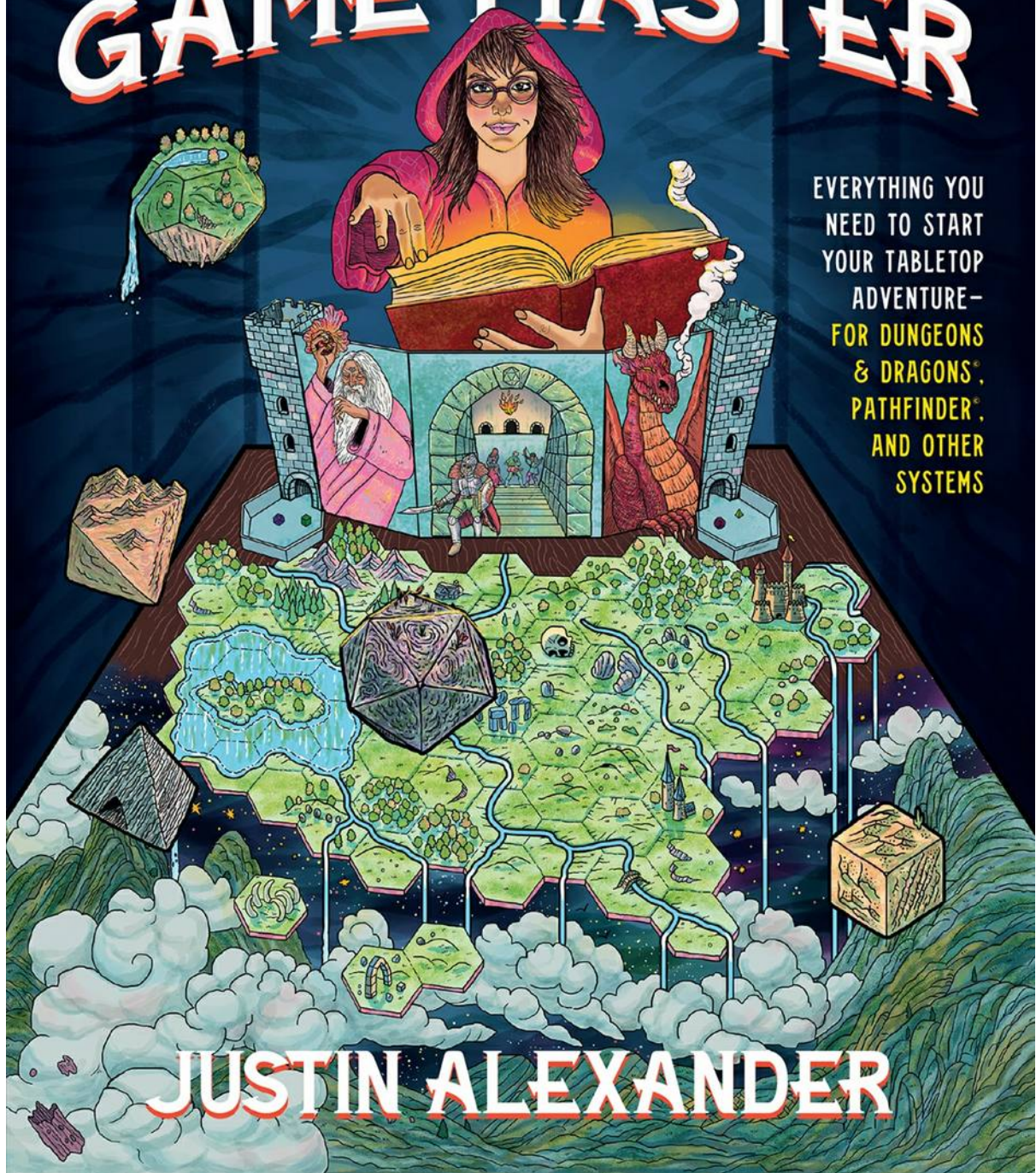# SO YOU WANT TO BE A GAME MASTER

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO START YOUR TABLETOP ADVENTURE—FOR DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®, PATHFINDER®, AND OTHER SYSTEMS

JUSTIN ALEXANDER

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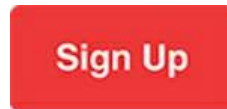
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TO SARAH HOLMBERG,

WITHOUT WHOM THIS BOOK WOULD NOT EXIST.
THANKS, LOVE.

