

WINTER CHILD

AN ADVENTURE FOR 5TH EDITION
BY GRAHAM WARD



Written by Graham Ward
Illustration by Charlie Bullen-Spicer

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BACKGROUND

Iljudheim is a politically tumultuous region teeming with young kingdoms. The humans that live here call themselves the Ansë. Even more than most humans, these doughty homesteaders generally regard anyone or anything unfamiliar with suspicion and fear.

Unfortunately for the Ansë, their kingdoms lie in what used to be the very center of fey civilization in this world. The buffetings of their grim history have caused the elves to become a dwindling and perilous people. Their reputation for cruelty is not always unfounded. Alfyrstock, the elf-wood, is the largest vestige of the old fey domains in these lands. The elves that nest there suffer no outsiders to set foot there and live.

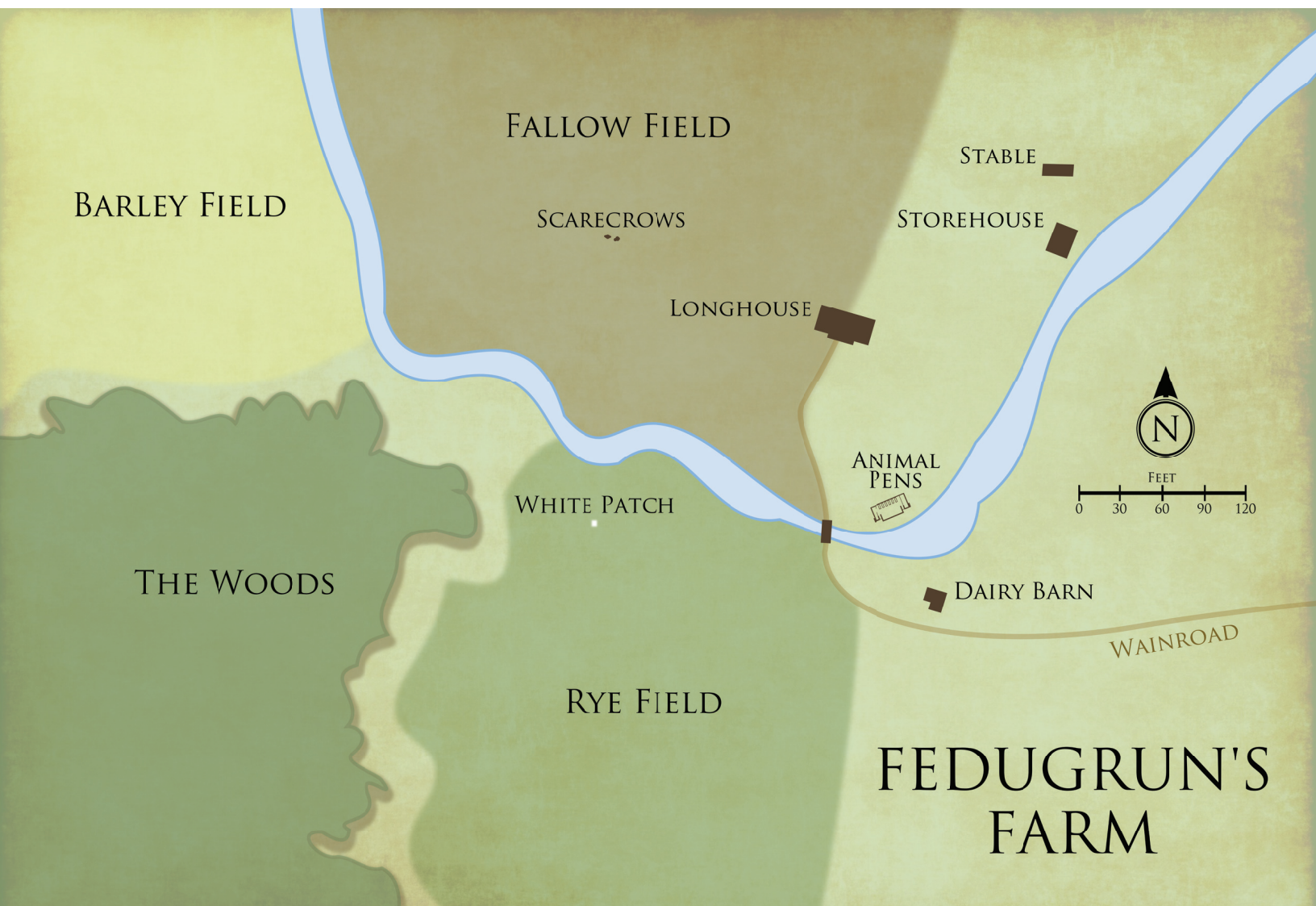
The coast lands east of Alfyrstock contain a collection of Ansë homesteads that surround the city of Hostyr. These humans speak in tremulous whispers of spirits that walk naked in the woods. They believe the elves are tortured ghosts from Sivenheim (the Underworld) reaching through the bars of its prison into the realm of the living. The fact that the elves live an actual society with its own culture isn't generally acknowledged by the Ansë.

