

Writing Alchemy Episode 31 – Tarragon Songsteel and the Underwater Maze

Transcribed by Larcie

[*Intro music that is an energetic, electronic song begins playing.]

TOBI: You are listening to Writing Alchemy, stories that step outside the oppressive grind of the everyday world with your host, writer and artist Fay Onyx.

[*Music swells and then fades to a background volume.]

FAY: Meet Tarragon Songsteel the orc bard in this character introduction episode. Tarragon is a student at the celebrated Adventurers Academy, and right now they are studying creative problem-solving. Join them for a surreal training exercise where they attempt to retrieve an orb from a mysterious underwater maze.

[*Music swells and then fades out entirely.]

FAY: Hello and welcome to the 31st episode of Writing Alchemy. I am Fay Onyx and today is the twelfth game episode of Unfamiliar Heroes, my new podcast series where I work with players and storytellers to create new representations of disabled, sick, and neurodiverse people using tabletop role-playing games. Today's game is the character introduction episode that I'm calling "Tarragon Songsteel and the Underwater Maze."

Today's episode is preparation for The Owlbear Reintroduction Program game. In it, the players' characters are students at the Adventurers Academy. For their first internship mission, they will be participating in The Owlbear Reintroduction Program, a project that is reestablishing owlbears in wilderness areas where the owlbear populations have been previously wiped out. Of course, this is not as simple as it sounds, because owlbears are large, ferocious, magical predators. Throw in a group of skilled poachers determined to steal owlbear eggs and things are bound to get interesting.

This game was played using Magic Goes Awry, which is a game system that I have created. Magic Goes Awry is designed to capture the fun of Dungeons and Dragons in a free game that is accessible to a wider range of people. I created it to have little math, fewer things to keep

track of, and more room for creativity, while still having enough options for people to create a diverse range of fantastical characters.

Note that internet connectivity problems have affected some of the audio in today's game. I did my best to fix the affected sections, but there are a few areas where I did need to cut in some replacement audio.

Now I'm going to take a quick moment to say thank you to all of the people who help make this show possible. To each and every one of my Patreon backers, a huge heartfelt thank you for setting aside some of your money to support Writing Alchemy. Your contributions keep this show going! To all of my guests and participants past, present, and future, thank you for putting in the time, effort, and commitment to add your unique perspective and experience to this show. I can't do this without you! And to each person who took the time to comment and share this show with others, thank you for helping this project grow. Your participation is creating a community and I am so grateful for that!

Finally I'm going to quickly mention that you can follow Writing Alchemy on Twitter at [@Writing_Alchemy](https://twitter.com/Writing_Alchemy), on Facebook at facebook.com/WritingAlchemy, and on Google+ at plus.google.com/+WritingAlchemy. You can visit writingalchemy.net to find all of the Writing Alchemy podcasts, articles, stories, and other content. And if you want to help me keep this project going, you can pledge your support on Patreon at patreon.com/writingalchemy.

And now, let's get to the show!

"Tarragon Songsteel and the Underwater Maze."

[*Game theme, a bright, mysterious piece of world music featuring flute and percussion, plays.]

FAY: So I'm Fay Onyx. My pronouns are ze and hir, and I am queer, asexual, genderqueer... I have anxiety, and I have a chronic back condition, and I'm also privileged in that I am white and middle-class. And something interesting about myself for today is that right now my cat is snuggled up to me, but she's doing this thing that she often does, which is- she's a little bit obsessed about sleeping on my hands. She will accept feet and legs if hands are not available, but right now she's awkwardly pinning down my left arm. And she is so cute and so comfortable, so we're doing this thing together.

ROBIN: That's adorable. And quite an introduction to follow. (both laugh)

FAY: She's not my first cat who's been obsessed with hands, either. (**ROBIN** laughs)

ROBIN: So my name is Robin, and my pronouns are they/them or she/her. I am dyslexic and I have chronic fatigue syndrome, so we're having to be aware of not making the sessions too long, and sometimes I need a little bit of time to read things if there's stuff to read. (**FAY:** Mhm.) As I say, I am chronically ill, which has led to me being classified as disabled with chronic fatigue syndrome and EDS. I've got mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. I am privileged in the fact that I am white and well-educated. And I am in the UK- I'm UK-born as well, which adds to [the] sort of levels of privilege. I'm genderqueer and bisexual. And just an interesting fact about myself: I do live-action roleplay and I recently spent a weekend in a magical realm discussing terrible music with the priests.

FAY: (laughs) That's awesome.

ROBIN: Yeah.

FAY: That is really exciting. Okay, so... I'm going to jump us into the character creation. (**ROBIN:** Okay.) And what I'm thinking I'm gonna do is I'm gonna start by reading to you some summaries of aspects of the culture in the particular setting that this is gonna be set in.

ROBIN: Okay, that's great.

