



Placeholder AI art

SAMPLE

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RULES (*sample version*)

This adventure stars YOU—or rather, your alter ego in a distant, chaotic future. Four attributes define your character: **Resolve (RES)**, **Ability (ABL)**, **Empathy (EMP)**, and **Constitution (CON)**. Their meaning will be explained later, when you assign points to them.

ACTION COSTS AND CHECK COSTS

Some sections require you to spend attribute points. The cost may appear **at the beginning of a section** (*action cost*), like this:

*This action costs you 2 **Resolve** points.*

Or it may appear **at the end of a section** (*check cost*), like this:

*EMP 1, **78**; otherwise, **162**.*

Actions represent deliberate decisions that are difficult to carry out and leave you mentally or physically drained. Checks represent situations in which you react on instinct. **Action costs must always be paid.** By the time the cost is revealed, your decision to perform the action has already been made. **Check costs are optional.** If you cannot or choose not to pay the cost, turn to the section indicated by the *otherwise* option.

Whenever you pay a cost, reduce the *current value* of the corresponding attribute on your character sheet. Occasionally, an attribute's *current value* may increase. However, **an attribute's current value can never exceed its max value.**

MORALE

The total points assigned to **Resolve, Ability, and Empathy** make up your **Morale**. **Constitution is not part of your Morale.**

If you do not have enough attribute points to pay an *action cost* (but not a *check cost*), you must push yourself beyond your limits, and your Morale will suffer. Subtract the missing points from **any combination of your Morale attributes**, remembering that **Morale points are worth only half as much**—you must spend 2 Morale points to make up for 1 missing attribute point. If your Morale ever falls to 0, that's the end of the adventure. **Check costs cannot be paid using Morale points.**

Example of using Morale points

During the adventure, you encounter the following *action cost*:

*This action costs you 3 **Resolve** points.*

Your current attribute values are:

RES 1, ABL 4, EMP 5, CON 7

Since you do not have the 3 Resolve points required, you spend your remaining 1 Resolve point to cover part of the cost. The 2 remaining points must be paid using Morale, which requires spending 4 Morale points (since Morale points are worth only half as much).

You decide to spend 3 Empathy points and 1 Ability point to make up the remaining cost. (Constitution cannot be used as Morale)

Your current attribute values are now:

RES 0, ABL 3, EMP 2, CON 7

Although Constitution points cannot be used as Morale points, you can use Morale points to pay *action costs* that require Constitution. Unlike the other attributes, you may choose to pay a Constitution *action cost* with Morale points **even if you have enough Constitution points to pay the cost.**

Example of using Morale points to pay a Constitution action cost

During the adventure, you encounter the following *action cost*:

*This action costs you 2 **Constitution** points.*

Your current attribute values are:

RES 2, ABL 3, EMP 3, CON 3

Although you have enough Constitution points to pay the *action cost*, you may choose to use Morale points instead to prevent your Constitution from dropping to 1, which would leave you dangerously close to death.

You decide to spend 2 Ability points as Morale to cover 1 Constitution point of the cost. Your current attribute values are now:

RES 2, ABL 1, EMP 3, CON 2

Constitution can only be reduced to 0 (resulting in your character's death) as a result of wounds (see *Wounds and Combat*). In other words, if you are down to 1 Constitution point, that last point cannot be spent to pay costs. In that case, any Constitution *action costs* must be paid using Morale points instead.

If, for any reason, the adventure instructs you to lose Morale points, subtract them from any of your Morale attributes (Resolve, Ability, and Empathy). You may take the loss from a single attribute or divide it among any combination of them.

ITEMS

Items you can pick up are shown in **bold**. Some items are followed, in parentheses, by one of the following notations:

- DS (Digit Sum).
- A positive or negative value.

The notation indicates the operation you must perform on the current section number when you wish to use the item. For example: **microchip (-40)**. To use this item, subtract 40 from the number of your current section. If the resulting section does not list the item's name immediately below the section number, the item has no effect. **Immediately return to the section you came from.**

Whenever you pick up an item, record its name and its associated formula or section number(s) in the Inventory section of your character sheet.

Items cannot be used in sections that require an attribute check (where a *check cost* may be paid).

