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VILLAGE BACKDROP:
WOODRIDGE





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VILLAGE BACKDROP: WOODBRIDGE

Ruled over for centuries by the scheming, ambitious Lorsch family, Woodridge is little more than a backwater village standing on the eastern bounds of the Duchy of Ashlar. Standing astride an ancient, now little-used trade route the village is a poor, but seemingly peaceful place. Its folk tend their small fields, pay their lord his due and are content to be left in peace. But all is not as it seems. Spies lurk among the populace, and dark forces gather which would see Woodridge's lord, Hilduin Lorsch, converted to their faith or dead.

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SYSTEM NEUTRAL EDITION

Welcome to this Raging Swan Press System Neutral Edition Village Backdrop. Herein you'll find evocative, inspiring text designed to help you—the busy GM—run better, quicker and easier games.

This book is compatible with most fantasy roleplaying games. It's impossible to create a truly system neutral book, though, and some generic game terms—wizard, fighter, human, elf and so on—lurk within. These generic terms are easily modified to the GM's system of choice.

One special note about the NPCs in this supplement. While some are wizards, fighters, clerics and so on, others are simply normal folk. Because different game systems handle normal folk differently we've made no attempt to note their "class" leaving them simply as "female human" and so on.

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WOODRIDGE AT A GLANCE

Ruler Hilduin Lorsch

Government Overlord

Population 185 (172 humans, 7 half-elves, 4 half-orcs, 2 halflings)

Alignments LN

Languages Common

Resources & Industry Agriculture, hunting

Ruled over for centuries by the scheming, ambitious Lorsch family, Woodridge is little more than a backwater village standing on the eastern bounds of the Duchy of Ashlar. Standing astride an ancient, now little-used trade route the village is a poor, but seemingly peaceful place. Its folk tend their small fields, pay their lord his due and are content to be left in peace. But all is not as it seems. Spies lurk among the populace, and dark forces gather which would see Woodridge's lord, Hilduin Lorsch, converted to their faith or dead.

A settlement has stood on the site for centuries. First a robber baron claimed the area. After he was slain and his followers scattered, the victors raised a church to Conn, The Father, and started farming the surrounding land and hunting the nearby Briarwood. The people prospered and trade flowed through the village along the Ridgeway. But the opening of an alternate trade route bypassing Woodridge brought hard times to the village and its lord. This new route, sponsored by the ruler of the nearby town of Dulwich, sparked a rivalry between the two families—the Galls and the Lorsch—which endures to this very day. Even now, the two families struggle for control of the village of Longbridge, its strategically important bridge and its plentiful tax revenues.

Thus, while Woodridge is a peaceful place, an undefinable but palpable tension seems to hang in the air. Its people know war is likely soon for their lord is not a patient man and they dread its approach. Many of the villagers serve in the local militia and many will likely fall in the coming battles.

VILLAGERS

Appearance Weather-beaten and poor, the villagers can seem dour to outsiders. In truth, they are often simply exhausted.

Dress The villagers wear stout peasant garb well suited for days of hard labour in the fields. Many peasants own short hunting bows and are often found in huntsman's garb in Briarwood's fringes.

Nomenclature *male* Aaro, Elmo, Reima, Sauli, Usko; *female* Aune, Eeva, Irja, Oirjo; *family* Eronen, Leino, Ojanen, Takala.

VILLAGE LORE

A PC may know something about Woodridge, its history and surrounds. Determine how knowledgeable the PCs are and then impart some (or all) of the information below:

- Woodridge is an isolated village in Ashlar's eastern reaches. Hilduin Lorsch—a brooding, ambitious man—rules.
- Woodridge is a poor place. It straddles the Ridgeway—an old trading route now superseded by an easier trail. Lorsch dreams of adding the nearby village of Longbridge to his holdings, but his rival continues to thwart his desires.
- Strange things are said to live in the woods to the north of the village. Sometimes, thick fog boils forth from the forest and travellers go missing.

WHISPERS & RUMOURS

While in Woodridge a PC may hear one or more rumours. The PC can learn this information in a number of ways: perhaps by overhearing two locals gossiping, chatting with regulars over a few drinks at the local tavern and so on. Use the table below, to determine which rumours the PC learns.

