

ISERITH'S GUIDE TO

ADJUDICATING
ACTIONS

IN

D&D 5E

DISCLAIMER

This guide is a reflection of how I personally interpret the rules and goals of play for D&D 5e, combined with over 25 years of practical dungeon-mastering experience. Other DMs may adjudicate actions differently based on their own understanding of the game and their own experiences. You are well-advised to adjudicate actions in the way you and your players find to be the most fun.

Read more: <http://www.enworld.org/forum/showthread.php?453707-How-to-Adjudicate-Actions-in-D-amp-D-5e#ixzz44mScJ82F>

INTRODUCTION

According to the Basic Rules (page 3), the basic conversation of the game is:

1. The DM describes the environment.
2. The players describe what they want to do.
3. The DM narrates the results of the adventurers' actions.

Somewhere between 2 and 3, the Basic Rules tell us (page 58) that the DM must decide if the action has an uncertain outcome. If the DM determines that there is uncertainty, then the DM calls for an appropriate ability check. A skill may or may not apply to this check at the DM's discretion. The check might also be a group check or a passive check (page 59), depending on the players' stated approach.

The DM must also decide what the difficulty class (DC) will be - the number that must be rolled to determine if the check is a success or failure. While the DM can set this number to anything between 5 (very easy) to 30 (nearly impossible), the game works fine if the DM never chooses a DC other than 10 (easy), 15 (medium), or 20 (hard).

Further, the Basic Rules also tell us (page 57) that the DM must determine whether or not the circumstances of the action and situation warrant applying Advantage or Disadvantage to the check.

Finally, it's important that the DM consider the stakes - what success and failure look like - prior to adjudication. A common complaint about D&D's resolution system is that it produces boring results e.g. a character does a thing or fails to do a thing. While this is fine in some situations, in others it falls quite flat and produces outcomes that are less desirable. Therefore, the DM should consider applying what the Basic Rules call "progress combined with a setback" (page 58) or what the Dungeon Master's Guide refers to as "success at a cost" (page 242). It is also a generally good practice to make the players aware of the stakes prior to the roll so that they know the consequences of success and failure. This helps make sure that everyone's expectations about the situation are in line and the players don't feel blindsided because they have a different understanding of what's at stake.

In this guide, I'm going to provide example adjudications for all ability (skill) checks and some tips you can use in a more general sense to adjudicate in a way that makes your game more fun, exciting, and memorable. My hope is that this resource is both a guide to help you run your game and a dialogue where

we can all discuss methods for performing this most important function of the DM's role.

Now, let's meet our 1st-level adventuring party, who will be the focus of the examples provided in this guide:

Sacred Cow, a minotaur hermit cleric:

Ability Scores

Str 14, Dex 10, Con 12, Int 14, Wis 16, Cha 8

Skills

Athletics +4, History +6 (Blessings of Knowledge),
Insight +6, Medicine +6, Nature +6, Religion +6
(Blessings of Knowledge)

Tools

Navigator's Tools, Vehicles (Water)

Lack-Toes the Intolerant, a half-orc gladiator fighter:

Ability Scores

Str 16, Dex 10, Con 16, Int 8, Wis 12, Cha 13

Skills

Acrobatics +2, Athletics +5, Intimidation +3,
Performance +3, Survival +3

Tools

Disguise Kit, Musical Instrument (Flute)

Chuck Dagger, a human criminal rogue:

Ability Scores

Str 8, Dex 16, Con 10, Int 14, Wis 13, Cha 14

Skills

Acrobatics +5, Deception +4, Investigation +4,
Perception +5 (expertise), Persuasion +4, Sleight
of Hand +5, Stealth +7 (expertise)

Tools

Disguise Kit, Gaming Set (Dice), Thieves' Tools

Feat

Observant

Rosemary Thyme, a half-elf sage wizard:

Ability Scores

Str 8, Dex 14, Con 10, Int 16, Wis 14, Cha 14

Skills

Animal Handling +4, Arcana +5, History +5, Insight
+4, Investigation +5, Persuasion +4

Tools

None

STRENGTH CHECKS

A Strength check can model any attempt to lift, push, pull, or break something, to force your body through a space, or to otherwise apply brute force to a situation. The Athletics skill reflects aptitude in certain kinds of Strength checks.

The adventurers are forced to abandon a ship that ran aground just off the coast of a jungle-choked island. They are tossed into storm-wracked, perilous seas at night...

DM: Chuck spots a large fin cutting through the water, heading directly for Rosemary who is some distance away from the others. What do you do?

Chuck: Shark! Rosemary, swim for it!

Rosemary: Gods help me! I'm barely treading water as is!

DM: You can both barely hear each other over the howling winds.

Lack-Toes: I'm on it! I give it my all to swim to Rosemary and defend her from the shark.

DM Decision Point: Here the DM must decide if Lack-Toes can make it to Rosemary before the shark gets to her, fails to make it there in time, or if the outcome is uncertain.

DM: The speed of the shark in its natural element and the tumultuous waves make this uncertain. This is a DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check. If Lack-Toes succeeds, he'll make it there in time and the shark will break off. If Lack-Toes fails, the shark will bite Rosemary's backpack and drag her under!

