

WHAT CROOKED ROOTS

15 FOLK-HORROR ROLEPLAY ENCOUNTERS TO
UNSETTLE AND TERRIFY



5E

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- **Body horror and blood** - Body Boundary, If Mounds Could Speak, A Crag in the Egg, Body Tags
- **Allusions to cannibalism** - Fruit Tooth
- **Allusions to pregnancy** - Fruit Tooth
- **Allusions to stalking** - Rapture & Missed Connections
- **Animal hunting and harvesting** - Summon Drum
- **Self-harm in a ritualistic setting** - The Silent Ones
- **Cult-like behavior** - The Silent Ones
- **Funeral for a child** - The Beekeepers

THANK YOU

Special thanks to the amazing TTRPG community on Twitter and the Hope for TTRPGs Discord. Every Retweet, like, and conversation has meant the world to me. This started out as an afterthought, and your support and belief in me grew these crooked roots into a passion project I hold dear. I dedicate this wonderfully horrifying thing to you.

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In these
unfamiliar woods,
you're the stranger.

1.

You've been living in an isolated village for five years: Westerbrook. You don't remember how you came to be here. You recall feeling weak when you regained consciousness under the careful eyes of the villagers. After recovering, you decided to stay.

Westerbrook is a completely self-sustaining farming community, and a nice change from adventuring. Your cottage is comfortable and quiet. You're surrounded by fields of wheat and, beyond that, the Dark Woods, a twisted, overgrown forest that no one is allowed to enter... Except on special occasions.

That's where we join you.

You're tasked with escorting a basket of bread down the path that appeared just last night. It weaves from the center of the village, past the wheat fields, and disappears into the shadows of the Dark Woods. "This must be done every ten years," the village elder informed you. "You're the strongest," another leader said. "We shall mend your armor," spoke your neighbor.

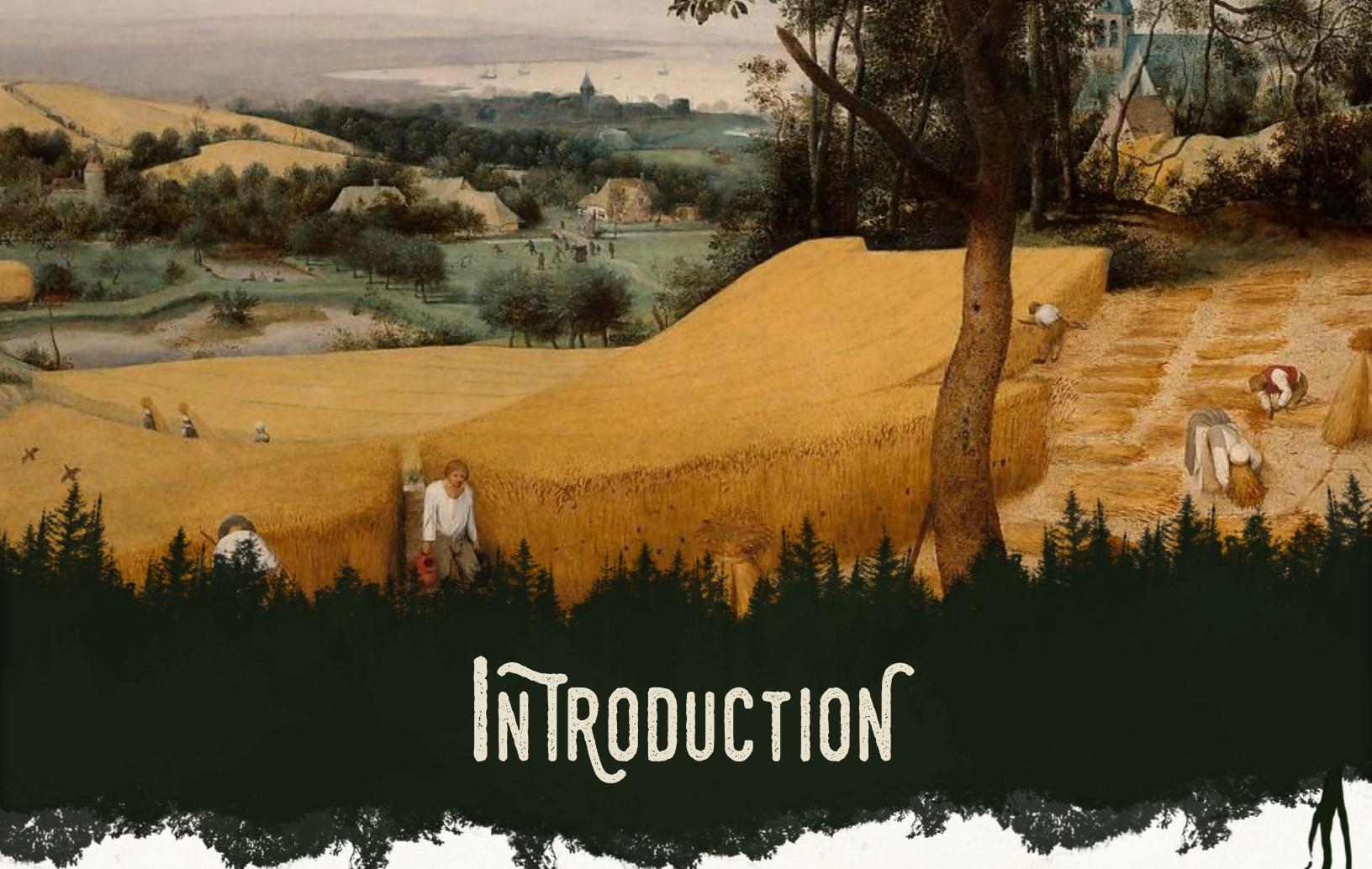
Your questions about safety and origin are met with sly smiles before the subject changes.

Where are you taking the bread?
The path will show you.

What if you get lost?
Try not to leave the path.

The path may try to trick you.





INTRODUCTION

ROOTED IN ROLEPLAY

In this text, you'll find mostly roleplaying encounters, though your party may choose violence. I've kept these simple, but have your stat blocks prepared ahead of time. Most humanoids presented here use the commoner stat block unless otherwise noted, but feel free to change up what they look and sound like to fit your campaign. Green hags are an obvious replacement to many creatures, but regular humanoids without special features can be frightening enough when given the right tools...

WHERE & WHEN TO USE THESE ENCOUNTERS

Most of these encounters use the woods as a backdrop, though many would fit in other biomes with some work (icy tundras, wet swamps, empty deserts). Some encounters work best if characters have heard corresponding rumors ahead of time.

These encounters work best with an average party level of 1-4. Some are more deadly than others.

ELEMENTS, NOT PLOTS

Most of the offerings here are not fully fleshed-out stories. They're meant to be dropped into a campaign while players engage with something else at large. You're invited to tie them into larger story arcs if you can, but they work as standalones.

DON'T GIVE OUT ANSWERS

Horror works because the audience doesn't know the rules or see behind the curtain. Nightmares are frightening, and they often don't make sense. Scary encounters don't have to make sense, have an exact purpose, or follow traditional mechanics. It's comforting when things make sense, which goes against horror. If your players ask you to explain how something worked or why something was the way it was, invite them to share their theories. Give them a point of inspiration for the conversation, and change the subject. Some of these encounters have explanations it'll be difficult to explain in game. Feel free to allow checks, drop diaries, or include other hints that might help paint a full picture outside of the encounter.

THE DETECT MAGIC PROBLEM

Detect Magic, Dispel Magic, and Identify are wonderfully fun spells, but in horror campaigns they can remove a sense of mystery. You can consider eliminating them from play during Session Zero. If you keep Detect Magic and the like, keep in mind:

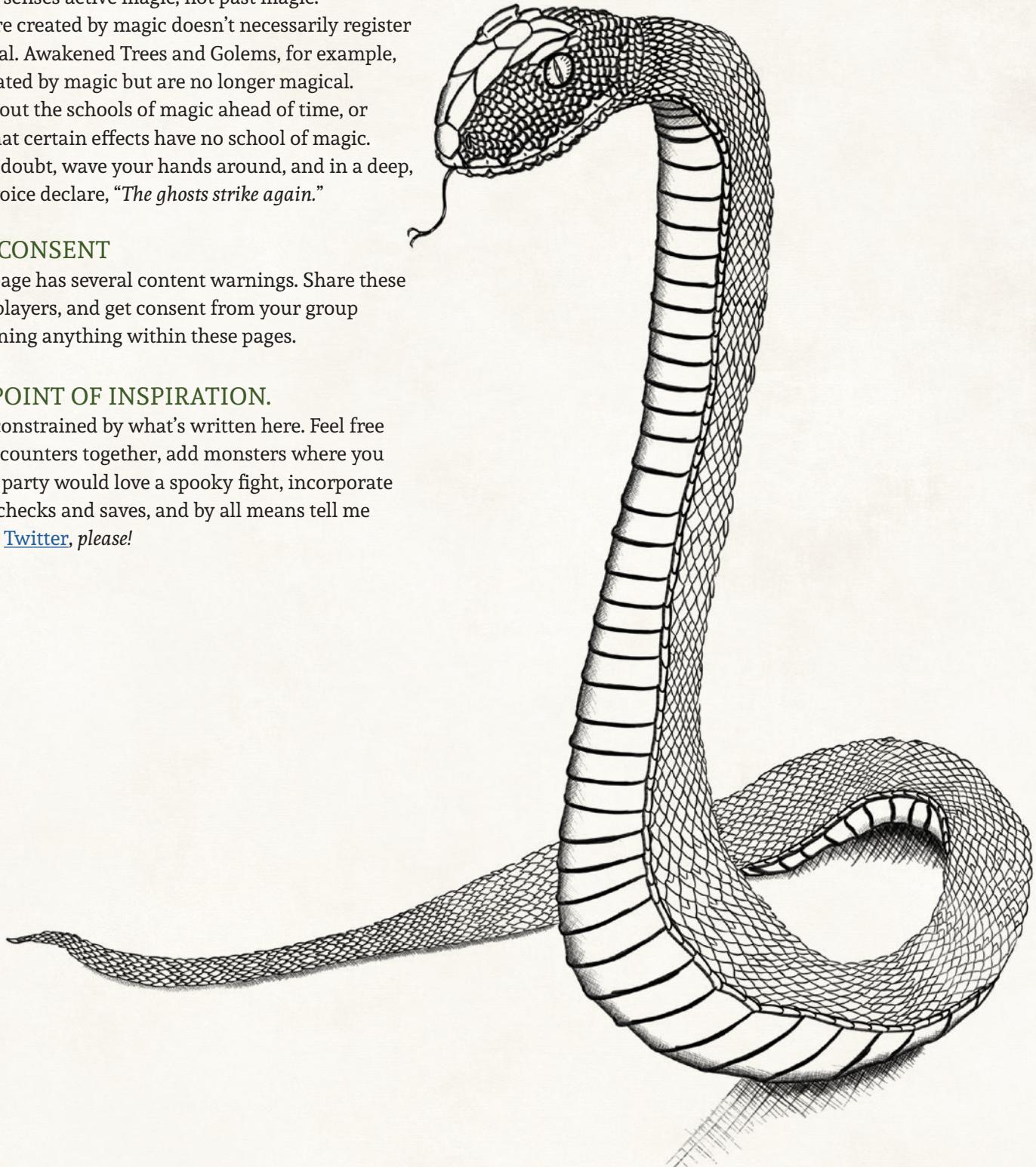
- You can't detect the location of invisible creatures or objects, or see their auras.
- The spell senses active magic, not past magic.
- A creature created by magic doesn't necessarily register as magical. Awakened Trees and Golems, for example, were created by magic but are no longer magical.
- Think about the schools of magic ahead of time, or decide that certain effects have no school of magic.
- When in doubt, wave your hands around, and in a deep, spooky voice declare, "*The ghosts strike again.*"

