



SURFACE TENSION

4 Difficulty
5 Complexity

A standalone encounter for five adventurers

By Corwin Riddle

Surface Tension is a standalone encounter designed for five characters between levels 6 to 9. The city of Stonegate was built on an expansive series of canals and aqueducts, used long ago to divert and carry water to neighboring cities. Now, the sewers are home to a variety of dangerous creatures, including a band of murderous sahuagin. The sahuagin climb to the surface each night, killing and kidnapping the city's residents, who call for any brave enough to enter the aqueducts and dispatch this new threat.

BACKGROUND

Once a small outpost for maintaining a system of freshwater canals, the city of Stonegate has grown into a bustling center of industry and commerce, flourishing long after the canals and sewers below fell into disrepair. The canal system tapped into several lakes and rivers, diverting and regulating the flow into several nearby cities in need of water; but as communities turned into villages, and villages turned into cities, they sought their own independent water sources—the aqueducts were emptied and forgotten. The city of Stonegate was erected above the abandoned canal system shortly after, with much of the water rerouted to form a series of moats and canals around throughout the city, providing a secure location to those looking to buy or sell valuables.

Without constant upkeep and repair, the ancient canals began to crumble and break apart; the aqueducts were flooded and became impassable in most places. Amphibious and aquatic creatures now make their homes beneath the city, claiming passages and spillways for themselves; many larger monsters follow the canals from the old lakes and rivers, traveling the distance of the aqueducts before settling in the expansive area below the city. The residents of Stonegate are aware of the ecosystem below, but have adapted to live in relative harmony with its residents—indeed, there seems to be a tacit agreement between the two realms to neither interfere nor intrude into the other territory. There are sometimes violent incidents between Stonegate and the aqueducts, but they occur infrequently, and rarely leave a lasting impression.

Lately, however, the city has been living in fear of what lies beneath; people have been disappearing almost nightly, leaving behind nothing but a trail of blood and water from their residence to a nearby well or sewer entrance—pieces of bloody clothing, sometimes containing pieces of bloody residents, surface days later. The malefactors belong to a tribe of vicious sahuagin, who stumbled upon a canal entrance near the coast; claiming part of the aqueducts for themselves, the sahuagin see Stonegate as a permanent source of food and game. Paralyzed with fear each night, the citizens of Stonegate desperately look for help, praying to the gods for help from above—hoping it will save them from the terrors below.

GETTING THE PLAYERS INVOLVED

Surface Tension can be used as a standalone encounter, or as the basis of an entire adventure. The players can stumble upon the aqueducts and the sahuagin, follow a trail into the canals, or be sent there with one of the following hooks:

HOOK 1: A RESCUE MISSION

A local guardsman named Telo is one of the few people to survive an encounter with the sahuagin, and the only one ever to return alive after heading into the aqueducts in search of them, though not without his scars—Telo is missing one of his legs, which had to be amputated after his wounds became infected. He tells the PCs a story of his daughter, Elise, who was taken in the night—dragged screaming from their house—into the sewers, into a nearby well leading to the sea devils' lair.

Telo says the sahuagin went out of their way to avoid injuring Elise in any way, even after she stabbed one of them with a knife; he knows the sailor's tales of sahuagin and their ritualistic sacrifices to Sekolah, and thinks they are holding Elise for this purpose. Unable to even stand, Telo begs the PCs to enter the well and rescue his daughter, killing any sahuagin in their way.

Telo, having seen much of the canals, gives the PCs general directions for finding their lair, housed in an ancient spillway, and mentions that there are other ways into the spillway that do not pass through main spillway tunnel—a bottleneck and perfect place to be ambushed.

Quest XP: 1000 XP and 1000 gp for bringing back Telo's daughter alive.

HOOK 2: SEA DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

One of the traders in Stonegate is a worldly traveler named Lercous, who specializes in selling unique weapons. Although he's terrified and appalled by the sahuagin attacks, he can't help but admire the ornate tridents they carry around; such a weapon would make a marvelous addition to his collection and might fetch a considerable sum if still in pristine condition. Lercous approaches the PCs as they are about to enter the aqueducts, asking them to collect as many tridents as possible from any sahuagin; Lercous will pay the PCs for every trident in a relatively mint condition.

He warns the PCs that he's not interested in tridents full of nicks, scratches, or other imperfections bound to occur in lengthy battles.

