

Trading with the Spider

This module is a step-by-step guide for running a trade with Black Spider, in which the villain of our story parleys with the party for the Mysterious Puzzle Box. The goal of this scene is to ignite that all-important rivalry between the players and the Black Spider. Before running this module, the party should have already met the Black Spider in Phandalin, established a relationship and arranged to trade for the Mysterious Puzzle Box. While the player characters (PCs) could ask for anything in the trade (and she will promise to give anything to the party, regardless of whether she can actually follow through on that promise), this module is written with the assumption that they asked to trade for their kidnapped friend, Gundren.

In our pursuit to stoke this rivalry between the party and our villain, we have to remember the Black Spider is not evil for evil's sake. Instead, she's cunning and strategic, motivated by her conviction. She isn't attacking the party *just* because she wants to kill them. Through the lens of her cold pragmatism, she sees the party as a volatile quantity in her machinations, and the best way for her to eliminate the risk they pose is to kill them.

But we don't want her to be so instantly dislikable that the PCs attack her instantly. When roleplaying the Spider, remember she is ruthlessly polite, endlessly charming and utterly committed to claiming the Mysterious Puzzle Box and achieving her goals.

THE MYSTERIOUS PUZZLE BOX DOESN'T ACTUALLY MATTER

The point of the Mysterious Puzzle Box is to ensure the party meets the Black Spider and forms a relationship with her, so as long as you're capitalizing on this opportunity to roleplay the Spider with the party, it doesn't matter on a story-level whether she succeeds in getting the Mysterious Puzzle Box or not. In the story, our justification for including the Mysterious Puzzle Box is that it's needed to bypass the Guardian of the Forge at the end of the campaign. If you haven't already, now is the time to decide how the Mysterious Puzzle Box relates to the Guardian of the Forge (whether a source of power, a means of control, or something entirely different), and you'll need to decide exactly what kind of creature or challenge the Guardian is. The party may expect answers.

The Mysterious Puzzle Box and the Guardian will be covered in greater detail as part of a separate PDF on Patreon.



The Crossroads Saloon

Our dramatic scene takes place when the clock strikes midnight at a derelict saloon and distillery sitting on an ancient crossroads in the wilderness. With the PCs being given a time and location for the trade (midnight at the Crossroads Saloon), they should make their way to our set piece. To set the tone, when the party sees the building in the distance, the sky opens up and buckets down torrential rain. Describe water matting their hair to their scalps and running off their chins like faucets as they plot their approach to the building.

They're met by a lone structure, not far from the main road, but far enough that people may not have gone out of their way to visit it. The building is a saloon with two storeys and a cellar. The roof on the second storey is partially caved in. Aside from the front saloon doors, there are two other entrances: a staff entrance on the side, and the cellar doors around the back which open to stairs leading under the building.

Due to the age of this building, the floorboards are creaky, loose, and rotting. Decrepit furniture litters the ground and top floor. The wood around the bar and the entrance to the cellar have signs of being burned decades ago. If the PCs want to be quiet, any Dexterity (Stealth) check is made with disadvantage.

The Spider is in the second storey of the building, waiting and listening for movements below.

1. THE CELLAR

If the PCs go through the cellar, they will see distilling equipment, a furnace, flasks and kegs – this saloon was manufacturing its own alcohol, and it was something strong. The walls are scorched from a previous explosion, with some of the equipment showing damage from an explosive force within.



The cellar door. The cellar door has a rusted padlock on it. The padlock is locked. It can be opened with a successful DC 12 Dexterity check using thieves' tools. If the ability check to unlock the cellar entrance fails, the lock is damaged and becomes inoperable. The doors can be forced open automatically by any character with a Strength ability score of 12 or higher. If forced open, it creates noise and alerts the Spider.

Stairs. The stairs lead up to the first floor.

Scorch marks. The walls and floor are covered in soot and peeling plaster from some ancient explosion in the cellar.

Volatile kegs. Whether some moonshine survived the explosion or new distillers used the equipment, there is potent moonshine in here. With a DC 10 Intelligence (Investigation) check, a player could determine that it is flammable, volatile and engineerable into some kind of weapon in a large-enough quantity. If the players set up a fuse, the exploding distilling equipment could be a hail Mary in the upcoming negotiations upstairs. The explosion is unlikely to harm anyone on the top floor, though the red blast will silhouette the battle and force all characters to make a DC 10 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone from the blast.

When the explosion goes off, anyone on the bottom floor or in the cellar must make a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw, taking 14 (4d6) fire damage on a failure, or half as much on a successful save. Anyone in the cellar has disadvantage on this saving throw.

