

THE COUNTING

AN ADVENTURE FOR CHARACTERS OF 2ND TO 4TH LEVEL



AVERN
ALES



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THE COUNTING IS A FIFTH EDITION ADVENTURE for three to six characters of 2nd to 4th-level, optimized for a party of four 3rd-level characters. A tribe of goblins known as the Thornpurse has learned the mechanisms of tax collection following the ambush of a collector's wagon, and have decided to assume responsibility themselves. As their ersatz bureaucracy has swelled, disruption to the regional populace and local commerce has grown too impactful to ignore. Can the party venture into their lair and audit the goblins' operation, or will violent intervention prove necessary? This adventure is set in the realm of Cartosia, but can be easily adapted to feature in any campaign setting.

BACKGROUND

The goblins of the Thornpurse, as they insist on being called, were an unremarkable tribe scraping out a meager existence in the hills. They raided often, scavenged as necessary, and spent most of their time and energy feuding with rival goblin bands over irrelevant scraps of territory. Four months ago, a single, fateful ambush on a tax collector's wagon set the tribe on a new course.

The wagon itself yielded little of material value beyond its strongbox of coins, some clothing, and a few crates of supplies. Far more consequential was its ledger; a heavy, leather-bound book swollen with numbers, names, and figures none of the goblins could read but were nevertheless mesmerized by. The tribe's boss, a cunning and self-important goblin named Giegs, studied the ledger for days, tracing his pungent fingers along its lines and muttering to himself. He couldn't decipher the words, but he understood numbers well enough to grasp the underlying concept: someone with authority could demand money from others simply by writing it down. This, Giegs decided, was the secret to civilization.

Under Giegs' direction, the Thornpurse evolved. They stopped calling themselves a tribe and began referring to their assembly as "the Counting," a term they use with bureaucratic solemnity. Giegs established a crude hierarchy of assessors, collectors, and enforcers, each identified by the number of coin pouches they carry on their person—pouches that jingle with a mixture of actual currency, river stones, metal scraps, and anything else that clinks. Giegs mandated daily arithmetic drills for his followers, reasoning that a proper tax authority requires its agents to be numerate. The goblins took to this with enthusiasm, if not aptitude.

The Thornpurse have since fortified a small cave and the adjoining clifftop overlook above the river, establishing what they consider a legitimate toll station along a trade road that winds through the surrounding hills. Patrols of goblin "assessors" intercept travelers and demand payment according to an ever-shifting and internally contradictory tax code that Giegs invented and continues to capriciously

revise. Those who pay are issued receipts in the form of nonsensical scratches on strips of bark or leather and then sent on their way. Those who refuse are detained as "tax evaders" in cells within the caves below.

For months, the Thornpurse targeted only lone travelers and small groups, collecting just enough to avoid drawing serious attention. Recently, however, Giegs' ambitions have outpaced his judgment. The goblins have begun stopping merchant caravans and demanding increasingly exorbitant sums, and the disruption to local commerce has grown impossible to ignore.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

There are several reasons why the party might be compelled to confront the Thornpurse. A few of these reasons are outlined below:

Disrupted Commerce. A merchant guild operating in the region has grown increasingly frustrated by the Thornpurse's interference with trade along the road. A guild representative approaches the party, offering: 200 gp to shut down the goblin operation and reopen the road, with an additional 50 gp if the originally stolen ledger can be recovered.

The Missing Collector. A regional tax collector went missing along the hill road three weeks ago while investigating reports of illegal toll collection. Her superior suspects the goblins are responsible. He hires the party to locate the collector and secure her release, offering 150 gp for her safe return.

Outstanding Debts. A local farmer approaches the party in desperation. They were detained by goblin assessors on the road and forced to surrender the livestock and coin they were carrying as "back taxes." They can't really afford to hire professionals, but they offer the meagre 10 gp they have, as well as a family heirloom worth twice that to the right buyer, and beg the party to recover their property from the lair.

GENERAL FEATURES

The Thornpurse lair occupies a rocky hillside above a river, split across three levels: a clifftop camp overlooking a waterfall, a cave entrance fortified with a wooden palisade, and a network of underground chambers. A trade road passes within sight of the cliff, giving the goblins a commanding view of approaching travelers. Unless otherwise stated, the features of the lair are described as follows:

Ceilings, Walls, and Floors. The clifftop and cave entrance are open to the sky or sheltered by natural rock overhangs. The underground chambers are naturally formed caverns with rough stone walls and uneven floors, but are not considered

difficult terrain. Ceilings in the underground range from 8 to 15 feet in height.

