

Bits of the Wilderness™:

Into the Wildwood

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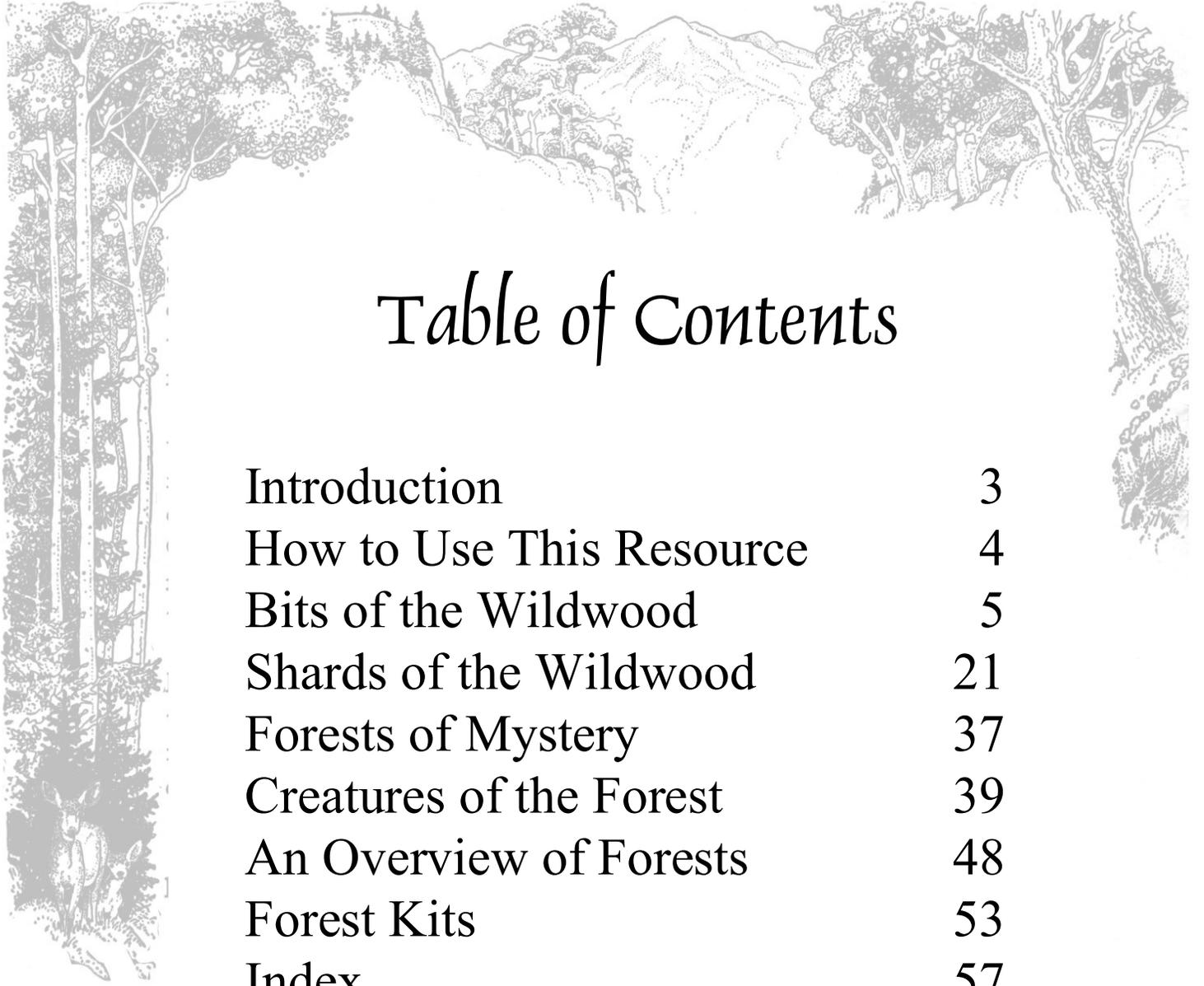
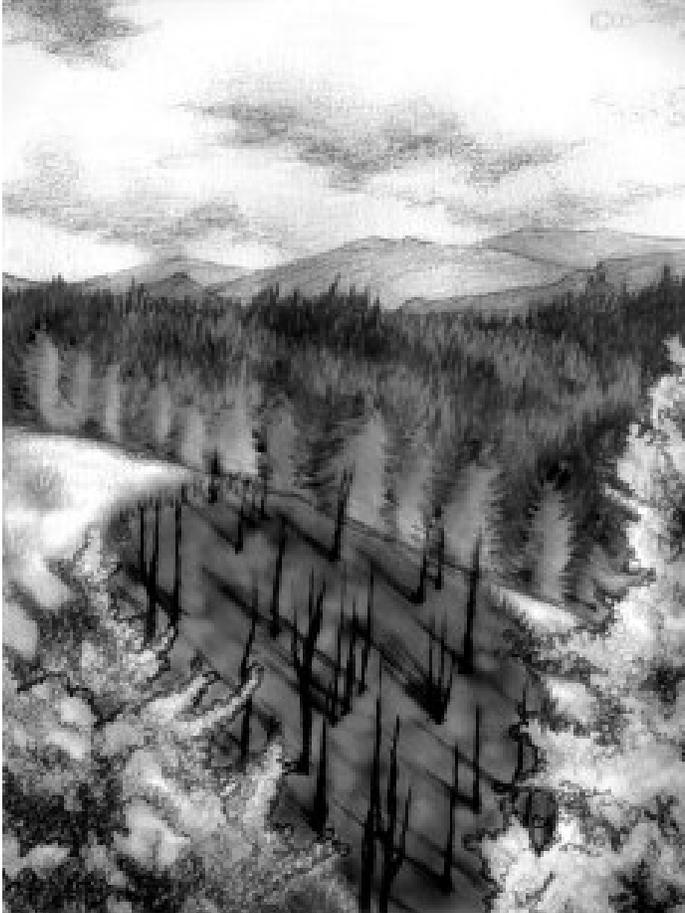