Lack-Toes: *rolls a 16*

DM: The shark breaks the surface of the water, its tooth-filled mouth wide just as Lack-Toes gets to Rosemary - but it diverts at the last second and swims away.

Later, after break of day...

DM: It was a rough night, but the storm seems to have abated and dawn sees you bobbing in the water a long distance away from the island. Waves crash against the cliffs that mark the beginning of dry land. You've all managed to find a piece of debris upon which to float, but the sea is dragging you away from the island, not toward it. What do you do?

Cow: It is dry land I seek.

Rosemary: I hope my spellbook isn't waterlogged...

Chuck: We hold onto our bits of debris and kick our way to the island, however long it takes.

DM Decision Point: Here the DM must decide if the group makes it to the shore, fails to make it to the shore, or that the outcome is uncertain enough to warrant a check. This could also be considered a task that is performed repeatedly over a period of time which makes it suitable for a passive check, if the DM wishes.

DM: It takes a while, but you all eventually make it to the cliffs. However, some of you may be strained by the effort of working against the tide. If your passive Athletics check is under 15, you're exhausted. The debris gives you advantage which is a +5 to your check in this case.

Rosemary: I arrive at the cliffs, but I'm exhausted.

Chuck: Same here - I'm ready to collapse between last night and this morning!

Lack-Toes: I kept up even with my missing toes.

Cow: The minotaur are born sea reavers - this is nothing to me!

But their trial is not yet over...

DM: You are bumping up against a steep cliff face where waves crash against the rock. Sheer and slippery, it's a treacherous climb to the relative safety of the mysterious island. A flock of blood-red sea gulls fly above the cliffs, crying out for a warm meal. What do you do?

Cow: We must be as nimble as mountain goats and climb our way to safety!

Chuck: I don't know if I can make this climb after that swim.

Rosemary: Buck up, Chuck. Though I surely don't like the look of those sea gulls.

Lack-Toes: Complaining does not help us get up these rocks. I take out some rope and spikes to aid in our climb. Sacred Cow and I can help Chuck and Rosemary along.

DM Decision Point: Again, here is the point at which the DM must decide if the climb is successful, a failure, or whether the outcome is uncertain. Because the group are all helping each other, this qualifies for a group check.

DM: This will be a DC 10 group Athletics check. Half of you need to succeed for the whole group to succeed. If the group fails, you'll make it to the top of the cliffs, but you'll have drawn the attention of the blood gulls which will attack!

Party: *rolls 5, 14, 19, 7*

DM: Just enough - you make it to the top of the cliffs and find the island jungle sprawled out before you...

Pro-Tip: Should there be an ability check every time a character climbs, jumps, or swims? No. Unless there is some kind of dramatic circumstance or difficult situation that is making their attempt at climbing, jumping, or swimming have an uncertain outcome, you should just use the normal movement rules (Basic Rules, page 64). Remember, not every action the PCs take has an uncertain outcome. You have to decide which ones do and which ones do not.

DEXTERITY CHECKS

A Dexterity check can model any attempt to move nimbly, quickly, or quietly, or to keep from falling on tricky footing. The Acrobatics, Sleight of Hand, and Stealth skills reflect aptitude in certain kinds of Dexterity checks.

Sacred Cow, Lack-Toes the Intolerant, Chuck Dagger, and Rosemary Thyme have taken a long rest. During the night, they heard far-off drums from somewhere in the jungle. The morning has been marked with smoke rising from the island's central volcano and tremors in the ground...

DM: So you've decided to plunge into the jungle to find the ruins said to lay at the heart of the island. Moving toward the center of the island is an uphill, slippery affair marked by periodic tremors that threaten your balance. How do you deal with this to mitigate the chance of injury while traveling?

Cow: I fashion a walking stick for additional support and use it to keep my balance.

Chuck: I am quite sure-footed now that I've had a good rest - I even make some amusing flourishes when trying to keep my balance for effect.

Lack-Toes: I am too strong and proud to fall, so I trudge ahead grabbing vines and the like as I need to.

Rosemary: Here's hoping my elvish blood makes me as deft as my ancestors.

DM Decision Point: By now, you should know what to do here - decide if the PCs individually succeed, fail, or whether their check is uncertain. This is also a task performed repeatedly, so we can do a passive check here. I'll note where DM Decision Points are going forward, but won't spell it out.

DM: Okay, let's do a passive Acrobatics check to represent how well you deal with the slippery ground and random tremors. The DC is 15 - Sacred Cow, you have advantage due to your walking stick. If you fail, mark off a hit die due to injuries you're free to describe.

Lack-Toes: I fall short of that DC, so a tremor caught me off-guard and I slipped on some lichens. I grumble about this for a good long while. I also blame Chuck.

Chuck: "Hey!"

Rosemary: Yes, and when he fell, he tumbled back into me - which caused me to get tripped up as well.

DM: The jungle is rife with sharp rocks and spiny plants that make falling quite painful. Both of you lose a hit die due to the strain. The terrain eventually evens out and the tremors subside.

Later, the jungle gets thicker and thicker. Lack-Toes moves to the front of the marching order to hack their way through the brush. Chuck moves to the rear to keep an eye out for any hidden threats that might be trailing them...