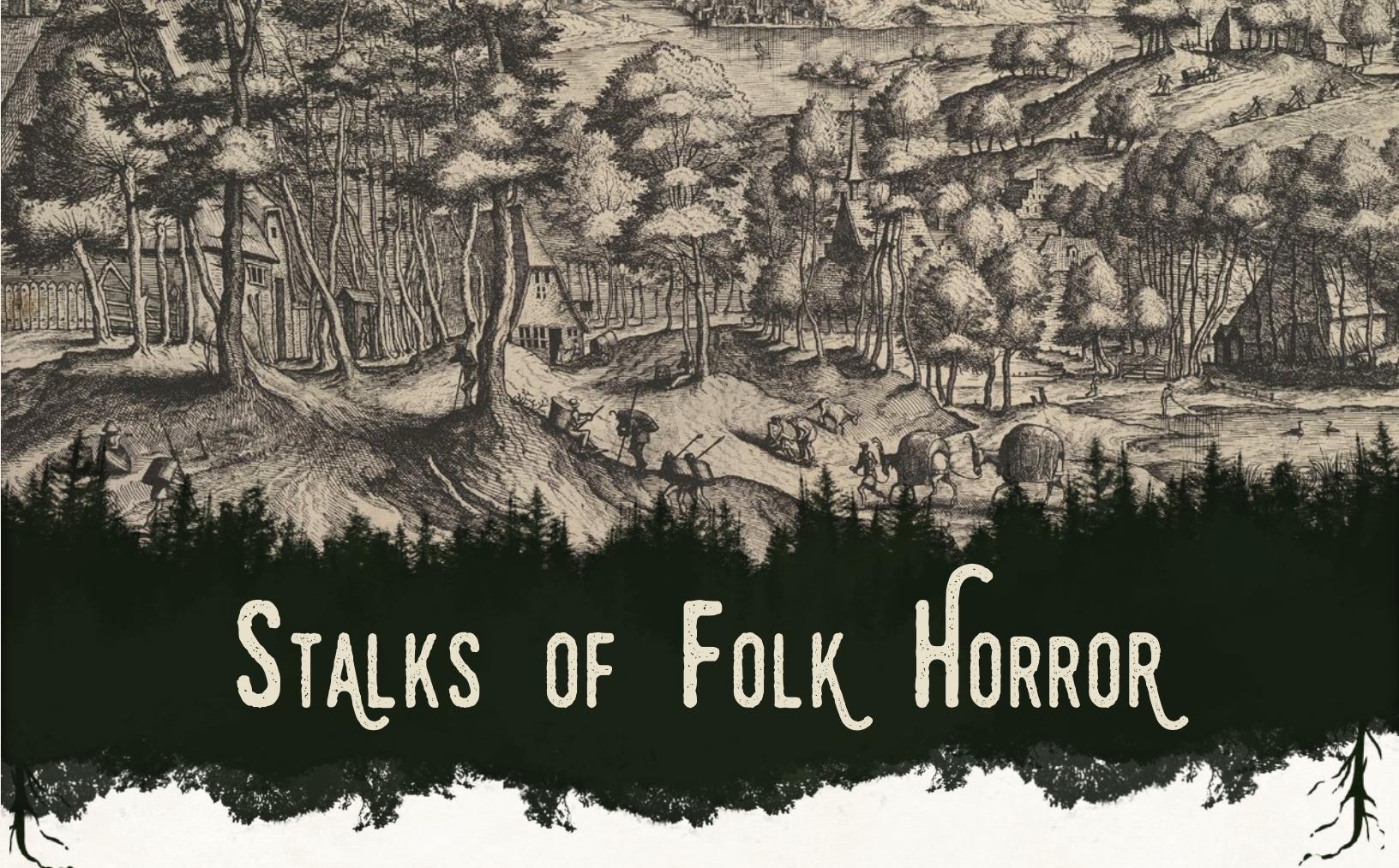
PLAYER CONSENT

The front page has several content warnings. Share these with your players, and get consent from your group before running anything within these pages.

TAKE A POINT OF INSPIRATION.

Don't feel constrained by what's written here. Feel free to mash encounters together, add monsters where you think your party would love a spooky fight, incorporate more skill checks and saves, and by all means tell me about it on [Twitter](#), *please!*





STALKS OF FOLK HORROR

We all have our own ideas of the type of trauma that makes up folk horror. I think it's safe to say that, for many, *The Wicker Man* is the quintessential folk horror film — but what makes it so?

ADAM SCOVELL'S FOLK-HORROR CHAIN

There lacks any impressive amount of scholarship regarding folk horror, but what does exist often references [Scovell's dissection of folk-horror films](#) or many of his other writings on the genre. He eloquently lays out a domino effect present in most films:

- Stories feature the landscape and an environment of the natural and rural as a strong aesthetic. The surrounding world feels like a character unto itself.
- The rolling hills, dark forests, and oceans of crops separate and isolate the "folk." There is no easy escape, and one must assimilate to survive.
- Away from policed societies, morality loses meaning and new belief systems thrive. Often we see goats and wicker men as new deities worthy of worship.
- Violence always strikes, often supernaturally. These tropes include sacrifice, possession, a ritual, a summoning, and the appearance of something unnatural. Death is nearly always present.

Scovell's chain focuses mostly on popularly referenced films like *The Wicker Man*, *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, and *Witchfinder General* and the themes and anxieties that swallowed Britain at the time. While these films are hallmarks of the genre, they fail to encompass the true expanse of folk horror — an idea with which I believe Scovell would agree. The world is much larger than Britain.

EXPANDING FOLK HORROR

To reduce Folk Horror to only the tropes and themes of three films would be doing the genre a disservice. No shame to those who enjoy these tropes, but the world is vast and wide with cultures mythologizing dread for a range of reasons in colorful, sublime ways.

My own understanding of folk horror is admittedly limited. As I approached this collection of encounters, I dove headfirst into a slew of collected works, documentaries, and any articles I could get my hands on. When I emerged from the brush a bit more wild, I determined that these enduring subjects would be the wicker and paste I'd use to build out how folk horror can be used for interesting encounters:

- Horror in isolation
- A sense of *what happened here?*

- The lingering fear of *this will happen again*
- How seemingly innocent mistakes can lead to life-ending consequences
- Exploring where the feral meets the civilized
- Unearthing the feminine

While not all of these are present in every encounter, these are the guiding thoughts used to craft many of the stories waiting to unfold within these pages. Feel free to use them as inspiration to build your own encounters.

HORROR IN ISOLATION

Isolation as a theme circles back to Scovell's theories. Unlike haunted houses in the dead of night, folk horror encounters can be their creepiest when the sun is high and an endless field of wheat moved by the harsh prairie wind is all that surrounds you. While not frightening on the surface, a sense of creeping unease is hard to deny. It's a different kind of claustrophobia.

WHAT HAPPENED HERE?

While many subgenres of folk horror explore aftermath as a concept, I situate these encounters within nature. Most of us have an innate understanding of how plants grow, change, bloom, and die. When something challenges our understanding of a process, it caresses the imagination, sometimes bringing forth fears we didn't know we had.

IT WILL HAPPEN AGAIN.

Inevitability might be one of the strongest motivators for fear. What you've witnessed isn't over. It's part of a cycle started long before you knew of it. Since you're isolated from anyone who could help, and you don't know the rules of what's causing this, there's nothing you can do to stop it.

CONSEQUENCES OF A HARMLESS MISTAKE

Nature punishes, especially in a world where nature lives, breathes, and births terrible horrors. If you don't pay the toll, make the sacrifice, or abide by the law of the land, who knows what will creep from the shadows? The ignorant are not so innocent either. Nature doesn't care if you didn't know that chopping that tree would anger her. She has the perfect spot for you to spend the rest of your days.

WHERE THE FERAL MEETS THE CIVILIZED

Wildlings only seem that way because we have a point of reference. Take away the context, and maybe they

don't seem so deranged. Many folk horror stories rely on a civilized person venturing into an "uncivilized" community where morality is interpreted differently. Other stories follow the wildling into an even more "uncivilized" territory where monsters might roam or the burdens of modern tools destroy. The wildling is wild because he must be to survive.

UNEARTHING THE FEMININE

Like most horror genres, folk horror has a strange relationship with the feminine. From murdering women who might be witches to sacrificing virgins, there's a lot to unpack. I'm more interested in mother mythologies and how the nurturer can be its own horror.

In some tales, Mother is the giver and nurturer of a distorted, sick land. In others, Mother is a necessary sacrifice to ensure the safety of her enduring community and the blessing of future offspring. Does Mother have a place in your world? Some of the encounters here explore motherhood in unexpected shapes.

