

Ingrid Atherton

"Simon! Thora! Chelsea! Enert! Gavin! Lily! Rowan! Ingrid! Time for supper! Get your butts in here!" Agnes stood at the front porch, clanging an old beaten cowbell as she called her children in. She counted heads as they filed past, stomping the dirt off their bare feet on the porch before going inside. Her count off, she stopped the last one by grabbing his ear. "Enert, where's your baby sister?!"

"Ow, ma!" The lad protested. His head was tilted at a severe angle but he new better then try to wiggle out of his mother's grip. "I think she went down by the Harris farm. Donald said he found a cave and she wanted to see."

Agnes let go of her son and ran her fingers through her hair. "That girl will be the death of me yet." Shaking her head, she turned and went inside to serve dinner.

"Down further!" Ingrid called back to the mouth of the cave. She was dangling upside down, her long hair hung loosely below her.

"I can't reach any further," the boy's voice was tinged with stress and strain. "I'll slip." He was holding her by the ankles, his shoulders at the mouth of the cave. His human frame was too large to slip into the opening but he allowed himself to be talked into lowering Ingrid down.

"No you won't," Ingrid insisted. "Just try!"

"I can't!" The boy was starting to panic under the pressure.

"Fine!" Ingrid pouted. "You big wuss. Pull me up."

The boy sighed and backed up, pulling Ingrid out of the cave. She rolled over and sat up, hair falling in her face. "Ugh!" she exclaimed as she blew and pulled her hair out of the way, frustrated that her adventure had ended so quickly and uneventfully.

After a few awkward minutes, she stood up and said, "I know! Follow me!"

Back at the Harris stead, the two youths walked up to the back of the house. "Get met that lantern," Ingrid pointed to an old lantern hanging on the wall well above her reach. Donald did as he was told as Ingrid picked up some rope.

"Donald? Is that you?" A male voice came from inside.

"Yes, father," Donald replied.

"Is that nice little Halfling girl with ya?" This time it was a female voice.

Ingrid violently shook her head, mouthing "No! No!" to Donald.

"Uh... No, mother."

"Good. Get in here! I need your help." His father's tone left no room for questioning.

"Yes, sir." Donald looked at Ingrid and shrugged. He put the lantern down and walked inside.

Ingrid waiting for a while to see if her friend would come out. Soon, she got bored and snuck around the side of the modest farmhouse. Tiling her hear up to the window, she listened in on the conversation. Ever since the Donald's father was injured by a mule, the boy has had to help out a lot more around the house. From the sounds she heard, it did not seem like Donald would be playing any more today. But now that she had the rope and lantern, she did not really need him anymore.

She walked back around the house, grabbed the lantern and made sure she could light it. With gear in hand, she went back to the cave. Tying one end to a nearby tree and the other to the lit lantern, she lowered the light down the uneven shaft of the cave. She climbed her way down on the rope until she got to a point where she shaft made a slow right angle. Untying the lantern, she held it before her as she walked hunched over down the tunnel.

Supper at the Atherton's was chaotic and boisterous as it normally was. Basil sat at one end eating his food in silence as his wife both served and scolded the children. "Thora, leave your brother alone. Rowan, quit playing with your potatoes. Chelsea, can you get another bell pepper for your mother?" Basil silenced any objection or appeal with a look or a grunt.

And so she continued to explore every corner and crevice of this natural fissure in the ground. Time became meaningless to her and by the time she satisfied herself that there was no were else to explore, it was well past dark.

As the table was cleared of dirty plates and bowls, Agnes looked out her kitchen window searching for her wayward daughter. She sighed and shook her head. It was not unusual for Ingrid to be late, but this was the first evening meal she had missed. Any anger she might have felt earlier was not being replace by worry and concern.

Ingrid tied the lantern to the rope again and gave a good tug before climbing her way back out. She could not see that the old rope had begun to fray against a sharp rock near the top. As she was about to reach that point, the rope gave way, sending her falling back, sliding against the rough sides of the shaft. She landed on her feet, but hit the lantern knocking it and her over. The lantern went out. The angle of the shaft blocked any starlight from above. It was black as pitch.