Tents. Canvas tents reinforced with hides and sharpened stakes are positioned both on the clifftop and at the cave entrance. They are crude but functional shelters, each large enough to accommodate two to four goblins. Most contain bedrolls, personal effects, and at least one coin pouch stuffed with a mixture of actual coinage and junk.

Palisade. A wooden palisade of sharpened logs surrounds the southeastern approach to the cave entrance. The palisade is 8 feet tall and can be climbed with a successful DC 20 Strength (Athletics) check.

Waterfall. A river cascades over the western cliff face, creating a waterfall that feeds a pool at its base. The sound of the waterfall imposes disadvantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on hearing within 30 feet of it. A hidden passage behind the waterfall provides an alternate entrance to the cave level.

Light. The clifftop and cave entrance receive natural light during the day. The underground chambers are lit by crude tallow candles and the occasional stolen lantern, providing dim light throughout occupied areas.

LAIR ROUTINE

The Thornpurse number sixteen goblins in total, including their boss, Giegs. All goblins, with the exception of Giegs (see “Giegs’ Chambers”), use **goblin** statistics. The lair also houses three **worgs** in a pit within the underground level.

During the day, the lair is at its most active. Goblins rotate between duties with an energy that borders on industrious, if chaotic. A typical daytime distribution is as follows:

Clifftop (4–5 goblins). Two goblins maintain watch from the overlook, scanning the trade road for approaching travelers. Another two or three occupy the tents and campfire area, resting, eating, or drilling their arithmetic under the supervision of a senior goblin.

Cave Entrance (3–4 goblins). Two goblins guard the palisade gate. One or two more occupy the guard tent or linger near the worg pit access, responsible for feeding the worgs.

Underground (6–7 goblins). Giegs holds court in his chambers for much of the day, attended by one or two subordinates. The remaining goblins are spread between the gathering chamber, the sleeping chamber, and the storage areas, tending to domestic tasks or counting and recounting the tribe's accumulated wealth.

A patrol of three goblin assessors is typically absent from the lair during daylight hours, working the trade road. The patrol returns to the lair at dusk.

At night, the lair quiets. Most goblins retreat underground to sleep in the sleeping chamber and gathering chamber, leaving a skeleton watch above:

Clifftop (2 goblins). Two goblins remain on watch at the overlook, though their attentiveness wanes considerably after midnight.

Cave Entrance (2 goblins). Two goblins guard the palisade gate in shifts, one of whom is frequently dozing.

Underground (11 goblins). The rest of the tribe sleeps underground. Giegs retires to his chambers. The underground is quiet save for the restless growling of the worgs in their pit.

Raising the Alarm. There is no formal alarm system within the lair. If goblins on one level detect intruders, they shout warnings to those nearby, and the sound carries unevenly through the caves. Goblins on the clifftop can alert those at the cave entrance quickly, but sound from the entrance level does not reliably reach the underground chambers. As a general rule, combat or loud disturbances on one level alerts the nearest adjacent level(s) within two rounds. Word of a ruckus raised underground will not reach the overlook, and vice versa, unless a goblin physically moves between them to spread the word. Once an alarm is raised, as applicable, one goblin will move to release the worgs from their pens against their attackers. While goblins on the overlook will remain stationed there to keep watch for any potential second wave of assault, all goblins within the cave network will quickly move to converge on the party's position.

TALKING TO THE THORNPURSE

The Thornpurse are not immediately hostile toward visitors. They view approaching travelers as potential revenue, and their first instinct is to tax rather than attack. A party that approaches the lair openly during the day is challenged by the palisade guards, who demand to know their business.

Presenting a transactional reason for being there, such as paying an outstanding tariff, settling a fine, or retrieving confiscated goods, can earn the party passage through the gate. Fabricating a convincing pretext requires a successful DC 10 Charisma (Deception) check made with advantage. Visitors without an obvious financial reason for their presence are turned away with threats, and those who linger are attacked.

Once inside the cave entrance, the party is directed to an assessor stationed in the gathering chamber (area 5), who serves as the Counting's front-facing clerk. This goblin can process straightforward transactions: accepting payments, issuing receipts, and releasing confiscated goods once the appropriate "fee" has been collected. For many visitors, this is as far as the interaction goes.