DM: After a few more swings of Lack-Toes' ax, the brush gives way to a game trail that cuts through the dense foliage. It looks to run in the direction of the volcano and away, perpendicular to your current path. There is a pile of moldering fruit on the trail about 10 feet away from you.

Rosemary: "Yeesh, what stinks?"

Lack-Toes: I move over and inspect the fruit.

DM: As you approach the fruit, something catches on your foot - a trip wire! It's taut against your boot... one wrong move and whatever trap you've stumbled upon will be sprung! What do you do?

Lack-Toes: "Chuck! Get over here..."

Cow: "Lack-Toes sounds distressed!" I approach cautiously.

Chuck: As do I.

DM: The trap is immediately obvious to Chuck's observant eyes. Had he been in the front of the marching order, he'd have spotted it first. Hidden behind some bushes near the pile of fruit is a drawn bow on its side in which a sizeable arrow with a barbed head is nocked, pointed directly at Lack-Toes. The trip wire runs into the bushes where the bow is found. What do you do?

Chuck: "Hold very still, Lack-Toes..." I take out my thieves' tools and set about trying to carefully cut the bowstring. That should sort out the trap.

Cow: "Act with the confidence of the Horned God, Chuck." I cast guidance.

DM Decision Point...

DM: Okay, go ahead and make a Dexterity (Thieves' Tools) check. The DC is 15 and you have a +1d4 bonus from Sacred Cow's blessing. If you succeed, the trap will be disabled. If you fail, Lack-Toes will be subject to the trap's attack.

Chuck: *rolls 18* Snip!

Rosemary: Phew!

Lack-Toes: I roar loudly, ripping the tripwire and any attached components out of the bushes, then stomp on them.

Cow: "Calm, friend! The peril has been avoided."

Several indigenous hunters have been alerted to the adventurers' presence by Lack-Toes' rage and move to intercept them, making no attempt to be quiet in their approach...

DM: Some yelps and calls from the jungle herald the approach of potentially hostile natives. You can hear them crashing through the brush, getting closer. What do you do?

Cow: "The wise course is to hide until we know what we're up against."

Rosemary: "Agreed - hide!" I pick up the pieces of the busted trap and throw them in the brush.

Lack-Toes: I help by kicking the dirt and trying to cover up our tracks before taking cover.

Chuck: I slip into some bushes beneath a vine-covered tree and hide, helping my friends stay out of sight.

DM Decision Point...

DM: This will be a group Dexterity (Stealth) check. The DC is 14. As you huddle in the brush and try to hide, four humanoids move up the trail to the pile of moldering fruit. They are marked by the symbols of snakes in numerous pigments and wield flat clubs lined with pieces of sharp obsidian. Shortbows are slung over their shoulders. As they talk to each other, their language is notably sibilant and at least one of them flicks a forked tongue in the air as he looks around. Let's see some rolls.

Party: *rolls 8, 13, 15, 21*

DM: Well done. The hunters are looking around and have found their damaged trap, but haven't noticed you. Chuck, however, spots a pair of pliers from his thieves' tool kit laying at the edge of the trail nearby. It must have slipped out - and now the natives are moving toward it. If they see it, they'll know it wasn't a boar that broke their trap. What do you do?

Chuck: My heart is in my throat... I don't want to be the one that gets us caught by the snake-men! I reach out of the bushes and try to deftly grab it without being noticed.

DM Decision Point...

DM: Give me a DC 10 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check. If you succeed, you'll grab those pliers before they see it, no problem. If you fail, you're caught, but your friends are not unless they make a move.

Chuck: *rolls 16* Oh, thank the gods!

DM: The snake-men walk up the game trail in the direction of the volcano and are soon out of sight.

Pro-Tip: While I could have said that Lack-Toes' passive Perception wasn't high enough to notice the trap and then had the trap loose an arrow at him when he hit the tripwire, this could be seen as something of a "gotcha." I also provided the moldering fruit as a form of telegraphing, that is, a clue that indicates something notable to be explored. Given that it was a game trail, a player might suspect a trap, proceed cautiously, and find the trip wire before stepping on it. Lack-Toes, in this example, did not so I put him in a tense situation with clear stakes that the players used teamwork to resolve and which made for an interesting scene.

CONSTITUTION CHECKS

Constitution checks are uncommon, and no skills apply to Constitution checks, because the endurance this ability represents is largely passive rather than involving a specific effort on the part of a character or monster. A Constitution check can model your attempt to push beyond normal limits, however.

After additional trials, tribulations, a pitched battle with a yuan-ti pureblood and its swarm of poisonous water moccasins, plus a long rest, the adventuring party is now 2nd level. They have encountered an insane castaway, Scurvy Pete, who knows a secret way into the dungeon...

DM: Scurvy Pete challenges Chuck Dagger to go one-for-one with him eating these fat, maggot-like grubs with black heads, each big as a thumb, that live in the palm trees. "They explode when you bite down on them and taste like old fish!" If Chuck can eat more of the grubs than Scurvy Pete, then he promises to tell you where the secret entrance to the dungeon is, outside of snake-men territory. If Chuck can't stomach this, then you're on your own.