Agnes paused at the bottom of the stairs. Her eldest children were still playing their games up in their bedrooms thinking their mother could not hear. She walked to the hearth which was burning low but

steady. Her husband sat in the chair, his feet up on a small bench with his soles toward the fire. He smoked a pipe slowly and deliberately.

"Everything will be fine, dear," Basil said with a nonchalant confidence that almost made her believe him. He was a quiet man who chose his words carefully and only spoke when necessary.

Too anxious to sit, Agnes took the pipe from his hand and took a few puffs of her own before giving it back. "I know. But I worry. I am afraid that one will never settle down. I want to have grandchildren!" Agnes pouted.

"You have three other daughters and four sons. You will have more grandchildren than I will know what to do with." He reached out and took her hand tenderly, reassuringly.

The fire was almost gone and the pipe almost finished when a slow creak at the front door woke Agnes with a start from the chair where she had nodded off next to her husband.

"Sorry I'm late, mama," Ingrid said sincerely. "The rope broke and I kinda slid down and had to climb my way back up." She stepped into the firelight to reveal the scrapes on her knees, elbows, hands, and forehead.

Her mother rushed forward. "What have you done to yourself, little one?" She immediately began wiping the dirt and blood from her youngest with her apron, applying spit when necessary to get the thicker spots out.

"I'm okay, really!" Ingrid squirmed under the harsh attention. "Pop, make her stop!" she pleaded to her father, who responded with a light chuckle. "This is your punishment for worrying your mother," he said.

Agnes held Ingrid by the shoulders and inspected her for signs of further injury. She brushed through Ingrid's dirty blond hair looking for bumps and bruises. She squeezed and moved Ingrid's arms and legs, looking for breaks.

"Ya, I guess so," Agnes finally relented. "Now go wash yourself off and go to bed." She slapped Ingrid on the behind as the little one ran off.

"I swear that child is part dwarf," Agnes said.

Basil raised an eyebrow. "Is there something you should be telling me dear?"

"No, you silly goose," his wife said as she kissed him on his bald head. "Now just enjoy your pipe and I'll take care of the little one." She followed her daughter upstairs and tucked her into bed.

"I'm a man now, and this is something that I have to do?"

Ingrid laughed. "A man? You're no more a man than I am." She slugged Donald in the gut hard enough to have him recoil and buckle slightly but mostly because he was not prepared for the friendly punch.

"No, I'm serious," Donald whined, offended. "The decision has already been made. I leave on the next military caravan to the north."

"Who's decision? Yours or your father's?" Ingrid stared at him, her jaw pulsing and her lips trembling with anger. Her eyes were starting to well up.

Donald looked down at his feet and then to the side, avoided eye contact. "I'm sorry," was all he could say. He lingered for a few uneasy moments before slowly turning and walking away.

Ingrid's hands began to tremble and her knees weakened. "Fine! Go. See what I care. I hope you..." but she stopped herself before saying something she knew she would regret. She turned her back to him and could no longer hold back the tears. She sat on the ground and cried.

Several days later, Agnes and Basil sat in front of the hearth. He was rubbing her feet while smoking his pipe. The house was oddly quiet. Their eldest, Simon, had taken a job as a farm hand and no longer stayed at home. Thora had married and moved in with her new family. The rest were sleeping peacefully upstairs.

"Father, I'm worried about the little one."

Basil gave her an inquiring look and then mumbled, "She's upstairs," without taking out his pipe.

"No, that's not what I mean." She leaned forward and took the pipe from his mouth. "She has not been herself lately."

"She seems pretty normal," Basil shrugged.

"That is what I mean. She has been moping around the house. Did you see her after supper? She actually started washing dishes without being asked."

Basil nodded and added sarcastically, "Ah, I see what you mean."

"I'm serious," Agnes protested, gently kicking away his hands. She sat up straight and leaned over, taking a puff from the pipe before handing it back to her husband. "I want you to take her with you into town. She needs something to get her mind off that Harris boy."

Basil cocked his eyebrow, not knowing what that last comment meant. But then, he was the last to know that Thora was engaged, so he let it be and simply nodded and grunted agreement with his wife.

Early the next morning, he walked into the girls' room. The others were already up and doing their chores. He poked Ingrid in the shoulder until she sleepily opened her eyes. "Get dressed. You're coming with me this morning."

