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VILLAGE BACKDROP: NEEDLEBRIAR



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VILLAGE BACKDROP: NEEDLEBRIAR

Needlebriar lies in a remote corner of a large duchy. Years ago, war devastated the small halfling community, leading the villagers to commit heinous acts of cannibalism and murder to survive. The violence awoke an ancient spirit who granted the desperate halflings the power to hunt those who dared to harm them. Generations have passed and the halflings continue to hunt the nearby lands, transforming into beasts to sate their hunger. Dancing around raging bonfires, they hold bloody feasts, devouring their captive victims, in worship of the fell spirit of the land, becoming more like wild animals every day as they sink further into depravity. Many of the halfling have the tell-tale shake of cannibalism about them and shuffle about the village in heavy leather cloaks. Meanwhile, the rest of the duchy becomes more and more suspicious.

Designed for use with the 5th edition of the world's most popular roleplaying game.

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CONTENTS

Needlebriar At A Glance.....	2
Notable Locations at a Glance.....	3
Life in Needlebriar.....	4
The Surrounding Locality.....	5
Notable Locations in Needlebriar.....	6
Support Raging Swan Press	9
OGL V1.0A	9

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NEEDLEBRIAR AT A GLANCE

Ruler: Boram Thornnuggle (but really Rillka Thorngaggle)
Government: Secret syndicate
Alignments: N, CN, NE, CE
Population: 156 (156 halflings)
Notable Folk: Fosco Mooncaller (Thorn Island), Maara Thornhill (Maara's Apothecary)
Languages: Common, Druidic
Resources & Industry: Brewing, farming, fishing, leather working, pigs

Needlebriar takes its name from the thorny hedgerows snaking along its streets and coiling about the earthen halfling homes whose windows stare outward like cold, dead eyes. The village air feels hot and moist, like the open jaws of a predator while its citizens shuffle about in thick leather cloaks pulled tight about them to hide the tell-tale shaking resulting from cannibalism.

Generations ago, a duke forced Needlebriar's able-bodied halflings to fight in his war. While the men-folk were off dying as fodder, the young, weak and old fell prey to bandits and monsters. When the few survivors returned close to winter, they found their loved ones on the verge of starvation. To survive, the remaining villagers began to consume the flesh of their dead. As they feasted, a feral howl ripped through the village, emanating from an ancient, worn stone altar on an island in the middle of Needlebriar Lake. The villagers had inadvertently awoken an ancient, corrupted animal spirit imprisoned in the altar. The spirit, Hunger Devours Moon, granted the villagers the power to transform into animals and hunt their prey as long as they continued to practise cannibalism and ritualistic sacrifice.

The halflings continue to serve the fell spirit, conducting raids on the nearby human lands to bring back prisoners to feast upon, all the while making the attacks seem like the predations of animals or monsters. The halflings try to hide behind a veneer of civility and decorum to waylay suspicion, yet fall further into depravity. Needlebriar's ruler Rillka Thorngaggle, the Moon Matron, pushes Needlebriar's citizens into increasingly violent raids, supported by the druid, Fosco Mooncaller. Rumours are beginning to crowd thickly about the village as an increasing number of visitors and tax collectors are reported missing.



VILLAGE LORE

A PC may know something about Needlebriar, its history and surrounds. A PC making a DC 10 Intelligence check knows one or more pieces of information from the list below. A successful check gains all the information revealed by a lesser check.

DC 10: Needlebriar is renowned for its thorny hedgerows festooned with bright red flowers.

DC 15: The village fell into decline years ago during a war and has not recovered well.

DC 20: Several prominent merchants have disappeared near the village lately.

VILLAGERS

Appearance: Needlebriar's citizens are often thin for halflings, with hard, wiry bodies. Both men and women wear their hair long. Fingernails and toenails are untrimmed and filthy.

Dress: To hide the effects of cannibalism, many of the citizens wear heavy, leather cloaks. Jewellery consists of bits of bone and any gems or golds stolen from their victims.

