

NLS4



the northlands series:
the long night of winter

NLS4: Oath of the Predator

by James M. Spahn



**FROG GOD
GAMES**



the northLANDS series:
the LONG NIGHT OF WINTER

NLS4: Oath of the Predator

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The Long Night of Winter

NLS4: Oath of the Predator

By James M. Spahn



Oath of the Predator is a *Swords & Wizardry* adventure for the *Northlands Saga* setting and is the fourth adventure in *The Long Night of Winter* adventure anthology. Like the other adventures in the anthology, *Oath of the Predator* is intended to be dropped into a *Northlands Saga* campaign by the Referee at any time or place that is convenient. It is not tied to any particular location other than taking place amid a dense, primal forest. It is designed for a party of characters of levels 4-6.

The Northlands Series: The Long Night of Winter



“Gather round, lads and lasses, and draw close to the hearth fire. Let the glowing coals warm your hands and a horn of mead warm your heart while the old men tell tales and sing songs of days long gone. Each winter the storms howl down from the Far North and bury our fields and halls in a thick blanket of white. They bring nights cold enough to shatter a man’s bones or freeze an aurochs’ blood in its veins, and all men huddle close to their fires in the darkness and wonder if this is finally the Fimbulwinter that will bring about the great battle of Ragnarök. Some say these harsh winters are the work of demons of the Ginnungagap sent to break the will of men in preparation for the coming End Days. Others say they are the gift of the Æsir to mold men and hone their strength as the fire tempers good steel in anticipation of those dark times.

“Me? This old skald thinks it is a time to gather close to comrades and loved ones and tell stories and lies, to swap boasts and jests, and to celebrate that the All—Father has given us one more night for the heartsblood to run hot. The morrow’s dawn is never promised us, and there are things other than the cold that stalk the long night of winter and can kill a strong man just as surely. So tilt the flagon to fill an old man’s drinking horn once again, for talk can be dry work, and lean in close to listen. I have a tale to tell you ...”

The *Northlands Series (NLS)* are standalone adventures set in the Northlands that allow the Referee to drop a one-shot game into that setting or as a short interlude into *The Northlands Saga Adventure Path* with minimal effort. They are not tied to a particular locale within the Northlands, though they may require a certain general type of terrain (e.g. mountains, forest, etc.), and they are not tied to a specific chronology. They can be played in any order, and all or none of them can be used as the Referee sees fit. They are presented from the standpoint of a fireside tale being told by an old skald to pass the long hours of a winter night, allowing the Referee to use them as short breaks from normal campaign play with different characters and without any long-term consequences, or they can be inserted into a normal campaign. The idea is to provide the Referee with the maximum flexibility for their use with a minimum of fuss.

So take them. Use them. Make them your own. The winter night is cold, and there are many hours to pass before the dawn ...

Oath of the Predator

Oath of the Predator is a short *Swords & Wizardry* adventure for character levels 4–6. It takes place in a remote forested area where a hero was lost a generation ago and a tiny logging town built in his honor continues to eke out an existence on the very edge of the deep woods.

Adventure Background

Thorvald the Wanderer has been dead for a generation, though in his time he came out of the wild places of the world to bring protection and justice to those who lived on the edge of untamed lands. As his reputation grew, he drew the service of several loyal retainers, none more loyal than Ivar the Stout. Ivar became his closest friend and loyal shieldbearer. Together they drove back the fell things of the deep forests, including a great many predators who had been corrupted into *sceadugenga* — otherworldly shadow walkers of the night — by some terrible malady whose source went undiscovered by Thorvald and Ivar for decades. These twisted *sceadugenga* of all types seemed to crawl from the shadows of the dark wood with a taste for the flesh of Northlander, Alfar, and Dvergar alike — any beings they could get hold of it seemed. They were keen and cunning beyond the intelligence of normal animals. Finally, Thorvald took a company of men loyal to him into the heart of the deep woods and swore that he would destroy the source of this terrible evil or die trying. Deep in the heart of the forest, Thorvald's company found a great black oak that was both living and dead. It was untouched by the seasons, yet cast a terrible shadow over all other living things in the deep woods. From its roots bubbled a great spring of murky water that offered no life but only festered and polluted the soil.

No skalds' tales recall what happened in the deep woods, save that Thorvald was slain. Only Ivar and a handful of survivors emerged from that terrible place, paying their respects to their fallen leader before scattering to the four corners of the world. Only Ivar remained behind. Proclaiming the land clean, Ivar planted his great spear in the ground and founded the village of Thorvald's Gift on the edge of the deep woods. With his great strength he helped establish the logging trade that would be the cornerstone of this village. All who came to the Gift found fortune and prosperity.

But darkness has risen again from the deep woods, and an ill wind blows in the village of Thorvald's Gift. Jarl Ivar, now old and gray, though still hail and strong by all accounts, has gone missing — vanished under the light of the full moon. Huscarls and woodsmen who venture into the forest are disappearing, and strange, predatory sounds — the snarls of beasts and other inhuman creatures — are heard drawing closer to the village. Ivar's badly injured son and chief huscarl, Bóthvarr, has put out a call for aid. He offers payment and gratitude to any who can discover the fate of his father and set Thorvald's Gift at peace once more.

The truth is far more terrible than Bóthvarr knows: His father, Ivar, is a monstrous werebear — a great, grizzled beast capable of unimaginable destruction. Ivar's condition has long been a point of shame for him and, unknown to his son, the accursed lycanthrope took up service with Thorvald years earlier in hopes of somehow finding a cure for his affliction before he became too bestial. When Thorvald and Ivar discovered the terrible Black Oak that was corrupting the deep woods, its evil took hold of Ivar and he slew his boon companion. Fearing that he had finally given in completely to the great evil within himself, Ivar swore an oath to any god that would listen that night that the blood of his battle-brother would cleanse the deep woods until the full moons vanished from the sky. Ivar knew his oath was fulfilled, but knew not which god had accepted his promise.

Much to his woe, the trickster god Loptr heard the cries of the man, and a few weeks ago, the full moons of both the Pale Sister and the Dark Sister were eclipsed in the night sky. Ivar finally lost his battle with his bestial nature during this time of darkness. After tearing through his own hall and nearly killing his son, Ivar fled into the deep woods where he

now remains. But in the shedding of innocent blood, he has disturbed the spirit of his murdered friend, and with it, corruption has returned to the deep woods. Only by setting right the sins of Ivar can peace return to Thorvald's Gift.

Adventure Summary

The characters arrive in Thorvald's Gift to find the town beset by bestial predators that attack in the dark of night. In the first attack, the local jarl was dragged away into the forest by the beast and has not been seen since. Working on behalf of the jarl's son, the characters trace the abnormal beasts into the deepest parts of the forest where they find the vile, unnatural Black Oak, a great tree corrupting the heart of the forest. Ascending within its hollow trunk, they discover many secrets of that fateful trip years ago when the hero Thorvald the Wanderer fell, and learn that it was at the hands of his most-trusted comrade, the missing jarl Ivar the Stout. Only by destroying a dark idol at the heart of the tree and laying the vengeful soul of Thorvald to rest do the characters have the chance to release Ivar from his own curse and finally bring justice for his betrayal decades ago.

Beginning the Adventure

The characters can be drawn to the tragedy of Thorvald's Gift in several ways. A ranger or druid might know the legends surrounding Thorvald and travel to Thorvald's Gift to pay homage to the lost hero — only to stumble upon the troubles currently plaguing the village. For a more direct draw to Thorvald's Gift, rangers, druids, or others attuned to the cycles of the natural world might feel the dark energy suddenly flowing from the deep woods and travel there on their own to investigate. Another option could be that the party receives word from Bóthvarr seeking their aid. He is still recovering from the wounds he received during the attack by the terrible beast that he believes took his father. Whatever draws the characters to Thorvald's Gift, they find it in dire straits and in desperate need of help.

Part One: Thorvald's Gift

Thorvald's Gift is barely a village, and more a collection of households clustered around the modest hall of Jarl Ivar the Stout under the very eaves of the deep woods. The hall serves as the home of the jarl and also the local gathering place and drinking hall. In good weather, locals gather under a large pavilion outside the hall to drink to one another's health and the prosperity of the local timber trade. Other than the jarl's hall, the largest building in the village is a shop that sells saws, axes and other tools necessary for logging. This small settlement has seen prosperity following Jarl Ivar for more than 20 years before the "attack" and his subsequent disappearance.

Thorvald's Gift

Neutral hamlet

Qualities insular

Government autocracy

Population 53 (humans [Northlanders])

Notable NPCs

Bóthvarr, Chief Huscarl (Neutral male human [huscarl] Ftr6)

Thrasi, Lumber Overseer (Neutral male human Rgr4)

Purchase Maximum 1000gp

A. The Village of Thorvald's Gift

When the characters first approach the village, read the following.

The rutted road cuts a thin path through a thick, almost oppressive woodland that reluctantly opens up to a large clearing that appears to be little more than a loggers' camp. A broad stream flows through the clearing next to the lumberyard set on its banks with a flotilla of logs being prepared to float downstream. A few large carts for dragging logs rest nearby. A single longhouse showing significant recent damage stands in the center of the settlement with a large pavilion tent erected just outside. Within this pavilion can be seen a long bar and large tables that serve as a watering hole for the loggers who work the nearby yard. Small log cabins are clustered around these structures as if huddling for safety away from the dark depths of the surrounding forest eaves. A burly Northlander with a thick red beard and a prominent scar on his cheek approaches, a heavy logging axe in one meaty hand.

The man approaching is a huscarl named **Thrasi** who oversees the lumberyard. He greets the characters in a brusque, almost rude manner. He has little time to explain the situation to them. If they tell him they received word that Thorvald's Gift was seeking aid for an evil plaguing the village, he softens somewhat and directs them to Jarl Ivar's hall (**Area A1**). If the characters can't get on his good side, he brushes them off with an admonishment to not disturb his work or that of the other loggers and provides no further information. He's not unsympathetic to the village's plight — quite the contrary. He just doesn't trust strangers and is worried that the characters will bring more troubles down on an already troubled village. If the characters wish to locate Thrasi later, he can usually be found in the lumberyard (**Area A3**) or his house (**Area A6a**).

Thrasi, Logging Overseer (Ftr3): HP 20; AC 5[14]; Atk battle axe (1d8+1); Move 12; Save 12; AL N; CL/XP 3/60; **Special:** multiple attacks (3) vs. creatures with 1 or fewer HD, +1 to hit and damage strength bonus.

