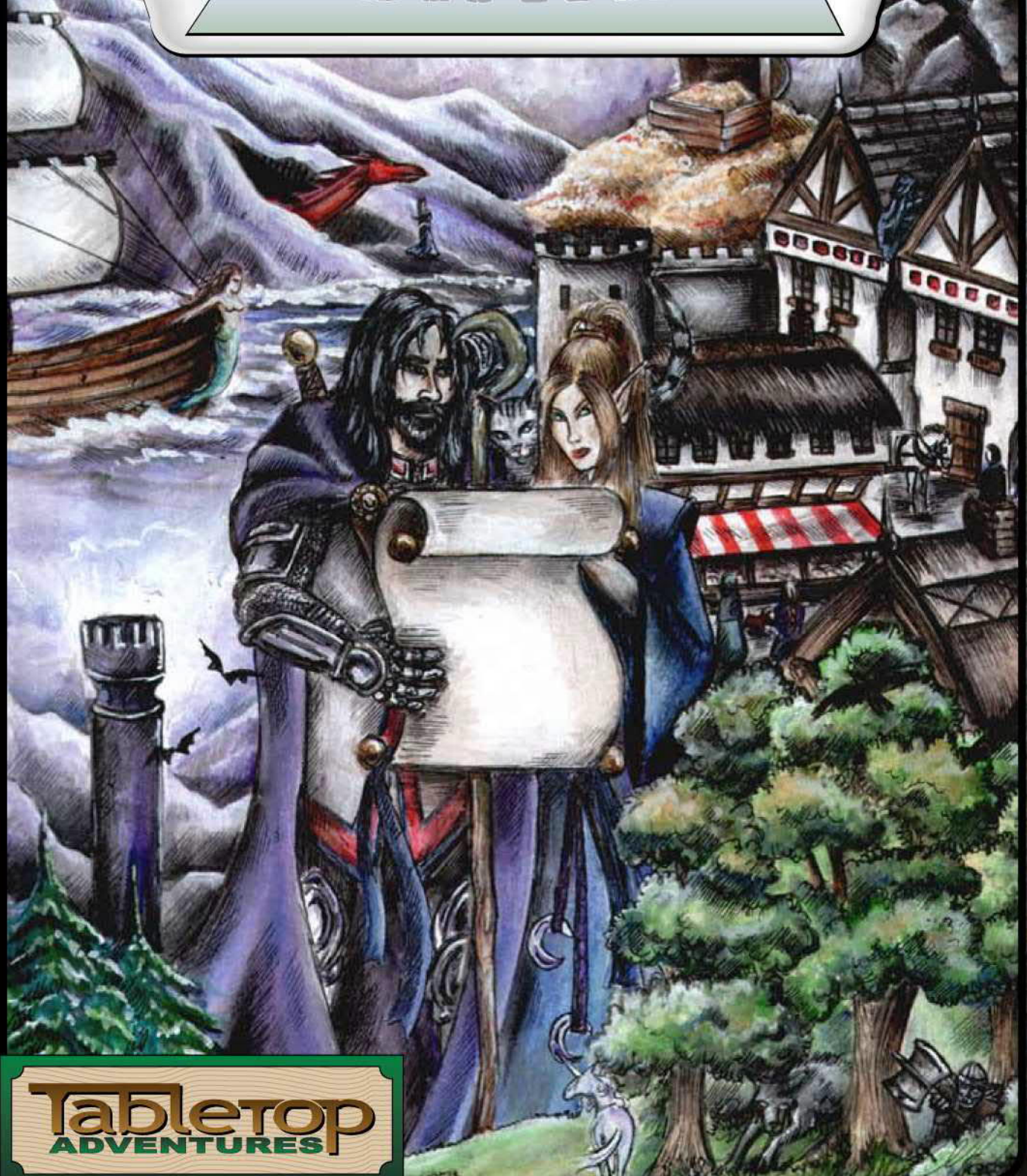


Tabletop Adventures presents

Bits of the Wilderness
**INTO THE
MOUNTAINS**



Tabletop
ADVENTURES



*Bits of the Wilderness*TM

Into the Mountains

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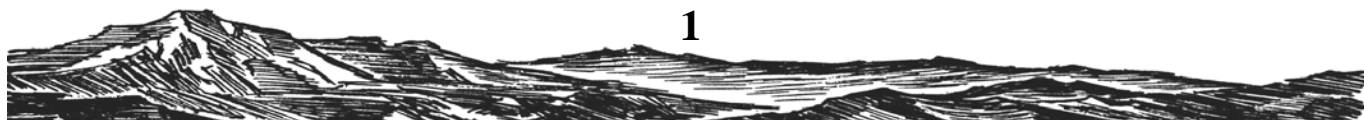




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Introduction

Welcome!

Welcome to “Bits of the Wilderness™: Into the Mountains,” Tabletop Adventures’ book describing those high and lofty places. Make trips through any mountains more interesting and memorable for your players. Our writers, with a broad range of writing experience and gaming expertise, have provided lots of realistic or fantastic detail besides, “It’s really steep.”

We have taken care to provide descriptions that can be used in virtually any game that takes place in a quasi-European medieval fantasy setting without “clashing” with the feel or setting of your existing campaign. However, in those rare cases that something seems out of place, either discard the description or change it as you have need. These descriptions are for your use in your game and you are free to modify them to keep your game fun and exciting for you and your players. I hope that you can find plenty of material here to augment your players’ imaginations and to stimulate your own ideas for adventures.

Harried Game Masters, or How We Came to Write This Book

So, I hear you ask, “Why write a book like this?” Well, I’m glad you asked. We wrote it for all those Game Masters who have ever lamented not having the time that they wanted to spend on their games because those unforgiving intrusions to gaming (life, work, family, school) interfered. We wrote it for all those game masters who have come home from a hard day of work or just finished a grueling finals week and had friends call up and say, “Hey, let’s play tonight. I had a rough day and I want to kill something.” For all of you who need more than 24 hours in a day,

welcome to Tabletop Adventures’ line of products for the Harried Game Master.

We here at TTA believe that description is a very important part of game-mastering and that vivid descriptions can make a world or an adventure come alive. However, we have noticed that the more rushed or frazzled a GM becomes, the more mechanical the game tends to be. So we have written a book that we have always wished to have, one that would have made our lives easier over the years. Tabletop Adventures’ “Harried Game Master” products are designed to be products that you can buy today and play tonight. We have taken care to make them flexible so they can be used in virtually any campaign without changing its feel or details. They are to help you, the Game Master, make the maximum use of the limited time you have available.

This tool provides the GM with a way to stimulate the characters’ senses and the players’ imaginations without having to use game-changing information. The descriptions can give players a “feel” for a situation, a better image of what is happening or what their characters are experiencing without all of those experiences leading directly to combat or treasure. They are intended to enhance role-playing by encouraging character building, reaction, and interaction. These Mountain Bits, and all the accompanying material, are made for you, to ease the life of the Harried Game Master.

Enjoy, have fun, and create fun for others!

The good people at Tabletop Adventures,
and the Overlord.





How to Use This Resource

What are Shards and Bits™, Anyway?

Shards and Bits™ should be viewed as small pieces of an adventure. Think of the archeologist, collecting little pieces of pottery and then fitting them together into a fascinating whole. Bits are small pieces of description that can be thrown in anywhere to provide “color” or add a little excitement to what might otherwise be a dull spot. Shards are longer and more elaborate, meant to be selected rather than added randomly. They may describe a certain area or specific thing, or particular facets that do not fit well in a random table such as times or seasons.

One thing to remember in using this product is that we provide you products that will add a bit of drama to your game and therefore, delivery is important. The way you choose to deliver the descriptions here can have a tremendous effect on the subsequent playability of the situation involved. With proper use, our Bits and Shards can add greater depth to your gaming experience and make everything seem more “real” and exciting for your players.

Bold print is to be read aloud to the players; light print is for the GM. This may include optional changes, such as “**Throughout the afternoon** [night]”, or the notes could be additional information. As with our previous terrain description products, these Bits of the Wilderness™ are numbered so that a GM can roll percentile dice or pick a card to randomly generate a dash of description for an adventure. An Index is provided in case a Bit is needed to fit a particular situation, and we have included many Shards for specific situations, conditions, or locations. These all can help you flesh out areas or give you an “instant” description for those occasions when your players do something you didn’t expect and catch you off-guard.

These descriptions need not be followed verbatim. As GM, you should feel free to adapt

them so that you may use them to greatest effect. Another thing to consider is that some of the Shards or longer Bits can be used a little at a time. Read one paragraph, let the adventurers move on a little further or ask questions, and then continue with the text. In some instances these descriptions may even give you ideas for additional adventures for your players. These Bits are for whatever you want! If a piece sparks your imagination (or those of your players) and you want to build on it, then go for it.

A Bit About Weather

Another important feature you will find in our “above ground” products is pieces describing weather and events pertinent to different seasons. Weather charts, while perhaps realistic, can be cumbersome. Using the “weather” section in the Index, a GM can choose or randomly select weather for the day. If it seems inconsistent from one day to the next, well, weather changes quickly at high altitudes so that would be appropriate.

Printing This Product

These pages can be printed out on regular paper. However, the final pages are formatted to be printed on card stock. As cards, they can be shuffled and drawn randomly during play or sorted ahead of time, with the GM selecting certain Bits for use and placing them with the appropriate map or other materials. Some GMs prefer to just roll randomly as needed, or write the appropriate number on the GM’s map and refer to it when the characters arrive there.

Other Products from TTA

Tabletop Adventures continues to bring you high quality products with lots of description to augment your imagination and enhance your role-playing experience. For more information visit our website at www.tabletopadventures.com.



Bits of the Mountains

01. Fluffy white clouds dot the azure sky. The track, after crisscrossing bare rocky slopes, turns and heads into a tree-filled valley. Intense sunshine is glaringly bright on the pale rocks, and the air warms. The path is steep, rough and edged with jagged rocks on all sides. Ahead, rich velvet-green grass beckons below broad open stands of aspen and pine. The round bright green leaves of the aspens rattle in a light breeze. A small river leaps noisily down a series of bright rapids along the stony slope.
02. You come around the mountain and see the charred remains of a small wooden building. The pungent odor of burned wood still permeates the surroundings. The frame of the building can still be seen, but three walls are gone. The remains of the roof lie scattered in pieces on the dirt floor. Everything is blackened and scarred with damage. The far wall has a large hole through which the sun is shining. Shards of colored glass litter this area; though the pieces are dirtied by ashes, you can see that the majority of them are blue or white, with a few pieces of various other colors.
03. The trees around you are tall and straight, rising with the mountain. As you make your way along you come to a strange sight. One lone tree appears to have been struck by lightning, or some other fiery force. It is split down the middle, though its trunk still stands, and it has burn marks all along its surface. [If the tree is examined closely:] When you approach the tree you notice that there is a hole in the trunk, and you can see something sitting inside. [If someone reaches inside the trunk:] You reach in and pull out a jug of what appears to be some sort of liquid. One quick sniff tells your senses that the jug is full of something strongly alcoholic [a very strong whiskey].
04. A slight movement catches your attention as you pass by. The leaves on a nearby tree are dagger-shaped, in a pleasingly deep green color, and they are motionless in the still air. Yet one leaf is twitching feverishly, for no obvious reason.
05. The day is bright and clear, and a gentle breeze blows at lower elevations. Atop the mountain that rakes the sky above you, a glistening veil of crystalline ice and snow is driven over the ridge. As wind gusts over the crest, the spindrift billows upward in great curls to catch the sun. As quiet as it seems from where you stand, the snow blowing off the divide above suggests that the high country is far from calm. [Passes, cols, and other low points can accelerate mountain winds to double their normal speeds as they funnel through the gaps. Spindrift is a good indicator of substantial winds at the crest of a divide.]
06. Walking around a large tree you stop dead in your tracks, looking straight into the eyes of a full-grown moose. The entire mountain range seems to become deathly still and quiet for what must be an eternity as the moose looks at you with dead black eyes. Then, suddenly it bolts and runs off at an angle to your path. Though it looks clumsy as it runs away, it is obviously a powerful creature.
07. The rocky path winds through the trees. It is difficult to see through the heavy foliage and branches. As you round a bend, giant stone structures come into view straight ahead. Stones taller than a person are stacked one on top of another, formed into a structure several stories high. Clearly these stones are not naturally formed this way, but there is no indication of who might have built it or why.
08. The pines recede as you enter a small field of grass, prickly weeds and yellow wildflowers. The tangy scent of the flowers tickles your nose. Beyond the field is a placid azure pond that mirrors the tall green trees on the far shore. Two triangular peaks push toward you on the surface as their counterparts push toward the blue sky above.

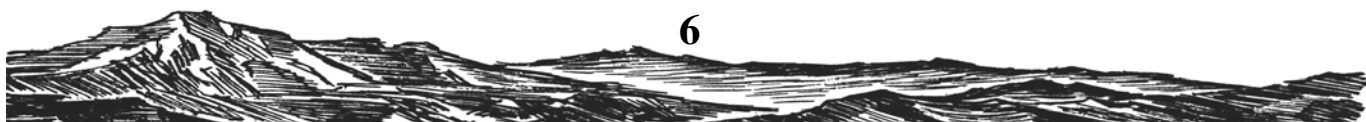



09. A waterfall cascades from a spot high on the mountain. It is impossible to see where the water lands, for the terrain is thick with lush green brush and trees in that area. Even from this great distance, the boom of the waterfall thunders through the canyon, its mist rising into the thin air in sheets of translucent white.
10. You stand on a tree-covered plateau, overlooking a break in the foothills below. A herd of bison [or other large grazing herd animals] moves through the gap in the hills. They are well beyond bowshot, but the noise and dust of the herd comes through on the breeze. Though the hills are green, they still yield up a churning brown dust that is borne away by the wind. To either side the foothills rise, the uneven terrain becoming ever steeper. Green-black clumps of pines grow thicker, eventually merging into the mountain forest at your back.

11. All day long you climb [descend]. The path is well-used, weaving in and out between great rocks. Often it is in the open, with the clear sky above. Rocks and gravel strew the path and your feet often slide on the loose stones. The sun beats on your backs through the thin air and shines too brightly on the white and light gray rocks, tiring your eyes. Then the path leads into a forest and by contrast it is dim, almost dark. The air smells of pines and ferns. The ground is wet and muddy underfoot from snowmelt, and temporary streams wander along the path. Plants are pushing out of the wet ground and star-shaped white flowers are blooming here and there.

12. Rounding a bend in the path you find yourself staring at a huge white boulder. It will not be hard to make your way around it, but something catches your eye as you near it. Where the base of the rock meets the ground there is a large anthill. This sandy hill is home to a colony of incredibly big ants, each about the size of a human thumb. It seems likely that a bite from just one of these insects would cause quite a bit of pain. The creatures are scurrying in and out of the opening in the hill, carrying pieces of dirt and rock. There is no visible source of food here for the ants, but it is obvious that they are thriving in this place.

13. A single tree graces the trail. This spot on the path is covered with leaves, which crunch underneath your feet. As the wind rustles the leaves high above, another sound catches your ear. You see movement—something small high in the tree is clambering around, causing bits of bark and the occasional seed to rain down upon you. A pair of black eyes and a gray button nose poke out from around the main trunk and the small furry visitor regards you with a twitter. It clammers down further and stops on the next branch, its fluffy gray and white tail fur fluttering in the breeze. Another noise like a chirp comes out of its mouth. Then as suddenly as it appeared, it sprints to the main trunk again and skitters up the tree and out of view.





14. You stand before an edifice of rock, at least twice the height of a large dragon, its surface rippled but otherwise free of imperfection. A lone fissure is within view. Shards of stone edge from its sides into the passage like spears from murder-holes in the mountain's walls. The path winds upward [downward] before passing out of sight around a bend.

15. The trail climbs [descends] into a narrow valley between high rock walls, along a babbling stream. All around are deciduous trees [birch/aspen] laden with light green leaves. The sun makes a long angle into the valley, putting a lovely pale light onto the leaves which filters gently through to the ground. A mild breeze makes light-flecks jump. You travel through the flickering forest with gravel at the stream's edge crunching underfoot. Soon you can walk [ride] out of the trees and into a meadow of deep green grasses interlaced with red and white flowers, mainly in shade from the high canyons around you. Just as you come out of the forest, something large and dark at the other side of the meadow bolts away, out of sight beyond a low hill ahead of you. [This thing could be an elk or a predator.]

16. At the base of the steep mountain, overgrowth has nearly obscured the beginnings of three narrow, one-person-wide paths leading upward. Each trail takes a slightly different direction from the others, and only one appears to still be in use, based on its relative lack of underbrush. Although the evergreens near the start of the paths are quite large and tall, the trees are much younger and shorter in the direction where the nearest, most overgrown, path leads. A swath of those saplings has been ripped out; branches, trunks and roots poke out from swooping mounds and valleys of dried earth. Evidence of other landslides, both old and fresh, appears throughout this mountainside and may account for the paths' lack of use.


17. As you climb a low hill, there is a space where a tree has fallen down an eroding slope and you get a view of the countryside. [GM – select

the appropriate description. Deciduous trees:] The trees roll on modest hills away to the horizon, mostly medium green with rounded tops, but here and there a darker pointed tree or a dead tree stands amid the green. It is silent except for the soft rustle of a breeze in the leaves. [Evergreen trees:] Rank upon rank of tall pines cover rolling hills to the distant horizon. The hills beyond are blue gray in the distance. The wind murmurs softly in their tops and brings you the rich smell of resins.

18. Here the trail follows a dry creek bed. Under your feet the gravel feels harsh after miles of soft forest litter. The stones are rather pretty; some might be small agates, bits of marble or crystals of quartz. Then the gravel ends and you walk on sand. It has been disturbed by many footprints, suggesting that it has been weeks or months since the stream's water smoothed it.

19. As you come over a slight rise, a flock of wild fowl [turkeys] reacts in alarm to your presence. There are more than a dozen of them, several adults about waist-high, with shiny black feathers, and ten young ones the size of chickens, with long legs and necks. They turn and hurry away from you, spindly legs covering the uneven ground with surprising speed. In less than a minute, the last bird has vanished under the ferns.

20. Snow-white clouds lazily drift across the sky, causing ever-shifting shadows and light to play along the foothills. During one brief break in the cover, the light shines brilliantly upon the nearest mountain, revealing its steep sides rising high above the clouds. The light pinpoints on a large rounded rock cropping out of the curvy slopes partway up the mountainside. Surrounded by dark green trees and colorful brush, the blanched rock seems to gleam in the sun. On top of the rock, and barely visible to the naked eye, is a set of arches. Whether the arches are man-made or a natural geographical oddity cannot be seen from this distance. The clouds move together once more and the rock with its arches vanishes from view.



21. Trees—you have seen nothing but trees for hours. Evergreens of all sorts have been your only scenery for an immeasurable amount of time. The pine needles stab your skin when you walk too close to the trees and you can hear other needles, and pinecones, crunching under your feet as you walk.

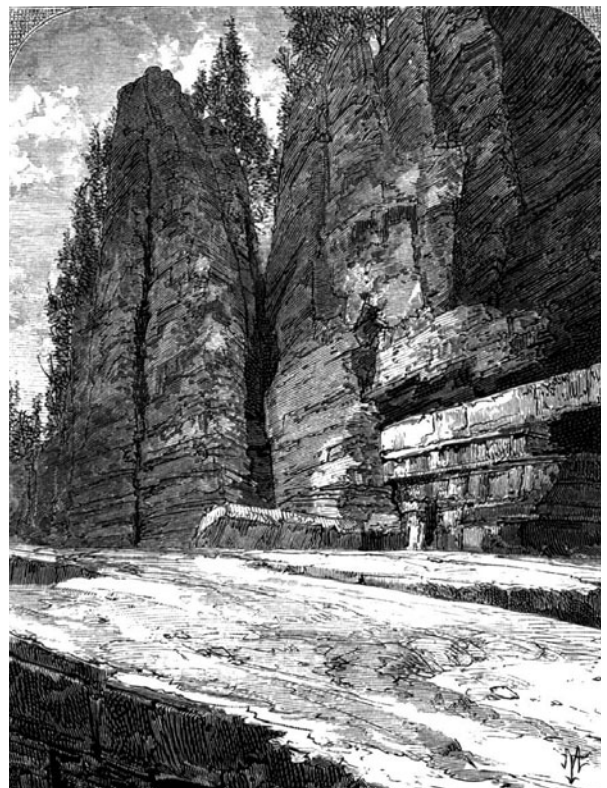
22. Here, the trail meanders through a high valley. The forest is open and the going easy. For once there is dry dirt on the path, thick enough to cushion your [horses'] steps. On all sides the mountainsides slope up, thickly and uniformly covered by tall thin pines. The sides do not seem particularly steep, but that is an illusion of distance. It would be a long hike from the trail down the center of the valley to its edges. The slopes angle up at about a quarter of vertical, which would be an arduous climb. Seen from this distance, the hike up the sides looks gentle and pleasant: no great rocks stick out and the deep green forest rises smoothly to the crest of the hill. Beyond the forested slopes, another mountain range rises higher, with bare rock faces and snow lying on protected slopes.


23. Clouds gather [in the night; in the morning; during the day] until the sky is overcast. The thick gray clouds hide the sky. The wind is brisk and chilly. Ahead, the mountains tower up, great dark shapes under the threatening sky. Under the clouds the tree-covered mountainsides are almost silhouettes against the sky, but beyond the nearer mountains rises a more majestic range. The sky over the high peaks is clear and brilliantly blue. On those distant heights the snow shines in the strong light, glittering white, the more dramatic because the nearer range is so dark.

24. The rocks here are a vibrant deep red. They have been eroded to make the red dirt on which you walk, the dirt that blows around as dark red dust. The breeze blows through cracks and fissures in the rocks, making an odd hollow sound and throwing the red dust into your faces. Despite the fact that you are riding in the sunlight, the breeze is coming

down off the mountain and it is cold. Small bright-colored birds fly up in pursuit of insects, undeterred by the gusty wind. Your route crosses a snowmelt stream, all spread out across the trail, and it is a relief to have less red dust in the air. Finally the red rocks are behind you, and now the boulders are great blocks of yellow or dark gray stone. The forest closes in, with leaves and grass covering the ground, muting all sound.

25. You cross a little meadow, a beautiful place of nodding plants with bright flowers. Birds fly up crying as you approach, some bright blue and others with black and white feathers. Insects buzz among the colorful meadow flowers and the leaves of the trees flutter in the slight cool breeze. Then the trail turns, heading up the ridge on bare gravel, twisting left and right to find easier angles. The sun shines on your backs and the gravel reflects heat. You glance back once to the pleasant meadow. [Adventurers have a 25% chance to notice that it has the shape of a huge footprint.]





26. A dark spot can be seen far ahead in the sky between the peaks. [Only a person with exceptional vision will be able to make out wings and a bird-like shape.] Gradually the spot resolves so that everyone can see that it is some type of creature soaring on the wind, high up. As time goes by it holds more or less the same spot, appearing and disappearing from view as you twist and turn up the trail and as the fluffy white clouds close and open. By midafternoon it is clear that it is a very large winged animal, but perhaps not a bird. [The GM can give hints as to what type of animal it is, if desired. For example, "The tail is too long for a bird." Or, "you can tell it is not a bird because it has four legs." Possibilities: dragon, wyvern, hippogriff, pegasus, etc.]

27. The path winds gently to the right, through a high mountain meadow laced with sweet-smelling wildflowers. The only sound is the monotonous buzzing of bees in the field. The trail you are on comes to a crossroads, branching off in two separate directions. Nothing marks either path, and the terrain is not visible beyond a few hundred feet [30-60m] in either direction. At the center of the crossroads, a small pile of rocks is stacked carefully. [This may mark a holy place, or be some type of trail marker.]



28. The rocky terrain around you is lit up by the brilliant sun. The light makes the rocks and patches of snow almost too bright to look at. The mountains continue on in your view, one behind the other, alternating in a staggered pattern. One is a rocky mountain, another is forested, then finally in the distance a snow-capped peak. This last seems to have some activity. You aren't sure what it is, but you

definitely do see movement. As you continue to watch, a large flying creature takes off from the peak and flaps its massive wings several times. Before you can say anything, it vanishes from view into a cloud overhead. Judging the size of the creature from here, you might be distinctly glad it is miles away from you.

29. The path here is steep and clearly has not been traveled by anyone in recent years. It has been obliterated in some areas by rocks which have tumbled from above. They are too heavy to move, piled one on top of another to a height twice that of the average person, and the narrow tracks the deer [or mountain sheep] have made around them are nearly impassable to humans.

