

# How to Build F\$&%ing Awesome Encounters

by The Angry DM

*Welcome to the fourth part in my ongoing series: Getting the Most Out of Your Skill System. In the last part (Four Things You've Never Heard of That Make Encounters Not Suck), I told you all about four things that... well... you know. Actually, I wrote that article so I could write this article.*

*This article is what you have been waiting for. This is the one where I actually put the pieces together and build an encounter the Angry way. Which is the AWESOME way. Together with the last one, this article concludes my obligation to Twitter friend @Clampclontoller who started this whole mess by asking me how to use the Angry (Awesome) method to build a cool chase scene. So, in addition to talking about encounter building in general, it also focuses more specifically on building non-combat action scenes and obstacles. Throughout, I will be using The Chase as an ongoing example of how to apply the ideas I'm discussing.*

*As before, you can Download this Article as a PDF because I don't write short. Study it well. Once you have mastered my lessons, grasshopper, we will move on to building and running social interaction challenges. Coming soon!*

## **The Seed: "From Tiny Acorns..." or Some Hippy Bulls#\$^ Like That**

If an encounter is like skiing off a cliff (see the previous article), then building an encounter is like planting a tree on the slope. Partly because when the PCs come skiing by, you might be able to break their legs, but mostly because you start by planting a seed. Or an acorn. Or pinecone. Or whatever the hell ski slope trees grow from. I'm not an arborist. But I am a DM and I know how to make an encounter.

The encounter seed is simply the starting point. The idea. The first thing in your head that starts off the whole pain in the a#% process of building and running an encounter. A seed could be anything at all: a specific monster (a dragon), a specific location (inside an active volcano), a dramatic question that needs answering (can the PCs learn the identity of the assassin who burned the prince to death, ate his body, and flew away), a specific adventure purpose (an encounter to soften the party up before they get to the dragon), or just a cool scene or set piece you want to build an encounter around (a flying carpet escape from a volcanic eruption caused by a dragon corpse falling into the caldera). Anything can be a seed.

But it is important to remember that a seed is not an encounter. Just as a fir tree seed needs water and sunlight and plant food and... whatever plants need to grow, an encounter needs to be nurtured and cultivated to blossom into a beautiful flower. Tree. Whatever. You may think it gets you off the hook if you are a heavy improviser and just show up with some stat blocks and pine cones to the table, but it doesn't. The only difference between preparing an encounter ahead of time and improvising an encounter is the amount of time you have to prepare everything you need to run the encounter. You still have to create a damn encounter.

## ***The Chase***

*The chase is simple. The seed here is "chase scene." That's all I was given to work with. I am going to flesh it out just a little bit and say I want the PCs to chase after and try to catch an assassin and I want an urban chase scene. That's the seed. The pinecone. The berry. Now to fertilize it.*

### **The Dramatic Question: Here We Go With the Literary Bulls#&\$ Again**

Once you've planted the seed, you need to fertilize it. And bulls#\*\$ makes the best fertilizer. You can't run an encounter without dramatic question and you can't build one without it either. Fortunately, the dramatic question is pretty easy to come up with. It might even be your seed. If not, you need to ask yourself what the PCs are trying to accomplish in the encounter. Why should they care? What do they get out of the encounter?

Remember though that freedom is everything in an RPG, right? So, you don't want the dramatic question assume anything about what how the PCs are going to resolve the question. Remember in the last article we talked about the difference between "can the PCs continue their journey" and "can the PCs survive the spider attack" and "can the PCs kill the spiders?" Well, I'm talking about it again, but only to remind you that we talked about it. Go read the last article if you have to.

The only caveat is that it is okay for the dramatic question to assume things about how the PCs are going to resolve the question if you want to limit the PCs. Wow. Big caveat, huh? "Remember how important it is not to impose limitations unless you really really want to." Why bother saying "don't," then?

The truth is that it is perfectly okay for some of your encounters to limit the approaches the PCs can take as long as it is a conscious choice. Sometimes, the hallway only goes in two directions. Sometimes, the orcs really are just going to try to kill the PCs because orcs hate civilized humanoids and want to kill them and eat them and take their stuff. It is fine. I know someone is already scrolling down to the comment section to scream about railroading, but those people are idiots and I will ignore them. Because there are many different ways to give the PCs freedom and as long as the PCs are mostly free most of the time in a variety of ways, the game can handle the occasional bottleneck through a single approach. I am not going to get into the philosophy here, but trust me. You never complain, in real life, that you don't have free will just because sometimes your choices are limited by your circumstances and surroundings.

Figure out what the dramatic question is. Write it big at the top of your encounter building page. Read it over once or twice and ask yourself if it assumes anything about how the PCs will resolve the scene. If you realize it does, ask yourself if that is okay. If it is, keep it. If not, rewrite the damned thing until it is vague enough to pass muster.

## ***The Chase***

*The dramatic question here is pretty easy: can the heroes catch the assassin before he escapes. Now, reading that over, notice that I have made two assumptions. First, I have assumed (by using the word 'catch') that the heroes will be chasing him down and they probably won't try to kill him. Second (a little more subtly), notice that I have made an assumption about how the scene is going to end. Either the heroes catch the assassin OR the assassin escapes and the heroes have limited time to catch the assassin. I'm going to talk a little later about why these things are important, but understand that I could*

*have just as easily have said “can the heroes catch the assassin?” That works just as well, but I am trying to show you how easy it is to sneak assumptions into your words without even noticing it. They WILL shape your thoughts and designs, even if you don’t recognize they are there. So get used to asking yourself why you chose every single word. If even one word is unnecessary, drop it! It could get in your way later.*

### **The Hook: You Can Lead the PCs to a Quest, But You Can’t Make Them Care**

In the last article, I talked a lot about how to “pose the dramatic question” to yourself, but I left something important out. How do you pose the dramatic question to the PCs? When an encounter starts, you have to get the PCs to the top of the ski slope, show them the trail, point them toward the trees, and give them a shove. Sort of. We call this a hook.

An encounter’s hook presents the PCs with a dramatic question that needs answering, it gives them a reason to care about answering the question, and then it calls them to act. Most DMs figure out the whole “presenting the PCs with a dramatic question” thing intuitively. Many even figure out that “reason to care” business. But many DMs screw up the call to action. It is important to understand all of these things, though, because this is where any limitations you set up in the question are going to come in.

“The tunnel emerges into the long side of a wide, oval cave, about 60 feet long and 40 feet across. Thanks to your light spell, you can see only one other exit, a wide tunnel directly across from you, about 40 feet away. Before you can set foot in the cave, however, several giant spiders drop the ceiling. They rear up, raising their front legs menacingly and spreading their double-pairs of mandibles in a soundless hiss. They are about to lunge! Roll for initiative!”

That’s a hook. After describing the basic scene, the first thing it does is point out a goal and therefore establish a dramatic question. It shows the party the only exit and, assuming they want to continue their travels, they are going to have to reach it. “Can the party safely reach the tunnel on the far side of the cave?” Of course, this hook assumes the DM already knows the party has some reason to be traveling from point A to point B. But the truth is that motivating PCs at the start of an encounter is usually pretty easy. The PCs generally have a goal by the time they are wandering from encounter to encounter, so the important part is simply to let them see how this particular encounter brings them toward that goal. Alternatively, if the encounter doesn’t bring them toward a personal or adventure goal, you have to show them something else they might want (“... on the far side of the chamber is a glittering pile of gold and gemstones!”)

