it runs back to nudge its mother and, for a few paces, follow sedately. Two men in straw hats, armed with bows and staves, sit watching the herd. Birds fly up ahead of the moving cows, calling as they go.




23 Your way is blocked by sheep. The pale area across your route [the road ahead] resolves itself into a herd of sheep, extending all across the way you want to go. There are hundreds of them, bleating and milling around as they very slowly move across your path. They are long-haired and the hair is a dirty white and packed with mud along the bottom. Their faces are black. They have a distinctive stink which is very strong in the heat of the sun. Most are ewes with one or two lambs following. Now and then a lamb capers around, showing more energy, but mostly the whole herd seems lethargic. Two men and four shaggy gray dogs keep the sheep together and moving slowly forward. They notice your presence but do not appear to care that you are delayed, letting the sheep move along ever so gradually.

24 In the distance you see a solitary tree highlighted against the horizon. There appears to be something dangling from a rope tied to one of the branches. [As the adventurers approach closer to the tree:] As you draw nearer you realize that the dangling object is the decomposing corpse of a hanged man. The stench of him wafts to you on the breeze, washing over you. The man is naked except for a wooden sign hung around his neck on a leather cord. It reads, simply: 'HORSE THIEF'. [There is nothing else of interest or value in this area.]

25 The trail here is packed and open. Plants are trying to retake the path, but they have been broken by the regular passage of men, beasts and carts, so they are low and trampled. On either side of you, the grass stands as high as a tall man's shoulder, creating a wall of leaves, that bends at the slight pressure of the winds. The land is relatively flat, rolling in long gentle hills. From the higher spots you can see the grassland stretching ahead of you as far as the eye can see, getting dimmer in the distance until the horizon merges with the sky. Flocks of small birds whistle and sing from the tops of the grass stalks, their calls like so many shards of glass.






26 After traveling for hours [a time] through the open spaces, you come upon a band of trees. Crunching through the undergrowth, you begin to descend by bits. Picking your way down the bluffs is tedious. Fog rises around you as you progress. You continue forward through the mists, until you find yourself at the bank of a river. Fog floats across the surface of the waters. What you can see through the gray is a hazy reflection of the trees on either bank as well as the sky above. In the distance, a man fishes from the furthest bank, a dark-gray shadow in the fog. If you were to shout, he could not hear you as he is too far away. The air is heavy with the stillness.

27 The trail climbs a slight rise and for three paces you cross an old road. The solid roadbed still holds large paving stones in place. Grass has grown close on each side and a few blades reach up between the stones. The road surface is laid of big limestone blocks that must have been hauled a long distance. They stand out oddly here, where soil is a fine dark dirt with few stones of any size. Standing on the road, you can see it once stretched east and west [north and south] in a straight line, cutting across hills and valleys without regard to the terrain. A huge crew of workers and animals must have labored a long time to lay it. It lies like an ancient leg bone, pale, neglected and overgrown by grasses. Whatever it connected is no longer there. You step down onto the soft trail and leave the old road behind.

28 Tan hills rise in the distance, placing a boundary on the plains stretching out before you. Far off, you can make out a tent, a couple stocky brown horses with black manes, and their keeper. A bed of river rock cuts its way through the grassy expanse. The river is currently dry, but you can see where the spring rains have cut away soil at each bend of the wash. The soil is as black as can be. The grass here is sparse, but green. It would make for adequate short-term grazing. [This area is suitable for summer pastures, but water is scarce



right now. The boy tending the horses has nothing of value, nor does he have much useful information. He is resistant to give up the horses as his family has little else in the way of possessions. Flash flooding is possible if a sudden rainstorm were to arise.]

29 You come to a place where the trail you are on crosses another road. Your track has been wide enough to accommodate a cart comfortably. It is pockmarked with hoof prints made in wet weather and irregularly scraped by the wheel tracks of carts. The road crossing your path is more than twice as wide as the trail you are on and is scraped clear of all plants. By comparison, a few hardy weeds, some flattened and broken, manage to grow on your trail. The other path is furthermore sunk almost ankle deep compared to the surrounding grassland. Looking up and down, it you see nothing and no one. Along it, broken grass blades suggest that something passed by quite recently.



30 A sudden break in the prairie reveals a narrow lane stretching to the left and right. To the left, the road curves away almost immediately, but you can see where it winds through the grass to the distance. It is straighter to the right, heading off into the horizon. It looks like an old path, with well-worn grooves from passing horse carts and wagons. Low weeds and thistles line the road on both sides, giving way to the taller grasses just a few feet past.



31 There is an odd structure up ahead, instantly distinguished by straight lines in an environment where all things curve. As you near the structure you perceive that it is the wall of an old building. Two sides still stand but the grassland has reclaimed all the area around the walls. The two walls, only a story high, are at right angles to each other and protrude awkwardly out of the plain. On the one facing you, part of the interior when the building was complete, you are struck by reflections off an old mosaic that covers the wall. The tiles are still bright blue and white. Despite the gaps from missing tiles, you recognize the scene as a mountain above a blue lake. No real mountains or lakes are visible anywhere.

32 A small bare patch appears in the middle of the grass. The area is covered with stone, but a few sturdy thistles have begun growing up through the cracks in the rock. It appears as though a building may have stood here once, and the stone is laid over an area about the right size for a modest farmhouse. The fields of wild grass around the old foundation show no signs of having ever been tamed. If they were, it was long enough ago that the grasses have reclaimed everything but the stone itself. Some distance away, you see a trio of worn and faded headstones. If they were ever carved with the names of those who lie below them, wind and rain have long since worn the inscriptions away.




33 Your path intersects another, forming a crossroads. [The new path and crossroads are not on any map the travelers might have with them.] In the middle of this crossroad is a wooden signpost with four arrows, pointing each direction of path. Closer inspection of the post, however, reveals that all four arrows are completely devoid of any writing.

34 As you journey through the lush green land you see ahead a round grassy mound with a slender finger of stone at its top. When you approach, you can see the hill is about twenty feet high and forty feet across at the base. Atop this mound is a granite obelisk seven feet high. [Should someone climb the mound to examine the obelisk:] The stone is old and weather worn, with an inscription at its base

written in a forgotten script. Behind the obelisk is a large patch of freshly turned earth.

35 You have ascended a slight hill that has a nice view of a low valley from its top. The hills open up away from you and roll gently down to a meandering stream and the deeper green of shrubs and trees. There is no visible path down, but a roadside shrine sits at the edge of the slope. A spot has been cleared of plants and a nice square piece of polished white marble—rather dramatically out of

place in all this grass and dirt—set in the open space. The offerings of travelers litter the area. Most are local flowers, dry or drying, but there have also been food offerings, stones and candles.



36 You come upon a post, leaning crookedly to a height of eight feet. It is festooned with a garland of small animal skulls and the teeth and talons of much larger beasts. It seems to be a marker of some sort, left here as a warning. You are not sure for whom the warning was meant, or what it warns of, but the post looks very, very old. Apparently whoever left the warning and whatever dangers once lurked here are long gone. You look around, and there is nothing else to be seen but the sky and the distant horizon.

37 Against the horizon you see a tall, black spire. Drawing nearer you realize it is the crumbling remains of an obelisk. It stands about fifteen feet tall, its surface beaten and cracked by weather and the fierce winds. There appear to be marks all over the surface, but too much time has passed since they were carved, and they are now just shallow tracings in the stone. [If the adventurers try to read the marks they will realize the carvings are in an ancient tongue that they cannot read. The obelisk is merely a border marker of an empire that fell long ago.]

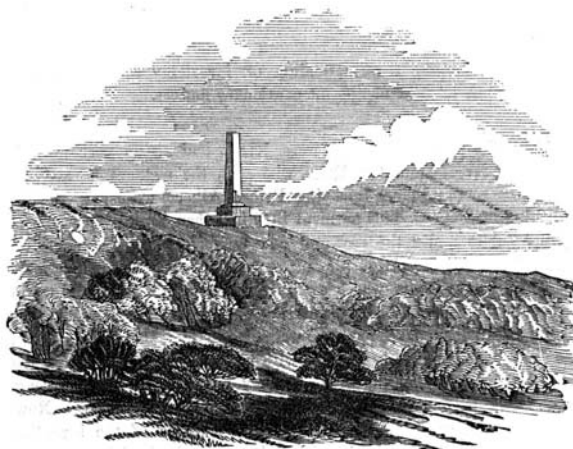
38 As you push your way through the tall grass, you notice a gap up ahead. When you get closer, you see what appears to be a cairn made of white stones dominates the center of the lifeless, barren clearing. Your breath catches in your throat as you realize that the rocks are not rocks at all, but humanoid skulls, bleached and scoured by the sun, wind, and the passage of time. Even though the cairn has obviously been here for many years, a traveler could feel uneasy just standing near them. [If the adventurers decide to investigate further, they will find nothing of value.]

39 The grass has been trampled down here and a roughly circular space cleared. In the center, the remains of what was once a campfire have turned into a black and sooty mush. A few broken, sooty twigs litter the ground that might have been used to barbecue some small and unfortunate creature, perhaps a rabbit or stoat.

40 It looks like somebody's dinner has been interrupted. A fire had been made, although it has now long since gone out, perhaps a couple of days ago. Cow pats were gathered and heaped to make fuel for the fire. Above the fire pit, suspended from a wooden pole by some twine is a loosely made bag of some poor creature's skin and fur. It looks like the

creature would have been about the size of a dog. [If the party investigates the skin bag: inside the bag is a mixture of half-cooked meat and flat stones.] To one side, the bones and entrails have been left unwanted, which now have attracted the attention of numerous flies and ants, although nothing has yet attacked the contents of the bag. [This is the authentic method of cooking marmots used by Mongols on the steppes.]

41 In a small clearing, you find the remains of a recent campfire. The grass has been trampled down by heavy foot traffic. The fire was extinguished by someone kicking dirt over it. The scent of burned wood and smoke remains strong in the area [and the coals are still warm to the touch]. Around the fire pit are a few discarded bones from small animals, and further out, body-sized impressions on the ground where it appears a group of people slept. Nearby, a patch of grass is much shorter than that surrounding it; this grass looks bitten or cut. [A character with the ability to track has a good chance of estimating that a dozen armed and armored people with horses camped here recently.]





Animals

- 42 The sun shines out of a pale-blue sky. The early morning cool burns off and the sun is hot on your faces [backs]. The slight breeze is very welcome. The packed dirt trail is dry and gives a comfortable solid thump under your [your horses'] feet. The soil of the trail has a rich earthy smell and the grass adds a fine set of plant odors. Small dark birds rise up as you near, flap their wings hard to get airborne, and then catch the breeze to fly much more easily, dropping down again into the grass as small distant dots. Far ahead in the air a hunting hawk soars lazily on the wind.
- 43 The path leads you into an area of higher hills. The trail curves along the high spots. Where it descends a little, you are aware of the increased heat and the still air, so that when you climb back to the ridge, the slightly greater breeze up there cools you. Once back to where the trail snakes along the highest ground, you have maximum visibility. You see a small herd of about 15 grazers [antelope, ostrich, kangaroos] in the distance, well beyond arrow range. After a time, you see off to your left, beyond a slighter rise, the soil is blackened from a recent fire, but already new grass blades cover it with thin green fuzz.
- 44 Concealed amongst the tall grass is a large, flat boulder. Below the front edge someone or something has burrowed under the rock, creating a small shelter. [The burrow is small and dark, but big enough for a person of average size to squeeze inside. If someone looks inside, or enters:] The small space is damp and smells strongly of wet fur. There are scatterings of bird bones and small piles of dried dung littering the floor. There is no other life in here except for a few beetles, crawling slowly along the burrow wall. [It is the den of a small predator, possibly a feral dog or a badger. The creature is out hunting and poses no danger to the adventurers.]
- 45 The grassland is a rolling field of green—a lawn that stretches to distant horizons. There

is just enough variation that in some places you can see for miles and in other places you are hidden and can see for no distance at all. Thus it is that despite the apparent openness you find yourselves within easy arrowshot of five long-legged grazers [antelope, deer, ostrich]. They stare at you in large-eyed curiosity for a moment, then one lays its ears back. In an instant all five brown and white animals are bounding away with amazing speed to vanish over the horizon. [Unless adventurers' bows are strung and at hand, they do not get a shot.]

- 46 In a still moment, large winged birds are slowly circling in the distance. They float a little up and a little down again, not landing and not moving away from whatever it is they are passing round and round. They are large enough to be vultures and it looks as if some unfortunate creature is about to breathe its last and become food for the hungry birds.



47 The lowland along the river is slightly warmer and moister than more open areas. The trail drops down along the water for a while and weaves in and out, picking a comfortable path just beyond the river vegetation. Once, it passes under a towering tree, as tall and broad itself as any cathedral. A flurry of small birds fly up from its protective branches as you move under them, and a hawk drops from unseen heights like a falling stone to grab an unwary songbird in a feat of incredible flying skill, swinging with its prey in an arc that never touches the ground. The hawk, bird in its talons, flies powerfully over the riverbed and out of sight. One last feather flutters to the ground behind you.

48 In a low area stands a tree. It is leafless and dead. It is three or four times a man's height, with numerous branches. At one time it must have been handsome, standing by itself in the grassland. Below it the grass is tall and deeply green. The tree cannot have been dead more than a year or two; the smaller branches are still intact and the bark has not peeled. On one of the lower branches, a bird perches, visible as a dark silhouette. As you pass by, you can hear its high mournful whistle: "ahh- whee."




49 You are making good time as you travel. The grass is hip high, interspersed with some weedy bushes. Suddenly a handful of birds shoots out of the grass practically under your noses. The loud thrumming of their wings

startles you, sounding almost like the roll of drums or the pounding of horses' hooves. The birds themselves are round-bodied and smaller than chickens; their gray, black and white speckled feathers hide them perfectly in the grass once they resettle. [These are quail, or some other similar bird. They will try to distract intruders to lead them away from any nest.]

50 There is a sudden rustling nearby and a creature darts out of a hole in the ground and away into the taller grass where it can no longer be seen. As it charged away, it looked to be about the size of a dog but more powerful, the brown fur seemingly covering its body seemed to be hiding powerful muscles. A strange whistling sound emerges from the distance and is answered further away by a whistle in a higher pitch. Are these creatures communicating with each other? [This is a marmot is also known as the groundhog.]

51 A small nest of grass rats [rabbits] lies just ahead of you. Seven tiny bundles of fur wriggle around in the nest, so young that their eyes are still closed. The parents seem to have abandoned the nest because there is no food available for the rats [rabbits].

52 Your horse rears and stamps its hooves. Something has startled it and any other pack animals are also snickering nervously. There is a small movement on the ground and you can see the remains of a snake about two paces long. The snake has been pulverized where the horse's hooves have stamped on it and it is clearly dead, although still writhing slowly. Its green- and yellow-striped body makes it look like it was just a harmless grass snake. [Ignore this incident if the party has no mounts or pack animals, select one player. At your discretion, the snake could have been a venomous viper and it might be possible to retrieve some of its poison. Most non-poisonous snakes are identifiable as such due to their narrow oval-shaped heads.]



53. A cluster of black shapes seem to float in the air a considerable distance away from you, off to the left and a little ahead of you. [If the adventurers are able to focus better on the shapes, or if they go closer to investigate:] The shapes turn out to be a trio of vultures, circling lazily above a spot that is still some distance from you.

54 Something dark drops from the sky and thumps to the ground just ahead of you. Of all the things that you would have least expected to see out here in a sea of grass, seemingly miles from any water at all, high on the list would be a live fish. Yet a fish is what you do see, flopping about on the grass in front of you and looking like it has just popped out of the water. It is a kind of catfish and looks like it would afford a good meal for someone. [The fish was taken up from a river by a hawk that was then attacked by an eagle, in or above the lowest clouds. The hawk eventually had to release the fish and it fell to the ground miles from its natural habitat.]

55 Emerging onto a rock ledge, a dry short-grass prairie stretches below. A few ravines course through the flattened expanse of green and tan. The fields are littered with circular patches of white dirt. As you come closer, you see clusters of small light brown creatures popping in and out of their burrows or digging tunnels in the patches of dirt. A few creatures are up on their haunches, little sentinels with watchful eyes. Soon you realize there are hundreds, maybe thousands of these creatures, with holes for miles. The creatures have a white streak from their pointy nose down their belly. They stabilize themselves




with a short, sleek tail with a black tip. Their short, delicate front paws grasp their tidbit of the moment. [These are prairie dogs. Prairie dog colonies in the U.S. have been known to reach over 1,000 creatures. One 1901 Texas prairie dog town was recorded to have covered 25,000 miles and included 400,000,000 animals. Pack animals, cattle and horses are at risk of breaking their legs in prairie dog burrows. Prairie dogs feed on grasses, so grazing grass will be scarce here.]

56 [At midmorning,] your walk [ride] is pleasant. The sun shines warmly but is not [yet] hot, and the air moves softly in the grass. Small black and brown birds chirp and whistle. Butterflies with large black and yellow wings flutter across your path. For a while the prairie is a carpet of blooms. Mingling in the green grass are round yellow flowers, tubular white flowers, clusters of tiny gold and blue flowers, and flat purple flowers. Then the land you travel changes in some way and the grasses wave high and green, with only a very occasional flower visible. You can still hear the birds but they are invisible in the sea of grass. To your left a series of disturbed areas interrupt the grass. Something has dug into the ground to make low mounds of freshly turned dirt [gophers, moles].

57 You ride [walk] for the rest of the day amid a great herd. Your progress is slow because you have to circle around animals in your path. You watch from a distance as two big bulls crash into each other, transforming suddenly from slow-moving grazers to fast-running attackers who hit each other with such force that it seems to shake the earth. The bulls must each weigh more than two or three big farm horses combined, and they slam into each other with great power. Both bulls remain standing, circle and ram each other again. There is a third pass and then the slightly lighter of the two moves off while the larger returns to the place of challenge and bellows loudly.





58 A big animal, a large rack of antlers on its head, stands on a hilltop. It is not far away but well out of arrow range. You can see the brown fur, thicker along the neck and lean legs. The sun is behind it and its shaggy body becomes a silhouette against the sky. The animal lifts its head high and gives a deep booming bellow which echoes across the plain. From the southwest you hear a faint answering bellow. After a moment, another answer comes from the southeast. It bellows twice more and then stands still on the hilltop.

59 Up ahead, lying just off the trail, you see some kind of feature. As you get closer, it looks like the area is bright white, making a strong contrast with the surrounding green grasses. You can see it well before you reach it; the plants are interrupted by something. As you come closer, you see that a thick white layer covers all the plants in an area more than three paces across and roughly round. The plants are weighed down and broken but it is clear that they are merely covered and some at least will grow through it. The white layer is hard, half a finger's width in thickness and has little odor [a rock dropping].



60 There is a strange group of rocks at the base of a tall dead tree along a small stream. The ground is open and generally rocky with only occasional plants, but these rocks are about knee high, much bigger than most of these you see. They look from a distance somehow “broken open.” As you get close to them, you

see bones sticking out of them. The false rocks are spherical and packed with bones and fur. They are soft, almost fibrous and you can smell the odor of decaying meat. You see wings that could be from ducks and the skulls of rabbits. Many older broken bones lie scattered on the ground as well. [Giant owl pellets, regurgitated by owls after the edible parts are digested. The bones may be of animals as big as calves.]

61 Your attention is drawn to a group of birds circling a mile distant. One by one, the birds drop to the ground. You approach from downwind and before you can see what the birds are doing, you smell the cloying odor of rotting flesh. Ahead of you, the birds sit pecking at the corpse of a large animal. [If the characters approach the carcass, add:] the birds squawk at you and shift around the body but do not give up their feast. One, sitting on the head of the dead creature, eyes you balefully. [The animal is a buffalo or similar large plains-dwelling herbivore. Any character accustomed to hunting or living in the wild can guess that it has been dead for a couple of days, probably taken down by wolves or similar predators.]

62 This area has small stands of trees interspersed with the grasses. In a grove to your left, you hear the distinctive cracking sound of a tree, or at least a large limb, falling to the ground. Immediately, the air over the trees is filled with a flurry of small birds squawking and circling. They fly around madly for a few seconds then begin to settle back into the trees. Once again, the area is quiet. [This is intended to be simply a large dead limb or dead tree finally falling to the ground. However, if an encounter is desired, it is possible that someone or something felled the tree in the grove. If the characters explore the area, they can easily spot the tree or large limb that crashed.]

63 Overhead, a flight of geese streams by in typical “v” formation. As you watch, the lead goose falls back into the pack and another takes its place at the front. The new vanguard banks, and those following bank with it veer off to the left. As they fly away, you can hear them honking to each other.



64 Off in the distance you see the tall grass rippling and folding under as something large and heavy bullies its way through. The breeze carries the sound of the creature to your ears, snuffling and grunting as it searches for food. [If the adventurers attempt to pursue the creature they will only find the trail it has made. Read the following:] You come upon the trail left by some large beast. The grass is flattened and crushed in a meandering trail that is roughly six feet wide, peppered irregularly with clumps of fresh dung. The beast is long gone, its path stretching on as far as your eyes can see. [As the trail runs perpendicular to the direction the adventurers are traveling, any attempts to pursue the creature will only lead them off course.]

65 As you push through the waist-high grass, the field before you erupts. Scores of large black birds [crows] burst out and fly around you, scolding and darting at your face, pecking and clawing. Just as abruptly as they appeared, they are gone, cawing and wheeling about as they fly off towards the horizon.