30. When you stop to rest, the mosquitoes catch up. They are easily ignored when you are moving, but when you sit, you quickly find a cloud of them hovering around your head. You can kill one or two when they land to drink blood, but there are many more. Their wings make a constant, muted buzz. If you are inattentive you find your skin covered with insects stabbing into it. Worse, they easily get into your mouth, nose and eyes. They taste bad, make your nose run, and could irritate your eyes so that they water for an hour.

31. The slope has leveled off here and you can see through the trees that you will have an easier journey for at least a while. Even though the sun doesn't hit you directly because of the full canopy of leaves and branches above you, it is still very hot. Your clothes cling to the sweat on your body as you move. Suddenly you are surprised by a crash of sound behind you. Before you can even turn around, a rather large red fox bounds by, running as if being chased. [If the adventurers look around:] You do not see anything else except the fox, which quickly disappears into the trees ahead of you.



32. Birds suddenly flock into the air, startled and cawing in their surprise, as the pounding, thumping sound of a rockfall comes from somewhere up ahead. The rocks bounce and crash, occasionally hammering into trees with a woody bump. You are lucky that the rocks were far enough away that no one was hurt, so you are fine – as long as no more rocks come down.



33. Wolves howl above you as you journey through the dark forest that lines this mountainous region. They sound distant but you know that sounds can be deceiving, so you must tread cautiously. As you continue your expedition the air becomes still and quiet for several moments. Then, like a faint echo, the howling begins again. It sounds as if it is further away than the first time you heard it, but as time passes the echoes of the calls start to sound as if the creatures are approaching your location.

34. A column of smoke, thin and almost impossibly long, rises up to the heights of the mountains. You see no signs of a fire, but the scent of one has found its way to your nostrils.

35. The trail climbs [descends] steadily beside a fast-running little river, just beyond the bare rocks of its banks. The water splashes noisily. For a bit you travel on level ground through a patch of trees, their fluttering leaves casting cool shade. Small pines grow under the deciduous trees and the pine smell is very strong. Young green grasses and tiny white or yellow wildflowers cover the ground. The trail emerges from the trees to ford the river. Below you the mountains drop steeply down; the slopes are bare for a long drop, and then the tops of trees can be seen. Above you, the slope is almost as steep, with great granite

outcrops and scattered, twisted pines. The icy cold water of the ford is knee deep, but the ford is wide enough that the current is not dangerously strong.

36. The enticing smell of evergreen is in the air as you travel through this area heavily forested with pine. The gentle breeze winds its way through the trees, carrying the aroma of many different types of pine. The odor is so prevalent that you can smell it clinging to your clothing. Squirrels chatter at you as you continue through the sloping forest, and the temperature seems to rise a bit as you travel along.

37. Below you, a cliff falls steeply down, dropping almost vertically. The dark rock is slick and very smooth. [In Spring: Tiny streams of water trickle down the rock face.] This trail is narrow, with only a long step between you and open space. Now and then you send pieces of stone over the edge; they drop out of sight into the forest far below. The cliff is so steep that almost no plants grow on it except one or two twisted pines that hang precariously out from cracks in the rock. Below you, a big hawk takes flight, soaring out over the tops of the pine forest below the cliff.

38. [A character could kick up this shell while walking around or setting up camp, or it might just be lying in plain sight, to be found by anyone who is looking around.] You see a large shell of some type poking out of the earth. [If someone picks up the shell:] It is long and thin, definitely not a snail shell; it looks instead like a seashell. [The shell once held a razor clam, delicious in stew but hardly known for its migratory properties.]

39. You slowly climb [descend] the steep trail that leads up [down] the mountain. You think you hear the call of an eagle or another hawk as you watch your step on the dangerous incline. Rounding a bend in the path you notice a plethora of raspberry brambles clinging to the side of an almost-vertical wall. Thousands of the small, juicy red fruits hang from the wall and though they do not quite look ripe, they are nearly so and you could easily pick and save them for a later meal.



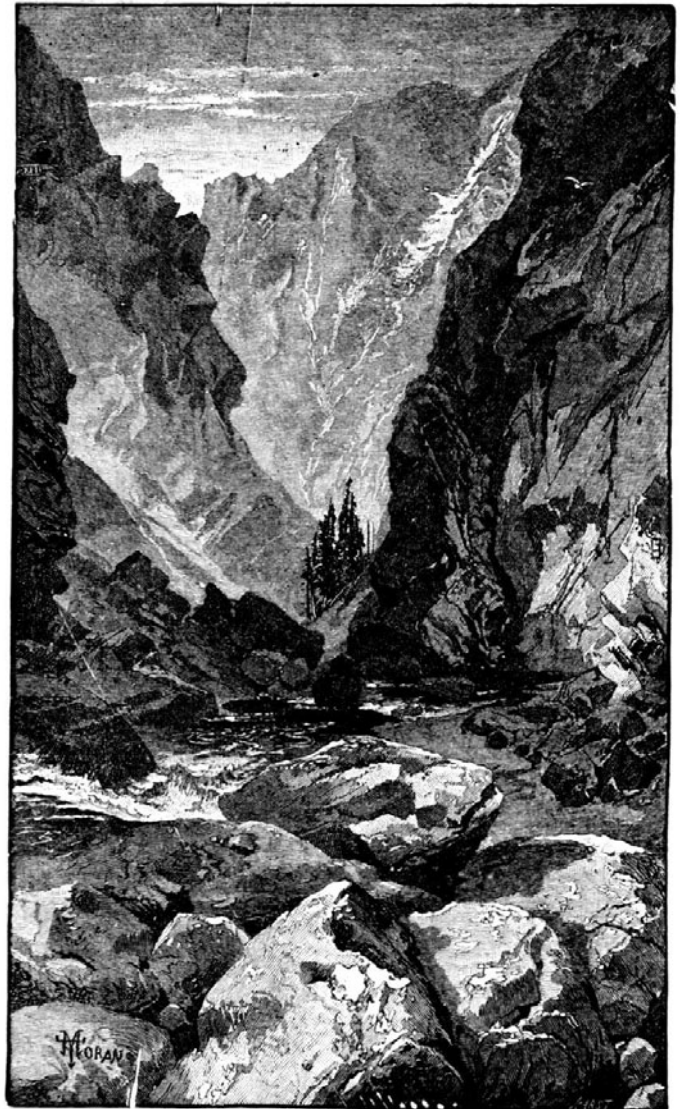
40. [The following should not be obvious to everyone. An average individual should have about one chance in ten of noticing:] **A tiny space between two hanging rocks seems to be insignificant at first but something about it seems odd. As the path brings you closer, you realize that parts of the rock faces are worn strangely smooth, as if they have been rubbed. [If someone investigates further:] You can just make out some indentations worn darkly into the rock.** [This was the home of a monk seeking enlightenment far from the actions and involvements of other people. Some suggest that coming close to the physical space occupied by a holy master such as this will provide, in some unknown way, arcane or spiritual benefits to those involved.]

41. **Scruffy grass grabs at your boots as you ascend the next hill. Sharp verdant peaks, reaching toward the blue of the sky, poke their heads above the hill's crest. Each step closer to the summit reveals trees waving side-to-side as they climb in rows to the tops of the distant heights.**

42. **The sun is shining bright, but gives off little heat at this high elevation. A cold breeze cuts through the canyons, enhancing the chill in the air. Dark storm clouds can be seen off in the distance, probably heading your way.**

43. **Stones bounce and the sound rings out and then, a few heartbeats later, rings out again. [If the party decides to try it out:] You call out in amazement and then your voice comes back to you once more. This seems interesting – you experiment and soon the mountain pass rings out with the echoes of your calls. [Of course, if the party is trying to maintain silence or at least discretion then this can be disallowed and the phenomenon itself observed without adding to it.]**


44. **A rocky ledge widens against the mountain's side, just enough to provide a place to rest on this steep climb. [The dark soil is dangerously loose, soaked deep down from the melted snow. Any step too close to the edge could cause the fragile ledge to collapse, likely resulting in severe injury to anyone falling from such a height.]**



45. **The hillside beneath your feet is more than damp; each step squishes underfoot and water starts to seep into your footwear. The plants have changed, turning into the segmented, reedy grasses you would expect to find in a swamp. Dragonflies flit from reed to reed and up the hill a frog starts to sound. Still, the source of all this wetness is unclear. [Hillside swampland occurs at the base of sandstone cliffs where the water-saturated stone provides a steady seeping of water all season.]**

46. **The hills and ridges rise into the distance, fading into deep greens and then purples. The taller peaks are lost in the clouds most of the**





morning but the sky clears toward midday. High peaks tower above the nearer hills and mountains, rising to very great heights. Snow covers their sides and shines in the sun, looking almost metallic. [Travelers have a 15% chance of perceiving: For a moment it looks like a great armored serpent lying on the heights.] Then the clouds close in again and only the nearer and lower mountains can be seen.

47. Winded from climbing [descending] the steep incline for so long, you look for a place to rest for a moment, and spot a large flat rock ahead. As you approach it you notice spectacular hues of light green and dark red shining in the sun. When you finally stand beside the rock you can see that the colors are coming from some form of lichen that has infested almost the entire rock. The green and red colors are beautiful to the eye, but you can't tell if they are safe to touch. [The lichen is quite harmless, and is actually a mutated form of rock tripe or Gyrophora, which is edible and especially tasty when combined with meat.]

48. Ahead of you is a lone dead oak tree, standing rigid, as if keeping watch for any interlopers. A faint buzzing sound can be heard as you pass close to the barren tree. You notice that part of the oak's bark has been stripped away at about eye level, and you think that you see the movement of some type of insect on that section of the tree. [If anyone gets closer to the tree:] As you approach the tree you can tell that the buzzing sound you heard was definitely coming from the tree. You notice a solitary wasp walking around a small hole in the oak. The wasp circles the opening for a moment and then quickly walks through the hole, disappearing into the tree. You can still hear buzzing as the wasp disappears, and realize the sound must be the buzzing of many wasps.




49. The wind blows strongly in your face as you push ahead. You suddenly hear a high-pitched chattering sound, and off to your left you see a fat striped squirrel sitting on the white branch of a birch tree. You notice dozens of nuts of different varieties poured out of a hole at the base of the tree; if his chattering is any indicator the squirrel considers you to be a threat to his horde.

50. Emerald and golden grasses soften your footsteps as you wend your way through evergreen and white-barked trees [aspen]. Quick rustles in the grass here and there indicate startled wildlife, and sometimes you catch a glimpse of the rodent or reptile responsible for the disturbance as it scurries away. Often you need to step over, walk around, or climb over granite rocks blocking your path. Above the treetops the sky is a clear, bold, azure blue, and the air is filled with the songs of birds.

51. Ahead you see a rope, dangling across the middle of the path behind an odd rock. The wind picks up, causing the rope to sway back and forth. As you approach, you see it isn't a rock after all, but the skull of a skeleton clothed in a simple woven tunic and tattered pants. [Further inspection reveals that the musty yellowish skull has an irregular dent in it and several ribs are broken.] The rope leads up the cliff at least twenty feet. [6m] There is a small opening in the cliff face near where rope connects into the cliff; from where you stand it looks as if it might be large enough for a halfling to enter. [The rope is old but sturdy. The rock, however, has eroded and will break and fall if any significant weight is put on the rope. It was held by a now-rusted spike which will also fall.]

52. The mountain trail snakes back and forth as it climbs the rock-strewn slope. Great boulders litter the mountainside; the trail picks its way around them. The trees here are a mix of high mountain spruce and



fir with some of the toughest of the pines of lower elevations. Under them are fragrant evergreen shrubs. Squirrels chatter and dash out of sight and now and then you spot a mountain sheep on a rock face above you. Turning a corner, you find a big pine, still green, blocking the trail. It was clearly hit by lightning: the great trunk is split, and the two halves, each wider than a man's waist, are both sprawled across the path. The trunk is slightly blackened but not seriously burned. There is no easy way around; the great boulders and steep rock faces offer no alternate path.

53. The path ends at an open field, with grass tall enough to hide any markers which may have been left behind by previous travelers. A herd of deer graze in the distance and the field is lined by dead trees, their ancient trunks burned black from the constant lightning that strikes this region.
54. A sudden rattle startles you and you look around just as a handful of small stones comes bouncing down the mountain ahead of you. They came from somewhere high above but there is no sign of what caused them to fall like that. The rest of the rocks on the slope seem stable, but of course that was what you thought before that little shower of stones.
55. The narrow, steep trail that you are on opens to a small clearing. Two other heavily overgrown paths converge here, and lead to a final short passage out to a large flat rock overlooking the foothills [optionally: and the ocean beyond]. On this rock, standing like silent sentinels, are massive stone arches connected by a series of low stone walls. Bits of partially burned, rotting wood can still be found pressed into the bottom-most wall crevices. This abandoned structure, perhaps once a fortress or a grand house, frames the

view of the cottony clouds below, which hover over the dark foothills [optionally: and sparkling blue ocean with its far coastal islands]. [The cool, moist air blowing up the coast will continue to decay the remnants of this structure's framework, leaving just the bare skeleton to slowly erode away in time.]

56. The path's incline is steep, but only for a short distance; it widens as the terrain flattens out on a mesa. Trees are thick at this elevation, providing shade from the burning sun and at least some shelter from the afternoon rains.
57. This hillside is thick with plant life, but several patches of it are brown and dead for no apparent reason. The air feels damp, even though the sun is out and shining down through gaps in the clouds. Very few birds are in the area, only a few harshly squawking crows. There is a distant rumble, as though the puffy white clouds overhead are about to start pouring rain down. The crows squawk even louder and take off, flapping their wings frantically as they climb into the sky. Suddenly a white gout of steam sprays up from the middle of a patch of dead bushes, casting a geyser of brown leaves and boiling water into the air. [The disturbance can be a single geyser, the first in a series of geysers, or the start of a cataclysmic eruption.]
58. The sun peeking through the trees warms the forested hill that you are climbing [descending]. You continue onward and soon a cool scent of damp earth fills your senses as you enter an area that is strangely devoid of almost anything but tall grass. Several tree stumps stand about knee high in this open area, indicating that this place once had trees like the rest of the hill. You notice a moss on the stumps, a strange growth that is rough to the touch, many different shades of green, and with the earthy smell of decay.

59. The trees stop and the path here narrows and stretches across a steep hillside filled with flat shards of dark gray rock [shale]. The flat surfaces of the rocks glisten in the sun and the edges appear sharp. [Shale makes for unsteady footing.]

Above the path you can see the field of rocks extend upward to a vertical bluff where thin layers of the dark rock have crumbled away. The rock field extends down the steep hillside for a good piece before the trees re-establish their foothold.

[If members of the party misstep as they cross the field, they risk sliding uncontrollably down the slope. At a minimum, exposed skin and thin fabric would be cut up and torn by the rock.]

60. Somewhat ahead of you and across a deep valley you see what looks like a ruined fortress. Three large walls of dark rock stand but the area between them has fallen to about half their height. The tops, once certainly uniform in height, are visibly irregular from erosion. You know of no one who might have built a fortress here—no current defenders and no ancient civilizations. As the trail continues up along the ridge, you realize that the fortress is far too large to have been built by humans. It is massive: twenty, perhaps forty, times the height of a man. The walls, too, are huge: surely many paces thick. [Perhaps the walls are actually a natural formation, where a section of an old mountain has eroded to form the appearance of ruined walls, or perhaps not.]

61. The trees sparkle and applaud as the mountain breeze passes through their branches, the light undersides of their leaves alternating




with their dark tops. The rush of their applause echoes against the peaks nearby.

62. Knobby roots, fallen tree trunks and thick layers of dead leaves make this mountain treacherous. It is very difficult to get a solid footing owing to the unpredictable depths of the fallen leaves. You get the impression that there are numerous hollows in the mountainside, as there are several areas in the leaves that are slightly lower than the rest.

63. Your road jogs around a corner, revealing a very pretty sight. In one direction there is a majestic mountain covered with fir and pine trees. Even from here, the fresh scents reach your nostrils. Bits of snow highlight the branches of the higher trees and glisten in the sun. Opposite this mountainside is a solid cliff face draped in shadow. The rock is colored in red and brown tints and stands like a formidable tower. The surface appears flaky but no rock slides of any sort are apparent. Your route runs between the two heights, giving you a nice view to enliven your long journey.





64. The trail through the forest takes you across spongy moss-covered ground, very pleasant to the feet. The pines smell pungent and fresh; the breeze tosses their tops gently. A flock of gray birds feed in the trees, chattering, but they take flight as you pass under them. The trail weaves, staying relatively level and detouring around great boulders bigger than ox carts. There are a few small shrubs with tiny leaves, and along the ground vibrant new growth, intensely green. Against one of the rocks leans a circular wooden shield, painted in black and red circles, its surface dented but intact. [The leather straps are in good condition; the shield cannot have been there very long, but there is no indication of how it got there.]

65. The sun beats down as you traverse the steep mountain path. The day is not very hot, but is extremely bright. No clouds stain the sky as you try to focus on your footing, while squinting to see where you are going. About three hundred feet [100m] ahead you make out a cliff that ascends almost straight up for a distance that is further than the sunlight allows you to determine. As you approach closer to the rock face you notice a lone pine tree is poking out of the crag about fifty feet up. [15m] The sight of this full-grown conifer forcing its life right out of the rock is amazing. The tree is twisted and gnarled, obviously from trying to grow toward the life-giving sun.

66. The winds, which had been light earlier, pick up. They blow chillingly cold down from higher elevations, smelling of pines and snowfields. The wind whips the branches of the great fir trees until they shudder and sigh. Thin brown leaves blow past you, tumbling over the precipices and floating down, down, down toward unseen valleys below. Then the winds shift and the leaves fly up, up, up, past your heads, to vanish over a hill. Fine reddish dust from below showers you. Over the vast drop beside you, songbirds struggle to stay aloft, dark wings flapping vigorously, but the birds go nowhere. Higher up, great raptors soar effortlessly, watching.

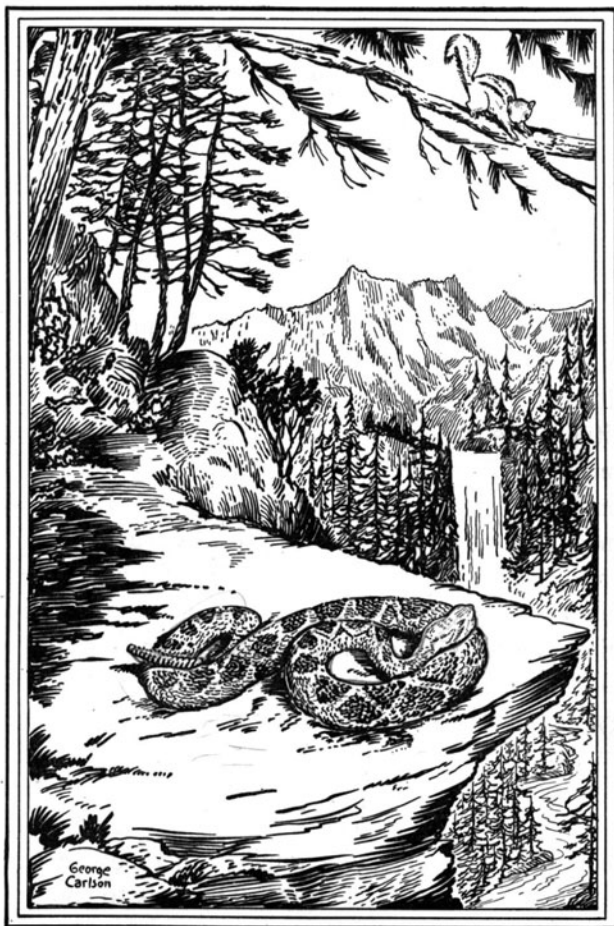


67. The mountain surface is jagged, as if a tremendous force has thrust its interior toward the sky. Black onyx shafts, razor sharp, jut from the cliff face, ready to cut even the noblest of those who would attempt to scale the majestic heights. The jet-black rocks glisten as polished glass. Their beauty hides their deceptiveness and peril.

68. You make your way over the next difficult precipice. The air is much thinner now than when you first started your climb and breathing is more difficult. You pull yourself up to discover a hollow section in the wall of the mountain. Although the fissure appears natural, you can tell that it has been used as a makeshift campsite by others. What is left of a fire pit now sits cold and it is hard to determine how long it's been since the last travelers departed. [This area will provide fair shelter from the elements if the party should decide to rest here.]

69. Ahead, a solitary mountain peak appears to have reached into the atmosphere and snagged a bit of cloud. The cloud has a distinct domed shape, like a silvery cap pulled low over the mountain's brow. The summit is invisible. [Lenticular clouds occur when a moisture-bearing air mass is forced upwards by another air mass or by a landform, like a mountain. They indicate upper-atmosphere moisture and suggest precipitation within the next day or two.]

70. The trail slopes steeply here. Near the crest of the hill there is a gap in the trees to your right: a towering stump stands there, split and blackened [by lightning]. Around it the ground is black with only a few small plants. The thin mountain air smells clean and is fragrant from the pines. You start along the steep trail; stones dislodged by your feet [horses' hooves] bounce down the slope beside you. The sun is warm, but the air from above



keeps you cool. In the shade of the big trees beside the trail, the plants are deep green and knee high.

71. On the slopes far below, you can make out the figure of a man poking about among the scrubby undergrowth sticking to the bones of the rocks. He is a thin man and a spot of sunlight reflecting from his pate suggests baldness. There is a sack slung over his shoulder and a forked stick in his hand. The man suddenly thrusts his stick into a bush and, a second later, maneuvers a wriggling snake into the sack, which he then draws tight with the string he is presumably holding in his other hand. Looks like snake soup for someone tonight! [This still happens in Korea.]

72. One single tree stands alone on an exposed precipice. It is a dark tree with just a few branches and scarcely any leaves. Its limbs creak dryly. A noose swings from one long branch, empty but for the shadows around it. This would certainly be a lonely place to die.

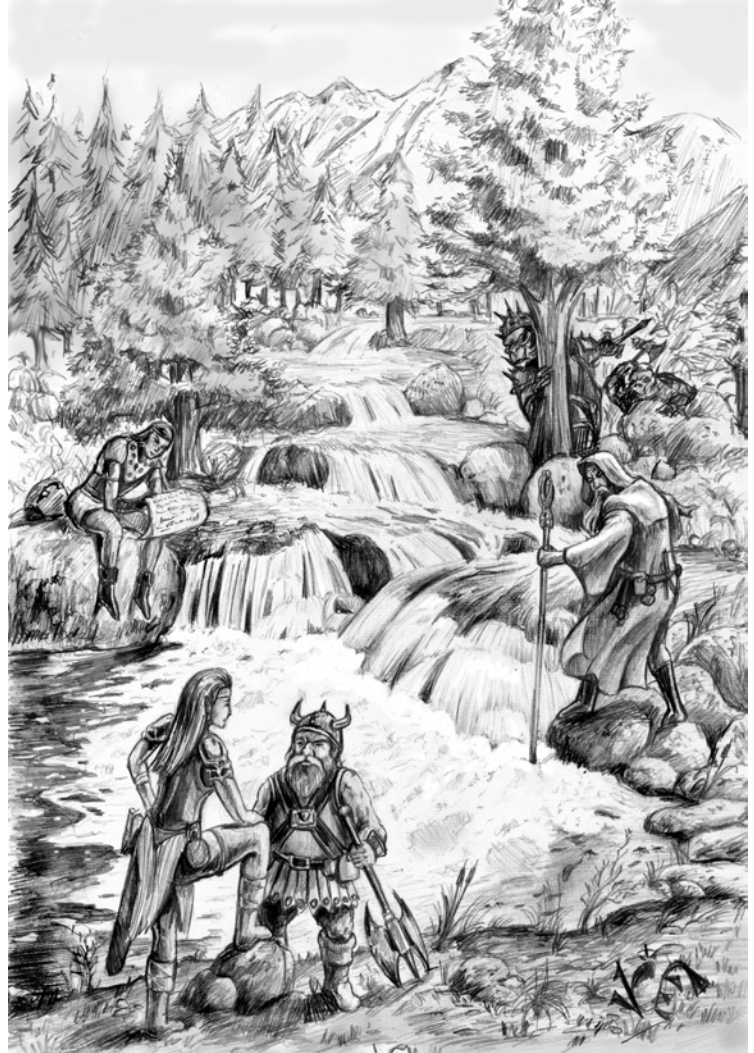
73. Vultures fly overhead, several hundred yards from where you stand. The trees at this height of the mountain are young, but they keep you from seeing what interests the carrion-craving birds. [If the adventurers begin to move toward the area where the vultures are flying overhead:] After walking for several minutes your nose is assailed by the smell of death. Through the trees you can see what looks like a pile of branches, dead grass and brambles, but as you get closer you see that several bodies lie piled on the ground beneath the brush. [The bodies have already been stripped of anything of value.]