FAY: The setting for this is called Crossroads.

[*Crossroads setting mystery theme, an ambient electronic track, begins playing.]

FAY: And the land of Crossroads is a kingdom that exists in a mysterious ring of mist. So this ring of mist goes entirely around the kingdom. Trade comes through the ring, but the nature of the mist and what lies beyond it is still uncertain. This is an eclectic high-fantasy setting with significant fairy-tale influences. It is a quirky place of great ecological and cultural diversity, which contains a pocket of every kind of person, culture, or creature. This means that the types of characters available [are] deliberately left open-ended, and people are welcome to bring in elements from other genres such as steam-powered airships, clockwork golems, and gunslingers - like, particularly magic-powered ones - if they would like.

ROBIN: Um, may I interrupt?

FAY: Oh, absolutely, yeah.

[*Music fades out.]

ROBIN: You used the term “golems.” And I know that there are some Jewish people who are uncomfortable with that being used in fictional settings (**FAY:** Oh.) because it’s related to Jewish history and Jewish law.

FAY: Oh, okay. That is worth knowing.

ROBIN: Yeah, so an alternative word I’d seen suggested is “constructs.”

FAY: Um, okay, absolutely. Thank you so much.

[*Music resumes.]

FAY: So the social structure of Crossroads is that Crossroads is a heavily organized society with many laws, rules, and regulations. This is actually based on medieval England- medieval times in general, but medieval England because BBC does give so many good documentaries. (both laugh) And so it’s very litigious, and there’s many laws that cover many aspects of daily life. It’s a densely populated kingdom, and so every resource is regulated. Hunting, harvesting, gathering- everything requires a permit or a fee. So that’s kind of the background of the setting.

ROBIN: It’s cool. That’s pretty cool.

FAY: Yeah, so now we’re just gonna jump into the steps of the character creation from the website... and I believe that you already have a concept for your character. Would you like to share that now?

ROBIN: Yeah, I’ve had a look through the character creation guide, and I gotta say I’ve got some basics, but there’s still a lot of planning, you know, extra detail to add in this. So I was thinking I’d like to play a bard class. (**FAY:** Awesome.) I’ve never played a bard before, so that will be fun.

FAY: Yeah, and they’re designed to actually be pretty powerful in this setting, unlike other settings where they’re... not. (both laugh)

ROBIN: Should be quite exciting. And then I was thinking about what race, and I couldn't decide whether to go for an orc or a centaur. And I think it ultimately comes down to how I could keep them mobile. (**FAY:** Mmm.) Because I'm wanting to create a character which reflects my chronic pain problems. And that does mean that while I am mobile, sometimes I get- I can only go for so long before I get very tired. So if you've got a character doing that, you wouldn't want to be stopping the adventure every couple of hours and going, "No, I just can't today. I'm too tired." (**FAY:** Mhm. Mhm.) Like that's not really possible, so it's thinking of mobility aids which might make them better and things like that, so.

FAY: Well, so this is a magical setting, so it would be... (**ROBIN:** Yeah.) So basically, one of the founders for the academy actually has a disability herself, so there's a lot of... assistance available in that way because the academy itself provides both mundane and magical technology to students. Every character gets a magical item, and one option is a magical mobility aid. So theoretically, if you want to borrow something from the kind of Dungeons-&-Dragons-type setting, you could have a floating disk that your character could just lie down on. (**ROBIN:** Okay, yeah.) Or sit on. The challenges of that would be that it might be a little big for, say, going into a forested area or certain spaces. Which would give it an inherent limitation, which can be useful for gameplay.

ROBIN: Mhm, okay. Um, I think even with that, I might go for the orc. (**FAY:** Sure.) It's a little bit more fleshed out in my head, I think.

FAY: Yeah, sure. Absolutely.

ROBIN: I'm gonna go for an orc with chronic fatigue and with the chronic pain.

FAY: Awesome. Yeah, and one of the things about the setting is because there's so much cultural diversity, there's a lot of room for, like, different orc cultures and very different appearances. One of the characters you'll be encountering is Kyra Piper, who is one of the founders of the academy, and she is an orc as well. She's got the bright green skin, bright blue hair... sort of [a] vibrantly-colored-typeorc. But you're welcome to make your orc have whatever sort of appearance fits what you want your orc to be.

ROBIN: Okay, that's really cool. I like that. And is it okay to have something like [taking] a special herbal preparation every day, which helps with the symptoms? It can help with the pain, but I was thinking

maybe I'd make them a bit more clumsy. (**FAY**: Sure.) Or forgetful would be the other one. Yeah, maybe it makes them a bit more forgetful. (**FAY**: Okay.) Or the trade-off is they don't take it. Then maybe they can't be as physical, but they can remember things, so.

FAY: Oh yeah, that's a pretty good trade-off, and medications affecting the mind is a pretty common side effect for a lot of medications too. (**ROBIN**: Yeah.) Absolutely.