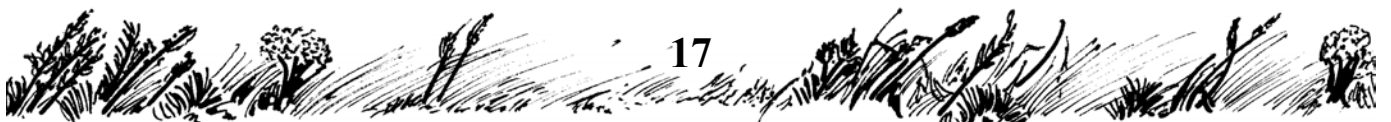
66 You come upon an obscenely fat vulture, feeding on the foul-smelling remains of a buffalo [antelope, gazelle]. The bird regards you with indifferent eyes and croaks haughtily. You pause for a moment as it warningly flaps its wings, sending clouds of flies billowing up and away from the bloated corpse. The vulture does not appear hostile,

only annoyed that you have disturbed its dinner. [If the adventurers approach or attack the vulture, it will only fly away out of reach and wait for them to leave before it resumes dining.]

67 In the distance you see what appears to be a gathering of all manner of plains creatures, large and small. They are milling around peacefully, ignoring each other for the most part. As you draw closer, an antelope [or any other appropriate grazing creature] bleats a warning and they all flee out of sight. You come upon their gathering place, a watering hole. The pool is twenty feet wide, its muddy banks scored with the tracks of countless creatures of all sizes. The water is shallow, its surface dark with mud and darting insects.

68 Isolated on the plain stands the trunk of an enormous tree. The branches are bare, scrabbling at the sky as the breeze rustles through them. As you draw nearer you can see that it is hollow, and has obviously been dead for quite some time. The empty husks of nuts and seed pods fill the hollowed center, spilling out onto the ground beneath. You can hear faint scratching noises from higher up inside the hollow. As you stop to watch, a pair of tiny eyes [squirrel] appear in a small hole in the trunk and gaze back at you quizzically. With a small chitter the creature disappears and you can hear it scrambling upwards inside the trunk.

69 As you make your way through the wide-open grasslands, you hear a faint rustling in the dense growth behind you. You stop to listen, and the rustling stops. Shaking your head, you continue on...and hear it again, moving behind you. You turn to look, and the noise stops abruptly, but you see nothing. [It is only a small, wild dog. It follows merely out of curiosity. If the adventurers investigate, they will catch a glimpse of it as it flees harmlessly:] A small, brown dog bursts out of the grass before you and darts between your legs. You hear the frenzied rustling of its flight through the tall grass, growing fainter as the dog gets further away. Then you hear nothing but the buzzing and chirping of insects.



Weather

70 Sudden spurts of a gentle breeze cause the thick grasses around you to swish and scrape against one another. At times the sounds almost come to resemble the murmur of distant voices.


71 Purple and gray clouds stretch out along the horizon in the distance. As you study them you see streaks reaching from the high clouds to the earth below. When the breeze is right, you can smell a mixture of rain and damp earth on the wind. Gentle slopes of tan grasses spread out from under your feet [horses' hooves] as far as the eye can see in any direction. A faint line of the deepest green can be seen tracing the branching spine of the ridges rising from the gentle slopes. A rainbow touches the earth in the distance, its luminous colors stretching into the heavens, a promise of better days to come. [The rain is moving away from the travelers. The ground can be dry or wet, depending upon the storm's path.]

72 As the day has spent its hours, the sun has grown hot and the air sticky with moisture. The wind has stilled, leaving behind an oppressive heat and the air almost feels thick as you breathe. Cresting a rise does not bring relief; there is no breeze to be had anywhere. Shimmers of heat rise from the prairie before you, creating small waves in the images before your eyes. Sweat courses down your forehead. You are sweating so profusely that you cannot avoid getting it into your eyes; [The animals in your party have their flanks covered in sweat and] soon little gnats and stinging insects are circling you like a gourmet feast.

73 The wind whispers all the time. It stirs the grass constantly so that you cannot be sure if something is moving through it out there in the distance. For all that the wind limits your ability to detect other creatures it makes the days tolerable. The breeze cools the air as the bright sun beats unremittingly down on your heads. The drooping grass tops nod and dance in response to the gusts. Near midday, the breeze stops for a while and the air becomes oppressively hot and still. You get very warm, even if you shed all your armor. Then, as the sun turns westward, the breeze is back, cooling your necks and tossing the loose ends of your hair into your eyes.



74 The air is hot and the wind is blowing steady and strong out of the west [or whatever direction the fronts come from in your world]. The wind picks up hats and tumbles them two or three horse-lengths beyond you. Empty leather bottles blow across the ground, anything not firmly tied is ripped away. Light things, the weight of paper or ribbon, not only blow away, but are lifted up high into the air and carried far out of reach across the grass. The gusts also carry dust and plant bits, that get in your nose, eyes and mouth, dirty and irritating. The wind blows strongly all day, interrupted only by stronger gusts.



75 A single fat drop of rain hits you [or insert character's name] on the nose, and it appears that the storm that has threatened all day is finally here. A few more fat lazy drops splatter on the ground around you, then nothing. The humidity hangs heavily in the air. Perhaps it will rain later, but for now, the dark clouds are a promise unfulfilled.

76 The wind blows through the dry grasses, making their tops bow and dance. In places the grass seems to go on uninterrupted for miles and there the wind creates the illusion of ripples of water as they dip and sway, like waves moving across this ocean of grass.

77 The wind picks up suddenly and the clouds begin to scuttle across the sky like sheep being whipped by a shepherd who fears the onset of wolves. Yet not all of the clouds move in the same direction. One gray and silver cloud, shaped something like an anvil, holds its place in the distance as if to mock its diminutive fellows and demonstrate its independence. [This could be an entirely natural phenomenon or else a flying alien ship or a city in the sky. In any case, it is beyond the reach of any adventurers.]

78 Cresting a hill, you have a magnificent view of the plains stretching out all around you. The wind is stronger up here, ruffling your hair and rattling buckles and other loose bits of your gear. The sun seems almost impossibly bright and the heat on your skin is intense. As the wind blows across the plain, huge swaths of grass bend with it all at once, giving the appearance of waves on a vast, green ocean. Just as quickly as it started, the wind dies down to a gentle breeze, only to pick up again, this time sending the waves of grass in a different direction.

79 The wind ripples through the grass, often softly, sometimes strongly, but constantly, so that it is hard to listen for danger. The sounds of insects are incessant, chirps and buzzes, but mostly unseen somewhere in the grass. Occasionally there is a clearer sound, the hiss

of something moving quickly away through the leaves, unseen.

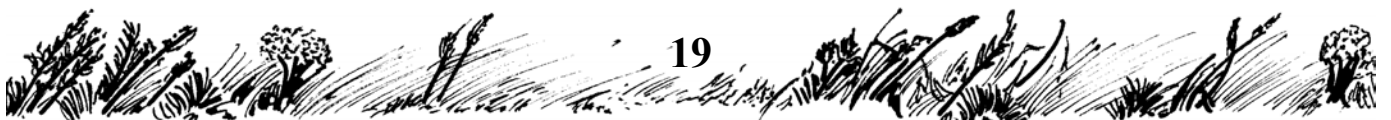
80 The wind beats against you as you stumble through the neck-high grass. The seed pods crowning the weed-tops beat against your chest, leaving a slight pulpy green residue and filling your nose with the sweet scent of plant juices. There seems to be no respite from the fierceness of the wind, so you turn your head against it and stumble on.

81 As you come over the rise, your face is hit with another blast of hot wind. The wind blows steadily and



incessantly, parching the land and all that it contains. The sky is faded blue with not a cloud in sight. Large birds, maybe vultures, wheel overhead. Songbirds and smaller animals have moved on or are resting during the heat of the day. The grasses and scrub brush rustle stiffly, just dried skeletons of their former selves. As you ride [walk] along, puffs of dust rise behind you. The grit seems to sift into everything; it is in your mouth, your nose, your gear, and your clothes. Before long, your face and hands begin to feel tight and red. There is little relief from the blowing.

82 Over the course of the next half hour or so of travel, the sky above you grows gradually darker and darker. Thick, dark clouds, presumably heavy with rain, roll in and shield you from the sun's heat. [Add flashes of lightning to increase the sense of foreboding or the actual environmental danger, depending on the distance from the adventurers. The clouds could also just roll through without any storm.]

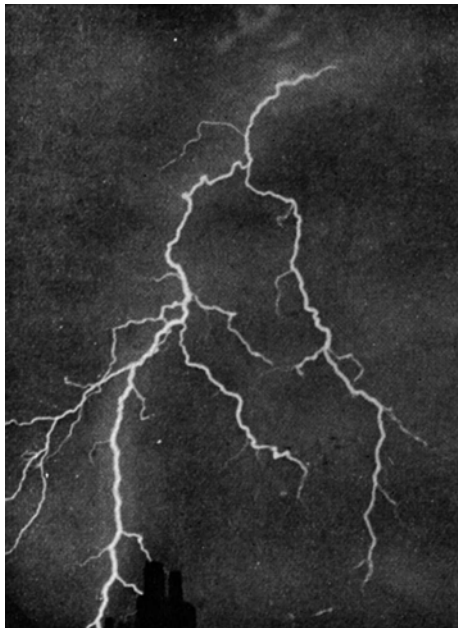




83 Over the course of a few minutes, the wind mounts and an eerie whistling sound begins to play all across the grasslands. Black clouds dart across the sky, moving so fast that you can follow their progress easily. Only one cloud seems to be remaining stationary. [This could be a magical or arcane phenomenon such as an artificial moon or giant spaceship but it will be too far away for proper inspection.]

84 Without really noticing the transition, you find that you have come into a patch of shadow. Behind you, the waves of grass are as brightly lit as ever, but up ahead and to both sides, it is relatively dark and cool. Looking up, you see that you are in the shadow of a huge, puffy cloud, which is slowly meandering across the sky. It is a welcome respite from the heat of the sun and even the hot wind to which you've grown accustomed seems cooler than it has been all day. And then as quickly as it came, the cloud moves on, returning you to brightness and heat.

85 A bolt of lightning lances down from the sky, squarely striking a small tree [large bush, cactus plant, rock formation] nearby. You feel a shower of small wood [cactus, rock] chips strike you as the tree virtually explodes under the electrical onslaught. You notice that a few gray clouds have gathered overhead, but nothing to indicate a storm. [For added danger, have the tree catch fire; the fire will, of course, spread quickly to the grass.]




Waterways

86 A small stream crosses in front of you and feeds into the river some distance away. The stream is just a couple of paces across and it burbles merrily on its way. [If the adventurers look closely:] Among the small, flat stones that line the bed of the stream can be found a dozen or so river shrimp and a handful of the tiny, coin-sized land crabs that would make a pleasant change to your diet.

87 A stream can be seen in the distance, making a snaky line of richer green through the grassland. No trees grow along its banks, but it is distinctive because the sedges and reeds are thicker, coarser and a deeper green than the surrounding grasses. It appears to converge with the trail ahead and soon you can see it is a step or two wide, with a small amount of water running in it. The trail takes you nearer and for a bit the stream parallels the trail and you can see eroding banks, not as high as your knees, but nearly bare and vertical. Finally it intersects with the trail, broadening to a shallow channel two steps wide. You [stop for a drink, then] splash through it, smelling the water and noting the brief moment of humidity.

88 A little pond catches the sunlight and gleams like a dirty mirror. A side path leads down to what must be a commonly used campsite, brushing between low, thorny shrubs. The pond is small—it would take barely a dozen steps to walk around it—and a large area of dry mud surrounds it. The entry stream, to your left as you approach, is just a dry bed of gravel. The water in the pond is greenish and still. As you get within two steps of it, a large green frog leaps suddenly ahead of you to land well out into the pond with a resounding splash that sends ripples quickly all across the surface and tosses drops on the nearest adventurers. A pair of dark birds sitting at the edge of the grass on the other side flutter into flight, surprised by the disturbance.






89 Without warning, you come across a dry streambed directly in your path. The ground slopes sharply into the miniature valley, its dusty sides covered with dead grass, and rises equally sharply on the other side. The streambed itself is perhaps ten feet wide, and it winds off through the scrub and grass in both directions. Brightly colored pebbles have collected here, long since bleached to a dull, sandy color, along with larger stones, which sit in a long row in the bottom of the streambed. As you dip down into the trench to cross it, the sound of the wind diminishes, and you can hear the steady chirp of prairie crickets. The hot, dusty smell of the streambed sticks with you long after you have climbed the far side and moved on. [Dry streambeds are susceptible to flash flooding if a sudden downpour were to occur.]

Miscellaneous Sights

90 From a distance you see what look like haystacks, although it is not obvious what haystacks would be doing here so far away from any farming. As you approach, it becomes clear that these are piles of dung, possibly cow's dung to judge from cautious observation. The cow pats have been compacted into dry, crumbling stacks and although they no longer smell of anything much, you are reluctant to get too close to them.

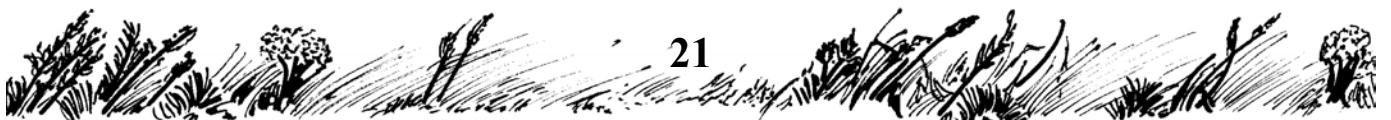
91 Rust-colored grasses as high as a man's head block your path. After a few steps, you find your feet sinking in mud. Feet [and hooves] squish into the muck and mire, yielding a sucking sound with each step. Mosquitoes, gnats and horseflies are a constant irritation. This march through the slough is not without its price. [Any exposed skin or animal parts without fur have accumulated tiny cuts from these sharp grasses.] Through the tips of the grasses you can see the bluest of skies. You




can just make out the tops of some trees in the distance. From the looks of it, they are oak trees or their ilk, over a hundred feet tall. The leaves burn yellow and gold [or glinting green] in the bright sun. [Sloughs or prairie potholes are wetlands common to the plains. They can be either freshwater or saline wetlands. In seasons of drought, they can dry up completely. If any characters are less than healthy, it is possible to contract malaria or other insect-borne diseases.]

92 You descend from a slight rise into a broad, flat valley. The stems of the grasses hide the ground, so you are surprised to discover that the valley is actually a couple feet deeper than it appears. Rather than rising to your [your horses'] knees, as they have been, the grasses are now hip high. The stems are taller than a man's arm is long, with upward-pointing leaves. Each leaf is as wide as a man's finger at the base and as much as a foot long. They are stiff with sharp edges, and make a brittle rustling sound as the wind blows. You have to be careful as you travel through the area; the grass blades are sharp and slash at any exposed skin [though the horses' hides should be safe]. The ground here is slightly softer; perhaps the wind cannot reach it to suck the moisture out. [Slough grass is found in lowland prairies. The leaves are sharp enough to cut skin, similar to a deep paper cut, and possibly draw blood.]

93 The grass here is taller than you are, its sharp edges threatening to slice through your skin as you push it aside. You can see only the dazzling blue of clear skies above you, and the rich jade green of the saw-toothed grass. The air hangs heavy with the pungent steam rising from the leaves as the morning dew dries in the sun. [You may wish to have an adventurer cut him or herself pushing through the grass. This will most likely be a trivial wound, not causing actual damage. If an adventurer is cut, read the following:] The grass catches on your bare skin leaving a long, thin gash. A drop of blood drips from your skin onto a broad blade of grass, pooling in the creases and dribbling down the stem.





94 It has been a warm breezy day as you make your way through the grassy plains. Things are tranquil as the sun-dried grasses ripple in the wind. Then you see a thick black column of smoke to your right. Something has lit the prairie ablaze. At that moment the wind changes and the smell of burning grass and ash assails you. The flames of a small prairie fire now sweep towards you at an alarming rate. [The fire may be as much as 300 feet wide, moves downwind at the rate of 40 feet per turn and widens by 10 feet on each side per turn. If there are animals in the group they will require expert handling to be prevented from panicking.]

95 A large area is charred and still smoking in places. The ground is black with white patches where it burned more thoroughly. The grass blades that were not consumed are brown and crisp. There is no food for horses and no game. Three vultures rise up from a carcass. It is difficult to say what died—a gopher or hare perhaps. You continue through the burned area all morning [afternoon].

Vultures and an occasional hawk can be seen, soaring in the sky, but nothing moves on the blackened plain. Your boots [horses' legs] are filthy from the ash. The smell and dust block your nostrils. When the wind blows, great clouds of ash swirl into the sky, obscuring the sun and blowing grit that seeps into every opening in clothes and packs.




96 The morning sun had been steady and true and the day seemed set to be fair and pleasant, yet now a red tinge is beginning to touch the sky in front of you and dark, reddish clouds are approaching. They are but clouds of course and you continue on your way unperturbed. However, the rain that the clouds eventually bring is not the wet water you expect but a fine drizzle of red sand that gets in your eyes and your hair [and irritates the horses and other animals]. The ground is quickly covered by the red sand but the accompanying wind causes it to skip and swirl around at ankle height. [Sand picked up from a desert by powerful wind storms can be transported very long distances before being deposited in remote locations.]

97 Miles away, just on the horizon, you spot a huge cloud of dust rising into the air. It looks small from this distance, but given how far away it actually is—ten miles, at least—it must be massive. As you walk [ride] through the grass, you can see the cloud moving, spreading out and rising higher as it stretches out along the horizon line. Glancing back, you can see that in places your party has kicked up smaller dust clouds of its own; it would take a much larger group to create that distant cloud.

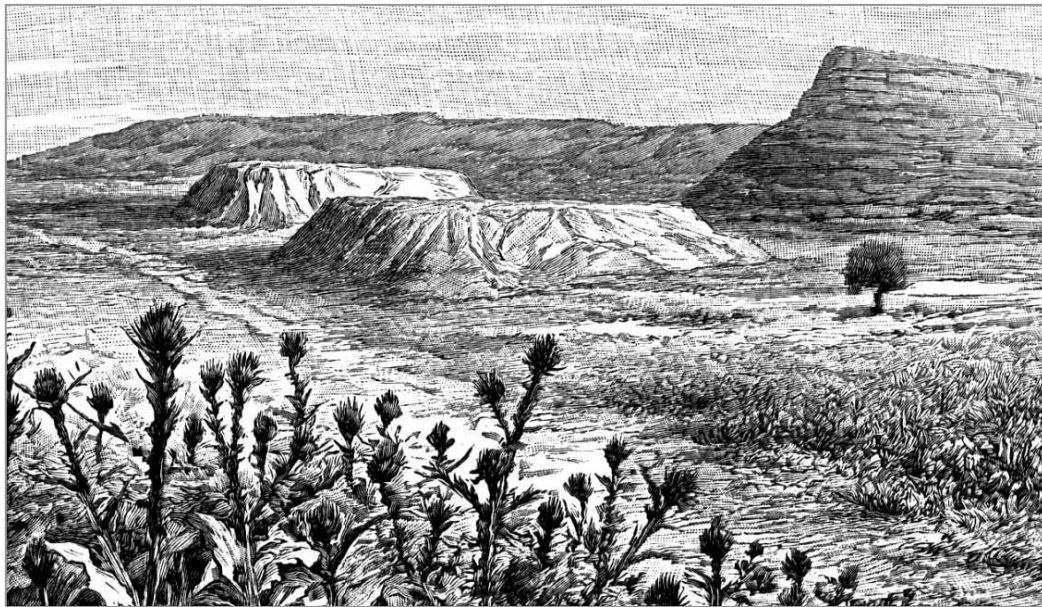
98 The grass has been rising higher and higher but now suddenly it is interrupted. It seems that a clear lane has been created, stretching from side to side into the distance. Traveling a few yards further, another lane crosses your path, this time sweeping away in a curve and then bending back on itself. The edges of the lane are marked by a very abrupt return to grass, so that it looks like someone has created the paths with a very sharp knife or scythe. Why would anyone do such a thing? A number of other lanes meet and crisscross over the next hundred yards. [Should anyone have the ability to fly, they might be able to look down on these lanes and work out that they spell the word 'Proof' in a suitable local language.]





99 An acrid stench overwhelms you as you stumble into a clearing in the field. Investigating, you discover that the grass here is flattened and scorched in a strange manner, as if some force had crushed it down then set it aflame. You suddenly realize that the shape of the clearing in the grass is not circular, as you would expect. A chill comes over you as you realize you are standing in the center of a massive, unfamiliar glyph. [Perhaps it is the effect of a spell, or perhaps the mark of some otherworldly power's entrance into this realm.]

100 As your eyes sweep across the landscape, you see endless miles of white dirt and pebbles with occasional tufts of faded grass. Your feet [horses' hooves] crunch across the rocky ground. The land is dry and scattered with straw colored globes of brush. Every so often, as the wind begins to gust, this brush breaks off and begins to bounce along in the wind. Soon, several large tumbleweeds are bounding across the fields in front of you, drifting like huge flakes of snow in every crack or crevice. Some areas of the gullies and washes are filled with the dead carcasses of this brush. Growing much of anything in this land would be a hardship.





Shards of the Plains

General

1 *A Blighted Area*

With no transition at all, the grass around you goes from fresh, green and vital to blighted, dry and dead. Looking ahead, you can see that this swath of unwholesome grass is at least a hundred feet in diameter. In places, the blades are covered with brown and black spots – but are still standing – while in other areas, clumps of grass are withered and flattened out on the dry earth. Where you can usually hear the chirps and buzzes of insects, and smell the prairie's grasses and flowers, this area is silent and you smell nothing at all.

2 *A Pile of Death*

As you cross the open plain, you suddenly catch a whiff of a heavy, fetid odor that is instantly recognizable: rotting flesh. Coming over the top of a low, broad hill, you see its source up ahead of you—a pile of carcasses at least ten feet high and perhaps twice that large around. The smell intensifies the closer you get, becoming almost unbearable at about twenty feet away. At that distance, it is clear that the corpses are all humanoid, though they have become bloated almost beyond recognition in the unrelenting heat of the sun. Their eyeballs have burst and rotted away, and the many animals of the plains have eaten much of what remains of the bodies themselves. As you pass by the heap, the drone of flies, which had been covered by the steady wind, fills your ears and it stays with you as you leave the mound of bodies behind.