WOUNDS AND COMBAT

Wounds directly reduce your Constitution. **Their cost cannot be paid using Morale points.** If your Constitution is reduced to 0 as a result of wounds, your character dies and the adventure ends. *Wound costs* are indicated as follows:

*Lose 2 **Constitution** points due to wounds.*

Combat sections are likely to include *wound costs*. In addition, particularly strenuous battles may also inflict fatigue. *Fatigue costs* are indicated as follows:

*Lose 1 **Constitution** point due to fatigue.*

Unlike *wound costs*, ***fatigue costs* may be paid using Morale points.**

CHECKBOXES

The checkboxes record the changes your actions make to the game world. Mark them whenever instructed to do so.

FINAL NOTE

Any instruction given in the adventure itself takes precedence over these rules.

The complete rules—including temporary effects, penalties for failed item use, and full item mechanics—are available as a separate download.

ASTEROIDS

Hanging in the void on the other side of the glass, seemingly motionless even though you know they are moving. Lined up in an endless belt, oblivious to your miserable existence. You wonder: when will you find the courage to put an end to it? You realize you don't dare. There are still a few things—only a few—left for you on this side of the curtain. The most important of them is Xeic. You cannot leave him alone, not now, when you must face Mr. Sobota and tell him that you have lost his cargo.

"We should have run," you mutter bitterly, still watching the slow dance of the asteroids. "Mr. Sobota can't search the whole galaxy. Coming here to his lair was as stupid as two sheep walking into a slaughterhouse of their own accord."

"Run away from the outer rings?" You see Xeic's tall, lanky figure reflected in the glass. He speaks with barely a movement of his lips. "I like the idea. Instead of dying in Mr. Sobota's expert hands, we'd slowly wither away in the endless interstellar void." He laughs.

Xeic carries the roguish air of someone used to getting into trouble and coming out of it unharmed. His hair is so blond he could almost pass for an albino. In truth, Xeic could pass for anything he wished. He fished you out of the slums about three years ago, when he offered you the position of co-pilot on his cargo ship.

"Someone with your survival instinct would suit me," he had said.

You remember with particular clarity the way he introduced himself—Xeic—snapping the *x* like the crack of a whip. You don't know his last name; in fact, you doubt that *Xeic* is even the name he was born with. He always walks surrounded by an aura of mystery, and asking certain questions only leads to deeper ambiguities.

But you do not hold it against him. He rescued you from misery and gave meaning to your existence. If there is one thing you know about him, it is that he will be the last person you think of when you finally decide to take that one-way journey among the asteroids.

Xeic lifts the corners of his lips into the reassuring smile he reserves for the most delicate situations.

"Don't worry. I know Mr. Sobota. We'll get through this."

You force yourself to believe him.

Xeic steps back and sits on the bench that runs along the wall opposite the window. From one pocket he pulls out a large copper coin. He holds it before him thoughtfully, studying one side, then the other. Suddenly, he tosses it into the air.

"Heads," he says.

He catches the coin between his palms and opens them just enough to glance at it. Before you can ask anything, the echo of heavy footsteps coming down the corridor startles you. For a moment you had

forgotten where you were. Xeic slips the coin away and rises with a determined gesture; in his eyes you see not the faintest shadow of doubt.

The guards arrive. Two asterri, humanoids native to the asteroid belt. Taller and more heavily built than an average human, with swollen faces and bodies covered in leathery skin that acts as natural armor.

They take only Xeic. When you try to follow, one of the guards shoves you back.

“Only him,” he spits. His voice sounds like pebbles grinding together.

You look at Xeic, bewildered.

“It’s OK,” he says. “Mr. Sobota doesn’t like strangers. Wait here.”

Reluctantly, you watch them disappear down the corridor. Reality sways beneath your feet. This could be the end of the journey—plain, without fireworks, as befits the poor souls condemned to live in the outer rings. Your mind fills with a swarm of tangled thoughts. Run. Cling to Xeic. Tear him from the guards’ grasp.

But you do none of those things.

“Xeic!” you suddenly call out. “The coin. What did it land on?”

Xeic turns just enough for you to glimpse the tail of his smile.

“Tails,” he answers.

And then he disappears around a bend in the corridor.

You sit and wait. Seconds stretch into minutes; minutes into hours. You fix your gaze on the pitted rocks that seem to stare back at you from the other side of the glass. The side of life, the side of death.

Which is which—that is another question entirely.

Suddenly, the echo of footsteps tears you from your thoughts. Four asterri take shape in the dim corridor. They are enormous—over two meters tall—and they advance toward you with a determination that chills your blood.

