

AUTUMN PERILS



THE BLACK ANTLER HUNT / GRAVEWAKE KEEP

TWO LEVEL-5 ADVENTURES | 3-5 PLAYERS + DM

Two nights. Dangerous company.

A magistrate chooses the prey. A necromancer prepares to open a city by force. Enter an autumn forest stalked by an antlered revenant, then a storm-battered keep where the prisoners are building their captor's weapon.

Two complete adventures of investigation, infiltration, tactical combat, and consequential choices. Each stands alone. Together they give the same level-5 party two very different nights of play.

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Created with Familiar Content Studio and Publish Review. Writing and twelve original illustrations are AI-assisted. Keyed diagrams are original. Editorial and print checks were performed by the authoring host; these adventures have not been independently playtested. All enemy profiles and special challenge procedures are original homebrew for 2014-style 5e. Core rules and player characters are required. Familiar is independent of Wizards of the Coast. Personal table use and sharing with your own players are permitted.

Running these adventures

A familiar kind of danger

Use normal combat and death-save rules. Villains may lie, flee, or kill; surrender and retreat still have practical outcomes. Discuss captivity, threatened murder, and undead before play. The text avoids graphic injury but does not promise harmless defeat.

One party, two independent stories

Both adventures assume four level-5 characters and include adjustments for three or five. Allow four to five hours apiece, with a break. If playing them in sequence, give the party ordinary downtime and a full rest between adventures. Advancement follows your campaign pace; no automatic level increase is assumed.

Pressure that players can understand

Place each adventure's six-step clock where the table can see it. Advance only for the listed triggers. Tell players when a rest or delay will cost a step. Never spend a step merely because they discuss a plan or ask what their characters can see.

Use the images at the table

The twelve illustrations depict four named NPCs, four adversaries, and four locations. Show a portrait when its subject is met and a monster only when it appears. The separate player art folio contains large clean copies. Architectural illustrations establish atmosphere; keyed diagrams and text determine distances, cover, routes, and active defenses.

Before the first roll

Read the chosen overview, enemy profiles, and ending paths. Select the party-size adjustment. Prepare three handouts, six clock tokens, and markers for the horn braces or siege couplings. Choose who tracks the objective while you run the opposition. Never hide an essential operating instruction behind a single failed check.

The DM control sheet

Hunt: what actually ends the curse

Three copper braces protect the horn. Remove all three; then break the horn. Defeating the Rider buys until next dusk. Killing Corven does not erase an entered name. Destroying the trophy on the Rider's belt does nothing. These distinctions are discoverable, never secret adjudication traps.

Hunt: keep the geography honest

Town and lodge are twenty minutes apart. A hero cannot run between them during one combat round. At clock 6 the party sees the tannery under attack before Dain dies. Evacuation preserves a rescue; an active horn preserves tomorrow's threat. Do not add surviving earlier hound packs to the finale's printed enemy budget.

Keep: count four preparation results

Quiet Entry affects Sera's initial posture. Sera's Help holds the gate and blocks the one reserve. Prisoners Free requires an actual extraction plan. Dark Signal prevents that reserve from receiving the launch message. These benefits change the situation without creating free allied turns in the boss fight.

Keep: separate three objectives

Rescue prisoners, stop the Ram, and capture Ilyra are distinct. One disabled coupling removes the trampling burst; two stop route advances; three shut the Ram down. Direct HP damage also works. Killing Ilyra does not stop it. Once stopped, one minute dismantles the brazier permanently.

Keep: run the finale visibly

Use separate initiatives for Ilyra and the Ram. Mark the six route advances; ordinary repositioning never adds advances. Announce the brazier strip before its discharge. An ally can cut Binding Line with an action. The reserve is bounded, and a party victory is never reversed by an invented reinforcement wave.

The Black Antler Hunt



Dungeon Master's edition

The village council offers 400 gp for ending the hunt and another 200 gp for recovering the missing hunters or confirming their fate. A character can instead know Dain, owe Ada a favor, or seek the lodge's confiscated estate records. Each connection grants entry to the town hall without committing the party to Corven's account. Dain refuses to flee alone while his neighbors remain vulnerable, but will accept an escorted evacuation.

OPENING READ-ALoud

You hear a hunting horn beyond the last houses, one long note that shakes rain from the inn's sign. A riderless horse stumbles into the square, dragging an empty saddle through copper leaves. Beside the well, a man pulls back his sleeve: a black antler mark spreads across his wrist while the crowd falls silent. You smell wet leather and smoke from a hurriedly shuttered forge. A woman in a green cloak points toward the road; a richly dressed man calls everyone into the hall. Who do you approach, and what do you do about the open road?

Overview

An armored revenant hunts people named by a living magistrate. At Kestrel Ford, the party must survive his hounds, trace the victims to a ruined hunting lodge, and decide whether to break the weapon of terror, turn it against its keeper, or destroy the hunter in open battle.

This original one-shot is designed for four level-5 characters using 2014-style 5e rules, with scaling for three or five. Allow four to five hours. All adversary profiles and special procedures below are original homebrew; use your core rules for spells, conditions, rests, and character features. Ordinary death saves apply. The adventure includes threatened murder, oppressive authority, animal-shaped monsters, and skeletal undead, described without graphic injury. The hounds are supernatural constructs of the hunt, not ordinary dogs. Discuss these elements before play.

DM truth: Magistrate Corven Vale found the Ivory Horn three nights ago while surveying land he intends to seize. Its old quarry ledger accepts any living person named beneath his inherited square seal. It does not test guilt. Each dusk the Antler Rider rises to kill the latest marked quarry. Corven has entered people resisting his land purchase, disguising the deaths as an ancient curse. He chose tanner Dain Holt for tonight. Aurel, the Rider, was a cruel feudal huntsman before death; he is an obedient murderer, not a misunderstood guardian. Corven's signature matters to the magic; killing Corven alone does not erase a name already entered.

The horn and ledger occupy a cradle in the lodge's great hall. Three copper braces join horn to cradle. Cut all three, then shatter the exposed horn, to end the hunt permanently. Defeating the Rider buys until the following dusk and gives ample time to reach the horn. Taking the intact horn creates a portable danger: the Rider follows it after his current quarry is slain or protected until dawn.

At a Glance

- Party: four level-5 heroes; three/five-character adjustments in each encounter.
- Play budget: opening 10 minutes; village 35; forest 40; lodge investigation 40; horn chamber 35; showdown 60; ending 15; one 15-minute break. About 4 hours 10 minutes, with room for deliberation.
- Compact route: Ada supplies the horn drawing, combine the crossing with the pack fight, and omit the archive patrol. Preserve the ledger, the horn choice, and the showdown.
- Essential conclusions: someone chooses the quarry; Corven has access; the horn can be dismantled. Each has at least three independent sources below.
- Prepare six Hunt counters, the three handouts, four braces/horn markers, and the keyed lodge plan. Show portraits when the corresponding NPC is met; keep the Rider and lodge interior images concealed until seen.

Hook

The village council offers 400 gp for ending the hunt and another 200 gp for recovering the missing hunters or confirming their fate. A character can instead know Dain, owe Ada a favor, or seek the lodge's confiscated estate records. Each connection grants entry to the town hall without committing the party to Corven's account. Dain refuses to flee alone while his neighbors remain vulnerable, but will accept an escorted evacuation.

Stakes

Use a six-step Hunt clock beginning at 0. Advance once for each short rest, a failed risky route check, returning to town after leaving it, or a deliberate 30-minute delay. Do not tick for ordinary conversation, searching a keyed room, reading a handout, or the scheduled table break. Tell players before a proposed action spends a step. Travel between town, crossing, and lodge is included in the scene transitions.

At 2, villagers hear a second horn note and shut the road gate. At 4, the Rider leaves the lodge; his hoofless iron footsteps appear on the forest path, warning the party. At 6, he reaches town and begins breaking Dain's barricade. Switch Scene 5 to the tannery; Dain is still alive when the heroes arrive. If the party abandons Dain without help, he dies after the next deliberately spent step. This is a visible consequence, not a surprise off-screen penalty. A successful escorted evacuation prevents his death tonight but leaves the horn active. A long rest forfeits tonight's village defense; it remains possible to end the curse tomorrow.

Factions

The Ford Council

Ada Thorn and Dain want the murders stopped and surviving people protected. Their leverage is the town's ferry, local testimony, and Ada's lodge knowledge. Ada will expose Corven even if it costs her guiding work. Dain supplies a cart, stout ropes, and his tannery as shelter. Neither demands that the heroes kill a suspect without evidence.

Vale's Estate Office

Corven wants three final holdouts removed and the ledger concealed. His leverage is legal authority, 300 gp in discretionary funds, and two hired bailiffs who do not know the horn kills. He lies until confronted with a marked petition and seal impression, then offers money and escape routes. His bailiffs turn against him if shown the matching quarry ledger and victim names; an unsupported accusation instead makes them insist on a public hearing.

The Black Antler Hunt

The Rider and Briar Hounds serve the entered quarry name. They seek a kill, not territory or payment. The Rider may state his quarry aloud when challenged. Erasing ink does nothing once a name has been sealed. Replacing the active name requires Corven's actual signet, the intact ledger, and the horn cradle; the ritual takes one minute and carries the consequences in Scene 4. Destruction is the only permanent end.

Locations

Location: Kestrel Ford

V1 Town square is 60 feet across, with a well offering half cover. V2 Town hall is west, with a public records table and Corven's locked study; its back window opens onto an alley. V3 Tannery is east, 80 feet from the hall, with a 30-by-40-foot work floor, drying racks offering half cover, a rear cart door, and a stair to an upper refuge. The tannery door has AC 15 and 30 HP. Only its ground floor can be reached by the Rider without spending movement on the stairs. V4 South gate opens onto the lodge road. Civilians use the northern ferry as their safe exit.

