

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CASTLE OF BONES

for Pendragon 5th Edition

by Matthew M. DeForrest

IRELAND, AD 530

The High King, having lost patience with the continual raids from Ireland and the treacherous war waged against King Anguish of Leinster by High King Muirchertach, has chosen to subjugate that island and bring it into the Pax Arthur. The smooth and rapid crossing of the Irish Sea leaves little doubt among the knights and soldiers that at least one magician has accompanied the army.

The first test of the army comes with the landing at Dublin. Here, player knights can prove themselves to Arthur. [Energetic: Success. The player knights efforts get their ship to the beach quickly, allowing them to be some of the first on the beach. +10 Glory] While the number of enemy warriors on the beaches is small, it can make for an excellent skirmish for your player knights to lead and fight.

Skirmish on the Beach

Commanders

A Player Knight

Conal O'Connor (Battle=16)

Battle Size: Skirmish

Modifiers

The player knights are fighting in the surf and onto the shore, -5; player knights are outnumbered -5; player knights have superior troops, +5.

Follow Up

If the player knights are successful in establishing a beachhead, Arthur orders the bulk of his ships to land in that area. If the player knights fail to do so, Arthur will land nearby and come to their aid. The important task here is to have the player knights an opportunity to be noted for their valor.

Soon after the main landing, the Irish find themselves "reinforced" by King Anguish. He quickly negotiates the surrender of the local Irish and has them swear fealty to Arthur. In doing so, they spare Dublin from being sacked by Arthur's troops.

If the player knights are unable to distinguish themselves in their attempt to take the beach, you may wish to have them assigned as outrider cavalry to protect the flanks of the army and face bands of Irish raiders.

The player knights' final opportunity to impress the High King take place at the Battle of Tara, described on page 216 of *The Great Pendragon Campaign*.

The Nature of the Beast

The Adventure of the Castle of Bones is unusual. It is based on a Welsh fragment "Preideu Annwvyn" from *The Book of Taliesin*. The poem is thought to be from the 8th or 9th Century — one of the earliest pieces of Arthurian literature and also one of the earliest recognizable versions of the Grail Quest. Unfortunately, only a fragment of the poem comes down to us. In addition, the fragment is full of images that give a sense of danger and terror but do not provide many specific details. Many of the few specifics indicate that the story has been taken from the story of "Branwen the Daughter of Llyr" in *The Mabinogion* as part of the process of incorporating the legends of Bran the Blessed into the Arthurian tales. This adventure combines elements from the poem and this story. The trap of the Cauldron is taken from "Manawyddan the Son of Llyr," also from *The Mabinogion*.

The sources of the adventure dictate its nature. Most adventures provide player characters with challenges they can overcome or problems they can solve. Also, player knights are usually at the center of the action, in control of the flow of events. This adventure is very different. Here, the player knights' object is simply to survive and to experience the danger and horror of the Otherworld while Arthur makes most of the decisions. Simply put, player knights cannot hope to overcome this opponent. Their goal will be to be one of the seven men to survive the encounter.

Also remember that this is an atmospheric piece. Play up the darkness and the cold. You are telling a horror story — a horror story which provides the opportunity to earn great glory and earn a seat at the Round Table.

More important than this, however, is to consider your player knights. If they are unlikely to enjoy an encounter that they cannot win and, like Badon Hill and Camlaan, run the serious risk of killing off their characters, then this adventure is not for them. It may, however, be a way to either clear out an overabundance of seldom used player knights or as a one-shot adventure with characters your players do not intend to use again or as a chance for them to take the roles of Arthur and famous knights like Gawaine and Bedevere as they fight to survive The Castle of Bones.

The Summoning

Evening has come to Dublin on the first night following the army's return from one of the many small skirmishes fought to subjugate Ireland following the Battle of Tara. To the south of the town, the High King's army begins to prepare for the feasting. The tent city has been jokingly dubbed King's Town by the locals, who have taken the opportunity to join the celebrations or sell their goods and services to the rich knights of Arthur's realm.

The battles have brought sorrow to some through the loss of friends and kin but it could have been far worse. Some of the older knights keep things in perspective with tales of the twelve battles that followed the coming of the King. Even so, they are quick to praise the valor and skill of the younger knights, reminding them that it will be upon their shoulders to protect Arthur's realm as he ages and then to defend his heir, followed by speculation on whether or not Arthur will recognize his illegitimate son Sir Borre.

The weather promises to be raw. Many are thanking Heaven or Manannan that the fog beginning to creep up from the River Liffey held off until tonight and did not appear during the recent battles. Some talk in hushed tones of the absence of Merlin, who protected the army from such dangers and of the rumors of a young and relatively unknown druid or bard who was brought along to hold off the elements. Others, wary of the mist in a land where the Otherworld feels noticeably closer than in Logres, huddle closer to the campfires — the major sources of light during this coming night of the new moon. To most, however, the encroaching fog is nothing more than a chance to have some fun with the more superstitious knights or to give an added bit of privacy to their celebrations.

A handful of cloaked figures pass quietly through the mist, briefly stopping to speak to individual knights. Soon, they approach you. The first face you recognize out of the swirling mists is Sir Bedevere, who is accompanied by a young man you do not recognize. "Act normally and quietly, Sir Knights," Bedevere begins, "for secrecy is the watch word of the hour. The High King has requested your presence. Start at the west gate of Dublin and travel a half-mile inland. There, you will meet the High King and learn of his plans. Speak of this to none you meet until you are in the presence of the King."