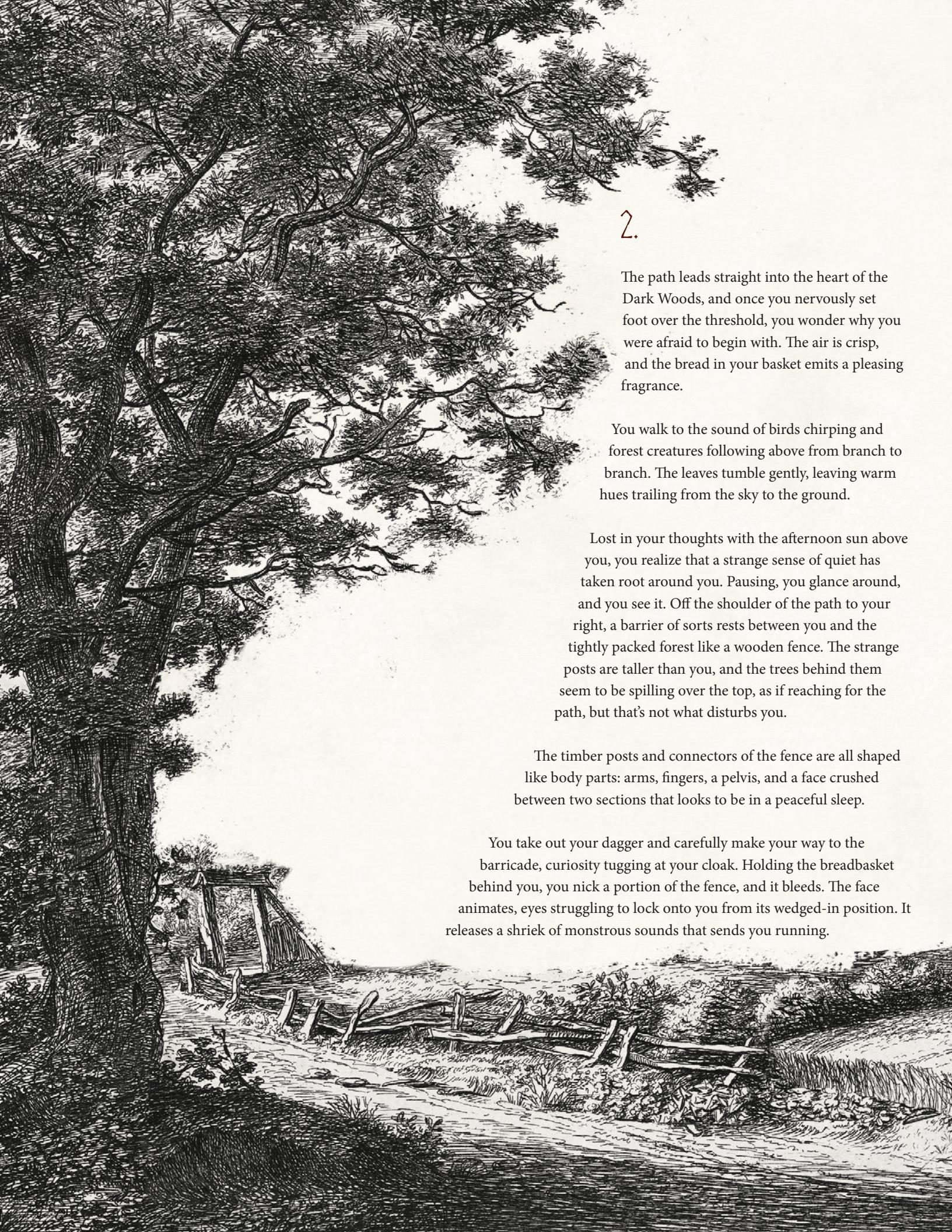
VISIONS OF FOLK HORROR

My focus for this collection is on Western iterations of fear in the woods. For me, folk horror pieces usually conjure endless corn crops, rolling hills saturated with wilderness, a hot sun glinting through autumn leaves, shadows so deep you're sure someone is lurking within... yet flowers bloom in chaotic arrangement, the forest encroaches on society's domain, wheat awaits harvest, and the celebrations continue.

You're invited, and the games are just starting.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I fully admit that I am not a folk horror expert. What I've gathered here is a culmination of my own research and the influences of popular media (most noted in the Touchstones section). If you feel I've made an error somewhere, or you have recommendations, let's chat on [Twitter!](#)



2.

The path leads straight into the heart of the Dark Woods, and once you nervously set foot over the threshold, you wonder why you were afraid to begin with. The air is crisp, and the bread in your basket emits a pleasing fragrance.

You walk to the sound of birds chirping and forest creatures following above from branch to branch. The leaves tumble gently, leaving warm hues trailing from the sky to the ground.

Lost in your thoughts with the afternoon sun above you, you realize that a strange sense of quiet has taken root around you. Pausing, you glance around, and you see it. Off the shoulder of the path to your right, a barrier of sorts rests between you and the tightly packed forest like a wooden fence. The strange posts are taller than you, and the trees behind them seem to be spilling over the top, as if reaching for the path, but that's not what disturbs you.

The timber posts and connectors of the fence are all shaped like body parts: arms, fingers, a pelvis, and a face crushed between two sections that looks to be in a peaceful sleep.

You take out your dagger and carefully make your way to the barricade, curiosity tugging at your cloak. Holding the breadbasket behind you, you nick a portion of the fence, and it bleeds. The face animates, eyes struggling to lock onto you from its wedged-in position. It releases a shriek of monstrous sounds that sends you running.



GHOSTLY GUIDE

A peaceful ghost helps characters find their way out of an encroaching forest.

Difficulty: Easy

Length: Short

Note: If the party contains a Ranger with the forest as their favored terrain, this encounter likely won't fit the group.

THE ENCOUNTER

After a recent rain or heavy snow melt, there is a flash flood in the area. The water uproots any trails for the time being, and a thick fog makes it difficult to navigate. If the party is following a road, it gets washed out in all directions. If it's night or overcast, there is no sun or star to point characters North, and they quickly become lost.

A local NPC appears and offers to guide the characters back to the road. He may ask for payment. The NPC

has the commoner stat block for the duration of the encounter.

If the party accepts his offer, he'll lead them through the woods, avoiding any and all danger. His path takes the group near a gravestone that features a somewhat recently dug grave. The guide lingers at the gravestone for a somber moment before moving along. He won't answer questions about who is buried there, requesting that some matters remain private. Investigating the gravestone reveals no markings carved into it.

As he leads characters to their destination, he can impart some rumors or hooks as you see fit (though they should be a bit outdated). Once finished helping, he leaves the way they came. Characters with a Passive Perception of 14 or higher note that the guide makes no sound when leaving. A DC 12 Survival (Wisdom) check reveals that limbs, bushes, and other forest obstacles seem to pass right through him. If a character calls out to him, he walks behind a tree and vanishes.

BODY BOUNDARY

A grotesque and long fence keeps an unknown threat at bay.

Difficulty: Deadly

Length: Short

THE ENCOUNTER

When characters are traveling far from civilization, the path they're following comes up against an area where the trees are packed extremely close together. For one-square mile, the trees grow so densely that it's hard to imagine tiny creatures living within them, let alone a humanoid moving through without issue. Light barely passes through the branches.

A six-foot high wooden fence-like boundary stops countless Awakened Trees from swallowing the path on which the characters travel. They see that the woods hang over the path, as if trying to absorb it, but the sturdy fence contains the trees. There is no room to stand on top of the thin fence. A casual study of the wooden boundary reveals that all the posts are shaped like body parts and bones:

- A wooden hand extends from one post and grabs another.
- A wooden face peacefully sleeps upside down, smashed between two rib cages.
- Ropes of braided hair tie sections together.



- Spine-shaped wood lines the ground, providing a strong foundation.
- The fence keeps away everything but a few weeds, birds, insects, and the weather.
- If any portion of the barrier is cut, it bleeds a thick crimson ooze, eyes within crevices open, and all sleeping faces awaken and emit an ear-splitting scream. Each creature within 10 feet takes 1d8 psychic damage.

If characters scale the fence, a tree tries to grapple and pull them deeper into the woods, constricting and attacking until the character is dead and their body can provide fertilizer. Since every tree behind the fence is a trapped monster mechanically, the party is outnumbered easily. The trees cannot move, but they can hand someone around, damaging them in the process.

If characters get within opportunity attack range while investigating the fence but don't cross it, the trees leave them be. The trees only attack if a character attempts to enter their domain in humanoid form.

To up the difficulty and entice characters to explore, you may give the trees access to Thaumaturgy. The trees use this spell to mimic whispers or a small child in order to lure characters across the boundary. If the trees hear a name among the party, they may repeat it in hopes of luring the owner into the woods.

ABOUT THE BODY BOUNDARY

Over the last several centuries, the forest folk have made a variety of sacrifices within the woods. They didn't realize the trees were gaining a taste for blood and death. When the sacrifices reduced in number and frequency, the trees grew hungry and claimed what they could when they could, growing at an unstoppable number. In an attempt to protect themselves, the forest folk halved their number in a bloody event. It took many turns of the moon and much loss of life to construct the body boundary. It provides a constant source of nutrition for the ravenous trees while keeping them at bay. A body must be added once a year to the boundary or it fails, and the trees consume all living humanoids within a 30-mile radius in a vicious takeover.

QUEEN BEEKEEPERS

Two beekeepers need help lighting a pyre during a quiet funeral.

Difficulty: Easy

Length: Medium

THE ENCOUNTER

The characters come across a small cottage with a modest fenced-in backyard. They hear a lot of buzzing. The fence is about a meter high, making it easy for medium and large humanoids to see over. The yard is full of wildflowers and herbs. Basil, mint, and thyme are easy to spot for any characters who cook while purple asters, red Blanket Flowers, and lace plants are easily spotted by druids, rangers, or other survivalists. Four beehives are set up in a corner. Finally, a small wooden pyre has been built at the farthest reaches of the yard.

The characters may not recognize the beehives depending on their background. The beehives are similar to what was used in the medieval ages:

- They're almost cone-like in shape, with a narrow flat top and a wide flat bottom.
- A small hole is in the middle that allows the bees to enter and exit.

Two beekeepers are in the backyard when the characters arrive. The beekeepers wear white robes, stockings, slippers, and a hood with a wicker mask. They are harvesting honey. One beekeeper holds a beehive horizontally while the other digs into the bottom of it, pulling out combs of honey and wax and placing them in a wax-coated basket. They wave down the characters and ask them to meet them out front because they need help with something. When the beekeepers finish collecting honey and wax, they'll invite the party inside their cottage.

ABOUT THE BEEKEEPERS

- They are two queen bees, each living in enchanted beekeeper attire. They live in the hood of the outfit.
- The clothing enchantment allows them to have a long memory, the ability to speak and understand most humanoid languages, and a rudimentary understanding of humanoid best practices (manners, food needs, etc.).
- Their attire also ensures the queen bees do not need food or drink.

- The enchantment ends if the cloth is punctured, as the magic contained within escapes when a hole is created. This includes removing the hood, shoes, or gloves.
- The enchantment ends with Dispel Magic. Detect Magic reveals transmutation magic, but the beekeepers will not let others touch them to cast Identify. If a character insists, the beekeepers become hostile and ask them to leave.
- The beekeepers try not to engage in combat.
- The beekeepers are afraid of fire and sharp tools. A third beekeeper lost the magic of her suit by burning it. That queen bee now resides in one of the hives in the yard, but cannot recall her time as a beekeeper
- It's nearly impossible to tell them apart unless a character has high perception and takes time to study the yellow stains on their beekeeping attire.
- They have feminine voices; however, their attire hides any identifying features.
- They use their humanoid forms to protect the hives and grow wildflowers.
- The beekeepers found their cottage abandoned and have spent the last several years "cleaning" it, but their definition of cleaning may differ from civilized folk.
- If asked why they don't remove their attire, the beekeepers assure the inquisitor that they're comfortable as they are.

Watching over the non-sentient bees has worn down the beekeepers. They know of children, and they long for their own. They do not know how to produce, so instead they've been trying to grow their own from honeycomb and animal bones. They have had many failures and nothing but time. The jars of their failures litter their home, but an unknowing viewer might assume the containers are jars of honey.

The beekeepers did manage to grow a honeycomb-shaped human boy no older than five, in a large trough of honey. The boy, named Royal, behaved much like a human child, but a day ago, a curious bear split him in two, breaking whatever magic animated him. The beekeepers found his upper half, and while they are upset, they lack the emotional depth of humanoids to react the way one might expect.

