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20 THINGS #57:  
BESIEGED CASTLE



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# 20 THINGS #57: BESIEGED CASTLE

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*Are you a busy GM? Does session prep take too long? Do you never have time to work on the cool little details that can bring your session to life? Well fear not! That's where the 20 Things line comes in. This short, focused compilation gives you, the time-crunched GM, the tools to effortlessly add verisimilitude and detail to your adventure. Use the material herein either before or during play and bask in your players' adulation.*

*This instalment provides five pages of material compatible with virtually any fantasy roleplaying game and is designed to help you flesh out and bring to life the besieged castles in your campaign.*

## CREDITS

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## USING THIS BOOK

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You can use these system neutral tables either during session prep or "on the fly" during the actual session. Roll on the desired table and describe the result. Remember:

- Some players may assume because you describe something it is important. This may slow down the party's progress through the adventure. This isn't necessarily a bad thing.
- Modify any result so it fit with your game.
- Ignore or re-roll inappropriate results.
- Have fun!

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## I: MINOR EVENTS

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The besiegers and the defenders must contend with the vagaries of nature, logistics, morale and their enemies. The minor events below will not turn the siege's tide in anyone's favour, but canny commanders can use them to their advantage.

### DAYTIME EVENTS

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Most of the action in a castle siege takes place during the day, unless many of the combatants can see in the dark.

1. A messenger pigeon avoids an arrow storm, but relief at the bird's survival is short-lived. It arrives with dire news: a week-long delay for expected reinforcements and supplies.
2. A mercenary band arrives to offer their services at an exorbitant fee. However, they prove more than capable as fighters and boast an elven sharpshooting archer who can easily pick off foes at great range. If rebuffed, they threaten to make a similar offer to the enemy.
3. Steady rain has turned the surrounding land into a mire, which gives the defenders a break from battering rams and other direct attacks from siege engines. However, the enemy forces continue to use catapults.
4. A kettle of vultures circles overhead, potentially unnerving those in the castle or among the besieging army. Alternatively, an unkindness of ravens or other group of portentous (either good- or ill-omened) birds flocks to the ramparts and begins calling loudly.
5. One of the castle's towers collapses, providing the besieging army easy access to the castle. As the siege-laying army clambers over the rubble, defenders must turn them away and strive to make the pile of rubble unclimbable.
6. A lightning strike or errant ember ignites dry vegetation. The fire builds and threatens to sweep across the battlefield. While the castle acts as an inherent buffer against the fire, smoke inhalation or fiery material carried aloft by the wind pose threats to the defenders.
7. Strong winds blow away from the castle toward the enemy (or vice versa). Powerful gusts render the use of incendiary munitions a dangerous prospect.
8. A well-respected leader of the castle garrison dies in battle, from natural causes or through foul play. Regardless of the circumstances, members of the guard must quickly pay their respects to their fallen leader. If the cause of death is suspect, it prompts an investigation, provided it does not interfere with the castle's defence.
9. A seemingly neutral party arrives under the flag of peace to negotiate the cessation of hostilities. Their purpose for doing so may be purely altruistic or may conceal sinister intentions for either side of the conflict.
10. A massive crack forms in the castle's foundation due to the strain of repeated attacks by siege engines or through a shift in the underlying earth. A team of engineers must repair the crack before it spreads and creates an opening through which the invaders can pour.

## NIGHT-TIME EVENTS

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Though fighting may stop once night falls, minor incidents still occur. Additionally, both sides use the quiet and cover of night to plot or conduct espionage or sabotage.