3 *A Circle in the Grass*

The grass is short here and the plants occur in tufts and hillocks. Bright flowers are scattered randomly across the plain. Rocks of various sizes and colors stick up here and there. The randomness of the plants and rocks makes the circle before you that much more dramatic. A circle of dense grass grows, perfectly green and evenly shaped, out in the


middle of the prairie, several dozen paces from the trail. It appears about three paces in diameter and is quite symmetrical. Along its outer edge there is a ring of white flowers and around them a band of shorter yellow flowers; No rocks can be seen within the ring of yellow flowers, there either are none or the grass in the center completely covers them. No paths lead up to it. [This may be an obscure garden, the result of a very large circular influx of fertilizer, or a more mystical phenomenon.]

4 *A Walk in the Tall Grass*

The long, supple grass leaves are taller than dwarves. In the unbroken grassland, the only form of travel that makes any sense is going single file. The first person forces the grass apart and begins the process of knocking it down to make a path. The farther back you are in the line, the easier the going, because the grass is more trampled when you walk over it. The one in the lead works hard in the relentless sun. Every step requires forcing a way through long, soft but resilient grass blades. There is little air movement when you are surrounded by the tall grass, even though the wind makes the plant tops dip and dance. You drip with perspiration. The sky has few clouds and the sun beats on you. You have to conserve your water because there are few streams. Behind you the path you made lies as a conspicuous line across the plain.

5 *Hills of Yellow*

The continual yellow brown of the rolling hills goes on ahead of you to the horizon. There are no trees. The monotony is broken only by areas of dark green in the low spots between the low hills. Fresh water is scarce; you cross many dry streambeds but only rarely is there even a murky puddle to be seen. The shrubs have thick leaves with a rich complex smell; their spines and the branches are dense and very stiff. Generally you see the shrubs at a distance because the trail climbs to near the crest of the chain of hills and stays high,



avoiding going up or down if possible. When it does dip you note another advantage to the hilltop: finding the maximum breeze in the hot dry sunny days. Side paths sometimes head off toward the clusters of shrubs. Many side paths are well worn and clearly frequently traveled.

6 *Green Bees*

A small, bright green bee lands on you. It scrapes with its mouth [mandibles] across your shirt, clearly seeking something. On your skin it slows down, searching or feeding more slowly. Its six little feet barely tickle. A second bee lands, then a third. They walk slowly up and down your arms and legs, gathering in large numbers [on the sweaty sides of the horses]. There is no problem until you accidentally pinch one in your elbow or neck when you move. Then the bees sting! It is a small sharp pain that hardly raises a welt, but it hurts. You cannot avoid stings with a hundred or so little bees walking all over you. The middle of the day is an ordeal of non-aggressive little green bees. [The horses swish them off with their tails and apparently the sting does not reach through horsehide]. In mid-afternoon the bees gradually disappear [to reappear midmorning for two more days].



7 *Swimming in Grass*


The prairie stretches out before you. The grass is nearly five feet high, forming a solid wall of green as far as the eye can see. The blades are individually weak, but the sheer number of them makes a barrier so that passing through it is like swimming or making a path in deep snow. Pushing open a gap with the hands helps, yet beyond that is more grass and with the next step, yet more. The second person in line has an easier time because they can walk in the break in the grass.

Your passage leaves an obvious path behind you, but only someone on a high spot could see it from any distance. After a few yards, you are surrounded by grass and can see nothing except grass tops and the blue bowl of the sky above. To look for landmarks, you would have to be six feet up or higher. Not that there are landmarks to see; just unbroken, waving grass. The ground is not level but rises and falls over long gentle slopes. From the highest spots, there is a panoramic view of tall green grass dotted with spikes of yellow or blue flowers. Most of the time, however, one can see nothing but the grass on all sides.

8 *A Dry Grassland*

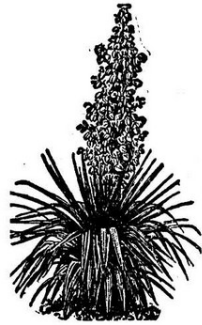
The land rises slowly. As you ride through the day, the dry grassland gets even drier. The grasses are knee-high with nodding pale heads. Often those heads have long threads that tangle in your laces and straps, or drive cruelly into your skin through buttonholes and seams. Amid the grasses are bright flowers: purple spikes, yellow tubes, and white umbels. They form bright patches in the vast pale-green grassland. There are no trees, even along the streams. As the land rises, there are more large rocks, which are pleasant to sit on during breaks. The plants are not tall enough to completely cover them, so you can see that they are abundant. Later in the day, the rocks have not gotten larger but the grasses and wildflowers are shorter: they fill the spaces between the rocks but rarely reach across them.





9 *A Prickly Situation*

In the short grassland, the grasses are interspersed with spiny plants [cacti]. When you sit down on some rocks to rest, you have to watch where you put your hands to avoid being stuck with long thorns. Leather gloves protect your hands effectively but the barbed tips are hard to remove once embedded in the leather. Likewise, good leather boots will not be pierced, but if you have been used to wearing sandals or slippers in the camp at night, you will find that the spines will go through normal cloth. They are sharp and painful to remove. When they catch in your clothing, even if they do not stab you, removing them requires caution, so that they do not stick into your hands when released from your clothes. [The horses hate them, and at every stop you must pull them off the ankles and lips of your mounts.]



Signs of Inhabitants

10 *Coming to the castle*

You walk [ride] down open dirt roads between trampled and grazed pasture and tilled fields. Herds of sheep and goats, tended by boys, graze on the hillsides. Presently knee-high fields of grains [wheat, oats] nod in the wind on both sides of the road. In most places a ditch and a low stone wall lies between you and the fields. A distant field worker in a broad hat hoes weeds. A blur on the horizon that is a fortress resolves itself into tall walls and turrets. Now you pass rows of vegetables: leafy greens and the growing tops that will bear carrots, onions or beans later in the season. Fruit orchards of small trees can be seen across the valley. On the hills, row upon row of grapevines have small developing fruits. It is diverse and productive, and the vistas of orderly fields run to the horizon in all directions.

11 *Elven Courier*

A dark spot is seen on the horizon behind you. The shape presently resolves into a slender man on a light brown horse—a solitary rider, pushing his horse, slowly overtakes you. As he catches up you see well-worn leathers, a short bow and a curving sword. On his head is a funny hat, broad-brimmed at the front and back only, with a long white feather in the brim. The horse is a big handsome animal taking long strides effortlessly, despite the distance it must have come. The rider's long dark hair is tied back from a weathered face of elven beauty. He nods to you and passes quickly. [He does not respond to comments.] A crested pouch with a golden seal proclaims him a courier on royal business. He rides swiftly onward until he vanishes into the distance, leaving you to tell half-remembered stories of the magic and daring of the elven couriers.


12 *Party of Traveling Folk*

Some distance away, a party of travelers cross your projected path. Two wagons, with little dwellings built into the wagon beds and several rugged horsemen and women comprise the party. They are not dressed for war, but rather appear as rogues or wanderers, traveling folk by your best estimation. [It would take some quick riding to reach them in time to stop their progress.] It appears their possessions are few, and the wheels of the wagons are turning easily. They do not appear to be heavily loaded. On one of the wagon seats, sits an elderly couple; on the other there is a young woman with a child. A goat is tied to one of the wagons and a pack mule to the other.

13 *A Land of Villages*

The neat straight road leaves the city and passes through open lands dotted with villages. No trees grow along the road. The sun shines brightly overhead and the breeze is pleasant. Small birds sing melodically from somewhere out of sight. On both sides of the road are fields of village crops—wheat, rye and peas mainly. Low rock or stick fences





mark the boundaries and protect the crops from wandering livestock. The road dips down to ford slow-moving streams, passing through thick, sloppy black mud. It has not rained for several days and the approach to the ford is bone dry—only close to and in the water is it muddy. At the streams edge, there are vivid red flowers. Disturbed by your appearance, a flock of small yellow birds erupt from the stream bed, while a dozen orange butterflies, feeding on the black mud, barely move as you pass through.



14 *A Field of Beans*

As you come to the top of a hill, you are struck by the smell of freshly turned earth and the stink of manure. Below you are carefully aligned rows of crops. From this distance, they look like bean plants. Further off, you can see a small cluster of people carefully tending the plants, working with hoes to dig the soil. Beyond them is a small collection of buildings. One, with smoke coming from a chimney, is most likely a house. The others resemble a barn and buildings for crop and tool storage.

15 *A Meeting of Travelers*

You travel hours without seeing anyone else on the trail. The wind whispers continuously around you. The grass, dotted with bright

wildflowers, stretches out in all directions, featureless. A red-brown songbird perches on a tall dead stick, singing loudly and melodiously. When you finally meet another group on the trail, it is a long process. First they are dots on the horizon. Gradually they come close enough that you can pick out and count eleven horses. Slowly details come into focus: spears held by the outriders, three riderless horses laden with burdens, a horse carrying two children. They move cautiously off the trail to let you pass, guards on the outside, pack horses and children on the inside, but they greet you courteously enough as you pass, asking about the trail you have come over and briefly reassuring you about the trail ahead.

16 *Old Wagon Trail*

Your path through the grassland intersects with an old wagon trail, its surface broken up by clumps of scrub grass. Two wide, deep ruts run down its length, with lines of grass growing parallel to each of them. This trail looks like it has not been used for years, although it is not clear why it would have been abandoned. Half buried in the bare dirt on the side of the trail furthest from you is part of a wagon wheel, its metal rim pitted with rust.

17 *A Path through the Tall Grass*

The grass stands shoulder high, its leaves half as wide as your thumbprint. Stalks that will hold seeds, still green for now, are shooting up another handspan or two. In some places you cannot see more than a few feet because the grasses block the view. Between the grasses, the trail is packed and open. Plants are growing on the trail but they have been trampled by the regular passage of men, beasts and carts, so they are crushed and broken. For hours, the soil is very soft and fine, with virtually no rocks, so travel is very comfortable. On either side of you, the grass stands like a wall of leaves that stretches far as the eye can see. It waves slightly in the wind, as if it were the top of a great sleeping animal with green hair.





18 *A Canyon through the Grass*

You have come to an area where the trail is clearly not frequently used, because while it is easy to see where the path goes, the grass is only knocked down. No open space without plants exists. Instead, travelers have broken enough plants to make a canyon through the shoulder-high tall grass. These leaves are large for a grass plant, and very long, reaching to even tall men's chins. Stalks that will hold seeds, still green now, stick up another handspan or two. In some places you cannot see more than a few feet ahead because the grasses block the view. You tromp onward, beating down the grass even more and working harder than you prefer to travel because the trail is neither open nor level. The wind whispers through the grass, making it move and concealing any sounds that might warn you of the presence of others.

19 *A Ruined Temple*

You see a strange shape sticking up out of the ground ahead of you. From this distance, you cannot quite make out the details, but it looks like a building of some sort. As you approach, the shape becomes more distinct. It is a ruined temple of some sort, and from the look of things, it has been abandoned for dozens of years. Only part of one wall remains, standing grimly over the rubble strewn around the site. A single stone staircase leads six or seven feet into the air, ending at nothing. Planks and timbers stick up from the ruin randomly. The entire site is strewn with stones that vary in size from pebbles to blocks too large for anyone to lift. [There is nothing of value here. The temple fell into disrepair and ruin more than 100 years ago, and any valuables have long since been taken away. Any character knowledgeable about religion can guess that this may have been a temple to a local nature god.]

20 *Stone Obelisk*

You first spot it on the horizon, where it looks like a tall finger pointing in the air. The closer you come, the more you realize the scale of the thing, which is the height of five men in total. It is an obelisk, a huge standing stone

erected by some long-vanished people for unknown reasons. Although tall it is narrow and little more than three paces wide or deep. The narrowness of the obelisk makes it look as if a strong gust of wind would surely knock it down yet it seems to have been standing there for a long time, judging by the smoothness of the stone from which all traces of any pattern or inscription seem to have been completely eroded. It is impossible to tell where the stone originated or how far it was dragged here by its creators. [If desired, the obelisk could be reached at dawn, dusk or a time of equinox when it points directly to the sun, moon or other astronomical phenomenon.]


Animals

21 *Spooking the herd*

The land rises to your right, and silhouetted against the horizon about a mile away is a herd of grazing animals. They are too far away to see exactly what they are or to count



them precisely, but there are at least three dozen of them. You are, perhaps fortunately, upwind of the herd. Most of the animals are the size of adults, but you can see a few younger ones milling about. [If the party approaches, they find the animals are a typical of the area. If an adventurer approaches within one-quarter mile, read the following:] **The largest member of the herd snorts and raises its head to look at you. It stands completely still, and even from this distance you can hear it breathing heavily. After a few seconds, other members of the herd stop grazing and turn to look at you as well. Suddenly, as a single organism, the entire herd turns and races away from you as fast as it can, disappearing over the far side of the hill.**



22 *Crispy Dinner*

The breeze is light and puffy white clouds in fantastic shapes pass in front of the sun now and then, keeping the heat from getting too intense. The grasses are more than knee high and their green tops nod in the wind. Then you see a spot that is not green. The grass here is burned to black and white ash. No plants have re-grown here at all, but there is no smoke. The burned area is small, only the size of a large peasant's hut in extent. There are no features that suggest why this particular spot caught fire. In all directions the grass is growing normally. You do see some signs of disturbance within the burned area: the soil is turned as if a heavy animal or animals struggled there, but there are no carcass or bones. [A dragon or other monster killed its prey with fiery breath and flew off with it.]

23 *Big Bird*

A bird is visible overhead. It is so high you can see no features, but it moves like an eagle. Sometimes you think you can pick out black and white markings, but mostly it is a silent silhouette, lazily riding the thermals. You have seen this bird, or one like it, on other days. You watch it land briefly far ahead of you, on a pile of three rocks, each as tall as it is. It sits for a long time, and then, well before you can see any features, it leaps back into the air, flaps



strong wings and rises out of sight ahead of you. Today, the country is rough, and the trail twists and turns to find an easy path between huge rocks. In late afternoon you reach the rock upon which the big bird sat, and discover that, if you have not mistaken the place, the bird must be huge because each of the three rocks is twice as tall as a man.

Times and Seasons

24 *Morning Rainbow*

The air is cool and there is a slight breeze as the sun rises. To the east and overhead the sky turns a crisp bright blue with the dawn, but the west is dark with rain clouds. As you are packing, you look west to see a rainbow against the clouds. The great arc rises high in the sky, intensely colored: red, orange, yellow and green. The blue is visible and there is even a band that is clearly violet. It hangs there all the time you are loading up. Indeed, it appears nearer as the dark clouds approach. The sun rises higher, the rainbow intensifies, the slate-gray rain clouds tower higher. And then, raindrops fall on you, at first a few then a cascade. The rainbow has vanished. You can still see the sun to the east. Beyond the storm, westward, blue sky appears. The storm moves off after only a few minutes, and not enough rain falls to form puddles.

25 *Sunrise, Sunset*

Knee-high grasses brush your legs as you continue to walk. As the sky begins to lighten [darken], bands of pink and blue color the sky. The pink matches the pinkish-purple spikes of the flowers at your feet. The fog begins to lift [rise] in the valley before you, the mists swirling slowly here and there. They are mesmerizing to watch. Dots of yellow daisy-like flowers are interspersed in the field. Slowly the shades burn away [fall] and the sun starts to burn bright and hot, warming you with its rays [starts to fade, crisping the air as it sets]. [The fog can obscure any number of things from the travelers' view, like animals, monsters, the road ahead, a shack, etc.]



26 *Morning on the Plains*

The hills are green, fading off into unimaginable distances without a feature. No trees, no rock outcrops, just endless grass. It would be easy to get lost in this land without features to steer by. However, the sun is almost always visible as a reference point. At dawn there are a few scattered clouds but the mainly clear sky lets you follow the sun's path easily. Indeed, the sun's heat beats down unceasingly. The morning temperatures are mild but hour after hour in the sun and



everything warms up, becoming oppressively hot. Only the slight breeze that blows most of the time eases the heat. The trail is generally easy to follow; with no barriers for great distances it is a straight line heading in a compass direction. Now and then it intersects a stream and follows that for a while, before heading due west [or north, south, east] again.

27 *A Chilly Morning*

The morning air is cool. Dew glistens on all the leaf-blades in the long beams of the low sun, like a field of diamonds. A light breeze caresses your skin and you are almost cool enough to need an extra shirt. A big bee lumbers past you, making a buzzing sound. It is the size of your thumb and it flies strongly

into the chilly breeze. You have a glimpse of a fuzzy round black- and yellow-striped body as it passes. It makes a straight line out over the grasses and then suddenly drops down, vanishing among the foliage. After an interval it reappears, popping suddenly into sight, and then it speeds away, the buzz barely audible, across the tops of the grass.

28 *Afternoon Clouds*

The early afternoon sky is bright blue with a few fluffy white clouds against the vastness that seems all around you as you walk [ride] through the low vegetation. As the hours pass, the clouds grow slowly into great soft-looking white towers, until they rise unimaginably high overhead. The taller they get, the darker the earthward end becomes. The massive clouds block the sun sometimes but more than half of the sky is still blue and cloudless, so you largely pass the afternoon in the bright warm sunlight. Birds soar and dive, chirping, in pursuit of insects. The wind picks up, tugging at your hair and whistling in the grass.

29 *An Evening Rain*

The day has been long and tedious and the landscape has remained the same sullen gray and brown all around. As evening arrives and thoughts turn to the day's final meal and rest, a light rain begins to fall. The gentle rain is absorbed into the ground and within a few minutes works a transformation all around: snails and worms emerge from the earth and move slowly about the land, while flowers like tiny blue daisies bloom in the evening air and give forth a pleasant, fresh aroma. The land changes and breathes as if it has been given new life. [Someone may wish to eat the snails and worms, which are edible, if not to everyone's taste.]



30 *Fireflies at Sunset*

The sun descends over the rolling hills to the west. The sky around it is bathed in reds, oranges, and yellows. With every moment, the colors darken and shift, reflecting off the puffy, rolling clouds. Your shadows grow long on the grass, stretching out behind you and blending into the grass itself. The first few brave fireflies are just starting to light up and in the low light it is difficult to focus on them as they drift around in the light breeze. The last few fingers of light are cheered on by a sudden chorus of crickets. Finally, all that is left is the rosy glow of the sun under the horizon, which slowly dies out and gives way to darkness.

you put a casual hand on the ground in the darkness. Walk in the dark and the individual spines lodge in your boots or hook into your ankle. Reach down incautiously to pull them off and you get them in your hands! Otherwise, the camp is very pleasant. The wind dies to a gentle whisper and the temperature drops to be cool but not cold. The stars appear one by one in the cloudless sky until there are millions of them overhead, slowly wheeling around the blue-black sky as the night passes.

32 *Setting Sun, Starry Skies*

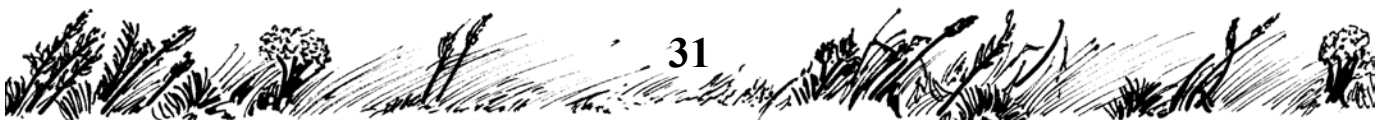
The sun sets slowly into the west, lighting the clouds with oranges and pinks and then slowly fading to purples. The shades of color get darker and darker, but are still bright right where the sun sank below the horizon. Color lingers after the sun has gone. The breeze is cool and the air smells sweet. The first star appears high overhead as the sky color deepens from dark blue to almost black. Another star appears near the horizon, and suddenly there are ten, a hundred, then uncounted numbers. They fill the night sky so densely that even though the



31 *A Spiny Campsite*

The well-used campsites have been cleared of most plants and you move about without thinking of the little spiny plants [cacti] that dot the landscape. However, as you set up camp tonight in an area where others have not created a campsite, the stiff little plants are an infuriating hazard. They stab you if

moon[s] has [have] not risen, the night is bright from starlight. You can walk in reasonable safety about the camp. The light from the campfire actually makes your vision worse. All is black and grays, and yet you can pick out the grasses, and the sleepers in their bedding, [the horses] without difficulty.



33 *Creatures of the Night*

As the sun sets, fast-flying birds [swallows] swoop back and forth across the grassland, picking off insects. Their agility draws your eyes to watch the show: they drop suddenly, rise sharply, and fly on apparent collision-courses, only to avoid each other at the last second. As the darkness deepens, they become less numerous and soon are gone, only to be replaced by bats. A lone bird whistles from a distance. The breeze makes the grasses



whisper softly. Crickets call out rattling chirps in the grass. A howl from the far horizon begins, is joined by two others and answered by a chorus on the other side of your camp [wolves or coyotes]. A great bird's flight across the sky high above blocks the stars for a few seconds and is gone in absolute silence [owl?].

34 *Starry Night*

The night sky is so bright and clear here in the grasslands. The stars themselves twinkle like diamonds in the void. Shooting stars race through the night, first white and then darkening to orange. It looks as if they will fall to earth here and perhaps bring luck and fortune with them, but they always just disappear before they come to earth. [It is possible to come across a meteor that has landed. They were much prized for the quality of steel that could be made from meteoric iron.]