Lack-Toes: "How 'bout I just beat the information out of this lunatic?"

Cow: "Let us not stoop to such measures. Bad karma."

Rosemary: "C'mon Chuck, we need this. Those snake-men are dangerous."

Cow: "Use your third eye and imagine they're something other than what they are." I cast guidance on Chuck.

Chuck: I sigh. "I'll take the challenge... I'll try to imagine they're just pieces of runny cheese."

DM: Scurvy Pete puts the palm leaf before you, covered in squirming grubs. "Go!"

Rosemary: On the sly, I cast a spell - prestidigitation - to change the flavor of grubs on Chuck's side of the leaf to delicious cheese.

DM Decision Point...

DM: That will grant advantage to Chuck's Constitution check, plus another 1d4 for guidance. The DC will be Scurvy Pete's Constitution check.

Chuck: *rolls 15*

DM: *rolls 18* Even with good advice and magic on your side, you couldn't eat more grubs than Scurvy Pete. What happened?

Chuck: They tasted surprisingly good but the way they looked and squirmed psyched me out. I only got a couple down before my stomach turned.

DM: Scurvy Pete does a jig to celebrate his victory. This crazed man won't tell you how to get to the secret entrance. You'll have to find it yourself which will take time or go through yuan-ti territory which is more dangerous.

Later, after a dangerous skirmish with yuan-ti pureblood hunters and a giant constrictor snake, the adventurers are being pursued by a dozen or more snake-men...

DM: Arrows whistle past you and embed themselves in nearby trees with an ominous "thokk!" as you try to keep ahead of the yuan-ti. More seem to join the chase as you race toward the volcano which trembles and smokes. Thorny vines and brush tear at your exposed skin as you run. How do you seek to get away from your pursuers?

Rosemary: We know they won't follow us into the ruins in the mountain - they think it's cursed. "To the ruins!"

Chuck: I'm huffing and puffing. This running fast over long distances is definitely not for me.

DM: Your legs are burning and your chest feels like it's going to explode from the effort.

Lack-Toes: I'm running behind Chuck to make sure he doesn't fall down and get captured. "Move!"

Cow: "This reminds me of the running of the bulls during the Horned God's festival!" I run with the spirit of my deity in my heart and a smile on my face.

DM Decision Point...

DM: It sounds like you're all just trying to push past your normal limits and beat the yuan-ti to the ruins. Let's do this as a group DC 14 Constitution check. If at least half of you make it, you get to the ruins and the yuan-ti stop giving chase. If less than half of you make it, then you're captured by the snake-men and brought before their Great Abomination.

Party: *rolls 8, 9, 14, 17*

Chuck: "I thought... we... were... goners..."

Lack-Toes: "We?"

DM: By the skin of your teeth, you leave the hissing yuan-ti behind as you plunge into a cave mouth on the mountain. They will most assuredly be waiting for you if and when you come out. Meanwhile, fissures in the mountain have been spewing smoke, ash, and toxic gases into the air. This cave and the tunnel that cuts into the mountain are choked with it and so do will you be if you don't do something about it. So what do you do?

Cow: I gasp and cough, trying to get whatever good air there is into my lungs, then hold my breath.

Lack-Toes: Me too. "We can power through this."

Chuck: "I'm already out of breath from running - now this?!" I hold my breath as best I can, considering.

Rosemary: I cover my mouth and nose with a wet cloth.

Cow: I point ahead - maybe deeper in the tunnels the smoke will abate. "Onward!"

DM Decision Point...

DM: Okay, this will be a passive Constitution check, DC 10. Disadvantage if you failed your Constitution check when you were being chased by yuan-ti. If you succeed, you make it to better air with no ill effect. If you fail, you make it to better air but you took in a lot of toxic fumes while traveling - poisoned for 1 hour. Rosemary, advantage for the wet cloth. How are you feeling after your journey through the tunnel?

Chuck: I cough loudly and struggle to make it, crawling the last bit, nearly passing out. I'm poisoned.

Rosemary: I feel okay and try to help Chuck along.

Lack-Toes: "It smells good in here!"

Cow: "I must admit - I feel unwell. I am too used to the bracing sea air."

Pro-Tip: There are three good go-to's that are easy to imagine for a failed check. Take some resources off the PCs - some hit points, a hit die, some equipment, time, etc. Throw a condition on them for a given amount of time. Or escalate the situation - the NPC gets hostile, they're captured, monsters show up, the trap's about to go off, or whatever makes sense in the scene. Make success be what they stated as their goal when they described what they wanted to do. Make failure cost them something or change the scene in some way. And always be sure it follows in the fiction and is interesting and fun for the players (even if it's bad for the characters!).

INTELLIGENCE CHECKS

An Intelligence check comes into play when you need to draw on logic, education, memory, or deductive reasoning. The Arcana, History, Investigation, Nature, and Religion skills reflect aptitude in certain kinds of Intelligence checks.

Our adventurers have made it into the dungeon, a burial complex for the kings that once ruled this island. As they explore and encounter dangerous traps and monsters, the volcano threatens to blow and come crashing down upon them...

DM: A swarm of giant beetles the size of small dogs surges toward you and the door you have opened, glowing an angry red, mandibles clacking in a most disconcerting fashion. What do you do?

