

BULWARK

BULWARK

A role-playing game of epic deeds in desperate circumstances.

Ben Wright, March 2013.

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AT FORT BRIGGS...

Arpad stared out over the battlements and into the pass. Snow was still everywhere, despite the thaw.

The soldiers next to him were nervous - any why shouldn't they be? They'd never had to face a situation like this before. Some were still hauling baulks of timber to reinforce the fort's main gate. The walls were short enough that Arpad could have reached down to help.

Arpad was determined to help. They were good people. The night before the officers had arranged a hearty meal to improve morale, but the cold morning air seemed to have leached all the bravado out of them. Arpad was made of sterner stuff. He'd been in dire situations before. He'd walked away from all of them, but sometimes in defeat. There'd be no holding back if he wanted to save the previous night's drinking companions.

The thief, Zsuzsa, was watching the same horizon from a different section of wall. Arpad had met her once before, and she'd disappeared with a small fortune of his. Arpad didn't bear a grudge. A good sword and a sturdy shield were more important to him than gold or jewels. He knew she could handle herself at least as well as he could. She'd claimed to be just passing through, but passing through to where? She must have realised, as he had, that the invasion was coming and come here to help hold it back.

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Every spring the thaw came. Every year an army would descend from goblin lands as soon as the mountain pass was clear. Every invasion was met by an army here at Fort Briggs. The stronghold provided a safe place to take the wounded and a vantage point for archers while the main battle happened on open ground. There was no army this year. When the the thaw finally came after the Year of No Summer the rivers had burst their banks, washed away bridges and turned roads in quagmires. The human armies, already depleted following the poor harvest, could not make it to the Fort in time. The goblin horde, however, was likely to be the largest ever seen after being pent up behind the mountains for over a year. If the Fort couldn't hold the pass, the farmlands were undefended.

Down in the ward, the young ex-cleric, Sandor, was putting the final touches to his improvised field hospital. Arpad found him young and nervous, but anyone who got thrown out of holy orders for answering back was all right in his book.

Along the valley, Arpad spotted the other veteran, Wiola, waving frantically. She was an archer, and a bloody good one from what he'd seen. He didn't understand her journey or vision quest or whatever she called it, but the steel he'd seen in her eyes when he'd explained the situation here had told him she could be relied on. From her position next to the rock traps the soldiers had prepared, she had seen the advancing army.

Arpad watched the rabble appear around a rocky outcropping. Hundreds, no, thousands of goblins screeching their anger. Good news, then. Plenty for everyone.

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YOU ARE A BULWARK

This is a rule-light role-playing game where you take on the persona of bad-ass, heroic engine of destruction and fight to defend a castle, town or other settlement from a vast attacking army.

The main thrust of the game is in describing the incredible stunts your hero pulls off, riffing off other players' actions and otherwise entertaining yourself and your friends. It's about description and imagination.

Because even the most exciting fight is a bit pointless without some context, you also create reasons why your hero is personally invested in the fortunes of this settlement. Those things are not just put at risk by the invasion in general – each is tied to a specific enemy action over the course of the battle.

The events of the actual battle are played through dice rolls. Tokens are used to record the progress through different parts of the battle and the heroes' reserves of strength. The tokens for the heroes help divide up 'screen time' amongst the players fairly.

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What You Need

- At least 2 players. There's no hard upper limit, but the more players there are, the more time each player will spend watching other people hog all the glory, and the longer the game will last.
- Reference sheets for the heroes. You can use a copy of the sheet give in this book, or jot the details down on paper.
- Reference sheets for crises during the battle. Again, you can copy the blank in this book or just write the details down by hand.
- Two six-sided dice.
- Tokens. You will need 16 or so per player. You can use anything you want as a token. You can use dice to show the total number of tokens for something, but bear in mind that dice have a tendency to be rolled by mistake or knocked over by accident. You can record numbers on paper instead, but they will change frequently and involve lots of rubbing out or crossing out.
- Balls of steel.

HERO GENERATION

You want to create a hard as nails hero with a weapon, a glare and no fear? Good for you.

Background

Take some time to think about the basics of your hero. What weapons do they fight with? What do they look like? How do they talk, move and behave?

A memorable hero is something more than a clichéd character or a shallow copy of a famous figure from fiction. A memorable hero is something unique. You shouldn't try to create an entire fascinating backstory right from the outset; no-one, not even you, will remember all of the details. Instead, pick a few strong characteristics and be prepared to let your hero develop their own personality as you play.

Basic Details

The usual suspects: name, sex, appearance and typical weaponry.

