Tales of the Old Margreve

BY WOLFGANG BAUR, MATT CORLEY,
JON SAWATSKY, AND JAMES INTROCASO

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CREDITS

Lead Designer: Matthew Corley

Designers: Wolfgang Baur, Richard Green, James Introcaso, Ben McFarland, Jon Sawatsky

Editor: Kim Mohan

Editorial Assistance: Meagan Maricle, Thomas Reid

Cover Art: Eric Belisle

Interior Artists: Michele Giorgi, Miguel Regodón Harkness, Julia Metzger, Dio Mahesa, William O'Brien, Beatrice Pelagatti, Roberto Pitturru, Addison Rankin, Florian Stitz, Bryan Syme, Egil Thompson, Quico Vicens, Michael Witmann, Alena Zhukova

Cartographers: Jon Pintar, Dean Spencer

Art Director: Marc Radle

Publisher: Wolfgang Baur

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PLAYTESTERS

Circle of Missfits GM: David "CastleDave" Ferguson; Players: Melissa Horadam, Kevin McDonald, Rebecca McDonald, "TBD" McDonald, Karen Tello

BattleRealm GM: Zack Holmes; Players: Jonathan Grumball, Micah Holmes, Andy Lamers, Sören Mohrhusen, Devin Zaccardo

Cat Herding GM: Adam Etherington; Players: Dan Lamothe, Timothy Major, Robb McGaw, Jacob Rahme, Amanda Schwerdtfeger, Jeff Watson

Dead Men Walking GM: Sean Gahagan; Players: Sarah D'Apice, Michelle D'Apice, Christine Deitz, John Mynaugh

DnD Role Players GM: SA Bright; Players: Adam, Blair, Spencer, Therai, Will

Dragon Ballad GM: Teil Buck; Players: Gabby Andrick, Aaron Donahoo, Eric Heidbreder, Ruwani Kirin, Dylan Lloyd, Eric Salazar

From the Gates of Hell GM: Winifred Chiang; Players: Justin K., Tyler R.

Girls Like to Battle GM: Clayton Thomson; Players: Fiona Callahan, Lani Frost, Dawn Thomson, Gillian Thomson

Glory Hounds GM: Joshua Sterrett; Players: Andrew Cousineau, Sara Davis, JB Little (DroptheDie), David Schwab, Leigh Shull

Kindred GM: Valkyn; Players: Dwaine, Jed, Ken, Matthew

Lou's Table GM: Lou Anders; Players: Jonathan Anders, Lou' Son, Nathan W. Ertel, Heath Robinson, Francisco Rodriguez

Lute & Lyre, LLC GM: Janine Hempy; Players: Josh McDaniel, Jason Mollett, Loc Nyugen, Victor Palos, Jason Schwenker

Morgantha's Pie Server GM:Corry Rogerson; Players: Anthony B, Derrick Giselle, John Graczkowski

Paul's Group GM: Paul Wright; Players: Andy, Todd

Team Owlbear GM: James Marko; Players: Jake Ezzo, Josi Hausman, Chris Magenta, Michael Mandel, David Van Arsdell

The Dead-Liners GM: Garrett Colón; Players: Chris Balboni, Deb Berlin, Max Cushner, Derek DaSilva, Carlos Robles

The Endurance GM: Nora Haynes; Players: Rose Acord, Tom Molley, Tony Segui

The Last Refuge GM: Eugenio Vargas; Players: Robert Hupf, Karin Nilo, Alex Ward

The Vanguard (Knights of Coggins) GM: Jordan Berry; Players: Connor Dea, John Horton, Emma Kennedy, Nick Kennedy, Luke Russell

The Zobeck 14 GM: Rich Fraser; Players: Lucy B, Jeff D, Will F, Alex G, Christopher M, Tom W, Tristen

World of Harthron GM: William Hart SR; Players: JD Gran, Billy Hart Jr., Dan Hunt, Alex Robinson, Seth Rowley

Unnamed Group GM: Angella Coffee; Players: John Archambault, Cliff Coffee, Zack Colbeck, Max D, Eric Peterson

Unnamed Group GM: Jeramie Cooper; Players: Kristine Cooper, Catie Ecklund, Kyle Garms, Elizabeth Klitgaard, Lauren Smith

Unnamed Group GM: Brian Donnelly; Players: Vladimirledeux, Cosdyn Akers, Christopher "Oak" Caywood, Daniel 'Alvyn' Holland, Josh Lorentzen

Unnamed Group GM: Melissa Doucette; Players: Erin Dwyer, Sheldon Jenkins, Kevin Mason, Raven Mikhail, Amy White

Unnamed Group GM: Jeremy Hochhalter; Players: Bryan Gillispie, Emilie Gunderson, Jaime Will

Unnamed Group GM: TJ McKay; Players: Aoibhinn Manak, Jim Semkiw, Zach Sromalla

Unnamed Group GM: Tim Rose; Players: Stephanie Botsford, Anna Rose, Jennie Rose

The Old Margreve Gazetteer

> *The hills rise wild, and there are valleys with deep woods that no axe has ever cut. There are dark, narrow glens where the trees slope fantastically, and where thin brooklets trickle without ever having caught the glint of sunlight.*
>
> *… The old folk have gone away, and foreigners do not like to live there … The place is not good for imagination, and does not bring restful dreams at night.*
>
> —H.P. Lovecraft, "The Colour Out of Space"

The Old Margreve Forest is an ancient place, already old when most of the gods were young. In time immemorial, it cradled the great spirits of nature, and its loam felt the footfalls of the old ones. As millennia passed, its roots swallowed rivers, its canopy stole the sun from vast tracts of land, and its groves crested mountains that have since weathered to hills.

In all that time, the Margreve has changed little. Time seems to flow around it, lapping at its edges like the sea around an island. As kingdoms rise and fall beyond its borders, the Margreve remains a world apart—a place where memories and old magic linger in the rings of trees and where new ideas never quite take root.

Mood and Mystery

Very little is known in the world at large about the Margreve's interior. There is simply something wrong with the place, something that unsettles the nerves, plays upon fears, and discourages exploration. Too many stories of danger exit the wood, and too many travelers do not. The few adventurers who dare the Margreve's deep trails return with strange scars, stranger stories, and too few prizes to warrant either.

From the outside, the Margreve looks like any Old World forest. In some places it is dark, tangled, and foreboding. In other places, it is sun-dappled and open, like an evergreen palace of towering tree pillars, ivy carpet, and wind-rustled canopy. But there is something more to it. Something hiding behind the wind and the leaves and the trees. Something living and vigilant. A presence that none who stand dwarfed among the trees can deny.

The Margreve unsettles the nerves of interlopers, evoking fear and trembling, especially in first-time visitors. It conjures awe and intimidation as the intruder delves deeper. And nearest the heart of the forest, the unsettling feeling of being in proximity to a supernatural or divine "other" is intensified.

Most describe this faceless "other" as a dark, sinister presence, but perhaps they are simply not in touch with the natural order of this ancient place. Deep-woods druids cast the Margreve in a brighter, if not wilder, light, describing the supernatural presence as beautiful, terrible, and bestial. They talk of "Margreve" as if it were a living creature with a personality and a will of its own. Religious figures reject the idea that the forest is alive but acknowledge that some great presence lives therein. Worshipers of Porevit and Yarila claim to hear the whispers of a withdrawn aspect of their Green Gods. Others sense older gods, inimical to man and dwarf, brooding in the forest's vastness and waiting for the age of man to pass. Perhaps they are all right. Even Baba Yaga confesses, "The Margreve came before such recent inventions as gods and spells and names and language."

Character Status in the Margreve

The forest is encompassed by an antediluvian intelligence with a personality all its own. Natives know that the Margreve is quick to anger, slow to forgive, and will hold a grudge that passes from generation to generation like a powerful curse. Races, classes, and creature types that have a strong connection to the

ADVENTURES IN THE MARGREVE

Even though all the adventures in this anthology share the dark-forest, Old World theme, each adventure stands alone. They can be played individually or linked together into a sequence that takes the characters from 1st to 10th level and beyond.

Three of the adventure sites are interconnected, providing locations and a framework for weaving a common thread into the characters' exploration of the Margreve. The sites, collectively titled "What Remains of Derende," are each designed for a different tier of play. The first one, "The Fingers of Derende" for levels 1 to 4 (see page 63), contains background information that applies to all three adventures, including "The Tongue of Derende" for levels 5 to 9, and "The Heart of Derende" for levels 10 and higher.

The adventures in this anthology do not typically take into account the powers of the Margreve as described in this gazetteer. Thus, DMs who want to locate these adventures in a standard forest setting can do so without modification. DMs who want to run these adventures in the Margreve are encouraged to review *The Vengeful Heart* as an example of how to mix the forest's powers into an adventure.

natural world are looked upon favorably. Undead, gearforged, and other creatures anathema to the natural order are scorned. The rules presented below offer the GM a more nuanced approach to the guidelines presented under Margreve Attitude for determining how the characters' actions and inaction ultimately affect their experience in the Margreve.

The inhabitants of the Margreve learn quickly that their every move, action, and word are witnessed by the nearly omniscient forest. The Margreve's ancient and alien presence cares not for social niceties, and the standing of characters in other lands has no bearing there. But in the forest, a character's status with respect to the Margreve is a critical consideration. Each player character's status can be determined by using the information below, first to generate a starting value and then to adjust it according to actions the character undertakes.

As a rule, status determines which player character most NPCs will defer to; they will address the character with the highest status as the default party leader. Conversely, characters with low status will be treated with suspicion or even outright hostility. While characters are in the Margreve, the forest's disposition toward them has tangible effects on them too.

DETERMINING STATUS

A character's beginning status is equal to 1d6 + 1 plus the character's Charisma modifier. That value is then subject to further change because of class and race. For any race not listed, the forest views such creatures either as natives (no bonus or penalty) or outsiders (–1 to beginning status), as determined by the character's back story. Any class not listed has no adjustment to a character's beginning status.

RACE/CLASS	STATUS
Alseid	+2
Bearfolk	+2
Centaur	+1
Darakhul	–4
Dhampir	–4
Elf	+2
Elfmarked	+1
Erina	+1
Gearforged	–4
Gnome (Niemheim)	–2
Goblin	–2
Human (Kariv)	+1
Minotaur	+1
Piney	+2
Ratfolk	+1
Ravenfolk	+1
Shadow fey	+1
Winterfolk	+1
Druid	+2
Ranger	+1
Wizard	+1
Cleric	+1
Sorcerer	+1
Bard	+1
Warlock	+1

A character's beginning status fluctuates whenever the character performs certain acts that increase or decrease their status. See the table below for examples.

ACTION	STATUS
Damaging the Margreve	–1 to –4
Break a sworn oath	–2
Destroy a creature acting on behalf of the Margreve	–4
Cast *blight*	–1
Cast *horrid wilting*	–2
An ancestor was an invader of the Margreve	–1 to –4
Cast an 8th-level spell	+1
Cast a 9th-level spell	+1
Save an agent of the Margreve	+1
Defeat an intelligent undead of at least CR 5	+1
Protect the Margreve from an imminent threat	+1 or +2
Restore a damaged portion of the Margreve	+1 or +2

EFFECTS OF STATUS

A character's status with the Margreve, of course, affects how the forest conducts itself in that individual's presence. Refer to the following table, moving up or down as the character gains or loses status.

STATUS	STANDING
0 or lower	**Invader of the Margreve**: The forest will periodically (at the GM's discretion) act to hinder you. The forest is hostile toward you.
1–10	**Uninvited Guest of the Margreve**: You are largely ignored as the forest monitors your deeds. The forest is indifferent to your presence.
11–20	**Guest of the Margreve**: You have proven to the forest that your actions will not cause it harm. The forest is friendly to you. While you act on behalf of the Margreve, it might favor you in times of duress.
21–30	**Friend of the Margreve**: Your actions have benefited the Margreve, and it is friendly toward you. Once per week you can use an action to call upon the forest to aid you. Additionally, while you act on behalf of the Margreve, it might aid you of its own volition.
30 or higher	**Hero of the Margreve**: You have shown time and again that the forest is under your protection, and the Margreve reciprocates by aiding you. Once per day you can use an action to call upon the Margreve for aid. Additionally, while you act on behalf of the Margreve, it might aid you of its own volition.

STATUS REWARDS FOR ADVENTURES

If you use the rules for status while playing the adventures in this book, apply the following changes as each adventure concludes.

Hollow: If the characters prevent any additional villager deaths, they receive a +1 bonus to their Margreve status.

The Honey Queen: Characters who come to a peaceful agreement with the Honey Queen receive a +1 bonus to their Margreve status. Characters who destroy the queen instead receive a –2 penalty.

The Vengeful Heart: Characters who successfully guide Chairo and the children to Wheedon receive a +1 bonus to their Margreve status. If they also cause Eagehrt to pay for his deeds, they receive an additional +1.

Challenge of the Fang: The character who successfully completes the challenge receives a +2 bonus to their Margreve status.

The Griffon Hatchling Heist: If Lesharrk's final attitude toward the heroes is helpful, they receive a +1 bonus to their Margreve status. If her attitude toward them is unfriendly or hostile, they instead receive a –2 penalty.

Gall of the Spider Crone: If the heroes rescue Flawn and prevent him from harming himself, they receive a +1 bonus to their Margreve status.

Blood and Thorns: If the heroes destroy all the undead allies of Catchweed, they receive a +2 bonus to their Margreve status.

Grandmother's Fire: If the heroes destroy all the Ghost Knights of Doresh, they receive a +1 bonus to their Margreve status.

The Vengeful Dragon: If the heroes befriend Mama Cana and secure her aid, they receive a +1 bonus to their Margreve status. If the heroes battle the Heart when it awakens, they receive a –4 penalty to their Margreve status.

What Remains of Derende: If the heroes rid the forest of Captain Thoulous and her ghouls, they receive a +2 bonus to their status and may harvest the Tongue with no repercussions. Characters who damage any body part of Derende, except as noted previously, receive a –2 penalty to their status for each part damaged.

HELPING AND HINDERING

The tables below offer examples of how the Margreve might aid or hinder a character. Roll a d12 and refer to the appropriate table, or choose a result.

Friendly Margreve Effects

D12	EFFECT
1	You find ample trails, spoor, and deer-sign around every corner. Once daily the character automatically succeeds on a Wisdom (Survival) check to hunt wild game.
2	A stream, brook, or small pond seems to always be just off the trail. Once daily the character automatically succeeds on a Wisdom (Survival) check to find clean, fresh water.
3	The inhabitants of the forest are uncharacteristically curious of you. Wisdom (Animal Handling) checks targeting beasts in the forest are made with advantage.
4	A cool breeze and plentiful shade aid your trek through the forest. Constitution saves to avoid levels of exhaustion due to environmental effects are made with a +2 bonus in the forest.
5	The flora and fauna of the forest reveal their secrets to you. All Intelligence (Nature) checks in the forest are made with a +2 bonus.
6	The forest alters the path to aid you in your journey. While traveling, your party covers an additional 1 mile per hour.
7	The ground always seems to be clear wherever you travel. Difficult terrain does not slow your travel.
8	A branch, tree, or cover is always nearby. Once per day the character has advantage on a Dexterity (Stealth) check to hide.
9	Your steps are muffled by the soft undergrowth and terrain. All Dexterity (Stealth) checks in the forest are made with a +2 bonus.
10	The inhabitants of the forest watch over you protectively. Wisdom (Perception) checks in the forest are made with a +2 bonus.
11	The canopy of the forest extends over your every step. Characters who have Sunlight Sensitivity are never in direct sunlight.
12	There is always a branch or handhold within reach. All Strength (Athletics) checks to climb in the forest are made with a +2 bonus.

Hostile Margreve Effects

D12	EFFECT
1	The animals of the forest avoid you at all costs. Any Wisdom (Survival) checks to hunt game in the forest are made with disadvantage.
2	Sinkholes, quicksand, and brambles appear in your path. While traveling, your party covers 1 less mile per hour than normal.
3	When given the opportunity to flee or attack, beasts will choose to attack you.
4	Difficult terrain is riddled with brambles that deal 1 piercing damage per 10 feet traveled; succeeding on a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw prevents this damage.
5	Tree branches are out of reach, and rock faces are sheer or choppy. Strength (Athletics) checks to climb in the forest are made with a –2 penalty.
6	Brackish, still water is abundant, and clean water is rare. Wisdom (Survival) checks to find potable water in the forest are made with a –2 penalty. If the check fails by 5 or less, water is still found, but it is tainted. Characters who drink tainted water must succeed on a DC 13 Constitution save or be poisoned for 1d4 hours.
7	Malevolent intent emanates from the forest, putting the character on edge. The character has a –2 penalty on saving throws against fear effects.
8	Shadows and strange sounds are everywhere, confusing your senses. Wisdom (Perception) checks in the forest are made with a –2 penalty.
9	Foliage and objects in the forest move away from you at inconvenient times. Dexterity (Stealth) checks in the forest are made with a –2 penalty.
10	A root is always underfoot. When taking the Dash action, a DC 12 Dexterity check is required or the character falls prone.
11	Biting insects plague the character, making it difficult to focus on fine tasks. Intelligence (Investigation) checks in the forest are made with a –2 penalty.
12	Toxic plants line your path. The character inadvertently leads the party into a patch of poisonous plants. All characters must succeed on a DC 10 Constitution save or be poisoned for 1d2 hours.

The Life of the Margreve

The Margreve is three quarters location and one quarter magical beast. Its personality, will, and mindset are ancient, bordering on alien. It has perceptions and powers beyond understanding—and often beyond the notice—of those who dare to enter its bounds. It nourishes itself. It defends itself. And it remembers those who have challenged it in the past. It is in many ways like any other creature, with the notable exception that it is the size of a country.

Senses: The Margreve feels. Keenly. It enjoys forest-wide tremorsense, keen enough to pinpoint the location of any creature and identify it by species. Some say the forest recognizes individuals by their unique footfalls; although this assertion is not true, it spawns from the accurate observation that deep woods inhabitants sometimes "step" like other creatures to protect themselves from the surveillance of the ever-vigilant trees. Inhabitants also worry that the forest "feels" their voices, so secrets are often spoken in whispers while rapping loudly on a tree.

The Margreve can indeed recognize individuals—not by their footfalls, but by the blood they spill. The first time an individual bleeds on the forest floor, the Margreve knows of that creature. It tracks such individuals with its tremorsense until they leave the forest. If an individual reenters the forest and bleeds again, the forest "remembers" the uniqueness of that blood and connects the individual's current activity to the past deeds it has witnessed.

Often the Margreve connects newcomers to blood relatives who spilled their blood in the past, perhaps many generations or even centuries before. Those whose ancestors performed dark deeds in the Margreve's borders feel a great threatening presence all around them. In many ways, the rumor that the Margreve punishes men for the sins of their fathers is correct.

During times of intense stress and/or need, the forest may act. The manifestation is largely determined by what will have the most impact on the situation and how the forest views the character.

Memory: What the Margreve consumes, it remembers. In addition to recognizing and remembering creatures by the blood they spill, the Margreve absorbs many of the memories and much of the knowledge of those who expire beneath its canopy. To something as old and alien as the Margreve, this knowledge is rarely valuable on an individual level, but it helps to refine the forest's viewpoint of the individual's species.

Attitude: The forest dreams of ancient times, of the behaviors of long-dead creatures and pre-civilized forest dwellers, just as people dream of idealized crops, forests, or orchards. What the fledgling races of humans and elves call progress, the Margreve considers pale shadows, intolerable deviations into the madness of civilization, and corruptions of the green and ancient state of life. As a consequence, the Margreve considers those behaviors of old to be correct, and incorrect behavior must be pruned.

Movement: Like all intelligent creatures, the Margreve knows that the element of surprise provides a great tactical advantage. The forest tends to act when creatures are not looking. Since the forest cannot see normally, it uses its tremorsense to determine when target creatures are still and their heartbeats are slowed. Its activity typically occurs when creatures are sleeping, but it is not uncommon for a relaxed (or drunken) person on watch to hear or notice movement while sitting quietly at a campfire.

The Margreve can move paths, add forks, or redirect game trails at will. Explorers who wake in the Margreve might feel disoriented, as if their camp had rotated during the night. Trails that should lead deeper into the forest now lead out of it. Landmarks cannot be trusted. A compass is the explorer's only friend. The best advice comes from a handful of successful trappers and furriers. "Don't make any appointments," they say, "A path may take three days, or it may take a fortnight. It just depends." Cautious parties go around large, ancient trees on the same side, lest they risk being separated.

Night comes early in the Margreve. This is true not only because of the forest's canopy but because the Margreve can thicken (or thin) it at will. During the day, the Margreve filters the sun's rays, blocking most before they reach the forest floor and creating an area of dim light centered on targets whose species suffer in such conditions. Vampires and undead travelers experience the opposite effect, as the canopy opens above them and subjects them to the full glare of the sun. At night, the Margreve typically hides the moon and stars, making navigation by celestial bodies impossible and the prospect of getting lost dangerously likely. The exception is for lycanthropes, whose wildness the Margreve favors and from whom the Margreve never conceals the moon.

One of the Margreve's most insidious defenses against interlopers is to starve them. It moves its roots to redirect streams underground and withhold fresh water. It shakes its branches to spook game and withhold fresh food. An old Margreve saying, "Deer and rabbits dance around the starving man," has been memorialized in wood sculptures whittled by emaciated men and found near their bones.

Voice: In addition to the challenges of disorientation and starvation, an interloper must come to grips with the forest's haunting sounds and voices. The Margreve has the power to listen to vibrations and repeat them anywhere within its borders. It does not understand languages or the meanings of sounds to those who hear them, but it often experiments with the repetition of sounds, and it has cataloged the reactions that species have to various noises. The Margreve might repeat the roar of a mountain lion or the wail of a banshee to scare interlopers into perilous terrain or the domain of a territorial creature.

These strange, disconnected sounds have prompted many rumors among neighboring folk. Some wrongly believe that the Margreve has the power to teleport creatures within its borders, which explains why dreadful creatures can be anywhere (Can't you hear one now?!) and why people get lost inside the forest. Most folk simply believe that the Margreve is haunted. It is, but forest crones know that the sounds the forest makes are not true evidence of that fact. In fact, some listen to the leaves to gather imprecise information about distant areas of the woods. Baba Yaga and her sisters have even mastered a type of clairaudience they can enjoy by stepping into trees or burying themselves next to roots that vibrate with carried sounds.

Powers of the Margreve

The Margreve has a number of magical properties, most of them equivalent to or similar to spells, that affect how visitors interact with the forest and vice versa. The following descriptions supplement the information given in the sidebar "The Margreve in the Game."

Aura of Rust: Iron and iron alloys rust quickly in the Margreve. Though the effect does not destroy thick blades overnight, the sharpening and replacement cost of rusted axes and saw mill blades make large scale logging unprofitable.

Aura of Wildness: A mild aura of wildness permeates the Margreve. Bardic tales counsel travelers to abandon or kill animal companions that grow aggressive under the Margreve's canopy. In one famous song, a ranger's cat transforms into a smilodon and spears him with its saber-teeth. In another, a snake transforms into a chthonic creature with horned plates and gliding membranes. Though exaggerated and romanticized, these songs communicate the core truth that, in time, tamed beasts regress to feral states. And occasionally, devolved creatures do emerge from the forest.

Animating and Controlling: The Margreve's ability to move trees, roots, and branches is a very minor and temporary version of its full ability to awaken and control Margreve-born flora and fauna. No one knows the limit of this power. The forest awakens animals to speak and to help travelers, spawns green hussars (see page 100) as guardians, and creates permanent protectors like treants and leshy (see *Tome of Beasts*) to ward certain springs, runestones, groves, and ley line sites. All serve the forest, and many act as extensions of the forest's defenses.

Some creatures the Margreve does not awaken but merely controls for a time. Stories abound of biting ants invading bed rolls, poisonous grubs spoiling food, and wasp swarms gathering on weapon hafts.

The Margreve's power to awaken and control animals, vermin, and plants transcends death. A dead animal, even one already cooked, animates if the Margreve so chooses. Though rare, such an event has occurred often enough to prompt forest dwellers to ritually bless their food. They have a saying: "Thank the Margreve for your breakfast, for the forest has let you catch it. Thank the Margreve for your supper, lest it rise up and flee."

Reincarnate: The Margreve's power over death enables it to spontaneously reincarnate fauna, sometimes in the bodies of dead humanoids. Disturbing stories of "the ferals" describe ordinary folk who wandered into the Margreve as people and reemerged with the disposition of a rabid animal. In truth, these unfortunates perished in the wood, and while their souls have passed on, their risen bodies now host the awakened soul of a badger, an owl, or a wolf.

THE MARGREVE IN THE GAME

The Margreve is not a creature in most respects, and thus it doesn't have a true stat block. But it does have a suite of traits and abilities that are defined in game terms.

SENSES

Using bloodsense and tremorsense, the Margreve tracks individuals until they leave the forest. When an individual returns, the Margreve can recognize it again by its blood. Until then, the forest knows only its species.

Bloodsense. The Margreve can identify individuals by their blood, when any has been spilled in its environs.

Tremorsense. In addition to the normal functions of tremorsense, the Margreve can also identify an individual's species.

TRAITS

The very environment of the Margreve has properties that affect objects, creatures, and spells inside its borders.

Absorb Knowledge. The Margreve absorbs and remembers the knowledge possessed by those who die on the forest floor. Treat the Margreve's knowledge of a particular fact as if it had cast *speak with dead* on the corpse. The Margreve understands any language that has been spoken within its borders.

Aura of Rust. Nonmagical ferrous metal objects take a permanent and cumulative –1 penalty to damage rolls each day. If the penalty drops to –5, the object is destroyed. A *mending* spell effectively repairs rusted objects. Bottles of deer tallow, linseed oil, and other special oils can prevent rusting. Each bottle costs 5 sp and holds five applications. Each application treats an item no larger than a weapon or shield for 1 day. Armor requires two applications. Ferrous creatures take 3d6 damage per week from rusting.

Aura of Wildness. Domesticated creatures must make a successful DC 19 Wisdom save once daily or become untamed, as the *snap the leash* spell (see page 50). Lycanthropes may attempt to assume humanoid form only once per day with a successful DC 15 Constitution saving throw, and individuals with the Wild Shape class feature must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution save to change to humanoid form.

Siphon Magic. All spells cast within the Margreve are hampered in some way, as the forest drains some of their essence. See the "Magic in the Margreve" section, page 47, for details.

INNATE SPELLCASTING

The Margreve's innate spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 19, +11 to hit with spell attacks). It can cast the following spells without needing any components.

Animate Objects. At will; forest-wide. As the *animate objects* spell, except the target must be a dead Margreve-born animal, and the effect ends if the target leaves the forest.

Animate Plants. At will; forest-wide. As the *animate objects* spell, except the target must be a Margreve-born plant, and the effect ends if the target leaves the forest. Typically used to redirect or remove paths, add forks, thicken or thin canopy, move branches, and channel or relocate water by moving roots.

Awaken. 1/day per square mile. As the *awaken* spell, except the target must be a Margreve-born plant or animal, and the target serves the forest indefinitely.

Charm Person. At will; forest-wide. As the *charm person* spell, except the target must be a Margreve-born plant or animal—including familiars and vermin—and the charmed target understands the forest's desire.

Reincarnate. 1/day per square mile. As the *reincarnate* spell, except the target must be a Margreve-born animal, and the new body may be either newly formed (per the spell) or the body of a whole creature that is less than 1 hour deceased. If the target is nonintelligent, the Margreve can awaken it after it is reincarnated.

Thaumaturgy. At will; forest-wide. As the *thaumaturgy* spell. The sound might include speech, and it must be a sound currently being produced somewhere else in the forest.

Warp Wood. At will; forest-wide. The forest can cause wooden objects (but not living wood) to warp and bend, effectively rendering them useless. Ranged weapons and ammunition that become warped are ruined, and attacks with warped melee weapons are made with disadvantage.

Siphoning Magic: Sun, rain, and soil are the basic needs that must be met for any forest to thrive. The Margreve takes more. It siphons magic from every spell cast within its borders. This effect usually evidences itself in small ways, depending on the spell. For example, when the Margreve feeds on a fraction of the magic of a *cure wounds* spell, the grass around the spell recipient becomes lush and vibrant. Such "spell marks" last for days and, for those who have learned to read them, can reveal a great deal about the nature and power of the spell that was cast and the events that may have transpired around it.

The Margreve wants casters to cast more spells, so that it can siphon more spell energy. The siphoning encourages them to do so, because the spell just cast was not as effective as hoped, and thus the caster might feel it necessary to repeat the casting or try a different spell.

When spellcasting visitors are not in great profusion, the Margreve's few permanent inhabitants provide a base amount of magic for the forest to feed on. The energy is woven into daily rituals, blessings, curses, sacrifices, and children's rhymes. These cantrip-level spells hold little magic individually, but they are an integral part of every inhabitant's daily life, repeated at meals, before and after rest, and during many common tasks. The energy from each usage is slight, but provided so frequently that it sustains the forest, much in the way that a whale subsists on krill.

Baba Yaga suspects that the Margreve hides "reservoirs" of siphoned spell energy somewhere in the Heart of the Wood. She has yet to locate one. If one does exist, it could hold devastating potential—an accumulation of magical energy collected across a country-sized area over a period of centuries.

Customizing the Margreve Experience

The degree to which the Margreve uses its powers to intervene against interlopers depends on the mood you want to elicit. A less aggressive Margreve tends to evoke a more mysterious atmosphere, filled with occasionally justified superstitions, unexplained disappearances, strange creatures, and terrifying stories. Fear derives from the unknown, and it is never quite clear whether the Margreve or its inhabitants are responsible for the effects that the characters experience. The Margreve reacts subtly and sporadically. One cannot learn from cause and effect. One cannot trust one's senses. Perhaps darkness has fallen unnaturally early, or perhaps it is just later than one thinks.

With a less aggressive Margreve, the setting is one of ominous foreboding, as much about mystery as about terror. Lower aggression could result from the forest's relatively slow responses to stimuli. Or the forest might simply not always address concerns as small as humanoid trespassers. With this option, the powers of the Margreve function something like an immune system, designed to deal with trivial invaders without requiring conscious will or much energy. This does not imply that the Margreve does not have a consciousness, but simply that the phenomena detailed above pale in comparison with the true powers of the Margreve, should it ever deign to turn its eye and attention to confronting a grievous assault on its body.

To elicit feelings of a major power at play, ratchet up the Margreve's aggressiveness. Outsiders are never welcome and rarely tolerated. Hostile leshy patrol the borders and thwart casual exploration by thickening the underbrush with vines and brambles. The forest responds to undeterred interlopers quickly and consistently. Stepping into the Margreve demands the same amount of care taken when entering a dungeon. The forest shifts from backdrop to active participant, warping and rusting outsiders' weapons at critical moments, forcing spellcasters to deplete their power whenever possible, and twisting trails so that they lead toward peril rather than away from it.

This elevated aggression might be temporary or permanent. If it is long-lasting, inhabitants and outsiders can, through experience, predict the Margreve's reaction to their actions, and through trial and error, learn something about how the Margreve works. Feelings of fear and mystery diminish as characters begin thinking of the Margreve as a foe with predictable reactions, which naturally suggest clever tactics and spells to blunt those reactions. The use of obsidian blades can eliminate the problems of warping and rust. Levitating casters can fool the forest's tremorsense. Until the Margreve turns its full attention against the invaders, an appropriately equipped party, armed with spells to deceive the Margreve, might enjoy a measure of success.

Whatever level of aggression you choose, factor in the Margreve's demeanor toward each character. This allows the characters some control over their environment, and through their actions, the opportunity to temper (or inflame) the Margreve's aggression toward each of them.

RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

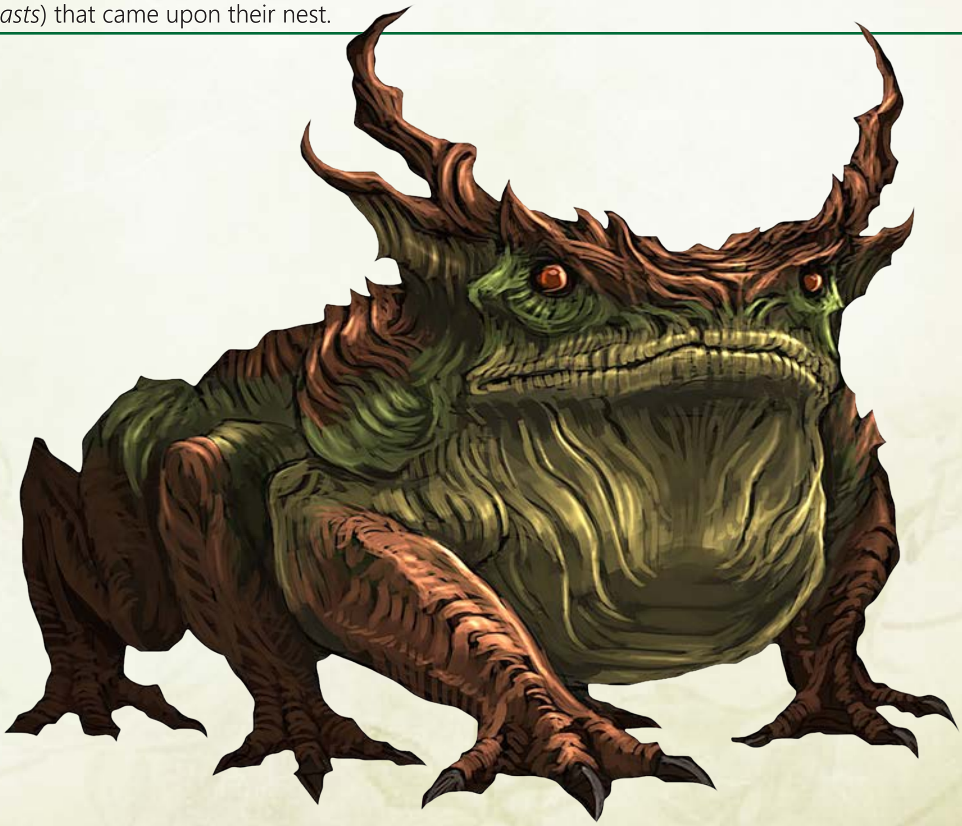
While characters adventure in the Margreve, it is recommended that you check for random encounters three times a day: morning, midday, and night. Roll a d20 at those times, and on an 18 or higher an encounter occurs. The time of day, party level, and general location will guide you to the correct table; then roll a d12 to determine the encounter. Alternatively, you can choose entries from the tables based on pacing, thematic appropriateness, and personal preference.

ENCOUNTERS ON THE GREAT NORTHERN ROAD (CR 1 TO 4)

D12	ENCOUNTER
1	Trees have fallen into the road, blocking it. For travelers on foot the obstacle presents little challenge but would be problematic for a caravan. Something or someone caused the trees to fall into the path.
2	The faint sound of bells precedes a caravan of brightly covered wagons. Kariv crab hunters eye you warily as they pass by. A successful DC 12 Wisdom (Insight) check indicates they are hiding something.
3	Six mendicant travelers (**acolytes**) are heading away from Zobeck into the forest. Their robes are nondescript, and they proselytize to all they meet.
4	A party of supplicants traveling to Zobeck passes you. The leader, a stern woman (**cult fanatic**) in muted red robes, appraises the group with a wary eye. A successful DC 12 Wisdom (Religion) check identifies her as a Blood Sister.
5	Wary travelers (passive Perception of 13 or higher) feel that they are being watched from (or by) the forest. The forest is too thick to see much else without further investigation. A pack of **awakened wolves** (see page 100) are shadowing the party.
6	The sound of powerful wings precedes the appearance of a flight of Griffon Knights as they speed across the sky toward the interior of the forest. Are they descending?
7	A band of children traveling by themselves spot the heroes and rush them, asking for help getting home. The "children" are a mix of halfling and gnome urchins (**commoners** with Sleight of Hand +2) intent on picking the pockets of travelers.
8	As you walk around a large puddle, its odd shape catches your attention. A successful DC 12 Wisdom (Survival) check indicates the puddle is in fact a footprint of a gargantuan beast.
9	You hear the sounds of a struggle coming from over the next rise. A gearforged cleric of Rava (**priest**) is being dragged into the forest by a **vine golem** (page 189).
10	The road slopes gradually downward, easing your journey. Near the bottom of the slope, the forest turns boggy and you hear the sounds of frogs, dragonflies, and other swamp denizens. A clutch of **exploding frogs** (see *Creature Codex*) make their home near the edge of the road.
11	An overgrown trail leads off the road. The trail leads to an **alehouse drake** (see *Tome of Beasts*) that refuses to leave its home, even though the inn has long since been reduced to rubble.
12	A tiny figure in gem-studded armor flies up to you and demands that you move out of the way, despite the fact that he could easily fly above or around you. His name is Pexl, a **chernomoi** (see *Tome of Beasts*), and he is traveling to Zobeck.

Encounters with the Fey of the Margreve (CR 5 to 9)

D12	ENCOUNTER
1	Four **shadow fey** (see *Tome of Beasts*) are canvassing the forest in search of the nest of a **peluda drake** (see *Creature Codex*). They're convinced they are close and would welcome the assistance of a few adventurers.
2	A faded marker appears in a shadowy clearing. The ground is flat, covered lushly, and a middling sized tree grows up from what could be the center of a grave. Two guardian **shadow fey** (see *Tome of Beasts*) watch from a distance, ready to intervene if any approach too closely.
3	The character with the lowest Margreve status makes a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw to avoid being tripped by a hidden vine or root. The character can slow to half her normal speed to avoid the check.
4	A beautiful, haunting melody is heard deep in the forest. If investigated, the song leads to a **banshee**, singing to a bundle cradled in her arms in a darkened corner of the Margreve.
5	An unearthly roar shakes the trees, and shortly afterward you see an enormous beast coming your way. Two **shadow fey forest hunters** (see *Tome of Beasts*) have a **bukavac** (see *Tome of Beasts*) on the run, and you're in its path.
6	Five shadow fey led by a **shadow fey duelist** (see *Tome of Beasts*) are bored and wandering through the Margreve. The natives have been uninterested in playing, and they don't last long anyway. The adventurers look much more robust.
7	The smell of rotten eggs leads you to a volcanic vent in a rocky outcropping. The boulders all around the vent are deeply covered in black soot; an **ash drake** (see *Tome of Beasts*) has its home here.
8	A watchful character (one with passive Perception of 14 or higher) notices a vine and moss-covered figure partially buried off the path. Investigating, the heroes find the remains of a **clockwork myrmidon** (see *Tome of Beasts*) that has been bludgeoned to death.
9	The party comes across a trail of small tracks. A successful DC 15 Wisdom (Survival) check identifies them as belonging to **burrowlings** (see *Tome of Beasts*). The tracks disappear into a burrow after a mile.
10	Three **awakened trees** are looming over a fallen man, their branches raised to pummel him. One of the trees has two gashes in its trunk, clearly from the axe that is just out of the man's reach.
11	Several deer run swiftly across your path and disappear into the bush. The smell of smoke comes quickly afterward, and you see the fingers of a forest fire spreading out before you.
12	A mated pair of **arboreal grapplers** (see *Tome of Beasts*) are getting the upper hand on the party of **shadow fey** (see *Tome of Beasts*) that came upon their nest.



Daytime Encounters in the Outskirts of the Margreve (CR 1 to 4)

D12	ENCOUNTER
1	A dejected and sullen **alp** (see page 89) walks boldly up to the party, at first demanding and then begging them desperately to help it find its missing cap.
2	Partially wrapped around a tree is the shed skin of a Large snake. A successful DC 10 Wisdom (Survival) check reveals that the skin was shed recently, and if the DC is exceeded by 5 or more you identify the snake as a **scitalis** (see *Creature Codex*).
3	The tracks of an animal cross your path and continue a mile before abruptly stopping at a **bulbous violet** (see page 187). The tracks are too ill-defined for identification, but a successful DC 16 Wisdom (Survival) check indicates they are days old.
4	A flight of three Griffon Knights (each a **knight** mounted on a **griffon**) are circling a spot a few hundred yards from your current position.
5	A **pseudodragon** is searching the Margreve for a master and hasn't found anyone that meets his standards. He confronts the character with the highest Margreve status and begins to interview her for the role.
6	An old, but well maintained, bridge spans a brook. One **shellycoat** (see *Tome of Beasts*) hides under the bridge and a second in the brook. A character can spot a glint of light off the cloak of the one under the bridge with a successful DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check.
7	A family of **bearfolk** (see *Tome of Beasts*) are on a pilgrimage deep into the heart of the Margreve to make an offering to the Bear King.
8	**Sutureflies** (see *Tome of Beasts*) suddenly appear. They are so thick that they obscure all vision beyond 10 feet. The sutureflies disperse after 1d4 rounds.
9	The silence of the forest is broken by yells in Dwarvish. Four **dwarves** and two **dogmoles** (see *Tome of Beasts*) are working to open the mouth of a collapsed cave. They're having a hard time of it.
10	A **miremal** (see *Tome of Beasts*) emerges from the shadows and walks carefully forward. His skin is covered in toadstools and moss, and it looks as if he hasn't eaten in a very long time. He politely introduces himself as Gryzvald and offers his services as a guide.
11	A pristine meadow fills the expanse before you. Marring its beauty are a handful of large mounds. At the top of each is a hole large enough for a Small creature, leading to the home to a tribe of **erina** (see *Tome of Beasts*).
12	A small, fiery figure is traveling from tree to tree, setting them ablaze. It is vaguely humanoid, covered in wisps of black smoke and spots of bright red-orange flame. The **firegeist** (see *Tome of Beasts*) ignores the characters unless they attack it.

Daytime Encounters Deep in the Interior of the Margreve (CR 5 to 9)

D12	ENCOUNTER
1	A ray of sunlight shines through the forest canopy, illuminating a tree-like creature with four root-like legs, and a pair of flower "eyes." The **child of Yggdrasil** (see *Creature Codex*) is sunning itself and otherwise placid. Characters succeeding on a DC 17 Wisdom (Perception) check see a trio of **tree skinners** (see page 196) stalking the child.
2	The path has gradually become more overgrown and covered with vines. The heroes have inadvertently stumbled into the lair of a **razorleaf** (see *Creature Codex*).
3	A trio of small ponds, each partially covered by wisps of fog, are grouped closely together. A successful DC 14 Wisdom (Survival) check reveals that signs of local wildlife are notably absent. The ponds are the home of a **vallowex** (see page 198)
4	Three survivors of a squad of **wolf reaver dwarves** (see *Tome of Beasts*) find you. They are lost, starving, and dying of thirst because the Margreve hates them.
5	You surprise a **child of the briar** (see *Tome of Beasts*) and it immediately runs away, leaving behind a half-dozen acorn shells full of blood.
6	The air grows heavy with the promise of rain, and you hear the persistent thunderous crash of heat lightning nearby. Characters who follow the sound come across a **spark** (see *Tome of Beasts*) emerging from the lightning.
7	A **young green dragon** is wandering the forest looking for just the right spot to make its home. It's not immediately hostile and is interested in hearing of other parts of the Margreve.
8	The swirling green form of a **wolf spirit swarm** (see *Tome of Beasts*) howls in the distance and pursues the party. If the wielder of Wolf Killer (see page 104) is in the party, it focuses all its attention on that character.
9	Your journey takes you to a dark corner of the forest. The trees are diseased and misshapen, and through the scarce foliage you see a beautiful woman with red skin (a **red hag**; see *Tome of Beasts*) worrying at something in her lap.
10	A still lake in an idyllic glen greets the characters after a long day's travel. The sun is hot, and the water is cool, clean, and inviting. A satiated **storm boar** (see page 194) sleeps on the bank.
11	A faint glow emanates from the cave before you. The cave is home to two colonies of **cavelight moss** (see *Tome of Beasts*).
12	The pervasive sounds of the forest slowly fade to nothing as the characters approach the lair of a **qwyllion** (see *Tome of Beasts*).

Daytime Encounters in the Heart of the Forest (CR 10+)

D12	ENCOUNTER
1	The characters look up and, as if appearing from nowhere, they see a **pegasus** grazing.
2	Bright Day, one of **Baba Yaga's horsemen** (see *Tome of Beasts*), is traveling the Margreve with a scroll from Grandmother that contains a message for a red-haired woman born during Harvest Tide twenty years past.
3	A manic **kobold trapsmith** (see *Tome of Beasts*) is seeking investors for a venture to capture an **ychen bannog** (see *Tome of Beasts*). He's got schematics and a well-rehearsed pitch.
4	The large nest of an **owl harpy** (see *Tome of Beasts*) can be seen high in the trees. The nest contains three eggs, one of which is notably larger, metallic, and has veins of rust in its shell. A DC 18 Wisdom (Survival) check identifies this egg as belonging to a **rust drake** (see *Tome of Beasts*).
5	A family of **bearfolk** (see *Tome of Beasts*) have sought out and been given an audience with the **Bear King** (see *Tome of Beasts*), and the characters have stumbled into it. As recompense for the interruption, the Bear King has a task for them.
6	A **vine troll skeleton** (see *Tome of Beasts*) bursts from the forest, immediately attacking the character with the lowest Margreve status. On the following round a **duskthorn dryad** (see *Tome of Beasts*) joins the fray, screaming, "Interloper!"
7	The landscape gradually turns marshy, and wisps of fog rise from the ground. A pride of three **vapor lynxes** (see *Tome of Beasts*) are hunting the party, and they try to separate the most lightly armored character from the others.
8	A pair of **feyward trees** (see *Tome of Beasts*) surround a sinkhole just large enough to admit entry by a Medium creature.
9	A small lake with an island appears before you. On the island you see a solitary tree. The lake is home to a swarm of **gerridae** (see *Tome of Beasts*), and they guard it ferociously. The island is a long-dormant **dragon turtle**.
10	A mound of vines, vaguely humanoid and four feet long, contains the still-living body of a **devilbound gnomish prince** (see *Tome of Beasts*) that has run afoul of the Margreve. Did it just move?
11	You see looming cliffs in the distance. A character who succeeds on a DC 18 Wisdom (Perception) check can make out the signs of a roc nest. It is empty.
12	A **naina** (see *Tome of Beasts*) in the form of a human crone appears suddenly from behind a tree. She's looking for a kiss from a chaste divine spellcaster. Grandmother has set her on this quest, and she cannot return until it is completed.

Nighttime Encounters in the Outskirts of the Margreve (CR 1 to 4)

D12	ENCOUNTER
1	Two **mylings** (see *Tome of Beasts*) are playing a game of tag in the woods, and the sounds reach the ears of the character on watch.
2	A tiny ball of light, a **witchlight** (see *Tome of Beasts*), floats over the adventurers' camp.
3	As the sun sets, an obscuring fog rolls in and limits visibility to 15 feet. Growls and shuffling sounds are amplified by the fog and come from all directions.
4	A curious **lunarchidna** (see page 190) has spotted the characters from its vantage spot in the trees and is waiting until the dead of night to engage them.
5	A character has unknowingly offended the fey. In response, two **vile barbers** (see *Tome of Beasts*) have been dispatched to dispense fey justice.
6	The wind changes, and with it an awful stench assails your senses. If the characters investigate quickly, they witness the birth of a **death butterfly swarm** (see *Tome of Beasts*) as it consumes the corpse of a fiend.
7	A faint song breaks the silence of the night. A pair of **shadhavar** (see *Tome of Beasts*) are following the party from a distance, consuming creatures they have defeated in battle.
8	All magical and nonmagical light sources are suddenly extinguished.
9	Characters on watch must succeed on a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check to notice a pair of eyes watching from a distance. For every 2 by which the DC is exceeded, another pair of eyes is spotted.
10	A bewildered young Kariv man with a bloody nose comes into your camp, requesting succor. The youth has been recently possessed by a **sap demon** (see *Tome of Beasts*).
11	A **kot bayun** (see *Tome of Beasts*) lazes on a tree branch near the party's campsite. He remains invisible while observing the group as he decides what to do with them.
12	A torrential rain begins with no warning, and the characters are soaked to the bone. If they continue traveling they come across a trail, still dry despite the rain.

Nighttime Encounters Deep in the Interior of the Margreve (CR 5 to 9)

D12	ENCOUNTER
1	Three **ghasts of leng** (see *Creature Codex*) have ventured from their subterranean home in search of fresh meat. The forest has hindered their hunt, and they have begun to fight with one another.
2	Your dreams are invaded by visions of future battles and challenges. Each character gains advantage on a single attack roll or ability check thanks to this foresight.
3	As you're preparing to set up camp, you find the fresh remains of a pair of wild horses, the only evidence of the recent feast of an **elder shadow drake** (see *Tome of Beasts*).
4	A **shadow beast** (see *Tome of Beasts*) is barking orders in Umbral to three **shadow fey** (see *Tome of Beasts*) as they frantically search the forest.
5	The trail left by the characters has inexplicably changed—they now leave behind the tracks of forest animals.
6	A **shadow fey enchantress** (see *Tome of Beasts*) is trapping **eala** (see *Tome of Beasts*) for the Queen of Night and Magic.
7	The twisted, cracked face of a **weeping treant** (see *Tome of Beasts*) appears in the darkness. As an agent of the Margreve, its disposition toward the heroes is the same as the forest's.
8	A **redcap** (see *Tome of Beasts*) whose hat is drying up stalks the characters, desperate to spill some blood.
9	A **herald of darkness** (see *Tome of Beasts*) is exploring the Margreve, looking for a pliant soul to corrupt. She offers boons to whoever will listen in exchange for a promise of future aid.
10	The character with the lowest Margreve status hears a voice spewing insult after insult at her. A **likho** (see *Tome of Beasts*) is hiding in the forest, using *message* for its entertainment. It can be spotted by someone who succeeds on a DC 20 Wisdom (Perception) check.
11	The baying of wolves pierces the night, rapidly comes closer, and abruptly stops. If a character possesses Wolf Killer (see page 104), a **hound of the night** (see *Tome of Beasts*) and two **dire wolves** attack immediately. Otherwise, they watch patiently, hoping their prey comes to them.
12	You come across a mushroom patch in the shape of four large concentric circles. A solitary ruby red mushroom the size of a small gnome stands at the very center.

NIGHTTIME ENCOUNTERS IN THE HEART OF THE FOREST (CR 10+)

D12	ENCOUNTER
1	The **Moonlit King** (see *Tome of Beasts*) strolls into camp with a **satyr**. He produces empty cups for each member of the party and invites you all to share a drink and tell tales.
2	A **wraith bear** (see page 199) bursts from the forest undergrowth and immediately attacks the characters.
3	A **mavka** (see *Tome of Beasts*) and her **nightmare** steed have been dispatched from Morgau by order of Prince Lucan, and she comes across the characters.
4	An ogre, draped in shadows and holding its decapitated head (a **dullahan**; see *Tome of Beasts*), points a finger directly at one of the characters. In a voice so deep it causes your ears to ache, the creature speaks a single word: "Betrayer!"
5	The quiet murmurs of night are broken by a snoring sound so loud it wakens everyone. Following the noise is easy and leads to an elderly man, actually a shapechanged **stuhac** (see *Tome of Beasts*), napping in a nest of bones.
6	Sleeping characters dream of their greatest triumphs; but in their dreams the heroes fail at a critical moment, and the consequences unfold before them. Any character who gets a failure on a DC 17 Charisma save wakes up with white hair and gains 1 level of exhaustion.
7	A humanoid figure in voluminous, obscuring rags greets the characters cheerfully. An **abominable beauty** (see *Tome of Beasts*) has heard whispers about the character with the highest Charisma, and she wants to judge that individual for herself.
8	Black Night, one of **Baba Yaga's horsemen** (see *Tome of Beasts*), is traveling with a writ signed by Grandmother requesting a pint of blood from an elven character. If his request is granted by a party member, he might bequeath a boon. If spurned, he leaves without a word.
9	An unearthly roar reverberates through the night. A huge creature can be heard crashing through the forest and it is coming closer. A rampaging **gug** (see *Tome of Beasts*) is searching the forest for psychotropic mushrooms.
10	Whispers emanate from the forest in an incomprehensible language from the forest's past.
11	The emotions of the characters have drawn a **fear smith** (see *Tome of Beasts*) to them. He watches from the shadows before making his presence known.
12	A fruit-bearing bush appears in the middle of camp. If eaten, the fruit acts as the berries of a *goodberry* spell for creatures that the Margreve is indifferent or friendly toward. For others, it is tasteless and unsatisfying.

Margreve Sites, Inhabitants, and Adventure Hooks

Recent History

The Margreve endures while the city-states, duchies, kingdoms and empires surrounding it change. The rumblings and machinations of recent events have had little effect on the forest. The Margreve is a primal wilderness outside the influence of mortals. As such, it could be seen as the board upon which the greatest powers of Midgard play their games. The foolish do not realize that the board too is a player, one with infinite patience and nearly omniscient knowledge of the pieces in play.

The Scathsidhe (shadow fey) have been thwarted in their attempts to take the Free City of Zobeck back, but they retain a strong presence there. The shadow fey look to rekindle alliances, restore lost strongholds, and reestablish their claim to the Margreve.

In the Blood Kingdom, King Lucan and Emperor Nicoforus have solidified their alliance and directed their forces to conquer Krakova. The Red Goddess of Marena sent disturbing visions to her priestesses, spurring even more bloodshed in her name. They see the Margreve as the final obstacle in their expansion into Zobeck and Magdar. The internal machinations of the undead continue to develop, as many hope to capitalize on recent developments.

Nikolai Savitch's rise to leadership in the Black Cauldron of Chernobog has been felt as far south as the Margreve. The Margreve is at the center of the complex and contradictory relationship between his lord and Baba Yaga.

Geography

The Margreve is a sprawling, trackless forest of 32,000 square miles. Mountains, hills, rivers, and swamps contain and snake through a vast wilderness of old growth and dense underbrush. The River Argent forms the Margreve's winding southern border, which separates the forest from the Free City of Zobeck and the Ironcrag Cantons to Zobeck's west. The Dwarven Cantons and the Grisal Marches lie to west. In the north, low mountains separate the Margreve from the undead kingdoms of Morgau and Doresh. In ancient times, the Cloudwall Mountains formed the Margreve's eastern border, but the trees have since crested the mountains' spine and the southern Black Hills extension. A full third of the forest (over 10,000 square miles) now lies east of the Cloudwalls, flowing down toward the open steppe of centaur territory.

West of the Cloudwalls, the Great Northern Road divides the other two thirds of the Margreve fairly evenly. This wagon-wide road, running north from Zobeck to Castle Valach, is the only trail known to proceed from one side of the Margreve to the other.

THE GREAT NORTHERN ROAD

"Ol' Mikhail, a family man, took the Old Margreve's trees.
So the Old Margreve took his family and brought him to his knees.
Ol' Mikhail, a vengeful man, embraced his ax and pain.
As it had his heart, he vowed to cut the Margreve in twain."

—The Legend of the Great Northern Road

The Great Northern Road stretches some 200 miles from Zobeck to Castle Valach, on its way to the city of Bratislor in the north. High overhead, the branches of flanking trees reach for each other, turning the road into a long tunnel with a tall gothic arch. Some sun reaches travelers on the road, but night falls early even in high summer.

Due to boggy, rocky, and overgrown stretches, travelers frequently take a fortnight to traverse the road's full length on foot. Riders typically make the trip in 8–10 days if they pull no wagons. Coaching inns, spaced 1–3 days' travel apart, offer travelers a respite from beasts and weather.

Though snow and cold challenge winter travelers, the road's condition is affected most by meltwater, spring rain, and mud. Coaching inns are either closed or not prepared to cater to travelers during this time. Merchants who are willing to risk traversing the Great Northern Road before the annual road opening festival in Zobeck can expect tough going, both in terms of terrain and hungry creatures emerging from the deeper hollows.

ROAD TRAVELERS AND SECURITY

The northern road is the only passable route to the rich cities of the Red Queen and the undead princes of Morgau and Doresh. As the second source of wealth for the city of Zobeck—the first being the River Argent—the Great Northern Road sees its share of travelers.

The traffic of dwarf muleteers, Kariv gypsies, and Zobeck traders keeps the path from growing over. It falls to the traveler to clear trees that storms throw across the road. Creeks to provide water for abound, but superstitious travelers burden themselves with water drawn from outside the forest. Boggy sections of the road claim a cart or two each year, and rocky sections can cripple wheels, hooves, and ankles. It is not an easy road to travel, certainly, but there are no dwarven tolls or the risk of centaur banditry on it either.

Small caravans of Kariv trundle along the road more frequently than any other merchants dare. Each train of four or five wagons, painted with wards and sigils, carries a trickle of goods and what pass for luxuries. Somehow, more wagons arrive in Zobeck than a traveler heading in the other direction would pass. Some claim that the Kariv have entered into a bargain with the shadow fey, allowing the gypsies to travel along a shadow trail that runs parallel to the road. Others say that Kariv witches can make their most valuable wagons invisible to conceal them from bandits. Either fact could be true for folk as canny and ambitious as the Kariv.

The Order of the Griffon Riders in the city of Zobeck takes responsibility for security along the road. The order often hires auxiliaries and irregulars for clearing out nests of bandits. Merchant houses also pool funds to buy additional security for the first mule train of the season.

GRIFFON TOWERS AND COACHING INNS

Many years ago, House Stross constructed twelve Griffon Towers to defend its fortunes. Eight of them were spaced evenly along the Great Northern Road to guard its full length. Four more were constructed in the woods to guard hunting lodges, mines, or powerful wellsprings of magic. Most people assume that the towers got their name from the griffon blazons carved in their walls, but that is merely the mark of the Stross border guards.

House Stross built the towers as watch stations for its griffon riders, an elite company of couriers and shock cavalry. The parsimonious council of the Free City has done away with that tradition in recent years, so now the Margreve griffons run wild. A top predator along the forest road, they pose a constant threat to caravans and mule trains. The griffons come in both black and speckled varieties, and knowing the difference can prove critical. The griffons are more aggressive and very fond of horseflesh; some claim they are faerie steeds. The speckled ones are shy, tameable, and might serve as animal companions for suitable characters.

With the disbanding of the griffon riders, the abandoned towers fell into disrepair. In spring, feral griffons nested in them, and in summer and fall, travelers took shelter behind their thick stone walls. The Free City Council saw the opportunity to make coin and sold the heavily reinforced strongholds to enterprising businessmen, who turned them into coaching inns. These combination hostels, stables, and resupply centers double as trading forts for wagons meeting mid road.

Though these coaching inns inherit stalwart defenses from their days as Griffon Towers, the Margreve remains a dangerous place to live and work. The inns change hands frequently. At any given time, there is a 10 percent chance that an inn that bustled with trade wagons last season now sits empty, has new “owners,” or is occupied by a nightmare creature from the Old World.

THE RUINED GRIFFON TOWER

Between Ol’ Mikhail’s inn and the Witch’s Teat inn lies the burned-out ruins of an inn whose name no one recalls and whose walls no one dares rebuild. It sits in a logistically awkward spot for those who fear the sounds that escape it during the night, for it rests midway between two other inns, precisely where travelers and their beasts of burden would need to rest.

Adventure Hook. His Excellency Ambassador Glaninin Thelamandrine wants to restore the Griffon Towers and establish new ones. Before he can make much headway, he needs someone to clear out the current occupants.

THE EYE OF THE FOREST COACHING INN

This inn marks the midpoint of the Great Northern Road and is a hub of activity as wagons meet from both directions to trade and share news. Compared to the other coaching inns, the Eye of the Forest is quite civilized. Defended by a full-time retinue of experienced military men and managed by Zobeck natives, the inn feels out of place, seemingly mocking of the backward wilderness that surrounds it. Years

ago, the owner discovered a tangled clearing just off the road, where the forest had reclaimed a burned-down cottage. In the midst of the charred ruin stood a large brick oven. The oven now sits in the Eye of the Forest's common room. The owner keeps the oven's cast iron door slightly ajar, and many a traveling child has creaked it open with curiosity. Inside lies a sweet reward and a blackened skeleton—the remains of a human female, hunched and shrunken with age.

THE SHADOW SISTER INN

The Kariv tell a campfire tale that has caused many travelers to press their tired horses past the Forest King inn at the road's northern end. The inn's gnoll owner claims that the Kariv invented the tale to hurt his business, but the Kariv swear the tale is true. "Step from the Forest King inn at midnight," the gypsies say, "and squint your eyes at the moon-kissed mists of the Eastern Margreve. Do you see the Shadow Sister inn standing in the trees? Do you see the mist pour from its chimney? Do you see the shadow man squinting back at you?"

FOREST FEATURES

Although traveling the Great Northern Road can be risky business, only fools and heroes branch off into the wilderness. Beyond the unnatural creatures that lurk in the underbrush, natural hazards and tough terrain abound. Crevices and bogs cradle skeletons of the hapless. Razor thorns slice skin and leather. Rocky outcroppings hide dire bear and dire boar dens. Carnivorous plants lie in wait, and poisonous pollens send their mist into the wild.

Poor weather and limited visibility exacerbate the treacherousness. Rain triggers suffocating mudslides. Snow buries landmarks. Lightning storms strike armor-clad travelers, and blizzards block passes, cripple sight, and freeze limbs.

Those who survive the Margreve's dangers return with incredible tales and bragging rights. They speak of mountain trees that grow upon each other, merging acre-wide groves into a single tree of mythic proportions and unbelievable height. They speak of titanic caverns where creatures have built cities between colossal roots that dangle from the ceiling. And they speak of old places, alive with ancient memories that whisper and plead.

INTERLOPERS AND INHABITANTS

The intolerable taint of neighboring lands hems in the Margreve on all sides, occasionally bleeding into the forest in the form of woodcutters, interlopers, and villages. The Margreve slowly and silently swallows many of these visitors. Lumberjacks and traveling companions seem to wander off and disappear. Ghost towns of palsied cottages lie abandoned and overgrown in the forest fringes. Few survive to testify to the Margreve's methods. Most interlopers simply get lost and never return to civilization. Others become servants of the wood, new creatures with the faces of loved ones standing at their relatives' windows.

Despite the intolerance of the Margreve, a few scattered permanent settlements do exist. The people of these backwater villages have a complex symbiotic relationship with the forest. They respect the forest's power, honor the covenants of their forebears, and observe, what people now call the Old Ways. Few outsiders have ever seen these inhabitants, for they rarely leave the woods. But some gypsies and rangers do carry intriguing stories back to campfires and public houses.

PINEYS

In over 30,000 square miles of forest, only four human villages are known to exist. Most of their insular inhabitants, known as pineys (see page 192), live out their lives without ever venturing beyond the shade of the forest's clinging boughs. One or two elected individuals, commonly defilers of the Old Ways, conduct the village's infrequent business with outsiders.

These villagers emerge from the woods at coaching inns to trade for salt and other rare commodities. Except for these excursions, few outsiders have ever seen a piney in person, for the forest folk come and go as quickly as possible, often in the middle of the night when fewer civilized folk are about. Some coaching inn owners describe pineys as "disturbing to view" with their oversized eyes and ears. They say that pineys stare at your heart and never blink. They say that pineys' large eyes and awkward mannerisms stem from living deep within the dark forest for generations, or possibly from interbreeding with fey or darker powers. Gypsies retell stories of the discovery of piney skeletons with strangely twisted limbs that no human should have. Perhaps they are just poor, inbred souls slowly degenerating in form and function. Or perhaps something sinister does transpire in those hidden villages.

THE OLD WAYS

To outsiders, a piney's life is a mysterious one, filled with strange sayings, regimented rituals, and daily traditions that seem superstitious and backward. If a person wants to live in the Margreve or even wander it safely, he or she must learn how to feed the forest with rhyme and ritual. Only this is not how the inhabitants think of it. Their rhymes and rituals are merely "the Old Ways," passed down from generation to generation. To Margrevians, the Old Ways have spiritual connotations, habitually observed and rarely shared with outsiders. Characters who endeavor to learn the Old Ways quickly find themselves participating in the mood and traditions of the forest.

The forest's permanent inhabitants believe in countless superstitions and traditions, all representative of the Old Ways. The details vary wildly from place to place, but a few of the practices have adherents throughout the forest:

- Margrevians open the eyes of their dead, lest the deceased wander lost and angry through the wood, unable to find their way to the afterlife.
- Sinners confess their transgressions by cutting themselves and dripping their blood upon the thirsty forest floor.
- A bloodless person cannot pass to the afterlife. Consequently, the dead are never buried, lest the roots exsanguinate them before the souls can reach heaven.
- One of the greatest punishments is to be buried—dead or alive. Revenants of the buried haunt the Margreve. Every dawn, they return to their graves, and the root wicker cage that was once their circulatory system.
- Any manufactured structure built without sacrificing blood to the forest shakes itself down upon its owner.
- In a year's time, treants grow from those dead who have commended themselves to the forest with sap, seed, and ritual.
- There are places in the forest that give or take youth, but only the unborn and the dead can find them.
- Margrevians extinguish torches before midnight. This practice is related to a far older tradition: Margrevians do not permit white moths to gather, lest a mora (witch) hide among their number.
- If you count butterflies one less than your group's number, one of you will die.
- A common belief is that an evil creature is born every time a "civilized" man enters the woods.

- Margreve beasts must never leave the forest as tamed companions of outsiders, lest the beasts become infatuated with "civilization" and become half-men, the abominations that outsiders call lycanthropes.
- If you nail the skin or hair of a sick person to a tree, the tree will absorb part of the disease and lend its strength to healing the illness.
- Every year, Margrevian kin, friends, and lovers celebrate the upcoming spring by giving each other blood-dyed pieces of thread. Each wears the thread until a tree signifying their relationship blossoms, whereupon the bearer drapes the thread across the blossoming branch. It is an ill omen if the tree never flowers.
- Every plant has a theme, a power, and a purpose. Flowers tend to be beguilers, and that is perhaps why outsiders are so fond of them. True power lies in leaf, stem, and root.
- Salt is incapable of holding magic, and makes an excellent ward against magical creatures, enchantments, and curses. Margrevians who hear rumors of salt-encrusted springs are like gold diggers hearing of a new vein. Salt is one of the few reasons that Margrevians emerge to encounter merchants along the Great Northern Road.

WESTERN MARGREVE

The Western Margreve represents the one third of the forest that lies west of the Great Northern Road. Here, old growth trees and dense underbrush predominate. Line of sight ranges from 30 to 60 ([1d4 + 2] × 10) feet. The primary canopy is unnaturally thick, and the environment on the floor is perpetually dim or dark.

The terrain is fairly flat, with the exception of the perch of Castle Shadowcrag in the center of this area and the rise of the Dwarven Cantons off to the west. Numerous streams meander down from these higher grounds and stagnate in small lakes that dot this side of the forest. In many places, the multitiered dense underbrush make the forest impossible to traverse except by canoe.

The Western Margreve is the oldest section of the forest, and the least densely inhabited. No known human communities exist. But less than a day's journey into the fringes of the forest, evidence of numerous failed settlements hide among the trees. Decrepit structures slowly weather and collapse, and vines overrun statues and stone arches. The Western Margreve is defiantly wild and actively resists habitation. Here, villages fail and individuals struggle to survive.

The head of the School of Star and Shadow Magic at Zobeck's Arcane Collegium claims that shadow magic threads through the trees of the Western Margreve. He points to the magic woven at Castle Shadowcrag, the shadow fey that still emerge, and the midnight echoes of baying hounds of the night (see *Tome of Beasts*). He discourages anyone from entering the Western Margreve without first learning fundamental shadow magic and undertaking lessons he teaches at the Collegium. Lesson One: Never discount Margreve superstitions, especially those about shadows and death. When a Margrevian says, "Never sleep against a tree's west side, lest its morning shadow swallow you," best take heed.

BRIARBLACK HILL

A field of baby's breath surrounds a hill covered in jet black buds and briars. Few have ever seen the place, but legends say that a mighty battle once took place in the sky above it. A dozen ala (see *Tome of Beasts*), wicked spirits of lightning and pain, brought down an elder zmey, a multiheaded black dragon of lust and dominance. The great creature crashed to the ground. Thanks to happenstance and a magical wellspring on the site, the dragon's corpse never completely decayed. In time, soil covered it, forming Briarblack Hill.

Adventure Hook. A magical wellspring with powers of rejuvenation does indeed flow beneath Briarblack Hill, but it is not quite the fountain of youth that the characters seek. Wait ... did the hill just move?

CASTLE SHADOWCRAG

Perched on a hill, commanding a panoramic view of the Western Margreve, lie the ruins of Castle Shadowcrag. The dwarves of Clan Grimbold stayed at the castle for a spell. And certain unnamed wizards and cultists visited them from time to time, to purchase things best not discussed. Likewise, fighters seeking weapons forged of starmetal or pure shadow often made their way to the Grimbold dwarves, paying steep prices for weapons and armor not available anywhere else.

Adventure Hook. The dark magic infused into weapons, armor, and wondrous items created at Castle Shadowcrag is fading, and the wizards, cultists, and fighters of old are drawn en masse to Shadowcrag to renew them. In fact, the fading magic is all the ploy of Stross shadow fey half-breed ghosts who extort the gathered magic items' owners into advancing the ghosts' plot to take revenge against Zobeck, the city that was once theirs.

GENEZEK KRAJ RUIN

Little remains of the temples of Genezek Kraj, except for legends of relics and an archipelago of ruined stone arches rising from a sea of underbrush. Hedge witch Vara's flock of thirty wereravens roosts on the arches and in treetop hovels whose entrances face the sky. This "roost" is also home to several varieties of lesser blackbirds and ravens.

Adventure Hook. A forest crone rewards the characters with a map that leads them toward the fabled relics of Genezek Kraj. It directs them to the grove of arches, up the trees, through the wereravens' lofty hovels, down through hollow trunks, and into the ancient temples' buried chambers. Perhaps the characters can defeat the traps and guardians that the "forest crone" Vara could not. She and her flock wait topside in ambush.

MINERS' LAMENT

In the Western Margreve, any magics that detect or divine the presence of metal or minerals point to Miners' Lament, a dry gulch nestled along the southwest edge of the forest. The place is a veritable treasure trove of raw ores. Embedded bronze nuggets glow at sunset, and new rain exposes pockets of uncut opal and veins of gold. The first dwarf excavators rubbed their hands in glee, eager to lay claim to the bounty that lay at their feet. But the moment their first pick struck, the walls of the gulch hemorrhaged a great red torrent of clay, mud, and magic that buried all. Some say the gulch turns greed, blood, and bones into the very precious metals that it uses to lure the next victims.

In truth, the gulch is the Western Margreve's cesspool, where the forest channels the dregs of siphoned magic. The forest is incapable of using up siphoned magic completely, and some spells—such as those that deal force damage or radiant damage—leave trace amounts of magical "ash" behind. As this ash flows toward Miners' Lament, precious metals absorb some of it as they too are swept into the gulch. Few have ever claimed any such "treasures" from Miners' Lament.

Adventure Hook. The Western Margreve's cesspool reaches deep into the earth, and its corruption has begun to affect creatures above and below ground. Malignant earth elementals and creatures that can only be described as walking spells make their way toward Zobeck's outlying farms. The Margreve parts trees and foliage to let the creatures pass. It is more than happy to watch its magical refuse show itself out.

PARIYA

The "leper" colony, of infected intelligent undead that fled Morgau a decade ago has, against all expectations, survived to form a small hamlet in the northwestern edge of the Margreve. Their contagious radiant energy illness is a clear and present danger to their former masters in the Grand Duchy. Their existence is known only to King Lucan and select advisors. Should it become more widely known, the Grand Duchy's position of dominance would be greatly weakened.

Adventure Hook. King Lucan's efforts to destroy the colony have all been rebuffed by the Margreve, and he has been forced to pursue a different approach. A single priestess of the Blood Sisters has been dispatched to recruit a group of heroes to find and destroy the hamlet by any means necessary. If the heroes discover the truth, they will have knowledge that King Lucan and many others would kill for.

UNDEAD AND THE NORTHERN SWAMPS

Zombies, skeletons, and other mindless undead prowl the northwestern edge of the Margreve. Centuries past have seen countless battles in the swamps, and the ground is littered with the remains of those that fought there.

Adventure Hook. The Black Canton dwarves have noticed a change in the behavior of the omnipresent mindless undead and enlist the aid of adventurers to seek out the source. They believe, incorrectly, that Lord Fandorin is behind the changes. The heroes learn that worshipers of Chernobog are using the fertile grounds to establish a base for further incursions into the Forest.

CENTRAL MARGREVE

The Central Margreve is the third of the forest that lies east of the Great Northern Road and west of the Cloudwalls. The underbrush is less twisted and dense than in the Western Margreve, the canopy is not as thick, and the forest floor is not as dark. Line of sight ranges from 50 to 120 ([1d8 + 4] × 10) feet. Pine, spruce, cedar, and other coniferous trees and shrubs dominate the northern portion and fill the valleys between the fingers of the Cloudwalls. Needles, pine cones, and ferns carpet the forest floor. In the south, deciduous trees dominate, dropping their colored leaves and seeds upon a floor thick with detritus, creeping ivy, and night blooming flowers.

A contagious wildness permeates the Central Margreve, and the place smells of cedar and musk. Malefic beasts and rabid animals are common. In general, the forest seems more alive than the oppressively dark Western Margreve. In the Central Margreve, Spider Crones spin tales and proffer poisons, rusalkas (see *Tome of Beasts*) drown men in their arms, and leshy (see *Tome of Beasts*) erase trails and imperil interlopers. Old World magic throbs with power. The uncontainable spells of Baba Yaga and her sisters hide in the hollows and chase each other through the trees.

ARMIGER WOOD

In the crook of Grandfather's Tears lies a stretch of forest where rusty armor girdles the trees, as if a regiment of warriors had been transformed to gnarled wood or saplings had sprouted within suits of discarded plate. Forest goblins sometimes run through here beating on their tarnished breastplates like drums, a sure sign that they are whipping themselves up to cause major trouble. Despite years of such abuse and layers of rust, the armor shows no sign of falling apart.

Adventure Hook. The residents of Whistlehollow Village, south of the Armiger Wood, recently experienced a sort of enlightenment, a vision of life not predicated on superstitions. They expelled their old puritanical leadership in favor of the new ways. The exiled leaders are returning to take revenge, and they are not alone. As the vengeful druids of old once did, the exiles have animated many of the trees in the Armiger Wood, creating raving treants with a level of barbarian and a distinctly un-treelike blood lust.

CRADLE GROVE

The hearty maple trees in this part of the forest feature giant burls at their bases. A natural depression on the top gives each burl a basin shape, and the formations collect rainwater as it runs down the trees. Villagers from nearby Ulchik Village ladle out the water and pour it over newborns in a forest baptism ceremony. Babes dedicated to the forest are left overnight in the burl cradles, defended only by the great trees. On nights of the full moon, as many as seven babies might be found lying in Cradle Grove.

Adventure Hook. A party of powerful do-gooders "rescued" three babes from Cradle Grove, committed them to an orphanage in Zobeck, and then disappeared on some promising new adventure. Terrible tragedies erupt around the children. People die. The characters must discover where the "unlucky ones" came from and take them back safely to Ulchik Village. The orphanage is anxious to see the babes go, especially the one with the white pupils.

DARKBUD MARSH

A sacred species of lily-of-the-valley grows in a marsh beside the River Argent. When this flower, appearing like a chain of tiny white bells, is picked, it does not die. Instead, its buds blacken and wither when touched by sin, disloyalty, and deception. Margrevians respect this flower that sees into the heart, but outsiders have no such compunction. Some courtiers and rich merchants have begun sewing the blossoms into their cuffs as an ostentatious display of their purity and honesty.

Of course, such individuals have the coin to replace the rare flower when it blackens. Forest folk worry that outsiders will harvest the darkbud to extinction, a troubling fact in light of their belief that the flowers absorb the evil proclivities of the forest, and as the flowers' numbers dwindle, the dark side of the forest slowly emerges.

Adventure Hook. Spent and blackened darkbuds, smelling of rotting meat, quickly draw rats, dogs, and other carnivores. Creatures that eat the discarded buds see the black hearts of those who divested their sin into the flowers. All over Zobeck, such animals are turning on their masters. It is as if the animals are seeing their deceptive, perfidious owners and companions for the first time.

FIVE WAGON OAK

The largest oak south of the Pine Bogs once grew on the southern edge of the Central Margreve. But an enterprising family of retired loggers chopped it down, cleared the surrounding land, and built an entire farming community out of its wood. The community is gone now. All that remains on the overgrown site is a forlorn windmill, covered in vines and moss. The creaking of the mill can still be heard in the dead of night, but the wheel has not turned in a century. Those who hear the sound slowly lose their minds. Some messengers following the Argent's southern bank toward Zobeck have drowned themselves in an attempt to escape the terrible creak by submerging themselves.

Adventure Hook. Too many messengers from the East are not showing up in Zobeck as expected. The latest one to go missing carried crucial documents. The Free City, suspecting bandits or dangerous creatures, sends the characters to investigate and neutralize the threat. The heroes discover a thriving farm at Five Wagon Oak—but none of it is real, except for the old windmill. Inside it lie the hollow shells of the messengers, which now house rats. The characters do reclaim some documents, though —documents they never should have seen.

THE FOGROLLS

Along the southern edge of the Margreve, hot water bubbles up from the swampy ground. Mud fields, each deeper than a man is tall, swallow unsuspecting and unprepared travelers. The hot water heats the air, and convection carries the warmth toward the River Argent. Throughout winter, a dense fog bank forms over the water and rolls over the surrounding land, cloaking fields and hanging in the forest for miles. Even at high noon, visibility is limited to a few handspans.

Adventure Hook. While traveling along the River Argent in late fall, the characters and a group of Kariv gypsies wake to a bitterly cold morning shrouded in mist. Fog shadows haunt the Fogrolls, calling to worried Kariv parents in the muted voices of their lost children. Unlike regular shadows, fog shadows are dark gray, have a soft, three-dimensional quality, and feed on fear in the manner of will-o'-wisps.

GRANDFATHER'S TEARS

In the center of the Central Margreve, cedar water flows out of the Pine Bogs. Farther northeast, fresh water trickles down the Cloudwalls, gathers at Splitoaks Crossing, and creates a fast-moving river that meets the slower tributary through the Pine Bogs at Three Sisters Lake. The lake overflows into an artery called Grandfather's Tears, which emerges from the Central Margreve near Levoča Village and joins the River Argent heading south.