The Fellowship of the Cauldron

The trip takes the players less than an hour by horse. The late twilight of summer (Summer twilight begins at roughly 10:30 PM.) has only begun when the player knights reach the small town of Saggart. Here, they find the Arthur speaking with some of his greater knights below the beginnings of an old-style motte and bailey castle. Not long after the player

knights arrive, the king steps up onto a cart and begins to speak.

"My good and loyal knights," the High King begins, "The one-hundred and forty four of you have been brought here tonight by a mixture of chance and fate. Some of you are like my mother's bother, Sir Gweir, who has been loyal to me from the early days of my reign. I know you to be good and trusted knights, strong and well tempered in battle. Others of you are young and, as of yet, relatively unknown — yet showing the promise of great things. Still others are so familiar to me that they feel like Excalibur — always by my side in battle and never far away in peace. Their names — like Bedevere and Gawaine — are as familiar in the mouths of the people of Logres as are their own names. I thank you all for heeding my call.

"For the young among you, I offer the opportunity for great glory and the chance to see places where few mortals have tread. For those among you who have traveled with me before,

"And yet, I want every one here to feel they are free to leave now. I know well how bravely you fought earlier today. Some of you may be tired or have received wounds of which I do not know. If such a man is here, let him feel free to depart now, with neither shame nor dishonor, nor the fear of being called coward by any man here. For if any man did, he would have to answer to me."

The king's eyes sweep the assembled knights. Player knights may choose to leave. If they do leave, they will be the only ones to do so. Once it is clear no one is leaving, Arthur smiles and begins to speak again.

"The adventure we go on tonight is to regain an ancient cauldron, once possessed by my ancestors. This cauldron cooked food for only the brave — your choice to remain here is ample proof that each man here will ever after find his food cooked at my hearth.

"The cauldron has another property, which is this: any man killed in battle, when cast into the cauldron, will come out again alive, although unable to speak.

"The cauldron, when taken into Ireland in ages past, was rimmed in pearls. To give you an idea of its size, it took a giant to carry it on his shoulders.

"I remember this from Merlin's tales. But Merlin trained me to be a king, not a storyteller. Gwion Bach, who has served us earlier today and knows where the Cauldron may be found, will sing to you its story."

As Arthur steps back, a young Welshman steps forward and begins to sing. He tells the tale of the Cauldron, given by Bran, King of the Island of the Mighty, to Matholwch, the King of Ireland, as part of a gift to repay the disfigurement of his horses by Evnissyen, Bran's troublesome brother. Evnissyen

had objected to Bran's giving their sister Branwen in marriage to Matholwch.

The Cauldron was originally from Ireland, being carried by an evil giant out of the Lake of the Cauldron. The Irish, in an attempt to destroy this giant and his wife, had tricked them into an Iron House, under which fires were lit. The two escaped to Britain and are given shelter by Bran, to whom they gave the Cauldron.

Yet this gift, and the gold and silver that went with it, were not enough for Matholwch's foster brothers. After a year in Ireland, and after she had borne a son named Gwern, Branwen was sent to the kitchens to cook for the court and have the butcher box her on the ear each day. Branwen was able to train a starling to carry word of her disgrace to her brother.

Learning of his sister's state, Bran invaded Ireland. Being a giant, he waded across the Irish Sea at the head of the fleet that carried his men. The Irish retreated across the Lifé River, at which point they thought they would be safe from Bran. At the time, the Lifé was too deep to be easily forded and had a powerful loadstone in its depths that prevented any ship from sailing up its length. Bran looked across the river and said, "Let he who would be king also be a bridge." He spanned the Lifé with his body and let his army march across.

The Irish then advised Matholwch to sue for peace. To impress Bran, a house was constructed for him — the first house he was ever able to enter. Matholwch also surrendered his kingdom to Bran's will. Yet the Irish had devised a plan to trap Bran. The house that was built had a hundred posts. Upon each post, two brackets were fixed. From each bracket, a sack was hung and a warrior hid in each sack. Yet before Bran and the men of the Island of the Mighty entered the house, Evnissyen inspected the house. He walked up to each sack and asked what it contained. Each time, his Irish escort answered, "Meal." Evnissyen then crushed the head of each until he reached the last man. While the answer was still "Meal," Evnissyen discovered that this man wore a helmet. Even so, Evnissyen crushed his head and the helmet and composed an elgyn:

There is in this bag a different sort of meal,
The ready combatant, when the assault is made
By his fellow warriors, prepared for battle.¹

Bran and his men entered from one side of the house and Matholwch and his men from the other. Gwern is declared King of Ireland. All seem pleased with the outcome of events. At the moment of peace, Evnissyen asked for the child king, who has been moving from one of his British relatives to another, to come and see him. When the child reaches him, he

throws the child into the fire, killing him and restarting the war.

As the battle raged within the massive house, the Irish set the Cauldron upon the fire to revive their dead. Soon, Evnissyen recognizes his folly as the Irish begin to overwhelm the British. To save his countrymen, he hides himself among the Irish dead and, once in the Cauldron, stretches out and bursts is from within. The effort kills him but the destruction of the Cauldron ultimately leads to a British victory.

Yet the victory comes at a terrible cost. Bran has been wounded in the foot with a poisoned dart. He instructed the seven men who survived to cut off his head and carry it back to Britain. Ireland was depopulated but for five pregnant women who had hidden in a cave in the wilderness. But these, Gwion Bach tells his audience, are tales for a different time.

"And yet," he says, "I must repeat for all to hear the prophecy I have heard concerning this venture — that Arthur will be forced to leave blood behind on this quest."

