

“Remember to play to the *strengths of the medium*—most all of which are about *character*, not plot.”

—S. John Ross, The Big List of RPG Plots.

comments

#324

myles corcoran

You have my condolences on Sam’s morning sickness and congratulations on the cause.

You bring up very good issues regarding ability levels and your preference for 4dF.1. On the other hand, many people find 4dF.1 too predictable and not very interesting.

I think there is a fundamental issue here on the assumptions built into rpg mechanics. One of the biggest is that every character has a chance, however small, at any task, however difficult. To accommodate this assumption, consistency tends to go out the window in favor of more open-ended and random-feeling mechanics. I hope to address this topic more in the future.

richard iorio 2

Agreed on every point regarding *Star Wars*. Here is a question: Why do R2 and 3PO in Episodes 4-6 not recognize people and places from Episodes 1-2? Assuming they were mind-wiped, why do Vader, Yoda, Obi-Wan, and Uncle Owen not recognize them? Episode 3 had better include a massive conspiracy of silence and an explanation of why R2 never flies in later films.

joshua kronengold

I think you hit the nail on the head about damage in combat, nibbling versus a single felling blow. However, sometimes nibbling is the proper model, such as in the classic brick slugfest. How about “tactical nibbling,” in which you win by successively putting your opponent at a bigger and bigger disadvantage until you can make a single, decisive strike? Unlike hit points, a character’s “tactical points” can fluctuate up or down during a fight.

brian misiaszek

A point system saying, “everyone must be the same number of points” is equivalent to saying “everyone starts out at the same level” that is so common in D&D (and more so now in d20 now that xp/level is the same for all classes and multi-classing is greatly streamlined). These issues of game balance are not system-dependent. They are part of the rpg culture. Not knowing what class or level a peasant farmer should be a problem with the system.

You cannot defend d20’s flaws by pointing to unrelated flaws in a different system. Besides, BRP, Interlock, WaRP, d6, and many other skill-based systems can all create “non-adventuring” characters easily and without special rules and do not ascribe to the notion that “for every advantage there must be a disadvantage.”

I find d20 good but not elegant. I love Cherry Garcia ice cream but I would never call it elegant. All natural vanilla is elegant. d20 just has too many crunchy bits, though it certainly is more clever than previous version of D&D.

If you compare the percentage of anti-d20 arguments with the pro-d20 arguments, you will probably find that it is consistent with most decent systems. d20, being the most visible system at the moment, appears to get an undue share of detractors, but that is only because the base numbers are much bigger and the arguments more numerous and easier to find.

There are many levels of immersion, from minimal (barely speaking in character) to scary (being one’s character outside the game). Character immersion, at whatever level, is a process that takes practice, talent, and desire. It is also what separates roleplaying for other types of games and other types of media.

Many people roleplay because they want to be/play the characters from film, comics, and novels. They want a level of interaction and immersion that you cannot get from passive entertainment. Therefore, there is some merit in emulating situations and themes from books and movies. However, the very interaction that makes rpgs fun limits how well they can mimic other media types. But you can do things with rpgs you cannot ever hope to achieve with a movie, book, or radio play.

lisa padol

I agree the key to improvisation is good preparation. I also agree that bad games are easier to withstand at 3¼ hours. But I want good games to last much longer.