35 *Springtime Prairie*

The rolling plain stretches on and on into the pale distance ahead until you can see no

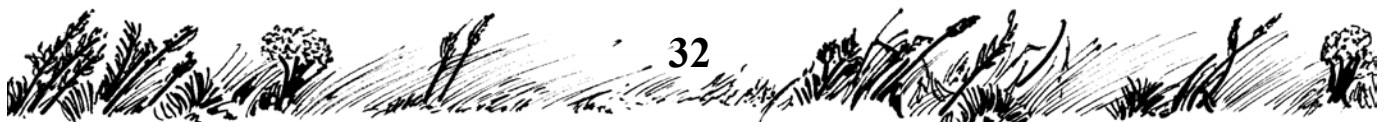
farther. The grasses are knee-high, green leaves of the new season pushing up above the brown blades of last year, making a mottled, shaggy look. Much of it is bright green, appearing smooth and silky. Amid that are areas of varied hues: deep green, reddish, and bluish greens. The great carpet of grass is interrupted in places by groups of bright yellow flowers or by the cream-colored heads of plants in bud. Here and there are spikes of strong pink and blue. Closer to you, you can see large coarse leaves on some of the plants, which the wind turns so that they move in your view alternately light and dark green. A small bird with a white belly sings a chirping song from its perch on an old stick, the sound seeming very loud for such a small bird.


36 *Fields of Summer*

The road runs straight, passing between cultivated fields. At this time [early summer] some of the fields have dense green plants covered with beans or peas. The wheat and oats are ripening their grains. Other fields are being planted with fall or winter vegetables. Still other plots lie fallow, unplowed and unplanted, with only a tangle of weeds growing on them. Villagers work the fields. You see two or three men, plowing with big tawny oxen. One leads the animal and the others follow behind, manipulating the plow and burying seeds carried in a cloth shoulder bag. Elsewhere, chopping out weeds and picking off bugs, you see women with their heads wrapped in patterned scarves, carrying woven baskets on their backs and flanked by children. They rarely seem to notice you, but



when they do, they quickly drop their eyes and go back to work.





37 *A Dry Summer*


This country has long rolling hills covered with grass, but the rain is seasonal and falls in the winter. Here in midsummer just past the Solstice, the grass is brown and very dry. It cracks and breaks underfoot. You travel amid great swaths of dead grass while the sun wheels across the cloudless blue sky. The air warms until you are hot but a slight breeze playing on the plant tops rustles your hair and keeps it bearable. Flocks of small birds fly up suddenly from among the grasses where they have been consuming seeds. They flutter and cry loudly as they rise into the air. In a flurry of wings dozens of small birds fly up beyond arrow shot to land and vanish again amid the grasses.

38 *Golden Autumn*

Autumn is coming on here. The nights are much cooler, though many afternoons are still warm. Today is a perfect fall day, the temperature just right for travel. The fields of grass through which you pass are no longer green, but in the sun they glow golden rather than showing winter's dull brown. Above you the sky seems huge, stretching from one distant horizon to the other. It is a deep, glorious blue in color, crystal clear and brilliant in contrast to a few high, puffy white clouds.

39 *A Foggy Winter's Day*

A jagged line of trees rises from the plain. Through the tan grasses, you can barely see the covering of grainy snow on the ground. The cold catches in your lungs when you breathe deeply. Riding [walking] along the edges of the open area, gray mists surround you. The snow crunches under foot. Fog drifts through the tree line and black branch fingers trace paths through it. The trees stand, lonely black sentinels against the white sky. The sun's bright white glow does not cut the chill or burn away the fog. [Is this an earthly fog, or does it hid something supernatural in its midst?]




40 *Wind and Snow*

The ground is covered with over a foot of dry snow. It blows over the ground, the currents and eddies of a frozen wind-borne river. Wisps of snow swirl with the breeze. Piles of cold grainy snow trace bulky shadows behind every tuft of dried grass. Small rises turn into frozen waves of snowdrifts. Blue and white shadows cover the landscape. The blue sky is cloudless overhead. The sun hangs low on the horizon, with faded bands of blue and pink just above it. Several faint lines of smoke are visible in the sky, but you cannot see their source. [The smoke could indicate a traveling party, a dwelling or city nearby.] A dark line of purple hills is barely visible on the horizon. To reach the next village, it will be a couple days of hard travel [sledding.] You [your dogs, caribou, horses, oxen] will tire quickly in the loose snow.

41 *Whiteout!*

The steel-gray sky is barely visible through the blast of white that surrounds you. If you put your arm out in front of you, you can barely see your hand. The snow drifts in jagged peaks. In those moments when the wind dies, you can just make out the ridge of snow stretching before you. Sharp needles of wind-driven snow make their way through your heavy wraps and burrow into every inch of open flesh. If you stay out in this weather too long, frostbite will be guaranteed. [Frostbite is the freezing of fluids in the skin or bodily tissues. It can occur in minutes. Several layers of woolen material are the best protection. Hand coverings are essential.] There is little sound other than the roaring of the wind in your ears. Large jagged chunks of snow are scattered along the ridge, where drifts have broken apart. It is hard to tell which direction you came from and which direction you are going. [Whiteout conditions are common in the Plains when gusting winds pick up dry snow. Travelers often get lost in these conditions without guidance.]



42 *Blizzard on the Plains*

It is a gray day and bitterly cold. As you pack up [travel], large flakes of snow begin to accumulate on your sleeves. Each is an amazing kaleidoscope of shapes, not one alike. They taste wet upon your lips and tongue. They are falling faster with each moment, covering the ground and the wind is picking up. This may be a bad day for travel. [Travelers should decide quickly whether to set up camp again or try to outrun the storm.] From the skies, you can see no end in sight to the clouds that crest the horizon. The wind is whipping faster now and the snow has changed from soft flakes to stinging barbs against your cheeks. You can now no longer see across your campsite [see more than a stone's throw away]. The wind builds to a full roar, buffeting your body and stealing your breath. In a matter of minutes you will no longer be able to see your hand in front of your face. Blizzards come on fast in these open spaces. [Blizzards are difficult to predict. Blizzards are characterized by falling or blowing snow with 35 mph winds for periods exceeding 3 hours in length. Whiteouts involve blowing snow and can be so severe it becomes impossible to distinguish the air from the ground.]

43 *A Snowy Day*

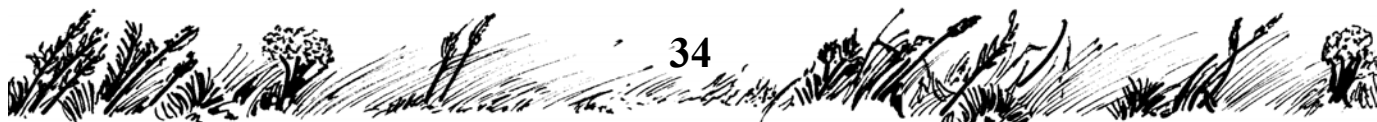
Thick blankets of snow cover the bank of the river [stream]. The trees each have their own cloak of snow. You hear muffled thumps as wet snow falls from branches laden with the stuff. If you brush against the thinner tree trunks, you will get your own personal snow drift from above. The river [stream] flows in silent black ribbons around the mushroom-shaped puffs of white covering each stone in the freezing waters. The smooth river stone is slippery as you tread upon it [ride across it] making the way treacherous. You can hear the songs of birds wintering in the valley. They sing briskly, fluffing their feathers against the cold. Everything is softened in this world of winter white and gray.

44 *Icy River*

The sky is a brilliant blue overhead, with bits of clouds traveling along in the breeze. You leave the flat of the snow-covered plains and pick your way down through the bluffs and cottonwood skeletons along the banks of the river. The steely gray waters are running swiftly. Broken chunks of ice swirl on the surface of the waters, shifting as if they were puffy clouds in a summer sky. There is no way to cross the river safely here. You will need to find a way around it somehow. You hear creaking and snapping from the trees at the river banks and from the ice in the river. Further down the bank, several large trees



have fallen. Conveniently, two of them stretch from bank to bank. The ice is stacking up at this obstruction. The ice looks like thick shards of opaque glass swept into a pile. [The ice will eventually form an ice dam. If enough water and ice back up, flooding will occur, overflowing the river banks at this location. The pressure from the river and the ice could eventually snap the fallen trees.]



45 *A Hot Spring*

You can see a pool that seems to be clear of ice. Snow-covered grasses extend to the water's edge. A few trees create a bit of shelter in these open lands. Great hulking beasts with snowy backs snuffle away at the snow to graze on the sparse grasses underneath, while a few stand in the stream, drinking their fill. Steam rises from the open waters. A hot spring has formed a pool of open water, an oasis in the ever-present cold. The steam billows up, rising into the bluest of skies. The great beasts create steam of their own with their heavy breath; their humped backs and great beards are frosted with ice. They move slowly and cautiously, watching you with small beady eyes as they leave the spring. The snow glitters and sparkles in the sun. It looks like you have the pool to yourself; what do you do? [Travelers can set up camp and enjoy the hot spring. At its outer reaches, it is like a hot tub. If they get too close to the spring's source though, they can sustain damage. Travelers can also try a bison hunt.]

46 *Deer in the Winter*
Hoarfrost traces the twisted lines of the scrub oaks that dot the landscape. Each dark branch underlines a collection of white crystals.



The frost will soon burn away as the sun warms the air. Tufts of grass peek through the sparse snow, easy targets for the small herd of deer foraging here. Their brown fur and white rumps are recognizable. The pale-blue sky above is

cloudless and open. The air is still and brisk, a kinder winter day than many another. The horizon is near; you are approaching a crest. The gentle rise and fall of the land will stretch before you for days [hours] if you continue this course. The ground is rocky beneath the sparse grasses. It climbs gently upwards, only to fall again after you reach the crest. [There are twelve white-tailed deer in this herd, but the party sees only six of them. The rest are lying down or hiding in the brush. They blend well into the white and brown of the landscape.]

Weather

47 *A Sudden Storm*

The skies darken as clouds race in front of the sun. The temperature drops noticeably as a wind skips across the land. When the rain begins to fall, it falls in great heavy drops. It sweeps across the fields of grass and forces them down almost as if they had been scythed down with the rapidity of a blade slicing through the plants.

52 *The Dark Day*

As the afternoon progresses, clouds build. Soon towering gray clouds cover the westerly sun. The clouds come lower, filling the sky. The wind picks up, and soon it is blowing very strongly. If your hat is not tied on, it will blow off. Although it is still day, it gets very dark. You can see lightning jumping between the clouds and hear the thunder. As the storm reaches you, you are pounded by hail the size of cherries, beating on the party members [and tormenting the horses]. The lightning cracks overhead, lighting the sky as bright as daylight for a few seconds. Then the dark descends again and the thunder shakes the very air. Sheets of rain pour down, blinding everyone. Water gets into everything, making pools in even slight depressions in your garments and gear. After about a quarter hour it lessens to a steady rainfall. Then the wind drives the storm onward and the clouds overhead start to break up. The late sun shines on you and you ride on a soggy path with water dripping off all of your gear.



49 *After the Rain*

The rain has finally abated and for a minute, everything is quiet. The water soaks completely into the ground, leaving damp patches and the smell of wet earth. As if on cue, the hum of insects surrounds you suddenly, with hundreds of locusts starting their monotonous drone. The clouds break up slowly and the pale sun peers through as it burns off the remaining cover. Surprisingly, the ground is almost dry already as the thirsty soil absorbs the rain. A gentle breeze blows through the prairie, misting you with the water dripping off the blades of grass.

50 *The Smell of Rain*

What starts with a few drops, fat and heavy, quickly becomes a steady patter as a gentle rain begins to fall. As the pace picks up, the grass around you begins to bow down, and fat raindrops slide off the larger blades of grass. The air is instantly cooler, and the smell of grass and heat is replaced by the damp, pleasant smell of the rain itself. The sky is still fairly clear, with only patches of deep-gray clouds, but the haze of rain covers the plains as far as you can see. The wind has died down, and in its place is the steady beat of rain on the grass, scrub and bare earth.

51 *Storm on the Horizon*

Overhead sweeping rows of tiny clouds, are marching most of the way to the horizon, but as you travel they are replaced by tall, dark rain clouds. There is a storm on the horizon, a wide gray and black band that stretches as far as you can see in either direction. Bright flashes spark within the clouds, and occasionally wide arcing bolts of lightning reach out of the clouds and touch down somewhere over the

horizon. You cannot hear or smell the storm, but you can feel its presence: massive, heavy and brooding.

48 *Thunderstorm*

A gigantic flash of lightning is followed immediately by a deafening clap of thunder and with a rush, the rain is upon you. The water pelts you mercilessly, instantly soaking you. The rain drips under armor and through clothing, chilling you. Gusts of wind whip through the grass, swirling it wildly. For a few moments, the rain comes down so hard you cannot see, then, as you get used to the sheeting water, your eyes adjust and are able to make out the dim shapes of your comrades. Overhead, the sky has grown completely black with thick clouds, and each flash of lightning illuminates the boiling mass of thunderheads above. Lightning and thunder are now virtually simultaneous, and each boom shakes the ground under your feet. The torrent continues for what feels like hours,

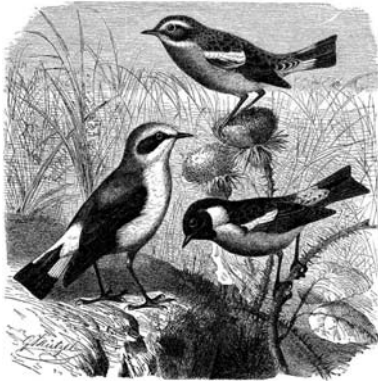


then quickly dies off with a few final stinging drops. The rain passes, though the clouds overhead promise to deliver more. Flashes of lightning still burst in the sky, but the thunder sounds farther away.



53 *Little Black Rain Cloud*

The wind is strong and there are scattered areas of dark clouds. You watch one of them along the horizon, almost black, with rain coming out of the bottom like lines of darkness. Lightning sometimes cuts through it, but it is so far away you cannot hear it. A bit later, one dark cloud comes nearer and nearer as you hike [ride] along. It seems to be converging with the trail ahead of you. Presently the dark winds swirl around you and the rain reaches you first as drops and then as a wall of water. The wind blasts the rain into your face and whips around you. The rain makes it hard to see where you are going, but you are just thinking to stop and wait it out when it eases off, and the cloud continues on the way you came, drenching everything. In the wet sunshine after the rainstorm, small birds sing boldly.



54 *Building Storm*

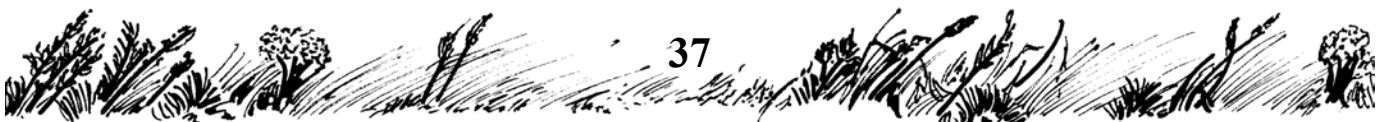
The clouds, few and far between in the morning sunlight, increase in number and size all afternoon. By the late afternoon, they are building into tall thunderheads. By evening the sky is overcast and the clouds hang low above you. Then lightning can be seen in the distance, jumping from the sky to the earth. It is still far away and the rumble of thunder is more felt in the earth than heard. The sun sets behind the billowing clouds, staining them glorious oranges, reds and purples. But when that fades, there are no stars to be seen. The thunder is nearer. The lightning flashes light the sky, forking and dividing. You know you are going to get soaked more than a half hour before it reaches you. The storm gives a terrific light show, with lightning streaking in all directions.

55 *Hailstorm*

Clouds have gathered, and large drops of rain begin to spatter the dry ground. The rain falls a little harder, and then strikes hard enough to sting. You realize suddenly that was not the rain at all; tiny white pellets are falling along with the water. The sharp pattering of the hail turns to solid thumps as larger pieces start to fall. [Adventurers with metal helms will have their heads well-protected, but may end up with headaches due to the noise.] When pieces of ice the size of walnuts start coming down, the situation changes from inconvenient to dangerous-these are heavy enough to cause bruises or cuts [or possibly a concussion, in the right circumstances. The party should seek shelter, or find ways to protect themselves and their animals.]

56 *Tornado Hits*

The sky has a sickly greenish-yellow cast to it, turning the clouds an unearthly shade. Until a few minutes ago, the wind had been blowing steadily, now the unexpected lull makes your group uneasy, [including any animals in your party.] After some time, a sudden change takes place. The clouds have darkened and the wind begins whipping ferociously. Sheets of rain fall from the sky drenching everything, followed closely by heavy hail. [Characters should be taking shelter in low areas or protected places at this point.] Lightning streaks across the sky; the black clouds are piled high above you. A roaring sound is heard and the ground begins to shake. You see a writhing grey finger of cloud begin to descend from the sky towards the earth. As it touches down, the dust of the fields mushrooms up around its base. Like a snake preparing to strike, the storm writhes its way on a parallel course to your own, spreading destruction in its wake. [At the GM's discretion, the wind could change course and hit the group. If the group has not taken shelter, the strong winds could lift and carry away characters and pack animals. Even at a distance, flying debris could result in injuries.]



57 *Tornado Moves Away*

Black clouds threaten overhead, visible even in the looming darkness. In the distance thunderheads build, lightning flashing through them as if a giant blacksmith were at work. You can see the distant rain drawing streaks across the sky and a whiff of rain reaches you on the breeze. A section of cloud slowly twists towards the ground, its point plowing a furrow in the earth while the cloud of debris around the funnel grows. The sight of awesome yet terrifying power holds your attention as you watch the tornado bounce its way across several fields before rising back into the sky. [This storm is no threat to the characters, unless of course the GM wishes otherwise.]

Waterways

58 *A Shallow Stream*

The land angles down in a gentle slope, rising a little then falling more as you continue. After a few hundred yards, the ground levels off and you come to a small stream running with clear water. The stream looks too large to jump across [approximately 30 feet to the other bank]. Fortunately, it is also very shallow, and you can probably wade to the other side without getting too wet above your ankles. A few tiny fish dart through the low reeds growing here, moving back and forth in search of food. The stream bed is covered in small rocks that have a polished look to them. The creek winds off into the grass both upstream and down. [This water is safe to drink, although it is a little silty. The fish are edible, but so small that they are not worth the effort except by the truly desperate.]

59 *A Sluggish Creek*

Your trail runs into a shallow creek a few feet wide, which sits in a deep furrow in the earth. Long grass hangs over it on both sides. Clouds of tiny flies buzz soundlessly over the length of the stream, which meanders its way through the grassland to either side of your path. Bits of dead grass and occasional leaves can be seen floating on the water's surface,

carried slowly downstream on the sluggish current. The stream is not more than a few inches deep in most places, and rocks of all shapes and sizes stick up out of the water, their tops bleached and baked dry by the sun.

60 *A Summer River*

You reach a big riverbed. The channel is farther across than any of you could throw a stone, but it is filled with shrubs. Almost no water is running down the river. You can clearly see the course of the river when it is filled with water in the spring. Now [in midsummer] shrubs and weeds taller than halflings are growing densely within the banks of the river and on the sand bars that were left as the water retreated. There is only one area left where water is standing, greenish, stagnant and warm. A variety of



reeds and rushes encroach on it. Something leaps into the water with a splash. You can see tiny fish, leeches and water striders in the muddy water. [The river is running: if someone digs a hole in the sand, it will quickly fill with water, and a rainstorm would speedily quickly rejuvenate this river.]



61 *River to the Sea*

The river is broad and dark here. Tiny islets have sprung up in the slow flow of the water so that tufts of grass poke out into the air. As



you continue to follow the course of the river, the expanse of the water increases dramatically and the islands increase in number and size. Eventually it is clear that there is no single river any more but a series of perhaps eight, ten or a dozen. It is not possible to count each branch individually because some are so far away. A salt tang has entered the air you breathe, indicating that the sea is very near now. Gulls wheel and scream as they fly swiftly around the sky, occasionally swooping down to the surface of the water to try to snatch up an unwary fish. As you watch, it is a gull that has become unwary as the sea creature the bird sought to snatch from the water instead grabs it and pulls it, wings flapping frantically, down into the depths. Sand gnats hover low around some of the patches of grasses, especially closer to the edge of the sea, where some plants have rotted from the ebb and flow of the tide.

62 *Grassland by the Sea*


The air is cool. The breeze off the sea tosses the tops of the flowers. Around you the grass is bright green and ankle-high. The seasonal rain stopped a week ago and the plants are growing rapidly. There are all kinds of flowers just starting to bloom: orange saucers, purple spikes and tiny white crosses, dotting the rolling hills as far as the eye can see. The sun beats down. Bees and bright butterflies flit between the flowers. Small songbirds whistle complex calls. The birds are hard to see where they perch on the low flowers, but their calls are clearly audible for some distance. Flowers are growing on the little-used trail and every step you take crushes a few more. The green smell is pleasant. [An area along a large body of water. These are grasslands because of low rainfall, poor soils or both.]

Miscellaneous Sights

63 *The Mudslide*

Underfoot the trail is gravelly and firm but to your right you see a hillside that slid in recent heavy rains. Great sections of mud slid down the slope, tearing up everything in their path and burying whatever may have been at the bottom of the hill many feet deep. The slide is bare and brown as the trail passes within a stone's throw of it. Yet there is scarcely a puddle visible: the soil has soaked up all the water. You plod on through fields of flowers, white and yellow and orange. There is little scent besides that of green grass and the [salty] smell of the sea [lake, bay, salt marsh]. Gulls [ducks, geese] sweep overhead, crying. An occasional long-legged wading bird flies slowly overhead, great wings beating very slowly.





64 *The Meteor*

Sometimes shooting stars do come to earth and great good fortune is said to favor those who find one. Well, fortune is certainly smiling on you today as a rock the size of a large dog sits not far from where you tread. The rock is still glowing slightly and there is a trail of blackened, scorched grass to show where it initially landed and then slid along the ground perhaps as much as fifty paces. It is too hot to handle at the moment and a rock that size would be very heavy, but it is well-known that the iron from meteors can be used to make superior steel and swords made from it may have a telling advantage. [Two long swords or four shorter blades could be made from the meteor, if it can be successfully brought to a suitably skilled blacksmith. Those weapons may at the GM's discretion have a bonus in combat or else just be light, flexible and well-formed.]