Traits

A hero has 3 traits, imaginatively-named Attack, Defence and Movement. Attack is used primarily when you're getting up in someone's face, taking down big enemies and generally wading into a fight. Defence is used when you're protecting or defending

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something like a group of soldiers, a gap in a wall or a strategic strong-point. Movement is used to dash from place to place in a hurry and bolster the other two traits.

Each trait has a minimum score of 1. You can spend 6 points on traits in total.

During the game, you will have a stack of tokens for each trait. It is these tokens that you spend when you use the trait. The amount of tokens for a trait can be higher than its score.

Heroism Points

Heroism points are special tokens you can earn during the battle. You do not start with any, and do not carry any over between battles.

Trophies

As your character rolls from one epic battle to another, they'll carry a few keepsakes with them to remind them of past glories. Enchanted weapons, magical trinkets, singular treasures, scars – they're all much of a muchness as far as a hero is concerned. They can be brought into the story as reminders of past events, a more tangible equivalent of the backstory you've dreamed up for them.

A hero only receives a trophy after a successful defence of a stronghold, so your character begins with none.

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Bragging Rights

Bragging Rights are accolades you earn during the battle, for particular heroism, effectiveness or overall bad-assitude. You only record bragging rights for the current battle.

Personal Connections

In each battle, there are 3 things that your hero is particularly determined to protect. They are established at the start of each battle, so you can leave them blank now.

The Final Step

Would your hero ever consider doing any of the following, under any circumstances:

- Betraying his fellows for personal gain?
- Abandoning the innocent to their fate?
- Taking advantage of a someone's dire situation for personal gain?
- Displaying callous disregard for people's lives and safety?
- Wilfully destroying something of significance to someone else?

If the answer to anyone of these question is yes, then your character dies. Make another. Your first one just wasn't hero material.

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BATTLE GENERATION

Now you have your heroes ready for action, it is time to create the site of the battle.

The heroes are engaged in an heroic defence. Often, they are defending a fortification of some kind, but the site of the battle could easily be a town or building complex not designed to withstand an invasion – an abbey or a magical college, for example. All players should discuss and agree on what location they are defending. Write down the interesting details to refer to later. You can draw a sketch map, if you want, but it's not mandatory.

The Location

More detailed discussion of fortifications is given in a later section. The important thing is that everyone has a clear idea of what the location looks like, and is already getting ideas for entertaining stunts.

The Enemy

The enemy army is unlikely to roll up to the gates disorganised. They know about their target, and they have prepared accordingly. For each weakness in the location's defences, they will have a means to exploit it. For each strength, a way to avoid it or nullify it. More ideas for what the attacking army can bring to the table is in a later section.

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Personal Connections

Pick a player at random. That player describes to the group a personal connection their hero has to the location. The connection can be a person, an organisation, an object or anything else that they would fight to protect. It need not be a motivating factor in their decision to defend the location. In fact, they might not even have met the person in question or known the object existed until they arrived to help. The important thing is that it's something that the hero has a personal desire to see the connection survive the battle. Some examples are:

- A foot soldier the hero shared a meal and a campfire song with on the eve of the battle.
- A group of war orphans whose guardian brought them here in the belief it was safe.
- An old arms instructor of the hero.
- This is the spiritual home of the hero's order or unit.
- This is the capital of an area the hero grew up in.
- A rare art treasure is stored here, that the hero does not want to see stolen or destroyed.
- A valuable library is sited here, and the loss of its knowledge would be a tragedy.
- This place has exceptional architectural beauty that captures the heart of the hero.

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The connection doesn't have to be something that your hero would spend his life guarding – they are way too experienced and pragmatic for such a grand gesture. Your hero will, however, go out of his way to preserve that connection, even in the heat of battle.

Once that player has picked a connection, another player does so. No player can pick a connection that's identical to one for another hero. A player can pick one that's closely related but independent.

Continue until each player has picked 3 connections for their hero.

Crises

The course of the battle is determined by the outcome of a number of crises. Each crisis is a specific challenge the defenders face. Averting the crisis keep the location relatively safe, failing to avert the crisis brings defeat just that bit closer. Each crisis is also tied to one of a hero's personal connections, and that connection is placed in harm's way by that part of the battle.

The way that the personal connection is put at risk by the crisis need not be direct. In the panic and chaos of a battle, any attack has the potential to cause damage or casualties anywhere. The link between the crisis and the connection exists to make one hero in particular keen to avert it. The group decisions about the attacking army are a useful place to get ideas for crises.