The hook above also provides the PCs with a call to action. Spiders are attacking; roll for initiative so we can start this combat! It tells the PCs that it is time for them to do something to pursue their goal. It is the equivalent of “what do you do?”

Now, consider this hook:

“The tunnel emerges into the long side of a wide, oval cave, about 60 feet long and 40 feet across. Thanks to your light spell, you can see only one other exit, a wide tunnel directly across from you, about 40 feet away. Milling about on the ceiling of the cave, stringing sticky strands of glistening silk between the cave growths is a colony of spiders.

They either have not noticed yet or are not bothered by your presence at the entrance to their cave. They continue their work on their webby nest.”

Now, it starts off the same way and sets up the same goal. But things are a little different. At first, it might seem like it doesn't have any call to action. But it does. The players now have a goal and they have been presented with a source of conflict between them and the goal, just like the combat. The difference is that the actions they can take are more open-ended. The heroes could attack, launching spells and arrows at the spiders and gaining the upper hand, or they could opt for a different approach. They could send someone to approach the spiders to see how they react. They could attempt to sneak around the very edges of the cave. They could put the spiders to sleep or shroud the cave in obscuring mist or simply bolt for the exit and hope they can flee before the spiders are upon them.

A good call to action does a couple of things. First, it shows the players one or two obvious paths to their goal, or at least suggests some. Second, it creates exigency, a need to act. A sense of urgency. Not every encounter has the same level of exigency, but most encounters are served well with some sense that the time to act is limited in some way. Notice that the second encounter implies the heroes haven't been noticed YET or haven't disturbed the spiders YET. The simple inclusion of that word hints to the players that you will not wait forever for them to formulate a plan.

Notice also that, by changing the hook, I have added or removed assumptions from the dramatic question. The first hook assumes a fight is imminent. The players still might be able to avoid a fight with the right spells or by fleeing past the spiders, but the default is definitely a knock-down, drag-out with a bunch of oversized arachnids. The second hook offers opportunities around a fight and doesn't even mention the possibility of a fight. If the party wants to kill the spiders, they can, but they aren't forced to by the situation.

Now, I did the flavor text thing to illustrate how different hooks look when they are done. But you don't need to write a full hook just yet. In fact, it is better if you leave it a little vague for now. You just want to get a sense of how you're going to start your encounter and why the PCs are going to care. After you write down a hook, ask yourself if the heroes will actually be driven to action by your hook. Are they likely to care? Ask yourself if it suggests an action that might be taken to pursue the goal?

It is important to note that sometimes the hook is dependant on the actions of the PCs or the fall of the dice. For example, the spider cave with the nasty hunting spiders could have up to three hooks: the heroes surprise the spiders and can act before the spiders notice them, the spiders surprise the heroes and can act before the heroes notice them, or neither side surprises the other and both can act against the other. It is important to treat all three as potential hooks (unless you know ahead of time there is only one) and make sure that each one poses the dramatic question and calls the heroes to action properly. So, the hunting spiders might look like this:

- Heroes Surprise the Spiders: “Up ahead, clinging to the ceiling, you see a clutch of vicious giant cave spiders. They are clearly ready to drop down on unsuspecting prey in order to devour them. They haven't noticed you yet.”
- Spiders Surprise the Heroes: “Suddenly, with three heavy thuds, giant spiders drop down from the ceiling into your midst. They waste no time, taking advantage of the element of surprise to attack!”

- Neither Side Surprised: “Several giant spiders drop the ceiling ahead of you. They rear up, raising their front legs menacingly and spreading their double-pairs of mandibles in a soundless hiss. They obviously mean to make a meal of you.”

### ***The Chase***

*Lacking anything else to go on (thanks @Clampclontoller), I've got to come up with a hook on my own. I could take the easy way out and assume the PCs already had a reason to be interested in the assassin and they've stumbled on his lair and he flees out the back door, precipitating the chase, but they doesn't demonstrate much.*

*So, let's assume this chase is going to start an adventure. Something about uncovering a big conspiracy. And the assassin is a hired underling. Catching him and learning who he is and who hired him starts off a big mystery. The question is how to get the PCs to care, how to tell them to chase the assassin, and how to call them to action.*

*Because I'm just starting this one off, I'm keeping it vague. I'm not writing the full flavor text for it just yet. Instead, I am going to assume the PCs are on the street when an assassin shoots someone with a poisoned crossbow bolt. The PCs are lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time and see the assassin as he drops the crossbow and flees into the crowd toward the bustling market.*

*Now, for most PCs, that is enough to get them chasing, especially assuming they are good guys. I've got a good call to action and a sense of urgency. The assassin is already running, he has a big head start, he wants to flee.*

*But is that enough? Let's assume my players are a little more resistant. What else could I do. I could put the visiting person in priest robes, making him sympathetic and obviously innocent. Or perhaps make him an obvious city official. And make him beloved, too. A good city official. Perhaps when the people on the street see who got shot down, some of them scream while others drop to their knees and wail. These are all nice ways to get the PCs to care. I could also point out that the ruler of the city would likely reward anyone handsomely for running down the assassin if some of my players are more of a mercenary bent.*

*My bigger worry is that the PCs will be more worried about the dying noble than about the assassin. So, I might want to make sure that there are NPCs tending to him right away or that someone announces that he is dead right away. Either way helps get the players moving.*

*But that is really it for the hook. All I have to do is show the PCs a goal, give them one or more paths to the goal, and give them a chance to act.*

### **The Primary Source of Conflict: Because the PCs Can't Always Get What They Want**

We have a seed, a dramatic question, and a hook, and that leads us naturally to the primary source of conflict. In fact, sometimes it is easier to decide on a primary source of conflict before you create a hook. The order of the steps here matter less and less the deeper into the process you go. I prefer to come up with the hook first because that usually shines a spotlight right on the primary source of conflict.

The primary source of conflict is the most obvious source of conflict, the first one the PCs will see, and the one they will be most focussed on resolving somehow. In the caves above, the spiders and their desire to eat the PCs or defend their lair represent the primary sources of conflict (remember a source of conflict needs a reason to oppose the PCs or else there is no conflict). The primary source of conflict is usually visible in the hook. In fact, the call to action in the hook is usually a call to resolve the primary conflict.

Keep in mind that we haven't done any stats or mechanics yet and that is by design. Game mechanics and statistics are the last thing you want to worry about. Stats and mechanics are not encounters. Usually, they are simply sources of conflict. And they aren't even that. A stat block, by itself, is not a source of conflict because a stat block has no reason to oppose the heroes. At this point, we just want to identify the primary source of conflict: what is it and why is it opposing the PCs.

### ***The Chase***

*Well, this is easy. Just by looking at the hook you can see the primary source of conflict: the assassin wants to escape. In fact, I'm going to overstate the case a little. The assassin will do anything to escape.*

*One of the big secrets of designing encounters and adventures that I am trying to sneakily reveal is that word choice is tremendously important. And the choices you make change the way you see the things you're designing. The assassin who will do anything to escape is much more dangerous than the assassin who simply wants to escape. He is desperate. This desperation will become very important later.*

*Remember, every word you write down needs to serve a good purpose. Get used to reading the things you write carefully and asking why you chose one word over another.*

### **The Orc and the Pie: Your Encounter is Complete**

Technically, putting aside all of the mechanics and statistics you might need to make it happen in the game, your encounter might be finished now. You actually have everything you absolutely need to create a good dramatic scene. Dramatic question, hook, source of conflict.

