

The Barrowmaze

Session 85 04-03-26 Missing Mother Birch

Next Session 11-03-26

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

Tamson inspects the dead Ankhegs, commenting that such large specimens attacking in a group of four is highly unusual, normally he would expect one or two at the most. Casting his practised Ranger's eye over the scene of the fight he notices a slightly smouldering stick figure on the ground. Picking it up he sees that it's the same, somehow sinister, design that they noticed during their recent spider hunter rescue.

Tamson tosses it to the ground and Leo swiftly dismantles it with his sword. Gerald vaguely remembers Fenella commenting that it might be the sort of symbol employed by a witch of some sort but he can't recall the exact term she used. He asks Fenella but she also can't remember what she was thinking of, so they stick with evil witch for the time being.

Returning to reviewing the aftermath of the battle, Fenella notes that Leo is wounded but Bella and Gerald are both bearing significantly more serious injuries. Gerald quickly pipes up with his usual mantra of not wanting to be healed, indicating that Bella and Leo should be attended to first, which exasperates Fenella as usual. The Druid irritatedly explains, as she glares at Gerald, the value of having fit and healthy front line fighters such as... Gerald, in order to protect everyone! So, Gerald's constant self-denial only serves to make the party as a whole weaker, and therefore unnecessarily vulnerable. Both Leo and Luna firmly agree, Gerald's zealot-like adherence to his peculiar principles are a hazard to all of them.

Bella reminds them she has already cast both of her CLWs for the day and will only recover them after a full night's rest. Brooking no complaints Fenella grabs Gerald and casts the powerful healing spell, Cure Serious Wounds on him as the Paladin babbles on about curing others while Tamson looks on in bemusement.

As the shadows lengthen over the twisted and obviously unnatural swampy forest, Leo notes that it's still winter, just the first few days of the second month, Haenubrius, and as such it will soon be dark. Perhaps they should return to their camp on the edge of the Blackened Forest and spend the night there in more normal surroundings?

Gerald suggests that he should therefore use his Laying on of Hands to significantly heal Leo rather than Bella since Leo can both take and deal more damage than the Priest. Surprised at Gerald's apparent conversion to good tactical sense, the others agree as the miracle of Gerald's connection to the healing power of St Ygg is manifested, much improving Sir Leo's battle readiness. Fenella treats Bella with one of her CLWs also restoring the wounded Priest of St Ygg to a better fighting state as Luna periodically disappears, making the most of the oncoming darkness to support her stealth skills. With the party's health patched up and the daylight fading they decide to follow Leo's suggestion and turn to the south, retracing their route.

After a few minutes, looming into view through the mist-enshrouded landscape they see what appears to be a large dwelling, seemingly organically grown yet intertwined with sections of more conventionally constructed wooden building. A brightly flickering torch stands at the foot of some wooden steps leading upwards to a wide open and inviting entrance, the flickering light of a warm fire showing from within to remind them of their chilled bones out here in the wilds in winter.

An Unavoidable Place

"How did we miss this on the way in?" exclaims Leo as Tamson confirms that they haven't deviated from the path. "This construction just wasn't here when we passed through earlier," he explains. Frowning at the entrance, Fenella declares it unnatural and wrong and therefore to be treated with suspicion, especially since it appears to be so keen to welcome them in.

Gerald eyes up the surrounding trees, looking to see if there are any more stick figures dangling from them like they saw in the Spider Colony and indeed there are several of the small shapes swinging gently in the branches, in the manner of a body hanging from a gibbet.

Leo and Tamson look around to see if it's possible to walk around the obstacle and find that there is a route to one side of the intertwined growth and Tamson quickly confirms that it bypasses the dwelling and should join up again to the southbound pathway. Reluctantly Gerald agrees that they're not in the best of shape to face down the undoubted evil that lies within so they carefully move around the structure and in about ten minutes they leave it behind as Tamson confirms that they are on the right track, heading south through the corrupted swampy forest.

They continue for another twenty minutes or so, trudging along until with some surprise they spot the same building emerging from the mist in front of them! Leo chuckles to himself as Fenella curses beneath her breath and Gerald observes that it seems to be an invitation they cannot refuse.

Luna admits that it's been bothering her that they left the dwelling unexplored as Leo cheerfully informs her to, "worry no more," as they crouch at the edge of the tree cover, regarding the invitingly open entrance.