ROBIN: Okay.

FAY: (narration) The audio here cuts out several times, but what Robin is saying is that one of the types of defensive magical training that comes up later in character creation involves having a magical staff.

ROBIN: And I'd like, even if it's a magical staff, I'd like being able to use that as a walking aid as well. (**FAY**: Sure.) Not a- it's a magical staff, but it's not a magical walking aid, if that makes sense. (laughs) But it means that I can use that as something to lean on.

FAY: Absolutely. Yeah, so jumping into choosing your number: so there's three number sets.

ROBIN: Mhm. I was gonna go for the middle one and go for a four-four split, so quite balanced.

FAY: Absolutely, that sounds awesome. And so now we can go through and choose your basic class abilities. (**ROBIN**: Okay.) Yeah, so basically you have access to all of the abilities, but the bard-specific one that is super bard-specific is your character has two types of bardic performance that are their best performances. (**ROBIN**: Yeah.) [There's a] diverse range of performance options available. I do recommend choosing, like, two different ones. So not just two physical ones or not just two, um, oral ones, but choosing ones that are significantly different because that gives your character more flexibility in how they use their bardic magic.

ROBIN: Okay. Yup. I was thinking of enhance and transportation, so how does that sound? Just have a quick look?

FAY: Oh, for the effects of the magic, absolutely. But what I'm talking about is the actual performance itself. (**ROBIN**: Yeah.) So is your character playing a fiddle? Is your character juggling? Is your character reciting or singing? There's, like, a physical thing your character is doing when they're casting their magic.

ROBIN: Yeah, I thought one of them, maybe, is singing. Not sure about the other.

FAY: Yeah, so I have a wide range of options. Playing some sort of musical instrument... you can do singing, oratory recitation, feats of skill or dexterity, comedy, juggling, circus arts, dance, theater... There's, um-

ROBIN: Ooh, I have an idea. I think I would like to do firebreathing.

FAY: Sure. That's gonna be really exciting. (**ROBIN** laughs) Okay, and so you're wanting to do transportation magic. Your character can use their firebreathing or their singing (**ROBIN:** Mhm) to create transportation-based effects: so like, speeding up travel, summoning magical mounts, potentially even up to things like teleportation. Although being a big effect, that does have a lot more risk associated with it.

ROBIN: Yeah, I thought I'd do another magical performance (**FAY:** Mhm) to be enhance.

FAY: Awesome.

ROBIN: And I was thinking [for my] skill, derring-do.

FAY: Awesome. I was hoping someone would take derring-do. Yeah, so derring-do is basically that three times a day, the character is prepared - which means they'll be significantly more likely to succeed - when they attempt some sort of daring feat of acrobatics, athletics, climbing, escaping, flying, riding, or swimming. (**ROBIN:** Excellent.) So that means that you have one ability left.

ROBIN: Okay, I was thinking of natural sympathy.

FAY: Absolutely. Do you have an idea of what you want off the druid list?

ROBIN: I think I was looking at the weather effects.

FAY: Oh, weather magic. Yeah, so there's two options of how you could do this. So one option is that you could have your magical performance allow you to perform weather magic. (**ROBIN:** Okay.) Or you can have druid training, which means that you would have a deep connection to nature. You would have a symbol of power, which is the thing that druids need to cast druid magic.

ROBIN: I think actually I might change it, then, to being magical performance.

FAY: Absolutely, so you specifically wanted weather magic?

ROBIN: Yeah.

FAY: Awesome. That's particularly interesting, as the character creation session that I've already done was with Oriana, and Oriana's character is particularly sensitive to temperature, so.

ROBIN: Oh, okay. That's interesting.

FAY: Yeah, so having someone who can control the weather is definitely interesting. Of course, if that goes wrong... (**ROBIN:** True.) You know. (both laugh) But that's a way, you know, [to make] it interesting.

ROBIN: We'll deal with that if that happens.

FAY: Absolutely, if it comes up. Awesome. Yeah, so there's the defensive training options. So basically, it sounds like your character is wanting to use a staff for their magical defense?

ROBIN: Yes, that was my first pick. And then the second choice I was looking at was dodging.

FAY: Awesome. And so now we have skills. So your character gets a total of eight skills, and again, this is basically just what your character's particularly good at.

ROBIN: Mhm. Um, I was thinking... survival, animal handling, (**FAY:** Mhm.) climbing, swimming, riding, arcana- how's that pronounced? Ahr-kay-nuh or ahr-kah-nuh?

FAY: Um, however you wanna pronounce it. I usually pronounce it knowledge ahr-kah-nuh, but I imagine it's regional. (laughs) (**ROBIN:** Okay.) I've been shocked at how many words have totally regional pronunciations. It's really fascinating.

ROBIN: And then when they don't come up that often in everyday conversation, it's even stranger.