Nomenclature: *male* Cade, Miro, Osborn, Surnak; *female* Anafa, Reenee, Verna, Yoneedall; *family* Bristlebrow, Huskwallow, Needlesticks, Thornhumper

WHISPERS & RUMOURS

While in Needlebriar, a PC may hear one or more rumours. A PC making a DC 10 Charisma check learns one rumour from the table below. A PC exceeding this check learns an additional rumour for each 5 points by which he exceeded DC 10.

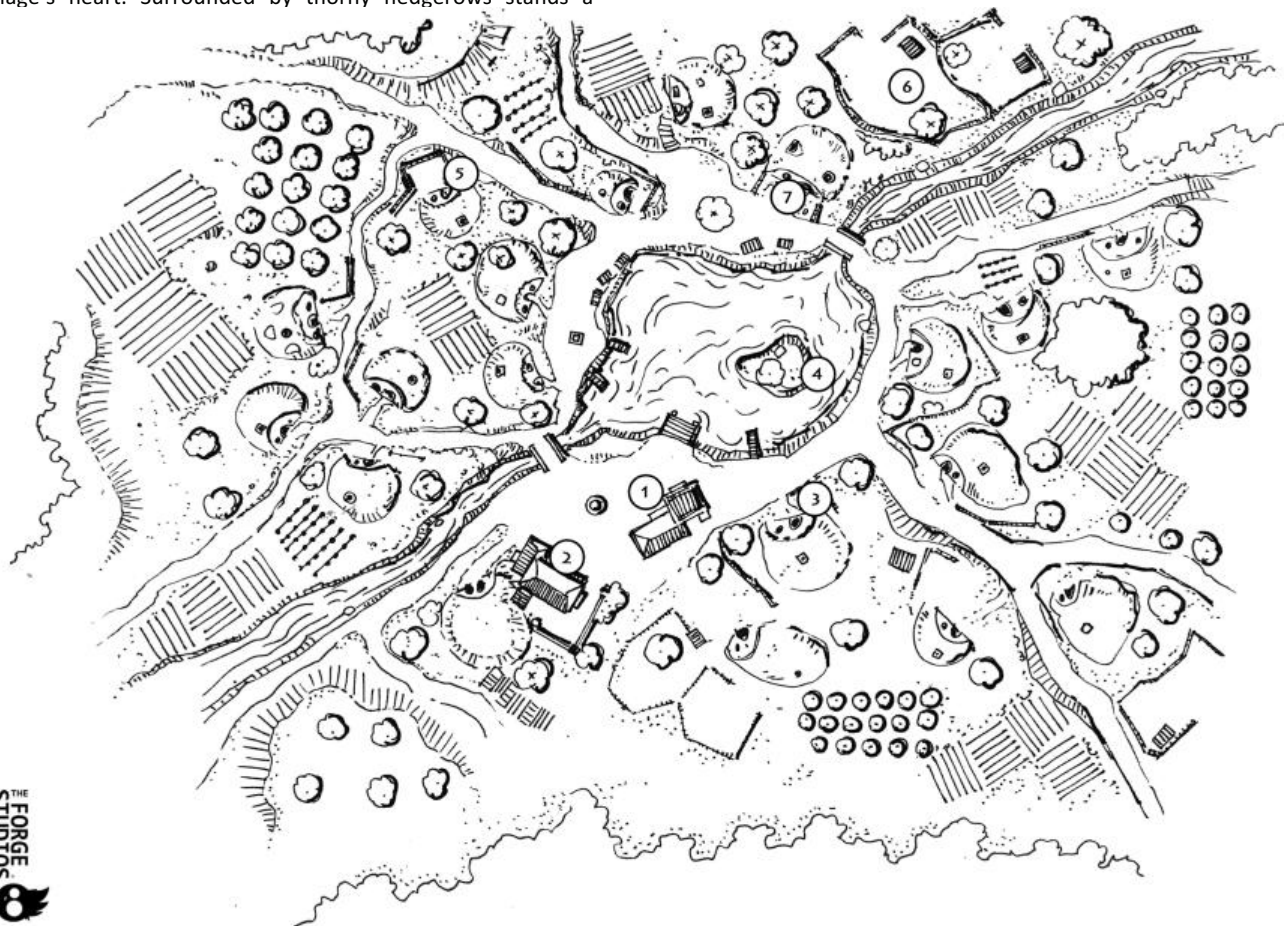
D6	RUMOUR
1*	The bodies of Needlebriar's citizens are buried under the hedgerows which is why the flowers bloom red.
2*	The halflings of Needlebriar wear heavy cloaks because they are ugly and deformed by disease, possibly a plague or leprosy.
3*	Needlebriar never recovered from the war many years ago in which most of its citizens perished. To survive, they practiced evil sorcery. They wear the skin of those they defeat in spell duels.
4	Though remote, Needlebriar is known for its apothecary shop and its marrow bone brewed beer.
5	Needlebriar's citizens are not known for their hospitality and seem to dislike humans. Most think this stems from how they were treated during the war many years ago.
6	Needlebriar is in a wild, remote country so it's not uncommon for people to go missing in that area. Bandits and monsters abound in the region.