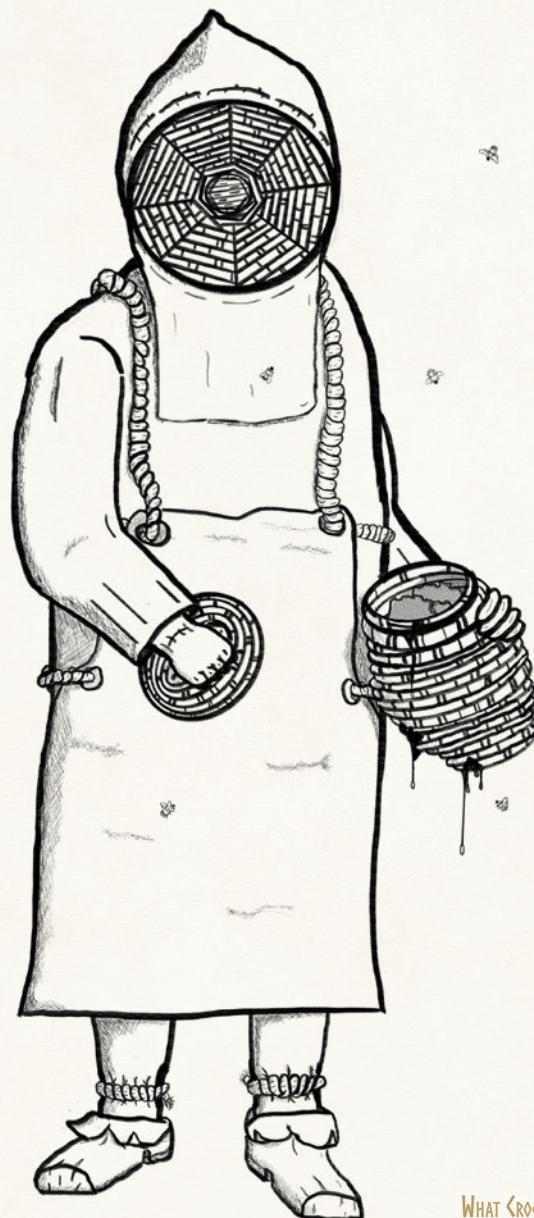
The cottage has three rooms and dirt floors in all of them. The main room has shelves mounted floor to ceiling, some cushions scattered about, a blanket on the floor, and an unused stove with an assortment of mismatched kitchenware inside, instead of wood. The shelves are stacked with jars full of golden liquids and gels. The jars come in a variety of shapes and sizes.

Another room in the cottage has one two-person bed and a child-sized bed. The last room has no windows and

acts as dried honeycomb storage, but it also contains a large horse trough with a makeshift wooden lid. Inside the trough is a mixture of honey, honeycomb, wax, animal bones, plants, mold, and dead insects. It smells rancid. This is where Royal, the honeycomb boy, was created. Most items in the cottage have been scavenged or stolen, though the beekeepers don't really know the concept of stealing.

The beekeepers offer characters room-temperature "tea" (rainwater with fresh-picked flowers floating in it) and "biscuits" (pressed leaves in dry honey). The beekeepers explain that they need help lighting a pyre in honor of their dead son.

- The pyre is in the backyard and five feet tall.
- It's made of a collection of stacked wood, forming a cone around a child made of honeycomb hidden inside. The beekeepers do not mention the child inside, feeling that he should be kept secret.



- The beekeepers explain that they are afraid of fire, but know that burning their son stops forest beasts from digging him up.

IF THE PARTY HELPS

The beekeepers take characters to the pyre to get started. The party may light the pyre using a tinderbox, torch, or magical means. If someone gets within 10 feet of the pyre and passes a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check, they glimpse the shape of a small boy. Anyone investigating the pyre gets an auto success. Looking closer, they see Royal's upper half only. Chunks of him have started to rot, and flies crawl all over him. His yellow eyes stare ahead, unblinking, and tears of honey drip down his face. Removing the boy enrages the beekeepers to the point that the bees in the hives come out to attack the characters, forcing the party to encounter 1d3+1 Swarms of Insects.

Lighting the pyre makes the beekeepers happy, as well as the bees. During the burning, the bees leave their hives and circle the pyre at a safe distance. The buzzing is louder than the crackling fire. The beekeepers answer any questions the party has about the woods or area they inhabit. They also pick flowers to make the characters lovely bouquets and weave them flower crowns. The beekeepers use Royal's ashes as fertilizer for their flowers.

If asked about the honeycomb boy, the beekeepers deflect and gaslight. Here are some examples of how dialogue might go:

*"What is this?"
Our son. Please, leave him be.*

*"Why does he look like this?" or "Why's he made of honeycomb?"
What did you expect him to look like? It's simply the way of nature, and now nature must reclaim him.*

*"How did he get like this?"
The bears did it, now let us put him to rest.*

IF THE PARTY DOESN'T HELP

The beekeepers thank the party for their time and send them off with a jar of honey. The jar has crystallized and if ingested, infects its consumer with botulism, mechanically treated as a disease.

It takes 1d4 hours for symptoms to show themselves, and they include fatigue, a fever, and cramps. The infected character also suffers one level of exhaustion and gains no benefits from finishing a long rest; however, they still gain the benefits of a short rest. At the end of a long rest, the character can make a DC 10 Constitution saving throw. On a failed save, the character gains one level of exhaustion. On a successful save, the character's exhaustion level decreases by one level. The character recovers when their exhaustion level is less than one.

CORRUPTED GROVE

Mentally unsound Awakened Trees wonder if the party is made up of returning druids who left them so long ago.

Difficulty: Easy to Deadly

Length: Short

THE ENCOUNTER

While the party is in the woods, there's distant chanting in ancient druidic. If tracked with a Wisdom (Survival) check of 20 or higher, it seems to lead to a crowded grove of trees. If characters don't investigate, or cannot successfully track the trees, the chanting grows louder in addition to rumbling sounds joining the chorus. Eight Awakened Trees approach and surround the characters.

The trees have gone mad and repeat chants they heard from the local corrupted forest folk decades to centuries earlier. When finding, hearing, or seeing humanoids in the forest, they instinctively approach, believing them to be their long-gone awokeners. If left alone, the trees circle the party for several seconds chanting, before dispersing back into the woods, taking root, and peacefully going quiet. If a tree is attacked or senses magic has been cast on it (such as the Detect Thoughts spell), it retaliates with violence. Depending on your party's level and the amount of challenge you want to present, you can have all the trees attack or just the offended one.



The trees cannot be reasoned with, and no form of magic releases them from their madness. They are harmless as long as they are left alone. Some locals may refer to them as The Wandering Grove and spin tales about their legends.

A druid might be able to translate the chanting roughly to: Blood to root. Claim the fruit.

BORN OF FIRE

The party follows a trail of strange bonfires.

Difficulty: Easy

Length: Short

THE ENCOUNTER

The party comes upon a burntout bonfire in the woods. It's obviously larger than a standard campfire. There are small animal bones and beads scattered at the boundaries. It gently smokes. Looking closer, all the wood is black to its core. There is nothing else to find here.

As the party continues exploring the woods, they come across another bonfire mound. If they explore further, they'll come across another one. At each bonfire, it seems as though fewer logs are burnt, and the fire was more recent. Characters can come upon the bonfires one after another, or you can spread them out over several hours or days. At the last bonfire, the characters see a figure walking to the flames without making a sound. The fire burns for about five minutes before going out.



Detect Magic reveals illusion magic, and dispelling it dispels the fire; the circle of bones and the pyre of wood remain. Anyone burned by the fire takes 1d8 fire damage, and they have a vision that hints at something to come in future sessions.

Here are some characteristics you can add to the figure depending on the tone and setting of your game. Combine as many as you'd like or roll 1d6 twice:

- 1 The figure is covered in blood.
- 2 Where the figure stepped, putrid mushrooms grow.
- 3 The figure has several horns, antlers, or other features not usually associated with their species.
- 4 The figure turns to beckon the party into the fire. The characters must succeed on a DC 12 Wisdom save or feel compelled to approach the flames. They can re-do the save at the end of their turns. The effect lasts until they're burned by the fire or another party member casts Greater Restoration on them.
- 5 As the figure is absorbed by the flames, a goat-like entity appears in the smoke briefly.
- 6 A wicked laugh echoes all around the characters when the fire goes out.

IF MOUNDS COULD SPEAK

A strange mound is hungry for offerings, and provides a gift to those who feed it.

Difficulty: Easy

Length: Short

THE ENCOUNTER

The obscure path on which the party travels suddenly splits in half to accommodate a large mound growing very short grass. The mound is about 20 feet tall at its flat peak and gently slopes. From the path, characters can see the very edge of something in the middle of the mound.

The top is a 15-foot flat circle. If characters scale the mound, they'll find a smaller circle made of bone dust, lined with ancient runes inside. They can identify the dust with a DC 15 Wisdom (Nature) check; however, the secrets of the runes have been lost to the modern world. The runes are permanent, even appearing within the soil if the grass is trimmed. The bone dust can be removed, but slowly reappears in 1d4 days.

In the center of the bone dust circle, there is an empty wicker bowl with a small hole the size of a grape in the bottom center. The bowl appears stuck to the ground. Players can put whatever into the bowl, but only objects small enough go through the hole. Sticking a finger in the hole results in it being bit off.

Leaving an item of value in the bowl too big to go down the hole causes nothing to happen. Putting an item in the bowl — no matter the material — that fits down the hole pleases the Mound. If the player is within the bone ash circle, the Mound uses its magic to engrave a painful tattoo on the back of the character's hand. Vines emerge around the character's feet climbing up their body and squeezing for several seconds until the tattoo appears. The tattoo smells like dirt and offers one use of the Entangle spell without using spell slots. This works for non-casters as well as caster classes other than druid. If Mage Hand or some other means of delivery is used to drop a small enough object into the bowl while the character stands outside the bone dust circle, the gift cannot be bestowed.

A character with a successful DC 15 Strength check can pull the bowl away revealing an endless hole lined with rows of sharp teeth (the mouth is sucking on the bowl to keep it in place). This hole is large enough for a hand, but isn't dangerous unless someone reaches in, in which case, the hand is bitten off.

The mound has no eyes, nose, lips, or tongue, so it cannot speak. It's been driven mad by hunger, so spells that allow telepathy or mind reading don't reveal much. The runes ensure the Mound cannot move or change shape. It has 400 hit points and an AC of 30. If pierced, the mound leaks black ichor that eats away anything nonmagical, other than plants and dirt.

FRUIT TOOTH

Curious undocumented fruit ripens and falls to the ground from a strange-looking tree.

Difficulty: Easy

Length: Short

THE ENCOUNTER

The party encounters a twisted tree with pinkish, fleshy fruit. The limbs of the tree slouch with blue-gray leaves. Cutting open a piece of fruit reveals seeds that look exactly like human teeth. The fruit tastes fine. After 1d6 days, the tree dies and the fruit rots. The only thing that remains are small piles of human teeth. Foreshadow this encounter for greater effect by having the party stumble across piles of teeth with no explanation.

