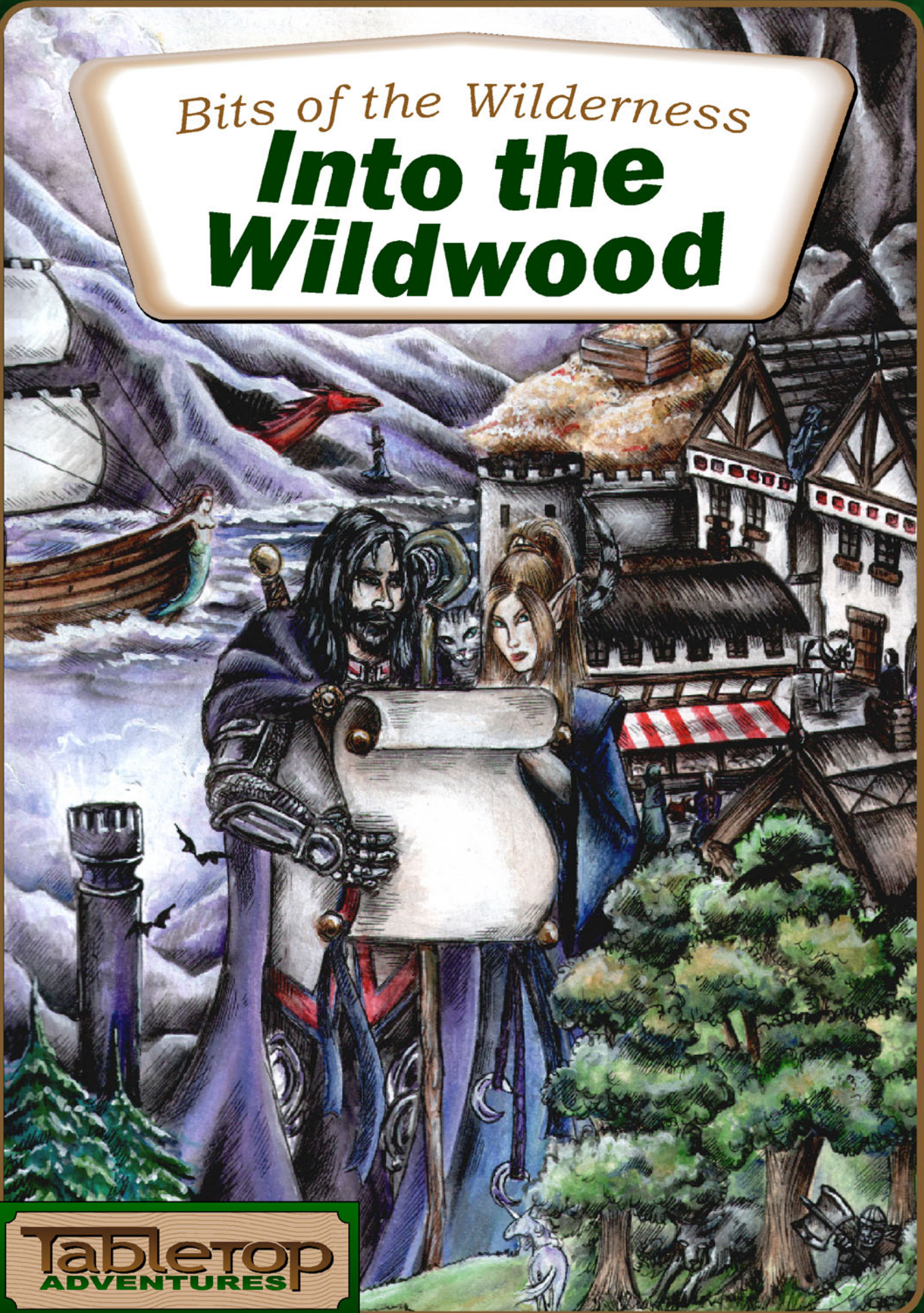


Tabletop Adventures presents

Bits of the Wilderness

Into the Wildwood



Tabletop
ADVENTURES



Bits of the Wilderness™:

Into the Wildwood

Writers:

K. H. Keeler
Christopher A. Field
Daniel Brakhage
Deborah Balsam
Matt Blakeley
Rodney Lucas
Martin Ralya
John Walsh
Brian Williams
Mark Potter
Vicki Potter
Christopher Welsh

Artists:

Cover Artwork by
Gillian Pearce

Original Interior Artwork by
Christine Griffin

Cover Layout by
Edward Wedig

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Table of Contents

| | |
|------------------------------|----|
| Introduction | 3 |
| How to Use This Resource | 4 |
| Bits of the Wildwood | 5 |
| Shards of the Wildwood | 21 |
| Forests of Mystery | 37 |
| Creatures of the Forest | 39 |
| An Overview of Forests | 48 |
| Forest Kits | 53 |
| Index | 57 |
| Bits of the Wildwood - Cards | 58 |



Introduction

Welcome!

Welcome to “Bits of the Wilderness™: Into the Wildwood,” Tabletop Adventures’ book of forest descriptions. It can be tough to develop forests that are realistic and yet not all the same and we hope to make your job easier. Our writers, with a broad range of writing experience and gaming expertise, have provided pieces that represent a diverse range of settings.

We have taken care to provide descriptions that can be used in virtually any game that takes place in a quasi-European medieval fantasy setting without “clashing” with the feel or setting of your existing campaign. However, in those rare cases that something seems out of place, either discard the description or change it as you have need. These descriptions are for your use in your game and you are free to modify them to keep your game fun and exciting for you and your players. I hope that you can find plenty of material here to augment your players’ imaginations and to stimulate your own ideas for adventures.

Harried Game Masters, or How We Came to Write This Book

So, I hear you ask, “Why write a book like this?” Well, I’m glad you asked. We wrote it for all those Game Masters who have ever lamented not having the time that they wanted to spend on their game because those unforgiving intrusions to gaming (life, work, family, school) interfered. We wrote it for all those game masters who have come home from a hard day of work or just finished a grueling finals week and had friends call up and say, “Hey, let’s play tonight. I had a rough day and I want to kill something.” For

all of you who need more than 24 hours in a day, welcome to Tabletop Adventures’ line of products for the Harried Game Master.

We here at TTA believe that description is a very important part of game-mastering and that vivid descriptions can make a world or an adventure come alive. However, we have noticed that the more rushed or frazzled a GM becomes, the more mechanical the game tends to be. So we have written a book that we’ve always wished to have, one that would have made our lives easier over the years. Tabletop Adventures’ “Harried Game Master” products are designed to be products that you can buy today and play tonight. We have taken care to make them flexible so they can be used in virtually any campaign without changing its feel or details. They are to help you, the Game Master, make the maximum use of the limited time you have available.

This tool provides the GM with a way to stimulate the characters’ senses and the players’ imaginations without having to use game-changing information. The descriptions can give players a “feel” for a situation, a better image of what is happening or what their characters are experiencing without all of those experiences leading directly to combat or treasure. They are intended to enhance role-playing by encouraging character building, reaction, and interaction. These Bits of the Wildwood, and all the accompanying material, are made for you, to ease the life of the Harried Game Master.

Enjoy, have fun, and create fun for others!

The good people at Tabletop Adventures, and the Overlord.



How to Use This Resource

What are Shards and Bits™, Anyway?

Shards and Bits™ should be viewed as small pieces of an adventure. Think of the archeologist, collecting little pieces of pottery and then fitting them together into a fascinating whole. Bits are tiny pieces of description that can be thrown in anywhere to provide “color” or add a little excitement to what might otherwise be a dull spot. Shards are longer and more elaborate, meant to be selected rather than added randomly. They may describe a certain area or specific thing, or particular facets that do not fit well in a random table such as times or seasons.

One thing to remember in using this is that we try to provide you products that will add a bit of drama to your game. Therefore, delivery is important. The way you choose to deliver the descriptions that are provided can have a tremendous effect on the subsequent playability of the situation involved.

As with our previous products in the Bits of Darkness™ series, these Bits of the Wilderness™ have been numbered so that a GM can roll percentile dice or pick a card to randomly generate a dash of description for an adventure. An Index is provided in case a Bit is needed to fit a particular situation, and we have included many Shards for specific situations, conditions, or locations within the forest. These all can help you flesh out areas of a particular forest or give you an "instant" description for those occasions when your players go "where no-one has gone before" and you don't yet have a clue what is there because you didn't expect them to go that way.

These descriptions need not be followed verbatim. As GM, you should feel free to

adapt them however you need in order to use them to greatest effect. In some instances they may even give you ideas for additional adventures for your players. These Bits are for whatever you want! If a piece sparks your imagination (or those of your players) and you want to build on it, then go for it.

Another thing to consider is that some of the Shards or longer Bits can be used a little at a time. Read one paragraph, let the adventurers move on a little further or ask questions, and then continue with the text.

Printing This Product

These pages can be printed out on regular paper. However, the final pages are formatted to be printed on card stock. As cards, they can be shuffled and drawn randomly during play or sorted ahead of time, with the GM selecting certain bits for use and placing them with the appropriate map or other materials. If you don't want to work with cards, you can roll randomly and read the description to the players, or write the appropriate number on the GM's map and refer to it when the characters arrive there.

Upcoming Products from TTA

Be watching for the next product from Tabletop Adventures™. “Bits of the Wilderness™: Into the Swamp” will bring you descriptions for drama and suspense as your adventurers venture into the mystery and mud of the unexplored swamp. Visit www.tabletopadventures.com for more information. As always, if you have any comments or suggestions please send them to the Overlord at overlord@tabletopadventures.com.



Bits of the Wildwood

01. This area of forest is dense with thin young trees. The trunks are barely three inches in diameter and they fill the space, so there are hundreds of them on all sides of you. The young trees are about 30 feet tall and form a complete canopy blocking out the sun. All the trunks are about the same size, and they are so dense that for a bit, you cannot get everyone off the trail even if you want to. Individuals could [dismount and] pick their way between the trees, but it would be slow going.

02. You hear a sudden crash and see a flash of light as the leaves are forced aside and reflect the sunlight. The drumming of hooves tells the tale as a stag flees the intruders to his woods.

03. As the path meanders around a corner, you see a ring of toadstools just off the path ahead of you. Some call such a thing a “faerie ring” and claim it leads to the lands of the fey. Others believe it is simply an odd formation of mushrooms, either edible or, possibly, poisonous. Thinking about it, you almost believe you can smell freshly brewed ale as you get closer – or is that the scent of roasting meat? And is that just a trick of the light, or is there a shimmering form in the toadstool ring? [The GM can have the smells be illusory products of self-deception or use this to lead into a faerie encounter.]

04. The path you are on narrows to an animal trail only a forearm’s length wide. You can make some effort to move more quietly if you move in single file and go carefully along this path. That choice might actually be faster than going side by side and blazing new trails. If you spread out to make your way through the deadfall and underbrush, it will be a struggle and you will make considerably more noise.

Anyone not on the path will move slowly and grow fatigued very rapidly. If you have to fight here it will have to be close in with thrusting weapons. Any attempt to swing a long sword or other long weapon would have a good chance of being caught in the branches and dry vines. Wherever you are, you could stand and reach out with a long sword and touch a tree trunk – or several.

05. You hear a loud cracking noise and a branch suddenly falls from about head height, just in front of the party, narrowly missing you. The smell of dry wood and of soot reaches you. Looking over to your left, you see the lightning-scarred tree from which the branch fell. The damage to the great oak is extensive, but seems awfully low to the ground. How could a bolt of lightning miss the great crown and just strike the trunk where it did? The question quickly leaves your mind, though, as you hear further snapping and cracking from the tree and see it begin to topple towards you.

06. The forest around you seems wrong. Unnatural. Anyone with knowledge of nature would be especially disconcerted by the trees you have been passing through, though it is only slowly that you are beginning to realize why. The trees are a little too evenly spaced, with too little undergrowth around them. The trees themselves appear too regular, too similar in size and even shape. As you look around, taking it in, the forest seems more like an orderly garden than something that has grown up on its own. You see no signs of civilization, no signs of cultivation, but the natural chaos of the forest seems to have been replaced by an unnatural orderliness. [The GM can have this continue for a few hundred yards or several miles, and then just end suddenly without explanation.]

07. The forest has been thick with leafy trees of all sorts, especially oaks and elms, but now you have come across a clearing with a single pine tree in it. The tree is not especially tall, perhaps fifteen feet, but its needles seem almost more dark blue than green. Stranger than that, however, is the silvery sheen that covers the tree and the ground around it. Your first thought is that it is covered in snow, but it is far too warm for that. As you look closer, it is unmistakably silver and not white. When the wind passes through the branches of the pine, you seem to hear the tinkling sound of bells. [The GM can make this the beginning of an encounter with a faerie, dryad, or other magical creature or have it just be mysterious and inexplicable.]

08. You see a large, uprooted tree across the trail ahead of you. The tree is over twenty-five feet long, including about five feet of its root structure. As you glance over to your left, you see the spot where the tree must have been ripped out of the ground. Glancing to your right, you see several trees cracked or broken at about the height of a human head. It appears as if this tree was ripped from the ground and thrown across the trail. [If the adventurers look closer:] You see dry, brownish stains on the tree trunks, and brownish drops splashed on nearby vegetation. They look like they could be old blood.

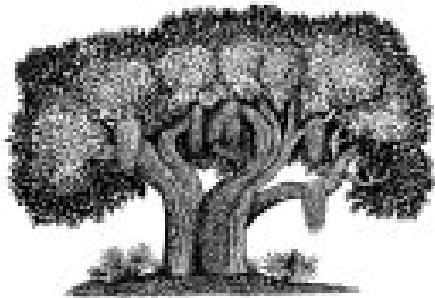
09. You hear the distant sound of pan pipes coming from behind you. They fade away, but then you seem to hear the very same pipes start up far ahead of you. You think you also hear wild, almost insane laughter just under the sound of the pipes. Again, they fade away, only to reappear on your left. No matter how hard you try, you can't catch sight of any player. The pattern repeats on your right and then you hear the sounds again behind you. Each time, they seem to come closer and closer before they retreat. As the trail turns, you see a clearing ahead of you. In the center, as if from a vision or a dream, stands an immense oaken table, covered with dishes of exotic foods. You see no one there, but you seem to



hear the clinking of glasses and faint, ghostly echoes of revelry. [The GM can have the sights and sounds all fade away as an illusion or a ghostly memory or lead into an encounter with a satyr or other magical creature.]

10. You have a feeling of unease as the air seems filled with an unnatural tension. Suddenly, crashing and screeching explodes in the underbrush to your left. You can't see what it is, but you can hear the squeals of at least a dozen small animals running away in terror. You then hear the roar of some predator. The sound is strange, not like anything you've heard before. You catch a quick glimpse of red as whatever it is chases after the horrified animals. You see another flash of red, and the broken body of a rabbit is tossed up into the air. Then the sound of the pursuit races off through the trees and is gone.

11. The forest trail begins to wind through a much hillier area than before. Some of the trees look very precarious, almost as if they are dragging the hilltops down. Eventually you come across one that has fallen, strewing dirt, rocks, and foliage all over the trail. Your progress slows greatly as you have to pick your way across the broken terrain. Glancing over at the hill, however, you spot something odd. Something metallic. As you focus in on it, you can see that it is an armpiece from a suit of armor, but by the size it was never made to fit any human. It also still seems to have the arm in it. Whatever it is, it has been lying on this hillside for a very long time.



12. The ground in this part of the forest is rougher, with a lot of stones, and the trees are slightly farther apart. You have been passing through them for at least a hundred yards before you realize you are in overgrown ruins. Along the fringes, the stone buildings were reduced to scattered, moss-covered rocks, but here the remains are larger. The walls, while far from intact, are recognizable as walls. You come across a larger building that has pieces of all four walls – and a huge, ancient oak growing up from its center. The remains become smaller and less impressive again, as you seem to be coming to the edge of the ruins.

13. The evergreen trees here have grown tall and spread their graceful limbs out wide, sweeping the air as they sway in the breeze. The crisp scent of aged pine fills your lungs with every breath as you ride [hike] across the thick blanket of warm brown needles. Below some of the oldest, tallest evergreens the needles are layered so thick that they bury

your horses' hooves [or: your feet to the ankle] with each crunching, crackling step.

14. For most of this journey the trees have been lush and the underbrush plentiful, but now you reach a clearing where the forest suddenly turns from brown and green to black. A solitary and barren tree stands in the center of a twenty-yard circle of blackened ash and charred earth. The tree's thick trunk is scorched and covered with a web of fine cracks. Only the thickest branches remain, reaching their burnt limbs toward the empty sky. A gentle breeze stirs up small clouds of ashes, which drift lazily around the desolate clearing.

15. Outside the woods the sky seems to be clear and the sun shining brightly, but here beneath the thick green canopy it might as well be nearly night. The layers upon layers of overarching branches intertwine yards above your heads to form an almost unbroken ceiling of leaf and wood. Light pierces through only in thin, bright shafts, illuminating spots upon the forest floor no larger than your hand. The trees are so close together that you see one whose trunk has rotted away at the base, yet it still hangs suspended in the air by the tight weave of its branches with those of its neighbors.

16. There is a break in the trees and you walk out into a small clearing, its surface covered with dead, overgrown weeds. A ripe smell of decay rises from the ground. In the distance, stems of bright flowers rise from a mist that is rolling in from the other side of the clearing. Clouds gather and the wind stirs the dead foliage on the ground, making it hiss like a shaman's rattle. The fog rolls over the yellow flowers and the clearing and surrounds your feet, gathering and breaking like ocean waves. Above you an owl hoots several times. Suddenly the wind gathers force and the younger trees at the clearing's edge begin to sway, their trunks creaking loudly. There is a sharp, snapping sound, and a dead limb comes crashing to the ground behind you.

17. Here the path narrows and the undergrowth on either side grows wilder and thicker. Tall ferns, bright purple flowers and tangled thorn bushes grow in riots at the feet of the trees. The path is now stonier, and covered in moss in several places. As it turns to the right you notice a section of the ground covered in glossy, black feathers. [The feathers belonged to a crow.]

18. The air around you is still and quiet, warm and a bit humid. Big green trees hang down over the trail here, and at the same time their great branches spread overhead and block the sun with their long, thick, dark-green oval leaves. The bark is thick and gray-green, but over it in many places grow mosses of a bluer cast. Below the trees where you travel everything is dim and dark. A deep layer of leaf litter covers the ground, muffling all sound; the noise of your passage just falls into the stillness. The silence seems to swallow all sounds – not even any birds can be heard. Looking into the trees, nothing can be seen moving either nearby or in the distance. You cannot see more than 30 yards in any direction before the tree branches block the view.

19. The woods are filled with birdsong today. From the lilting twitters of tiny, brightly feathered finches to the throaty calls of surly crows, the birds all seem to be trying to outdo each other in volume and persistence. Above you there are glimpses of the singers darting away from your group to continue their serenades from more secluded branches. The music is at times lovely, other times cacophonous. The one thing it never is, is silent.

20. The sound of running water can be heard coming from somewhere beyond the thick undergrowth to the east. It grows louder as you continue on the path. Suddenly the path bends again, sharply to the right, and the ground begins to descend until it ends at the banks of a broad, swiftly running brook. Fallen branches, moss-covered rocks and leaves partially clog the water. You suddenly

see a leather rucksack bobbing to the surface downstream from you, being carried by the swiftly-moving current. In just a few seconds it swirls out of sight around a bend in the stream. [This Bit may be combined with the description of the rucksack in Bit #21. To do so, use the following alternate ending: **It gets snagged on a fallen log about a hundred feet downstream.]**

21. Your path curves to follow briefly the course of a wide but swift stream. A torn leather rucksack is snagged on a fallen log in the brook, about fifteen feet from the bank. Its straps are sewn with iridescent snail shells and carved wooden faces, and the front flap is covered in multicolor beadwork. [If it is retrieved and opened the rucksack is found to contain a small garnet, a small leather purse with three copper pieces and a very soggy flute. This bag belonged to a halfling bard. The GM may give a 10% chance that one of the party recognizes the pack.]



22. A large, moss-covered rock stands ten feet in height, directly ahead in the center of the path. The path goes around it on each side. Drawn in tree sap on the surface of the rock is an arrow pointing down. Flies buzz in swarms all around. At the base of the rock, partially buried in the dark soil, is a roll of soft tree bark, tied with string like a scroll. Upon investigation you see, several crude depictions of orcs, scratched into the surface of the bark itself.

23. Ropy branches and fruit-laden tendrils of vine block your path at chest height, while overgrown weeds and gnarled tree roots block your path at ankle height. Low hanging branches are just waiting to smack an unsuspecting forehead as you duck underneath them. The dense growth in this part of the forest has slowed your movement dramatically. [In this overgrown section of forest, all movement is at half the normal speed.]

24. The path you were following disappears. Ahead, the ground and the trees are charred and black. Small plants have begun to grow here and there amid the ashes, and stark white toadstools spring out of the gloomy ground like ghosts. The sun is hot here, and there is very little besides the occasional fallen bough to shade you. Against one of the burned trees someone has erected a small lean-to of charred timbers. Within the lean-to are a few crusts of rock-hard bread, an empty wineskin, and a small dagger with a chipped blade.

25. As you move through the woods you spot a stag about fifty feet from where you stand. He looks in your direction, rigid and serious, as you gaze back at him. You lock eyes with him for a moment, and then he bolts away like lightning. You are able track his retreat for a moment and then he is gone, lost in the mesh of trees and plants.

26. A few paces away, a stream burbles its way through the trees. A small patch of mist hangs above the water, although the weather does not feel cool enough for fog or anything similar. It floats slowly downstream and then dissipates.

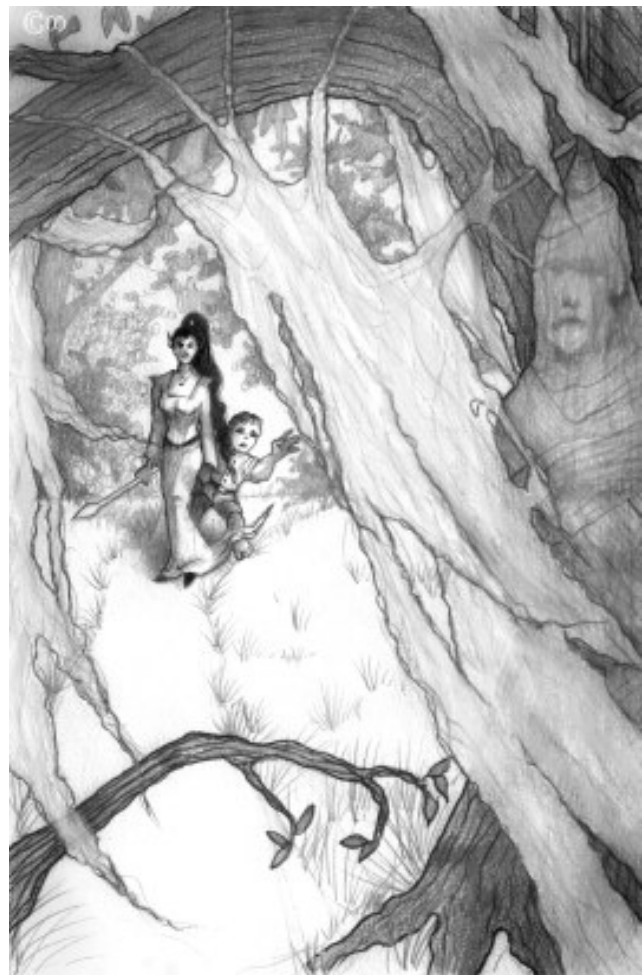
27. What began as the occasional spider web has now quickly blossomed into gossamer curtains and sheets of webbing. You see evidence that the webs have been hacked and burned away from the trail, but the forest around you has web upon web. All around you, you smell dust and decay. Here and there, you see hanging objects that could be bodies; too many of them seem to be humanoid in shape. Everywhere you look, you see gleams that seem to be glittering eyes staring back at you. Eerily, you notice that you can no longer hear the normal sounds of the forest – only the gentle sighing of a mournful wind.

28. A tree has fallen next to the path and some branches sprawl across the way. The inside of the tree seems to have been hollowed out and smells strongly of something overly ripe and musty. Looking inside, there are several types

of fungus growing sturdily in the woody heart of the tree. Some of them look as if they might have medicinal purposes – or hallucinatory.

29. You come to a still, clear pool nestled among the tangled roots of a huge tree. Now and then a single leaf falls from the treetop to set down upon the glass-smooth surface of the pool. The water tastes clean, if not a little bit like soil.

30. A hidden branch provokes a stumble and a heavier footfall than normal. A momentary glint indicates that something has been revealed, something that may have long been hidden in the ground. Closer inspection shows that it is a coin, a silver coin, although one of a type that is completely unfamiliar. Whose crown and whose regalia might this coin be showing? Who will ever know?



31. A crow sits on a branch. Its beady eye looks all around with an arrogant air. It opens its beak to caw and seems like it would spit if it could. Unhurriedly, it lifts its black, feathery wings and flutters off on business of its own.

32. A thick knot of long worms has spilled out of a rabbit burrow and across the path. Wriggling and writhing, they lie entangled with each other in some kind of obscene dance. They are horrible things.

33. A murder of crows flies noisily overhead and settles around a fallen tree. They have landed in a circle and one of their fellows sits in the middle, hopping about as if concerned. In fact, it looks as if it is limping from some wound. A sharp series of caws breaks out. There is a moment of silence and then a muffled reply from the limping crow. A louder chorus from the circle receives no reply at all and then a third, the loudest of all is followed by an explosion of feathers and wings as all dive upon the crow in the center, tearing it to pieces with their sharp claws and beaks. Then, the crows fly away. All that remains are a few bloody pieces and one shining eye.



34. Up ahead you see the stump of a great, old tree, fifteen feet in diameter and six feet high from the ground. A ladder made of fibrous plant material hangs down one side. On the top of the stump you can see a huge spiral of amber-colored stones set in the wood, with a small circle of smooth, black pebbles in the center. [If any of the party walks counterclockwise, the direction of the spiral, the sun shines brightly upon the stump. If they walk clockwise, the sun darkens and shadow falls upon the stump. If any of them stands within the circle of black stones, all of the sounds of the forest become noticeably louder. Anyone trying to listen for something would have a bonus of 15% added while standing in the circle of black stones. The stones are all just common rock, with no monetary value.]