You stand without knowing whether to flee or fight. Soon enough, both options become impossible.

The asterri surround you with a well-practiced maneuver. Two of them seize your arms while a third injects something into the side of your neck.

In the blink of an eye, you fall into an abyss of silence.

CHARACTER CREATION

Now that you've had a glimpse of your alter ego's personality and motivations, it's time to assign your attribute points.

Resolve (RES): represents initiative, courage, and determination.

Ability (ABL): represents dexterity, intelligence, and intuition.

Empathy (EMP): represents charisma, persuasion, and deception.

Constitution (CON): represents physical endurance and the ability to withstand wounds.

The total points assigned to Resolve, Ability, and Empathy make up your **Morale**. Morale represents your will to carry on.

Distribute **22 points** among Resolve, Ability, Empathy, and Constitution, ensuring that **each attribute has at least 2 points**. Once you have finished, compare your highest and lowest attribute values. **For every 3-point difference between them, add 1 point to your highest attribute.**

Record the final value of each attribute in the corresponding *max value* box on your character sheet.

Finally, give your character a name and turn the page to begin your adventure.

1

Consciousness brings pain. As you try to sit up, the effort makes something burst inside your skull. You collapse again with a groan. Your blood rushes through the veins in your temples, and your throat is gripped by a searing thirst. Blindly, you grope across the ground around you until your hand finds a round object. It is a stone bowl, filled with water. Water!

You gulp it down greedily, feeling the cool liquid ease, if only slightly, the pounding agony in your head.

You lie back down, and sleep soon overtakes you. Turn to **115**.

12

You sit down on the stone bed and rest your palms on its nonexistent mattress. The guard grunts and shifts in his sleep. If you have not taken it, the **stone bowl (DS)** rests on the floor.

The minutes crawl by. From somewhere farther down the corridor come the muffled sounds of voices and running footsteps. You have a feeling you do not have much longer to spend in this cell.

Suddenly, your head spins and a wave of nausea rises in your throat. You cough, struggling to keep it down.

You may inspect the moss on the walls by turning to **216**, or examine the door's lock by turning to **209**. To reach into the crevice between the bed and the wall, turn to **237**. You may also call out to the guard by turning to **178**. If you would rather do nothing and wait to see what happens, turn to **141**.

16

(stone bowl)

You pick up the bowl from the floor and turn it upside down to show the guard that it is empty.

"Thirsty," you mutter in Asterri.

The guard nods reluctantly. You pass the bowl through the bars, and watch as he carries it away beyond a bend in the tunnel. You have no way of knowing how long it will take him to return.

Lose the stone bowl.

If you inspect the patches of moss, turn to **93**. If you examine the door's lock, turn to **295**. If you reach into the crevice between the bed and the wall, turn to **237**. If you do nothing, turn to **141**.

28

The beating the asterri gives you is more brutal than anything you have ever experienced, even in the most violent alleys of the slums. The giant's fists are like wrecking balls; two blows are enough to leave you unable to fight back. Not satisfied with seeing you sprawled on the floor, he hauls you up by the throat. Holding you aloft like a limp puppet with neither the strength nor the will to defend yourself, he drives kick after kick into you, laughing like a madman as your teeth and blood splatter across the walls of the cell.

He keeps beating you for what feels like an eternity before, suddenly, stopping himself and letting you drop. Before leaving, he grabs your right ankle in his massive hand and, with a swift twist, dislocates it. You barely feel it.

"So you'll remember me tomorrow, before you die in the arena!" he laughs as he leaves the cell.

The onset of unconsciousness grants you a welcome reprieve.

*Lose 5 **Constitution** points due to wounds. If, after subtracting them, your current Constitution is greater than 1, **reduce it to 1**. Also **lose half** (rounded up) of your **maximum and current Resolve** due to your dislocated ankle, and lose 2 **Morale** points.*

EMP 3, 232 ; otherwise, (end of sample)

48

*This action costs you 1 **Ability** point.*

You search through the dry, glowing moss, hoping to find something that might help you escape the cell.

If you have not already taken it, your nimble fingers brush against something: a **screen-printed bracelet (-30)**, engraved with an intricate ornamental pattern reminiscent of an electronic circuit. You assume it must have been hidden there by a prisoner who, for reasons you dare not imagine, was never able to come back for it. Turn to **105**.