65 *High Plains*

Bunch grasses, sagebrush and cacti cover the ground in a seemingly endless stretch to either side along this valley. You have been climbing slowly but steadily higher, leaving the lush plains below. In the far distance, jagged mountains with snowcap peaks rise just at the edge of the expanse. Puffs of clouds scud across the sky as a brisk breeze touches your face. The terrain grows steadily rougher and there is less and less grazing [greenery] to be seen. Shadows of the clouds race each other across the fields in front of you, urging you to move just a bit more quickly. [This terrain can be either high dessert plains between two mountain ranges or the foothills between plains and mountains. The party is at risk of sudden storms and snow squalls in this country. Flash flooding is also a risk here.]

Prairie Fire Set (66-75)

[It does not much matter what direction the party is moving with respect to the wind-driven fire, the fire will catch them. However, there are more interesting possibilities if they are traveling

into the wind so that they will have to detour to avoid the fire.]

66 *The Smell of Smoke*

The tall grass nods in the steady breeze. The green grassland is dotted with a few bright yellow flowers and a small herd of elk [antelope] grazing in the distance. Small birds fly up out of the grass as you near, soaring



into the cloudless blue sky. The sun is warm on your heads. [The GM may want the characters to attempt a check to detect the following:] **You think you scent something unusual. After sniffing for several seconds, you agree there is a faint smell of smoke on the wind.**

67 *Acrid Smoke Odors*

The wind continues steadily from the same direction and the day warms. The open prairie is hot. The humidity is low and so the wind evaporates off your sweat. The smell of smoke is still detectable in the wind and instead of becoming accustomed and not noticing it, you are now all certain that the smell is stronger. [The horses seem to have also noticed and become uneasy.] **There are no plumes of smoke on any horizon however. The grassland seems empty except for the small birds flitting through the tall grass.**

68 *Campsite at the End of the Day*

The stream you have found is tiny, dribbling along through banks matted with grass, but it is a source of water. Others have camped here before: the grass is packed down and the signs of staked horses grazing are unmistakable. The sun sets in a dramatic red and gold display, fading slowly to purple. The stars emerge one by one in the cloudless sky. The temperature drops with the sunset to become very comfortable. The wind that was so steady all day continues from the same direction, still bringing the smell of smoke.



69 *The Dark before Dawn*

The stars of the cool summer night wheel slowly through the dark sky. The wind blows strongly and steadily, always from the same direction. Birds of the night fly across the stars on their mysterious errands. Crickets chirp. Coyotes and wolves howl occasionally, mostly from downwind. Finally it is the dark of the predawn [Person on watch may detect the orange glow of the dawn on the horizon.]

70 *Smoke on the Horizon*

The stars fade. Dawn paints the sky pink then orange and then the sun rises as a bright ball of fire. [Characters may check to see gray smoke on the horizon.] The early morning sun shines brightly, drying off the light dew. Songbirds greet the dawn with trilling songs. The wind tugs at your hair and clothes, making the grass heads nod, and it smells sharply of smoke.

71 *Billows of Black Smoke*

Before you are packed and on the move this morning, the pillars of smoke on the horizon are clear to everyone: great dark billows of black smoke rise and dissipate into the sky, making the deep-blue sky pale and hazy. Nearer to the ground, the smoke forms a dense blanket, seemingly rolling toward you, although it is still very distant. The smoke smell is strong, getting into everything. [Your horses are jumpy and uncooperative.]

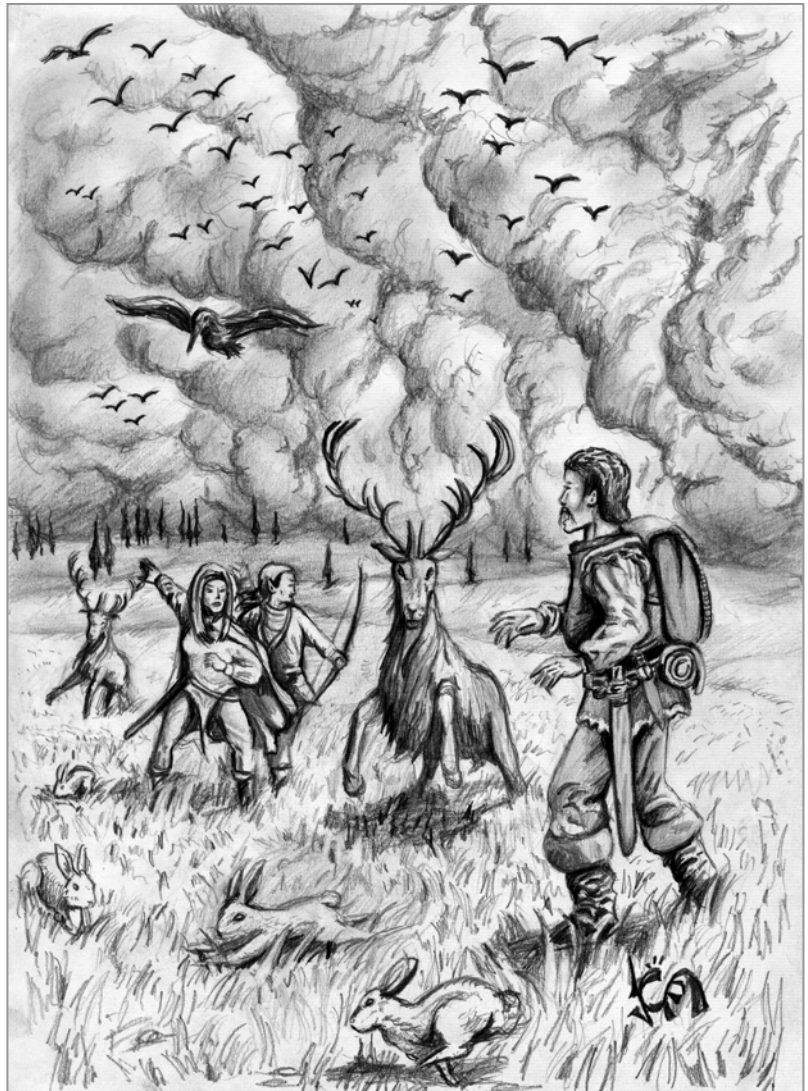
72 *Smoke Against the Sky*

[If the party is at an angle toward the fire:] As you travel steadily through the morning the line of smoke clouds grows. Once in a while, you can see light under the wall of black smoke. The smoke becomes ever more obvious until it darkens half of the sky. The wind now carries bits of ash as well as the smell of smoke. [Sensitive characters may cough and choke on the smoke, or discover it bothers their eyes.] A


herd of grazing animals [elk, small group of bison] passes you at a distance, moving resolutely across the wind and away from the fire.

73 *Toward the Fire*

[If the party is going toward the fire:] By midmorning the smoke has darkened most of the sky. Now and then you can see light on the horizon below the wall of black smoke. The



wind now carries larger flecks of ash and an acrid smoky smell. [Eye irritation is increasingly a problem and characters' throats are getting raw.] Grazing animals of different types [elk, deer, bison] pass you at a distance,



moving urgently across the wind and away from the fire.

74 *A Line of Red Flame*

You can now see a line of red flame on the horizon, visible most of the time despite the heavy black smoke it is producing. Sometimes it seems to leap even higher. The wind and its direction are unchanged, though the intensity of the wind may have increased slightly. The air is laden with ash and is very warm. The grass whispers and moves in the wind. The birds are silent and no grazers can be seen. The distance is hard to estimate. [A character with knowledge of the wilderness would have a 30% chance of knowing the fire is several hours' walk or 10 miles (17 km) away.] The sky is clear; all around you is waist-high grass, some of it taller than that, and there are no visible streams [unless the trail follows one].

75 *Sizzling Flames*

As the fire nears you, the wind picks up, gusting and eddying in the head-high grass. The flames can be seen leaping high above the grass and then dropping down, responding with a noisy sizzle as the wind gusts. [If the party is not running, they should be.] The hot air coming off it is filled with smoke and ash. Your eyes water and you choke on the ashy air. [It is beginning to impair the group's functions.] A small hare, normally very shy, bursts out of the grass, a patch of fur on its rump blackened and smoking. Panting, it stares with large brown eyes at you, then dashes on in the direction it was going, vanishing into the tall grass. [Note: The way to find safety in a prairie fire is to turn at right angles to the fire and travel until you can no longer smell it. If you can see the flames, and are on foot, you are in serious trouble. A prairie fire can go 30 mph (55 kph) for as many miles as it has wind behind it and fuel to burn. The fire dries the grass as it reaches it and the heat generates its own winds. If the fire runs over someone, it will cause severe burns in a few moments before it moves on. Clothing can catch fire, adding to the burn risk. Fire burns oxygen, so in an enclosed space, suffocation is a risk. An

area cleared of grass can be relatively safe, except for the intense heat as the fire passes over, which would probably be survivable with substantial damage to adventurers. The risk of asphyxiation on the thick smoke is high; as many as 45% of unprotected persons might succumb to the effects. It is against all the instincts of horses to stand with an oncoming fire; they will run if they can.]

Burnt Prairie Set (76-78)

76 *Trail Blazing*

There is no trail, yet you need to cross this prairie. The grass is chin-high on tall men, and over the heads of shorter folk. You walk out into the grass, and find the area is filled with long grass leaves. Individually they are weak, but together they resist casual invasion. To travel here you push forward as if swimming. The taller people can keep track of where they are going, but the shorter ones are down below the grass canopy and so their world is a wall of green pressing in. They can see the break in the grasses behind them where they walked, and a tiny glimpse of blue sky directly overhead. It creates a claustrophobic reaction despite the fact that you know you are in the open. [If short adventurers jump up, usually they can see above the grass for a moment. That may look strange to onlookers, but makes a lot of sense to those doing it.]

77 *Grass to Ash*

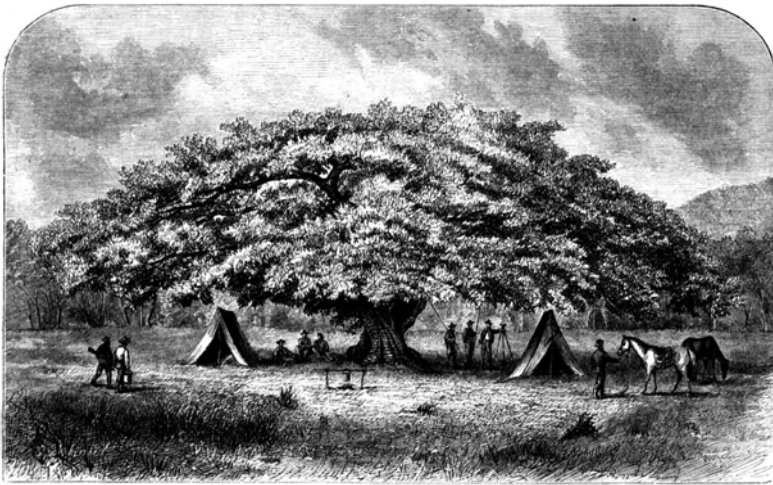
Suddenly, the grass ends. The land lays bare to the horizon, charred and black. In places, patches of grass have burned without falling down, and disintegrate at the slightest touch. In other spots the vegetation is reduced to white ash. Most of the ground, though, is covered with a thin layer of black ash. Here and there it is still smoking. A snake, apparently burned to death, lies stretched near a hole. Nothing moves except the slow expansion of smoke from the last of the fire and high overhead, a hawk rides the thermals, looking keenly to see what prey the fire might have revealed.

78 *Ashes, Ashes Everywhere*

[If the party walks across the burn:] The ash comes off onto your boots and ankles, blackening them. By the end of the hike your hands and face are all streaked or covered with the black ash. The smell of burned grass, pleasant initially, becomes overwhelming until you wish it gone. The odor is everywhere, and it clings to your clothes for weeks afterward. The ash is not very deep. You leave clear footprints behind you; the dark-brown soil can be seen when the thin layer of ash is disturbed. Other places you leave footprints by stepping into deep ash, where a grass clump has been burned. The ash comes up in powdery waves, setting shorter party members coughing.

Campsite Set (79-81)

79 *Sheltered by a Great Tree*



Along the river, the trail winds past a tall tree that spreads its long branches to make a great gallery below it. The tree is so large that a wagon pulled by six horses could shelter fully under its shade. It is dark and cool beneath the tree and within a stone's throw of the river, so it is an obvious campsite. Others have camped here before, leaving the spot heavily trampled. The central area is packed dirt, free of all plants. A charred circle surrounded by rocks shows the most popular campfire spot, but there are two other charred circles under the wide-spreading tree

as well. As the temperature falls in the twilight, the wind drops, no longer blowing in the strong gusts common during most of the day. It is now a pleasant little breeze rattling the tree's leaves high above.

80 *Little Water*

You check the access to water from the campsite. A wide track, easily traveled by horses, leads down to the high-water mark of the river. The river is low; there is no water at that point at all. The track continues down another bank. This would be hard for horses, and someone collapsed part of the bank to more easily accommodate livestock. This brings you to the current level of the river, but it is reduced to a series of streams only partially filling its channel so you have to cross about six more steps to actually come to water. The water is a sluggish stream about two paces wide, moving slowly over the sand. It is warm and cloudy. [Wary travelers will dig a hole in the sand and let water seep in; it will be much cleaner.]

81 *Cotton in the Morning*

You wake in the morning to find that all the ground is white. Lying over everything is a layer of white stuff, that looks like snow. But the moment you move, it shifts and rises in ways snow never does. As you brush it off, it hovers in the air, gradually settling. There are thousands of tiny seeds, each surrounded by a gossamer sphere of tiny white fluff that helps it float lightly in the air. They came, apparently, from the great tree by the river [cottonwood] and covered the ground, plants, and people. They get into everything, though they do no damage. They are annoying to breathe but are only very dense right around the tree. Within a short time, although you can see one or two still floating on the breeze; most have dispersed with the wind.



Grazers Galore (82-84)

82 Into the Herd

The prairie seems a flat and featureless lawn stretching on and on beyond your sight. It is not, however, actually level, but rather a series of rolling hills. From their tops you can see great distances but in the depressions you are hidden from the plain and it is hidden from you. This is why you find yourselves suddenly inside a herd of large grazers [buffalo, large pigs, ground sloths] before either you or they are aware of it. You must have walked [rode] inside the outliers or the animals moved around your party while you followed the trail into a stream-fed gully. Now, climbing back out, you find big animals,



larger than horses, armed with plain, effective-looking horns [tusks, claws] grazing on both sides. The green grassland is dotted with large shaggy brown and black animals, hundreds of them. They stop feeding and stare.

83 A Huge Herd

As you emerge from a draw, the big grazers [buffalo, large pigs, ground sloths] stop pulling up plants and stare at you. They watch your every move, wide-eyed. Those farther away soon are feeding again but the nearer ones continue to stand and stare. It is a really large herd of hundreds, maybe thousands, of animals. Light-colored calves [piglets] nip

grass and cavort next to their darker brown mothers. The cows [sows] watch you with unblinking stares. Calf-less old cows [sows], skin wrinkly and sagging, give you a brief look and then resume grazing. Many younger animals of no certain sex stare, move a bit farther away, eat a few bites and then look at you again. A few bulls [boars], a third larger than the cows, prowl through the herd; the nearest one comes toward you at an unhurried pace. Beyond him the herd darkens the plain.

84 Road Block

The big animals surround the trail ahead. To continue on you have to ride [walk] among them. [The party advances.] The nearest

animals step aside, letting you pass. They have a rich odor of warm fur, trampled plants and stomach gas. It is easily recognized and not unpleasant. Small birds flutter about, ignoring the big animals as they search for seeds

and insects. As you travel deeper into the herd, the animals begin to ignore you. When you near, they stare, but they soon go back to eating the new green grass blades. Presently you come to a place where several of the great beasts stand on the trail. They look hard at you as you approach but do not move. [If the party waves hands to move them, they simply stare. They will ignore any loud noises and movement.] Going around them is more effective than trying to move them.





The Many Faces of the Plains

Into the Open

Where is “the open?” Usually, where the adventurers are taller than the plants. That eliminates almost all forests. Ecologists recognize several non-forested land ecosystems; grasslands, tundra, and desert are the primary examples of this type of ecosystem. This book was written mainly about grasslands. The central United States; southern South America; eastern Russia; western Asia; large sections of Africa; and much of Australia were grasslands before settlement. Much of it still is because corn, rice, wheat, and sorghum are all cultivated grasses. These regions are characterized by a community of plants that are herbs (that is, not woody, neither trees nor shrubs) and that die back to the ground each winter. In particular, the dominant plants are grasses. Tundra and desert are open areas too; some of these descriptions will apply to tundra in midsummer and some to desert, especially after the brief rainy season, but mostly we were imagining grasslands when we wrote these descriptions.

About Grasses

Grasslands are open because they lack trees. Many grassland regions are too dry for trees to survive, but other historic grasslands have plenty

of rain for trees; they become treeless because of wild fires. Grasslands share periods of drought (not necessarily long ones) in which everything dries out and wildfires sweep across the land. Grasses usually have leaves that begin at or under the ground (which is why mowing a lawn has to be done so often!); while trees, shrubs and most herbs grow from growing points (meristems) in the air. Consequently, if a fire burns a shrub or tree, the plant is set back substantially. The grass blade’s growing point is rarely burned and so continues to grow. Therefore if a prairie burns during the growing season, in a week it looks like a well-tended golf course.



Grass fires run before the wind, consuming the grass blades quickly. A big prairie fire will dry out the grass with its heat, so green grass burns almost as well as dead grass, although it is much smokier. Most historic grassland areas are flat or have rolling hills, so a fire burns for miles, sometimes hundreds of miles. Rivers in flat, relatively dry areas are often small and low, posing no barrier to a wind-driven fire. Only really big rivers, such as the Mississippi in North America, are broad enough that a prairie fire cannot jump over them.

Grasslands, then, occur where it is either too dry for trees or where fire keeps trees out. They





may also occur where for some reason the soil is too shallow to support trees. This is the usual explanation of meadows within forested regions.

While they do have things in common, not all grasslands are the same. Wet ones burn frequently (every three to five years in what is



now the Corn Belt) while dry ones rarely have enough fuel to carry a fire. Some grasslands are host to many large, bright-colored wildflowers, some are almost entirely of grass. (Grasses have flowers but they are inconspicuous. Many spring grassland flowers are from bulbs, which are technically members of the grass family.) In areas of lower rainfall or shorter growing seasons



(for example, higher elevations) the height of the grassland plants gets shorter and shorter and distance between plants greater and greater, until

it is a desert. In the driest grasslands, the plants are never taller than a well-maintained lawn. The non-grasses in dry grasslands are often well protected from grazing animals by thorns or spines (cacti make a good American example).

Animals of the Open

With leaves readily accessible near the ground, grasslands have abundant food for herbivores in the growing season. Vast herds form and big predators follow them. Whether cheetahs, wolves, lions, dragons, or rocs, the big herds provide lots of prey. The open conditions allow big winged animals to take off and land safely, and to pursue their prey until they catch it.

Animals in open areas are exposed. Their enemies can see them from far away. Conversely, they can see their enemies. Animals of open communities have good eyesight. They are also fleet of foot, with excellent stamina. Grasslands are good places for running from danger, but you may have to go miles before you are out of sight. Animals of the open tend to travel in groups: many eyes watching are much more effective than just two.



Animals of open lands that do not run well must have some other form of protection from their predators. One simple defense is to be big and tough, like buffalo and musk oxen. For animals that are smaller, such as hares, camouflage and the ability to dart under the grass may work. Anything larger needs additional defenses: they must fly or hide in burrows in the ground or be inedible because they are spiny or poisonous.





Invertebrates

Open area insects, spiders, ticks, and parasitic worms are usually minor items for travelers. Exceptions to that include grasshopper outbreaks. These occur periodically in most grasslands. When the outbreaks do happen, the grasshoppers eat everything edible and gnaw on most of the rest, so that there is no forage for other animals, including the horses of adventurers. Under these conditions, grasshoppers will bite people; they taste whatever they land on. Real grasshoppers can bite hard enough to draw blood, fantasy grasshoppers...you decide.

Mosquitoes are rarely a problem by day but can be numerous and aggressive at night. Biting flies, from stable flies to horse flies, are generally common only around livestock, including the great wild herds. Ticks and chiggers lurk in the grass most of the time. The usual internal parasites are found in these communities and since everyone drinks from the same pools, infections are easily transmitted. Spiders with toxic bites lurk in odd places rather than building great webs. Any insect can be extremely annoying if it is very common. Small bees that gather sweat off warm travelers will sting if disturbed: one bee is tolerable, 25 a hazard. Butterflies flying in front of you are pretty, until you cannot see where you are going for the butterflies.

Water and Weather

A Dry and Thirsty Land

There are few open communities where there is an excess of water like in marshes and bogs. In grasslands, tundra, and deserts, water is often in short supply. Open water is rare, clean water rarer. Trails and trade routes often follow rivers and streams so that travelers have access to water. The adventurers will have to be careful about water. On horseback, they will need abundant water for their horses.

Afoot, it takes longer to get to the next water source. In either case, water is heavy to carry in adequate amounts. This makes it easy for bandits, brigands, and other humanoids such as orcs to anticipate where they might find their victims. A party that does not keep extra watch



when at a known campsite is foolish indeed.

Because water is necessary for life and is uncommon in some places on the plains, all the animals of the region are attracted to the few rivers, streams and ponds that are found there. The grazers find lush plants to eat and water to drink while the predators come to hunt the grazers, as well as to drink.

Seasonal Patterns:

In mid-continent temperate grasslands, the seasons change rapidly. Severe cold gives way to warm and then very hot temperatures, and then it cools again. The plants grow rapidly, flower, go to seed, and lie dormant during the winter. Animals migrate in to eat the plants and must move out (or go underground, hibernating or living on stored food) when it is cold and there is nothing to eat.