Eating a piece of fruit may offer some effects at the GM's discretion. Roll 1d6 to determine what happens:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 | Effects of the Goodberry spell. |
| 2 | The player tastes blood, and if they wipe their mouth, they smear blood on their palm. For the next 24 hours, their breath smells like a body decaying. |
| 3 | The sensations of a baby kicking where the player's womb would be (even if they identify as male). |
| 4 | The fruit is spicy and numbs the character's lips. They have disadvantage on Charisma checks for 24 hours. |
| 5 | As the character bites in, they feel a crunch. If they spit it out, they find a tooth yet they aren't missing any. If they swallow, they have dreams that night of coughing up whole fruits intact. Each time they cough up a fruit, a tooth comes loose in their mouth. They awake with all their teeth and a mild stomachache. |
| 6 | Nothing happens. |

To learn why this tree might be here, see the "Body Tags" encounter.

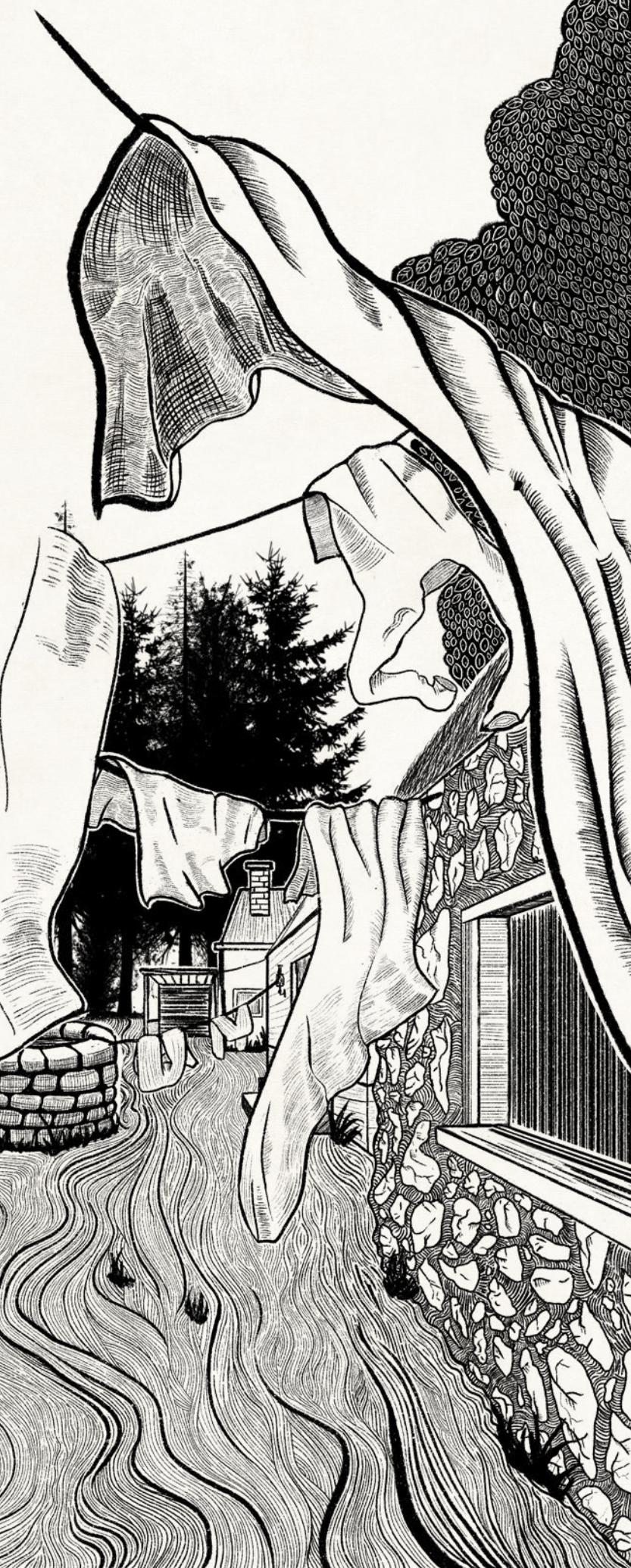
3.

You run along the path as far as you can, and when you turn to look, the fence of wooden body parts is no longer there, and the trees here seem less threatening. You wipe the sweat from your forehead and check the bread in your basket. All seems well.

Taking a breath, you continue forward. After walking some time, you come to what appears to be a village. There are small cottages and several completely full clothing lines running from roof to roof, post to post, and tree limb to tree limb. You can't see to the other side of the village, as white sheets, shirts, and other clothes obscure your view. You duck under one clothing line, only to find another right in front of you. Pushing the fabric out of the way while keeping your breadbasket secure is exhausting, and it occurs to you that you neither see nor hear anyone.

Looking around, you see one open window in a nearby cottage and weave your way to it. The inside of the cottage is completely empty except for what appears to be a man sitting in a chair looking at the front door. You call to him and the ground around him moves, stirred by your voice. The floor is crawling with snakes.

You cast Light to get a better look at the man and realize he's not a man at all but a strange shape of clothing and mud. He turns to look at you. You back up, fabric from a clothing line blocking your view briefly. When you look again, he's facing the doorway once more. The snakes hiss.





RAPTURE

Characters find an abandoned village in the woods with one remaining resident.

Difficulty: Medium-Hard

Length: Medium

THE ENCOUNTER

The characters come upon a collection of 5 small, one-to-two room cabins centered around a well. Throughout the homestead, several dozen clothing lines hang in a disordered, almost manic arrangement. The clothing lines are adorned with a variety of clean, dry, and pristinely white clothing. The clothing lines are set extremely close to one another and block line of sight throughout the village. The lines connect the houses, trees, the well, and a single cart (missing wheels) with a chaotic web, confusing most who would attempt to navigate it.

No humanoids are present in the village. Investigating the cabins reveal that the insides are swarming with 2d4 swarms of snakes, vine creepers, and other overgrown foliage. The snakes can be spotted with an Intelligence (Investigation) check of 15 or a Passive Perception of 17. It's up to the GM how aggressive the snakes are.

The first cabin the party peeks in has what looks to be an adult man dressed like a peasant farmer sitting in a lone chair. He faces the front door, holding a sickle in his lap. There are no furniture pieces or knickknacks in the cabin. On the ground surrounding the figure is a 10-foot diameter circle carved in the dirt with an assortment of runes and lines inside it. Eight mostly melted black beeswax candles sit around the circle's perimeter. The area within the circle is an Antimagic Field.

Entering the cabin and closely inspecting the figure reveals that it's made of almond, sugar, and groats held together by mud, with a splash of hay for hair. Its eyes are empty voids, and it has no mouth. There is dried blood on its sickle.

Casting Detect Magic or Identify on the Groat Man reveals nothing as it is a construct and in an Antimagic Field. When it remains completely still, it is impossible to tell that it is capable of movement.

If characters make themselves known to the Groat Man by making a lot of sound in the hamlet or by investigating its hut, its hunt begins.

THE GROAT MAN'S TACTICS

If characters investigate its hut, the Groat Man remains still throughout the duration. If a creature attacks it, their attacks likely won't reduce the Groat Man's hit points, thanks to its immunity to most nonmagical damage and the Antimagic Field surrounding it. If they try to burn the Groat Man with a torch, it runs outside, taking the hide action and attempting to disappear within the clothing lines. A character that tries to take the Groat Man's sickle must make a contested Strength check. If it's stolen, the Groat Man knows of another sickle under the cart.

The Groat Man waits for the party to lose interest, and follows them, stealthing and using its Mimicry feature to trick characters into thinking a villager needs help in the hamlet (it is mimicking previously murdered travelers). It hides behind hanging laundry and tries to separate the party so that it can jump characters.

If a clothing line is cut, dropping what hangs from it to the ground, the Groat Man becomes enraged and loses interest in stealth, fighting face-to-face until it or whoever it attacks dies.

The Groat Man is dedicated to the hamlet, and if characters flee, it won't chase them more than 100 feet from the village. When combat is over, the Groat Man returns to his seat.

ABOUT THE GROAT MAN

Very long ago, a young, now polymorphed-into-a-snake girl, made the Groat Man. She wanted a lover unlike any found in her hamlet, and using what little magic she was born with, as well as old rituals passed down within her family, she created the Groat Man. But she was untrained in the finer details of magic, and a chaotic bloom of power transformed her and the rest of the humanoids in her village into snakes as the Groat Man was born.

The Groat Man is imbued with the girl's disdain for dirt and uncleanliness to a faulty amount. To counteract dust, it removed all furniture from the huts, and cleaned and hung all clothing it could find, destroying anything not white.

The Groat Man has stalked and killed many travelers who happen upon its village, as humanoid sounds disturb the Groat Man, and it's frankly bored. The Groat Man stripped them of their clothing and belongings and cleaned any white clothing or blankets. It ripped off any holy symbols and colorful decorations.

THE GROAT MAN

Medium construct, chaotic evil

Armor Class 13
Hit points 52 (8d8+16)
Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
11(+0)	13(+1)	11(+0)	10(+0)	10(+0)	13(+1)

Skills Stealth +6

Damage Vulnerabilities Fire

Damage Immunities Poison; Bludgeoning, Piercing, and Slashing from Nonmagical Attacks

Condition Immunities Charmed, Exhaustion, Frightened, Paralyzed, Poisoned, Unconscious

Senses Darkvision 60 ft., Passive Perception 10

Languages understands the languages of its creator but can only mimic words and sounds it has heard

Challenge 3 (700 XP)

Proficiency Bonus +2



False Appearance. While the Groat Man remains motionless, it's impossible to tell that it is a living being.

Mimicry. The Groat Man can mimic any sounds it has heard, including voices. A creature that hears the sounds can tell they are imitations with a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Insight) check.

Actions

Multiattack. The Groat Man makes two sickle attacks.

Sickle. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 11 (2d6 + 4) slashing damage. If the target is a creature, it must succeed on a DC 13 Wisdom saving throw or be frightened until the end of the Groat Man's next turn.

Glare of Fear. The Groat Man targets one creature it can see within 30 feet of it. If the target can see the Groat Man, the target must succeed on a DC 13 Wisdom saving throw against this magic or become frightened and paralyzed until the end of the Groat Man's next turn.

FOOD SCRAP DELIVERY

The characters are asked to run a simple errand for the dead.

Difficulty: Easy

Length: Medium

THE ENCOUNTER

As the party travels, they come upon a human woman sweeping her front stoop. Her name is Bridget Knight, and she wears peasant clothes along with bracelets and necklaces made out of twine. A pouch of animal bones hangs off her belt, and her cottage smells heavily of the lavender recently hung to dry. She is really a Night Hag but does her best to stay away from evil activities, though she's been known to dabble. Her cottage is small, and because of all her hanging herbs and magical components, she's hesitant to invite strangers in, worried they might make off with her collection.

Bridget makes conversation with the party, asking them where they're from and where they're headed. After some friendly back and forth, she'll pick out the strongest looking character and request a favor: take her food scraps down the road to the local fire pit and burn them. It should be the direction they're traveling.

Bridget already has the scraps bagged up in a potato sack, she just hasn't had time to burn them, and she's worried about attracting animals. She tells the party:

- The scraps must be burned as that's how you feed the dead.
- Feeding the dead enough is a good practice because then they'll stay away.

