



4

Adventure in the Wood

A T A L E S X A T A T H E V A A A

INTRODUCTION

The earth beneath Leya felt unusually warm. She reached down to confirm and pulled back in pain immediately. Her feathers were seared slightly. The season had been unusually dry, but this was a frightening temperature. After a closer look, it seemed like the ground was glowing.

CRACK! Leya's eyes went to the sound. The large tree she'd played in as a child had fallen, and smoke rose from its remains. "Go!" her mind yelled, and she listened, rushing towards home. "Get to them before—"

Suddenly, flames burst forth, travelling at an unearthly velocity towards Leya's perch. Her perch meant the world to her, but in the vast expanse of the Wood it was small and unimportant. Too insignificant for a Perch Guard outpost of its own. Her heart tightened knowing the remote settlement wouldn't be warned in time, and that aid would not be close by.

Leya's hands began to move without thought as she whispered the words of her grandmother. It wouldn't be enough, but she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she didn't try. When taught to her, the spell was meant to help farms through rainless seasons. It wasn't intended to be used defensively. Droplets of a lost cause formed between her fingers.

Conjured water fell to the ground, evaporating as soon as it hit the steaming forest floor. As she concentrated, a strong warm gust touched Leya's face. It's Altus, it must be! Leya thought. The Amaranthine of storms was bringing rain to quench this hateful wildfire. She looked to the sky, frantically searching for more signs of changing weather.

Barely able to register what she saw, her arms dropped to her sides in defeat. Flying balls of fire were filling up the sky. A swarm broke off, headed in her direction. Leya sank to her knees, hoping with her last thoughts that someone would save Humblewood before it all burned.

FREE RESOURCES

To supplement your Humblewood adventure, handouts, maps, tools and more are available at:

HUMBLEWOOD.COM/RESOURCES



RUNNING THE CAMPAIGN

The following chapter contains a full adventure set in Humblewood that takes characters from levels 1 to 5. This chapter is meant for the GM's eyes only. It is recommended that you read the entire book, including the **Adventure in the Wood** chapter, prior to running it with your group. It is also assumed that you have read the 5th Edition Core Rules and Monster Books.

Information formatted in a box like this should be read out loud for players. This information is to be read when the party arrives at that point in the adventure.

Information formatted in a box like this is additional background information used to help shape the campaign. This information can be revealed to the players when necessary.

Any monster or non-player character (NPC) stat block included in this book is identified by **bold blue text**. These monsters can be found in **Appendix A: Bestiary (pg.177)** and the NPC's are listed in **Appendix B: Nonplayer Characters (pg.190)**. Any monster or NPC stat block in **bold purple text** can be found using the 5th Edition Core Rules. NPCs with given names will appear in **bold green text** the first time they are introduced to the players. **Bold red text** references other sections within this book. Magic items and spells will appear in *italics*. Those with an asterisk (*) beside them can be found in **Appendix D: New Magic Items (pg.211)** or **Chapter 1: New Spells (pg.48)** of this book. Those without an asterisk can be found in the 5th Edition Core Rules.

The challenges in this adventure were created with a balanced party of four players in mind. If your group has more or fewer players, consider adding or removing enemies in each encounter. Try to ensure players feel challenged, but not overwhelmed. The adventure can be played through in its entirety, or used as pieces for your own custom campaign. **Appendix E: Random Encounters (pg.213)**, as well as the *Monster Cards*, and *NPC Cards* can be used to further flesh out the game.

Humblewood lies on the eastern coast of a vast continent, nestled in a valley between the towering Crest Mountains and the marshlands of the Mokka Fields. It is a mystical, secluded place that gets by quite well without much trade from the outside world, due to the fertility of the soil and an abundance of natural resources. The Wood has many skilled workers and artisans, and this, coupled with the supply of raw materials, makes Humblewood a great exporter.

The Wood has a diverse population, but the true power in Humblewood are the birdfolk. At the heart of their nation lies the great capital of Alderheart. The seat of commerce, art, and political power in the region, Alderheart has long been a refuge for those seeking fame, fortune, or protection.

Players will encounter some locations that are not extensively explained in this chapter. It is recommended that the information in the **Traversing the Wood (pg.76)** chapter be used to help players understand their surroundings.

Monster and NPC Cards. In addition to their entries in **Appendix A: Bestiary (pg.177)**, all the monsters and NPCs exclusive to this adventure have accompanying *The Deck of Many* cards for quick reference.

Character Advancement. For ease of play, the adventure has been structured with the milestone leveling rules in mind. Characters will level up automatically at the end of key story moments. For those groups using the standard XP rewards, there are experience point rewards for the social, puzzle, and other non-combat encounters provided alongside the milestone rewards. Otherwise, award standard XP for defeated foes as the players progress through the adventure.

OVERVIEW

There have been disturbing signs over the last few months, signalling that something is wrong in Humblewood. The troubles appear to originate from activity in the Scorched Grove, an ashen plain that was ravaged many centuries ago by a destructive fire. Whatever caused the fire has scarred the land with elemental magic, making it inhospitable to all but strange fire-based creatures. Of late, the Grove has begun to expand. At first, it was hard to notice the slow expansion, but those in tune with nature (especially the Tenders) could see the imbalance in the elemental forces of Humblewood. For many common folk, this imbalance has been experienced as unseasonal dryness, which has led to crop failure and an increased frequency of forest fires. There have also been a number of unusually aggressive emberbat clouds reported far outside of their natural ranges.

The true nature of the danger still remains hidden from the people of the Wood. A corvum necromancer named **Odwald Ebonhart (see Appendix B, pg.196)** has stirred the elemental **aspect of fire**, which has lain dormant beneath the Scorched Grove since its first burning. The aspect's energies have begun to empower fire-based creatures within the Wood. The increased range of emberbat swarms have brought fires that have expanded the Grove. Many forest-dwellers, who have been left without homes, have turned to banditry to survive. Soon the elemental incarnation will break free, and players must find a way to stop the aspect of fire before it reduces the Wood to ashes.





Part 1: The Adventure Begins

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Part 1 of the adventure is designed to start a party of 1st level characters off on their journey in the world of Humblewood. The kinds of characters players create will influence how the campaign begins.

If characters are not playing races described in this book, perhaps they have heard legends of Humblewood, and have traveled or were brought here to explore the wonders of the forest. Maybe the newcomers have come to see the magnificent city of Alderheart, or to seek an audience with the Birdfolk Council. Any number of stories can be crafted about why standard 5th Edition races have ended up in the Wood, but keep in mind that they might be viewed as curiosities as they travel the land. Most folk in Humblewood haven't seen outsiders like them before.

If characters are birdfolk or humblefolk, have them start their adventure as residents of Meadowfen, a small village south of the Scorched Grove, near the main road.

SLEEPY MEADOWFEN

Meadowfen has been quiet for as long as anyone can remember, and life there goes by slowly. Recently, Meadowfen has fallen on hard times. Seasonal rainfalls haven't arrived, leaving the fields barren. To make matters worse, trade wagons sent to provide relief have gone missing, fueling rumors of bandits prowling the roadways. Fire-based creatures are venturing closer to the village than ever before. A week ago, an ominous plume of black smoke to the north blocked the sun. A few

brave villagers ventured out to investigate, but they haven't returned. The source of the smoke remains unknown.

The sleepy village of Meadowfen is the perfect home for aspiring adventurers who dream of fantastical quests across Humblewood. The recent chaos surrounding the settlement presents ample opportunity for a group of heroes to get their feet wet. Meadowfen also works well as a staging ground for new arrivals to the Wood, as there are few here who the village Elder can turn to for help in these times. It would be fortuitous if a group of travelling adventurers were to show up.

Wherever the journey begins, one of the locals who went to investigate the black smoke in the north will return, badly wounded and in need of aid.

THE GREAT BLAZE

There is a commotion in the village square. A wounded strig woman limps towards the Meadowfen Elder's home, staggering and catching herself on the side of a well. She is bloodied, and her tawny feathers are singed and flecked with ash and soot.

The birdfolk, **Cara Stormsinger** (see Appendix B, pg.193), is one of the villagers who left a week ago to investigate the smoke to the north.

Cara will take water if it is offered, but will refuse other aid as she is adamant about getting to the village Elder.

“I must speak to the Elder, we are all in grave danger. The Grove has taken an entire town.” At this moment, a wizened gallus, who was sitting on her front porch, rises and flings open her door, waving for Cara to come. Cara cannot carry herself anymore

If a party member does not assist her, a villager helps Cara into the Elder’s house. The gallus, **Ardwyn, Elder of Meadowfen** (see Appendix B, pg.190) grants entrance to Cara and the party. Many villagers will try to follow Cara, but Ardwyn will turn them away. It is clear the party was only allowed into Ardwyn’s home because she wants to speak with them.

If any party member has proficiency in the Medicine skill, they will be given time to tend to Cara’s wounds.

Impatiently, Ardwyn approaches Cara.

“It’s clear you have endured much, my child,” the respected gallus says, motioning to the party to gather around. “But we must know what happened out there.”

Cara explains that the fires from the Scorched Grove have spread to the hillside town of Ashbarrow and razed it to the ground. Cara warns that the roads are full of bandits. Luckily, she escaped with her life. Others, Ashbarrow citizens fleeing their burning homes, were not so lucky. Cara doesn’t know where those captured by the bandits were taken.

The Elder, understanding how serious this is, asks the party to travel to Alderheart, to speak to the Birdfolk Council and inform them of Ashbarrow’s destruction and of the bandit activity on the roads near Meadowfen. The party may be the only ones who can make the dangerous journey.



FIVE FINGER DISCOUNT

As the party sets out from Meadowfen, four hooded figures will come into view on the road ahead.

Three hooded figures are gesturing violently at a crumpled body on the ground, while a fourth is leaning against a nearby tree. A small hand-cart stacked high with bags and boxes of various sizes stands nearby. One of the hooded figures goes to the cart and unceremoniously sifts through the packages, leaving fallen bundles strewn on the road.

As you approach the three strangers who were gesturing at the body, you can see the pointed faces of mapach under the hoods. Two male and one female mapach, each wearing worn leather armor and a short sword on their belt. The fourth, an intimidating vulpin female, is lightly armored and wears an ornate sword on her hip. She seems to be hanging back, letting her subordinates do all the work.

You hear a whimpered “Help me” from the creature laying on the road, but you can’t make out their features. The mapach female, still standing near the fallen body, puts her hands on her hips and says to the party, “All right folks, nothing to see. Move along if you know what’s good for ya.”

The vulpin leading these three **mapach bandits** is a powerful foe named **Fray Merridan** (see Appendix B, pg.207). She represents a serious threat to the party, but won’t take interest in them unless she has a reason to believe the characters are a worthy challenge.

Assuming the party doesn’t want to fight, the bandits will leave if bribed. They are reasonable robbers, and will gladly relinquish the cart if the party can offer a worthy sum. Negotiations start with Fray evaluating the cart’s contents. She and her crew will simply walk away for 10 gp each. Players can roll opposed Charisma (Deception) or (Persuasion) checks against a Wisdom check made by Fray to negotiate for a lower price, but the bandits won’t leave for anything less than 5 gp each.

Believing they have the upper hand, the bandits won’t hesitate to attack if they sense trepidation or suspect that the party might be up to something. Any threats or posturing from the characters will be met with an attack from the three mapach bandits. This fight shouldn’t be too difficult, as the party likely outnumbers the bandits and are probably better equipped.

Fray will stay back and let the party fight the bandits for a round or two. She will intervene after two rounds or when a bandit is brought down. Fray will target the character who looks to be the most capable in single combat. If the party is larger than four players, she will engage in combat from the start, ordering her underlings to deal with the others.



Joining the fight, the bandit captain says, “Intriguing. You look like you might actually give me a proper fight!” The vulpin smirks and draws her blade, tracing intricate patterns in the air as she rushes into battle.

Fray is a deadly foe, but she wasn’t prepared to have her heist interrupted. She won’t risk her life needlessly if the odds turn against her. If at least two of the mapach bandits go down, she will make a tactical retreat into the dense forest, where she can easily disappear in the foliage. While escaping, she will swear revenge and leave any unfortunate underlings to the party’s mercy.

The terrain is difficult for the party, but not for Fray, who is familiar with the area. Any character trying to pursue Fray on foot will quickly lose her in the forest unless they can make a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check each round. The dense forest also makes gliding difficult. Most birdfolk can’t glide through the trees, but Small birdfolk characters can attempt to glide after Fray, avoiding trunks and branches with a DC 15 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check.

Failure on either the Wisdom or Dexterity check means the character has lost sight of Fray and ends the chase for that character. A character successfully chasing Fray through the woods means the party catches up with her, at which point she will surrender. If four rounds have passed since her retreat, the party has lost Fray.

Should the party choose to try and locate Fray by continuing down the road, they will arrive at a clearing where a river separates them from a dense forest on the other side. A heavy log sits with one end on riverbank and the other end in the water, preventing the party from crossing the river and chasing Fray.

If the party continues through any forest terrain, they will need to make regular survival checks to avoid becoming lost in the trees. Use the **Forest Encounters (Level 1-2) table (pg.214)** for an especially persistent group. Make it clear that the vulpin has made her getaway, covering her tracks well enough that following her is fruitless.

If the encounter should go horribly awry, the bandits won’t bother capturing the party or finishing them off. Rather, they will retreat, stealing as much from the hand-cart as they can carry. After all, the bandits aren’t sure there won’t be reinforcements coming to the rescue. If a player consents, their character can earn a scar from their battle with Fray in order to heighten anticipation for the rematch later.

TREASURE

The mapach bandits are wearing worn leather armor and each one carries a poorly-kept short sword. If they are defeated and searched, the party also finds a small coin purse with 5 gp inside it.

If Fray is defeated. She is wearing a suit of studded leather armor (obviously pilfered), and a finely crafted shortsword with a rose insignia on the pommel. The sword is not magical, but it will sell for double the normal going rate of a shortsword. Any lower level bandit who sees a character wearing the sword will immediately recognize it as a captain’s sword. So long as the sword is visible, all bandits of a rank lower than captain will have disadvantage on any rolls made to oppose Charisma (Intimidation) ability checks made by that character. The party will also find among Fray’s possessions 10 gp, and a map which has the location of a bandit camp marked (see **Bandit Camp, pg.110**).

ESCORTING ELIZA

After defeating or bribing the bandits, the characters can help the beaten figure lying in the road to her feet. If they don’t engage with her immediately, have her grunt or whine to attract attention. If they still don’t assist, the merchant eventually sits up on her own. She is **Eliza Pennygleam (see Appendix B, pg.196)**, an eluran who hails from lands beyond Humblewood. It’s fairly common to see eluran traders in these parts, and the merchant is happy to explain that she has traveled here to set up shop.

If the characters were defeated by the bandits, Eliza will be the one who revives them, healing each character for 2d4+2 hit points using the last of a supply of poultices from her small hand-cart. She will curse the bandits who stole from her, but will still be grateful to the party for their valiant efforts.

“My whiskers, that was close! Thank you all for protecting me and my cart. My name is Eliza. I’m on my way to Alderheart by way of Winnowing Reach. Would you be kind enough to help me the rest of the way?”



In case the characters are unfamiliar with the Wood, Eliza describes the road ahead. She explains that it works its way along the edge of Mokka Fields, a large swampland, before reaching Winothing Reach, a small research outpost whose inhabitants study the slimes that live in the nearby caverns.

Eliza's plan was to stop briefly in Winothing Reach, to sell her wares and acquire new stock, before eventually making her way to Alderheart.

If the characters seem reluctant to aid her, she will entice them by offering each character a single item from her cart in exchange for their protection and company on the road—to be awarded upon arrival.

If the party decides to walk with Eliza, their movement speed is reduced considerably as she pulls her cart behind her. A strong character can offer to pull the heavy-laden hand-cart instead. Succeeding a DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check keeps everyone moving at regular traveling speed, while failure means the party continues slowly.

B-B-B-BATS!

The road to Winothing Reach keeps the party just out of reach of the swamplands on the right.

As you make your way down the road, terrain on the left side changes considerably. Beyond the lush green trees lining the road, glimpses of burned stumps and ash-covered fields can be seen. It looks as if a massive fire recently ravaged this place.

This bleak landscape seems to stretch for miles. While looking out over this gray scene, the characters may notice a cloud of creatures flying above the ash. Those who keep an eye on the

creatures, or characters with a passive perception score of 15 or higher, notice the cloud change course and begin flying toward the party.

A swarm draws near. You can see it is composed of hundreds of tiny flying creatures, each one resembling a bat with a candle-sized flame sprouting from above its upturned nostrils. The combined heat of their bodies can be felt on the wind.

If the cloud's course change was noticed, the characters have about 10 seconds before the bats descend on them. If the bats flew unnoticed until this point, they arrive so swiftly that the characters do not have time to prepare for the attack.

The characters are beset by two **swarms of emberbats**. The bats dive and harass their targets relentlessly until they are slain or the party is defeated. The swarm won't give chase for long, and can be escaped if the party is able to put considerable distance between themselves and the ashy plain.

WINNOWING REACH

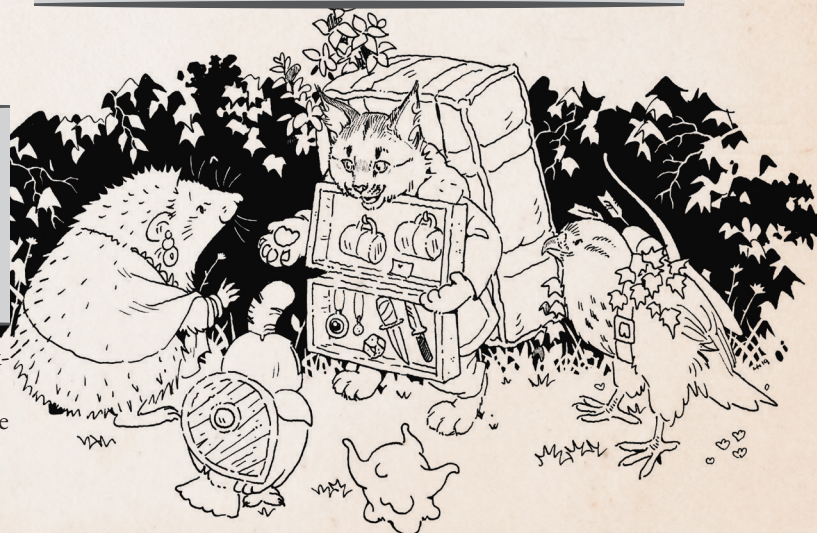
With the flaming bats behind the party, the rest of the trip is uneventful. After a couple hours on the road, the village of Winothing Reach comes into view.

Entering the Reach, Eliza thanks the party and tells them that she will set up in the center of town to see what she can sell or trade.

"Have a rest," Eliza says. "You are going to need it for when you escort me to Alderheart," she winks.

If Eliza promised the characters an item for accompanying her to Winothing Reach, they can claim that now. Each player can choose a piece of adventuring gear worth 50 gp or fewer as a reward.

"Come find me when you are ready to head north," she calls out as she walks away.



WINNOWING REACH

fig. 1.1



Characters are free to explore Winnowing Reach, though they will find the amenities of this research station to be lacking compared to other settlements of its size. There is a general store and a small inn with a tavern, but instead of staples like a weapon or armorsmith, the town has an apothecary and a bookbinder. The following numbered locations refer to Fig. 1.1: the map of Winnowing Reach.

1. STORAGE AND GRANARY

This large building houses slime residue, which will eventually be exported across the Wood, as well as collected foodstuffs from nearby farms. It is a hub of activity, with laborers moving about constantly under the watchful eye of Winnowing Reach's town militia.

2. TOWN GAOL

As it is not a large settlement, Winnowing Reach has only a small gaol. Looked after by a **birdfolk guard** who commands the small local militia, it's usually empty. If the party has any captive bandits in tow, this gaol should hold them until a wagon from Alderheart arrives to bring outlaws to the capital for sentencing.

3. MAGISTRATE'S OFFICE

A stately building in the center of town serves as the official chambers for the local magistrate. Two **birdfolk militia** guard the stairway that leads up to the platform upon which the building rests. Entry to this building is generally denied unless it is for official business (in response to a summons by the magistrate, for example).

4. ELIZA'S CART

Although she isn't particularly well-stocked at the moment, Eliza's cart contains a variety of wares available for barter or trade. Eliza has an odd assortment of equipment from the Weapons, Tools, Adventuring Gear, and Trade Goods sections of the Core Rules. Rather than determining what she has in her cart ahead of time, whenever a character wishes to purchase an item from her, roll a d6. If the result is an even number, she has such an item with her, while if the result is odd, she does not. Eliza is interested in expanding her wares, and will accept a trade for an item of greater value instead of payment in gold pieces.

5. APOTHECARY

The apothecary has *potions of healing*, healer's kits, and herbalism kits for sale. They also sell swamp herbs, philters, and other raw materials, which can be used to make *potions of healing*. It costs half the price of a completed potion to buy enough reagents to craft one. Any character proficient with an herbalism kit can craft a potion.

6. THE BOOKBINDERY

The bookbinder has a small library of assorted tomes to offer, and a few strange books may be found among the modest collection. Books can be purchased for 1 gp each. Some books may confer an advantage on the next Intelligence check made to see what a character knows about a creature, object, or location when read, depending on their subject matter.

7. THE WRANGLER'S REST

The local inn and tavern here in the Reach is a quiet place with quality rooms and decent food. The innkeep receives quite a few visitors from the Avium, along with the occasional adventurer looking to try their hand at slime wrangling. Treat the Wrangler's Rest as a Modest Inn.

REACHING THE MAGISTRATE

At some point during the party's stay, word of the adventurers reaches the Magistrate, the ranking political figure in Winnowing Reach. He eventually tracks the party down and implores them to help find a missing researcher. He fears the lost researcher has entered the Mokkden Caverns to conduct hazardous research.

THE MISSING RESEARCHER

SHE SLIPPED AWAY

A young corvum researcher looking to make a name for herself has recently gone missing. The Magistrate investigated her office, and learned she had been studying the nearby slimes in order to understand their physiology. Attempting to get live samples, she has ventured to the nearby caverns which are known to be infested with several species of slimes.

The town's magistrate, **Walden Krane, Magistrate of Winnowing Reach** (see Appendix B, pg.207), petitions the characters to find the researcher, a young woman named **Kenna Brightspark** (see Appendix B, pg.201).

Once the party is properly rested, the Magistrate will approach them.

An agitated kindled corvum dressed in finery approaches you, his feathers ruffled with worry. "Adventurers? Thank Clhuran you happened here! Please, you must help me. Kenna, that foolish girl, has gotten in over her head! She ventured to the caverns looking for slimes, but hasn't returned for days! I can only hope she's still alive—you will help me, won't you?"

If the party declines, the Magistrate can offer to use his position to get the party an audience with the Birdfolk Council in Alderheart. Certainly, they don't think the Council will just see just anyone, do they? Walden can write a letter of introduction to help the party get an audience, but he makes it clear he won't consider this until he is certain Kenna is safe. Should the party agree, Walden will express his gratitude, adding:

"Oh, and if along your way, you just so happen to reduce the local slime population, the Reach would be grateful for your service..." Somewhat unconvincingly, Walden adds, "Of course, Kenna's safety comes first."

For the service of killing a few slimes, the Magistrate also promises five gold pieces to each character.

If the party opts to find Kenna, the Magistrate will provide a rough map of Mokk Fields that has the entrances to the Mokkden Caverns marked.

THE MOKKDEN CAVERNS

The Mokkden Caverns are a network of caves and tunnels with several entrances dotting the Mokk Fields. The closest entrance to the Reach is located about half a day's hike southwest, in the middle of the swamp. Alternatively, there is a road that leads around the swamp to the south, arriving at another entrance at the very southwest edge of the swamp.

This is a longer route, most likely requiring a night of camping along the road, but it is safer than the swamp. The outside of the rocky caves are visible against the backdrop of the sunken Mokk Fields, though tall reeds and dead trees provide barriers to sight. The entrances can be spotted through the marsh from about 80 feet away.

A DANGEROUS SWAMP

Along the way, the party might run into bandits, or swamp creatures who want to make a meal of them. Decide what feels right for pacing and difficulty and add in an extra encounter here to ratchet up the action. Refer to the **Swamp Encounters (Level 1) table (pg.215)** for suggestions.

GENERAL FEATURES

The inside of the caverns are dark, damp, and dank. It is evident that the murky waters of the surrounding swamp have inundated the system of tunnels beneath. Water drips from the glistening ceilings and gathers in pools throughout the caverns, filling the subterranean area with the harsh smell of rot. Tunnels descend gradually into the ground, curving gently back and forth as they go. The Mokkden Caverns are vast and largely uncharted.

The cave interior is dimly lit at best, with most of the natural light provided by glowing fungi that grows in the humid environment. Ceilings in the tunnels are about 10 feet high but can drop low enough in some places that Medium characters will need to hunch. Many of the open areas have ceilings that are 15 feet high unless otherwise specified.

The journey through the caverns can be made more difficult by incorporating difficult terrain. It can take the form of areas water-logged by the swamp seeping in or areas made slippery by dripping water and organic muck. While navigating slippery areas at more than half speed, a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw is required to avoid tripping and falling prone.

The slimes encountered within don't attack with reason or tactics. They lash out at the nearest target and attack until that target is subdued, even when assailed by multiple characters at the same time.

ENTRANCE

The closer entrance to the Mokkden Caverns juts out obviously from the surrounding mire. Be sure to roll on the **Swamp Encounters (Level 1) table (pg.215)** as the party approaches. They are taking a dangerous route through the swamp, and will likely run into trouble. When the party arrives, there are two **sticky slimes** burbling about in front of this entrance.

The farther entrance can be spotted just as the forest gives way to marshlands. This cave opening has two **caustic slimes** in front of it, wading through the fen looking for prey. This route will take the party longer to reach, but is safe enough that they shouldn't encounter anything else on the way.

The slimes are ostensibly combat encounters, but any character can make a DC 12 Perception check as they approach, easily spotting the slimes from 80 feet away on a success. On a failure the character does not notice the slimes until they are within 60 feet. If the party enters the range of the slime's blindsight (60 feet), the slime will attack. If the party can spot the slimes before then, they can attempt to pick the slimes off with ranged weapons and spells (treat the slimes as though they are blinded if they are attacked beyond their blindsight radius).

Other methods, such as luring the slimes away with a distraction, or using stealth to slip by unnoticed, can also work. So long as the party didn't bumble into a slime's blindsight range, the party can avoid either encounter by succeeding on a DC 14 group Dexterity (Stealth) check. If at least half of the party members succeed, they make it by quietly.

Despite being dangerous, the slimes are slow and easy to outrun, so be sure to let the party know that they can make a break for the entrance if they're spotted. The slimes will give up the chase a few rounds after the party moves outside of their blindsight range.

TREASURE

If the party defeats the slimes they will find 15 silver pieces undigested inside the creatures.



COLLAPSING HAZARD

After about 30 minutes of walking in the caves, the party stumbles upon a 50-foot-long tunnel. It appears to be the only way forward, but seems dangerous to say the least.

You look down the tunnel in front of you. It is haphazardly propped up by makeshift frame made from wooden struts. The timeworn frame creaks audibly, and dust occasionally showers down from the ceiling into the tunnel. It looks like it could collapse at any moment.

The first researchers created supports to shore up hazardous rocks on the tunnel ceiling that threatened to collapse. In the years since, the struts have largely been ignored. The easiest way to circumvent the hazard is to collapse the struts on purpose, which can be accomplished in a few ways:

- **Break the moisture rotted struts.** This requires a successful DC 13 Strength check. Make sure to have players describe what methods they'll use for the Strength check and ensure that their choices won't leave them in the path of falling rocks (for example, using a 10-foot pole as a lever, or trying to throw a reasonably-sized object at the struts).
- **Determine weak spots in the structure.** After a minute of observation, characters can determine weak spots in the structure. Striking these with a series of three hits against AC 10 with ranged weapons or spells will trigger the collapse.
- **Thunder damage.** Any spell or ability that deals thunder damage can create enough of a shockwave to collapse the rocks.
- **A novel path forward.** If the party is especially clever, create some ad hoc rules using the above as guidelines.

Once the struts have collapsed, characters will need to navigate the debris-strewn ground (treat as difficult terrain) but will otherwise be fine.

Conversely, characters can attempt to go through the tunnel carefully. With a successful DC 14 group Dexterity (Stealth) check, they can move through without disturbing the boulders. On a failure, their movement will trigger a small collapse. Characters must then make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw or take 4 (1d8) points of bludgeoning damage from falling debris. Consider replacing the damage with a level of exhaustion if it deals too much damage to the party. Treat the collapsed tunnel as difficult terrain.

FALLING SLIMES

After about 30 minutes of walking through the winding subterranean paths, the party arrives at a large cavern.

The tunnel opens up into a spacious cavern. Stalactites and stalagmites dot the floor and ceiling, the sound of dripping water can be heard slowly echoing in the distance.

The cavern is roughly 30 feet high and 60 feet across.

Two **sticky slimes** and two **caustic slimes** have heard the vibrations of possible prey passing through the adjoining tunnels, and are lying in wait upside-down on the ceiling. If players are being cautious and say they're keeping an eye out, a DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check is required to locate the motionless blobs against the dark ceiling.

Without warning, two sticky slimes and two caustic slimes drop down from above, surrounding you! Besides the entrance you just came through, you can make out three exits on the opposite side of this dark cavern.

The slimes land, encircling the group. Characters looking to flee can escape either through the three exits ahead or by backtracking through the tunnel they entered from. However, the ceiling in the entrance tunnel is 10 feet high, providing ample room for slimes to follow. There, any pursuing slimes are able to move upside down on the ceiling and attack from above. Fleeing through the three exits ahead is a simple matter—slimes don't move very quickly and the party should be able to lose them in a round or two.

There are three exits from the chamber:

- ♣ **Exit 1**—a 15-foot-tall, 5-foot-wide exit that goes for 90 feet, and quickly narrows out to 10 feet in height before becoming a dead end.
- ♣ **Exit 2**—a 15-foot-tall, 10-foot-wide exit reinforced with rickety wooden beams to prevent cave-ins (like the one in the previous encounter). This exit must be navigated at half-speed in order to avoid triggering a collapse. Characters can intentionally cause a cave-in to drop rocks on any pursuing slimes. This leads to the next area.
- ♣ **Exit 3**—a smaller opening, about 4 feet tall and 4 feet wide. Medium or Larger creatures would need to squeeze through using half of their movement. The exit tunnel quickly widens to 15 feet in height, providing no impediment to movement beyond the entrance. After a minute, the tunnel curves to join up with Exit 2's tunnel (the one that leads to the next area).

If the party successfully defeat the slimes, they will find that Exit 1 leads to a dead end that is safe, dry, and perfectly suited for a short rest.

TREASURE

One of the slimes has an intact brass magnifying glass inside of it, which can be recovered if the slime has been defeated. The magnifying glass is slightly corroded and needs cleaning, but is still serviceable. It can be kept, or sold for 40 gp when properly cleaned.

SLIME ATTACK!

After another 30 minutes of walking through the caverns, the area will become dimly-lit (for the purpose of vision).

Smears of luminescent residue line the walls of the tunnels. At first, the smears are sporadic, but soon there is enough faintly glowing goo to dimly light your surroundings.

Coming upon a space that seems to be the center of the cave, you see a young corvum standing next to a rock formation. Because of the sheen of slime covering the birdfolk, you are quickly able to deduce that she is in fact stuck to the rock! Her eyes go wide and suddenly focus on something above you. A giant slime drops down from the ceiling and attacks!



MOKKDEN CAVERNS

fig. 1.2



-  SLIME RESIDUE
-  STICKY SLIME
-  SHIFTING SLIME
-  TRAPPED CORVUM
-  STARTING LOCATION

The center of the cave is a 60-foot-wide clearing with tunnels branching off in different directions. Refer to Fig. 1.2 for a map of the Mokkden Caverns.

USING THE MOKKDEN CAVERNS BATTLEMAP

This is a suggested setup for the battle with the Shifting Slime and the three Sticky Slimes. The party can find their way to the main chamber through any of the entrances marked with a white “X.” Choose the entrance that makes the most sense based on the characters journey through the caverns so far. A suggested location for the trapped corvum researcher is provided, though she can be positioned anywhere up against the inner wall of the cavern. The hatched green lines represent the spaces that have been coated in sticky slime.

The characters are beset by a **shifting slime** (the large slime), and three **sticky slimes**. The sticky slimes have left several residue trails between the characters and the chamber’s entrance. Any character that steps into the trail becomes restrained unless they make a DC 10 Strength saving throw.

A character who hits a shifting slime with a damage dealing spell will notice the slime change color.

CAPTURED IN SLIME

If a character would die in combat, instead of dealing a killing blow, a sticky slime may instead try to encase the character in ooze, preserving them for later. A character reduced to 0 hit points in this way remains stable, but is rendered unconscious and restrained by the ooze that encases them. The character will regain consciousness when they have at least 1 hit point, and can attempt to free themselves with a DC 12 Strength check, ending the restrained condition on a success. Other characters can attempt to free the restrained party member with a DC 12 Strength check.

FREEING THE RESEARCHER

To free Kenna from her slime prison, a character, using an action, needs to succeed on a DC 12 Strength check or use applicable spells. Once free, if the slimes are still a threat, Kenna will do her best to stay out of the way and follow orders that don’t put her in danger. So long Kenna doesn’t attack, the slimes will ignore her.



TREASURE

Inside the body of the shifting slime is a trinket that looks to be a small sphere, intricately woven from strands of gold and bronze. This is a *nest charm**. The charm's magical aura is faint from having been fed upon by the shifting slime, but it is very much intact.

SLIME SAMPLING

Kenna runs towards the adventurers. “Thank you for saving me, but, please, I need a sample!” the corvum says, her eyes filled with determination. She almost lost her life, but is now begging you to help her collect ooze samples from slimes. “I can give you something if you help me. Please, it’s so important to my research. I can’t go back to the Reach empty handed. I’ve come so far. I have risked so much. Please...” You can hear the desperation in her pleas.

If characters refuse to help Kenna, a DC 10 Charisma (Persuasion) check is required to get her to come along.

If characters wish to assist the young researcher, Kenna has three vials she will pass out to anyone willing to help. One vial is sufficient for a sample.

The party must find a live slime from which to collect the sample. This can be accomplished by making a DC 12 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check.

The party can backtrack to find slimes they previously encountered in the caves, or the party can explore the Mokk Fields outside of the caverns for slimes. The **Swamp Encounters (Level 1) table (pg.215)** or the **Cave Encounters (Level 1) table (pg.213)** can be used to decide what creatures lurk in the fields and caves.

RETURNING TO THE REACH

The trip back to Winoing Reach is uneventful, if a little slow, with the researcher tagging along. Magistrate Krane is relieved to see Kenna returned safely and is satisfied to hear there are fewer slimes in the Mokk Fields. For the service of killing a few slimes, the Magistrate awards 5 gp to each character.

“Look!” Kenna says, holding up the vials of ooze up for the Magistrate to see. The Magistrate gives her a look of disapproval, which goes unnoticed. Nodding his head slightly to the travellers the Magistrate begrudgingly thanks the party. “It really wasn’t necessary to go to all that trouble for a few samples...but thank you for your help.”

Irrespective of if the Magistrate had promised a letter in exchange for the party’s help, as thanks, Magistrate Krane promises he will write a letter to the Birdfolk Council on the party’s behalf. However, before Krane can write the correspondence requesting that the Council grant an audience to the travelers, he must attend to an urgent problem in the Reach.

“If you are still around tomorrow, I will summon you to discuss this matter. I may need the help of adventurers and am willing to pay well for your assistance.” And with that, the Magistrate leaves.

Kenna smiles at the group, “Alright, time to celebrate! How about some refreshments at the Wrangler’s Rest? What do you say? First round is on me!”