INTRODUCTION

YOU HAVE CHOSEN to enter a world of heroic adventure. More importantly, you have taken your first step toward unlocking those adventures for your friends. Unlike books, movies, or other types of games, a roleplaying game (RPG) offers infinite adventures, limited only by the power of your imagination. And because it's a game of imagination, it can be played almost anywhere. Most games are played around a table, but you can just as easily play via a video call, email, or special programs called virtual tabletops (VTTs).

One member of the group—the one this book is about and whom you've chosen to become—is the game master (GM). In *Dungeons & Dragons*, one of the most popular roleplaying games, the GM is known as the dungeon master (DM). As the DM, you'll be responsible for describing the fantasy world in which the game takes place:

> *As you come around the corner, you see that the corridor comes to a dead end. Carved in bas-relief upon this wall is a giant face—a face larger than you are tall. As your gaze alights upon it, the face begins to move. Its granite lips form words—words that thunder down the corridor. "WHO DARES TO TRESPASS HERE?"*

The other players can now tell you what they're going to do: Will they talk to the face? Try to destroy it? Cast a spell to *silence* it? Or will they try something completely different? The decision is up to them!

But the players don't need to play as themselves. Instead, they'll create the role of a fantasy hero and step into their shoes. Perhaps they'd like to play as a heroic knight pursuing quests of honor. Or as an enigmatic wizard seeking the lost secrets of the cosmos. Or as an ancient elf hoping that the companionship of the younger races will help him to recover the youth he lost centuries ago. In a

roleplaying game, you can pretend to be anyone you want!

Playing an RPG is a little like performing in an improvised radio drama. It's as if you were acting in a play or movie, but there's no script and the wonders of your adventure are not limited by even the most extravagant of special effects budgets.

Anything you can imagine is possible in a roleplaying game.

But an RPG isn't just Make-Believe or Let's Pretend. It's also a game. The players' characters will face challenges—monsters, traps, and the like—and their success is not assured. By rolling dice and following the rules of the game, you'll be able to determine the success or failure of your characters' actions. In other words, the players will tell you (the DM) what they want their characters to do, and you'll use the rules (and your own creativity!) to figure out what the result is.

INTO THE DUNGEON

For many of you reading this, nothing I've written here will have come as a surprise. You've either played a roleplaying game before or read a similar introduction in a rulebook or watched an actual play video featuring other people playing the game. That's why you picked up this book in the first place. In fact, you may have already run your first adventure as a DM and are trying to figure out how you can do it better.

But whether you're taking your first steps or taking your game to the next level, let's take a peek at an example of what actually playing a roleplaying game looks like, how that relates to what you'll be doing as a DM, and how this book is going to help you do that.

Jason is serving as the DM for a group of three players. Seth is playing Ranthir, a young apprentice wizard with an endless thirst for knowledge and a penchant for carrying a dozen different bags and satchels packed full of various useful odds and ends. Sarah is playing Tithenmamiwen (Tee), an elven maid rebelling against her elders. Dave is playing Agnarr, a brash barbarian who has little regard for the cares or concerns of the civilized world.

The group, also commonly referred to as a "party," are currently exploring an underground labyrinth once occupied by the Sons of Jade—a group of scholars, loremasters, and magi who sought to unlock the secrets of the ancient and powerful Jade Magi of the Lost City of Shandrala.

JASON (DM): As you emerge through the rubble of the broken wall, you see a large room of cream-colored stone. There are three doors leading out of the room—a tall door of bluish steel directly across from you and two smaller ones off to either side. In the corner of the chamber, a huge mass of debris has been piled high.

Jason is running a dungeon scenario, in which the players' characters (PCs) have descended into an underground vault filled with dangers to overcome and treasure to win. We'll be looking at how to run and create your own dungeons in Part 1, starting on page 21.

SARAH (TEE): I'll go check out the door of blue steel.

DAVE (AGNARR): I'll go dig through the garbage.

