



Monstrous:
The Wylderwood

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The Wylderwood



Fellingbrow River

Iveagh Labyrinth



Blackbrooke



Northvern



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A word of warning...

Monstrous: The Wylderwood is suitable for mature audiences.

This piece deals with themes and imagery that may be disturbing for younger readers. Much of what is described is implied; however, there are mentions of violence, blood/gore, body horror, child neglect, and more.

This is not a piece to be taken lightly, and reader discretion is advised.

Welcome to the Wylderwood

In a corner of a world just a sidestep from our own, there is a forest. This forest is older than memory and darker than night. This forest has roots that stretch farther than its canopy and undergrowth that can't be permeated. This forest changes all who enter it and alters all that it touches.

This forest is where you must go. This forest is the Wylderwood.

Monstrous: The Wylderwood is an interactive novella that allows you, the reader, to explore the eponymous forest and the secrets it holds. As one of five monstrous lineages, you will track your emotional well-being via the use of *emgots*, which feed directly into your stats. You will explore the Wylderwood, influence the story, and discover who the true monsters are.

Character Creation

Before you can go any further, you must make the character you'll play in your journey through the Wylderwood. Using the character sheet included in the back of the book, you can fill out the following information.

Emgots

Before the story begins, you are given 30 emgots, or emotional currency. These represent your character's emotional well-being. Along the path of the story, your character may make certain choices or have things happen to them, and such actions may cause them to lose or gain emgots.

Emgots feed directly into your character's stats. Using your 30 emgots, you will distribute them across the five stats. They may be distributed in any way, and additional bonuses are given based on your chosen lineage—more on this on page 8. These stats—and thus the amount of emgots allotted to each—will determine how successful your character may be at a specific check.

Additionally, if a stat drops to zero (0), you can no longer use the affected stat for the rest of the narrative. Stats can not go into the negatives.

Stats

Your character has five main stats: **Heart**, **Grit**, **Lore**, **Charm**, and **Luck**. These are at the core of your character, and they determine what you are able to do throughout the story. When there is the option to use one of your stats, the number of your stat indicates what sort of information you glean and which path you may take.

Heart determines compassion, resolve, and empathy. Decisions you make that require showing—or not showing—compassion will use and affect this stat.

Grit determines physical and mental strength. Decisions you make that require physical or mental fortitude will use and affect this stat.

Lore determines investigation, research, and intellect. Decisions you make that require intellectual know-how or technical knowledge will use and affect this stat.

Charm determines external personality and persuasion. Decisions you make that alter how you are perceived by other people—and yourself—will use and affect this stat.

Luck determines natural luck. Instances where a gut feeling or instinct may guide you will use and affect this stat.

Lineages

In the world of the Wylderwood, your lineage governs your play style as opposed to your physical appearance or traits—though your physical appearance may be affected, it is not of chief concern. Each lineage has particular qualities, which indicate which stat they receive a one-time bonus to.

Maenads were once thought to be merely drunken revelers, and are raucous and fiercely protective of all those who don't have the ability to protect themselves. Maenads get +2 to their base Heart score.

Gorgons are those with snakes for hair and eyes that stun. They are descended from a woman who was turned into

such a creature by a goddess who had no other way to protect her. Gorgons get +2 to their base Grit score.

Banshees are precognizant beings who wail in the hours before someone is to die, and are insatiable in their thirst for knowledge. Banshees get +2 to their base Lore score.

Fae are cunning tricksters and are among the oldest creatures to roam the world of the Wylderwood. They perhaps have a stronger tie to it than most. Fae get +2 to their base Charm score.

Selkies are shapeshifters and often water-dwellers who rely on their magical cloaks in order to change form. Selkies get a +2 to their base Luck score.

Part I: The Town at the Edge of it All

Discover what has brought you to the edge of the Wylderwood

Northvern is a town like many others in the country. Back before the mills died off, back before the wealthy got over the novelty of living in the shadow of the Wylderwood, back before the forest began digging its roots beneath the town, Northvern was a tidy, bustling haven brimming with inhabitants.

Now, however, cracked cobbled streets are empty at dusk and a hush lays over the shuttered buildings at every hour. Visitors rarely stop and, when they do, they're gone within a day and will never make the return trip.

You are one of these visitors; whether you will return or not remains to be seen.

As you come into Northvern, arriving at the tail end of many a long days' journey, you see a main street lined with shops and businesses that were once painted in bright pastels—carnation pinks, buttercup yellows, forget-me-not blues—but whose paint has faded from hundreds of days of sun and hundreds more of torrential rain. It's raining now as you ride in, and you lean out the window of the only stagecoach that travels to Northvern. Water drips off the buildings whose heydays were years ago.

But you're not looking there. You're not looking at the water pooling in the street gutters that are choked with leaves and garbage. You're not looking at the locals peering from shuttered shop windows at the only bit of movement Northvern has seen in days. You're not looking at the vines that have woven their way between the crumbling brick walls. You're looking at the Wylderwood.

You've only ever heard of the Wylderwood in stories, and of course in your correspondence with Northvern's Council of

Elders, but nothing could have prepared you for how large it actually is.

The trees stand taller than any other, and the smallest of trunks are as big around as a mill wheel. It's early fall, and though the dark green leaves have begun fading into golds and crimsons, you know that the leaves will not fall from the branches. They will cycle through their sunset colors until they land on the brown of an oak leaf, and they will remain shriveled and brown throughout the winter, until crocuses push through the snow and pale green begins to show on the leaves. They will get larger, and darker, until they cover the spaces in the canopy in the deepest green seen anywhere in the country.

"All out for Northvern!"

The driver, a tall woman wrapped in a gray traveling cloak, swings off the front and raps on the coach. Despite her clear impatience—the tapping foot, the raised eyebrow—there's no rush as you exit the carriage. You are the only passenger. It is the last stop.

Stepping out onto the rain-soaked street, you hand over a few dull coins to the driver before turning to face the main street of Northvern. It's no brighter now that you're standing in the midst of it, but you can see everything a bit better. Only about half of the buildings have any indication that they're open; some are boarded up, while others glow from behind chipping glass.

While the meeting with the Council is pressing and can't be avoided, there is time to take in a few places around town before you must begin. Perhaps it's a good idea to understand this town you're supposed to be saving.

There are four potential locations to explore. Of these, you will only have time to fully examine two.

To explore Ofre's General Store, turn to page 13.

To explore the abandoned clothiers, turn to page 23.

*To explore the Mother of Sorrows chapel, turn to page 45.
To meet with the Council of Elders, turn to page 53.*

Ofre's General Store

A bright light hovers outside of the tidy storefront in place of a streetlamp. The swinging sign that proclaims *Ofre's Mercantile* swings in a faint breeze. One window has been replaced with planks of wood. Fine vines like threads have woven their way up the corner of the wall, tiny leaves bursting across the slats, which have been nailed tight enough to not let any drafts through. The other window is clean and intact, and shows various wares that may be found within—baskets of wrapped bread, tinned vegetables, jars of herbs, tinkering tools—and light glows from behind the faint tint of the glass.

You enter; tinny bells ring above the door. The store is brightly lit with glimmering orbs that buzz, their light of a cold, winter blue that makes the space feel chillier than the outside. There is no one inside, not even behind the counter, and as you step through the few aisles that the shop holds, you see swaths of empty shelves. The only things that remain on the shelves are the items that no one ever buys—sulfur-scented pickled eggs, matchsticks in self-lighting boxes, bottles of wax-stopped sludgy potions that are more than likely well-past their useful date.

Floorboards creak beneath your boots. Each aisle is emptier than the previous, until you're at the front counter, empty-handed save for your bag. There's a curtain behind the counter; as you watch, it moves, and a woman who can't be much older than you appears. You can't help but stare.

Her hair is a coil of garter snakes, sliding over her forehead and slithering over her shoulders. Green, serpentine eyes stare out from a deeply tanned face. She doesn't smile; instead, she takes a half step backwards to take in your soaked cloak, your muddy boots. She crosses her arms.

“Just browsing?”

Her voice rasps out, quiet and controlled. You see how she swallows as if the mere act pains her.

Just browsing.

*I'm looking for something
specific.*

“There’s not much to browse, so good luck. The caravans only reach here once, maybe twice a month. Then we’re full of products and people for three days and it’s back to these.” She gestures to the neglected items. She squints at the pickled eggs and frowns. “I ought to stop ordering those.”

You introduce yourself, offer a hand that she refuses. She gives you a nod instead, the snakes wriggling in protest.

“Ilva. What brings you to Northvern?”

She doesn’t wait for the answer, but it’s clear she’s still listening. The snakes swing in your direction as she retrieves a bottle and rag from behind the counter.

I'm not sure. (page 15)

I'm here to investigate the Wylderwood. (page 16)

I'm not sure.

“Well, if it was for a pleasant little vacation, I would have picked someplace else.” Ilva pours some of the clear liquid from the bottle onto the counter and begins wiping it down with the rag. The scent of cedar and alcohol fills the air, enough to make your eyes water. “There’s not much left in Northvern.”

Her words hang in the air as she finishes wiping down a counter that, to you, seemed clean even before she started. She puts the bottle away.

“Are you going to buy anything, or just stand and stare?”

Exit the shop. (page 22)

Buy something. (page 18)

Ask her about the snakes. (page 20)

I'm here to investigate the Wylderwood.

Ilva stills. “You’d be the latest summons, then. Damn Council can’t stop trying.”

The words hang in the air, the store silent now save for the buzzing of the orbs and the soft hissing of snakes. You don’t know what to say at that, but you’re once again all too aware of the Council’s letter folded up in your pocket.

“You’re not the first one they’ve asked. They send out those letters as far as they can reach, wait for people to answer and traipse into this town, weave their promises behind the doors of the fucking town hall, and they never return.”

She uncorks the bottle and pours some over the countertop. The acrid scent of alcohol with undertones of cedar fills your nostrils and throat. She scrubs at the counter with the rag, though there is no visible dirt. The snakes recoil from the scent as well, baring teeth and hissing.

“It’s not your fault,” she notes, pouring more of the liquid. You want to ask what, exactly, it is, but the smell of it makes you cough. “But it’s only fair to warn you. The Council certainly won’t. They just can’t stand the way things change. Neither can the rest of us, but you don’t see us asking strangers to risk their lives.”

One of the smaller snakes slithers down Ilva’s cheek, tracing along her temple and cheek, tongue darting out to touch the bridge of her nose. The action seems to soothe her as she sighs, throwing the rag aside and stopping up the bottle once more. The counter is glossy; the alcohol scent fades while you wait, leaving only lingering notes of cedar and something else—something floral, like lavender, or lilac, perhaps. It’s gone before you can identify it.

“Apologies. Was there anything you wanted to buy?”

Exit the shop. (page 22)

Buy something. (page 18)

Ask her about the snakes. (page 20)

Buy something.

“Well, what will it be, then?” She wipes her hands on the rag, glancing to the barren shelves.

You turn back to the shelves, taking a closer look than you did on your first pass. There aren’t many options, yes, but surely something here could be useful to you in your upcoming travels.

There are the potions you remember from earlier. They look no more appetizing now. Some of the bottles can fit in the palm of your hand. Others are round and squat like jam jars, and still others are slender and made of crystal. They’re also unlabeled—it seems that no matter which one you would select, some amount of luck might be needed upon consuming it.

Down another aisle are the forgotten canned goods. Faded labels advertise string beans and potatoes for the tamer options, while brighter packaging proclaims canned mystery meats lie within. The most recognizable is a tin of sardines, complete with the promise to expire in several years.

By the register are a cluster of knickknacks. A small flocked bear rests next to interlocked rusty nails; a metal wind-up bird twitches against a cluster of glittering purple crystal points. All useless, yes, but you can’t help but smile as you look at them.

Purchase a potion.

Purchase the canned fish.

Purchase a trinket.

You bring your choice up to the counter. Ilva takes it carefully in her hands, examines it, and says, “Just a tinpenney for this, please.”

You hand her the coin; she hands you back your new possession, which you tuck away in your bag as she speaks, waving

“Well. Good luck on your journey.”

She grabs the rag, moving with the intention of ducking back behind the curtain.

Exit the shop. (page 22)

Ask her about the snakes. (page 20)

Ask about the snakes.

She raises an eyebrow. “Took you longer than most to ask.”

Ilva reaches under the counter and produces a framed photograph, which she turns to face you.

Her hands are chapped, and they’re clasped around the photo that shows a young girl, smiling broadly, one front tooth missing. She stands between a man and a woman, and all are in the fashions of earlier years; the young Ilva sports twin ribbons tied at the ends of long, light braids.

She takes a moment to look at the photograph. Absentmindedly, a single finger strokes down one of the larger snakes, who curls around her wrist. It sinks its teeth into the delicate skin and she doesn’t notice.

“The longer I’ve spent here, the more I’ve become...well, whatever this is.”

In Northvern?

By the Wylderwood?

She doesn’t clarify. You wonder if she even knows the answer. She’s still staring at the photograph.

“It’s strange to stare in the mirror and to not recognize the face staring back.”

Ilva looks up, eyes boring directly into yours. You feel rooted to the spot, as if your feet and legs have turned to stone. The green of her eyes is mesmerizing, swirling outward from the slit of a pupil to fill where the whites of her eyes should have been. She smiles. Her canines are unnaturally sharp.

“Take care.”

You suspect she doesn’t mean it just as a simple parting. Something in your chest aches as you watch the smile slide from her face, her eyes drifting back to the photograph.

Lose 1 Heart OR 1 Charm.

Exit the shop (page 22).

Exit the shop.

You apologize for bothering her, and leave out the door. The bells ring again as it swings shut behind you. The street outside is still deserted, still hazy gray beneath the mist and dribble of rain that has yet to let up. You wonder if it has ever let up.

You pull the hood of your cloak up and hasten to your next destination.

To explore the abandoned clothiers, turn to page 23.

To explore the Mother of Sorrows chapel, turn to page 45.

To meet with the Council of Elders, turn to page 53.

Abandoned Clothiers

Up the street, back the way you came, the buildings grow smaller, more spread apart. The street begins to deteriorate, cobblestones replaced with mossy puddles and tiny saplings that bend beneath the rain. You walk on the sidewalk, though there's really no need to; there are no carriages rattling past, and no other pedestrians around.

Empty lots dot the spaces between buildings; some still have half-rotted scaffolding and other such evidence of forgotten construction work, but even more bear nothing except the sunken remains of cellars now grown over with crawling ivy and stringy brown moss.

Mud squelches beneath your boots as you step through one of the lots. A ways back from the street, there's a shop that you can reach via a sunken stone foot path. It's easier to walk alongside it, though; the stones have tilted and rearranged themselves over the years in the freezing and thawing of the ground. They stick up like spines as you pick your way to the front porch of the shop.

It used to be pink, but most of the building has faded so light that it's bone-white in places. It's only the shaded parts—the front shutters, the door—that remain peony-pink, and even there the paint is peeling from the swollen wood.

The large window to the right of the door still has glimmering letters arching above the painted image of a dressmaker's mannequin. *Madame Clothier's* is written in swirling gold. You try the handle of the door. At first you think it locked, but after a swift kick, the door groans open.

Stepping inside, you kick up a cloud of dust that makes your eyes water. The carpet beneath your feet is half thread and half dirt; floorboards creak as you tread carefully inside.

Moths flutter in the air, no doubt full from a feast of forgotten fabric and frocks. It's as if the owner had stepped out of

the store for a quick errand and had forgotten to return; clothing, now desiccated by the appetite of the moths, hangs on rusted bars around the perimeter of the store. Various mannequins are scattered on the floor. Some are upright, others lean haphazardly, and still others have collapsed onto the floor entirely. There's even the cashier's box atop the glass counter, which is coated with a layer of grime so thick that you're unsure if there's anything left behind inside. And in the back right of the shop, behind the counter, is a doorway leading to a staircase that spirals upwards.

You probably shouldn't be here—but the door was unlocked, and that's half of an invitation. Floorboards squeal with protest as you pace forward; you can hear what you only hope are mice in the rafters.

Pick up to two areas to investigate.

Investigate the case and register (Grit). (page 25)

Investigate the mannequins and shelves (Lore). (page 32)

Investigate the backdoor and backyard (Luck). (page 37)

Investigate the case and register.

The glass case is coated with a thick layer of grime, years of dirt and mold and pollen leaving a waxy residue that obscures the contents. Scrubbing at it seems pointless. Atop the case, its brass keys strung with cobwebs and desiccated bugs, is the old cash register. The black and white sliding numbers are stuck in the middle, as if they froze mid-transaction.

Should you decide to attempt to break the case and/or open the register, make a Grit check. All information at and below your Grit is available to you.

0-4 (page 26)

5-9 (page 27)

10-14 (page 28)

15+ (page 29)

0-4

You are unable to break the glass; all you manage to do is bruise your elbow when you try. It does, however, smudge away some of the dirt, and if you squint *juust* the right amount, you can see a few forlorn hairbows resting on deflated satin pillows.

The cash register isn't much better. Hitting each key does nothing except sting your fingertips, and no matter how much you pry at it, the drawer won't open. All you end up with are bruises and rust beneath your fingernails.

Leave the shop. (page 42)

Explore upstairs. (page 43)

5-9

In taking a closer look at the case, you notice that the glass is thicker than you initially expected, though it seems to thin out near the metal corners of the cabinet. Luckily, your boots were made for more than just walking, and with two stomps of the sole against the glass, it shatters. Glass sprays across the contents of the case, which you can now see.

Had you not shattered the glass, everything inside would have been perfectly preserved; as it is, though, nothing appears damaged, only covered with grimy glass shards. Trays are laid out with hair accessories—hairbows, tortoiseshell barrettes, pearl clips. Hairpins are arranged in crystal cups, pointed ends down, gemstone-studded backs glittering up at you.

Though it's tempting to also take your boot to the register, you decide that prying the drawer open with a hairpin is the next best course of action. The hairpin is slender enough to fit into the slit between the drawer and the rest of the register, but it bends beyond use instead of allowing you access.

Leave the shop. (page 42)

Explore upstairs. (page 43)

10-14

Though the glass of the case is thick, you note the tarnished brass of the corners and top. In following them, you find the door to access the case is not on the back or side, but rather on top, and though it takes a moment of working at the rusted lock and hinges, you're able to open up the case. Everything inside is preserved, the glass having sealed out the dust and insects. Baubles and hair accessories lay on velvet-lined trays, but what catches your eye is one of the larger items, still curled up around itself like a well-fed cat.

A veil with a thin, bejeweled comb glitters on a pillow. It's made of lace, and as you brush a hand over it, the softness of it surprises you. This is not like the lace in cities, where you can purchase it for tinpennies a yard. It's handmade, and clearly done with a great deal of care. The comb is silver, unattached to the veil, and the stones within it are set in a pattern of oranges and reds reminiscent of a sunset, or a crackling fire. The tag attached simply reads "Reserved."

Leave the shop. (page 42)

Explore upstairs. (page 43)

15+

Once you've propped open the case—no short feat given the rusting on the hinges and lock—you borrow some bobby pins and hatpins from their respective cups. It takes a few minutes, as you're not exactly trained in locksmithing, but with just the right amount of maneuvering and wriggling of the pins, you hear the *click* of the mechanism and the drawer springs open. Coins and even bills still sit in the trays, and there's another one dedicated to papers that seem to be a collection of receipts and checks. These are what you grab and begin to rifle through.