Where the Western Margreve uses Miners' Lament as a cesspool for the dregs of siphoned magic that the forest cannot completely burn, the Central Margreve washes its magical ash away. Strange and terrible things, dead and alive, float out of the forest in Grandfather's Tears. Over the millennia, trace magic has accumulated on the riverbed and infused the river water like salt. At night, the rocky riverbed glows with a faint blue luminescence. Dead organic material rots quickly when submerged. Wooden boats and oars decay quickly, making river travel nigh impossible.

Aquatic wildlife have adapted to breathing and swimming in the tainted water. Because the river removes protective layers of dead skin and scales before wounds have the chance to heal and new skin grows underneath, many species have developed regeneration (1 hit point per round) to compensate. Those who have superior healing abilities survive and breed themselves to the top of the food chain. Fish, eel, and frogs grow patches of horny plate instead of skin or scales, and many appear as devolved as the horseshoe crabs that skim the river bottom. Forest denizens that habitually eat these creatures or slake their thirst with the water of Grandfather's Tears appear equally changed.

Adventure Hook. Tin-bottomed boats and living vessels, like the canoes grown at Edgewater Village in the Eastern Margreve, are the only watercraft capable of surviving the rot, fighting the current, and carrying the characters upstream along Grandfather's Tears. Getting to Edgewater, one hundred miles into the Margreve, is the hard part.

MOONDRAWN CAVES

A wellspring captures the magic of the moon. It carries moonlight to the deepest depths of a network of caves in the far north of the Margreve. Far below the surface world, a slothful lunar devil (see *Tome of Beasts*) uses the stream as a source of nourishment and power. The devil emerges from the cave periodically to do the bidding of the Moonlit King.

Adventure Hook. A middle-aged woman hires the characters to recover her father, a renowned explorer who refuses to retire. Clues point toward a magical wellspring that her father believed (mistakenly) to be the fountain of youth. The characters follow the trail of the old man deep into the Moondrawn Caves and find him with his new ally.

SPIRITSIGN

Tall trees ring an unremarkable clearing fifty miles northeast of the Fogrolls. High overhead, their branches mingle in the wind. The alseid believe that the true of heart experience omens here. Unless such petitioners know they are in a sacred place, however, they might remain oblivious to the signs that the trees cast as dappled light upon the forest floor. The alseid have taken back the glen from the griffons that had claimed it, renamed it Spiritsign, and consider it a holy site.

Adventure Hook. The shadow fey want to establish a hunting lodge in the Central Margreve and have chosen this clearing to begin construction. The alseid have been decimated in the past by the shadow fey, and now they fear they will lose the holy site they so recently reclaimed. But the signs show that a group of champions (the characters) might succeed in removing the shadow fey threat once and for all.

TWILIGHT FORK

Drawnbow Trail heads east from the banks of the River Argent and terminates at Twilight Fork. By day or at night, Twilight Fork looks like an ordinary forest trail. But not so at twilight, when ghostly fog and an ominous quality settles upon the site. They say that a traveler who is torn over a life-and-death decision can take two paths at the same time. One path leads half his soul to the reaper. The other path infuses the other half of his soul with the power to overcome whatever problem besets him. The desperate and the indecisive come to Twilight Fork, but only tattered half-souls leave.

Adventure Hook. Two men hire the characters to capture and return a woman who has fled into the forest. She is a spouse to both men. When the first husband returned after his wife had long presumed him dead, she became torn between her old and new husbands and fled toward Twilight Fork. If the characters do not catch her in time, she returns with only half a soul. Catching the woman is not easy, for she is a talented rogue and wizard.

ULCHIK VILLAGE

Isolated from the civilized world by the Cloudwalls and thousands of square miles of dangerous wilderness, Ulchik Village is one of the most remote human settlements in this area of the world. It is also one of the strangest. The villagers worship Pyotr, a withdrawn tree-aspect of the Green Gods, Porevit and Yarila. The village adults live the silent, enduring lives of trees, without clothing or shelter, and very often in tree shape. The village children feed and water their elders. It is a difficult task for the youngsters, who hobble along with twisted necks, clubfeet, and degenerate limbs that centuries of inbreeding have begotten.

Adventure Hook. Ever since a midwife came to the village a few years ago, the telltale signs and aftereffects of inbreeding among the villagers have miraculously receded. The heroes come across the village and immediately notice the physical differences between the younger and older children. The villagers readily volunteer that the midwife has blessed them with healthy offspring for the first time in many generations. They do not as readily admit to the existence of the shrine to the Red Goddess Marena that she brought with her.

WHISTLEHOLLOW VILLAGE

South of Armiger Wood lies the village of Whistlehollow. Proponents of the new ways have expelled the puritanical leaders of old and are forging toward a new era in the Margreve. Heretical druids have developed methods to mask themselves from the forest and make frequent use of proxies and subterfuge to further their goals.

Adventure Hook. The characters are approached by an elder of the village and enlisted to destroy an inert wickerman (see *Creature Codex*) that has been seen in the nearby forest. He explains that followers of the new ways seed these constructs throughout the forest and are waiting until the right time to activate them. He tells the heroes that the constructs are vulnerable to fire, and downing one should be as easy as putting it to the torch.

The elder is in fact a druid of the new ways and is using the characters to activate the wickermen. He hopes not only to progress his agenda but to also make sure that the ire of the forest is directed firmly toward the characters.

EASTERN MARGREVE

The Eastern Margreve is the third of the forest that lies east of the Cloudwalls. The youngest section of the wood, its trees are merely millennia old. Conifers dominate the higher elevations and fade into deciduous varieties as the land falls toward the Rothenian Plain and the open steppe of centaur territory. There is a grand openness to the Eastern Margreve, like walking through a palace of pillars. Fewer trees reach for the sky, but their branches and leaves are legion and form a canopy just as thick as that in the Central Margreve. In most locations, the underbrush is not dense enough to impede movement and not remarkable enough to use as landmarks. A monotony of trees stretches in every direction, making the forest especially difficult to navigate (Wisdom [Survival] checks to avoid getting lost are made with disadvantage). Line of sight ranges from 90 to 180 ([1d10 + 8] × 10) feet.

A handful of small, freshwater lakes hide in the woods, but they are difficult to find. Interlopers who lack survival skills and who do not carry in their own water frequently die of thirst (Wisdom [Survival] checks associated with locating potable water and game are made with disadvantage). Because of the dearth of fresh water, fewer wild animals make their homes in the Eastern Margreve. Many of these, forced to drink the tainted water of Grandfather's Tears, appear both dire and devolved, with aggressive personalities, tumors, spines, and patches of horn and shell plating. Trees survive by tapping the water table, which provides the same sustenance as the lakes.

Aberrations, undead, and other unnatural creatures roam the eastern woods and contribute to its inhospitable reputation. But these denizens are uncommon, and one is as likely to die of thirst, hunger, or exposure as one is to perish in the claws of a wandering monster.

Compared to the dark, overgrown feel of the Western Margreve and the wild, old magic atmosphere of the Central Margreve, the Eastern Margreve seems vacant and dreamlike. It includes vast areas of utter silence, where no birds sing and nothing moves but the wind through the branches and leaves. At night, the conspicuous absence of chirping insects and hooting owls becomes especially disconcerting. Were it not for night falling and sunrise coming to pass, time might lose meaning for a party camping under these boughs.

Indeed, some legends tell of travelers who enter the Eastern Margreve young and emerge old, and some who enter old and emerge at a younger time of life. The basis for these tales is unclear. Perhaps the windblown branches hold the power to entrance and sustain. Perhaps explorers stumble upon cursed wellsprings in their search for water. Or perhaps the veil to the Astral Plane thins here, and unbidden dreams carry folk to its timeless expanse. This last conjecture would also explain the numerous sightings of ghosts, as spirits of loved ones pass through the Astral Plane on their way to the afterlife.

BRAIDWOOD VILLAGE

Every year, more centaurs abandon the isolationist ideals of their ancestors and gravitate toward cosmopolitan trade centers. Not so at Braidwood Village, where tradition and the Old Ways thrive. Legendary hunters and warriors, the Braidwood centaurs dominate the southeastern Margreve. They frequently challenge nearby alseid tribes over hunting grounds and water sources and defend their territory from Rothenian oinotaur centaurs looking for wood and game. Every structure at Braidwood Village is grown, not constructed. With purposeful grafting, pruning, and braiding, the centaurs shape living trees into homes and art. Complex living sculptures of ancestors locked in battle with their enemies decorate the grounds.

Adventure Hook. A covey of mora (see page 102) from the Hag's Tooth Hills has teased the centaur warriors out of Braidwood Village before surrounding it in an impenetrable ring of whirling leaves and hair. Inside the ring, the characters and a pathetic cadre of young, old, and infirm centaurs fight for their lives against mora and the wood-braid statues they animate. If the mora capture the centaur elder for whom they came, they plan to coax desired knowledge out of him through torture.

CAVES OF SORROW

High in the Cloudwall Mountains, a shallow cave forms what looks like an eye and tear from below. A sect of Kariv gypsies travel across the Rothenian Plain, dare the forest, and climb the mountain to practice an incredible form of ancestor worship in the cave. They make sacrifices to a local forest god, who rewards them with one-on-one discussions with their departed loved ones. For worthier sacrifices, the godling allows intimate relations with their departed spouses. It has been this way for generations. A Kariv woman is always pregnant.

Adventure Hook. To solve a mystery, the characters need to speak with a departed soul, but they have no corpse upon which to cast *speak with dead*. The Kariv tell the characters of the Caves of Sorrow and the powers of the godling there. The characters might offer sacrifices, meet the godling, and walk away satisfied. Or they might realize that the godling is actually an incubus sorcerer using its abilities to don the faces of the departed and keep the sacrifices coming.

DJURDJA FALLS

What little water falls on the eastern side of the Cloudwalls gathers at Djurdja Falls. Here, it plunges into the four-hundred-foot-wide mouth of an upturned cave, where it disappears into darkness, one thousand feet deep. Strange plants dangle hundred-foot-long tendrils over the lip to gather water and nutrients from the waterfall's mist. Small herbivores with mist-collecting dorsal plates, like those of a stegosaurus, wander the cold mists around the hole and down the mountainside. Carnivores have adapted to retain water and extract it from blood.

Adventure Hook. The characters lead an expedition up the Cloudwalls, over the cave lip at Djurdja Falls, and down into darkness. The thousand-foot drop leads to whitewater torrents, mile-long belly crawls, and vast caverns. What alien aberrations or prehistoric beasts lurk below the mountain or fight for dominance in this isolated ecology? Can the characters escape after Baba Yaga's sisters seal the cave mouth? Are the witches trying to bury the same power that the characters have arrived to explore or that they have inadvertently roused?

LOST HEART'S COPSE

Here, the ghosts of bent-backed men search the underbrush for lost items, missing loved ones, and the souls of their departed mates. Legend says that this stretch of forest calls to all who refuse to move on after loss. Any living creature that enters this area experiences temporary life-blindness. Any affected creature sees only other creatures with life-blindness normally; all others appear incorporeal with muted voices. Unlike when looking at the Material Plane from the Ethereal Plane, inanimate objects and dead creatures appear normal.

Adventure Hook. After stumbling into Lost Heart's Copse, a weeping ghost picking through the underbrush asks the characters to help him find his wife. The mission takes the life-blind characters to Zobeck, whose bustling streets now seem like lonely cobblestones through a quiet, clockwork ghost town. To locate the ghost's wife, the characters must solve the mystery of her abduction and murder. The crime is old. Clues haunt places that no longer exist. There are no NPCs to help our heroes.

SALT SPRINGS

In the center of the Eastern Margreve, toxic, salt water bubbles up through crusty sores between the rocks. As more water oozes up and cools, the salt precipitates from the suspension, accumulating around the vent and forming roughly man-sized pillars of salt over time. Few know of the site where the "salt men" stand among the trees. A brave kobold family risks making their way here to collect the salt men, bartering them within the forest and selling them beyond the wood to alchemists who claim the salt men have special properties.

Adventure Hook. A wealthy Zobeck merchant learns of the salt springs' existence and sends the characters to find it, claim it, and build a stockade around it. On their way, the characters encounter a family of kobolds carrying coffins through the predawn forest. Inside each coffin is a salt man they are hiding from possible bandits. A dead rat, added to each coffin for smell, completes the deception. The kobolds attempt to thwart the characters' mission in every way possible. They have already trapped the site of their source of wealth and have no intention of sharing their find, let alone allowing a stockade to be built.

SLEEPWALKER'S HILL

In the northeastern corner of the Margreve, atop a single forested hill, aerial plants drape over the branches like Spanish moss and drop their puffy pollen like snowflakes from the canopy. Once a year, the Margreve's aridni (see *Tome of Beasts*) collect the pollen and grind it into the dust that imbues their arrows with the power of confusion, fear, uncontrollable laughter and sleep. The aridni seem to be the only creatures who can remember the hill at all, which is quite remarkable. How can one forget the menagerie of individuals—beasts and humanoids alike—that wander here without yesterdays?

Adventure Hook. Creatures too powerful for the aridni to handle have taken up residence near the aerial plants whose pollen they value for their own defense. The aridni need something or someone to vanquish the intruders. The aridni have enslaved a friend of the heroes and offer her freedom in exchange for help exterminating the clutter of Chelicerai (see *Tome of Beasts*).

Hearts of the Forest

The western and central sections of the Margreve each feature a geographical region known as a heart. Vast concentrations of magical power, siphoned and stored over millennia, pulse through the landscape in these places, adding shadow powers to the Western Heart, and feral powers to the Central Heart.

A heart has not yet formed in the Eastern Magreve, but that event is on the cusp. Once realized, it will feature a concentration of dream powers.

The power held in the hearts of the forest exceeds that of major artifacts. Like a major artifact, a singular method for destroying a heart might exist, but no mortal knows it, and carrying out the deed is nigh impossible. Fire, blight, natural disasters, and the magic of mortals pale before these great seats of the Margreve's power. Even the terrible magic of the world's great sorcerers cannot destroy a heart, any more than a man can kill a lake with a sword thrust.

Despite the meager threat that individuals present, the Margreve tolerates few interlopers in its hearts. Only those well versed in the Old Ways have any chance of surviving the forest's often aggressive response to their presence.

WESTERN HEART

The Western Heart of the Margreve has taproots older than the modern gods. Like a tangle of world-snakes, these titanic roots branch, intertwine, and bore deep into the earth.

HEART OF THE FOREST POWERS AT A GLANCE

In addition to the global Margreve powers, each heart of the forest has the following traits and abilities:

Drawn Curtain. Divination (scrying) spells cannot perceive anything within the heart, and those within the heart are immune to *detect thoughts* with respect to those without. Conjuration (teleportation) spells either fail utterly (75%) or land the caster outside the forest (25%) at a location nearest the caster's current position.

Hungry Heart. Magical effects, except for other powers of the forest, have a 5 percent chance per round to be suppressed (siphoned) entirely as if in an antimagic field.

Quench. The forest can immediately extinguish all nonmagical fires. Any fire-based spell is dispelled automatically at the beginning of the next round after it is cast.

The Western Heart harnesses the bulk of its power from the Shadow Plane. The heart's roots pierce the plane of shadow and grip its tattered edges. In this part of the forest, the shadows of trees and beasts are disproportionately long, even at noon. Sometimes they move with slight independence or detach entirely.

Plant life flourishes even in the dim light. In many places, it grows with such density that it reduces travel to a crawl. Ivy spirals up abandoned spider webs, filling in the gaps, and forming great leafy sheets between the trees. The wind puffs the sheets back and forth, and walking through this heart of the forest is like hacking one's way through the gills of a breathing fish.

ASHEN GLADES

Legend claims that Perun, god of lightning and war, threw a pair of lightning bolts across the Western Heart of the Margreve, scarring the face of the landscape with wide swaths of charred wood. To this day, nothing grows in these places. Blackened logs cover the forest floor, and the jagged edges of snapped trunks poke between them like a spiked pit made of trees. Dozens of ala (see *Tome of Beasts*) nest in the charred tree trunks and herald the preternatural storms that rage over the forest. The Margreve tolerates the ala because the ala do not tolerate interlopers, especially humanoids. The hags attempt to kill or eject any who enter their domain.

Adventure Hook. The priests of Perun believe that the survival of Zobeck depends on their obtaining a fragment of one of Perun's lightning bolts that still sparks somewhere beneath the Ashen Glades. The temple hires the characters to locate and retrieve the relic. Divination reveals that a zmey (see *Tome of Beasts*) is imprisoned somewhere under the Western Heart, and that these ala hate dragons even more than they hate humanoids. Freeing the beast might be the characters' only chance to distract the powerful ala away from the site where the hags roost.

THE CRUMBLING TOMB

Covered in lichen and gripped by ivy, the Crumbling Tomb rests in the eternal darkness of the forest canopy. Behind its mithral-barred doors lies a mummified sage, guarded by a pair of sorcerous assassin vines. A unicorn is the only recurring visitor. Shadow fey legends say that when the time comes, the corpse will gain unlife and take sides in a pivotal conflict in the Old Margreve. At dawn, shadow ivy pulls the Crumbling Tomb underground, leaving a small chip of stone to mark the site. At dusk the Crumbling Tomb emerges in another Western Heart location. Some say that the tomb is searching for something.

Adventure Hook. The characters require critical information that only the unicorn possesses. To meet the unicorn, the characters must locate the Crumbling Tomb after dusk and enter it before it disappears at dawn. When the unicorn does not show on the first night, the characters must either abandon their mission or remain inside the tomb and shadow walk with it to its next location. On the shadow walk between dawn and dusk, the characters experience an adventure on the tattered edge of the Shadow Plane and learn the terrible truth about the tomb's unicorn visitor.

CENTRAL HEART

The Central Heart of the forest is a place of unbridled wildness. Trails disappear behind those who blaze them. Structures shake themselves down. Poisons are more

WESTERN HEART POWERS AT A GLANCE

In addition to its other heart of the forest powers, the Western Heart has the following traits and abilities:

Aura of Desecration. All attempts to turn undead are made with disadvantage; undead and shadow creatures have a +1 bonus to attack rolls, damage rolls, and saving throws.

Early Grave. Those who fall prone or lie down (such as to rest) are subject to a 5-foot-square *Evard's black tentacles* effect, except with erupting vines instead of tentacles. The vines draw dying creatures into the earth at the rate of 1 foot per round.

Shades. 1/day per square mile; as the spell *conjure fey*, except that the creatures summoned are native to the plane of Shadow.

Shadow Heart. A "shadow heart" pumps the blood of any creature reincarnated within the Western Heart. The creature gains the ability to cast claws of darkness (see *Heroes Handbook*) once daily but cannot touch a loved one without dealing strength damage as a shadow.

deadly, diseases more virulent. Travelers devolve to beasts, and beasts devolve to creatures best left unnamed.

The forest uses its abilities, particularly Warp Wood and Animate Plants, more frequently in the Central Heart. Its auras of rust and wildness pulse with extra potency.

Baba Yaga frequently calls the Central Heart home. The most daring of explorers might find her living house wandering somewhere between Baba's Wend and the Mistwallows. Even with all her powers, Baba Yaga can but nudge the wild heart of the wood toward her ends, and only then at great cost. Its deeply rooted power cannot be harnessed, although she and others fight over the knowledge of how to cajole it and the wisdom of doing so.

DEAD DRUID'S RUN

A fast-running river thunders through the north end of the Central Heart of the forest. Where the rapids are roughest, no trees or underbrush encroach near the river's bank for one hundred feet. Instead, an elliptical-shaped bank lies open to the sky. Rising from the whitewater, five jagged, roughly humanoid-shaped rocks burst toward the sky. The folk of nearby Ulchik Village say the rocks were once druids that one of Baba Yaga's children encased in stone, presumably as punishment for some treacherous deed they suffered upon her—or attempted to. If one concentrates on drowning out the cacophony of the whitewater, a chorus of screams can be heard emanating from the rocks. It is said that the druids will grant a wish to whoever frees them.

Adventure Hook. A thousand years ago, a gold plaque at Dead Druids' Run told the tale of the sacrifice the druids made to protect Midgard. A witch did petrify the druids, but at their request. Under each stony figure, an elder vampire lies buried in the riverbed. Stakes shatter against the chests of these legendary creatures. Sunlight warps around their foul bodies. Running water blackens where they step. Only the sacrifice of the druids holds the unnatural creatures down, and only a (foolish) creature of good heart can free the druids from their timeless duty in the stone.

Commander Beleneus of the Order of the Knights Incorporeal holds the lost plaque, and his patience wears thin. The rumors he has circulated for generations have not had the effect he'd anticipated. It is time that he and his consort take an active role in freeing the trapped vampires.

CENTRAL POWERS AT A GLANCE

In addition to its other heart of the forest powers, the Central Heart has the following traits and abilities:

Augmented Aura of Rust. As the Aura of Rust ability, except twice as much damage.

Augmented Aura of Wildness. As the Aura of Wildness ability, except that saving throws to resist are made with disadvantage.

Lycanthrope Needles. The Margreve transmits the curse of lycanthropy through the needles of its conifers. Every 10 rounds a creature spends moving through dense terrain, it risks brushing past a lycanthrope needle and contracting the curse (a successful DC 12 Constitution saving throw avoids the infection). The Margreve chooses the base animal.

Social Decay. The forest haunts the dreams of sleeping creatures in the Central Heart, slowly shifting them to a state of paranoia against their companions. Any creature sleeping in the Central heart must make a DC 14 Charisma saving throw after finishing a long rest. On a failed save, the creature experiences overwhelming paranoia for the next 2d6 days. The saving throw can be repeated after each night's sleep, ending the effect on a success. If the creature remains in the Central Heart, saves beyond the first one are made with disadvantage.

While paranoid, the creature has disadvantage on Charisma saving throws and Charisma checks; cannot receive benefit from or attempt the Help action; and cannot willingly accept aid (including healing) from another creature. The effect can be cured with a *lesser restoration* spell or similar magic.

Unending Rage. Individuals with the Rage class feature must rage every time they enter combat until they have expanded all their uses. On each occasion, a successful DC 17 Charisma saving throw allows the individual to choose whether to rage or not for the duration of the current encounter.

Virulence. All saving throws related to negating or healing natural diseases and poisons are made with disadvantage.

PALEWOOD

Amid a copse of white birch no larger than a town market, a limestone outcrop rises nearly as high as the treetops. Riddled with small holes, the crag is home to a burgeoning cadre of tiny wicker effigies. When a forest resident commits a sin, he or she weaves an effigy, divests the sin into it, sacrifices a month of life energy, and stakes the newly animated wicker figure on the forest floor for the wild beasts to ravage. Sometimes the sin-eating effigies escape their ignominious fate. Why they gather at the crag at Palewood is a mystery that most forest folk believe is best left unsolved.

Adventure Hook. The sin-eater effigies at Palewood possess memory of and feel guilt for sins they never committed. Many of them have become the epitome of the sins from which they are woven. The wrathful boil with hatred for their creators. The envious want to change places with their creators. The proud demand their due, and the greedy want their creators' very souls. Soon, they will organize. Soon, they will march.

EASTERN HEART

Though the Margreve crested the Cloudwalls and spilled upon the Rothenian Plain untold centuries ago, a true Eastern Heart of the forest has not yet formed. The mountains have slowed the necessary transfer of power . . . until now. The Eastern Heart finally stands on the brink of coming into existence. And that fact has Baba Yaga worried.

There is a prophecy that begins with "An Eastern Heart shall be born" and ends with "And the great witch shall die." Baba Yaga believes that the verse refers to her, and she has gone to incredible lengths to slow the Eastern Heart's formation. Though her power is nearly limitless, Baba Yaga cannot prevent the Eastern Heart from being born altogether. She has, however, enacted a plan to buy herself time.

With the help of her sorcerous daughters and at great expense to her health and sanity, Baba Yaga has chipped off shards of the embryonic "soul" of the Eastern Heart, effectively shattering what would have been a full heart into thirty-seven pieces. Each chipped shard, as it flew off, coupled with the soul of a living creature. Baba Yaga does not know which individuals bear the soul fragments, nor in what small or grievous way the shard affects each of them. But she is happy, because until those creatures die, the disjointed heart cannot fully form.

In time, Baba Yaga plans to locate these "forest-hearted" individuals and offer them attractive ways to extend their lives. She might assign a daughter or a minion to act as their guardian, lingering in the background and protecting them from time to time. If a forest-hearted insists on putting itself in danger, Baba Yaga instructs the guardian to abduct and imprison it.

Meanwhile, Baba Yaga's archrival, an ancient zmey named Czarizeby ("Black Teeth"), seeks the same individuals—but in order to kill them and thus hasten the prophecy. Even if the zmey is unsuccessful, Baba Yaga has the harder task, for some of the forest-hearted already stand on the opposite sides of a battlefield. Some are prey animals, and some are adventuring characters who frequently wander close to their own deaths.

The forest-hearted live their lives, oblivious of the power and potential connected to their soul. In some of them, sorcerous powers develop, flashing out during moments of emotional turmoil.

MEADOW OF FEY REVELS

"We knew we had reached our destination when we heard sounds of revelry up ahead. The fey road came to an end at the edge of a large meadow encircled by a ring of standing stones; a great bonfire burned in the middle. Here, dozens of strange creatures, some from our world, many others from the Bright Land and the Shadow Realm, made merry."

– *Lost in the Arbonesse and Other Escapades*, by Tavareen Windrider

In the forested foothills of the Tonder Alps to the northeast of the River Court lies the enchanting Meadow of Fey Revels. Here, the elves of the Arbonesse and diverse fey of peculiar mien come together to celebrate on four special nights of the year: the spring equinox (the Rites of Spring), the summer solstice (the Summer Festival), the autumn equinox, and finally the winter solstice. Like many locations in the Arbonesse, the Meadow of Fey Revels exists in both Midgard and the Summer Lands. It is said that the fey roads only lead mortals to the meadow on the days of the revels, although it is likely that the Fair Folk are able to find their way here at other times.

The characters might find themselves on the fey road leading to the meadow by chance as they wander through the Arbonesse. Alternatively, they could travel to the meadow in search of information from the fey revelers, or to obtain faerie magic. The Meadow of Fey Revels can also work as a lead-in or side trek for groups playing the adventure *Wrath of the River King*.

The revels are presided over by Lord Chelessfield, Sidhe Lord of the Highland Marches, who rules over these lands at the behest of the River King. Lord Chelessfield is an elderly elf with golden hair and purple eyes, who wears a circlet of pure gold worked into the shape of a dragon. Charming and dangerous, with friends at both the River King's Court and among the shadow fey, it is unwise to get on the wrong side of the sidhe lord. See *Wrath of the River King* for more information on Lord Chelessfield.

Each season's revels begin shortly after midday and continue until early the next morning. All involve music, dancing, feasting, and drinking large amounts of wine and beer, but each season's revel has its own distinct elements too.

SPRING: On the morning of the spring revel, the sun rises precisely between the two largest standing stones. Tents and stalls are decorated with red, green, and yellow ribbons, and the revelers feast on cheese, eggs, wheaten cakes, and pancakes. To mark the start of the revel, the fey, led by Lord Chelessfield, scatter magical seeds around the meadow to decorate it. Yellow primroses and celandines and pure white anemones carpet the grass, while vibrant bluebells spring up the trees. Attempts to stand a green dragon egg on one end (without using magic) and other games take place in the afternoon. As dusk falls, a great poetry contest begins. Lyrical elegance and razor-sharp wit are both valued, and players can gain advantage on their characters' Charisma (Performance) checks by quoting or composing a few entertaining couplets.

SUMMER: In summer, the meadow becomes a riot of color as bright blue cornflowers, scarlet poppies, and purple knapweed spring up, and bees and beautifully patterned butterflies flit among the flowers. Revelers at the Summer Festival wear wreaths of colorful flowers and garlands of oak leaves. The raising of the midsummer pole marks the start of the revel. This tall wooden column is decorated with ivy, oak leaves, and flowers, and hung with many-colored ribbons. Once it has been erected in the middle of the meadow, the dancing and merriment get under way, with a troupe of pixies flying around the pole pulling the ribbons behind them.

Contests at the summer revel are tests of physical prowess, including foot races, mock combats, and archery competitions where the participants shoot at straw targets carried by running goblins. Characters can try their luck by making relevant ability or skill checks or melee and ranged attack rolls. When the sun goes down bonfires are lit, and contestants can prove their bravery by jumping over the flames or walking barefoot across burning coals.

AUTUMN: By autumn, grazing deer have trimmed the grass, and wet weather has encouraged mushrooms and toadstools to sprout, forming dozens of fairy rings across the meadow. Food is abundant following the harvest and the feasting is excellent. Carts piled high with loaves of bread, vegetables, and fruit arrive via the fey roads, gifts from the cities of Dornig to honor the fey. Much trading of spells, magical items, and the like takes place at the autumn revel, with contests held to demonstrate magical prowess in the evening. Creativity is prized over sheer power; characters can gain advantage on their Performance checks by inventing imaginative magical displays to amuse, scare, and astonish onlookers.

WINTER: With winter's arrival, frost coats the grass, and robins feast on the juicy white berries of the mistletoe growing on the leafless oak and beech trees around the meadow's edge. A great log is paraded around the stone circle and then set aflame to mark the start of the festival. Wine and beer made during the year are now fermented and ready to drink. As the libations are poured, the Midwinter Goat, a goat-headed fey, appears before the lords and ladies to demand his customary gifts. Candles are lit all around the meadow as night begins to fall, and an evening of elegant dancing ensues, with a prize awarded to the most talented dancers. Light-footed characters can impress their hosts with Dexterity (Performance) checks, but dancers must be prepared to whirl and twirl all night long until the first flurry of snow on the following morning marks the end of the revel.

EXPLORING THE MEADOW

Surrounded on all sides by the dense trees of the Arbonesse Forest, the Meadow of Fey Revels measures about 500 yards across. It is essentially a large, grassy open space whose appearance changes with the seasons. Several notable features are described below:

The Stone Circle: A ring of over one hundred ancient, lichen-covered standing stones runs around the circumference of the field, not far from the treeline. These weather-worn megaliths are between ten and twelve feet high and date back to the time before the fall of Ankeshel and the arrival in these lands of the elves from the Far West. Faint spiral patterns can be seen etched into some of the stones; others are carved with petroglyphs depicting stick men, birds, and animals.

Faerie magic is enhanced within the ring formed by the stones; saving throws against spells cast by elves, gnomes, and fey inside the circle are made with disadvantage.

The Stalls: At each revel, an ever-changing lineup of brightly colored tents and wooden stalls springs up where the fey road enters the meadow. Staffed by goblins, gnomes, and fey, these stalls offer food and drink for sale, as well as other goods, including herbs and medicinal plants, potions and minor magical items, and interesting trinkets. Characters shopping at these stalls should keep their wits about them, since the fey like little more than getting one over on a foolish mortal. Cursed items, wands with but a single charge, and mislabeled potions are common tricks, but one should be cautious when sampling the foodstuffs too. Snargle the goblin's spicy mushroom pasties are delicious but cause weird hallucinations (treat as short-term madness) when eaten by non-fey that fail a DC 11 Constitution saving throw.

The Lord's Pavilion: This large, open-sided tent is made from fine blue and silver silk. Here, Lord Chelessfield and his honored guests enjoy the revels, waited on hand and foot by goblin servants, and protected by a dozen elven guards. If a character wins

MINOR EVENTS AT THE REVELS

1. A rabbit in a waistcoat and a hedgehog in a pinafore serve glasses of mead to a group of elegant elven lords and ladies.
2. Two young children with piercing blue eyes are selling little gingerbread houses. Look closely and you'll see one of them has a tiny squeaking witch inside.
3. A tiny sprite who has over-indulged in blackberry wine flies into a menhir and crash lands in a crumpled heap.
4. Three leprechauns in bottle green hats and jackets sit on a wooden bench reciting a nonsensical poem that rhymes "garden" with "pardon".
5. A pure white swan swoops down to land in the meadow. As its webbed feet hit the ground, it transforms into a beautiful sylvan maiden.
6. A group of small fey arrive riding giant weasels. Armed with glaives fashioned from antlers, these are emissaries from Thistlegloom, King of the Far Darrig.
7. A hag chants softly to herself while resting her right hand on one of the standing stones. The spiral pattern carved into the stone begins to glow with a fiery red light.
8. A gang of five boorish bugbears take it in turns to throw axes at a magnificent ancient oak tree.
9. Prowling in the shadows with razors in their hands, two vile barbers get ready to slash open the throat of an unsuspecting gnome who has angered the Queen of Witches.
10. A crow-like fey dressed in fine clothes rushes across the meadow bearing an important message.

one of the contests, they will be invited to the pavilion to be awarded their prize.

The Bog: A small stream flows through the southeastern corner of the meadow, causing the ground here to become boggy, particularly in spring and autumn when rainfall is plentiful. Tall reeds and yellow irises grow around the edge of the bog, which is home to Gerribbit, a giant frog (see *Personalities* below).

PERSONALITIES OF THE MEADOW

Hundreds of fey and other creatures attend the revels. Here are a few of the most notable and interesting personalities.

ANYA GRISTLEGROT

This nine-foot-tall ogress has greenish skin, a bulbous nose covered in pimples, and a mouth filled with crooked and broken teeth. She reeks of a heady combination of sweat and patchouli. Anya has few friends among the other revelers. She resents most fey, particularly elves, for looking down their perfectly formed noses at her, and likes nothing more than to see them taken down a peg or two. Anya hates the Holly Queen for humiliating her at the last winter revels and longs for revenge. She spends a lot of time brooding on her lowly status, and is quick to anger, but can be won over with flattery focusing on how fearsome and devious she is. Anya sometimes has potions and other minor magic items for sale.

Anya has the stats of a green hag, but her size is Large. In addition to her standard hag abilities, she can take the following action:

Cursing Stick (recharges after a long rest). Anya points a gnarled wooden stick at a single creature within 30 feet and utters a powerful curse. If the creature fails a DC 12 Wisdom saving throw, Anya polymorphs the target into a giant frog, or transforms its head into a donkey's. The target remains under the curse until it fulfills a special challenge set by Anya (e.g. stealing a leprechaun's pot of gold, winning a race with a quickling), the target drops to 0 hp or dies, or Anya's cursing stick is destroyed. The cursing stick is AC 15 and has 10 hp. It takes Anya a day to craft a replacement. The cursed creature is limited in the actions it can perform by the nature of its new form, and cannot speak.

GERRIBBIT

Until a few days ago, Gerribbit was Solanquis, a young and arrogant minor elf noble at the River King's Court. Now he is a giant frog. The foppish youth made the mistake of upsetting Anya Gristlegrot by failing to treat her with respect, and the angry ogress polymorphed the hapless elf into his present form with her cursing stick. Gerribbit is cursed to remain a frog until he wins a big, slobbery kiss from a hairy dwarf, half-orc, or satyr. He has had no luck so far but that doesn't stop him from leaping beside any suitable character in the hopes they will kiss him.

Gerribbit tries his best to communicate with the characters but can only say "gerribbit." If they are able to talk to him with *speak with animals*, he explains his predicament and begs for their help. If Gerribbit returns to his true form, he will tell them that events in the nearby human village of Riverbend have angered the River King, and its inhabitants may soon come under attack by the fey; see *Wrath of the River King*.

HOLLY QUEEN

This raven-haired shadow fey enchantress (see *Tome of Beasts*) is a guest of honor at the winter revel, and usually attends the spring and autumn revels, but is seen at the summer revel only rarely. She wears a holly crown with bright red berries on her horned head, and dresses in long black robes adorned with winter wolf fur. A tiny robin redbreast perches on her shoulder.

The Holly Queen is a loyal vassal of the Moonlit King, and is out of favor at the Courts of the Shadow Fey while the Queen of Night and Magic and her Summer Court are in the ascendant. Quiet, observant, and somewhat sorrowful, she comes to the revels to keep abreast of affairs among the elves of the Arbonesse and to gather intelligence on the River Court. The winners of the dancing contest at the winter revel each get to dance with the Holly Queen in turn. As they twirl around together, she will whisper in their ear, asking them if they are willing to wear her badge. Those that say yes may find themselves performing a service for the queen in the future and may even be whisked off to spend the summer months at her castle in the Shadow Realm.

The Holly Queen has been given Pumpkin Jack's candle by a pombero (see *Tome of Beasts*) named Gloamwalker who wanted to curry favor with her. If the characters ask her respectfully, she is willing to exchange it for a "small service." The Holly Queen has heard whispers of goblin raids and kidnappings in the human village of Riverbend and would like the characters to find out what is going on; see *Wrath of the River King*.

PUMPKIN JACK

This fey bogeyman makes his home in the Shadow Realm, venturing into the Material Plane to frighten mortals at the behest of his mistress, the Queen of Night and Magic. A terrifying figure with a grinning, evil-looking jack-o-lantern for a head and long, wicked claws, Pumpkin Jack steps out of the victim's wardrobe or appears from beneath their bed to scare them to death.

But Pumpkin Jack has a problem. After overindulging in Snargle's hallucinogenic mushroom pasties at the revel, Jack passed out and someone stole the burning candle inside his head. This candle was the source of Jack's power – the thing that allowed him to terrify mortals.

Utterly humiliated, Jack is a pathetic figure. If the characters talk to him, he tells them, through constant sobbing, what happened. He has since discovered his candle is now in the possession of the Holly Queen. If they are prepared to intercede with her on his behalf and recover his candle, he offers to scare an enemy for them or take them wherever they want to go in Midgard via the shadow roads.

Pumpkin Jack's normal stats are below. Without his candle, he cannot use *master of the shadow roads* or *frightful presence*.

PUMPKIN JACK

Medium fey, chaotic neutral

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 78 (12d8 + 24)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	18 (+4)	14 (+2)	10 (+0)	12 (+1)	18 (+4)

Saving Throws Wis +4

Skills Perception +4, Stealth +7

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical weapons

Condition Immunities charmed, frightened

Senses darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 14

Languages Common, Elvish, Umbral

Challenge 6 (2,300 XP)

Innate Spellcasting. Pumpkin Jack's innate spellcasting ability is Charisma. He can cast the following spell innately, requiring no material components:

At will: *misty step* (when in shadows, dim light, or darkness only)

Master of the Shadow Roads. Pumpkin Jack can use the shadow roads to travel to anywhere in Midgard in just 1d3 days. He arrives after dusk, or in a dimly lit or dark area, within 1d6 miles of the desired location. If Pumpkin Jack has been sent after a specific individual and has an item of their clothing or a lock of their hair, he appears within 30 feet of the target.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Pumpkin Jack makes two claw attacks.

Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 12 (2d8 + 4) slashing damage. If the target is frightened, it takes an additional 10 (3d6) psychic damage from this attack.

Frightful Presence. Each creature within 60 feet of Pumpkin Jack and aware of him must succeed on a DC 15 Wisdom saving throw or become frightened for 1 minute. A creature can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success. If a creature's saving throw is successful or the effect ends for it, the creature is immune to Pumpkin Jack's Frightful Presence for the next 24 hours.

REACTIONS

Relentless Stalker. When an adjacent creature moves away from Pumpkin Jack, he can use his reaction to cast *misty step*.

ZELOS CLOVENFOOT

Zelos is a lovelorn satyr. The object of his affections is Nyessa, a lovely dryad who lives in an ancient oak tree on the edge of the meadow. Unfortunately, the hot-headed Zelos has blown his chances with her by giving her a love potion he purchased from Anya Gristlegrot that wore off all too briefly, and left Nyessa in no doubt that she had been duped. Now, he sits slumped against a menhir, drowning his sorrows with mead.

There is a way the characters can help Zelos if they take pity on him. A gang of bugbears have been upsetting Nyessa by using her tree as target practice for their axe-throwing. The dryad charmed one of them and got him to stop, but there are still five left. Maybe Zelos can impress Nyessa with his bravery by driving the bugbears off? Of course, he should probably sober up first and the characters might need to offer some backup. If they can find a way to make Zelos into a hero, Nyessa will at least start speaking to the satyr again. If this transpires, Zelos will be overcome with gratitude, and will even be willing to kiss Gerribbit if the characters request it.

BLUEBELL COACHING INN

The old Bluebell is one of the small and cozy coaching inns that lie along the Great Northern Road through the depths of the Margreve forest. These inns are stocked with oats and hay, fresh water, warm stables, and taprooms full of cheer. Usually. If you don't offend the locals. And if the inn hasn't been overrun with flowering vine golems in a pollen-heavy springtime revel, or left abandoned by staff taking the day off to celebrate at the Dancing Stones.

The Bluebell is a bit peculiar in that it is simultaneously an inn catering to travelers, and a trading post between humans, alseid, pineys, bearfolk, and other deep woods races. Humans are often outnumbered on the smooth oaken benches of the taproom, and the menu offers both fragrant well water and road apples for the plantfolk who savor such things. Venison is rarely served when alseid are visiting, and large tubs of honey are kept for the bearfolk shaman, Otterskin, who sometimes visits with a full clan in tow.

At the Bluebell, the forest denizens come to chatter, to share their wisdom, and to sing. City folk rarely understand the place, though some few do stay for a year and a day before setting their feet once more on the Great Northern Road.

THE LEAFY OWNER: What few know about the Bluebell is that it is owned by the forest itself, for the elves who built it long ago bequeathed it to a gnarled, oak-like treant named Leafhair Rootglum to watch over. He has made it a gathering place for creatures normally found only in the deep woods. The inn has always been closely connected to the fey and the land, and some believe that the Bluebell is both the oldest of the coaching inns and the most heavily enchanted. Rootglum makes it a welcome place for sprites and drakes, redcaps and gnomes, aridni, and alseids—all are welcome, and humans often find themselves outnumbered by creatures more often found in the Summer Lands of the elves.

That said, the towering Leafhair rarely shows himself except in winter. In the growing season, he lives nearby in a patch of deep forest overrun with bulbous violets (see page 187) that devour trespassers and intruders. When he does appear after the first frost, he settles in a corner and is sometimes mistaken for part of the architecture. Rootglum is known for singing mournful, day-long songs of remembrance of all the trees dead and burned in the hearth. When questioned on topics of forest lore, he is invariably truthful and long-winded. He is known to disappear from the inn for a few days after midsummer and midwinter each year.

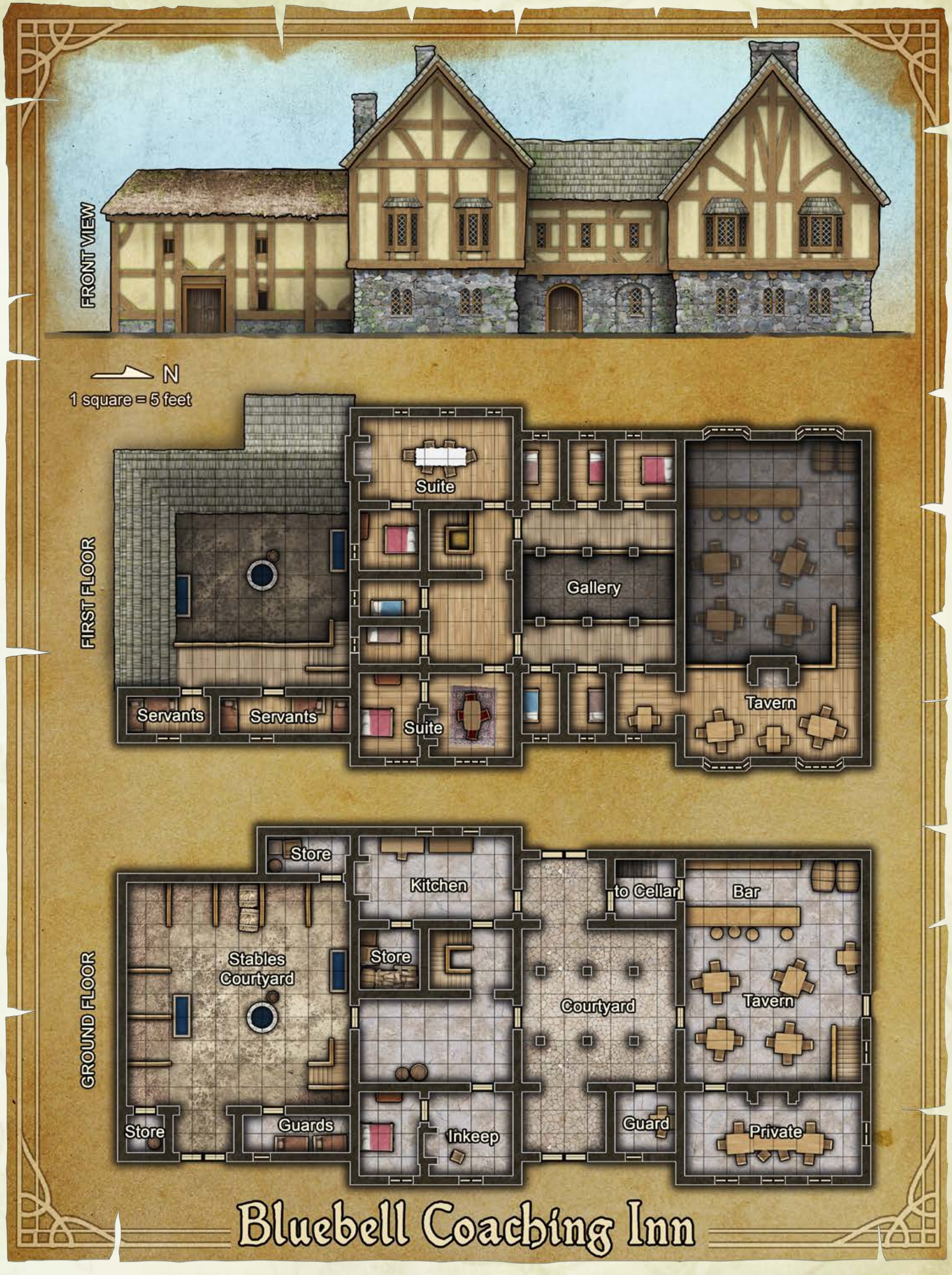
Barkeep: The barkeep, Hlara Goldfeather, always leaves a thimble of spirits next to the fireplace for the soot sprites in exchange for a clean fireplace and chimney once the embers die down. She is brave but prefers to stay out of other people's fights if she can. In winter, she'll just ask Rootglum to throw offenders out; in summer, she might ask one of the staff to spike their ale or one of the gnomes to bend their anger into calm with an enchantment.

One night a year, she clears the bar from sundown to sunup. That afternoon Hlara shutters doors and windows, and she and the cook prepare the finest meats, cheeses, mulled wines and ales—and scatter bones full of marrow on the floor. Some say that at these times, a blindfolded Hlara entertains the Lord of the Hunt (see *Tome of Beasts* page 184) and his hounds and minions. She covers her eyes because those who see the Lord are compelled to join the Hunt and never return to the Bluebell.

Cook and Kitchens: Shilo of the Argental, a human cook who has been at the inn for a full decade, is known for a superb goulash, for a masterful loaf of longbread, and for his dalliances in witchcraft. Shilo's strange, rat-like familiar, Knickers, has been known to

RUMORS AND ADVENTURES TABLE

D12	RESULT
1	The "Hourglass Mushroom" is a rare and gruesome fungus found rarely in the Margreve, and sometimes near the Tliggan Stream, about a mile from the Bluebell. If you eat it, you travel backward in time to a point one minute before you ate it. At the end of the minute, something terrible always happens to the other "you" whom you meet upon traveling back—only one version of you remains alive.
2	Fish Wanted: While staying at the old Bluebell, a pregnant river selkie named Pearpaws has a mighty craving for smoked carp. Her husband, Cloudsmoke, refuses to leave her side but is willing to pay good coin for any fish from the Margreve.
3	Tree Rot: Piney plantfolk arrive and ask for help; a peculiar disease is rotting the trees from the inside out. Plantfolk and natural plants alike are affected, and some believe the disease can turn living humanoids into plant creatures by gradually infecting them.
4	The Weeping Ogre: After being offered venison jerky, a timid ogre weeps into his bowl of porridge. He claims that the woods are full of deerfolk that have hunted him remorselessly ever since he mistakenly killed a young alseid that he mistook for a fawn. Perhaps the adventurers will take his sincere apologies to the alseid circle of druids?
5	Three Spinning Sisters: Travelers tell tales of three young women who spin and weave their way through the forest deep, gathering spider silk and starshine into luminous nets. When they meet a traveler, they seize the strands of that one's fate, to bind into their own weavings.
6	Stable Trouble: A leprechaun has painted the horses in her favorite color—green—several times, annoying the grooms. The grooms think someone should find a way to catch that joker and paint him purple.
7	Blooming Beams: At summer solstice or on midwinter day, all the wooden beams in the Bluebell bloom. Foliage fills the windows. Roots choke the fireplace. Holly sprouts from the door frames. Thorns puncture tapestries, while greedy mosses soak up kegs of beer.
8	A goblin merchant sells trinkets, general supplies, basic weapons, and minor magic items or potions. He pushes a handcart from inn to inn and from dungeon to dungeon, picking through the remains of dead adventurers along the way.
9	On summer nights, a white pegasus sometimes appears at the edge of the clearing by the Bluebell where the carts and wagons are circled up at night, seemingly waiting or searching for something. By sunrise, it has disappeared.
10	A wandering human merchant named Noromo Esdallefin swears that a great black owlbear is stalking him, its beak full of great teeth. He swears it is a stryxbear, but he's probably just seeing things. He comes to the inn to hide and sometimes to seek a bodyguard.
11	In winter and spring, the woods are filled with fairy fog, a joyous, delirious thing, full of music and lights. Mortals who stumble into it wake up to find themselves robbed, feverish, and often bruised or raw, but strangely happy. These mists are especially common near the Bluebell.
12	Every now and then, the veiled stag shows up. Tale-spinners claim it is a fallen alseid, one who has succumbed to the curse of vampirism. Others believe it is a novitiate druid, sworn to a wandering quest that is connected to Rootglum and the bulbous violets near the Bluebell.


FRONT VIEW
N
1 square = 5 feet
FIRST FLOOR
Suite
Gallery
Servants
Servants
Suite
Tavern
GROUND FLOOR
Store
Kitchen
to Cellar
Bar
Stables Courtyard
Store
Courtyard
Tavern
Store
Guards
Inkeep
Guard
Private
Bluebell Coaching Inn

watch over the entrance and hiss a warning at those who enter with ill wishes in their hearts.

The kitchen help includes a rotating group of halflings, gnomes, humans, and even pineys who wash dishes and peel vegetables, feed the hearth, carry water, stir pots, and turn the spit for long hours. All of them know they will be well fed and housed in comfort, though some might complain about Shilo's insistence on everyone doing a fair share of the work. The laziest often get a nasty bite from his rat familiar.

The Bluebell kitchen helpers rarely stay around, because the kitchen is frequently cursed or haunted. Pots and pans come to life and shout: "We've had it, you burning our faces and mouths; let's see how you like it!" It might be trickery and illusion, but mealtime has gone poorly of late.

In addition, a colony of enchanted, poisonous fly agaric mushrooms lives in the kitchen herb garden gathering information for the Moonlit King on the quality of beer, the names of travelers, and the strength of moonlight and starshine. Although they detect as magical, their link to the Moonlit King is tenuous and difficult to track. Culinary secrets of the Bluebell are sometimes stolen and presented at the Courts of the Shadow Fey.

GROOMS AND STABLE HANDS: All the Bluebell's grooms and stable hands are gnomes and halflings, who wear livery of robin's-egg blue and vie with one another to be helpful to every coach, cart, wagon, and mule train coming through. The head groom is Yllesh Doublebarker, a female gnome who seems very good at

NPC TABLE

D20	RESULT
1	Long escaped from the witch's coven that created her, the hyperintelligent ferret Keflute lounges on windowsills, masquerading as a community pet while begging for table scraps. In reality, she expertly eavesdrops and reports information to various merchant groups in Morgau and Doresh.
2	A young ravenfolk male claims to be His Feathered Majesty, Treeprince Geogawa, a deposed prince of the Morgau ravenfolk. He offers anyone who will listen a large share of a princely treasure he will soon have—if someone will but lend him a small sum of money to help him regain his rightful lands and fiefdom.
3	Occasionally, the blue-haired human bard, Hallistra, and her lover, Danafey the elven ranger, stop in for a bath and a meal. These two girls, united in love, search the Margreve for a spring of eternal youth (or perhaps simply explore the forest together).
4	Punara Leif, an elfmarked ranger, wears green dragon hide leather and is equipped only with his walking stick and his vast knowledge of the forest. He seeks his niece, Danafey, who has run away from home with a human friend.
5	The Willow Maiden, an ancient dryad, sometimes comes to sing sorrowful songs; her mere presence brings silence to the otherwise raucous hall. Her heart was broken by a former lover, and she feeds on the tears of her audience. There's never a dry eye when the Willow Maiden sings.
6	A ravenfolk, Moonglow, runs the Bluebell's night shift. She trades moonshine for stories from the night creatures—stories that her prodigious memory enables her to tell again and again in their original form. Of course, the creatures of the night are known for their lies and deception.
7	Garryth, the resident alehouse drake (see *Tome of Beasts* page 148), absolutely loves playing matchmaker. Though he is chronically tipsy, he means well, even when advocating matches that seem unlikely at best.
8	A seedy-looking gnome in the corner named Octavius Gloompuddle is peddling what he claims is a memory trapped in amber. Despite his claim that the memory leads to great riches, he is desperate to sell it and will take almost any offer.
9	Loopmutton Ningel, a gnomish bard, has spent the last decade living among the forest goblins in hopes of writing her dissertation: *Matriarchy in Goblin Society, a Treatise on Merit-Based Leadership in Goblin Tribal Communities*. She tends to have leaves in her hair, mud on her breeches, and ink on her fingers.
10	On new moon nights, Gackitch the roachling merchant delivers his odiferous wares from the Lands Below, such as darakhul brining salts, kobold spicy truffle-cheese, and his own people's nettle beer. Kobolds and the folk of Morgau are his best (and only) customers.
11	Xanry Honeywine, a halfling brewer of mead, has a new secret recipe that will provide magical benefits to the imbiber, but he needs help with an ingredient often found in a dragon's cave. Also, he needs people to fetch river water, harvest clover, and keep bears away from his brewing vat.

telling all the other grooms what to do and when—but never seems to lift a finger herself. Instead, Yllesh sits on a pile of straw and dreams of long-gone days.

PECULIARITIES OF THE BLUEBELL

A fey and elvish place with roots as deep as the Bluebell has a number of strange features beyond its rather unstable kitchen. Here are the most prominent.

The Cellars: Hundreds of albino spiders that dwell in the Bluebell's deep cellar carry rumors about the goings-on of the Ghoul Imperium—though only those who read Undercommon can decipher the web-scrawled messages.

Soul and Spirit Gambling Hall: An old passage leads from the kitchen through a window into a secret, invitation-only back room, where the Wild Roses, a degenerate local gnome gang, operates an illicit gambling den. The fey wager memories, songs, and promises of years of service. Gold and jewels won't get you a stake at these tables; a new melody or a willing period of servitude might.

Stables: The Acorn's Cap is a small pub located within the Bluebell stables that caters to the smallest denizens of the forest and is run by a particularly proud brownie barkeep named Moxi Umberson. Mice, hedgehogs, pixies, and rabbits are among its customers. A single lantern illuminates the Acorn's Cap, and most of its beverages fit in a thimble. Customers as large as gnomes and halflings are sometimes allowed in for a tipple.

Well: The old stable well has been a reliable source for fresh water for as long as anyone can remember. Recently, though, the younger grooms and children have heard voices calling out from the well. But so far, no adults have heard anything. The children and

D20	RESULT
12	Ulliam Bonedrinker, a halfling warrior with a wild shock of bone-white hair, sits in the corner, hunched over a cup of ale; he shudders despite the warm hearth, and with each loud noise he almost jumps out of his worn boots. (Some believe he is not a halfling at all, but rather a Niemheim gnome jumpy in Baba Yaga's backyard.)
13	A mushroom creature named Xilluck sits in a corner. This myconid (see *Tome of Beasts* page 300) drinks only hot water in a battered tin cup he brings in himself, but he pays for the water with ancient golden coins. He never speaks, but if approached he places two cracked bone dice on the table. Beat him two out of three, and he will lead you into the woods. Those who have won say that the visions he reveals can make a person's fortune, or break their spirit entirely.
14	Gray-haired and smelling of liniment, Lord Carvaren has retired from adventure a dozen times. His eyes are clear, however, and his enthusiasm infectious. The pastoral life of a minor noble is not for him, and the map he's showing you . . . Well, all he needs are a few brave souls to reach a legendary trove, the Golden Tomb of Saint Idracallos, patron saint of goldsmiths.
15	Trusk is a grumpy, middle-aged elfmarked man who likes to drink a pint by the hearth. He always wears dirty worker's clothes and has a pig's snout instead of a nose. If addressed, he always replies, "You think you know me? Well, you don't." A sour note in any evening.
16	Fenric Nine-Fingers, a bard in mourning, is reluctant to tell of his loss: his favorite lute, smashed by bandits. He still carries the pieces with him. A cup of fine wine might loosen his tongue (and a *mending* spell might restore the lute to wholeness).
17	The Green Knight of the Woods appears and challenges an arrogant character to a contest. If they can cut off the Green Knight's head with only three blows, they win the Knight's magnificent fey warhorse. If they fail, the Green Knight gets the chance to cut off the character's head.
18	Xanry Honeywine, a halfling brewer of mead, supplies the Bluebell with fine honey and is here with his latest delivery. It is smaller than usual, since several of his hives have recently gone missing.
19	Krasnak the beardless dwarf is sometimes found in the Bluebell talking to his axe, Exiter, which he insists is a cursed god, and acting as though he's drunk, even though he never orders drinks.
20	A rogue aridni (see *Tome of Beasts* page 26) named Tamarisk can be found nursing a thimble of excellent dark wine (she is a snob about vintages). She offers potions or gold, trying to find the elves her ancestors served—and she's trickster enough to slip a sleeping potion to a rowdy dwarf, bearfolk, or loudmouth. They fall asleep face first in their pudding.

grooms avoid the well entirely; their elders believe they are just shirking the work of pulling up the bucket.

Chambers: A tiny, carnivorous fey named Nibbler lives in the walls of the Bluebell—and it must consume its own weight in flesh once a month. Usually Rootglum or Hlara sets out a morsel of meat at night to satisfy the creature, but occasionally they forget, and a guest might awaken to find they are missing the tip of a finger or a toe.

RUMORS AND ADVENTURES TABLE

This table provides some grist for the conversations, rumors and plot hooks found at the Bluebell; some are just wild tales spun to amuse travelers, others are part of the fabric of the forest, and it's up to you to decide what's going into your version of the Margreve (you know what your players are likely to enjoy). Roll a d12 whenever a party member starts chatting with other patrons at the inn. Alternatively, choose a favorite tale and make sure the bartender fills them in with a bit of "not everyone knows this, but I'll tell you" inside story.

NPC TABLE

These named characters are frequent guests or permanent residents at the Bluebell, with hopes and schemes of their own. Choose a favorite or roll a d20 if the party seeks to recruit allies or quiz locals.

THE DANCING STONES OF THE MARGREVE

Although many ley line conjunctions and mystical crossroads are marked with a set of runestones or standing stones, the dancing stones of the Margreve are quite a bit more animated and dangerous than the typical circle of stone. They are not animated often, but when they are, the Dancing Stones come alive and hold various forms of celebrations, ceremonies of ley line manipulation, imprisonments, and even executions. Here are a few of the details of the Dancing Stones of the Margreve.

TIMING

The stones are well known for being active at solstices and equinoxes, and rather quiet most of the rest of the year, with a few important exceptions. The dancing stones can be awakened by a druid of 4th level or higher, by anyone who has the Ley Initiate feat (*Midgard Heroes Handbook* page 97), or by anyone casting a *meld into stone* spell on them.

Once awakened, the stones dance, and those who see them are sometimes also compelled to dance. Resisting this compulsion requires a DC 14 Wisdom saving throw; on a failed save, a creature dances until the stones return to rest some hours later. The effort of continuous movement is tiring, and those affected take 2d12 bludgeoning damage. On a successful save, the creature is immune to the dancing compulsion of this set of stones.

LOCALES AND KNOWN STONES

The sites associated with Derende are sometimes also associated with standing stones, but even more so are the various twists and flows of the Black Road and the Red Boar's Run, the two titanic ley lines that surge or trickle through the Margreve (see the *Midgard Worldbook* for more information on ley lines). At some times, these ley lines are quite easy for anyone with arcane training to detect; at other times they are wisps of magic, their strength dependent on the flow of arcane seasons that few understand.

The Black Road's standing stones are usually simple menhirs set in a triangle; at other times, two stones support a third as the lintel (in these cases, entering the Black Road requires passing through the doorway constructed by the stones). The five stone markers of the Black Road in the Margreve are:

1. **The Teller of Tales**: Three tall stones and one fallen one that are said to speak to visitors on occasion, if addressed politely or invoked through ritual. The three standing stones are always marked with runes, but rarely the same ones twice; the fallen stone is blank. A *read magic* spell is required to decipher them; sometimes they discuss the weather, sometimes they speak of danger and adventure, depending on how one stands with the Margreve.
2. **The Hungry Bears**: Two large and one small stone that lean toward each other, but that do not quite form a tripod. Popular among the bearfolk, who sometimes run off "trespassers" who squat at the site for too long.
3. **Mother's Maw**: Two side stones and a lintel that somehow suggests a giant's face or an open mouth. Rather intimidating, and also quite chilly underneath it, even in summer.
4. **The Silver Spinners**: Four stones with veins of some silvery material, said to be a site of rituals conducted by lunarchidna (see page 190). Web strands woven into nets sometimes hang like a canopy between the stones.

5. **The Three Soldiers**: Widely believed to be an elven general's burial mound, this small hillock stands over the surrounding forest and provides a view to the horizon. The three pale gray stones on top of the mound are heavily marked with elvish runes describing a warrior's life.

For the more direct line of Red Boar's Run, the stones are a bit more intimidating; offerings to dark gods such as the Hunter and Marena are often found at these stones, and (more rarely) offerings to Sarastra, Holda, or Yarila and Porevit. The stones of Red Boar's Run are all marked with elvish runes, sometimes defaced in the northerly reaches running through Morgau to the Nieder Strait.

The three best-known stones of the Red Boar's Run in the Margreve are:

1. **The Spires**: The tallest of the Margreve's stones, each of the seven spires stands more than 30 feet tall. Made of a pale gneiss, they are aligned to the stars and the sun, and druids often come here at the solstice or the equinox for particular rituals and measurement of the seasons. It is said that one can step directly from the top of the spires onto Red Boar's Run, and emerge at the shore of the Nieder Strait or the palace at Cronepisht in a day.
2. **The Queen's Daughters**: These three stones surround the entrance to a cairn that was looted long ago. The stones sometimes weep golden tears that smell of pine sap, and that dry into precious amber.
3. **The Coven**: These deep reddish-brown stones are streaked with black and gold inclusions, and each is carved with spirals, stars, and other symbols. There are usually three or four stones in the Coven, but visitors have reported as many as six stones gathered; it seems that some members of this set of stones do wander off. The invocation of the ley line road here seems to be much easier for female ley line initiates than for males (females' caster rolls are made with advantage).

In addition to these ley-line anchoring stones, dozens if not hundreds of lesser stones are scattered through the Margreve, some mossy and forgotten, others still tended by the alseid or the bearfolk. Here are five of the better-known ones for you to place as you wish in the Margreve.

1. **Gentlemen of the Gate**: These four pink and gray stones and two lintels create two portals and are widely believed to be connected to a trickster

god, possibly Baccho or Loki or even Volund in a whimsical mood. Gamblers believe the site is lucky and make pilgrimages to it when their luck has turned sour. Some bandits likewise find the place congenial, since servants of the law seem to have great difficulty finding these particular stones.

2. **Troll Picture Stones**: Simple tan stones carved with images of birds and deer, the troll picture stones were once venerated by trollkin and other darker fey creatures. They seem to have been abandoned since the Retreat; though power still hums at the site, only a very few trollkin and some ogres know how to channel it. An ogre shaman named Snowdrop lived there for a time, but seems to have wandered away; a trollkin band led by a young shaman has been tracking her to learn some of the tales and spells associated with the picture stones.
3. **Fish Stones**: These stones are always found in water, usually in Grandfather's Tears but occasionally in a pond or on a marshy hummock. They are five blue-gray stones, carved with images of fish, frogs, and a crab. The stones produce an ear-shattering array of croaking noises in the spring, and some believe a minor ley line connects these stones to the court of the River King in the Arbonesse.
4. **Antler Hill Stones**: Beloved by the alseid and considered sacred ground for the deerfolk, the Antler Hill Stones are relatively small and round, as smooth as fine-wrought pillars. Each is carved with either a set of antlers at the top or a flowery set of ferns and greenery, and there are more than a dozen such stones. The alseid say each one is the grave of a grand druid from among their people, and the hill itself is a place of worship and remembrance each year at the autumn equinox. The spirits of these druids sometimes animate the Antler Hill Stones to strike down interlopers who visit the stones.
5. **Three Silent Lads**: These stones all lean a bit, and two of them lean against each other for support. They are usually found on the western edge of the Margreve, between Obertal and Valach, and when discovered they invariably attract a pilgrimage of Ninkash worshippers, who consider them propitious and holy. Their small pilgrim caravan usually rolls up with some carts of ale and offers an impressive service with a hundred holy toasts; when the pilgrims wake up the next morning, the Three Silent Lads have moved on.

LEY LINE WARPING

The dancing stones are often awakened to help shift a ley line in some useful fashion; their dancing can enhance, dampen, or reroute a ley line. Doing so is a magical ritual called *stone river*, which works as shown below.

STONE RIVER

4th-level transmutation (ritual)

Casting Time: 1 action

Range: Touch

Components: V, S, M (standing stones)

Duration: 8 hours or until spell cast

You call on a circle of standing stones to assist you in shifting the flow of magical energy though ley lines for the duration. Doing so requires a successful Intelligence (Arcana) or Wisdom (Religion) check; on a failed check, the change to a ley line does not happen. A successful check allows one of the following changes, depending on the check total.

CHECK	CHANGE
11	Extinguish weak ley line
12	Modify weak ley line (change its character)
13	Move weak ley line (up to 2d12 miles + caster level)
12	Dampen strong ley line to a weak one
14	Modify strong ley line (change its character)
15	Move strong ley line (up to 1d12 miles + caster level)
16	Dampen titanic ley line to a strong one
18	Modify titanic ley line (change its character)
20	Move titanic ley line (up to caster level in miles)

After you have successfully manipulated a ley line, you can call on its energies to empower other spells. Once a single spell is cast with the modified ley line, your manipulation of it ends, and the ley line collapses back into its usual shape and channels.

STONE FAMILIARS

On rare occasions, a dancing stone might choose to follow a wizard as a familiar or a druid as a companion. A dancing stone familiar is somewhat oblong or spherical, and moves by rolling or dancing. It is about 1 foot tall (size Tiny), with 20 hit points, AC 18, Strength 8, Constitution 10, Dexterity 16, Intelligence 6, Wisdom 6, and Charisma 3. Though it avoids combat, if attacked it can respond with a melee slam attack at +6 to hit, dealing 1d4 + 2 bludgeoning damage on a hit.

Dancing stone familiars weigh from 80 to 95 pounds.

Magic in the Margreve

Like any living thing, the Margreve wants to thrive and grow. But unlike a normal forest, the Margreve requires more than just sun, rain, and soil. The Margreve hungers for magical energy, which it acquires by absorbing some of the power of every spell cast within its borders.

The Margreve's power to siphon magic affects all spells cast within its borders. All spell save DCs have a –1 penalty and all spell attack rolls have a –1 penalty. Baba Yaga is a notable exception to this effect. There may be others at the DM's discretion.

The dissipation of siphoned energy into the forest frequently manifests visually, in a fashion associated with the spell's school or its niche within a school. In some cases, casters experience more than just a loss of power from the siphoning. During the process, eldritch Margreve energy commingles with a cast spell's energy, noticeably twisting the spell's normal effect. The visual effects and side effects (if any) for spells of particular types are described below.

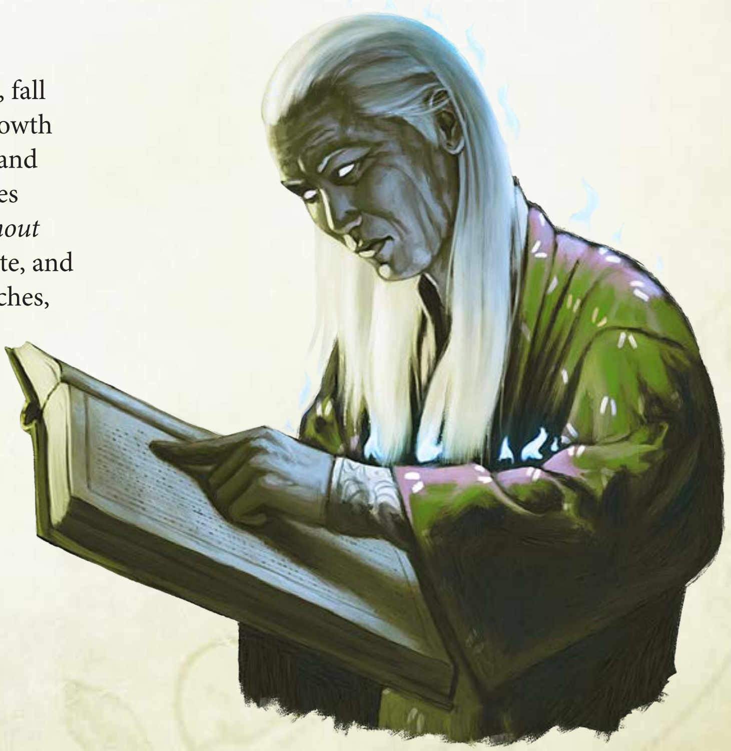
ABJURATION

Wisps of abjuration magic curl around the target, fall to the ground, and strengthen grass and undergrowth with protective force. For 1 round per spell level and in a radius of 1 foot per spell level, trodden grasses spring back and retain no footprints (as *pass without trace*), underbrush slides past the bite of a machete, and evocation magic leaves no mark on a place it touches, unless a caster targets such a spot directly.

CONJURATION (HEALING)

Low-level cure spells cause grass to grow, weeds to sprout, and buds to open in a circle centered on the target. Days after the blood has soaked into the forest floor, a perspicacious adventurer can still detect the site of a battle by the lush circles that dot the landscape. More powerful spells create wider circles or cause more pronounced growth. For example, *raise dead* causes a young tree to sprout beneath the corpse so that the target awakens in its boughs.

Side Effect: Low-level healing spells like *cure wounds* leave tiny galls and patches of bark on the target for 1 day per spell level. High-level spells, like *heal* and *raise dead*, have profound (but harmless) effects on the target's physiology, practically covering the target in wet bark and knotted roots. Adventurers who survive the forest often emerge as "tree men," covered with the telltale signs of curative magic.



CONJURATION (SUMMONING)

When a conjuration spell that brings forth other creatures is cast, a transparent image of the creature(s) summoned screams out of the caster's face and melts, wide-mouthed, into the ground.

Side Effect: The Margreve usually chooses the creatures summoned through the use of conjuration spells. A spellcaster can bring about their own choice by including a tooth, claw, or other body part (not hair)—from the desired creature type as an additional material component. During the siphoning process, the forest's aura of wildness intertwines with the spell's energy, giving summoned creatures a 10 percent chance to gain the confused condition before their first opportunity to act.

CONJURATION (TELEPORT)

When a *teleport* spell is cast in the forest, a loop of silver cord drifts out of the target, like a fishing line taken by the tide. Its direction and length provide some indication as to how far off target the spell will be.

Side Effect: Ancient stone circles, sacred groves, siphoned "spell batteries," and ley lines tug and distort the path to the caster's desired destination. Subtract 20 and add the caster's level to rolls on the spell's familiarity table. If the Margreve is friendly toward the caster, add 10. If hostile, subtract 20. The modifier applies if the origin and/or destination are within the Margreve. Results below 1 are treated as a 1 and results above 100 are treated as 100.

DIVINATION

When an *augury* spell is cast in the forest, vines and underbrush withdraw or creep toward the caster depending on the woe or weal of the divination respectively. For other divination spells, the plant life moves inward as if intent on the result of the casting.

Side Effect: Two or more divination spells cast in the same round in the Margreve have a 10 percent chance of crossing wires, providing all parties with inaccurate (and sometimes wildly inappropriate) information.

EVOCATION

Depending on the kind of magical energy an evocation spell produces, frost covers the ground (cold), fire singes vegetation (fire), light glows and fades into the trees (light), the canopy closes to treasure the darkness (darkness), leaves kick up at the caster's feet (air), sparks arc between the caster's legs or nearby trees (electricity), and so on.

ILLUSION

Illusory sounds and images created in the Old Margreve often have minor details added, as if the forest were trying to fit them in somehow. Moss grows on illusory trees, brambles curl around illusory walls, and chirping birdsong accompanies ghost sounds. The DC to disbelieve such spells is increased by 1.

Non-Caster Casters

Every intelligent creature born in the Margreve and raised in the Old Ways treasures an intimate magical connection with the forest. Even those who have no talent for the magical arts cradle a tiny spark of Margrevian magic in their soul. This spark allows them to cast a single cantrip once daily. The spellcasting ability for the cantrip depends on the spell list it was taken from: Charisma for bard, sorcerer, or warlock; Wisdom for cleric or druid; or Intelligence from wizard. If the cantrip is on multiple spell lists the player chooses of those available.

The spell is always the same for an individual, and the material components, gestures, or rhyme necessary to cast the spell are unique to the individual. The spell represents both the character's relationship with the forest and the expenditure of cantrip magic that feeds the forest. Through this magic, one Margrevian may have a knack for keeping blades sharp, another for locating game, and another for predicting storms or the arrival of foreigners.

THE MARGREVE SPELLS

Margreve spells are taught to piney druids, wizards, and rangers during an apprenticeship. Sometimes, wandering priests of the old elven gods (and especially Holda, Baccholon, and Yarila and Porevit) will teach such spells to elfmarked humans, to druids, and to those who remember and placate the forest spirits.

FEED THE FOREST

1st-level evocation (all)

Casting Time: 1 action

Range: Self

Components: V, S

Duration: 1 hour

When cast in the Margreve, this spell feeds a constant trickle of magical energy into the forest. For the duration of the spell, you can cast spells of 1st level or lower without the forest siphoning power from the spell as it normally does. The forest remains aware of you and may interdict or attack you for other reasons.

At Higher Levels. If *feed the forest* is cast with a spell slot of 2nd level or higher, the duration increases 1 hour per slot level above 1st, and the level of magic masked is equal to the level of the slot expended.

POREVIT'S MANTLE

1st-level transmutation (druid, ranger)

Casting Time: 1 action

Range: Touch

Components: V, S, M

Duration: 1 hour

You take on the physical characteristics of the terrain around you. Grass and tiny mushrooms sprout in your hair, moss beards your chin, and your flesh takes on the mottled hue of leaf green and bark brown. This effect provides a +2 bonus to Stealth checks in the appropriate terrain.

At Higher Levels. If this spell is cast with a 2nd level or higher spell slot, one additional creature is affected per slot above 1st.

SNAP THE LEASH

2nd-level enchantment (druid, sorcerer, wizard)
Casting Time: 1 action
Range: 30 feet
Components: V, S, M (a used leash or similar object)
Duration: Instantaneous

Choose a beast that you can see within range. If the beast's Intelligence is 4 or higher, the spell fails. The beast must make a Wisdom saving throw; on a failed save, you remove the shackles of domestication from the creature's mind, causing it to entirely forget being broken or trained. Mounts refuse to be ridden, and other animals forget any tricks learned and obedience taught. Other memories are not affected, so creatures may remain drawn to those who have treated them kindly and aggressive toward those who have harmed them. The animal can be domesticated again, but the trainer must start from scratch.

This spell is only partly effective against animal companions, familiars, and paladin mounts. Although itremoves any tricks such creatures know, the bond between creature and master is otherwise unaffected.

SPY MY SHADOW

2nd-level transmutation (sorcerer, wizard, warlock)
Casting Time: 1 action
Range: Self
Components: V
Duration: Concentration, up to 1 minute

You whisper a fey rhyme to your shadow, bringing it to life as a tenebrous spy that can slip under doors, between shutters, and through the narrowest of cracks. You can stretch your shadow up to ten times your height and move it as you desire. It remains two-dimensional and cannot interact with physical objects.

You can spy through your shadow's eyes and ears as if they were your own, but magically enhanced senses do not work through this spell. You can utilize the Stealth skill normally if trying to keep your shadow's presence a secret: it gains advantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks in dim lighting but disadvantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks in brightly lit areas.

STEP LIKE ME

1st-level transmutation (ranger, sorcerer, wizard)
Casting Time: 1 action
Range: 60 feet
Components: V, S, M (blood, hair, or a personal item of target)
Duration: 24 hours

Choose a creature within one size category of yourself that you can see within range. The target must succeed on a Constitution saving throw or you steal its footsteps. For the duration of the spell, you leave the tracks of the target, while it leaves tracks as if it were you. In addition, those capable of identifying creatures through tremorsense mistake you for a creature of the target's kind.

YARILA'S BOUNTY

5th-level transmutation (druid, ranger)
Casting Time: 1 action
Range: Touch
Components: V, S
Duration: Concentration, up to 1 hour

The sun's life-giving energy heals and sustains your body. For the duration, you heal 1 hit point at the start of each of your turns whenever you are bathed in direct sunlight; 30 minutes or more of exposure also provides a day's normal nourishment.

In dim light, the spell's healing is reduced to 1 hit point per minute. Normal or magical darkness suppresses the spell's effect entirely. While in sunlight, the target can ignore 1 level of exhaustion (the level is only temporarily removed).

Undead are especially vulnerable to this spell. If a targeted undead fails its Wisdom save, it gains the poisoned condition and suffers radiant damage instead of healing while in sunlight.

Hollow

By Richard Pett

The one sure way to tell if the baby-eating Margreve Witch is at hand is to watch your milk—if it curdles suddenly, then she is near. If so, never answer a knocking on your door at midnight, for it is sure to be her Hollow Man come to collect your head!

