

THE EMBER ELK



Accessible Adventure of the Week

MAKE LIVES BETTER THROUGH D&D

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CONTENT TRIGGER WARNINGS

This adventure includes topics of violence, death, and loss of a family member.

THE FIRE IS COMING. WILL YOU PREVENT IT IN TIME?

It's an old forest with majestic trees so thick that the canopy darkens the forest floor, but a looming danger is coming: the Ember Elk! What will happen to the forest when this flaming deer appears? And what about the goblin woman living in the cottage in the woods — can you save her?

This side adventure is designed for four to six characters with an average party level of 4.

BACKGROUND & SYNOPSIS

The Ember Elk is known for its destructive nature. When it appears, it's a sign of doom for the forest as it trots through, antlers blazing, leaving a blazing trail of destruction. Many believe that the Ember Elk is a demon or fire elemental for this reason. But truthfully, the Ember Elk is a celestial being that prevents the spread of invasive species such as russet mold that causes **vegepygmies** and **thornies**, **needle spawn**, **spawn of Kyuss**, and other fast-spreading plagues.

Russet mold has been growing in this forest, which has led to a growing plague of vegepygmies, who manage well under the dense canopy of the lush beech trees that comprise most of the vegetation as smaller plants struggle to grow in the dense shade. If left unchecked, this plague of "moldies" will spread to wipe out the fauna of this ecosystem. The Ember Elk knows that this forest has reached the end of its life cycle, and it's time to burn down the canopy so that life may begin anew, wiping out the plague in the process.

Meanwhile, a lone goblin lives in an old wooden cottage in the forest, aware of the growing threat but seemingly unconcerned, insisting that she can handle these "walking salads." But this goblin woman is more than she seems, a **barghest** that feeds on the goblin parties who use this forest for seemingly safe travel between outposts. Her cottage was once the retirement home of a decorated goblin war hero that she ate and is now posing as his widow. She is terrified of fire, has heard rumors of the Ember Elk, knows its true nature, and seeks to put an end to it by tricking the party into destroying it.

A halfling ranger, Arieni Kettlewhistle, who specializes in plants and plant creatures has been fighting the vegepygmy threat. She is not familiar with the Ember Elk, but she is aware that the forest is due for a burn, and while she regrets that, she understands its necessity in the grand scheme of things.

The party will need to decide how to handle this situation. Should they kill the Ember Elk to protect the forest from burning, thus also allowing this barghest to continue to victimize passing goblin parties? Can they convince this stubborn woman to leave her home in the woods? Perhaps she would find a home in one of the goblin villages near the edge of the forest! Or does she reveal her true nature to the party?

ADVENTURE HOOKS

This is an easy story to incorporate into an existing adventure, especially if the campaign follows seasons, as it's best played in the early fall, when the ground is dry, and the leaves are turning colors but have barely begun to fall. The adventure begins as the vegepygmies attack the nearby cottage, looking for a meal.

WHERE ARE WE?

The forest grows thick with lush beech trees, their thick branches providing homes for the many wildlife species that populate it. Their leaves have begun changing color as they prepare themselves to shed them for the winter. The forest goes on for several days' travel in every direction, and while it has no definite trails through it, hearty travelers who know their way around its branches can occasionally be seen cutting through, including goblin and orc parties who have villages and outposts on the perimeter of the woods and trade with their extended families and each other.



DRAMATIS PERSONAE & BESTIARY

VEGEPYGMY

Small plant, neutral

Armor Class 13 (natural armor)
Hit Points 9 (2d6 + 2)
Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
7 (-2)	14 (+2)	13 (+1)	6 (-2)	11 (+0)	7 (-2)

Skills Perception +2, Stealth +4
Damage Resistances lightning, piercing
Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 12
Languages Vegepygmy
Challenge 1/4 (50 XP)
Proficiency Bonus +2

Plant Camouflage. The vegepygmy has advantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks it makes in any terrain with ample obscuring plant life.

Regeneration. The vegepygmy regains 3 hit points at the start of its turn. If it takes cold, fire, or necrotic damage, this trait doesn't function at the start of the vegepygmy's next turn. The vegepygmy dies only if it starts its turn with 0 hit points and doesn't regenerate.

Actions

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 2) slashing damage.

Sling. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, range 30/120 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) bludgeoning damage.

THORNY

Medium plant, neutral

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)
Hit Points 27 (5d8 + 5)
Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
13 (+1)	12 (+1)	13 (+1)	2 (-4)	10 (+0)	6 (-2)

Skills Perception +4, Stealth +3
Damage Resistances lightning, piercing
Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 14
Languages —
Challenge 1 (200 XP)
Proficiency Bonus +2

Plant Camouflage. The thorny has advantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks it makes in any terrain with ample obscuring plant life.