*False rumour

NOTABLE LOCATIONS AT A GLANCE

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

1. **Prickly Pixie:** Kaleb Greenbottle runs Needlebriar's one inn and tavern. The quaint faux inviting attire masks its sinister nature. Many a visitor has been poisoned and captured here only to end up in a halfling stew pot. Tunnels beneath the inn connect to Needlebriar Wares and Needlebriar Jail, allowing the halflings to move prisoners in secret.
2. **Needlebriar Wares:** This general store carries common items, farming and fishing equipment, as well as some adventuring gear, but not armour or weapons. The owner and operator is Etune Goodbarrel, a mean, violent halfling woman. Underneath the store is a storehouse with weapons and disguises used in the halflings' raids. Tunnels connect to the Prickly Pixie and jail.
3. **Needlebriar Jail:** This mostly empty jail serves as a front. The real jail is below where prisoners are kept before they are sacrificed and eaten. Needlebriar's leader, Rillka Thorngaggle, spends most of her time here.
4. **Needlebriar Island:** The island rests in a small lake at the village's heart. Surrounded by thorny hedgerows stands a decrepit stone statue. The statue serves as a prison for the ancient animal spirit Hunger Devours Moon. The spirit can warp a few worshippers into animals if it's appeased with blood. Fosco Mooncaller, serves as the spirit's emissary.
5. **Maara's Apothecary:** Needlebriar's renowned apothecary sits at the edge of the village. Maara Thornhill, an expert herbalist but impatient wizard, runs the place. She keeps out of Rillka's and the village's machinations, instead focusing on how to bind Hunger Devours Moon for her own ends.
6. **Bone Pit:** Whatever the halflings cannot eat of their victims, and the pigs do not want, gets buried in this field. Usually, a few halflings are posted here to keep an eye out. Strange sights and sounds occur in the Bone Pit regularly and occasionally some foul creature emerges from the pit to terrorize the surrounding countryside.
7. **Mayoral Residence:** Needlebriar's puppet mayor, Boram Thornnuggle, operates from this modest home. He acts as the face of Needlebriar, ensuring outsiders do not get too suspicious of what occurs in the village. Boram knows his survival depends on doing his job well. If he does not, he will be Rillka's main course for dinner.



LIFE IN NEEDLEBRIAR

At first glance, there seems to be nothing wrong with Needlebriar's halflings and it appears like any other halfling community. It is when one looks closer, you notice there are no songs sung to daily tasks, no cheer in meeting neighbours and no halfling children running amuck along the needle-sharp hedgerows. The whole village begins to feel like its hiding, waiting to ambush its prey.

TRADE & INDUSTRY

Many halflings farm, growing wheat in the fields and hearty root vegetables in well-tended gardens. Others raise pigs and much of the meat is sold to merchants or taken to nearby markets. The halflings consider pork a decent substitute if human or other demi-human flesh is not available. A few halflings engage in brewing beer and have developed several popular beer styles using bone marrow (usually from cows or pigs but they brew a special beer for celebrations using human bone marrow). Needlebriar is also known for its excellent leather-working skills, though the halflings are careful not to sell leather fashioned from human skin lest it give them away.