—Old wives' tale of Margreve

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

I once served the Margreve Witch, as her guardian and protector, until one day, when I heard singing and staggered through the forest to serve a new mistress. I have no words for what I felt, nor a mouth to form them if I had, but I know what I have to do: I must serve the ancient tree that is dying—will die—unless I help her. The forest stirs, and soon things that should have remained dead beneath the rust carpet of fallen pine needles will awaken once more. She whispers to me, this Singing Tree, and the heads I bring give her a voice. With that voice she can talk once more, calling upon her legs to chase you, her hands to throttle you, and her teeth to bite you. I am the Hollow Man, and soon the harvest begins. . . .

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

"Hollow" is a 1st-level adventure set on the edges of Margreve Forest. The adventure takes place in and around Levoča—a village plagued by a wooden construct called the Hollow Man, made of trees and spit and babies' tears. It collects heads for its mistress, the Singing Tree, a magical tree that awakens the minds and the anger of animals.

The adventure begins when the characters enter Levoča, where things are amiss: a bull has killed its owner, a young girl has disappeared, and on the very night of the characters' arrival, a pack of wolves menaces the village.

Soon the culprit—the Hollow Man—is found as it begins knocking on doors at midnight with its sickle, eager to collect heads for the Singing Tree. The Hollow Man effectively besieges Levoča, and the locals resolve to kill it.

Even if the Hollow Man and its wards are dealt with, the animals remain angry because the vile Singing Tree continues to call in the dark. The characters must locate the tree and destroy it, facing a dense forest alive with angry creatures before a final confrontation with the Singing Tree herself.

STARTING THE ADVENTURE

The characters need only to arrive at Levoča for the events of this adventure to occur. Perhaps Levoča is simply a stop on their journey, or their first steps in exploring the Margreve.

The adventure begins as the characters approach the village late one afternoon, just as the sun begins to drop behind the pines.

A WORD OF WARNING

The Hollow Man, a construct made of twisted wood, is a challenge rating 5 creature that would, under normal circumstances, easily wipe out a party of 1st-level adventurers, even with the help of the villagers.
The intent of this adventure is to create a seemingly unassailable foe, forcing the characters and villagers to work together to overcome it using brains as well as brawn. Do not use the Hollow Man as an excuse to kill the party but, instead, as a precursor to other foes that lie within the forest. The Hollow Man is interested simply in harvesting heads for the Singing Tree and does not sully its weapon with un-chosen blood.

Running an adventure such as this one can provide an interesting change of pace, making characters think twice about boldly entering the Margreve while assuming that they can deal with whatever lies within.

LEVOČA: A TROUBLED VILLAGE

As characters approach the village, read or paraphrase the following description:

> The muddy byway you are on winds its way through the forest and eventually reaches a damp clearing where the sun struggles to reach the ground through a canopy of forlorn trees. About thirty moldering, thatched cottages sit in this clearing. Local children chase pigs and sheep in play, but they all rush toward you. They take your hands and lead you into the dark village, the clearing around which is watched by hundreds of scarecrows made from bones and branches wound together.

Levoča is a community of 75 humans that subsists on farming and hunting. Ostensibly, leadership is awarded by default to Brother Arkadi, who is a follower of Porevit and Yarila; in truth, however, the brother is little more than a weak-willed old man.

Houses are made of wattle and daub (AC 10, 10 hp, resistance to piercing damage) and have thatched roofs built around a central stone chimney. Doors are simple (successful DC 11 Strength check to break down) and held shut by a latch. Each one-room house has two to five windows with shutters (1 hp each).

Nowadays, Levoča is a troubled village; the normally sleepy village has been plagued by unexpected events recently.

Allies: Although the characters can overcome events in and around the village themselves, things may be easier with help. A torch-wielding mob is more likely to be capable of driving the Hollow Man into a fiery grave, and any extra muscle is always useful for low-level characters. The locals begin with an indifferent attitude toward the characters, and they are treated as a single entity for the sake of resolving any Charisma checks. Each adult resident of Levoča is a **commoner** with 4 hit points.

If the total of all the characters‘ Charisma modifiers is +4 or higher, they have advantage on their Charisma checks to get the aid of the villagers. If the total of all the characters‘ Charisma modifiers is –4 or lower, they have disadvantage on their Charisma checks.

A total of three citizens are willing to help the characters at the start of the adventure; this number rises to six if the locals' attitude improves to friendly. If the locals' attitude becomes hostile at any time, the characters receive no help.

As events move on, the following modifiers should be added to any attempt to get the locals' help through Charisma checks:

TABLE 1–1: CHARISMA CHECK MODIFIERS

For being caught digging up Yurt's body	–4
For each villager killed (whether by characters' hands or not)	–1
For each wolf killed by a character	+1
For helping to drive off the wolves	+1
For rallying the locals into firing at wolves, not shadows	+2
For returning Karda's body and destroying the swarm	+2
For telling Drash of the connection between the bull's madness and the forest	+2

Although the characters can probably count on the support of at least some of the locals, who gladly help in any reasonable way, when things start to get scary, they might lose heart and run away. The locals will stick around if the characters make a successful Charisma check (DC 10 if the locals are friendly, DC 12 if indifferent, and DC 15 if hostile). For each villager who was left unconscious or dying after any dangerous encounter, the DC increases by 1.

Events: This adventure is run as a series of daily events linked by the Hollow Man and the Singing Tree. Events beyond day 6 are not included but should follow the pattern of the previous days.

Wildlife: The sudden madness of animals, caused by the Singing Tree, is a backdrop to events in "Hollow." Use animals to provide hints to the characters that all is not well, and expand upon the listed events as you see fit. For example, the village is full of domestic animals, and though some have made their saves against the Singing Tree's effects, some have not—or they may fail at various points in the adventure. You can have some fun with unexpected nips from dogs and scratches from cats, but keep these things as occasional features; it could soon become tiresome to the players if every goat they pass butts them or every bird that flies past pecks them.

Familiars and animal companions are special, since they are summoned animals. Each such animal must make a DC 12 Charisma saving throw at midnight each day (using its own or its master's Charisma modifier,

whichever is higher). On a failed save, it becomes enraged by the Singing Tree's song and attacks random targets nearby, including the summoner. The creature reverts to an ordinary animal and flees into the forest, returning on a later night if it succeeds on the save or if the Singing Tree is silenced, otherwise remaining wild. Assume that such companions come to no harm while they are wild.

AREA 1: THE OLD LIME KILN

> The collapsed remains of an old lime kiln lie here.

Less than a decade ago, the locals planned to use limestone quarried nearby to make quicklime, which has various purposes. The kiln fell into disuse over a series of three bad summers and now sits here slowly collapsing.

The kiln is a 5-foot-wide shaft 20 feet deep; an exposed chimney top embedded in the hillside links to a funnel-shaped burning area 10 feet across at the base, which is loaded with fuel through an 18-inch-wide crawl hole.

The kiln can be repaired. Doing so requires two successful DC 10 Dexterity checks using mason's tools; one attempt per person per day is allowed, and on a failed check, the day's work is lost. Another day's work is required to fill the kiln with fuel and fire it for 8 hours.

Characters who fall into a burning kiln take 3d6 fire damage per round and begin to suffocate. The only escape is through the crawl hole, which requires a successful DC 10 Strength (Athletics) check to negotiate.

AREA 2: THE WITCH PIT

> A pair of mangy-looking ducks calls this perfectly circular pond home. A timber stake mysteriously rises from its center, and three rusted manacles dangle from the top of the stake.

The Witch Pit, left over from ancient times, was once used to burn witches. It has not been used for many years and has slowly filled with water and muck. A character who succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check notices that the ironwood stake shows signs of severe scorching.

If the water is removed, an act that takes five workers at least three days, the 15-foot-deep, 10-foot-wide pit is revealed in all its glory, complete with more rusting manacles and vague stone markings on its smooth walls.

Another day's work would place enough fuel in the pit to let it burn for 8 hours. Characters who fall into the burning pit take 3d6 fire damage per round and begin to suffocate. Escaping from the pit requires a successful DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check.

AREA 3: THE WOOD WARDS

> The edges of the village are thick with strange figures staring outward, scarecrows of sack and stick. Each has been carefully fashioned to appear angry and wakeful.

There are nearly one hundred **wood wards** (see page 62) on the edge of the village. Traditionally, one is placed each year just as winter arrives to keep away evil spirits. They are significant to the locals, who would look upon their destruction—even in light of the Hollow Man animating them—as sacrilege.

AREA 4: THE CHAPEL TO POREVIT AND YARILA, THE GREEN GODS

> A fresh grave stands in the lonely graveyard beside this small, simple chapel, whose roof is sagging dangerously.

This chapel with a cornucopian altar is used by Brother Arkadi to conduct religious ceremonies. The fresh grave is that of Olay Yurt.

Brother Arkadi, the senile clergyman (NG male human **commoner**), is very old; his sight is almost gone, and his hearing is practically nonexistent. He stays in Levoča to give the occasional service, to marry and bury people, and to bless festivals. That Arkadi is the elder of the village is not in doubt; he has become so senile, however, that in effect Levoča has no leader.

AREA 5: ANNA'S PLACE

> This large farmstead has an attached barn, complete with an iron weather vane.

Anna's place is roomy, and the widow allows travelers to stay in her barn for a very modest fee—providing they behave. Anna might even cook for travelers if they can change her indifferent attitude to friendly, although this mother of three has a difficult time making her food stretch far.

The barn is 20 feet square with a large, simple door that can be broken open with a successful DC 10 Strength check. The hayloft is 10 feet above the floor and filled with hay in autumn, a supply that depletes to nothing by the following spring.

AREA 6: KARL'S PLACE

> This small farmstead has a huge amount of timber drying in an open outhouse, next to which is a large, sturdy storage shed.

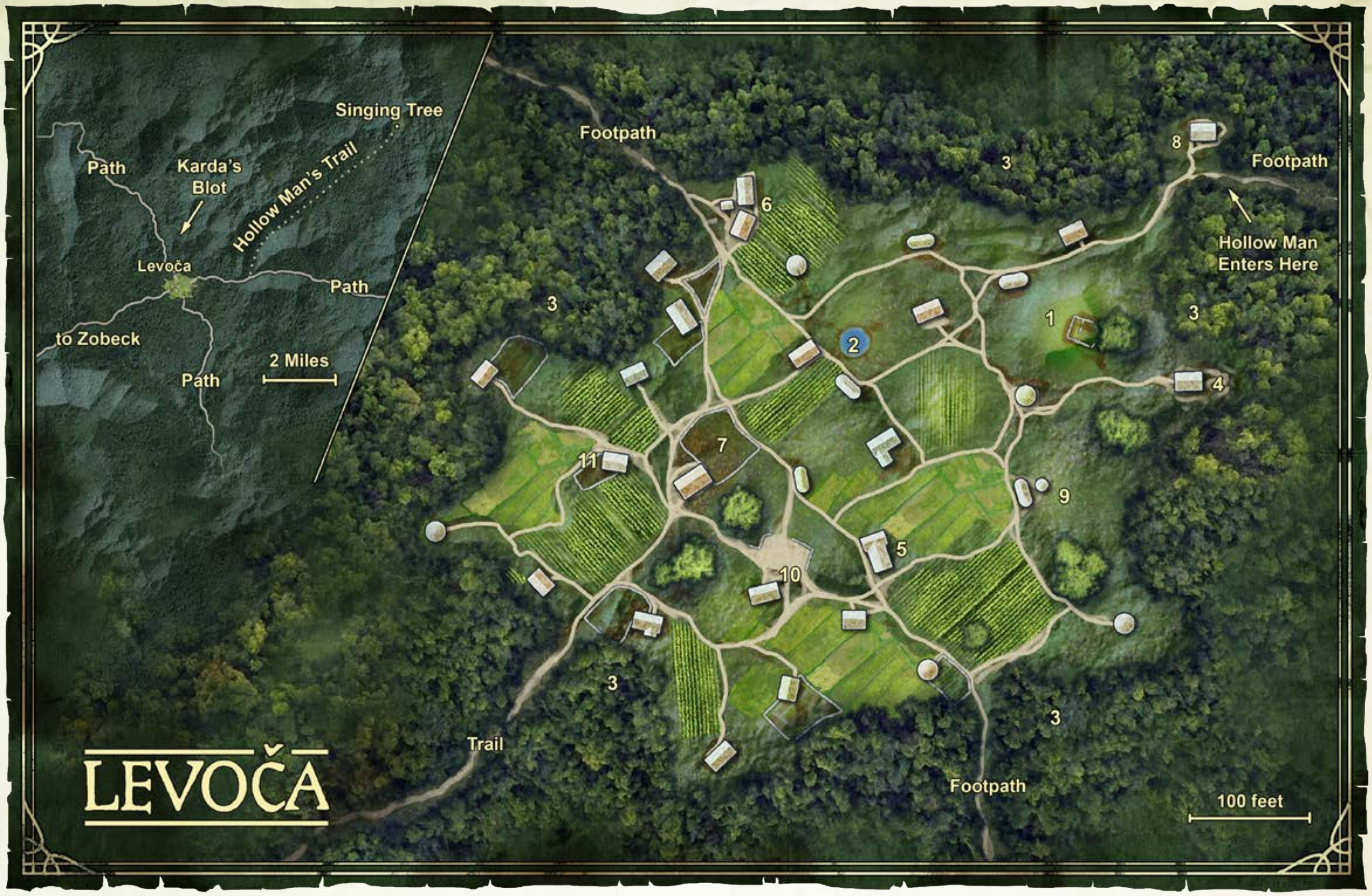
Karl, dour and age-weary, fires charcoal once a fortnight by building a large timber mound; the wood is covered with soil and turf before firing. This process takes Karl about 2 days, and the resulting charcoal is then sold.

Karl has enough charcoal and timber to fill both the lime kiln and the Witch Pit once (or one of them twice), but he does not give it up readily unless he becomes friendly with the characters or someone offers him the right price (around 25 gp).

AREA 7: OLAY YURT'S HOUSE

> This small croft has a pair of walled fields at the rear.

Yurt was killed 3 days ago by his bull. Yurt's son, who lives on the other side of the village, spends the first few days of this adventure removing his father's belongings and trying to decide what to do about the bull.



8. KOSTYA'S FARMSTEAD: FIRST VICTIM (DAY 2)

9. BAČA'S FARM: SECOND VICTIM (DAY 3)

10. KOREŇ'S CROFT: THIRD VICTIM (DAY 4)

11. CHROBÁK'S PLACE: FOURTH VICTIM (DAY 5)

Each of these four locations, areas 8 through 11, is a standard farmstead as detailed above. Unless it is prevented from doing so, the Hollow Man visits each of these locations in turn to claim another head for the Singing Tree.

BEFORE TODAY

Unbeknownst to the locals, the Singing Tree's cries have already begun their unsettling effect on local animals in the events described below, both of which started to unfold before the characters arrive.

THE ANGRY BULL

Olay Yurt was a good man in his late forties. He had achieved something of a reputation as the village comedian and always had a tall tale to tell or a yarn to spin. Yurt lived alone in his house (area 7) since the death of his wife during childbirth 22 years ago.

Yurt bred cows and calves to eat and sell, and his bull was his pride and joy. It had sired over forty calves and made Yurt a good living and a sizable belly.

All that changed three days ago.

Yurt was tending his beloved bull, preparing for a new batch of cows he expected to buy soon, when the bull attacked him. It's unclear what happened exactly, but the entire village was alerted to Yurt's yelling. It took the villagers several minutes to rescue Yurt from being gored and stomped, so fierce was the bull, and by that time the animal had mangled the body beyond help.

The locals buried Yurt yesterday; his grave can be seen outside the chapel. Yurt's son, Drash, initially tried to kill the bull but was driven back; he is now busy emptying his father's house, intending to burn it when he's done. At that time, Drash intends to walk into the field where the bull is confined and slaughter it with a hunting spear. It takes Drash a total of three days to empty his father's house.

Drash is not inclined to talk, and any Charisma checks the characters make involving him take a −1 penalty. The locals unhappily relate what little they know, but any talk of digging up Yurt and casting *speak with dead* on the remains is looked upon with horror. With a successful Charisma (Persuasion) check, the characters learn that the bull has never attacked anyone before—indeed, occasionally brave lads rode its back.

Creature: The **bull** (see page 60) is in the field at the back of Yurt's house. The field is 50 feet square and edged with stone walls 5 feet high. If subjected to a *speak with animals* spell, the bull is decidedly aggressive, and the only information the characters learn is that it keeps hearing a maddening singing noise coming from the forest. It recalls nothing of the attack. Wisdom (Animal Handling) checks involving the bull are made with disadvantage. The bull has advantage on saving throws against the *animal friendship* spell. Characters might notice (with a successful DC 17 Wisdom [Perception] check) that every few minutes the bull suddenly looks up and bellows (because of the Singing Tree). A character who succeeds on a DC 10 Intelligence (Nature) check recalls that it is not unusual for a bull to become aggressive during spring, but at other times, such behavior is unusual.

If Drash attempts to kill the bull, play out the combat. If the characters point out that it might be something in the forest that has driven the bull mad, Drash agrees to wait until the characters find out more information.

THE MISSING GIRL

Six-year-old Karda often goes into the forest in search of truffles with her beloved pig. Her parents have never minded, since she rarely came back empty-handed, and truffles fetch high prices. And Karda was a careful little girl who never went deeper than the edges of the forest.

Last evening she didn't return, and as the characters arrive in town, her mother Jarka is in the woods searching for her while her father tends to their farm.

Karda actually strayed a little farther than usual into the forest this last time, following her pig as it went on the trail of truffles. But now the pig succumbed to the maddening noise of the Singing Tree and fled. Karda gave chase and stumbled as she ran beneath a tree where a beehive hangs. The **swarm of bees** (see page 61), also angered by the singing, stung the poor girl to death.

The characters can follow Karda's tracks with a successful Wisdom (Survival) check. The DC begins at 10 and increases by 1 for each day that has passed since she ran away.

Creatures: Karda's body lies at the foot of a large beech tree. The characters can easily see that she has been stung to death (no check required). Characters with a passive Perception score of 13 or higher notice the beehive, which hangs 15 feet up in the branches.

Development: The swarm is fierce, and it attacks anyone who comes within 20 feet of the tree. The swarm is not easily deterred and attacks until reduced to 0 hit points, at which point it dissipates. The bees do not give chase beyond 30 feet from their tree.

With a successful DC 10 Intelligence (Nature) check, the characters realize that bees normally do not swarm and attack unless they are provoked.

If the characters do not intervene, Jarka finds her daughter's body on day 3 and is also killed by the swarm.

DAY 1: THE WOLVES

Allow the characters to explore the village, remembering that it is early evening when they arrive. As the evening wears on, wolf howls are heard near the village, and as midnight approaches, a pack of six **wolves** nears. The villagers light torches and arm themselves with shortbows, standing watch with the wood wards.

Use this encounter to show how disorganized and scared the villagers are: there are twenty-four in all, divided into two groups. The villagers are a greater danger to themselves than to the wolves, firing arrows hastily into the dark, dashing out into each other's line of fire, and accidentally setting fire to crofts. If necessary, have Anna (see area 5) plead with the characters to help the locals.

This incident gives you a chance to introduce the villagers as a mob using torches and driving opponents away (see Destroying the Hollow Man for more information). At some point in the episode, have a group of twelve locals rush a wolf, driving it back and demoralizing it until it flees.

Development: The wolves are angered by the Singing Tree and behave with uncharacteristic aggression. They stalk 50 feet from the village (their Dexterity [Stealth] checks are made with advantage). At intervals of 1d6 rounds, two or three of them surge in to attack, withdrawing in the round after. If three wolves are slain, the rest flee.

The villagers jump at their own shadows, fire shots at random noises, and dash around foolishly. They are armed with shortbows, and each round, several of them (1d4 + 1) fire into the woods at what they believe to be wolves. If a villager sees a wolf (by succeeding on a Wisdom [Perception] check contested by the wolf's Dexterity [Stealth] check), he or she has a chance to hit it; otherwise, the villagers' arrows are wasted as they fearfully shoot at shadows. At your option, if a villager rolls a natural 1, the failed attack might hit another villager or a character. If the locals run out of arrows, they flee indoors.

By making a successful DC 13 Charisma [Persuasion] check, the characters can calm the villagers enough so that they fire arrows only when they actually see wolves.

DAY 2: THE HOLLOW MAN COMES KNOCKING

Guided by its sickle, called Harvester, and on a mission for the Singing Tree, the **Hollow Man** (see page 60) comes knocking at midnight, tonight and for twelve nights hereafter. The Hollow Man enters the village via the Hollow Way, accompanied by a **wood ward** (see page 62), and proceeds directly to its victim's house. Tonight, it comes after Kostya (area 8). Unless the characters intervene, the Hollow Man enters, pushes Kostya's wife aside, and lops off the old farmer's head in a single swing.

When the Hollow Man enters the village, read or paraphrase the following:

> A crooked thing lurches into view—a creature made of moldering briar, bone white parched branches, and polypore-infested tree trunks. It grips a long, cruelly bent sickle in one hand, the weapon hung with the corpses of countless animals, some of which seem to still twitch. The creature has no eyes, but it seems to be looking for someone, and as it raises its formless head of aged wood, an idiot moan drones from it as it stares slowly around.

DEVELOPMENT: The Hollow Man knocks three times on the door of its intended victim with Harvester before entering the building. Assume that once the Hollow Man enters a house, unless a character intervenes, it takes 3 rounds for it to sever its chosen head and gather it up. Once it collects a head, it moves back toward the Singing Tree as quickly as possible.

If attacked, the Hollow Man lashes out with a single slam attack, not wanting to sully Harvester (see page 62) with impure blood. Only if the Hollow Man is seriously threatened does it lash out with its scythe.

If the Hollow Man finds its intended target's house empty, it uses Harvester's abilities to first teleport to its chosen victim and then return to the village to show the results of its work before going back to the Singing Tree. It never returns to the Singing Tree empty-handed, and it uses Harvester's special abilities only to chase down fleeing victims.

> It staggers through the forest toward you—an animated tangle of broken branches, twigs, and animal bones held by wire, rot, and anger. Its head is a moldering, eyeless sack ending in a flaccid sheep jaw, and its hands and spastic legs are bent branches that it uses to move along the ground like an injured spider.

DEVELOPMENT: The Hollow Man directs the wood ward to protect it, either by standing guard outside the door of its victim's croft or by directly intervening against any attackers in combat. The wood ward attacks until destroyed. It remains animated for 8 hours.

A HOLLOW TALE

Knock, knock, knock;
  The Hollow Man calls.
Swing, swing, swing!
  His greedy sickle falls!
Chop, chop, chop;
  He takes another head.
Burn, burn, burn!
  The Hollow Man is dead!

The Margreve Forest has been haunted by Hollow Men for centuries. Some, like this one, are animated servants of the Margreve Witch herself. Others have been gouged from trees, and at least one was made out of a naughty child.

In each case, the Hollow Man has a weakness—a vulnerability to fire—and the characters can exploit this.

The curious rhyme above is well known to the locals, and any adult or child is able to repeat it word for word. The locals know that villagers used to burn an effigy of a hollow man at a special festival, although this event is no longer held. With a successful DC 17 Intelligence (History) check, a character can recall being familiar with the rhyme and knows that it celebrates the way such things were killed by warriors in centuries past.

DESTROYING THE HOLLOW MAN

The Hollow Man is a considerable foe, and one that could easily conquer a party of low-level adventurers. There are two key factors that the characters can learn that make the challenge manageable:

1. The Hollow Man is concerned only with its intended victims. It has no interest in any kind of combat except what's involved in securing a head each night for the Singing Tree.
2. The Hollow Man is vulnerable to fire. There are two locations in the village where the characters can deal considerable damage to the Hollow Man with little personal risk—assuming they can lure it to one of them: the lime kiln (area 1) or the Witch Pit (area 2).

There is enough flammable material at Karl's to fill both the kiln and the pit, each burning for 8 hours, and there is enough other timber in the village for a second attempt at one location. Using less timber or charcoal lowers the time and temperature (adjust the damage accordingly), but a minimum of 4 hours of flammable material is needed to get both locations burning efficiently.

The Hollow Man is not about to conveniently step into a burning pit and must be lured or driven there. It will not willingly come closer to any fire source, even one as small as a candle. A successful bull rush can push a target, but the Hollow Man's high Athletics bonus makes this approach unlikely to succeed. Portable burning objects, such as carts, can be used; these objects enable characters to use the Help action (up to two characters for every 5-foot square of size). Such checks are made with advantage if the object is burning (although those pushing risk catching on fire themselves), and such objects burn for only 10 rounds.

The characters might try to lure the Hollow Man into a house and then torch the place. A house set afire burns for 1 hour, and anyone trapped within takes 1d6 damage per round and risks catching fire (the Hollow Man takes 2d6 damage due to its vulnerability to fire).

A less risky method involves using the locals to help: a crowd of torch-wielding citizens might be able to help drive the Hollow Man to its doom. The characters can be made aware of this option in several ways: by having the locals use torches to drive away wolves on day 1, by having the Hollow Man back away from a small fire, or by having an NPC suggest the tactic.

REACHING THE SINGING TREE ALONG THE HOLLOW WAY

The characters might first hear about the Hollow Man's route into the village when Mother Molvor comes to Levoča from her house—Dead-Nettle Cottage, which lies about a mile north of the village—early on day 3. Mother Molvor saw the Hollow Man pass her cottage the night before on its way to the village and was worried. The locals are likely to alert the characters to this event if they do not notice her themselves. Characters who accompany the old lady back to her cottage might find some clues.

Mother Molvor readily points out where she saw the Hollow Man pass her cottage and the thick forest it emerged from in the twilight. Characters who investigate soon come upon the freshly mangled corpse of a magpie.

The magpie was one of the many animals that have become enraged in the forest of late and that have attacked the Hollow Man as it moves through the forest. So common are these attacks, and so numerous are their victims, that they offer a trail that can be followed back to the Singing Tree.

If the characters move at a normal pace and make a successful DC 16 Wisdom (Survival) check, they can follow the trail. It's easier to follow the route (DC 12) if they travel at a slow pace, and more difficult (DC 20) if they keep up a fast pace. Apply a –1 modifier to the DCs for each day beyond day 3, because the number of animal carcasses increases over time.

The Singing Tree is 6 miles away, and characters might encounter angry animals themselves along the route.

Day 3 and Beyond

Day 3, A Victim Escapes: At dawn, Bača (area 9) and his family leave the village, packing their belongings into a handcart and vowing never to return. About 2 hours later, Mother Molvor arrives in the village to check that everyone is safe.

The Hollow Man returns tonight for its next victim, which was supposed to be Bača—but, after finding him gone, it seemingly leaves the village. The Hollow Man actually utilizes Harvester's special ability to locate the man and his family, beheads the farmer, and returns to the village to parade the head—almost gratuitously—around Levoča.

Day 4, A Cry for Help: If the Hollow Man is still alive, the terrified locals organize a meeting in which angry words are exchanged. Allow the characters to take part in this meeting and present their ideas to this large captive audience.

Regardless of the characters' intervention, the locals decide to send for help. They instruct Kahr, the fastest runner in the village, to hurry to Zobeck and beg for help from Lord Mayor Gluck. If the characters provide a horse, Kahr rides.

On his journey, Kahr is attacked and killed by a pack of wolves. (If the characters are with Kahr, use the wolf pack detailed in the "Day 1: The Wolves" section to play out this encounter.)

That night, Koreň's croft (area 10) is attacked by the Hollow Man. Koreň is a widow, but her eldest son, Torb, is beheaded unless someone stops the Hollow Man.

Day 5, The Returning Messenger: The Hollow Man returns tonight and enters Chrobák's place (area 11). The farmer puts up a fight but meets the same fate.

Day 6 and Beyond, The Hollow Man Comes Knocking on the Characters' Door: Day 6 begins the turn of the characters—one by one they are targeted, until either the Hollow Man or the characters have been disposed of. Once the final victim is taken, the Hollow Man's mission is completed (see the next section).

The Singing Tree

Her voice is hoarse now, for the lone head she sings with is frail. Soon, she knows, she'll become as silent as the other trees of the forest unless she can find new heads to sing through and learn to walk again as in ages past.

The **Singing Tree** (see page $) is an awakened tree whose voice was once heard across the entire forest, but centuries ago, the Margreve Witch cast her into a deep sleep from which she thought she would never awaken. Now, however, something stirs again in the deep of the forest, its call dredging up many creatures from beneath fallen leaves, awakening many things that should not be awake.

The animals were the first to answer the Singing Tree, but they could not help her, and her singing and weeping drove them to madness. It was not long before one came to her who could help—the Hollow Man. Now at last she has hands to chop with, and legs to do her fetching and carrying. She told her new servant to gather a head each night for twelve nights, and once thirteen heads adorn her thorny boughs, she will become a weeping treant with a dark soul once more.

THE WOODS ABOUT THE SINGING TREE

The forest here is dense enough that characters must make successful DC 13 Wisdom (Survival) checks to avoid getting lost. This area has many animals driven mad by the tree's singing, and they attack anyone that comes near. Once every 4 hours, or as you see fit, roll a d20 or choose a random encounter from the table below.

Table 1–2: Random Encounters

D20	ENCOUNTER	CR
1–10	No encounter	—
11–12	1d4 swamp adders[1]	1
13–14	1d4 red-banded line spiders[1]	1
15–16	Bone crab[1]	1/2
17–18	**Dire wolf**	1
19–20	**Giant boar**	2

[1] See *Tome of Beasts*

THE SITE OF THE TREE

The Singing Tree lies 4 miles from the village, but the Hollow Man follows a route 6 miles in length. The tree stands in a clearing blighted by decay and covered in fungus. The air here is thick with buzzing things, even in winter, and the ground crawls with insects.

> Here is the pitiful wreckage of a once magnificent tree. Now, the plant is riddled with sick fungal growths; its thorny boughs hang wasted, swaying in the wind; its once great girth withered to little more than a black, lightning tortured canker swollen by disease. Human heads leer from the branches of this monstrosity, the meeting point of plant and flesh a cluster of lesions.

If the Hollow Man still lives, it sleeps in the boughs of the Singing Tree by day. As soon as she spots intruders, the Singing Tree instructs it to attack. If the Hollow Man is not alive, the Singing Tree immediately weeps, calling eight giant centipedes to her aid; she then sings. She tries not to enter combat unless at least one attacker is affected by her singing, preferring to call animals to her aid.

If reduced to 10 hit points, the Singing Tree offers the characters a dark secret if they let her go. The details of this secret are left to your devising, but it should be something of great use in future adventures in the forest (perhaps some knowledge of the Margreve's powers). The secret is her only bargaining chip, and once she has lost it, she flees. If cornered, she fights to the end.

Development: If the Singing Tree gains thirteen heads, she becomes a weeping treant (see *Tome of Beasts*) once more. She terrorizes the nearby villages, and her singing continues to drive animals insane. How the adventure progresses beyond this point is up to you, but perhaps some way can be found to kill her.

Treasure: Upon her death, the Singing Tree turns bone white, resembling an ashen-faced woman of great beauty, clasping a bright red apple. The apple radiates a strong aura of enchantment magic. An *identify* spell does not reveal the magical property of the apple, only that it is a permanent effect. Anyone who bites the apple receives a permanent +1 increase to Charisma; after a single bite is taken, the apple withers and turns to dust. The apple cannot be preserved and will wither soon after being removed from the tree.

Characters who succeed on a DC 17 Wisdom (Perception) check find the buried possessions of former victims. Alternatively, characters who dig near the tree need only a successful DC 10 Intelligence (Investigation) check to uncover the treasure. The possessions are fragile from the passage of time but show strange filigree, almost disturbing fey imagery. They are a silver mirror with an ebony handle (75 gp), a *potion of poison resistance* in a green glass jar with a silver stopper (10 gp), a *scrimshaw comb* (see page 62) with dire boar bristles (30 gp), 34 pp, an elaborate ring fashioned of walnut depicting dancing fey (a *ring of the ram* with 3 charges), and a chain shirt.

NEW CREATURES AND MAGIC ITEMS

The monsters and magic items introduced in this adventure are detailed below.

BULL

Large beast, unaligned

Armor Class 11

Hit Points 25 (3d10 + 9)

Speed 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	12 (+1)	16 (+3)	2 (–4)	9 (–1)	7 (–2)

Senses passive Perception 9

Languages —

Challenge 1/4 (50 XP)

Charge. If the bull moves at least 30 feet in a straight line toward a target and then hits it with a gore attack on the same turn, the target takes an extra 3 (1d6) piercing damage.

ACTIONS

Hooves. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 9 (2d4 + 4) bludgeoning damage.

Gore. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 11 (2d6 + 4) piercing damage.

HOLLOW MAN

Medium construct, unaligned

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 76 (8d10 + 32)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	10 (+0)	18 (+4)	3 (–4)	11 (+0)	1 (–5)

Skills Athletics +7

Damage Vulnerabilities fire

Damage Immunities poison, psychic; bludgeoning, piercing and slashing from nonmagical weapons that aren't adamantine

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, frightened, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages understands the languages of its creator but can't speak

Challenge 5 (5,900 XP)

Animate Wood Ward (1/day). The Hollow Man can animate one wood ward that it can see and is within 60 feet of it. The wood ward follows simple instructions from the Hollow Man.

Immutable Form. The Hollow Man is immune to any spell or effect that would alter its form.

Magic Resistance. The Hollow Man has advantage on saving throws against spells or other magical effects.

Magic Weapons. The Hollow Man's attacks are magical.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The Hollow Man makes two slam attacks or two weapon attacks with Harvester.

Slam. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 11 (2d6 + 4) bludgeoning damage.

Harvester. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 9 (2d4 + 4) slashing damage.

SINGING TREE

Large plant, neutral evil

Armor Class 13 (natural armor)

Hit Points 66 (6d12+ 24)

Speed 10 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	8 (–1)	20 (+5)	12 (+2)	16 (+3)	14 (+2)

Damage Vulnerabilities fire

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing and slashing from nonmagical weapons

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 13

Languages Common, Druidic, Elvish, Sylvan

Challenge 3 (700 XP)

Thirteen Heads. The tree begins the adventure with a single mummified head and then adds another for each successful mission the Hollow Man carries out. Instead of targeting the creature, opponents can target the heads. Each head has AC 13 and 5 hit points. Damage to the heads does not reduce the Singing Tree's hit points. Without any heads, the Singing Tree cannot use Sing or Weep.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The Singing Tree makes two slam attacks.

Slam. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 9 (2d6 + 2) bludgeoning damage, and a Medium or smaller target is grappled (escape DC 12). Until the grapple ends, the target is also restrained and takes 5 (1d6 + 2) bludgeoning damage at the start of each of its turns as the Singing Tree constricts it.

Weep (Recharge 5–6). The Singing Tree casts *conjure animals,* requiring no components. The Singing Tree does not need to maintain concentration for the summoned animals to remain friendly to it.

Sing. The Singing Tree's song targets a creature within 45 feet that can hear it. The target must make a successful DC 13 Wisdom save or be affected as if by the *confusion* spell. The target can repeat the save at the end of its turn. The effect ends on a successful save or if the Singing Tree stops singing. While singing, the tree can take other actions. A creature that saves is immune to this effect for the next 24 hours.

SWARM OF BEES

Medium swarm of tiny beasts, unaligned

Armor Class 14

Hit Points 36 (8d8)

Speed 5 ft., fly 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8 (–1)	18 (+4)	11 (+0)	1 (–5)	10 (+0)	3 (–4)

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, slashing

Condition Immunities charmed, frightened, paralyzed, petrified, prone, restrained, stunned

Senses blindsight 10 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages —

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Swarm. The swarm can occupy another creature's space, and vice versa. The swarm can move through any opening large enough for a Tiny insect. The swarm cannot regain hit points or gain temporary hit points.

ACTIONS

Sting. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, range 0 ft., one target in the swarm's space. *Hit:* 10 (4d4) piercing damage, or 5 (2d4) piercing damage if the swarm is at half its hit points or fewer. The target must make a DC 10 Constitution saving throw, taking 1 poison damage on a failed save.

WOOD WARD

Medium construct, unaligned

Armor Class 13 (natural armor)

Hit Points 20 (2d10 +8)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
11 (+0)	12 (+1)	18 (+4)	3 (–4)	12 (+1)	1 (–5)

Damage Vulnerabilities fire

Damage Immunities poison, psychic, bludgeoning, piercing and slashing from nonmagical weapons that aren't adamantine

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, frightened, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 11

Languages understands the languages of its creator but can't speak

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Immutable Form. The wood ward is immune to any spell or effect that would alter its form.

Magic Resistance. The wood ward has advantage on saving throws against spells or other magical effects.

ACTIONS

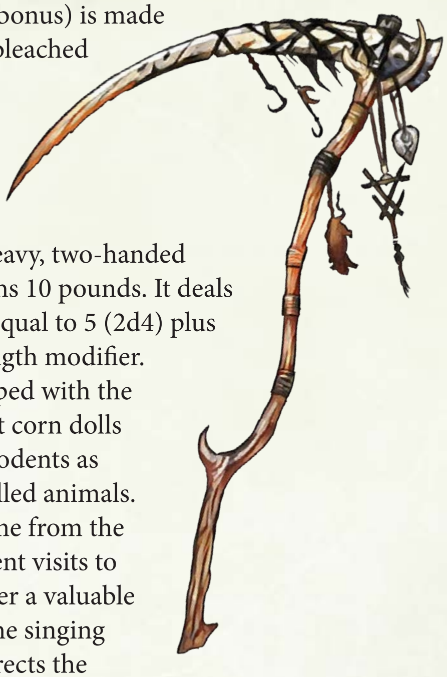
Multiattack. The wood ward makes two slam attacks or uses its Horror Gaze.

Slam. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +2 to hit, reach 5 ft. one target. *Hit:* 2 (1d4) bludgeoning damage.

Horror Gaze (1/day). All creatures within a 30-foot cone of the wood ward that it can see make a DC 10 Charisma saving throw. On a failed save, the target is frightened of the wood ward for 1 minute. The target may repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on a success. If the saving throw succeeds, the target is immune to this wood ward's gaze for 24 hours.

HARVESTER (THE HOLLOW MAN'S SICKLE)

Weapon (sickle), very rare (requires attunement)



This *+1 sickle* (attunement is not required to benefit from the magical bonus) is made of ancient wood, bleached and smoothed by time, and it is actually a part of the Singing Tree itself.

The sickle is a heavy, two-handed weapon that weighs 10 pounds. It deals slashing damage equal to 5 (2d4) plus the wielder's Strength modifier.

Harvester is draped with the remains of ancient corn dolls and mummified rodents as well as recently killed animals. The fresh kills come from the Hollow Man's recent visits to the village and offer a valuable clue to reaching the singing tree. The sickle directs the Hollow Man to the Singing Tree's chosen victims as though the wielder had cast the *find the path* spell. An attuned wielder can cast *tree stride* once per day, requiring no components.

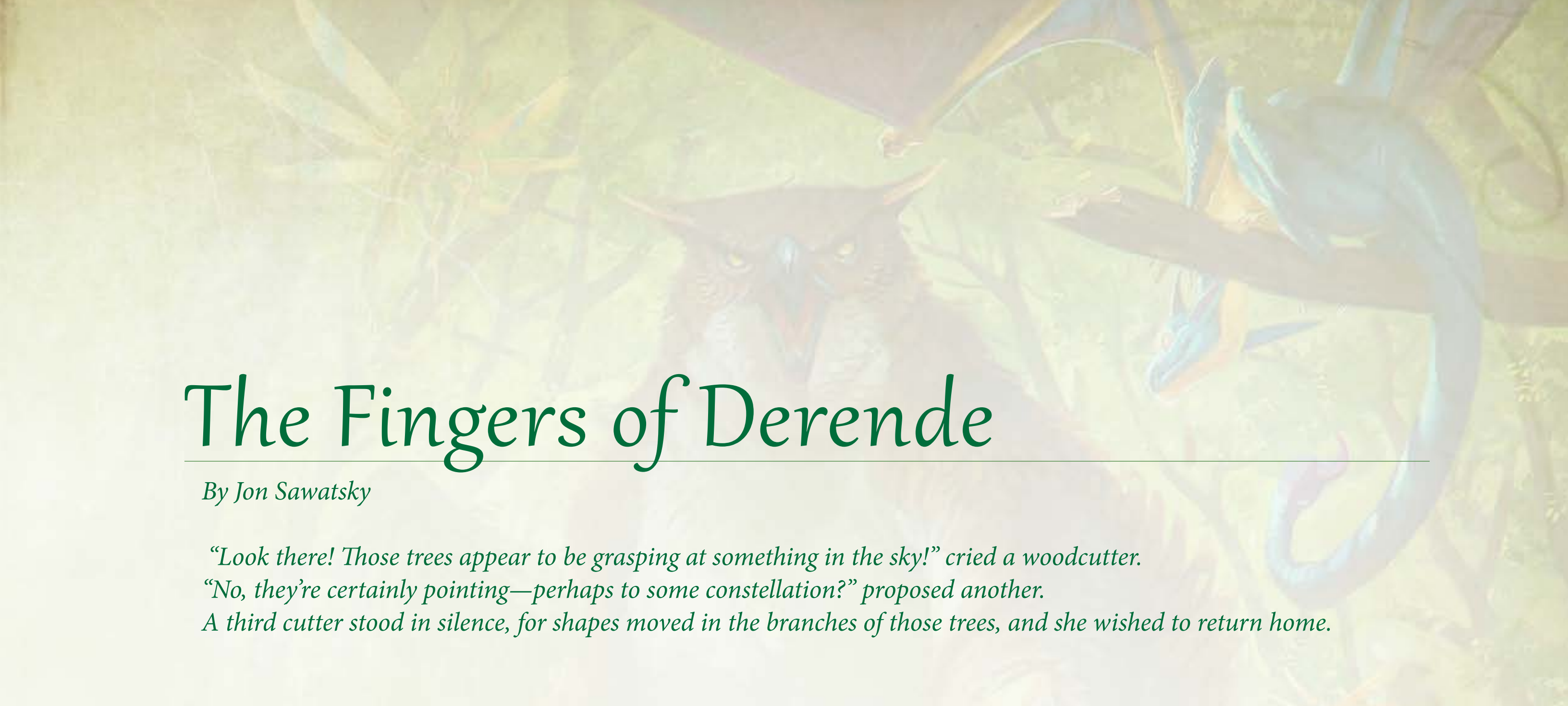
Any wooden construct wielding the weapon returns to full hit points at midnight. Upon the death of the Singing Tree, Harvester reverts to a *+1 sickle*, losing all other powers.

SCRIMSHAW COMB

Wondrous item, uncommon (requires attunement)

Aside from being carved from bone, this comb is a beautiful example of functional art. It has 3 charges. As an action, you can expend a charge to cast *invisibility*.

Unlike the standard version of this spell, you are invisible only to undead creatures. But you can attack creatures who are not undead (and thus unaffected by the spell) without ending the effect. Casting a spell breaks the effect as normal. The comb regains 1d3 expended charges daily at dawn.



The Fingers of Derende

By Jon Sawatsky

"Look there! Those trees appear to be grasping at something in the sky!" cried a woodcutter.
"No, they're certainly pointing—perhaps to some constellation?" proposed another.
A third cutter stood in silence, for shapes moved in the branches of those trees, and she wished to return home.

"The Fingers of Derende" is an encounter site intended for characters of 1st to 4th level.

OVERVIEW

Scattered throughout the Margreve are small copses of strange trees resembling jointed fingers. Sometimes the trees grow in groups of two or three, and other times the trunks are a dozen strong. The trees are tall and spindly, with pale gray and white bark and great knots growing along their length. The leaves are distinctive: very long, dark green, and curled like overgrown nails. The roots of the trees are as hard as their trunks, and extend deep into the ground.

A full-grown finger of Derende (AC 15, 40 hit points) is immune to damage from nonmagical weapons. It stands 60 to 70 feet tall, with a 4-foot-thick trunk. Wood harvested from these trees loses its damage immunity, but it is twice as hard and durable as normal wood. Weapons made from the wood (greatclubs, clubs, staffs) gain a +1 bonus (nonmagical) to their damage.

When they are saplings and young trees, fingers of Derende are no different from mundane trees. Harvesting a full-grown finger of Derende can be a challenge, however. The trees naturally draw creatures to live in their boughs and serve as guardians. In addition to these treetop guardians, **awakened trees** gather near the places where the fingers grow. If the sound of axes biting into fingers of Derende rings out, these living trees come to investigate.

MAGIC

The two types of fingers of Derende are associated with truth (pointing) and tool use (articulating). Wherever the fingers grow, they form one of two basic patterns. Depending on which pattern they display, various magical effects occur in the area. Creatures who finish a long rest within 100 feet of the fingers of Derende must succeed on a DC 12 Wisdom saving throw or be afflicted by one form of short-term madness. The madness lasts for 10 minutes.

POINTING

One tree grows to its full 60- or 70-foot height. This tree is perfectly straight and appears to point to someplace in the sky. Other fingers grow nearby, though their trunks curl unnaturally. A pointing finger of Derende has the following magical qualities:

- Spells cast as rituals within 100 feet of the finger require no components and have their duration doubled.
- A *clairvoyance* spell cast from near the top of a pointing finger of Derende has its range increased to 100 miles.

ARTICULATING

Several fingers of Derende grow close together, entwining so that they resemble fingers delicately holding a small object. The trees change their position daily; their motion is similar to that of trees being blown by a strong wind.

- Creatures gain advantage on ability checks when using artisan's tools within 100 feet of the articulating fingers.
- The amount of time a creature must spend to learn how to use a new set of tools is reduced by half, provided the lessons and the practice occur within 100 feet of the fingers.

The Finger-Fortress of Family Starless

Deep in the Margreve, a “family” of fey creatures and their guardians live in the boughs of some fingers of Derende. They have constructed leafy huts in the trees and built a crude platform near the top of a pointing finger, where they conduct dark rituals. Bolstered by the magic of the trees, and maddened by their prolonged exposure to the site, the Family Starless poses a threat to those living in the region.

FAMILY STARLESS

Family Starless is led by an aridni (see *Tome of Beasts*) named Binia. She once worked for a slaver whose fortress is hidden in the Morgau Hills; she left the slaver’s employ when her demand for an increase in pay was denied. While Binia claims to have discovered the grove of pointing fingers of Derende by accident, the trees in fact called her to them to serve as their guardian. Since then, Binia has attracted all manner of fey, beasts, and other humanoids to her treetop fortress. All is not well, however; Binia is tortured by visions of the outer realms, and she often sees horrible, tentacled specters both while she dreams and in daylight. Only Binia can see these creatures, and when she experiences such a vision, she gains disadvantage on all attack rolls and ability checks for up to 1 hour.

Members of the Family Starless wear grim fetishes made from natural materials and dead animals. Each family member has a signature accessory: a brooch featuring a dead mouse and four burned pine cones, a fox skull wrapped in dry grass, a serpent’s spine formed into a headband and decorated with blood-soaked moss. These little crafts are done to honor Derende; the Family Starless believe that Binia has been chosen by Derende, and that soon a great truth will be revealed to her.

The following table presents the members of the Family Starless.

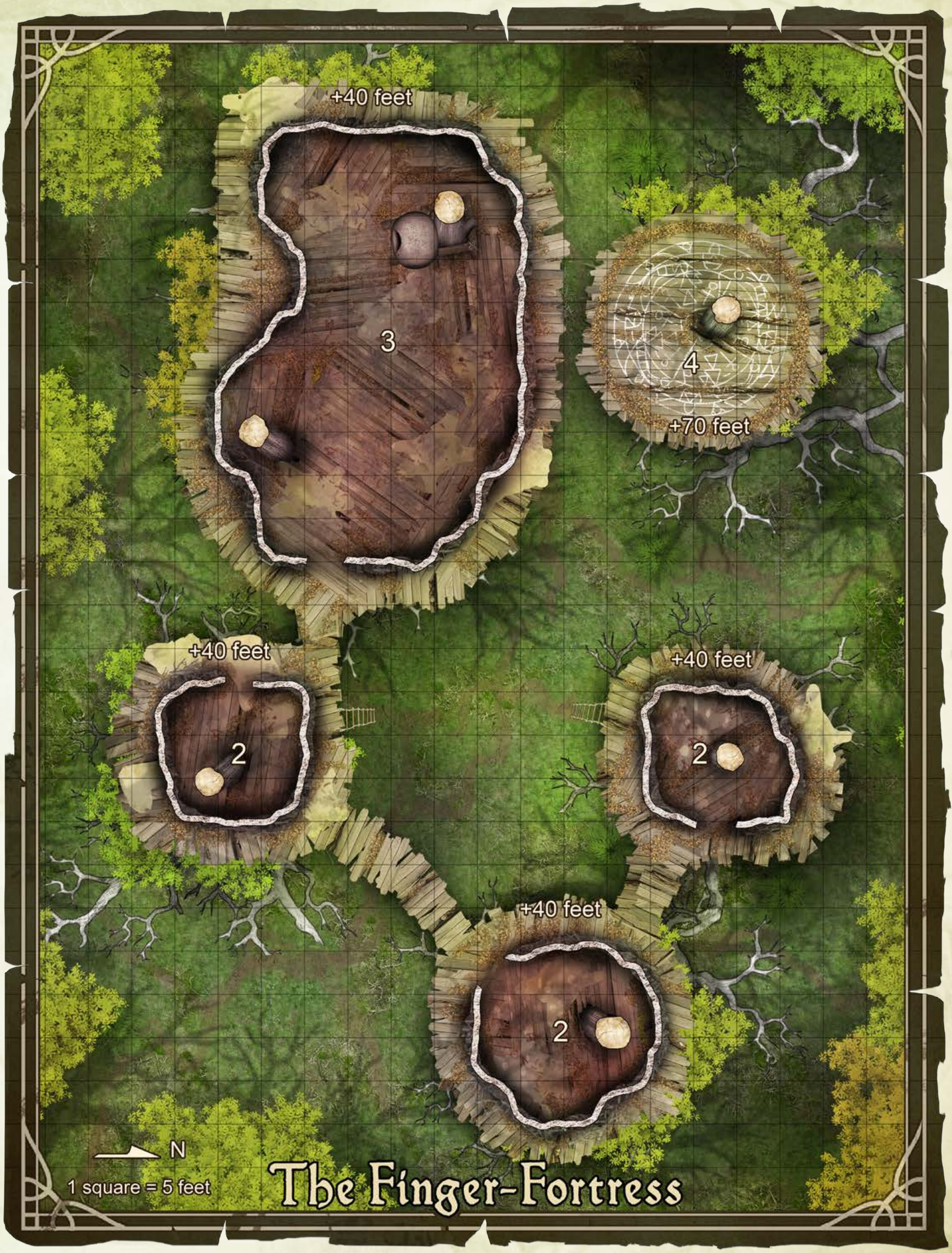
FAMILY MEMBER	DESCRIPTION
Yidji	A former woodcutter (**tribal warrior**) from a nearby human hamlet. He is mute and terribly afflicted by madness caused by the fingers.
Ganchoo and Fanchoo	Two roachling brothers (**roachling skirmishers**; see *Tome of Beasts*) who followed Binia when she departed from her former employer.
Vil’Opon	A **dryad** who is second in command of the family. Her skin is branded with angular glyphs.
Drom	An orc warrior (**berserker**) who has joined the family in the hope that Binia can locate his sister, who is lost in the forest.
Sivix	A **satyr** who has fallen in love with Binia. He plays a flute made from the bones of a giant toad.
Binia	The **aridni** leader of the family. She is often away from the fortress, hunting or cavorting with Sivix. She has learned how to cast *clairvoyance*.

THE LEGACY OF DERENDE

Derende, the Primal Tender of Midgard, is one of the Margreve’s most well-kept secrets. Its origins, characteristics, and purpose are lost, though some say Baba Yaga keeps Derende’s spade in the deep chambers of her hut. Some stories describe Derende as a benevolent gardener, who nurtured Midgard’s elder forest when it was but a small grove of saplings. Other darker tales suggest the creature slipped into Midgard from the cold outer realms, drawn by curiosity; these tales link Derende with the horrors that walk the Western Wastes.

Derende is long dead, and while some druids of the Margreve perform rituals to respect its primal force, none worship it today. Despite its passing, the creature’s magic still influences the old forest. The ley lines that run through the Margreve are colored by the creature’s remains, which help to form both the physical and magical landscape.

Scattered throughout the Margreve, disconnected from one another, the physical remains of the Primal Tender serve as sites of great magic. Creatures of all sorts are drawn to Derende’s remains, where they can use the lingering power for their own ends. Deer, hawks, alseid, and humans all visit them from time to time.


+40 feet
3
4
+70 feet
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+40 feet
2
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+40 feet
2
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1 square = 5 feet
The Finger-Fortress

RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

Roll or choose encounters from the following table to challenge the characters as they travel near the fortress of Family Starless.

D10	CR	ENCOUNTER
1	1	A goblin scout accompanied by four **stryx** (see *Tome of Beasts*) plot an ambush from the shadows.
2	1	Four **ratfolk** (see *Tome of Beasts*) tasked with capturing slaves have made camp in the hollow of a tree.
3	2	A **child of the briar** (see *Tome of Beasts*) rides atop a brown bear in search of food for the "family".
4	2	Three **worgs** patrol the perimeter of the family's territory.
5	3	An **owlbear** digs through a pile of refuse created by the family. The refuse is infested with three **giant centipedes** that are not about to give up their nest.
6	3	The "family" watering hole (a nearby pond) is guarded by a **shellycoat** (see *Tome of Beasts*) and its **giant frog** companion.
7	3	Two **leshy** (see *Tome of Beasts*) are searching for the Family Starless to put an end to their evil.
8	4	A **far darrig** (see *Tome of Beasts*) and its **boar** companion battle four Family Starless **goblins** and their two pet **dogmoles** (see *Tome of Beasts*).
9	5	A **troll** has been tasked to haul rocks back to the fortress.
10	6	Binia the **aridni** (see *Tome of Beasts*) and her **satyr** companion are skinning a deer they have recently slain.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

Two suggestions for getting the characters involved with the Family Starless are offered below.

SLAVES AND SACRIFICE

Pilzfanger, a small hamlet north of Stefanstor, has sent a plea for help. Several woodcutters out felling trees in the Margreve have been taken captive by the Family Starless. One of the woodcutters escaped, and told a dark tale wherein her companions were sacrificed at the top of a tall and dreadful tree by malicious fey. The characters are hired to find and punish the dark-hearted fey, and must assault their treetop fortress.

SHELTER IN THE STORM

While the characters are traveling through or near the Margreve, a great thunderstorm drives them to seek shelter. As they search for safety or at least a dry corner, they stumble across the fortress of the Family Starless, and the sisters invite the characters to take refuge in their smoky huts. The characters soon discover that they are not free to leave, and in fact their hosts plan to eat them.

AREA DESCRIPTIONS

The home of the Family Starless is located in and around a cluster of fingers of Derende.

1. THE GROUND BELOW

> Six tall trees with pale gray bark have grown into a shape resembling a hand pointing toward the sky. The ground around the trees is covered in glistening, green-gray moss. Several rope ladders descend from a huts built in the boughs of the trees. High above the grove, near the tip of the tallest tree that seems most like a pointing finger, is a crude platform with no apparent means of access.

Glistening Moss. The ground below the fortress is covered with moss that makes loud, crackling sounds when it is stepped on. Creatures have disadvantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks in this area.

Rope Ladders. The ladders located at *A*, *B*, and *C* are crude but effective. They can safely bear the weight of one Medium creature as it ascends 30 feet to the area above it. If more than one Medium creature climbs the ladder at the same time, it breaks, sending the climbers to ground. A creature that falls takes 3 (1d6) bludgeoning damage for each 10 feet it falls. A character who makes a successful DC 10 Intelligence (Investigation) check determines that the ladders will break if more than one creature uses them at a time.

Creatures. The ground below the fortress is guarded by beasts that have been tamed by Binia. Choose the guardians that best challenge your party.

CR	Creatures
1	Four **giant wolf spiders** have spun webs between the base of the trees.
2	A **kobold** is feeding dead mice to two **cockatrices**.
3	Three **giant goats**, their horns decorated with grim fetishes, munch on the moss below the fortress.
4	Three **bugbears** hide in the trees and bushes.

2. LIVING QUARTERS

> Wooden walkways connect a series of huts and creaking shelters. No rails are available to steady you.

If the characters enter a hut:

> The huts are filled with small bones and simple sleeping mats. The smell of thick vegetation mingles with the acrid stench of burnt animal waste.

Walkways. The walkways can support multiple travelers, but the lack of handrails makes them treacherous to fight on. Any creature that is knocked prone on a walkway must succeed on a DC 10 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check or fall 30 feet to the mossy ground below.

Huts. The huts contain the personal possessions of their inhabitants (if any) and crude furnishings. The doors leading to the hut are made of raw animal hides that attract bloated flies.

Creatures. The six huts serve as quarters for the members of Family Starless. The residents defend their homes, and each other, if they are attacked. You can stock the living quarters however you see fit. The following table provides a range of challenges for the heroes if they attack the fortress.

CR	Family Members in Hut
1	Ganchoo and Fanchoo are fixing a leak in the roof of their hut.
1	A **bucca** (see *Tome of Beasts*) is preparing to join the family, and Yidji is showing it around.
2	Vil'Opon is brewing an herbal poultice in her hut. It smells like wet dog.
2	Drom builds a new walkway between two huts.
2	Fanchoo and Sivix are putting out a small fire that has erupted in their hut.
3	Ganchoo and Drom have eaten hallucinogenic berries and are singing strange songs.
3	Vil'Opon and Yidji are plucking feathers from a dead cockatrice.
4	Sivix and Drom are preparing to go out hunting.
5	Binia flies over the hut. In her mind, she is being pursued by a horrible tentacled snake.
6	Binia, Ganchoo, and Fanchoo are repairing a damaged walkway outside their hut.

Treasure. One of the huts (your choice) contains a thick "book" made from bark and bound with dried vines. The book is filled with angular glyphs and crude drawings of constellations. A character who spends an uninterrupted hour studying the book and succeeds on a DC 12 Intelligence (Investigation or Arcana) check learns a secret about the Margreve that they cannot put into words. The character who learns the secret also gains one form of short-term madness, which lasts for 10 minutes. A character who succeeds on this check acquires the Cerebral Roots mutation (see page 186) permanently.

3. THE STARLESS HALL

> The leaves and branches that form the ceiling here are tightly bound together. No light from the outside penetrates this pitch-black chamber. The floor is covered with mounds of long, curled leaves, reddish bones, and simple fetishes. A stone oven sits in the center of the hall; it is lashed to the tree trunk that passes through the room.

Characters who have passive Perception scores of 14 or higher also learn:

> You hear small scratching noises coming from inside the oven's closed body.

The family gathers here to eat, to listen to Binia speak about Derende, and to make the small fetishes they wear to honor the Primal Tender.

Oven. Six living rabbits hop out to freedom as soon as the oven door is opened. There are many claw marks in the walls of the oven.

Treasure. Family Starless keeps its accumulated wealth inside the mounds of leaves. Rummaging through the piles uncovers:

- Three hide sacks each containing 120 gp
- Ten pieces of silver jewelry (10 gp each)
- A silver skull (20 gp) with two pieces of jade set into the eye sockets (25 gp each)
- A rotting wooden chest containing 2,000 cp
- Six *+1 arrows*
- A fancy metal flask containing 3 doses of antivenom

4. FAMILY PERCH

> This wooden platform encircles the tip of the tallest trees, and it sways slightly under your weight. It creaks ominously, but remains sturdy enough. A small leafy wall surrounds the platform, which is open to the air. Painted sigils cover the wooden floor, radiating out from the center.

The Family Starless uses this perch to perform rituals in honor of Derende. A single rope ladder provides access to the perch, though Binia leaves it coiled up inside the perch when not in use. The perch is unfurnished.

The Honey Queen

By Jonathon McAnulty

Young Lyla, purple flowers braided in her auburn hair, gazed into the cave mouth. The smell of honey wafted pleasantly out from the dark interior. The bees buzzed invitingly around her. She was not afraid. She liked the bees, and they liked her. She always treated them respectfully, just as she had been taught, and in return, they ensured no harm ever came to her. Such were the ways of the Margreve. With a playful smile, she stepped into the cave. The bees followed.

"The Honey Queen" is a forest adventure suitable for four characters of 2nd level.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

A rare purple flower, the effildawnan, blooms within the Old Margreve. Herbalists prize the flower's sleep-inducing properties and use it to create teas, poultices, and medicines, A colony of bees in the Old Margreve also makes use of the flower's pollen to create a magical form of honey, which they sell to the forest fey. This hive, a curious blend of honey bees and giant bees, inhabits a cave near a glade along the southern border of the Old Margreve. A succession of awakened queen bees rules the hive, and these queens are responsible for the honey's creation. The characters are hired to journey into the forest and confront the bees.

The honey has two special qualities. It prevents aging in those that eat it—but this eternal youth comes at a steep cost, for the taste of the honey sends a soul into an ageless sleep. The fey, in particular, prize the honey as the preferred method for extending the lives of their valued guests as they spend the time between festivities sleeping in stasis.

In addition to the queen, a second intelligence dwells within the hive. A young girl named Lyla, some fifty years ago, befriended the bees and tasted their honey. The hive, for reasons of their own, have kept her slumbering and perpetually young. Over the years, her mind has found a way to wander free of her sleeping body, entering into the simple consciousnesses of the honey bees.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

In "The Honey Queen," characters are tasked with journeying into the Old Margreve and confronting the Honey Queen. With little to go on, they encounter a trio of potential helpers, the last of which can guide them toward the Queen's Glade, a meadow frequented by bees. From there, the characters follow the bees to their home. Effildawnan blossoms fill the area around the glade, and the fragrance of the flowers induces dream-like hallucinations, forcing the characters to question reality.

At the entrance to the honey bees' home, the characters must get past the old bear that guards the entrance. They then meet a large face made of bees, which asks them their business and identifies herself as Lyla. Whether by guile or force, the characters must enter the bees' home, a series of tunnels in the forest floor. Within the extensive hive are several traps and guardians. As the characters finally reach the door of the queen's chambers, they again meet Lyla, who seeks to prevent them from entering and disturbing "Mother." After overcoming this swarm of bees, the characters enter her chamber and confront the Honey Queen, an awakened queen bee. They also discover a girl in an enchanted sleep, being cared for by the bees. The characters now have the chance to bring the Honey Queen to task and rescue the girl.

ADVENTURE HOOK

Terelsa Garlook is a go-between, an agent who knows how to hire the right people for any sort of job: domestic, dangerous, mundane, or odd. Although she avoids strictly illegal commissions, she sometimes works for less than savory characters who often want, for obvious reasons, to remain anonymous. She also does occasional work for the city government. A friend of an acquaintance (or a relative) put Elsa onto the characters, and now she approaches them with a job offer:

> "I have been told you lot aren't completely unfamiliar with danger and might even be able to find your way through the woods at night without getting lost and eaten. There's a certain rare purple flower blooming in the Margreve, and I have a client interested in it. That is, interested in the honey that it is rumored might be made from this flower's pollen. The stories say it's like getting back a little bit of youth and that interests my client, who would be willing to pay quite handsomely for a container of the stuff. The thing is, the sellers of this honey won't do business with my client, so we want you to convince them to part with some. We'll give you something to buy the honey with, and we'll pay you afterward for making the journey and the acquisition."

Terelsa initially offers 350 gp in exchange for a vial of the honey, but if pressed (with a successful DC 15 Charisma [Persuasion] check), she is willing to go up to 700 gp. She will not reveal the identity of her client. Assuming the characters accept the job, Terelsa supplies the following bits of information, the sum of what she has been told:

- The purple effildawnan flower blooms near the southern border of the Margreve, westward and well away from the Old Road.
- Some claim the forest fey have access to the honey, knowing both where and how to acquire it. Enticing the honey queen to sell to non-fey will require a delicate touch.
- The honey in question has a slight purple cast to it and radiates magic.

To "pay" for the honey, Terelsa supplies the characters with a *ring of warmth*, which they are supposed to trade for the honey, although they can use it until the time comes to part with it.

PART 1: IN THE FOREST

You can determine how long characters adventure in the Old Margreve as they search for the magic honey, but it is suggested that over the course of one to three days, the characters have the following three encounters, designed both to give a fairy-tale quality to the adventure and to spur the action forward.

THE CRONE

> Ahead, you hear soft singing. Parting the branches at the edge of a clearing, you spy an elderly woman in a simple dress and wrapped in a shawl. She is seated on a stump. "Greetings, children," she says, "Have you anything for a poor, old woman to eat?"

The woman is Baba Migori, also called Grandmother Migori. A powerful druid who is very familiar with the forest, she often tests travelers for their worthiness. Uninterested in fighting, she quickly disappears in

the wind if attacked. (She actually turns into an air elemental and flies away through the trees.) Her interest in the characters is straightforward.

Having been informed of the characters' quest, she wants them to rescue Lyla, thinking it is time the child woke from her sleep.

Development: If the characters share some food with her, Baba Migori says:

> "Thank you kindly. One good deed deserves another. I know your journey and your business. I advise you to head west and search for the Queen's Glade. Remember to always treat royalty with respect, but sometimes even the noblest need to be corrected. Still, the sword is not the answer to all problems, and the bees open their homes to those that know the name of Lyla."

If questioned about Lyla, she volunteers that there is a young girl by that name "imprisoned" by the Honey Queen. Baba Migori tries to extract an oath from the characters that they will rescue the child. After receiving such a promise, she vanishes.

If the characters share their food but are rude and hostile, Baba Migori merely tells them to continue west. If the characters threaten her, she leaves without helping them at all.

THE MOTHER

> Continuing your journey through the thick woods, you come suddenly into a more open area with a lush carpet of grass instead of the underbrush you've been fighting so hard all day. The area is dominated by a singularly large tree, its trunk possibly fifteen feet in width. A woman stands at its base, gazing up. "Don't move! Stay still!" she calls up, worry in her voice.

Creatures: A family of bearfolk lives in a small cottage just north of this clearing. The woman, Elsee Barkcot, is the mother of the family, and her youngest son, Obiah, is in a predicament after climbing high in the tree. Getting down wouldn't be much of a problem, except that a **giant spider** lairs in the tree and has crawled out onto the trunk between the boy and the ground.

Challenge: The child is afraid to come down, and his mother is afraid to climb up after him, because she has an irrational fear of spiders. The boy clutches the tree 80 feet above the ground as the mother pleads with the characters to help. A successful DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check while climbing is needed to reach the boy. A second DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check is needed to return to the ground safely with the boy. The giant spider has half cover because of all the branches between it and the ground. Characters who rescue the child should be rewarded as for overcoming a monster of challenge rating 1 (200 XP). Elsee gives the characters a *spell scroll* of *animal friendship* for saving her Obiah.

THE MAIDEN

> From nearby comes a frantic cry for help. You hear the sound of something large crashing through the spring growth and another cry for help. It sounds like the cry of a young woman.

Creatures: The sound is that of an **ogre** chasing a young, female alseid (see *Tome of Beasts*) named Frauleene. She is not armed and has an injured leg. She can only just keep ahead of the savage ogre that wants to torment and consume her.

Development: As Frauleene, an herbalist, gathered plants in the forest, she was caught off guard by the ogre. Assuming the characters rescue her, she responds with sincere gratitude. More important, she knows where to find Queen's Glade and can lead the characters in that direction. She has no interest in venturing among blooming effildawnan and does not accompany the characters all the way to the glade, but she can share the following information:

- Blooming effildawnan induces hallucinations and should not be taken lightly.
- There are those in the Margreve who trade with the Honey Queen for her magic honey.
- Once in Queen's Glade, the characters should follow the giant bees back to their home.

PART 2: AMONG THE EFFILDAWNAN

Frauleene leaves the characters as soon as she sees one of the purple effildawnan flowers, but she tells them the meadow they seek is only 1 mile farther west.

THE SCENT OF THE FLOWERS

Effildawnan grows as a vine on the sides of trees. As the characters near Queen's Glade, they see more and more of the purple flowers, some growing so thickly as to threaten the health of their hosts. At the same time, the scent of the flowers increases in intensity. Buzzing around the blossoms, hundreds of honey bees busily gather the pollen. In theory, one could follow these smaller bees to their home (with a successful DC 30 Wisdom [Survival] check).

Development: Few harvest the effildawnan flower, for in addition to its rarity, the pollen of the flower induces dreamlike hallucinations. As the characters near the glade, each must make a DC 12 Constitution saving throw. On a failed save, the character begins to hallucinate and have disadvantage on skill checks while effected Even a successful save, however, does not prevent a character from feeling as if they are walking in a dream-like state. It is feasible that a hallucinating character might go from one dream vision into a second or even a third before the glade is reached. The ramifications of each vision are left to you and the players. You can choose what each hallucinating character sees, or roll a d12 and consult the following list for each affected character:

1. A giant bee buzzes among the flowers, singing a cheerful tavern tune.
2. Goblins peek around the trees and laugh at the character.
3. The character is sure he or she isn't wearing any pants.
4. Cold red rain begins falling through the green leaves.
5. The trees are walking alongside the characters.
6. The shadow of a large, multiheaded flying creature circles above the characters as if it were tracking them.
7. A large stone starts following the characters, moving only when it is not being watched.
8. A warm, moist feeling spreads through the character's pants, suggestive of a weak bladder.
9. Bats in the daytime! Hundreds of bats all fly from the heart of the forest to the north.
10. The character hears the distressed calls of a loved one, constantly just out of sight.
11. The smell of something cooking fills the air. Someone close by is baking something very tasty.
12. A veritable storm of pollen swirls heavily through the air, a white cloud reducing visibility.

Characters who experience these hallucinations can otherwise act normally, and the visions will stop 2d6 minutes after entering Queen's Glade, leaving the flowers behind. Though you do not have to mention it, the characters might remember, with a successful DC 10 Intelligence (Nature) check, that the flowers are valuable. The fresh flowers sell for 10 gp per pound.

For every hour spent among the flowers, unaffected characters have to make a new Constitution save, to make sure they don't start hallucinating as well.

THE BOAR IN THE STREAM

While the characters are still among the effildawnan, only 1/4 mile from Queen's Glade, they meet a very real danger—one they might at first take for a hallucination.

Creature: A **giant boar** has wandered among the flowers and is now confused and disoriented. Once it spots the characters, it rushes to attack, eager to vent its frustration. The boar has been seeing things for the last 2 days, and any attempt to calm it is made with disadvantage. The boar has advantage on any attempt to resist an enchantment.

Terrain: The area is heavily wooded, with effildawnan vines growing thick on all the trees. The land slopes gently down to a 10-foot-wide stream. The water is 3 feet deep at its deepest spot.

THE DRONING OF BEES

Queen's Glade is a meadow in the Old Margreve nearly 1/2 mile in diameter. In the spring, flowers and bees fill the entire glade. A character who enters Queen's Glade while hallucinating under the influence of the effildawnan must succeed on a DC 10 Wisdom saving throw or become panicked by the overpowering droning of the bees. Panicked characters flee back to the safety of the effildawnan vines.

THE GIRL IN THE GLADE

When the characters first enter Queen's Glade, those who are not hallucinating under the influence of the effildawnan might spot (with a successful DC 11 Wisdom [Perception] check) what appears to be a child dancing near the northern edge of the glade. This child is Lyla (see area 2). If the characters approach her stealthily (Lyla has a passive Perception score of 13), they discover that the image of the girl is actually a swarm of flying honey bees moving as one. As soon as Lyla is aware of any onlookers, she disappears, returning home. If the characters manage to watch her long enough, they see her head north through the woods, back home, as the sun begins to set.

TRACKING A BEE

There are several **giant bees** (see page 79) in the glade, in addition to the smaller bees. They will not bother the characters in any fashion unless attacked first. They are more easily followed northward to their home (requiring a successful DC 10 Wisdom [Survival] check).

PART 3: IN THE HONEY CAVE

Following the giant bees home, the characters come to the base of a great tree. Two roots of this ancient oak form a door frame, beyond which is a cave. The earthen cave has few stone walls, but the great roots of the surrounding trees and walls of thick wax provide the necessary stability to keep the roof from collapsing. Unfortunately for those who might plan on smoking the bees to sleep, the air always blows out of the cave's mouth, never in. Except where noted, the tunnels within are 9 feet in height, and once past the initial chamber, all the walls, ceilings, and floors are coated in 6 inches of wax. There are numerous honey lamps in the cave on both the walls and the floors (but none on the ceilings except where noted in the text). The Honey Queen has placed these for the benefit of visiting fey, for reasons of aesthetics, and for disguising certain traps. These lamps cannot be removed from their locations without destroying them. The fragrant smell of honey and the constant buzzing of thousands of bees fill the whole complex.

Two kinds of bees live in the honey cave. The first, diminutive honeybees, buzz constantly to and fro. Though a few might land on the characters, these bees are not aggressive unless the Honey Queen instructs them to be. Giant bees also lair within (see area 3). These giant bees are, except for their size, identical to the smaller honeybees in habits and temperament. Despite their generally passive nature, the Honey Queen has set several of them as guards, and these bees fight to the death. Still, you should have a few of these large bees zip noisily past the adventurers as a reminder that this is an active, working hive.

1. THE GUARDIAN

> The roots of an ancient tree frame the entrance of this earthen cave. The sweet smell of honey wafts out on the gentle, cool breeze emanating from the large hole. It appears that there is a dark chamber just past the entranceway, but farther in, light is visible.

Creature: An old grizzly bear (as **polar bear**), grown fat on honey and easy living, lairs inside the entrance to the honey cave. Well trained, the bear knows to allow anyone who mentions the name of Lyla to enter. Those who don't mention Lyla are forcefully barred entry. The bear attacks if provoked.

Treasure: In the back of the lair, among a pile of dried bones, is a coin purse with 11 pp. A character who searches this area can find it with a successful DC 13 Wisdom (Perception) check.

2. THE FACE OF LYLA

> The scent of honey grows stronger as the dirt floor of the bear's den gives way to a slick, waxy floor. The walls and ceiling are likewise coated with a thick layer of golden wax, all illuminated by the warm glow of lights embedded in the floor. The tunnel opens into a large circular room. Lights, like those in the floor, are embedded in the walls, giving the whole room a golden glow. Clouds of bees buzz busily through the air. Along the walls are benches of stone covered in the ubiquitous beeswax.

This is where guests of the hive, those seeking to do business with the Honey Queen, are expected to wait. As the characters enter the room and get their bearings, tiny bees begin coalescing in the center of the chamber, forming a buzzing swarm. Within 2 rounds, the swarm shapes itself into the face of a young girl with curly locks.

Creature: It's not every day you see a gigantic, three-dimensional bust of a girl formed from a swarm of bees. Play up the uniqueness of this sight, and make sure the characters understand what they are seeing. After a round of shaping itself, the face speaks. The voice is that of a girl, modulated through the filter of a thousand bees. Named Lyla, she serves as the Honey Queen's adopted daughter and spokesperson. If the characters hurt or killed the guardian bear, she knows this and severely berates them for their rudeness before asking them their business. If the characters ask about her identity, she becomes recalcitrant, giving them only her name. If they mention their desire for the magic honey, she responds, "Magic is for fey. Not for you!" She does not agree to sell them the honey under any circumstances. Only if the characters attack does she retaliate, unleashing herself upon them as a **swarm of bees** (see page 61). If the characters do not attack but persist in going farther into the hive, she says only, "Turn back before it is too late, I warn you," before dissipating.

This swarm of bees is a manifestation of Lyla, a 12-year-old girl who has been asleep for 50 years. It can shape itself to match the self-image of Lyla, sometimes appearing in the image of a dancing girl, sometimes as a sword fighter, sometimes as a large, talking head. When it does this, the swarm has a 5-foot space space, as a Medium creature. If Lyla attacks, the silhouette image explodes into a typical swarm of angry, stinging bees. Lyla can use the droning of the bees to communicate, producing an unearthly, chilling feminine voice. A swarm of bees possessed by the personality of Lyla is identical to other swarms, with the exception that it has Perception +3 and is no longer immune to the charmed or frightened conditions—if the swarm is affected by one of those conditions, the swarm is dispersed as Lyla loses influence over the bees.

3. A FLOOR OF HONEY

Just 10 feet beyond the meeting room, the floor of the tunnel is trapped, and a pair of giant bees are under orders to attack any non-bees.

Trap: The wax floor of the tunnel is rigged to break when stepped on, trapping the feet of trespassers in a glue-like honey. Spotting the trap requires a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check. The trap cannot be disabled, but it can be avoided. If the trap is triggered, the character must make a successful DC 12 Dexterity saving throw to avoid falling through and becoming grappled (escape DC 12).

Creatures: Two **giant bees** (see page 79) wait on the wall, just beyond the trapped square. They swiftly attack as soon as the characters enter the square containing the trap. They have no regard for their lives and fight to the death. They do not coordinate their attack and simply go straight for the intruder in the lead.

4. HONEY BEE HIVES

> Honeycombs line a recess in the wall that is crawling with tiny honeybees. Golden honey drips thickly from the honeycomb onto the floor.