57

It is not long before the corridor echoes with the heavy footsteps of someone of immense weight. A chill runs down your spine as you see the guard snap to attention, his body tense and his eyes fixed on the bend in the tunnel. A moment later, an enormous asterri steps into view—well over two and a half meters tall, with a colossal chest and arms as thick as stone columns. Unlike the guard, who wears nothing but a tattered belt, this one is dressed in a sleeveless, open-front tunic of faded blue and a pair of rough leather boots.

The guard makes a timid gesture to stop him, but the giant brushes him aside without so much as a

glance. He approaches the cell and thrusts his face between the bars to get a better look at you. His features are disfigured by countless scars, and one of his eyes has been replaced by what appears to be an emerald, gleaming with an unsettling light.

The monster smiles and slowly runs his tongue—slimy as a leech—over his pointed, meticulously sharpened teeth.

“So this is supposed to entertain us?” he roars, his booming voice rumbling like a rock crusher. “Don’t make me laugh... I’d wager my rank it won’t even last two rounds! Open the door!”

Your blood runs cold as you watch the guard obey with a trembling hand. The brute steps into the cell, cracking his knuckles.

If you try to reason with him, turn to **189**. If you show submission to calm him down, turn to **111**. If you provoke him to prove that you are not afraid, turn to **130**. If you attack before he does, turn to **199**.

61

*This action costs you 1 **Ability** point.*

You describe Xeic in Asterri, sounding like a lisping child speaking with a mouth full of food, but you somehow manage to make yourself understood.

“Another human?” the guard replies with disdain. “I haven’t seen one. Now be quiet! I’m not allowed to speak with prisoners!”

The guard returns to his chair and soon drifts back to sleep. You sigh, your hands gripping the bars as the weight of the air bears down on you. Turn to **141**.

73

You sit down on the stone bed and rest your palms on its nonexistent mattress. The guard grunts and shifts in his sleep. If you have not taken it, the **stone bowl (DS)** rests on the floor.

The minutes crawl by. From somewhere farther down the corridor come the muffled sounds of voices and running footsteps. You have a feeling you do not have much longer to spend in this cell.

Suddenly, your head spins and a wave of nausea rises in your throat. You cough, struggling to keep it down. Turn to **141**.

93

*This action costs you 1 **Ability** point.*

You search through the dry, glowing moss, hoping to find something that might help you escape the cell. Unfortunately, you do not have long to search. Turn to **141**.

96

*This action costs you 2 **Resolve** points.*

The asterri crushes you beneath his weight, but your longing for freedom drives you to fight. You hammer your knees against his armored abdomen, your fingers searching for a crevice in the leathery skin. You claw and tear at him while his talons struggle to pin you down, ripping open your flesh. It is hopeless. Your position is too unfavorable. At last, one massive hand clamps over your face while the other pins your arm to the ground. Helpless, lying on your back, you can see the expression of triumph etched across the asterri's bestial features.

He opens his mouth to speak, but never gets the chance.

In your frantic flailing, your free hand has struck a loose rock. Before the guard can utter a single word, you smash it into his temple with every ounce of strength you have left. The asterri collapses unconscious, leaving a trail of dark blood droplets in the wake of his fall. You struggle to your feet, panting, and assess your injuries. The cuts are not deep, and they soon stop bleeding.

*Lose 1 **Constitution** point due to wounds and 1 **Constitution** point due to fatigue.*

If you search the guard, turn to **231**. If you flee down the corridor before anyone appears, turn to **99**.

99

You run, weaving through heaps of discarded machinery along the black-rock tunnel, always keeping to the patches of shadow that seem to vie with the glowing clusters of luminescent moss covering the walls.

From somewhere in the distance comes the murmur of footsteps and alien voices. For now, however, they remain what they are: a distant, inconsequential rumble, like the heartbeat of the asteroid itself. The corridor stretches on before you, deserted and dust-choked, and you press forward with the certainty that every step brings you closer to your goal: finding Xeic.

The stone bowl is too bulky and heavy to carry with you. If you have it, lose it.

After wandering through countless twists and forks, you arrive at a broad intersection. Rising from its center is a massive pillar of some kind, purple and slick-looking, so thick that you could not wrap your arms around it. It descends through a hole in the ceiling, and at its base spreads a web of roots that radiate in every direction before disappearing into the rock.