LAW & ORDER

Though Boram Thornnuggle there is the mayor, Rillka Thorngaggle secretly rules Needlebriar as the Moon Matron, enforcing order and leading raids. Not every halfling participates in the raids but nearly all offer support in some way. Justice is swift and harsh, and those who break taboos or endanger the village end up in a cooking pot. There is no place for the sick or weak in Needlebriar; they are the dredges of society who threaten the safety of the others.

CUSTOMS & TRADITIONS

Needlebriar's halflings first became cannibals out of necessity after the war but continued their foul practises due to Hunger Devours Moon's evil influence. The humans of the duchy are still blamed for the halflings' plight and are enemies to be destroyed and eaten. It's customary for halfling raiders to take a piece of each victim and keep it on their person. They believe each kill makes them stronger.

At the full moon, the halflings pray to Hunger Devours Moon, transforming their leaders into animals. Afterwards, the halfling raiders conduct their hunt, disguised as beasts, scouring the countryside for prey. They make their attacks look like the depredations of animals or other monster attacks. Then on a moonless night, they hold a feast on the island, venerating their foul spirit protector around raging bonfires and devour their captives. The remains are then buried in the Bone Pit or fed to the pigs while skin is taken for leather working.

VILLAGE DRESSING

Use this table to generate the minor sights and sounds the PCs experience as they move about Needlebriar.

D20 DRESSING/EVENT

1	A brief rainstorm sweeps in; however, the rain smells strongly of blood. After it passes, the red flowers on the thorny hedgerows take on a vibrant hue.
2	A small halfling boy, his stomach gurgling hungrily, drools while staring at a random PC.
3	No matter the place or time, every hour a random PC hears a wolf howling close by, getting nearer each time. No one else but the PC hears the howling.
4	A group of halflings walk by, wearing heavy cloaks. A random PC notices the halflings' arms trembling.
5	An out of town merchant queries passers-by if anyone has seen his friend who went missing the night before.
6	A halfling girl drags a large bloodstained sack behind her as she appears to be heading home.
7	A random PC notices a group of halflings gambling nearby, tossing handfuls of teeth on the ground. If they are asked, they identify the game as "teethsies."
8	A lone, emaciated wolf runs through the village but no one pays it any heed.
9	Halflings ply boats on the lake, their poles listlessly dipping into the water.
10	A group of halfling women pass around a tray of fragrant meat pies. They nod appreciatively to one another as they each take a bite.
11	A naked man, covered in blood, runs screaming through the village with five halflings in pursuit.
12	A dog meanders by, gleefully holding what looks like a severed human arm in its mouth.
13	A herd of pigs trundles down the lane, led by a dog and group of halfling children who try to avoid the PCs.
14	A cloaked halfling suddenly falls in front of the PCs and begins shuddering violently, making animal sounds.
15	A half-blind old halfling woman attempts to bite a random PC. Her teeth are filed to points.
16	As the PCs travel about, cloaked halflings going about their business eye them warily.
17	A halfling child attempts to ride a giant pig which threatens to crash into a random PC.
18	A halfling child sits on the ground playing with a doll before taking a knife out and hacking of its head and limbs.
19	A group of halflings, men and women, suddenly start howling in unison, stop, and then move on as if nothing happened.
20	The air feels unnaturally humid and wet. The PCs hear the faint sound of an animal panting, carried on the wind.

THE SURROUNDING LOCALITY

Needlebriar lies in a remote corner of a large duchy, watered by the tributary of a wide river flowing from the mountains looming to the east. The section of mountains near Needlebriar lack any crossable passes, rising steeply from the ground, so few venture out to them. Those who have report tales of tall but thin giants with obsidian skin and blazing red eyes. The giants are said to worship a massive egg of scintillating colours resting on one of the mountaintops.

A thick forest lies just a few miles to the west and north. Though the forest is rich in game, a depraved faerie court makes its home at the forest's heart, enslaving many of the forest's more monstrous denizens and those foolish enough to wander too far in. The Needlebriar halflings occasionally raid the forest's fringes where woodcutters live, allowing them to lay the blame of the disappearances on the forest dwellers. The halflings have an instinctive hatred of the fey but are not numerous enough to directly oppose them.