35. From far away, perhaps from beneath the ground, there is a deep rumbling and it feels like the very earth shudders, perhaps in revulsion. The trees, the vines and the smaller plants shake and quiver. Birds fly into the air with a sudden, rushed squawk and clouds of gnats fill the skies. The cawing of the crows resounds in the distance.

36. Here for a bit the forest opens into a meadow. There are knee-high grasses on both sides of the trail. Among the bright green leaves are a variety of flowers, red, yellow blue and white in splashes of riotous color. Bees, butterflies and hummingbirds move between the flowers, collectively making a low buzzing sound. Birds are calling from the edge of the forest and now and then a small bright bird perches on a low plant in the meadow, sings a loud, trilling group of notes and then darts away. There's a breeze across the meadow that cools your faces and makes the warm sunshine seem very pleasant.

37. Small bones protrude from the dry earth underneath the a flat, grey stone. They seem to come from a fish of at least the length of an arm. It is odd to find a fish skeleton in the heart of the forest. No obvious explanation comes to mind.

38. Everything is in deep shade under the trees. The big leaves over your head block the breeze and filter the sunlight. You can see quite a distance in all directions because there are few plants growing here in the semidarkness.

39. Next to the path but partially hidden by a screen of smaller plants, a shrine has been established. There is a statue of a god, with chubby arms and legs and a welcoming smile, together with some tiny metal bowls and plates. It looks like someone has in the past set out little bowls of food and drink for the god as a form of tribute. A small scorched area perhaps indicates where a fire has been set, although it may have been nothing more than a large candle.

40. There is a sudden disturbance up in one of the trees and something is moving there. A caw sounds out and then some small object plunges to the ground. It is an egg, probably a bird's egg. It has smashed and inside, what was a few seconds ago a living creature is now just a pulped mass of blood and bone fragments.

41. A large, red flower rears out of the undergrowth. Its rampant bloom is pointing upwards and outwards, as if towards the watery sun. Petals, leaves, stamen and all seem to be straining, reaching, almost as if directed by some external agency.

42. A large log lies along the side of the trail. The wear pattern in the top and on the sides suggests travelers have frequently rested here. The trees overhead produce a welcome shade and there's a pleasant view across the forest interior. The forest has big trees standing very tall, and some tiny saplings not yet taller than a man. The ground is deep in leaves and pine needles.

43. [Pick one character for this event:]
[For riders:] Your horse stumbles slightly and then rears, startled by something. It looks like it very nearly put its foot in a rabbit burrow. Luckily it avoided a broken leg, but that was close.
[For walkers:] You take an uneven step and trip, barely catching yourself. You look down and see that you very nearly put your foot in a rabbit burrow. You have avoided a sprain or a broken leg, but that was close.

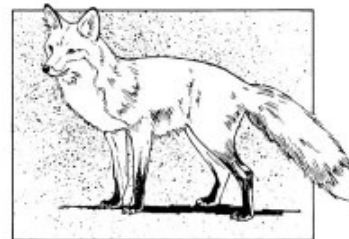
44. You come to a wide grassy clearing in the forest. The center of the meadow between the trees is flooded, a stream winding its way across and submerging the path. The water isn't deep, but it is very cold. The stream is only fifty feet wide but there are no rocks or logs and so no way for someone on foot to avoid getting wet. [If the party is riding: The horses splash through it, sending water drops flying.]

45. You have been gradually climbing a hill, and now the path diverges. On the right, the trail descends on a gravelly slope toward the bottom of the hill. The left path stays high, running, as far as you can see it, along the crest of the hill.

46. Several small bunches of berries are growing on one of the trees, although it is difficult to see why they should be growing on that one and not any of the others. Most of the berries are a green-blue color and have quite a pleasant fragrance. Another smaller bunch is ruby red and is covered by patches of a powdery, whitish mould.

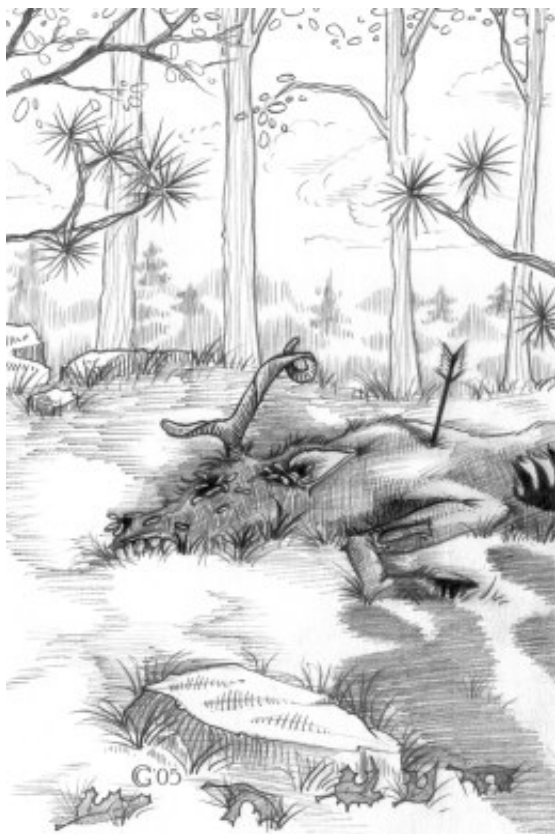
47. The trail climbs through a section of forest composed of tall pines that reach nearly out of sight. The pine smell is very strong. Needles carpet the rocky ground, making it alternately spongy and very hard underfoot. The lower branches are long dead and broken. The trees go up, straight and unbranched, to make a green canopy high above. The tree trunks are covered in small, fine, light brown bark. It seems like traveling in a huge building, the tree trunks a great array of dark columns supporting a lofty ceiling.

48. The trail climbs for a bit. On the right it is open, with scattered big pine trees and huge gray rocks the size of a wagon protruding from the ground. The ground is fairly level, with knee-high plants, including some big white flowers. To the left, the ground falls away after only about 30 feet and drops into a valley, but the view is obscured because there are lots of trees there; all you can see are the branches of the pines. Squirrels chatter at you from out of sight in the trees.



49. The path is clear, winding ahead of you one horse wide. Few plants grow on it. The surface is soft with fallen leaves and organic debris. The horses' hooves [or: Your feet] make only the softest thumps as they fall. You can hear the creak of leather and the jingle of your arms and armor as a softly repeating, familiar group of sounds. There are a few birdcalls, but the birds tend to fall silent as you near, so mostly you hear only the sounds of your companions and the whisper of wind in the tops of the trees high above.

50. Rounding a bend in the path, you suddenly hear a low buzzing noise, at once sonorous and frantic. Off to one side of the path is the carcass of a large animal, about the size of a moose – and the sound comes from the cloud of flies buzzing around the corpse. You can't tell exactly what kind of creature it was, but it's easy to see what killed it: amidst the maggots swarming over the place where its head used to be, you can see part of an arrow. The shaft is jet black, and the fletching is a muted gold in color.



51. As you skirt the base of a hill, surrounded by the silent forest, you see an opening in the hillside about 30 yards from you, where the land starts to rise. Inside all is darkness. You can tell it is not a natural cave; the entrance is too regular. Large enough for a human, the sagging opening is reinforced with wood. As you move on past it, you see a weed-covered pile of gravel outside and realize it must be an abandoned mine.

52. You emerge onto a high saddle of land. Behind you the forest stretches far into the distance. Ahead, the trail descends again, almost immediately swallowed up by the trees. But here, you climb sharply for a few steps to stand on a rock outcrop that is bare of plant life. Worn by weather, the big rocks are bald and smooth, and warm in the bright sunshine. As you look around, you see fluffy white clouds in the sky but they are small and there is no immediate threat of rain. Ahead, the forest lies vast and quiet, an unbroken sea of trees in all the shades of green.

53. The path travels alongside a stream for a space, but most places you cannot easily get to it. Although the trail is clear and the stream is obvious, the plants along the stream edge are very dense and difficult to move through. Furthermore, the stream is about a foot below its banks, so you see that if you tear through the bushes to the edge of the brook, you will likely find yourself at the top of a muddy bank, with no sure way to reach the water without falling in.

54. You can hear running water near the path, but catch only glimpses of it through the trees. Presently there is a side path. It leads between six-foot shrubs laden with strongly-scented bright white flowers [for example, honeysuckle] and, dipping slightly, stops at an open spot by the river. A small area is pounded hard, and bare of grass. There is no obvious place to sit, but horses and people can easily reach down from the edge to get water. The old dry horse dung clearly indicates other parties have watered their horses here.

55. For a bit, you ride [walk] along a forest stream. The water gurgles with a pleasant sound, moving under overhanging branches. Most of the time you can see the little creek, but you can always hear it.

56. A large tree lies partly in the path. Its leaves are still green, though wilting. The bark is gray and darkly lined. A few feet into the forest, the great roots of this tree have been upended and the upper side is more than ten feet in the air.

57. The trail leads you to a marshy area. The plants are much taller, their great leaves often two feet by three feet. The horses [or: Your boots] splash through shallow water and up onto firmer ground, then back into water again. A stream has spread across a low area and all of it is very wet in this season. The path picks its way, weaving back and forth as it seeks the driest route. That route isn't very dry, but the horses' legs are only splashed [or: but your feet are only soggy, not soaked,] when you come to the far side.

58. The narrow trail has been widening for a few yards, and then it descends in quite a broad path to a ford. The slope is steep, although you are in no danger of falling. A clear little stream rattles across a series of stones at the base of the incline. At its narrowest it is three feet wide, with stones sticking up above the water level. Horses can easily wade through the six-inch deep water, and people on foot can cross on the stones, having to step into the stream only at either end of the ford, where the water runs about an inch deep over coarse sand. On the far side the trail climbs uphill, snaking around a series of large rocks.

59. A large gray-brown rock, the size of a peasant's house but shaped remarkably like a turtle, sits by the side of the trail. The tree canopy doesn't quite close over it, and so the top is bathed in warm sunlight. The even shape and the lure of sunlight make it an appealing place to take a break. There are

scuff marks on the side of the rock. The trampling of the grass and browsing damage to the trees beside it indicate that other passersby have rested here.



60. The road forks up ahead. To the right, the trail is wide and even, the dirt packed smooth. The right fork continues under the trees near you but soon emerges from the forest into a meadow covered by waving grasses. You can see where the track crosses the meadow and disappears into the shade of the trees on the far side. To your left, the trail is only half as wide, and is overgrown with spring plants. It forms a thin aisle through the leaves of shrubs and trees on all sides, and is very quickly lost to sight among the greenery. The intersection is marked by a tall standing stone, obviously not original here, that has been carved to indicate the directions, but it is so weathered that the markings are unreadable.

61. A beam of sunlight has made its way past the reaching branches above, to illuminate, like a spotlight, one of the shrubs of the forest floor. The shrub's dark green leaves gleam in the sunlight and its brightly lit orange flowers practically glow against the darkness of the leaves. Butterflies flutter above the shrub, their wings showing white and dark, alternately. The patch of light seems to sparkle with the movement of the butterflies. A small green and yellow bird suddenly appears and, in a flutter of moving wings, seizes one of the butterflies and alights on a top branch in the sunlight to devour its prize. The sparkling motion of the butterflies continues, unheeding.

62. The trail passes over a creek, where the water has cut a ragged channel in the rocky soil. Long ago someone made a sort of a bridge from a row of logs, and it has been repaired casually by piling another log on top as the ones below rotted. Undeterred, the stream carved a path below the intervening logs. You ride [walk] comfortably across the logs of the little bridge, the creek gurgling and bubbling around mossy rocks just below you. A few white flowers can be seen emerging from the cold water under the bridge.



63. The forest is composed of trees of a variety sizes and shades. Mostly you can see only their trunks, but those are diverse: yellow-brown and red-brown, nearly black, or light or dark gray, with a coarse texture or a fine pattern, or great ridges. The sizes range from thinner than a finger to broader than a man, with all the sizes in between, spread across the landscape in no order. That makes the dead tree more memorable. Broken about fifteen feet high and as large around as it is tall, it must have been a forest giant, long ago. Now the center has rotted out and it is riddled with animal holes. The yellow bark has mostly fallen off, leaving a pale white inner trunk. About eight feet from the ground, two old branches, each larger than any nearby tree, form a “Y”. Their position, and the bird’s nest in between, make it look like a huge, stocky being with its arms raised to the sky.

64. The trail climbs over a hill and meanders along the slope, rising steadily. The hill is rocky and too steep to be climbed straight without great effort. The path, however, is wide enough to walk two abreast most of the way. Carts must have cut this path; there are deep ruts where their wheels sank into the

gravel. The small stones crunch under your feet. The view is poor most of the time; all you can see is trees, even though you are climbing higher and higher. You finally arrive at a spot where the nearest two trees are dead, and you can see back the way you have come. A few clouds are riding high in the sky, and the trees range out behind you along the relatively level lands you just passed over. To the left you see a small lake amid the forest, bright blue under the nearly cloudless sky.

65. You emerge from the forest into a glade. The path, which has been clear through the trees, vanishes under the vibrant plants of the meadow. Long slender leaves of various grasses cover the ground. You can see, however, where the trail leaves the meadow on the other side. The path up the rocky ground under the trees 100 yards away is obvious even from this distance. A straight line to the path has you [your horses] stepping on buttercups and iris, pushing bright flowers into the soft ground. It is squishy underfoot and water oozes into your footprints. At the center of the meadow, the area is flooded, with a few inches of water flowing over everything. Those in the lead splash through cold clear water; those behind them in cold muddy water.

66. The path runs along the bottomland, and everywhere there are flying insects. Some are mosquitoes and biting flies, bent on sucking your blood, but most of them are “midges”, uninterested in you, but forming great clouds. From the moment you climb out of your blankets they surround and pursue you. Washing requires chasing insects off your face. They fall into your food, or fly into your mouth, nose, and eyes. They swarm about you [and your animals] as you travel, buzzing and hovering. The path ahead looks clear of them, but when you move forward, the humming, fluttering swarm circles you relentlessly. There is no peace in the night, only a different horde of insects that fly into the fire, incinerating themselves, or attack those on guard.

67. You ride [walk] out of deep shade into bright sunlight. Blinking in the full daylight, you see this isn't a meadow but that the trees here have been cut, some of them recently. The cutting style leaves a point on each stem. [It was done by beavers.] Both slender and large trees have been cut and hauled away, and the sun is hot in the open. Plants with purple and white flowers grow almost as high as the older stumps. Where the stumps are new, you can see younger versions of the same plants starting to grow. The trail, which had drawn near a small stream briefly, drops down a little and ahead you see a small pond. [This piece can be followed by Bit #68.]

68. The trail vanishes into a pond here. Circling along the edge, looking for the trail, branches slap at your faces and your gear [such as packs or protruding weapons] gets caught by vines. The pond appears to be at least 100 feet across, but its edge is irregular and not easy to see; once you find yourselves splashing in shallow water. Working your way toward what ought to be the pond's exit, you find a beaver dam. The dam is woven of logs, sticks and leaves, easily six feet high above the stream at its center, three feet at its edges. It is in excellent repair; some of the branches on it still have green leaves. The pond spreads out from there and you can see the top of a beaver lodge 20 yards out in the pond. The stream spills under the dam, filling a wide channel there. The pond covers the trail. You will have to pick a place to ford the stream, either above or below the dam.

69. You come upon a standing stone which seems out of place, sticking as it does vertically out of the ground all alone in the grass. Then the shapes next to it resolve into an old helm, and the remains of other offerings, red and yellow cloth perhaps, and you realize it is a grave. The area is rocky enough that the stone might have been found nearby, but arranging it to sit on its long end by the roadside required considerable effort. The stone stands barely six feet from the trail. The sand and loam path passes through rocky ground with

scattered grasses and other short plants, some with fragrant leaves. The trees here form a sparse but continuous canopy overhead. There is nothing at all to distinguish this spot, except the grave.



70. You ride [walk] through an area where some kind of disturbance happened in the past. Big rocks sit in odd positions atop, rather than in, the earth. Piles of earth are peculiarly arranged across the land. Some are ten feet tall, some only three feet. Likewise, there are odd holes in the ground of various sizes and depths. Trees cover the area but they are small; few are thicker than a sword hilt. Many are 30 feet tall, and the area feels forested. There are large patches, however, where there is a marked absence of small plants and no trees have established themselves, suggesting perhaps some lingering damage to the soil.

71. The trail is covered by grasses and wildflowers. Dead grass suggests that the path has not been used much in several years. The location of the trail is pretty clear across the grassy slope, but under the trees it is much more difficult to follow. In the grass the impression of the trail, though not everywhere clear, can generally be picked up, but on the rocks and shallow soils under the trees, the impression of the trail has faded and is nearly unrecognizable in places. Your pace must be very slow to avoid missing the trail, even though it generally goes straight ahead.

72. Your path winds down into a narrow ravine, its walls formed by an eroded dirt cliff face on one side, and a massive stone that has been thrust up from the earth on the other. The top of the cliff is thick with ferns, and sunlight passing through their fronds dapples the path that meanders through the ravine itself. Roots poke out through the cliff wall in places, giving the whole ravine a heavy, earthy smell.

Most of the rock face that forms the right-hand wall of the ravine is covered in moss and lichen, but one nearby section looks different: patches of moss are gone, and the stone beneath has fresh grooves carved into it. On the ground below the missing patches is a sword, its blade unmarred by rust, half-buried in the moist earth.



73. Emerging into a clearing in the trees, you see a pond in the clearing up ahead. The pond wraps around a small, marshy spit of land, and the water is thick with water lilies and rushes. You can hear the insistent buzz of dragonflies and the occasional croak of a bullfrog. The surface of the pond is undisturbed, and the whole clearing is still and peaceful. Perhaps for this reason, a circle of flat-topped stones has been set up at the end of the little spit of land, overlooking the water.

74. After passing through some thick undergrowth, you come upon a wide circular clearing. Around the edge is a ring of menhirs, each about ten feet tall and situated a few paces from the surrounding trees. The ground between the stones is an overgrown mix of clover, wildflowers and stunted berry bushes – except in the center of the clearing.

The middle of the clearing is dominated by a massive slab of weathered stone, fully as wide and long as a hay wagon. The stone sits atop a mound of earth, and a circle of ground around it has been cleared down to the dirt in the recent past. The slab itself has been tipped halfway off the mound, as if someone tried to knock it from its perch, and you can see that the surface is covered in dark stains. [This may be a druid circle, or could be/have been used for some other rituals.]

75. As your path dips into a shallow valley, you begin to see the detritus of an ancient battle on either side of you. The sloping ground is thick with bones, long since picked clean by scavengers, and in places steel arrowheads gleam in the short grass. One section of the hill to your right looks as though it was scarred by fire, perhaps at the time of the battle, and the trees in that area have still not fully recovered.

As you pass more closely to the scene, you can pick out the remains of men – now little more than bones – clad in rusty chain mail, some still wearing iron caps and other armor as well. There is a disquieting stillness to this little glade, as if the usual sounds of the forest have receded into the distance.

76. A crumbling stone well lies just off the path, its fallen stones overgrown with moss. The well's wooden pulley system still stands, but the wood is black with damp and strangely warped. A good portion of the roof has decayed, letting sunlight stream into the well. A battered iron cup hangs from a rusty nail, below a sign written in some other language. [If any of the adventurers can read Orcish, they can determine the sign says, “REPLACE CUP, WORMMEAT!”]

77. Leaves and twigs crackle under your feet as you make your way through the thick forest. You can smell the pine needles as you try in vain to move as quietly as possible. This woodland area makes you feel as if you are closed in, imprisoned in its canopy of wood and foliage, and you almost long to come to the end of its confines.

78. This forest is so thickly populated with trees that you can see clearly only about twenty feet in any direction. The thought enters your mind that you're not sure if you could find your way back from whence you came even if you tried. The sounds of your footfalls are by no means the only noise you hear in this humid place. Birds make their sounds all around you, not quite songs, but chirps and twitters. You hear other sounds also, sounds of which you cannot discern the origin; they may be the sounds of animals moving nearby, or something more ominous.

79. As you round a thick copse of trees, you see that the path ahead is blocked by a large, covered wagon. The wagon sits athwart the path, and the rear wheel closest to you is smashed to pieces. There are large tears in the canvas covering, exposing the inside of the wagon; it is empty and bare, its contents most likely either eaten or carried off by other travelers. There is no sign of the horses that would have pulled the wagon, and the harness yoke is snapped in two.

A handful of tiny sparrows are hopping around and under the wagon, picking at the ground in search of food. You watch as one of them picks something up and then tosses it aside – and it catches your eye because it's not a seed or a pebble, but rather a tiny pearl. Looking more closely, you can see that the ground is littered with scattered seed pearls, as if from a broken necklace.

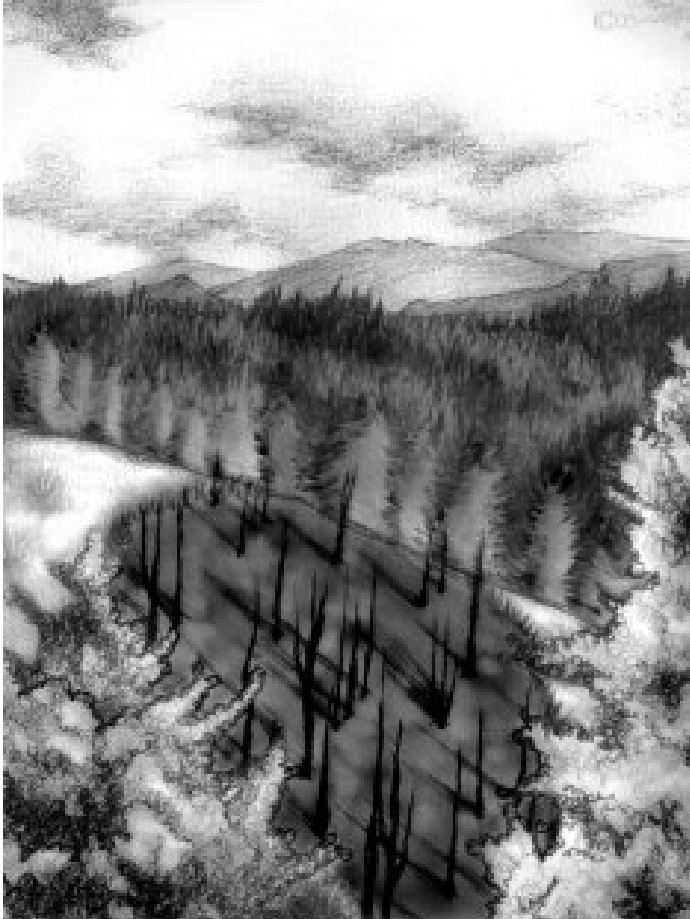
80. As you continue to make your way through the woods you hear a loud creaking sound, and suddenly fifteen feet to your right you see a small tree fall. The forest fills with the noise of the crash as it drops to the

ground. [If the party examines the small tree that has fallen:] The small tree seems to be dead, which may be the reason that it fell. Its branches have broken in the fall, apparently very brittle from standing dead for so long. The wood is dark with a smooth bark, but you're not sure what kind of tree it was. At the base of the fallen tree there are marks that look like scratches, maybe from a deer in rut or some other animal, but as far as you can tell, the scratches are not the reason for the tree falling.



81. The forest is dense and the trees grow thickly around the trail, most only a yard or two apart. You ride on deep litter, the sound of your [your horses'] feet muffled. Ferns and knee-high plants cover the ground between the trees as they have for hours. Quite suddenly the ground suddenly comes to life, with dozens and dozens of small dark birds taking flight in a mad flapping of wings. They swirl around you, trying to escape, wings beating, making lots of little gusts of wind in all directions. Dead leaves flutter on the ground in response to the wind. The noise of their squawks and cries is deafening. Then they rise into the leaves above you and are gone, and the quiet of the forest envelops you again.

82. The trees overhang the roadway here and from horseback you could easily reach up and pull a leaf off one of the lower branches. The fresh smell of the greenery is strong enough to relieve your senses from the familiar smells of sweat, leather, and horse [or, if the party is on foot: sweat, leather and steel]. The light and shadows produced by the interplay of the leafy canopy create unusual patterns around you as you pass. They are striking, but the irregular patterns make it difficult to see anything that might be hiding in the woods. The dense foliage can be beautiful, but might be deadly to the unwary.



83. You have come suddenly to a spot of forest where the trees are blackened and dead. The edge is abrupt; outside this area the trees seem untouched, inside they are thoroughly burned. In this area, a nearly circular patch about 40 feet across, every tree is burned, base to crown, the leaves and smaller branches all missing. The shrubs and herbs on the ground were incinerated as well. The fire appears to have occurred this year because no live plants have colonized the devastated area. There is a lingering smoky smell but it seems residual, not recent. [This was the site of a fireball.]

84. The woodland creatures are uncomfortably quiet today. No squirrels chatter, and the birds are silent. Even the expected drone of insects is missing. You do not know if it because you and your companions are passing, or whether it is due to something else more menacing.

85. As you hike through the woods you notice a number of deer tracks that go off to the west. You can smell the pine trees that stand all around you and a thick bed of needles blankets the forest floor. You note that the land in front of you seems to be quite flat and you can see a good distance through this sparsely wooded place.

86. Birds sit in the trees, singing as you journey through the woods. You hear the rat-a-tat-tat of a woodpecker at work, and then spot him toiling away on the light-brown wood of a sycamore tree. He stops, apparently at the sound of your foot-falls, and cocks his head in your direction. All around you, you can sense the myriad forms of life that dwell in this forest.

87. The vegetation is thick and the path greatly overhung by leafy branches. The location of the trail is pretty clearly marked by blazes on the trees, but trees and shrubs have grown down into and up out of the trail, making it difficult to travel even when you know clearly where it is. You duck under branches, or weave to avoid them. Despite your best efforts, you are stung by spiny leaves and your clothes scraped and ripped by branches with long thorns. Hacking at them with knives would make passage easier but it would be very slow.

