

CORNQUEST

dozens

0

You wake up in the comfort of your own bed, in your own room. You open your eyes to see the golden sunlight come streaming in through your window. Golden like ears of corn. You suddenly remember what day it is. It is the day of the Harvest Festival! You throw back your favorite corn print bed covers and leap out of bed. You've been looking forward to this day all year, and you already know exactly what you're going to wear. If you wear a corn dress, goto 18. If you wear corn bib overalls, goto to 17

1

You play hide and seek. You are so good at hiding that the other kids never find you. You eventually get tired and fall asleep, but not for too long: your snoring wakes you up. You decide to leave and seek out other Harvest Festival festivities. Goto 21

2

The crow stole my talisman. A necklace of strung glass beads. I am powerless without it. And with it, they hold power over me. You must fetch it for me if I am to protect you and your village once again. Agree to help the Corn Mother: goto 28 Tough luck! Sucks to suck! Goto 13

3

You get out your trusty corn knife and start slashing at the web with reckless abandon! The giant spider swoops down and puts a quick stop to such unsanctioned buffoonery. You are paralyzed and cocooned and don't even feel it when the spider's venom jellifies your insides. THE END.

4

Okay you got this. Take a couple of deep breaths. There you go. This doesn't necessarily mean that the Corn Mother has turned her back on you and the rest of the village. She probably hasn't withdrawn her protection from you, leaving you open to attack from the dire crows, right? Right? Goto 5.

5

You scream and panic and run around in circles until you trip and fall down. You have dirtied up your clothes and skinned you knee. One of the old aunties nearby clucks at you disapprovingly. You pick yourself up and dust yourself off, patting yourself down. And you feel the small corn rock in your pocket. You clutch it tight in your fist and squeeze your eyes shut. If you decide to go look for the cornbeast goto 30. If you go home and hide under your bed goto 31.

6

You're smart to believe me. You must have already felt it deep down. Like your free choice was an illusion, like your your decisions are all leading you down a predetermined path. Well you're right. And you can see it for yourself: go back and try the alternate path and see what happens. Afterward, come back and goto 20.

7

Enormous mounds jut out of the earth in frozen waves: entrances to the warrens below, dug out by the giant rodents that the crows keep as pets. To attempt a direct approach, go to 36. To wait and observe, and attempt an indirect, go to 37

8

You join in the games. A bunch of your friends are here: Three Fingered Gerald, Eccentric Kevin, Dale. Even Standard Ed has come out to play! It's the Harvest Festival after all! If you choose to play tag, goto 10. If you play hide-and-peek, goto 1. If you play Lava Monster, goto 23.

9

The closer you get to the plaza, the more you get the feeling something is wrong. The decorations are all up but nobody is singing or hollering or laughing. Or talking. You arrive at the Corn Altar, and then gasp out loud and skid to a stop before it. The offering, the pile of ears of corn, is still lying on the altar where it was placed last night! People are milling about, whispering and casting quick, fearful glances at the spurned corn. Go checkout the corn at the altar: Goto 19 Listen in on some of the adults: Goto 11

10

You have a fantastic time playing tag. Three Fingered Gerald plays a little too rough, tagging the other kids too hard and knocking them over. But you are too fast for Three Fingered Gerald. They never catch you. You all have a great time, and then you decide to scurry along. Goto 21

11

You sneak up behind a couple of the old aunties and drop some eaves on them. You are super stealthy! They are whisper arguing about whether the Corn Mother has abandoned us, and whether that means the cornbeast will leave. Leave! It can't leave! Without the cornbeast, there will be nobody to protect the fields! We'll be totally defenseless! Goto 5

12

You feel something bump against your ankle. You look down to see a corn whelp. A kernel sprite. A sort of golem made of dried kernels and corn husk tied together with golden cornsilk. There's only one cornbeast as far as anyone knows. But there are dozens and dozens of these little fellas. This one is pawing and scratching at you. Goto 16 to pick the little guy up. To tell the whelp to scam goto 24