Southwards, the land rises into rocky hills and jutting cliffs. A nomadic people live here, under constant pressure of being absorbed by the duchy. Many tunnels in the hills lead deep into the lightless depths of the earth. It's believed the hill people can summon foul creatures out from the tunnels to do their bidding

and aid in their defence. Observations of the hill people say some of them are not quite human, pointing to their strangely-coloured eyes and nostrils or scaly skin as evidence.

Access to the village comes from a meandering, single lane path winding through the numerous farms, hamlets and other small villages in the surrounding landscape. The ruins of castles and border forts lurk on lonely hilltops between the settlements, wreckage from the war that devastated the region many generations ago. Over the years, scavengers stole anything of valuable and much of the stone has been used to construct nearby homes. Still, the ruins attract bandits and other monstrous humanoids who utilize them as bases to launch raids. The Needlebriar halflings are very familiar with most of the established bandits, sometimes aiding them and other times preying upon them (especially any groups comprised of mostly humans; no Needlebriar halfling would eat a goblin or similar creatures). Merchants make use of the roads to ply their trade at the various settlements and tax collectors arrive once or twice a year. After the last few disappearances, the tax collectors now travel with small band of guards, if they even go at all.



NOTABLE LOCATIONS IN NEEDLEBRIAR

1: PRICKLY PIXIE

A sign depicting a woman with butterfly wings wrapped in a thorny vine swings lazily over the rounded wooden door of a squat inn sagging under a turf roof and its own age.

The Prickly Pixie is Needlebriar's tavern and inn. It features a homely bar room replete with a smoky hearth. Upstairs, sparse rooms can accommodate both halflings and humans. Overall, the inn is spartan in appearance. An attempt has been made to make the place look comfortable and inviting on the surface but perceptive visitors feel this is just a deception. Many guests have been poisoned here over the years by innkeeper, Kaleb Greenbottle (NE male halfling **spy**) to be eaten at the monthly celebration. An earthen tunnel in the basement connects to the Needlebriar Wares and the jail.

- **Food & Drink** meal (potato and bacon tureen, pork head cheese and [hard] bread) 3 sp, marrow brewed ale 1 sp, wine (pitcher) 3 sp.
- **Accommodation** One-bed human-sized chamber 5 sp; two-bed halfling chamber 10 sp; common room 2 sp.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

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

D6	EVENT
1	A fellow patron, a gaudily dressed merchant, suddenly passes out face down in his soup.
2	A loud banging comes from under the floorboards followed by a muffled scream. No one else seems to notice.
3	One of the PCs finds a human eyeball in his soup.
4	Three cloaked halflings stare at the PCs the entire time, slowly sipping their beer and grinning.
5	An emaciated woman, followed by Kaleb, bursts from the kitchen door screaming for help.
6	Any PC eating a meal must make a DC 12 Fortitude saving throw to avoid been poisoned and knocked unconscious for 1d8+1 hours.

2: NEEDLEBRIAR WARES

Moss hangs down from the turf roof and over shop sign of this stout, rectangular stone building.

Needlebriar's general store is a large, rambling affair, selling everything from everyday items, to simple farming and fishing

implements, to basic adventuring gear. By law, no weapons or armour are sold here. Secretly, weapons and armour are kept in the basement which acts as both a storehouse and base for the raiding parties. Tunnels connect the store to both the Prickly Pixie and the jail. One of Needlebriar's captains, Etune Goodbarrel (CE female halfling **berserker**), oversees the store and the hidden storehouse.

- **For Sale:** *potion of animal friendship* (150 gp), *scroll of charm person* (150 gp)

WHAT'S GOING ON?

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

D6	EVENT
1	A merchant attempts to haggle with a large halfling woman but then is punched hard in the face.
2	A halfling child outside the store places a necklace of flowers around a PC. This marks the PC as a target to be kidnapped that night.
3	Two halflings carry a crate through the store. Two swords clatter out of the crate loudly onto the floor.
4	A small nervous halfling tries to mop up what appears to be a large bloodstain on the floor.
5	Human teeth fall out of an item a PC is inspecting.
6	In the corner of the store, a PC finds the remains of a half-eaten human foot.

3: NEEDLEBRIAR JAIL

Iron bars fill the windows of what appears at first glance to be a residential home. Two guards posted outside suggest otherwise.