OVERVIEW

Winter Child is a short adventure meant to be played in a single sitting. It takes place around the homestead of an Ansë farmer named Fedugrun Njudsen and the terrifying hauntings that plague his farm. The characters will investigate his claims, leading them through a passage to Ittallach—the world of the fey—where they'll confront the force behind the supernatural occurrences.

ADVENTURE HOOK

The players likely encounter Fedugrun's farm while traveling to or from Hostyr. They might be desperate for shelter during a storm, lost in the outskirts of the wood, or have previously arranged to lodge there during their travels. One or more characters might have a previously-established relationship with Fedugrun. Perhaps they fought beside him years ago during the war between the houses of Skolgradn and Doryn. However the party arrives, it's important that they plan to spend the night.



FEDUGRUN'S FARM

As a typical Ansë homesteader, Fedugrun Njutsen works the land to survive. His large farm includes five acres of barley, five of rye, a fallow field with no crop, a storehouse, a stable, a dairy barn, animal pens, and the house itself, which is a timber longhouse with a high, thatched roof. The place's only residents are Fedugrun himself, two slack-jawed farmhands, three dogs, a few pigs and chickens, and about twenty head of cattle.

When the party arrives at the farm, it should be just past dusk. The air is still warm, but the light is almost gone and the wind in the barley fields sounds like a warning whisper. As the house comes into view on a low hill ahead of them, the characters see a tiny flicker of firelight through a window. Passing the dairy barn, they catch a horrid stench of rotting meat.

On the approach to the longhouse, and throughout the party's investigations, they may encounter some of the following areas.

BARLEY FIELD (WESTERN APPROACH)

The barley field lies furthest from the house, against the woods to the west. The sound of the wind shaking the golden stalks is oddly intelligible. A character with a **passive Perception of 12** or higher hears the following phrase whispered by the barley field:

"He is ours. The winter child is ours and none other shall have him."

DAIRY BARN (EASTERN APPROACH)

If the characters come along the Wainroad from the east, they approach a dairy barn that stands on the north side of the road, just before the bridge. The characters hear weak moaning coming from within. The small, weathered door opens to reveal the remains of seven brutally butchered cows, and an eighth slumped over in the middle of them, craning its neck upward and braying. It's swollen up to nearly twice its usual size, and its mouth is covered with blood.

Large portions of the dead cows have been savagely eaten. A **DC 12 Intelligence (Investigation) check** reveals clearly that the survivor attacked the others and, one by one, ate them alive. Something drove this herbivore to feast on the meat of its fellows. A **DC 10 Wisdom (Medicine) check** exposes no sign of disease or curse on the surviving cow, though it has eaten a fatally large amount, and won't survive the night.

RYE FIELD (SOUTHERN APPROACH)

On the southern side of the house, nestled against the woods, is a field of green, drooping rye, where the characters sense a palpable dread. The air is cold and tense, especially near the northwest corner. As characters approach that area of the field, a light flurry of snow seems to fall around them, and the landscape transforms into a dark, wintry moor that replaces the farmland in sight. Walking away from the spot returns the surroundings' appearance to the farm.

