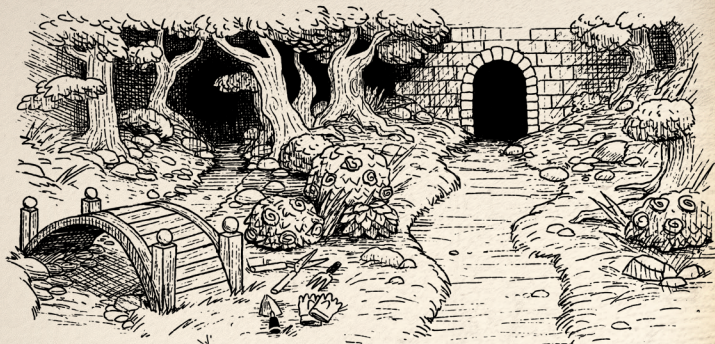




YOU ARE THE HERO OF YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

You are visiting The Ohio State University as a guest of the Physics department when you realize the path to Scott Laboratory is completely obscured to you. While you search for a way to a familiar place, you see a distressed young man frantically searching the campus. It occurs to you that this young man might be searching for the very same thing you are, but it's also possible that he might distract you, leading you further astray. *If you engage the young man, turn to page 6. If you continue your search without interruption, go to page 5.*

What happens next in the story? It all depends on the choices *you* make. How does the story end? Only you can find out! And the best part is that you can keep reading and rereading until you've had not *one*, but *many* incredibly daring experiences!

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE



THE OHIO STATE
UNIVERSITY

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE • 1

YOU'RE THE STAR OF THE STORY!

THE HIDDEN PATH

WRITTEN FOR M. GREGG ROE

1 • CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

THE HIDDEN PATH



ILLUSTRATED BY MATTIE MUELLER

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE • 1

THE HIDDEN PATH

WRITTEN FOR M. GREGG ROE
BY COURTNEY LEE



THE OHIO STATE
UNIVERSITY

THE HIDDEN PATH

WARNING ! ! ! !

Do not read this book straight through from beginning to end! These pages contain many different adventures you can go on in The Hidden Path. From time to time as you read along, you will be asked to make a choice. Your choice may lead to success or disaster!

The adventures you take a result of your choice and occasionally your skill, so make sure you have a D20 handy! You are responsible because you choose! After you make your choice, follow the instructions to see what happens to you next.

Remember—you cannot go back! Think carefully before you make a move! One mistake can be your last ... or it may lead you to fame and fortune!



You find yourself visiting The Ohio State University at the start of fall semester at the invitation of the Department of Physics, who wishes to celebrate the lives and accomplishments of its alums. You are especially excited to meet students who have benefitted from your late professor, Dr. Art Epstein, and see what they have been able to achieve with his support. Rumor has it that a few will be presenting at an upcoming colloquium that you are hoping to attend, and you hope to gain some exclusive knowledge prior to the experience.

You have time to spare and decide to indulge in a trip down memory lane. You visit Mirror Lake, renovated since your time in school but still a space where students connect, study and enjoy the peaceful view. The new Ohio Union is large and bustling with activity from the incoming freshmen getting last-minute necessities. The Oval is refreshingly familiar in spite of the passage of time, and you're delighted to see students lounging under trees, studying in front of Thompson Library and playing frisbee across the green.

Go on to the next page.

Eventually, it is time to make your way toward Smith Laboratory to visit the former home of the physics department. You remember fondly the path you once took as a student that provided the safest passage to your education and, hoping to see current students on the same trajectory you remember traveling so fondly, you decide to travel the path once more. Unfortunately, the road is not as clearly marked as you remember and you are struggling to find the trailhead. You retrace your steps and revisit several familiar areas, but the path to a physics education evades you.

As you stumble through the area you are noticed by several students who pass by with a quizzical look, and you realize that the sight of a grown man pacing an area while muttering, "Surely it's here somewhere," is somewhat alarming. Taking some deep breaths, you refocus yourself and try to remember the last time you saw the path. Yes, you could walk a different route, but this particular path is the safest and surest way to get to where physics students and professors need to be. Regardless of your current needs, it surely must be here somewhere! As you compose yourself, you notice a young man walking around looking distressed.

Do you choose to engage the man?

If yes, go to page 6.

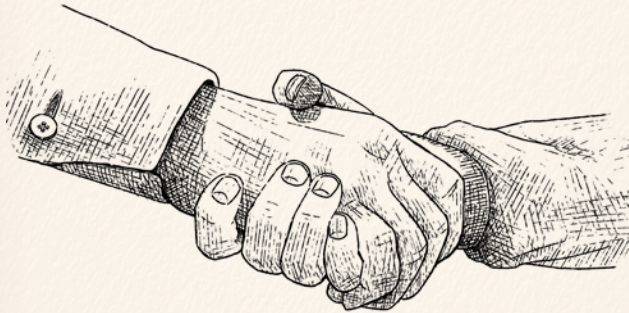
If no, go to page 5.