Most of them appear to be fairly simple orders—tailoring a blouse, ordering new pants, commissioning a new hat—but there are a handful of receipts that are far more interesting. They all seem to be from the same customer, an L. Nellae, and all indicate the spending of exorbitant amounts of money, the likes of which you've never even dreamed of seeing. Every single one of these ones is notated, in the same cursive as is on the tags in the shop, with the words "Athir's Wedding." Amidst them are detailed are yards of fabric, flower girl dresses, and the veil you saw in the case, all stamped with a red stamp proclaiming PAID IN FULL. One receipt is missing the stamp.

On closer inspection, you note all the trimmings on that receipt are for the makings of a wedding dress.

Pocket the receipts. (page 30)

Pocket the money. (page 31)

Pocket the receipts.

You sort the receipts out, tucking the checks back into the drawer and closing it with a firm shove from the heel of your hand. You glance at them one last time before folding them up and tucking them into a pocket.

An incomplete wedding, the pieces strewn about a forgotten shop. When you swallow, your throat is dry.

Leave the shop. (page 42)

Explore upstairs. (page 43)

Pocket the money.

You pocket the money from the cash register. Though there is no one left around to use it, guilt sticks to the back of your throat, bitter as stale-orange candy drops. Someone would have noticed, once, just as someone once endeavored towards a wedding that it seems never happened.

Leave the shop. (page 42)

Explore upstairs. (page 43)

Investigate the mannequins and shelves.

The mannequins, you realize, are wearing partial outfits; one has only pants, another a jacket, and one of the upright ones has a dress that seems to be half-finished. Pins are still stuck through the draped fabric and into the canvas of the mannequin.

The shelves lining the walls don't just hold hats. Stepping closer, you can see bolts of fabric, bobbins of lace and ribbon, and jars of buttons and other sewing addendums.

Make a Lore check. You receive all information from at and below your Lore stat.

0-4 (page 33)

5-9 (page 34)

10-14 (page 35)

15+ (page 36)

0-4

One of the jars of buttons catches your eye. Something sparkles within it. Stretching up on your tiptoes, you ease it off the shelf, disturbing the dirt that's accumulated and sending a stream of it into your eyes and lungs. It takes a moment of coughing and eye-rubbing with the clean side of your cloak to see again, and you unscrew the jar to see if anything will reveal itself.

You sift through the buttons, trying to search for the source of whatever had caught your attention. Your fingers scabble through the smooth tortoiseshell chips and pearl circles, but the mouth of the jar is too small for you to dig to the bottom. You twist the jar and it slips from your hands, shattering on the wooden floor and sending shards of glass and buttons skittering like beetles across the shop. Only glass and buttons. Nothing sparkles anymore.

Leave the shop. (page 42)

Explore upstairs. (page 43)

5-9

There are tags attached to the mannequins. You crouch to read one, pinned to a skirt covered in baby blue ruffles, and pick up the crumbling paper in your hands. A name is smudged across it, illegible now, along with a date from about twenty years prior. It could be the date ordered, or the date it was set to be completed, but either way the project is unfinished, frozen from some period of time after the tag was written.

It's one of the smaller mannequins, too, and is still adjusted to one of the smallest settings. The skirt has what seems to be a crinoline or petticoat beneath it, which would have fluffed it out like a powderpuff. You flip the tag over. "Flower girl" is scrawled in the same messy cursive.

Leave the shop. (page 42)

Explore upstairs. (page 43)

10-14

You survey all of the mannequins. There are about half a dozen, each with a different project—pants, jacket, dresses—and you notice that despite their varying sizes and states of completion, they’re all using similar fabrics. The gowns are in various shades of baby or powder blue chiffon and white lace, while the suits are a brown so dark it’s nearly black.

On the floor, half-hidden by one of the fallen mannequins, is a ring of fabric swatches that you tug free. It’s a loop of pale blues and deep browns, white lace, and an iridescent fabric that shimmers like a pearl. You realize it’s shifting colors as it lays in your hand, shimmering in layers of purple and green and blue over top of white. An enchanted piece of fabric like this is ludicrously expensive and indecently gaudy—only the wealthy reserved it for special occasions.

Looking at the scattered mannequins, you see that no piece uses this fabric. But given its expense, and the matching nature of the rest of the clothes, you would be right in concluding that it was intended for a wedding gown. Where, then, would that be?

Leave the shop. (page 42)
Explore upstairs. (page 43)

15+

After examining all the mannequins, you leave them on the floor and move towards the back of the shop. There's something like a pedestal, now coated in dust, that sits just feet away from a grimy full-length mirror. It's the sort of thing people would stand on if their dresses or pants needed to be hemmed.

You look up; there are the tracks and rusted gold rings of a curtain rod. You look down; the curtain itself lies in a semi-circular heap. Rings still cling to some of it, while other grommets are torn clean off, like someone had yanked the curtain down. Not far from that pile of fabric is a pile of clothes, all of the sort that contradict the rest of the finery in the shop. You crouch and pick it up gently, shaking out the grime. A cream blouse and brown skirt, both plain, yet made with the same careful stitching of all the other clothes. Boots of tough, worn leather—not unlike yours—lie kicked against the wall, like the wearer was in a hurry to take them off.

You sit back on your heels, take in the space once more. Scraps of dirty white fabric cling to the edge of the pedestal. Scissors are open on the floor, broken in two from the force of a fall. Someone had been trying something on, and they hadn't stayed around to see it finished.

Leave the shop. (page 42)

Explore upstairs. (page 43)

Investigate the backdoor and backyard.

You're not quite sure what you're looking for, or if there's even anything to find, but something makes you press forward into the shop. There are shelves lined with hats, ridiculous flowers and feathers sprouting from their bands. You think about trying one on—there's one with a cluster of peacock feathers that catches your eye—but you remind yourself that a family of spiders or mice might have seen that hat as a perfect place to live, and you decide not to risk it.

You look to the back door, just to the left of the register. A well-trampled doormat sits in front of it; lacey pink curtains cover the little window you suspect may look over a backyard.

To explore the backyard, make a Luck check.

0-4 (page 38)

5-9 (page 39)

10-14 (page 40)

15+ (page 41)

0-4

The door is unlocked, so you push it open and peer outside. Muddy crabgrass sprouts up in scraggly patches. A tiny doghouse, roof caved in, stares back at you from the edge of the yard.

Looming over the tumbled-down fence stretching along the back of the property are the trees of the Wylderwood. The boughs dip down as if they're reaching for something. Wind swirls the rain, pelting it against the side of the shop, sending it flinging into your eyes. There doesn't seem to be much else outside, so you close the door and return to the dryness of the shop.

Leave the shop. (page 42)

Explore upstairs. (page 43)

5-9

There are tiny paths through the crabgrass. Though time has passed and weeds have sprouted up across them, the remnants of steps traveled beat deeper than the shallow roots of the grasses living there now. It's easy to see the paths people once traveled; from the door to the doghouse; from the door to the outhouse you know is just over in the alleyway; from the door to the very back of the yard, all the way up to the fence. That's the path you decide to trod, loosely following the footsteps of those long gone.

Burrs cling at your cloak as you pass through. It seems children played here, once. There's the wooden frame of an abandoned sandbox now populated with the stems of wildflowers, and a few wooden blocks, too smooth to be natural, are littered around as you decide to examine the doghouse. It's still small, even up close, and a metal bowl filled with years of dirt and muddy water rusts in the mist. **ATHIR'S DOG** is written in childish scrawl above the door; below it is written the name "OTIE" in a neater version of the same handwriting.

Leave the shop. (page 42)

Explore upstairs. (page 43)

10-14

Farther out into the yard, where the weeds stretch up to your knees, you find a waterlogged teddy bear face-down in the mud. Its fur is bleached pink, but when you pick it up, its face and tummy are still a deep brown, now tinged with grime and bits of plant matter. A blue satin heart is stitched on its chest. Tied around its neck is a thick pink ribbon. It seems it would have been better used on hair rather than as a teddy bear's tie. Attached to the ribbon is a wedding band that still gleams gold in hazy gray air.

You stare at the peculiar object, wondering how a wedding band connects to a childhood toy. It was laying just off the path that leads to the fence, so you creep closer, chills that you tell yourself are from the cold crawling up your spine. You can see, now that you're closer, that the fence is not just tumbling down. It seems like something *split* the fence at one point, like giant hands wrenched apart the planks, or an axe of unimaginable size had cleaved it in two and left it to fall.

Leave the shop. (page 42)

Explore upstairs. (page 43)

15+

You reach the dilapidated fence. It's taller than you initially thought. If it wasn't broken, it would easily stretch above your head, but now it lies twisted beneath vegetation and rot.

Careful not to get splinters, you wrap your hands around the edges of the fence you *can* reach and peer over to the other side, over to the carpet of the Wylderwood. Two shoes lie scattered, as if they'd been kicked off. Two high heels, moss growing over them.

When you look up, all you can see are the trunks of the Wylderwood trees, dark and straight and crowded. There appears to be no path into it, and certainly no way back out of it. Yet, as you watch, it's as if the trees turn to taffy, stretching upwards and outwards, creating space—and a path—where before there was none. You see pale brown dirt winding into the forest, where it vanishes into yet-unmoving trees. Then you blink and the trees are still again. There is no path.

Leave the shop. (page 42)

Explore upstairs. (page 43)

Leave the shop.

You step through the new messes you've made in the shop, reminding yourself that if anyone still cared about this place, surely they wouldn't have left it like this for so long. Still, as you leave out the front door, you ensure it's closed as tightly as it was when you first arrived. It's the least you can do.

Mice scurry in the porch rafters, too, as you retreat back into the rain, leaving the forlorn, formerly pink building behind. The rain is cool on your face when you return to the main street, haphazard cobblestone semi-securely beneath your boots.

To explore Ofre's General Store, turn to page 13.

To explore the Mother of Sorrows chapel, turn to page 45.

To meet with the Council of Elders, turn to page 53.

Explore upstairs.

There are more noises upstairs. Though the spiral staircase creaks beneath your feet, it is the sound of scurrying animals and the slow *drip drip drip* of an unattended stream of water that catches your attention as you enter the living quarters of whoever used to live here.

You stand, then, in the living room of a tiny apartment. You can see the kitchen, and even the open doors to two bedrooms from where you stand, tracking mud over a rug that had been merely dusty beforehand. It's here that you realize that you don't even know any of their names. You don't know anything about anyone who ever lived here.

Creeping forward, the kitchen comes into view, as does the sink with half of the dishes still soaking in filmy brown water. It's above the sink that the ceiling is dripping. You leave the mess behind and approach the bedrooms.

The doors face one another, so you can see into both rooms as you stand in the dimly-lit hallway. The one to your right contains a large bed, made neatly with a dark quilt of uncountable fabric scraps. Nothing seems amiss; a hope chest sits at the foot of the bed, a vanity squats in front of the window, pairs of shoes line the far wall. Long-brown flowers crumble in a bedside vase.

The room to your left, though, looks as though a hurricane hit it. A twin bed is unmade, its blue quilt half on the floor, dirt clearly visible on the pale sheets. A few empty shelves are nailed to the walls, while their contents—books, trinkets, childhood toys—are strewn across the floor, many of them in shattered pieces or cracked halves. Starburst scorch marks light up the wallpaper and the scent of soot lingers even all these years later. The memory of the magic that caused them shimmers in thin waves of blue, which you can only see if you don't stare directly, yet the sorrow of the caster is still palpable in the still air. It tastes bitter beneath your tongue. You see, then, that the door

to the room is hanging on by only the bottommost hinge; it squeaks in protest as you step into the room.

A nightstand lies on its side, the drawer ripped out, bottles and papers dumped on the floor and hastily rifled through. Desiccated leaves are piled in the corners, as if a fall breeze had swept them inside. You might have thought this all to be the result a magical tantrum if you hadn't seen the shoes. The shoes that join the floor mess are closer to your size than to that of a child's. Every object in the room seems caught between childhood and adulthood, stuck in a liminal time that you're unsure if the occupant ever escaped.

You back out of the room, unsure if you even should have ventured up here. The sorrow does not leave you; it clings to your skin as you descend the steps, and it burrows itself in the space in the center of your chest where there is room for such things.

Lose 1 Heart stat.

Leave the shop. (page 42)

Mother of Sorrows Chapel

Closer to the Wylderwood, practically touching the grass growing beneath its shade, is a chapel painted with the customary black walls and red roof, indicating that worshippers of the Mother of Sorrows would frequent its pews.

As you walk up, you can't help but notice how beautiful the building is. It's as if time hasn't touched this place since the moment it was built. The black paint shines like obsidian, and even the bronze statues lined along the steps seem to glow from within as you reach the doors. It's not magic, you suspect—or at least, it's not *all* magic—but care that has preserved this place so well. The statues shimmer in faint streaks of red in the peripheries of your vision when you pass them by.

Inside is just as beautiful as it is simple. Dark pews line the main chapel, and a crimson runner leads up the aisle to the main atrium. There appears to be no one else inside; you wonder if anyone still worships here, or if it's maintained out of duty and tradition.

Candles and gas lights glimmer, washing the space in soft golden light. In the center of the atrium is a pool of crystal water, and in the center of the pool is the statue of Mar, Mother of Sorrows. She is carved from black marble, silver streaked through it like shooting stars. She stands with her arms spread wide as if for an embrace; in the center of her chest is the red stone of her heart, pierced through with three golden daggers. Water pours from her cavernous eyes like tears, flowing into and from the pool of water at her feet.

To her right and left are tiers of candles in multicolored glass holders. Most are dark, but a few flicker, sending stained glass shadows on the wooden risers they rest upon. You haven't been in one of these chapels in a while, not with all of your travels, but you know that each colored votive is intended for a different patron.

Black, of course, is for the Mother herself. Then there are the ones for the Daughters. There's yellow for Bria, the Burdened; purple for Grat, the Grieving; green for Liva, the Lost; blue for Vray, the Truthteller; and red for Wyrn, the Render. Their statues line the walls of the atrium, carved from pale gray stone, hands outstretched towards the Mother—or perhaps, also, towards any of the worshippers who may come into the chapel.

Light a candle. (page 47)

Explore the chapel further. (page 49)

Light a candle.

You're not sure if you believe, necessarily, but an offering to something larger than yourself would surely never hurt.

The matches are long, spindly, and you snap the first one as you attempt to strike it. The second one lights with no issue, the flame flickering beneath your breath as you choose your votive.

You don't know any of the prayers. You think it's enough, though, to simply ask for protection and guidance. That's what most of the prayers mean, anyways. Murmuring the words, the candle flame flickers and brightens in front of your eyes, smoke drifting up in wisps of gold and red. Warmth settles in your chest.

If you light a candle that is yellow, receive +1 to Luck.

If you light a candle that is purple, receive +1 to Heart.

If you light a candle that is green, receive +1 to Lore.

If you light a candle that is blue, receive +1 to Charm.

If you light a candle that is red, receive +1 to Grit.

If you light a candle that is black, receive +2 to a stat of your choosing

Leave the chapel. (page 48)

Explore the chapel further. (page 49)

Leave the chapel.

You incline your head to the statues of Mer and her daughters. Lighting the votives leaves you feeling no different than before, at least physically, but you can admit to yourself that the act of it is still calming. You may or may not believe in the power of these deities. It doesn't matter much here. Sometimes it's nice to put an aspect of yourself into the hands of another, whether or not you believe something will change because of it.

You bow once more to the statues, out of tradition more than anything, and leave silently out of the front door. The rain continues to pour with vengeance, and you pull up the hood of your cloak.

To explore Ofre's General Store, turn to page 13.

To explore the abandoned clothiers, turn to page 23.

To meet with the Council of Elders, turn to page 53.

Explore the chapel further.

Only the sound of the ever-running water from the statue fills the chapel. Even your boots make no sound on the tile or carpet, as if the whole place has been enchanted to stay quiet. And that's not a farfetched idea; many chapels or sanctuaries do the same, though it makes more sense in the large cities, with all their people and noise and interruptions. Here, where the loudest sounds are the summer thunderstorms passing through the countryside, it seems silly to waste magic on such a charm.

You walk back down the center, then turn up the right-side aisle. The walls are unadorned; the glass in the windows is warped, letting in slight amounts of gray light. On the windowsills are bits of folded paper, stuck into the plaster with metal pins. More intentions. The whole place is built on them.

As your slow walk brings you back up to the front of the chapel, you begin to hear something that is not water: a voice. Two of them, actually, and the closer you get to the dark doorway that presumably leads into the offices, the louder the voices get. They're not shouting—not yet, anyways—but it's clear that the two are arguing. Over what, you're unsure. You'd have to get closer to know.

Eavesdrop on the conversation. (page 50)

Leave the chapel. (page 52)

Eavesdrop on the conversation.

“It’s about hope, Eadlyn.” Their voice is lower, raspy, like scales sliding over stone. It’s clear they’re admonishing whoever Eadlyn is, though she retorts almost instantly.

“Is it? Because it feels an awful lot like lying. How much longer do we let them *hope*, Char? Until the mills come back? Until the Council gets their asses out of their seats and apologizes?”

You can feel the heat of her anger through the door. Your face glows warm, as if you’re staring into a bonfire. Black smoke seeps beneath the door, though you have no fear of fire—magic is emotionally reactive, yes, but it would always hurt the caster before anyone else. Most would stop before it ever got to even that point.

“We don’t *have* anything else. Just these travelers who spend a night in the tavern and vanish into the wood. At least here, in this place, we care about the people who walk through those doors. The Council would have fed everyone to the dyrewolves if it even gave them the barest chance at returning to how they once were. You know that.”

Their voice softens, and you hear footsteps. You instinctively back away from the door, pressing yourself into the nearest pew, but the door remains closed. Char speaks again.

“I know you’re tired. I’m tired, too.”

The heat dwindles, then dissipates entirely. The soft sounds of either laughter or sobbing—the two have always been so similar to you, though you would bet it’s the latter—spill out.

You creep out of the pew. You shouldn’t have listened. This has nothing to do with you. Nothing at all. All it does is fill your bones with dread and worry; you force your feet to walk to the door, try to keep your eyes on the red rug beneath your feet.

But you can’t help glancing one last time at the statue of Mer, turning towards her like a flower to the sun. For a moment,

her tears stop, and the chapel fills with a painful silence that digs into your ribs. Your breath chokes in your throat, and you stumble outside as she begins sobbing once more. You wonder if it's rain or tears of your own that you wipe away.

Lose 1 Charm stat.

To explore Ofire's General Store, turn to page 13.

To explore the abandoned clothiers, turn to page 23.

To meet with the Council of Elders, turn to page 53.

Leave the chapel.

It would be rude to listen to a conversation that has nothing to do with you. You back away from the doorway, letting the voices fade into the rushing of water. The sound of water fills your ears as you return to the entrance, and you glance over your shoulder at the statues one last time. Despite there being no sunshine, the atrium still glows as if the rain outside has stopped. It hasn't; you can hear it on the roof and on the steps outside. Still, you hold the image in your mind as you return to the pouring gray of the rain.

