

**silly thought—iron chef: the ccg**<sup>1</sup>

Each player builds a deck of ingredients and cooking techniques. Each card has an associated style, such as French, Italian, etc. You can build a deck with a pure style or make a mixed-style deck for “Neo Japanese” or “Cosmopolitan” or whatever.

During the game, players must prepare dishes based on a theme ingredient chosen at the start of the match. These dishes may include one soup, one appetizer, one dessert, and any number of entrees. Dishes are a combination of ingredient and technique (steam, fry, sauté, etc.) cards. There are rules dictating which cards can be played together in a dish (allowable combinations, the order in which cards can be played, etc.). When a dish is complete, a presentation card is played to it, but then the dish can no longer be improved with further cards. The value of each dish is based on the cards played to it though some appropriately clever mechanism.

The game continues with the players taking turns playing cards to their own dishes. Some random, time-based element, such as a “times up” card mixed into the bottom half of the draw pile, determines when the game ends and scoring begins.

At the end of the game, dishes are compared directly to dishes of similar types (soup to soup, as it were). With multiple entrées, arrange your entrées in descending order: highest to lowest. Compare your highest-ranking entrée with your opponent’s then your second highest-ranking entrée, etc., like comparing dice is Risk.

All dishes submitted for judgment must have a presentation card. Any dish without is considered “unfinished” and not included in the scoring. If your dish beats your opponents’ corresponding dish, you earn 2 points. Ties earn 0 points. If your opponent does not have a dish that corresponds to yours, you earn only 1 point. The player with the most total points wins.

*Option:* judges. There are four judges, determined randomly at the start of the game. Each judge has one type of card (ingredient or technique) that it prefers and one type that it dislikes. For each judge, count the number of preferred cards minus the number of disliked cards total across all dishes. The player with the highest total earns a bonus point from that judge. Thus, catering to a judge’s tastes in one dish can help counteract inferior or missing dishes.

<sup>1</sup> Customizable card game—it need not be collectable or tradable.

**theory versus practice**

I used to be a real system tinkerer. I loved to play with game mechanics and fiddle with how rules fit together. If given the choice between two games with similar settings, I would pick the one with a system I had not used before. To this day, I do not understand those who say, “I am too busy to learn a new system.”

However, I have found a fundamental difference between how I approach rules and how I actually play. I had the misfortune of cutting my GMing teeth<sup>2</sup> on a diceless and practically system-less campaign, using only Amber as my guide. I now have little patience for the process involved with most rules and I blatantly and unapologetically ignore rules.<sup>3</sup> If rules are to help us make decisions, and I have already made the decision, why do I need rules?

Most of the time, I have a reasonable expectation of whether or not a character will succeed at a task based on the ability of the character and difficulty of the task. If I am in doubt, I will prompt the player for more detail; e.g., “Where do you look?” “What are you trying to accomplish this round,” etc. I can then judge success or failure based on the character’s approach to the problem.

I like to use this method for combat as well, again using Amber as the model. I do not want or need detailed maneuver descriptions, but a simple description describing the intent (to stab, to trip, to disarm, etc.) and aggression is helpful. Unfortunately, this method does not work as well with some players and is one of the things that has not worked well in the online game. This is not to say that the lack of dice is the problem, but the narrative-dependent nature of the system in place.

When I roll dice, it feels more out of habit or as a stall tactic than any meaningful addition to the roleplaying experience. I sometimes do it just so that the players do not think success or failure is pre-ordained, even if basically is (not because the script says so but because their ability levels say so). Other times, I want to give the character some slim chance at success, despite the player’s poor decisions.

To summarize, I really do not need many rules to help me make decisions out of combat. All I need is to compare the ability level with the difficulty. With

<sup>2</sup> I had run a short-lived (with me as GM) AD&D2e game and had done a couple of one-off AD&D games, but these were so bad I would rather forget them.

<sup>3</sup> Even the ones I make!

this in mind, the number of distinct ability/difficulty levels should be low—a 1-10 scale seems to work well. Higher than that (1-20 or 1-100), I need to have dice (or whatever) so that they can distinguish between two nearly identical ability levels even when I cannot.

Likewise, the players need to have a clear indication of how well their character can be expected to perform. Ability levels should be transparent and attributes not too closely linked. The specificity found in games like GURPS and even CoC is not desired. For example, having separate fast-talk and persuade skills trips up players time and time again. Along these same lines, divining the expected results of the dice method used should be as easy as possible. This is one great advantage to percentile-based systems one great disadvantage to dice-pool systems.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, as players and GMs use a system, this becomes less of an issue.

Inside combat, where the number of decisions—and thus my mental anguish—increases exponentially, I need a crutch. I want rules and guidelines to help me decide who will win after an extended encounter with multiple combatants. To keep things moving, the rules should make a decision as quickly as possible, but not quicker. In other words, a slower, good<sup>5</sup> decision is better than a fast, bad decision.

Unfortunately, good rules for combat are the most difficult to made. Character creation rules are a dime-a-dozen. There is no great trick to designing guidelines for making characters. Even basic task resolution is straightforward. The only thing to avoid here are “cute” or “fun” mechanics that either make bad decisions (there is that term again) or interfere with roleplaying.

The other tricky part with combat is that it becomes abstracted very quickly. Basic task resolution is usually over so quickly that a GM does not have to worry about players slipping out of character. The rules for combat tend to involve bookkeeping and terminology that hampers character immersion. To a certain extent, this is unavoidable and it remains to the players to maintain focus and stay in character even if the game rules are distracting them.

So, where does all this lead? I have no idea. Maybe more next time, but I have hit a creative dead-end for the moment.

<sup>4</sup> Particularly funky ones like Godlike.

<sup>5</sup> Good in the sense that it feels right.

### michael cule

What I mean by “fun” mechanics are those that are fun “for their intrinsic entertainment,” as Paul puts it. If you remove the roleplaying and they are still fun, then they are not transparent. This is especially true of miniatures- or map-based combat.

### lee gold

In the ideal combat session, I would feel my character’s fear, anxiety, tension, and pain. To do this, I need to think of the character’s actions and wounds in ways that do not scream “You are playing a game!” Unfortunately, I cannot think of anything more specific than that that I can actually incorporate into an roleplaying game.