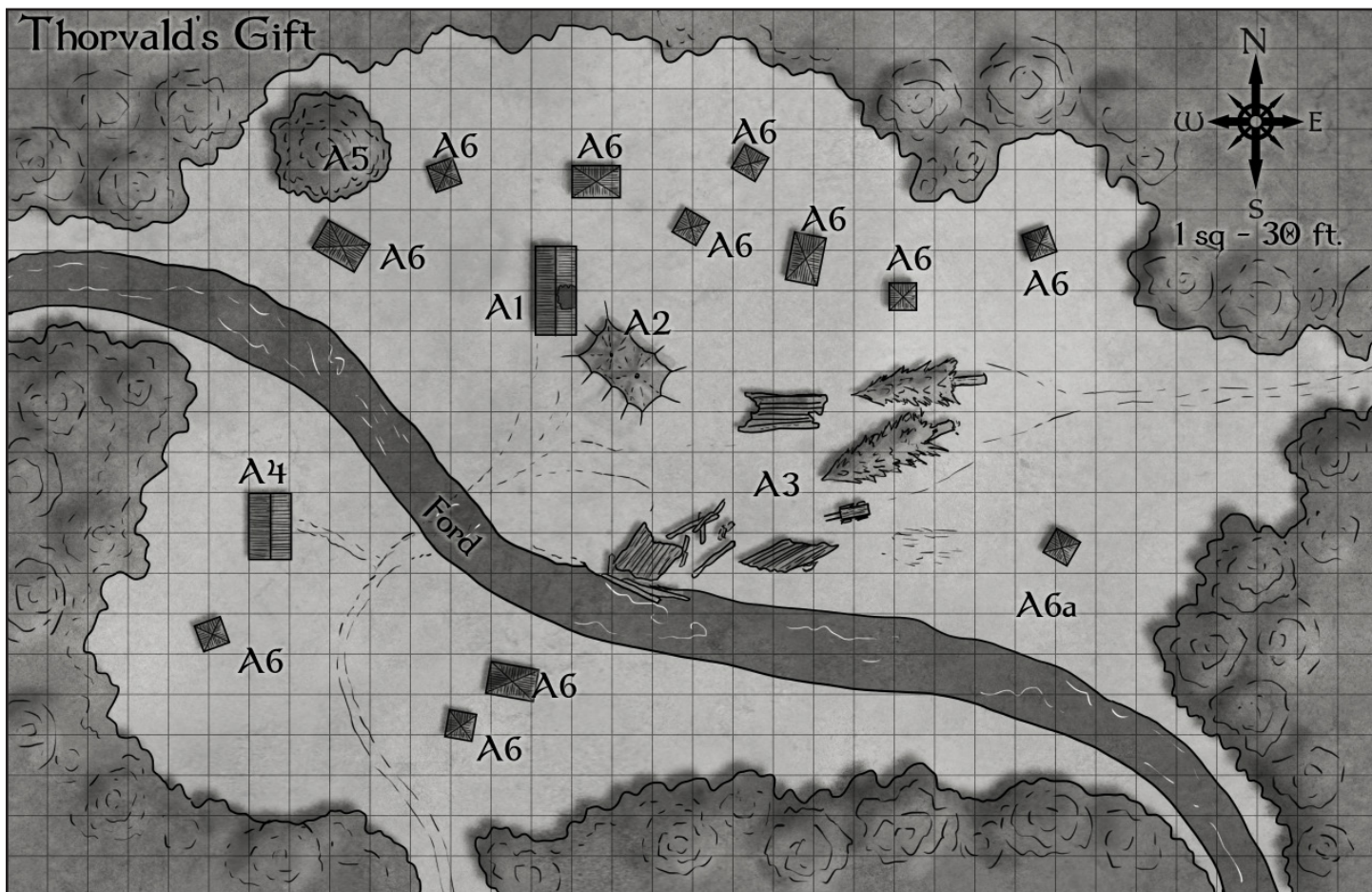
Equipment: chainmail, red cloak, battle axe.

Ar. Jarl Ivar's Hall

Clearly the hall of a person of importance in this small settlement, it is nevertheless rather small and unassuming as most longhouses go. Added to this humble appearance is the fact that its thatch roof and parts of its log and earthen walls have been nearly torn to splinters. Heavy tarps secured by nails cover the gaping holes. A heavy oak door marks the entrance to this damaged hall and stands open, revealing flickering firelight within.

The home of Jarl Ivar, his son **Bóthvarr**, and a pair of elderly household thralls is as simple as a longhouse can be, with a modest hall and small hearth for cooking and warmth in the colder months, and two small bedrooms and an attached dairy for making goat cheese adjoining it. The main hall once held a pair of tables with benches but is wrecked, with blood spatters on the floor and walls where a terrible fight recently occurred. Likewise, one of the bedrooms — the one belonging to Jarl Ivar — has had its wooden door torn from its hinges. The bed within is destroyed and soaked in old blood. The door to the other bedroom is closed and bolted from within.

A single young **huscarl** stands guard in the main hall, but gestures toward the closed door and lets them pass if they come in peace and are clearly not **sceadugenga**. **Bóthvarr** is resting in the second bedroom but if the characters knock, he comes to the door leaning on a stout cudgel. He is a young man in the prime of his life with wild hair the color of amber and



HIGH SUMMER, YEAR OF THE WOLF
 THORVALD HAS LEAD US DEEP INTO THE HEART
 OF THE WOOD. HIS SKILL WITH BLADE AND BOW
 ARE BEYOND MEASURE, AS THOUGH HE HAS
 HARNESSSED ALL THE GRACE OF THE ALFAR AND
 ALL THE TENACITY OF MEN. HE LEADS US
 THROUGH DEER PATHS AND UNTouched
 WILDERNESS WITH EASE, UNDETERRED BY THE
 GROWING DARKNESS AND FESTERING BEASTS
 THAT PLAGUE THESE FORESTS. I CAN FEEL THEM
 CALLING TO ME, BEGGING ME TO JOIN THEM. TO
 GIVE IN. BUT NEVER AGAIN. I AM STRONGER
 THAN THE URGE AND WITH THORVALD AS MY
 GUIDE, I SHALL NOT HEED THE FELL VOICES
 OF MY BASK INSTINCTS.

—FOUND THE BLACK OAK. I CAN HEAR IT IN
 MY MIND. IT FEEDS ON THE FOREST AND FEEDS
 INTO IT. IT CRAVES BLOOD. IT CRAVES LIFE. IT
 IS ANCIENT, BEFORE THE WOODS AND ALSO OF
 THEM. ITS WATERS ARE TINTED, LIKE BLOOD
 AND IT STANDS TALLER THAN ANY OTHER TREE
 IN THE WOOD. THE SUN IS SETTING.
 NO. PLEASE, NO.

—SUNRISE. IT IS DONE. THORVALD IS DEAD
 AND HIS BLOOD IS UPON MY HANDS— BUT THE
 WOOD IS AT PEACE. I HAVE SWORN MY OATH
 AND UNDOUBTEDLY DAMNED MYSELF IN THE
 EYES OF WHATEVER GOD HEARD MY PLEAS. I AM
 SORRY, OLD FRIEND. FORGIVE ME. THE BLACK
 OAK DEMANDED BLOOD AND I GAVE IT THE
 MOST WORTHY BLOOD I KNEW.

—IT HAS BEEN NEARLY A WEEK AND IT FEELS
 AS THOUGH THE CURSED WOOD IS WITHOUT
 END. AS WE DRAW DEEPER INTO THE FOREST I
 FIND IT MORE AND MORE DIFFIKULT TO RESIST
 THE CALL. THORVALD ASKS ME EACH NIGHT IF
 I AM ALRIGHT, AND I PLACATE HIM WITH IDLE
 WORDS OF REASSURANCE. BUT I DO NOT KNOW
 HOW MUCH LONGER I CAN REMAIN HERE. IT IS
 ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE MY BETTER
 NATURE IS BROKEN AND INSTINCT TAKES HOLD.
 I CAN HEAR IT CALLING TO ME, CALLING TO ME
 —EACH NIGHT WHEN THE BEASTS CALL,
 WHEN THE WIND SINGS, THEY BEG ME TO JOIN
 THEM IN THE HUNT.

THE NORTHLANDS SERIES: THE LONG NIGHT OF WINTER

a short-cropped beard. Heavy bandages soaked with fresh blood bind his left leg as he hobbles forth. He offers a pained smile as he offers them the hospitality of his father's ruined hall and dismisses Mitvald the huscarl so he can talk with the characters in private.

Bóthvarr (Ftr5): HP 34 (currently 7); AC 4[15]; Atk short sword (1d8+1); Move 12; Save 10; AL N; CL/XP 5/240; **Special:** multiple attacks (5) vs. creatures with 1 or fewer HD.

Equipment: chainmail, shield, short sword, 2 silver arm-rings (75hs each).

Mitvald, Huscarl (Ftr1): HP 6; AC 4[15]; Atk handaxe (1d6) or shortbow x2 (1d6); Move 12; Save 14; AL N; CL/XP 1/15; **Special:** none.

Equipment: chainmail, wooden shield, handaxe, shortbow with 20 arrows.

Development: Bóthvarr explains that more than a week ago a terrible beast tore the very wall from this hall, killed the house thralls, and mauled his father before dragging him off into the deep woods. Bóthvarr awoke and tried to battle the beast but could not overcome its fury, nearly losing his left leg in the attempt. Four of the jarl's huscarls pursued the beast into the forest but have not been seen since. Since then, beasts have been seen prowling the edge of the woods near the village, and a few of the locals were attacked when leaving the lumberyard for their homes in the late hours of the night. In spite of his wounds, the town looks to him for leadership as the jarl's son and chief huscarl.

Bóthvarr relates to the characters his father's adventures with Thorvald (the first two paragraphs under **Adventure Background** above). He says his father never spoke much of what transpired in the shadows of the deep woods that day, but Bóthvarr believes these attacks are somehow related to the old stories. He is desperate for aid and fears that these attacks will only get worse as the nights pass. All the attacks have been in the evening, and the locals all get a sense that the deep woods has somehow grown fouler — nothing overt, just a sense of ill omen and the sounds of sceadugenga in the night. The beast that attacked his father and the few locals seems to be acting randomly, though Bóthvarr and the two thralls are the only victims who were not carried off into the deep woods. Thus far, including the original rampage in the jarl's hall, there have been three such attacks.

In return for their aid, Bóthvarr is willing to pay the party a portion of his father's own treasures that he gained in his days of high adventure with Thorvald the Wanderer. Beyond that, he has little to offer, but he makes every attempt to play to their better nature and mind's-worth as Northlander heroes.

Once his offer is accepted, Bóthvarr asks the characters to retrieve a long wooden footlocker bound in iron from under his bed. It is fairly heavy, and when they bring it to him, he tells them to open it and take whatever they like. Inside it they find Ivar's old adventuring kit and a small nest egg of valuables that include gold and silver arm-rings, torcs, and hacksilver (see "Treasure" below). A previously undiscovered false bottom in the chest hides a small traveler's journal. Bóthvarr is as surprised as the characters at its discovery. See the adjacent **player handout** for relevant entries from the journal.