To explore Ofre's General Store, turn to page 13.

To explore the abandoned clothiers, turn to page 23.

To meet with the Council of Elders, turn to page 53.

The Council of Elders

Well, you've put it off long enough. The meeting with the Council can wait no longer, so you return to the street and search for the town hall.

It's easy to find, easier than you would have thought. It is the only building made of stone, a single-story structure with pewter-gray smooth rock for walls and a pale wood for the curved roof. The stone is from someplace else, you're sure—the only stones around here are nuisances in the soil—and it was the expensive sort that was usually reserved for city buildings. The wood, however, you're unsure about. It's not the russet of the trees you can see in the Wylderwood, and in wracking your brain, you can't come up with its origin. It's a beautiful building, yes, and one they'd clearly spared no expense in making.

You mount the steps. The doors are made of the same pale wood as the roof, and elaborate carvings grace the panels. They depict a forest, the Wylderwood if you were to guess, its intricate trunks and leaves nestled amidst the whorls of the wood.

They're silent as you swing them open into a foyer tiled in the same gray stone as the exterior, though it's hard to tell beneath the myriad of teal and violet rugs layered over the floor. It's cold in here, almost colder than outside, and the gas lights flare as the breeze sweeps in with you. The lights, and the small windows covered in gauzy green curtains, illuminate walls crowded with paintings and photographs, so many that you almost can't see the purple wallpaper beneath.

There are a few chairs pressed against the wall to your left. They're large pieces that would look more at home in a parlor than a municipal building, and are upholstered in a garish chartreuse velvet that was popular thirty years ago—if it was popular at all. On the wall in front of you is another set of double doors, done in wood so dark it's nearly black, with brass knobs that glitter as if they'd just been polished. You step towards them.

“Careful with that rainwater. They’ll be mad if you get it all over the rug.”

You turn at the sound of the voice. To your right, on a wooden bench that looks about as comfortable as a gravestone, sits a woman. The bench is the only thing that looks like it doesn’t belong in this opulent hodgepodge of a room, and likewise, neither does the woman. She wears a gray floor-length gown, and a sheer black veil covers her eyes, but her mouth is smiling. You can’t tell if with mirth or malice.

Before you can ask her why, or even which rug in particular you should be wary of, the doors to your left open outwards with an audible *creeeaaaak* that makes you wince. The woman merely sighs.

No one is on the other side of the door. Instead, you see a curved railing overlooking a room that has been carved out of the ground. It’s silent and even darker inside. You wonder if you should have brought your own lantern to this town.

“They won’t be happy that you’ve kept them waiting.”

The woman stands, stepping on several rugs as she walks to the doors leading outside. Her feet leave muddy footprints on the plush carpets, and she gives you another smile.

“But they can stand to wait. Mother knows we have.”

And with those words, she slips outside and into the rain.

There’s no such freedom for you. This is the reason for coming here; their letter requesting your presence burns in the pocket of your cloak. You’d made the choice before you’d made the carriage ride.

You look at your feet. Already, a watery mud puddle seeps into the violet rug you’re standing on. There’s no helping it, though; the path to the door is fully carpeted, so you trail filthy footprints behind you as you descend into the chamber.

†††

“Traveler. You’ve accepted the terms, yes?”

The chamber is freezing; it had taken you ten minutes of walking down the stone staircase to reach the bottom, where the Council sits in gilded seats raised on a curved dais, each of the nine members peering down at you like a particularly interesting bug they've pinned to a board. There is no seat for you so you stand, shivering, in the center of the circular room. The man who'd spoken does not break eye contact with you. He does not blink. You can't remember if his mouth moved while asking you the question.

You nod and produce their letter from the pocket of your cloak.

Each of the members lean forward, tilting their heads, eyes glittering with something you can't place—interest? surprise? malice?—before all leaning back with a collective sigh that echoes around the space. Of all the members, not a single one looks to be below sixty human years, and most appear to be above eighty; white hair is poorly hidden beneath dark wigs that have seen better days; velvet and fur clothes hang from them as if from tree limbs; paper-thin skin stretches across veiny hands that clutch at the arms of the chairs. You wonder if they ever leave this chamber. You wonder if they are human. You don't know the answer to either of those questions, but you know enough not to ask them.

“Payment can be collected upon completion of the task.”

Standard, though you know no one has ever collected it. No one has returned from this task. That's what drew you here; you love impossible things. You always have. And it was certainly impossible to turn away what seemed like such a simple task for so high a cost. Find out why people and industry left Northvern. They'd told you the answer was in the Wylderwood; they were sure of it. Except they couldn't find it. They needed someone like you to find it.

“Anything else is inconsequential, you understand. We are under no liability if you cause any tragic fate or meet one of your own.”

You notice it first in your eyes; they begin to smart, tears gathering like smoke is tearing at them. It’s as if a fire licks at your feet. You feel the warmth, then the burning. You can’t move your legs.

“Find the Heart of the Wylderwood.”

It’s the same voice. Chills travel up your arms and your throat burns. Different mouths move, but the voice remains the same. Invisible fire creeps up your waist.

“Return it to us.”

You nod. You gave them your word, and your name on the contract. Well. Not your *real* name; you’re smarter than that. Still, you will honor that word and contract, though the burning creeps ever higher. Some beings have strange rituals. You’re not privy to all of them.

“Help us save Northvern.”

The door you entered from swings open. Whatever held you lets go; the burning stops. You can move your legs and you do, nodding once to the Council as you back out the door. Your stomach aches. You don’t want to take your eyes off them. You don’t, not until the door shuts in front of your nose and you are faced with the stone steps leading upwards.

After one shaking breath that tastes like smoke, you begin the ascent.

Signing the contract requires you to lose a total of 5 stat points. These can be taken from any combination of your base stats.

Part II: The House at the End of the Lane

Discover what drove the wealthy away from Northvern

You spend the night at the only available place in Northvern—the Golden Wheel Inn and Tavern. It’s quiet your entire stay. There are no other guests, and the locals who linger in the bar with their mugs of ale and chipped wine glasses don’t ask questions. They hardly acknowledge you.

Over a breakfast of eggs and toast, you consult the crudely drawn map the Council had included with the paperwork. On paper, the path to the Heart of the Wylderwood is clear. You leave the town, travelling northeast until you cross the river, and then move due east. Clearly it wasn’t that simple if no one returns. You see the sketched trees, wonder what they might be hiding, and decide that their paper versions won’t answer that question.

There are other places marked on the map, too. There was a mill—the Blackbrooke—to the east, while just outside of town is a cluster of homes with the words “Iveagh Labyrinth” scrawled in jagged letters. Those would be the vacation homes that the wealthy towners built and abandoned.

You fold the map and tuck it away. If the Council wants to know why people left, it wouldn’t make sense to beeline for the center of the forest. That’s not where people fled; they returned to their cities. And they might have left behind reasons as to why. So, you’ll start at the Iveagh Labyrinth.

Shouldering your bag, you return your dishes to the empty bar and exit. You feel the eyes of the patrons on your back before the door closes behind you and you are alone in the street. It’s stopped raining, though only a few stray spots of blue shine through the soft gray-white of the clouds. You’re on foot from

here on out; no carriages or even rideable beasts willingly venture into the Wylderwood, no matter the price offered.

Still. It will be good to walk. You glance to your left, at the crumbling town you're about to leave behind. Then you turn to your right and walk into the cold shade of the Wylderwood.



The path leading to the Iveagh Labyrinth is paved in river stones of all colors and sizes—reds, blues, grays, and browns of the speckled and striped varieties are smooth beneath your feet. The forest around you is quiet. You're not deep inside of it at all; this path winds northward just within the trees, and between the wide trunks, you can see the scraggly farmland that has long since ceased at producing anything other than weeds and scrawny cattle. You've been walking for an hour, maybe more, maybe less. It's hard to estimate, and you don't want to fidget with the disappointment of checking your pocket watch.

On either side of the path, hedges begin to rise, moving from ankle-height to waist-height in a matter of a couple dozen feet. They're wild and untrimmed, evergreen branches spilling over the stones, and the farther you walk down the path, the higher they get, until the branches entangle themselves over your head. The pathway is twisted with the roots of the unkempt hedges; you alternate between ducking your head to look for trip hazards and looking upwards to avoid low-hanging branches.

Before it gets too dark beneath the hedges, you stumble out of the other side of the tunnel onto a wider road. Though still hemmed in by the overgrown hedges, you find yourself walking into the center of a crumbling cul-de-sac, hedges spilling into the street. Towering higher than the bushes and misshapen topiaries are mansions bleached gray and white from the sun. You pause. You hadn't thought they were this close to town, but the stone sign in the center of the cul-de-sac is engraved with *Iveagh Labyrinth* in letters that swirl so much you can hardly read them.

It seems that less than half the houses here have survived the years unscathed; many have twisted roofs caved in from snowstorms, or flaking plaster and brick walls with shattered windows that show straight through to more outdoors. A soft breeze brushes through the greenery, sweeping up crinkled brown leaves against the stone curbs. Iron gates enclose the driveways of the homes; you spin, slowly, looking at the rusted black bars, noting the chains and locks snagging them shut. Only one set of gates are open, and when you walk over to them, your feet crunching on the leaves and loose pebbles, you see that one is pushed back while the other lies on the inside lawn, twisted off its hinges.

You step into the driveway and face the house. It's in considerably better shape than the others. It still has a roof, for one. Three stories of white paint, carved columns, and filmy glass windows stare down at you. It could easily house all the occupants you met in Northvern with room to spare. Walking up to the front door, you see overgrown lawn stretching off to both sides, thorny rosebushes and unattended trellises sending thorns and vines crawling up the lower story. A dried-out fountain coated in moss and purple mold takes up the lawn to your right. It must have been beautiful in its heyday; flowers and fae creatures are carved into the stone, their details now lost to the overgrowth.

Maybe you shouldn't go where you aren't invited. That thought does cross your mind as you stare at a house finer than any one you've ever been inside. But you mount the steps anyways, peering around the porch, noting the swing that's been snapped off its chains.

The doors are smaller than you expected—which means that they're average height, actually—and they swing open with the slightest shove from your hands. It's silent inside. You expected no less. Light pours in through the windows, even past the dirt and the moth-eaten curtains. You're standing on slabs of golden-yellow stone. They stretch outwards into the foyer, vanishing

beneath the shadow of the curved double staircase leading up to a mezzanine you can't see.

At first you think it's the way the light hits this place, but as you venture ever-forward in tiny steps, realization takes root in your brain as your eyes process. The mezzanine and the hallway behind it are enshrouded in darkness because of the plants bursting from the hallway. You tilt your head back, mouth falling open, seeing how the vines have crawled from some indiscernible location to cling to the painted ceiling, emerald leaves and fuchsia flowers dripping in swaths so wide you can no longer make out whatever image was once up there. They choke out the upstairs windows, wrap themselves around the railing, drop down from the balcony, and you wonder how they got in here in the first place.

When you tear your eyes away, you notice the two doorways near you, nearly hidden in the shade. Small, light wooden doors lie on your right. They look as though they're meant to swing open and shut; neither has a knob. In front of you are the large, grand doors you'd been expecting at the house's entry; they stretch across the entire space beneath the stairs.

Stay on the ground floor. (page 61)
Hunt for the source of the vines. (page 64)

Stay on the ground floor.

With your shoulder, you push through the swinging doors and find yourself in the glowing warmth of a kitchen. There are no windows, but a fire burns in the metal stove squatting in the corner. Cut wood is stacked in the wood box. These things draw your attention immediately because, well, fire can't burn if left unattended for a few hours, much less for thirty-odd years. It's quiet in here except for the crackling of the fire and the *click* of your boots on the tile.

When you get over the surprise of seeing the fire, you see wide counters scrubbed clean, dishes laid out to dry on towels, and not a speck of grime on the floor. A pot bubbles atop the stove; you smell herbs, and as you get closer, you can see vegetables and pieces of stringy meat swirling in the broth. On the counter next to the stove is a cutting board with a loaf of bread that still steams. Three slices are cut already; the knife lies off to the side. Butter melts in a ceramic dish painted with wobbly flowers.

Your stomach growls. No matter how good it looks, it would be ill-advised to eat the food. You know this. There are beings—not just ones of the Wylderwood—who don't take kindly to breaking the rules of hospitality.

So you distract yourself, turning to search for other things. There are two other doors here; one seems to lead outside, to the backyard, while another is open to a dim hallway. There's not much else in the kitchen, anyways, so you make your way over to the hall, nudging the door open farther with your foot.

Lights burn on the walls, small balls of dandelion yellow energy flickering inside of glass lamps. They cast dancing shadows on the wall, your own shadow wavering wildly between far too small and far too large as you pass. You're not sure where you're going, though the lack of light and windows would seem to indicate a servant's passage of some sort.

A few small doors take up the walls, which are painted a soft baby blue that's streaky around the baseboards, like they hadn't had quite enough of the paint to finish. Maybe they'd used leftover materials from some other part of the house—though they certainly could have afforded the expense of another gallon or so of paint.

You bump open a few of the doors. None of them are locked, nor even closed all the way, and you can see that most of these are storerooms. There are barrels tucked into corners; shelves lined with jars and piles of folded, moldering linens; long-empty sacks that have given over their stores of grain and seed to the vermin that have come to call this place home. The floor beneath your feet is rough stone. This whole area is notably cooler than the rest of the house, though you wouldn't call the rest of the house warm. Despite the rotting food, the smell of which lingers even after you close the doors, it feels as though someone has been here, recently—a feeling only strengthened by the sight of the kitchen, which presses itself into your mind. Who would be here after all this time?

The question dies in your throat—not that you would have said it aloud—as you open another door. This room isn't a storeroom. There are four sets of bunk beds, lined up on opposite walls, two to each. Most of them are crookedly made with gray wool blankets and flat pillows. Three of the beds—two on bottom bunks, one on top—are unmade, strewn with colorful patchwork quilts and lumpy pillows. A massive rag rug takes up the center of the floor, stretching nearly to the edges of the walls, and a few toys are littered on the carpet. There's a stuffed bunny, floppy ears tied with yellow ribbons, who's sat holding a tea party with a porcelain doll in corduroy overalls and two figures made of bundles of twigs and ferns, with acorns for heads and painted white dots for eyes. Painted porcelain teacups are set in front of them, the sort that would normally be kept in a cabinet for special

occasions, and they're filled with a pinkish-purple liquid that you assume to be tea—it is a tea party, after all. The drinks still steam.

Like the other rooms down here, there are no windows. Against the far wall is a massive chest with its lid open; inside are a collection of more toys, though you can't make all of them out. You walk inside, glancing behind you. Your scalp prickles with unease, but you can't look away, can't move out of here, not now. Even in looking up, just to see if there are eyes in the ceiling, you see nothing. You didn't expect to.

Next to the toy chest is a rickety wooden rack, which is draped with clothes. They're nothing of note, really; dresses in rough-spun taupes and grays, trousers torn and patched at the knees, stockings with mended holes in the heels and toes. But they're all children's sizes. The largest wouldn't fit a child much older than thirteen. When you run a hand over them, they're still damp. The soft scent of soap and lavender hangs in the air, the cleanest thing you've smelled since being here. It makes your skin crawl.

You retreat from the room, tripping over a metal train left on the carpet in your haste. Some emotion wraps itself around your throat, and you blurt out an apology to the open air as you lurch back into the hallway. You don't know why. It just feels like the right thing to do. You don't mean any harm. This, too, you repeat out loud. If anything, it gives you an excuse to fill the cloying silence.

It's that silence that wraps itself around you as you retrace your steps to the foyer, but the discomfort of it stays no longer than the sun on the solstice. In the amber light of the foyer, heart pattering wildly in your chest, you hear something new—a single violin, sliding along the notes to an unfamiliar song.

Explore upstairs. (page 64)
Investigate the music. (page 74)

Hunt for the source of the vines.

You follow the trail of vines up the staircase, taking cautious steps into the upstairs hallway. It gets darker with every meter you travel. There are no windows in the hall—or, if there were, they’ve been choked out by the greenery that cocoons the space. Even the carpet beneath your feet has been replaced with moss and tiny white flowers that turn their faces towards you as you pass by.

There must be doorways up here, but you only catch glimpses of metal where knobs should be as you walk deeper into the house. Soft birdsongs twitter around your ears. Unseen animals scurry beyond the foliage; you imagine that they’ve taken over the place, that they’ve become the new occupants of the abandoned rooms. Nothing large could get in here, you reason, but the idea of coming across a bear or wolf or other beast of some formidable size does cross your mind. But you assuage yourself with the fact that you would have been found or attacked already if that were the case. Though you can’t call that thought comforting, the logic has an odd way of soothing you.

Using either Lore or Charm, you may attempt to find the source of the vines.

0-4 (page 65)

5-9 (page 67)

10+ (page 70)

0-4

Many, many leaves.

You push aside knot after knot of tangled vines, the stems pliant beneath your palms. It might have been helpful to have studied botany, or at least done a little more reading on the flora of the Wylderwood before you came here, but it's far too late to worry about such things now. The vines are thick and green; purple and white flowers the size of dinner plates have bloomed in some places, and the pollen makes your nose itch. Though it's strange to admit, you can't deny that there's some odd beauty in all of this.

Turning down another hallway—rather, down several hallways, all of which seem to tangle into one another like hairs in a comb—you reach some outer wall of the house. You know this because there are shards of light coming through the vines on one side of the corridor. The ceilings here are higher, practically vaulted, and the bare gray marble lays exposed beneath thinner trails of vines.

There are thorns, too, hidden between the leaves, and you scratch your wrists and the backs of your hands in fine lines as you dig for the windows. Half the thorns draw thin trails of blood; others simply mark white scores against your skin. Moths flutter out of the greenery; they're not malicious, but they're clearly upset that their homes are being disturbed. You pluck three particularly persnickety ones off the collar of your shirt and the shoulder of your cloak before you press your nose to the windows.

They look over the back garden of the house. There's a hexagonal courtyard, choked with weeds and lined with untrimmed rosebushes that spill onto the stone. Hedges that once hemmed in the far edge of the property have crawled their way across the lawn, tumbling branches reaching for the stone and plaster of the house. A massive tree rises in the center of the yard,

twisting branches half-covered in golden-yellow leaves. Tucked into its branches, made of rough boards and rusted corrugated metal, is a treehouse. The roof is long gone, but the walls remain, with dark holes where windows and a door would have been. It seems like the only thing in this place that wouldn't have been polished and trimmed in its heyday. Staring at it knots your stomach.

Beetles buzz in your ears; it's the only sound in the house besides your own breathing. There are dozens and dozens of them crawling around here, you realize. Some are the size of a pin's head, glittering in coppers and oranges; others are the size of your pinky finger, stretching shiny peony-pink wings in the weak beams of sunlight.

But there are no roots here. You must have picked the wrong direction—though you can't really be blamed, since there were so many turns to choose.

You peel yourself back from the window, determined to retrace your steps. It's difficult work. You begin wishing that you had thought to mark the walls with chalk, or to break off certain vines, in order to indicate the return path. Except you didn't, so it takes you three times as long to find your way back to the mezzanine, leaving you sweating and exhausted as you lean over the railing to stare at the empty foyer below. The hair on the back of your neck prickles as you hear it.