The man wanders off and leaves your mind. Unfortunately, so do any ideas about where you could possibly find the path you are looking for. You search deeper into campus to areas with which you are unfamiliar. Construction looms at every turn and you see a sign advertising construction of the new University Hospital. You've wandered too far off path and fear you are late to the celebration. Alas, a journey through the heart of the ever-changing university is near impossible without the aid and guidance of fellow travelers. Realizing that you have missed the opportunity to walk down your path with new and returning adventurers, you wander until you find a recognizable street, call a cab and head home.

The End

(Unless you'd like to return to page 4 and try a different tactic?)

"Young man, are you all right?" you ask. He looks to you in surprise, having been interrupted from his anxious mumbling, "Terribly sorry to disturb you, sir! I'm trying to find my way to the Physics Research Building. I was told to take the path from here to Smith Hall, but I'm not finding it anywhere. It seems it's not very well marked. I must get there soon, lest I will never find my path!" You smile knowingly, "I, too, am searching for the path. I have had the pleasure of traveling it before but seem to be unable to find it at present. Perhaps we can look together? I would hate to be late for the celebration at Smith and could use the pleasant company of a new traveler." He gratefully takes your hand and shakes it enthusiastically in relief, "Thank you, sir! It's my first day here and I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm Danny, by the way."



Go on to the next page.

Working with Danny's scrawled-out maps and and your own memory, you are eventually able to find the head of the path. It was no wonder neither of you could locate it, given how overgrown the entrance is. Looking down, you notice it's in disrepair. The cement clearly began crumbling long ago and weeds have started to pop up through the cracks. It's narrower than you remember, and there are several areas where it appears to branch out without any clear direction. More alarming still are the sections you can't see due to shadows obscuring the way.

"Yeesh, when was the last time someone did maintenance on this?" Danny asked, walking forward. You are completely flummoxed. How could this have happened? During your time here, this path was well maintained and safe, with a clear view of the way forward. How can future students be expected to find their way without a means to arrive at their destinations?

Go on to the next page.

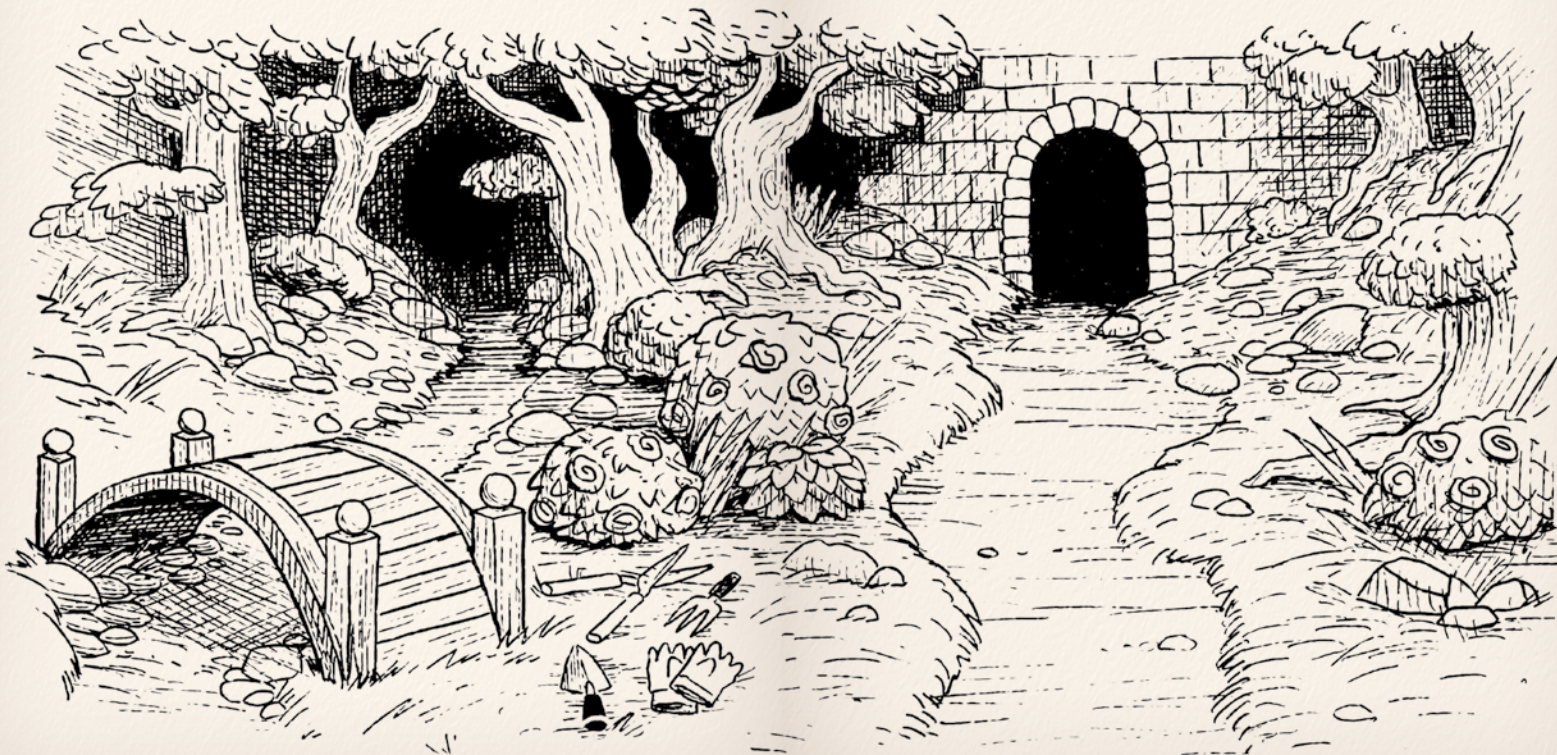
You continue to mull things over when the path seems to split. This comes as a surprise since, while the road to an education in physics wasn't exactly a straight line from point A to point B, the literal path was. "I hate decisions like this," Danny says, peering down both paths, "I wasn't even sure I would go this route in the first place, and who knows where we'll end up now!"