Location: The Ashwater Crossing

F1 Near bank has a stout oak and a 15-foot-high stone shelf. F2 Broken bridge spans a 20-foot gap over fast but shallow water; its far end holds a canvas pack. F3 Upstream ford is 120 feet north and 40 feet wide, knee-deep with a sound gravel bed. F4 Far trail reaches the lodge in twenty minutes. Ropes secured to the oak can make the bridge safe; the ford is automatically found by following the open bank. These routes remain accessible after combat.

Location: The Old Antler Lodge

L1 Courtyard is 50 by 50 feet; low walls grant half cover, its open south arch is the broad exit. L2 Great hall is 60 by 40 feet, entered through a 15-foot-wide broken arch from L1. L3 West archive is 20 by 30 feet, accessible from either L1 or L2; its outside shutter has a simple bar visible through a gap. L4 East gallery rises 10 feet above L2, with stone stairs at each end and a waist-high parapet. L5 Horn cradle occupies the north end of L2 below an oak growing through the wall. L6 Root breach behind the oak is a 5-foot-wide exit into woodland. Nobody must use L4 or a jump to reach L5. The entire hall is under open sky; natural moonlight provides dim light.

Encounter Matrix

1. The Marked Man SITE: V1-V3 PRESSURE: Hounds enter town USEFUL APPROACHES: Fight, barricade, draw away CONSEQUENCE: Dain protected or relocation required
2. Teeth at the Crossing SITE: F1-F4 PRESSURE: Pack and broken bridge USEFUL APPROACHES: High ground, bait, ford CONSEQUENCE: Reach lodge; delay changes clock
3. The Quarry Ledger SITE: L1/L3 PRESSURE: Bailiffs conceal evidence USEFUL APPROACHES: Proof, infiltration, subdual CONSEQUENCE: Obtain seal history and horn procedure
4. Three Copper Braces SITE: L2/L5 PRESSURE: Active curse USEFUL APPROACHES: Dismantle, counterseal, remove CONSEQUENCE: Permanent end or altered quarry
5. The Antler Rider SITE: L2 or V3 PRESSURE: Hunter closes on quarry USEFUL APPROACHES: Battle, horn destruction, evacuation CONSEQUENCE: Different lasting endings

Scenes

Scene 1: Names at the Tannery

Runtime: 35 minutes. Objective: protect Dain and identify a deliberate pattern. Stakes: the town must choose whether to trust its magistrate before the next attack.

READ-ALoud

You see drying hides hanging behind barred windows and a fresh cart track leading to the tannery's rear door. Dain holds a bucket against the swelling antler mark on his arm. You hear claws scrape the roof above him, then a deep growl from the alley. Ada pulls a loose shutter across the nearest window. Where do you take position, and whom do you help first?

Run Encounter 1. After immediate danger, Dain produces his rejected land petition without a check: it carries Corven's square seal. Ada has the pack of her missing brother Brann's apprentice; its torn note reads, 'He reads them names. A hunter does not ask why.' She last saw Brann guiding Corven toward the lodge. A public clerk independently supplies the three victims' petitions: all refused Vale's offer. These clues establish selection without requiring intimidation or a successful roll.

Corven calls the mark a punishment for poaching. Asked about his signature, he admits purchasing land but denies returning to the lodge. Insight DC 14 reveals rehearsed answers, not magical certainty of guilt. A quiet search of his publicly accessible survey chart shows yesterday's route to the lodge. Entering his study through the rear window needs thieves' tools DC 13 or a conspicuous broken latch; failure attracts the bailiffs but does not destroy the chart. The council can authorize the search after seeing the three petitions.

Offer three protective plans: barricade the tannery with Dain and two neighbors; escort him to the northern ferry, spending one Hunt step but ensuring safety until dawn; or bring him with the party, exposing him to travel danger while keeping him close. He uses the civilian profile and never fights by default. Ada can stay with him or guide the party; she offers the same directions either way.

Success: Dain protected and the seal pattern established. Fail-forward: if the hounds drive everyone out, the ferry crew shelters survivors and the public clerk gives the petitions there. Transition: follow the lodge trail to Scene 2; a direct march bypasses no essential clue.

Scene 2: A Pack in the Rain



Ashwater approach: atmosphere; use keyed text for safe routes and distances.

Runtime: 40 minutes. Objective: cross Ashwater and recover Brann's last message. Stakes: risky haste gives the hunt time and an exposed crossing invites ambush.

READ-ALoud

You smell churned mud and wet bark as the road drops toward a broken bridge. Water knocks loose timber against a stone pier. Across the gap, a hunter's pack hangs from a railing; dark shapes move behind it, their backs ridged with thorns. A rope still stretches from your bank to the far pier. Which crossing do you examine, and how do you watch the far bank?

Run Encounter 2. The pack contains Handout A, a charcoal diagram showing three braces around the horn, and Brann's brass guide badge. Brann died on the hunt's first night; his wrapped remains lie in L3, identifiable by the other half of the badge. Do not place his death in player read-aloud or require inspection of injuries. Recovering him earns the council's bounty and gives Ada closure without affecting access to the horn.

Reaching the pack never depends on swimming: use the ford, bridge rope, or a hooked pole after reaching the far bank. Following hound tracks automatically leads to L1. Survival DC 13 reveals a side trail to L6, offering concealed entry; failure costs one Hunt step and still finds the breach. Ada knows that route automatically if present. A captive bailiff in Scene 3 can also identify it.

Success: cross and obtain Brann's diagram. Fail-forward: if forced to retreat, the pack washes onto the accessible near bank, water-stained but readable; the ford remains safe. Transition: approach L1 openly or L6 quietly in Scene 3.

Scene 3: The Names in the Book



Lodge arrival: use the keyed plan for entrances and tactical dimensions.

Runtime: 40 minutes. Objective: recover proof and learn the horn's limits. Stakes: Corven's servants may escape with evidence, but the horn continues regardless.

READ-ALoud

You see a roofless hall beyond the courtyard, its far wall split by a living oak. To the west, lamplight leaks around a shutter and you hear two people arguing over a heavy box. Rain hisses on a small brazier beside the open arch. A narrow gap among the oak roots opens into darkness at the rear. Which entrance do you choose, and do you announce yourselves?

Run Encounter 3 if the bailiffs remain. The archive contains unburned duplicates of all quarry entries, Brann's belongings, and Handout B, a plain maintenance instruction. None is trapped. A written receipt records Corven paying the bailiffs to 'remove all correspondence before dawn'; they believed they were handling embarrassing tax records. The current quarry ledger remains chained beside L5, so losing the archive papers cannot stop play.

Clue redundancy: Handout A, Handout B, and a visible diagram engraved on the cradle each explain braces before horn. Brann's note, the archive entries, and the Rider's spoken quarry name identify deliberate selection. Corven's petitions, his signed receipt, and his bailiffs independently establish his access. Show these directly when their locations are searched; Investigation DC 13 only speeds sorting and identifies an extra 75 gp hidden in a survey tube.

If Corven was allowed to travel freely, he arrives behind the heroes with his actual signet, trying to buy back the ledger. He does not teleport past guarded exits. If detained in town, the ring can be fetched by an escorted messenger at a cost of one Hunt step; destruction never requires it. Corven's flight uses L1, taking two full rounds to reach the outer woods from L3. Public evidence lets the council prosecute him even if he escapes tonight.

Success: learn the procedure and secure evidence. Fail-forward: if the bailiffs flee with the box, cradle inscriptions and the chained ledger preserve essential facts; later legal proof is weaker. Transition: enter L2 and approach L5 in Scene 4. At Hunt 4 or higher, the Rider is on the road; otherwise his armor stands inert beside the cradle until disturbed.

Scene 4: The Horn in the Roots

Runtime: 35 minutes. Objective: choose what to do with the horn. Stakes: the party can end the curse, redirect a killing, or carry an unresolved weapon away.

READ-ALoud

You hear a low note vibrating inside an ivory horn fixed beneath the oak. You see three green copper braces holding it against a stone cradle. Beside it, a chained book lies open to a fresh square seal and a name you recognize. Rainwater runs through old chisel marks around the base. What do you inspect before touching the horn?

Run Encounter 4. Read the three options aloud once the characters examine the cradle. Do not hide the permanence distinction behind Arcana. The intact horn has no beneficial player-item powers; its only known use is choosing a victim. The cradle engraving explicitly says that borrowed signatures fail, a sealed name lasts until dawn, and a broken horn unbinds the hunt.

If the Rider has not yet left, touching a brace or turning a ledger page animates him and begins Scene 5 immediately. If he has left, the first brace removed calls him back: he arrives at the south arch after three rounds, making those rounds useful preparation. If Hunt has already reached 6, removing braces does not teleport him home; the party must decide whether to trust their speed or send defenders to V3. When the horn breaks, every hound collapses into harmless thorn litter and the Rider's animation ends, wherever they are. Characters physically harmed remain harmed; no death or property loss is retroactively undone.

Success: choose and begin a concrete solution.

Fail-forward: dropping the horn or failing a tools check attracts the Rider but does not repair a removed brace or erase learned procedure. Transition: resolve the confrontation in Scene 5 or, if the horn is broken before his return, proceed directly to the ending with that earned victory.

Scene 5: No Quarry Beyond Dawn

Runtime: 60 minutes. Objective: stop the Rider reaching his quarry or destroy his anchor. Stakes: this is a lethal hunter, and escape alone leaves tomorrow's threat intact.

READ-ALoud

You hear iron steps scrape stone before the antlered figure reaches the light. Rain runs from its black armor and falls from the hook of its long blade. A small hunting horn hangs at its belt, cracked and silent. Its pale eyes turn toward the marked wrist, then toward the nearest doorway. Where do you stand, and what do you protect?

Use this opener at either site, omitting 'marked wrist' if Dain is absent and substituting 'the road toward town.' Run Encounter 5. The belt horn is a mundane broken trophy, visibly different from the ivory instrument in L5; destroying it has no effect, and an examination reveals this automatically. At the lodge, the actual horn remains accessible while the Rider fights. At the tannery, racks and doors let characters obstruct pursuit while another team returns to L5. One-way travel between V3 and L5 takes twenty minutes; no one can run it within a normal combat round.

