This is the intro sequence from Vulcanverse book 5: *Workshop of the Gods*.
Buy it here.

1

Time is a river, they say, and it is not possible to step into the same river twice. But you can swim upstream in memory and in dreams, treading water to revisit the moments that time has swept away.

Begin by setting your four attribute scores on your Adventure Sheet: CHARM, GRACE, INGENUITY and STRENGTH are all at 0. The scores may change depending on your choices growing up.

Yours is a large family. Your parents are active members of the community and you have many sisters, yet when your brother is born it is for some reason assumed that he is your special responsibility. You make sure he is safe in his cradle. Later, when he is old enough to wander off, you are the one who makes sure the yard gate stays closed.

What do you think about these duties?

Looking after him is a chore ► 247
It's fine – you love him ► 83

83

When your brother is old enough to go to school, you take it on yourself to walk with him each morning. At first he chatters to you about his day, all the new things he has seen and learned about and the friends he is making. It is a delight to experience the world made afresh in his eyes.

After only a few weeks, though, his usual outgoing nature changes. He drags his feet on the way to school, keeping his eyes on the ground, and replies to your attempts to draw him out with a few mumbled words.

You make enquiries and discover he is being picked on by a boy of about your own age named Nihakos, a sullen brute whom you have never liked.

How do you deal with it?

Challenge Nihakos to a fight ► 288
Humiliate the bully ► 329
Teach your brother to defend himself ► 739

Do nothing; your brother must learn to fight his own battles ► 247

124

Simple relaxation does not come naturally to you. When you are at home, you find the sense of comfort and security chafes on your nerves until you want to scream. Having your family around you, much as you love them, saps your strength. You would rather be out in the dark, maze-like warrens of the city's criminal quarter, where danger is a taste on the air and any corner might conceal a threat. Only then do you feel truly alive, your blood quickening with the promise of strife and violence. Despite your youth, would-be muggers have only to see your wolfish smile and sharp eyes to back away in search of an easier victim.

'That one belongs to the wild lord,' you hear one gang member mutter to another.

You stride boldly up to them. 'Who is that who claims to own me?'

He laughs, but not without a tremor of unease. 'Ares, the blood-stained bane of mortals. He's in your heart, youngster, and you'll know no rest this side of the grave.'

Record on your Adventure Sheet that Ares is your god, then ► 452

165

'Melt it down for the silver,' says Uncle Nicomachus, observing your interest in the coin. 'That's all it's good for these days.'

'Is beauty worth nothing, then?' chuckles Sophos. 'I would have thought a soldier like you would appreciate this coin as a memento of greater days, Nicomachus.'

'Is this an ant?' you ask.

'The insignia of the Myrmidons,' says Sophos.

Nicomachus rolls his eyes, exasperated at the interruption to the game, but he can't help himself. 'The Myrmidons were Achilles's men. Fierce, hardy, industrious and loyal. They wore black armour. Imagine looking down from the walls of Troy and seeing that gleaming horde arrayed against you.'

'What happened to them?'

'An army is nothing without its people,' says Sophos, 'and people need crops. The mighty river of Notus sustained the city of Iskandria, but when the river dried up the crops started to wither – and so did the civilization of the Myrmidons.'

'Ancient history,' growls Nicomachus. 'Now go away and let us enjoy our game.' But later, at supper, he says, 'If you're interested in the Myrmidons I could introduce you to an old army buddy of mine who spent some time in Iskandria.'

'I'd like to meet him.' ► 698

'Maybe some other time.' ► 575

206

You overhear a group of philosophers arguing about the concept of free will. 'It is an illusion,' maintains one. 'Our choices are determined by rules over which we have no control.'

'Not at all!' shouts another. 'I choose to refute you, but I might equally have remained silent and allowed you to keep your delusion.'

'Why should you not both be right?' says a third. 'If I am perfectly logical, I will always make the correct choice. That choice is therefore decided by an external set of rules, namely logic, but behaving logically is my conscious decision.'