74. Riotous color covers this rolling hillside. Due to a lack of trees, flowers and flowering brush have taken over. They stretch for great distances in all directions, up and down the mountainside. Similar patches of color are visible on a hillside that must be at least two miles off.

75. The creek's cold, clear water trickles, gurgles and splashes around boulders, flowing from pool to pool by a series of small waterfalls and arching rocky slopes. Although the water level is low, debris of dry branches and small rocks above the banks indicates a past flood. Now, though, several types of young leafing and evergreen trees grow right along the creek bed. Colorful grasses, shrubs and mosses cover the ground among the trees and even grow in the creek itself, especially where a beaver dam has slowed the flow of water. Small fish dart around submerged rocks and hide in the trailing foliage while water bugs skim the surface. Animal tracks [of beaver, deer, goats, bear] crisscrossing on a sandbar in the middle of the creek indicate that this is a favorite watering hole.


76. The direction you want to go is across the valley, but there does not seem to be a trail. You know your goal from the land and the maps but whatever path there may have been seems completely gone, so you strike out and try to travel in a straight line toward the point on the horizon that you know is your goal. You twist and dodge through trees and around rocks, trying to find a reasonable path. Then you find a dry riverbed running the right direction and the travel is quite easy for a while. The gravel of the former river bottom crunches under your [your horses'] feet.

77. The mountain path winds onward. A few snowdrops line the way, their drooping white heads symbolizing the dispiriting nature of your seemingly endless trek. Next to the snowdrops, almost obscured by their slender stems, is a tiny wooden cup that has been knocked over, its contents spilled on the thirsty rocks. Next to the cup is a small wooden frame with a crudely sketched portrait in it. There is no indication as to who the person may have been. [It is a common custom in many parts of the world, when a person has died at some dangerous spot, to leave a picture of the person at the place of death.]



78. This mountain is made of reddish rock, clay, and very little else. Its slope is not very steep, but it is particularly hard to get and keep your footing – water runoff [or something similar] has cut gullies and ravines everywhere into the mountainside. A few patches of scrub grass and hardscrabble brush eke out their livings between the clay and the rock. When the sun passes behind a cloud the mountainside takes on an unhealthy sheen, as though it was covered with grease. You can see several bones, bleached white, poking forlornly out of a sloping patch of reddish mud.





79. Your feet squish across the muddy brown grass as you descend [climb] the mountainside. Puffy gray clouds seem to be keeping the sun from drying the area. The land levels off into a big patch of icy white and brown slush, which crackles as you stomp through it and makes your feet even colder and wetter. The air is very cool in this area, and you can see more wet ground ahead.



80. The trail comes out of the forest to cross a cliff face. It follows a narrow ledge, probably not completely natural, which winds along the middle of the cliff face. Beside you the mountain slopes away, dropping hundreds of yards [meters]. The treetops below are indistinct beneath small white clouds. No plants grow on that sheer slope. If you slipped, you would fall through space for

several heartbeats before hitting the pines below. The trail is wide enough for a pack-carrying human to walk easily, but terribly bare, with no plants or big solid rocks between you and the bottom far below. Above, the cliff is as steep as it is below: treeless cold dark stone with a few small cracks and irregularities. The cold wind tugs at you and the gravel of the path crunches underfoot.

81. Ahead of you is a rare sight indeed. A cliff face appears to have been assaulted by large boulders. Great, round indentations pepper the mountain wall. Huge rocks have piled up at the bottom of the cliff, along with chunks of rock that have broken off of the rock face. As you stare at it, it seems that someone or something has thrown the boulders at the wall of the cliff, tearing off large sections of rock. It could possibly have been done by large catapults, but what reason anyone would have to attack a sheer face with siege engines is **unknown**. [One explanation is that giants were doing some type of target practice.]

82. Traveling up the steep path you see something ahead of you. As you approach you notice that a lone broken wagon wheel lies off to the side of the path. It looks as if it may have been here for quite some time, but it is hard to tell. The path doesn't seem wide enough for a horse-drawn wagon to safely traverse, but you find no other debris or clues as to the origins of this lone wheel.

83. Birds have been flying about most of the day and by now they scarcely attract your attention at all. However, they are still capable of surprising you. One large crow comes flying toward you, swooping over the mountain slopes as if on some kind of a mission. Then it flies directly into the trunk of a tree – bang – and falls stunned to the ground. Before you have a chance to decide whether or not to laugh, the bird is already staggering to its feet, stepping backward and forward. Then, the bird seems to shake off its dizziness and launches itself back into the sky to continue about its business.



84. You have been traveling across spines of rock that have the shape of a brown dragon's hand, but now they give way to a low valley. Leaves dance around you as if celebrating your arrival, or perhaps your doom. Tall fangs of rock bar your path on the far side. Each spire is tattooed with shaded lines of white and brown. A pink haze hangs over the teeth fading into the azure sky above.

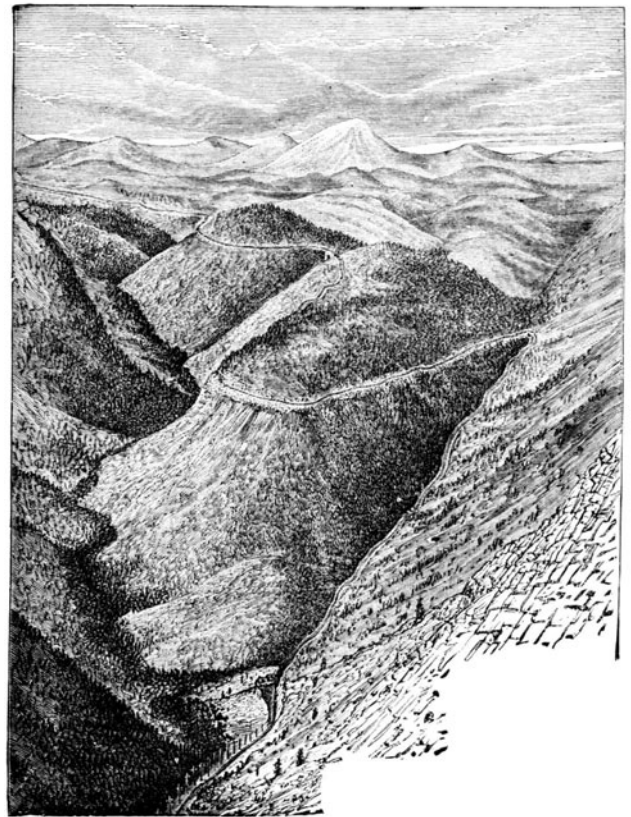
85. Pinecones litter the ground at your feet. All are in various stages of opening their prickly brown scales. As you pick one up to get a closer look at it, a flutter of brown one-winged seeds emerges, twirling as they go.

86. Isolated trees stand out from various outcroppings, giving the impression of markers or flagpoles. Between these few instances of greenery the mountain is desolate and bare. At a distance you see a small cream-colored creature dart from one tree to another.

87. The stony mountain looms above you, the steep slope broken only by a few small outcroppings. A few bushes with barely any leaves reach feebly upward, eking out a living on the mountainside. Bare white bones protrude from a large jumbled heap of stones next to you, perhaps indicating an old rockslide.

88. Broken trees and brush cover this part of the hillside and the stink of dried blood is everywhere. A huge oak tree has been broken in half by something, with splinters as big as fingers lying all around the stump. Hordes of flies and some crows fly around, collecting unidentifiable scraps and blood.

89. "Over the mountains are mountains." You remember what the old folk told you as you were so keen to leave the town of [insert the name of a suitable stopping place] and were unwilling to stop to listen to their copious, slowly-delivered advice. Now you can see their point, as you tramp over what seem to be endless slopes and peaks and valleys, one after another. "Make efforts to be calm and patient," said the old folks. "You will find in




your life that over the mountains are mountains. And then, over the top of the mountains are more mountains."

90. The path you have been following continues for some distance. Below you is a lovely view of the foothills and plains you left behind [you are approaching]. As you round the next turn of the switchback, you come to a small shrine carved into the rock face. The holy place does not look as though it has been visited lately and is in disrepair, though not wholly forgotten – a wreath of mountain plants rests on a pedestal, although it looks to be many seasons old. [The shrine could belong to any deity associated with mountains, stone or earth.]

91. This bare brown-gray mountainside is imposing in its desolation. A long-dead tree lies across the path up ahead, turned pale gray-white by long exposure to the elements. Pieces of shattered bones lie scattered around the path, including what appears to be part of a human skull with a long horn growing out





of the forehead. The area is so devoid of life that there are not even any birds or insects – the bone shards were picked clean of meat some time ago. [In settings without mutants or supernatural creatures, the skull is a trick of the eye – a deer antler or something similar lies next to the skull to make it look strange. In other situations, it was left behind by a creature killed years ago.]

92. The trees are varied and thick here as you make your way up [down] the hill. The air is moving calmly but steadily and you can smell all the aromas that an old, dark forest has to offer. As the slope becomes more pronounced you notice something ahead of you; it looks as if a ghost is fluttering in the wind. It's hard to tell exactly what it is because of how thickly the trees stand together. [If the party approaches the object:] As you gain ground on the flowing object you discover that it is simply a silk cloak that has caught on the branch of a tree. It looks to be made of very high quality silk, dyed red and now faded. You do not see any footprints or other clues that might tell you to whom the cloak once belonged.

93. The forest disperses to a barren mountainside. All around are shades of slate gray, except for the dark of a pit falling from the high path. Sheer rock seems to stretch down seventy or eighty feet [20-24m], the surface glassy, with no handholds. Shapes can be made out at the bottom of the pit. They are disturbingly human—but larger than might be expected from this distance. [If the adventurers are able to get a better look at the remains:] Closer inspection reveals almost complete skeletons, with scraps of hide adhering to their bones. They seem to have been thrown into the pit and left there. [This is a graveyard for the hill giants in the area, who revere it as a holy place.]


94. Towards midday [midnight], you become aware of a dim halo surrounding the sun [moon]. Throughout the afternoon [night] the light becomes increasingly diffused as the halo grows, until everything is bathed in flat,



muted luminescence. The halo endures until sunset [moonset], when the orb disappears into thicker haze on the horizon. [The halo, or sundog, is a byproduct of high-altitude moisture and presages precipitation, probably within the next day.]

95. Several small furry creatures no larger than your hand [chipmunks] skitter along the edge of the path. One creature stops and cocks its head, staring briefly at you before it scampers off again. These creatures are more tail than body and each has several thin black stripes stretching down its back from the tiny head to the fluffy tail. Wherever you see one of these creatures, you see five or so of its furry brethren.

96. A distant roar echoes up and down the valley. The open stone surfaces, devoid of plant cover, reflect and alter the sound. It could have come from just about anywhere in the valley, and its source is uncertain.

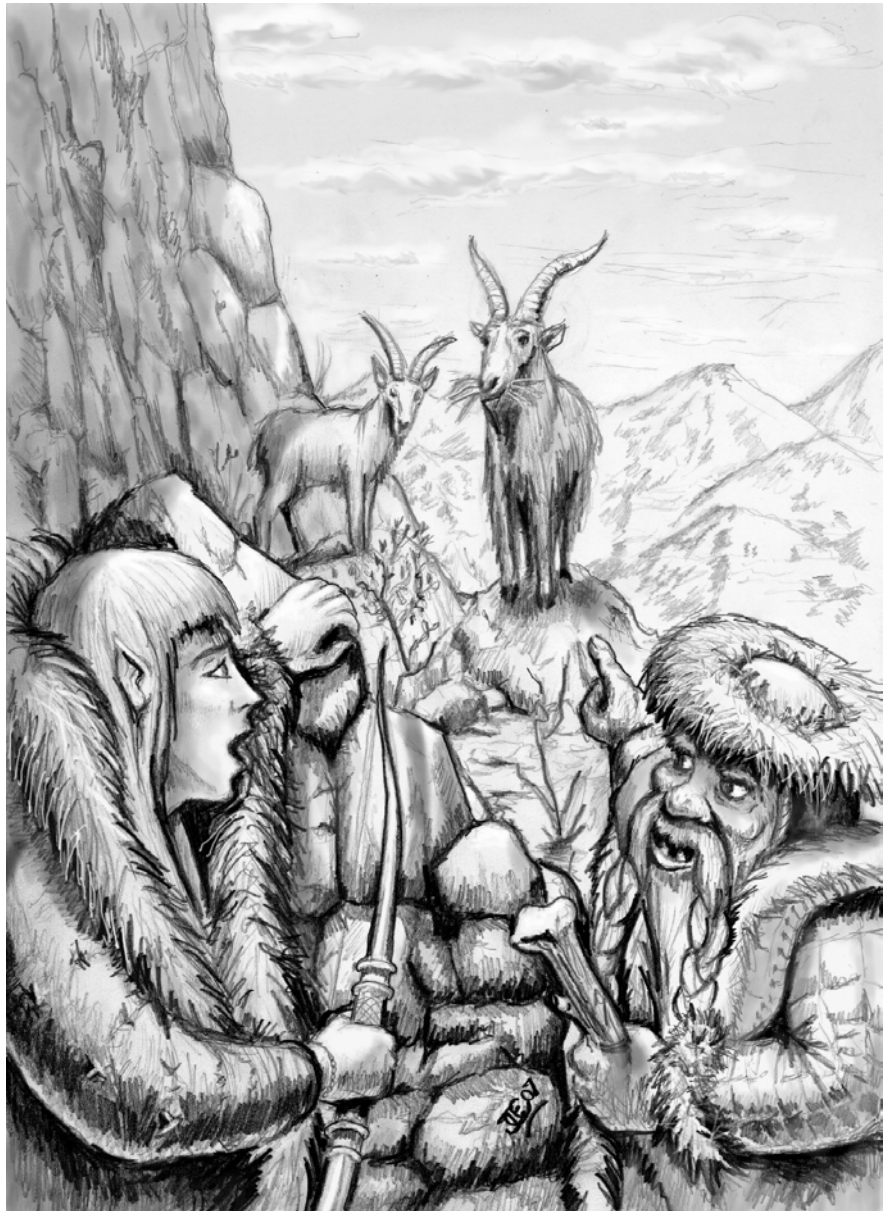


97. The biting wind whistles past your ear as you climb [descend] the next rock. Its rough surface scrapes your hands as you clamber up [down] it. All around are large rocks and boulders. Jumping to the next area, you finally come to some sturdy ground with a small path around the side of the mountain. You turn the corner and come face to face with a small mountain goat. Its mangy gray hair seems to do well in keeping it warm from this cold wind. It bleats at you and backs away, keeping one round eye on you at all times. It drops its mouthful of grass and then, still bleating, turns and bounds off around the mountain.

98. Bright mushrooms dot the slope in a shaded area. Most are a rich brown, but a few are reddish, one almost bright red. On more careful scrutiny, you can see they are growing on a leaf and litter-covered mound, roughly in the shape of a tree.

99. This stony mountain is covered with jagged and broken surfaces where stones have cracked off. Broken stone and boulders lie on ledges and in the scrub brush. The clouds overhead make everything look gray and dull, but some movement catches your eye. Watching for a few moments, you see some type of mountain goats – they move carefully from boulder to ridge, then leap across open spaces in search of plants and water. [The goats are too far away for the adventurers to attack them except with ranged weapons. If someone shoots and misses, there is a small chance that the weapon could cause a minor rockfall.]

100. Somewhere among the peaks, a notch in the rock aligns so perfectly with the prevailing wind that it creates an eerie whistling sound. You cannot tell from which direction the sound comes; it is carried by the wind, rising to a scream, then falling to a murmur. The effect is disconcerting; with any luck, the wind will die at twilight, silencing the dreadful keening.





Mountain Shards

Weather

1. Rain and Thunder

Heavy gray clouds drift by, some of them passing directly across the mountain's peak. There is a patter on the brush and the ground as the first raindrops come down. The sky flashes white with lightning for a moment and then there is an ear-rattling thunderclap.

2. Thunder and Lightning

Thunder echoes in the steep canyons as lightning strikes all around, like burning zigzag fingers grasping at the mountain tops. Sheets of black cloud drape low to the horizon, venting their wet anger on the ground below.

3. St. Elmo's Fire

You are traversing a flaking granite dome when a curious buzzing catches your attention. As you cast your gaze about, seeking its source, you can see that the rock slopes off in all directions and only a few scraggly shrubs and stunted trees grow in deep fissures in the rock. Suddenly your hair bristles, standing nearly on end, and your fingertips begin to tingle. You realize with alarm that your [sword, ice axe, metal implement] is humming and glowing with a blue-violet aura of coruscating flame. Overhead, you see that the sky, previously clear, is now crowded with towering cumulonimbus clouds. [The accumulation of static electricity is an indicator of an imminent lightning strike—a major hazard in the mountains, especially above treeline. The buzzing and tingling indicate a building static charge, and ideal conditions for a lightning strike. The glow—known as St. Elmo's Fire—is essentially a plasma discharge caused by the ionization of air molecules. Any of these indicators suggest that a speedy descent is in order.]

4. Torrents of Rain

The dark clouds roll over the mountains nearby, as if pushed by an angry invisible god.

As they rush overhead, torrents of rain mercilessly pelt everything in their path. Within moments, what had been a sunny day becomes a dangerous situation as loosened rocks and muddy soil race down the slopes and crevices.

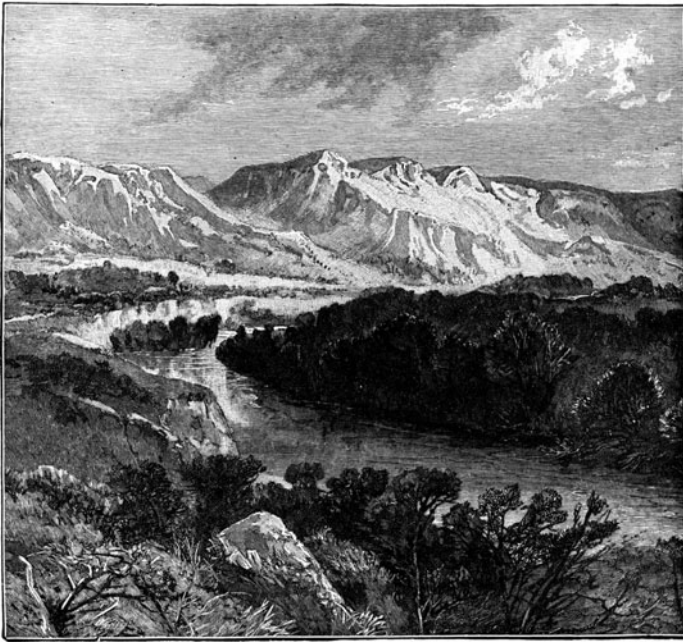
5. Sudden Downpour

You are winding your way upon an open trail high up in the mountains. The dry, rocky trail leads you up and down, around curves and turns, with several places along the way to see breathtaking views. Suddenly a drop falls on your forehead, then another. The rocks around you kick up small puffs of dust as water droplets start to hit, making a soft pitter-patter sound. Clouds have gathered unexpectedly, and are now growing darker. Faster and faster the noise echoes around you and rain starts to beat rapidly down on your clothes. [If the party is unable to take shelter:] The feeling changes quickly from soft patters to harsh wetness and within no time you are all soaked, as the clouds above you seem to be bursting. There are small rocky outcrops here and there within sight but you are already drenched. The sky looks ominous and thunder begins to boom around you. Luckily there is no strong wind about. The water flows down the rocks of the winding trail, turning the dirt to slippery mud. [The trail is now very slippery – it is very hard ground, on a slope, covered in mud. Travelers will need to go more slowly or risk a fall.]

6. Clearing Skies

You wake to heavily overcast skies. The chilly morning air drips with moisture, and the tops of the shaggy pine trees are lost in the clouds. The path is slippery, wet with condensed moisture. You walk [ride] among the trees for a while, coming out onto open slopes. The morning is brightening and the clouds rising, though you can see nothing above you but dark clouds. When the land slopes downhill, your view is blocked by more clouds below

you. The morning bird calls seem muted. Gradually the clouds thin. Patches of blue sky appear and spread. At nearly midday, after traveling all morning, you turn a corner and the now-clear air reveals a huge mountain range before you [that you have not previously seen], its breathtakingly beautiful snowy peaks rising to the heavens.



7. *Thick Mist*

The mist is thick at this elevation. The chilly moisture hangs in the air, permeating everything from the thick moss to the clothing that you wear, causing a heavy, damp saturation. It would be difficult to light a fire in this mist, let alone keep it going. [If above the tree line:] In fact, there is such a shortage of wood or other combustibles in this area that it might not be possible to have a fire at all.

8. *Fog*

As you stumble across the perilous ground your sight is dangerously impaired. Intermittently, you can see clearly, then your vision is obscured as your path takes you through an icy, cloud-like fog. Figures loom out of the mist, startling you – misshapen limbs and monstrous heads that gradually reveal themselves to be nothing more than

crag and boulders. As the mists envelop you, it is difficult to tell what is the snow-covered mountainside and what is the white opaque atmosphere that would plunge you to your death if you stepped away from the safe path.

9. *Hail Starting*

You have been climbing [descending] this rock wall [or: very steep face] for quite some time, carefully choosing every move to ensure your safety. You look down at your feet to check your footing for the next step when something small but hard hits you on top of the head. You look up, expecting to see the beginning of a rock slide coming toward you, but instead you just see the same hard, cold rock wall that you have been staring at for hours. Then you are hit again, but this time you catch a glimpse of what it was. Just as you realize it, hail begins to fall steadily, pelting you with little icy balls of pain.

10. *Freezing Rain*

The temperature has dropped noticeably in the course of the day. By afternoon, slushy hail begins to fall. The temperature continues to plummet on the ground, but warmer temperatures aloft prevent snow from forming. Instead, the biting rain freezes on your clothes and equipment. Buckles and laces freeze solid, and equipment become unwieldy in numb fingers. When you find respite [perhaps in the lee of a stone or in a stand of trees] and shrug out of your outer layers, you find that they sit like hollow suits of armor, sheathed in ice.


11. *Frigid Cold*

The frigid cold makes it difficult for you to feel the rocks underfoot. Bare-branched trees stand like isolated fence posts on the mountainside. The snowcapped peak above you is still quite far away and heavy gray clouds are gathering around it.

12. *Snowstorm*

The day dawns chilly and overcast. [Those on third watch saw the clouds rolling in, blotting out the stars.] You are not on the trail long before the snow begins. First the small white flakes





fall softly and eddy in the cold wind. Then both wind and snow pick up, and you are enveloped in sheets of white, the wind gusts leeching the heat from you despite your heavy clothes. Your faces take the worst of it. Between gusts the temperatures seem bearable. The intensity of the snow increases so that soon you can barely see the person [horse] ahead of you and the forest on both sides is invisible in the falling snow. [To be safe, the party should stop traveling. The trail may vanish in the snow or otherwise become dangerous without the adventurers being aware, or someone may make a wrong turn and be separated from the party.]



13. *Whiteout*

It has been snowing for much of the day. Ahead, you see a strange sight: a wall of solid white, disconcertingly featureless in the distance. Before you can read any detail, you realize that it is advancing, swallowing objects as it comes. First distant peaks and ridgelines are blotted from sight, and then nearby trees and rock outcroppings. The wind gusts briefly as it envelops you, and you find yourself enshrouded in white blankness. So heavy is the snowfall that the collective impact of flakes is

audible as a soft, pattering hiss. They impact on your eyelashes and get in your eyes, melting and blurring your vision, but there is nothing to see anyway... not until the heart of the snowstorm passes you over. [When heavy snow comes on this quickly, it is easy to become disoriented: visibility is limited to a few feet, and tracks are quickly obscured. A party traveling in dispersed formation or sentries on patrol are easily scattered and lost.]

14. *Heat and Dust*

As you travel down [up] the mountainside, the red-brown trail kicks up clouds of dust in your face and dries out the back of your throat. The hot sun beats down on you, which doesn't make it any easier. One of your party starts coughing and then another, as the fine red-brown powder is stirred up all around you. As you continue you notice it is everywhere, coloring your clothes and your packs [and any animals you have with you, which begin to sneeze as well]. A cool trickle of water from your waterskin stops your coughing, but it will take a good cleaning of your clothes to get all of the dust off of you.

Times


15. *Morning Mist Like Honey*

From where you are standing, you can see many different levels of mountain paths; higher paths may be traced down to lower by those with very keen eyes. In this early morning light, the mist is still prevalent in the slightly damp atmosphere. The mist that formed on the upper levels is now rapidly flowing down the different levels, almost like honey flowing down a stack of oat cakes. For a moment it almost seems that you are standing on an island, surrounded by an ocean of mist.