D6	RUMOUR
1	Ancient ruins lie hidden deep in the Briarwood.
2	Hilduin Lorsch is consumed with ambition and wants to better his father who did much to improve his family's fortune.
3*	Caves below the Lorsch manor hold great stores of ancient gold coins.
4	Something strange is going on at the Travelling Man. Vesa Ahokas has occasional furtive meetings with travellers who never stay long and who seem to have no real reason to visit Woodridge.
5*	Weird things live in the Briarwood. When the fog rises, they steal forth to fall upon and eat any travellers they find on the Ridgeway.
6	Father Turkka is an ingrate who cares more for his own comfort and pleasure than his flock's well-being.

*False rumour



NOTABLE FOLK

Most of the population are nothing more than hardworking peasants. A few, however, are of interest to adventurers:

Eeva Keto (location 5; NE female human cleric [Braal] 5) A new resident, Eeva plots to seduce Hilduin and lure him into her dark lord's embrace (or kill him).

Father Turkka (location 3; LN middle-aged male human cleric [Conn] 3) Priest at the Father's Sanctum, Turkka frets over the state of his lord's hall and seeks funds for its repair (while jealously guarding his own comfortable lifestyle).

Hilduin Lorsch (location 1; LE male human fighter 2) Lord of Woodridge, Hilduin constantly schemes to add the village of Longbridge to his possessions.

Kanbrar Aralivar (location 7; LG male half-elf wizard 2) Varma's apprentice, Kanbrar is a kindly soul who now performs most of her duties.

Reima Lankinen (location 2; LN male middle-aged human) Courteous and clever, Reima is a consummate merchant; he is always looking for a way to enrich himself.

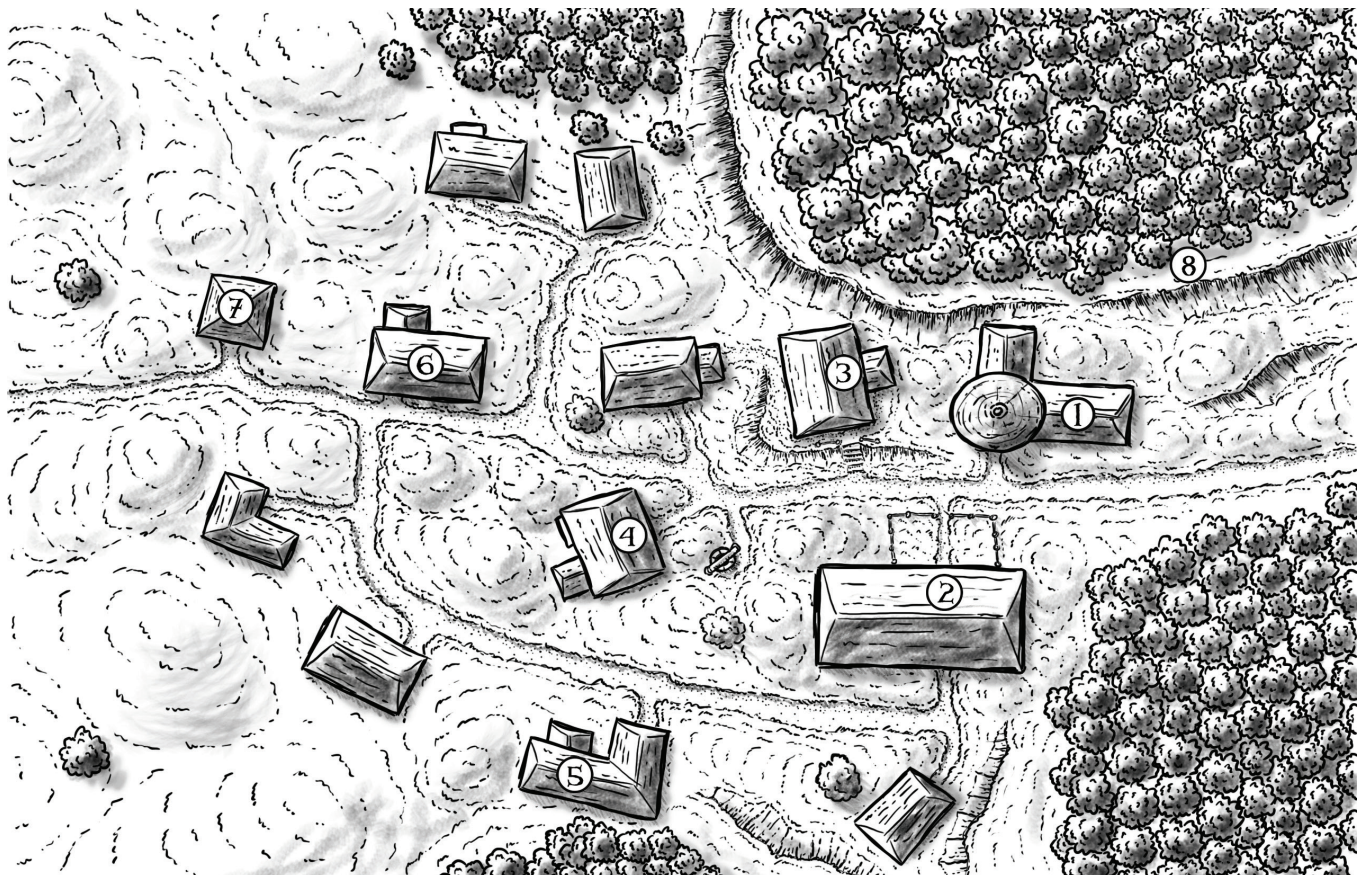
Varma Timonen (location 7; N old female human wizard 3) Now growing forgetful, Varma serves as Hilduin's court wizard. She rarely leaves the Smoking Tower.