In a lull in the debate, you venture a question: 'Do you know of any experiment that would show the difference between free will and determinism?'

'All things being exactly equal,' replies the first philosopher, 'a person will always make the same choice.'

'Pish and tosh,' grumbles the second. 'I might eat toast for breakfast today and porridge tomorrow.'

'But you remember having toast today,' you point out. 'That will influence your choice tomorrow. And all you are doing is asserting a point of view, not providing evidence for it. So is there any way of testing these theories?'

'Who taught you to think in this way?' wonders the third philosopher.

'Nobody taught me. It's obvious.'

'The child is inspired by the goddess,' declares another scholar who has been listening to the debate.

'Which goddess?' you ask.

'The most beauteous and wise Athena, of course.'

Record on your Adventure Sheet that Athena is your god and then ► 452

247

As you get older you spend more time with your friends and less at home. You become familiar with the streets of your city, even the districts that your parents never brought you to.

Where are you most often to be found?

The Forum ► 370

The Academy of Philosophers ► 206

The Groves of Dionysus ► 780

The slums and backstreets ► 124

288

'Standing up for your weakling kid brother, eh?' he sneers.

'No. I just feel like giving you a pasting.'

After school the two of you meet behind a wall in the necropolis to settle the matter. Most of your schoolmates have come to cheer you on. Everybody would like to see Nihakos taken down a peg or two.

Do you win the fight?

Of course ► 616

It's more or less a draw ► 411

Nihakos kicks your butt ► 821

329

One morning you send your brother to school on his own. He takes a route that runs past Nihakos's house, and as Nihakos comes out of his gate he gets a rotten tomato smack in his face. After a moment of blank astonishment he chases after your brother, calling out almost lascivious promises of bloody revenge.

Your brother darts down the street you told him to take, leaping at just the right moment. Nihakos charges on in his heavy flat-footed way and falls right through the carpet of palm leaves you positioned over an open sewer cover. There is a splash, a frenzied bubbling cry, and then vile sucking sounds as Nihakos tries to heave himself out of the slime.

He plods back home past walls lined with the schoolkids he has lorded it over in the past – all jeering at the excrement-covered bully. You never see him again. Perhaps his family moved away. You never bother to find out.

Increase your GRACE or your INGENUITY by +1 (you decide which) but reduce your CHARM to −1.

► 247

370

You are drawn to the hub of the city, where majestic marble statues proclaim the glory of heroes, politicians debate matters of state, citizens gather to exchange news and opinions, and musicians and artists show off their latest works.

These are the qualities of Apollo, Olympian lord of the founding of cities and colonies. Record on your Adventure Sheet that he is your god.

► 452

411

You both go home scraped and bruised after a no-holds-barred fight that becomes a minor legend among the other children.

From that day on Nihakos has a new respect for you. He stops bullying your brother and even goes out of his way to seem as friendly as his terse, untrusting nature will allow.

If you return his friendship, maybe you can influence him to be a better person.

Good idea ► 534
No, he doesn't deserve friends ► 657

452

Note on your Adventure Sheet that your Current Location is **1238**, then read on.

One blazing hot afternoon, you return home to find your uncles Nicomachus and Sophos playing a game of psephoi in the cool green shade of the arbour at the side of the house.

You watch them make their moves across the board, each trying to surround the other's playing pieces. Nicomachus squints closely at the board with his one good eye, making his moves with sudden furious decisiveness. He holds the pieces awkwardly in his right hand, which is missing a couple of fingers from an old war-wound, while Sophos sits back, serenely contemplative, a thoughtful smile playing about his white-bearded lips.

Nicomachus places a piece on the holy line in the centre of the board and throws himself upright in his chair with a self-congratulatory snort. Absent-mindedly reaching for a piece to counter the move, Sophos picks up a silver coin from the table in front of him. Seeing his mistake, he laughs and sets the coin aside, taking up a legitimate playing piece instead. But perhaps it has caught your eye, lying there shining in a shaft of sunlight? The face on the coin is that of an insect.