simon reeve

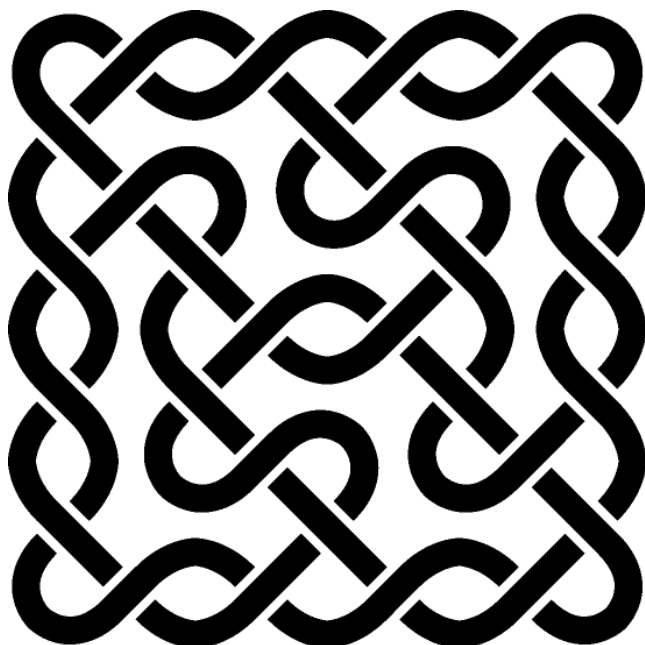
Humans in d20 get “1 extra feat at 1st level, 4 extra skill points at 1st level, and 1 extra skill point at each additional level.” In addition, they can have any favored class. In other words, d20 perpetuates the humans as generalists theme.

jonathan tweet

Randomness in character creation can be a very helpful tool, but it should be its own reward. Giving bonuses for random character creation simply exacerbates issues of balance that randomness tends to create, as your example demonstrates.

You can have a Price Is Right system like Pendragon in which the goal is to roll high but still under a target number. I think this is the best variation of “roll under” systems.

What I don't like about GNS is that it leaves out roleplaying. I do think it is helpful when the game designer can describe design decisions in these kinds of terms, such as “this combat rule was added to make it a more accurate *simulation*, even if it slows down game play,” or “this mechanic makes the *game* more balanced, but detracts from immersion.”



daphne & bertwald

As we return to the action, there remain three goblins, two wounded and one unwounded. All three are on the ground groveling.

Daphne draws her knife and looks over to see what Bert is doing.

Bert is looking down into the eyes of his horse, rubbing her nose. He looks very upset. He seems to be whispering something to her.

The cut on Daphne's calf is bad. She can walk, but it is bleeding significantly and it hurts. “Bert.”

He glances up.

“What are we going to do about these three?”

He glances at them, shrugs, and turns back to his horse. His eyes seem to be glinting.

Daphne mutters something under her breath. “Daphne.”

“What?”

“Can you tell how bad she is?”

“Just give me a minute.” Daphne carefully closes in on the goblins.

Bert tries to staunch the bleeding.

The unwounded one, crab-walks away from Daphne. She springs towards it and stabs it. As it turns over to scamper away, Daphne catches it in the back. It stops moving.

She stabs it again, just to make sure. Green blood pours from the wounds.

Bert's horse stops breathing.

As she finishes off the two wounded ones, Daphne notices the pain in her leg. She hobbles over to a rock on the side of the road.

Bert sits with his head down for a long minute. Then he gets up slowly. He pulls his knife and cuts several long strands of the horse's tail. He winds them up in a tight coil, and puts them in one of his pouches. Finally, he looks up, looking around for Daphne.

She is sitting on a rock, grimacing. He walks over to her. “Your leg? Here, let me look at it.”

She lets him. It has a good slice through the muscle—not too deep, but deep enough.

He pulls off her boot, and slips her pant leg up. “It doesn't look too good. Do you know some way to close it up?”

“Go get me my pack off my horse.” She adds, “Please.”

Bert does so, looking back at the “please” in disbelief. He brings the pack back to her. “Here.”

“Help me stand up”

He reaches for her arm, pulls it around his shoulder, and lifts her up.

She starts taking off her pants.

Bert suddenly is standing very still.

She sits down again once they are down to about her knees.

"Can I do anything?" He is carefully not looking.

"Pull these off the rest of the way."

Bert makes a noise sort of like cleaning his throat or something. He kneels down in front of her, and pulls the pants legs off from the bottom, looking only at her feet. "What now?"

Daphne washes off the cut and bandages it as best she can.¹

"Daph."

"Huh?"

"Daph. If I'd needed to put poor Gwen out of her misery, what would have been the best way to do it?"

"Aurora's rosy tits, Bert! I'm bleeding here!"