The party should walk awhile, wondering if they're ever going to find the burn pit. Once they're feeling pretty hopeless, they'll come upon a large boulder the size of a hut. Within the ground in front of the boulder is an unmissable large pit full of ash, a few flies, and snakeskin.

On the boulder are runes, but they're difficult to spot unless there is fire in the pit. When a fire ignites something in the pit, the runes glow noticeably. Depending on party make up, a druid or someone

proficient in History, Nature, or Arcana might discover the runes on the boulder suggest the pit does in fact "feed the dead," but it's not so they stay away. It's so they can come back.

If the party returns to Bridget's hut, she'll feign ignorance and offer a Potion of Healing made from tree sap and goat's blood for the trouble. The potion is redder than most Potions of Healing and smells putrid, but it has no negative benefits. If asked about the origin of the burn pit, Bridget truthfully says that it's always been there, and that the forest folk feed the pit out of fear of what might happen if they don't.

VOW OF SILENCE

A humble farmer requests that the party scare off a strange group he calls the Silent Ones squatting in his corn crop.

Difficulty: Medium

Length: Long

Note: This encounter works best if it can take place during a full moon, and the GM is OK with a small village suffering a hungry cicada attack.

THE ENCOUNTER

A local farmer named Emmet notices the party as they're traveling or meets them in town while he's trading goods. He approaches them and asks if they can help him with a pest problem:

- (Lie) A group of tieflings he calls the Silent Ones have started living in his corn crops.
- (Truth) The tieflings won't speak to him, and he's never heard them say a word.
- (Lie) They sleep during the day and light fires at night.
- (Lie) He's tried to chase them off, but they always come back the next day.
- (Lie) He's nervous that if he's too violent with them, they'll curse his land.

Possible rewards he'll offer include:

- 100 gold coins that his family has saved up over generations.
- A place to rest with free food. His farmhouse has one guest room, but if members of the party are fine with sleeping in the woods, sleeping on the floor in front of a fire should be acceptable.



- Emmet travels, delivering his harvest around the countryside. He'll gladly vouch for the adventurers, spreading word that they're trustworthy and capable of good work.

Emmet takes the party to what he claims is his cornfield and points out a path where the stalks have been broken. He'll inform the party that this path goes to the center of the field where the Silent Ones camp. The corn stalks are 10-15 feet high and almost ready to be harvested. The party may realize that it will take a lot of work to harvest this crop, even with rudimentary tools.

ENTERING THE CROP

It takes the characters about 20 minutes to reach the center of the cornfield. If characters investigate the corn by opening a husk, there's a 50 percent chance they find either an ear of nearly ripe yellow corn or an ear full of almost ready cicada eggs. A ranger, druid, or other party member familiar with insects can identify them with a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Survival) check. If a character succeeds on the check, they also know that cicadas have never been known to grow in this manner.

No matter which way the characters head, they'll arrive at the center of the crop. For the sake of a ranger's navigation abilities, this is magical terrain. It registers under Detect Magic, but it does not have a school of magic, and Identify does not reveal its cursed nature. When they reach the center of the crop, the party finds the corn pushed down into a flat circle with a 50-foot diameter. This is where the Silent Ones live.

There are no tents, but enough bedrolls for each member of the Silent Ones currently living here. A small fire smolders in the center of the circle. It can be used to navigate within a 200-foot diameter. There are a few contraptions built out of wood and foraged animal bones for holding clothes and other items that make shade.

ABOUT THE SILENT ONES

The Silent Ones are all tieflings, and use the commoner stat block with these additions:

- Resistance to fire damage
- Dark vision out to 60 feet

The Silent Ones are surprised to see the outsiders but are not at all violent. Using hand gestures, they offer a place near the fire for characters to sit. Any attempt to read minds yields surface level thoughts focused on creating a hospitable environment. Probing deeper, the party might learn the Silent Ones hope to get help from them.

ABOUT FARMER EMMET

Emmet is actually a Bearded Devil in disguise with the additional ability to speak whichever language is most common where the party runs into him. His Hat of Disguise makes it difficult to discern his true nature, since it gives him a thick beard, straw hat, and overalls. His Ring of Mind Shielding protects his thoughts. Emmet's real name is Nuervish (pronounced Newer-veesh) and his goal is to launch a minor plague in the area to claim souls for his master in the Nine Hells. He's using the corn field to house and hatch several thousand cicadas so they can devour the countryside. The curse he enacted to achieve this forbids fiends from entering the affected area or else he could slaughter the Silent Ones without issue.

ROLEPLAYING FARMER EMMET

Emmet wants to present himself as an honest and humble farmer. He'll do his best to feign ignorance about anything that might lead to the discovery of his true identity, and he'll only have a surface-level understanding of farming techniques. He travels with a cart that he took from a couple he murdered. He also lives in the couple's farmhouse. Their bodies are buried in the backyard.

The Silent Ones settled on this land a few years ago (before Emmet cursed it) and tend to the crops they've planted. If asked about Emmet, the Silent Ones look visibly confused as they have no idea who he is.

The Silent Ones won't talk, as part of their vow to join the community was to give up speaking. Most of the members made this vow several years ago and would never consider breaking it.

The number of full moons in a year minus one determines how many people are in this group. For example, if your setting has 12 full moons in a year, there are 11 people in the community. The total number of members used to make up the total number of full moons, but a member left the crop to scavenge for resources and never came back. Unknown to the Silent Ones, Emmet found the stray member and killed him.

Because they do not speak, the Silent Ones have a deeper understanding of the environment around them, and it whispers to them in dreams. They can write complex exchanges though they deeply prefer to draw symbols. They have prepared a tapestry that foretells of the events to come.

If the party doesn't seem immediately violent, the Silent Ones quickly build an apparatus to display the



tapestry. It's 6 feet tall and 5 feet wide. The embroidered designs on the tapestry have been handwoven and depict the community's shared dreams.

The characters must try to make sense of what they see:

- The tapestry is black with white details.
- There are three obvious sections to the tapestry.
- The middle section shows 12 figures standing in a circle around a white fire. (Change this number to match the number of full moons that appear within a calendar year in your setting.) Above the figures is a large white circle that represents the full moon.
- The top section depicts a tall and healthy corn crop with large ears ready for harvest.
- The bottom section shows a cloud of insects flying toward a village as well as individuals hiding in holes.

The middle section shows a ritual the Silent Ones believe will cleanse the crops. They require one more humanoid for it to work, and it must be completed at night when the moon is out. They attempt to help outsiders make the connection that they are the white figures on the tapestry. The top section of the tapestry illustrates the good ending: the crops will be healed of the curse if the ritual is performed. The bottom shows the bad ending: if the crops are not healed tonight, the cicada eggs hatch at sunrise and rapidly reach adulthood before decimating any nearby civilizations.

If characters insist that the Silent Ones must leave the crop, the group recognizes that they're outmatched and leave. After 1d6 days, the Silent Ones return.

IF THE PARTY HELPS

A party member must agree to a vow of silence until the end of the ritual. The Silent Ones understand the character is only joining temporarily, but they paint red vertical lines across the outsider's mouth in red berry juice to signify the vow. If the character talks, any nearby Silent Ones give them a scornful look and make gestures towards their closed mouths. The ritual cannot begin until the middle of the night.

- The ritual requires those who have taken the vow of silence to surround the fire in a circle.
- They all wear white homemade robes. One is provided to the outsider that participates.
- They all take turns slicing their palms with a specially carved bone dagger.
- Each step forward and squeezes blood from their hands into the fire. A white flame hand emerges from the fire to catch the drop of blood each time.

- Once each person has done this and returned to their spot in the circle, they all join hands. They'll walk clockwise first, counter-clockwise second, and raise their hands to the moon that becomes full when directly above the fire — no matter what phase it's in.
- Chattering and inhuman screams can be heard as the ritual takes place. The cicadas are hatching early and dying off.
- The fire turns completely white, and a humanoid figure without gender or obvious features grows in its place. The figure is extremely tall and eclipses the moon, leaving a large shadow over the field.
- The ritual participants' eyes roll in the back of their head as they receive a vision of the dying cicadas.
- The tall figure blows a cold breath over the crops before becoming smoke. Darkness is all that remains.

The Silent Ones light a fire but won't talk in the darkness. They offer hugs to outsiders, some of their harvest, and a guide to anywhere nearby that the Silent Ones might know of. In neighboring towns, the party may hear villagers complain about the first cold wind of autumn.

IF THE PARTY REFUSES TO HELP

The Silent Ones accept what is to come. They'll pack up their belongings, snuff out the fire, and help characters leave the crop. Once out of the field, the Silent Ones head in the opposite direction of the nearest civilization and start digging. They won't invite outsiders to follow them, but they also won't send them away either. They dig three to four large holes as fast as possible. The holes are in an L shape that reaches about 6 feet deep with small tunnels large enough for 3 medium humanoids to crouch. The Silent Ones are preparing for the cicada attack and hide in these holes until nightfall the next day.

The party won't be able to find Emmett, as he senses the quest is complete and prepares for his soul harvest. If the party doesn't seek refuge, they'll likely be found by a group of cicadas: 1d3+1 Swarm of Insects. Depending on the terrain, the party can see a large cloud of insects leaving the cornfield, heading toward the closest village.

OPTIONAL

Depending on the party's level and interest in combat, Farmer Emmet could reveal his true nature and attempt to slay the party, regardless of their choice. He might want to tie up loose ends or seek revenge. He could also vanish in anger, leaving behind clues of his true nature in the farmhouse he said was his home.

4.

You left the abandoned village swiftly, and now you've been at the quest for hours. You no longer smell the bread, but you've checked the basket several times. The bread remains pristine.

Your stomach growls, but you mustn't eat the bread. It serves an important purpose. What purpose, you're not sure, but it may be the only thing protecting you in these strange woods.

Ahead, you see a single tree twisting over the path. Fruit you've never seen hangs delicately on each branch, ripe and plump. Your stomach growls again. You approach and cautiously remove a piece of fruit. It smells wonderful, and you see no blemishes of mold or evidence of insect infestation. You wipe it on your tunic and take a bite.

The fruit tastes divine. Sugary and somewhat savory juices run down your chin. You smile and look at the fruit with satisfaction as you chew. Inside the center of the fruit, where the seeds should be, you see a collection of human teeth. You unconsciously swallow, dropping the fruit to the ground. Pain sears your lips for a nanosecond before they go completely numb. Soon your gums and throat lose feeling as well. You sit down and claw at your throat, willing normalcy to return. You feel several strange knocking sensations within your abdomen and gasp for air in surprise. You clutch your belly with both hands, bloody from scratching your throat.

All feeling comes back.



MISSED CONNECTIONS

A strange altar just off the path holds a stone with a message from a suspicious being.

Difficulty: Easy

Length: Varies

THE ENCOUNTER

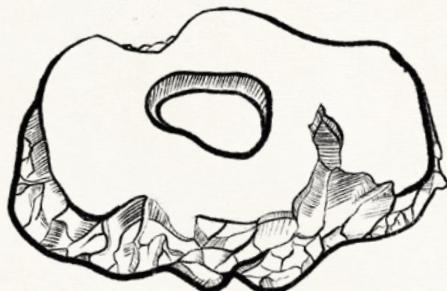
Just slightly off the road is a large, dead tree. Its thick, twisted, and long roots reach out like a web above the soil. Cradled in roots at the base of the tree, is a brass bowl tarnished from the elements. The bowl has decorative carvings inside and out. Within the bowl is a single hagstone about the size of a human hand. The stone is flat and has a large hole in the middle of it.

