

The Witching Wood

Poisoned Pages Adventure for Starting Characters

The vale was meant to be their safe retreat, but they didn't count on the woods.

Five years ago, pilgrims established the tiny village of Respite in the idyllic Orborous Vale on the western edge of the Dark Forest, a stretch of evil wood found in the Northern Reach. At first, the land was good to them and fruitful, yielding rich harvests and allowing their livestock to flourish. The sun rose every morn with great beauty and life-giving warmth, and all was good and peaceful for the fifty or so souls that called Respite home—so long as they did not venture into the shadowed wood just beyond their border.

As the years passed, however, all that began to change, though the village elders could no longer point to a single event to mark the shift. The soil thinned and ceased to yield the abundance it once had. Now, the village's crops molder on the vine, their root vegetables emerge from the ground spindly and bleeding, and their blighted herb plants taste like ash and vomit. Flowers wither to brown

and black within moments of being cut. Goats give bloody milk floating with pus, and their weak cows sometimes bear calves with too many limbs or a second head. Now, the village treads perilously close to starvation, and tempers are rising. Some believe the New God has abandoned them, while others blame the misfortunes on a nearer threat.

Mayor Rickard Bailey and the elders of the Dawn Seekers have long forbidden anyone to venture into the wood. Only the strongest members of the village venture beneath the looming branches among the scintillating shadows, armed with what weapons they can muster to trap and hunt game in the uncertain darkness. Rumors and village tales abound about strange creatures that dwell in the wood, and the children of Respite are warned to mind themselves, or else a terrible witch will come for them.

The villagers are more right than they know.

The Witching Wood is an adventure for starting characters. In it, the characters must come together to find the source of the troubles besetting Respite and drive it away. If they succeed, the crucible of shared experience combines them into a group and sets the stage for even greater adventures.

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GETTING STARTED

The adventure assumes the characters either live in Respite or are passing through when the first attack occurs. Non-human characters are most likely travelers or recent settlers, looked upon with suspicion by the villagers.

Give the players some detail about the village and let them determine their characters' places in the community and how they know one another, if they do. It is particularly important to note whether any of them participate in the initial dawn ritual (see Day One).

If a question of reward arises during the adventure, Mayor Bailey offers to 2 ss each to rid Respite of the witch. Any more than that, the community can't afford.

RESPITE

The tiny village named Respite appears on no map. Travelers only rarely happen across the isolated valley in which it stands. Respite crafts most of its own goods, with its people only rarely making trips to one of the larger settlements more than a week's travel in any direction. Younger residents have never seen a city like Crossings and can scarce imagine what it might be like.

Home to about fifty settlers—a dozen families plus a few outsiders—the tiny village in Orborous Vale sports twenty or so tarred-wood buildings with thatched roofs clustered in the center of corn fields and livestock yards. Respite includes a roofed-but-unwalled smithy, a squat carpenter's shop, and a stable for the seven horses owned amongst the residents.

The town is erected in a shallow crescent on a hill, so that each home has a full view of the rising sun over the forest to the east. Most villagers rise before dawn, gathering in a communal field to pray to the rising sun.

The largest, most impressive building is a temple built to the New God on the northern edge of town, which features a worship hall big enough for the whole village and a cramped but serviceable rectory up a set of rickety stairs. Built on a stout stone foundation and made from thick wood, the church even has a glass window that the head priest, Father Barnabas, brought from far-away Crossings where he trained.

Toward the southern end of the village stands the two-storied Godswounds, a tavern and general store with an ignoble reputation among the righteous of Respite. Uncommon travelers to the village usually sleep in one of the Godswounds' two unoccupied rooms or secure a place near the fire in the common room.

Except as noted below, humans make up the entire population of Respite. The Dawn Seekers distrust members of other races and generally avoid them whenever possible, they are quick to suspect non-humans of involvement in the village's troubles.

The entire village squats about a mile west of the Dark Forest—entirely too close, some often say.

KEY FOLK OF RESPITE

The mayor of Respite is **Rickard Bailey**, a human of about forty, devout and decent. He has a wandering eye (particularly for Rhiannon, see below) and a love of smoking the crimson clove (a narcotic leafy plant that grows in the forest). Bailey is given to self-flagellation, and so his back has become a mass of scars.

Phillipe Goodheart runs the Godswounds. An energetic man in his thirties, he is a former prostitute and agitator from Crossings who delights in remarking on religious hypocrisy. He flirts with everyone who comes into the tavern—male or female, human or otherwise—and tells wild stories about horrific things he's seen. He sells common items for coin or barter.

The head priest **Barnabas "the Bald"** is about sixty. He used to serve the New God in Crossings but was denounced for heresy. He still has some fire in him, mostly reserved for berating Phillipe for his "wicked ways" (fornication and running an inn and brothel).