If you follow this link, you will see the World's Shortest Adventure, flippantly tossed off by Monte Cook: <http://www.instantdungeon.com/node/4> (link opens in new tab). Notice that this "adventure" is actually a single encounter. It asks a dramatic question (can the PCs obtain the pie), poses that question to the players with the hook (there is a pie in the room but there is an orc in the way), and presents a source of conflict (the orc wants to protect his pie). It isn't quite phrased exactly that way, but all of the elements are there and there isn't anything else.

Frankly, if you check out the spider caves above, you have some complete encounters right there. Just print out some spider stat blocks, map out the rooms, and you're done. So, why is there still so much to this article?

Because complete is not the same as good. If you follow only the steps above, you will have a complete encounter. And you can run that encounter with some mechanical window dressing and everyone will probably have a good time most of the time. And that is why most Dungeon Master books kind of stop here when they talk about how to build encounters.

But I'm not most Dungeon Masters. I don't settle for complete. I want greatness. And that means I have to take it to the next level. I've got to worry about how the encounter is going to end. I've got to think about structure elements. And I've got to keep an eye on decision points.

And that is really where encounter building becomes anarchy. Because from here on out it becomes a process of thinking about what you've written, spotting the problems, and fixing them. Write, examine, tweak, examine, add, examine, subtract, think, fix, massage, fondle, think. From here on out, building the encounter is like fondling a tree. You heard me.

My point is this: from here on, it is impossible to do things in any sort of step-by-step, guided way. So, I'm going to begin by identifying two major questions that you need to worry about and then talk about ways to fix those specific problems. Don't try to follow things in order when you are building encounters from here, though. Just fiddle, question, and play. And fondle.

### **How the Hell Will You Know When the Encounter is Over?**

Now that you have the skeleton of an encounter to fondle, you need to see if it will work or not. The first thing to ask is "how can the encounter end?" Well, it ends when the dramatic question has been answered, right? But what will that look like?

For example, take the "spiders want to kill and eat the party." The dramatic question is "do the PCs survive the spider ambush?" How will you know when the question has been answered? Well, if the PCs kill all the spiders or drive them off or escape from them, the answer is yes. If the PCs are all dead, the answer is no. And those are the obvious ways the encounter could end. It is always possible the PCs will discover some outcome you didn't conceive of ("I don't know how you did it, but you have managed to befriend the spiders... somehow"), but that is part of the "joy" (sarcastic quotes) of running a game. Let those happen when they happen. All you have to worry about is the obvious, likely outcomes.

Alternatively, the "spiders want to defend their lair" has different possible outcomes. The dramatic question is "can the PCs reach the far side of the spider cave safely?" If the PCs end up on the other side of the cave, the answer is yes. If the PCs are all dead or if the PCs were forced to retreat, the answer is no. Again, those are the obvious, likely outcomes.

There are two reasons to worry about the ending now. First, so you can make sure that you are okay with the likely outcomes? Do you like those possibilities? Can you handle them? Notice, in the first encounter, the only possible failure is that the PCs end up dead. Is that okay? There is no right or wrong answer here. It depends on the group. But if you don't want that possible outcome, now is the time to figure out how to get rid of it. Perhaps the spiders leave the PCs alive and strung up in spider cocoons for later consumption. The PCs can escape, but that means you might want to write another encounter that gives them the opportunity to do so.

The other reason to worry about the ending is so that you can make sure you will know when the encounter is over. You never want an encounter to overstay its welcome. In the spider encounters, it is easy to tell when all the spiders are dead or all the PCs are dead. The most obtuse DM can work out when something is dead (hopefully). It is also pretty easy to tell when the party has left the cave (one way or the other). But how will you know when the spiders are driven off? This is where structure elements enter the picture. Remember when I talked about them in the last article (plug, plug, plug)? Well, this is where you identify things that need some sort of mechanic or structure or method of

keeping score. You don't have to be concerned about figuring out exactly what that structure is yet, but you should identify the bits of mechanics you need. "I need something to tell me when the spiders are driven off."

Structure elements are very important for avoiding what I like to call "The Encounter that Wouldn't Die." Players hate to admit defeat and DMs hate to tell players "give it up, guys, you failed." So, you end up with the unending social interaction where the players just keep repeating the same things over and over again or the scene where the players just keep "trying one more thing" even though the encounter was been robbed of all excitement an hour ago. Structure elements allow you, the DM, to decide when the players have failed and remind you to tell the players so and stop the encounter.

Finally, note that sometimes you will have an encounter in which you already know the answer to the dramatic question. Let's take a very simple one. Question: "Can the PCs obtain the treasure safely from the treasure chest." Hook: "There is a treasure chest. It probably has treasure inside." Primary Conflict: "There is an arrow trap that shoots anyone who opens the chest." Really, assuming the party buys into the hook (they decide to open the chest), either they will discover and disarm the trap or else someone will get shot with an arrow and get hurt. It probably won't be lethal unless the PC is already gravely injured. So, there is no doubt that, if the heroes take the hook, they will end up with the treasure. Another example is an interrogation in which the heroes are seeking information that the subject does not have. No amount of interrogation can get the information. These are fine. They happen sometimes. Some DM's run all of their games based on the assumption that the players can't fail. They always know what the answer to the dramatic question will be. That is fine. It isn't my thing, but there is nothing inherently flawed about an encounter structured in that way. What matters is that the players are uncertain about how the question will be answered. So, if you discover that there really are no possible "yes" answers or no possible "no" answers to your dramatic question, don't panic. You didn't screw up. Of course, if there are no possible answers are all, you may find that encounter tricky to run.

### **The Chase**

*So, how will The Chase end? The question is "can the heroes capture the assassin before he escapes." Either the assassin ends up captured, or he escapes. Seems simple, right? Well, not entirely. As long as the party can see the assassin, chase the assassin, or even search every single street, avenue, alley, and doorway for the assassin, they will keep up the hunt. And then The Chase will turn into The Encounter that Wouldn't Die. The question is: how can the assassin get away.*

*Firstly, I need to assume the assassin has a goal in mind. I need a finish line. If he reaches the finish line ahead of the party, he vanishes. For example, suppose he is running for a tavern where he knows the owner will hide him. If he gets there with any sort of lead on the party, he can disappear into a secret room and be assured the tavern keeper will hide him. That doesn't prevent the party from turning the place upside down or interrogating the landlord, of course, but those are different encounters.*

*Secondly, if he gets far enough away from the party, he can hide. He can vanish into the crowd or disappear into a maze of back alleys. At that point, the party might have a chance to hunt him down and search the area, but if they can't find his hiding spot within a reasonable amount of time, he's escaped.*

*So, my encounter will need two things. First, it needs a finish line and some way to know when the assassin has crossed it. Second, it needs a way to know how much of a lead the assassin has on the party. That is all I need to know for now.*



## Do You Have Enough Decision Points?

As I noted in THE LAST ARTICLE (remember how I wrote an article before this one?! Do you?!), the more complex an encounter, the more decision points it needs. When an encounter runs out of decision points, it becomes boring. At that point, if the encounter is still going, you have a problem. Nothing will destroy an encounter as efficiently as not having enough decision points. If you've done everything else really well, but you want to turn your encounter to s\$&%, ignore this step and go with what you've got.