16. *Morning Color*

Upon the colorful line of the morning horizon you spot some jagged mountain peaks. The sun rising behind you has tipped them with gold and they seem to touch the pure blueness of beautiful sky in the distance. Most of the ground around you is overflowing with





vegetation of different shapes and sizes. Many plants thrive here, from the smallest herb to the most gigantic evergreen tree you have ever seen.

17. *Morning Light*

The light of the morning sun scarcely warms you at all, though it is quite bright. Brilliant purple flashes catch your eye from a small pond nearby. [If the party investigates:] The sun shines on the tiny shells of the snails living in the water and the color gleams in the light.

18. *Sunset*

The sun sets behind the range of mountains, turning their snow-capped peaks fiery orange and then crimson. Then the sky darkens to deep purple and the mountains are shrouded in darkness, with only the tips still lit. Beyond and above them, stars appear, first one and then dozens. The air cools quickly and the night birds whistle. Echoing in the increasing quiet, you hear an uncanny howl, like a wolf but higher-pitched and almost human. It wails to a crescendo and dies suddenly away. [Someone who has good ears may hear a second one answer from far away.]

19. *Bat Swarm*

The path has leveled here and walking becomes much easier. The cool, moist dusk air hits your face as you travel. Ahead of you there seems to be a dark shadow on the side of the hill. As you approach you can tell that it is actually a cave opening, and the path goes right by it. [As the characters pass the opening:] Suddenly a colony of bats bursts out into the twilight. Thousands of the small creatures fly out just barely over your heads, their shrieks stabbing at the silence as they leave the cave in search of insects.

20. *Stars Appear*

The sun vanishes behind the tall peaks to the west but the light lingers for some time. Gradually the clouds turn pink, orange and purple and the sky darkens from azure to aquamarine to midnight blue. One at a time the stars appear: the evening star, the red star, and then thousands of stars fill the sky. The

great constellations can be seen in the sky overhead, almost hard to pick out against all the others. Only the stars of the horizon are missing, lost behind the tall mountain peaks. The cloudless night is bright from all the stars. The air cools until, ungloved, your fingers are painfully cold and you can see your breath in the air.

21. *Full Moon*

The full moon rises just after sunset, hanging large and orange close to the horizon. The rest of the sky is cloudy and no stars can be seen, just the moon. As the moon climbs, low clouds pass in front of it, making an eye patch, then a mustache, then a beard across its face. As you stand watch [sit by the campfire], there is no wind and it is pleasantly cool. [The campfire, now a low bed of coals, glows faintly.] The rest of the ground around you is cloaked in darkness. The tall rugged pine trees stand as inky but distinct silhouettes against the cloudy sky. A night bird calls plaintively, while in the middle distance a big predator roars.

22. *Shooting Stars*

The night sky is calm and clouds are few. The stars twinkle prettily and a few seem to flash on and off, as if trying to convey some arcane message. From over toward the western horizon, a sudden stream of golden, fiery balls shoots through the sky. It must be a star falling to earth in the most spectacular way. People say that a person who finds where a star has fallen to earth may be a recipient of great good fortune. [In fact, meteors are valuable for the metal ore they contain, particularly iron. Meteoric iron is believed to yield a superior kind of steel, especially when quenched in horse urine.]

23. *Starry, Starry Night*

You hear the sound of fast-moving water and in the full moon's glow you can see a myriad of tiny lights sparkle in the rapids running down the hillside. Trees stand around like sentinels. The clear sky is full of stars, and a meteor streaks by overhead. A single owl hoots, the sound echoing down the mountainside.



Seasons

24. *Spring Thaw*

A sustained chorus of creaking and groaning reaches your ears as you prepare to camp. Rising water levels and changing temperatures have caused the ice on the nearby river [or stream, or lake] to buckle and swell. With the melt underway, any stream crossings will be increasingly treacherous and travel across the ice is no longer a viable option.



25. *Early Spring*

The cold has succumbed to the slight spring warmth. The white blanket that covered the foothills is broken by bold patches of moss in shades of acid green. Small tufts of heather, like purple clouds, creep through the snow in the harder to reach areas alongside the track. The snow on the lower slopes is beginning to melt. A stream which was just a gentle trickle a couple weeks ago is now a surging river that drowns out all conversation.

26. *Spring Surprise*

The air is cool and the snow has barely started to melt off. The trail winds in and out of the woods, sometimes on muddy rock, sometimes over boot-deep old snow. The wind coming down the mountain is cold but the sun is warm. Squirrels dash for the trees as you pass and birds squawk warnings. Plants are just emerging where the snow has melted: rows of

new green leaves stick out of the wet soil. The melting snow uncovers the lower branches of the great pines, and many fallen logs. [The adventurers have a 30% chance to notice that one log is not a log, but the leg of a dead man, still frozen solid. He is dressed in practical winter clothes, and was cut nearly in half by a sword-like blow. His head is missing, as are any weapons, pack and valuables.]

27. *Migrating Geese – Autumn*

The air is still on this cool autumn day as you travel up [down] the gently sloping mountain. Off in the distance you hear the honking sounds of geese, and you turn to look toward the source of the sound. At first you can only make out the V-shaped pattern in which the birds are flying, but within seconds you can see the geese clearly. A quick estimate suggests that there are probably over fifty geese flying in a relatively uniform shape. They fly low overhead, honking noisily as they pass over you and continue on their journey.

28. *Aspen Grove in Autumn*


The forest opens up here on the slope, but the yellow-leaved brush underfoot still slows travel. The trees have slim trunks whose white bark is marked by slashes of black and peels back from the tree trunks here and there. The golden color of the leaves is brilliant against the dark green of the adjacent pines. These leaves almost seem to shimmer as they twist and clatter in the crisp breeze.

29. *Autumn Forest*

The autumn wind blows crisp and fresh on your face as you travel along, surrounded by barren trees. Dead leaves crackle under your feet and all around you the leafless branches of the trees sway to the rhythm of that fall wind. The forest floor is completely covered by the leaves and brambles and you can hear small rustlings from the myriad of small life forms that make their homes under all of the trees' fallen foliage.

30. *Lake Shore's First Freeze*

The season has turned. This morning, the grassy hummocks and stands of scrubby



heather are silver with frost, and the lakeside mud has pushed itself up into hard ridges. The lake's still surface is frozen to the thickness of a windowpane at the shore, and reaches in a glassy shelf a dozen feet [4m] out into the lake. The willows that crowd the inlet stream of the tiny mountain lake have yellowed with autumn's arrival, and now their leaves fall to carpet the shore.

31. *Icy River*

You walk along a river, the chill of winter biting hard on your skin. The solid, snow-covered ground crunches with every step you take. Ice covers parts of the river, but you can still see it flowing strongly under the temporary frozen ceiling. Evergreens line the riverside and their limbs hang low, heavy with frozen snow that has settled on them with every blizzard that has come during this harsh winter. As you look at the river, a swell of water forms right in the center of the current. You can't tell what caused the odd movement of water, but in this cold season it seems unlikely that there is anything living in the river large enough to create that ripple.

32. *Winter's Nigh.*

As you rise in the dead of night [for a turn at watch, or to answer nature's call], you quickly form the suspicion that no night has ever been more bitterly cold. It is the deepest part of winter, and although many hours have passed since sundown it will be many more yet before the sun makes its feeble attempt to warm the earth from its low path through the winter sky. On top of that, the night is clear; no blanket of clouds serves to trap yesterday's heat. Overhead, the stars twinkle coldly, as if they themselves were scintillating shards of ice. Your body immediately begins to shiver in a subconscious effort to generate heat. Your

breath freezes instantly in the still air, and ice crystals form on your eyelashes [and beard or other facial hair] and clothing. The frigid air stings your nose and cheeks and burns your sinuses; your eyes water involuntarily, tears freezing halfway down your face. The world is silent, for in a cold as inhospitable as this, no living thing stirs from its den or nest. In the starlight, the landscape is devoid of color; that, coupled with the silence, renders the night strangely surreal. Only the mind-numbing cold reminds you of how painfully alive you are.

Special Locations

33. *Distant Peaks*

The mountains lie before you, rank on rank. The nearest range rises stark and steep, and in it you can see deep canyons and eroding cliffs. The slopes are densely covered with green trees, looking almost fuzzy in the distance. On the higher slopes are the spires of pine trees. The farther range of mountains is blue with distance and sharp ridges of stone can be seen, naked of trees and tipped in snow. At the farthest edge of sight, you discern a very high range of purple peaks, jagged against the blue sky, the snow on their high summits shining in the sun.

34. *High Altitude*

Half-way up the mountain, the trees are but a sparse covering. Grass does not grow here; instead it is replaced by thick moss and small, sharp rocks. No matter what the season, it is always colder here than below. The air is crisp, almost biting, as it quickly chills everything it envelops. Rain never falls in this higher region, but instead, snow falls with a constant regularity, blanketing everything in its frigid grasp.



35. *Snow Avalanche*

As you are beginning your trek up the mountain, a light snow begins to fall. Gazing ahead you can see that the snowfall is heavier further up the slope. You start to climb and suddenly you hear a distant but powerful noise that almost sounds like thunder. You look up again and witness black cracks appearing on the snowy tip of the mountain. A large section of the snowcap begins to move and you watch as a powerful avalanche slides down the side of the mountain, throwing up clouds of snow as it goes. You are safe where you stand, but any living thing in the path of the moving landscape was almost certainly destroyed.

36. *Postholing*

The snow that fell days ago has now been blown into long drifts in the lee of every tree and boulder. The wind's action and the sun's warmth have compressed the snow's surface into a thin crust. The surface is such that it supports small ground animals, but the weight of a person buckles the crust and sends you plunging hip-deep into a drift. The effort of hoisting each leg out of its hole to punch another is exhausting; your thighs and gut ache from the effort before the first mile is

behind you. Occasionally your step collapses snow being supported by a bush [or some other snow-supporting structure], spilling you sideways into a deeper snow bank. You quickly acquire skinned knees, twisted ankles, and wet feet. [Postholing and breaking trail in crusted snow are some of the most exhausting types of travel the mountains can offer. Experienced parties rotate their leaders to the back occasionally so that nobody has to break trail for more than a few hundred yards at a time.]

37. *The Divide*

Many long miles of climbing have put the valleys and streams, and even the trees, far behind you. The last sections of trail have been so steep that at times you could reach out an arm and touch the trail at chest height. One false horizon after another has replaced motivation with what seems to be an endless wall of broken rock hanging above you. Suddenly, with no warning or fanfare, you crest the divide. The ground falls away sharply on both sides of a knife-edged ridgeline. Behind you lie the miles of trail you have covered thus far. Ahead, a whole new landscape unfolds before you, with new peaks skirted in green forest, and long valleys studded with lakes and traced by winding streams. Your field of vision is unrestricted, and you can see beyond the mountains [to the sea, the plains, a city, etc. Depending on the time of day and direction of travel:] Far below, cast over the unexplored terrain, you can see your own shadow, preceding you into the new territory. [Nothing adds renewed energy to tired legs and sore backs like the sight of a new landscape viewed from the crest of a divide that has just been climbed with much sweat and sacrifice.]



38. *View from the Summit*

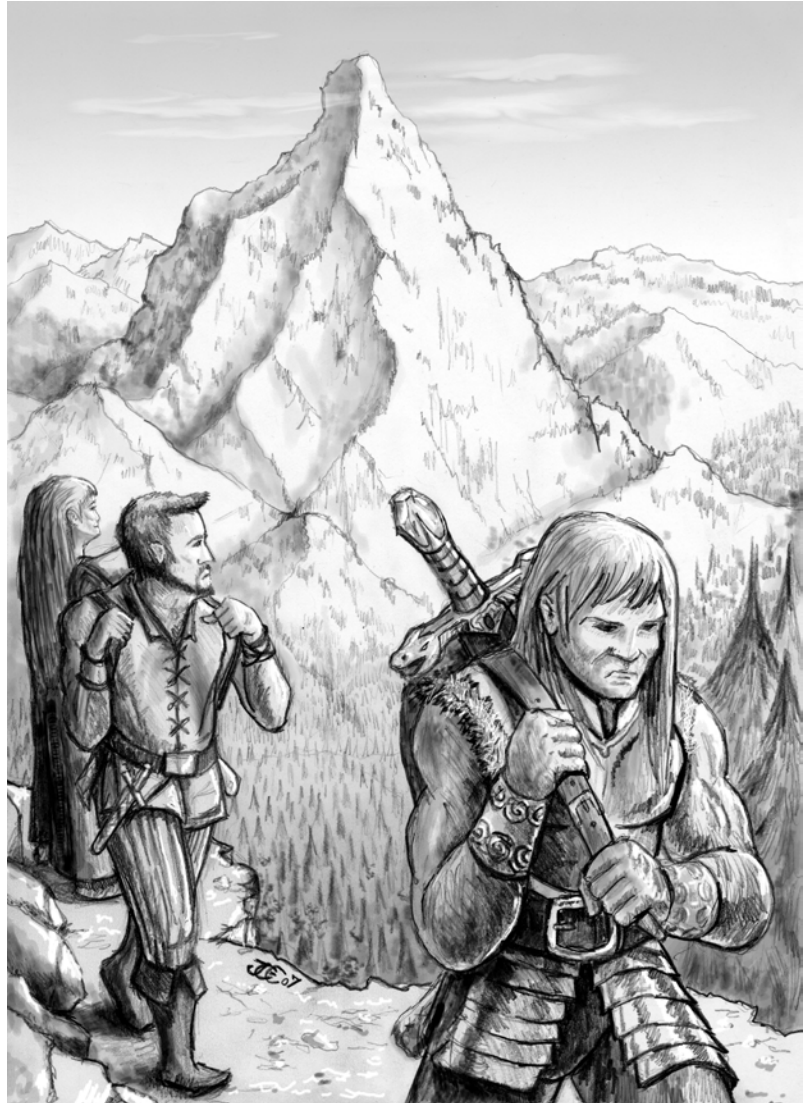
Finally you reach the summit! Wind and water have carved the highest peak of the mountain into an almost humanoid likeness, though any details are hidden beneath a thick layer of snow and icicles. There is little room to stand, much less safely make camp – the ground here is irregular and far from level, a solid mass of gray rock cracked in places by eons of exposure to the elements. Below you stretches a panoramic vista quite unlike any other you have seen. Streams and rivers that begin their lives in this very mountain lead to settlements which are faint and distant, little more than gray points along the ground. [optional: Perhaps this is what it feels like to be a god, looking down on the world from the heavens.]

39. *Snowy Peak*

You step into the fine white snow and your boots sink in deep, crunching through the layers of the small flattened peak. Around you a cold wind blows, sending shivers up and down your spine. Your tracks are very detectable here, or they would be, if any would brave this height. On the other side of the clearing the mountain descends very fast, much too steep to climb down and made worse by the coat of ice that covers it. As dangerous as it looks, it is also very pretty, the way the sun shines directly onto it, sending forth rays tipped in prismatic colors. A better way down the slope lies to your right, a more gradual grade that has obviously been used before as you see stakes and wooden slats driven into the rock. The slats are covered in snow and ice but look sturdy. Chipping away the ice should not take long.

40. *Below the Tree Line*

You descend, now below the fluffy clouds. They block the sun and close off your view of the heights. You move into a moist, cool green vale, an environment very different from the bare exposures of just an hour before.




41. *Mountain Pass*

The dull roar you have heard for the past hour has steadily grown louder, amplified by the gray stone walls of the pass as they inch together. You look up and still see a small strip of blue far above. A tiny speck glides from the right cliff, passing out of sight on the left. Mist begins to pelt your face as you edge closer to the top of the pass.

42. *Switchback Path*

You continue traveling and come to a simple pathway carved from the rock of the mountain, leading upward in a switchback

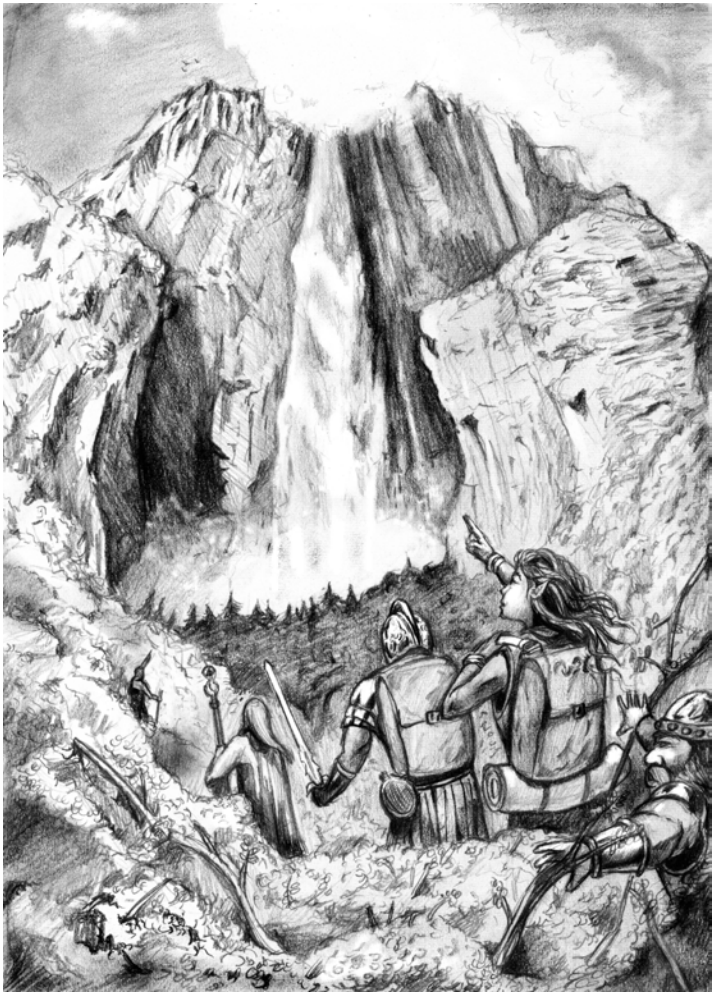




pattern, increasing the distance to travel, though making the rise more manageable. The trees have become sparser here, though tough shrubs and other alpine plants are still prevalent. The path rises some distance before teetering into nothingness, its construction forgotten or perhaps abandoned. [Plants and trees encountered in the area can include foxtail pine, devil's club, houseleek, larch, and arnica (which is known as a pain-relieving herb).]

43. Waterfall

The air is light here and difficult to catch in your lungs; headaches are common and the icy air is occasionally painful to breathe. Blood rushes through your ears – well, it sounds like that, but the sound continues for longer than seems possible. Eventually you realize that the noise is external rather than internal. It comes




from somewhere else, somewhere above you. When you look up to see what the disturbance can be, you feel a few drops of water on your forehead. The noise is from a waterfall, still far away but obviously powerful; it seems to be directly ahead of you. The path continues and you follow it as you must. The noise of the splashing water waxes until it drowns out all normal conversation. [If animals are present:] Your animals become nervous and skittish, tossing their heads. They require careful handling before they can be persuaded to continue. [The waterfall can be a peril or simply be close to the path. If it is a peril, then it should not be too dangerous unless its course has been changed for malevolent purposes, for the path would not have been wrought from the mountain so close to a dangerous phenomenon.]

44. Overgrown Terraces

The massive networks of vines and creepers on the mountainside do little to hide the fact that it was terraformed at some point. They hang like leafy curtains over the edges of each terrace, giving the mountain an oddly hairy look. Underfoot the ground is soft and loamy. In places you can see food plants competing for sunlight against the rampantly growing vines, evidence that someone used this area for cultivation in the past. When you look around you can see similar titanic staircases cut into neighboring slopes, though they are mostly overgrown as well. Wide swathes of gray and brown stone devoid of green shrubbery show where rockslides or floods scoured the mountain clean. [Terracing mountains to provide fields was a practice common to pre-modern mountain-dwellers in the Andes and parts of China, and probably other places as well.]

45. Wayhouse

As the mountain path continues to wind its way around the endless rock, thoughts of mortality are never far away. Falling off an icy precipice, breaking a leg and starving, attack by some fierce mountain tribe sneaking up from below the ground or giant eagles swooping down from above all seem equally possible. Off the trail, into the woods a few



paces, stands a wooden way house. A few short, sturdy log pieces are set into the ground beside the structure. [Under the logs is a pit holding some dried provisions wrapped in greased oilskins. At the GM's discretion this could include anything from preserved carrots and dried fish to horns of wine and dried beef. Etiquette and custom require that those who take provisions from a way station such as this should at the very least recompense the system by providing donations when they are able to do so.]

46. Vine Mountain

Dark and bright green leaves and vines run rampant all over the mountainside. Just about everything else is invisible, covered by the vines. In some places they seem to rise up bizarrely, giving the impression of huge mounds of ivy. It is most likely that there are trees under those massive vine wigs, but you cannot see from here whether or not that is true. Something rustles in the copious underbrush and twenty feet [6m] of greenery move at once. [If the adventurers investigate:] As you get closer you realize that there are hordes of insects swarming through the greenery – ants, ticks and other things. [Depending on setting the party could easily wind up fighting sentient vines or monsters that use the greenery as cover for an ambush.]

47. Amphitheater

Above you as you climb, you can see towering red stones: some huge rounded boulders and others tall standing stones. As you draw closer you discover that there is room to walk between the rocks. Passing between two tall stones you find yourself standing at the lip of a large bowl-shaped depression. Other rocks scatter the ground throughout the valley, though none is as large as the giants that guard the rim. At the far side a tall cliff rises, cutting off a section of this otherwise circular area. The ground here is solid rock, running fairly smoothly down to the bottom. [This is a natural amphitheater; sounds made near the apex of the inverted cone which is this area carry easily to all parts of the valley, but (generally) not beyond the stones at its lip. It could be a rallying

spot for tribes of humanoids or a location for a gathering of wandering nature priests.]

48. Log over Ravine

After climbing some steep inclines, you find yourself walking through a forest of very tall trees. They seem to go on for miles; no end is in sight. You hear a quiet sound, one of trickling, rushing water, quite distant. Eventually the trees thin out as you continue across the hard dirt and crispy leaves of the forest floor. The rushing water gets louder; it definitely sounds like a creek of some sort. You finally come through the last of the trees to find a ravine in front of you, about 50 feet [15m] across and over a hundred feet [30m] down. A small stream dances down the middle of the ravine. Near you, off to one side, is a fallen log which reaches the other side of the ravine. The log is thick and seems sturdy enough to cross. Crossing the log safely would be a slow task and possibly dizzying to those that look down. [The log is strong and will hold weights of up to 350 pounds (160 kg). Adventurers can shimmy across in a seated position if they take their time. They could also connect ropes to the trees on either side to make the crossing safer. Walking across would be risky and would require checks to avoid falling.]

49. Former Quarry

At some point in the past someone cut huge chunks of stone out of the side of this hill. Pale white veins run through the dark gray stone in a crazed manner with no discernible pattern. You can see numerous roads carved directly into the mountainside as well as dozens of square holes at regular intervals around the wall of the quarry. Things are not all regular and systematic, however, as there are several places where great jagged stones have come out of the wall. Some of them lie across the road, while others have tumbled down into the deep chasm in the middle of the quarry and left fragments everywhere. The mountainside has been cut back substantially. [The stone was probably carted off to a local site, though it could also have been sold off. The holes in the wall are from the method used to cut the blocks.]

50. Severed Lifeline

As your party traverses a narrow ledge, a disturbing sight meets your eyes. Near the ground, someone has wedged a large stone into a cleft in the rock and wound a rope around it twice before knotting it. From the makeshift anchor the rope snakes loosely across your path to the edge of the drop. There it has been severed, perhaps by the sharp granite edge, perhaps by something sharper. Peering over the brink, you see that the ground is several dozen [or several hundred] feet below. There is no sign of the owner of the rope, nor is there any indication of the reason he or she left the ledge. [Abrasion is capable of cutting a rope, particularly one which is poorly made; climbers often use patches of canvas or empty packs to pad a sharp edge. Whether this rope wore itself in two or was cut purposefully is up to the GM, as is the intent and the fate of its owner.]

51. A Burdensome Offering

Through the trees you can see a bundle laid on a frame of branches and the package or its contents seem to have attracted the birds [vultures]. Large wings beat the air nearby as scavenger birds close in on the clearing among the trees. Amongst the flurry of feathers and talons, you can see glimpses of a bundle wrapped tightly in strips of linen. Now and again you catch a distinctive scent wafting on the breeze. The birds proceed to tear at the cloth, eventually revealing flesh and bone. [The adventurers have stumbled upon an offering, or an excarnation or sky burial of some type. This description is a fictionalized account based on the practice of jhator that takes place in the mountain steppes of Tibet or of the Towers of Silence funeral practices of Iran, where fuel is scarce and burial next to impossible.]