SARAH (TEE): There's no pile of filth too large or too small for Agnarr.

JASON (DM): (*laughing*) OK, Agnarr starts digging through the trash. Tee, the door is locked.

SETH (RANTHIR): Does it look like that last door of blue steel we found?

JASON (DM): Virtually identical.

SARAH (Tee): Well, I won't be able to pick the lock then. We'll need the password.

A roleplaying game is a conversation. You'll describe what the PCs see, the players will respond by telling you what their characters do in response or by asking questions to clarify their understanding of the situation, and then you'll respond to them. It's a loop, right? Your topic of conversation is the fictional world of the game, and you'll build that world—and the things

that happen in it—by actively engaging with that conversation. You'll listen to each other. You'll build on each other's ideas. You may even get emotional or interrupt or disagree with each other, just like any other conversation.

DAVE (AGNARR): I hate those doors. (*to Jason*) Have I found anything in the trash pile yet?

JASON (DM): Looks like a lot of glass and metal. Small stuff.

SETH (RANTHIR): Anything interesting?

JASON (DM): Give me an Intelligence (Arcana) check.

SETH (RANTHIR): (*rolls some dice*) 13.

JASON (DM): There's a bunch of alchemical equipment. You think it might be the remains of a rather large laboratory. Agnarr's smashing a lot of it, but it doesn't look like it was worth much to begin with.

SETH (RANTHIR): Carry on.

The character is attempting an action and the DM isn't certain of the outcome, so he calls for a skill check, using the mechanics of the game to determine the outcome. The player rolls a 20-sided die, then adds their Intelligence modifier and, because they're proficient in the Arcana skill, their proficiency bonus. The result is 13, which the DM compares to the difficulty of the action. Because the check was equal to or higher than the difficulty, Ranthir succeeded in identifying the alchemical equipment.

*This is called a **ruling**: As the DM, you are figuring out how the rules of the game can be used to determine what happens in the game world. This is more or less the most basic skill of being a DM: When the player says, "I want to do X," how do you respond? We'll break this skill down into a simple procedure, starting on page 24.*

JASON (DM): As you shove aside a particularly large mass of debris, you reveal the corpse of a dead goblin. The sickly sweet smell of decay washes over you in a thick wave. What are you all doing?

SARAH (TEE): Tee doesn't even look. She wants no part of whatever's making that smell. She's going to head over to the door on the left and see if she can get that open.

DAVE (AGNARR): I'll keep digging!

SARAH (TEE): Of course you will …

JASON (DM): There are a couple more goblin corpses after the first.

SETH (RANTHIR): How long have they been dead? (*rolls some dice*) I got a 17 on my Wisdom (Medicine) check.

Wisdom is a different ability score from Intelligence, and Medicine is a different skill from Arcana. Different characters will have different ability scores and be proficient in different skills. Figuring out which mechanics to use is an important part of making a good ruling.

JASON (DM): Hard to say for certain. Probably at least a couple of weeks. They're pretty badly decomposed.

SETH (RANTHIR): okay. I guess I'll keep an eye out over Agnarr's shoulder. If he comes across anything valuable, I'll try to stop him before he destroys it.

JASON (DM): A couple layers down from the corpses, Agnarr suddenly unearths a perfectly preserved box of cherry wood with a mosaic design of inlaid jade. It seems to be completely unmarred—a stark contrast to the broken junk around it.

SETH (RANTHIR): I cast *detect magic.*

Detect magic *is the name of a magical spell. Some characters, including wizards like Ranthir, are capable of casting powerful dweomers. This spell allows Ranthir to detect the presence of other magical effects.*

JASON (DM): (*to Sarah*) Tee finds the door unlocked.

SARAH (TEE): I'll open it.

JASON (DM): (*to Ranthir*) As soon as your spell comes into effect, you can see a faint magical aura around the box.

SETH (RANTHIR): (*to Dave*) May I please see that, Master Agnarr?

DAVE (AGNARR): (*with a shrug*) Sure. I hand it over.

SETH (RANTHIR): I'll try to open the box.