### brian misiaszek

At its most basic form, character immersion is simply speaking in-character. Do you honestly think that insisting people speak in-character prevents them from doing so? Speaking in-character leads to thinking in-character (at least for me, other roleplaying may differ). Thinking in-character means not thinking out-of-character. It is not much to ask.

How can radio be cooler than a book? Radio has sound effects, voice intonations, and an atmosphere not found in books. This would seem to make it hotter with less left to the imagination.

I defy any movie to precisely emulate roleplaying!

### lisa padol

In Fudge, you can have the players make their own traits, just like in OTE. Fudge mystic shit can be structured or loose like Everway. There is really not much work required for your style, I do not think.

### simon reeve

The Doctor Occult of *Books of Magic* (and a later one-shot comic) shares a body with Rose. Like two star-crossed lovers, they can never physically be together.

## eugene reynolds

Islam also has a sacred language and for centuries, the Catholic Church (I do not know about the Greek Orthodox) used Latin as the “sacred” language.

Call me a purist, but “Frost” is a perfectly good bunny name. “Frosty-Mosty” would be more appropriate for Teletubbies or Toon and not a serious<sup>6</sup> game like Bunnies and Burrows.

## christine styles

Even Tarzan, raised by apes, held out for Jane.

Consistency is a perfectly valid reason for following rules. I do think some GMs and players absolutely kill the game by over-insisting on consistency, especially when dealing with fiddly rules that do little to enhance the roleplaying experience.

## daphne and bertwald

### on the trail

Last we left our heroes, Daphne had the entire loft to herself while poor Bertie spent a rather cold night in the stables. There was a touch of rain that would have been snow a few weeks ago overnight. Bertie just snuggles a bit closer to his horse. Daphne is sleeping so soundly she doesn't even notice the rain.

In the morning, Ean wakes Bertwald. “Me Mum has hot porridge on the stove, Sir.”

Shivering, “That sounds wonderful! Thanks!”

Daphne is woken by the sound of breakfast being served. She quickly washes up as best she can and gets dressed

Bert eats enough for two. In fact, he does his best to be sure there's none left.

“It is good to see the Duke sending help, but I fear that it may be too late,” the husband says.

“Why is that?” Bert asks.

From the loft, Daphne can pretty much hear everything in the main room and the kitchen. She goes downstairs as soon as she's done.

“Cuz 'dem boys wouldn't know shelter from a hole in their head.” This from a grizzled farmer who is also having breakfast.

“Where were they trying to go?”

“Who knowz wat goes through boys minds these days?”

“Still, if you can find the bodies,” the husband says, “it would mean a great deal to their parents.”

Daphne stands by Bert. “Horses ready?”

He looks her up and down. “Waiting fer yer orders, mistress.” He pulls at a forelock, mockingly. “Did they often go off like this?”

Daphne states, “We'll need someone who can at least show us which way the search party headed off. And some descriptions of these people, too.”

“One of 'em fell down a well a few years back. Took us an entire day to find 'em.”

“I assume you've already checked there this time?” Daphne asks.

The husband gives Daphne a look of “don't be insulting,” but quickly retracts it, saying “of course.”

“Dey went north, initially, that's where the dog thought to go.”

“The dog? What dog?” Bert asks.

“The sheepdog that Augers keeps around. Neither of them came back.”

Bert asks, “The dog went off with the boys? Or with the search party?”

“The search party.”

Daphne, her original question unanswered,<sup>7</sup> asks again, “So who, exactly is missing. And how will we recognize them?”

“Nigel's a tall kid, sandy hair. Irwin's stocky and Rolf is just funny lookin’”

Bertie asks, “How many in the search party?”

“Four men, and horses.” says the bartender, “and the mutt,” interjects the old man.

“Can the village spare anyone who know the local area well?” Daphne is still looking for a guide.

“Well, Marcus' horse was the last we had, and it came up lame last night.”

“I guess just point us the way they were last seen then.” To Bert: “Want to grab the supplies we put together last night?”

“Best of luck t'ya.” “John,” the farmer nods to the bartender, and he walks out the door. The wife cleans up after the farmer.

Bertie takes whatever it is she's talking about, and heads out to the stables. He gets his own horse ready. “Ean, Mistress Daphne will be needing her horse right away.”

“Yessir”

They leave the tavern, but with nobody around, having risen before our heroes, Daphne says, “This is hopeless.”

“We know the general direction. There may be a trail once we get to the woods.”

“Are you always this perky?”

“Look. Apparently you don't like me. But we're here to do a job, to help these people, and to bring credit to our Duke. Can we just stick to the job, and not insult each other?”

Daphne laughs. “I'm sorry. Did you think I was insulting you?”

“When haven't you been?” he mutters.

“Look, aside from your rather unenlightened views on what a woman's place is, I have nothing against you.”

“Fine. You've got a reputation as a good tracker. Let's see what we can find ahead.”

<sup>6</sup> Yes, I am serious when I say, “serious.”

<sup>7</sup> As often happens when I'm threading conversations together online.

She'll spur her horse ahead, looking for any likely path and laugh again. "You will know when I insult you."

"I can hardly wait," he says, but softly. Bertie keeps an eye on the general countryside, and behind them as well.

There is a path that leads to the woods. After a ways north through the woods, they find a game trail that leads roughly east-west. There are no signs recent that it was used recently by something other than game.

"What do you think, Mistress? Right or left?"

"First of all, stop calling me Mistress. Second of all, neither seems any more likely than the other."

"What d'ya want me to call you, then?"

"Daphne will work just fine."

Bertie is looking around to see if he can spot anything helpful. "Alright, Daphne."

"West will take us into the foothills there. That's which way I'd go if I were looking for something interesting. What do you think?"

"That's as good a place as any to start. We can always come back."

Daphne takes a piece of red cloth from her pack and tie it on a tree branch where the game trail and path cross. They start to follow the trail west, but the trail is old and not well used. The horses have a tough time of it.

They occasionally find horse tracks, at most a week old given the weather. As they move west, the hills become more pronounced. By midday, they come across a small clearing with obvious (to Daphne) signs there was a small camp here not too long ago. It looks as if the search party headed west after they camped.

Daphne suggests, "Why don't you break out some lunch while I have a look around."

Bert says, "I'd rather we stayed together. I can't be much help if I'm here and you're somewhere else. Or vice versa."

"I'm just going to look around the clearing."

"Oh, okay."

"Don't worry, this is kind of early for the boogey man."

Bert turns his back on her and starts getting lunch out.