A crisis has a Danger score, which determines how difficult it is to avert and how long you have to avert it. The Danger score is 3, 4, or 5. Each crisis also a type – attack or defence – that reflects

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the best way for a hero to fight it. Crises with the 'attack' type are best dealt with by getting out into the enemy army and causing trouble. Crises with the 'defence' type are best dealt with by fighting from the walls or towers and pushing the enemy back. Crises with a Danger score of 3 or 4 are either attack or defence, crises with Danger 5 always count as both.

Crises usually fall into one of the following categories:

- **Soldiers** - a unit of ordinary soldiers fighting with the defenders.
- **Champions** - powerful commanders that take concerted effort to kill. Not as strong as the heroes, but just strong enough that it's non-trivial to despatch them.
- **Siege Engines** - Machines to break down or bypass the defences.
- **Magic** - Wizards or magical artefacts that bolster the attackers or hurt the defenders.
- **Fantastic Beasts** - Magical creatures that can fly, knock down walls, breathe fire or all three.
- **Bad Luck** - Dangerous weather conditions, fire, out-of-control magic or some other danger not immediately caused by the attacking army.

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A battle has a number of crises equal to 3 times the number of players, created using the following procedure:

Step 1

Each player picks one personal connection from the hero to their left and writes a Danger 3 crisis for it. The crisis can be either attack or defence. It has space for tokens for 'Progress' and 'Ticking Clock'. Write in the a brief description or name for the crisis and the personal connection linked to it. Put a tick next to the connection used on the hero's character sheet.

Once all the players have written a crisis, put them all face down in the middle of the table.

Step 2

Each player now picks a personal connection from the player to their right and writes a Danger 5 crisis for it. The connection can't be the one already used. Put a tick next to the connection chosen this time. This crisis counts as both attack and defence, as described earlier. Once everyone has finished, the crises are added to the face-down pile.

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Step 3

Finally, each player writes a Danger 4 crisis for the personal connection on their own hero's sheet without a tick next to it. This crisis has to be of the opposite type to the one they wrote for their left-hand neighbour. Once everyone is finished, put the last crises into the middle and have someone shuffle them all thoroughly.

It is possible that two or more crises will share an element from the attacking army, as their details are secret until they are revealed during the battle. When that happens, simply rationalise it away as an enemy not being as dead as was thought, having a sudden identical twin, or reinforcements arriving.

Incoming!

You are now ready to begin the battle.

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THE BATTLE

The battle is fought over three waves. Between each wave, the heroes replenish some of their traits.

Starting the First Wave

Each hero stocks up their traits with tokens. They begin with a number of tokens in each trait equal to twice its score, for 12 tokens in total.

Randomly select a number of crises equal to the number of players minus one. These crises make up the first wave of the battle. Add tokens to the Ticking Clock of each crisis equal to its Danger.

Pick a player at random to start.

Taking a Turn

Each hero can only deal with one crisis at a time. Your hero is either committed to a crisis, or uncommitted. All heroes begin a wave uncommitted.

If your hero is uncommitted and there is a crisis in play without any hero fighting it, you must send your hero to join a crisis. Sending them to fight an 'empty' crisis is free. Sending them to a crisis that already has a hero fighting it costs them 1 Movement token.

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If your hero is uncommitted, but all crises in play are currently being fought. You spend 1 Movement to join any crisis or pass the rest of your turn.

If your hero is committed, you can choose to move to a different crisis by spending 1 Movement token.

If you didn't pass, you then make a dice roll against the crisis your hero is now fighting. Dice Rolls are covered in a later section.

Then either you or the next player takes a turn, as described in the dice rolling section.

Resolving Crises

When a crisis is averted by collecting 5 Progress tokens, remove any remaining Ticking Clock tokens and place it on a victory pile off to one side.

All heroes that were committed to the crisis get a Heroism token.

If the crisis was defeated by a single hero without any help, the player can write the name of that crisis down as a Bragging Right.

When a crisis comes to pass by running out of Ticking Clock tokens, remove any Progress tokens and place it on a defeat pile off to one side.

In either case, all heroes that were fighting it are now uncommitted.

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First Wave to Second Wave

Once all the crises have been resolved, the first wave is over. Each hero receives tokens in their traits equal to their score, in addition to any tokens they had left at the end of the wave.

Randomly select a number of unresolved crises equal to the number of players. Give them Ticking Clock tokens equal to their Danger.

Pick a random player to start the second wave.

Second Wave to Third Wave

Once all the crises have been resolved, the second wave is over. Each hero receives tokens in their traits equal to their score, in addition to any tokens they had left at the end of the wave.