Vesa Ahokas (location 6; N middle-aged male human) Vesa runs the Travelling Man. He secretly (and reluctantly) spies on Hilduin Lorsch and his doings.

NOTABLE LOCATIONS

Most of Woodridge comprises peasant homes. A few locations, however, are of interest to adventurers:

1. **Lorsch Manor:** This brooding fortified manor is the Lorsch ancestral home. Here dwells Hilduin Lorsch and his family.
2. **Lankinen's:** This large building is a general provisioners, stables and moneylenders. Reima Lankinen is the second richest man in the village.
3. **Father's Sanctum:** Dedicated to Conn, this is the oldest building in Woodridge except for parts of the Lorsch Manor. Dilapidated, it has seen better days.
4. **Priesthome:** Home to Father Turkka, this is a substantial building.
5. **Eeva's Home:** Here dwells (and plots) Eeva Keto.
6. **The Travelling Man:** Woodridge's only inn is welcoming and comfortable, but rarely busy.
7. **The Smoking Tower:** Varma Timonen dwells here, as she has for decades. She feels the cold terribly; consequently, smoke always belches from the tower's chimney.
8. **Briarwood:** These tangled, ancient woodlands are said to hold ancient ruins and to be the home of certain horrible creatures. Thick fog often blankets the area.



NOTABLE LOCATIONS

Woodridge is a far-flung community. Homesteads and forester's huts are scattered throughout the surrounding area, while the village's mercantile businesses and other places of import cluster about an old well that has never run dry. The Ridgeway—an old trade route—runs through the village, but is little used now. As well as being far-flung the village is a poor place; only a few individuals have real wealth; the rest of the populace live hand to mouth.

1: LORSCH MANOR

Here dwells Hilduin Lorsch (LE male human fighter 2), his family and two score or so family retainers and soldiers. The Lorsch family manor is heavily fortified. It comprises a squat and weathered ancient keep-tower and two newer fortified wings built by Hilduin's father.

The Lorsch family has ruled Woodridge for hundreds of years, but have ever chafed at their relatively minor standing among Ashlar's noble families. Lorsch means to increase his power and wealth by extending his rule over the nearby village of Longbridge. Unfortunately, Wido Gall (LN male human wizard 4), the ruler of the nearby town of Dulwich, also covets Longbridge. Thus far, the two rulers' struggle has not spilled over into violence, but such a confrontation cannot be far off.

Hilduin is married to Aila (CN female human ranger 1), daughter of a wealthy woodsman, who brought with her a substantial dowry. While the two are relatively happy, they are not in love and Aila spends an increasing amount of time in Briarwood. Not particularly religious, Hilduin pays lip-service to Conn the Father. In search of an advantage over his rival, he is in danger of falling for Eeva Keto's (location 5; NE female human cleric [Baal] 5) charms and into Baal's ebon clutches.

2: LANKINEN'S

This large building rivals the Lorsch Manor in size, but not grandeur. Obviously a business, it rambles over two floors. At the front, a fenced yard often holds cattle and horses for sale.