Setting a fuse. Ask the players if they want to set a short fuse (d4), medium fuse (d6) or long fuse (d8) on the explosion. Clarify that regardless of which length fuse the players set, there's a chance it could go off early. When combat with the Spider begins, roll the fuse dice at regular intervals. If the result is a 1, the explosion goes off. You can decide to roll at dramatic moments, or at the start of each round, or at the start of each turn — whatever you think is most fun. However, make sure the players understand the mechanic behind the fuse and explosion when you start rolling, so they can participate in the drama of anticipating a 1.

Loot. If the players use one of the bottles to collect some of the ancient moonshine resin, it can be fashioned into a vial of Alchemist's Fire with a successful DC10 intelligence check.

2. THE FIRST FLOOR

The interior of this decrepit saloon is wooden and smells of mold. The bar takes up half the space, designed only to accommodate standing room for patrons. Shattered bottles and rotting furniture decorate the area.

The front door. The front doors are classic saloon-style, hanging on hinges at chest height. If the party enters from this direction, the Black Spider is immediately alerted to their presence via the Alarm spell which she hears silently in her mind.

The side entrance. The side entrance can be opened with a successful DC 12 Dexterity check using thieves' tools. If the ability check to unlock the side entrance fails, the lock is damaged and becomes inoperable.

Stairs. Stairs behind the bar lead down to the cellar. Stairs in the customer-facing area lead up to the second floor.

Optional combat. If you need to pad out your session length, it would be appropriate to have a combat here against a combination of Giant Rats and a Swarms of Rats.

Loot. In the ruined piano is a +1 hand crossbow, strung with piano wire. This crossbow emits a musical sound when fired.

3. THE SECOND FLOOR

The ceiling has a hole in it with debris leading to the top of the rooftop, allowing the light from occasional streaks of lightning to flash through. Heavy rain is bucketing through the hole and drumming on the swollen floorboards. The remains of the roof are piled in a scalable fashion which gives access to the rooftop if necessary, though the rubble and rooftop are both difficult terrain. At the cusp of the darkness on the other side of the hole, the Spider sits waiting. The Black Spider has the Gundren in the open, handcuffed, wearing a black hood and gagged. Between her and the party is a large, circular poker table and an overturned pool table.

Debris. Rubble acts as a ramp to the rooftop.

Stairs. The stairs lead down to the first floor.

Rotting floorboards. Three floorboards on the second floor are rotted through. Stepping onto a section of rotted floorboards forces a creature to make a DC 11 Dexterity saving throw, taking 1d6 bludgeoning damage, falling prone and suffering the grappled condition until the start of their next turn. On a success, the creature has jumped to a safe area of wood. Each area of rotting floorboards can only be triggered once. Rotting floorboards are noted on the map below with the ☀ symbol.



4. THE ROOFTOP

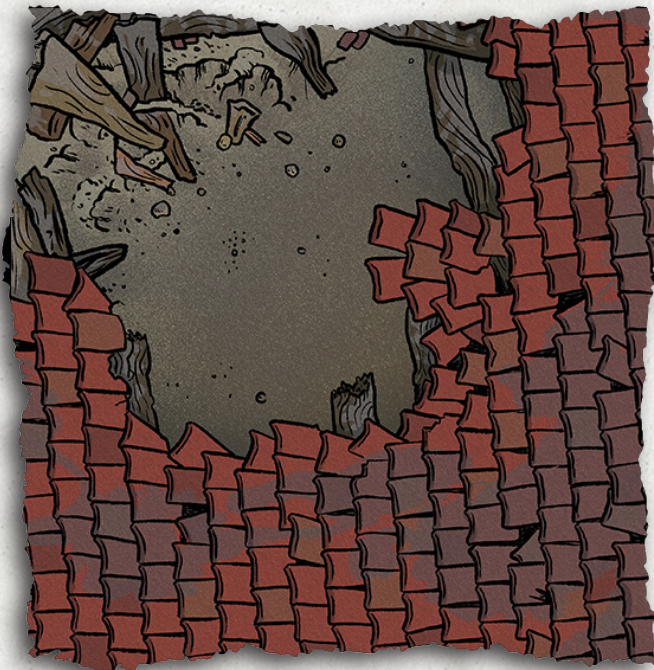
The rooftop is exposed to the rain. There is a hole in the rooftop leading down to the second floor.

Debris. Rubble acts as a ramp to the second floor.

Unstable shingles. The shingles on the roof count as difficult terrain.

Cover. Creatures on the rooftop have half cover against range attacks made from the second floor.

Falling and climbing. If a creature falls from the rooftop to the ground outside, they take 2D6 bludgeoning damage. A creature can attempt to scale to the rooftop from the ground outside with two successful DC14 Athletics checks, taking 1D6 bludgeoning damage if they fall by failing the first check, 2D6 bludgeoning damage if they fall by failing the second check.