"You're fixed up. I just need to know, if case I ever have to do it." He starts getting her feet back into her pants again. Still not looking up. She has to have him help her up again to finish putting them on.

"How's your leg feeling? Can we keep going, or should we head back?"

"Might as well keep going" She cleans the green blood off her knife.

Bert helps her mount, then walks beside her horse.

As they start on their way, they both notice a single crow circling above. Daphne says, "That can't be good."

"It's probably just coming for Gwen and the dead goblins." The little catch in his voice almost cannot be heard.

It is getting toward late afternoon when Daphne notices something in the road way up ahead. It looks like three or four people and mounts, not too far past the location is the bridge, she recons.

She points them out to Bert and gets her bow ready. Bert can see them, but not make out any details. Bert decides to follow her lead for once, and gets his bow ready, too.

They proceed on carefully along the road. When they finally get close enough to see details, they appear to be four humans sitting on

or standing next to their mounts. No weapons are drawn, but they do appear to be talking.

Bert holds his bow inconspicuously. Daphne approaches slowly and Bert sticks with Daphne.

After a few moments, one rides off away from them. Another goes into the woods. The other remains in the road, mounted. They were wearing dark clothing, but nothing noteworthy.

Bert says, "I'm feeling kinda weird about this."

"Yeah, me too"

He starts trying to watch their flanks, dropping back behind the horse so he can see both sides, and checking backwards as well.

When our heroes get within a couple dozen yards, Daphne can make out the figure remaining is wearing leather armor. The horse does not appear to be a warhorse. The figure has long, gray hair under a open-faced helm.

Daphne stops and calls, "Hello there."

Bert doesn't notice anything from behind or the sides. He nearly bumps into the horse that stopped in front of him, as he's looking around. He turns his back to the horse, and continues keeping a watch out.

Bert thinks he sees a horse and rider on the side of the road, maybe a hundred paces down the road.

"I said, hello there."

The figure holds up an open hand, "Good day."

Daphne's bow is in her left hand, which is down at her hip. "We had some problems with goblins down the road. Have you seen any?"

Bert keeps a sharp eye on the rider's position, while still looking for anyone else coming. The longer Bert stares, the more he thinks he's imagining things. Maybe it was just a shadow or branch.

"None this way, praise Merik. Are you all right? Do you require assistance?"

"I was slightly injured, and my companion here lost his horse," Daphne responds. "Can you tell us what is on the road ahead?"

"A wooden bridge that crosses the river." The man asks, "Are you in need of a healer?"

"I don't know that it shall be required. No unpleasant surprises await us, then?"

Bert is definitely sure there may be a horse and rider there.

"None that I know of, milady. Do you wish an escort?"

¹ She has Good Healing, so she's done a reasonably good job.

"Perhaps if I knew who you were I could better answer that."

"My name is Gerrad." He starts his horse walking toward Daphne and Bert.

Bert searches for any movement from the maybe horse and rider, but maybe it was just the wind blowing a branch.

Bert asks, "Everything okay, Daph?"

"And where do you hail from, sir?" Daphne's right hand has moved closer to the knife handle.

"The village up the way, over the river." Their horses are now nose-to-nose.

Bert looks around quickly to see what's going on, and then turns back.

"You have not given me the pleasure of your name, milady." Gerrad is young, but older than either of our heroes. He has thin lips and a large nose.

Bert laughs softly to himself. "She's not a lady," he mutters under his breath.

"I am sorry. It is just that the fact that you and your companions outnumber us has slightly unnerved me. My name is Daphne."

He smiles, "Well Daphne, I assure you we mean you and your companion no harm."

"Perhaps you could tell me where your friends have gone, then."

"We were hunting for game when we saw you approach." Gerrad whistles and Bert sees the horse and rider come out onto the road.

"Our little brother has headed back toward the bridge."

"There is not an abundance of game in these parts, is there?"

"No, but one can generally round up a boar or rabbit."

"We thank you for your offer, but we are not headed back to your village." It is now late afternoon. She continues, "An escort would take you far out of your way."