You hadn't heard it when you first entered, but it's clearer now, and you notice. It makes you pause, listening intently, to a melody played on a single violin.

Explore the ground floor. (page 61)

Investigate the music. (page 74)

5-9

Parents' bedroom

Hunting through the vines is tricky. The farther you move into the house and its maze of hallways, the denser the vegetation becomes. It crawls along the walls, over bulges you assume to be oil paintings and statues. Seems like the sort of thing that wealthy people would keep in their hallways. It creeps over the floor, reaching roots digging through once-plush carpet.

A single branch, larger than the rest, twists overhead. Smaller vines drip off it, reaching for holds amidst the other vines. It's clearly the oldest of the bunch, and you decide to follow it, tracing along it like a river on a map, weaving through hallways, squinting through the dim gray light. At some points, you lose it amidst the glossy greenery.

Slowly, though, you begin to see patches of brown and yellow appear. These vines are dead, or dying; you're not sure which, and you're unsure if it particularly matters. The shriveled carcasses of the leaves *crunch* beneath your heels as you walk. The leaves give way to pale and slender branches, bare of adornment. You can see the original striped wallpaper in this hall, can even see the sun through waxy windowpanes. Everything in this hallway is stripped of leaves, but they're still very much alive, you realize.

You find yourself in front of a set of double doors grown over with a patch of brambles. Shining chestnut-colored thorns jut out from lemony-green stems, weaving over and under and around the doorknobs. No one has been inside that room for a very, *very* long time.

Curiosity burns in your brain. Surely if there were secrets, they would be behind these doors that no one has touched—the doors that no one *can* touch.

Yet you move forward, wrapping a hand in your cloak, hopeful to avoid the sharpest of the thorns as you reach for the

doorknob. And then you double-step backwards because the briars shudder, creaking, retreating backwards from the knob. You whip your head around, but you are the only figure in the hallway. Not even a mirror reflects your form back to you as the hinges of the doors squeal, swinging inwards though you'd never touched them.

Mouth dry, you swallow anyways and step into the space.

It's a bedroom, and a spacious one at that. No plants grow in this room. It is cold despite the sunlight illuminating the pale wood and pale fabrics that blanket the place. The first thing that catches your attention, however, is that the bed is made. White sheets and a cream duvet, all neatly tucked in and straightened. Yes, thick dust lays upon anything, but a strong wind would leave this place still looking inhabited.

You move farther into the room, glancing behind you. The doors stay open. You don't get the feeling that they'll close, and surely if the briars could move the door, then they could have come for you at any moment. Since they hadn't, you decide to assume the best of their intentions. Doing anything else would make your stomach churn and head spin, anyways.

There's a trunk at the foot of the bed, it's lid open. Dresser drawers, too, are pulled out, some to the point that they're nearly off their hinges, while the wardrobe doors creak as you pass by them. Twin wardrobes squat on opposite sides of a white brick fireplace, and both are equally empty. You peek inside, pulling open the doors even more, but there's nothing but dust and dried-out beetle wings.

It's the same with the trunk, and the dressers. All are plucked dead-pheasant clean, while nothing else in the room seems to have been touched. But there was no great hurry to leave, no shattered glass or spilled objects. Everything of importance is gone. No clothing, no jewelry, no mementoes. Well, actually, as you step around the side of the bed, you realize that's not true.

On the far nightstand, the one on the side of the mostly-curtained balcony doors, you find a photo frame, facedown. You flip it over. Shattered glass skitters across the night stand. It's a family portrait. Two adults—a woman and a man—sit on opposite ends of a too-small couch. There are two children smushed between them and both are in frilly dresses and ringlet curls. You would place the older one around eleven; the other girl is no more than eight. Seated on the floor is an even younger child, perhaps four or five, whose starched white collar is nearly as big as he is. No one is smiling. The two girls hold each other's hands.

You can't help the anger that bubbles in your stomach. Why, of all things, would they leave this behind? At the least, photography had been incredibly expensive thirty years ago—not to mention it seemed to be the only item of personality in the whole room. You hold the frame in your hands, jagged bits of glass still clinging to the wood. A corner of the photograph peels up from the frame. You debate pulling the whole thing out, even pick at it with your fingernail, but end up setting it back down on the nightstand. The house itself shudders as you do so. You hope it's the wind, but you can't be sure.

Retracing your steps out of the room isn't difficult, nor is finding your way back to the mezzanine. But in walking away from the bedroom, you look over your shoulder. The brambles shudder back into place, creaking as they scour the doors beneath them. They curl tighter than you remember, knotting themselves up and sliding outwards from the baseboards to crawl over the floor. The sight makes your skin crawl, too, and you double your pace back to the foyer.

You lean against the railing, breathing purposefully slow in the quiet of the house. And you realize it's not silent; straining against the still air is the distant sound of a single violin.

Explore the ground floor. (page 61)

Investigate the music. (page 74)

10+

Nursery

Vines drip from every available surface as you push deeper into the house. It's amazing, really, how much of the place has become a terrarium. Beetles flicker through the twining leaves, and you can hear the soft skittering of small creatures—mice and squirrels, most likely. You watch where the ceiling meets the walls, where the molding is covered by moss and the thick, twisted vine that seems older than most—maybe all—of the other vegetation choking up this place. You decide to follow it, alternating between watching your step and watching where the vine winds to. It's difficult to keep track of it. There are moments where you lose it completely and you have to rely on instinct alone to carry you forward.

But it seems to pay off. You're not sure where in the house you are, at least not relative to compass points, but you find yourself standing in the midst of a block of rooms. There are two doors to your left and two to your right, each crisscrossed over with tangles of leaves and blackberry brambles. You step towards the closest door, the one on your left. Above it, through cracked plaster, the main branch swells. Somehow it was strong enough to smash through the walls. You don't want to know how, or why. Glistening berries hang in bunches, tauntingly plump and promising to be the sweetest thing you've ever tasted. Your mouth waters. You wrap your hand around a cluster, almost involuntarily, ready to pull the berries from the vine, before you stop.

You shouldn't eat anything here. There's no telling what rules this place abides by, and you're already pushing the limits of hospitality. Instead, you close your fingers and squeeze until the blackberries burst and the thorns dig into your skin. Violet juice dribbles through your fingers and down your wrist. It stings the new cuts, and you let the crushed berries fall to the floor, using

your cloak to wipe away the sticky trails now tracking across the back of your hand and up your forearm.

Using the same hand, you push aside the greenery, surprised at how easily it moves, and you're even more surprised—and perhaps scared—as it shudders and recoils back from the door, branches trembling in disjointed motion as they recede. Seeing them move, and hearing the creaking from the plants as they resettle into a new formation sends chills sliding down your arms. Could they always move?

You swallow over the dryness of your tongue and wrap a hand around the doorknob, pushing open the door. The musty scent of mildew clogs your nose and throat; you cough, choking on it for a moment. Through teary eyes, you peer into the space, stepping in farther. Water must have made its way in here; the floorboards are soft beneath your feet. You try to take small steps, to not move any more than you must. You'll be no help if you fall through the ceiling.

It's a playroom, maybe even a nursery, if the rotting crib tucked in the corner is any indication. Feathery blue-green algae blooms on the water-stained wallpaper, skulking along the crown molding and spilling onto the ceiling like mold growing over the lip of an unwashed tea mug. Trails of water weeds hang down in some facsimile of an upside-down fishbowl, though the only decorations you find are faded paintings on the wall that were definitely drawn by a child's hand. The lines are wobbly, unsure, but the colors would have been bold, once. There is a house, and stick figures lined up next to it. Their names and scribbled faces have been blotted out by the plant life and the peeling of the wallpaper. Despite this, you see there are five figures, two standing taller than the other three. Parents and children, you think.

The one large window in here has burst open, and the long, sinewy vine that you had followed here snakes across the ceiling and continues outside, through the broken glass and

wrought iron trim. This was where it began, then. You turn, slowly, trying to see what else is in the space with you. It's a messy room—and not just because of the decay. Strewn about the floor are toys: wooden blocks, floppy-eared stuffed rabbits, tiny paperback books, porcelain dolls in grimy frocks.

You take careful steps over to the window, trying to stay on the rotting carpet. Wrapping cautious hands over the sill, you peer outside, searching for something that will answer the question wriggling in the back of your throat.

All you see instead is the spiraling vine, twisting downwards and out, offshoots skulking across the outside of the house and through other windows, black-green leaves fluttering in a quiet breeze. You lose sight of it in the overgrown yard, but you can see the trees—and the saplings—of the Wylderwood. They're close. Which, of course, is no surprise. Iveagh Labyrinth has always been within the borders of the Wylderwood, even if it's just within those borders. And decades after it was built and abandoned, it seems the forest has only crept in closer. You wonder if it ever really left this space. You've seen enough to know it hasn't. It's not the answer to your question, but you think it's enough for the moment. You're not sure you can stand to be in here much longer, anyways.

At least you have the luxury of being able to leave when you wish. You tread careful steps to the door, the floor squealing and crumbling beneath you, and you shut the door—though there was no need to. The briars and vines creak and move faster than they had before, as if they've shaken off some sort of lethargy, and they bind the door shut. They weave themselves tight enough that there is no more wood or metal visible beneath them. Instead, you are staring at shuddering bunches of blackberries and burnished briars. So you back away, unsure if you should turn your back, and you keep your eyes on the doorway until after you've turned the corner out of their sight. And then you run, tripping down the hallways you'd just wandered through,

something like panic welling up in your chest. You're not sure why. They hadn't come after you. You suppose that they could have, and that thought does nothing to tamp down your anxiety as you skitter back out onto the mezzanine.

It's several minutes of trying to calm your breathing and refocus your mind before you hear the sound. And at first, you're convinced it's a trick, that it's merely your ears attempting to cover over the distress shuddering through your body. Try as you might to ignore it, though, you still hear the soft melody, played on a solo violin, of an unknown song.

Explore the ground floor. (page 61)

Investigate the music. (page 74)

Investigate the music.

At first you think it's your imagination.

You creep around the foyer, turning this way and that, trying to trace the music. As you step beneath the mezzanine, closer to the massive wooden doors, the music swells. There's another instrument now—a flute. With every step you take towards the door, the music grows louder and louder.

All it takes is a pull with both hands, and the doors open for you.

You don't want to step in, not once you see everything before you. You even step back, shock propelling the movement. But you don't get a choice in the matter. You're pushed in from behind, with what feels like far too many small hands on your back, your arms, your legs—yet when you spin to watch the doors slam in front of your face, the foyer is still empty.

The music swells, now played by a full band, and chattering and laughter fill your ears. You try not to vomit as you turn back into the ballroom. It is crowded with people. None of them look at you. None of them even seem to have noticed that the doors have opened and slammed shut again.

Though it's terror that binds itself around your ribs, you're still caught by the beauty of the place. The ceiling stretches up to the third story, arched segments painted in rose and lavender, molding wreathed in gold. Glittering chandeliers light the space, orbs of blue and white light bound in the place of candles. Petty magic, but useful. Stained-glass windows wrap around the upper walls, casting shards of colored light. They don't depict much of note, mostly floral motifs and garden scenes. Frivolous and utterly unnecessary in a room already as opulent as this.

The band plays in the corner, next to a small stage, all wearing dark suits, all facing away from the crowd. An odd custom, and an old-fashioned one. Hosts wanted music, yes, but

they didn't want them to be the focus. Once, that had been achieved by using curtains to shield the performers, but patrons had complained of muffled sounds. This—the reverse-facing—had been the next attempt, though it had well fallen out of fashion many years ago. But thinking of all this is merely a distraction, and you're pulled back into the party as a waiter passes in front of you, carrying a shining silver tray loaded with fizzing champagne flutes.

You move forward, trying to make eye contact, trying to interrupt a conversation, but the guests' eyes slide over you like you're made of glass. They're clustered in circles, wearing well-made suits and shining gowns and ludicrous cloaks. You realize, too, that you can't hear what they're saying. The noise had been so shocking at first you hadn't noticed. The words coming from their mouths are garbled, as if said through water or from the very far end of a tunnel. A word comes through now and again, but by themselves, they mean nothing.

You weave through the crowd like a ghost, passing in the spaces between guests, catching only stray words. It seems you're caught in a memory. Dread pools in your stomach, dripping down to your legs, slowing your pace. You're not sure you want your questions answered anymore.

The band finishes their piece, and a smattering of polite applause makes its way around the still-babbling audience. A woman in a bubblegum-pink dress steps up onto the stage, though stage is a generous name for the over-glorified platform. The dress itself is something of a relic; not a single piece of it would be considered fashionable today. There are the tight, sheer sleeves and the overabundance of ruffles on a slim skirt, and her matching heels click on the marble. The fabric itself is enchanted; you can tell by the way it shifts beneath the lights, sometimes more violet than pink. It looks uncomfortable, and the pink isn't quite the right color against her pale skin and shock of long, curled red hair, but she smiles and holds out her arms. It doesn't

seem to matter. Somehow it still works for her, as if merely by the power of suggestion. She must be the host, which would make her the matriarch of this house.

You expect her to make a speech, but she doesn't say anything as her eyes are drawn suddenly to the side of the ballroom—your right, her left. She barely catches the mask of her face. In the moment before she does, you register disgust.

“Mama! Mama, we've made it home!”

The crowd ripples. Running in from the side, hands held tight in each other's, is a trio of children, two girls and a boy. They track in mud, smearing it across the pristine white floor of the ballroom. People part in front of them. Any sound there had been dies off into a horrified silence.

It's the younger of the two girls who has spoken, her dirt-streaked face split with a smile.

Make a Luck check.

0-6 (page 77)

7+ (page 80)

0-6

Unlucky

You recognize it a second before the partygoers do, and anguish wells in your chest as screams are heard from crowd.

The little girl—the one who had spoken—has a tangle of snakes for hair. They’re coppery-red and striped with brown, and they whip around her head to take in the scene. The children stop, suddenly, yanked back by the grip the oldest girl has on their hands. She stares at the woman onstage and takes a single step forward, tugging the other two children behind her. She can’t be older than fourteen. Her own hair is twisted into a single braid and, despite the twigs woven into the strands and the mud coating the ends, you can see it’s the exact same shade of red as the woman she now stares down.

“What...what sort of trick is this?” The red-haired woman steps backwards, looking towards the crowd, doing everything she can to avoid staring at the children. “Who brought these *things* here?”

No one answers.

She raises her voice. “Answer me!”

You push through the tide of people, stumbling amidst a crowd where no one seems to know what to do. Some people are pushing for the exits, trying to leave as subtly as possible; others step closer to the stage, closer to the children staring at the woman in confusion and terror. These are the people who you join, one of many gawkers at some bizarre show none of you purchased tickets for.

“A trick?” The oldest girl glares, and if looks could set fires, the woman would be engulfed in flame. “Did you even notice we were missing, Mother?”

For a moment the silence swallows the space. A man in a black suit and bubblegum-pink tie steps up to the stage, glancing between the children and the woman. He holds out a hand to

her. You push even closer, right to the front edge of the crowd, mere feet away from the scene. Still, no one notices you.

“Come, Evangeline,” he mutters, his outstretched hand trembling. “We can discuss this elsewhere.”

Her eyes flicker to him. From behind gritted teeth, she hisses, “There’s nothing to discuss.”

To your right, you see the little boy trying to wriggle out of his older sister’s grip, but her hand is like iron on his wrist as she shakes her head. She’s shaking, tapping her foot, glancing between the man and the woman and the crowd and her siblings. You can practically see gears behind her eyes clicking as she calculates what, exactly, is happening.

“We have no children,” Evangeline snaps, and her voice lulls the crowd into a bubbling silence. She’s the only one still looking to the crowd, still looking to put up a façade that no one wants to contradict. “We have never had children.”

The man flinches, looking towards the children, looking back to his wife. Your heart twists against your ribs as you see the eldest register the words. If anything, her anger only grows, sharp and crackling in the very air around her. You want to step back, but something deeper than your discomfort roots you to the spot.

“That’s just fine,” the eldest says, though her voice nearly breaks at the end of the sentence. She settles her posture, standing up taller as she alternates glares between her mother and father. “We have no parents. We never have.”

The little boy doesn’t seem to understand. He looks towards his older sisters, eyes wide and completely milky-white. Black trails like tears track down his cheeks, though he’s not crying. But the other girl only stares in outright confusion, creeping closer to her sister even as her eyes watch the parents. The snakes on her head slither down her cheeks and neck, one stretching up to rest on her sister’s shoulder.

“Daphne, Mama and Papa are right there,” she offers, her voice barely a whisper.

Daphne—the eldest—shakes her head. Though she lets go of the younger children’s hands, she does not leave them. She wraps her arms over their shoulders, hugging them to her side. The nails on her fingers lengthen into talons; when she speaks, you see that rows of pearly razor-sharp teeth have replaced the human incisors and molars. She’s trembling, too, but her eyes are dry.

“It’s fine. We’ll survive quite well without you.”

She turns briefly towards the crowd, shepherding her siblings back the way they came, when her eyes find yours. Though her expression doesn’t change, there’s no mistaking that she can see you. She holds your gaze for a moment before ducking back through the crowd with her brother and sister. Bile crawls up your throat and you bite it back down, determined not to be sick. The crowd swallows them up and in the same moment the band is playing again, their music rising to a dizzying tempo and volume that crashes against your ears. You stagger beneath the sound of it all, pressing your hands first to your ears and then to your eyes, sinking to your knees, feeling the weight of the jabbering voices cocooning in around you like quicksand, your whole world becoming a swirl of sound and pink-blue light until silence cuts it off in a swift moment.

When you force open your eyes, the first thing you do is vomit over the grimy marble tiles you’re knelt on. You’re still in the ballroom, now dark and empty, the only light from the glimmers of stained-glass shadows. All you can do is hug your arms around yourself and cry.

Lose 1 Grit and 1 Luck.

Proceed to Part III. (page 84)

Lucky

Your stomach flips. Though you're insubstantial to the people in the room, moving against the current of partygoers is difficult. Even before the screams rise from the crowd, you know that they're coming. The younger of the two girls, the one who had spoken, has a mess of copperheads for hair, all of them whipping around to take in the sights and scents of the ballroom. No one here has ever seen anyone like that. The trio bobs in and out of your sight as the crowd shifts and moves.

Despite shoving and dodging—which should arguably be more effective, given that no one can see you—getting closer to the stage is impossible; the swell of moving partygoers bounces you first in one direction and then another, buoying you towards the side of the room, below the lower ceilings, where the picked-over buffet tables live. You can still see the woman onstage, her red hair a match for the eldest daughter. Words elude you, even as you manage to get closer; it's less crowded here on this side of the room. Many people of slipped out of the massive doors, while others seem to be trying very hard to not hear whatever family argument is going on between the children and their mother—and seemingly their father, as a man comes up the stage and gestures between the hostess and the children. When you finally catch sight of the children again, they've turned from the stage and are moving swiftly back the way they entered. The eldest daughter, eyes wildly angry, nails curled into talons, hugs her brother and sister around their shoulders as she ushers them away from the party, away from the crowd with the prying eyes, and away from the parents who don't even give them a second glance.