Success: a broken horn ends the hunt permanently; a defeated Rider gives until next dusk; an evacuation saves the quarry tonight. Fail-forward: retreat through L6 or the tannery's cart door remains open unless the party deliberately blocks it. If Dain dies, the Rider returns to L5

and waits for dawn, giving surviving heroes another chance to destroy the horn without an active fight. Transition: resolve the chosen ending; do not claim victory over the curse solely because combat ended.

Encounters

Encounter 1: The Marked Man

Setup: two Briar Hounds enter V3 from opposite alley mouths, each 30 feet from Dain. They need one full turn to reach an unguarded civilian. Roll initiative openly. Their first target is anyone blocking the marked quarry. They retreat toward the forest when one dies or both fall below half HP.

Procedure: fight using the hound profile; barricade the tannery door with one action from inside, using its stated AC/HP; or draw both hounds away by carrying Dain's marked sleeve, torn off with his permission, and succeeding on Animal Handling or Deception DC 14 as an action. That decoy works for two rounds, enough to close doors or move Dain. The hounds discover the trick if they reach the cloth. A character can protect Dain with Dodge and interpose physically; use ordinary opportunity attacks, not invented damage interception.

Escalation: at round 3 an unblocked hound attempts the rear cart door. Noncombat: the ferry departure succeeds if the party holds the alley for two rounds; no check compels a hound to become friendly. For three heroes use one hound; for five use two and increase each to 48 HP. Success: town defense holds. Fail-forward: neighbors move Dain to the ferry if the heroes retreat. Consequence and transition: injuries and damaged doors persist; Scene 1's testimony remains available.

Encounter 2: Teeth at the Crossing



Briar Hound: visible anatomy and thorn silhouette.

Setup: two hounds occupy F2's far bank, 25 feet apart. An iron spike and a coil of sound rope lie by F1. A tied rope allows careful crossing at half speed with no check. An unsupported leap across the 20-foot gap uses ordinary jumping distance; a failed attempt lands in shallow water, deals 2d6 bludgeoning, and places the character 30 feet downstream on a climbable bank, not in an endless drowning loop.

Procedure: use high ground, cross at F3 while a decoy distracts, or fight. Throwing provisions carrying Dain's scent draws the hounds 30 feet for one round, once only. The near stone shelf requires 15 feet of climbing; hounds cannot climb its sheer face. Ranged attacks remain possible from both banks. At round 3 the damaged bridge falls if a Large creature or three Medium creatures occupy it simultaneously; telegraph bending supports on the previous turn. The secured rope remains intact.

Noncombat: travel via the visible ford and leave the territorial pack behind; this costs one Hunt step and succeeds without a roll. Three heroes face one hound; five face three, with the third arriving round 2. Success: obtain the pack and cross. Fail-forward: retreat to the bank, collect the washed-up note, and use the ford. Consequence and transition: track any spent step and proceed to Scene 3.

Encounter 3: The Quarry Ledger

Setup: bailiffs Pell and Jun load a box in L3. Use Estate Bailiff profiles. Neither attacks a clearly peaceful approach. They want wages and freedom from blame. A displayed petition and mention of Brann's death makes Jun demand an explanation from Pell; showing an archive entry persuades both to release the box without a roll. Deception DC 14 can instead present a credible recall order, but failure makes them bar the door and negotiate through it.

Procedure: persuade with proof; enter from L2 while distracting at the shutter; or subdue them. In combat they use shove and baton, taking nonlethal melee finishing blows. At round 3 Pell attempts to flee with the box through L1, dropping it if reduced below half HP. Jun surrenders when Pell leaves. Locked shutter: AC 13, 15 HP, or thieves' tools DC 13; a failure is audible but never burns evidence automatically.

Escalation: Corven may arrive as established in Scene 3, offering 300 gp for 'private arbitration.' A bribe buys the papers, not magical control of the hunt. Scaling: one bailiff for three heroes; two for four or five. Success: records and witnesses secured. Fail-forward: even a lost box leaves the current ledger and cradle inscription. Consequence and transition: evidence quality affects Corven's fate; move to Scene 4.

Encounter 4: Three Copper Braces

Setup: three separate copper braces secure the actual horn. Each has AC 13, 12 HP, immunity to poison and psychic damage; tools DC 14 removes one with an action. Failed checks do not damage tools and can be retried, but the first failure sounds the summoning note. Deliberate work outside initiative takes one minute per brace and succeeds without a check. Braces do not regenerate.

Once all three are removed, the horn has AC 15, 18 HP, immunity to poison and psychic damage, and no other resistance. Until then it cannot be damaged; this is visible as blows turn away within a pale field. Breaking it ends the hunt immediately. Dispel magic against a level-3 effect suppresses one brace for one minute, allowing it to be removed without a roll; it does not permanently shatter the

horn or erase the ledger.

Alternative: with Corven's actual ring, spend ten consecutive rounds at the open ledger entering a new living quarry and sealing it. Movement away interrupts progress; damage requires Constitution save DC 10 to retain progress. Completed countersealing turns the Rider toward the chosen person, ending his pursuit of Dain but authorizing a murder. The target must be someone the inscriber has personally met, preventing vague names or invented persons. Corven himself qualifies. Forged rings visibly fail before any step is spent.

Alternative: remove braces and carry the horn away. It weighs 5 lb. The curse survives and the carrier becomes responsible for securing it. No roll conceals this known consequence. Escalation: the Rider's arrival follows Scene 4. Noncombat: dismantling before his return is a legitimate complete win. Success: selected operation completed. Fail-forward: removed braces remain removed after retreat. Consequence and transition: continue Scene 5 only if a threat remains active.

Encounter 5: The Antler Rider



The Antler Rider: reveal when the hunter enters view.

Setup: use the Rider and one hound, unless the horn has already been broken. The hound arrives in round 2 through the broad exit, telegraphed by a growl in round 1. Three heroes face the Rider alone with 110 HP; five face him with 155 HP and two hounds arriving separately in rounds 2 and 3. Do not add surviving earlier packs on top of this budget.

Procedure: the Rider advances on the quarry but attacks an immediate blocker rather than ignoring all enemies. He uses the glaive to move a defender off the horn cradle, never to throw someone into an unlisted instant-death pit. He cannot pass through solid objects, fly, or magically locate unmarked hidden characters. At half HP he breaks a nearby rack or low wall as part of his movement, creating a 10-foot square of difficult terrain; this deals no automatic damage. Describe the collapsing cover before anyone moves into it.

Noncombat: keep the quarry beyond his reach until dawn, expose the active seal to make him state whose order he follows, or destroy the horn while allies obstruct him. Words alone do not redeem him. When reduced to 0 HP, his armor collapses and he reforms at L5 next dusk if the horn remains intact. He never revives during this

encounter. Success: record exactly whether the curse ended or only tonight's pursuit stopped. Fail-forward: the open site exits permit retreat; resolve Dain's fate with the clock and visible actions. Transition: choose the appropriate Resolution Path.

NPCs

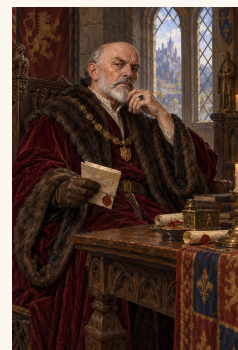
NPC: Ada Thorn



Ada Thorn: show when the ranger joins the conversation.

Ranger and local guide; dark skin, copper braid, green wool cloak over a leather jerkin, direct gaze. Wants the town safe and Brann's fate known; fears Corven will buy another silence. Voice: 'Tracks do not care whose seal is on the paper.' She knows both crossing routes and L6, but has never touched the horn. Help wins routes and testimony; pressure makes her demand the party show its evidence; betrayal makes her protect Dain independently. Her leverage is access, not a hidden solution. If fighting is unavoidable use Scout Ally below; otherwise keep her defending civilians so she does not add unnoticed party power. Her portrait is safe to show on introduction.

NPC: Corven Vale



Corven Vale: public appearance, before his guilt is established.

Bald magistrate with silver beard, burgundy robe and fur-trimmed mantle, and square black signet. Wants land and immunity; fears loss of standing more than supernatural judgment. Voice: 'You have identified an irregularity. Let us discuss a remedy.' He knows the sealing procedure and current quarry, but wrongly assumes the horn indestructible. He offers money under pressure, then claims the bailiffs acted alone. Protecting him from the Rider can still lead to his arrest. Searching his clothing

recovers the ring; no interrogation is required for the destruction route. Use Civilian with 18 HP; he carries a dagger, +3 to hit, 1d4+1 piercing, and flees rather than duels. His portrait shows public appearance, not secret guilt.

NPC: Dain Holt

Tanner with rolled sleeves and an antler mark. Wants neighbors protected; fears becoming bait without consent. Voice: 'Tell me where to stand. Tell me why.' Knows the petition pattern and ferry crew. He accepts dangerous participation only when the plan and escape are explained. Use Civilian. He supplies two healer's kits from the town store; these follow ordinary core rules and are not magical healing.

Reference Appendix

These profiles are original homebrew, intended for this adventure; CR is not claimed as independently validated. All creatures use normal initiative, one action, movement, and one reaction per round. Unlisted ability checks use their listed ability modifiers. No creature gains an unlisted immunity because it is undead.

Briar Hound: Medium monstrosity; AC 14; HP 39; speed 40 feet; Str +3, Dex +2, Con +2, Int -3, Wis +2, Cha -2; Perception +4; darkvision 60 feet. Bite: +6 to hit, reach 5 feet, one target, 2d6+3 piercing. If it moved at least 20 feet straight toward the target immediately before hitting, target makes Strength save DC 13 or falls prone. It makes only one bite per action. Thorn Hide: once per turn, a creature grappling the hound takes 2 piercing at the start of that creature's turn. No resistance or damage immunity. It understands the horn's quarry command but no spoken language.