People of Open Lands

Historically many of the human groups of open lands were migratory, following the herds and hunting as teams. In some places they could settle because the topography brought game to them, for example along a river or a natural feature forcing animals together. Often though, the winter in the open grassland was too difficult with poor hunting, little fuel for fires, and a lack of cover from wind, cold and snow; so they moved to forests or mountain valleys, or south (north) to warmer weather, to return in the spring.



In some grasslands there is neither usable timber nor stone for building, so if people settled there they had to build their homes from grasses, hides, bones, sod or even dig underground. Other open areas do have useable stone, and of course, building materials can be imported.

In a game people might come to the open areas seeking minerals, rare plants for medicine or dye, or food for a gourmet market. Other people, in small groups or alone, might hunt game for medicine or specialty foods, for hides and furs or for the sheer challenge of it. Local recluses and crazies will still need access to water and some kind of shelter in winter.

All of these comments would apply equally to races like gnomes, to organized humanoids like goblins, and groups of intelligent animals.

Grassland Regions

The Americas, Europe, Asia, Australia, and Africa

These areas share the general patterns of open areas. The animals of course differ: horses, cattle and saiga grazed the plains of Europe and Asia, kangaroos and wallabies in Australia. Most of Africa's and South America's grasslands are tropical, not temperate, but there are diverse antelope, as well as zebra, giraffe, elephants, and ostriches. American grasslands were as diverse as modern African grasslands a million years ago: camels, horses, gomphotheres, ground sloth, antelope, oxen, and numerous other species that have gone extinct in the Americas since then. A fantasy grassland can be quite reasonably populated with all manner of big and small animals.


Coastal Grasslands

Where weather patterns drive water away from an area, or the soil is very shallow (due to an impermeable rock or clay layer), grasslands can occur in such places as the shores of big lakes or the ocean. The seasons, however, will reflect the rest of the area, as will the plants and animals. If the grassland is extensive, there will be characteristic fast-running animals with good eyesight, and wildfires are likely.

Settled Areas as Open Spaces

Most crops are relatively low plants grown as annuals, so fields can be open areas. When people settle in forested areas, cultivating land creates open areas and when they settle in grasslands, the area stays open. Cattle and other domesticated animals grazing in a forest will still be in a forest, but where the land is too dry or too rocky to farm, raising livestock is an important occupation. Continual grazing will keep the vegetation short and the region very open. People raising crops must be protected from raiders or





war, and people with only horses or feet for travel will live close to their fields. Given the rate of travel afoot or a-horse, the adventurers may spend days amid fields before reaching the city or wilder country.



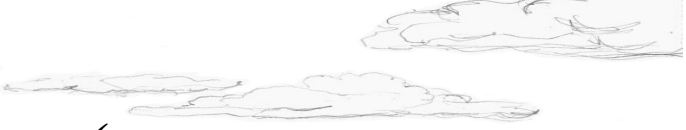
Monsters for the Grassland

Adding fantasy animals or monsters to a grassland region is easily done. Your dragons or other monsters should, however, be able to take off from flat land and be able to stay warm in the winter.

Adventuring in the Open

Here are some things to consider:

- ✓ Water is in short supply.
- ✓ Summer in many open areas is hot enough to be life threatening, especially if water is short.
- ✓ Winter in many open lands is life-threateningly cold.
- ✓ There is no protection from the elements. The adventurers and their horses are taller than most of the plants, so the rain, hail, winds, snow or sun hit them. There is rarely anything to get under or into to get out of the normal weather, let alone provide protection in blizzards, lightning strikes, or tornados.

- 
- ✓ Anywhere that you cannot see mountains or other great landmarks are easy places to get lost. The terrain of grasslands is remarkably uniform.
 - ✓ There is no fuel. The evening campfire in a grassland region has nothing to burn. Grass leaves burn up almost instantly. It was due to a lack of any other fuel source that American pioneers gathered and burned dry buffalo droppings ('buffalo chips').
 - ✓ At the same time, during most seasons and in most places the grass easily catches fire to become a wildfire.





Open Kits

Mixed Prairie

In this region the grass never gets more than about three feet tall and there are open spaces where you can see the ground between plants. The plants are mostly grasses with some wildflowers of many colors scattered among them. In places you find desert plants like yucca and cacti. Trees are rare, found mainly along the few permanent rivers. The wild fires occur frequently but often burn out after a few miles for lack of fuel. It is windy. It is dry in summer. The rain storms are infrequent but often violent with hail, lightning and tornados. Summers are hot (to 102°F, 40°C), and winters are cold (to -30°F, -34°C). This is good country for finding big herds of grazers, such as buffalo. Other mammals likely to be seen in moderate to large herds are elk, pronghorns, and mule deer. The predators are wolves, grizzly bears, coyotes, foxes, mountain lions, weasels, and badgers. Common smaller animals are hares, rats including packrats, and various mice. Prairie dog towns extend for miles. They have associated species like burrowing owls and black-footed ferrets which are rarely encountered except in prairie dog towns. Birds of this region include eagles, hawks, vultures, grouse and wild chickens, crows and ravens, many sparrows, swallows, and larks. Ducks, geese, cranes, sandpipers, and plovers live in wet areas, their numbers augmented by great migratory flocks in spring and fall. The reptiles and amphibians found here are small lizards, snakes, turtles/tortoises, frogs/toads, and salamanders and some dry-land species such as horned lizards and desert snakes. Fish in the streams are tiny since the streams often dry out. This dry region has no really big rivers—most rivers are shallow with braided channels among sandbars, going nearly dry by late summer. Insects are few and inoffensive most of the time, but any group can have a particularly good year and reach high densities. There may be settlements along the riverbeds but the region is generally empty with the few resident people migrating as hunters following the herds.

Settled Land

Close to the castle — which typically sits on a relative high spot — are numerous, carefully tended orchards of apple, peach, plum, and pear trees. Walnut and almond trees are grown there, too. Beyond them is a large area of well-trimmed grape vines growing along arbors. Small villages nestle within an hour's walk of the castle in all directions. Around them are cultivated fields. The fields are usually fenced by stone walls made from irregularly shaped stones, but sometimes with rough wood fences. The fields are long and narrow and planted with peas, beans, onions, turnips, beets, parsnips, or carrots. The largest and best fields are growing grains—oats and wheat especially, but also barley and rye. People plow behind an ox or a horse. They scatter and cover the seeds and hoe the weeds by hand. These fields surround the party for many miles as one village's lands are replaced by another's. As you get farther from the castle, there is more and more uncultivated land. On some of it, cattle, sheep, goats, or geese graze, in small herds watched over by boys, or in slightly larger herds guarded by herdsmen with dogs. Out beyond the last village, the open lands are grazed short by livestock in roving herds protected by herdsmen. Finally, several days walk out beyond the castle, the land seems wild and barely touched by the livestock or people from the villages.



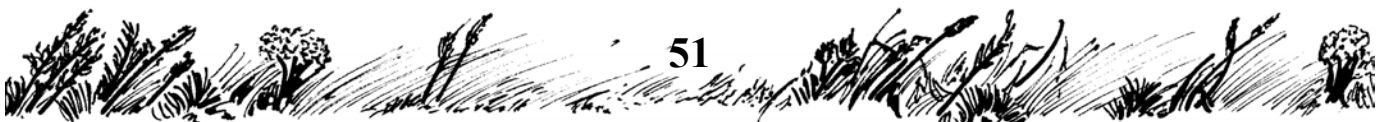


Moist Grassland

In a moist grassland during midsummer the grasses are as tall as corn and as dense as a wheat field. Other plants (non-grassy herbs and a few native shrubs) are present but very scattered. Fires, started by lightning but also by people, sweep the land frequently (about once every four years), sometimes burning a dozen counties in a single fire. It is windy. It is dry in summer. Rain usually comes in a fierce thunderstorm preceded by hail or a tornado, with strong winds and dangerous lightning. Summers are hot (to 100°F, 38°C) and winters are cold (to -30°F, -34°C). Trees grow where they are protected from the fires. Big herds (for example, buffalo) come here to eat the new grasses but avoid the area when the grass is tall. Other mammals you might see in moderate to large herds are elk and mule deer. Predators following the herds are wolves, coyotes, foxes, weasels, badgers, mountain lions, and grizzly bears. The smaller animals are hares, ground squirrels and other rodents including various rats and mice, and moles. Beaver, muskrats, skunks, white-tailed deer, and raccoons occur in the forested areas along rivers and streams. Birds include eagles, hawks, vultures and owls, crows and ravens, grouse and wild chickens, many sparrows, swallows, and larks. Ducks, geese, cranes, sandpipers and plovers can be found in wet areas. Great flocks of birds fly through seasonally (spring and fall). The reptiles and amphibians in these grasslands are generally small lizards, snakes, turtles/tortoises, frogs/toads, and salamanders. Fish in most rivers and streams are small since the streams often dry out. The big rivers (the size of the Mississippi) have really big fish. Some of the resident people farm along the rivers, others follow the herds nomadically. The latter are more aggressive than the former.

Sagebrush Prairie

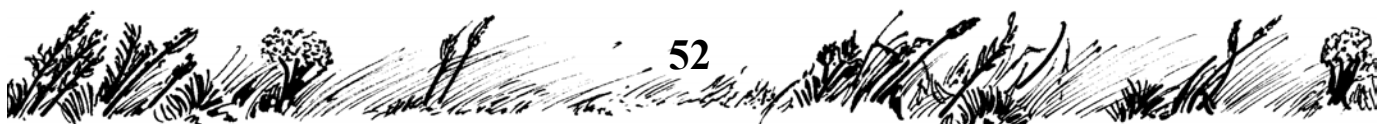
Sagebrush is the dominant plant in this region. The landscape seems totally monotonous with nothing but these short rounded bushes with gray-green leaves. The leaves smell like turpentine, especially after a rain or if they are bruised. In between the sagebrush plants are smaller plants, including bunch grasses (which grow in discrete clumps) and herbs which, briefly, have bright-colored flowers. Small herds of pronghorn antelope, deer and elk, which eat a mixed diet of shrubs, herbs and grasses, wander this region. (There are no big herds of grass-eating animals such as buffalo because of the dry conditions and low amount of grasses.) Prairie dog towns can be very large. Predators include bears, wolves, mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes, badgers, and weasels. Other animals include diverse mice, various rats and skunks. None are common: this country is relatively empty because the main thing to eat is sagebrush which is unhealthy in large quantities. Birds include eagles, owls and hawks, vultures, crows and ravens, larks, sparrows, grouse and swallows. There are also snakes, including poisonous ones, lizards, tortoises and toads, and in wet areas, frogs, salamanders and small turtles. Permanent water is uncommon and the fish are few and small. Insects flourish in the spring, then decrease in number as the summer dries out. It is too dry and unproductive for most people to live here. They mainly hunt here, and the hunting is not particularly good.





Shortgrass Steppe

This dry grassland has desert-like characteristics. The important grasses never grow taller than a lawn. Two or three short grasses make up most of the vegetation. One of them (buffalo grass) is nutritious green or dry, fresh or frozen, so it supports herds of buffalo and other grazers all year. The plants between the grasses are either ephemeral, appearing only briefly after it rains (usually in the spring) or inedible, with spines (cacti) or toxins (locoweeds). It is windy. It is dry most of the time. Rain comes as violent thunderstorms, with hail, lightning, strong winds, and sometimes tornados. Summers are hot (to 102°F, 40°C), and winters are cold (to -30°F, -34°C). Nights are cooler and moister than days, so lots of animals sleep through the day and are active at twilight or during the night. Buffalo migrate through this region annually, usually going to moister prairies in spring and summer for the greater forage. Severe drought is common, and then both forage and water run out and grazing animals migrate away. Other mammals of dry grasslands are elk, pronghorn antelopes, mule deer, and peccary (wild pigs). The predators are wolves, grizzly bears, coyotes, foxes, weasels, mountain lions, and badgers. The smaller animals are hares, rats including packrats, various mice, prairie dogs, and desert rodents like jumping rats and mice (kangaroo rats). Birds include eagles, hawks, vultures, burrowing owls, larks, wild chickens and quail, swallows and many sparrows. Extensive flocks of birds fly through seasonally and ducks, geese, cranes, sandpipers and plovers can be found in wet areas at least briefly. Reptiles and amphibians are more diverse than in wetter prairies: increasingly large lizards, more species and sizes of snakes, various tortoises, and desert toads, as well as frogs and salamanders in the few ponds and streams. Fish are few because of the frequency with which even big rivers dry up. There is not enough water for people to live here except beside a spring (of course, a spring and dwarf village could be underground). Most people simply hunt this country in the summer and spend the rest of the year elsewhere.





Coastal Grasslands

(Modeled after California's grasslands) This grassland region is the product of a seasonal climate, with all the rain falling in the six winter months, so that the drought stress in the other half of the year is too severe for most trees. Even the grasses go dormant by midsummer, so the land is green when it is raining but brown most of the rest of the year as the plants dry up and die. Summers are hot. Winters are mild, with frost and snow in midwinter, but not severe cold so plants do grow despite the regular frosts. In summer, these grasslands are hazardous to adventurers because the miles of dry grass will burn easily and once burned, there will be no forage until the next rainy season. Water is likewise hard to find because without rain, the streams mostly dry up.

The plants of this grassland are quite diverse with different species growing separately from each other, on upper slopes versus lower slopes, facing south versus facing north, on deep rich soils versus shallow rocky spots, etc. Bright flowers produce huge swaths of color at the end of the rainy season (March to May) in reds, oranges and yellows, blues and whites; some blooms are tiny (like nemophila), some rather large (like the California poppy). Though they have low productivity, these grasslands host elk, pronghorn, gophers, black-tailed deer, ground squirrels, jack rabbits, and many species of mouse and rat. Predators include grizzly bears, coyotes, foxes, and badgers. The grazers are rarely numerous. (Animal numbers are kept low because the animals must move away most summers when the water runs out.) Bird numbers and diversity are greater since birds can fly to water or away from fires. Common birds are hawks, eagles, condors, vultures, owls, quail, magpies, jays, crows, swallows, sparrows of many kinds, and hummingbirds. Reptiles include snakes, some poisonous, lizards, and turtles. Toads might be found anywhere but frogs and salamanders are confined to the rare areas with permanent water. The insects bloom with the plants, many of them having highly seasonal, very short life cycles that match the rainfall. Briefly there are many bees, butterflies, flies, moths, grasshoppers, crickets, etc. As the dry season continues, these animals vanish. Only very deep permanent waters have fish or aquatic animals. People come seasonally, just like the animals. They might harvest valuable plants for dyes and medicines or hunt game, but when the plants have dried up, they too leave.





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Rocks – Bit 44; Shards 3, 8
Rolling Hills – Bits 11, 15, 25, 28, 35;
Shards 5, 26, 30, 37, 82-84
Trampled – Bits 14, 39, 41; Shard 17
Valley – Bits 7, 11, 35, 89, 92; Shards 10,
25, 43, 65

Waterways:

Creek Bed – Bits 16, 20; Shard 60
Dry Streambed – Bits 11, 89; Shard 5
Pond, Pool – Bit 88; Shard 45
Stream, River – Bits 16, 26, 35, 47, 55, 60,
86, 87; Shards 13, 26, 43, 44, 58, 59,
60, 61, 79-81

Weather:

Blue Sky – Bits 1, 4, 7, 19, 21, 42, 81, 91,
93; Shards 7, 28, 37, 38, 40, 45, 49, 66
Breeze – Bits 4, 21, 43, 68, 70, 78; Shards
22, 26, 27, 33, 37, 49, 79
Clouds – Bits 4, 11, 21, 77, 82, 83, 84, 85;
Shards 22, 26, 28, 38, 47, 48, 50, 51,
53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 65

Dirt Clouds – Bits 96, 97:
Flash Flooding – Bits 28, 89; Shards 65
Fog, Mist – Bit 26; Shards 25, 39
Hail – Shards 48, 55
Rain – Bits 71, 75, 82; Shards 24, 29, 47,
48, 50, 52, 53, 55, 56
Rainbow – Bit 71; Shard 24
Snow – Shards 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45,
46
Sun – Bits 1, 3, 21, 42, 72, 78, 84, 96;
Shards 4, 13, 26, 40, 70
Humid - Bits 72
Tornado – Shards 56, 57
Wind – Bits 9, 10, 72, 73, 76, 77, 78, 79,
80, 81, 83, 95; Shards 28, 41, 42, 48, 56,
67, 75



Bits of the Plains - Cards

Into the Open

01

It is hard to have a sense of space here. You walk a hundred steps, a thousand steps, ten thousand steps, and yet the land seems unchanged. You pass over a hill and down the slope and up the next rolling hill but the horizon is the same. There are no features and no satisfactory ways to tell your progress. The sun rises higher, reaches its zenith, and then sinks westward but your progress is still between unchanging walls of stalks and leaves. The grasses wave in the breeze all the way to the horizon, as they did first thing in the morning. The sky is a great blue and white bowl overhead, the land barely more than flat in all directions under the encompassing dome.

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Into the Open

03

Single file is the only form of travel that makes any sense in the unbroken grassland. The first person forces the grass apart and begins the process of making a path. The farther back you are in the line the easier the going because the grass is more trampled when you get to it. The one in the lead finds it hard work in the relentless sun. There is little air movement where you stand surrounded by the tall grass, even though the wind makes the plant tops dip and dance, and you drip with perspiration. You have to watch your water because there are few streams. Behind you the path you took lies as a conspicuous line across the plain.

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Into the Open

05

You can see a low hill ahead of you with a strange shape on the top, a badly misshapen tree, possibly. As you near it, you see that your first impression was correct; it is a tree that has gone through some terrible accident. The tree is split down the middle; each half now hangs out from the base of the trunk as if the tree was struck with a giant axe. As you draw closer, you can see obvious charring along the bark and the interior wood. The smell of burnt wood is evident, but has faded into a faint tinge in the air. The lightning that destroyed this tree did so months ago.

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Into the Open

02

A spray of colorful flowers interrupts the otherwise monotonous greenish-brown of the tall prairie grasses. The rippling petals range from a deep blood red to an almost glowing orange. A gentle intermittent buzzing sound alerts you to the presence of bees flitting around the stand of wildflowers. [If the PCs get close enough to smell the flowers:] The flowers have an intense, tangy aroma, a smell that somehow evokes the taste of a strong fruit juice. [The bees probably signal the presence of a nearby hive where the PCs could find honey. At the your option, the flowers could be poisonous, or useful in some way to herbalists.]

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Into the Open

04

A dome of royal blue sky stretches overhead, as if a gigantic bowl has been set upon the rim of the earth. White and blue clouds rim the horizon, alive with light and shadow. There will be no storms today. The grass carpet before you is emerald green with a relief of knee high grasses interrupting the smooth expanse. The patches of knee high grasses are a mixture of green and rust colored plants. A small band of wild horses grazes upon the low-growing emerald green patches, avoiding the rust colored plants for more succulent morsels. The breeze is fresh and clean on your face. [The wild horses will be difficult to catch unless the adventurers have a skilled animal handler among them.]

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Into the Open

06

Partially covered by the grass in front of you, a wagon lies on the ground. Its wooden struts have been mostly eroded by the wind and the rain yet the shape of the cart remains intact. A cart like this might have brought a family of migrants to a new and better life somewhere, yet there is no sign of any population in this vicinity. [The wood is too old to be of any use and the remainder of the wagon has long since rotted away.]

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Into the Open

07

Without feeling like you have climbed a hill, you find yourselves descending into a broad, shallow valley. The soft swish of wind through the long grass is quieter here, and as you walk [ride] into the valley, the small sounds of the open plain disappear behind you. The horizon disappears as well, replaced by the gentle curve of the hills around you. Tall grass stands out atop the hills, silhouetted against the clear blue sky. There is a bit of shade on the hillsides, and tiny purple flowers can be seen amongst the grass. As you pass through the valley, their sweet smell surrounds you whenever the wind picks up.

Into the Open

08

Lying beside the road is a set of leather armor. A full torso of tiny leather plates sewn together lies on the grass, still in a round shape with the straps closed, so it gives the eerie impression of still being worn, even though the wearer cannot be seen. The owner must have been a middle-sized man, quite broad-shouldered. You do not initially see the leg armor, but it is there, scattered in the grass, dispelling the illusion that anyone is in the body armor. No helm, weapons pack or shoes can be found, only leather armor. The armor is still supple and soft, although in some places grass is growing up through it. Grass grows fast and leather weathers quickly, so this cannot have been here long.

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Into the Open

09

As you come out of a stretch of rolling hills, the grass goes from knee-high [for humans] to being much taller, three or four feet high in some places. It brushes against your clothes and skin as you continue walking [riding], and it is impossible to take a step without pushing sheaves of it aside as you go. The smells of the prairie—the faint sweetness of the different grasses, the occasional blush of flowers, and the dry smell of plants baking in the sun—are much stronger here, and the sound of grass brushing against grass is ceaseless. The wind blows paths through the high grass, sometimes making it look as though unseen animals are moving among the blades around you.

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Into the Open

10

Amidst the clumps of grass, low hillocks, and long stretches of bare earth, you begin to see wildflowers appearing in little clusters. A bit further along, the clusters become more and more frequent, with many different kinds of flowers—tiny purple blooms, delicate stalks with bright yellow flowers along their lengths, and others. The wind has settled down, and as you walk [ride] the many smells of these flowers become stronger, until you find yourselves in an endless field of wildflowers. It quickly becomes impossible to walk [ride through] without crushing flowers underfoot, which only intensifies the smell.