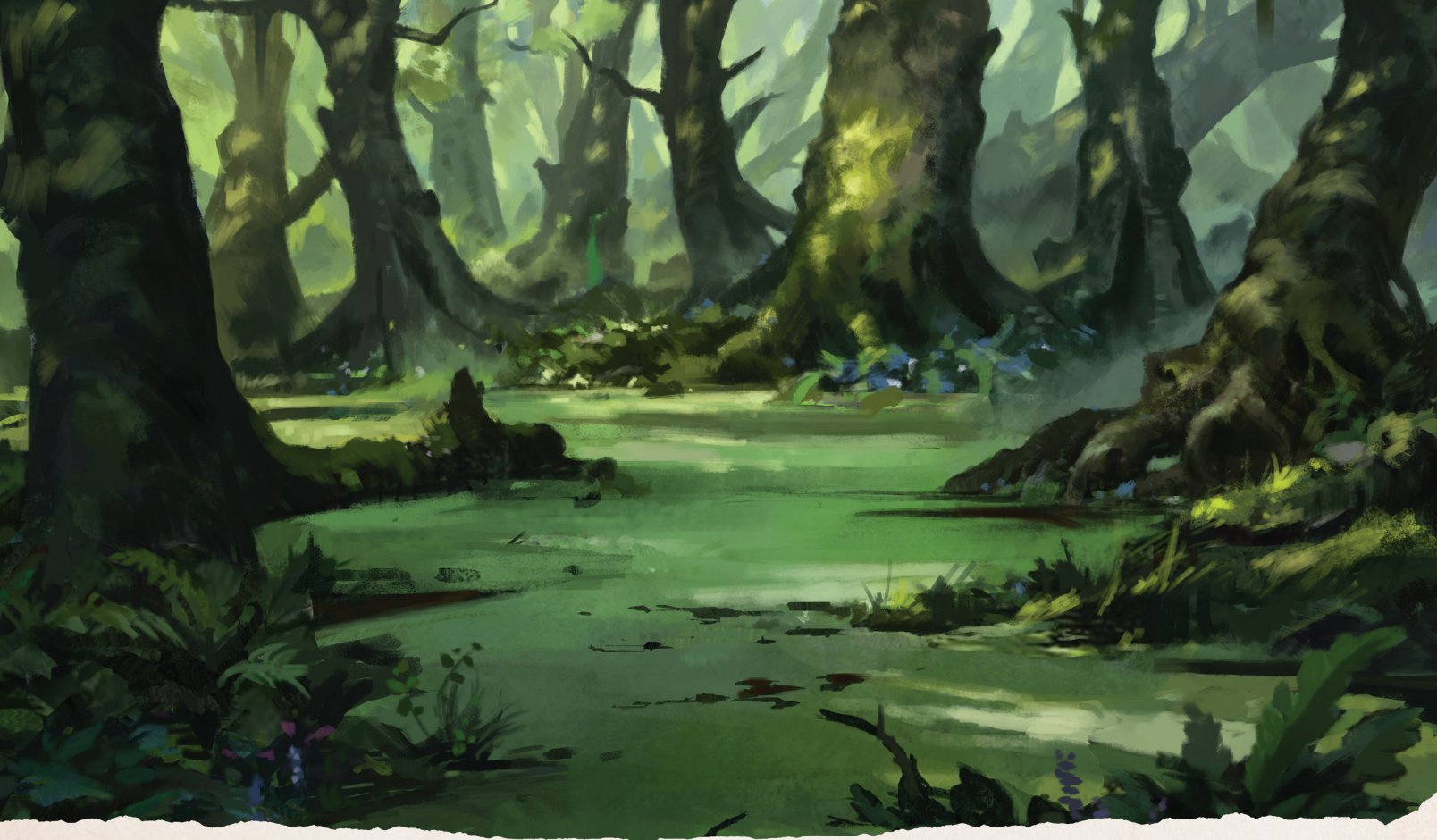
Suggest spending the night in Winoing Reach if it makes sense for the time of day, or if the characters need a rest. Add that in order to deliver Elder Ardwyn’s message to the Birdfolk Council, a letter from the Magistrate would go a long way—it may be in the party’s best interest to find out what he wants from the group.

THE SWAMP WITCH

A SECOND REQUEST

The next day, Magistrate Krane summons the party to his official chambers. The discussion requires some discretion and he doesn’t want others overhearing.

Turning a few nobbs and pushing a few levers, a clunk is heard, and the chamber door is bolted. Satisfied that you are alone, the Magistrate lets out a big sigh before turning around to face you. He looks concerned and tired. “The swamp,” he begins hesitantly, “is home to a foul sorceress, a witch who dabbles in evil magics. I need you to discreetly take care of her. If it got out that I allowed this, I would be finished. Especially after what happened to Ashbarrow, everyone is scared. Think of the Wood. Do what is best for it. Do this one thing for me and I swear, I will write a letter to the Birdfolk Council.”



At first the Magistrate appeals to the decency and goodness of the party, but if pressed, he will offer 5 gp per character to help deal with the witch. However, he'll also make it clear his coffers are running low. In order to prove they have dispatched the witch, Walden asks that the party obtain a distinctive amulet made from a small curled horn that she wears, after they've finished the job. It may be a demon's horn, the source of her evil powers, and he would see it destroyed with his own eyes.

TRAVERSING THE SWAMP

The Magistrate suspects the witch's lair can be found in the deepest, foulest stretches of the Mork Fields.

To speed up travel, a character can make a DC 15 Wisdom (Survival) check to navigate the swamp and find signs of the witch.

Alternatively, a DC 12 Intelligence (Arcana) check could be used to determine the optimal location for magical activity within the swamp.

On a success, the party finds the witch after only a few hours of travel, leaving plenty of daylight. On a failure, it takes them longer to find the witch than anticipated, and the party arrives at dusk.

SWAMP ENCOUNTERS

To add more action, consider rolling a d20 for every hour of travel. On a roll of 5 or lower, roll again on the **Swamp Encounters (Level 1) table (pg.215)** to see what happens. The party can also stumble across an encounter from the table if they fail their check to navigate the swamp.

THE WITCH'S HUT

At last you find yourselves at a small hut on a thin patch of dry land. There are a few gnarled trees, more moss than leaves, flanking the rustic hut. From the porch roof hangs dozens of bundles containing flowers, herbs, and some desiccated lizards.

Smoke gently rises from a cobblestone chimney, and a strange yet delicious smell fills the air. Through a window you can see a short, robed figure shuffling quickly about the kitchen, adding ingredients to a cauldron in the shape of a giant snail shell. There is also a rather large beetle skittering around, hopping at their master's heels. She leans over to pat the beetle affectionately, and it chitters in a way that is almost sweet.

If the party opts to attack, **Susan of the Swamp** (see **Appendix B, pg.200**) will defend herself. She will appeal to the party, explaining that she is not evil, merely misunderstood. During combat she will continue to try and explain that she means no harm, defending only with as much force as necessary to protect herself.

Should the party successfully kill the witch, they can easily retrieve the amulet from her body before heading back to inform the Magistrate of their success.

If the party approaches civilly, or Susan convinces them to stand down, they will learn that she is a friendly hedge witch who lives with her beetle familiar, Normal. Susan will explain that she relocated to the swamp in order to delve into secret and ancient magical lore on her own terms. In fact, when they walked in on her, she was in the middle of a ritual. It was her hope to summon an entity that she might question regarding a vision she had during a recent divination ritual.

"I saw a great blaze consuming the Wood. Near the Scorched Grove, I think. There were figures, too. A large, lumbering, burning thing, and something else, shadowed and distant, watching from afar. Heh—that's lizard spleens for you. Their tea gives very cryptic visions. Shame I don't have any moonfish. You always get clear visions from moonfish... or was it starfish?"

She asks if the party might help her gather the necessary ingredients to complete her ritual.

If asked about her amulet, she'll offer a throaty giggle and reply:

"Oh, this old thing?" the hedge witch laughs, holding up the horn amulet. "This is just my old ocarina." She demonstrates by placing the horn to her lips and playing a few notes. "I used to study music at the College." She says with a wistful sigh, "Takes me back."

The amulet has no special powers or worth, but it holds a great deal of personal significance to Susan. She won't assent to giving it up simply to appease the Magistrate, but she will consider giving it to the party if they agree to help her complete her ritual.

FINDING THE REAGENTS

The characters are asked to gather some swamp herbs and capture a few plump green frogs, whose spleens are an essential component. Both can be found about an hour's walk north from the hut, near a large pond wreathed with dense reeds. The herbs are easy to locate with a successful DC 14 Wisdom (Survival) check. On a failure, the characters do not find the herbs, but instead find one of the following items:

- ♣ a bull-rush root,
- ♣ the shed tail of a swamp lizard,
- ♣ a small scale, or
- ♣ a feather, covered in muck.

These items are magical reagents in their own right and can be turned in to Susan in exchange for potions. Players can roll as many Survival checks as they need to find the herbs.

The frogs are Tiny creatures with an armor class of 14, but they only have 1 hit point. The frogs will retreat into the pond's depths at the slightest hint of trouble, and characters require a DC 15 Dexterity (Stealth) check to attack them.

There are enough frogs about that characters can find as many as they need. After three failed attempts to catch them, however, the players will trigger an event.

The ground around you begins to rumble, as a chorus of croaking rings in your ears. A gigantic frog bursts from the pond, fixing you and your companions with a hungry gaze!

This frog resembles the smaller ones the party was trying to catch, but it is many times their size, and is looking to make a meal of the characters. Use the stats for a **giant toad**. Upon defeating the creature, a character can cut out its spleen easily, provided they don't mind getting covered in frog innards. The spleen is so large that Medium creatures must carry it with both hands, and Small creatures can barely carry it over their shoulder. The giant frog's spleen should provide ample material for the ritual.

After the party has gathered three frogs, or one spleen from the giant frog, they can return to the witch. If they returned with the giant frog's spleen, Susan will congratulate them and muse how lucky she is to have this for future experiments. She will save all that she doesn't use in stoppered glass jars.



SUSAN'S HUT

fig. 1.3



THE LAST DEMON I SUMMONED WOULDN'T STOP TALKING...

Now that she has what she requires, Susan will start the ritual.

Susan draws the curtains on her windows. The only light source in the hut is the eerie green glow that emanates from the mixture bubbling in the large snail shell cauldron. Susan adds the final ingredients: first the herbs, which burn as they are incorporated into the mixture. This causes Susan to cackle with delight, while Normal clicks its mandibles cheerily. "O great spirit, heed my call!" Susan intones as she adds the frog spleens. "Rise and grant me the wisdom I seek!" The ritual ends with a flash, and a whoosh of air whips the curtains open.

Refer to Fig. 1.3 for a map of Susan's Hut.

USING THE SUSAN'S HUT MAP

Determine where the player characters are positioned when the fight breaks out. Suggested starting positions for the lesser demon and Susan are provided for ease of play. Should the fight spill outside, consider having the water areas of the map be difficult terrain.

After a moment of trepidation, a **lesser demon** climbs out of the cauldron, spilling the ritual mixture everywhere. Susan begins to ask the demon a flurry of questions. At first the demon seems uninterested, and is unresponsive to Susan's inquiries. Suddenly, it attacks the nearest person wildly, which may be Susan or a party member. It behaves confused and feral, remaining on the attack until defeated, at which point it crumbles into ash that floats away mysteriously.

A WITCH'S DEBT

Susan is grateful for your help in dispatching the demon. She admits she may have been a bit too ambitious with her summoning, and will adjust her future rituals accordingly. If the party asked her for her amulet (or if they ask her for it now), she'll part with it as thanks for stopping the demon before it could hurt anyone or destroy her home. Susan will also thank the party for warning her about the Magistrate, but assure them that she's accustomed to looking after herself.

If the party ever visits the Mokk Fields in the future, Susan promises her door will always be open. As the party walks away from the hut, it almost seems like Normal is waving goodbye.

The party may now call on Susan to make a variety of potions and brews in exchange for ingredients and a donation of 1 gp per potion. Refer to the table below for more details.

REWARDS

If the party assisted the witch successfully, she is now considered an ally. She offers two *potions of healing* to the party, with the promise of more potions in exchange for ingredients.



Potion	Ingredients	Potion Effect
<i>Potion of Healing</i>	A swamp lizard tail and bull-rush root	Heals the drinker for 2d4 + 2.
<i>Potion of Greater Healing</i>	A crocodile eye, bull-rush root, and a violet fungus cap	Heals the drinker for 4d4 + 4.
<i>Potion of Animal Friendship</i>	A bit of fur, a scale, a feather, and a whisker	The imbiber can cast <i>animal friendship</i> (save DC 13) for 1 hour at will.
<i>Potion of Feather Fall</i>	A downy feather and a pinch of forest ash	The imbiber gains the effects of the <i>feather fall</i> spell for 5 minutes.
<i>Potion of Resistance</i>	Shifting slime residue and a small mirror	The imbiber gains resistance to one type of damage for 1 hour (Player's choice).
<i>Oil of Stickiness</i>	Sticky slime residue and a forest slug	When spread on an object or location it creates a nearly imperceptible coating. Creatures that come into contact with the oil must succeed a DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check or become restrained. At the end of each of its turns, a restrained creature can repeat the saving throw, ending the effect on a success.
<i>Oil of Slipperiness</i>	Mountain breeze and morning dew	If spread on a creature, they gain the effects of the <i>freedom of movement</i> spell for 10 minutes. If spread on a location, it gains the effects of the <i>grease</i> spell for 20 minutes or until it is washed away.

LEAVING THE REACH

After dealing with the swamp witch, the party returns to Winnowing Reach. The Magistrate wants to hear about the excursion, and again invites the characters into his chambers for a private conference.

If the party killed the witch. They can simply tell the truth. Walden will immediately ask for his proof; handing him the horn amulet will convince him of the party's deed and allow them to receive the promised reward of 5 gp per character, if agreed upon.

If the party did not kill the witch and wishes to lie about it. One character must make a DC 11 Charisma (Deception) check to pass off a suitable lie to the Magistrate. If they produce the horn amulet as proof, the character making the check rolls with advantage. If they do not have the amulet, they must account for why they don't have it in order for Walden to accept their story and reward them.

If the party killed the witch, or convinced the Magistrate of such. Walden also produces the promised letter.

If the party did not kill the witch, and tells the truth. The Magistrate responds furiously:

"You WHAT!?" Walden replies. "Don't you see that you have doomed our town? You are not the heroes I took you for. Take your things and leave."

He refuses to pay any agreed upon bounty for the party's work, and will not write them their letter of introduction.

"Should you require a letter of introduction," Walden begins, a sardonic look playing across his face, "why not try the Magistrate of Alderheart?" He gives a hollow chuckle. "Oath-breakers like yourselves will have much in common with that scoundrel."

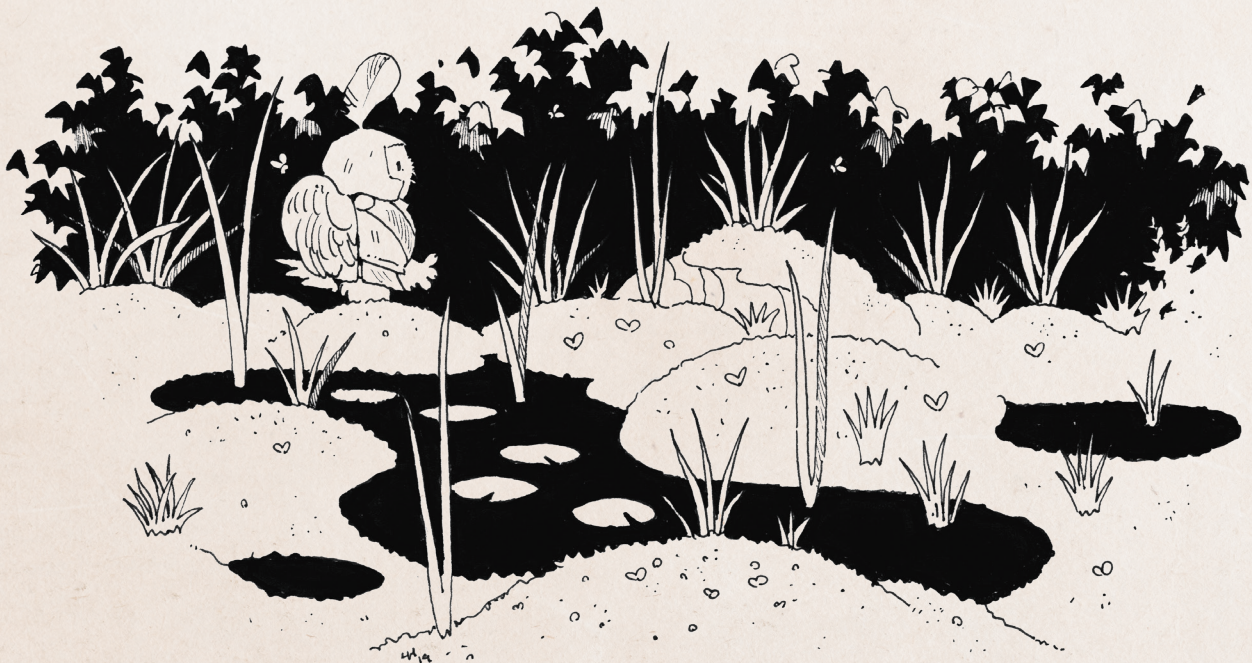
As the party prepares to depart, Eliza approaches, asking if she might travel alongside them to Alderheart. She welcomes both the company and protection offered by the party.

When the party is ready to leave, they can resume their journey to Alderheart to deliver Elder Ardwyn's message to the Council. The road to Alderheart leads northeast out of town, deeper into the forest.

REWARDS

- ♦ Award standard XP for defeated foes.
- ♦ For surviving the collapsing hazard in the Mokkden Caverns: 100 XP per character.

If using the milestone experience rule, the characters reach 2nd level.



Roll a d20 for each day of travel, and on a roll of 5 or lower, roll again on the **Road Encounters** table. To add more random encounters, roll a d20 every four hours of travel. Alternatively, have the party skip straight to Alderheart.

In each encounter, if accompanied by Eliza, she will do her best to stay out of danger, hiding behind her cart and relying on the party to protect her and her wares.

ROAD ENCOUNTERS

- | d8 | Encounter |
|----|--|
| 1 | 2d4 mapach bandits ambush the party. |
| 2 | 1d2 swarms of emberbats attack the party. |
| 3 | 1d3 magmin can be spotted burning foliage through the trees. They haven't started a fire yet, but they will if left unchecked. |
| 4 | A giant elk appears in a peaceful glade, drinking from a mysterious pond with an abundance of plant life. There is a sense of calm and serenity here. Each character that stops to drink from the pond heals 1d4 + 2 hit points. |
| 5 | 1d4 + 1 mapach bandits and a jerbeen thief spring from the forest, offering safe passage for a road toll of 3 gp per party member. They will attack if the toll is not paid immediately. |
| 6 | A traveling gallus druid is met on the road. She has a calm demeanour and will inform the party of the The Tenders (see Appendix B, pg.206), an organization to which she belongs. She has two bags of poultice that she will sell for 15 gp apiece. Each can be applied to a wound to heal 1d4 + 2 hit points. |
| 7 | A small pool of water giving off mist can be seen in a clearing. Disturbing the pool reveals that the mist is actually steam and the water is scalding. 1d4 + 1 steam mephits appear and attack immediately. |
| 8 | A bandit's net trap has been laid across the trail and covered with leaves. It can be spotted with a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check. If characters walk into it, the trap springs, and characters must make a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw to avoid getting caught. On a failure, you can roll on this table again to complicate the encounter. |

THE GREAT TREE CITY

If traveling with Eliza, read this:

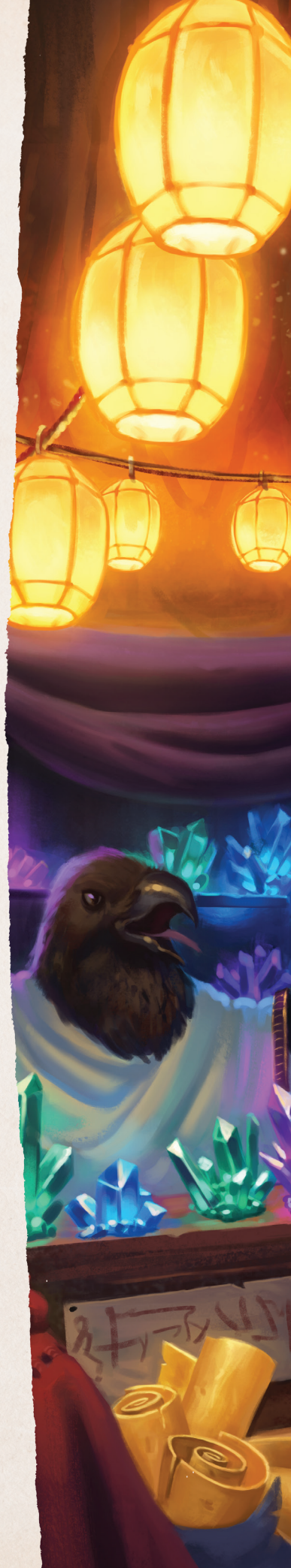
After a few hours of travel, Eliza abruptly sets her cart down where the road winds around an immense tree trunk. The tree is so large its branches block out sunlight for at least a mile. "Well, this is it! We've finally arrived at Alderheart!" She gestures upward to a network of platforms and bridges in the canopy above. Closer inspection of the tree shows rough steps carved into the trunk. At a distance, these steps are almost impossible to spot.

If Eliza is not around to guide the party, read the following:

After a few hours of travel, the road winds around an enormous tree whose branches block out the sunlight for at least a mile. Looking up, in the canopy you can see a system of pulleys which lead to networks of platforms and bridges. Closer inspection of the tree reveals hidden steps carved into the massive trunk. You have reached Alderheart, the Great Tree City.

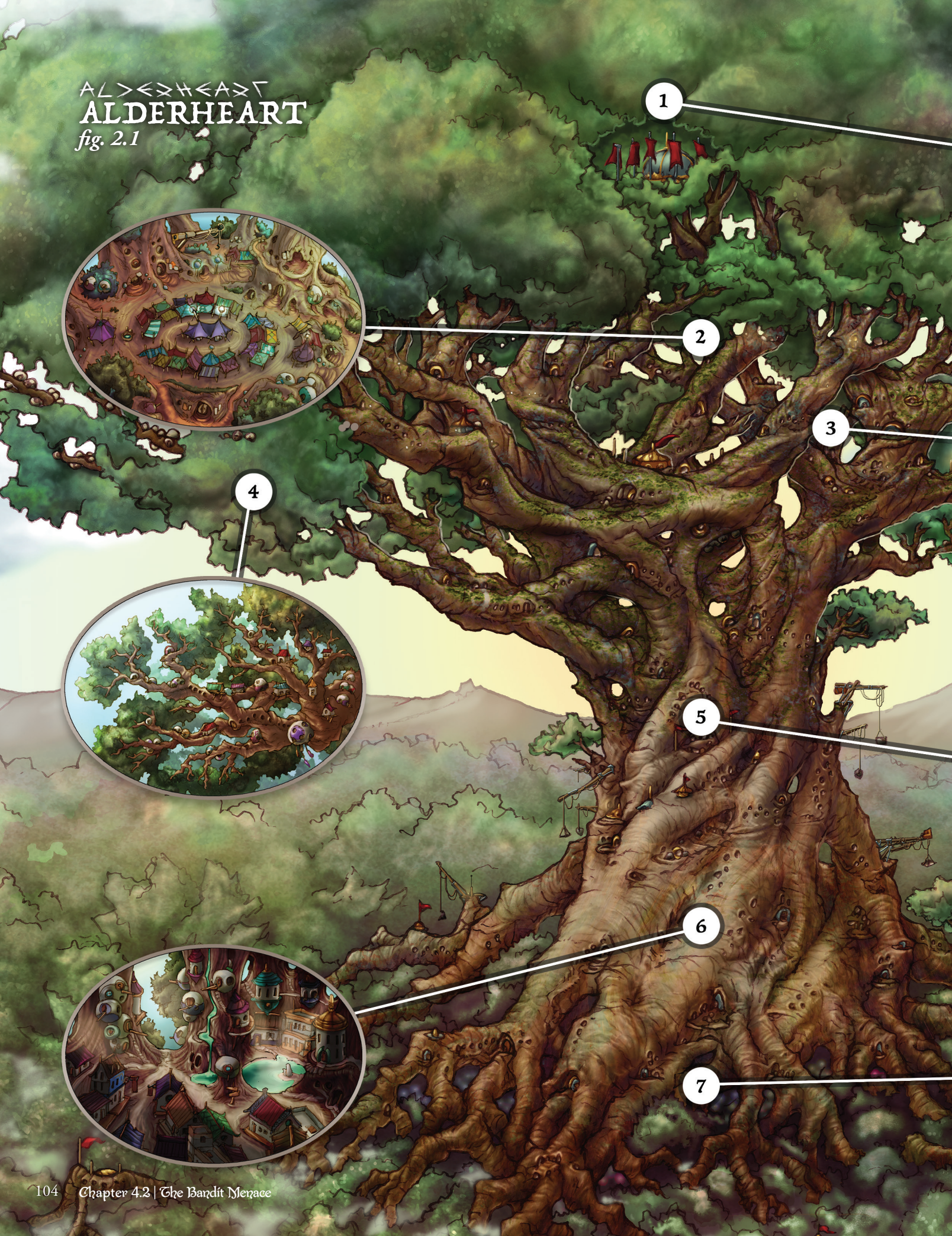
A BUSTLING METROPOLIS

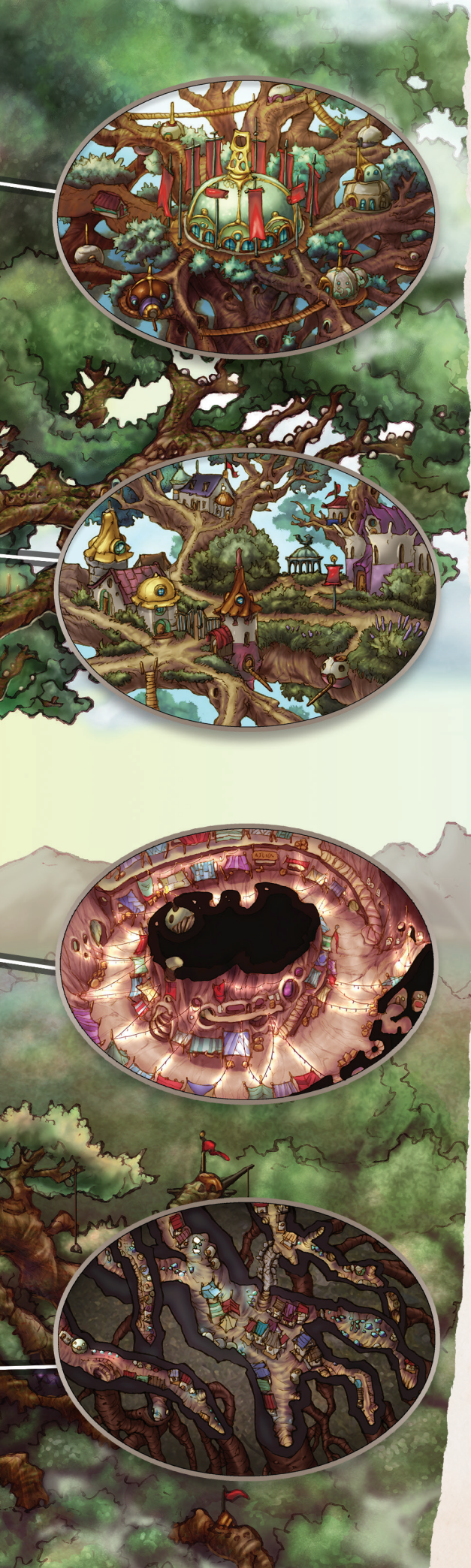
You and your companions emerge from the winding stairway up the trunk into a canopy filled with the bustle of city life. Buildings are located within the foliage, and crowded roadways are sculpted from the giant branches. The roadways are connected with rope, wood bridges, and carefully positioned platforms made of timber. Bird-folk guards, known colloquially as "the Perch Guard," can be seen keeping watch throughout the city. Laborers operate pulley systems that are used to raise carts to the canopy platforms.





AL><>H<A>T
ALDERHEART
fig. 2.1





For more details about the city, refer to the description of Alderheart in **Chapter 3: Traversing the Wood (pg.76)**. All the usual amenities of a large city can be found here. Refer to Fig. 2.1 for a map of Alderheart.

1. COUNCIL PLAZA

The upper levels of Alderheart's canopy can be reached by a stairway near the canopy market that leads up through a massive central pillar. This is where all judicial and government buildings related to the oversight of Alderheart and Humblewood can be found. Here, characters can find the Birdfolk Council Chambers, a large domed structure nestled within the branches. Next to it, there is a courthouse, a gaol, and the Perch Guard Headquarters. All of these buildings are arranged around an open plaza containing a large statue of a sera luma dressed in ceremonial robes. This is an effigy of Speaker Ava, the Founder of the Birdfolk Council.

2. CANOPY MARKET

This busy market in the canopy is where characters can find high quality wares and imported goods from beyond Humblewood. Talented weaponsmiths, armorers, and merchants of all sorts do business here. There are also shops on the outskirts with truly unique wares. **Eliza's Emporium (pg.106)** is located in the canopy market, a little ways off from the main thoroughfare.

3. THE BOUGHS

An affluent neighborhood of high class homes. Many of Alderheart's aristocrats and high ranking city officials have residences here.

4. THE BRANCHES

A neighborhood made of modest homes, connected by wood bridges and gliding platforms. This area is dangerous for non-birdfolk. Without the ability to glide, a fall from here is almost certainly fatal.

5. TRUNK MARKET

Lately, the number of folks residing in the trunk section has swelled due to villagers escaping the fires. A hollow space, just a few minutes walk from the trunk's market, has become a shelter area for refugees, much to the dismay of local merchants. The market area is overcrowded, and many refugees are searching for work, begging for alms, or taking to thievery to support themselves.

6. THE BRIGHT HOLLOW

This part of the trunk is known for a series of holes within the bark that allow natural light to stream in. The trunk contains many of the common homes and markets in Alderheart, and the majority of those who live there are humblefolk. Some pathways here lead to dwellings on the outside of the tree, which are nicer than the simplest homes that can be found inside the trunk.

7. THE UNDERFALL

The roots are the slums of Alderheart, and within these shabby tunnels characters will see destitute refugees and communities of locals living in poverty. This is the best place to find criminal contacts within the city, as well as fences who can help characters sell restricted goods or purchase them at a heavily inflated price.

SEEING THE SIGHTS

Characters should be given an opportunity to rest after their journey, and be encouraged to explore the city.

ELIZA'S EMPORIUM

USING THE MAP OF ELIZA'S EMPORIUM

Though it is unlikely that an interaction in Eliza's shop will result in combat, a map of her emporium is provided to show what the interior of a common Humblewood shop or home might look like.

If Eliza accompanied the characters, a day or more has passed since arriving to Alderheart, Eliza will find the party and let them know where her new storefront is located. She is taking over an old shop on the edge of the canopy market, the same one her sister used to manage. Visiting the shop now, the

characters will find that it looks a little run down compared to the others nearby, but Eliza is determined to make her business a success. Should the party return after the next few encounters, she will have it looking almost new. Refer to Fig. 2.2 for a map of Eliza's Emporium.

If the party helped Eliza along her journey she will remember their kindness and offer them a 10% discount on purchases, and an extra 10% when selling to her. While always friendly and welcoming, if a character ever deeply offends Eliza, she will refuse them service. Those looking to get back in her good graces may find success by offering a unique item as an apology.

ELIZA'S EMPORIUM
fig. 2.2



GOODS FOR SALE

In addition to adventuring essentials, Eliza prides herself on stocking one-of-a-kind items and treasures. She is a consummate capitalist and always knows how to properly value an item. Her rare goods usually come with large price tags.

Eliza's stock consists of basic adventuring gear, along with a collection of strange and unique goods found in her travels. At first, her wares are sparse, but more items may be added to the shop as the story unfolds and Eliza becomes more established in the city. The below tables can also be rolled on to randomize the wondrous items Eliza has managed to acquire. All magic items listed here can be found in the 5th Edition Core Rules.

MAGIC ITEMS THAT REFERENCE CHARACTER RACES

Typical fantasy races (elves, dwarves, halflings, orcs and the like) aren't native to the world of Everden, but instead of keeping magic items that reference these races out of your campaign, it is recommended that you find a way to incorporate them in ways that fit with the races available in the Humblewood setting. For example, the cloak of elvenkind allows its wearer to camouflage with their surroundings, much like the Patterned Feathers ability possessed by strigs, so it could be called the cloak of strigkind instead.

d6	Item	Cost
1	Deed to a house in Brackenmill	500 gp
2	Wooden Eye	10 gp
3	Scroll of <i>major image</i>	150 gp
4	A small clockwork squirrel made of bronze. It will hop for 1 minute after it has been properly wound.	25 gp
5	Token with a ram's head on it	5 gp
6	An old spellbook with 1d6 random 1st level spells, 1d4 random 2nd level spells, and 1 random 3rd level spell (choose from the Wizard's spell list).	350 gp

d10	Magic Item	Cost
1	<i>eluran boots (boots of elvenkind)</i>	200 gp
2	<i>bracers of archery</i>	250 gp
3	<i>cloak of strigkind (cloak of elvenkind)</i>	300 gp
4	<i>efficient quiver</i>	350 gp
5	<i>feather token (bird)</i>	500 gp
6	<i>feather token (tree)</i>	500 gp
7	<i>figurine of wondrous power (silver raven)</i>	250 gp
8	<i>ring of feather falling</i>	600 gp
9	<i>robe of useful items</i>	350 gp
10	<i>staff of the python</i>	500 gp

THE BIRDFOLK COUNCIL

Walking towards the Council Chambers, you can see a huge domed structure rising up through the foliage. The building is cradled into the natural curve of Alderheart's giant trunk. A large platform has been built around the imposing structure, connecting it to the branch-roads that run throughout the city. It is adorned with brightly-colored banners displaying crests of the major settlements of the Wood. Two guards in resplendent armor stand watch at the entrance, turning away those who do not have permission to enter. A throng of people mill about nearby.

Without a letter of introduction, the guards will ask the party to register their pleas at the local magistrate's office and wait for their request to be approved (see **The Magistrate of Alderheart**, pg.107).

With a letter of introduction from a magistrate, the guards watching the entrance will verify the paperwork (skip **The Magistrate of Alderheart**, and see **Audience with the Council**, pg.108).

THE MAGISTRATE OF ALDERHEART

When the party enters the Magistrate's office they find **Gregor Thornspur, Magistrate of Alderheart** (see **Appendix B**, pg.196), sitting at his desk.

"Ashbarrow has burned to the ground? You don't say!" The Magistrate looks down at his papers as he strokes his chin. "Now, that is important. Unfortunately, I am bound by my office to be fair, so your news will have to wait, just like everyone else. I recommend you make yourselves comfortable and enjoy the splendor of the city." After a short pause, Gregor raises his head and continues, "But, if you are interested, and are willing to hear me out, I might 'accidentally' submit your request ahead of the others. These things do happen, you know."

If the party agrees to help, the Magistrate will tell them about a group of jerbeens that have been causing trouble around the trunk's market district. People down there have been filing complaints, and he would like to see the matter dealt with. Supposing the party can ensure Gregor never has to hear about this problem again, he'll grant them an early audience with the Council.

You can have the party come up with their own solution for finding the jerbeens, but if they're stuck, advise them that asking around the market might be an easy way to locate them. Inquiring around the market will require a DC 13 Intelligence (Investigation) check, which will lead the party straight to the jerbeen hideout on a success. A failure will require another hour of searching before coming across someone who knows where the hideout is.

There are four jerbeens, all of them siblings. Their parents died when their village was consumed by a forest fire, and they've been stealing to survive ever since. The eldest uses the stat block for a **jerbeen thief**. The other three, being far less skilled, use the stat block for a **bandit**, but halve the bandit's hit points (add jerbeen traits to these NPCs if desired). They are all armed with daggers and slings.

The party can attempt to persuade the thieves to stop stealing and find another means to support themselves. A DC 14 Charisma (Persuasion) check will convince them their current lifestyle is too dangerous, but it won't solve their problems. Have the characters roleplay to find a solution. Any character with a background that grants them connections to a temple, business, or other such institutions in the city could likely help the jerbeen orphans secure work.

The party can give the young thieves some gold, solving their financial problems temporarily. Any amount of gold will help them for a time: five gold pieces will provide the siblings enough security to look for honest work, while a payment of one gold piece could result in the jerbeens resorting to stealing again, once the gold runs out. In the latter situation, the characters may cross paths with the Magistrate later, at which point he will report that "The thieves are at it again!"

The orphans can also simply be fought. If one or more of them are reduced to 0 hit points, the rest will flee. This humbling experience could result in them aligning with the bandits to survive. The Magistrate may never hear from the orphans again, but the party might meet the jerbeen orphans again during an encounter with bandits.

Whatever the party decides to do, after confirming the player's actions through some of his connections in the city, the Magistrate will tell the party they can expect to have their audience granted the following day.

AUDIENCE WITH THE COUNCIL

The guard to your left roughly grabs the paperwork. "Let me see that." After giving the scroll a very thorough readthrough, the guard moves to the side, stiffens his back, and gestures towards the door. "Everything is in order here. Please join the other petitioners waiting to be summoned."

After waiting for what feels like an eternity, another guard loudly calls your names and instructs you to enter the chambers.