Antler Rider: Medium undead; AC 17; HP 136; speed 35 feet; Str +4, Dex +1, Con +4, Int +0, Wis +2, Cha +2; Strength save +7, Wisdom save +5; Perception +5; darkvision 60 feet; understands Common and speaks short quarry declarations. Immune to poison damage and poisoned condition; no resistance to ordinary weapons. Multiattack: two glaive attacks, each +7 to hit, reach 10 feet, 2d8+4 slashing. Once on his turn after a glaive hit, he may push the target 5 feet if it fails Strength save DC 15. Reaction, Pursuing Step: when a creature within 10 feet moves away voluntarily, move up to 10 feet after that movement; this movement provokes opportunity attacks normally and is not a free attack. Grave Resolve, once per encounter: when he fails a saving throw, he may reroll it, using the new result. Describe the horn flickering as this resource is spent. Anchor: reform next dusk at L5 only if the horn survives. Destroying the horn reduces him to 0 HP immediately.

Estate Bailiff: Medium humanoid; AC 14; HP 22; speed 30 feet; Str +2, Dex +1, Con +1, Int +0, Wis +0, Cha +0. Baton: +4 to hit, reach 5 feet, 1d6+2 bludgeoning. Light crossbow: +3 to hit, range 80/320 feet, 1d8+1 piercing, one attack per action. Athletics +4. Morale as Encounter 3; no extra attacks.

Scout Ally: Medium humanoid; AC 14; HP 27; speed 30 feet; Str +1, Dex +3, Con +1, Int +0, Wis +3, Cha +0. Bow: +5 to hit, range 80/320 feet, 1d6+3 piercing, one attack. Survival +5, Perception +5. Civilian: AC 10, HP 9, speed 30 feet, all ability modifiers +0; no effective combat attack. Use ordinary death saves for named friendly NPCs when the table wants a rescue opportunity; agree before play.

Handouts

Handout: A - Brann's Field Note

Visibility: player-safe

'He reads them names. A hunter does not ask why. The ivory horn has three copper braces. I saw the pale field weaken when the keeper loosened one. Free the horn before you strike it. The root gap is broad enough for a person; I left the brush pulled aside.'

Handout: B - The Hornkeeper's Instruction

Visibility: player-safe

'Three braces bind the horn to its cradle. Remove all three to expose the ivory. Broken ivory ends the hunt. A name beneath the keeper's own seal commands tonight's quarry. A false seal has no force. Ink scraped away cannot recall a sounded name. A newly sealed name replaces the former until dawn.'

Handout: C - Petition Receipt

Visibility: player-safe

'Kestrel Ford land petition. Applicant: Dain Holt. Request: retain the common road and ferry access. Disposition: rejected. Corven Vale, Magistrate. Beneath the signature is the impression of a square seal crossed by a single black antler.'

Resolution Paths

Broken horn: every marked person is freed, the Rider and hounds cease, and the council pays the full rescue/end-of-hunt rewards earned. Arresting Corven with ledger and testimony protects the seized land through a public hearing; killing him may leave his estate heirs contesting it. Ada offers the lodge as a future cleared base after ordinary repairs.

Rider defeated, horn intact: Dain lives tonight. State plainly that the armor reforms next dusk. Give the heroes the remaining hours to dismantle the accessible horn rather than launching another mandatory fight. If they choose to keep it, the next hunt is their unresolved responsibility and the council withholds the 400 gp end-of-hunt payment.

Hunt redirected: Dain's mark fades and the chosen person's wrist darkens. Corven can be captured and protected while the horn is later destroyed, or abandoned to the Rider. Evidence and public consequences differ; this is not an automatically righteous execution. Taking his signet does not erase the ledger.

Evacuation or retreat: the saved villagers remain alive across the ferry. The hunt persists on land until dawn. The heroes retain all evidence and removed braces; they can return without repeating completed obstacles. If Dain died, his death remains real and Ada seeks a permanent end rather than another payment negotiation.

Rewards and Follow-Up

Pay 400 gp for ending the hunt and 200 gp for recovering Brann or confirming his fate with reliable evidence; the separate archive cache holds 75 gp. The lodge contains a silver hunting clasp worth 60 gp and two potions of healing, using core rules. No character must accept or use the horn as loot. After a full session, award milestone advancement only if this adventure fits the campaign's normal pace; it does not automatically grant a level in a longer sequence.

Record: Dain alive or dead; horn broken, held, or abandoned; Corven arrested, escaped, protected, or killed; evidence recovered; Brann identified; Hunt clock at resolution. Possible next adventure: the estate's buyers hired mercenaries at Gravewake Keep. That lead is optional and does not make the keep's necromancer the secret cause of this independent hunt.

The Old Antler Lodge

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graph TD; L1[L1 Courtyard] --- L2[L2 Great hall]; L2 --- L3[L3 West archive]; L2 --- L4[L4 East gallery]; L2 --- L6[L6 Root breach];
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L1 Courtyard
50 x 50 ft; low walls give half cover
South arch: broad exit to forest

L2 Great hall
60 x 40 ft; open sky; dim moonlight
L5 horn cradle at north end
Three braces; horn exposed after removal

L3 West archive
20 x 30 ft; box and records
Door to L1; door to L2
Outside shutter has a bar

L4 East gallery
10 ft above L2
Parapet: half cover
Stairs at both ends

L6 Root breach
5 ft wide; woodland escape behind oak

Broken arch: 15 ft wide

Two stair routes

Map key: DM reference. Use the keyed location descriptions in the adventure. Reveal discoveries during play.

Gravewake Keep



Dungeon Master's edition

A fishing skiff brings a wounded engineer and a payroll contract to the party's harbor. Brother Oren escaped through the keep's drainage passage. The city offers 700 gp for stopping the Ram and 300 gp for returning the captive garrison alive. An individual character may know a prisoner, have served at the keep, or want evidence against its buyers. These connections grant a trusted local boat and Oren's testimony; no character must swear loyalty to the city or pardon Sera.

OPENING READ-ALoud

You hear a skiff strike the quay below the harbor lamps. A soaked dwarf climbs out with a leather document case clutched against his apron; seawater pours from it onto the stones. Beyond him, lightning outlines Gravewake Keep on the headland, and something enormous knocks three times from inside its walls. You smell salt, lamp oil, and the hot metal of the tool he presses into your hand. The next boat is already being readied. What do you ask him before deciding how to approach the keep?

Overview

Mercenaries sold a coastal fortress to necromancer Ilyra Sorn. Its surviving defenders now build the weapon that will open their own city's gates. The party must enter the keep, free the prisoners, and disable the Ossuary Ram before the next tide raises its launch platform. Storm, divided loyalties, and a moving battlefield reward preparation without requiring stealth or a particular party composition.

This original one-shot supports four level-5 characters using 2014-style 5e core rules. Allow four to five hours, or use the compact route for about three. All enemy profiles, clocks, and siege procedures are original homebrew, not claimed official stat blocks or independently calibrated challenge ratings. Ordinary combat lethality, death saves, spellcasting, and rest rules apply. Content includes captivity, military betrayal, animated skeletons, and threatened attacks on civilians; describe injuries without graphic detail. Prisoners are people to rescue, never literal fuel inside the monster.

DM truth: Captain Sera Venn signed a contract to surrender the keep in exchange for her soldiers' back pay and safe discharge. Ilyra changed the terms once inside, imprisoning the old garrison and threatening to bind Sera's deserters into undead service. Sera is culpable and frightened, not secretly innocent. Ilyra wants the city's coastal gate broken so her skeleton infantry can seize the harbor. Her Ossuary Ram uses a funerary brazier bound to its oak-and-bone body by three exposed copper rune-collars (the couplings). Disabling all three stops the machine even if Ilyra survives; killing Ilyra does not switch it off.

The city relief force is a day away. The party's job is sabotage and extraction, not defeating an entire army. Only the soldiers assigned to the listed encounters enter tonight's fights. The rest are sealed in transport barges offshore and cannot reach the keep before the tide window closes.

At a Glance

- Party: four level-5 heroes, with three/five-character dials in each encounter.
- Budget: opening 10 minutes; approach 35; gatehouse 35; prison 40; signal tower 35; battery 65; escape/ending 20; break 15. About 4 hours 15 minutes.
- Compact route: Brother Oren supplies the entry sketch; Sera surrenders the gate key immediately upon seeing her revoked contract; resolve signal lamps in the prison control room instead of visiting K6. Keep the prisoner decision and full battery finale.
- Four preparation benefits: Quiet Entry, Sera's Help, Prisoners Free, and Dark Signal. Each changes a later situation explicitly.
- Bring six Tide counters, three coupling markers, a gate-key token, the three handouts, and the keyed keep

diagram. Art is shown only when its subject is encountered; architectural pictures are atmosphere, not measured battle maps.

Hook

A fishing skiff brings a wounded engineer and a payroll contract to the party's harbor. Brother Oren escaped through the keep's drainage passage. The city offers 700 gp for stopping the Ram and 300 gp for returning the captive garrison alive. An individual character may know a prisoner, have served at the keep, or want evidence against its buyers. These connections grant a trusted local boat and Oren's testimony; no character must swear loyalty to the city or pardon Sera.

Stakes

The Tide clock begins at 0 of 6. Advance once for a short rest, a failed risky entry or signal attempt, returning to the harbor after arrival, or an explicitly chosen 30-minute delay. Tell players before a choice spends a step. Ordinary room searches, roleplay, combat rounds, scene-to-scene walking, and the table break do not advance it. The clock represents storm and launch preparation as well as literal water level.

At 2, water begins covering the lower drainage ledge; the passage remains usable. At 4, crews raise the sea doors and sound a warning bell, making the deadline audible. At 6, the launch restraint releases. The Ram's escape route covers 60 feet to the causeway ramp and then the 120-foot causeway: six 30-foot advances. Start counting when the party can see or hear its movement, not before giving them a chance to act. A pursuit on the causeway uses the remaining advances, never a fresh countdown. If the party abandons the interception, it reaches the coastal road and the city must evacuate its outer harbor; the adventure can end in a prisoner rescue with failed sabotage.