Looking toward the left, you see a small, rapidly flowing creek that is crossable via bridge. Beyond that, the path is obscured with trees—you note that the landscaping crew must have been by

recently, as their tools have been left behind. To the right, you see a dark tunnel. You aren't able to see much beyond the entrance of the tunnel, and it is possessed by an eerie, echoless quiet. Danny looks at you hopefully, "You've been here before. Which way should we go?"

If right, go to page 10.

If left, go to page 13.



“I don’t remember there being any creeks on Ohio State’s campus. I don’t recall tunnels, either, but that seems slightly more plausible. Let’s take the right fork.” Danny gratefully follows. As you walk, the still darkness envelops you, seeming to dampen even the sounds of your footsteps. Strangely, the silence does not concern you, it doesn’t even feel spooky anymore. Instead, it feels familiar. Painfully familiar. It brings to mind the weekends before exams where you pored through your notes, hoping to retain the knowledge at front of mind at least for a few days. You fondly recall the peace and late-night study sessions, squirreled away into your favorite corner of ... you gasp as a realization suddenly hits you, then you clap your mouth shut, but it’s too late.

Go on to the next page.

“SHHH!!!” a librarian leading a group of new students in proper research procedures firmly hushes you. Danny looks confused, but it dawns on you that you had not, in fact, walked into a tunnel, but had mistaken a makeshift portico protecting construction just outside one of Thompson Library’s entrances for one. “Why isn’t there a map???” you ask in frustration, and a different librarian passing by hands you one as well as several resources on syncing the map in the Ohio State app and instructions for accessing the university’s Wi-Fi.

This has been fun, but it’s not the destination you were aiming for. You approach Danny to see if he wants to take another crack at the Physics path but find him at a computer with a grad student convincing him to instead go into the excitement-packed field of classical humanities. It seems like a weird and sudden change of heart, but given his anxiety surrounding the Physics pathway it would be hard to convince him otherwise.

Go on to the next page.

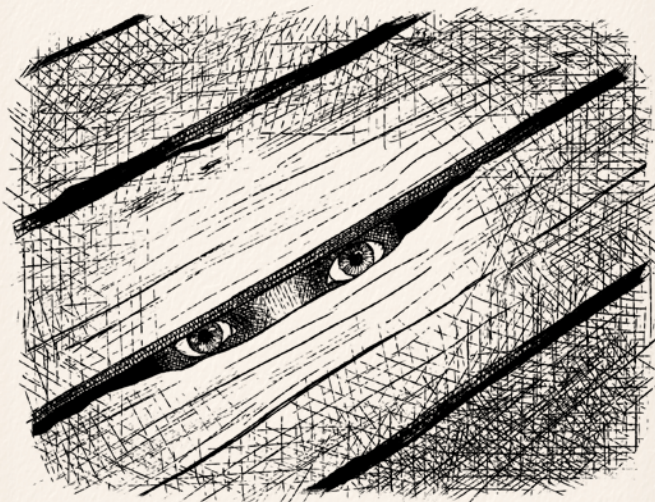
You take a moment to collect your thoughts, sitting in your former favorite study corner. The chair is soft and very comfortable, and as you ease into it you think about how nice it was that the libraries have been able to keep their resources and technology cutting edge and maintain such lovely facilities. You think about how such a cozy spot is a perfect place to steal a nap in between classes.

You are awoken four hours later by a student employee informing you that the library is closing for the evening. You've missed the event and lost a student! While things didn't necessarily end *poorly* they certainly could have ended better. As you drive home for the night, you think about what might have happened had you chosen a different direction.

The End

*(Unless, you'd like to go back to the crossroads?
Return to page 9 to try again.)*

You walk toward the bridge with Danny, explaining that, while you don't remember Ohio State's main campus having any creeks, you don't remember it having any tunnels either. So you might as well take the better lit path. Danny agrees and tells you he's just grateful to be with someone who can help him find the way. You take a step onto the bridge, and it creaks under your weight but seems sturdy enough. As Danny takes his first steps behind you, you hear a faint voice from below, "Who's that trip-trapping over my bridge?" Danny looks alarmed—what do you do?



If you sneak up on the voice, go to page 14.