As you pass through the double doors into the Council Chambers, you see a group of five stately bird-folk arranged across elevated seats. Each council member has a tall podium in front of them, rising to just above their waist. A sheaf of papers is ordered neatly upon each podium. A circular aperture in the center of the ceiling allows sunlight to shine in. A wise-looking bright gallus raises a talon in greeting and addresses your party: "You now stand in the presence of the Birdfolk Council. I am the Council's Speaker, Bita. Please, state your case."



Speaker Bita

Overseen by **Bita, the Council Speaker** (see Appendix B, pg.193), the Council is the ruling body of Humblewood. The Council has the authority to draft laws that affect the entire Wood.

The members of the Council will gladly hear the party out. Despite the dignity and formality with which they hold themselves, each Council member cares deeply for the people of the Wood. They will listen carefully to the woes Meadowfen is facing, and will be saddened to hear of Ashbarrow's destruction. If there are any other issues the party wishes to recount to the Council, they will hear these as well.

Use this pool of information to inform the Council's behavior:

- The Council is aware of the spreading fires, but their primary concern is banditry jeopardizing the big city and essential trading hubs. The bandit ranks have swelled of late, and the Perch Guard can only be spread so thin.
- The bandits have been rallied by a fearsome leader, making them bolder than ever. Little is known about this leader, but the Council has been able to corroborate that she is a ruthless cervan female, named Benna Seridan, who holds a great hatred for Alderheart.

- The Council knows that Alderheart could support more refugees, but they prefer to remain cautious in these difficult times. The fires keep spreading, after all. If all the refugees are allowed to enter, how long before the city runs out of food and other essential resources?
- The Council can decide to confer among themselves and meet with the party again tomorrow afternoon, to see what aid they can afford to send to Meadowfen. They assure the party that aid will be sent, but ask for their patience during these trying times. Sending a cart of supplies along bandit-ridden roads will not be easy, and any guards they send as an escort will mean less protection for the Alderites

BANDITS ATTACK

After the meeting with the Birdfolk Council, in the middle of the night, the following happens:

A city-wide alarm sounds, rousing the Perch Guard to their posts. Following the commotion, you see a great deal of movement around the northern entrance to Alderheart. There are shouts of “Bandits!” all around, and something about a merchant caravan arriving at the city.

If the party decides to check out the scene, they will arrive at a platform in front of the northernmost city gate. There they will be faced with a dismal scene: several wagons are being besieged by a massive bandit force. If the characters are armed or wearing armor, the guard captain will beseech them to help repel the bandits.

Below, a handful of bandit captains are barking orders at dozens of bandits attacking the caravans. Though the party may want to leap right into the fray, be sure to emphasize the danger involved. While ranged combat might help provide support for the sparse Perch Guard infantry, any character that throws themselves into the melee will soon be overwhelmed.

There are many ways characters could provide support for the sparse Perch Guard infantry. Examples include rallying the scattered Perch Guard with a heartening display, or cutting the ropes on the pulley system or freight elevators to create make-shift cover for Alderheart’s forces to crouch behind. Encourage players to come up with their own creative solutions.

After two or three party members have helped stem the assault, the brigands will start to flee, spilling armfuls of plundered treasure as they escape. At this point, the bandit horde will be small enough that the Perch Guard can go on the offensive, and characters can attempt to enter melee combat. If they do, have them encounter a **vulpin captain**, still trying to keep the bandit forces organized. A one-on-one fight with a character might be appropriate, but if the whole party joins in, add two **mapach bandits** or a single **jerbeen thief**. The downfall of these foes marks the complete rout of the bandit forces.

If no characters go into melee combat, the Perch Guard will run the bandits out of the city and into the Wood.

Spears, arrows, and even rocks thrown from slings rain down upon the bandit horde. Laden with the spoils of their raid, the bandits struggle to fight and begin to retreat. A victorious cry goes up along the wall, but the captain of the Perch Guard gazes down at the razed and ramshackled caravan with a look of steely determination. “We have wounded down there,” she exclaims, rallying the troops. “Send for healers!”

The bandits have taken all they can carry and fled into the northern forest. The scene left in their wake is one of broken merchant carts and wounded people. Birdfolk and humblefolk alike are injured and frightened. Characters can join in the relief effort, helping to carry the injured up the tree for treatment, or assist the shocked travelers to the safety of the canopy. A character who can provide medical aid with skills, tools, or spells may also do so.

As the wounds of the injured are being tended, the guard captain will immediately begin organizing a counter-attack, hoping to press the bandits back to their hideout and snuff out the threat for good.






“This cannot be allowed to continue!” the captain shouts, swinging up on a nearby branch to make herself visible to the crowd. “These bandits strike at our home, at our livelihood, and at our dignity as citizens of the Wood. Well, I say no more! The time has come for us to stop this menace, once and for all! Who’s with me!?”

The party should be encouraged to join the growing force of guards, militia, and common folk getting ready to leave for the bandit camp. The captain will applaud the party if they volunteer, and single them out to the jeers of the crowd if they try to refuse. Be sure that the captain advises the party to heal if they are wounded, as the bandit camp is heavily fortified and they will meet with strong resistance.



>A<7<A<7<A<7<A< BANDIT CAMP fig. 2.3



- I 1st STAGE
- II 2nd STAGE
-  FRAY MERRIDAN
-  WOLF
-  MAPACH BANDIT
-  JERBEEN THIEF
-  STARTING LOCATION

TAKING THE FIGHT TO THEM

The bandits, loaded down with stolen goods, leave an obvious trail. They have become brash and sloppy, leading the guard captain and her troops directly to their camp. The camp is a collection of canvas tents and a few hastily-constructed storehouses behind fortified palisades. There is a large central tent that appears to be for the leader of the camp. Refer to Fig. 2.3 for a map of the Bandit Camp.

USING THE BANDIT CAMP MAP

Depending on how players approach the bandit camp, have them enter at either point marked with a white "X." The bandits attack in two stages, as indicated by the numbered creatures shown on the map. The diagram provides suggested positions for each stage to enter the fight. **Fray Merridan** (see [Appendix B, pg.207](#)), her wolf, and a jerbeen lieutenant are hiding in the tent, as indicated. If playing with tokens or miniatures, consider keeping Fray and her group off the map until their presence is revealed.

The party is joined by a number of birdfolk who are anxious to put an end to the raids. Utilize the **birdfolk guard**, **birdfolk skirmisher**, **birdfolk militia**, and **birdfolk farmer** stat blocks to fill in the fighting force. For narrative purposes, have these characters fight in the background, adding tension and color to the encounter. Some of them can join the party's fight if it looks like the characters could use help. Slot them in at the start of the round for the purposes of determining initiative.

There is also a lone **strig knight** fighting among the Alderites. He is a mighty ally, and the party should notice him displaying his skill and prowess during the fight, perhaps even diverting the flow of battle so that the party can deal with their encounters without interference from more experienced bandits. The knight is **Riffin, the Ash-Knight** (see Appendix B, pg.205), an NPC players can choose to seek out after the battle. Whether or not a character speaks to Riffin after the battle, Riffin will join the story at a later juncture. It is advised to not have him help the party directly unless they are in dire need, as he can easily overpower any of the challenges faced here.

The moment the two sides meet, fighting will immediately break out between the Perch Guard and the bandits. If at any time the encounter seems too easy, add an extra **mapach bandit**.

The bandits attack in stages. Roll initiative for all creatures involved in both stages, but only have the second group engage once the first group has been dealt with. The attack stages are as follows:

STAGE 1: ATTACK NOW, THINK LATER

Out of the greenery rush five **mapach bandits**. There is nothing elegant about the attack. Success in numbers seems to be the battleplan.

STAGE 2: "A" IS FOR ARROWS AND ARBALIST

Schwaff! An arrow wizzes by and embeds itself in the earth near one of the defeated bandits. Before the arbalist can be located, two **jerbeen thieves** fall from the branches above. Jumping around wildly, the jerbeens will attempt to disarm and distract the party. Two **mapach bandits** with crossbows, using camp tents as cover, provide ranged support for the thieves.

LEADER OF THE BANDITS

When the party starts to get the bandits under control, read the following:

The chaos of battle surrounds you. Birdfolk militia clash with bandits. Some, merely farmers with pitchforks, are not faring as well as the trained guards. A swift defeat of the bandit leader will surely save many lives.

If by some happenstance Fray was killed or captured, skip the below text and replace her with another **vulpin captain**. The bandit leader will single out the party as the primary threat and decide to take them on.

As you approach the largest tent, you see a familiar figure exit, along with a retainer and a trained wolf. She greets you with a sneer, "You again!" The tall, graceful vulpin leader of this bandit camp is none other than Fray Merridan! "It's time I finished you once and for all." Fray draws her sword with a flourish, pointing it at you and your companions. "You shall have the honor of witnessing my deadly grace before you die."

This time, Fray will attack along with her **wolf** animal companion, and a rough-looking **jerbeen thief**. The thief has a scrap of cloth covering one of her eyes and one ear that looks like it's been cut with a knife. Fray and her retainer both have magical items:

- Fray has come into possession of a magical brooch, which grants her resistance to all force damage and immunity to the *magic missile* spell.
- The jerbeen thief is wearing magic boots. She can click her heels together as a bonus action to double her walking speed and, for the rest of the fight, cause opportunity attacks made against her to have disadvantage.



Fray will target whoever she fought in her first encounter with the party before battling the rest of the characters. There will be no attempts at self-preservation this time. The Coalition is counting on Fray to defend the camp, and she will not desert her post. Fray will command her wolf and the thief to attack the same target, but if Fray is heavily injured she will call the animal to her aid.

TREASURE

If the party defeated Fray and her retainer, they are free to help themselves to their equipment.

Fray has:

- ♣ a fine suit of studded leather armor (obviously pilfered).
- ♣ a flawlessly made shortsword with a rose insignia on the pommel. It isn't magical, but of obvious craftsmanship, and will sell for double the normal going rate for a shortsword. Any lower level bandit who sees a character wearing it will also immediately recognize it as a captain's sword, giving them disadvantage on any rolls made to oppose Charisma (Intimidation) ability checks made by that character against them.
- ♣ a *brooch of shielding*.
- ♣ A pilfered bronze ring, studded with rubies, worth 480 gp.

The thief has:

- ♣ a suit of leather armor.
- ♣ three daggers.
- ♣ *boots of speed*. The magic in these boots is such that once they are attuned, they will re-shape themselves to fit the feet of the creature wearing them, including transforming into talon-covers for birdfolk.

THE REST SCATTER

After their leader is dispatched, the remainder of the bandit forces flee in any direction they can.

With their leader nowhere in sight, and Alderheart's forces bearing down on them, any semblance of order among the bandits disintegrates. They begin to flee in every direction, taking what they can, and abandoning the camp. A cry of victory rises from the assembled citizens. The day is won, but at a heavy cost.

The bulk of the bandit force appears to be heading east, toward The Crest. The guards, beaten and exhausted, cannot give chase. The guards bandage up the injured and rest briefly before preparing the fallen for transport back to Alderheart.

With the camp abandoned by the bandits, the party can take their time searching the camp.

During a search of the camp, a few captive birdfolk will be found. These hostages are the villagers from Meadowfen. Taken as ransom, they are a little malnourished but otherwise fine. The captain of the guard promises that she will ensure

the Medofenners get to Alderheart safely and, once they are well enough to travel, provide them with an escort back to Meadowfen.

TREASURE

In the storage buildings near the camp's rear entrance the party finds an assortment of stolen goods, much of it from the day's raid on the merchant caravan:

- ♣ A chest of coins, with a combined value of 350 gp.
- ♣ A collection of small gemstones pried from various objects, with a combined value of 250 gp.
- ♣ A variety of gold and silver plated urns, plates, and utensils, with a combined value of 200 gp.

RETURNING VICTORIOUS

Leaving the traces of battle behind, the remainder of the Perch Guard and militia return to Alderheart. Honoring their sacrifice, the fallen are transported at the front of the somber parade back to the city. Those who cannot carry themselves are carried on makeshift stretchers while the injured are helped along the trail home. Despite heavy losses, you and your companions are welcomed back to Alderheart as heroes.

Upon returning to Alderheart, the party is summoned to an emergency meeting of the Birdfolk Council. The Captain of the Perch Guard commends the party for their bravery and skill, but the Council urgently demands to hear about the bandits. The Council asks many questions about the bandits: their numbers, their tactics, which way they fled, and how many were injured. It is clear the Council fears reinforcements may be nearby.

One Council member asks if any personal items were found at the camp, explaining that over the past few months goods and possessions have gone missing. Should the party be honest about what they found in the camp, they will be allowed to keep any recovered magical items for their effort, as well as half of the value of treasure they recovered from the bandit camp.

It is also an option to keep their treasure a secret, requiring a DC 15 Charisma (Deception) check. On a success, the party is taken at their word. On a failure, the Council member who posed the question distrusts them, but the rest of the Council will side with the party in this dispute, at least for now.

The Birdfolk Council, not knowing the location of the bandit's hoard, will conduct an inquiry in the coming days.

REWARDS

- ♣ Award standard XP for defeated foes.

If using milestone rules for experience, each character should now reach level 3.

THE COMING STORM

With the bandits dealt with for now, life quiets down a bit around Alderheart. This is a good opportunity for the characters to further explore the city and resolve plot threads or character hooks.

The razing of the bandit camp was a huge blow to the morale of the Bandit Coalition, and should the party wander around the city, the Alderites will make them feel that their actions have had an enormous impact. Roughly a week's downtime is reasonable. Shorten or extend the quiet period depending on side quests. As soon as the party seems ready, skip to **Council Summons** (pg.113).

BANDIT INTERROGATION

If any of the party members are curious or would like to pursue leads on the bandit threat, they will find out that Fray (if she is still alive) and any bandits the militia rounded up are being held in the Alderheart gaol.

At the gaol, the characters may question Fray or another bandit to persuade them to reveal the location of the bandit's mountain stronghold. The interviewee is initially tight-lipped, but if either goaded with a DC 14 Charisma (Intimidation) check or bluffed with a DC 14 Charisma (Deception) check, they will reveal the stronghold's exact location in the Crest. Sometimes there is more than one way to open a lock, and the players may be able to find other avenues to acquire this information. Either way, the captive's position is simple:

The prisoner scoffs, then says snidely, "So, you know where our base is. It won't do you any good. Our people have suffered while the Council sits by and does nothing. A reckoning is coming to Alderheart."

Once the Birdfolk Council learns that the location of the bandit stronghold has been revealed, it won't take them long to summon the party and ask for their assistance in dealing with the stronghold once and for all. Hopefully, action can be taken before the bandits can unleash whatever they're planning for Alderheart.

SEEKING OUT THE ASH-KNIGHT

Should the party want to seek the Ash-Knight out, Riffin can be found at the Wooden Flagon. The Wooden Flagon is a tavern near the trunk's market district where Riffin has been staying. It won't be too hard to locate him, especially if the party speaks with any of the guards, militia, or birdfolk who fought in the assault on the bandit camp. Riffin's gallant efforts against the bandits have made him the talk of the town, and he has had many visitors since the victory.



You see before you a small yet sturdy looking strig clad head to talon in heavy armor, sitting at the bar with a flagon of ale. He wears a shield emblazoned with a wing crest on his back and a sheathed sword on his belt. He regards you with a friendly look as you approach. "Well, hullo, how'dya do?"

Riffin is friendly, and will gladly share his story. He is from Ashbarrow and was only able to escape the recent destruction of his village thanks to the help of his good friend **Odwald Ebonhart** (see **Appendix B**, pg.196), who brought him here. Riffin and Odwald have been adventuring buddies for a long time. The morning before the bandits raided the merchant caravan outside Alderheart's gates, Riffin awoke to find Odwald gone without a word. He was looking for his friend when the violence began, but he couldn't stand idly by while bandits attacked the city. Now that he's confirmed Odwald is no longer in Alderheart, Riffin is preparing to leave on a journey to find Odwald. He has some idea of where the old bird might've gone.

"I owe Odwald, even if he might not accept it. Maybe it's strange, but I just know he's got himself into 'sumthin'. He needs my help. What sorta friend would I be if I abandoned him?"

Riffin will politely decline any requests from the party asking for his help in dealing with the bandits. His duty now is to his friend. If the party offers to help Riffin look for Odwald, the strig will thank them kindly, but insist that both as a knight and a friend it is his duty alone to pursue this. He knows Odwald well, and Riffin is certain he'll find his friend at one of their old haunts.

As the party leaves the tavern, Riffin will wish them luck on their travels. If the party tries to locate Riffin once they get back from the stronghold, they'll find he has already left the city.

COUNCIL SUMMONS

If the party was unsuccessful at holding an audience with the Birdfolk Council and relaying Ardwyn's message, the party may relay that message at this meeting with the Birdfolk Council (see **Audience with the Council**, pg.108).

To guarantee the characters meet with the Alderheart Birdfolk Council, have a messenger or guard present them with an immediate summons to the Council Chambers. There, during a brief meeting, the party can be presented with the task of dealing with the bandit stronghold.

Having fled after the defeat at their forest camp, many bandits have returned to their stronghold in the Crest. This fortress is capable of withstanding a large-scale attack, and its position in the mountains makes it a dangerous location to assault. The Council has seen fit to ask the adventurers to flush out the bandit leadership once and for all, finally ridding Humblewood of their thievery and brutality. Given a major encounter would prove disastrous, the Council calls on the

heroes to use their proven skills to infiltrate the fortress and dispatch the leader of the Bandit Coalition: Benna Seridan.

APPROACHING THE BANDIT STRONGHOLD

The Crest Mountains are located roughly five days away from the capital. The party must travel through the forest before they can begin their ascent of the Crest. For the sake of pacing, choose to simply start the party at the foot of the mountains. Given the importance of their mission, it's reasonable that Alderheart would send an entourage of guards to escort the party to the base of the mountain, which would provide sufficient protection to eliminate the risk of encounters.

If the group consists of players who enjoy the experience of traveling across open country with their characters, use the **Road Encounters table (pg.102)** at the start of this section, or the **Forest Encounters (Level 1-2) table (pg.214)** to provide some color to the journey.

However they choose to arrive there, players will be greeted by a majestic sight:

The jagged slopes of the Crest tower before you, their peaks obscured by clouds. There is but a single path ahead. The daunting ascent up the mountain looks to be the only way to reach the summit and the bandit stronghold.

The crags and canyons of the Crest would be enough to deter even the most hardened explorers, and the ascent to the fortress will take time, roughly two days of travel up the steep mountain road. If the party has an escort, the escort will leave them at the base of the mountain and return to Alderheart.

Along the way, the party will need to contend with rock slides, **mountain lions**, and bandit patrols.

The mountain climb can be fast-tracked by having at least one member of the party make a DC 14 Wisdom (Survival) check each day, skipping the day's encounter and potentially reaching the fortress without incident. On a failure, have the party deal with an encounter from the **Mountain Road Encounters** table. The paths that lead up the Crest are narrow and weave between craggy outcrops (perfect for ambushes), or along sheer cliffs (perfect for traps), but it would be appropriate to create other terrain hazards for a given encounter.



MOUNTAIN ROAD ENCOUNTERS

d6	Encounter
1	A sudden rock slide! Make a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw or suffer one level of exhaustion. Roll again on this table.
2	Bandit patrol of four mapach bandits led by a vulpin captain .
3	A pair of mountain lions attack.
4	Find an old birdfolk hermit's campsite containing 1d4 random common objects.
5	Find an old but serviceable explorer's pack, missing the rations.
6	Bandit patrol of three mapach bandits and two jerbeen thieves .

BANDIT PATROLS

To maintain the secrecy and security of the fortress, the bandits regularly patrol the paths. These patrols are comprised primarily of three **mapach bandits** and two **jerbeen thieves**, but if the party has been spotted by patrols at any point, add a **vulpin captain** to the encounter.

THE BANDIT STRONGHOLD

Finally, through the mist you see a pair of great stone towers looming on the horizon. As you approach, you notice they are connected to a squat and sturdy fortress, which stands in lonely vigil among the crags. A few distant shapes can be seen patrolling the parapets, and banners with the crest of the Bandit Coalition hang proudly from the walls.

Entering the fortress proper will be a challenge. It has 100-foot-high stone walls with guard posts stationed around the perimeter. Behind the perimeter, the fortress opens into a square, 120-foot-long inner courtyard consisting of barracks and training areas. A narrow wagon-road leads from the north of the courtyard to a wooden palisade with a set of double doors. Beyond that, a meeting hall has been dug into the mountain itself, and serves as the inner keep.

Connecting the courtyard to the outside is a single large entrance on the front wall: a massive wooden door behind an iron portcullis, which can be lowered like a drawbridge for wagons. A smaller, 5-foot-wide door to the side allows for single-file entry and is guarded by two well-armored mapachs who are big for their kind. These two each use the stat block for a **mapach bandit**, but with the following changes:

- They have 21 HP each
- They have a Strength score of 14 (an additional +1 to attack rolls)
- They are wearing chain mail (AC 16)
- They are wielding greataxes (1d12 + 2 damage per hit)

Storming this entrance will almost certainly raise an alarm and incur attacks from the four archers walking the walls (use the stat block for a mapach bandit). The archers each benefit from three-quarters cover thanks to the parapets. Even though the stat block of the mapach bandit can be used for many of the least-skilled members of the camp, they come from a variety of humblefolk races. Hedges, cervans, jerbeens, and vulpins can all be found within their ranks.

CAPTURED!

There are many ways things could go badly for a party of adventurers here. If by chance they are overwhelmed by bandits, remember that Benna won't necessarily want them dead. She'll want to question them first, so the party will be placed in the fortress' prison until she's satisfied she has the answers she wants. If Benna has any reason to believe some of the characters are valuable hostages, she'll happily keep them alive in order to ransom them to the Birdfolk Council at Alderheart and continue filling the Coalition's coffers. If any of the party members are humblefolk, she might even try to convince them to join the Coalition. Birdfolk have had power in these lands for too long. If the character accepts her offer, once her plan to get revenge on the Council is complete, she'll be sure they share in the spoils.

FINDING A WAY IN

If there are any humblefolk in the party, and the party managed to get their hands on bandit outfits (either by taking some with them from the bandits defeated near Alderheart or from defeated bandit patrols on their way up the mountainside), those characters can easily disguise themselves and bluff their way into the fortress. The bandit ranks have grown steadily over the last few months, and new arrivals to the fortress are common. A birdfolk can attempt to bluff their way in, but this will be a little more challenging, requiring a DC 14 Charisma (Deception) check to fool the bandits. A few "odd birds" have sided with the bandits, but their numbers are low enough to make the guards suspicious. Unless they are being introduced as "prisoners" rounded up by the humblefolk, birdfolk characters infiltrating the base will need to be careful of catching Benna's eye. They will face immediate suspicion from her if they are noticed.

THE CAPTAIN'S SWORD

Any character wearing Fray's sword will have advantage on Charisma (Deception) checks needed to enter the stronghold, as the sword denotes a captain's rank in the Coalition, and the sentries won't want to risk offending a ranking officer. While there aren't many bandits here who would recognize it as Fray's sword, any character openly wearing this weapon will need to be careful around Benna. She knows her captains well, and this will draw immediate suspicion.

While the fortress walls are high, they are still surmountable with at least 100 feet of rope and a grappling hook, but the party will need to approach this option with caution. Spending a few hours on a stakeout will reveal the guard patrol patterns well enough to attempt to infiltrate the fortress with advantage on the DC 15 group Dexterity (Stealth) check required to avoid the sentries. Stealthier parties may be able to slip in unnoticed without such preparation.

In addition to the above options, the party could choose a number of other routes to gain entry. Below are some possible options that would open a path to Benna:

- ♣ **Creating a distraction**, like setting a fire or sounding an alarm, that would pull the guards away from their posts.
- ♣ **Causing a scene outside the fortress or in the courtyard**, goading Benna to come out and fight. She will accept the terms of single combat, but the party will need to abide by the results and be prepared to be taken as hostages if they lose (see **The Prison, pg.117**). If another party member attempts to interfere, she'll set the camp on them (see **Entering By Force, pg.116**).
- ♣ **If the party stakes out the fortress**, they'll find that wagons with stolen goods make regular shipments up to the keep. The party could create a distraction, then sneak into one of these wagons and enter the keep undetected (see **The Storeroom, pg.117**).
- ♣ **If characters encountered the jerbeen orphans in Alderheart, and treated them fairly**, the orphans can turn up in the fortress as insider allies. They don't like the methods the bandits use, but they will mention that Benna is kind and has provided for all of the folks here, many of whom lost their homes to the fires.

FIGHTING TO THE BOSS

The party can always choose to simply try to fight their way into the fortress, but it isn't recommended. It might not be too hard for them to force their way past the outer walls and into the courtyard, but from there, resistance will only increase (see **Entering By Force, pg.116**). If the characters are getting in over their heads, have Benna appear early to fight them without having too many smaller confrontations.

THE COURTYARD

The wide courtyard contains a small community of humblefolk, some wearing arms and armor, others unarmed and going about their day. There are two buildings inside the walls, as well as a narrow road leading up to the meeting hall. A few points of interest can be seen here:

- ♣ The largest building is the wooden barracks to the east. It has rows of target dummies at the front. Depending on the time of day the party may see a captain training fresh recruits.

- The building to the west of the barracks is only slightly smaller, and more barn-like. The party may see supply wagons being carted in.
- There is a large canvas tent near the barracks. Two guards stand watch out front. A gust of wind whips up one of the side-flaps, revealing large cages inside. This is the stronghold's prison.
- Spiral stairs at the intersecting corners of each of the walls provide access to the upper levels. The pathways along the top of the wall are 5 feet wide, and provide three-quarters cover for characters firing down on targets.
- There are two large levers inside the gate. One controls the portcullis, and the other the drawbridge. The drawbridge lever can be pulled quickly, causing it to swing open. The portcullis lever drops the portcullis across the entrance. Large rope pulleys on either side are used to reset the levers.
- There are at least a dozen bandits inside the courtyard. Some are training by the barracks, some are helping move supplies around the fort, and others are simply enjoying downtime by reading and whittling behind the safety of the walls.

THE ART OF INFILTRATION

If the party snuck in or managed to bluff their way inside, it's pretty easy to keep a low profile and explore the courtyard. Most bandits will assume they're supposed to be here, unless the party does something to draw the suspicion of the captains. If the party strikes up conversations with members of the camp, or attempts to scout around with a successful DC 13 Intelligence (Investigation) check, they should be able to find out one of the following pieces of information:

- The Bandit Coalition used to be a far less organized and effective force until General Seridan took over. She has really changed things for the better, and the stronghold is now well-stocked and prepared, even if Alderheart sends an army to drive them out.
- Not all who live here can fight. Some work as messengers, cooks, healers, and other odd jobs that keep the camp running. The General has never forced anyone to fight. She inspires them to take up arms by example, and support the cause to the best of their abilities.
- General Seridan has taken excellent care of the people here since the fires burned their homes and ruined their lives. There is an infirmary in the inner keep to treat those burned while fleeing their villages or wounded in raids. Some of the refugees are children, but Benna has provided for them all the same.
- The General lost her family to the fires. If the Birdfolk Council had listened to Benna's mother, a powerful seer, they might have lived.
- Alderheart needs to change its ways of dealing with humblefolk in the Wood, and General Seridan is the only one with the vision to make it happen. Members of the Coalition should take heart, and know that they're helping to shape the Wood for the better.

- Alderheart should be prepared for a reckoning. The Birdfolk Council should fear the power of the Coalition.

If some of the party have been escorted in as prisoners, the guards at the gate will wave over reinforcements to help characters posing as bandits transport the hostages to the prison in the courtyard. They'll be able to escape later (see **The Prison**, pg.117).

ENTERING BY FORCE

Should the party fight their way in, or decide to start a fight once inside, they can expect to be set upon in waves as messengers rush to alert Benna, while the rest of the camp prepares for the worst. At first the party will fight four **mapach bandits** led by a **vulpin captain**, then two **jerbeen thieves** and another vulpin captain. If any archers have been left on the walls, they will fire from three-quarters cover throughout the fights, only retreating once the last of the bandit forces have been dispatched. During the fight, the rest of the bandits here will have made their way up the road to the inner fortress.

If the party defeats the courtyard's forces, they will have an opportunity for a short rest before continuing, as the Coalition holes up in the inner fortress, fearing reinforcements are coming. If the party lingers for too long after their rest, start sending bandit patrols down to assess the situation and report back to Benna. Otherwise, skip to **The Inner Keep** (pg.118).

If the party is defeated, decide whether they are taken to the prison for a jailbreak sequence (see **The Prison**, pg.117), or whether they are delivered to the meeting hall of the inner keep for a final showdown with Benna (see **The Bandit Leader**, pg.120).



THE BARRACKS

Rows of triple decker bunk beds can be seen next to a rest area, where a table lies strewn with playing cards and game pieces. Some of the bunks are occupied by people sleeping or reading, and a few of the bunks have sheathed weapons and leather armor hanging from hooks built into their frames. Stairs lead from this main area up to the top level. There looks to be ample space here for all who live in the camp.

The barracks serve as the main living quarters. Many who live here train to become raiders in order to advance the aims of the Coalition across the Wood. At any given time there will be empty beds, as some bandits are out patrolling, working, or taking up other posts throughout the camp.

The game table in the corner is usually empty during the day, but at night it may be filled with off-shift bandits who gather for games over flagons of ale after a hard day.

Upstairs, the party will find more rows of bunk beds, some occupied, as well as a door marked “Captains’ Quarters.” Entry to this area is off limits to most bandits, but individuals bearing a captain’s sword may enter untroubled. Otherwise, anyone in the nearby bunks will politely inform the party that the area is restricted. They may even introduce themselves, as new recruits are common, and declare how good it is to see new members for the cause. This can be an opportunity to continue to drip-feed the party information from **The Art of Infiltration (pg.116)**, so long as the party doesn’t do anything to arouse the suspicion of NPCs.

Inside the captains’ quarters there are four single beds, each with a personal storage trunk in front. There’s nothing here for General Seridan, however. She sleeps in the inner keep. All the beds are empty, and the trunks each contain different personal effects, such as small trinkets and letters from friends and family. Some of the letters reveal that the captains have friends and family in the Coalition, while others are scattered among the Wood as refugees. There are also a handful of coins between the trunks (2d4 gold pieces worth), as well as 1d4 trinkets and 1d4 tools or instruments (your choice). Some of these objects bear scorch marks.

If the scene could use a little tension, have a **vulpin captain** walk in on the party, and require them to roleplay their way out of the situation or risk having their cover blown.

If the party is captured, decide whether they’re taken to the prison for a jailbreak sequence (see **The Prison**), or whether to have them delivered to the meeting hall of the inner keep for a final showdown with Benna (see **The Bandit Leader, pg.120**).

THE STOREROOM

Nothing of much value can be found in this storeroom, which keeps enough food (fruits, vegetables, cured meats, and grains) to sustain the fort for an extended period of time. There are also torches, lanterns, rope, and other general supplies. There isn’t much in the way of a guard here, but a hedge with bright eyes and incredibly thick spectacles does serve as the storeroom’s keeper. He’ll mention the characters are free to take something if they’re hungry, but to let him know so he can record it in his ledger. If questioned, his attitude will be similar to that of the other bandits in the camp (see **The Art of Infiltration, pg.116**), and he will call the guards if the party arouses his suspicion.

THE PRISON

The interior of this large canvas tent contains a small open area with a large locked chest, and a chair where the gaoler sits, a ring of keys hanging loosely from her belt. The rest of the area is filled with four rusty-looking iron cages. The cages are all currently empty.

If any of the party members are captured, or brought into the fort posing as hostages, they’ll wind up here in one or more of the cages. This tent is watched by two **jerbeen thieves**, and attacking them directly is all but certain to raise an alarm within the camp. Any weapons or treasure (coins, gems, and art objects) characters carry will be moved into the gaoler’s chest until they can be properly sorted. All other clothing and equipment worn by the prisoner will be left alone. The gaoler is a bit lax and doesn’t bother to remove anyone’s armor, or do a detailed search. This might be a boon for any characters who have hidden objects on their person.

Gaolers trade shifts once a day at noon, passing the belt from which the keyring hangs to the next gaoler as they arrive. The gaoler is more of an attendant than the guards outside, and can be easily subdued by a character (use the **commoner** stat block). The gaoler’s job is to stay at their post and call the guards if anything happens. They are a tad complacent however, as no prisoners have tried to escape.

The prison tent is held up by poles throughout its interior, and four pitons that keep it all in place. The flaps of the tent can be lifted easily. Clearly, the tent’s function is mainly to keep the cages from rusting further. The makeshift prison’s interior is 30-foot-wide and 35-foot-long, and light filters through the canvas during the daytime making it easy to distinguish day and night. The cages are 10-foot-cubes, and have 10-foot-wide paths between them. They nearly fill the small space, leaving barely 5 feet between the gaoler and the bars. This is easily enough distance for a character to attempt to grab the keyring on the gaoler’s belt, so long as the party can create a distraction to keep the gaoler occupied while they work. Grabbing the keyring from the gaoler’s belt requires a successful DC 15 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check, but depending on the nature of the distraction (such as if the gaoler is put to sleep) advantage may be granted on this roll.

The cage bars are heavily rusted, and some are weak enough to bend with a successful DC 12 Strength check, allowing a character to slip out. The gaoler is watchful, however, so they would need to be distracted for this plan to succeed.

There are a number of ways a party could plot an escape. If the players are having a difficult time, provide them some hints at the solutions above, or present them with an opportunity by having a gaoler fall asleep during their shift. If the party escapes, they should be able to evade the guards (who are mostly focused on threats outside the walls) with a successful DC 13 Dexterity (Stealth) check. The party has advantage on all stealth checks rolled at night.

If the party is caught escaping from the gaol, use this opportunity to have them brought before Benna Seridan in the inner keep to initiate the final showdown with the bandit general (see **The Bandit Leader**, pg.120).

THE INNER KEEP

Refer to Fig. 2.4 for a map of the Inner Keep.

USING THE INNER KEEP MAP

The map provides suggested starting positions for the bandits in each area. An asterisk on a creature indicates that it has some changes to its stat block. Refer to the numbered areas in which they appear for these details.

If the party kept a low profile and made it to this location while exploring the camp, read:

The rough road to the north of the courtyard climbs up the steep crags until it curves, revealing a forty-foot-tall barricade of logs lashed together, and a large set of double doors. A pair of tough-looking mapachs in chain armor eye you warily as you approach. One saunters up, raising a hand to halt you. "That's far enough, friend," he says in a gravelly voice. "State your business."

If the camp was alerted to the intruders, the guards will be openly hostile and it will be a fight.

The outer guards use stat blocks identical to the **mapach bandits** who guard the fortress gate (see **The Bandit Stronghold**, pg.114). There is a much smaller courtyard here, and unlike the one the party came through, no one is milling around. People don't come here without reason. There are two square wooden buildings, one to the east and another to the west:

- The larger one to the east is the infirmary.
- The building to the west is smaller and has a strong lock on the door. This leads to the armory.

A narrow pathway between the two leads to a sturdy wooden door that grants access to the inner keep carved into the mountainside.

1. THE INFIRMARY

Several cots occupy the inside of this space. A shelf at one corner of the room is filled with salves and tinctures, as well as a few books and some herb samples preserved in glass jars and fluids. A wooden table nearby, stained with long-dried blood, has an opened healer's kit upon it. Three bandits, bandaged along various parts of their bodies, are resting on the cots.

This building serves as a burn ward and infirmary for the bandits. A **jerbeen thief** and two hedges rest here (for the hedges, use the stat block for a **mapach bandit**). The three bandits are fast asleep thanks to some sleeping herbs, and will not wake unless a character attacks or forces them awake. If awakened, they will assume the characters are friendly, but they will immediately shout for help if characters give any indication of being otherwise.

If the bandits are left asleep, a successful DC 13 Wisdom (Medicine) check on their bodies will reveal they were treated by a healer of some skill. The healer's kit is missing six uses, but is otherwise perfectly serviceable. The shelf contains two burn salves, which can be applied to heal 4d4 hit points each, but will only work if the damage was caused by fire. The two books are valuable advanced medical texts worth 5 gp each. Characters who have both of these books on hand, and at least a minute to skim through them, have advantage on all Intelligence and Wisdom checks related to medical matters. The herbs are useless to characters without proper training, but anyone with proficiency in a herbalism kit could use them to craft a single *potion of superior healing*.

2. THE ARMORY

The lock to this building is made of heavy iron and is incredibly sturdy, requiring a successful DC 17 Dexterity (Thieves' Tools) check to open. The lock can be broken by force, but it has an AC of 18, 20 hit points, and resistance to all non-magical bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage. The noise of breaking it may draw bandits from the inner keep.

