



VIII

UNUSUAL GROUNDS



# “OFF CAMPUS”

Most schools in the southlands—that is, the rest of Hjass—exist either in city centers or peaceful rural environs. Elseridge Academy is unique in its dangerous isolation. When students want to leave campus for some non-academic relaxation, the options are limited. They can wander into the irradiated salt flats beyond the safety of campus (dangerous), climb along the edge of the world (extremely dangerous), or venture into the void of space (almost certainly fatal).

Alternatively, they can head “off-campus.” Along Elseridge Academy’s eastern edge is a small patch of land claimed by no college and no administrative office. Instead, this land is maintained by the druids—ensuring that plant life can still flourish—

but remains wholly independent from the college...

Of course, this land is not, in fact, *truly* independent. Centuries ago, Professor Antoine Gurtchel submitted a request to the academy’s trust. In the confidential letter, he outlined his plan for a *seemingly* independent cafe and bar that would exist for the twin purposes of appeasing students and keeping tabs on them. Gurtchel’s request was granted, and while the academy has gradually dialed back its more paternalistic tendencies, the Gurtchel family still maintains a partial deed to the land centuries later.

Now, this verdant patch of non-Elseridge land is home to three equally significant off-campus landmarks:

- ★ **Other Leg**, Elseridge Academy’s pub, where students can sit down with a drink and relax, or grab some stationary and knickknacks for their dorm rooms.
- ★ **The Fluxum Shard**, a massive and mysterious space rock that exudes a bizarre interstellar magic and is used almost exclusively for sporting events
- ★ **The Boardwalk**, a winding tangle of pathways from which students can watch Scramble Shard matches or toss shrimp to countless flamingos

# OTHER LEG

When Antoine Gurtchel petitioned the academy's trust, he did not expect the secretive board of overseers to grant him and his descendants a deed to the land in perpetuity. As soon as they did, though, he immediately retired from his academic career to ensure that his new pub would become the ultimate hangout spot for Elseridge students.

Other Leg is still owned and operated by the Gurtchel family today. Though they are loathe to discuss their unusual claim on the land, most suspect that the exact wording forbids the family from transferring the property to anyone else. Luckily, each generation of Gurtchel children has produced at least one or two offspring who have been willing and able to run the family business.

As the pub operates independently from the school, Other Leg does not have the luxury of existing more or less outside the