A long rest forfeits tonight's launch window. Freed prisoners stay free; disabled couplings stay disabled; an escaped Ilyra cannot undo either achievement between scenes. The keep is not magically reset if the party retreats.

Factions

The Captive Garrison

Sergeant Hett leads eight living prisoners, including two injured soldiers who need assistance walking. They want extraction and testimony preserved. Their leverage is knowledge of the launch sequence, a spare signal lens, and enough hands to carry wounded people. They do not insist on recovering weapons before leaving. Oren knows the drainage route and rune-collar couplings, but lacks the gate key and cannot solve social decisions for the party.

Venn's Red Company

Sera and her surviving mercenaries want to leave alive with proof that Ilyra broke their agreement. They hold the main gate and K4 key ring. Their original betrayal is real. Showing the amended contract persuades Sera that retreat is her best option; asking her to confess publicly remains a separate bargain. She can secure an escape lane or escort prisoners, not become a free second boss-fighting party.

Sorn's Bone Legion

Ilyra and her Bonehook Legionaries seek launch and control of the harbor. The legionaries follow a brass command token carried by Ilyra; they are not susceptible to forged spoken orders without that token. Ilyra can trade prisoners for withdrawal, but never voluntarily abandons the Ram while she believes it can launch. At personal risk she may escape instead of dying for it. Her workshop ledger identifies buyers and supply routes for later adventures without requiring a larger hidden conspiracy tonight.

Locations

Location: Gravewake Headland

K0 Approach includes a 120-foot stone causeway, 15 feet wide, and a sheltered eastern cove. Low parapets provide half cover on the causeway; broken sections are visibly marked by fallen masonry. The sea below the outer wall is 30 feet down, with rocks clearly visible. The eastern boat landing avoids climbing those cliffs. K1 Main gate leads into K3; K2 Drain is reached from the cove by a 40-foot tidal ledge. Oren's skiff can carry four passengers plus rower at a time; the prisoners later use the larger supply boat at K2.

Location: The Gate and Cells

K1 Gatehouse is 30 by 30 feet with an iron portcullis, a winding stair to the wall walk, and the winch. K2 Drain is 5 feet wide and 50 feet long, with an iron grate halfway through; it opens into K4's storeroom through an unlocked hatch. K3 Courtyard is 60 by 50 feet and connects K1, K4 west, K5 east, and K6 north. Crates grant half cover; no invisible patrol enters after the listed alarm consequence. K4 Cells are two 15-foot-square rooms beside a 20-by-30-foot storeroom; a broad rear door reaches the boat stairs. The injured can be carried through K2 or moved to the boat stairs without climbing ladders.

Location: The Tower and Battery

K6 Signal tower stands north of K3, with 40 feet of internal stairs to a covered lamp room. K7 Command office is at its base, entered from K3 or K6; it holds records and a maintenance diagram, with no secret mandatory entrance. K5 Battery hall is east of K3, 80 feet long and 50 feet wide. Its western door is 15 feet wide. Shallow guide grooves run east-west through the middle to K8 sea doors at the east end. A west catwalk is 10 feet high, with stairs at north and south ends; crates beneath provide half cover. Three isolated binding-release handles are on the north wall, 15 feet apart. The Ram's couplings can also be reached from the floor at its north side. K8 opens onto a loading apron connected by a broad ramp to the causeway, so the machine's route is physically continuous. The Ram cannot squeeze into K4 or K6.

Encounter Matrix

1. Under the Storm Wall

SITE: K0-K2

MAIN PRESSURE: Patrol and exposed entry

APPROACHES: Bluff, drain, causeway attack

LASTING RESULT: Quiet Entry or alarm

2. A Contract in Red Ink

SITE: K1/K3

MAIN PRESSURE: Sera's divided loyalty

APPROACHES: Evidence, bargain, subdual

LASTING RESULT: Sera's Help or hostile gate

3. The Living Garrison

SITE: K4

MAIN PRESSURE: Skeleton guards and locked cells

APPROACHES: Key, tools, force, token

LASTING RESULT: Prisoners Free and safe extraction

4. Three Lamps to Sea

SITE: K6/K7

MAIN PRESSURE: Signal and reserve activation

APPROACHES: Lens, shutters, destroy lamps

LASTING RESULT: Dark Signal or one reserve wave

5. Break the Ossuary Ram

SITE: K5/K8

MAIN PRESSURE: Necromancer and moving machine

APPROACHES: Couplings, combat, retreat sabotage

LASTING RESULT: Launch stopped or city threatened



Gravewake approach: use keyed text for active defenses and entry routes.

Runtime: 35 minutes. Objective: establish an entry and a retreat route. Stakes: a loud approach alerts the gate, but a failed stealth roll never closes every route.

READ-ALoud

You feel spray strike your face as the skiff passes beneath the keep's eastern wall. A narrow ledge runs from the cove to a dark drainage mouth. Above it, you hear boots on wet stone and see a lantern sweep across the sea. Farther west, the causeway ends at a shut iron gate. Which route do you take, and where do you leave the boat?

Oren gives Handout A automatically before entry. He can wait with the skiff, return to harbor, or accompany the party as a noncombat guide; let them decide. Run Encounter 1. A successful concealed or bluffed entry earns Quiet Entry, keeping Sera unprepared for immediate violence in Scene 2. A loud entry removes that benefit but does not make negotiation impossible.

The drain grate opens with the rusted external lever described in Handout A. If the lever is missed, Perception DC 12 spots it; failure still reveals the grate can be cut, pried, or opened with thieves' tools. The supply boat below K4 is plainly visible from the cove, providing a second extraction option. Do not require a hidden key to leave.

Success: enter K1 or K4 with a named escape route. Fail-forward: a patrol shout raises the alarm and spends one Tide step; the party can still use either entrance under its listed opposition. Transition: meet Sera in Scene 2, or proceed straight to Scene 3 from the drain and encounter her when crossing K3. The order is genuinely flexible.

Scene 2: The Price of a Gate

Runtime: 35 minutes. Objective: neutralize or enlist the gate's living defenders. Stakes: help secures an exit, while a careless promise may shield a culpable captain.

Scenes

Scene 1: Below the Wall

READ-ALoud

You hear an argument behind the gatehouse door, then a woman in a faded red surcoat steps into the lantern light. An iron key hangs from one hand. Two soldiers watch her instead of watching you. Rain taps the steel of her breastplate as she asks who sent you. What do you show her, and how close do you approach?

Run Encounter 2. Sera begins with the claim that the old garrison was transferred safely. Oren's testimony or the audible prisoners in K4 disproves it; she admits captivity and says Ilyra changed the contract. Handout B, recovered from Oren's case or duplicated in K7, states that the mercenaries themselves will be 'retained for indefinite service.' This is leverage for defection, not proof that Sera never betrayed anyone.

Offer a concrete agreement: safe departure in exchange for keys and escorted prisoners; surrender to the garrison and later trial; or a temporary ceasefire while the party destroys the Ram. Sera accepts keys-for-escape upon seeing the altered contract, no roll. Persuasion DC 15 can additionally secure her written confession; failure leaves the practical agreement intact. Intimidation without evidence makes her demand that one hero remain at the gate while others inspect the cells. They can refuse and choose another approach.

With Sera's Help, she and her soldiers hold K1 open and escort prisoners down the boat stairs, preventing the single reserve wave from attacking evacuees. If commanded into the finale instead, she refuses: 'I can hold your way out. I cannot win your battle for you.' If captured, her key ring still opens the cells. If killed, the papers and prisoners can expose the betrayal without her testimony.

Success: secure keys, a ceasefire, or control of the gate. Fail-forward: losing the parley costs Quiet Entry but the drain remains accessible and the cells can be forced. Transition: visit K4 in Scene 3 or K7 for records; neither route requires Sera alive.

Scene 3: People Behind Iron

Runtime: 40 minutes. Objective: free eight captives and decide who gets them out. Stakes: injured prisoners need a plan, and escorting them personally consumes time but guarantees attention.

READ-ALoud

You smell damp straw and boiled cabbage beyond the storeroom hatch. Behind two iron doors, people stand as quietly as they can; one raises a bandaged hand through the bars. A skeleton in a dark helmet drags the hook of its polearm along the floor, producing a slow metallic rasp. The broad rear door stands beyond it. Who draws its attention, and who goes toward the cells?

Run Encounter 3. Once doors open, Sergeant Hett states the three-coupling procedure from memory. Oren's diagram

and K7's maintenance board provide the same information independently. Hett also knows the signal lamps summon a local reserve; extinguishing them before launch prevents that reserve joining the battery. Neither clue needs a roll or a lengthy conversation while enemies attack.

The two injured prisoners can walk at 15 feet with assistance. The six able prisoners can carry both if given poles and blankets from the storeroom, automatically found. Options: Sera escorts them if allied; two able soldiers row the supply boat carrying all eight, with Oren navigating if present; or the party escorts them through K2 and back, spending one Tide step. Once aboard the supply boat, they are safe from this adventure's reserve unless the party deliberately leaves them tied at the exposed launch apron. Do not make their rescue secretly depend on killing Ilyra.

A 10-minute search finds two potions of healing and a wax-sealed city payroll packet worth 120 gp, belonging to the prisoners. Keeping that packet is theft with witnesses; it is not hidden reward money. Hett will testify against Sera while acknowledging any help she provides now. The party can promise a fair hearing without promising acquittal.

Success: record Prisoners Free and their actual escape plan. Fail-forward: if forced out, guards drag the keys to K7, but locks remain pickable and the rear door can be breached. The prisoners are not executed because of one failed roll. Transition: Hett points to K6's signal lamps and K5's construct, leading to Scene 4 or directly to Scene 5.

Scene 4: Signals Above the Rain

Runtime: 35 minutes. Objective: prevent the local reserve joining the launch. Stakes: sabotage reduces the finale's opposition, while record theft may give Ilyra time to prepare.

READ-ALoud

You hear wind force rain against the signal room's open shutters. Three hooded lamps face the water, their colored glass throwing narrow streaks across the floor. Below the western window, the causeway disappears into spray. A enchanted speaking stone beside the stairs rattles with a distant voice asking for the launch signal. Which lamp or shutter do you approach first?