Anything beyond routine business, such as releasing a detained prisoner, disputing a tax assessment, negotiating a broader arrangement, or requesting an audience with the boss, exceeds what the assessor is willing to authorize alone. A successful DC 12 Charisma (Persuasion or Deception) check convinces the assessor to send word to Giegs below, who agrees to receive the party in his chambers. Two goblins escort them through the lair.

If the party's intentions become hostile or their deception is uncovered, the goblins do not hesitate to attack. Any Charisma checks made to de-escalate after trust has been broken are made with disadvantage.

The following areas are keyed to the provided map of the Thornpurse's lair:

I. OVERLOOK

Three canvas tents bristling with sharpened stakes ring a stone-lined campfire on this grassy cliff. Bones and scraps of hides litter the ground around the fire pit. To the northeast, a natural shaft descends into the rock, fitted with a wooden ladder. The sound of the waterfall is constant.

The overlook serves as the Thornpurse's first line of surveillance, offering clear sightlines along the nearby trade road in both directions. The shaft to the east descends 20 feet to the cave entrance level, connecting to area 4.

Encounter: Goblins. At least two **goblins** are posted here at all times, watching the road. They are vigilant during daylight hours but grow inattentive after dark, imposing disadvantage on their Perception checks after midnight. If they spot approaching travelers, one goblin descends the shaft to alert the cave entrance while the other remains to observe. If the overlook is attacked, the goblins shout to alert any others on the cliff. They do not fight to the death.

2. PALISADE ENTRANCE

A crude palisade of sharpened logs forms a perimeter around the mouth of a cave set into the hillside. A single

tent sits within the perimeter to provide a comfortable vantage point over the entrance, which is flanked by two stone braziers. To the west, the mouth of a wide pit has been latticed with heavy timber planks. A low growling rises from below.

The palisade gate is the Thornpurse's front door and the point at which most visitors are challenged (see "Talking to the Thornpurse"). The pit drops 15 feet to the worg pen (area 13) on the underground level. It is fitted with an unlocked trapdoor that can be lifted by a single creature.

Encounter: Gate Guards. At least two **goblins** are posted here at all times. If the alarm is raised and there are hostile party members nearby, one goblin moves to lift the trapdoor and release the worgs from the pit, who scramble up a rough earthen ramp to the surface.

Treasure: Confiscated Goods. Sitting at the mouth of the cave is a wagon loaded with confiscated goods awaiting sorting. Most of the goods are low-value and include worthless personal effects taken from travelers, though a character who searches through the material and makes a successful DC 10 Intelligence (Investigation) check finds a small purse containing 10 gp amidst the junk.

3. UPPER STORAGE

Barrels and crates are stacked against the walls of this shallow alcove, alongside a few sacks of grain and a cask of something foul-smelling. To the east, a narrow passage descends into darkness.

The Thornpurse use this area to store bulk supplies, mostly mundane provisions extorted from travelers or scavenged from the surrounding hills. The descending passage is fitted with a ladder and connects to the underground level, emerging at the sleeping chamber.