Determine the quality of a trident by the number of successful attacks made with it by a non-minion sahuagin:

0 attacks: pristine, 500 gp

1-3 attacks: near mint, 100 gp

4 or more: damaged, 0 gp

Quest XP: 300 XP for bringing back at least one acceptable trident.

HOOK 3: A SIGN OF WEAKNESS

Ra'shil is on the council of Stonegate, a powerful ruling organization tasked with the welfare and safety of the city. So far, every expedition into the sewers to deal with the sahuagin threat has been unsuccessful, and the casualties many. As distressful as the situation is, Ra'shil is worried that the sahuagin's impunity might encourage the many other creatures living below to join in and take advantage of the plentiful food and spoils of the surface. To ensure the city doesn't appear weak, Ra'shil wants the PCs to enter the canals and kill every sahuagin they come across, letting the other monsters below know that Stonegate is fully capable of bringing punishment to those below.

Quest XP: 300 XP and 400 gp for killing at least 10 sahuagin.

SPECIAL FEATURES

RUNNING THE SKILL CHALLENGE

The skill challenge **Another Entrance** is designed to take place before the PCs enter the encounter area, and has a significant impact on the setup of the encounter.

SPILLWAY VALVES

Marked as yellow valves on the map, a PC standing adjacent to a valve can open a floodgate below it, unleashing a wave of water capable of damaging those in its way.

Lay **Cutout 1** over a canal to represent the water there.

Spillway Valve

Single-Use Terrain

Some of the spillway controls look to be in working condition, though rusted tight. A pair of strong arms could dislodge the flow valve, opening the gate below and unleashing a wave of water.

Standard Action

Requirement: You must be adjacent to the spillway valve.

Check: DC 12 Athletics to activate the valve.

Success: The spillway canal below the valve lets loose a violent flood that persists in the canal as waist-deep water.

Target: Each creature standing within the canal below.

Attack: 18 vs Reflex

Hit: 2d6 + 4 damage, and each damaged creature is knocked prone and pushed 3 squares in the direction of the water.

Effect: The canal area is filled with waist-deep water.

STOPPING THE SACRIFICE

The sahuagin ritualists will attempt to sacrifice the girl. Each turn they will spend a standard action to further the sacrifice, and need a total of 8 actions to complete it.

A ritualist will stop sacrificing if it is bloodied or forcefully pushed away and is no longer adjacent to the altar.

If the sacrifice is completed, every sahuagin gains a +2 bonus to all attack and damage rolls for the encounter.

GETTING STARTED

Regardless of why the PCs enter the aqueducts, read this once they are below:

What once was an impressive feat of architectural ingenuity has deteriorated into nothing more than a common sewer, reeking of garbage and things you are glad you can't identify. Instructions for care and maintenance are inscribed into the walls of the canals in an older form of common.

There are small ledges lining the perimeter of the tunnel, cross-hatched in sunlight filtering through grates of the streets above. The water itself is only waist deep, but slimy and thick with refuse. Etched into the ledges are a series of arrows, presumably pointing toward the spillway entrance.

SKILL CHALLENGE

When the players first reach the spillway entrance, present them with the following skill challenge that will allow them to enter through another passageway.

ANOTHER ENTRANCE

The spillway entrance lies before you, and is not inviting. The almost incessant sound of rats is now gone, replaced with an eerie quiet. Once committing to this entrance, you will need to pass through a slim bottleneck—an ambush seems likely. Perhaps there is another way around.

Setup: For the PCs to successfully sneak into the spillway, they will need to pass two stages: discovering the entrance, and traversing the corridor. Once the PCs have achieved three successes in Stage 1, move on to Stage 2.

Level: 7

Complexity: 3 (requires 8 successes before 4 failures).

Stage 1: Discovering the Entrance (first three successes).

Primary Skills: Perception, Dungeoneering, Thievery.

Perception (DC 14): You notice several grates along the walls behind you at certain intervals and begin combing the walls for one, certain there's something behind all the sludge and grime. This skill can be used as a second success, but as a DC 19 check.

Dungeoneering (DC 14): You've been in a lot of dark, dangerous places, and use your trained eyes to look for any discoloration or inconsistency with the walls that might hide a door. This skill can be used as a second success, but as a DC 19 check.

Thievery (DC 14): Finding traps and trap doors are your specialty, and you start feeling the walls with nimble fingers, looking for any sign of a hidden tunnel. This skill can be used as a second success, but will increase to a DC 19 check.