In the northwest corner is a 3-foot by 3-foot patch of white, sandy soil where nothing grows. If a character stands directly in the center of this area, he or she must succeed on a **DC 14 Wisdom** saving throw or become frightened of all creatures for 1 minute. Any creature frightened this way spends its turn running to the nearby river, where, once they are submerged, the frightened condition ends.

FALLOW FIELD (NORTHERN APPROACH)

This northern field blankets the backside of the hill on which the longhouse is built. Nothing grows here. As Fedugrun rotates the placement of his crops, he leaves one plot vacant so it can replenish its nutrients for the next season.

Upon first approaching the fallow field, the characters can see two dark shapes on the far side, toiling in silence as though harvesting something in the black dirt. If any creature begins to approach them, the figures look up and stare, but when the characters get within 60 feet they see only two scarecrows. One is propped on a stake with its arms hanging down and the other has fallen over, creating the impression that it is stooping. Once all creatures are more than 60 feet away, the scarecrows can again be seen to stare in their direction, with wide eyes glinting in the failing light.

STOREHOUSE

About two hundred feet from the door, at one side of the fallow field, sits the storehouse. It's a run-down stone structure with a thatched roof and a wooden door. Inside the 30-foot by 50-foot building sit piles of rotting barley, rye, and wheat. Large cobwebs span the interior of the storehouse.

Eight swarms of spiders and **two phase spiders** live in this rundown stone structure. When a character enters, the spiders sense it through vibrations in their webs and attempt to sneak up on their victim. The swarms go for the feet, but the phase spiders will phase

into the Spirit Realm and reemerge just behind the intruding character to gain advantage on their attacks.

The thickest webbing in the north corner of the storehouse contains the bodies of six goats and two dead farmhands that exactly resemble the slack-jawed Gogen and Almut they will meet elsewhere. Almut's body carries 5 gp. Gogen's carries 2 gp and a silver ring worth 2 gp.

STABLE

A few yards from the storehouse is the small stable where Fedugrun keeps his workhorses. The roof is thatched and the sides are open to the elements.

Inside the stable are six horses: two dead and four alive. The two dead horses are crumpled in the back of their stalls as if shrinking away from something. One has a torn throat, and the other seems to have starved. A successful **DC 12 Intelligence (Nature) or Wisdom (Survival)** check reveals that the horse with the torn throat was attacked by a wild beast some time ago. No tracks remain.

ANIMAL PENS

These open-air pens are made with a thin wooden fence. Inside are about a dozen pigs, twenty chickens, and five goats. All of the animals look emaciated.

The animals are unusually afraid at the party's approach, as if they expect the characters to lash out at them. They make a lot of noise and scamper to the other side of their pens where possible.

THE WOODS

All along the western edge of Fedugrun's property lies the wood that eventually becomes Alfyrstock. Here on the outskirts of the elf-lands, the forest still holds a close connection to the fey world of Iltallach, and some who explore the forest might find themselves wandering a strange moor beneath a stormy sky.

If a character explores the woods for at least 1 hour, roll 1d6, adding the number of hours spent in the woods. If the result is 6 or higher, the character becomes lost in Iltallach. See the section Lost in Iltallach for details.

LONGHOUSE

The longhouse is a sturdy, but ill-kept building on the top of the gentle hill that overlooks the farm. If the adventurers are expected, Fedugrun will be waiting for them at the door. Otherwise, he comes when they knock.

The front door opens to a hall with a central fire pit, a large table, and about six straw mattresses lain on the floor with wolf skins. Two open doorways at the back of the hall lead into the kitchen. A small stairway begins on the left of the door and winds around the hall like a loft, perching above the two kitchen entrances. At the far end of the loft, a heavy wooden door marks the entrance to Fedugrun's bedroom.

The table is set, but the meal is crawling with flies and several of the dishes look dusty. The roast is turning a sickly grey, the rye bread is hard and brittle, and the horn contains ripe-smelling milk. The entire house smells strongly of rotting meat, though the party gets the sense that the uninviting meal can't be entirely responsible for the pervasive stench.

FEDUGRUN

Fedugrun is a troubled man with heavy eyes and broad, stooping shoulders. He's very unkempt, even if expecting guests. From his first appearance, it's clear that he has experienced something terrible and is still burdened by it. He is a **veteran**, but wears no armor.

