

THE GUARDIAN OF THE FOREST

by Awkward Bard

CREATURE: *Medusa* | **LEVEL(S):** 5-8
CW: *Snakes, loss, kidnapping, patricide*

SYNOPSIS

Rare portals between the planes sometimes appear in the Caslan Woods. Recently though, these mythical woods have slowly moldered into swampland. As if that wasn't grim enough, bands of ogres and kobolds raid nearby settlement without fear of reprisal. Your adventuring party traverses the Caslan Woods, hoping to find the source to these strange occurrences. What lies at the heart of the swamp, however, is anything but expected. *The Guardian of the Forest* is an adventure for characters of 5th-8th level, but can be easily adjusted for different levels of play.

ADVENTURE HOOK

Sudden kobold attacks and the Caslan Woods' putrefaction are raising concerns among local figures. The party is hired by a local noble concerned for the magical woods or by a merchant worried the kobold attacks are bad for business.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Caslan Woods is a place where the veil between planes grows thin. Ophion, the giant snake responsible for mediating the portals and the travelers they bring, grows old and soon needs to leave their position. Aware of this, they adopted Petra, a medusa abandoned at the Forest Temple when a child, and trained her to assume their position. Ophion, however, also trained another. Murgyss, a proud black dragon seeking to grow powerful. Furious not be chosen as the next Guardian of the Forest, Murgyss plans his revenge. When the Ascendance ceremony arrived, the black dragon attacked, interrupting the delicate ritual. Certain he could take Ophion's power by force,

Murgyss allowed Petra to escape with her life. What he didn't know, however, is that, although the Ascendance ritual was interrupted, a portion of Ophion's power transferred to Petra. Now, Murgyss desperately searches for her, needing both Ophion's and Petra's power to become the new Guardian of the Forest.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

- **PETRA:** (LG female **medusa**; pronouns: she/her.) Ophion's adopted daughter and successor.
- **OPHION:** (NG non-binary **giant constrictor snake**; pronouns: they/them.) Watches over Caslan Woods and the portals that open there. Well respected by forest dwellers, who see them as a guardian of good.
- **MURGYSS, THE USURPER OF LIFE:** (LE male **young black dragon**; pronouns: he/him.) Studied under Ophion in hopes of gaining more power. He took the forest temple for himself and holds Ophion hostage.

CHAPTER 1 – A CALL FOR HELP

While investigating Caslan Woods, the party finds a collection of kobold-shaped statues. Between them, a trail of blood and several small footprints lead into a clearing.

Moving toward the center of Caslan Woods, the fresh breeze slowly turns humid and still. The ground beneath your feet becomes muddy and the foul smell of rot is too strong to ignore.

After a few days, you discover something unusual. A statue of a small lizard creature stands in the middle of a clearing. Realistically rendered, it perfectly captures the utter despair on the creature's face. Beyond it, you see more statues, all of similar lizard creatures.

With a successful DC 12 Intelligence (Nature) check, a character identifies this as a statue of a kobold, a small draconic creature rarely found alone. By succeeding on the check by five or more, the character also knows kobolds worship evil dragons and serve as their minions.

A successful DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) or Intelligence (Nature) check reveals that this statue was not carved naturally.

A character with a passive Wisdom (Perception) of 13 or more notices a few drops of blood on the ground near the statue. The trail of blood follows the array of statues, becoming larger and more frequent.

STICKS, STONES, AND KOBOLDS

The party stumbles upon Petra fighting against a group of **kobolds**. She appears grievously injured and unable to resist for much longer.

Following the trail of statues and drops of blood, you begin to hear the sounds of struggle in the distance. The clashing of steel, screams of frustration and agony, and teasing words in a strange fractured language draw you onward. Stepping into the clearing, you light upon a medusa surrounded by half a dozen kobolds.

Although the medusa appears strong and able, she bears several injuries, some in an advanced stage of healing. The lizard creatures, relying on size and number, overwhelm her.

Two kobolds come up behind her with a net and attempt to trap her. She locks eyes with them and her eyes glow a bright yellow. *"Let me go or I'll make sure you never again see the sunlight you so dread."* Her captor spits on her face and mocks her between laughter, *"There's nothing you can do to me that Murgys can't undo!"* The medusa's eyes burn even brighter, and the two kobold in front of her are frozen in place, now statues. The other kobolds avert their gaze.

"I will never surrender to the Usurper!" The medusa yells as she runs from the kobolds and into your party.