JASON (DM): (*to Seth*) You open the box to find a perfectly preserved pack of love letters. They appear to have been written by a woman named Athara and are addressed to a man named Oliss. (*to Sarah*) The door swings open with a loud, rusty creak. The narrow hall beyond the door is choked with thick, ropelike webs. The webs nearest to the door have been hacked apart and hang forlornly from the walls in tattered wisps. About 15 feet away, you can see another hall intersecting this one. At the intersection, the hacking of the webs comes to an end and you can see that the corpses of two large spiders—spiders nearly the size of a small cow—lie belly-up on the floor there.

A dungeon adventure is divided into separate rooms. *Everything up until this point has taken place in one room, and Jason has known what's in that room—for example, what's hidden inside the pile of garbage—by looking at his notes for that room. We call those notes the* **room key**. *Now Sarah has opened a door and is looking into another room, so Jason flips through his notes to the key for that room and can describe what Sarah sees there.*

Knowing how to create, read, and run a room key is, of course, a fundamental part of running a successful dungeon adventure.

See here for more information on running a room.

SARAH (TEE): Uh, guys, I think you should come over here and look at this. (*to Jason*) Do I see anything unusual about the spider corpses?

JASON (DM): Give me a Perception check.

SETH (RANTHIR): I'll close the box and head over to Tee.

SARAH (TEE): (*rolls some dice*) Awesome! Natural 20 for a total of

28.

JASON (DM): At first everything seems okay. But then one of the corpses starts to twitch.

SARAH (TEE): That's bad.

JASON (DM): Actually, you're pretty sure it's not the corpse itself. Something on the corpse—or inside it?—is crawling and squirming around.

SARAH (TEE): That's very, very bad.

SETH (RANTHIR): (*pretending he doesn't know what only Tee can see*) What's wrong?

SARAH (TEE): Something very, very bad! (*to Jason*) I slam the door shut.

JASON (DM): As you reach for the door you see five smaller spiders—these are only about the size of a large dog—burst out of the larger corpses and start skittering toward you.

SARAH (TEE): I SLAM THE DOOR SHUT!

JASON (DM): You slam the door shut. I need initiative checks.

SARAH (TEE): (*rolls some dice*) 7.

DAVE (AGNARR): (*rolls some dice*) 16.

SETH (RANTHIR): (*rolls some dice*) 10.

In D&D there's a special set of rules used to resolve combat. When combat starts, every character—including the giant spiders being controlled by the DM—rolls for initiative. The highest initiative result goes first, followed by the second highest, and so forth.

By forcing everyone to take turns, the conversation during combat becomes more formal. This will help you (and the players!) keep track of a situation that might otherwise be hopelessly complex. On page 486, we'll dive into techniques that can make running combat even more fun, and we'll also find other situations in which a more formal structure will help you run the game.

JASON (DM): (*rolling dice for the spiders*) Okay, Agnarr, you're

first.

DAVE (AGNARR): I throw my shoulder against the door to hold it shut. I've got oil! Anyone got a fire?

SARAH (TEE): Uh … You've got your flaming sword.

DAVE (AGNARR): Oh. Right. Well, I don't think I can open the door, throw the oil, and light it before the spiders get through.

SARAH (TEE): Throw the oil over here. *(to Jason)* Can we have him yank the door open while I throw the flask, and then he can hit it with his sword in midair?

JASON (DM): Sure.

DAVE (AGNARR): Awesome. Okay, I toss my flask of oil to Tee and get ready to open the door. FOR THE GLORY!

JASON (DM): All right. As Agnarr shouts the command word for his sword, it bursts into flame. He yanks open the door as Tee throws the oil. The flaming greatsword sweeps through the air, shattering the flask and sending a cascade of burning oil over the bustling mass of spiders just inside the door. Not only the oil but also the thick, dry webs burst into flame. *(rolls some dice)* Two of the spiders—on fire—come bursting out of the conflagration. One crawls up Agnarr's leg and buries its fangs into his thigh.

DAVE (AGNARR): Get it off! Get it off!

JASON (DM): *(rolls some dice)* You take 4 points of damage. And I'll need a Constitution saving throw.

Characters have hit points (HP), which represent their vitality. When a character takes damage, they lose hit points. When a character runs out of hit points, they fall unconscious and may die.