Ingrid looked at her father dressed for work in his clean shirt, tailored vest, and breeches. His command had her confused. She had only been to the office where he worked a handful of times, and usually to bring him lunch when they went shopping in the market. He never took his children to work with him. "Ya, sure," she mumbled as she rolled out of bed. As Ingrid washed her face, Basil turned and left to meet her downstairs.

As they left, Agnes kissed her husband goodbye and placed a scarf on Ingrid's head and she said, "Mind your father, Ingrid."

The two of them walked in silence down the path that would bring them to the lane that connected with the road that lead to town. Once on the road, Basil flagged down a passing cart and rode on the back into town. He took the moment to fill and light his pipe. Once he got it started, he offered it to Ingrid, but she was not paying attention—her gaze was focused on the road passing underneath them. He nudged her in the shoulder and offered again. As if in a trance, she accepted, took a puff and immediately began coughing. Basil smiled and took the pipe, letting her get some air.

As they drew closer to the town, the traffic on the road grew thicker and louder. As they neared the town center, Basil hopped off the moving cart and offered to catch Ingrid, but she needed no assistance. They walked along the road, through the market center, and then down a narrow cobblestone alley.

The front door chimed as Basil opened it and followed Ingrid inside. "Good morning, Basil! I see you have brought one of your brood." The gnomish voice was friendly and welcoming. Its owner sat behind a large desk covered in scrolls and parchment. A strange device with a glass lens sat precariously on its head.

"Good morning, Deheuwyn," Basil replied, taking off his hat and placing it on a peg by the door. "This one's name is Ingrid, my youngest." He patted her shoulder before taking his place behind a smaller, less cluttered desk. "Ingrid, I believe you have met Deheuwyn, but you may not remember."

"I remember," she said politely. "Nice to make your acquaintance again, Deheuwyn." She curtsied and found a chair by her father's desk.

Ingrid had once asked what her father did in town. She knew he worked for Deheuwyn as an assistant. Deheuwyn was like a merchant, but he had no merchandise. Instead, it involved a complex system of papers and various notes. At the time, she did not understand it, but knew that Deheuwyn was quiet wealthy because of it and her father made a more than comfortable living so that they did not have to manage a large farm like the Harris family did. The coming weeks and months did little to help her make sense of it all.

Ingrid worked as her father's assistant. For the

first few days, they kept her mostly in the office. But she had no patience or talent for the papers and numbers, so they began sending her on errands mostly delivering messages to other merchants and caravan organizers. It was during this time that she got to know Springriver as well as she knew the surrounding rural areas. For the next four years, she worked for Deheuwyn and her father. Her adventurous spirit eventually returned and she forgot all about Donald.

Ingrid sat at a table with a good view of the market. Though she could not see far past the crowd, she had a good view of the exotic merchant stalls and wagons that came and went. She picked at a thin loaf of bread and used the pieces to soak up the last of the soup from her bowl.

She heard someone call her name, but saw no one as she looked around. She shrugged and drank the last of her wine. Again, she heard "Ingrid" being called out over the din of the busy marketplace.

Ingrid put down the goblet and turned around, scanning the crowd. It was then she saw him coming. He was taller than she remembered, or maybe his filled-out chest and arms that just made him seem bigger, and his face was unshaven, but he still had the same boyish face under the short beard.

"Donald!" Ingrid rushed to him and had to stop herself from tackling him. She pulled a lock of hair behind her hair and smiled. "What are you doing back?" Her eyes were shining and she was positively beaming. "How did you find me?"

"I went to your father's office. He said you would be here." Donald stepped aside to reveal a petite, pretty, red-headed young woman in a fine dress. "We're going to meet my folks. This is Emily. My fiancé." The words did not register at first with Ingrid.

"Oh, isn't she the most adorable thing?" the woman said as she moved forward. "I hope you come to the wedding."

"Congratulations." The words stumbled from her lips. "I have... I have to go now." She turned and walked away, holding her head high. Once she was out of sight down a side street, however, she broke down and cried with her head in her hands.

"Hey, are you alright?" Donald lingered at the corner.

Ingrid stiffened immediately. She sniffled and wiped her eyes before turning around and facing him. Her face was red and her eyes were puffy. She scowled at him, not saying a word.

"I thought you would be happy," he said, still confused. "We were best friends. I want you to come and wish us well."