If the characters ask to see Bóthvarr's wounds, he tells them not to concern themselves with his minor injuries. However, if they press the matter, he reveals them. Other than minor bruises and cuts, the wounds are clearly those of someone who has been attacked by a large predatory beast, with claw marks raking his side and several obviously cracked ribs. His left leg has been badly mauled by the toothed maw of said beast, and he is lucky to not have lost it. The two thralls were both buried behind the hall, and if dug up, show the same kind of mauling wounds. The superstitious Northlanders will be aghast at risking the wrath of the wights by disturbing their graves, and thereafter the people of Thorvald's Gift are reluctant to interact with the characters.

Treasure: The total value of the gold and silver in Ivar's chest is 2900hs plus 2 amethysts (150hs each). In addition, there are a *potion of extra healing*, *potion of healing*, *potion of heroism*, *ring of protection* +2, +2 *handaxe*, and +1 *dagger*.

A2. The White Hart

This open-sided tent has been set up outside the jarl's damaged hall to offer more room and protection from sun and rain. The canvas roof of the tent is painted with the simple but distinct image of a white stag. Beneath its canopy are half-a-dozen long wooden tables flanked by benches. These surround a round wooden bar upon which are set large casks of bitters, port, and ale. Wooden tankards and horn steins cover one side of the bar, and a large roasting pit ringed with stones serves as a cook fire beyond its boundaries. Built near this fire pit is an oven of stacked stone. Smoke rises from its tall chimney, and the smell of baking bread is mouthwatering.

A matronly woman with formerly fiery hair — now more ashes than flame — is filling mugs and calling names. She occasionally wanders out to the fire to pull roasted meat from long skewers and sets them on wooden trenchers. In spite of her age, she is still spry and moves with strength and purpose. The handful of somber patrons who sit at the tables or linger at the bar take their food and drinks from her, leaving hacksilver for her to collect.

The owner of The White Hart as the locals have come to call the summer pavilion is **Merada Whitehair**, the widow of a once-prominent shipbuilder of Halfstead. She came to Thorvald's Gift soon after its founding when her husband was killed in a construction accident. She was put in charge of Jarl Ivar's kitchens and was eventually able to create this pavilion to better serve food and drink to the hard-working locals in the warmer months. She is tough, no-nonsense, and is not afraid to settle disputes with a cudgel. She's firm, fair, and enjoys a good conversation with any patron who spends time in her establishment. During the day, the White Hart isn't very busy, with only **1d4 loggers**. During the evenings, it springs to life with **4d6 loggers** present for food and drink in spite of the recent troubles. The villagers are gruff and reserved, but open up for anyone who rolls below their charisma on 3d6. Buying them a drink or a meal allows the player to roll 2d6 instead. No check is necessary to obtain information from Merada. If the characters inquire with Merada or any of the patrons about the recent troubles, consult **Thorvald's Gift Rumor Table**. Talking to Merada yields two rumors rather than just one.

Merada Whitehair, Barkeep: HP 12; AC 9[10]; Atk +1 *club* (1d6+1) or frying pan (1d4); Move 12; Save 14; AL L; CL/XP 3/60; **Special:** none.

Equipment: +1 *club*, frying pan.

Logger: HD 1; AC 7[12]; Atk handaxe (1d6); Move 12; Save 17; AL L; CL/XP 1/15; **Special:** none.

Equipment: leather armor, handaxe, dagger, pouch with 5d10hs. (see **Area A6**)

A3. Lumberyard

Felled trees cut at various lengths rest here in piles. Men work with axes and saws trimming, stripping, and sectioning trees in preparation for transport downstream.

The lumberyard is the heart of Thorvald's Gift. During the day, **2d8+4 loggers** can be found here working the timber. They are gruff and more concerned with their work than dealing with curious travelers. If the characters ask about the recent troubles in Thorvald's Gift, they are directed to speak with Bóthvarr (**Area A1**) or Merada (**Area A2**). Characters who become violent or aggressive find themselves facing several angry Northlanders armed with axes.

Thorvald's Gift Rumor Table

While in Thorvald's Gift, the characters have multiple opportunities to obtain rumors about current events through contact with the locals. Anytime the characters attempt to obtain information, roll 1d12 and consult the table below to determine what rumor they hear. Unless otherwise noted, each interaction with a local yields only one rumor. A rumor can be heard more than once, but if the characters are unlucky and keep hearing the same rumor over again feel free to reroll or choose another rumor as necessary.

1d12	Rumor
1	An evil tree at the heart of the wood is the lair of a powerful wight returned from the grave for his vengeance. (Partially true)
2	Ivar's story about his past adventures with Thorvald are lies. There were other survivors on that last fateful journey, and I have heard it said that they tell things differently about what occurred in the deep woods. (Partially true)
3	Merada brews a special drink that could fell even one of the Jötnar with one swig. (False)
4	If you sleep under the full moon at the shrine of the Vanir, when you awake you'll be in the land of the sceedugenga. (False)
5	A great linnorm that lives deep in the forest is the source of the evils that trouble Thorvald's Gift. (False)
6	Bóthvarr and Merada are having a secret love affair. (False)
7	The overseer of the lumberyard is stealing from the jarl. (False)
8	Thorvald's spirit still lingers in the deep woods where he fell. (True)
9	An evil god of the Ginnvaettir has cursed the deep woods. (Partially true)
10	The noises of beasts heard at night are the wights of loggers who died felling trees. (False)
11	Bóthvarr made a deal with the beasts of the woodland to murder his father. (False)
12	Ivar murdered his wife soon after Bóthvarr was born. (False)

Loggers (2d8+4): HD 1; AC 7[12]; Atk handaxe (1d6); Move 12; Save 17; AL L; CL/XP 1/15; Special: none.

Equipment: leather armor, handaxe, dagger, pouch with 5d10hs. (see **Area A6**)

A4. Shop

Other than the jarl's hall, this is the largest building in Thorvald's Gift. A simple cottage, it has large, hide-covered windows set into its front face, flanking a heavy wooden door standing open. A sign hangs over the door with the simple image of various hand tools burnt into the wood. A thatched roof protects it from the elements, and through the open

doorway you can see all manner of wares associated with the lumber trade sitting on display on shelves and tables.

Torfi the Shrewd owns and operates the general store. He lives here with his wife **Geirhildr**. He also keeps a trained **guard dog** on a leash behind his establishment during the day, though the beast sleeps inside at night. He keeps a well-stocked shop that contains all manner of supplies needed to manage the lumberyard and maintain a household. This includes axes, saws, rope, knives, hooks and other tools of the trade and many assorted mundane household goods. He does not keep a large stock of weapons beyond those used by hunters, such as shortbows, spears, and arrows. He does not stock martial weapons or heavy armor. If the characters seek some particular mundane item not mentioned above, there is a flat 65% chance he has it. A ladder leads to a small loft bedroom above the main floor. Torfi keeps his earnings hidden in a large sack that is under his large straw mattress. The sack contains his savings of 327hs.

Torfi the Shrewd, Shopkeeper: HP 5; AC 9[10]; Atk handaxe (1d6); Move 12; Save 18; AL L; CL/XP B/10; Special: none.
Equipment: handaxe.

Geirhildr, Shopkeeper: HP 3; AC 9[10]; Atk club (1d4); Move 12; Save 18; AL L; CL/XP A/5; Special: none.
Equipment: club.

Dog, Guard: HD 2; HP 12; AC 7[12]; Atk bite (1d3); Move 15; Save 17; AL N; CL/XP 1/15; Special: none. (**Monstrosities** 127)

Development: If questioned about current events, Torfi has little interest in the beasts that have been attacking Thorvald's Gift, save for as it pertains to the protection of his wife and his business. He will, however, play up the threat if he thinks he can make a few extra sales to gullible would-be heroes.

A5. Shrine to the Vanir

This large tree casts a shadow over many of the surrounding cottages. A hollow has been cut into its base, and the heartwood beneath is carved to depict the image of a man with a beard of leaves and a woman holding a bow. Small alcoves cut into the wood can be used for small candles or to leave offerings.

This small shrine is the closest thing that Thorvald's Gift has to a godshouse. It is a simple shrine devoted to the Vanir gods of nature — primarily Freyja and Freyr. There is no full-time godi to tend to the small shrine, though locals occasionally come here to offer up a small prayer or gift. Lately, villagers have been leaving garlands of flowers in a plea for protection from the predators of the deep woods. Druids or clerics dedicated to one of the Vanir who spend an hour in prayerful vigil at this shrine can prepare one additional 1st-level spell for the day. The locals are unaware of this shrine's secret blessing, but a cleric who makes successful saving throw can realize its significance. If the characters take offerings left by the villagers or otherwise despoil the shrine, the perpetrators suffer a -1 penalty on to-hit rolls and saves for 24 hours (no save).

A6. Loggers' Homes

About a dozen small cabins are scattered about the village of Thorvald's Gift. They are simple thatch-roofed affairs, with stone chimneys. Goodwives bustle about, tending to small gardens or washing clothes on the nearby riverbanks. A few children are present, gathered in a small group to play with a large mongrel dog.

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The residents found here during the day are primarily the wives and children of the loggers who work the forest. They have little interest in strangers, whom they fear are likely to bring more trouble down on Thorvald's Gift. Most adults who are approached are likely to ask the player characters to go on about their business and leave them be. The children, on the other hand, are quite curious, though their information is likely to be embellished and full of fanciful tales. Use **Thorvald's Gift Rumor Table** for any news obtained from these locals, though feel free to expand upon them in fanciful ways to reflect the children's imaginations. The **mongrel dog** who plays with the children is a surprisingly stout mutt who follows any character who feeds it, serving loyally as long as it is shown kindness.

After nightfall, the **loggers** begin to return to their homes. They are generally taciturn and tightlipped toward strangers. If the characters mention they are working on behalf of young Bóthvarr, they are much friendlier toward the characters. Refer to **Thorvald's Gift Rumor Table** for information that can be gleaned from the encounter.

Mongrel Dog: HD 2+2; HP 16; AC 7[12]; Atk bite (1d4+1); Move 18; Save 16; AL N; CL/XP 2/30; **Special:** none.

Logger: HD 1; AC 7[12]; Atk handaxe (1d6); Move 12; Save 17; AL L; CL/XP 1/15; **Special:** none.

Equipment: leather armor, handaxe, dagger, pouch with 5d10hs.

A6a Thrasi's House

This cottage, much like the others, is the home of the foreman Thrasi (see **Area A** above). It is empty when he is gone, with no wife or children to occupy it. Searching within its cluttered and unkempt interior can locate his personal stash of 167hs.

Night Watch

As a means of ending the predation, the characters are likely to take guard duty in or around the village and perhaps even set a trap. Regardless of the preparations that they make, shortly after the sun sets the sounds of vicious wild beasts begin to be heard intermittently under the eaves of the surrounding trees and steadily grow closer to the settlement. Whether the characters choose to plunge into the forest to confront the creatures, wait for them to emerge, or set up some sort of trap, their efforts are soon rewarded as a number of large wolves attack. They are unprepared for the presence of the characters, and it is possible that they are surprised by the party and put at a considerable disadvantage from the outset. Feel free to allow the party's plans to come off without a hitch for this encounter, as it is meant to be revelatory as opposed to a serious challenge. If the characters choose to set off into the woods immediately rather than guard the village, then this encounter occurs during their first night of travel.

