

# The Barrowmaze

## Session 84 26-02-26 Missing Mother Birch

Next Session 04-03-26

Thursday the 1st day of Haenubrius 13:00, The Brazen Strumpet Inn, Helix

The Hammers are finishing lunch in The Brazen Strumpet two days after their rescue of the spider harvesting party. Even after two days of healing, good food and rest both Gerald and Bella still bear some wounds from their battle with the spider colony.

They hear some complaints around town and at the Inn that Mother Birch, the best local herbalist, wasn't at the market yesterday and also the recent Saturday although she was seen trading last Wednesday as usual. Mother Birch is a regular at the market and has a pitch spot for her stall, arriving on foot with her pack donkey on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

She makes infusions and poultices that do some good for many common ailments as well as handling midwifery on occasion. A good number of the Helix area people like to use her remedies which stop short of full blown cures such as the church of St Ygg administer but are also reasonably priced and come without any expectations of charitable donations and attendance at a church that preaches hard work and abstinence and anyway, only dispenses precious cures for serious ailments or wounds.

As Bollo serves their drinks he complains he has run out of the usual liniment he buys from Mother Birch and since she's not been at the market his old adventuring knee wound is giving him some trouble. As the conversation turns to speculation of why the herbalist might be missing market days, Osen the mercenary and guard commander wanders in and spotting The Hammers joins them, saying in his slightly accented common, "ahhh, Im glid I bemped into yew lod."

Osen explains, people have been pestering him about Mother Birch's whereabouts. He goes on to say it's not really his remit to bother about missing persons, he's a mercenary commander actually but the mercenary and guards guild receive a retainer to keep the peace in Helix so he sent a couple of men to take a look at Mother Birch's cottage outside the town to the west (about 1/2 hour's ride), just off the road to the Blackened Forest.

They found the door unlocked, the cottage empty and her donkey also missing; so not being detectives and not the sharpest blades in the smithy, they just came back and reported. Osen asks, if they could maybe do him a favour whilst they're here in Helix? Go and have a look and bring your skills and abilities to bear and see if you can make anything of it?

Much to Osen's relief, The Hammers agree to help but they first set about finding out a bit more about Mother Birch while they are still in town.

### **Making Enquiries**

Leo asks Bella if she knows anything about Mother Birch and she replies that she doesn't approve of witches, before catching herself and apologising to Fenella in some embarrassment, who despite being a Druid rather than a witch in the strict sense of the word styles herself somewhat similarly and has been known to use the title of witch from time to time.

Fenella has previously noticed Mother Birch in the market and seen that the herbs are of good quality and she is aware that preparations using these herbs can be beneficial so she doesn't disapprove.

Leo wonders who operates the market and he is informed it is the town of Helix and the pitches are handled by The Rosy Quartz Jeweller, Bank and Moneylender; HHR Hoffenung.

Luna is interested when Mother Birch was last seen in Helix and who saw her so pays close attention as they make their enquiries.

As excellent customers of Hoffenung's modest financial empire The Hammers are quickly seen by Hoffenung himself, an elegantly dressed Halfling with impressive sideburns, seated behind a large imposing desk. He rises to greet them warmly and offers an excellent small brandy which Leo definitely hears as a large one which is offered freely and with pleasure.

Leo enquires about Mother Birch and Hoffenung informs them he sold her a subscription licence to pitch on market days. He wasn't aware that she was missing but he confirms that she's normally very reliable and sells good products that many people of the town find beneficial. He recalls seeing her the previous Wednesday trading as usual and he's pretty sure now he thinks about it that she wasn't there on Saturday. Hoffenung explains she leads her pack donkey into town and stables it at The Silver Standard Trading Company for the day's market trading.

They rise to leave and follow Gerald's suggestion to check at The Silver Standard. Leo gulps down another hefty measure of Hoffenung's brandy before they leave as the solicitous Halfling sees them to the door.

They visit the Silver Standard to ask about the stabling. A clerk summons the boss and a slightly portly fellow dressed in fine clothing enters and shaking off his initial irritation at being disturbed, he extends his hand and introduces himself as Billworth Turgen, proprietor and manager of The Silver Standard, "how may I help?"

Gerald asks if Mother Birch's donkey is still here? Turgen asks his clerk, who rifles through a ledger as Turgen asks Gerald, "why do you want to know?" and Gerald explains she is missing so as the clerk whispers in his ear Turgen informs them that she collected the donkey last Wednesday after market.

Luna asks about how things have been recently and Turgen beams gratefully and thanks them for clearing out the Barrowmaze so comprehensively, explaining that people are not so worried about travelling any more. He then takes great pleasure in making his sales pitch for his shop, Turgen's Trade Goods, to the group before they leave. Luna has the impression that Turgen is a bit slimy and unctuous so she's quite pleased to be going.

Leo wonders about the Ranger family at the mill and Gerald enthusiastically agrees that they can see if Tamson is available for a bit of tracking, so they visit the mill.

Tamson's mother, Vina is tending the garden and waves and smiles as they arrive. Tamson walks over from the house grinning, "I thought I heard you coming," he beams. Tamson's younger brother Yusef comes out asking if he can come along as well but Tamson gently talks him out of it, "now Yusef, go back to your books." Tamson jokes about Yusef not really being from a family of Rangers since he is so bookish and studious.

Tamson has heard that Mother Birch is missing and indeed he was thinking about going to take a look himself so since The Hammers have been asked to investigate, they team up once more with the young Ranger.

They decide they now know enough of Mother Birch and as Shadwell appears with the horses, they depart town to the west on the same road that leads to both The Barrowmaze and The Blackened Forest.

### **Mother Birch's Cottage**

They arrive at Mother Birch's cottage observing a well-kept and neat garden with a stable at the back.