Lack-Toes: "I hate bugs!" I start stomping them.

DM: Several of the ones in the front of the swarm are smashed beneath your boot, but they just keep coming and now they perceive you as a threat. What do you do?

Cow: I try to recall what I know about beetles like these.

DM Decision Point...

DM: Okay, let's see a DC 10 Nature check. If you succeed, I'll give you something interesting and useful. If you fail, I'll give you the info, but you hesitate and you're subject to an attack from 1d4 beetles.

Cow: *rolls 25* I am an expert, it seems!

DM: Wow, yeah. So these are giant fire beetles. Driven by instinct, it's clear they seek to escape the quaking mountain more than they seek to feed on adventurers. What do you do?

Cow: "Moooooove out of the way!" I instruct my comrades to simply get out of the way of the beetles and let them pass. There is no need to waste our resources doing battle with these creatures.

Party: *gets out of the way*

DM: The beetles pass by after a few moments with a great deal of clamor but no violence.

Later, the adventurers come to what they believe to be an antechamber to an important section of the dungeon where rests the legendary magical sword, Flame Tongue...

DM: The walls of the 20-foot-square chamber are covered in strange hieroglyphs that mark the names and deeds of the kings who once ruled this land. They are organized in neat columns framed with

tiny pieces of obsidian. A large stone door stands upon the north wall. It bears a rectangle framed in volcanic glass, but there are no symbols within it. A tremor shakes the room, causing stones from the ceiling to fall, reminding you that time is of the essence. What do you do?

Lack-Toes: "There is no time! Graaaaah!" I rush toward the stone door and throw my shoulder into it, trying to break it down.

DM Decision Point. The door is made of stone and reinforced by magic, so here I'm going to say that Lack-Toes' action automatically fails.

DM: You come away with a pain in your shoulder and the door has not budged. You can see that the rectangle framed in volcanic glass has an indentation where your shoulder hit it, as if it were quite malleable.

Cow: "How odd!" I push against the malleable part of the door with one of my hooves.

DM: It pushes in easily and when you come away, an impression of your hoof remains.

Rosemary: "Hmm..." I'm going to walk around the chamber quickly look for clues to how we might bypass this door and delve deeper into the dungeon.

DM Decision Point. There's not much in this chamber to obscure Rosemary's search, so I decide she just succeeds.

DM: You find what appears to be a stylus, fashioned from bone, carelessly tossed into a corner of the chamber.

Rosemary: "Look - a writing implement..."

Chuck: "I bet that has something to do with the clay on the door, or whatever that is. And I wonder if these symbols have anything to do with it, too." I'm going to spend some time investigating the symbols, trying to find a pattern.

DM Decision Point. Chuck is willing to take some time on his search despite the threat of the ceiling coming down around his ears. I think figuring out a good clue about the hieroglyphs has an uncertain outcome and I decide to go with passive Investigation because he's performing a task repeatedly over time as he moves about the chamber.

DM: So that will be a passive Investigation. The DC is 15. If you succeed, I'll give you a good clue. If you fail, I'll give you the clue, but it takes additional time and a dangerous tremor occurs.

Chuck: Pfft, no problem - I'm observant. My passive Investigation is 19.

DM: You discover that every column bears some of the symbols that were marked on the sarcophagi in the crypt you previously explored. One column is conspicuously blank. As you are making your way around the room, out of the corner of your eye, you pick up a faint flicker of light from one of the symbols - a fearsome demon's face with a ring through its nose.

Chuck: "I don't like the look of this symbol over here, Rosemary. It might be magic."

Rosemary: Without approaching it, I try to examine the demon symbol from afar and see what it's about.

DM: Embedded in one of the demon's eyes is a small magical glyph. It might have been overlooked if not for Chuck's keen eye.

Rosemary: I try to recall what I know of eldritch runes, seeking to determine if it is dangerous or not.

DM Decision Point. A glyph of warding is a common enough magic spell, so I'm going to assume Rosemary can recognize it. Automatic success. If I thought there was a chance she couldn't recognize it, I'd ask for an Arcana check.

DM: It's a glyph of warding that will cause this chamber to erupt in flames if the rune is disturbed in any way. A growing crack in the wall created by the tremors is less than an inch away from it. What do you do?

Rosemary: I impart this dire news to my companions. "As if the ceiling set to collapse wasn't bad enough..."

Lack-Toes: "Foul magic! Can you use your magic to erase it?"

Rosemary: "I can try. We don't want to die by both fire and falling stone, after all."

Cow: "I try to remember the names of the kings that ruled over this island. One of them is missing. That is what I will write upon the door."

Chuck: "Good idea."

Rosemary: I give Sacred Cow the stylus. I'm going to try to disable the glyph of warding with disruptive magic while she inscribes the name of the king on the door.

Lack-Toes: I stand ready with my shield. "I will protect you from the rocks above and the magical fire."

DM Decision Point. The pressure's on and the tension of the moment almost demands some dice. I'm going to say that Rosemary's and Sacred Cow's actions have uncertain outcomes.