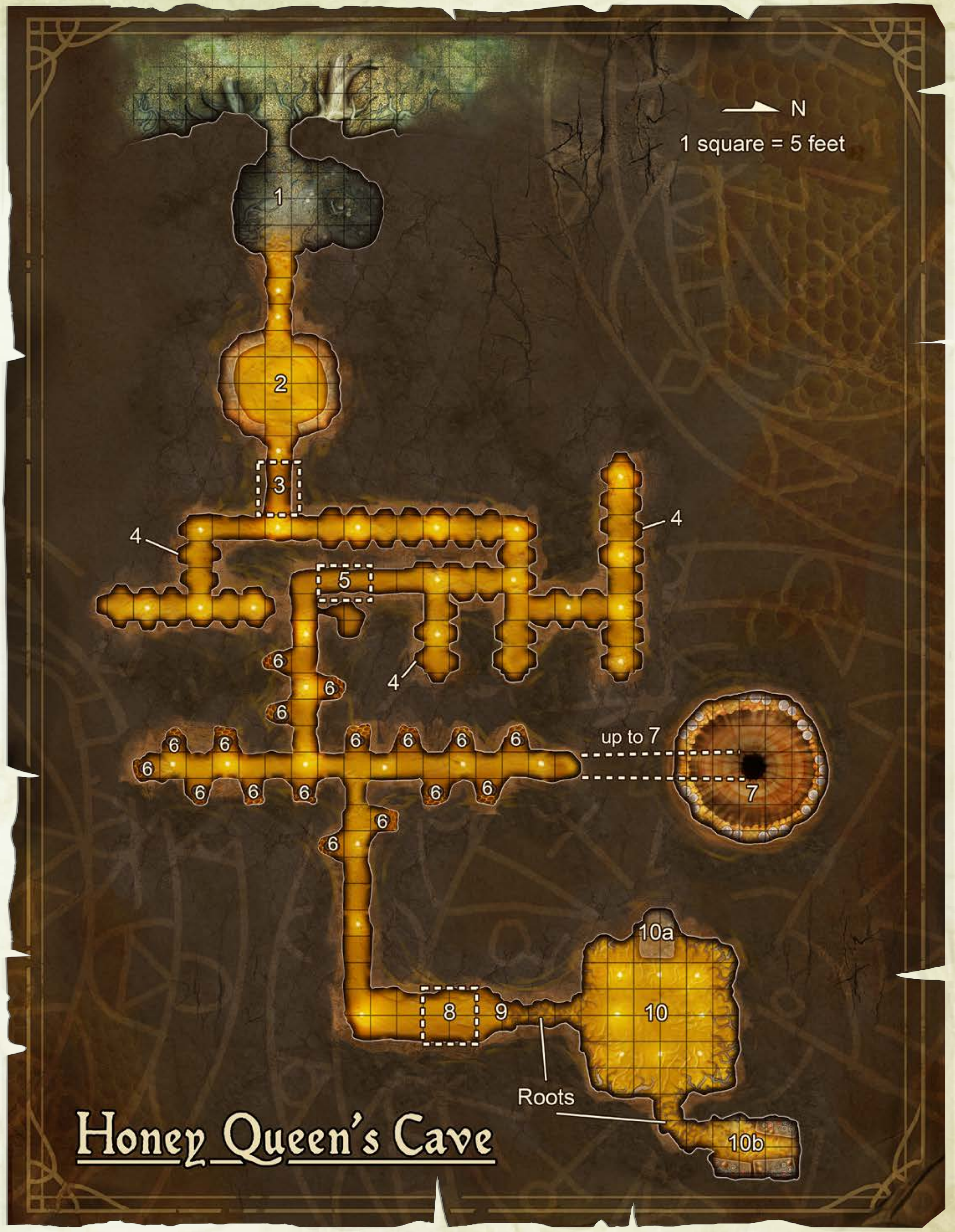
Many such hives fill the tunnels, each with their own queen and workers. Though the bees do not attack en masse, they sting anyone reaching for the honey or attempting to break off the honeycomb without proper attire, such as gloves. Anyone stung is affected by poison as if attacked by a giant bee (DC 11 Constitution saving throw, taking 10 (3d6) poison damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one).

5. A THIN FLOOR AND A SHORT FALL

This hallway has been trapped to prevent intruders from reaching the more important hives of the giant bee colony.

Trap: The wax floor is constructed in such a way as to break when someone reaches the designated area. Spotting the trap requires a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check. The trap cannot be disabled, but it can be avoided. Old giant bee stingers line the floor at the bottom of the pit, embedded in wax. Avoiding the stingers requires a successful DC 12 Dexterity saving throw. A character who is unable to avoid the stingers takes 3 (1d6) piercing damage and must make a DC 10 Constitution saving throw, taking 7 (2d6) poison damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. The pit is further disguised by the fact that there is a honey lamp embedded in the wax of the floor.

Creatures: Just beyond the trapped hallway, in a small earthen tunnel, lives a fat mite by the name of **Duxt** (see page 79). Duxt receives room and board from the Honey Queen in exchange for a few light duties, one of which is the guarding of this area. Duxt bursts out of his den, uttering a series of blustery threats, 2 rounds after the characters encounter the pit trap. He is accompanied by a lone **giant bee** (see page 79), which he directs to attack any intruder not in the pit. Duxt prefers lightly armored intruders as primary targets. On the third round of combat, a second giant bee attacks from the rear. A third arrives on the sixth round of combat. If the combat finishes before the reinforcements arrive, these other giant bees do not attack but instead harmlessly fly by, oblivious to the threat to their hive.


N
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6
6
up to 7
7
10a
8
9
10
Roots
10b
Honey Queen's Cave

Development: Duxt knows the location of the Honey Queen and the next trap, and if captured alive, he can easily be made to talk by a character who succeeds on a DC 10 Charisma (Intimidation) check. Duxt himself gets across the traps by riding on a giant bee.

Treasure: Besides his *brooch of shielding*, which he wears, Duxt keeps a pouch in his lair containing three emeralds, each worth 100 gp.

6. GIANT BEE CELLS

> Set into recesses in the wax-covered walls are giant honeycombs, each easily two feet wide and dripping with golden honey. In more than one of them, giant white maggoty things squirm.

There are several of these areas, each one basically identical except for the number of giant bees encountered at each location.

Creatures: At any given time, each section of giant honeycomb contains 1d3 **giant bees** (see page 79), each busily at work. These giant bees ignore the characters unless attacked or unless the characters touch one of the larval giant bees. If the characters do either of these things, the giant bees swiftly attack, fighting to the death to protect the young.

7. THE YOUNG QUEEN

This chamber, set inside the polished hollow of an ancient tree, can be reached only by climbing the tunnel leading up to it (requiring a successful DC 17 Strength [Athletics] check). The room is 20 feet high, and the ledge, upon which the newly laid eggs are first kept, is 15 feet from the rounded floor. Unlike the halls and chambers below, it has no lighting. Read the following only if the characters are using a light source:

> The golden brown walls of this egg-shaped chamber are fashioned from well-polished wood. A high ledge encircles the room, and in several places, leathery-looking eggs rest atop it.

Creatures: Two **giant bees** (see page 79) occupy this chamber, and they attack anyone who climbs to the ledge. They also attack if either they or the eggs are threatened. Otherwise, they ignore intruders. One of the bees is a **young giant queen bee** (see page 79) that serves as the current egg layer for the giant bee hive. The other is a worker that periodically carries eggs to various honeycombs below.

Terrain: Because of its egg-like shape, anyone moving more than 5 feet from the lip of the tunnel entrance must make a DC 10 Strength [Athletics] or Dexterity [Acrobatics] check. On a failed check, a character must make a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw. On a failed save, the character tumbles back down into the tunnel before falling 20 feet to the floor below and taking 2d6 bludgeoning damage.

Development: Traditionally, when a Honey Queen dies, her gift of intellect transfers magically to a young queen, such as the one in this chamber. Thus, there is always a Honey Queen to oversee the hive. If the characters kill this young queen and subsequently kill the current Honey Queen, the line of queens is broken and the magic honey ceases to be produced until a new queen matures. Of course, if the characters destroy all the bees in the hive, they also destroy any possibility of a new Honey Queen. Doing so severely angers many important Margrevians, who appreciate the goods produced by this hive, and possibly the Margreve itself.

8. A THIN FLOOR AND A LONG FALL

This hallway has been trapped to prevent intruders from reaching the chambers of the Honey Queen.

Trap: The wax floor is constructed to break when someone reaches the designated area. Spotting the trap and avoiding it requires a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check. If the trap is not avoided, those who are caught in it fall 20 feet, taking 2d6 bludgeoning damage. The soft earthen walls of the pit make getting out difficult, requiring a DC 25 Strength (Athletics) check. If the characters attempt to climb out at the corners, the DC is decreased to 20.

Development: If the characters fall into the pit, Lyla meets them here rather than at area 9, choosing to fight them while they are trapped.

9. LYLA THE SWORD WOMAN

> Honeybees begin swarming in front of you. As they buzz and fly, they form an image in the air of a shapely woman, dressed in armor of some sort. The three-dimensional silhouette, formed of buzzing gold and black bodies, seems to be holding a sword—albeit one made entirely of flying bees. When it speaks, though the image is that of a woman, the voice is the voice of the girl you heard in the outer chamber. Even as distorted as it is by the buzzing that produces it, the voice is recognizable as the same.
>
> "Silly people!" the voice says. "My mother must not be disturbed. What do you want?"

Lyla, though willing to talk for a short time, cannot be persuaded to allow the characters to pass. Since they have made it this far, she perceives them to be enemies and thieves. Eventually, she attacks, and though she continues a playful banter, her attack is quite earnest.

Creatures: The statistics for Lyla in this encounter are identical to those used in area 2, regardless of any damage that was done there. This is essentially a new swarm of bees she is using

10. THE HONEY QUEEN'S CHAMBERS

The **Honey Queen** (see page 79) spends almost all her time in these chambers, experimenting and crafting.

When the characters make their way through the entrance hallway (see "Terrain" below), read or paraphrase the following:

> The root-filled tunnel opens into a vast, magnificent golden chamber. It is lit by a dozen golden globes, each attached to the plethora of wax-covered roots that have been laced together to form the roof approximately fifteen feet from the slick, waxy floor.
>
> Four more lights are placed around a wax-covered bed of stone on the south side of the room. A young girl, her features vaguely familiar to you, lies upon it, apparently asleep, while small honeybees crawl across her face.

Creature: The Honey Queen is the title of a dynasty of awakened queen bees. How these creatures first came to self-awareness remains a mystery, but when one Honey Queen dies, another always rises to take her place. Within the Old Margreve, the Honey Queens maintain a brisk business selling honey (both magical and nonmagical) to the fey of the forest. The bees trade nonmagical honey for glassware, wooden tools, and occasional repairs to the hive tunnels. They trade magic honey for fairy magic, often scrolls or small temporary magical favors, which in turn allow the Honey Queen to continue manufacturing her magic honey.

When the characters enter, the Honey Queen, who is approximately as tall as a horse, exits from the tunnel leading into her laboratory and promptly demands they state their business.

Terrain: The chambers of the Honey Queen make good use of roots and the Honey Queen's ability to bypass these roots. A multitude of roots fill the hall, and Medium or larger creatures treat the chamber as difficult terrain, though characters who have a climb speed can move freely at that speed. One other option is hacking through the roots, removing them as an obstacle; for each round spent in such activity, a 5-foot-square section is cleared and is no longer difficult terrain.

The hall leading to area 10b, the queen's laboratory, is identical in nature to the entry hall.

The ceiling of the main chamber rises to a height of 25 feet and is likewise filled with a multitude of roots, although the queen keeps them woven together in such a way as to create a subterranean bower, 10 feet deep, in which she both rests and stores her treasures. The queen is able to move about and to easily enter this room-within–a-room.

Development: This final confrontation, the showdown with the Honey Queen, can go a number of ways depending on the characters and how they present themselves to the queen. The Honey Queen is not overly concerned about her slain bees, for their lives are cheap to her, and they are easily replaced. Rudeness angers her, however, and overt aggression brings retaliation. Though the queen begins with an indifferent attitude, the fact that the characters have made it this far intrigues her, and if the characters use Persuasion checks to improve her attitude to friendly, she relents and sells them the honey they seek. If the characters attack, she defends herself. If the characters try to force their way into the laboratory, remove Lyla from her bed, or attempt to intimidate the queen, she likewise becomes aggressive. In short, though the queen is not naturally violent, neither is she possessed of a generous spirit.

If combat ensues, the Honey Queen surrenders when reduced to 10 hit points or fewer. In surrendering, she is agreeable to two concessions: the characters can purchase her honey (an uncommon magic item, such as the *ring of warmth* provided by Terelsa, or any item of similar value is accepted as payment), and they may remove Lyla. She does not, however, quickly forgive them for either act.

Characters who use Persuasion or roleplaying to solve the problem should be awarded as if they had defeated the queen in combat (1,800 XP).

Treasure: In the root-woven upper chamber are four spell scrolls containing the following spells: *cure wounds*, *pass without trace*, *mage armor,* and *magic missile*. In a pinch, the queen can attempt to use them in combat. To obtain the scrolls, the characters need to hack their way into the queen's bower and then find them (which requires a successful DC 13 Wisdom [Perception] check).

10A. THE SLEEPING LYLA

The child sleeping on the wax-covered bed of stone is Lyla. The characters may try any number of ways to break the enchantment she lies under. If removed from the care of the bees, she wakes naturally within 1 week, as the spell wears off. Otherwise, the antidote in the next chamber can break the enchantment (and the queen might be made to disclose this information).

10B. THE QUEEN'S LABORATORY

> Unlike the rest of the complex, the walls of this smaller side room are cut stone and the ceiling is of worked timber. Oversized counters line the walls, all covered with vials, bottles, jars, burners, candles, and chalks.

This laboratory contains all the equipment, powders, and expensive ingredients needed to manufacture a multitude of magical creations. The Honey Queen uses it to craft her magical honey.

Treasure: Besides the many expensive ingredients in this room, two wax vials containing ageless honey sit beside another vial that contains a black-tinged honey (an immediate antidote for ageless honey). A fourth vial holds a magic honey thar operates identically to a *potion of greater healing*. The queen carries a vial similar to this one on a belt around her waist, but the curative honey in this room has been manufactured to fill an order from an important Margrevian. A honey lamp, resting in a bowl, illuminates the room. If the characters impress the queen with their diplomatic efforts, she gifts them this lamp.

Concluding the Adventure

Concluding "The Honey Queen," regardless of the results, presents opportunities for further adventures.

If the characters deliver the honey to Terelsa, she makes good on their payment. Good-aligned characters might well worry about who wanted the honey and whether they are aware of its sleep-inducing qualities.

Lyla, if rescued, presents her own difficulties. Her family, woodsmen from the borders of the Margreve, are dead or gone, and no one remains to care for her. She awakens disoriented, remembering the events of her slumber only as a dream. Within a month, she begins manifesting sorcerous abilities.

As noted earlier, characters who manage to wipe out the giant bees make themselves no friends by doing so. The forest is a tough place, and a bit of larceny or maiden rescuing is one thing. But destroying part of the forest's makeup brings only anger and disapproval (as hinted at by Baba Migori). If the old Honey Queen still lives, she most certainly holds a grudge, and besides redoubling her defenses, she keeps her antennae up for opportunities to get back at her attackers.

New Creatures and Magic Items

The monsters and magic items introduced in this adventure are detailed below.

DUXT

Small fey, lawful evil

Armor Class 12

Hit Points 7 (2d6)

Speed 25 ft., climb 25 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	14 (+2)	10 (+0)	10 (+0)	9 (–1)	8 (–1)

Spell Immunity *magic missile*

Damage Resistances force

Saving Throws Dex +4

Skills Athletics +2, Perception +1, Stealth +4

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages Common, Sylvan

Challenge 1/4 (50 XP)

Special Equipment. Duxt wears a *brooch of shielding*, which gives him resistance to force damage and immunity to damage from the *magic missile* spell (both included above).

ACTIONS

Shortsword. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 2) piercing damage.

Dart. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, range 20/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) piercing damage.

GIANT BEE

Medium beast, unaligned

Armor Class 12

Hit Points 18 (4d8)

Speed 10 ft., fly 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	14 (+2)	10 (+0)	1 (–5)	10 (+0)	3 (–4)

Skills Perception +2

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 12

Languages —

Challenge 1/2 (100 XP)

Sedating Smoke. When the giant bee enters a sufficiently smoky area for the first time or ends its turn there, it must succeed on a DC 12 Constitution saving throw or be affected as if by the *slow* spell.

ACTIONS

Sting. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 2) piercing damage and the target must make a DC 11 Constitution saving throw, taking 10 (3d6) poison damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

YOUNG GIANT QUEEN BEE

Medium beast, unaligned

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 33 (6d8 + 6)

Speed 10 ft., fly 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	17 (+3)	12 (+1)	5 (–3)	10 (+0)	8 (–1)

Skills Perception +3

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 13

Languages Common

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Sedating Smoke. When the young giant queen bee enters a sufficiently smoky area for the first time or ends her turn there, she must make a DC 12 Constitution saving throw or be affected as by the *slow* spell.

ACTIONS

Sting. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage and the target must make a DC 12 Constitution saving throw, taking 10 (3d6) poison damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

THE HONEY QUEEN

Large beast, unaligned

Armor Class 16 (*mage armor*)

Hit Points 60 (8d10 + 16)

Speed 10 ft., fly 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	16 (+3)	14 (+2)	10 (+0)	10 (+0)	16(+3)

Saving Throws Con +5, Cha +6

Skills Insight +3, Perception +3, Persuasion +6

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 13

Languages Common, Sylvan

Challenge 5 (1,800 XP)

Command Bees. As a bonus action, the Honey Queen can command any number of bees or giant bees

telepathically, giving them simple orders. They must be visible to her when she issues the command but will continue to follow orders until they are carried out even if they move out of sight. Awakened or otherwise intelligent bees can resist this effect with a successful DC 15 Charisma saving throw.

Sedating Smoke. When the Honey Queen enters a sufficiently smoky area for the first time or ends her turn there, she must succeed on a DC 12 Constitution saving throw or be affected as if by the *slow* spell.

Spellcaster. The Honey Queen is a 4th-level spellcaster. Her casting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 13, +5 to hit with spell attacks). She has the following spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *friends, mage hand, minor illusion, poison spray, prestidigitation*

1st level (4 slots): *charm person, entangle, mage armor, sleep*

2nd level (3 slots): *hold person, scorching ray, suggestion*

ACTIONS

Sting. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 9 (2d6 + 3) piercing damage and the target must make a DC 13 Constitution saving throw, taking 10 (3d6) poison damage on a failed save and gaining the poisoned condition until the end of its next turn, or half as much damage on a successful one.

AGELESS HONEY

Wondrous item, rare

Crafted only by the Honey Queens of the Old Margreve from honeys made from the pollen of the effildawnan flower, a small spoonful of this purple-tinged honey causes you to fall into a deep sleep for 1 month (a successful DC 20 Constitution saving throw reduces this time to 1 day). During this time, you are subject to neither aging nor hunger.

HONEY LAMP

Wondrous item, uncommon

Honey lamps, made from glowing honey encased in beeswax, shed light as a lamp. Though the lamps are often found in the shape of a globe, the honey can also be sealed side stone or wood recesses. If the wax that shields the honey is broken or smashed, the honey crystallizes in 7 days and ceases to glow. Eating the honey while it is still glowing grants darkvision out to a range of 30 feet for 1 week and 1 day.

The Vengeful Heart

By Matt Corley

"The Vengeful Heart" is a forest adventure suitable for four 3rd-level characters.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Hard times have fallen on the small hamlet of Incot. The families have come together to ration their food, but the outlook for winter is bleak. A week ago, a stranger and his retinue came to them, offering hope and a way to survive the upcoming winter. His request was simple: one gold piece and a hearty meal for a small blood offering; a more substantial tithe would earn as much as five gold pieces. The stranger assured the village folk that they would recover quickly and completely from their donation.

The children were hungry, stores were sparse, and so the choice was easily made. Over the next few days the stranger was visited by every able-bodied adult in the village. True to his word, the donation took little time, and although uncomfortable, it was hardly debilitating. As he left, the villagers thanked the stranger for his custom, asked him to come back any time, and lauded their gods for the friendly visitor that saved them from starvation.

The stranger's name is Eagehrt, a blood mage of the Sanguine Path (see *Demon Cults and Secret Societies*). Eagehrt was dispatched to the Margreve by the Path to gather Collybiscus root for a grand ritual. Knowing the Margreve's deadly reputation, he devised a simple plan: Stop at the first village he came to, ingratiate himself with the locals, and use their blood, given freely or not, to create blood marks (see *The Midgard Worldbook*) to protect himself and his entourage.

Eagehrt's plan worked beautifully, and the folks of Incot were able to supply enough blood for everyone in his party to have a handful of blood marks. Shortly after leaving Incot, his party was targeted while resting for the night by a scouting party of shadow fey. They survived the encounter, just barely, and in doing so they were forced to use the blood marks they had harvested in Incot. In a matter of minutes, the entire adult population of the hamlet perished. The children of Incot are lost, confused, and looking for protection. Eagehrt and his troops are in search of more villages to replenish their stock of blood marks as they continue their search for material components. The shadow fey are looking for revenge—and the heroes are caught in the middle of it all.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

AN ABANDONED VILLAGE: The characters are traveling through the Margreve and find a recently abandoned hamlet. With little effort they discover that all the adult inhabitants of the village are dead in their beds. There are no obvious wounds or signs of foul play on the bodies.

SENT FROM ZOBECK: Lucca Angeli, high priestess of Lada in Zobeck, has heard the rumors of increased shadow fey activity in the Margreve. She sends an intermediary to hire the heroes to investigate and report their findings back to her.

PORTENTS AND OMENS: Visions of dread and disaster have assailed Master Diviner Rudwin Whitstone. He has been able to determine that blood magic and rare material components from the Old Margreve are involved in the casting. Eagehrt Mathye, a suspected member of the Sanguine Path, left for the Margreve last week, and Master Whitstone hires the characters to follow and stop him.

THE VILLAGE OF INCOT

> You notice a grouping of small huts as you crest the hill. It's small enough and quiet enough that if you were a few dozen yards farther into the forest you may not have noticed it at all. A well, an animal pen, and a small garden complete the picture of a small and self-sufficient village.

THE HUTS

The huts of the village are primitive affairs of daub and wattle with thatch roofs. They are not particularly distinct and have little to distinguish themselves from one another. If the characters investigate the huts, read the following:

> The door swings open easily, revealing a common room. As soon as you enter, the distinct smell of death greets you. There is a fireplace with a large cooking pot on the hearth. A threadbare cloth is the only separator between this room and the next.

There is little of interest in the common room. The characters should have the impression of extreme squalor.

> The smell intensifies as the curtain is pushed to the side, and you see what is causing it. A pair of bodies, a young adult man and woman, lie motionless on a pallet. A smaller, empty pallet lies in the other corner of the room.

The same scene plays out in each of the huts. If the characters examine all six huts they find one hut with two small pallets, two huts with a single small pallet, and larger pallets that the adults sleep on in all of the huts. There are two dead adults in each hut.

If the characters examine the bodies, they can learn several pieces of information through successful ability checks that might give them an idea of what happened:

- Each body has a small puncture wound in the crook of its arm (Wisdom [Perception] DC 10).
- The wounds are minor, had begun healing, and could not have caused death in and of themselves (Wisdom [Medicine] DC 12).
- A thorough examination of the bodies shows signs of livor mortis (Intelligence [Investigation] DC 10).
- The lividity of the bodies indicates that the victims have been dead for about 2 days (Wisdom [Medicine] DC 15) and that the bodies have less blood in them than expected (Wisdom [Medicine] DC 20).
- If they do not figure it out themselves, allow the group a DC 10 Intelligence check to realize that all the victims are adults and all the children are missing from the village.

A character who makes a cursory examination of the bedroom (requiring a successful DC 10 Intelligence [Investigation] check or a passive Perception score of 12 or higher) finds a small pouch poorly hidden away from prying eyes. The contents of the pouch vary depending on whether there were any children in the household (as indicated by small sleeping pallets). If there were children living in the hut, the pouch is empty. If the hut had only adult inhabitants, it contains 5 gp per adult. The coins are from the Free City of Zobeck.

PENS, WELL, AND GARDEN

The door to the pen lies open, and whatever animals had been in it are no longer there. The well and the garden are unremarkable. The characters can replenish their food and water in these places. Characters who examine the well, garden, or animal pen can make a Wisdom (Survival) check to gain some or all of this information:

- DC 10: A well-worn trail leads into the forest.
- DC 15: There are two distinct sets of prints, larger humanoids and a second smaller set of humanoid tracks.
- DC 18: The larger tracks are a few days older than the smaller tracks.

Into the Margreve

If the characters follow the trail into the forest, the shadows grow heavier as the canopy gets thicker and the landscape more primeval with each step. This part of the forest is dimly lit, with plentiful shadows for even Large creatures to hide in.

During their travels, roll a d20 or choose a random encounter from the table three times daily (morning, midday, and evening) or when dramatically appropriate.

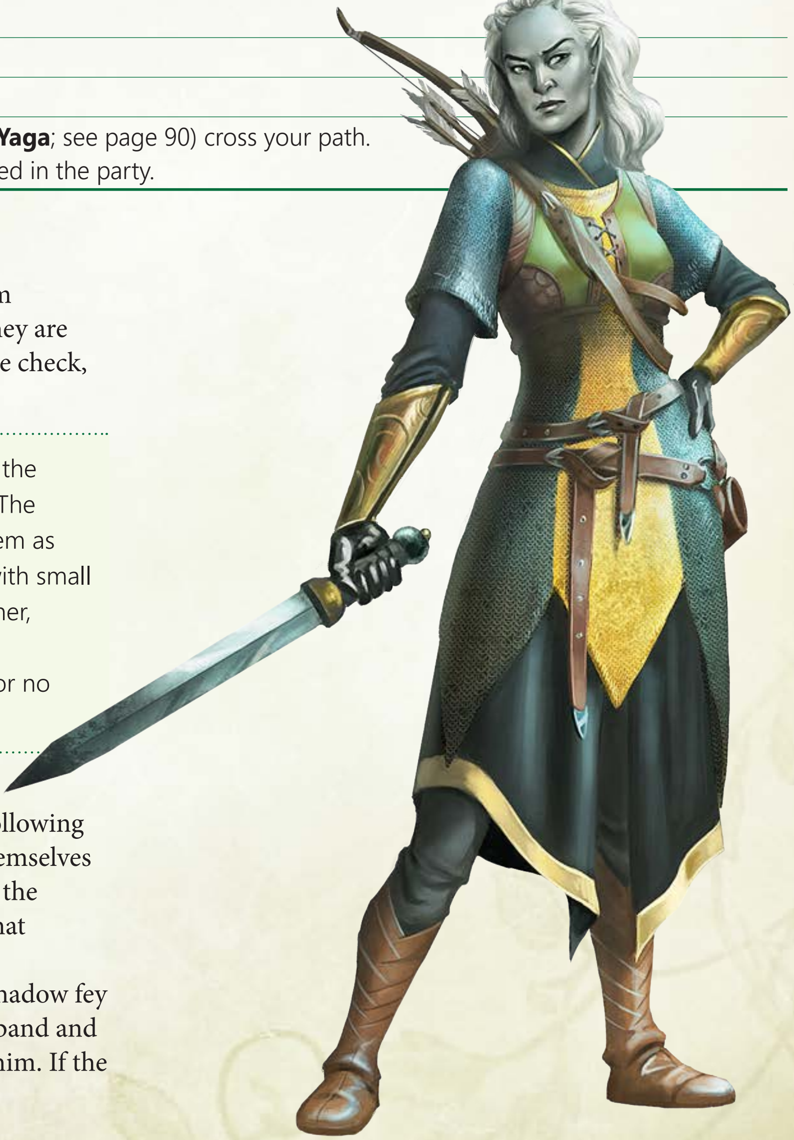
Random Encounters

D20	ENCOUNTER
1–9	No encounter
10	A figure slumped against a tree. The creature is long dead and has been looted of any valuables. Mushrooms of all shapes and sizes are growing from its exposed skin.
11	A small gold plaque (5 gp) nailed to a tree. In Common, it says, "Here lies . . ." The rest of the writing has been weathered away and is illegible.
12	A tree with a greatsword embedded in it. The sword is buried almost to the hilt. The tree is vaguely humanoid in shape.
13	A charred area, devoid of any signs of life. It is 30 feet in radius and is clearly demarcated from the rest of the forest.
14	The forest turns swampy and even darker. **Exploding frogs** (Stealth +5) are hiding within the boggy landscape.
15	An ill-tempered **alp** (see page 89) looking for a wooden bucket
16	1d4 **Red-banded line spiders** (see *Tome of Beasts*)
17	**Bone crab** (see *Tome of Beasts*)
18	**Dire wolf**
19	**Giant boar**
20	A pair of tiny teeth (**iron teeth of Baba Yaga**; see page 90) cross your path. The teeth might or might not be interested in the party.

WATCHFUL EYES

Allow the characters to make a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check to see if they realize that they are being watched. If the characters succeed on the check, read or paraphrase the following:

> The sounds of a large beast come from within the woods. Then, five fey emerge from the forest. The telltale white hair and gray skin tones mark them as shadow fey. One of them, a beautiful female with small horns, steps forward. The four other fey flank her, weapons at the ready.
>
> "You'll not be so lucky this time. Leave now, or no amount of healing magic will save you."



On a failed Perception check, the characters do not realize that they are being following by the shadow fey. The fey choose to reveal themselves at a suitable time before the group encounters the children. It should be clear to the characters that they've been followed for quite some time.

The female, named Suzenga, and the other shadow fey have previously encountered Eagehrt and his band and assume that the characters are in league with him. If the characters succeed on a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check, they notice small wounds, scuffs, and other signs of recent battle on the fey. Any attempts to intimidate the fey immediately incite combat.

If the characters choose to parley and succeed on a DC 10 Wisdom (Insight) check, Suzenga will answer questions about their prior encounter. She makes it clear that she wants revenge on Eagehrt and that she's willing to bargain with the characters. She suggests the characters swear an Oath (see "Oath Magic," page 88) to deliver Eagehrt to her. She does not expect the characters to defeat him and is satisfied if they engineer an ambush or a similar encounter. Her group keeps tabs on the characters throughout their journey in the Margreve, watching and making sure they are doing as they promised.

If questioned, Suzenga can share the following information:

- The fey approached Eagehrt's group and were attacked. She implies the attack was without provocation. (Partially true; Eagehrt was told to leave the forest immediately, and he responded with force.)
- The shadow fey are in the forest on a hunting trip. (Partially true; they are scouting to determine how the forest has changed since the shadow fey last claimed ownership of it.)
- The group that attacked them consisted of a blood mage and six guards. One of his guards and two of the fey did not survive the encounter. (True.)
- The fey were winning the fight, and the mage and guards used blood magic to heal themselves. (True.)

THE OWLBEAR, AND FINDING EMPLOYMENT

While following the trail, the characters notice a second, fresh set of tracks if they succeed on a DC 12 Wisdom (Survival) check. On a check total of 15, they see that the new tracks are from a large predator, possibly a bear. On a check total of 18 or higher, they determine that the tracks are from an owlbear and are very fresh.

The characters have enough time to prepare for the encounter and possibly surprise the **owlbear**. It is focused on following the trail and does not have advantage on its Wisdom (Perception) checks to detect stealthy characters.

As soon as the owlbear has been defeated or driven off, read or paraphrase the following:

> No sooner has the owlbear been dealt with than you see movement in the canopy. The leaves and branches are too thick to make out who or what the forest is hiding. Before your eyes the branches part and gently deposit four children onto the ground before you.

The children realized their predicament and took to the forest. They followed the same trail as Eagehrt toward the nearest village, Wheedon, where they have family.

The oldest, a girl, as tall and waifish as an elf, introduces herself as **Chairo** (see page 90). She has a palpable, charismatic presence, and something about her demeanor is slightly unsettling. The other three children, two girls and a boy, are younger than Chairo. The girls are Rhosyn, Chairo's sister, and Eriu, her best friend. The boy and the smallest of the bunch, Eoin, is holding hands with Rhosyn.

Considering the circumstances, the children are remarkably calm and in no apparent distress. They defer completely to Chairo, treating her as the leader of their group. Chairo comes forward to address the character with the highest status. Without preamble, or so much as mentioning the owlbear, she says:

> "You will to take us to Wheedon." She reaches into a filthy pouch and hands the character ten gold pieces. "I'll give you the rest when we get there."

She gathers the other children and continues down the trail they had been following. If the heroes do not follow her she turns around, her irritation clear, and reminds them that they are working for her and they need to catch up. If necessary, Chairo will use her Persuasion skill to get the heroes to take the children to Wheedon.

Chairo will freely chat with the characters once they are on their way to Wheedon. She knows everything from the "Adventure Background" section as seen from the eyes of a child and shares the following details:

- The adults were not sick when they went to bed, but they didn't wake up.
- The children waited to see if anyone would come to Incot or if the adults would awaken.
- She decided they should leave, and they took money from their parents and left.
- She does not know exactly what the stranger did to her parents, just that they were tired afterward, and as soon as they seemed to be getting better they died. She suspects Eagehrt is behind the "illness."

The trail is noticeably easier to follow now that the children have joined the group. There are no random encounters along the way, and any attempts at foraging or hunting are made with advantage. An observant character (one who succeeds on a DC 17 Wisdom [Perception] check) notices that Chairo makes no sound and leaves no footprints when traveling through the forest.

THE VILLAGE OF WHEEDON

> The journey to Wheedon is remarkably uneventful. The path is clear, game is plentiful, and as you travel to Wheedon everyone is in excellent spirits. Early the next morning the path becomes a road of sorts, and soon Wheedon stands before you. A priest and his retinue are just leaving the village; they are walking directly toward you.

The characters enter the town as Eagehrt is leaving. A small group of villagers have come to see him and his companions off. He has performed his rituals, paid for the donations, and is continuing his mission. Much the same as at Incot, the folk of Wheedon consider Eagehrt's intervention a blessing.

WHEN CHAIRO SEES EAGEHRT

Before the children and Eagehrt's retinue get too close together, but after Chairo gets a good look at the priest, the situation changes quickly.

> The forest comes alive, and the air thickens suddenly with humidity. Clouds gather overheard. You realize that the ever-present sounds of the forest are gone. Everything is deathly still.
>
> In a small voice, Rhosyn says, "Chairo? What's happening? You're scaring me …"
>
> Were it not for her clothes, you'd have a hard time recognizing her, as an aspect of the Margreve seems to have taken hold of Chairo. Her fey-like features have become more prominent, and her entire demeanor has changed. A primeval rage plays across her face, and she starts to move in the direction of the priest.

The characters have moments to calm Chairo down (requiring a successful DC 13 Charisma [Persuasion] or Wisdom [Insight] check) to keep her from confronting Eagehrt for what happened in Incot. As she calms down, the aspect of the forest leaves her, and she stands before you breathing heavily.

Eagehrt and his group are far enough away that they can't see Chairo's changing demeanor.

CONFRONTING EAGEHRT

If Chairo confronts Eagehrt, the venom of her words is enough to stop him in his tracks. He literally takes a step back before remembering who she is and realizing that a little girl is berating him before the villagers and his guards. Chairo loses steam after a few moments and moves away, clearly exhausted.

If the heroes calm Chairo down and prevent her tirade, Eagehrt greets them with indifference. The villagers are simple folk and describe Eagehrt's ritual if asked. They confirm that though they were tired afterward, there are no apparent long-term effects.

Eagehrt is the epitome of a selfish, arrogant, and narcissistic noble. Someone who succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Insight) check can see that **Eagehrt** (see page 88) is uneasy and nervous. His time in the Margreve has been difficult, and he wants to return to Zobeck. He has three guards with him that are **ecstatics** (see page 89). Eagehrt admits to being sent into the Margreve to gather rare plants but is vague on the details:

> "Once I have them," he says, "I'm leaving this gods-forsaken place as quickly as I can."

Eagehrt will not reveal his affiliation under any circumstances and does not actually know what the collybiscus root will be used for. While in the Margreve he has visited two villages, Incot and Wheedon. In both places he has offered gold in exchange for a tithe of blood. Eagehrt believes he is helping the villagers and

that the ritual is a fair exchange. He will reluctantly explain the basics of how blood marks work and say they're necessary to ensure his safety. When asked about the shadow fey, he glances at the forest nervously:

> "They are everywhere, watching us, hunting us. They want their forest back."

He is afraid of the fey and of going back into the forest. If the characters haven't thought of it already, he suggests that he would no longer need the blood marks and would be willing to leave the forest if the characters get the collybiscus root for him. Chairo also urges the characters to save this village the potentially lethal effects of the blood marks.

If the characters approach him with hostility or attack, he and his guards will fight to the best of their ability and freely use their blood marks (they each have four) as they are needed. For every two blood marks expended, one villager dies before the characters' eyes. Eagehrt will accept surrender from the characters, and in return he expects them to retrieve the collybiscus root and return it to him in exchange for their lives.

THE BARGAIN

Before leaving Wheedon, Eagehrt extracts an Oath from the characters that they will procure the plant for him. As part of the Oath-making process, clever players may include conditions that Eagehrt too must meet as a component of their Oath. He's not above using a blood mark while talking to the characters to strengthen his bargaining position.

Eagehrt describes the collybiscus plant in detail, providing a drawing as a reference. Showing the villagers the picture gives the characters a +1 bonus on their first check to locate the plant (see below). Showing the picture to Chairo gives the characters advantage on all their checks to find the collybiscus plant, as she gives them detailed directions (this benefit does not stack with the bonus from talking to the villagers). Chairo and the children will not accompany the characters into the forest.

FINDING THE PLANTS

While the characters are searching in the forest, check for random encounters three times daily (morning, midday, and evening). After each random encounter is resolved, the characters can make a DC 15 Wisdom (Nature) check. On a successful check, they find a shoot of the plant.

When the characters make their third successful Wisdom (Nature) check, read the following:

> The third, and final, bunch of collybiscus rests in a quiet, idyllic glen. An uneasiness settles over all of you as you get within sight of the plant.

The shadow fey know the importance of collybiscus and have tasked a **shadow fey guardian** (see *Tome of Beasts*) and three awakened **wolves** with protecting it from outsiders. The guardian and the wolves wait in the shadows for the characters to approach. Noticing the guardian requires a successful DC 10 Wisdom (Perception) check; on a check total of 14 or higher, the characters notice the wolves as well.

The disposition of the guardian is largely contingent upon the characters' previous actions.

- If the characters have made an Oath to Suzenga and the guardian is convinced (by a successful DC 13 Charisma [Persuasion] check) that they are working to fulfil that Oath, he is willing to bargain with them, possibly extracting an Oath for a service to be named later in exchange for the plant.
- If the characters eliminated the shadow fey, he knows that something has happened to that group, and he attacks on sight (assuming that they are behind the missing shadow fey scouting party).
- If the characters left the shadow fey without hostilities and without an agreement, he is hostile but does not attack immediately. He might be willing to aid the characters, if they make a successful DC 15 Charisma (Persuasion) check and swear an oath that benefits him directly.

Regardless of how the players react to the encounter, they must make their way back to Eagehrt. Returning to Wheedon requires three successful DC 12 Wisdom (Survival) checks (morning, midday, and evening). Check for random encounters at the same time.

BACK TO WHEEDON

Chairo and the children have stayed in Wheedon while the characters were in the forest; Eagehrt waits impatiently for his plants. What happens next is largely dependent on the actions that the characters have taken to this point, what their intent is regarding the collybiscus, and any oaths that have been sworn. Regardless of the actions of the characters, the shadow fey will ambush Eagehrt, and the consequences of that attack will be felt from Wheedon to Zobeck.

Conclusion

The plots and machinations of the shadow fey, the Sanguine Path, and Baba Yaga continue regardless of the ultimate outcome of the adventure.

If the *Portents and Omens* adventure hook was used, reporting to the University about the Sanguine Path gains the characters an ally and, if Eagehrt was prevented from completing his mission, an enemy.

If the *Sent from Zobeck* adventure hook was used, the Priesthood of Lada will view the heroes as allies and might turn to them again for assistance when more public channels aren't appropriate.

The Scáthsidhe might view the players as oathbreakers, interlopers, pawns, entertainment, or even allies, depending on their actions in the Margreve. Last, and certainly not least, is Baba Yaga. How will Grandmother respond to the discovery of a forest-hearted? Did Eagehrt or the shadow fey recognize Chairo for what she really is? Will Chairo (or Baba Yaga) turn to the heroes again for help?

New Creatures and Magic

The magical concepts and new monsters featured in this adventure are detailed below.

OATH MAGIC

The primordial magic of an Oath is subtle and powerful. An Oath is not as simple as making a promise, it is about declaring intent and making a sacred vow. Once an Oath is taken, the maker is expected to fulfil it. A creature that breaks an Oath is labeled an Oathbreaker and its status changes accordingly. Other negative effects, particularly in social settings with creatures for whom Oaths are important, such as the fey, follow the Oathbreaker until the creature atones.

The characters will have the opportunity to pledge an Oath several times within this series of adventures. They have tremendous agency in what they say and how they say it. The GM may allow the characters a check using Intelligence (History or Arcana) to realize the difference between an oath (ordinary promise) and an Oath, especially when made in a place of primeval magic such as the Margreve. If you're trying to trick someone with a loophole in an Oath, you can make a Charisma (Deception) check opposed by their Wisdom (Insight).

FOREST-HEARTED

The Forest-hearted house a small portion of Baba Yaga's soul within them (see the "Eastern Heart" section in the Gazetteer). The manifestation of this sliver varies widely and is unique to the individual. All forest-hearted are friends of the Margreve and it may actively protect them. Due to their unique connection with both Baba Yaga and the Margreve, forest-hearted casters are immune to the Margreve's siphon magic ability. Not all Forest-hearted pursue magic, but those that do tend to be sorcerers of great skill and power.

EAGEHRT

Medium humanoid (human), chaotic evil

Armor Class 11 (14 with *mage armor*)

Hit Points 104 (16d8 + 32)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8 (–1)	13 (+1)	14 (+2)	10 (+0)	12 (+1)	18 (+4)

Skills Insight, +3, Perception +3, Persuasion +6

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, frightened

Senses passive Perception 13

Languages Common, Elvish

Challenge 4 (1,100 XP)

Spellcasting. Eagehrt is a 6th-level spellcaster whose spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 14, +6 to hit with spell attacks). He has the following sorcerer spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *fire bolt, message*

1st level (4 slots): *charm person, mage armor, magic missile*

2nd level (3 slots): *alter self, hold person, suggestion*

3rd level (3 slots): *fear, fireball*

Truth Is Red and Flowing (1/day). Eagehrt can perform a ritual that reveals the knowledge of a creature's past. The ritual requires at least a pint of the creature's blood, an uncut ruby worth 100 gp or more, and 1 hour to complete. Once it is completed, Eagehrt knows about crucial events in the creature's past and can use that knowledge against the creature; for 24 hours, Eagehrt has advantage on spell attack rolls against the creature, and the creature has disadvantage on saving throws against his spells.

ACTIONS

Dagger. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 3 (1d4 + 1) piercing damage.

Visage of the Blood Bound (1/day). Eagehrt draws back his hood, revealing a horrific visage of ever-bleeding wounds. Any creature within 60 feet that can see him must make a successful DC 14 Wisdom saving throw or be frightened of him. A frightened creature repeats the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself with a successful save.

ECSTATIC

Medium humanoid (human), neutral evil

Armor Class 13 (shield)

Hit Points 65 (10d8+20)

Speed 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
15 (+2)	12 (+1)	14 (+2)	7 (–2)	11 (+0)	6 (–2)

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, frightened

Senses passive Perception 10

Languages Common

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Witness. Ecstatics have advantage on saving throws against spells and effects that affect the mind.

ACTIONS

Filth-Encrusted Morningstar. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 6 (1d8 + 2) piercing damage plus 2 (1d4) poison damage; a successful DC 13 Constitution saving throw negates the poison damage.

Sling. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, range 30/120 ft., one target. *Hit:* 3 (1d4 + 1) bludgeoning damage.

ALP

Small fey (shapechanger), chaotic evil

Armor Class 12

Hit Points 44 (8d6 + 16)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	16 (+3)	14 (+2)	10 (+0)	16 (+3)	8 (–1)

Damage Resistances cold, necrotic

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, paralyzed, unconscious

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 13

Languages Common, Sylvan, Umbral

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Shadow Stealth. While in dim light or darkness, the alp can take the Hide action as a bonus action.

Shapechanger. The alp can use its action to polymorph into a Small or Tiny beast it has seen, or back into its true form. Its statistics, other than its size, are the same in each form. Any equipment it is wearing or carrying isn't transformed. It reverts to its true form if it dies.

Sunlight Sensitivity. While in sunlight, the alp has disadvantage on attack rolls, as well as on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on sight.

Innate Spellcasting. The alp's spellcasting ability is Wisdom. The alp can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: *invisibility*

3/day each: *silent image, sleep*

1/day each: *bestow curse, dream*

ACTIONS

Sleeper's Slap. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (2d4 + 3) bludgeoning damage, and if the target was sleeping or unconscious before it was hit, it must succeed on a DC 13 Wisdom saving throw or be frightened and restrained for 1 minute. The creature can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the restrained condition on itself on a success. The creature must succeed on another saving throw on a following round to end the frightened condition.

IRON TEETH OF BABA YAGA

Tiny fey, chaotic neutral

Armor Class 14

Hit Points 67 (15d6+15)

Speed 0 ft., fly 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	18 (+4)	12 (+1)	18 (+4)	10 (+0)	10 (+0)

Skills Arcana +6, History +6

Damage Resistances lightning

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages Common, Dwarvish, Elvish, Infernal, Sylvan

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Innate Spellcasting. The iron teeth's spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 14, +6 to hit with spell attacks). It can cast the following spells innately, requiring only verbal components:

At will: *detect magic, mending, ray of frost, true strike*

2/day each: *grease, magic missile, shield*

1/day each: *acid arrow, blur, heat metal*

ACTIONS

Pinch. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 11 (3d4 + 4) piercing damage.

CHAIRO

Medium humanoid (human), chaotic good

Armor Class 11

Hit Points 4 (1d8)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
7 (–2)	12 (+1)	10 (+0)	12 (+1)	8 (–1)	16 (+3)

Saving Throws Cha +5, Con +2

Skills Deception +5, Intimidation +5, Persuasion +5

Senses passive Perception 9

Languages Common

Challenge 1/4 (50 XP)

Forest-Hearted. While in the Margreve, Chairo has advantage on all Wisdom (Survival) and Intelligence (Nature) checks. She is under the effect of a *pass without trace* spell at all times; this does not extend to others.

ACTIONS

Primeval Aspect (1/day). Chairo assumes an aspect of the Margreve. The effect lasts for 1d4 rounds. While she is manifesting the aspect, she has advantage on Charisma checks. Afterward, she must make a successful DC 10 Constitution check or gain one level of exhaustion.

Challenge of the Fang

By Dan Voyce

"Have no fear, my child. Just wear the cloak and carry the offerings, and all will be well. The Margreve will guide you. I know we said never to wander alone, but this is different. It's just another ritual, like the dolls at harvest time."

"Or spring, when we sacrifice the lambs? Father, why are you crying?"

"I … I'm just so proud of you. Now run along, girl, we mustn't keep the forest waiting."

"Challenge of the Fang" is a grim fairy tale for characters of 4th level. Depending on their actions, adventurers might earn more or less treasure than average.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Some stories never die. They demand to be told again and again. They weave themselves into reality, age-old rituals with age-old power. Mortals, of course, forget such things. Even long-lived elves forget, in time. But the Old Margreve remembers, and now the time has come for one such ancient tale to play out yet again. The Challenge of the Fang is a battle between wolf and man—between the tooth and claw of nature, and the fire and steel of civilization—for the Margreve's blessing. Chosen by omens, an innocent is sent into the forest, sought by both sides—one trying to devour her, the other to save her. Whoever wins earns the forest's favor for three generations.

This time, a young girl named Czerwonya wears the red cloak that marks a sacred offering. While she was being sent into the forest by her tearful father, deep in the Margreve the title of Would-Be-King of Wolves was given to the smartest and toughest of the lupine horde, and that creature set off to hunt her down. The third part of the ritual triad is the hunter, wielder of axe and fire, who must slay the wolf to ensure that it is civilization that gains the forest's boon. Fate chooses a character to fill this role.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

A panicked horse carries a dead man into the party's midst, with wolves pursuing close behind. Brave characters can claim the woodsman's magic hatchet, called Wolf Killer. At the nearest refuge, Czerwonya's father pleads for help, and fellow travelers turn out to be shapeshifters in service to the Would-Be-King of Wolves.

Heading into the deep woods, characters are tested in their knowledge of the Old Ways. Besting these challenges earns help and grudging respect from local fey. Failure means an encounter with the Mora—moths whose touch brings lethal apathy and deadly dreams.

Their final destination is the tree house of a forest crone, nestled in the canopy of a meandering treant. The lupine champion has devoured the witch, who is visibly writhing in its swollen belly. The outcome of this battle decides not just the fate of Czerwonya but who gains the Margreve's blessing: wolf or man.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

Fate chooses the characters to represent the forces of civilization in the Challenge of the Fang, and this decision is enforced by the Old Margreve. Player character druids, paladins, warlocks, or sorcerers with connections to the fey that prepare spells in the forest during the adventure gain an ambiguous but strong impression that the forest has a task for them. The Margreve also lures them in with twisting trails and misdirection, sending characters to the Paths of Gamayun whether they want to go there or not.

Recalcitrant players can be hooked in several ways. Local druids and elders can communicate the forest's will—stressing the honor of being chosen, the danger if the wolves should succeed, and the sure death of an innocent girl. If greed can sway the characters, Czerwonya's father also offers a magical reward.

PART 1: ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE FOG

The adventure begins as characters travel the Great Northern Road, clouds descending from the nearby mountains to become fog. Their ultimate destination is immaterial, for fate will interrupt the journey. You can stage this adventure wherever you want along the road.

FIGHT IN THE FOG

The characters are near the end of a day's travel. The sun is descending behind the tree line, and a thickening fog muffles the sounds of the forest, making it seem as if the party were one step removed from the normal world. A distant sound grows louder by the moment, and it becomes clear that the clatter of galloping hooves is coming from behind the group:

> A wild-eyed horse bursts out of the fog, blood flying from its wounded flanks. Its fur-swathed rider sways in the saddle, gleaming hatchet in his hand.

The characters' mounts and animals might panic, but can be prevented from doing so with a successful Wisdom (Animal Handling) check, DC 10 for battle-trained creatures and DC 17 for other animals. The horse runs straight into their midst, its rider bouncing and swaying but not making an attack. Any blow sends him tumbling to the ground, but he was dead long before the blow was swung. Both horse and master have been mauled, but the rider seems to have died of old age rather than his wounds. He is swathed in wolf furs, and his saddle and tack look ancient. Clasped in his death grip is a silver hatchet.

Give the characters a round or two to react, and then read or paraphrase the following:

> Low shapes prowl around you, hazy silhouettes in the fog. From the mist a gravelly voice says, "That prey is ours. Leave it and be gone, and we may spare you."

CREATURES: Five **awakened wolves** (see page 100) lurk in the fog, using scent to detect the characters. They're proud and belligerent if the party tries to talk, demanding the surrender of the horse, the man, and the man's axe. Although able to converse in Common, these wolves know nothing of the civilized world. They call the axe "Wolf Killer" and humanoids "furless" or "two-legs." If asked who sent them, they say only, "One who would be king."

TERRAIN: Because of the fog the entire area is heavily obscured.

DEVELOPMENT: The wolves lunge out of the fog before retreating, only to attack again from a different direction. If a character is wielding Wolf Killer (see page 104), the wolves attempt to disarm her: A wolf makes an attack roll that is contested by the target's Strength [Athletics] or Dexterity [Acrobatics] check; on a failed check, the target drops the weapon. The wolves make off with the axe if possible. The fog continues to thicken, and twilight soon gives way to impenetrable darkness. The characters hear sounds of movement in the underbrush on either side of the road, but investigation reveals nothing but fresh wolf tracks shadowing their trail.

REFUGE AND REVELATION

The nearest refuge is a roadside coaching inn. If the characters enter, read:

> Flickering hearth flames send light and shadow dancing across the room. A man nurses an empty flagon by the fire, looking up at you with tearful eyes. Nearby, a shriveled crone tells the fortune of an awed young man while a dwarf peddler sharpens knives on a mechanical grinding wheel. Another corner is filled with road-stained pilgrims, intent on a card game while a pair of barber-surgeons, gaily dressed and overloud, lean on the bar and court the attentions of a flustered serving girl.

The barber-surgeons, Janusz and Marek, are loud and drunk but otherwise harmless. The dwarf is Baldernek Gunnacksen, traveling mainly for some respite from his large and disputatious family. The young man having his fortune told is Pavel Gruszka, on his way to be married in a nearby village. All four individuals have the statistics of a **commoner**.

DEVELOPMENT: The main topics of gossip are the ill-omened weather and how wolves seem to be growing bolder and more cunning of late.

THE FORTUNE TELLER

Mother Babushka is a woman so tiny and wrinkled that she looks like a gnome, almost buried beneath a cloak of owl feathers and layers of patterned cloth. Patches of moss and wood-like nubs mark her olive skin, a sure sign of someone who has drunk deep of the Margreve's power. She calls to anyone passing by:

> "A coin for your future, traveler? I know much that is spoken of in the gossip of crows, the howls of wolves, and the whispering of leaves."

If Wolf Killer is being carried by a character, Babushka watches its bearer with an odd look in her eyes. She will wistfully admit to knowing one of its previous bearers long ago, having worn the red cloak herself once upon a time. She knows that the Challenge of the Fang involves a battle with the Would-Be-King of Wolves and tests in a sacred place called the Paths of Gamayun.

Development: If anyone asks to have their fortune told, she has that individual drip candle wax into a bowl of cold water, then examines the shapes that form:

> "I see choice, catechism, and consequences. You will pass through places that were old before iron was born, and iron will avail you little there. Knowledge of the Old Ways is better than sword or shield. I'll also say this: Not all that's devoured is dead and gone, and when offered a choice, the brave may earn a great reward by boldly saying 'All'."

THE DESPERATE FATHER

The tearful man is Hodel Köhler, drowning his sorrows in cheap liquor. Nervously wringing his hands, he soon approaches the party, then bursts into tears, begging for help. He says that his daughter has become lost in the forest, and no one dares go look for her. His emotions are genuine, but someone who succeeds on a DC 17 Wisdom (Insight) check can tell that he's hiding something. If the characters press him on this, he proves to be poor at concealing the truth (he has a –1 penalty on Charisma [Deception] checks).

The truth is that his daughter Czerwonya was chosen to take part in the Challenge of the Fang, and he felt he had no choice but to submit to the forest's will and hope that civilization's chosen champion could save her. It takes a successful DC 17 Charisma (Persuasion) check to tease this information from him. Hodel starts out indifferent toward the party, becoming friendly if he sees that someone carries Wolf Killer or if the characters assure him they'll save his child.

A character might recognize Hodel's story, with a successful DC 14 Intelligence (History) or Charisma (Performance) check. It's similar to many ancient stories from different locales, but the root always seems to be some kind of contest between wolf and man, with the life of an innocent caught in the middle. If the characters show Wolf Killer to him, Hodel's face lights up with hope. He begs its bearer to slay the Would-Be-King of Wolves. If the characters ask where Czerwonya might be, he tells them to head into the forest. "The Margreve will guide you," he assures them. Then he offers them a small gift:

> "Long ago, I saw the firebird and tried to catch it, but all I managed to grab was this. Please take it with you as a light for the dark places and a token of my love for little Czerwonya."

Treasure: Hodel promises his eternal gratitude if they save his daughter, but he can provide little in the way of a cash incentive. As a gift however, he presents a small tin box that's warm to the touch. Inside is a golden *firebird feather* (see page 103), which flickers with a flame that never burns out.

In exchange for the feather, Hodel asks that the characters stand beneath one of the nearby trees with him and swear to save his daughter. No magical force binds them to their oath, but there'll be consequences later if they break their word.

WOLVES IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

The pilgrims, of which there are ten (four **scouts** and six **commoners**), wear green woolen cloaks and the holy symbol of the Green Gods. They're an uncouth-looking bunch, but who's at their best after a long journey? Their occasional unfriendly glances suggest that they are sizing the party up.

They rebuff attempts at conversation or requests to join them, seemingly obsessed with a deck of tarocchi fortune-telling cards that their leader is dealing from. Again and again, he casts readings for his companions, and a handful of cards keep cropping up each time. If a character gets a good look at these repeating cards, they'll see something strangely familiar in them: each represents one of the characters, suggesting that the fates of the pilgrims and the characters are soon to be intertwined.

Four of these men (the scouts) are vargamors—woodsmen who worship the power of the wolf and use enchanted oils to take on lupine characteristics. Repeated use of *worg salve* (see page 104) has left them all with physical characteristics similar to those of werewolves: moon-shaped birthmarks on their palms, elongated index fingers, snaggletooth grins, eyes that reflect the moonlight, and brows that meet in the middle.

Their leader, Boleslav, is a **werewolf** and also a šestaci—a wicked man with six fingers on each hand who can see the true form of ala and serves their evil whims.

Development: Boleslav and the vargamors prefer to attack when they can ambush the party—such as when they're asleep—or as soon as their cover is blown.

The travelers—Baldernek, Hodel, and the barber-surgeons—assist the characters as well as they can but are terrified of the curse of lycanthropy and of being overmatched by the vargamors' ferocity. Mother Babushka mysteriously disappears during the fight.

Boleslav flees in wolf form if the battle goes poorly.

From this point onward, lupine adversaries shadow the characters' every move. If they stray from the path, the Margreve sets wolves, worgs, werewolves, and vargamors on them. All try to make a name for themselves by killing the characters or stealing Wolf Killer.

Treasure: Each vargamor has one or two doses of *worg salve* (see page 104). Boleslav carries an amulet of lightning-struck stone in the shape of an ala (50 gp).

PART 2: THE PATHS OF GAMAYUN

Whether or not they're searching for the missing girl, once they leave sight of civilization, the characters are engulfed in the Margreve's power. The forest leads them ever deeper; paths shift, compasses veer, noises lure them on, and dangerous creatures block the way home. They're drawn inexorably into the deep woods. At some point in their travels, read:

> Before you is a living arch formed from a pair of intertwining trees. Flanking it are gnarled wooden statues of horsemen, almost swallowed by weeds. Vines curl around their wooden lances, and tiny flowers poke through their beards of moss. Beyond the arch, thick briars and brambles flank a narrow path.

Features: The statues are **green hussars** (see page 100) that planted themselves here long ago and have never yet had cause to move. Only if they are attacked or if the characters try to burn the bramble maze do they animate. Anyone who examines them closely notices tiny ribbons, twisted leaves, and other offerings in their wings. Adding a token to the brambles marks a character as respectful of and faithful to the forest's power, which is noted by the fey that wait farther in.

TRAVELING THE PATHS

If the characters pass through the arch, they have embarked upon the Paths of Gamayun. This is a labyrinth with no physical solution; it forms and shifts according to the Margreve's will, and the only way to leave is by confronting the tests that await the characters (see below) or forcing a way out through the thick, tall briars flanking the trail (treat as a *wall of thorns* spell). The path forks many times during their journey, but if the party splits up, the characters find themselves meeting up again at the site of their next test.

Time is of the essence in reaching Czerwonya before the Would-Be-King of Wolves can do so, and characters can speed their journey by making checks to reveal the best path to take through the maze. Intersperse these checks with the major and minor encounters described below:

- DC 11 Wisdom (Survival)—Identify local trail marks that show the correct path.
- DC 14 Wisdom (Perception)—See a strand of red cloth caught on a thorn.
- Wisdom (Insight) (contested)—Determine whether the information provided by a child of the briar is truthful.
- DC 12 Wisdom (Survival)—Spot wolf tracks or a child's footprints in the mud.

The following minor encounters can be used to add extra detail to the characters' journey:

- ***Briars and Liars***. **Children of the briar** (see *Tome of Beasts*) lurk in the underbrush, clawing at anyone who tries to leave the path. They can be tempted out to talk by promises of gossip, gifts, or an acorn cup of blood.
- ***Crumbling Cadavers***. Dusty gray corpses crouch in the underbrush, some huddled in fear and others curled up as if merely sleeping. They are the remains of those who failed the tests and became victims of the Mora. Touching a corpse makes it to crumble to dust.
- ***Laughing Little Man***. A **pixie** follows the characters, taunting and hindering them. It's all good fun, though, and characters who can laugh at themselves earn the pixie's respect. Those who attack the pixie suffer ill fortune and minor inconveniences throughout their time in the forest.
- ***Polymorphing Pool***. A pool of water reflects not the viewer's appearance but the animal that best fits their personality. Drinking from the pool changes the character into an animal for a time, as the *polymorph* spell.
- ***Sap Diplomacy***. A globule of sap, actually a **sap demon** (see *Tome of Beasts*), dangles over the path, oozing from a wounded branch. A face in the ooze converses with the characters and tries to get them to stand beneath it as it falls.
- ***Wolfish Wiles***. A silver-tongued **worg** shadows the party's progress from beyond the wall of briars. It tries to convince them to abandon their quest so that wolves can take their rightful place as masters of the forest. It offers *worg salve* (see page 104), an opportunity to become a lycanthrope, and the friendship of its kind as a bribe.

The three tests that await the characters are described below. Stage them whenever you see fit as the characters attempt to navigate the labyrinth.

THE TEST OF KNOWLEDGE

The characters' knowledge of and respect for the Old Ways is tested as their path crosses a river:

> There's a break in the canopy as you find a river running across your path. Dark, muddy water swirls and bubbles around a ford composed of mossy stepping stones.

The party may well be suspicious of such a tranquil scene, but no immediate danger presents itself. Anyone who examines the stones and succeeds on a DC 17 Wisdom (Perception) check can tell there is something not quite right about some of them.

CREATURES: Only some of the stepping stones are real—three of them are actually the moss- and mud-covered heads of **bagienniks** (see *Tome of Beasts*) lurking just below the surface. A fourth creature circles in the muddy water, in case anyone tries swimming:

> Monstrous creatures burst from the water, their long limbs caked with mud and fish bones. "Defilers!" one shouts. "How dare you tread in her sacred place? We demand tribute for this affront!"

TERRAIN: The river is 25 feet wide and presents no challenge to a decent swimmer. Hopping across using the stones is also possible with a successful DC 12

Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics) check (but see below).

Development: Demands that they be gone or questions like "Whose sacred place is this?" only insult and enrage the bagienniks. A polite and respectful response, apologizing for trespassing and requesting passage, plus a successful DC 12 Charisma (Persuasion) check, appeases them. Increase the DC if the bagienniks are especially annoyed.

If the characters kill the bagienniks, they fail this test. If the characters negotiate their way past the bagienniks, award them half the XP value of the encounter (1,400 XP).

THE TEST OF RESOLVE

Shortly after their encounter at the river, or whenever the characters are looking for a place to rest, their resolve is tested by a pair of distracting vila.

> A break in the bramble wall reveals a clearing where two shapely female forms await. They have skin like polished mahogany but hair and eyes as green as emeralds. They nod as you approach.

Creatures: These two **vila** (see *Tome of Beasts*) are Iwona ("yew tree") and Jagoda ("berry"). Iwona, the elder, is calmer and shrewder. Jagoda is more vivacious but quicker to anger. They are friendly, if somewhat aloof, but show a little more respect to druids and rangers. They invite the party to rest a moment, becoming angry if the characters try to depart in disrespectful haste. They use their Fascinate action option on reluctant characters.

Terrain: The glade behind the vila looks like the perfect campsite, although characters who examine the ground can find countless wolf tracks. The area contains a green pavilion tent, beside which is an archery butt and a stone altar overflowing with cakes, ribbons, fresh fruits, and flowers. A successful DC 12 Intelligence (Religion) check indicates that these are traditional offerings to the vila.

Development: The vila suggest a meal, then a friendly archery competition, and various other diversions (including hints of a possible romantic liaison) to deflect the characters from their purpose.

They also have a request: they ask to administer a single slap to each character, to remind each one of the seriousness of their quest and the seriousness of oaths. This slap deals 1d3 + 1 damage. If the target has ever broken an oath sworn in the forest, the target takes an additional 28 (8d6) lightning damage. Oath-breakers are scorned and reviled by both vila.

The characters fail this test if they refuse the vila's request, or allow themselves to be overly delayed, or if more than one character proves to be an oath-breaker.

Treasure: Each vila carries three *sand arrows* (see page 104) in addition to their normal equipment, which they use to confound violent characters and offer as a prize to anyone who can beat them at archery.

THE TEST OF TALENT

The maze ends at a circular clearing. Here sits the characters' final challenge, a fearsome **ala** (see *Tome of Beasts*) named Stuhac, sitting cross-legged on a flat rock surrounded by goblin bones. She is haughty, scornful, and thoroughly enjoying herself. As the party arrives, she's cracking open a femur and sucking out the marrow:

> "Greetings, would-be champions of axe and flame. I am the final test of the Paths of Gamayun. I offer you three challenges: one of skill, one of strength, and one of wits—choose now or the game is over, and I'll feast on more than bones!"

Creatures: Stuhac sits alone in the clearing, but countless eyes peer out from the underbrush: fey, wolves, and others come to observe the final test.

Development: Stuhac responds angrily if the characters recall Mother Babushka's advice and demand to try all three challenges, but she acquiesces grudgingly if they insist. She also reacts poorly to threats, violence, or attempts to avoid trying any of the challenges:

> "Foolish mortals! I am the storm's wrath and the fury of winter sky. The hill has not yet been cleft to drive the shaft from which the iron to kill me will be mined. Know your place, and do not anger me with this foolishness!"

The Rules: Anyone caught cheating gets a blast of the ala's Lightning's Kiss, but she declares the challenge forfeit only if she tires of their antics. To her, "cheating" and "boring" are interchangeable. She is especially amused by character tricks that backfire.

The Challenge of Skill: A party member must play a balalaika that's crawling with a **swarm of wasps**. Doing this requires three successful DC 17 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) checks to avoid disturbing the wasps, alternating with three successful DC 12 Charisma (Performance) checks to play a decent tune. Failing a Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check subjects the character to the swarm's ire, and the following Charisma (Performance) check is made with disadvantage. On each failed check, the swarm attacks for 1 round before settling back down on the balalaika. Stuhac heckles the character throughout, but if the character is still successful on at least one Charisma (Performance) check, the ala is satisfied. If all six checks result in successes, both Stuhac and the watching fey are highly impressed.

Challenge of Strength: At first glance, this activity seems pretty straightforward: outwrestle the "dwarf" Zapasník (he is indeed quite short for a **leshy**; see *Tome of Beasts*). Stuhac says that the contest is to the best of three pins and involves "clinch fighting, hurling, slamming, pinning, gouging—torn cartilage and popping joints!" If anyone complains that this sounds too dangerous, she politely suggests that perhaps a local milkmaid could be persuaded to fight for them, or would they prefer to just shut up and climb into her jaws?

Development. Characters who disbelieve the leshy's illusory size grapple as normal, but if they're fooled, the leshy has advantage on all checks to grapple his target.

Challenge of Wits: Stuhac produces a gul bara (backgammon) board of lacquered green and black wood and invites one of the characters to defeat her in a game.

Play involves a contest of Intelligence checks. For every 2 points by which one contestant's check beats the other's, one of the winner's pieces is removed. The first player to remove all twelve of their pieces is the winner. A player can add 2 to the check result by succeeding on a Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check contested by the opponent's Wisdom (Perception) check. Spells such as *prestidigitation*, *suggestion*, and *silent image* might also be used to grant a bonus. Stuhac herself has little skill at the game but is using an enchanted board.

Stuhac's Enchanted Gameboard. This gul bara set is enchanted to assist its owner: the dice roll favorably and the pieces shift position accordingly, giving the owner advantage on Intelligence checks against an opponent. A successful DC 20 Wisdom (Perception) check is required to detect this subterfuge.

Development. If the character wins, Stuhac angrily hurls the board into the trees. The characters can retrieve it and claim it for themselves, but doing this in front of Stuhac makes her even more annoyed.

Victorious characters are permitted to depart unmolested. If they overcame all three of Stuhac's challenges, she is forced to grant them a boon: either a *Matrushka doll* (see page 103), the return of Wolf Killer (if the characters don't have it), or a favor to be asked for later. If characters take the latter option, she gleefully twists any request like a malevolent genie.

If the characters fail all three challenges (or just won't play), Stuhac magnanimously offers to let them go unmolested if someone volunteers to be eaten. If they refuse that bargain, she calls down lightning, toying with them for a round or two. The lightning causes a conflagration to spring up, which she fans toward the party, forcing them to flee.

FAILING THE TESTS: ENTER THE MORA

Some say the Mora is a swarm awoken by the Margreve; others that its moths are possessed by the spirits of witches and shadow fey, who gather to drink the dreams and souls of travelers. If the characters fail all the tests, refuse to try them, force their way out of the maze or otherwise anger the forest, it sends the **Mora** (see page 102) to punish them.

Development: If the characters defeat the Mora, they can go on their way, or they can return to the Paths of Gamayun and try again.

Part 3: The Belly of the Beast

One way or another, the party leaves the Paths of Gamayun, and the trail leads back into the forest proper. Allow the characters time for a long rest after their trials, before they come across a small dell where Czerwonya spent the night.

A GATHERING OF DOLLS

> The remains of an improvised camp sit in a small dell, the fire pit properly ringed with stones and the ashes scattered. The underbrush is filled with small wooden dolls, their paint faded and peeling, that ring the camp as if watching over it.

Several small boot prints, a strand of red wool, and an impression where a small body was curled up in the mossy earth mark this site. The dolls are nonmagical, but there's no sure sign of how they got there. Someone who makes a successful DC 12 Intelligence (Religion) check surmises that they serve as proxy sacrifices, left on altars and set adrift in streams by superstitious villagers throughout the region.

Ringing the camp are the tracks of a large wolf. It circled the clearing several times, then apparently ran off ahead of the girl.

Just beyond the camp are a series of odd, uneven depressions in the underbrush about 3 feet in diameter and almost as deep. The tracks are easily found by anyone who searches the area. Identifying them as treant tracks requires a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Nature) check. Czerwonya's footprints follow these tracks for a while before suddenly vanishing, but the tracks continue on. Maybe she hitched a ride?

GRANDMA'S HOUSE

Czerwonya's destination is the tree house of Mother Babushka, the ancient crone who might have read their fortune back at the inn. Her hut is nestled in the leafy canopy of a meandering treant named Raudnun, who resembles a witchwood tree:

> A tree lopes through the forest. Its upper half is a wide spray of green leaves and crimson berries, its trunk-legs wrapped in mistletoe vines. Surmounting its canopy is a rickety-looking hut. Crows flap around it, agitated and cawing loudly. Amid their shrieking, you hear what seems like words: "Axe! Axe! Wolf! Wolf! Cloak! Cloak!"

Creatures: Raudnun is a slow-witted **treant** (Intelligence 7) that doesn't speak Common. He ignores the party unless they use fire or start hammering pitons into him. Annoying Raudnun earns an irritated swat from him, which should be enough to discourage further bad behavior.

Terrain: Babuskha's hut is 30 feet off the ground. Climbing up to it requires a successful DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check. Anyone who falls while climbing can make a successful DC 12 Dexterity saving throw to grab a branch and halt their fall.

If the party manages to communicate, Raudnun eventually confirms that the old witch who lives in his branches has had a couple of recent visitors: a little human and a big wolf. Characters who speak with the crows find them in a jubilant mood, expecting a good feast one way or the other.

THE BIG BAD WOLF

The situation in Babushka's hut depends on how quickly the characters got here how well they did in the tests of the Paths of Gamayun.

Swift and successful characters reach Raudnun only a few minutes after Czerwonya (a **commoner**). The **Would-Be-King of Wolves** (see page 103) has devoured Mother Babushka and is conversing with the girl in her guise, trying to gain Czerwonya's confidence. With a successful DC 17 Wisdom (Perception) check, a character can hear snatches of conversation from above, such as "My, what big eyes you have …"

Characters who were slightly delayed or failed at least one test arrive as the wolf is about to throw off its disguise and leap at Czerwonya. The characters have only a few rounds to get into the hut before he catches and kills her.

Characters who failed at least two tests arrive just after the wolf has killed Czerwonya. His ritual complete, the new King of Wolves is jovial. He banters with the characters while disguised as an abnormally fat Babushka. He'll try to lure Wolf Killer's bearer to approach alone if he can, but he is content with gloating if they pierce his disguise (an *alter self* spell). His main aim is to escape and consolidate his power. Any fight becomes a chase as he races through the forest in search of reinforcements.

Terrain: Babushka's hut is full of clutter: crude tables, discarded clothes, potted plants, and scattered bric-a-brac. Cabinets balance precariously; their shelves overflow with jams and preserves, ceramic vials, and ancient scrolls. Countless herbs dangle from the roof. The floor of the hut counts as difficult terrain, and characters moving at greater than their walking speed stumble and fall unless they succeed on a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw.

Several branches outside the hut are wide enough to walk on. The Would-Be-King of Wolves retreats onto them if the characters try to corral him inside the hut.

Babushka's cauldron is actually **Inushka's pot** (see page 101), boiling vigorously despite having no fire beneath it. Throwing its boiling proto-potions on someone deals 3d4 fire damage to the target plus 1 fire damage to all creatures within 5 feet. If the characters somehow get the wolf to speak scornfully about its contents, *Inushka's pot* immediately animates and attacks him.

Combat: If hostilities break out, the Would-Be-King of Wolves starts out by asserting itself. Read:

> A bear-sized wolf rears back on its hind legs, eyes agleam with malice and hunger. Its jaws open wider than any normal wolf's, revealing a bright red tongue and gore-stained fangs. The shapes of a screaming face and clawing hands are visible beneath the skin of its swollen belly, as if it had devoured someone who is struggling to escape.

The Would-Be-King of Wolves begins the fight having swallowed Mother Babushka and cannot use Swallow Whole again until his belly is empty. Cutting Babushka free requires dealing at least 20 slashing damage in a single attack against the Would-Be-King of Wolves.

Among the herbs dangling from the ceiling is a sprig of fresh wolfsbane. Using an action to present the wolfsbane to the Would-Be-King of Wolves forces him to succeed on a DC 15 Wisdom saving throw or become frightened. The Would-Be-King can repeat the save at the end of each of his turns, ending the effect on a successful save.

If she is rescued from the wolf's belly, **Mother Babushka** (see page 102) profusely thanks the characters and recovers enough to assist them after 1d3 rounds. If they are in serious need of help, Raudnun can be enticed to pitch in by someone who succeeds on a DC 16 Charisma (Persuasion) check.

After the fight, if Czerwonya still lives, Babushka offers *Inushka's pot* as a reward. At your discretion, she can become an ally and teacher to the party, allowing them to learn more of the forest's ancient lore.

Babushka smiles coyly if the characters ask how the wolf was able to devour her whole and steal her magic, or what events she knew of in advance, admitting only that "We all had our parts to play."

Concluding the Adventure

If characters save Czerwonya and kill the Would-Be-King of Wolves, then the wolves must bow before humankind for three generations. They become wary of civilization. Attacks on livestock lessen, and most wolves live in fear of humankind—especially the characters.

If both Czerwonya and the Would-Be-King die, the situation is a stalemate. The Margreve's wolves eventually learn of the party's involvement, and some try to prove themselves by hunting the characters down. The boundaries between the worlds of wolf and man remain uncertain, with lives lost on both sides as the borders are tested.

If Czerwonya dies and the Would-Be-King escapes, the Margreve judges wolves to be superior to men. United by their new king, wolf packs are soon a menace; prowling fearlessly up to villages, campsites, and coaching inns alike. Livestock is plundered, lone travelers waylaid and devoured. Wolves become the most common animal awakened to do the forest's bidding, and tales of werewolves and wolf worship soon begin to spread. Killing the Wolf King does little to stem the tide—wolves continue to run victorious and proud until the next Challenge of the Fang.

New Creatures and Magic Items

The monsters and magic items introduced in this adventure are detailed below.

AWAKENED WOLF

Small monstrosity, unaligned

Armor Class 13 (natural armor)

Hit Points 11 (2d8 + 2)

Speed 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	15 (+2)	12 (+1)	10 (+0)	12 (+1)	6 (–2)

Skills Perception +3, Stealth +4

Senses passive Perception 13

Languages Common, Sylvan

Challenge 1/4 (50 XP)

Keen Hearing and Smell. The wolf has advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on hearing or smell.

Pack Tactics. The wolf has advantage on attack rolls if at least one of the wolf's allies is within 5 feet of the creature and the ally isn't incapacitated.

ACTIONS

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (2d4 + 2) piercing damage. If the target is a creature, it must succeed on a DC 11 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

GREEN HUSSAR

Large plant, unaligned

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 60 (8d8 + 24)

Speed 50 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
17 (+3)	14 (+2)	16 (+3)	8 (–1)	14 (+2)	10 (+0)

Skills Perception +5, Stealth +5, Survival +5

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing

Damage Vulnerabilities fire

Senses blindsight 60 ft., darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 8

Languages understands Sylvan but cannot speak

Challenge 3 (700 XP)

Agent of the Forest. While in a forest, the green hussar has advantage on all Perception, Stealth, and Survival checks.

Woodland Stride. The green hussar ignores difficult terrain while it is in a forest.

ACTIONS

Shortbow. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, range 80/320 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 2) piercing damage.

Flowering Lance. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 9 (1d12 + 3) piercing damage and the target loses 3 hit points from bleeding at the start of each of its turns for 4 rounds unless it receives magical healing.

INUSHKA'S POT

Small construct, unaligned

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 17 (5d6)

Speed 20 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	15 (+2)	10 (+0)	1 (–5)	3 (–4)	1 (–5)

Damage Immunities poison, psychic

Condition Immunities blinded, charmed, deafened, frightened, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned

Senses blindsight 60 ft. (blind beyond this radius), passive Perception 6

Languages —

Challenge 1/4 (50 XP)

Antimagic Susceptibility. The pot is incapacitated while in the area of an antimagic field. If targeted by *dispel magic*, the pot must succeed on a Constitution saving throw against the caster's spell save DC or fall unconscious for 1 minute.

False Appearance. While it remains motionless, the pot is indistinguishable from a normal cauldron.

ACTIONS

Slam. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d6 + 1) bludgeoning damage.

Boil Over (Recharge 6). The pot is able to expel some of its boiling contents at a target within 15 feet. The target takes 8 (3d4) fire damage, or half that damage on a successful DC 15 Dexterity save. All creatures within 5 feet of the target take 1 fire damage, or no damage on a successful DC 15 Dexterity save.