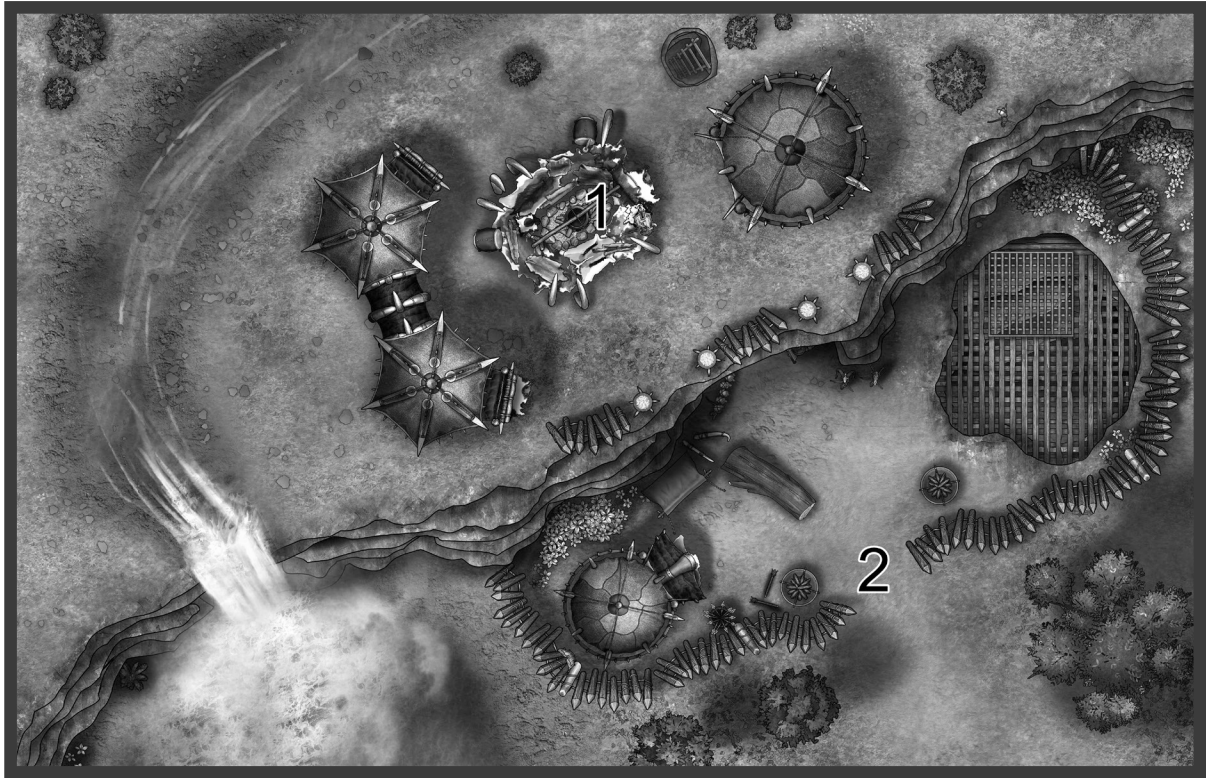
Treasure: Overlooked Tools. Nearly everything in this chamber is worthless—stolen food, ragged cloth, and rusted cookware. A character who spends a few minutes searching and succeeds on a DC 12 Intelligence (Investigation) check finds a polished wooden case wedged between two barrels. Inside is an orange set of calligrapher's supplies worth 25 gp, which the goblins overlooked because it contains no coins.

4. TRAPPED PASSAGE

A wooden ladder rises through a shaft in the ceiling of this low-ceilinged chamber. A cluster of small red mushrooms grows along the western wall.

The ladder ascends 20 feet to the overlook above. Passages lead south toward the palisade entrance and west deeper into the cave network. The red mushrooms are mildly toxic. A character who makes a successful DC 10 Intelligence (Nature) check identifies them as gut-rot