Ingrid nearly choked but caught herself and managed to nod. "Ya, okay." She even managed a

weak smile. "I wouldn't miss it for the world." He could not see she was clenching her fists.

Donald grinned and said, "Great. I need to go, but I will see you anon." He then turned and walked back to his fiancé.

Ingrid walked quickly and deliberately back to the office. She paused for no one, weaving around people. By the time she arrived, she knew exactly what she was going to do. She opened the door and caused the bell to ring violently.

Basil looked up. He did not say anything until Ingrid picked up the calendar and scanned it. "Something wrong, dear?"

"I'm leaving," is all she said. Her tone left no room for discussion. Having gotten the information she needed, she collected her accumulated pay from Deheuwyn, thanking him. Her father was meeting her at the door as he left. She hugged him firmly and got on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. "Good-bye, daddy."

Basil kissed her on the forehead before letting her go. Ingrid then walked out of the office and caught the next caravan heading south.

"Ingrid, can you check that rigging over there?" Max Stormforge was working on a large square piece of leather. He pointed to the corner of the tent between strokes.

Ingrid nodded, "Sure thing, Max." She walked over to the stake planted firmly in the ground. Grabbing the rope that connected it to the tent, she pulled with all her might to gain some slack. She adjusted the tension in the knot until she was satisfied and let go of the rope.

She waved to Max and continued her rounds around the camp. The caravan had stopped and decided to set camp in a meadow adjacent to a slow bend in the river. Ingrid helped unload the wagons, set up the tents, and other miscellaneous tasks. This was the third caravan she had worked for. She was hired by Leofwyn, who commanded the guards, but she had gone off the scout the area and perhaps do some hunting, leaving Ingrid and a few other guards at the camp.

"That smells quite good," she said as she peered over the lip of a large black pot that was hanging over a modest fire. "Is that fish?"

"I caught a few in the river," was the reply from the homely woman who was now cutting some mysterious vegetable. "I figured they would be a good change from the dried meat and hard tack we have been having."

Ingrid smiled, "Well, I am sure it will be delicious." Ingrid pulled herself away, her stomach growling. What she missed most about home was the food, even though she had missed quite a few meals. To

her embarrassment, she was never around the kitchen long enough to learn how to cook and it was not until she left home that she appreciated the hard work and craft that goes into making a good meal.

As the sun began to set, Leofwyn had not yet returned. Normally, this was not a cause of concern, especially if she brought back something from the hunt. Rather than wandering the camp as she did, the three other guards stood together, mumbling amongst themselves. Like the others on the hunt, they were sellswords hired back in Port Brighton and forced upon Leofwyn. In a private moment, Leofwyn confided to Ingrid that she did not particularly trust them, but they were adequate warriors. Leofwyn had hired Ingrid so that she would have someone she could count on. Ingrid did not particularly like them, as they had odd and insulting assumptions about how a halfling should act or was capable of. So she left them alone and was content to make friends with the merchants and pilgrims.

The life of a professional caravan guard was dirty, tiring work for little pay, but the adventure was the reason she stuck with it. Travel was a constant and there was always a new place to see and explore. There was danger, of course, but simply having the guards present deterred most of the potential bandits.

The sun had set and Ingrid was sitting on the edge of the camp, leaning against a broad tree and savoring a bowl of fish stew. As she sat there, two of the sellswords sneaked past. She did not hear them coming, but they had not seen her. They looked around and Ingrid crouched down, afraid.

"Where is she?" one whispered. "I don't know," the other replied. "What does it matter? She's just a halfling."

The question was answered with a smack on the shoulder. "They're sneaky buggers. I don't want that bitch getting a warning to the elf."

"I thought the others took care of her." Ingrid could tell this was not the schemer but nor was he attractive.

Even in the shadow of night, the frustration on the other's face was clear. "They ain't back yet, are they? I'm tired of waiting. We have to act now. We need to have everything ready to go by tomorrow morning." With that, the two drew their swords and went back into camp.

Ingrid slowly crept from her hiding place. The three so-called guards were rounding everyone up around the fire. She could hear the Max's curses as they beat the dwarf down to submission. They tied everyone up, including Max, who was unconscious and bleeding. "I'll show you sneaky, bastards," Ingrid mumbled to herself as she retreated into the darkness.