THE MORA

Medium swarm of tiny beasts, unaligned

Armor Class 14

Hit Points 55 (10d8 + 10)

Speed 20 ft., fly 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
3 (–4)	18 (+4)	12 (+1)	12 (+1)	13 (+1)	14 (+2)

Saving Throws Dex +8

Skills Perception +9, Stealth +8

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, slashing

Condition Immunity charmed, frightened, grappled, paralyzed, petrified, prone, restrained, stunned

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 17

Languages —

Challenge 5 (1,800 XP)

Sanctuary. Apathy afflicts all who intend harm against the Mora. Any creature who targets the Mora with an attack or a harmful spell must make a DC 14 Wisdom saving throw. On a failed save, the creature must choose a new target or lose the attack or spell. This trait doesn't protect the Mora from incidental damage due to area effects that target other creatures.

Innate Spellcasting. The Mora is a 7th-level spellcaster. Its casting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 14, +6 to hit with spell attacks). It can innately cast the following spells, requiring no components:

3/day: *sleep, calm emotions*

ACTIONS

Lullaby. One creature that the Mora can see and is within 60 feet is targeted by its lullaby. The target must make a successful DC 14 Constitution save or gain 1 level of exhaustion.

MOTHER BABUSHKA

Medium humanoid (human), neutral good

Armor Class 12

Hit Points 44 (8d6 +16)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	15 (+2)	14 (+2)	13 (+1)	12 (+1)	18 (+4)

Saving Throws Con +5, Cha +7

Skills Insight +4, Medicine +4, Nature +4, Survival +4

Senses passive Perception 11

Languages Common, Sylvan

Challenge 4 (1,100 XP)

Subtle Spell (3/day). Mother Babushka can choose to cast a spell without the required verbal and/or somatic components.

Careful Spell (3/day). Mother Babushka can choose to allow up-to four creatures to automatically succeed on a saving throw against one of her spells.

Spellcasting. Mother Babushka is an 8th-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 15, +7 to hit with spell attacks). She has the following spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *bless the dead* (see *Heroes Handbook*), *guidance, mending, minor illusion*

1st level (4 slots): *disguise self, entangle, goodberry, speak with animals*

2nd level (3 slots): *misty step, pass without trace, spike growth*

3rd level (3 slots): *clairvoyance, conjure animals, sleet storm*

4th level (2 slots): *cursed gift* (see *Heroes Handbook*), *polymorph*

ACTIONS

Quarterstaff. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, reach 5 ft. one target. *Hit:* 3 (1d6) bludgeoning damage, or 4 (1d8) bludgeoning damage if wielded with two hands.

WOULD-BE-KING OF WOLVES

Large beast, neutral evil

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 76 (9d10 + 27)

Speed 50 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	17 (+3)	16 (+3)	12 (+1)	11 (+0)	15 (+2)

Saving Throws Con +6, Cha +5

Skills Athletics +7, Deception +5, Perception +6, Stealth +6, Survival +6

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 16

Damage Resistance bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks not made with silvered weapons

Languages Common, Sylvan

Challenge 6 (2,300 XP)

Consume Magic. The Would-Be-King of Wolves can absorb the magic of a swallowed opponent. It can use the spells of its victim, as if it were the swallowed creature. During this time the swallowed creature cannot use its own spells.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The Would-Be-King of Wolves makes two claw attacks or one claw attack and one bite attack.

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (2d4 + 3) slashing damage. If both claws hit the same target in a single turn, that target is grappled (escape DC 17). The Would-Be-King of Wolves can grapple only one creature at a time, and it can't use its claw attack against a different target while it has a creature grappled.

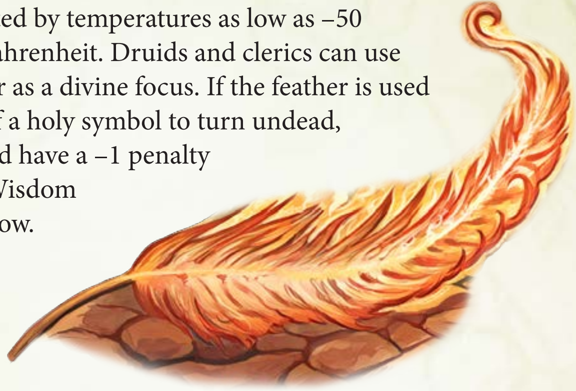
Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d8 + 3) piercing damage.

Swallow Whole. The Would-Be-King of Wolves makes a bite attack against a creature that it has grappled. If the attack hits, the creature becomes swallowed. A swallowed creature is blinded and restrained. The Would-Be-King of Wolves can swallow one only creature at a time. If the Would-Be-King of Wolves takes 20 slashing damage in a single attack, a swallowed creature is regurgitated.

FIREBIRD FEATHER

Wondrous item, uncommon

A *firebird feather* gives off light as a *continual flame* spell. Additionally, whoever carries the feather is unaffected by temperatures as low as –50 degrees Fahrenheit. Druids and clerics can use the feather as a divine focus. If the feather is used in place of a holy symbol to turn undead, the undead have a –1 penalty on their Wisdom saving throw.



MATRUSHKA DOLL

Wondrous item, rare (requires attunement)

A *Matrushka doll* consists of a wooden effigy about a hand's span tall. The figure is hollow, and within it rest 1d3 smaller figures. Each doll is smaller than the previous one and fits neatly within the next larger one.

The owner of a *Matrushka doll* can use her reaction to reroll a failed save. With each use, the smallest doll inside is consumed. When the last doll inside is consumed, the outer shell turns to dust.

SAND ARROW

Weapon (arrow), uncommon

The shaft of a *sand arrow* is made of tightly packed white sand that discorporates into a blast of grit when it strikes a target. On a successful hit, the sand catches in the fittings and joints of metal armor, imposing a 10-foot penalty to speed on the wearer until the armor can be cleaned. Additionally, creatures hit by a *sand arrow* are blinded until the end of their next turn unless they succeed on a DC 11 Constitution saving throw.

WOLF KILLER

Weapon (handaxe), rare (requires attunement)

This ancient silver hatchet was cast by the first woodsman to face the Challenge of the Fang. One side of the blade is engraved with a snarling wolf's face, the other with a young child's visage.

Wolf Killer is a *+1 moonsteel handaxe*. The weapon deals an extra 1d6 radiant damage to any creature it hits. Additionally, any creature that is not in its true form or has the shapechanger trait must succeed on a DC 13 Charisma saving throw or be frightened until the start of its next turn, and it is forced to immediately resume its natural form.

Anyone touching the axe feels a tingle of magic and the inexplicable sense that there's a price involved in owning it. During the Challenge of the Fang, the wielder is the subject of a *geas* (save DC 17) urging the character to head into the deep woods and face the Would-Be-King of Wolves and is plagued by dreams and visions: fearsome wolves pursuing a red-cloaked girl, and apparitions of Wolf Killer's many previous wielders.

WORG SALVE

Wondrous item, uncommon

Brewed by hags and lycanthropes, this oil grants you lupine features. Each pot contains enough for three applications. One application rubbed on the appropriate area grants one of the following benefits: darkvision 60 ft., advantage on Wisdom [Perception} checks that rely on scent, speed 50 ft., or a secondary attack (bite) for 5 minutes. Use all three applications at once to transform into a wolf, as the *polymorph* spell. Excessive use of *worg salve* might result in the target's becoming a werewolf.

The Griffon Hatchling Heist

By Michael Fulanetto

"The Griffon Hatchling Heist" is a forest-based fantasy adventure suitable for characters of 5th level, in which the adventurers learn that the challenge of parenthood is even more fearsome than bloodthirsty monsters and dusty ruins. Although it contains several opportunities for combat, it emphasizes planning, stealth, and creative problem solving.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Centuries ago, House Stross, rulers of Zobeck, built a dozen griffon towers under the boughs of the Margreve. Each of these towers housed a unit of elite griffon cavalry. Eight guarded the Great Northern Road, while the other four stood watch over hunting grounds, mines, and other important locales. The Still Tower falls in the last category. It is built over a magical oddity—a location that enhances divination spells. Under the guise of a quiet forest retreat, the nobleman who ordered its construction hoped to use this effect to his advantage and to study its origin.

Not long thereafter, House Stross fell, and the Griffon Towers fell into disuse and disrepair. As the most isolated of the lot, the Still Tower housed only the descendants of its black griffon inhabitants. These griffons, the largest and most aggressive in the forest, are led by Lesharrkk, whose voracious appetite for horseflesh is matched only by her self-regard.

The Still Tower was attacked ten days ago. A group of brigands led by a corrupted ogre chief and a sorcerer struck during a thunderstorm. Their first blow used a purloined scroll—and some luck—to polymorph Lesharrkk into a less threatening form. With their greatest opposition neutralized, the bandits were able to kill the other adult griffons and capture a clutch of valuable eggs. The sorcerer and part of the gang have left the tower to sell their loot, while the corrupted ogre chief, three ogres, and a host of bugbears remain to guard the clutch.

Lesharrkk, who escaped the massacre in her new form, finds the adventurers and asks them to rescue her eggs.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

The characters are approached by a talking housecat who claims (truly) to be Lesharrkk, the proud pride-mother of the oldest and most ferocious pack of black griffons in the Margreve Forest. Her tower was attacked by brigands—her pride mates are dead, her eggs are held hostage, and she has been transformed. She asks the characters to retrieve her eggs before they hatch; in return, she offers her gratitude and all the treasure left by the previous masters of the Still Tower.

The characters make their way up a narrow forest track to a hidden back entrance to the tower. After dealing with an ancient carnivorous tree, a claustrophobic swim up an underground stream, and the dusty telamon columns guarding an ancient library, the characters sneak through the tower under the noses of the band of brigands. Atop the tower, they fight the corrupted ogre chief leader of the bandits to retrieve the griffon eggs.

Of course, the eggs hatch as soon as the party takes possession of them. The characters must escape the surrounding bandits while guarding their hungry cargo, all the while ensuring that the hatchlings do not begin to believe that one of the characters is their mother. Success wins the party a powerful ally, a long-forgotten magical secret, and a potential future base of operations. Failure probably leads to a slow roast on a corrupted ogre chief's spit.

Adventure Hooks

The adventure takes place during springtime in the Margreve, when griffon eggs hatch and seasonal rains turn the roads and paths to mud. The characters should be near or in the forest when the adventure begins. They can get involved in one or more of the following ways:

- If the characters have built a reputation as competent problem-solvers, Lesharrkk might have heard of their exploits from other forest denizens. Alternatively, an ally of the party from a previous adventure might have recommended them to the griffon.
- If the characters have been struggling with a recurring villain, then make that villain either the leader of the brigands or the buyer for the griffon eggs. In this case, the characters might be hunting for Lesharrkk after hearing rumors of their foil's exploits.
- If the characters have done some service for the forest, then perhaps the Margreve itself guides Lesharrkk to them. If your campaign is emphasizing the otherworldly and magical aspects of the Margreve, this hook would reinforce that theme.

Introduction

The action begins as the characters come across a cat fighting with a raven.

> A snarling cat leaps out at a low-flying raven. "Perun's bolts!" spits the cat as the bird flies away. Turning to look at you, the cat bares its teeth in what seems to be an attempt at a friendly smile.

Creature: The cat is a polymorphed black griffon. She has retained her mental ability scores and her ability to read and write.

Development: A successful DC 17 Intelligence (Nature) check identifies Lesharrkk's natural form. Driven by the desire to reclaim her eggs, Lesharrkk will not engage in combat in her current form. Once she is returned to her normal form, treat Lesharrkk as a griffon with an additional 21 hit points.

Lesharrkk is desperate for help, and given her time constraints, the characters are her only remaining option. Perhaps she finds an ally to speak on her behalf, or maybe she uses her paws to write her plea in the dirt—be inventive, but do not force the party's hand. Under no circumstances will Lesharrkk engage in combat; if attacked, she departs to find a way to reverse her transformation. Once restored, she—and all the griffons of the Margreve—harry the characters at every opportunity.

If the characters agree to talk with her, Lesharrkk will recount the events of the bandit attack as described in the adventure background. One of her pride mates flew her away from the tower before he succumbed to the missile fire of the bugbears. After the attack, Lesharrkk stayed to observe the comings and goings of the criminal band. She learned that the middling sorcerer who leads the brigands is planning to sell the griffon eggs for a princely sum and that the tower would be lightly guarded while he escorted the buyer to the eggs. Eventually, since she could not carry her eggs to safety in her new form, she left to seek help.

She is unsure why the transformation hasn't worn off yet, and if the heroes attempt to use *dispel magic*, the casting fails. While the characters are recovering her eggs, she plans to visit a little-known Margreve locale and perform a ritual to reverse her condition. Never having done this before, she worries that it will take too much time, preventing her from rescuing the eggs.

If the characters agree to help, Lesharrkk gives them some information to help in their quest:

> "Just north of the Eye of the Forest is a hunting track heading west between two mossy stumps. Follow it, always choosing the right-hand fork, until you reach a clear pond under a bluff. There the trail ends, but a guardian of some sort waits by the pond. Take care! The tower will be on top of the bluff to your left. You can swim into the cellar of the tower through the pool—head upstream until you find air again. Most of the brigands camp outside the tower, so once you are behind its walls, you should be able to make your way to right under the noses of the filthy swine who slaughtered my kin.
>
> "My clutch of eggs awaits atop the tower—those criminals are too mercenary to risk moving them and losing their reward. You have no more than a week before they hatch, and the rest of the bandits will return soon, so please hurry. After you recover the eggs, I will meet you at the two stumps where the trail begins. My hatchlings will treat whomever they see first as their mother. So, if you tarry and they hatch before I reach you, you must disguise yourselves, or distract them, something—neither of us wants you to foster a griffon."

Part 1: To the Tower

The Still Tower lies 30 miles west of the Eye of the Forest on the Great Northern Road. Lesharrkk directs the party to a hunting trail that leads to the hidden entrance to the tower. The characters should cover that distance in two or three days.

Feel free to provide appropriate random encounters for the party during the first day or two, but avoid doing so on the day they reach the tower to avoid depleting their resources any further.

Rain begins to fall late on the first day. It's just a drizzle at first, but during their journey it strengthens steadily. By the time the characters reach the razorleaf, they should be tired of slogging through mud in the driving rain. The hard rain continues until the characters enter the tower; during this time, visibility is halved and Wisdom (Perception) checks are made with disadvantage. Later, the rain softens to a misty drizzle, still reducing visibility by half but having no additional effect on Wisdom (Perception) checks.

RAZORLEAF SPRING

The builders of the Still Tower recognized that the underground spring that fed their well emerged aboveground not far from the tower. To protect against foes who might take advantage of this vulnerability, they planted razorleaf around the pool. Over time, all but one of the razorleaf plants have perished; the one that remains waits at the end of the hunting track the characters travel.

> The track finally reaches its end. On your left is a fifty-foot-high, bracken-covered bluff. Just visible through the driving rain, sixty feet ahead, is the small pool. The forest thins somewhat around the pool, with only a few waterside trees shading a small field of wildflowers and knee-high grasses.

Once the razorleaf springs its ambush, read:

> The smell of newly turned earth surrounds you as thin branches with wickedly sharp leaves burst forth, slashing at everyone in reach.

THE STILL TOWER AND MAGIC

The Still Tower sits on a particularly powerful wellspring of divination magic. All spells of the divination school cast within 100 feet of the center of the upper floors of the tower behave as if they were cast with a spell slot one higher than what was expended in the casting.

Casters must know of this effect in order to take advantage of it. This knowledge can be gained from the texts inside the tower or with a successful DC 25 Intelligence (Arcana) check when a divination spell is cast. (A successful check allows the caster to take advantage of this effect on the spell being cast at that time.) Very few know of this secret wellspring—the powers of the Margreve probably know, as might some surviving Stross scions or retainers. Lesharrkk knows that the tower was built for some sort of arcane study, but she does not understand the details.

Divination magic cast within the tower does not attract the attention of the Margreve's magic siphon, even if the caster is not aware of the Still Tower's boon.

Creatures: A single razorleaf (see *Creature Codex*) waits in ambush on the bank of the pond. Its trunk is 10 feet from the path on the side opposite the bluff.

Terrain: Everywhere except the path and the pool is difficult terrain. The pool is 5 feet deep (see below for more details on water flow and escape from the pool). The bluff is 50 feet high and covered in thick brush. The profusion of handholds makes climbing relatively easy although slow—requiring successful DC 10 Strength (Athletics) checks, with each successful check allowing movement of only one-fifth of walking speed.

> These stubby trees bear green-bladed leaves and nondescript brown bark. On their boughs grow bright red, apple-like fruit that gives off a sweet-smelling scent.

Treasure: Someone who succeeds on a DC 10 Wisdom (Perception) check notices a patch of recently turned soil. Digging into it reveals a half-buried leather sack that contains 45 pp, 490 gp, and 398 sp—loot formerly owned by a bugbear rogue who was killed by the razorleaf after fleeing from the companions he robbed. Time and rain have rendered his trail down the bluff almost impossible to follow, requiring a successful DC 30 Wisdom (Survival) check. If the characters succeed, the trail leads directly to the main bugbear encampment.

THE BRIGAND BAND OBSERVATION

Your goal in this section of the adventure should be to make the characters nervous. They are not powerful enough to handle the entre brigand band at once, so stealth should be their goal. Keep the characters on their toes by rolling—or seeming to roll—Wisdom (Perception) checks for the brigands every time the characters enter a new room, every time they enter combat, every time an hour passes . . . essentially, every time the action or the tension flags.

To aid you in this task, the entries for all the rooms in the tower contain notes detailing the changes to the DC of the Wisdom (Perception) checks made by the brigands, which brigand will make the checks, and how long the brigands will take to respond. Although the characters likely do not realize it, the bandits are bored and inattentive, so reasonable precautions by the party almost certainly lead to success. Feel free to decide results of the bandits' Wisdom (Perception) checks without rolling. For instance, a party that is really embracing the spirit of stealthy exploration should not be penalized by an unfortunate die roll.

Most of the brigands, including the corrupted ogre chief and ogres, are awake from late afternoon until near dawn. While they rest, their (Wisdom) Perception checks are made with disadvantage. Some bugbears are on the opposite schedule, so the tower is always guarded.

The base Wisdom (Perception) DC for the brigands to hear nearby sounds of combat is 10. The DC is 15 for normal activity or conversation, and 20 if nearby sounds are no louder than a whisper. If characters are otherwise being quiet, the bandits can hear them moving if they succeed on a Wisdom (Perception) check contested by the characters' Dexterity (Stealth) check.

If the bugbears hear the characters, they investigate the source of the commotion in 1d4 + 4 rounds. Unless the characters are visible, have a light source that is obvious, or make more noise, the bugbears quickly give up, assuming the noise was unimportant..

UP THE STREAM

The pond is fed by an underground spring. This channel, 5 to 7 feet wide, flows from the depths to the well room of the Still Tower (see area A1) and then to the razorleaf's pond. A 60-foot swim against the frigid stream's current is necessary to reach the well room. This corresponds to 3 or 4 rounds of swimming, requiring a successful DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check each round. Also, because the stream is underground, characters must hold their breath.

The pond is too far away from the brigands and too shielded acoustically by the Still Tower for the bandits to notice the characters unless they employ particularly flashy tactics.

PART 2: STEALTHILY THROUGH THE STILL TOWER

Long abandoned by all but the griffons, the Still Tower now hosts a vicious group of bandits:

> A thin, square tower rises sharply above the top of the bluff. Its ground floor connects to several wooden buildings while its top seems open to the elements, although the crenellations make it difficult to see clearly from the ground. Windows open into the main floor and two upper levels of the tower. The sides are scarred with soot and scorch marks from recent magic. A noisome camp lies in the lee of the tower opposite the bluff.

The Still Tower has some common architectural features. All ceilings are 9 feet high. The exterior walls of the main tower are reinforced masonry (AC 17, 180 hp per 10-foot section, DC 17 Strength [Athletics] check to climb), and the interior walls are superior masonry (AC 17, 90 hp per 10-foot section, DC 21 Strength [Athletics] check to climb). The stables and barracks have wooden walls (AC 15, 27 hp per 10-foot section, DC 17 Strength [Athletics] check to climb). All doors are strong wooden ones (AC 15, 20 hp); none can be locked. All doors and walls have resistance to piercing and slashing damage from nonmagical weapons and immunity to psychic and poison damage.

The most straightforward way for the characters to complete this adventure is for them to sneak into the well room. From there they can proceed up through the secret rooms A2, B7, C2, D1, and E2 to the roof, where they can retrieve the eggs. Remember, the eggs will hatch no more than a week after the meeting with Lesharrkk, so slow sniping at the bandits may not be an effective tactic. The balance of the brigand band does not return until after the week is up, so they are not detailed below.

The bandit camp is the most important feature outside the Still Tower. It sits 10 feet east of B1 and B2.

THE BANDIT CAMP

> A large camp lies near the tower opposite the bluff. At least two dozen dark-furred creatures are living amid the squalor.

Creatures: There are thirty **bugbears** at the tower, although the camp holds accommodations for twice as many. (Half the group is escorting the sorcerer to the buyer.) The remaining bugbears, bored, spend most of their time wrestling and boasting.

Development: If combat occurs, the bugbears swarm any foe, attempting to overwhelm them with superior numbers. Note that the bugbears are well supplied with ranged weapons—a consequence of their preparations for combat with flying opponents—so they do not hesitate to use them. Once half the bugbears are dead, the survivors flee when reduced to 5 hit points. The ogres and the corrupted ogre chief will investigate any commotion involving the bugbears in 1d4 rounds.

Treasure: The bugbears have a total of 3,000 gp worth of coins, gems, and jewelry.

LEVEL A. CELLAR

This level contains both the well room for the tower and the secret library of the tower's master.

1. WELL ROOM

> The western wall of this thirty-foot by-thirty-foot chamber contains a pool of water surrounded by a low stone wall. Broken ladles, smashed kegs, and rotted pails suggest that this room once served as a well chamber. The southeastern corner used to contain a wooden staircase leading up, but years of decay have left the timbers in a splintered pile on the floor. Ruined kitchen supplies and rotted sacks of grain complete the decor.

Development: The closed door and distance increases the DC of Wisdom (Perception) checks made by the bandits. All such checks have their DC increased by +9. The secret door to A2 provides an alternate exit, which can be found with a successful DC 21 Wisdom (Perception) check.

2: SECRET LIBRARY

> This twenty-foot-by-twenty-five-foot room was once a library, but the smashed bookcases and torn tomes now form a pile of refuse on the floor. A metal ladder leads up in the northeast corner. Around it stand two humanoid shapes sculpted from marble. Their unmoving eyes stare past the stone flails held in front of their shirtless chests.

Creatures: Two **telamon columns** (see page 116) guard the room and attack anyone who enters, except those who wear the badge of the Griffon Riders.

Terrain: The refuse on the floor makes this entire chamber difficult terrain. That fact, and the need for silence, increases the difficulty of this encounter to CR 6.

Development: The only noise made by either column during combat is the crash of their weapons against their opponents. The telamon columns fight as long as any enemies remain in the room.

The remoteness of this echoing chamber gives a +9 modifier to the DCs of Wisdom (Perception) checks made by the bugbear bandits. If one hears anything, it will open the door to the well room (A1) and peer in 1d4 + 4 rounds later.

The ladder leads upward to room B7.

Treasure: Three old tomes can be pieced together with 2 hours of patient work. Two of the tomes concern the nature of divination magic and could be sold for 400 gp. The third explains the magical effect on which the Still Tower was built. Give any characters who read it the information found in the Still Tower and Magic sidebar. The chamber would be a secure place to take a long rest.

LEVEL B. MAIN FLOOR

This level contained the main floor of the tower, including the great hall, barracks, kitchen, and stables.

3. STABLE STOREROOM

> The stalls and the accoutrements of a stable still fill this room, although the large doors have been knocked down into timber. The central aisle is filled with torn bridles, ruined bits, and shredded, bloodstained saddles. The wooden walls are stained and worm-eaten but appear to be stable.

Development: The broken door, thin walls, and distance give a +4 modifier to the DC of Wisdom (Perception) checks made by the bugbear bandits.

The horse gear is all that remains of the griffons' favorite foodstuff; the corpses were dumped into the razorleaf's domain below.

4. BARRACKS

> This wooden-walled twenty-foot-by-thirty-foot room must have been a barracks, for it contains two rows of broken beds and shattered wooden chests. Now it appears to house a variety of rodents and insects.

Development: The thin walls and distance give a +3 modifier to the DC of Wisdom (Perception) checks made by the bugbear bandits. The Stross guards and griffon riders slept here while serving at the Still Tower. None of its current inhabitants pose any danger to the characters.

Treasure: This only item of value in this room is a Griffon Rider badge (see area A2).

5. MAIN HALL

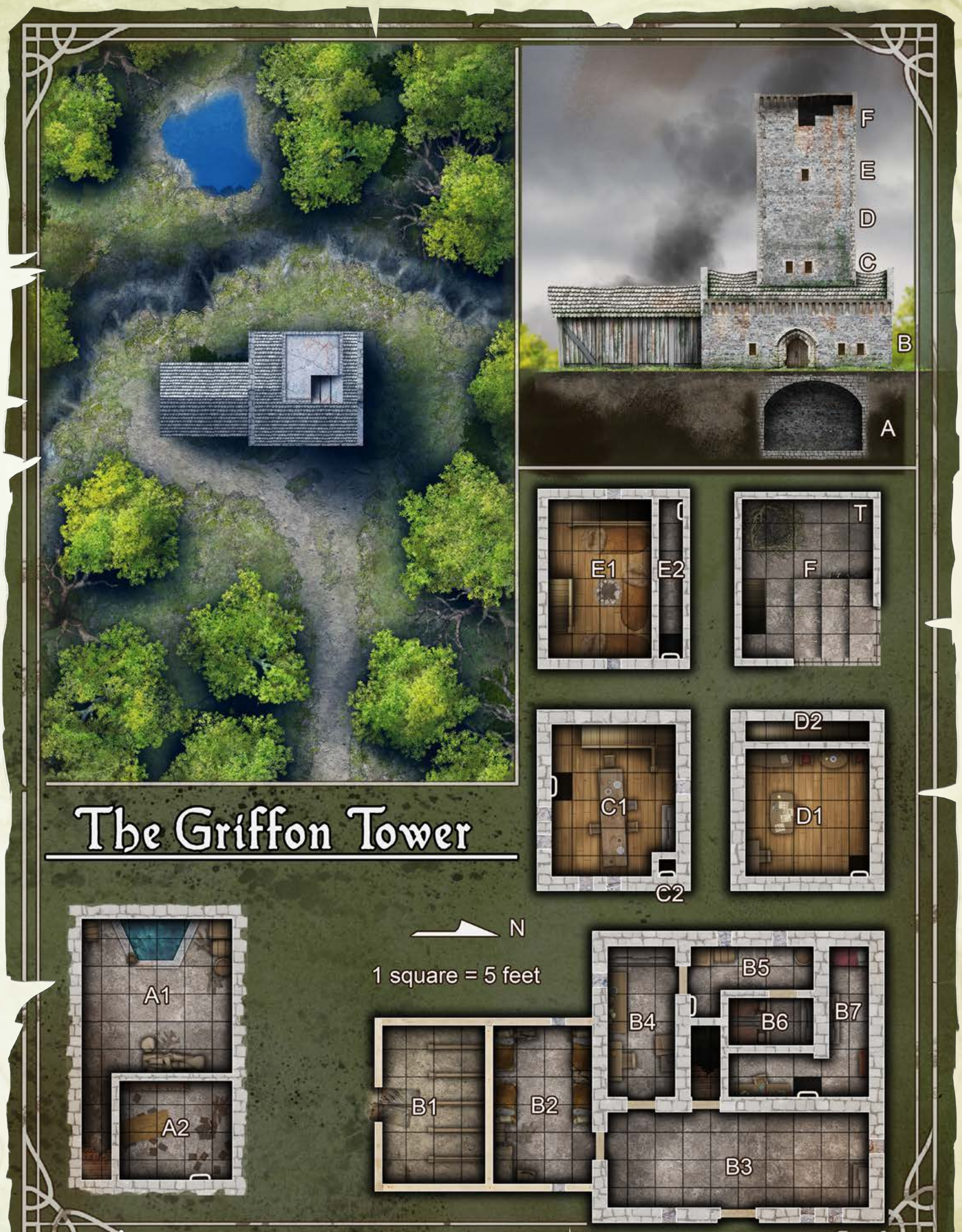
> This large stone room is now empty, with even the windows missing their shutters and panes. The ashes of long-cold campfires smear the floor. The main double doors exit to the east, while other closed doors pierce the south and west walls. A large fireplace fills the northeast corner, surrounded by windows on the north and east walls.

Development: The closed door and distance give a +5 modifier to the DC of Wisdom (Perception) checks made by the bugbear bandits. The doors lead to B2, B3, and the stairs to A1 (moving clockwise from the south).

6. KITCHENS

> This rectangular, stone-walled room was once a kitchen. Large cooking fireplaces fill the west wall, just beyond the doorway to the north. Discarded implements litter the floor, and dusty debris covers the cobwebbed tables and counters. A single window is set in the south wall.

Development: The closed door and distance give a +10 modifier to the DC of Wisdom (Perception) checks made by the bugbear bandits. The doors lead to B3 and B5.


F
E
D
C
B
A
E1
E2
T
F
D2
C1
D1
C2
The Griffon Tower
N
1 square = 5 feet
A1
A2
B5
B4
B6
B7
B1
B2
B3

7. PANTRY

> This roughly rectangular room contains a variety of tattered sacks and broken, overturned barrels. Windows in the west wall overlook the high bluff, while doors in the east and south walls lead to other rooms. A fireplace graces the northern wall, and a rusty metal ladder on the eastern wall climbs through the ceiling.

Development: The closed doors and distance give a +9 modifier to the DC of (Wisdom) Perception checks made by the bugbear bandits, and the check is made with disadvantage. The doors lead to B4 and B6. The ladder leads up to C1.

This room was once a dining room for the servants and a pantry.

8. SERVANTS' QUARTERS

> Spiders and rats have replaced the former inhabitants of these windowless sleeping quarters. The furniture seems better preserved here than elsewhere in the tower, although it is still stained and sagging. A fireplace fills much of the north wall.

Development: The closed door and distance give a +10 modifier to the DC of (Wisdom) Perception checks made by the bugbear bandits, and the check is made with disadvantage. The door leads to B5.

Treasure: This chamber contains nothing of value. It would be a secure place to rest and recover spells.

9. SECRET BEDROOM

> This L-shaped room must have served two functions. The northwestern leg contains a dresser, bed, and basin, clearly marking it as a bedchamber. The southern leg contains tools, tables, and broken glass implements. A sturdy metal ladder drops through the floor and rises through the ceiling. No windows allow light into this chamber, although a small fireplace on the southwestern wall must have provided some illumination.

Development: The walls and distance give a +9 modifier to the DC of (Wisdom) Perception checks made by the bugbear bandits, and the check is made with disadvantage. The ladder leads down to A2 and up through C2 to D1. Note that there is no entrance to B7 from the rest of the main level.

Once, this chamber served as a bedroom and workshop for the Stross noble who commanded the tower. When he fled, he took everything of value with him.

LEVEL C. MEETING ROOM

This level contains a secluded meeting room for the Stross.

10. TREATY ROOM

> Two window frames pierce three of the walls of this twenty-five-foot-square room. A metal ladder passes through the floor by the south wall, and a staircase rises along the western wall. The rotting frame of a large table fills the center of the room, surrounded by collapsed chairs, moldy upholstery, and the moth-eaten remains of tapestries. Spider webs fill a fireplace in the northeastern corner.

Development: The ladder leads down into B5. The stairs lead up through D2 to E1. The open staircase gives the ogres in E1 a +2 modifier to the DC of their Wisdom (Perception) checks, while the open windows give the bugbears outside a +6 modifier to the DC of their Wisdom (Perception) checks. One ogre investigates any disturbance in this area after 1d3 rounds, while the bugbears take 1d4 + 6 rounds to appear. The windows look out over the roof of the lower level (at roughly the same level) on the north, east, and south.

11. LADDERWAY

The metal ladder continues upward from B7 to D1.

Development: The thick stone walls give a +10 modifier to the DC of Wisdom (Perception) checks by the ogres in E1 above. Any noise will cause one of them to explore C1 in 1d3 rounds, increasing their chances to hear further noises in this area.

LEVEL D. SCRYING ROOM

This level contains a secret room used by the Stross for powerful divinations.

D1. SCRYING ROOM

> Time has been kinder to this windowless room than to the rest of the tower. In the northeast corner, a ladder rises through the floor and continues through the ceiling. Antique chairs, several small tables, stained papers, and a variety of cracked crystals, broken mirrors, and tarnished metal are strewn around the room.

Development: The ladder leads down through C2 into B7 and up into E2. It takes a successful DC 25 Wisdom (Perception) check to determine that the ladder to E2 is rusted through. The first creature to climb the ladder causes it to break and takes 1d6 bludgeoning damage from the fall unless it succeeds on a DC 17 Dexterity saving throw. The ogres in E1 might hear the sound of rending metal, with a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check. One ogre will go to C1 to investigate any disturbance in this area after 1d3 rounds.

Treasure: None of the contents of the room are in good enough condition to retain any value. The papers are cryptic notes without any modern relevance (although they provide a good opportunity to foreshadow future adventures). A small pewter key lies among the detritus, discoverable with a successful DC 17 Wisdom (Perception0 check); this key fits the chest in room E2. The chamber would be a secure place for a long rest.

D2. STAIRWAY

The staircase continues upward from C1 to E1.

LEVEL E. SUPPLIES AND SECRETS

This level contained a storeroom for the Griffon Riders and a secret treasury for the Stross.

14. SUPPLY ROOM

> This square room connects to stairs leading both upward and downward. Windows on the south and east walls look out over the roof of the main level twenty feet below. The bulk of the room contains pegs, lockers, chests, and tables, reminding you of nothing so much as an army quartermaster's tent. All the original contents are now gone. Instead, a campfire smolders on the wooden floor and a haunch of rotting meat sits against one wall. Three bedrolls attest to the presence of more recent occupants.

Creatures: Every corner of the forest has its ogres. Sometimes they get evicted by something bigger or fall out of favor with a hag. Once upon a time, three of them, a little more motivated than the average ogre, all fell together at the same time. Perhaps they were all inordinately full from the caravan that they assaulted, or perhaps it was the strong drink they also found. After the feasting, though, they stayed together. Very few people dare to bother them. They happen to be for hire for a fairly cheap price, because they just love slaughtering and eating humanoids. Now they work as personal bodyguards for Zyzhashcha, the corrupted ogre chieftain. They have claimed this room as their own and attack any who enter—anticipating both sport and food.

Development: The ogres while away the time until the hatchling's buyer returns and they are paid. They throw knucklebones and casually gnaw their way through the last black griffon corpse.

In combat, two of the ogres concentrate their attacks on the same foe while the third one attacks whoever attacked it last. The ogres flee if reduced to 5 hit points, passing down through the tower to stay away from the chieftain. They avoid the bugbears and flee the encampment entirely.

Zyzhashcha has disadvantage on any Wisdom (Perception) checks she makes to hear activity in this chamber. Accustomed to the toddler-like squabbling between the ogres, she will not investigate any noises that persist for less than 2d3 rounds, no matter what the sound signifies. The bugbears are more inclined to investigate, but the distance from their camp gives them a +9 modifier to the DC of any Perception checks they make. If successful, they investigate 1d4 + 8 rounds later.

One staircase leads down through D2 to C1, while the other leads upward to level F. This room once contained supplies for the Griffon Riders, but it has been stripped of any valuables.

Treasure: Aside from their equipment, the spendthrift ogres have only 25 sp between them.

15. TREASURY

> A thick layer of dust covers every horizontal surface of this windowless, rectangular room. Although your arrival has stirred the still air, kicking up some dust, clearly no one else has passed this way for many years. In the east, a ladder rises from the floor and, to the west, another metal ladder rises to a trapdoor in the ceiling. A small wooden chest sits under its own layer of dust in the center of the room.

Development: The ogres have a +7 modifier to the DC of any Wisdom (Perception) checks they make to hear activity in this chamber. Both ogres assume that any noises lasting less than 2d3 rounds are not worth checking out. The bugbears are more inclined to investigate, but the distance and walls give them a +9 modifier to the DC of any Wisdom (Perception) checks they make, and those checks are made with disadvantage. If successful, they investigate area E1 and level F 1d4 + 8 rounds later.

One ladder leads down to D1 (see that area for details on its hidden structural weakness). The other rises to the secret trapdoor to level F, although the trapdoor is clearly visible from below. This room was once the hidden treasury of the Stross lord, complete with a hidden escape route.

The staircase continues up from C1 to E1.

Treasure: The chest is locked but can be opened with a successful DC 17 Dexterity check using thieves' tools. The key to the lock can be found in area D1. The chest contains an imperial topaz and gold necklace (125 gp) and two *spell scrolls* of *lesser restoration*.

LEVEL F. GRIFFON ROOSTS

This level is the nesting area for the black griffon tribe:

> A short battlement surrounds the top of the tower. On the south and west, the wall extends up to a ten-foot-high ceiling, but the north and east sides of this enclosure are open to the elements. In the southeast corner, a staircase descends beneath the roof. In the northeast, three stone roosts rise up to heights of three, six, and nine feet. The entire area is covered with feathers, fur, and bits of discarded food. In the southwest corner is a large nest containing four enormous eggs.

Creatures: One of the leaders of the bandits, Zyzhashcha the corrupted ogre chieftain (see appendix A in *Tome of Beasts*), lives here, guarding their hard-earned treasure.

Terrain: The roosts and the roof provide high ground. The battlements are 4 feet high; any rushes over the battlements would lead to a fall of 30 or 40 feet. Remember to assess damage to the eggs from any area attacks that include their square; use the AC and saving throws given below.

Development: Zyzhashcha spends most of her time sleeping, eating, or throwing rocks at passing birds. She is not aware of the secret trapdoor.

In combat, Zyzhashcha attempts to defeat any foes herself, not calling for aid from the other brigands. Although she is careful not to damage the griffon eggs, in the heat of battle she does not think to hold them hostage in a threat against the characters. Zyzhashcha fights to the death.

The ogres have advantage on any Wisdom (Perception) checks they make to hear activity here. They will not investigate any noises that persist for less than 2d4 rounds, no matter what the sounds signify. The bugbears have learned not to disturb their leader, so they will investigate only if a corpse lands amid their campsite.

The staircase leads down to E1. The hidden trapdoor requires a DC 25 Wisdom (Perception) check to find from this side; it leads to E2.

After 1 round of combat, characters can notice the eggs beginning to hatch with a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check:

> The four blue-speckled eggs, each the size of a sheep's head, lean against one another. Suddenly, the nearest one starts to shake. A thin crack appears at its peak. The other three eggs then start to shake and crack too.

Give the characters 6 rounds for combat and to prepare before the surviving hatchlings emerge from the eggs. They hatch at a rate of one per round thereafter.

Part 3: Hatchlings!

> The egg fully cracks, and out pokes the head of a small bird, its feathers plastered to its scalp. As it emerges from the shards of the eggshell, you see that its legs are covered in mated fur and its back bears two spindly wings.

Creatures: Black griffon hatchlings (use the statistics of a **cat**) are about the size of a housecat.

Development: Griffon hatchlings sleep for most of the first few days of their life, awakening every 5 hours for 20 minutes or so. When awake, they are noisy—reduce by 5 the DC of any Perception checks made to notice them. Each time they awake, they want to eat; as carnivores, meat, eggs, and milk are the only things that sate their hunger. If they are not fed, they get louder (reduce Perception check DCs by 10) before going back to sleep. If the characters and the hatchlings remain in the Still Tower, be sure to check to see if the bandits hear the new additions to the party.

Each time the hatchlings awaken, they seek their mother. The characters can avoid this imprinting by making it difficult for the young griffons to perceive any humanoids during a waking period (by blindfolding them, for instance) or by succeeding on a Charisma (Deception) check against each hatchling during each waking period, opposed by the hatchling's Wisdom [Insight] check. Keep track of the number of times the characters failed to deceive the hatchlings.

In general, encourage creativity here. Let the characters use scent transfer from the roosts or from discarded feathers. Interpret spell effects generously—characters should be able to cast *sleep* on the quaking eggs, for instance, to buy themselves some time. Likewise, magical communication with the hatchlings (using *speak with animals*) could reverse the effects of a single failure per hatchling.

Finally, if the characters are stuck, successful DC 10 Intelligence (Nature) checks provide a way for you to give them suggestions.

Part 4: Escape from the Still Tower

All that remains for the characters is to escape with the hatchlings. They have a number of options. Although the young griffons will not survive an unprotected trip down the underground stream, characters who think to enclose them in insulated, air-filled containers might leave successfully the way they came. At the other extreme, characters could fly magically away from the rooftop itself, trusting on their speed or magical protections to avoid the bugbears' attacks.

Whatever the plan, ensure that the characters have at least one test (of roughly challenge rating 6) on their way out. The ogre trio is provided as a default—they can be investigating the rooftop just before the characters escape down the secret trapdoor with the hatchlings, or they could stand in the way of an escape out a back window over the bluff. If the players come up with a particularly clever way to extract the hatchlings, consider providing an easier encounter without reducing the characters' XP award. (Note that the default ogre trio has almost no treasure, so other options will not shortchange the characters in terms of treasure.)

Concluding the Adventure

Lesharrkk's ritual worked faster than she expected, so she meets the characters one day's travel up the trail from the Still Tower.

Depending on her attitude toward the characters, Lesharrkk could make a valuable ally in later adventures. She could serve as a scout, a source of information, a safe hideout, or even transportation for the characters. Perhaps she will share the secret ritual she used to break the enchantment on herself.

Her reaction to the characters depends on how successful they were. Award 3 points for every hatchling returned alive. Add 1 point if the characters offer Lesharrkk food (or 2 if they offer horseflesh). Deduct 1 point for each meal a hatchling missed. Deduct 1 point for each time a hatchling began to imprint upon a character. Then, use the following table to determine the result.

SCORE	LESHARRKK'S INCLINATION TOWARD PARTY	OUTCOME
12 or higher	Helpful	Lesharrkk helps the characters as much as she can.
8–11	Friendly	Lesharrkk does a favor for the characters or helps them in minor ways for a year.
5–7	Indifferent	Lesharrkk does a favor for the characters.
3–4	Unfriendly	Lesharrkk orders the griffons of the Margreve to leave the characters alone for a year.
2 or lower	Hostile	After raising her young, Lesharrkk becomes the characters' enemy.

Tailor each outcome to fit your campaign. Some DMs might have Lesharrkk provide griffon mounts for the characters as a favor, for example, while others might allow the characters to move into the Still Tower.

FUTURE ADVENTURES

The Still Tower could spark future adventures. The characters might return there to cast important divinations, or they might seek to harness its power more fully. Also, the other half of the bandit troop remains at large. If that band is led by a recurring enemy of the characters, the events of this adventure provide even stronger grounds for enmity. Even if the bandits are a new foe, the survivors might seek revenge.

NEW CREATURE

The new creature in this adventure is detailed below.

TELAMON COLUMN

Large construct, unaligned

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 38 (4d10 + 16)

Speed 20 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	8 (–1)	18 (+4)	3 (–4)	11 (+0)	1 (–5)

Damage Immunities poison, psychic, bludgeoning, piercing and slashing from nonmagical weapons that aren't adamantine

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, frightened, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages understands the languages of its creator but can't speak

Challenge 3 (700 XP)

False Appearance. While motionless, the telamon column is indistinguishable from a normal column.

Immutable Form. The telamon column is immune to any spell or effect that would alter its form.

Magic Resistance. The telamon column has advantage on saving throws against spells or other magical effects

Magic Weapons. The telamon column's attacks are magical.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The telamon column makes two slam attacks.

Slam. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 11 (2d6 + 4) bludgeoning damage.

The Tongue of Derende

By Jon Sawatsky

> *"All words become one in that dark and mushroomed place."*
>
> —Giudod of Zobeck

"The Tongue of Derende" is an encounter site intended for characters of 5th to 9th level. If the characters have not experienced "The Fingers of Derende," see page 63 for background information to help establish the situation.

OVERVIEW

Deep in the forest, beyond the waxy shrubs at the Margreve's limits, is a large cave whose floor is made from the still-living tongue of Derende. The fey of the forest call the place the Cavern of Whispers. For centuries it has served as a sacred site where conflicts are ended, treaties are signed, and understanding blossoms. Large, multicolored fungus patches grow on the walls, casting dim, calming light throughout the cavern. The insects that live in the mushrooms glow in rainbow hues.

The tongue of Derende is an enormous mushroom-like life form growing deep in the earth below the Margreve. Its tendrils reach out for miles, often sprouting small versions of the larger organ. There is no magic associated with these smaller growths, and they wither and die within a week.

MAGIC

The tongue of Derende enables all creatures to speak a single universal language—those that walk on its surface find that they can understand and converse with most other creatures. A creature standing upon the tongue of Derende is subject to the following magical effects:

- Creatures who know at least one language can communicate with one another through speaking, writing, or gesturing.
- A creature has advantage on Charisma (Persuasion or Performance) checks made while standing on the tongue.
- A creature that benefits from this effect experiences vivid and persistent nightmares during its next long rest. The nightmares revolve around a massive, swirling void consuming whatever it contacts. The benefits of the long rest are lost, and the creature gains 1 level of exhaustion.

COLLECTING A BIT OF TONGUE

Thanks to the rapid rate at which it regenerates, the tongue of Derende is immune to damage. No sooner does a blade slice, or a fire burn than the tongue is restored to its former condition. A character who succeeds on a DC 12 Dexterity check using a sharp object can remove a 1-ounce portion of the tongue. On a failed check, the sharp object is absorbed into the tongue and is lost forever. If the sharp object is magical, it becomes stuck instead of absorbed, and retrieving it requires a successful DC 16 Strength check.

A character who consumes 1 ounce of the tongue of Derende can replace one language it knows with any language it has heard in the last 24 hours. This effect lasts for 1 hour, and the character is considered literate in the new language. After the effect wears off, the character's known languages are restored to normal. A character can benefit from this effect only once a week.

THE DEAD SPEAK

Captain Thoulous, an iron ghoul, and her unit of ghouls known as Thoulous's Spear have claimed the tongue of Derende. The captain was charged with escorting two necromancers to the ancient site. The spellcasters plan to use ritual magic to summon the spirit of Derende itself and pose it several vexing questions to further their research. The dread wizards have sealed the entrance to the underground hall and summoned foul elementals to guard it. For several days, the ghouls have attempted to commune with the Primal Tender, but their efforts have gone unrewarded. The soldiers have not rested properly since arriving, and discipline is breaking down. A few of the soldiers have abandoned their duties, crawling to the surface through forgotten tunnels.

THOULOUS'S SPEAR

Captain Thoulous is a veteran of several wars, and her record of success means she is often tasked with missions considered impossible by other commanders. She handpicks her soldiers, and often claims the best warriors from other units; this makes her unpopular among the Imperium's rank and file. The captain is battle-hardened, humorless, and keeps her feeding pit stocked with the freshest corpses.

Ghouls under her command wear a black burlap tabard with silver stitching that depicts a spear piercing the sun.

Thoulous's Spear is composed of various creatures (see table below).

FAILING MORALE

Thoulous's Spear is falling apart. The captain struggles to maintain order, and many have begin openly defying her second in command, requiring the captain to discipline the soldiers personally. The necromancers have so far failed to communicate with Derende, and they are no closer to doing so than when the ghouls first arrived.

Food is running low, and the ghouls have begun to eat the haulers, despite being forbidden to do so by their superiors. Several of the Spears have escaped into the forest above and hunt animals and humanoids at night, taking shelter from the hideous sun during the day.

RITUAL OF THE NECROMANCERS

The necromancers are at their wits' end. For several weeks they have taken turns performing the ritual as devised by the head of their order, but none of them have created the desired link with Derende. The ritual involves chanting verses in Abyssal and burning a foul-smelling incense made from dried duergar flesh. A character who succeeds on a DC 10 Intelligence (Arcana) check recognizes the smell.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

Two suggestions for getting the characters involved with Thoulous's Spear are offered below.

GHOULS BY NIGHT

Several hungry **ghouls** assault the party while resting in the Margreve. The characters find a document featuring a map to the location of the Cavern of Whispers as loot carried by one of the assailants.

SPRITE WRATH

A community of **sprites** living near the Whispers scours the forest for assistance in ridding the sacred caves of the undead. The escaped **ghoul** soldiers have slain and devoured several sprites, and their leader, Mimilia, offers emeralds worth 2,000 gp to anyone capable of driving away the ghouls.

PERSON OR GROUP	DESCRIPTION
Captain Thoulous	The leader of the unit, an **iron ghoul** (see *Tome of Beasts*). She has never once cleaned her armor, and it bears a thick layer of caked blood and dried entrails.
Lieutenant Hass	An **imperial ghoul** (see *Tome of Beasts*) responsible for ensuring that Thoulous's will is done. He is fond of horseflesh and wears a bleached equine skull as a mask in battle.
Lieutenant Bordchak	A **darakhul ghoul** (see *Tome of Beasts*) whose main duty is shepherding the haulers and food.
Obscures	Necromancers (**cult fanatics**) attempting to speak with Derende.
Spears	The **ghoul** soldiers that form the body of the unit. They are battle-ready and generally obedient under normal circumstances.
Haulers	Slaves (**commoners**) that were captured and are being forced to carry the unit's supplies.
Food	Former haulers (**commoners**) who are no longer able to perform their duties.

CAVERN OF WHISPERS

The caverns are moist and quiet, very mossy and with vapors redolent of something a bit like mushrooms or pine sap.

1. EXTERIOR AND ENTRANCE

> A large plant-covered mound rises from the forest floor. Glistening wooden doors decorated with carved leafy patterns are set into the mound. The doors are firmly closed. Several piles of fresh earth sit on top of the mound. Insects crawl through the piles, and a few birds regard you from their peaks.

Doors. The doors have been barred from the other side. A character who makes a successful DC 15 Strength check can force the doors open. The wooden bars keeping it closed can be removed with a single *knock* spell. The door (AC 15, 45 hit points) can be destroyed, but the noise will alert the soldiers guarding area 2.

Creatures. The ghouls have summoned two **gravedirt elementals** (see page 186) to guard the entrance to the cave. If the characters get close enough to see one of them, read:

> A humanoid-shaped pile of dirt, bones, and rotting plant matter slouches across the forest floor. A single blood-red eye searches the area before it, its cavernous maw opening and closing reflexively.

The elementals are instructed to attack any living creature that approaches the entrance.

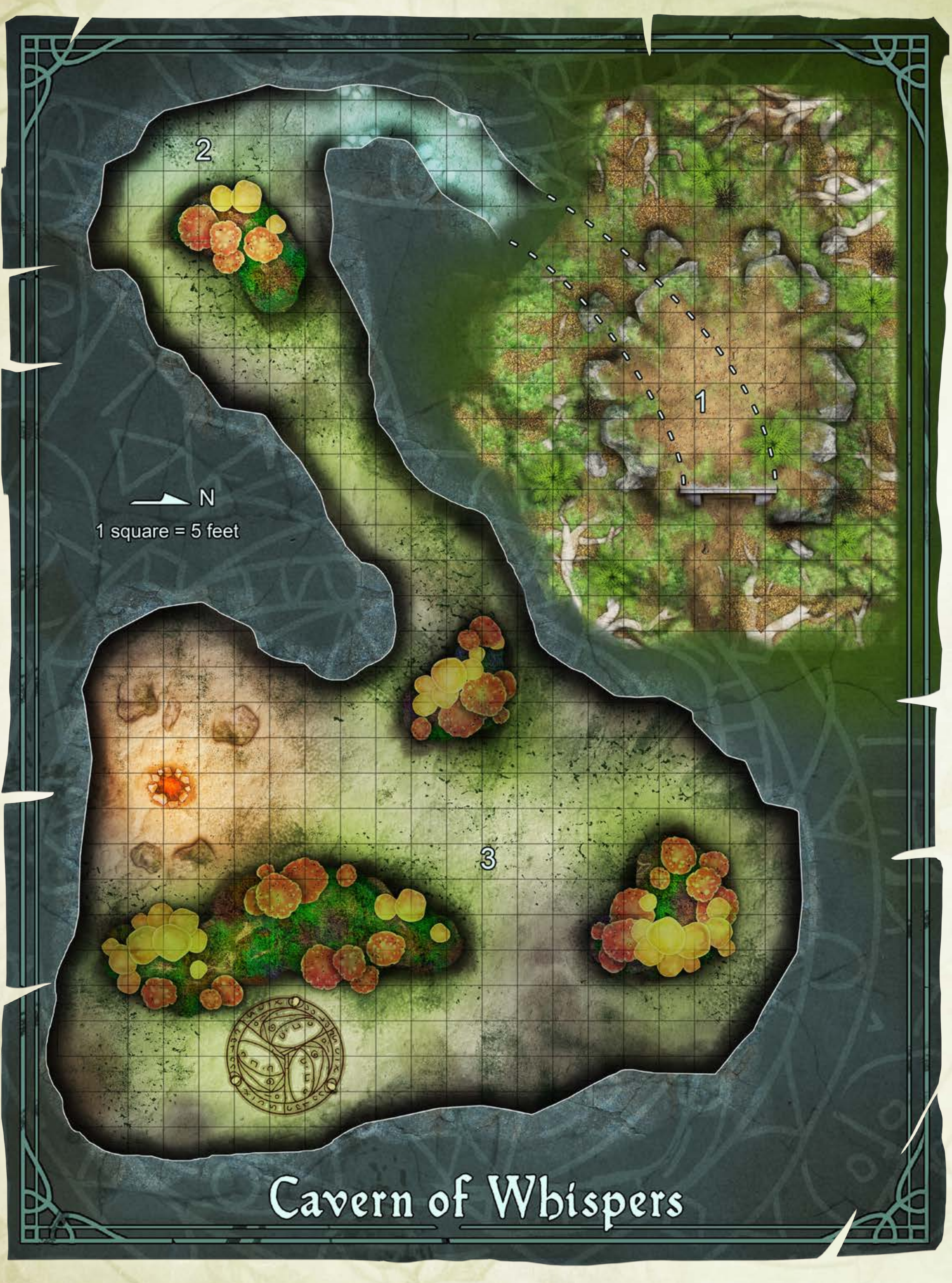
2. THE DESCENT

> The tunnel descends deep underneath the forest. The air here is close, and contains traces of the scent of rotting flesh. Oval-shaped mushrooms grow here and there, shedding dim blue light in the tunnel. White roots trailing down from the plants above snake their way across the ceiling.

Mushrooms. The glowing mushrooms illuminate this area and area 3 with dim light. They can be harvested and carried, though they lose their luminescent quality after 1 hour if plucked.

Development. The ghouls patrol this hall regularly. If the party reduced the door to 0 hit points with attacks, the ghouls in this area are alerted to their presence and will fortify the middle of the hallway. Otherwise, the patrol wanders up and down the hall.

Creatures. Lieutenant Bordchak (a **darakhul ghoul**; see *Tome of Beasts*) and a number of Spears (**ghouls**) protect this area. The ghouls won't attack on sight, and instead try to intimidate the party into leaving. Convincing the ghouls to bring the party to speak with their leader is a near impossible task. A character who succeeds on a DC 20 Charisma (Persuasion) check can gain an audience with Thoulous (see area 3). Otherwise the patrol attacks if the party doesn't leave.



Cavern of Whispers

To tailor this encounter for the capabilities of the party, vary the number of ghouls that accompany Lieutenant Bordchak. Three **ghouls** would be appropriate for a 5th-level party, and for each level above 5th one additional **ghoul** should be added to the encounter.

3. WHISPERS

> A long natural cave extends out before you. The floor here is soft and made of a pale white spongy material. The ubiquitous mushrooms provide enough light to see that a small camp has been established near the center of the room. Large patches of rainbow-colored fungus cover the walls here and grow as columns from the floor to the ceiling. Chanting, low and dreadful, rises from the far side of the hall. This place smells of blood and rotting flesh.

Audience with Thoulos. If the party gains an audience with Captain Thoulous, she reveals nothing about the ritual. She insists the party should leave. In truth, the captain is close to giving up on the endeavor and reveals that the ghouls would depart if the party would provide her with enough treasure to avoid shame upon her return below. She abandons the Cavern of Whispers if the party offers her 2,000 gp or a suitably powerful rare or very rare magic item.

Creatures. The remaining members of Thoulous's Spear occupy this room. Captain Thoulous, an **iron ghoul** (see *Tome of Beasts*) leads a group of **ghouls** in an attack on the party. Lieutenant Hass, an **imperial ghoul** (see *Tome of Beasts*) and a few **ghouls** retreat to protect the necromancers (**cult fanatics**).

Captain Thoulous alone is an appropriate encounter for a 5th-level party, and for each level above 5th one additional ghoul should be added to the encounter.

Lieutenant Hass and one necromancer is appropriate for a 5th-level party, and for each level above 5th one ghoul should be added. At party levels 9th and 12th an additional cult fanatic can be added in place of a ghoul.

Treasure. Captain Thoulous wields a *+1 glaive*. A single iron-bound chest sits unlocked at the campsite. It contains:

- 750 gp
- A dozen miniature silver spears (commendations for the captain's soldiers not yet distributed) worth 10 gp each
- A large bag of grim-smelling spices made from smoked ettercaps

Gall of the Spider Crone

By Tim Connors

The Spider Crone donned her ivy crown of prophecy, and her face paled. The crown never lied. Today, she would die.

"Gall of the Spider Crone" is a wilderness fantasy adventure suitable for characters of 6th level. It uses fast campaign progression and is therefore generous with treasure.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Kariv gypsies sing the "Rhyme of the Spider Crones" to their children and to guests gathered at their campfires. It recounts the life of Jędza Nansa and her vila sisters who traded their legendary beauty for arcane power, hags' faces, and the company of spiders. It is a true story.

Jędza Nansa lives among the monstrous spiders of the Margreve, where she traffics in potions and poisons, divinations, and enchanted ropes and nets. Many trade their most precious possessions for her services.

Earlier today, Jędza prophesied that she would die. To avoid her fate, she melded with a willow tree, hoping to escape any harm that might otherwise befall her. Unbeknownst to her, the tree bore a powerful parasite in a gall high in its branches. The willow expelled Jędza, and horror flooded her face as she discovered a gall now growing upon her own belly. She took her knife to it. She focused her magic upon it. Both attempts to remove it failed.

Something began to twitch inside the parasitic pocket. Something began to claw at her from the inside. She doubled over, sickened and dazed. Jędza stumbled through the woods toward her sister's house, but she soon collapsed.

A woodcutter named Sandor found Jędza unconscious. He had braved the deep Margreve to offer Jędza his life in exchange for a potion that would cure the terminally ill babe that was strapped to his back. Now he carried Jędza too.

A thunderstorm brewed as Sandor carried the woman and the child toward the Great Northern Road. Lightning flashed. Rain and sweat slid down his face. A Kariv band, securing their wind-blown wagons against a coaching inn, spotted Sandor as he stepped from the trees.

Soon thereafter, the Kariv tended to Jędza in an upper room of the Witch's Teat coaching inn. With healing potions, they have revived Jędza. She has promised the Kariv her treasured *ivy crown of prophecy*, arachnid escorts . . . anything they want, if they will just remove the gall that is killing her. The greedy and opportunistic Kariv have agreed, but they are not faring well. One of them takes a hot knife to the crone's belly. Four others brave the storm-wracked woods to collect a magic jug from Jędza's sister's house at Jędza's request. Meanwhile, the storm grows ever more violent as something struggles to be born from the "Gall of the Spider Crone."

ADVENTURE HOOK

A preternatural storm rages over the Margreve. Lightning flashes, wind howls, and trees crash across the Great Northern Road. Through the darkness and slanted rain, the characters spot the lantern that marks the Witch's Teat inn. Whether the characters have business at the inn or are traveling the Great Northern Road on some other errand, the adventure begins as they enter the inn.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

A storm drives the characters into the Witch's Teat inn. Inside, screams of pain echo from an upper room, and a Kariv midwife dashes downstairs with water and blood-soaked rags. She begs the characters for healing potions but suspiciously denies them access to the "pregnant woman" upstairs until it is nearly too late.

The characters discover that the pregnant woman is actually the gall-bellied Spider Crone. Something squirms inside her parasitic pocket. The crone kicks the incompetent Kariv surgeon aside and begs the characters to cut the gall out of her.

Attempts to excise the gall fail. Jędza tells the characters that if they can retrieve her sister's magic jug in time, she might be able to capture the unborn creature before it devours her soul. In exchange, she promises the characters everything she previously promised to the Kariv, which vexes the gypsies.

The characters rush into the wild night, armed with a crude map and the crone's struggling homunculus, which acts as an unwilling key to her sister's domain.

Jędza's sister's "house" is the abdomen of a giant, rickety spider construct. It hangs from a chasm-spanning spider web. Defeating the trap that protects the jug requires eight hands. But the characters will never make it back in time anyway . . . unless they manipulate the spider-silk ropes that control the home and ride it back to the inn.

While the characters are away, the Kariv continue their reckless attempts to excise the gall in order to earn Jędza's reward. Unless the characters get back in time, the gall creature devours Jędza's soul and finally erupts in a black whirlwind of claws and lightning.

PART 1: THE PREGNANT WOMAN UPSTAIRS

A vast expanse of forest surrounds the Witch's Teat inn. The closest city, Zobeck, lies 100 miles south along the Great Northern Road.

The inn was once a griffon tower, built by House Stross for its griffon riders, an elite company of couriers and shock cavalry. When the parsimonious council of the Free City abandoned that tradition in recent years, a crippled Kariv named Vassily purchased the tower, and the fortified structure began its second life as a coaching inn.

THE WITCH'S TEAT INN

Outside the inn, the light of a lantern struggles against the night. A wooden placard bearing the words "Witch's Teat" clacks in the wind against the inn's stone walls. Kariv wagons are secured along the side of the building.

When the characters enter the inn, read the following:

> As you enter the coaching inn, wind and rain race inside past you. Half a dozen candles snuff out in the common room, and gruff voices call from the shadows, telling you to shut the door.
>
> A maid with striking features latches the door against the howling wind. Two more young women relight the candles, and one by one, the faces of men sitting at tables throughout the common room catch the light. All are dressed in the garb of gypsies. They stare at you with anxious or dour faces. On every table, even the unoccupied ones, a gleaming knife stands on end, pointing toward the sky.
>
> An older woman wearing a babushka descends a staircase and comes toward you with an armload of blood-soaked rags. Screams of pain echo from an upper room.

The maid who closed the door is Mishenka, the daughter of the inn's owner, a crippled old Kariv man named Vassily. Vassily stands, revealing his wicker leg. He welcomes the characters without enthusiasm and motions for Mishenka to usher them to an empty table near the fire and tend to their requests. Vassily sits and resumes a hushed conversation with Adrik, the patriarch of the Kariv band staying at the inn.

More screams come down at intervals from the upper room. Tanya, the midwife and mother of Adrik, carries her load of bloody rags down the stairs, then wrings them out over the fire near where the characters are standing. If questioned, the superstitious woman says that blood-wringing is a Kariv custom, and she attempts to redirect the conversation by begging the characters for healing potions for "her daughter" who is in labor upstairs. If the characters refuse, Tanya offers to pay up to twice the usual price. If the characters ask her daughter's name or offer to attend to the girl personally, Tanya stammers suspiciously and heads back up the stairs.

Let the players drive the pace of this scene. As the anxious but tightlipped Kariv pretend that all is well, build tension and suspicion:

- Increasingly frequent screams (and curses) are heard from upstairs.
- Everyone quickly resets the tables' upturned knives when a loud thunderclap topples them. If asked, the gypsies claim that the knives protect against evil storm spirits.
- Tanya reappears periodically, silently wringing out her bloody rags and whispering into Adrik's ear.
- Vassily and Adrik continue their whispered but heated conversation. Vassily wants Adrik to murder "her" (Jędza) before "it" (the gall creature) is born. Adrik refuses, because if she dies, he will never learn the hidden locations of the promised treasures
- A hot-headed young Kariv draws his sword and makes for the stairs to "end this." Adrik and two others intervene, and Kariv dissent blossoms.
- A baby (the woodcutter Sandor's unnamed daughter) starts crying upstairs, but the screams of pain continue.

If the characters still do not try to ascend the stairs, Adrik approaches them directly. Either way, he decides that the characters might be his only avenue to saving Jędza and securing her riches. Perhaps they can keep the crone alive long enough for his brother and three nephews to return with Jędza's sister's magic jug. Before leading the characters upstairs, he gravely warns them not to judge by appearances.

THE GALL AND THE PLEA

> Stone stairs spiral up into the inn's second story, where a gossamer curtain separates a landing from a dark bedchamber. In the center of the room, an ugly old woman lies on a featherbed soaked in blood. A Kariv man stands beside her with a bloody knife in his hand. Behind him, a shaking Kariv woman cups her mouth with one hand and tries to hold the room's only lantern over the man's shoulder so that he can see.
>
> The ugly old woman in the bed is not pregnant. A large gall grows upon her belly, like a burl on a tree. The surgeon lowers his knife against the gall, and the crone screams, curses, and kicks him aside. Something big squirms inside the gall. The ugly old woman looks at you beseechingly. "Please," she pleads. "For the love of Perun. Help me!"
>
> In the corner, a woodcutter feeds goat's milk to a baby.

The creature inside Jędza claws away at her. Reducing her hit points by 3 per hour. She has only 11 hit points left, so unless provided with magical healing, she has only 4 hours to live. Once reduced to 0 hit points, she cannot be stabilized, and magical healing has no effect. The Kariv have depleted all the healing measures at their disposal. All attempts (by anyone) to excise the gall are ineffective and deal 1 damage to Jędza per round of surgery. If she is moved or carried, she also takes 1 damage per round.

A closed coffer on a side table contains the Kariv's captive suturefly (see *Tome of Beasts*). Its triple pair of wings buzz loudly whenever someone within 30 feet lies. Jędza has answered the Kariv's questions truthfully and is also truthful with the characters. If the suturefly buzzes because someone lies (such as the surgeon claiming he needs no help), the Kariv explain the creature's purpose.

If the characters consider harming the crone, give her the chance to warn them (truthfully) of the dire consequences of her death. She says that the gall creature is immune to any harm inflicted on its host and that, if she dies, the creature will doom her immortal soul by claiming it as its own. Moreover, it will erupt more powerful than she ever was—powerful enough to slaughter everyone at the inn. A character who succeeds on a DC 21 Intelligence (Nature) check recalls corroborating tales of gall-borne creatures devouring treants' souls. Sandor the woodcutter gravely adds that if the crone dies, she cannot brew the potion to save his child. The rare king's sleep poison that courses through the babe's veins has already killed its mother. The child can be cured by someone who succeeds on a DC 16 Wisdom (Medicine) check using a healer's kit.

Whether the characters consider harming the crone or not, she promises them everything she previously promised to the Kariv: namely her *ivy crown of prophecy*, hidden somewhere in the forest. This offer vexes Adrik, who has risked his band's safety for a prize he can no longer win. He adroitly suggests that the characters merely heal Jędza (for "a lesser but still generous reward") to give his brother and three nephews time to return with the magic jug that the crone will use to contain the gall creature.

Jędza retorts that the four men are already dead. She asks pale-faced Tanya to open the shuttered window, after which Jędza's homunculus climbs over the sill, into the room, and across the wall. The goblin-faced homunculus has four arms and four legs and holds the other end of its broken leash in its maw. The Kariv men took the homunculus with them as a key to access Jędza's sister's domain. Now, it reports telepathically to Jędza that shocker lizards have killed the four men.

While Tanya grieves for her son and his children, Jędza begs the characters to succeed where the Kariv men failed. If they retrieve her sister's magic jug in time, she might be able to save her soul and maybe even save Sandor's child.

If the characters agree to collect the jug, Jędza asks them to swear an oath on the child's head that they will succeed. Jędza draws a crude map to her sister Mavra's house, featuring four major landmarks: from the inn, they travel west to a clearing, northwest to an alseid graveyard, and north along a ravine to Mavra's house, with each location 3/4 mile from the previous site. Jędza also explains that the characters will require the presence of Nitca, her homunculus, whom Mavra knows and trusts. Nitca will not willingly travel more than 1 mile from Jędza, so it must be forced. Jędza calls for Vassily's wicker leg to be used as a cage (AC 13, 5 hp, immunity to poison and psychic damage), and Vassily agrees out of fear. If instead the characters decide to stuff Nitca in an extradimensional space, such as a *bag of holding*, Nitca reluctantly enters the space under Jędza's demanding gaze, but the homunculus becomes hostile and bites whoever sticks their hand in to retrieve it later.

If the characters attack Jędza, Sandor and the Kariv defend her. Jędza swears revenge and defends herself as

well as she can until she dies, and the ala bursts from her corpse (see "The Ala Erupts" in Part Four).

Treasure: One of the Kariv has taken Jędza's *+1 shortbow* and quiver of twenty poisoned arrows (DC 10 Constitution saving throw or take an extra 1d4 poison damage) for "safekeeping" while the surgery takes place.

Part 2: Into the Woods

As the characters leave the inn, fist-sized spiders converge on the building. The harmless spiders brave the storm to be near Jędza on her death bed.

Weather, Movement, and Getting Lost: The thunderstorm rages. Poor visibility and a trackless forest reduce all movement to 1/4 normal. (For example, a character with a speed of 30 feet walks 3/4 mile in 1 hour.) The Kariv and the shocker lizards are 3/4 mile (1 hour) away. Mavra's house is an additional 1–1/2 miles (2 hours) away. At this speed, the round trip will take 6 hours. Unless the characters heal Jędza before they depart, she dies—and Nitca goes insane—after 4 hours.

The downpour reduces visibility to 1/4 normal, and everything more than 10 feet away is considered lightly obscured. Gusts of wind cause ranged weapon attacks to be made with disadvantage. Tiny creatures (such as Nitca) must succeed on a DC 17 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check to fly at all. The wind automatically extinguishes unprotected flames, such as normal torches. Protected flames dance wildly but do not automatically go out.

Randomly, approximately every hour, when the characters are not in combat, check to see if:

- protected flames are extinguished (50 percent chance).
- the characters' leader gets them lost (on a failed DC 17 Wisdom [Survival] check).

THE DEAD KARIV

Unless the characters instruct Nitca to guide them through this area, the homunculus (or Jędza's map) leads the characters directly to the Kariv and the shocker lizards, 3/4 mile west of the inn. The homunculus understands Common but cannot speak, so it waves its arms wildly as the party nears this area:

> A wide clearing lies open to the rolling thunderclouds. The downpour has turned the forest floor into an impromptu bog. Tufts of grass form islands that rise from shin-high water. A short distance ahead, a man dressed in Kariv clothes lies facedown, his arms above his head, clinging to the grass.

The man is Adrik's nephew, Driskaw. He twitches, alive but dying (a successful DC 10 Wisdom [Medicine] check or any magical healing can stabilize him). If roused, Driskaw wants to try to save his father and brothers and return to the inn. He is a noncombatant and does not join the party.

Driskaw's father, Rurik, and his two brothers lie dead in the same clearing, their bodies 30 feet apart from one another. In the darkness and downpour, the characters might notice them only one at a time.

Creatures: As the characters approach the third man—Rurik, who wears a blue cloak—the man's body rises 8 feet into the air on a tangled mass of vines and roots. A **shambling mound** attempts to carry him away from the three **shocker lizards** (see page 136) that were nibbling at him. As with the other bodies, the characters cannot tell if the man is unconscious or dead without "rescuing" him.

Terrain: Treat the 80-foot-diameter clearing of shallow bog as difficult terrain. Any Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics) checks are made with a –2 penalty due to the sucking mud.

Development: In combat, the shocker lizards add lethal shocks to target characters and the shambling mound, which is immune to them. The shocker lizards flee if only one lizard still lives, but the shambling mound fights to the death.

Treasure: Woefully ill-equipped for their task, the Kariv have little of value, except for four *potions of healing* (one apiece) and Rurik's' *blue willow cloak* (see page 137). If the characters recover all the bodies, Driskaw gives them the cloak and all the potions except for one he needs for his own wounds.

NITCA GOES BERSERK

Once the characters are 1 mile from the inn, Nitca goes berserk, trying everything in its power to get back within range of Jędza. It becomes uncooperative, and its attitude sours from indifferent to hostile. If caged, it gnashes its teeth, spits, claws, and bites the bars (ineffectively, if enclosed in Vassily's wicker leg). If Nitca escapes somehow, it returns to Jędza, who scolds it and sends it back toward the characters. It waits for the characters exactly 1 mile away from Jędza but resists any attempt the characters make to capture it again.

THE ALSEID GRAVEYARD

The map leads the characters another 3/4 miles northwest of the clearing to the overgrown acreage of the alseid graveyard:

> Enormous antler racks protrude from the sopping ground and catch weeds that the storm has uprooted and blown away. The sound of rushing water issues from the northwest. From out of the darkness ride three vine-covered alseid skeletons. Each gallops forward in a series of imperfect, jarring motions.

Creatures: Three **puppet vines** (see page 135) have taken residence in the protective rib cages of alseid skeletons. Each vine's tendrils corkscrew around the limbs of its skeletal host, acting as muscle on bone. The main body of each plant writhes in a tangled mass inside the skeleton's torso. Assume each is 30 to 60 feet distant from the characters (in a random direction) and is preceded by a 30-foot-radius of animated weeds.

THE RAVINE

The graveyard slopes toward a ravine along the graveyard's northwest edge. The 15-foot-wide ravine carries a torrent of 8-foot-deep floodwater north at 60 feet per round. A character who enters it must succeed on a DC 17 Strength (Athletics) check every round to avoid going under and being swept away. Fording the ravine requires three successful checks in a row.

As the ravine heads north, it gradually widens and deepens, forming a steep-walled chasm that runs like a scar toward Mavra's house. Over the 3/4-mile course between the graveyard and Mavra's house, the chasm becomes 40 feet wide, its sidewalls grow to 40 feet tall above the water, and the water reaches 15 feet deep. After Mavra's house, the chasm narrows, its walls shrink, and the water recedes, returning the chasm to a 15-foot-wide ravine with 8-foot-deep water within another 3/4 mile.

Climbing the walls requires a successful DC 17 Strength (Athletics) check. The branches of the trees meet 70 feet above the ravine.

THE ALSEID EXILE

After following the ravine for 1/4 mile northwest from the graveyard, the characters discover the following:

> The ravine is slowly widening and deepening as it proceeds northwest. Less than a mile from the alseid graveyard, the ravine has widened to twenty feet across, and its sidewalls tower ten feet over the water that rushes through it. Just ahead, a large, partially submerged web spans the chasm. The web has caught a great deal of debris, including some sizable logs. A half-cocooned alseid struggles at the water line to free itself from the sticky webs and swim against the current, but the rushing water repeatedly drives it back into the web. Near the top of the web, a human-sized spider slowly crawls toward its escaping prey. The alseid screams a blood-curdling cry for help.

Creatures: Flawn is a young, bastard alseid (see *Tome of Beasts*) and an exile. His tribe sawed off his antlers and banished him after the tribe's matriarch revealed that Flawn leaves human tracks, and is therefore no woodfriend. The truth is that Jędza told the matriarch that one day Flawn's antlers will grow fourteen points, a prediction that threatens the matriarch's own son's rise to Imperial Alseid, so the matriarch cursed Flawn with the false prints.

Flawn does not know the truth. He seeks Jędza to explain and atone for the curse of his tracks. If he is in fact an abomination, he plans to kill himself at the alseid graveyard.

Flawn desperately tries to free himself from the web but is nearing exhaustion. He is 10 feet below and 10 feet beyond the ravine's lip.

The weight of the logs threatens to breach the web, and the giant spider tests the web's integrity with each step it takes toward Flawn (10 feet below the spider).

Development: Unless the characters intervene, the spider reaches Flawn in 2 rounds and proceeds to bite him. In combat, the spider throws webs at attacking characters. If the characters attack the web, the spider abandons it, but continues to fight to the death.

If rescued, Flawn becomes a lifelong friend of the characters. He tells them his situation, says he could not find Jędza, and asks to borrow a dagger, which he says he will take to the graveyard and use to kill himself. To prevent his suicide, the characters must lend a sympathetic ear and make a heartfelt counterargument (requiring a successful DC 17 Charisma [Persuasion] check). A promise to help Flawn solve the mystery of his strange human tracks provides advantage on the check. At your discretion, Flawn might join the party now or plan to rejoin them at a later date.

THE WEATHER CLEARS

After the characters follow the ravine toward Mavra's house another 1/4 mile, the weather abruptly changes. The 2-mile-radius thunderstorm centers on the ala in Jędza's gall. When the characters trek beyond this radius, the thunderstorm and its torrential downpour cease as if travelers had passed through a curtain.

The characters still have another 1/4 mile to go, but there is no wind, no lightning, and no rain, though darkness still cloaks the forest and the terrain remains difficult.

TINY COFFINS

Just before Mavra's house comes into view (around a bend), read:

> The ravine has widened and deepened further, becoming a forty-foot-wide, forty-foot-deep chasm. On the side opposite the alseid graveyard, a dozen child-sized coffins are piled haphazardly on the ground.

Creatures: Somewhere far upstream, the folk of an unnamed Margreve village divest their sins into tiny wicker effigies and float them away in tiny coffins. The sacrificial ritual transfers months of the sinner's life into the newly animated effigies, and the wicker men bang and scrape inside their coffins as young girls place them in the stream and weep over their loss. Mavra has taken to plucking the coffins from the water, freeing the sin-eater effigies, and using them as companions and guardians. The **sin-eater effigies** (see page 136) do not attack Mavra, Nitca, or common animals, but they spring from hiding to surround and attack the characters. Read the following when this happens:

> All around you, cat-sized wicker men spring from behind rocks, emerge from thickets, and drop from tree branches. These menacing creatures look like man-made effigies of sticks bundled in twine and thorns. Of the dozen in sight, some have flailing seed-pod dreadlocks, and others leap forward with rocks rattling in their wicker cage bellies.

If Flawn is with the party, he warns the characters not to let the sin-eaters bite them. He grapples an attacking sin-eater, closes his own eyes, and says, "Child of the Margreve, child of man, I take back your name," whereupon the sin-eater dies peacefully. The characters can perform the same maneuver, with the same results. An adherent of the Old Ways, Flawn believes that this is the appropriate way to dispose of a rogue sin-eater.