Visitors might wonder why a small village like Needlebriar needs a jail but it has one none the less, mostly for appearances as the cells above ground are almost always empty. The real jail is below ground where the halflings keep their prisoners in narrow, lightless cells before they are eaten in the monthly celebration. Tunnels connect to the Prickly Pixie and Needlebriar Wares. Rillka Thorngaggle (NE female halfling fighter 6) keeps an office under the jail where she plans the halflings' upcoming raids.

A Missing Son: The son of a minor provincial noble went missing during a debauch; rumours suggest he was arrested at Needlebriar after drinking too much of their famous marrow bone beer. To avoid further embarrassment, the noble wishes to hire the PCs to fetch his son from the Needlebriar jail. Of course, the son is there, in the cells below, awaiting a grisly fate.

4: THORN ISLAND

Thorny hedgerows covered in red flowers crawl along the edges of an island in the middle of the small lake. A rough stone statue is just visible through the thorny hedges.

A small, thorny island lies in the middle of Needlebriar Lake surrounded by the village's namesake hedgerows. At its centre rests a strange stone statue. Worn with age, it appears to have once depicted a four-legged creature. It serves as the prison of an ancient, corrupted animal spirit calling itself Hunger Devours Moon. Awoken by the halflings' horrific acts, it retains its powers

KALEB GREENBOTTLE

NE male halfling **spy**

This halfling man sports a severe widow's peak, small black eyes and sharp, beak-like nose.

Mannerisms: Kaleb darts his head back and forth, often peering at people from the corner of his eye.

Personality: Kaleb appears overly unctuous and ingratiating towards guests but is ruthless. He has an observant and discerning eye.

Background: Kaleb has liked poisons since he was a child, having found some during his first raid. His skills at developing poisons to drug prey serve the village well and he became one of the village's captains, allowing himself to be blessed with Hunger Devours Moon's divine blessings. He keeps a collection of eye balls in jars, taken from his victims over the years. When hunting, he assumes the form of a large bird of prey.

ETUNE GOODBARREL

CE female halfling **berserker**

Etune is a barrel-chested halfling with corded arms and short, bristling hair.

Mannerisms: Loud and boisterous, Etune snorts when she laughs and when she's angry. The difference is hard to tell.

Personality: Etune relishes fighting and violence; running the store is boring, for her. Because of this, she often picks on her underlings, occasionally inflicting severe injuries.

Background: Etune grew up with Rillka (location 3) who seemed to be the only one who could keep the wild halfling calm as Etune likes to charge headfirst into battles. When Rillka became Needlebriar's leader, Etune was her first choice for a captain so she is deeply loyal. She often relies on Rillka's protection when she takes things too far with the others. On hunts, she transforms into a raging boar.

through acts of veneration involving human sacrifice and consumption. If the statue absorbs the blood of at least 8 Hit Dice worth of creatures once a month, on the night of the next full moon, it can bestow upon four creatures of evil alignment the druid's ability to wild shape as if the creature were an 8th-level druid. The effect only lasts that night. The island and statue are attended to by Fosco Mooncaller (NE male halfling druid 5), who serves as the spirit's servant and mouthpiece.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

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

D4	EVENT
1	A random PC feels hot wet breath on the back of his neck and hears panting.
2	A sudden wind carries the smell of blood and gore to the PCs, but just as swiftly it is gone.
3	An accidental kick of a loose rock reveals a severed human hand poking out of the ground.
4	One of the PCs accidentally pricks himself on the thorny hedgerow. The red flowers on it become noticeably more vibrant in their colouring.

Druidic Lore: The PCs possess a book with bark pages covered in ancient Druidic writing. It is important the book's contents are deciphered and the only known druid in the area is Fosco. Whatever is written in the book puts the PCs in conflict with Fosco and the Needlebriar halflings.

RILLKA THORNGAGGLE

NE female halfling fighter 6

The beauty of this striking halfling is marred by the severe look in her eyes and the permanent scowl on her face.

Mannerisms: Rillka's gaze is piercing and cold. She talks quickly and sharply.

Personality: Rillka is imperious, barking orders and expecting them to be obeyed. She has little patience and her heart is black and cold after having suffered tragedy.