Secondary Skills: Streetwise, History, Insight.

Streetwise (DC 10): You know that the best place to hide a secret door is up high, and relay this information to your allies. Add a +2 bonus to a primary skill check of your choice.

History (DC 10): You've read about the ancient canals of Stonegate, and know that maintenance shafts are located high above the water level in case of flooding. Add a +2 bonus to a primary skill check of your choice.

Insight (DC 10): You've been noticing a trend in the architecture that helps focus the area of your search. Add a +2 bonus to a primary skill check of your choice.

Stage 1 Success: Hidden under a layer of filth, you find grate, expertly disguised as part of the wall. It's large enough for you to fit through, and seems to wrap around the rear of the spillway. This passage looks to be forgotten—using it might give you the jump on your enemies.

Stage 2: Traversing the Corridor (last five successes)

Primary Skills: Perception, Dungeoneering, Stealth, Strength, Thievery.

Perception (DC 14): Through a break in the tunnel wall, you notice the shadows of a nearby creature and its three-pronged weapon. You halt your allies just in time, allowing the patrol to pass. This can be used as a second success, but will as a DC 19 check.

Dungeoneering (DC 14): The tunnel forks, but you've kept a good sense of direction and know which corridor to follow. This can be used as a second success, but as a DC 19 check.

Stealth (DC 14): You notice a puddle on the floor and direct your allies to step around it, avoiding a loud splash that could give your position away. This can be used as a second success, but as a DC 19 check.

Strength (DC 14): Part of the tunnel has collapsed, but you are able to quietly lift part of the debris long enough for you and your allies to pass. This can be used as a second success, but as a DC 19 check.

Thievery (DC 14): The sahuagin have placed a primitive wire trap ahead, designed to knock over rocks and alert them to any intruders. You're able to quickly disarm it without incident. This can be used as a second success, but as a DC 19 check.

Secondary Skills: Streetwise, Acrobatics, Insight, Religion

Streetwise (DC 10): There are several openings in the tunnel that share a wall with the spillway. You keep to the shadows, just in case, lowering the chance of detection. Add a +2 bonus to a primary skill check of your choice.

Acrobatics (DC 10): An ally slips, but you deftly catch them before they hit the floor and alert any nearby guards. Add a +2 bonus to a primary skill check of your choice.

Insight (DC 10): You've been keeping an eye out for shadows of the guards, and have managed to time their patrols, alerting your allies to move when they are farthest away and least likely to detect you. Add a +2 bonus to a primary skill check of your choice.

Religion (DC 10): You call upon your god to cover the ears of your enemies, giving you and your allies a better chance of success. Add a +2 bonus to a primary skill check of your choice.

Success: You quietly emerge from the tunnel onto the upper level of the spillway. Down below, you can see a clan of sahuagin clearly visible in the torch light, perched on the edges of the main entrance and waiting to ambush anyone using the bottleneck. Your entrance has gone undetected.

Failure: You hear the clatter of an alarm, and the door behind you creaking and clicking as it is sealed and locked. The sahuagin know you're coming, and will be ready for you when you emerge.

A success changes the encounter in the following ways:

- The PCs gain 900 XP.
- The PCs enter the spillway from the secret entrance.
- The sahuagin start near the main spillway door.
- The PCs gain a surprise round in the encounter.

A failure changes the encounter in the following ways:

- The PCs enter the spill way from the secret entrance.
- The sahuagin are positioned near the secret entrance.
- The sahuagin gain a surprise round against the PCs.

AREA: THE SPILLWAY

Read this when the PCs enter the spillway:

A large canal of slimy water flows down the center of the spillway, falling from a higher tier. There are several smaller canals in this room, most drained and empty of water. Small stone slabs lie around the room, covered in blood, the remains of other organs and surrounded by humanoid bones.

Lit by small candles and torches, a larger stone slab sits near the center of the room, where a small girl lies shackled. Above the makeshift altar is a giant bone jaw of some shark, its mouth stuffed with what you assume to be intestines, dripping blood onto the table below.

Perception (DC 10): Above the canals there are a series of valves and levers, most likely controls for flooding and draining the canals below.