Luna's whisper emerges from the shadows, suggesting that she can make a reconnaissance since this sort of thing is exactly what she excels in; stealthy, concealed investigation with her elven half making the most of her night vision.

Into The Dwelling

Luna creeps up to the entrance, entirely unobserved, pausing on the threshold to listen and look around carefully. She sees a large interior going down to a lower level on her right featuring a big blazing fireplace, the source of the comfortable warmth in the dwelling, and a higher raised level of short stairways to elevated flooring on her left. Luna is suspicious that there might be somebody in the lower area near the fire to the right so she decides to explore to the left and up the short flight of stairs.

Moving with extreme caution she creeps silently up the stairs to the left, noting that the central column of this large dwelling area is a gnarled and ancient tree. Looking further up on the first level she notes another door ahead of her that seems to open onto a terrace where a table and chair are visible. From this vantage point she can look down on the fireplace area and notes a long table against the wall and above it a beast skull of some kind is mounted. At first, she takes it to be a stag but soon realises it is some sort of monstrously sized goatish creature.

Perhaps being too curious for her own good, Luna continues left and up the shallow steps, gradually getting a better view of the entire area and noticing additional fire sconces and even lit candles. The whole interior looks like a reasonably comfortable if somewhat dusty and eccentric home. Taking a last good look around, Luna silently returns to the entrance and rejoins the Hammers, briefing them on the layout.

They approach the entrance with Gerald and Leo at the front doing their best to move less noisily. As they clank up to the entrance Luna winces as she follows along in the shadows. Entering, they see the layout as described by Luna and they pause a while just inside the threshold. Gerald asks Fenella and Tamson about the skull on the wall and Fenella guesses some sort of large goat-like creature. Luna spots a kettle gently steaming in the glowing embers of the fire. "We're expected for tea then," mutters Gerald.

They note pots and pans, barrels and storage around the place. They look at the terrace balcony noting that there are water or wineskins on the two tables on the outside terrace and there is a roasted large fowl on the left table. Luna wonders how fresh it is so they go and examine it, noting that it has been cooked but seems to be slowly rotting.

They return inside and continue up and to the right coming eventually to a higher chamber with a standing mirror and a wardrobe, both quite dusty. There is a spinning wheel to the left and another smaller fire in this area which is warming them quite nicely.

They are wary of the mirror and avoid it with Gerald warning against cleaning the glass. Leo opens the wardrobe door cautiously using his dagger. He finds some conservative lady's dresses that might fit an adult woman but the garments are a little threadbare and dusty. Mouldy potatoes spill slightly out of a sack to the right and they find a chest which Leo fails to open with his dagger.

Luna notices another goat-like skull affixed to the wall as Leo wonders who might be able to open a locked chest. Luna applies her skills but unfortunately the lock eludes her. Leo waves his sword threateningly above the chest as if he's considering smashing it open as Luna looks on in horror hurriedly shushing the chaotic Knight. Eventually even Leo agrees it would make too much noise so he sheathes his sword and grins sheepishly back at the others.

Fenella is trying to make sense of this strange dwelling and eventually she remembers what she thought might be responsible for this place, not a witch but a Hag. Hags are nightmare creatures that are thoroughly evil and wish only to twist and corrupt, revelling in cruelty and destruction. Fenella fills them in and Tamson pales somewhat at the description as this manifestation of sadistic evil is described.

The Fireplace

Holding this thought, they descend to the lower area and look around. Leo notes some alchemical equipment, materials and potions. Gerald decides to use his ability to detect evil and has everyone stand still while he does this, slowly turning 360 degrees before declaring that entire place utterly reeks of evil as Luna wisely retreats to the shadows.

Leo thinks the fire is large enough to have a passageway behind it so they investigate what is actually a chimney flue, albeit unusually large and wide. Leo wants to search this room thoroughly so he and Gerald set about it as Luna mentions that she is a half-elf and can therefore sense secret doors even more easily than they can. As the fighters stop clanking around, Luna searches, finding the fireplace very suspicious, something in the way the air moves is wrong. Leo wants to move the embers out of the way so they can search without getting incinerated and after a short rummage he finds a poker and fire shovel, so he approaches the fireplace brandishing the shovel. As the blade of the shovel touches the blazingly hot fireplace the embers and indeed the fierce heat instantly disappear... it is just an empty fireplace and ahead of them in the back wall is a hidden passage! There is no heat at all, there never was.