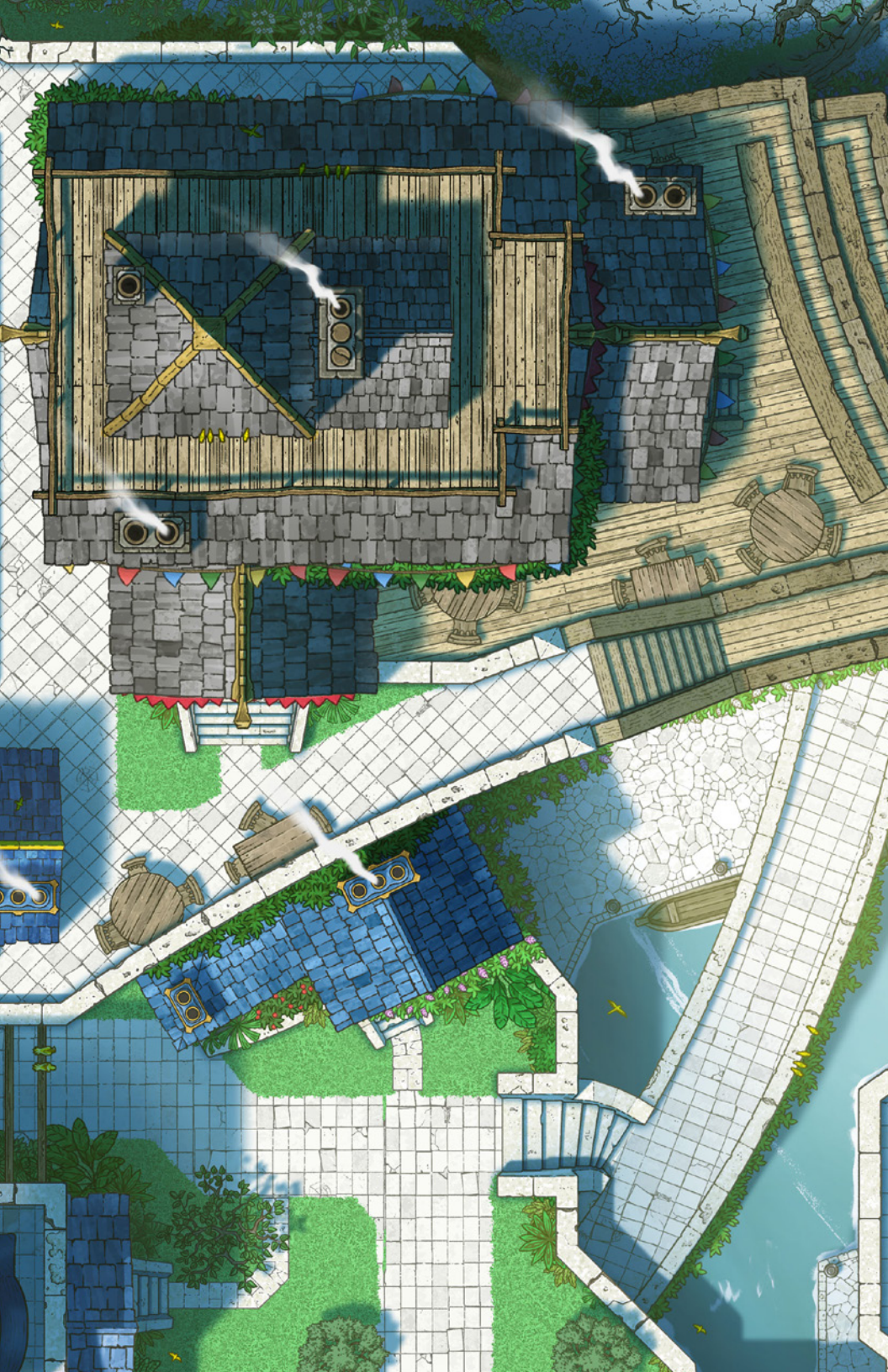
constraints of economics. While the trust has seemingly bottomless coffers with which to pay faculty and staff, the Gurtchel family must actually run their business like a business. Food and drink cost money, and though the bar has little competition in the way of other nearby eateries, they must do their best to actively attract clientele. After all, the alternative to spending money at Other Leg is eating delicious food for free in the grand banquet hall. Accordingly, most items are priced affordably, though charging anything at all means that wealthier students tend to frequent the establishment far more often than those of meager means.

In addition to snack and beverage offerings, Other Leg also features a market stall where students can purchase small accoutrements: kettles, backup wands, wool socks, envelopes, or any other odds and ends they might need throughout the semester.

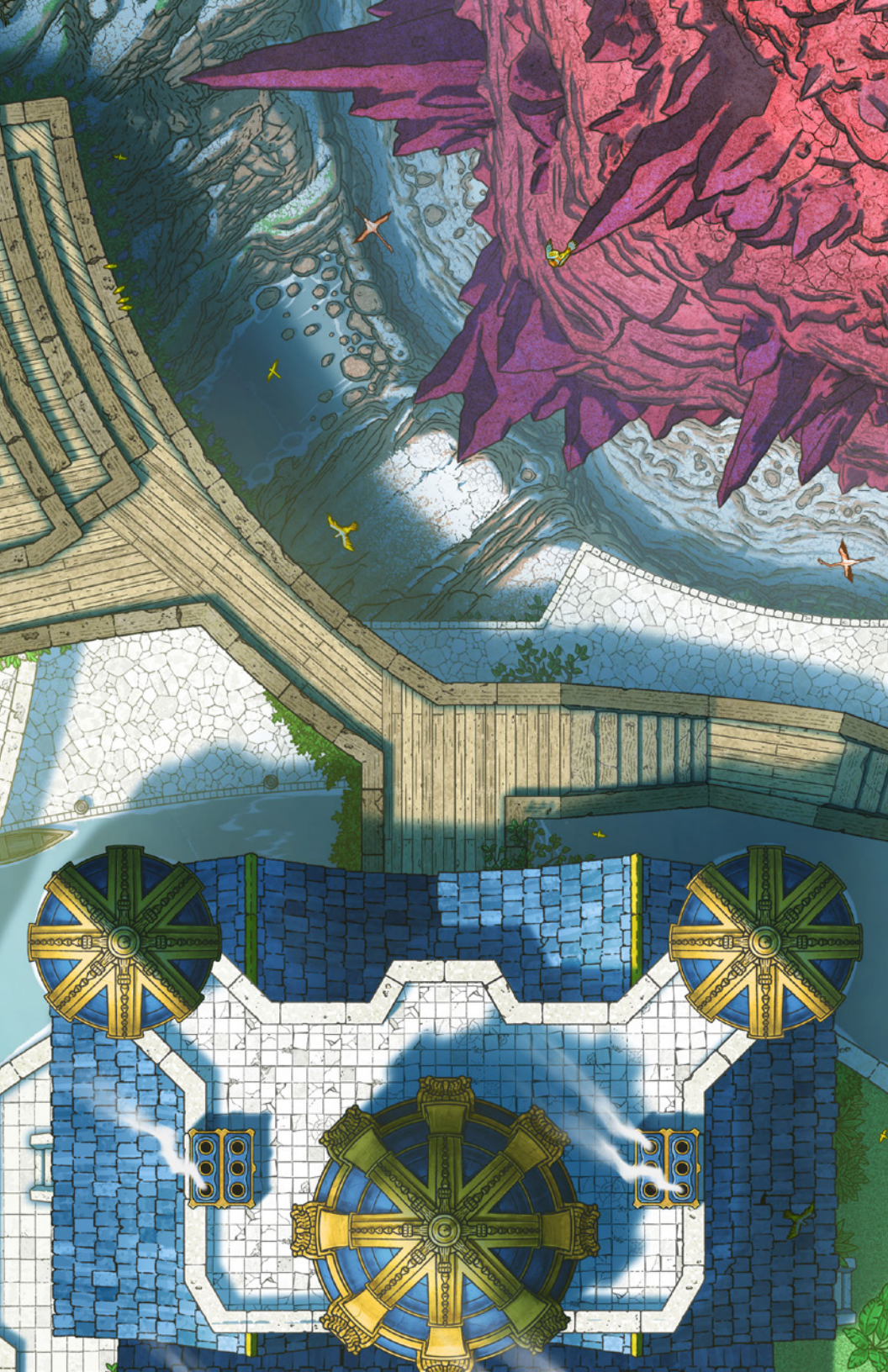
## WHY IS IT CALLED OTHER LEG?