Deal out the rest of the unresolved crises for the third wave. There should be 1 more than the number of players. Give them Ticking Clock tokens equal to their Danger.

Pick a random player to start the third wave.

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End of the Battle

Once all the crises in the third wave have been dealt with, the battle is over.

The overall outcome of the battle is determined by how many crises were averted. If over half of the crises were averted, the battle ends in victory. Otherwise, the battle ends in defeat, and the heroes slink away in shame and ignominy.

Each player narrates their hero's reaction to discovering the fates of their personal connections. If the crisis was averted, the connection survives or endures, even if the battle was lost. If the crisis came to pass, the connection is lost or ruined, even if the battle was won.

If the battle was victory, then if any hero had more Heroism tokens left than any other, then they receive the Bragging Right of 'Most Heroic'. Then the heroes can celebrate their victory and tell each other the stories of their bragging rights, with suitable embellishment.

After the revelry has subsided, each player can select a Trophy to add to their character permanently. This could be a weapon found during the battle, a valuable artefact taken from an enemy or presented as a gift by a grateful survivor, an impressive scar or some other bauble that the hero keeps to remind themselves of their triumph.

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DICE ROLLS

So, you want to get stuck in? Good for you.

This is not a game where you roll to hit, then roll to see how much damage you do, or anything pitiful like that.

In this game the question is not ‘will you mess your enemy up?’. The question is ‘how badly will you mess your enemy up?’.

Step 1

What are you going to do, and to whom?

Describe the heroic action you are taking. As a rule, you don’t have to pussy-foot around couching your description in terms of ‘I try to’ or something like that. You want to behead five goblins? You behead five goblins. The uncertainty of the dice roll determines if your deeds have the impact you want them to on the wider battle.

Now you decide whether your action is better described as an Attack or a Defence. Attacks are attempts to break the enemy line, destroy siege weapons and other proactive actions. Defences are attempts to protect weak spots, halt enemy advances, protect allies and other reactive actions.

Spend an Attack or Defence token now.

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Step 2

Roll 2 dice.

If you rolled matching numbers, immediately gain 2 tokens. These must be gained in the same trait, and that trait cannot be the one you have just spent from to take the action.

Now look at the highest number you rolled. This is your score for the roll. If the type of crisis (Attack or Defence) doesn't match the trait you rolled, then reduce your score by 1.

You can increase your score by spending tokens from the same trait you rolled, or from Movement. Each token you spend increases your score by 1.

If you didn't have any Attack or Defence tokens, you still roll dice, but your score is the lowest number you rolled. If you rolled doubles, you can gain the tokens in any trait.

Step 3

Progress.

If your score is strictly higher than the Danger of the crisis you are facing, you add a token to the Progress of the crisis.

If you have just added the 5th Progress token, the crisis is averted. Skip step 4.

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Step 4

Ticking clock.

If either of the dice rolled a 1, remove a token from the Ticking Clock of the crisis. If both dice were 1, then also remove a token from the Ticking Clock of all other crises in the current wave.

If this removes the last such token from a crisis, then it has come to pass.

Step 5

Next turn.

If you added Progress without needing to spend an extra token to do so, you take another turn. Otherwise, the player to your left takes the next turn.

Using Heroism

When called upon to roll dice, you can instead spend a point of Heroism to add a Progress token automatically. This can be very handy if the Ticking Clock of the crisis is on its last token.

CREATING LOCATIONS

The quickest way to start playing is to pick a picture, description or map of a fortification and use that. You can choose re-enact a famous battle from fiction or pick a real world castle as the basis for the game.

Defenders

The size of the army you are supporting is important, as is its make-up of soldiers. Assisting massed ranks of conscripted pikemen is very different to supporting an elite unit of bowmen. Are the soldiers human, elf, dwarf or a mix of those and others? How many horsemen do they have. Siege engines? A famous general to lead them? Captains and lieutenants who are powerful warriors in their own right (although naturally a poor second to you...)?

Fortifications and other Defences

Siegecraft is a large and fascinating field. You don't have to be a real life expert in mediæval warfare, but the more details you can include, the more realistic the defence will feel. All defences are based on a very simple idea - make it as difficult and time-consuming as possible for people outside to get in, and offer the defenders as much protection as you can while they rain death on the attackers.