PART 3: MAVRA'S HOUSE

Just around a bend, **Mavra's house** (see page 135) comes into view:

> A single taut cord spans the forty-foot-wide chasm. Hanging upside down like a bat from the center of the cord is a ramshackle wooden building in the shape of a spider. Its fifteen-foot-long legs hook over the cord to hold it in place, while its wagon-sized abdomen dangles fifteen feet above the rushing water below. Most of the spider's innards, including some cabinets, ropes, and fastened-on furniture, are visible. Other areas are concealed by the tattered molt of a giant spider, which the wooden house has slipped a few of its own legs into, like fingers into a ruined glove.

Mavra is not at home and does not appear in this adventure. She typically leaves her home dangling here for safekeeping. The cord functions as a *rope of climbing*. Mavra has purposely increased the weight of the house so that the rope is just strong enough to support a lightly encumbered Medium creature (which Mavra is) in addition to the house, which weighs nearly 3,000 pounds. Any more weight than that causes the rope to snap and the house to plummet into the 15-foot-deep torrent below. The house does not discourage intruders, and getting inside is as simple as slipping from the outside to the inside of its wood-frame body.

Possible ways to get to the house include:

- Tightrope walking along the slightly sloped thread and climbing down into the house 20 feet from the chasm lip at the center of the thread. Doing this requires a successful DC 18 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check while moving at no more than half speed.
- Using hands and feet to slowly inch along the rope for 20 feet (moving at no more than one quarter speed). Dangling and traversing with only one's hands requires a successful DC 17 Strength (Athletics) check.
- Making a running long jump (Strength [Athletics] DC 17) from the chasm lip to the house and grabbing hold of the house (Dexterity [Acrobatics] DC 14). If either check fails, the character falls into the torrent and is swept downstream. If both succeed, the character latches onto the house, the rope snaps, and both character and house crash into the torrent (see "The House Drops" below).
- Flying to Mavra's house is accomplished without incident.

Ad Hoc XP Award: Give the characters 700 XP each for their efforts if they get into the house.

The House Drops: If the house drops into the water, neither it nor anyone in or on it takes falling damage. The house immediately animates in a panic, trying to escape the water and the chasm. Any character inside the house must succeed on a DC 19 Strength (Athletics) check or begin to drown. Any character swimming within 15 feet of the house has disadvantage on Strength (Athletics) checks to swim as the house's eight legs blindly flail. Clinging to the house's abdomen or legs requires a successful DC 17 Strength (Athletics) check each round. Perching safely atop the house's body requires a successful DC 21 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check.

Rescuing the House: The house's 15-foot legs scrape the ravine bottom, slowing its downstream movement to 50 feet per round. Characters not clinging to the house are swept downstream at 60 feet per round. It will be 1/4 mile (26 rounds) before the depth of the water decreases to 10 feet and the house gains the purchase it needs to clamber out of the ravine of its own accord. Although helping the house escape sooner is difficult at best, let the characters play out their attempts.

Once the house escapes the chasm, it spider climbs up a tall elm and remains in the branches, 50 feet above the ground. Climbing to reach it requires successful DC 12 Strength (Athletics) checks.

INSIDE THE HOUSE

Whether up in a tree or resting on the ground, the house sits perfectly still and rests on solid footing:

> Moss, spittle, and ichor seem to hold the rickety spider house's wooden pieces together. The monstrous spider molt into which the house has slipped itself covers a few of the legs and forms a makeshift roof over the wood-ribbed abdomen. Inside rest the bare bones of what could otherwise be a wagon. Two wide, flat chests form the floor, a cabinet is fastened to the frame with webs, and a second cabinet's door opens at the back of the spider house's head. A sticky net swings like a hammock, and eight silk ropes pass down through a metal ring above it.

Up to four Medium creatures can cram into the spider house.

Chests: If the house fell into the water, the two chests are smashed open and empty. Otherwise, they contain:

Chest 1—Utensils, dried apples, salt, and a jug of sweet sap.

Chest 2—Clothes, fasteners, empty bottles, common tools, and a *treebleed bucket* (see page 138).

Cabinets: Both cabinets are unlocked but secured with *arcane lock* spells. Opening a lock requires a successful DC 20 Dexterity check using thieves' tools.

Cabinet 1—Knives, eight *sand arrows* (see page 104), various material components, five *potions of greater healing*, and a *potion of poison resistance*.

Cabinet 2—This cabinet acts as the head of the spider house and is a wondrous item called a *hungry chest* (see page 137).

Hammock and Ropes: Each rope controls one of the spider house's legs, but someone must sit in the hammock for them to function (see "Riding the House" below).

Treasure: Mavra's hammock is a net of masterful workmanship. Concealed inside the hungry chest are three 2-foot-tall clay jugs, each shaped and painted like a grotesque head, complete with nose spout and ear handles. Each bears a different comical expression, might give off a magical aura, might be sealed with a stopper, and has specific contents:

- Jug 1 is sealed and appears to be holding back a sneeze. *Detect magic* reveals an aura of necromancy radiating from it. If the jug is unsealed, a living ochre jelly bursts out and lands upon every creature within 5 feet. This jug also contains ten amber gems worth 250 gp each.
- Jug 2 is unsealed and wears an expression of surprise. It does not register as magical. The jug is empty.
- Jug 3 is sealed and looks like its cheeks are filled with air. *Detect magic* reveals an aura of necromancy radiating from it. The jug is empty, but it is a *soul jug* (see page 138)—the magic item that Jędza wants the characters to retrieve.

PLEA ON THE WIND

Before the characters leave the house, Jędza uses a *sending* spell to communicate with one of them. The message is: "Hurry, I beg you! You will not make it back in time on foot. Drive the house! Nitca knows how. Take the trees. Hurry!"

The Kariv have continued their desperate surgical procedures in the characters' absence. Thanks to their meddling, Jędza now has only 6 hit points (1-1/2 hours to live), regardless of whether the characters healed her before departing. The characters can ride the spider house back to the inn in 1 hour, but first they must learn how to control it.

If Nitca is present when the message comes through, it temporarily acts friendly toward the characters. Nitca jumps into the hammock, which activates the control ropes. The ugly homunculus bounces excitedly, pointing to the ropes and anxiously miming directions.

RIDING THE HOUSE

Any weight placed in or on the hammock activates the ropes. Pulling a control rope requires so little energy that Mavra can manipulate each one by tying them around her individual fingers. Each rope controls a leg, but the spider house moves only when the ropes are manipulated in a coordinated way.

The rope handlers must be inside the house, which accommodates up to four Medium creatures. Others, like Nitca and Flawn, can ride by clinging to the side or top.

To drive the spider house, the rope handlers take turns making Dexterity checks (each one is DC 6), and no one may help them. The group must achieve 10 successes before 3 failures. Each roll takes a –2 penalty for each handler less than four. If Nitca is present, the handlers receive a +1 bonus to their checks, as Nitca mimes which ropes to pull and when.

You are encouraged to add descriptive flavor to the roll results. Every time a handler succeeds on a check, the house steps forward, turns appropriately, or gains momentum. Every time a handler fails a check, the house bucks wildly. Nitca waves and points, and, depending on the handlers' recent results, its goblin face bears an expression of glee or disgust.

After three failures, the house comes to a dead stop, flips upside down, or rears wildly (at your discretion). In addition, the group loses 10 minutes while regrouping and must begin making checks all over again.

After ten successes, the party drives the house as desired, controlling its movement—and its slam attacks!—completely, as long as the same handlers continue to operate the ropes. If they are up in a tree, they safely descend.

A RIVAL DROPS IN

As the characters approach the inn, read the following:

> A giant lizard, the size of a horse, climbs over the inn, gobbling up fist-sized spiders. It rushes down the side and hisses in anger. A brightly colored frill flares around its head and shakes like a rattle.

The **giant frilled lizard** (see page 133) claims the arachnid feast and attacks any who attempt to enter the inn.

If the characters are driving the spider house, they can pull its strings to use it to fight the lizard. Everyone inside the spider house has total cover from outside until the house is destroyed.

PART 4: BACK AT THE INN

While the characters were away, nothing good has happened back at the inn. Although Adrik, the Kariv leader, would never admit it, he has been helping Jędza out of greed, not kindness. He risked his family members' lives staying at the inn to keep Jędza alive, and his brother and nephews have died trying to save the ugly crone. And after all this, it will be the characters who receive the reward that Jędza previously promised him. Realizing his situation, Adrik went into action during the characters' absence.

In a desperate attempt to win Jędza's reward before the characters returned, Adrik continued his surgical attempts with ever-increasing aggressiveness and at great peril to Jędza. Just before Jędza fell unconscious, she begged Adrik to stop. Only **Adrik** (see page 133) and his mother **Tanya** (see page 137) remain in the inn. All others are hiding in the woods 1 mile away.

JĘDZA'S STATUS: If the characters arrive in time, assume that Adrik's surgical foibles have reduced Jędza to –3 hp and she is unconscious. All stabilization and magical healing attempts fail. The ala is born when Jędza dies in 10 rounds.

If the characters do not get back to the inn in time, assume that they arrive just as Jędza dies—Nitca goes insane, and the ala breaks free (see "The Ala Erupts" below).

WHAT THE KARIV DO: If Jędza is still alive, Adrik asks the characters to hand Tanya the jug. If the characters ask why, Adrik lies (forgetting about the suturefly in the coffer by the bedside), saying that Tanya knows how to use the jug. The lie-detecting suturefly vibrates its wings loudly. In truth, Adrik wants his family, not the characters, to save Jędza.

If Tanya gets the *soul jug*, she casts *identify* on it and examines the jug for 3 rounds. She understands all of the properties of the jug, including that it is impossible to suck the unborn gall creature into the soul jug and that Jędza's hand must be manipulated to unstopper the jug in order for her soul to transfer to the jug. Tanya starts to tell the characters these details, but despicable Adrik interrupts, asking the characters to promise to share Jędza's reward first.

What the Characters Might Do: The characters have several possible courses of action:

- If they try to heal Jędza to consciousness, the attempt fails.
- If they flee or they kill Jędza, she dies and the ala erupts.
- If anyone unstoppers the jug, that character falls to the floor, apparently lifeless, and his or her soul enters the jug. Any attempt to possess Jędza succeeds.
- If a character manipulates Jędza's hand to unstopper the jug, her soul transfers to it.

What Jędza Does: If she is transferred to the jug, Jędza attempts to exact revenge on Kariv by making an immediate attempt to possess a character (requiring a successful DC 15 Charisma saving throw to avoid). Consider this a reaction that occurs before the jug can be restoppered. A possessed character's soul transfers to the jug, and the character can take no actions (just as with the *magic jar* spell).

Jędza's soul replaces the character's Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma scores with her own. She retains her attributes as given in her stat block, including spellcasting and innate spellcasting. The character's body retains its Strength, Dexterity, Constitution and hit points. Jędza cannot use the character's class features. Consider giving the possessed character's player the "new stats" to represent the Spider Crone. Tell the player (privately) that Jędza wants to lose the jug's stopper so that she cannot be trapped in or out of the jug, and Jędza wants to stab Adrik in the face: He swore an oath to help her, but performed reckless surgery and risked her soul for greed. Tanya was complicit in this effort.

After Jędza deals with Adrik and Tanya, she asks the other characters if they want her to relinquish her host's body and return her soul to the jug, or if they want her to fight the gall creature using the character's body. Either way, she attempts to extract a heartfelt promise from the characters to raise her from the dead when it is all over.

THE ALA ERUPTS

As soon as Jędza's body dies, the ala (see *Tome of Beasts*) erupts. If the characters are not present, the ala kills Adrik and Tanya. If it perceives the characters nearby, it attacks them. Otherwise, it hunts them down after finding and killing the rest of the Kariv.

If the characters are present, read the following:

> A tremendous thunderclap rocks the Margreve. Lightning spears the night, strikes the inn, and splits nearby trees with crackling fire. Wind sucks the shutters from the building, and a gale snuffs out all natural lighting inside. In the deeper darkness, sparks dance across the cracked surface of the Spider Crone's gall. It bursts open. From inside rises a black whirlwind of claws and lightning.

The ala claims the soul that currently occupies Jędza's body. Mortal magic cannot recover this soul, even after the ala dies.

If the ala claimed Jędza's soul, it is born as a CR 10 creature (XP 5,900), with the following changes: Its size becomes Large. It gains 30 hit points. Its Strength becomes 22 and its Constitution 19. Its attack rolls are +10 to hit, and its damage on bite and claw attacks is 1 higher. Saving throws against its effects are DC 17.

If the ala claimed anyone else's soul, it is born as a CR 9 creature (XP 5,000), with the following changes: It gains 9 hit points. Its attack rolls are+9 to hit. Saving throws against its effects are DC 17.

If the ala did not claim a soul because Jędza's body was soulless, the ala is born soulless as a CR 8 creature (XP 3,900), takes damage from channel energy as if undead, and cannot be possessed by using the *soul jug*.

Development: The ala begins combat with the upper body of a hag and the lower body of a whirlwind. On round 3, it uses Lightning's Kiss and will use it thereafter as often as it recharges.

Concluding the Adventure

The Spider Crone's body dies when the ala is born. If her soul was in the body at the time, her soul is destroyed also. She cannot be raised or resurrected by mortal magic.

If the characters removed the Spider Crone from her body in time, they save her immortal soul. She remains "alive" in the *soul jug* (or in a possessed character) until the jug's *magic jar* effect ends in 9 hours. At that time, she dies. But in this case, her soul is free and willing to be raised from the dead.

If the characters raise or reincarnate her, she thanks them and rewards them with the promised *ivy crown of prophecy* (see page 138). She brews a potion, which saves Sandor's baby, and Sandor names the babe after the most heroic character.

At the DM's option, Mavra, Jędza's sister, might be good or evil. If good, she forgives the characters for breaking into her house and raises Jędza back to life if the characters do not. If evil, she plots to punish the characters for breaking into her house; she claims Jędza's territory if the characters do not raise Jędza; and she begins abducting children from groups traveling the Great Northern Road. Reclaiming the children and killing Mavra might become a new mission for the characters. Whether good or evil, Mavra does not let the characters leave the Margreve with her house.

If the characters do not kill the ala, it rages through the forest, heralding a series of preternatural lightning and hailstorms. Eventually, it threatens Zobeck farmlands, and the Free City seeks brave individuals to track it to a tree hollow where it broods, flashes, and thunders.

New Creatures and Magic Items

The monsters and magic items introduced in this adventure are detailed below.

ADRIK

Medium human, chaotic neutral

Armor Class 15 (studded leather)

Hit Points 39 (6d10 + 6)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	16 (+3)	12 (+1)	13 (+1)	9 (–1)	8 (–2)

Saving Throws Str +5, Con +4

Skills Athletics +5, Survival +2

Senses passive Perception 9

Languages Common, Elvish

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Action Surge (1/day). Adrik can push himself beyond his normal limits for a moment. On his turn he can take one additional action on top of his regular action.

Improved Critical. Adrik scores a critical hit on a roll of 19 or 20.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Adrik makes two shortsword attacks or two shortbow attacks. Adrik can use his additional action to make an attack with his shortsword.

Shortsword. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage.

Shortbow. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, range 80/320 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage.

GIANT FRILLED LIZARD

Large beast, unaligned

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 105 (14d10 + 28)

Speed 30 ft., climb 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	18 (+4)	15 (+2)	2 (–4)	12 (+1)	10 (+0)

Skills Athletics +8, Perception +4

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 14

Languages —

Challenge 5 (1,800 XP)

Intimidating Charge. When a giant frilled lizard charges, it hisses ferociously, extends its neck frills, and darts forward on its hind legs, increasing its walking speed to 50 feet for that round. In addition, the creature charged must succeed on a DC 13 Charisma saving throw or be frightened for 1d6 rounds. The creature can repeat the save at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on a success.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The giant frilled lizard makes one bite attack and one tail attack.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 11 (2d6 + 4) piercing damage plus 10 (4d4) poison damage.

Tail. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (1d8 + 4) bludgeoning damage.

JĘDZA NANSA

Medium fey, chaotic neutral

Armor Class 15

Hit Points 77 (14d8 +14)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	20 (+5)	13 (+1)	11 (+0)	14 (+2)	18 (+4)

Saving Throws Dex +8, Con +4, Wis +5, Cha +7

Skills Animal Handling +8, Arcana +3, Insight +5, Intimidation +7, Perception +8, Stealth +8

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical weapons

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 18

Languages Common, Sylvan, telepathy 60 ft. (beasts only)

Challenge 6 (2,300 XP)

Dance of the Luckless (1/day). Vila who dance for 1 hour create a fairy ring of small gray mushrooms. The ring lasts for seven days and has a 50-foot diameter per dancing vila. Non-vila who fall asleep (including magical sleep) inside the ring have disadvantage on ability checks for 24 hours from the time they awaken.

Forest Quickness. While in forest surroundings, Jędza Nansa has a +4 bonus on initiative checks.

Forest Meld. Jędza Nansa can meld into any tree in the forest for as long as she wishes, similar to the *meld into stone* spell.

Innate Spellcasting. Jędza Nansa's innate spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 15). She can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

1/day: *sending*
3/day: *sleep*
1/week: *control weather*

Spellcasting. Jędza Nansa is a 4th-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 15, +7 to hit with spell attacks). She has the following spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *guidance, dancing lights, produce flame*
1st level (4 slots): *animal friendship, entangle, fog cloud, longstrider*
2nd level (3 slots): *calm emotions, animal messenger, hold person*

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Jędza makes two quarterstaff attacks or two shortbow attacks.

+1 Quarterstaff. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 2) bludgeoning damage, or 6 (1d8 + 2) bludgeoning damage if wielded with two hands.

+1 Shortbow. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +9 to hit, range 80/320 ft., one target. *Hit:* 9 (1d6 + 6) piercing damage.

Fascinate (1/Day). When the vila sings, all those within 60 feet of her and who can hear her must make a successful DC 14 Charisma saving throw or be stunned for 1d4 rounds. Those who succeed on the saving throw are immune to that vila's singing for 24 hours.

Forest Song (1/Day). The vila magically calls 2d6 wolves or 2 wampus cats (see *Tome of Beasts*). The called creatures arrive in 1d4 rounds, acting as allies of the vila and obeying her spoken commands. The beasts remain for 1 hour, until the vila dies, or until the vila dismisses them as a bonus action.

MAVRA'S HOUSE

Huge construct, unaligned

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 73 (7d12 + 28)

Speed 80 ft., climb 80 ft. (see below)

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
20 (+5)	9 (–1)	18 (+4)	4 (–4)	3 (–4)	3 (–4)

Damage Immunities poison, psychic; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical weapons that aren't adamantine

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, frightened, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned

Senses darkvision 30 ft., passive Perception 6

Languages understands Common but can't speak

Challenge 6 (2,300 XP)

Fleet of Foot. The house is under the effect of a permanent *spider climb* spell, and its legs have been shod with *horseshoes of speed*. The house's speed has been adjusted to include these effects

Symbiotic. The house depends on Jędza's magic to exist. If Jędza dies, the house is rendered inert.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The house makes up to four slam attacks.

Slam. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 15 ft., one target. *Hit:* 14 (2d8 + 5) bludgeoning damage and the target must make a successful DC 15 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

PUPPET VINE

Large plant, unaligned

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 30 (4d8 + 12)

Speed as the host creature or 5 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	10 (+0)	16 (+3)	2 (–4)	13 (+1)	9 (–1)

Damage Immunities electrical

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing

Senses darkvision 30 ft., blindsight 30 ft., passive Perception 11

Languages —

Challenge 3 (700 XP)

False Appearance. While motionless, puppet vines are indistinguishable from normal vines.

ACTIONS

Tendril. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d4 + 4) bludgeoning damage and the target must make a successful DC 15 Dexterity saving throw or be grappled by the puppet vine (escape DC 15). While grappled in this way, the creature is restrained and takes 7 (1d6 + 4) bludgeoning damage from constriction at the start of its turn.

SHOCKER LIZARD

Small beast, unaligned

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 16 (3d8 + 3)

Speed 40 ft., climb 20 ft., swim 20 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8 (–1)	15 (+2)	13 (+1)	2 (–4)	8 (–1)	3 (–4)

Senses darkvision 30 ft., Passive Perception 13

Languages —

Challenge 1/2 (100 XP)

Electricity Sense. The shocker lizard automatically detects any electrical discharge within 100 feet.

Shock. A shocker lizard's body generates a potent charge of electricity. A creature that touches the lizard or makes a successful melee attack against it lizard must make a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw, taking 3 (1d4) lightning damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. If other shocker lizards are within 20 feet, the fields augment each other to a maximum of 24 (8d4) lightning damage.

ACTIONS

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) piercing damage and the target must make a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw, taking 2 (1d4) lightning damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

SIN-EATER EFFIGY

Tiny construct, neutral evil

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 13 (2d10 + 2)

Speed 20 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8 (–1)	15 (+2)	12 (+1)	10 (+0)	7 (–2)	12 (+1)

Skills Perception +2, Stealth +6

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from weapons that aren't adamantine

Condition Immunities charmed, exhausted, frightened, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 12

Languages —

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Sin Soak. The sin-eater divests its sin-based life force into a victim and dies, and the victim gains immunity to subsequent uses of Sin Soak for 1 hour. The curse affects its victim only during combat. On each of its turns, the victim has a 50 percent chance to act normally; otherwise, the victim acts according to the sin that was infused into that effigy (choose or roll randomly, once per affliction):

Despair—Take a –2 penalty on attack rolls, saving throws, ability checks, skill checks, and weapon damage rolls.

Envy—Claw at the face of the visible humanoid with the highest Charisma. If the victim does not have a natural claw attack, this attack is a Strength-based unarmed attack that deals 1 piercing damage on a hit.

Gluttony—Make a successful DC 11 Constitution saving throw (the DC increases by +1 for each previous check) or gain 1 level of exhaustion from starvation.

Greed—Attempt to grapple a target and steal the most valuable item it carries.

Pride—Become stunned while contemplating an epiphany about how great you have become.

Sloth—Take no action and become incapacitated.

Wrath—Bite an enemy with animal fury. If the victim does not have a natural bite attack, this attack is a Strength-based unarmed attack that deals 1 piercing damage on a hit.

ACTIONS

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) piercing damage, and the target must make a successful DC 11 Charisma saving throw or be affected by the effigy's Sin Soak ability.

TANYA

Medium human, chaotic neutral

Armor Class 14 (with *mage armor*)

Hit Points 21 (6d6)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8 (–1)	13 (+1)	10 (+0)	13 (+1)	14 (+2)	18 (+4)

Saving Throws Con +3, Cha +7

Skills Arcana +4, Deception +7

Senses passive Perception 12

Languages Common, Elvish

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Subtle Spell (2/day). Tanya can choose to cast a spell without the required verbal and/or somatic components.

Quickened Spell (2/day). When casting a spell that has a casting time of 1 action, Tanya can change the casting time to 1 bonus action for this casting.

Spellcasting. Tanya is a 6th-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 15, +7 to hit with spell attacks). She has the following spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *dancing lights, douse light* (see *Heroes Handbook*), *fire bolt, mending, prestidigitation*

1st level (4 slots): *comprehend languages, identify, mage armor*

2nd level (3 slots): *alter self, detect thoughts*

3rd level (3 slots): *clairvoyance, fear*

ACTIONS

Quarterstaff. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +2 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 2 (1d6 – 1) bludgeoning damage, or 3 (1d8 – 1) bludgeoning damage if wielded with two hands.

BLUE WILLOW CLOAK

Wondrous item, uncommon

This light cloak of fey silk is waterproof. When worn and activated in the rain, it grants invisibility to the wearer. The effect lasts for as long as it rains or 1 hour, whichever is shorter. Once used, this property cannot be used again until the next dawn.

HUNGRY CHEST

Wondrous item, uncommon

This chest, an 8-foot cube, appears to be a wooden spider head from the outside. It functions as a *bag of holding* with a twist. When opened, it appears to be a normal empty chest, regardless of the actual contents.

When an inanimate object passes over the threshold into the space, it is sucked in with great force. If you let go, the object disappears inside. You can retain your hold on the object with a successful DC 17 Strength check. On a failed check, you must succeed on a DC 17 Dexterity saving throw to avoid being sucked in with the object and suffocating after 10 minutes.

When an empty hand reaches inside, the silhouettes of concealed contents—items and gasping, sucked-in creatures—become vaguely visible. The more hands reaching inside, the more real all the contents become.

A full eight hands are required to withdraw an item. A sucked-in creature counts its own hands as among the eight necessary to escape.

This item is a fundamental component of the spider house. If the house is destroyed, so is the hungry chest. Mavra assumes the form of a spider when she wants to extract items.

IVY CROWN OF PROPHECY

Wondrous item, rare (requires attunement)

On command, this ivy filigreed crown grants you the benefit of a *divination* spell. Once it is used, this property cannot be used again until the next dawn.

SOUL JUG

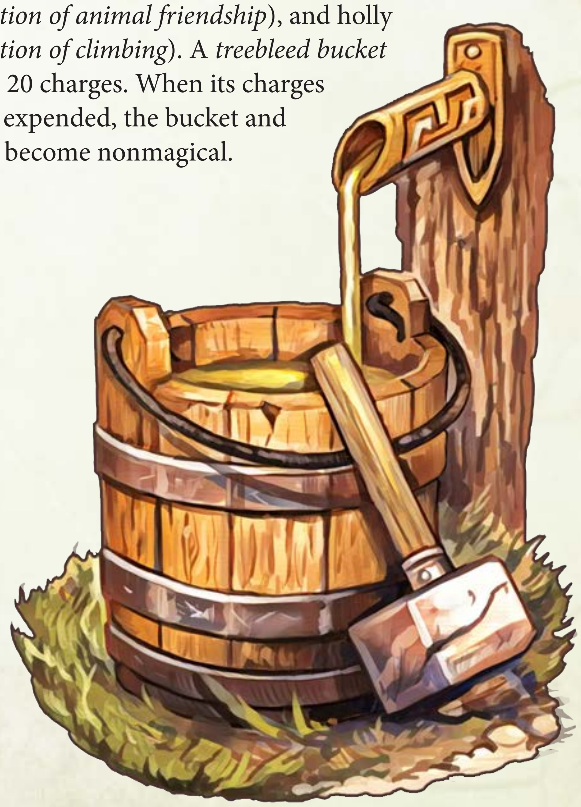
Wondrous item, very rare

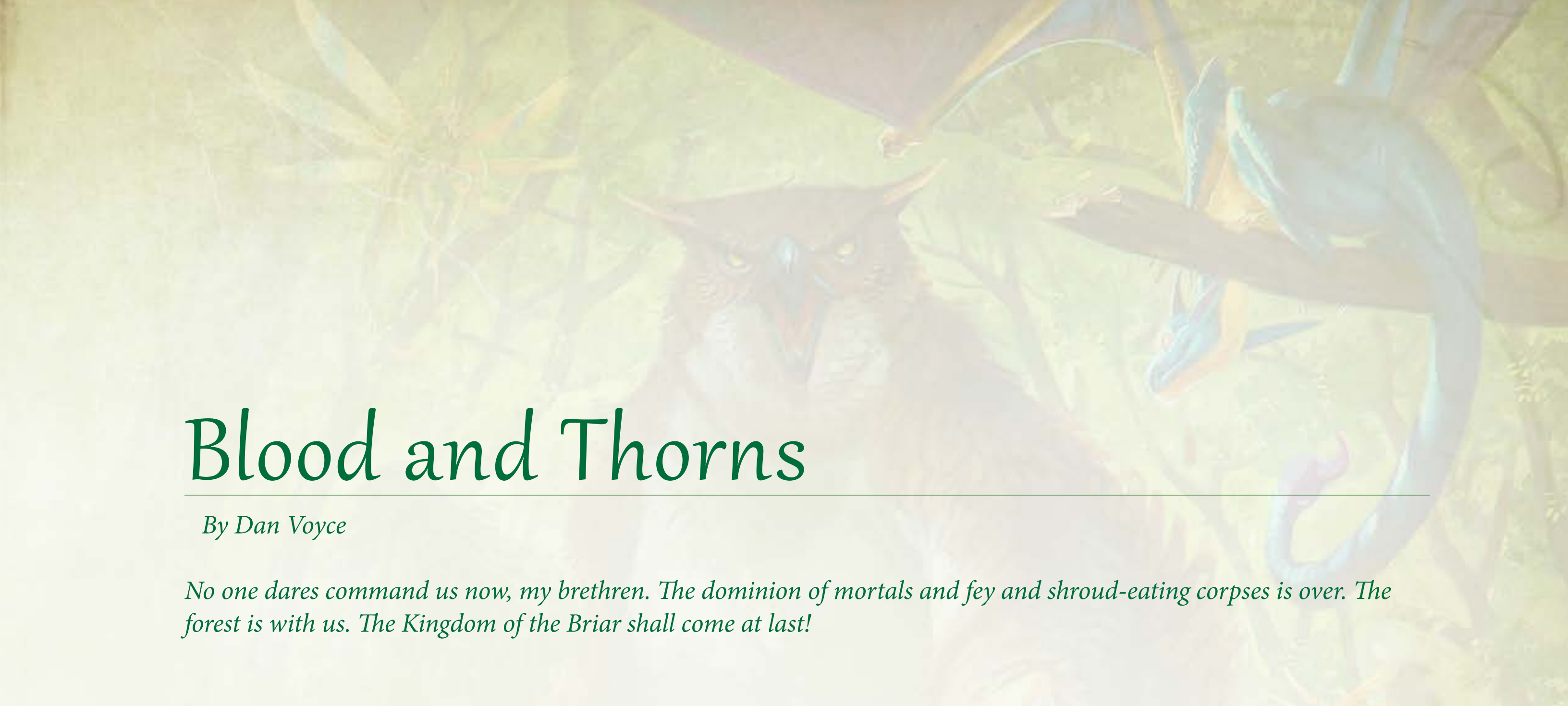
If you unstopper the jug, your soul enters it; this effect functions as the *magic jar* spell with a 9-hour duration and the jug acting as the gem. Unlike the *magic jar* spell, the jug must remain unstoppered for you to move your soul to a nearby body, back to the jug, or back to your own body. Possessing a target is an action, and your target can foil the attempt by succeeding on a DC 16 Charisma saving throw. Only one soul can be in the jug at one time. If a soul is in the jug when the duration ends, the jug shatters.

TREEBLEED BUCKET

Wondrous item, uncommon

This combination sap bucket and tap is used to extract sap from certain trees, after which the sap magically changes into a potion. The potion remains viable for 24 hours, and its type depends on the tree as follows: oak (*potion of resistance*), rowan (*potion of healing*), willow (*potion of animal friendship*), and holly (*potion of climbing*). A *treebleed bucket* has 20 charges. When its charges are expended, the bucket and tap become nonmagical.





Blood and Thorns

By Dan Voyce

No one dares command us now, my brethren. The dominion of mortals and fey and shroud-eating corpses is over. The forest is with us. The Kingdom of the Briar shall come at last!

"Blood and Thorns" is a tale of bloody revolution and would-be kings for characters of 7th level. Its climax is set in the deep woods near the Grisal Marches, but initial scenes can take place anywhere. It uses fast progression and treasure.

Adventure Background

For years, the children of the briar have traded favors, secrets, and droplets of blood. A nuisance more than a menace, they are quickly ignored when their spying stops being useful. Things are changing, however. An adventurous child of the briar named Catchweed, who long served the wiles of the shadow fey, has decided that enough is enough. It's time for his people to rise up and become a power in the Old Margreve—the match of any hag, nymph, or scáthsidhe.

Assembling an alliance of sap demons, shambling mounds, shadows, and children of the briar, he ambushed a hunting party of vampires from the Grisal Marches, immobilizing them with *living stakes* made of mandrake root. Their necromantic blood provided a potent catalyst for his growing power.

Under Catchweed's command, briars and brambles are spreading throughout the forest and infesting the flesh of fey and beast alike. Wise enough not to threaten the Margreve itself, he instead challenges other forest dwellers for dominion. His crusade has a simple philosophy: plants have the strongest ties to the Old Margreve, so all other creatures should bow before them.

If Catchweed isn't stopped, a new power will arise in the forest, fueled by the blood of vampires and stolen fey spells: a spiteful Kingdom of the Briar to clash with the Courts of the Shadow Fey, the shroud-eaters of Walker's Wood, and Zobeck's dominion over the Great Northern Road.

Adventure Summary

The adventure begins at a wedding, when briar-tangled boars on a pain-maddened rampage interrupt the proceedings. In the aftermath, characters hear many similar tales. Investigation uncovers rumors of a "King of Thorns," but an ancient Margreve ritual hides him. Only the Spider Crone Jędza Padak has the means to find the king, but to get her help, characters have to climb high into a maze of webs.

By bargaining or through force, the party gains Padak's aid in the form of a strand of phase spider silk that they can follow to the villain's lair. To stop the King of Thorns, they'll need to sneak past his forces and into his Palace of Briars, where the source of Catchweed's power is revealed.

Adventure Hooks

Although the characters have danger thrust upon them in the opening scene, they're at their leisure to investigate (or not) afterward. Things only get worse as time goes on, and sooner or later, they'll have to either stop the King of Thorns or bow to his power.

If they need a nudge to get involved, use existing friends and allies to spur them on. Innkeepers and village elders promise to scrounge up every penny they can as a reward.

Getting help from the authorities is easier said than done. City-based merchants are concerned only for the sanctity of their trade route, and though Zobeck's griffon riders are responsible for the area's security, they have learned the hard way not to get involved in matters beyond the road. Convincing either party that the threat of the King of Thorns is credible, with a successful DC 25 Charisma (Persuasion) check, merely spurs them to hire expendable irregulars (like the characters) to sort things out.

Unsurprisingly, no one suggests approaching the vampire lords of Morgau and Doresh for aid.

Introduction

The characters are guests at a wedding feast in the open air at the forest's edge, amid trees hung with lanterns and bright cloth pennants. The rituals are over: The happy couple has tasted sacred salt, then stood back to back and gazed at each other in bronze mirrors, and each guest has tied a ribbon around their clasped hands as they stood, palms against an ancient tree, and swore the marriage oath. Now they're bound together as closely as Porevit and Yarila.

When the ceremonies are over, the party begins. Friends and relatives sit down to a feast at long tables. Ale, wine, and wedding mead flow copiously. A handful of minstrels beat drums, pluck their balalaikas, and sing.

Getting the Party Involved: As 7th-level characters, characters are big fish in the very small pond of local villages. Elders seek their advice, children come to gawp, and lusty local lads and lasses try to catch their eye. Perhaps the characters are invited purely because of their celebrity. Maybe they're related to the bridal party, or they saved one of them during a previous adventure. Even complete strangers are welcome, since tradition dictates that anyone arriving during a feast must be offered hospitality.

As a holy hero favored by the gods, a player character cleric or paladin might be asked to officiate the ceremony. Arcane spellcasters will be politely badgered to provide magical entertainment, and any bard worthy of the name should be chomping at the bit to show off. Rogues can find ample opportunity to charm potential patrons (or victims), while martial types might take part in a pre-wedding hunt with the groom's family, to catch the boar that's destined to serve as the banquet's centerpiece.

Part 1: The Handfasting

This event is a social occasion, not a dungeon delve, so the party shouldn't be equipped for combat. None of the guests are wearing armor, and the only weapons on scene are a few daggers and staffs. Etiquette allows the characters, as famous adventurers, to carry swords and other flashy weapons, but if the characters allow themselves to be disarmed (including swapping their combat spells for flashy, entertaining magic) then they receive XP awards as if each enemy creature had a challenge rating 1 higher than normal.

FEAST INTERRUPTED

Like everyone else, the characters are invited to cut meat from the roasted boar. As one of them comes back for a second or third helping:

> A horrible choking and moaning disturbs the festivities, accompanied by the sudden screams of guests. The boar on the spit—skinless, cooked, and carved down to its ribs—is twisting and groaning as if alive.

The spasms of the carcass are unnerving but harmless, a warning from the Margreve of what's to come.

Creatures: As the meat starts to groan, a living **giant boar** with briars erupting from its flesh bursts into the glade. Two more charge into the clearing in round 2, and three more on round 3.

Development: The boars overturn tables, send mead barrels rolling, and trample gifts, guests, and food alike. They charge the nearest group in each round and are easily distracted. The boars fight to the death.

If all the boars are defeated, the wedding party profusely thanks the characters (assuming they helped) before beating a hasty retreat with whatever remains of the food and drink. In the aftermath, the characters hear many similar tales of maddened forest beasts and the unnatural abundance of brambles and briars. The peasants naturally look to them for answers.

Below are some of the stories to be heard. Several of the creatures mentioned below have been charmed by Catchweed's *cap of thorns* (see page 154).

- An elderly druid was recently found dead, tangled in a bramble patch that should have been neutralized by his Land's Stride feature.
- A trio of **dryads** haunts a nearby campsite. Driven mad by itchy thorns growing out of their flesh, they try to lure passing travelers into their spiny embrace.

- Grandmother Bear has lived peacefully near the village for decades, protecting locals from danger and accepting offerings to the forest. Now she batters down fences, shatters cabin walls, and slaughters livestock without reason (treat as an awakened **polar bear**).
- A unicorn lies dying in a thorn bush—eyes bulging, tongue lolling, flanks slashed to ribbons by thorny vines wrapped around it. If the party tries to free it or claim its horn, the vines are revealed to be a thorny **shambling mound**.
- Children of the briar (see *Tome of Beasts*) have been disappearing. Many local nests are empty, and those that remain are much more belligerent.

Part 2: A Thorny Problem

It's obvious that something wicked is brewing in the forest's depths, but to discover exactly what that is, characters will need good knowledge of the forest's secrets or answers from someone similarly skilled. If they wander the Margreve for clues, use the stories detailed above to create encounters for them.

Gaining Knowledge: The characters can make Charisma (Persuasion) or Wisdom (Survival) checks to learn more about the situation:

DC 12—Maybe the children of the briar know something about what's going on.
DC 17—Someone or something calling itself the King of Thorns is rumored to dwell in the deep woods.
DC 18—The king's servants are plants and creatures infested with thorny briars. They hate all humanoids.
DC 21—The king is said to live in a briar palace somewhere near Walker's Wood. Powerful magic hides its location.

The party might be able to seek advice from wise NPCs they've met in earlier adventurers. Those individuals can confirm that something important is afoot that the Margreve's spirit seems to be either ignoring or supporting. They can also point characters in the direction of the children of the briar, both as a good source of information and another type of briar-related trouble.

QUESTIONING THE KING'S SERVANTS

Learning about the King of Thorns is difficult—almost every child of the briar in the Old Margreve supports him, and all charmed minions are convinced his cause is just:

> "The King of Thorns promises that we shall rule this forest. Dryad, nymph, and vila will serve us; man and alseid, wolf and hag, will bow to us. The Kingdom of the Briar is coming."

Catchweed's servants begin any conversation hostile, and typical DCs to learn certain information are as follows:

DC 20—Basic facts as outlined above
DC 25—Catchweed's plans for a plant kingdom
DC 30—The Spider Crone's involvement

Intimidation or magic can help loosen their tongues, and if characters break the charm on those controlled by the *cap of thorns*, most creatures will become friendly.

FINDING THE PALACE OF BRIARS

Regardless of the method used, no one is able to reveal the King of Thorns' location or lead characters to his lair. The knowledge melts from their minds when they try to speak it, and if characters try to find it themselves, paths shift and magic twists to keep both Catchweed and his palace hidden, sending all non-plant creatures in endless circles.

Any divination attempts that target Catchweed or the Briar Palace automatically fail. Indirect or cunningly worded divinations might reveal that the forest is actively hiding him, and that a Spider Crone is somehow involved. A sample divination is provided below:

> Thorn King nestles in a green enclasp,
> Seekers find nothing but a thorny rasp.
> His lair cannot be known or shown,
> Thanks to the wisdom of a Spider Crone.

NEST DIPLOMACY

If characters investigate the children of the briar, they'll find their normal haunts abandoned, inhabitants run off to join the King of Thorns' army. They can eventually locate an active nest, and locals will advise them to capture a suturefly or two in advance of the meeting, to ensure the honesty of any information gained.

The briar children's nest is a mass of spiky brambles filling a dell about 100 feet in diameter. Entrances sized for Tiny creatures dot the circumference, and similar-sized paths run through its center. The nest provides concealment and half cover. The surrounding terrain is heavy undergrowth, filled with thorny plants.

Six **children of the briar** (see *Tome of Beasts*) live here. Bloodroot grows throughout the nest, and the children dab their tongues with it before spitting, which adds 1d4 poison damage to their Spitdart Tongue action option.

Development: The children are in no mood to cooperate unless captured. Characters who do not locate all the nest's entrances (requiring a successful DC 17 Wisdom [Survival] check) find their foes slipping away once they no longer have the upper hand.

Treasure: Breaking open the nest reveals the children's treasure: trinkets (300 gp in total), a coppery-tasting *potion of greater healing* made from vampire blood, and two carved bark *spell scrolls*, one of *plant growth* and one of *sleet storm*.

SISTER OF SPIDERS

Characters who go searching for Jędza Padak eventually reach a section of the deep woods that's shrouded by webbing. Bundles of cocooned prey dangle overhead, getting larger as the characters move deeper: animals at first, then the shriveled corpses of forest goblins, alseid, and unwary woodsmen.

Creatures: Three **ettercaps** roam the forest floor, harvesting silk and poison from local spider swarms: they're bent double carrying huge bundles of raw silk, and half-filled glass vials dangle around their necks. If questioned about the spider crone's whereabouts, they point upward and gesture to indicate that characters should climb the webbing.

AND THE BLADE WENT SNICKER-SNACK!

> The webs around you are crowded with spiders both large and miniscule. Strands thick enough to walk on spiral high into the canopy, passing between pulsating grey egg sacks, entangled victims, and globular buildings made from spittle and silk. Eightfold eyes watch you from a veritable city of spiders.
>
> High above, you can make out a giant arachnid silhouette.

Creatures: There are spiders everywhere, but only a few are immediate dangers. Three **giant spiders** help **Snickersnack** (see page 153) block the way to where Jędza Padak is located. They throw webs at characters who try to bypass the fight.

Terrain: Traversing the webs requires successful DC 8 Dexterity (Acrobatics) or Strength (Athletics) checks; these checks are also required if creatures are hit in combat while on a web strand. Web strands (AC 11; 14 hit points) crisscross the area horizontally and vertically, the nearest typically 1d3 + 5 feet away. Falling results in a plunge of 1d6 × 10 feet into webbing, which deals 2 (1d3) damage per 10 feet fallen. Flying characters risk becoming entangled each round unless they succeed on a DC 15 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check.

Development: Other giant spiders merely watch, clicking their mandibles as if commenting excitedly on the battle. If a character drops something valuable, a swarm quickly binds it in webs and drags it away. This also applies to characters that remain helpless or unconscious for more than 2 rounds.

Snickersnack looks like a suit of plate armor made from giant spider carapaces, wearing a bright green cape and tricorn hat. Unlike most constructs, it is fully intelligent and firmly good-aligned. Roleplay Snickersnack as if it was a paladin and an honorable swashbuckler. Although it can't speak beyond rattles and clicks, Snickersnack's gestures are expressive enough: cap doffing, cloak swishing, and mocking bows should leave the characters in no doubt that they are facing a flamboyant duelist.

THE CRONE AND THE STRAND

Once Snickersnack is subdued or destroyed, nothing else impedes the party's journey:

> An old woman sings wordlessly as she weaves on a living loom—a man-sized spider with silk twisted into a cat's cradle around its legs. The crone has bark-brown skin and wispy white hair, her toothless mouth showing just a hint of mandible as she smiles. Her round head and pronounced hump combine with thin gangly limbs and overlong fingers to give the disturbing impression of an arachnid in not quite perfect human guise.

The crone immediately asks for a promise not to hurt her. If they break this oath, characters become vulnerable to her smite power.

Creatures: **Jędza Padak** (see page 152) presents an innocent demeanor, offering nettle tea and making small talk as if visiting her was the most normal thing in the world. Slyness and menace always seem to lurk just beneath the surface, however. She's happy to answer characters' questions, but never let them forget this is an amoral creature of great power:

> "I didn't hide the King of Thorns, but I taught him how to ask the Margreve for sanctuary, and the forest has given it to him. Poor little thing. Such a nice boy when he was young, but time and scorn have made him as cold and angry as a winter storm. He only wants to do right by his people, though. Get them respect, safety, and a kingdom of their own. Is that really so wrong?"

Development: The Margreve hides Catchweed from Jędza Padak, just like everyone else. She does have a means of finding him, however.

The question she puts to characters is why she should help. Why undo the King of Thorns' plans? She doesn't care who claims rulership of the Old Margreve, and the forest certainly doesn't. Humans, dwarves, and kobolds all engage in war and conquest, so why shouldn't the children of the briar? Perhaps people are being hurt, but that's true everywhere—especially in vampire-haunted Doresh. Why doesn't the party go help them instead?

If the characters have a good response to these questions, Jędza Padak will aid them. This isn't a matter of Charisma checks, just good roleplaying; she's interested in their opinions, not their ability to present them. If they spared Snickersnack, then he'll support the party with rattles and clicks if they bring up the suffering that Catchweed's campaign is causing.

If she remains unconvinced, Padak is prepared to sell them her *ghost thread* (see page 154). She will accept something in barter of at least equal value, rising to twice or three times that much if the characters destroyed Snickersnack. Promises of future service can make up part of this bargain, but she'll also demand something tangible.

If they use force, she surrenders when reduced to 15 hit points or fewer, relinquishing the thread and marking the party for later vengeance. Unless characters gain her oath to let them depart in safely, a horde of spiders pursue them as soon as they leave her company.

Treasure: Currently, one end of the *ghost thread* is wrapped around a bent nail in the hut's wall while the other is tied to the Palace of Briars. If a character keeps a careful grip on the strand at all times, the party can follow it to Catchweed's lair.

Part 3: Kingdom of the Briar

By carefully following the *ghost thread*, the characters can defeat the Margreve's shifting trails and attempts at misdirection. It leads them north, to a location near Walker's Wood. The King of Thorns' domain is eerily silent—the air stale and the undergrowth thick with briars. Animals seem to be completely absent.

UTBURD'S HENGE

A break in the canopy allows sunlight to bathe this clearing. Moss girds a rough circle of rectangular stones. Blue flowers abound: chicory, cornflower, and harebell. S cattered bones of children lay concealed in long grass.

Characters might have heard of this place, called Utburd's Henge. A successful DC 17 Intelligence (History) check establishes that fact, and a check total of 21 or higher reveals that "utburd" is an ancient word meaning "that which is taken outside"— probably referring to the practice of abandoning unwanted children. Despite this, the place seems wholesome and mercifully free of choking undergrowth.

Creatures: **Mylings** (see *Tome of Beasts*) haunt this glade. There is one creature per character. They approach peacefully at first, with wide eyes and mournful gray countenances, whispering their plea to be taken home.

Development: The mylings' chosen burial grounds are the barrows surrounding Catchweed's palace. If the party agrees to carry them home, they'll provide some useful information on the King of Thorns and his army.

GREEN GUARDIANS

The King of Thorns' first line of defense is a scattering of enchanted mandrake roots: Tiny humanoid-like plants that shriek if anyone passes near.

Creatures: The area is patrolled by a **vine troll skeleton** (see *Tome of Beasts*). If an enchanted mandrake root shrieks, the vine troll skeleton bursts out of the earth in a frenzy of flailing tentacles and hunts the characters down within 2d6 rounds,. The creature retreats deep below ground if reduced to 20 hit points or fewer.

Terrain: This area has large trees and heavy undergrowth (treat as difficult terrain).

Trap: The mandrake roots are living plants with AC 5 and 4 hit points apiece. A root screams (as an *alarm* spell) when a non-plant creature comes within 20 feet. It can be disarmed by impaling it with an iron pin. If a mandrake root is destroyed or uprooted, it becomes the point of origin of a DC12 *thunderclap* spell (see *Heroes Handbook*).

Development: Once characters have encountered their first mandrake root, they can pick their way safely through the others with successful DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) checks. Failing a check means they stumble onto another root, attracting the vine troll skeleton or one of the sample encounters below, if the skeleton has already been defeated.

THE THORN KING'S DEFENDERS

Catchweed uses a cluster of ancient barrows as his base of operations. Every tomb has been broken open: ancient chieftains are animated as lesser tendril puppets, unwanted bronze regalia is discarded beside empty biers. Carvings on the walls depict a people who never knew how to smelt iron and revered the forest's power.

Shadows slip between clusters of briar creatures and decrepit-looking zombies. Sap demons toy with possessed travelers, and briar men foray out, returning periodically with captives who are taken into the Palace of Briars and never seen again.

To add to the difficulty of reaching the palace, use one or more of these sample encounters as you see fit:

- 1 **briar bully** (see page 149), drilling a unit of five **lesser tendril puppets** (see page 153)
- 3 **briar bullies**, strutting proudly
- 1 **briar man** (see page 149), returning to camp with a captured goblin
- 4 roving **shadows**
- 2 **sap demons** (see *Tome of Beasts*), laughing and joking as they toy with their hosts

To get into the palace, characters will need to sneak or talk their way past this ragtag army. They have several options:

Bluff—A character who claims to be a human possessed by a sap demon can convince an adversary by succeeding on a Charisma (Deception) check (made with advantage if the target is disguised appropriately) contested by the Wisdom (Insight) check of an adversary. Charisma (Deception) can also be used for other purposes to allay suspicions if the characters are spotted.

Stealth—Patches of heavy undergrowth provide advantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks. Unless an alarm has been raised, assume all enemies use their passive score for their Perception checks.

Violence: The characters might resort to a surgical strike against their adversaries if deception and stealth fail them. If the combat finishes within 2 rounds, allow characters to make a new Dexterity (Stealth) check with a −5 penalty to successfully hide again before anyone glances in their direction.

Raising the Alarm: The camp goes on alert if any intrusion is detected. Shadows patrol the outskirts in pairs, while hunting parties spread out to look for the characters (select opponents from the sample encounters above, or devise your own).

Characters who flee the scene might trigger a shrieking mandrake root, giving away their position and attracting the vine troll skeleton.

THE PALACE OF BRIARS

> At the heart of the tumult sits a dome of stygian briars. The wood looks dead and brittle but is still an effective barrier. Finger-length thorns protrude in all directions, like a regiment of tiny spears.

Someone who succeeds on a DC 20 Intelligence (Arcana) check realizes the black briars are native to the Shadow Realm. Treat the dome as a nonmagical wall of thorns that exists in both the Material and Ethereal Planes. Passageways are unlit unless noted otherwise. The palace is filled with a rhythmic clickety-clack sound as hundreds of children of the briar chant in unison.

Terrain: The floor is carpeted with thorns, but characters can move safely if they use their walking speed. Effects that might cause a target to be knocked prone gain a +1 bonus due to the uncertain footing, and anyone who uses the Dash action risks falling (on a failed DC 8 Dexterity [Acrobatics] check) and taking 1d4 damage. Children of the briar are not affected by these considerations.

BP1. DOOR OF THORNS

A mass of taut vines held together by a tangle of interlocked spines forms a thorny mesh door. Entry can be gained by destroying it (AC 11, 30 hit points), breaking it open (requiring a successful DC 19 Strength check), or unweaving the vines (requiring a successful DC 21 Dexterity [Sleight of Hand] check). The door is enchanted to respond to commands from the King of Thorns or his briar men.

Creatures: Two **lesser tendril puppets** (see page 153) guard the doorway, wearing the ragged raiment of ancient lords. If the alarm has been raised, they are replaced by two **briar men** (see page 149).

Terrain: The dome overhangs the doorway, allowing characters to hide there.

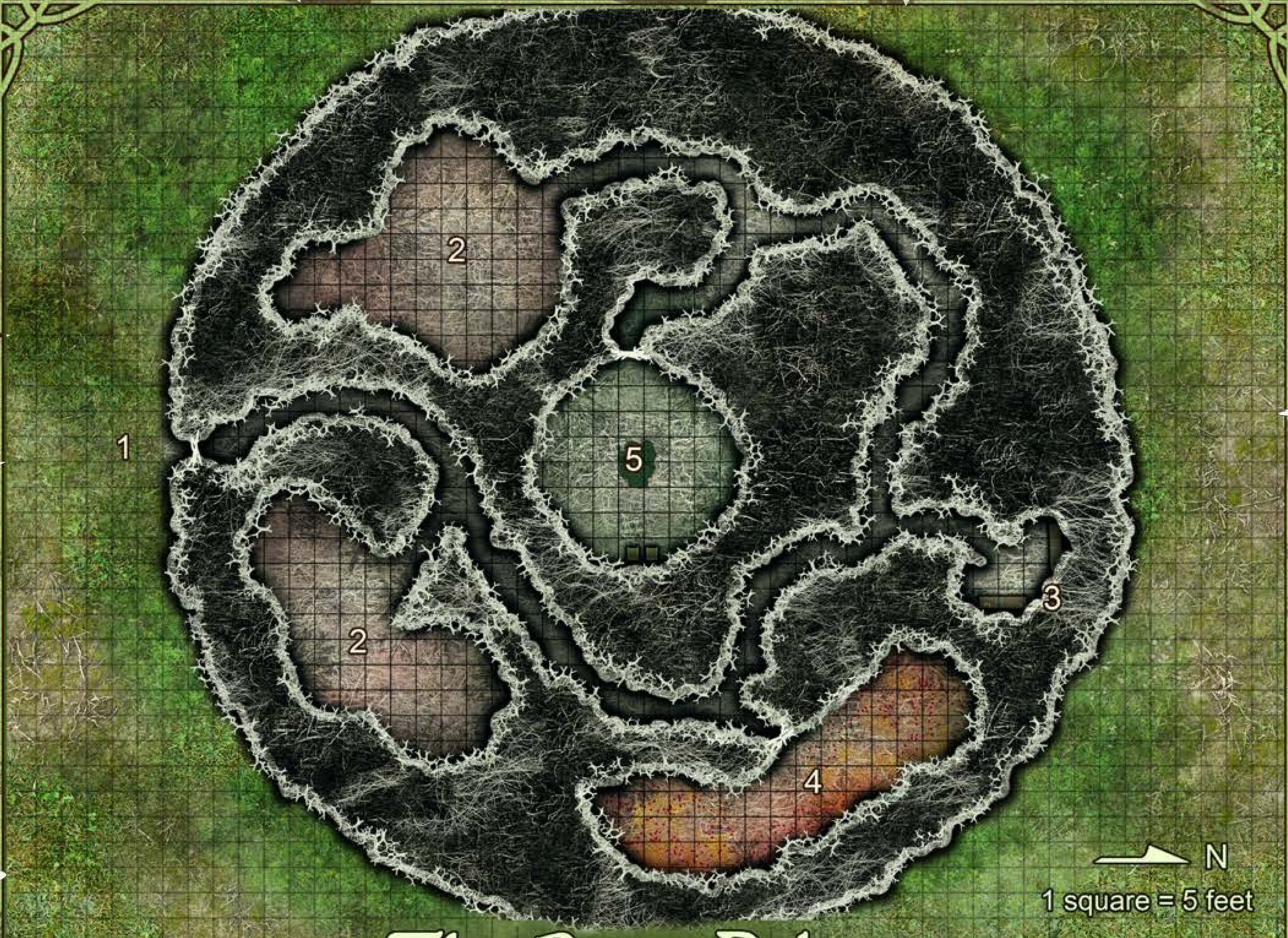
Trap: Breaking the door open or dealing more than 10 damage to it causes thorns to emerge and attack the nearest creature. The thorns are +8 to hit, deal 3d6 piercing damage on a hit, and a target hit is also grappled (escape DC 15). A successful DC 15 Dexterity saving throw reduces the damage by half and negates the grappled condition.

BP2. EXSANGUINARIUM

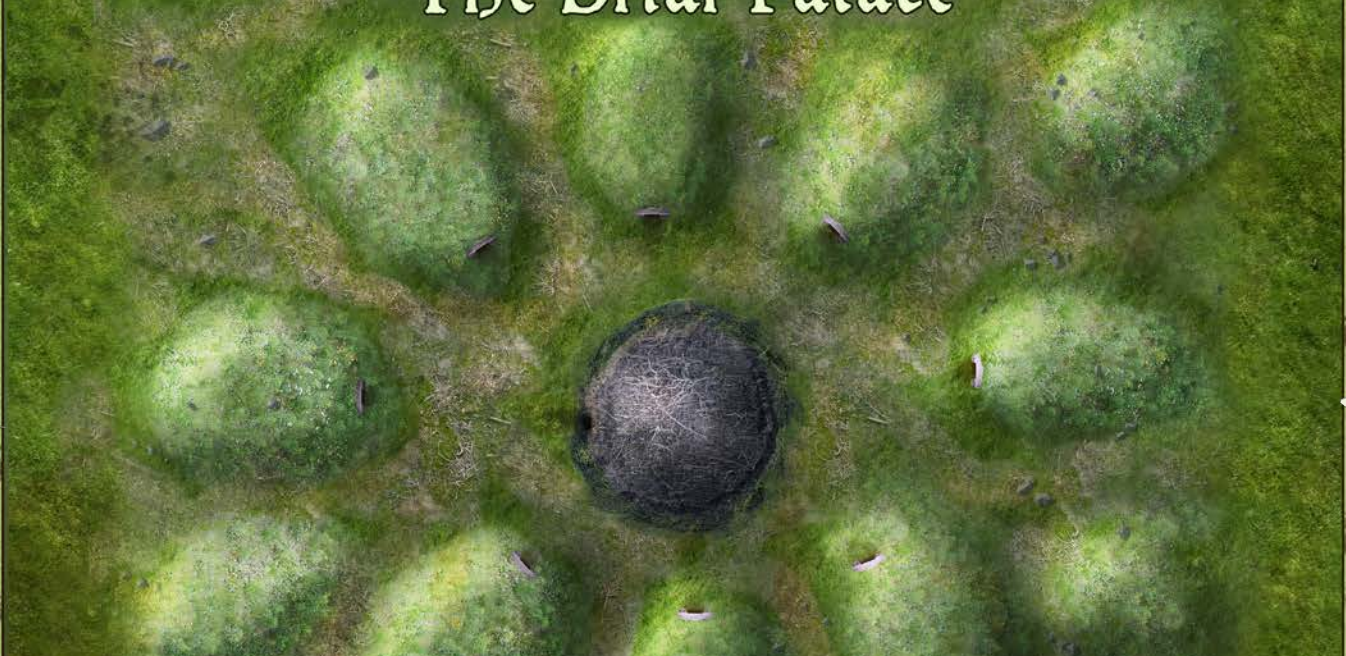
> Blood drips slowly from bodies tangled in the thorny ceiling. Hundreds of children of the briar crouch here, swaying and clicking as one. Occasionally, one of them stretches up to catch a falling droplet in its mouth. A larger briar man strides around the chamber, applying a scourge to the back of anyone who strays out of time with the chorus.

Each of these rooms is used to harvest blood to create briar men and is important in a ritual that keeps the Palace of Briars hidden from would-be interlopers.

Creatures: There is a **briar army** (see page 148) in this chamber, but it does not notice the characters unless they draw attention to themselves. If they engage the **briar man** (see page 149) in combat, there is a 50 percent chance each round that a **briar bully** notices and joins



The Briar Palace



the fight. If area effect spells hit the chanting briar army, it might wake from its trance—adding its strength to the battle.

Features: The emaciated humanoids tangled in the ceiling are four **vampire spawn**, presently immobilized by hawthorn roots piercing their chests. They remain aware of their situation—eyes wide in terror, fanged mouths open in silent screams.

The rhythmic clicking of the children is a necessary part of a ritual that feeds the Margreve with magical power, while its performers request sanctuary and concealment from prying eyes. If the characters destroy the chanters in both of these chambers, the magic that hides Catchweed and the Briar Palace comes to an end.

Development: If they are freed, the vampire spawn don't remember much. They are newly created and most can't remember how they got this way (they were abducted by the King of Thorns' minions and spawned by Valanora). They don't understand their fate, and if it's made clear to them, some will beg for death. Ravenous hunger (each has 1 hit point if its stake is removed) soon drives them to attack the characters.

Development: Starving vampire spawn must make a successful DC 12 Charisma saving throw each round or attack the nearest living target. They attack frenziedly, desperate for blood. Once they are engaged in combat, they fight to the death.

BP3. SANGUINE ALCHEMY

> This chamber is filled with red-stained alchemical equipment. Desiccated bats hang from the ceiling. The foul scent of decaying blood hangs heavy in the air.

Here, the King of Thorns experiments in harnessing the power of vampire blood. Amid the test tubes are a dissected child of the briar and small pots that hold cuttings of basidirond, a vine lord, and assassin vine—all regularly fed with blood.

Creatures: Karayan is a **deathwisp** (see *Tome of Beasts*) with a talent for poisons and alchemy. Longtime companion to the King of Thorns, he works to perfect new recipes and in return is allowed to feed on the breath of captured creatures before they're transformed into vampires. The characters likely catch him working on his latest batch of potions.

Treasure: There are *potions of climbing*, *gaseous form*, and *heroism* here, but since they are brewed from vampire blood, they might have unforeseen side effects at your discretion.

Development: Karayan parleys in a murmuring voice that undulates in and out of audibility. He can tell characters much of what occurs in the Briar Palace but does not directly betray his oldest (and only) friend, the King of Thorns. His aim in any negotiation is to escape unharmed.

TP4. HALL OF TRIBUTE

> Surely every gift, bribe, and token ever offered to a child of the briar is in this room. Coins, jewelry, knickknacks, and curiosities . . . and hundreds of tiny acorn cups, each holding a blood-red pellet.

Creature: Woven into the ceiling is a sleeping **briar man** (see page 149). If the alarm is raised, he awakes and drops down on unauthorized visitors. Characters can avoid waking him with a successful DC 11 Dexterity (Stealth) check.

Traps: This room warded by a flailing thorns trap (see area BP1). An enchanted mandrake root is planted just inside the room.

Treasure: The room contains 1,350 gp in baubles and curios. Among them are a *living stake* (see page 154) and several mementos from Catchweed's adventures in the shadow fey courts: a *philter of love*, a *swan boat feather token*, and a *thirsting thorn* (see *Items Wondrous and Strange*).

Development: Each acorn cup contains a pellet of solidified blood, labeled with the name of its donor. If the pellet is consumed, any saving throw the target makes against an effect of the imbiber's for the next 24 hours takes a −2 penalty.

If any characters have previously given a cupful of blood to a child of the briar (see "Challenge of the Fang"), their tribute is here among the acorn cups. The King of Thorns will consume a character's pellet as soon as he identifies the character.

TP5. THORN KING'S SANCTUM

> The walls of this room are adorned with umbral tapestries and statuettes of delicate silver filigree. Opposite the entrance is a pair of wooden thrones. The left one is occupied by a severe young woman in scarlet robes. Briars seem to be growing all around her, pinning her to the chair.
>
> In the center of this room is a miniature forest, seeming to be a tiny model of the whole Margreve.

Creatures: Sitting on the throne is **Dame Valanora** (see page 151), captured during a hunting expedition in the forest and now Catchweed's unwilling ally. She is immobilized by a *living stake* pushed through her heart. If freed, she forms a temporary alliance with the party.

Features: The miniature forest is a living replica of the Old Margreve, produced in exacting detail. The characters can easily identify various locations they have visited. Only the Margreve's hearts lack detail. Anyone making a prolonged examination of the miniature forest will feel the telltale tingle of magic and see additional details appearing: it allows a user to cast *scrying* (1/day, DC 14) somewhere in the forest.

Trap: This room is warded by a flailing thorns trap (see area BP1).

Also in this room is **Catchweed, King of Thorns** (see page 150), wearing his *cap of thorns* (see page 154) and wielding the half-sword of the Margreve Knights (see page 154). Catchweed is a cunning opponent, never engaging in a fair fight if possible, often surprising his foes. He begins battle by invoking his *cap of thorns*, and once he has control of the battlefield he moves in to claw, grapple, and ultimately bite any vulnerable opponents. He will also use *night terrors* on those not already charmed. If in mortal danger, Catchweed uses *darkness* and his Spider Climb ability to escape and gather reinforcements.

Treasure: Lining the walls are mementos from the Shadow Realm worth a total of 800 gp. Some of these objects are silver and can be wielded against vampires as improvised weapons.

CONCLUDING THE ADVENTURE

Unless stopped, Catchweed forges a new kingdom that soon clashes with the other powers of the forest. He eventually perfects his method for creating spawn, and a new breed of vampire briar men become the enforcers of his regime. Battles with shadow fey and ghost knights from the Grisal Marches keep his power in check, but for the foreseeable future, the northern Margreve is a much more dangerous place.

If Catchweed is defeated, his army soon falls to squabbling and soon after that disbands. Briars cease to spread unnaturally, and those bearing the king's mark recover from their enchanted servitude. Children of the briar creep back into their nests with another grudge to add to their long list of grievances, but their behavior otherwise returns to normal.

NEW CREATURES AND MAGIC ITEMS

The monsters and magic items introduced in this adventure are detailed below.

BRIAR ARMY

Medium swarm of tiny plants, neutral evil

Armor Class 13

Hit Points 70 (20d6)

Speed 20 ft., climb 10 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
6 (–2)	17 (+3)	11 (+0)	13 (+1)	10 (+0)	14 (+2)

Skills Perception +4, Stealth +7

Damage Vulnerabilities fire

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, slashing

Condition Immunities exhaustion, grappled, paralyzed, petrified, prone, restrained, stunned, unconscious

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 14

Languages Briarclick, Common, Sylvan

Challenge 5 (1,800) XP)

Fey Blood. The briar army counts as both plant and fey for any effect related to type.

Swarm. The swarm can occupy another creature's space and vice versa, and the swarm can move through any opening large enough for a Tiny insect. The swarm can't regain hit points or gain temporary hit points.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. A briar army makes two claw attacks. If both attacks hit the same target, the target is engulfed and the briar army uses its Thorny Embrace on it.

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 24 (6d6 + 3) piercing damage or 13 (3d6 + 3) piercing damage if the swarm has half its hit points or fewer.

Entangle (1/day). The briar army can cast a version of the *entangle* spell, requiring no components. The affected area must be within 15 feet of the swarm. Creatures in the area must make a successful DC 13 Strength saving throw or be restrained. All briar creatures are immune to the effect.

Thorny Embrace. An engulfed creature takes 24 (6d6 + 3) piercing damage or 13 (3d6 + 3) piercing damage if the swarm has half its hit points or fewer at the end of the creature's turn for as long as it remains engulfed.

BRIAR BULLY

Small plant, neutral evil

Armor Class 13

Hit Points 70 (20d6)

Speed 25 ft., climb 15 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8 (–1)	16 (+3)	11 (+0)	13 (+1)	10 (+0)	14 (+2)

Skills Perception +4, Stealth +7

Damage Vulnerabilities fire

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 14

Languages Briarclick, Common, Sylvan

Challenge 2 (450) XP)

Fey Blood. The briar bully counts as both plant and fey for any effect related to type.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. A briar bully makes two claw attacks. If both attacks hit the same target, the target is grappled (escape DC 13) and the briar bully uses its Thorny Grapple on it.

Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d8 + 3) piercing damage.

Spitdart Tongue (Recharge 4–6). *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, range 20/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage. Every briar bully can shoot thorns from its mouth.

Entangle. Briar bullies and children of the briar work as a pair to cast a version of the *entangle* spell requiring no components, at will. Both creatures must be within 10 feet of each other, and both must use their action to cast the spell. The affected area must include at least one of the casters but doesn't need to be centered on either caster. Creatures in the area must make a successful DC 13 Strength saving throw or be restrained.

Thorny Grapple. A briar bully's long, thorny limbs help it grapple creatures of up to Large size. A grappled creature takes 3 (1d6) piercing damage at the end of the creature's turn for as long as it remains grappled.

BRIAR MAN

Medium undead, neutral evil

Armor Class 13

Hit Points 90 (20d8 + 20)

Speed 30 ft., climb 20 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	16 (+3)	13 (+1)	13 (+1)	10 (+0)	14 (+2)

Skills Athletics +3, Intimidation +5, Stealth +7

Damage Resistances necrotic; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks

Damage Vulnerabilities fire

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages Briarclick, Common, Sylvan

Challenge 5 (1,800) XP)

Fey Blood. The briar man counts as both fey and undead for any effect related to type.

Regeneration. The briar man regains 5 hit points at the start of its turn if it has at least 1 hit point and isn't in sunlight or running water. If the briar man takes radiant damage or damage from holy water, this trait doesn't function at the start of its next turn.

Spider Climb. The briar man can climb difficult surfaces, including upside down on ceilings, without needing to make an ability check.

Vampire Weaknesses. The briar man has the following flaws:

Forbiddance. The briar man can't enter a residence without an invitation from one of the occupants.

Harmed by Running Water. The briar man takes 20 acid damage when it ends its turn in running water.

Sunlight Hypersensitivity. While in direct sunlight, the briar man has disadvantage on attack rolls and on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely sight.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. A briar man makes two attacks, only one of which can be a bite attack. If both claw attacks hit the same target, the target is grappled (escape DC 13) and the briar bully uses its Thorny Grapple on it.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one willing creature, or a creature that is grappled by the briar man, incapacitated, or restrained. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage plus 7 (2d6) necrotic damage. The target's hit point maximum is reduced by an amount equal to the necrotic damage taken, and the briar man regains hit points equal to that amount. The reduction lasts until the target finishes a long rest. The target dies if this effect reduces its hit point maximum to 0.

Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d8 + 3) piercing damage.

Whip. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d4 + 3) slashing damage.

Spitdart Tongue (Recharge 4–6). *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, range 20/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage. Every briar man can shoot thorns from its mouth.

Entangle. Brian bullies, briar men, and children of the briar work as a pair to cast a version of the *entangle* spell requiring no components, at will. Both creatures must be within 10 feet of each other, and both must use their action to cast the spell. The affected area must include at least one of the casters but doesn't need to be centered on either caster. Creatures in the area must make a successful DC 13 Strength saving throw or be restrained.

Thorny Grapple. A briar man's long, thorny limbs help it grapple creatures of up to Large size. A grappled creature takes 3 (1d6) piercing damage at the end of the creature's turn for as long as it remains grappled.

CATCHWEED, KING OF THORNS

Large undead, neutral evil

Armor Class 18 (natural armor)

Hit Points 130 (20d10 + 20)

Speed 30 ft., climb 20 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
17 (+3)	19 (+4)	13 (+1)	13 (+1)	10 (+0)	17 (+3)

Skills Athletics +6, Intimidation +6, Perception +6, Stealth +7

Damage Resistances necrotic; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks.

Damage Vulnerabilities fire

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 16

Languages Aklo, Briarclick, Common, Sylvan

Challenge 7 (2,900) XP)

Fey Blood. Catchweed counts as both fey and undead for any effect related to type.

Legendary Resistance (1/day). If Catchweed fails a saving throw, it can choose to succeed instead.

Regeneration. Catchweed regains 5 hit points at the start of its turn if it has at least 1 hit point and isn't in sunlight or running water. If Catchweed takes radiant damage or damage from holy water, this trait doesn't function at the start of its next turn.

Spider Climb. Catchweed can climb difficult surfaces, including upside down on ceilings, without needing to make an ability check.

Vampire Weaknesses. Catchweed has the following flaws:

Forbiddance. It can't enter a residence without an invitation from one of the occupants.

Harmed by Running Water. It takes 20 acid damage when it ends its turn in running water.

Sunlight Hypersensitivity. While in direct sunlight it has disadvantage on attack rolls and on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely sight.

Spellcasting. Catchweed is a 7th-level spellcaster. Its spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 12, +4 to hit with spell attacks). It has the following spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *mage hand, message, minor illusion*
1st level (4 slots): *disguise self, magic missile, sleep*
2nd level (3 slots): *darkness, mirror image, enthrall*
3rd level (3 slots): *dispel magic, legion* (see *Heroes Handbook*), *speak with plants*
4th level (1 slot): *night terrors* (see *Heroes Handbook*)

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Catchweed makes two attacks, only one of which can be a bite attack. If both claw attacks hit the same target, the target is grappled (escape DC 13) and Catchweed uses its Thorny Grapple on it.

Bite *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one willing creature, or a creature that is grappled by Catchweed, incapacitated, or restrained. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage plus 7 (2d6) necrotic damage. The target's hit point maximum is reduced by an amount equal to the necrotic damage taken, and Catchweed regains hit points equal to that amount. The reduction lasts until the target finishes a long rest. The target dies if this effect reduces its hit point maximum to 0.

Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (1d8 + 4) piercing damage.

Spitdart Tongue (Recharge 4–6). *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, range 20/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d6 + 4) piercing damage.

Entangle. Catchweed can work with another briar creature as a pair to cast a version of the *entangle* spell requiring no components, at will. Both creatures must be within 10 feet of each other, and both must use their action to cast the spell. The affected area must include at least one of the casters but doesn't need to be centered on either caster. Creatures in the area must make a successful DC 13 Strength saving throw or be restrained.

Thorny Grapple. Catchweed's long thorny limbs help it grapple creatures up to Huge size. A grappled creature takes 3 (1d6) piercing damage at the end of the creature's turn for as long as it remains grappled.

DAME VALANORA

Medium undead, neutral evil

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 60 (11d8 + 11)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+1)	16 (+3)	13 (+1)	13 (+1)	10 (+0)	18 (+4)

Skills Arcana +4, Perception +3, Stealth +6

Damage Resistances necrotic; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages Common

Challenge 7 (2,900) XP)

Regeneration. Dame Valanora regains 10 hit points at the start of her turn if she has at least 1 hit point and

isn't in sunlight or running water. If she takes radiant damage or damage from holy water, this trait doesn't function at the start of her next turn.

Spider Climb. Dame Valanora can climb difficult surfaces, including upside down on ceilings, without needing to make an ability check.

Vampire Weaknesses. Dame Valanora has the following flaws:

Forbiddance. She can't enter a residence without an invitation from one of the occupants.

Harmed by Running Water. She takes 20 acid damage when she ends her turn in running water.

Stake to the Heart. She is destroyed if a piercing weapon made of wood is driven into her heart while she is incapacitated in her resting state.

Sunlight Hypersensitivity. She takes 20 radiant damage when she starts her turn in sunlight. While in direct sunlight, she has disadvantage on attack rolls and on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely sight.

Spellcasting. Dame Valanova is a 7th-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 15, +7 to hit with spell attacks). She has the following spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *dancing lights, mage hand, mending, message*

1st level (4 slots): *burning hands, disguise self, magic missile*

2nd level (3 slots): *hold person, invisibility, web*

3rd level (3 slots): *dispel magic, hypnotic pattern*

4th level (1 slot): *greater invisibility*

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Dame Valanora makes two attacks, only one of which can be a bite attack.

Bite *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one willing creature, or a creature that is grappled by Dame Valanora, incapacitated, or restrained. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage plus 7 (2d6) necrotic damage. The target's hit point maximum is reduced by an amount equal to the necrotic damage taken, and Dame Valanora regains hit points equal to that amount. The reduction lasts until the target finishes a long rest. The target dies if this effect reduces its hit point maximum to 0.

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (2d4 + 3) slashing damage. Instead of dealing damage, she can grapple the target (escape DC 13).

JĘDZA PADAK

Medium fey, chaotic neutral

Armor Class 15

Hit Points 77 (14d8 + 14)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	20 (+5)	13 (+1)	11 (+0)	14 (+2)	18 (+4)

Saving Throws Dex +8, Con +4, Wis +5, Cha +7

Skills Animal Handling +8, Arcana +3, Insight +5, Intimidation +7, Perception +8, Stealth +8

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical weapons

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 18

Languages Common, Sylvan, telepathy 60 ft. (beasts only)

Challenge 6 (2,300 XP)

Dance of the Luckless (1/day). Vila who dance for one hour create a fairy ring of small gray mushrooms. The ring lasts for seven days and has a 50-foot diameter per dancing vila. Non-vila who fall asleep (including magical sleep) inside the ring have disadvantage on skill checks for 24 hours from the time they awaken.

Forest Quickness. While in forest surroundings, a vila receives a +4 bonus on initiative checks.

Forest Meld. A vila can meld into any tree in her forest for as long as she wishes, similar to the meld into stone spell

Innate Spellcasting. The vila's innate spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 15). She can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

3/day: *sleep*

1/week: *control weather*

Spellcasting. Jędza Padak is a 4th-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 15, +7 to hit with spell attacks). She has the following spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *guidance, dancing lights, produce flame*

1st level (4 slots): *animal friendship, entangle, fog cloud, longstrider*

2nd level (3 slots): *calm emotions, animal messenger, hold person*

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Jędza makes two quarterstaff attacks or two shortbow attacks.

+1 Quarterstaff. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 2) bludgeoning damage, or 6 (1d8 + 2) bludgeoning damage if wielded with two hands.

+1 Shortbow. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +9 to hit, range 80/320 ft., one target. *Hit:* 9 (1d6 + 6) piercing damage.

Fascinate (1/Day). When the vila sings, all those within 60 feet of her and who can hear her must make a successful DC 14 Charisma saving throw or be stunned for 1d4 rounds. Those who succeed on the saving throw are immune to that vila's singing for 24 hours.

Forest Song (1/Day): The vila magically calls 2d6 wolves or 2 wampus cats (see *Tome of Beasts*). The called creatures arrive in 1d4 rounds, acting as allies of the vila and obeying its spoken commands. The beasts remain for 1 hour, until the vila dies, or until the vila dismisses them as a bonus action.

SNICKERSNACK

Medium construct, lawful good

Armor Class 18 (natural armor, shield)

Hit Points 76 (8d10 + 32)

Speed 30 ft., climb 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
20 (+5)	14 (+2)	18 (+4)	10 (+0)	10 (+0)	14 (+2)

Saving Throws Dex +5

Skills Acrobatics +8, Athletics +9, Perception +4, Performance +5, Stealth +4

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical weapons that are not made of adamantine

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, frightened, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages understands Common but cannot speak; can communicate with spiders

Challenge 5 (1,800 XP)

Spider Climb. Snickersnack can climb difficult surfaces, including upside down on ceilings, without needing to make an ability check.