The attack consists of **5 worgs** and a **werewolf** in wolf form (and largely indistinguishable from the worgs themselves). Though normally intelligent beasts, these creatures fight with a savage fury with little regard for tactics and refuse to surrender.

Wolves, Worgs (5): HD 4; HP 31, 30x2, 27, 25; AC 6[13]; Atk bite (1d6+1); Move 18; Save 13; AL C; CL/XP 4/120; **Special:** none.

Lycanthrope, Werewolf: HD 4+4; HP 34; AC 5[14]; Atk bite (2d4); Move 12; Save 13; AL C; CL/XP 5/240; **Special:** lycanthropy (contract if wounded greater 50% hit point maximum), silver or +1 or better weapon to hit.

Development: The werewolf remains in wolf form until he falls in battle, at which point he transforms back into the form of one of the human villagers, a logger named Fenrir who disappeared in one of the attacks a week ago and has been presumed dead. If the characters attempt to communicate with him, then with his dying breaths he mumbles, "The corrupted heart ... at the Black Oak," before expiring. If his death does not allow such an opportunity, then it is one of the worgs who utters this cryptic statement before it dies (the worgs speak *nørsk* and giant).

If the party does not take the hint to investigate the heart of the wood from this encounter, then attacks continue nightly (consult the **Deep Woods Encounter Table** below). There are no more lycanthropic villagers involved, but the participants of each attack is far more savage and bestial than a normal member of its species might otherwise be, once again pointing to something that is inherently wrong occurring deep in the forest.

Part Two: Deep Trouble in the Deep Woods

After the characters have had the opportunity to speak with Bóthvarr, Merada, and others to learn of the recent troubles in Thorvald's Gift, they should be concerning themselves with protecting the villagers from the nightly attacks. This might involve a sojourn into the ominous depths of the forest where it seems the troubles may have started. After the events of **Night Watch** above, such a journey should seem inevitable.

No known tracks cut through the forest, and it is little explored beyond its eaves where the loggers ply their trade. If the characters recovered Ivar's journal from **Area A1**, then they can piece together a course leading to the strange black oak at the heart of the forest from his writings. Otherwise, simply by traveling through the forest and always walking in the direction that the trees seem to grow taller and darker, the undergrowth thicker will more or less guide the characters in the right direction as well. This latter information is well known among the loggers of Thorvald's Gift and is used as local wisdom in order to *not* accidentally stumble into the deep woods. Any local who is asked readily provides this bit of guidance.

There is no map of the forest depths themselves; instead, the journey is presented as taking a certain length of time that is punctuated by escalating random encounters before the characters reach the source of the darkness at its center: the Black Oak. It ordinarily takes 5 days of travel for the party to walk to the Black Oak (mounted travel or flight are not options due to the thickness of the forest). If the characters have Ivar's journal, then they are able to set a more direct course, reducing the time of travel to 4 days. Along the way, they encounter many dangers of the woodlands. Play up the oppressive nature of the deep woods and the sense that the characters are being watched and even hunted.

The forest is dense, trackless and difficult to traverse. Little direct sunlight reaches the woodland floor through its thick canopy, and travel is slow. Overland travel is at one-half speed, and unless otherwise noted, each encounter occurs in light undergrowth with a 25% chance of being in heavy undergrowth (4-in-6 chance of being surprised). For each day of travel, characters have a 10% chance of becoming lost, requiring them to spend much of the day backtracking, adding 1 day to the length of time needed to reach the Black Oak.

Each day of travel after the first (see **The Return of Ivar** below) brings the chance of a random encounter. This begins as a base 50% chance the first night. Each cumulative day of travel increases this chance by 5%. Each night spent camped in the woods increases this chance by 10%. If the characters opt to light a campfire at night, the chance increases by 20% rather than 10%. However, if a night encounter occurs and the characters do not have a campfire or other light source, then they will be fighting in total darkness unless they have low-light vision or darkvision. So they must deal with certain risks either way.

Once an encounter occurs, the base chance resets to 50% and increases cumulatively again as described above. A check for encounters should be rolled once during the day after the first day and once during each night, starting with the first night. If an encounter is called for, roll 1d10 and consult the **Deep Woods Encounter Table** below.

Deep Woods Encounter Table

1d10	Encounter
1	1d3 giant skunks
2	1d4+3 archer-tree

1d10	Encounter
3	Hangman tree
4	3d4 worgs
5	1d4+2 assassin vines
6	Tree ghost
7	4d4 redcap goblins
8	Ivar the Stout (see The Return of Ivar below)
9-10	1d2 urrslumber



Archer-Trees (1d4+3): HD 7; AC 6[13]; Atk 1d4 needles (1d6 plus paralyze); Move 1; Save 9; AL N; CL/XP 8/800; **Special:** paralysis (3d6 turns, save avoids). (*Monstrosities* 21)

Assassin Vines (1d4+2): HD 7; AC 5[14]; Atk vine (1d6+1); Move 1; Save 9; AL N; CL/XP 8/800; **Special:** animate plants (30ft, save or victims immobilized). (*Monstrosities* 23)

Giant Skunks (1d3): HD 4; AC 7[12]; Atk bite (1d6); Move 9; Save 13; AL N; CL/XP 5/240; **Special:** sprays musk (cone, 20ft wide at point, 60ft long, 60ft wide at base; nauseated for 1d6 turns, save avoids; blinded, 3d6 turns, second save; leather has 20% chance of dissolving; stench remains 1d6 days). (*Monstrosities* 431)

Hangman Tree: HD 8; AC 2[17]; Atk 4 vines (1d8 plus strangle); Move 3; Save 8; AL N; CL/XP 10/1400; **Special:** hallucinatory spores (50ft radius, save or passive for 2d6 rounds), magic resistance (45%), strangle (1d6+1 damage per round, vine AC 4[15] and 6hp), surprise (1-4 on 1d6), swallow (strangling victim, save or swallowed, 2d6 damage per round, open doors check to escape, 2 victims maximum). (*The Tome of Horrors Complete* 318)

Redcap Goblins (Chaos Goblins) (4d4): HD 1d6 hp; AC 6[13]; Atk bite (1d6); Move 9; Save 17; AL C; CL/XP 1/15; **Special:** -1 to hit in sunlight, vicious healing (receive hp equal to damage dealt up to maximum hp). (*Monstrosities* 217)

Tree Ghost: HD 3; AC 6[13]; Atk 2 claws (1d3) or thorns (0); Move 12; Save 14; AL C; CL/XP 10/1400; **Special:** animate wood (50ft radius), charisma drain (thorns, 1d4 charisma per hour, save avoids), immunities (normal weapons, cold, electricity, acid, and non-magical fire), insect plague (1/day). (*Monstrosities* 486)

Urrslumber: HD 5; AC 4[15]; Atk grapple in plant form (1d6 plus sleep poison), or claw or bite in bear form (2d6); Move 9; Save 12; AL C; CL/XP 6/400; **Special:** sleep poison (1d6 hours, save avoids), surprise opponents on a 1-4 in plant form, gaze attack (blindness, 1d6 rounds, save avoids) in bear form, and the bear form itself is blind. (*Monstrosities* 495)

Wolves, Worgs (3d4): HD 4; AC 6[13]; Atk bite (1d6+1); Move 18; Save 13; AL C; CL/XP 4/120; **Special:** none.

The Return of Ivar

The first day of the party's travel in the deep woods brings them face to face with the man they are seeking. **Ivar the Stout**, as the powerful werebear that he has become, stalks the woods and comes across the party's trail.

Ivar the Stout (Werebear): HD 8; HP 64; AC 2[17]; Atk 2 claws (1d3), bite (2d4); Move 9; Save 8; AL C; CL/XP 11/1700; **Special:** hug (on natural 18+ to-hit, grab and hug for

additional 2d8 damage), lycanthropy, silver or +1 or better weapons to hit, regenerate (2hp/round while Black Oak and Dark Idol remain active).

Tactics: Ivar follows the party's trail and attempts to catch them by surprise. He remains in his bear-like form throughout the battle, so it is unlikely that the characters realize who he is during this encounter.

Development: Ivar attacks and fights for 1d4 rounds or until he loses a quarter of his hit points. He then flees back into the woods, though a ranger character could attempt to track him and bring him to bay. If the characters actually manage to slay Ivar in this encounter, after 1 round his body sinks into the ground where it is claimed by the forest and can no longer be found. This act regenerates him — the oath he swore to Loptr will not allow him to end his suffering until the Black Oak has been destroyed and Thorvald's spirit laid to rest. He regains full hit points and emerges from the forest floor again in some random location near where he fell at moonrise of the next night, allowing him to continue to plague the characters.

B. The Black Oak Grove

The great canopy of the deep woods opens, only to be consumed by an even greater shadow. Amid a pool of festering, putrid water there rises a gnarled oak of unimaginable size. Its long branches are covered with gray, dead leaves that somehow seem to block out even more light than the other oppressive vegetation of this accursed forest as they droop in the mist-laden air of this clearing. Its thick roots plunge into the pool, burying themselves deep in the sleeping earth — it is vast, unyielding and vile. If ever there was a heart of corruption in the forest depths, it is this infernal oak.

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The terrible Black Oak is, in fact, the source of evil in the deep woods. Its mere presence has a corrupting influence. Characters who are good and noble (of Lawful alignment) find themselves uncomfortable and downtrodden in its presence, suffering a -1 penalty on all saving throws for as long as they remain within sight of the tree. In addition, the tree weakens the effects of healing magic, drawing the positive energy from such spells as they are cast. All curative spells that restore hit points are only 50% as effective as normal. Harm spells (such as *cause light wounds*) meanwhile deal 150% normal damage.

In addition to the dark pact made by Ivar long ago, the tree's blight over the land is further enhanced by the presence of several former adventuring compatriots of Thorvald, now bound to the Black Oak under the same curse. They are corrupted and monstrous, fed and groomed by its all-pervasive evil.

The waters in which the Black Oak takes root are also corrupted. Anyone foolish enough to drink of this fell brew finds that it does not quench thirst. In fact, it causes greater thirst and weakness in the drinker as if he has gone for days without water or sustenance (-2 to hit and saves for 48 hours, save avoids). Furthermore, those who disturb the water or drink from it alert the **Velana**, Thorvald's former lover and adventuring companion. The **fen witch** is now bound to the pool of the Black Oak. She has gray, sloughing leathery skin over a skeletal frame, webbed hands and feet, fiery red points of light in hollow eye sockets, and a single nostril in the center of her face, all shrouded in the tatters of a rotten robe.