After a brief introduction and invitation to spend the night, Fedugrun doesn't speak unless spoken to. He shares the following information with the party, whether at the door or over a late supper.

Fedugrun begins the interaction with the following information. A **DC 16 Wisdom (Insight) check** reveals that he is lying in both cases.

- His wife Benhalgë (who may or may not be known to the party) is sleeping upstairs. She's been very melancholy and reclusive since the stillbirth of her child last winter.
- The stench in the house is from a cow that he slaughtered last week that went uneaten. Previous guests canceled their visit and he hasn't had time to clear the carcass from the kitchen.

The following information is true (as far as Fedugrun knows), and will hold up to investigation or further questioning.

- The closest settlement is about ten days east of here, a small town called Suvjil.
- The woods nearby are dangerous, and shouldn't be explored. Spirits of the dead walk there.
- Yesterday, he discovered the dead horses in the stable. He believes his farmhands have cleared the corpses out, but doesn't seem much bothered if told that this is not true.

- His two farmhands, Gogen and Almut, are terrible help. They're wicked and lazy, but are all he can get in these wild parts. He warns the party not to make trouble with them. Last spring they killed the third farmhand in a drunken brawl.
- Despite the limited help, Fedugrun's crops are growing well. He suspects there is some unnatural power behind it.

If asked about his dreadful appearance or the sad state of the farm, Fedugrun puts the blame on overwork and lack of help since his wife's melancholy began

A QUIET SUPPER

Fedugrun sulkily invites the party to settle in and have a simple meal: stale cheese on barley-bread with smoked bacon and near-sour milk. He himself has already eaten, so he leaves them to it and goes upstairs.

Fedugrun tells them they'll sleep on the floor of the main hall by the fire. If anyone suggests sleeping outdoors, he forbids it, warning that the grounds aren't safe. If caught outdoors by night, the dead will strangle them. He likewise asks them not to disturb his wife Benhalgë, who is upstairs asleep. If asked about Benhalgë's health, he reports that she hasn't been herself since the death of their child. She has fever-fits and sleeps most of the time.

What's for Dinner? During the course of the meal, have the players each make a **DC 14 Intelligence** saving throw. On a success, the character simply can't shake the feeling that something is watching them.

A character that fails bites into their food to feel a sharp pain in their mouth. They look down to see that the food is actually a pile of broken glass. Upon realizing this, the character takes 2d6 damage that seems like slashing damage, but is actually psychic damage from an illusion. If the different damage type would change the amount taken, be sure to modify it and tell the player the correct amount.

Characters unaffected by the haunting don't notice anything other than the reactions of the affected characters. Still, hold off describing the scene from the unaffected characters' view until the players know the whole thing was an illusion.

After 1 minute, or once they've used an action to make a successful **DC 14 Intelligence (Investigation)** check, the affected characters see that the glass they ate was actually food and the whole experience was an illusory haunting.

This haunting sets up the other queer events that will transpire during the night. There's no need to spend too much time on these hauntings, but the goal is to keep the players guessing what's real and what's not.

NIGHT TERRORS

Once the party has finished eating or begun to settle in, the character with the highest passive Perception hears a child crying somewhere outside the longhouse. They may wish to explore the various areas of the farm, despite Fedugrun's warning. If so, the crying moves from location to location, always seeming just at the next spot, until the character either visit each place, or grow tired of following the illusory sound.

If they choose to ignore the sound, you can instead draw them outside with **1d4+1 ghosts**, which appear at midnight and employ hit-and-run tactics to lead them from location to location. Either way, the hauntings in this section occur throughout the night as the party navigates the areas of the farm. If the players are insistent on remaining inside, the ghost attack or hauntings can happen in the hall while they rest.

Midnight Cold. Despite the warm season, the grounds get extremely cold at midnight. Characters notice the change quickly, and if away from a heat source begin to suffer the effects of extreme cold. These conditions last three hours.

Field of Spirits. After midnight, shadowy figures become visible in all three fields. Some watch the house motionlessly, while others seem to be harvesting. The figures congregate most thickly around the northeast corner of the rye field. If approached, these figures seem to drift off into the night faster than they can be chased, or else disappear altogether in the darkness.