Ask about it ► 165
You're not interested ► 575

493

Another time. You are at the top of one of the city towers. Your father is here too, which is strange as even when you were a child he rarely had time from his work to take you to places around the city. Now that you are almost an adult, you wonder why he has brought you here.

'You will have to look after your mother and sisters,' he is saying. 'Your brother too.'

'I want to see the world,' you say, standing at the parapet and gazing out from the tower across leagues. Even the nearest villages are like toys, their fields like green felt, and the rivers are silver ribbons that connect them to specks that must be even further settlements. The sun is setting. Smoke rises from chimneys in thin threads. The mountains and plains shade off into blue infinity. Night waits in the east, impatient for the day to die.

'It's getting cold,' your father says, drawing his cloak against the wind whistling around the tower. 'Let's go down.'

Then it's days later and he is being carried, wrapped in dyed cloth, along the road to the necropolis. Your sisters and brother are wailing their grief to the sky. Your mother walks in silence, stumbling, her bare feet grey with dust, hardly seeming to know where she is. Neighbours bow their heads in respectful sorrow as you pass.

At the family tomb, the priests chant blessings to speed your father's soul to Elysium. The crowds of mourners depart like the tide going out and you are alone.

'I want to see the world,' you tell the blank stone door of the tomb.

Get the codeword ***Reverie*** if you didn't have it already and then ► 520

520

Having been born and raised in Vulcan City, you know your way around. You can travel to any of these local landmarks:

Your family home ► 1238
The North Gate ► **222**
The South Gate ► **555**
The East Gate ► **333**
The West Gate ► **509**
The Forum ► **1642**
The Tower of Ice ► **451**
Pan's Column ► **48**
The Tower of Sand ► **570**
The Tower of Riches ► **1222**
The Grumbles ► **771**
The Necropolis ► **674**
The Groves of Dionysus ► **806**
The Academy of Philosophers ► **1544**
The Tavern of the Hero of Temesa ► **764**
The market ► **716**
The temple district ► **103**
The Tomb of Hope ► **88**

However, there are also some places in the city not widely known even to locals. You can only travel to these if the corresponding box is ticked. You need to discover these secret locations in the course of your adventures, at which point you'll be told to tick the corresponding box.

❑ A tunnel straight to hell ► **80**
❑ Lady Pemphreda's salon ► **898**
❑ Your mansion ► **1353**

If you don't want to visit any of these locations right now ► Current Location

534

You soon get the feeling that Nihakos had been looking for a way to give up bullying the other kids, but he didn't know how until his friendship with you gave him a lifeline.

He is never going to be the sort of person to bare his soul to others, but a couple of times he lets slip how lonely he used to feel. Just hints like: 'When everyone's afraid of you, that's sort of fine but it doesn't leave you anyone you can hang out with.'

You haven't made him a saint, but you've shown him there's more to life than picking on weaker people. And

you've saved a lot of kids from being his victims.

Gain +1 to your CHARM score and ► 247

575

You recall two events of your youth. They happened on different days, perhaps even different years, but memory is a palette on which the colours mix freely.

The first memory: you are strolling with your Aunt Eremia and your sisters. It is the Street of Ash where the puppet booths are set up. A blaze of green, made from fluttering spikes of grass-coloured paper, catches your eye. The puppet is pushing his way through a verdant forest. 'Clever,' says your aunt, 'but it's been a long time since Arcadia was that lush.'

And now you're in the market with both your aunts. Terpe inspects some peaches, squeezing and sniffing them critically. 'Fresh from Arcadia, lady,' ventures the stall-holder.

'From Arcadia they might be,' says Aunt Eremia with an apologetic laugh, 'but they're not exactly fresh.'

'I thought Arcadia would be your kind of place,' you say to Eremia.

'The great god Pan has forsaken it,' she says sadly. 'The lakes are stinking and choked with algae. Rubbish discarded in the streams. The trees all gnarled and so bare of leaves they look like balding old men.'

'Rank grass spotted all about with worm casts,' adds Terpe. 'So sad. Remember the vineyards, sister? Oh, such rich wines.'