Flamingos spend most of the day standing on one leg. Pub founder Antoine Gurtchel reckoned that whenever they switch legs, it must come as an incredible relief.













## JULES GURTCHEL

**RANK:** Bartender / Barista

**ACADEMIC FOCUS:** Mixology (typically non-alchemical)

**ARCANE IMPLEMENT:** Spoons, shakers, strainers, kettles, etc

**HERITAGE:** Human, from a long line of Elseridge natives

Any time a student walks into Other Leg, they're likely to see Jules Gurtchel (he/him) tending bar. While some students take on shifts at the pub to earn a bit of spending cash throughout the school year, mostly it's just Jules waking up early for the morning rush and staying up into the wee hours of the morning serv-

ing drinks and catering to late-night studiers. Jules's husband insists that he can't keep burning the candle at both ends, but Jules is terrified of what his sister Camille would say if he were to request any time off.

Though Jules comes from a long line of magically proficient bartenders, chefs, and business owners, he never received proper training himself. He decided not to attend Elseridge in his younger years, though he deeply regrets his decision. Luckily, a handful of alchemy students have been tutoring Jules over the past couple years. Now, Jules will occasionally infuse his drinks with a bit of magical *je ne sais quoi*.

## D8 DRINK SPECIALTIES

- 1 **Salt Flat White.** An espresso drink topped with salted foam. A favorite drink during rainy days filled with studying.
- 2 **Wrongish Mead.** Mead made from the honey of bees that collect their nectar from Wrong Campus. “Funky” doesn’t do this unusual drink justice.
- 3 **Imported Cherry Wine.** The drink of choice for younger professors who don’t trust Jules’s more unusual offerings.
- 4 **Vyndurbjór.** This dwarven stout is almost disgustingly chocolatey and far too strong for most students. Still, it’s quite easy to get shipped in from the nearby mountains.
- 5 **Moonbeam.** This drink sounds like it ought to be some sort of alchemical creation, but it’s actually just a stellar smoothie made with fruits from the greenhouse.
- 6 **Steppebeast Milk.** Cityfolk might find it repugnant, but many students from rural homes find the piquant flavor of fresh steppebeast milk uniquely nostalgic.
- 7 **Cool Morning.** This fizzy refreshment is guaranteed to stay cold for up to an hour even without ice. A neat trick from the fledgling alchemist.
- 8 **The Jules Julep.** Jules’s finest alchemical concoction. This mint julep is infused with invigorating reagents that allegedly boost memory retention. Of course, it *also* has alcohol in it, so it’s not exactly the best study aid.