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Walls are an obvious first step. Ditches, moats, fences and raised earthworks can be used as an alternative or together with walls. Larger strongholds have multiple concentric walls, giving the defenders somewhere to rally to and start the process over again. Walls have entrances let in them; which are often heavily fortified in the manner you would imagine. Less well-known are sally ports - smaller doors that can be used by the defenders to send out small groups of troops to flank or otherwise harry the attackers. Sally ports get away with being largely undefended by virtue of being too small, too well-hidden or too difficult to approach for an attacking army to realistically gain control of them. Water gates - sally ports leading out directly into a river or the sea, can be used in a similar way as well as to bring in provisions and reinforcements unhampered by the enemy. The walls themselves, if they are broad enough, have walkways for defending soldiers. A well-prepared castle will cover these with wooden shelters, to provide extra cover against enemy arrows.

Towers can mark the points of the wall, jutting out to give defending archers the angle they need to shoot foes at the base of the wall. They are also strong-points of defence even after the enemy breaches the walls. The area inside the wall can turn into a killing field with angry defenders on all sides.

Natural features can be exploited to make the stronghold more secure. A river is an important obstacle, and reduces the number of sides that the defenders need to protect fully. High ground exhausts the enemy, and many castles are built with a perimeter that matches the cliffs of a raised piece of ground as a natural wall.

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The layout of the castle depends on a number of factors: the money available to build it, the purpose of the castle – some ratio of defence to opulence, and what strength of force it was built to withstand. Castles are rarely built all at once. Generations of owners expand and remodel the buildings, and often a castle is built on the ruins of an older one. Larger fortifications have a nested series of defences, so that even if one ring is pierced the attackers have to start all over again.

The central buildings of a castle tend to be either luxurious apartments for the nobles, or a mighty tower designed to be the last hold-out against an army. Everyday buildings, such as kitchens and stables are not normally in the most secure part of the castle.

There are many specific defensive tricks that castles employ. A narrow and winding access road to the gates slows the assault and gives opportunity for the defenders to pick off the enemy. Drawbridges of various kinds are doubly effective – removing a necessary means of access and putting a wall in the way. The kind of drawbridge most usually depicted is one over a moat, but a more effective kind hinges in the middle over two deep pits. Where defence is valued over convenience, important castle buildings don't have access from ground level. Entry is via a staircase, hindering the invaders. If the staircase is made of wood, the defenders can destroy it in an emergency, leaving the attackers with a very difficult task ahead of them to force their way inside.

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A Fantasy World

Those are just the options available in the real world. In a magical land, there are a whole host of other defences. Golems, illusions, magical traps and other active defences are obvious additions, but there are subtler ways that a magical setting can affect castle construction.

The existence of flying monsters and magic means that extra care needs to be taken in defensive preparation. Access to the roof of towers needs to be defended, and wooden defences might be eschewed as at risk from magical fire. The existence of fantasy metals with ridiculous properties might mean that gates can be light yet impossibly strong.

A hallmark of high fantasy art is gross exaggeration of scale, and there is no reason why you can't use that exaggeration to make your castle even more impressive. Enchanted landscapes might have impossibly tall cliffs or highly unusual geography. Magical construction methods allow walls and towers far larger than would ever be possible in the real world.

Exotic Locations

Dwarven fortresses dug out of the mountains, elven treetop havens, selkie cities deep under the sea - all of these are available as fantastic locations for a battle. Each will change the usual defensive tactics and means of fortification considerably. A clichéd situation is when somewhere protected by an enchantment that makes it invisible or invincible is inconveniently denied that security by enemy action.

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Non-Fortifications

If the location of the battle is not a stronghold, then it will lack the usual defences. The defenders might have had opportunity to evacuate the non-combatants and throw up a few wooden palisades, but such ad-hoc measures are no replacement for some solid walls. It's inevitable that the location will be over-run by the enemy, but without a central keep where the commanders can be found, over-running the place is not enough to conquer it.

If the settlement was built with a half-hearted eye to defence, such as a walled abbey or a fortified manor house, the minimal advantage the defensive position offers has to be used to its fullest before the enemy swarms into the main buildings.

Peaceful settlements tend to be larger than castles, as the latter are encouraged to stay small by the expense and effort of encircling them with walls. There is an abundance of cellars, attics and other hiding places that bands of skirmishers can erupt from to harry the invaders.

Natural features such as rivers, cliffs and hills are still an obstacle to the attackers. They might not be exploited as a defensive feature in a town in the same way they would in a castle. Perhaps the biggest advantage is that militiamen and soldiers fighting in familiar surroundings know all the short-cuts and hiding places. They'll need every edge they can get.