Background: Rillka was destined to be nothing more than the wife of a leader of Needlebriar and a mother. However, when both her husband and son fell during a raid, Rillka took control of the village during the chaos, slaying and consuming a rival. Rillka has quickly become Needlebriar's most canny but ruthless leader. She fights not just for the village's way of life but also revenge for husband and son. Titled the "Moon Matron," Rillka takes the form of a wolf during raids.

5: MAARA'S APOTHECARY

The pungent smell of herbs and unfamiliar spices wafts out from this large halfling home.

Maara Thornhill (CN female halfling wizard 5) runs an apothecary from her home, specializing in herbs to ease pain and assist in child birth. She has a few magic items found in her travels or traded from merchants for sale. Her basement contains her research into Hunger Devours Moon.

- **For Sale:** *scroll of identify* (150 gp), *scroll of shatter* (250 gp)

Monstrous Ingredients: Someone close to the PCs is deathly sick and Maara might have the cure. She doesn't mind parting with the herbs but asks the PCs to hunt down a monster and to harvest certain of its organs for a spell she is researching.

6: BONE PIT

The stench of death emanates from a stretch of churned earth. Thick clumps of weeds claw up through the ground.

Needlebriar's citizens toss anything they don't consume into a field they loosely refer to as the Bone Pit. Occasionally these remains arise as horrid undead creatures. The creatures never attack the halflings, instead roaming the nearby countryside.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

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

D4	EVENT
1	A PC spies something moving beneath the ground.
2	The wind carries the sound of wailing and agony as it scours the weed-choked earth before it dissipates.
3	A PC spies a halfling dumping a bag of ghastly viscera into an open hole in the field.
4	A clawed, gnawed skeletal hand reaches out and grabs a PC's ankle.

Tracking the Beast: The PCs are hired by a nearby settlement to deal with a creature attacking livestock and travellers. The creature is an undead monster risen from the Bone Pit. The monster's tracks lead from its lair back to Needlebriar.

7: MAYORAL RESIDENCE

This quaint halfling home has a well-tended garden. A fresh coat of paint adorns its shuttered windows and front door.

Boram Thornnuggle, Needlebriar's "mayor" lives and works from his well-to-do home. Boram holds little real power in Needlebriar. He mainly operates as a face for visitors, especially those asking too many questions about Needlebriar's citizens.

Missing Tax Collector: The PCs are hired by a local noble. A tax collector with ties to his family has gone missing while visiting Needlebriar and they are desperate to find him.

BORAM THORNUGLE

NE male halfling spy

This man wears a foppish hat and large pendant.

Mannerisms: Boram is always smiling.

Personality: Serving as Needlebriar's mayor has taken its toll. He harbours deep anxiety and paranoia about his position, greatly fearing Rikka's wrath if he fails at his duties.

Background: Boram was always a smooth talker with a beguiling boyish charm which made him the perfect mayor. Even as a child, he was squeamish of blood and gore.

FOSCO MOONCALLER

NE male halfling druid 5

Fosco wears a long beard festooned with animal bones. Tattoos cover his face, his hair spiked with faeces.

Mannerisms: Fosco often behaves as a wild animal would. Like an animal, he has no shame in doing in public certain activities that tend to be done privately.

Personality: Fosco is a bit insane, having served in his position a long time and his mind thinks like that of a preying beast. He recognizes Rillka as the alpha beast of their pack.

Background: Fosco was taken from his family as a child and raised by his predecessor. Many years ago, his animal instincts noticed the steel resolve hidden in Rillka. He secretly caused the deaths of her husband and son and assisted her in becoming the new leader of Needlebriar.

MAARA THORNHILL

CN female halfling wizard 5

This halfling woman wears a pair of ornate spectacles and a heavy robe emblazoned with arcane runes.

Mannerisms: Maara claps and wrings her hands when excited often darting about as she does so.

Personality: Maara would be a better wizard if she could focus on her studies, but instead she is always looking for the next shortcut or scheme to increase her power. She seems to relate better to plants than people.

Background: Maara is Rillka's younger cousin. She is one of the few halflings who is not a cannibal. Instead, she works on a ritual to bind Hunger Devours Moon to her will.

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