If you call out to the voice, go to page 17.

“Danny, how are you at stealth?” you ask. “Is this a physics question?” he looks at you confused. You motion for him to keep his voice low and whisper, “I think we have a troll under this bridge, or at least someone who thinks themselves a troll. If we’re to pass safely, we need to catch him off guard.” You throw your bag in front of you to mimic the sound of further movement on the bridge and creep as quietly as you can. Your nerves are on fire—you cannot think of a moment in your educational, professional or *personal* career where you’ve encountered a monster under a bridge. You are thankful that this is real life and not a game of Dungeons & Dragons where you’d have to roll a stealth check.

Except you do need to roll a stealth check! Go ahead and roll that new D20 to see if you and Danny pass. This is a weird situation and neither of you were expecting to need to use stealth in your adult lives. So you don’t have any modifiers, but Danny did take gymnastics until he was 14 and is light on his feet, so I’ll give you an advantage. You need to beat a 15.

If you pass, go to page 15.

If you fail, go to page 16.

Danny is freakishly agile, which is good because you were not remotely prepared for sneaking. He leaps over the side of the bridge before you can even say “troll bridge” and you hear a surprised yelp before the sounds of a muddy scuffle. Following after him, you see that he has managed to pin a muddy figure, who is now loudly protesting this treatment.

“Let me go!” the figure shouts. “NEVER, TROLL!” hollers Danny with renewed confidence after his successful sneak attack. “I’m not a ... troll ...” huffs the figure, struggling, “... I’m ... a grad ... student!”

You convince Danny to let go of his prisoner and offer him a towel you kept in your bag. Like many adventurers, you always know where your towel is. Both he and the figure, which you see is a woman, are absolutely coated in drainage ditch detritus. The figure catches her breath, then angrily snatches the towel from Danny before wiping clean her glasses.

“I can’t believe you jumped on me!” she yells. “I can’t believe you were hiding under a bridge like you were expecting billy goats!” you retort, “What can you possibly be doing down here?”

Turn to page 24.

You are an educated man. A *highly* educated man. You have multiple degrees, including a PhD, and have spent your life devoted to furthering education. These are admirable qualities that you should be proud of. None of those qualities lent themselves to this bizarre plan to sneak up on the troll-like voice from below. Hubris emboldens even the weakest man, however, and you find yourself confidently hopping over the side of the bridge like Indiana Jones. Except you are not Indiana Jones, and you have no idea how to execute this maneuver, so you splash face first into the shallow creek. You do not take any physical damage, but you have taken emotional damage, which in the real world is just as devastating.

A muddled woman looks at you in shock. She looks at Danny, who has clambered down behind you, unsure of what to do next. You wipe mud from your face and say, "Hello there. Might you tell us who you are?"

From this point on, regardless of where you are in the story, you are muddled. This will affect future choices you make, so be aware.

Turn to page 24.

"Hello there!" you call out, "Pray, tell us who is hiding under this bridge?"

"Pay the toll," a gravelly voice creaks out.

"Toll? This is a bridge on a state university campus over a drainage ditch. What toll?"

"Five bucks."

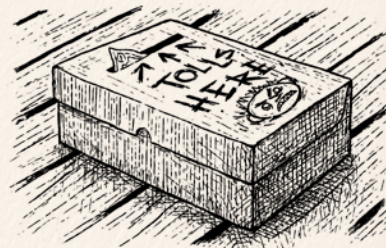
"Are you serious?"

"In the box. Right in the box."

Danny cocks his head toward the middle of the bridge. There's a small shoebox off to the side with "TOLLS HERE" scrawled over the brand logo and an arrow pointing to a slot in the box. A crudely drawn picture of an angry troll with pointy teeth accompanies the writing. A closer look shows a handful of bills and a few bits of loose change inside.

"This is insane!" you burst out.

"Tolls or I ... grind your bones. Make 'em into bread. Grrrrrr I'm scary, better do it."



Wait, that doesn't sound right. Roll a wisdom check. You are very wise, so you get a plus 3 to your roll. Danny, however, is still green, so no advantage. You are looking to beat a 12.

If you pass, go to page 22.

If you fail, go to page 18.

Goodness gracious, this campus has trolls now! The rational world you exist in has always remained separate from the fantasy world you adventure in, and you struggle with the sudden combination of the two. You reach into your wallet and grab a \$5 bill and slide it into the box. Do trolls usually ask for money? It doesn't matter, you just want to go on your way. You'll address this with your university friends later. You make your way to exit the bridge when you hear the voice again, "Hey, you both have to pay. \$1 for the other guy." You don't have more cash with you and look at Danny with a shrug.

"Who even carries cash anymore?" Danny asks, exasperated. "Scan the QR. On the box," the voice responds. Danny turns the box over to see a taped on printout of a QR code.

Go on to the next page.

"The ... wait is this a Venmo?"

"Modern troll times. Modern troll solutions. Raaawr better pay better pay."

"I don't even HAVE a Venmo."

"Hmm. Gotta pay though."

"Do you have PayPal?"

"Are we in the year 2015?"

"Look, I have what I have man, I'm not sure what you want from me."