SETUP

10 Sahuagin Marauder (M)

6 Sahuagin Sentry (S)

2 Sahuagin Ritualist (R)

The sahuagin location depends on whether or not the PCs attempted the skill challenge, and then whether or not they succeeded:

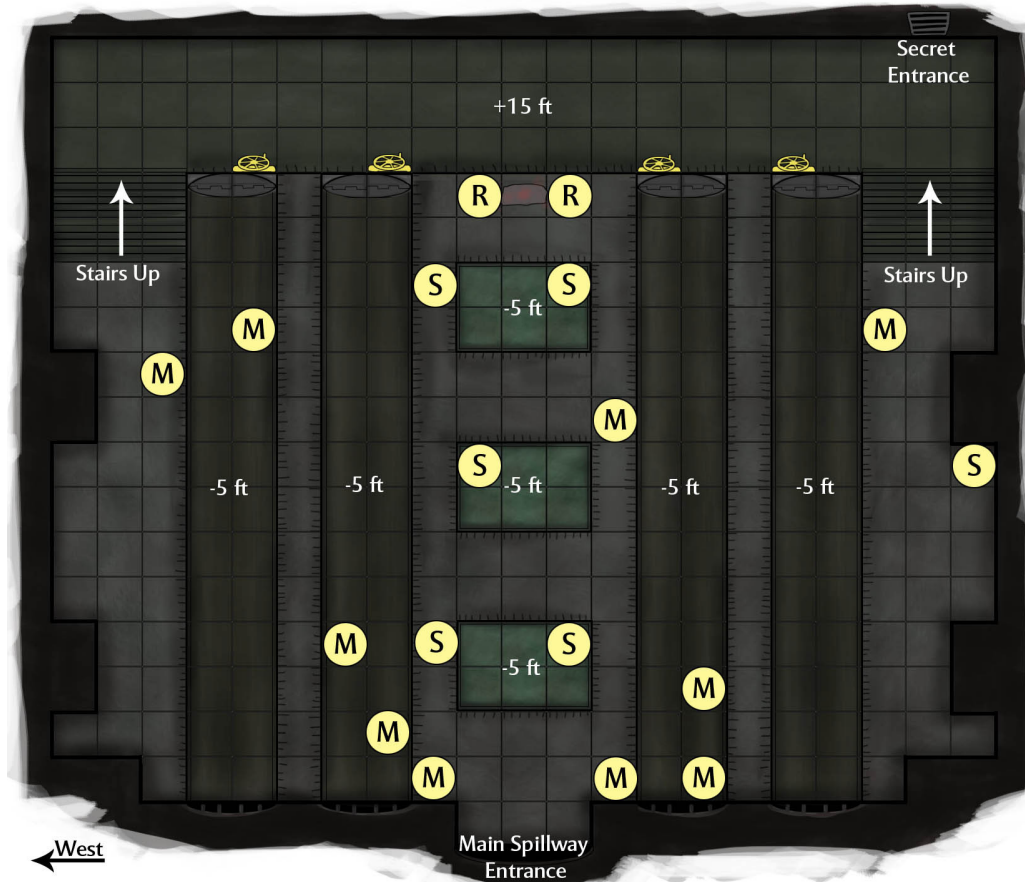
No skill challenge: use the shown setup.

Succeeded on the skill challenge: use the shown setup. The PCs get a surprise round against the sahuagin.

Failed the skill challenge: move 3 of the sentries and 4 of the marauders up top, surrounding the secret entrance. The sahuagin get a surprise round against the PCs.

Regardless of an attempt or outcome of the skill challenge, read this as the fight begins:

A pair of sahuagin, draped in robes of garbage and kelp, crowd around Elise and begin muttering and gesturing to the shark jaw. One of them draws a crude knife and begins to circle the girl, chanting in an abyssal tongue. It looks like they plan to sacrifice her to Sekolah as soon as possible—there's not much time left to save her.



FEATURES OF THE AREA

Height: The spillway has a 30' ceiling.

Illumination: Low-light; any creature adjacent to a wall or crouching in water gains partial concealment.

Canals: Marked as lower terrain, the canals are 5' deep. Moving into the canals does not require an extra square of movement, but climbing out does.

Water: Marked as greenish squares, the water is 3' and counts as difficult terrain. The sahuagin can swim in it.

Spillway Valves: Marked as yellow valves. A PC can spend a standard action to fill the canal below. See *Special Features*.

Water Gates: Marked as gray gates below each valve. This is where water will emerge when the valves are activated.