### GM NOTE

While we refer to Other Leg as a “pub,” you absolutely do not need to include alcohol in your magic school games. Whether you’re playing Elseridge more as a high school analog or whether you just don’t like including addictive substances in your games, alcohol is completely optional.



## CAMILLE GURTCHER

**RANK:** Pub Owner

**ACADEMIC FOCUS:** Economics

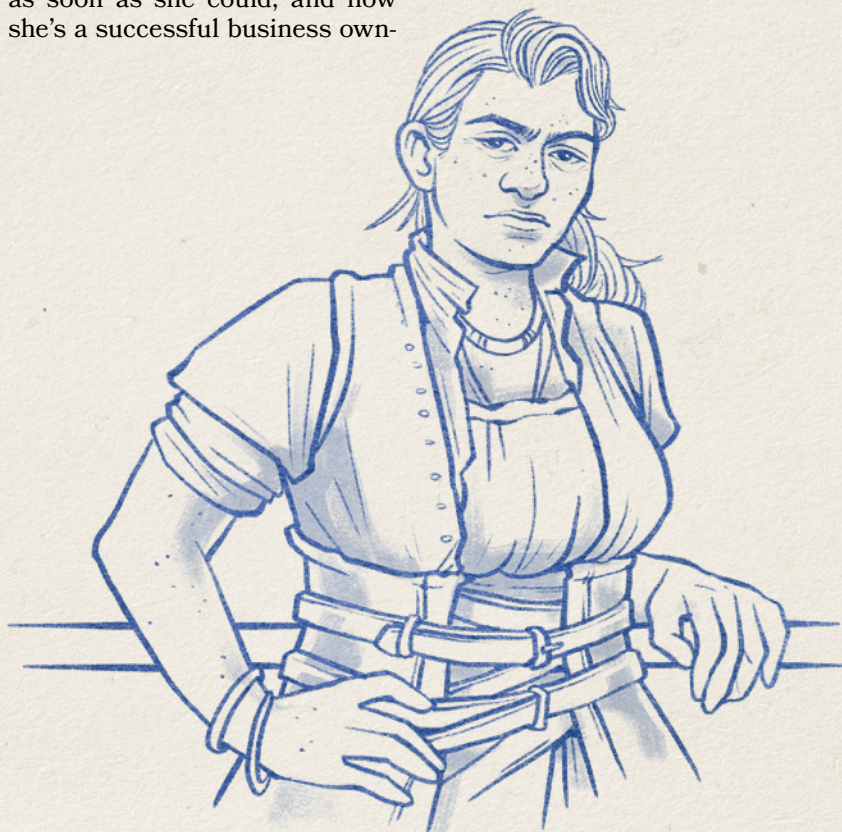
**ARCANE IMPLEMENT:** Spread-sheets (nonmagical)

**HERITAGE:** Human, from a long line of Elseridge natives

Camille Gurtchel (she/her) is the owner and operator of Other Leg. Like her younger brother, she also opted not to attend Elseridge, though she has no misgivings about this decision. She wanted to take over the pub as soon as she could, and now she's a successful business own-

er with no need for arcane assistance.

Camille is gruff and focused. Her goal has always been to honor her forebearers by elevating Other Leg to higher and higher heights. She has been, at best, middlingly successful. The bar is exactly as popular as it has always been, which is to say, fairly popular! Ultimately, it doesn't matter how many treatises on entrepreneurship one reads. If a university has but a single pub on campus, that pub will always do just fine.



## SHEFFIR GURTCHEL (NÉ SULIANA)

**RANK:** Huckster

**ACADEMIC FOCUS:** Airship piloting (formerly)

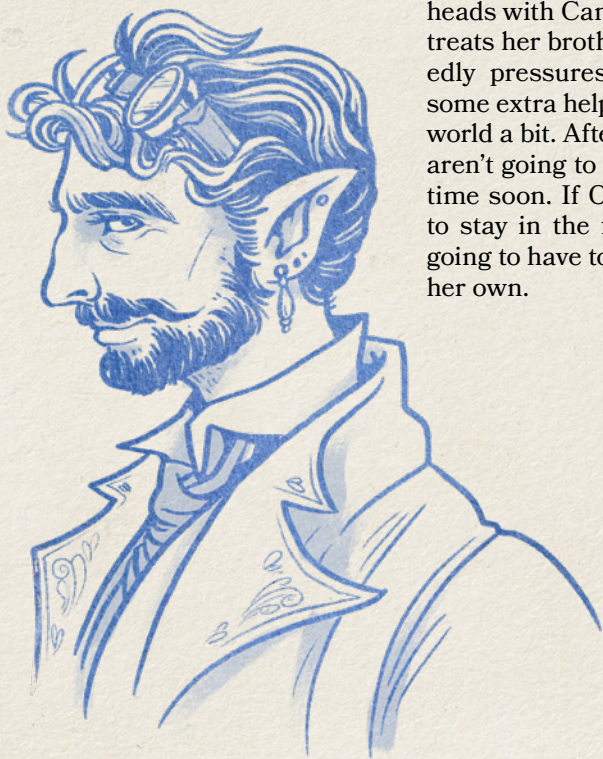
**ARCANE IMPLEMENT:** Merchant stand (nonmagical)