The sound of approaching footsteps startles you. From the shadows, you watch a group of thin, ragged asterri emerge from the western passage, panting beneath the weight of the bulky bundles they carry. They disappear behind the purple pillar, and you hear a strange splashing sound. They never reappear on the other side. Turn to *(end of sample)*.

105

Footsteps in the corridor startle you, and before you can react, the guard rounds the corner. When he finds you wandering around the cell, he flies into a rage and smashes a small container he was carrying against the floor.

“You lying soft-flesh scum!” he bellows. “If you ever speak to me again, I’ll crush your throat myself!”

You retreat to the back of the cell, but he seems to have no intention of entering. Instead, he returns to his post. This time, however, he does not fall asleep. Turn to **57**.

106

This action costs you 1 Empathy point.

You pretend to be too weak to stand: you double over in pain, clutch your stomach, and, through a convincing grimace of suffering, murmur the Asterri word for "healer." The guard hesitates, mutters a curse under his breath, and bolts out of the cell. Making sure to lock the door behind him, he disappears down the corridor. This is your chance!

If you inspect the patches of moss, turn to **48**. If you examine the door’s lock, turn to **188**. If you reach into the crevice between the bed and the wall, turn to **206**. If you do nothing, turn to **105**.

107

Adrenaline overpowers the searing pain that radiates from your leg, spreading through your nervous system like a river of fire. You struggle to your feet and run, panting and stumbling, vaulting over heaps of scrap and taking random turns through a maze of indistinguishable tunnels.

*Mark checkbox **Mo**.*

The stone bowl is too bulky and heavy to carry with you. If you have it, lose it.

You reach an intersection where three tunnels branch off. At its center stands a strange purple pillar with a slick, almost slimy surface, but now is neither the time to investigate it nor to think. Turn to **241**.

111

You manage to dodge the first charge, but you are not so lucky with the second. The beating he gives you is brutal. The giant's fists are like wrecking balls; two blows are enough to leave you unable to fight back. Unsatisfied, he keeps pounding you until you are on the brink of unconsciousness. Only when he sees that you are barely breathing does he finally stop. He hauls you up by your shirt, holding your limp body so that his hideous face is only a foot from yours. You feel the caress of his breath, though the blood filling your mouth masks its stench.

"You aren't worth the energy," he spits. Then, with a savage kick that sends several of your teeth flying, he hurls you to the far side of the cell. "You'd better do better tomorrow!" He lets out a thunderous laugh as he leaves the cell.

You manage to drag your battered body to the stone bed, where you collapse into unconsciousness.

*Lose 5 **Constitution** points due to wounds. If, after subtracting them, your current Constitution is greater than 1, **reduce it to 1**. Also lose 2 **Morale** points.*

EMP 3, 232 ; otherwise, (end of sample)

115

When you wake, your head is still pounding furiously, but at least you can open your eyes without the light tearing at your pupils. The air is dry and dusty, leaving your throat parched. Fortunately, while you slept, someone refilled the stone bowl, and beside it left a block of what appears to be black bread. At least now you know they have no intention of killing you—not yet.

You drain the bowl once more and devour the bread. Then you take a look around.

You are in a small cell. The only furniture is a bed—or rather, a bare slab of stone, with no mattress—set apart from the back wall by a dark crevice about an arm's width across. On the floor lies the now-empty **stone bowl (DS)**.

Three of the four walls are made of black, sandy rock, mottled with a strange luminescent moss that bathes the cell in a faint, milky glow. The fourth wall is formed by thick, warped bars made of a hard, gleaming material that could be either metal or stone. Set into the bars is a door fitted with a crude lock set with a large keyhole.

Beyond the bars stretches a tunnel cluttered with the remains of machinery made from the same ambiguous material, their surfaces glinting beneath the moss's pale radiance. Nestled among the scrap, a guard cracks open one eye, glances at you, grunts, and promptly drifts back to sleep. He is an asterri. This fact, together with the rocky surroundings, leads you to conclude that you are somewhere beneath the surface of an asteroid.

The guard is smaller and lacks the arrogant bearing of the asterri who attacked you at Mr. Sobota's outpost. You could speak to him, if you wished. You know his language, though only imperfectly and with a dreadful human accent; the human vocal tract simply cannot produce some of its sounds. You

learned it in the slums, where countless asterri scraped out a miserable existence in society's foulest sewers, chasing an impossible promise of glory.