She laughs again. "See, now that was insulting." After searching for a while, she says, "Well, the dog was still with them when they camped here."

Bertwald starts eating without waiting for her.

"You're kind of moody, you know that?" and she starts eating as well.

"Moody's better than what some are like."

"Oh? And what is that?"

He mutters something beneath his breath.

"I see," she says. Then, "Well, are you ready?"

"Whenever you are," and he vaults onto the back of his horse.

"I'm going to miss these little chats of ours when we get back." Daphne ties another red strip of cloth to a tree branch before saddling up

It does not take long before the trail winds southward and they come across the northern pass road. This used to be a well-used trade route, but has since fallen off and is

not much more than a wide dirt path with shallow ruts. The game trail they had been following is basically gone at this point.

Daphne another strip of cloth by where the trail meets the road. "What do think? Keep going west up into the mountains?"

"Well, I can't see anything else that might interest a pack of boys."

The rains had pretty much washed the road and there are no signs of tracks. After some debate of which way to go, they head west, away from Brennon. After only a few minutes, you see the body of a dog lying on the south side of the road. It looks like it has a badly broken hindquarters; it probably died of exposure a couple of days previous.

Bertie rides over to look at it, but stays on his horse. "What could have done that? Kicked by a horse or something?"

There are no obvious signs of blows; if you had to guess, it looks like the poor thing fell from a good height. Bertie looks up at the large pine tree, thinks about it, then decides no, there is nothing it could have fallen from. However, Bertie now wonders if something could have carried the dog up the tree and thrown it.

Daphne finds definite signs of heavy traffic (broken branches, etc.) to the south. "Let's go."

"I was just gonna check out that tree.... oh, I see what you mean."

"I don't like this."

After five minutes or so into the hills, they find the broken remains of a horse. Still with saddle and pack, it's back is completely broken and misshapen.

"This is bizarre. Have you ever seen anything like this?"

Daphne shakes her head in response.

Looking around, they quickly find a human body equally has broken, at a heap at the base of a tree. Looking closer, they see it is a middle-aged man. While they do not recognize him, they figure someone who knew him may be able to recognize him from his physical effects.

The sun is low on the horizon and Bertie says, "We'd better think about camp... but I don't know if we want to camp near here."

Daphne says, "Let's go a little bit farther up."

"Okay."

Following the trail of carnage, they see a bow and quiver, lying on the ground. Not too far from that is a sword. Next to that is a broken shield, and right near by is a yard-long footprint.

"Sweet Aurora's breath," Daphne exclaims.

"Merik protect us, what the hell is that!?"

Daphne says, "That would explain the dog and the horde."

"Giants. Did it have to be giants?"

"We might as well set up camp. I think even you could track that thing."

"What the hell will we do about giants? You know a handy way to kill them?"

"Me? I thought that was your department."

"I'm the son of a jester, for god's sake! I can ride a horse, and swing a sword - what good's that against a giant?"

"With any luck, we'll never even see the damn thing. Just find it's lair, see if it has any of the villagers there, then get out."

"We damn well better not see the goddamn thing!"

"If you keep yelling like that we probably will."

"I'm not yelling!" Bert says intensely.

"Let's just find some spot that has a little cover."

Though they each find campsites, Daphne says, "I think we'd better go with mine."

"Of course. Why not? It's obviously better."

"It's not that I have anything against stream beds. It's just the being flooded if it rains I don't care for."

"No need to explain. You're right, as always." Bert is not being obviously sarcastic.

"Don't be so hard on yourself. I've been doing this all my life."

The sound of teeth grinding can be heard.

"Besides, I'm sure the situation will arise where you can prove that you are not incompetent."

"You taking first watch this time?"

"I'm not feeling too sleepy."

"Fine. Are we having a fire?"

"I'd feel better without one."

He doesn't let her see that he approves, just gets off his horse, hobbles it near some grass, and prepares a place to sleep.

Daphne will stash the gear a little bit away from the horses, then settles with her back to a tree. "Sweet dreams, if you can manage it."

In the middle of the night, as they change watches, they hear distant thumping from the general direction of the big rocks just a few hours away to the southwest.

Bertie looks at Daphne. A look of dread is quickly replaced by as brave an expression as he can manage.

Daphne has a slightly concerned look as she gazes into the night sky.

It crosses Bertie's mind that if she looked even a little afraid, he might try to put his arm around her, but it fades as he falls asleep.

Last we left our heroes, they had camped for the night. They found strong evidence for something very big lurking about.

Daphne says, "I'm betting if we follow this track, it will eventually loop around to the southwest. I just wonder of we'll find any...thing else along the way."

"I'm sure you're right." Bert mutters to himself, "you always are."

"What are we going to do if we catch up with this giant?"

"That's why you came along, isn't it?"

"I thought I was here to fetch and carry." Bertie is feeling more bitter than usual after watching her sleeping so close to him all night.

"Well you carry that sword around like you think you know what you are doing. Now why don't we saddle up and move out."

"It's not going to be much use against a giant! It'd be like stabbing someone with a toothpick!"

He saddles up his horse, and packs away his stuff.

"Haven't you ever heard the story of Robert the Cruel?"

He thinks for a minute. "No, can't say I have."

As soon as they are mounted, they follow the path of broken tree limbs and etc.

"He got stabbed with a toothpick."

"And what did that accomplish?"

"He died. Lowly peasants freed from his tyranny. All that good stuff. Are you sure your dad was the jester?"

"What killed him? Hey, don't blame it on my father if he hasn't heard of some story you're making up on the spot!"

They are amazed on how thin the trail really is. Sure, there are a few broken branches here and there, but not many and ground tracks are even rarer. The branches that are broken appear about 10 feet above the ground, on average.

"Maybe if he spent less time being a leech he would have heard of it."

A grinding noise can be heard from Bert's direction. He refrains from comment.

"Sorry if I offend, but he probably never grabbed your butt in front of the entire court. And if he did, I don't want to know about it."

Bert has decided that, in the interest of his sanity, he's not going to listen to her any more. He's now wracking his brain for anything he's ever heard about dealing with giants. Bert's dad, being the practical, cowardly sort, always advised to run.<sup>8</sup> That is Bertie's instinct now, but he may have been exposed to other influences recently.