Velana, Fen Witch: HD 6; HP 41; AC 5[14]; Atk 2 claws (1d4); Move 12; Save 11; AL C; CL/XP 11/1700; **Special:** death speak (speak name and die, save resists), horrific appearance (save or lose 1d8 strength), magic resistance (25%), mind probe (60ft radius, save or fen witch learns true name). (*The Tome of Horrors Complete* 240)

Tactics: Velana does not attack right away, preferring instead to remain hidden in the mists shrouding the surrounding trees. When the characters enter the clearing, read the following:

Gentle laughter echoes through the misty clearing, but quickly turns predatory. "Come for Thorvald, have you? You'll not have him. He belonged first to me, then to the tree. None shall pass between the roots to claim him while the blood of the vine still flows. ... Who are you, and why do you seek Thorvald?"

While the characters search for the source of the voice, the fen witch uses her mind probe ability to try to learn the true names of some of the characters or confirm any names that the characters gave her if they responded to her questions. Once she is discovered, she unleashes her horrific appearance and attempts to use death speak against any characters whose names she knows. Velana fights until reduced to 0 hp, at which point the roots of the tree reach forth and drag her under screaming as the tree reclaims its prize.

Development: Observant characters may have noticed that Velana made mention of passing "between the roots." This is the key to entering the hollow of the Black Oak, which can only be done by actually wading into the waist-deep pool among the roots. A character need only feel about in the murky waters near the roots to discover a hollow that leads them into the depths below (**Area B1**). Of course, characters may be reluctant to do so given the dangers of the water, but if they are careful not to swallow the water and have dealt with Velana, they can find a short, muddy, and water-filled tunnel that leads under the pool and up into the hollow at the base of the tree.

Treasure: A few remnants of Velana's days as a thief still linger in the putrid waters, though they are difficult to find. Searching through the waters is time consuming and allows a single 10% chance per searcher per hour to discover a small waterlogged and rotten bag containing a +2 dagger and 2 rubies worth 300hs each.

Inside the Black Oak

The Black Oak is alive (such as it is), but its heartwood is corrupted and in many places has completely rotted away, creating huge hollows in its interior. These hollows are so large as to be cavernous. Its interior is humid and oppressive, with no internal light. The walls are wood, though it is far too wet to burn, even with magical fire. In truth, it is protected by evil magic that prevents its destruction unless the great altar at its uppermost reaches is destroyed. The only hope is that would-be heroes ascend from its nested roots and destroy the black heart at its apex.

Br. The Roots

The murky waters surrounding the great tree are pooled here in a large cavern of roots and thick, brown mud fed by a constant trickle from the water above. This hidden pool is chest deep, and the mud sucks at your feet as you struggle toward what passes for a shore, where the tangle of winding roots has formed what could serve as a crude ladder to ascend into the dark interior of the tree itself.

The mud here is thick and deep, equal to a deep bog. A **strangle weed** dwells at the bottom of this pool and attempts to coil around the first character to cross toward the root ladder. Moreover, this pool is the final resting place of one of Thorvald's companions. This druid's bones have long since sunk into the deep muck, infusing the mud with a rudimentary intelligence. The resulting **mudbog** now guards the bones as the **Keeper of the Pool**. It sees anyone attempting to cross the pool as desecrating its the grave and immediately attacks, though it has been slumbering for long years and will not awake to attack until 1 round after the strangle weed does so. The Keeper and the strangle weed ignore each other, but tend to complement each other quite well in battle as they gang up on victims rendered nearly helpless in the mud. The strangle weed will not leave the pool, but the Keeper pursues until destroyed.

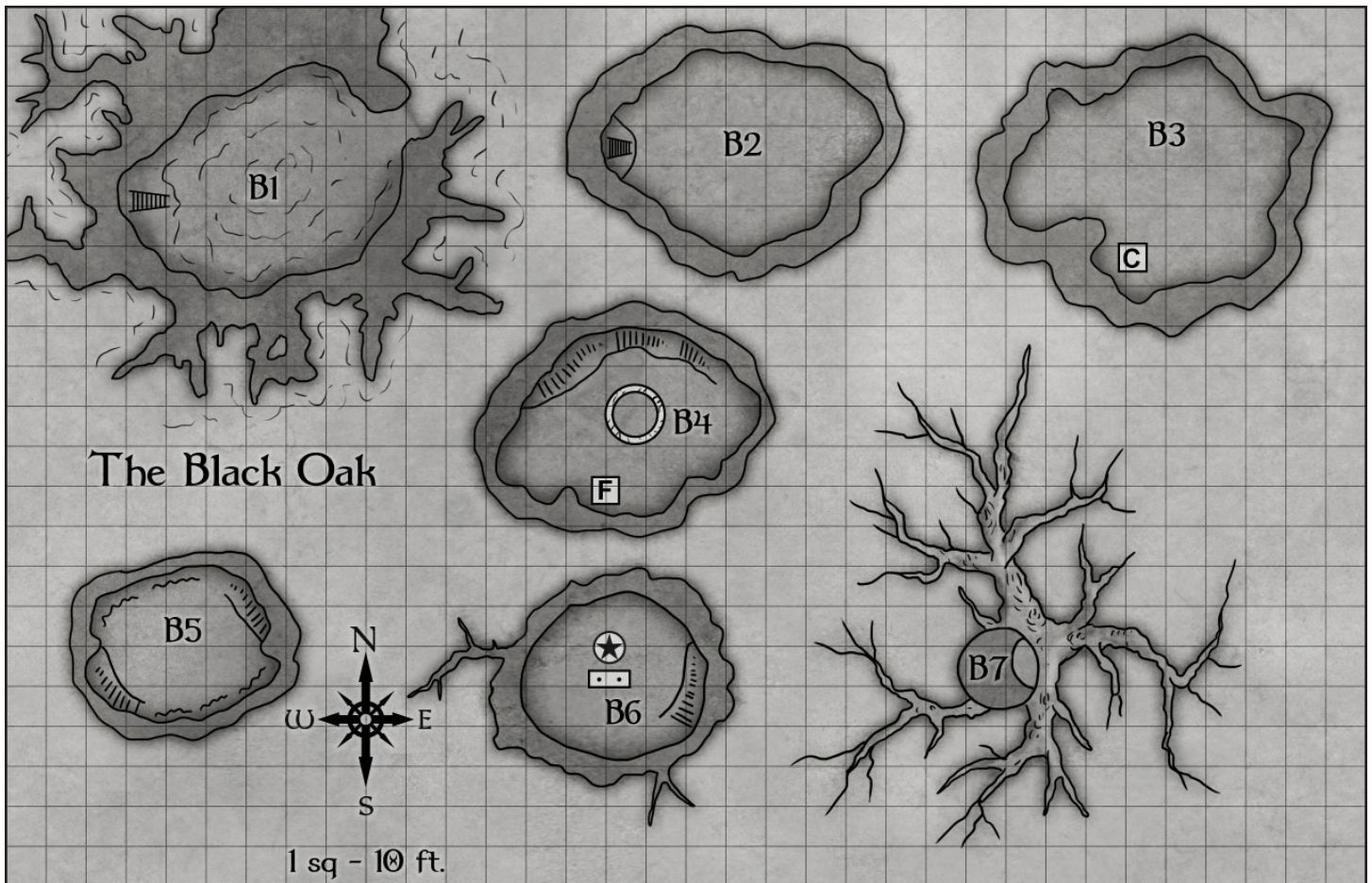
Strangle Weed: HD 8; HP 53; AC 5[14]; Atk slam (1d6); Move 3; Save 8; AL N; CL/XP 9/1100; **Special:** camouflage, constriction (save or be held, automatic 1d6 points of damage per round), resist fire (50%), surprise (1-4 on 1d6). (*The Tome of Horrors Complete* 523)

Keeper of the Pool (Mudbog): HD 7; HP 46; AC 5[14]; Atk engulf; Move 3; Save 9; AL N; CL/XP 7/600; **Special:** acid (1d6), engulf (creatures entering mudbog, 1d6 acid)

Unique Magic Sword

Flicker

Recovered during a raid in the Southlands long ago, *Flicker* is an intelligent +2 *extra attack short sword* containing the personality of a halfling thief of Bard's Gate. It has adapted to life in the Northlands, and even learned *nørsk* before being lost in the Black Oak. It is able to cast *dimension door* and *invisibility* 1/day each. Its purpose is to defeat the rivals of the Gray Deacons thieves' guild (see *Bard's Gate* by *Necromancer Games*), but is unaware that the guild is no longer extant. As a result, it sees any thief who does not identify himself with the Gray Deacons as a rival and makes use of its special purpose power to give its wielder a +2 bonus on attacks and saves against that foe. If *Flicker* is told of the destruction of the Gray Deacons, it goes into a deep depression and loses its special purpose power. At the Referee's discretion it can associate itself with another organization to renew its special purpose. *Flicker* can use telepathy and speech.



damage per round while within), immune to blunt weapons. (*The Tome of Horrors Complete* 390)

Treasure: Anyone taking the time to dig in the muck at the bottom of the pool for at least 15 minutes can locate the deceased druid's mortal remains — or at least the few stained bones and teeth that make up what is left of them. Pulling out the remains exposes what's left of his gear lying beneath him. The remains consist of a rotten knapsack and a short sword in an equally rotten scabbard. The blade is the intelligent short sword *Flicker* (see sidebox), while the knapsack still holds a *potion of animal control*, 502hs, 2 pearls (75hs each), and an emerald (300hs).

B2. Sleeping Squirrels

This large chamber is framed by both a floor and ceiling of thickly interwoven roots and leaves. It is dark, musty and moist. A low rustling in the darkness seems to be coming from the shadowed vines far above your head. A pungent odor lingers in the room.

This level is home to **2 mutated squirrel swarms** who slip in and out of the tree through tiny knotholes and glide with their rudimentary wing-like membranes that extend between their hind legs and forelegs. They are particularly aggressive and are awakened the first time any loud noise is made in the chamber. They swarm the chamber, attacking en masse, hoping to devour their targets' brains with the tiny tentacles that extend from their open maws. Once the swarms have been dealt with, the characters have to find their own way to continue their ascent in the tree, as the root ladder ends here. This can be anything from flying to cutting footholds in the inner walls of the tree, to using hooks to pull down the ceiling of tangled branches. The tangle is too dense for anyone to pass through, though it can be cut with a determined effort.

Swarms, Mutated Squirrel (2): HD 4; HP 27, 24; AC 7[12]; Atk swarm (2d6); Move 6 (glide 12); Save 13; AL N; CL/XP 5/240; **Special:** glide silently, mindfeed on natural 20 (automatic 1d6 damage while attached, up to 4 squirrels on single target). (*Sword of Air* 331)

Development: Unless the characters are particularly quiet or ingenious in dealing with the squirrel swarms, they are likely to alert the spiders on the level above to their presence. Cutting through the tangle of branches certainly does so. If such is the case, the spiders are waiting in ambush for their arrival, though they do not descend from their webs to engage the player characters.

B3. Ravenous Spiders

There is a palpable sense of danger in this chamber. Movement through the area is hindered by thick, sticky webbing that coats the walls and floor in sheets. Countless pairs of red eyes suddenly flash to life in the heart this massive nest of enormous spiders.