1. The full moon, previously cloaked by clouds, becomes free of its obscurement and gives the defenders a clear view of the enemy encampment.
2. An explosion shakes the castle, waking all but the soundest of sleepers. The explosion's source is unclear even to the night watch, but the castle appears undamaged. Unfortunately, a fraught wait until morning is required before the defenders can make a true assessment.
3. A small group from the besieging army attempts to infiltrate the castle. They plan to scout the castle's defences, inhibit the defenders' ability to hold off the siege or create an opening (or enlarge an existing one) so a larger force can break in.
4. The night grows quiet, as the enemy seems to settle down for the night. Suddenly, wolf howls from too near the castle break the silence. Are the wolves preying on the besiegers or part of their forces?
5. A member of the besieging encampment loudly plays a discordant tune on a brass instrument. The instrument's player keeps the racket up for the entire night, and the sound penetrates even the densest castle walls. The rest of the encampment is either used to the noise or uses wax or another means to deaden it.
6. A group of commoners displaced by the conflict threads its way through the enemy encampment. The people seek shelter in the castle and offer to help in any way they can, but their numbers threaten the already dwindling supplies. A spy or assassin could lurk among the refugees.
7. A meteorite streaks across the night sky. Augurs from both sides try to ascertain whether its appearance bodes good or evil. Likewise, a partial or full lunar eclipse, or the appearance of a comet or other celestial event, might provoke concern about its portent.
8. Members of the night watch hear the sounds of construction from behind a copse. Campfire light necessary for the builders to see their work illuminates the top of a siege engine visible over the tallest trees.
9. A team from the besieging force begins, or continues digging, a tunnel under the castle. They have chosen a location where their digging cannot be heard or do their work while a louder sound (for example, the cacophonous instrument playing in #5) conceals their toil.
10. Rain (either a continuation of the rain from daytime event #3 or a fresh storm) douses campfires and makes conditions miserable for the besiegers. Fortunately, the structure provides a respite for everyone but the night watch.



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## 2: ATTACKS

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The besieging force will likely try a number of inventive tactics to breach the castle's walls. Use this list below, to generate the basic details of such actions.

1. Warriors run toward the castle walls carrying long ladders. Some of the attackers carry tower shields, and these warriors are first up the ladders. They hold the shields above their heads to protect themselves from the defenders' missiles. On the ground, archers unleash a storm of arrows to keep the defenders' head down.
2. The attackers draw up several wagons filled with wood, straw and other combustible materials. Much of the material piled into the wagon is damp. When the wind blows in the right direction—toward the castle—they set the wagons aflame. Smoke billows from the wagons, which the attackers begin to push toward the castle walls. Behind the wagons, obscured in the smoke, lurks the assault force.
3. At dusk, the enemy draw up a large force opposite one of the castle's walls. The warriors make a lot of noise—banging their weapons on their shields, taunting the defenders, singing and so on. The spectacle goes on as night falls. The display is a diversion—several enemy champions creep toward another wall intent on using stealth to enter the castle. Once inside, they plan to open the main gates for their fellows.
4. The attackers dig a tunnel to undermine a wall or tower. Observant characters—or perhaps those sent out to disrupt the enemy camp—spot the tunnel entrance, or the hidden piles of spoils carried away from the tunnel. When the tunnel is finished, the sappers plan to pack it with oil-soaked wood and set it on fire. The resultant collapse should cause a collapse and breach the castle defences.
5. The enemy pile a wagon full of barrels of oil and other highly flammable substances. To dissuade the castle defenders from shooting at the wagon, they tie (or nail) captives taken from the surrounding locality to the front and sides of the wagon. When the enemy are ready to attack, heavily armoured warriors push the wagon towards the castle gates.
6. As number 5 above, but instead of captives the enemy have "armoured" the wagon by nailing many shields to its sides, front and over its wheels.
7. Using sword and flame, the attacking troops drive a huge herd of cattle at the castle gates. They hope either the panicked animals will sunder the gate in their panic to escape or the heaps of dead animals will pile so high they can use them to scale the walls.
8. The enemy use catapults to hurl balls of pitch-soaked flaming hay bales and the like against the castle walls. The flaming missiles do no damage but create dense clouds of smoke which hide an imminent attack.
9. The enemy have many captives and slaves. They set the captives free and drive them toward the castle. They then charge forward. Quickly, the two groups become intermingled, making it hard for the defenders to target the

enemy's warriors without injuring or killing the innocents desperately trying to reach the safety of the castle.