Decision points are spots where the players are asked to choose how to resolve the encounter. Every time you ask the player "what do you do," you have a decision point. However, if there is only one useful thing to do (or the player THINKS there is only one useful thing to do), it doesn't count as a decision point. "The lock is almost picked, you'll need to pick it just a little more, what do you do?" That? THAT IS NOT A DECISION!!! THAT IS A DM ASKING A PLAYER TO "PRESS X TO CONTINUE!"

Decision points come in two general flavors. Either a player can choose which particular conflict to resolve OR the player can choose how to resolve a particular conflict. Choosing which conflict to resolve occurs when a player chooses which enemy to target or decides whether to try and get through the gate or scale the castle wall. Choosing how to resolve a particular conflict occurs when a player chooses what spell or attack to use on a particular enemy or whether to bribe the guard, fight the guard, or sneak past the guard. Complex encounters utilize both types, but some encounters focus more on one type than another. I like to call encounters that focus primarily on choosing which conflicts to resolve "Mazes" and encounters that focus on how to resolve a given conflict "Obstacle Courses." Hopefully, it is obvious why.

Now, combat encounters are pretty loaded with decision points already. If an encounter is planned as a combat, or if it might become one, you are covered for decision points. Most RPG systems are pretty good at making sure combat is loaded with decisions. I will talk more about designing good combat encounters though. There are some techniques that definitely help. Likewise, most social interactions, by their nature, are chock full of decisions. Each time a player opens their mouth, they have a near infinite number of possible choices for what to say. And you can bet your sweet bippy I will be talking about social interaction encounters, possibly in the very next article I write.

So, that leaves us with the messy, ugly, non-combat, non-interaction encounters (NCNIs) as well as the parts of mixed encounters that don't involve talking to things or killing things. If you've ever wondered why most DMs seem to instinctively shy away from those encounters, the reason is because they are very hard to create and there is no good, universal format. If you jump down to the comment section to point out D&D 4E skill challenges, by the way, I will hit you. There is no GOOD universal format. The reason is because every encounter has different needs and X successes before 3 failures with arbitrary action restrictions doesn't serve all those needs by a long shot. If you like skill challenges, as implemented in 4E, fine and dandy. Me, I want more than they can give me. And I want you to want more too so I can give you the more I want you to want. Got it?

Look at your encounter and try to imagine the different ways it might play out. How many times will different players have to choose between multiple options, either by choosing between different sources of conflict or choosing how to resolve a particular conflict? And how many of those decisions are obvious? How many do you explicitly call attention to? Remember, if the players don't think they have options, the choice doesn't count as a decision point.

Let's look at the spiders who just want to defend their cave. How many decision points are in that encounter? First the party has to decide how to pursue their goal. They could kill the spiders or they could sneak around the room and try to avoid them or they could bolt for the far exit past the spiders. That is one decision point with three pretty obvious options. Now, follow each of those options. If the party tries to fight, that opens a combat and we don't have to worry. There will be a lot of decision points. But if the party tries to sneak around the room, if they succeed, they have no more decisions to make. Likewise, if they sprint for the far side, apart from possibly trying to slow or distract the spiders, there aren't any more decisions there. If the party gets caught sneaking or sprinting, they will have to choose a strategy, but otherwise, that's it for decisions. So, this encounter has as few as one decision point and, apart from the combat, as many as two.

So, how many decision points are enough? It depends. Remember that once an encounter has run out of decision points, it should be finished in two or three dice rolls or people will get bored with it. If you have only one decision point to start with, you shouldn't expect each player to roll dice more than two or three times before the encounter is over. Given the spider cave encounter, that isn't unreasonable. So, it works.

But there is also the question of how much weight you want the encounter to have. Do you want it to feel big and important or do you want it to feel like a minor victory? Do you want it to feel like the players finished a level? Do you want it to feel like the players rescued the princess? Or do you want it to feel like the players stomped on a goomba? The more decision points you have, the bigger and grander and more complicated the encounter feels.

Non-combat, non-interaction encounters tend to move faster and have fewer decisions than combats or interactions, but they still feel pretty substantial as long as they are run well. One or two decisions and a few die rolls feels about as significant as a combat against a minor foe. Thus, avoiding the spiders with stealth seems to feel as big as beating them in a fight, at least to most players. That means, a well run encounter with between five and ten decision points is a pretty grand and weighty scene.

As a brief aside, there is a myth that you absolutely always want to engage all of the players in every scene and you should strive to give each player something to do in every encounter. This is complete bulls\$% and it will lead you building encounters that feel forced and contrived and sometimes even annoying your players. You'll never pull it off anytime anyway, so you'll just be chasing your own tail. Because most NCNI encounters don't last too long anyway and because you are building encounters with a good dramatic questions and strong hooks, most players who are not directly involved will still be invested in the outcome. They will find ways to contribute if they want to, but they will happily sit for ten minutes to see how the other PCs resolve things. In fact, distracting them with pointless asides just so they have something to do may just upset them. If you mix up your encounters and allow plenty of freedom in how they are resolved, all of your players will remain engaged even if they aren't always in every spotlight every time. Trust me.

### ***The Chase***

*If I ran The Chase right now, how many decision points would it have? Well, the party can decide to run after the assassin and try to tackle him. And that's about it.*

*See what I mean about how a good-looking encounter can fall apart. This exciting seeming encounter actually has nothing to do. I can call upon players to make some sort of endurance-type check to keep up the chase and a strength-based check to tackle the assassin if they get close, but as it stands right now, there is nothing for the players to decide to do other than deciding to engage in the encounter itself. That is going to need to be fixed.*

*I should point out that I want this scene to feel "big and important," whatever that means. I have decided (arbitrarily), that this encounter is supposed to start off my adventure and my game session. I want it to feel exciting and to draw the players into a mystery. So I really do want to have more than five decision points.*

*Incidentally, the limited number of decision points is a problem with many NCNI encounters and chase scenes are among the most problematic of them all. Another encounter type that always creates trouble is the "crossing the wilderness" scene which almost always come down to "roll to not starve, now fight a wandering monster."*

### **Upping the Decision Point Ante**

So, you have a promising encounter except that your heroes have nothing to do. How do you fix that? Obviously, you need to add decision points. Fortunately, that is pretty easy. Most decision points are created by sources of conflict, so you can either add new sources of conflict or have your existing sources of conflict do things to complicate the situation.

But not all conflicts are created equally. Some sources of conflict don't really involve decisions. For example:

Dramatic Question: "can the heroes safely get the treasure"

Hook: "there is treasure and you want it"

Source of Conflict: "there is a wide pit blocking the path to the treasure"

A pit is a nice obstacle. Heroes can jump it, climb down one side and up the other, build a bridge, teleport, fly, they have lots of options. It is a nice, open-ended conflict. Lots of ways to handle it. It is still just one decision, but one with a lot of freedom. Now, imagine I add a locked steel gate on the other side. If the heroes are low-level enough or weak enough, their only option may be to pick the lock. Therefore, I haven't added a decision point here. They have no obvious choice but to pick the lock. It is just an obstacle. Of course, at higher levels or with more tools, they may have more options. Remember that decision points only exist if the players THINK they have options.