DAVE (AGNARR): *(rolls some dice)* 18.

JASON (DM): Okay, you can feel the acidic burn of the spider's venom, but you manage to shake it loose before it can deliver a full dose. It falls back to the floor at Agnarr's feet. *(to Seth)* The other spider is scuttling straight toward Ranthir. What do you do?

SETH (RANTHIR): I cast *magic missile.* (*rolls some dice*) 3,4, and 5 points of damage.

JASON (DM): Three blasts of eldritch force lance out from Ranthir's fingertips, striking the spider mid-scuttle. It gives a high-pitched screech as it collapses into a small, smoldering ball. (*to Dave*) It's Agnarr's turn again.

DAVE (AGNARR): With a howl of rage, Agnarr smites the little bastard. (*rolls some dice*) 16 to hit.

JASON (DM): The spider, shaken free from Agnarr's leg, is still skidding across the floor as Agnarr's greatsword smashes down on it. Give me damage.

DAVE (AGNARR): (*rolls some dice*) 14 points of damage plus 3 fire damage.

JASON (DM): Agnarr's sword cleaves the spider in twain. A great gout of greenish ichor geysers into the air.

SARAH (TEE): Are there any other spiders moving in the hallway?

JASON (DM): No. It looks like the flaming oil killed them. But the fire back there is getting quite intense. It's being fueled by the thick webs …

SARAH (TEE): I close the door. I say we just wait for it to burn out.

DAVE (AGNARR): Sounds good to me.

SARAH (TEE): Should we try the other door?

SETH (RANTHIR): Actually I've got an idea, (*to Jason*) I take out the packet of love letters we found. I'm going to stand in front of the door of blue steel and start reading them out loud.

JASON (DM): Umm … okay.

SARAH (TEE): What are you doing?

SETH (RANTHIR): If the door of blue steel has a password, then it must have been known to the Sons of Jade when they worked here. And if these letters were written at the same time, the password might be mentioned.

JASON (DM): (*rolls some dice*) How long are you going to keep

reading?

SETH (RANTHIR): Until I've finished the letters.

JASON (DM): After 22 minutes of reading, Ranthir begins a new letter: "I am sorry I have not written to you sooner, but the old taskmaster has been working us hard again. Athvor Krassek may think himself to be …" But he trails off. At the name of "Athvor Krassek," the door of blue steel begins to swing open …

ACTIVE FLAY

One of the coolest things about a roleplaying game—and you can see it happening in this example of play—is that nobody knows what's going to happen until it happens.

If Jason were writing a story for someone else to read, obviously he'd be in complete control. He'd know that A would happen and then B would happen and then C would happen. But Jason isn't an author writing a story. He's a dungeon master playing the game with his friends.

So the players, for example, don't know that there are spider hatchlings hiding inside the mother's corpse (ick!). Jason does, because he created the scenario and plays the nonplayer characters (NPCs), but he doesn't know that the players' characters are going to light the corridor on fire.

Similarly, Jason knows that the password for the blue steel door is "Athvor Krassek," a former administrator of the laboratory, but he wasn't anticipating Ranthir's player deciding to read the love letters in front of the door. Does the name "Athvor Krassek" even appear in those letters? Jason doesn't know that, either, so he decides to roll some dice to figure it out.

Moments like these are created through active play: The players are actively playing their characters. In response, the DM is actively playing all the other characters, and is also constantly putting toys into the fictional world—the love letters, the door, the discarded alchemy equipment—that *everyone* gets to play with.

Active play is the fundamental principle of a roleplaying game. And the secret to being a great dungeon master ultimately boils

down to (a) prepping cool toys for you and your players and then (b) playing with them freely and creatively together.

Everything else is just a matter of technique.

TAKING YOUR FIRST STEPS

This book isn't a roleplaying game. It won't teach you the rules. If you want to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, you'll want to pick up either the *D&D Starter Set* (for a quick, playable introduction) or the three rulebooks that contain the full game (the *Player's Handbook, Dungeon Master's Guide,* and *Monster Manual*). In fact, from this point forward I'll be assuming that you're familiar with the rules of D&D.