The band strikes up again, the tempo dizzyingly fast, and you decide to follow the muddy footprints of the children. They've slipped in and then back out of a side door, no doubt meant for the servants who haven't stopped moving throughout

the throngs of guests, and you sneak in after them, shutting the door behind you to muffle the sound of a party that continues as if nothing ever happened.

You don't have to go far to find them. Sobs catch your ears before you see the children, the eldest knelt in front of the younger two, all three of them tucked in an unobtrusive corner. The younger girl is crying, furiously wiping away tears. The little boy has started to cry, too, and now that you're closer, you can see that his eyes are milky-white, black streaked beneath his eyes like permanent tear tracks.

"Daphne, why did Mama say that?" The snakes on the younger girl's head brush against her cheeks, flickering tongues licking at the salt water. The eldest hesitates, her hands resting on her siblings' shoulders. She's so young; all of them are. You'd guess her to be fourteen, if that, with the younger two closer to nine and five. Your throat aches with words you can't say. This is only a memory. All you can do is watch.

"She's upset. Sometimes Mama is upset, and she says mean things. But she's not going to say them anymore, okay, Kele? I promise." Daphne smiles. You can see that her teeth aren't quite human; each one is sharp like a canine, and a second set glints behind the first in the low yellow light of the hall. "There's no need to cry, sweetie. No need to cry, Alastor. It's okay. We're all together, okay? We're all together."

She squeezes both of their shoulders, smiling even as she glances over her shoulder. You see her eyebrows knit together, the worry shining through in the moment that her siblings can't see her. The little boy snuffles, nodding, but neither of them stops crying. She turns back to them, her smile settled firmly in place.

"We'll have a sleepout in the treehouse tonight. Won't that be fun?"

Daphne stands, pulling both children into a hug. She squeezes her eyes shut, pressing her lips together as if to suppress a scream.

“You two go into the treehouse, okay? Kele, you help Alastor climb, and I’ll go sneak us some dinner from the kitchen. I’ll only be a minute, maybe two.”

Kele and Alastor nod. They take each other’s hands and walk off down the hallway towards a far door that you assume leads to the backyard. Daphne watches them go, hands clenched around her elbows, an encouraging smile on her face. But the second the door closes behind them, her face crumples like aluminum foil and she chokes back a scream as tears leak down her cheeks. All of her rage and sorrow ripple through the air, jolting through you like an electric shock, so thick you could choke on it. She leans against the wall, stifling her sobs. For a moment she stares into the space of the hallway before she turns away, standing up, rolling her shoulders. She moves towards where you stand and you don’t bother moving; out of habit, you’re not blocking the hallway, but you presume she’ll walk right by you like all the other party guests.

And she does, taking sure-footed steps past you on her march to the kitchen.

“They packed up that night. Left without even saying goodbye.”

She turns at the doorway to the kitchen, her eyes finding yours, now a still-living memory as panic claws through your chest. Daphne shrugs, her eyes wandering away from you, confusion fluttering over her face before she vanishes into the kitchen. She’s just a memory again.

The panic moves your legs before you recognize it, sprinting back through the doorway to the ballroom, now gray and utterly abandoned. You stagger over the cracked marble floors, ignoring the tug of stinging nettles and briars on your clothes as you bolt for the massive doors, shoving them open with such force that they slam into the staircase on either side, raining down dust and pebbles onto your head. The front doors are still open. You’d never closed them. Now you stagger outside, chest

tight, tears burning in your eyes. You collapse on the lawn first to your knees, then roll over on your back, staring at the twilight sky, shaking with sobs you're trying to choke down.

You'll need time for processing. That can come later; you'll have more solitude than you'll know what to do with as you wander towards the heart of Wylderwood. For now, it's enough to just stare at the sky and its slow-coming stars and sob.

Gain 1 Heart.

Proceed to Part III. (page 84)

Part III:

The Mill on the Banks of the Brook

Discover why the mills died and industry was abandoned.

You camp in the middle of the cul-de-sac for two nights. Maybe you should have left; it's hard sleeping beneath the ever-watching eyes of the cracked windows, and the sighing wind rustles the canvas you've set up as your roof. You spend half your time staring at the house you escaped. The other half is divided between sleeping and cooking the meager rations you've squirreled away in your bag. Mostly it's thin broth and jerky that could chip a tooth, but when you combine the two, your meals are almost bearable. There isn't anything else to do. Really, it's a waste of your time to stay in Iveagh Labyrinth, but the shock of whatever magic keeping the memories replaying in that house has seeped into your bones and veins. You couldn't have left immediately. You couldn't have run. So you linger, feeling the pain like phantom tremors in your fingers and feet.

On the morning of the third day, you sip a cup of bitter tea and watch the sun rise over the forest. You smooth the wrinkled map over your knee, alternatively tracing the paths, the trees, and the river with your finger, which doesn't help your understanding and only seems to smudge the ink and charcoal. There's the marking in the upper right of the map, northeast to where you are now. You remember what the Council said about finding the Heart of the Wylderwood. There isn't any path to the Heart marked on the map. There had been when you'd first looked, you were sure of it. The only paths you see now are the one you came from and the dual lines leading to Blackbrooke—one comes from Northvern, and the other leads out of Iveagh Labyrinth.

The most you know about Blackbrooke is that it's one of many now-derelict mills that squats along the banks of the

Fellingbrow River. It was one of the last ones to shut its doors, though they all closed around the same time. They'd poured out hundreds of bolts of fabric and thousands of buttons, all gathered and shipped off to faraway cities who didn't care where their materials came from, so long as they came at all.

You leave that afternoon, scattering the cold logs and ashes of your campfire across the brown grass of the cul-de-sac. The houses loom over you, seeming taller than when you came, and you feel the gaze of their windows on your back as you shoulder your bag, draw your cloak tighter, and begin your walk deeper into the Wylderwood.



It's quiet beneath the cover of the trees. The path you walk is overgrown, but it's surprisingly clear. It seems that it was never paved—there are no smooth stones out here—and scraggly brush creeps over the edges to cover up the reaching roots that have coiled beneath the packed dirt. You expect to hear birdsongs, but all you hear is the soft whistle of the wind throughout the curled leaves. There's less green this far into the Wylderwood; most of the trees have seemed to realize that autumn is upon them, and they're drawing all their sap inwards, leaving their leaves shriveled husks of themselves. You're surrounded by gray and brown, all lit in soft shadows as the sun begins to fall. Maybe it would have only taken an hour by carriage to get to Blackbrooke, but you guess that it will be well into night by the time you arrive.

Animals skitter beyond your line of sight. You remind yourself that everything sounds larger in the forest. You almost wish that you could see them; an animal, any animal at all, would offer you some company rather than the aching solitude of striding through a forest that no one understands. As the shadows lengthen and darken, turning from gray to midnight-blue, it's as if the woods wake up beneath the gloam. Bird cries unlike anything you've heard reverberate off the massive tree trunks. You hear

the brush of wings against withered leaves, and the forest only grows darker with each step you take. At least you were smart enough to steal a lantern from the Labyrinth; it was something of a lawn ornament, all rusty metal after sitting out through the seasons, but you'd cleaned it up and armed it with a magic sphere of your own. Magic isn't exactly your forte—it's best to leave such matters to the naturally inclined or the researchers—but you know a few simple evocations. You call up the energy now, warmth emanating from your palm as the lantern glows an icy blue.

Lantern gripped in one hand and dagger in the other, you trudge on through the darkening forest. Though you don't know this place, though you don't make a habit of visiting the wilderness, though everyone has seemed to tell you to beware what lies in the Wylderwood, you're surprised by how little fear is in your body. There is the small pit in your stomach, yes, but that is always there. It's the same amount of fear you have for the clockwork engines that run the trains back home. It is the fear of seeing something every day, of not understanding it, and of hoping that it won't go wrong in all the ways you worry it could.

You walk for hours. The light in your hand does not dim, and the sounds that you hear beyond the trees grow more frequent and varied, but never closer. When there is movement overhead you look up, but all you can see are the stars through the branches. If you had come during the summer, you wouldn't have seen the sky at all. Even now, the moonlight and flickering of the stars is hard to catch between the dark tendrils of branches woven overhead. Creaks and groans seep from the trees around you, and the bushes and brambles tug at your cloak and legs. You're still surprised that anything can grow amidst the massive trunks.

You do not stop to rest. There is a worry, however small, that if you sit down on the side of the path, the vines will reach out to swallow you up. Your calves burn and your heels ache, but you continue walking. The chill of the night soaks through your

cloak, through your clothes, through your skin. You shiver. Autumn will be over soon enough, and then winter will sweep through the province with a blind fury. Every year you hope to stay warm enough, and every year you come up shy. You tug your hood over your head and murmur a charm beneath your breath, repeating the words to the time of your steps, and your hands and face glow with a peachy-pink warmth. The lest you can do is prevent your fingers and nose from freezing.

†††

You reach Blackbrooke in the early morning hours. It will be many more hours until the sun rises, but the curve of the moon casts a sickly silver glow over the place. You do not look at the hulking building. It's colder now, far colder. Your breath puffs in front of your face in white clouds. The light of your hands and of your lantern have dimmed. Exhaustion grips your bones. You will think much better in the day time. You will be able to see Blackbrooke far better, too.

Turning your back to the mill, you wade just inside of the tree line to set up a camp for the night. The roots of the trees jut far above the dirt, so far that you are able to tie your canvas over their tops and spread your bedroll between them, forming a low room that you crawl into. You block the entrance with a fallen branch out of habit, and to help trap what little body heat you have. You sleep deeply for hours, and dream of yourself in a boat, floating beneath a starless sky down a long, dark river whose banks you cannot see.

†††

Frost crackles atop your bedroll as you awake to the soft light of a sun long past rising. It's warm beneath the covers. You relish it for a time, watching your breath form small clouds in front of your eyes before forcing yourself to crawl out of the makeshift cave. Your tongue tastes sour and you sip water from your canteen, rubbing your eyes. It's overcast but still bright, and

there is no rain as you step out from the cover of the trees to stare at the mill.

Blackbrooke squats on the edge of Fellingbrow River, its two massive waterwheels listing and rotting in the near-stagnant water. With the sun showing its pale face, you can see that dark vines choke the side of the building, burst windows filled with withering leaves. There is no door, not anymore, and beyond the doorway are the harsh outlines of wood railings and metal machinery that stretch up to the ceiling. Brown brick chimneys stretch to the sky, one of them cracked in half, the other missing a side. You see that the interior is scorched black. Blackbrooke is both larger and smaller than you expected.

You glance back to your makeshift camp; it's unobtrusive, relatively unnoticeable. It should be safe for a bit and besides, you're not going far, anyways. So you tread carefully up the shuddering wooden stairs and step inside, letting the cool shadows of the building cover you.

This entrance—the only entrance—spits you out onto the top floor of the mill, which is a wooden platform that rings the whole building. On the far side, you see a glass window and closed door, which you would assume to be the office. Below you are rows and rows of machines. You only really recognize the looms; you'd never realized that there were so many different machines housed in places like this. Looking at the mill, though, you can't help but feel like you've stepped into the wrong place. Mills are not made to be empty. Your throat aches and you don't know why.

You may choose to search any number of places. However, searching two places will cost one (1) emgot; searching three places will cost two (2) emgots; searching all four will cost three (3) emgots. These can be deducted from any combination of your stats.

Investigate with Heart. (page 90)

Investigate with Grit. (page 98)

Investigate with Lore. (page 105)

Investigate with Luck. (page 113)

The brook

You step back outside, gaze drawn to the two useless waterwheels. Fellingbrow River was an odd choice to build mills along, especially this spot. It's not particularly large, and you're not sure if something has changed since Blackbrooke was built, but the water itself moves at a slow crawl—if it's moving at all. It seems like too little water for one waterwheel, much less two. From where you stand, you're looking down on at the water, which looks less like water and more like a collection of algae. A small path winds downwards through scraggly weeds. You follow it, winding your way along the trail until you reach the banks of the river.

The banks slope heavily, bare roots and rocks exposed from the water's erosion. It's a more pleasant view from up top. Glossy black bugs the size of your fist skate atop algae, thick swaths of celadon scum rippling beneath their tracks. And next to the water, you can smell the rotting plant matter. Maybe this place was beautiful, once, but time has not been kind to it. You tilt your face up to the sun, trying to soak up a little warmth as the cool wind picks up across the water.

Using Heart, you may investigate the brook further.

0-4 (page 91)

5-9 (page 93)

10+ (page 95)

0-4

For a moment you watch the river. You can see straight across, and can see up and down it until it curves away in opposite directions. There are fewer trees here, though you would guess that has to do with the builders' interference and not with the natural growth of the Wylderwood. There isn't any wildlife beside the skating bugs. You hate how silent it is here, but you don't know what you would want to replace the silence.

The path splits from where you stand. There's farther downstream, and then upstream, which is where you originally came from. Wondering what sorts of things you might have missed in the darkness, you decide to turn upstream. You don't even remember crossing the river to get here; you can't remember if you would have needed to. Maybe not the main river, but perhaps a tributary. It's far more treacherous walking down here. The path crumbles, pieces sliding down into the river as you walk past. Reeds and roots stretch into the water. You wonder, briefly, where the roots come from, but there's only one explanation. The canopies of the Wylderwood's trees stretch far; their roots would stretch even farther.

The first one you see is small. You must pass half a dozen before they're tall enough to stick in your mind, and you finally take note of the small stone cairns settled on the side of the pathway closest to the forest. They're not the large ones, the graveyard sort, but the ones people would use to mark the trail. Anyone traveling this trail, though, wouldn't have needed them. The river was guide enough, and anyone moving through the forest would almost certainly come and go by way of the same roads that you walked her on.

You pause in front of one that stretches up to your knee. Its stones are smooth, round. Some are peppered with gray and brown specks. Others are swirled with white and rust. One is made up of other stones, polished smooth by water. You don't

touch them for fear of upsetting their balancing act, but you crouch to get a closer look.

You frown. There are dried flower petals caught between the rocks. There aren't any flowers growing by the river banks, much less any whose petals would last through the harshness of a Wylderwood winter. Besides, it seems like they're lodged beneath the stone by a slender bit of stem. Of course someone—or many someones—would have had to build the cairns, but placing flowers in them wasn't something you've ever heard about.

Glancing farther up the path, you see that this is the last cairn. You walk back towards Blackbrooke, counting the stacks of stones along the way, worry gnawing at the edge of your tongue. Nineteen. Nineteen cairns. The number tumbles over in your head as the taste of worry goes stale in your mouth.

Investigate with Grit. (page 98)
Investigate with Lore. (page 105)
Investigate with Luck. (page 113)
Leave the mill. (page 121)

5-9

Though it's marginally warmer out here than it was in the mill, you still draw your cloak tighter around your shoulders. It's been under two weeks since you first came to Northvern, yet it seems winter is already beginning to gather its bitter days for distribution. Wind ripples the top of the water, bringing the sour scent of rotting vegetation with it.

The pathway you're standing on follows along the river. You glance upstream and downstream, watching how the water and the path curve out of sight no matter which way you look. You decide to walk downstream, taking each step slowly as it narrows and winds back from the banks, towards the forest.

For now, you just walk through the dry grass and gravel. You're surprised at how worn the path is, even all these years later. You wonder if people still travel it, and then you wonder why they would even come. Maybe they come for the same reason you do, though you're growing more and more unsure that you've come here at the behest of the Council. That's what you've been telling yourself—to find the answers they're looking for, you need to look in every place possible. But it certainly feels like they wouldn't have wanted you out here.

You walk for a little while longer, the mill at your back, the river on your right, and the soft, cold wind brushing across your cheeks. The path begins to widen in front of you, and you find yourself walking alongside a low, rickety fence strung together with wire. You could step over it, easily, but you wait until there's a break in it large enough for a gate and you step inside, where the grass and weeds have been cleared away. Rising in the center of the clearing is a stone cairn of river rocks, smooth stone stacked in circles that come together to form a point. It's taller than you are; if you hadn't been focusing on the river and your feet on the path, you would surely have noticed it.

Flowers are tucked into the gaps of the stones. Many of them are long-dead, their desiccated leaves and petals scattered down the rocks and across the dirt, and more you can not see have been blown away by the wind. Some of the flowers, though, are still fresh. They're not of the sort any florist would sell. You step closer. There are bundles of wildflowers, bright goldenrod and soft clover and bunches of small, pink flowers whose name escapes your mind. One such bundle lays on the ground and you pick it up, seeing the twine and ribbon wound around the stems. Someone cared enough to bring these here. Your heart aches as you slot the bundle back into an empty space on the cairn.

You take a few steps back and glance around the clearing. To the side, propped against the lowest row of stones, is a long curve of pale gray rock, etched with flowers and engraved with a phrase that burns a hole into your chest.

For those lost and never found, and for those we
buried beneath stone and sorrow.

Staring for a moment, the wind winding around your neck and the soft calls of far-off birds in your ears, you first kneel, then sit on the dusty ground. You curl your knees to your chest and rest your chin atop them, digging your nails into your legs as a reminder that you are here, and you are present. And then you sit at the grave site, counting the stones until your eyes burn.

Investigate with Grit. (page 98)
Investigate with Lore. (page 105)
Investigate with Luck. (page 113)
Leave the mill. (page 121)

10+

The path continues onwards and so do you, pausing for a moment to stare at the riverbanks. You look at the waterwheels, see how they've peeled off from the building and now flounder in the water. The tops of them still stretch far above your head, even listing as they are. Fellingbrow must not be all that deep, though you're not looking to test that theory. It reeks of rotten leaves, sour and putrid enough to make you cough.

At the edge of the river, you have to decide if you'll follow the path upstream or downstream. You choose the downstream path, reasoning that anything thrown into the river would drift that way. You're not sure why that thought occurs to you, but it's the one that sticks in your mind as you pace down the packed dirt path.

It's quiet still; distant birdsongs drift through the breeze, which only picks up as you walk. Icy air tickles the back of your neck and curls around your cheeks. Winter is well on its way. You focus on your feet, watching for stray stones and hazardous roots, but there's only dead grass beat into the earth of the pathway. It winds back from the river, peeling off towards the forest, so that's where you walk. The grass grows higher here, brushing your waist and tickling the tips of your fingers. It nearly disguises the ramshackle wooden fence, but even the overgrowth can't disguise the cairn rising from the center of a small clearing. You peer up at the cairn; it stands taller than you, and only looms ever higher as you step through the gap in the fence and tiptoe closer to it.

Stones of all colors and sizes make up the cairn. Each one is smooth to the touch, warmed beneath the sun. Your fingertips brush a row at shoulder height, and you see, too, the bundles of flowers tucked in between the rocks. Most are brown and shriveled, their petals and leaves scattered by the same wind that's begun picking up. But a few are fresh, hardly wilted, and bound together with twine. Keeping one hand on the stone, you step

around the side, looking at the speckles of color and the flashes of mica, until your eyes land on the stone slab laid against one side. Crude flowers are cut into it, as are the words:

For those lost and never found, and for those we
buried beneath stone and sorrow.