Be aware also that adding options to an existing source of conflict doesn't actually add decision points. If I add thick vines hanging over the pit or a secret door that allows the party to get around the pit, I haven't added any decision points. They just have more obvious options to deal with the one decision point they have.

Most decision points should be focused on actions the heroes can take to resolve a conflict or pursue the dramatic question. It is important to make sure that at least some of the decisions the heroes have to make are about how they can bring about victory, not just about how to avoid defeat. That can often be tricky. The heroes should be resolving conflicts, not attempting to avoid being resolved by conflicts.

There is a special kind of decision point that needs to be mentioned: the dilemma. A dilemma occurs when a decision requires a hero to choose between multiple goals - usually a personal goal and the goal represented by the dramatic question. For example, suppose it turns out that the captive will not speak unless violently coerced. The party wants the information, but the party cleric is both lawful and good. In terms of the encounter, the decision to use torture or not use torture is pretty simple. However, adding in a personal goal (the goal to behave as a lawful and good person would) complicates that. In that case, the cleric must choose between getting the information and keeping to his vows. Dilemmas do not have to be about morality, they simply have to pit two things a character desperately wants against one another and force the player to choose.

Once you have decided that you need to add decision points to an encounter, things get pretty chaotic. You can either add new sources of conflict that create decisions or have existing sources of conflict take actions that force decisions. The more complex the encounter, the more you want to mix things up. In point of fact, building an encounter is a lot like building a dungeon. You have a start point and an end point and you want to put rooms full of encounters between the beginning and the end. Some of the rooms might offer multiple exits. Others simply force the PCs to confront obstacles and decide how to deal with them. Some dungeons are mazes that need to be navigated. Others are linear obstacle courses. Many have elements of both. A really well-built, complex NCNI encounter can actually be mapped like a dungeon (or a flowchart if you prefer because you're BORING!).

Finally, remember that if you want the players to know they have an option, you have to tell them. Players are stupid and confused by subtlety. A secret door does not, generally, count as an option unless the players have a compelling reason to search for one. I am not saying that you need to tell your PCs to search for secret doors. That'd be pretty dumb considering the word "secret" in the name. What I'm saying is that the secret door should always be the THIRD option, never the SECOND when you're trying to create decision points. That way, heroes who never think to search for secret doors still have a choice, but the players who do search find an easier way to their goal.

### ***The Chase***

*Watch how complicated this can get! This, right here is the real meat and potatoes of encounter building. This is where the magic happens. Pay attention. This will be pretty frenetic.*

*My primary source of conflict is the desperate assassin who will do anything to escape. But that alone doesn't lend itself to any actions other than just running after him. Right away, I need something the players can actively DO to close the gap and gain some ground. If I'm chugging along running away and heroes are chugging along behind me, what can they do to close the gap. And I don't mean what might CERTAIN heroes be able to do (a wizard can throw a grease spell, sure). Well, the heroes can push harder than me, right? They can sprint. Like Will Smith chasing down the cephalapoid on foot, right? Just crank. Go all out. But I can't let them do that all the time, right? Or else there is no decision. So, first thing is that I'm going to give them some kind of limited ability to sprint. Maybe they need a clear, straight run to sprint. And maybe sprinting too much will exhaust them. I will have to tell them about this option as soon as the chase starts so they know it exists. Otherwise, they might assume they are running at top speed all the time anyway and not bother.*

*Fine. So that is one thing they can do during the chase. But that isn't enough. When to sprint is really just an extended single decision point. I've seen movies, what else might players do to get an advantage. Well, if I am running through crowded streets (I've decided some of the streets are crowded), someone*

*chasing me could go for the high ground. Rooftop chases are classic. So, a hero can climb up onto the roofs of the city to keep an eye on me and to have more open ground. Of course, the acrobatic hero will need to make jumps and aerial maneuvers and risks falling, injuring himself, and being taken out of the chase, but that's the way it goes.*

*What else? Well, you know that thing in movies where it looks like the crook has gotten away and then, all of the sudden, the cop's partner who disappeared at the beginning of the chase and we forgot about, suddenly that guy bursts out and tackles the crook? Well, that is damned cool. Why can't we give THAT option. How could a player pull that off? Well, in order to take a short cut, the player has to be able to predict where the assassin is going to go. Maybe the assassin is taking off in a particular direction, perhaps toward a crime-ridden, dangerous neighborhood where he knows he has friends to hide him. Someone who knows the city and makes a skill check (like Local Knowledge or Streetwise) might be able to guess where he is going. Let's assume the players know the city since @Clampclontoller didn't say they don't. That guy could slip away at the beginning of the chase, navigate a shortcut, and... well, if there is a chokepoint along the route... he could spring a trap there. So, let's suppose the districts of the city have walls or rivers or something between them. If the assassin wants to get to Crimetown, he has to go over the Crimetown Bridge. If someone can beat him there, they get a chance to tackle him.*

*Now, that is not something the players might think off. So, if none of them asks about it in the first round of the chase, I will call for the Street Knowledge Local Wise whatever check on the second round and, anyone who succeeds gets the prediction (he's probably heading to Crimetown where he might have friends to hide or defend him, there's only one good way using the Crimetown Bridge). At that point, the players might ask about shortcuts or alternate routes and, if they don't, well they can still chase the guy.*

*So, now we have chasing with sprinting, stalking on the roof tops, and outflanking the guy. But those are all really just one decision. Three different approaches to bring about the same thing. Plus, the players now have enough elements to play with that they could be more clever. For example, if they get someone on the rooftops, they could drop back and stop chasing, hoping the rooftop guy can stalk him stealthily. Or if one or two of them discover the alternate route, the rest could drop back and hope the shortcut pans out. Hell, they could all take the alternate route. I could call the encounter done at this point and it'd be okay (as long as I resolve it in three die rolls or so), but let's not stop there. One decision with a few obvious paths and a bunch of clever alternatives is neat, but lets try to drag this out. We're still playing with just one main source of conflict: the assassin who wants desperately to escape. Can we add some more?*

*Well, damn straight we can. We have a whole city to play with. The city is full of sources of conflict. A crowded market that slows down anyone who is trying to force their way through the crowd, for example. Let's say the chase starts and immediately the assassin tries to lose the heroes in the crowded market. There are lots of ways any ground-based chasers might clear a way through the crowd. If the assassin is slowed down, but the heroes can do something to mitigate the crowd (a strong character 'clearing a path'; a charismatic character screaming orders to move or using a bluff to scare the crowd away; a wizard firing spells into the crowd to injure, kill, or disperse citizens (don't look at me, some players think like that); and so on).*

*But the market keeps people from sprinting. So, the whole chase can't happen in the market. What if the chase actually passes through a couple of different neighborhoods like an obstacle course (an obstacle course, imagine that \*wink\*). So, we start off and the guy bolts into the market. The PCs can follow, try to gain the rooftops, or have a chance to guess his route and cut him off. Then, those following can*