This small building contains a rack of weapons, an armor rack, and bags of assorted treasure in a pile.

The armory doubles as storage for valuables. If the party managed to enter, they will find:

- Three coffer overspilling with coins, there's at least 800 gp worth, in various denominations. This is too much for the party to carry out at once without some clever thinking.



INNER KEEP

fig. 2.4



- A small box filled with an assortment of precious jewelry. Among them is a necklace of polished shells and pearls worth 200 gp, and a high quality ring inlaid with gold and polished wood worth 400 gp. The rest of the baubles will fetch 320 gp together on the market.
- Two paintings of the Wood, one of the Mokk Fields at sunset, and the other of the sunrise behind Alderheart. They are signed by an unknown artist. These were made by an artist of uncommon skill, and can easily fetch 300 gp each on the market.
- Four light crossbows, each next to a full quiver of bolts, sit on a weapon rack, alongside a finely kept longsword and a halberd. This halberd is obviously one used by the Perch Guard, and even has divots on the top part of the haft where a banner could be affixed.
- A suit of scale mail on the armor rack.



Benna Seridan

3. THE MEETING HALL

Three long tables are crammed into this meeting area. Two of them along the sides, a jumble of chairs packed together at each one. Remains of a meal still linger in front of each seat. On the northern wall there is a third table with a single high-backed chair. Candles and a single iron chandelier bathe the area in a dim light. Two jerbeen sentries stand watch over a door in the hall's northeast corner.

The meeting hall was a part of the fortress long before the bandits moved in. The stonework has aged, but is still of high quality. This is where the denizens of the stronghold share their meals, and the table near the northern wall is often stood upon, and used to share stories of suffering as well as news of successful raids.

Inside the meeting hall, a pair of veteran jerbeen guards stand outside the entrance to their leader's personal chambers. These are Benna's elite skirmishers. Each uses the stat block for a **jerbeen thief**, but with the following changes:

- They are wearing pilfered scale mail (AC 16).
- They wield a rapier (which deals 1d8 + 2 piercing damage on a hit) as well as a dagger (which deals 1d4 + 2 piercing damage on a hit), and they can make one attack with each as part of their attack action.

If a fight ensues, the noise will draw Benna from her chambers (see **Cut Off the Head**, pg.121). Have her act immediately at the top of the round.

THE BANDIT LEADER

Whatever the party's plan is, all roads eventually lead to Benna Seridan, leader of the Bandit Coalition. If the party was brought to the meeting hall after being captured, they will encounter Benna, standing atop the northmost table. The two elite skirmishers guarding the area will keep watch on either side of the party.

A solid cervan woman with a face partially obscured by a red bandana fixes you with a stony glare. "So, this is what Alderheart sends: a group of greenhorns? Pathetic. If you knew what we're fighting for you wouldn't be so quick to condemn us."

Their engagement can be roleplayed, or have Benna simply draw on the party, explaining that she'll end the threat they pose to her operations here once and for all (see **Cut Off the Head**, pg.121). Benna isn't unreasonable, and will listen to the party if they engage with her. She is conflicted, and unpredictable as a result. The trauma that led her to join the Coalition, as well as the actions she took to become its general, have hardened her heart, and she is bent not only on change, but revenge. She loathes the Birdfolk Council, whom she still holds responsible for the deaths of her family and the destruction of her home. She also blames them for the suffering of all

those who have lost their homes to the flames, as the Council has chosen to hide behind the bastion of Alderheart instead of reaching out to help folk in need. However, Benna has begun to find solace in the act of caring for others. Building a community here, using her combat experience to teach others to defend themselves, and inspiring the once hopeless people of the Wood has ignited a passion within her, and she desperately wants to do right by her people. She has begun to wonder if there might be a better way to lead, one which wouldn't place so many of her loved ones in harm's way.

Should a character offer a particularly impassioned and heartfelt plea, decide how Benna behaves based on their role-playing. If a player has to roll, their character must succeed on a DC 16 Charisma (Persuasion) check. A successful negotiation will only be enough for Benna to agree to treat with the Birdfolk Council, her hated enemies, so that the lives she has fought to save are not lost needlessly in the struggle. If this is accomplished, the party will be allowed to leave the camp to deliver Benna's terms to the Council, but bandit activity will not stop in the interim. Failure to sway her here will lead to combat.

CUT OFF THE HEAD

If the characters storm the inner keep, or if Benna has decided to attack the party, read the following:

Benna removes her bandana, revealing the concealed portion of her face. She is horribly burned, her left ear is gone, and her eye can barely be seen under the warped flesh. "The fires have already burned away everything I love. I will make sure they burn away the corruption that festers within Alderheart."

Benna is a spirited and skilled foe, and will press the attack even to her own detriment. If at any point the fight seems too easy, add a patrol of two **mapach bandits** returning to report. Benna will not flee, nor will she give up. The party will need to render Benna unconscious if they wish to take her captive and bring her to Alderheart to face the Council's judgement. Capturing Benna will allow the party to walk out of the stronghold without a fight, as the bandits will not risk injury to their leader.

If Benna is killed, the members of the Coalition will scatter, taking what they can as they move to safehouses stationed all over the Wood.

TREASURE

As with the bandit camp, there is a wealth of treasure to be found in the armory of the complex (see **2. The Armory, pg. 118**), as well as Benna's personal quarters. Most of this loot is stolen, and belongs to various merchants and residents of Humblewood. The council will allow the party to keep half of the treasure as a reward for their services, just as before.

The party will also be free to keep the *blade of the wood** recovered from Benna.

The party finds the following in Benna's quarters:

- ♣ A scorched music box. It is made of varnished alderwood and inlaid with gold. When opened, a cervan dancer spins on a spring to a familiar humblefolk folk tune. Despite its condition, this rare item is worth 300 gp.
- ♣ A rough map of the Crest and the peninsula to the northeast.



WHAT THE FUTURE MAY HOLD

This is a major part of the story completed, as now the bandits will return to being a far less threatening force in the Wood. Ultimately there are two ways this part of the story can end: with Benna slain, or with the Council and Benna negotiating for a better outcome for the Wood's displaced humblefolk.

If Benna was captured, and delivered to the Birdfolk Council as promised, the party should be made aware that the penalty for her crimes is death. Even so, there may still be hope for the characters to convince the Birdfolk Council to improve the lives of humblefolk.

Either the party or Benna can plead for Benna's life and the desperate cause of humblefolk in the Wood, leading to a new directive for the Coalition; go to **If Benna was reasoned with**.

If Benna can't be reasoned with and is executed, the Coalition won't be interested in peace talks; go to **If Benna was killed**.

If the Benna was reasoned with, the Birdfolk Council will be dismayed and angry at first. The party will need to spend some time convincing the Council of the good Benna has done, and the benefits of treating with her and her organization. It will take some heated discussion, but the Council members will consent to meeting with her provisionally. After hearing Benna's story, the Council's disposition will soften. They will agree on the need to provide aid to the humblefolk who have lost their homes to the fire.

The Bandit Coalition will keep control of the fortress. Either Benna will retain command, or she'll support a new leader being appointed for the Coalition—this could be the characters (if they so choose), or someone selected from among Benna's captains. The Council will work with whoever leads the Coalition, provided the party (if they don't take over themselves) can vouch for the leader's good intentions and agrees to keep them in line. Spurred by a new purpose, the criminal elements of the Coalition will be put to an end, and the organization will turn into a relief network for those displaced by the fires.

With the Coalition's supply networks and Alderheart's resources working together, response times for relief efforts will be greatly improved. While some members of the Coalition will abandon the cause for their own gains, many will be willing to help it transition into an organization dedicated to helping fight the spreading fires and provide relief and shelter to those in need. The Birdfolk Council will release a decree: they will become the Humblewood Council, and new representatives from major humblefolk villages in the regions and within Alderheart itself will be added to their numbers, effectively giving humblefolk across the Wood a voice in governance for the first time. This significant change will take the span of the adventure to resolve, but by the end, the Humblewood Council will lead the way to a new era of unity in Humblewood. Now dedicated to peace, Benna will show her gratitude by presenting the party with the *blade of the wood** she once wielded.

If Benna was killed, between losing their camp near Alderheart and their mountain stronghold, the Coalition will be dealt a heavy blow and the bandit menace will no longer pose the same threat to the region. Many will lose hope and desert without Benna, but others will see her as a martyr and rally under a surviving captain. Members will work from safehouses in the forests, doing their best to keep the Coalition command structure intact, and continue to cause problems for the Wood after the events of this adventure. Perhaps peace can be achieved someday, when the wounds of losing their beloved leader aren't so fresh. But, without Benna, the Coalition won't trust or treat with outsiders.

Once the bandit general has been defeated, the Council will send an armed force to secure the stronghold. Should the players wish, this could become their base of operations. The Council will happily grant this boon to the party as they have proven themselves to be valuable allies and defenders of the realm. A small contingent of guards and hirelings from the Birdfolk Council will oversee the upkeep and protection of the fortress while the party is away. The Council does, however, expect the heroes to come to the aid of the realm whenever summoned to do so.

DEFENDERS OF ALDERHEART

Regardless of how the party dealt with this, the Alderites will remember them as the ones who saved their city by ending the threat of the Bandit Coalition. With the bandit threat halted by the party's efforts, the Council will gladly send for a contingent of Perch Guard to Meadowfen with much needed supplies. Henceforth, rumors of the party's deeds will slowly begin to spread across the realm, and soon the people of the Wood will recognize the party by their new title: the Defenders of Alderheart.





Part 3: An Urgent Summons

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With the Council agreeing to aid Meadowfen, and the bandit forces dealt with, the Wood is enjoying relative peace. The party is free to engage in some downtime activities. Just remember that there may be a need to increase the challenge of the encounters listed here if the party reaches level 4 before this part of the adventure.

In this part of the story, the party will receive an urgent summons from the Council in Alderheart, who will explain that a huge creature, about which little is known, has been spotted burrowing under the ashen fields of the Scorched Grove. This is an [ashsnake](#), one of many new fire-aspected creatures never before encountered in Humblewood. It was brought to life as a manifestation of the great [aspect of fire](#)'s rage.

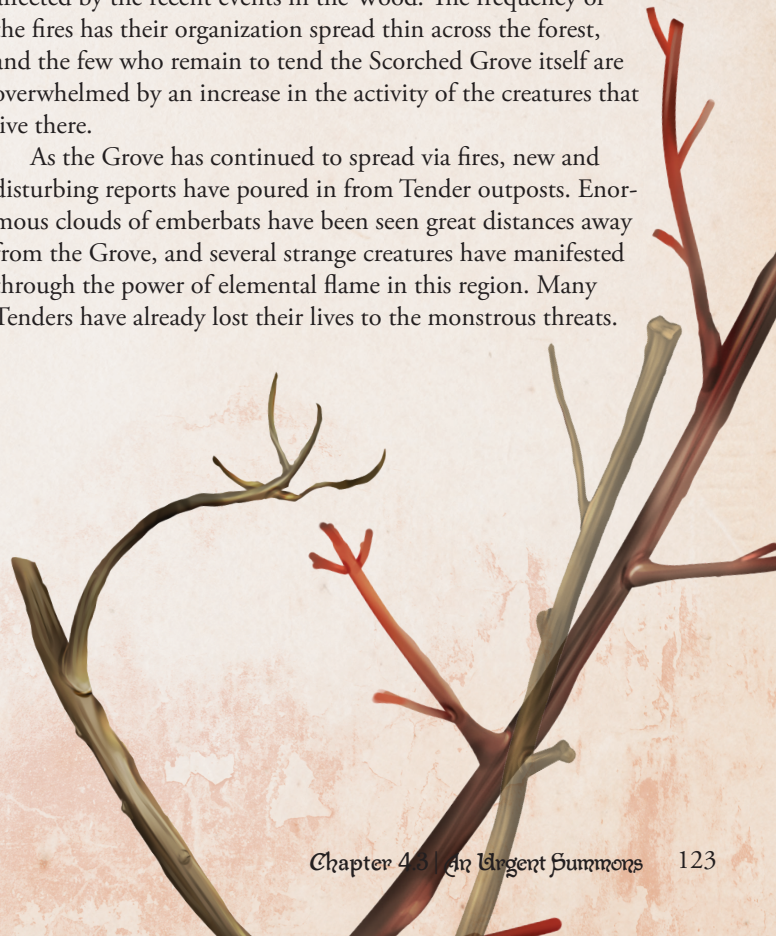
The aspect of fire has been stirring more and more since its slumber was first disturbed, and fires began ravaging the Wood. The appearance of these elemental monstrosities signals that the aspect is close to fully awakening. Worse still, the ashsnake roaming the Scorched Grove has started to make things dangerous for the Tenders.

Having seen the party's prowess handling the bandits, the Council has sent for them to help put an end to this strange creature. It has become clear to both the Council and the Tenders that whatever has been happening in Humblewood of late has its roots in the Scorched Grove. For the good of the realm, the party will need to go investigate.

THE TENDERS

The Tenders (see [Appendix B](#), pg.206) have been badly affected by the recent events in the Wood. The frequency of the fires has their organization spread thin across the forest, and the few who remain to tend the Scorched Grove itself are overwhelmed by an increase in the activity of the creatures that live there.

As the Grove has continued to spread via fires, new and disturbing reports have poured in from Tender outposts. Enormous clouds of emberbats have been seen great distances away from the Grove, and several strange creatures have manifested through the power of elemental flame in this region. Many Tenders have already lost their lives to the monstrous threats.



COUNCIL SUMMONS

If the party is in Alderheart, a frantic Council aide will come to find them and deliver an emergency Council summons. The official-looking letter asks the characters to appear before the Council as soon as they are able.

If the characters are currently at another location in the Wood, a tracker from Alderheart may come to call on them or deliver the urgent summons.

In either case, have the date of the summons set for the next day, or the day after characters arrive in the city to give them a chance to explore.



RETURN TO ALDERHEART

Whether or not this is actually a return depends on where characters spent their downtime: in Alderheart or elsewhere. Characters in the city are free to see the sights.

Eliza's Emporium (pg.106), still owned and operated by the party's favorite eluran, will be turning a good profit and might have some new wares available at your discretion.

Susan of the Swamp (see Appendix B, pg.200) is now here! She has assembled a small tent of wares in the Trunk Market, which she hopes to sell along with fortune readings. If a character wants their fortune read, it will cost a single gold piece. After taking a drop of their blood and consulting her cauldron, Susan will offer cryptic visions of a character's future. Either ad lib these or prepare them ahead of time to suit the game and the characters.

Susan will still offer to make potions in exchange for reagents (see **A Witch's Debt, pg.99**), but she'll also sell a few prepared potions to fund her ongoing arcane research. Each of her potions costs 50 gp, except for *potions of superior healing* and *potions of resistance*, which each cost 100 gp. To decide how many of each potion she has in stock, roll randomly. Use a 1d4 to determine the quantity of any potion that cost 50 gp, and a 1d2 to determine the quantity of any potion that costs 100 gp.

FUTURE OF THE COALITION

Alderheart will have changed since the character's foray into the Bandit Stronghold, in ways that reflect the party's choices. Below are the two most common ways this could play out, but details can be modified based on how players decided to deal with the events of **Part 2: The Bandit Menace (pg.101)**.

If Benna was reasoned with, the party will see a new uniformed force around Alderheart: the Wildwood Brigade, into which the Bandit Coalition has begun to successfully transition. They specialize in quickly mobilizing across parts of the Wood the Perch Guard have trouble reaching. They have already been of great help in extinguishing fires before remote villages can be destroyed, and delivering supplies and aid to villages damaged by blazes. Many members are humblefolk, former refugees who use their knowledge of pathways under the forest canopy to get where they're needed in a short time.

The bandit stronghold in the Crest has been converted into a supply depot and fallback point for the wounded. A

new headquarters is also under construction in the Canopy, near the Perch Guard's headquarters. Characters may even find Benna, or whoever was appointed the Brigade's leader, working out of a temporary office in the Canopy district. They're busy overseeing operations for the Brigade, receiving intel from the ground, and mobilizing help where it's needed. The work is challenging, and word is coming in that the situation with the fires just keeps getting worse.

The Council chambers will now not only have the flags of the different birdfolk perches adorning it, but also several flags of the larger humblefolk settlements in the Wood. The humblefolk delegate selections for the Humblewood Council are ongoing. Many prominent figures have arisen in the political scene and are becoming more engaged in Council matters, hoping to win their own seat.

If Benna was killed, with the defeat of their leader and the capture of their fortress, the Bandit Coalition has been broken in Humblewood, making for easier travel across the roads and an increase in the Perch Guard's ability to send aid to those affected by fires. Maintaining supply routes is still a strain however, and rumor has it conditions for humblefolk aren't much better.

Refugees still crowd the trunk market, and more are sneaking up into the city through secret knotholes, or making their way down to the roots where there is more space. Crime is becoming a real problem in Alderheart, and while the situation is not immediately noticeable in the canopy, even relatively affluent areas in the trunk show increased Perch Guard presence and increased fear of thievery among the populace. Locals lock their doors at night, and some have begun to arm themselves, fearing the need to defend their livelihoods. Merchants are especially vocal about this, and many can be found waiting for an audience outside the Council chambers.

TROUBLE WITH TENDERS

At some point during their stay in the city, the party will run into one of the Tenders speaking to a crowd in the canopy market.

A frail young huden gallus stands on a crate in the market square, trying to catch the attention of the passing crowd. "The fires are spreading more and more by the day. We need help to quell the blaze! Please, join with the Tenders and help us heal our Wood!" As he speaks, a shy looking sable luma stands awkwardly to the side of him. No one seems to be taking much interest in the gallus' speech, and some are openly derisive.



The gallus is named **Havel of the Autumn Moon** (see **Appendix B, pg.196**) and the luma is **Tevor of the Spring Path** (see **Appendix B, pg.193**). They both wear the robes of Tenders, though Havel seems to have more authority than Tevor. Havel will recognize the party as the Defenders of Alderheart, and inform them that he had a friend in the caravan attack last month who survived thanks to their efforts. He has heard of the party's deeds since they arrived in Alderheart, and will admit to a bit of jealousy. He wishes he were able to go out and help survivors of the fires across the Wood, but he is frail and lacks the fortitude to work in such conditions.

Tevor seems incredibly nervous, and informs Havel that he wouldn't be so quick to say things like that if he'd ever been to the Scorched Grove. Tevor has been helping heal the Grove, and will relate that lately things have been very difficult for the Tenders there, with many being injured or worse due to monster activity.

Tevor was summoned to Alderheart by the Council just like the party, but he isn't sure why. It's clear from the pained expression on Havel's face that there's more to the story. A DC 14 Wisdom (Insight) check will reveal Tevor is lying. Tevor won't answer anymore questions about his summons, and he will leave if pressed for information. So long as Tevor isn't around, Havel can be made to divulge what he knows with a DC 12 Charisma (Persuasion) check: Tevor only barely escaped an encounter with an unknown monster that has been hunting Tenders in the Scorched Grove. Tevor doesn't talk about it, but Havel heard that Tevor's instructor died.

Havel will share that he'll likely see the party again soon, since he and Tevor are both due to attend the Council chambers tomorrow.

AN EMERGENCY SESSION

When the characters enter the Council chambers they are met with an unusual sight: it is filled with people! Birdfolk, humblefolk, Tenders, and even a few people from beyond the Wood have assembled here:

All those assembled clamor over each other, their pleas desperate. Some are urging for an immediate removal of all Tenders from the Grove before more lives are lost. Some are calling for a mobilization of the Perch Guard to meet the monsters head on. It seems everyone has an opinion and is fighting to be heard. Tevor and Havel are here as well, standing patiently off to the side of the rabble.

Shortly after the party enters, the familiar bright gallus seated in the middle of a long table at the front of the hall raises her feathered hand. This is **Bita, the Council Speaker** (see **Appendix B, pg.193**). She waits patiently as many of the gathered birdfolk notice her gesture and fall silent. The silence in the hall is almost overwhelming in its contrast to the noise that filled it moments before.

When Bita speaks it is not with a booming voice or harsh language. The sound of command and respect permeate her every word. She addresses you and your companions simply. "Thank you all for heeding our summons so quickly. The Wood is in great need, and many of our Tenders have already paid the dearest price to protect it. We hope you will hear our pleas and offer us your aid in this most dire of circumstances."

Speaker Bita continues by describing clouds of ember-bats, in larger numbers than have ever been seen. She speaks of strange fire creatures sighted in the Wood, and how they have injured many travelers. She then talks about the missing Tenders and the reports of a huge, unknown creature stalking the ash plains of the Grove. Something must be done, which is why the Council has called upon the help of the Defenders of Alderheart. Bita offers whatever information she can, but this creature is a new discovery and the Council has little to go on.

Tevor is called up before the head table. He was the most recent Tender to encounter the massive beast in the Grove. He recalls seeing the ash of the plains seize up, as if something were burrowing through. The creature never broke the surface, so he was unable to get a good look at it. It must have grabbed his instructor, though, as Tevor saw him get sucked under the ash. Tevor ran, until he was safe on the edge of the Scorched Grove.

Tevor is obviously shaken after the account, but Havel places a hand on his shoulder, which seems to comfort him.

Tevor points out on a map where this most recent sighting took place. Bitu will mention that the Grove is a dangerous place, and ask Havel to look for someone to guide the party. At first, Tevor simply raises his hand to speak. It's clear that he is conflicted and his fear is getting the better of him. Despite this, he'll firmly state that he will guide the party to where he last saw the creature. He will admit his fear, but every second they waste is a chance for it to strike again.

THE SCORCHED GROVE

The great ashen plain that stretches across the northwest forest has come to be called the Scorched Grove. The Grove is the result of a massive forest fire known as the Great Calamity, which raged centuries ago. It left the area altered, and strongly connected to the magic of elemental fire. This barren place has remained in such a state for as long as anyone in the Wood can remember.

A TENDER'S TELLING

The story of the Calamity that has been passed down through the Tenders goes like this:

"Long ago, birdfolk thought they could stop forest fires from devastating the Wood by using powerful otherworldly magics. But the plan backfired. Their magics only fueled the flames, and the Grove was consumed. By the grace of the Amaranthine, the birdfolk were able to lull the blaze into a quiet slumber. Though the flames were contained, the act unbalanced the elemental forces of the Wood for generations. This is why only gentle magics are used to help the earth heal. With nature, the slow way is the right way."



APPROACHING THE GROVE

To get to the Scorched Grove by road the party will need to head back toward Winoing Reach, then continue west until the road nears the southern edge of the Grove. While this is the easiest path, it will take four days to arrive at the location where Tevor last saw the beast. If the party takes the long road, they are not at risk of an encounter.

Alternatively, the party can take a more direct approach through the forest to the northeastern edge of the Grove, very near where the beast was last spotted.

If the party takes the direct approach, they will reach their destination in two days, but they'll likely run into some trouble. After one of the following encounters (either **A Cloud of Emberbats** or **The Flaming Specter**, pg.127), the party will make good time to the location described by Tevor. Choose one of the encounters below.

CLOUD OF EMBERBATS

While nearing the Scorched Grove, you begin to hear a faint sound far off in the distance. The sound quickly grows louder, and a cacophony of screeches reaches your ears before you see the source: a great cloud of emberbats is consuming the sparse forest to the north. They are still a distance away, but you can feel the combined heat of their bodies even from here. A bright and mysterious orange light can occasionally be seen shining in between them.

Tevor will try to sound calm as he advises against rushing in blindly, but it's clear that he's frightened of this swarming mass of emberbats. He'll support the party however he can while maintaining a safe distance.

The emberbat cloud takes up the space of a Huge creature, and it has 103 hit points and resistance to slashing, bludgeoning, and piercing damage. It also has the following properties:

- It can fly at a speed of 30 feet per round and it begins 60 feet away from the party.
- The heat generated by the emberbats is so intense that any creature within 30 feet must make a DC 13 Constitution saving throw when they enter this area, or start their turn inside of it, taking 4 (1d8) points of fire damage on a failure.
- The emberbats' space can be entered and moved through freely, but the heat inside is so intense that creatures inside this area take 7 (2d8) points of fire damage if they end their turn inside it.

Any creature that enters the emberbats' space will see that they are swarming around a glowing ball of molten orange energy. This orb is only a foot across and shines like a miniature sun, making it difficult to target.

The orb can be attacked, and has the following properties:

- ♣ AC 18
- ♣ 30 hit points
- ♣ Immunity to fire damage
- ♣ Vulnerability to cold damage
- ♣ Resistance to bludgeoning, slashing, and piercing damage dealt by non-magical weapons
- ♣ It is magic, and registers as conjuration magic if examined with *detect magic* or a similar effect

Once this orb is destroyed, the cloud of emberbats will gradually disperse, taking 4 rounds to disappear completely. If the bats are killed, but the orb remains, the orb will fly off in a random direction at a speed of 60 feet per round, streaking through the forest, eventually slowing down as it attracts a new cloud of emberbats.

Whatever type of energy the orb was, it seemed to be exciting the emberbats, driving them to cloud in large numbers. A difficult DC 17 Intelligence (Arcana) check will be enough for a character to ascertain similarities between this phenomena and similar instances mentioned in conjuration textbooks: when high-level conjuration circles deteriorate, such energy nodes have been observed being intermittently released.

THE FLAMING SPECTER

While making your way through the tranquil forest, you see what looks to be a blazing fire off in the distance. As you look at the fire, you notice the flames have taken on a birdfolk-like form, resembling a weeping corvum. It's far enough away that you could make it past without being noticed, but branches of the trees around its body are already beginning to smolder.

This creature is a fire specter, a memory of a former inhabitant of the Scorched Grove animated by the flames that took its life. Tevor will be able to identify the creature immediately. He'll also add that such entities are only found in the deepest parts of the Grove, and it's unheard of to see one so far from the Grove itself. The Tenders are taught to leave them be, as they will dissipate once they have fulfilled their purpose, which usually consists of re-enacting a memory from the life of the victim. Tevor will warn the party that disturbing the specter risks invoking its wrath.

If characters interact with the specter peacefully, read this:

As you approach, the creature appears unaware of your presence. It is on its knees, and continues to fruitlessly grasp at something in the underbrush, only to burn any plant life it touches. With each failed attempt the creature places its head in its talons and shudders in a way that suggests weeping.



The memory this creature is enacting is one of picking flowers to place at a nearby gravesite. Players must figure this out on their own. If a character examines the area, with a DC 14 Intelligence (Investigation) check they will be able to locate an overgrown wooden grave marker covered by reeds. The singed, desiccated bush the specter keeps reaching for matches bushes on either side of it, around which small patches of bluebells grow. Simply gathering any number of these flowers and placing them upon the grave will be enough to cause the specter to dissipate harmlessly.

Remind the players that their time is limited, as the mere presence of the specter is causing trees and shrubs around it to smoke. Characters can attempt to quench the flames before they become true blazes, but unless they have a way to do this at range, they'll need to get within 5 feet of the fire specter. Any character that lingers too long near the specter takes 5 (1d10) fire damage from its heat. Have characters continue to take fire damage the longer they stay in close proximity to the fire specter.

If a player disturbs the creature in any way or attempts to harm it, it will turn and attack. The fire specter uses the stat block for a **fire elemental**, but it is Medium and has only 51 hit points. The creature can be lured into a nearby clearing to prevent more fires. It will attack ferociously until it has been slain, at which point it will dissolve into smoke and ash.



“Beneath the ash it lies in wait. A hiss, a snap, and it’s too late.”

- From *The Epic of Fire*, a centuries old poem.

REACHING THE GROVE

The forest gives way to expansive plains of ash, dotted with the charred husks of petrified trees. The wind here has a heat to it, and it constantly disturbs the ashen soil. As it blows, small embers can be seen forming in the disturbed ash, glowing briefly before being swept up and fading on the wind. This place is clearly unnatural.

Regardless of the route party took, once they arrive at the location described by Tevor they will need to locate the creature that has been preying on the Tenders. A DC 15 Wisdom (Survival) check or other tracking skill is needed to follow its trail. On a failure, it takes another day of searching to catch sight of the creature. Optionally, roll on the **Scorched Grove Encounters (Level 3) table (pg.215)** if the party fails to find the **ashsnake**.

PAYING THE PRICE

To add some urgency or consequences to the player's decisions, or to complicate matters, announce that by the time they locate the ashsnake it has already found another Tender and is attacking them! Not only must the party fight the beast, they must do so while attempting to save the Tender from meeting a deadly fate.

Have combat start with the party being surprised by the ashsnake ambushing the fleeing Tender. The ashsnake will burst from the ground next to the Tender as they try to escape.

The Tender has 30 hit points and can cast the *druidcraft* and *spare the dying* cantrips. They have no combat ability, but they make any rolls to escape being grappled at a +2 bonus. In combat, they act directly after the ashsnake.

ASHSNAKE ATTACK

Suddenly, you see what looks to be a disturbance in the ashen plains. Something is moving underneath the thick coating of cinders at frightening speeds, churning up burning embers on either side as it goes, before vanishing. Something is here, and it has noticed you.

The **ashsnake** starts hidden in the ash. The first time it attacks, read the following:

A creature resembling a huge molten snake breaks the ashen surface with incredible force! Its scales are like charcoal, and between the scales a sinister orange glow issues from its molten core. This same glow can be seen coming from two points on the creature's head, resembling eyes, though whether or not it uses these to see is unclear.

The ashsnake can feel vibrations within 60 feet of itself, and will attack if it senses movement within range of its bite or constrict attacks. If it senses the party grouping up, it will unleash its breath attack on them. If attacked from outside the range of its tremorsense, the ashsnake takes an action to determine the direction from which the attack originated.

During the fight, the ashsnake will try to stay under the ash to protect itself, but it will come up to attack when it senses an opening. Have it burrow or surface to make the fight interesting.

Here are a few points to remember:

- The ashsnake will generally surface near characters to try and knock them over with its eruption ability. If anyone falls prone, they can expect to have a grab attack launched against them, or a bite attack if the creature is already grappling a character.
- The ashsnake can be attacked while under the ash, although it has a bonus to its armor class (as noted in the monster's description).
- The ashsnake can also hide under the ash, but to do this it needs to spend an action making a Dexterity (Stealth) check opposed by each character's passive perception score. While hidden in this way the ashsnake is functionally invisible, although characters can make a Wisdom (Perception) check against its initial roll once on their turn (this doesn't cost an action), determining its location on a success. Anytime the ashsnake emerges it is no longer hidden.
- The ashsnake can grab characters before burrowing, and can move freely underground with a grappled character in tow. Each time a character starts their turn under the ash they need to hold their breath (which they can do for 1+ their Constitution modifier's worth of minutes before they start to suffocate). This resets every time the creature surfaces, giving the character a chance to gasp for air. If a character cannot hold their breath, they must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw, taking one level of exhaustion on a failure.
- The ashsnake isn't very intelligent, but it understands how to hunt prey. It is drawn to loud noises and heavy movements. A party member could attempt to distract it in this way.
- The ashsnake will always try to have one creature grappled while it bites, and will use its ash breath as often as it can, provided there are enough targets close together for it to hit.

OUTRUNNING THE FIRE

As soon as the ashsnake is slain, the following will happen in the Grove:

The earth shakes, nearly knocking you and your companions from your feet. All around you ashsnakes erupt through massive mounds of ash. They rear up, emitting a terrifying hiss, a sound so shrill it's as though the air were being rent. As the ashsnakes encircle you, there is a deeper rumble, less violent but full of power. The creatures hesitate for a moment, until another more powerful tremor shakes even their massive bodies. The ashsnakes flee, heading south and burrowing into the ash. The tremors continue to gain in momentum and intensity. To the north, miles away, something gigantic rises from a bed of cinders. First a hill, then a small mountain, releasing a plume of ash that blocks the sun. As the dust clouds settle, you see a huge creature made of craggy black rock and pulsing orange magma. It bellows a guttural sound unlike anything you've ever heard and begins to march toward your position.



The **aspect of fire** is a primeval elemental whose very being thrums with rage. Try to avoid calling it the “aspect of fire” in front of your players, as this creature is currently unknown to them. If a character wants to make an Intelligence (Arcana) check to see if they know of it, a roll of 16 or higher would be enough for them to have heard of the aspect of fire through scant tales and myths. The stories say that this creature’s sole desire is to consume, heedless of the destruction it leaves in its wake. Characters would not know anything more than this.

The aspect will immediately sense the party of intruders in its Grove, and make for them at full speed. It’s obvious from the size and power of this creature that taking it on would be folly. Be sure to communicate this to the players. However, any party member who stays to make a noble sacrifice will surely buy time for their companions to escape.

The party can make whatever plans they want, but the shortest distance out of the aspect’s path is back into the forest toward Alderheart. Any other path out of the Grove would leave them exposed to the aspect’s march or ashsnakes that could be following. The forest canopy should also provide some cover from the creature, making the party difficult to target.

Tevor will flee immediately into the forest, making his escape before the party can react. This is the simplest way to resolve the matter, but if it makes sense within the story, you can have Tevor sacrifice himself to buy the party time to escape, or to save a party member in the following chase sequence.

Have the players describe how they would make their way to safety. The easiest way to resolve this would be to have each character make a DC 14 Strength or Dexterity (Athletics) check to attempt to outrun the aspect. Allow players to make different ability checks if they can come up with a unique way

for their characters to escape the threat. For example, distracting the creature might be somewhat of a challenge, requiring a DC 14 Charisma or Intelligence (Deception) check, but attempting to restrain it would be more difficult.

Once they have succeeded on the first skill check, have each player make another skill check to determine how successful they are at fleeing as the creature continues to move toward them. Make this check easier or harder depending on how well players did on the first check. If players succeed at this check, their character flees at a sufficiently quick pace to avoid being in range of the creature’s attacks. Particularly dire failures on this check could result in characters falling prone. Advantage on any rolls can be granted to flee based on class abilities or roleplaying decisions made by the players as they planned their flight.

As the aspect marches, it indiscriminately hurls massive boulders of magma and rock into the forest. Characters who failed the second skill check have fallen behind and are in range of these attacks. They must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw at the start of each round. On a failure, they take 16 (3d10) fire damage. On a success, they take half that damage. They may then attempt another skill or ability check to flee out of the creature’s range. As above, be flexible here, and try to reward players for creativity while keeping the threat to their characters believable.

After about two rounds of pursuit, the characters should notice that the aspect isn’t gaining as quickly, and after another round the characters will all have made it out of the creature’s range regardless. If any look back, all they will see is an ominous red glow through the trees, and a plume of thick smoke rising up over the horizon. From here the characters are free to make their way safely into the forest and back to Alderheart.

FLY TO ALDERHEART

A large part of the forest has been burned away in the wake of the **aspect of fire**, but it seems to have mysteriously given up chase. The party has made it back to the city safely. Having heard and felt the massive aspect's movement, the Council is eager to hear a firsthand account of what happened in the Grove.

The Council members accept the news with sadness, anger, concern, and confusion. Whatever this creature is, it represents a threat to all life in the Wood. Many elementals have resided in and around the forest for centuries, but this one harbors a rage that the Council doesn't understand.

A sage looking Council member will mention that she once heard tales of an elemental creature of great size and power called an aspect of fire, but that she hopes this is not the monster they face. Another Council member will mention that the first rule of battle is "know thine enemy," and add that the Dean of the Avium, a sable luma named **Gabe Windworth** (see Appendix B, pg.201), is incredibly knowledgeable. He may be able to offer some insight on the situation. Council Speaker Bitu will agree, and state that should the Dean be unable to assist the party, the Avium is still home to the largest library in the Wood and it's tomes may be the party's best chance at finding answers.

The Council is interested in any information that can be found regarding this creature. More than that, they would welcome a means of defeating it. In the meantime, they will begin to rally the Perch Guard in case Alderheart should come under threat. The party must now embark on a quest to stop this monster, before it consumes the land.

Thick plumes of smoke from the massive blaze the party outran can be seen from Alderheart's canopy, and news of both the awoken creature and the destruction it has wrought spreads through the whole city quickly.

If Tevor led the party, and returned with them, he will be granted the rank of Summerblossom for his valor. He will head up the effort to quell the forest fires the aspect has started. If he did not return, Havel will lead the relief effort, drawing on the memory of his friend to inspire the crowd, and Tevor will be given a solemn funeral. Either way, many volunteers, both humblefolk and birdfolk, will sign up to help quell the still-raging flames and assist those injured in the blaze. The party can choose whether or not they wish to aid in this effort, but nobody will begrudge them if they need to rest after their ordeal.

TREASURE

The party will be given a special requisition from the Council to aid in fulfilling their mission to stop the creature. Characters will be able to use this unassuming piece of parchment, stamped with the seal of Alderheart, to requisition up to 500 gp worth of equipment from any shop in the city. This can be used in separate stores, or all at the same place. Likewise, it can be used to pay for a portion of an item, such as a weapon or piece of armor, with the rest needing to be paid in coin.