FAY: Yeah. Oh yeah, yeah.

ROBIN: Okay, so ahr-kah-nuh. That's fine. Have I said escaping?

FAY: Not yet, but now you have.

ROBIN: Very good (laughs) I think nature would be good, actually. That would go along with-

FAY: Yeah, absolutely. That's a good knowledge to have for an animal-focused adventure, yup. And also, your character is someone who does weather magic. Knowledge of nature might be useful.

ROBIN: Useful, yes. (both laugh)

FAY: Okay, so now it's just finishing touches.

ROBIN: So I was thinking that they would be... sort of excitable and enthusiastic and quite lively. (**FAY:** Mhm.) And then as a goal, I was thinking I liked the word "discover," so it's all about discovering new things, learning new things.

FAY: Awesome. What pronouns does your character have, by the way?

ROBIN: They/them.

FAY: Sure. So do you have an idea for a name, or are we gonna need-

ROBIN: I have no idea.

FAY: Oh yeah? Okay. (laughs)

ROBIN: I'm really bad at naming characters. Anything, any guidance you've got there would be helpful.

FAY: Um, yeah, I'm gonna actually just Google bard names. A lot of times, I'll just go to books that have lists of names in the, like, sections, (**ROBIN** laughs) and I'll just be like, "Oh, that'll work." I'm kinda curious- Wizards of the Coast has a D&D character name generator. That's interesting.

ROBIN: Oh great, okay.

FAY: Do you wanna try their half-orc names? (laughs) Uh, half-orc bard names. Okay, so they have suggested, "Darella, D-A-R-E-L-L-A." I can get more suggestions if you would like. I will be forgetting these, so.

ROBIN: That's not bad.

FAY: Yeah, it's not bad. I'm not sure how that is pronounced, so I'm gonna do that again. Ohhh, okay. Now they're just giving me things that are, like, impronounceable. With lots of the same letters. (both giggle) I don't know how to- that one actually looks like a cool one. "Songsteel" is a pretty good last name, though. For a bard. I don't know if you care about having a last-

ROBIN: "Songsteel," yeah. That's very strong. (**FAY:** Yeah.) Now, I like that, then.

FAY: "Belbin." Huh. Some of these look Scandinavian, and I'm just not familiar- but some of these are like, how many of that letter do you- wow, that's a lot of S's. (**ROBIN** snorts) Um, some of these look Celtic, maybe. Wow, the first one was alright. (**ROBIN:** Yeah.) I do sometimes go to just, like, nature things. Not, you know, not nature things that would be pseudo-Native American because I definitely want to avoid that, but things that are traditionally nature words. Like gemstone names. Types of trees, so ash and oak and willow and other tree types that are common names. You got amber and ruby and... can go like lapis or sapphire or...

ROBIN: How about... [they] might be named Tarragon.

FAY: Tarragon? Oh, like the spice? Awesome.

ROBIN: Yes.

FAY: Or the herb or something. Cool. Yay, names! Okay, and do you have a physical appearance in mind for your character?

ROBIN: Um, I was thinking that they are a little short for an orc, but they're still noticeably orc-sized, still very stocky and muscular. They've got green and sort of sea-green mottled skin as well as the usual orc... (**FAY:** Mhm.) They also have extra wrappings around the... knees and the elbows and the wrists.

FAY: To kind of have support?

ROBIN: Yeah.

FAY: Do they have a general style of dress that's noticeable?

ROBIN: It's quite soft. It's loose and comfortable, but not really elegant because it's an orc. But you know, loose, flowing fabrics.

FAY: Mmkay. And is there, like, a core idea you have for a backstory?

ROBIN: Yeah, I was thinking that they come from a family group [that] is very supportive as well as being very connected and loyal to each other and [allows] each other to really develop their own individual personality. (**FAY:** Yeah) Which is why you get orc bards. Because if it turns out that a young orc has a (**FAY:** (narration to replace unclear audio) talent) for singing or breathing fire, sometimes it's best to encourage that [than to] accidentally burn the house down when they're practicing in private. (**FAY** laughs) This means that [in] this particular family group, it's quite common for them to train to become adventurers because it's something that a lot of them feel drawn to, this individual exploration. So there's a lot of support from the family, encouraging this orc to go off and train to be an adventurer, and then [they're] able to bring the backstories and songs to share with the family group after a successful adventure.

FAY: Awesome. How did your character come to the Adventurers Academy?

ROBIN: I think it was a case of they would have been concerned because they know that they're maybe not as fit and healthy as some other adventurers. So another adventurer said, "Hey, this is somewhere you can go, and they will show you how to do it safely."

FAY: Absolutely. And certainly the Adventurers Academy is a place where people with disabilities can get training that is more specific - in terms of specific to how to do things not from an able-bodied perspective, but from the perspective of other adventurers who have disabilities.