Arthur once again steps forward. "These are the tales of our past. The Cauldron is our goal — to return to Britain the treasure of our ancestors. We shall carry the cauldron back to Camelot to cook the food of the brave and to make certain that no man need fear to enter battle and leave his family unprotected. Never again shall we fear the invasion from overseas.

"As for the threat to me, I do not fear injury to myself — especially given the possible rewards to my kingdom!"

With Arthur's speech, the player knight should generate a Loyalty (Company of the Cauldron) Passion, modified normally. This will be important later in the adventure.

The Journey

Arthur leads his men further upriver into the thickening fog. While he marches, his ship Prydwen is rowed alongside. On a successful [Awareness] roll, player knights will notice that the captain of the ship is keeping a close watch on a water clock. Eventually, he looks up and waves to the High King. At this moment, Arthur calls a halt to the march. "Although I am not a giant, I will provide us with a bridge across the Lifé." With that, he and his chief knights leave their horses onshore and board Prydwen. The ship then disappears into the fog and is rowed across the river.

After a few minutes, the ship returns for another boatload. Once the player knights are onboard, they, too, are rowed across the river — a journey that takes a quarter of an hour. On a successful [Awareness] roll, the player knights will realize that the time it takes to reach the far shore is far longer than the time the ship to have dropped off earlier groups of knights. On a critical success, the player knight also realizes

that the Lifé is not wide enough to take this amount of time to cross. For those who count, it takes Prydwen three trips to bring all the knights across.

When Prydwen reaches the far shore, the player knights disembark and join the throng of dismounted knights. Above the throng, upon a hill, is a huge house similar in style to the crannogs the knights have seen throughout Ireland. The details of the building are impossible to see in the fog but some things are clear. The building is large — at least the size of a castle. Its thatched roof soars at least fifty feet into the air. The outer walls, made of daub and wattle, are roughly 20 feet tall. Unlike the crannogs they have seen, the player knights notice that there is a long hallway running from the doorway into the center of the building. It is at least 100 feet wide — a full third the diameter of the building. At the end of the hall are the building's impossibly massive double doors, at least 30 feet in height. Unless your player knights have encountered a huge giant, they will never have seen a creature so large as to require such a door. Along the line where the doors meet, an inscription in Ogham set in gold. On a successful [Read (Ogham)], the player knight can read the inscription: "The Door of the Men of the Island of the Mighty." If none of the player characters can read Ogham, they will hear it when Gwion Bach reads the inscription aloud for the assembled knights.

"This door was entered by the men of Britain in the company of Bran the Blessed," Arthur declares. "As the heirs to his land, it is appropriate that we enter here as well." With the touch of his hand, the doors swing open. If any player knight attempts to open the door, he will not be able to budge it nor will any number of the company be able to do so — no matter how many combine their strengths in an attempt to do so.

Should the player knights suggest that the building be scouted prior to entering, Arthur agrees to the suggestion. The only item of note that the players will discover is that a normal size door has been built opposite the giant doorway. Upon this door, written in silver, are more Ogham characters. Here, they read "The Door of the Men of the Island of Ireland." These doors will not open for anyone except the High King of Ireland.

Once the door swings open, Arthur enters at the head of his men.

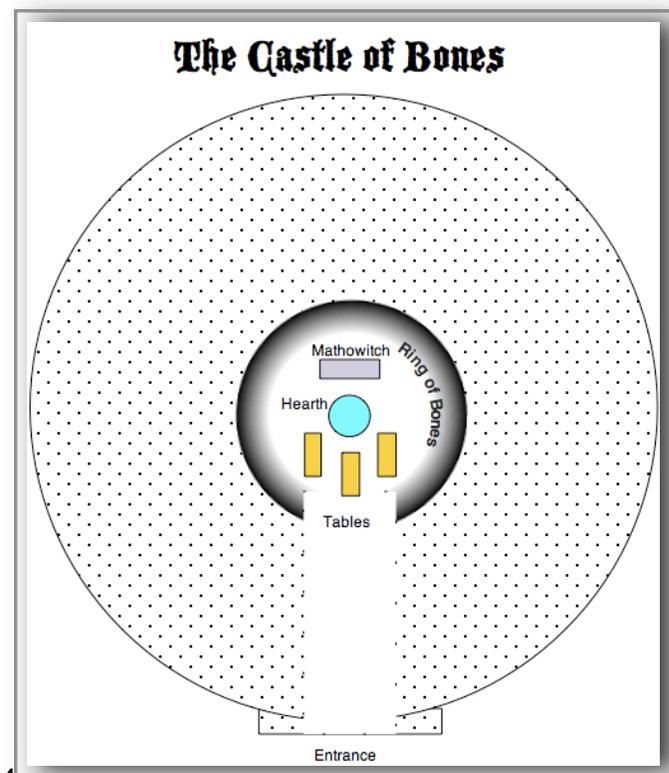
Inside the Castle of Bones

Arthur steps into the darkness, his men following close behind. As the player knights enter, they see that the building is lilt and heated from a central hearth. From the entryway, the cold, blue flames do not feel like they provide sufficient heat to warm the building. A forest of columns supports the building's high, thatched roof. On a successful [Awareness] roll, player knights will be able to notice that the sacks

described by Gwion Bach still hang from their brackets in the darkness near the roof. On a critical success, the player knight will notice that the bags still contain something. On a failure, the player knight will not notice the bags while the player knight will believe the sacks are empty on a fumbled roll.