52. Hunting

Today looks like a good day for hunting. Herds of deer and elk have come down from the higher slopes to graze on the thick green grass. Watching from behind a cluster of trees, you notice a movement

in a separate group of trees a hundred feet away [30 m]. When you look to pin down the movement, you catch a glimpse of a face through the branches.

53. Wild Horses in the Canyonlands

A herd of spotted stallions and mares begins to stream over the boulder-strewn slopes away to your left, the thundering of their hooves barely reaching your ears. It is unclear what has caused their stampede, but from your vantage point, you are in no immediate danger. The green and yellow slopes under the feet of these majestic beasts are broken here and there by shelves of rock jutting through the grasses. Eventually the herd wheels away, following their leader like a flock of geese.



54. Wildfire

Fire has broken out a little further down the slopes. The wind is blowing the flames away from your path at the moment and it looks as if you will be safe, as long as the wind does not change or die away.

55. Cave Entrance

Brush damp with dew dangles from a massive stony overhang on the cliff's side. Creeper vines of epic length stretch right over the edge of the outcropping, giving a sort of wispy look to a gaping black hole in the mountainside. Huge gray stone boulders lie around the cave mouth and further down the mountainside. Some evidently rolled from high above, as they are cracked into numerous pieces and lie at some distance from the cave. Almost all of the stone is slick with accumulated dew at this hour of the day. The cave looms imposingly, a massive shadow in the mountainside. [The cave can be an entrance to whatever the GM likes.]

56. Blocked Mine

The path you have chosen to ascend the mountain has allowed you to make quick progress. As you follow what seems like a natural rock trail you see something ahead of you. As you move forward a faint smell of sulfur touches your nose, and you see what looks like a cave ahead of you. Rocks have fallen in the entrance, leaving only a small opening. [If the adventurers look more closely:] You see the remains of wooden beams under the boulders and the smell of sulfur is very strong here. [This was once a mine shaft, now nearly sealed by a rock fall. There may be room for characters to enter, at the GM's option.]

Shard Set -- Mountain Lake

57. Inviting Lake

The day has been hot. The sun beats down and the snow seems to melt before your eyes. The trees, pines which cast almost no shade, thin and you step [ride] into a meadow. Evergreen bushes are pushing up from the melting snow banks; the rocks seem very dark and the snow, dirty as it is, blindingly bright. Above and




beyond this basin, fir-clad hills rise to great heights. Suddenly you can see a lake ahead, sparkling deep blue in the sun. The perspiration drips off you and the water looks wonderfully cool and inviting. It will be as cold as snowmelt, but the air is warm. [The air is about 70° F (20° C) and warmer on exposed rocks, so swimming or bathing is reasonable. In one shallow area the water is not quite so cold.]

58. Lake Details

The lake, when you reach it, is a deep cerulean blue. The light breeze makes faint ripples on its surface so the surrounding mountains appear as dark areas, not clear reflections. Ahead, the water is shallow and the bottom appears gravelly. Logs and standing dead stumps, old and smooth, protrude from the lake to your right. To your left, a clear stream





splashes into the lake over shallow rapids of fist-sized smooth rocks. A group of about eight ducks reacts to your appearance, flying up from the water in a flurry of brown and white feathers, quacking loudly.

59. *Mucky Shore*

You can see the clear water of the lake, but the shore before you has deep mud, covered by minute shining green plants. Your [horses'] feet sink nearly knee deep into the soft mud. Lifted, the mud makes a deep slurping sound and clings to your [horses'] feet. The smell of the muck, now all over your [horses'] legs, is strong and very foul. It smells of rotting eggs, putrefying plants, and dead animals with a definite dash of "old latrine". [If the adventurers get mud on themselves, the smell stays with them until they can wash off—but they are soon used to it and barely notice. There is a 30% chance that any person is extra sensitive to the smell and stays repulsed for hours.]

60. *Duck in Danger*

The brown and white ducks are feeding along the lake shore. Periodically several dive, tail and butt sticking straight up. After a few moments the head and shoulders reappear, and you can see the beak move as the ducks munch whatever they caught. The breeze has died and now the lake is like a fine mirror, reflecting the tall mountains. In the reflection you can even pick out individual pine trees with distinctive upper branches or a split crown, until a solitary duck swims slowly across the mountain's image, blurring it. There is a sudden movement in the water. The duck utters an abbreviated squawk and disappears under the surface, where its wings thrash for the merest moment. The water roils briefly and a tiny wave spreads toward the shore, but after a moment the lake is again a perfect mirror of the mountains.



11-74



Adventuring in the Mountains

by Dr. K. H. Keeler

Creating Distinctive Mountain Ranges

Interesting mountains are much more than just very large hills with a higher frequency of encounters. Do we make our mountain ranges very different from other terrain so that people get the feel of mountains? If your characters were suddenly teleported into the mountains would they be able to tell which of your world's mountain ranges they were in just from your description?

In the real world, anyone who has been to the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachian Mountains in North America realizes that the characteristics of those ranges are very different. And these ranges also have a different feel than the Swiss Alps or the Atlas Mountains of Northern Africa. Even among the Atlas Mountains there is a dramatic difference between the High Atlas and the Saharan Atlas ranges.

What follows is Tabletop Adventures' offering to help the Harried Game Master make creative and distinct mountain ranges for his or her game for the enjoyment of all. This article is specifically designed to get you thinking about your own mountain ranges. You can read through the material until you get an idea that sparks your imagination, or (if you are in a hurry or want complete mountain ideas) you can use one of the Mountain Terrain Kits at the end and go with that. Whatever method you decide to use, we hope that this article will help you create vivid imagery and hours of fun as you consider... Mountains!

The Overlord

A Bit about Mountains

Mountains are found throughout the world. They are built by uplifting when great landmasses collide, by volcanic action, or by both at once. Mountains reach great heights and then erode away.

Mountains are Barriers. 1) Mountains form barriers to rivers. Often a continental divide runs along a mountain range, with rivers on one side running east or south to one ocean and on the other side running west or north to a quite

different ocean. 2) Mountains form barriers to rain. Large air masses drop the water they are carrying as they rise. Over the summit, the descending air masses are dry and can only make the land drier. This can produce rain forests on one slope and desert on the other. 3) Mountains are barriers to animals and plants. Species common on one side may be totally absent from the other. Alternatively, a species may split into two varieties, with, for example, black leopards on one side and white leopards on the other. Most important: 4) Mountains are barriers to commerce. Goods, animals and people cannot move over an area of mountains as easily as most other land. If there is a good pass, then commerce will be deflected to this one route. If not, travelers and haulers must detour around the mountains.


Mountains Environments are Different. Climbing into the mountains, the adventurers encounter environments not found in the plains or forests below. Temperatures drop steadily with increased elevation. The growing season gets steadily shorter. Mountains generally form zones—montane, with moderate altitude forest; subalpine, with high elevation trees; and alpine, above the tree line. The zones are broad if the slope is gradual or narrow if the slopes are steep. Drier mountains have much the same zones as wet ones, but the number and identity of the plants and animals (and monsters) may be different.

Mountains are Dangerous Places. For gaming, mountains are wonderful places to adventure. The elevational changes make getting places difficult. Lack of settlement facilitates the presence of large wild animals or monsters and there are many hazards to mountain travel, ranging from avalanches to flash floods.

People of the Mountains

The natives of mountains can be anything from barbarians to ancient civilizations. Traditional elves may live in the forests and dwarves mine the rock. Bandits, 'mountain men' hunting in isolation, prospectors seeking instant wealth, trappers with their bundles of pelts, druids worshipping among the great trees, herders of sheep or goats, and hermits praying in mountain caves might all be encountered.

Mountain areas can be farmed, usually by terracing the hillsides to create relatively flat ground. However, soil is produced slowly and easily erodes away on slopes. Mountains start off without soil and develop it only over centuries, while soil increase is opposed by erosion. The



cool climate further slows the development of soils. Good soils for farming are few on mountains. Flat areas and valleys do support row agriculture but generally there are only pockets of settlement, not major population centers.

Mountain pastures can be places to raise cattle, or even better, sheep and goats. Many historical human cultures lived in the lowlands and valleys and pastured cows or goats on the heights above, moving with the seasons.

Mountains are good places for hunting animals for their pelts or for meat or medicine. The mountain streams are home to small mammals like beaver and mink whose winter pelts are thick and profitable, and the furs of larger mammals like wolves and bears are likewise lucrative. Trappers often winter in the high country and carry their furs to market in the spring, returning with fresh provisions in the fall. The wilderness of mountains, with areas that are likely to be inaccessible except to the very nimble, may also allow the presence of strange animals and monsters.

Of course, mineral wealth is particularly accessible on mountains. Gold- or silver-bearing rock layers are sometimes even exposed on the surface and thus easy to mine—assuming you can carry the ore down to a market. Miners and mining operations, large and small, are common. Above ground, logging can be profitable. Trees cut deep in the forest travel by river to more populated areas.

Types of Mountains

Most mountains are part of mountain ranges, with peaks of varying sizes, often in a line. Mountain ranges often include both uplift peaks (produced by folding of the earth's crust) and volcanoes (produced by forcing solid and liquid rock to the surface) because the collision of continental plates that pushes mountains up also presses molten rock toward the surface. Occasionally one encounters solitary mountains, most commonly produced by volcanic action.

Mountains can be very high; ancient mountain ranges had many peaks as high as the tallest summits in the Himalayas (30,000 feet or 9100 meters). Young mountains are very steep and rugged. Mountains still rising will be shaken with earthquakes caused by the uplifting pressures. Volcanoes rise from successive deposits of rock and lava.

Erosion gradually wears down all mountains until they are gone. Old mountains can still be high, but their slopes are much longer and less steep than younger mountains, from all the rock that has rolled down the slope and piled up. They may, however, have deep canyons and very complex caves formed by water erosion over long periods of time.

Appearance: Descriptors for individual mountains include: castellate, with horizontal layers rising to higher and higher peaks to make a shape reminiscent of a castle; dogtooth when almost vertical layers erode into a jagged peak; anticlinal mountains, created when compressed, uplifted rocks rise into a dome; dome mountains when the dome is produced by pressure of magma below the surface; and Matterhorn-type mountains, made by glaciers scouring all four sides to a squared summit. Other peaks have one steep and smooth face and the other gradual and sloping, created when horizontal rock layers are pushed up at angles as great as 60°. Volcanoes form both cones and shields, the latter happening when lava flows out repeatedly to build a mountain with long, gentle slopes which can nevertheless be very high.

Volcanoes: These occur where the molten rock of the earth's core finds its way to the surface. The release of pressure from below may be as a catastrophic explosion or as waves of lava rolling out of the earth. Repeated lava flows build mountains, sometimes very quickly.


Volcanic eruptions may be cataclysmic explosions if the pressure is held underground until it blows off the cap of rock restraining it. Whole mountains can blow away in an instant. Eruptions can also be flows of molten lava several yards (meters) thick rolling down the mountainside, igniting and burying trees or structures they encounter. Other eruptions throw large amounts of ash, which can blow considerable distances downwind. The ash is generally fine white particles that can cover everything several inches (or several feet) deep. Plants suffocate, people and animals have all kinds of eye, nose and lung problems, fine machinery clogs and roofs collapse from the weight. Really large and rapid ash falls will bury every living thing, suffocating them. Uncommon but very deadly are releases of poisonous gases that kill everything that breathes them, although generally these are only dangerous on the slopes of the mountain. In addition, an erupting volcano may cause violent earthquakes which set off landslides, avalanches or (by displacing lakes) floods.

Eruptions can leave behind treacherous conditions. Lava flowing down a mountain cools on the outside, which means travelers can fall through an apparently safe cool surface into molten lava. Sometimes lava tubes cool, leaving an empty tunnel; people or animals can fall through, injuring themselves or becoming trapped.

Mountain Environments

The Elevational Gradient

Climbing into the mountains takes travelers through relatively predictable zones in succession: the montane zone, subalpine zone & alpine zone. The base of the



mountain is the same as the surrounding region. A little higher, the conditions start to cool. With less evaporation on hot days, moisture is more available and the plants are likely to be bigger and denser. New species appear. As one presses higher, one reaches the treeline and transitions to a zone without trees and a region with much fewer plants.

Altitude and Latitude: At the latitude of the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn (30° North and 30° South, which define the tropics in our world), the lower limit of the treeless alpine zone is about 13,000 feet (4000 meters). This limit drops steadily as the latitude approaches the poles, until inside the Arctic Circle there is tundra at sea level (0 feet elevation). The other mountain zones (below) appear at lower altitudes as well. Since conditions depend on the location of a particular mountain, these zones do not have any elevations indicated.

Montane Zone: Climbing higher takes the party into areas with only a brief cool summer. Here evergreens replace deciduous trees. Trees with needle-like leaves all year (pines, firs, araucarias) can shed even heavy wet snow, which would break leafy branches on broad-leaved trees. Strong-smelling chemicals reduce the palatability to animals of the leaves that are accessible on the trees when the ground is buried in snow. There are few herbs under the dense conifers, but openings in the forest have tall stands of bright wildflowers in summer, often many different colors and shapes. Trees other than the dominant conifers occur in disturbed or wet areas. (An example would be aspen in the Rocky Mountains.)

Subalpine Zone: The temperature cools with increased elevation until the trees that dominate the montane zone disappear and slower growing conifers replace them: spruce or fir, or larch in the Alps. Forest cover declines and the trees become smaller. Trees are less dense and under them wildflowers and shrubs are more abundant. These make forage for wild animals (rabbits, tree and ground squirrels, elk, mountain goats, mountain sheep, bears, and their predators) which are numerous here in summer. Toward the upper limits of the subalpine zone, snow persists in protected areas into summer.

Eventually, however, there is an elevation where the trees thin and ultimately stop. Here trees are bent and twisted. Winds, usually coming down from the heights, force them into contorted shapes called krummholz. Toward the upper edge of the krummholz, the trees are little more than stunted shrubs and form a thick band of branches near that ground that is very dense and difficult to move through.

Alpine Zone: Above the krummholz is the treeless tundra. Here it is so cold that in places the water in the ground never thaws, forming permafrost. Permafrost makes an

impenetrable layer of ice a few inches below the soil surface. Between the short growing season, the permafrost and the severe cold, trees do not survive in the alpine zone. The plants of high elevations are all low, mostly well under a foot (30 centimeters) tall, from lichens and mosses to grasses and species with bright flowers like saxifrage and alpine lilies, to dwarf willows. In tundra the daytime temperatures go above freezing only a few weeks of the year. The tiny plants grow quickly after the snow melts and the tundra bursts into bloom. Insects with an equally short life cycle appear, visiting the flowers. Wild goats and sheep, burrowing rodents and other mountain herbivores gather to eat the ephemeral plants. Seeds are set and then the season is over. Substantial snow is possible any day of the year and permanent snowfields and mountain glaciers fill the cold spots.

Above the tundra are regions virtually devoid of plants. If there are plants they occur in areas where the snow does not accumulate. Gentler slopes above the tundra have snow or ice on them all year round. Here you find extensive mountain glaciers. The snow accumulates and its weight condenses it into ice. Only on slopes where the snow and ice slide off is the ground not packed with deep snow and ice. Mountain animals can climb up here, but they have little reason to do so.


Seasonal Patterns

On temperate mountains, the snow-covered area includes low elevations in the winter but is limited to the heights in summer. Cold-loving species may come far down the mountain in winter; humans and others may climb very high in summer. Plant eaters and their predators move up as spring moves up the mountain—often to the upper alpine zone in midsummer—then move back down as autumn deepens.

Temperatures and Weather

It is likely to be cool in the mountains, especially at night. The temperatures will drop below freezing all year round at high elevations and during most months at even a few thousand feet in elevation. Compounding the dangers of cold are various kinds of exposure. Mountains have frequent storms and it can be impossible to see them approaching behind the peaks. Sudden rainstorms may soak adventurers; combined with cold this can be very dangerous. The risk of lightning strikes compounds the hazard of storms. Lightning from thunderstorms often strikes mountainsides and mountain forests and can occur 10 miles (17 kilometers) from the storm itself.

Exercising in very cold conditions is hazardous: under all the insulating layers adventurers may heat and overheat. Keeping a safe temperature and not getting chilled when cooling down are important and not easy. Since water



exacerbates heat-loss, wet clothing and wet bedding raise the risk of hypothermia (dying of cold). Keeping dry and warm in high mountains requires constant vigilance.

Oxygen

The available oxygen declines noticeably with elevation. For people who live at sea level, the decline in oxygen is noticeable as low as 4000 feet (1200 meters). By 6000 feet (1800 meters) they are panting whenever they exert themselves. Drinking plenty of water improves the situation. By 8000 feet (2450 meters) some people have significant discomfort—headaches, vomiting, confusion, dizziness. Over 11,000 feet (3350 meters) the low oxygen effects can be life threatening; the simple solution is to get down to lower elevations. Over 14,000 feet (4250 meters) only a few can go safely without supplemental oxygen. Above 18,000 feet (5450 meters), oxygen is so low that the body starts to shut down.

The human body produces more red blood cells in response to lower oxygen. Thus most parties of adventurers, climbing on foot or with horses to high elevations, will likely acclimate as they go up and not have problems with the elevation until they are very high. That would not be the case for those who went up very suddenly, for example carried by a roc to a mountain peak. People born and raised at high elevations are adapted to low oxygen in ways that a week's acclimatization cannot do, so there is great variation in the response of individuals to elevation.

Mountain Diversity

Some features occur within all elevational zones, creating the diverse landscape.

Mountain Canyons and Valleys

Canyons: These occur in some mountain systems and not in others. Recent glacier advance, as in most temperate mountains in our world, tends to open up canyons into gentler valleys. Where the glaciers have not reshaped everything, rivers will have cut deep canyons in the mountainsides over millions of years. Even when there has been glaciation, some canyons occur where a river cut a channel under a glacier or where the glaciers or erosion opened up the roof of great underground caverns. Canyons are generally protected from winds and snow lingers late in them since the sun shines there only a few hours a day due to the high canyon walls. Once spring comes, plants are lush. Flash flooding is often a risk in narrow canyons.

Valleys: Broader than canyons, valleys hold the best soils in the mountains. They are naturally tree-filled with little growth under coniferous trees, although there may be areas with relatively high densities of otherwise uncommon broadleaved trees if the valley is not very high up. In

addition, since streams run through most valleys, they are likely to have inhabitants or be disturbed by human (and humanoid) activity. Disturbed areas are rich in summer wildflowers. Many large animals graze in undisturbed valleys. Furthermore, valleys are protected in winter and make winter quarters for big animals (elk, moose, or mountain goats, to use examples from the Rocky Mountains). If the region below the mountains is grassland, badlands or desert, migratory species from nearby regions may winter in protected low elevation valleys, to return to the open in milder weather. (Examples include buffalo in the Rocky Mountains or elk on the elk reserve in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where tens of thousands over-winter.)


Slopes: Mountain regions are full of slopes. When they are nearly vertical they form cliffs, serious barriers to travel when ascending and hazards descending. Talus slopes are made of loose rocks, sometimes large, sometimes small. They are unstable, slowly rolling downhill and very difficult to travel over as is any pile of rocks. The whole mountain rises with some gentle slopes, some talus-covered and very steep. Volcanoes can add to the complexity: *pahoehoe* lava flows are relatively smooth and easily crossed (although one must watch out for thin-roofed lava tubes, see “Volcanoes” above) while *‘a’a* lava is much coarser, like an expanse of fist- to melon-sized rocks, much less comfortable for travel. Rarely is the angle of the mountainside so gentle that it is comfortable to climb straight up the slope, so most paths snake across the slope making numerous switchbacks to moderate the angle of the climb.

The slopes that are so difficult to go up and down also invite rock and landslides; without warning huge amounts of stuff may break off and go thundering down the valley, tearing up plants and rocks and taking with it everything in its path.

Fjords occur where valleys between mountains have been flooded by the ocean.

Water

Mountain streams: Melting snow and ice form streams and rivers coming out of the mountains. They are dangerous: cold from the snowmelt and fast moving because of the slope. Many also dip into and out of underground sections, adding risk for anyone who falls into one. In winter small streams freeze solid but many larger streams go on running below the snow and frozen surfaces. Winter and spring travelers risk falling into icy water because streams can be invisible beneath several feet of snow. In spring, snowmelt swells the streams; they run high in their banks and spread out over level areas, still dangerously cold and swift. They are hard to cross, a significant problem for spring adventuring. Streams



slacken as the snow melts, making travel much easier later in the season. In dry mountains, water can be hard to find by late summer because all the streams have dried up.

Flash floods are a risk to adventurers in the mountains. Thunderstorms may cause substantial rainfall which rushes downhill, building quickly to flood stage. The situation can be even more dangerous because the rainstorm may have been on the heights out of sight, so that the adventurers do not even know it rained. River channels are often the easiest places to climb up a mountain, but some are quite narrow and a flash flood can fill them to dangerous levels in an hour. Hurrying up or down the river channel provides no safety. Climbing the sides of the channel is the wisest move but not all river channels have sides which people can climb without technical gear, let alone by horses or carts.

Springs: Mountainous regions are likely to have hot springs and mineral springs. A spring brings water to the surface; if it is above normal air temperature it is a hot spring, if it is laden with some dissolved mineral it is a mineral spring. The water can simply be rainwater passing through the mountain, or an outlet of an underground stream. The primal heat of the earth or a volcanic vent may provide heat, or the water may dissolve soluble minerals are found in the mountain's rocks. If the water encounters an opening, it can surface as a hot or mineral spring.

Areas of warm water are a delight in a spa but less so for adventurers climbing the slopes. A mountain area may be full of dangerously hot pools, burning mud or hidden pits and caves. The hot water dissolves minerals and the water may be more than just hot, it may contain enough sulfur to be hot sulfuric acid. (Other soluble elements could be involved depending on the location.) Mineral springs with their unique chemistry can harbor unusual bacteria or algae, while the pools formed in hot springs support plants and animals (especially fish) that are intolerant of cold so far above their normal altitudinal limits. In a fantasy world, all sorts of strange organisms might lurk around hot or mineral springs.

Snow

Most parties will not travel in winter. Winter brings deep snow, as much as 700 inches (18 meters) of snow to moist mountains. Of course this buries any forage for horses, leaving only twigs and pine needles for grazing. Everyone leaves obvious tracks as they pass through deep snow. Movement can be very difficult: without snowshoes or skis travelers will likely sink in knee-deep or farther, making each step a tremendous effort.

At high elevations, there is almost always snow. If it is new snow, it may be so soft that each step sinks deeply and snow falls easily into every opening of a traveler's


clothing. If it is old, it may have a thick crust, hard enough to support some of the party and not others (with consequences for marching order) or may simply support some steps and give way on others. Falling in every tenth step is hardly more pleasant than falling in every step! Below the crust, the snow can be so deep that even tall people are in danger of being buried and suffocating. Windswept slopes and areas under tall trees will have less snow but their own travel problems: biting cold or interfering branches, for example.

Snow melting off (during spring travel, or early summer at higher elevations) means the streams are high. Where the land is not flooded by the overflowing streams, travelers may alternate between walking over areas of old snow and mud. The snow often has a crust and gives way, even on a well-used trail, since the warming continually changes the amount of snow present. The mud would be slick, deep and clinging.

Avalanches: The deep snow of mountains can be unstable. Particularly after a heavy snow or in spring as conditions warm, unequal melting or weight can cause a large area to give way and slide down the mountain taking with it everything in its path. Rocks are torn from the ground and trees are snapped off and carried away with the snow. Sudden loud sounds can set off avalanches, as can travelers, animals, wind, and even sunshine. The avalanche itself makes a great rumbling noise, as it bounces and slides down the slope. Persons caught in an avalanche are carried down the slope with the snow and debris, often to be buried when it stops in a low spot. Victims could be crushed, or suffocate under the snow.

The paths of avalanches are evident in summer as vertical zones on slopes which are bare of trees but may be brilliant with disturbance-loving wildflowers. They can remain as scars for many years after the avalanche. Avalanches tend to occur in the same places as earlier ones.