A botanist and astrologer in her early 20s, **Rhiannon Stargazer** radiates the sort of beauty that puts others to shame and inspires devotion and obsession in equal measure, to which she is oblivious. Cheerful and compassionate, she adorns her small shop with flowers that seem immune to the rot that plagues Respite. Jealous rumors abound of fey heritage or witchcraft, and respectable Dawn Seekers warn their children (vainly) to stay away from her.

Rhiannon's bosom companion and fraternal twin sister **Lanja** is a folklorist and occultist. She is witty and sardonic, plain and practical where her sister is beautiful and spacey, and fiercely loyal. Lanja has some sort of dark secret she keeps hidden.

The smith of Respite, **Chet Smithies** is a man in his late twenties who is just handsome and arrogant enough to be insufferable. He constantly attempts to woo Rhiannon and avoid Lanja, without much success.

THE DAWN SEEKERS

A Sect of the Cult of the New God that believes in salvation through privation and asceticism, the Dawn Seekers are deeply religious pilgrims. They settled in Respite, seeking freedom to worship as they choose. They believe the sun is a manifestation of the New God that will purge the world of the growing "shadow" of doom that creeps across it. They eschew the temptation of the flesh and the body's hungers, making them ripe targets for the predations of the witch in the woods.



SEASON OF THE WITCH

The witch Vizreen haunts the woods on Respite's border, seething with fury at the villagers and their loathsome devotions. Her coven has been the source of Respite's problems. Left unchecked, she causes the calamities described below.

Between the events, the characters can see to other tasks, investigate other threats, real or imagined, or simply go about their normal business. When the characters decide to move into the Dark Forest and investigate, go to "Into the Woods."

DAY ONE: THE WORMS INSIDE

The village gathers to welcome the sun in its normal dawn ritual, with the breeze whispering through the grass. All seems well, until halfway through, when two naked figures smeared with mud, blood, and human waste come stumbling out of the woods and run across the stark cornfield as though pursued by wolves no one can see. The villagers are slow to react to this scene, giving the characters a chance to act first.

The unfortunates are a young woman, **Caran**, and her adolescent brother, **Luca**. Seemingly unharmed, Caran is half-leading, half-carrying the boy, who gags and mutters in nonsensical words that resemble no living language. Both are shivering from exposure. Caran has three bruises from abnormally large fingers on her left arm above the elbow, while Luca has a number of deep scratches all over his body.

Assuming the boy is possessed, the villagers take him immediately to the rectory above the church, where they start praying over him. The boy's moans become screams and he grasps at his head and guts, ripping at his skin unless restrained, which requires a success on a Strength challenge roll made with 1 boon. A success on a Perception challenge roll reveals two moving lumps in his flesh, as though something is crawling just under his skin. These are 2 **burrowing centipedes**. Unless they are carefully treated (see the rules in *Shadow*), they eventually rupture Luca's flesh, killing him, and attack anyone else nearby.

Caran can be questioned normally, but she remembers little beyond the previous midday, when she went into the forest to look for her brother during a game of find the faerie. She has a vague sense of wandering dazed among the trees and then seeing a door lined in blood leading into a tree. She can say no more. If cleansed of the muck caked onto her body, a blood-red handprint is discovered tattooed on the small of her back. The hand is the same size as the mark on her arm and has six fingers.

Unless restrained, Caran slips away at the first opportunity, moving as if in a trance, and disappears into the woods. Unless rescued by midnight, she is never seen alive again.

DAY TWO: THE MISSING CHILD

The horror of the previous day raises tensions in the village and arguments break out more easily among the Dawn Seekers. The faithful pray more fervently at dawn, while others debate sending a search party into the woods (probably to find Caran).

At about midday, a young girl named **Magta** rushes up to one of the main residents in tears, saying her infant brother has vanished after she was set to watch him. All she remembers is the grass rustling faintly around them, she looked away for half a breath, and then he was gone.

That night, the village can hear the baby crying piteously from the forest, preventing sleep. The sounds suddenly grow loud and frantic around midnight, and then stop in a single agonized screech.

DAY THREE: FIND THE WITCH!

Fear has turned to anger and despair by now. Villagers start turning on one another. Women accuse Rhiannon of being in league with the witch of the wood, and she and Lanja shut themselves up in their shack to elude capture. The cowardly Mayor Bailey does nothing to prevent it, and Chet Smithies (angry at Rhiannon's constant rejection) actually encourages it. If the characters do not help the women escape, the villagers break in and either burn Rhiannon at the stake or imprison her (if so convinced).