Those knights who look off to the right or the left as they walk down the great hall will doubtless be disturbed by what they see. The flickering light of the fire creates bands of dim light and shadow as it shines through the fifty pillars on this half of the fort, casting wild shadows across a floor littered with bones and archaic broken weapons. A careful examination of the scene will provide enough information to reconstruct how many of the men faced their deaths. In some locations, small knots of bones clearly show where a group of men sold their lives dearly while in others, makeshift fortifications made from feasting tables and benches indicate where others tried to stave off the inevitable. Crushed skulls, shattered limbs, and spears still impaled in rib cages provide mute testament to how individuals died. The walls are so far away from the central hearth as to be left heavily shadowed.

The bones become more numerous as the player knights approach the center of the room. On a successful awareness roll, the player knights will be able to pick out several skeletons of unusual size among the piles of bones. On a critical success, the player knights pick out the largest set of bones in the building — a skeleton missing a skull. If these bones are pointed out to Arthur, he will take a moment to pray for the departed soul of his ancestor.



While still in the doorway, the player knight can clearly see a person sitting at the far side of the central hearth. The smoke of the fire currently obscures his features but the player knights can tell that the figure is flanked by a pair of bodyguards carrying bronze spears and shields. The fire burns in what appears to be a metal frame that reaches up as if a set of fingers reaching up out of the flames. Four chains, from which hang large chunks of metal, hang down from the darkness at the center of the roof. On a successful [Awareness] roll, player knights will also notice nine cloaked figures in the shadows behind the giant and his bodyguards.

On the near side of the hearth, the player knight can see three large tables with benches. A giant chair takes pride of place at the center table. Forty eight goblets are set on each of the tables.

As the player knights approach the figure at the center of the building, they are able to more clearly see what is before them. Unlike the rest of the building, the central hearth is free of bones. A ring of bones half as tall as a man encircles the hearth, broken only by the flow of the Hall. Even here, the central hearth provides no heat. What appeared to be an iron framework is now clearly seen to be the ribs of a giant. Knights making a successful [Awareness] roll will be able to distinguish a smaller set of bones among the flames. On a critical success, the player knight will be able to determine they are the bones of a child.

The pieces of metal hanging from the blue-tinted chains are easily discernable as the quarters of a large cauldron. Should they look for it, the players will be able to clearly see that the rims of the pieces of cauldron are studded with pearls.

Until the High King and his company approach, the figures remain silent. Small and subtle movements — shifting from one foot to the other, the tightening and loosening of a warrior's grip on his spear, the slight turning of a head to look at something deep in the shadows — give evidence that they are alive and not statues. On a successful [Awareness] roll, a player knight will know that there is something wrong about the figures, although he will be unable to put his finger on exactly what bothers him. If the players achieve a critical success on an [Awareness] roll, they may notice that the figures, although they move and fidget like mortals, do not breathe.

If a player knight decides to try to speak with the figures, ask him to make a Courtesy roll at +10. On any success, the player knight remembers that Arthur has precedence and will speak first. On a failure, the player knight will speak but do so in a way that makes him seem the leader of the expedition. On a fumble, the player knight has stepped forward in a manner that usurps Arthur's position. Even if the

player knight attempts to speak to the figures, they will not speak to anyone but Arthur.

Once Arthur approaches, the seated figure speaks: "Hail, Arthur Pendragon, King of the Island of the Mighty. Welcome to you and to your men. Be seated and partake of the hospitality of the men of Ireland and the court of Matholwch."

"Thanks to you, King Matholwch, for your hospitality," Arthur responds formally.

At this point, the player knights are likely to become concerned. After all, Gwion Bach told them earlier that all the men of Ireland were killed in the final battle between Bran the Blessed and Matholwch following the murder of Gwern. Should the player knights attempt to look at Matholwch more closely, he will be unable to see Matholwch clearly through the smoke, which oddly distorts everything seen through it. In addition, the fire's pale light produces flickering shadows and bleeds the colors out of everything in the room. On a critical [Awareness] roll, the player knight will get the impression that Matholwch and his bodyguards are unusually pale and do not appear to breathe.

Matholwch motions to the figures in the shadows. "Few from the mortal world have come here since my wounding. In honor of your arrival, I have tapped a barrel of my finest mead. I hope you find it to your liking."

Nine female figures, fully cowed, glide forward with pitchers and begin pouring heady-smelling mead into the goblets. After all the goblets have been filled, Matholwch toasts his guests. "Do not hesitate to ask for more. There is enough to sate the fiercest thirst. Perhaps your bard will favor us with a song before we discuss your coming." As Gwion Bach sings "The Dreaming of Maxen Wledig," the player knights have an opportunity to sample the mead before them.

The mead is like none the player knights have ever had. It is mellow beyond words — sweet and smooth without being syrupy or sticky. It is also an otherworldly intoxicant. Ask the player knights to make a Temperate/Indulgent roll to determine when each of them stops drinking. (They will have time to drink five goblets full of the mead before the battle begins.) Player knights who take a single taste — a critical success on a Temperate roll — will have no difficulty in stopping whenever they choose and earn a Temperate check. On a success, the player knight will finish the goblet that has been poured for them. On a failed roll, the player knight will ask for one of the three figures serving the table for another drink but may choose to stop after a second goblet. On a fumble, the player knight asks for more and continues to drink until he fails an [Indulgent] test. Check Indulgent. The player knights can always choose to drink more after a successful Temperate roll. While they will suffer from the effects of the intoxication,

the player knight does not need to make another Temperate roll to stop drinking.