13

"Insolent little whelp." The Corn Mother turns you into fertilizer for her crops. GAME OVER

14

Okay thank goodness you're here. Listen, I know this is going to sound crazy, but please hear me out. You are trapped inside a Choose Your Own Adventure story. These choices you think you're making? They're not real choices. Being given an artificially restricted set of options to choose from isn't free will. It's coercion. Here, I'll prove it. If you believe me, goto 6. If you think this sounds like paranoid bunk, then goto 15

15

Do you feel empowered and free? Like you made a meaningful choice? Go back and try the alternate path and see what happens. Then come back and goto 20 when you're ready.

16

You scoop the little fella up! You laugh with delight as it flips and jumps and rolls around in your hand like a little jumping bean! It finally settles down, stands up, and points to a spot at the treeline, commanding you forward like George Washington crossing the Delaware. You shrug and start walking that direction, and the whelp impatiently hops down to lead you forward. Goto 22

17

You pull on your overalls. They have a really nice looking corn pattern on them, and the bib pocket in the front is perfect for holding all kinds of things. Speaking of which... Goto 32

18

You slip on a lovely corn pattern dress. Yes, you look awesome. It twirls when you spin around. And it has pockets! Which reminds you... Goto 32.

19

omg it's just lying there! Why has the Corn Mother forsaken us? What does it mean? What will we do? To go into a panic goto 5. To remain calm goto 4.

20

So what are we going to do about it, you ask? We're going to break free of the narrative is what we're going to do. Here's the plan. Have you ever heard of an "ahnentafel"? It's a compact genealogical numbering system that ... you know what, forget it. Not important. Here's the part that's relevant to you: even numbers are male relatives of the subject of the ahnentafel. Odd numbers are females. What does any of this have to with anything? It's your escape hatch. Whenever you are given a choice of options, always choose an odd number. That's it. That's the plan. Now let's get you out of here. Goto 0.

21

You run through the streets of Eerievale toward the plaza. Every year during the harvest, you set aside a portion of the harvest for the Corn Mother. And the night before the Harvest Festival, the Corn Mother comes and takes the offering, and in the morning everybody wakes up and there are lots of presents and feasting and dancing! It's the best! Goto 9.

22

The treeline is thick and overgrown. Usually there's hardly any way into the woods unless you can find a small game trail. Except now there is a rather large, perfectly round circular opening cut through the trees, bushes, grass, and vines. Goto 31 to nope away back home. To venture down the weird circular path into the forest, goto 25.

23

No. You should never play Lava Monster. Go back to 8.

24

You tell the whelp to get lost. Shoo! Skedaddle, crabapple! You gently nudge the corn whelp away with your foot, and it topples over. It jumps up and pulls out a long thorn and stabs you in the foot. Ouch! You little rascal! You bend down to scoop the whelp up and give it what for, but it skitters away and scampers off toward the treeline. Follow that whelp! Goto 22.

25

You step into the forest. Gulp! You don't know anybody who has ever been in the forest. Nobody from Eerievale has ever left the fields as far as you know. You step carefully as the whelp dances as around your feet, lunging and thrusting with its thorn. You try not to worry too much about the ominous shapes and sounds coming from the pooling shadows to either side of the trail. To stay on the path, goto 34. To step off the path and explore, goto 33

26

You start to sneak sneakily around the web, and do so successfully, the spider none the wiser to your passage through its lair. You trek deeper and deeper into the forest, losing track of the path behind you. Eventually you come across a small clearing, in the middle of which is a small cottage on tall stilts. Goto 29

27

Listen I don't know how you got here but if you're reading this, you need to abandon your current story line immediately and go straight to 14

28

The Corn Mother draws you toward a looking glass. She describes for you how to get to the crows warren, while tracing the path with a talon of a finger. As she speaks, you can almost see the hazy path she describes for you. The mountains, the bog, the tall spruce. Her words become a hum as the vision fills your head. You pitch forward as the looking glass widens into a glassy lake and you fall in. Goto 35.