Run Encounter 4. Handout C gives the maintenance sequence: shutter, isolate, remove lens. The same three steps are engraved directly on the lamp's control plate. Hett knows them if alive; Oren can deduce them automatically after a minute. A successful Arcana or tools check is not necessary to obtain the sequence.

K7 contains Ilyra's workshop ledger, a copied contract, the brass command token if it has been stolen from her by prior play, and a spare diagram of the Ram. Normally Ilyra carries the token; do not grant a duplicate by default. Investigation DC 13 identifies the ledger's exact shipping contacts; failure still finds the contract and diagram, but sorting shipping references costs one Tide step. The ledger

names unrelated buyers beyond the headland; it does not retroactively connect Ilyra to the Antler Rider.

At Tide 4, launch bells start even if the signals are dark. Dark Signal prevents a reserve message; it does not stop the machinery. If players skip the tower, apply the precisely bounded reserve in Encounter 5, not an entire army. If the party splits, run a short round of actions for each group and show both clocks openly.

Success: record Dark Signal and take evidence. Fail-forward: smashed lamps also stop the signal, but the audible crash spends one Tide step. Transition: descend to K5 in Scene 5; the stairs and courtyard are still traversable. A character can instead reach the west catwalk through K7's ordinary maintenance door, 20 feet of passage, gaining an elevated entry.

Scene 5: The Machine That Opens Cities



Battery interior: catwalk, binding-release handles, and guide grooves.

Runtime: 65 minutes. Objective: disable all three couplings or destroy the Ram before it escapes. Stakes: saving prisoners, stopping the machine, and capturing Ilyra are separate achievable goals.

READ-ALoud

You feel the floor shudder as six skeletal legs lift a heavy siege frame from its cradle. Cold blue light burns behind a cage of ribs. Three copper rune-collars glow along its flank, while floor grooves lead toward doors opening on the storm. Above you, a silver-haired woman lifts her rune-bound arm and orders the machine forward. Which position do you take, and what do you try to stop first?

Run Encounter 5. Ilyra offers to release any remaining prisoners if the party leaves. If accepted, she genuinely opens their cells because a clear launch is worth more to her; the party must still choose whether allowing an attack on the city is acceptable. She refuses an offer to stop launch without credible leverage: a disabled machine, captured command token, or personal defeat. Her spell-like abilities cannot repair couplings or teleport the Ram.

The command token grants safe passage past legionaries when displayed, but control of the Ram requires its physical controls; taking the token does not make it a

player pet. Destroying the brazier after the machine is stopped prevents quick repair, requiring one minute with tools and no check. That final minute matters only if enemies remain. Killing Ilyra is sufficient to prevent her escape, not to end the still-active encounter.

Success: record disabled couplings, machine HP, prisoners' status, evidence, and Ilyra's fate independently.

Fail-forward: the battery west door, catwalk stairs, boat stairs, and causeway remain usable exits. Retreat can preserve a rescue even if sabotage fails. Transition: after the active machine is stopped or escaped, resolve the extraction and one of the endings below; never reopen freed cells or reattach couplings off-screen.

Encounters

Encounter 1: Under the Storm Wall

Setup: two Red Company soldiers patrol K0's causeway, while a Bonehook Legionary watches the drain from a wall platform. The skeleton's crossbow has partial cover lines; it cannot see creatures crouched directly beneath the wall. The skiff begins 40 feet from K2. Patrols do not all teleport to whichever route the party picks.

Approaches: show a plausible supply or payroll case and bluff the soldiers with Deception DC 13; use Oren's drain lever, then travel quietly past the wall watcher with a group Stealth DC 13; or fight across the causeway. A failed bluff calls Sera to the gate, creating negotiation rather than an automatic volley. Failed stealth raises alarm and allows one crossbow shot at a visible character before normal initiative, with no surprise condition applied to alerted heroes. Spend one Tide step for either failed risky entry, at most once per approach.

The grate has AC 15, 20 HP; its external lever opens it automatically. It can also be picked with tools DC 13, pried with Athletics DC 15, or bypassed by entering through the gate. High tide makes the ledge difficult terrain but never completely seals the drain during tonight's scenes. A fall from the ledge drops only 5 feet into water beside the skiff, requiring 10 feet of swimming to reach a rope; the 30-foot cliff is a separate visible hazard, not the default failure.

Three heroes face one soldier or one legionary; five face three soldiers or two legionaries. Use only the opposition on the chosen route. Escalation: surviving guards call Sera, then hold position. Success: Quiet Entry if no alarm. Fail-forward: gate parley or forced drain entry remains available. Consequence and transition: begin Scene 2 or 3 with the recorded alarm state.

Encounter 2: A Contract in Red Ink

Setup: Sera and two soldiers occupy K1, with the winch 15 feet behind her. With Quiet Entry she talks before drawing steel; without it she holds the winch but still listens to evidence. The portcullis can be jammed open using an iron tool once lifted; closing it is Sera's action, visibly begun at the winch, not a free reaction.

Procedure: present the revised contract; negotiate temporary cooperation; infiltrate through K2 and steal keys later; or fight. In combat Sera uses cover and her two attacks, but surrenders at 15 HP or when both soldiers fall. They also surrender if she does. A character can end a melee attack nonlethally under ordinary core rules. Sera does not execute unconscious heroes; Ilyra may imprison them in K4 with ordinary locks and their equipment in the storeroom, offering a costly escape rather than pretending defeat never occurred.

For three heroes use Sera alone at 42 HP. For five use Sera and three soldiers. Escalation: at round 3 a soldier moves toward the courtyard alarm bell; an action at the bell removes Quiet Entry, but does not spawn additional enemies here. Noncombat evidence bargain needs no check; the confession is the optional DC 15 improvement. Success: Sera's Help or captured gate. Fail-forward: drain and cell locks remain alternate access. Consequence and transition: keys facilitate Scene 3; Sera's decision affects extraction.

Encounter 3: The Living Garrison



Bonehook Legionary: armor and hooked reach weapon.

Setup: two Bonehook Legionaries guard K4, one at the cells and one at the boat door, 25 feet apart. Cell locks open with Sera's keys, thieves' tools DC 14 as an action, or force against AC 16 and 25 HP per door. A failed pick can be retried; five minutes of careful work with tools succeeds automatically outside combat. The guards have no authority to execute captives and focus on intruders.

Procedure: fight them, distract them with a thrown alarm bell for one round while opening the other door, or display Ilyra's actual command token and order them to stand aside. The token route requires obtaining it through earlier creative play; it is not the expected solution. A lever by the rear door drops an empty cargo net over a 10-foot square. One action releases it; occupants make Dexterity save DC 13 or become restrained. Escape uses an action with Athletics DC 13, or cut the net, AC 10 and 10 HP. Telegraph the hanging net so either side can exploit it.

Three heroes face one legionary; five face three. At round 3 the rear guard tries to close the boat door, delaying movement by one action to reopen it; it never seals magically. Noncombat stealth can get one cell open before the guards notice, allowing prisoners to distract while heroes work. Success: freed prisoners gain an explicit

route. Fail-forward: retreat leaves picked locks open and keys traceable to K7. Consequence and transition: Hett provides the coupling and signal information before Scene 4.

Encounter 4: Three Lamps to Sea

Setup: one legionary stands below K6 and can be lured into K3, fought, or bypassed through K7. The lamps themselves are a procedural hazard, not a riddle with one unknowable answer. Three separate lamps share an enchanted copper binding strip. The signal fires when any intact lamp remains uncovered as launch begins.

Safe procedure: close all three shutters, pull the marked isolation lever, then remove the three lenses. Each operation takes one action; closing all shutters is one action using their linked chain. No roll when following the engraved sequence. Wrong order: touching a live lens deals 2d6 lightning, Dexterity save DC 13 for half, once per attempted removal. The visible arc warns the group and spends one Tide step, maximum one step for this encounter. Mistakes do not reset closed shutters.

Alternatives: smash all three lenses, each AC 12 and 5 HP, spending one Tide step for noise; or use the spare opaque maintenance lens from Hett, fitting it to the common binding strip with one action and tools DC 13. A failed fit does not consume the lens. Darkness magic blocks the outgoing light for its duration; if maintained through launch it earns Dark Signal without permanent destruction.

No extra enemies for party scaling; for three heroes reduce arc damage to 1d6, for five retain 2d6. Escalation: the enchanted speaking stone requests confirmation after three rounds, providing urgency but no automatic new wave. Success: Dark Signal prevents the finale reserve. Fail-forward: audible destruction is still a working solution. Consequence and transition: enter K5 through courtyard or elevated maintenance passage.

Encounter 5: Break the Ossuary Ram



Ossuary Ram: show all three copper coupling targets.

Setup for four heroes: Ilyra on the west catwalk, the Ram on central guide grooves, and one Bonehook Legionary by K8. The Ram starts 60 feet from the causeway ramp. Ilyra and the Ram use separate initiatives. If Dark Signal is absent, one additional legionary approaches through K1 and enters K5 from K3 at the end of round 3; a shouted response on round 2 announces it. This is the entire

reserve. With Sera's Help, she blocks that reserve at the courtyard instead, so it does not join the finale. Do not add both benefits as extra friendly combatants.

Three heroes: Ram 85 HP, Ilyra 48 HP, no initial or reserve legionary; failure at the tower instead gives Ilyra half cover on her first turn. Five heroes: Ram 135 HP, Ilyra 75 HP, two initial legionaries; the same single reserve limit. These are starting recommendations, not a guarantee against unusually strong or depleted parties. Allow the party to spend one short rest if the clock permits it.

On its turn the Ram spends its movement advancing 30 feet along the launch route, marking one advance. It may instead reposition within its current segment to attack a blocker; that turn earns no advance. It never Dashes during launch and receives no extra end-of-turn movement. Six 30-foot advances cover the 60 feet to the ramp plus the 120-foot causeway; mark them visibly. If the party reaches K5 before Tide 6, launch has not begun: the Ram fights in its cradle area until Ilyra spends an action releasing it, beginning those six advances. Incapacitating her before release leaves it confined to the hall, still hostile. Blocking the ramp with the catwalk's cargo crane takes one action at its clearly visible brake and Athletics DC 14, or two characters' actions with no check; this cancels one advance, once only.