88. Standing stones as high as a grown man's knee line the path. The smooth boulders are dominated by a single spiraling glyph carved into their face, which may represent a blessing for travelers – or a warning. Underneath the runes are a series of dots and dashes which may have meaning to someone, but not to you.

89. A jagged shard of unpainted wood has been driven into a low mound of earth just off the forest path. A badly misspelled message gouged into the impromptu grave marker with a dull knife announces “Justen, a pedlur dyd heer. Gods rest hm.”

90. You've been walking for quite some time through this thickly wooded area. As you have moved up and down small hills and vales you've noticed that this forest is alive with sights, smells, and sounds. Though you haven't actually seen any animals larger than small birds, you have heard the calls of wolves, or wild dogs. You've also seen the spoor of deer, rabbit, and possibly bear on the ground as you've delved deeper into the woods.

91. The sound of your footsteps is muted here as you stride down the path. [Or: The war-shod hooves of your horses ring hollowly on the paving stones of the ancient imperial highway.] The forest on either side of the road has grown uncomfortably close over the years [centuries] and you feel hemmed in by its vastness. You peer into the shadowy woods, but those shadows do not readily reveal their secrets. The woods here are made up of gnarled poplars and willows that have stood for a long time. As you gaze into the darkness of the wood, you almost feel that the trees are looking back at you.

92. On the far side of a clearing, you see tufts of goldenrod reaching three feet in height. Amidst it you can see a pile of rocks, pyramidal in shape and covered with bright green moss. Scores of white butterflies dart and duck about the rocks. Suddenly the sun breaks free of some clouds and the stark, white sky is warmed by patches of blue. The faint humming of insects can be heard. The smell of decay is strong here, a fetid mingling of rotting plants and death. A small red bird flits down to land on the topmost rock and begins to preen itself there. [If anyone tries to disturb or climb the rocks, many will easily tumble, revealing the thigh bone of a small humanoid.]

93. The ground becomes spongier and wetter, and soon your feet are sinking into it. Huge, bright green ferns completely blanket the forest floor here. Some of the plants rise more than three feet from the forest floor and the ferns grow so closely together that the ground itself becomes impossible to see. Swarms of

gnats gather in the shafts of sunlight that filter down from the thick ceiling above. The ground is becoming steadily wetter, and the ferns rustle with hidden life. Now and then thick, ropy vines hang from some of the deciduous trees, their dark tendrils stopping just above the tips of the ferns.

94. Ahead of you is a very unusual sight. Two fruit trees stand, one on each side of the trail; however, they are bent together into an arch. In the past, some creature, item, or unknown power forced them together. This was not recent, either, as you can see how the branches have continued to grow, further entwining the trees together. You see no other sign of intelligent creatures, buildings, or activity in the area – only this mysterious archway. The delicious scent of fruit drifts toward you as you consider the arch.



95. Your journey through the forest brings you to a small valley, where the large and stately trees give way to squat and gnarled specimens surrounded by low tangles of shrubs and wide mossy carpets. In the lowest spot of this brushy dell is an ancient stone statue, cracked with time and overrun by red-leafed creeper vines. It depicts an armored warrior with one arm held aloft, though whatever was once raised in that hand has long since broken off and is unrecognizable amidst the other rocks near the base. Any inscription seems to have long since worn away, along with the finer details of this old, gray carving.



96. A rickety wooden lean-to has been built in the lee of a chipped old boulder, and from the signs found nearby it's obvious that the rude shelter has been used by passers by for years. A blackened circle of stones marks an ash-stained fire pit, and a clearly tramped down path from the lean-to leading to a stinking patch of ground behind some oleander bushes marks the site of a well-established latrine. One of the lean-to's last inhabitants must have been a whittler. Shavings of wood are piled up in front of the small structure, and a half completed, fist-sized figurine of some kind of horse lies partially buried in the mud.

97. Colorful shelf fungi grow up the sides of the trees in this area. A grey-and-black striped lizard sits atop one of these mushrooms, flicking unwary dragonflies out of the air. One of its bulbous eyes focuses in on you and then it darts back down into the underbrush, frightened by the clamor of your passage through its domain.

98. Offerings of now-rotted fruit and old shell jewelry lie at the base of a colorful, intricately carved totem pole. A turtle forms the base of the high oak pole, supporting a bear, above that a grimacing orc face, and at the pole's peak, a human male icon. The rich array of paints used to decorate the pole are flaking and running thanks to years of neglect.

99. Off in the distance, a buck with an impressive rack mounts a doe with bleating screams of pleasure and dominance. When the pair notices your approach, they disentangle clumsily and bound deeper into the forest, moving in opposite directions.

100. You hear frantic yipping somewhere nearby, and a red fox, its tail in the air, dashes past your group. It doesn't even seem to notice your presence. The pungent odor of skunk drifts to your nostrils, indicating the probable reason for the fox's preoccupation.



Shards of the Wildwood

Common Locations

1. *Tangled Entrance*

You stand at the edge of a thick, dark forest. The trees stand close together and there appears to be no discernable path that you can follow into this tangle of vegetation. Greens and browns of every hue fill your vision, and the smell of green life permeates the air around you.

2. *Well-used Entrance*

The clouds overhead darken as you approach the forest. A well-worn path, about twelve feet wide, leads into the woods. The path is so washed out that you can't recognize any definite tracks of either man or beast. Suddenly, in the distance, you hear the howl of a wolf coming from within the forest.

3. *Entering from the heat*

The sun stands high in the blue sky as you draw near the edge of a wooded region. You can feel the heat of the yellow orb beating down on your skin. Sweat beads up wherever your skin meets clothing and your brow moistens as you stare at the forest.

4. *Quiet Entrance*

The path leads down into [through] the forest of tall trees. Most of the ground is blanketed with dry, russet-colored needles, though piles of dead leaves also gather among the large, gnarled roots of the trees. The ceiling of the forest allows only isolated pillars of light from above and the sun pools in small circles about your feet. Your footsteps make quiet crunching sounds along the spongy path. You hear the industrious tapping of a woodpecker far in the distance, and the flutter of many wings from the forest ceiling above. The air is very still and despite the darkness of

the woods it is becoming warmer as you walk.

5. *Stream and Pond*

Traveling along, as you scan the area, you think that you hear the sound of water, as if from a rippling stream. The sound is coming from directly in front of you. [If the adventurers follow the sounds of the water:] You advance only about fifty yards further when the sound becomes more distinct. As you move around a particularly large tree you see the source of the noise. About twenty yards ahead of you there is a large pool of water, big enough to call a pond, but too small to describe as a lake. [If the party advances further:] A stream is feeding the pond on the opposite side from where you stand. It strikes you as odd that although the gurgling rivulet is running into the pool of water, there is no stream running out.

[If the group has some knowledge of nature it may deduce the following:] **You know that water must be leaving the pond from somewhere, or else it would continuously rise and flood the area, which doesn't seem to be happening. Your only guess is that there must be an egress below the surface of the water where the overflow makes its way underground to some unknown destination. [The GM may decide that the hidden waterway pathway leads to an underground cavern or all the way to another stream that resurfaces elsewhere.] The sun holds sway here due to the size of the pond, and you can see about ten feet down into the clear water, but beyond that you can't tell how deep this pool goes. [The water is fresh and drinkable. The pond is about thirty feet deep and the cavern that leads underground is at the bottom]. As you take in the scene, you know that you must move on, but this does seem like a good place for a short rest.**

6. *Steep Slope*

The trail takes you down from the hill country toward the lowlands. It winds through gravelly and rocky landscape under big old trees. The trees seem widely spaced but are numerous enough that you are in shade most of the time. Increasingly the slope is very steep and walking of necessity is slow so that you don't miss a step and fall on the loose surface [or: riding of necessity is slow so that the horses don't miss a step and fall on the loose surface]. You can see places where rocks and gravel slid down, and sometimes those rock falls lie across the path and you have to pick your way very carefully. Your feet [horses' hooves] put fine dust into the air and cause small slides of pebbles down the slope beside you when you displace a rock or two.

7. *Lifeless Wood*

You come upon a dead forest. You have rarely seen anything like this in your travels. There is no telling what horror befell this once living and vibrant wood. Most of the trees are still standing, brown and lifeless, while a few have fallen, actually uprooted from the ground. You can tell that this forest has been dead for quite some time and you can't imagine any wildlife still calling this place home.



8. *Logging*

Emerging from the forest itself, you come to a swath of land which had been clear cut in the past. Dead tree stumps rise to about knee high, the signs of logging stretch around you. Dozens of young trees, soft and green, grow among the graying stumps, possibly planted by the loggers. Passing by one of the wide stumps, you notice several games of naughts and crosses scratched into the wood by bored laborers.

9. *Single Log Bridge*

Ahead of you the path is split by a deep chasm with a river at the bottom. There is a bridge

across it, made of a single log. A big tree has been cut and dropped over the chasm. There is no other way across except to walk on the tree. The tree was more than a hundred feet tall and at least sixty of those feet are out over the chasm. You can hear water rushing and when you look down, you see white water between tall boulders. The bark is still on this tree bridge but the branches have been chopped off. A slightly lighter color down the center shows the path. It's about a foot wide and level. On both sides another six inches of log slopes away. It's not a difficult path, if you don't mind being suspended in space sixty feet above a wild river.

10. *Rope Bridge*

As the path emerges from the trees, you discover the ground here drops precipitously. Scrambling down the steep slope would be possible, but definitely not easy. Then there would be the climb back up the other side of this narrow valley – another possibly dangerous effort. Instead the path turns and runs along the edge for a distance, and ahead you see a bridge. It's a suspended rope bridge stretching more than one hundred feet across the deep valley. In the center the tops of tall forest trees are more than thirty feet below.

The bridge is constructed of four ropes. Two form the base, with short pieces of wood tied between them for a walking surface. The second pair of ropes is suspended about three feet above the first. At intervals, short pieces of rope tie the upper and lower ropes together. Below, you can hear a rushing river, but it is obscured by the thick woods.

Walking on the bridge causes it to vibrate and swing strongly. When you try to cross, you discover that most adventurers are too tall to hold on to the three-foot-high "handrail" comfortably. To grasp the upper ropes, it will be necessary to bend over. All the way across the bridge, you will be choosing between bending to have a handhold, despite the risk of unsettling all the weight you are carrying, or walking the swaying, uneven logs without a handhold and with a rail that is no higher than your hips.

11. *Old Footbridge*

The trail is intersected by a narrow, swiftly moving stream. Across the stream is a fallen tree, upon which has been built a footbridge. The planks of the footbridge are rotten, as are the railings on either side. Ropes which may have once served to tie the planks together now hang from the bridge, their frayed ends mingling with the foamy whitewater below. The corpse of an elf hangs upside down, its foot tangled in one of the bridge's ropes, its head lost amid the swirling, cold water of the stream. [If the body is pulled up the players will find it has clothing, boots and chain shirt but no equipment. Whatever weapon or other gear he was carrying must have fallen into the stream. The elf's face is horribly distorted and bloated by such prolonged exposure to the water.]



12. *Plank Bridge*

Up ahead is a small bridge that crosses a burbling stream. The two ends of the bridge are made of ancient, weathered stone, thick with moss. These are connected by a row of thick oaken planks, apparently added much more recently. Rough-hewn branches have been lashed together to form railings, and the whole assemblage is perhaps ten feet long. Standing out against the new wood, a brown smear of blood can be seen on the end of the bridge closest to you. It ends abruptly on the right side of the bridge, where what looks like a human handprint can be seen along the edge of one of the planks.

13. *Ancient Bridge*

The path you have been following cannot really be called a trail. It is clearly an animal path, probably leading to a water source and indeed you hear the sound of rushing water up ahead before you reach it. This all makes the object up ahead even more unusual. As the trees clear, you see a deep, wide stream and an ancient stone bridge which crosses the river. Your path leads straight up to it and you can see a similar path leading off away from it. [If the adventurers don't believe their eyes, they may test the bridge: Not believing what you see, you reach out to touch the bridge and see if it is an illusion. You feel rough stone under your hand. Prodding with a stick shows that the surface of the bridge is also real.] Whatever this is, and whoever put it here, it seems to be a real, well-made stone bridge. [GM Note: This could well be used as a prelude to the party arriving at the ruins in Bit #12.]

14. *Stone Bridge*

A narrow stone bridge rises in a gentle arc over the river. It appears to be mainly for foot and horse travel because it is barely wide enough for one wagon to cross. The rocks were worn smooth. The bigger stones form a wide rail on both sides. Below the river runs sluggishly in the summer sunshine.

15. *Rough Timber Bridge*

The forest road begins to wind along a stream that runs to your right. It is about four arm lengths across. If you were to walk in it most of it would only rise to your shins, but you can tell there are a few places where it may be deeper. The brook bubbles and dances along its way, tumbling over rocks and around fallen trees. Thick green grasses cover its banks and small evergreens dot the way. The stream comes right up to the edge of the road occasionally and the horses clearly want to stop for a drink.

Up ahead you see a bridge that crosses the stream, as the road you are following turns. It is not a very impressive bridge; it is made of rough timber with wooden rails, but it looks solid enough. Between where you are and the bridge there are flowering trees – some with purple flowers and others with dainty white ones. Beyond the bridge the road turns again, but the beautiful green woods are too dense to see where it leads.

16. *Packed Dirt Road*

This seems to be a very old road. It is pounded down below the level of the rest of the ground, smooth and free of rocks. The surface is hard, but only because the dirt is so compressed. It is wide enough for a wagon to pass easily. No plants grow on it, and rocks that might have once been in the path are jumbled along the edges. The smoothness makes your travel easy; rarely do you need to worry about a misstep.

17. *Broken Old Road*

This road was once well-maintained. You see stones that must have leveled the irregular spots and channels built to deflect rainwater off the trail. It has been a long time, though, since anyone took care of it. The leveling stones are tilted and some have broken. Small trees have grown into the trail and their broken stumps are a hazard. Rain has gouged deep channels in the trail so that you have to take care where you step [or: where your horse steps] for fear of causing an injury.

18. *Gravel Path*

A well traveled gravel path winds through this portion of the forest, and evidence of the passage of many other travelers can be seen along its littered edges. Squirrels pick at garbage along the trail, and you catch sight of a lizard darting from underneath a discarded old work boot.

19. *Ruined Building*

The trail winds over a dark sandy soil, comfortable to walk [ride] on because it gives slightly but makes little dust. The temperature is pleasant in the shade of the great trees. Later it will likely be a bit warm for travel, but for now it is comfortably cool. The air carries sweet plant scents [such as pine and wintergreen]. In all directions you see tall broad-leafed trees, or really, their trunks, reaching upward. Occasionally the trunks are those of pines, leaking sticky, fragrant sap. Middle-sized shrubs dot the forest floor. Between them are ferns and grasses but most of the ground is bare except for fallen, brown leaves and fuzzy deep green mosses. A ruined building ahead makes a stark contrast. Only one wall stands, but you can see a dark empty area where the interior was, and sections of the fallen walls are visible. In front weeds, rare here in the forest, form a wild tangle of green and brown shoots. It is both forlorn and ugly.

Times and Seasons

20. *Morning in the Woods*

A whiff of decay tingles the nose this morning as the sun struggles to poke through the double cover of trees and clouds. Large, flat, golden leaves stick to everything, adhering with the morning dew. The trees are spaced far apart in this part of the forest, appearing as wooden caryatids guarding entry to the retreating mist. The ground slopes downward in the direction of the trail, a gentle decline, easily managed if care is taken with the leaf bedding. The mist retreats further where the sun manages to reach it.

21. *Morning Fog*

The air is chill and the morning fog is dense. You can see your breath. [The horses stamp restlessly.] The trail, which seemed so ordinary last evening, is now shrouded in fog, and vanishes into gray mist in only a dozen steps. As you move forward, shapes appear ahead of you, resolving into trees or rocks only when you are nearly on them. The low-hanging leaves on each side of the trail fade quickly off into indistinctness. All the sounds are hushed; bird calls seem faint and distant. The fog condenses on you [and your horses], soaking everything in the eerie cold mist.

22. *Obscuring Fog*

This morning in the wood is chilly. Mist and fog seem to rise out of the very ground and thicken the air around you with an impenetrable gray blanket. The chill begins to numb not just the fingers and joints but the mind itself even as the realization sets in that danger could be but forty feet away and you would not be able to see it in this fog. As you are walking the trees seem to shift and move in the fog, though when you concentrate on a specific tree form, it doesn't move but reveals itself as you draw closer and then hides again in the mist after you pass. You can hear a wolf howl; it sounds so close in this mist but it could be a mile away. On the other hand, the lupine could be close at hand and still be invisible, under these conditions. You feel only slightly comforted that this mist would be equally limiting to any enemy. The mist covers your movement in this malevolent wood but the severe restriction to your range of sight makes you feel exposed and vulnerable.

23. *Sun Coming Out*

You can see the sun behind the clouds, a point of brighter color. The morning fog is burning off. The visibility expands steadily. First things ten yards ahead are clear, then twenty yards out. The forest is no longer gray but colors appear. The small rich green leaves of the tall gray- and brown-barked trees, the thick green, almost black, leaves of tall shrubs with their bright pink or orange flowers [for example,

rhododendrons] and the finer, yellow-green leaves of ferns below the shrubs, slowly become clearly seen, stretching in all directions around you. As you move through an area where the trees are farther apart, looking up you can even see blue sky above you.



24. *Noonday heat*

The blazing noonday sunlight filters green through the forest's leafy canopy. Patches of watery light crawl slowly over the tangled roots which poke through the black soil. These tall trees have enormous leaves, and their veins are projected like strange shadow puppets by the blistering sunlight.

25. *Evening Fog*

It's not dark yet but the mist is rolling in from the river. As you move down from the ridge top, you can already see that the trees on the valley floor are disappearing in a fog that is rapidly working its way up the sides of the valley. That brings to mind other watches in the night, sitting in the fog, straining to hear or even smell any danger before it is upon the encampment. As you descend into the fog the chill that is carried with the damp surely and steadily works its way into your clothing, leaving you damp and chilled to the bone. Soon all you can see is the darkening mist is only the very nearest trees. You know that as soon as level ground is reached, the slope that is helping you keep your sense of direction will be lost as well.

26. *Night*

The stars glimmer as you walk through the forest. The trees here don't grow together as thickly as you have seen elsewhere, which affords you a wondrous view of the night sky. The thin crescent of the new moon sheds very little light for your journey, but the darkness it allows enables you to enjoy the glory of the heavens.

27. *Night watch*

The fire makes a cheery little blaze, casting long shadows on the trees so that they seem to move despite the lack of wind. The wood is dry and makes almost no smoke. As everyone settles down for the night, the fire burns low, and casts a limited glow, letting you see out into the night much more easily. The forest is very dark in the night. The green leafy woods of daytime have become an impenetrable darkness all around you. Now and then a night bird calls in the distance. Directly overhead you can see a few stars in a very dark blue sky, but most of the area above you is shrouded in the leaves and branches of the great trees. The air is cool when you face away from the fire. Crickets call and far away you can hear a tree frog. The loudest sound is the breathing [or: snores] of your companions.



28. *Late watch*

The moon set early so the late watch is very dark. Thin clouds cover the high stars most of the time. The air is chilly enough that you cannot sit long without getting cold. The fire has burned very low, casting warmth only if you sit right next to the few glowing coals. A gentle breeze moves the branches overhead, making a soft whispering sound as leaves brush each other. You hear little of interest. Overhead a bat buzzes across the clearing, changes direction suddenly in its hunt and then flies off in another direction. On the ground, there's a brief sound of motion in the leaves and then silence, as if some night hunter saw you and quickly retreated. A distant bird calls and another, much closer, answers: whee-ooo. A big owl passes and air moves against your face though you hear no sound; a dark shape briefly blocks the stars and is gone.

29. *Early Spring*

The trees are sparse, their branches gray or light brown; their leaves are pale green, light green or occasionally yellow, round and noisily rustling in the light breeze. The breeze can be heard more than felt; it rattles the leaves but has only the lightest touch on your faces. A thick litter of fallen leaves covers the ground, whispering softly as you move through it. On the trail the leaves have been crushed to a fine powder that soon coats your boots [or: horses' hooves]. Small green plants poke up above the sea of leaves on the ground, dark irregular shapes scattered across the land. The forest floor is still, but now and again you see a movement out of the corner of your eye as some animal runs up the trunk of a tree. Birds are uncommon but now and then you hear calls and whistles above the continual rustling of the young leaves.

30. *Spring Color*

A multitude of colors fills your vision as you walk through the woods. Spring is at its glorious height in this place and the foliage is truly a sight to behold. Even the forest floor is covered with fallen leaves of all colors, making it look as if it has been painted by some overzealous artist.

31. *Late Autumn*

The forest stinks of rotting leaves and decaying fruit. The trees are bare, having shed their leaves at winter's approach. The stagnant air is cool and dry, and the clouds barely move through the low, grey sky. Red hawks patrol the sky, searching for the few remaining squirrels and rabbits to satisfy their autumn hunger.

32. *Winter Weather*

The cold bites hard at your exposed skin as you walk through the trees. Even though there is little wind in this protected forest, the temperature is low enough that your clothing provides only modest protection. Snow hangs off of branches and clings to the sides of large trees, and a mantle of white covers the ground beneath you.

FOUR SEASONS – *These are four variations of the same scene, to cover all the seasons. These are provided to give examples of how other pieces might be modified for weather in non-campaigning seasons.*

33. Temperate Forest Summer

The canopy of leaves here is so thick that no grass grows upon the forest floor. Instead there is moss and a variety of plants, including infant trees struggling to make their way in a world that is too big for them. Leaves and deadfall predominate and a multitude of insects and creatures scurry or slither beneath the fallen leaves and sticks in an effort to get out of your way. The trees here vary in thickness, but they are close enough together that wherever you are you can reach out to touch a tree. This dense wood means that long weapons will be very difficult (if not impossible) to use. You have no way of knowing how long the woods will be this dense or where they may open up. The light that filters through the thick canopy of leaves is bright in many shades of green and gold, but the shadows it produces form a complex pattern in the undergrowth that could conceal many secrets.

34. Temperate Forest Spring

The canopy of leaves must grow thick here, since no grass grows upon the forest floor. You can see moss under the carpet of dead leaves, and a variety of plants are beginning to grow, including infant trees struggling to make their way in a world too big for them. Leaves and deadfall predominate and a multitude of insects and creatures scurry or slither beneath the fallen leaves and sticks in an effort to get out of your way. The trees here are close together and vary in thickness but wherever you are you can almost reach out to touch a tree. This dense wood means that long weapons will be very difficult (if not impossible) to use. You have no way of knowing how long the woods will be this dense or where they may open up. The light that filters through the newly budding leaves is a bright green that gives the forest the green



glow of new life. The renewing, fresh scent of small flowers blooming amidst the deadfall serves as a reminder that life will find a way.

35. Temperate Forest Fall

The canopy of leaves here is so thick that no grass grows upon the forest floor. Instead there is moss and a variety of plants, including infant trees struggling to make their way in a world that is too big for them. Leaves and deadfall predominate and a multitude of insects and creatures scurry or slither beneath the fallen leaves and sticks in an effort to get out of your way. The trees here are close together and vary in thickness but wherever you are you can almost reach out to touch a tree. This dense wood means that long weapons will be very difficult (if not impossible) to use. You have no way of knowing how long these woods will be this dense or where they may open up. The light that filters through the red and gold leaves gives the whole forest a golden glow.

36. *Temperate Forest Winter*

The canopy of leaves must grow thick here, since no grass grows upon the forest floor. You can see moss under the carpet of dead leaves, which the frost has begun to make slimy, and a variety of wilted and dry plants. What you at first thought were dry vertical sticks are actually infant trees, soaking in what light they can now as they struggle to make their way in a world too big for them. Leaves and deadfall predominate and a multitude of insects and creatures scurry or slither beneath the fallen leaves and sticks in an effort to get out of your way. You have no way of knowing how long these woods will be this dense or where they may open up. The lack of leaves makes it seem deceptively open. The light that filters through the leafless trees is grey and cold, reflecting off the patches of snow that have dusted the deadfall with crystals. Although you do not see much activity, you know that beneath the warm blanket of fallen leaves life goes on and insects and worms are still going about their business. What other creatures may still be active here at this season you can only guess.

Weather

37. *Indications of Heavy Rain*

While it rained last night all through the forest, it seems to have rained much more heavily here. The ground is soggy and a musty smell fills the air. The water has mostly drained off the path you are following, but mud still clings to your boots [or: to the hooves of your horses].



38. *Approaching Rain*

By noon the clouds are gathering. It is not long before the rain begins, gently at first, and

then pouring down, rattling through the leaves.

39. *Sudden Shower*

There is a sudden silence and for a moment it is not clear what has happened. Then, the first tap-tap-tapping from the leaves above provides the sound that fills the vacuum. The tapping intensifies and some drops of water start to reach the ground. The animals around you seem to prick up their ears. Already the smells of leaves and flowers and earth have become richer. [The shower may be brief, at the GM's option, thus causing no problems with mud.]

40. *Steady Rain*

Above the trees, the clouds are thick and gray. There is no color to anything; the sky is gray, the leaves a darker gray, the road dim ahead. The falling rain initially seems light but it is steady and soon everything is soaked. The track under your feet becomes sodden, though the leaf litter soaks up the water and it doesn't become muddy. The air is not cold but the rain soon makes you chilly. Water accumulates on your clothes and hair and you can see droplets standing on each others' hair [and beards].

41. *Night Rain*

The rain can be heard and smelled before it is felt, a delay caused by the tightly knit canopy overhead. The same canopy provided relief from the sun during the day's travels, yet confounded any attempts at fixing a position by the stars as night fell. Now it serves as a tent, diverting the light rain.

Psh...psh...psh... Larger drops, having run together along the branches and leaves overhead, drop steadily into the fire. A gentle rumbling far to the north announces the storm head, too far off to be a concern. A second rumbling a few moments later confirms it is moving east, and away.

The air in the clearing grows brighter by degrees as the light from the fire catches in the misty rain. The dirt around the fire becomes speckled, and a prevailing dampness settles in.