For each full goblet drunk, ask the player knight to make roll against [CON]. Each failure indicates that the player knight has become intoxicated, resulting in a penalty of -1 being assessed against *all* rolls made by the player knight for the remainder of the adventure. This effect is cumulative. On a fumble, the player knight passes out.

After they have drain the first goblets of mead, Arthur and Matholwch begin to speak. Matholwch asks Arthur a series of questions and the High King responds. With each response, the voices of the kings become more strained and tense.

“What journey, duty, or whim has brought you to this house, Arthur Pendragon?”

“I am here to reclaim the Cauldron of Bran the Blessed, Matholwch.”

“What makes you think the Cauldron is yours to claim, Arthur Pendragon?”

“I claim it on the grounds that it and this house are mine by right of descent.”

“And from whom do you trace this descent, Arthur Pendragon?”

“I claim it by descent from Bran the Blessed, from whom I am descended through both my father, Uther Pendragon, and my mother, Ygraine.”

“What makes you believe the Cauldron was Bran the Blessed’s to claim, Arthur Pendragon? Bran gave the Cauldron to me many years ago.”

“The Cauldron reverted to Bran when you surrendered it, along with your kingdom, to him following your shameful treatment of Branwen the Daughter of Llyr.”

“You forget, Arthur Pendragon, that the kingdom was passed to my son, Gwern. Following his death by Evnissyen’s treachery, and the beheading of his uncle, Bran, the kingdom reverted to me as the closest male heir to King Gwern. Thus, the cauldron and this fort belong to me and mine.”

“Yet you surrendered all to the King of the Island of the Mighty. Thus, you rule here at the sufferance of that king. I am his inheritor in blood and in title. I am prepared to let you rule this fort as my vassal and my friend. To the Cauldron, thought, I maintain my claim.”

“In truth, Arthur Pendragon,” Matholwch replies, “it is a plausible claim. Yet fine words can clothe the bandit as well as the just man. You, above all, must know how close the meanings of might and right can be. I would hear from your followers to know which is the case here.”

For whatever reason, Matholwch turns to the table where the player characters sit and invites them to speak, perhaps making mention of their recent acts of valor and inquiring if they are as well versed with words as they are with weapons. [Faerie Lore: Success: Irish Heroes are expected to be eloquent as

well as great warriors.] Should they ask Arthur’s leave to speak, he willingly grants it to them.

All of the player characters who choose to speak on behalf of Arthur may attempt to use whatever skills they wish. The most likely skills are, of course, Courtesy and Orate. Matholwch listens to each in turn. The result of the player character’s attempts will determine what he says next.

On a Critical Success, Matholwch acknowledges the wit and skill of the player character, who earns 150 Glory for aiding the High King. Matholwch also gives the player character a gift: “a plate of gold as broad as his face, given to him by Bran the Blessed himself.” The player character’s words also allow the Company of the Cauldron to test their Loyalty (Company of the Cauldron) to see if they are Inspired by the player character’s words.

If any of the player characters achieve a Critical Success or if at least half achieve Successes, Matholwch responds, “I admit your claim is just, Arthur Pendragon. Yet mine is more just. I cannot accept your claim is greater than mine.”

If more than half Fail, Matholwch responds, “Based on what I have heard from your own men, Arthur Pendragon, your claim is weak and is not greater than is mine.”

If more than half fail and someone Fumbles their test, Matholwch sneers. “It is little better than bandits you are: men of violence without substance. Although you may be noted for your justice, Arthur Pendragon, your followers are not. Employing such

Skeletons of the Ancient Irish

SIZ	16	Move	2
DEX	6	Damage	5d6
STR	14	Hit Points	30
CON	14	Armor	8 + Shield
APP	0		

Attacks: Sword 12, Spear 18, Dagger 10

Significant Traits: Valorous 20

Significant Passions: Hate (British) 16

Modifier to Valorous: -5 (Headless -10)

Equipment: Early Chain Armor, small round shield, Spear, open helm, sword, dagger, miscellaneous jewelry (torques, armbands, etc.) worth £2

These are the remains of Ireland’s 500 chief warriors, loyal to Matholwch in death as well as life, and the 200 warriors hiding in the sacks hung on the pillars of the house. They hate all who follow the King of the Island of the Mighty, who they blame for their current existence. They possess the best arms and armor for their period. They fight without fear but with some strategy. Three will attack each opponent. The skeleton directly before the knight will use the Defense combat tactic while the other two will use the Berserker Attack combat tactic.

men in a venture speaks poorly of its worth. I find your claim without merit.” As a result of the Fumble, the player characters should test their Loyalty (Company of the Cauldron). On a Failure, they will lose 1 point from that score.

No matter what Matholwch says, Arthur responds, “Yet I maintain it is.”

“How do you intend to defend this claim, Arthur Pendragon?”

“By force of arms, if necessary.”

A tense silence falls over the room. Even those who have become intoxicated are stunned into silence by the gravity of the situation. From the point of view of Matholwch, Arthur’s claim on the cauldron and threat of force is a violation of the laws of hospitality. From Arthur’s point of view, Matholwch’s claim on the castle is an act of rebellion at best and usurpation at worst. Just as when Bran and Matholwch faced one another here ages ago, there is a real risk of imminent violence.