CREATING ARMIES

The most effective way of conquering a fortification is to lay siege to it and starve the defenders out. As this is a game about fighting a battle, you can probably guess that that is not an option. There are plenty of potential reasons for the urgency. An army might be on its way to help the defenders, so the attackers needs to finish things quickly. The army laying siege might be over-confident, or too crazed with blood-lust to wait it out.

As mentioned earlier, attacking armies come prepared for the defences they expect to face. Bad luck for them that they weren't expected a small group of incredibly dangerous heroes.

Siege Engines

Siege engines designed to pound fortifications, such as trebuchets as catapults, can be set up a comfortable distance away. As long as the operators are protected from arrows and a suitable supply of big heavy rocks can be found, these weapons can keep firing for hours on end. The drawback, as an offensive strategy, is that it takes a lot of effort to breach even a fairly modest wall this way.

Field siege engines, such as ballistae, are largely ineffective against walls. If the attacking army has any, it will be because they were brought along for use in field battles. They can still be effective on the rare occasions they hit a defender on the walls, or to hold back a sortie by the defenders.

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Siege towers are custom-built for the height of the walls. They provide shelter for the attackers from enemy arrows while the slow-moving machine is pushed up to the castle. It's a laborious process with plenty of potential for interference by an intrepid hero. Once it gets there however, all the soldiers inside it can spill out onto the walls with little to stop them. A moat, even a dry one, is enough to render a siege tower useless. The siege tower's lesser nephews, ladders, are an act of a desperate attacker given how easy they are to dislodge and how unprotected the carriers and climbers are as they rush the walls.

The weakest point in a wall system is the gate. A lucky hit with catapult can't be relied on, so a battering ram is often deployed. A simple ram is just a tree trunk and lots of soldiers to carry it, and yet more soldiers to replace casualties. A more accomplished battering ram is suspended from a wheeled frame, where the ram's own weight and momentum delivers the blow. The frame has a roof, to protect the operators from arrows.

Engineers and Sappers

Soldiers can breach defences even without complicated siege engines. Sappers tunnel under walls and fortifications to undermine their foundations, then burn through the ceiling props and collapse the stonework. A long tunnel takes some time to dig, and there is always the danger of collapse before the destination is reached.

Engineers can build more than big, impressive siege engines. Woven wooden fences can be used to protect archers, both from enemy arrows and as an obstacle to *mêlée* attackers. Prefabricated bridges and platforms can be constructed to cross

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ditches and moats. A more permanent approach is to have foot soldiers construct a causeway out of loose stones, soil and sand, deposited under the protection of shields or other barriers. There is even a historical account of a broad, inclined causeway being built to afford access to the top of the walls.

Fire and Other Terrors

Fire is more than a convenient way of destroying wooden constructions and demoralising the enemy. Smoke is dangerous in its own right, and fire an almost impenetrable barrier. Stacking fuel around a defensive tower and setting it alight might not destroy the fabric of the building, but lives will be lost, archer rendered useless and morale destroyed. Flasks of Greek fire, or the local fantasy equivalent, are an effective anti-personnel weapon as well as a means of causing fires from a distance.

Biological warfare is trickier to pull off, and best practised when entrenching for a long siege, but diseased animal corpses flung into the castle to disgust and demoralise never go out of fashion.

Psychological warfare is a very effective tool, and suitably villainous commanders will think nothing of displaying slain enemies in full view of the walls or lashing prisoners to shield walls or siege engines to discourage the defenders from attacking them.

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Troops

A well-appointed army will have foot soldiers, archers and mounted of various kinds, but what distinguishes one army from another are the kinds of elite troops it contains. Elite troops are more than warm bodies to snare incoming arrows – they are the backbone about which the attack is built. Naturally, even these elite forces take a pasting when a hero gets involved, but they add variety and colour to the battle. Define a few elite units for the attacking army. These can then become crises in their own right, and captains of them single enemies worthy of special attention from the heroes.

A Fantasy World

Magic can be thought of as the ultimate siege weapon, when a suitably powerful wizard is involved. Control over rock can break open even the strongest wall.

Magical beasts can be living battering rams, siege towers, stone throwers or fire-breathing monstrosities. Their armoured hides make them much harder to stop than simple machines, although they can easily be panicked if wounded or deprived of their handlers.

Flying monsters, and their riders, are a constant threat. Nowhere is completely safe from such an attack, and strategically significant positions such as gatehouses can be taken by surprise, dropping drawbridges to make things easier for allies.

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EXAMPLES

Hero: Arpad of Lhun

Arpad is a soldier, born of noble stock but living with the memories of his lands and family being slaughtered. What began as a self-destructive desire to die in battle became a determination to save others from the same sorrow. He fights with a sword and shield, usually. He wears lighter armour than most armsmen, the better to move about he battle quickly.