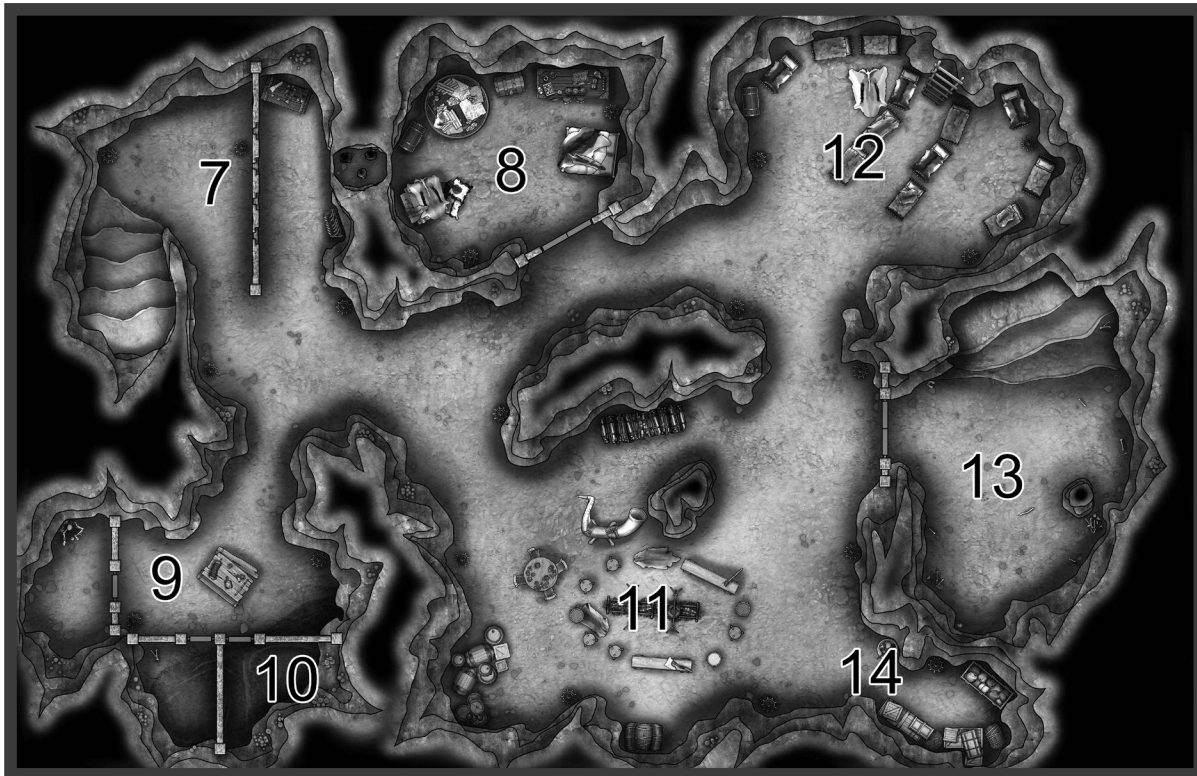
OVERLOOK



UPPER CHAMBERS



LOWER CHAMBERS



sprouts, which cause a vile stomach ache if ingested but are otherwise harmless.

Trap: Pressure Plates. Two stone slabs set into the floor of this chamber are goblin-rigged pressure plates. A character who examines the floor and succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check notices that the slabs sit slightly higher than the surrounding stone and that crude mechanisms are visible in the seams. A creature that steps on either plate triggers a volley of sharpened sticks that fire from concealed slots in the north wall. Any creatures within the chamber must make a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw, taking 7 (2d6) piercing damage on a failed save, or half as much on a successful one. The plates can only fire once before their ammunition is spent. The goblins reset the trap daily. The plates can be disarmed with a successful DC 12 Sleight of Hand check using thieves' tools. Failing this check by 5 or more triggers the trap.

5. GATHERING CHAMBER

This broad cavern serves as the hub of this level. A hide tent occupies its center, while the perimeter of the chamber is lined with crates, barrels, and loose piles of confiscated goods. The air smells of tallow and unwashed goblin.

The gathering chamber is the Counting's administrative heart. Visitors admitted through the palisade are directed here to conduct their business. Connecting passageways branch in several directions, including a sloped tunnel to the west which descends to the lower chambers.

Encounter: Assessor Frusiaz. A goblin named Frusiaz (NE he/him **goblin**) occupies the tent and serves as the Counting's front-facing clerk. Seated behind a creaky desk, he is fastidious by goblin standards, wearing seven pouches and carrying a bundle of bark strips that he scratches on with a sharpened stick whenever a transaction occurs. Frusiaz is officious and self-important but not brave; if combat breaks out, he retreats underground to alert Giegs.

Encounter: Counting Goblins. At least two **goblins** are typically present in this chamber during the day, seated cross-legged on the floor amid piles of confiscated goods. They sort items into categories of their own invention, counting and recounting each pile while muttering figures to one another and arguing over discrepancies.

6. WATERFALL ENTRANCE

The roar of the water is deafening here, the rock slick with spray and partially obscured by thick ferns growing just beyond the cascading waterfall within the cover of the cavern.

This hidden passage provides an alternate entrance to the cave level, bypassing the palisade entirely. The Thornpurse are aware of it and consider it one of their proudest secrets. The entrance is not visible from the trade road or the palisade. A character scouting the cliff face from the base of the waterfall who makes a successful DC 14 Wisdom (Perception) check notices a ledge behind the falls, suggesting a possible cavern below.

7. ARCHERS' GALLERY

A crude stone wall bisects this chamber, running floor to ceiling and fitted with narrow slits at goblin eye-height. A wooden table holding bundles of arrows is nestled against its back face.

This chamber serves as the lair's last line of interior defense. The arrow slits provide three-quarters cover to creatures firing from behind the wall and restrict line of sight to a narrow corridor on the eastern side. The gallery is unoccupied under normal circumstances. If the alarm has been raised and the goblins have had time to prepare, up to three **goblins** take position behind the wall with shortbows, firing on anyone approaching from the entrance level above.

Secret Passage. A narrow tunnel connects this chamber to Giegs' quarters, concealed behind a tattered hide draped over the wall. A character who examines the wall and succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check notices the hide shifts slightly with airflow from the passage behind it.