In order to obtain this discount players must explain how the requisitioned goods will aid them in their mission. Some shopkeepers may require more convincing than others.

The requisition is stamped on the back by a merchant each time it is redeemed, and notarized with the amount it was used for. This can be altered with a difficult skill check using a forgery kit. However, modifying the document constitutes thievery, and any character caught doing this will be arrested and brought before the Council to face punishment.

Characters will also be rewarded with a *feathered helm** from the Tenders for their good work. If Tevor awards characters this item, it will come with a gallus feather, given by Havel, to thank the party for helping Tevor return safely.

If Tevor died, have Havel gift them the helm instead. It will contain a luma feather in memory of his lost friend. If the optional variant **Paying the Price** (pg.129) was used for the ashsnake encounter, the Tender the party saved may award them the helm, fitted with an appropriate feather.

REWARDS

- ♦ Award standard XP for defeated foes.
- ♦ For successfully fleeing the Aspect of Fire: 275 XP per player.

If using the rules for milestone experience, each character should now reach level 4.



THE LONG ROAD

If the party takes the long road around the forest, there are a few ways to handle this. The first and easiest way is to skip to them arriving at the Avium after an uneventful journey. This is useful for speeding up the pace of the game, or if players are itching to get to the next story beat. Be sure to mention things they encountered along the way to provide additional context:

- If the Bandit Coalition was crushed, Humblewood will have an increased presence of Perch Guard forces. The party might see merchant caravans carrying supplies from Brackenmill being escorted by Perch Guard lancers known as “The Spears.” Perhaps some of the Perch Guard will even be hauling Bandit Coalition prisoners who managed to escape the fortress back to Alderheart for trial and sentencing.
- If the Bandit Coalition has started to transition into the Wildwood Brigade, the party might see intrepid groups of ex-bandits turned rangers. These individuals may be helping escort supply trains and refugees to prepared camps where food, shelter, and medical supplies are available. It seems like everyone is doing their part to keep the Wood together in these trying times.

RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

If the party enjoys travel time and random adventures on the road, use the **Forest Encounters (Level 1-2) table (pg.214)** to decide what they encounter. For each day of travel, roll a d20, and on a roll of 5 or lower, roll on the encounter table to see what happens. Some of these fights might be easy for a party of level 4 adventurers, so more enemies can be added to provide a greater challenge.

OPTIONAL ENCOUNTER: MY NAME IS KRALL

Not every bandit shares Benna’s idealism. A few bad seeds will either use her death as an opportunity to promote themselves, or they’ll balk at the idea of a reformed Coalition and splinter off into disparate groups. Use this optional encounter to add danger to the route, and help illustrate the new threats that have risen in the wake of the Coalition’s destruction or transformation.

These new bandits are no better than raiders, and they prey on humblefolk and birdfolk alike. Among the strongest are forces led by a mapach known as **Krall, the Scavenger King (see Appendix B, pg.194)**. After hearing news of the party traveling through his territory, Krall is interested in cementing his reputation among the remaining raider factions by taking down the adventurers who either killed or turned Benna.

Krall has a force of bandits lying in ambush in the surrounding forest. These include a **jerbeen thief**, two **mapach bandits**, and his vulpin lieutenant: **Shyla Denn (see Appendix B, pg.205)**.

As the party approaches Krall’s trap, the forest seems eerily quiet. Something is amiss. The bandits are well-hidden in the dark undergrowth, so rather than using passive perception, have each character make a DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check to spot the ambush. If anyone fails this check, they will spend their first round surprised. Read the following:



You see a burly mapach with matted fur, missing in patches, sitting on the road ahead, casually picking his teeth with a long, pointed dagger. He wears studded leather armor and has a rapier sheathed at his hip. He eyes you maliciously as you approach, standing to reveal that he is nearly six feet tall. “Well well, if it isn’t Alderheart’s lackeys.”

Krall immediately attacks with his force. The thief supports him in melee combat while his priest and the two mapach bandits stay in the forest and attack the party at range. Krall will order Shyla to heal him if he is wounded, but otherwise she is free to attack using her own judgement, and support the bandits with her spells as needed.

The dense forest provides a half cover bonus to anyone within it, and creatures there can hide as an action on their turn.

During the fight on his turn, Krall will boast:

“If you thought Benna was tough, then you lot got no idea what you’re in for. I’ll show the whole Wood how harmless you really are.”

This is a challenging fight, and if it looks like the party is having trouble add some wandering Perch Guard NPCs to aid them. A force of three **birdfolk skirmishers** should turn the tide in the party’s favor, but the guards will be focused on defending the party and won’t pursue Krall into the forest if he makes a run for it. Perch Guard forces should also come to chase off Krall if he’s victorious, though he won’t stick around for too long.

If Krall wins, he'll settle for humiliating the heroes by stealing something of value from each party member. Retrieving these items could be the basis of a whole side adventure all its own.

Krall seeks revenge, but he isn't so foolhardy as to risk death here. If the party seems amenable, he'll beg for mercy and turn himself in. He has connections in Alderheart's criminal underbelly, and he would rather be imprisoned than dead. If the party doesn't seem like the merciful sort, Krall will order his forces to scatter into the forest when things look grim. Once he enters the forest, the party has only 2 rounds to capture him before he leads his pursuers into a prepared escape burrow where he will pull a lever which snaps a wooden portcullis over the entrance. The portcullis can be broken by spending an action and succeeding on a DC 15 Strength check, but in this time Krall will already have traveled down one of the many branching pathways of the tunnel and made a clean getaway. His followers don't know about the escape burrow, and they can be easily captured. Krall won't hesitate to cut them loose to save himself.

If any Perch Guard came to offer assistance, those remaining will sound a horn, calling on reinforcements that will arrive in the next few minutes. This will include combat medics who can help tend to the party's wounds. The Perch Guard have orders to take a share of any treasure recovered from either Krall or his bandits back to Alderheart. However, the Guard appreciates the party's service to the Wood and will look the other way if the party decides to take the treasure for themselves.

TREASURE

The bandits all have standard equipment for their stat blocks, with the exception of Krall's parrying dagger, which appears to be of high quality and is branded with the insignia of the Bandit Coalition on its pommel. Treat this weapon as a shortsword. It also allows anyone proficient with shortswords to use their reaction to parry one melee attack that targets them, adding +2 to their AC against it. They must be wielding the weapon in order to use this feature.

- Each of the mapach bandits have pouches filled with 35 gp and the jerbeen thief has an opal (worth 200 gp) in their pouch.
- The priest has a flawless emerald (worth 350 gp) and three spell scrolls: *spiritual weapon*, *spirit guardians*, and *locate object*.
- Krall himself has a *chime of opening* with five remaining uses in his bag, along with a pair of exquisite rubies (worth 600 gp each) and a small sapphire (worth 200 gp).

THE ANCIENT FOREST

The forest may be a quicker route to the Avium, but progress is slow in the dense undergrowth. This part of the forest is ancient, and its floor is a thick carpet of ferns, moss, and other plant life. Treat all areas in this forest that are not clearings or groves as difficult terrain, unless the party does something about it. Spells that deal fire or acid damage can remove the difficult terrain from target areas. Characters can also choose to climb up the branches and travel via gliding if they are birdfolk, completely bypassing the difficult terrain. The forest is thick enough that anyone up at least 30 feet in the giant trees will have an easy time finding branches in gliding range, allowing them to make progress at normal speed, or scout ahead with ease if they so desire.

Gigantic 60-foot-tall trees form a canopy that significantly weakens incoming sunlight, and only dim light filters down from above. It's easy to hide here, and cover is readily available behind the trunks of the giant trees. Even with a map, there are no recognizable landmarks, and it doesn't take much for travelers to become disoriented. At least one character must lead the group, succeeding on a DC 15 Wisdom (Survival) check every four hours of travel to avoid getting lost. Getting lost means the party must spend another hour wandering off-course before they can correct their course. Each time the party fails one of these checks, roll on the **Ancient Forest Encounters** table to see what they encounter in their wanderings.

ANCIENT FOREST ENCOUNTERS

d6	Encounter
1	A thicket containing a hidden shambling mound , which attacks as soon as a character enters its reach. It can be seen with a passive perception of 14 or higher.
2	A group of 1d4 giant elk can be seen grazing peacefully by a grove with a clear pond.
3	The bones of a giant elk , picked clean and growing moss. A successful DC 17 Intelligence (Nature) check is enough to tell this was done by a forest prowler .
4	A 60-foot-wide clearing contains 1d3 giant boars rooting around the soil for food. They have 1d4 young (Medium sized beasts that cannot attack) with them and will attack if provoked.
5	An owlbear can be seen in a clearing nearby. It is young (only has half its normal hit points) and hasn't yet spotted the party. There is another owlbear, its mother, also nearby. The mother will arrive after a round of combat has passed to defend her child.
6	A unicorn appears in a small grove. It is wary, but can be approached if the party is careful. If befriended, it will heal the party's wounds. If threatened, it will flee.

HUNTER AND PREY

The party will eventually encounter the **forest prowler** that has been nesting in the area for the last month. It makes its home in the treetops in well-camouflaged nests made from leaves and branches. A sure way to tell a prowler's nest from a giant bird's is the stench of meat. Prowlers keep carrion from the animals they hunt, usually giant elk or boars, on nearby branches as a source of food.

This encounter should happen towards the end of the party's journey through the forest. The characters could come across the prowler's lair mere hours from the forest's end, or the beast could ambush them as they camp for the night. As long as the party keeps moving in a stealthy manner, they will elude the beast, but if they stay camped in one spot for more than an hour the forest prowler will be alerted to their presence.

However the encounter happens, the prowler will study the party from a distance first, biding its time as they move through its territory. It will attempt to use its stealth to approach the party quietly, and will single out the smallest and most vulnerable character among the group as its prey. The prowler hunts through hit-and-run tactics, disappearing into the foliage with its camouflaging fur before pouncing again on unsuspecting foes. The prowler's incredible claws give it a solid grip on tree trunks, and it can climb even the highest branches with ease. Once it begins its assault it won't stop until it has scored a kill, or has been critically wounded.

THE AVIUM

After the party has either made their way through the forest or reached the end of the road, they will arrive at the Avium, the magical college of the birdfolk. Here arcane spellcasters from all over Humblewood study, decipher mystic secrets, and teach the next generation their craft.

ODWALD'S DISGUISE

Throughout most of this part, Odwald Ebonhart has assumed the identity of the librarian Mordane Swiftgale. To avoid confusion, the person the players know as Mordane will be referred to in this text as Odwald. This ensures that it is clear when reading this part that certain events do not involve the real Mordane. Be cautious when GMing, and refer to the disguised Odwald only as Mordane until Odwald's true identity has been revealed.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

At the heart of the Avium is a mystery the players will need to solve. The party's suspicions should be aroused when they start their research and realize much of the information they require is missing. In most cases, books have had pages torn out. The tomes were vandalized by Odwald while in a frantic state, before he took **Mordane Swiftgale** (see **Appendix B, pg.202**) hostage and assumed his appearance.

As Librarian Swiftgale, Odwald now has access to all of the highly regulated books in a part of the College known as the lower library (see **Into the Library, pg.139**). He can manipulate the records to account for missing books and place suspicion on others.

During his research, Odwald has uncovered a frightening truth: the **aspect of fire** is immortal, its energies have seeped into the Scorched Grove over centuries, creating a well of power it can use to reconstruct its form if it is ever destroyed. However, evidence of his earlier panicked search still remains, and Odwald worries that the heroes may use it to expose him.

The torn-out pages contain information necessary for the party to defeat the aspect of fire, but the players won't be able to find this out until they discover Odwald's secret chamber in the library, where he has been using the information he stole to plan a way to kill the aspect. Odwald has been dabbling in dangerous necromancy, and he's created a **cobblefright** to aid in his research, seeking to study its soul siphon ability in order to recreate the effect as a large-scale spell. If it works, such a spell might drain the vital energies that make the aspect immortal, ending its threat to the Wood once and for all. The cobblefright is a threat to all who currently live and study in the Avium, and the party will need to uncover Odwald's secret laboratory and dangerous monster before he loses control of his creation.

There are many pathways players can follow throughout this investigation, and many ways for the party to come across important information. The party doesn't need to know everything to find out the location of Odwald's lair, but the more they know, the more complete their picture of the happenings at the Avium will be. Because there are many connections players can make between different leads, clues, and avenues of investigation, some sections will cross-reference others that might be relevant.

If the players are lost or unsure where to go, an NPC can deliver one or more of the following hints to move the narrative along:

- Only faculty members have access to tomes dealing with high-level or forbidden magic, and even then it's solely intended for research purposes. Removing one of these dangerous books from the lower library, or practicing the knowledge they contain, is grounds for termination from the Avium.
- One tenured librarian, Mordane Swiftgale, has always been an odd one, but lately he's been keeping to himself even more than usual.
- Secret rooms were built into the Avium, and many remain undiscovered to this day.
- A lot of odd things seem to be happening in and around the lower library. Books with missing pages, malfunctioning servitor skeletons, and strange noises coming from the stacks, have all been reported.

Players can find the information they need through reading tomes in the library or speaking with knowledgeable NPCs on campus. By the end of their time at the Avium players should know the following:

- ♣ The aspect of fire is immortal. There is no known way to destroy it without it simply regenerating.
- ♣ The aspect of fire consumes living forests for energy.
- ♣ The aspect of fire is weakened by cold damage, which may cause it to cool and become immobilized.
- ♣ In the past, the aspect of fire was sealed away using a conjuration circle somewhere in the Grove.

ARRIVING ON CAMPUS

The Avium is a remarkable structure, and as the party approaches it, either from the forest or from the road, read the following:

Four gigantic circular stone platforms float alongside several towers and spires in the air above you. These structures slowly rotate around a leafless and branchless tree trunk made from solid stone. The trunk towers hundreds of feet high, and the orbiting structures appear to connect to stone bridges which jut out of the trunk near its upper levels. You see two Perch Guards in crenellated watch posts above the entryway to this petrified trunk. They greet you, and moments later a robed, bespectacled raptor glides down to land at your feet.

The raptor is an associate professor named **Rhys Birchwalker** (see **Appendix B, pg.203**), who has been sent to greet the party. She explains the Dean is expecting them, and then leads the party to the large central gate, which appears to be the only entrance into the structure. She withdraws an amulet with the Avium's crest upon it from the folds of her robe and presents it to the giant wooden double doors. After a brief moment the same symbol etches itself in light across the entrance. Then, with a heavy creak, the doors begin to part, revealing an interior lounge.

A main desk sits near the far wall, behind which a scribe is busy with tottering piles of paper. Several chairs and couches are situated around circular tables throughout the room, which is lit comfortably by floating braisers containing magical flames. Portraits of wizened birdfolk hang from the walls, each one wearing robes similar to those of your attendant.

Behind the main desk is a spiral staircase that leads down. The staircase is flanked by a pair of large birdfolk statues, one of which bears the likeness of a corvum whose portrait hangs from the west wall. Opposite this staircase, a circular platform rests in its own cylindrical alcove.

Professor Birchwalker leads the party onto the circular platform and utters an incantation, which causes the entire stone



disk to rise from the ground and propel the group upwards through the tree trunk. A few windows occasionally zip by on the way up, showing glimpses of the Wood and just how high the party is traveling. The platform stops halfway up the structure, and the party finds themselves in an area next to a busy atrium. Following Professor Birchwalker, everyone arrives at the Dean's office.

You and your companions enter into a round stone office. It is surrounded on all sides by windows, through which several spires and large circular terrariums can be observed slowly floating by. The many tables inside the office are filled with disorganized piles of books, and the desk is in a similar state of disorder. A sable luma peeks up from over the books. "Oh, please excuse me! I'm reviewing a few... hundred theses for my students. Excellent work! But, one does tend to lose track of time. I'm terribly sorry."

The luma is **Gabe Windsworth** (see **Appendix B, pg.201**), the Dean of the Avium. He will apologize profusely and clear a few tomes off his desk before moving to give each party member a firm handshake and an official welcome to his College. The Dean will then cut right to the chase: he knows why the party is here and what they've come for, thanks to messages from the Council. He is eager to help them find whatever they need to stop the aspect of fire. The Dean will tell the party:

“You won’t find information on something that old and powerful in just any library. Thankfully, the Avium was built upon the greatest store of knowledge in all of Humblewood... literally! Beneath the main building is the oldest structure here, a library with a collection of tomes, folios, and manuscripts gathered from all over Everden. With any luck, that’s where you’ll find what you’re looking for. Now, a disclaimer—some of the tomes in there are a little... uh, deadly. But worry not, our librarians are experts. They’ll help point you in the right direction while steering you clear of the more... ‘advanced’ materials.”

He will then give each of the characters a small amulet with the insignia of the Avium. These appear to be of lesser quality than Professor Birchwalker’s, and Dean Windsworth will inform the party that these are amulets, made especially for guest researchers. The party will then be free to roam the grounds.

The Dean knows the importance of their mission, but he also knows they’ve had a long journey. The amulets will give the party access to dormitory chambers that have been prepared specifically for them. The room will have exactly the right number of bunkbeds for the playgroup. The party won’t need to worry about food either, as their guest amulets grant them free meals at the campus dining hall. Characters are also free to sit in on any lectures they wish to attend around campus, as well as to peruse the more conventional libraries housed in the orbiting structures.



EXPLORING THE AVIUM

Refer to Fig. 4.1 (pg.138) for a map of the Avium.

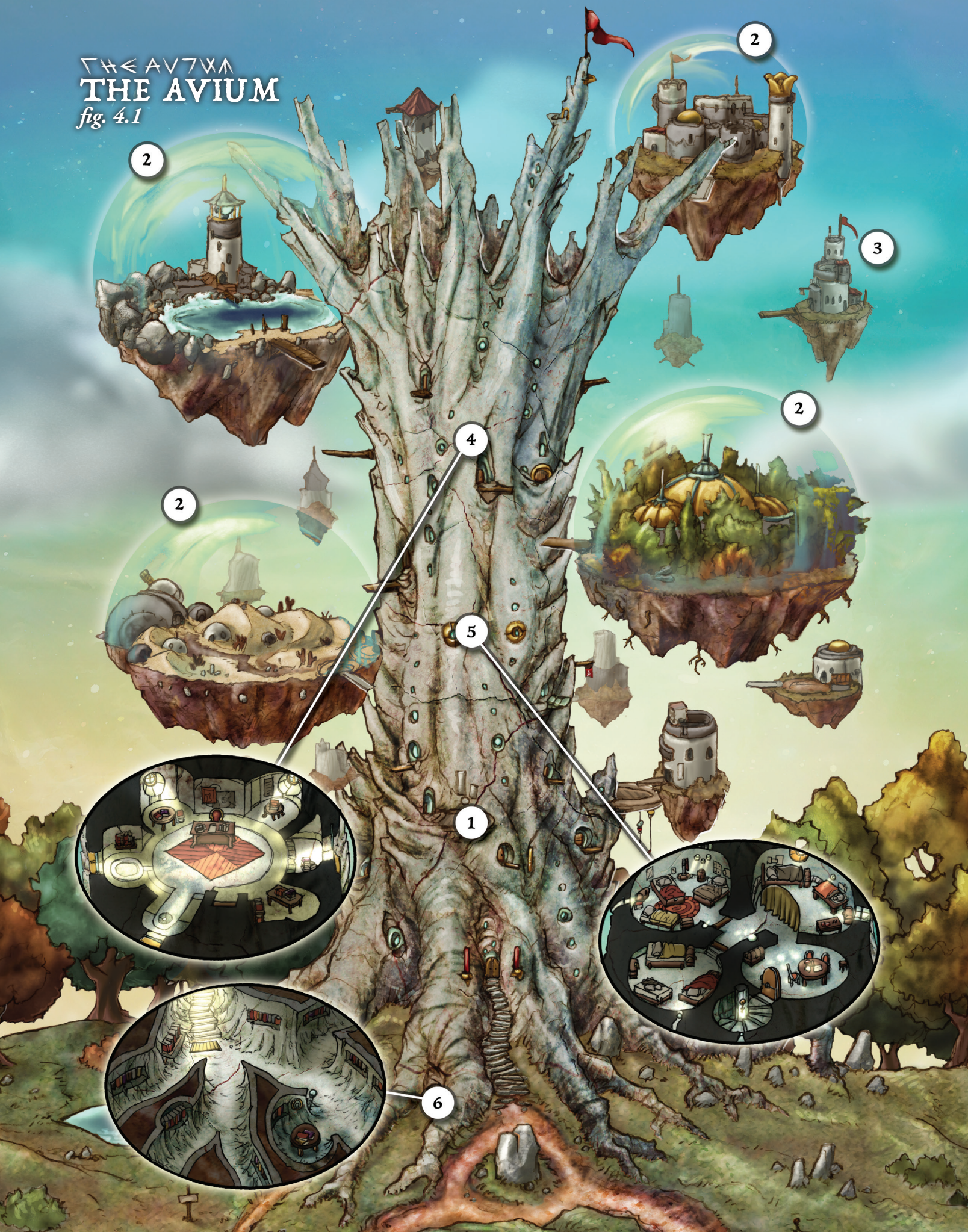
At the heart of the Avium is the central building, made from the trunk of a petrified tree. It is orbited by four terrariums and a dozen or so smaller towers. Each structure which orbits the trunk does so at varying heights and speeds, between one rotation every 10 minutes, and one rotation every half hour.

The orbiting structures each have gliding platforms and moveable bridges, which correspond with bridge sections on other structures and connect at regular intervals to form complete overpasses. These structures stay aligned for 10 minutes, allowing for crossing by foot. For humblefolk students, knowing when to cross can make the difference between missing a class and arriving on time. But for birdfolk, the entire aerial campus can be traversed with ease. If ever in doubt about how long it will take for the route to an orbiting structure to connect, roll 3d10 and use that number in minutes to decide when the next favorable rotation will be.

There are many places in the Avium for characters to explore, and characters can spend their time here however they wish. Those who so desire can learn new spells or concoct potions. To track the party’s activities, let the players know that each day they spend in the Avium consists of eight hours within which they can benefit from all the College has to offer. After this time, several campus areas close their doors to students, and only those with special faculty amulets can get past security. Studying at the College can grant one of the following benefits:

- ♦ Wizards who study here can add any spell on the wizard’s spell list to their spellbook, but they still require the necessary amount of coin and time to do this. Spells are only granted to wizards deemed worthy of their power, meaning only spells of a level the wizard could cast will be made available.
- ♦ By spending a full day studying and practicing, any bard, ranger, sorcerer or warlock can swap one spell they have learned previously for another of the same level that is on their class spell list.
- ♦ Additionally, any character proficient with a herbalism kit can avail themselves of the campus potions laboratory, which stocks reagents needed for potion making. Creating a potion can be done for the normal cost (to help cover the expenses associated with growing so many magical herbs) and only takes one day of brewing instead of the normal amount of time it would take to craft such an item.

THE AVIUM
fig. 4.1



1. CENTRAL BUILDING

Faculty offices, most lecture halls, the large communal dining hall, and the infirmary are all located in the central building. A Perch Guard station near the middle of the central building serves as the headquarters for campus security forces. Servitor skeletons can often be found here, performing janitorial tasks.

2. THE TERRARIUMS

The four terrariums are circular stone structures with bowl-shaped bottoms and mostly flat surfaces. They are contained in magical spherical fields, which allow matter to pass through, but are designed to shield and contain magical blasts. This keeps the surrounding structures safe in case of an accident. Three of the terrariums are 200 feet in diameter. They contain different biomes and are used for natural research. The fourth is smaller, only 100 feet across, and is located higher up. It houses a security building, as well as a gaol, both overseen by the Perch Guard.

3. THE TOWERS

The floating towers are between 40 to 80 feet across, and they are the oldest structures orbiting the central tree. Some house libraries and small classrooms on niche subjects, mostly for advanced students of a particular school of magic. Other towers contain laboratories for practicing spellcraft, testing established arcane theorems, and brewing potions.

4. THE DEAN'S OFFICE

Located high in the Avium's structure, this large office belongs to Dean Windsworth. More than just his private study, it is a historical part of the building, having been used by every headmaster of the Avium since the College's founding. Dean Windsworth can often be found here poring over documents.

5. DORMITORIES

The central building houses dormitories for students and faculty. The student rooms are near the lower part of the tree, and are divided by an individual's standing within the Avium, with those in their first year having rooms closer to the ground. The faculty dorms rest above these, in areas off limits to students.

6. LOWER LIBRARY

The lower library consists of a series of rooms and corridors, shaped from inside the tree's stone roots. Unlike many of the classrooms in the central building, which have been remodeled, much of the lower library remains unchanged since the days of the Avium's founding. It contains the most dangerous and rare books in the Avium, and only high ranking faculty members and a few special guest researchers are privy to the contents within. The sturdy stone shelves here are molded from the same stone that makes up the floor. They tower with books and require little in the way of care beyond dusting (though some sections are clearly overdue for it).

INTO THE LIBRARY

The staircase near the entrance leads down to the lower library. This area is only accessible to those with the appropriate pass, at appropriate times of day. If the party attempts to descend the stairs without their guest amulets or outside of normal hours, the two **stone golems** that guard the entrance (the birdfolk statues on either side of the stairway) will come to life and attempt to stop them. The golems seek only to restrain the party until Perch Guard authorities arrive. If the party attempts combat, the golems will defend themselves, but they will strike with calculated force. Any character reduced to 0 hit points by the golems will remain stable, since the sentries are under strict commands to incapacitate intruders, not kill them.

As characters enter the lower library they will be greeted by the librarian, Mordane Swiftgale, who is actually Odwald Ebonhart in disguise. This is a magical effect produced by a specially crafted pendant that Odwald wears, and as long as he (or anyone else) wears it, they will look and sound exactly like Mordane Swiftgale. This is a transmutation effect, although it has been supplemented with illusion spells so as not to appear magical when examined with detect magic or similar effects.

As you reach the bottom of the long and winding staircase, you emerge into a room filled with rows upon rows of large stone shelves, each containing several hundred books. Magical braisers illuminate this area, but their light strains to reach every nook between the large bookshelves. A swift strig sits reading behind a desk in the center of the room. As you approach he puts down his book and eyes you curiously. "The Defenders of Alderheart, I presume?"



Odwald will inform the party that he is Mordane Swiftgale, and he's been instructed to help them find whatever they need. While the request came directly from the Dean, Odwald has some trepidation about assisting the party. He fears that if the heroes start poking around, they'll discover the pages he tore from the tomes. If characters notice his nervousness and make a Wisdom (Insight) check, have Odwald make an opposed Charisma (Deception) check. Even if a character succeeds they won't find out anything incriminating, only that Mordane appears apprehensive. If characters report the missing pages to him, Odwald will feign shock and confusion and recommend they notify the Dean as such vandalism is taken very seriously. If a character doesn't believe Odwald, have the character make another Wisdom (Insight) check opposed by Odwald's Charisma (Deception) check.

A success will show the character that Mordane is clearly flustered, but nothing more. Odwald's bluster is in character with Mordane, who was always passionate about the library, and this will help to conceal his true identity.

For players who want to use their downtime to research the aspect, they need to decide what types of information to look for. The information the characters will be looking for can broadly fit into four categories: **The Scorched Grove**, **The Great Calamity**, **Elemental Creatures**, and **Conjuration Magic**. Each category has an associated amount of time required for research in order to obtain all the information for that category. This time can be lessened by having multiple characters research different areas of the same topic.

HELPING THE PARTY

If the party ends up stuck during research, or are unsure of what to do, you can always have them run into one of the NPCs in this chapter: Professor Birchwalker, Professor Revayne, or even Dean Windsworth. Any of these characters would be able to guide the party in their research and help point them towards the sections they should investigate.

Alternatively, if your party finds the research portion boring, you can skip to the incident in **Shadows Fall (pg.142)** early. This will provide some action and a quick transition from the party's investigation into the strange occurrences happening at the Avium.

While Odwald wants to stop the party's efforts, he knows just how much attention he could draw to himself if he acts out of character. He'll guide them to the first three topics, but anyone looking for help acquiring information on **Conjuration Magic** will find Mordane busying himself with other tasks, such as cataloging source materials and returning tomes to far-flung wings of the enormous underground library.

If what a player wants to research doesn't fit into one of these categories, either base the findings on what's known about the aspect (be careful not to give too much away), or rule that while they located the tome they were looking for,

all important information appears to have been on pages that were ripped out. No matter how much time the characters spend on research, the information on torn-out pages can't be found in other books.

THE SCORCHED GROVE

There are many books here regarding the Scorched Grove, and since scholarly interest in this subject is so focused on its physical properties, origins, and fauna, it won't take more than a day of research before a character finds information repeating itself or covering the same questions from increasingly esoteric angles.

Most of the writing available on the Grove covers what was already provided in **Part 3: An Urgent Summons (pg.123)**. Reiterate information for the players if necessary, or just say that no new information is available. However, one book found by a character researching this topic will contain important knowledge. The character finds the following passage:

... from the above evidence, one can conclude that the Scorched Grove displays properties which suggest extreme conjury, perhaps even the calling of a major elemental force. Whether this was conjured from a nearby plane or a farther one remains uncertain, but the readiness with which the elemental magics have taken root suggests a source in close proximity to our world.

THE GREAT CALAMITY

There is very little work of substance on the Great Calamity, as numerous books addressing the subject resort to legend more than truth. Those books which do attempt serious historical study of the event note the relative lack of credible living witnesses. In terms of overall scope, there is a wealth of material written about the Calamity, although the information is unfocused and spread across many books. It could take a character three days of research to get through all there is to read. Quite a few books have had pages torn out and these seem to reference prophecies of some kind, but it's unclear exactly what they pertain to.

The following passage was found:

... regardless of the origin of the Calamity, whether or not the rumors of an elder elemental being hold any truth to them, a magical event of incredible significance is almost certain to have taken place. The calling of such elemental energies, whether through evocation or conjuration, would require a mage of unparalleled skill, or an entity of unfathomable power.

Details on the aspect have been torn out of one book: an eyewitness account, from someone who claimed to have seen a “creature of fire and destruction.”

Read this when the torn out pages are found (see **The Old Classroom, pg.149**):

“It flared so brightly as it consumed the forest. It turned the burning trees into fuel, gaining power as it devoured them, and left naught but ashes in its wake.”

ELEMENTAL CREATURES

A fairly straightforward avenue of research, the library holds a wealth of tomes on elemental creatures. However, elementals of the size seen in the Grove comprise a narrow field of study, and a character researching this subject should be able to find everything they need to know in about two days of study. The following information can be found:

- ✦ The most important thing they will learn is that elementals of this size are normally elder elementals, incredibly powerful beings that re-shape the lands in which they live through their sheer presence. These beings would require advanced conjuration magics to summon.
- ✦ Many elder elementals have the traits of one or two elements working in concert. Stories from across Humblewood tell of a fire and earth elemental who may have been involved in the calamity that birthed the Scorched Grove.
- ✦ They’ll find this passage in an old book:

Elemental creatures composed of fire that also possess earth elemental traits tend to be incredibly strong and durable, and do not appear to retain their vulnerability to cold-typed magics. However, cold-typed magic should theoretically be able to...

- ✦ The following page is torn out. Read this when the torn out pages are found (see **The Old Classroom, pg.149**):

...slow such creatures down as it cools their molten exterior, eventually encasing them in a shell of hard earth and rendering them immobile. This is only temporary, however, and depending on the power of the creature, this immobilized state may only last for one hour.

- ✦ A fragment of text in one book reads:

Elder elementals have strong connections to the energy of their aspected element. This connection can be so strong that...

- ✦ The following page is torn out. Read this when the torn out pages are found (see **The Old Classroom, pg.149**):

...some of the most powerful elementals have been reported to regenerate themselves completely if destroyed through conventional means. They do this through the vast reservoirs of aspected energy present in areas that have been infused with their elemental aura, normally through extended exposure to the elder elemental.

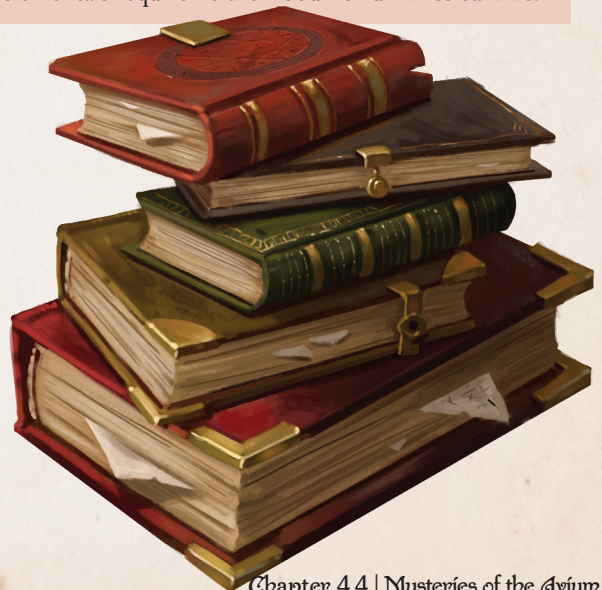
- ✦ Finally, the party may come across a few burned pages from an old tome. The pages are badly damaged, almost as if they were saved from a fire, and are kept in a small magical field to prevent further disintegration. Their origin is unknown. The following passage can be made out:

“After its defeat, the aspect of ice lost a single shard... *the Borealus*... was sealed away... A dance of fire and ice maintains the Wood’s balance... if the fire wanes, it must wane slowly, only then will its energies have time to ebb away...”

ASHSNAKE LORE

The ashsnakes were thought to be new to Humblewood, but with a bit of poking around characters can find out that the creatures may have appeared in the past.

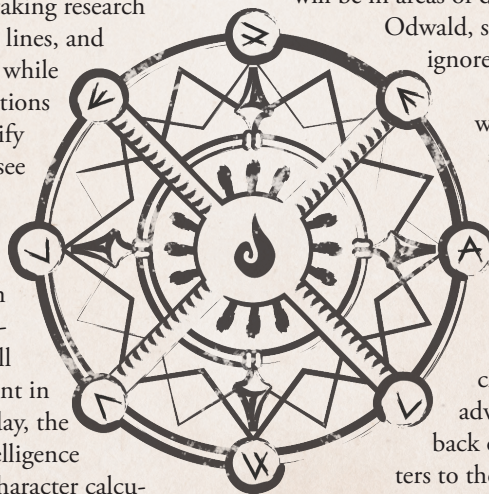
Any player that spends the full amount of days researching **Elemental Creatures** or **The Great Calamity**, while also looking for information about ashsnakes, will find a few accounts detailing sightings of similar creatures around the time of the Great Calamity. Although the ashsnakes are definitely related to the element of fire, accounts do not provide enough information to tell whether or not the creatures are elementals, and descriptions of them feeding run exactly counter to this notion, as elementals require neither food nor drink to survive.



CONJURATION MAGIC

Any player who picked up on the evidence of conjuration magic in the Grove, possibly from their encounter with the **Cloud of Emberbats** (pg.126), could have their character investigate this topic. Other research topics could lead characters here as well. This is a broad category, and even when pared down to tomes on elemental summoning, it would take time to sift through. After four days of research, a character will learn the following:

- Anything as big as the aspect would require huge amounts of energy to seal. It would take tremendous effort on the part of a creature, even one as powerful as the aspect of fire, to break free. This likely couldn't have been done without the seal being weakened by some outside force.
- A large conjuration circle would be needed in order to seal away anything as massive as the aspect of fire. The circle may have become obscured over time, but it is impossible for the aspect to have been kept dormant all this time without it.
- After finding the previous piece of information, further research will lead the party to a cryptic tome: a treatise by a conjurer who attempted to calculate the location of the postulated conjuration circle within the Grove. The conjurer's treatise is based on painstaking research on energy readings, topography, ley lines, and other academic esoterica. However, while the complex formulae of his calculations remain, the pages that actually specify the location have been ripped out (see **The Old Classroom**, pg.149). Without the missing page, the conjurer's calculations could be worked through to find the location of the circle, but it would be incredibly challenging, taking at least a full day of research by someone proficient in the Arcana skill. At the end of the day, the researcher must make a DC 21 Intelligence (Arcana) check. On a success, the character calculates the circle's postulated location in the Grove, which is on it's eastern edge, at a point between Winnowing Reach and Alderheart. On a failure, the character must repeat the process, requiring another full day of calculations. Other characters can help with this roll, granting advantage to the character rolling for the check, but only if the supporting characters are also proficient in the Arcana skill. Professor Birchwalker can also help a character perform the calculations to find the location of the conjuration circle within the Grove.