- Attack: 1
- Defence: 3
- Movement: 2

Personal connections:

- Antanas, a common soldier defending the fort who made Arpad laugh.
- The Snow Scouts, a collection of wilderness trackers who search for people lost on the mountains. They are trapped in the fort after coming here to warn the soldiers they were about to come under attack.
- The farmlands at the lower slopes of the mountains, filled with defenceless farmers trapped by the inclement weather.

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Hero: Zsuzsa Slatewalker

Zsuzsa was once a common thief, and one of the most accomplished in the world. As her skills increased, big scores became routine. In time her fame was an obstacle, so she retired. A chance intervention in a pirate raid on a coastal town gave her a new purpose – protecting those who didn't have the advantages of nobility and wealth from those that did. She fights with twin daggers and a small crossbow. Her skill in climbing and moving unnoticed lets her find her mark easily.

- Attack: 3
- Defence: 1
- Movement: 2

Personal connections:

- Brandusa, a serving girl in the fort, used up all her meagre savings to buy extra bandages for the forthcoming battle.
- Captain Nojas is secretly another thief from her guild and good company, to boot.
- The coffers of the fort contains a few valuable gold items; if they are lost to the goblins it will be very difficult to find them again.

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Fort Briggs

The fortification under attack is a small fort guarding the mouth of a mountain pass. It has only a small compliment of soldiers, mostly archers. Usually, when the spring thaw comes a relief force travels up from the plains to hold the pass against the yearly goblin advance. This year, bad weather has held the force back, just at a time when the goblin army is rumoured to be the largest ever seen.

The fort is built into the side of one mountains, with two walls coming away from the sheer cliff face to meet at a tower in the middle of the pass itself. The main gate faces back towards the plains, rather towards goblin lands. The rocky ground is too hard for any kind of ditch to protect the walls, but each wall has three levels of wallwalk, to provide the maximum possible standing area for archers.

The fort armoury was stocked in anticipation of the relief force's arrival, so has an abundance of weapons and armour, so at least the defenders are well-equipped. For once, running out of arrows is not a concern.

The mountainside adjacent to the fort has narrow pathways cut into it for defenders, high above where the army will pass. Although there is insufficient cover on them for them to be a good vantage point for archers, the defenders have set up large chunks of rock with levers, ready to drop on the advancing foes.

The few footmen in the fort are experienced soldiers, and will not break even if the walls are breached. There are only 600 or so defenders at the fort.

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Goblin Horde

The goblin horde has little organisation. Most of it is made up of baying, blood-crazed foot soldiers with no sense of self-preservation. The mountain goblins are known for occasionally growing up as giants of their kind, eight feet tall and nearly as far around the waist. Some of these titans load and cock the crude catapults the horde uses. Others are strapped with armour plates and used as shock troops. A few goblins with bows ride on the back of each.

The officers of the horde, if such they can be called, are cannier than most and vicious fighters. They prefer to stay behind their own lines and direct the battle, but when an extra push is needed they wade into battle. Naturally, they claim the best weapons and armour available.

The disorganised nature of the army means that sometimes a formation will break and run, only to be whipped back into the battle at a later stage.

A few goblins in the ranks have experimented with explosive powder, and the fruits of their craft are sometimes loaded into the catapults or carried towards the walls by unwilling runners.

There are rumours of a powerful goblin druid somewhere in the throng, who can make wood, soil and rock rise up against the defenders.

The horde's greatest asset, however, is force of numbers. There are thousands of them and the loss of a few hundred here or there makes little difference.

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Crisis: Goblin Raiders

A ragged band of goblins unconcerned with the battle, who intend only to head down the mountain path to attack the farms.

- Danger: 3
- Connection: Farmlands
- Type: Defence

Crisis: Goblin Heavies

Captain Nojas becomes isolated on the mountainside, menaced by giant goblins.

- Danger: 3
- Connection: Captain Nojas
- Type: Attack

Crisis: Catapults

Antanas takes a glancing blow from a catapult boulder. He is trapped on the ground as more rocks rain down.

- Danger: 5
- Connection: Antanas
- Type: Attack and Defence

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Crisis: Terror in the Sanitorium

The Goblin Druid has seized control of the ground underneath where Brandusa is treating injured soldiers. The injured and those tending to them are in great danger.

- Danger: 5
- Connection: Brandusa
- Type: Attack and Defence

Crisis: The Berserker

The Snow Scouts have taken to the battlefield, and a goblin berserker is about to carve his way through them.