42. *Feelings in the Rain*

[This Shard may be used as a whole, or in sections as the party travels.]

A light rain begins to fall as you move through the trees. The foliage is not so thick as to hinder your view of the sky, so you can see the dark clouds that have formed overhead. The smells of damp woodland overwhelm your senses as you make your way through the forest. You notice that your feet are feeling heavier as you look down to see that the forest floor has quickly become muddy. The dirt sticks to your boots and makes your progress a little slower. The rain, as it falls lightly, bouncing off of leaves and branches, is actually quite calming. You can feel its cool wet drops on your skin as you walk and it actually lifts your spirits a bit. You usually associate rain with a dreary feeling, but somehow in this forest, with its sweet smells and wet leaves, you feel anything but dreary.

Even though the mire created by the rain on the forest floor has slowed your step, you don't mind. You find yourself taking the time to notice individual trees as you make your way through this wooded place. [Anyone with knowledge of nature would have a 60% or better chance of recognizing these types of trees, and a 40% chance of knowing the additional details. If no one recognizes the trees, read the paragraph below instead.] You spot the smooth, light gray bark of a beech tree, and the chalky-white, peeling bark of a birch. Further along you spot a hazelnut tree, full of nuts ready for the picking. As you walk even further you notice a silver maple. Its gray, scaly bark grabs your attention and you stop to touch it. Wet and rough on your fingers, the furrows in the wood feel like some large reptile's encrusted skin. You look up and see that this maple stands almost eighty feet high. As you are looking skyward with the rain gently hitting your face, you see that the clouds are starting to depart. You almost feel sad that the rain will end soon, but you look forward to continuing on your journey.

[The bark from a birch tree peels off easily and can be used as a good starter fuel for campfires. The nuts from a hazelnut tree (actually a bush

that grows well in mature forests) are edible by humans and animals. If the party decides to gather some nuts, 6-60 can be found.]

[If no one in the party can identify the trees, use this description:]

A few trees have a rather smooth bark, light gray in color. Others have bark that is almost whitish and is peeling right off the tree. If you try, you can peel off a sheet of bark so thin it is almost like curled up paper. Further along you spot a tree – well, perhaps really more of a bush – covered with nuts. They're probably edible; a squirrel scolding from a branch of a nearby tree certainly considers them to be so. As you walk even further, a tree with gray, scaly bark catches your attention and you stop to touch it. Wet and rough on your fingers, the furrows in the wood feel like some large reptile's encrusted skin. You look up and see that this tree stands almost eighty feet high. As you are looking skyward with the rain gently hitting your face, you see that the clouds are starting to depart. The rain has been almost pleasantly refreshing, but you look forward to continuing on your journey.



43. *Thunder and Lightning*

Thunder cracks, and the forest shakes as if were a single frightened beast. You see an especially bright bolt of lightning and hear a "crack!" as it strikes a tree. Even over the following rumble of thunder you can hear crashing, as the giant victim crushes its neighbors with its death throes.

44. *Thunderstorm*

The storm builds all afternoon. The humidity rises and there's a creepy stillness to the air, but there is no wind. You begin to hear thunder in the distance. The thunder sounds again, much nearer, as the leaves whip about, driven by winds above you. Then the rain comes through the forest like a moving wall: on one side dry, on the other almost solid water. It falls in blinding sheets. The thunder is right on you; you can feel as well as hear it. The lightning illuminates everything for a spectacular instant, and then everything seems much darker. The wind throws branches down on you and pulls free anything not well-tied. The water streams down so thickly it is hard to breathe. Again the lightning flashes, and you can smell the ozone. [If the party has horses or other animals: **Your animals are extremely nervous. They shy away at the lightning and pull at the ropes that hold them, rolling their eyes wildly in fear.**] Eventually the rain eases and then stops, and the thunder moves ever farther off. The soft forest soil is rapidly absorbing the water and the air is much cooler than before the storm.

45. *After the rain*

You slosh through mud as you try to make your way through the trees. Even though it isn't raining here now, it must have been not long ago because the ground is like sludge and the trees all around you drip with fresh-smelling water. You struggle to keep your boots on as you travel through this muddy mess of a forest.



46. *Puddles on the Trail*

The rain ends but the forest still drips. You go forward on a poorly-marked trail filled with muddy puddles. The mud is very slick; it requires concentration to move without slipping. If you go around the puddles, you brush the wet leaves and they dump water on you.

47. *Windstorm*

The wind begins to blow powerfully as you travel through the woods. Your first clue is the growing rustling of the leaves, and then a rushing sound as the wind whips through the treetops. You look up and see that the high branches of the trees are swaying wildly in the strong breeze, and you can tell that the thick lower foliage is sheltering you from the true power of the wind. Leaves fall unnaturally in huge numbers, giving way in the windstorm that has blown up unexpectedly. You notice the temperature drop abruptly, as a shiver surfaces on your skin and runs throughout your body. You think that it might start raining at any time, but the shower never comes. Instead, you are assaulted by the sting of the dirt and leaves that hit your body as you move along.

Miscellaneous

48. *Door in a Tree*

In one large tree, you are surprised to see a small wooden door set with a pewter handle. [This can either be at the base of a tree, or up above the ground where one of the large limbs meets the trunk.] The door is four feet in height and three feet across. It is painted brown and decorated with a pattern of small faces, each fixed in a different expression. The door knob itself looks like an angry little face with a protruding tongue. [The door is locked. There is no magic upon it, nor is it set with any traps. There is only a 25% base chance to open the lock.] The door opens into a small room carved into the living tree. The room is twelve feet in diameter, and twenty feet in height. Two small circular windows are carved into the tree near the ceiling, letting in a small amount of sunlight. The floor of the room is covered in pine needles and leaves, and a few, tiny potato bugs and beetles are trundling across the floor. There is no furniture, only a pile of animal skins in the corner. [Beneath the animals skins are five silver pieces. There is no evidence as to who may have carved the little room or built the door.]

49. *Ruins in the Trees*

This part of the forest is very thick. The trees here are truly ancient – it seems no woodsman’s axe has ever come near them – but they are strong, healthy, and sturdy. This would be a paradise for the elves. Just as you think that, you see something fall from a tree and crash to the ground ahead of you. [If the adventurers investigate:] When you approach, you see that it is a piece of shattered lumber, old and weathered, but definitely worked wood. It must have been part of a structure. As you look up, you can see the sagging remains of a house in the tree top. Despite its current decrepit state, you can clearly see its elven architecture. [The GM may give a 50% chance for gathering the following information, if desired: Examining the piece before you makes that even clearer; given its size and thickness, and the holes bored near one end, this chunk must have been part of the walkway of an elven town.] Why would the elves abandon an area this perfect?

50. *Tree Roads*

This part of the forest is dominated by great, squat trees with trunks as much as twelve feet in diameter. The trees’ long limbs begin only three feet off the ground and stretch out in lengths of twenty to forty feet, often meeting and intertwining with limbs from other trees. The limbs themselves are sturdy and thick, with an average diameter of one and a half feet. [If the players choose to climb the trees and use the limbs for travel, they will find that the forest continues like this for several miles. Choosing to travel on the ground could prove difficult because of the many thick, interlaced tree limbs barring their way. The GM may allow a trail if desired.]

51. *Bear Sighting*

Across a clearing a black bear with a trio of cubs stares at you balefully and roars a warning. [If the adventurers approach, she rises up on her hind legs and roars another challenge.] At the first sign of danger, she rushes her cubs back into the treeline, leaving behind the majority of their kill, a viciously savaged, half-

eaten boar. [The GM can avoid any encounter here by simply having the bear leave the scene.]

52. *Mysterious Key*

You reach a fork in the path. The ground surrounding the path here is completely blanketed with a vibrant, blue clover, the bright full blooms almost glowing in the gloom of the woods. Hovering and darting above the clover are tiny white butterflies. There is a rustling among the clover and a small green viper courses his way through the plants. Suddenly you catch a glimpse of something gleaming dully among the greenery.

[If the adventurers investigate:]

Searching through the clover, you discover a small pewter skeleton key, the top of which is carved to resemble a squat little face with a protruding tongue. Your search startles the little viper, which slithers quickly from the clover bed and across the path. It slips back into the clover on the other side of the path and disappears from sight. [Note: This piece can be used with “Box in the Bower,” Shard #53 below.]



53. *Box in the Bower*

Here the trees are spaced more widely apart and more sunlight reaches the forest floor. Some of the trees seem ancient, reaching heights of a hundred feet or more. Many of their trunks have a diameter of ten to twelve feet. The trees' great, twisted roots have grown over the trail in many places, at times rising four feet above the ground before delving back into the loamy earth. Dozens of tiny red mushrooms sprout from the soft wood of the roots. You come to a place in the trail where it seems two of the enormous trees have grown toward each other, their great roots intertwining and forming a latticework wall that completely bars the path. The roots grown in a way that suggests a ladder, and seem easy to climb despite the slippery nature of the moss and the mushrooms growing on them.

[The roots are indeed easy to climb, and go up about eight feet. If any of the party climb them, they will find a small 'nest' of twigs and leaves tucked up against the trunk of one great tree. It is about the right size for a creature two feet tall. It contains a dirty suit of clothes in a very small size, a tiny pair of shoes, and a small locked iron box. (If any of the party has the skeleton key from Shard #52, it will fit into the keyhole and can be used to unlock the box.) Within the box are five silver pieces and a small glass vial with no stopper.]



54. *Fallen Trees*

You come to a place where all of the trees have been toppled or uprooted. Some of the trees are still alive, and new growth rustles in the wind at the tops of tangled roots, upturned, spiky branches, and thick, jutting tree boughs. You face a confusing maze of limbs and roots that seems to stretch ahead for quite a distance. The fallen trees continue in either direction as well. The air smells rich with soil here, and clouds of gnats swarm amid the dirt-choked roots and tangled branches. The only sound is the angry

bickering of squirrels from somewhere amid the deadfall.

You notice that within the root clusters of one of the fallen trees is an opening. As you look inside the opening you can see the tree is hollowed out, forming a passageway about seven feet across. A few feet into the hollow tree you discover a spider has been busy; walls of thick web break as you pass through them. [If they continue, the adventurers must pass through fifty feet or so of webs. They may encounter several normal spiders, but none are harmful.] After a hundred feet or you can see light coming from the end of the hollow tree, but once outside you find yourself in a natural cage of tangled roots as the hollow tree you just left meets with a second, hollowed tree about four feet in diameter. [If they choose to enter the second tree, they will find ten arrows and a ten-foot coil of rope. The second tree continues for another thirty feet.] After you emerge from the second hollow tree, you find the forest on the other side is once again normal, and most of the felled trees are behind you.

55. *Unusual Trail*

You switched to this branch of the forest trail a few minutes ago and it has only grown wider as you have gone along. Every step you take away from civilization seems to bring a larger and better defined trail – exactly the opposite of what you expect. After several more minutes of travel, it is fully twenty feet wide. You see no signs of it having been cleared, no saplings or plants thrown into the underbrush at its side. The soil is not dead, because you can see seedlings sprouting up here and there, but something has completely removed all traces of grown plants. You also smell a scent that you cannot recognize for some time. It teases your memory until you finally place it: the sea. The smell of salt water is all around you, despite your distance from the sea. You see no signs of a lake, a stream, even a small pond, but the salt water smell only grows stronger. [The unusual trail can diminish and disappear sooner or later, at the GM's discretion.]

56. *Miniature Forest*

As you approach a clearing, you assume you are entering a normal area, filled with ordinary undergrowth. When you enter it, though, you can see that it is far different. This area is filled with trees, but they are all tiny and stunted. You recognize them as the same types that are in the forest around you, but none are over two feet in height. They are well-grown, but tiny. They look as if someone took normal trees and somehow reduced them to one-tenth or less of their proper height. [If the adventurers examine the small trees more closely:] As you bend down to look at them, you notice tiny insects flittering among them – or do you? The details are nearly impossible to make out, but it almost seems that the specks you see are minute birds, rather than insects.

57. *Time Paradox*

With so much magic in the world, the laws of physics occasionally bend and break, creating spontaneous enigmas. The forest clearing you've stumbled across is one such mystery. Outside the glade it is a typical autumn afternoon, and red and brown leaves drift slowly down to carpet the forest floor. Inside, the forest's time line has been inverted. Leaves float upwards from untidy piles on the forest floor, reattach themselves to bare trees and slowly return to a lively shade of green. [This odd time paradox has no game effect other than what's noted, and it affects only this particular glade.]

58. *Ruined Goblin Village*

A goblin warren once stood in the shadows of an ancient dead oak, small tents made of poorly tanned skin propped up against the rotting bark. At one time tiny paper lanterns lit the night in a dozen shades of amber. Not any more.

The goblins were slaughtered to the last creature, their crude village razed. Small unburied bodies have been picked clean by scavengers and only bones and bits of tattered leather armor remain. Broken arrows, cracked wooden bucklers and blunted spears

litter the spaces between the shacks. Ragged strips of tenting flap and snap like whips, and crows caw loudly, their out of tune 'dinner music' the loudest sound in this blasted piece of forest.

59. *Forest Herd*

You come around a large rock on a sloping hillside to find a group of big animals [elk, or possibly a type of deer] sitting and standing in the trail. The big male stands 4' tall at the shoulders and has handsome, multi-tined symmetrical antlers, fully 3' long. He turns aggressively and stands determinedly in the path, the charcoal hairs on his neck, a strong contrast on his otherwise gray-brown color, now erect and spiky. Behind him, the antlerless does and a couple of fawns half the size of their mothers leap to their feet with a rather frantic motion and then retreat quickly and very quietly up the trail. In a moment they are out of sight where the trail continues to curve around the hill. As the last doe disappears, the big buck snorts, turns and leaps away in stiff-legged but surprisingly large bounds, to vanish following the does. [Terms for elk should be bull/cow/calf; deer are buck/doe/fawn... this is fantasy.]



The Noisy Forest

This series of short pieces comprises an entire experience of traveling through a fir wood to the accompaniment of thousands of hidden, chirping insects.

60. *Entering the Fir Forest*

When you first hear the sounds, they are rather pleasant: "cha-chirp!" – a clear little sound against the silence of the forest. You have just entered a section of the forest where occasional big fir trees can be seen between the light-barked deciduous trees. In the darkness under the firs, the shrubs and ferns of the understory are interrupted by a dense green-colored moss. As you travel along, the firs become more numerous and the moss becomes more common, like a carpet of rich deep-pile green velvet.

61. *Smells and Sounds in the Firs*

The trail takes you between stately trees, and the smell of their thin, needle-like leaves has a distinctive pungent [piney] fragrance. The soil of the trail is soft, almost spongy, and very comfortable to walk [ride] on. The “cha-chirps” become more frequent so that they are happen regularly. Soon no minute passes without one: “Cha-chirp! Cha-chirp!” Each sounds like all the others. There may be a few that are very slightly higher or lower in pitch, slower or faster, but very little difference is



discernable. Cha-chirp! The fir trees become steadily denser and more abundant. The cha-chirps increase in number until you hear many all at once and moments of silence are rare.

62. *A Din in the Forest*

The trail rises and the rocks cease to be visible through the thick moss. The big fir trees, with smaller ones poking up below them, are now the only trees in sight. The air has a rich pungent smell. The trail is wide and easily found, comfortably spongy under your feet. The noise is deafening. You can hear nothing but cha-chirp! cha-chirp! cha-chirp! cha-chirp! cha-chirp! cha-chirp! It comes from what must be thousands of voices, all at once, all around you. Normal speech is impossible; you can shout or use hand signals but you cannot hear normally above that incessant din.

64. *Cacophony among the Trees*

You can hear nothing but cha-chirp! cha-chirp! cha-chirp! cha-chirp! cha-chirp! Yet to the eye, the forest is still, with no movement. The luxurious green branches of fir trees of all sizes grow down to the ground, over a darker green carpet of thick moss. You cannot see far because the trees are so

numerous. Sunlight filters through the narrow leaves and the heavy scent of the resins overwhelms even the smells of sweaty shirts [sweaty horses] and leather. You see little water in this forest, but occasionally a tiny stream trickles between exposed tree roots and moss-covered rocks. The cha-chirp! sounds continue incessantly and intensely all the daylight hours.

64. *Camping Among the Firs*

If you camp in the fir forest, you have to scrape a hole in the moss to set a fire. The moss is as attractive close up as from a distance: soft, green, spongy but dry. It has a mild pleasant “green” smell. It burns easily, but it makes an incredibly foul-smelling thick black smoke. In contrast, fir tree branches burn nicely with a pleasant piney smell. As you move the moss, dozens of little black bugs [like crickets], each about the size of your thumb, jump away. They are everywhere under the moss—dozens, maybe hundreds, of them.

[The insects won’t call except from hiding. If one gets into a backpack or sleeping roll, it will call from there. However, they are not attracted to substances other than moss, so that should not be common. Should they call from a pack, the calls are not muffled by the moss and are painfully loud. Each bug calls about once every 4 minutes].

65. *The Smell of the Sound*

The cha-chirp! bugs don’t have much smell. The first time you look at one you really don’t notice any, but by the time you leave the forest there is a characteristic musty odor that you [and all your animals] strongly associate with cha-chirp! bugs and equally strongly detest.

[The cha-chirp! bugs taste very bitter with a nasty lingering flavor that is hard to identify but that causes most people and animals to want to rinse their mouths. Birds won’t eat them alive or dead. Only a foolish young dog that eats just anything will eat them. If an adult of human size eats about 4, it will cause strong, painful vomiting. (Scale that to other sizes appropriately.) If adult humans eat 7-8, the toxins in them would probably be fatal.]

66. *Silent Night*

As darkness falls, the sounds stop abruptly. One minute you are deafened, the next minute not a cha-chirp! can be heard. The silence goes on and on and presently you hear a distant bird call, and later another. Soon the night seems normal with the murmur of a slight breeze in the leaves and infrequent bird calls in the firs. [Should the adventurers investigate:] Under the moss (including that under your blankets), you can find many cha-chirp bugs.

67. *The Dawn Chorus*

The light is pale beyond the trees and overhead the stars are fading. There is no gradual beginning. A little pink can be seen on the clouds in the east and with no warning the cha-chirp! chorus begins. All about you, everywhere, cha-chirp! Cha-chirp! Cha-chirp! Cha-chirp! Cha-chirp! Cha-chirp! It is a constant noise, too loud and continuous to speak over. [Shouting works.]

68. *Annoyed Mounts*

[If the party is traveling with on horseback:] The horses do not like hearing the cha-chirps. They become irritable, respond more reluctantly to commands, and lash out against you and each other with hooves or teeth for infractions they normally accept without reacting. If you don't slow them, they steadily increase their pace as they go through the forest with its infuriating cha-chirp! sounds, until they are trotting and then cantering. It would not take much to startle them into a panicked, irritated stampede through the forest.

69. *Annoyed Companions*

All morning you travel in a pounding, deafening chorus of cha-chirp! cha-chirp! It doesn't seem to increase or decrease, just go on and on until you are highly irritable yourselves. The cadence is so incessant that you finally can't hear it exactly; it's just a vast, pounding headache you cannot escape.

70. *A Change in Sight*

You start seeing different types of trees: broad light-colored leaves among the deep green fir

needles. The occasional rock is visible on the ground without a covering of moss. Then the deciduous trees expand to form islands of large leaves amid the dark of the firs, with ferns and wild flowers, not moss, below them. Any decrease in sound is not obvious; your ears do not hear the difference. However, the sound must have decreased, though your exhausted ears do not really register it, because you find you can talk to each other over the cha-chirp! sounds. You are tempted to talk or sing just to hear something other than cha-chirp!

71. *Leaving the Firs Behind*

By the time the firs are scattered in a sea of broad-leaved trees—oaks and elms and maples—the cha-chirp! sounds are separate and seconds, then whole minutes, go by without hearing one. You can talk easily. The forest understory is diverse and interesting, no longer moss-covered and dark, with filmy yellow-green ferns interspersed between thick dark-green leaved shrubs [like rhododendrons], and clusters of short plants of a medium green between them, their bell-like white flowers visible above rocky ground.



72. *Relief at Last*

Before many hours pass, the forest has become a hardwood forest of big-leaved deciduous trees stretching overhead, with a layer of ferns covering the ground, dotted with big dark-leaved shrubs [like rhododendrons]. Bright wild flowers can be seen at intervals, white bells, blue cups and deep reddish spires. The woods has no consistent smell, sometimes smelling of decaying wood, sometimes of the dusty trail, sometimes a passing sweet floral scent. The sounds you hear are the warning cries of birds and occasional squirrels as they see you, and the cries of bird flocks in the canopy.

Someone traveling through the fir forest in early spring will find it is a lovely place:

73. *The Fir Forest in Spring*

The forest rises high over your heads with big, wide fir trees dominating. At first you see them just occasionally among deciduous trees, but they steadily become more numerous. Since they are so big, they seem close in, limiting your vision. Soon all that are around you are firs – tall ones and short ones, some close up and others farther away seen incompletely beyond the near ones, more firs. Their needle-like leaves perfume the air with a pungent resinous scent. Their canopies block the sun over head and you travel in cool shadows. The forest floor is covered by a thick moss, dark green and soft, that is a joy to sit or lie on, spongy, dry and with a pleasant leafy smell.

If someone travels through this forest after high summer:

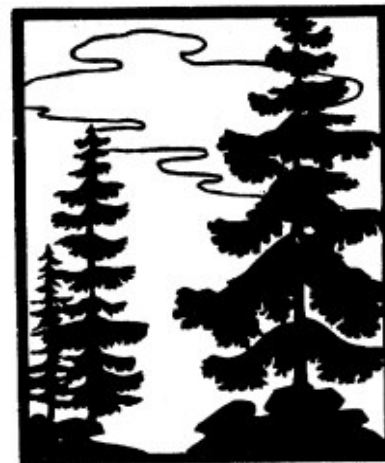
74. *The Fir Forest in Autumn*

The forest gradually changes from deciduous trees, their leaves starting to be tinged with the yellows of fall, to a dense fir forest. The firs are deep green and unaffected by the changing season. The tall firs block out the sun and are all that can be seen in all directions, a deep quiet darkness. Their needle-like leaves

have a pleasant resinous smell. Thick moss lies under and between the big fir trees, muffling sounds. The moss is spongy and soft to touch. Wherever you look, there are dead black bugs about the size of your thumb. Their bodies lie with more than 100 per square yard, and so as you look at the trail and across the forest floor you can see thousands of them. They crunch as your feet [your horses' hooves] step on them. The smell of their rotting bodies is mild, but foul and pervasive. At first you only dislike it, but presently it turns your stomach and you think about gagging. You consider putting some other scent onto a cloth and tying it over your nose to get relief.

75. *Camping in the Autumn*

To light a campfire you have to clear an area of the moss (which is everywhere) because it seems that it might burn very well and might ignite the forest. Furthermore, when it burns it makes a thick black smoke that smells as bad as the dead bugs. The fir trees make good fire wood which has a pleasant smell, although the stink of the dead bugs still comes through to you. At this time, sleeping on the ground is almost unbearable because of the intensity of the smell of the rotting bugs. Clearing an area of dead bugs will help, but it can take more than an hour and you will have to smell them in much closer proximity. The smell clings to your gear even when it is scrubbed with soap. [The next town sells elixirs that wash off the smell, some of which even work.]





Forests of Mystery

Do we really give forests their due in our adventure settings? Sometimes I think that I have reduced forests to simply another terrain type with different monster encounters. In the busy-ness of life I have occasionally lost the opportunity to build a forest setting that conveys the mystery and wonder with which Medieval forests were regarded.

Part of the difficulty is that we don't perceive forests the same way that our adventurers and other people of our game worlds would perceive them. We think of a forest merely as a wooded ecosystem. Perhaps we have never been in a forest except on a highway or in the safety and comfort of a car, have seen them only on television or in a movie. Worse yet, we may think of a wild forest as being a park with trees. The closest most of us could ever get to the wilds of a forest is to visit a wildlife refuge, and the park officers are hesitant to let the public wander through those areas because even today they are dangerous. (Note that they are indeed dangerous to life and limb even though they do *not* have dragons, orcs, giant spiders, or evil magic users in them.)

Too often in our games, normal animals are not much of a challenge despite the fact that if we were really in the wild, our first indication that something was hunting us would probably be when it landed upon us and sunk its claws or teeth into us. While fantasy Rangers would have a better chance to perceive the danger, a Ranger would also be the last person who would take a wildwood for granted. The danger could well be imperceptible to the average fighter (unless he or she was also a hunter) and a standard warrior would probably be in the same situation in which many of us would be. A magic user, on the other hand, would probably be so busy trying to thumb through

a book on forest survival or trying to catalog the flora that he or she would be oblivious to the fact that something was contemplating having him or her for dinner. While these examples may seem extreme, I wish to make the point that most human and dwarven characters are not going to be any more at home in the woods than an average modern-day person would be. The situation was even more pronounced in the Medieval and ancient periods, when forests were places of mystery and enchantment that were best avoided. We see this in numerous sources.

Sir James Frazer writes in The Golden Bough of the ancient forests of Europe:

"Down to the first century before our era the Hercynian forest stretched eastward from the Rhine for a distance at once vast and unknown; Germans whom Caesar questioned had traveled for two months through it without reaching the end. Four centuries later it was visited by the Emperor Julian, and the solitude, the gloom, the silence of the forest appear to have made a deep impression on his sensitive nature [p.126]." This sense of wonder was complicated by the idea that great trees had spirits of their own and this belief persists to this day in some circles.

Frazer quotes an English account as follows: When an oak is being felled "it gives a kind of shriekes or groanes, that may be heard a mile off, as if it were the genius of the oake lamenting. E. Wyld, Esq., hath heard it several times [p.130]."

Besides the mystery of the wood itself were the dangers concealed therein. When people went into forests they often did not return, and rangers and woodsmen were viewed with a sense of mistrust and as harbingers of danger because they could walk those paths on a daily basis. An adventurer might hear some elderly villager insist: "It just isn't natural for someone to live out there."