The trail is making a beeline for the Big Rock. By mid-morning, the Rock looms high overhead. It is a huge rock that looks like it was either dropped from the sky or erupted from the earth. There are smaller (relatively) rocks surrounding it, making all sorts of places for something large to hide. They stop at the edge of the woods, where it meets the rocky ground. Bert is very alert... adrenaline is great for keeping one on one's toes.

Bertie is waiting for marching orders from Daphne, avoidingly looking at her.

"Why don't we circle around?"

He does an "after you" gesture, and gathers up his reins.

She leads the way, looping around the east side of the rock, staying on the fringes of the woods. Bertwald follows, watching their backs, with his sword drawn.

"Did you sleep OK last night?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How'd you manage it?"

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<sup>8</sup> "Son," he said, "If you ever find yourself on the trail of a giant, turn around"

“Why, didn't you?”

“I was fine. I just thought it'd be hard to sleep with that stick up your ass.”

Bertie's face freezes for a second, but then he can't help it... he bursts out laughing.

They circle around to the northwest wide, nearly opposite from where they were before, and notice a thin wisp of smoke against the red face of the Rock. It seems to be coming from behind a number of large boulders, near the base of the Rock, uphill a ways from where they are now.

“Shhhhhh.” She points at the smoke. He quiets right down, but his shoulders are shaking.

“I think we should go on foot.”

“I was just about to suggest that.” Bertie pulls his horse to a stop, and dismounts. He waits for Daphne to dismount then takes her reins. He takes both horses off to a hidden spot, and ties them to a tree.

As they approach, Daphne hears a faint, intermediate rumbling.

Daphne says, “Let's stash the gear somewhere a little ways from the horses. Just in case.”

The wind shifts, and they both catch the smell of cooking food.

“Good idea.”

Daphne takes a deep breath. “Ready?”

Bert nods. He steps up beside her, sword at the ready. “Let's be very quiet,” he mouths.

The wind shifts again and the smell goes away. The rumbling is rhythmic, but not consistent—about 3 seconds out of every 10-15 seconds.

Daphne grasps her bow and starts picking a trail towards the rock, using as much cover as she can.

Bert listens, then touches her arm, and whispers in her ear, “Doesn't that sound sort of like... snoring?”

Using the smoke as a guide, you weave your way through the rocks. There are lots of little rocks on the ground that makes moving silently difficult and slow going.

“I guess. It's hard to tell.”

They come around a boulder and find the source of the smoke. It is from a flame under a giant iron cauldron holding 4 horse hooves sticking up (upside down) from it. Past the cauldron, in a large fissure at the base of the Rock, they hear definite sounds of snoring. They also see rusting armor and weapons scattered about among the red rocks. Between the snores, they hear bubbling water.

Daphne nods her head to the cave and whispers “Go ahead—I'll cover you.”

Speaking softly right into her ear again, Bertie says, “What do you think about circling around and checking the place out from all angles?” He almost forgets what he's doing for a minute, though... he can feel the warmth from her ear.

She nods and gestures for him to lead. He girds his loins, and steps quietly out, circling around the camp area, checking out all the nooks and crannies. Daphne draws an arrow from her quiver as she follows him.

Bertwald looks, obviously, to see if there are any more bodies, or live people stashed somewhere outside, plus to find the quickest ways out. His adrenaline is now pumping away, and his senses seem extraordinarily sharp. Once Bert is satisfied he has seen all he can, he stops to listen for snores.

Nearly every step brings the shuffling and clicking of rocks. They find no other bodies; the quickest ways out are involve running between boulders. There are other fissures in other boulders, but all are too small for anything bigger than a rabbit.

The snoring stops abruptly, and Bert freezes in his tracks behind a boulder and puts out an arm to stop Daphne. They see a large figure step out of the cave. It is a huge man-like creature, three-men tall. He is wearing a jerkin that goes down to his knees, tied with a thick rope. Bert swallows, but noiselessly.

“Get you hand off my bosom, please.”

Bert glares at her as she nocks the arrow, peeking out from behind the boulder.

“He doesn't look so tough—I think you can take him,” Daphne assures Bertie.

“In your dreams, I can take him. What do you think I am?”

The ogre stretches and yawns, scratching his sides. He reaches down the cauldron and shakes one of the hooves. Satisfied, he steps away from them, behind some other boulders.

Daphne cringes. “He better not be relieving himself back there. The horse smells bad enough.”

“Do you know where we could get some sort of sleeping herbs or something? Or poison?” Bert is still talking as softly as he can into her ear. But he is not distracted by her warmth now.

She nods. “That might work.”

He ducks down, so they can no longer see him. Bert edges around behind the boulder to be sure it's right between him and the giant, being extremely careful. “Well... do you have anything like that?”

“No. I'd have to find some.”

“Alright. So... if we get the chance, shall we try to get away, get some, and come back?”

Daphne realizes that would take some time (at least a day) to find and prepare a sleeping drug and the he quantities needed to create even a poison for this guy may not be possible at all. “I want to see what he is doing now. If he leaves we can just check the cave.”

Bert shrugs. “Whatever you say.”

When her fears are confirmed, Daphne wrinkles her nose. “Ewwwwwww.”

“Now's the time to check the cave, I'm betting.”

“Not enough time.”

The heroes wait. Daphne chews her bottom lip a little while she waits for the giant to do something. Bert watches her chewing her lip and gets a kind of far away look in his eyes. The ogre returns, checks the cauldron, goes into the cave a few yards, and sits on the ground, leaning against the wall.

"This guy doesn't have much of a social life, apparently." It is late morning now.

Bert slowly reaches over to untangle a twig from Daphne's hair.

She looks at him with very large eyes. "What are you doing?"

He stops. "Umm... you've got this twig stuck in your hair... I was just getting it out..."

"Oh."

He cautiously continues. It takes him a long time.

"Uh. We should really be, ummm, watching."

"We have to wait til he's really soundly asleep." Bert leans a bit closer, still working on her hair, though he's mostly stroking it.

Between snores, they hear mumbles—thinking they hear him say "mommy."

"Mommy? You don't think..."

Bert's face is now fairly close to hers. Unless she's glaring at him, he's going to try to lean in for a kiss.<sup>9</sup>

She puts his hand on his chest, keeping him at a distance. "In case you've forgotten, there's a somewhat large and probably dangerous THING over there. And if you had been listening, there might be something even larger about somewhere."

He is... very disappointed. But then, it finally sinks into his head what she said just before the last thing. "I don't think what? Oh my lord... you don't think that's a ... I mean, you think he's got a ... a mother? That he's a ... I can't say it... a baby?" Bertie blanches.