Mountain Glaciers: Glaciers are areas of ice that endure from year to year. They are common in the upper alpine zone and above. Snow accumulates and its weight turns the lower layers to ice. Snowfields stay put but glaciers move slowly downhill. The glacier rolls over dirt, rock and anything else in its path and takes it along. At the lower end, a mountain glacier melts. Small changes in climate alter the balance of continual glacier expansion from snow accumulating on top and contraction due to melting at the margins. Walking on glaciers is hazardous because of deep crevasses: cracks in the ice caused by the creep of the glacier. Crevasses can be 50 meters (160 feet) deep and covered on the surface by snow. A crevasse is very cold and can be very difficult to escape. At the upper end of a glacier there is a crevasse between mountain and glacier



formed because the mountain's rock warms faster than the ice, causing it the ice melt away. At the lower end of any glacier not currently advancing there is a ridge of till (unsorted particles of various sizes all jumbled together) that the glacier moved and dropped; this is called the terminal moraine.

Other Conditions

Wind: Mountains are among the windiest places on earth. The wind often blows and wind speeds of 100 miles per hour (170 kilometers per hour) are not uncommon. Loss of heat to the wind intensifies cold conditions. In dry mountains it intensifies dry conditions.

Clouds: At middle elevations the climbers are at the same level as the clouds over the valley. Clouds are water vapor; the party may pass through areas of fog, drizzle or rain. Higher elevations bring travelers out above the clouds. Here the high elevation sun can beat down on them and any terrain below would be obscured.

Caves: Mountains are full of caves. Their entrances may be in plain sight, or hidden among rocks, or just a small hole in the ground in a little depression. Streams and rivers may run into and out of cave systems. What might seem to be a simple animal's den could connect to subterranean passages and more. (For descriptions of underground areas, see *Bits of Darkness*.™ *Caverns* by Tabletop Adventures.)

Fires: Forest fires in the mountains may be caused by lightning, volcanic action or by natives, either on purpose or accidentally. Very moist mountains will not burn and high elevations generally are too cool or have too much snow to burn well, but in the lower and middle elevations of drier mountains fire is a recurring hazard. In some regions the dominant trees are adapted to and depend on fires, opening their cones only after fire heats them to temperatures never produced on a warm day. In these areas dead trees and fallen needles are often full of resins that catch easily, assisting the fire, although the bark of the trees may be fire-resistant. Fanned by mountain winds a forest fire in the mountains is very dangerous, since safe shelters are limited and the fire moves simultaneously across the ground and through the treetops. Both heat and suffocation (fires consume oxygen) are dangers in a forest fire. The main wave of the fire passes an area quickly but once well-lit, great trees may burn for weeks until the fire consumes them completely.

Inaccessible places: The terrain of a mountain can produce areas where normal people cannot go: beyond unscalable sheer rock walls or up steep cliffs, so the valley

or the cliff top may never have had human visitors or may harbor strange creatures. Thus, mountain habitats are marvelous places for adventures.

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Mountain Terrain Kits

Terrain Kits present distinct types or patterns of mountain ranges. Each Kit provides the GM with descriptions or details of each successive elevation zone, generally in the spring and summer months.

So many real-world plants and animals are seen on mountains on different continents that a comprehensive list here would be overwhelming. For instance, the mountains of New Zealand and Europe are similar in pattern but the animals and plants differ. So these kits have been populated with fantasy forests. In these fantasy forests; the plant names are made up and the animals (while real) are intended to be representative. The plants are consistent between Kits so that, for example, Kit 1 could be the wet side of Kit 2.

Kit 1: Tall, wet mountain range or wet side of high young mountain –

Montane Zone: The lower zone forest is mostly made up of two types of very tall handsome coniferous trees (mountain pine, valley fir), with deciduous trees in the valleys (mountain maple, copper aspen). Most places the pines and firs are tall and under them is a thick carpet of mosses topped by ferns and rhododendrons, over which grow small shade-loving trees (wild bay, whitebud). Vines (bear grape, spinybower) tangle it all together. Where there is a gap in the trees bright flowers grow. Especially obvious is gapflower, a tall plant with a spike of stark white flowers; but also meadowbells, butterfly drops, elfsmantle and the like.

Deer and elk graze in the forest, in small wary groups. Squirrels, chipmunks and porcupines live in the trees; ground squirrels, gophers and hares, various mice and packrats live on or in the ground. Mountain lions and wolves stalk the deer and elk; coyotes, foxes, badgers, weasels and wolverines hunt the smaller herbivores. Raccoons and bears eat both plants and animals.

Small songbirds such as sparrows, wrens and warblers eat insects among the leaves. Kingfishers and swallows take insects out of the air, woodpeckers out of wood. Jays, ravens, and crows eat a broader diet, from robbing nests to scavenging. Eagles, owls and hawks prey on other birds, or specialized prey, like fish. Vultures (or condors) scavenge.

Even the lower reaches of the mountain are too cool for most reptiles and amphibians so this area has only two types of harmless snakes, box turtles, a skink (looks like a lizard) that lives in the leaf litter and five kinds of frogs. The streams have trout-like fish, as well as smaller ones.

Insects are abundant starting almost as the snow melts off: mosquitoes and biting flies are especially noticeable. Also: flies of various sorts, colorful butterflies, drab but common moths, dragonflies and damselflies, beetles, crickets, and insect larvae in the slow areas of the streams. Worms, grubs and numerous spiders can be found in the earth. In the streams are small crayfish and tiny shrimp.

Climbing through this zone is easy in places and difficult in others. Well-used paths lead a traveler comfortably across the level areas, to unavoidable steep grades. A path may go up along the edge of a fast-moving stream, taking advantage of the channel cut by a small river. (A larger river can cut a deep gorge, which may be impassible.) The stream may be high with spring snowmelt. There are some steep inclines where a path could go very steeply up a rocky exposed slope; if it is on a trail, then it should be difficult but possible for horses.


It rains every day or every other day, generally about the same time—mid-afternoon for example. Sometimes the rain continues all evening.

Subalpine Zone: About this point the vegetation is changing: the mountain pine disappears and upland spruce takes its place, and then green fir replaces the valley fir. The copper aspen is here too, but it is shorter and a more bronze color. The trees are shorter, but still very tall (60 feet or 20 meters). The vegetation on the ground is thinner, now featuring berry bushes (golden bramble, pine blueberry, rose currants). Open areas are filled with gapflower and many of the same flowers as lower down, but some (such as elfsmantle) have dropped out and some have been added, like the small yellow sunlily and pale orange mountain orchids. The night temperatures drop from pleasant to cool to chilly.

Spring comes later, higher up in the mountains. Some places the copper aspen is not yet in leaf. At the lower edge of this zone the wildflowers are well up, but higher up they are less and less mature. The rain is heavier and falls earlier in the day. Sometimes it rains and drizzles all day and dry firewood is nonexistent. The rain may fall as light snow, only to melt off quickly. In the mornings there is heavy frost or ice on everything, though it soon melts. Snow lies under the trees and in shaded low spots, old and half-melted. Most paths become shallow streams as the snowmelt combines with rainwater and runs down the trails.

Deer and elk graze in the forest, mountain sheep and goats on the open slopes. Squirrels and porcupines live in the trees; mountain ground squirrels, mice and packrats live on or in the ground. Bear are coming out of hibernation with





cubs and are dangerous. Mountain lions and wolves, foxes, badgers, weasels and wolverines are the predators. There are sparrows, warblers and woodpeckers, jays, ravens and crows, owls, eagles and hawks, and vultures (or condors). No reptiles, amphibians or fish get this high. Insects are of limited diversity but abundant in number; mosquitoes and biting flies are especially noticeable. There are also flies of various sorts, colorful butterflies, dragonflies, beetles, and crickets. Worms and grubs are not common but can be found in the ground.

The air is noticeably thinner at this altitude; travelers (and their mounts) gasp on even mild inclines. This zone is steep so trails wind back and forth—requiring many miles of walking to go half a mile vertically, and the decreasing oxygen makes it harder to sustain rapid motion. Gaps between the trees become more common and climbing through eroded rock falls (talus slopes) may happen frequently during the day. When the clouds clear, the view over the plain or forest below is terrific.

This zone is steep so trails wind back and forth—requiring many miles of walking to go half a mile vertically, and the decreasing oxygen makes it harder to sustain rapid motion.

The krummholz zone is very obvious. The party travels a limited distance still surrounded by green fir, now contorted and shorter than all but the halflings. If there is no path, the going will be very difficult through the bent and twisted branches. The wind that deformed the branches blows hard, carrying snow or more often cold rain.

Alpine Zone: Within a short distance, the krummholz ends and the party is above the tree line in alpine tundra. Only in midsummer (late June to early August in the Northern Hemisphere) is this area free of snow. In mid-June deep drifts still lie in the low spots but the open areas are full of rapid plant growth, bright green. Here alpine grasses and sedges and miniature willows are scattered across the rocks, with bright splashes of color from pixie marigolds, mountain chimes, stone roses and meadow blues.

Numerous mountain sheep and goats graze on the new growth. Mountain ground squirrels are repairing their burrows after the winter's damage. Wolves, mountain lion, wolverines and foxes hunt here. High elevation birds are courting or nesting.

The days are at least partly sunny but they often cloud up and have rain, sleet or snow. The water drains off or runs downhill quickly, despite the volume of snowmelt coming down from higher up. The temperature is only really pleasant when the sun is out and the wind is blocked. At night a canteen of water will freeze solid. The air is thin and there is no firewood.

Higher still, the adventurers climb through snowfields and windswept open rocks. The clouds and daily rain are mostly below this elevation; here the wind whips through the snowfields and the sun shines without providing much heat. The glare off the ice and snow is blinding. It is impossible to travel only on bare rock: the trail goes over snow and ice, some places packed, some places loose, some places atop glaciers. The air is very thin. Any snow comes as a major storm with dangerously cold conditions. The snow covers everything, blotting out trails, although markers left as guides are mostly taller stakes that snowfall will not cover. In midsummer, the new snow may melt off within a day or two.


Kit 2: High, dry mountain range or dry side of tall young mountain

Montane Zone: The slopes of the mountain are covered mainly by coniferous trees (canyon pine), with deciduous trees in the valleys and flat areas (hill oak, whispering birch). Canyon pines are fine tall trees, but in most places there are openings here and there between the trees. Coarse grasses, with new green leaves in the spring, cover the ground. Between the grasses are tall wildflowers, tall white gapflower, red daisies, ladyhand and bright yellow rockweed. In streambeds or marshes the diversity is much greater, with baby's-breath orchids, blue marshlilies, yellow deerflowers and mountain iris. Sparser growth and sandier soils characterize drier areas. The plants tend to be tough and fibrous and grow in low patches between the trees. Occasional moist meadows host greater diversities of plants, especially wildflowers.

Deer and elk graze in the forest, especially in the wetter areas. Squirrels, chipmunks and porcupines live in the trees; ground squirrels, gophers and hares, various mice and packrats live on or in the ground. Mountain lions and wolves stalk the deer and elk; coyotes, foxes, badgers, weasels and wolverines hunt the smaller herbivores. Raccoons and bears eat both plants and animals.

Small songbirds like sparrows, wrens and warblers hunt insects among the leaves and woodpeckers bang on the tree trunks. Kingfishers dive after insects and swallows fly, gobbling up insects as they go. Jays, ravens, and crows eat whatever they can get, from robbing nests to scavenging. The birds of prey are eagles, owls and hawks. Vultures (or condors) scavenge.

A few reptiles and amphibians live in this area: four varieties of harmless snakes and one poisonous one, two types of ground turtles, one kind of lizard on the open rocky slopes, a toad and a frog. The streams have trout-like fish, as well as smaller fishes. Insects are abundant starting as soon as the snow melts in the spring, especially flies,



mosquitoes and biting flies. There are also butterflies, moths, dragonflies and damselflies, beetles, crickets, and a variety of less-visible insects. Spiders are numerous and diverse. In the streams are small crayfish and tiny shrimp.


The conditions of the paths go from dry and dusty in full sun where a path runs between patches of rock, to covered with water under the trees, where snowmelt runs downhill along the trail or floods the ground. Under the trees it is quite cool, while in the sun it is quite hot. Well-used paths cross the level areas, to climb the unavoidable steep grades. The paths tend to follow the streams, because they have cut a trail that does not end at the bottom of a sheer cliff. (Of course, the trail the party chooses could end at the base of a waterfall.) The streams are high with spring snowmelt. There are some steep areas where the path goes very sharply up a rocky exposed slope. If that is on a trail, then it is hard but possible for horses.

Most days are dry. In late afternoon there may be violent thunderstorms, sometimes with wind and lightning but very little rainfall.

Subalpine Zone: The nights go from pleasant through cool to chilly. About this point the vegetation is changing: knobby spruce and green fir replace the canyon pine. Whispering birch is here but forms clumps of shrubs rather than single trees. The trees have more space in between them, which allows richer vegetation on the ground featuring berry bushes (white cranberry, speckled currants, mushberries). Open areas are filled with gapflower and many of the same flowers as lower down, but some have dropped out (such as red daisies) and some have been added, like alpine pinks and purple-and-yellow globettes. Spring comes later at higher elevations; some places the birch leaves have not unrolled. At the base of the zone the wildflowers are well up, but higher they are less and less mature.

Deer and elk graze in the forest, mountain sheep and goats on the open slopes. Squirrels and porcupines live in the trees; mountain ground squirrels, mice and packrats live on or in the ground. Bears are coming out of hibernation with cubs and are dangerous. Mountain lions and wolves, foxes, badgers, weasels and wolverines are the predators. There are sparrows, warblers and woodpeckers, jays, ravens and crows, owls, eagles and hawks and vultures (or condors). No reptiles, amphibians or fish get this high. Insects are few in species but numerous: mosquitoes and biting flies are especially noticeable. There are also flies, bright butterflies, dragonflies, beetles, and crickets.

It rarely rains but when it does it is a severe thunderstorm, sometimes with sleet and light snow. Any new snow



quickly melts. Old snow, brown and crusty, still lies under many trees and in the low spots. The paths mostly are shallow muddy streams as the snowmelt runs down them. The trail winds in and out of the trees, often climbing over rock-covered (talus) slopes. The views out onto the plain (or forest) are spectacular.

The air is noticeably thinner at this altitude; travelers (and their mounts) are short of breath whenever they exert themselves. This zone is steep so trails snake back and forth with many miles of travel for a half mile of vertical progress and the lower oxygen makes it difficult to sustain rapid motion.

The zone of krummholz is very obvious. Green fir and knobby spruce are still present but they are bent and twisted into low shrubs, shorter than all but the halflings. The twisted branches make an area that is hard to pass through except where someone has hacked out a trail. The wind off the mountain above is strong and cold.

Alpine Zone: The krummholz is not extensive and above it the party is in the treeless alpine tundra. Only in midsummer (late June to early August in the Northern Hemisphere) is this area free of snow, although this slope (or perhaps the entire mountain) is more cold and windy than snowy. In mid-June snow still lies in all the low spots, but the open areas are full of new plant growth with bright green leaves. This includes alpine grasses and tiny willows, mountain chimes, stone roses and meadow blues.

Numerous mountain goats and sheep graze on the new leaves. Alpine ground squirrels make piles of newly turned dirt. Wolves, mountain lions, wolverines and foxes hunt here. Birds are courting or nesting, mostly species not seen at lower elevations.

The days are mostly sunny and cold. When a storm occurs it brings sleet or snow. It is chilly or cold except when sitting in the sun out of the wind. Water freezes at night. Most of the soil is damp from snowmelt but drying out quickly. The air is thin.

Higher still are only snowfields and windswept rocks. The cold wind whistles across the mountain and the sun shines without providing much heat. The trail goes mostly along rocks, avoiding snow and ice whenever possible but consequently going along windy ridges and some high cliffs. The air is very thin. When snow comes it is as a blinding snowstorm with dangerously cold conditions. The snow covers everything, blotting out trails. In midsummer, enough of the snow may soon melt off to reveal landmarks again.



Kit 3: Tall, old mountains

Montane Zone: Tall stately coniferous trees (mountain pine) dominate the lower zone with valley spruce in wetter locations and canyon pine on the rocky outcrops. The deciduous trees (mountain maple, copper aspen) grow in valleys and canyons. The mountain pines are tall enough that under them is a rich community of rhododendrons and shade-loving trees like wild bay, and below those ferns and mountain grasses. There are a few vines (bear grape, spinybower) in the wet areas. Marshes and ponds dot the valleys, bursting into bloom with early season wildflowers: meadowbells, mountain spoons, elfsmantle and the like. Gapflower will turn tree-falls and other disturbed sites bright white in mid-May (mid-November in the southern hemisphere).

Small herds of deer, elk and wild pigs browse in the forest. Squirrels, chipmunks and porcupines live in the trees; ground squirrels, gophers and hares, various mice and packrats live on or in the ground. Mountain lions and wolves hunt the big browsers; coyotes, foxes, badgers, weasels and wolverines pursue smaller prey. Raccoons and bears are omnivores, but have to take more animals than plants early in the season.

Small songbirds like sparrows, wrens and warblers prowl the trees for insects among the leaves. Kingfishers and swallows take insects from the air while woodpeckers can be heard digging into tree trunks. Jays, ravens and crows eat a broad diet, from insects to mice to eggs of other birds to scavenging. Eagles, owls and hawks prey on other birds, mice or fish. Vultures (or condors) scavenge.

The lower reaches of the mountain have a few reptiles and amphibians: three types of harmless snakes and one poisonous one, three species of turtle, a skink (looks like a shiny lizard) in the leaf litter, three frogs and three toads. The streams have trout-like fish, catfish and a variety of minnows. Insects are numerous as the snow melts: mosquitoes and biting flies but also houseflies, dragonflies and damselflies, butterflies, moths, all kinds of beetles, crickets, and a myriad of others. There are numerous spiders. In the streams are small crayfish and tiny shrimp as well as aquatic insects.

The terrain is more difficult than it appears at a distance. Millions of years of erosion have tumbled tons of rocks down. The ground is gravelly, with the plants thinly covering many feet of rocks; many of the steeper climbs are unstable, easily sliding down carrying the party members. The spring thaw spreads water all over. While most of it is shallow, here and there are deep holes. The rivers have eroded deep channels and canyons. The trail is easy along the canyon, but when it reaches the head of the canyon, the climb up beside the waterfall is rigorous

although the view out over the lowlands is increasingly fine. This is a repeating pattern: easy climb along the valley, tough climb between valleys. Striking out away from the trail is likely to put the party in a canyon with no outlet.


Older mountains may have more than one ice age behind them. If this is the case, the peaks may have been ground flat into high plateaus. Also, glacial valleys are broader than river-carved canyons, and may host extensive meadows running for miles.

It rains, often as thunderstorms, a couple of days a week. The storms build visibly overhead and then may rain elsewhere. Sometimes the rain continues all evening.

Subalpine Zone: The nighttime temperatures have become chilly. The vegetation is changing: the mountain pine disappears, replaced by upland spruce and green fir. The copper aspen here is shorter and more brown- or bronze-colored. The trees in general are shorter and less dense. The vegetation on the ground is easy to see across, with many bushes that will have berries later in the year (golden bramble, pine blueberry). Open areas have many of the same flowers as lower down, such as the ever-present white gapflower, meadowbells, and mountain spoons, but one can no longer find elfsmantle, and there are new flowers like the little yellow sunlilies and alpine pinks.

At higher elevations the season is not as far advanced. Some places the copper aspen is still not yet in leaf and the wildflowers are less mature. The rain is heavier, coming in powerful but short-lived storms and occasionally in two or three days of steady rain. In the mornings there is frost over everything, though it soon melts off. Higher up, light snow may fall instead of rain but it quickly melts off. Snowmelt has turned most of the paths to shallow streams and the actual streams are swollen enough that crossing them can be difficult.

Deer and elk graze in the forest, mountain sheep and goats on the open slopes. Squirrels and porcupines live in the trees; mountain ground squirrels, mice and packrats live on or in the ground. Bears, coming out of hibernation with cubs, are dangerous. Mountain lions and wolves, foxes, badgers, weasels and wolverines are the predators. There are sparrows and warblers and woodpeckers, jays, ravens and crows, owls, eagles and hawks and vultures (or condors). No reptiles, amphibians or fish get this high. Insects are of limited diversity but abundant, especially mosquitoes and biting flies. There are also flies of various sorts, butterflies and moths, dragonflies, many beetles, and crickets. Worms and grubs are not common but can be found in the ground. Snow lies under the trees and in shaded low spots, old and half-melted.



The air is noticeably thinner: travelers and their mounts gasp for air on moderate inclines. Gaps between the trees are more common and most of the time the adventurers are climbing on tumbled rock (talus slopes). The grade is steady with steeper areas. The trail winds, sometimes detouring miles around canyons. The decreasing oxygen makes it harder to sustain rapid motion. Marks of landslides and avalanches are visible on many hillsides. Travelers are above most of the clouds here, and when gaps open the view is spectacular.

The grade is steady with steeper areas. The trail winds, sometimes detouring miles around canyons. The decreasing oxygen makes it harder to sustain rapid motion.

The zone of krummholz is unmistakable. The green fir is now contorted and not as tall as a human's waist. Moving through it off the trail would be very difficult because thick, bent and twisted branches fill the space. The wind blows hard and cold.

Alpine Zone: Within a short distance, the krummholz ends and the party is in alpine tundra, above the tree line. Only in midsummer (late June to early August in the Northern Hemisphere) is this area free of snow. Travelers coming in mid-June would see deep drifts still in the low spots, but open areas full of rapidly growing plants with bright green leaves: alpine grasses and miniature willows, mountain chimes, stone roses and meadow blues.

The days are sunny but clouds often come up in the afternoon and produce rain, sleet or snow. The temperature is only warm in the sun and out of the wind. At night water freezes hard. The air is thin and there is no firewood.

Above the tundra, where there are almost no living things (a few lichens or mosses on rocks perhaps), travelers pass through snowfields and windswept open rocks. The wind whips through the snowfields and the sun shines without providing much heat. The glare off the ice and snow is blinding. It is impossible to stay on bare rock: the trail goes over snow and ice, some places packed, some places loose, some places concealing glaciers. The air is very thin. Any snow comes as a major storm with dangerously cold conditions. The snow covers everything, blotting out trails, although markers left as directions are mostly taller stakes that snowfall will not cover. In midsummer, the new snow may melt off within a day or two.

Kit 4: Tall young volcano

Montane Zone: The forested parts of the lower reaches of the mountain are mostly a rich conifer forest (mountain pine, valley fir), with occasional deciduous trees (mountain maple). Little is growing under the trees, mostly tall coarse ferns and mountain grass. Gapflower, a tall plant with a spike of bright white flowers, is everywhere, but one can

also see red daisies and yellow rockweed. The marshes are full of blue marshlilies and yellow deerflowers.

Deer, elk and wild pigs browse in the forest. Squirrels, chipmunks and porcupines live in the trees; rabbits run through the grasses. There are a few ground squirrels and gophers but for the most part the ground is rock, not dirt, and burrowing animals cannot make tunnels. Mountain lions and wolves hunt the big browsers; coyotes, foxes, weasels, and wolverines pursue smaller prey. Raccoons and bears eat more animals than plants early in the season.

Small songbirds like sparrows, wrens and warblers prowl the trees for insects among the leaves. Kingfishers and swallows take insects out of the air while woodpeckers can be heard digging into tree trunks. Jays, ravens, and crows eat a broad diet, from insects to mice or eggs of other birds to scavenging. Eagles, owls and hawks prey on other birds or mice. Vultures (or condors) scavenge.

The lower reaches of the mountain have a few reptiles and amphibians: one harmless type of snake and one poisonous one, a species of small turtle, a frog and two toads. The streams and ponds have two species of fish: one trout-like fish, and a minnow. Insects are numerous as the snow melts; mosquitoes and biting flies are especially common but there are also houseflies, dragonflies, butterflies, moths, all kinds of beetles, crickets, and a myriad of others. Spiders are numerous.

The land rises sharply. The surface is almost all rock, with only the barest covering of dirt. Where there are trees, they root down into cracks in the old lava. The streams come down the mountainsides without clear channels; climbing up along a stream provides a landmark but no improved path. Streams swollen from snowmelt spread across the land; some places the only choice is to cross water-slicked rock on steep slopes. Other places are just fields of bare rock, with neither water nor cover. Here and there are cracks, faults and cliffs, where the earthquakes that periodically shake the mountain have broken loose sections of rock.

It rains, often as thunderstorms, a couple of days a week. The storms build visibly on the heights, with dramatic lightning, but sometimes blow off to rain somewhere else. The rain may continue all evening.

Coming down from the summit is a long path of new lava. It is visible as an open scar on the mountainside, appearing very dark in the sunlight and completely barren of plants. (Some small plants may be visible from a short distance).

