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Story Citadel

The World: ARLANTHA

Part One:

Brainstorming

I would like to partially credit the results of my brainstorming to my friend Daniel Grindle, who spoke with me at a time when I was stuck.

I started my brainstorming thinking about genres that I like to work in, so was thinking about detective stories, or stories involving you needing to sing in order to win something important. But mainly, I wanted to work in the fantasy genre, at least somewhat.

I skyped with Dan and we rapid-fired characters to each other, and we landed on each other's mutual love of horses and developed the idea for the character of a talking horse who has somehow found his way into a magical forest *but* not all of the forest creatures like him because he was once a human horse.

Realizing that a Humans vs. Animals motif could be compelling, we thought up an inciting incident where there is noise and our talking horse protagonist, whom we named Aardvarth Emory, would have to confront this noise, expecting to come face-to-face with some wicked human character. But instead, we made each other laugh by coming up with the human character Cornelius Watson, who had to have a Southern accent.

From here, I developed the two additional characters of Bores III and Malinda IV. I figured that Bores, a boar, could be a character that hates Aardvarth for him being human, while Malinda respects him. Initially, Malinda was thought of as a mockingbird before she was shifted to be a cat.

I couldn't think up last names for these two characters, so I thought: okay, maybe they don't have last names. Maybe Aardvarth carries the last name of his ex-human family, and this makes him an outsider, because the other animals in the forest don't have last names.

From here, my first patch of brainstorming notes for the story came about...

Brainstorming Session:

In this forest, you go by your first name only... Borès was the protector of the forest until Aardvarth came along and saved everyone from THIS CONFLICT. Borès, who sees Aardvarth as a descendant of humans and not one of them, does not trust him. Malinda the Mockingbird helped Aardvarth enter the forest, but she also grew up with Borès, even though he is mad at her for helping Aardvarth enter their world. In truth though, most of the animals of the forest respond to Malinda.

Starts with commotion on the clearing. Aardvarth and Malinda are strolling when there is a loud commotion on the scene. Enter Borès. Do you go towards the commotion or away from it to warn the other animals.

If you choose to warn the animals, players get informed about the safety protocol of the forest, as well as the importance of THE HILL before the scene with Cornelius Watson. If not, then, well, you don't and it will come out later (maybe).

Either way, other animals will request that someone deal with these creatures. Malinda can see them from a distance. Many animals want war, while others are already reeling from THE CONFLICT (this should have been internal as opposed to external). Therefore, Borès doesn't see Aardvarth's victory over (maybe Wolves, or some other dark creature of the forest that has since been banished) as a good thing, he sees it as a bad thing because now the Forest is weaker once the Humans return.

-Maybe this scene could introduce the Dark Creatures as not being welcome

The scene with Cornelius Watson WILL happen, and outright conflict can occur (with injury), or a deal can be struck in which he agrees to not go past the hill. If conflict occurs, the characters must run away and stall the Humans with a puzzle involving the forest environment to buy them time. The other animals, depending on how the meeting before transpired, are at the original point, the Hill, or a further rendezvous point.

If this conflict transpires, the first battle will be fought at one of these three points. The characters fight off the incoming attack or it stalls in order for the rest of the animals to escape. This is not wise though, and will lead to more casualties and injuries to the main characters. The main characters are left defeated while the Human attack rolls through the forest.

If a deal is struck, the characters have more time to prepare for this conflict. They may decide to go after The Wolves/Dark Creatures that were banished from the forest for reinforcements early, or go to THE HILL to set up a trap for the Humans.

Either way, one of the main characters should be left injured.

So, basic beats:

- 1. Introduction*
- 2. (Optional) Scene of Warning the Animals*
- 3. Cornelius Watson Scene*
- 4. Immediate Conflict or Set-Up*
- 5. Fight Scene*
- 6. (If you didn't warn the animals, they will be furious that you tried to play hero rather than warn them)*
- 7. Characters Left Injured - Must Go for Help (either dark creatures or Aardvarth's ex-owners?)*
- 8. Characters Go Get Help*
- 9. (Dark Creatures will refuse help, Ex-Owners won't be there, but you'll get clues that they are involved with Cornelius Watson, showing transfers of money for the magic that powers the forest)*

10. Help Scene (depending on how long it takes; you can also do multiple "help" scenes with both the dark creatures and the owners) - length determines how much forest is destroyed
11. (Should the Dark Creatures try to kill them, having been paid by the Traitor?)
12. Characters Return and the Forest is Basically Destroyed; although the animals have fled
13. You come across an exchange, with Watson, Aardvarth's ex-owners (maybe they are a member of a group and they are the only ones that voted against this plan), and then, the Traitor
14. (You can follow them in secret or attack; eventually they will separate; who do you follow)
15. If you follow the humans, you'll get more information
16. If you follow the Traitor, you'll get more information AND you'll be led to their new home that Aardvarth's ex-owners built for them, and now it needs to be powered by magic - you overhear the group complaining about the ones that thought they were more important than everyone else; the other animals think it was the humans (you can listen in on them too, maybe using Malinda's ability) who uprooted them, but it was one of them. The Traitor becomes a "hero" by revealing that he managed to save... hmmm.... maybe the traitor shouldn't be so evil; maybe the entirety of the animals was behind this...
17. (As characters debate whether to leave, the Dark Creatures arrive)
18. (Maybe the Traitor is planning for war with the humans, having tricked them into giving him more magic?)
19. How should the conflict be resolved?
20. Somehow the good guys have to "turn on" Malinda's ability so the other animals can hear the Traitor's words and turn on him
21. (If you didn't follow the humans, Owners come anyway, if you did, then it is a direct parallel)
22. (Maybe if you follow the humans, you find most of them killed other than the Owners, with the Traitor having done it)
23. Maybe Aardvarth and the Traitor have to fight
24. When Owners arrive seeing the Traitor downed, they leave the animals to be, and we get a "Rise of the Planet of the Apes" ending where Aardvarth and his owners finally say goodbye.

Aardvarth's ex-owners are trying to stop the deforestation? Like, he left but they actually loved him...

No, some of the other ANIMALS hired Watson and the others to destroy the forest because they want out of the structure; first it was Bores, now it's Aardvarth, they don't want leaders, they want peace. Malinda can sense that something is wrong, but can't put her finger on it.

IMPORTANT NPCs

Cornelius Watson - second-in-command of the deforestation

Aardvarth's Ex-Owner - Aardvarth believes they're in charge

Head of Dark Creatures - characters go to see this person to convince them to fight; they talk about how the forest was dying long before an event like this; people were fractured

Traitor Character - Someone who speaks up in the Warning scene, who is the only one still there

Maybe Watson and the others are gathering sources of the forest's magic to transport to a different location...

So, the Traitor gets what he/she wants - a new home; humans get lumber;

Malinda has powers closer to the forest (mental), very little physical powers though and can be hurt easily,

Maybe the forest exists separately from the human world, with some sort of portal/gate, and the animals fear humans entering their realm. The deal the traitor makes with the humans is to give them a piece of human land, but in truth, the traitor believes the animals are the better species and, knowing that their magic is more powerful in the human realm, plans to destroy them all as well and is mobilizing for war (basically becoming humans, which Aardvarth knows too well). Aardvarth, Borès, and Malinda (whose power is weaker in the human realm, but stronger once the magic leaves the forest) must stop the Traitor before he marches the animals to war.

Should the Dark Creatures be those who have descended from humans, and thus are banished to a different realm?

Who should the Traitor be - he hates the isolationism and cowardice of leaders like Borès and Aardvarth, having seen what humans can do (but also believes that they are inherently weak). Maybe Borès should still be the leader if Aardvarth has all this backstory, because Borès is the best fighter.

The Traitor believes that the animals shouldn't be so focused on defense; they should take the fight to the humans

Maybe the heroes take a piece of the magic (a crystal maybe) from the Wellspring-esque place to bring it to the Dark Creatures (who are the most ancient of all the beings of the forest, having been directly descended of creatures who came from the Human World), and, once it leaves the forest, it gets more powerful.

Next Steps:

After this first pass, the feeling was that the plot might be too complicated, so I tried to focus more on the characters in my next iteration, giving more attention to certain abilities that might make Malinda stand out more. Also, instead of giving the villain a complicated backstory, I decided to allow him to be anyone and thus more ambiguous for a final twist...

Also, I decided to focus more on the animal realm itself and the potential lore that could come out of it.

Lastly, in terms of plot, I realized that it would be stronger if the good guys actually *won* the opening skirmish, and then instead of being sent out to get help, were informed that the powerful crystal disappeared and then needed to go find clues as to where it might have gone to. So... I came up with the following list of characters:

Player Characters

Aardvarth Emory (Aardvarth I)

Bores III

Malinda IV (mockingbird or cat?)

NPCs

Cornelius Watson – “Leader” of the Humans

Jakar XIV – Head of the Ja’rak

The Emorys – father and kids

-Jackson Emory – the one you were closest to

-Martin Emory

-Adelaide Emory

-Arthur Emory – the father

Anton VI – a friendly gorilla – prone to violence, but out of protection for the realm – this person is Bores’s best friend

Squirrus VII – a “friendly” squirrel – he hates humans as much as Bores, but hides it; twist villain

Marie III – a friendly rabbit – wants war and is on your side

Olly V – a lion – who is on Squirrus’s side – desires peace

Special Attributes

Sentience – Malinda has this – can use Mental Attacks

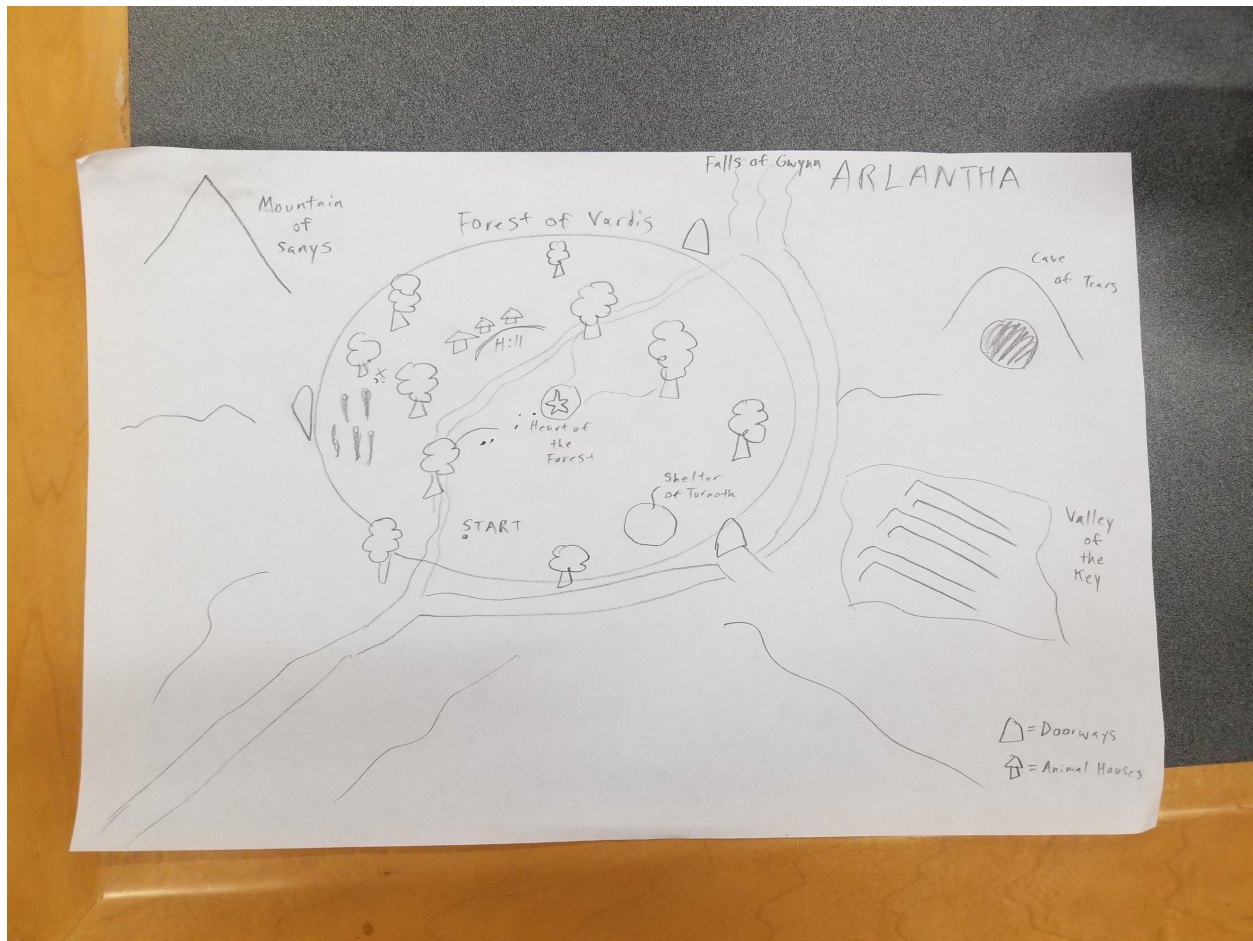
Crystal Powers

Kindness – Aardvarth has this

Now, in terms of writing the story used for running the adventure, I left a lot of things open to have the potential for improv. I also provided pictures for the PC character sheets (of both their animals and the voice actors who might voice them in a film version of this adventure) and NPCs. This was a tip gleamed from Chris Klug’s RPG Writing class, in that seeing faces of the characters helps visualize their personality for players. For the PC character sheets, I modified the Roleplaying 101 guide to remove some of the more technical aspects and include a few more empathetic ones.

Part Two: The Adventure

THE SANYS OF ARLANTHA



Welcome to Arlantha, the mystical realm of the animal kingdom. In Arlantha, animals of all species live, free of humans, and exist in “peace”. At the center of Arlantha is the Forest of Vardis – its greenery and forest life is powered by the Allcrystal, a sacred stone that sits at the Heart of the Forest and connects out to all its trees and brush. Arlantha exists as a realm outside the Human World, and there are Doorways scattered around the globe that act as gateways into the forest. The Doorways can be opened from the Arlantha side and are kept open for a very short while, as there is a great fear of Humans coming into Arlantha.

At some point in the recent past, Aardvarth, a favoured stallion of House Emory of England stumbled upon one of these Doorways that transported him from the Human Realm into Arlantha. Unlike the rest of the animals, who have one name and a numerical designation for their generation of name, Aardvarth has two names, signifying his outsider position as “one of the humans.” Years ago, animals freely passed into and out of the Doorways, but in recent decades, there is minimal travel across Realms. Now, basically all the animals are born inside Arlantha, and animals coming from the Human Realm, like Aardvarth, are deemed dangerous.

See, because back in the day, animals possessed sentience and could communicate mentally with each other and with nature. However, this sentience is slowly dissipating from Arlantha,

to the point that only a select few have it. Malinda IV, a cat, possesses this skill but, in order to retain the trust and respect (she has a reputation as the mother of the forest) of the other animals, tries not to use it.

Many animals believe that the loss of sentience signals that the Allcrystal is dying off and are trying to come up with ways to make a new one. Others believe the filth of humans has been leeching over into their realm and believe that they should close the Portals so no one can enter and exit. Many animals also believe that the new way of living, WITHOUT sentience, is better because it is more private (basically a lot of animals want there to be more privacy and isolationism and less dangerous.

Soon after Aardvarth entered the realm, the most Ancient of the animals, the Ja'rak, who are directly descended from human animals and the oldest in the forest, had a member of their tribe go mad with his sentience, killing another animal. This led to a vote of having the Ja'rak banished, which they resisted. The ensuing fights (known as the Ja'rak Rebellion) left much of the Ja'rak killed. Aardvarth fought alongside the other animals and was key to winning this fight. The remaining Ja'rak, including their leader, Jakar, were then banished from the forest, forced to roam the more barren wastelands of Arlantha.

At the time of their banishment, they were experimenting with how to make new crystals to power the realm, should the ancient Allcrystal be destroyed.

Nowadays, Aardvarth has the respect of some animals, mainly those who fear sentience. But several, including Bores III, the de facto leader of the animals due to his strength, still do not trust him and see him as an outsider. Malinda, however, has taken a kindness to Aardvarth.

Combat can be used at the GM's discretion. The only required combat scene is the final confrontation (the final villain is the only NPC with stats), but the first fight with the Humans, and the Ja'rak fight both can potentially feature combat. Standard: roll d20 initiative rolls and d6 rolls for damage.

AT THE START OF PLAY

Aardvarth and Malinda are conversing on an ordinary forest day when there is a loud noise and commotion to the west of the forest. Animals come running through the forest, rushing east, exclaiming that humans have arrived. Bores arrives, blaming Aardvarth for this animal, and Malinda can tap into her sentience to learn that the animals are rushing to the Shelter of Turnoth beneath The Great Tree to have an emergency council meeting. You must decide whether to go west to see these humans or go east to council with the other animals.

If you go West:

You see that humans are mobilizing with drilling equipment. Their leader, Cornelius Watson, spots you and will engage. He will be very much non-aggressive even if you try to provoke him,

and you learn that the Human World has lost its greenery and is graying out. Because the Allcrystal of Vardis can regenerate their forest, the humans merely seek a small faction of the animals' lumber to return to Human World in an attempt to rebuild.

If you go East:

You meet the other animals. Many demand war with the humans, while others see the animals as not strong enough for such conflict. The key animals are introduced:

Anton VI – a friendly gorilla – prone to violence, but out of protection for the realm – this person is Bores's best friend

Squirrus VII – a "friendly" squirrel – he will agree with you, but will advise caution

Marie III – a friendly rabbit – wants war and is on your side; likes Aardvarth

Olly V – a lion – who is on Squirrus's side – desires peace

Information can be mined about about the distrust for Bores III's leadership, given the Ja'rak rebellion that occurred very recently, as well as the general distrust for Aardvarth. As time passes, an animal will arrive, exclaiming that the humans drill towards the Hill (where the majority of the animal domestic houses are) and that they must be stopped. You can learn that even a piece of the Allcrystal, if broken off, can possess tremendous power.

Regardless of what you do:

You end up by the Hill where the humans are drilling. You can either use Bores to try and attack the drills mechanically, use Malinda to tap into the forest and try to break off trees to halt their progress. Information will be mined out about being able to use the Allcrystal

You need to either use the crystal or use the forest to block the humans' progress. Basically somehow halt them (you can also save the animals' homes in the process, as well as items in the abandoned Ja'rak home). If stuck, GM has an NPC bring a piece of crystal (probably Anton) to the confrontation. The Hill is where a lot of the animals live, but it's not the Heart of the forest, which is further south.

The crystal's power summons a flood as the humans cross the hill, destroying their equipment.

(If you DIDN'T speak to the humans first) You learn about their plight from one of the guards you kill

However, after this apparent victory, another NPC rushes by, exclaiming that the Allcrystal has been stolen but that this must be impossible as there is no documented strength that can

remove it from the Heart of the Forest. However, these human machines could be strong enough.

Malinda confirms this by her powers waning. No one knows where Watson's real army went; probably left to return to the Human Realm.

Either way, the forest cannot sustain itself anymore. It will die, BUT the fact that the humans arrived means that someone must have let them in. The Ja'rak were experimenting with ways to create crystals and open Doorways before the infighting; maybe they created a crystal powerful enough to both create enough power to remove the Allcrystal from the Heart, and maybe powerful enough to power human machinery.

Interrogating the Other Animals:

The Ja'rak are known to be in one of four locations (the Cave of Tears, the Mountain of Sanys, the Valley of the Key, or the Falls of Gwynn), which you need to figure out by talking to other animals who might know this (*this is the de facto puzzle of the experience*). The hope is that they might have succeeded in creating a new kind of crystal, which, if patched into the forest's center, can sustain life in the forest while you search for Watson in the Human Realm.

(If you DIDN'T speak to animals in-council, you learn more about them now. This is also where information begins to get mined out about Sanys, the perceived Savior of the lands.

Once you figure out where the Ja'rak are, you can use the piece of crystal that remains in your possession, in attempt to teleport directly there, but BE CAREFUL – you only have enough energy for 3 teleportations.

Ja'rak Scene:

Arriving in the Ja'rak domain, the Cave of Tears, they will immediately be on you. A crystal that they created is immediately visible. However, you can avoid fighting through the following means:

- If you saved certain items in the battle, they will be more accommodating, as it was representative of their culture.
- If you DIDN'T but spoke long enough to Squirrus, who held some of their items in belief that a day like this would come, they will accommodate.
- If NOT, you can attempt to talk them down using the crystal you have.
- If NOT, you can offer Malinda to power their crystal.

Fighting can happen otherwise and Malinda will need to stop it using her powers.

(If ended peacefully) the Ja'rak will share what they now know – that the Arlantha crystals are more powerful in the human realm, and they can patch Malinda into it to show you. If players

resist, they can talk about hushed human voices that they can overhear, but they do not speak human – only Aardvarth does.

(If fighting) Malinda must use the crystal to subdue the Ja’rak, learn about the humans AND this new information, and then must muster the Ja’rak to come help, though they now hate you. *Malinda can also hear the Emorys, recognizing their voices having listened to Aardvarth’s mind before.*

Return to the Forest / Human Interrogation & Fight:

The group returns to the forest, which has decayed much faster than predicted. Anton has been slain, but Olly has spotted the humans and leads you there. Watson AND the Emorys are there with the crystal, discussing ways to open portals and combine. You can fight them, or they can see you and the Emorys will tell the humans to stop, having recognized you. Cornelius as a deal with the “Helper,” but, being a business partner with the Emorys, he brought them along for them to search for Aardvarth. Basically, the Emorys are not part of Cornelius’s “deal,” they were just brought along.

Squirrus Reveal / First Fight:

At this point, Squirrus will destroy the bulk of the humans (if you didn’t so already). Squirrus will reveal himself as the one who allowed the humans into the realm with the deal that they could mine their Allcrystal to create a link between the Human Realm and their realm in exchange for dummy land in the Human Realm (Squirrus didn’t care about this land tho – he just needed the drills to create this crystallized link). Olly will grab Bores (revealing herself to be in on Squirrus’s plot) and Squirrus will take control of Malinda, explaining that he needed an animal of sentience (who patched in with the new crystal that connects to the human realm of which HE gave the Ja’rak the pieces to make) to be in his range and utilize the link between the Human Realm and Arlantha, to take control of not only this forest, but the human realm, believing that the animals are greater than the humans, and can destroy them.

You can fight (Aardvarth, Bores, the Ja’rak vs. Squirrus, turned Malinda, Olly, other enemies) but are defeated until the downed Emorys look into Aardvarth’s eyes, giving him a boost and you realize that a good heart is more powerful than the outward magic of the crystal – this is why the forest has been dying, not because of the crystals, but because of the infighting. Aardvarth joining with the Emorys, who you can ask to set a trap for Squirrus’s goons before he gets to the Heart of the Forest. Seeing this peace, the other animals who are hiding will start to join you.

Second Fight:

Squirrus does a “you will never learn” speech towards Aardvarth (who has a boost in attacking Squirrus, whereas Bores has a boost in attacking Squirrus’s goons). With a crystal placed into the Heart to begin the merge with the Human Realm, you fight. You can fight Squirrus directly,

fight the crystallized Malinda who acts as Squirrus's helper, attack the crystal that has been placed in the Heart of the Forest, or attack Squirrus's goons.

- Squirrus has 50 health in his crystal form
- He can lose +5 health every turn if damaged with an external crystal shard (fight crystal with a different crystal).
- Squirrus gets a +10 on die rolls using the Ja'arak's larger crystal, while Malinda uses her own physical abilities and a +5 for the original Allcrystal.
- Of course, damage done to Malinda can potentially kill your friend, so be careful.
- If Squirrus absorbs Malinda's power, his health will be restored.
- If you use either a power of love or are able to remove the crystal from the Heart of the Forest, Squirrus reverts to his non-crystallized form, who only has a health of 10 and no attack bonuses.

(If Squirrus starts rolling good rolls) He can use the crystallized Malinda to stab Aardvarth. Aardvarth has power sucked out of him every turn now that the crystal (which is decaying) is in his bloodstream. Seeing this betrayal makes some of Squirrus's men betray him (if you're losing, they will).

If you're still losing, Squirrus will fatally stab Aardvarth, giving Malinda a "power of love" boost big enough to free herself from the crystal and kill him.

Upon Squirrus's defeat, Aardvarth starts to fall. The remaining humans (including the Emorys), the remaining Ja'arak, and Bores and Malinda and the other animals stand around him as either Bores or Malinda pledge to believe in hope again. That is how you rebuild the forest. *Gladiator* ending

(If Squirrus starts losing) He can absorb Malinda's crystallized power, using last of her magic (freeing her) to become bigger, restoring his health and fighting the PCs himself. Malinda can now be used to help in the final fight.

If, however, you managed to defeat Squirrus without Aardvarth being killed, you get a *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* ending where the Emorys offer to get Aardvarth help for his wounds, and to protect him from Humans that will start asking questions for Cornelius and the others' deaths, but he chooses to stay with the others. Malinda stands by him, and even Bores stands by him. The Emorys and the Ja'arak look on as the animals ride off to rebuild the forest.

Aardvarth Emory



Role: Though he is not the leader of the team, he commands a certain authority due to his steadfastness, bravery, and will to help others. Because he was not born in Arlantha, many of the animalfolk look down on him as an outsider, though he won some hearts over due to his cleverness with regards to his role in helping quell the Ja'rak Rebellion (an honor he is not particularly proud of). He is sensitive about his coming from the Human Realm, yet does not share the same animosity towards humans that Bores and some other animals do. In fact, a part of him misses his Human Family (which he would never reveal to anyone in Arlantha), though his memories of them have started to fade. His surname "Emory" designates him as separate from the other single-named animals. Aardvarth particularly misses Jackson Emory, the youngest of the family. He desires peace and a place in this world.

Quote: "There is no reason for war. Words are a better medicine than any hurt we can throw at each other."

Early Life: Aardvarth is a horse from the Human Realm, bred as a prized stallion by the influential and wealthy Emory family. Though he lived a life of relative comfort and gentility with his Human Family, he had zero outlet to the world outside their manor, nor to any animals of his kind. So, he fled his family and, after some time wandering through the wilderness in the Human Realm, accidentally stumbled across one of the Doorways leading to Arlantha. He was immediately seen as an outsider due to his coming from the Human Realm, though Malinda took a light kindness to him. When the

Ja'rak rebelled a year ago, Aardvarth was instrumental in the military strategy that led to the capture of their leader, Jarak, and their eventual banishment, which has left the rest of animal community begrudgingly accepting of him.

Personality: Aardvarth has a relatively calm demeanor and believes that we have an honor to each other that comes first. He is not one to pick a fight, but is willing to do so if it means defending those he cares about, which includes his newfound community in the Forest of Vardis.

Relationship with Bores: Though Aardvarth has tried to remain cordial to Bores, the boar remains steadfast in his hatred of Aardvarth. Aardvarth believes that if he remains true to the cause of protecting Arlantha, Bores might eventually come around. Internally, Aardvarth does not appreciate Bores's repeated hatred of humans; Aardvarth has indeed seen what they are capable of, but he also sees the love in them as well.

Relationship with Malinda: Aardvarth appreciates Malinda's kindness more than she knows. She was the first animal to show him any remote sort of affection upon his arrival to Arlantha, and he empathizes with her own struggles of having a kind of knowledge (her sentience) of the world that she tries to not share with people. They both desire, above all else, safety for their community.

Talents: Aardvarth's core talents are in his intelligence and knowledge of how to utilize the world around him. His soft-spoken demeanor during confrontations is also valuable.

Wants: He wants to be accepted and prove himself to Bores, but also desires peaces for his community. Internally, he would also like to see the Emorys again, though he knows this is unlikely.

Flaws: His upbringing in general civility has left him somewhat naïve to the hardships and treacherous of the world, both the Human Realm and this one. Despite his intelligence, he's not *as* tough as some of the other animals.

Player: Aardvarth Emory
Name:

Current HP:

Max HP: 20

Attributes

Physical: 11

Mental: 15

Social: 9

Skills

Skill Points

Actual Skill

Physical

| | | |
|-------------------|----|----|
| Unarmed Combat | 0 | 1 |
| Melee Combat | -2 | -2 |
| Long-Range Combat | -2 | -1 |
| Combat Defense | 4 | 5 |
| Athletics | 4 | 5 |
| Stealth | 3 | 4 |

Mental

| | | |
|---------------|---|----|
| Investigation | 5 | 10 |
| History | 3 | 8 |
| Medicinal | 0 | 5 |
| Repair | 0 | 5 |
| Hearing | 2 | 7 |

Social Skills

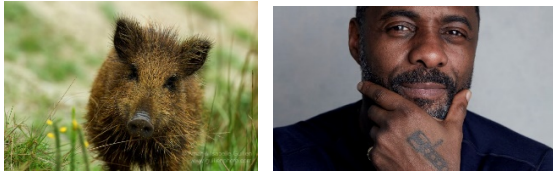
| | | |
|--------------|---|----|
| Leadership | 2 | 1 |
| Performance | 4 | 3 |
| Intimidation | 0 | -1 |
| Subterfuge | 1 | 0 |
| Style | 0 | -1 |
| Empathy | 3 | 2 |

Inventory

Silver Medallion around his neck. Inside it is emblazoned with the word "Emory"

Understands "Human"

Bores III



Role: He is the de facto leader of the Forest of Vardis. He has quelled attacks from the Outer Regions of Arlantha. He has taught the animals of the forest how to fight in battle, for the most part training them himself. His skill in the field is unmatched. He is, at his core, a very emotional guy and sometimes this slips out in angry tirades. His hatred of humans stems from his youth (see below), and, if he can't think of anything to say, he will get angry about humans. He finds it difficult to interact with stupid people and those who are too naïve enough to think that this world is gentle.

Quote: "The human capacity for violence and destruction has left their world in shambles. And now and then, it slips into us."

Early Life: Bores's father, Bores II, was orphaned when, during an expedition to the human realm, his father (Bores's grandfather) was killed. This left Bores's father with an unquenchable rage towards humans and a desire for vengeance. Unable to find this vengeance, it came out in violent ways towards his son. Bores's father eventually fled Arlantha, ostensibly to track down the humans that murdered Bores I, and never returned, leaving his son to fend for himself. Bores learned the rough ways of this world and the next until eventually his skill in combat earned him the respect (and possibly fear) of his peers.

Personality: Bores is rough around all the edges, prone to outbursts and bouts of anger if he feels that he or the community is being threatened. These outbursts have gotten worse since both Aardvarth's arrival and the Ja'rak Rebellion. Bores believes that

the world is a dark, cruel place, and believes that the only way to stay alive is to defend yourself with any means necessary. His relationship with Anton VII, whom he grew up with and helped him during his times of need, is the greatest source of his gentility.

Relationship with Aardvarth: Bores absolutely despises Aardvarth. Aardvarth (a) comes from the Human World, so he represents the world that stole Bores's family and breeds corruption; (b) has a care-free, calm demeanor that he himself can never have and he knows this; and (c) Aardvarth believes that he can win respect through military intelligence and has already started to win over some of the other animals, leaving Bores to believe that Aardvarth might replace him. No matter what Aardvarth does, Bores will not accept him.

Relationship with Malinda: Bores respects Malinda, somewhat, as they have helped "lead" the Forest of Vardis the last several years, with Bores providing toughness and strength and Malinda providing a spiritual connection and calmness through her sentience. Bores understands that together, they balance each other. However, he worries about her, as her sentience is fraying lately. Bores worries more that she could become a danger to them, like the Ja'rak did, more than he does her own safety.

Talents: Bores can fight, and understands military matters to a tee. He also understands the way things work in the world very well.

Wants: Beyond Aardvarth going away and never coming back, Bores *says* he wants peace. In truth, he is the happiest and most in his element when there is someone to fight. Deeply internally, he wishes the pain that came about from his father's upbringing and subsequent abandonment would stop torturing him.

Flaws: His upbringing has led him to see the worst in people. And his emotional outbursts, particularly where Aardvarth is concerned, threaten to counterbalance his skills on the field.

Player: Bores III
Name:

Current HP:

Max HP: 25

Attributes

Physical: 16

Mental: 13

Social: 7

Skills

Skill Points

Actual Skill

Physical

| | | |
|-------------------|----|----|
| Unarmed Combat | 2 | 8 |
| Melee Combat | 1 | 7 |
| Long-Range Combat | -2 | 4 |
| Combat Defense | 2 | 8 |
| Athletics | 4 | 10 |
| Stealth | -2 | 4 |

Mental

| | | |
|---------------|----|----|
| Investigation | 1 | 4 |
| History | 3 | 6 |
| Medicinal | 0 | 0 |
| Repair | -1 | -1 |
| Hearing | 1 | 4 |

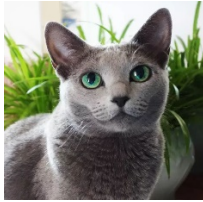
Social Skills

| | | |
|--------------|---|----|
| Leadership | 2 | -1 |
| Performance | 0 | -3 |
| Intimidation | 5 | 2 |
| Subterfuge | 1 | -2 |
| Style | 0 | -3 |
| Empathy | 0 | -3 |

Inventory

None

Malinda



Role: Malinda is, in a way, the spiritual guider and “mother” of the Forest of Vardis. As one of the select few who possess Sentience in Arlantha, she can commune with the thoughts and feelings of the other animals in the forest. She needs to be at a relatively close distance for this to work – she can hear whispers and pains from far away, but to actually listen in on a person’s thoughts, she needs to be close. Like Aardvarth, she initially was deemed an outsider for this ability. Her stride to ONLY use her ability in times of personal (if another animal is suffering and wants to be understood) or communal (if the forest is in danger) has, slowly, earned her a level of trust among the animal community. She works at it every day, knowing that if she used her gift for more malicious purposes, she would be cast aside by everyone.

Quote: “I feel your pain. I can feel everyone’s pain, and I can feel how they might react because of it. It is a wonderful and terrible gift.”

Early Life: In her youth, Malinda realized that she was one of a very small amount of animals still able to possess the ability of Sentience in Arlantha, even though the ability has been dying off for decades. As she was still learning to channel this power, it was hard to control, which led to animals “detecting” her sneaking in their minds and led to her being labeled as an outsider. But, trying to believe her ability as a gift, she decided to only use this gift for good. Overtime, she helped countless animals in the community suffering with feelings of pain and sadness, and, in times of crisis, she listened in on enemies to protect everyone. Now, she has earned a level of respect among the other animals.

Personality: Malinda has an extremely spiritual demeanor. She moves slowly and calmly, feeling connected to other animals and nature as a whole. She would love to see peace come to Arlantha, but knows that the schims around the world remain.

Relationship with Aardvarth: When Aardvarth first arrived in Arlantha, everyone either was afraid of him or hated him, but not Malinda. Feeling his pain to be closer to others and his genuine disposition to kindness, she began to look out for him. She knows what the Emorys sounded like, she knows what Aardvarth felt when he was alone in the Human World. She only speaks about this when he wants to be heard. What has surprised her is his inclination to listen to *her*.

Relationship with Bores: Like with Aardvarth, Malinda has “felt” Bores’s pain from his upbringing, though he has never allowed her to discuss it with him. This empathy has led her to accept him on a deeper level than most other animals do. She knows that Bores is the shield against the corruption of the Human World and the world beyond. And she agrees – they work well together; her as spiritual guidance and him as purveyor of strength. Yet, she worries. She worries that his outbursts have been getting worse. She worries that he could be losing himself.

Talents: Beyond her ability of Sentience, Malinda is genuinely kind. Also, as a cat, she is fairly nimble and can sneak into tough-to-reach places.

Wants: She desires peace in Arlantha, though, unlike Aardvarth, she is less hopeful (though she’ll never admit this). Internally, she would love to be free of her power, and be able to live a normal life of peace for *her*.

Flaws: Her ability has left her a touch blind to other more material things, so she might struggle detecting hidden objects that can’t be “felt.” Also, whereas Bores sees the worst in people, her ability to empathize makes her see the best, which is in itself a gift. But some people shouldn’t be trusted.

Player: Malinda IV
Name:

Current HP:

Max HP: 15

Attributes

Physical: 9

Mental: 12

Social: 14

Skills

Skill Points

Actual Skill

Physical

| | | |
|-------------------|---|----|
| Unarmed Combat | 0 | -1 |
| Melee Combat | 2 | 1 |
| Long-Range Combat | 1 | 0 |
| Combat Defense | 0 | -1 |
| Athletics | 4 | 3 |
| Stealth | 2 | 1 |

Mental

| | | |
|---------------|----|---|
| Investigation | -1 | 1 |
| History | 4 | 6 |
| Medicinal | 1 | 3 |
| Repair | 1 | 3 |
| Hearing | 2 | 4 |

Social Skills

| | | |
|--------------|---|---|
| Leadership | 1 | 5 |
| Performance | 0 | 4 |
| Intimidation | 0 | 4 |
| Subterfuge | 1 | 5 |
| Style | 0 | 4 |
| Empathy | 5 | 9 |

Inventory

Sentence – Adds a +5 boost to Hearing if used. But be careful. If used too often and for too many “stalkative” purposes, there will be consequences.

NPCs – Humans

Cornelius Watson



Jackson Emory



Martin Emory



Adelaide Emory



Arthur Emory



NPCs – Animals

Jakar XIV



Anton VII



Squirrus VI



Marie III



Olivia "Olly" V



Part Three:

Running the Adventure



I would like to give a special thanks to Chance Lytle here for participating. The fourth member of our original group, Thomas Bair, ended up needing to make a last-minute appointment, so Chance agreed to play as the last player. Thank you!

Aardvarth Emory – Joey Yeo

Bores III – Chance Lytle

Malinda IV – Spencer Frum

I went through the first page of the GM notes, mainly detailing the backstory of Arlantha and the forest, before handing out copies of the PC character sheets, mentioning that the pictures correspond to the character's look and also the potential voice actor to play them. The players asked some clarification questions as to why the Ja'rak rebelled, and why Malinda is the only character who possesses Sentience. In terms of the Doorways, I clarified that humans can't access the Doorways unless they know where they are, and that the Doorways can only be opened using aspects of the Allcrystal's power.

We also talked about the aspect of animals in Arlantha being able to speak their own universal language, but clarifying that Aardvarth is the only character able to understand "Human" because he was raised with them.

As emerged in our adventure, the rule became that *in* Arlantha, humans can talk to the animals and understand them, but in the Human Realm, they just hear animal sounds.

1. Aardvarth and Malinda begin by having a casual conversation in the forest. They talk about Malinda understanding Aardvarth's pain and him wanting to be closer to others. Aardvarth talks about people maybe starting to include him.
2. The loud noise to the West of the forest (where the smoke signals on the map are) is heard, and the PCs see animals come rushing through the forest exclaiming that "the humans have arrived." Bores arrives at this point and tells Aardvarth that "this is all your fault."
 - a. **GM Note: At this point, we agreed that the Forest is about the size of Pittsburgh.**
3. Bores immediately wants to fight the humans, with Aardvarth agreeing that he wants to hear what the humans are doing because he can understand them.
4. **The PCs decide to go West first.**
 - a. **GM Clarification: The Doorway at the Western part of the forest is closed now, but if the animals wanted to use crystal power to open a Doorway, it would appear there.**
5. Standing around in a clearing are humans with several Drills (visualizing the Drill from the movie *Atlantis*, about three times the size of a horse). At the center is one human gesturing to the others. Aardvarth doesn't know these humans. Bores knows what a Drill is, but this is the first time he is seeing one.
 - a. Aardvarth rolls for Hearing, but it isn't high enough to listen in.
 - b. Malinda rolls for Stealth to try and sneak up and listen in on the humans, but a Drill blocks Malinda just as she gets close enough to listen in.
6. Bores and Aardvarth argue, with Bores wanting to charge and test the humans' strength, while Aardvarth wants to lay low and figure out what to do.
7. Malinda, being told she is a cute cat and that humans like cats, decides to do a Performance to lure a human nearby to come closer (however, the roll is a 1). So when she tries to sneak out in front of the trees to lure a human, the human gesturing exclaims "Whoa, why is there a cat over there?" and more humans come rushing over.
8. Aardvarth tells Malinda to jump on his back and then all of the PCs rush away.
9. After several successful Athletics Rolls, they hide behind some trees, losing the humans for now. However, the humans are now wandering around looking for them.
 - a. **GM Note: I let the players know that... now that they're hiding behind the trees and humans are around, they can listen in.**
 - b. Aardvarth, who can understand Human, listens in successfully and hears the humans say "We lost them, but they can't stop us from getting the lumber we need. Mobilize up north. We need to make it to the Hill before sundown." These Humans have a Southern accent.
 - c. **GM Note: I let everyone know that there are animal houses up there by the Hill**
10. After being pressured by Aardvarth, Bores begrudgingly agrees to help get them out of the way before attacking the humans head-on.
11. At the hill, the houses there are Shire-esque houses built into the hill, but tinier. The PCs meet Squirrus and Marie.
 - a. **GM Note: I whisper to Aardvarth that "Marie likes you and you're not happy about it."**

- b. Marie exclaims “Oh my God, Aardvarth, thank God you’re here, now we can be safe.”
 - c. The PCs, led by Bores, tell Squirrus and Marie that the humans have come and that they must get out of here and get the larger animals to come.
 - d. Marie says “These humans have been asking for war for years, and if they want war, we will give them war.”
 - a. Squirrus says “I understand what they’re saying, but we must understand what humans are capable of, and we have to be careful or we could lose everything.”
- 12. **The PCs decide to send Squirrus to the Eastern part of the forest to find the larger animals, while Marie is allowed to stay and help.**
- 13. The PCs investigate the area and it is critically successful.
 - a. **GM Note: I tell them about the tree standing right next to the road next to a drill-sized hole and there’s a crack in it. I mention the river but with less detail than the tree.**
- 14. A Sentry Drill, being driven by a human, appears on the horizon and the PCs immediately decide to use the tree to stop it and capture the human. Working together, the PCs bash against the tree and have it smash into the Drill, sending the human tumbling out onto the ground, breaking his arm.
- 15. The PCs interrogate this human, who exclaims that the humans are only here to obtain lumber and trees to be able to rebuild the dying forests of their human realm, accidentally letting slip that he knows that Arlantha possesses magic that allows the forest to regenerate.
 - a. **GM Note: I realized a plot hole here that you can just use seeds to rebuild the forest.**
- 16. At Malinda’s suggestion, the human is sent away to find their leader, named “Cornelius Watson”, so the animals and humans can have a meeting. Marie is sent along with the human to make sure he cooperates.
- 17. As the human leaves, the larger animals arrive behind the PCs, including Anton and Olivia. Other legions of animals, such as beavers and monkeys, have also arrived. Anton talks to Bores about whether the humans are coming for the Heart of the Forest. The PCs remember that “the humans know that our forest is magical, so we have to be careful.”
 - a. **GM Note: I whisper to Bores here that Anton is his best friend.**
- 18. Anton mentions that they could potentially use the Allcrystal’s power to harness nature, but the PCs disagree, saying that “the forest is dying and we can’t overuse its power.”
- 19. Cornelius Watson (who also has a Southern accent) arrives on the scene, along with five other humans and 3 Drills, reiterating that the humans need lumber and accidentally information-drops that The Deal is steadfast, afterward exclaiming “oh my, I said too much.”
- 20. Malinda intimidates (rolled a 20) Cornelius by staring deeply into his eyes, really, really aggressively so it looks like she’s reading his mind.
 - a. Cornelius responds “We’re gonna go down to the bottom of the hill, if you wanna talk we’ll be there all night...”

21. Now that Cornelius and the other humans have their backs turned, Bores decides to charge them, with Anton by his side. Together, the PCs and Anton take down the supporting humans and disarm the Drills, but Cornelius escapes into the brush at the bottom of the Hill.
 - a. Aardvarth says “well... Bores already started it... so even if I don’t agree... I’ll also fight.”
22. Olivia yells at Bores about provoking war by charging the humans, exclaiming that “We don’t even know who let them in!”
 - a. This clues the PCs in to the idea that there is a traitor among them who led the humans to a Doorway.
 - b. Initially, they think that Aardvarth may have done it.
 - c. They also question Marie, but she exclaims “I like war, but I would never betray us because Aardvarth wants peace.”
23. At this point, the PCs exclaim that they need to find where Cornelius and the other humans went, so Squirrus suggests that Malinda, just this once, use her power. She puts her paws to the temples of her ears and listens in Cornelius Watson’s essence. She feeling his fear of letting down a greater power.
 - a. The PCs now know that Cornelius has a boss.
 - b. As Malinda continues to listen in, there is a crack in the connection and she is thrown back, leading the PCs to believe that Cornelius may have just been shot.
 - c. **GM Note: Cornelius wasn’t shot, but I’m clueing the PCs in to the idea of Malinda’s connection slowly eroding because the AllCrystal is being messed with right now.**
24. Malinda, now knowing more what her power can do, decides to listen in to Aardvarth’s memories to confirm that he is not the traitor:
 - a. Memories of Aardvarth being petted by Jackson Emory, whom he loved
 - b. Aardvarth does love humans deep down inside
 - c. See Aardvarth’s loneliness being the only animal
 - d. Running away from humans
 - e. Voices of humans calling out for “Aardvarth... where did you go...”
 - f. The side of a rainy street... Aardvarth alone in London...
 - g. See Aardvarth stumble into an alleyway that led to the Doorway
 - h. See his memories of sleeping in the woods when the humans entered the realm
25. Malinda confirms Aardvarth’s innocence, so Bores remembers his History (successful roll) and gleams out backstory on the other characters:
 - a. Anton – none of his family was attacked by humans, like Bores
 - b. Marie – wants Aardvarth; last of her species of rabbit
 - c. Squirrus – helped you in agreeing with you when you rose in the ranks of the forest
 - d. Olivia – mad at you because of leadership
- 26. The PCs become suspicious of Anton because of the amount of backstory given to him and by the fact that he continually tells them not to use Sentience.**
- 27. Malinda tries to use Sentience on Anton... but nothing happens.**

28. The PCs try to Intimidate Anton to learn more, but these attempts are middling. They end up just alienating him, and they tell Marie to keep an eye out on him.
- a. **GM Note: This moment led to a humorous conversation amongst the table on the idea of a rabbit “keeping watch” on a gorilla.**
29. **The PCs send Squirrus off to follow Cornelius’s footprints to see where he went.**
30. Meanwhile, the PCs still have three Drills in their possession. They decide to destroy them by rolling them down the Hill into the river. This attempt is successful.
31. Squirrus returns and exclaims “THE CRYSTAL IS GONE!!!!” That’s why Malinda’s ability didn’t work.
- a. Initially, there is a brief suspicion of “Wait... Squirrus, weren’t you looking for the humans?”
 - b. Squirrus exclaims that he was and that their footprints lead right to the Heart of the Forest.
 - c. In theory, there should be no power in the forest that can remove the Allcrystal from its perch there.
 - d. But maybe it’s because the humans have appposable thumbs...
 - e. The PCs wonder “do you know who else has appposable thumbs? Anton!”
32. **The PCs decide to follow Squirrus to the Heart of the Forest.** It is an *Avatar*-style network full of blue connections and a hole in the center of them where the Allcrystal used to be. *However*, there is a **crystal shard** in the middle of the hole. The human footprints lead from there and then stop down at the river.
- a. Squirrus says... “it was all a trap... they got us to a meeting at the Hill... Cornelius Watson, of course he wasn’t the leader...”
33. The PC intuition is that they can **use the crystal shard to locate the rest of the crystal.**
- a. **GM Note: I let Malinda know that, with the shard near her, she can listen in.**
34. Malinda listens in to sounds connected to the crystal shard and hears a jumble of:
- a. “Lighter” human voices different from Cornelius Watson and his men.
 - b. Meshed with the sound of a hard, rumbling animalistic voice.
 - c. **GM Note: I whisper to Malinda that these sounds are those that she would recognize as the Ja’rak**
35. The PCs exclaim that we need to find the Ja’rak, but we don’t know where they are! Squirrus relays information to them about the Ja’rak trying to make their own crystal, so maybe they should listen in to sounds coming from the crystal again. They know that the Ja’rak would be in four locations (Mount Sanys, Cave of Tears, Valley of the Key, Falls of Gwynn), but they don’t know where.
- a. **GM Note: This is where my puzzle didn’t work as intended. As intended, the PCs were meant to find out with all of the animal NPCs around them, so that they could then ask them to learn about clues regarding the information of the four locations. However, with Anton being guarded by Marie and me not wanting to bring Olivia to the Heart of the Forest (afraid that this would clue the PCs in that she and Squirrus were working together), it ended up just being the PCs being information-dumped regarding the locations via Sentience.**

36. The PCs overhear the sounds of the Ja'rak in the **Valley of the Key** collecting resources and bringing them North. The PCs understand that the Ja'rak are most likely in the **Cave of Tears**, so they ride off East in search of them.
37. Upon arriving at the Cave, they are beset by the Ja'rak – dark, cat-like creatures that stand on two legs and have thumbs.
38. **Rather than fight the surrounding Ja'rak, the PCs decide to have them bring them to their leader, Jakar.**
39. The Ja'rak lead the PCs deeper into the Cave, where Jakar sits on a large rock. Nearby next to him is a staff with a much-larger crystal (compared to the original Allcrystal) on top of it. **The old Allcrystal is blue, but this new one is yellow.**
40. The PCs converse with Jakar:
- a. Jakar says "Aardvarth Emory... brave man to show yourself here again..."
 - b. The PCs want to know why Jakar is collaborating with the humans
 - c. Jakar is like: "This is a different crystal... wait... humans are in this realm? No no... what you must have heard... we weren't speaking to the humans... we were speaking *around* them..."
 - d. Jakar explains that they have discovered these crystals possess much more power in the Human Realm than in Arlantha, and that sometimes the venture out into the Human Realm to experiment, opening Doorways in the process.
 - b. The PCs accuse Jakar of opening up a portal by accident, and thus leading the humans into Arlantha, but he retorts, saying "I don't know about animals opening up portals... but it is dangerous... the humans can use the opening to power their weaponry... they can destroy us all..."
41. While Bores distracts Jakar by doing an awkward dance, Malinda uses Sentience to listen in to Jakar's thoughts. When this doesn't tell her anything, she decides to listen in to the nearby crystal.
- a. She hears the sounds of human voices AND animal voices speaking together, with animal saying "Thank you... this is exactly what we needed."
 - b. In a separate segment of memory, she can hear human voices that she identifies as the Emorys conversing with Cornelius Watson
 - i. **GM Note: I whisper this aspect to Malinda directly, so she can decide how to tell Aardvarth and Bores.**
42. Jakar realizes that the PCs brought a Sentient-being into their mist and plan to tell the others that they've invented a new crystal. He tells his followers to "seize them." However, the PCs roll a critically successful Athletics and escape.
43. The Jakar chase after them.
- a. **GM Note: This part was Improv'd, the Jakar chasing after them.**
44. Malinda tells Aardvarth and Bores that she heard the Emorys talking with Cornelius, meaning that they might be funding the expedition.
45. **The PCs decide that they must go to the Human Realm in attempt to reason with the Emorys.**
- a. **GM Note: This part was unplanned, but was a great twist. My original brainstorming notes had the PCs potentially traveling to the Human Realm.**

46. The PCs use the **crystal shard**'s power to open a Doorway and enter the Human Realm, finding themselves in England. It has been more than three years since Aardvarth has seen his old masters, but he remembers where Emory Manor is.
47. Knocking on the door of Emory Manor, the Butler answers. Animals and humans are unable to communicate via language in the Human Realm (Aardvarth can understand what the Butler says, but the Butler can't understand Aardvarth), but Aardvarth has the medallion around his neck that designates his status as a member of the Emory family. Seeing the medallion, the Butler recognizes him and allows the PCs into the house.
48. Around the household are scattered pictures of the Emory family members, along with a picture of the patriarch, Arthur Emory, shaking hands with Cornelius Watson.
49. Aardvarth wants to see Jackson Emory, so he goes up to Jackson's room, with Malinda following.
50. There, there is a map there with an X next to the location of the Human Realm Doorway location and the corresponding Arlantha Western Doorway location.
- a. Drawn-out plans for a specific Doorway that tracks to the West Smoke symbol
 - b. X mark for where it opens
 - c. They knew where the door was gonna open
 - d. No one is in the house
51. Malinda has more power in the Human Realm than in Arlantha, especially with the **crystal shard**, so she can directly patch into the Butler's mind and literally read his thoughts.
52. The Butler monotones: "Jackson... in... Arlantha... looking... looking... he's still in Arlantha... the deal is almost complete... Jackson with father... and helper... meeting happening..."
53. The PCs realize that the Emorys are in Arlantha **right now**, at the Western Doorway where all this started, completing some sort of deal. The PCs, with knowledge of where the associative Human Realm Doorway is, rush back to Arlantha.
54. Back in Arlantha, the forest is even more grayed out than usual and Anton has been slain.
- a. He was slain by a claw.
 - b. The PCs wonder if it was the Ja'kar, but they were coming from the East and the PCs were only in London for a short period of time.
 - c. Who killed Anton?
55. The PCs check Anton for Inventory and find a Pointed Stick in his hand, which Malinda takes. This adds +1 to her Melee Attacks.
56. Nearby, the PCs can hear hushed human voices. The PCs roll for Athletics to move towards where the hushed voices are, but more slowly and Olivia catches up with them from behind. She yells at the PCs for being distant and allowing Anton to die, and then leads them to where the humans are.
57. Cornelius Watson and Arthur Emory are conversing in front of one of the Drills, with the three children (Jackson, Martin, and Adelaide) sitting on a log nearby. Cornelius is yelling at Arthur for convincing him to bring them along. Cornelius exclaims that "I

know we have a good relationship, but your personal quest is less important than my deal with The Helper.”

58. While this is going on, Aardvarth decides to sneak up behind Jackson to try and appeal to him. Jackson is overjoyed to see Aardvarth and, in addition to being happy that he can actually speak to his beloved horse now, he tells Aardvarth that the Emorys came to Arlantha in search of Aardvarth.
 - a. Basically, they were not part of Cornelius’s plot.
59. As this conversation occurs, the Ja’rak begin sneaking out from behind a bush on the other side of the clearing. Aardvarth decides to warn the Emorys of this, and Jackson calls out to his dad before the Ja’rak can attack. Arthur wheels around and **shoots Jakar dead**.
60. Jakar’s staff, which holds the **Yellow Crystal**, falls to the ground, and the crystal itself rolls out in front of the PCs.
61. Malinda, on instinct, decides to try to patch into this crystal to try and find out where their **original Allcrystal** is.
62. And immediately: her eyes turn white and her body loses control.
63. A sinister voice laughs “hehehehehe... you’ve been using Sentience so much, this was easy...”
64. Squirrus, levitating over the ground, reveals himself as getting the Humans to use their Drills to open a connection between the Human Realm. He then needed the PCs to go find the more powerful crystal that he knew the Ja’rak had, and then bring it and Malinda together in the same place so that then he could control them both, and eventually unite the realms and unleash the combined power of the crystals on the humans.
65. **The PCs decide to attack Squirrus, but he snaps his fingers and the nearby Drill explodes, killing Cornelius Watson and Arthur Emory.**
66. Squirrus, along with the possessed Malinda, try to escape while Aardvarth is downed. Bores charges Squirrus, but Olivia jumps in between him and Squirrus, revealing herself to be in on the plot. Squirrus disappears into the distance, heading towards the Heart of the Forest.
67. While Bores fights Olivia, Aardvarth appeals to Jackson using Empathy, telling him to come with him after Squirrus... avenge your dad...
 - a. **GM Note: I point out that Squirrus, in his hubris, forgot to take the original crystal shard the PCs had.**
 - b. Jackson agrees to fight with Aardvarth and the two of them ride off in chase of Squirrus.
68. Bores fights Olivia, facing off as growling animals. They charge. She attacks his face, but after two successful Attack rolls by Bores, he gets her off of him and gravely injures her. She growls at him “you always were a terrible leader” and then he kills her.
69. Meanwhile, the Ja’rak step up and cut Arthur Emory’s throat, even though he is already dead. Additionally, seeing Bores fight the lieutenant of the true villain has earned their respect, and they agree to help.
70. Marie also appears behind a tree with a bunch of friendly, smaller animals and wants to help. Bores allows it. He and the others race off after Aardvarth.

- a. **GM Note: I give Bores the option of asking Martin and Adelaide to join the fray, but Bores decides "it's not their fight" and lets them be.**
71. Aardvarth chases after Squirrus and reaches him just as he places the **Yellow Crystal** into the Heart of the Forest, beginning a merging process between Arlantha and the Human Realm.
72. Aardvarth charges Squirrus and has Jackson punch him in the face. Annoyed, Squirrus engages Aardvarth in combat, saying "you will never learn." The two fight to a draw (**literally, the rolls of the first two rounds were ties**).
73. Meanwhile, Squirrus summons his followers, an army of smaller squirrels and beavers, to attack as well. However, Bores arrives at the same time. He has the choice to attack Squirrus directly, or bowl over the cronies that are about to overwhelm Aardvarth. Bores chooses to protect Aardvarth and, for the first time, Aardvarth and Bores stand together.
- a. Meanwhile, the Ja'rak and Marie's group fight the beavers and squirrels in the background.
 - b. Squirrus summons Malinda to attack Bores and Aardvarth.
 - c. **GM Note: I hint to Aardvarth that the tree surrounding the Heart of the Forest has branches and that Jackson can climb things and he holds the crystal shard.**
 - d. Aardvarth rolls Athletics for Jackson, who scrambles up onto the tree to start climbing it. The roll ended up being low, so this process took an extra turn.
74. Malinda attacks Bores and is repelled, sustaining damage. It is immediately prevalent that, if the PCs attack Malinda, she will die.
75. Malinda uses her own Sentience to try and repel Squirrus. Her essence breaks free for a nanosecond and she tells Aardvarth to "attack him."
76. **On PC intuition, Aardvarth begins to attack the Yellow Crystal that is now embedded into the Heart of the Forest. However, Squirrus tries to block this attack by using Malinda as a shield.**
77. With Squirrus distracted from what's above him, Jackson falls onto Squirrus from above. Holding the shard from the original Allcrystal, he is able to damage Squirrus and get him in a headlock, holding the shard to his neck like a knife.
- a. **GM Note: This lore needed to be clearer, that, if used against each other, the two types of crystals can damage each other.**
78. With Squirrus trapped and with Bores and Aardvarth about to dislodge the **Yellow Crystal** from the Heart of the Forest, Squirrus uses his final resort, absorbing the power from Malinda. He throws Jackson off of him, grows in size, and moves to attack Bores and Aardvarth.
79. *However*, this action frees Malinda. After a poor Attack roll by Squirrus, Malinda uses the Pointed Stick (from Anton) to attack Squirrus, distracting him long enough for the others to dislodge the crystal.
80. This reduces Squirrus's power significantly.
- a. **GM Note: I tell the PCs that two more rolls will kill me**
81. Malinda spears Squirrus one more time, knocking him to the ground. Aardvarth steps up to Squirrus, who says "I only wanted to help the animals... we're better than them..." Aardvarth says "that's not true..." and steps on Squirrus, killing him.

82. The animals stand there in the clearing, with the Ja'rak having subdued the rest of Squirrus's goons.
83. Jackson gets up and looks at Aardvarth and is like "if the humans find out about my father's death, there will be problems... I can protect you"
84. Aardvarth says, naturally, that "I have to stay here because this is my home and that is your home"
85. Jackson touches Aardvarth's face one last time and then leaves.
86. Bores is like "and the Ja'rak helped so now they're un-banished!"
87. The story ends by the PCs agreeing that Bores and Aardvarth will be able to resolve their problems because "going through a traumatic event like that together heals things" and that Marie and Aardvarth **will not start a relationship**.

Aardvarth Emory



Role: Though he is not the leader of the team, he commands a certain authority due to his steadfastness, bravery, and will to help others. Because he was not born in Ariantha, many of the animfolk look down on him as an outsider, though he won some hearts over due to his cleverness with regards to his role in helping quell the Ja'rak Rebellion (an honor he is not particularly proud of). He is sensitive about his coming from the Human Realm, yet does not share the same animosity towards humans that Bores and some other animals do. In fact, a part of him misses his Human Family (which he would never reveal to anyone in Ariantha), though his memories of them have started to fade. His surname "Emory" designates him as separate from the other single-named animals. Aardvarth particularly misses Jackson Emory, the youngest of the family. He desires peace and a place in this world.

Quote: "There is no reason for war. Words are a better medicine than any hurt we can throw at each other."

Early Life: Aardvarth is a horse from the Human Realm, bred as a prized stallion by the influential and wealthy Emory family. Though he lived a life of relative comfort and gentility with his Human Family, he had zero outlet to the world outside their manor, nor to any animals of his kind. So, he fled his family and, after some time wandering through the wilderness in the Human Realm, accidentally stumbled across one of the Doorways leading to Ariantha. He was immediately seen as an outsider due to his coming from the Human Realm, though Malinda took a light kindness to him. When the

Ja'rak rebelled a year ago, Aardvarth was instrumental in the military strategy that led to the capture of their leader, Jarak, and their eventual banishment, which has left the rest of animal community begrudgingly accepting of him.

Personality: Aardvarth has a relatively calm demeanor and believes that we have an honor to each other that comes first. He is not one to pick a fight, but is willing to do so if it means defending those he cares about, which includes his newfound community in the Forest of Vardis.

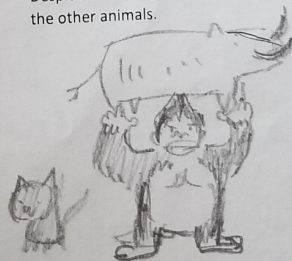
Relationship with Bores: Though Aardvarth has tried to remain cordial to Bores, the boar remains steadfast in his hatred of Aardvarth. Aardvarth believes that if he remains true to the cause of protecting Ariantha, Bores might eventually come around. Internally, Aardvarth does not appreciate Bores's repeated hatred of humans; Aardvarth has indeed seen what they are capable of, but he also sees the love in them as well.

Relationship with Malinda: Aardvarth appreciates Malinda's kindness more than she knows. She was the first animal to show him any remote sort of affection upon his arrival to Ariantha, and he empathizes with her own struggles of having a kind of knowledge (her sentience) of the world that she tries to not share with people. They both desire, above all else, safety for their community.

Talents: Aardvarth's core talents are in his intelligence and knowledge of how to utilize the world around him. His soft-spoken demeanor during confrontations is also valuable.

Wants: He wants to be accepted and prove himself to Bores, but also desires peace for his community. Internally, he would also like to see the Emorys again, though he knows this is unlikely.

Flaws: His upbringing in general civility has left him somewhat naïve to the hardships and treacherous of the world, both the Human Realm and this one. Despite his intelligence, he's not as tough as some of the other animals.



Player: Aardvarth Emory

Name: *Joey* ☺

Current HP:

Max HP: ~~20~~
16

Attributes

Physical: 11

Mental: 15

Social: 9

Skills

Physical

Unarmed Combat
Melee Combat
Long-Range Combat
Combat Defense
Athletics
Stealth

Skill Points

0
-2
-2
4
4
3

Actual Skill

1
-2
-1
5
5
4

Mental

Investigation
History
Medicinal
Repair
Hearing

5
3
0
0
2

10
8
5
5
7

Social Skills

Leadership
Performance
Intimidation
Subterfuge
Style
Empathy

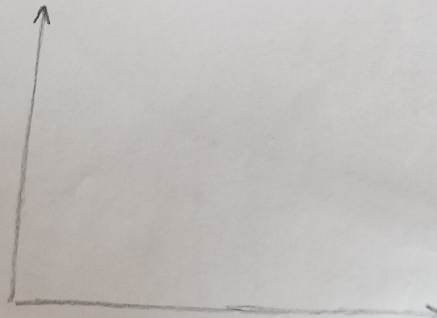
2
4
0
1
0
3

1
3
-1
0
-1
2

Inventory

Silver Medallion around his neck. Inside it is emblazoned with the word "Emory"

Understands "Human"



Player: Bores III
Name: *Not Thomas*



Current HP:

Max HP: 25

Attributes

Physical: 16

Mental: 13

Social: 7

Skills

Physical

| | Skill Points | Actual Skill |
|-------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Unarmed Combat | 2 | 8 |
| Melee Combat | 1 | 7 |
| Long-Range Combat | -2 | 4 |
| Combat Defense | 2 | 8 |
| Athletics | 4 | 10 |
| Stealth | -2 | 4 |

Mental

| | | |
|---------------|----|----|
| Investigation | 1 | 4 |
| History | 3 | 6 |
| Medicinal | 0 | 0 |
| Repair | -1 | -1 |
| Hearing | 1 | 4 |

Social Skills

| | | |
|--------------|---|----|
| Leadership | 2 | -1 |
| Performance | 0 | -3 |
| Intimidation | 5 | 2 |
| Subterfuge | 1 | -2 |
| Style | 0 | -3 |
| Empathy | 0 | -3 |

Inventory

None

Player: Malinda IV
Name:

Current HP:

Max HP: 15
10

Attributes

Physical: 9
Mental: 12
Social: 14

| Skills | Skill Points | Actual Skill |
|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Physical | | |
| Unarmed Combat | 0 | -1 |
| Melee Combat | 2 | 1 + 1 penalty strike |
| Long-Range Combat | 1 | 0 |
| Combat Defense | 0 | -1 |
| Athletics | 4 | 3 |
| Stealth | 2 | 1 |
| Mental | | |
| Investigation | -1 | 1 |
| History | 4 | 6 |
| Medicinal | 1 | 3 |
| Repair | 1 | 3 |
| Hearing | 2 | 4 |
| Social Skills | | |
| Leadership | 1 | 5 |
| Performance | 0 | 4 |
| Intimidation | 0 | 4 |
| Subterfuge | 1 | 5 |
| Style | 0 | 4 |
| Empathy | 5 | 9 |

Inventory

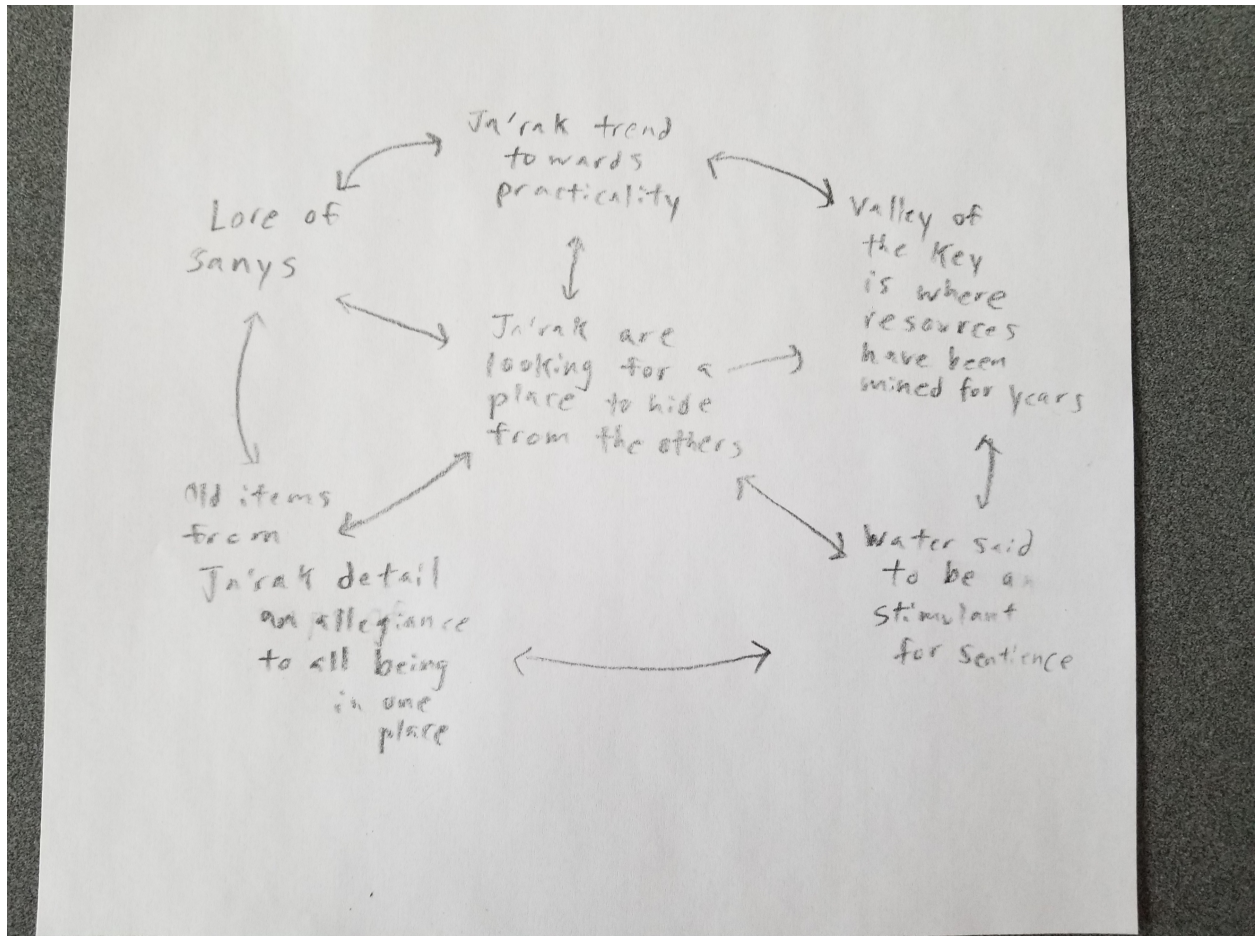
Sentence – Adds a +5 boost to Hearing if used. But be careful. If used too often and for too many “stalkative” purposes, there will be consequences.

Part Four:

Puzzles and Interest Curves

The Puzzle

The puzzle was meant to have the PCs need to talk to the different animals to mine out clues as to where the Ja'rak might be. One character would know something about the Mountain of Sanys being related to an ancient story about the Sanys (a.k.a. the savior of the Forest), and then another character would know something about the Ja'rak not believing in folklore and that they prefer the practicality of experimentation and discovery – which would lead the PCs to investigating information about the Valley of the Key, which would then be revealed as a research hub where the animals' ancestors gathered the materials to make new crystals, though these materials ran dry long ago.



If the PCs started to struggle, another NPC would remark that it wouldn't matter where and how the Ja'rak made a new crystal, they would not trust the rest of Arlantha and would be in the best place for hiding.

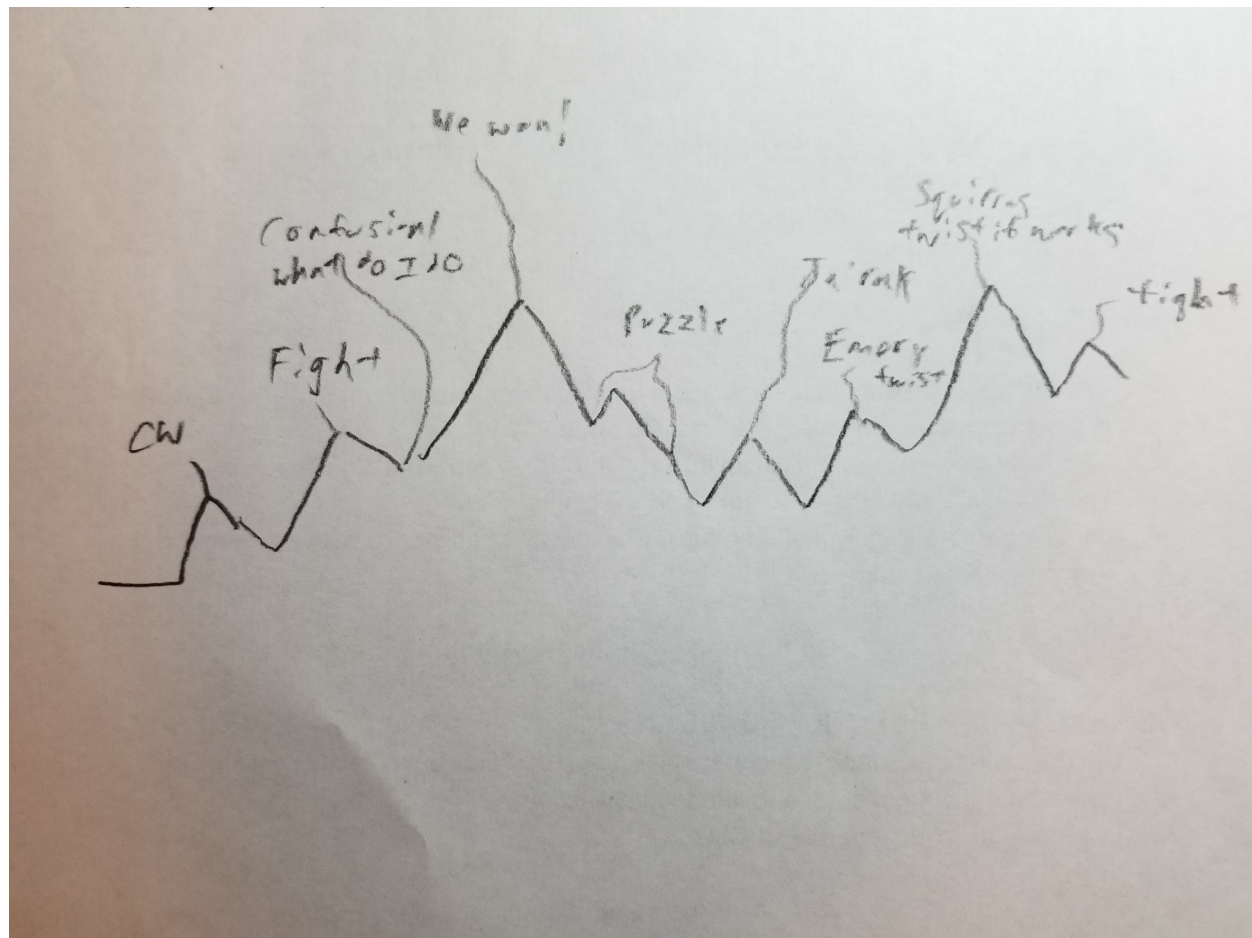
However, in the playthrough, we ended up in a situation where only Squirrus was nearby and I also needed to have Malinda be an information dump. I also made a mistake of not introducing the items that you could have gathered at the Hill, which would mine out some information

about the Ja'rak. But yeah – this alternative method of just using the crystal wasn't the best because it was too easy to get whatever information you wanted.

The puzzle was designed so that the PCs would be interacting more with the NPCs and getting to know their personalities better. The clues would more or less be interchangeable (I planned on coming up with additional ones on the spot), but the way it which they would be said would be paramount, as then it would explain NPC motivations more strongly.

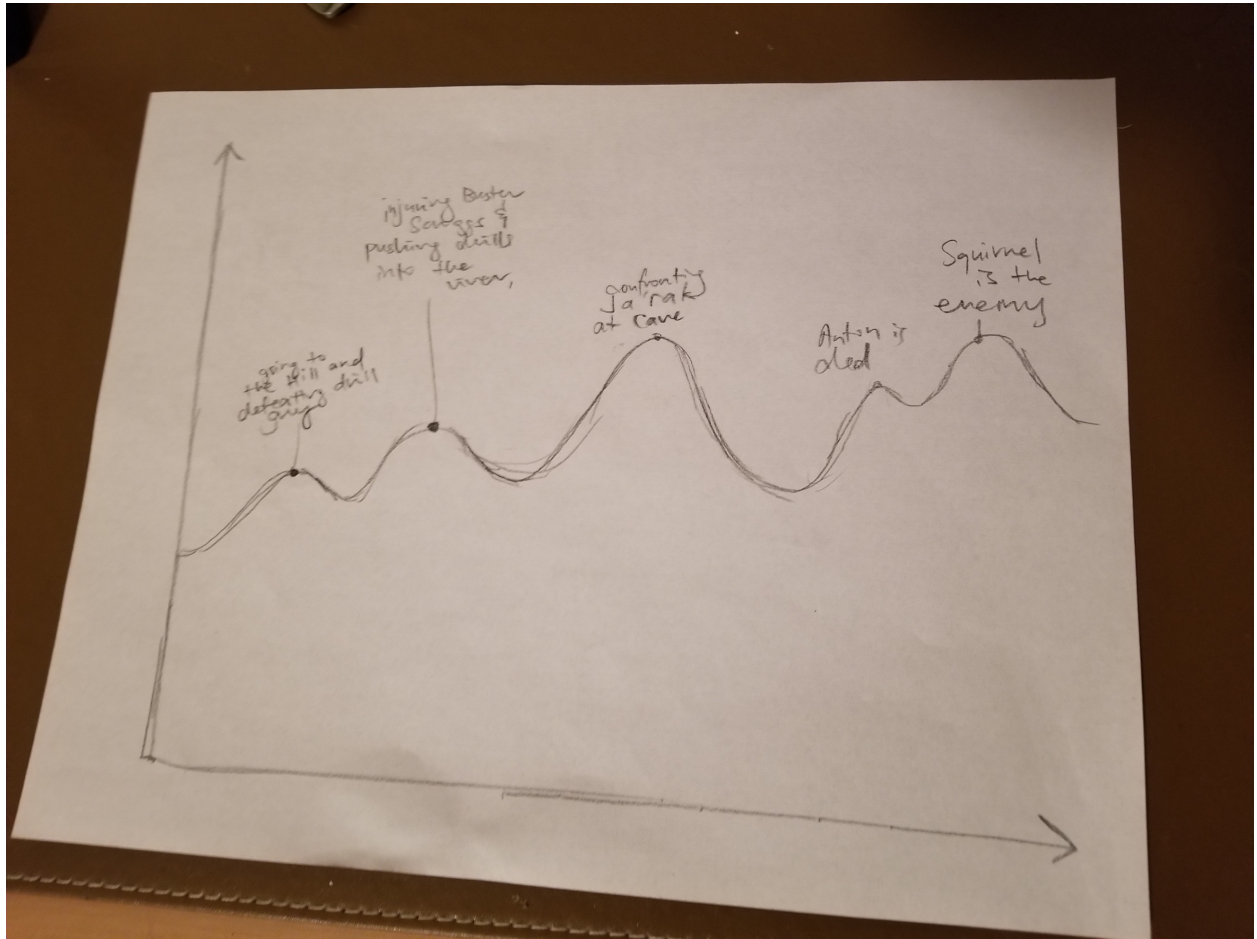
Ironically, the players ended up enjoying the sequence of clues laid out in the Human Realm, going from discovering that the Emorys were involved to the final reveal, back in Arlantha, that the Emorys went with Cornelius in search of Aardvarth, not for nefarious purposes. It's interesting that this aspect ended up being improvised, while the scheduled puzzle felt flat.

My Predicted Interest Curve

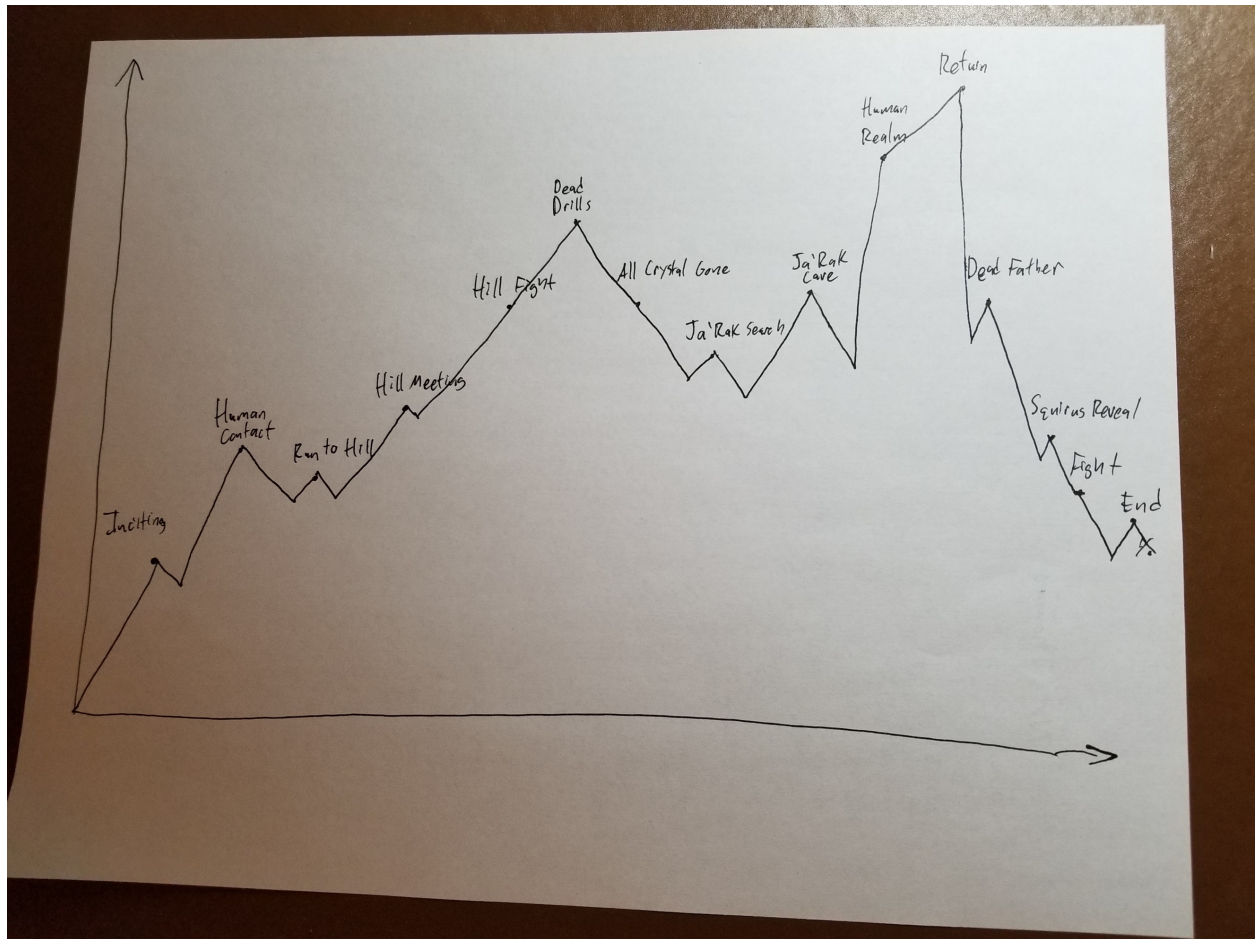


Lots of backstory
 First combat
 Humans arrive/improv through escape
 Go in to the hills
 Didn't know how to lay trap/out crystal
 Meeting Cornelius Scene improv
 Fight!
 Minor hiccup
 What to do now?
 Drill S. request
 Puzzle done work
 Once Jack starts working
 Go in to Human Realm
 Andon is dead!
 Meeting Jackson
 Don't Jackal Squid's reply
 Olive twist
 How do we fight?
 Early twist
 Confusing return
 Ending
 Need to intro Nump Crystal

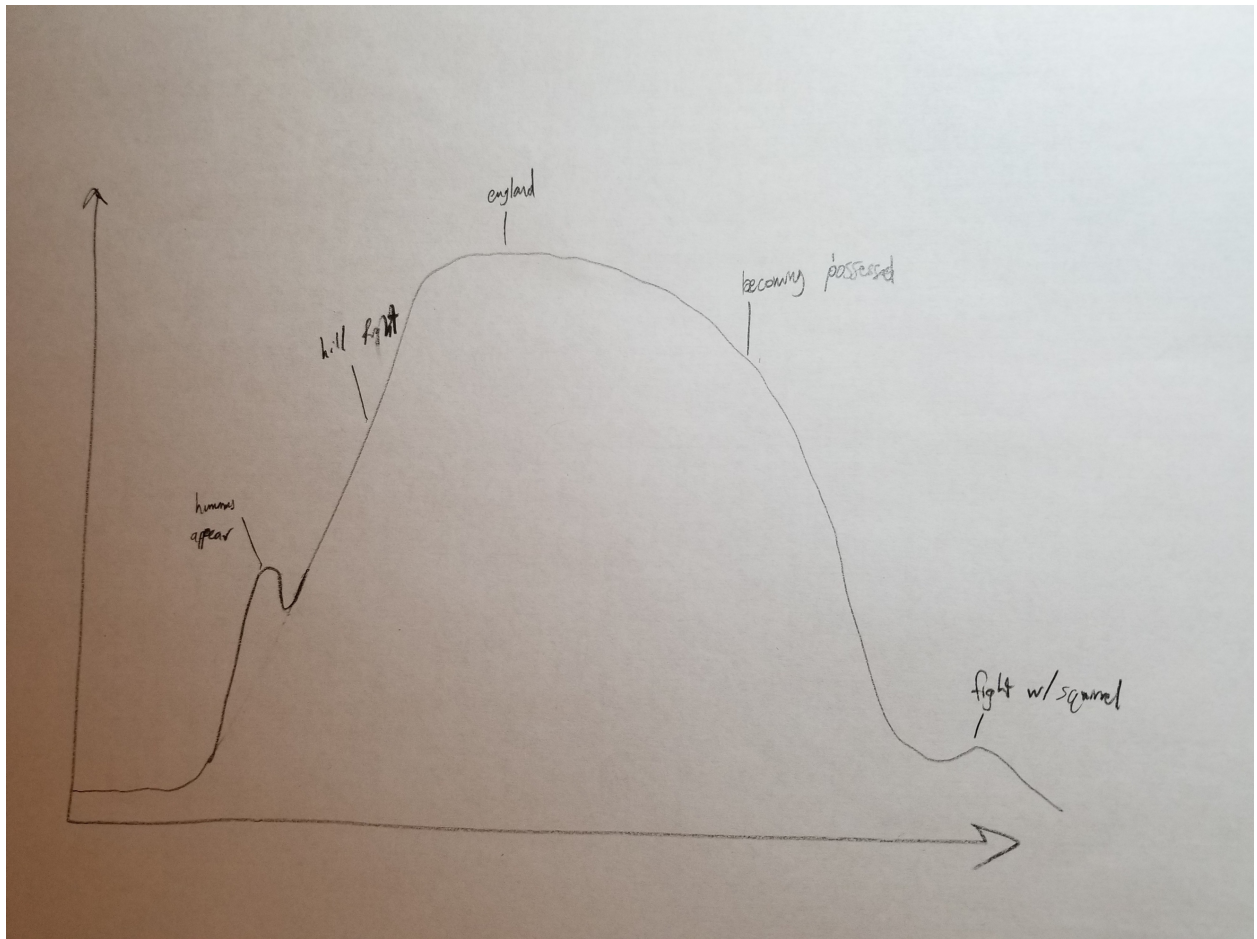
Interest Curve: Aardvarth



Interest Curve: Bores



Interest Curve: Malinda



Part Five:

Analysis

This was my first time GMing a game so I went into this with a lot of nerves. As such, one of the things I know I did was employ a lot of high-level structure and a lot of events for my PCs to go through so I would never feel like I was spiraling, but I also tried to allow room for natural conversation amongst players and learning about this balance between **lots of structure** and **freeform** is the biggest takeaway for me.

1: Analysis of the Interest Curves

Ironically, my two interest curves didn't turn out to be hugely different. I expected there to be a consistent build-up until the end of the first foray when you defeat a group of humans and have this first taste of victory, and then a lull as you learn that the Allcrystal has been stolen and must investigate as to where. **This shift from a more physical/conflict style to a more investigative style I knew would feel weird at first, especially because at this point you're going from a specific set of areas in the forest, to searching around the realm.**

But I knew that this lull could be worth it if I could pull off the Squirrus twist, which conflicted me a lot as well (see below). At the same time, I expected the final fight to be a downward trend. At the time of my run-through, I had put a lot of thought into the character elements and character conflicts and backstories as to why Squirrus might betray the forest or why Aardvarth still has affection for the Emories, but for the final fight I felt needed to be more high-level and employ a larger sense of lore, and I wasn't as confident with it. All I had landed on was "Aardvarth and Malinda love each other and this is powerful enough to stop Squirrus," but this does not directly tie into the power of Allcrystal, so it felt hokey.

In the end, the final fight ended up just being straight combat without any high-level stuff, but it still ended up having a downward spiral, mainly because for all of the characters, their arcs had been completed before the fight:

- Aardvarth reached a level of peace with the Emorys by finding out that they still loved him
- Bores reached a level of peace with Aardvarth by choosing to stand by him
- Malinda ends up being possessed

So, each character ended up just going through the motions instead of experiencing some sort of great catharsis. And because I specifically played Squirrus (this time) bare, there was less of a character conflict once it was revealed that he was the traitor.

The biggest shift from my predicted curve to my actual curve was in the Emory scene in the Human Realm, which wasn't planned. *However*, I had had a potential Human Realm scene in my original brainstorming notes, so I felt less bare in running it than some of the other improv scenes. And this turned out to be a great scene, utilizing a **Hero's Journey** element of having Aardvarth return to his original home, find out more (potentially crushing) information and then go back to Arlantha.

My interest curves differed in a few places from my players'. In the meeting scene and subsequent fight with Cornelius Watson and his men on the Hill, I was making stuff up completely on the fly as my players didn't end up using the Allcrystal's power like I had tried to set up. But... as it turns out... all of my players liked this aspect. **I'm guessing that having this fight emerge naturally from the meeting rather than feeling shoehorned into it helped with player response.**

Between the testers, Aardvarth and Bores have curves closer together that, aside from the amplitude of fluctuation are more or less consistent. Aardvarth preferred the Squirrus twist over the Human Realm scene, while Bores preferred the inverse. But for the most part, the spikes mirrored mine.