The horse hooves have sunk below the rim of the cauldron.

"I'm going to go in closer. You stay here—create a distraction if things get ugly."

"No, can't be. He must just be dreaming about his childhood." Bertie grabs her. "No! you aren't going in there alone."

"Shhhhh."

He holds her in a firm grip. "Okay, I'll shhhh. But you aren't going in there alone."

"OK, but we'll go one at a time. Me first."

He nods.

As they approach, they see that his legs are blocking 1/3 of the cave, but there is room to move around if they decide to enter. The cave is about 50 feet deep, there is enough light from outside to see without torches. There is nothing in the cave besides rocks, bones, and more metal things. At the end, a 6-foot boulder seems to be blocking a passage further into the cave—much too narrow for him to pass through.

Daphne says, "If something goes wrong, make for the horses as fast as you can."

"And do what? I'm not leaving here without you."

"Make for the road. I'll be fine on my own."

"I'm not leaving here without you." Bertie looks at Daphne questioningly, nodding toward the boulder, making a pushing gesture.

She points to the giant and shakes her head 'no'

Bert now gestures back out, still questioning.

Mumble, "good boy," mumble, comes from the ogre.

She nods.

He gestures for her to lead the way. They make their way back to the boulder they were hiding behind. "If anyone is still alive, they're probably behind that rock."

"Big rock. Think we'll be able to move it on our own?" Daphne asks.

"If we could work at it uninterrupted, probably. With the help of a long, strong pole. If anyone is alive in there, they could push from the inside, too. But we've got to do something about the giant."

"That's what I was thinking."

"I wonder if we could get him tied up in his sleep... maybe bash him over the head with something?"

"I was thinking distracting him away from the cave somehow."

"That might work... but how can we be sure he'd be gone long enough?"

"I've got 40 arrows. That buy you enough time?"

Bert tries to remember how much rope they brought along... but when he hears what she said, his face gets really red, and he says through gritted teeth, "What are you, suicidal? You aren't going to be bait!"

"Who would be better able to elude the thing, me or you?"

"Besides, it'll probably take both of us to move that rock! What good will it do us or them for you to get killed, and then I can't move the rock anyway? I think we'd be better if we tried getting him tied up and knocked out, or knocked out and tied up. Then we can kill him."

"The rope we have isn't going to hold that thing."

Daphne is probably right, unless they had plenty of time to do a really good job.

"Look! You aren't going to be able to outrun him! No one else did!"

"Who says they were trying to outrun him? They probably did something asinine like trying to knock him out. Besides, I think I can handle myself better than some farmers from the sticks."

Snore, "little birdie," mumble.

"Look. Please. I know you can do a lot. I know you're good. But please be realistic here. Be honest, with yourself, if not with me. Try to imagine that thing running after you. Do you really think you could get away unhurt?" Bertie is getting desperate to convince her.

"Tell me how else we're going to get that thing out its cave for long enough to move that rock."

"Maybe we could string a rope across the mouth of the cave, low enough to trip him. Then you could make noise, and when he falls, I'll be right there, and I'll sink my sword in his back."

"Oh, and MY plan was suicidal."

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<sup>9</sup> He's had some practice at this, and is considered to be a really excellent kisser. If he makes it.

Bertie is out of ideas, and can't think of any way to dissuade her. He drops his head into his hands, and says "Alright. Alright. Tell me exactly what it is you thinking of doing."

"I'll ride up, get his attention, and do whatever I can to get him to follow me. Once I'm gone, get in there, get that rock moved, and get anyone that's in there out."

"If you can lead them due east, we can meet back up again at the ruined village we spent the first night in."

"Where are you planning on trying to lead him? Do you figure he's going to give up chasing you eventually? What if your horse falls? I don't think you've thought this through at all."

"Then I figure he'll go for the horse and I'll slip into the woods."

"And then you'll be able to outrun him? He can kill the horse with one hand and be after you in a minute."

"OK, fine. You win. I'll go get the rope. I just wish we had brought a shovel so I can dig your grave, because one sword thrust isn't going to kill that thing. You stay here and keep an eye on the giant."

Bertie leans his head back against the rock, and sighs. "Damn it all. But you're probably right. Your way is better. You probably can slip in through the deep forest better than him. You could even take my horse, too... and give him two horses to chase if you had to. And I need to get a suitable pole or branch for a lever, too."

"On the other hand, maybe we had better wait until tomorrow morning. It might take you all day to reach those ruins on foot. In the meantime, maybe it will just leave of its own accord."

"Yes, maybe it will."

By noon, they decide upon a plan: wait the rest of the day to see if the giant leaves. Otherwise, Daphne's plan to draw the giant away will be put into effect the next morning.

"Of course, this whole thing will seem awfully silly if there's no one behind that rock", Bert says.

"Well that goes without saying."

## the big climax

Last we saw our heroes, they were courageously hiding behind a boulder waiting for the resident of the Big Rock to go away. Come mid-afternoon, our heroes get the pleasure of watching, should they so desire, the resident of The Big Rock eating lunch from the pot. Before he is finished, a crow lands on his shoulder.

"Hello birdie." He says, "Time to see Mommy?"

Bertie looks at Daph, to see if she's hearing this.

The crow crows in response.

Daphne is muttering something to herself. Bert leans closer to try to hear what Daph is saying.

"Okay, Birdie." He finishes off the pot, does something in the cave, and then steps out with a tree log club in hand. The crow flies due south and he follows. He doesn't make as much noise when he walks as they would expect him to.

"Should we follow him, or check the cave?" She asks.

"I think we should check the cave first. We can track him after if we need to."

They safely make it to the mouth of the cave. The inside has scattered rocks and bones. Bert heads for the big rock in front of the fissure. He notices that there are gaps on the top and bottom, enough room for a rabbit to fit through. It is fairly round and probably would roll well if he could get it moving.

Daphne is keeping an eye out from the entrance of the cave.

Bertwald calls through the lower hole, "Hey! Hi there! Is anyone there?" He hears something stir beyond the rock. "Is someone there? Are you from the village?"

"Uuuuuugh?"—A quiet, low moan.

"Are you hurt? Is there more than one of you?"

"Wh-who-wh-who're you?" It is pitch black behind the boulder, so Bert cannot see any movement

"We've been sent by the Duke to help find some people missing from... from.... Hey, Daphne, what the name of the town?"