"Figure it out. Grrrrrrrr I'm dangerous."

Danny is now arguing with the troll and you are out \$5. While this continues, roll a perception check. You're trying to beat a 12. You get a +3 wisdom bonus, but you're at a disadvantage because you now believe trolls are real.

If you pass, go to page 21.

If you fail, go to page 20.

Nothing seems out of the ordinary while Danny bickers with the bridge troll. Eventually, he yells out a frustrated, "FINE. I WILL GET VENMO." He pulls out his cell phone and begins downloading the app. Unfortunately, he has not learned how to connect to university Wi-Fi and is at the mercy of his parents' data plan. As the sky starts to darken, he is finally triumphant in his download. At which point he realizes he doesn't have a credit card on him. He yells out, "Hey, do you take IOUs?" There is no response, though you think you hear the faint sound of snoring. Looking at your own phone, it's late and you've missed the event. Unfortunately, this is the end of your journey.

The End

(Unless you'd like to try the bridge on page 13 again?)

As Danny continues to argue with the voice, you realize that the voice is sounding less gravelly during the argument. In fact, it sounds human. This infuses you with courage that you haven't felt since five minutes ago when you didn't believe trolls were real. You decide to use this moment to investigate under the bridge.

Turn to page 16.



"You've got your stories mixed up," you say calmly. "That's giants."

"What?"

"Bones into bread. That's Jack and the Beanstalk. You started with The Billy Goats Gruff, though. So, are you a giant or a troll down there?"

"I'm ... I mean obviously I'm—"

"And if you are a giant," Danny adds, "how do you fit down there? There's not enough space down there. Unless you had some sort of pocket universe situation happening."

"Graarg no I'm a tro—wait wait pocket universe?"

"Well yeah, that's the only way a huge giant would fit under that bridge."

"It's not a tardis kid, what are you saying?"

"It could happen! According to Alan Guth—"

"—Alan Guth did NOT suggest pocket universes were hanging out under bridges to keep trolls in."

"GIANTS. Trolls would fit under the bridge. Anyway, if there was one under the bridge the giant would fit just fine!"

"Who is *teaching* you, the SyFy channel?"

"Who has cable anymore??? What *year* are you in?"

"Look buddy, I'm not sure where you got your inflationary theory knowledge, but—"

"ENOUGH!" you cry out. You are not here to moderate a debate about physical cosmology between a college freshman and someone pretending to be a troll. "This is ridiculous! I'm not giving you \$5 and I'm not attending a physics lecture, so either tell us who you are and what you think you're doing, or let me be on my way!"

"If only I was at a physics lecture," says the voice sadly, "I definitely wouldn't be down here hassling undergrads for loose change." You hear noises under the bridge and see a figure climb out. Unsurprisingly, it is not a troll. It's a young a woman. She looks exhausted and muddy.

"I'm a grad student," she starts, sheepishly, "My name's Bailey. Sorry for scaring you. I fell down here trying to find my new office weeks ago. While I was getting up, a couple college kids walking by heard me groaning and ... I guess they just thought I was some sort of bridge troll and they threw some change at me. I've been doing this ever since."

"But why on earth would you just ... keep doing ... this?" Danny asks, gesturing to the homemade toll box. "I mean, at first it was just a funny way of getting a few extra bucks. My stipend covers my living expenses and I could be doing much worse, but if I can't get conference fees paid, that tanks my career path, so I figured ... you know ... I could just do my research down here while collecting some extra cash," she lets out a heavy sigh, "but the point is moot, because I'm wrapping up for the day, my phone is dead and I *still* can't find the PRB, so there's no conferences, there's no stipend, and I should probably just go back to Iowa."

"The PRB?!" you exclaim. You know that building, or at least of it. It's the Physics Research Building, the current base of operations for Ohio State's physics department. "This path should have led you straight there. Surely, they've updated it to include a branch to your building?"

"Sir, have you seen the path lately? It could barely get you to Smith Lab if you had a cartography degree and a park ranger. I walked in circles before I finally set up shop under the bridge."

"But how could this have happened? It was so clear and accessible when I was here."

"It probably was. But how many years ago was that?" she pauses, and you decline to answer. Being polite, she continues, "I'm not sure if you've researched the growth of university attendance, state universities and the explosion of interest in STEM fields, but the path to physics has taken on far more students than it originally needed to accommodate. Maintenance needs resources, and it needs a lot more of that with the growth its experienced," she pauses again to remove her dead cell phone from her pocket, "Geez, I wish I'd thought to pop into the library before I left. They could have helped me figure out how to sync up the map on the OSU app."

You feel a tug at your chest. You know what it is like to be a graduate student—you experienced it more than once. Her method of survival was certainly *unorthodox*, but you’ve seen PhD candidates do much weirder. You look at her kindly and say, “If you promise that your days as a troll are over, I would be happy to escort you to the physics department. My young ward and I are also trying to find it, and I swear to you that I will aid you both any way I can in order to get you there.”

She smiles and shakes your and Danny’s hands, “Thank you. I’d sincerely appreciate that.”

