Session 26

Exploring the hidden city of the Forest Folk!

It is a grey, misty and drizzly day. Visibility is low, making the camouflaged buildings even harder to make out against the trees and bushes. The trail that the party is on gradually transitions from packed dirt to slate cobblestones. Weeds have nearly covered them completely but some still shine through.

Soren enters one of the buildings and it seems to be the remains of a small yet lovely home. The furniture is low to the ground, with a central table and some beds behind a collapsed screen. Half of the roof is caved in as well, adding to the dilapidated nature. Moving farther inside he finds a storeroom that used to be full or ceramic jars, but now they are just a pile of shards on the floor. The shelves are still intact, and the remains are in one big pile so whatever or whoever did this was methodical and focused in their efforts. Other than this, there are no signs of violence or a struggle. Soren and Esme discuss the possibilities of what happened, but there are still many more questions than answers. They leave the house and continue down the path, winding through the trees in such a way that makes it hard to see more than a dozen meters ahead.

As they follow the trail it opens into a small clearing and the party sees the first thing that resembles a body. It is like a wooden statue with spiky protrusions sticking out of its body all over. It is controrted, laying on the ground next to the path. The detail is remarkable, even if there are some spreading cracks through the figure. Esme brushes some moss off its face, studying its features. She turns to Kiva asking if she had heard of any magic like this, that could transform a person into wood. Kiva is stumped, transformation magic isn't unheard of, but usually its into animals not plants. Something tickles Soren's mind though, and he is brought back to the scene of carnage they found on the way to the Crinwin nest. The racoon had spiky bone growths similar to these spikes. Esme points out that maybe the wood transmutation was an attempt at curing or stalling the disease. Hearing the word disease Soren takes a step back, advising the others not to touch them. If it can infect racoons and forest folk, it could infect us as well.

As the group continues along the buildings get dense and less cunningly hidden. More and more of the wooden bodies appear around them, and Esme inspects each one's face, looking for any sign of familiarity. Rua cups his hands and shouts "HELLOOOOO! IS ANYBODY THERE!?" No sound comes back, except the patter of the rain. They find another of the bodies that is lacking any spikes, but has a hole punched clean through its chest, big enough to put your fist in it. Rua walks up and tries to put his arm through it and Esme quickly slaps his hand away. "Be respectful of the dead" she admonishes him.

Continuing forward they come to what appears to be a central square, the trees pulling back and revealing a veritable carpet of bodies on the ground. There must be at least a hundred of them

strewn about. Around the square there are several buildings, one the remains of a tall tower that has signs of a fire, collapsing in on itself. Another one looks like a large hall, easily enough to fit 3 or 4 of Stonetop's schoolhouse inside. To the south there is a massive building looming over the area as well. Rua heads to the burnt watchtower and the others follow with him. As they approach Soren's sixth sense starts to tingle. He has been distracted by the bodies and the architecture but his instincts start to kick in and tell him to be on guard. he looks to Fio and he can tell she feels it too. Suddenly it hits him, the sounds of the forest have stopped. No birds are singing, no critters are moving about. He looks around suddenly and he sees the branches of a small tree at the edge of the clearing...looking closer, is that the head of a deer? with antlers sticking out?... Soren calls out to Rua "Rua stop! something is very wrong here, listen, no birds, no sounds of the forest. We need to be very careful, I feel like we are being watched." Everyone freezes, they can't tell if the deer thing is wooden or not, its a little too far away.

Esme pulls a small set of pipes out of her pack and starts to play a tune unfamiliar to the rest of the party, but possibly familiar to any forest folk. As she plays the deer starts to move, jerkily stalking out of the bushes now that it has lost the element of surprise. It immediately charges at Esme who has her hands full. Kiva reacts quickly, flinging her spear at it but in her hast she overshoots it, missing completely. Thanks to Soren's warning Esme has just enough to pull out her shield out and brace for impact. The deer hits hard, a screeching sound coming from where its antlers and bones spikes are grinding against her shield. The impact is heavy, breaking some of the spikes on its chest but its antlers poked over the top of her shield and raked her slightly. Soren steps forward drawing his bronze sword, striking at the back legs of the mutated deer. This is a thing of supernatural chaos and he imagines a connection with Aratis as Esme has been trying to teach him, praying for the god's favour to guide his strike. Unfortunately, communing with Aratis has always been Esme's thing, Soren hasn't really been able to make a good connection with him so his sword bounces off one of the bone spikes , dealing no real damage. It lunges back at him in response, off balance from Esme's block but still poking him with its spikes. The wound is shallow, but he immediately feels a burning sensation emanating from it. He calls this out, telling people to be extra careful.