Immutable Form. Snickersnack is immune to any spell or effect that would alter its form.

Magic Resistance. Snickersnack has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

Magic Weapons. Snickersnack's weapon attacks are magical.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Snickersnack makes four attacks, only two of which can be made with a single weapon.

Half-Sword of the Margreve Knights. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +9 to hit, reach 5 ft., *Hit:* 11 (1d10 + 6) slashing damage. This sword scores a critical hit on a roll of 19–20. Snickersnack wields this sword with two hands.

Rapier. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 9 (1d8 + 5) piercing damage.

Whip. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d4 + 5) slashing damage.

LESSER TENDRIL PUPPET

Medium plant, unaligned

Armor Class 10 (natural armor)

Hit Points 32 (5d8 + 10)

Speed 20 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	8 (–2)	14 (+2)	3 (–4)	9 (–1)	3 (–4)

Saving Throws Con +4

Skills Perception +1

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, poisoned

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 11

Languages —

Challenge 1/2 (100 XP)

Undead Fortitude. If damage reduces the lesser tendril puppet to 0 hit points, it must make a Constitution saving throw with a DC equal to 5 + the damage taken, unless the damage is fire or from a critical hit. On a successful save, the lesser tendril puppet drops to 1 hit point instead.

ACTIONS

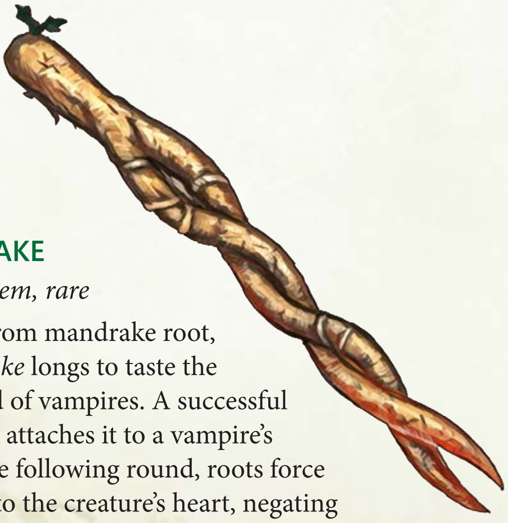
Slam. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d8 + 2) bludgeoning damage.

CAP OF THORNS

Wondrous item, very rare (requires attunement)

Donning this thorny wooden circlet causes it to meld with your scalp. It can be removed only upon your death or by a *remove curse* spell. The cap ingests some of your blood, dealing 2d4 piercing damage. After this first feeding, the thorns feed once per day for 1d4 piercing damage.

Once per day, you can sacrifice 1 hit point per level you possess to cast a special *entangle* spell made of thorny vines. Charisma is your spellcasting ability for this effect. Restrained creatures must make a successful Charisma save or be affected by a *charm person* spell as thorns pierce their body. The target can repeat the save at the end of each round, ending the effect on a success. If the target fails three consecutive saves, the thorns become deeply rooted and the effect is permanent until *remove curse* or similar magic is cast on the target.



LIVING STAKE

Wondrous item, rare

Fashioned from mandrake root, the *living stake* longs to taste the heart's blood of vampires. A successful melee attack attaches it to a vampire's chest. On the following round, roots force their way into the creature's heart, negating fast healing and preventing gaseous form. If the target is reduced to 0 hit points, it is immobilized as if it had been staked. The stake can be pulled out with a successful DC 17 Strength (Athletics) check made as an action; doing this destroys the magic item. The stake has no effect on targets other than vampires.

GHOST THREAD

Wondrous item, rare

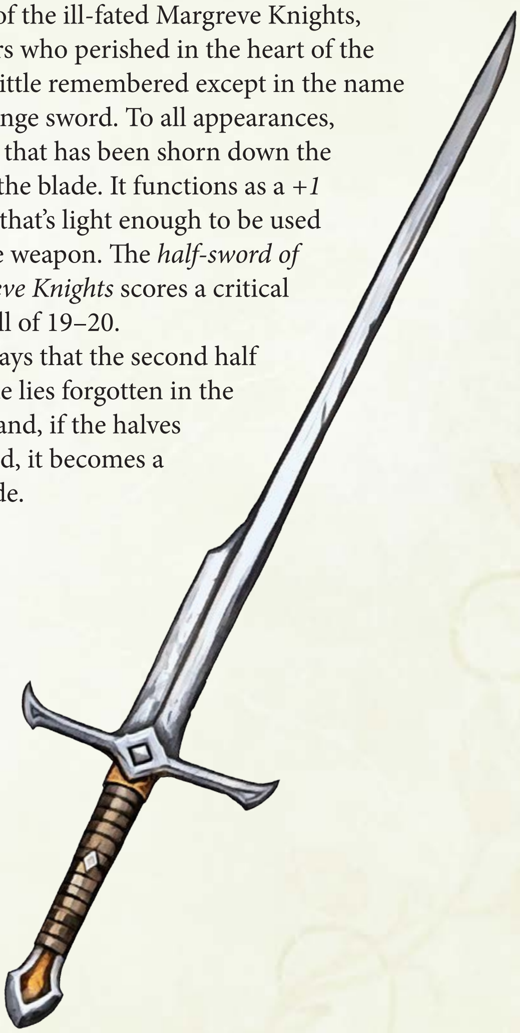
Most of this miles-long strand of enchanted silk, created by phase spiders, resides on the Ethereal Plane. Only a few inches at either end exist permanently on the Material Plane, and those may be used as any normal string would be. Creatures using it to navigate can follow the strand to its destination by running their hand along the thread, which phases into the Material Plane beneath their grasp. If dropped or severed (AC 8, 1 hit point), the thread disappears back into the Ethereal Plane in 2d6 rounds.

HALF-SWORD OF THE MARGREVE KNIGHTS

Weapon, unique (requires attunement)

The story of the ill-fated Margreve Knights, adventurers who perished in the heart of the woods, is little remembered except in the name of this strange sword. To all appearances, this sword that has been shorn down the middle of the blade. It functions as a *+1 longsword* that's light enough to be used as a finesse weapon. The *half-sword of the Margreve Knights* scores a critical hit on a roll of 19–20.

Legend says that the second half of the blade lies forgotten in the Margreve and, if the halves are rejoined, it becomes a *vorpal* blade.



Grandmother's Fire

By Ben McFarland

No fires burn throughout the Old Margreve, and fey trickery is afoot! Will you journey deep into the Heart of the woods to lift the terrible curse before the cold bite of winter kills countless innocents?

"Grandmother's Fire" is a wilderness adventure suitable for characters of 8th or 9th level.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Once, there was a werewolf named Dmitri who loved a village girl named Elena. Knowing Elena's family would never accept his curse, Dmitri met Elena as a woodcutter and concealed his true nature. They fell in love, continuing to meet secretly in the woods until Dmitri could "find the right moment" to talk to Elena's family.

A jealous vodyanoi watched their trysts from the river and coveted the beautiful girl. After learning the werewolf's secret, the creature kidnapped Elena, drowned her, and turned her into its rusalka wife. Despite the werewolf's pleas, the vodyanoi refused to release the girl's spirit.

Desperate to free his beloved from vodyanoi slavery, the werewolf sought advice from a Kariv oracle who claimed that only Grandmother's fire could manage the task. With the conviction of true love, Dmitri stole Baba Yaga's skull of embers. But while he raced back to dry Elena's shawl, Dmitri was captured by ghouls, and the skull was lost to the vodyanoi. A furious Baba Yaga cursed the whole of the Margreve for the theft—so long as she has no cinders in her hearth, no fire burns within the forest, and the people suffer the cold until they return what was stolen.

Into all of this come the adventurers. . . .

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

While crossing the Margreve, the adventurers encounter ghoulish Ghost Knights of Doresh hunting peasants. During the ensuing battle, it's discovered that fire spells produce cold or acid effects. Afterward, the rescued serfs fearfully explain that they seek Baba Yaga to ask why fires no longer burn. They beg for the characters to escort them.

At her walking hut, Baba Yaga declares that a thief has stolen the fire from her stove. The Margreve will know only the cold of her hearth and the bile of her anger until the embers return. If the characters accept this mission, she grants them magical sight to follow the thief's trail, with a warning of dire consequences for failure.

Tracking the culprit leads to a site near the edge of the Margreve's Heart. Werewolves are tearing apart well-armored corpses while unconscious captives, including the thief, hang in cages. The werewolves attack any characters who try to rescue Dmitri. Upon waking, Dmitri explains his actions and explains that if the characters help him recover the skull, they may claim the cinders.

On the way to the vodyanoi's sacred pool in the Heart of the Margreve, the rusalka Elena begs them to turn back. Made to realize her folly, she aids them in defeating the vodyanoi. While Dmitri steals the shawl, the vodyanoi fights bitterly at its pool, summoning boiling geysers and steaming elementals to slay the party. Its death frees Elena and allows the skull's return.

Adventure Hooks

The characters can begin this adventure during any trip through the Old Margreve, although the story has its greatest urgency when it's set in late fall, since the lack of fire means the impending winter will be deadly to many forest denizens. This hook relies upon the adventurers' good nature and willingness to help a group of scared commoners.

Other motivations might include:

The party might know Dmitri but be unaware of his true nature. He asks for their aid with a task.

The party might know Elena. Her family asks the group to recover her body and attend her funeral pyre.

Part 1: Proper Hunted

As the story begins, the characters are traveling along the road in the Old Margreve on a late autumn day.

COURSING PEASANTS

> The autumn air is crisp, with a hint of approaching frost, and the Old Margreve is calm as your group makes its way along the trail. Suddenly, the quiet is broken as a group of people burst from the foliage ahead. Oblivious to you, they look back with panic evident in their faces. Faint, hollow-sounding barks echo through the woods, as if hounds were pursuing them, and are quickly joined by the muted thunder of hooves.

Allow the characters to make Perception checks to spot the arrival of the Ghost Knights and other checks to learn about them, using the following DCs:

Wisdom (Perception) Checks:

DC 10—The characters see knights approaching.

DC 12—Some of the horses appear translucent. And there are flying, skeletal dogs!

DC 14—Characters notice the knights' livery (allows Intelligence [History] check as below).

DC 18—There's something unusual about the knights (allows Wisdom [Religion] check as below).

Intelligence (History) Checks:

DC 11—These are Ghost Knights of Doresh!

DC 14—Knights with that sort of armament are usually undead.

DC 17—These are Honest Brothers (full knights) from the Walker's Wood Commandery of Commander Orkov.

Wisdom (Religion) Checks:

DC 16—These knights appear to be darakhuls, with a pack of lich hounds!

If the characters spot the knights, read:

> A group of mounted warriors pauses, visible through the foliage. Some of their mounts shimmer and waver, as if insubstantial, and several skeletal creatures lope past them, feet floating over the ground as they run toward the peasants.

Creatures: This is a contingent of four Ghost Knights of Doresh (as **darakhul**; see *Tome of Beasts*), ghoulish warriors of that princedom. The knights are mounted on warhorses and accompanied by two **lich hounds** (see *Tome of Beasts*). They often hunt the forest's occupants for sport.

Terrain: This portion of the Old Margreve is mostly old growth, with a tall canopy and some scattered brush. Otherwise, the sky is visible only in slivers and fragments through the branches. Flight is possible to an altitude of 20 feet before the flier becomes entangled. Areas of brush or trees are difficult terrain. Areas of evergreen trees provide cover and concealment. Illumination is normal during the day and limited to what the characters possess at night. (The peasants carry a flickering torch at night.) The weather is slightly overcast and cool. Characters who sleep outdoors awaken to a frost.

During this adventure, no fire burns. Alchemist's fire and oil do nothing but soak the target. Spells or items that deal fire damage instead deal either cold or acid damage. This effect is immediately apparent to the caster or wielder, and no amount of experimenting will change the situation. (Reasons for this are explained in "The Dancing Hut" below.)

The characters might want to act. If so, roll for initiative, but first read the following:

> The flying skeletal hounds yip and bark, turning in your direction. The creatures appear to have sensed your presence, and the whole group has turned in your direction. They might not not notice you yet, but they certainly will soon.

The lich hounds have identified the characters as prey, and their orders dictate they should chase the strongest humanoids they sense. The lich hounds turn to pursue the characters, and the Ghost Knights follow suit. Unless the characters act first and take steps to

magically conceal their locations, the hunting party discovers them and attacks.

Development: After the Knights have been slain or driven off, the peasants approach the characters:

> A group of rough and dirty peasants, all men, emerge from where they had been hiding. The fear from their recent experience still colors their faces, and the boldest among them approaches you.
>
> "Mighty lords," he says, "we owe you our lives. Still, we must beg such powerful folk as you for another favor. No fire burns in the forest, and we don't know why. The Kariv oracle we consulted clutched her head, crying out when she tried to read the innards of her divining crab. She made a warding sign and told us to seek out old Baba Yaga, telling us that only Grandmother could say why we must live in the dark and cold. The Fell Crone is potent, and we are men with families. Please. Winter is coming, and without fire, the snows will kill our children. Will you go to her hut and ask mercy on our behalf? Or perhaps learn what angers her so? Please! Nothing more, we swear it!"

The peasants have little to offer as a reward, but they do know the way to Baba Yaga's hut. If the characters agree to help them, go to "The Dancing Hut" below.

If the characters decline, the adventure has one chance to continue. The peasants go on ahead to the hut, but when they arrive Baba Yaga eats them. On the first night the characters make camp thereafter, the forest becomes unnaturally cold. Unless they sleep in an extradimensional space, characters and mounts must make successful DC 10 Constitution saves each hour or gain 1 level of exhaustion. If the characters have second thoughts and decide to backtrack, they can follow the peasants' trail and find Baba Yaga's home after all.

THE DANCING HUT

The peasants lead the characters into the Margreve, following game trails and woodcutters' footpaths for 2 hours before coming upon a clearing. Within the meadow is a small wooden hut surrounded by a cast-iron fence. On each fencepost, except for two, sits a bare skull. A tiny spark flickers in each eye socket.

The hut always seems to face away from the characters, no matter how they approach it. To enter, one must say, “Turn your back to the forest, your front to me.” That fact is known by someone who succeeds on a DC 21 Intelligence (Arcana) or Intelligence (History) check. On a failed check, and after the characters make a few attempts at finding the entrance to the hut, one of the peasants remembers the phrase and speaks it:

> Suddenly, the hut stands up on an enormous pair of chicken legs. After a few unceremonious steps, it turns and settles back down again, this time with the gate positioned directly in your path.

When the party approaches the gate, it swings open untouched. The hut shudders like a bird settling into a nest as the group crosses the threshold. The peasants beg to remain outside, offering to watch the characters’ mounts and animal companions. They fear Baba Yaga and will not willingly approach her.

> The front door swings open without a touch. Inside, a golden-eyed cat strolls across the threshold. “Fools,” the animal mutters. “Come in, quick, before she rages again.”

The cat fixes its gaze on any animal companions, telling the characters to leave their pets outside.

Those who enter the hut find it is larger inside than outside. Random objects float about; disembodied hands use knives to cut slivers of meat and sweep the floor with a silver birch broom. An old woman leans over a cylindrical basin, holding an enormous pestle while staring into the waters in the basin. Several lanterns illuminate the interior.

> “Pfaw,” spits the crone, slapping the surface of the water with her dark nails before turning to face you. Her face twists with anger, her iron teeth evident in her scowl. She stands slightly hunched, but her eyes hold a terrible ferocity. She leers at you with a butcher’s appraising glance. “What brings you to Grandmother?” she says, then gestures for you to come closer. “Speak! Before I grow angry and add your skulls to my fence.” Adding weight to the comment, invisible hands slam the door shut behind you.

Baba Yaga doesn’t attack the characters inside her hut, but she threatens violence more than once. Any attack against her here by the characters simply fails to deal damage, although she vows to “remember your little tantrum for another day.” Baba Yaga answers the following questions:

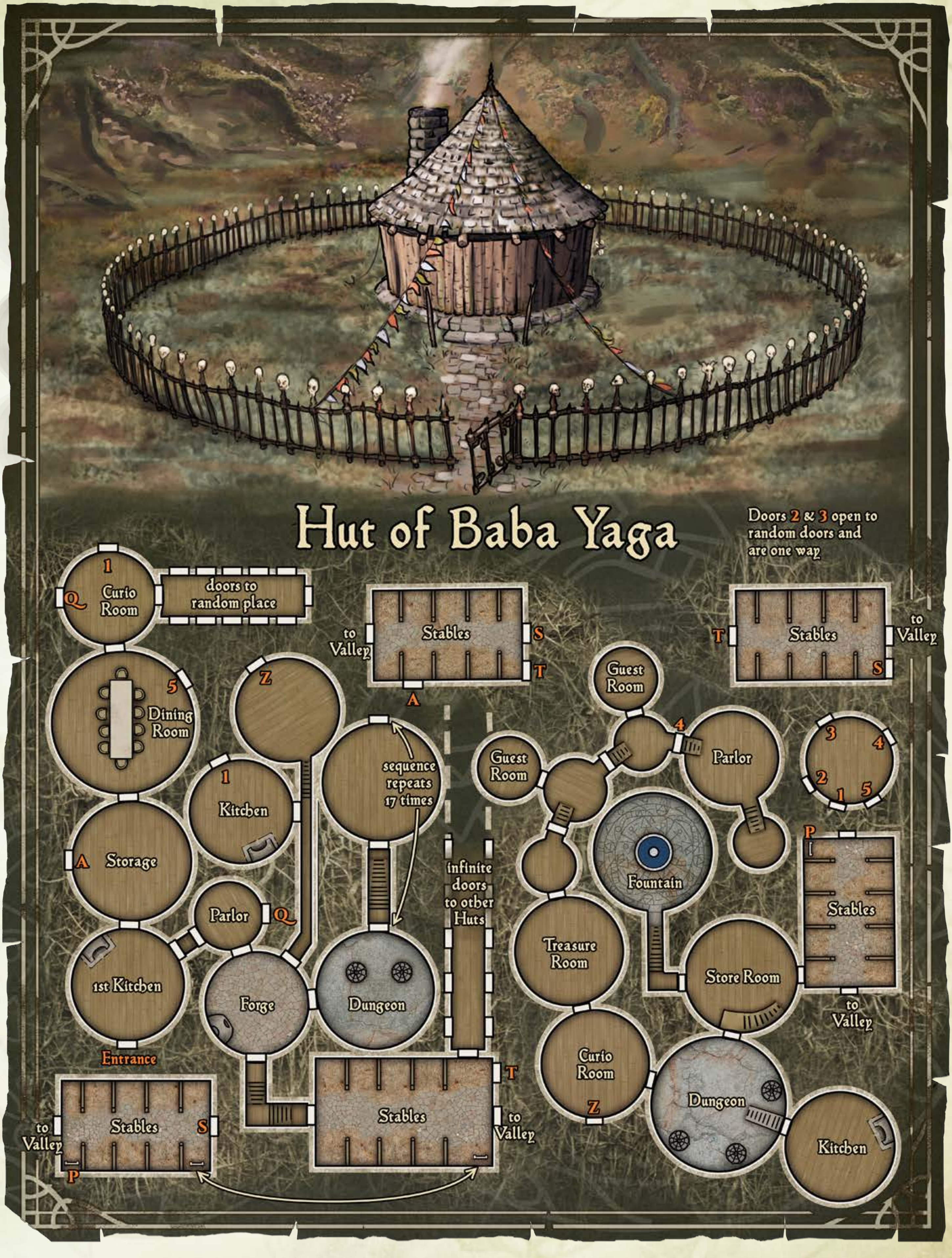
- *Why won’t fires burn?* “A thief took the fire from my stove inside a skull from my fence. And so I cursed the Margreve.”
- *When will you lift the curse?* “When the fire and the skull carrying it are returned. Until then, the Margreve will know only the cold of my hearth and the bile of my anger.”
- *Do you know who stole your fire?* “A fool of a boy named Dmitri, who claimed he had a question. Oh, I’ll not forget his face.”
- *Why don’t you reclaim it yourself?* “Because I’ve another task to tend to elsewhen. And as long as I suffer, the Margreve suffers. Suffering tends to motivate people like you.”
- *What will you give us if we recover the fire?* “I’ll not eat you this day, or the day you return my fire.”
- *Can you give us any help?* “Heh. Since you’re willing, yes. Until the sun rises, you can see the thief’s footsteps through the Margreve. This is my aid to you.”

As the party leaves, read:

> “Do not fail me in this,” she says, her voice trailing off as she bids you farewell. “I’ll not forget you.”

Time flows differently inside Baba Yaga’s hut. The conversation with her might take a blink of an eye or several hours. Depending on when you want the characters’ journey to begin (daytime or nighttime), adjust the passage of time spent conversing with the Fell Crone accordingly. When the characters exit the hut, its location seems slightly changed, as if the hut had moved while they were inside, but the fence around it is in the same relative position. The peasants are gone when the characters leave the hut, but any mounts or other beasts remain, secure and unmolested.

Baba Yaga’s gift of magical sight lasts until the sun rises on the following day and makes the thief’s steps appear as faintly glowing footprints. Keeping to the trail isn’t difficult, but the trip takes several hours due to the terrain. At normal movement rates, they arrive at the next encounter area in 3 hours.


Hut of Baba Yaga
Doors 2 & 3 open to random doors and are one way
1
Curio Room
Q
doors to random place
to Valley
Stables
S
T
A
T
Stables
to Valley
S
5
Dining Room
Z
Guest Room
4
Parlor
3
4
2
1
5
Guest Room
1
Kitchen
sequence repeats 17 times
A
Storage
infinite doors to other Huts
Fountain
P
Stables
Parlor
Q
Treasure Room
Store Room
1st Kitchen
Forge
Dungeon
to Valley
Entrance
Curio Room
T
Z
Stables
S
to Valley
P
Stables
to Valley
Dungeon
Kitchen

Part 2: Into the Bush

Read the following as the characters travel away from Baba Yaga's hut into a dark and foreboding portion of the Margreve:

> The trees become closer together as you follow the thief's route through the forest. Thick trunks of birch and pine crowd out most of the low brush, leaving you to thread your way between grasping branches and melancholy ferns. Few sounds echo through the shadows, and the air hangs heavy with the smell of peat.

As the group approaches, allow Wisdom (Perception) checks to detect the sounds and smells coming from the nearby clearing when the group is 50 feet from it. The characters can make these checks from 100 feet away, but they are made with disadvantage, and no details beyond the DC 12 information can be detected without magical assistance.

Wisdom (Perception) Check:

DC 10—The character notes that something is happening up ahead in the clearing, near a mound.
DC 12—The character can see men stacking logs.
DC 17—Those aren't men, those are werewolves!
DC 21—Those aren't logs, they're corpses!

TWO IN THE BUSH

If the characters take precautions to approach stealthily, make (Wisdom) Perception checks for the werewolves contested by the characters' Dexterity (Stealth) checks. A successful result for the werewolves indicates they know the party is approaching, possibly knowing how many. Otherwise, the werewolves do not detect the characters until they are 30 feet from the clearing.

When the werewolves detect the characters, read:

> The figures stop whatever they were doing in the clearing. There is a pause, and then, a chorus of long, deep wolf howls breaks the silence of the forest, followed by the muted fluttering of several birds taking flight. A soft groan pulls your attention to a ring of man-sized cages swaying behind the figures.

Creatures: These four **Margreve werewolves** (see page 167) recently defeated the junior Ghost Knights guarding this encampment and proceed with the dismembering and destroying of the ghoulish corpses before freeing the prisoners, although it may seem they're preparing to eat the prisoners. They suspect more Ghost Knights are approaching the meadow and ready an action to rage, anticipating battle. They do so as soon as the party engages them or becomes visible.

Groups that do not immediately engage the werewolves in combat can attempt to negotiate a peaceful encounter. Any Charisma [Intimidation] attempts, however, fail automatically and immediately instigate combat.

Charisma (Persuasion) Check:

DC 25—The werewolves do not believe the party and remain hostile. If the party does not immediately depart, they begin combat.
DC 30—The werewolves remain hostile and aggressive but do not immediately attack. They discuss the situation and initiate combat only if the party suggests they surrender Dmitri. Permit another check and reduce the DCs by 5.

DC 35—The werewolves are indifferent but become hostile if the characters ask them to surrender Dmitri. In this case, allow another check to calm relations. The characters can recover the situation if they make a successful DC 20 Charisma check.

If the party fails to make the werewolves friendly, the lycanthropes demand the characters leave immediately. Failure to do so initiates combat. If the werewolves become friendly, they allow Dmitri to talk with the party on the condition that the characters bind their weapons and stow any symbols or spell component pouches. The werewolves never change out of hybrid form. (Proceed to "Confessions of a Werewolf" below.)

Terrain: The forest is thick here, and areas outside the clearing are difficult terrain. The sky is blocked out by branches and leaves. Flight is possible to an altitude of 15 feet before the flier becomes entangled. Areas outside the meadow provide cover and concealment. Illumination is dim during the day and limited to what the characters possess at night. The weather is slightly overcast and cool.

The Cages: Six dwarves and Dmitri are imprisoned in the 200-pound cages. Each cage holds an unconscious creature suspended from a 10-foot-high segmented pole that is anchored by two cables to nearby trees. These cables or the pole can be sundered (AC 15, 15 hp), causing the cage to swing down and either away from the sundered cable, or toward the sundered pole.

A swinging cage attacks any creature in a 15-foot cone originating from either its remaining anchor point or one of the trees. It has a +5 bonus to hit and deals 10 (3d6) bludgeoning damage on a hit. If a target hit by the cage is Large or smaller, it must succeed on a DC 12 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

Development: With the werewolves defeated or placated, the cages can be lowered and the occupants freed. Dmitri awakens 1 hour after being freed unless the characters take steps to wake him sooner (requiring a successful DC 17 Wisdom [Medicine] check or any magical healing). The dwarves are reavers from the Black Canton of Grisal in the Ironcrags and quite grateful for their liberation before departing—promising a reward if the characters ever visit them. They don't know Dmitri; he was captured after them.

Although he is strangely upset after being freed from his captivity, Dmitri does not fight the characters but willingly explains what happened.

CONFESSIONS OF A WEREWOLF

If the characters incapacitated the werewolves but didn't kill them, Dmitri asks for mercy on their behalf, saying they didn't capture him. If they are dead, he says nothing but remains visibly upset. He explains his situation:

> Dmitri sits up, a hearty young man with a full beard. After taking a drink, he begins speaking, looking at each of you. "Yes. I stole Baba Yaga's fire. I had to. A cruel and jealous vodyanoi drowned my Elena, and now it wants to keep her as its rusalka bride. I couldn't let her spend forever like that, and so I sought out the Kariv. Their oracle said that if I could dry Elena's shawl, I would free her from the fey," he swallows back tears. "The oracle claimed the only thing that could do that was Grandmother's fire."
>
> He gives a bitter laugh. "I can be a charming fellow. I found the dancing hut and spoke with one of Grandmother's daughters in the woods nearby. I convinced her that I could help her finish her chores for naught but a cup of tea."
>
> Shaking his head, Dmitri continues. "We worked until afternoon. Then I suggested to her daughter to collect the firewood, and I would prepare the kettle. After I had helped all day, she trusted me." Sniffing, his voice full of disgust, he goes on. "Once she was off to find firewood, I took a skull from the fence and filled it with the cinders from the hearth. Like a rabbit, I bolted from there. I swear the skulls screamed 'Thief!' as I left. But I no longer have the skull."

It takes only a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Insight) check to ascertain his sincerity. If asked where the skull is now, he continues:

> "As I made my way to the vodyanoi's pool, the Ghost Knights began hunting me. They chased me across the river where the vodyanoi was waiting." Dmitri barks a short, angry laugh, "It churned the river to an angry froth and tripped me as I balanced on a fallen tree. It snatched up the skull while I dangled over the rapids." He chokes back a sob. "The miserable river spirit fled, and the ghouls caught me as I scrambled back to my feet. They poisoned me and stuffed me in that cage before hunting further."
>
> Dmitri looks up, his eyes tearful. "And then I awoke to the sight of you."

If asked about the werewolves, he states that they look familiar but he doesn't know them. A successful DC 21 Wisdom (Insight) check indicates that on this point he is lying. If pressed, he says they are fellow villagers, but he didn't want to slander their reputation by identifying them. A successful DC 25 Wisdom (Insight) check indicates this fact is true, but he is still holding something back. (Dmitri is also a natural werewolf, but remains in human form. It is best to keep this secret until the "Crossing the River" section.)

Development: His story told, Dmitri explains he is willing to help the characters recover the skull by leading them to the vodyanoi's pool—if they will agree to let him use the fire to dry Elena's shawl before returning the fire to Baba Yaga. Travel to the vodyanoi's pool takes 1 hour on foot.

CROSSING THE RIVER

Halfway to the vodyanoi's pool, the characters come to a river crossing. Standing on a large fallen tree that serves as a bridge is a soaked young woman with a bluish tinge to her complexion. This is Elena.

Development: Elena (a **rusalka**; see *Tome of Beasts*) does not fight the characters.

Dmitri immediately recognizes her and begs the characters not to attack. As they approach, he moves to embrace her, but Elena motions for him to stay on the river's edge:

> "Wait, my love!" she calls. "Do not do this. I chose this fate to free you from your blood curse," Elena gives him a mournful look, then she turns to you. "The vodyanoi claimed he was doomed to be a werewolf. I offered to become its wife if the spirit altered his fate. It agreed." She begins crying. "Once I drowned, it sent word to the Ghost Knights, claiming that death frees everyone."
>
> A painful sob escapes from Dmitri. "Oh, Elena," he says, his voice breaking, "In truth, I was born a werewolf." He looks to your group. "It was my pack brothers you fought in the clearing. I can't be 'freed.'"
>
> Her eyes shining with tears, Elena looks toward you with a vengeful expression. "The vodyanoi tricked us, but I'll have my revenge." She walks to the far side of the river and plucks a large toadstool, its cap dripping with moisture. "Anoint your boots with this dew and then wash your faces with just a splash. Until the sun sets tomorrow, you will be able to walk upon the vodyanoi's pool and breathe its waters as if they were air. If you do this, you can kill the cursed fey and free me." She looks back at Dmitri and you. "Will you do this for me? For us?"

Dmitri nods his agreement with Elena's offer, asking the characters to participate in this act of righteous vengeance. He apologizes for concealing his true nature until now but claims he needed help in freeing Elena and didn't want to risk gaining the characters' enmity.

Doing as Elena instructs grants the characters the benefit of *water breathing* and *water walk* spells until sunset on the following day. (Dmitri plans to dive into the water to reclaim the skull while the party engages the fey, so he does not put the dew on his boots.)

Development: After she has secured the characters' assistance, Elena walks into the river, melting away with the current as the group departs. Travel from this point to the vodyanoi's pool takes 1/2 hour.

PART 3: THE HEART OF THE MATTER

This stage of their journey takes the characters into the Heart of the Margreve. This part of the forest is preternaturally quiet and the air so heavy with magical essence it makes the hair on the back of the characters' necks stand on end.

The spirit of the Margreve watches the coming events unfold with hungry interest. Any creature willing to take damage equal to its Hit Dice as a sacrifice to the forest gains a +2 bonus on its next attack roll and a bonus to damage equal to the amount of damage it took voluntarily. For example, a creature with 10 Hit Dice can take 10 damage to gain a +2 bonus on its next attack roll and +10 damage on the attack. The vodyanoi knows of this phenomenon before combat starts; characters can get the sense of it through whispers and mutterings on the wind.

THE VODYANOI'S POOL

As the group approaches the vodyanoi's pool, Dmitri reveals his plan to the characters:

> "The vodyanoi certainly knows we're coming. If you go to the edge of its pool and challenge it, the creature's pride will draw it out to face you. While you fight it, I'll dive into the water and steal the skull from its lair with Elena's help. Don't worry, you have my word—I won't try to run away with the skull. All I want is to free Elena."

With the plan confirmed, he slinks into the underbrush and shifts into wolf form.

Creatures: The vodyanoi lairs at this pool with *Baba Yaga's cinderskull* (see page 167), gloating over how it tricked the rusalka into becoming its wife. When the characters arrive, this **cinder-fueled vodyanoi** (see page 166) rises up out of the water:

> A frog-like humanoid climbs from the water and stands on its surface as if it were solid. Its skin is gray-blue, and its beard is a tangle of reeds and stick. Its voice is cruel and grating as it addresses you, a light mist rising from its form.
>
> "Trespassers! You have no business in the Heart of the Forest and no right to challenge me. The boy was a clumsy fool, and the girl made a bargain with me. I'll not let her go."

The vodyanoi is not interested in discussion. It intends to destroy the characters to prove its superiority. Its link to the power of the skull grants it the ability to cast *scorching ray* three times per day, as if using a 4th-level slot each time. The vodyanoi has coerced two **fire-infused water elementals** (see page 165) to help defend his pool. They rise out of the water on their initiative counts to attack the characters.

As combat begins, Dmitri runs and dives into the pool, changing into human form as he does so.

Terrain: The forest is fairly open, and areas outside the pool are normal terrain. The sky is visible above through branches and leaves. Flight is possible to an altitude of 65 feet before the flier becomes entangled. Areas of branches or roots at either end of the fallen tree provide cover and concealment. Illumination is normal during the day and limited to what the characters possess at night. The weather is slightly overcast and cool.

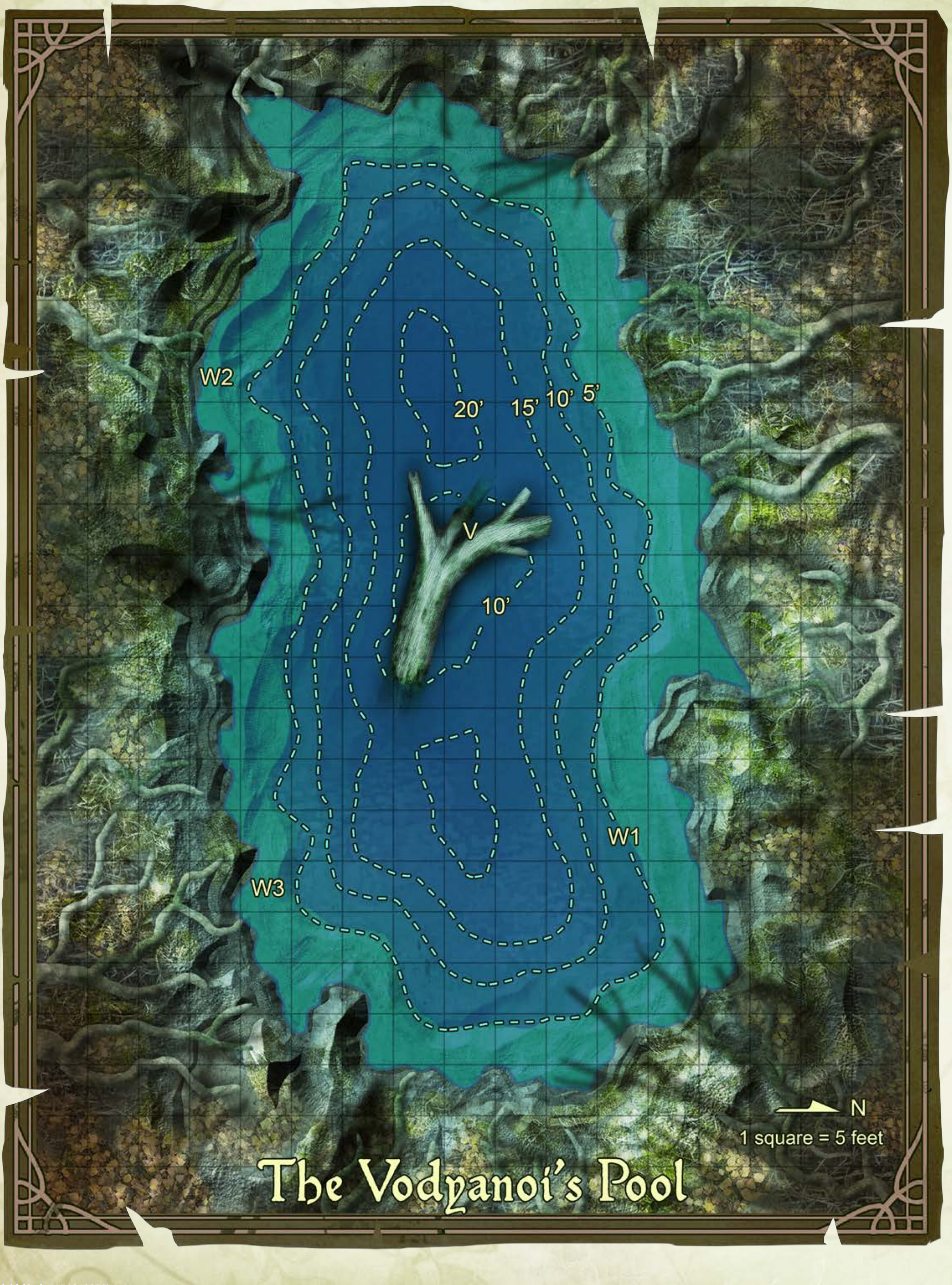
Development: The elementals try to kill the characters by any means possible. They open with Scald attacks and resort to slams if necessary. The vodyanoi sticks to Suffocating Water, Boiling Geyser, and *scorching ray*, resorting to claw attacks only when necessary.

DEAD MAN TALKING

When the vodyanoi is defeated, Dmitri emerges from the depths of the pool with the steaming skull, and Elena rises from the waters shortly afterward, bearing her shawl:

> Dmitri transforms into his hybrid form as he turns the skull's bronze gaze upon Elena's shawl, causing steam to dissipate into the air as the shawl dries. Elena looks at you, smiling as she does so, and says:
>
> "We cannot thank you enough. Know that you will find Grandmother's hut at the river crossing where we met. You can return her fire to her there." She begins to fade out of sight and reaches up toward Dmitri's face. "Come with me, my love." He responds by scooping up her lithe frame in his arms, and the two embrace. Water washes over them, pouring from Elena and engulfing the werewolf. The skull falls into the shallow edge of the pool, small wisps of vapor curling up from it.
>
> The couple melts into the waters of the pool, dissolving into nothing while leaving Dmitri's abandoned pelt floating on the surface. Their mingling voices speak as if from the empty air: "And now we will be together forever. Please accept this cloak as a token of our gratitude." Gentle waves break the surface of the pond, pushing the wolf pelt toward shore.
>
> At the same time, sapphire-hued roses begin to sprout and blossom around where the skull resides, their blooms opening in moments. "And take these roses," the voice continues. "Brew a tea from their petals, and you'll be certain to gain Baba Yaga's favor. Again, thank you for your kindness." With a ripple of wind across the water, their voices fade—leaving behind only the characters' gifts and the sounds of the forest.

Although it looks like a simple cloak fashioned from a wolf skin, the wolf pelt is actually a magic item—a *Margreve fur* (see page 167).



The Vodyanoi's Pool

Development: The four blue roses blooming around the skull are enough to brew a single pot of tea. This tea has special value to Baba Yaga.

Concluding the Adventure

With the vodyanoi slain, Elena's shawl dried, and Dmitri dead, there is nothing left to do but return the skull to Baba Yaga.

But the characters might not want to do that.

Nothing forces the characters to return the skull. But if they choose to keep it, they earn Baba Yaga's ire. She might send her horsemen or Koschei the Deathless (see *Tome of Beasts* for both) to recover the cinders. Failing to return the skull also that means the region suffers through a long and miserable winter without fire. Countless inhabitants freeze to death in the season's icy grip, and the Ghost Knights spread their influence deeper into the forest.

All things considered, the characters probably don't want to be responsible for all that tragedy. Assuming they decide to return to Baba Yaga's hut, read the following when they follow Elena's directions to the site:

> Standing right where Elena claimed it would be, Baba Yaga's hut overlooks the stream where you met the rusalka. A wisp of smoke curls from the chimney, and both the door and the gate stand open. All along the fence, the skulls twinkle with a sinister gleam.

If they return the skull to her, Baba Yaga cackles gleefully and lifts her curse from the Margreve. She welcomes the characters inside and covetously takes the skull, talking softly to it as she cracks it open like an egg and pours the embers inside back into her hearth. She thanks them for their service, telling them they may leave with their lives.

If the characters bring her tea brewed from the blue roses that bloomed at the edge of the vodyanoi's pool, the Fell Crone offers them a boon for their honesty—they may seek out her hut at some point in the future and safely ask her a single question, which she promises to answer truthfully.

With this, she dismisses them and hums a tune as she begins cooking something. After the characters depart the hut, a backward glance shows that the fence is nowhere to be seen and the hut is silently moving out of the clearing and disappearing into the foliage on its great chicken legs.

New Creatures and Magic Items

The monsters and magic items introduced in this adventure are detailed below.

FIRE-INFUSED WATER ELEMENTAL

Huge elemental, neutral

Armor Class 14

Hit Points 138 (12d12 + 60)

Speed 30 ft., swim 90 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
20 (+5)	14 (+2)	20 (+5)	5 (–3)	10 (+0)	8 (–1)

Damage Resistances acid, fire, cold; bludgeoning, piercing, slashing from non-magical attacks

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities exhaustion, grappled, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned, prone, restrained, unconscious

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages Aquan

Challenge 7 (2,900) XP)

Water Form. The elemental can enter a hostile creature's space and stop there. It can move through a space as narrow as 1 inch wide without squeezing.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The elemental makes two slam attacks.

Slam. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 16 (2d10 + 5) bludgeoning damage, plus 7 (2d6) fire damage from the scalding heat.

Scald (Recharge 6). A fire-infused water elemental can project a cone of superheated water. Each creature in a 30-foot cone must make a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw. A creature takes 21 (6d6) fire damage and is knocked prone on a failed save, or takes half as much damage on a successful save and is not knocked prone.

CINDER-FUELED VODYANOI

Medium fey, neutral evil

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 97 (13d8 + 39)

Speed 30 ft., swim 20 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	15 (+2)	16 (+3)	14 (+2)	10 (+2)	20 (+5)

Saving Throws Dex +5

Skills Arcana +5, Deception +4, Insight +5, Perception +5

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 15

Languages Common, Sylvan

Challenge 7 (2,900 XP)

Amphibious. A vodyanoi can breathe air or water.

Legendary Resistance (1/day). If the cinder-fueled vodyanoi fails a saving throw, it can cho to succeed instead.

Innate Spellcasting. The vodyanoi's spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 16, +8 to hit with spell attacks). It can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: *control water, water breathing, water walk*
3/day: *lightning bolt, sleet storm*
1/day: *ice storm*

Scorching Ray (3/day). The vodyanoi uses *Baba Yaga's cinderskull* to cast *scorching ray*, as if using a 4th-level slot.

Suffocating Water (1/day). The vodyanoi can cause the water surrounding it up to a radius of 30 feet to grow thick and slimy, making it difficult for water-breathing creatures within the area. A vodyanoi can exclude up to three creatures from this effect. Vodyanois themselves are immune to this effect. All other creatures in an area of suffocating water must hold their breath or risk suffocation. Once created, an area of suffocating water does not move. The slimy water does not impact swimming speeds or visibility in any significant manner.

Water Mastery. The vodyanoi gains a +1 bonus on attack and damage rolls if both it and its opponent are touching water. If either the vodyanoi or its opponent are not touching water, it has disadvantage on attack rolls.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The cinder-fueled vodyanoi makes two claw attacks.

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 11 (2d8 + 2) slashing damage.

LEGENDARY ACTIONS

The cinder-fueled vodyanoi can take 1 legendary action, but only at the end of another creature's turn. The cinder-fueled vodyanoi regains its spent legendary action at the start of its turn.

Boiling Geyser. The vodyanoi fills a 10-foot-square with a geyser of boiling water, centered on a point it can see within 30 feet. Each creature in the area takes 21 (6d6) fire damage, or half as much damage with a successful DC 14 Dexterity saving throw.

MARGREVE WEREWOLF

Medium humanoid (human, shapechanger), chaotic evil

Armor Class 16 (unarmored defense)

Hit Points 94 (9d12 + 36)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	14 (+2)	18 (+4)	10 (+0)	11 (+0)	10 (–1)

Saving Throws Con +7

Skills Athletics +7, Perception +6, Stealth +5, Survival +3

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing (while raging)

Damage Immunities bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing weapons that are not silver

Senses passive Perception 16

Languages Common

Challenge 6 (2,300 XP)

Shapechanger. The Margreve werewolf can use its action to polymorph into a wolf-humanoid hybrid or a wolf, or back to its true form, which is humanoid. Its statistics are the same in each form. Any equipment it is wearing or carrying isn't transformed. It reverts to its true form if it dies.

Keen Hearing and Smell. The Margreve werewolf has advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on hearing or sight.

Rage (3/day). The Margreve werewolf can enter a rage as a bonus action. While raging, it has the following benefits: resistance to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage, +2 damage on all melee weapon attacks, and advantage on all Strength checks and Strength saving throws.

Reckless. At the start of its turn, the Margreve werewolf can gain advantage on all melee weapon attack rolls during that turn, but all attack rolls against it have advantage until the start of its next turn.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The werewolf makes two attacks. While in hybrid or wolf form, it can bite as a bonus action.

Bite (Wolf or Hybrid Form Only). *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 10 (1d8 + 6) piercing damage. If the target is a humanoid, it must succeed on a DC 12 Constitution saving throw or be cursed with werewolf lycanthropy.

Claws (Hybrid Form Only). *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 11 (2d4 + 6) slashing damage.

Spear (Humanoid Form Only). *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft. or range 20/60 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 9 (1d6 + 6) piercing damage, or 10 (1d8 + 6) piercing damage if used with two hands to make a melee attack.

BABA YAGA'S CINDERSKULL

Wondrous item, rare (requires attunement)

Warm to the touch, this white, dry skull emanates an orange glow from its eye sockets equivalent to dim illumination in a 30-foot radius. The owner of the skull requires only half of the food and water normally required for a creature of its size. The owner can withstand extreme temperatures indefinitely, and automatically succeeds on all saving throws against extreme heat and cold. As an action, the owner can use the *cinderskull* to cast *scorching ray* at 3rd level (+5 to hit). The skull can't be used in this way again until the next dawn.

MARGREVE FUR

Wondrous item, rare (requires attunement)

Many tales tell of those who gain the powers of Margreve's animals by wearing their fur. While wearing this cloak, you have proficiency with Dexterity saving throws (if you don't have it already). You also have proficiency in the Deception and Persuasion skills. If you already have either of these proficiencies, your proficiency bonus is doubled for those checks.

The Vengeful Dragon

By Steve Robert with Wolfgang Baur

The zmey's eyes locked on the lovely Kariv maiden as the creature's sinuous necks circled the girl. It stood, mesmerized by lust, until arrows rained down from the Kariv hidden in the branches above. Uncontrollable rage welled up inside the zmey, and its three heads reared back and spat a tremendous gout of fire.

But even as the flames left its mouth, they turned into mere puffs of smoke. The beast's eyes widened as the great oak above him stirred. Only then did the zmey recognize its mistake.

"The Vengeful Dragon" is a forest adventure suitable for characters of 10th level.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

The Margreve's zmey inspire fear and terror far and wide, but they have a strange weakness: they seem to occasionally befriend lust for chaste human maidens who are strong in the Old Ways.

Days ago, one of the Margreve's elder zmey, named Manje, awoke from a decades-long slumber. His bright eyes sparkled, and his sharp ears heard the forest whisper to him of the lovely girl Vidanya, who had visited him in his slumber, and sung a song that still haunts his dreams along with mocking laughter—for what awoke the dragon from his slumber was not ordinary wakefulness, but the premonition of a theft. He had been visited in his sleep by a brother and sister, Petrek and Vidanya, who each took a fistful of gems from his hoard. The dragon now chases Vidanya, thundering toward Levoča.

Only Baba Ludva, one of the Margreve's notorious Spider Crones, foresaw Vidanya and Petrek's theft, and Manje's subsequent rage and fixation. She spirited Vidanya away before the zmey could find her. Vidanya's respite is only temporary, however, for now the crone plans to trade the girl to further her own dangerous plans.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

The zmey arrives at Levoča while the characters sleep, devastating the town in its desperate search for Vidanya and its stolen gemstones—three fine emeralds and a dozen chunks of rich amber. The characters fight a group of zmey headlings and emerge just in time to hear the dragon's ultimatum: turn over Vidanya and Petrek and all the gemstones immediately, or Levoča burns.

After the dragon departs, Levoča's leaders beg the characters' help in saving the youths and the village—they have neither the girl nor the gemstones, and Petrek swears he gave all the gemstones to his sister just before she was snatched by a crone, Baba Ludva. The heroes must first find a suspicious Kariv seer and convince her to teach them a ritual to trap the zmey. They must then retrieve the girl from Baba Ludva, either through bargain or force.

The characters next journey to the Margreve's Heart, gathering the necessary components for the *zmeytrap* ritual. The zmey, mad with rage, arrives, and clever characters can turn the forest against it. But once the Heart itself is awakened, the forest's ire focuses on the characters.

INTRODUCTION

The adventure assumes only that the characters spend a single night in Levoča. Any ties they might have to the village and its residents, perhaps dating back to the adventure "Hollow," will strengthen their motivation. (If they have completed that adventure, the prospect of attending the Festival of the Hollow Man might lure them back.)

The action begins after Levoča's Festival of the Hollow Man, which commemorates the defeat of a fearsome wooden construct that plagued Levoča in days past (recently, if the characters completed "Hollow," or long ago if not).

That night, Manje begins his hunt for Vidanya and his precious jewels.

PART 1: A TROUBLED VILLAGE

This section takes place in Levoča (see page 52 in the adventure "Hollow" for more details).

HEADLING HELL

This initial encounter assumes that the characters spend the night in one of Levoča's barns—possibly Anna's—which function as the town's guest quarters.

Read or paraphrase the following to begin the adventure, taking into account any precautions the characters take before sleeping:

> Levoča huddles fearfully at the edge of the Margreve, but this evening it hosts a rare celebration. The villagers reenact the defeat of the legendary Hollow Man with burning effigies, dancing, and drinking long into the night. Then, with a sense of exhausted satisfaction, the town fades into a peaceful torpor, and you settle down in the barn for a night's rest.
>
> Suddenly, a crash and a loud shriek shatter the silence. Moments later, two gouts of fire explode against the walls of your quarters.

Creatures: Manje begins his assault by leveling Vidanya and Petrek's house, but of more immediate danger to the characters are two **zmey headlings** (see *Tome of Beasts*). These creatures are all that remain of another zmey that suffered a grisly death while contesting with Manje for the right to pursue Vidanya. After tearing the headlings from his rival's body, Manje chased them into Levoča, where the ravenous beasts soon discover the characters.

Unless the characters have posted a guard outside the barn or have magical defenses, noises from outside awaken them just as the headlings attack.

Terrain: The wattle and daub barn walls (AC 13, 10 hit points) burn relatively slowly. Assume that the wall segments adjacent to each headling's initial position catch fire on the first round of combat. Each segment takes 1d6 fire damage/round and spreads to the adjacent segment(s) at the end of the round.

Bales of flammable hay fill the hayloft, 10 feet above the ground, as well as part of the ground floor. Any hay adjacent to a burning wall segment has a 25 percent chance each round to catch fire. When that occurs, the straw burns in 1 round, dealing 7 (2d6) fire damage to creatures within 5 feet and setting them ablaze (DC 12 Dexterity save for half damage and to avoid catching fire).

Development: The headlings breathe fire on the building, hoping to set it ablaze. One enters through a window, and one through the ceiling. Intensely hungry, each headling focuses its attacks on one (preferably unprepared) character. They try to pin characters inside the building and use their Fire Breath whenever possible. The headlings fight to the death.

Outside, shrieks and thundering crashes continue throughout the battle. Once the characters defeat the headlings or exit the barn, continue immediately with the next encounter.

FIRES OF NIGHT

> Chaos fills Levoča. Fire has damaged several buildings, and bleeding bodies litter the ground where, only hours ago, they were dancing. Most of the residents huddle in the Witch Pit, a circular depression about twenty feet deep. Above them, two dragons—one enormous and the other even bigger—fly lazy circles around the pit, lit eerily by the flames below.
>
> The larger dragon's three long, solid necks end in spine-frilled heads, and dappled green and black scales cover its immense bulk. Presently, one head booms out, "You hide the amber stones from me, fools? The thieving boy and girl belong to me—return them or suffer my wrath!"
>
> With that, another head torches a huge oak adjacent to the pit, and the vast creature soars to the north. The smaller dragon continues to circle, eyeing the trapped villagers hungrily.

The roaring fires create dim illumination throughout the village.

Creatures: Manje flies into the Margreve at full speed. If the characters pursue, he tries to escape but pauses to swat interlopers away. After 3 rounds, he spots a pond, dives in, and uses Lake Leap to escape.

A more immediate danger is the remaining **full-grown zmey headling** (see page 179), which is significantly larger than its siblings and has regrown its two missing heads. If left unmolested, the zmey headling pushes the burning oak tree into the Witch Pit and tries to feast on the villagers trapped inside.

Development: If the characters approach, the zmey headling breathes flame and charges, eager for more food. It flees if reduced to 30 hit points or fewer. It pauses only to push the burning tree into the pit (requiring a successful DC 17 Strength check); on a failed check, the tree is not uprooted enough to be a danger.

LEVOČA'S APPEAL

After the villagers extinguish the fires, Anna (or someone else with whom they have good relations) approaches the characters:

> Dreadful silence fills the village, its exhausted residents staring blankly. After a time, Anna approaches, her face composed but her dress blanketed in soot.
>
> "The evil eye has locked its gaze on us again. The great zmey has marked our girl Vidanya, strong in the Old Ways, as a thief of its hoard, doomed to die. Her brother Petrek was part of a foolish visit to the zmey's lair, and he tells us that they took more than a dozen shining gemstones from the cavern. The zmey will destroy them both, one way or another—and may destroy us all as well.
>
> "And yet, it grows even worse. Baba Ludva, the eldest of the Spider Crones, visited Levoča three days ago. Her sour face spewed honeyed words of wisdom and compassion, and she huddled closely with our young women. The next morning, she had vanished—and Vidanya with her. Surely, she holds the girl and jewels hostage, and Levoča will suffer as a result.
>
> "We turn to you in desperation, for our village can bear no more calamites. Please, save Vidanya—and us—from this fate. We can offer little, but we cling to hope, for as terrible as it seems, the zmey can be defeated. Folktales speak of Kariv magic that saved one of their villages from a dragon's fury. Seek their wisdom, we beseech you. And please, hurry."

Anna can relate any of the information about the zmey from the creature's description, although her folk-tale sources often exaggerate the zmey's power. She does her best to impress on the characters the great danger of engaging the zmey and urges them to seek the Kariv. The residents of Levoča are otherwise quite hostile to the Kariv (a fact that a character can discern with a successful DC 12 Wisdom [Insight] check).

She knows that one of the Kariv's greatest seers, Mama Cana, has camped for the season at the ruins of Whistlehollow Village, a day's travel upriver. She can also provide general directions to Baba Ludva's demesne in the Hag's Tooth Hills, although none know precisely how to find her burrow.

Part 2: Hidden Agendas

The characters now must find the crone—and hence Vidanya—and learn the Kariv's secret. The order in which they perform these tasks does not matter, but the Kariv are closer to Levoča.

Although Manje will not return to Levoča for several days, his threats should put the characters under time pressure. If they dally, tales of the enraged dragon torching nearby villages in his search for Vidanya reach their ears.

THE SHRIVE'S STORY

When the characters arrive in Whistlehollow Village, read the following:

> Whistlehollow once occupied one of the most beautiful of the Margreve's dells, but now its ruined hovels lie buried under fallen trees and collapsed rock walls jutting awkwardly through the day's misty rain. Now the Margreve is reclaiming its territory, the village abandoned decades ago for unknown reasons.
>
> A small circle of bright wagons are huddled together in the town's center. Four armed men and women recline under one of the wagon's rough awnings—two scan their surroundings while the others talk softly. Candlelight streams out of one wagon.

Creatures: The Kariv shrive who calls herself **Mama Cana** (see page 180) has retreated here to escape the less welcoming "civilized" settlements. The middle-aged woman long ago forsook her clan and sought her own way within the forest. In an ironic twist, four Kariv youths (as **bandit captains**) have abandoned their own clans to join Cana's independent band.

Cana has a deep respect for the Margreve and assiduously avoids its ire and attention. As such, she forswears magic of all forms—aside from krinomancy, at least. Instead, her soothsaying appears to be entirely nonmagical yet still remarkably insightful. Any characters who use magic in her presence worsen her attitude toward them by one step. She wears a simple but brightly colored wrap, with her long, gray hair framing her penetrating black eyes.

Cana was born with the profound insight of krinomancy. She can discern with absolute accuracy any lie told to her or written in her presence by someone whose blood she has tasted within the previous year. The amount of blood required is minimal, but she cannot ingest it with any other substance and must be able to taste it for the ability to have effect. Cana is also incapable of lying, although she may refrain from speaking or tell only part of the truth.

Cana flees if combat breaks out, while her companions cover her escape. The youths flank and sneak attack where possible, fleeing once Cana is safe.

DEVELOPMENT: Vanic, one of the youths, warily greets the characters and suspiciously demands their business. He will fetch Cana from the wagon only if the characters improve his attitude from indifferent to friendly or if they provide a good reason to see her. The story of Levoča's plight satisfies him, although the Karivs' faces sour at the mention of the name.

The meeting with Cana proceeds in four stages. The ceremonial first stage includes blessings and prayers to Cana's patrons, the Green Gods. Characters who comport themselves especially well (by succeeding on a DC 21 Intelligence [Religion] or Intelligence [History] check) gain the party a +2 bonus on subsequent Charisma (Persuasion) checks. Immediately afterward, Cana volunteers to read the characters' fortunes. She tells each one to venture into the surrounding forest and find a fallen branch that "calls to" them. When each branch is returned to her, she continues:

> Cana thrice strikes the bough sharply against a sapling, whispering softly, "The blood, the heart, the soul." Each strike snaps off a single leaf from the sapling, which flutters into her waiting hand.

Cana examines the leaves for a few seconds, presents them to the character along with a small knife, and asks the character to spatter some blood onto the leaves. She then delicately tastes the blood and enters a brief trance-like state.

Characters who refuse the reading receive quizzical looks from the Kariv and cause Cana's attitude (initially indifferent) to worsen toward them.

The second stage consists largely of small talk. Here the characters can use Charisma (Persuasion) checks to improve Cana's attitude as normal.

In the third stage, Cana carefully probes the characters' story. Her skill at truth-seeking forces characters who attempt to hold back information to succeed on a Charisma (Deception) check contested by Cana's Wisdom (Insight) check in order to avoid having to either lie or reveal the information. Any lie she detects, either through krinomancy or a successful Wisdom (Insight) check, immediately worsens Cana's attitude (a character who succeeds on a DC 21 Wisdom [Insight] check notes her reaction), although she does not explicitly acknowledge her insight or pursue any hidden information.

She also asks why she should help the characters. Mentioning a quest to save Levoča worsens her attitude, because its residents are so hostile to the Kariv. Talking about defeating the zmey neither improves nor worsens her attitude, for she regards it as part of the Margreve. Saving the thieving girl Vidanya likewise leaves her indifferent—but offering to save her hapless brother makes Cana much more sympathetic, improving her attitude by one step.

If Cana is inclined to share information, she explains that once a person has stolen from a dragon, that person is known and hunted by the dragon and its kin—simply killing the zmey will only trigger another creature to continue the pursuit. The Kariv incantation, and its zmey sacrifice, offer the only route to remove the stain of thievery permanently.

Finally, in the fourth stage, Cana reveals the results of her readings. She turns to each character and refers elliptically to a shameful secret, action, or thought in their past, usually something that occurred in or near the Margreve. She says little about the event itself but implies it's important. Characters who admit culpability in the event—even if not detailing it—earn the group one boon. Those who deny the truth worsen her attitude toward them, while those who remain silent are not affected. When appropriate, Cana's reading should offer hints about atonement or overcoming the character's inner demons.

After this step in the process, assuming that she is indifferent or friendly toward the characters, Cana explains the *Zmeytrap* incantation (see Part 4) and provides directions to the Legion Oak. For each boon they have earned, she adds some advice: the characters can choose to either substitute one of Cana's skills for their own on a single ability check while performing the incantation, or they can add a +2 bonus to any one of their skill checks. She also recommends tricking the zmey into breathing fire on the Legion Oak and then battling from its branches, which will provide assistance.

Moreover, Cana tells the characters where to find the necessary foci in the Heart's Rushfens. If the characters lack a means to reach the Heart quickly, Cana suggests beseeching Baba Ludva for help.

If Cana is friendly and if the players have done a particularly good job roleplaying the encounter, she teaches them a short chant that reduces the forest's anger by one step (see Part 4).

Story Award: If the characters make Cana friendly, award them 3,900 XP. Also, award them 450 XP for each boon they earn from Cana.

THE CRONE'S BAIT

The characters most likely seek the Spider Crone to find Vidanya, but they might also need a way to reach the Heart quickly.

Once the characters arrive in the Hag's Tooth Hills, they find her burrow after 4 hours of searching and a successful DC 25 Wisdom (Perception) check. For a check total less than 25, increase the time by 1 hour for every 2 by which the check is less than 25, to a maximum of 9 hours for a check total of 15 or lower.

> The rocky outcroppings of the Hag's Tooth Hills lie among the more barren corners of the Margreve with gnarled pines worming their way into the joints of the moss-covered stones. Lizards bask in the relative abundance of sunlight while spiderwebs overflow from the larger crevices.
>
> The path meanders among the pines and suddenly opens into a small clearing. A crude lean-to made of branches lashed together by fine silken strands nestles between two outcroppings. Inside it, a girl matching Vidanya's descripton—pale, strikingly beautiful, long blonde hair—sits like a child on the ground, intently sewing patches into a bright quilt. A large iron pot gurgles and steams next to her.

The structure is visible only within 60 feet.

Baba Ludva has cursed **Vidanya** (see page 180); the girl ignores the characters while continuing to sew patches onto the quilt. Next to her sits an ogre's pot.

Terrain: The lean-to, a 5-foot-square structure, stands at the corner of two vertical stone walls, each 20 feet across and 10 feet tall. Other outcroppings produce a rough circle 60 feet across. The entrance to Baba Ludva's burrow, a 5-foot-wide trap door rigged to open and shut by pulling the spider webs below, lies adjacent to the structure. Its shaft descends vertically 30 feet and opens into a 40-foot-diameter, web-filled chamber (treat as a *web* spell) with a crude bed and a functioning—though filthy—magical workshop. A warren of web-filled tunnels surrounds the chamber.

Baba Ludva has also used her Ensnare action option to spread webs in a 50-foot circle around her burrow (detectable with a successful DC 29 Wisdom [Perception] check).

Creatures: Like her sisters, **Baba Ludva** (see page 179) long ago traded her vila powers and her beauty for a darker end. Becoming something akin to a night hag, Ludva gained power over others' dreams, while she lost her own as she developed an unexpected kinship with

dreamless spiders. The crone ultimately seeks to enter the forest's dreams and claim them for her own.

Ludva appears to be an emaciated, gray-skinned old woman with tangled gray hair and pools of blackness instead of eyes. Clothes that touch her body immediately disintegrate into rags.

The crone's web of vermin spies noticed Manje stirring, and so she spirited Vidanya away from Levoča, intending to offer her to the zmey in return for help with her plan.

This left the girl in a permanent dream, rendering her nearly mindless but pliable to the crone's every whim (curing this condition requires Baba Ludva's death or a *remove curse* spell). She is unconcerned with her bait sitting in the open, since the zmey's wrath cannot be sated without the girl's soul. Note that the Vidanya is also immune to attempts to locate her through scrying.

The crone's minions, four phase spiders, hide in the surrounding outcroppings (giving them advantage on Dexterity [Stealth] checks). They turn ethereal as soon as they spot the characters, and one of them reports back to Ludva. One other spider grapples Vidanya and carries her inside the burrow.

Development: Baba Ludva regards Vidanya as a useful tool, but she will happily listen to the characters.

The crone begins hostile toward the characters but can be influenced by successful Charisma (Persuasion) checks. In exchange for Vidanya's soul, she initially demands another soul to place inside her heartstone, and she refuses to negotiate unless the characters improve her attitude. In that case, she settles for the characters vowing an oath to bring her sap from the Margreve's dreaming Heart (see Part 4), for which she provides a *treebleed bucket* (see page 138). She warns the characters that tapping the tree will anger it, so they should wait to do so until they are ready to leave.

If the characters defeat Baba Ludva, she retreats into the burrow and uses Charisma (Deception) to convince the characters that she can kill Vidanya while her soul is trapped. She still attempts to drive a hard bargain, although she will ultimately trade the girl for her life. If the characters earn her friendship, the crone gives them her two *salted webs* (see page 181) to assist them in their mission.

Treasure: Vidanya has just finished sewing a *quilted bridge* (see page 181). Next to her is an *ogre's pot* (see page 180). The laboratory inside the burrow contains a *treebleed bucket* and two *salted webs*. Ludva's heartstone is an opal worth 1,800 gp.

Story Award: If the characters rescue Vidanya without violence, award them XP as if they had defeated Baba Ludva in combat.

Part 3: Into the Heart

The characters' quest to retrieve the incantation components now takes them to the Eastern Heart of the Margreve. The following encounters can be completed in any order. If the characters travel magically through the Margreve, the forest's power and Avigna's madness divert them to the rusalka's lair, regardless of their intended destination.

A THIRD CRONE AND OTHER EASTER EGGS

This adventure uses a third Spider Crone; the characters might have already encountered two of her sisters. If they had particularly memorable encounters with either of them, consider replacing this Spider Crone with one of her more familiar sisters, although this will require some thought as to her (nefarious) machinations, or at least allow their dealings to influence Ludva's attitude.

As the final stage of this book's adventure sequence, "The Vengeful Dragon" offers an opportunity to involve some of the characters' old friends and enemies. Here are a few possibilities:

- *The Honey Queen*: The queen's honey is a necessary component for the Zmeytrap incantation.
- *Challenge of the Fang*: If the characters won the challenge, reduce the forest's anger by one step in the final encounter. Otherwise, increase it by one step.
- *The Griffon Hatchling Heist*: Lesharrkk might assist the characters in traveling quickly around the Margreve.
- *Gall of the Spider Crone*: The characters' dealings with the other Kariv could influence Mama Cana.
- *Grandmother's Fire*: The Zmeytrap incantaton requires a match lit using Baba Yaga's cinderskull.

THE WOMAN SCORNED

> The overwhelming stench of the Rushfens—cloying algae, swamp gases, and decay—blankets the earth as completely as the two-foot-thick layer of thick, muddy water that lies beneath. Above, the great trees of the Margreve's Heart grasp at each other from the isolated low hummocks on which they perch.
>
> Buried in the gurgling muck are a myriad of tree boughs and husks. Sometimes this debris cordons off a deep pool as still as the winter sky; sometimes it forms the sides of channels through which water hurtles as if down a mountainside. The treacherous footing of this ever-changing landscape stretches for miles.

The Rushfens are very difficult terrain, reducing overland travel speed to only 1 mile per hour. This rate increases to 2 miles per hour if the characters have a *quilted bridge* or similar magic that enables them to bypass obstacles.

Cana's directions (or the Margreve's magic) lead the characters to the lair of the rusalka Avigna, which lies 6 miles inside the fens. She rests inside a particularly large and brackish pool, nearly 30 feet across and just as deep. The muddy water provides total cover after only 5 feet, but allow the characters to make DC 21 Wisdom (Perception) checks to trace an underwater creature's movements by the water's ripples and waves. The surrounding swamp consists mostly of shallow bog (difficult terrain, and Dexterity [Acrobatics] and Dexterity [Stealth] checks have a –2 penalty), with a couple channels of rapids (4 feet deep). Medium characters who try to cross the channels without swimming must succeed on a DC 17 Strength (Athletics) check or be knocked prone. Small creatures must swim.

Creature: Many years ago, the Kariv girl **Avigna** (see page 178) sang sweet songs to a zmey for many days—and helped herself to some coins from the dragon's hoard, which caused the creature to become enraged and pursue her. Although Avigna's kinfolk hid the girl from the dragon for weeks, her beloved nonetheless denounced Avigna as cursed, and the distraught girl eventually threw herself into the Rushfens. Days later she rose as a rusalka. Now insane, she desires the zmey's love again. If she discovers that Vidanya is being hunted by the dragon, she focuses all her attention on the girl.

Development: If the characters defeat Avigna, her body crumbles, leaving a soft leather pouch where her heart was. This is a *scorn pouch* (see page 180), which is a focus for the Zmeytrap incantation.

KILLER VINES

Near the edge of the Rushfens, the characters find the following scene:

> A dense copse of dead trees lies ahead of you. Some of the trunks have fallen, leaning at odd angles, while inky black vines choke others.
>
> The dead trees permit one of the few clear views of the sky this deep in the forest, and the undergrowth runs wild here. These lesser plants and the thicket of trees obscure the grove's center from view.

Light undergrowth fills the ground throughout the 80–foot-diameter copse (treat the area as difficult terrain, and Dexterity [Acrobatics] and Dexterity [Stealth] checks have a –2 penalty). A creature or object has total cover against any other creature farther than 20 feet away.

Creatures: A dangerous **vine lord** (see *Tome of Beasts*) and three **tendril puppets** (see *Tome of Beasts*) destroyed these trees and now inhabit the grove's center. The vine lord and the tendril puppets strike quickly to crush any life they encounter.

SALT OF THE EARTH

Inside—and under—the Eastern Heart lies a great salt dome. The mineral reaches the surface at the Salt Springs, which feeds the Rushfens at their southern tip and attracts both the forest's residents and alchemists:

> The cloudy water of a strange spring bubbles up through a crusty, oozing sore in the rock. The air smells sharp and tangy, and the trees here huddle close to the ground, blanketed in a thick brown moss. The water trickles slowly northward in a series of stagnant pools layered on salt-encrusted stones.

The spring fills a single 5-foot square; the surrounding terrain is relatively clear.

Creature: The Margreve's strange energy recently animated a dangerous guardian here, a **salt golem** (see *Tome of Beasts*). It attacks any creature gathering salt from the spring. The creature glides out of the salt dome, emerging as an enormous humanoid.

Development: The golem focuses its attacks on creatures that try to gather salt. It will not pursue those who retreat. By scraping the nearby deposits, characters can gather 1 pound of salt in 2 hours. The material is worth 5 sp per pound in most towns or cities.

PART 4: BENEATH THE OAK

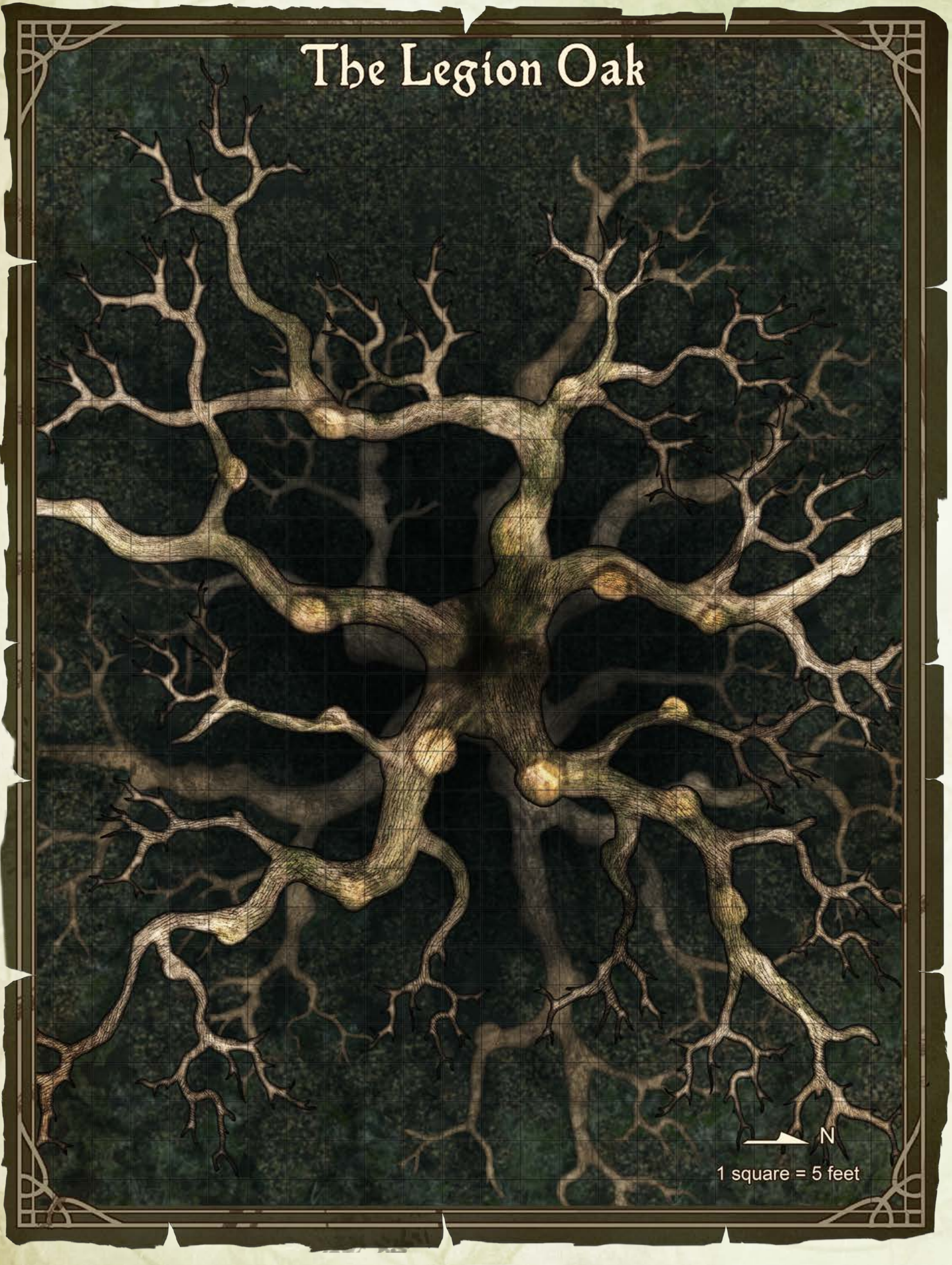
Cana's directions send the characters deep into the Margreve's Eastern Heart, where they perform the Zmeytrap incantation (see page 181) under the forest's greatest tree: the Legion Oak.

> The shadowed stillness of the Margreve's Heart intensifies toward its center, where a monumental oak, encrusted with dozens of cancerous galls and burls, rises at least two hundred feet above the forest floor and spreads its writhing branches—many thicker than ordinary oaks—even farther horizontally, creeping up and down, left and right along the ground.
>
> A two-foot-thick layer of leaves and fallen branches blankets the ground below, making the terrain treacherous. Dry and dead saplings dot the ground, their lives cut short by the thick canopy above.

While the characters perform the Zmeytrap incantation, keep track of the number of failed skill checks, since they have consequences in the next encounter. Each time the characters get a failure on a check, the oak's trunk groans, the galls creak, and the fallen leaves crackle.

CREATURE: After 6 hours, the **zmey** (see *Tome of Beasts*) finally approaches from the east. Unless attacked, Manje moves as quickly as possible toward Vidanya, squeezing through the branches where necessary.

TERRAIN: The Legion Oak's branches snake up, down, and around. The map shows only the lowest layer of branches thick enough to walk on (on average, 5 feet above ground). Before the zmey awakens the Heart (see below), moving through the tree's space requires care (treat it as difficult terrain). But once it wakes, the tree assists characters, and they can move at full speed with no penalty. For simplicity, assume that a creature can locate a branch leading upward 1d6 × 5 feet away from



The Legion Oak

1 square = 5 feet

their current location. Such branches always lead directly toward or away from the trunk, and they rise 1d10 × 5 feet before becoming too thin to support creatures.

The lower branches are all solid enough that moving between them requires Large creatures to squeeze. Leaves densely pack the upper layers of branches, providing total cover to creatures 20 feet away.

The dead leaves and branches covering the ground make it difficult terrain for Medium or smaller creatures, which also take a –2 penalty on Dexterity (Acrobatics) and Dexterity (Stealth) checks.

Creatures larger than Medium cannot fly under the tree unless they can hover.

While they await Manje's arrival, the characters can clear this terrain or set traps in any reasonable way. Clearing leaves and branches from a 5-foot square takes 15 minutes of work. With 2 hours of work, characters can also use the fallen logs and dead saplings to create barricades, deadfall traps (DC 15 Wisdom [Survival] to create; DC 12 Dexterity save to avoid; damage varies according to depth of the pit and what is at the bottom of it), an unstable log trap (DC 15 Wisdom [Survival] to create; DC 12 Dexterity save or target is knocked prone), or any other reasonable contraption they can imagine (using Wisdom [Survival]).

Development: While subject to the Zmeytrap, Manje uses suboptimal tactics. He pays no heed to terrain or traps (even if he must squeeze) as long as he ends each turn closer to Vidanya. Once attacked, he immediately breathes fire (see below). Until Manje throws off the Zmeytrap incantation, he must use a move action each turn to approach Vidanya (or to pass the circle). Once he saves against the incantation, he focuses all his attacks on a single character, preferably a spellcaster. Even without the use of the Zmeytrap incantation, Manje's obsession with Vidanya makes him fight to the death.

Once Manje uses his breath weapon, the forest awakens immediately and snuffs out the flame, cutting the damage in half. His breath weapon then becomes useless for the remainder of the battle (and this allows it an immediate save to escape the Zmeytrap incantation).

Moreover, the tree itself turns its anger on Manje. Any time Manje begins his turn adjacent to a large branch, the tree attempts to grapple the zmey (+10 to hit, escape DC 17). If the attempt is successful, the zmey cannot move on that turn, but it can escape by hitting the branch (AC 16) for at least 15 damage.

Treasure: Manje carries his remaining hoard in a tree bag (treat as a *bag of holding*, except the bag opens into a hollow tree deep in the Margreve) looped around one of his talons. It contains 2,500 gp, 2,650 sp, three emeralds (250 gp each), a golden hair rope (a variant *rope of climbing* that coils into a single golden hair), a *goblin shield* (see page 180), and a *figurine of wondrous power* (bronze griffon).