"It would be a pleasure and honor to escort someone as well spoken as yourself, milady Daphne. And if there are goblins about, no man or woman is safe except in numbers."

"But milady Daphne already has an escort," Bert chimes in. "Me."

"I see that, good sir...?"

Daphne coughs slightly

"I'm no sir. I'm Bert."

"Bert... but you have lost your mount, and surely four escorts are better than one." The one behind them has advanced to maybe a couple dozen yards. He has a flail at his side, but

nothing in his hands besides the reins. His expression is flat.

Bert says, "Da...Milady Daphne, it is getting late. Perhaps we should look for lodging in the village." He then says to Gerrad, "Would you mind if I spoke privately with milady Daphne for a moment?"

"Very well." He steps his horse back a bit, but not much, without turning his back to Bert and Daphne.

Bert moves a few steps towards the woods, encouraging Daphne to come over. She does.

"I don't like this," Bert whispers, still watching the guy behind.

"Me neither."

"Any ideas?"

"Not at the moment."

"I could jump up behind you and we could make a run for it, through the woods."

Daphne disagrees, "They'd catch up to us no problem."

"So, we go along with them for awhile?"

"I guess."

"Or just tell them no, firmly, and see what happens?"

"We can try."

"Maybe I should get up behind you anyway, in case we have to make a quick move?"

"It'll look too suspicious." Daphne continues to be helpful.

Bert says, "I'll follow your lead, then. Keep sharp."

Daphne leads her horse back over. "We again thank you for your offer, but our way is far from certain. We could not ask you to put aside your hunt merely to aid us."

"Shall we go, milady?" Bert starts walking, keeping an eye out.

Gerrad responds, "Very well." He draws a long sword and advances on Bert

Bert draws his sword, dropping the bow. "Watch out, Daphne!"

Gerrad advances and swings over Bert's head. The one behind is swinging the flail and charging.

Daphne grabs an arrow from her quiver and nocks it.

Bert swings wildly at anything he can hit, but swing is blocked by the Gerrad's sword

Daphne manages to get one shot off before the man with the flail is right on her. She can feel the breeze of the flail as it passes within a hair of

her head. He overruns her position by several yards.

“Merik, protect us!” Bert swings again but doesn’t land a solid blow. Instead, he is knocked to his knees by an overhand blow to the head.

Daphne gets a shot off, but did not have enough time to pull the string back fully. The arrow sticks in the guy’s armor.

Bert rolls away from the horse, gets to his feet, and yells, “Let’s go, Daph!”

Daphne breaks down the road towards the bridge.

Bert heads off into the woods. After a few moments, he is followed by Gerrad.

The other guy is on Daphne’s heels, in hot pursuit.

As Bert runs, occasionally has to duck under and around trees. The horse is having a worse time of it and eventually, Gerrad dismounts and runs after Bert.

Daphne’s calf is on fire. All she hears is the pounding of hooves and her heart. She can see the bridge coming up ahead but can sense the other gaining on her.

Bert tries to angle back towards the bridge, but staying in the woods. He sees several shadows in the woods, in the trees following him, watching him. Soon, Bert is alone.

Bert stumbles to a halt, looking around wildly. “Thank you,” he breathes, and starts running toward the bridge again.

As she rides, Daphne slings the bow over her saddle and draws her knife. Daphne can feel the breath of the other horse behind her. She is nearly on the bridge.

Bert finds the river, downstream from the bridge. There is heavy tree cover and he cannot see the bridge from where he is. He heads upstream to where he thinks the bridge is. It is slow trudging over unstable ground along the riverbank and around trees.

He climbs down into the river and tries walking upstream, wading in the very, very cold water.

Right before the bridge, Daphne makes as sharp of a turn as she can, turning the horse around. As she turns, her horse is hit on the flank by the flail, nearly causing it to stumble.

Bert finds walking against the current and on wobbly river rocks is no better, but he can see the bridge a ways up there. He keeps slogging along, but hangs near the bank.