Subalpine Zone: The nights are chilly, not just cool. The mountain pine and valley fir are replaced by upland spruce on the older areas and small trees of angular spruce on the newer lava flows. Whispering birch grows here as an



important stunted shrub. The trees are shorter and less dense than lower down. The ground is often bare, with bushes (white cranberries, mushberry) and grasses under the trees. In the flooded meadows there are gapflower, yellow rockweed and alpine pinks.

At higher elevations the season is not as far advanced, so the birch leaves are younger and the wildflowers less mature. The rain comes in powerful but short-lived thunderstorms and occasionally in two or three days of steady rain. The nights produce heavy frost, though it is soon gone as the morning warms. In the upper half of this zone it sometimes snows lightly. Snowmelt has turned most of the paths to shallow streams and large areas are under a couple inches of water. Snowdrifts still lie under some trees and in sheltered spots.

The air is thinner, made more noticeable by the steady steepness of the mountain. The grade is steep. Only very long switchbacks make the climb even moderate. It is possible to go up more or less straight in a line, although sometimes that means climbing a wall of relatively new lava rock. The decreasing oxygen makes it hard to sustain rapid motion. The trees are confined to areas of old lava but big sections of new lava run between them. Often the new rock is almost as tall as the trees the lava did not quite reach, making a solid rock wall. In the forests the trees are scattered, with big empty areas of solid lava rock between them and a few berries and grasses growing thinly there.

Deer and elk graze, concentrated by the lava flows into the older forests. A few mountain sheep and goats live on the open slopes, apparently finding pioneer plants to eat. Squirrels and porcupines live in the trees. Mountain lions, wolves, bears, foxes, and weasels are the predators. There are sparrows, warblers and woodpeckers, jays, ravens and crows, owls, eagles and hawks, and vultures (or condors). No reptiles, amphibians or fish get this high. Insects are of limited diversity but abundant, especially mosquitoes and biting flies. There are also flies of various sorts, butterflies and moths, dragonflies, many beetles, and crickets.

In some places the lava still gives off heat, which can be detected either because snow does not stick there while it accumulates elsewhere, or because steam rises off the rock, or because it is warm (not hot) when touched. These places would likely be part way up a steep hill, where a little more lava was laid down as an active flow ended.

The zone of krummholz is unmistakable. The oldest forests up here do not seem very old. The only trees are angular



spruce and whispering birch. At the tree line both varieties are reduced to dwarfed shrubs, twisted and contorted. The branches are old and dense but angular spruce is brittle: travelers can break through the krummholz without much effort, although the branches are rough and unpleasant to handle. The wind blows hard and cold; it smells of sulfur and fire.

Alpine Zone: The band of krummholz is narrow; above that is alpine tundra. Only in midsummer (late June to early August in the Northern Hemisphere) is this area free of snow. In mid-June, deep snow fills in the low spots, but the open areas are full of bright green new plant growth. Most of it is alpine grass, but there are mountain chimes, stone roses and meadow blues. The tundra forms sunken islands between great sections of relatively new lava. Numerous mountain sheep and goats graze warily on the new growth. Wolves, mountain lions and foxes hunt here. High elevation birds are courting or nesting.

The days are sunny and cold with afternoon storms, dropping snow as often as rain. It is only warm in the sun and out of the wind. Nights are very cold. The air is thin and there is no firewood.

Higher still, the mountain is a complex of snowfields and windswept open rocks. Lava flows have overlain each other so one may frequently encounter walls of rock 10 to 30 feet (3 to 9 meters) high. Some have gentler slopes; others are nearly vertical on all sides. Snow piles in all the low spots, in some cases many feet deep. The wind whips through the snowfields and the sun shines without providing much warmth. The glare off the ice and snow is blinding, while the dark lava enhances the contrast. The air is very thin. Any snows comes as a storm with dangerously cold conditions. The snow covers everything, blotting out trails and concealing small glaciers. Where the lava has not fully cooled, it melts the snow.

Eventually travelers would be able to look down into the crater and see a great bowl stretched out below. It is clearly a long way down (with the same dangerous travel conditions as the alpine zone), and a long way across, though without reference points it is difficult to guess distance. For example, a volcano crater might be 1000 feet (300 meters) down and 1 mile (1.7 kilometers) across. In the center of the bowl, a low dome smokes during the day and glows red at night. The crater can be at any elevation; it could be in the montane zone, with montane forest growing up to where lava has killed it.





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Bits of the Mountains - Cards

The following pages contain a series of cards for in-game use. The cards contain the Bits descriptions in an easy-to-use format. These cards can be mixed and matched with other Tabletop Adventures fantasy Shards and Bits products.



Into the Mountains 01

Fluffy white clouds dot the azure sky. The track, after crisscrossing bare rocky slopes, turns and heads into a tree-filled valley. Intense sunshine is glaringly bright on the pale rocks, and the air warms. The path is steep, rough and edged with jagged rocks on all sides. Ahead, rich velvet-green grass beckons below broad open stands of aspen and pine. The round bright green leaves of the aspens rattle in a light breeze. A small river leaps noisily down a series of bright rapids along the stony slope

Into the Mountains 02

You come around the mountain and see the charred remains of a small wooden building. The pungent odor of burned wood still permeates the surroundings. The frame of the building can still be seen, but three walls are gone. The remains of the roof lie scattered in pieces on the dirt floor. Everything is blackened and scarred with damage. The far wall has a large hole through which the sun is shining. Shards of colored glass litter this area; though the pieces are dirtied by ashes, you can see that the majority of them are blue or white, with a few pieces of various other colors.

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Into the Mountains 03

The trees around you are tall and straight, rising with the mountain. As you make your way along you come to a strange sight. One lone tree appears to have been struck by lightning, or some other fiery force. It is split down the middle, though its trunk still stands, and it has burn marks all along its surface. [If the tree is examined closely:] When you approach the tree you notice that there is a hole in the trunk, and you can see something sitting inside. [If someone reaches inside the trunk:] You reach in and pull out a jug of what appears to be some sort of liquid. One quick sniff tells your senses that the jug is full of something strongly alcoholic [a very strong whiskey].

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Into the Mountains 04

A slight movement catches your attention as you pass by. The leaves on a nearby tree are dagger-shaped, in a pleasingly deep green color, and they are motionless in the still air. Yet one leaf is twitching feverishly, for no obvious reason.

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Into the Mountains 05

The day is bright and clear, and a gentle breeze blows at lower elevations. Atop the mountain that rakes the sky above you, a glistening veil of crystalline ice and snow is driven over the ridge. As wind gusts over the crest, the spindrift billows upward in great curls to catch the sun. As quiet as it seems from where you stand, the snow blowing off the divide above suggests that the high country is far from calm. [Passes, cols, and other low points can accelerate mountain winds to double their normal speeds as they funnel through the gaps. Spindrift is a good indicator of substantial winds at the crest of a divide.]

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Into the Mountains 06

Walking around a large tree you stop dead in your tracks, looking straight into the eyes of a full-grown moose. The entire mountain range seems to become deathly still and quiet for what must be an eternity as the moose looks at you with dead black eyes. Then, suddenly it bolts and runs off at an angle to your path. Though it looks clumsy as it runs away, it is obviously a powerful creature.

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Into the Mountains

07

The rocky path winds through the trees. It is difficult to see through the heavy foliage and branches. As you round a bend, giant stone structures come into view straight ahead. Stones taller than a person are stacked one on top of another, formed into a structure several stories high. Clearly these stones are not naturally formed this way, but there is no indication of who might have built it or why.

Into the Mountains

08

The pines recede as you enter a small field of grass, prickly weeds and yellow wildflowers. The tangy scent of the flowers tickles your nose. Beyond the field is a placid azure pond that mirrors the tall green trees on the far shore. Two triangular peaks push toward you on the surface as their counterparts push toward the blue sky above.

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Into the Mountains

09

A waterfall cascades from a spot high on the mountain. It is impossible to see where the water lands, for the terrain is thick with lush green brush and trees in that area. Even from this great distance, the boom of the waterfall thunders through the canyon, its mist rising into the thin air in sheets of translucent white.

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Into the Mountains

10

You stand on a tree-covered plateau, overlooking a break in the foothills below. A herd of bison [or other large grazing herd animals] moves through the gap in the hills. They are well beyond bowshot, but the noise and dust of the herd comes through on the breeze. Though the hills are green, they still yield up a churning brown dust that is borne away by the wind. To either side the foothills rise, the uneven terrain becoming ever steeper. Green-black clumps of pines grow thicker, eventually merging into the mountain forest at your back.

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Into the Mountains

11

All day long you climb [descend]. The path is well-used, weaving in and out between great rocks. Often it is in the open, with the clear sky above. Rocks and gravel strew the path and your feet often slide on the loose stones. The sun beats on your backs through the thin air and shines too brightly on the white and light gray rocks, tiring your eyes. Then the path leads into a forest and by contrast it is dim, almost dark. The air smells of pines and ferns. The ground is wet and muddy underfoot from snowmelt, and temporary streams wander along the path. Plants are pushing out of the wet ground and star-shaped white flowers are blooming here and there.

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Into the Mountains

12

Rounding a bend in the path you find yourself staring at a huge white boulder. It will not be hard to make your way around it, but something catches your eye as you near it. Where the base of the rock meets the ground there is a large anthill. This sandy hill is home to a colony of incredibly big ants, each about the size of a human thumb. It seems likely that a bite from just one of these insects would cause quite a bit of pain. The creatures are scurrying in and out of the opening in the hill, carrying pieces of dirt and rock. There is no visible source of food here for the ants, but it is obvious that they are thriving in this place.

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Into the Mountains 13

A single tree graces the trail. This spot on the path is covered with leaves, which crunch underneath your feet. As the wind rustles the leaves high above, another sound catches your ear. You see movement—something small high in the tree is clambering around, causing bits of bark and the occasional seed to rain down upon you. A pair of black eyes and a gray button nose poke out from around the main trunk and the small furry visitor regards you with a twitter. It clammers down further and stops on the next branch, its fluffy gray and white tail fur fluttering in the breeze. Another noise like a chirp comes out of its mouth. Then as suddenly as it appeared, it sprints to the main trunk again and skitters up the tree and out of view.

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Into the Mountains 15

The trail climbs [descends] into a narrow valley between high rock walls, along a babbling stream. All around are deciduous trees [birch/aspen] laden with light green leaves. The sun makes a long angle into the valley, putting a lovely pale light onto the leaves which filters gently through to the ground. A mild breeze makes light-flecks jump. You travel through the flickering forest with gravel at the stream's edge crunching underfoot. Soon you can walk [ride] out of the trees and into a meadow of deep green grasses interlaced with red and white flowers, mainly in shade from the high canyons around you. Just as you come out of the forest, something large and dark at the other side of the meadow bolts away, out of sight beyond a low hill ahead of you. [This thing could be an elk or a predator.]

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Into the Mountains 17

As you climb a low hill, there is a space where a tree has fallen down an eroding slope and you get a view of the countryside. [GM – select the appropriate description. Deciduous trees:] The trees roll on modest hills away to the horizon, mostly medium green with rounded tops, but here and there a darker pointed tree or a dead tree stands amid the green. It is silent except for the soft rustle of a breeze in the leaves. [Evergreen trees:] Rank upon rank of tall pines cover rolling hills to the distant horizon. The hills beyond are blue gray in the distance. The wind murmurs softly in their tops and brings you the rich smell of resins.

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Into the Mountains 14

You stand before an edifice of rock, at least twice the height of a large dragon, its surface rippled but otherwise free of imperfection. A lone fissure is within view. Shards of stone edge from its sides into the passage like spears from murder-holes in the mountain's walls. The path winds upward [downward] before passing out of sight around a bend.

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Into the Mountains 16

At the base of the steep mountain, overgrowth has nearly obscured the beginnings of three narrow, one-person-wide paths leading upward. Each trail takes a slightly different direction from the others, and only one appears to still be in use, based on its relative lack of underbrush. Although the evergreens near the start of the paths are quite large and tall, the trees are much younger and shorter in the direction where the nearest, most overgrown, path leads. A swath of those saplings has been ripped out; branches, trunks and roots poke out from swooping mounds and valleys of dried earth. Evidence of other landslides, both old and fresh, appear throughout this mountainside and may account for the paths' lack of use.

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Into the Mountains 18

Here the trail follows a dry creek bed. Under your feet the gravel feels harsh after miles of soft forest litter. The stones are rather pretty; some might be small agates, bits of marble or crystals of quartz. Then the gravel ends and you walk on sand. It has been disturbed by many footprints, suggesting that it has been weeks or months since the stream's water smoothed it

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Into the Mountains

19

As you come over a slight rise, a flock of wild fowl [turkeys] reacts in alarm to your presence. There are more than a dozen of them, several adults more than waist high, with shiny black feathers, and ten young ones the size of chickens, with long legs and necks. They turn and hurry away from you, spindly legs covering the uneven ground with surprising speed. In less than a minute, the last bird has vanished under the ferns.

Into the Mountains

20

Snow-white clouds lazily drift across the sky, causing ever-shifting shadows and light to play along the foothills. During one brief break in the cover, the light shines brilliantly upon the nearest mountain, revealing its steep sides rising high above the clouds. The light pinpoints on a large rounded rock cropping out of the curvy slopes partway up the mountainside. Surrounded by dark green trees and colorful brush, the blanched rock seems to gleam in the sun. On top of the rock, and barely visible to the naked eye, is a set of arches. Whether the arches are man-made or a natural geographical oddity cannot be seen from this distance. The clouds move together once more and the rock with its arches vanishes from view.

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Into the Mountains

21

Trees—you have seen nothing but trees for hours. Evergreens of all sorts have been your only scenery for an immeasurable amount of time. The pine needles stab your skin when you walk too close to the trees and you can hear other needles, and pinecones, crunching under your feet as you walk.

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Into the Mountains

22

Here, the trail meanders through a high valley. The forest is open and the going easy. For once there is dry dirt on the path, thick enough to cushion your [horses'] steps. On all sides the mountainsides slope up, thickly and uniformly covered by tall thin pines. The sides do not seem particularly steep, but that is an illusion of distance. It would be a long hike from the trail down the center of the valley to its edges. The slopes angle up at about a quarter of vertical, which would be an arduous climb. Seen from this distance, the hike up the sides looks gentle and pleasant: no great rocks stick out and the deep green forest rises smoothly to the crest of the hill. Beyond the forested slopes, another mountain range rises higher, with bare rock faces and snow lying on protected slopes.

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Into the Mountains

23

Clouds gather [in the night; in the morning; during the day] until the sky is overcast. The thick gray clouds hide the sky. The wind is brisk and chilly. Ahead, the mountains tower up, great dark shapes under the threatening sky. Under the clouds the tree-covered mountainsides are almost silhouettes against the sky, but beyond the nearer mountains rises a more majestic range. The sky over the high peaks is clear and brilliantly blue. On those distant heights, the snow shines in the strong light, glittering white, the more dramatic because the nearer range is so dark.

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Into the Mountains

24

The rocks here are a vibrant deep red. They have been eroded to make the red dirt on which you walk, the dirt that blows around as dark red dust. The breeze blows through cracks and fissures in the rocks, making an odd hollow sound and throwing the red dust into your faces. Despite the fact that you are riding in the sunlight, the breeze is coming down off the mountain and it is cold. Small bright-colored birds fly up in pursuit of insects, undeterred by the gusty wind. Your route crosses a snowmelt stream, all spread out across the trail, and it is a relief to have less red dust in the air. Finally the red rocks are behind you, and now the boulders are great blocks of yellow or dark gray stone. The forest closes in, with leaves and grass covering the ground, muting all sound

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Into the Mountains

25

You cross a little meadow, a beautiful place of nodding plants with bright flowers. Birds fly up crying as you approach, some bright blue and others with black and white feathers. Insects buzz among the colorful meadow flowers and the leaves of the trees flutter in the slight cool breeze. Then the trail turns, heading up the ridge on bare gravel, twisting left and right to find easier angles. The sun shines on your backs and the gravel reflects heat. You glance back once to the pleasant meadow. [Adventurers have a 25% chance to notice that it has the shape of a huge footprint.]

Into the Mountains

26

A dark spot can be seen far ahead in the sky between the peaks. [Only a person with exceptional vision will be able to make out wings and a bird-like shape.] Gradually the spot resolves so that everyone can see that it is some type of creature soaring on the wind, high up. As time goes by it holds more or less the same spot, appearing and disappearing from view as you twist and turn up the trail and as the fluffy white clouds close and open. By midafternoon it is clear that it is a very large winged animal, but perhaps not a bird. [The GM can give hints as to what type of animal it is, if desired. For example, "The tail is too long for a bird." Or, "you can tell it is not a bird because it has four legs." Possibilities: dragon, wyvern, hippogriff, pegasus, etc.]

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Into the Mountains

27

The path winds gently to the right, through a high mountain meadow laced with sweet-smelling wildflowers. The only sound is the monotonous buzzing of bees in the field. The trail you are on comes to a crossroads, branching off in two separate directions. Nothing marks either path, and the terrain is not visible beyond a few hundred feet [30-60m] in either direction. At the center of the crossroads, a small pile of rocks is stacked carefully. [This may mark a holy place, or be some type of trail marker.]

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Into the Mountains

28

The rocky terrain around you is lit up by the brilliant sun. The light makes the rocks and patches of snow almost too bright to look at. The mountains continue on in your view, one behind the other, alternating in a staggered pattern. One is a rocky mountain, another is forested, then finally in the distance a snow-capped peak. This last seems to have some activity. You aren't sure what it is, but you definitely do see movement. As you continue to watch, a large flying creature takes off from the peak and flaps its massive wings several times. Before you can say anything, it vanishes from view into a cloud overhead. Judging the size of the creature from here, you might be distinctly glad it is miles away from you.

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Into the Mountains

29

The path here is steep and clearly has not been traveled by anyone in recent years. It has been obliterated in some areas by rocks which have tumbled from above. They are too heavy to move, piled one on top of another to a height twice that of the average person, and the narrow tracks the deer [or mountain sheep] have made around them are nearly impassable to humans.

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Into the Mountains

30

When you stop to rest, the mosquitoes catch up. They are easily ignored when you are moving, but when you sit, you quickly find a cloud of them hovering around your head. You can kill one or two when they land to drink blood, but there are many more. Their wings make a constant, muted buzz. If you are inattentive you find your skin covered with insects stabbing into it. Worse, they easily get into your mouth, nose and eyes. They taste bad, make your nose run, and could irritate your eyes so that they water for an hour.

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Into the Mountains

31

The slope has leveled off here and you can see through the trees that you will have an easier journey for at least a while. Even though the sun doesn't hit you directly because of the full canopy of leaves and branches above you, it is still very hot. Your clothes cling to the sweat on your body as you move. Suddenly you are surprised by a crash of sound behind you. Before you can even turn around, a rather large red fox bounds by, running as if being chased. [If the adventurers look around:] You do not see anything else except the fox, which quickly disappears into the trees ahead of you.

Into the Mountains

32

Birds suddenly flock into the air, startled and cawing in their surprise, as the pounding, thumping sound of a rockfall comes from somewhere up ahead. The rocks bounce and crash, occasionally hammering into trees with a woody bump. You are lucky that the rocks were far enough away that no one was hurt, so you are fine – as long as no more rocks come down.

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Into the Mountains

33

Wolves howl above you as you journey through the dark forest that lines this mountainous region. They sound distant but you know that sounds can be deceiving, so you must tread cautiously. As you continue your expedition the air becomes still and quiet for several moments. Then, like a faint echo, the howling begins again. It sounds as if it is further away than the first time you heard it, but as time passes the echoes of the calls start to sound as if the creatures are approaching your location.

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Into the Mountains

34

A column of smoke, thin and almost impossibly long, rises up to the heights of the mountains. You see no signs of a fire, but the scent of one has found its way to your nostrils.

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Into the Mountains

35

The trail climbs [descends] steadily beside a fast-running little river, just beyond the bare rocks of its banks. The water splashes noisily. For a bit you travel on level ground through a patch of trees, their fluttering leaves casting cool shade. Small pines grow under the deciduous trees and the pine smell is very strong. Young green grasses and tiny white or yellow wildflowers cover the ground. The trail emerges from the trees to ford the river. Below you the mountains drop steeply down; the slopes are bare for a long drop, and then the tops of trees can be seen. Above you, the slope is almost as steep, with great granite outcrops and scattered, twisted pines. The icy cold water of the ford is knee deep, but the ford is wide enough that the current is not dangerously strong.

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Into the Mountains

36

The enticing smell of evergreen is in the air as you travel through this area heavily forested with pine. The gentle breeze winds its way through the trees, carrying the aroma of many different types of pine. The odor is so prevalent that you can smell it clinging to your clothing. Squirrels chatter at you as you continue through the sloping forest, and the temperature seems to rise a bit as you travel along.

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Into the Mountains

37

Below you, a cliff falls steeply down, dropping almost vertically. The dark rock is slick and very smooth. [In Spring: Tiny streams of water trickle down the rock face.] **This trail is narrow, with only a long step between you and open space. Now and then you send pieces of stone over the edge; they drop out of sight into the forest far below. The cliff is so steep that almost no plants grow on it except one or two twisted pines that hang precariously out from cracks in the rock. Below you, a big hawk takes flight, soaring out over the tops of the pine forest below the cliff.**

Into the Mountains

38

[A character could kick up this shell while walking around or setting up camp, or it might just be lying in plain sight, to be found by anyone who is looking around.] **You see a large shell of some type poking out of the earth.** [If someone picks up the shell:] **It is long and thin, definitely not a snail shell; it looks instead like a seashell.** [The shell once held a razor clam, delicious in stew but hardly known for its migratory properties.]

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Into the Mountains

39

You slowly climb [descend] the steep trail that leads up [down] the mountain. You think you hear the call of an eagle or another hawk as you watch your step on the dangerous incline. Rounding a bend in the path you notice a plethora of raspberry brambles clinging to the side of an almost-vertical wall. Thousands of the small, juicy red fruits hang from the wall and though they do not quite look ripe, they are nearly so and you could easily pick and save them for a later meal.

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Into the Mountains

40

[The following should not be obvious to everyone. An average individual should have about one chance in ten of noticing:] **A tiny space between two hanging rocks seems to be insignificant at first but something about it seems odd. As the path brings you closer, you realize that parts of the rock faces are worn strangely smooth, as if they have been rubbed.** [If someone investigates further:] **You can just make out some indentations worn darkly into the rock.** [This was the home of a monk seeking enlightenment far from the actions and involvements of other people. Some suggest that coming close to the physical space occupied by a holy master such as this will provide, in some unknown way, arcane or spiritual benefits to those involved.]

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Into the Mountains

41

Scruffy grass grabs at your boots as you ascend the next hill. Sharp verdant peaks, reaching toward the blue of the sky, poke their heads above the hill's crest. Each step closer to the summit reveals trees waving side-to-side as they climb in rows to the tops of the distant heights.

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Into the Mountains

42

The sun is shining bright, but gives off little heat at this high elevation. A cold breeze cuts through the canyons, enhancing the chill in the air. Dark storm clouds can be seen off in the distance, probably heading your way.

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43

Stones bounce and the sound rings out and then, a few heartbeats later, rings out again. [If the party decides to try it out:] **You call out in amazement and then your voice comes back to you once more. This seems interesting – you experiment and soon the mountain pass rings out with the echoes of your calls.** [Of course, if the party is trying to maintain silence or at least discretion then this can be disallowed and the phenomenon itself observed without contributing to it.]

Into the Mountains

44

A rocky ledge widens against the mountain's side, just enough to provide a place to rest on this steep climb. [The dark soil is dangerously loose, soaked deep down from the melted snow. Any step too close to the edge could cause the fragile ledge to collapse, likely resulting in severe injury to anyone falling from such a height.]

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Into the Mountains

45

The hillside beneath your feet is more than damp; each step squishes underfoot and water starts to seep into your footwear. The plants have changed, turning into the segmented, reedy grasses you would expect to find in a swamp. Dragonflies flit from reed to reed and up the hill a frog starts to sound. Still, the source of all this wetness is unclear. [Hillside swampland occurs at the base of sandstone cliffs where the water-saturated stone provides a steady seeping of water all season.]

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46

The hills and ridges rise into the distance, fading into deep greens and then purples. The taller peaks are lost in the clouds most of the morning but the sky clears toward midday. High peaks tower above the nearer hills and mountains, rising to very great heights. Snow covers their sides and shines in the sun, looking almost metallic. [Travelers have a 15% chance of perceiving: For a moment it looks like a great armored serpent lying on the heights.] **Then the clouds close in again and only the nearer and lower mountains can be seen.**

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Into the Mountains

47

Winded from climbing [descending] the steep incline for so long, you look for a place to rest for a moment, and spot a large flat rock ahead. As you approach it you notice spectacular hues of light green and dark red shining in the sun. When you finally stand beside the rock you can see that the colors are coming from some form of lichen that has infested almost the entire rock. The green and red colors are beautiful to the eye, but you can't tell if they are safe to touch. [The lichen is quite harmless, and is actually a mutated form of rock tripe or Gyrophora, which is edible and especially tasty when combined with meat.]