TACTICS

- All of the sahuagin will prefer to attack in water, knowing they have an advantage in mobility. They will also attempt to gain concealment in the low-light by crouching within the water if not in range of attacking a PC.
- The marauders will try to mob the nearest PCs, hoping to bloody them as soon as possible. The sentries will take up position between the PCs and the ritualists, using *Trident Sweep* to keep the PCs away, letting them continue the sacrifice or throw ranged attacks from safety.
- The ritualists will attempt to sacrifice Elise at the beginning of combat, stopping to fight only after becoming bloodied or moved away from the altar. After they are disrupted, the ritualists will hide behind the other sahuagin, moving to water to use *Sewage Bolt* for maximum damage and to prepare to use *Tidal Blast* if cornered.
- When any PC becomes bloodied, the sahuagin will start to swarm, focusing their attacks on the injured player.
- The sahuagin are unaware of the valve controls, and won't make a conscious attempt to move out of the canals to avoid the rush of water.

PLAYER STRATEGY

- Regardless of their entrance, the PCs should first attempt to stop the sacrifice. The ritualists need four full turns to complete their ritual, and the PCs need only to reduce them to bloodied or push, pull, or slide them and disrupt the process.
- The spillway valves on the second tier will do a considerable amount of damage to the sahuagin and can clear out a good number of the marauder minions if timed correctly, but will leave the canal below covered in water, which is a disadvantage to the PCs, who must jump over or wade through the canals.

Sahuagin Sentry		Level 6 Soldier
Medium natural humanoid (aquatic)		XP 250
Initiative +7	Senses Perception +4; low-light vision	
HP 70; Bloodied 35		
AC 20; Fortitude 19, Reflex 16, Will 15		
Speed 6, swim 6		
Ⓣ Trident (standard; at-will) • Weapon		
+11 vs AC; 1d8 + 5 damage and the target is marked until the end of the sahuagin sentry's next turn.		
➤ Trident (standard; at-will) • Weapon		
Ranged 3/6; +11 vs AC; 1d8 + 5 damage. The sahuagin sentry must retrieve its trident before it can throw it again.		
✱ Trident Sweep (standard; recharge ⓂⓂⓂⓂ) • Weapon		
Area burst 1; +11 vs AC; each creature adjacent to the sahuagin sentry takes 1d6 + 4 damage and is pushed 1 square.		
Blood Frenzy		
The sahuagin gains a +1 bonus to attack rolls and a +2 bonus to damage rolls against bloodied enemies.		
Alignment Chaotic Evil	Languages Abyssal	
Str 20	Dex 14	Wis 12
Con 14	Int 10	Cha 10
Equipment Trident		

Sahuagin Ritualist		Level 6 Artillery
Medium natural humanoid (aquatic)		XP 250
Initiative +6	Senses Perception +7; low-light vision	
HP 57; Bloodied 28		
AC 20; Fortitude 17, Reflex 18, Will 19		
Speed 6, swim 8		
Ⓣ Trident (standard; at-will) • Weapon		
+10 vs AC; 1d6 + 5 damage		
➤ Trident (standard; at-will) • Weapon		
Ranged 3/6; +11 vs AC; 1d8 + 5 damage. The sahuagin ritualist must retrieve its trident before it can throw it again.		
➤ Sewage Bolt (standard; at-will)		
Ranged 20 (10 out of water); +12 vs Will; 2d8 + 4 damage (1d8 + 4 out of water)		
⚡ Tidal Blast (standard; recharge ⓂⓂⓂⓂ)		
Close blast 3; +12 vs Will; 2d8 + 5 damage, and any non-aquatic creature in the blast is pushed 2 squares. Only usable when the sahuagin ritualist is standing in water.		
Blood Frenzy		
The sahuagin gains a +1 bonus to attack rolls and a +2 bonus to damage rolls against bloodied enemies.		
Alignment Chaotic Evil	Languages Abyssal	
Str 15	Dex 17	Wis 19
Con 15	Int 11	Cha 15
Equipment Trident, Holy Symbol		

Sahuagin Marauder		Level 6 Minion
Medium natural humanoid (aquatic)		XP 63
Initiative +5	Senses Perception +4; low-light vision	
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion.		
AC 20; Fortitude 18, Reflex 17, Will 16		
Speed 6, swim 6		
Ⓣ Trident (standard; at-will) • Weapon		
+11 vs AC; 5 damage.		
➤ Trident (standard; at-will) • Weapon		
Ranged 3/6; +11 vs AC; 5 damage. The sahuagin marauder must retrieve its trident before it can throw it again.		
Blood Frenzy		
The sahuagin gains a +1 bonus to attack rolls and a +2 bonus to damage rolls against bloodied enemies.		
Alignment Chaotic Evil	Languages Abyssal	
Str 16	Dex 14	Wis 12
Con 14	Int 10	Cha 10
Equipment Trident		

COMBAT FLAVOR

If you dislike reading powers and effects to your players, give them hints with the following flavor text.