A colony of **8 giant spiders** resides in this nest. They immediately attack, eager for a new meal beyond the squirrels upon which they are accustomed to feeding. If they were aware of the party's presence, then they attack with surprise in the first round after characters begin to ascend into the room and attempt to entangle as many characters as possible with their webs. More than one spider focuses its attacks on a character until that individual is entangled. After the spiders are defeated, anyone clearing the webbing near the top of the chamber finds a ceiling of solid heartwood. Set near one edge is a small manmade trapdoor that provides access above and obviously has not been opened in many years (it is stuck, however).

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Spider, Giant (4ft diameter) (8): HD 2+2; HP 15, 14x2, 12, 11x3, 10; AC 6[13]; Atk bite (1d6 plus poison); Move 18; Save 16; AL N; CL/XP 5/240; **Special:** lethal poison (+1 save), 5 in 6 chance to surprise prey.

Treasure: If the party manages to defeat the spiders without burning their webs, they can discover the remains of past victims encased within them. These desiccated, skeletal husks include not only forest animals but loggers and travelers that have gone missing over the years. One corpse wears 2 gold arm-rings (250hs each), and clutches a wash-leather in one hand. Within the pouch are 22hs, a small jade statuette of a Dvergarg (500hs), and a sapphire (650hs). A different corpse still wears a dusty *cloak of protection* +2. If the webs are burned, the arm-rings and statuette can still be recovered, but the other items will be lost or destroyed.

B4. The Wailing Heart

A surprising sense of serenity pervades this chamber. A solid stairwell carved from the chamber's walls wraps around the room and up into the darkness above. The floor of polished heartwood is blackening around the edges as if slowly giving way to the corruption that infects the great tree, though this corruption does not reach the center. A circle of graceful luminous sigils has been inscribed into the wood. Within the confines of this circle, you see that the floor is pristine and the wood still fresh and vibrant. More shocking is the beautiful Alfar maiden who stands within the circle. She is clearly a Nûklander, her glossy black hair is vibrant and lush, and her deep brown eyes are dimmed with sadness. She gasps in surprise upon seeing you and reaches a hand tentatively in your direction. A shock of green energy lances from the runes at the extended hand, and she cries out in pain, quickly drawing it back.

This Nûk woman is **Elk-Running**, another druid who was a member of Thorvald's company that came to the tree. She was exploring its interior when she sensed a coming darkness as Ivar slew his friend and swore his oath of evil. She quickly wove a powerful enchantment in the form of a unique protective circle to protect herself, but the magic from an ancient scroll she had found in the Far North

was more powerful than she knew, and she has been imprisoned within it ever since. She has lingered here for decades, her life force extended by her own imprisoning magic.

Elk-Running (Clr7): HP 32; AC 7[12]; Atk +1 spear (1d6+1); Move 12; Save 8 (+1, ring); AL L; CL/XP 8/800; **Special:** immunity to fey charms, +2 save versus fire, shape change, spells (4/2/2/1).

Spells: 1st—*detect magic*, *faerie fire*, *predict weather*, *purify water*; 2nd—*create water*, *cure light wounds*; 3rd—*cure disease*, *protection against fire*; 4th—*dispel magic*.

Equipment: leather armor, spear, *ring of protection* +1, silver arm-ring (75hs)

Development: Elk-Running is pleased to see the characters and is willing to tell them what she knows if they will help release her. She sensed the evil of Ivar's actions and knew that he betrayed and murdered Thorvald before making some powerful oath, but she does not know any details beyond that. She says that she always found something odd about Ivar, as if the primal violence of nature was somehow contained within his body. But Thorvald's trust in him was sufficient for her, and she had never pursued the matter further — much to her regret. She tells the characters that she cannot undo her own enchantment, but if they will free her she will aid them in their quest to destroy the corrupting influence of the Black Oak.

Elk-Running has tried to cast *dispel magic* on the circle, but it never seems to be strong enough. If any living thing attempts to cross the plane of the circle, it immediately takes 3d6 points of damage and is pushed

back out the way it came in (no save). The truth of the matter is that two successful castings of *dispel magic* (against a 12th-level caster) must be done simultaneously to break the circle's power. Elk-Running can provide one of the castings, but will have to rely on the characters to perform the other if they are able.

Unfortunately, Elk-Running has been exposed to the powerful corruption of the Black Oak for many long years, and its effects have been held at bay only by the magic of the circle. If the characters are successful in breaking the circle's enchantment, the years of dark magic it has contained suddenly floods in upon the Nûk woman, and she falls to the ground, writhing in pain as evil energy visibly devours her. Sores and wounds open on her body as the energy engulfs her. If quick-thinking characters immediately begin casting healing spells to protect Elk-Running, they can protect her from the negative effects of the tree's corruption if they give her the equivalent of 20 hp of healing within 3 rounds. Otherwise, at the end of the third round she is fully consumed by the long-denied dark forces of the tree, leaving only her equipment and empty clothing behind. Worse than even this fate, Elk-Running rises in 1d6 rounds as a **groaning spirit** and pursues the characters for vengeance until destroyed.

Groaning Spirit: HD 7; HP 49; AC 2[17]; Atk incorporeal touch (1d8 plus chill touch); Move 12; Save 9; AL C; CL/XP 12/2000; **Special:** chill touch (drain 1 point of strength, save avoids), fear aura (flee in terror for 1d6+4 rounds, save avoids), immunity to cold and electricity, keening (1/day, at night, 30ft range, 3d6 damage, save or die), magic resistance (50%), vulnerability to *holy word*. (**The Tome of Horrors Complete** 312)

If the characters decide to wait until after they have destroyed the evil of the Black Oak before freeing Elk-Running, they find that the task is much easier. Once the idol at **Area B6** is destroyed, the circle collapses and Elk-Running is free to seek out the characters on her own. If freed from the circle and she survives, Elk-Running joins the characters and aids them against the Black Oak to the best of her ability. Whether she is willing to remain after and continue as a member of the party is up the Referee.

Ad Hoc Xp Award: If Elk-Running is freed by the characters and survives it, award the characters 4800 XP for their efforts.

B5. Last of the Old Guard

The stairs wind upward into a room that offers a vision of horror entombed in nature. The blackened vines that have frequently served as what passes for arras in this terrible oak clutch the corpses of long-slain armored warriors now rotted to rust and bone. Their faces are twisted in terrible grimaces, and weapons are still clutched in skeletal hands. Another winding stair of carven oak rises out of the tangled vines of the floor into the darkness above.

These poor souls are the last wretches who died in the service of Thorvald's ill-fated quest into the deep woods. The life-sapping energy of the Black Oak, combined with Ivar's oath, have bent them to the service of the evil power whose temple lies at the farthest height of the tree. If the characters set foot upon the far stairwell ascending into the tree above, the vines of the room immediately spring to life to grab the characters (save or be held, open doors check to escape). At the same time, a chorus of rasping voices fills the room, appearing to emanate from the corpses, and call out, "Do you swear as Thorvald's Betrayer did? Do you offer your promise?" The voices give no more explanation than this. If the characters do not all answer in the affirmative within 3 rounds, or if they refuse, the undead tear free from the walls and attack as **5 wights**. If they do answer in the affirmative, then each character is given the opportunity to shift his alignment to Chaotic. If they do not take the opportunity to do so, then the wights react as if a negative answer was given; any character that chooses the alignment shift (or who is already evil) is thereafter ignored by the wights and the entangling vines and allowed to proceed unimpeded.

These wights are the last comrades of Thorvald who are "protecting

him” even in their state of corrupted undeath. They are armed with the weapons they once wielded in life, and one of them is even wearing a *ring of spell turning*, which it activates on its first action. These weapons drain levels just as if the wight had hit a victim with its claw attacks (although they lose this ability once the wights are killed). These creatures fight until destroyed and are unaffected by the tangling vines. Once all five have been dealt with, the vines return to their quiescent state.

Wight: HD 6; HP 44; AC 5[14]; Atk +2 *longsword* (1d8+2 plus level drain) or *claw* (1 plus level drain); **Move** 9; **Save** 11; **AL** C; **CL/XP** 9/1100; **Special:** drain 1 level per hit, silver or +1 or better weapons to hit.

Equipment: chainmail, +2 *longsword*

Wight: HD 4; HP 31; AC 5[14]; Atk +1 *longsword* (1d8+1) or *claw* (1 plus level drain); **Move** 9; **Save** 13; **AL** C; **CL/XP** 7/600; **Special:** drain 1 level per hit, silver or +1 or better weapons to hit.

Equipment: chainmail, +1 *longsword*, *ring of spell turning*

Wight: HD 4; HP 27; AC 5[14]; Atk +1 *spear that returns to hand* (1d6+1) or *claw* (1 plus level drain); **Move** 9; **Save** 13; **AL** C; **CL/XP** 7/600; **Special:** drain 1 level per hit, silver or +1 or better weapons to hit.

Equipment: chainmail, +1 *spear that returns to hand*

Wight: HD 3; HP 19; AC 5[14]; Atk +2 *heavy mace* (1d6+2) or *claw* (1 plus level drain); **Move** 9; **Save** 14; **AL** C; **CL/XP** 6/400; **Special:** drain 1 level per hit, silver or +1 or better weapons to hit.

Equipment: chainmail, +2 *heavy mace*

Wight: HD 5; HP 34; AC 5[14]; Atk +1 *short sword* (1d6+1) or *claw* (1 plus level drain); **Move** 9; **Save** 12; **AL** C; **CL/XP** 8/800; **Special:** drain 1 level per hit, silver or +1 or better weapons to hit.

Equipment: chainmail, +1 *short sword*

B6. Guardian of the Black Oak

You ascend the stairs and come to a room unlike any you have seen thus far, a chamber of rich, polished black oak. To your surprise, daylight actually streams through an opening high above at the top of the tree, sending a bright shaft onto a large wooden altar that is carved as one contiguous piece from the floor itself. This shrine is covered in foul carven runes smeared with blood and powdered bone. An idol of terrible magnificence carved from polished black wood sits upon it, and behind the altar stands a colossus of the same construction. A voice booms across the chamber.

“Ivar could not come himself, I see! He sent lackeys — mere sellswords?” You realize the voice is coming from a figure clad in shadow who is looking down from the opening above. His features are hard to distinguish, little more than a silhouette against the light.

“Thorvald will not be betrayed again. I will not be twice-damned! I now serve forces greater than that oath-breaker knows. See for yourself the terrors that my new master has given me. From the deep woods, his power shall spread until all the natural world is bent to his will and under my command. Rise, Heart of the Black Oak, and lay waste to my foes!”