In the ancient world groves were considered to be enchanted places where monsters or fantastical creatures lived, and to enter them was to invite an encounter with the gods. It was in such woods that the hunter Actaeon came across the goddess Artemis and her nymphs bathing. She turned him into a stag and he was torn apart by his own hounds. (As an adventure, that would have ended with rolling up a new character.)

One forest encounter that could have ended poorly involved two young children who ventured into the woods and came upon a witch's cabin. They were invited in for dinner – but only they were the dinner. Another young lass was stalked by the big bad wolf, while in yet another instance a man who ventured into the forest and fell asleep in a magical glen didn't wake up for generations. Another unhappy incident occurred when a beautiful young woman was given an enchanted apple by a witch and fell asleep, and was forced to wait for true love's kiss.

Also, let us think briefly on the way the men and dwarf in Tolkien's Fellowship regarded the forest of Lothlorien. They did not take *it* for granted, and saw entering the forest as an act of desperation. In fact only the ranger and the elf considered it a reasonable option. We could go on and on with examples from fiction, legend, myth, and history, but the point is that these stories should tell us something about how forests were regarded in medieval and ancient times and also how our fantasy RPG characters would regard them. Remember, the ancients only *thought* that the woods harbored dangerous enchanted creatures, while our adventurers know for a fact that they do.

It is up to the gamemaster to educate the players in this sense of awe and mystery regarding forests. The most memorable way to do that is to weave a forest of mystery around the characters as they adventure. When characters are hunting up adventure in the forest they may well have something hunting them in turn. At the very least they should get the feeling that they are being watched. Fairies, dryads, sprites, kobolds, and even intelligent birds or familiars could very

likely take an interest in the adventurers and (even if they don't attack) may watch them from a safe distance. It could well be more unnerving to be shadowed by a band of goblins that melts away into the trees when the adventurers try to confront them then to have a direct encounter where the group wipes out a band of goblins.

One thing that may help to build the mystery is to weave the descriptions of encounters into the description of the forest in general. If a gamemaster provides detailed descriptions of the forest that have nothing to do with an encounter it will be harder for experienced players to know that their characters are actually entering into an encounter when one occurs. Most experienced players have come to realize that when the GM begins describing things in detail, then something is up. When a detailed description is given of a pool that is just a pool or a flower that is just a flower, adventurers are more likely to approach an enchanted pool, or a man-eating plant, as if it were just another body of water or bit of forest vegetation. This opens up whole new avenues for both adventures and roleplaying.

Bits of the Wilderness: Into the Wildwood will help you do that. Not only can these descriptions help add ambiance but they can also be camouflage so that even something as small as fire ants have an opportunity to strike and be a terrible nuisance.

By spending more time describing the wonder and mystery of the forest we can really build a sense that the adventurers are far, far away from help. Woods can once more become places where the world of the known intersects the world of the unknown. As we build our wildwoods into places of nearly impenetrable mystery, enchantment, and myriad dangers, they will come alive for both the players and the characters, and the adventures may spawn stories that will be shared and remembered by all participants for years to come.

Frazer, James George, Sir. *The Golden Bough*. New York: Macmillan, 1922. Available on-line at <http://www.bartleby.com/196/>

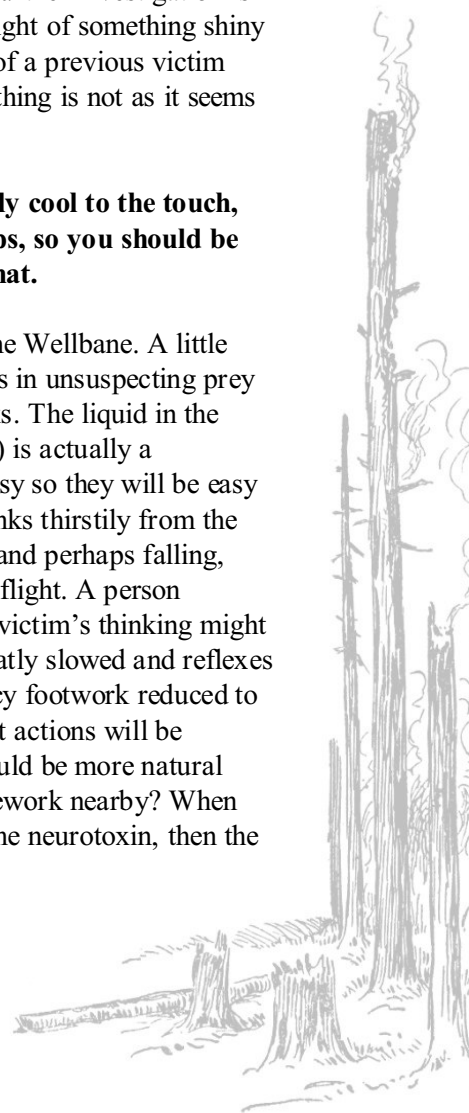
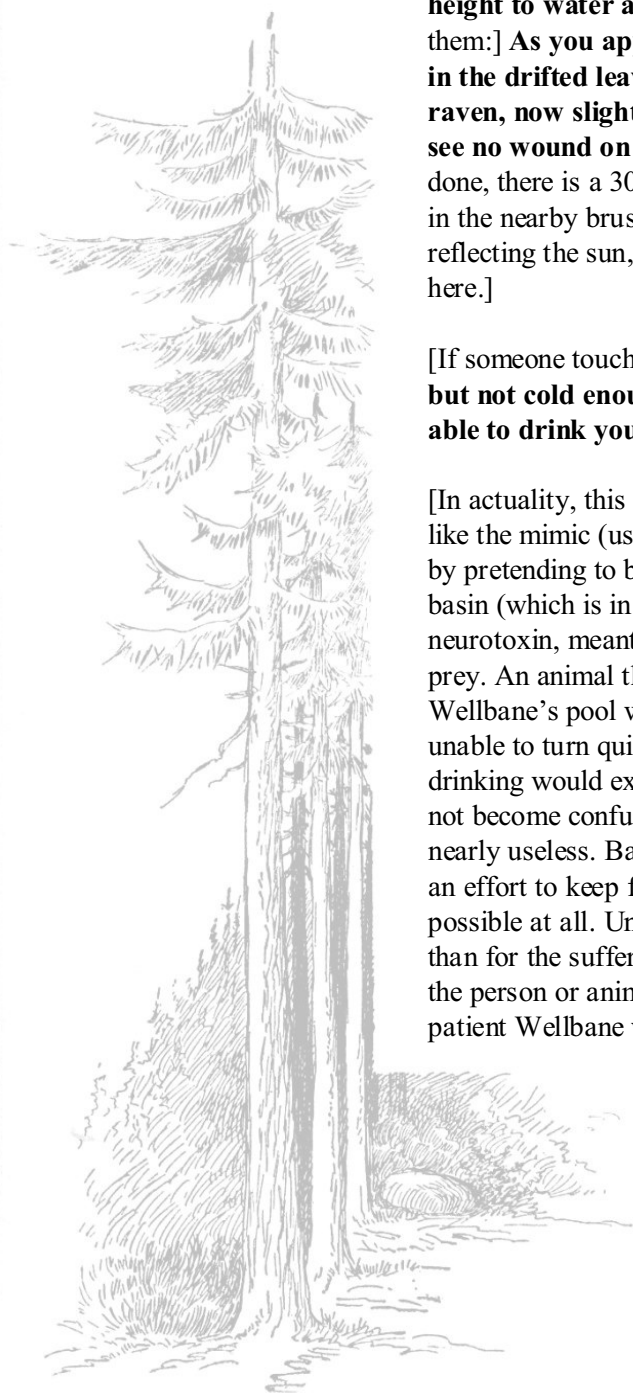
CREATURES OF THE FOREST: Wellbane

Introduction:

Not too far into the forest, near a place where several game trails cross, you are surprised to discover what seems to be an old catchbasin. The dirty stone edges are worn down and rough, but the fluid in it is surprisingly clear fresh-looking. The bowl is the perfect height to water a horse, or fill a waterskin. [Pick a character and tell them:] As you approach the basin, you step on something half-hidden in the drifted leaves. [If the adventurer investigates:] It is the body of a raven, now slightly worse for wear. It is still slightly warm, but you see no wound on it or evidence of an attack. [If further investigation is done, there is a 30% chance of a person catching sight of something shiny in the nearby brush. This is metal or gem remains of a previous victim reflecting the sun, and might give a clue that everything is not as it seems here.]

[If someone touches the fluid:] The liquid is slightly cool to the touch, but not cold enough to cause any stomach cramps, so you should be able to drink your fill without worrying about that.

[In actuality, this is a predatory arthropod called the Wellbane. A little like the mimic (usually found underground), it lures in unsuspecting prey by pretending to be something else, and then attacks. The liquid in the basin (which is in fact part of the Wellbane's back) is actually a neurotoxin, meant to render victims slow and clumsy so they will be easy prey. An animal the size of a deer or horse that drinks thirstily from the Wellbane's pool will be slightly dazed, staggering and perhaps falling, unable to turn quickly or make any kind of speedy flight. A person drinking would experience similar symptoms. The victim's thinking might not become confused, but reaction time will be greatly slowed and reflexes nearly useless. Balance will be affected badly, fancy footwork reduced to an effort to keep from falling, and only the simplest actions will be possible at all. Under such circumstances, what could be more natural than for the sufferer to rest against the sturdy stonework nearby? When the person or animal is well and truly affected by the neurotoxin, then the patient Wellbane will attack.]



Creature Description: Wellbane
(also called Fool's Oasis, Fountain Bug)

by Christopher A. Field

Size/Type: Large Beast

Hit Dice: 2D10 + 8 (28 HP)

Initiative: +0

Speed: 30 ft

AC: 17 (-1 size, +8 natural)

Base Attack/Grapple: +1/+10 grapple

Attacks: Bite +6 melee (1D8+5)

Full Attack: Bite +6 melee (1D8+5)

Space/Reach: 10'/10'

Special Attacks: Improved Grab

Special Qualities: Neurotoxic Venom,
Tremorsense 60ft

Saves: Fort +6, Ref +2, Will +1

Abilities: Str 20, Dex 11, Con 19, Int 2,
Wis13, Cha 4

Skills: Spot +3, Listen +3, Hide +12 (see Skills)

Environment: Any forest

Organization: Solitary or mated pair

Challenge Rating: 2

Treasure: Standard, hidden near hunting area

Alignment: Always neutral

Advancement: 3-8 HD (Large); 9-13 HD
(Huge)

The wellbane is a highly specialized, extremely cunning arthropod roughly the size of a horse. Its thick carapace has evolved to resemble worked stone. Depending on breed, some wellbanes have skins resembling broken bits of marble statuary; others have a coloring that imitates the brick and mortar of a fallen wall. The creature's vicious mandibles resemble that of an ankheg, from which some naturalists believe it evolved.

The wellbane is a patient predator, which spends most of its life waiting for the perfect opportunity to pounce. To lure in prey, wellbanes have evolved an ingenious disguise. Each has a recess on its back resembling the mouth of a well, and their bodies naturally produce a neurotoxin that

looks, tastes and smells like clean, pure water.

Combat: After luring a thirsty creature in to drink, the wellbane waits patiently for its prey to become incapacitated. For most creatures, this happens within two minutes. If the victim is rendered helpless by the loss of Dexterity, the wellbane kills it quickly and enjoys its meal in peace. If the creature is staggered but does not fall, the wellbane attacks with its fierce bite. Wellbanes prefer to prey on horses, livestock and deer, but will risk combat with more dangerous prey, such as humanoids, wolves or bears, if times are tough.

Wellbanes can quickly devour a carcass, bones and all, leaving little evidence of their predation. (They regurgitate this meal to feed their young.) The wellbane cannot easily digest inorganic matter, like metal or gems, and such material is often found near its hunting ground; it is usually concealed under loose brush so as not to alert potential prey to the hunter's presence.

Improved Grab (Ex): To use this ability, the Wellbane must hit with its bite attack. If it gets a hold, it automatically deals bite damage each round the hold is maintained. Wellbanes prefer to break their prey's neck or suffocate it after the creature succumbs to their neurotoxin.

Neurotoxic Venom (Ex): Drinking from the wellbane exposes a victim to its potent neurotoxin. It is an ingested poison only, DC 22. Initial and secondary damage are 1d8 Dex.

Tremorsense (Ex): The wellbane can automatically sense the location of anything within 60 feet that is in contact with the ground. The Wellbane uses this ability to sense prey's approach while lying dormant.

Skills: The wellbane's coloration and the design of its exoskeleton give it a +12 racial bonus on Hide checks when in rocky areas, among worked stone, or amid ruins of any kind.

CREATURES OF THE FOREST: Whistler in the Forest

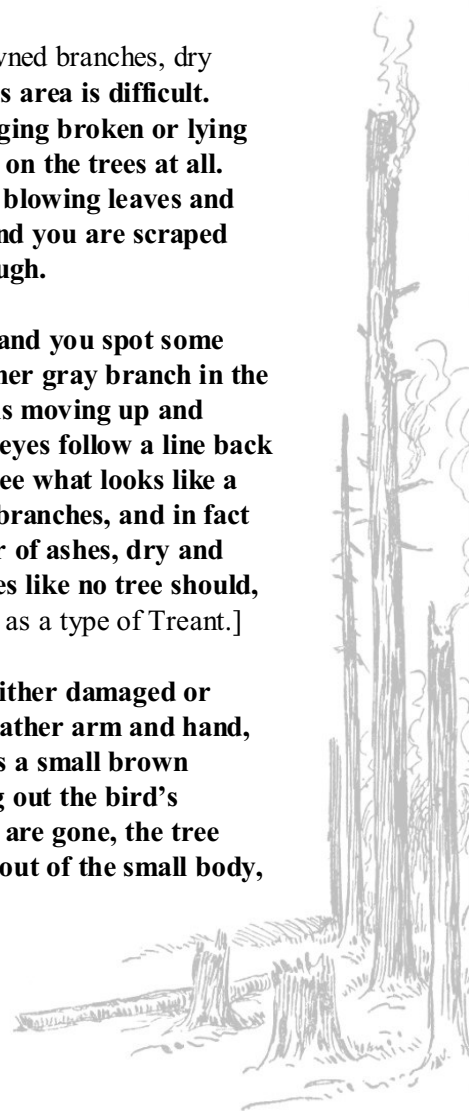
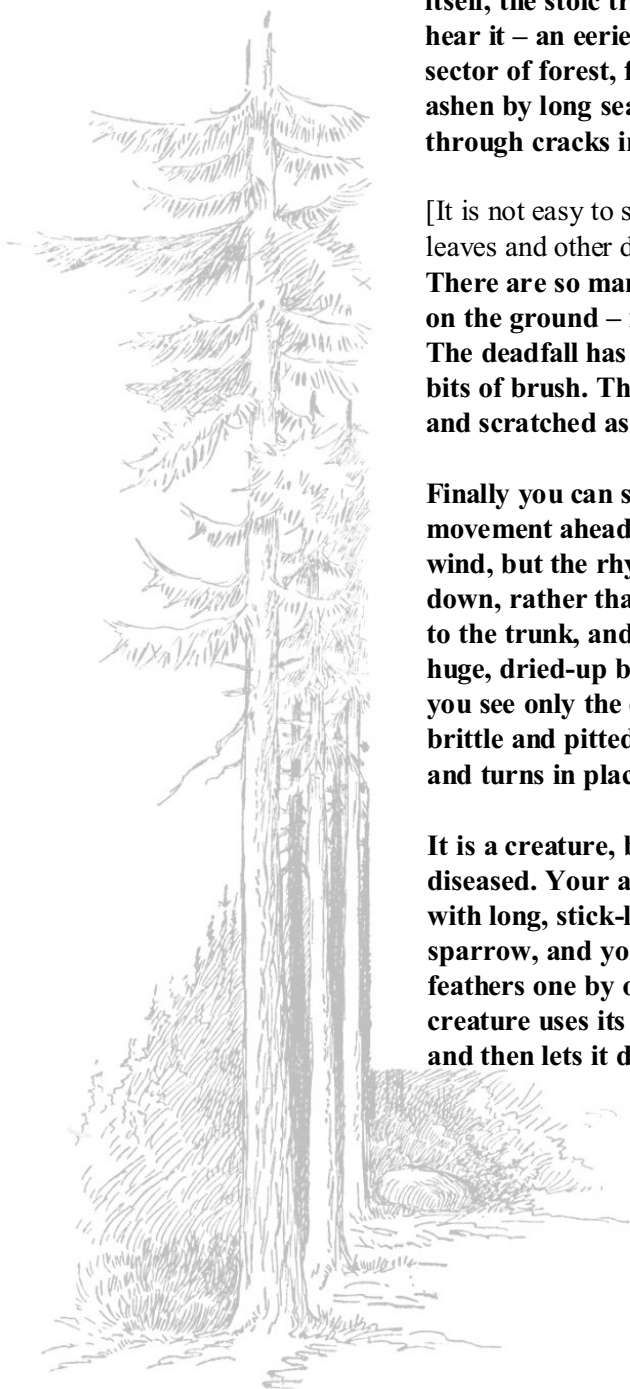
Introduction:

The area of the forest into which you have traveled is very still; no birds call, no deer forage. Aside from the plants, swaying silently in the breeze, there is no sound, no movement. In fact, there is no sign of animal life at all – not a squirrel, not even an insect, just the forest itself, the stoic trees and the swaying of massive branches. Then you hear it – an eerie whistling sound, coming from the deepest, oldest sector of forest, from somewhere within a stand of dead trees made ashen by long seasons. It sounds almost like the wind whistling through cracks in the ancient rotting oaks. Almost.

[It is not easy to see past the dead trees, due to downed branches, dry leaves and other deadfall.] **Movement through this area is difficult. There are so many dead branches around – hanging broken or lying on the ground – it is a wonder there are any left on the trees at all. The deadfall has captured more bits and pieces, blowing leaves and bits of brush. The result is practically a maze, and you are scraped and scratched as you try to push your way through.**

Finally you can see through into a clearer area, and you spot some movement ahead. At first it just seems like another gray branch in the wind, but the rhythm is wrong, and the branch is moving up and down, rather than swaying in any breeze. Your eyes follow a line back to the trunk, and then up to the top where you see what looks like a huge, dried-up bird's nest. There are no upper branches, and in fact you see only the one. The tree's bark is the color of ashes, dry and brittle and pitted with insect holes. Then it moves like no tree should, and turns in place. [Adventurers may recognize it as a type of Treant.]

It is a creature, but if it is related to trees, it is either damaged or diseased. Your attention goes to its branch, or rather arm and hand, with long, stick-like fingers. Its other hand holds a small brown sparrow, and you can now see that it is plucking out the bird's feathers one by one. When all the large feathers are gone, the tree creature uses its nimble fingers to crush the life out of the small body, and then lets it drop to the ground.



Creature Description: **Whistler in the Forest**

by Christopher A. Field

Size/Type: Huge Undead (Plant)

Hit Dice: 8d12 (52 hp)

Initiative: +0

Speed: 30 ft

AC: 21 (-2 size, +13 natural)

Base Attack/Grapple: +4/+13 grapple

Attacks: Slam +12 melee (2d6 + 9)

Full Attack: 2 slams, +12 melee or 1 slam + bite

Space/Reach: 10 ft / 15 ft reach

Special Attacks: Animate trees, double damage vs. objects, spell-like abilities, trample

Special Qualities: Immune to piercing damage, undead traits, vulnerability to fire (3x)

Saves: Fort +10, Ref +1, Will +6

Abilities: Str 29, Dex 10, Con --, Int 12, Wis 15, Cha 17

Environment: Any forest

Organization: Solitary

Challenge Rating: 9

Treasure: Standard

Alignment: Always chaotic evil.

Advancement: 9-12 HD (Huge), 13-18 HD (Gargantuan), 19+ HD (Colossal)

What makes adventurers think that only humanoids can become undead? Treants are massively powerful creatures, beings of inscrutable purpose who are possessed of a will as strong as the earth itself. Treants rarely succumb to natural death, and the majestic tree-creatures refuse to accept the finality of murder. A Whistler in the Forest is created when a treant is slain before its time, its grove of trees cut down (usually at the hands of greedy humanoid loggers), and the creature's dying thoughts are of pure hatred and revenge.

Whistlers in the Forest make even deadlier enemies than a typical treant; they have none of their 'parent species' morality or compassion. Whistlers hate all humanoids unquestioningly; more than that they despise all animal life.

Whistlers will kill any living being that enters their forest, often torturing and mutilating them for days before allowing them to die. Fortunately, the whistler in the forest is spiritually bound to the location where it died, so one must usually content itself with mutilating brown bears and pulling the wings off sparrows. A single whistler can turn an entire forest uninhabitable, and are often recorded by myth and history as the vengeful spirit of the trees, or of all nature itself.

A whistler in the forest resembles only superficially the treant it once was. Its features have been twisted by evil into a demonic visage, with wickedly serrated teeth formed from hardened bark. Elsewhere its bark is white and ashy, cracked and pitted with age; swarms of wood-boring insects have taken up residence in the rotting wood. The wind whistles through cracks in the creature's cellulose hide, giving its characteristic name; the movement of its rotting tangle of branches and dead leaves acts almost as musical accompaniment. Most whistlers in the forest decorate themselves with the hides and skulls of creatures they kill.

Combat: A whistler in the forest has all the abilities common to treants, and uses similar tactics when in battle. It also develops new abilities after becoming an undead mockery of its former self.

Animate Trees (Sp): A whistler in the forest can animate trees within 180 ft. at will, controlling up to two trees at a time. It takes one full round for a normal tree to uproot itself. Thereafter it moves at a speed of 15 ft. and fights with physical statistics identical to the whistler who created it. Animated trees lose their ability to move if the whistler that animated them is destroyed or if they move out of range.

Double Damage vs. Objects (Ex): Like a treant, the whistler in the forest that makes a full attack against an object or structure deals double damage.

Spell-Like Abilities: *3/day-diminish plants, entangle* (DC 14), *fear* (DC 14), and *obscuring mist*.

Special effect: The Obscuring Mist spell-like ability takes the form of a cloud of millions of gnats and tiny flies that live in the whistler's rotting trunk. The spell's game effect is identical to the standard *obscuring mist* spell, since even in this cloud, the gnats are too weak to be considered a swarm. The gnats block vision and hinder communication; they do not inflict damage.

Trample (Ex): A whistler or animated tree can trample Medium-sized or smaller creatures for $2d12 + 5$ points of damage. Opponents who do not make attacks of opportunity against the creature can attempt a save (Ref DC 20) to take half damage.

Immune to Piercing Damage (Ex): Attacking the whistler in the forest with piercing weapons is useless; while the weapon might inflict cosmetic damage on the monster (knocking away rotting wood and releasing insect parasites) the injury causes no pain or debilitation to the supernatural plant.

Undead Traits: Immune to mind-influencing effects, poison, sleep, paralysis, stunning, disease and death effects. Not subject to critical hits, nonlethal damage, ability drain, energy drain, or death from massive damage.

Vulnerability to Fire (Ex): The whistler's dry structure is exceptionally vulnerable to fire damage. Any attack or spell that deals fire damage does *triple* damage to the whistler, unless the effect allows a save. If the whistler succeeds at the save, it still takes normal fire damage.

CREATURES OF THE FOREST: Thorn Royal

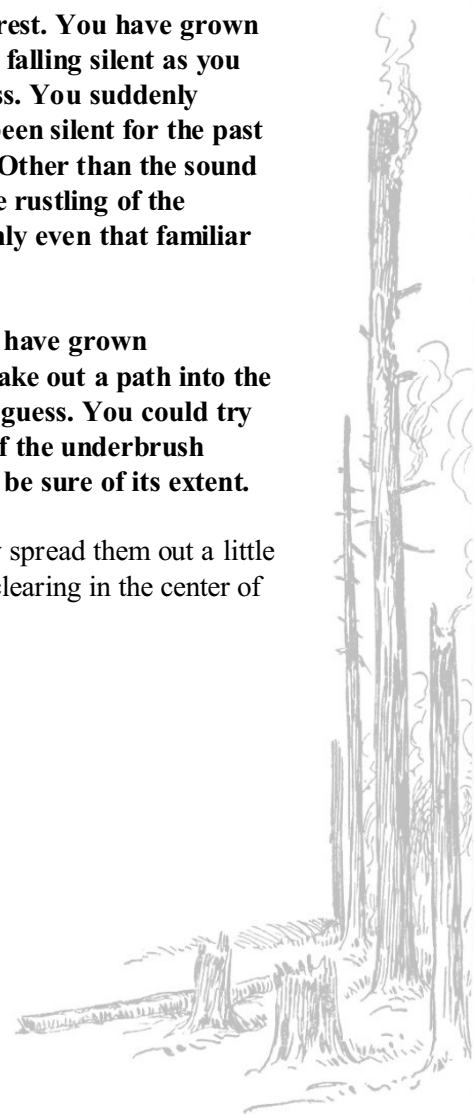
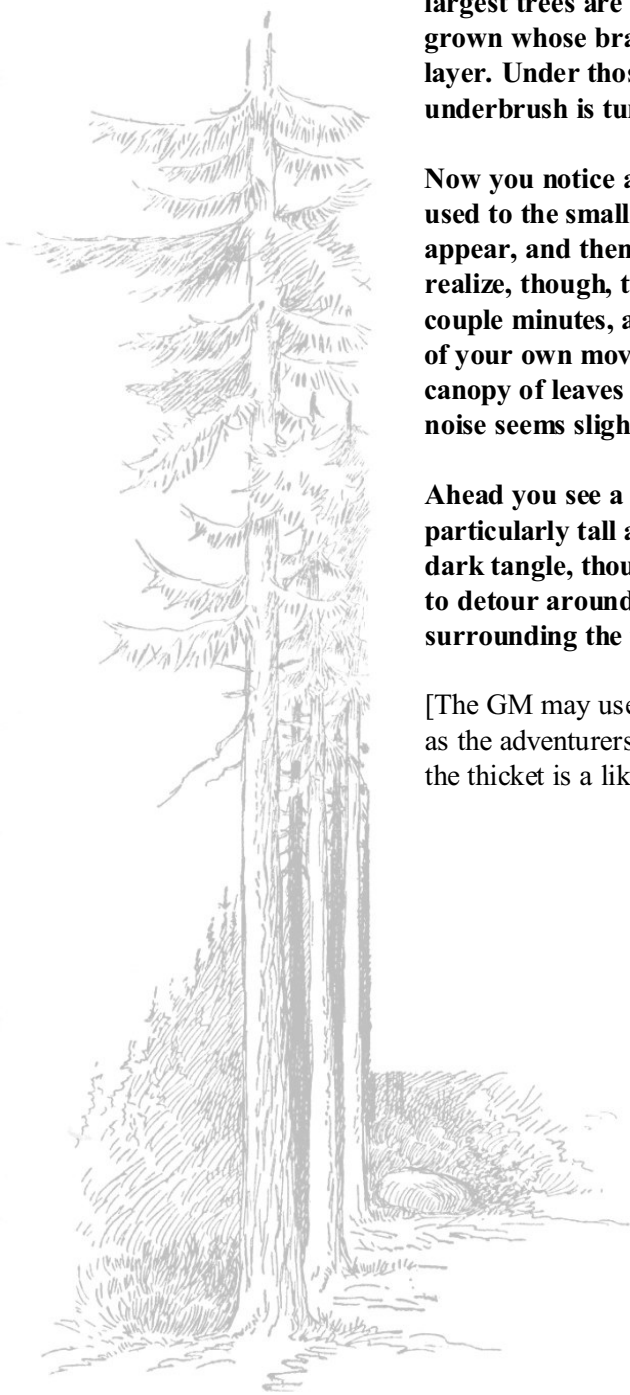
Introduction:

The forest has grown dimmer as you travel along, and the woods appear almost dusky now although it is full day. The branches of the largest trees are high and thick, but below them smaller trees have grown whose branches hide what sun might filter through the upper layer. Under those have been shrubs and small flowers, but now the underbrush is turning more and more to spiny bushes and brambles.