“Is this what grad studies are like???” Danny asks in alarm. “Yes,” you say, “and it’s one of the most amazing journeys of your life.” With that, the three of you continue your way on the path.



You and your companions cross the bridge without further incident. Bailey stops to empty her box, muttering, “Hmmm. Not a bad back-up plan.” Walking toward the trees, you can see the landscaping equipment you noticed earlier, as well as piles of bricks and cement. You wonder if someone is planning to tend to the path soon; your concern over the well-being of students and faculty attempting their journey to physics education is growing, and you know you can’t personally lead every individual student the way you have for Danny and Bailey.

The path is getting less obscured now, so you take an opportunity to check in with your companions. You turn to Danny, “So young man, what has led you to this field in this place?” “That’s a very good question,” Danny responds, “To be honest, I’m not really sure. I just know that I liked my physics classes and I think space is cool. Studying physics seemed as good a choice as any, and I heard Ohio State had good tutoring resources if I had trouble with the math portions. I wasn’t exactly expecting to get this turned around on my first day, though.”

"That's how I started, too," Bailey chimes in, "I was good at math and after I got yelled at for taking apart my dad's stereo speakers, I figured I should learn how to put them back together. After I did that and my grounding ended, I wanted to know why they worked. Anyway, here we are." "But why does it work?" Danny asks. Bailey smiles, "You'll be able to figure that out yourself by your third year." You chuckle and wonder if Bailey will be teaching any introductory physics classes in the future. You imagine if she has any say in things, Danny will be well versed in electromagnetism well before his undergraduate experience ends.

The path starts to change as you walk. Imperceptibly at first, but you notice it's a little less "rustic" looking as you go on. It's wider now, with more bricks added across, though the mortar is messy and the bricks are uneven. Still, it's a marked improvement. You comment as much to your companions who nod appreciatively before continuing a conversation about the ins and outs of financial aid offices.

Quick, roll a dexterity-saving throw! The number to beat is 10. If you are muddy, take -1 to the roll, as you are slippery.

If you pass, go to page 29.

If you fail, go to page 30.

You don't see what has tripped you, but whatever it is it came out of nowhere. Thankfully, years of tai chi have left you well balanced and you're able to catch yourself and end up back on your feet no worse for wear. Danny and Bailey immediately check on you, their conversation coming to a halt at the prospect of their unofficial guide becoming injured.

"Are you all right?" Danny asks with concern. You take a deep breath, collect yourself for a moment and respond, "I'm fine, thank you. Just a little rattled, but nothing I can't handle. Every adventure comes with a few stumbles!" Danny sighs in relief as Bailey looks over the road curiously. "What was that?" she asks, "I thought I saw something scurrying along, but it was so quick I didn't get a good look."

"Probably just a squirrel or something," Danny responds. This seems plausible. University squirrels are well known for being fearless menaces, though how much of that is squirrel evolution and how much of it is enthusiastic students sharing their snacks is debatable. Still, you are left feeling uneasy and remain on high alert.

You now have a +1 bonus to future perception checks.

Turn to page 31.

You don't see what did it, but you fall to the ground with a hard thud. Danny and Bailey immediately end their conversation and help you up, worried for the well-being of their impromptu guide.

"Oh my gosh, are you ok?" Bailey asks, "What even was that?" "It was probably just one of those overfed squirrels. The students really ought to stop feeding them, they're absolutely out of control now," you respond, angrily. You collect yourself before apologizing for your tone. You assure them that all adventures come with the occasional stumble, but still demand Danny promise you that he will not feed the campus squirrels before you agree to continue on your journey.

You didn't take any physical damage from the fall, but you are annoyed now, and as a result are less careful. **-1 to future perception checks.**

Go on to the next page.

After the incident, you continue on. The path is still rustic, but your companions are being considerably more careful now, less chatty than before. You think you must be starting to get close, and you're excited to show these young students the place where your journey once began. It's important for them to see it's not all just unlabeled roads, troll bridges and chaotic squirrels, and it's important to you that you find the people responsible for removing those hazards so it's not as perilous going forward. As you consider these things, you think you hear a faint sound.

Roll a perception check. You need to beat a 15. You get +3 wisdom and whatever modifiers from previous pages.

If you pass, go to page 32.

If you fail, go to page 33.

You are certain you hear persistent buzzing, but not the gentle buzzing of a bee. No, this sounds mechanical, like a piece of machinery gone awry. You motion your friends to stay quiet while you try to find the source of the sound. It's coming from off the path to the right. You're getting so close to the end, though. Do you choose to investigate?

If yes, go to page 35.

If no, go to page 33.

You walk on unbothered. You're positive you can see Smith Lab off in the distance now, and no amount of paranoia will stop you. You point triumphantly and shout, "Over there, my young friends!" and gesture for them to follow you.

You make it 10 feet before something crashes by you again, this time catching you fully by surprise with no chance of responding. You realize now that this is not a Dorito-fueled squirrel. No, this is much more powerful, driven and far less reasonable. You've been ambushed by a robot lawnmower. Even worse, it's managed to get the hem of your pants caught in its blades.