- Danger: 4
- Connection: Snow Scouts
- Type: Defence

Crisis: The General

The Goblin Chief has led a strike force through forgotten tunnels into the heart of the fort, to destroy the armoury and the vault.

- Danger: 4
- Connection: Gold in the coffer
- Type: Attack

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Play Example

Arpad, who was uncommitted, takes on the crisis 'The Berserker'. As the first hero to do so, he doesn't have to spend a movement token.

The crisis has Danger 4, and is a Defence crisis. As it's the start of the battle, Arpad has 6 Defence tokens. He spends one and makes a roll.

He rolls a 1 and a 4.

He decides to spend one of his 4 Movement tokens to take his score up to 5, enough to make Progress against the crisis.

The Ticking Clock for the crisis drops down to 3.

As Arpad has to spend a token to make progress, the turn passes.

Zsuzsa decides to pass, as the Berserker is the only crisis and she is ill-equipped to deal with it.

Arpad spends another Defence token. He rolls a 2 and a 5. This is enough to add another Progress token, and the Ticking Clock does not change.

As he didn't have to spend an extra token, he can take the next turn.

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He spends a third Defence token, taking him down to 3. He rolls a 4 and a 5. A third Progress token, no Ticking clock, another turn.

He spend a Defence token, rolls a 3 and a 3. He chooses to add 2 tokens to his Movement, taking it to 5, but doesn't increase his score.

Zsuzsa takes the next turn. She spends 1 Movement token to join Arpad at the crisis. She then spends 1 Defence token and rolls a 1 and a 5.

She adds a fourth Progress token to the crisis, but the Ticking Clock reduces to 1.

She takes the next turn, spending her last Defence token and rolling a 1 and a 4. If she doesn't make progress, the Ticking Clock will run out. So, she spends a point of Movement and increases her score to 5 in order to avert the crisis.

Arpad and Zsuzsa both receive a Heroism Point.

As there was only 1 crisis in this first wave, they each receive trait tokens.

Arpad now has Attack 3, Defence 5, Movement 7, 1 Heroism Point.

Zsuzsa now has Attack 9, Defence 1, Movement 5, 1 Heroism Point.

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Description Example

Seeing the Snow Scouts in trouble, Arpad leaps from one of the wallwalks, using his shield and an unhappy goblin to break his fall. His dramatic entrance draws the attention of the berserker.

Seeing the grip of his shield is broken, he throws it with all his strength. The shield catches the berserker across the brow, knocking the creature into the mud.

As the beast is staggering back to its feet, Arpad charges in, sliding through the mud on one knee and opening up the berserker's stomach with a well-timed swing of his sword.

As he stands up, he smashes the hilt of his sword into the goblin's face, but the crazed attacker feels no pain.

Zsuzsa appears from behind a tree, putting a crossbow bolt into one of the goblin's calf muscles. It shrieks in anger and wheels to face her.

When it rushes her, she barely ducks out of the way and falls onto a rocky outcropping. As the goblin closes for the kill, she rolls forwards and one of her daggers finds its heart.

Warm blood gushes over her forearm as the berserker's death rattle is lost in the noise of the battle.

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THE NEXT DAY

Arpad slumped onto the ground, ignoring the blood seeping from under the dressing on his arm. The carrion birds were enjoying the harvest left for them in the mountain pass, but it was a song he had learned to detest.

The surviving Snow Scouts were already preparing to brave the journey down to the plains, to see how bad things had got for the farmers after a contingent of goblins slipped past the fort.

Antanas sat down next to him, alive but pale. Arpad put an arm around the boy. It was a hell of a first battle. Corpses choked the mountain road, most of them goblins. They had even dammed the river of snowmelt, sending it to the side and through the rubble of one of the fort's shattered walls. Someone had planted a flag on the scarred gatehouse that snapped in the wind.

The soldiers who weren't injured were already combing the battlefield for their fallen comrades. Captain Nojas, leaning on a makeshift crutch, supervised them. The ground in the mountains was too hard to bury them, and there wasn't enough dry wood for a pyre. They would have to be laid, with reverence, in the fort's vault until wagons were available. It was empty now, after being burgled by goblins in the chaos.

Zsuzsa had distanced herself from the rest of the survivors. She was turning Brandusa's headscarf over and over in her hands. The horrific scene in the sanitorium, where furniture had turned to snarls of spikes and grown through living flesh, would stay with her forever.

Arpad wished he knew what he could say to comfort her.