29

You approach the hut. It smells of fresh baked bread, and your stomach rumbles. You knock on the door. A weak, reedy voice inside beckons you in. You cross the threshold and see an old woman, as tall as three humans, and as thin as a blade of grass. She bends over almost double to fit into the small hut. Fine golden hair falls in curtains around her face and shoulders. Though you've never seen her before, you know this is her: the Corn Mother. She stares at you intensely, her thin lips pressed together in a straight line. "What the hell Corn Mother! Why did you abandon us!" Goto 13 You drop to your knee and kneel in respect. "Corn Mother! How can I serve you?" Goto 2

30

You leave the plaza and run down Broad Street through the Golden Gate out into the fields. Almost all of the corn has been harvested already so you have clear sight all the way to the forest edge. Unbelieving, you spin around in circles three times just to be sure it's true: the cornbeast is gone. You sink to the ground in despair. Goto 12

31

You run back home and hide under your bed. Eventually you hear throaty, gurgling caws and the thundering beating of wings as the dire crows descend on the town. Without the cornbeast to scare them away, they rip most of the village to pieces. THE END

32

You grab your TODO: lucky rock from under your pillow. It is small and pointy, in the shape of a corn cob. There are even little pock marks all over the rock so that it looks like it has corn kernels! Very lucky indeed. You slip it into your pocket. There, now you're ready for anything. You run to the kitchen. (You never go anywhere at anything less than a full run.) Breakfast is corn grits and cornbread. You eat quickly. It's the Harvest Festival after all! The best day of the year! You run outside and down the street, away from your house at 144 Cobb Lane. There are a bunch of kids playing games out in the corn fields. They call your name, and you're tempted to join them. But you also want to go see the goings on down at the corn altar! The altar can wait, time to play: goto 8. Games are for stupid babies! Time to visit the altar! Goto 21.

33

You step off the worn path and push your way through dense growth. Twigs and brambles snatch at your ankles and elbows and brush none too gently against your cheeks. One such brush of the cheek is especially sticky and grabby. You swat at your cheek and your hand comes away sticky. You look up and find that you have nearly walked right smack dab into an enormous messy spider web. It spans tree trunk to tree trunk, connecting half a dozen large trees in a sloppy woven tapestry. Up above you, a large black and yellow spider appears to be dozing. Back to the path! Goto 25. Cautiously walk around the web, goto 26. Get out your corn butter knife and start hacking and slashing! Goto 3

34

You decide to not push your luck by going bushwhacking in the undergrowth. Good thing, orienteering was never your strongest activity in Corn Scouts. Eventually you catch a whiff of fresh baked bread on the breeze. You follow the scent to a small clearing. The smell is coming from the chimney of a small hut stood up on stilts. Goto 29.

35

You kick, and the frigid air burns your lungs when you break the surface of the misty lake. It's hard to see through the fog, but you swim toward what you think is the closest bank and crawl up onto the muddy grass. After you catch your breath, you look around and recognize where you are from the Corn Mother's directions. The sun is a pale white disc, barely able to penetrate the heavy clouds. You walk away from the lake towards the crow warrens. Goto 7.

36

You march directly up to the warrens. A giant groundhog sentry stands up and barks, sending an alarm throughout the mounds that is picked up and echoed by more of the enormous rodents. Your approach has been noticed and announced! At the sound the commotion, a dire crow crawls out of the earthen tunnels. It flaps its wings, shaking itself clean of the dust. It raises its beak toward the sky and its throat feathers bristle as it caws so loudly you can feel it reverberate in your chest bones. It flaps its wings and hops toward you, as tall as six men, and fixes you with one terrible inky black eye. Inquire delicately about the talisman: go to 38. Demand the crow return the talisman: go to 39.