*mitigate the crowd while those above close some distance. Now, we'll go to a nice a straight run. A connecting sidestreet, not too crowded with few outlets. Followers can sprint if they want to try to close the distance. Maybe a follower decides to take a shot with a ranged weapon (losing a lot of ground) or throw a spell in the clear street (also losing a lot of ground). A good spell or difficult ranged attack could end the chase. Then, well, maybe our assassin gets desperate.*

*The next street is a work street filled with laborers unloading carts. As the assassin runs past, he draws a long knife and rakes a cart horse in the flank. The horse tears free of its harness, panics, and charges down the street, injuring people in the crowd and barrelling toward the PCs. Maybe the PCs try to run past it, but maybe someone tries to control the horse to protect the crowd, taking themselves out of the race to do the right thing. Or maybe someone gets the idea to jump onto the horse (or another one) and use the horse to keep up the chase. We won't mention that idea explicitly. Something a clever player might think of.*

*Now, we'll add a short interlude of chasing down a winding side street with no real obstacles or diversions, but no straight line of sight. The assassin just keeps running. No one can really do anything here. It is more of a pause in the action. But it gives the players a chance to think. I've been demanding a bunch of quick decisions from them. A few seconds where they can sit back and listen to some flavor text helps keep them involved.*

*Now, we have the bridge to Crimetown. And this is a big spot. The shortcut hero gets their one chance to stop the Chase. And then everyone is funneled down the bridge. The bridge is another nice straightaway, but a little too crowded to make ranged attacks or spells, but it will let people sprint and close the distance again. More importantly, the river is too wide to jump. Why? Because the guy on the roof has been doing nothing but keeping up with the assassin, making occasional acrobatic-type checks at my direction. I need to get him down. Remember that "three die rolls without a decision point?" He ran his three actions out and now he needs to come down. Remember that episode of the Tick where they "run out of rooftops?" There you go.*

*Meanwhile, if they don't end the chase here (and it is possible they will), then the assassin will punish them. Suppose he does the horse trick again, only worse. He slashes someone and shoves them over the rail into the river. The person thrashes in the water, but the stunned citizens just gawp and shout. No one jumps in. Even if the PCs did not do anything to stop the horse, they will likely save the hapless innocent.*

*Beyond the bridge, we'll put another open street and a straightaway. Let people try to sprint again, give someone an opportunity to get up onto the Crimetown rooftops, let someone take a shot with a bow or a spell.*

*And then, we'll go for the home stretch. Much more in his element, the assassin bolts into the back alleys and he knows the alleys. If he has any sort of decent lead at this point, he is going to try to evade. This isn't really a decision point. It is more of an obstacle. He'll try the old turn a corner, then dart into a hiding place and hope everyone bolts past. If that succeeds, he escapes. If not, the heroes turn around and can pick up the chase once more. Someone on the roof might have an easier time spotting him, call out his location, or do the sneaky stalker thing.*

*Then, one more street with a thick crowd for the PCs to dodge through (criminals, urchins, and beggars). If the PCs don't catch the assassin here, he ducks into the Scumm and Villainy Bar and Grill, into the*

*secret room, and the bartender tries to cover for him. But that's another encounter. Now, there is an encounter LOADED with decision points.*

### **Structure and Mechanics: All Them Pesky Rules Bits**

You might have noticed that I have barely touched on the mechanics of the encounter, except to briefly mention “an endurance-like” check or “some kind of local knowledge” check. Of course, some of you may already have been reading my example chase scene and saying things like “oh, sure, use Streetwise, DC 15” or “he means a Constitution check with a +2 bonus for the Run feat.” Honestly, except for one little piece of the puzzle which I will get to, the example encounter I spelled out above is pretty much what I would bring to the table. The reason I started this series with the ways to adjudicate actions on the fly is because, once you have that part down, non-combat encounters don't need a whole lot of other stuff. So, when one of my players says “I want to run up that empty cart, grab the eave, and vault onto the rooftops to continue the chase,” I can just go “give me an Acrojumpclimb check, DC eleventy-two.” or whatever. Because I'm awesome. And I've helped to make you awesome too. Just not quite as awesome as me.

So, when you are building your encounters, you focus on the s\$&% that matters. Dramatic questions, hooks, conflicts, and decisions. But not everyone is comfortable flying so fast and loose with the mechanics. And that's fine. You can now run through your encounter, write it up nice, fill in the skill checks for the stuff you've decided, figuring out difficulty numbers, and so on. If you've got the potential for a fight, put in a stat block. If one of the conflicts is a trap, build and stat that. I don't need to go through that process and I've wasted enough pages.

But, let's do waste some pages on structure elements and unique rules. I told you earlier to make note of any special mechanics or rules or scorekeeping mechanisms you might need to know how the encounter ends, right? Well, now it is the time to build that. Also, it is now time to build any other special mechanics that might have grown out of the process of filling up the encounter with juicy, juicy decision points.

Structure elements are ways to keep score so you know when it is time to bring your brilliant encounter to a conclusion. Unique rules are fiddly little bits that you think you need to pull off a certain conflict or decision point or whatever.

For example, in the spider encounters, I mentioned the possibility of the heroes driving off the spiders instead of killing them. That is all well and good, but I might want a structure element to tell me when the spiders are “driven off.” Likewise, I might want to give the heroes the opportunity to scare off the spiders somehow. I might spend a little bit of time on a unique mechanical element to make that happen.

It is easy to go crazy with structure elements and unique rules, but you want to keep them as simple as possible and expose the players to as few of them as possible. Players rarely need to see the structure elements unless it helps visually build tension. Even if it does, do not explain the structure elements and how they work except in the most rudimentary way. Never, ever allow the players to play the structure element. Make them play the situation. The structure element is a scorekeeping tool FOR YOU. Likewise, extra bits of mechanics do not have to be explained in detail until they come up, though it is always nice to let players know they have options that might not occur to them.

Structure elements and unique rules should always be as small as possible for the use you intend to get out of them. Most of them will last for one encounter and then vanish. Do not spend a lot of time on them. However, if an element is going to be used again and again, you might want to devote more effort. Be wary of reusing structure elements though. They work best when they are tailored to the situation. Universal rules and structures generally force you to hamfistedly cram situations into rules rather than build rules around situations (see again: skill challenges).

For example, I need a way of tracking the morale or fighting spirit of the spiders, right? Well, I could design a complex mechanical system of morale to use again and again with a bunch of things to keep track of, but that is probably not worth my time. Spiders are going to keep fighting until they are risking severe injury or death. Insects and arachnids are tenacious. So, all I need is a simple rule: when a spider has 10% of its hit points left (or less), it will flee if it can do so without getting further injured. Otherwise, it will keep fighting until it can flee. That's it. Morale system done!

Likewise, let's say that once the spiders are below half their hit points, someone could scare them off with an intimidate check or something. Again, simple (I know some games include just this sort of rule, but I'm writing for every game right now) and easy. When a spider gets below half its hit points, I might call out to the player that the spider is growing more hesitant and defensive and they might be able to drive it off. We don't need to talk about rules or DCs. I just need to tell them that it is possible to scare the spider away. If someone does something clever ("I wave my torch in its face, screaming and shouting at it"), I can give a bonus.