Eremia shakes her head. 'All withered now. Blight got into the grapes. If there's any wine at all to be got there it's sour, and you can't sweeten it with honey because the hives are just abandoned husks.'

'Somebody needs to get the place back on its feet again.'

'But who?' Eremia makes a sweeping gesture. 'They'd need to be bold, resourceful, unflagging.'

Terpe agrees. 'And also be a leader, able to inspire people with a vision of something better – as well as having the administrative skills and the acuity to plan and execute a project on a grand scale.'

In this dream, or memory, or whatever it is, did you answer them?

'I can do all that!' ► 1657

Say nothing ► 493

616

You take care to make it a painful lesson for Nihakos. He goes home with blood pouring from a split lip and by the next day he's sporting two black eyes. From then on he leaves you and your brother alone.

Increase your STRENGTH by +1 but reduce one of your other attributes to −1. (You choose which.)

► 247

657

You spurn him, leaving him even more isolated than before. Maybe he takes out his resentment on other kids, but as long as he leaves you and your brother alone that's not your problem.

Your hard heart shows in the ruthless set of your jaw and the unforgiving steel of your gaze.

Gain 1 scar – not all such marks are physical.

► 247

698

Nicomachus takes you to the park and points out an old blind veteran sitting on a marble bench beside a pond. 'That's Ptolemos. Don't let his gruff manner put you off.'

'Oh, I'm used to you, Uncle.'

'I'm a cream-puff in comparison. OK then, you can let me know later how you get on.'

'Are you not coming to say hello?'

'Last time I parted ways with Ptolemos, we swore to kill each other. Can't even remember what the argument was about now, but seeing as we have one good eye between the two of us there's no sense in raking up the past.'

You join Ptolemos on the bench. At first it's hard to strike up a conversation, but his tongue is loosened by the mention of Iskandria.

'Must've been a sight to behold in the old days,' he says. 'Everyone's heard those tales. All gone now, of course. The city walls fell long ago. Nothing much to see except a few overgrown stones and miles and miles of mud flats.'

'What about the Myrmidons?'

'The people there now, I suppose they're what's left of the Myrmidons. Good job their ancestors can't see them. A rabble of goat herders, beachcombers, mudlarks and starving farmers. They make a few coins taking tourists round the ruins and spinning yarns about the past.' He gives a wry chuckle. 'Still, I'm one to talk.'

'Seems a sad end for a proud race.'

'Lesson for us all, kid. You're young, you think strength and glory are everything. But the river of life, it dries up.'

'That was the Great River, right? Was there a curse or something? Some reason it went away?'

'Don't know. An old mate of mine, name of Loutro, he was always talking about greening the desert.'

'How?'

'Oh, he was like you. Looking for curses and portents when most of the time the shit that happens is just random. He had a madcap notion that some ritual to some goddess would bring the river back. Hah, it's been nothing but a trickle of piss in the sand for centuries now.'

'Did he ever do the ritual?'

'Always had an excuse. Special items he needed to collect first. Guess he never found them, as Iskandria is still a stinking ruin on the mudflats last I heard.'

You get up to leave. 'Where would I find him, this Loutro?'

'Down Notus way, if you're serious. Near a lake somewhere I should think. He never did care for sand.' As you walk away he calls after you, 'If you see him, don't forget to come by and tell me about it sometime.

Get the codeword ***Ripple*** and ► 575

739

You show him some simple moves, really just tricks such as getting in close so that your opponent can't see to block a blow.

'Don't assume these techniques will always work,' you tell him. 'The best I can say is that at least anyone who picks on you will know they've been in a fight.'

As it turns out, he never has to use what you've taught him. Just the training alone is enough to give him a new sense of confidence. Sensing that, Nihakos gives up bullying him, going off to find a weaker victim.

If you wish, you can adjust any one of your attributes by +1 and adjust another by −1.

► 247

780

Nothing matches the joy you feel when you are able to leave behind the paved streets and the city dust to race through the park, losing yourself in the scent of blossom and the abundance of greenery, feeling the grass between your toes and watching the sun blaze and swim on the ponds and fountains.