Leo is very impressed, going on to suggest... "Well, Gerald, shall we do the usual?" and joined by the Paladin he leads The Hammers through the revealed secret passage and into a rocky passageway leading downwards, dimly lit by phosphorescent fungi. Luna searches the fireplace threshold with the idea of making sure it won't somehow close behind them as Leo searches the area immediately ahead. They are both satisfied that there are no concealed mechanisms so they move on, descending into the depths below.

The Cavern

After a few minutes they emerge into a large cavern, which glows with the same dim fungal light, and they notice scattered bones and blood stains over the floor. Their view forward is partially blocked by a column of rock before them.

Luna has been conspicuously "absent" since they entered the shadowy rock passageway. They move cautiously forward spreading out and carefully trying to peer around the large rock blocking their view. As they see the full cavern ahead, they notice a column of wood driven into the ground and chained to it is the bloodied form of an older woman tightly bound to the post. They also become aware of the many blood-stained items of torture hanging from various hooks on the cavern walls. The woman is looking anxiously to the northeast where there is a gaping dark passage entrance. Tamson hisses, "that's Mother Birch."

As they pause to take this in there is a sudden horrific screeching cackling laugh, dripping in malice and cruelty from the northeast passage and the woman shrinks in terror at the awful sound.

Gerald bellows out, "show yourself, foul Hag" but his shouted demand is drowned out by the shrieking voice, cackling with malignant glee... "don't worry Mother Birch, I'm coming back, I know you miss me... we can play some more... we can eat your donkey together... I will make you eat it!"

Mother Birch hears Gerald's cry and she turns her head to see The Hammers. She pleads, "please please it's coming!" The Hammers move forward, bristling with weaponry and relying on the concealed Luna to free the cruelly used old woman. Gerald yells out his challenge to the Hag as loudly as he can, as the screeching voice replies to him, "Oh goody, come to play have we? We can have so much fun together... I do so love my toys."

Leo wants to move forward but Gerald tells him to wait, Leo asks, "what for... wait while you comb your hair?" Gerald quickly replies, "no need, it's perfect already."

Suddenly, emerging from the gloom comes the towering 8 ft tall hideous figure of the Hag, cackling with glee, "hahaha you fools, you came right here just as I intended. I want you to know, before you die... I ate Mother Birch's still beating heart this morning. There is no Mother Birch!" and surely enough, the Mother Birch illusion fades away as The Hag squeals in delight, "but which one is the real meeeeeeee!?" as two more identical Hags materialise around the cavern, screeching in unison.

"Well, this makes Wall of Thorns a little bit tricky," grumbles Fenella.

Leo interjects, "we'll soon know which one is the real one." But the others are more sceptical... "how?" asks Gerald but Leo just readies his weapons and strides forwards to attack the northeastern Hag, calling to Tamson to fight the one to the south.

They notice as the Mother Birch illusion fades away, the cruelly used corpse of Mother Birch appears on the ground near the post, her chest is indeed a bloody mess where the Hag seized and devoured her still beating heart. The three Hags speak as one, their shrieking cackles echoing triumphantly around the cavern... "I made sure she suffered just as you will!"

Gerald as usual makes tactical decisions for Fenella, inventing in his mind, a fantastic new Entangle spell that doesn't require any foliage to function as Fenella, also as usual, completely ignores him and as the Hags advance on them Fenella begins to gesture and mutter the incantations of her signature Wall of Thorns spell to use against at least some of the Hags, illusory or not.

As the pure unadulterated evil of the Hag Matrons advance menacingly towards them, Gerald the Paladin champion of Lawful Good, bravely stands still and watches them approach. The nearest Hag rushes over in an instant and targeting Bella, attacks with her vicious bite and claws. Bella is hit by the bite but dodges one of the talon attacks unfortunately being raked by the second and suddenly she is badly wounded and bleeding freely.

Leo charges forward and attacking with a mighty swing carves a deep wound into the Hag with his razor sharp magical sword. Bella strikes back with her silver Hammer but misses as Tamson attacks the nearest Hag with his broadsword but fails to connect. Fenella's spell goes off targeting the two Hags to the north and as she casts, she wonders with one part of her considerable intellect whether she is casting at two illusions but supposes at least that they will then be out of the reckoning. Gerald also wonders out loud whether they might be illusions.

The Wall of Thorns erupts from the ground and almost instantly covers the two Hags as the thorns twist and writhe, tearing into the Hags as their horrible shrieks echo around the cavern... at which point the illusory Hags disappear and (presumably) the real one appears behind them, more menacing and measured in her malice and hatred. "Very clever Druid but now you all die." It seems that Fenella's mighty Briarthorns have dispelled the illusion and flushed the real Hag Matron out of hiding.