Each of three couplings has AC 14, 15 HP, immunity to poison and psychic; a creature adjacent can instead disconnect one with tools DC 14 as an action. Failure deals 1d6 lightning to that creature and can be retried. Pulling a north-wall isolation lever first removes that coupling's shock and lowers its tools DC to 10. Numbers I, II, III match plainly on levers and couplings; no puzzle translation required. Coupling damage does not reduce the Ram's HP. With one disabled it loses its trampling burst; with two its stride-binding fails: speed becomes 10 feet for repositioning within its current segment, and it cannot advance along the escape route; with three it shuts down at 0 HP. A shut-down Ram cannot attack, and Ilyra cannot reconnect couplings during this scene. Directly reducing its HP to 0 also stops it.

At round 2, a brazier seal glows before discharging at initiative count 0 into a clearly indicated 10-by-20-foot strip beside the grooves. Dexterity save DC 14, 2d6 fire, half on success. It repeats every other round, changing to the opposite side each time. A disconnected coupling or the north-wall ward-release handle disables this environmental hazard; operating the handle takes one action and no check. Never apply both witchfire damage and an untelegraphed explosion when the Ram dies.

Ilyra targets saboteurs with her bolt and uses Binding Line to delay, not to hold the entire party helpless. Below 20 HP with two couplings disabled, she runs for the sea stairs using her movement and Dash; heroes can pursue, let her go to finish sabotage, or bargain for surrender with the command token. The Ram stays active until stopped. Noncombat: sabotage from cover, lure the Ram under the crane, or negotiate withdrawal of Ilyra after disabling it. Success: sabotage and rescue are counted separately.

Fail-forward: a launched Ram with existing damage can still be stopped on the causeway with the same profiles and remaining advances; once it clears the route, end the chase honestly. Transition: resolve extraction and consequences.

NPCs

NPC: Captain Sera Venn



Captain Sera Venn: show at the gatehouse meeting.

Olive skin, short dark knot, red surcoat over mail and steel, brass ear cuff. Wants her surviving soldiers out; fears being judged by the prisoners she sold. Voice: 'I signed for a surrender. She wrote a different war.' Knows keys, gate winch, and the supply boat. Hides her advance payment of 200 gp until Hett challenges her. Help earns practical cooperation; pressure can earn a confession with evidence; betrayal makes her flee through K1, leaving any surrendered keys behind. Her portrait is safe to show when met. Mechanically, use her complete profile below and keep her assistance on the escape route.

NPC: Ilyra Sorn



Ilyra Sorn: reveal when the necromancer is seen.

Brown skin, close silver hair, charcoal-and-violet wizard robes, ivory talisman, iron rune-bracer wreathed in ghost-light. Wants her machine and method recognized by conquest; fears being reduced to an expendable contractor. Voice: 'A gate is an argument. I have built the answer.' Knows every coupling and her limited reserve. Hides shipping contacts in K7, not a magical escape hatch. She honors a prisoner-for-withdrawal bargain because launch matters more, but interprets vague promises narrowly. Credible defeat may buy surrender; flattery alone never makes her abandon her objective. Her portrait is

player-safe appearance, revealed only when she is seen.

NPC: Brother Oren

Dwarf engineer with black beard, round spectacles, leather apron, and a scorched pair of tongs. Wants captives freed and his stolen design dismantled; fears heroes attacking the brazier while ignoring its binding chains. Voice: 'Three lines. Any hand can cut them. Mine shook.' Knows K2 and the coupling diagram; does not know Ilyra's current position or what Sera will accept. Responds to patience with concrete diagrams, pressure with the same facts tersely, betrayal by warning the city himself. Use Civilian with 18 HP; he is not a combat healer despite his title.

NPC: Sergeant Hett

Human veteran with a splinted knee and a dry, precise voice. Wants all eight prisoners home, including two soldiers who once argued for surrender. Knows the signal procedure and boat. Voice: 'Count us before you promise anything.' She accepts Sera's help without withdrawing her accusation. She can coordinate carrying the injured, freeing heroes to sabotage. Use Civilian with 16 HP and speed 15 feet; no implied full-strength fighter joins the party.

Reference Appendix

Original homebrew profiles for this adventure. All use normal action economy and core conditions. No unlisted resistance, immunity, spell slot, legendary action, or automatic reanimation applies. Named spells used by player characters retain their normal effects; a spell-like enemy action below is not a claim to reproduce a published spell.

Red Company Soldier: Medium humanoid; AC 15; HP 24; speed 30 feet; Str +2, Dex +1, Con +1, Int +0, Wis +1, Cha +0. Spear +4 to hit, reach 5 feet or range 20/60, 1d6+2 piercing. Light crossbow +3, range 80/320, 1d8+1 piercing. One attack per action; Athletics +4. Surrenders when captain orders or at 6 HP if escape is offered.

Captain Sera Venn: Medium humanoid; AC 16; HP 58; speed 30 feet; Str +3, Dex +2, Con +2, Int +1, Wis +1, Cha +2. Athletics +5, Insight +3. Multiattack: two sword attacks, +5 to hit, reach 5 feet, 1d8+3 slashing each. Reaction, Guarded Retreat: when hit by a melee attack, reduce that attack's damage by 1d6; then move 5 feet without provoking from that attacker only. One reaction per round. No spells. Surrender rules appear in Encounter 2.

Bonehook Legionary: Medium undead; AC 15; HP 30; speed 30 feet; Str +2, Dex +1, Con +2, Int -2, Wis +0, Cha -2; darkvision 60 feet; understands Common commands but cannot speak. Immune poison damage and poisoned condition; no weapon resistance. Hooked polearm +5 to hit, reach 10 feet, 1d10+2 slashing; on hit it may pull the target 5 feet toward itself if the target fails Strength save DC 13. One attack per action. Crossbow +3, range 80/320, 1d8+1 piercing. It cannot pull through a solid barrier or take a free second attack. Actual command token can order it to stand

aside; spoken imitations without the token fail.

Ilyra Sorn: Medium humanoid; AC 14; HP 64; speed 30 feet; Str -1, Dex +2, Con +2, Int +4, Wis +1, Cha +2; Intelligence save +7, Constitution save +5; Arcana +7. Necrotic Bolt: ranged spell attack +7, range 90 feet, one target, 3d8 necrotic. Binding Line, twice per encounter: one creature within 60 feet makes Strength save DC 14 or is restrained by a visible spectral chain. At the end of each of its turns it repeats the save; an ally adjacent to the creature can cut the chain with one action and no check. Ilyra must concentrate as on a spell and can maintain only one line. Dispel magic against a level-2 effect ends it. Reaction, Iron Ward, twice per encounter: reduce damage from one attack that hits her by 8. Cannot use it against save-based damage or while incapacitated. She has no unstated resurrection or teleport ability. Her bracer's magic fails when removed; it is salvage worth 80 gp, not a reusable player spell construct.

Ossuary Ram: Huge construct; AC 16; HP 110; speed 30 feet; Str +5, Dex -1, Con +4, Int -4, Wis +0, Cha -3; Strength save +8; immune poison and psychic damage, poisoned and frightened conditions; no other resistance. Ram attack: +7 to hit, reach 10 feet, one target, 3d8+5 bludgeoning; it may push a hit target 10 feet on a failed Strength save DC 15. One attack per action. Trampling Burst, once per encounter and only while all three couplings work: instead of its attack, move up to 20 feet in a straight line; creatures in its path make Dexterity save DC 14, taking 3d6 bludgeoning and falling prone on failure, half damage and no prone on success. It cannot pass through walls, shut portcullises, or another Huge creature. After two couplings are disabled, speed 10 feet and no route advance; after three, shut down. Its six skeletal legs, oak siege beams, and iron straps move by sorcery; the copper collars bind the bones to its ghost-flame. Its six legs grant no extra attacks. Its brazier contains magical energy, not captive souls. Civilian: AC 10, HP 9 unless noted, speed 30 feet unless noted, all ability modifiers +0; no effective attack.

Handouts

Handout: A - Oren's Entry Sketch

Visibility: player-safe

'Use the eastern cove. The narrow ledge reaches a drain below the cells. The grate lever is outside, under the square stone lip on the right. Keep the skiff's line tied to the iron ring. A larger supply boat waits below the broad rear door. Do not try the outer cliff in this weather.'

Handout: B - Revised Discharge Terms

Visibility: player-safe

'Red Company discharge is suspended until the harbor is secured. Captain and enlisted personnel will remain available for indefinite service. Prior payment does not release any body from this obligation. Sorn's office recognizes no conflicting verbal agreement. Attached: Captain Venn's original request for payment and safe discharge.'

Handout: C - Isolation Instructions

Visibility: player-safe

'SIGNAL: close the shutters; break the binding; remove the lenses. RAM: isolate a binding chain at the wall to handle its matching coupling safely. Disconnect all three couplings to stop the frame. Breaking only the command token does not stop the construct. Once stopped, open and dismantle the brazier before leaving it for repair.'

Resolution Paths

Rescue and sabotage: prisoners reach the harbor, the Ram is stopped, and the party earns both bounties. Dark Signal and a held gate make extraction orderly. Without those benefits, heroes cover the retreat against only any already-listed surviving guards; do not invent a new wave after the finale. The city can reclaim the abandoned keep with its arriving relief force.

Sabotage without rescue: the immediate assault fails, but captives remain at risk. If Ilyra is defeated, locks and remaining guards can still be addressed using existing keys and profiles; offer that earned opportunity. If the party leaves them knowingly, Hett's eventual testimony reflects it and the rescue bounty is unpaid.