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Into the Mountains

48

Ahead of you is a lone dead oak tree, standing rigid, as if keeping watch for any interlopers. A faint buzzing sound can be heard as you pass close to the barren tree. You notice that part of the oak's bark has been stripped away at about eye level, and you think that you see the movement of some type of insect on that section of the tree. [If anyone gets closer to the tree:] **As you approach the tree you can tell that the buzzing sound you heard was definitely coming from the tree. You notice a solitary wasp walking around a small hole in the oak. The wasp circles the opening for a moment and then quickly walks through the hole, disappearing into the tree. You can still hear buzzing as the wasp disappears, and realize the sound must be the buzzing of many wasps.**

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Into the Mountains

49

The wind blows strongly in your face as you push ahead. You suddenly hear a high-pitched chattering sound, and off to your left you see a fat striped squirrel sitting on the white branch of a birch tree. You notice dozens of nuts of different varieties poured out of a hole at the base of the tree; if his chattering is any indicator the squirrel considers you to be a threat to his horde.

Into the Mountains

50

Emerald and golden grasses soften your footsteps as you wend your way through evergreen and white-barked trees [aspen]. Quick rustles in the grass here and there indicate startled wildlife, and sometimes you catch a glimpse of the rodent or reptile responsible for the disturbance as it scurries away. Often you need to step over, walk around, or climb over granite rocks blocking your path. Above the treetops the sky is a clear, bold, azure blue, and the air is filled with the songs of birds.

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Into the Mountains

51

Ahead you see a rope, dangling across the middle of the path behind an odd rock. The wind picks up, causing the rope to sway back and forth. As you approach, you see it isn't a rock after all, but the skull of a skeleton clothed in a simple woven tunic and tattered pants. [Further inspection reveals that the musty yellowish skull has an irregular dent in it and several ribs are broken.] The rope leads up the cliff at least twenty feet. There is a small opening in the cliff face near where rope connects into the cliff; from where you stand it looks as if it might be large enough for a halfling to enter. [The rope is old but sturdy. The rock, however, has eroded and will break and fall if any significant weight is put on the rope. It was held by a now-rusted spike which will also fall.]

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Into the Mountains

52

The mountain trail snakes back and forth as it climbs the rock-strewn slope. Great boulders litter the mountainside; the trail picks its way around them. The trees here are a mix of high mountain spruce and fir with some of the toughest of the pines of lower elevations. Under them are fragrant evergreen shrubs. Squirrels chatter and dash out of sight and now and then you spot a mountain sheep on a rock face above you. Turning a corner, you find a big pine, still green, blocking the trail. It was clearly hit by lightning: the great trunk is split, and the two halves, each wider than a man's waist, are both sprawled across the path. The trunk is slightly blackened but not seriously burned. There is no easy way around; the great boulders and steep rock faces offer no alternate path.

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Into the Mountains

53

The path ends at an open field, with grass tall enough to hide any markers which may have been left behind by previous travelers. A herd of deer graze in the distance and the field is lined by dead trees, their ancient trunks burned black from the constant lightning that strikes this region.

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Into the Mountains

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A sudden rattle startles you and you look around just as a handful of small stones comes bouncing down the mountain ahead of you. They came from somewhere high above but there is no sign of what caused them to fall like that. The rest of the rocks on the slope seem stable, but of course that was what you thought before that little shower of stones.

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Into the Mountains

55

The narrow, steep trail that you are on opens to a small clearing. Two other heavily overgrown paths converge here, and lead to a final short passage out to a large flat rock overlooking the foothills [optionally: and the ocean beyond]. On this rock, standing like silent sentinels, are massive stone arches connected by a series of low stone walls. Bits of partially burned, rotting wood can still be found pressed into the bottom-most wall crevices. This abandoned structure, perhaps once a fortress or a grand house, frames the view of the cottony clouds below, which hover over the dark foothills [optionally: and sparkling blue ocean with its far coastal islands]. [The cool, moist air blowing up the coast will continue to decay the remnants of this structure's framework, leaving just the bare skeleton to slowly erode away in time.]

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Into the Mountains

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This hillside is thick with plant life, but several patches of it are brown and dead for no apparent reason. The air feels damp, even though the sun is out and shining down through gaps in the clouds. Very few birds are in the area, only a few harshly squawking crows. There is a distant rumble, as though the puffy white clouds overhead are about to start pouring rain down. The crows squawk even louder and take off, flapping their wings frantically as they climb into the sky. Suddenly a white gout of steam sprays up from the middle of a patch of dead bushes, casting a geyser of brown leaves and boiling water into the air. [The disturbance can be a single geyser, the first in a series of geysers, or the start of a cataclysmic eruption.]

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The tree stop and the path here narrows and stretches across a steep hillside filled with flat shards of dark gray rock [shale]. The flat surfaces of the rocks glisten in the sun and the edges appear sharp. [Shale makes for unsteady footing.] Above the path you can see the field of rocks extend upward to a vertical bluff where thin layers of the dark rock have crumbled away. The rock field extends down the steep hillside for a good piece before the trees re-establish their foothold. [If members of the party misstep as they cross the field, they risk sliding uncontrollably down the slope. At a minimum, exposed skin and thin fabric would be cut up and torn by the rock.]

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The path's incline is steep, but only for a short distance; it widens as the terrain flattens out on a mesa. Trees are thick at this elevation, providing shade from the burning sun and at least some shelter from the afternoon rains.

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Into the Mountains

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The sun peeking through the trees warms the forested hill that you are climbing [descending]. You continue onward and soon a cool scent of damp earth fills your senses as you enter an area that is strangely devoid of almost anything but tall grass. Several tree stumps stand about two feet high in this open area, indicating that this place once had trees like the rest of the hill. You notice a moss on the stumps, a strange growth that is rough to the touch, many different shades of green, and with the earthy smell of decay.

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Somewhat ahead of you and across a deep valley you see what looks like a ruined fortress. Three large walls of dark rock stand but the area between them has fallen to about half their height. The tops, once certainly uniform in height, are visibly irregular from erosion. You know of no one who might have built a fortress here—no current defenders and no ancient civilizations. As the trail continues up along the ridge, you realize that the fortress is far too large to have been built by humans. It is massive: twenty, perhaps forty, times the height of a man. The walls, too, are huge: surely many paces thick. [Perhaps the walls are actually a natural formation, where a section of an old mountain has eroded to form the appearance of ruined walls, or perhaps not.]

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Into the Mountains

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The trees sparkle and applaud as the mountain breeze passes through their branches, the light undersides of their leaves alternating with their dark tops. The rush of their applause echoes against the peaks nearby.

Into the Mountains

62

Knobby roots, fallen tree trunks and thick layers of dead leaves make this mountain treacherous. It is very difficult to get a solid footing owing to the unpredictable depths of the fallen leaves. You get the impression that there are numerous hollows in the mountainside, as there are several areas in the leaves that are slightly lower than the rest.

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Into the Mountains

63

Your road jogs around a corner, revealing a very pretty sight. In one direction there is a majestic mountain covered with fir and pine trees. Even from here, the fresh scents reach your nostrils. Bits of snow highlight the branches of the higher trees and glisten in the sun. Opposite this mountainside is a solid cliff face draped in shadow. The rock is colored in red and brown tints and stands like a formidable tower. The surface appears flaky but no rock slides of any sort are apparent. Your route runs between the two heights, giving you a nice view to enliven your long journey.

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Into the Mountains

64

The trail through the forest takes you across spongy moss-covered ground, very pleasant to the feet. The pines smell pungent and fresh; the breeze tosses their tops gently. A flock of gray birds feed in the trees, chattering, but they take flight as you pass under them. The trail weaves, staying relatively level and detouring around great boulders bigger than ox carts. There are a few small shrubs with tiny leaves, and along the ground vibrant new growth, intensely green. Against one of the rocks leans a circular wooden shield, painted in black and red circles, its surface dented but intact. [The leather straps are in good condition; the shield cannot have been there very long, but there is no indication of how it got there.]

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Into the Mountains

65

The sun beats down as you traverse the steep mountain path. The day is not very hot, but is extremely bright. No clouds stain the sky as you try to focus on your footing, while squinting to see where you are going. About three hundred feet [100m] ahead you make out a cliff that ascends almost straight up for a distance that is further than the sunlight allows you to determine. As you approach closer to the rock face you notice a lone pine tree is poking out of the crag about fifty feet up. [15m] The sight of this full-grown conifer forcing its life right out of the rock is amazing. The tree is twisted and gnarled, obviously from trying to grow toward the life-giving sun.

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Into the Mountains

66

The winds, which had been light earlier, pick up. They blow chillingly cold down from higher elevations, smelling of pines and snowfields. The wind whips the branches of the great fir trees until they shudder and sigh. Thin brown leaves blow past you, tumbling over the precipices and floating down, down, down toward unseen valleys below. Then the winds shift and the leaves fly up, up, up, past your heads, to vanish over a hill. Fine reddish dust from below showers you. Over the vast drop beside you, songbirds struggle to stay aloft, dark wings flapping vigorously, but the birds go nowhere. Higher up, great raptors soar effortlessly, watching.

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Into the Mountains

67

The mountain surface is jagged, as if a tremendous force has thrust its interior toward the sky. Black onyx shafts, razor sharp, jut from the cliff face, ready to cut even the noblest of those who would attempt to scale the majestic heights. The jet-black rocks glisten as polished glass. Their beauty hides their deceptiveness and peril.

Into the Mountains

68

You make your way over the next difficult precipice. The air is much thinner now than when you first started your climb and breathing is more difficult. You pull yourself up to discover a hollow section in the wall of the mountain. Although the fissure appears natural, you can tell that it has been used as a makeshift campsite by others. What is left of a fire pit now sits cold and it is hard to determine how long it's been since the last travelers departed. [This area will provide fair shelter from the elements if the party should decide to rest here.]

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Into the Mountains

69

The day is bright and clear, and a gentle breeze blows at lower elevations. Atop the mountain that rakes the sky above you, a glistening veil of crystalline ice and snow is driven over the ridge. As wind gusts over the crest, the spindrift billows upward in great curls to catch the sun. As quiet as it seems from where you stand, the snow blowing off the divide above suggests that the high country is far from calm. [Passes, cols, and other low points can accelerate mountain winds to double their normal speeds as they funnel through the gaps. Spindrift is a good indicator of substantial winds at the crest of a divide.]

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Into the Mountains

70

The trail slopes steeply here. Near the crest of the hill there is a gap in the trees to your right: a towering stump stands there, split and blackened [by lightning]. Around it the ground is black with only a few small plants. The thin mountain air smells clean and is fragrant from the pines. You start along the steep trail; stones dislodged by your feet [horses' hooves] bounce down the slope beside you. The sun is warm, but the air from above keeps you cool. In the shade of the big trees beside the trail, the plants are deep green and knee high.

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Into the Mountains

71

On the slopes far below, you can make out the figure of a man poking about among the scrubby undergrowth sticking to the bones of the rocks. He is a thin man and a spot of sunlight reflecting from his pate suggests baldness. There is a sack slung over his shoulder and a forked stick in his hand. The man suddenly thrusts his stick into a bush and, a second later, maneuvers a wriggling snake into the sack, which he then draws tight with the string he is presumably holding in his other hand. Looks like snake soup for someone tonight! [This still happens in Korea.]

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Into the Mountains

72

One single tree stands alone on an exposed precipice. It is a dark tree with just a few branches and scarcely any leaves. Its limbs creak dryly. A noose swings from one long branch, empty but for the shadows around it. This would certainly be a lonely place to die.

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Into the Mountains

73

Vultures fly overhead, several hundred yards from where you stand. The trees at this height of the mountain are young, but they keep you from seeing what interests the carrion-craving birds. [If the adventurers begin to move toward the area where the vultures are flying overhead:] After walking for several minutes your nose is assailed by the smell of death. Through the trees you can see what looks like a pile of branches, dead grass and brambles, but as you get closer you see that several bodies lie piled on the ground beneath the brush. [The bodies have already been stripped of anything of value.]

Into the Mountains

74

Riotous color covers this rolling hillside. Due to a lack of trees, flowers and flowering brush have taken over. They stretch for great distances in all directions, up and down the mountainside. Similar patches of color are visible on a hillside that must be at least two miles off.

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Into the Mountains

75

The creek's cold, clear water trickles, gurgles and splashes around boulders, flowing from pool to pool by a series of small waterfalls and arching rocky slopes. Although the water level is low, debris of dry branches and small rocks above the banks indicates a past flood. Now, though, several types of young leafing and evergreen trees grow right along the creek bed. Colorful grasses, shrubs and mosses cover the ground among the trees and even grow in the creek itself, especially where a beaver dam has slowed the flow of water. Small fish dart around submerged rocks and hide in the trailing foliage while water bugs skim the surface. Animal tracks [of beaver, deer, goats, bear] crisscrossing on a sandbar in the middle of the creek indicate that this is a favorite watering hole.

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Into the Mountains

76

The direction you want to go is across the valley, but there does not seem to be a trail. You know your goal from the land and the maps but whatever path there may have been seems completely gone, so you strike out and try to travel in a straight line toward the point on the horizon that you know is your goal. You twist and dodge through trees and around rocks, trying to find a reasonable path. Then you find a dry riverbed running the right direction and the travel is quite easy for a while. The gravel of the former river bottom crunches under your [your horses'] feet.

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Into the Mountains

77

The mountain path winds onward. A few snowdrops line the way, their drooping white heads symbolizing the dispiriting nature of your seemingly endless trek. Next to the snowdrops, almost obscured by their slender stems, is a tiny wooden cup that has been knocked over, its contents spilled on the thirsty rocks. Next to the cup is a small wooden frame with a crudely sketched portrait in it. There is no indication as to who the person may have been. [It is a common custom in many parts of the world, when a person has died at some dangerous spot, to leave a picture of the person at the place of death.]

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Into the Mountains

78

This mountain is made of reddish rock, clay, and very little else. Its slope is not very steep, but it is particularly hard to get and keep your footing – water runoff [or something similar] has cut gullies and ravines everywhere into the mountainside. A few patches of scrub grass and hardscrabble brush eke out their livings between the clay and the rock. When the sun passes behind a cloud the mountainside takes on an unhealthy sheen, as though it was covered with grease. You can see several bones, bleached white, poking forlornly out of a sloping patch of reddish mud.

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Into the Mountains

79

Your feet squish across the muddy brown grass as you descend [climb] the mountainside. Puffy gray clouds seem to be keeping the sun from drying the area. The land levels off into a big patch of icy white and brown slush, which crackles as you stomp through it and makes your feet even colder and wetter. The air is very cool in this area, and you can see more wet ground ahead.

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Into the Mountains

81

Ahead of you is a sight that you have never seen. A cliff face appears to have been assaulted by large boulders. Great, round indentations pepper the mountain wall. Huge rocks have piled up at the bottom of the cliff, along with chunks of rock that have broken off of the rock face. As you stare at it, it seems that someone or something has thrown the boulders at the wall of the cliff, tearing off large sections of rock. It could possibly have been done by large catapults, but what reason anyone would have to attack a sheer face with siege engines is **unknown**. [One explanation is that giants were doing some type of target practice.]

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Into the Mountains

83

Birds have been flying about most of the day and by now they scarcely attract your attention at all. However, they are still capable of surprising you. One large crow comes flying toward you, swooping over the mountain slopes as if on some kind of a mission. Then it flies directly into the trunk of a tree – bang – and falls stunned to the ground. Before you have a chance to decide whether or not to laugh, the bird is already staggering to its feet, stepping backward and forward. Then, the bird seems to shake off its dizziness and launches itself back into the sky to continue about its business.

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Into the Mountains

80

The trail comes out of the forest to cross a cliff face. It follows a narrow ledge, probably not completely natural, which winds along the middle of the cliff face. Beside you the mountain slopes away, dropping hundreds of yards [meters]. The treetops below are indistinct beneath small white clouds. No plants grow on that sheer slope. If you slipped, you would fall through space for several heartbeats before hitting the pines below. The trail is wide enough for a pack-carrying human to walk easily, but terribly bare, with no plants or big solid rocks between you and the bottom far below. Above, the cliff is as steep as it is below: treeless cold dark stone with a few small cracks and irregularities. The cold wind tugs at you and the gravel of the path crunches underfoot.

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Into the Mountains

82

Traveling up the steep path you see something ahead of you. As you approach you notice that a lone broken wagon wheel lies off to the side of the path. It looks as if it may have been here for quite some time, but it is hard to tell. The path doesn't seem wide enough for a horse-drawn wagon to safely traverse, but you find no other debris or clues as to the origins of this lone wheel.

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Into the Mountains

84

You have been traveling across spines of rock that have the shape of a brown dragon's hand, but now they give way to a low valley. Leaves dance around you as if celebrating your arrival, or perhaps your doom. Tall fangs of rock bar your path on the far side. Each spire is tattooed with shaded lines of white and brown. A pink haze hangs over the teeth fading into the azure sky above.

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Into the Mountains

85

Pinecones litter the ground at your feet. All are in various stages of opening their prickly brown scales. As you pick one up to get a closer look at it, a flutter of brown one-winged seeds emerges, twirling as they go.

Into the Mountains

86

Isolated trees stand out from various outcroppings, giving the impression of markers or flagpoles. Between these few instances of greenery the mountain is desolate and bare. At a distance you see a small cream-colored creature dart from one tree to another.

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Into the Mountains

87

The stony mountain looms above you, the steep slope broken only by a few small outcroppings. A few bushes with barely any leaves reach feebly upward, eking out a living on the mountainside. Bare white bones protrude from a large jumbled heap of stones next to you, perhaps indicating an old rockslide.

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Into the Mountains

88

Broken trees and brush cover this part of the hillside and the stink of dried blood is everywhere. A huge oak tree has been broken in half by something, with splinters as big as fingers lying all around the stump. Hordes of flies and some crows fly around, collecting unidentifiable scraps and blood.

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Into the Mountains

89

“Over the mountains are mountains.” You remember what the old folk told you as you were so keen to leave the town of [insert the name of a suitable stopping place] and were unwilling to stop to listen to their copious, slowly-delivered advice. Now you can see their point, as you tramp over what seem to be endless slopes and peaks and valleys, one after another. “Make efforts to be calm and patient,” said the old folks. “You will find in your life that over the mountains are mountains. And then, over the top of the mountains are more mountains.”

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Into the Mountains

90

The path you have been following continues for some distance. Below you is a lovely view of the foothills and plains you left behind [you are approaching]. As you round the next turn of the switchback, you come to a small shrine carved into the rock face. The holy place does not look as though it has been visited lately and is in disrepair, though not wholly forgotten – a wreath of mountain plants rests on a pedestal, although it looks to be many seasons old. [The shrine could belong to any deity associated with mountains, stone or earth.]

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Into the Mountains

91

This bare brown-gray mountainside is imposing in its desolation. A long-dead tree lies across the path up ahead, turned pale gray-white by long exposure to the elements. Pieces of shattered bones lie scattered around the path, including what appears to be part of a human skull with a long horn growing out of the forehead. The area is so devoid of life that there are not even any birds or insects – the bone shards were picked clean of meat some time ago. [In settings without mutants or supernatural creatures, the skull is a trick of the eye – a deer antler or something similar lies next to the skull to make it look strange. In other situations, it was left behind by a creature killed years ago.]

Into the Mountains

92

The trees are varied and thick here as you make your way up [down] the hill. The air is moving calmly but steadily and you can smell all the aromas that an old, dark forest has to offer. As the slope becomes more pronounced you notice something ahead of you; it looks as if a ghost is fluttering in the wind. It's hard to tell exactly what it is because of how thickly the trees stand together. [If the party approaches the object:] As you gain ground on the flowing object you discover that it is simply a silk cloak that has caught on the branch of a tree. It looks to be made of very high quality silk, dyed red and now faded. You do not see any footprints or other clues that might tell you to whom the cloak once belonged.

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Into the Mountains

93

The forest disperses to a barren mountainside. All around are shades of slate gray, except for the dark of a pit falling from the high path. Sheer rock seems to stretch down seventy or eighty feet [20-24m], the surface glassy, with no handholds. Shapes can be made out at the bottom of the pit. They are disturbingly human—but larger than might be expected from this distance. [If the adventurers are able to get a better look at the remains:] Closer inspection reveals almost complete skeletons, with scraps of hide adhering to their bones. They seem to have been thrown into the pit and left there. [This is a graveyard for the hill giants in the area, who revere it as a holy place.]

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Into the Mountains

94

Towards midday [midnight], you become aware of a dim halo surrounding the sun [moon]. Throughout the afternoon [night] the light becomes increasingly diffused as the halo grows, until everything is bathed in flat, muted luminescence. The halo endures until sunset [moonset], when the orb disappears into thicker haze on the horizon. [The halo, or sundog, is a byproduct of high-altitude moisture and presages precipitation, probably within the next day.]

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Into the Mountains

95

Several small furry creatures no larger than your hand [chipmunks] skitter along the edge of the path. One creature stops and cocks its head, staring briefly at you before it scampers off again. These creatures are more tail than body and each has several thin black stripes stretching down its back from the tiny head to the fluffy tail. Wherever you see one of these creatures, you see five or so of its furry brethren.

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Into the Mountains

96

A distant roar echoes up and down the valley. The open stone surfaces, devoid of plant cover, reflect and alter the sound. It could have come from just about anywhere in the valley, and its source is uncertain.

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Into the Mountains

97

The biting wind whistles past your ear as you climb [descend] the next rock. Its rough surface scrapes your hands as you clamber up [down] it. All around are large rocks and boulders. Jumping to the next area, you finally come to some sturdy ground with a small path around the side of the mountain. You turn the corner and come face to face with a small mountain goat. Its mangy gray hair seems to do well in keeping it warm from this cold wind. It bleats at you and backs away, keeping one round eye on you at all times. It drops its mouthful of grass and then, still bleating, turns and bounds off around the mountain.

Into the Mountains

98

Bright mushrooms dot the slope in a shaded area. Most are a rich brown, but a few are reddish, one almost bright red. On more careful scrutiny, you can see they are growing on a leaf and litter-covered mound, roughly in the shape of a tree.

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Into the Mountains

99

This stony mountain is covered with jagged and broken surfaces where stones have cracked off. Broken stone and boulders lie on ledges and in the scrub brush. The clouds overhead make everything look gray and dull, but some movement catches your eye. Watching for a few moments, you see some type of mountain goats – they move carefully from boulder to ridge, then leap across open spaces in search of plants and water. [The goats are too far away for the adventurers to attack them except with ranged weapons. If someone shoots and misses, there is a small chance that the weapon could cause a minor rockfall.]

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Into the Mountains

100

Somewhere among the peaks, a notch in the rock aligns so perfectly with the prevailing wind that it creates an eerie whistling sound. You cannot tell from which direction the sound comes; it is carried by the wind, rising to a scream, then falling to a murmur. The effect is disconcerting; with any luck, the wind will die at twilight, silencing the dreadful keening.

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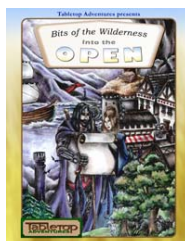
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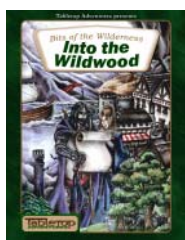
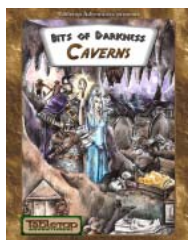
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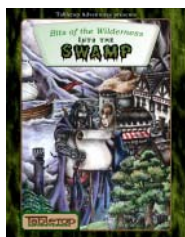
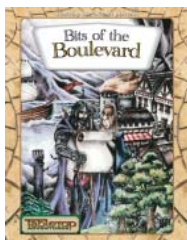
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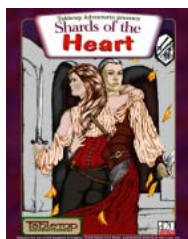
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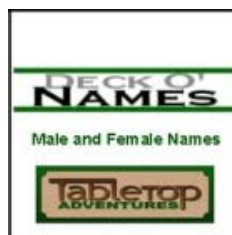


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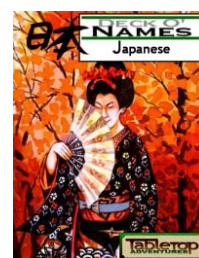
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