SHADOWS FALL

After the party completes five days of research, Odwald will become nervous. He'll try to use a necromantic ritual ripped from one of the tomes he stole in an attempt to scare the party off. He'll wait until the party members are absorbed in their tasks before acting. When no one is watching him, he will use *greater invisibility* to move unseen and unheard between the large stacks, then cast the ritual slowly and quietly. Once Odwald completes the ritual, he'll discard the useless ritual page in a place where the characters can find it, attempting to frame another necromancer on campus. If characters search the area where the shadows appeared, they will find the page. A DC 16 Intelligence (Arcana) check will reveal the dark runes scratched upon the parchment to be associated with particularly foul necromancy. All the magic in the runes has been spent.

Odwald's ritual curses the characters, causing their **shadow** to detach and become an undead creature in the character's likeness. The shadows each attack the character to which they are closest, and if in an area of dim light they will use their bonus action to hide immediately before making their attack. Party members in the main areas of the library will be in conditions of bright light, while those between the shelves will be in areas of dim light. If anyone calls for help,

Odwald, still disguised as Mordane, will hear it but ignore their pleas.

Once the shadows are defeated, Odwald will arrive and make excuses for his absence at the onset of battle. He'll tell a story about having to return some terribly fragile evocation scrolls to a far-away section of the library. If any characters doubt this story, have them make opposed Wisdom (Insight) checks against Odwald's Charisma (Deception) check. Odwald makes this check with advantage. He knows this library like the back of his talon and can easily lead the characters to the exact section where he placed the tomes earlier to set up this alibi.

If a party member succeeds, let it be known Mordane is hiding something, but don't reveal exactly what. A good thing to note is that a party member's success should put him on a list of potential suspects for the strange occurrences on campus, not force the final encounter early. If pressured, Odwald would likely keep up his ruse, and even call security on the party if they try a heavy-handed tactic like resorting to intimidation.

Regardless of the conversation, Odwald will ask if the party requires aid, and if any have been injured he will use his faculty amulet to contact Avium security and medics. The party members will be escorted to the infirmary, where healers will tend to their wounds and examine them with divination magic. The healers will ask any characters who've taken Strength damage to finish a short rest in the infirmary, to make sure the curse of undeath is fully purged. Characters should return to normal after completing a short or long rest.

UNMAKING THE MYSTERY

This isn't recommended, but should the decision be made to force the final encounter early—if the party isn't the type for mysteries—this section will detail how they can proceed from this point. Make sure to read everything from **The Secret Door (pg.147)** to get a rough idea of the dungeon the party will be going into.

If at any point “Mordane” is presumed to be behind the strange happenings, make sure the disguised Odwald has time to escape from the party (with his spells he should have plenty of ways to evade them). Then, have him flee through his secret passageway, which the party must uncover in order to continue their pursuit.

The party can even appeal to the Dean for help, as Dean Windsworth would now be forced to agree that something suspicious seems to have happened to Mordane.

If Odwald made it to his laboratory, he'll stay hidden there, working on his calculations. Because he knows the party is coming, he will have the **cobblefright** guarding **The Old Classroom (pg.149)** to make it easier for him to escape.

MYSTERIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES

The day after the party's encounter with the shadows, they will be awoken by a knock on their dormitory door. Professor Birchwalker will inform the party that the Dean wishes to see them as soon as possible. The party will find the Dean in his office in a nervous state. He'll ask them to shut the door moments after entering.

Dean Windsworth fixes you with a serious stare and anxiously speaks: “You aren't the first to have an ‘incident’ in the past few weeks. I... uh, don't mean to alarm you, but several strange things have been reported across campus and... well, this college was made by powerful wizards, and... we haven't really figured out everything those old codgers left hidden here. Magical defenses and the like. We've had a few uh...accidents in the past. I hope that isn't the case...but if it is, well, you folks are the Defenders of Alderheart, right? I can't think of anyone else I'd rather have looking into this.”

The Dean will elaborate if the characters have questions. He's received odd reports from across campus, and believes them to be the result of some as yet undiscovered magical defense built into the Avium being accidentally triggered. He has a few leads that might help the party find out what's happening. Normally, the Dean would trust such investigations to the Perch Guard, but he has so little to go on at this point that he'd rather not involve them if it turns out to be something minor. If the party mentions anything suspicious on the part of the faculty, the Dean will insist they gather sufficient proof first. He trusts his staff and will need hard evidence

before he can even consider the possibility of one of them being to blame. The Dean outlines three leads for the party to follow-up on:

- A poor student, **Figory Figgins (see Appendix B, pg.196)**, is a skittish jerbeen who recently applied for sick leave. He filed reports about experiencing something unusual and frightening on campus. Most people think he's exaggerating to gain a medical exemption from classes, but the Dean believes something scared Figory. In truth, Figory was attacked by the **cobblefright**, and was afflicted when it drained some of his vitality. The party will find Figory in the first year dormitories in the central building, near the ground floor (see **The Unnerved Underachiever, pg.143**).
- **Corvax Revayne (see Appendix B, pg.195)**, a dusk corvum divination instructor, has made cryptic predictions, regarding a bad event that's either going to, or already has happened on the campus. He's a brilliant scholar, but also a bit of an oddball. It would be of great help if the party could check in and see what exactly the old corvum has predicted. It might be related to the events on campus. He has an office in the central building, but he can be found in the divination lab in one of the outer spires (see **A Disturbed Diviner, pg.144**).
- A studious sera luma named **Jell Platena (see Appendix B, pg.200)** has lodged a complaint about the servitor skeletons on campus acting oddly. It's minor, but it might be worth looking into. Jell doesn't know this, but what she saw was the direct result of Odwald controlling the servitor skeletons to help in his research. She can be found in one of the libraries in the inner spires (see **The Apprehensive Apprentice, pg.145**).

THE UNNERVED UNDERACHIEVER

The party will find Figory in his room. He'll be hesitant to talk with them, as he is accustomed to being bullied by the other students.

The door to the dormitory room opens only a crack, and through it you can see a small eye looking at you nervously. A timid voice squeaks, “Who are you? What do you want?”

If the party explains they're here to question Figory, he'll shut the door and ask them to leave. The party can convince him to let them in with a DC 14 Charisma (Persuasion) check or a DC 12 Charisma (Intimidation) check. They can also try a more subtle route, such as claiming they were sent to check up on his health. Figory, really does feel burdened with his secret, but he isn't convinced people will believe him.

Figory looks pale and weak. His face is drained of color and his eyes are heavy, as though he hasn't slept. If the party persuaded their way in or otherwise entered in a non-threatening way, Figory will open up and tell them his story. If they intimidated or otherwise bullied their way in, they'll have to

succeed on another Intimidation skill check (at the same DC) to get him to speak. On a failure, he won't talk, and if the party continues to push he'll ask them to leave immediately, warning the group that he will call for campus security if they don't. If the party can get him to speak, this is the story Figory tells:

"It was a cold night. It was raining. I—I could hear scratching, like something scraping at the wall outside my window. When I looked out, I saw it. This huge monster was c-c-climbing with its c-claws... It saw me too. It had four eyes. Four big red eyes. It opened its mouth and... I think I passed out. When I woke up I felt sick, and it—it was just gone. You probably think I'm crazy... don't you?"

If the party asks around to see if other students heard or saw anything, there will be no corroboration. It was raining heavily, and even Figory will admit to only being able to hear the creature faintly through the downpour. If anyone in the party casts detect magic on Figory they will find that he has a faint aura of necromancy about him, as though he was recently affected by necromantic magic.

Figory isn't interested in getting too involved in the investigation. He explains that he has to focus on his health in order to be ready for the next semester, but it would be a great comfort to know the party has caught the creature he saw before it can hurt someone. He will provide them with any information he can before they leave.

If the party examines the outside of the trunk where Figory saw the creature, a DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check will be enough to uncover marks on the trunk's surface, as well as a few pieces of bone peeking out of the soft earth.

The marks on the trunk are faded and subtler than one would expect from Figory's story. These are leftover from the transmutation magic Odwald used to cover up the damage done by his escaped cobblerfright creation. Any wizard specializing in transmutation can instantly identify magical tampering on the trunk upon examination. Such a character would also be able to tell that whoever covered up these markings wasn't a specialist transmuter: there are differences in the way the magic was used here, and a true master of this magical school could have blended these markings seamlessly. The same information could be discerned by any other character with a DC 16 Intelligence (Arcana) check.

The bone fragments on the ground can be identified as birdfolk bones with a DC 15 Wisdom (Medicine) or Wisdom (Survival) check, but the pieces are too small to make out anything else. The bones feel strange to anyone holding them, somehow imparting a sense of unease. Casting *detect magic* on the bones will reveal them to have a strong aura of necromancy.



A DISTURBED DIVINER

Professor Revayne is in his classroom, at a table specially prepared for divination. He is performing some kind of ritual with a set of small animal bones when the party enters. The interruption causes him to lose focus and curse at the party, until he realizes they are the Defenders of Alderheart. Then, he is eager for their aid in convincing the Dean to mount an investigation regarding the strange omens he keeps reading in relation to the College. Instead of explaining further, Professor Revayne will demonstrate by performing the *augury* ritual now.

As he casts the magic, and throws a set of small animal bones inside a prepared ritual circle, they begin to glow. A soft voice speaks, revealing a cryptic clue:

A black heart lies among the white and gray, but in the dimness it is hard to say,

Who is friend, and who is foe? The master weal, the monster woe.

This is what the ritual has revealed every day for the last few weeks. The professor is unsure what to make of it, but he thinks the first line might hint that the threat comes from someone people trust on campus: a student, or perhaps even a faculty member.

If showed the bones from **The Unnerved Underachiever (pg.143)**, Professor Revayne will cast *detect magic* on them, and report the necromantic aura. This is outside of his area of expertise, but he'll postulate they might be from one of the servitor skeletons that perform menial tasks throughout the school. If the party tells the professor about the creature Figory described, he'll be unnerved and caution them to proceed carefully. Necromancy is only taught in theory at the Avium, and the servitor skeletons are all former faculty members or alumni who willingly donated their remains to the College after a natural death. If anyone were to have created something else, it would surely be cause for alarm. Either way, if Professor Revayne found or heard that the bones appear to have an aura of necromancy about them, he'll direct the party to **Glinda Nightseed (see Appendix B, pg.195)**, a professor of theoretic necromancy (see **The Necromancer, pg.145**).

THE APPREHENSIVE APPRENTICE

It might take the party a bit of time to locate Jell. She's a serious student, and is often on the go from one place to the next for classes, extra credit activities, and her own personal studies. If the party asks around campus, during the day they should be able to find which library she's currently in with a DC 13 Charisma (Investigation) check. They can also ask the Dean for her dorm room location, where they'll be able to track her down at night, but she might not be in much of a mood to talk at that point.

Once they manage to find a suitable time to speak with her, Jell will tell the party she noticed the servitor skeletons behaving weirdly. This is her story:

"Well, I was finishing up an extra credit assignment for Professor Leachwood in the potions lab, when something strange happened. The servitors that were cleaning up the lab stopped, walked out of the lab, and went toward the crossing platform. I was curious, so I followed them. It looked like they were headed into the lower library. I would have followed them down, but I don't have access to the lower levels."

Jell filed a notice with the administration that day, but figured it was their doing after she didn't hear anything back. She guesses it might have been a planned drill or maintenance. She won't be able to provide more information than this, but she can point the party to Professor Glinda Nightseed who teaches an advanced course in theoretic necromancy (see **The Necromancer, pg.145**). If anyone were to know what was happening with the skeletons, it would be Professor Nightseed.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

If the party suspects that the individual they believe to be Mordane Swiftgale is behind the strange happenings, they may begin to investigate him. If Odwald realizes he has come under suspicion, he will try to draw attention to Professor Glinda Nightseed, as she is the perfect scapegoat. Odwald hopes by diverting the party's suspicions, he will buy himself time to

continue his experiments in peace. Even if the party is clueless as to Odwald's involvement, or have already spoken to Professor Nightseed, Odwald will attempt to shift their investigation towards her by dropping the following information:

"A few days ago, Professor Nightseed came by with a rather unusual request. It was for the *Necronomicon Ex Corvis*, a tome of powerful necromancy spells. Normally such dangerous books are not permitted to leave the lower library, but she insisted. Of course, she returned it after studying it for some time, but recently that same tome has gone missing from my shelves. I have been waiting to hear back from the appropriate channels, but it seems that whoever has taken the book wished to leave me shouldering the blame. I have my suspicions, but... I cannot very well level such an accusation at a tenured professor without proof."

THE NECROMANCER

Professor Glinda Nightseed can be found in her office in the main building, or in a classroom in one of the outer spires where she teaches theoretical necromancy. Strictures in the Avium forbid her from practicing necromancy on campus, with the exception of reanimating those who wished to serve the College in death.

Professor Nightseed seems nice enough, if a little strange, and she is a skilled necromancer. But the Professor is hiding a secret that makes her seem very suspicious, especially around the subject of the campus' servitor skeletons. She has been using these legal reanimations to practice new ways of imbuing simple undead creatures with greater faculties, on par with the living. This is gray-area work, definitely bending some of the strictures against necromancy at the Avium, if not breaking the rules outright, and it could cost the professor her job.

If the party has the bones found in **The Unnerved Underachiever (pg.143)**, Professor Nightseed will be able to tell them that the bones carry a strong aura of necromancy, something dark and sinister. It genuinely spooks her.

If the party mentions the servitor skeletons they heard about in **The Apprehensive Apprentice (pg.145)**, the professor will become visibly uncomfortable. Professor Nightseed's secret makes her nervous at this point, and she'll simply say she couldn't guess as to why this might be happening. Any player who succeeds on a DC 12 Wisdom (Insight) check will be able to tell that the professor is lying. Professor Nightseed won't discuss the subject further, and if the party pushes her she'll ask them to leave.

If the party decides to break into Professor Nightseed's office to investigate, they can find a notebook within a locked desk drawer (DC 16 Dexterity check to unlock with thieves' tools). The professor's notes will reveal her secret manipulation of the servitor skeletons.



Professor Nightseed

The party will also notice a necromancy tome on the professor's bookshelf. This is the *Necronomicon Ex Corvis**, out of which Odwald tore a page to cast his ritual in **Shadows Fall (pg. 142)**, though it appears to have additional pages missing. Odwald planted the book here to frame Professor Nightseed.

Tomes like the *Necronomicon Ex Corvis** are dangerous and restricted material on campus. Any character caught with the book risks being banned from the Avium (see **Developments, pg. 152**).

If confronted by the party, Professor Nightseed will claim to know nothing of how the forbidden book managed to get in her office. She will even go so far as to insist the party hand the book back to her so that she might bring it to the lower library, citing its danger in inexperienced hands.

Should the party have read Glinda's notebook, they can confront her about her experiments. In this case, she will admit to some wrongdoing, but ask the party to keep her experiments a secret. As an expert on both the good and evil sides of necromancy, Professor Nightseed assures them that while her research is not strictly permitted, she is not using any sinister magics to achieve her results. She is simply researching ways to resurrect the dead at a lower cost of both materials and magical energy, and these experiments are key to crafting cutting-edge magics. The impressions remaining within the servitor skeletons may hold the solution to successfully completing her research.



If forced into combat, Professor Nightseed's primary goal is to restrain the heroes and escape to call security. She doesn't wish to kill the party, and will refrain from any spells or tactics that might result in their death.

If the party informs the Dean that they found the *Necronomicon Ex Corvis** in Professor's Nightseed's office (or convince the Dean to have Perch Guard security search Professor Nightseed's office, where they will surely find the contraband grimoire) the Dean will be satisfied that the party has found the one responsible for summoning the shadows (as the missing page from this book was clearly the one used to cast that ritual), and Professor Nightseed will be imprisoned in the gaol for questioning. The professor will protest her innocence to the last.

If the party has no conclusive evidence linking Professor Nightseed to any wrongdoing on campus, Glinda will be released and the party will be reprimanded by the Dean for their error in judgement. Dean Windsworth will give them another chance, however, as they are still the best hope at finding out who or what is causing these disturbances.

Revealing Professor Nightseed's secret research will result in a less harsh reprimand for the party. The Professor will be released from custody, but her experiments constitute a serious breach of campus rules, and she'll lose her job. Either way, the party had best be certain the next time they accuse a faculty member, since another mistake like this could get them banned from the campus.

TREASURE

If a character didn't return the book planted by Odwald, they will now be in possession of the *Necronomicon Ex Corvis**. The page containing the Grasp of Shadows ritual has been torn out.

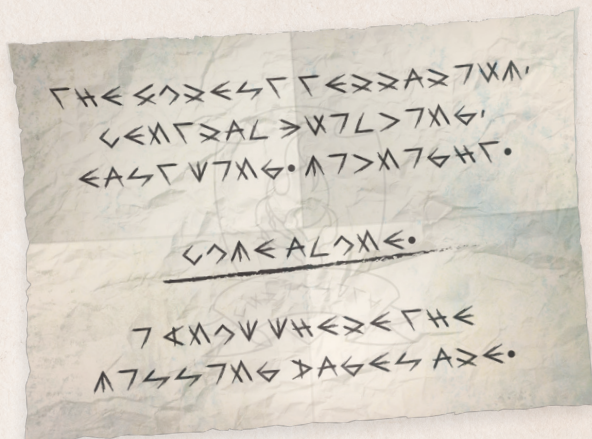
ODWALD'S TRAP

If the party fell for Odwald's framing of Professor Nightseed, it shouldn't take more than an interrogation to discover that she knows nothing of the missing pages. This development is something Odwald hadn't considered, and now he worries that he might have incriminated himself by leading the party to her.

Similarly, if the party has been to visit Glinda but haven't turned her in, Odwald worries it'll only be a matter of time before the suspicion falls on him.

Using various methods of disguise and surveillance, Odwald is keeping an eye on the party as they investigate around campus. The characters might not be aware of it yet, but every person they talk to will unwittingly provide a clue pointing toward Odwald's involvement. Their continued investigation will push an already skittish Odwald over the edge, and prompt him to lay a trap for the party, hoping to put them out of commission for the rest of their stay at the Avium.

A day after the party meets with Glinda Nightseed (if she was not arrested), or two days afterward (if she was arrested), a note will be slipped under the door of the party's dormitory room. Scrawled on the parchment in scratchy letters are the words:



“The Forest Terrarium, Central Building, East Wing. Midnight. Come alone. I know where the missing pages are.”

If the party alerts the Dean (or anyone who might tell the Dean), he will attempt to stop them from going, insisting it's too dangerous. The Dean will request the party allow the Perch Guard to handle the situation. The party can refuse, but if the Perch Guard attends the meeting, with or without the party, Odwald will abandon his trap (skip to **The Secret Door**). If the party arrives at the terrarium unaccompanied, read the following:

It is a dark, moonless night as you step onto the large floating disc that houses the Forest Terrarium. You find yourself in an unusual woodland with several types of trees that don't look quite right beside one another. In the center of this place is a building, made up of a great central dome which branches off into two semi-spherical wings on either side. The night is deathly quiet.

Anyone can make a DC 12 Intelligence (Nature) or Wisdom (Survival) check to discover these trees don't naturally grow next to one another. Some might even have been altered by magic. The central building has no door, simply a wide archway that leads into the interior of the domed structure. This is a museum, and behind glass panels the party can see fossils, as well as magical recreations of extinct plants. The west and east wing both contain fossils and skeletons of animals from different points in the natural history of Humblewood. The sound of chanting carries over from the east wing. When the party enters the east wing read the following:

You see a shadow moving in the distance, and hear the sound of sharp footfalls on the smooth stone floor. Suddenly, two elk skeletons flash with crackling, dark energy, and burst from their glass confines. They circle your party.

Use the stat block for a **minotaur skeleton** to determine the fighting capabilities of the elk skeletons. Replace the minotaur's greataxe attack with a hoof attack that deals the same amount of bludgeoning damage. The skeletons will attack the nearest targets, and pursue any characters who flee if there isn't at least one character to keep their attention in the main room.

At the start of the elk encounter, the party catches a glimpse of someone fleeing. The retreating figure is an undisguised Odwald, who needed to be nearby to reanimate the skeletons. Odwald's robes are enough to conceal his features, but any character within 5 feet of him will be able to tell he is a corvum. If anyone follows the sound of his footsteps, they will end up outside where they witness a dark hooded figure leap from the terrarium's edge, feathered arms outstretched. Within a round, Odwald will use a scroll of *fly* he has prepared to hide in the darkness within the rotating spires of the College. From there he can use *greater invisibility* to guarantee his escape. If forced to defend himself, Odwald will fight, looking to end things quickly while making his escape. While not intent on killing anyone, Odwald isn't opposed to seriously injuring his opponents. All the better if it slows down their investigation.

After combat, characters will be able to search the Forest Terrarium for clues. Any character who succeeds on a DC 16 Intelligence (Investigation) check will discover a scroll which was accidentally dropped by Odwald in his retreat. This heavy vellum scroll bears necromantic symbols. It is also clearly marked as material belonging in the lower library. A character can attempt a DC 18 Intelligence (Arcana) check to decipher the spell, but a Wizard of the Necromancy Arcane Tradition rolls with advantage. On a success, the character will deduce that these sigils form a spell designed to control large numbers of simple undead, such as the Avium's servitor skeletons. Characters who fail this check can take this scroll to Professor Nightseed (if she hasn't been arrested) or to the Dean, either of whom will be able to decipher it and tell the party that this is scroll forbidden to leave the library. Furthermore, it looks to have been altered by a highly skilled mage to enhance its effectiveness.

THE SECRET DOOR

The goal of the events at the Avium is to lead the players to this point. If they've completed enough of the above tasks, they should have sufficient clues to understand there is necromancy at play on campus, the culprit is a faculty member, and the mystery leads to the lower library.

If the party needs more help, have Dean Windsworth call them up to discuss their progress. Once he hears their evidence, he could reasonably conclude the lower library is a good place to investigate further, and he can even point them toward some of the older documents about the Avium's

construction for clues as to what he still desperately wants to believe is just a malfunctioning magical defense.

If the party decides to investigate the lower library, they can find what they're looking for in one of three ways:

If the party spends a full day stealthily staking out Mordane Swiftgale, they may catch him sneaking off behind some shelves, which could lead them to the wall with the hidden door. This requires a group Dexterity (Stealth) check against DC 14. Reduce the DC to 10 if Glinda was apprehended, as Odwald will be less careful with a scapegoat behind bars. Either way, if the party fails this check, Odwald will notice their efforts and not use the secret entrance.

If the party spends a day in the lower library, they will notice some of the servitor skeletons abruptly stop their programmed tasks. Should the characters follow the skeletons closely, the skeletons will lead them to a wall that appears to be a dead end, but which actually hides a secret door.

If the party researches the documents on the Avium's construction, after a day of research, the party will find an old scroll with lower library blueprints that show plans for lower level classrooms and laboratories. It's hard to tell from the blueprints if these were ever built. The area indicated on the plans is bricked off and is now a wall.

Regardless of how they are led to the wall in the lower library, investigating it with a successful DC 15 Investigation check will reveal a hidden door. The door opens when pushed inward, causing a stone slab to recede into a groove, revealing a secret path. Some hidden mechanism resets the door after five seconds have passed, but there is enough time for everyone to make it through before it closes. A lever on the opposite side of the door can be used to open it again. Once the party makes it through the door, read:

You and your companions find yourselves in a small hallway, dimly-lit by motes of magical light which float in slow, random patterns near the passageway's ceiling. The hall before you continues downward into darkness. Twenty feet ahead, to your left, a door has been left ajar.

This hallway is 10 feet wide and 100 feet long. The magical motes follow the party through the area, continually providing them with dim light. As the hallway proceeds, it turns at regu-

lar intervals until it ends at a closed door. Light is streaming from the crack beneath it (see **The Old Classroom**, pg.149).

The open door leads to a small room that looks like an office (see **The Study Room**).

THE STUDY ROOM

This small stone room smells musty and old. Bookshelves line the walls, though they are mainly empty, and there is a table against the right wall. A cushioned chair sits in the middle of the room. Most of the furniture is old, except for the chair, which appears to be a new addition. A simple wooden door lies to the left.

When the characters enter the study, they will notice that it's clean, and appears to have seen recent use. The wooden door to the left of the entrance opens into a closet, which contains the real librarian, Mordane Swiftgale. Mordane is standing upright, though his eyes are closed as if he is sleeping, and he's surrounded by a field of swirling gray energy, which has a jelly-like viscosity when touched. He does not appear to be breathing. If Mordane is checked for a pulse, a character will find that he is alive, but his pulse is beating at an incredibly slow rate. It is obvious he's being kept alive and imprisoned by this magic, but a DC 18 Intelligence (Arcana) check is required for a character to figure out that necromancy is involved, and that it's holding Mordane in a state of suspended animation. This effect can be dispelled, and counts as a 4th level spell for the purposes of determining the DC of *dispel magic*.

A crystal pendant hangs from a hook on the inside of the closet door. The pendant looks familiar, and any character who succeeds on a DC 14 Intelligence check, or who has the Sharp Mind trait, will recognize it as the one worn by the birdfolk they know as Mordane. Analyzing the pendant reveals it to possess both moderate transmutation and illusion auras. Anyone who puts on the pendant assumes the appearance of Mordane Swiftgale, and an examination of the character in this form will reveal no magical aura of any kind until the pendant is removed.

The doorway that led into the study is the only exit, and will lead players back to the main hallway.



THE OLD CLASSROOM

As you and your companions travel down the dim hall, you are met with the unmistakable smell of death. There's no ambient sound here, aside from your own footsteps. You pass by empty rooms, all of which look to have been long abandoned, but soft candlelight seeps out from beneath a closed door at the end of the hallway.

The hallway within 20 feet of the wooden door is guarded by a permanent *alarm* spell, and if the alarm is triggered Odwald will receive a silent signal in his mind.

A character that sneaks up to the door without triggering the alarm and presses their ear against the door can hear soft, incomprehensible speech, as if someone is muttering, along with strange clacking noises and a hollow scraping sound. If a character triggers the alarm, however, there will be nothing but eerie silence.

The door opens into 40-foot-wide, 80-foot-long classroom containing Odwald and five *birdfolk skeletons*. There is a passageway to the west of Odwald's desk that leads into darkness. The servitor skeletons are under his control, and he had them working on various blackboards set up around the room, writing out arcane equations.

If the alarm was triggered, Odwald will have pulled his skeletons away from their calculations into defensive positions. He won't send his minions out to attack the party, but he and his undead servants will be ready for them when they open the door. The party will begin combat surprised.

If the alarm wasn't triggered, Odwald will be surprised at the beginning of combat, and will be found seated at a paper strewn desk, doing calculations. His skeletons will still be at their chalkboards when the party opens the door. Odwald can command the skeletons to defend him as a bonus action on his turn.

If the party is aware of the alarm, through *detect magic* or a similar effect, they can plan to storm the room to try and catch Odwald off guard. If they do this, Odwald will not be surprised, as his alarm will still trigger, but he won't have had time to pull his skeletons into defensive positions either. Roll initiative as normal.

After a round of combat, Odwald will make for the passageway to the left, which leads to a staircase. His primary goal is escape, but he may throw out a spell or two before he does so in order to keep the party off-balance while they fight his minions. If things are looking particularly bad for Odwald he'll use greater invisibility to protect himself as he flees. Once Odwald has fled, the skeletons will bar entry to the passageway, lashing out at the party with rusty weapons and sharp, bony talons.

TREASURE

In the old classroom, the party finds some of the missing pages (see *Into the Library*, [pg.139](#)) on the desk. However, it's clear he's taken some crucial information with him. If they take at least an hour to look through everything here, the party will also have enough information to discover the culprit's name: Odwald Ebonhart.

If the party defeats or captures Odwald in *The Old Classroom*, then the *cobblefright*, no longer able to feel its master's control, will climb the stairs to investigate. Freed from Odwald's command, the cobblefright is hungry for the character's life energy, and any characters attempting to take a short rest in the classroom will soon find it interrupted.

Once the fight with the cobblefright has been concluded, refer to the developments section (see *Developments*, [pg.152](#)) to see what happens.







Odwald Ebonhart

THE SECRET LABORATORY

fig. 4.2



-  COBBLEFRIGHT
-  ODWALD
-  STARTING LOCATION
-  ESCAPE ROUTE

THE SECRET LABORATORY

The stairway that Odwald fled through leads from **The Old Classroom (pg.149)** down to his laboratory. If the party follows Odwald immediately after the previous encounter, they will be able to engage him there, though they may be surprised to find that he isn't alone. the **cobblefright** he created lurks in the darkness.

Refer to Fig. 4.2 for a map of the Secret Laboratory.

USING THE SECRET LABORATORY MAP

When the party descends to Odwald's Lab, have them start in the space marked with a white "X." Suggested placements for Odwald and his cobblefright are shown for ease of play. If Odwald flees from the laboratory, he will head through the door marked with a red asterisk (*) and down the spiral staircase to the tunnels and passages below the College.

You find yourself in a macabre laboratory. An assortment of bones lays strewn across the tables, and foul-smelling liquids bubble in pots. The stench of death is gut-wrenching. A terrifying creature lurches towards you, a hulking monstrosity of bone and sinew. It appears to be comprised of hundreds of birdfolk bones, jumbled together to form a roughly humanoid shape. The arms end in several talons intertwined into circular claws, and the creature's face is made from the top halves of two birdfolk skulls, one atop the other. It gazes at you with its four empty red eyes and emits a shriek.

As long as Odwald is near, the cobblefright won't go on the offensive unless the order is given, but it stands ready to defend itself or its master. Have Odwald say:

"You don't understand what you're doing. Stay out of my way!"

Given the chance, Odwald will explain his plans, detailing his creation of the cobblefright from deceased birdfolk, and telling of how he stole the information he needed to stop the aspect. The aspect is immortal, and the only sure way to defeat it for good is to drain its vital energies through necromancy. To Odwald, stopping the aspect is worth any risk. He is condescending to the party at every opportunity. He is arrogant, and doesn't think the Defenders of Alderheart could possibly understand what he sees as necessary steps to stop the aspect. He is also deeply afraid for the future of the Wood, and doesn't believe the party can be trusted to defeat the aspect on their own.

Depending on if the party hears him out or not, it may be possible to talk Odwald out of moving forward with his plan. Even if they may not be able to argue logic with Odwald, he might listen if the party can make an emotional appeal. Though Odwald acts as if his plan has been well-considered,

he is entirely motivated by fear, and he hasn't actually given himself time to think through the consequences of his actions. Any character who can convince him that he's not thinking clearly may help him recognize his folly.

If the party manages to reason with him, create tension by having Odwald lose control of the cobblefright just as he is about to surrender quietly. Fearing for his life, Odwald's cowardice will compel him to flee, apologizing as he leaves the party to fight his mistake. Though, if reasoned with, Odwald will return after the battle to face his demons, and offer to let the party turn him in to the Dean.

If the party attacks Odwald, or fails to reason with him, he will order the cobblefright to hold them off while he flees. Though he intends for the cobblefright to do this nonlethally, the creature's corrupted and evil nature will cause it to attack with maximum violence.

Should the players have difficulty with this fight, have Odwald experience a change of heart and come back to assist against the cobblefright. With this change of heart, Odwald will allow the party to turn him over to the authorities.

If a character attempts to capture a retreating Odwald, allow the character following him as he flees to try and catch up to him, but give Odwald a 60-foot head-start. Odwald won't bother attacking his pursuer unless it's absolutely necessary to avoid capture. Instead, he will turn invisible and attempt to lose any character chasing him in the winding passageways.

TREASURE

The Defenders of Alderheart are celebrated for uncovering Odwald's scheme and putting a stop to his creation before things got any worse. The real Mordane will thank them personally for freeing him.

Provided that the characters broke none of the Avium's rules, the Dean welcomes each character back to study, seek information in the libraries, or even to teach a class if they possess the requisite skills and interest to do so. Additionally, the Dean offers a *ring of spell-storing*, which contains the *stellar bodies** spell, cast by him at 5th level, along with two *potions of resistance* which grant resistance to fire damage. He hopes these will help in the party's quest to save Humblewood from the aspect's fury.

The Dean will also grant the party the sigil sequence to a secret teleportation circle within the College, as well as an amulet emblazoned with the Avium's crest, which allows them faculty-level access to campus resources. The Avium is home to the only teleportation circle in Humblewood, which is a closely-guarded secret. Those who learn this sequence can teleport to the Avium using the magic contained in their faculty-level amulets, but this can only be done once per day, and only to return to the Avium's teleportation circle. Upon arrival by way of the circle, campus security will demand they show their faculty amulet for identification.

REWARDS

- Award standard XP for defeated foes.
- For completing research in the lower library: 300 XP per character.
- For investigating any claims by Figory, Corvax, or Jell: 117 XP per character, per claim investigated.
- For investigating Professor Nightseed: 200 XP per character.
- For discovering Odwald's secret identity in the Necromancers Trap: 200 XP per character.

If you are using the milestone rules for experience, each character should now reach level 5.

DEVELOPMENTS

If any character was caught with the Necronomicon Ex Corvis (This is the book that Odwald planted in Professor Glinda Nightseed's office, see **The Necromancer, pg.145**), they will not receive the faculty-level amulet and teleportation circle sequence and will be informed that they have been banned from the Avium. Other party members may suffer the same fate for failing to report such a dangerous tome and return it to those trained in its proper care. At the Dean's behest, any banned characters may be granted restricted, temporary access to the Avium. The Avium will still provide any aid the Defenders of Alderheart might require to quell the threat of the aspect, but only under strict supervision. After the aspect is dealt with, anyone banned from the College will no longer be welcomed at the Avium. The characters can protest, but while the Dean is sympathetic, he'll ultimately uphold the rules of the institution.

If Odwald has been apprehended, the Dean will express shock and disappointment that a brilliant alumni of the College would perpetrate such heinous actions under his beak. However, as Odwald explains the gravity of the situation, the Dean will take a moment to consider. Odwald will mention his research has yielded results: if the aspect can't be destroyed, the party may be able to re-seal it in such a way that its harmful energies are contained. It's a long shot, but he knows a seer of great talent, who can help them find an item that could theoretically be used to stop the aspect. Should they allow him some time to rest, he can locate her and help the party bring an end to this menace.

It's up to the party whether or not they accept Odwald's help, but Dean Windsworth will advise that this could represent the best option for success, even if they don't like the idea of teaming up with Odwald. For his part, the Dean will ensure the necromancer is held in custody, and he will make sure Odwald faces judgement before the Council at Alderheart for his crimes. Odwald will accept whatever consequences his actions have brought, so long as the party promises to stop the aspect before it destroys the Wood.

If Odwald was slain, it will take some time for his background and the full scope of his research to be uncovered. However, it's clear from the evidence gathered that he had an interest in researching the aspect. The Dean will task his best scholars with studying the old corvum's notes. They will contact the party when they've found something.

If Odwald escaped, the Dean will encourage the party to find him in order to uncover what else he knows, as well as to prevent him from continuing his dangerous research somewhere else.





Part 5: Of Fate and Flame



In this part, the party will learn how to quell the **aspect of fire's** rage, and of a dungeon hidden somewhere within the Scorched Grove. There, a mystic staff known as *the Borealus** waits for someone worthy to wield its frozen power. Once obtained, *the Borealus* can help the party seal the creature and its harmful energies away properly, healing the imbalance in the Wood. Not many know about the ancient myth of *the Borealus* or its resting place. While **Odwald Ebonhart** (see **Appendix B, pg.196**) managed to theorize how one might use this item to re-seal the aspect, he isn't sure how this would work in practice, or if *the Borealus* even truly exists. Pursuing the staff is a gamble, but without any other recourse, the mythic weapon might be the last hope to save the Wood from fiery ruin.

How this part of the adventure plays out depends on the choices the party made up until now, beginning with whether or not Odwald was killed, apprehended, or if he escaped in **Part 4: Mysteries of the Avium (pg.132)**.

Unless Odwald escaped, give the players a few days of downtime. The Dean will take the time to consider Odwald's fate. If Odwald died, use the same downtime to allow the Dean and his scholars to pore over the deceased Odwald's notes as they try to discover what he was up to. During this time the party is free to avail themselves of the potions lab or the spell libraries on campus (see **Exploring the Avium, pg.137**). Since the party can teleport back to the Avium (unless they've been banned for life), use this time to deal with character hooks or plotlines. After the party members have

finished with their activities, the Dean will summon the party to his office to discuss what he's learned.

ODWALD'S FATE

If Odwald escaped, the party will be told that there's no time to waste. The Dean has launched an investigation into Odwald's lab, and his scribes are examining the materials left behind, but there appear to be some notes missing. It's probable Odwald took them with him when he fled. Odwald must be found (skip to **Finding the Necromancer, pg.156**). Since it's likely that the party will need to form an alliance with Odwald if he is captured, it's recommended to read **If Odwald was apprehended (pg.154)**. Much of this information will still be relevant later, so use it as a reference for character interactions with Odwald as the events of this part of the adventure unfold.