Regeneration. The thorny regains 5 hit points at the start of its turn. If it takes cold, fire, or necrotic damage, this trait doesn't function at the start of the thorny's next turn. The thorny dies only if it starts its turn with 0 hit points and doesn't regenerate.

Thorny Body. At the start of its turn, the thorny deals 2 (1d4) piercing damage to any creature grappling it.

Actions

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (2d6 + 1) piercing damage.

ARIENI KETTLEWHISTLE

(RANGER: HUNTER)

Small humanoid (Stout Halfling), Neutral Good

Armor Class 16 (scale mail)

Hit Points 32 (4d10)

Speed 25 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	17 (+3)	13 (+1)	10 (+0)	15 (+2)	8 (-1)

Skills Athletics +4, Investigation +2, Nature +2, Perception +4, Survival +4

Damage Resistances poison

Senses passive Perception 14

Languages Common, Elvish, Halfling, Sylvan

Spellcasting. Arieni is a 4th-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Wisdom (spell save DC 12, +4 to hit with spell attacks). Arieni has the following Druid spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *control flame*, *druidcraft*
1st level (3 slots): *hunter's mark*, *cure wounds*, *zephyr strike*

Favored Enemy (Plants). Arieni has advantage on Survival checks to track her favored enemies, as well as on INT checks to recall information about them. She also learn one language of your choice that is spoken by your favored enemies, if they speak one at all.

Natural Explorer (Forest). Arieni has a favored terrain type. Her proficiency bonus is doubled for proficient skills when she makes an INT or WIS check related to it. While traveling for an hour or more in her chosen terrain, difficult terrain doesn't slow her group's travel, her group can't become lost except by magical means, she remains alert to danger even when she is engaged in another activity, she can move stealthily at a normal pace (while alone), she finds twice as much food while foraging, and while tracking creatures, she learns the exact number, sizes, and how long ago they passed through the area.

Primeval Awareness. As an action, Arieni can expend one ranger spell slot (1 minute per level of spell slot) to sense whether any aberrations, celestials, dragons, elementals, fey, fiends, or undead are present within 1 mile of her (or within up to 6 miles if she is in her favored terrain). This feature doesn't reveal the creatures' location or number.

Lucky. When Arieni rolls a 1 on the d20 for an attack roll, ability check, or saving throw, she can reroll the die and must use the new roll.

Brave. Arieni has advantage on saving throws against being frightened.

Halfling Nimbleness. The halfling can move through the space of any creature that is of a size larger than its own.

Stout Resilience. Arieni has advantage on saving throws against poison, and she has resistance against poison damage.

Attention Deficit (Severity Degree 2). You have trouble choosing subjects to focus on. When you're not completely interested in a subject at hand, your mind unintentionally wanders to other subjects, and you easily lose track of time. This leads to difficulties concentrating and indecision. You have a -1 per Severity Degree penalty to initiative rolls due to indecision. This works the opposite when you're focused on something that holds your interest to the point that the rest of the world fades into the background. When performing any task requiring an Intelligence check or other sustained, potentially monotonous task, you must succeed on a DC 8 + Severity Degree Constitution check. Failure indicates that you've been distracted — subtract the modified result from the DC, and multiply the resulting number × 15 percent to determine how long the task takes. While distracted, you have a + (Severity Degree) on passive Wisdom (Perception) checks. On success, if the modified roll is at least 5 more than needed, you become hyperfocused and complete the task in ((modified result) - DC) × 10 percent less time. While hyperfocused, you have a -1 per Severity Degree penalty to passive Wisdom (Perception).

Paralysis & Numbness (Right Arm, Severity Degree 3). You can neither feel nor move your fingers (Severity Degree 1), wrist to fingers (Severity Degree 2), elbow to fingers (Severity Degree 3), or shoulder to fingers (Severity Degree 4). Your fingers can use magic rings, but otherwise, you can't use that appendage, and if exposed to damage, you don't notice, which can result in further ongoing damage. Spells with Somatic components usually need to be modified to work within your physical range, requiring a day for every hour normally needed to inscribe into your spellbook and double the cost due to experimentation materials.

Actions

Horde Breaker. Once on each of her turns when Arieni makes a weapon attack, she can make another attack with the same weapon against a different creature that is within 5 ft. of the original target and within range of her weapon.

Shortsword. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage.

Hand Crossbow. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, range 30/120 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage.

EMBER ELK

Large celestial, Neutral good

Armor Class 12

Hit Points 67 (9d10 + 18)

Speed 50 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	14 (+2)	15 (+2)	10 (+0)	15 (+2)	16 (+3)

Damage Immunities fire, poison

Condition Immunities charmed, paralyzed, poisoned

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 12

Languages Celestial, Elvish, Sylvan, telepathy 60 ft.