Now you notice a change in the sounds of the forest. You have grown used to the small rustles and chirps of the forest falling silent as you appear, and then starting up again after you pass. You suddenly realize, though, that the forest around you has been silent for the past couple minutes, ahead of you as well as behind. Other than the sound of your own movement, all you hear is the gentle rustling of the canopy of leaves in the slight breeze, and suddenly even that familiar noise seems slightly ominous.

Ahead you see a thicket where the thorn bushes have grown particularly tall and thick. You think you can make out a path into the dark tangle, though how far it leads is anyone's guess. You could try to detour around the thicket, but with the rest of the underbrush surrounding the thorny mass, it is impossible to be sure of its extent.

[The GM may use these pieces at one time, or may spread them out a little as the adventurers travel on through the forest. A clearing in the center of the thicket is a likely home for the Thorn Royal.]



Creature Description:

Thorn Royal

(Also Called Bramble King, Kingdom of One, Exiled Scion)

by Christopher A. Field

Size/Type: Medium Plant

Hit Dice: 6d8 +12 (37 hp)

Initiative: +2

Speed: 30 ft; Fly 30 ft (poor)

AC: 18 (+2 Dex, +6 natural)

Base Attack/Grapple: +4 / +7 grapple

Attacks: +7 thornstrike (1d8+3 and wounding)

Full Attack: +7 thornstrike (1d8+3 and wounding)

Space/Reach: 5 ft x 5 ft

Special Attacks: Frightful rhetoric, spell-like abilities

Special Qualities: Forest flight, plant traits

Saves: Fort +6, Ref +3, Will +1

Abilities: Str 17, Dex 15, Con 14, Int 8, Wis 11, Cha 18

Environment: Any forest

Organization: Solitary

Challenge Rating: 5

Treasure: double coins, double goods

(These things are usually mementoes of the creature's former life, hidden in its lair.)

Alignment: Chaotic evil

Advancement: 7-9 HD (Medium), 10-14 HD (Large)

No matter how complete the executions that follow the rebellion, some of the privileged always survive: a forgotten princess left for dead, a duke smuggled out of the castle just before the mob arrives, or a favorite concubine sold into slavery rather than put to death. Some deposed nobles eventually raise an army and reclaim their birthright; others live in comfortable exile, or starve on alien shores far from home. Others retreat far from civilization, driven by pursuers real and imagined; they find comfort in the darkest parts of the forest, and in turn the Forest transforms them.

No one is sure why some exiles die alone and unremembered as just another mad hermit,

wandering dazedly through the forest, and why some become something much darker. Some scholars speculate that the horrific Thorn Royal is a type of fey, transformed and empowered by the animistic spirits of the forest; others believe the creature to be undead, a ghostly remnant of kingdoms long dead, now merged forever with the forest that gave shelter in the twilight of the creature's life.

All that is known is that once a human being becomes a thorn royal the change is irrecoverable; all that was once decent and human is overgrown by hate, fear, isolation and jealousy. Over the centuries, thorn royals grow ever more delusional; in their twisted minds, the forest has become their destroyed home, and they will gleefully torture and murder any trespassers.

At a distance, the thorn royal appears like a pale and emaciated human of obvious noble breeding or high caste. They dress in tattered finery whose colors have faded with uncounted seasons of hard use. A cloak of woven brambles and forest vines billows behind the monster like dragonfly wings.

Closer up, the true horror of the creature becomes obvious. Writhing vines and roots worm their way through the royal's veins, and rootlets snake out of its slack-jawed mouth. It has no eyes; instead clusters of bioluminescent fungi erupt through the once-man's optical cavity. A crown, made of thorns, broken birds and deer antlers rests atop the creature's brow. Old dueling rapiers or other ceremonial weapons hang rusted and useless from the creature's belt, but it's obvious that it doesn't need them. Foot-long thorns jut from the monster's wrist, razor sharp and so dark they have a purple gleam.

(No instances are known of a thorn royal that was once an elf or a dwarf. This does not prove they are restricted to humans, but elves are unlikely to engage in the sort of political conflict that produces noble refugees, and dwarves are unlikely to flee to a forest for refuge. It might be possible for a noble humanoid – if that is not a contradiction in terms – to become a thorn royal.)

Combat:

Wounding Thorns (Ex): A creature struck by the thorn royal's wrist thorns must make a Fortitude save (DC 22) or suffer 1 point of temporary constitution damage, in addition to the normal agony caused by these vicious, serrated weapons.

Frightful Rhetoric (Su): Most of the thorn royal's miserable existence is spent bemoaning its fate, longing for its lost homeland, and plotting elaborate, murderous revenge on all traitors and tormentors. Its fiery speeches are unfocused, rambling diatribes of pure hate and rage, and can break the mind of the weak willed.

Any sentient creature that comes within 60 ft. of a speaking thorn royal must make a Will save (DC 22) or suffer the effects of a *confusion* spell for the next 4d6 rounds. Success indicates the victim cannot be affected by that thorn royal's rhetoric for the next 24 hours. Characters with

10 or more ranks in any of the following skills gain a +2 circumstance bonus on the save: Diplomacy, Knowledge (Nobility, History) or Profession (any courtly/noble).

Spell-Like Abilities: At will—*ghost sound, dancing lights, pass without trace*. 3/day—*darkness, fog cloud, tree stride*. A thorn royal uses its illusion-casting abilities to torment its victims with flickering, hallucinatory glimpses of the royal's dimly remembered former life. The other abilities help it to split a group, create terror and confusion, and escape.

Forest Flight (Ex): Without the dark energy it draws from the forest, the thorn royal cannot fly. The creature's flight speed applies only when flying in or over Forest terrain.

Plant Traits: Immune to mind influencing effects, poison, sleep, paralysis, stunning, and polymorphing. Not subject to critical hits.

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An Overview of Temperate Forests

by K. H. Keeler, Ph.D.

Introduction:

The use of forests

Temperate forests grow around the world. At some point your adventurers are likely to cross one of these forests, and interesting forests will add color to your fantasy campaign. The adventurers' goal might lie in the forest, or they could pass quickly through the forest to reach their goal. Of course, even when the party expects to just pass through, adventures can happen.

On our modern earth, temperate forests are found in moister, seasonal areas of both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres and at moderate elevations in the mountains. This discussion focuses on incorporating detail into the temperate forests in your game.

When creating your forest, ask yourself some basic questions about its type and location. What kind of temperate forest is it? (See suggestions below.) How extensive will it be? Are you planning a campaign in this forest or is it just between the party and their goal? The nature of the forest will suggest encounters: with furtive magical creatures, with really big hungry predators, or with strange druids gathering herbs. If your forest is well planned, it will be easy to envision the environment and to answer questions consistently and quickly. A forest that is not just "the trees outside your window" will make the party more interested and more careful.

Forest Variety:

Not all forests are created equal

How temperate forests are alike: Obviously, all forests have trees. To be called a forest,

the trees need to shade the majority of the ground. They also have relatively high rainfall: trees are big plants, and need water at least during the growing season. In addition, temperate forests have a well-defined winter. As a quick distinction, tropical forests never get a frost, and temperate forests have hard frosts every year.

How temperate forests differ: Temperate forests differ in height; the density of the trees; the size and age of trees, from all one extreme (old/large vs. young/small) to a mixture; tree diversity: that is, the number of tree species and whether one species dominates or several are each very common; evergreenness: deciduous trees (dropping their leaves in winter or the dry season) vs. evergreens, including trees which have needle-like leaves (pines, spruce) or regular leaves (live oaks); openness: from almost no plants under the trees to layer upon layer of plants of different statures making "stratification"; and the frequency and diversity of the vines. These visible differences are caused by the amount and pattern of rain; soil types; the length of the growing season; other climate factors (how hot it is midsummer, how cold midwinter is); and the history of the region, to name the obvious ones.

Some forests have more species of trees and other living things than other forests. One reason may be that they are simply more productive. Forests that are warmer, have higher rainfall, and/or longer growing seasons have more variety than cool, dry, or short-season forests. Another reason may be that they are older; time leads to speciation and diversity. In North America, where the area was glaciated 10,000 years ago, the forest is much less diverse than in areas that have

supported forests continuously for millions of years. Some forests have more species because they have good soils. The converse is probably more obvious: shallow soils (usually, on rock), seasonally flooded areas and any soils with unusual chemistry often have unexpectedly few tree species. This is often because only one or two species can grow well on those soils.

The same patterns in diversity hold for most other groups: mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, herbs, vines, shrubs. They might be expected to hold for monsters and nonstandard animals as well.

Something that people from the tropics notice about temperate areas is the profusion of flowers. All kinds of plants grow and bloom at about the same time because that's the only available time. The shorter the growing season, the more sudden and almost universal is the period of flowering. Animal life cycles are also synchronized in short seasons.

More than just trees:

Other things found in a forest

Smaller plants: These would include shrubs, which are short woody plants, often with multiple trunks and herbs, nonwoody plants, that can be mere inches or ten feet tall, but rarely taller than that. Other possible plants would be vines and climbing plants, and epiphytes or "air plants," which get their water and nutrients from the air and grow not on the ground but on other plants.

Animals: In the real world, 20-100 plants are likely to be encountered for every animal seen (counting insects!) and 20-100 plant-eating animals for each predator encountered. Since predators include hawks (which eat sparrows), eagles (which eat fish & birds) and spiders, wasps, dragonflies, robber flies, and many beetles (including tiny ones), realistically it will be rare to see a dangerous predator. Either most fantasy forests are overloaded with dangerous animals, or there are a lot of uneventful travel days that aren't mentioned.

The types of animals that can be found in a temperate forest include:

- *Plant-eaters.* Herbivores can be big (for example, moose) or small (mice); winged (bats or birds); burrowing in the ground (moles, groundhogs), or along the surface of the ground if it's too rocky or too wet for burrows; they can be tiny (insects, snails), eating in the leaves or on the leaves or in the stems or on the flowers or on the nuts and seeds or in the roots...
- *Animal-eaters:* Some carnivores are bigger than their prey (bears); some hunt in packs (wolves); some are smaller than their prey but very skilled at killing them (wasps); some are parasites living inside the prey (tapeworms). Some predators fly (bats); some capture their prey with a jump (spiders); some run (wolves); some lie in wait for prey (mountain lions, ticks); some build webs or other traps (spiders).
- *Decomposers:* These organisms break down fallen trees and leaves, scavenge on the carcasses of dead animals, and help break down bones and such. Most of these are small (insects, worms) but many predators like wolves and coyotes scavenge when they can. A few big animals are predominantly scavengers (fox, condor).

People: In our modern world, about the only place not at least hunted by humans over the last one thousand years is Antarctica.

- *Indigenous people* could live in your forest. The indigenous people can be primitives, even unknown tribes, or they could be of an unfamiliar complex civilization. Sometimes those are hostile, sometimes friendly. Of course they could be some nonhuman race of your world, gnomes or elves or lizardmen. They might not speak any known language. They might carry out traditional rituals that appear repulsive or offensive. They could have elaborate and complex permanent homes in the forest, or have just arrived yesterday to gather berries. They might trade eagerly or they might be offended if the adventurers hunt in the forest. Large or small, well-marked or unmarked areas could

be off limits to visitors.

- *Residents:* All sorts of people from your culture could live in the forest – hunters, rangers, miners, woodcutters, hermits or recluses. The military might patrol, the mad wizard could have a tower, the grove and temple of the earth goddess might be here. Of course outlaws—from organized raiders to fugitives to solitary psychopaths to anarchists and revolutionaries—are likely to take refuge in a forest.

Monsters and Magical Creatures: Some of the animal roles in your forest may be taken by magical creatures or monsters, simply because that's how the local ecology works; the top carnivore could be a wyvern or giant spider or dragon (but give some thought to how a big dragon will hunt in dense trees). The history of the site might add to the strangeness: an abandoned experimental farm might have released monsters into the forest, exotic animals escaped from zoos might hide here; a magic pool or old mine might create or attract monsters or magical creatures.

Other Forest Features:

Interesting History: Not all forests have always been there. Some have grown up where previous civilizations lived. In those, you can find ruins of all sorts: building foundations, half-buried stone plazas and roads, pyramids and tunnels. And in all cases, there will be peculiar patterns of plants – trees that still reflect an abandoned orchard or that once lined a handsome boulevard, for example. Also characteristic of such areas are weeds, escaped crops or exotic trees or shrubs once planted by the residents, and formerly domesticated animals.

Forest Disturbances: Forests have areas where some type of disturbance has broken the continuity. These areas might include: tree falls, which are openings in the canopy where a tree has fallen over; old fields where at some time in the past the area was farmed; burned areas after a forest fire; and torn up areas where a herd of

animals (especially pigs) has dug up the ground.

“Enchanted forests”: The forest could be evil or malicious, held hostage by a demon, full of leprechauns, a playground for gods or extra planar beings, or any number of other things...

In the forest:

Real-world examples

In our world, the leaves of trees (and other plants) are green because they capture every other color of light and turn it into food (sugars and starches). Thin evergreen leaves – the needle-like leaves of pines and other conifers – can capture sunlight in early spring and late fall, long after the deciduous trees have lost their big leaves. Big leaves are more efficient but more susceptible to snow damage.

Real-world evergreens: pine, spruce, juniper, cedar, redwood, hemlock, yew, but also live oak and most tropical trees (though those are not found in the temperate forest)

Real-world deciduous trees: oak, beech, maple, walnut, elm, chestnut, sycamore, rowan, willow, but also bald cypress.

Under the biggest trees are shorter, shade-loving trees: deciduous ones such as redbud, dogwood and alder; smaller conifers like white pine. Shorter still are the shrubs: deciduous (for example snowberry and honeysuckle) and evergreen (rhododendron and azalea). Grapes, greenbrier (smilax) and poison ivy are common forest vines. Under the shrubs in complex forests are tall herbs: ferns, stinging nettles, wild parsley. Finally, on the forest floor, are mosses, and short herbs with bright flowers like trillium, wild ginger and violets.

There will be squirrels or porcupines, or other small animals that live in the trees, eating leaves and bark; deer or elk or goats or wild pigs browsing plants that grow on the ground; and big cats, wolves, and mink hunting the browsers.

The birds show the same kinds of patterns: many

small songbirds such as warblers and robins that eat insects and seeds, and hawks that eat them. Fruit- and honey-eating birds (such as parrots or hummingbirds) have to be migratory because there is no food for them in winter.

In the colder forests, there are no (normal) reptiles, such as snakes, lizards, or turtles. Generally cold forests have no amphibians (frogs, salamanders) but a brief season for a few species happens relatively far north (south).

Insects are less diverse where the growing season is shorter, but often more numerous. Clouds of mosquitoes appear in-season in forests from Minnesota to Alaska; farther south they are less concentrated and their predators have more time to eat them so they are present but less noticeable.

Customization: Is your world one with familiar animals? If so you can find animals and plants quickly in a reference for the natural history of such areas as New England, Europe or Australia. You can easily customize it with a few odd species: small bears that look a lot like teddy bears, intelligent hawks, warm-blooded tarantulas or predatory pines. Include as much detail as feels comfortable to you. However, if the party is just going to ride through in a day, you won't get to use most of your clever additions.

Temperate Forest Types: General Descriptions

These are seven major types of temperate forests, described here in very general terms. Examples of various plants and animals are found in parentheses. For more specifics, especially regarding "adventuring season," see the Forest Kits in the Appendix.

High latitude forests, approaching the poles. The winter is severe and the growing season very short. The temperatures are never very warm and it can snow any day of the year. Plants (violets, trillium) bloom and insects (mosquitoes, flies) thrive in the few short weeks when the daytime

temperatures are above freezing. Many big migratory birds (swans, cranes) arrive, breed and depart. Tree diversity is low: two or three evergreen tree species (for example, spruce and fir) are everywhere, only a few other tree species can be found, usually in marshy areas (birches, willows). In the same way, there are only a few big browsing animals but they appear in huge herds (such as caribou). Animals at high latitudes tend to be bigger and rounder because that body shape insulates better in the severe winters (big bears, big wolves). There are few tree-dwelling or tree climbing animals, just one or two highly adapted species (such as mink and porcupines), perhaps because the small body size needed to live in trees gets too cold in this climate.

Mixed forests. Winter is several months long and the snow can be deep. The forest is a mix of evergreens in the cooler sites and deciduous trees in warmer areas. Two or three trees dominate (for example spruce, oak, and maple), but there are numerous minor trees that are not particularly hard to find (willows, alders, birch). Under the dominant trees are a few shrubs and herbs (small dogwoods and gooseberries, violets, wild ginger), but mainly the forest is open and park-like. A thick layer of fallen leaves hides tracks and is noisy to move through. Many small migratory birds arrive in the summer to breed (buntings, warblers). A few winter species fly farther north (that is, toward the pole) in summer. Grazers in moderate to large herds feed on the herbs and low shrubs (elk, deer, goats). Predators may be small or quite large; some hunt on the ground while others climb trees after their prey (wolves, mountain lions, mink).

Deciduous forests. Trees drop their leaves for at least a few weeks in winter, but summers are long and humid. Rain is frequent in the summer. Under the dominant trees (oak, elm, maple) are shade-loving trees of shorter stature (redbud, dogwood, rowan), and usually large shrubs under them (rhododendron, honeysuckle), and under them ferns and tall herbs (nettles, wild parsley, foxglove). Lots of leafy vegetation covers the ground, making it hard to see very far.

Animals live in small herds or solitarily (deer, peccaries – group size depends on season); they take advantage of the vegetation for food and cover. Predators likewise lurk in the vegetation, stalking prey (bear, wolves, foxes, mountain lions, lynxes, mink). Badgers dig their prey out of their burrows. There is more diversity than in any of the cooler forests, both of animals and plants.

Temperate rainforests. Where heavy rain falls in temperate regions, there are temperate rainforests. These can be evergreen or deciduous depending on the temperature (cooler temperature, more evergreens). Unless the area is very young, there are likely to be many different species present (spruce, fir, redwood, maple, oak). These forests are full of plants; one can barely see a few yards because of the leaves. It rains for days at a time. The ground is covered with a thick litter of partly-decayed leaves, silent to walk on and spongy. Mosses and vines and epiphytes (plants that take their nutrients out of the air rather than the ground) grow on trunks, branches, or leaves. It is no more penetrable to big animals than to travelers: animals tend to be solitary or small (deer, elk, rabbits, ground and tree squirrels), and hard to spot from a distance. Nevertheless, the abundance of plants means that there are many herbivores and they have numerous predators, large and small (mountain lions, bears, wolves, weasels, shrews).

Scrub forests. At the limit of moisture that will support a forest are forests of thin short trees. The trees can be evergreen or deciduous depending on the length of the growing season (pines, oaks, juniper, mesquite, locusts). The trees tend to have spines or thick leaves in order to keep animals from eating them. Most of the time there will be very few plants under the trees, although in the spring after snowmelt or after a heavy rainfall, a number of bright flowers appear briefly (annual clarkias, flaxes, evening primroses). Animals who live here are solitary and relatively small (small pigs, deer, squirrels), although in an unusually wet year, big herds which usually frequent other areas may feed here briefly, trailed by their predators (wolves, mountain lions).

Mountain forests. On a mountain, a forest often goes through zones resembling deciduous forests, mixed forests and high latitude forests as the altitude becomes higher. The main difference is in the steep hillsides and the fact that the areas of each kind of forest are smaller so they usually support fewer or less diverse species. Mountain specialists may be found, particularly animals that are good climbers (goats, sheep).

Gallery and riparian forests. In areas where it is too dry for forests generally, trees form forests along rivers and streams. These are rarely more than a few trees deep, but may be miles and miles long, paralleling the water. They act as a corridor for forest animals which might otherwise be rare in this country, and a place where predators hunt prey that comes down to the water to drink. In the spring the soil is almost soggy, but it dries during midsummer. The area usually fills with small trees, so there's no easy passage, but it is shady.

About the author: K.H. Keeler combines 20 years of roleplaying experience (D&D) with 30 years as a professor of biology (ecology).

APPENDIX: FOREST KITS - *Use these to quickly flesh out a forest.*

High altitude forest: This mountain forest is mostly evergreen trees, and only two or three different species of them. The hills are steep and eroding, so the forest is quite open with frequent sunny spots, but travel is very treacherous due to unsafe footing. The leveler and moister spots are full of flowering herbs in the short mountain summer. Bright insects and birds visit the flowers. Big grazers like large goats travel in herds of 5-10, climbing agilely out of reach when approached. A bit lower down, others, elk-like, wade in the creeks in groups of three to six. In mating season (late summer), they are quite dangerous. The predators climb well, whether cats, bears or something else. Some of them are strong enough to pull down big mountain goats.

Animals similar to: goats, sheep, elk, pikas, rats, mice, porcupines, tree & ground squirrels, marmots; mountain lions, smaller cats, wolves, coyotes, fox, bear, raccoon; wolverine, mink. Birds: small, medium and large insect-eating forest birds similar to wrens, sparrows, buntings, warblers, jays, crows; woodpeckers; hummingbirds; eagles, hawks, owls. Along the fast-flowing streams: beaver, small fish, frogs. Insects include species similar to dragonflies, mosquitoes, midges, various flies including biting flies, bees and wasps, butterflies, moths and beetles, among others. Other invertebrates are species like spiders, ticks, or earthworms.

No (normal): lizards, snakes, turtles, salamanders, toads

High latitude forest (dry): The trees are tall evergreens with needle-like leaves. They stretch for miles with almost no change in height or color. There are two kinds about equally common, and virtually no other type of tree. They cast enough shade that there are almost no plants beneath them except a few hardy herbs. Water is hard to find, streams are few and ponds nonexistent. The days are cool and the nights go below freezing, even in midsummer. Since the growing season is very short, in a few days the area goes from frozen to full bloom. All the low-growing plants produce surprisingly bright flowers, but they smell like rotting meat. Insects, too, arrive suddenly and in great numbers. Herds of big grazers fill the forest in places, blocking your path. In their midsummer mating season, they pose a serious risk to travelers as big courting males chase anything that they see. The predators are big, very strong and either very hungry because they just came out of hibernation, or ever-hungry, capable of pulling down bigger animals in midwinter. Migratory birds nest in the trees.

Animals are found similar to: elk or deer, wild goats, hares, rats, mice, porcupines, gophers, squirrels; mountain lions, wolves, coyotes, fox, bear, wolverines, mink. Birds include: small, medium and large insect-eating forest birds similar to chickadees, juncos, jays, ravens; woodpeckers; hawks, owls. Insects include species similar to: dragonflies, mosquitoes, midges, various flies including biting flies, bees and wasps, butterflies, moths, beetles; spiders and ticks.

No (normal): lizards, snakes, turtles, salamanders, frogs, toads

High latitude forest (moist): The trees are a mix of evergreens on the uplands and deciduous trees in the more protected areas. Both groups are made of three or four different species (with different potential uses). Under the trees there are ferns, mosses and diverse herbs. The snow lies deep in the low areas almost to midsummer; plants start growing under the snow and are flowering within days of reaching the air. The land is soggy for a few weeks as the snow melts off. The plants make glorious meadows of knee-high flowers in riotous colors. The insects appear as the plants do: mosquitoes and black flies in the millions. Migratory birds nest in the trees and meadows, taking advantage of bugs to feed their nestlings. Medium-sized predators hunt in packs, killing ground-nesting birds and anything else they catch. Big grazers appear in herds of hundreds or thousands, eating everything in their path. The predators are equally big and often well camouflaged.

Animals are found similar to: elk (or deer), moose, wild goats, wild cattle, hares, rats, mice, porcupines, gophers, beaver, muskrat, tree and ground squirrels; mountain lions, smaller wild cats, wolves, coyotes, fox, bear, wolverines, mink, raccoon. Birds include: small, medium and large insect-eating forest birds similar to chickadees, warblers, juncos, jays, ravens; woodpeckers; eagles, hawks, owls; near water: ducks, geese, small shorebirds like plovers, fish-eating eagles. In the streams: small fish, possibly a frog. Insects include species similar to: dragonflies, mosquitoes, midges, various flies including biting flies, bees and wasps, butterflies, moths, beetles and many others. Other common invertebrates are similar to spiders, ticks, worms and parasitic worms.