[*Podcast announcements music, a calm electronic track, comes in.]

FAY: If you are enjoying today's show, please help me keep it going by heading over to my Patreon page at [www dot P A T R E O N dot com slash Writing Alchemy](http://www.patreon.com/Alchemy) and pledging a monthly donation. Even a dollar a month is a meaningful contribution that helps me keep doing this. These pledges pay for things like audio equipment, web hosting services, and acquiring all of the interesting gaming systems we will be playing in this series. It is also my hope to grow my Patreon funding to the point where I can afford to increase accessibility with things like episode transcriptions.

I believe that art is an important source of community sustenance in these challenging times. It also gives us a place to learn, grow, and create new ways of doing things. However, in the larger culture, intersectionally marginalized artists are under valued and under paid.

It is hard for us to have the resources to keep doing this important work. That is why your Patreon pledges are so important. They help me pay my costs and support myself as an artist.

I know that not everyone can afford a dollar a month and there are non-monetary ways that all of you can support this show. The biggest is sharing the show with your friends and telling them how much you enjoy it. You can also help out by rating and reviewing Writing Alchemy on iTunes and Stitcher. Each five star review helps new people find this show.

And to all of my Patreon backers, guests, participants, and community members: Thank you! Your support makes this show possible!

[*Music swells and then fades.]

FAY: Okay, so the mini-adventure I have set up is a training sequence. Basically, it's a little vignette of your character's time at the academy, and it takes place in Kyra Piper's Creative Problem Solving class.

(**ROBIN:** Okay.) So to remind you, Kyra Piper is an orc, and she is someone with a disability, and she's one of the founders of the academy. So she's a[n] orc with bright green skin and bright blue hair, and she has a hovering wheelchair. And in this class, there are many different challenges that students went through: some of `em training individually, some of `em training as groups. (**ROBIN:** Mhm.) This is [an] individual training sequence, and it took place in a large magical arena that is at the center of the academy. And this arena is basically very magical, and so it can produce illusions that are very real-feeling and that are very simulationist. So when your character enters the arena-

[*An ambient electronic track that combines a sense of wonder with a bit of ominous mystery, begins playing.]

FAY: -in front of them is a thin ring of black sand, which surrounds a large, deep pool of salty water. Just below the surface of this water, a school of tiny silver fish is darting around. In the blue depths, you can just barely make out large, irregular dark shapes. And so as you enter the arena, Kyra hands your character an amulet, which will allow them to breathe underwater.

The goal of this challenge is to find and retrieve a fist-sized crystal orb. And this is a radiant orb, and it emits both a soft white light and a gentle warmth, which can be felt or seen at the exact same distance. So you can feel the warmth from a good ways away, as well as see it.

And your goal is to find that and retrieve it. (**ROBIN**: Okay.) What does Tarragon do?

[*Music fades out.]

ROBIN: Let's see. I think Tarragon will approach the pool of water quite slowly at first because they're not sure what's living in there. And they are going to kneel down at the edge, quite close to the water, and have a good peer in and see if they can see what the darker shapes are.

[*Music resumes.]

FAY: Uh, yeah, so there's these large shapes underneath. From this distance, Tarragon can't make out the exact dimensions. The water's fairly clear, but it's not perfectly clear, so there's a kind of effect that is often seen underwater, where the shapes just merge into kind of a mysterious dark background (**ROBIN**: Mhm.) And there's a little rippling on the surface of the water, which makes it hard to completely see exactly what the shapes are. But some of them seem a bit brownish, a color that you might associate with kelp.

ROBIN: Okay, okay. So making sure that the amulet is secured on their body-

[*Music fades out.]

ROBIN: -they stand up and check that everything is secured to them (**FAY**: Absolutely.) and carefully set their firebreathing equipment to one side because we can't get that wet. Then they're diving into the water.

[*A splash followed by ongoing underwater sounds.]

[*Atmospheric underwater music, a mysterious, dark, and rich soundscape featuring synths and a bell melody, begins playing softly. (Description taken from composer's webpage; see episode post on Writing Alchemy website for link.)]

FAY: So underneath the water, the shapes become more clear, and as your character swims farther down, your character encounters more of these little tiny silver fish underneath them. In the water, they can see a large complex that is [made] of rocks and also kelp. And there are multiple different entrances to it, so it's basically an underwater system of many caves. The caves themselves seem to be kind of- they

have lots of right angles to them, so they, like, make fairly sharp turns, and it looks somewhat like a maze.

ROBIN: Oh, okay. First of all, [I will] make sure that the orb isn't outside of the cave.

FAY: Yeah, so there's multiple entrances to this maze. It's fairly large, so if your character wants to, they can swim around the perimeter. And the orb is not perceivable anywhere outside of the maze.

ROBIN: Okay, in which case I will swim into one of the entrances, the one which is closest to me.