They dismount and leave the horses with Shadwell as Tamson and Fenella go ahead to scout. Independently, Luna sets out on her own careful reconnaissance although it's quite a bright day so there are no shadows for the Thief to conceal herself.

Tamson finds the traces of the visiting guards that Osen sent, then continues to search. He finds that the garden has been recently tended but no sign of stealthy movement around the cottage.

The young Ranger heads back to main trail and searches back and forth a little. After a while he says he has found donkey tracks and a track of two people walking alongside the donkey. The trail leads towards the Blackened Forest to the northwest.

Luna approaches to the door and finding it unlocked, she carefully eases it open revealing a neat and tidy sitting room with a comfortable chair near the fire. She notices what she imagines should be a pair of vases standing on the mantelpiece above the fire but the one nearest the chair is missing. Moving carefully into the room she finds the matching vase lying smashed next to the chair, also the rug before the fire is slightly disturbed, with a fold standing up as if there have been some quick movement over it. Luna is sure that these things would be guaranteed to annoy a person of such tidy habits and points it out to the others.

Gerald goes in and concludes a small struggle probably took place here. They leave the room and although she is not very well trained in lockpicking, Luna has a try at picking the lock closed but unfortunately doesn't manage it. Her small act of kindness leaves Gerald rather surprised, perhaps he should review his views on Thieves? "Probably just practicing getting better at opening them," he thinks, shrugging and moving on.

### **The Blackened Forest (again)**

With Tamson hot on the trail, they follow the path until they reach The Blackened Forest where they leave Shadwell, who makes a small camp and tends the horses whilst they are in the forest.

Fenella goes for a quick tour through the impenetrable undergrowth emerging effortlessly a few moments later, as Luna wanders around periodically disappearing into the dark shadows that abound in the forest. About half an hour into the forest Tamson thinks he's found a bloodstain but on closer examination it's just some crushed berries but the thought of blood gives them pause and they re-arrange their group into a more combat ready marching order.

They sight the spider colony ahead and Tamson leads them around the web bedecked area following the trail as it veers off to a smaller trail to the north.

Heading north they notice the landscape transforming from a dark coniferous wood into something marshier with twisted and somewhat sickly plant growth. Fenella thinks it doesn't belong here and Tamson agrees, as he gazes forward, noting that the area seems to get wider further to the north. Fenella asks Tamson if it has always been here and he replies he hasn't been here before but he's sure his dad must have walked these woods and he would have mentioned any unnatural swamp.

They continue following the trail to the north and notice the temperature is rising a little. Tamson says, "do you hear that?" and listening Fenella slowly nods... the sounds of wildlife are fading into the background, leaving this region almost silent.

They cross over a relatively open area and as they get to the other side of the clearing four 10 ft long insectoid creatures burst from their hiding places just beneath the surface attacking with surprise!

### **Insect Frenzy**

Fenella, Gerald, Bella and Leo are instantly attacked.

Leo receives a bite attack from the Ankheg's fearsome mandibles as it goes for the throat and gores Leo severely. As he struggles to get it off himself, he notices a smell of acid in the air around the creature.

Bella is also bitten and manages to avoid the worst of the attack but she is still bleeding as Fenella dodges her insect's attack. Gerald is badly bitten and takes a serious slashing from the creature's gnashing mandibles.

As The Hammers act after the surprise attack, Fenella makes a quick gambler's decision and begins to cast Entangle on the two Ankhegs attacking herself and Bella at the back of the party.

Gerald counter attacks his assailant, slicing into the insect before him causing it a small wound but Leo misses as Bella manages to dodge the frantically grasping monster.

Gerald receives another attack and is again badly hit as blood gushes from his multiple wounds.

At this point Luna notes that two of the party healers, Gerald and Bella were not fully healed before setting out on this expedition despite Leo even mentioning it before they left town... reckless overconfidence, she assumes.

Tamson attacks the Ankheg chewing on Gerald, swinging his broadsword as he runs in and slicing into it, unfortunately for another lighter wound.

Fenella is attacked while casting, but the Ankheg misses as a grinning Fenella triumphantly completes her Entangle spell, entrapping the two nearest insects in the mass of vegetation that suddenly erupts from the ground, tightly binding both. They fail to resist the spell, so they will be completely imprisoned for the next 10 minutes.

Bella rushes in to cast CLW on Gerald, healing him up a little as Luna, moving in stealth, approaches the insect attacking Leo with her backstab attack, striking the Ankheg from melee and discovering that backstab does indeed work on insects.

Leo swings the Sword of Sir Chyde mightily, finally doing some significant damage to the wriggling monstrosity before him.

Having tied up two of the Ankhegs Fenella turns her attention to the one attacking Gerald and uses her magical spear to attack from 10 ft away, wounding the Ankheg severely. The Ankheg fights back choosing Bella as its target but misses. The second Ankheg also chooses Bella from the available targets, but it misses. Bella reaches out with her second CLW healing Gerald for a much needed almost full effect cure.

Fenella calls out that two of the Ankhegs are out of the fight, trapped in her Entangle as they renew their attacks on the two still fighting.

Luna backstabs the Ankheg attacking Gerald and hurts it badly as Tamson swings a mighty broadsword blow to finish it off. On the other side of the clearing, Leo drives his magical sword deep into his Ankheg, killing it instantly.

They throw oil into the Entangle and fling a couple of lit torches in, sending the wrapped foliage up in a blaze as they also fire arrows at the writhing shapes within, killing them horribly while Leo tut tuts about dishonourable weaponry.

It all goes quiet as Luna suggests that the healers might like to heal themselves before something else attacks them.

Thursday the 1st day of Haenubrius 16:20, The Blackened Forest, Swamp Region