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Into the Open

11

Rolling hills rife with thin golden grasses lay at your feet. Yellow goldenrod is scattered here and there among the grasses. Every so often, you find a bunch of purple echinacea [or similar flower]. Overhead, flat-bottomed fluffy white clouds follow on, one after another, like a herd of wayward sheep. The clouds cast their shadows across the fields below, as they progress over the valley in a slow parade. The faint rivulets and tendrils of creek beds all are greener where the grasses have found some source of underground waters, yet there is no drinkable water to be found in any of these dry streams. A hawk [falcon, eagle] soars overhead, looking for today's meal.

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Into the Open

12

Nestled in the tall grass you discover a broken-down wagon. The peeling paint on the wind-blasted sideboards reads 'McLellan's Traveling Mystical Emporium.' The rear axle is broken, causing the wagon to sag drunkenly to the left. The leather harnesses are rotting away, still connected to the shaft. The tattered canvas cover has been destroyed leaving the metal frame highlighted against the sky like the ribs of some great beast. The wheels have sunken into the prairie ground several inches. It would seem that the wagon was abandoned long ago. [If the adventurers search the wagon they find nothing of value.]

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13

As you make your way across the plains you trip over something hidden beneath the dense growth. [If the adventurers investigate:] You find the rusted remains of what appears to have been a poorly made sword. It breaks in half as you pull it out of the grass that has grown over it during the years it has lain in this spot. Apparently it was cast aside, or dropped by someone in their haste. [The adventurers continue on:] After walking fifty paces, you stumble upon the skeleton of a man, lying facedown in the open field. The rotted remnant of an arrow shaft juts out of his ribcage. [If the heroes investigate they will find nothing of value. Any adventurer who can read will be able to make out the glyph for 'Vengeance' carved into the head of the arrow. The dead man was a bandit whose crimes finally caught up to him.]

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Into the Open

15

As you lift your head, you can smell dampness on the breeze. It has that heady mix of earth and moisture that comes before the rain. New grass is emerging green through the tan grasses of years past. At each rise, you see several rounded grassy peaks in the distance. There are ten of them when you stop to count, but it would be several hard days travel before you would be within reach of those distant hills. The song of a meadowlark [thrush, warbler, finch] pierces the air. Several narrow [walking, deer] paths meander here and there, the pounded earth trails blatant to the naked eye.

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Into the Open

17

A horn call off behind you makes you all turn to see what it is. It is a hunting horn or a military horn, blown with authority. You look but there is nothing to see. The plain stretches out with no visible people or animals: just the tops of grasses, blowing softly in the wind. Again you hear the horn: distant but clear, with some kind of urgent messages, it calls you to come. But you can see no one and nothing to respond to. A third time it blows, with a somewhat desperate sound, but other than determining its direction you cannot locate the source. The horn does not sound again, though you listen for it.

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Into the Open

14

As you crest a small rise, you see ahead a large dark area of ground. The grass has been trampled and the soil churned to roughness. From a distance you see sticks protruding from the ground at crazy angles and twigs lying about. As you approach, you can see that what you thought were sticks are actually sturdy hafts of wood and that the twigs are instead bones. Drawing nearer you can see spears sticking into the ground, and the bones that are lying about are gnawed and cracked. Some sort of battle or attack was obviously carried out here, but the scavengers have disturbed things so much that you may never know what happened.

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16

Your route is running along a small bluff. As you descend to the creek bed below, you spy a small doorway of sorts hollowed out of the bank of the stream. A faint path leads to the entrance, which is flanked on either side by berry bushes, their branches starting to grow over the opening. [Should someone investigate the opening, read the following:] Drawing nearer, you can see into the shadows, and it appears that a small table is present in the room. Poking your head inside, you see a small room made of logs covered with sod. The dugout appears to have been a dwelling at some time, but all that is left now is a rickety table and a rotting fur in the corner. [The GM could add a trap, or turn the dugout into an active dwelling if desired.]

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Into the Open

18

A group of dots appear on the horizon to your right. They gradually get larger, moving steadily across the grassland toward you. When the distance is reduced enough, you can see there are five natives [bandits, barbarians, mongols] on horseback. The passage leaves a line in the grass where it was disturbed. They ride to the top of a small hill where they stop and sit on their horses, watching you. It looks like a hunting or raiding party: five strong young riders, dressed in painted leathers, armed with—as best you can determine—bows and spears. Their horses are compact, small and well muscled. The whole group rests on the windy hilltop, alert but at ease. They mark your passage from beyond arrow range for a while, then turn and ride back the way they came, presently vanishing over the horizon.

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Into the Open

19

You seem to smell bacon and fresh bread. The sky is cloudless and the grassland looks the same as it did yesterday and the day before. There is nothing unusual but a low grassy hill, from which the smells of bacon and baking bread seem to come. And then you spot a metal pipe. It sticks out of the ground about knee high, with a small metal roof on top. It is surely a chimney. But there is no house to be seen. The smell lingers, so presumably, somewhere way down in the earth, someone is in a kitchen making a meal. There is no sign of any disturbance or habitation visible anywhere. [Perhaps, dwarves, gnomes, or miners built it so long ago there is no trace left, or they have some very long tunnel vents here.]

Into the Open

20

You are passing through grazing land. The trail cuts through the open range and all about you the grass has been chewed low by sheep and cattle. Their dung is visible and its smell ever-present. The areas around the streams are denuded of plants and the bare edges of ponds are mires of deeply pitted mud. At intervals you see the herds. There are long-haired, long-horned sheep, some black and some white, with each herd usually a mix of both colors. The cattle are red, reddish brown or black, often with irregular white spots. They are lean and have an edgy look as if they would run or charge if at all disturbed. Most herds are attended by herdsmen and dogs. Sometimes the men are mounted but mostly they walk beside the flocks. They wave greetings as you pass by.

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Into the Open

21

A winding dirt track brings you into a region where the land is cultivated. You see a small hamlet at a distance and the fields lie on both sides of the narrow pitted road. The sky is clear blue with small clouds and a light breeze, and sun beats down on you and on the crops. Thick green fields of peas alternate with taller, paler wheat fields, separated by walls of piled gray stone. Bushes and vines grow along the walls. Small groups of people in plain work clothes, their heads covered by floppy hats or scarves, hoe the weeds. Mostly they seem like family groups: women and children, with the occasional man. If they notice you, they stand, hoes stilled, and stare across the field at you. [Only occasionally will they return a wave.]

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Into the Open

22

About twenty-five cows are grazing on the grasslands within a stone's throw of the road [your path]. They are lean enough that you can see ribs, but not gaunt. They are black or a mixture of black and brown; a few have white spots. The cows' horns have been sawn off to make blunt stumps. With them are half-grown calves, long-legged and jumpy. One all-black calf follows a larger, brown and white cow. Then it suddenly veers off, kicking up its hind legs as it dashes through grasses almost as tall as it is. Abruptly, it runs back to nudge its mother and, for a few paces, follow sedately. Two men in straw hats, armed with bows and staves, sit watching the herd. Birds fly up ahead of the moving cows, calling as they go.

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Into the Open

23

Your way is blocked by sheep. The pale area across your route [the road ahead] resolves itself into a herd of sheep, extending all across the way you want to go. There are hundreds of them, bleating and milling around as they very slowly move across your path. They are long-haired and the hair is a dirty white and packed with mud along the bottom. Their faces are black. They have a distinctive stink which is very strong in the heat of the sun. Most are ewes with one or two lambs following. Now and then a lamb capers around, showing more energy, but mostly the whole herd seems lethargic. Two men and four shaggy gray dogs keep the sheep together and moving slowly forward. They notice your presence but do not appear to care that you are delayed, letting the sheep move along ever so gradually.

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Into the Open

24

In the distance you see a solitary tree highlighted against the horizon. There appears to be something dangling from a rope tied to one of the branches. [As the adventurers approach closer to the tree:] As you draw nearer you realize that the dangling object is the decomposing corpse of a hanged man. The stench of him wafts to you on the breeze, washing over you. The man is naked except for a wooden sign hung around his neck on a leather cord. It reads, simply: 'HORSE THIEF'. [There is nothing else of interest or value in this area.]

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25

The trail here is packed and open. Plants are trying to retake the path, but they have been broken by the regular passage of men, beasts and carts, so they are low and trampled. On either side of you, the grass stands as high as a tall man's shoulder, creating a wall of leaves, that bends at the slight pressure of the winds. The land is relatively flat, rolling in long gentle hills. From the higher spots you can see the grassland stretching ahead of you as far as the eye can see, getting dimmer in the distance until the horizon merges with the sky. Flocks of small birds whistle and sing from the tops of the grass stalks, their calls like so many shards of glass.

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Into the Open

27

The trail climbs a slight rise and for three paces you cross an old road. The solid roadbed still holds large paving stones in place. Grass has grown close on each side and a few blades reach up between the stones. The road surface is laid of big limestone blocks that must have been hauled a long distance. They stand out oddly here, where soil is a fine dark dirt with few stones of any size. Standing on the road, you can see it once stretched east and west [north and south] in a straight line, cutting across hills and valleys without regard to the terrain. A huge crew of workers and animals must have labored a long time to lay it. It lies like an ancient leg bone, pale, neglected and overgrown by grasses. Whatever it connected is no longer there. You step down onto the soft trail and leave the old road behind.

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Into the Open

29

You come to a place where the trail you are on crosses another road. Your track has been wide enough to accommodate a cart comfortably. It is pockmarked with hoof prints made in wet weather and irregularly scraped by the wheel tracks of carts. The road crossing your path is more than twice as wide as the trail you are on and is scraped clear of all plants. By comparison, a few hardy weeds, some flattened and broken, manage to grow on your trail. The other path is furthermore sunk almost ankle deep compared to the surrounding grassland. Looking up and down, it you see nothing and no one. Along it, broken grass blades suggest that something passed by quite recently.

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Into the Open

26

After traveling for hours [a time] through the open spaces, you come upon a band of trees. Crunching through the undergrowth, you begin to descend by bits. Picking your way down the bluffs is tedious. Fog rises around you as you progress. You continue forward through the mists, until you find yourself at the bank of a river. Fog floats across the surface of the waters. What you can see through the gray is a hazy reflection of the trees on either bank as well as the sky above. In the distance, a man fishes from the furthest bank, a dark-gray shadow in the fog. If you were to shout, he could not hear you as he is too far away. The air is heavy with the stillness.

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28

Tan hills rise in the distance, placing a boundary on the plains stretching out before you. Far off, you can make out a tent, a couple stocky brown horses with black manes, and their keeper. A bed of river rock cuts its way through the grassy expanse. The river is currently dry, but you can see where the spring rains have cut away soil at each bend of the wash. The soil is as black as can be. The grass here is sparse, but green. It would make for adequate short-term grazing. [This area is suitable for summer pastures, but water is scarce right now. The boy tending the horses has nothing of value, nor does he have much useful information. He is resistant to give up the horses as his family has little else in the way of possessions. Flash flooding is possible if a sudden rainstorm were to arise.]

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Into the Open

30

A sudden break in the prairie reveals a narrow lane stretching to the left and right. To the left, the road curves away almost immediately, but you can see where it winds through the grass to the distance. It is straighter to the right, heading off into the horizon. It looks like an old path, with well-worn grooves from passing horse carts and wagons. Low weeds and thistles line the road on both sides, giving way to the taller grasses just a few feet past.

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Into the Open

31

There is an odd structure up ahead, instantly distinguished by straight lines in an environment where all things curve. As you near the structure you perceive that it is the wall of an old building. Two sides still stand but the grassland has reclaimed all the area around the walls. The two walls, only a story high, are at right angles to each other and protrude awkwardly out of the plain. On the one facing you, part of the interior when the building was complete, you are struck by reflections off an old mosaic that covers the wall. The tiles are still bright blue and white. Despite the gaps from missing tiles, you recognize the scene as a mountain above a blue lake. No real mountains or lakes are visible anywhere.

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Into the Open

33

Your path intersects another, forming a crossroads. [The new path and crossroads are not on any map the travelers might have with them.] In the middle of this crossroad is a wooden signpost with four arrows, pointing each direction of path. Closer inspection of the post, however, reveals that all four arrows are completely devoid of any writing.

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Into the Open

35

You have ascended a slight hill that has a nice view of a low valley from its top. The hills open up away from you and roll gently down to a meandering stream and the deeper green of shrubs and trees. There is no visible path down, but a roadside shrine sits at the edge of the slope. A spot has been cleared of plants and a nice square piece of polished white marble—rather dramatically out of place in all this grass and dirt—set in the open space. The offerings of travelers litter the area. Most are local flowers, dry or drying, but there have also been food offerings, stones and candles.

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Into the Open

32

A small bare patch appears in the middle of the grass. The area is covered with stone, but a few sturdy thistles have begun growing up through the cracks in the rock. It appears as though a building may have stood here once, and the stone is laid over an area about the right size for a modest farmhouse. The fields of wild grass around the old foundation show no signs of having ever been tamed. If they were, it was long enough ago that the grasses have reclaimed everything but the stone itself. Some distance away, you see a trio of worn and faded headstones. If they were ever carved with the names of those who lie below them, wind and rain have long since worn the inscriptions away.

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Into the Open

34

As you journey through the lush green land you see ahead a round grassy mound with a slender finger of stone at its top. When you approach, you can see the hill is about twenty feet high and forty feet across at the base. Atop this mound is a granite obelisk seven feet high. [Should someone climb the mound to examine the obelisk:] The stone is old and weather worn, with an inscription at its base written in a forgotten script. Behind the obelisk is a large patch of freshly turned earth.

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Into the Open

36

You come upon a post, leaning crookedly to a height of eight feet. It is festooned with a garland of small animal skulls and the teeth and talons of much larger beasts. It seems to be a marker of some sort, left here as a warning. You are not sure for whom the warning was meant, or what it warns of, but the post looks very, very old. Apparently whoever left the warning and whatever dangers once lurked here are long gone. You look around, and there is nothing else to be seen but the sky and the distant horizon.

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Into the Open

37

Against the horizon you see a tall, black spire. Drawing nearer you realize it is the crumbling remains of an obelisk. It stands about fifteen feet tall, its surface beaten and cracked by weather and the fierce winds. There appear to be marks all over the surface, but too much time has passed since they were carved, and they are now just shallow tracings in the stone. [If the adventurers try to read the marks they will realize the carvings are in an ancient tongue that they cannot read. The obelisk is merely a border marker of an empire that fell long ago.]

Into the Open

38

As you push your way through the tall grass, you notice a gap up ahead. When you get closer, you see what appears to be a cairn made of white stones dominates the center of the lifeless, barren clearing. Your breath catches in your throat as you realize that the rocks are not rocks at all, but humanoid skulls, bleached and scoured by the sun, wind, and the passage of time. Even though the cairn has obviously been here for many years, a traveler could feel uneasy just standing near them. [If the adventurers decide to investigate further, they will find nothing of value.]

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Into the Open

39

The grass has been trampled down here and a roughly circular space cleared. In the center, the remains of what was once a campfire have turned into a black and sooty mush. A few broken, sooty twigs litter the ground that might have been used to barbecue some small and unfortunate creature, perhaps a rabbit or stoat.

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Into the Open

40

It looks like somebody's dinner has been interrupted. A fire had been made, although it has now long since gone out, perhaps a couple of days ago. Cow pats were gathered and heaped to make fuel for the fire. Above the fire pit, suspended from a wooden pole by some twine is a loosely made bag of some poor creature's skin and fur. It looks like the creature would have been about the size of a dog. [If the party investigates the skin bag: inside the bag is a mixture of half-cooked meat and flat stones.] **To one side, the bones and entrails have been left unwanted, which now have attracted the attention of numerous flies and ants, although nothing has yet attacked the contents of the bag.** [This is the authentic method of cooking marmots used by Mongols on the steppes.]

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Into the Open

41

In a small clearing, you find the remains of a recent campfire. The grass has been trampled down by heavy foot traffic. The fire was extinguished by someone kicking dirt over it. The scent of burned wood and smoke remains strong in the area [and the coals are still warm to the touch]. Around the fire pit are a few discarded bones from small animals, and further out, body-sized impressions on the ground where it appears a group of people slept. Nearby, a patch of grass is much shorter than that surrounding it; this grass looks bitten or cut. [A character with the ability to track has a good chance of estimating that a dozen armed and armored people with horses camped here recently.]

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Into the Open

42

The sun shines out of a pale-blue sky. The early morning cool burns off and the sun is hot on your faces [backs]. The slight breeze is very welcome. The packed dirt trail is dry and gives a comfortable solid thump under your [your horses'] feet. The soil of the trail has a rich earthy smell and the grass adds a fine set of plant odors. Small dark birds rise up as you near, flap their wings hard to get airborne, and then catch the breeze to fly much more easily, dropping down again into the grass as small distant dots. Far ahead in the air a hunting hawk soars lazily on the wind.

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43

The path leads you into an area of higher hills. The trail curves along the high spots. Where it descends a little, you are aware of the increased heat and the still air, so that when you climb back to the ridge, the slightly greater breeze up there cools you. Once back to where the trail snakes along the highest ground, you have maximum visibility. You see a small herd of about 15 grazers [antelope, ostrich, kangaroos] in the distance, well beyond arrow range. After a time, you see off to your left, beyond a slighter rise, the soil is blackened from a recent fire, but already new grass blades cover it with thin green fuzz.

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Into the Open

45

The grassland is a rolling field of green—a lawn that stretches to distant horizons. There is just enough variation that in some places you can see for miles and in other places you are hidden and can see for no distance at all. Thus it is that despite the apparent openness you find yourselves within easy arrowshot of five long-legged grazers [antelope, deer, ostrich]. They stare at you in large-eyed curiosity for a moment, then one lays its ears back. In an instant all five brown and white animals are bounding away with amazing speed to vanish over the horizon. [Unless adventurers' bows are strung and at hand, they do not get a shot.]

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Into the Open

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The lowland along the river is slightly warmer and moister than more open areas. The trail drops down along the water for a while and weaves in and out, picking a comfortable path just beyond the river vegetation. Once, it passes under a towering tree, as tall and broad itself as any cathedral. A flurry of small birds fly up from its protective branches as you move under them, and a hawk drops from unseen heights like a falling stone to grab an unwary songbird in a feat of incredible flying skill, swinging with its prey in an arc that never touches the ground. The hawk, bird in its talons, flies powerfully over the riverbed and out of sight. One last feather flutters to the ground behind you.

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Concealed amongst the tall grass is a large, flat boulder. Below the front edge someone or something has burrowed under the rock, creating a small shelter. [The burrow is small and dark, but big enough for a person of average size to squeeze inside. If someone looks inside, or enters:] The small space is damp and smells strongly of wet fur. There are scatterings of bird bones and small piles of dried dung littering the floor. There is no other life in here except for a few beetles, crawling slowly along the burrow wall. [It is the den of a small predator, possibly a feral dog or a badger. The creature is out hunting and poses no danger to the adventurers.]

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46

In a still moment, large winged birds are slowly circling in the distance. They float a little up and a little down again, not landing and not moving away from whatever it is they are passing round and round. They are large enough to be vultures and it looks as if some unfortunate creature is about to breathe its last and become food for the hungry birds.

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In a low area stands a tree. It is leafless and dead. It is three or four times a man's height, with numerous branches. At one time it must have been handsome, standing by itself in the grassland. Below it the grass is tall and deeply green. The tree cannot have been dead more than a year or two; the smaller branches are still intact and the bark has not peeled. On one of the lower branches, a bird perches, visible as a dark silhouette. As you pass by, you can hear its high mournful whistle: "ahh-whee."

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49

You are making good time as you travel. The grass is hip high, interspersed with some weedy bushes. Suddenly a handful of birds shoots out of the grass practically under your noses. The loud thrumming of their wings startles you, sounding almost like the roll of drums or the pounding of horses' hooves. The birds themselves are round-bodied and smaller than chickens; their gray, black and white speckled feathers hide them perfectly in the grass once they resettle. [These are quail, or some other similar bird. They will try to distract intruders to lead them away from any nest.]

Into the Open

50

There is a sudden rustling nearby and a creature darts out of a hole in the ground and away into the taller grass where it can no longer be seen. As it charged away, it looked to be about the size of a dog but more powerful, the brown fur seemingly covering its body seemed to be hiding powerful muscles. A strange whistling sound emerges from the distance and is answered further away by a whistle in a higher pitch. Are these creatures communicating with each other? [This is a marmot is also known as the groundhog.]

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51

A small nest of grass rats [rabbits] lies just ahead of you. Seven tiny bundles of fur wriggle around in the nest, so young that their eyes are still closed. The parents seem to have abandoned the nest because there is no food available for the rats [rabbits].

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52

Your horse rears and stamps its hooves. Something has startled it and any other pack animals are also snickering nervously. There is a small movement on the ground and you can see the remains of a snake about two paces long. The snake has been pulverized where the horse's hooves have stamped on it and it is clearly dead, although still writhing slowly. Its green- and yellow-striped body makes it look like it was just a harmless grass snake. [Ignore this incident if the party has no mounts or pack animals, select one player. At your discretion, the snake could have been a venomous viper and it might be possible to retrieve some of its poison. Most non-poisonous snakes are identifiable as such due to their narrow oval-shaped heads.]

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A cluster of black shapes seem to float in the air a considerable distance away from you, off to the left and a little ahead of you. [If the adventurers are able to focus better on the shapes, or if they go closer to investigate:] The shapes turn out to be a trio of vultures, circling lazily above a spot that is still some distance from you.

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Something dark drops from the sky and thumps to the ground just ahead of you. Of all the things that you would have least expected to see out here in a sea of grass, seemingly miles from any water at all, high on the list would be a live fish. Yet a fish is what you do see, flopping about on the grass in front of you and looking like it has just popped out of the water. It is a kind of catfish and looks like it would afford a good meal for someone. [The fish was taken up from a river by a hawk that was then attacked by an eagle, in or above the lowest clouds. The hawk eventually had to release the fish and it fell to the ground miles from its natural habitat.]