The Trade

When the players arrive on the second floor, from the darkness, the Black Spider says, *“You’ve arrived... I was afraid you might have gotten lost in the rain. I thought I might have to come and find you. And yet, here we are. There’s all of you on that side and just me on this side, and there’s the table in between. So I kindly ask you to place the puzzle box on the table, and I will send your friend over. Then we go on our merry ways. Me, richer in pocket and with access to the Forge of Spells, and you, richer in spirit with your friend back. Though, you may wish to set up camp in the saloon for the night if this rain keeps up. I would lend you my umbrella, but sadly, I only have this one.”*

There is one last decision to be made before the trade begins. You have to decide whether this is the real Gundren, or the Black Spider’s ally in disguise, the doppelgänger Monteith. If you want to fast-forward the story and have the next session be the final dungeon, this dwarf captive is the real Gundren. But if you want to maintain the story’s current pace and have the party rescue the real Gundren from the Cragmaw Castle, instead use Monteith the doppelgänger here.

Either way, Black Spider says, *“As you can see I have your friend here, unharmed, but perhaps he is a bit uncomfortable. This is not my doing though. It seems the Cragmaw goblins are not as gracious hosts as I am.”*

Play this scene slowly and build the tension. The party may have questions, and she will answer some of them. She can tell them about various factions around the town, what the guardian of the forge is, how the Mysterious Puzzle Box will help, or anything else you think she knows that the party asks. She will not disclose the location of the cave. If the players had any questions about the campaign’s plot, by the end of this conversation, the party should have a good idea of who the major players are in the story and what they want. If you suspect the players are confused about some element of the plot but they’re not asking the right questions, have the Black Spider volunteer the information.

If the dwarf captive is Monteith, there may be signs that this is not the dwarf that the party is looking for. He might make a mistake with a character’s name, or he might have the wrong accent. When deceiving the party in this way, it’s meant to be a short con. Make the party feel special by letting them pick apart your little ruse and accuse the Black Spider of deception. Under no circumstances is fake-Gundren actually leaving this saloon with the party.

When it comes time to make the exchange, if the characters are reluctant, the Black Spider is not above using Suggestion to force a party member to hand it over. After Gundren passes onto the side of the table that the PCs are on, combat will start in one of three ways.

Combat if the dwarf is Monteith. If Monteith is disguised as the Gundren, the players might uncover the ruse from his behavior and instigate combat. But if they don’t work out the deception, Monteith will cower behind the PCs as if scared of the Black Spider, right before using a Slam attack against one of the weaker members of the party at a dramatic moment as a surprise round.

Combat if the dwarf is Gundren. If the dwarf captive is the real Gundren, as he reaches the party, the Black Spider blasts him with a fire bolt to protect the mine's secret location. Gundren falls below zero hit points and will make death saves throughout combat. In the narrative flavor of this, let's keep Gundren semi-conscious and speaking, because he needs to inform the PCs of the cave's location with his dying breath after all. He can tell any character near enough to hear him, "*Look to the mountains east of town with a lens of quartz.*" A quartz lens will allow them to see arcane residue billowing from the mountain where the Forge is. The residue is invisible to the naked eye.

Combat if trade doesn't go ahead. Players are a fickle bunch, so they might try to renege on the trade. If the Black Spider detects any foul play, or if the players try to leave, she will attack.

THE BLACK SPIDER'S TACTICS

The Black Spider's goal is to have the puzzle box in her possession if she doesn't already, and when she does claim it, she will focus on keeping it and killing the party. When she gets the puzzle box, she will quip, "*Thank you for such an amiable trade.*"

She will use the names of the PCs regularly, especially when targeted by or targeting them. Remember: we want to reinforce a personal relationship with the villain!

Lethality. It would be appropriate to kill a PC in this encounter.

Cover. She may take advantage of the overturned pool table for three-quarters cover.

Hazards. She may use *Suggestion* to get one of the PCs to step on a weakened floorboard.

The rooftop. The debris that leads to the roof allows her to get out of close-quarters combat or spells such as silence. Creatures on the rooftop would have half-cover against ranged attacks from the floors below.

Escape. When the tides of battle turn against her, the Black Spider's demeanor will change. Her mindset is that if she can't kill them, then perhaps she miscalculated her ability to do so, which casts doubts within herself. This isn't helped by the fact that she is under a lot of stress and taking a lot of risks by lying to a lot of people. She needs this puzzle box. Any failure here would be the first chink in her otherwise unwavering conviction.

When you decide it's time for the Black Spider to make her escape, she will cast *Dimension Door* either on her turn or by using her *Cheque Please!* legendary action. Remember: it's okay to fudge the Black Spider's health in this fight if you need to make it more suspenseful. Unless you have a very good reason and a backup plan, the Black Spider should not die here.



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