Conspiracy of Ravens. At a moment of seeming quiet or stillness, **10 swarms of ravens** fly into the midst of the characters from thin air, filling the room or flapping about them in a cloud of frantic pecking. The ravens attack the characters until one swarm has been defeated, at which point they wheel off and simply circle the air above the party for the rest of the night.

Threatening Darkness. When the characters seem to be handling things confidently, all nonmagical light around them becomes extinguished as if the *darkness* spell had been cast on each character. The effect lasts for 10 minutes, during which time a disembodied voice whispers personalized threats to each of them that no one else hears. The voice seems to come from directly beside their ears, and they can feel the breath of the whisperer insisting they leave the house.

Waking Dreams. This haunting may occur to each of the characters in turn if they sleep during a long rest anywhere on Fedugrun's property. If the party remains awake, one or several of them may turn a corner and find themselves in a group dream without remembering falling asleep.

The dreamers see themselves as walking (or waking up) in a dark, stormy moor. The wind howls through the dry bushes and wild ponies batten about in the distance. It's snowing, but as the flurries melt into rain, a dim vision formulates in the sky—three colossal, wild-eyed women stare down at the dreamers and begin to cackle. Their laughs are like distant thunder and their fingers reach down like lightning.

The whole scene is surreal, but don't immediately tell the players that it's a dream. Let them think they've been transported somewhere unfamiliar and terrible. With a furious crack the lightning strikes them, and they wake up as they each take 1d6 psychic damage.

Characters who weren't included in this dream-haunting simply see the dreamers standing or lying where they were, in a deep, unconscious sleep. Those who experienced the haunting cannot benefit from a long rest until the following dusk.

THE KITCHEN

The kitchen, while messy, contains no rotten meat to speak of. Characters entering know immediately that Fedugrun was lying. In fact, the rotten meat smell is fainter here than in the rest of the longhouse.

A small trapdoor in the ceiling of the kitchen leads up into Fedugrun's bedroom.

THE BEDROOM

If the party attempts to get a glimpse at the bedroom (against Fedugrun's wishes), they can access it one of three ways.

Loft Door. The door at the top of the stairs is creaky, and will make enough noise to automatically wake Fedugrun if he's asleep in there. It's up to you how much of the room the players are able to glimpse before he flies at them in a rage and slams the door. A character might be able to prevent him from forcing the door shut, in which case Fedugrun will become violent, only backing down once he has lost half his hit points.

Trap Door. The kitchen ceiling contains a small trapdoor that leads directly to the far corner of the bedroom, about 10 feet from the foot of the bed. Medium creatures must squeeze to fit through, then make a **DC 10 Strength (Athletics) check** to lift

themselves up. Large creatures won't fit through the trapdoor at all.

Bedroom Window. The open-air window in the bedroom sits about 12 feet from the ground. It's boarded up from the inside, but a strong character could attempt to push the boards back with a **DC 14 Strength check**. If no effect prevents the sound from the reaching inside the room (requiring a *silence* spell or similar effect), a **DC 20 Dexterity (Stealth) check** is required from the character removing the boards. A failure on this check will alert Fedugrun to their presence.

Benhalgë. Inside the bedroom, Fedugrun sleeps in a fur-lined chair between the door and the bed. In the bed lies the corpse of Benhalgë. Her face is drawn back in a stiff expression of horror and her bloodstained legs are propped up as if she's about to give birth. It's clear that she's been dead for some time, and is herself the source of the smell of rotten meat.

A successful **DC 12 Intelligence (Medicine) check** reveals that the poor woman died in childbirth, and hasn't been moved since that time (about seven months). An **Investigation** check of the same DC uncovers no evidence that the child was ever delivered, dead or alive.

A successful **DC 14 Dexterity (Stealth) check** will ensure that characters in the bedroom don't waken Fedugrun. If he does wake, he reacts violently unless a character succeeds on a **DC 18 Charisma check**, benefiting from proficiency in either Persuasion or Intimidation.