Xeic is never far from your thoughts. You have to find him. The two of you have to get out of here.

You may inspect the moss by turning to **211**, or examine the door's lock by turning to **197**. To reach into the crevice between the bed and the wall, turn to **227**. You may also call out to the guard by turning to **169**. If you would rather do nothing and wait to see what happens, turn to **73**.

125

*This action costs you 1 **Resolve** point.*

With a shove, you knock the guard aside and, without bothering to make sense of the curses he hurls after you, sprint for the door. But nothing is ever that easy.

A sharp crack behind you is followed by what feels like a bite in your calf, then by a searing, unbearable pain that races up your nerves like tongues of flame. You look down to see a barbed filament coiled around your ankle. A violent tug tears at your flesh, yanking your leg backward and sending you crashing to the ground—so close to the door, so close to freedom.

*Lose 1 **Constitution** point due to wounds.*

*RES 1, **107** ; otherwise, **148***

130

*This action costs you 2 **Resolve** points.*

In your limited Asterri, you somehow manage to hurl a string of choice insults at him without the slightest trace of fear creeping into your voice. For a brief instant, the giant's expression shifts to surprise before twisting into a mask of fury.

"I won't leave so much as splinters of your bones!" he bellows as he hurls himself at you.

Turn to **28**.

133

*This action costs you 1 **Ability** point.*

You click your tongue and clack your teeth together, managing only a poor imitation of Asterri pronunciation.

“This is our asteroid,” the guard barks. “Now be quiet! I’m not allowed to speak with prisoners!”

He returns to his post and, after casting you one last glance, closes his eyes. Turn to **141**.

135

*This action costs you 1 **Ability** point.*

You click your tongue and clack your teeth together, managing only a poor imitation of Asterri pronunciation.

“This is our asteroid,” the guard barks. “Now be quiet! I’m not allowed to speak with prisoners!”

He returns to his post and, after casting you one last glance, closes his eyes. Turn to **12**.

138

(thin bone)

*This action costs you 1 **Ability** point.*

You slip the bone into the keyhole and begin probing the lock’s mechanism. Its workmanship is so crude that picking it proves surprisingly easy. With a hopeful *click*, the lock gives way.

*Mark checkbox **Mo**.*

Without a moment’s hesitation you leave the cell behind, disappearing into the corridor bathed in pale white light. Turn to **99**.

141

What started as a spell of dizziness quickly escalates into a wave of overwhelming nausea. You collapse onto all fours, seized by violent convulsions, coughing and vomiting up the remnants of the drug still burning inside you.

You must have lost consciousness, because by the time the retching subsides and your vision comes back into focus, you find yourself lying on your back, the guard’s bloated face staring down at you from barely two feet away. You turn your head aside and wipe your mouth with your sleeve.

*ABL 1, **160** ; otherwise, **207***

145

*This action costs you 1 **Ability** point.*

You describe Xeic in Asterri, sounding like a lisping child speaking with a mouth full of food, but you somehow manage to make yourself understood.

“Another human?” the guard replies with disdain. “I haven’t seen one. Now be quiet! I’m not allowed to speak with prisoners!”

The guard returns to his chair and soon drifts back to sleep. You sigh, your hands gripping the bars as the weight of the air bears down on you. Turn to **12**.

148

The pain burns through you, clouding your vision. Even so, you try to get back on your feet, but the guard is faster. He pounces on you like a predator, and the two of you tumble across the ground as his massive hands struggle to pin you down.

Will you fight (turn to **96**) or surrender (turn to **170**)?

152

Out of the corner of your eye, you catch a metallic glint among the strands of moss. It is a piece of costume jewelry: a **screen-printed bracelet (-30)**, engraved with an intricate ornamental pattern reminiscent of an electronic circuit. You assume it must have been hidden there by a prisoner who, for reasons you dare not imagine, was never able to come back for it. Turn to **12**.

159

(thin bone)

*This action costs you 1 **Ability** point.*

You slip the bone into the lock and begin probing its mechanism. At first, you keep glancing toward the guard to make sure he is still dozing, but the delicate task of manipulating the tiny springs in the correct sequence soon absorbs your full attention.

At last, you hear it. *Click*. The sound of your freedom.