THE HEART AWAKENS

> As the zmey thunders to the ground, its necks thrashing violently but impotently, the forest itself breathes deeply. The Legion Oak's black galls transform into wooden cavalry while the rustling leaves above begin an angry whisper, animating into creatures of babbling leafy mouths. Rhythmic tremors like colossal footsteps shake the ground, and around you, the soil separates as smooth, rock-hard tree trunks wielding branches as sharp as swords rise slowly from below.
>
> The Margreve has awakened.

The angry Margreve slowly but steadily animates its minions in an attempt to drive the characters away: harnessing the forest's power has consequences, especially if the act is done crudely. If the characters leave immediately, they can avoid most of the danger. If they stay—perhaps to extract the sap from the oak for Baba Ludva—the danger increases.

The Heart's degree of anger determines how rapidly the danger builds. It begins as hostile toward the heroes. Two failed skill checks during the incantation incites the forest to actively target the characters with attacks. Using the treebleed bucket to collect sap takes 3 rounds and also causes the forest to attack the characters.

If the characters know and use Cana's chant, that act improves the forest's disposition toward them by one step.

Creatures: The round after the zmey falls, a **treant** appears at the north edge of the map and six **green hussars** (see page 100) emerge from the tree's galls.

Development: The treant pursues the characters deliberately, animating trees to force them to move away from the Legion Oak. The hussars use their mobility to isolate spellcasters.

If the characters move at least 400 feet from the ritual circle and continue to move steadily away, the Heart sends no more foes after this first wave. If the characters remain in proximity, more and more creatures animate. Continue to throw difficult encounters at the characters until they realize that they cannot calm the Heart's ire. The purpose of this sequence is not to kill the characters but to demonstrate to them the danger and power of the Margreve's Heart and to teach them that using it carries inevitable, and ultimately deadly, risks. Large groups of creatures with low challenge ratings are unlikely to cause harm quickly, so they are the safest foes to use.

If the characters agreed to retrieve the Heart's sap for the Spider Crone, she shadows them ethereally throughout their battle. If they break their oath, she materializes and demands they fulfill it, attacking them if they refuse. The Heart's minions ignore her, since the forest does not regard her as an enemy.

Concluding the Adventure

If the characters defeat Manje, save Petrek and Vidanya, and escape the Heart, they can return to Levoča without major incident. The grateful townsfolk hail them as heroes but have little to offer as a reward.

If Manje survives, he devours Vidanya, scars Petrek as a warning to others, and punishes Levoča for the characters' insolence. The heroes might have another opportunity to confront him during his assault.

If the characters deliver the Heart's sap to Baba Ludva, she regards them as allies for bringing her mysterious plans one step closer to fruition. Even so, the characters have likely angered the Margreve, and they would be wise to make amends quickly.

New Creatures and Magic Items

The monsters and magic items introduced in this adventure are detailed below.

AVIGNA

Medium undead, chaotic evil

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 130 (20d8 + 40)

Speed 30 ft., swim 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
17 (+3)	13 (+1)	14 (+2)	11 (+0)	15 (+2)	20 (+5)

Saving Throws Con +6, Cha +9

Skills Insight +6, Perception +10

Damage Immunities necrotic, poison; piercing and slashing from nonmagical weapons

Condition Immunities charmed, frightened, paralyzed, poisoned

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 20

Languages Common

Challenge 10 (5,900 XP)

Rapid Caster (4/day). Avigna can use her bonus action to cast a cantrip.

Withered Tresses. If a rusalka is kept out of water for 24 consecutive hours, its hair and body dry into desiccated swamp weeds and the creature is utterly destroyed.

Innate Spellcasting. Avigna's spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 17, +9 to hit). She can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: *control water, suggestion, tongues, water walk* (can be ended freely at will)

1/day: *confusion*

Spellcasting. Avigna is an 8th-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 17, +9 to hit with spell attacks). She has the following spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *dancing lights, message, ray of frost*

1st level (4 slots): *hideous laughter, magic missile, sleep*

2nd level (3 slots): *hold person, mirror image, scorching ray* (deals cold damage)

3rd level (3 slots): *fireball* (deals cold damage), *protection from energy*

4th level (2 slots): *watery sphere, night terrors* (see *Heroes Handbook*)

ACTIONS

Breathless Kiss. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* the target is grappled (escape DC 13), and the rusalka draws all the air from the target's lungs with a kiss. If the rusalka has movement remaining, she drags the grappled creature into deep water, where it begins suffocating.

Drowning Hair (1/Day). The rusalka's long hair tangles around a creature the rusalka has grappled. The creature takes 33 (6d10) necrotic damage, or half damage with a successful DC 15 Constitution saving throw. In addition, until it escapes the rusalka's grapple, it is restrained and has disadvantage on Strength checks to escape the grapple.

LEGENDARY ACTIONS

Avigna can take 1 legendary action, choosing from the options below. Only one legendary action option can be used at a time and only at the end of another creature's turn. She regains her legendary actions at the start of her turn.

Breathless Kiss. Avigna moves up to half her movement without prompting opportunity attacks and makes a Breathless Kiss attack.

Intrinsic Casting. Avigna uses one of her at-will spells.

BABA LUDVA

Medium fiend, chaotic neutral

Armor Class 17 (natural armor)

Hit Points 135 (18d8 + 54)

Speed 30 ft.,

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	15 (+2)	16 (+3)	16 (+3)	15 (+2)	20 (+5)

Saving Throws Con +6, Cha +8

Skills Arcana +7, Deception +8, Insight +5, Perception +5, Stealth +5

Damage Immunities cold, fire

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks not made with silvered weapons

Condition Immunities charmed, frightened

Senses darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 16

Languages Abyssal, Celestial, Common, Infernal

Challenge 8 (3,900 XP)

Magic Resistance. Baba Ludva has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

Innate Spellcasting. Baba Ludva's spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 16, +8 to hit). She can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: *detect magic, magic missile, web*

2/day: *black tentacles, invisibility, plane shift* (self only), *ray of enfeeblement, sleep*

1/day: *curse of incompetence* (see *Heroes Handbook*)

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Baba Ludva makes two claw attacks.

Claws (Hag Form Only). *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 13 (2d8 + 4) slashing damage.

Change Shape. The hag magically polymorphs into a Small or Medium female humanoid, or back into her true form. Her statistics are the same in each form. Any equipment she is wearing or carrying isn't transformed. She reverts to her true form if she dies.

Etherealness. The hag magically enters the Ethereal Plane from the Material Plane, or vice versa. To do so, the hag must have a heartstone in her possession.

Unsettling Presence. Each creature that is within 30 feet of Baba Ludva and can see her must succeed on a DC 17 Charisma saving throw or be frightened of her. The creature can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on a success. Once the creature succeeds, it is immune to this effect for 24 hours.

Nightmare Haunting (1/Day). While on the Ethereal Plane, the hag magically touches a sleeping humanoid on the Material Plane. A *protection from evil and good* spell cast on the target prevents this contact, as does a *magic circle*. For as long as the contact persists, the target has dreadful visions. If these visions last for at least 1 hour, the target gains no benefit from its rest, and its hit point maximum is reduced by 5 (1d10). If this effect reduces the target's hit point maximum to 0, the target dies, and if the target was evil, its soul is trapped in the hag's soul bag. The reduction to the target's hit point maximum lasts until removed by the *greater restoration* spell or similar magic.

Ensnare (Recharge 5–6). *Ranged Spell Attack:* +9 to hit, range 60 ft., one target. *Hit:* The target is restrained by ghostly webbing. While restrained in this way, the target is invisible to all creatures except Baba Ludva. A creature restrained by Ensnare can escape by using an action to make a successful DC 14 Strength check, or the webs can be attacked and destroyed (AC 10, 5 hp).

FULL-GROWN ZMEY HEADLING

Large dragon, chaotic evil

Armor Class 17 (natural armor)

Hit Points 133 (14d10 + 56)

Speed 30 ft., fly 50 ft., swim 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
19 (+4)	12 (+1)	18 (+4)	10 (+0)	16 (+3)	10 (+0)

Saving Throws Con +8, Wis +7, Cha +4

Skills Perception +7

Damage Resistances cold, fire

Condition Immunities paralyzed, unconscious

Senses darkvision 90 ft., passive Perception 17

Languages Common, Draconic, Sylvan

Challenge 10 (5,900 XP)

Amphibious. The zmey headling can breathe air and water.

Regeneration. The zmey headling regains 10 hit points at the start of its turn. This trait doesn't function if the headling took acid or fire damage since the end of its previous turn. It dies if it starts its turn with 0 hit points and doesn't regenerate.

Legendary Resistance (1/day). If the zmey headling fails a saving throw, it can count it as a success instead.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The zmey heading makes three bite attacks (one per head) and one claws or tail attack.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 17 (2d12 + 4) piercing damage.

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 15 (2d10 + 4) slashing damage.

Tail. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 13 (2d8 + 4) bludgeoning damage.

Fire Breath (Recharge 5–6). The zmey headling exhales fire in a 30-foot cone. Each creature in that area takes 16 (3d10) fire damage, or half damage with a successful DC 16 Dexterity saving throw.

MAMA CANA

Medium humanoid (human), lawful neutral

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 42 (12d6)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8 (–1)	12 (+1)	11 (+0)	15 (+2)	18 (+4)	16 (+3)

Saving Throws Wis +6, Cha +5

Skills Arcana +6, History +6, Insight +8, Nature +6, Perception +8, Religion +4

Senses passive Perception 15

Languages Common, Sylvan, Elvish, Kariv

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

ACTIONS

Quarterstaff. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +1 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 3 (1d6 – 1) bludgeoning damage, or 4 (1d8 – 1) bludgeoning damage if used with two hands.

VIDANYA

Medium humanoid (human), neutral

Armor Class 10

Hit Points 6 (1d8 + 2)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	10 (+0)	14 (+2)	10 (+0)	10 (+0)	18 (+5)

Senses passive Perception 10

Languages Common

Challenge 0 (10 XP)

ACTIONS

Club. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +2 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 3 (1d4) bludgeoning damage.

GOBLIN SHIELD

Shield, rare (requires attunement)

This shield is wrought to resemble a goblin's head. Three times per day as a bonus action, the goblin's head can be commanded to attack, biting with the owner's attack bonus and dealing 2d4 piercing damage. The object regains all uses at the next dawn.

OGRE'S POT

Wondrous item, rare

This cauldron boils anything placed inside it, whether venison or timber, to a vaguely edible paste. Also, when commanded (a bonus action), the pot rolls directly to its master (speed 40 feet), following the shortest possible path and knocking down any obstacles or creatures in its path, dealing 7 (2d6) bludgeoning damage and knocking the target prone; a creature that makes a successful DC 12 Dexterity saving throw avoids the pot completely.

SCORN POUCH

Wondrous item, uncommon

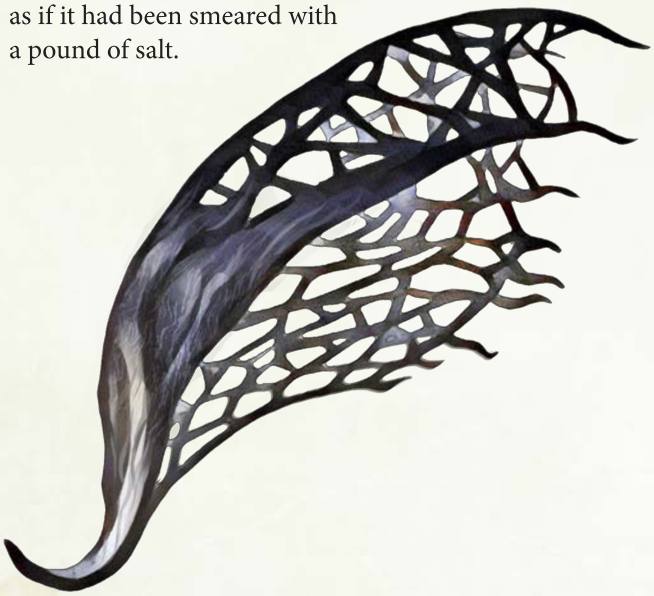
The heart of a lover scorned turns black and potent. So too does this small leather pouch darken whenever it comes near to a person who would speak ill of you: the pouch's color turns from brown to black when a hostile creature passes within 10 feet.

SALTED WEB

Wondrous item, rare (requires attunement)

When thrown, this shimmering packet of black silk explodes into a tangle of black webbing. Caustic salt coats the sticky webs. For most purposes, this effect acts exactly like a net. A *salted web* is especially potent against zmey: a successful attack wraps the web around one of the zmey's heads, which then takes a −2 penalty to attack rolls with that head's bite attack. (The head can escape if the zmey succeeds on a DC 21 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check, made in place of a bite attack.)

In addition, a *salted web* prevents a severed zmey head from maturing into a headling, as if it had been smeared with a pound of salt.



QUILTED BRIDGE

Wondrous item, rare

A practiced hand sewed together a collection of cloth remnants from magical garb to make this colorful and warm blanket. Unfold it, pour out three drops of wine in tribute to its maker, and it becomes a 10-foot-long bridge as sturdy as steel. You can fold the bridge back up as an action.

ZMEYTRAP

5th-level enchantment (incantation)

Effective Level 8th

Skill Checks DC 20 Wisdom (Survival), 3 successes; DC 20 Intelligence (Arcana), 3 successes; DC 20 Charisma (Deception) or DC 20 Wisdom (Insight), 2 successes

Casting Time 2 hours (see text)

Range Old Margreve Forest

Components V, S, M

The Zmeytrap incantation requires a minimum of four participants. They must supply four items: 1 pound of salt, a known thief of dragon's treasure, a creeping vine of surpassing age, and a silver bell marked with draconic runes, to properly focus the incantation.

Target one zmey

Duration see text

The Zmeytrap incantation focuses a zmey's greed and rage into an unquenchable obsession to attack a thief or egg-napper. The casters must use salt to draw a ritual circle around the Legion Oak, the greatest tree in the Margreve, within which the thief (and no others) must remain. The incantation draws out some of the Margreve's spirit to compel the zmey to race directly toward the victim. The compulsion takes hold in the zmey after 2 hours, but at least one caster must continue the performing the incantation until the zmey has come close enough to see the victim.

The zmey must succeed on a Charisma saving throw (DC 15 + primary caster's Charisma modifier), and the save is made with disadvantage. On a failed save, the zmey can take no actions other than movement unless it is provoked by an attack or other hostile action. It can respond to such a threat but must do so without cunning or rational thought. For example, it can use its breath weapon but cannot choose to leave plants unaffected, it ignores difficult terrain, and it cannot succeed on any Wisdom (Perception) check with a DC higher than 10. The zmey can repeat the save at the end of each round after it is attacked, ending the effect on itself on a success.

The Heart of Derende

By Jon Sawatsky

Heart within the heart; do you beat in a dream of life or
Does your body yet live?

—Archdruid Methensna of the Margreve

"The Heart of Derende" is an encounter site intended for characters of 10th level or higher. If the characters have not experienced "The Fingers of Derende" or "The Tongue of Derende," see page 63 for background information to help establish the situation.

OVERVIEW

In the silent and shadowy depths of the Margreve, the veil between Midgard and the Shadow Realm thins. There, in the center of the elder forest, the heart of Derende sits petrified in an ancient grove. The heart is made of steel-hard wood, and it grows from the trunk of a massive tree. The shadows are unnaturally long in the heart's grove, and the animals and other denizens of the forest avoid the place.

Once a year, when the stars are aligned in a certain way, the heart of Derende beats once. When it does, the entire forest creaks and shifts—the canopy sways as if a great wind blows through it, and all light temporarily disappears from the forest floor.

The fey of the Shadow Realm gather for this annual event. In the days leading to the heart's single beat, the shadow fey celebrate; they hold feasts and sing dark songs in honor of Derende. The festivities reach a climax when the heart finally beats, and one of the celebrants is transformed by the Primal Tender's lingering magic. The avatar of Derende is selected randomly from among those present for the heart's beating. The avatar returns to the Shadow Realm, where it lopes through the wilds, devouring what it will.

This year, however, much to the disappointment of the fey present for the event, a humble insect was selected as the avatar. The creature grew massive and fierce, and drove away the celebrants. Now, having made a lair in the heart of the Margreve, this Derendian moth abomination terrorizes the residents of the forest.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

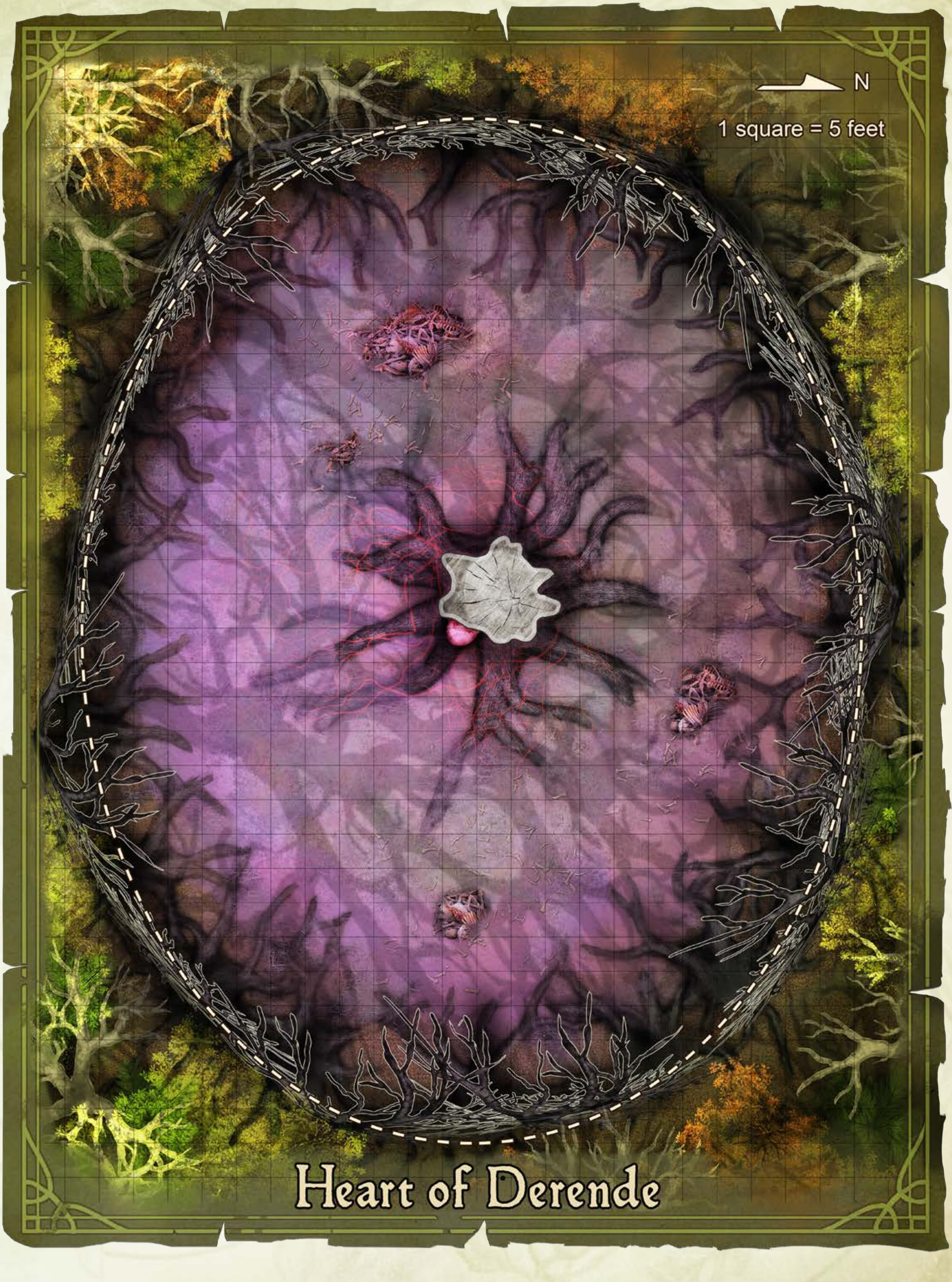
Two suggestions for getting the characters involved with the Heart of Derende are offered below.

HORROR IN THE SKY

The Margreve is being terrorized by a huge moth-like abomination. It flies above the forest canopy, swooping down to feast on fleeing creatures below. The abomination has even devoured several trade caravans destined for Zobeck. The party is implored by a merchant's association to end the creature's reign of destruction.

BAD LUCK

The characters are traveling through the Margreve on other business when they come across a group of shadow fey fleeing through the woods. The fey (an **enchantress** and two **guardians**; see *Tome of Beasts*) give dire warning of a powerful monstrosity lurking in a nearby grove and then try to flee. Depending on the party's actions, the fey might offer information about the events in the Heart of Derende's grove. The party is soon thereafter assaulted by the monster, which returns to its lair once it is wounded.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1 square = 5 feet
Heart of Derende

Lair of the Abomination

The abomination that the characters are out to vanquish makes its lair in the sacred site that is dominated by the Heart of Derende.

1. PERIMETER

> A wall of coal-black trees rises before you. The trees form a barrier that encircles some place hidden within. The sky is obscured by a shadowy canopy that rises high above you. Out of the center of this fortification, a single enormous tree lunges up beyond the roof of the forest. Its surface is covered in angular glyphs that rise and fade through the bark of the tree. The air here seems a little hard to breathe because of a fine dust that seems suspended in it.

The perimeter of the site is entirely dark regardless of the time of day.

Gaining Entrance. The shadowy trees fortify the lair of the abomination. They offer no visible portal through which a creature might pass. Though the barrier they form is completely solid, the trees are made from mundane wood, and can chopped through, burned, or otherwise affected by magic as normal. Encourage the characters to devise their own way of carving through the walls around the abomination's lair.

The abomination can move through the wall of trees without hindrance; the branches and trunks crack and writhe aside as it passes.

Dust. The air for 200 feet around the grove is saturated with dust from the moth abomination's wings. It coats the throat and lungs and makes breathing uncomfortable. A creature gains 1 level of exhaustion for each hour it spends breathing the air around and inside the lair.

2. THE HEART TREE

> Inside the wall of trees, a cavernous area stretches before you. The floor here is covered in rainbow-colored dust. The decaying remains of half-eaten animals lie strewn throughout the area. At the center of the place, an enormous wooden heart grows from the side of the great tree.

Heart of Derende. The remaining magic of the Primal Tender is strongest here near its heart. Any creature that touches the heart must make a successful DC 16 Constitution saving throw or acquire one random Derendian mutation (see page 186) permanently. A creature can choose to fail this saving throw. Once a mutation is acquired, it can be removed only with a *greater restoration* spell.

The heart is made from wood and can be destroyed with little effort. It will regrow within 1 year of its destruction. This regrowth cannot be stopped, but a *wish* spell extends the period of regrowth to 100 years.

Creatures. This place is the lair of the **Derendian moth abomination** (see page 184).

> Clinging upside down to a wooden branch high above, a large moth-like creature regards you with its faceted eyes. Its wings are rainbow-hued, and its body is likewise colored. From its mouth, the creature extends a dozen long, pink and black tentacles with fat white suction cups. The tentacles writhe around a great black beak that glistens in the dim light. The creature spreads its wings, revealing a dizzying pattern of purple, pink, and blue. Strange, fine-haired appendages hang limply from its hind quarters.

New Creatures and Derendian Mutations

The monsters introduced in this adventure are detailed below, as well as a selection of Derendian mutations.

DERENDIAN MOTH ABOMINATION

Huge monstrosity, neutral evil

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 210 (20d12 + 80)

Speed 30 ft., fly 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	20 (+5)	18 (+4)	16 (+3)	14 (+2)	10 (+0)

Saving Throws Dex +9

Skills Stealth +9

Damage Immunities cold, necrotic

Condition Immunities frightened

Senses darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 16

Languages —

Challenge 12 (8,400 XP)

Antennae. The Derendian moth abomination has advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on smell.

Assimilation. The Derendian moth abomination has six tentacles. Whenever it takes 30 or more damage in a single turn, one of its tentacles is shorn from its body.

Whenever a non-undead creature drops to 0 hit points within 200 feet of the Derendian moth abomination, it can use its reaction to sprout one additional tentacle, up to a maximum of ten. Additional tentacles atrophy after one day.

Legendary Resistance (3/Day). If the Derendian moth abomination fails a saving throw, it can choose to succeed instead.

Magic Weapons. The Derendian moth abomination's weapon attacks are magical.

Unbound. The Derendian moth abomination's movement is unaffected by difficult terrain, and spells and other magical effects can neither reduce the target's speed nor cause it to be paralyzed or restrained.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The Derendian moth abomination makes a number of tentacle attacks equal to the number of tentacles it currently possesses, and one beak attack.

Tentacle. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +9 to hit, reach 20 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d8 + 1) bludgeoning damage.

Beak. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +9 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 17 (3d10) piercing damage.

Wings of the Primal Tender (1/day). The Derendian moth abomination teleports to an unoccupied location within 100 feet, leaving a shimmering outline of its wings in its former location. The shimmering wings flap violently before exploding in a rainbow-colored dust cloud covering a 60-foot radius. Any creature caught in the dust cloud must make a successful DC 16 Wisdom saving throw or be reduced to 0 hit points. Creatures reduced to 0 hit points from this effect regenerate 10 hit points at the beginning of their next three turns.

LEGENDARY ACTIONS

The Derendian moth abomination can take 3 legendary actions, choosing from the options below. Only one legendary action can be used at a time, and only at the end of another creature's turn. Spent legendary actions are regained at the start of each turn.

Detect. The abomination makes a Perception check.

Pursue. The abomination moves its flying speed.

Lay Eggs (Costs 2 Actions). The Derendian moth abomination ejects a sticky mass of eggs within 5 feet of itself. At the beginning of the abomination's next turn, the eggs hatch as a **swarm of insects** that attacks the abomination's enemies.

GRAVEDIRT ELEMENTAL

Medium elemental, neutral evil

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 75 (10d8 + 30)

Speed 30 ft., burrow 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	10 (+0)	16 (+3)	7 (–3)	10 (+0)	9 (–1)

Condition Immunities exhaustion, frightened, poisoned

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages —

Challenge 3 (700 XP)

Earth Glide. The gravedirt elemental can burrow through nonmagical, unworked earth and stone. While doing so, the elemental doesn't disturb the material it moves through.

Undead Fortitude. If damage reduces the gravedirt elemental to 0 hit points, it must make a Constitution saving throw with a DC of 5 + the damage taken, unless the damage is radiant or from a critical hit. On a successful save, the gravedirt elemental drops to 1 hit point instead.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The gravedirt elemental makes two slam attacks.

Slam. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (1d8 + 4) bludgeoning damage.

DERENDIAN MUTATIONS

The following Derendian-themed mutations can be used as (dubious) rewards, or dreadful consequences.

Cerebral Roots. Thin roots grow from your brain, through the base of your skull, and down the back of your neck. Your mind is filled with pieces of Derende's memory. You gain advantage on all Intelligence (History) ability checks related to the Margreve.

Green Tentacle. A 1-foot-long, leaf-green tentacle grows from one of your wrists. You gain proficiency with herbalism kits and can use the tentacle in place of a kit. You lose this proficiency if the mutation is removed.

Living Hair. Your hair becomes thin, living vines of any color you choose. You gain proficiency in the Intimidation skill and can command your hair to be styled into any shape. You lose this proficiency if the mutation is removed.

Oaken Teeth. Your teeth become sharp pieces of living oak. You gain the following magical attack action option:

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* (Strength modifier + proficiency bonus) to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 1d4 + Strength modifier piercing damage.

Bloom. Patches of small pale violet flowers bloom on your skin at sunrise each day, wilting and falling to the ground and sunset. The flowers take 1 minute to remove; doing so is not painful, though the skin itches terribly thereafter. The flowers release a calming perfume; as long as a patch of flowers grows from your flesh, you have advantage on saving throws against spells and effects that cause the frightened condition.

Appendix: Forest Monsters

This section contains a variety of new monsters native to the Margreve Forest. Some of these creatures are allies of Margreve's inhabitants while others prey on those who stray too far from the Great Northern Road or too deep into the forest.

BULBOUS VIOLET

An enormous deep purple flower pushes forward on its vines, which are covered in throbbing black protrusions. As it moves, a single protrusion bursts open, spraying a green, sizzling substance all over the forest floor.

Meat Drinkers. Bulbous violets are carnivorous plants. The black growths that cover their vines are filled with acid and pop on impact, dissolving the violets' prey. The plants then stand in the remains and drink in the liquefied gore.

Migrating Predators. Bulbous violets travel in packs that follow warm weather. Although they can survive the cold, most of their prey disappears in the colder months, forcing the plants to travel for food. Sometimes these paths take the plants through farms where the plants attack livestock and people. If the violets find food, they stop their migration, hunting every morsel they can find before moving on. Violets can sense the nearby presence of creatures made of flesh. This magical ability guides their migration route and leads them into unexpected places.

Germinating in Gore. In order to grow, bulbous violet seeds need to be sown in ground that has been covered in the blood, entrails, and corpses of other creatures. When a pack of violets is ready to drop their seeds, they go into areas crowded with prey and begin killing all they can. They attack monster hideouts, animal herds, and even villages to provide enough sustenance for their seeds.

BULBOUS VIOLET

Medium plant, unaligned

Armor Class 12

Hit Points 38 (7d8 + 7)

Speed 20 ft., climb 20 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
15 (+2)	14 (+2)	13 (+1)	2 (–4)	10 (+0)	2 (–4)

Damage Immunities acid

Senses passive Perception 10

Languages —

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

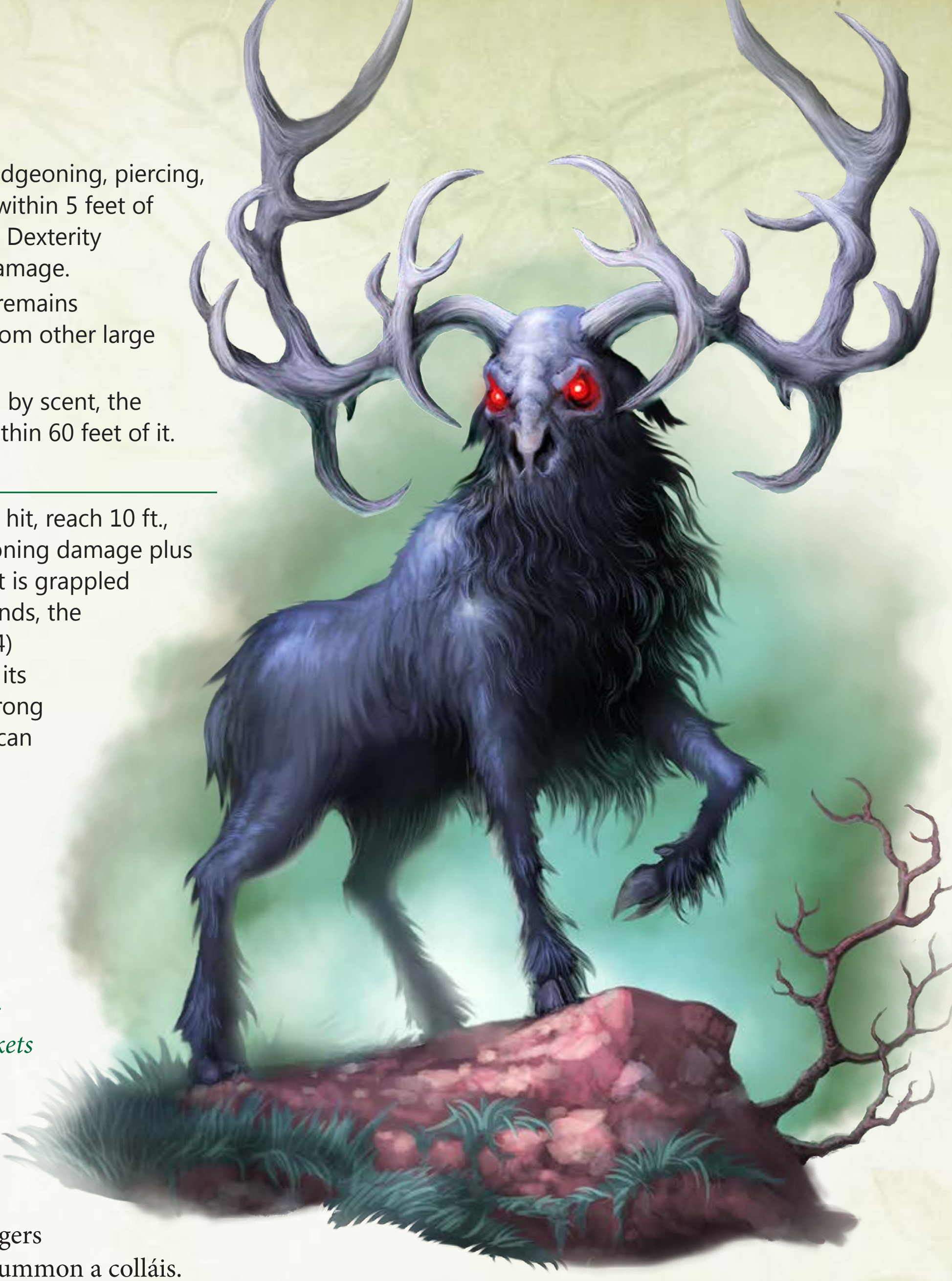
Acid Sacs. When the violet takes bludgeoning, piercing, or slashing damage, each creature within 5 feet of the violet must succeed on a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw or take 2 (1d4) acid damage.

False Appearance. While the violet remains motionless, it is indistinguishable from other large flowering plants.

Flesh Sense. The violet can pinpoint, by scent, the location of flesh-based creatures within 60 feet of it.

ACTIONS

Tendril. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +4 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) bludgeoning damage plus 2 (1d4) acid damage, and the target is grappled (escape DC 12). Until this grapple ends, the target is restrained and takes 2 (1d4) acid damage at the start of each of its turns. The violet has two tendrils strong enough to grapple creatures, each can grapple only one target. If the acid damage reduces the target to 0 hp, the violet regains 7 (2d6) hp.



COLLÁIS

The colláis is a large, deer-like creature covered in thick, black fur. A great rack of antlers grows from its thick skull, whose prominent eye sockets display two red embers for eyes. The monster has no mouth; instead, a coarse beard grows in its place.

Summoned Protector. If a piney village is in danger, the villagers might perform a ritual sacrifice to summon a colláis. Once the ritual is complete, the creature appears in the branches of a nearby tree. It then stalks the village and its surroundings. A colláis returns to its home plane after 24 hours.

COLLÁIS

Large monstrosity, neutral

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 150 (20d10 + 40)

Speed 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
19 (+4)	15 (+2)	14 (+2)	10 (+0)	17 (+3)	13 (+1)

Saving Throws Cha +5

Skills Intimidation +9, Perception +7

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks

Condition Immunities charmed, frightened

Senses darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 17

Languages understands Piney and Sylvan but can't speak

Challenge 10 (5,900 XP)

Impale and Toss. When the colláis hits a Medium or smaller creature with a gore attack, it can use a bonus action to impale and toss the creature. The target must succeed on a DC 16 Strength saving throw or take 11 (2d10) piercing damage and be flung up to 10 feet away from the colláis in a random direction and knocked prone.

Magic Resistance. The colláis has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The colláis makes one gore attack and two hooves attacks.

Gore. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +8 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 15 (2d10 + 4) piercing damage.

Hooves. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 13 (2d8 + 4) bludgeoning damage.

Cry of the Margreve. The colláis sounds a dreadful and reverberating call. Each creature within 100 feet of the colláis that can hear the cry must succeed on a DC 16 Charisma saving throw or be frightened until the end of its next turn. If a creature's saving throw is successful or the effect ends for it, the creature is immune to the colláis's Cry of the Margreve for the next 24 hours. Forest-dwelling beasts and monstrosities with an Intelligence of 4 or lower automatically succeed or fail on this saving throw, depending on the colláis's choice.

GOLEM, VINE

A humanoid-shaped tangle of green vines shambles through a portal and gives a friendly wave.

Druid Servants. Vine golems are constructs created by druids for use as scouts and guardians. These plant-like constructs maintain a psychic connection with their creators, who can see through their eyes and cast spells through them. The golem-creator connection is maintained across the planes of the multiverse and is severed only if the construct or the druid dies. The vine golem is made from a variety of rare plants and flowers found only in the depths of old-growth forests. The process of creating a vine golem is closely guarded by cabals of druids, who will sometimes gift worthy druids with the knowledge in the form of a *manual of vine golems*.

Golems without Creators. When a vine golem's creator dies, the construct carries out the druid's final orders then retreats to the nearest wilderness. Driven by a psyche fractured from the loss of its creator, the vine golem guards the animals and plants of its chosen home with extreme prejudice, attacking all intruders, regardless of any affiliation they might have previously had with its creator.

Construct Nature. A vine golem doesn't require air, food, drink, or sleep.

VINE GOLEM

Medium construct, neutral

Armor Class 14

Hit Points 67 (9d8 + 27)

Speed 30 ft., climb 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	18 (+4)	17 (+3)	6 (–2)	10 (+0)	5 (–3)

Skills Perception +2, Stealth +6

Damage Vulnerabilities slashing

Damage Resistances bludgeoning and piercing from nonmagical attacks not made with adamantine weapons

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, frightened, paralyzed, poisoned

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 12

Languages understands the languages of its creator but can't speak

Challenge 3 (700 XP)

Bound. The vine golem is psychically bound to its creator and can communicate telepathically with its creator as long as neither is incapacitated. In addition, each knows the distance and direction to the other. The golem and its creator don't have to be on the same plane of existence to communicate telepathically, but they do have to be on the same plane to know the distance and direction to each other.

Creator's Eyes and Ears. As a bonus action, the creator can see through the vine golem's eyes and hear what it hears until the start of the creator's next turn, gaining the benefits of the vine golem's darkvision. During this time, the creator is deaf and blind with regard to its own senses. While using the construct's senses, the creator can cast a spell through the vine golem, using those senses to target the spell. The range, area, and effect of the spell are calculated as if the spell originated from the vine golem, not the master, though the master must still cast the spell on the master's turn. Spells that require concentration must be maintained by the master.

Immutable Form. The vine golem is immune to any spell or effect that would alter its form.

Magic Resistance. The vine golem has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

Plant Camouflage. The vine golem has advantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks it makes in any terrain that contains ample obscuring plant life.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The vine golem makes two thorned vine attacks.

Thorned Vine. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +6 to hit, reach 15 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (1d8 + 4) piercing damage, and the target must succeed on a DC 14 Strength saving throw or be pulled 10 feet toward the vine golem.

Thorned Embrace. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one Medium or smaller creature. *Hit:* 13 (2d8 + 4) piercing damage, and the target is grappled (escape DC 11). Until the grapple ends, the target is retrained, and the vine golem can't embrace another target.

LUNARCHIDNA

A four-armed, four-legged creature in the vague shape of a human but seemingly made of fine spider-silk moves down a tree, slowly chanting the incantation of a spell in the pale light of the full moon.

Made in Corrupt Forests. Lunarchidnas are beings of moonlight and spider silk created in forests permeated by residual dark magic. When this magic coalesces on a spider web touched by the light of a full moon, the web animates. The web gains life and flies through the forest gathering other webs until it collects enough silk to form a faceless humanoid body with four legs and four arms.

Hatred of Elves. Lunarchidnas hate elves and love to make the creatures suffer. They poison water sources, set fire to villages, and bait monsters into stampeding through elf communities. These aberrations especially enjoy stealing away elf children to use as bait to trap the adults that come to the rescue.

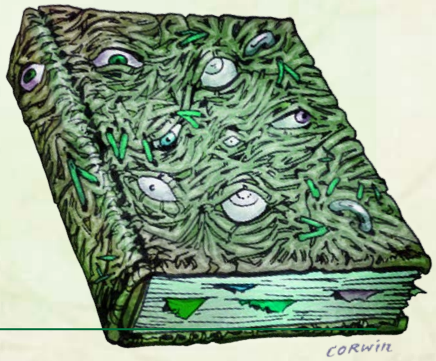
Cyclical Power. The lunarchidna's power is tied to the moon. When the skies are dark during a new moon, the lunarchidna becomes more shadow than living web. Its mental ability dulls, and it becomes barely more than a savage animal. When a full moon brightens the night, however, the lunarchidna becomes a conduit of lunar light and can channel that power through its body. Using its heightened intellect, it makes plans, writes notes, and plots from the safety of the trees where it makes its home. In the intermittent phases of the moon, the lunarchidna is a more than capable hunter, trapping and devouring prey it encounters while retaining enough knowledge of its plans and magic to further its goals in minor ways. The lunarchidna's statistics change cyclically as shown on the Lunarchidna Moon Phase table.

MANUAL OF VINE GOLEMS

Wondrous item, very rare

This tome contains information and incantations necessary to make a vine golem. To decipher and use the manual, you must be a druid with at least two 3rd-level spell slots. A creature that can't use a manual of vine golems and attempts to read it takes 4d6 psychic damage.

To create a vine golem, you must spend 20 days working without interruption with the manual at hand and resting no more than 8 hours per day. You must also use powders made from rare plants and crushed gems worth 30,000 gp to create the vine golem, all of which are consumed in the process. Once you finish creating the vine golem, the book decays into ash. The vine golem becomes animate when the ashes of the manual are sprinkled on it. It is under your control, and it understands and obeys your spoken commands.



LESSER LUNARCHIDNA

Medium aberration, neutral evil

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 39 (6d8 + 12)

Speed 30 ft., climb 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	15 (+2)	14 (+2)	6 (–2)	12 (+1)	13 (+1)

Skills Perception +3, Stealth +6

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities poisoned, restrained

Senses blindsight 10 ft., darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 13

Languages Deep Speech, Elvish

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Light Sensitivity. While in bright light, the lunarchidna has disadvantage on attack rolls, as well as on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on sight.

Shadow Stealth. While in dim light or darkness, the lunarchidna can take the Hide action as a bonus action.

Spider Climb. The lunarchidna can climb difficult surfaces, including upside down on ceilings, without needing to make an ability check.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The lunarchidna makes one bite attack and two claw attacks.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 2) necrotic damage. The target must succeed on a DC 12 Constitution saving throw or its hit point maximum is reduced by an amount equal to the damage taken. This reduction lasts until the target finishes a long rest. The target dies if this effect reduces its hit point maximum to 0.

Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) slashing damage.

Lunarchidna Moon Phase

MOON PHASE	STATISTICS
Daytime, new, or crescent moon	Lesser lunarchidna
Quarter or half moon	Greater lunarchidna
Gibbous or full moon	Transcendent lunarchidna

GREATER LUNARCHIDNA

Medium aberration, neutral evil

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 58 (9d8 + 18)

Speed 30 ft., climb 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	16 (+3)	14 (+2)	12 (+1)	12 (+1)	15 (+2)

Saving Throws Con +4, Wis +3

Skills Perception +3, Stealth +7

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities poisoned, restrained

Senses blindsight 10 ft., darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 13

Languages Deep Speech, Elvish

Challenge 4 (1,100 XP)

Spider Climb. The lunarchidna can climb difficult surfaces, including upside down on ceilings, without needing to make an ability check.

Sunlight Sensitivity. While in sunlight, the lunarchidna has disadvantage on attack rolls, as well as on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on sight.

Web Walker. The lunarchidna ignores movement restrictions caused by webbing.

Spellcasting. The lunarchidna is a 4th-level spellcaster. Its spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 11, +3 to hit with spell attacks). The lunarchidna has the following wizard spells prepared:

- **Cantrips (at will)**: *minor illusion, mage hand, poison spray, ray of frost*
- **1st level (4 slots)**: *detect magic, magic missile, shield*
- **2nd level (3 slots)**: *alter self, suggestion*

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The lunarchidna makes two attacks: one with its bite and one with its claws. If the lunarchidna hits a Medium or smaller target with both attacks on the same turn, the target is restrained by webbing and the lunarchidna uses Wrap Up.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 10 (2d6 + 3) necrotic damage. The target must succeed on a DC 13 Constitution saving throw or its hit point maximum is reduced by an amount equal to the damage taken. This reduction lasts until the target finishes a long rest. The target dies if this effect reduces its hit point maximum to 0.

Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (2d4 + 3) slashing damage.

Web (Recharge 5–6). *Ranged Weapon Attack*: +5 to hit, ranged 30/60 ft., one creature. *Hit:* The target is restrained by webbing. As an action the restrained target can make a DC 13 Strength check, bursting the webbing on a success. The webbing can also be attacked and destroyed (AC 10; hp 5; vulnerability to fire damage; immunity to bludgeoning, poison, and psychic damage).

Wrap Up. The lunarchidna wraps up a Medium or smaller creature restrained by webbing. The wrapped target is blinded, restrained, and unable to breathe, and it must succeed on a DC 13 Constitution saving throw at the start of each of the lunarchidna's turns or take 5 (1d4 + 3) bludgeoning damage. The webbing can be attacked and destroyed (AC 10; hp 15; vulnerability to fire damage; immunity to bludgeoning, poison, and psychic damage). The lunarchidna can have only one creature wrapped at a time.

TRANSCENDENT LUNARCHIDA

Medium aberration, neutral evil

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 91 (14d8 + 28)

Speed 30 ft., climb 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	17 (+3)	14 (+2)	18 (+4)	12 (+1)	17 (+3)

Saving Throws Con +5, Wis +4

Skills Perception +4, Stealth +9

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities poisoned, restrained

Senses blindsight 10 ft., darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 14

Languages Deep Speech, Elvish

Challenge 6 (2,300 XP)

Light Invisibility. The lunarchidna is invisible while in bright or dim light.

Spider Climb. The lunarchidna can climb difficult surfaces, including upside down on ceilings, without needing to make an ability check.

Sunlight Sensitivity. While in sunlight, the lunarchidna has disadvantage on attack rolls, as well as on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on sight.

Web Walker. The lunarchidna ignores movement restrictions caused by webbing.

Spellcasting. The lunarchidna is a 8th-level spellcaster. Its spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 15, +7 to hit with spell attacks). The lunarchidna has the following wizard spells prepared:

- **Cantrips (at will)**: *minor illusion, mage hand, poison spray, ray of frost*
- **1st level (4 slots)**: *color spray, detect magic, magic missile, shield*
- **2nd level (3 slots)**: *alter self, suggestion, web*
- **3rd level (3 slots)**: *counterspell, fireball, major image*
- **4th level (2 slots)**: *black tentacles, confusion*

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The lunarchidna makes three attacks: one with its bite and two with its claws.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 10 (2d6 + 3) necrotic damage. The target must succeed on a DC 13 Constitution saving throw or its hit point maximum is reduced by an amount equal to the damage taken. This reduction lasts until the target finishes a long rest. The target dies if this effect reduces its hit point maximum to 0.

Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (2d4 + 3) slashing damage.

Web (Recharge 5–6). *Ranged Weapon Attack*: +6 to hit, ranged 30/60 ft., one creature. *Hit:* The target is restrained by webbing. As an action the restrained target can make a DC 13 Strength check, bursting the webbing on a success. The webbing can also be attacked and destroyed (AC 10; hp 5; vulnerability to fire damage; immunity to bludgeoning, poison, and psychic damage).

Lunar Beam (Recharge 5–6). The lunarchidna flashes a beam of moonlight in a 30-foot line that is 5 feet wide. Each creature in that line must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 28 (8d6) radiant damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

PINEY

Pineys are humans who have lived for generations in the Margreve Forest. The primeval magic of the forest has changed them in both mind and body. They often have plant-like physical qualities, such as rooty appendages for feet, coarse and bark-like skin, or photosynthesizing flesh.

Bound to the Woods. Pineys very rarely leave the limits of the Margreve. Their connection to nature and its magic wanes the farther they are from the forest.

PINEY

Medium humanoid, lawful neutral

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 33 (6d8 + 6)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
16 (+3)	10 (+0)	12 (+1)	9 (–1)	14 (+2)	10 (+0)

Skills Perception +4, Survival +4

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 14

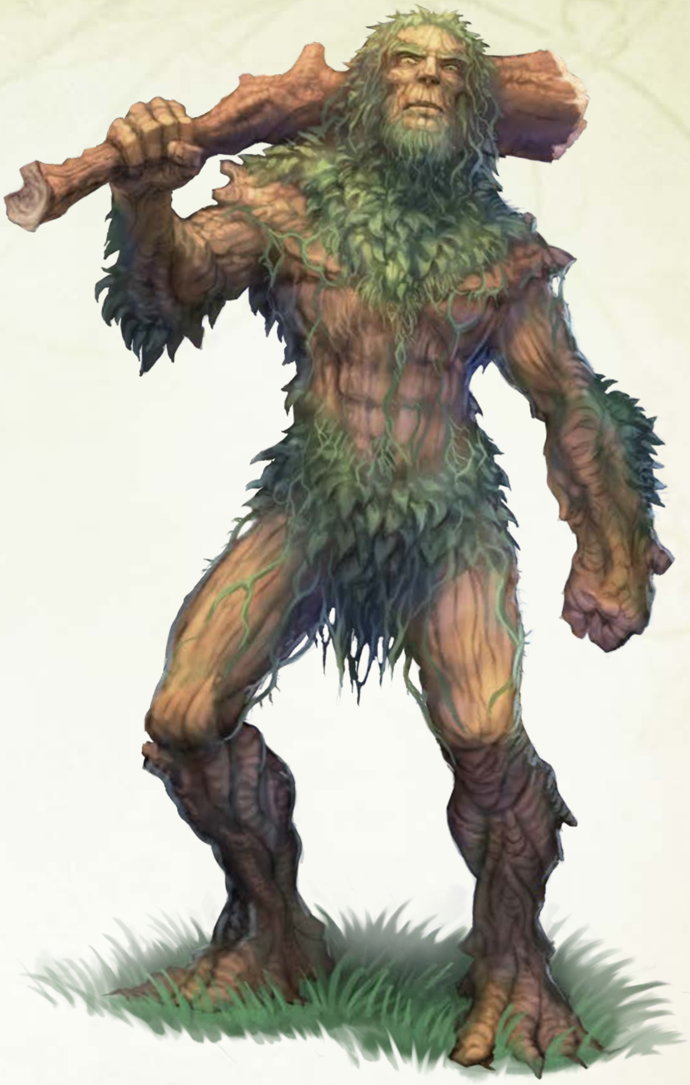
Languages Piney

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Force of Nature. When the piney hits with any weapon while within the boundaries of the Margreve, the weapon deals an extra 3 (1d6) force damage (included in the attack).

Verdant Transformation. At the start of each of its turns while it is within the Margreve, the piney can choose one of the following ways for the forest to physically manifest through it:

Oaken Flesh. The piney's Armor Class increases by 2, and it has resistance to bludgeoning damage until the start of its next turn.



Strong Roots. The piney is immune to the prone condition, and it has advantage on ability checks made to grapple until the start of its next turn.

Sun Feaster. The piney regains 3 hit points if it starts its turn in sunlight.

ACTIONS

Club. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) bludgeoning damage plus 3 (1d6) force damage.

PINEY ROOTWALKER

Pineys rootwalkers are elder pineys who are deeply affected by the magic of the Margreve. Their twisted forms are barely recognizable as humanoid, and they wander silently through the groves and fields near their villages.

Revered. Though misshapen and dangerous, the rootwalkers are nonetheless revered by other pineys, who believe that sacrifices made to the rootwalkers ensure the safety of their villages.

PINEY ROOTWALKER

Large humanoid, neutral

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 60 (8d10 +16)

Speed 30 ft., climb 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	10 (+0)	14 (+2)	9 (–1)	16 (+3)	8 (–1)

Skills Perception +5, Stealth +2

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 15

Languages Piney, Sylvan

Challenge 3 (700 XP)

Force of Nature. When the piney rootwalker hits with any weapon while within the boundaries of the Margreve, the weapon deals an extra 7 (2d6) force damage (included in the attack).

One with the Woods. While in a forest, the piney rootwalker can't be tracked. In addition, the piney rootwalker has advantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks made to hide in forest terrain.

Innate Spellcasting. The piney rootwalker's innate spellcasting ability is Wisdom (spell save DC 13). It can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components.

At will: *mending, poison spray, resistance*

2/day each: *entangle, healing word*

1/day each: *locate animals or plants, spike growth*

ACTIONS

Slam. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +6 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 11 (2d6 + 4) bludgeoning damage plus 7 (2d6) force damage.

Rock. *Ranged Weapon Attack*: +6 to hit, range 60/240 ft., one target. *Hit:* 9 (1d10 + 4) bludgeoning damage plus 7 (2d6) force damage.

STORMBOAR

A massive, green-scaled boar snorts angrily as tiny bolts of blue lightning ripple over its body.

Accidental Arcane Creations. Pygmalion Snorzage, an evoker who raised hogs to fund his wild experiments, accidentally blew up his tower years ago. The explosion created a horrific storm that raged for days in the region, causing the locals to take shelter. When the storm dissipated, Pygmalion and his notes on his latest experiment were gone, but his hogs had been transformed into scaled beasts that harnessed the power of lightning and thunder.

Storm's Fury. Storm boars embody the fury of the storm. Just as stubborn and ferocious as their more mundane cousins, storm boars let no obstacle get in their way while they look for food or protect their offspring. Wise hunters leave a storm boar alone if they encounter one in the deep woods. Seasoned hunters know enough to drop an offering of metal behind as they leave the area to ensure that the boar is too distracted to follow them.

Metal Devourers. Storm boars crave metal. Prospectors track the boars in order to find rivers and bedrock rich with precious minerals and veins of ore, and treasure hunters use the creatures to sniff out hidden vaults of wealth. Anyone relying on a storm boar must be careful, however. The boars see any creature wearing or carrying metal as the deliverer of an easy meal. The aggressive creatures won't stop attacking until they've consumed every bit of metal an unfortunate traveler is carrying (in addition to the traveler). Starving storm boars have been known to venture into civilized areas for a meal.

STORMBOAR

Large monstrosity, unaligned

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 95 (10d10 + 40)

Speed 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
19 (+4)	12 (+1)	18 (+4)	3 (–4)	10 (+0)	7 (–2)

Damage Immunities lightning, thunder

Senses passive Perception 10

Languages —

Challenge 6 (2,300 XP)

Iron Scent. The boar can pinpoint, by scent, the location of ferrous metal within 60 feet of it.

Lightning Hide. A creature that touches the boar or hits it with a melee attack while within 5 feet of it takes 5 (2d4) lightning damage.

Relentless (Recharges after a Short or Long Rest). If the boar takes 15 damage or less that would reduce it to 0 hp, it is reduced to 1 hp instead.

Thunder Charge. If the boar moves at least 20 feet straight toward a target and then hits it with a tusk attack on the same turn, the target takes an extra 11 (2d10) thunder damage. If the target is a creature, it must succeed on a DC 15 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

ACTIONS

Tusk. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 11 (2d6 + 4) slashing damage and 11 (2d10) lightning damage. In addition, nonmagical metal armor worn by the target is partly devoured by the boar and takes a permanent and cumulative −2 penalty to the AC it offers. The armor is destroyed if the penalty reduces its AC to 10.

Lightning Run (Recharge 6). The boar becomes a bolt of living lightning and moves up to its speed without provoking opportunity attacks. It can move through creatures and objects as if they were difficult terrain. It takes 5 (1d10) force damage and is pushed to the

closest unoccupied space if it ends its turn inside an object. Each creature in the boar's path must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 22 (4d10) lightning damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

Thunder Leap (Recharge 6). The boar moves up to 20 feet, jumping over obstacles in its way. Difficult terrain doesn't cost it extra movement when it leaps. Each creature within 10 feet of the boar when it leaps and each creature within 10 feet of where it lands must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw. On a failure, a creature takes 16 (3d10) thunder damage and is pushed up to 10 feet away from the boar. On a success, a creature takes half the damage and isn't pushed.

TREE SKINNER

A feminine creature made of decaying, thorny plant life gives a wicked laugh as she touches a tree and disappears. Moments later, the tree emits the same laugh as it swings its branches.

Formed by Hags. Night hags create tree skinners by taking advantage of dryads that have been driven mad by the death of their trees. The hags promise the dryads a chance to connect with trees again and induce them into submitting to a special ritual. The ritual used to transform a dryad into a skinner also instills in the dryad a hatred of all fey. The irony of a former dryad using trees to murder fey creatures delights the hags to no end.

Tree Puppeteers. Tree skinners can inhabit trees, turning the plants into weapons that can destroy forest communities. The evil essence of a skinner slowly rots a tree from the inside out, eventually killing the plant. When the tree dies, the skinner is expelled and becomes agitated until she finds a new tree to inhabit.

Skinner Bands. Tree skinners all share the same desire—the destruction of all fey creatures. When the skinners encounter others of their kind, they join forces to attack communities of fey. As long as they have fey to attack, the group will stay together indefinitely, otherwise the lack of a common enemy causes infighting, leading to the dissolution of the group.

Hated by Treants. Treants abhor tree skinners, seeing them as abominations that manipulate plants and sap the life of trees. If a treant hears of skinner activity, it stops at nothing to slay the fiend.

TREE SKINNER

Medium fiend, chaotic evil

Armor Class 13

Hit Points 38 (7d8 + 7)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	16 (+3)	13 (+1)	14 (+2)	15 (+2)	18 (+4)

Skills Perception +4, Stealth +7

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks not made with silvered weapons

Condition Immunities charmed

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 14
Languages Abyssal, Elvish, Infernal, Sylvan
Challenge 2 (450 XP)

False Appearance (Tree Form Only). While the skinner remains motionless, it is indistinguishable from a normal tree.

Inhabit Tree. As a bonus action, the skinner touches a Medium or larger tree that is not a creature and disappears inside it. While inside the tree, the skinner has tremorsense with a radius of 30 feet, has an AC of 15, has a speed of 0, and has vulnerability to fire damage. When the skinner is reduced to 15 hp, the tree dies and the skinner appears within 5 feet of the dead tree or in the nearest unoccupied space. The skinner can exit the tree as a bonus action, appearing within 5 feet of the tree in the nearest unoccupied space, and the tree reverts to being an object. The skinner can inhabit a tree for only 3 days at most before the tree dies, requiring the skinner to seek another vessel.

Magic Resistance. The skinner has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

ACTIONS

Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) slashing damage. The target must succeed on a DC 13 Constitution saving throw or take 7 (2d6) poison damage and become poisoned until the end of its next turn.

Vine Whip (Tree Form Only). *Melee Weapon Attack*: +5 to hit, reach 20 ft., one target. *Hit:* 10 (2d6 + 3) bludgeoning damage, and if the target is a Large or smaller creature, it is grappled (escape DC 13). The skinner can grapple up to two creatures at one time.

Squeeze (Tree Form Only). The tree skinner makes one vine whip attack against a creature it is grappling. If the attack hits, the target is also unable to breathe or cast spells with verbal components until this grapple ends.

TSUCHINOKO

A serpent with a midsection wider than its head or its tail leaps high into the air, its fanged mouth agape.

Tsuchinoko are venomous snakes with a unique way of moving through the air and a taste for alcohol.

Alcohol Seekers. Tsuchinoko have an excellent sense of smell, which they use to find their favorite delicacies: rodents, birds, and, above all, alcohol. Although the snakes don't usually attack humans, tsuchinoko are known to kill travelers who are carrying a flask of ale or a bottle of spirits. Large groups of these creatures sometimes assault merchant caravans traveling through the forest.

Mobile Predators. Tsuchinoko spend most of their time hiding, relying on their natural camouflage to help them catch meals. They have two special modes of movement for chasing prey when ambushes fail: leaping and rolling. The serpents can throw themselves into the air then leap a second time at the zenith of their first jump, allowing them to clear obstacles and bite low-flying targets. A tsuchinoko can also swallow the end of its tail, forming its body into a hoop that rolls through the forest with ease.

Rumors of Sapience. Though such sounds have never been recorded, some claim that the deepest, darkest parts of the forest are home to tsuchinoko that can speak. It is said that these tsuchinoko enjoy mischief and pranks, and they steer travelers towards hazards, monsters, and other trouble as entertainment.

TSUCHINOKO

Tiny beast, unaligned

Armor Class 14
Hit Points 14 (4d4 + 4)
Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
5 (–3)	18 (+4)	12 (+1)	2 (–4)	12 (+1)	5 (–3)

Skills Perception +3, Stealth +6
Damage Immunities poison
Condition Immunities poisoned
Senses blindsight 10 ft., passive Perception 13
Languages —
Challenge 1/2 (100 XP)

Keen Smell. The tsuchinoko has advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on smell.

Plant Camouflage. The tsuchinoko has advantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks it makes in any terrain with ample obscuring plant life.

Standing Leap. The tsuchinoko's long jump is up to 15 feet and its high jump is up to 5 feet, with or without a running start.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The tsuchinoko makes two leaping bite attacks. The second attack has disadvantage and must be made against the same target as the first.

Leaping Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +6 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 1 piercing damage plus 5 (2d4) poison damage.

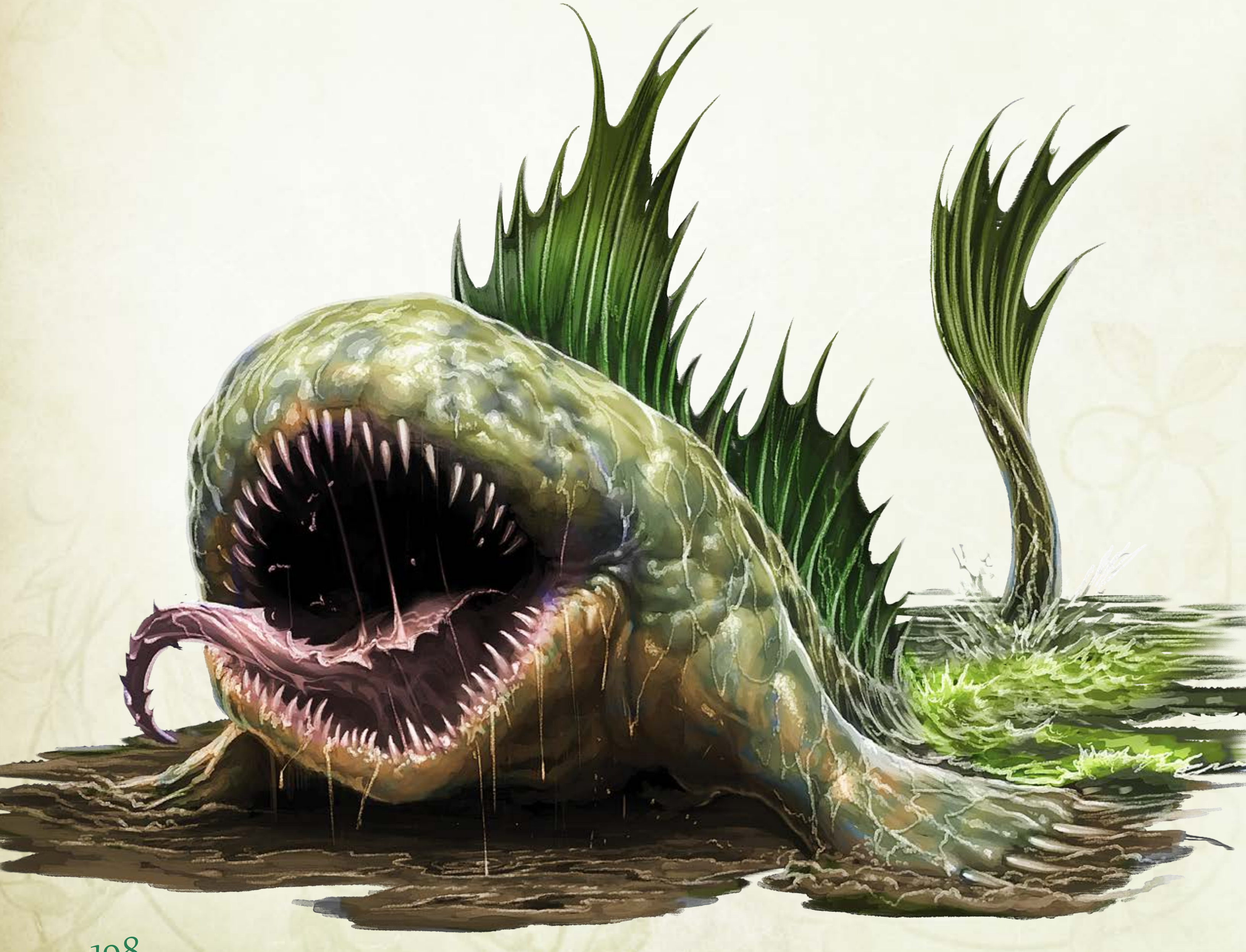
Hoop Form. The tsuchinoko bites its tail, forming a hoop with its body. While in hoop form, the tsuchinoko has a walking speed of 60 feet and can't make leaping bite attacks. The tsuchinoko can end its hoop form as a bonus action.

VALLOWEX

A slimy creature emerges from the dark water, pulled by two front legs and dragging a long, flat tail. Its bulbous, eyeless head nearly splits in half as its mouth opens to reveal a spiked tongue.

Luring with Thirst. The carnivorous vallowex haunts woodland rivers, luring in potential prey with its thirst-inducing aura. When a creature stops to drink, the vallowex attacks with a spiked tongue and drags the creature into the water to feast.

Reproduce through Hosts. Vallowexes reproduce by releasing eggs into the water where they lurk. After a creature ingests the eggs while drinking, a vallowex tadpole hatches in its stomach. The tadpole slowly consumes the host from the inside out, emerging as a young vallowex when the host dies.



VALLOWEX

Large aberration, chaotic neutral

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 123 (13d10 + 52)

Speed 30 ft., swim 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
20 (+5)	10 (+0)	18 (+4)	5 (–3)	12 (+1)	5 (–3)

Saving Throws Wis +4

Skills Perception +4, Stealth +6

Senses blindsight 60 ft. (blind beyond this radius), passive Perception 14

Languages —

Challenge 7 (2,900 XP)

Amphibious. The vallowex can breathe air and water.

Aura of Thirst. At the start of each of the vallowex's turns, each creature within 30 feet of it must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or have disadvantage on its next attack roll or ability check as a gnawing thirst distracts it. For each minute a creature stays in the vallowex's aura, it gains one level of exhaustion from dehydration. A level of exhaustion is removed if the creature uses an action to drink 1 pint of water. A vallowex is immune to its own Aura of Thirst as well as the auras of other vallowexes.

Underwater Camouflage. The vallowex has advantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks made while underwater.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The vallowex makes two attacks: one with its spiked tongue and one with its tail.

Spiked Tongue. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +8 to hit, reach 15 ft., one target. *Hit:* 14 (2d8 + 5) piercing damage, and the target is grappled (escape DC 15). Until this grapple ends, the target is restrained, and the vallowex can't use its spiked tongue against another target.

Tail. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 16 (2d10 + 5) bludgeoning damage.

Swallow. The vallowex makes one spiked tongue attack against a Medium or smaller target it is grappling. If the attack hits, the target is also swallowed, and the grapple ends. The swallowed target is blinded and restrained, it has total cover against attacks and other effects outside the vallowex, and it takes 10 (3d6) acid damage at the start of each of the vallowex's turns. The vallowex can have only one creature swallowed at a time.

If the vallowex takes 15 damage or more on a single turn from the swallowed creature, the vallowex must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw at the end of that turn or regurgitate the creature, which falls prone in a space within 5 feet of the vallowex. If the vallowex dies, the swallowed creature is no longer restrained by it and can escape from the corpse using 10 feet of movement, exiting prone.

Release Eggs (1/Week). A vallowex can release a 40-foot-radius cloud of microscopic eggs into a body of water it touches. The eggs live for 1 hour. Any humanoid or beast that drinks the eggs must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or be infected with a disease—a vallowex tadpole.

A host can carry only one vallowex tadpole to term at a time. While it has the disease, the host must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw at the end of each long rest. On a failed save, the host's Strength score is reduced by 1d4. This reduction lasts until the host finishes a long rest after the disease is cured. If the host's Strength score is reduced to 0, the host dies, and a young vallowex emerges from the corpse. The young vallowex grows into an adult vallowex one week later.

If the host succeeds on three saving throws or the disease is magically cured, the unborn tadpole disintegrates.

WRAITH BEAR

The black, spectral form of an enormous bear with burning red eyes lets loose a bone-chilling roar.

Corrupted Spirits. Bear spirits are believed to be the spirits of ancestral warriors and guardians that take on the form of a bear to aid their descendants. Necromancers and dark shamans know magic that twists the mind of these spirits, causing them to feel anger and malice toward the family they once protected. These wraith bears hunt and murder their descendants, listening to no other commands until they have murdered what remains of their family. When this mission is complete, the wraith bear returns to its corruptor, following orders loyally.

Forest Haunters. If a wraith bear's corruptor dies and the creature has no family left to hunt, it retreats to the forest. There the bear wanders, its hatred for all life a festering madness that drives it to violence. The wraith bear's mere presence begins to kill nearby plant life, and it attacks any living creature it finds.

Restored by Archfey. A wraith bear can be reinstated as a bear spirit by the touch of an archfey. Finding an archfey is difficult enough, but convincing it to take on such a task usually involves paying a heavy price.

Undead Nature. A wraith bear doesn't require air, food, drink, or sleep.

WRAITH BEAR

Large undead, chaotic evil

Armor Class 13

Hit Points 133 (14d10 + 56)

Speed 0 ft., fly 60 ft. (hover)

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	16 (+3)	18 (+4)	10 (+0)	16 (+3)	15 (+2)

Skills Perception +7, Survival +7

Damage Resistances acid, cold, fire, lightning, thunder; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks not made with silvered weapons

Damage Immunities necrotic, poison

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, grappled, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned, prone, restrained

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 17

Languages the languages it knew in life

Challenge 9 (5,000 XP)

Detect Ancestors. The wraith bear knows the direction to its nearest living ancestor on the same plane, but not the ancestor's exact location.

Draining Regeneration. The wraith bear regains 10 hp at the start of its turn if it has at least 1 hp and there are living plants within 5 feet of it. When the wraith bear regains hp, all plant life within 5 feet of it dies, and it can't regain hp from those same plants again.

Incorporeal Movement. The wraith bear can move through other creatures and objects as if they were difficult terrain. It takes 5 (1d10) force damage if it ends its turn inside an object.

ACTIONS

Life Drain. *Melee Weapon Attack*: +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 31 (6d8 + 4) necrotic damage. The target must succeed on a DC 16 Constitution saving throw or its hp maximum is reduced by an amount equal to the damage taken. This reduction lasts until the target finishes a long rest. The target dies if this effect reduces its hp maximum to 0.

Baleful Roar (Recharge 6). The bear lets out a supernatural roar in a 30-foot cone. Each creature in that area that can hear the bear must make a DC 15 Wisdom saving throw. On a failure, a creature is incapacitated for 1 minute. On a success, a creature is frightened until the end of its next turn. An incapacitated creature can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success.

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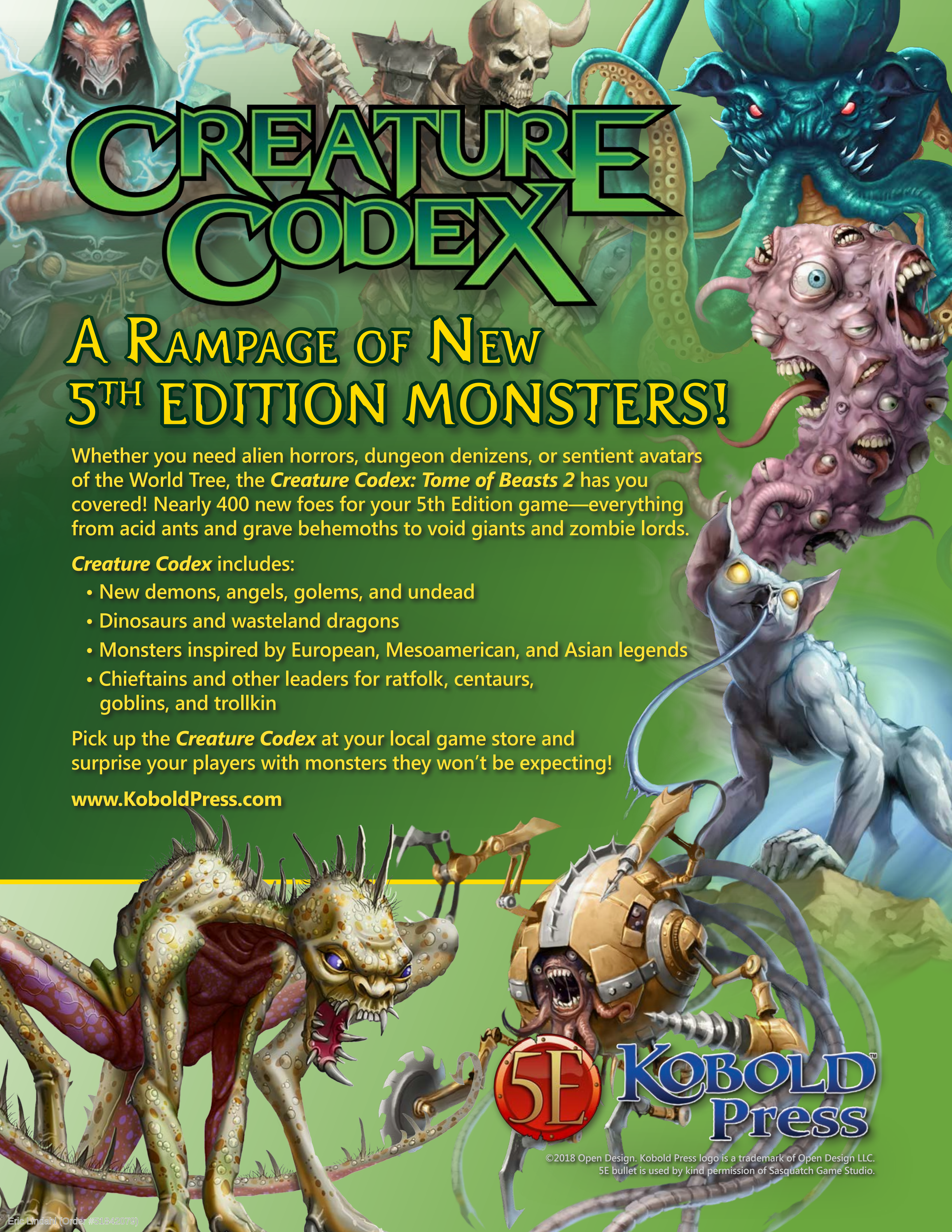

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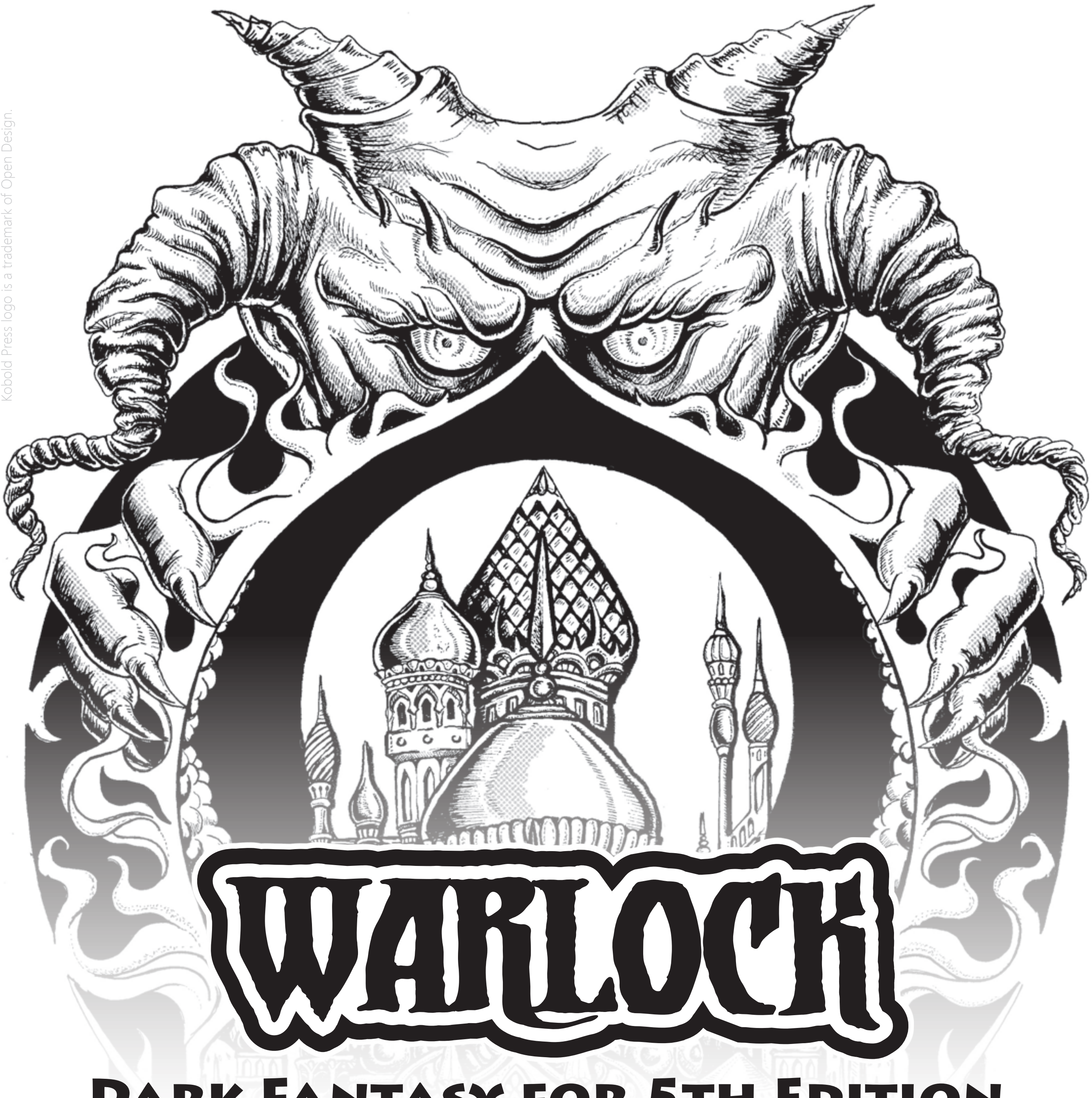

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