FAY: So Tarragon swims into the entrance that's closest.

ROBIN: Yes.

FAY: Okay. Well, inside you get a very clear view of what the maze is made of, and it is a combination of rock and kelp. And the kelp does not seem natural; it seems like it's, you know, bent into these right angles. (**ROBIN:** Mhm.) And it's in very thick, dense mats. So you have mats of kelp [alternating] with this black stone.

ROBIN: What's it feel like to touch?

FAY: Um, the kelp is fairly tough and rubbery.

ROBIN: Okay, so Tarragon will slowly, keeping one hand on the wall of the maze, (**FAY:** Mhm.) keep swimming forward until they find a turn or a change in direction.

FAY: So the tunnel goes forward about fifteen feet. Then there's a turn to the right, another turn to the right, a turn to the left, and then there's an intersection.

ROBIN: Um, they follow the turns, and when they get to the intersection, they've got their left hand on the left-hand wall. (**FAY:** Sure.) So they will take, then, the left-hand intersections so that they can carry on following that wall around.

FAY: Okay. As Tarragon gets farther into this maze, is your character going to take the tactic that every time they reach a turn, they take the left-hand one?

ROBIN: That's right.

FAY: Okay. Uh, so... I'm gonna have Tarragon roll two dice, and let me know how many successes you have.

ROBIN: Is this for physical or for mind?

FAY: It's basically a mind roll.

ROBIN: Okay. You want a roll under the mind number.

FAY: Mhm.

ROBIN: [Under] four I get no successes. I rolled five and six.

FAY: (laughs) Okay, yeah, so as Tarragon progresses, they don't feel like they're necessarily getting anywhere immediately, and in fact, they end up going out one of the other exits of the maze.

ROBIN: Oh. Okay. So on sort of finding themselves [at] this exit, Tarragon will stand there confused for a moment, but then will gather up their will and determination and push themselves back into the cave through this option. (**FAY:** Mhm.) And this time, they're going to swim until they get to the first intersection, and then they're going to try and remember which way they came from.

FAY: Yeah, so you get to the first intersection, and Tarragon's going to try to remember what this intersection was and what they did before, so that's gonna be a perception skill. (**ROBIN:** Okay.) Your character does not have perception as a skill, so that's a single dice.

ROBIN: Ooh. And I got under; I got three.

FAY: Awesome. Okay, so Tarragon's actually doing pretty well at remembering what they've seen before. So it turns out that this maze is just distinctive enough in the way that the kelp and the rock kind of form patterns and shapes, so Tarragon is able to get farther into the maze by remembering where they've been, and they've basically kind of gone around the outer edge a bit. (**ROBIN:** Mhm.) And they're able to get farther into the maze than before. However, they haven't been through this section that is closer to the center of the maze, so they're now in a space where they haven't been before. So they can't keep using this strategy.

ROBIN: Yes. Okay, so because their first strategy of just sticking to the left didn't work, and it's now unfamiliar territory for them, they're now starting to get a little bit confused, and they're not following as much of a clear strategy as they were previously. Um, if there is a

downward sloping path, they will take the one which is going deeper. (**FAY**: Okay.) If that is an option.

FAY: Absolutely. So you have a strategy now, going deeper. I'm gonna give you two dice. (**ROBIN**: Mhm.) And again, we're gonna roll with mind to see how effective this strategy is.

ROBIN: Um, we get one which equals and one which is under, so I rolled a four and a two.

FAY: Okay, so that is a partial success. So following this strategy does take Tarragon deeper into the maze, and in fact, Tarragon does manage to actually make it to the central cavern of the maze. However, Tarragon is now a bit turned around, (**ROBIN**: Yes.) having done this. So Tarragon is not immediately certain how to get back out of the maze, but Tarragon has now reached the central cavern. And as Tarragon swims forward, this large cavern opens up around them, and in the center is a large three-foot-long mechanical fish. And attached to its back is a glowing orb.

ROBIN: Okay. So Tarragon initially stays quite still, so as not to alarm the fish because they're not sure how- even though it's mechanical, they're not sure, you know, if it has any sort of awareness to itself. (**FAY**: Absolutely.) [They're going to] try and examine it from different angles.

FAY: So is there a skill you're using to examine it?

ROBIN: Um, though it's a mechanical fish, would I be able to sort of compare it to animals that I would be familiar with?

FAY: Absolutely. So you could use nature to compare it to... um, you don't have engineering, but that would be to understand its- sorry, let me step back and clarify. (**ROBIN** laughs) So each of these different skills will give you different types of knowledge about it. So knowledge nature will let you know how much its behavior mimics a natural fish. (**ROBIN**: Yeah.) Knowledge arcana might give you knowledge of any magical aspects to its workings. Engineering will give you knowledge of any machine aspects of its workings.

ROBIN: So [I'll be] using nature and arcana as well, if that's possible to use both.