The first person who picks up the hagstone hears a question cloudy with echoes: "Who are you? Never mind, it doesn't matter. Tell me where you are, I'll explain what's going on when I find you."

The hagstone is connected to a copy of itself that a ghost carries around. The ghost doesn't know it's no longer among the living and wanders around the ethereal plane with the stone as its only possession. The ghost doesn't remember its name and forms an immediate and urgent bond to whomever picks up the hagstone. The ghost becomes obsessed with finding them, but it doesn't know why.

No matter how a character responds to the ghost, the ghost cannot talk through the stone again until the next day. This encounter may occur over several in-game days. Here are some things the ghost may say to convince a character to give up the party's location:

- "I found something I can't explain. I need to show you. Tell me where you are."
- "I'm in danger. Only you can help me. If they get me, they'll come for you."
- "I went where I thought you'd be, and there was something in the shadows."
- "Something is coming after you, and I can't help unless you tell me where you are."



After $1d4+2$ days, the ghost finds the party even if it was never given directions. As the character prepares to sleep, meditate, or relax for a long rest they'll hear a whisper in their ear: "I found you."

By finding the character, the ghost enjoys a moment of clarity before its soul rests. After its announcement, it leaves the realm, causing any objects within 5 feet of the target, not secured to anything, to be blown back. The hagstone in the character's possession no longer speaks.

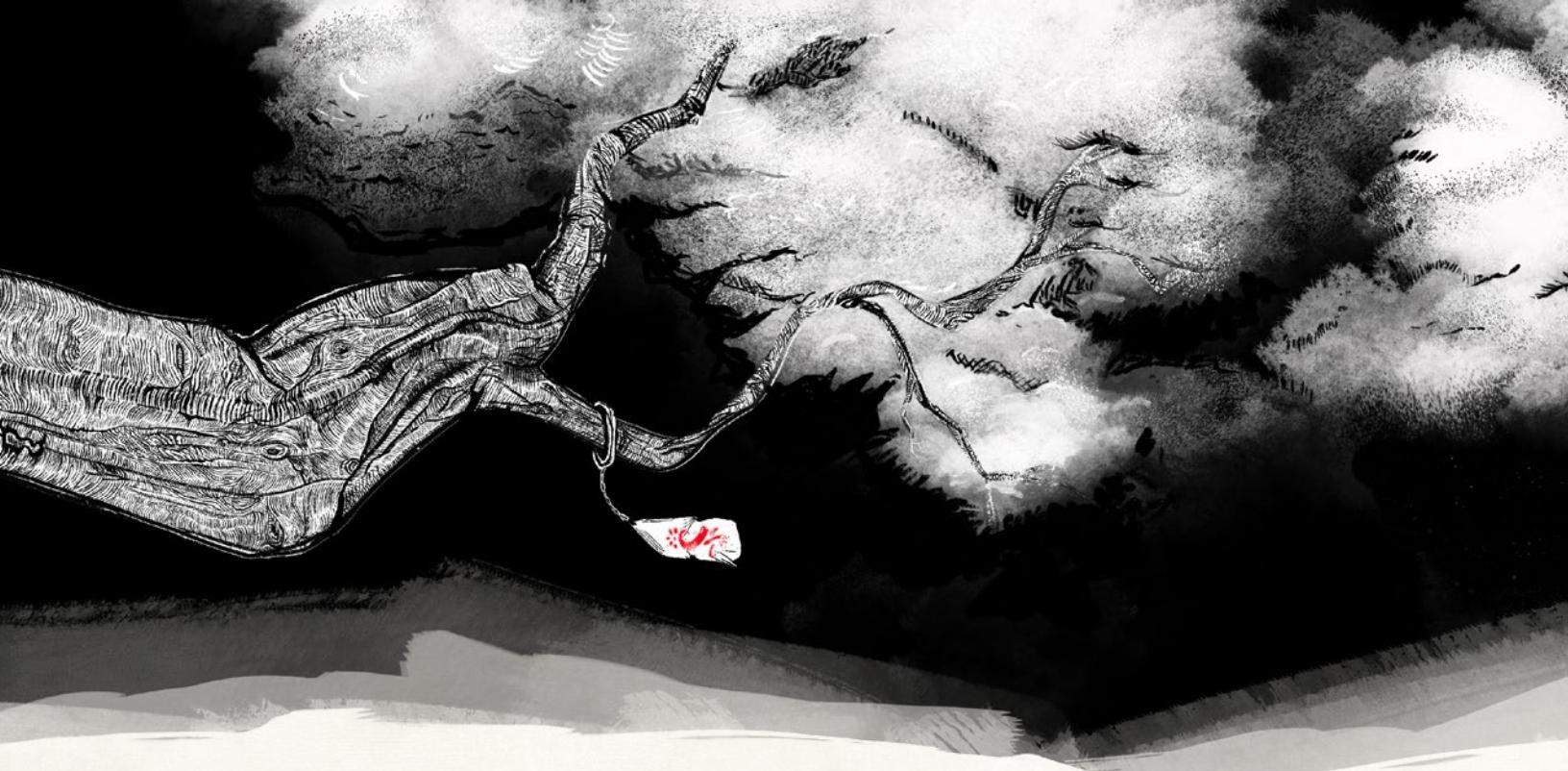
If the material plane hagstone is broken or discarded before the ghost is freed, the hagstone appears intact in the character's pocket or bag the next dawn.

Rules for the Hagstone

The hagstone can receive and send approximately 10 seconds of chatter once per day.

ABOUT THE GHOST

The spirit of the ghost is no one of consequence. He was just a traveler who met some bad luck. While traveling, he picked up a hagstone from a large stream and planned to deliver it to someone important to him. Sadly, violent bandits found and murdered him without remorse. Jokingly, the bandits put the hagstone in the brass bowl. When the traveler came to within the ethereal plane, all he had on him were his clothes and the stone in his pocket. He passes his seemingly endless time by fiddling with the stone on his finger.



BODY TAGS

The trees of a small forest groan at all hours as the tags hanging off their branches dance in the light breeze.

Difficulty: Easy

Length: Short

THE ENCOUNTER

This cluster of twisted, thorny trees is off the beaten path and somewhat hidden. Before the party arrives, they hear soft moaning that could easily be mistaken for the wind. A character with a high Passive Perception or a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Insight) check, surmises that the moans originate from some type of creature.

Soon, the party notices the trees around them all have hundreds of paper tags hanging off their limbs. The groaning is the loudest here, and comes from all directions, including above the party. Anyone studying a paper tag recognizes arcane runes written on the paper in red. A successful DC 13 Intelligence (Arcana) check reveals the tags are connected to illusion magic. Each tag has different runes.

The bark on the trees is nearly black. The ground is red, sticky, and seeps a reddish liquid wherever someone steps. Exposed dark roots tangle the landscape, making it difficult terrain. This area is large and sends the party far out of their way if they wish to go around.

As they make their way through the trees, party members need to make three DC 12 Dexterity checks

each. Any traveler who fails, inadvertently pulls a tag by having it get caught on a weapon, stumbling and reaching for it, or some other accidental in-character way. Familiars or pets may also take interest in the dangling tags.

Pulling more than 5 tags off the limbs breaks the magic entirely. All the tags turn to ash, raining down on the party. When the ash clears, 40-50 human-like undead can be seen hanging in the trees nearly motionless. The undead humanoids lack bones and drape like thick cloaks tossed on a drying rack. They'll try to scratch characters if they get too close, but the undead are mostly stuck in place. Use the Zombie stat block, and remove movement speed.

If any of the undead creatures manage to draw blood from a humanoid in the party, they flick it to the ground. From the spot where the blood lands, the ground becomes dark and lush soil, spreading quickly as black root-like tendrils stretch out. The undead stop groaning, and chant in unison three times: "The spirit speaks in the night, and grows fruit in the morning."

The undead whither away into decayed leaves that fall to the ground. In 1d4 days, a strange, fruiting tree grows in the place where the blood dropped. See the "Fruit Tooth" encounter for more information about the tree.

A DARK ORIGIN

Humanoid bones are required for powerful nature-taming magic. A skilled and evil magic practitioner would need to harvest bones often; however, burning bodies can be a waste of resources and burial requires

too much work. The person responsible for the undead here is likely long gone, but their storage system remains. While the tags help hide their no-longer used crop, they also label which undead might have fingernails, hair, intestines, and skin still worthy of use.

In their time abandoned in the woods, the undead have become infused with a rare corrupted form of nature. If they draw blood, the force within the undead awakens, making them chant to finish the ritual.



A SMALL BURIAL

The party comes across a group of humans in animal masks dancing around a small mound of dirt containing a secret.

Difficulty: Easy

Length: Varies

THE ENCOUNTER

As the party is traveling, they'll find a group of four seemingly human people dancing in a circle around a small mound. Each humanoid wears a wooden animal mask, and they refer to each other by the mask they wear instead of normal names. The masks go over their entire heads and neck, stopping at their shoulders. Their clothes are simple, but their masks are quite detailed and expensive looking.

While in humanoid form, they all use the commoner stat block. Fox has +4 to Dexterity and +2 to Charisma.

- Fox: The leader of the group and very charismatic.
- Goat: Tilts his head constantly and is frightened of others.
- Hare: Talks fast and asks Fox a lot of questions.
- Raccoon: Tries to diffuse Goat and Hare while Fox talks.

The humanoids are actually animals in a strange human/hybrid form, and the masks are attached to their shoulders. They can take this form once a month, and they don't remember how they acquired the ability. They are getting very tired of each other and want a new animal-hybrid friend to join them. Fox has convinced the rest of them that this activity will save their friendships.

They do not know how to create a new friend, so together they tricked, killed, and buried a traveling merchant. They affixed a poorly made doe mask to his face before burying him. The grave is pretty shallow and part of the man's forearm and hand stick out of the ground. Characters with a Passive Perception of 10 or higher can easily spot it. Since the animals don't remember how they gained the ability to transform, they're dancing around the grave in hopes they'll pound magic into the ground and awaken Deer.

If questioned, Fox does most of the talking while Goat and Hare anxiously try to hide behind him. Raccoon is a bit slow and pets Hare in hopes of calming her. They try to hide the fact that they're dancing around a body as long as possible. Fox and the rest of the group don't have much experience with humanoids. They do their best to pretend to be one, but their acting and dialogue should be slightly off. Here are some answers to common questions:

If asked what they're doing:

- "Stomping the ground as humans do when there are leaves to crunch."
- "It's honest work, but someone's gotta do it."

If asked about their masks:

- "Where's yours?"
- "We can help you find it."

If asked about the body:

- "We found this fellow ripped to shreds by wolves, and we're doing our best to give him a burial."

- “It’s custom to celebrate life, and dancing is how we go about it.”
- “Would you like to dance with us?”