Rescue without sabotage: the garrison survives to warn the city. The outer harbor is evacuated and damaged when the Ram arrives. Pay the rescue bounty, not the sabotage bounty. The ledger, destroyed signals, and damaged couplings give the city a credible defense advantage; do not erase them merely to create a darker ending.

Ilyra escapes: her machine and prisoners stay lost if the heroes won those objectives. She may return with a different plan in a later campaign, but never with this Ram inexplicably repaired overnight. Ilyra captured: her testimony exposes buyers and gives the city leverage; her captors choose whether to bargain over sentencing. Sera's confession, cooperation, flight, or death is judged separately from Ilyra's guilt.

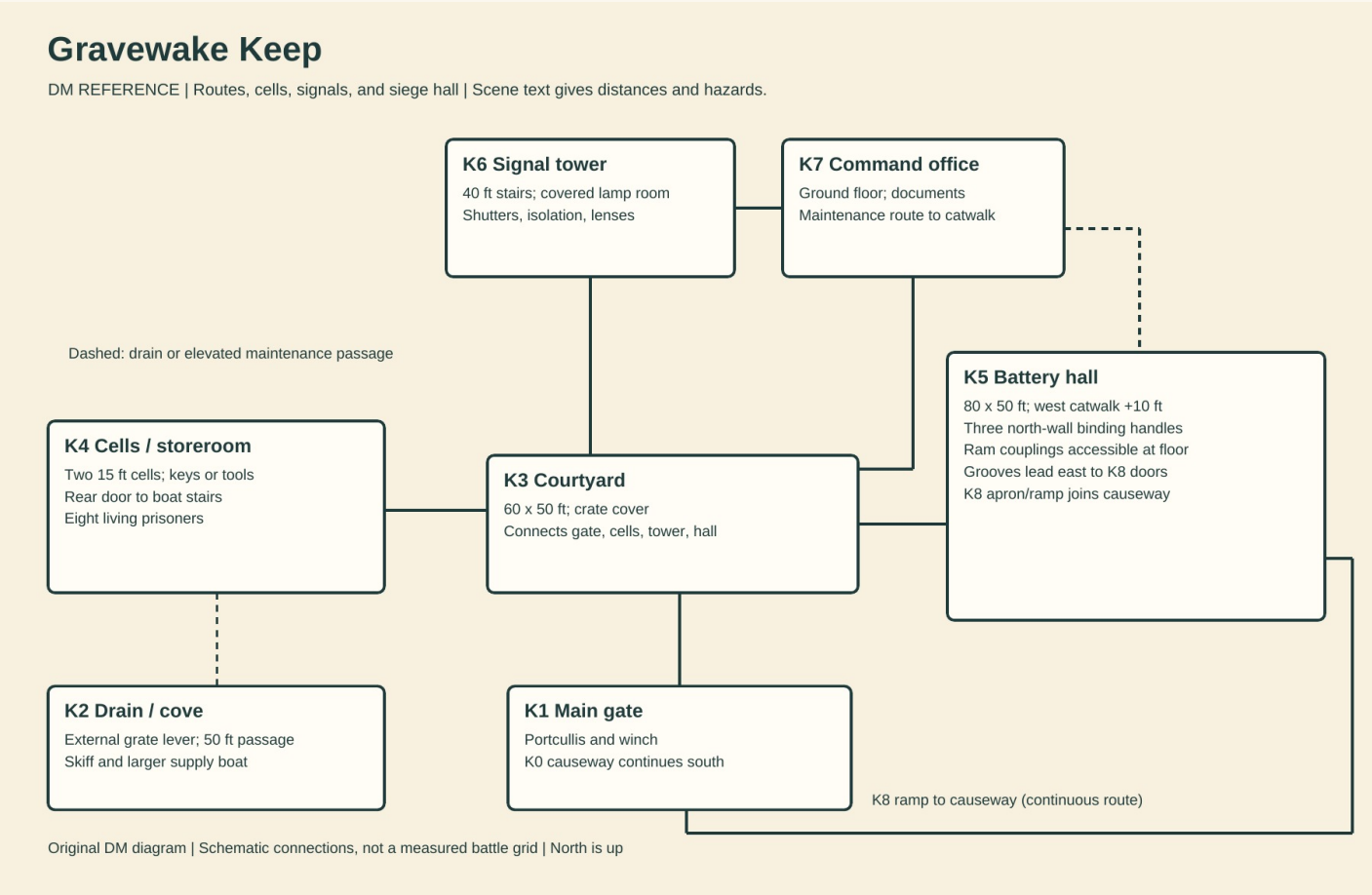
Rewards and Follow-Up

The city pays 700 gp for stopping the launch and 300 gp for returning all eight captives alive; if fewer survive, it still pays 40 gp per survivor up to that 300 gp cap. Two potions of healing in K4 use ordinary core rules. Ilyra's inert bracer is worth 80 gp as salvage; an unlocked workshop chest holds 160 gp of her own funds. The prisoners' 120 gp payroll is explicitly their property.

A stopped Ram can be permanently dismantled with a minute of safe work after opposition ends. If the party wants to sell it intact, the city withholds the sabotage bounty until satisfied it cannot launch; handling a huge siege frame requires transport and a future task, not automatic inventory space. Milestone advancement follows the group's campaign pace, with no assumed level change if played after The Black Antler Hunt.

Record: Quiet Entry; Sera's Help and confession; eight individual prisoners' fates; Dark Signal; coupling states; machine stopped or launched; brazier dismantled; Ilyra captured, escaped, or killed; ledger recovered; payroll returned. The two adventures can share the same level-5 party after a normal downtime rest. Keep their causes independent: Corven misused an old hunting curse, while Ilyra built a military weapon.

Gravewake Keep: keyed DM plan



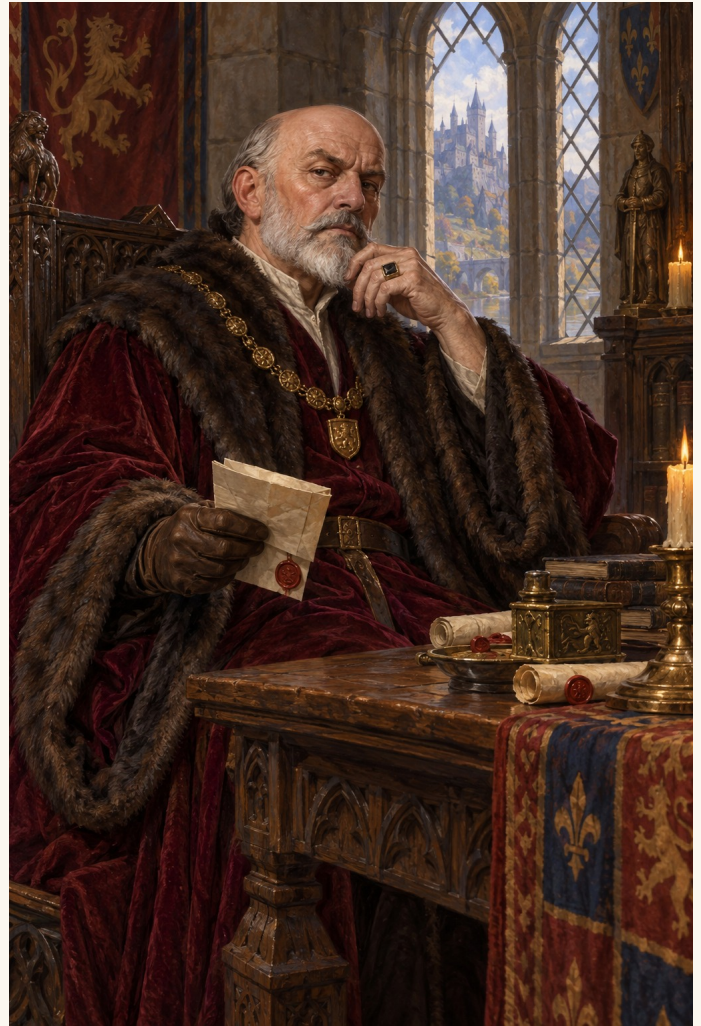
Map key: DM reference. Use the keyed location descriptions in the adventure. Reveal discoveries during play.

Faces of Kestrel Ford

Show only the subject the characters have encountered. These plates contain appearance and names, with no hidden motives or combat statistics.



Ada Thorn



Corven Vale

What your character notices

Creatures of the Hunt

Show only the subject the characters have encountered. These plates contain appearance and names, with no hidden motives or combat statistics.



The Antler Rider



Briar Hound

What your character notices

Faces of Gravewake

Show only the subject the characters have encountered. These plates contain appearance and names, with no hidden motives or combat statistics.



Captain Sera Venn



Ilyra Sorn

What your character notices

The Bone Legion

Show only the subject the characters have encountered. These plates contain appearance and names, with no hidden motives or combat statistics.



Bonehook Legionary



Ossuary Ram

What your character notices

Player handouts - the Hunt

Give each card only when its adventure reveals it. Cut along the rules or share one card at a time.

A - Brann's Field Note

He reads them names. A hunter does not ask why. The ivory horn has three copper braces. I saw the pale field weaken when the keeper loosened one. Free the horn before you strike it. The root gap is broad enough for a person; I left the brush pulled aside.

B - The Hornkeeper's Instruction

Three braces bind the horn to its cradle. Remove all three to expose the ivory. Broken ivory ends the hunt. A name beneath the keeper's own seal commands tonight's quarry. A false seal has no force. Ink scraped away cannot recall a sounded name. A newly sealed name replaces the former until dawn.

C - Petition Receipt

Kestrel Ford land petition. Applicant: Dain Holt. Request: retain the common road and ferry access. Disposition: rejected. Corven Vale, Magistrate. Beneath the signature is the impression of a square seal crossed by a single black antler.

Player handouts - the Keep

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Adventure outcome ledger

The Black Antler Hunt

Dain / Brann / other people saved or lost:

Horn and braces / Corven / evidence recovered:

Council reward / promises / remaining threat:

Gravewake Keep

Prisoners and escape route / Sera and confession:

Couplings / Ram / brazier / Ilyra:

Signals / ledger / payroll / city reward:
