

# THE DUNGEON BENEATH TOUR TORIEL

## ASCENT TO PRIME: LEVEL ONE

This is an introductory adventure geared towards learning how to play the Cortex Prime roleplaying game. It is the first in a series of five adventures that start very simple and slowly develop more complexity as you play.

If you'd like to give it a try, you'll need a few friends, some pens and paper, some tokens or counters, and some polyhedral dice. You can play online through video conferencing or face-to-face around a table. Each adventure takes a few hours to play: think of it like making your own movie.

Once you've gathered your players and materials, read the following aloud:

On the high plateaus of the roof of the world stands the spire of Tour Toriel, a tower of rock and ancient ruins that predates all of recorded history. Within the fortress that clings to its unassailable slopes reigns the Dread Tyrant, whose power is so great that every kingdom and city in the land has bent to his dominion. One year ago, a terrible purple hole opened in the sky above the spire. Harvests began to spoil in the fields; unspeakable new monsters spilled out of the wilderness. The wise women, the priesthoods, and the scholars cannot explain what is happening, but all signs are clear as to the source: something in Tour Toriel has gone awry, and will destroy the world if it is not stopped.

You are a band of heroes dedicated to finding out what has gone wrong in the spire and stopping it. It is almost certainly a suicide run, but doing nothing is only a slower death. You have discovered a secret entrance to the caves under the mountains upon which the spire rests. Your plan is to delve this dungeon and work your way upwards into the castle. There, by hook or by crook, you will discover the source of this calamity and—hopefully—the means to end it.

My friends. We are going to teach each other how to play Cortex by playing a Cortex game. This game is staged in five levels, and each level introduces new rules to the game. We start very simply in Level One and slowly add more layers and options until we are playing with a whole bunch of interlocking options in Level Five. Throughout this adventure, I will be reading boxed text passages like this, and I will be using this ridiculous voice whenever I do so.

Let's play Cortex.

# CREATING LEVEL ONE CHARACTERS

The *Keystone: Ascent to Prime* adventure series is played with characters that start simple and pick up new complexities and options as you progress through play. To begin play, you'll need to create some very simple characters, based off of pre-built archetypes. There are six archetypes to pick from, and each player (besides the Game Moderator) will pick a different one to play. A few steps will set up and customize your character, and then you're ready to play.

Give each player a blank character sheet and then spread out the archetype sheets in the center of the table.

Read the following aloud, proceeding as the players complete the steps:

Each one of you will play a different character in our story. We'll create these characters by selecting an archetype and making a few customization choices. There are six archetypes to choose from. None of them have to be in play; you can pick whichever suits your fancy. Everybody besides the Game Moderator should choose an archetype now.

We'll use the archetypes to fill out our character sheets. The archetypes and your choices will give you a bunch of traits. These describe who your character is and what they're good at. Each trait has a name and a die rating. The name will tell you what kinds of rolls the trait can be used in. The larger the die, the more useful that trait is to your character.

The traits are organized into sets: **Distinctions**, **Attributes**, **Skills**, and **Assets**. There's a different section for each on your character sheet.

Distinctions are who your character is. Each archetype has three, and you get all three. Copy your distinction names onto your character sheet now. All distinctions are rated at **8**. We're going to ignore, for now, the SFX listed under those distinctions. We'll get to them later.

Attributes describe your character's most basic, raw capabilities. Everybody has the same set of three attributes, but different dice. Copy the dice listed on your archetype's attributes to your character sheet. Remember, the bigger the die, the more useful that trait is to you. Your smaller dice will still be somewhat useful and you'll roll them occasionally when you're operating outside your strong suit.

Skills are things that your character can train. Everybody starts with a **4** rating in all skills to represent their untrained competency with that skill. Each of your archetype's distinctions highlights two skills. Each time a skill is highlighted by a distinction, it gets a step up. That means its die gets traded in for a bigger one. **4**s become **6**s, **6**s become **8**s, **8**s become **10**s. Go down the list of distinctions on your archetype and step up the skills that are highlighted. There may be some overlap, in which case you step up that skill twice or three times.

Once you've got all your highlight skills stepped up, you may step up your skills nine more times. Which ones you step up is entirely up to you: highlighted or unhighlighted. You cannot step up a skill past **12**.

Assets are items that you carry with you that can give you a bonus die. You may pick one of the two options listed on your archetype. You'll have other stuff, too—all the things an adventurer might take—but only one of them is special enough to give you a bonus die. Copy over the name to your character sheet and assign it a **6** rating. If you want to change the name a little, feel free.

Once all these steps are completed, our characters are ready to play.

### SIDEBAR: SWAPPING SPECIES

You may have noticed that the third distinction on each archetype is a fantasy species, like elf or dwarf or ork. You may have wondered if you could play the same kind of character, like a rogue, but as a different species, like a goblin. You totally can! Swap the species around however you like. (You can in fact also swap all the distinctions around however you like; it's just not the best idea on your first game.)



BETHANY BERG

# RUNNING THE DUNGEON

Read the following aloud:

In this, the first level of the Ascent to Prime, we will be teaching each other how to assemble and roll dice pools, take stresses, and recover stresses.

It's worthwhile to note that, in later levels, players will gain access to mechanics like plot points, SFX, and assets, which can be used to soften the die results. These rules aren't available in this level, which makes things pretty dangerous. Remember: this is a learning experience. We're going to let the dice fall as they may, and characters will probably get banged up. That's actually important because in this level we're also going to learn how to heal them up after they take hits. The characters may lose some fights, but if everybody learns how to roll Cortex dice, that's a win.

The Dungeon consists of eight encounters of different difficulties and levels of complexity. Each encounter teaches new concepts or allows everyone to practice what they've learned so far.

There is no dungeon map because the Game Moderator introduces the encounters in the order that will teach the concepts best.

Start with the **KOBOLD WELCOME MAT** and **FLEE THE CUBE!** to familiarize yourselves with the die mechanics with simple tests.

Introduce the **RESPITE IN THE TORTURE CHAMBER** encounter whenever half the players have picked up stresses or anyone has a **10** or **12** stress. If the characters get banged up again, suggest they backtrack to the Torture Chamber to patch themselves up again before proceeding into more danger.

The next three encounters—**RATKIN RUMBLE, THE MYSTERY OF THE KOBOLD'S FOOT**, and **DANGEROUS MACHINATIONS**—elaborate the context in which tests happen. Do them in whichever order feels good.

The **DUELLING THE STONE** encounter introduces contests, and should occur after the **RATKIN RUMBLE**.

If you haven't hit the **RESPITE IN THE TORTURE CHAMBER** encounter yet, do that before proceeding onwards.

Finish with the **DUNGEON'S DRAGON**, which ties everything you've learned together.

The rules you'll be using in each encounter are spelled out in that encounter, but all the rules used in the Dungeon are also presented in the **RULES SUMMARY** at the end of this chapter.

# ENTER THE DUNGEON

Read the following to get the adventure started:

You have followed reports of increased kobold sightings in and around the badlands at the base of the dread spire, Tour Toriel. The local villagers talk about a cave mouth that leads deep into the spire's living rock. The eldest crones insist that a benevolent dragon once lived there, but no one has seen her since the tyrant took up residence above. Finding said cave mouth is simple, especially given the kobold tracks that lead to it. If the caves connect to the stronghold above as the stories say, this may be the back door that you need to find and fix whatever is wrong high above.

Ask the players how they are approaching the cave mouth, and allow some time for light roleplay as people get into character and consider the task before them. Feel free to add in some details about the entrance; there are kobold tracks, but no kobolds: at least not yet.

# THE KOBOLD WELCOME MAT

## TESTS FOR TRAPS

This first encounter is a series of die rolls in simple tests as the player characters try to avoid or overcome a series of traps laid out by the dungeon's kobolds. There are four traps here; simply pick one for each player character. If you have five or six players, the fifth and sixth characters can encounter another instance of the same kind of trap.

Read the following for each trap, substituting in the character's name for "Hero."

Hero, you are proceeding down a flat-bottomed cavern corridor when you hear a click beneath your feet. Suddenly the ground falls away—revealed as a cleverly-obfuscated trap door—and there is nothing underneath you besides open air and a collection of sharpened stakes the length of your leg. Roll some dice to avoid falling for this hidden trap.

Hero, you are passing down a long corridor built out of rough-hewn stone. There are strange carvings all along the walls, and when you pass between two figures who appear to be singing at each other, a metallic click sounds. A split second later, darts fly out of the figures' open mouths, directly at you! Roll some dice to avoid becoming a pincushion.

Hero, you are navigating a narrow passage through a natural crevasse on a rickety series of bridges and scaffolds of dubious structural integrity. Suddenly, you hear a tremendous rumbling to your right. What first appeared to be a wall of lashed poles bursts open and a torrent of rocks, large and small, come tumbling directly at you. Roll some dice to avoid a crushing disappointment.

Hero, you have reached a wide, shallow lake of questionably safe water. A series of stepping stones leads across the placid underground lake, and seems to be the only way across. When you hop onto the fifth stepping stone, Hero, a whistling blade swings down on a long arm from the ceiling, hurtling directly towards you. Roll some dice to keep it together.

## SET THE DIFFICULTY

For each trap, the GM needs to set the difficulty. Roll **6 6 6** and add the highest two results together to get your total. The third die becomes your effect die.

## PLAYER ROLLS

Whichever player is confronting the trap then assembles a dice pool. They may pick one trait from each set on their sheet: one distinction, one attribute, one skill, and their asset, if it applies.

There are no set traits that the player must roll; instead, the player describes how they are overcoming or subverting the trap and then select the traits that best suit the actions that they are taking. There's almost always going to be a distinction, attribute, and skill that fits. The asset might not, and if it doesn't, they just don't roll an asset die.

The player rolls all their dice together. If they roll any 1s, describe some minor hindrance that complicates their effort or a misfortune that arises from it. The player then adds their highest two die results together to get their total. For these rolls, they won't need to assign an effect die (but you might do so anyway to get into the habit).

If the player's total is higher than the GM's total, their character defeats the trap. Describe their victory or invite the player to describe it. (I'm a fan of asking players, "What's that look like?")

If the player's total is not higher than the GM's total, their character falls victim to the trap. Describe the details, including what minor injuries the character suffers. Then ask the other players how they pull the victim out of the trap (no rolls necessary here—for now).

## TAKING STRESS

If a player fails to beat the difficulty and falls victim to a trap, they will gain stress. There are three kinds of stress in the Dungeon: **Injured**, **Exhausted**, and **Demoralized**. All the kobold traps inflict **Injured** stress.

The stress's die rating is equal to the GM's effect die. Since the trap rolls **6 6 6**, this will usually be a **6**. If any of the dice came up 1, they cannot be used as the effect die, in which case the effect die defaults to **4**.

### "BUT I WAS BEING CAREFUL!"

Some players, especially the Rogue's, may take issue at the suggestion that their character inadvertently triggered the trap. They might expect that their careful precautions would have allowed them to notice and avoid the trap before it was sprung, thus avoiding a die roll and the potential of injury.

Invite the player to put together a die pool to do just that. They can express all their careful precautions in the dice that they pick, and the roll will determine if that care pays off. What you've described is what will happen if the roll fails, and they fall prey to the trap.

Alternately, suggest that the hero may have intentionally sprung the trap, knowing it was there the entire time, in order to subvert it and clear the way for their fellow adventurers. Now all they have to do is put together a die pool to subvert the trap that they knew they were springing.

The key here is that most problems can be approached in many different ways, and in Cortex, nearly all of them can be handled with a test.

# FLEE THE CUBE!

## A TEST

You find yourselves in a long corridor with no doors on either side for a long distance. No sooner are you far enough down said corridor that you cannot easily return the way you came, a towering column of gelatinous ooze squeezes its way into the corridor behind you. This is the dreaded *cubici phagocytosis*, a dungeon denizen known for scouring corridors clean by engulfing and digesting everything it passes. This ooze must smell the presence of fresh meat, because it slides faster down the corridor towards all of you!

## SET THE DIFFICULTY

This encounter is a simple test with a difficulty of **8 8 8**. The GM should roll immediately, adding the highest two results together to get the test's difficulty. Set the third die to the side as the effect die.

## PLAYER ROLLS

Tell the players that they'll each try to beat the difficulty individually.

Allow time for players to assemble their die pools, roll, and add two results together for their totals. If anyone rolls a 1, describe some piece of dungeon corridor detritus that gets in the way of their panicked flight.

Each adventurer who rolled higher than the difficulty escapes unscathed. At the end of the corridor is a ladder that they can scale and the ooze cannot.

## TAKING STRESS

Everyone who failed to roll higher than the difficulty falls prey to the ooze.

The losers suffer a few agonizing moments of its slow digestion before they can be pulled out by their compatriots on the ladder.

While the acid burns they suffer are painful, player characters can be rescued before the digestion turns into real physical damage. The experience of being engulfed and digested is more than a little upsetting, however, so, they'll take **Demoralized** stress equal to the effect die you set aside when you rolled the difficulty pool.

# RATKIN RUMBLE

## COMBAT VIA TESTS

As you proceed through the dungeon, you seem to sink deeper and deeper into a pungent and sour miasma. Turning a corner, you finally discover its source: the tattered hovels of a ratkin nest. A swarm of the little pests spill out of every nook and cranny in the room, hissing defiance at you for invading their territory. A glance backwards, however, reveals that you cannot simply turn around. The ratkin have you surrounded and seem intent on making you their supper.

## A MISCHIEF OF RATKIN, A MOB

This encounter is a series of tests against a mob, **A Mischief of Ratkin**. A mob is a kind of threat controlled by the GMC that represents a group of nameless minor characters. A mob has traits and dice, but in a significantly simpler configuration than a player character. The **Mischief** has a **Mob** trait, which starts at **6 6 6 6**, plus the additional traits of **Claws and Teeth 8** and **Cowardly 10**. The GM always rolls the **Mob** trait, and roll the other two traits when they apply to the roll: when the ratkin attack with claws or teeth, add the **8**; when they're fleeing or surrendering, add in the **10**.

## THE MISCHIEF'S ATTACK

Each step of the fight is resolved as a test. You'll roll the **Mischief's** dice for the test's difficulty each time.

To set the difficulty for the first test, roll **A Mischief of Ratkin's 6 6 6 6**, the **Claws and Teeth d8**, and each player's largest stress (if they have any). Add together the highest two dice and set aside the largest remaining die as the effect die. Describe the group of ratkin attacking the group, highlighting those stresses that the ratkin are exploiting.

Tell the players that they'll each try to beat the difficulty individually.

Each player who rolls lower than or equal to the difficulty gets hurt. They'll take stress: usually **Injured**. The stress's die size starts equal to the **Mischief's** effect die.

Players who roll higher than the difficulty avoid injury... for now.

## A MISCHIEF OF RATKIN

*They may not talk, but they sure can swarm and devour.*

### BOSS TRAIT:

#### RATKIN SWARM

**8** CLAWS AND TEETH

**10** COWARDLY



## PLAYER ROLLS

Once the ratkin's initial attack is resolved, ask which player character is going first. The players can all act in any order they like; they'll each get a turn before the ratkin act again.

Players can put together a die pool for whatever action they are attempting as they have before. If the Mischief has stress, they can add one of its stress traits to their pool.

No matter what action the player is taking, roll **A Mischief of Ratkin's Mob** trait, **Claws and Teeth**, and that player's highest stress. Total the two highest die results for the test difficulty and set aside the largest remaining die as the effect die.

If a player rolls higher than **A Mischief of Ratkin**, they'll inflict stress. Ask the player which stress they inflict: Demoralized, Exhausted, and Injured. The stress starts equal to the player's effect die or, if it already has that stress at that die size or higher, the stress steps up.

If the stress is larger than the mischief's Mob die size (6), the player takes out a couple of the ratkin entirely; eliminate the stress and remove one die from the **Mob** trait for the rest of the encounter.

If any player rolls a 1, describe them stumbling over the detritus of the ratkin nest, losing track of one ratkin until it is nearly too late, or some other minor inconvenience. This doesn't change the result of their roll, but it's a little spot of colorful detail to add to the unfolding story.

Some players may try to do something that isn't directly attacking the ratkin. Setting up an advantage for use later, assisting another player, or even healing, are more complicated maneuvers handled with rules that haven't yet been introduced. Tell the players that later these sorts of actions will use different rules and yield different benefits. For now, every action will have the mechanical effect of whittling down the **Mischief's** dice: describe how their displays of teamwork and forward planning intimidate ratkin into fleeing.

## MORE MISCHIEF

Once all the players have had a turn, the Mischief may act again. If there are two or more dice in the **Mischief's Mob** trait, roll **Mob, Claws and Teeth**, and each player's highest stress. Total the two highest die results and set aside the largest remaining die as the effect die. Describe the **Mischief's** next attack and invite all players to roll to defend themselves.

Once again, each player who does not beat the **Mischief's** attack roll gets hurt. If they haven't been hurt yet, they gain **Injured** stress equal to the **Mischief's** effect die that you set aside.

If they already have a die rating in Injured stress, it will get more serious: if the **Mischief's** effect die is larger than the stress, step up the stress to match the effect die. Otherwise, just step up the stress one step. If the stress is stepped past 12, the character is taken out, and cannot act for the remainder of the combat.

## FLEEING

When there is only one die left in the mischief's **Mob** trait, the ratkin will attempt to flee. Roll their **Mob** trait plus **Cowardly d10** and assemble a total. Describe the ratkin scurrying and limping away. Tell the players they can act to stop their escape by rolling dice and beating the difficulty you just set. Or they can just give in and let the ratkin escape.

## LOOT

If the players decide to ransack the ratkin nests (rude!), they may find the remains of an adventurer or two who was not as lucky as they were. Ask each player what they're hoping to find on the bodies. Each player gains a d6 asset for that thing. The Fighter might find a **Battered Shield d6**, the Wizard might find a **Soul Gem d6**, the Bard might find a **Rather Fetching Sash d6**, and so on. Each player can add that asset to their character sheet.

# THE MYSTERY OF THE KOBOLD'S FOOT

## TESTS WITH SCENE DISTINCTIONS

Your delve has been blocked by a sturdy gate with a giant lock. Hearing someone approach from behind you, you hid, and a single kobold came trotting up to the gate. They produced a large iron key and moved to slide it into the lock. It's at that point when one of you made a sound, spooking the kobold. They bolted down the corridor and ducked through a side door. But a moment later, there was a terrified yelp from within. When you followed through the door, all you found was a deadend room full of furniture and, in the center of the room, the kobold's foot sitting in a pool of blood.

## SCENE DISTINCTIONS

Explain to the players that this encounter starts with the scene distinction **Dismembered Kobold Foot**. Anyone—players and GM—can add the distinction's  to their roll if the Foot is useful to what they're attempting.

## SPOILERS

This encounter is a very short mystery, and the characters will need to solve it to progress. The room is occupied by a mimic: a shapeshifting and very carnivorous monster that can take on the appearance of any inanimate object. The mimic ate (most of) the kobold, along with the key that the characters need.

To get the key, the characters will need to identify and kill the mimic. The mimic knows it's outnumbered, so it's just holding shape, hoping the adventurers will go away.

## PLAYER ROLLS

The players may elect to do a number of different things, most of which can be resolved with a test. No matter what they propose to do, roll    and any stresses the player has that would hinder their effort. Add the highest two results to get the difficulty they must beat.

If the characters win a test to search the room, they'll uncover another scene distinction: **Large Carnivore Spoor**, piled up in the corner of the room.

If the characters win a test to figure out what happened to the kobold (both the **Foot** and the **Spoor** would be useful in such a roll) tell them that it appears a mimic ate them.

If the characters win a test to find the mimic—using the **Foot** because whatever the mimic is pretending to be, there will probably be blood and maybe trouser fabric stuck to it—direct their attention to the carved wardrobe in the corner, with the “drawer” that is lined with fresh blood.

If the characters win a test to attack the wardrobe, they skewer it before it has a chance to flee. Its mouth sags open, revealing a half-chewed kobold corpse with a key on its belt.

## LOOT

In addition to the key, the dead kobold has a few useful items on their person. Players may loot and add to their character sheet the following: **Small Chain Shirt** , **Scale-Soled Boots** , **Dragontooth Dirk** , and a **Pouch of Herbal Remedies** . Who gets what is up to the players.

# DANGEROUS MACHINATIONS

## A SERIES OF TESTS

When the last of you steps into this large, cubical chamber, the stone door slams shut behind you. There are no other doors out of the room, but there is a square hole, five feet on a side, in the center of the ceiling. The room is full of the roar of falling water: a torrent spills from a corner of the room. The gushing water drains out of the room through a five-foot-wide circular hole off to one side. Inscribed on the wall behind the waterfall are the words “Fly Like the Fishes.”

When you stand in the center of the room, a pressure plate releases a giant stone sphere, eight feet wide, which swings across the room on a pair of ropes secured to the ceiling.

## THE STONE SPHERE

Immediately roll **6 6 6** for the difficulty and prompt players to assemble die pools to avoid the stone sphere trap. Those who cannot beat the difficulty gain **Injured** stress: a **6** if they haven't been hurt yet, or stepping up the stress's rating if they have.

Then describe the great stone sphere slowly swinging to a halt, suspended in its rope net. The stone comes to a rest underneath the ceiling hole, but the two ropes that suspend it are anchored where the ceiling meets the wall. This means that clambering up on top of the sphere only gets you halfway to the exit.

## ESCAPING THE STONE ROOM

The encounter can be cleared by three tests, which have to occur in order:

1. Loose the stone sphere from the rope netting.
2. Push the stone sphere into the circular drain, flooding the room.
3. As the room fills with water, swim up to the exit in the ceiling.

For the first two tests, roll **6 6 6** for the difficulty and invite any player to assemble and roll a die pool for a plausible approach to that end. The Ranger might shoot the rope, the Wizard might burn through it with a gout of flame, the Rogue might get tossed up to scale the netting and cut through the rope. The method is not terribly important; this can be a fun opportunity for player inventiveness.

For the last test, roll **8 8 8** and invite all players to roll to avoid drowning as the room fills up. Those who beat the difficulty can swim up to the ceiling door uneventfully; those who fail pick up **Exhausted** **8** stress before making it out.

In the chamber above, they find a large lever and a rope ladder. The lever drains the flooded room and unlocks the door, and the rope ladder can allow them to backtrack to encounters they've already visited, if necessary.

## DOWN THE DRAIN

It's possible that characters may attempt to escape the room through the drain. Warn them that the torrent of water is fierce and there is no sign that there is any air down the drain, but let them try if they insist.

Roll  for the difficulty and inflict the stress **Exhausted**  if they fail.

Succeed or fail, describe them tumbling through a long, twisting tube of rushing water only to come bursting out of the ceiling of the room at the top of the waterfall, landing in a heap next to the drain.

## A QUICK NOTE ON PEDAGOGY

This encounter's relatively trivial puzzle demonstrates the importance of each roll's context. The players cannot roll to swim up to the exit until the room is flooded. They cannot plug the drain with the stone sphere until it's cut loose.

This general principle applies to every roll in Cortex: *it doesn't matter what dice you've got if what you're trying to do is impossible.*

It's also possible that the players cobble together some other plausible way of gaining the exit. If you can, split the attempt into two or three stages to demonstrate the importance of context. Ask: "What do you have to do first before you can attempt to escape that way?"

It's also worthwhile to note that that last roll to swim up and out is not about whether each hero escapes. Everybody escapes. The test is rolled to see if they do so *without consequences*. One character left behind could be an interesting wrinkle, but for the purposes of this adventure, it's best to keep the action moving forward into the next encounter.

# DUELLING THE STONE

## A CONTEST

The next chamber you enter is quite strange: it is ten feet wide and thirty feet long and the middle of it plunges into a pit the bottom of which is beyond your sight. A single stone arch, a mere handspan wide, connects the landing on your side to a matching landing on the other. A roughly humanoid figure made of stone paces across the apex of the arch, but when you enter it turns to face you and shouts, “Who dares challenge me to win passage over my bridge?”

This encounter uses entirely transparent narrative constraints to force a one-on-one duel with an opponent. Instead of a test or series of tests, this encounter uses a **contest**, which sort of piles tests on top of each other to create a back-and-forth action sequence. Instead of a single difficulty, the number to beat gets higher and higher until one side fails to beat it.

## STARTING THE CONTEST

Ask the players who will step out onto the arch and challenge the figure. When you have a volunteer, describe the **Stone Guardian** reforming to create a rocky, mirror image of the challenger, who then waits for them to make the first move. Ask the player what they are doing to get across the chasm.

Whatever their tactic, the player can then put together a die pool to represent that attempt, roll it, and add together two die results for their total and set aside an effect die. (In a contest, the player may go first.)

## THE GUARDIAN RESPONDS

Describe the Guardian reacting to the challenger’s attempt to cross and trying to push the challenger backwards, off the arch. If the challenger attacks, the Guardian blocks the blow and retaliates, slamming the challenger back. If the challenger tries to evade the Guardian, it attempts a grapple and throw. If the challenger casts spells, the Guardian does, too. If the challenger tries to reason with the Guardian, the Guardian can argue right back at them.

Whatever the tactic employed, roll **d8d8d8d8**. If any of the challenger’s stresses seem applicable, roll the highest one in as well. Add the two highest results together for your total and set aside an effect die.

If the Guardian’s total is higher, describe how its response seems to be effective, but don’t describe the Guardian winning—not yet. Proceed to **THE CHALLENGER RESPONDS**.

If the Guardian’s total is lower or equal, describe how their response doesn’t work, and they come away hindered: either they’re struck, plainly confused, or stunned into inaction. However, do not describe the challenger getting across. Ask for the player’s effect die and explain that the Guardian has taken stress at that die rating. Ask the player if they feel they have injured, exhausted, or demoralized the Guardian, and inflict stress accordingly. If the Guardian already has stress of a higher die rating, step up that stress’s die rating. Jump down to **ANOTHER CONTEST**, below.

## STONE GUARDIAN

*Anything you can do,  
I can do better!*

**DIE POOL:**

**UNYIELDING ADVERSARY**



## THE CHALLENGER RESPONDS

Here's where it gets interesting. Ask the challenger what they're doing now to respond to the Guardian's latest action. They can give in or they can press on.

If the player gives in, they concede defeat. They get to narrate how their character is pushed back off the arch and are returned to square one. They do not take any stress.

If the player presses on, they roll dice and risk stress. Ask them to describe how they press on. Make sure they not only say what they're doing in response to the Guardian's action but also ask them what they are doing to still fulfill their goal of getting across the arch.

Ask the challenger to put together a die pool for their next action. They'll add two die results together for their total and set aside an effect die. Their goal is to beat the Guardian's latest total.

If the player rolls higher than the Guardian's total, describe the challenger's latest action looking promising, but don't describe the challenger getting all the way across—not yet. Follow the instructions in **THE GUARDIAN RESPONDS**, using the challenger's new total as the number for the Guardian to beat.

If the player rolls lower than or equal to the Guardian's total, describe the Guardian pushing (or throwing, or intimidating) the challenger backwards but not all the way off the arch. The challenger gains stress equal to the Guardian's effect die. They might be **Injured, Exhausted, or Demoralized**, depending on what happened during the contest. If more than one might apply, the GM chooses which stress they take—generally the one that has the lowest die rating.

This bears repeating: if the player rolls low, their character takes stress, but does not get pushed off the arch. The contest is over, but the challenger is still on the arch. Proceed to **ANOTHER CONTEST**.

## SIDEBAR: HELPING OUT

Cortex has a number of different rules for different ways that player characters can help each other out. Because this is a learning experience, those rules are not yet available to the players, and will be introduced later.

## ANOTHER CONTEST

If a contest ends with one side trying and failing to beat the current difficulty, the contest is over but nobody gets what they wanted. In this case, both the Guardian and the challenger are still on the arch. The challenger hasn't got across and the Guardian hasn't pushed them back off.

The primary result of such a contest is that the losing side of the contest gains stress.

If either the Guardian or the challenger steps up a stress past 12, jump down to **TAKEN OUT** immediately.

However, if nobody is taken out, either one side needs to stand down or somebody starts a new contest. In this encounter, the Guardian will never stand down. The challenger must redouble their efforts in a new contest or step back to let a different character give it a try. If the challenger gave in, they cannot immediately start a new contest: another hero will need to make an attempt.

If any challenger—new or old—starts a new contest, they reset the difficulty to their new total, and we go back and forth again, difficulty rising with each exchange, until the challenger gives in or somebody fails to beat the difficulty. See **STARTING THE CONTEST**, above.

## TAKEN OUT

When stress is stepped up past 12, that character is taken out of the scene. Whether or not they physically leave the scene, they cannot roll dice or take decisive action. They're out.

If the Guardian is taken out, it might be smashed to rubble, knocked off the arch, or convinced that the player characters should be allowed to pass over the arch unmolested. Describe something appropriate, and make it juicy to celebrate the player's victory.

If the challenger is taken out, describe the Guardian pushing, smashing, or throwing them back across the arch to the landing where the player characters entered. The challenger may not start another contest for now; they're beat. The characters might backtrack to the **Torture Chamber** (or explore a different corridor and conveniently find it) to recover their stresses before trying to get past the Guardian again.

## GANGING UP

The players might attempt to send one hero onto the bridge while the others attack at range or similar tactics to avoid the one-on-one duel. This is perfectly reasonable and also short-circuits what the encounter is trying to teach!

Any actions taken by players who are not the hero on the bridge closest to the Guardian will automatically fail. Shots ricochet off its rocky skin; passionate entreaties are ignored with stony indifference.

If the players persist, the Guardian shouts, "Only the chosen champion may challenge me! You'll get your chance when this one fails." Then explain that there are rules for cooperative action that have not yet been introduced. The purpose of the present encounter is to play a contest in isolation so everyone understands it later when additional rules are added in.

## MORE GUARDIANS

It's possible, even probable, that the characters will dispatch the Guardian before everyone gets a chance to face it and practice the contest rules. Depending on time and interest, you can add a series of Guardians to the scene so that everyone can roll in a contest to get across the chasm. Or you can just say that the first Guardian taken out defeats the encounter and the rest may cross freely.

If you choose to feature more Guardian, read the following once the first challenger makes it across:

Suddenly, the chamber's ceiling rumbles and grinds. Looking up, what you might have originally took to be stalactites all across the ceiling are quite clearly hanging feet. One pair of feet twitches, raining down gravel and dust, and then the feet slide downward, revealing legs and a body, arms and a head. Another Guardian drops out of the ceiling, lands neatly on the arch, and shouts, "Who dares challenge me to win passage over my bridge?"

If you really want to get campy, read this in its entirety after each challenger gets across.

## SIDEBAR: GUARDIAN GIVES IN

Technically, there is one missing step to this contest example, and that's the option for the Guardian to give in and accept defeat. For teaching purposes, this adventure skips that step, but GMs may choose to employ it, especially if the difficulty rises to 16 or more (which the Guardian usually can't beat) or if the scene is dragging.

# STRESS FOR LUCKY PLAYERS

## A PEDAGOGICALLY NECESSARY DEPARTURE FROM THE RULES

If the players somehow beat all the above encounters without ever taking stress, explain that, in order to demonstrate how to get rid of stresses, you are giving them each stress to remove. Normally this only happens when you fail a roll or roll a bunch of 1s, but today is their lucky day: they get one for free.

The easiest and most plausible stress to add is **Exhausted**. For the sake of the story, you might say that they are only now noticing that all their strenuous efforts throughout the dungeon thus far have taken their toll, and their fatigue is beginning to drag on them. They then gain **Exhausted** 6.

# A RESPITE IN THE TORTURE CHAMBER

## RECOVERY ROLLS

As the corridor you are in slowly descends, you feel enveloped by a rising sense of dread. The ambient sounds of the dungeon around you grow quiet and still, and soon you discover why: you have found a moldering torture chamber, still reeking of death and suffering. The dungeon inhabitants seem to avoid the creepy place, and you quickly discover a cabinet still full of bandages and even a few salves and unguents. Apparently whoever used this place needed to keep their subjects healthy enough to continue torturing them. Still, it means that you have found a place where you can take refuge and even recover some wounds.

This room has the scene distinction **Torturer's Medicine Cabinet**.

This encounter is an opportunity for players to recover their stresses, either reducing their impact or eliminating them entirely. Any character can attempt to recover any other character's stresses (or even recover their own), although some characters like the Cleric will be more adept in the endeavor.

## SET THE DIFFICULTY

Whenever a player elects to recover stress, the GM will roll   and the stress's die rating. Add together two of the die results (not necessarily the highest, if you are feeling generous) and set aside the third die as the effect die.

## PLAYER ROLLS

Players put together a die pool as normal, and may include the scene distinction **Torturer's Medicine Cabinet** for an additional .

If the player rolls any 1s, describe how the dillapitated furniture in the room collapses under them or what they thought was untouched medicine has in fact gone a little rancid. None of this will change the outcome of their roll, but will add a little color.

If the player rolls higher than the difficulty, the stress is recovered, in whole or in part. If the player's effect die is smaller than the stress, the stress is stepped down. If the player's effect die is larger than the stress, the stress is eliminated from their sheet entirely.

If the player roll does not beat the difficulty, the stress stays on the character sheet, untouched.

Players can attempt to recover each stress once per visit to the torture chamber. If they want to try again, they'll need to go confront another encounter and then return to the torture chamber.

# THE DUNGEON'S DRAGON

## A BIG CLIMACTIC FIGHT USING A CONTEST, TESTS, AND SCENE DISTINCTIONS

At the top of a series of low steps, the passage opens up into a mammoth natural cavern. Daylight streams in from a fissure in the ceiling, but the sun's rays are split up by thick iron bars. The opening to the outside world is blocked by a huge gate at least a hundred yards above the cavern floor. A complicated series of gears and pulleys connects the gate to winches and levers on the ground. The rest of the interior space is filled with kobolds, all swarming in and around some great shape in the center. Suddenly, there is a terrifying roar and a gout of flame blooms upwards. The kobolds shriek and scatter, revealing the object of their attention: a scarlet-scaled dragon the size of a house.

You observe from behind some stone outcroppings as the kobolds tentatively return to the dragon's side, bringing it food and polishing its scales. The dragon does not take kindly to their doting, however, and any kobolds who linger too near its talons or maw gets swiped or snapped at. When the dragon moves, the chamber fills with the sound of clattering chains: each leg is shackled to the back wall.

It is on that back wall that you see the goal of your adventure: a staircase, cut directly into the rock, and zig-zagging up the chamber wall and into the murk of the ceiling high above. This must be the entrance to Tour Toriel. You'll just have to get past this dragon and a small army of kobolds.

This is a relatively complex action sequence with a handful of moving parts. The players' goal is to get up the staircase, but the kobolds and dragonling stand in the way. The kobolds can be circumvented or beaten down, the dragon can be slain or freed, and these tactics can be mixed or matched in any combination. Whatever the player characters' course of action, it will be difficult and dangerous.

The **Kobold Attendants** are represented as a mob, which you've seen before with the **Mischief of Ratkin**. The **Dragonling** is represented as a boss. This works almost identically to a mob, except it represents a single entity instead of a group. There are also a handful of scene distinctions that anyone—player characters, dragon, and kobolds alike—can use.



### SCENE DISTINCTIONS

- **NOOKS AND CRANNIES** 8
- **EXPOSED STAIRCASE** 8
- **GEAR ASSEMBLY** 8

## WEAVING THREADS

This encounter has a lot of things to do and most parties will immediately split up to do multiple things at once. While there are many complicated ways to decide who goes when, for the purposes of this encounter, it's simplest to just go around the table. Each player gets a 'go' and then the GM gets a go for the **Kobold Attendants** and a go for the **Dragonling**.

On a player's go, they may pursue whichever course of action they're interested in. Often, this will fall into one of the options outlined below, and you'll do a test or one step of a contest. Players being as they are, they may come up with alternatives not covered below. In most cases, resolve this with a simple test using the **Kobold Attendants** or the **Dragonling** as opposition. If the player wins, describe their victory in glowing terms.

### SIDEBAR: BEING SNEAKY

Some characters (especially the Rogue) may try to hide or sneak around the unfolding action sequence. That's great! Neither the **Kobold Attendants** nor the **Dragonling** can attack targets they can't see. But they *can* use their roll to find the heroes.

Once a hero has been discovered, they can be attacked. Of course, nothing says they can't roll to hide on their next turn, at which point they can't be attacked again. Good thing the chamber has a bunch of **Nooks and Crannies** that's worth a !

Once all the players have had a go, it is time for the **Kobold Attendants** and the **Dragonling** to act. These are always simple tests. The kobolds' test targets all the player characters; the dragon's test targets one player character (or sometimes none at all). You can find details for each in their entries below.

Once both the kobolds and the dragon have had their go, just go around the table again. Eventually you'll reach a resolution for the encounter: either the characters get up the staircase or everybody is taken out.

If at any point in the encounter a player character's stress steps up past , they are taken out. They are out of the action for the remainder of the scene. Unless you and the rest of your table is enthusiastic about grim outcomes for adventurers, feel free to describe the character's staggering retreat to the relative safety of the corridor outside. If enough player characters are taken out, the players may choose to retreat, recover in the Torture Chamber, and give this final encounter another go. For the sake of the players, the **Mob** and **Boss** traits do not recover to full dice if the players retreat.

## ATTENDING TO THE KOBOLDS

The **Kobold Attendants** is a mob representing the dozens of kobolds attending to and imprisoning the **Dragonling**. Their top priorities are to keep the dragon alive and captured, and secondarily to prevent the player characters from getting up the stairs.

On the kobolds' turn, they will move to discover or attack the player characters. This is a test which each player must beat or suffer consequences. To set the difficulty, roll the **Kobold Attendants' Mob** (6 6 6 6 6 6) and **Teamwork** (8) dice and add the highest two dice for your total. Each player who beats that total remains hidden or defends themselves from the kobolds' attack. Any player who fails to beat that total is discovered or either gains stress equal to your effect die or steps up an existing stress.

On their turn, the players might attack the kobolds or distract them.

Players may take the direct route and lay into the kobolds with melee combat. The chamber is big enough to engage with the kobolds while staying out of range of the dragon's talons and flame. To set the difficulty, roll the **Kobold Attendants' Mob**, **Teamwork**, and **Scales**; add the two highest dice to get the total. If the player beats that difficulty, they inflict stress. If the stress is higher than 6, eliminate the stress and remove a die from the **Mob** trait. If the player fails to beat the difficulty, they gain or step up stress.

Players may attempt to distract the kobolds to allow the other player characters to act unhindered. Simply attacking some kobolds does not necessarily distract all the kobolds. Getting all their attention is a test; roll the **Kobold Attendants' Mob** and **Teamwork** and add the two highest die results for the difficulty. If the player beats the difficulty, the **Kobold Attendants** cannot assist the



## KOBOLD ATTENDANTS

*Defending this last bastion till their last breath.*

### MOB TRAIT:

DRAGON CULT

8 TEAMWORK

8 SCALES

10 TRAPCRAFTERS

**Dragonling** or oppose any other actions until they act again. If the player fails to beat the difficulty, the kobolds continue getting into absolutely everything.

Whether the players are attacking or distracting the kobolds, when any of their dice roll a 1, describe something that goes just slightly awry. That may be a stumble or a less-than-courageous yelp. If the player character is trying to stay away from the **Dragonling**, it may mean stumbling into its reach.

If the **Kobold Attendants' Mob** is reduced to zero dice, read the following aloud:

As the last kobold falls, they reach forward and grab your collar. They pull you close and sputter: "The dragon's not here to keep you out of the spire... it's to keep them in!" Before they can say any more, they loose a death rattle and expire.

## TANGLING WITH THE DRAGONLING

The **Dragonling** is a boss even if it's just a baby. Too young to be rational, the little rascal is simply hungry and angry at its imprisonment. It will happily attempt to eat anyone who comes within reach, and isn't opposed to roasting anyone in range but out of reach, if only to express their displeasure.

The **Dragonling** has a special stress called **Chained Down**. This works like normal stress, and can be rolled into the players' die pools whenever the Dragonling being shackled makes things a little easier for them. It can also be recovered to reduce or eliminate it, although the kobolds won't and the **Dragonling** can't.

On the dragonling's turn, it will attack anyone within its grasp. Players who are careful to stay away from the dragon are usually safe, but rolling 1s might mean stumbling into range. If no player character is in range on the **Dragonling's** turn, describe a kobold getting a little too close and getting mauled or eaten. (This does not affect the **Kobold Attendants' Mob** trait).

When the dragon attacks, pick a single player character to target with a test. Roll the **Dragonling's Boss, Flame Breath, and Baby Talons**, and add the highest two results to get your total. The targeted player puts together a die pool as normal, and may make use of the dragon's **Chained Down** stress, as well. If the targeted character beats the difficulty, they adequately defend themselves or escape. If they fail to beat the difficulty, they gain or step up Injured.

The players may get caught up in the adventuring spirit and attempt to slay the dragon. Attacking the dragon is a test. Roll the **Dragonling's Boss, Baby Talons, and Scales**, and add the highest two results to get your total. The attacking player may make use

of the **Chained Down** stress (or possibly another if the **Dragonling** has taken any hits). If the attacking character beats the difficulty, the **Dragonling** takes stress. If that stress is higher than d8, eliminate the stress and remove a die from its **Boss** trait. When the last die is removed from the **Boss** trait, the **Dragonling** is taken out of the fight and cowers in a corner.

Alternately, the players might choose to free the dragon. This is a recovery test: they are trying to reduce and eventually eliminate the **Dragonling's Chained Down** stress. The kobolds serve as the primary opposition for this roll (but the confused dragonling can be used in a pinch). Roll the **Kobold Attendants' Mob** and **Teamwork**, plus **Chained Down**, and add the highest two die results to get your total. If the player beats the difficulty, compare their effect die to **Chained Down's** current rating. If the stress's die is larger, step it down: the chains are loosened, or perhaps one leg is freed. If the effect die is larger, eliminate the stress entirely. The dragon is now free.

Of course, freeing the dragonling before the ceiling gate is open will not pacify the beast. It's still angry and hungry and too young to reason with... and now it's not chained down.

Lastly, the players might need to distract the dragon. This is as easy as getting close enough for the beast to eat you. The test is whether you can do so and escape unscathed. Roll the **Dragonling's Boss, Fire Breath, and Baby Talons**, plus any applicable stresses the player character may have, and add the highest two die results to get your total. If the dragon is still **chained down**, the distracting player may add that stress to their die pool. If the player beats the difficulty, they distract the dragon without getting injured. If they fail to beat the difficulty, the dragon is still distracted—its attention is consumed by mauling the player character, who gains or steps up stress.

## OPENING THE CEILING GATE

Opening the gate in the ceiling requires winning a contest. The winch does not require brute strength—it can be operated by diminutive kobolds, after all—but there are a complicated series of counterweights that must be thrown in the correct sequence to get the thing to work. The kobolds will obviously not take kindly to the player characters freeing their dragon, and will oppose any attempt to do so. The gear assembly is also within reach of the dragon, so this is a dangerous tactic.

The player begins the contest by composing a die pool and rolling it. The **Gear Assembly** scene distinction is entirely appropriate, here. The player adds their highest two die results to get their total and initiate the contest.

The opposition for the contest comes from the **kobold attendants** or the **dragonling**. Roll this opposition immediately after the player character rolls, on the player's 'go' as you progress around the table. Always leave the player in anticipation on whether (and how) they'll overcome the total you just laid down. (This also gives them time to consider if a different tactic will give them a better die pool.)

Usually, the opposition is provided by the **Kobold Attendants**. As long as the **Dragonling** is still chained down, the kobolds will give in if the total gets higher than 15 or so: they have other priorities. If the **Dragonling** is free, the kobolds will oppose

until they're down to one die in their **Mob** trait or taken out entirely. When the kobolds oppose, roll their **Mob**, and **Teamwork**, the scene distinction **Nooks and Crannies** (they pop out of nowhere!), plus any relevant stresses of the player character. Add together the highest two results to get your total.

If the kobolds are distracted or defeated, the contest can be opposed by the dragon, but the big baby monster is poorly suited to interfering. Mostly it will try to pluck the character out from between the gears and levers, but that may be interference enough. If the total is higher than 12, or if there's an easier target for the dragon to try to eat, the dragon will give in instead of roll. When the **Dragonling** opposes the contest, roll its **Mob** and **Baby Talons**, plus any stresses the player character has. Add together the highest two results to get your total.

Remember: the contest is only won when the opposition gives in. If one side rolls and fails to beat the current total, the contest ends and they take stress equal to their opposition's effect die.

If either the **Kobold Attendants** or **Dragonling** give in, the gear assembly is engaged and the ceiling grate yawns open. If the dragon has already been freed, or as soon as it is freed, it immediately bolts for the exit and freedom beyond. As soon as the dragonling escapes, the kobolds will turn and flee.

### DRAGONLING

*It's scared and confused and misses its mommy, but most of all, it's hungry.*

#### BOSS TRAIT

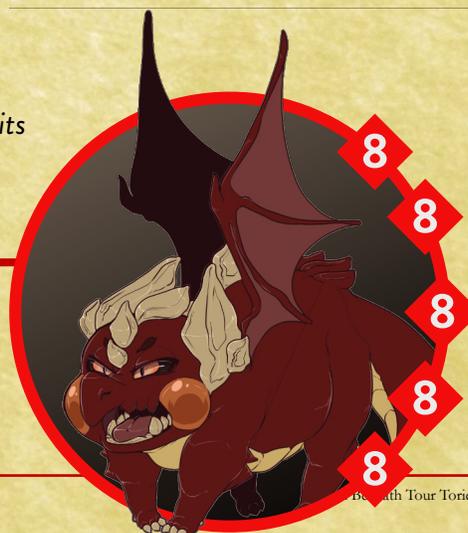
IMMATURE TITAN

10 FLAME BREATH

6 BABY TALONS

8 SCALES

10 CHAINED DOWN (STRESS)



## MAKING A RUN FOR IT

Players might attempt to sneak past the **Dragonling** and **Kobold Attendants** or even simply rush the stairs. First, remind the players that the staircase is exposed and the **Dragonling** breathes fire. The **Dragonling** is chained at the base of the stairs so the fact that it's **Chained Down** won't hamper its ability to barbecue them. Additionally, they can see some tripwires and deadfalls on the stairs, and there's probably others that they can't see. That path features loads of dangers and bull rushing them all at once is essentially suicidal.

If the players persist, here's your absolutely bonkers die pool: the **Dragonling's Boss**      and its **Flame Breath** , the **Exposed Staircase** , and then the **Kobold Attendants** can gang up to assist the **Dragonling** with       (their **Mob** trait) and their **Trapcrafters** .

That's a total of              , which will reliably hit 16 without even trying and be almost guaranteed to deal big effect dice.

Gaining the top of the staircase requires each player winning a contest against that monstrous die pool. The **Dragonling** and **Kobold Attendants** are not going to give in under any circumstances—the kobolds are cultishly devoted to their cause and the **Dragonling** is starving to the point of desperation—so that means each player running through multiple contests, each one ending in stresses until those stresses are stepped past .

To put it in simple numbers: can *each* of the players put together die pools that beat 16 about five times in a row?

## ADJUSTMENTS

This encounter is geared for a party of six player characters. If you are playing with fewer characters, this may be difficult to impossible to win. For each 'missing' character, reduce the **Kobold Attendants' Mob** trait by one die. For every two missing characters, reduce the **Dragonling's Boss** trait by one die.

## LOOT

Kobolds who fall in battle may be looted for gear. They have an assortment of small, crude hand weapons, armor sized for small people, and a few minor magic tools. After the encounter is over, ask each player what they want to find given those constraints and give them each one  asset to represent that thing.

## A NOTE ON PEDAGOGY

While this multi-page description of the encounter may seem complex, it's only this long because so many of the possibilities are written out in exhaustive detail. At root, this encounter really boils down to: a mob, a boss, and a few scene distinctions. If anything, it's a reminder that not every encounter needs to end with whittling die pools down to zero, and that the agenda of antagonists are rarely in perfect alignment.

## THE STAIRS UP TO THE BATTLEMENTS

Once the player characters gain safe access to the stairs, read the following:

You ascend the rough-hewn stairs chiseled into the rock wall of the cave, back and forth, back and forth, up past and through the ceiling. Darkness closes around you. When it becomes necessary to light a torch, the walls remain dark, and you discover that they are covered in soot and burn marks. The crude steps give way to quarried stone set together with masonic precision.

And then finally, at the top of the steps, you reach the remains of a door, burned off its hinges. Beyond it, the moonlight filters into a dilapidated stonework room. More scorch marks decorate the walls, and the half-burned husks of furniture line the walls. Something terrible happened here, and as you take in the scene, you can hear a distant wail rise up from the howling wind. Whatever happened, something still lurks here.

And we'll find out what it is in the next level of the Ascent to Prime: the Battlements.

# RULES SUMMARY FOR THE DUNGEON

All the rules in use in Level One are detailed below for ease of reference. In most cases, the rules you'll be using in each encounter are written out in that encounter.

## ASSEMBLING DICE POOLS

The primary goal of the Dungeon level is to teach the basics of Cortex die rolling and how they work in the larger structures of Cortex Prime. Whenever the player characters are doing something risky or interesting, they'll put together a die pool and roll it.

Assembling a die pool is, in the simplest terms, picking one trait from each category on your character sheet and adding that trait's die rating to your die pool. That means you get one attribute die, one distinction die, one skill die, and so on. The only exception here is assets, for which you can use as many as apply.

If a character is cleverly sneaking around their hometown, they might grab the dice for the Mental attribute, their Sneak skill, and their third distinction, which is about where they come from. If they have an asset for, say, **Soft Soled Shoes**, they might add that to their die pool, as well.

## SCENE DISTINCTIONS

Players will be getting a lot of use out of the traits on their character sheets, but there are other sources of dice, as well. One of these is scene distinctions, which are introduced halfway through the level. These distinctions describe elements of a scene and can be used by any character in that scene. Scene distinctions can range from the prosaic—**Candlelit Feast and Revellers**—to the exceptional—**The Floor Is Collapsing Into Lava**. Whatever the distinction describes, if you incorporate how that element assists your action, you get a bonus die.

Scene distinctions do not replace the character distinction; it's just another trait that can be used alongside the character distinction and everything else.

Scene Distinctions appear in **THE MYSTERY OF THE KOBOLD'S FOOT**, **A RESPITE IN THE TORTURE CHAMBER**, and **THE DUNGEON'S DRAGON**.

## STRESSES

The other trait that players occasionally get to leverage is stress: not theirs, but their opponent's. Stresses describe hindrances like Exhausted **6** or Injured **8**. If something is going wrong with whoever is opposing you, you can incorporate their handicaps into your efforts. This also gets you a bonus die, to the tune of the stress's die rating.

The Game Moderator will be rolling the player characters' stresses, too, and probably more often than the other players will be rolling the GMC's. They may enjoy a little vindictive glee when they finally get to turn the tables.

There are two GMCs in this level that will have stresses that the players can roll: the **Mischief of Ratkin**, the **Stone Guardian**, the **Kobold Attendants**, and the **Dragonling**.

## ROLLING DICE POOLS & ASSIGNING DICE

Once you have a die pool, roll the whole thing. Then you'll pull out a few of those dice to determine the outcome of your character's actions. There are three things dice might be assigned to: hitches, a total, and an effect die.

First, remove all the dice that rolled 1s. These are hitches, and they represent things going just a little bit sideways. In later levels, hitches can be activated for some other mechanics, but for now they'll just prompt you for some fun extra details.

Next, take two dice and add their results together to get your total. Your total measures how well your character has performed. A high result means they've done very well; a low result might mean that they fail at whatever they're attempting. Usually you'll add together your highest two dice to get your highest possible total, but you don't necessarily have to. If you only have one die remaining after removing 1s, its result is your total.

Lastly, you'll assign one of the remaining dice as your effect die. For this, it's the size of the die, not the result that it rolled, that matters. The effect die measures the magnitude of your character's action. A large effect die will have a big impact; a small effect die will have a small impact. If you don't have any dice left, your effect die is a **4**.

Once you have your total and your effect die (and possibly hitches), you can use them in a test or a contest.

## TESTS

A test is a quick comparison between two rolls. This might determine which character gets to the big red button first, if one character can scale a wall without another character spotting them, two characters in a fistfight, or a character binding up the wounds of a patient.

One side of a test is almost always a player character. The other side of the test might be a Game Moderator Character or a more abstract difficulty pool. This adventure explicitly lays out what the GM will roll each time.

The GM rolls first in a test; their total is the difficulty of the test. The other players then roll and compare their total to the difficulty. If the player beats the total, their character succeeds at what they were doing. If they do not beat the total, their character fails.

The losing side of the test might suffer consequences for their failure in the form of stresses—see *Inflicting Stress*, below.

Some GMCs don't take stress, but have a die pool that is reduced when they lose tests.

Tests are the versatile workhorse of *Cortex*, and you can do a whole lot with them. There are also some fun wrinkles you can throw in.

You can split up a big conflict into a bunch of tests for each step, or you can do the whole thing as a single test. This level gives explicit instructions about which method to use when. Outside of this sort of scripted adventure, the Game Moderator picks whichever approach fits the mood and pacing of the game.

You can include multiple player characters in a single test, when the story requires more than one character to respond to what's happening, whether that be a rockslide, an attack by giant feral hamsters, or a heartfelt appeal for help. The GM rolls once and all the other players try to beat the GM's total.

Most of the die rolls in the *Dungeon* are tests.

## CONTESTS

Contests are a way of focusing attention on an extended sequence of actions between two characters. A contest bounces die rolls back and forth between these two characters, chasing an ever-escalating difficulty.

A contest may be initiated by either the GM or the other players. Their initial total becomes the starting difficulty. They describe what they're doing, and what outcome they're aiming for. Then it's time for the other side's turn.

When it's your turn, you first decide if you're going to give in or press on. If you give in, you do not roll dice. You describe how the other side gets what they wanted. Or you can risk things and pick up dice to oppose them. You make a roll as normal and try to beat the difficulty.

If you beat the difficulty, describe what you're doing to stop them and what outcome you're aiming for. Your total becomes the new difficulty. Now they have to decide whether to give in or roll dice.

If you choose to roll dice but don't beat the difficulty, your opponent will inflict stress on your character. However, you failing the roll does not mean they get the outcome they were aiming for. Failure here only means that you've been hurt (or otherwise suffered a consequence) while stopping them. If either of you still want to press on, you start another contest. Eventually somebody will give in—or be taken out.

The Dungeon only uses two contests, in the **DUELLING THE STONE** and **THE DUNGEON'S DRAGON** encounters.

## INFLECTING STRESS

Both tests and contests can result in inflicting stress on a character. There are three stresses in the Dungeon: Injured, Exhausted, and Demoralized. Stress is measured in die ratings: the larger the die rating, the more stressed the character is operating under. Player characters start off with no die rating in any stress, but that won't remain the case for long.

When a character fails to beat the difficulty in a test or contest where failure might result in lasting consequences, they take stress. Pick the stress that is most appropriate for the circumstances. Take Injured stress when you fail in a fight (or in trying to avoid a fight). Take Exhausted stress when you are performing a taxing physical task, like swimming against a strong current. Take Demoralized stress when your failure casts doubt on your chances in the Dungeon. These circumstances are not mutually exclusive, and if more than one fits the situation, the player inflicting the stress chooses which one gets used.

When a character takes stress the first time, the new stress's rating is equal to the effect die of the roll they failed to beat. If you roll a 14 with a **8** effect and your opponent fails to beat the 14, you inflict a **8** stress.

However, if the character already has a similar stress, that stress gets stepped up. If the effect die is higher than the existing stress, step up the stress to match the effect die. If the stress is already bigger than the effect die, step it up once: **6** to **8**, **8** to **10**, **10** to **12**.

If a character's stress is stepped up past **12**, they are taken out of the action until they recover.

## TAKEN OUT

When a character's stress steps past 12, they are taken out. A character who is taken out cannot participate in tests or contests. They cannot take any decisive action, and any action they might want to take can be stopped by any character who is not taken out.

Taken out often means knocked unconscious, but it can be spun in other directions, too. It may remove the character from the scene physically—whether by them fleeing or by them being bodily thrown out of the action. A character who is taken out may have been captured, might be bound up in physical restraints, or even stunned into inaction by threats to their loved ones.

The Dungeon is designed for “soft” taken out results. When player characters are taken out, they retreat to the safety of the corridor (or, maybe bodily thrown there). If everyone is taken out (or even just enough heroes are taken out that everyone else retreats, too), the party can recover and return to the encounter for another try.

When a character comes back from being Taken Out, their stress is reduced to 12. They're on the edge of getting taken out again, and should tread lightly until they can recover that stress.

### SIDEBAR: BUT HOW DO I KILL PCS?

Death generally only happens in Cortex Prime with the player's buy in. This can be surprisingly powerful, especially at the ends of narrative arcs or in grand sacrifices. A contest might end with a player giving in to death, for instance. Or a player might do something that is plainly suicidal and roll to see if that sacrifice buys the rest of the PCs the time they need.

## MOBS AND BOSSES

Some GMCs have a **Mob** or **Boss** trait which is rated in multiple dice. This represents their rough power level, and can be reduced by player actions.

Whenever a stress is stepped up past the die size of the **Mob** or **Boss** trait, **Mob** or **Boss** is reduced by one die and the stress is removed.

A **Mob** or **Boss** is only taken out when its **Mob** or **Boss** trait is reduced to zero dice. Most will attempt to flee when they reach one or two dice, however.

## REST AND STRESS

If the heroes find an opportunity to rest, their various stresses may fade a bit. Any scene that does not feature significant action or drama affords them the opportunity to step down each of their stress traits one step.

The GM may frame a scene explicitly as a restful period, in which case the players may step down their stresses at any point in the scene.

If an entire scene passes without significant action or drama, the players might suggest that the scene was restful and reduce their stresses.

Of the encounters in the Dungeon, only **A RESPITE IN THE TORTURE CHAMBER** is specifically restful, although **THE MYSTERY OF THE KOBOLD'S FOOT** may also qualify, depending on how it plays out.

## RECOVERING STRESS

Once a player has a die rating in one or more stresses—and once the GM starts rolling them against their character—they’ll usually be eager to get rid of them. This is simple in terms of rules but is often complicated in terms of the story.

In terms of rules, recovering stress is a simple test. Players can roll to recover their own stress or to recover someone else’s stress. If the player wins the test, they reduce or eliminate the stress. If the player’s effect die is smaller or equal to the stress’s rating, the stress is stepped down. If their effect die is greater than the stress’s rating, the stress is removed entirely.

In terms of the story, however, the player character can only heal up when the circumstances allow it. You can’t just make a recovery roll in the middle of fighting a fire-breathing dragon. You’ll need to find or create a safe, quiet place to work on recovery. Some stresses will require tools and materials to recover: if the stress is **Injured** , you’ll need to find bandages or other medical supplies. Some stresses are best tended to by others, such as getting a pep talk to recover your **Demoralized** . What exactly is necessary is a conversation for the GM and the players to work through at the table, given the specific circumstances of the story.

In the Dungeon, there is a specific, recurring encounter for player characters to recover their stresses, **A RESPITE IN THE TORTURE CHAMBER**. Recovery also features in **THE DUNGEON’S DRAGON** if the player characters attempt to free the **Dragonling**.

## DEAR PLAYTESTERS

Thank you for taking a look at this document and perhaps even giving it a try.

I've got the next four levels of Tour Toriel in the pipeline and hope to release them in the coming months. After that, I hope to develop Keystone as an expansive game in its own right, and invite other creative folk to add their own imaginative spark.

But it starts here, with Level One, so I really want to get this right.

If you give this game a whirl, please tell me how it goes. You can email me at [keystonefeedback@joshroby.com](mailto:keystonefeedback@joshroby.com) or find me on twitter at @joshroby. (Admittedly I'm much better at responding via twitter; my emails are a mess!) Or you can find me on the Cortex Roleplaying Discord at <https://discord.com/invite/EGwwfwS>, where I am still @joshroby.

I do hope you enjoy playing Keystone, and I also hope you'll tell me about your game.

Thanks so much,

—Josh Roby

# CHANGELOG

## VERSION 0.1.1

- Added d8s to distinctions on Archetypes
- For Mobs and Bosses, when a stress is stepped up past the Mob or Boss trait, the Mob or Boss trait is reduced by one die *and the stress is eliminated*. The italicized rule had been omitted.
- New “But I Was Being Careful!” section on page 7
- Dangerous Machinations’ Note on Pedagogy highlights the swim roll as not a test to escape but a test to escape without consequences.
- Duelling the Stone notes that challengers who give in may not immediately initiate a new contest.
- The Stone Guardian is no longer labeled as a Boss
- New section “Ganging Up” added to Duelling the Statue to explain why you shouldn’t and can’t gang up on the statue
- Numerous instances of ‘smaller’ that should have been ‘smaller or equal’ amended
- Stresses section in Rules Summary no longer makes references to complications, which haven’t been introduced yet. Also correctly identifies the four GMCs who may have stresses to roll (two had been omitted).
- New “Mobs and Bosses” section in Rules Summary for the Dungeon

## VERSION 0.1.2

- Starting signature assets are d6 and are now described as such.
- Expanded assets paragraph in character creation to note that characters may be equipped with other things that are not rated assets
- Added “Rest and Stress” to p30
- Noted that PCs coming back from being Taken Out return to play with d12 stress.
- Added the Being Sneaky sidebar to p20