FEDUGRUN'S SECRET

Fedugrun is unarmed and wears no armor. If confronted about his wife's body, he will go wild and attack the party in a fit of rage until he loses half his hit points. Once he's been physically subdued, he simply weeps and pleads with the characters to forgive him.

If pressed to tell them what happened, Fedugrun reveals the following.

- When he was a boy of 10, Fedugrun discovered a passage through the wood into a strange, dreamlike moor that changed each time he visited it.
- On one of his many explorations there, he found an abandoned cottage, where three beautiful women lay naked and chained inside an iron stove.
- The women begged him to free them. When the master came home, he would use their rage to fuel the furnace and warm his cottage. But the master was away. Fedugrun agreed to help them.

- In return for his help, the women fawned over the child and seduced him. When he said he was only a boy, they responded, “What does it matter if our lover is 10 or 100, when we are old as the sky?”
- Fedugrun returned home changed. He only dimly remembered the experience, though the women came to him in dreams, putting black rings on his fingers and dressing him in fine robes.
- After the clan wars claimed his parents, brothers, and his youth, Fedugrun settled back home, marrying Benhalgë. Trouble soon followed.
- His young wife knew nothing of the women in his dreams, but from the moment they married, the farm began to wither. Strange people could be seen in the fields at night. The land twisted and changed from one day to the next.
- Benhalgë was tormented with hallucinations and paranoid delusions. Slowly Fedugrun realized that she was being punished—by his first wives.
- When winter came, Benhalgë went into premature labor with their first child, and lost all that remained of her mind. She wailed day and night with hardly a breath.
- After two full days of labor, the midwife arrived from Suvjil. Examining the poor woman, she insisted that Benhalgë had never been pregnant. A few hours later, she died.
- Fedugrun was left in disoriented agony. He barely remembers a day from then to now. All he can recall are the vivid, torturous dreams of the three women handing him tokens of their forgiveness.
- For some reason, he is unable to leave the grounds. Every time he tries, he find himself wandering the hidden moors, only to stumble back into the rye field.
- He is convinced that the women are dead spirits, and that their mysterious moor is Sivenheim, the realm of the dead.

Elves, fey creatures, or those with proficiency in Arcana, History, or Religion ascertain that the woods must contain a passage into Iltallach, the realm of Faerie. By extension, the three brides are most likely hags or sorceresses that employ powerful illusion magic.

Fedugrun is noticeably comforted by sharing his dark secret, and now asks the characters to help him escape. It is clear the farm is besieged by perilous magic.

ILTALLACH

If the characters decide to escort Fedugrun from the farm, the **ghosts** of Gogen and Almut (the farmhands whose corpses adorn the storehouse) will attempt to stop them before they leave the house. They are both under the enslavement of the three fey women, and will possess Fedugrun’s body as a means of keeping him on the grounds. During such an encounter, Benhalgë will also rise from the dead as a **ghast** and support the ghosts.

If the players instead wish to proactively confront the force behind the hauntings, they can wander the woods, searching for an entrance to Iltallach. If at any point they leave the grounds of the farm, all effects of the hauntings immediately end, but Fedugrun will be teleported into Iltallach if he attempts to go with them.

LOST IN ILTALLACH

After transitioning from the woods to the world of Iltallach, characters will see the same landscape described under the Waking Dreams haunting. This time, though, it’s not a dream.

It’s snowing on the dimly lit moor, lightly obscuring everything. The cold will force characters to begin suffering the effects of extreme cold. The moor itself is miles wide, but there are areas of forest half a mile away that might provide shelter from the snow.

To return to the Material Realm, characters must search for a dimensional passage to the farm using skills, magic, or relying on luck. If they explore the moor for at least 1 hour, roll 1d6 + the number of hours spent there. If the result is 6 or higher, the characters stumble on a passage back to Fedugrun’s farm. They’re back in their own world, but the toll taken on them by the cold of Iltallach might be devastating.

The Fey Women. After 3 hours, the fey women become aware of the party’s presence on the moor. If the characters are lost without knowledge of the fey women’s existence, the women might appear to them as friends or attempt to separate and seduce them with use of *minor illusion*, *phantasmal force*, or *hallucinatory terrain*.