Challenge 4 (1,100 XP)

Charge. If the Elk moves at least 20 ft. straight toward a target and then hits it with a ram attack on the same turn, the target takes an extra 7 (2d6) bludgeoning damage. If the target is a creature, it must succeed on a DC 15 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

Innate Spellcasting. The Elk's innate spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 13). The Elk can innately cast the following spells, requiring no components:

At will: *detect evil and good*, *fire bolt*, *pass without trace*

1/day each: *fireball*, *dispel evil and good*, *wall of fire*

Magic Resistance. The Elk has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

Magic Weapons. The Elk's weapon attacks are magical.

Actions

Multiattack. The Elk makes two attacks: one with its hooves and one with its antlers.

Hooves. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 11 (2d6 + 4) bludgeoning damage.

Antlers. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (1d8 + 4) bludgeoning damage + 3 (1d6) fire damage.

Purifying Fire (3/Day). The Elk touches another creature with its antlers. The touch removes all charms and diseases, neutralizes all poisons, and removes 1 level of exhaustion afflicting the target.

Refiner's Fire (1/Day). The Elk emanates a flaming aura from its antlers that expend 10' per round for up to 5 rounds. Each aberration, elemental, fey, fiend, and undead in the area must make a Dexterity saving throw. It takes 7d10 fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

Legendary Actions

The Elk can take 3 legendary actions, choosing from the options below. Only one legendary action option can be used at a time and only at the end of another creature's turn. The Elk regains spent legendary actions at the start of its turn.

Hooves. The Elk makes one attack with its hooves.

Aura of Fire (Costs 2 Actions). The Elk creates a burning, magical field around itself or another creature it can see within 60 ft. of it. The target gains the benefits of a *fire shield* spell until the end of the Elk's next turn.

Enkindle (Costs 3 Actions). The Elk is suddenly engulfed in blue flame and regains 10 (3d6) hit points.

VRALMEA (BARGHEST)

Large fiend (shapechanger), neutral evil

Armor Class 17 (natural armor)

Hit Points 90 (12d10 + 24)

Speed 60 ft. (30 ft. in goblin form)

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
19 (+4)	15 (+2)	14 (+2)	13 (+1)	12 (+1)	14 (+2)

Skills Deception +4, Intimidation +4, Perception +5, Stealth +4

Damage Resistances cold, fire, lightning; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks

Damage Immunities acid, poison

Condition Immunities poisoned

Senses blindsight 60 ft., darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 15

Languages Abyssal, Common, Goblin, Infernal, telepathy 60 ft.

Challenge 4 (1,100 XP)

Proficiency Bonus +2

Shapechanger. The barghest can use its action to polymorph into a Small goblin or back into its true form. Other than its size and speed, its statistics are the same in each form. Any equipment it is wearing or carrying isn't transformed. The barghest reverts to its true form if it dies.

Fire Banishment. When the barghest starts its turn engulfed in flames that are at least 10 feet high or wide, it must succeed on a DC 15 Charisma saving throw or be instantly banished to Gehenna. Instantaneous bursts of flame (such as a red dragon's breath or a fireball spell) don't have this effect on the barghest.

Innate Spellcasting. The barghest's innate spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 12). It can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: *levitate*, *minor illusion*, *pass without trace*
1/day each: *charm person*, *dimension door*, *suggestion*

Keen Smell. The barghest has advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on smell.

Soul Feeding. A barghest can feed on the corpse of a humanoid that it killed that has been dead for less than 10 minutes, devouring both flesh and soul in doing so. This feeding takes at least 1 minute, and it destroys the victim's body. The victim's soul is trapped in the barghest for 24 hours, after which time it is digested. If the barghest dies before the soul is digested, the soul is released.

While a humanoid's soul is trapped in a barghest, any form of revival that could work has only a 50 percent chance of doing so, freeing the soul from the barghest if it is successful. Once a creature's soul is digested, however, no mortal magic can return that humanoid to life.

Actions

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 13 (2d8 + 4) piercing damage.

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (1d8 + 4) slashing damage.

ATTACK OF THE KILLER PEAT MOSS

Read the following to the players:

As you travel through the woods, you notice what appears to be a wooden cottage not far away. At first, you thought it was a brush pile, as it's not in much better shape, and its thatch roof provides unintentional camouflage. You see some movement by it as the sounds of the forest are interrupted by an angry scream.

As the party draws closer to the cottage, they notice what appear to be moving masses of fungus and sticks advancing on the building. A successful DC 10 Wisdom (Perception) check reveals that the mounds look vaguely humanoid, while others look something like green bears. As the party approaches, they may hear the hissy whistling of the creatures, although the screams of Vralmea the goblin may drown them out.