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83. You have come suddenly to a spot of forest where the trees are blackened and dead. The edge is abrupt; outside this area the trees seem untouched, inside they are thoroughly burned. In this area, a nearly circular patch about 40 feet across, every tree is burned, base to crown, the leaves and smaller branches all missing. The shrubs and herbs on the ground were incinerated as well. The fire appears to have occurred this year because no live plants have colonized the devastated area. There is a lingering smoky smell but it seems residual, not recent. [This was the site of a fireball.]

84. The woodland creatures are uncomfortably quiet today. No squirrels chatter, and the birds are silent. Even the expected drone of insects is missing. You do not know if it because you and your companions are passing, or whether it is due to something else more menacing.

85. As you hike through the woods you notice a number of deer tracks that go off to the west. You can smell the pine trees that stand all around you and a thick bed of needles blankets the forest floor. You note that the land in front of you seems to be quite flat and you can see a good distance through this sparsely wooded place.

86. Birds sit in the trees, singing as you journey through the woods. You hear the rat-a-tat-tat of a woodpecker at work, and then spot him toiling away on the light-brown wood of a sycamore tree. He stops, apparently at the sound of your foot-falls, and cocks his head in your direction. All around you, you can sense the myriad forms of life that dwell in this forest.

87. The vegetation is thick and the path greatly overhung by leafy branches. The location of the trail is pretty clearly marked by blazes on the trees, but trees and shrubs have grown down into and up out of the trail, making it difficult to travel even when you know clearly where it is. You duck under branches, or weave to avoid them. Despite your best efforts, you are stung by spiny leaves and your clothes scraped and ripped by branches with long thorns. Hacking at them with knives would make passage easier but it would be very slow.

88. Standing stones as high as a grown man's knee line the path. The smooth boulders are dominated by a single spiraling glyph carved into their face, which may represent a blessing for travelers – or a warning. Underneath the runes are a series of dots and dashes which may have meaning to someone, but not to you.

89. A jagged shard of unpainted wood has been driven into a low mound of earth just off the forest path. A badly misspelled message gouged into the impromptu grave marker with a dull knife announces “Justen, a pedlur dyd heer. Gods rest hm.”

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You've been walking for quite some time through this thickly wooded area. As you have moved up and down small hills and vales you've noticed that this forest is alive with sights, smells, and sounds. Though you haven't actually seen any animals larger than small birds, you have heard the calls of wolves, or wild dogs. You've also seen the spoor of deer, rabbit, and possibly bear on the ground as you've delved deeper into the woods.

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CREATURES OF THE FOREST: Whistler in the Forest

Introduction:

The area of the forest into which you have traveled is very still; no birds call, no deer forage. Aside from the plants, swaying silently in the breeze, there is no sound, no movement. In fact, there is no sign of animal life at all – not a squirrel, not even an insect, just the forest itself, the stoic trees and the swaying of massive branches. Then you hear it – an eerie whistling sound, coming from the deepest, oldest sector of forest, from somewhere within a stand of dead trees made ashen by long seasons. It sounds almost like the wind whistling through cracks in the ancient rotting oaks. Almost.

[It is not easy to see past the dead trees, due to downed branches, dry leaves and other deadfall.] **Movement through this area is difficult. There are so many dead branches around – hanging broken or lying on the ground – it is a wonder there are any left on the trees at all. The deadfall has captured more bits and pieces, blowing leaves and bits of brush. The result is practically a maze, and you are scraped and scratched as you try to push your way through.**

Finally you can see through into a clearer area, and you spot some movement ahead. At first it just seems like another gray branch in the wind, but the rhythm is wrong, and the branch is moving up and down, rather than swaying in any breeze. Your eyes follow a line back to the trunk, and then up to the top where you see what looks like a huge, dried-up bird's nest. There are no upper branches, and in fact you see only the one. The tree's bark is the color of ashes, dry and brittle and pitted with insect holes. Then it moves like no tree should, and turns in place. [Adventurers may recognize it as a type of Treant.]

It is a creature, but if it is related to trees, it is either damaged or diseased. Your attention goes to its branch, or rather arm and hand, with long, stick-like fingers. Its other hand holds a small brown sparrow, and you can now see that it is plucking out the bird's feathers one by one. When all the large feathers are gone, the tree creature uses its nimble fingers to crush the life out of the small body, and then lets it drop to the ground.