Lankinen's is the only commercial operation in Woodridge except the Travelling Man (location 6). Reima Lankinen (LN male middle-aged human) owns the establishment. For a finder's fee, he can get almost anything a villager needs through his extensive contacts in the near towns of Dulwich and Languard. Whispers also endow him with links to the smugglers of dismal Coldwater to the north. He laughs at such conjecture—perhaps a little too heartily—and no one has thus far proved the truth of the matter.

Lankinen's features a large shop space, filled with gear of interest to travellers and farmers, and a stable on the ground floor. The family dwell in a series of well-appointed rooms on

the second floor. Above it all, a surprisingly spacious attic is a riot of disorganisation filled with dusty and unwanted goods. Reima Lankinen fills many roles in the village: trader, moneychanger and pawnbroker. A necessary evil, he is not popular; many in the surrounding countryside owe him money. He hides a substantial store of coin, and the most valuable items pawned at his establishment, in the attic behind a false wall.

3: FATHER'S SANCTUM

This once-fine chapel has seen better days. Dedicated to Conn (LN god of community, family and rulership), it was built over 200 years ago and is Woodridge's oldest structure except for the central tower-keep of the Lorsch manor. Father Turkka (LN middle-aged male human cleric 3) preaches here weekly, officiates at funerals and generally tends to his flock's spiritual needs. He dwells in his home (location 4) across the road.

An extensive ossuary fills several natural caverns found when the chapel's foundations were sunk. Here lie the bones of the deceased watched over by equally dead village priests.

4: PRIESTHOME

This substantial building overlooks both the Father's Sanctum (location 3) and the Ridgeway. Father Turkka (LN middle-aged male human cleric 3) dwells here. Two young acolytes, Raisa Leino and Alma Eerola (both LN female human cleric [Conn] 1), live in a small, cramped room at the rear of the house. Father Turkka likes the good things in life, but he rarely shares his bounty with his acolytes. Thus, they resent him. At the weekly service, Eeva Keto (location 5) has noticed their animosity toward the priest and has begun quietly working on the two.

5: EEVA'S HOME

This large house on the village's southern bounds houses the beautiful and cunning Eeva Keto (NE female human cleric [Baal] 5). Masquerading as an apothecary and seer, Eeva has lived in the village for two years. Eeva came here after her malevolent lord sent her a dream. In it, he revealed it was her destiny to come to Woodridge and seduce Hilduin to Baal's dark embrace. Faithful to her lord, she has toiled at her task, but has been stymied by Aila Lorsch (location 1) who has divined the apothecary's (apparent romantic) interest in her husband. Still, she has other irons in the fire—Father Turkka's acolytes are in danger of falling under her spell and soon she intends to arrange an accident for Aila. With her out of the way, Eeva can seduce and marry Hilduin. If he converts to Baal's worship, all well and good. If not, accidents happen with surprising regularity in the woods and Eeva has always wanted to be a Lady of the Realm.

6: THE TRAVELLING MAN

A sign depicting a heavily laden traveller complete with stout walking staff and comically bulging backpack marks this place as an inn and rest stop. The Travelling Man is a welcoming, cosy inn. The beds are soft, the rooms are warm and the food hearty.

Food & Drink meal (mutton in a creamy mushroom sauce or lamb chops with parsnips and leeks) 5 sp, ale 4 cp, wine (pitcher) 1 sp.

Accommodation A standard room costs 2 gp a night. A bed in the small communal dormitory can be had for 2 sp.

The guest rooms on the second-floor command far-reaching views over the village's western approaches. Here Vesa Ahokas (N middle-aged male human) sets a watch for travellers toiling up the Ridgeway. He does this partially for practical, commercial reasons and partially because he is a (reluctant) spy for Wido Gall. Vesa's eldest son, Oskari (NG male human fighter 1), is in Wido's service as a man-at-arms. The wily noble has suggested a terrible accident would befall Oskari if Vesa refuses to cooperate. Thus, Vesa reluctantly spies for Wido, while trying to come up with a plan to safeguard his son's safety.

Vesa runs the inn with help from his wife, Irja (NG female human), and a half-dozen or so servants drawn from the folk dwelling in the locality. Often the inn is empty, or near empty, and the arrival of rich adventurers is a cause for celebration. Such folk often spend gold like water and have much news to share.