In the confusion, a young man named **Edmure** disappears from the village. He was seen entering the woods, armed with a boar-hunting spear. That night is filled with his faint moans of growing ecstasy that suddenly become shrieks of horror and pain.

DAY FOUR: THE CURSED ARMY

Vizreen has offered enough sacrifices to gather the power to assemble an army to do her bidding.

She descends upon Respite alongside a single warg who acts as her lieutenant at the head of a small army of 20 **fomors** she enslaved, which she believes is sufficient to wipe out Respite. She is most likely correct.

INTO THE WOODS

At some point, the characters might enter the woods in an attempt to confront the source of Respite's troubles. The villagers might send a search party or two into the woods, but such parties never locate the witch and always emerge short one or two members, with the rest terrified out of their wits, if they return at all.

Finding the witch's lair requires a series of Intellect challenge rolls. The character making the check does so with 1 bane during day and 2 banes at night. Weirdness in the woods prevents other characters from helping on the roll so only the character leading the expedition makes the roll. After the third success, the characters find the Witch's Lair.

Failures, however, cause trouble. Each failure results in an encounter, which you can determine by rolling a d6 and finding the number rolled on the following table. If the characters would have the same encounter twice, treat the duplicate result as if you had rolled a 1. After the third failure, the characters have no luck finding the witch that day or night but can try again the next day.

In addition, each time a character gets a failure, roll a d6. On a 1–3, Vizreen (as an **apprentice witch** with 4 Corruption) finds the characters and uses her magic to frustrate and impede them. If they find her lair, she retreats into the wood to fight another day.

INTO THE WOODS ENCOUNTERS

d6	Encounter
1	The characters wander lost for an hour before finding themselves back where they came from.
2	The characters find themselves in a cobweb strewn dark part of the woods. One large spider descends on them and attacks.
3	The characters stumble upon a hunting party of 3 fomors .
4	The characters blunder into a spiked pit trap made to catch animals. Two randomly determined characters must make Agility challenge rolls. A character springs aside safely on a success or takes 1d6 damage from falling to the bottom of the pit on a failure.
5	The characters find a patch of spongy leaves that barely covers a pit of squirming 4 void larva chewing on a still-living animal. The lead character must get a success on an Agility challenge roll or fall into the pit. Anyone seeing this scene must get a success on a Will challenge roll or gain 1 Insanity. Characters who fall into the pit make the roll with 2 banes.
6)	The characters discover a circle with 6 cultists dancing around the grisly remains of a humanoid corpse.

THE WITCH'S LAIR

The characters know the area of the lair instantly by the cold, dark aura that permeates it. The blackened trees and crackling brush seem stunted and mutated.

Except for the clear walkway to the hovel, the whole area is choked with brambles. Any character attempting to move through them must get a success on an Agility challenge roll or take 1d3 damage from the dagger-like thorns.

Vizreen dwells in a cave beneath a fallen tree, into whose stump she has built a small, poorly fitted door. Blood-red light leaks around this door from inside (hence Caran's memory) and a smell of roasting pork wafts from it. Moans emerge from the door, growing louder as the characters approach.

Inside, rusty cooking implements hang beside fingerbones and still moldering fingers. The walls are painted in obscene sigils with blood and feces and other fluids. There is a bubbling cooking pot with at least one small skeletal arm poking out. Seeing the interior of the hovel requires characters to make Will challenge rolls with a number of banes equal to the number of villagers Vizreen has killed (Caran, Magta's baby brother, and Edmure). Their remains are visible and in various states of horrific disrepair. A failure results in the character gaining 1 Insanity.

Several of their organs sit, moldering and hard to distinguish, on a crude mantelpiece like grisly trophies. Beside them is a bloody, ancient sacrificial knife of elven make (worth 7 ss), an old book containing incantations of two rank 0 spells you choose, and scattered amongst the refuse are 14 cp and 2 ss.

In addition to any of the lost youths the characters might think they are rescuing, one of Vizreen's captives is still alive: **Norn**, a middle-aged man from the village who disappeared weeks ago. He is the source of the moans. The witch cut off several of his appendages and stitched his eyes and mouth shut, a process during which he went hopelessly insane.

CONCLUSION

The best outcome is for the player characters to successfully drive off the witch and discover her lair. If they do so, Vizreen most likely returns to torment the town later and with help. The threat of her return could become the plot of the next adventure.

The characters, along with a few villagers, might simply flee. If so, the witch arrives and commands her henchmen to raze the community. If the characters return, they find any villagers who remained behind torn apart and partly eaten.

Ultimately, the events in this short adventure should unite the characters and give them a common bond that helps them stay together in the trials ahead. Thus, having survived the experience, the characters have impetus for undergoing the training necessary to take the first step onto their novice paths.