Read the most appropriate text below when a sahuagin ritualist uses a standard action to sacrifice Elise:

1-3: *The sahuagin surrounding Elise ignore your presence, chanting while focusing on the girl.*

4-5: *Elise screams as the sahuagin begin to perform a series of small cuts, nearing completion of the sacrifice.*

6-7: *One of the ritualists places Elise into the open mouth of the shark jaws, and raises his knife to strike.*

8 (dead): *Elise's screams abruptly stop, turning into a sickening gargle. The sahuagin present begin to roar with vicious enthusiasm.*

When a spillway valve is activated:

The gate below creaks and moans as it moves aside, unleashing a sudden torrent of sewer water that fills the canal.

CONCLUSION

The sahuagin are fearless and territorial, and each one will fight to the death. Once they are defeated, the PCs can search for any pristine tridents, and prepare to take Elise back to the surface. Near the altar is a collection of gems and gold taken from previous sacrifices, totaling 1000 gp. They will also find a level 9 magical item nearby. Telo will thank and reward the PCs for returning his daughter.

Upon returning to Ra'Shil, he will thank the PCs for their service, saying:

"Thank you for your service. With such an audacious display of strength and violence, the monsters below will most certainly step aside as we expand the city downward and open up the canals once again. I must admit, when first summoning the sahuagin to the city, I did not imagine they would be quite so troublesome; however, everything worked out in the end. Stonegate's glory shall only grow, thanks to you."

ADJUSTMENTS

If you like this encounter but aren't sure you can fit it into your current campaign, you can adjust and scale it to accommodate your adventure. Here are some suggestions:

We don't have five players:

Reduce the ritualists to 1 and lower the number of other sahuagin.

We're not the right level:

*All of the sahuagin are based off the sahuagin guard, priest, and raider in the **Monster Manual** and **Monster Builder**.*

It's too hard for my PCs, they keep wiping:

The PCs need to find a balance for using the canals to damage, and keeping the sahuagin out of water. If one of the PCs went a little

valve-happy and flooded all of the canals, consider allowing them to drain them as well by using the valve again. The difficulty of the encounter also depends greatly on whether or not they succeeded on the skill challenge, which provides them with a free round and great position for the fight.

It's too easy for my PCs, they're breezing through:

This encounter might be a little easy for a group of tactical players (as always) smart enough to draw the sahuagin across the room and inflict maximum damage with the valves. Ranged characters will also have an easy time, since there are only two ranged enemies and they will most likely be attacked first.

Consider having the sahuagin minions rush one particular player, forcing the others to help out or lose an ally. A swarm of minions can chip away a character's hit points quickly once surrounded.

We don't like the theme/characters/combat hook:

If you don't like parts of the adventure, but enjoy even one of the ideas - steal it and dump the rest.

I don't know how to run a skill challenge:

You can have your players roll initiative and take turns in that order, passing as they like, or if they're not an unruly bunch, just solicit turns from willing players that have something they want to contribute at that moment.

For the challenge itself, you can introduce it as a skill challenge and let them know the stakes, or weave it in organically through descriptions and flavor text. For the primary and secondary skills, you can list them, or integrate them into your narration, such as "those trained in perceiving their surroundings and thieving might be able to locate a hidden door."

Besides having them incur a surprise round penalty, consider turning the skill challenge into another encounter or adding isolated combat; perhaps they have to fight a patrolling guard on a failed stealth check, or have an opportunity to quietly take out a sentry that wanders near the secret entrance—reducing the number of sahuagin in battle.

We'd rather play a full adventure than a one encounter:

The aqueducts below Stonegate could go on for miles, and are full of a number of dangerous creatures and possible encounters. Here are some examples:

Encounter 1

2 Black Puddings (MM2)
2 Black Pudding Spawns (MM2)

Encounter 2

4 Troglodyte Thrashers (MM2)
1 Troglodyte Deepscourge (MM2)

Encounter 3

1 Greenscale March Mystic (MM1)
3 Blackscale Brutes (MM1)
2 Greenscale Darters (MM1)
1 Greenscale Hunter (MM1)