In a panic you look toward Bailey and Danny for help, but realize that Danny has passed out from shock and Bailey has run back toward her bridge screaming. After everything, this is still somehow the most ridiculous scenario you have ever found yourself in, and now you must face it alone.

Go on to the next page.

You put up a good fight, but it's a robot lawnmower and it has your shoelaces. Every move you take is hindered by your fear of becoming inadvertently sans shoes. *Is this how I meet my end? Shoeless and attacked by automated lawncare equipment?* you wonder to yourself, kicking your left foot wildly. It seems like something that would happen to an adventurer, but not how you expected your physics career to go.

Thankfully, you eventually shake it off, though it chases you before eventually running out of gas. By the time you are done, you are sure the event has already started, and given your current state, it's far too late now. You manage to get Danny upright again and try to coax Bailey out from under her bridge again before deciding to end the adventure for the day and go home. You can always come back to the path later.

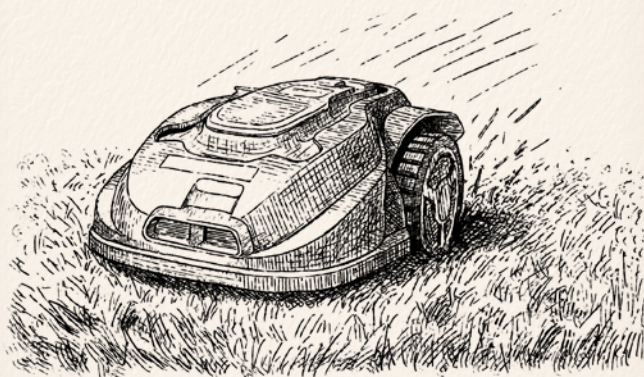
The End

(Unless you'd like to go back to a previous section and try again?)

If there's a machine running afoul, best take a look to make sure it's nothing serious. You say as much to Danny and Bailey, telling them to stay a safe distance behind you before moving toward the noise.

As you approach, the buzzing sound gets louder and is clearly moving. You hear another noise, too, almost like something is struggling against the machine. It seems like this is all happening behind a row of bushes. You quietly part some branches and look.

Out of all the bizarre things that have happened today, this is probably the strangest. The buzzing is revealed as a robot lawnmowing device. You've seen these before but note that this one appears to be running considerably faster than other models. Stranger, though, is that it appears to be chasing something. You search for a bit, then gasp in instant recognition.



Go on to the next page.

That something is Rick Harrison! You've met him many times, and he has helped you with your donations to the university. You're not used to seeing him running in a panic from a rogue lawnmower, though. You call out, "Rick! What is happening?"

"Oh my gosh, Dr. Roe, is that you? Thank goodness!!!! I tried to set up this lawnmower to handle the overbrush on the physics path, but it's gone haywire! Get help!!! Quick!"

You think about lawnmower mechanics for about half a second before a whirlwind of black-and-gray rush past you and your travel companions. You see the figures crouch and become impossibly still for a moment, seemingly readying an action. As they pounce at the rogue grass management system, recognition hits you, and you yell:

"Romee! Charlotte! What on Earth are you doing here???"

Before you can truly thank and/or chastise them for sneaking out of the house to save you, you see they have nearly fully disemboweled the "monster" before you. You shudder to think of how they'd handle rogue mice. Charlotte, the leader of this ordeal, jumps down from the corpse of the mangled lawnmower, trots in front of you, sits and proudly presents a bolt at your feet. She purrs as you take it and pushes her head in for congratulatory chin scratches. Looking at Romee, she is still batting at one of the loose gears, clearly not done with the hunt.

"Don't worry sir, I've got this," Bailey says as she grabs some rope from her bag and begins fashioning some makeshift harnesses for your cats. You thank Bailey, remind Charlotte and Romee that good kitties don't sneak out of their house to hunt automatons at the local state university, but that you're glad they saved the day. At last, you turn to Rick. "Are you ok?"

"Oh wow," he responds, "Wow, that was crazy. Yes I'm good now, thank you! All of you! I can't believe I was just chased by a lawnmower. I'm never asking the Freshman computer science students to program a lawnmower again!" You glance over him for injuries but notice he's not in his usual professional attire. "Rick ... are ... are you in coveralls?"

He looks down at himself, embarrassed, "Ah, I was doing a little work on the physics path. It's not as well maintained as it should be, and I wanted to have it cleared up a bit before the event tonight," he looks at his watch, "Which we are late for now! Oh goodness, I need to get moving! You need to get moving. And you two ... ?" he pauses, realizing that he does not know the two people kneeling over the corpse of the defunct lawncare device.

"They are coming, too. I've been helping them find their way through the path. We really need to get that fixed up soon. Hopefully we can chat later, but for now—yes! Let's get moving!"

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The four of you—now with the unhappily harnessed Romee and Charlotte—are now nearing Smith Lab, Rick thankfully taking the lead, having more familiarity with main campus. He makes small talk with Danny and Bailey, telling them how excited he is for some recent developments and renovations in the College of Arts and Sciences, encouraging them to utilize their resources regularly. You make slow progress with the inclusion of two cats, given their lack of concern with where you are trying to lead them vs. where they are trying to go. But it's steady, and eventually you give up on trying to coax them and carry them to your final location.