At the shadowy figure’s command, the colossus of wood lumbers to life and attacks the party. It is a **black oak golem** powered by the will of the vile tree from which it was made and exists only to destroy the enemies of the Black Oak. It is simpleminded, concentrating on the first person to

Damaging the Dark Idol

The dark idol is composed of the living wood of the Black Oak and is permanently attached to its wooden altar. The dark idol has 50hp and is immune to nonmagical attacks. Furthermore, it has a 50% chance to resist the effects of any spell cast against it. In addition to its passive qualities, the dark idol has an active defense as well. Anyone who makes a melee attack against the idol (whether successful or not) must make a saving throw or lose 1 level. Each time the idol drains a level from someone, it mends 5 points of damage that it has suffered. It cannot mend damage to gain more hit points than its maximum.

damage it until that target is slain before moving on to a new opponent. The black oak golem fights until destroyed, though clever characters might be able to exploit its weakness (see “Development” below). The figure above disappears from sight as soon as the golem attacks.

Black Oak Golem: HD 9 (40hp); AC 2[17]; Atk 2 *slams* (2d6); **Move** 9; **Save** 6; **AL** C; **CL/XP** 10/1400; **Special:** corrupting aura (all within 10ft save or sickened, -1 to hit and saves), immunities (cold, electricity), +1 or better magic weapons to hit, vulnerable to fire and *warp wood* (slows for 3 rounds, no save). (see **Appendix**)

Development: The black oak golem is intrinsically tied to the dark idol upon the altar. If a character appears to be threatening to damage the idol (the golem is unintelligent, so even a character that is near the idol could be considered to be threatening it), the golem immediately switches its attacks to that individual until it is no longer threatened. If the idol is actually damaged by someone, the golem attacks that individual until he is dead or someone else damages the idol, causing it to change its attacks to that target. See the sidebox for details of attacking the idol.

In addition to destroying the black oak golem, if the dark idol is destroyed, the heart of the Black Oak itself is killed and begins a process of withering that starts at the altar and extends outward through the entire tree. After 5 rounds, cracks and rot are noticeable in the wood of the tree, and its leaves begin to fall off. After 5d6 rounds, sections of the tree’s trunk and branches begin to collapse and fall away. None of these directly affect the characters, though they clearly see that the tree is crumbling and becoming unstable. After this point, running is impossible while inside the tree. After another 5d6 rounds, the entire tree collapses in a thunderous roar of splintered wood. Anyone still inside the tree or within 100ft when this occurs takes 10d6 damage from the falling debris and crushing force of the massive tree.

Treasure: Anyone taking the time to search the altar can locate a hidden compartment. If the compartment is opened without first disarming it, a **trap** is set off. Anything with fewer than 7 HD within 60ft of the trap must make a saving throw or perish in the resulting magical blast. Within are stored some of the treasures of Thorvald and his old adventuring companions. These include a bag holding 1520hs, a *potion of healing*, a *potion of levitation*, a suit of +1 *chainmail*, 20 +2 *arrows*, a +2 *wooden shield*, a *luckstone*, and a *wand of magic missiles* (8 charges).

B7. Lower Canopy

The warmth of the sun greets you as you step out into the great canopy of the Black Oak. Branches reach in all directions, most large and strong enough to support your weight. Thick leaves prevent you from seeing clearly beyond a few feet, though many are smeared with fresh drips of blood and the branches in the area show many bloody footprints. However, even as you watch, these bloody patches are absorbed into the dark bark of the tree.

Maniacal laughter can be heard from among the concealing foliage. “Come for me, will you? Think you I am but another pawn of this darkling sprout? Even were you to fell the Black Oak itself would I remain and rule from the forest depths!”

When Ivar betrayed and murdered his friend and mentor in the name of dark powers, he cut the hero’s throat and drained his blood into the pool at the roots of the Black Oak. From this morass of blood and vile mud, Thorvald’s spirit rose again as a vengeful **blood wight**. He now climbs among the branches of the tree shouting his barely remembered rage and sense of injustice to the silent forest, though there is little of Thorvald left in the creature. His massive oozing form leaves fresh bloody footprints dripping throughout the foliage, but the leaves and bark of the tree absorb this vital fluid after only a few seconds so he cannot be tracked in this way.

The omnipresent foliage hides anyone among these branches at a distance of farther than 10ft (–1 to hit) and conceals anyone at a distance farther than 50ft (–4 to hit). The branches twist and run about in all directions, but no one can move more than 5ft in any given direction without having to jump to another branch. Characters have a 10% chance of missing the branch they are aiming for. If they fail, the character must make a saving throw to catch smaller branches and foliage beneath to prevent a long fall. On a failed save, the leaper falls 1d6x10ft. After falling a total 100ft + 1d6x5ft, an individual reaches the pool at the base of the tree.

Thorvald the Betrayed (Blood Wight): HD 10; HP 73; AC 2[17]; Atk 2 claws (1d6 plus wounding) or +1 longbow x2 (1d6+1); Move 24 (boots, 30ft leap); Save 5; AL C; CL/XP 12/2000; **Special:** engulf (after 2 claws hit, victim engulfed until drowned), +1 or better magic weapons to hit, wounding (additional 1hp damage/round until healed). (*The Tome of Horrors Complete* 596)

Equipment: +1 longbow, cloak of elvenkind, boots of leaping

Tactics: Thorvald makes use of his boots and cloak to move among the branches and snipe vulnerable characters, especially spellcasters and archers. He does this at around a range of 40ft or so to keep the target in sight. If a single opponent manages to close in on Thorvald’s position, he attempts to engulf that individual and drown him before his companions can reach him to give aid.

Development: If the idol at Area B6 is destroyed or Thorvald travels more than 100 yards from the Black Oak, the dark power fueling his existence begins to fade and he loses his wounding ability and immunity to nonmagical weapons.

Part Three: Returning to Thorvald’s Gift

If the idol of the Black Oak was destroyed and Thorvald was slain, the characters have no random encounters on their return journey. Instead, they see harts and hinds, birds and beasts — natural creatures who belong in a verdant forest. It seems as though corruption is already fading from the deep woods. If the Black Oak still stands and Thorvald still lives, however, the forest plagues them with random encounters as described in **Part 2**.

Contrition

If the Black Oak is destroyed, the party has one specific set encounter the day after they leave the Black Oak behind.

The burly, aged man standing before you is wearing the tattered, bloodstained remains of what were once workman’s

clothing. He clutches a logger’s axe and his black hair is streaked with gray and silver. His pale blue eyes are weary and filled with guilt. He looks to you and your companions with almost pleading eyes.

“There is one corruption that yet lingers in the forest. There is one remnant of that evil oath which fouled these lands. I am Ivar, and I would ask on behalf of Thorvald’s Gift that you carry out one last act of heroism.”

Ivar explains all that has transpired in the past, from his dark oath, his true nature and the corruption of the deep woods. He leaves nothing out (see the last 2 paragraphs of the **Adventure Background**). At the end of his story, he asks that the characters release him from his curse by taking his life so that there is no lingering taint on the forest. This is an opportunity for roleplaying and discussion of what is the right choice to make between the players. In the end, if they refuse, Ivar transforms into his werebear form and attacks the party in an effort to force their hand. Once he is slain, he thanks the party and dies in peace. In his pocket is a strip of bark carved in runic by his own hand admitting to his condition and the wrongdoings — a final confession to unburden his soul of guilt.

Ivar the Stout (Werebear): HD 8; HP 64; AC 2[17]; Atk 2 claws (1d3), bite (2d4); **Move** 9; **Save** 8; **AL** C; **CL/XP** 11/1700; **Special:** hug (on natural 18+ to-hit, grab and hug for additional 2d8 damage), lycanthropy, silver or +1 or better weapons to hit, regenerate (2hp/round while Black Oak and Dark Idol remain active).

Concluding the Adventure

After hearing the news of Thorvald’s fell spirit, the curse of the maligned god, and the ultimate fate of his father (including his confession), Bóthvarr is of a mixed heart. He is saddened at the loss of his father, but recognizes that it was the only way for the village to remain safe. He assumes the position of jarl and invites the characters to stay in his hall as his honored huscarls. Regardless of whether they accept his offer or not, he also allows them to keep his father’s adventuring gear as well as any treasures they may have recovered in their adventure.

Each character receives a reward of 2500 XP for destroying the Black Oak and slaying Thorvald. This is in addition to any experience points they earned during the adventure itself. In addition, if the players roleplayed the final encounter with Ivar well and in a true Northlander manner, the Referee can award an additional 500 XP in reward.

In the event that the characters did not defeat Thorvald and lay Ivar to rest, the village suffers a terrible tragedy. Ivar’s attacks become bolder, and he begins dragging villagers out of their homes at night accompanied by packs of the fell creatures of the forest. Eventually, the few remaining survivors flee their homes to find a new life elsewhere, and the darkness of the deep woods grows, the forest becoming a blight upon the land for generations to come and a constant reminder of the failure of heroes.

Appendix: New Monster

Golem, Black Oak

Hit Dice: 9 (40hp)

Armor Class: 2[17]

Attacks: 2 slams (2d6)

Saving Throw: 6

Special: corrupting aura, immunities (cold, electricity), +1 or better magic weapons to hit, vulnerable to fire and *warp wood*

Move: 12

Alignment: Neutrality

Number Encountered: 1, 1d6+2 (grove)