**HERITAGE:** Half-elf, from the cosmopolitan city of Chiuseppoli

Other Leg relies on airship deliveries for much of their supplies, and for years, Sheffir (he/him) was the pub's primary supplier. He would fly all across Hjass, stocking up on barrels of mead, exotic coffee beans, and aromat-

ics overlooked by Elseridge's druids. Elseridge became a regular stop on his worldwide trade expeditions, regardless of how unprofitable trips to the edge of the world actually were. Of course, he had motivations beyond profit. His friendship with Jules blossomed into a passionate romance. Eventually, vows were exchanged, Sheffir took the Gurtchel name, and the former airship business changed hands.

Now, Sheffir sells various knickknacks to students and faculty from a booth in Other Leg. He has settled into his new role of quirky salesman gracefully, though he is constantly butting heads with Camille over how she treats her brother. Sheffir repeatedly pressures Camille to hire some extra help and to go see the world a bit. After all, he and Jules aren't going to have any kids any time soon. If Other Leg is going to stay in the family, Camille is going to have to find some love of her own.





## OTHER LEG SPECIAL EVENTS

**New Semester Hoorah.** At the end of the first week of each semester, students team up with the Gurtchels to host an inclusive party for everyone at Elseridge. All professors and students are invited, though few professors ever attend. The school pays for drinks with the intention of simply getting everyone mingling.

**Midwind Ball.** Dating can be an awkward affair at Elseridge. Plenty of young mages are shy, and the edge of the world is not necessarily conducive to conventional courtship. The Midwind Ball is an opportunity for students to invite a special someone to a formal date dance in between semesters.

**Starfall Silent Time.** During the peak of exam studying, Other Leg enforces “quiet hours,” during which students can come to the pub for coffee or tea and be sure that they won’t get distracted by loud noises.

**Jamboree.** Right before fluxum break, after exams are finished, but before the *Hexacoil* activates, Other Leg hosts their yearly jamboree. This is the most raucous party of the year, a time for late-night dancing and heartfelt confessions.



# SCRAMBLE SHARD

The most popular extracurricular at Elseridge Academy is an arcane sport known as Scramble Shard. Opposing teams use a mixture of magical know-how and raw athleticism to claim as many fluxum gems as they can. Professors act as referees, and scores of students show up to watch even the most inconsequential of exhibition matches.

## TEAM COMPOSITION

Two teams of three to seven<sup>1</sup> compete in an odd number of rounds. A Scramble Shard team consists of the following positions:

- ★ The **scrambler** climbs up and along the *Fluxum Shard* in search of the fluxum gem
- ★ The **honer** casts spells that assist the scrambler
- ★ The **rascal** (or rascals in large-team formats) casts spells to harry the opposing team

Each round, the scrambler from both teams must ascend the *Fluxum Shard* (usually just called “the shard”) and attempt to locate the sole fluxum gem that has emerged from the stone. This gem might appear anywhere on the shard, and thus the

scramblers must be prepared to search and quickly climb. Once a scrambler grasps the gem, they must then return it to their team’s honer. The scrambler may not cast spells unless the opposing scrambler has claimed the gem.

Meanwhile, the honer may cast spells to assist the scrambler or counteract the effects of the shard’s harmful or disorienting magical auras. The honer is allowed to perform any magic they wish, but they may not move from their starting position, and they may not cast spells that negatively impact the opposing team.

The rascal (or rascals) may freely move around the shard, but they may not touch it. The rascal may cast magic that affects the other team, but they may not cast spells that directly assist their scrambler. Spells cast by the rascal cannot directly harm the other team (e.g., setting them on fire), but they may cast spells that *indirectly* harm the other team (e.g., telekinetically yanking a scrambler off balance or temporarily paralyzing the opposing honer). Rascals may also defend themselves against opposing rascals.