Ingrid crept up to one of the wagons and hid underneath in the shadows. The three had given up their search. Two were conferring by the campfire

while other patrolled around the edges of the camp. Neither Leofwyn nor the others had returned yet and no doubt this was a point of concern. Fortunately, they were not bloodthirsty or ruthless enough to skill their captives, though most had suffered minor injuries.

Ingrid silently made her way into the wagon. It belonged to an alchemist and she was hoping to find something useful. It was too dark to see well, and it quickly became clear that rummaging through an alchemist's wagon in the dark was not wise, even in this desperate situation. Fortunately, she knew where to search for a couple of things and did not sneak away empty-handed.

With Max subdued, the guards were not watching his tent. She slipped under the wall and grabbed a dagger sitting on the workbench and a handful of sling bullets he was making for her. Her bedroll and backpack were next to Max's tent, where she had left them that afternoon. She took her rope and made her way back into the woods.

The guard on the edge of the camp scanned the woods inattentively. Ingrid threw a rock several yards ahead of him. He hesitantly walked forward and she threw another several yards further. He held a loaded crossbow and moved it side to side as he followed the sounds. Once he was well out of sight of the camp, he stopped at a piece of red cloth tied in a bundle. He looked around, and not seeing anyone, he bent over to pick it up. At that moment, Ingrid dropped out of the tree from above and sent him sprawling. A knife to the back ended his struggling.

Ingrid made her way back to the campsite and threw a stick into campfire. It quickly caught flame and emitted a thick, noxious smoke. Coughing and rubbing their eyes, the guards came out of the cloud. One was hit with a small bag that exploded in sticky goo, freezing him in his tracks. The other looked around and narrowly avoided a crossbow bolt that flew past. But he caught sight of the halfling and returned fire, hitting her in the shoulder. Ingrid recoiled; the guard was now barreling down on her.

Ingrid ran as fast as she could. The wound in her shoulder ached and she was starting to feel faint, but she could not stop. Her pursuer shouted obscenities as he gained ground on her. She led him around to the other side of the camp. He was nearly upon her now; she made a sharp turn and ran between two trees. The guard followed, but his feet flew out from under him as a rope caught him in the neck. He was flat on his back. Ingrid threw another tanglefoot bag and this one pinned him to the ground. Ingrid came up to him and slit his throat.

When she returned to the camp, the last guard had worked his way out. Ingrid pelted him with sling bullets from the cover of the woods until he ran away.

The next morning, she was sitting by the fire with her shoulder bandaged. She was cleaning the dagger,

admiring its fine quality and silver sheen.

"Are you doing alright?" Max asked her as he came up behind her. His eye was black and his arm was in a sling. Dried blood still clung to bits of his beard.

"Ya," she replied absentmindedly. "I had never killed anyone before. Not like that."

"Pray that you never get used to it," he said solemnly. He sat down beside her and pointed to the knife and said jovially, "That looks familiar,"

"Oh!" she smiled, embarrassed. "I was trying to clean it before returning it. It was dark when I grabbed it—I do not want to steal."

"Keep it," he smiled. "You earned it."

Ingrid smiled wide and nodded. A nobler soul would have refused such an expensive gift. She had only been doing her job and if she had been better, the guards would never have had a chance to execute their plan, and Max would not have been hurt. But she was not a nobler soul.

"Now, come. I want to show you something else." Max stood up and led her back to his tent. In front of them was a small suit of studded leather armor. "We will have to work on the fit, of course, but I am sure we can have it completed by the time we reach SpringRiver."

Physical Description

Ingrid has long dirty blond hair that she pulls back in a simple pony tail. She has bright brown eyes and a friendly, if crooked, smile. Ingrid has excellent upper body strength for her size. Her hands and feet are callused from much climbing and walking. When not wearing her armor, she wears rough spun breeches with a shirt and jacket. All her heavy equipment is kept in her backpack so that she can easily leave it behind to become unencumbered.

Personality

Above all else, Ingrid is an adventurer. She possesses an independent streak that her family could not tame. She loves her family deeply, but as the youngest of eight, she does not feel the same obligation to them as her siblings. She is stubborn and can be pushy at times when she has a goal in sight. She has always been smarter than she is wise and her lust for adventure often overrides any common sense she might have. Her greatest weakness is tall men, especially of the cute but not too bright variety.