10. Pairs of allied (perhaps mercenary) giants carry wagons full of enemy warriors toward the castle walls, which they plan to lift up onto the battlements. The warriors within are equipped with heavy shields and lengths of knotted rope. They plan to clear a stretch of the wall, let down their ropes and hold the breach until their fellows arrive.
11. The besieging force uses catapults to hurl the diseased bodies of animals—and perhaps even their own dead—over the castle walls.
12. The besieging force sends a small group to offer parley and to ask for the garrison's surrender. This is a trick, and a small band of elite warriors use the distraction to creep toward a lightly defended section of wall.

## DEFENCES AND COUNTERATTACKS

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Given enough time, the castle's defenders can devise numerous countermeasures to withstand a siege. Oftentimes, though, attacks come with less warning, requiring impromptu solutions. Use the list below to set up the castle's existing defences along with any countermeasures used during the heat of battle.

1. A water-filled moat is one of the surest defences against battering rams and other siege engines used to directly attack the castle. If a moat proves impractical, a small team can dig strategically placed trenches and cover them with natural material to conceal them. Additionally, breaking up the ground around the castle hinders ladder placement.
2. Several cauldrons stand in the castle grounds fed by wood- and coal-burning fires. While the inhabitants may have to suffer cold nights, the cauldrons filled with water, sand or oil provide a deadly threat to invaders using scaling ladders.
3. A supply of quarried stones acts as ammunition for catapults situated within the castle. These stones can destroy opposing siege engines or flatten swaths of enemy combatants. In dire situations, livestock or corpses can serve as missiles.
4. Rounding castle walls helps deflect battering rams and make the walls less susceptible to breaching. Though less effective, grease, liquid fat or other slick substances create a similar effect in a pinch.
5. Battlements grant protection for archers, allowing the defenders to take advantage of higher ground without fear of reprisal. Rubble and planks of wood serve as weaker protection. Hoardings provide greater protection from missile weapons and enables defenders to move about unseen.
6. Many castles fall prey to invaders digging tunnels under the walls. Extending the foundation is difficult even with ample warning, but a few stone blocks in easily compromised areas thwarts quick access. Defenders can use cauldrons of water to fill tunnels and drown would-be intruders and set up traps to protect obvious entry points.
7. Many siege engines are constructed primarily of wood; arrows or ballistae bolts coated with pitch and set aflame are useful agents of their destruction.

8. Erecting redundant outer and inner walls of increasing height allows the castle to absorb hits from siege engines, wears down enemies scaling the walls and accelerates attrition of enemy forces.
9. Both the besieging army and the castle's defenders use messenger birds to inform their leaders of events and to request reinforcements or resupply. Archers on both sides wait to shoot down the birds. Employing trained birds of prey to attack smaller birds proves similarly useful.
10. Though risky, castle defenders can allow themselves to become the enemy's prisoners. While imprisoned, they can

gain intelligence on their enemy's numbers and capabilities. Escaping with that information, while not divulging counterintelligence, is crucial for this tactic's success.

11. A small band of defenders creeps out at night to dig small holes along the attackers' expected line of attack, in the hopes of disrupting their charge. The group need guards, and the characters are asked to accompany them.
12. The defenders have a small supply of enemy equipment and uniforms. Volunteers are asked to join an intelligence-gathering sortie into the enemy camp.



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### 3: CHALLENGES & COMPLICATIONS

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The defenders' lot in a siege is a hard one.

#### DWINDLING SUPPLIES

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When a castle is under prolonged siege, supplies will run low. Use this list, to determine what shortages bedevil the defenders.