[1] Scramble Shard team sizes don’t need to be irregular. You can just select the team size that matches your party size.





SCRAMBLER



HONER



RASCAL

Typically, each team has one dedicated scrambler, one dedicated honer, and one or more dedicated rascals. However, teams can also elect to shuffle their positions between rounds.

## SCORING

- ★ When a scrambler claims a fluxum gem and returns it to their honer, they earn **3 points**, and the round ends.
- ★ If a rascal or honer is able to recover the gem from the opposing team, they earn **2 points**, and the round ends.
- ★ If, at any time after mounting the shard, both scramblers or the fluxum gem end up on the ground, the team with fewer points **earns 1 point**, and the round ends. If teams are tied, neither team earns a point.
- ★ When a team commits a foul (e.g., the honer moves from their starting position, the rascal enhances the abilities of the scrambler, or the scrambler casts a spell before the opposing team has claimed the fluxum gem), that team **loses 1 point**, and both teams restart the round.

★ Matches last three, five, or seven rounds. At the end of the match, the team with the **most points wins**.

★ In the event of a tie, teams play a tiebreaker round. All team members can cast any non-lethal spells they wish, and all competitors are allowed to ascend the shard. Whoever grasps the fluxum gem first **wins the match** for their team.

## THE FLUXUM SHARD

Key to the Scramble Shard match is the *Fluxum Shard* itself. This unsettling meteor gently landed on Elseridge's campus some 1,000 years ago. Teams of mages have determined that the meteor's magical effects are ultimately harmless, though the same interstellar magic that causes fluxum storms also causes space near the shard to act irrationally.

The *Fluxum Shard* has three noteworthy traits pertaining to the sport played on its surface.

The exact shape of the shard subtly morphs over time. As such, scramblers must be prepared to adapt their strategies on the fly. There is no purpose in memorizing and perfecting climbing routes, as those routes will undoubtedly change before the next match.

At any given time, the shard emits exactly one fluxum gem

from its surface. The location of this gem is completely random. If the gem ever touches the ground or finds itself greater than 20 or so feet from the shard, it will disappear, and a new fluxum gem will emerge.

A constant aura of unusual interstellar energy surrounds the shard. These swirling vapors cause a wide array of fluctuating magical effects, many of which have a profound impact on Scramble Shard matches.

#### D10 FLUXUM SHARD MAGICAL EFFECTS

- 1 Anyone within 5 feet of the shard experiences no gravity.
- 2 Anyone touching the shard moves at half speed (i.e., the honer and rascal act twice as quickly compared to the scrambler).
- 3 The shard becomes shrouded in a nearly opaque fog.
- 4 A mucus-like slime emerges from the shard.
- 5 A cloud of interstellar particles nullifies magic within 5 feet of the shard.
- 6 The shard becomes charged with electricity, occasionally zapping anyone touching it.
- 7 Psychedelic lights and colors emanate from the shard, transfixing those who gaze upon it.
- 8 An unnatural plume of total silence engulfs the shard.
- 9 The shard emits a sweet scent that attracts all nearby fauna, particularly flamingos.
- 10 A psychedelic compound heightens the emotions of anyone within 20 feet of the shard.



## ADDITIONAL RULES

**Magic reset.** Between rounds, any spells affecting the competitors or the environment must reset. For example, boons granted to scramblers must be deactivated before the next round begins. Teams can loan a *sphere of purging* from Other Leg to assist in removing magical effects.

**Equipment.** Competitors may wear armor and may wield exactly one arcane implement. The use of any additional items is forbidden *unless* the student is a member of the College of Alchemy, in which case they may bring up to three potions or contraptions for use in the game.

**Non-Student Participants.** The use of golems, elementals, or familiars is forbidden.

**Referees.** Competitors may act as their own referees for exhibition matches. During any ranked match, a professor must adjudicate.

### GM NOTE

We recommend rolling on the *Fluxum Shard* Magical Effects table each round. If you want fewer magical effects, roll a d20 and interpret any roll of 11 - 20 as indicating there is no meaningful effect. For maximal chaos, roll twice and apply both results. Feel free to craft your own effects as well!