"Brennon."

"Yeah, Brennon." He calls under the rock, "Are you from Brennon?"

"Y-y-yessir!" though elated, the voice is still weak.

"Who are you?" Bert is testing the rock now, as he waits for an answer, but the rock requires a strong lever of some sort to move.

"N-Nigel, sir. Irwin's here, but he's awful sick."

"Is Rolf in there?" Bert starts looking around for a lever.

"They took him." Bert hears crying

"Who took him where?" Daphne asks.

Bert heads outside to start looking for something suitable.

"The ogre, sir. And that horrible old hag."

Daphne is at the back of the cave. "Do you know where they took him?"

"No."

"OK, don't worry. We'll get you out."

Bert manages to find a good log out by the edge of the woods but it takes him several minutes. Daphne goes back to the cave mouth. "No, don't leave us!" She hears as she turns around.

"I'm not leaving the cave, don't worry."

Bert hurries over to the rock, and starts trying to lever it away from the opening. As much as he's loath to admit it, it will take both of them to move the boulder. He does not ask, though.

Daphne can hear the scraping of rock and wood as she watches outside. "Are you getting it?"

Bert manages to get it moving about an inch, but it rocks back into place. "It's really heavy."

Daphne throws what little weight she has into it. After a few tries, they are able to build up momentum and roll it a few feet to create a couple feet clearance to one side.

Daphne asks, "Can you guys squeeze through there now?"

Bert drops the lever and looks into the opening.

"I can't wake Irwin!" They see the one boy trying to drag the other.<sup>10</sup>

"Let me through." Daphne squeezes into the opening and checks out Irwin's condition. Irwin is the bigger of the two boys, both of whom look very wan. His breathing is very shallow.

Bert helps Nigel out, while Daphne tries to drag Irwin out.

"I tried to take care of him." Nigel's trying not to cry, "We weren't given much water." Both boys get out.

"Everything will be okay now. You did the best you could," Bert assures him.

"Let's get them out by the horses."

Bert looks over Nigel to see if he has any obvious wounds. Both boys, probably 13 or 14 years old, are dirty, bruised, and shaken, but no obvious wounds "Yes, let's get them to the horses. We've got some food and water there."

"How long does the giant usually stay away when he goes out?" Bert asks Nigel.

"Hours, I guess."

When they get out of the cave, both boys both cringe at the light of the sun.

"You might have to carry Irwin," suggests Daphne.

"He said something about seeing "Mommy". Do you know what that was about?" Bert lifts Irwin into his arms. Irwin is stocky, but he hasn't eaten hardly at all for the last several days.

"Whatever the hag they talked about is, I'd guess."

Nigel says, "That's what he called the old hag that took Rolf."

Bert staggers a little with Irwin's weight, but recovers. They get them into the woods and to the horses. They offer the boys water, which they greedily—so much so they have to slow them down.

"Daph, should we take them back first, or look for Rolf first?"

"Nigel, how long ago did the ogre take Rolf?"

"It was just after we got caught—Rolf's leg was broke."

Bert suggests, "Maybe we can take them a ways away, set up a camp, and then come look for Rolf?"

"My dad used to tell me stories about a part of the forest that was haunted."<sup>11</sup>

"Where is that?"

"He showed it to me once, told me never to go in there. Bad things happen."

"You think that's where the "hag" is?"

"My dad never said things like that, so I took him seriously. Well, as best as I remember, it was right south of here—the way that ogre headed off."

"Boys, how are you feeling now?"

"I wanna go home." This is the first peep they have heard out of Irwin.

"Better, sir." Nigel looks better.

Daphne asks, "Have you guys seen any of the men from your village?"

"Damn, I wish someone else had come with us. They could take the boys home, while we looked for the other one."

The boys look at our heroes with hopeful eyes.

"Well, whatever we do, let's get away from here." Bert mounts his horse, and reaches down an arm to help Irwin up in behind him. It takes him a couple of tries, but he manages with a lot of pull from Bert.

"Gee, Nige, looks like you get stuck with me." Nigel does not look disappointed.

"Hang on tight, boys. We need to put some distance between us and this place quick. Umm... right, Daph?"

She nods to the south; "Let's go." She takes the lead, hoping to pick up any tracks the ogre may have left. Bert's confused, but he falls in behind Daphne, not wanting to alarm the boys.

The tracking is straightforward as it was before—a few broken branches about 10' off the ground. For the first several hours, it is just like any other forest. Bert keeps giving small amounts of food and water to Irwin.

The sun is starting to set when they come upon a small clearing. The ogre is sitting on the ground leaning against a huge dead tree. He seems to be looking down at his feet and does not notice our heroes. Under the tree is small cottage. There are lights in the cottage, but no smoke from the chimney.

Daphne, as quietly as possible, backs her horse out of the clearing. Bert also quietly backpedals his horse and gets behind trees or bushes or rocks—whatever is available for cover.

"Let's circle around the clearing so we can come at it from the south," Daphne says.

"What are we doing here?" Nigel asks.

"Shhhhh." Nigel recoils from Daphne's shushing.

"It's okay, Nigel. Just be very quiet, please," Bert whispers to Nigel. He then follows Daphne, as quietly as possible. The boys are left on the horses.

As they circle around, the ogre looks up a few times, sniffing the air. Bert whispers, "Damn! What way is the wind blowing, Daph!" There is hardly any wind and the air is getting cold. Bert whispers again, "I'll sneak up and look in the window. Unless you want to do it?"

"Let's wait."

Daphne signals for everyone to dismount.

Wisps of smoke start coming out the cottage. The ogre stands up, waves, "bye-bye," and heads back north. They see a bent figure that had been concealed by the ogre, now go into the cottage.

"He's leaving!" Bert whispers. "Daph, we've got to see what's inside."

She nods.

"Me or you?"

<sup>10</sup> Avis: Is this gonna be really sad?? Me: what, me make a sad story? Matt: dammit, do I just need to kill myself right now? (Referencing the first online campaign in which Matt's character hanged himself at the conclusion).

<sup>11</sup> GM: "Where is that?" lol

"Do we think we should wait till morning? Or do it now?"

"Now. We'll be able to see inside, but it's getting dark out here. Now's the time."

"We'll both go," Daphne says. "Boys, you are going to have to guard the horses, OK?" The boys agree.