Malinda, however, was different. In running the adventure, **I realized that, especially in physical combat, Malinda often doesn't have anything to do.** She is significantly underpowered physically and can't attack like the others can. My player felt like he was making up supporting moves during these scenes while the others did most of the work. A solution would probably have been to maybe give Malinda some mental attacks to at least be able to provide more of a unique impact on battles. Maybe she could use her mind to scramble an opponents' to allow the other players to land a killing blow.

Then, later on in the experience, I worried that Malinda started becoming used as a plot device, being used to make Sentience rolls only to grab more information from out in the ether – information that I knew and my player didn't, which isn't fun for the player. Where I thought Malinda's abilities worked is if she were given different objects of different strength to patch into (i.e. choosing to patch into Jarak's mind vs. the Yellow Crystal during the Ja'rak scene), or given a time limit element to her ability. In these moments, there was more of a tension in what the character was doing.

This extended to the Human Realm scene, because her abilities enabled her to listen deeper into characters' minds, which is a new element that hadn't been introduced before. So the player feels happy because a new thing is being done, rather than just repeating the same ability for the same purpose. **Basically, using the same ability for the same purpose is repetitious and dull. But using the same ability for different purposes in which you get to choose which one works much better.**

Then, there is the issue of Malinda becoming possessed at the end, which, as my player notes, started off as a fun element but quickly grows stale because there's nothing to do. Maybe if Malinda were fighting Squirrus's mind during this sequence, so therefore I could mine out more information about Squirrus that hasn't already been revealed, but also allow Malinda's player to be fighting to try and free herself and help the team.

2: The Power of Improv

More specifically, I've realized how powerful improv is, both for the GM and the players. Like, it was all well and good when I was laying down events and my players were either following them or finding them in a roundabout way, but there was also an inherent tension of me worrying whether or not we were on the right path and the players potentially spinning their wheels until I gave them a new prompt.

Contrastingly, just by having scenes play out more naturally made a big difference. Thinking about the fight scene on the Hill, all I knew is that I needed Cornelius to escape alive, but everything else was freeform chaos. And the players got the chance to do whatever they chose, like having a gorilla lift up a boar, to try and win the fight.

I guess the listen is that if you have a high-level structure, know the simplest base elements that need to remain true in order for the story to stay on track, but try to keep those elements as minimal as possible so that then players can make up stuff as they go. And, then, I'm making up fun stuff as I go too and then *everyone* feels loose around the table and it feels more, well, fun.

3: Don't Put in Lore That You're Not Going to Use, or Force Plot Points

Going off of the previous point, that is also a reason not to put in lore that you're not going to use, or to force plot points. Right before running my adventure, I tacked on an additional conflict of some animals being wary of Sentience and this creating a schism, but that was never the core theme of the adventure (the core theme was always the tension of human prejudice vs. the animals' own inclinations toward violence). **Overstuffing this sense of lore I think led to more moments where players were confused as to their motivations.**

And this extends to the lore about the forest slowly decaying as well, which was added on at the end of my development process to give a sense of urgency (and to also set up the "love beats decay" coda that I had thought up for the end) to the proceedings. But the tension of the humans potentially stealing the forest's crystal did that to begin with. *And*, by suggesting that the crystal was tainted, the players didn't want to use it. The Allcrystal was meant to be featured prominently in the first act and be used against the human attack, showcasing its power.

But the players, afraid to waste the crystal's decaying power, didn't want to use it. Which was smart logic, really. So, this additional lore ended up hindering the choices that players could make.

Lastly, the title of the experience, "The Sanys of Arlantha" refers to the predestined savior of the realm, but, at the moment the plot point was meant to be introduced, it felt un-needed, so I skipped it. There was already enough going on to keep track of. I wonder what the limit is of number of things going on before another element feels too much. **In the end, the lore of Sanys wasn't brought up, and the experience was fine without it.**

This actually extends to character too. **Like, there didn't need to be four Emorys.** Jackson is significant due to his relationship with Aardvarth and Arthur is significant due to his connection to Cornelius. But the other two are extraneous. *Maybe* you can have one just there in case you want a backup for a possible death, but two extra characters is too much. This goes back to what we mentioned in class about every character needing to serve a purpose.

4: Give Characters Small Things that Might Get Used

So, in contrast being potentially wary of adding too many high-level concepts and tensions to try and sneak into the narrative, it's actually a good thing to just give the characters small little things that might be used later. Me, the GM, could have no clue how they are going to be used, but guess what: the players will come up with something.

It's easier to take a small, "anything" item and find a place for it than mine out things to do from amorphous, non-tangible plot backstories.

Aardvarth has the medallion that says "Emory" on it, meant to just be a random item to signify his outsider status. But hey – the players realized that they could use to inform the Emory's Butler of who you are, and this was a great moment of player intuition.

Additionally, the crystal shard wasn't initially thought to be used again once the final fight starts, but by that time, I realized that I had this item that was still hanging around and a plot hole I needed to fill of "how to get the jump on Squirrus," so let's use the crystal shard.

Oftentimes, when I think of narratives, I think of *Game of Thrones* or Christopher Nolan movies that are structured out almost to the nth degree. But I don't think these interactive narratives need to; actually, doing so actually hurts them. **Everything doesn't have to make narrative sense in my head beforehand. But if I give the players *tools* to make small narrative sense moments of their own, it will be powerful for them. And that's what you want.**

5: Have Information Relayed Through Sheets, Pictures, and Tangible Things

Speaking of tangible things, in the literal playing sphere, I think it helps to just have things to look at, especially if there is a lot of stuff to keep track of. I mention the crystal shard because that was the one item we had tokens to keep track of who was holding it at a given moment in time. And, being able to constantly look back at pictures of NPCs was positive in allowing players to better visualize with more context.

This falls under "stuff to improve" as well, because **there were some instances where I relayed plot points just through words, when there was potential to use paper or even more interactive media like sound.**

For instance, when it is revealed that you can hear the Ja'rak through the crystal, I just whispered to Malinda that "you know those sounds are the Ja'rak." It would have been much stronger had I literally recorded some soundclips of what the Ja'rak might sound like, played them at the beginning of the experience saying "this is what the Ja'rak sound like," and then played these clips *again* to say "this is what you hear in the crystal," allowing the players to make that connection instead of me telling them.

Heck, if I had a literal crystal shard it would have been stronger.

If there is a chance to take words and make them tangible in an experience like this, I think it's needed.

6: Whispering Worked

That being said, the motif I used of whispering known information to specific characters I think worked, because it allowed the players to talk to each other and share the information, while also feeling natural. I whispered to Aardvarth that Marie has a crush on him and he doesn't like it. So now Aardvarth starts acting a certain way towards Marie and the other two players can pick up on it and start making connections.

The same goes for whispering found information to Malinda when she learns it through the crystal. I thought I could have gone further with this by handing out to her literal information cards of people she's looked up and then having her decide how to relay the information even if it might hurt another character by telling it. In the one moment when I did this through whispering (telling her that she heard the Emorys talking to Watson and allowing her to tell the others), it felt very natural. In addition to the emotional benefits discussed above, it makes literal sense that she would get the information before the others, and also emotional sense.

7: Numbers Matter, Especially in Fights

In terms of aspects that I think could have been stronger, it's definitely in the numbers. Again, I put in a lot of effort to the high-level concepts as well as with the low-level characters, and thought that I could come up with some of the more nitty-gritty details on the fly. But it turns out that *the number of humans with Cornelius Watson is super important, as is the number of Drills. As is the number of Ja'rak, etc.*

Players remember numbers, and if the numbers don't make sense, it's hard to place things. During the fight on the hill, I structured it as an introduction for Cornelius Watson, forgetting that his supporters, especially in an interactive experience, are not just window-dressing like in a lot of action movies. **If you're going to fight them, you need to know where they are and how many they are.**

A couple of times I found my players remembering numbers from way earlier in the game, at which point I had chosen to change those numbers in my head based on where the story was

going. It turns out that you can change some landscapes or fight moves, but not the numbers, especially when fighting is involved.

8: Question of Backstory for a Twist Villain

As he stands, Squirrus has little backstory, which made the characters suspect him less, but made the final fight a little eh.

I debated a lot in terms of how much backstory to give Squirrus, and I think this question extends beyond interactive media as well. In my brainstorming notes, he was meant to be another animal that had grown up in the Human Realm and had come to Arlantha for shelter. But, unlike Aardvarth, he harbored a great hatred towards humans and tried to hide it. This would make him a foil to Aardvarth, and thus give a final fight a mucccccchhhh stronger impetus than what is there, wherein he is more or less just a “token bad guy...”

However, if I had relayed this information earlier in the experience, I’m pretty sure that players would have guessed Squirrus to be the main villain very quickly. And in a movie, if you guess a twist villain but there’s still a modicum of doubt, you can stay along for the ride and be at least moderately pleased that you found out you were right down the road. With an interactive experience, players could have seized Squirrus and made him tell them things really quickly if they suspected him, which could then neuter rest of the story.

In a sense, I could have always have switched the villain to a different character... then it would have been a parallel to this adventure, where the players were convinced Anton was the villain because he had more backstory only to be surprised that Squirrus was the villain.

Does this mean that you just can’t do twist villains in interactive narratives because the consequences of the players guessing it are greater than in movies? Or does it just mean you need to have backups if they guess it?

9: Give Players Backstory and Conflict with SPECIFIC CHARACTERS

Speaking of player backstory, in contrast, I think giving the PLAYERS a decent amount of backstory, specifically related to conflict with specific characters, is valuable. **Again, in these interactive stories, you don’t need to give the players much for them to come up with their own ideas.** Simply telling Aardvarth that Marie likes him and he doesn’t was enough to have consistent comedic relief throughout the story.

Having Aardvarth and Bores dislike each other throughout the story led to a lot of debates of the players sinking into their characters and knowing “okay, we’re opposites and I know exactly what I don’t like about you, so let’s go.”

Lastly, having Anton be close to Bores led to fun conversations in the first act of the story, but also both *me* and Bores knowing what to say and how to say it once Bores started to suspect him.

Contrast this with Malinda, who is given amicable relationships to Aardvarth and Bores and whose conflict with other characters is only talked about. She needed a **specific character** who either disliked her or challenged her on stuff to get her to engage the same way the other supporting NPCs engaged Aardvarth and Bores.

Similarly, Malinda doesn't have any specific relatives to people she thinks about, which then makes it harder to roleplay. Aardvarth got to talk a lot about Jackson when referencing reasons why humans have good in them. And Bores got to mention his dad to counter this argument. Malinda needed another specific character like that.

Basically, start with a small something and put it in the PC character sheet that gives players **someone** to talk about or **something specific** to clash with another player about. Conflict is more interesting than amicability.

10: The Nature of Character Sheets and Pictures

I'm still debating this point, because the other RPGs I played involved me drawing figurines on my character or making up my own name for my character, and this *is* indeed fun, because you feel like you're playing an avatar or someone *you* made instead of playing a character from someone else's game.

However, I think it's also harder to come up with specific backstories for such characters, because they need to be freeform enough to allow for whatever the PCs think of. And **good, specific character backstories** I think really spark even the casual conversation in these games, in between the plot points.

So, again... each method has its benefits. I like having long character sheets with pictures and a name, but I recognize the other side here.

11: Don't Speak for Your Players

A minor thing I noticed I did sometimes – sometimes after a player made a roll, I would describe their action along with a word they said, and I think this was a mistake. Yes, if I need to keep the action moving at a certain pace or the like, then maybe sometimes I can guide the actions, but I should always leave the words said to the players.

This way, *even* if I'm guiding the action, they feel like they're contributing and able to express themselves. If I take over both, then I'm stunting things.

12: Balance of GM Discretion

Which leads to my final point, which is the nature of GM discretion, which is extremely nuanced. I applied a lot of detail on the high-level and a lot of detail on the character level, and then tried to freeform a lot of the scene-by-scene work, which had mixed effects. I think the specific character backstories worked, especially with specific characters players could riff off of. And I think giving the players little guiding hints (especially in whisper form) then allowed them to create from that.

And combat is also mixed. The combat for much of the experience was freeform without any numbers of HP, and I liked this, because it meant that we could collectively track the emotional curve of a battle scene, and if it were starting to drag on a bit, end it. And then the final battle had numbers, and people's interest curves for this were not as strong as the former (although I think prior resolutions of character arcs played into this).

Maybe non-numbered combat works if the players aren't meant to feel like they could die and then the focus is just on the creation of the scene. Whereas if death is a spectre, you need the counter to physically see it.

In terms of details within the narrative, again, I think it's about those small details that players can tangibly use that are the most important. High-level stuff to set up themes is nice, but too much of it stifles the creativity within the narrative. I don't need to explain everything.

Give the players a set of tools and guide them through a story that they can shape. Don't force players through your story.

[1] Photo credits to Google Images for the photos of animals and corresponding voice actor images.

[2] Thank you to players Joey Yeo, Chance Lytle, and Spencer Frum

[3] Thank you to Daniel Grindle for helping me with brainstorming