Your heart burns against your ribs. You tear your eyes away from the monument, staring around the clearing again. There isn't anything else in the clearing besides you and the stones. Stick-like fence posts are strung together with bits of wire. You can see the opening where you came in, and then on the backside of the cairn, there is another opening in the fence. No path leads forth from it; grass bends beneath the breeze and you shiver.

You step through the second gap, crushing stalks beneath your boots. There is no clear path, so you let something else guide you. You walk on, weaving back towards the river, first running parallel to it as you leave the grassy field behind. As the ground beneath your feet turns to stone and sand, you find that the path now runs perpendicular to the river. You tilt backwards to give yourself leverage as the ground beneath your feet begins sloping, sharply, down to the riverbed. You can feel your heart thrumming in your throat as you hear running water, running much faster than what you saw back by the mill. When you look over your shoulder, you can see only the roof of Blackbrooke. You've gone farther than expected.

Fellingbrow comes into view again, narrower this time, and water bubbles over a series of small rapids. It's still not fast, but it doesn't take much water to sweep things away. You creep down to the very edge of the river, sliding down the bank, rocks and sand slipping with you. You slide ankle deep into the water, the chill of it ricocheting up your legs and spine. It's impossible to find anything to grab. Your hands scrabble through the dry dirt and the sun-bleached roots, and you slide farther into the river as

the rocks beneath your feet shift. You're wet up to your knees and shaking at the shock of the cold. The rushing water and the rushing blood in your ears blur together. Stones slide out beneath your heels and the water is up to your thighs. Panic clutches your throat and your pulse leaps until you manage to drag yourself back onto the shore, panting and cursing and dripping icy water. It would be easy for anything to be swept downstream. You roll on your back and take a deep, rattling breath that doesn't fill your lungs.

Investigate with Grit. (page 98)

Investigate with Lore. (page 105)

Investigate with Luck. (page 113)

Leave the mill. (page 121)

Machines

You step down the creaking stairs, careful not to hold the railing—the wood is splintering, and you value the use of your hands more than the assurance of balance. The machines are larger than you expected. They run in rows across the pockmarked wooden floor, towering above your head. Blackbrooke must have produced textiles; there are looms and spinning frames and vats crusted with dried-out dye. Unfinished projects hang on many machines, their snapped threads trailing the floor. Half-woven bolts of cloth are marred with moth holes and shredded at the corners. You begin walking down the aisles, trying to tease out the story from frozen machines and unraveling threads.

Using Grit, you may investigate the machines further.

0-4 (page 91)

5-9 (page 101)

10+ (page 103)

0-4

The machines rise like cage bars on either side of you as you pace down an aisle. You pause in front of one loom, running your hand over the warp threads. They're delicate, and some snap beneath your touch. You move on.

The broken windows allow the light to seep in, but you imagine that it would have been relatively dim if the glass were intact. When building the mills, they'd rather have sunk money into the machinery and their profits than invest in good windows. They would use the cheap glass, the kind that's so warped that you can't see anything from either side of it. Pieces of it lie shattered on the floors, having been shoved inside and over the top floor by the encroaching greenery.

Your steps slow, faltering as you reach the back of the factory. These machines are in considerably worse condition than the others. Rust clings to the gears, shedding in brown-orange flecks as you brush over the pieces. Then there is the other substance. It's dark, nearly black, and is splattered over the metal of the machines that seem to be in the worst shape. It could be oil, but you don't risk touching it to confirm your suspicion. These machines appear broken; gears and bars are scattered across the floor; the legs are bent and buckled, as if crushed or melted. The cloths have been ripped from their looms and a few stray strips adorn the floor, but you would have expected there to be more fabric.

Stepping farther, you feel a sudden warmth, your face glowing hot as if you've been sat in front of a fire. You're staring at the back brick wall, where scorch marks stretch towards the upper floor like thick spider legs, angled and emanating from a single point, as if an explosion had struck just above your eye level. There is no fire, and the warmth fades back to the stone-chill of the shadows. You're left shivering, stomach twisting as the

smell of singed hair flares in your nostrils. You flinch, checking yourself. You're fine. Of course you're fine.

Investigate with Heart. (page 90)

Investigate with Lore. (page 105)

Investigate with Luck. (page 113)

Leave the mill. (page 121)

5-9

It gets warmer the farther you walk into the factory, which makes little sense. The light certainly isn't doing anything for the place, and you doubt that they would have wasted money piping in heat for the workers. Floorboards creak beneath your feet and you look down, tearing your eyes from the machines, panic wrapping around your lungs at the thought of the wood giving out. It won't; the machines are still standing, aren't they?

But between the worn woodgrain, you notice the dark stains soaked into the floorboards. It could be machine oil. They would have needed copious amounts of it for some of these to keep the pieces from degrading. Something in your stomach flips and your steps falter. You try to reason with yourself, remind yourself that you know so little about how these machines run, but you can't convince yourself that it's only oil.

You keep walking. It's warmer still, only ratcheting up in temperature the closer you get to the back wall. Sweat slithers down your back. The machines here are twisted at their joints, buckled and melted and utterly unusable. Oddly, there are logs on the floor, the sort made from chopped up tree branches that have yet to be split. They're splintered, battered, like they'd been swung many times into something. You eye the broken machines.

Fabric, torn from its frames, lies in tattered strips on the floor, strewn about and crusted in dark burgundy stains that you can no longer deny is blood. You look up and your vision wavers like you're staring through hazy steam. The wall shimmers, black spiderwebbed scorch marks arcing out, reaching upwards towards the scorched underside of the upper level. Blackened and cracked wood makes up the supports. In some places it has given out entirely, and you can see through the floorboards right up to the roof.

Your eyes trace the scorching, following it along the wall, past the broken machines, over the intact yet badly burned

floorboards, all the way to the dye vats hulking in the corner. Twisted, misshapen metal is all that remains of some of them. Any dye that was left after fire seemingly tore through here is gummy umber sludge on the lips and sides of the vats. The smell of it makes you gag; you feel feverish and sick, staggering away from the corner with the cracked machines like crutches as you pull yourself up an aisle of machines. The air cools, leaving you shivering and swallowing down mouthful after mouthful of bile.

Investigate with Heart. (page 90)
Investigate with Lore. (page 105)
Investigate with Luck. (page 113)
Leave the mill. (page 121)

10+

All the machines closest to the front of the factory seem untouched, as if at any moment workers could file in after lunch to begin weaving again. You pace towards the back of the factory, ducking between the rows, running your hands over the machines, collecting dust and rust and splinters in your palms. You pluck them out and wince at the pinprick pain and the small dots of blood. There shouldn't be any wood on any of the machines, and glancing above you, you see no clear origin for them. The vines are the soft and pliant type, and they crawl over the inside of the roof, no wood in sight save for the upper floor. Except that's too polished to produce splinters, even all these years later.

You move closer and closer to the back wall, and you realize that these machines aren't like the others. They're warped, bent and broken and crumpled in places. Splintered logs lie discarded on the floor. You wonder if they'd been used to cause some of the damage. You can't linger on that thought, though, because a wave of scorching air sweeps over you. The warmth of it makes your face burn and your eyes smart. Sweat begins dripping down your back as the heat doesn't relent. You push forward, feeling your eyes begin to smart as if the air is filling with smoke.

But there is no smoke and there is no fire. Your body tells you otherwise.

It only gets warmer as you approach the back corner, where the dye vats are—were. They're still squatting in the corner, sticky with gummy remnants of the dye, but some of them have buckled at their riveted seams, or have crumpled along the curve of their edges. Something compels you to look inside, though your skin crawls for no discernable reason, your hands clammy and trembling as you stretch on your toes to see into them.

You blink into the vats with bleary eyes, watching as the sludge clinging to the sides momentarily become liquid, sliding to pool in the bottom where crumpled piles of fabric and bones lie, discarded and forgotten. Smoke smolders up from the remains, bringing with it a choking scent of rot that sends you reeling backwards, clutching at your throat and rubbing your eyes as you try—and fail—not to vomit. You press the heels of your hands into your eyes until stars flicker in the darkness of your vision, and when you peek again, the vats look as disgusting and sludgy as they were when you first looked. But there are no bodies. Doubled over, choking back bile and horror, you lurch back the way you came, each step slower than the one before it, tripping over your feet on the stairs as you pull yourself into the chill of the outside air. You're shaking.

Investigate with Heart. (page 90)

Investigate with Lore. (page 105)

Investigate with Luck. (page 113)

Leave the mill. (page 121)

The office.

You continue along the upper wooden platforms, careful to avoid the places where the wood has rotted or fallen to the floor below. The majority of it is in good condition despite the clear water damage from rain that has come through the broken windows. You make sure to walk slowly and to avoid the boards that have broken or simply the boards that seem to give just a little too much beneath your weight.

When you reach the office, you're surprised to see that the door is neatly shut and proven locked as you rattle the knob. Peering in through the grime-caked window, you can't make out much beyond hulking shapes that look vaguely like furniture. You glance around the quiet factory, more out of habit than anything else, and crouch down to fiddle with the lock. You try using the pins from your pocket, wiggling the lock until the tumblers *click* and the door creaks inwards.

Using Lore, you may investigate the office further.

0-4 (page 106)

5-9 (page 108)

10+ (page 110)

0-4

It's a surprisingly spacious office, and you notice immediately that the only reason it's dark is because there are massive gray curtains drawn across windows that stretch along the back wall, above a row of low bookshelves. When you open the curtains, light floods in and dust flies up, making you cough as it fills your nose and throat. The majority of the office is overtaken by a massive wooden desk, which seems far too large and far too ornate for a mere supervisor. It seems far too large and ornate for most anywhere, much less a factory.

The top of it is strewn with stacked papers, with some of the more haphazard stacks having slid to the floor some time ago. They form a new carpet over another, egregiously vermilion one that peeks through the scattered sheaves. The paper is almost preferable, in your opinion.

There are rows and rows of numbers and tiny text, and you pick up a few papers to glance over the information. At first you can't make heads or tails of the thing; it might as well be written in another language, and age has smeared the ink on the paper in some of the places. Well, wait. Paper rustles in your hands as you squint, bringing it closer to your eyes. The ink isn't smeared.

You thumb through a few more pages, seeing swaths of onyx ink blotting out the russet-colored typed letters and numbers. Different places, different amounts, but you clearly see two different kinds of ink. Someone redacted the documents on purpose. The non-redacted parts are useless, full of such generalizations that you're only sure that they're talking about profits and losses, a fact which is corroborated by the document headings. You hold the sheets up to the light of the window, hoping that will reveal some other secret, but instead you just look like a fool playing with paper. Your eyes ache from the strain and the light.

Investigate with Heart. (page 90)

Investigate with Grit. (page 98)

Investigate with Luck. (page 113)

Leave the mill. (page 121)

5-9

You tread inside carefully and open the curtains first, bringing in the weak sun and sending dust straight down your throat. Now you can see the low bookshelves beneath the window, the scattered papers and leatherbound ledgers on the floor, and the hulking desk that's far too large for this room.

You crouch to pick up one of the ledgers. You assume them to be ledgers, anyways. Seems like the sort of thing that would be in an office like this, and the bookshelves are crowded with identical looking books labelled with years that go back decades. Thumbing through the one in your hands, you see that you're right; the pages are crowded with transactions, money flowing out and in to the mill, and specifically to someplace called Witchweed. They'd gotten most of the money, it seems. You understand the numbers well enough to see that they made ridiculous profits while their workers made halfpennies.

Tucking the book beneath your arm, you continue pacing a small circle around the office, trying to avoid rustling up too much dust. It makes it difficult to breathe. You pull open the drawers of the desk, one by one. Some of them hold meager office supplies—fresh pen nibs, dried-up ink, clattering wax sticks and metal seals. In one of the top drawers, you find a stack of opened letters, all of which have been neatly re-folded and placed back in their envelopes. The desk chair creaks beneath you as you perch on the edge of it. You start at the bottom of the pile and begin reading.

They're typewritten, and all the papers have embossing across the top indicating that they come from Witchweed. That would make them the owners of Blackbrooke, then. Each one is addressed to a Mr. Selvern Melchoir. Most seem to be inconsequential correspondences, answering queries about shipments and requesting that production output be increased.

You fidget with the papers. All uninteresting, unimportant business missives.

As you skim the final letter, the discarded pile of others messily scooped together atop the desk, your eyes snag on a line. Air seeps out of your lungs and you can't seem to get it back, gulping in breath after breath that doesn't fill your chest.

If workers show further resistance, deadly force may be required, and should be used.

Investigate with Heart. (page 90)

Investigate with Grit. (page 98)

Investigate with Luck. (page 113)

Leave the mill. (page 121)

10+

Dust chokes the air as you step inside. You move around the shapes looming in the darkness, towards the faint outline of light on the far wall. Tugging the curtains open, more dust flies up, sending you into a coughing fit that doubles you over and brings tears to your eyes. It's difficult to breathe in here; beyond the dust, little air has gotten into this room. Its windows are still intact and firmly shut; there doesn't even appear to be a way to open them.

With the beams of pale-yellow sun shining in, you can see the furniture through the dancing dust motes. There are bookshelves crowded with brown cardboard boxes and rows upon rows of leatherbound ledgers, spines displaying years that go back decades. The most recent date is from seventeen years ago. A desk squats in the middle of the room, overtaking the space, and from beneath the papers that have slid to the floor, you see the hints of a hideously vermilion rug. The desk is piled with papers, too, but you don't waste your time with those. No one would keep anything of real importance out in the open.

You drop to your knees in front of the desk, coughing, ignoring the tightness in your chest. The drawers squeal on unoiled tracks as you pull them open, shoving aside unassuming ink jars and wax sticks. There's nothing personal in any of the drawers, nor even atop the desk. It's all just papers and records, with the name *Witchweed* embossed on every official document you come across. You've never heard the name, but they must be the ones who own *Blackbrooke* if the communications are any indications.

Even the stack of opened letters you find aren't all that helpful. They came from *Witchweed*, addressed to a *Mr. Selvern Melchoir*, but the only line that sticks out is from the top letter, dated the same year of the most recent ledger:

If workers show further resistance, deadly force may be required, and should be used.

Your breathing grows shallower, panic clawing at your lungs even as you try to ignore the reality that this business cared so little for its workers that it would rather kill them than listen. You don't want to think about that in this stuffy office, but you can't escape the thought as you peer under the desk, pressing trembling fingers along the wood paneling. Desks like these often held secrets. You just had to find the right—

There.

You dislodge the compartment, fingers tugging it out as they catch on three notched carved into the wood. Its contents slide out before you realize. Your head is spinning and you try to take a deep breath. You can't quite seem to catch your breath.

Shaking, you snatch the brown paper-wrapped bundle from the floor of the office. It's flat in order to slide into the secret space, but still large enough that the weight of it surprises you. You peel the paper off, sliding fingers underneath the wax keeping it sealed, and out slides multiple bands of crisp paper currency and once-crumpled letters. More money than you've ever had lies on the carpet and in your lap. You try to ignore it all and grab for the letters instead.

Revulsion convulses through you as you read. A payout. A payout for doing exactly what they'd given permission to do. The letter with Witchweed's embossing is unfolded, unmarred, and utterly nondescript as it describes a "bonus for services rendered."

It's the other letter, the crumpled one, that admits at least part of the truth. That's how you know what this is. The script is messy, blotted out in places, and ultimately unfinished. The letter was never sent. It's an apology of sorts, one that Mr. Selvern Melchoir waffles through, only admitting that the "abundance of casualties was so numerous, we couldn't hide them from the

survivors.” You read no true remorse in his words, but he’d clearly left the money. You’re not sure if he felt guilt over what happened—and you’re not quite sure what, exactly, that was—but you feel something that tastes like guilt choking in your throat. This room is too small, too warm, too choked with dust. You can’t breathe in here.

Pressing up to your feet, you turn to the window, trying to squeeze air into lungs that feel like they’re rapidly shrinking. Your fingers scrabble against the glass. Blood pounds in your head, building pressure in your ears. You were right, earlier; there isn’t any way to open it. There isn’t time to think, isn’t time to breathe, and you don’t even realize what you’re doing until it’s done and you’ve smashed out a pane of glass with your hand, not even caring enough to wrap it with your cloak. You smash one more, feeling the cool autumn air rush into the space as you take a truly deep breath. The rushing blood in your ears dims. You can breathe. You can breathe.

Paper rustles behind you. You stare outside, at the still river, and look at the blood now trickling down your knuckles and wrist. The pain of it doesn’t register, not yet, but it will certainly scar. You take a seat atop the bookshelf and begin picking out the glass shards, wincing at the physical pain in your hand and the phantom pain in your chest, aching for retribution that will never come.

Investigate with Heart. (page 90)

Investigate with Grit. (page 98)

Investigate with Luck. (page 113)

Leave the mill. (page 121)

The cellar

You step carefully down the splintered wooden stairs, double-checking each step before you put your full weight upon it. They're surprisingly sturdy, but you still distrust them. It's cooler down on the floor of the mill, but you imagine it would have been quite warm when it was working. The windows upstairs wouldn't have opened at all.

There isn't much besides the machines on the floor. You can't help feeling like you've stepped into someplace you shouldn't be; there's something deeply wrong about how utterly empty and silent this place is when it should be filled with people. You walk along the wall, eyeing the machines, until you come to a narrow door. When you try the handle and it's unlocked, you push it open. Icy air hits you as you stare at a set of stairs leading downwards. Singular globes of sputtering yellow light flicker along the sloping ceiling, a long-forgotten enchantment. A cellar.

Using Luck, you may investigate the cellar further.

0-4 (page 114)

5-9 (page 116)

10+ (page 118)

0-4

One hand carefully holding the railing, you take the steps down to the cellar slowly, careful to keep your eyes on your feet. The temperature keeps dropping, until you reach the packed dirt floor and are shivering in the dimly-lit space. It's not a large cellar, certainly not as large as the mill above it. Enchanted globes buzz in each corner, casting just enough sickly light to send distorted shadows skittering across the walls and floor. Small wooden barrels are stacked chest-high against one wall; the inked labels on the wood tell you that they're full of powdered dye. They're even marked on their lids with the corresponding color, but time hasn't been kind to the paint; everything looks like some different muddy shade of brown, only faintly tinged with its original violet or cobalt or crimson.

Your boots kick small rocks as you pace the cellar, searching for—well, you're not really sure. It's merely storage space down here. There are crates stacked beneath the stairs. You tease out their crumbling labels and see that they're supposedly full of machine parts. You feel no particular need to double-check that fact; the crates are still nailed shut, the rust a powdery orange against the dark wood.

Glancing down at the dirt floor, you see the tracks your boots have made in the dirt, and below them are drag marks from large items being moved. A single row of crates rest along the far wall. More machine parts, most likely. You glance to the ceiling and see only dim rafters strung with spiderwebs. Otherwise, it's all stone and dirt walls and the overwhelming smell of wet earth. A storage room, your eyes tell you. Nothing more, nothing less.

Yet your stomach aches as you mount the stairs again, casting one last look down, the sour taste of distrust on your tongue as you can't help but feel you're missing something.