HIDDEN STRUGGLES

While Woodridge may seem peaceful on the surface, tension and conflict seethe beneath society's veneer. Hilduin Lorsch lusts after the village of Longbridge and ceaselessly plots to bring it into his dominion. Hilduin will use any tool to achieve his goals, and is in danger of falling into the dark god Braal's ebon embrace.

To counteract Hilduin's plots, his rival Wido Gall has placed several spies in Woodridge. Chief amongst those is Vesa Ahokas, owner of the Travelling Man. Thus while Hilduin seeks to control Longbridge, Wido seeks to undermine his authority in Woodridge. At the same time, Braal's agent in the village, Eeva Keto, plots against Woodridge's priest Father Turkka and schemes to remove Hilduin's wife, Aila. Thus tensions are slowly rising in the village, but few of its folk really understand why or how this happening (and thus can do little to calm matters).

7: THE SMOKING TOWER

Enticed to Woodridge by Hilduin's father, Varma Timonen (N old female human wizard 3) serves as the Lorsch's court wizard and magical advisor. Given Hilduin's struggles against Wido Gall this is an important position. Sadly, Varma is old and getting more than a little forgetful. She rarely emerges from the Smoking Tower these days, and leaves her apprentice Kanbrar Aralivar (LG male half-elf wizard 2) to deal with visitors and Hilduin's occasional enquiries.

Now she is old, Varma feels the cold terribly, and the tower's chimney near constantly belches forth smoke as she tries to warm her old bones. This results in a steady stream of villagers bringing wood to the tower in exchange for Varma's burnished copper coins. Several villagers are convinced she is up to no good and is engaged in some (no doubt) sinister experiment. Some also believe Varma is dead—she rarely appears in public now—and that Kanbrar is the tower's true master.



8: BRIARWOOD

A great swath of tangled woodland lies north of Woodridge, straddling a line of rugged, high hills. Fog often swallows the woodland giving them an otherworldly, ill-aspect. Local legend places any number of bogeymen and the like in the woods.

Persistent rumours place more than one overgrown, ancient ruin within the woods. Gossips speak of the old gold coins Hilduin Lorsch's father found therein and which Hilduin occasionally uses to settle his debts. They also mutter about the occasional disappearance of travellers and hunters when the fog rises about the wood's ancient boles.

In truth, in the olden days a small clan of elves dwelled in the Briarwood. They struggled against terrible, evil creatures dwelling along the coast until their numbers dwindled and the survivors fled to the south. Time's inexorable progress has not yet destroyed all their settlements. The ruins of a few such places, now briar-choked and lost, still stands among the Briarwood's ancient trees. The few druids and their fey allies dwelling in the Briarwood jealously defend such places.

THE RIDGEWAY

This broad, but little-used track meanders through the duchy's eastern hills connecting Woodridge to Longbridge and Dulwich to the west and Coldwater to the north. To the north of Woodridge, it wends its way beneath the Briarwood's tangled canopy. Just north of the woods, a spur leads to Languard, Ashlar's capital.

LIFE IN WOODRIDGE

Despite its lord's plots, schemes and ambitions, Woodridge is a quiet place. Here the rhythm of life—slow, boring and unhurried—is only broken by the occasional traveller using the Ridgeway. Hilduin fancies himself a great warrior and general. He drills the militia and his men-at-arms once a week.

TRADE & INDUSTRY

Woodridge is a poor place; most of its habitants subsist on a mix of small-scale farming and hunting. Villagers live throughout the surrounding area in small wooded plots surrounded by gardens or small fields. All must pay a tithe to the Lorsch, and most do so with produce rather than coin.

Woodridge's few businesses survive by servicing the trickle of travellers using the Ridgeway. Such folk often stay only a single night before moving on.