No (normal): lizards, snakes, turtles, salamanders, toads

Mixed forest: The forest is a mix of deciduous trees and evergreens (the latter increasing as you go poleward). Two or three deciduous trees make up most of the trees, but several other species are common. The leaves expand in spring; by late spring a thick canopy of hand-sized leaves is everywhere overhead and the light filters through dimly. The ground is generally open and the effect is park-like. Fallen leaves cover the ground thickly. Smallish grazers in herds of five to 20 feed on the herbs and low shrubs; predators hunt both on the ground and from trees. There are good sites for dens and many species rely on them.

Animals are found similar to: elk, deer, wild pigs, wild sheep, wild cattle, rabbits, rats, mice, porcupines, tree and ground squirrels, gophers, moles; mountain lions, lynxes, wolves, coyotes, fox, wolverines, mink, shrews; bear, raccoon, bats; small snakes and turtles; frogs, toads. Birds include: small, medium and large insect-eating birds similar to sparrows and wrens, juncos, robins, jays, crows; woodpeckers; eagles, hawks, owls. Insects include species similar to: dragonflies, mosquitoes, midges, various flies including biting flies, bees and wasps, butterflies, moths, a few ants and small termite colonies, beetles, spiders, ticks; worms especially parasitic worms; snails. Along streams and ponds: beaver, ducks, geese, small shorebirds like plovers, kingfishers, fish-eating eagles, small to medium fish, frogs, salamanders

Deciduous forests: Almost all the trees are deciduous. In the summer, the big broad leaves of the tall trees block the sun. Under them, shorter, shade-tolerant trees grow to 30 feet. At 6-15 feet in height, there are multi-trunked shrubs, some with thick evergreen leaves, and others with thinner leaves. Summers are long enough that different plants flower in early, mid- and later summer, so some plants may be flowering while others have fruit and seeds. Insects are abundant but rarely overwhelming. Plants and insects are diverse: many species of herbs on the ground (big and little leaves, light, dark and spotted greens, with hairs, spines, fuzz); flying and crawling insects, caterpillars, beetles, moths and more. It is humid; it rains every couple days, at least for an hour, sometimes coming as an intense thunderstorm. The leafy vegetation is dense, making it hard to see very far. Animals live in small herds or are solitary and hide well among the plants. There is a lot of diversity among the animals: several types of squirrels, dozens of mice, two or three ground-dwelling animals, lots of lizards, some snakes, frogs, etc.

Animals similar to: elk, deer, small cattle, wild sheep, small horses, wild pigs, rabbits, rats, mice, tree and ground squirrels, gophers, moles; mountain lions, lynxes, wolves, coyotes, fox, wolverines, mink, shrews; bear, raccoon, opossums, bats; snakes, lizards and turtles; frogs, toads. Birds include: small, medium and large insect-eating birds similar to wrens, warblers, sparrows, swallows, robins, jays, cardinals, crows; woodpeckers; hummingbirds migrate through; eagles, hawks, owls. Insects include species similar to: dragonflies, mosquitoes, midges, various flies including biting flies, bees and wasps, butterflies, moths, ants and termites; beetles, lightning bugs; spiders, ticks; worms including parasitic worms; snails and a few slugs. Along streams and ponds: beaver, muskrat, ducks, geese, small shorebirds like plovers, kingfishers, fish-eating eagles, small to medium fish (minnows to trout), frogs, salamanders, crayfish, small clams.

Temperate rainforests: These are evergreen forest with 60 or 100 foot trees. The trees block the light but the moisture (more than 100 inches a year) lets shade-tolerant plants grow on everything: logs, the ground, rocks are all covered by mosses or herbs. The forest is dim and the air is cool, even in midsummer, and it often rains for days at a time. Visibility is barely 10 yards because of dense leaves and vines are common. The ground is covered with thick litter of partly decayed leaves. The animals, although numerous, are mainly small and secretive. A few large predators hunt stealthily.

Animals similar to: small elk, deer, small sheep, small (but mean) wild pigs, wild cattle, small horses, rabbits, rats, mice, porcupines, tree squirrels, gophers; mountain lions, lynxes, wolves, coyotes, fox, wolverines, mink; bear, raccoon, opossum; small snakes and turtles; frogs, toads. Birds include: small, medium and large insect-eating forest birds similar to sparrows, chickadees, titmice, swallows, jays, ravens; woodpeckers; eagles, hawks, owls; Insects include species similar to: dragonflies, mosquitoes, midges, various flies including biting flies, bees and wasps, butterflies, moths, ants and termites; beetles; spiders, ticks; worms including parasitic worms; snails and slugs. Along streams and ponds: beaver, muskrat, ducks, geese, small shorebirds like plovers, kingfishers, fish-eating eagles, small to medium fish (minnows, trout), frogs, salamanders.

Scrub forests: The ground and the air are dry. The trees are barely 10' tall but most have many branches, making it hard to ride or walk off the trail. There are two common tree species. Both have small, strong-smelling leaves protected by thorns. Under the trees it is nearly barren and a bit dusty; a few stunted herbs hang on. Small animals dash away through the tops of the trees or run rapidly into the distance, dodging the tree trunks. Small songbirds are numerous in the trees, eating abundant tiny insects. Very occasionally you will see solitary antelope-like animals in this forest.

In an unusually wet year, unexpected plants spring up on the ground, with bright flowers. Insects come seemingly out of nowhere to pollinate them. Often, in those rare wet years, big herds of grazers come in from elsewhere to feed here, trailed by their predators.

Animals similar to: small deer, wild pigs, little antelope; hares, rats, mice, squirrels; lynx, wolves, coyotes, fox, mink, shrews; small snakes and turtles; frogs, toads. Birds include: small and medium insect-eating forest birds similar to wrens, swallows, sparrows, jays and grackles; small woodpeckers; hawks, owls. Insects include species similar to: various flies including biting flies, bees and wasps, butterflies, moths; beetles, ants and termites; spiders, ticks, worms including parasitic worms.

Gallery and riparian forests. Along the stream, great trees tower in between much-shorter individuals of other species. The big trees are full of bird nests and holes that serve as dens or nest sites. The soil along the river is sandy and in late spring the river is still retreating from its spring flood, leaving ponds and soggy spots. In some areas beavers have dammed the stream channels making deep ponds. A variety of tall herbs rapidly grow up, filling the area under the trees. Many are spiny and unpleasant to walk through. Big animals take refuge here during the heat of summer or come to the river to drink. Little animals hide out in the deep foliage. The predators know that and hunt here.

Animals of the riparian forest itself: deer, wild pigs, little antelope, beaver, rabbits, rats, mice, tree squirrels; mountain lions, wolves, coyotes, fox, mink, shrews; snakes, turtles; frogs; toads. Birds include: small, medium and large insect-eating forest birds, ducks; fish-eating eagles, hawks, owls. Insects include species similar to: dragonflies, mosquitoes, midges, various flies including biting flies, bees and wasps, butterflies, moths, beetles, ants and termites; spiders, ticks, worms including parasitic worms, crayfish, snails, slugs, small clams.

AND animals characteristic of the surrounding habitat: grassland animals like buffalo, horses and antelope; or desert animals like camels or antelope, etc.



Index

Forest Entrances: Shards 1, 2, 3, 4

General Forest: Bits 13, 15, 17, 18, 38, 41, 42, 46, 47, 49, 61, 63, 77, 82, 85, 86, 87, 90, 97

Path/Trail: Bits 3, 4, 8, 9, 11, 17, 20, 22, 23, 36, 44, 45, 47, 48, 49, 52, 53, 54, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 62, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 71, 72, 75, 76, 79, 81, 87, 88, 89, 91, 94
Shards 2, 6, 15, 20, 21, 29, 33, 34, 35, 36, 40, 46, 55, 59

Roads: Bit 91
Shards 16, 17, 18

Bridges: Bit 62
Shards 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14

Water: Bits 20, 21, 26, 29, 44, 53, 54, 55, 57, 58, 62, 64, 65, 67, 68, 73, 93
Shards 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15

Thick Woods: Bits 1, 4, 15, 77, 78, 81, 82, 87, 90, 91, 93
Shards 1, 23, 33, 34, 35, 36, 50

Open Areas: Bits 14, 16, 36, 44, 60, 65, 57, 73, 74, 92
Shards 5, 8, 26, 56

Heights: Bits 45, 47, 48, 52, 64, 72
Shards 6, 9, 10, 25

Creatures: Bits 2, 10, 17, 19, 25, 27, 31, 32, 33, 35, 36, 40, 43, 50, 66, 61, 68, 73, 78, 79, 81, 84, 85, 86, 90, 92, 97, 99, 100
Shards 2, 4, 18, 21, 22, 27, 28, 29, 31, 33, 34, 35, 36, 39, 51, 62, 65, 58, 59

Previous Inhabitants: Bits 12, 34, 39, 51, 60, 74, 75, 76, 88, 95, 98
Shards 13, 19, 48, 49, 53, 58

Previous Travelers: Bits 5, 8, 11, 21, 22, 27, 30, 37, 39, 42, 54, 59, 69, 72, 73, 76, 79, 84, 87, 89, 96, 98
Shards 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 52, 54

Times of Day:
Morning – Shards 21, 21, 22, 23
Afternoon – Shards 24, 38, 44
Night – Shards 25, 26, 27, 28, 41

Seasons:
Spring – Shards 29, 30, 34, 73
Fall – Shards 31, 35, 57, 74, 75
Winter – Shards 32, 36

Weather:
Rain – Shards 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46
Fog – Shards 16, 17, 18
Wind – Shard 47
Snow – Shards 32, 36

Damage to Forest: Bits 5, 8, 14, 15, 24, 28, 56, 70, 75, 80, 83
Shards 7, 8, 54, 58

Unusual Sights: Bits 5, 6, 8, 11, 12, 14, 21, 22, 24, 27, 34, 37, 39, 50, 51, 59, 60, 69, 70, 74, 75, 76, 76, 79, 83, 88, 89, 91, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98
Shards 11, 12, 13, 19, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59

Possible Magic: Bits 3, 6, 7, 9, 26, 34, 94
Shards 56, 57

Possibly Spooky: Bits 10, 16, 18, 27, 77, 84
Shards 21, 22, 25

The Noisy Forest: Shards 60-75

Related Pieces: Bits 20/21, 67/68, Shard 13/
Bit 12, Shards 33-36, 52/53, 74/75



Wildwood

01

This area of forest is dense with thin young trees. The trunks are barely 3 inches in diameter, and they fill the space, so there are hundreds of them on all sides of you. The young trees are about 30 feet tall and they form a complete canopy blocking out the sun. But all the trees are about the same size, and they are so dense that for a bit, you cannot get everyone off the trail even if you want to. Individuals could [dismount and] pick their way between the trunks, but it would be slow going.

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Wildwood

02

You hear a sudden crash and see a flash of light as the leaves are forced aside and reflect the sunlight. The drumming of hooves tells the tale as a stag flees the intruders to his woods.

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Wildwood

03

As the path meanders around a corner, you see a ring of toadstools just off the path ahead of you. Some call such a thing a “faerie ring” and claim it leads to the lands of the fey. Others believe it is simply an odd formation of mushrooms, either edible or, possibly, poisonous. Thinking about it, you almost believe you can smell freshly brewed ale as you get closer – or is that the scent of roasting meat? And is that just a trick of the light, or is there a shimmering form in the toadstool ring? [The GM can have the smells be illusory products of self-deception or use this to lead into a faerie encounter.]

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Wildwood

04

The path you are on narrows to an animal trail only a forearm’s length wide. You can make some effort to move more quietly if you move in single file and go carefully along this path. That choice might actually be faster than going side by side and blazing new trails. If you spread out to make your way through the deadfall and underbrush, it will be a struggle and you will make considerably more noise. Anyone not on the path will move slowly and grow fatigued very rapidly. If you have to fight here it will have to be close in with thrusting weapons. Any attempt to swing a long sword or other long weapon would have a good chance of being caught in the branches and dry vines. Wherever you are, you could stand and reach out with a long sword and touch a tree trunk – or several.

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Wildwood

05

You hear a loud cracking noise and a branch suddenly falls from about head height, just in front of the party, narrowly missing you. The smell of dry wood and of soot reaches you. Looking over to your left, you see the lightning-scarred tree from which the branch fell. The damage to the great oak is extensive, but seems awfully low to the ground. How could a bolt of lightning miss the great crown and just strike the trunk where it did? The question quickly leaves your mind, though, as you hear further snapping and cracking from the tree and see it begin to topple towards you.

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Wildwood

06

The forest around you seems wrong. Unnatural. Anyone with knowledge of nature would be especially disconcerted by the trees you have been passing through, though it is only slowly that you are beginning to realize why. The trees are a little too evenly spaced, with too little undergrowth around them. The trees themselves appear too regular, too similar in size and even shape. As you look around, taking it in, the forest seems more like an orderly garden than something that has grown up on its own. You see no signs of civilization, no signs of cultivation, but the natural chaos of the forest seems to have been replaced by an unnatural orderliness. [The GM can have this continue for a few hundred yards or several miles, and then just end suddenly without explanation.]

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Wildwood

07

The forest has been thick with leafy trees of all sorts, especially oaks and elms, but now you have come across a clearing with a single pine tree in it. The tree is not especially tall, perhaps fifteen feet, but its needles seem almost more dark blue than green. Stranger than that, however, is the silvery sheen that covers the tree and the ground around it. Your first thought is that it is covered in snow, but it is far too warm for that. As you look closer, it is unmistakably silver and not white. When the wind passes through the branches of the pine, you seem to hear the tinkling sound of bells. [The GM can make this the beginning of an encounter with a faerie, dryad, or other magical creature or have it just be mysterious and inexplicable.]

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Wildwood

08

You see a large, uprooted tree across the trail ahead of you. The tree is over twenty-five feet long, including about five feet of its root structure. As you glance over to your left, you see the spot where the tree must have been ripped out of the ground. Glancing to your right, you see several trees cracked or broken at about the height of a human head. It appears as if this tree was ripped from the ground and thrown across the trail. [If the adventurers look closer:] You see dry, brownish stains on the tree trunks, and brownish drops splashed on nearby vegetation. They look like they could be old blood.

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Wildwood

09

You hear the distant sound of pan pipes coming from behind you. They fade away, but then you seem to hear the very same pipes start up far ahead of you. You think you also hear wild, almost insane laughter just under the sound of the pipes. Again, they fade away, only to reappear on your left. No matter how hard you try, you can't catch sight of any player. The pattern repeats on your right and then you hear the sounds again behind you. Each time, they seem to come closer and closer before they retreat. As the trail turns, you see a clearing ahead of you. In the center, as if from a vision or a dream, stands an immense oaken table, covered with dishes of exotic foods. You see no one there, but you seem to hear the clinking of glasses and faint, ghostly echoes of revelry. [The GM can have the sights and sounds all fade away as an illusion or a ghostly memory or lead into an encounter with a satyr or other magical creature.]

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Wildwood

10

You have a feeling of unease as the air seems filled with an unnatural tension. Suddenly, crashing and screeching explodes in the underbrush to your left. You can't see what it is, but you can hear the squeals of at least a dozen small animals running away in terror. You then hear the roar of some predator. The sound is strange, not like anything you've heard before. You catch a quick glimpse of red as whatever it is chases after the horrified animals. You see another flash of red, and the broken body of a rabbit is tossed up into the air. Then the sound of the pursuit races off through the trees and is gone.

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Wildwood

11

The forest trail begins to wind through a much hillier area than before. Some of the trees look very precarious, almost as if they are dragging the hilltops down. Eventually you come across one that has fallen, strewing dirt, rocks, and foliage all over the trail. Your progress slows greatly as you have to pick your way across the broken terrain. Glancing over at the hill, however, you spot something odd. Something metallic. As you focus in on it, you can see that it is an armpiece from a suit of armor, but by the size it was never made to fit any human. It also still seems to have the arm in it. Whatever it is, it has been lying on this hillside for a very long time.

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Wildwood

12

The ground in this part of the forest is rougher, with a lot of stones, and the trees are slightly farther apart. You have been passing through them for at least a hundred yards before you realize you are in overgrown ruins. Along the fringes, the stone buildings were reduced to scattered, moss-covered rocks, but here the remains are larger. The walls, while far from intact, are recognizable as walls. You come across a larger building that has pieces of all four walls – and a huge, ancient oak growing up from its center. The remains become smaller and less impressive again, as you seem to be coming to the edge of the ruins.

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Wildwood

13

The evergreen trees here have grown tall and spread their graceful limbs out wide, sweeping the air as they sway in the breeze. The crisp scent of aged pine fills your lungs with every breath as you ride [hike] across the thick blanket of warm brown needles. Below some of the oldest, tallest evergreens the needles are layered so thick that they bury your horses' hooves [or: your feet to the ankle] with each crunching, crackling step.

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Wildwood

14

For most of this journey the trees have been lush and the underbrush plentiful, but now you reach a clearing where the forest suddenly turns from brown and green to black. A solitary and barren tree stands in the center of a twenty-yard circle of blackened ash and charred earth. The tree's thick trunk is scorched and covered with a web of fine cracks. Only the thickest branches remain, reaching their burnt limbs toward the empty sky. A gentle breeze stirs up small clouds of ashes, which drift lazily around the desolate clearing.

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Wildwood

15

Outside the woods the sky seems to be clear and the sun shining brightly, but here beneath the thick green canopy it might as well be nearly night. The layers upon layers of overarching branches intertwine yards above your heads to form an almost unbroken ceiling of leaf and wood. Light pierces through only in thin, bright shafts, illuminating spots upon the forest floor no larger than your hand. The trees are so close together that you see one whose trunk has rotted away at the base, yet it still hangs suspended in the air by the tight weave of its branches with those of its neighbors.

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16

There is a break in the trees and you walk out into a small clearing, its surface covered with dead, overgrown weeds. A ripe smell of decay rises from the ground. In the distance, stems of bright flowers rise from a mist that is rolling in from the other side of the clearing. Clouds gather and the wind stirs the dead foliage on the ground, making it hiss like a shaman's rattle. The fog rolls over the yellow flowers and the clearing and surrounds your feet, gathering and breaking like ocean waves. Above you an owl hoots several times. Suddenly the wind gathers force and the younger trees at the clearing's edge begin to sway, their trunks creaking loudly. There is a sharp, snapping sound, and a dead limb comes crashing to the ground behind you.

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Wildwood

17

Here the path narrows and the undergrowth on either side grows wilder and thicker. Tall ferns, bright purple flowers and tangled thorn bushes grow in riots at the feet of the trees. The path is now stonier, and covered in moss in several places. As it turns to the right you notice a section of the ground covered in glossy, black feathers. [The feathers belonged to a crow.]

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18

The air around you is still and quiet, warm and a bit humid. Big green trees hang down over the trail here, and at the same time their great branches spread overhead and block the sun with their long, thick, dark-green oval leaves. The bark is thick and gray-green, but over it in many places grow mosses of a bluer cast. Below the trees where you travel everything is dim and dark. A deep layer of leaf litter covers the ground, muffling all sound; the noise of your passage just falls into the stillness. The silence seems to swallow all sounds – not even any birds can be heard. Looking into the trees, nothing can be seen moving either nearby or in the distance. You cannot see more than 30 yards in any direction before the tree branches block the view.


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Wildwood

19

The woods are filled with birdsong today. From the lilting twitters of tiny, brightly feathered finches to the throaty calls of surly crows, the birds all seem to be trying to outdo each other in volume and persistence. Above you there are glimpses of the singers darting away from your group to continue their serenades from more secluded branches. The music is at times lovely, other times cacophonous. The one thing it never is, is silent.

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Wildwood

20

The sound of running water can be heard coming from somewhere beyond the thick undergrowth to the east. It grows louder as you continue on the path. Suddenly the path bends again, sharply to the right, and the ground begins to descend until it ends at the banks of a broad, swiftly running brook. Fallen branches, moss-covered rocks and leaves partially clog the water. You suddenly see a leather rucksack bobbing to the surface downstream from you, being carried by the swiftly-moving current. In just a few seconds it swirls out of sight around a bend in the stream. [This Bit may be combined with the description of the rucksack in Bit #21. To do so, use the following alternate ending: **It gets snagged on a fallen log about a hundred feet downstream.**]

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Wildwood

21

Your path curves to follow briefly the course of a wide but swift stream. A torn leather rucksack is snagged on a fallen log in the brook, about fifteen feet from the bank. Its straps are sewn with iridescent snail shells and carved wooden faces, and the front flap is covered in multicolor beadwork. [If it is retrieved and opened the rucksack is found to contain a small garnet, a small leather purse with three copper pieces and a very soggy flute. This bag belonged to a halfling bard. The GM may give a 10% chance that one of the party recognizes the pack.]

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Wildwood

22

A large, moss-covered rock stands ten feet in height, directly ahead in the center of the path. The path goes around it on each side. Drawn in tree sap on the surface of the rock is an arrow pointing down. Flies buzz in swarms all around. At the base of the rock, partially buried in the dark soil, is a roll of soft tree bark, tied with string like a scroll. Upon investigation you see, several crude depictions of orcs, scratched into the surface of the bark itself.

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Wildwood

23

Ropy branches and fruit-laden tendrils of vine block your path at chest height, while overgrown weeds and gnarled tree roots block your path at ankle height. Low hanging branches are just waiting to smack an unsuspecting forehead as you duck underneath them. The dense growth in this part of the forest has slowed your movement dramatically. [In this overgrown section of forest, all movement is at half the normal speed.]

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Wildwood

24

The path you were following disappears. Ahead, the ground and the trees are charred and black. Small plants have begun to grow here and there amid the ashes, and stark white toadstools spring out of the gloomy ground like ghosts. The sun is hot here, and there is very little besides the occasional fallen bough to shade you. Against one of the burned trees someone has erected a small lean-to of charred timbers. Within the lean-to are a few crusts of rock-hard bread, an empty wineskin, and a small dagger with a chipped blade.

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As you move through the woods you spot a stag about fifty feet from where you stand. He looks in your direction, rigid and serious, as you gaze back at him. You lock eyes with him for a moment, and then he bolts away like lightning. You are able track his retreat for a moment and then he is gone, lost in the mesh of trees and plants.

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A few paces away, a stream burbles its way through the trees. A small patch of mist hangs above the water, although the weather does not feel cool enough for fog or anything similar. It floats slowly downstream and then dissipates.

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What began as the occasional spider web has now quickly blossomed into gossamer curtains and sheets of webbing. You see evidence that the webs have been hacked and burned away from the trail, but the forest around you has web upon web. All around you, you smell dust and decay. Here and there, you see hanging objects that could be bodies; too many of them seem to be humanoid in shape. Everywhere you look, you see gleams that seem to be glittering eyes staring back at you. Eerily, you notice that you can no longer hear the normal sounds of the forest – only the gentle sighing of a mournful wind.

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A tree has fallen next to the path and some branches sprawl across the way. The inside of the tree seems to have been hollowed out and smells strongly of something overly ripe and musty. Looking inside, there are several types of fungus growing sturdily in the woody heart of the tree. Some of them look as if they might have medicinal purposes – or hallucinatory.

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You come to a still, clear pool nestled among the tangled roots of a huge tree. Now and then a single leaf falls from the treetop to set down upon the glass-smooth surface of the pool. The water tastes clean, if not a little bit like soil.

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A hidden branch provokes a stumble and a heavier footfall than normal. A momentary glint indicates that something has been revealed, something that may have long been hidden in the ground. Closer inspection shows that it is a coin, a silver coin, although one of a type that is completely unfamiliar. Whose crown and whose regalia might this coin be showing? Who will ever know?

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A crow sits on a branch. Its beady eye looks all around with an arrogant air. It opens its beak to caw and seems like it would spit if it could. Unhurriedly, it lifts its black, feathery wings and flutters off on business of its own.

Bits of the Wilderness: Into the Wildwoods © 2005, Tabletop Adventures, LLC

A thick knot of long worms has spilled out of a rabbit burrow and across the path. Wriggling and writhing, they lie entangled with each other in some kind of obscene dance. They are horrible things.

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A murder of crows flies noisily overhead and settles around a fallen tree. They have landed in a circle and one of their fellows sits in the middle, hopping about as if concerned. In fact, it looks as if it is limping from some wound. A sharp series of caws breaks out. There is a moment of silence and then a muffled reply from the limping crow. A louder chorus from the circle receives no reply at all and then a third, the loudest of all is followed by an explosion of feathers and wings as all dive upon the crow in the center, tearing it to pieces with their sharp claws and beaks. Then, the crows fly away. All that remains are a few bloody pieces and one shining eye.

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Up ahead you see the stump of a great, old tree, fifteen feet in diameter and six feet high from the ground. A ladder made of fibrous plant material hangs down one side. On the top of the stump you can see a huge spiral of amber-colored stones set in the wood, with a small circle of smooth, black pebbles in the center. [If any of the party walks counterclockwise, the direction of the spiral, the sun shines brightly upon the stump. If they walk clockwise, the sun darkens and shadow falls upon the stump. If any of them stands within the circle of black stones, all of the sounds of the forest become noticeably louder. Anyone trying to listen for something would have a bonus of 15% added while standing in the circle of black stones. The stones are all just common rock, with no monetary value.]

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From far away, perhaps from beneath the ground, there is a deep rumbling and it feels like the very earth shudders, perhaps in revulsion. The trees, the vines and the smaller plants shake and quiver. Birds fly into the air with a sudden, rushed squawk and clouds of gnats fill the skies. The cawing of the crows resounds in the distance.

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Here for a bit the forest opens into a meadow. There are knee-high grasses on both sides of the trail. Among the bright green leaves are a variety of flowers, red, yellow blue and white in splashes of riotous color. Bees, butterflies and hummingbirds move between the flowers, collectively making a low buzzing sound. Birds are calling from the edge of the forest and now and then a small bright bird perches on a low plant in the meadow, sings a loud, trilling group of notes and then darts away. There's a breeze across the meadow that cools your faces and makes the warm sunshine seem very pleasant.

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Small bones protrude from the dry earth underneath the a flat, grey stone. They seem to come from a fish of at least the length of an arm. It is odd to find a fish skeleton in the heart of the forest. No obvious explanation comes to mind.

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Everything is in deep shade under the trees. The big leaves over your head block the breeze and filter the sunlight. You can see quite a distance in all directions because there are few plants growing here in the semidarkness.