She looks up at you, her eyes a deep green. With a whisper, she pleads, *"Please, don't let them take me!"*

The kobolds attempt to capture Petra and take her to the Forest Temple. If the adventurers intervene the kobolds run away, dishing out threats as they run.

THE MEDUSA PETRA

After the kobolds run, Petra thanks the adventurers and asks for their help.

The medusa struggles to stay on her feet. She looks at you and forces a smile.

"Thank you for helping me. And don't worry, I won't turn you to stone... If you don't try to hurt me. My name is Petra. Listen, I know I'm in no position to ask, but I need your help again."

THIS IS WHAT PETRA TELLS THE PARTY:

- The strange occurrences are a result of the machinations of Murgyss, a black dragon. He interrupted a sacred ritual and is attempting to steal an ancient power for himself.
- Her parent, Ophion, is being held captive by Murgyss.
- Although he is only a young dragon, he is already very powerful.
- Murgyss is slowly transforming the forest into a swamp.
- The kobold attacks are Murgyss' hoard growing stronger and bolder.
- She and her parent share a mental connection. Ophion is under extreme pain, which Petra feels as well.

DEVELOPMENT

If the party agrees to help Petra, she promises them Murgyss' hoard as a payment. Although Petra is hurt, she goes along with the party. She avoids fighting, but uses her petrifying gaze on anyone who attacks her.

CHAPTER 2 — THE CORRUPTED TEMPLE

The party arrives at the Forest Temple, an ancient structure sinking into the swamp.

AREA 1: ENTRANCE

The entrance is moderately guarded, and a fight would alert anyone inside.

With Petra's guidance, you make your way to the Forest Temple. Although it hasn't been under his control long, Murgyss' taint overwhelms the sanctuary. The plants and trees once surrounding the structure wilt and wither, most having been swallowed by the surrounding bog.

You spot a trio of winged lizard creatures sitting around the stairs, teasing a large ogre. You prepare to face the guards, but Petra calls your attention, *"There is another entrance. It is probably locked, but we could avoid the guards."*

Three winged **kobolds** and an **ogre** guard the entrance to the temple. If the party alerts the guards, they call for help from the guards in Area 2.

TACTICS: In 1d4 rounds, the ogre will sound an alarm warning the guards in Area 2. They aren't exactly organized, choosing to attack whichever character annoys them the most. While fighting, the kobolds tease both the party members and the ogre.

HIDDEN ENTRANCE

Not far from the main entrance is a door concealed by dangling foliage. The door is locked and requires a successful DC 15 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check to open or a successful DC 18 Strength (Athletics) check to break down. Entering this door takes the party to Area 2. Breaking down the door alerts the guards in Area 2.

AREA 2: ENTRANCE HALL

An ogre and five kobolds guard this area. The kobolds play around with a *driftglobe* (DMG, "Treasure") and mock the ogre, who in turn has trouble understanding the ridicule. If the ogre in Area 1 sounded the alarm, they will all have gone outside to join the fight, leaving the entrance hall empty, save for their forgotten *driftglobe*.

A group of kobolds play with a shiny ball of crystal. They toss it around and over the ogre's head while teasing and ridiculing it.

AREA 3: LARGE CORRIDOR

This immense passage leads from the entrance hall to the main chamber, where Murgyss awaits. Halfway there, a door branches off toward Area 4.

You enter a large corridor lined with colossal moss covered pillars. At the very end stands a door more grand than any other in the temple. The nearer you draw to the end of the corridor, the more a foul bog stench assails your senses.

Petra grows visibly tense and says, "*That's the main chamber, Murgyss should be in there.*"

Halfway down the corridor, you notice a strange door with several runes etched into it. Petra tells you this door leads to the basement, but the runes are fresh. Murgyss must have hidden something valuable down there.

A low and mournful cry echoes through the corridor.

THE WEeping OGRe

An ogre quietly weeps in the darkness behind a pillar. Her name is Fiona and she is not hostile toward the party unless provoked. She is crying because the kobolds from Area 2 took her *driftglobe*, which she refers to as "shiny."

If the party returns Fiona's *driftglobe* to her, she warns them about the crystals holding Ophion and how Murgyss can use them (see *Chapter 3*, "Slaying Murgyss"). She also helps them open the chamber door at the end of the corridor.

If they are nice to her, she will stay at the temple after Murgyss is defeated and will help rebuild it.

AREA 4: HOARD ROOM

The hoard room is warded by a rune puzzle. Petra hazards the door leads to the basement and the runes are a recent addition.