DM: Rosemary and Sacred Cow are performing their tasks at the same time under pressure. So let's see a DC 14 Arcana check from Rosemary. Success, you disable the glyph; fail, you set it off. Further, let's go with a DC 15 History check from Sacred Cow. If you're successful, you'll inscribe the correct name before the ceiling collapses. If you fail, rocks fall, everyone... gets hurt. If both of you fail, well, that's bad times indeed. Roll at the same time - go!

Rosemary: *rolls 10*

Cow: *rolls 18*

DM: As Sacred Cow makes the final mark upon the door, it slides open. Flames erupt from the glyph, drawing the breath from your lungs and searing your flesh. The explosion causes the ceiling to give way a stone at a time. Make a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw. With the door open and Lack-Toes' shield as protection, everyone but Lack-Toes has advantage on the save - half damage if you succeed.

Party: *rolls*

Pro-Tip: "Knowledge checks," that is, checks made to recall lore on a subject are perfect for "progress combined with a setback" or "success at a cost." The result of a check should always result in interesting and/or useful information, whether the check is a success or a failure. On a failure, however, that information costs something. Perhaps the adventurer flinches or hesitates which puts him or her at a disadvantage in the scene, tips his or her hand in some way to an adversary, or is frightened until the end of his or her next turn because of a sudden dire revelation.

WISDOM CHECKS

A Wisdom check might reflect an effort to read body language, understand someone's feelings, notice things about the environment, or care for an injured person. The Animal Handling, Insight, Medicine, Perception, and Survival skills reflect aptitude in certain kinds of Wisdom checks.

After recovering from their ordeal with the glyph of warding via a short rest, Chuck Dagger, Lack-Toes the Intolerant, Rosemary Thyme, and Sacred Cow encountered a salamander in its lair who demanded they defeat it in combat to learn what it knew of the Flame Tongue sword...

DM: Bloodied, the salamander Miraj withdraws to the pile of smoldering obsidian orbs near the churning pool of lava. A huge tremor rocks the mountain. "Time runs out for you! Only by this one..." the salamander gestures to Chuck with his tail, "... fighting dishonorably have you have bested me. Yet I will hold to the bargain." The sinuous serpent points to one of two tunnels with its flaming spear. "There - the path to the Flame Tongue." What do you do?

Chuck: "That feint wasn't dishonorable - it was crafty. Anyway, thanks for the directions."

Rosemary: I whisper to my friends. "It is known that these creatures are treacherous."

Cow: "Indeed."

Lack-Toes: "You best be telling the truth, fire-slug, or else we'll return to finish what was started here!"

DM: "The Flame Tongue is nothing to me for my very touch will make any sword or spear glow like the sun... go then and claim it!" Miraj points to the same tunnel again.

Cow: I am carefully observing the salamander's manner of speech and body language to discern its truthfulness.

DM Decision Point...

DM: It sounds like you're making an Insight check - DC is 10. Because the salamander is a monster that comes from a culture so foreign to your own, the check will be made at disadvantage. If you succeed, I'll tell you if Miraj is telling the truth. If you fail, Miraj's trustworthiness is inscrutable and you'll have to decide whether you can trust it or not.

Cow: *rolls 14, 11*

DM: Miraj is not telling the truth.

Cow: "We will take our leave then, noble salamander." I bid my comrades to follow me down the tunnel Miraj did not indicate.

Along this path, the adventurers do battle with some fire bats and narrowly avoid a collapsing floor that tumbled into a bubbling sea of lava...

DM: The tunnel stretches before you and ends at a stone door carved with an image of a glowing sword. Several pools of lava flank the tunnel and in each rise giant stony crabs, their carapaces stalagmites, brandishing open pincers that could drag even mighty Lack-Toes to a fiery end. They begin emitting a clicking sound as a warning to any who dare tread upon their domain. What do you do?

Lack-Toes: I grumble and ready my ax. "Did anyone remember to bring some drawn butter?"

Rosemary: "Perhaps we don't have to fight these creatures, Lack-Toes. After the battle with the salamander and fire bats, we can ill afford another melee."

Chuck: "Agreed. But what can we do?"

Rosemary: "Let us approach and try to pass by them slowly and with no sudden movements. If things go wrong, race toward the doors."

Cow: "I hope you are right, Rosemary..." We do what Rosemary said.

DM Decision Point...

DM: Okay, since I imagine you can all tread carefully, we're going to see if Rosemary was correct in her advice with a DC 15 Animal Handling check. If you succeed on the check, you'll make it past the crabs, no problem. If you fail on the check, the advice doesn't work and one of you is grappled by a crab, determined randomly. Roll it, Rosemary.

Rosemary: *rolls 10* Uh oh.

DM: *rolls 1d4* Mere feet from the door, Chuck's pack is grabbed by a giant fire crab. A sharp yank nearly pulls the rogue off his feet. If something isn't done, Chuck will be pulled into a pool of lava! What do you do?

Chuck: "Aaaargh! Help!"

A brief skirmish ensues resulting in Chuck losing his pack full of supplies and tools. The adventurers make it beyond the doors, slamming them on the agitated giant crabs.