Investigate with Heart. (page 90)

Investigate with Grit. (page 98)
Investigate with Lore. (page 105)
Leave the mill. (page 121)

5-9

Enchanted globes buzz in your ears like flies as you descend the stairs. You use one hand on the stone wall to anchor yourself; you're not sure you trust the splintery-looking railing. Shadows flicker against the walls, distorting the size of the stairs and the way the room looks as you take each stair with inching steps, gradually making your way to set foot on the solid packed-dirt floor.

It smells like wet, dark earth down here. It's cloying and heady, and you feel almost dizzy in the dim light as you peer around. The enchanted lights do little for the darkness; they almost make it worse with their flickering. Once-colorful barrels lay stacked on their sides along one wall; the paint that once distinguished them from one another has all run together in the moisture, leaving everything a muddy gray-brown. The stamped white labels on their sides identify them as dye powders.

You pace around the cellar, kicking small rocks into the darkened corners, and you notice that there are drag marks on the earthen floor—which wouldn't be unusual given the heavy nature of the barrels and crates stacked up here—except they're much smaller than you would expect. Tracing them with your eyes, you see them move from the bottom of the stairs and snake across the floor to the wall left of the barrels. A couple of crates rest along the wall, one high and four across. It doesn't seem like an economical use of the space; everything else is stacked at least chest-high, if not higher. An idea gnaws its way into your brain.

The crates aren't all that heavy as you drag them, one by one, away from the wall. You shove them against the other crates, the ones beneath the stairs, and then you're staring at a stone and dirt wall that looks very much like the other three stone and dirt walls. Placing your palms against it, the stone is cold and rough to the touch. You're not sure what you're looking for, exactly; you're only sure that there must be something else in this basement. It's

an odd sort of certainty that drives you, pressing your hands around the stones, running your fingertips over the packed dark earth. Dirt crumbles beneath your fingers and lodges under your nails. A small stone tumbles out of the wall and clatters on the floor with a tinny *clink* as it hits something that isn't dirt.

Dropping to your knees, you dig into the dirt of the floor, hands blackened with grime as you sweep aside enough earth to uncover a piece of metal. You try to pick it up, only to realize it's larger than you thought. It's part of something larger. Scooping handful after handful of dirt, you unearth a trapdoor, sweating, and with your nervousness beating in your throat.

It's rectangular, rusted along the edges and in patches on the top, with a small notch for a handle and a keyhole that's full of dirt. You stare for a moment, after a minute of near-silence, of buzzing lights and flickering shadows, you tug on the handle. You expect it to be locked, but it flies open beneath your grasp, the force of your yank ripping it from broken hinges.

A square of darkness yawns up at you. It's as if any light is simply absorbed into the shadow; all that you can see is the top rung of a rope ladder, secured to the side and vanishing below. The sickly-sweet stench of rot rises to overtake the smell of wet earth and your stomach twists as you shuffle backwards from the edge. You're not going down there. You want to vomit as you push to your feet and stumble backwards. There is no sound, no indication of movement, but still you watch the yawning opening as you bolt back up the stairs, gathering splinters in your palm from the railing while you take the steps two at a time. You slam the cellar door behind you and wish you could lock it.

Investigate with Heart. (page 90)

Investigate with Grit. (page 98)

Investigate with Lore. (page 105)

Leave the mill. (page 121)

10+

Half-rotten stairs squeal beneath your feet as you descend into the cellar, one hand on the wall to your right. It only grows colder, like winter has already seeped into the soil. The final stair snaps beneath your foot and you pitch forward, staggering onto the earthen floor, smashing your shoulder against the wall hard enough to knock the breath from your chest.

The lights here flicker wildly; you wonder who put them in place, and how much longer they'll last. Enchantments like this shouldn't have lasted this long, but you know that everything the Wylderwood touches never acts in the way you expect. Rubbing your shoulder, you take in the dimly-lit space, watching as the shadows flicker wildly across the walls and floor. The light almost makes it more difficult to see, but you're thankful for the odd company they provide.

Beneath the stairs are stacked crates, squeezed in together like bricks. You peek at the stamps, try to read the fuzzy ink, and manage to make out that they're filled with machine parts. There are more crates lined up along the wall farthest from the bottom of the stairs, though they're not stacked like these ones. It's just four crates shoved against the dirt portion of the wall.

On the wall opposite the stairs is a pyramid of barrels, stacked to the ceiling, with each one sporting a once-colorful lid now smeared a muddy gray by the moisture down here. You see that their labels are a bit clearer, and they identify the barrels by color names—violet, daffodil, indigo—which would make them dye powders. Some of the barrels still have cork-stopped spouts on them for portioning the powder into smaller vessels.

Your eyes drift to the single line of crates against the wall. It seems like a waste of space to do that, especially since they'd crowded so many beneath the stairs. Apprehension bubbles in your chest. You look up at the ceiling. Nothing but rafters strung with spiderwebs. You look down at the floor. There are your

footprints, and below them are several sets of drag marks. Following them back and forth with your eyes, you see them coming from the bottom of the stairs and moving all the way to the back wall where the crates are. The worry builds up to your throat.

Drag marks would make sense if they led to the heavy object in the basement. But they're too small to be from the crates, and none of them lead to the barrels. They all lead to the same crate.

It only takes a few moments for you to shove all of the crates away from the wall. They're surprisingly light; you wonder if they even have anything inside, but decide that looking inside would just be a distraction. The wall is nothing special, just dirt for the bottom half and stone for the upper, and a cursory run-over of it with your hands does nothing but trap dirt beneath your fingernails.

Your reaching hands also send a small stone falling out of the wall, and rather than hitting the dirt of the floor, a *clang* resonates through the space and you freeze, staring down at where it dropped. You cautiously tap it with your foot, then dig your toes into the dirt and swipe it to the side. A swath of metal appears from beneath the dirt.

You crouch down, digging into the floor, sending fists full of dirt flying. It's much looser than it should be, and it's not hard to uncover the rusted trapdoor. You stare at it for a moment, backing up as you realize you were practically on top of it. It has a small indented handle and a dirt-filled keyhole, yet as you grasp it and yank, you're shocked to find it unlocked. You pull the entire thing off its hinges and land on your ass as you gape at the square of darkness you've uncovered. You had thought this cellar was dark, but the humming globes don't even illuminate whatever lies beneath this room. There are hooks and the top rung of a ladder going down, and over it all is an awful, rotting stench that makes

you gag. You cover your nose and mouth and creep to the edge of the hole, peering down, trying to see into the shadow.

Even though it's an awful idea—and you know that before you decide, know that as you send down your own enchanted globe of blue light—you still wrap your hands around the rope ladder and lower yourself down, trying to hold your breath and breathe through the pulled-up collar of your top when that's not an option.

It's not a far trip, maybe six feet at most, and you step onto a floor that gives way to muck beneath your boots. This room is even smaller than the cellar you left behind. You would already be claustrophobic if it were empty, but you're not alone in the space. No, stacked against walls like cut firewood are cloth-wrapped forms in the shape of dressmaking mannequins—only you know that's not true. Your eyes burn with tears and you try not to vomit. You didn't need to come down here to confirm this—the scent was enough on its own—but something aches in your chest as you stare. Someone who cared had to witness this. You only hope that whoever did this died with guilt on their tongue.

You swallow, choking on the wretched air, and climb back up the ladder with sweating palms gripping the ropes. You leave the trapdoor open, leave everything in the disarray you created, and force yourself up the stairs with leaden legs. You track mud on the steps, across the floor of the factory, all the way upstairs until you find yourself in the doorway, breathing in fresh, cold air. Bracing against the doorframe, you don't realize that you're crying until you taste the salt on your tongue.

Investigate with Heart. (page 90)

Investigate with Grit. (page 98)

Investigate with Lore. (page 105)

Leave the mill. (page 121)

Leave the mill.

You leave the Fellingbrow and Blackbrooke behind, retreating into the edges of the forest. For just a little while, you crawl beneath the canvas roof you fastened above your bedroll and spend time curled on your side, eyes wide open. You're exhausted, yes, but even if it was nighttime, you wouldn't be able to sleep. For now, you just listen to the sound of your breathing and the creaking branches of the forest around you.

Maybe you shouldn't have come here. You certainly don't feel any better for it, though the information from Blackbrooke certainly colors why it was abandoned. Perhaps Blackbrooke is representative of the other mills, perhaps not, but you know that it certainly wasn't the Wylderwood's fault that so much tragedy occurred here. You roll onto your other side, hugging your arms around yourself as you curl your legs to your chest. Thinking about it makes your teeth ache.

When you can't stand the silence and the thinking any more, you make a fire at your camp, digging a firepit to protect the flickering flames from the wind making its way between the trees. There's more tea, packed in its little metal tin, and you find a mostly intact paper-wrapped package of crackers in a side pouch of your pack. You'd forgotten about them. They're a bit stale, but dunking them in the tea—well, calling the beverage you made “tea” is generous, but it makes you feel better—gives the crackers a bearable taste.

There isn't the luxury of time here, in your little bed between the roots. You'll stay the night, try to sleep, and set off as early as you can. You stare at Blackbrooke, lit in golden-red as the sun sinks. You can't find any part of it beautiful. It just looks like it's burning.

Gain 1 Grit and 1 Charm.

Continue to Part IV. (page 123)

Part IV: The Heart of the Forest

Discover how your story ends.

Today, you awake with the dawn. What wakes you is not the sun, nor the icy morning air seeping into your little camp, but the sound of birds bouncing about the trees and singing. You lay in the darkness, relishing the warmth of your bedroll. You don't want to get up. Everything from your toes to your fingers aches with fatigue, and even stretching does nothing except remind you that your head aches, too. After a few more moments of staring at the dark underside of the canvas, you crawl out into the clearing, wrapping your cloak tightly around you. Your breath puffs in frosty white clouds as you stretch, again. Again, it does little to help.

It's cold enough that the embers of your fire have died overnight, no doubt aided by the frost coating the tree trunks and the canvas, which you take the time to fold carefully and tuck away. Hopefully you'll have time to dry it later. You forego the warmth of a fire and a hot meal and instead unfold your map, gnawing on a strip of jerky. It's tough and horribly salty, but you don't feel like eating anything else. There is no path to the Heart of the Wylderwood. It's farther than anyplace else you've been so far, so your best guess is that it's a few days' walk, due north from Blackbrooke.

You fold the map up and tuck it away. It won't be much use. Instead, you shoulder your pack and settle your battered compass into your palm. Just because the path wasn't drawn doesn't mean there isn't one at all. If as many people as you suspect have gone hunting for the Heart, there will be signs and worn walkways from their boots. You do not turn back to look at Fellingbrow or Blackbrooke. You bury the cold remains of your

fire and move deeper into the woods, following the swaying red of the north-facing needle.

†††

The first day is uneventful. You walk north for hours, treading silently beneath the trees. It's lonely with no one to talk to, though in the overcast daylight, you can see the wildlife that's determinedly hid itself from you until now. At first it's just a stray songbird here and there, fluttering from one branch to another, but soon you begin to see the farro squirrels with their massive bottlebrush tails, or the waddling legs of porcupines as they shamble through the underbrush. None of them seem particularly interested in you, nor are they hostile in any way. Even the snakes you see, coppery green and as long as your forearm, slither out of the way, their scales scraping over dried leaves. The forest, however, only grows denser and darker the farther you walk.

When you decide to make camp, in the soft gray-lilac of the twilight glow, you have to clear away branches and press down ferns in order to cozy up between the roots of a tree even larger than the last one you slept under. You pitch your still-damp canvas, dig your firepit, and cook a small bowl of rice that you eat straight out of the pot. As night falls, shadows growing longer and longer until you're surrounded by darkness, you try to watch for the stars. All you can see are the leaf-laden branches silhouetted across the sky. You bank the ruby coals and crawl into your bedroll, snug against the bunched-up ferns and soft mulchy dirt.

†††

Your days follow the same pattern. You wake up in the early morning. Sometimes you make a hot breakfast. Most days you simply pack up and continue onwards, hiking through the massive trees until you grow hungry enough to pause for lunch, and then you continue walking. You find the tracks of large animals, larger than you've seen here, and you find the remains of campsites like yours, as their occupants were not as careful to

erase their trails. It's becoming easier to find your way through the trees. These ones are much larger than the ones you first encountered, back in Northvern. Those might as well be toothpicks compared to these. Camping between their roots is like camping in a shed; even standing, some of them reach as high as your shoulders.

Sometimes it rains, a light drizzle diffused through the curling leaves, and you spend those nights drying your clothes by whatever fire you can manage to make. Each day that passes grows colder; winter wants to make herself known, and you begin to see more and more fallen leaves, bunched into the roots or pushed into the underbrush. Each night you see more of the stars. You never knew there were so many, practically choking the velvet sky with pinpricks of diamond light, mapping out into constellations you don't know.

You've found pathways, here and there, just enough for you to know that someone else has walked where you walk. There are low stone walls, petering out and stretching to fence in nothing at all. In the streams that you cross or fill your canteen from, you find bits of water-smoothed pottery between the pebbles. People were here, once, beneath the branches of the Wylderwood. You pocket the porcelain without knowing why, something in your chest burning.



More than a week after you left Blackbrooke, you find it. You were worried about somehow missing the place, if it was a place at all, but this can't be anything other than the Heart of the Wylderwood. For a moment you just stare, resting against a root, your heart pounding in your throat and reverberating through your ears.

The dirt and rocks you've been treading on give way to soft, rich earth and a carpet of emerald moss. Though the trees grow no smaller, the roots here are different, weaving almost like massive vines in a vague circle. You duck between some, shimmy

through others, and then you can fully see what, exactly, the Heart of the Wylderwood is.

In the center of the ring of roots, there is a tree. You had thought the trees of the Wylderwood could grow no larger. You were wrong. This tree bursts through the canopy; you can not see the top of it, nor can you see around it. It is not of the same dark, burnished wood of the rest of the trees, either. No, this tree is honey-gold, and though you're too far away to touch it, the wood looks impossibly smooth.

It's utterly silent in the grove; there are no birdsongs or skittering of small animals, no burbling water, not even wind to rustle the dried leaves. The only thing you hear is your own breathing and your own heart.

What is your lowest stat?

In case of a tie, read all applicable parts.

Heart. (page 127)

Grit. (page 130)

Lore. (page 133)

Charm. (page 136)

Luck. (page 139)

Heart.

You take cautious steps up to the tree. It's not fear, exactly, that wrangles its way into your bones, but you find your eyes darting around the clearing. But it's silent still and nothing stops you from walking right up to the trunk.

When you run your fingertips over it, it is warm to the touch and trembles ever so slightly beneath you, almost as if it's breathing. You trace the whorls of the bark, running your fingertips over them and trying to commit to memory what it looks like. You're not sure what, exactly, compels you, but you press first one, then both hands to the trunk, palms flat, fingers splayed as if to grab hold of something. But there's nothing to grab.

Without lifting a hand from the tree, you begin a slow walk around it, fingers running over the roots and the dripping vines entangled there. Some of the branches droop low enough that you have to duck and wriggle your way through the tangles of root and branch. You look towards the trunk again, and worry churns in your stomach. You try to convince yourself it's just a trick of the light, but as you continue moving around, towards the other side of the trunk, you know that it is not.

Stretching for dozens of feet is a fissure in the trunk. It's not unlike a scar. You can see all the way into the very center of the tree. The heart of it is a pale, nearly white wood. Something about that color pricks at your temples, but you can't think of anything else except how much force it would have taken to rip this tree apart. So much of the tree is gone that a full stagecoach and six-horse team could fit inside with no issue and with more than enough room left to spare. In front of the scar, a long-dead branch lies on the ground, its wood rotting and moss-eaten, small pink mushrooms bubbling across its surface. Craning your neck, you can see the round, scarred rings where it must have been cut from.

A sudden urgency propels you forward. There must be more to see. You climb over the branch, up the roots, scrambling for the scar. Your feet slip against the smooth wood, but you grit your teeth and push upwards, reaching for the very bottom of the scar, hauling yourself up to kneel just inside of it. The edges are jagged and scored with the crisscrossed notches of mislaid ax strikes. Splinters dig into your palms and knees as you readjust, standing cautiously. It's eerily warm, and the sticky-sweet smell of sap fills your nose.

You step farther inside, careful hands on the sticky and splintered wood walls. You can see the waves of the rings like sandstone, and you know that you're surrounded by hundreds, if not thousands, of years of this tree. You slip down the cut as cautiously as you can. The deepest part cuts into the very core of the tree, where the wood moves from being bone-white to a crimson so dark it is nearly black. You reach for it without thinking, only to choke back a cry as you see your hands. They're sticky with wine-colored sap, staining the skin beneath the same color. Splinters dig into your palms and beneath your nails, painful now that you witness them, and small drops of blood mingle with the sap.

You look back to the center of the tree. There is only more wood, more oozing sap, and when your breath quiets again, you realize that you can hear the sap moving through the tree itself. It thrums with a quiet intensity, reverberating through your bones as you sink to your knees.

You remember the roof and the doors of the Council's chambers. Disgust fills your throat and mouth and you want to spit out the vile taste, but can't. You can't move, can hardly breathe. Anger rises to replace your disgust, pumping through your blood in hot waves, until that, too, tempers back down and all you feel is sorrow.

There's nothing here that would save Northvern. There's nothing here that should have been taken by them. That's the

thought that fills your mind as you curl into yourself, chest tight
and hollow beneath your despair.

Make a choice.

Return to Northvern. (page 140)

Continue into the Wylderwood. (page 143)

Grit.

You crane your neck to stare at the canopy. The sky beyond it is gray; with a shock, you realize you don't know the last time you saw the blue of a clear sky. All the days that weren't filled with rain were still covered in clouds. The branches of the surrounding trees interlock with the tree in the center, and many of them are low enough that, if you were to climb to the tops of some of the roots, you could reach them. It would certainly be a better view of the grove.

Your arms shake as you haul yourself up through the closest roots, the twists and bends acting like footholds. You tell yourself it's simply exhaustion and push through your aching muscles. There aren't many leaves left on the trees now, so it's easy to plan a climbing route. You don't quite know where you're going, nor what, exactly, you're looking for, but you keep climbing. Up here, the wind pushes against your face, raw and cold. Your breath rattles in your chest. Even in the moments where you pause, your heart patters against your ribs and your fingers tremble.

You're right, though. You do have a better view of the grove from up here. You can see how the roots and moss spiral, creating fractal patterns through the bare branches. There are spots of color, pinks and lavenders and citrines, though you don't remember seeing any flowers. You stretch to the next branch, moving higher, tugging your body closer to the trunk. The branches scrape your shins and forearms, but you ignore it. You have to keep climbing. You have to get higher. There must be something up here.

It's another few minutes before you pause, panting, your arms shaking. Every inch of you feels taut, like a thread about to snap. The branches up here are thinner, though you're not even high enough in the tree to consider it properly climbed. They're beginning to grow farther apart, harder for you to stretch towards.

You glance down again and regret it, your stomach crawling into your throat. You're so high up. Too high up.

You stare down at the far-away ground, your vision spinning as your breaths grow shallower. You don't know how to get down. You press your back to the trunk, gripping the branches until you feel sharp bark digging into your palms. Slowly, so slowly that you almost don't know that you're moving, you sit on the branch, feeling it sway beneath your weight.