8. GIEGS' QUARTERS

The entrance to this chamber is fitted with a pair of wooden doors, which are unlocked during the day but barred from the inside when Giegs sleeps. They can be forced open with a successful DC 15 Strength check. When the party enters, read aloud:

This chamber is lavish by goblin standards. A round table heaped with papers, bark strips, and crude maps dominates one side of the room. Against the east wall sits an actual bed, piled with mismatched hides and a stained feather pillow. A heavy desk holds an open ledger, an inkwell, and a set of brass scales. Two iron-banded chests sit against the north wall.

This is Giegs' personal quarters and the seat of the Counting's authority.

Encounter: Giegs. Giegs is small for a goblin, with sharp yellow eyes and a stolen, oversized pair of spectacles perched on his nose. He wears more pouches than any other goblin in the tribe: fifteen in total, which jangle with his every movement. He speaks in snappy, declarative sentences and has a habit of pausing mid-conversation to scribble something in his ledger. He is vain, suspicious, and genuinely

believes he is building something important. Giegs uses **goblin boss** statistics.

Giegs is willing to negotiate with visitors who treat the Counting as a legitimate institution. He is receptive to flattery, fascinated by descriptions of how "real" governments operate, and particularly susceptible to anyone who addresses him by a title, the more extravagant the better. He is far less receptive to threats, demands, or anything that undermines his authority in front of his subordinates. A party that wishes to negotiate the release of a prisoner or recover specific confiscated goods can do so with a successful DC 14 Charisma (Persuasion) check, made with advantage if they've meaningfully stroked Giegs' ego during the conversation, or alternatively by paying a fee ranging from 10 to 100 gp, depending on the nature of the request, how well the party plays to Giegs' ego, and the outcome of any relevant skill checks. Giegs will not, under any circumstances, willingly surrender the ledger—he considers it the founding document of the Counting and treats any suggestion of parting with it as a personal attack.

The Ledger. The leather-bound ledger on the desk is the original tax collector's ledger that inspired the Counting's creation. It is worth 50 gp to the merchant guild identified in the adventure hooks, or to any bureaucratic institution that might want it back. To Giegs, it is priceless.

Secret Passage. A narrow tunnel connects this chamber to the archers' gallery, concealed behind a hide nailed to the wall. A character who examines the wall and succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check notices the hide shifts slightly with airflow from the passage behind it.

Treasure: Giegs' Hoard. The two chests are locked; Giegs carries the only key. They can be picked with a successful DC 14 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check using thieves' tools. Between them, the chests contain 85 gp in actual coin, a silver chain worth 25 gp, a *potion of superior healing*, and a *spell scroll of charm person* that Giegs has been unable to identify.

9. CELLS

A timber partition fitted with iron bars divides this chamber into two holding areas. A crude wooden bench and a ring of keys hang on the wall outside the cells. The southern end of the chamber opens into a flooded depression that reeks of waste. A faint sobbing echoes off the stone.

The Thornpurse use these cells to occasionally hold "tax evaders". The iron bars are sturdy enough to hold a humanoid but far from professional work; the cell doors can be opened with the keys hanging on a nearby wall, picked with a successful DC 10 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check using thieves' tools, or forced open with a successful DC 15 Strength check.

Prisoner: Telma Shetsk. The sole current occupant is tax collector Telma Shetsk (LN she/her human **commoner**). She is exhausted, hungry, and furious. The goblins detained her three weeks ago when she arrived to investigate their operation, and the irony of a tax collector being imprisoned for failure to pay taxes has not improved her mood. She can provide a rough description of the lair's layout.

10. WASTE PIT

The stench here is indescribable. A shallow pool of stagnant water occupies most of this depression, its surface slicked with filth. Mushrooms thrive along the edges.

The Thornpurse use this flooded alcove as a communal latrine. There is nothing of value here.

11. EATING CHAMBER

A long wooden spit dominates the center of this chamber, flanked by crude benches. A round table cluttered with wooden bowls and gnawed bones sits to one side. A large, cracked drinking horn mounted on a stand of lashed bone occupies a place of apparent honor near the wall. Barrels and crates are heaped around the perimeter of the chamber.

This chamber serves as the Thornpurse's communal mess hall. The food on offer is grim—charred rat, tough roots, and whatever substantial meat the goblins can scavenge or extort. The barrels contain stale water and a foul brew that charitable observers might call ale.