DM: Beyond the door is a grand circular chamber lined with pillars. At the center is a dais over which floats a glorious flaming sword, its white hot steel lighting the room. Amid some rubble that has collected on the floor as a result of the tremors, a bloated corpse stinks up the place. What do you do?

Lack-Toes: "The Flame Tongue! At last!"

Cow: "Cautious, friends - something deadly lurks yet unseen in this place..."

Rosemary: I will approach the corpse and set about carefully examining. I want to determine the cause of death.

DM Decision Point...

DM: That will take a few moments to determine the cause of death with certainty. Will you spend some time on this or do a quick look-see and make a Medicine check?

Rosemary: It seems important, so I'll take my time. I'll see if the corpse has anything useful on it as well.

DM: What will the rest of you do in the meantime?

Chuck: I'll walk the perimeter of the dais, looking for any hidden threats.

Lack-Toes: I will watch over Rosemary, keeping my back against the door in case those crabs want in.

Cow: I will look for other exits.

Multiple DM Decision Points. Some time is being spent on these activities. I'll go with passive Perception checks for Chuck and Sacred Cow. Rosemary has opted to trade time for certainty, so she just succeeds. I also decide that Lack-Toes succeeds as well due to his strength and the strength of the door.

DM: Chuck notices intermittent vents carved into the floor around the dais which appear to have been purposefully concealed when constructed - part of a trap. Sacred Cow finds some lava tubes opposite the door Lack-Toes is guarding, leading to darkness. The door thumps several times as the crabs bump and scrape against it, but Lack-Toes is able to hold it shut. Rosemary discovers the corpse belongs to Poncho Cloak - Chuck's old partner-in-crime before their falling out - and he has died of asphyxiation. He might have gotten the Flame Tongue before you had he not met his [fate](#) here in this chamber. On his corpse, you find a set of thieves' tools.

Rosemary: "Chuck, look - it's Poncho. He suffocated."

Chuck: "I didn't recognize him, bloated as he is. I guess he finally got what he deserved." I say that, but my voice is a bit choked up and I trail off. Then I change the subject. "There are vents in the dais. Perhaps he fell victim to a gas."

Cow: "We may be able to escape via these lava tubes."

Lack-Toes: "Take the sword and let us go. These crabs still strike at the door."

DM: A big tremor shakes the chamber. A loud snap precedes a fissure snaking its way along the wall,

cracking the stone door and toppling two pillars nearby. A pincer tries to work its way through a small hole created by the crack. Red light spills out of the fissure as a wave of heat washes over you - lava is beginning to flow! What do you do?

Chuck: I quickly try to find the trigger of this trap, perhaps a floor tile or the like sets it off.

DM Decision Point...

DM: Time is of the essence and there's no time to be too cautious, so let's see a Perception check, Chuck. The DC is 15. If you succeed, you'll find any trigger that is there. If you fail, you'll find it, but not quickly enough - the crabs will break down the door.

Chuck: *rolls 12* Botched it!

DM: You find the trigger - it's all the stones on the uppermost step of the dais - but just a little too late. The door crumbles behind Lack-Toes and the giant crabs force their way into the chamber! What do you do?

Lack-Toes makes a break for the sword, leaping over the trapped stones to snatch it. The adventurers engage in a fighting withdrawal into the lava tubes as lava spills into the room...

DM: Maze-like and treacherous, the lava tubes offer you too many choices to run with too few clues to determine the best route. Molten rock and poisonous volcanic gases chase you all the way. How do you plan to escape this mountain with your prize?

Lack-Toes: I'm leading the way, guiding the group through the tunnels in the way lava might flow out.

Cow: "May the Horned God give you wisdom, my friend!" I'm casting guidance on Lack-Toes. Also, I'm trying to help him by drawing upon my knowledge of the terrain.

Rosemary: I race behind them, trying to keep up.

Chuck: I pray to every god I've ever heard of that I don't end up like Poncho.

DM Decision Point...

DM: Let's see a Survival check, Lack-Toes - DC 20. You'll have advantage because of Sacred Cow's knowledge of nature and terrain, plus another 1d4 because of her guidance spell. If you succeed, you'll manage to find Scurvy Pete's secret entrance and escape. If you fail, you'll find an opening on the side of a cliff and a long fall to a lagoon below.

Lack-Toes: *rolls 19, 21* Phew!

DM: You manage to find the side tunnel that leads to the light of day outside - lava rushes past your last position and carries on down the tube away from you as you exit. Outside, you find Scurvy Pete... captured by yuan-ti warriors...

Pro-Tip: When you adjudicate the results of an Insight check, it's important not to tell the players what their characters believe. Just tell them the truth (success) or nothing at all (failure). Alternatively, you can tell them the truth with either success or failure, but have there be a cost e.g. the NPC/monster knows the PC knows the truth. There are a number of good reasons for doing things this way, not the least of which is that you keep the trust of your players. Looking at a low die roll and then being told that "you believe the NPC" puts a player in an uncomfortable position. Instead, say that they do or do not discern the NPC's truthfulness. Then leave it to the player to decide what his or her character believes.

CHARISMA CHECKS

A Charisma check might arise when you try to influence or entertain others, when you try to make an impression or tell a convincing lie, or when you are navigating a tricky social situation. The Deception, Intimidation, Performance, and Persuasion skills reflect aptitude in certain kinds of Charisma checks.