She turns around again, so she is facing the guy. They come to standstill facing each other.

Bert’s back starts hurting—hopefully it is just fatigue. He keeps going, trying to find Daphne and see what is going on.

The flail is still. He seems to resting... or waiting

Daphne asks, “Ready to surrender yet?”

“Not in the least, little girl.” He glances past Daphne, down the road behind her.

“Being a bandit in these parts can’t pay very well.”

“I guess that is true,” he returns. “Good thing I’m not a bandit.”

“Salandra!” he yells as he charges toward Daphne.

Bert hears the man’s yell² and calls out as loud as he can, “Daphne! Into the woods! Remember the spirits!”

Daphne catches the flail in the shoulder, nearly knocking her off the saddle. She wheels around as the guy passes her and spurs her horse into the woods.

She heads into the woods, and hears a cry from her pursuer as he tries to follow.

Eventually, she finds Bert. Bert notices her left arm is hanging a bit limp. “Are you hurt? Let me look.” He holds up his arms to help her dismount.

She gets down and slumps onto a nearby log. “This is without a doubt the worst day I’ve ever had.”

He puts his arms around her for a quick hug, backing right off. “Thank Merik you’re okay. What happened to your arm? The flail?”

“Yeah” She tries moving it around to see if it is broken or separated. It is neither, but close.

GM Note: I hated how this encounter went. I could not figure the PCs out. When I presented them with the broken gypsy wagon, an encounter that was completely benign, they completely avoided it. When I presented them with this obviously threatening encounter, they went out of their way not to avoid it, even after the goblin encounter.

² Salandra is the name of the neighboring kingdom, but only Bert knows this.

After the session, Avis prodded the GM.
Avis: So... will the PCs be finding out who these creeps are? Or can you tell us now?
Me: That would be telling.
Avis: Okay :) not passing creeps, then.
Me: You think I would throw out major clues if they didn't mean something? I might not always know what they mean, but they mean something.

Last time we left our heroes, they were licking their wounds, after having been assailed by persons unknown.

Daphne slumps into a miserable little ball on the ground. Her shoulder is in pain, as is her calf, but the shoulder hurts like a sonovabitch.

Bert asks, "What's wrong? Where are you hurt?"

Daphne replies, "Tell ya what, Bert. You're in charge from here on out."

Bert leans over her. He is still suffering from a spear wound to the backside.

Bert looks astonished. "What are you talking about? The Duke put you in charge, not me." Then he thinks for a minute, while looking at her shoulder. "On the other hand, you don't need to be here anyway. I'm the one who has to do this. It isn't part of the Duke's mission."

Daphne says, "So far, we've been ambushed by goblins and nearly killed by a bunch of unknown cooking enthusiasts. Any more of my leadership and who knows what will happen."

"I think you were smart not getting sucked into their scheme. And I'm the one who forgot to defend my horse. Daph, what happened to your shoulder?"

"I'll be OK. Just won't be able to use my bow for a while."

"Look, I'm gonna set up camp. Let's try strapping that arm down for a while - it might feel better if it can't move. OK?"

Daphne tries to figure out how to strap down her own arm. Bert takes off his leather vest/jerkin, and takes off the shirt. He puts the leather garment back on and starts cutting his shirt up into long strips. "Look, bend your arm and hold it against your stomach. I'll see if I can strap it."

"Aaaaa-haa-haa-haaaa-aaaaaa"

"I didn't even touch you yet!" Bert exclaims.

Daphne cooperates and Bert ends up figuring out a sling type arrangement. And then runs a long strip around her body to hold the

whole thing close to her torso. It helps take some of the pressure off. Her shoulder is throbbing, but manageable.

Then he collects some firewood, and gets a fire going, brushes down the horse, etc.

Daphne asks, "You think the fire is a good idea?"

"Yes. We need some warm food; I think the forest spirit thingies are watching over us. We need to keep warm, since we've both had some injuries."

"I can appreciate that they scared the crap out of you, Bert, but do you really think they are going to hold off those guys for us?"