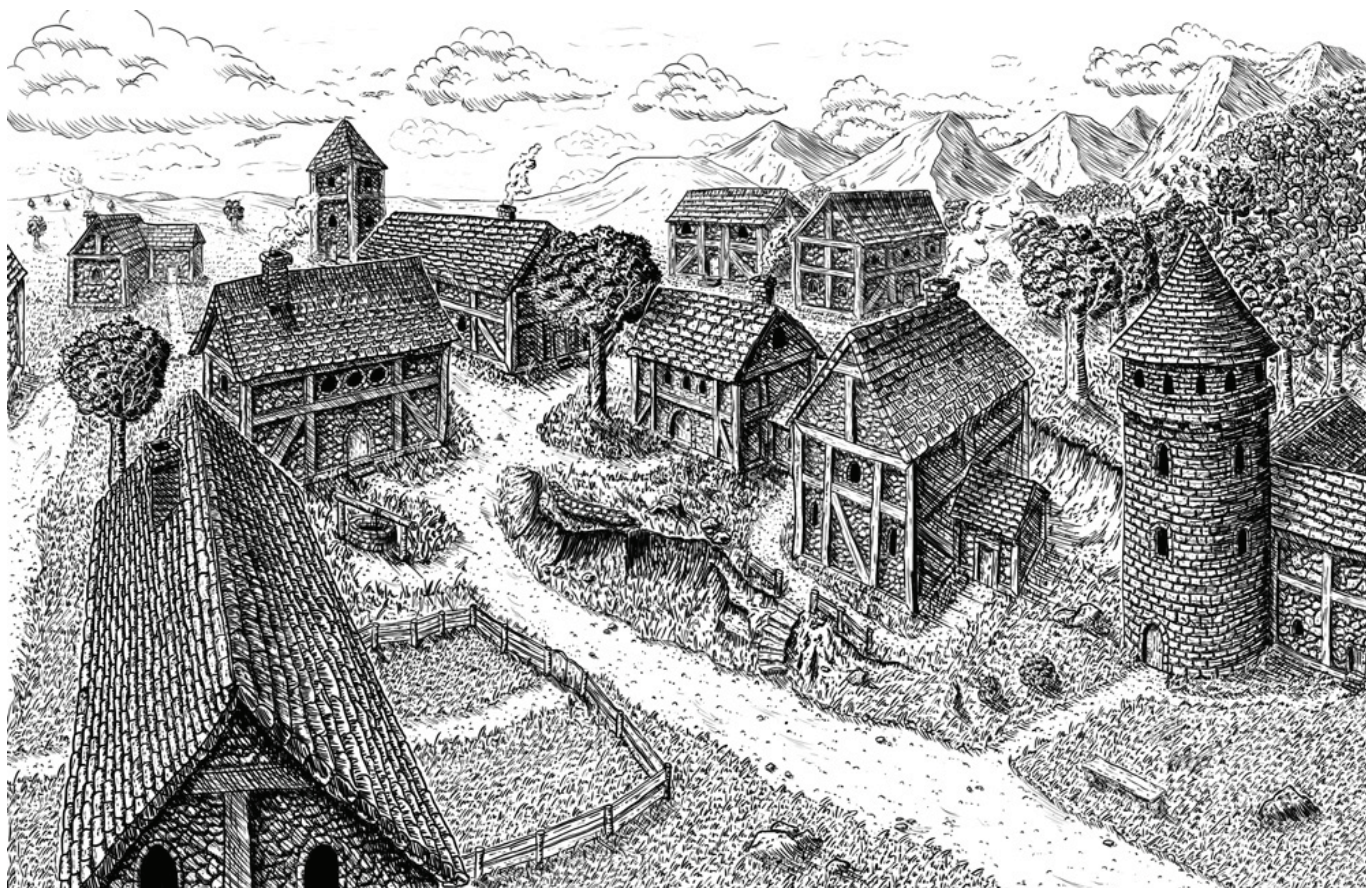
LAW & ORDER

Hilduin Lorsch is the law in Woodridge. Those threatening the peace are dealt with ruthlessly. He is a hard, inflexible man. His dreams far exceed what his resources can achieve and he jealously guards his power base.

EVENTS

While the PCs are in Woodridge, one or more of the events below may occur. Choose or determine randomly:

D4	EVENT
1	At dawn, thick and cloying fog cloaks the Briarwood. The locals mutter darkly at this and advise the PCs to delay their travels until the fog lifts.
2	A wandering tinker enters the village. Actually a spy for Wido Gall, he spends hours in deep conversation with Vesa Ahokas before leaving. Perceptive PCs notice the so-called tinker didn't complete any jobs or do any trading while in the village.
3	A traveller—Jani Varala—staggers into the village. Battered and bleeding he raves about the "living trees" before collapsing. His clothes are ripped and torn and he has lost his pack.
4	Hilduin Lorsch rides through the village. If he sees the PCs—and any of them are obviously warriors—he demands to know their names. If the warrior PC(s) are deferent, he offers them employment in his guard.



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