If Odwald was slain, the Dean will uncover some interesting information concerning Odwald's background. He'll inform the players that Odwald is a member of the illustrious and noble Ebonhart family from Alderheart. He was an adventurer in his past, as well as an alumnus of the Avium. The Dean appears saddened that such a prestigious scholar turned to the dark arts. According to Odwald's notes, he blamed himself for the awakening of the aspect, but the details of how Odwald might have been involved are unclear. Among them, however, are scrawlings of a prophecy predicting that a member of the Ebonhart family would be the one to finally heal the Wood from the effects of the Great Calamity.

In his research, Odwald also found writings about a mystical artifact called *the Borealus*, which was hidden sometime after the Great Calamity. He discovered records of its creation, penned by the wizard who crafted, stored it in the Avium's lower library. Using these valuable notes, Odwald theorized a ritual that might utilize this artifact's power to seal the aspect of fire. He had abandoned the ritual in favour of the cobblefright, because he couldn't ascertain whether or not the records of the artifact were genuine. However, scribbles in the margins of his notebook hint that he was considering contacting someone he knew from his adventuring days to help him divine its location.

At this point, *the Borealus* may be the best lead the party has for a way to defeat the aspect. The Dean will ask them to travel to Alderheart and speak with the companion mentioned in Odwald's notes, a hedge witch named **Susan of the Swamp** (see **Appendix B, pg.200**) (if Susan is dead, see the **Should the Worst Have Happened, pg.156**). While they do this, the Dean will look over the formulae Odwald used, to see if he might be able to perform this ritual. However, the ritual clearly won't work without the power of *the Borealus* (skip to **Susan the Seer, pg.161**).

If the players wish to inform **Riffin, the Ash-Knight** (see **Appendix B, pg.205**) of Odwald's demise, have them run into him in Alderheart. He is once again at the Wooden Flagon, retracing his steps in the hopes of meeting Odwald along the way. Riffin will be saddened to hear about the loss of his friend, but he will remain confident that even if Odwald seemed bad, he had a good heart. Riffin will offer to help the party in any way he can, something which may become necessary in **Facing the Aspect (pg.172)**.

If Odwald was apprehended, the party will receive a summons from the Dean to convene in his office. When the party arrives Odwald will be there, waiting beside Dean Windsworth. Odwald has some kind of silver bangles affixed to his wrists, which the Dean explains are necessary to prevent Odwald from using magic.

The old corvum wishes to pursue a lead that could reveal the location of a magical artifact called *the Borealus*, a weapon that may seal away the aspect's energies and return it to a dormant state beneath the Grove. It was a coincidence that Odwald stumbled upon historical accounts of this artifact, and while he isn't convinced it exists or whether the ritual he's created will work, it's the only thing he can think of that might stop the aspect from continually being reborn.

The Council has granted Odwald permission to join the party in order to follow up on this lead. He is to stay within sight of the party at all times, until the aspect of fire has been dealt with. Afterwards, Odwald must be brought to Alderheart for trial and sentencing. Characters may have reservations about teaming up with Odwald, but there's no other choice. The Dean is clearly suspicious of Odwald, but the necromancer's research has granted him a situational awareness that the Dean would need time to grasp. Furthermore, Odwald's past experience as an adventurer means he knows his way around the Wood. If Odwald attempts to flee, the party is to apprehend him at once and deliver him to Alderheart.

ODWALD'S STORY

If the party apprehends Odwald, once given leave to assist the party, Odwald will help them willingly. Time has made him reflect on his actions, and he feels great shame. He is now committed to fixing his mistakes in the right way. Odwald will offer the party every assistance they might require, and he will even share a bit about his background to any characters who are curious.

During their travels, determine when it fits the narrative flow for Odwald to share information regarding his family, researching *the Borealus*, and his longtime friend, Riffin.

When role-playing Odwald, remember that he is prideful and cowardly, but also intelligent and deeply concerned for the well-being of the Wood. He sees everything that has happened up to now as a personal failing, and while he's finally willing to ask others for help, in the end, he still feels responsible for the current state of the Wood.

ODWALD'S FAMILY

Odwald is a member of the noble Ebonhart family, one of the founding families of Alderheart.

"My family holds a generations-old prophecy that an Ebonhart will be the one to finally heal the Wood from the Great Calamity that birthed the Scorched Grove. For many years I believed it would be me, but the more I learned, the less I knew about the fundamental nature of the problem. Six months ago I was granted a vision. An entity visited me in a dream and imparted knowledge of the aspect's existence. It showed me the location of the seal, and told me of the spells I might use to heal the Grove of the aspect's influence once and for all."

The entity that spoke to Odwald in his dream kept its true form hidden. All he could hear was a voice that sounded very old and felt wise beyond the understanding of any mortal. He went to the conjuration circle in the Grove and found it unusually active, as if it was already weakening. He panicked, and used the spells he was shown to try and cleanse the aspect's energy. Instead, the sigil flared up, and shortly thereafter the fires began to spread.



If asked why he did it, Odwald will reply:

“I was a damned fool. All these years I’ve spent, afraid of failing to live up to my family’s name. It was this same fear that caused me to act so recklessly. I should never have listened to that blasted voice... and now my actions may have doomed Humblewood.”

RESEARCHING *THE BOREALUS*

If any characters ask Odwald about his knowledge of *the Borealus*, he will relate the following points of information:

- ♣ He stumbled across an old legend mentioning *the Borealus* many years ago, but it was only since returning to the Avium that he managed to find a collection of laboratory notes claiming to be from the wizard who crafted it.
- ♣ Because of these notes, Odwald concedes that such an item could have been created. If it was indeed constructed, its power would not only be tremendous, but also uniquely suited to counter the elemental energies of the aspect.
- ♣ Based on his research, he has theorized a way to use *the Borealus* along with the conjuration circle to re-seal the aspect. However, this isn’t something he could test, and coupled with the uncertainty of *the Borealus*’ existence, it seemed like this avenue had too small a chance of success.
- ♣ Since his recent research on spellcrafting (trying to create a spell that mimics the cobbler’s siphon soul ability), he has hit upon some new documents, which have increased his confidence in the chances of success for a ritual using *the Borealus*... but there’s still no way to be sure.

Odwald will add that this gamble may be the Wood’s last hope, as his studies have indicated the aspect will continue to grow in strength the longer it remains un-sealed. He only hopes that *the Borealus* still resides in the Wood, because their time is short.

FRIENDSHIP WITH RIFFIN

If any player asks about Riffin, or brings up that the strig knight has been looking for Odwald, he will evince a combination of relief and sorrow. He and Riffin were once adventurers who traveled Humblewood together. Odwald was staying with Riffin in Ashbarrow when the fires claimed it. He and Riffin helped people evacuate, but during the chaos a building collapsed and seriously injured Riffin. Odwald saved him and brought him to Alderheart. Burdened as Odwald was by the knowledge that he was responsible for the fires that destroyed Riffin’s home, he couldn’t bear to stay.

“It was then I resolved to find a way to correct my mistakes, by any means necessary. It seems all I’ve succeeded in doing is hurting others. I should have asked for help but... perhaps I couldn’t accept the idea that it wasn’t possible to quell the aspect alone.” He scoffs, “My own selfish pride as a chosen son of Ebonhart is to blame. I am truly sorry for the way I acted toward you all.”

Odwald still feels great shame because of his actions, but he will acknowledge that he needs to make amends with Riffin. Besides, Riffin is a capable warrior, and his assistance might prove valuable if they are to face the aspect. Odwald has a good idea where his old friend might be found (skip to **The Perch of Brackenmill, pg.157**).

If the subject of Riffin never comes up, Odwald will suggest the party meet with one of his old adventuring companions, a hedge witch by the name of Susan, who may be able to help point the party toward the location of *the Borealus* (skip to **Susan the Seer, pg.161**).



SHOULD THE WORST HAVE HAPPENED

If Susan is dead, direct the party to **Ardwyn, Elder of Meadowfen** (see Appendix B, pg.190) of Meadowfen from **Part 1: The Adventure Begins** (pg.86) instead. She was once a formidable priestess of Tyton, and back in Odwald's adventuring days she was known as a talented seer. She should be able to perform a similar ritual to guide the party to *the Borealus'* resting place.

LEAVING THE AVIUM

When the party leaves the Avium, they should be armed with knowledge about the terrifying and deathless nature of the aspect of fire, but also with a clear view of its weaknesses. Depending on what happened to Odwald, they may have a sense of where to look for leads regarding the location of *the Borealus*.

FINDING THE NECROMANCER

If Odwald escaped in **Part 4**, then the party's next step is to track him down before he can start more trouble. Have Dean Windsworth or another character impress upon the party that Odwald might have absconded with information from the Avium that could help defeat the aspect once and for all. Therefore, it's important he be captured alive. To help the party achieve this, the Dean will give them a pair of silver bangles, which can be affixed to Odwald to prevent him from using magic. The party's mission is still to quell the aspect, and while Odwald must face justice, the safety of the Wood comes first. Once they apprehend Odwald they are to return him to the Avium for questioning.

A DIVINATION RITUAL

The Dean has informed his most learned professors of the party's situation, and many have offered to help in any way they can. Particularly, the divination professor, **Corvax Revayne** (see Appendix B, pg.195), may be able to locate Odwald. The party can meet with Professor Revayne in his office, where he has already made the necessary preparations.

Inside this small office, the furniture has been pushed aside to make space for an intricate chalk circle drawn with several flourishes on the flat stone floor. Professor Revayne, still sketching symbols around the circle's edge, is startled by your approach and immediately stands to address you. "Be careful! This circle must reflect the many threads of fate in order to show what is possible. Erase any of them and we risk inaccuracy!" He then motions for you to move to the edges of the room.

Once he finishes a few strokes, or fills in any lines a hapless character may have stepped on, grumbling as he does so, he will lightly hop into the center of the circle. He asks that someone pass him his tools: a crystal on a string, a bowl of water, and a bag of sand, all of which are easily accessible on the nearby table. Professor Revayne carefully places the bowl of

water in the center of the circle, and requests silence while he works. He will suspend the crystal over the bowl and begin to incant his spell.

The air in the room crackles with arcane energy as the pendulum swings back and forth over the bowl of water, which reflects the crystal above like a mirror. The corvum's eyes glow white as he casts a small pinch of sand into the water. It ripples, and images begin to form on its surface. As the pendulum is pulled strongly south-east by an invisible force, you can see tree-farms, wagons filled with goods, and corrals of giant insects. With a gentle "swoosh" the circle of chalk lifts from the ground and disappears into vapour, returning both the bowl of water and the professor to normal.

Professor Revayne will inform the party that Odwald is in Brackenmill. This place appears to have personal significance to Odwald, though the professor can't guess what it might be. However, the professor is certain the necromancer's form will be veiled in concealing magic. Professor Revayne will also impart that someone else in Brackenmill is looking for Odwald. There was a winged shield in his vision: the one who bears this shield is the key to finding Odwald.

He will also remind the party that the augury he performed in **Part 4** ("the master weal, the monster woe") might mean Odwald is a potential ally. He'll caution them against making any rash moves against Odwald, as his vision gave him the impression the necromancer might yet have a part to play in the fate of the Wood.

The professor will also provide the party with a *gem of seeing*. This variant of the item grants only the effects of *see invisibility* rather than *truesight*, and it does not regain charges at dawn. Once all its charges have been expended it will become a normal, non-magical gem. Professor Revayne will point out that this item could come in handy if the necromancer attempts to use invisibility to escape (as he may have done in their first encounter).

ODWALD'S DISGUISE

Armed with new knowledge, players can prepare to set out from the Avium, though it will take about three days on the road to reach Brackenmill. Have this trip be uneventful in order to keep up the game's pace, but hint at the growing power of the aspect by mentioning that the air is much warmer and drier than it was when the party began their journey. The forest also appears quieter than usual as they travel. These are dire times indeed.

Since his escape from the Avium, Odwald has reached Brackenmill, where he now weighs his options. His research has been set back to zero, he has none of his materials or laboratory equipment, and while he harbours some idea of how to stop the aspect he isn't certain the artifact even exists, let alone if its powers are truly as strong as he's read. After having had time to reflect, he is painfully aware of the danger he posed to the innocent people at the College. He has also spotted his

old friend Riffin in Brackenmill, and a part of him desperately seeks to confess his misdeeds to the strig knight. However, Odwald lacks courage and will simply be trying to lay low. When the Defenders of Alderheart arrive, he is contemplating his next steps.

Odwald is using *disguise self* to pose as a traveling huden gallus monk, staying at the Sunny Silkworm Inn. He must limit his interactions with others due to the nature of the spell, but the form he has chosen roughly matches his own size, so the spell is difficult to uncover at a glance. Any player that specifically examines Odwald can make a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check to see if something is amiss; for example, if a part of his vestments passes through a table as he moves by. Any physical interaction with Odwald would be enough to detect his illusion, so he'll do his best to deny the party that opportunity by keeping his distance. Odwald endeavours to stay in his rented lodgings for as long as he can, only making appearances in the inn's common room or around town in short intervals, since he must hide and re-cast his spell each hour to maintain its effect. Any player able to scan Odwald with detect magic will instantly know he is under the effect of an illusion spell.

If he ever feels as though he has been discovered, Odwald will attempt to flee into the forest.



THE PERCH OF BRACKENMILL

When the party reaches Brackenmill, they'll find themselves looking up at a series of lush tree canopies. These will be immediately recognizable as perch-farms; the boughs are filled with familiar herbs, fruiting vines, and are tended by several farmers. Corrals on the ground house different varieties of giant insects, including giant silkworms, munching on greenery.

Brackenmill is a lively hub for folks of all kinds, and upon seeing travelers, folks will smile and greet them politely, welcoming them to their perch. Steps shaped into the tall trees allow players to climb up to a series of bridges made of wood and rope, and platforms that serve to connect the trees together.

The locals here are a hearty folk, and while busy, they exude a kind of rustic hospitality that is honest and charming. If any characters ask about life in Brackenmill of late, locals will tell them that things have been busy. This season, people have had to work even harder than usual to produce enough crops to aid those displaced by the fires. Moreover, it has been so dry that crops require more care to keep them green and healthy. Some of the Tenders have helped by nourishing the plants with their magic, but such services are in short supply. It's been a hard year, and everyone is overworked.

*If the party has come here with Odwald looking for Riffin, Odwald will suggest heading to **The Sunny Silkworm** (pg.158).*

Grant characters who offer to assist the farmers an opportunity to glimpse Odwald in disguise as he passes by. To speed up the pace, have the character make a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check to notice some malfunction in Odwald's illusion.

*If a character who succeeded on this check attempts to call attention to Odwald in a friendly manner, Odwald will ignore them and walk hastily back to the safety of his room at **The Sunny Silkworm** (pg.158).*

*If Odwald is called out in a way that suggests the character is suspicious of him, Odwald makes for the forest as fast as he can (skip to **A Confrontation**, pg.159).*

If the characters ask around for clues about any strange travelers entering town, the locals won't be much help. People come and go everyday, after all, transporting goods and materials between the various perches that depend on Brackenmill's tree-farms. Folk will point the players toward the local inn, The Sunny Silkworm, which lies near the center of town. Many travelers frequent it, and some even pay to keep rooms in permanent reserve.

THE SUNNY SILKWORM

The Sunny Silkworm is a large inn and tavern housed in an expansive, circular wooden building in the center of Brackenmill's sprawl. The building rests on a disk-shaped wooden platform seated within the gnarled branches of a great tree that has been shaped around it. Different bridges connect with the wooden platform to allow travel from all around Brackenmill. The place looks cozy and inviting, and players who approach will notice a wooden sign above the door with a smiling silkworm munching on a leaf. Pleasant-smelling smoke wafts from the large chimneys that emerge from its quaint thatched roof. The inn is usually bustling, and today is no exception. When the party enters the building, read:

The common room of this inn and tavern teems with activity. Many birdfolk and humblefolk of all descriptions are engaged in talk, drink, and games. Three large hearths frame the space, one to the right, another in a stone chimney which rises in the center of the common room, and one behind the bar counter at the back of the common room, over which pots of stew bubble away aromatically. The place is warm and inviting.

The party will find Riffin in the inn's common room, sitting at a small table next to the large central hearth, where he is engaged in a game of cards.

If the party came here with Odwald, they will likely be searching for Riffin so that Odwald can explain himself to his old friend. Once they find Riffin, skip to **Riffin and Odwald (pg.160)**.

If the party came here looking for Odwald, they'll find Riffin is still looking for him as well. After checking many of their old haunts, Riffin decided it's best to wait at the Sunny Silkworm, rather than risk missing his friend in roving. After all, this was where they always ended up when they traveled together; he's hoping to run into Odwald eventually if he stays long enough. If the characters interacted with Riffin at the Wooden Flagon in Alderheart, he'll recognize the party once they enter and excuse himself from his table to greet them.

If the party never spoke to Riffin, he will recognize them from the battle at the Bandit Camp, as well as from stories he's heard about their exploits since that battle. By now, they surely sound like honorable and upstanding folk to the strig knight, and he'll introduce himself in a familiar tone (they fought alongside each other, after all).

"Hullo again, friends! Looks like you've grown into fine adventurers. 'Defenders of Alderheart' even!" he'll say with a friendly chuckle. "Would ya care for a drink? I'd love a chance to catch up."

If for some reason the party has gained a negative reputation, Riffin will still wish to talk with them, but his response will be a little more subdued.



A familiar looking strig knight waves you over as you enter. "By Tyton's stars, it looks like you've grown a fair sight since that hubbub at the bandit camp," he'll say with a chuckle. "Would ya care for a drink? It's not every day you see the Defenders of Alderheart up close."

In this case, Riffin will explain that he's come here looking for his friend, Odwald. Refer to **Seeking out the Ash-Knight (pg.113)** to determine how he would react to the party, and how he would answer questions about his journey to find his friend.

Should the party try to explain to Riffin what Odwald's been up to, he will politely insist they must be mistaken. Odwald might have gotten himself into some tough scrapes before, but he would never act in such a reckless and hurtful manner. If the party decides to press the point, Riffin will excuse himself, maintaining that they don't know what they're talking about. He and Odwald have known each other for years, and this doesn't sound like him.

So long as the party doesn't do anything to really offend Riffin, he will be able to provide some useful information. Though he hasn't seen Odwald, he has noticed a few lodgers who don't seem very friendly. He'll point some of them out:

- ♣ A surly luma sorcerer who wants to be left alone. She doesn't wish to explain why to a stranger.
- ♣ A stoic strig barbarian who seems cold and expressionless, unless someone in the party strikes up a conversation about weapons, at which point he becomes quite animated.
- ♣ A withdrawn gallus monk (this is Odwald in disguise).

If anyone approaches Odwald, he will attempt to bluff that he is a humble traveler looking for work defending caravans in order to hone his skills. A character who sits down with Odwald must succeed on a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check to notice a hiccup in his illusion. The moment Odwald feels unsafe, he'll run.

A CONFRONTATION

Once the party has unmasked Odwald, he won't be able to flee very far. He's tired, ragged from stress, and filled with doubt. If necessary, he will attempt to use the last of his magic to escape. He will refrain from hurting the party and simply look to make a bloodless escape. Odwald will try to turn invisible, or use *suggestion* or *fear* to attempt to slow down his pursuers or send them off-course. He'll use *counterspell* or *misty step* against any spells cast to restrain him. If he escapes the party, he'll flee Brackenmill and run into the forest. Whatever happens here, the commotion will attract the attention of the local Perch Guard.

Odwald will flee until he reaches a clearing filled with dense and difficult forest terrain. This is the last stop for the exhausted corvum, and once the party has dealt with any ill effects caused by his magic, they should be able to track him here. They'll find him panting, out of energy, and trapped by the difficult terrain. If the party manages to capture him sooner, Odwald will relent once it's clear he cannot escape.



"That's quite enough, I yield," the old corvum wheezes. "I can't run from my fate any longer. Take me away, I'll come quietly..."

Odwald will comply with the party's wishes, letting them place the silver bangles on him, though he will insist on keeping his book of research notes. He intends to go peacefully and cooperate with the Avium, and the notes would make far less sense without his guidance. If questioned, Odwald will explain what he was trying to achieve with his experiments, and why it was so important to him that he be the one to stop the aspect, but that he regrets everything. His actions have brought harm to the Wood and its people. Depending on how much players want to roleplay this, refer to the information presented in **Odwald's Fate (pg.153)** to further flesh out this interaction.

At some point, the Brackenmill Perch Guard will arrive, drawn by the disturbance caused by Odwald's flight and the party's pursuit. The party can easily explain the situation, and once they present proof that they are working with the Dean of the Avium (their amulets will do) the Perch Guard will relinquish Odwald to their custody. Riffin, who accompanied the guards, looking to help, will rush over to aid his friend, regarding the corvum with a look of shock and confusion.

RIFFIN AND ODWALD

If Odwald came willingly to Brackenmill, the corvum is looking to apologize to Riffin, and this interaction will likely take place in The Sunny Silkworm. Riffin will look more and more confused as Odwald explains himself. Once Odwald has finished his narrative, read:

The tired old corvum regards his friend with a sad expression. “It’s all my fault. Riffin, I’m sorry.”

If Odwald was trapped in the forest, this scene will play out amongst the trees. The strig will look at Odwald and ask him pointedly if what the Defenders of Alderheart said about him is true. Odwald can only look crestfallen, and deliver the above line.

Either way, Riffin is hurt. Odwald not only saved his life, but traveled with him for many years, and Riffin thought he could trust his friend. To find out that the corvum had been keeping so much from him, coupled with the reckless and dangerous nature of his activities, has Riffin considering whether or not to break ties with Odwald.

Riffin will retreat to his room at The Sunny Silkworm without a word. He’ll stay here for one more day, but he won’t accept any visitors until the next day at dawn. This will give players some time to learn more about him and his motives (see *If Odwald was apprehended* under **Odwald’s Fate**, **pg.153**, for details into his backstory), all of which might impact their decision whether or not to help repair his friendship with Riffin.

Once Riffin is taking visitors, Odwald will encourage the party to go and convince the string knight to stick around and help their party. The character talking with Riffin can make a Charisma (Persuasion) check to convince him to take the course of action they suggest, but the difficulty check of the skill should be modified based on the approach party members take while talking with Riffin. For example, if they appeal to his sense of honor and duty to the Wood, the check should be easier. Some players may decide to have Riffin and Odwald meet to talk things over, which could also be successful. Characters who try to convince Riffin can make any number of arguments:

- ♣ They need Riffin’s help to defeat the aspect.
- ♣ Riffin should work with them for the good of the Wood.
- ♣ Odwald seems to regret his actions and care deeply about their friendship.
- ♣ Anything else the players might come up with that feels appropriate.

Decide how things play out based on the motives of the characters, improvising checks with any characters who might be serving to mediate, and select the outcome that best fits with the narrative.

If Riffin and Odwald reconcile, Riffin will steadfastly agree to help the party in whatever way he can on their quest. Riffin and Odwald’s relationship will be strained for the rest of the game, but they will work together to defeat the aspect.

Riffin will accompany the party back to the Avium, but he won’t have much to say along the way—he’s more of a doer than a thinker. Despite recent events, should it be required, he’ll act as a character witness for Odwald. Riffin will never totally forgive the old corvum, but he can attest to his brilliance and reliability from their years of adventuring together. Riffin is willing to journey with the party to Alderheart. He’ll choose to bunk separately at the Wooden Flagon, the inn and tavern in the trunk district. If the players wish, Riffin can accompany them on the rest of their journey. If he joins the party, he will be treated as another character for the purposes of dividing up XP.

If Riffin and Odwald don’t reconcile, Riffin will leave. He feels betrayed, but also conflicted, and he needs time to figure things out. When he returns, it will be in the final battle, after contemplating his duty and coming to the decision to help the party.

If the party came to Brackenmill to find the escaped Odwald, the characters can either return Odwald to the Avium for questioning, or take him to Alderheart, where he will help them find their next lead. This may depend on whether or not the party believes in Odwald’s change of heart. Regardless, he’ll try to convince them to take him to Alderheart since time is of the essence.

If the party returns Odwald to the Avium, resume play from the “*If Odwald was apprehended*” section in **Odwald’s Fate** (**pg.153**).

If the party killed Odwald, they will find the old corvum’s book of research notes on his body. Resume play from the “*If Odwald was slain*” section in **Odwald’s Fate** (**pg.153**).

If the party takes Odwald to Alderheart, skip to **Susan the Seer** (**pg.161**). The party may need to explain themselves to the Dean or the Council for this later.

DEAN WINDSWORTH

In certain situations, it may be necessary for you to account for the whereabouts of Dean Windsworth during the events of **Part 5**. He can be a pivotal character, filling Odwald’s role in the story if Odwald was killed, or an important side character if Odwald lives. The Dean can even assist Odwald in the final battle against the aspect of fire.

If Odwald lives, whether he was apprehended at the Avium (**Part 4**) or in Brackenmill, the Dean will remain at the College after the party has left for Alderheart. There he will research Odwald’s ritual, perhaps improving upon it in the process, until he is ready to rejoin the party for the final fight with the aspect of fire.

If Odwald is dead, the Dean will join up with the party in Alderheart, out of a sense of duty. In all likelihood, the only reason Odwald was able to break the aspect’s seal in the first place was because of what he learned as a student in the Avium, and the Dean feels that he should make himself available in case the party is in need of advice. The Dean won’t help in combat—he will spend his stay in Alderheart looking through the old corvum’s notes to decipher the ritual that Odwald theorized would re-seal the aspect.

SUSAN THE SEER

At this point the party will be led to Alderheart either by the living Odwald, or by information Dean Windsworth gleaned from the deceased corvum's notes. There, Odwald's old friend and former adventuring companion, Susan of the Swamp, can be found. Susan's eclectic scholarship has led to her possessing some esoteric knowledge. This, coupled with her unique divination abilities, means she is the party's best hope of finding *the Borealus*.

SEEING AN OLD FRIEND

The party will find Susan's tent in Alderheart's trunk market (see **Return to Alderheart**, pg.124, for information on her services). She's been turning a tidy profit in Alderheart with her fortune telling. If the party has encountered her before this, she'll greet them fondly and tell them she's been meaning to pack up and head back to her hut in the swamp to try out some new experimental conjury. Perhaps it's fate that they came here when they did.

If Odwald is with the party, she'll give him a warm welcome and ask how he's been all this time. While Odwald is happy to see Susan, he'll make it clear that catching up will need to wait, explaining the urgency of their task.

If Odwald was killed, this is explained to Susan. She will become quiet and solemnly agree to help the players with any task they should need for the good of the Wood.

However this encounter happens, Susan will eventually perform her ritual.

The hedge witch circles her snail shell cauldron, picking handfuls of hanging herbs and small dessicated creatures from around her tent, and plopping them into the brew. Her beetle familiar, Normal, assists in this task, and as it drops a shriveled tentacle into the cauldron, Susan chuckles, "Starfish, for visions as clear as a midsummer's night..." The witch mutters an incantation over the brew, and then, satisfied with her work, she grabs a ladle and portions out a bit of the liquid, blowing it cool before taking a sip.



As soon as Susan sips the concoction, her pupils dilate until her eyes turn black. They appear to contain stars and constellations, and for a moment Susan seems far away. Then her eyes return to normal, and Susan regains her senses.

"What a vision... there are so many possible futures, it's hard to keep track!" she says, moving to a small bookshelf behind her. "I saw one great power being kept in check by another. An endless dance of fire and ice." Susan then pulls a tome from the shelf and rifles through it. "*the Borealus* wants to be united with the flames. It is barred behind a door of cinders, to which only the Tenders have the key. To reach it you must find... this!"

Susan will find the page she was looking for, and show it to the party. It's an illustration of a plant that characters proficient in the Survival or Nature skills can easily recognize as skyleaf, a type of leafy vine that grows around the taller trees in Humblewood. She'll explain her vision showed a sprig of skyleaf would be the key to accessing *the Borealus*, and that the artifact still rests in Humblewood, but beyond this she isn't sure. Signs pointed to the Tenders living in Alderheart; a character the party should be familiar with holds the second key to *the Borealus*' resting place.

Susan will tell the party that skyleaf vines grow in a part of the forest to the northwest, a three hour walk from Alderheart. The party can choose to search for the skyleaf right away (see **Picking through the Ashes**), or speak to the Tenders (see **The Wisdom of Tenders**, pg.162). Remind the players they can also avail themselves of Alderheart's many shops while they're here, including **Eliza's Emporium** (pg.106).

PICKING THROUGH THE ASHES

The northwest forests of Alderheart have changed.

You arrive to see a sparse, burned forest. Ashes litter the branches and cover the forest floor in a thick carpet. To the north, a swath of charred trees is visible in the distance, unmistakably the work of the aspect. It looks like the aspect has been able to push even closer to Alderheart.

The ashes that cover the forest floor are cool, and possess none of the supernatural properties that ashes within the Scorched Grove have, but their presence here is disconcerting. The forest is still, and the familiar sights and sounds of the Wood are conspicuously absent.

A party member will need to make a DC 16 Wisdom (Survival) or Intelligence (Nature) check to locate skyleaf among the ash-covered foliage. This search can be done either from the ground or in a tree, but once the leaf is located, a character will need to climb up to retrieve it. Any character attempting to climb a tree must make a DC 14 Strength (Athletics) check, as skyleaf grows only within the highest

branches. After a character has acquired the skyleaf sprig, (preferably while one or more party members are up in a tree) the party will run into an **ashsnake** that will try to use the ash cover to ambush a target close enough to the ground. Resolve passive perception checks as normal, and point out that the trees in this part of the forest are in small copses around 80 feet apart, making it difficult (but not impossible) to retreat using glide.

THE WISDOM OF TENDERS

The Tenders the party will find in Alderheart are **Tevor of the Spring Path** (see Appendix B, pg.193) and **Havel of the Autumn Moon** (see Appendix B, pg.196), whom they met in **Part 3: An Urgent Summons** (pg.123). The party should run into Havel and Tevor at the Tenders' headquarters within Alderheart's trunk. If the players aren't familiar with this location yet, it won't be hard to locate when asking around. Despite the short supply of Tenders in the Wood, both Havel and Tevor (presuming Tevor survived the events of **Part 3**) can be found there, helping where needed.

If Tevor is still alive, Havel and Tevor have begun to live together, and are clearly affectionate toward one another. The harrowing events in the Wood lately have helped deepen their bond, and they now work as partners to train and coordinate the less experienced Tenders. If Tevor died, Havel carries on alone, working hard to honor Tevor's sacrifice.

Either way, whoever is there to meet the party greets them warmly, and will offer up any assistance the Defenders of Alderheart require.

Havel is familiar with old Tender legends about *the Borealus*. He explains:

"The story of *the Borealus* tells of a wizard who stole a piece of a powerful spirit of winter. They thought they could control its icy power by containing it within a staff, but instead it froze them. Left to itself, the newly-made artifact kept freezing the land around it. The tales say that the old Tenders felt this imbalance in the Wood. When they found *the Borealus*, they had the artifact sealed away by Tender Elders using a sprig of skyleaf, which remains hearty even through the winter."

Havel will add that he hadn't placed much stock in the tale, since it's ancient, and he only came across it after a long period of study. When he first read it, he thought the story to be a parable about the dangers of trying to enslave the powers of living elementals. When the party (or Odwald, if he's traveling with them) tells Havel what they know, he'll be surprised and offer to help the Defenders of Alderheart however he can.

If Tevor is alive, he will reveal some practical information that can help locate *the Borealus*. Tevor will recall a story he once heard from his mentor. According to the tale, the fate of an elder who wished to become a Tender Treekeeper was decided by delivering an unburned skyleaf sprig to a frog-shaped rock in the southwest of the Scorched Grove. Havel will support Tevor, and say he believes this agrees with references to an ancient chamber in the Scorched Grove. The text appeared in the historical records around the same time as the stories of *the Borealus* being sealed away. Neither Tevor nor Havel can take the party to the location because they're needed in Alderheart, but Tevor can mark it on the party's map. It's a fairly distinctive landmark, so the party should be able to find it easily with this direction.

If Tevor is dead, Havel will admit he doesn't know anything that might hint at *the Borealus'* location, but he has access to some rather old tomes of lore in the archives of the Tenders' headquarters. If given time to unravel this mystery, Havel might be able to find something of use. It will take him a day to discover the information, which he will be so eager to deliver to the party that he'll rush to meet them at dawn wherever they're staying. He will say, tearfully, that he recalled a story Tevor once told him, and he just needed to look up references in the ancient records to be sure. Havel will tell the party that the entrance to *the Borealus'* resting place is in the Scorched Grove, near a frog-shaped rock in the south.

THE CRUCIBLE OF FIRE

Odwald will ask to accompany the party into the Scorched Grove, but he'll point out that due to his magical restraints he won't be of use to them in a fight. Should any party members try to get crafty and break Odwald out of the silver bangles, a close examination will reveal that the restraints cannot be dispelled or removed through conventional means, and appear to be made of a virtually indestructible material. If another reason to prevent Odwald from fighting by the party's side is required, he can also point out that should he die, the knowledge of the ritual which might save the Wood dies with him.

While he'll do his best to stay out of combat, Odwald can offer valuable insights. The party rolls any ability checks that rely on Intelligence with advantage while Odwald is with them. Should the heroes decide to journey without him, Odwald will stay in Alderheart under Perch Guard supervision, and await the party's return.

It's also possible that the party could bring Riffin along for this journey. Be sure to adjust encounters appropriately if this is the case.

The party can reach the Grove in a day's travel if they don't mind hiking through the more dangerous parts of the Wood. Much of the Wood is covered in ash, and the energies of the Grove have spread in such a way that small patches of the nearby forested areas have become home to creatures and phenomena previously only witnessed in the Grove. For a more action-filled trip, roll on the **Scorched Grove Encounters (Level 3) table (pg.215)**. Optionally, skip right to the next section to increase the pace of the game.

In stark contrast to their last trip through the Scorched Grove, the party will find the ashen plain to be eerily silent and devoid of life, even the strange variety that usually finds purchase here. This is due to the increasing influence of the aspect of fire, which has caused the creatures here to scatter. It is much hotter and drier than it was before; have characters make a DC 12 Constitution saving throw once as part of traveling through the Grove, taking a level of exhaustion from the heat on a failure.

BURIED IN THE ASH

In order to contain the tremendous ice-aspected energies of *the Borealus*, the Tenders created a dungeon hidden beneath ash, and several magical defenses to keep the artifact out of mortal hands. The Elder Tenders of old needed to store the staff where the fire-aspected energies of the Scorched Grove could serve to keep *the Borealus'* dangerous energies sequestered. In times long past, Tenders wishing to join the leadership of their organization would come here to be tested for their worthiness; this practice was ended when a breach of the sanctum caused the Tenders to swear the location of *the Borealus* to secrecy and destroy records of its location. Only scant myths and snippets of information escaped the culling. Eventually, the last of those who possessed actual knowledge of the artifact died, and the dungeon has sat unused for hundreds of years.

The Borealus lies at the lowest level of the dungeon, where the flame energies are strongest. It is safeguarded by an ancient treant called **Oakheart (see Appendix B, pg.203)**. He is a sworn guardian, who was given instructions to only allow *the Borealus* to pass into the hands of one who understands and is committed to keeping nature's balance.

The party should arrive at the frog-shaped rock after a few hours of travel through the Grove, but they need to figure out how to locate the dungeon's entrance. Without the proper key, the entrance to the dungeon will not reveal itself. Read the following if the party is carrying the sprig of skylleaf with them:

As soon as you and your companions arrive at the frog-shaped rock formation, the ground begins to quake. Five pedestals emerge from the ashes, one at each cardinal point around a flat disk that rises in their center. The fifth stands in the middle of the disk. One of the four outer pedestals is broken.



The pedestals rise from the earth, to a height of four feet. The ones to the west, east, and south have distinctive carvings and motifs, along with a domed receptacle on their top which opens like a mouth. The receptacles are large enough to fit the sprig of skylleaf. The fourth pedestal to the north is broken in half and exhibits obvious wear, as though it had been smashed long ago. The pedestal in the center of the disk has no domed receptacle or motif carved, only an inscribed Druidic rhyme. Druidic is a language known only by druids, but any character using the *comprehend languages* spell or a similar effect will be able to read this:

The cycle of nature is death and rebirth,
forests to ashes and ashes to earth.

Stand in the compass and your proof there deliver,
to the cleanser of forests, the sapling's life-giver.

The motifs carved into the three intact pedestals represent elemental forces of nature. The one to the west has motifs of waves and rain clouds, the one to the east has gusting winds and blowing leaves, and the one to the south has flames and smoke plumes. Upon closer examination, the broken pedestal has worn geometric motifs, depicting fallen trees on fractured ground, most likely representing earth. At least one party member must stand in the middle of these pedestals when placing the skylleaf sprig into a receptacle. Whether or not the party chooses the correct answer, nothing will happen if no one is standing in the center of the "compass" when placing the sprig inside a receptacle.