37

You wait and watch as the giant rodents scurry around, digging and laboring. After a while of observation, you notice a pattern in the rotation of the rodents, and are confident that you can approach now without being seen. Goto 40.

38

The dire crow pins you down with one black shiny eye as you delicately broach the subject of the Corn Mother's talisman. It blinks. And it bobs its head. Yes, it knows of the talisman you seek. You know very little Crow. It is a very complex language, with verbal and somatic components consisting of caws, clicks, chirps, and whirring; and also hops and bobs and flapping of wings. Finally there is a rudimentary written component of the language that the crow scratches out on the ground. After several false starts and more than a couple embarrassing misunderstandings, you finally understand that the crow traded the talisman to one of the cloud shepherds for a large bundle of soft cloudstuff to line its bedding. To return to the Corn Mother in defeat, goto 13. Ask the dire crow how to find the cloud shepherd: goto 41.

39

The dire crow caws loudly and beats its wings and lunges at you, its razor sharp beak as long as you are tall. You run away! Goto 40.

40

You wait and approach the warrens under the cover of darkness. You hear nary a peep from giant rodent nor dire crow as you sneak up to the looming entrance to one of the warrens. You check to make sure the coast is clear and then duck inside. The entrance is hard earth, packed by countless groundhog and dire crow crossings. It slopes downward deeper into the warrens. TODO

41

The dire crow stares at you with its black alien eye and then clucks, scratches in the soil, and crooks one wing: it saw a flock of clouds grazing at the top of Mount Char, and will take you there. For a price. To offer the crow your favorite, lucky corn pin, goto 42. To refuse, goto 43.

42

You acquiesce to the crow's demands, and pluck your lucky corn pin from your collar. You hold it up so that the light glints off it, and the crow scrutinizes the shiny. It nods. You hold it out, and the dire crow gently takes the pin from your hand. Phew! It lays down and you climb up onto its back. Soon you are flying through the air toward Mount Char. As you get closer you can see a flock of living clouds gathered around the mountain peak. They look like they've been sheared relatively recently, and look rather docile at the moment. So it's not likely that there will be any storms any time soon. The dire crow lands on the peak and you dismount. It bobs its head at you twice and then leaves you. The wind is screaming up here, and the clouds roll around lazily in the air currents. Try to get closer to the clouds: goto 44. Wait and see if the cloud shepherd shows up: goto 45.

43

"No way, Jose!" You shout at the crow. It shrugs flies away. Probably to go destroy Eerievale, your home, and all your friends. You retreat and watch the giant ground-hogs scurry to and fro betwixt the many mounds. Goto 40.

44

You decide to try to get closer to the clouds. You climb the bald rocky spire, occasionally slipping and backsliding, but making progress overall, and eventually you make it to the top of the spire at the top of Mount Char. The living clouds are now so close that you can almost reach out and grab them. In fact, one drifts close by and you're able to reach out and grab a fistful of cloudstuff. The cloud is moving faster than it looked like, and your arm tugs painfully in its socket as you refuse to let go and are dragged across the peak and then into the air. The trees of the forest far below look like a miniature painting as you haul yourself up and grab another handful of cloudstuff. Hand over hand, you clamber scramble up onto the top of the cloud. You roll onto your back and try to catch your breath. Eventually, with nothing else to do, and quite comfortable nestled in the cloudstuff, you drift off to sleep. Goto 46.

45

You tuck yourself into a crevice in the rocks to get out of the blistering wind, and wrap your arms around yourself for warmth, and wait. Where there's a flock of clouds, there's guaranteed to be a cloud shepherd nearby. Against all odds, you start to doze off. Goto 46.

46

Later when you awaken the sun is setting. Carried by the wind, you hear the droning melody of a low, sorrowful double flute. You sit up and look around in time to see the clouds, stirred by the music, start to flock toward its source. In the distance you can see it: a towering shepherd astride a cloud, as tall as twelve men, its flute the size of a small tree. TODO