Arthur’s eyes remain fixed on the figure of Matholwch and his bodyguards. Meanwhile, Matholwch’s eyes sweep Arthur’s forces as his bodyguards move slightly forward and to the side to be in a better position to defend their master. If the player knights take a closer look at the bodyguards, ask them to make another [Awareness] roll. On a critical success, the player knight can clearly make out that the bodyguards are dead. The dried, parchment-like skin is stretched tightly over the bones of their face and hands. Flickering lights the same color as the fire have replaced their eyes and they do not breathe. On a success, the player knight will notice that the figures are impossibly emaciated and notice that the flames of the fire are reflected in their dark, whiteless eyes. On a failure, the player knight will notice the reflection of the fire in the bodyguards’ eyes. On a fumble, the player knight will interpret the guards’ movements as preparations for an assault on Arthur.

Ask the player knights if they wish to do anything at this time. The haunted atmosphere is now laden with tension. Also remind the player knights that they have no idea what is in the darkness behind Matholwch’s throne. Also tell them that the nine serving women have disappeared when they were not looking. If the players act in a hostile or threatening manner, they may set of a battle.

If the player knights do nothing, Matholwch will make the first move. “Since you have violated my Hospitality by laying claim to my Cauldron, Arthur Pendragon, I must ask you to leave.”

“Such words are violations of Hospitality, Matholwch,” responds the High King darkly, “Doubly so because you are attempting to order your rightful lord out of a fortress that belongs to him by both right of birth and conquest.”

“You may have conquered the upper world, Arthur, but the Underworld lies outside your realms. If you will not leave by your own will, then I will make you leave by force!”

With this pronouncement, Matholwch raises his hands. As his bodyguards take up defensive positions, a dry rattling comes from around the hearth. From the ring of bones arise armed and partially armored skeletons. At this point, the player knights must make a successful Valorous Roll at –5 in order to face the creatures. Players who were inspired by their Loyalty (Pendragon) roll at the beginning of the adventure do not have to make a Valorous roll to face the long-dead Irish warriors before them.

Once the battle begins, the player knights will soon find themselves in a great deal of danger. On the first round, they will have to face one opponent. On the second round, they will face another. On the next round, two more will be ready to face each player knight. On the following round, three more will be ready.

Should by some chance a player knight reach Matholwch, use the statistics for the faerie knight listed on page 185 of the *Pendragon* rulebook. Matholwch’s bodyguards can be represented by the statistics for a Saxon Warrior. Like the skeletons, these three can be regenerated by the fragmented Cauldron as detailed below.

The skeletal army has several strategic goals. First, they will attempt to push back Arthur’s forces to secure the central hearth. In order to accomplish this, they will leave an avenue of retreat to the rear of Arthur’s men. While 100 skeletal warriors are scattered throughout the ring of bones, only seventy-five stand, leaving one-quarter of the ring open behind Arthur. Likewise, the 200 skeletal warriors scattered throughout the bones behind Arthur remain prone. The two hundred warriors before Arthur and his men, in the Irish half of the fort, do stand.

As the player knights engage their opponents, allow them to make any rolls to be inspired they can justify — inspired by their Amor to survive and see her again, Hatred of a specific person to so as not to die first, and so on. Given the overwhelming odds, you should be generous with your players. After all,

The Shattered Cauldron of Bran the Blessed

Despite its shattered condition, the Cauldron of Bran still has great power. While it once held the power to raise the dead, the cauldron is now limited to repairing the 500 warriors that it reanimated in the distant past. Should a player magician somehow find a way to draw on the Cauldron to power their spell, they discover it has 5d20 Ambient Life Force and 7d20 Necromantic Life Force.

the Skeletons are likely to be inspired by their hatred of the British King.

There are two ways of determining the outcome of this encounter. The first is to use the battle system. While this method will allow you to keep track of the flow of events of large numbers of knights, it does de-emphasize the player knights' place in the events — something the structure of the adventure has already done. For that reason, keeping the events focused on the player knights would be preferable. In addition, as will be detailed below, there are some considerations that will make record keeping easier.

First, Arthur orders his men to fall back into a more defensible formation and so as not to become surrounded. As he moves back, however, the dead in the ring arise to keep him retreating. Once out of the circle, the rest of the dead rise.

The situation goes from bad to worse when the player knight realizes that the enemy's number will remain constant. Following Arthur's retreat from the circle, ask the player knights to make an [Awareness] roll. On a success, the player knight will notice a portion of the skeletons begin collecting their fallen. They carry the collections of bones to the fire, now surrounded by the nine cloaked women, and throw them in between the fragments of the cauldron. The fire briefly flares and the once-destroyed skeleton

What happens if My Players Touch the Cauldron?

This trap is taken from "Manawyddan the Son of Llyr" in *The Mabinogion*:

When [Pryderi] came within the castle, neither man nor beast, nor boar nor dogs, nor house nor dwelling saw he within it. But in the centre of the castle floor he beheld a fountain with a marble work around it, and on the margin of the fountain a golden bowl upon a marble slab, and chains hanging from the air, to which he saw no end.

And he was greatly pleased with the beauty of the gold, and with the rich workmanship of the bowl, and he went to the bowl, and laid hold of it. And when he had taken hold of it his hands stuck to the bowl, and his feet to the slab on which the bowl was placed, and all his joyousness forsook him, so that he could not utter a word. And thus he stood.

Should your players take hold of any part of the Cauldron, tell the player knight the world around him fades to a dull grey and that he has lost all desire to the point that cannot even get up the desire to move. If you wish, player can break free if he succeeds in making an opposed roll using his highest Passion against the Cauldron's power to hold the character, rated at 23.

What if too many Player Knights Survive the Encounter to Match the Poem?

The best solution to this is actually relatively simple: Change the number of survivors in the poem. Your players are not part of the literature as it stands. Their becoming part of your version of the story is the reason for the game.