'You have met the goddess,' says your father, seeing the blissful look on your face when you return from an afternoon in the groves.

'Which goddess?' you ask, though you know the answer.

'Artemis, fairest huntress, lady of the lakes and forests.'

On your Adventure Sheet, note that your god is Artemis.

► 452

821

Nihakos makes sure to rub your face in the dirt. You limp home with a black eye, but what really hurts is your injured pride.

But, even though you lost, from that day Nihakos stops bullying your brother. Maybe he has found another kid to torment, or maybe he was more worried about the fight than he let on. Even though he beat you easily, bullies don't like to risk anyone challenging them. When intimidation fails, they move onto other victims.

Your reputation soars among the other schoolchildren. 'But I don't get it,' you tell your best friend. 'I lost!'

'Nobody expected you to win, stupid, but you're the only one brave enough to spit in Nihakos's eye.'

Gain 1 Glory and ► 247

970

On the Boulevard of the Undine where the city wall overlooks the verdant land of Boreas, the paving stones are strewn with fresh palm leaves and the smells of the city are swept away by the clean breeze off the woodlands to the north-east.

If you have the codeword ***Reverie*** and wish to drop in at your home ► 1238

To go straight to a city location that you already know about, note **970** as your Current Location, then ► **1432**

Or you can go:

West towards the city gates ► **222**

East towards the watchtower ► **48**

1238

The house where you grew up is on the Boulevard of the Undine. Your spirits lift as you come in sight of the familiar porch gate, the doorstep worn smooth by generations of your ancestors, and the apple tree you used to swing on as a child. Wherever you travel in the Vulcanverse, it is always comforting to return here.

If you have the codeword ***Ostrich*** and this box ❑ is empty, tick it and ► **1214**; otherwise read on.

Your mother has a loaf of freshly baked bread and a bowl of hot soup waiting for you. She always seems to know when you are coming. You enjoy a fine meal and, if you are injured, you can untick the Wound box on your Adventure Sheet.

You can also leave possessions and money here to save having to carry them around with you. To do that, note that your Current Location is **970** and then ► **319**

To leave the house ► 970

1657

Did your aunts say anything in reply to your boast? You only remember their secret smiles. But later – how long later? – they told you of a tavern nestled against the city's eastern wall.

'If you find yourself in the garden there one afternoon,' says Aunt Terpe, 'and you hear the sound of singing, go and look into the arbour.'

You have an image of a bearded man with broad shoulders, sweat glistening on his chest under an open shirt, eyes flashing with dangerous merriment. He is sitting with a brimming wine jug in front of him. Greenery filters the afternoon sun in his thick brown hair. Bees drone amid the blossom whose sweet perfume fills the warm air.

The wooden seat in the arbour creaks under his powerful bulk as he sways crooning a song of meadows and brooks and woodlands. Then suddenly he stops singing, looks around with an expression between anger and delight, and points a meaty finger at you. 'There you are!'

'My aunts sent me,' you stammer.

'What's this? Modesty? I won't have modesty. Fate brought you to me!'

He pours another goblet of wine. It's strong and dark and unlocks thoughts of hot sun, light rain, and fresh green growth.

Hesitantly you accept the goblet. 'I don't know if I should.'

'You can call me Bosk,' he says in his booming voice, and curls of ivy stir in the heavy air as he spreads his arms wide, inviting you to join him.

You wake up in the park around midnight, still drunk, and somehow find your way home. The morning stabs you between the eyes and when your mother puts breakfast on the table it's all you can do not to throw up.

'Painting the town red?' says Aunt Eremia.

'Green, more like.' You nurse your aching head. 'Sorry, I don't know what I'm talking about. Might have had a bit too much to drink.'

'Now, what's this?' says your mother, giving your aunts a disapproving look, but they remain a picture of innocence.

‘The strangest thing…’ you go on. ‘I think I promised to do something, but I can’t remember what.’

Get the codeword ***Rye*** and ► 493