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Into the Open

55

Emerging onto a rock ledge, a dry short-grass prairie stretches below. A few ravines course through the flattened expanse of green and tan. The fields are littered with circular patches of white dirt. As you come closer, you see clusters of small light brown creatures popping in and out of their burrows or digging tunnels in the patches of dirt. A few creatures are up on their haunches, little sentinels with watchful eyes. Soon you realize there are hundreds, maybe thousands of these creatures, with holes for miles. The creatures have a white streak from their pointy nose down their belly. They stabilize themselves with a short, sleek tail with a black tip. Their short, delicate front paws grasp their tidbit of the moment. [Pack animals, cattle and horses are at risk of breaking their legs in prairie dog burrows. Prairie dogs feed on grasses, so grazing grass will be scarce here. See text for additional GM Notes.]

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57

You ride [walk] for the rest of the day amid a great herd. Your progress is slow because you have to circle around animals in your path. You watch from a distance as two big bulls crash into each other, transforming suddenly from slow-moving grazers to fast-running attackers who hit each other with such force that it seems to shake the earth. The bulls must each weigh more than two or three big farm horses combined, and they slam into each other with great power. Both bulls remain standing, circle and ram each other again. There is a third pass and then the slightly lighter of the two moves off while the larger returns to the place of challenge and bellows loudly.

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Up ahead, lying just off the trail, you see some kind of feature. As you get closer, it looks like the area is bright white, making a strong contrast with the surrounding green grasses. You can see it well before you reach it; the plants are interrupted by something. As you come closer, you see that a thick white layer covers all the plants in an area more than three paces across and roughly round. The plants are weighed down and broken but it is clear that they are merely covered and some at least will grow through it. The white layer is hard, half a finger's width in thickness and has little odor [a roc dropping].

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[At midmorning,] your walk [ride] is pleasant. The sun shines warmly but is not [yet] hot, and the air moves softly in the grass. Small black and brown birds chirp and whistle. Butterflies with large black and yellow wings flutter across your path. For a while the prairie is a carpet of blooms. Mingling in the green grass are round yellow flowers, tubular white flowers, clusters of tiny gold and blue flowers, and flat purple flowers. Then the land you travel changes in some way and the grasses wave high and green, with only a very occasional flower visible. You can still hear the birds but they are invisible in the sea of grass. To your left a series of disturbed areas interrupt the grass. Something has dug into the ground to make low mounds of freshly turned dirt [gophers, moles].

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Into the Open

58

A big animal, a large rack of antlers on its head, stands on a hilltop. It is not far away but well out of arrow range. You can see the brown fur, thicker along the neck and lean legs. The sun is behind it and its shaggy body becomes a silhouette against the sky. The animal lifts its head high and gives a deep booming bellow which echoes across the plain. From the southwest you hear a faint answering bellow. After a moment, another answer comes from the southeast. It bellows twice more and then stands still on the hilltop.

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Into the Open

60

There is a strange group of rocks at the base of a tall dead tree along a small stream. The ground is open and generally rocky with only occasional plants, but these rocks are about knee high, much bigger than most of these you see. They look from a distance somehow "broken open." As you get close to them, you see bones sticking out of them. The false rocks are spherical and packed with bones and fur. They are soft, almost fibrous and you can smell the odor of decaying meat. You see wings that could be from ducks and the skulls of rabbits. Many older broken bones lie scattered on the ground as well. [Giant owl pellets, regurgitated by owls after the edible parts are digested. The bones may be of animals as big as calves.]

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Your attention is drawn to a group of birds circling a mile distant. One by one, the birds drop to the ground. You approach from downwind and before you can see what the birds are doing, you smell the cloying odor of rotting flesh. Ahead of you, the birds sit pecking at the corpse of a large animal. [If the characters approach the carcass, add:]the birds squawk at you and shift around the body but do not give up their feast. One, sitting on the head of the dead creature, eyes you balefully. [The animal is a buffalo or similar large plains-dwelling herbivore. Any character accustomed to hunting or living in the wild can guess that it has been dead for a couple of days, probably taken down by wolves or similar predators.]

Into the Open

62

This area has small stands of trees interspersed with the grasses. In a grove to your left, you hear the distinctive cracking sound of a tree, or at least a large limb, falling to the ground. Immediately, the air over the trees is filled with a flurry of small birds squawking and circling. They fly around madly for a few seconds then begin to settle back into the trees. Once again, the area is quiet. [This is intended to be simply a large dead limb or dead tree finally falling to the ground. However, if an encounter is desired, it is possible that someone or something felled the tree in the grove. If the characters explore the area, they can easily spot the tree or large limb that crashed.]

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Into the Open

63

Overhead, a flight of geese streams by in typical “v” formation. As you watch, the lead goose falls back into the pack and another takes its place at the front. The new vanguard banks, and those following bank with it veer off to the left. As they fly away, you can hear them honking to each other.

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64

Off in the distance you see the tall grass rippling and folding under as something large and heavy bullies its way through. The breeze carries the sound of the creature to your ears, snuffling and grunting as it searches for food. [If the adventurers attempt to pursue the creature they will only find the trail it has made. Read the following:] You come upon the trail left by some large beast. The grass is flattened and crushed in a meandering trail that is roughly six feet wide, peppered irregularly with clumps of fresh dung. The beast is long gone, its path stretching on as far as your eyes can see. [As the trail runs perpendicular to the direction the adventurers are traveling, any attempts to pursue the creature will only lead them off course.]

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65

As you push through the waist-high grass, the field before you erupts. Scores of large black birds [crows] burst out and fly around you, scolding and darting at your face, pecking and clawing. Just as abruptly as they appeared, they are gone, cawing and wheeling about as they fly off towards the horizon.

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66

You come upon an obscenely fat vulture, feeding on the foul-smelling remains of a buffalo [antelope, gazelle]. The bird regards you with indifferent eyes and croaks haughtily. You pause for a moment as it warningly flaps its wings, sending clouds of flies billowing up and away from the bloated corpse. The vulture does not appear hostile, only annoyed that you have disturbed its dinner. [If the adventurers approach or attack the vulture, it will only fly away out of reach and wait for them to leave before it resumes dining.]

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In the distance you see what appears to be a gathering of all manner of plains creatures, large and small. They are milling around peacefully, ignoring each other for the most part. As you draw closer, an antelope [or any other appropriate grazing creature] bleats a warning and they all flee out of sight. You come upon their gathering place, a watering hole. The pool is twenty feet wide, its muddy banks scored with the tracks of countless creatures of all sizes. The water is shallow, its surface dark with mud and darting insects.

Into the Open

68

Isolated on the plain stands the trunk of an enormous tree. The branches are bare, scrabbling at the sky as the breeze rustles through them. As you draw nearer you can see that it is hollow, and has obviously been dead for quite some time. The empty husks of nuts and seed pods fill the hollowed center, spilling out onto the ground beneath. You can hear faint scratching noises from higher up inside the hollow. As you stop to watch, a pair of tiny eyes [squirrel] appear in a small hole in the trunk and gaze back at you quizzically. With a small chitter the creature disappears and you can hear it scrambling upwards inside the trunk.

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Into the Open

69

As you make your way through the wide-open grasslands, you hear a faint rustling in the dense growth behind you. You stop to listen, and the rustling stops. Shaking your head, you continue on...and hear it again, moving behind you. You turn to look, and the noise stops abruptly, but you see nothing. [It is only a small, wild dog. It follows merely out of curiosity. If the adventurers investigate, they will catch a glimpse of it as it flees harmlessly:] **A small, brown dog bursts out of the grass before you and darts between your legs. You hear the frenzied rustling of its flight through the tall grass, growing fainter as the dog gets further away. Then you hear nothing but the buzzing and chirping of insects.**

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70

Sudden spurts of a gentle breeze cause the thick grasses around you to swish and scrape against one another. At times the sounds almost come to resemble the murmur of distant voices.

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71

Purple and gray clouds stretch out along the horizon in the distance. As you study them you see streaks reaching from the high clouds to the earth below. When the breeze is right, you can smell a mixture of rain and damp earth on the wind. Gentle slopes of tan grasses spread out from under your feet [horses' hooves] as far as the eye can see in any direction. A faint line of the deepest green can be seen tracing the branching spine of the ridges rising from the gentle slopes. A rainbow touches the earth in the distance, its luminous colors stretching into the heavens, a promise of better days to come. [The rain is moving away from the travelers. The ground can be dry or wet, depending upon the storm's path.]

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72

As the day has spent its hours, the sun has grown hot and the air sticky with moisture. The wind has stilled, leaving behind an oppressive heat and the air almost feels thick as you breathe. Cresting a rise does not bring relief; there is no breeze to be had anywhere. Shimmers of heat rise from the prairie before you, creating small waves in the images before your eyes. Sweat courses down your forehead. You are sweating so profusely that you cannot avoid getting it into your eyes; [The animals in your party have their flanks covered in sweat and] soon little gnats and stinging insects are circling you like a gourmet feast.

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73

The wind whispers all the time. It stirs the grass constantly so that you cannot be sure if something is moving through it out there in the distance. For all that the wind limits your ability to detect other creatures it makes the days tolerable. The breeze cools the air as the bright sun beats unremittingly down on your heads. The drooping grass tops nod and dance in response to the gusts. Near midday, the breeze stops for a while and the air becomes oppressively hot and still. You get very warm, even if you shed all your armor. Then, as the sun turns westward, the breeze is back, cooling your necks and tossing the loose ends of your hair into your eyes.

Into the Open

74

The air is hot and the wind is blowing steady and strong out of the west [or whatever direction the fronts come from in your world]. The wind picks up hats and tumbles them two or three horse-lengths beyond you. Empty leather bottles blow across the ground, anything not firmly tied is ripped away. Light things, the weight of paper or ribbon, not only blow away, but are lifted up high into the air and carried far out of reach across the grass. The gusts also carry dust and plant bits, that get in your nose, eyes and mouth, dirty and irritating. The wind blows strongly all day, interrupted only by stronger gusts.

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75

A single fat drop of rain hits you [or insert character's name] on the nose, and it appears that the storm that has threatened all day is finally here. A few more fat lazy drops splatter on the ground around you, then nothing. The humidity hangs heavily in the air. Perhaps it will rain later, but for now, the dark clouds are a promise unfulfilled.

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76

The wind blows through the dry grasses, making their tops bow and dance. In places the grass seems to go on uninterrupted for miles and there the wind creates the illusion of ripples of water as they dip and sway, like waves moving across this ocean of grass.

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The wind picks up suddenly and the clouds begin to scuttle across the sky like sheep being whipped by a shepherd who fears the onset of wolves. Yet not all of the clouds move in the same direction. One gray and silver cloud, shaped something like an anvil, holds its place in the distance as if to mock its diminutive fellows and demonstrate its independence. [This could be an entirely natural phenomenon or else a flying alien ship or a city in the sky. In any case, it is beyond the reach of any adventurers.]

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78

Cresting a hill, you have a magnificent view of the plains stretching out all around you. The wind is stronger up here, ruffling your hair and rattling buckles and other loose bits of your gear. The sun seems almost impossibly bright and the heat on your skin is intense. As the wind blows across the plain, huge swaths of grass bend with it all at once, giving the appearance of waves on a vast, green ocean. Just as quickly as it started, the wind dies down to a gentle breeze, only to pick up again, this time sending the waves of grass in a different direction.

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79

The wind ripples through the grass, often softly, sometimes strongly, but constantly, so that it is hard to listen for danger. The sounds of insects are incessant, chirps and buzzes, but mostly unseen somewhere in the grass. Occasionally there is a clearer sound, the hiss of something moving quickly away through the leaves, unseen.

Into the Open

80

The wind beats against you as you stumble through the neck-high grass. The seed pods crowning the weed-tops beat against your chest, leaving a slight pulpy green residue and filling your nose with the sweet scent of plant juices. There seems to be no respite from the fierceness of the wind, so you turn your head against it and stumble on.

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81

As you come over the rise, your face is hit with another blast of hot wind. The wind blows steadily and incessantly, parching the land and all that it contains. The sky is faded blue with not a cloud in sight. Large birds, maybe vultures, wheel overhead. Songbirds and smaller animals have moved on or are resting during the heat of the day. The grasses and scrub brush rustle stiffly, just dried skeletons of their former selves. As you ride [walk] along, puffs of dust rise behind you. The grit seems to sift into everything; it is in your mouth, your nose, your gear, and your clothes. Before long, your face and hands begin to feel tight and red. There is little relief from the blowing.

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Over the course of the next half hour or so of travel, the sky above you grows gradually darker and darker. Thick, dark clouds, presumably heavy with rain, roll in and shield you from the sun's heat. [Add flashes of lightning to increase the sense of foreboding or the actual environmental danger, depending on the distance from the adventurers. The clouds could also just roll through without any storm.]

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83

Over the course of a few minutes, the wind mounts and an eerie whistling sound begins to play all across the grasslands. Black clouds dart across the sky, moving so fast that you can follow their progress easily. Only one cloud seems to be remaining stationary. [This could be a magical or arcane phenomenon such as an artificial moon or giant spaceship but it will be too far away for proper inspection.]

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Without really noticing the transition, you find that you have come into a patch of shadow. Behind you, the waves of grass are as brightly lit as ever, but up ahead and to both sides, it is relatively dark and cool. Looking up, you see that you are in the shadow of a huge, puffy cloud, which is slowly meandering across the sky. It is a welcome respite from the heat of the sun and even the hot wind to which you've grown accustomed seems cooler than it has been all day. And then as quickly as it came, the cloud moves on, returning you to brightness and heat.

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A bolt of lightning lances down from the sky, squarely striking a small tree [large bush, cactus plant, rock formation] nearby. You feel a shower of small wood [cactus, rock] chips strike you as the tree virtually explodes under the electrical onslaught. You notice that a few gray clouds have gathered overhead, but nothing to indicate a storm. [For added danger, have the tree catch fire; the fire will, of course, spread quickly to the grass.]

Into the Open

86

A small stream crosses in front of you and feeds into the river some distance away. The stream is just a couple of paces across and it burbles merrily on its way. [If the adventurers look closely:] Among the small, flat stones that line the bed of the stream can be found a dozen or so river shrimp and a handful of the tiny, coin-sized land crabs that would make a pleasant change to your diet.

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A stream can be seen in the distance, making a snaky line of richer green through the grassland. No trees grow along its banks, but it is distinctive because the sedges and reeds are thicker, coarser and a deeper green than the surrounding grasses. It appears to converge with the trail ahead and soon you can see it is a step or two wide, with a small amount of water running in it. The trail takes you nearer and for a bit the stream parallels the trail and you can see eroding banks, not as high as your knees, but nearly bare and vertical. Finally it intersects with the trail, broadening to a shallow channel two steps wide. You [stop for a drink, then] splash through it, smelling the water and noting the brief moment of humidity.

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A little pond catches the sunlight and gleams like a dirty mirror. A side path leads down to what must be a commonly used campsite, brushing between low, thorny shrubs. The pond is small—it would take barely a dozen steps to walk around it—and a large area of dry mud surrounds it. The entry stream, to your left as you approach, is just a dry bed of gravel. The water in the pond is greenish and still. As you get within two steps of it, a large green frog leaps suddenly ahead of you to land well out into the pond with a resounding splash that sends ripples quickly all across the surface and tosses drops on the nearest adventurers. A pair of dark birds sitting at the edge of the grass on the other side flutter into flight, surprised by the disturbance.

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Without warning, you come across a dry streambed directly in your path. The ground slopes sharply into the miniature valley, its dusty sides covered with dead grass, and rises equally sharply on the other side. The streambed itself is perhaps ten feet wide, and it winds off through the scrub and grass in both directions. Brightly colored pebbles have collected here, long since bleached to a dull, sandy color, along with larger stones, which sit in a long row in the bottom of the streambed. As you dip down into the trench to cross it, the sound of the wind diminishes, and you can hear the steady chirp of prairie crickets. The hot, dusty smell of the streambed sticks with you long after you have climbed the far side and moved on. [Dry streambeds are susceptible to flash flooding if a sudden downpour were to occur.]

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From a distance you see what look like haystacks, although it is not obvious what haystacks would be doing here so far away from any farming. As you approach, it becomes clear that these are piles of dung, possibly cow's dung to judge from cautious observation. The cow pats have been compacted into dry, crumbling stacks and although they no longer smell of anything much, you are reluctant to get too close to them.

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Rust-colored grasses as high as a man's head block your path. After a few steps, you find your feet sinking in mud. Feet [and hooves] squish into the muck and mire, yielding a sucking sound with each step. Mosquitoes, gnats and horseflies are a constant irritation. This march through the slough is not without its price. [Any exposed skin or animal parts without fur have accumulated tiny cuts from these sharp grasses.] Through the tips of the grasses you can see the bluest of skies. You can just make out the tops of some trees in the distance. From the looks of it, they are oak trees or their ilk, over a hundred feet tall. The leaves burn yellow and gold [or glinting green] in the bright sun. [Sloughs or prairie potholes are wetlands common to the plains. If any characters are less than healthy, it is possible to contract malaria or other insect-borne diseases. See additional GM Notes.]

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The grass here is taller than you are, its sharp edges threatening to slice through your skin as you push it aside. You can see only the dazzling blue of clear skies above you, and the rich jade green of the saw-toothed grass. The air hangs heavy with the pungent steam rising from the leaves as the morning dew dries in the sun. [You may wish to have an adventurer cut him or herself pushing through the grass. This will most likely be a trivial wound, not causing actual damage. If an adventurer is cut, read the following:] **The grass catches on your bare skin leaving a long, thin gash. A drop of blood drips from your skin onto a broad blade of grass, pooling in the creases and dribbling down the stem.**

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A large area is charred and still smoking in places. The ground is black with white patches where it burned more thoroughly. The grass blades that were not consumed are brown and crisp. There is no food for horses and no game. Three vultures rise up from a carcass. It is difficult to say what died—a gopher or hare perhaps. You continue through the burned area all morning [afternoon]. Vultures and an occasional hawk can be seen, soaring in the sky, but nothing moves on the blackened plain. Your boots [horses' legs] are filthy from the ash. The smell and dust block your nostrils. When the wind blows, great clouds of ash swirl into the sky, obscuring the sun and blowing grit that seeps into every opening in clothes and packs.

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You descend from a slight rise into a broad, flat valley. The stems of the grasses hide the ground, so you are surprised to discover that the valley is actually a couple feet deeper than it appears. Rather than rising to your [your horses'] knees, as they have been, the grasses are now hip high. The stems are taller than a man's arm is long, with upward-pointing leaves. Each leaf is as wide as a man's finger at the base and as much as a foot long. They are stiff with sharp edges, and make a brittle rustling sound as the wind blows. You have to be careful as you travel through the area; the grass blades are sharp and slash at any exposed skin [though the horses' hides should be safe]. The ground here is slightly softer; perhaps the wind cannot reach it to suck the moisture out. [Slough grass is found in lowland prairies. The leaves are sharp enough to cut skin, similar to a deep paper cut, and possibly draw blood.]

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Into the Open

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It has been a warm breezy day as you make your way through the grassy plains. Things are tranquil as the sun-dried grasses ripple in the wind. Then you see a thick black column of smoke to your right. Something has lit the prairie ablaze. At that moment the wind changes and the smell of burning grass and ash assails you. **The flames of a small prairie fire now sweep towards you at an alarming rate.** [The fire may be as much as 300 feet wide, moves downwind at the rate of 40 feet per turn and widens by 10 feet on each side per turn. If there are animals in the group they will require expert handling to be prevented from panicking.]

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Into the Open

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The morning sun had been steady and true and the day seemed set to be fair and pleasant, yet now a red tinge is beginning to touch the sky in front of you and dark, reddish clouds are approaching. They are but clouds of course and you continue on your way unperturbed. However, the rain that the clouds eventually bring is not the wet water you expect but a fine drizzle of red sand that gets in your eyes and your hair [and irritates the horses and other animals]. The ground is quickly covered by the red sand but the accompanying wind causes it to skip and swirl around at ankle height. [Sand picked up from a desert by powerful wind storms can be transported very long distances before being deposited in remote locations.]

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Miles away, just on the horizon, you spot a huge cloud of dust rising into the air. It looks small from this distance, but given how far away it actually is—ten miles, at least—it must be massive. As you walk [ride] through the grass, you can see the cloud moving, spreading out and rising higher as it stretches out along the horizon line. Glancing back, you can see that in places your party has kicked up smaller dust clouds of its own; it would take a much larger group to create that distant cloud.

Into the Open

98

The grass has been rising higher and higher but now suddenly it is interrupted. It seems that a clear lane has been created, stretching from side to side into the distance. Traveling a few yards further, another lane crosses your path, this time sweeping away in a curve and then bending back on itself. The edges of the lane are marked by a very abrupt return to grass, so that it looks like someone has created the paths with a very sharp knife or scythe. Why would anyone do such a thing? A number of other lanes meet and crisscross over the next hundred yards. [Should anyone have the ability to fly, they might be able to look down on these lanes and work out that they spell the word 'Proof' in a suitable local language.]

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An acrid stench overwhelms you as you stumble into a clearing in the field. Investigating, you discover that the grass here is flattened and scorched in a strange manner, as if some force had crushed it down then set it aflame. You suddenly realize that the shape of the clearing in the grass is not circular, as you would expect. A chill comes over you as you realize you are standing in the center of a massive, unfamiliar glyph. [Perhaps it is the effect of a spell, or perhaps the mark of some otherworldly power's entrance into this realm.]

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As your eyes sweep across the landscape, you see endless miles of white dirt and pebbles with occasional tufts of faded grass. Your feet [horses' hooves] crunch across the rocky ground. The land is dry and scattered with straw colored globes of brush. Every so often, as the wind begins to gust, this brush breaks off and begins to bounce along in the wind. Soon, several large tumbleweeds are bounding across the fields in front of you, drifting like huge flakes of snow in every crack or crevice. Some areas of the gullies and washes are filled with the dead carcasses of this brush. Growing much of anything in this land would be a hardship.

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