When you finally get to the doors of Smith Lab, Rick holds them open. You are so relieved to *finally* be at the end of your journey that you walk in without a second thought, leading your two young companions into the building you spent so much of your youth in.

At this moment, nothing more could possibly go wrong—or at least that's what you think when your feet go out from under you, and the room goes black.

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Your head hurts as much as your pride. You make a mental note to bring a helmet with you for the next time you visit Ohio State's campus and attempt to get up, but find you are fully prone. Something has bound you tightly and no matter how hard you struggle, you are stuck. You look down at yourself and see thick, red vines, dripping with sap holding each appendage to the floor and rapidly wrapping itself around your trunk.

You quickly take inventory of your surroundings and see the entire building is covered with these vines. "Dr. Roel!" calls a voice to your left—it's Bailey's, but you can barely see her through the tangle of vines swarming her, "Are you all right? What is this stuff?" "Is it an experiment gone wrong?" you hear the voice of Danny coming from your right.

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"I played a video game about something like this once and *mff mffle ffrrr!!*" You look over and watch in horror as the vines wrap themselves around his face, silencing him.

You think back to everything you know about botany—nope, nothing about sentient, crimson, vining monstrosities is coming to mind. You hear Romee hiss and see her and Charlotte evading the vines, but not managing to free you with their sharp claws. It's getting harder to breathe, and you feel the vegetal appendages slowly crush the air out of you. You gasp for one last breath, fearing it may be your last. Cutting through your panic is another thought—grief. Grief that this journey you took two young physics students on has come to such an untimely end. You close your eyes and prepare for the worst.

"Not today!"

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You blink in confusion while the wild spectacle that is Rick Harrison unfolds in front of you. He's gotten an arm out and is pawing through what seems to be a bottomless satchel before triumphantly revealing a gilded letter opener. Though it is small and your vision is obscured by the vining monstrosity, you see it gleam with what you swear is an internal, warm glow. It is covered in ornate etchings of runes and has a peculiar magic about it. "The letter opener of disentanglement!" a voice in the distance yells out, "I thought it a myth!"

Wielding this epic tool, Rick yells out, "Disrepair and age may have led to your residence here, but monstrosities will not stand in this hall of learning! Be gone!" With that, his arm arcs through the chaos of plant matter. You hear the shrill and agonized screams of the gnarled vines as the tool makes contact and see that, with each pass, the letter opener of disentanglement has sliced each vine in two, both sides shriveling to dust unceremoniously.

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As Rick works tirelessly to free you from the sticky, red mass of shrubbery you feel relief wash over you. He tosses you a spare dagger and says, "This is too much for one man—do you accept the call to action?" You've come too far now, and eagerly take it into your hands, triumphantly. You follow Rick's lead and swipe at the vine constricting the man next to you—who you recognize as Emeritus Professor, Dr. David Stroud. He thanks you profusely and points toward a group of people ensnared. "Those undergrads and their advisor are still stuck! We have to free them!"

You and Dr. Stroud continue to work at the sticky, red vines. On the other side of the building, Rick has successfully freed a group of astrophysicist researchers and begun working on a tangle of graduate assistants. You feel powerful and invigorated! You feel like you are truly making a difference and aiding these students stuck on their journeys! And now, as you work toward the end of an epic adventure, aided by students, an advancement professional, both of your cats and an esteemed physics professor, you realize that everything happening right now is patently ridiculous.

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Yes, obviously Rick Harrison wielding a magic letter opener is certainly weird, but beyond that—sentient lawnmowers? Your cats magically showing up? Bridge trolls? The sudden appearance of a literal physical path that magically takes you to the physics building? You ponder what could be happening a moment until you hear a soft, “Dr. Roe? Dr. Roe, did you nod off? Dr. Roe?”

You open your eyes. You look around and recognize your surroundings—you are in Thompson Library where you’d sat down moments ago before the event in Smith Laboratory to discuss career and education pathways with a student. They were excited to hear more about your experiences studying under Arthur Epstein and the possibility of benefiting from the travel fund in the future, you recall.

“Sir, are you all right?”

It’s Danny, except he looks considerably less lost at the moment, having returned with two hot teas from the cafe. “Quite fine, quite fine,” you say, shaking off the confusion. You notice the chair you’re in is incredibly comfortable and assume that you must have stopped to rest your eyes after the exciting day of touring the campus. “Just resting. Anyway, where were we, again?”

Danny smiles, "We were just finishing up. Oh, here, this is for you," he hands you a green tea, "I wanted to say thanks." "Oh, what for?" you ask, taking the piping hot beverage from his hands.

"For helping me navigate my path."

You look at him in wonder as he takes a sip, shakes your hand and bids farewell. You aren't sure what adventures will come for him next, but you are confident that, whatever comes, he'll have the resources to face them. He is a Roe scholar, after all.

And with that, you make your way to Smith Lab to enjoy the rest of your evening.

The End