But when you lift your eyes from the lock, you find the asterri standing directly on the other side of the door. His tiny eyes blaze with fury. Before you can react, he grabs you by the front of your shirt, drives a fist as hard as granite squarely into your face, and hurls you like a rag doll across the cell. Then he picks up the bone you were using to pick the lock and crushes it in his massive hand.

"Don't try that again," he warns as he locks the door.

*Lose 2 **Constitution** points due to wounds. Lose the thin bone.*

You stagger to your feet, your vision blurred with blood. Turn to **141**.

160

Your heart skips a beat: behind the guard, the cell door has been left ajar!

"Get up," the asterri barks. "Dying won't do either of us any favors."

If you pretend to need medical attention, turn to **106**. If you attack the guard, turn to **202**. If you try to escape through the open door, turn to **125**. If you get to your feet as the guard commands, turn to **57**.

166

The freedom you have won with blood is far too precious to risk for whatever trifles a ragged asterri might be carrying. You lock him inside the cell and toss the key behind a pile of rocks before melting into the tunnel's shadows. Turn to **99**.

169

You gesture to the guard. With obvious reluctance, he stands up and approaches with what is clearly meant to be a threatening stride. His appearance, however, undermines any attempt at projecting authority. He wears nothing but a grimy belt, his body is crisscrossed with whip scars, and the leathery skin seems far too large for the meager flesh beneath it.

He stops a safe distance from the bars, well beyond the reach of your arms. A short sheath hangs from his belt.

"What do you want?" he growls in Asterri.

To ask him what this place is, turn to **135**. To ask him where Xeic is, turn to **145**.

170

"I surrender!" you manage to stammer in Asterri, but the guard is furious. He hauls you off the ground by your clothes and, with a brutal shove, slams you against the wall. Fortunately, a patch of moss cushions the impact. He then shoves you back into the cell.

*Lose 1 **Constitution** point due to wounds.*

“Don’t you ever try to fool me again,” he barks as he locks the door. Turn to **57**.

178

You gesture to the guard. With obvious reluctance, he stands up and approaches with what is clearly meant to be a threatening stride. His appearance, however, undermines any attempt at projecting authority. He wears nothing but a grimy belt, his body is crisscrossed with whip scars, and the leathery skin seems far too large for the meager flesh beneath it.

He stops a safe distance from the bars, well beyond the reach of your arms. A short sheath hangs from his belt.

“What do you want?” he growls in Asterri.

To ask him what this place is, turn to **133**. To ask him where Xeic is, turn to **61**.

188

You approach the bars to examine the lock. It is fastened. Although the keyhole is large, it is not wide enough to fit your finger inside. You would need something thinner to pick it. Turn to **105**.

189

*This action costs you 1 **Ability** point.*

As best your inadequate vocal tract allows, you try to convince the giant that fighting is not worth it.

“I love it—the cowardly type!” the giant laughs, never slowing his advance toward you. “This is going to be fun.”

Turn to **111**.

197

You approach the bars, taking care not to attract the guard’s attention. The lock is fastened. Although the keyhole is large, it is not wide enough to fit your finger inside. You would need something thinner. Turn to **12**.

199

*This action costs you 3 **Resolve** points.*

You strike the asterri's abdomen like a bolt of lightning, driving a powerful blow against his thick skin. The giant doubles over with a growl that is equal parts rage and pain. Before he can straighten up, you land two sharp punches—one between the eyes, the other across the mouth—forcing him back.

Without giving him a moment to recover, you charge again, but the advantage of surprise is gone.

With a single backhanded swipe powerful enough to send you flying several meters, the asterri knocks you away. From where you land, you have a perfect view of the colossus rising to his full height, his lone eye blazing with fury. Turn to **28**.

202

*This action costs you 2 **Resolve** points.*

Flat on your back beneath the asterri, you are hardly in an ideal position. But a lifetime in the slums has taught you that advantage is not given—it is seized.

Before he has time to realize your intentions, you jab two stiffened fingers into his eyes. Blinded, the guard recoils with a howl of pain, slashing wildly with one hand while fumbling at his belt with the other, trying to draw something from its sheath. You move first. In a flash, you hurl yourself at him. The asterri's claws tear through your clothes and rake your flesh, but you manage to bring him down, pin him beneath you, and drive your fingers into the soft strip of exposed throat.