So, structure elements and unique rules should be as small as possible and kept out of the player's way as much as possible. Remember, all of the rules are just tools for you, the DM, to determine what happens when the players do things. I would love to give a simple set of rules and instructions for building structure elements, but there aren't any. Not GOOD ONES anyway. Because they are unique, they accomplish what you need them to accomplish, and they don't get in the way by doing more than that. So, you'll just have to wing it. You'll get better at them as time goes on. Have fun. The nice part about them is no one but you has to see them, so no one will know if you do a bad job and have to scrap it.

### ***The Chase***

*I am not going to spell out all of the mechanics of the chase in every given system, but I am going to discuss how I would build the unique elements and the structure element. First, let's review what I need.*

*First of all, I need to be able to keep track of the race. Specifically, I need to know when the assassin reaches the finish line. And I also need to know how far from the assassin the heroes are. But, looking at what I've come up with so far, I actually DON'T need to know when the assassin reaches the finish line. I've scripted the whole chase in terms of where the assassin is going to be. Market, Side Street, Horse Street, Winding Street, Bridge to Crimetown, Crimetown Street, Back Alleys, Crimetown Market. That is eight total scenes or "rounds" of play, right? But maybe I want to stretch things out a little. Let's say the Market and the Crimetown Street are two rounds, so I have a nice, even ten rounds of play. Why? Because I like round numbers. They are easier to work with. Doesn't matter. The point is, I know when the assassin gets into the bar because he just keeps chugging away for ten rounds, right? If the PCs don't stop him, he's gone.*



*But I need to know when the PCs are on top of him. For that, I need to measure the distance between the PCs and the assassin. I could do it in feet and consider relative speeds and all that crap, but due to the environment, no one is really moving at their top speed unless they are sprinting. The assassin won't sprint. He's pacing himself, navigating, and blazing the trail and he isn't as hardy as the heroes. So actual speeds don't matter. So, I just decide to arbitrarily measure the thing in "lead." How much of a lead does the assassin have?*

*You know what'd be neat? If I had a visual aid. Suppose I marked off a piece of paper in spaces and put the assassin at the end. Each space represents some arbitrary amount of lead. If I don't want a visual aid the players can see, I can just use numbers. PC 1 is 8 spaces behind the assassin. PC 2 is 5 spaces behind the assassin. And so on.*



*Each time the PCs take an action to increase their speed relative to the assassin, they move ahead a space. Each time the PCs take an action that requires them to stop (firing an arrow, throwing a spell, climbing up to the roofs), they lose a space. Simple as that. Again, the players don't need to know these rules. It is helpful to see the visual aid, but they shouldn't be playing the visual aid.*

*If all the heroes drop off the back of the chase (more than 10 spaces away), the assassin escapes. Moreover, if the assassin reaches Crimetown (across the bridge) and no one is in the front half of the board, he tries to vanish. The heroes each get a tricky check to spot him, but if they don't, he vanishes. The same occurs in the Crimetown Back Alleys. If anyone is on the rooftops, they get a big bonus on the check.*

*That seems pretty reasonable. So, how much of a lead should the assassin start with? Well, we want him to be catchable, but ideally, we want him to be catchable near the end of the race. What is the minimum number of spots someone can speed themselves up?*

*Twice in the Market, sprinting on the Side Street, Sprinting on the Bridge, Twice sprinting on the Crimetown Street, and once in the Market, right? As written those are where the heroes have nice, obvious ways to speed up. That's seven opportunities. But we don't want to require them to hit all seven. We want to allow for a few failures. So, let's require five. The assassin starts five spaces ahead of the party.*

*And that pretty much covers the basic structure of the encounter. Except, what about the person on the roof, if there is one? His main role is to be the spotter. He'll save the day if the assassin has a lead on the party in Crimetown. And he gives the party opportunities to choose to stalk instead of chase if they think of that. But what else.*

*Firstly, climbing onto the roofs costs a space. The person isn't chasing. They are staying still. But suppose, other than that, they automatically gain a space every round as long as they can manage an Acrobatic type check. If they fail the check, they fall to the ground, take damage, and lose a space. If they succeed, they gain a space. So, if someone climbs up on the roof in the first Market spot (right away), they are six behind, then five in the Market, then four in the Side Street, then three in the Winding Street, then two when the party hits the Bridge. Then, if they can dismount the roofs successfully, they can sprint in the next three spaces and win. That works really well. We'll add a rule about dismounting using an Acrobatic check to hit the ground running and not losing any ground.*

*Of course, on the other side of the bridge, they can reclaim the roofs at the cost of a space and keep gaining ground for a flying tackle. That's also cool.*

*Now, what about actions that slow up or injure the assassin. Someone is going to try to do something to the assassin: shoot him with a weapon, cast a spell, throw a rock, yell ahead for the crowd to stop him, something. We'll allow any of those actions that seem reasonable and we'll have them cause the assassin to lose a space which effectively means everyone else gains a space. Of course, most of those actions require one of the PCs to give up a space.*

*As for sprinting, it really doesn't require too many mechanics. We've limited it with the environment and we've made it an important way to win the chase if one doesn't use the roofs or the secret back route, so we don't need to make too many elaborate rules. We'll require some kind of endurance check for it, but let's make it risky too. If the person fails by a certain threshold (say five or more), they fatigue themselves, slow down, and lose a space. It is important that we do this so that the party can lose ground.*

*For that matter, we can also decide that someone who stops to save the crowd from the horse or to rescue the drowning guy on the bridge drops completely out of the race. So we can eliminate a couple of PCs to up the stakes. And, when the assassin sets the rampaging horse loose, if the PCs ignore the horse, they all need to make some sort of saving throw or lose a space avoiding the horse.*

*In point of fact, we probably want to make every attempt to speed up (like dealing with the crowd in either of the markets) cost a space if they fail, just to keep things shifting back and forth and add some excitement. It is a little more advanced topic, but "survive until the finish" is less interesting than "push for victory or be defeated." In general, you want opposition not just to prevent the PCs from winning, but to push them toward losing. That makes it feel like more of a conflict.*

*Also notice that the encounter has a number of different endpoints, even if it doesn't appear to at first glance. If the heroes catch the assassin, they can interrogate him. If they stay close enough to the assassin, they follow him to the tavern where he hides out. They can search the place and try to turn him up or stake it out. If they stay a little farther away, they have a rough sense of the neighborhood he is hiding out in when he vanishes into the back alleys and can start canvassing the neighborhood. This is an important thing to pay attention to when building an adventure. It also means I don't have to worry too*

*much about balancing every number in the encounter. As long as I get it close enough, the heroes will probably end up with some degree of success.*

*At this point, we have just about everything we need to make an exciting chase scene work. All that is left is to clean it up. Now, I am not going to give it a complete writeup, but I will spell out the basics for you.*

## The Chase

**Hook:** The heroes witness an assassin shoot down an important dignitary on the streets of Market Town. The assassin discards his crossbow and darts into a crowded market, where he is difficult to spot, but his rough, shabby appearance makes it difficult for him to hide completely. The heroes are the only ones who have seen the assassin. NPCs are tending to the dignitary. Can the heroes catch the assassin before he disappears?

**The Chase:** During the chase, measure the distance from the assassin to the heroes in spaces, each one representing an arbitrary distance. You can use a marked diagram if you'd like to give the heroes a visual aid. In general, any action the heroes take to speed themselves up should move them one space closer to the assassin. Any action the heroes take to slow the assassin should move all of the heroes one space closer (representing the assassin losing ground) except the hero who took the action (who probably had to stop running to take the action). Modify this as you see fit based on the action. Explain to the players that they are maintaining a steady pace, not running all out, but pacing themselves and avoiding the hazards of the city around them.