## GMING SCRAMBLE SHARD MATCHES

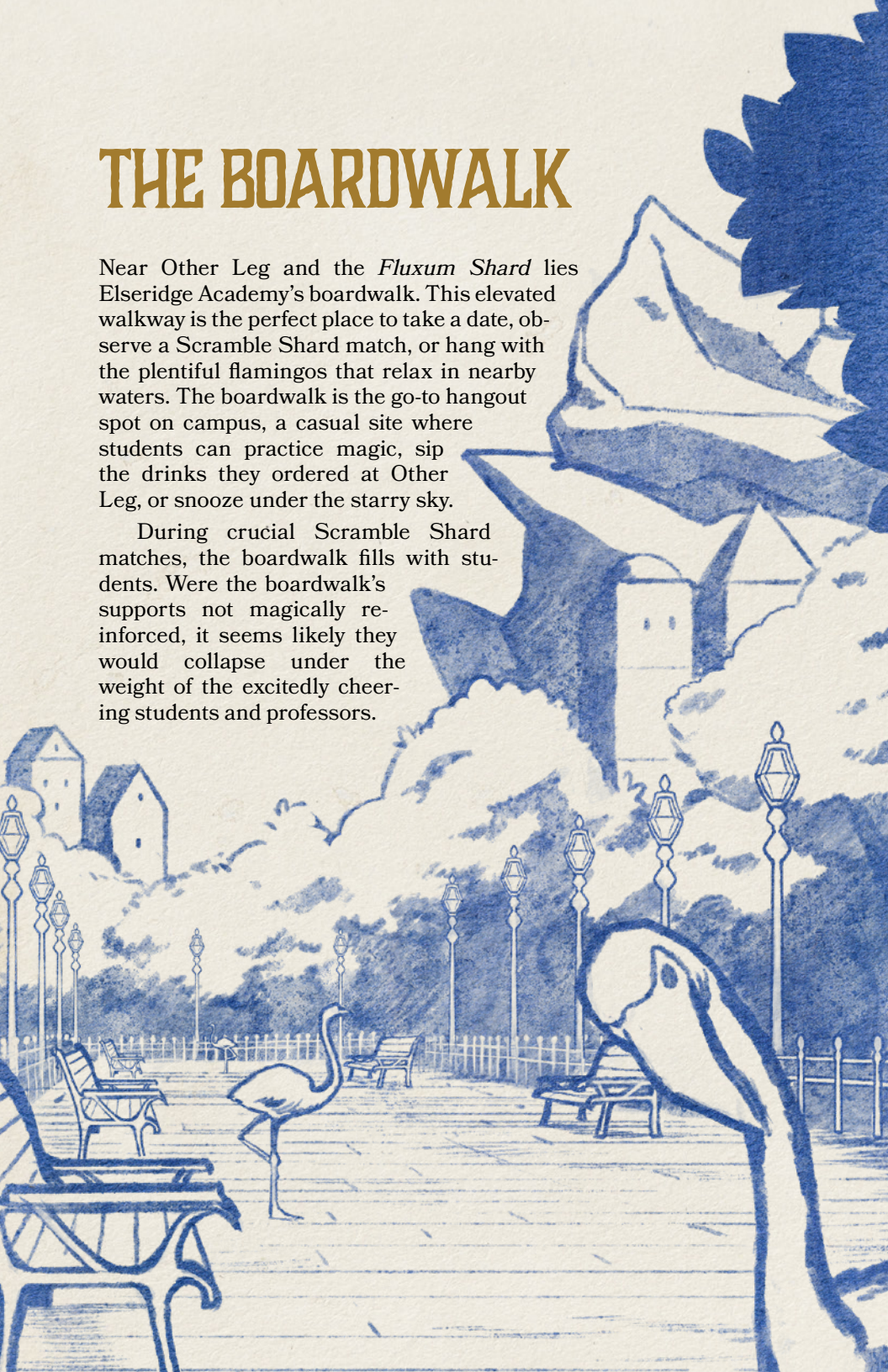
Scramble Shard is a great way to give your players the opportunity to use spells and abilities in a highly social non-combat encounter. We encourage you to tweak the rules to better fit the mechanics of your RPG. Here are some further considerations:

- ★ You will probably want team sizes that correspond with your party size. The scrambler position is the least magical and, thus, a great fit for player characters that are not mages.
- ★ Make sure opponents are appropriately equipped with magic. The main determinant of victory will access to spells. For example, if one team can grant their scramblers flight, that team will almost always win.
- ★ You can tweak what's considered a "harmful" spell. If your version of Elseridge is particularly violent, go ahead and let your rascals sling fireballs at each other.
- ★ If matches are taking too long, consider adding a rule that limits the number of spells each team member can cast per match or round.
- ★ Due to the impact of fouls on scoring, no team can ever *technical-*ly clinch a match until all rounds are completed. As such, you may want to add a rule that if one team ever gains a great enough lead, the match ends immediately.