Other possible solutions include dropping Bedevere and/or Gawaine from the list (Tell the player knights they must have confused the knight Arthur attempted to aid with Gawaine.). Gawaine could have stayed to guard the boats and Bedevere could have simply informed the knights where to go to participate on the adventure without going on the adventure himself. Arthur, Galegantis, and Gwion Bach, however, must enter and exit the fort.

arises from the flames. It then marches out and returns to the battle.

This allows you, as a gamemaster, some latitude in record keeping. Each player knights will always face three skeletons. As a shortcut, write the numbers one through thirty along the side of a piece of paper for each player knight. Then, to track the current state of the skeletons attacking the player knight, simply track the running hit points by sliding paperclips to mark the number of hit points remaining. You can use either colored paperclips to distinguish the three skeletons from one another or taping the numbers one, two, and three to the paperclips. For your convenience, such a sheet has been included in the appendix for you to photocopy. This sheet, found at the end of this adventure, also includes the skeleton's statistics for your reference.

There is more bad news for the player knights. Soon after their retreat from the hearth area, the warriors in the bags begin to cast their spears at the knights. Following the casting of their spear, the warriors will climb to the floor and join in the attack. These skeletons are identical to the other skeletons except that their skulls are crushed. As a result, they require a Valorous check at -10 to face. In addition, they cannot be raised by the shattered cauldron.

On a successful [Awareness] test, the player knights will notice something unusual — the skeletons are not attacking Gwion Bach. While he is not being assaulted, it is also clear that the bard is not out of danger, as he is surrounded by a number of the dead Irish, who have their weapons drawn and pointed towards him. Gwion Bach does, however, appear to have complete freedom of movement and can be seen moving from one fallen knight to another.

Four rounds into the combat, it becomes clear to everyone that Arthur's forces are being encircled. In a desperate attempt to achieve the adventure's goal, Sir Gweir leads a group of his household knights in an

What if I Want a More Upbeat Ending?

While it would require a great deal of change, you could alter this adventure to allow for the possibility for success. Should the player knights somehow determine how to reclaim the fragments of the Cauldron of Bran the Blessed, it will be discovered that the fragments of the Cauldron have no power to raise the dead or boil food (It retains the Life Force statistics described above.) unless it is reforged in the Otherworld. This would require an independent adventure. Returning to Camelot with such a Cauldron will make a significant difference in the flow of events. If, for example, the Cauldron were to be present at the Battle of Camlaan, it would produce a timeline much more similar to the *Prince Valiant* series of comics than anything in Mallory or other “canonical” writers.

assault to capture the Cauldron. While they are able to fight their way to the Cauldron, this proves to be their undoing. The moment Gweir touches a fragment of the Cauldron, he straightens and then freezes. He begins to moan inconsolably for the joy of life to return to him. His face slackens and his eyes become refocused. As Gweir’s men attempt to move him, the skeletons and Matholwch’s bodyguard cut them down. When Arthur sees this happen, he realizes that his attempt to achieve the Cauldron is doomed to failure, understanding the meaning of the prophecy uttered by Gwion Bach at the start of the adventure. As a result, decides to call a retreat.

As the retreat begins, be sure to play up the death occurring all around the player knights. The skeletons will overwhelm both isolated knights and knights in groups. Point out that some knights have attempted to use defensive positions created by Bran’s men. Player knights may wish to lead attempts to rescue knights cut off or close to being overwhelmed.

Eight rounds after the battle begins choose a player at random and tell him that something has grabbed his leg. Looking down, the player knight sees that one of the skeletons on the ground below him has grabbed his foot and is preparing to stab his leg with a dagger. On each round after this, there is a 1 in 3 chance that each player knight will be grabbed by a skeleton lying in ambush. This is a rare example of four enemies being able to attack a player knight at once.

At some point after he calls the retreat, Arthur will move away from his bodyguard to help a hard-pressed Gawaine. Before the king can reach his nephew, he is knocked to the floor, dropping Excalibur. Sir Galegantis of Nohaut, a relatively unknown knight, ignores his own attackers and rushes to the king’s side. Scooping up Excalibur, he strikes at the skeletons attacking the king. Arthur’s bodyguard fights its way to the King, as does

Gawaine. The king is on his feet again quickly but, in the intervening period, Galegantis takes several serious wounds and, as a result, has to be half-carried from the fort by Gwion Bach.

It takes at least 12 rounds from the start of the combat to reach the rear doors. By this time, Arthur’s force will have dwindled to seven men. Among those who escape are Arthur, Gwion Bach, Galegantis, Gawaine, and Bedevere.

Aftermath

On the return voyage, the mood is somber. Arthur is in a deep depression over the deaths of so many brave men. The only one who seems to have come through the experience with any sense of calm is Gwion Bach, who sits in the rear of the boat composing to himself. At one level, it is unsurprising that the bard is unaffected by events. If asked why he was not attacked in the Castle of Bones, he guesses that it is likely that his being a bard kept him safe. In fairness, his role as a bard prevents him from taking direct action in such events. It was also Should anyone confront his apparent indifference, he responds that he must record the effort of Arthur’s knights for posterity, so that their deeds should never be forgotten.

Upon their return to Dublin, Arthur will make certain that anyone wounded is taken care of and that the families of the dead are given some kind of compensation and made secure in any holdings they have. If any of the dead knights’ sons have not been knighted, Arthur will personally knight the son and, assuming he does not have his arms and armor, outfit him as a Rich Knight, as detailed on page 158 of the *Pendragon* rulebook. Any surviving knights who are chivalrous will be granted seat at the Round Table in 531. Finally, any knight who had to abandon a gold plate awarded to him by Matholwch will find it among his possessions on the morning after he returns. The plate is worth £10.