"No, one of us should cover the other. Watch out for that damn crow, too. I'll go, you watch out for the crow and anything else. Got your bow handy?"

Daphne says, "I don't think it's a good idea for just one of us to go."

"I'm just going to sneak up to the window and look in. I'll come right back."

"Look, just be careful, OK?"

He grins at her. "Here, hold my reins, Irwin, and keep the horse next to Daphne's." He heads for the window opposite the chimney.

"Bertwald?"

"What?"

"Just, ummm, watch yourself."

"What part should I watch?" He grins very impishly, and then moves very, very quietly toward the house. His acrobatic skills come in handy at a time like this.

She half-smiles, her bow ready.

Bert gets up to the window. There is no sign of the crow. He carefully slides his head sideways until just one eye is over the window. The rest of him is hidden, tight up against the wall. Bert sees a small bedroom, slightly ajar; light flickers from the other room. There is a bed, with someone under the covers.

He moves gingerly around to the first window he comes to on the back side of the cottage. It is blocked by something—probably the wardrobe in the bedroom, so he moves to the next window.

He sees a bent figure in black with a crow on its back tending the fire in the hearth. Extremely gingerly, he moves sideways, away from the window, then heads back for Daphne.

"Well?"

"Did you see 'em???" Nigel asks.

Bert whispers, "The old crone and the crow are in the room over there (he points), and in the room over there (pointing) is someone in a bed. The door between them isn't closed, though it isn't wide open."

"Did you see him??" Irwin asks pleadingly.

"I saw someone. I don't know if it was Nigel. But if he had a broken leg, it could well be him."

"Umm, boys, do you think you could give us a minute here?" Daphne asks, "So what do you think?"

"I think we better get that kid out of there and get away before the ogre comes back. We need a plan... and we don't want to let that crow get out."

"We could always try the direct approach."

"Which would be what?"

"Knock the front door. Ask politely for the kid to be returned."

"And that will keep the crow how? And what if she says no?"

"That's where you come in."

"How do I come in?"

"I'll offer you as trade. What do you mean how do you come in?"

"AS TRADE???" he whispers furiously.

"OK, the horses then."

"I don't think so. I think we should make a fire against that wall (pointing to the side where the crone is), and then get the kid out the other side while they're busy."

"What if she is just a harmless old lady? You're going to burn down her house?"

"She's the mother of an ogre! And they kidnapped a bunch of boys, and killed others," Bert says.

"We don't know anything for sure."

"Plus it won't be a big fire. She can probably put it out. I think it'll work better than knocking at the door. If we trade her the horses, we're gonna have a hard time outrunning the ogre."

Daphne walks over to where the boys are. "How exactly did you get captured by this ogre?"

"We were ... umm ... hunting, when we saw him and we ran but Rolf fell down and I tried to pull him up but he wouldn't and the ogre kept coming and Irwin was running but not very fast and next thing I..."

"Hold on, go back. What were you ...UMMM... hunting?" Daphne asks.

"...knew, I was upside down cuz he was holding me in the air and ... yes, hunting," Nigel says proudly, "... and he dragged us back to the cave but Rolf was hurt real bad and then he shoved us in the cave and ...

"OK, OK, OK."

"...put the rock there so we couldn't get away and we tried to get out but it wouldn't move... ."

"OK!"

Nigel shrks.

Bert asks, "Did he ever threaten you, or did he just keep you in the cave?"

"He just kept us there," Irwin says, "and he'd throw us scraps to eat."

"Did he say anything to you?" Daphne asks.

"He said he was going to eat us. I heard him tell the crow."

"He talks to the crow all the time?" Bert asks. "Does it answer him?"

"It just caws."

Daphne says, "Now, I need you to tell me exactly what you were doing when you first saw the ogre."

"Tracking a boar."

"Okay, time's passing." Bert says to Daphne, "Look, you're the leader. I'll do what you say, but no trading of me. If we have to trade the horses, well, try for one horse only. Rolf's leg's broken, remember?"

"OK."

"So... you go first, and I'll be ready with my sword drawn, right behind you. How about if we have the boys watching through the window where I saw the person in bed?"

"I think they should stay by the horses. I don't know what good they'd do watching the window."

"Okay, you're the boss."

As she approaches the front door, Bert follows Daphne. And enjoying the view... for the last couple moments they might be alive....

Daphne takes a deep breath and knocks on the door. Bert's sword is tightly clutched in his slightly sweaty palm.

She hears a crow from inside. The small drape across the small window in the door is moved aside. She sees white, weathered fingers.

Daphne takes a deep breath, acting as if this isn't the creepiest thing she's experienced in her life.

An eye surrounded by wrinkles appears in the window, "What?"

Bert pats Daphne's shoulder reassuringly.... well, it would be if his hand wasn't shaking a little.

"We are, ummmm, from the Duke's court madam. On official business," Daphne states.

"Go away." The drape is returned.

Daphne knocks again. She hears scurrying from inside.

After a brief moment, Bert says, "Pound it, Daph."

Daphne knocks really hard. They both hear chanting from inside. Daphne then tells Bert, "Kick in the door."

Bert steps back, and then runs hard at the door, hitting it with his shoulder.

A huge puff of smoke and flame explodes out of the chimney moments before the door swings open.

Bert runs in, looking all around. He sees the hag at the hearth, with hands raised over the pot.

Daphne has an arrow out and nocked, aiming at the hag.

As Bert moves toward the hearth the crow flies into Bert's face, scratching and pecking in the air. He swings at it with the hilt of his sword.

Daphne shoots, aiming for the woman's shoulder.

The crow is swatted away. The arrow finds its home and the hag lets loose a horrific scream.

Now Bert kicks over the pot, and stands threateningly over the woman. The pot spills its contents, with noxious fumes rising from the floor.

Daphne has another arrow nocked. "We're looking for a boy named Rolf."

Bert keeps an eye out for the crow, ready to belt him again.

The woman cowers and backs away.

"Daph, look in that room over there. I'll keep her covered."

Daphne goes over and pushes the door open with her foot, flooding the bedroom beyond with light.

The hag hisses, and claws at Bert with her gnarled hands. "Get away from there!" the woman shrieks.

Bertwald makes as if he's going to club her with the hilt of his sword, but pulls it at the last minute.

"Look—we just wanted to talk."

The hag spits into Bert's eye.

He grabs her, turns her around, and looks for something to tie her up with.