When the party reaches the cottage, they will find it besieged with four **vegepygmies** and two **thornies**. (If the party has more than eighteen combined levels, the Dungeon Master may want to add one or two vegepygmies to the encounter to increase the challenge.)

The creatures are trying to get into the cottage and are about to do so. Vralmea the goblin is swinging a large butcher knife and rolling pin at them, shouting in goblin, "I'll toss you like the salads you are," and, "Back off, you walking radishes!"

When the party gets near, the creatures notice the party and turn their attention to them, as they pose a larger threat. If the party attempts to use fire, Vralmea will scream at them to put it out, shouting first in goblin, then quickly switching to common, "Put that fire out! The forest is dry! You'll burn the whole thing down! What are you thinking?!" If more than three of the plant creatures are killed, they will attempt to flee.

THE HOMESTEAD

The cottage is made from beams and branches of the local beech trees. It's small and messy, with one wooden chair, a straw mat for a bed, and piles of dirty dishes next to a washtub that looks like it hasn't been changed recently. Characters with a passive Wisdom (Perception) of 12 or higher may notice that there's no fireplace or stove of any kind. If asked about this, she says that her husband was the gourmet in the family, so she lives on vegetables and berries foraged in the woods.

Vralmea thanks the party for their help. She tells them that she has lived alone in this forest for many years. Her husband was a retired goblin soldier who built this cottage, and it's special to her. "When I touch the beams, it's like I'm holding his hands, and I can still smell the blood, sweat, and tears he shed here." When asked about the vegepygmyies, she says, "The moldies are increasing in number, but I can handle them. They don't scare me." She will quickly change that or any other subject to news about the Ember Elk. She heard from a recent passing orc party that it has been seen in the area. There's fear in her voice as she talks about it, telling the party that it's a force of destruction, an elk with burning antlers, leaving a fiery path in its wake. It's fall, so the leaves are dry. If the Ember Elk so much as enters this forest, the whole woods will burn to cinders. She begs the party to find it and kill it to save the forest.

Knowledge of the Ember Elk requires a successful DC 20 Intelligence (Nature) check to have heard about the Ember Elk burning down forests and a DC 20 Intelligence (Arcana) check to know that it's a celestial, an even higher DC for more information than that.

Vralmea tells the party that, if they head south, they'll probably just have to watch for smoke to find it. If they need motivation, she tells them, "The forest has dozens of villages around its perimeter. If you stop the Elk, you'll be heroes to all of them!"



THE STUDYING MOUND

As the party heads south, they will see a small pile of cloth that seems to be moving, as if something is alive under it. The pile is actually Arieni Kettlewhistle, the halfling ranger, who is studying a mushroom, and due to her hyperfixation as a result of Attention Deficit Disorder, she doesn't notice their approach unless they deliberately make noise to get her attention or poke the pile of cloth when they reach it. Once she notices them, she instantly jumps to her feet and draws a shortsword from under the leafy ground cover with her right hand but points the sword at the ground, not the party, alert but not threatening. She also has a shortbow, quiver, and other gear buried under nearby leaf piles.



Arieni is aware of the growing vegepygmy threat and is looking for a way to remove them from the forest. She has expertise with plants and plant creatures and recognizes the threat that russet mold brings to a forest. While she won't want to suggest it and will attempt any other option first, she knows that the old growth forest is due for a burn to allow for new growth, and while she hasn't heard of the Ember Elk, she will reluctantly realize that allowing it to run through the forest would start a relatively natural process that would likely start soon anyway, and it would get rid of the moldies.

During the conversation, if the party discusses other matters beyond the plants in the forest and related matters, Arieni's attention may drift. The party may also notice that she never uses her right arm due to paralysis, especially if they see her use her shortbow to hunt for food.

COTTAGE MEETING

If the party settles on letting the forest burn, they must convince Vralmea to abandon her cottage. She will be angry with their decision and try to convince them otherwise, reminding them of all the villages on the periphery of the forest. She can eventually be convinced with a successful opposed Charisma (Persuasion) check since she is hoping to keep the status quo and knows she'd have to go far away to find another goblin crossroads.

MORE THAN YOU BARGHEST FOR

If the party convinces Vralmea to leave her cottage, it will take two days to walk out of the forest and stay ahead of the burning. If the party is small, During the first long rest, she will wait until they have removed armor and are mostly sleeping and then reveal her true nature, attacking the party in her true barghest form.

CONCLUSION

As the party leaves the forest, assuming they don't hunt it, they get a glimpse of the Ember Elk, which, when it sees them, bows its head in greeting. The forest hasn't lit yet, but as the party reaches the edge of the forest, they smell smoke and shortly afterward see the sky glow with the end of this cycle of the forest's life.



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