Leo turns to the new threat and immediately charges, striking true with the magical sword of Sir Chyde cleaving into the creature with a mighty blow, Tamson attacks but misses as Luna moves silently in, cloaked in the shadows.

The evil Hag strikes back lacerating Tamson as Leo calls out abuse to taunt the monster but the Hag seems to consider hurting Leo's friends as a perfectly adequate response. Tamson is hit badly multiple times by the Hag, slicing bloody wounds into his flesh and staggering the brave Ranger as he struggles to stay on his feet.

Meanwhile, Bella is astonished to realise she is not actually injured, presumably since she was attacked by a now dispelled illusion so she takes a still shaky shot with her sling just missing her target. Fenella hurls her spear at the Hag impaling the magical Druidic weapon into the evil creature for a deep wound as Gerald finally starts moving to attack but completely misses. Fenella sprints over to the blood-soaked Tamson and casts a CLW on the badly wounded Ranger restoring him to fighting wounded.

Luna has now crept within range of the Hag and methodically sets herself up for a backstab attempt while the Hag is battling Leo and Gerald, unfortunately despite her preparation, she stumbles and misses but luckily remains hidden. Tamson, under orders from Gerald steps back and switches to his longbow, loosing an arrow from short range but unfortunately missing his revenge shot. Leo, revelling in the glorious heat of battle, slices his glinting sword into Hag flesh, carving through her and pommel striking for good measure as he laughs suitably heroically right in her face.

Gerald again taunts the Hag and she finally begins to lose her patience and rises to the bait, attacking the hated champion of Lawful Good, yet only a single talon lands as Gerald continues to mock the evil creature. Bella, still amazed to be alive and seeing the Hag attack Gerald charges in brandishing her silvered hammer crying out, "for St Ygg!" before clobbering the Hag with righteous fury!

Gerald tries again to hit something and yet again misses as the Hag shrieks in delight right at him, "so much for the pathetic weak Paladin! Time to die fool!" Tamson lets loose another arrow but with his hands still shaking from his many wounds, he again misses. Noticing her spear is still impaled in the Hag Fenella steps back and takes a shot with her sling thwacking a solid sling bullet right into the Hag's hideous visage. "Not the largest wound but they all count she thinks, as Gerald finally stabs into the Hag with the Black Iron Shortsword.

The blood-soaked Hag, summoning her rapidly dwindling strength under the relentless Hammers assault, frantically attacks Gerald with her horrible claws as she tries to take the Paladin along with her to hell, dropping him in a shower of blood but with the blessings of St Ygg she fails to land the last, killing, blow! Bella shouts, "Gerald!" and disengages and grabbing Gerald's bloody, unconscious form, drags him away, desperately trying to stem the bleeding.

Sir Leo locks the Hag in face-to-face combat, pinning her in melee with him as her blows rain down on his fine armour and shield, proudly displaying his coat of arms as he smashes the shield into her face knocking the creature back to where Luna lurks unseen in the shadows. The concealed Thief raises the Stoutblade Dagger and with all of her considerable strength and skill plunges the magical weapon deep into the Hag's lower back forcefully manoeuvring the blade into the vital organs as the Hag shrieks in pain and horror, quivering in agony as the razor sharp blade probes and slices lungs, liver and spleen with Luna's final slam with the flat of her hand on the pommel of the dagger, dropping the towering hell spawn with the half-elf Thief grimly riding the blow down as with a jarring shock the Hag slams into the ground, her back broken, expiring in a pool of her own dark wicked blood.

Fenella races over to Bella and instantly casts CLW on the fallen Gerald, arresting the gravely injured Paladin's descent into death. He is unconscious and almost dead. Bella raises her hands to thank St Ygg for his intervention to save Gerald's life as Fenella grumbles, "it was me actually."

Leo searches around the grim scene finding "meat" joints and other bits of human and bestial bodies hanging on meat hooks before discovering an unlocked chest around the corner. Trying not to slip over in his blood soaked armour, he opens it up finding a fortune in gold and silver coins. (est. 6000 gp, 1000 sp). "Now how are we going to get this and a critically injured Gerald back to Helix?" he wonders.

Thursday the 1st day of Haenubrius 19:10, The Hag's Lair Cavern, Blackened Forest, Swamp Region