Daphne returns her attention to the bedroom, "Rolf?" She sees a boy cowering with covers up to his chin.

"Who are you?"

"Are you Rolf?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to hurt me?"

"I'm a friend of your father's. We're going to take you back to him, OK?" Daphne notices that Rolf's eyes are a tad too big for his face, his nose is crooked, and his ears do not line up.

"Find him?" Bert calls from the other room.

"I don't wanna go back."

"You now, we really don't have time to sort out your acceptance issues right now."

Bert has the woman tied up with some twine. He calls, "Hurry, I can't find the crow!"

Rolf edges away from Daphne.

"See that guy in there? He was always made fun of as a child, too. And now look him." Daphne pauses, "OK, so that's not a good example..." Bert fails to notice the comment over the old woman's cursing.

Bert grabs a towel or rag or something and gags her.

Daphne sighs and goes into the main room. She stands in front of the hag.

"Where is he?" Bert asks.

"In there." She gestures to the bedroom.

"Why didn't you bring him here?"

Daphne says to the hag, "Look, we just wanted to talk. Can we do that without getting all excited?" Then, turning to Bert, "You try."

Bert goes in to the room. Rolf jumps and falls to the floor with a yelp of pain.

"I'm sorry about shooting you," Daphne tells the woman, whose wound is bleeding but not too badly.

"Hey, careful of that leg! Let me help you," Bert tells Rolf.

Rolf cries, "Get away from me," and swings his fists in a sissy-boy kind of way.

Daphne pulls the arrow out and tries to bandage it.

Bert tries to help the kid up. "What's your problem? We're here to help you!"

"I don't want to go back," Rolf babbles.

"Now, can we talk?" Daphne asks the woman but is answered only in glares.

"Why not?" Bert takes a good look at the kid, confirming that Rolf is human and does have a broken leg.

Daphne pulls out the gag anyway.

"Cuz they make fun of me," Rolf says.

"Who makes fun of you? Nigel and Irwin?"

"Now, this boy's father is very upset that he is gone," Daphne says. "You can understand that, right?"

"And all the girls and everyone else talks about me behind my back," Rolf continues.

"But if you stay here, you'll get eaten!"

"Yes," the woman snarls.

"She took care of me! She let me sleep in the bed! If she was going to eat me, I'd already be dead!"

"I really am sorry about the whole kicking-in-the-door thing, but we are on official business."

Bertie says, "Your parents were very upset that you were missing."

"I don't have any parents."

"You don't? What happened to them?" Bertie continues, "Look, kid. A lot of people have problems. But the way to get people to like you is to be brave, and honest, to do what you say you'll do, and to treat other people right. That can make up for any problems. Young girls are stupid, but older ones will know a good thing when they see it. And Nigel and Irwin were going crazy wondering what had happened to you. They're right outside."

The hag pleads with Daphne, "Do not take my boy away from me, I beg of you."

"This is your boy?" Daphne asks, "Like, actually yours, or some sort of adoption thing?"

"I took care of him."

"What was your other son intending to do with the boys in his cave?"

"Keep them, eat them, didn't matter to me."

"So why did this one matter?"

"He needs me."

"That would be so much more touching of you hadn't just extolled the virtues of cannibalism."

She spits at Daphne.

"So, Rolf, where did you live if your parents are both dead?"

"Can we keep this civil, please?" Daphne asks. The old woman begins speaking in a strange language. Daphne shoves the gag back in her mouth.

Rolf looks confused, "uh ... my ... uh... I lived by myself."

"Lived by yourself? I don't understand. Where?"

Daphne calls out to Bertwald, "Bring the boy in here please."

"Come on... let's just go into the other room and discuss it."

Rolf tries to stand up but bumps his leg and falls back down. Bert lifts him up and carries him.

When they enter, Daphne asks, "So Rolf, you want to stay here?"

"I dunno," he says sheepishly.

"Aaarrgghh! You," she points to the hag, "You want him to stay, right? A simple head gesture will do."

Bert goes to the door. "Hey, Nigel! Irwin! Come here!"

Rolf says very meekly, "I want to go home." The woman, still gagged, screams at Rolf when she hears him. Daphne sighs.

"Then home you'll go, my young man," Bert smiles at him. "We better get a move on, Daph. I'm sure her son will be back soon."

"Just a minute," Daphne says. "Rolf, this is very important. Do you really want to go? Or do you want to stay?" It's totally up to you, but you need to decide quickly."

"I want to go home!"

She points at the hag, "You heard the boy. He wants to go."

Bert walks to the door, carrying the boy. He pauses at the door.

Daphne adds, "And there had better not be any reprisals from you or your son." The hag struggles in vain.

"We know where you live, and we can come back with a hundred men. Got it?"

That definitely got her attention. She bows her head.

Bert's contribution, "And we know where your son lives."

"Alright. Let's get out of here," Daphne says.

Outside, the boys have their reunion. It is now well after dark.

"Put Rolf on one of the horses," Daphne orders. "The rest of us will have to walk for a while."

"Yes, good idea. Let's go."

As they prepare to leave, Daphne asks, "Can you lead them east for a little while? I need a moment to myself."

"What for? I don't like leaving you unprotected."

"Just.... I'll be..." She turns and runs behind a tree.

"Oh. I see." He blushes. "I'm staying right here, though," he says quietly.

There is a barely audible sobbing from behind the tree for about a minute.

Bert tells the boys to hang on and keep an eye out. He approaches the tree. "Daph? What's wrong?"

There is a hurried sniffing. "Nothing. Is everyone ready?"

"Yes." He goes around the tree.

Daphne hurriedly wipes at her face. "Let's get going then. We'll probably have to walk in this darkness. Except for Rolf, of course."

He takes her into his arms and hugs her.

"What's wrong?"

"There's nothing wrong. We need to get moving."

He's still hugging her.

"By the rock.... it's not that... I mean..."

He kisses her teary cheeks...

"It's just.... you know.... I don't really..."

...and then kisses her gently on the mouth. She lets him for a second, then pushes away.

"You did a great job, you know. And now we really need to get going." He smiles.

She kisses Bertie on the cheek the bends up to whisper in his ear. He likes the feel of her breath on his ear. "If you ever tell anyone about this, I'm going to hunt you down and hang your privates on my wall."<sup>12</sup> She turns and heads to the horses.

He laughs uproariously and then takes her hand and heads back to the horses.

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<sup>12</sup> That's our Daphne! : )