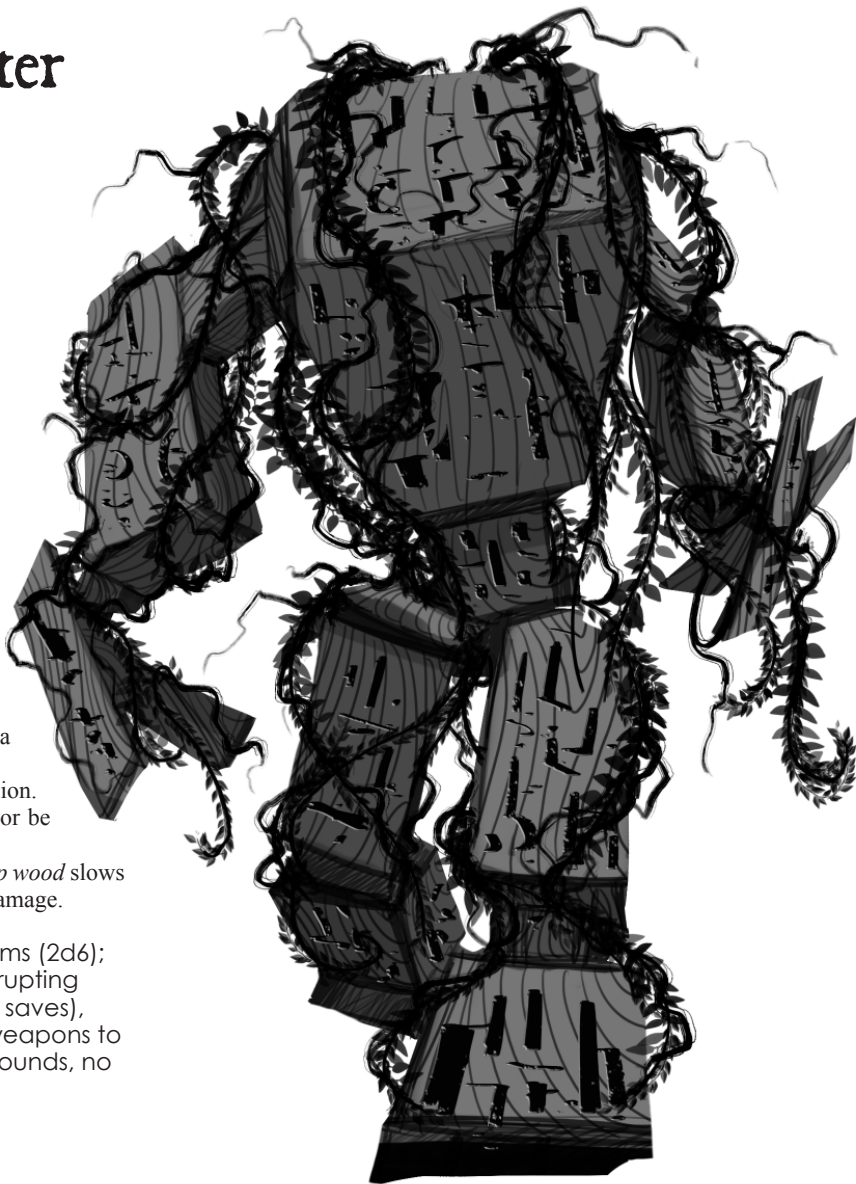
Challenge Level: 10/1400

A black oak golem stands nearly 9ft tall and is a lumbering 3000-lb. hulk of vaguely humanoid shape, though without any discernable head. Its arms swing wide above bowed legs, and nearly reach the ground as it plods forward. It appears to be carved from a single massive piece of black, coarsely grained wood that is pocked with knots and festooned with many splits and splinters. Yet despite its seemingly fragile composition, it moves with a solid, indomitable will that belies any apparent weakness.

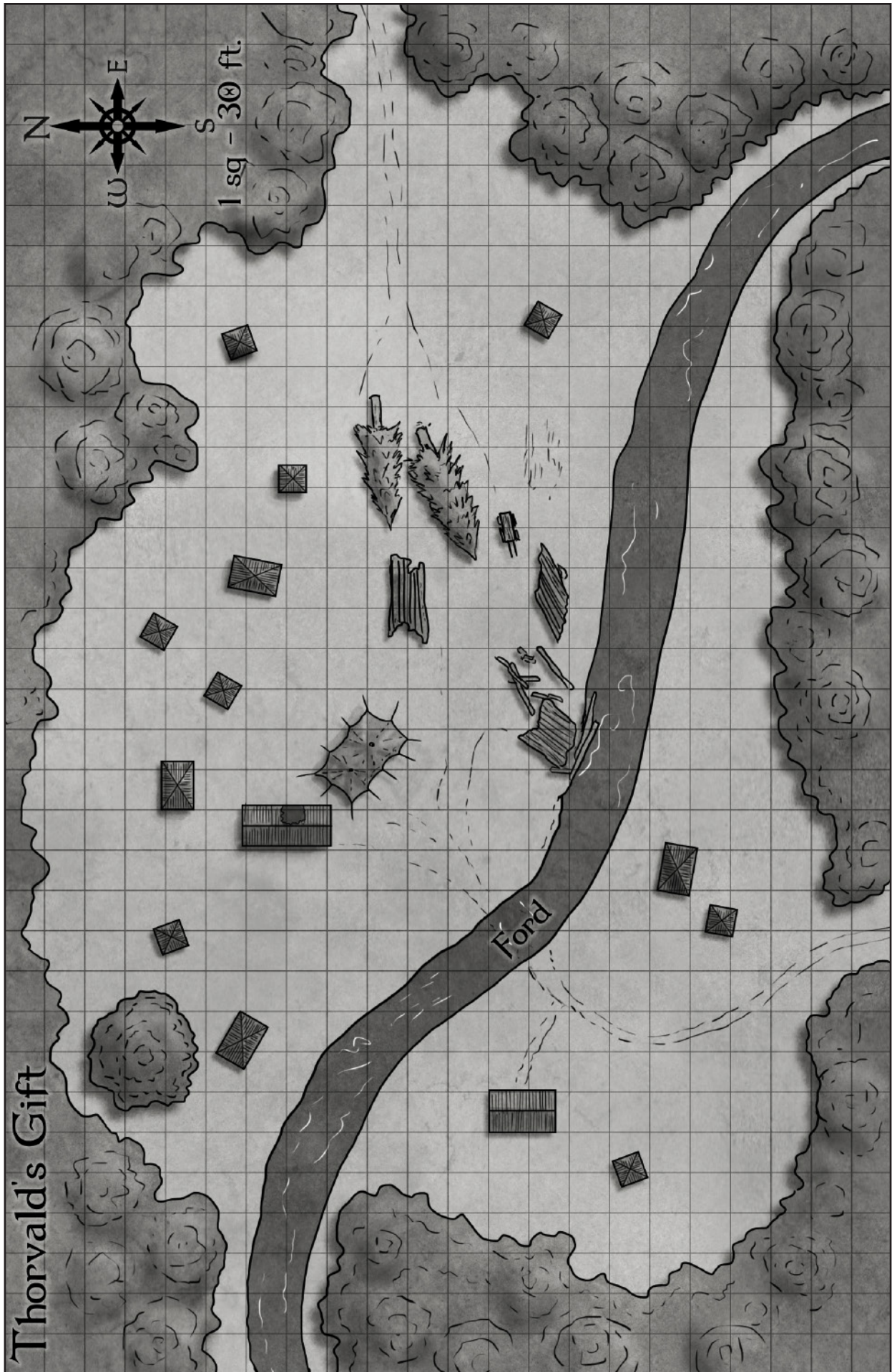
A black oak golem is surrounded by an aura of corruption. Any living creature within 10ft must make a saving throw or be sickened by its foul presence (–1 to hit and saves).

Black oak golems are immune to cold and electricity. *Warp wood* slows the golem (as a *slow* spell) for 3 rounds. Fire deals double damage.

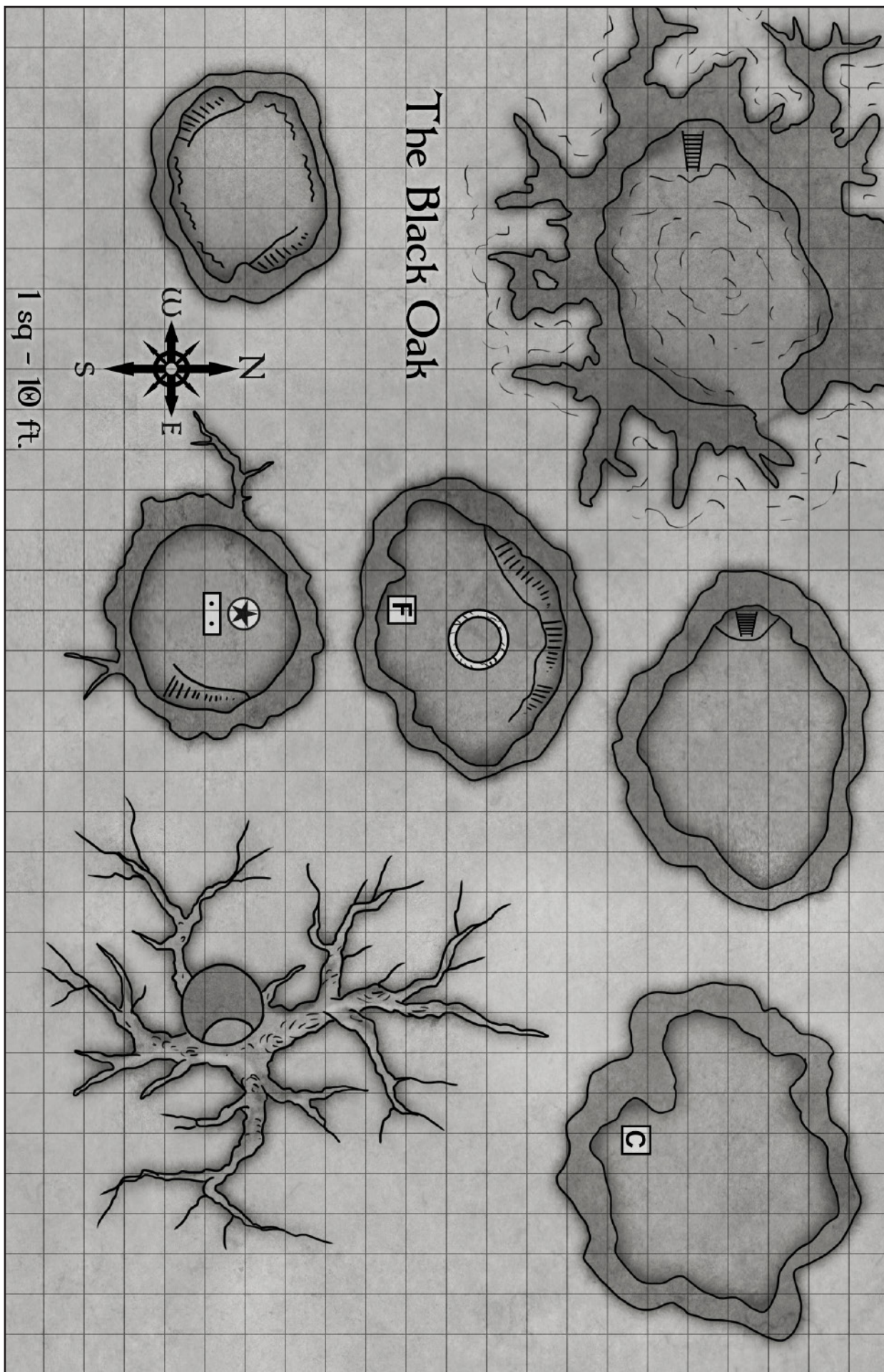
Black Oak Golem: HD 9 (40hp); AC 2[17]; Atk 2 slams (2d6); Move 9; Save 6; AL C; CL/XP 10/1400; **Special:** corrupting aura (all within 10ft save or sickened, –1 to hit and saves), immunities (cold, electricity), +1 or better magic weapons to hit, vulnerable to fire and *warp wood* (slows for 3 rounds, no save).



THORVALD'S GIFT - PLAYER'S MAP



THE BLACK OAK - PLAYER'S MAP



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THE NORTHLANDS SERIES: THE LONG NIGHT OF WINTER

NLS4: Oath of the Predator

Oath of the Predator is a *Swords & Wizardry* adventure for the *Northlands Saga* setting and is the fourth adventure in *The Long Night of Winter* adventure anthology. Like the other adventures in the anthology, *Oath of the Predator* is intended to be dropped into a *Northlands Saga* campaign by the Referee at any time or place that is convenient. It is not tied to any particular location other than taking place amid a dense, primal forest.

It is designed for a party of characters of levels 4-6.



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