The chase itself plays out in a series of rounds during which each hero will have the opportunity to take an action or react to the environment. During the chase, the assassin will lead them through several different neighborhoods and districts. Ultimately, the assassin is trying to reach the Scumm and Villainy Bar in Crimetown. The owner is a friend of his and maintains a secret back room the assassin can vanish into. The owner will cover for him.

The heroes begin the space five spaces behind the assassin. If, at any point, none of the heroes is within seven spaces of the assassin, the assassin ducks into an alley and disappears, escaping.

**The Rooftops:** During the chase, one or more of the heroes can try to gain the rooftops to make the chase easier. This option is called out twice during the chase, but players should be able to do so at any time. During the round in which the player climbs up to the rooftops, they lose a space. Thereafter, they must attempt a skill check each round to navigate the rooftops. If they fail, they fall to the streets, lose a space, and take falling damage. If they succeed, they gain a space. Heroes on the rooftops may jump down at any time with a skill check. If they succeed, they continue the chase. If they fail, they take falling damage and lose a space.

### Round 1: The Market

The assassin barrels through a crowded market which makes it slow going for both himself and the heroes. Allow the players to take an action to mitigate the crowd. Also, call attention to the bunting and streamers hanging down from the low rooftops and market stalls to suggest the idea of climbing onto the rooftops. If a hero does something to mitigate or disperse the crowd, allow that hero (or all the heroes based on the action) to gain a space. If a hero attempts to predict the assassin's route, allow them to make a skill check as described in the next round.

## **Round 2: The Market**

The assassin continues to make his way through the thick crowd. Continue as you did in the previous round, but don't call further attention to the rooftops. However, ask everyone to make a skill check to check their knowledge of the city. The check should be difficult.

If the check succeeds, tell the player that the assassin's rough clothing and demeanor would make it difficult for him to vanish here in Market Town. He may be running for the bridge to Crime Town, a slum neighborhood across the river, where he may be able to go to ground. Warn them, however, that the information is just a guess and could be wrong.

If any of the PCs ask, they can navigate a shortcut through the city. Ask them to make a skill check as they cut into an alley, but warn them that, if they fail to navigate, they will end up lost and be out of the chase.

## **Round 3: The Side Street**

The assassin bursts out of the market and into a straight side street. The street is not very crowded and provides a nice straight run with no outlets and it offers a clear line of sight. After a moment, also suggest that this might be a good place to sprint all out, but warn the heroes they might push too hard and fatigue themselves, losing some ground. Allow any heroes who want to make a skill check to sprint. Move them up a space if they succeed. They lose a space and fall back a bit if they fail. Also, allow any other actions to slow down the assassin you feel might be appropriate in the situation.

## **Round 4: The Horse Street**

The assassin turns a corner and darts down a street filled with carts, laborers, and draft animals. He takes out a long dagger and slashes at the flank of a horse as he darts past. The terrified animal whinnies and tears itself free of its harness, bolting up the street right toward the heroes, knocking people aside and injuring them as it charges out of control.

Allow the heroes a chance to react to the horse. If they seem intent on ignoring the horse, remind them it is charging right toward them and may run wild through the streets, injuring many people before it is caught and calmed down. If no one reacts, ask each hero to make a save. If they fail, they lose a space. If one of the heroes attempts to calm or capture the horse, he can prevent the rest of the heroes from having to make saves if successful.

If someone ends up on a horse somehow and takes control of it (which should be a difficult maneuver), allow them to gain a space. Thereafter, they gain two spaces every round until the heroes reach the Crimetown Alleys, whereupon the horse will not enter the narrow streets and will have to be abandoned.

## **Round 5: The Winding Street**

If there is a hero navigating the back alleys, ask for a second skill check as they attempt to find the shortcut to the bridge.

Meanwhile, the assassin darts down a winding, curved street, crowded with citizens. Describe the street and the chase, but the winding road doesn't allow clean lines of sight or let the heroes sprint. In all likelihood, the heroes will not be able to do much here.

### **Round 6: The Crimetown Bridge**

The bridge to Crimetown crosses a wide, slow-moving river. It is not terribly crowded, but there are a few people milling about on the bridge and numerous market stalls.

If the hero navigating the shortcut succeeded on both skill checks, he bursts onto the bridge ahead of the assassin and can attempt to tackle him. This should be a moderate check. If it fails, allow him to pick up the chase one space behind the assassin.

Now, the assassin slashes at a passerby on the bridge and shoves him over the railing. The citizen begins flailing into the water, bleeding freely. He is in imminent danger of drowning or bleeding to death. The other people on the bridge look shocked and alarmed, but no one is jumping into help him.

If there are any heroes on the rooftops, they will have to jump down as the river is too wide to continue their path. A hero might attempt to jump directly into the river to save the drowning man.

Meanwhile, heroes on the bridge can sprint after assassin, gaining ground as they could in the Side Street. If someone leaps into the river to rescue the citizen, allow them to do so with an easy check, but they can't rejoin the race as the rescue takes too long.

### **Round 7: The Crimetown Streets**

The assassin enters the rundown, dirty streets of Crimetown. At this point, if no one is within three spaces of the assassin, he darts into a side alley and disappears. Allow the closest hero a difficult skill check to spot his hiding place to continue the chase. If the hero spots him, he will realize it and bolt again, but the delay was enough to let every hero gain a space. If the heroes try to bluff or stalk the hidden assassin, he will remain hidden for a few minutes and then slowly make his way to the Scumm and Villainy Bar and Grill. The heroes should be able to ambush him with a skill check or two.

If the assassin doesn't attempt to hide, heroes may take advantage of the straight run to sprint as before or attempt other actions to slow down the assassin. A hero might also try to get back onto the rooftops.

### **Round 8: The Crimetown Streets**

The long, run-down street continues and the assassin continues running. Allow heroes to sprint or take other actions. In addition, draw attention to the sagging drain pipes, low eaves, and clothes hanging lines to remind the heroes about climbing on to the rooftops again.

### **Round 9: The Back Alleys**

The assassin darts into the tight back alleys of Crime Town. A horse will not ride into these narrow alleys beneath low overhangs. If no hero is within two spaces of the assassin or on the rooftops within four spaces of the assassin, the assassin disappears. Allow the closest hero a difficult skill check to spot his

hiding place (as on the Crime Town Streets). Otherwise, the assassin gets away. Otherwise, few actions are possible here, but allow creative heroes a chance to close the distance.

### **Round 10: The Crime Town Market**

The assassin emerges from the alleys into a crowded market filled with dirty, grubby tents and poor merchants, citizens, and criminals. The crowd impedes both the assassin and the heroes. Allow the heroes a chance to mitigate the crowd and catch up, gaining a space.

### **End: The Scumm and Villainy Bar and Grill**

The assassin ducks into the Scumm and Villainy Bar and Grill. Any hero within two spaces knows where the assassin went. However, the assassin disappears into a secret room immediately after entering and the owner covers for him. The heroes will have to ransack the place or question the owner and may end up in a fight, but that's a different encounter.