For what feels like an eternity, you squeeze. At last, the guard stops struggling. His limbs go limp, motionless on the stone floor. You stagger to your feet, trembling with exertion. The asterri's claws have left deep gouges across your torso. Some are serious, but none are life-threatening.

*Lose 2 **Constitution** points due to wounds and 1 **Constitution** point due to fatigue.*

The cell door stands open. Beyond it stretches a deserted tunnel, bathed in the ghostly glow of the moss. Will you flee now that the way is clear? Turn to **166**. Or would you rather search the guard first? Turn to **231**.

206

You slide your arm into the narrow gap between the bed and the wall. At the far end, your fingers brush against a tangled mass of long, rigid shafts—twigs, perhaps? You pull one free. It is a **thin bone (-50)**, no thicker than your little finger: the remains of some unfortunate creature that met its end trapped in the crevice. Turn to **105**.

207

“Get up,” the guard barks. “Dying won’t do either of us any favors.”

If you pretend to need medical attention, turn to **106**. If you attack the guard, turn to **202**. If you get to your feet as the guard commands, turn to **57**.

209

You approach the bars, taking care not to attract the guard’s attention. The lock is fastened. Although the keyhole is large, it is not wide enough to fit your finger inside. You would need something thinner to pick it. Turn to **141**.

211

The moss feels dry and coarse beneath your fingers, like a scouring pad. Were it not for the glow it emits, you would doubt it was alive.

ABL 1, 152; otherwise, 12

216

The moss feels dry and coarse beneath your fingers, like a scouring pad. Were it not for the glow it emits, you would doubt it was alive. Turn to **141**.

227

You slide your arm into the narrow gap between the bed and the wall. At the far end, your fingers brush against a tangled mass of long, rigid shafts—twigs, perhaps? You pull one free. It is a **thin bone (-50)**, no thicker than your little finger: the remains of some unfortunate creature that met its end trapped in the crevice. Turn to **12**.

231

You find a **tooth whip (+30)**, a weapon commonly used by the asterri, sheathed at the guard’s belt. The whip consists of a two-meter-long lash that combines the weapon’s normal striking power with the injection of a toxin through metal barbs embedded along its entire length. The toxin incapacitates the victim by overwhelming their pain receptors.

You also discover a **golden insignia bearing the symbol ☞ (+200)**, nestled within a small cavity at the

base of the guard's neck. About the size and shape of a coin, it is a personal talisman held sacred among the asterri. Thanks to your previous dealings with their race, you know they believe it is the vessel of an individual's life force.

You lock the guard inside the cell and toss the key behind a pile of rocks before melting into the tunnel's shadows. Turn to **99**.

232

You sleep, and you dream. A voice that is not human, yet calls your name as though it were. A face takes shape before your mind's eye: an elderly asterri, worn by the years, adorned with jewels and ornaments, his lips sewn shut. It lingers for a moment before dissolving, as suddenly as it appeared, into the tattered strands of another dream. Turn to *(end of sample)*.

237

You slide your arm into the narrow gap between the bed and the wall. At the far end, your fingers brush against a tangled mass of long, rigid shafts—twigs, perhaps? You pull one free. It is a **thin bone (-50)**, no thicker than your little finger: the remains of some unfortunate creature that met its end trapped in the crevice. Turn to **141**.

241

Will you take the east tunnel (turn to *(end of sample)*), the north tunnel (turn to *(end of sample)*), or the west tunnel (turn to *(end of sample)*)?

245

(thin bone)

*This action costs you 1 **Ability** point.*

You slip the bone into the keyhole and begin probing the lock's mechanism. Its workmanship is so crude that picking it proves surprisingly easy. With a hopeful *click*, the lock gives way, and without a moment's hesitation you leave the cell behind, disappearing into the corridor bathed in pale white light.

You have gone no more than a couple of dozen steps before a violent wave of nausea forces you to stop. Doubling over, you manage to crawl behind the heaps of machinery that clutter the tunnel. There, you vomit the last remnants of the drug that had been used to capture you, coughing and gasping so violently that everything fades to black.

*Mark checkbox **Mo**.*

When you come to, however, you feel better. Strong enough to carry on. Turn to **99**.

295

The lock is fastened. It is of very crude craftsmanship, with a keyhole so large that, by peering through it, you can make out part of the operating mechanism. Unfortunately, your finger is still too large to fit inside. You would need something thinner to pick it. Turn to **141**.