A large stone door with strange runes etched into it blocks your path. Above the door, the following words can be read:

THEM IEMS HOAEMR DEM BE LEMO
NEMGST OTHEEM USUEMRP EROF LIEM
FEME,
EMB OWYO EMUR HEEM AEMD A NEMDS
PEAEM KHIS NAEMME.
ONLY THEN CAN YOU ENTER.

A successful DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check reveals the runes to be a code, rather than a language. By succeeding the check by five or more, a character notices a repeating pattern in the sentence.

PUZZLE: To solve the puzzle, remove all the "EM"s and regroup the proper syllables together. The message reads: "This hoard belongs to the usurper of life, bow your head and speak his name."

To open the door, a creature must bow its head and speak "Murgyss."

After Murgyss is vanquished, the magical ward sealing the door wears off, and the hoard can be freely accessed.

THE DRAGON'S HOARD

Although the room is filled with piles of coin and treasure, it is certainly not as impressive as you expected. Murgyss may be powerful, but he is still young. His hoard is nowhere near as grand as that of the ancient dragons of legend.

Murgyss' hoard consists of the following:

- 626 gp, 257 sp, and 154 cp
- A large well-made tapestry worth 250 gp
- *Oil of slipperiness* (DMG)
- *Quaal's feather token*, tree (DMG)
- *Potion of resistance* (DMG)
- *Ring of the ram* (DMG)
- 1d6 trinkets (PHB)

DEVELOPMENT

The party can attempt to enter Area 4, where the hoard awaits. Petra won't object to this, as there might be some treasure that could help defeat Murgyss. She will, however, urge them to worry about the money and other valuables later.

The door to the main chamber is heavy, and can only be opened by characters with a combined Strength score of 35. If the party helped Fiona, she gladly helps open the door.

CHAPTER 3 — SLAYING MURGYSS

The party finally meets the cruel black dragon, Murgyss.

MURGYSS, THE USURPER OF LIFE

The main chamber houses a swamp, awash in pools of foul water. Moss clings to every available surface and twisted trees reach out with skeletal limbs devoid of leaves. At the far end of the hall, Ophion floats, tethered by strings of black energy connecting their body to three crystals. Murgyss, three kobolds, and an ogre await the party.

When you open the chamber door, a humid, fetid air flows out. Were it not for the walls and ceiling above, the room would be indistinguishable from the swamp outside. Foul water covers the floor and twisted plants grow all around and over the walls. A giant snake floats gently at the far end of the room. It makes no sound or movements, and appears asleep. Three strings of black energy wrap around its body, and connect to different crystals scattered across the chamber.

Slow laughter builds and reverberates throughout the hall. A voice seems to come from nowhere and everywhere at once.

"Finally you have come. I was starting to grow bored. Oh, and you've done me the great service of bringing my dearest Petra home. Good, I need to consume her, also."

BATTLE

Murgyss is a **young black dragon**. While in the swamp, he has access to his lair actions. Three kobolds and an ogre join the fight if commanded by Murgyss. The pools of foul water are considered difficult terrain.

TACTICS: Murgyss begins combat hidden under the swamp water. He commands the kobolds and ogre to attack the party and watches, both for his entertainment and to determine the weak link of the party. On the second round of combat, Murgyss will emerge from the water and try to catch the weak link by surprise. He uses his breath weapon whenever he can hit two or more party members. His lair actions will be focused on hindering whichever member presents the biggest threat to him. When Murgyss is at half or less hit points, he will consume a crystal (see below). Murgyss will defend the crystals over attacking weak party members. He will not willingly look at Petra.

CONSUMING A CRYSTAL

Murgyss can use an action to corrupt one of the restraining crystals, transferring Ophion's life force to himself. One of the black threads connecting Ophion to the crystals turns red as the serpent screeches in pain. Murgyss regains 3d8+6 hp. Once used, a crystal is consumed, changing its color to a faded red, and cannot be used again in this way.

Destroying a crystal or dispelling it will undo the magic that binds Ophion's life force. A destroyed crystal cannot be consumed. A crystal has an AC of 13 and 25 HP.

If all of the crystals are consumed, Ophion dies.

DIFFICULTY ADJUSTMENTS:

- If the party is underleveled, remove the ogre.
- If the party is overleveled, add two kobolds.
- If the party is vastly overleveled, add one ogre and increase Murgyss' healing to 4d8+10.