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Next to the path but partially hidden by a screen of smaller plants, a shrine has been established. There is a statue of a god, with chubby arms and legs and a welcoming smile, together with some tiny metal bowls and plates. It looks like someone has in the past set out little bowls of food and drink for the god as a form of tribute. A small scorched area perhaps indicates where a fire has been set, although it may have been nothing more than a large candle.

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There is a sudden disturbance up in one of the trees and something is moving there. A caw sounds out and then some small object plunges to the ground. It is an egg, probably a bird's egg. It has smashed and inside, what was a few seconds ago a living creature is now just a pulped mass of blood and bone fragments.

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A large, red flower rears out of the undergrowth. Its rampant bloom is pointing upwards and outwards, as if towards the watery sun. Petals, leaves, stamen and all seem to be straining, reaching, almost as if directed by some external agency.

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A large log lies along the side of the trail. The wear pattern in the top and on the sides suggests travelers have frequently rested here. The trees overhead produce a welcome shade and there's a pleasant view across the forest interior. The forest has big trees standing very tall, and some tiny saplings not yet taller than a man. The ground is deep in leaves and pine needles.

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Wildwood


43

[Pick one character for this event:]

[For riders:] **Your horse stumbles slightly and then rears, startled by something. It looks like it very nearly put its foot in a rabbit burrow. Luckily it avoided a broken leg, but that was close.**

[For walkers:] **You take an uneven step and trip, barely catching yourself. You look down and see that you very nearly put your foot in a rabbit burrow. You have avoided a sprain or a broken leg, but that was close.**

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Wildwood

44

You come to a wide grassy clearing in the forest. The center of the meadow between the trees is flooded, a stream winding its way across and submerging the path. The water isn't deep, but it is very cold. The stream is only fifty feet wide but there are no rocks or logs and so no way for someone on foot to avoid getting wet. [If the party is riding: The horses splash through it, sending water drops flying.]

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Wildwood

45

You have been gradually climbing a hill, and now the path diverges. On the right, the trail descends on a gravelly slope toward the bottom of the hill. The left path stays high, running, as far as you can see it, along the crest of the hill.

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Wildwood

46

Several small bunches of berries are growing on one of the trees, although it is difficult to see why they should be growing on that one and not any of the others. Most of the berries are a green-blue color and have quite a pleasant fragrance. Another smaller bunch is ruby red and is covered by patches of a powdery, whitish mold.

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Wildwood

47

The trail climbs through a section of forest composed of tall pines that reach nearly out of sight. The pine smell is very strong. Needles carpet the rocky ground, making it alternately spongy and very hard underfoot. The lower branches are long dead and broken. The trees go up, straight and unbranched, to make a green canopy high above. The tree trunks are covered in small, fine, light brown bark. It seems like traveling in a huge building, the tree trunks a great array of dark columns supporting a lofty ceiling.

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Wildwood

48

The trail climbs for a bit. On the right it is open, with scattered big pine trees and huge gray rocks the size of a wagon protruding from the ground. The ground is fairly level, with knee-high plants, including some big white flowers. To the left, the ground falls away after only about 30 feet and drops into a valley, but the view is obscured because there are lots of trees there; all you can see are the branches of the pines. Squirrels chatter at you from out of sight in the trees.

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The path is clear, winding ahead of you one horse wide. Few plants grow on it. The surface is soft with fallen leaves and organic debris. The horses' hooves [or: Your feet] make only the softest thumps as they fall. You can hear the creak of leather and the jingle of your arms and armor as a softly repeating, familiar group of sounds. There are a few birdcalls, but the birds tend to fall silent as you near, so mostly you hear only the sounds of your companions and the whisper of wind in the tops of the trees high above.

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Rounding a bend in the path, you suddenly hear a low buzzing noise, at once sonorous and frantic. Off to one side of the path is the carcass of a large animal, about the size of a moose – and the sound comes from the cloud of flies buzzing around the corpse. You can't tell exactly what kind of creature it was, but it's easy to see what killed it: amidst the maggots swarming over the place where its head used to be, you can see part of an arrow. The shaft is jet black, and the fletching is a muted gold in color.

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As you skirt the base of a hill, surrounded by the silent forest, you see an opening in the hillside about 30 yards from you, where the land starts to rise. Inside all is darkness. You can tell it is not a natural cave; the entrance is too regular. Large enough for a human, the sagging opening is reinforced with wood. As you move on past it, you see a weed-covered pile of gravel outside and realize it must be an abandoned mine.

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You emerge onto a high saddle of land. Behind you the forest stretches far into the distance. Ahead, the trail descends again, almost immediately swallowed up by the trees. But here, you climb sharply for a few steps to stand on a rock outcrop that is bare of plant life. Worn by weather, the big rocks are bald and smooth, and warm in the bright sunshine. As you look around, you see fluffy white clouds in the sky but they are small and there is no immediate threat of rain. Ahead, the forest lies vast and quiet, an unbroken sea of trees in all the shades of green.

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The path travels alongside a stream for a space, but most places you cannot easily get to it. Although the trail is clear and the stream is obvious, the plants along the stream edge are very dense and difficult to move through. Furthermore, the stream is about a foot below its banks, so you see that if you tear through the bushes to the edge of the brook, you will likely find yourself at the top of a muddy bank, with no sure way to reach the water without falling in.

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You can hear running water near the path, but catch only glimpses of it through the trees. Presently there is a side path. It leads between six-foot shrubs laden with strongly-scented bright white flowers [for example, honeysuckle] and, dipping slightly, stops at an open spot by the river. A small area is pounded hard, and bare of grass. There is no obvious place to sit, but horses and people can easily reach down from the edge to get water. The old dry horse dung clearly indicates other parties have watered their horses here.

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For a bit, you ride [walk] along a forest stream. The water gurgles with a pleasant sound, moving under overhanging branches. Most of the time you can see the little creek, but you can always hear it.

A large tree lies partly in the path. Its leaves are still green, though wilting. The bark is gray and darkly lined. A few feet into the forest, the great roots of this tree have been upended and the upper side is more than ten feet in the air.

The trail leads you to a marshy area. The plants are much taller, their great leaves often two feet by three feet. The horses [or: Your boots] splash through shallow water and up onto firmer ground, then back into water again. A stream has spread across a low area and all of it is very wet in this season. The path picks its way, weaving back and forth as it seeks the driest route. That route isn't very dry, but the horses' legs are only splashed [or: but your feet are only soggy, not soaked,] when you come to the far side.

The narrow trail has been widening for a few yards, and then it descends in quite a broad path to a ford. The slope is steep, although you are in no danger of falling. A clear little stream rattles across a series of stones at the base of the incline. At its narrowest it is three feet wide, with stones sticking up above the water level. Horses can easily wade through the six inches deep water, and people on foot can cross on the stones, having to step into the stream only at either end of the ford, where the water runs about an inch deep over coarse sand. On the far side the trail climbs uphill, snaking around a series of large rocks.

A large gray-brown rock, the size of a peasant's house but shaped remarkably like a turtle, sits by the side of the trail. The tree canopy doesn't quite close over it, and so the top is bathed in warm sunlight. The even shape and the lure of sunlight make it an appealing place to take a break. There are scuff marks on the side of the rock. The trampling of the grass and browsing damage to the trees beside it indicate that other passersby have rested here.

The road forks up ahead. To the right, the trail is wide and even, the dirt packed smooth. The right fork continues under the trees near you but soon emerges from the forest into a meadow covered by waving grasses. You can see where the track crosses the meadow and disappears into the shade of the trees on the far side. To your left, the trail is only half as wide, and is overgrown with spring plants. It forms a thin aisle through the leaves of shrubs and trees on all sides, and is very quickly lost to sight among the greenery. The intersection is marked by a tall standing stone, obviously not original here, that has been carved to indicate the directions, but it is so weathered that the markings are unreadable.

A beam of sunlight has made its way past the reaching branches above, to illuminate, like a spotlight, one of the shrubs of the forest floor. The shrub's dark green leaves gleam in the sunlight and its brightly lit orange flowers practically glow against the darkness of the leaves. Butterflies flutter above the shrub, their wings showing white and dark, alternately. The patch of light seems to sparkle with the movement of the butterflies. A small green and yellow bird suddenly appears and, in a flutter of moving wings, seizes one of the butterflies and alights on a top branch in the sunlight to devour its prize. The sparkling motion of the butterflies continues, unheeding.

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The trail passes over a creek, where the water has cut a ragged channel in the rocky soil. Long ago someone made a sort of a bridge from a row of logs, and it has been repaired casually by piling another log on top as the ones below rotted. Undeterred, the stream carved a path below the intervening logs. You ride [walk] comfortably across the logs of the little bridge, the creek gurgling and bubbling around mossy rocks just below you. A few white flowers can be seen emerging from the cold water under the bridge.

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The forest is composed of trees of a variety sizes and shades. Mostly you can see only their trunks, but those are diverse: yellow-brown and red-brown, nearly black, or light or dark gray, with a coarse texture or a fine pattern, or great ridges. The sizes range from thinner than a finger to broader than a man, with all the sizes in between, spread across the landscape in no order. That makes the dead tree more memorable. Broken about fifteen feet high and as large around as it is tall, it must have been a forest giant, long ago. Now the center has rotted out and it is riddled with animal holes. The yellow bark has mostly fallen off, leaving a pale white inner trunk. About eight feet from the ground, two old branches, each larger than any nearby tree, form a "Y". Their position, and the bird's nest in between, make it look like a huge, stocky being with its arms raised to the sky.

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The trail climbs over a hill and meanders along the slope, rising steadily. The hill is rocky and too steep to be climbed straight without great effort. The path, however, is wide enough to walk two abreast most of the way. Carts must have cut this path; there are deep ruts where their wheels sank into the gravel. The small stones crunch under your feet. The view is poor most of the time; all you can see is trees, even though you are climbing higher and higher. You finally arrive at a spot where the nearest two trees are dead, and you can see back the way you have come. A few clouds are riding high in the sky, and the trees range out behind you along the relatively level lands you just passed over. To the left you see a small lake amid the forest, bright blue under the nearly cloudless sky.

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You emerge from the forest into a glade. The path, which has been clear through the trees, vanishes under the vibrant plants of the meadow. Long slender leaves of various grasses cover the ground. You can see, however, where the trail leaves the meadow on the other side. The path up the rocky ground under the trees 100 yards away is obvious even from this distance. A straight line to the path has you [your horses] stepping on buttercups and iris, pushing bright flowers into the soft ground. It is squishy underfoot and water oozes into your footprints. At the center of the meadow, the area is flooded, with a few inches of water flowing over everything. Those in the lead splash through cold clear water; those behind them in cold muddy water.

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The path runs along the bottomland, and everywhere there are flying insects. Some are mosquitoes and biting flies, bent on sucking your blood, but most of them are "midges", uninterested in you, but forming great clouds. From the moment you climb out of your blankets they surround and pursue you. Washing requires chasing insects off your face. They fall into your food, or fly into your mouth, nose, and eyes. They swarm about you [and your animals] as you travel, buzzing and hovering. The path ahead looks clear of them, but when you move forward, the humming, fluttering swarm circles you relentlessly. There is no peace in the night, only a different horde of insects that fly into the fire, incinerating themselves, or attack those on guard.

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Wildwood

67

You ride [walk] out of deep shade into bright sunlight. Blinking in the full daylight, you see this isn't a meadow but that the trees here have been cut, some of them recently. The cutting style leaves a point on each stem. [It was done by beavers.] Both slender and large trees have been cut and hauled away, and the sun is hot in the open. Plants with purple and white flowers grow almost as high as the older stumps. Where the stumps are new, you can see younger versions of the same plants starting to grow. The trail, which had drawn near a small stream briefly, drops down a little and ahead you see a small pond. [This piece can be followed by Bit #68.]

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Wildwood

68

The trail vanishes into a pond here. Circling along the edge, looking for the trail, branches slap at your faces and your gear [such as packs or protruding weapons] gets caught by vines. The pond appears to be at least 100 feet across, but its edge is irregular and not easy to see; once you find yourselves splashing in shallow water. Working your way toward what ought to be the pond's exit, you find a beaver dam. The dam is woven of logs, sticks and leaves, easily six feet high above the stream at its center, three feet at its edges. It is in excellent repair; some of the branches on it still have green leaves. The pond spreads out from there and you can see the top of a beaver lodge 20 yards out in the pond. The stream spills under the dam, filling a wide channel there. The pond covers the trail. You will have to pick a place to ford the stream, either above or below the dam.

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Wildwood

69

You come upon a standing stone which seems out of place, sticking as it does vertically out of the ground all alone in the grass. Then the shapes next to it resolve into an old helm, and the remains of other offerings, red and yellow cloth perhaps, and you realize it is a grave. The area is rocky enough that the stone might have been found nearby, but arranging it to sit on its long end by the roadside required considerable effort. The stone stands barely six feet from the trail. The sand and loam path passes through rocky ground with scattered grasses and other short plants, some with fragrant leaves. The trees here form a sparse but continuous canopy overhead. There is nothing at all to distinguish this spot, except the grave.

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Wildwood

70

You ride [walk] through an area where some kind of disturbance happened in the past. Big rocks sit in odd positions atop, rather than in, the earth. Piles of earth are peculiarly arranged across the land. Some are ten feet tall, some only three feet. Likewise, there are odd holes in the ground of various sizes and depths. Trees cover the area but they are small; few are thicker than a sword hilt. Many are 30 feet tall, and the area feels forested. There are large patches, however, where there is a marked absence of small plants and no trees have established themselves, suggesting perhaps some lingering damage to the soil.

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Wildwood

71

The trail is covered by grasses and wildflowers. Dead grass suggests that the path has not been used much in several years. The location of the trail is pretty clear across the grassy slope, but under the trees it is much more difficult to follow. In the grass the impression of the trail, though not everywhere clear, can generally be picked up, but on the rocks and shallow soils under the trees, the impression of the trail has faded and is nearly unrecognizable in places. Your pace must be very slow to avoid missing the trail, even though it generally goes straight ahead.

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Wildwood

72

Your path winds down into a narrow ravine, its walls formed by an eroded dirt cliff face on one side, and a massive stone that has been thrust up from the earth on the other. The top of the cliff is thick with ferns, and sunlight passing through their fronds dapples the path that meanders through the ravine itself. Roots poke out through the cliff wall in places, giving the whole ravine a heavy, earthy smell.

Most of the rock face that forms the right-hand wall of the ravine is covered in moss and lichen, but one nearby section looks different: patches of moss are gone, and the stone beneath has fresh grooves carved into it. On the ground below the missing patches is a sword, its blade unmarred by rust, half-half-buried in the moist earth.

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Wildwood

73

Emerging into a clearing in the trees, you see a pond in the clearing up ahead. The pond wraps around a small, marshy spit of land, and the water is thick with water lilies and rushes. You can hear the insistent buzz of dragonflies and the occasional croak of a bullfrog. The surface of the pond is undisturbed, and the whole clearing is still and peaceful. Perhaps for this reason, a circle of flat-topped stones has been set up at the end of the little spit of land, overlooking the water.

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Wildwood

74

After passing through some thick undergrowth, you come upon a wide circular clearing. Around the edge is a ring of menhirs, each about ten feet tall and situated a few paces from the surrounding trees. The ground between the stones is an overgrown mix of clover, wildflowers and stunted berry bushes – except in the center of the clearing.

The middle of the clearing is dominated by a massive slab of weathered stone, fully as wide and long as a hay wagon. The stone sits atop a mound of earth, and a circle of ground around it has been cleared down to the dirt in the recent past. The slab itself has been tipped halfway off the mound, as if someone tried to knock it from its perch, and you can see that the surface is covered in dark stains. [This may be a druid circle, or could be/have been used for some other rituals.]

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Wildwood

75

As your path dips into a shallow valley, you begin to see the detritus of an ancient battle on either side of you. The sloping ground is thick with bones, long since picked clean by scavengers, and in places steel arrowheads gleam in the short grass. One section of the hill to your right looks as though it was scarred by fire, perhaps at the time of the battle, and the trees in that area have still not fully recovered.

As you pass more closely to the scene, you can pick out the remains of men – now little more than bones – clad in rusty chain mail, some still wearing iron caps and other armor as well. There is a disquieting stillness to this little glade, as if the usual sounds of the forest have receded into the distance.

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Wildwood

76

A crumbling stone well lies just off the path, its fallen stones overgrown with moss. The well's wooden pulley system still stands, but the wood is black with damp and strangely warped. A good portion of the roof has decayed, letting sunlight stream into the well. A battered iron cup hangs from a rusty nail, below a sign written in some other language. [If any of the adventurers can read Orcish, they can determine the sign says, "REPLACE CUP, WORMMEAT!"]

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Wildwood

77

Leaves and twigs crackle under your feet as you make your way through the thick forest. You can smell the pine needles as you try in vain to move as quietly as possible. This woodland area makes you feel as if you are closed in, imprisoned in its canopy of wood and foliage, and you almost long to come to the end of its confines.

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Wildwood

78

This forest is so thickly populated with trees that you can see clearly only about twenty feet in any direction. The thought enters your mind that you're not sure if you could find your way back from whence you came even if you tried. The sounds of your footfalls are by no means the only noise you hear in this humid place. Birds make their sounds all around you, not quite songs, but chirps and twitters. You hear other sounds also, sounds of which you cannot discern the origin; they may be the sounds of animals moving nearby, or something more ominous.

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Wildwood

79

As you round a thick copse of trees, you see that the path ahead is blocked by a large, covered wagon. The wagon sits athwart the path, and the rear wheel closest to you is smashed to pieces. There are large tears in the canvas covering, exposing the inside of the wagon; it is empty and bare, its contents most likely either eaten or carried off by other travelers. There is no sign of the horses that would have pulled the wagon, and the harness yoke is snapped in two.

A handful of tiny sparrows are hopping around and under the wagon, picking at the ground in search of food. You watch as one of them picks something up and then tosses it aside – and it catches your eye because it's not a seed or a pebble, but rather a tiny pearl. Looking more closely, you can see that the ground is littered with scattered seed pearls, as if from a broken necklace.

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Wildwood

80

As you continue to make your way through the woods you hear a loud creaking sound, and suddenly fifteen feet to your right you see a small tree fall. The forest fills with the noise of the crash as it drops to the ground. [If the party examines the small tree that has fallen:] The small tree seems to be dead, which may be the reason that it fell. Its branches have broken in the fall, apparently very brittle from standing dead for so long. The wood is dark with a smooth bark, but you're not sure what kind of tree it was. At the base of the fallen tree there are marks that look like scratches, maybe from a deer in rut or some other animal, but as far as you can tell, the scratches are not the reason for the tree falling.

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Wildwood

81

The forest is dense and the trees grow thickly around the trail, most only a yard or two apart. You ride on deep litter, the sound of your [your horses'] feet muffled. Ferns and knee-high plants cover the ground between the trees as they have for hours. Quite suddenly the ground suddenly comes to life, with dozens and dozens of small dark birds taking flight in a mad flapping of wings. They swirl around you, trying to escape, wings beating, making lots of little gusts of wind in all directions. Dead leaves flutter on the ground in response to the wind. The noise of their squawks and cries is deafening. Then they rise into the leaves above you and are gone, and the quiet of the forest envelops you again.

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Wildwood

82

The trees overhang the roadway here and from horseback you could easily reach up and pull a leaf off one of the lower branches. The fresh smell of the greenery is strong enough to relieve your senses from the familiar smells of sweat, leather, and horse [or, if the party is on foot: sweat, leather and steel]. The light and shadows produced by the interplay of the leafy canopy create unusual patterns around you as you pass. They are striking, but the irregular patterns make it difficult to see anything that might be hiding in the woods. The dense foliage can be beautiful, but might be deadly to the unwary.

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Wildwood

83

You have come suddenly to a spot of forest where the trees are blackened and dead. The edge is abrupt; outside this area the trees seem untouched, inside they are thoroughly burned. In this area, a nearly circular patch about 40 feet across, every tree is burned, base to crown, the leaves and smaller branches all missing. The shrubs and herbs on the ground were incinerated as well. The fire appears to have occurred this year because no live plants have colonized the devastated area. There is a lingering smoky smell but it seems residual, not recent. [This was the site of a fireball.]

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Wildwood

84

The woodland creatures are uncomfortably quiet today. No squirrels chatter, and the birds are silent. Even the expected drone of insects is missing. You do not know if it because you and your companions are passing, or whether it is due to something else more menacing.

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As you hike through the woods you notice a number of deer tracks that go off to the west. You can smell the pine trees that stand all around you and a thick bed of needles blankets the forest floor. You note that the land in front of you seems to be quite flat and you can see a good distance through this sparsely wooded place.

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Birds sit in the trees, singing as you journey through the woods. You hear the rat-a-tat-tat of a woodpecker at work, and then spot him toiling away on the light-brown wood of a sycamore tree. He stops, apparently at the sound of your foot-falls, and cocks his head in your direction. All around you, you can sense the myriad forms of life that dwell in this forest.

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The vegetation is thick and the path greatly overhung by leafy branches. The location of the trail is pretty clearly marked by blazes on the trees, but trees and shrubs have grown down into and up out of the trail, making it difficult to travel even when you know clearly where it is. You duck under branches, or weave to avoid them. Despite your best efforts, you are stung by spiny leaves and your clothes scraped and ripped by branches with long thorns. Hacking at them with knives would make passage easier but it would be very slow.

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Standing stones as high as a grown man's knee line the path. The smooth boulders are dominated by a single spiraling glyph carved into their face, which may represent a blessing for travelers – or a warning. Underneath the runes are a series of dots and dashes which may have meaning to someone, but not to you.

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A jagged shard of unpainted wood has been driven into a low mound of earth just off the forest path. A badly misspelled message gouged into the impromptu grave marker with a dull knife announces “Justen, a pedlur dyd heer. Gods rest hm.”

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You've been walking for quite some time through this thickly wooded area. As you have moved up and down small hills and vales you've noticed that this forest is alive with sights, smells, and sounds. Though you haven't actually seen any animals larger than small birds, you have heard the calls of wolves, or wild dogs. You've also seen the spoor of deer, rabbit, and possibly bear on the ground as you've delved deeper into the woods.

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Wildwood

91

The sound of your footsteps is muted here as you stride down the path. [Or: The war-shod hooves of your horses ring hollowly on the paving stones of the ancient imperial highway.] The forest on either side of the road has grown uncomfortably close over the years [centuries] and you feel hemmed in by its vastness. You peer into the shadowy woods, but those shadows do not readily reveal their secrets. The woods here are made up of gnarled poplars and willows that have stood for a long time. As you gaze into the darkness of the wood, you almost feel that the trees are looking back at you.

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Wildwood

92

On the far side of a clearing, you see tufts of goldenrod reaching three feet in height. Amidst it you can see a pile of rocks, pyramidal in shape and covered with bright green moss. Scores of white butterflies dart and duck about the rocks. Suddenly the sun breaks free of some clouds and the stark, white sky is warmed by patches of blue. The faint humming of insects can be heard. The smell of decay is strong here, a fetid mingling of rotting plants and death. A small red bird flits down to land on the topmost rock and begins to preen itself there. [If anyone tries to disturb or climb the rocks, many will easily tumble, revealing the thigh bone of a small humanoid.]

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Wildwood

93

The ground becomes spongier and wetter, and soon your feet are sinking into it. Huge, bright green ferns completely blanket the forest floor here. Some of the plants rise more than three feet from the forest floor and the ferns grow so closely together that the ground itself becomes impossible to see. Swarms of gnats gather in the shafts of sunlight that filter down from the thick ceiling above. The ground is becoming steadily wetter, and the ferns rustle with hidden life. Now and then thick, ropy vines hang from some of the deciduous trees, their dark tendrils stopping just above the tips of the ferns.

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Wildwood

94

Ahead of you is a very unusual sight. Two fruit trees stand, one on each side of the trail; however, they are bent together into an arch. In the past, some creature, item, or unknown power forced them together. This was not recent, either, as you can see how the branches have continued to grow, further entwining the trees together. You see no other sign of intelligent creatures, buildings, or activity in the area – only this mysterious archway. The delicious scent of fruit drifts toward you as you consider the arch.

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Wildwood

95

Your journey through the forest brings you to a small valley, where the large and stately trees give way to squat and gnarled specimens surrounded by low tangles of shrubs and wide mossy carpets. In the lowest spot of this brushy dell is an ancient stone statue, cracked with time and overrun by red-leafed creeper vines. It depicts an armored warrior with one arm held aloft, though whatever was once raised in that hand has long since broken off and is unrecognizable amidst the other rocks near the base. Any inscription seems to have long since worn away, along with the finer details of this old, gray carving.

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Wildwood

96

A rickety wooden lean-to has been built in the lee of a chipped old boulder, and from the signs found nearby it's obvious that the rude shelter has been used by passers by for years. A blackened circle of stones marks an ash-stained fire pit, and a clearly tramped down path from the lean-to leading to a stinking patch of ground behind some oleander bushes marks the site of a well-established latrine. One of the lean-to's last inhabitants must have been a whittler. Shavings of wood are piled up in front of the small structure, and a half completed, fist-sized figurine of some kind of horse lies partially buried in the mud.

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Colorful shelf fungi grow up the sides of the trees in this area. A grey-and-black striped lizard sits atop one of these mushrooms, flicking unwary dragonflies out of the air. One of its bulbous eyes focuses in on you and then it darts back down into the underbrush, frightened by the clamor of your passage through its domain.

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Offerings of now-rotted fruit and old shell jewelry lie at the base of a colorful, intricately carved totem pole. A turtle forms the base of the high oak pole, supporting a bear, above that a grimacing orc face, and at the pole's peak, a human male icon. The rich array of paints used to decorate the pole are flaking and running thanks to years of neglect.

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Off in the distance, a buck with an impressive rack mounts a doe with bleating screams of pleasure and dominance. When the pair notices your approach, they disentangle clumsily and bound deeper into the forest, moving in opposite directions.

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You hear frantic yipping somewhere nearby, and a red fox, its tail in the air, dashes past your group. It doesn't even seem to notice your presence. The pungent odor of skunk drifts to your nostrils, indicating the probable reason for the fox's preoccupation.

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