To Whom It May Concern

The thinness of this issue caused a bit of a panic within me. More people are dropping out (especially recently) with only a few coming back (Hi, Richard!).

I do not always read A&E attentively and often miss it when people come and go. As a general statement and apology: if I fail to comment on your departure or arrival, rest assured that it is only because of my lack of perception and not because I do not deem it noteworthy.

Myles Corcoran

D&D can be considered its own genre with its own source material independent of other fantasy source material. The same can be said of most rpgs, I think. "Advancement" as it occurs in rpgs rarely occurs in source material because it is an element of the rpg genre rather than the source genre. Despite my best efforts to ignore the issue, my recent Angel players kept demanding experience points.

A film or other adaptation of a work is distinct from "sub-creations" like fanfic and rpgs. Also, royalties from films, television, and even graphic novels are much greater than rpgs. I could understand why an author might authorize adaptations but not derivative works.

Michael Cule

Savant and Sorcerer was needed because they could sell it. :) Does anyone find the cover illustration as atrocious as I do?

I look forward to the GURPS rant. Though I am not a GURPS player (I have only purchased 4 books source books) and will most likely not purchase the new books (though I did download the Lite version), the rant should be entertaining and enlightening. :)

Lee Gold

The analogy of LotR to a pristine glade is not even close. A glade is physically affected by tourists. Someone else reading their copy of LotR has no affect on the work itself—the only thing that is affected is your own perception of it. The notion that a work is diminished as more people encounter it is ludicrous and selfish.

When I was in high school, it was accepted practice to give 5 points for an A in an Advanced Placement class. This skewed it so that students could have GPA scores over 4.0. However, it had the anomalous affect that a student who got straight-As in 1 AP and 3 normal classes got a higher GPA (4.25) than someone who got straight-As in 1 AP and 4 normal classes (GPA of 4.20).

On programming dreams, was there a control or placebo group? A success rate of 22% seems awfully

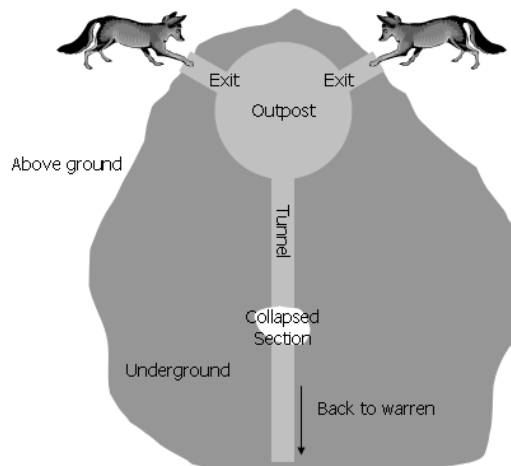
small and I think would be well within the realm of people who would dream about a prompt word without the device turned on.

Spike Y Jones

I noticed the suit-letter correlation in Spooks but then I also noticed that Bones and Bats should have been Blue instead of Red to maintain the alliteration.

Lisa Padol

How is this?



As for how long things will take, well, that is mostly a matter of drama. Since this is the teaser of the scenario, a little gentle railroading is acceptable. But if you want to nail things down and indicate how long things will take, I will leave that as "an exercise for the reader."¹

I think the rules should reflect the genre, but I not like it when the rules force the players to go out of character to enforce the genre.

I do not like it when players give blanket statements on what their PCs will do "every time" in the future. They are forcing me (the GM) to remember their character quirks instead of themselves, and that is bad form, in my opinion.

I enjoyed HP3 very much. I followed along with it just fine and did not find anything missing. I actually liked it more than the first two movies (which is to say the plot contrivances annoyed me less).

Brian Rogers

The ST game sounds fun. I think it would make a good convention game. Regarding the risk of PC death, if I suspect that my PC can die in any combat, I feel **less** emotionally attached to the character (and therefore the game). I think this is a subconscious emotional defense mechanism. Too often, combat for me is just rolling dice and calling out numbers. To get me emotionally involved, do something with my character besides trying to kill it!

¹ My favorite and most hated phrase from textbooks. :)