The rulebooks will teach you how to play, but you want to do more than that. You want to be a dungeon master. You want to create adventures and entire worlds to share with your players. You want to invite them into the wondrous vistas you've imagined and forge unforgettable stories with them. But where do you even begin?

Just turn the page.

Imagining an entire universe may feel daunting right now, but we're going to break this down step by step. Starting in the dungeon, we'll walk through running an adventure. That'll go a lot faster than you might think. You could be DMing your first game tomorrow if you wanted to!

After that, you'll design an adventure for the first time and run that, too. You'll be amazed at just how simple it can be! We'll build on that foundation to make your adventures more dynamic and exciting, and then you'll be ready to choose new types of adventures to explore—heists, mysteries, conspiracies, and more.

OTHER ROLEPLAYING GAMES
Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) is a fantasy RPG set in a world inspired by the works of authors like J. R. R. Tolkien, N. K. Jemisin, George R. R. Martin, and Robert E. Howard. But there are many other RPGs! If you enjoy cyberpunk stories, you might check out *Cyberpunk RED* or *Technoir.* Like horror

movies? Check out *Unknown Armies* or *Call of Cthulhu*®. You can also find licensed RPGs based directly on fictional universes you already love, like *Star Wars, A Song of Ice and Fire, Alien,* or *Doctor Who*.

For the sake of simplicity, the examples in the first section of this book are going to assume that you're playing the current edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. But the vast majority of the book—and the skills you'll learn—will be useful no matter what RPG you've chosen to master.
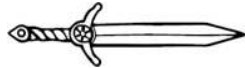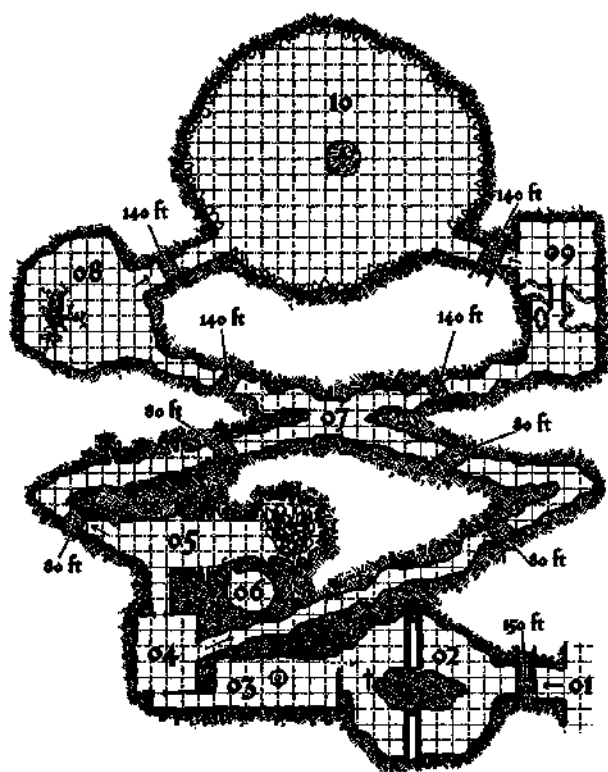
DUNGEONS

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS was born in the dungeon, with Dave Arneson—the creator of the modern roleplaying game—carving out

the labyrinths beneath Castle Blackmoor and giving his players the opportunity to delve down into its depths.

As a new dungeon master, you're going to start your adventures in the dungeon, too. The classic dungeon is an underground complex; a maze of corridors linking rooms filled with monsters, traps, and treasure. The heroes in a dungeon adventure enter the maze, defeat the monsters, avoid the traps, and claim the treasure for themselves. (Or maybe they'll flip the script, ally with the monsters, and donate the treasure to the local orphanage. You never really know what will happen during play!)

A dungeon scenario—the adventure that you'll be running for your players—is presented in two parts: the **dungeon map** and the **dungeon key.**

A dungeon map will look something like this:

On the map you can see the various rooms that make up the dungeon, and each room has been labeled with a number. In the dungeon key, each numbered room has been given a full description, telling you everything you need to know when the PCs enter that room.

Imagine that you're sitting at a table with your friends and