"Oh, I see you're starting to feel better, eh, Daph?" "I think they already did. The one chasing me just disappeared earlier."

He starts preparing something to eat. Soon he hands her a warm cup of some sort of gruel. "Mmmm, gruel."

The forest is quiet. They can hear the river near by.

"Eat up, there's plenty." He hands her some bread. He eats, too. "Look, why don't you try to sleep? I'll keep watch and keep the fire going. If you're cold, come over here next to me. I promise I won't try anything."

Daphne manages to avoid looking at Bert while she lies down next to him.

He avoids making eye contact with her, too. "You'll be your old self in the morning."

Daphne curls up into a ball, trying unsuccessfully to get to sleep.

"Look, that ground is hard on your shoulder. If you think it might be more comfortable, you can lean on me or something."

"I don't want to be a bother."

"It's no bother. Get comfortable. You need the rest."

She inches over and rests her head on his lap. He clenches his jaw a little and stays absolutely still.

Daphne does manage to fall asleep. Bert's leg falls asleep and he can't feel his left foot any longer.³

The night passes, though neither got the best of sleep.

When Bert awakes, he finds Daphne awake as well. "OK if I stand up? I gotta... you know..."

³ Matt: That's because all the blood is somewhere else :P

She sits up awkwardly and gets a twinge of pain from the shoulder, but not unbearable.

Bert gets stiffly to his feet, then does some stretching and bending moves. He then heads off for the trees. He's gone a bit longer than usual. He comes back looking a bit less strained.

"Untie me, please."

Bert laughs. "You make it sound like you're my prisoner. Hmm.... oh never mind." He unties the long strap, but leaves the sling.

Bert gets out some bread and cheese or whatever they have for breakfast.

Daphne asks, "So what's our plan for today?"

Bert slants a look over at her. "I think I should get you back to the village. I should do this part alone - it's my own problem that needs solving."

"We're almost there. No use turning around."

"I think we should stay off the path, but near it."

"Whatever you say."

Bert turns and stares at her. "What's this 'whatever I say' crap?"

"Like you said, it's your evil seed. You call the shots."

"Look, the Duke put you in charge for a reason. You're the brains; I'm just the brawn. Don't start being a typical girl."

Daphne looks like she's going to cry.

"You're not gonna cry like a wimpy girl just because you got a little bump, are ya? Come on, I know you're better than that. You're not hurt that bad. You're feeling better already."

"Sophia knows you're probably used to feeling like an incompetent ass..." She trails off and sits down on a log, her head drooping.

He sits down next to her, and puts an arm around her shoulder in a brotherly way. "I know, I know. But it wasn't your fault, and it could have been a lot worse."

After a couple of minutes she stands up, wiping at her face with her free hand. "We'd better get going."

"You know, I think your father would be proud of the way you've handled yourself so far."

He moves off to saddle up the horse, and get things packed. "Ready to climb aboard, Daph?"

She hobbles over to the horse.

Bert gets his hands in position to give her a boost up.

"Thanks."

After helping her mount, Bert lets his hand rest for a moment on hers. He then steps back,

and starts heading in a direction that will bring them back toward the bridge.

Daphne keeps a nervous eye out for anything unusual.

They near the bridge, where the river and the road meet (duh), but also where the forest ends and so does their cover. They pause to assess the situation.

Bert makes sure his sword is loose in the scabbard. He gets out his bow, and nocks an arrow.

Daphne points to under the bridge.

Bert asks, "Maybe we can tie the horse up and leave it here? Did he say how far from the bridge the cave was?"

"I think we'll have to."

As they approach, they see a mounted man in black on the bridge. He is dressed similarly to the ones they encountered yesterday, but they cannot make out a face. He is facing with his back to the river.

Bert whispers quietly in her ear, "Creep very quietly under the bridge? Or go downstream a bit, cross there, and come back up the other side? Try to cross the road on the other side?" He gestures as he says it, so she knows where he means.

Daphne is slipping her arm out of the sling. "Can you hand me an arrow?"