If the party attempts to dig up the body while the animal group is there, they frown before making their way quickly into the woods. They ask to be left alone, but if a chase occurs, Hare and Goat flee, Raccoon climbs a tree, and Fox tries to hide.

If the party attacks the animal group, they first attempt to run. If they’re caught, reduced to zero hit points, or a character removes an animal’s mask, the animal reverts back to its beast form. Its hit points reset, and it gains the use of its beast form’s stat block. When an animal reverts to beast form, its mask puffs out of existence. Use the Cat stat block with adjustments as you see fit for their animal forms.

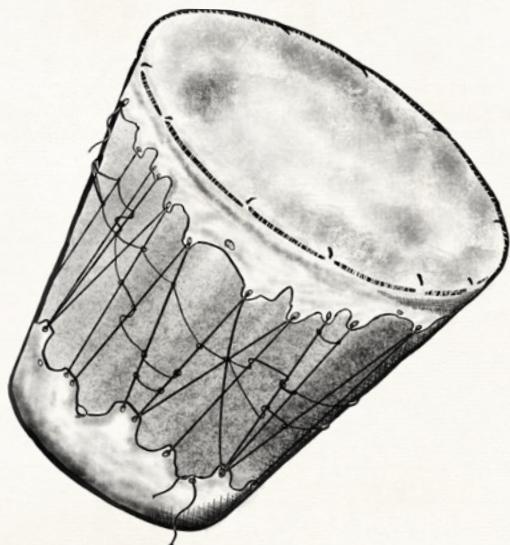
OPTIONAL

THE DEER HUNTER

You may decide the animals’ ritual worked, but not in the way expected. Instead of gaining a new friend, the animals create a flesh golem with a doe mask stuck to its face. The flesh golem retains some memories but not many and mistakenly thinks the party is behind its murder. It will attempt to track them down and seek revenge. It does not remove the deer mask.

THE SHOPPING SPREE

The poor buried man was a merchant delivering goods. Depending on what the party needs, you may either roll up some items and gold or handpick what remains on his person.



THE SUMMON DRUM

An innocent instrument imprisons a ghost who knows what the woods require.

Difficulty: Easy

Length: Short-Medium

THE ENCOUNTER

While traveling in the woods, the party spots a wooden drum left near a tree. It’s modestly sized, and easily fits under the arm of a medium-sized creature. Yellow dried skin stretches over the top — it’s impossible to tell the skin’s origin.

If the drum is played, roll 1d4 per each hit. When a 1 is rolled, the character who hit the drum must succeed on a DC 13 Charisma saving throw or become possessed by a ghost. The first character who fails is possessed and gains the following flaw: the woods are hungry, and I must feed them blood.

The possessed character gains memories of hunting hare, squirrels, and elk, leaving meat clean of fur on flat stones. If a character accomplishes what their memory shows, the ghost rests, leaving the character a gift: advantage on Survival checks while in these woods.

Dispel Evil and Good, Turn Undead, or the possessed character dropping to 0 hit points ends the possession early. The drum does not register to the effects of Detect Magic.

A CRAG IN THE EGG

The party must walk single file in between two sheer cliff faces covered in eggs.

Difficulty: Easy-Medium

Length: Short-Long

THE ENCOUNTER

As the party is traveling, their path becomes narrow when two hills rise up around them. The hills grow steeper and steeper until they form vertical cliff faces, essentially trapping characters within them. With a DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check or a Passive Perception of 12 or higher, characters notice words carved repeatedly into the crags. The druidic text is obscured by moss and damage from the environment, but with a little

time, druids can see that it reads: Leave the nest of life behind.

Moving forward, travelers must walk single file as the path becomes tighter. Medium-sized creatures may even need to walk sideways at points to squeeze through. A larger creature struggles the most, spending 4 feet of movement for every 1 foot it moves. The party notices only a few black eggs at first, but as they progress, the hundreds of black eggs dotting and lining the ridges all around them are hard to ignore.

Light works strangely here. Unless it's exactly noon, shadows fall crooked and chaotic. The cliffs range in height from 300-500 feet. If climbed, players continue to discover eggs all the way up, as if carefully placed on naturally formed shelves.

THE EGGS

The black eggs are carved with delicate symbols, but nothing the party would recognize aside from eyes. Cracking open an egg reveals yolk the color of blood. Eating raw or cooked eggs results in the paralyzed condition for 4 hours 1d100 minutes after eating. Anyone putting an egg to their ear hears echoing whispers that they don't understand. Under no conditions will an egg hatch. The eggs do not register under Detect Magic.

Players may take as many eggs as they'd like, but the eggshells quickly dissolve no matter how well they're



stored, leaving behind a thick puddle of bloody goo that smells terrible. If left in a dark place for 24 hours (such as a Bag of Holding), the goo becomes Black Pudding, eating its way out of whatever container it's kept in.

LOCAL LEGENDS

An old legend says to leave an egg here as you pass as a gift to the Forest King. Most eggs left are blue, off-white, or brown, but over time, they all turn black. No one knows why, and the locals are smart enough to leave well enough alone. They likely don't know about the Black Pudding or paralyzed conditions, as they simply follow lore passed down through generations. No one is punished for not leaving an egg because villagers come and leave extra for those who pass through without knowing an offering is required.

OPTIONAL

If the party doesn't seem interested in interacting with the eggs, one falls from a high cliff towards the players as they're about to exit the crags. Have them make Dexterity saving throws at disadvantage (due to the tight quarters). The player with the lowest result becomes covered in bloody egg goo.



5.

It is nearly dusk when you reach the end of the path, and it has not been without trial. From the strange stone you picked up to the bloody egg that fell on your head to the people who asked you to dance around a dead man, you've never felt more alone.

Before you a large altar awaits. It's granite length matches your height and the three stairs in front invite you to step up and lay down.

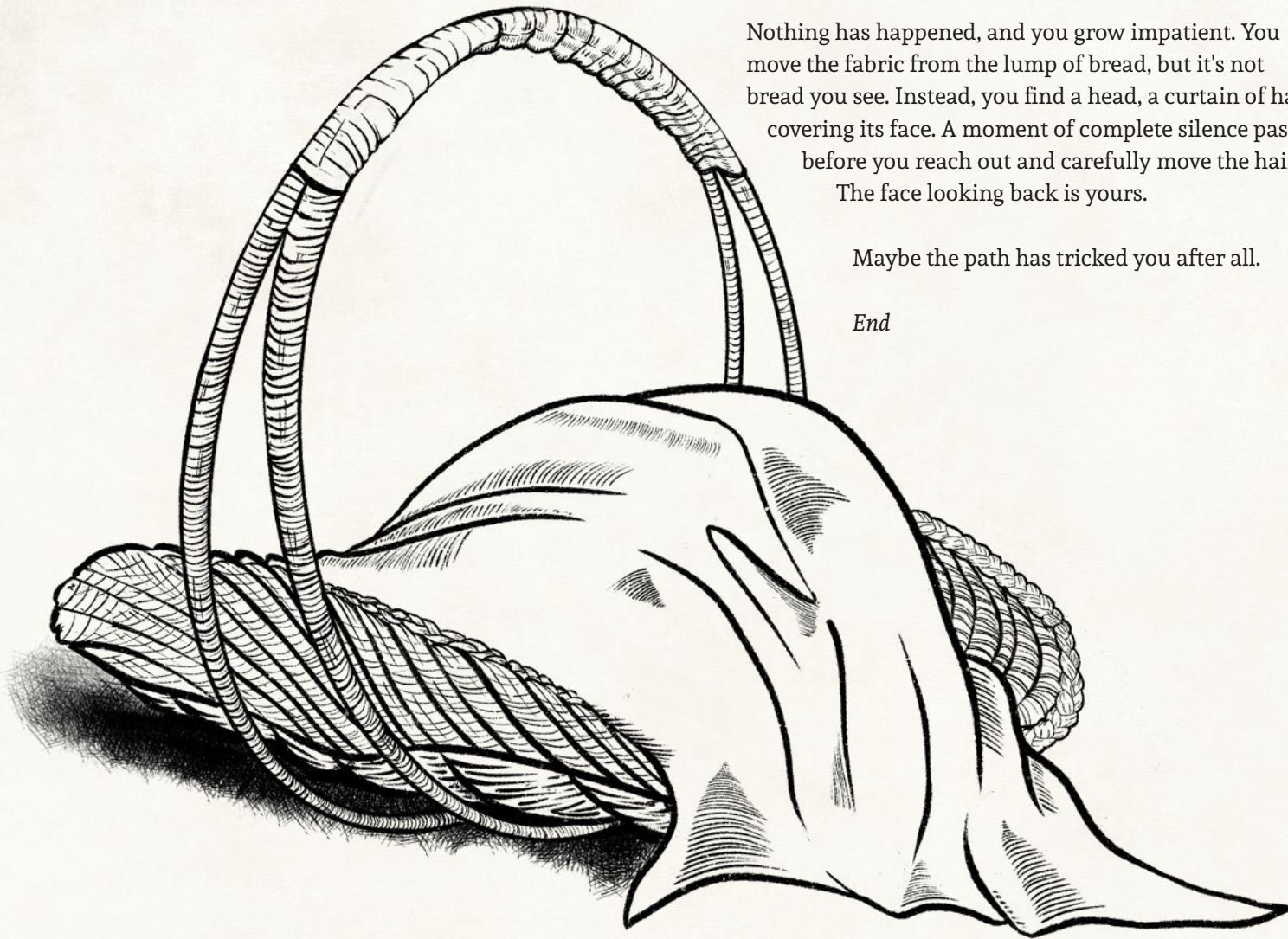
With resignation, you place the breadbasket on the altar, but you feel in your heart it's not enough. A large treeless hill looms before you, kissed by the last tendrils of twilight. Your stomach growls as the scent of the sweet-smelling bread drifts your way. You stand barely moving until darkness consumes the landscape and the last bits of sun leave the sky.

Nothing has happened, and you grow impatient. You move the fabric from the lump of bread, but it's not bread you see. Instead, you find a head, a curtain of hair covering its face. A moment of complete silence passes before you reach out and carefully move the hair.

The face looking back is yours.

Maybe the path has tricked you after all.

End



TOUCHSTONES

Need ideas or help building out your folk horror scenes? Here are the resources that inspired me while working on this list of encounters. It's by no means complete, but a great place to start.

FILMS AND TELEVISION

- *The Wicker Man* (1973)
- *Blood On Satan's Claw* (1971)
- *Witchfinder General* (1968)
- *The Blair Witch Project* (1999)
- *Over the Garden Wall* (2014)
- *The Witch* (2015)
- *The Ritual* (2017)
- *Midsommar* (2019)
- *The Green Knight* (2021)

DOCUMENTARIES

- *Woodlands Dark And Days Bewitched* (2021)
- *A History of Horror: Part 2* (2010)

BOOKS

- *Taaqtumi: An Anthology of Arctic Horror Stories*
- *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood
- *Through the Woods* by Emily Carroll
- *The Fiends in the Furrows*
- *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* by Stephen Gammell
and by Alvin Schwartz

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