Also in 531, Gwion Bach arrives at court to sing his rendition of the events.

The Spoils of the Castle of Bones

Gweir’s trap had been set in the Castle of Bones
As it had been for Pryderi in the ancient tales.
None of our fellowship braved it but he.
As the blue-steel chains hold the quartered cauldron
The pearl-crustrd rim now holds him fast.
There he will stay, his voice echoing in the bowl,
Imploring, as a bard, until the ending of days,
Singing for the Spoils we thought we desired.
Three times Prydwen was filled with men for the
assault.

None but seven returned from the Fort of the Sídh.

I have gained fame because my song was heard
In the Fortress whose walls face the four winds.

My voice echoed from within the Cauldron
To fill the whole of the Castle of Bones.
Nine maidens breath kindled the fire
Underneath of the Cauldron we thought we desired.
A ridge of fine pearls encircled its rim.
The coward will not find any cooked food therein.
Three times Prydwen was filled with men for the
assault.
None but seven returned from the Four Corner Fort.

Hospitality of a kind was offered therein.
Maiden freely served us the fine honey wine
That flashed invitingly from deep golden cups,
Blurring our vision, and slurring our speech.
Our limbs responded sluggishly when they sought
spear and sword
We had sworn to the service of Arthur, our lord.
Three times Prydwen was filled with men for the
assault.
None but seven returned from the Fort of
Intoxication.

As six thousand warriors our enemies seemed
When the hospitality we received was rudely
withdrawn.
Their silent attack unnerved the bravest of men
Those who had lived long after their death
Thanks to the Cauldron that brought them back.
To live in a half-world, far from the warmth
Of the sun and the light and the world of the living.
Three times Prydwen was filled with men for the
assault.
None but seven returned from the Fort as Cold as a
Grave.

It was then Arthur fell, overwhelmed by sheer
numbers —
Greater than those faced at blood-soaked Badon.
His bodyguard slain and borne down by dark hands,
Arthur seemed doomed to die, lost in that place.
Galegantis, ignoring the danger he placed himself in
Took Excalibur from the floor and defended his King.
Regaining his feet, the High King fought his way out.
Three times Prydwen was filled with men for the
assault.
None but sever returned from that well-hidden Fort.

I do not praise those who condemn the attempt
From the safety of the hearth or castles of kings.
I have no time for the crabbed complaints of monks
Bent by years over books that limit their lives.
My song is for men who will dare the unknown
And challenge their world for everlasting fame.
I sing not for myself. I was there to record.
I sing for King Arthur and his glorious men.
Those who three times filled Prydwen for the assault.
And the seven returning gloried in fame.

A Note on the Text of the Poem

This is a free translation of the Welsh poem “Preiddeu Annwvyn,” from the *Book of Taliesin*. This translation has been made with this adventure in mind. As such, it should not be viewed as an accurate or scholarly translation. Those interested in reading this fragment, one of the earliest references to King Arthur, are advised to consult Bromwich’s *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads*, Koch and Carey’s *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales*, Graves’ *The White Goddess*, or Nichol’s *The Book of Druidry*.

This song will be one of those repeated by Taliesin in 550, when he visits Camelot in order to identify himself to the High King.

Glory. Simply going on the quest into the Otherworld to attempt to carry of the Cauldron of Bran the Blessed is worth 1250 glory (for an extraordinary quest against long odds while in the company of the High King). For each round the player survives, the player earns an additional 15 glory. Likewise, the player knight earns 35 glory for each skeleton he “kills.” Other rewards, such as if the player knight rescues other knights from overwhelming odds or inspiring the assembly through his impassioned defense of Arthur’s case, can add even more glory to the player knight’s total.

Combat Sheets for the Adventure of the Castle of Bones

Skeletons of the Ancient Irish

SIZ	16	Move	2	Attacks: Sword 12, Spear 18, Dagger 10
DEX	6	Damage	5d6	Significant Traits: Valorous 20
STR	14	Hit Points	30	Significant Passions: Hate (British) 16
CON	14	Armor	8 + Shield	Modifier to Valorous: -5 (Headless -10)
APP	0			

Equipment: Early Chain Armor, small round shield, Spear, open helm, sword, dagger, miscellaneous jewelry (torques, armbands, etc.) worth £2

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30

Skeletons of the Ancient Irish

SIZ	16	Move	2	Attacks: Sword 12, Spear 18, Dagger 10
DEX	6	Damage	5d6	Significant Traits: Valorous 20
STR	14	Hit Points	30	Significant Passions: Hate (British) 16
CON	14	Armor	8 + Shield	Modifier to Valorous: -5 (Headless -10)
APP	0			

Equipment: Early Chain Armor, small round shield, Spear, open helm, sword, dagger, miscellaneous jewelry (torques, armbands, etc.) worth £2

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30

Skeletons of the Ancient Irish

SIZ	16	Move	2	Attacks: Sword 12, Spear 18, Dagger 10
DEX	6	Damage	5d6	Significant Traits: Valorous 20
STR	14	Hit Points	30	Significant Passions: Hate (British) 16
CON	14	Armor	8 + Shield	Modifier to Valorous: -5 (Headless -10)
APP	0			

Equipment: Early Chain Armor, small round shield, Spear, open helm, sword, dagger, miscellaneous jewelry (torques, armbands, etc.) worth £2

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30

Notes

¹ This version of Evnissyen's elgyn is taken from Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of *The Mabinogion*.