From their vantage point on the side of the erupting volcano, the adventurers can see a ship on the horizon. However, they're surrounded by hostile yuan-ti...

DM: There are a dozen or so yuan-ti hissing in the area, led by a muscular snake-man with the body of a human and the head of a serpent. He throws a bruised and bitten Scurvy Pete to the ground before you. Ash is raining down from the sky. "Sssacrifices to Ssseth the Sssibilant Death! Ssslither will have it ssso!" The warriors flanking Ssslither advance on you with nets. What do you do?

Lack-Toes: I draw the Flame Tongue and it ignites with blazing fire. "One more step forward and I will burn you down!"

DM: As if to underscore your point, the volcano trembles. What do you hope to achieve here?

Lack-Toes: I want them to back down from trying to capture us long enough to give my smarter friends a chance to figure out a plan of escape.

DM Decision Point. Ssslither has given a command to his subordinates that Lack-Toes is opposing. This is a good opportunity for an opposed check.

DM: Let's see a Charisma (Intimidation) check. I'll oppose that with Ssslither's Charisma check. If you succeed, the yuan-ti purebloods will back down for a time. If you fail, nets will fly toward your friends and Ssslither will attack you immediately with a wicked, obsidian scimitar.

Lack-Toes: *rolls 19*

DM: *rolls 12* Nice. The purebloods are cowed by the flaming sword and hesitate. This greatly angers Ssslither who hacks the head off a nearby yuan-ti. Its headless body contorts then runs into the jungle as if still alive. He turns back to you, serpentine eyes full of malice.

Rosemary: "Wait, wait!" I dive in between Ssslither and Lack-Toes. "There is no need of further violence. We should all get away from this volcano and discuss this rationally."

DM Decision Point. Ssslither isn't rational and diplomacy just isn't a workable solution. Automatic failure.

DM: Ssslither's reply is to open wide his maw and spray poison out toward Rosemary's face. Make a DC 11 Constitution saving throw, Rosemary.

Rosemary: Not my strong suit. *rolls 8*

DM: Everything goes dark as the poison hits you in the eyes. You're poisoned for an hour and, while you're poisoned, you're blinded.

Rosemary: I scream. "My eyes!"

Lack-Toes: "That's it!" I think it's time to do battle. I raise my sword, ready to fight.

Cow: I pull Rosemary away and tend to her. "Please, we are overmatched and outnumbered! We cannot hope to defeat these snake-men." I then mutter to Chuck and Lack-Toes that in the land from which I hail, snakes can often be charmed with music.

DM: Ssslither locks blades with Lack-Toes and they're face to face. "Sssurrender or die here and now!"

Chuck: "Okay, we surrender!" I throw down the two daggers they can see onto the ground. "Come then, friends, we cannot win this. We are food for Ssseth now." I'm trying to deceive the yuan-ti, lulling them into a false sense of superiority to give Lack-Toes some room to make a move.

Cow: I drop my weapon. I hope this serves as backup for Chuck's ploy.

DM Decision Point...

DM: Okay, give me a Charisma (Deception) check. If you hit DC 15, the yuan-ti will think you've given up and Lack-Toes will be able to act. If you fail, they will press their attack. You have advantage because Sacred Cow is backing your play.

Chuck: *rolls 17, 16* Sweeeet.

Lack-Toes: I break away from Ssslither and drive Flame Tongue into the ground next to me.

DM: Ssslither commands the yuan-ti purebloods forward. "Resstrain them."

Lack-Toes: Before they can get too close, I draw out my flute and start playing. I'm hoping to mesmerize them so my friends can escape.

DM Decision Point. Well, ****, isn't that interesting? This is the kind of thing that is just silly enough to make me want to say "Yes!" I could say it's a Performance check or a Tool check, but instead it's an automatic success. I've been playing up snake tropes pretty hard. That the players are responding in kind is something I should reward.

DM: To be clear, you just want your friends to escape - you're staying behind?

Lack-Toes: If that's what it takes.

DM: As they're closing in on you, the music gives them pause. The snake-men watch you, enraptured, swaying side to side as you play. It won't last long, however, so what do the rest of you do?

Chuck: I grab Flame Tongue and get the heck out of here!

Cow: I throw Rosemary over my shoulder and follow!

Rosemary: "Not so hard!"

DM: As you flee into the jungle, you hear the music abruptly end, followed by the sounds of a scuffle, then silence...

*A ship on the horizon? A friend captured by yuan-ti?
A sweet, sweet magic sword in hand? How will this
tale end? I leave that to your imagination!*

Pro-Tip: There's often an assumption on the part of many groups that the only person who should be engaging in social interaction is the party "face," that is, the character with the best Charisma and/or bonuses in Charisma-based skills. I believe the reason this happens is because the DM is asking for too many ability checks and isn't engaging the other players directly. So remember to only ask for ability checks when the outcome is uncertain (and the result of failure can be interesting). Also, shine the spotlight from time to time on anyone who is relevant to the exchange. Rather than leave it to the "face" to respond, directly ask someone else how he or she responds. Doing this will ensure that everyone gets to participate in social interaction challenges.