He pulls one out of her quiver and hands it to her. He gets his own bow and arrow ready.

"Actually, hand me two."

He reaches back again.

She bites down on one grimacing as she draws back the bowstring. He pulls back on his as well, trying to parallel her moves. She aims for the horse's neck, still biting down on the arrow. He aims where he thinks she's aiming.

She can't hold the bow drawn for long and fires. As soon as he senses her release, he lets go, too.

An arrow hits the horse in the neck and the rider in the ribs. The horse falls with the rider.

Daphne says, "Let's go!"

Bert runs with her, ready to help if she needs it.

As they reach the bridge and duck under it, they hear commotion on the bridge. "It came from this way!" they hear a man shout. "I... I'm okay, just get this thing off me!"

Daphne and Bertwald get a few trees deep into the woods on the river's upper bank.

Bert swings around, stops behind a tree, and looks back to see what's going on.

A rider heads toward where Bert and Daphne were. A figure is walking, bent over, along the road away from the bridge.

Bert says, "Damn, they'll find the horse."

As soon as they get into the woods, Daphne collapses to her knees and clutches his shoulder.

Bert pulls her up, slides her good arm over his shoulder, holding that hand, and puts his other arm around her, trying to hold most of her weight. "Tuck that arm into your shirt or waistband, and let's see if we can get some distance between us and them."

He tries to get them walking and she hobbles along as quickly as possible. They head upstream, still in the edge of the wood. Bert tries to keep an eye on the riverbanks as they go.

Up ahead, they see a man sitting on the riverbank with a couple of fishing poles. He is dressed like the others

Bert stops abruptly. "Damn"

Behind the figure is a large opening in the ground, reinforced with wood like the mouth of a mine. The opening is large enough to fit a horse and rider, barely.

Bert ducks them behind some trees.

They remember Erdin said it was a tiny cave that you'd probably have to crawl through. They have reasonably good cover where they are right now. The man is not paying attention, but is sitting near the mouth of the opening

Bert looks at Daphne, and whispers, "Let's sit for a few minutes, catch our breath, and watch what goes on." He checks behind and to the sides fairly often, to be sure no one is coming up behind them.

Daphne tries to ignore the excruciating pain in her calf and shoulder. The pain dies down to a low throbbing

Bert asks, "You have some healing skills, don't you? Is there anything around here that could help?"

"No."

"No tree bark to gnaw on or nothing?"

"You don't spend much time outdoors, do you?"

"Well, I did hear something about chewing tree bark for pain." He grins at her.

"You think this is our cave?"

"I don't know. Don't think so. But we needed to rest for a few minutes. We can look further

upstream once we've got our breath back." He adds, "What do you think?"

"I don't know. I mean, who dig a mineshaft right next to a river? Wouldn't it flood all the time?"

"Well, if that's where the stuff... whatever it is... is, then that's where you put the mine. The entrance wasn't at water level, I don't think." Was it?

About this time, another man walks up the bank toward the other.⁴ "They are still out there. I am going to report to the General. Help your brother search for them. We found their horse, so they shouldn't have gone far."

The new one goes into the opening and the one who had been fishing walks back downstream.

As soon as one or both have disappeared, Bert stands cautiously up, and helps Daphne up.

She says, "We'd better get moving"

He gets her back in the arm-over-the-shoulder position, and starts cautiously heading upstream, giving the mine a wide berth.

After many excruciating minutes walking upstream, Bert slows... halts. "Do you think...? That's got to have been the cave. Damn. Let's sit down and talk about this."

Daphne says, "Talk about what? This is hopeless."

"How many people have we seen so far? 3? And the General?"

"Sure."

"So. We're supposed to "stop the darkness"... that's what they said, right? Could these people be the darkness? Or just inconveniences?"

"I don't know."

Bert gives her a hug. "We need to watch for awhile, see if we can figure out what they're up to."

Next month, the inevitable conclusion

⁴ **Matt:** Yes—my baiting has caused another villain to appear.

Me: If you'd actually *do* something, I wouldn't have to entertain myself so much.