As they engage in melee, two more of the misshapen creatures stalk out of the forest and start to circle the group. Esme calls for a retreat to one of the smaller buildings, with more of the monsters joining and the bony growths causing burning sensations they need to get out of the open. Rua however jumps forward, sticking his spear into the side of the beast. It sinks in deep with a gurgling sound, and its clear these things are biological and can be hurt. Kiva is suddenly feeling very vulnerable so she darts forward and grabs at her spear, seeking to rearm herself. One of the circling deer darts forward, getting between her and the rest of the group. It's eyes are gone, replaced by bony spikes but it still turns its head as if it is looking directly at her. She hesitates for a moment before deciding to try to run past it and rejoin the group. Rua supports her, waving his spear around and trying to distract or antagonize the beast. He gets its attention away from Kiva, allowing her to run past but just as she gets clear she slips on the slick slate stones and falls to the ground. She is up quickly and running again to rejoin the others, but with a pronounced limp as the fall twisted her ankle.

Back together as a group they all start to retreat to the nearest building with a door small enough to bar the antlered deer. One of the deer tries to cut them off, but doesn't quite make it and has to

veer off to not hit the building. They slip through the door and find themselves in a partially collapsed three storey building. The ceiling is still intact on the first floor and the walls looks sturdy enough so it feels safe enough. Esme calls for Stella to look at Soren's wound. She brings her consecrated light close and it seems like just a shallow cut, except for a small lump at the end. This is where the wound burns the most Soren says. Stella cups her hands, focusing her light on the wound and invokes Helior's light to the wound. It is a very weird feeling, the shard of bone shivers in his arm and slowly slides out of the wound until Stella is able to pull it out and drop it on the floor. Kiva inspects it closely, peering down on it and sniffing it. She can't tell anything about it, but it definitely feels...off. A weirdness is the only way she can describe it. She starts to move to pick it up and put it in a small ceramic jar. Soren immediately speaks up, saying "Please tell me you aren't saving that. Its infectious! what if it spreads to others or the village?" Kiva replies "We need to study it, who knows if it will spread and having more knowledge is better than less." Esme also points out, the racoon shows its already spreading. We need to be prepared to fight it if we need to.

Fio has been standing by the door, observing the deer as they stalked around. She says, rightly so, that they are trapped so now what? Esme suggests shooting them from the safety of the house. Fio draws back an arrow and shoots, but misses and the arrow flies past them. The each raise their heads in unison, turning to regard the door before turning together and leaving the clearing, the injured one trailing behind slightly and leaving a bleeding trail. They spend the time to fully inspect the interior of the building, this was a communal eating area by the furniture strewn around. They find one wooden body, ridden with spikes like the others. Rua is seeing for the first time artistically crafted furniture, and the images sit in the back of his mind. There is another door at the back, opening out to the forest/city mix.

Fio calls out that the mutated deer are fully gone now, the misty square completely empty of movement. They decide to head to the largest building in the square, if there is anything for us to find it will probably be there. The massive main doors sit ajar, the gabled roof slightly leaning to the side and the 2nd floor windows gaping empty. Soren pulls out an oil lantern and has Stella light it and he pulls the door open the rest of the way. It resists him, creaking heavily as it slowly opens up. Inside it is very dark, a tree was growing at the center but the roof around it has fallen away letting the rain and mist fall to the floor. Lifting their lights they look around, in one corner there is an altar? a stage? not front and center but off to the side. On one wall there is an intricate wood carving. There is a chair at the edge of the room that is intact, but most of the other furniture is showing serious signs of wear and damage from the elements.

Esme and Kiva work together to inspect the room, looking for magic or script that might give them some information. Esme can feel a tingling of magic in the corner, looking closer she can see two skeletons. Notably they are not wooden, just corpses clad in rotting rags. As she focuses on the area she gets the feeling that something there is watching her back. She gets the send of a pair of floating, red eyes in the corner but when she blinks they are gone. It doesn't feel like the same malevolent feeling they got from the deer outside, so Esme calls out to it "Hello neighbor. We mean you no harm, we are trying to respect this place and redress any wrongs that were done here." There is a couple long moments of silence, with the others looking at each other cause Esme seems to be talking to thin air. But suddenly the eyes reappear, then rush towards them. It quickly retreats again as it approaches the dim light penetrating through the broken roof, but the

whole group feels a wave of gnawing hunger roll over them. Esme moves slowly to put herself between the entity and the others, directing them to stay away and check the mural on the far wall for information.

Soren and Kiva head to the mural to inspect it. Moving from right-to-left there are multiple panels, and on the right there is an inscription that Kiva can make out with some effort "All Thrive When Earth and People are One". In the first, tall figures wearing antlered-skull masks are holding smaller beings in their hands with other smaller beings at their feet bowing before them. The next few panels are confused, but seems to be some great war or series of battle between the tall skull-headed creatures and what looks like Fae beings with a wide variety of shapes and forms. There are a couple forest folk in each of the panels, first bowing at the masked figures feet, then battling against them, and finally scenes of them building and shaping trees. At the end there is a gathering of people, where one of the folk is kneeling before a big crowd of forest folk.

End of Session!

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