# THE BOARDWALK

Near Other Leg and the *Fluxum Shard* lies Elseridge Academy's boardwalk. This elevated walkway is the perfect place to take a date, observe a Scramble Shard match, or hang with the plentiful flamingos that relax in nearby waters. The boardwalk is the go-to hangout spot on campus, a casual site where students can practice magic, sip the drinks they ordered at Other Leg, or snooze under the starry sky.

During crucial Scramble Shard matches, the boardwalk fills with students. Were the boardwalk's supports not magically reinforced, it seems likely they would collapse under the weight of the excitedly cheering students and professors.





## STRUCTURING PLAY:

# AN ALTERNATE APPROACH

When designing tabletop campaigns set at a magic school, you have to wrestle with one fundamental tension: the need to offer opportunities to engage with the mechanics of your RPG and the need to explore the quotidian experiences of the player characters. While we offered one solution for this in the Focus Format (see *Elseridge Academy 02: Life at the Academy*), that structure has numerous drawbacks and may not suit the pacing or theming of your campaign. Another option is the Event Scene Format.

### EVENT SCENE FORMAT

As the GM, you predetermine a scene in which your players will participate for a given session. A scene always combines some noteworthy event with some otherwise typical magic school activity. In most instances, a scene will start with a bit of freeform roleplaying as your players settle into their characters. Partway through the session, some incident will add tension to the scene. At this point, the players must solve some problem, confront some enemy, or otherwise grapple with the central conflict you've established.

A campaign, thus, becomes a string of scenes that trace the arc of a school year while always prioritizing the most important events. Some scenes take place in classrooms, while others relate to extracurriculars or social events. "Downtime" (that is, any time during which students are attending normal classes, studying, or hanging with friends) gets mostly hand-waved.

**Example.** The party begins a session in a classroom during their second year. Their professor is giving a tutorial regarding ancient rituals. The party answers a few questions but mostly goofs off in the back of the classroom. The professor asks one party member to team up with a rival student for a practical exercise. The rival student uses this opportunity to summon an otherworldly monstrosity into the classroom. The professor is knocked unconscious, and thus, it is the party's responsibility to slay or banish the monster.

The next session begins a few weeks later. Their professor has recovered from their injuries but misremembers the event, blaming the party instead for the incident. Now, the party must defend themselves in front of the Discipli-

narian Order. During the hearing, the party notices their rival spying on them via oracular magic. They track down the rival after making their arguments, eventually discovering a hidden lair the rival has occupied in the salt flats.

In a later session, the party is sharing drinks at Other Leg. One of their friends walks in and says that the rival has just left for a multi-day field trip. The friend suggests that the party use this opportunity to explore the rival's lair. Investigating the strange hideout involves stealth, combat, and puzzle-solving. Eventually, the party gleans some secrets about the rival which will undoubtedly motivate future sessions.

**Pros and Cons.** The primary benefit of the Event Scene Format is that you can carefully curate the experience. By pre-determining the scenes in which your players will participate, you can dictate the exact pacing of your campaign. Additionally, each scene is guaranteed to showcase some aspect of student life while also providing opportunities for mechanical engagement.

There are three drawbacks to this format. First and foremost, you limit your players's agency to affect the pacing and focus of the story. Next, you will spend less time exploring the more mundane aspects of school life, as only the most eventful moments will receive any attention. Finally, this will likely require ad-

ditional preparation time, as you have to carefully concoct scenarios that will give your players opportunities to explore their daily lives while advancing your curated plot.

**Tweaks.** If your players just want to jump into the important events, you can always start *in medias res*. There's no explicit need to start each scene with mundane events.

You don't have to do exactly one scene per session. A session might consist of multiple scenes, or one scene might take two or more sessions.

As a change of pace, you can intersperse occasional "downtime sessions" during which your players engage in more mundane tasks. You can also dedicate time between sessions to downtime, roleplaying basic study sessions or long-term projects in a text chat.

**Tips.** The Event Scene Format works best when the focus of your campaign is *either* extremely episodic or densely plot-focused. If your campaign is episodic, it's fitting to focus on funny scenarios each session or, alternatively, relatively disconnected encounters to test your players' tactical prowess. If you are trying to tell a single complex narrative, the Event Scene Format allows you to delicately direct the story without getting sidetracked.