FAY: Yeah, so you'd use each one individually.

ROBIN: Okay.

FAY: So they'll be a- sorry, let me take a step back. (**ROBIN:** It's fine.) I keep starting my sentences... So there is a mechanic in this game which is that if your character is doing anything to prepare for an action - and these can be simple tasks, or they can be more complicated things - it gives your character more chance of success. So if there was something your character could do that would potentially give them a greater chance of success of figuring out how, how fishy its behavior is... (**ROBIN** laughs) To use a different example, if you were trying to throw a rope over a tree, tying a rock onto the end of the rope and using that would be, for example, a simple, straightforward action you don't actually need to roll that would give you assistance in getting the rope thrown effectively over a branch of a tree.

ROBIN: Okay, um... let's see if I would have anything on my person which would help- oh. Are there any loose stones on the floor?

FAY: So you're looking for- yeah, there's some gravel and sand on the floor.

ROBIN: So I would take a handful and sort of throw it just in front of the fish so that I can see better how it reacts and moves.

FAY: Absolutely. So you're throwing just a few pieces of small gravel, is that?

ROBIN: Yes.

FAY: So the goal is to not scare it too much, is that- is that what I'm getting there? Just a little?

ROBIN: Yeah, not to scare it, but more to stimulate movement or a reaction of some sort.

FAY: Right. To see if it reacts to its environment. Absolutely, okay. So that gives you three dice. Go ahead and give that a roll, and we'll see how the fish, the mechanical fish reacts.

ROBIN: Um, so I am successful on two dice.

FAY: Perfect, so that's a solid success. And so what you notice is that this mechanical fish indeed does react to the movement of the gravel.

[*Sound of sudden fish movement: water being displaced]

FAY: So it moves a bit farther away. So what you notice about this movement is that while it is reacting to stimulus, so it's moving farther away from this movement, it is not entirely acting like a natural fish. (**ROBIN:** Okay.) So instead of simply, like, what a natural fish might do - where it'd have a moment of being startled, and then it might, you know, move farther away or it might go investigate or it might take some other course of action - this fish seems to, as soon as it's done reacting to the stimulus, it then ignores the stimulus. And it seems to be ignoring you as well.

ROBIN: Okay. Hmm. I'd like to slowly approach the fish, please.

FAY: Mhm. How slowly are you approaching it?

ROBIN: Um, sort of step by step.

FAY: Oh, so is your character swimming or walking along at the bottom?

ROBIN: Sorry, swimming would make more sense, yes.

FAY: Yeah, so your character's swimming, and so your character is going to be, like, super slow? Or just kind of slow?

ROBIN: Just kind of slow.

FAY: Okay, awesome. And so is there any specific ability your character- I guess this is swimming, so I guess the question is, how carefully are you swimming? You're acting on some knowledge you've already uncovered, so I'll give you three dice to roll this swimming check.

ROBIN: One success.

FAY: One success, awesome. Yeah, so your character is swimming closer to this mechanical fish. You're noticing that it's responding to your movements, so you're probably doing a little bit of, like, the flipper feet. (**ROBIN:** Mhm.) And so Tarragon is able to get closer to it. But it is responding to movement more strongly the closer you get, so as you get closer, the slow foot movements and the little bit of hand movements are causing it to move away. Now, it's not leaving the cavern, but it is kind of slowly backing up away from you, so you're able to get about ten feet away from it. And it's slowly just moving away from you.

ROBIN: Okay. Um, I would like to try and use one of my magical performance skills to transport the orb from its back.

FAY: Sure, so that would be a two-dice mind roll.

[*“Come to Me,” a pop track, begins playing.]

ROBIN: So Tarragon takes a deep underwater breath and starts to sing.

[*Singer: “So come to me now / Just come to me now”]

FAY: Awesome.

ROBIN: And they’re trying to keep them quite soothing sounds, but they’re focusing on moving the orb off of the back of the fish.

[*Music fades out.]

ROBIN: And we get two successes.

FAY: Awesome, so that’s a solid success. Where were you trying to transport that orb to?

ROBIN: Closer towards me.

FAY: Okay, so it does exactly what you wanted it to do, and that orb, with a small flash of light, is now off its back and just a few feet in front of you. Then it basically starts slowly sinking through the water, and you can just grab that out of the water, if you would like.

ROBIN: Yes, Tarragon will reach out and take it.

FAY: Absolutely. And as you do so, the mechanical fish swims away. So you have the orb; now all you have to do is exit this maze.

ROBIN: Um, which way does the fish swim?

FAY: It just kind of moves really quickly away from you.

[*Sound of sudden fish movement]

FAY: But then it just goes back to sort of swimming around the cavern.

ROBIN: Okay. Right, then. Tarragon will turn around and see if they can remember which of the passages they came from. (**FAY:** Ah.) And they will start examining the patterns of the kelp.