DEVELOPMENT

- If Murgyss is defeated and Ophion is saved, proceed to *Conclusion A*.
- If Murgyss is defeated, but all the three crystals were consumed, proceed to *Conclusion B*.
- As Murgyss is defeated, all of his servants drop their things and flee.

CONCLUSION

With Murgyss, the Usurper of Life defeated, the Caslan Woods will begin to heal.

CONCLUSION A

Ophion is saved and the party is welcomed to stay for the Ritual of Ascendance. If they stay for the ritual, Petra will use her new powers to grant each of them a charm (see Petra's charms table in Rewards).

After a difficult battle, you defeat Murgyss, the Usurper of Life, and save Ophion from his grasp. Petra runs to her parent. The guardian is weakened, but will survive.

Petra, overflowing with joy and relief, turns to you. *"No words can express my gratitude to you! Please, feel free to stay for as long as you need."*

She and Ophion exchange a look, and Petra smiles, nodding. The Guardian of the Forest turns to face you. Their voice is weak but soothing, almost a whisper.

"Thank you for aiding my daughter, we are in eternal debt to you. Soon we must complete Petra's ascendance, it is a ceremony few mortals have ever witnessed and we would be honored if you would participate."

Slowly, the fog begins to dissipate. It will take some time, but this land will heal.

The ritual of Ascendance is completed without further interruption. Ophion ages visibly after passing on their power. They shed their skin and emerge a small and fragile snake, but are not saddened by this. They are glad not only to be alive, but to witness their daughter rise up and take her place as Guardian of the Forest. And although Petra's form doesn't visibly change, she emanates a powerful and inspiring energy.

CONCLUSION B

The party is not able to save Ophion's life in the battle against Murgyss. Petra will step up and take her role as Guardian of the Forest as was intended.

Murgyss is defeated, but none of you are in a celebratory mood. Petra approaches the body of her beloved parent and tears flow down her face as she says her goodbye. An orb of a gentle blue light leaves Ophion's body and lingers in front of Petra. You hear their whispered and ethereal voice echoing through the room.

"Don't cry for me, my child. I lived a good and long life, and I had you beside me. Nothing could have brought me greater joy... It pains me to leave you so unprepared to deal with your task, but you are more powerful than you imagine. Don't ever forget that..."

The small orb vanishes. Petra lies near Ophion's body for a time, her eyes filled with tears. After a while, she directs her words toward you.

"These woods are safe now, thanks to your help. Feel free to stay for as long as you need, and you can help yourself to Mur... to the treasure hoard, as promised. I wish I could offer further hospitality, but I'm afraid this is all I can do for now."

Although her words are polite, you don't feel welcomed. You should leave as soon you your wounds are healed.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The name Medusa, in the original Greek, means guardian or protectress. This mythological figure, however, is often portrayed as either an overtly sexualized femme-fatale, or a grotesque monster, both existing to threaten or lead men astray. Neither of those depictions possess an ounce of humanity or depth, which is why I chose to show the medusa as a fighter, a guardian of what is important to her, as her name suggests, rather than a monster or villain that needs to be slain. I am very grateful to my friends, Vin, Isis, and Gabi, who were very patient with me throughout this process, and never hesitated to lend me a helping hand.

REWARDS

Characters earn the contents of the Dragon's Hoard

PETRA'S CHARMS

Choose one for each player or roll from this table:

1D6 CHARM

1 Charm of Woodland Beings

This charm allows you to cast the conjure woodland beings (4th-level version) spell. Once used, the charm vanishes.

2 Charm of Plant Growth

This charm has 3 charges. While holding it, you can use an action and expend 1 charge to cast the plant growth spell. Once all charges have been expended, the charm vanishes.

3 Charm of Protection

One cloak in your possession becomes a cloak of protection for the next 9 days. The charm then vanishes, and the cloak returns to normal.

4 Charm of Invulnerability

This charm allows you to give yourself the benefit of a potion of invulnerability as an action. Once you do so, the charm vanishes.

5 Charm of Water Walking

This charm grants you the benefits of a ring of water walking. These benefits last for 10 days, after which the charm vanishes.

6 Charm of the Nature Caller

This charm has 6 charges. While holding it, you can use an action to expend some of its charges to cast one of the following spells: commune with nature (4 charges) or locate animals or plants (2 charges). Once all charges have been expended, the charm vanishes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Awkward Bard is a non-binary, bisexual content creator who loves spending their days playing *D&D*, re-reading their favorite novels, and creating stories that may or may not one day leave their head.