The Horn. The drinking horn is the tribe's most prized communal possession, looted from a merchant's wagon months ago. It is far too large for a goblin to drink from gracefully, but Giegs has declared it a symbol of the Counting's prosperity. Any goblin caught drinking from it without permission is fined three pouches' worth of coin. The horn is worth 5 gp to anyone willing to carry it.

Encounter: Off-Duty Goblins. Two or three **goblins** are usually found here during the day, eating, bickering, or drilling arithmetic by quizzing each other on sums using dried rat droppings as counters. The results are loudly disputed. One goblin is invariably trying to sneak a drink from the horn while the others aren't looking.

12. SLEEPING CHAMBER

Rows of hide bedrolls are spread across the floor of this chamber, arranged with surprising neatness. A wooden ladder ascends through a shaft in the ceiling. A few barrels and a chest sit against the walls, and the faint smell of dried meat hangs in the air.

This is where the majority of the Thornpurse sleep. The ladder ascends to the upper storage area. The barrels and the chest contain water and salted meat—unappetizing but edible. Personal effects are tucked beneath or beside each bedroll: whittled sticks, funny-looking rocks, scraps of hide bearing scratched tally marks, and the occasional copper piece. Each bedroll has a small coin pouch tucked inside it, most containing nothing of real value. At night, this chamber holds the bulk of the tribe, with up to ten goblins sleeping in shifts. During the day, the chamber is likely empty, save perhaps for one or two goblins resting between duties.

13. WORG PIT

A heavy timber gate blocks the entrance to this large, low-ceilinged chamber. Beyond it, the floor is littered with gnawed bones, tufts of coarse fur, and deep claw marks scored into the stone. A humanoid skeleton lies crumpled against the far wall. The stench is overwhelming.

The gate is barred from the outside with a heavy wooden beam and can be opened as an action. An earthen ramp at the north end of the chamber rises to the trapdoor at the palisade entrance. The skeleton belongs to a traveler who couldn't pay their "taxes" and was made an example of. There is nothing of value on the remains.

Encounter: Worgs. Three **worgs** are penned here. If they detect any non-goblins within thirty feet, the worgs snarl and throw themselves against the gate, creating noise that alerts any goblins on the adjacent underground level within one round. A character who approaches the gate quietly and makes a successful DC 14 Wisdom (Animal Handling) check can soothe them, causing them to remain passive so long as the gate stays closed and no loud noises occur nearby. If the goblins have already released the worgs, the beasts are frenzied and cannot be calmed by any means.

14. STORAGE

Crates and barrels are stacked along the walls of this cramped chamber. An open chest near the north wall holds bundled sacks. The air is thick with dust and the smell of old leather.

The Thornpurse keep the better pickings from their tax collections here—goods that Giegs has deemed worthy of holding onto but hasn't decided to claim for himself. Most of it is mundane: bolts of cloth, rope, tools, and sacks of flour.

Treasure: Assorted Goods. A character who spends a few minutes searching the chamber finds 30 gp in assorted coin spread across several containers, a capped flagon of decent wine worth 10 gp, and two *potions of healing* that the goblins mistook for perfume.

AFTERMATH

If the party dismantles the Thornpurse's operation—whether by killing or driving off Giegs or scattering the tribe—the trade road reopens and commerce resumes. Any quest givers identified in the adventure hooks pay the agreed-upon rewards once presented with evidence of success. If Telma Shetsk is rescued, she thanks the party curtly, requests directions to the nearest settlement, and files a formal complaint with her superiors about the whole ordeal.

Without Giegs, the remaining Thornpurse goblins scatter into the hills within days, reverting to the disorganized scavengers they were before the ledger changed everything. The lair is quickly picked clean by opportunists and left to the elements. If Giegs survives but is forced to flee, he nurses a grudge and may attempt to rebuild the Counting elsewhere.

If the party brokers a deal with Giegs rather than destroying the operation, the outcome depends entirely on the terms. Giegs honors agreements so long as they benefit him, but his ambitions will inevitably outgrow whatever boundaries the party sets. The Thornpurse may resurface as a recurring problem, or, improbably, evolve into something resembling an actual institution.

REFERENCES

This work includes material taken from the System Reference Document 5.1 (“SRD 5.1”) by Wizards of the Coast LLC and available at <https://dnd.wizards.com/resources/systems-reference-document>. The SRD 5.1 is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>.

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