The three fey women are **elf warlocks** (in service to an Archfey night hag named Tingrim Hurcassit, the merchant of forgotten dreams). Each has 49 hit points and an armor class of 14. One has a Pact of the Chain familiar: a sprite. Their spell slots have mostly been expended in keeping the farm under the influence of their illusions, leaving each with the following spells and slots available at the time the players first encounter them:

Cantrips (at will): *dancing lights, eldritch blast, message, mage hand, minor illusion, prestidigitation, ray of frost*

1st–5th level (1 5th-level slot): *animate dead, crown of madness, darkness, dominate person, fog cloud, hallucinatory terrain, invisibility, phantasmal force, phantasmal killer, unseen servant*

Combat. If the characters have made it clear that they're antagonistic, the fey women will make a final stand with a tactical use of *dominate person* on the most physically imposing character of the group. They themselves attempt to remain hidden as much as they can, only revealing themselves long enough to cast a spell or attack before getting out of sight.

If the party manages to draw the fey women back to the Material Realm, the fight will be a bit easier. The fey women lose access to their 5th-level spell slots if they venture out of the moor.

Once the characters have defeated two of the fey women, the remaining one will try to take control of Fedugrun with the *dominate person* spell (or, if the battle happens on the farm, by possessing him with one of the farmhand ghosts). Once he is controlled, she'll command him to approach and take her hand. If he reaches her while charmed or possessed, they take hands and both disappear. All the magical effects at the farm will end, but Fedugrun will be lost.

Rewards. Award the party 800 XP for each of the fey women they defeat.

THE NEST

Adventurers exploring Ittallach with a successful **DC 14 Wisdom (Survival) check** find a clearing in the woods where an 60-foot-tall willow tree stands high above the rest of the forest. At its top is a tall, thin structure like a house woven from the branches themselves, and draped prettily with fine green cloth.

Characters may climb the willow tree with a successful **DC 10 Strength (Athletics) check**, but about halfway up the branches, they will need to also succeed on a **DC 14 Dexterity** saving throw or be shoved by an invisible ward, falling 30 feet to the ground and taking 3d6 bludgeoning damage.

If they make it to the entrance of the willow's woven crown, characters can see a nest of sorts. Through an oval opening comes a very faint yellow light. Inside is a ghostly infant wrapped in a *cloak of elvenkind*. The baby looks like the spirit of a human boy and appears to be sleeping.

Any moderate sound wakes the baby up. It looks up knowingly at the characters and asks (in a voice unnaturally clear and eloquent for a child) if it's time to go home yet. He may inquire where those horrible women are who captured him, and if he'll ever see mommy and daddy like they promised.

This is the spirit of Fedugrun's child that was killed and captured before he could be born. The fey women seem to have treated him well, perhaps intending that he become their own child. If held in the cloak, the baby can be carried. Should the party bring him back to the farm, the boy's spirit will meet his father and say goodbye before passing into the Spirit Realm (leaving the cloak of elvenkind behind).

The fey women see the boy's spirit has been disturbed after 10 minutes, accelerating their confrontation with the party. They will furiously try to destroy the baby before anyone else can have him. The child has 3 hit points, an armor class of 8, and no attacks. He is resistant to acid, fire, lightning, thunder damage, as well as bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks.

WRAP-UP

This adventure may end tragically, depending on the fate of Fedugrun and his unborn child. The adventurers may wish to explore the world of Ittallach, either searching for Fedugrun or looking to learn the perilous secrets of the Fey. Such pursuits are beyond the scope of this adventure.

Ittallach is full of mysterious and unexplained magic. The Fey are wanton and cruel as children, with a hatred as intense as their passion. They tend to look at mortals as playthings. A collective madness has hold over the world and its denizens, stemming from the poisoned mind of Forlortha, its deranged goddess.

Allow the players to finish any exploration or investigation of the farm they wish to make before leaving. This is a good place to tie up loose ends or confusions about what they just experienced, especially if they never fully explored the grounds beyond the farmhouse. Fedugrun may wish to abandon the farm and follow the party. Perhaps instead he only desires death.

REWARDS

Defeating all three fey women is a quest worth 750 XP, plus 200 XP each for saving Fedugrun or his son's spirit.