
The Sunless Wood

Team Gore opened their sixth day in the Underdark at the edge of a forbidding and fearsome place known as the Sunless Wood. They had experienced the outer reaches of the Wood during their mission for the beholder Vendelorbris, but this time they would need to cross it.

The party broke camp and headed into the wood. They were immediately struck by the malevolent feel of the place, and after an hour several of the party had the strong feeling they were being followed. Their suspicions were confirmed when, a few minutes later, four fast-moving creatures leaped from the bushes and pounced on them. The monsters looked vaguely like hedges shaped in the form of lions. They clawed at the players with thorn-equipped claws, raking on each successful hit.

Bullseye reached for his kukri to defend against the beast that pounced on him, but dropped it to the ground. Gilead and Pyroh responded quickly with spells aimed at the creature, giving Bullseye a chance to drop to retrieve his weapon while Dimdar began inspiring the party with her song. Groop and Cori slashed away with their weapons. Purdue entered the fray with his fists before noting that the plants were resistant to bludgeoning damage. Switching to his double-ended sword increased his effectiveness.

The battle ended quickly. One succumbed to the concentrated magical attacks of Gilead and Pyroh, another to fire attacks from Nimbus, and the other two to the weapons of Groop, Renn, Cori and Purdue. When the fight was over, the ferocity of these creatures was apparent in the number of heroes that had suffered raking wounds. Much healing was needed and used.

The healing alone was not enough, it turned out. About 30 minutes after the battle, those who had been raked (Bullseye, Dimdar, Renn, Nimbus, Elayna, Groop, and Purdue) began feeling stiff and sore. They tried *neutralize poison*, *remove curse*, and even *heal* spells but nothing seemed to help the stiffness. The conviction began to set in that a majority of the party was slowly transforming into trees like those that surrounded them.

Halfway through the wood, the party encountered a well-groomed clearing marked by a stone fountain and two sets of stone double doors. The stonework was marked with a weird mixture of religious and unrecognizable symbols, as if scrawled by an insane priest of some sort. Small, insect-like tracks lead to one of the two sets of doors. The party opted to enter in search of information or a solution to their dilemma.

A mighty pull from Groop and Cori opened the door, revealing a huge stairway leading down. Nazir detected a tripwire about 70 feet down and Bullseye disabled it, noting that it seemed to be designed to sound an audible alarm of some sort.

At the end of the stair the party found a dirt chamber populated by bushes and, hanging from the ceiling, what appeared to be a diseased, insane treant. The creature walked easily along the ceiling, using its rootlike feet to clutch the roots and vines that made up the ceiling. Its height and reach made it nearly invulnerable to melee attack so the spellcasters stepped up. Pyroh's *fireball* seemed minimally effective, so Gilead and Elayna tried other means. Gilead's *vitriolic sphere* worked very well, prompting Pyroh to follow up with a *lesser acid orb*. Renn tried an acid-filled arrow but it went astray and hit Nazir instead. Vines clutched and grabbed at the party, but went still when *orbs of cold* from Gilead and then Nimbus felled the creature.

On closer inspection, the party concluded that the enemy truly was a treant, but it had been altered in some way by the eerie purple energy that seemed to be present throughout the forest. The bushes were likewise sickly-seeming though not aggressive. A search of the area turned up five dead bodies with drow house medallions (house Mahlvain, a strong house in Sheoloth). Nimbus also found a decayed pouch containing five oversized pearls, any of which were suitable for use as a focus for his new spell, *defenestrating sphere*.

A curtain of vines at the rear of the room hid a tiny 4 by 4 tunnel. Dimdar followed the tunnel and found herself confronted by a colony of small, ant-like humanoids. She felt her mind being briefly probed and found she could communicate with the creatures in the dwarven tongue.

The small creatures were dromites, psionic humanoids who lived in Middledark. About 50 years ago, they told Dimdar, a strange creature named Nockmort had started the wood using trees and bushes that had appeared when a portal opened into Middledark from another world, leaving piles of debris and stranding a number of humanoids. Nockmort was insane; believing flesh creatures to be responsible for his exile from the sunlit world, he set about devising ways to destroy humanoids. His most potent invention was the black moss poison, a quasi-magical toxin that turns flesh and blood creatures into trees and shrubs and is resistant to all magical cures short of a *limited wish*. Most of the trees and bushes in the forest were converted animals and humanoids. The dromites had been kept captive by Nockmort, who had the use of druidic magic, and forced to tend his gardens for fear of being turned into bushes. Every so often Nockmort would slay the strongest in the hive to ensure the dromites did not accumulate the power to escape.

The good news for the party was that the process of creating the black moss poison also created, as a side product, an antidote. The dromites told the party to find Nockmort's workshop and seek a white powder that smells of mold. Mixing that powder in concentrations described by the dromites creates an antidote that not only cures poisoned creatures but imbues the drinker with immunity to the poison for 12 hours.

Equipped with this information, the party sought Nockmort's workshop behind the second stone doorway. The door led to a stair, which in turn took the party into a swamp-like chamber. Wading through the slag was laborious enough and made worse then five shambling mounds rose up from their cover in the bog and attacked. The mounds used their long tentacles to grab and constrict the party as they tried to defend themselves.

First Pyroh and Nazir were grappled, then Elayna, Nimbus, Purdue and Renn. The creatures' tentacles crushed those they held.

The shamblers' long reach and slow movement made them good targets for magical attack. Now fully understanding the immunities of plant creatures, the spellcasters made full use of sonic and *magic missile* attacks. Pyroh joined the fray after using his *dimension jump* spell to escape the powerful grasp of a monster. The creatures writhed and squealed as the sonic and acid attacks hit.

Meanwhile, Groop led a determined melee attack. Shrugging off the clutching tentacles of two mounds, he swung his greataxe furiously, scoring hit after hit as Dimdar sung for inspiration. Cori and Purdue joined him with their slashing weapons, along with Renn. Even Bullseye joined in the melee, dealing the death blow to the largest of the monsters with his kukri.

Beyond the swamp a huge tunnel lead to Nockmort's workshop. Nockmort was there waiting and commanded the party to worship at his roots or die. Nockmort was a treant, they recognized, though as with all of the other plant life in this place his leaves had turned black and shiny and his bark had taken on the color of coal.

The fighters wasted no time; they charged and attacked. Nockmort tried to cast *infestation of maggots* on Groop, proving himself to be an accomplished druid, but the spell failed to affect the occult slayer.

The party's spellcasters discovered quickly that Nockmort had prepared himself with some form of magical spell resistance. Gilead's *unluck* spell and Pyroh's *magic missile* wand both failed to affect Nockmort. Bullseye took matters into his own hands by climbing the treant's trunk and blocking his vision with his body. Nockmort pried at the halfling and eventually flung him off, but the distraction prevented him from attacking effectively or casting more spells. Nockmort managed to trample Groop for some damage but took far more as the spellcasters broke out their sonic attacks and the fighters' weapons took chunks of bark off his body. Pyroh got in the last attack, a *lesser sonic orb* that destroyed Nockmort.

The druid's work bench held a good number of valuables, not the least of which was the white powder the party sought. They mixed up the antidote and cured the poisoned, then secured a supply of the white powder for themselves and gave the rest to the dromites. Nockmort's journals went into a haversack for later study, being scribed in the secret language of druids and therefore unreadable to the party. The rest of the powder they burned with a *fireball*, ensuring that it could not be used.

The death of Nockmort lifted some of the evil feel from the wood, but not nearly all. The party wasted no time in putting the wood behind them. They camped for the night in a secure place well away from Nockmort's domain. The next day they would enter the Boneyard.

<MR>