FAY: Absolutely. So if you're trying to figure out your way around the maze, I've actually decided that that's probably gonna be a survival roll. (**ROBIN:** Okay.) Because survival is all about staying oriented wherever you are in a natural environment, and this is close enough. So I'm gonna have that be a survival roll, actually. So that'll just be a two-dice mind roll.

ROBIN: And we get one success.

FAY: Well, so what I'm gonna say is you think you've spotted the entrance to this cavern that you came from. So there's actually a couple possible entrances to this cavern. (**ROBIN:** Mhm.) You think you know which one you came from. You go out through it, and you get a bit lost, but then you keep heading upwards. And after being lost for a bit, you find a section that you've been to before.

ROBIN: Okay. Then Tarragon will start to follow the more familiar landmarks and work their way up because they remember that they sloped downward to get to the cavern, so they're gonna try and stick with upward to get out.

FAY: Absolutely, absolutely. Okay. So can you give me another survival roll?

ROBIN: Um, and we get one success again.

FAY: Okay, so still getting a bit lost. You think you're making progress, but still getting a bit lost. Are there any actions Tarragon's gonna take to increase their chances of success, or are they just gonna take the long way – brute-force it, eventually they'll get out? (laughs)

ROBIN: Hmm, let's see what they can do. I think- can they examine the patterns of the kelp using their arcana knowledge (**FAY:** Oh.) to see if there's any hints there as to what direction?

FAY: Absolutely. So go ahead and do a knowledge arcana roll.

ROBIN: Is that one die?

FAY: Well, you are trained in arcana, so that's two dice.

ROBIN: Two, okay. And I get two successes.

FAY: Oh, that's a solid success. So yeah, actually, upon investigating this kelp more carefully, Tarragon notices that there's magical patterns in the kelp because magic was what sculpted the kelp in these shapes.

And in fact, the patterns are very distinctive and... they change distinctly as it gets towards the center of the maze and towards the outer edges. And Tarragon can use that, and hopefully those pattern changes will give them a solid guidance.

ROBIN: Okay, that's really helpful. (laughs)

FAY: Absolutely. One last survival roll; you get three dice this time.

ROBIN: And we get one success. (both laugh)

FAY: Okay. Well, so with the help of these patterns that Tarragon's following, after a bit more getting lost, Tarragon finally exits the maze.

ROBIN: Yay, that's great.

FAY: Yay!

ROBIN: They swim back up to the surface and climb out to the edge of the pool and hold up the orb they have recovered.

[*Sound of people cheering and clapping]

FAY: Everyone's very excited, and Kyra Piper congratulates you, so.

ROBIN: (laughs) Thank you.

FAY: Yay! Awesome, so that was the mini-adventure. And one of the reasons I've been running mini-adventures is, since this is a newer game system, it gives me a chance to get a sense of any aspect of your character's abilities that I might want to tweak, if things are working about how I hoped they would, that sort of thing. So hopefully this was a fun little mini-adventure also.

ROBIN: Yeah, it was nice. It's helpful just to get a feel for how things work, so.

FAY: Absolutely. Thank you so much.

ROBIN: Thank you very much.

FAY: I guess the final thing is, do you want people to find you on the internet, and if so, where can people find you?

ROBIN: Um, you can find me on Tumblr at skeletonmug.

FAY: Can you spell that, please?

ROBIN: That's- Yeah, sure, it's s-k-e-l-e-t-o-n-m-u-g, all as one word.

FAY: Okay.

ROBIN: And I have a blog called axesnyarn.blogger.co.uk [sic], which is a-x-e-s-n-y-a-r-n.

FAY: (narration) Dot blogspot dot co dot uk. That is, (spells out URL).

FAY: Well, thank you so much for going through this character creation and this mini-adventure. This was awesome. I hope you enjoyed it a bunch, and [I'm] really looking forward to the owlbear game.

ROBIN: Yeah, it's great. Thank you very much, and yeah, I'm looking forward to the next real session.

FAY: Awesome.

[*Game theme plays, then stops.]

FAY: (narration) Guest links will be posted in the show notes online at writingalchemy.net. And that is the end of this episode. Please join us in three weeks on Thursday, April 12th for the introduction episode for D'Zân the weredragon druid and their sky sharks mini-adventure.

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[*Outro, a calm electronic track, begins playing.]

FAY: There you can join the discussion and sign up for the mailing list to receive announcements about new podcasts and projects. If you are a person with a disability, chronic illness, or a diverse mind and you would like to participate in an Unfamiliar Heroes game, head over to WritingAlchemy.net and click on the participation link in the sidebar. Future games include recorded audio games and text games which will

be published in chapters. Thank you for listening, and please join us in three weeks on Thursday, April 12th for "D'Zân and the Sky Sharks"!

[*Music continues for about half a minute, then stops.]