The correct answer is to set the sprig in the receptacle of the pedestal with the flame motifs. This will cause the sprig to ignite with magical flames and the pedestals to recede, revealing the door to the dungeon.

The ashen field shifts again as the pillars recede beneath it. Then, with a lurch, a small hill rises from the ashes. A square section on the front of this hill falls away, revealing an open door. Ancient stone steps descend into darkness.

The steps lead to the room in **The Guardians of Flame (pg.165)**.

The other two answers are incorrect.

If the sprig is placed in the receptacle of the pedestal with the water motif, party members in the center of the compass will be caught in a trap, as the disk between the pillars instantly transforms into a 15-foot-diameter pool of cold water. The water within the pool is very deep, and moves as if possessed by a will of its own. Characters inside of the pool can feel a strong force attempting to pull them down into the cold depths and hold them there.

Have the players roll initiative. At the top of each round, each character in the pool takes 3 (1d6) points of cold damage and must make a DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check to avoid being pulled under. Characters who are pulled under are blinded by the dark waters, and may suffocate unless they can breathe water or hold their breath. Remember that characters can hold their breath for a number of minutes equal to 1 + their Constitution modifier (minimum of 30 seconds or 5 rounds), after which point they begin to suffocate.

Any player can use their action to attempt the Athletics check again on their turn. A character that has been pulled under can succeed on this check to reach the surface, allowing them to gasp for air. A character that is not currently being held under the water can attempt the Athletics check again on their turn to pull themselves free of the pool, though doing so is sufficiently taxing, and a character who successfully escapes the trap can do nothing else this turn.

Any character outside of the pool can make a DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check to free someone inside the pool. A character who has been pulled under the water is out of reach to a character outside of the pool, but characters in the pool who have not been can assist those who have been pulled under. Players may think of clever strategies to help their friends out, like throwing ropes and the like, but the water is dark in addition to being bitterly cold, and any character that was pulled under rolls Wisdom (Perception) checks with disadvantage.

Once all characters have left the pool, the disk returns to normal and the sprig may be safely retrieved from the water pedestal.

If the sprig is placed in the receptacle of the pedestal with the wind motif, party members in the center of the compass will be caught in a trap, as a 15-foot-sphere of wind appears above the disk between the pillars. The sphere encloses all creatures standing on the disk, lifting them 10 feet into the air, and begins to slowly crush them.

Have the players roll initiative. At the top of each round, each character in the sphere takes 4 (1d8) points of bludgeoning damage from the buffeting winds and must make a DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check to avoid being grappled by the gusting force.

A character that has been grappled can use their action to attempt this check again. On a success, the character is no longer grappled. A character that is not currently grappled can attempt the DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check again on their turn to push their way out of the wind sphere, falling prone in a space outside of the compass.

Any character outside of the sphere can make this check to free someone trapped inside on a success. However, a character outside who enters the sphere's space must make a DC 16 Constitution saving throw or be sucked inside as well. Characters inside the sphere who try to free a grappled ally roll their Strength (Athletics) check with disadvantage.

Players may think of clever strategies to help their friends out. Using a staff or a 10-foot pole a character can attempt to free a trapped ally without the risk of being sucked in themselves. Using a spell like *thunderwave* to blast allies clear of the effect will also work. Any thrown ropes or projectiles will simply be blown aside by the force of the sphere's winds.

Once all characters are free of the sphere, it slowly dissipates and the sprig may be safely retrieved from the wind pedestal.



THE GUARDIANS OF FLAME

The stairway descends into the dungeon for about 150 feet, occasionally turning and twisting upon itself, until it opens into a round chamber with a circular entranceway. There is no light source down here, and players without darkvision will need to provide illumination for themselves.

You see a chamber that appears to have been shaped out of black, volcanic rock. There is a wooden disk in the center of this chamber that has a series of druidic runes carved into its surface. In one quadrant of the disk these runes glow dimly with red light. Four alcoves surround this central room, equidistant from each other. In three of them, large statues of eagles, made from the same volcanic rock, rest upon intricately shaped branches of small, petrified trees. The fourth alcove is empty.

This chamber is 60 feet across, and each alcove is 10 feet across. The wooden disk in the center of the room is immune to fire damage, as are the petrified trees upon which the statues rest. As soon as the entire party enters the room, a stone slab closes over circular entryway, trapping the party inside. Each statue comes alight as the rock from which it is composed turns to barely-cooled magma. The 3 statues are Medium creatures that use the stat block for **gargoyles**, with the following changes:

- They speak Ignan instead of Terran.
- They are resistant to fire damage, but nothing else.
- They attack with their claws and their beaks, which use the same stats for the claw and bite attacks of the gargoyles. These attacks deal fire damage instead of slashing or piercing damage.

When an eagle statue is defeated it transforms into red flames, which are drawn toward the druidic runes on the wooden disk in the room's center. This will cause a section of the central platform's runes to glow red. Once the statues have been defeated, all of the runes will be lit, and the platform can be used to travel between this room and the dungeon's lower level. Stepping onto the activated platform, a character will learn that the code words "ascend" and "descend" can be spoken anywhere in this dungeon to cause this platform to magically float down to the lower levels, or rise back up to this chamber.

THE BLAZING BARRIERS

Speaking the word "descend," the platform moves down a 50-foot shaft, which opens into a wide subterranean cavern, and lands in a disk-shaped depression on an island.

This large subterranean cavern is lit by the glow of magma, which flows below an island of rock. A long bridge connects the island to a bank on the other side, where a passageway continues through the cavern wall. It is sweltering in here.

The island is a mere 30 feet wide, and the ceilings are 60 feet high. The magma lies 60 feet below the island of rock, and any character that gets too near the edges of the island will feel its full heat. The heat isn't enough to cause damage, but any creature that falls into the magma will almost certainly die, if they're not immune to fire damage, taking 33 (6d10) points of fire damage each time they enter magma for the first time on a turn, or end their turn there. Fortunately, under normal circumstances there are no dangers within this place that would cause a character to fall into the magma. Add such hazards if desired, but consider the risks carefully.

The bridge over the magma is 10 feet wide and 20 feet long. It appears to have small gaps at 5-foot intervals. Any player who steps onto the bridge's surface will trigger the bridge's main trap, which will cause a 20-foot-high jet of flame to erupt from the nearest gap. This jet remains for a few seconds, receding for a moment before flaring up again.

The party can tell that these flame jets aren't made of magma, but that they are still dangerous. Any character who passes through one will need to succeed on a DC 16 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check to avoid taking damage. Failure on this check means the character must make a DC 17 Dexterity saving throw, or take 10 (3d6) points of fire damage from the flames on a failure, or half as much on a success. Whether or not they succeed on this save, the characters will arrive on the other side of the jet, which will trigger the next flame jet.

Characters who hesitate once they begin crossing will find their energy sapped, as they are caught between the hot jets. It is impossible for a character to run across the bridge avoiding these jets, unless they succeed on the listed Acrobatics check for every jet they cross.

There are a few ways to circumvent this obstacle:

- Players might have access to the *fly* spell, which can be used to avoid the bridge altogether.
- Players with resistance to fire may be able to make it across even if they cannot succeed on their checks, especially if they have the ability to heal themselves.
- Players can attempt to block the jets of flame, though the jets erupt with enough force to blast through wooden barriers. If a metal object (like a shield) is held in place to allow passage across a jet, it will be rendered red hot, causing 9 (2d8) points of fire damage to anyone holding or stepping onto the object.
- The *floating disk* spell will completely block the flame jets, and its magic will shield anyone on top of the disk from the heat of the jets, allowing for easy passage.

Use the above rules to decide whether any of the more unique solutions players could conceive of will work.

On the bank at the other side of the bridge is a lever disguised as a rock formation. Any character with a passive perception of 17 or higher, or who succeeds on a DC 17 Wisdom (Perception) check, will be able to notice the lever. When pulled, the lever causes the flame jets to cease, and the magma in the chamber to cool almost instantly into solid rock. The tunnel into the rock wall ahead is the only way forward.



OAKHEART THE GUARDIAN

The passageway from the magma chamber continues for another 400 feet, curving downwards until it leads into a strange space.

The tunnel transitions into a room that has been magically shaped from the earth beneath the Grove. The floor is made of black cobblestones, shaped from a layer of volcanic rock. Breaking through the stones is a line of three great trees. Each tree appears black and charred, with leaves of flame and bark that glows like embers. The tree in the middle is the largest, and its roots tangle outward in a great mass.

The room is 90 feet long and 60 feet wide. The largest tree is **Oakheart** (see **Appendix B, pg.203**). Once enough of the party has made it within 80 feet of the trees, Oakheart will reveal himself, shuddering as if waking from a deep slumber. His body shifts into a more humanoid form. Oakheart speaks slowly in Birdfolk, or in Druidic if one of the party members is a druid, with a voice that sounds like a cross between creaking wood and a blasting forge.

Suddenly, the great tree at the back of the room quivers, and its bark shifts to reveal eyes and a mouth. Its long branches twist into hands and its roots become large feet. “Hrrmmmmmm... so... I am to receive... guests? How long has it been?” the creature creaks. “You do not look... like Tenders... a test is in order then...”

Oakheart will then fight the party to test whether or not they possess the skill needed to safely control *the Borealus*. If the above dialogue was interrupted by a player launching an attack at any point, do not treat Oakheart as being surprised and simply roll initiative as normal. Oakheart is sworn to guard *the Borealus* from thieves, and if attacked while speaking he'll scold the players on his turn, saying:

“Little ones... so impatient...”

If the party attempts to talk their way out of this fight, he will say:

“It matters not... None may obtain *the Borealus*... until they have proven... their worth!”

Oakheart will begin by animating the other two charred trees in the room. They have stats identical to Oakheart, but otherwise follow the rules for animated trees in the **treant** stat block.

Oakheart will not die once he reaches 0 hit points, but he will cease his assault and return the trees he animated to their posts. He is a guardian, but unless the party shows or has shown signs of ill intent throughout the dungeon, he will sense that they are not thieves and try not to kill them. He simply wishes to test whether or not they are strong enough to control the terrible power of *the Borealus*.

If the party does poorly in this fight, Oakheart may cease his assault and dismiss his animated trees, sitting down to parley. He'll ask why they have risked their lives to obtain *the Borealus*. If Oakheart is satisfied with the answer (attempting to save the Wood from burning is an acceptable explanation), he will give them the staff.

Whether defeated in battle or convinced to give the players *the Borealus*, Oakheart will inform the party that he has safeguarded the artifact with his own life force, and for its power to become unsealed his life must end. There's no way around this. If characters sympathize, he will thank them for their concerns, and offer a warm smile before delivering the parting statement:

"I have lived for a very... very... very long time. I go... with the blessing of the Nightfather... that I may pass onto you... this burden." Oakheart then reaches into a hollow in his trunk, and pulls out a luminous crystal staff. "Plant this one in flames... such is its power... otherwise... the Wood may freeze..."

As Oakheart speaks the light from his bark dims, and his flame-leaves fade, leaving behind a large blackened tree amidst the chamber.

TREASURE

The party receives the artifact they came here for: *the Borealus*.*

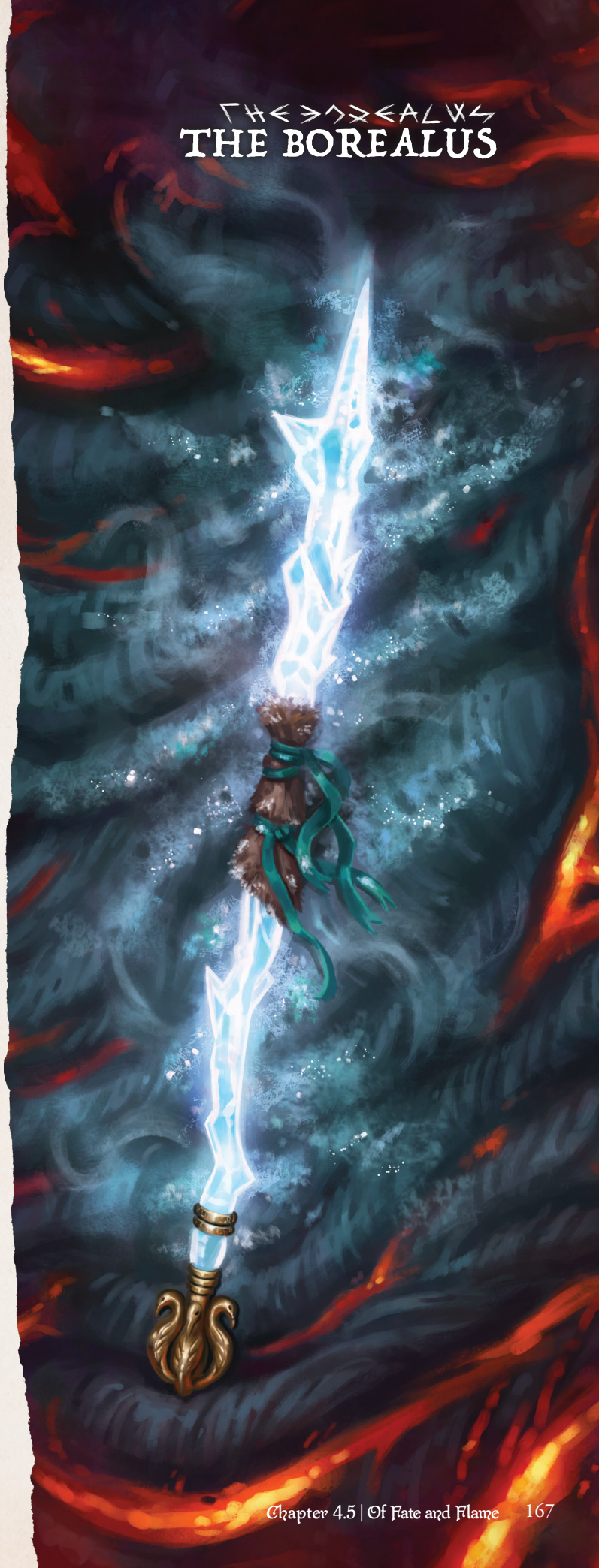
Once the party has acquired *the Borealus*, have them return to Alderheart.

THE FINAL SUMMONS

Upon returning to Alderheart, give the party a chance to have a long rest and recover from any exhaustion they may have suffered traveling through the Grove. After resting, they will find Dean Windsworth waiting for them in the common room of the inn in which they are staying. He has been called on by the Council to advise the Defenders of Alderheart during these perilous times. The Dean will be stupefied by the existence of *the Borealus*, and overjoyed that the party has obtained it. This means there is a chance to stop the aspect and save the Wood.

If Odwald is with the party, he will explain that the aspect must still be weakened in order for *the Borealus* to be useful in sealing it. What's more, in order to channel a power as vast as *the Borealus* is said to contain, the ritual requires at least two mages working in tandem to succeed. This ritual must be done

THE BOREALUS



over the conjuration circle that was used to seal the aspect the first time. Fortunately for them, Odwald knows its location. If Odwald died, the Dean will take over Odwald's role in explaining the information gleaned from the necromancer's ritual notes.

After learning about the ritual, the party will notice a commotion outside the inn. Some people are closing up their shops, others appear to be filing to the city gates with hastily packed bags, some with families in tow, and others still are heading toward the canopy. The party will soon learn the cause, either by asking passersby or listening to town criers, who announce an emergency meeting of all citizenry. The party can investigate, but it won't be long before they receive a summons from the Council. The news is grim: the aspect is moving toward the Great Tree City.

Everyone is crowded around the Council Chambers, some literally hanging from branches and filling up every inch of available space. In this sea of faces, the party will see any currently living friendly NPC they might have encountered on their journey who would reasonably be in Alderheart at this time, including: the Dean, Benna, Riffin, Susan, Odwald, Havel, Tevor, Eliza, and the jerbeen orphans.

The citizens are nervous and whispering amongst themselves. Some say they saw an intense red-orange glow far off in the forest, others that Alderheart is under attack, and some are worried the Council will call for an evacuation.

A contingent of The Spears escorts the members of the Council (including, if appropriate, any newly-elected humblefolk delegates) onto a specially prepared platform with a row of seats and a podium that bears Alderheart's city crest. **Bita, the Council Speaker (see Appendix B, pg.193)** appears from out of the ranks of the Council members as they take their seats. A hush falls over the crowd when she approaches the podium:

"My fellow citizens, we have just received a dire report from our watchposts. The elemental creature that so recently arose from beneath our Wood now makes its way toward Alderheart."

The citizens may remain silent, or begin to despair. They might even start to panic, at which point the Defenders of Alderheart may step in to help regain control. As symbols of hope in the realm, the crowd will listen to them. Any party member can step up to make a reassuring statement and attempt a DC 16 Charisma (Persuasion) check to calm the populace, allowing Speaker Bita to continue. Have a character roll this check with advantage if their reputation has earned them particular favor among the many Alderites (if they are seen as a champion of the people, for example).

Speaker Bita gives the crowd a moment, thanking the Defenders of Alderheart if they provided assistance, then resumes, speaking with a grace and dignity that inspires hope even in these dark times:

"Recently, we have faced many hardships. The flames that ravaged the Wood have threatened to tear our communities apart. Yet, Alderheart still stands. We are not birdfolk and humblefolk, nor are we perch-dwellers and forest-dwellers: we are people of Humblewood. Since its creation, Alderheart was meant to stand as a symbol of our unity. Perhaps we have lost our way since those early days, but there is still a chance for a brighter future. However, in order to obtain it we must stand together now! I implore each and every citizen of Humblewood, not as the Council Speaker, but as a fellow resident of the Wood. We must defend each other, we must defend Humblewood. It is the only home we have."

Someone starts cheering. Whoever starts the cheer is optional: it may be a humblefolk (perhaps one of the jerbeen orphans, or a reformed bandit working for the Wildwood Brigade), or a birdfolk (maybe Tevor, showing his newfound courage, or Riffin, to inspire the people). This one cry will multiply, and soon the crowd cheers together with one voice, as denizens from all parts of Humblewood unite.

PREPARING FOR BATTLE

After Speaker Bita's speech, the party will be found by either Odwald or the Dean (if Odwald isn't alive) and told that, by the looks of it, the aspect's influence in this region has grown tenfold since the party's first encounter. If they don't take the opportunity to try and seal the aspect with *the Borealus* now, even if it is driven back, the aspect may become too strong to attempt sealing again.

The Defenders of Alderheart will soon find their presence requested by the Council: the aspect of fire must be stopped before it reaches the Great Tree City. Its movement has stirred up ashsnakes, emberbats, and other fire creatures that are causing havoc in the surrounding forest. Give the party a chance to explain to the Council what they can do to help (the Council is receptive to most ideas), but if the party doesn't mention sealing away the aspect, then either Odwald or the Dean (if Odwald is dead) will make the suggestion.

While the Council will listen to the Dean, Odwald will be looked upon more suspiciously, and the party may need to convince the members on his behalf. To keep the tension high maybe have the party roll Charisma checks for this. The Council will trust the Defenders of Alderheart, even if they don't trust Odwald. However the Council is convinced, Speaker Bita will make it clear in no uncertain terms that the fate of the Wood is in the party's hands.

Odwald will elaborate that in order to complete the ritual to seal the aspect, two mages must work together to weave a spell into the existing conjuration circle to strengthen and alter its magic. He'll also remind the party of the importance of utilizing cold-type magics to subdue the aspect. Once it has been subdued, they will have only an hour before it regenerates, so it's imperative that the character attuned to *the Borealus* brings it to the circle, so the mages can complete the sealing.

If a spellcasting party member volunteers to help the NPCs prepare the sealing ritual, they will be turned down. Preparing the ritual will be time-consuming and require such focus that the party member wouldn't be able to fight the aspect at the same time. The mages who work the ritual need to rely on the Defenders of Alderheart to ensure their efforts aren't interrupted. Odwald (or the Dean, if Odwald is dead) will explain that the second mage must have a good grasp of arcane theory and precise control over their magic. They will essentially serve as an additional power source and they therefore do not need to have the same familiarity with the ritual.

Odwald can think of only one other spellcaster he would trust with this ritual: Susan, and he will ask for her to accompany him (if she is alive). Otherwise, the Dean can help. The Dean has a strong desire to see this through to the end, and would gladly work with Odwald for the good of the Wood. If Odwald is dead, the Dean will need assistance for the ritual. Should Susan not be able to assist, a Council member will mention knowing of a talented spellcasting protégé within the Tenders who may be able to help. This is, of course, Havel.

If Odwald is conducting the ritual he will request to have the restraints inhibiting his magic removed, which will cause the Council consternation, but they will ultimately agree. If the party is still suspicious of Odwald's intentions and unwilling to have his restraints removed, the Dean (who has been looking through Odwald's notes) is familiar enough with the material to lead the ritual. Even so, he'll insist they bring Odwald along, shackled or not, as the corvum's knowledge could prove useful should something go awry.

The plan is to have the mages escorted to the conjuration circle, by either the Wildwood Brigade or the Perch Guard, to prepare the ritual. The rest of the Perch Guard and/or Wildwood Brigade will need to work together to keep the path to the aspect cleared for the party.



Whoever is leading the ritual indicates that someone will have to grab the aspect's attention and lure it closer to the Grove. If the aspect is too far away when the ritual is completed, there's no guarantee it will be sealed. Scouts report that the aspect is easy to provoke, but it'll be difficult to outpace, and luring it to the Grove will certainly place the volunteer in incredible danger. Riffin volunteers to help draw the aspect back to the circle if he's here, otherwise a Defender of Alderheart has to volunteer for the task. Speed won't matter as much as endurance, since they'll need to be able to withstand whatever the aspect can throw at them in order to make it to the Grove.

As the party leaves the Council chambers, they will witness something special:

The mood in the city is electric. Birdfolk and humblefolk from all walks of life work hand-in-hand, with the Perch Guard distributing weapons and armor to any who volunteer. Those who cannot fight are readying supply lines and bucket brigades to help people on the front lines combat forest fires and support the Defenders of Alderheart. Everyone in Alderheart is doing their best to pitch in however they can.

If any characters are looking to prepare for the final fight, the party has a small window to resupply. Many of Alderheart's shops have been closed or abandoned, but the armories of Alderheart are open to the party, allowing them to take whatever supplies they may need (Weapons, Armor, or Adventuring Gear). If they're looking for a little extra, **Eliza's Emporium table (pg.106)** is always open, though even in such dire times the party won't be able to get a magic item for free. Eliza is volunteering for the bucket brigade and plans on living through this. While she's still willing to offer "friends-only" prices, and supply the party with any non-magical necessities they might need to complete their mission, she has no intention of giving up her livelihood out of fear.

THE CHASE

Before the characters can do battle with the **aspect of fire**, they must find a way to lure it out of the forest toward the Scorched Grove. This is necessary not only for the ritual, but because the abundance of available fuel in the forest makes the aspect functionally invincible there. Consider having a scout report that the aspect seems to flare up as it burns through the forest, as players may be unaware that the aspect can heal itself using the trees it consumes. While not a vital clue at this stage, this information about the aspect is essential to the fight.

If not given the hint, players will have to deduce why the aspect is not weakening when fought in wooded areas.

If Riffin volunteered to lure the aspect of fire into the Grove, skip to **Facing the Aspect (pg.172)**.

If Riffin wasn't around to volunteer, the player character who volunteered to bait the aspect will accompany a unit of Perch Guard or Wildwood Brigade scouts into the part of the forest where the





aspect is advancing. In the meantime, the rest of the party and the mages will be escorted to the conjuration circle to ready for the aspect's arrival. It isn't necessary for more than one party member to serve as bait, and if multiple characters volunteer then either Odwald or the Dean will advise against it, insisting that the rest of the party will need their strength to fight the aspect.

Separated from their friends, read to the player that volunteered:

Around you, you can see woodland denizens of all kinds fighting. Parts of the forest are ablaze. Bucket brigades desperately try to keep the fires in check while coordinated teams assault massive ashsnakes and use specially-crafted nets to drive back swarms of emberbats. The scouts lead you further into the brush, until you can see the blazing form of the aspect lumbering toward Alderheart. It hasn't yet spotted you or your guides in your hiding place.

The aspect of fire will give chase as soon as it sees the volunteer character, hurling hunks of magma at the lone hero. Rather than resolving this engagement using movement speed, resolve the chase through the ash covered-forest by having the pursued character make a DC 18 Dexterity (Acrobatics) or Strength (Athletics) check to keep ahead of the aspect and avoid taking damage. On a failure, have the player make a DC 16 Dexterity saving throw, taking 22 (4d10) fire damage on a failure, and half as much on a success. The character being chased can take one other action in addition to making their check, but they can do nothing else since the rest of their energies are focused on the flight.

If a player decides to attack the aspect during this chase, resolve their attack as normal, but the aspect won't take any damage. The character should see that once the aspect moves through a stand of trees, its fire consumes the trees, causing it to regain health and blaze brightly.

The character being chased must succeed on four of the above Athletics checks to lure the aspect toward the conjuration circle. Resolve each failure as it happens. Once the character being chased succeeds on two Dexterity or Strength checks, or is doing poorly, Riffin will appear, shielding the character from a hit and preventing the damage. From this point on, Riffin will protect the character from further harm.

As the fireball hurtles toward you, you see a flash of steel and suddenly find yourself shielded from the blast. Looking over, you can see Riffin, running alongside you with his shield held high. The face of his shield emits a barrier of wind which deflects the aspect's flames. The small strig gives you a smile and shouts, "Sorry I didn't help sooner, but I'm not about to let the whole Wood burn! Riffin the Ash-Knight, at your service."

However he feels about Odwald, Riffin has decided that his duty, both to the Wood and as a knight, comes first. This is the right thing to do.

RIFFIN'S FATE

Depending on who is alive, and if Riffin isn't alive, have another NPC be the last-minute-hero.

Or, should this be the first time the characters talk to Riffin, some introductions will be in order.

FACING THE ASPECT

Refer to Fig. 5.1 for a map of the Final Battle with the Aspect.

The final battle with the **aspect of fire** will take place in a 120-foot by 80-foot field that is mostly ashen plains. To the south of the field is 40-feet-deep tree cover. The aspect will be led through a gap in the tree cover that is 20 feet wide.

Only the 40 feet of tree cover to the south is substantial enough for the aspect to heal using its "Fuel for the Fire" ability.

The conjuration circle is 20 feet in diameter, and it's located 40 feet from the tree cover and 80 feet from the eastern edge of the map. As long as the aspect remains on the map, it is near enough to the circle for the ritual to succeed.

The aspect of fire gains the following ability:

♦ **Rekindle.** If the aspect of fire is at 0 hit points, it regains 10 hit points at the start of its next turn.

If the aspect is reduced to 0 hit points by cold damage, or is hit with cold damage while at 0 hit points, rekindle doesn't function at the start of the aspect's next turn. The aspect is petrified only if it starts its turn with 0 hit points and doesn't rekindle.

The aspect can not rekindle for one hour after being petrified. After an hour of being petrified, the aspect will regain all of its hit points and no longer be petrified.

A MILLION LITTLE PIECES

No matter how many pieces of the aspect are broken off while petrified, the aspect will reform. In 1d4 rounds, it will become whole again. Once petrification wears off, treat each separate piece as having the aspect's molten skin ability.



THE FINAL BATTLE

fig. 5.1



- ASPECT OF FIRE
- CONJURATION CIRCLE



First, what happens here will be decided by whomever was luring the aspect. If it was Riffin, read this:

The ground begins to quake, softly at first, then heavier and more rhythmic, until Riffin can be seen dashing hurriedly through the treeline toward the party. A moment later, the trees erupt in flames as the aspect bursts through the forest, leaving cinders in its wake. It seems to recognize you, and bellows in fury as it advances.

If a character lured the aspect have them arrive along with Riffin, and with the aspect in tow. Give the injured character a chance to be healed. An NPC will act at the top of the round by rushing over and casting a cure wounds spell at 3rd level on the injured character (assume a Wisdom modifier of +3 for the spell) before retreating. The NPC can either be Tevor (if he's alive), Havel (if not performing the ritual), or another NPC Tender.

Riffin will retreat, as the chase has exhausted him. While he longs to fight, he feels he would be more of a burden to them in his fatigued state, and insists they go on without him.

The task of facing the aspect of fire is up to the Defenders of Alderheart now.

At least one party member must attack the aspect each turn to hold its attention, otherwise the mages are at risk. If the party successfully keeps the aspect's attention, it will fight recklessly, ignoring everyone but the party.

If the aspect tries to attack the mages, the mages can spare some of the ritual power to create a shield against the aspect's attacks, causing the mages to take no damage from any attacks for one round. This will only work three times before they can no longer defend themselves.

If the aspect drops to half its hit points or lower, it will move as quickly as it can toward the treeline to try and refuel using the timber.

The battle ends once the aspect is petrified, at which point the mages will call to the character holding *the Borealus* and instruct them on what to do.

HEALING THE WOOD

With the aspect cooled or temporarily dissipated, the party has only one hour to complete the ritual before the creature returns to full strength. The two mages standing over the conjuration circle beckon to the character attuned with *the Borealus* to stand in the ritual circle's center.

The heat which surrounds you inside the circle is intense, but it feels as though *the Borealus* is pushing back against it. You feel the opposing elemental forces grate against each other as you reach the circle's center.

Upon reaching the center, either Odwald or Dean Windsworth will give the signal to plant the staff into the earth. The moment *the Borealus* hits the ground, a stream of energy shoots out and surrounds the petrified aspect. Once enveloped, the aspect begins to lose its physical form, becoming one with the energy around it. Suddenly, the flow of energy is pulled back into the ritual circle. Immediately, the heat will dissipate and a wave of pressure will emanate from the circle, knocking anyone within 500 feet who is not inside of the circle prone.

For a moment there is calm, but during this time the mages still struggle. The energies that crackle from their hands feed into the circle, which once again begins to flare. The ritual has been enacted, but something is wrong. There isn't enough power. *The Borealus'* long confinement has left it too weak to provide the required energy. Reaching the required level of power can only be done at a cost: someone will need to give their life in order to complete the ritual.

If Odwald is alive, any party member with the ability to cast spells, or the party member attuned to *the Borealus*, can volunteer. However, even if they do Odwald will insist upon being the one to give up his life. It was his mistakes that got the Wood into this mess, so in his eyes it's only fair that he forfeit his life. There is no time to argue, and if another

character volunteers and refuses to back down, Odwald will appear to acquiesce, only to sacrifice himself at the last minute and save them. As the blaze of the ritual fire consumes him, Odwald will thank the hero for helping him find some measure of peace.

If Odwald is dead, the Dean will offer to sacrifice himself, though he won't protest if a player takes his place. Either way, the Dean or the player in the ritual circle will see Odwald's ghost supplying them with even more power. Miraculously, Odwald will keep the sacrificial character alive.

The final moments of the ritual begins:

The land around the Grove quakes, as both the conjuring circle and *the Borealus* within are consumed in a harmonious white light. The ground beneath the seal shakes and swells, rising from the ashen plain as though it were a living creature. Those outside the circle can see the mound thrash, momentarily assuming the form of the aspect. It lashes out in fury, before its shape melts away into the earth, which rises still. Then, without warning, everything stops. The quakes cease, leaving a tranquil hill on the ashen plain.

Anyone inside the circle, including any sacrifice (besides Odwald), can be found unconscious at the top of the hill. Both *the Borealus* and the aspect are gone, and from atop the hill a single sapling grows. The threat to the Wood has ended.

REWARDS

- Award standard XP for defeated foes.
- For roleplaying and investigation in Brackenmill: 500 XP per player.
- For finding the entrance to the dungeon holding *the Borealus'* resting place (see **The Crucible of Fire, pg.162**): 300 XP per player.
- For surviving additional trials within the Tender's dungeon (see **The Blazing Barriers, pg.165**): 300 XP per player.

EPILOGUE

After the final battle, the characters will return to Alderheart to the cheer and jubilation of all. The Wood has been badly scarred, but once the aspect was sealed, the creatures assailing the forest fled back toward the Grove, and much of the Wood survives. In the coming days the characters can recover from their wounds and finish up any unresolved points they might have in their character arcs before the Council summons them to a ceremony celebrating their momentous feat.

Each character is given a medal bearing Alderheart's crest, and their choice of either a *blade of the wood**, *wing crest shield**, *red-feather bow**, or *feathered helm**. These rewards should be decided upon before the ceremony, and made to the character's exact specifications (so long as they fit within what

the weapons could be. For example, the blade of the wood might be a rapier or a greatsword, but it would need to be a sword). If the *feathered helm* is selected, the player can choose which race of birdfolk the feather is sourced from:

- ♣ If a corvum feather, it will have been one recovered from Odwald before his sacrifice—or if this doesn't make sense, one donated by Professor Revayne.
- ♣ If a gallus feather, Council Speaker Bitra will provide it.
- ♣ If a luma feather, it will be one belonging to Dean Windsworth.
- ♣ If a raptor feather, it will come from either the captain of the Perch Guard or Professor Birchwalker.
- ♣ If a strig feather, it will come from Riffin.

If there are any custom birdfolk NPCs, especially ones with whom the players have an affinity, consider having the feather come from one of them instead. A birdfolk party member may also donate a feather for the helm. Once the characters have received their medals and gifts from the Council, they are bestowed the title “Champions of Humblewood.” There is a parade in Alderheart and a great feast to follow, but the story doesn't end here...

Humblewood will undergo a great period of change in the coming months. Based on the choices made by the players, the fate of the Wood will be different. Decide whichever scenario is best given the actions of the party up to this point.

THE WOOD

Within a few months, the parts of the Wood that were recently consumed by the Scorched Grove return to normal, and the creatures of the Grove return to their natural ranges. As the forest heals, new settlements are constructed for those who wish to return to their lives on the forest floor. While it's impossible to replace everything lost in the fires, these homes will eventually grow into new communities. Riffin will return to Ashbarrow, and enlist to help the restoration efforts. Ashbarrow will recover its former beauty and provide a home for those who were forced to abandon it.

PERCH-DWELLERS AND FOREST-DWELLERS

If Benna was reasoned with, the Wildwood Brigade is now well-established. While small groups of raiders and brigands still beleaguer the roads, organized banditry in Humblewood on the scale of the Coalition appears to be a thing of the past.

After much deliberation, the new Humblewood Council has been established, and includes humblefolk delegates for a handful of prominent forest-dwelling communities. The Perch of Marshview has a humblefolk delegate, as the predominantly grounded settlement's birdfolk representative was replaced in a landslide vote. Council Speaker Bitra retains her position, to the applause of a far more inclusive Alderheart.

Trunk infrastructure within Alderheart is being expanded in the lower levels, and there are talks about improving living conditions in the roots, though there is still much to do in this regard. Humblewood appears to be entering its next golden age in birdfolk-humblefolk relations.

If Benna was killed, she has since become a folk hero among certain groups of forest-dwellers. She was seen as the one who could have helped cast aside the oppressive yoke of the perches and bring about a true redistribution of power in the Wood. This is a change that is sorely needed, and now that forest refugees have fought side by side with the Alderites, many are pushing for a true reform of the Birdfolk Council. The hope is to transform it into something that also represents delegates from outside the perches. The popular support for change means it will likely happen, even though there are already signs that most of the powerful nobles in Alderheart are opposed to the change.

Harsher sentences for bandits and thieves are being called for by Alderheart's elite, and the news on the wind is that the Bandit Coalition is still around. Though broken, it survives to cause trouble for merchants who can't afford an escort.

THE TENDERS AND THE GROVE

The Scorched Grove has shrunk in recent months, owing to the efforts of Tenders as much as the sealing of the aspect. While the Grove will remain part of Humblewood for the foreseeable future, the ash in its plains no longer burns with embers, reducing the frequency of fires in the Wood. The ashsnakes that appeared with the aspect remain, and have filled new niches in the ecology of the Grove, due to the snake's ability to survive on the energy of consumed elementals and beasts. The ashsnakes help keep some of the more dangerous fire-based creatures at bay. This has greatly helped the Tenders, who now see the ashsnakes as something to be respected from a distance, but not feared. Plants are growing on the lonely hill which marks the final resting place of the aspect of fire, and the sapling which sprouted from its top is quickly growing into a tree. It has been named “The Healing Hill,” and is watched over by the Tenders as a sacred site.

TO BE CONTINUED...

One night, a player's character, will have strange dreams. In the dreams, they encounter Odwald. His form is spectral and he appears to have something to say, but before he can impart any new wisdom, the character wakes up. Who was the entity that tricked him into releasing the aspect? If they could cause such destruction in Humblewood, what might happen to Everden if they're still out there?





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