Panic wells up to replace adrenaline. You look around the bare branches, searching for something, anything. Only smooth wood and the stray crumpled leaves stares back at you.

You peer down through the branches, trying to remember how you got up here, but it's just a blur of limbs and branches in your recent memory. You weren't thinking, simply acting. You inch to the edge of the branch you're sat on, clutching so tightly to your handholds that they cut into your palms. The pain is secondary to the sensation of blood trickling from your palm. You wipe it against your side, wincing.

There is no route to follow back. You have to start descending. You shimmy along on your stomach, sending your feet to touch the next branch, death-gripping your current branch until you can transfer your hold one hand at a time. Exhaustion fills every pore of your body and you try to push it away, tears burning on your cheeks. You don't have time for this. Staying stuck in the tree is not an option. So you continue, biting back the pain in your shoulders and ignoring the pain of your bones pressing into the branches while you wriggle downwards.

It feels like years before your feet touch the ground again. Your legs give out immediately beneath you, and you stare back up at the branches, shaking, trying to hold your body together. Dots of crimson—the blood from your palm—trace your downward path.

You squeeze your eyes shut and pull in a shuddering breath. The moss is soft on your back, the roots hard beneath

your head. You won't be moving from this position for a long while.

Make a choice.

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Continue into the Wylderwood. (page 143)

Lore.

You press forward into the clearing, running your fingers over the trailing roots. The smaller ones shudder slightly under your touch. Immediately in front of you rises two massive roots, with a bed of white-flowering moss snuggled in between them. There's something here, you're sure of it, but the moss looks utterly untouched. You walk around the tree, veering towards the right side. The moss is patchier over here; if it weren't for the abundance of branches overhead, you might have guessed it was due to direct sunlight.

Where there is no moss, sable dirt pokes through, dotted with spindly wildflowers stretching towards the hidden sun. You frown, stepping closer to the patches of dirt, which are in themselves much closer to the outer edge of the grove than they are to the trunk of the tree. The dirt is scattered over the moss, as if it has been disturbed at some point.

You crouch, your knees leaving deep impressions in the moss as you brush your fingers over the dirt. It's cold and damp beneath your touch, and oddly soft. There are no rocks hiding in the soil. You clutch a handful, letting it crumble through your fingers, scattering it across your lap and the moss.

The scent of it surprises you—mainly because there is no scent. You can smell the salt of sweat on your palms, but the earth merely smells like every other breath. Reaching with both hands, you scoop another handful, larger this time, and uproot one of the wildflowers with it. Its roots stretch, white and skeletal, through the dirt. But part of the roots, too, are balled around a clump of dirt. You shake it gently, pressing with your finger, but instead find something hard and sharp. The rest of the dirt runs from your hands as you examine the flower, teasing the roots apart until whatever is inside slips out, nearly falling to the ground. You snatch it out of the air, feeling the sharp pain of it cutting into your palm.

When you open your palm, you're staring at a piece of shining green glass, dotted on one side, and with the sharpest edge of it tinged with the blood now dripping from your hand.

You stare down at it for a moment before you set it on the moss beside you. It reminds you of something, but that thought it pushed to the back of your mind as you yank up another wildflower. You hadn't made an entirely conscious choice to; the impulse to see if another was hiding a secret was too great to ignore. And you're right. Tangled within the roots of this one is a tiny porcelain heart, painted with black swirls. You lay it next to the glass shard and plunge both of your hands into the dirt, clawing at it and scattering it in great handfuls. It spills over your lap and makes its way down your sleeves. You unearth the wildflowers, tearing their treasures from their roots, ignoring the grit building up beneath your nails and caking across your still-bleeding palm.

Broken gold links from a chain; a tiny shell painted with a seascape; glass shards of violet and lemon hues; a cloth doll with a stitched-on smile. You add to your pile of treasures, digging deeper into the dirt, scooping around the tangles of roots. None of these belong out here.

You sit back on your heels, looking at everything you've unearthed. Someone would have brought them here. Guilt pricks the back of your throat. People bury things because they don't want them to be found. All of these things are worth next to nothing for you; the glass doesn't make up anything, you've outgrown dolls and children's toys, and you hardly have room for the essentials in your pack, much less frivolities or broken pieces.

But they're not for you. That much is clear, and you feel a wash of shame flush your cheeks. They were supposed to be buried. Your head begins to ache, pulsing pain behind your eyes as you tuck everything back between the roots. You cup the dirt in your hands and sprinkle it over, smoothing over each layer with careful, trembling hands.

There is nothing for you to offer. You lay the uprooted flowers atop the newly-buried pit like a sorry funeral offering. You sit in your humiliation, studying your fingers and the black dirt caked around your nails.

Make a choice.

Return to Northvern. (page 140)

Continue into the Wylderwood. (page 143)

Charm.

You take hesitant steps farther into the grove, turning and taking in as much of it as you can. The tree draws your immediate attention, though after a moment of watching it, your gaze wanders to the surrounding trees. None of the flora here looks familiar—and by that, you mean that it doesn't look like it belongs to the rest of the Wylderwood. The Wylderwood you traveled through was shadowy, all dark bark and dying leaves. The only consistent color you had seen was the rose and vermillion of the sunsets and the pale yellow of the sunrises. Everything else was overcast gray shadow.

There are the massive trees that make up the rest of the Wylderwood. These encircle the place, their roots like tangled walls. But there are smaller trees, too, more like trees you see in the city parks back home.

They dot the clearing, rising up through the moss. They're small and slender, bright gold leaves curled up against the shiny scarlet of a fruit you don't recognize. You reach up and pluck one, turning it over in your palm. White speckles the surface and you dig your thumbs into the top of the fruit, splitting it open in a single motion as you continue your walk around the outer ring of the grove.

The fruit on the inside is deep ochre, its flesh stringy and firm as you press your fingers into it. You know better than to eat something like this, but your stomach growls anyway. You haven't had anything fresh for weeks.

You break one of the halves into quarters, relishing the snap of the skin as it splits. You can smell the syrupy sweetness of it, and the longer you look at it, the more acutely aware of your hunger you become. But you hesitate, glancing at the trees again, and you decide you can't have the temptation of it. You grab one quarter and hurl it into the forest, sending it sailing over the wall

of roots. You hear it bounce, roll over the fallen leaves, and then it's silent again.

You move closer to the barrier and pitch the second quarter over. There's more movement this time, more crunching leaves, and an abrupt stop. When you go to throw the remaining half, you freeze, your hand dropping to your side. It hadn't been the fruit making that noise. You stare at the wall of roots, terror rising in your stomach.

Glowing eyes glare back at you, separated by a mere meter of branches and roots. You stagger back, your voice and the screams that would go with it dying in your throat. No one would hear you.

The creature does not advance; it watches you, frost-blue eyes in the middle of a fur-covered face, jagged pearly teeth visible beneath bared lips. It growls again, sniffing at the air. Its eyes watch your hand, the one clutching the fruit. This is the largest creature you've seen—well, with what you can see of it, you feel confident with claiming that.

You take another step backwards and it growls, taking its own step forward, nosing part of the way beneath the roots. Your mouth is dry when you try to swallow. You glance at the fruit in your hand, then at the creature.

With a low toss, you land the fruit just in front of the beast, who sniffs it once and then raises its head to look at you. It nudges the fruit back towards you, narrowed eyes watching. You can feel your heart hammering in your chest.

You creep closer, though everything else in your body is telling you not to. You start talking to the creature. It doesn't react, but you feel a lot better with the sound of something other than silence filling the air. You duck and snatch the fruit up, babbling to the beast that you mean it no harm. It tilts its head, eyes back on the fruit. You're unsure it understands, but you stretch your hand out towards anyways, palm open and flat, with the fruit held carefully on it.

It seizes the fruit from your hand, teeth grazing your fingers, slicing three thin lines into your palm that well up with blood. You bite back your cry and pull your hand back, slowly, surprised tears pooling in your eyes. It watches you for a moment longer, crunching through the core of the fruit.

And then you blink and it's gone, vanished back into the Wylderwood without so much as a rustling leaf to mark its movement.

Make a choice.

Return to Northvern. (page 140)

Continue into the Wylderwood. (page 143)

Luck.

You stare at the Heart a little while longer. The clearing is littered with smaller trees, creeping vines, and swaths of fallen leaves that have been blown against the roots. The silence is unnerving; you can hear only your breaths and your footfalls as you meander into the grove.

At first, you don't think much about what you see. Most of your attention is taken up by the flora. Tangles of brambles lurk on the edges of the grove, while smaller bushes wait against the roots of the tree, jagged-edged leaves hiding tiny indigo berries. While the trees themselves are losing their leaves, many of the smaller plants—the wildflowers, the berry bushes, the ferns—seem to be at their most vibrant in the chilly autumn air. It's no planned out garden, by any means, but it is beautiful.

The nagging worry in your mind leaps to the forefront when you reach one of the inlets made by the roots. There's a firepit, neatly dug and outlined by rocks. Ashes are heaped high within it, and when you kneel and hold your hand over it, it's cold. It had been a long while since someone had camped here. You glance over your shoulder, focusing on where you came from.

While it was nothing like the walkways back near Northvern, you had been following a small path on your way here. It had continued just inside the grove, past the roots and branches. But now you can't see it. There isn't any pathway at all.

You move back to the outer edges of the clearing, peering through the gaps in the branches. Sometimes, you think that you see a path, sandy and studded with rocks, but when you move closer, ducking through some of the overgrowth, you find that there is no path.

The first time, you manage to convince yourself that it was merely a trick of the light, and that you were simply getting turned around. As it continues, though, and you find paths that only

vanish when you look too closely at it, your worry twists itself up in your stomach. You pull out your compass, hoping to retrace the direction you came from, but the needle simply spins, utterly indecisive on which way is true north.

After another path disappears in front of your eyes, you pull yourself back into the grove and try to gather your thoughts. You shove the compass back into your pocket. There's no use for it, anyways. When you hear the sound, you mistake it for the wind in the branches. Only when your cloak doesn't move and you don't feel the chill of it on your face, you realize it's not wind.

Along the edges, the brambles and vines are moving in jittering, creaking motions. They wrap themselves around the roots, around the low-hanging branches, around one another, and creep outwards to the forest beyond the grove. Anxiety ripples through your skin, and instead of backing away from the still-shuddering plants, you run towards them, grasping for any sort of opening in the perimeter.

The brambles seem to only move faster at your panic, whipping across the ground, shedding leaves and shredding the bark of the roots. You wrap your hands around the brambles, peering into the forest surrounding the grove. There are no paths; there is no way out besides the bramble-covered openings. Nothing is outside of the Heart besides the shadows of the forest and the trees that make them. You relinquish the briars, wincing at the pinprick cuts from the thorns. You wipe the blood on your cloak.

Make a choice.

Return to Northvern. (page 140)
Continue into the Wylderwood. (page 143)

Return to Northvern.

You don't wait in the Heart for long after you explore, only pausing to collect your bearings. Though there is no physical Heart to bring back to Northvern, you can at least deliver the message that there is nothing in the center of the forest. They had made you worried about a monster, or a curse. But there isn't anything here. And you have a contract to fulfill.

It takes more than twice as long to return to Northvern as it did to get to the center of the wood. You're careless with your rations, with your gear. After only half of the travel time, you abandon your canvas, the fabric too creased with mold and torn along the folds to be of any use. Your rations are gone a full day before you find the town again.

You stumble into the town as night is falling, tripping over the cracked cobblestones. There are no stars out; only clouds cover the sky, hiding the sliver of moon and bringing with them a dusting of fine, powdery snow. The first snow of the season. No one sees you return.

You do not wait for an invitation. You do not even wait for daylight to show its face. You march directly into the Council building, throwing open the doors and tracking slushy footprints over the rugs. It is brightly lit and empty, and the second set of doors is unlocked. The stone steps are as cold and unforgiving as you remember; you spend your descent pausing every ten steps to lean against the wall, shivering, teeth chattering, trying to warm up beneath the orange glow of enchanted globes. Though they give off no heat, it doesn't stop you from trying.

The Council still sits in their chairs. You doubt they ever leave. They speak and you stare at your hands while they do, eyes tracing the scratches and clearly visible veins.

“Where is it? Where is the Heart?”

That same awful voice, screeching now. You flinch, shaking your head, tugging your cloak around you. Breath puffs in front of your eyes. You see no such thing happening for the Council. And you tell them that there is no Heart. There is only a massive tree, the largest you’ve ever seen.

“Of course the tree is there. But where is the *Heart*?”

Their voice sharpens with anger. You’re unsure which one spoke.

You tell them again. Your vision swims and your teeth chatter. The Council blurs together and then splits apart, each member utterly still and utterly transfixed on you. You don’t want to be standing; every muscle in your body aches, and a headache radiates from the very base of your skull.

They do not speak for a long while. You do not beg for understanding or another chance; you doubt that you’ll get either. You wonder, though, if others have returned here before you, empty handed, trying to explain that the Heart is a place made up of objects and growth not something you can steal and transport.

The one in the center tilts its head, smiling a grin dotted with black teeth.

“If you didn’t bring the Heart, well...we reason yours ought to do just fine.”

There is no time to protect, no time to flee, before you feel the horrific twisting and hear the *snap* of something coming loose. You scream, terror flooding your veins, ice-cold hands clutching your chest only to find that the skin is utterly unmarred. There is only a deep emptiness in your chest, darker than any you’ve felt before it. It’s cold, jarring enough to pull your breath away, and you stagger backwards from the Council. They smile all together, red lips stretched grotesquely over rotting teeth.

They don't say anything when you stagger out of the room. You creep up the stairs, sometimes walking, sometimes crawling, always short of breath. It feels like you should be crying, like you should be feeling something, but the chill in your chest is all that you can focus on.

Continue into the Wylderwood.

You make camp within the Heart of the Wylderwood. It gives you something to do after you bandage your hands, and the slow, methodical way you prepare your meager dinner gives your brain something other than apprehension to focus on.

As night begins to fall, and you build yourself a fire out of dried leaves and brambles, the sounds of the forest begin to return. They're the quiet sort—owls calling through the air, crickets fluttering in the dark—but it finally breaks the stifling silence. You could cry.

You leave the canvas in your bag, and spread your bedroll out across the moss beside your firepit. It's soft and surprisingly warm; it may be the most comfortable place you've slept since leaving Northvern. You can see the stars here, too, as the clouds begin to dissipate from the night sky. You watch the sparks of the fire join the stars, all the pinpricks of light glittering in your eyes.

It's peaceful now, when you have the time to breathe and think. You think about Northvern, and the other towns on the edge of the Wylderwood. There were towns farther inside of it, once; you wonder if they were swallowed up by the wood, or if they simply chose not to be found. Either way, no one speaks of them anymore.

Your heart aches in your chest and you turn on your side, watching the glow of the fire burn down to embers. There is no Heart of the Wylderwood—not in the way the Council seemed to mean, anyways. They'd asked like it was some beast that needed to be slain, or some treasure that needed to be taken. But there's nothing of importance in this grove except the tree. Well, and you.

You can't go back to them. With nothing in your hands and no real answer to their question, you imagine that their reaction would be less than kind. They don't strike you as the benevolent sort of. . . well, whatever they are. Forget about the

contract; they don't have your real name on it, anyways, which means it holds no true power over you.

You sit up to bank the coals, sprinkling a bit of water on for good measure, and then curl back into your bedroll. You're not sure where you'll go; you won't return the way you came, and you're unsure exactly how large the Wylderwood truly is.

Whoever had drawn the map for you had thought very little about scale.

Wherever you go, you will carry the weight of what you witnessed. You close your eyes and take slow, deep breaths, pushing the thoughts to the side of your mind. There will be time for that later, on other nights. There will be time for healing. But for now, beneath the branches of the Wylderwood, it is enough to rest.

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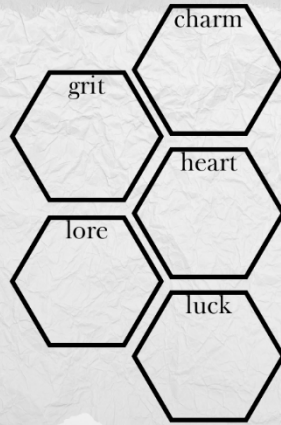


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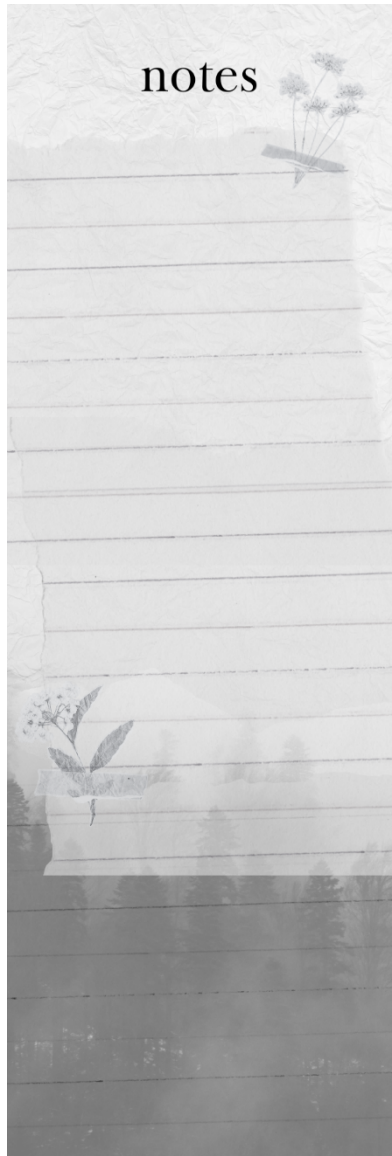
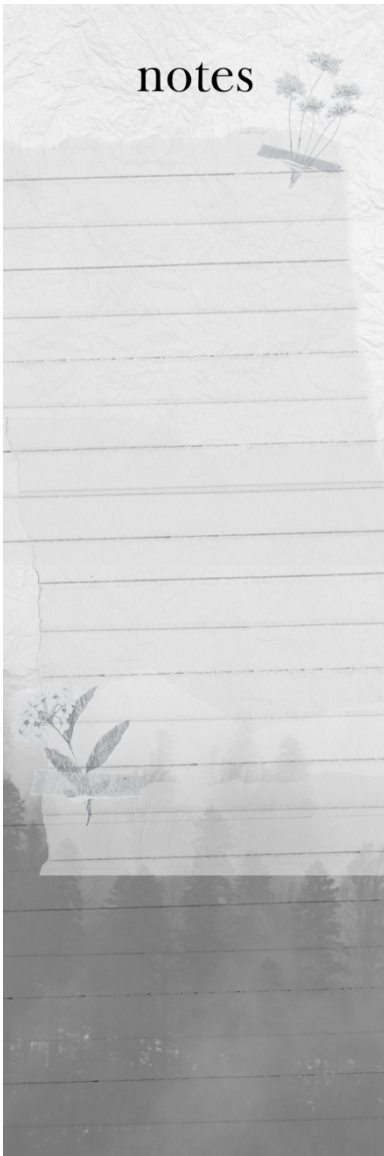
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In a corner of a world just a sidestep from our own, there is a forest. . .