1. **Iron & Coal:** The castle's blacksmith is hard at work repairing the garrison's arms and armour and forging new arrowheads, crossbow bolt tips and the like. Unfortunately, this frenzy of activity is eating into his stock of raw materials—iron bars, coal and the like. (The castle's bowyer/fletcher, leather worker and other essential crafter could also be in a similar situation).
2. **Animal Fodder:** Because the castle is under siege, more beasts of burden and horses are stabled within its walls. Sadly, supplies of animal fodder are running low and soon the stablemaster must slaughter some of the animals.
3. **Healing Supplies:** A constant stream of wounded soldiers and the like make their way to the castle's healers—either clerics, apothecaries or army surgeons. This constant demand is depleting the healers' supplies of bandages, unguents and the like. Alternatively, the castle's clerics could be running low on consumable magic items such as potions and scrolls.
4. **Wine & Ale:** The castle is running low on wine and ale to slake the defenders' thirst. During particularly harrowing times, the castle's lord uses both drinks to boost the morale and bravery of his soldiers. When the castle runs dry, a mutiny—or collapse in morale—could ensue.
5. **Oil & Torches:** A constant watch must be kept—particularly during the hours of darkness when evil's forces are at their most dangerous. Such activity requires the expenditure of much lamp oil and prepared torches for the castle's human defenders are at a disadvantage in the dark.
6. **Firewood:** The castle needs wood for its fires to boil water, cook food, light the blacksmith's forge and for heat. Wood is bulky, and the castle's supply is running low. Will someone slip over the wall to get more? (And if they do, how will they retrieve a decent supply?)
7. **Pigeons:** The castle has a small supply of messenger pigeons, but are running low as most have been despatched with requests for reinforcements, more supplies and the like. Can the characters sneak through the enemy lines to retrieve more birds from a group of nearby scouts?
8. **Masonry & Mortar:** Enemy action has damaged parts of the castle's ramparts and crenellations. The castle's supply of masonry and mortar are running low as the stonemasons patch up one piece of damage after another. (Alternatively, the castle could be running low on planks and other prepared wood as they use it to repair gates, hoardings and so on).
9. **Compassion & Caring:** Surrounded and under constant attack, the morale of the castle's garrison and those seeking shelter within, is falling. Arguments become more common, and small fights erupt over trivial matters. Someone must calm the situation before it spirals out of control.

10. **Fresh Air:** With so many bodies crammed into a small space, and the reduction in sanitation, coupled with the decomposing bodies of the dead and the fires of the besieging forces wafting over the castle, a miasma of death hangs over fortress. Sickness and plague could result, unless something is done.

#### LOW MORALE

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Prolonged sieges take their toll on even the doughtiest warriors, and ebbing morale can prove more dangerous than enemy attacks. The castle's lord or lady, or others in charge, must mitigate the causes of hopelessness among the soldiers and deal with its effects. Use this list, to determine the nature and level of the despair faced by the defenders.

1. Several defenders wish to surrender. The castle's lord or lady must assuage their fears and inspire them to keep fighting.
2. Tempers flare among the castle's guardians and fights break out, with each side blaming the other for failures and losses suffered during the siege. The situation requires a calming influence to restore faith within the ranks.
3. Defenders sneak out of the castle at night to make a deal with the besieging army, hoping to trade safety for intelligence on the defences. The traitors have convinced themselves everyone will die during the siege, so they hope to spare themselves from certain doom.
4. Rumours about horrible treatment by the enemy spread among the defenders. While this might seem to bolster resolve among them, they instead suffer sleepless nights as their imaginations run wild considering the torture awaiting them should the castle fall.
5. The castle's defenders believe the decisions made by their leaders are lacking so they plan to overthrow them.
6. The defenders threaten to strike for better conditions or pay for their work. Their threats intensify and their demands become more unreasonable as the siege's duration stretches from days to weeks.
7. Rumours circulate among the castle's inhabitants about a supernatural enemy among the besiegers. This intensifies the inhabitants' fear and degrades their ability to keep fighting.
8. Members of the night watch feel taken advantage of, since they must remain alert overnight while others benefit from the luxury of sleep. They become less attentive and more prone to napping during their watch.
9. Low morale spreads to the officers, who second guess their decisions and poll their followers for advice on how to handle the siege. This forces the followers to take matters into their own hands or requires the lord or lady of the castle to replace the ineffective leaders.
10. People begin to hoard food out of fear of dwindling supplies. Arguments about food rationing become more frequent. In extreme cases, someone poisons or purposely spoils the food so no one can eat.



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