

THE WITCH OF UNDERWILLOW



BY MERRIC BLACKMAN

A short adventure for 1st to 3rd-level characters



**CIRREM'S
TOWER**

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Introduction

The Witch of Underwillow is an adventure for four to six characters of levels 1-3. The expected playing time is about 2 hours.

The adventure includes a few opportunities for the players to misconstrue what is occurring. It is up to you to determine the true motivations of the witch; the basic adventure assumes that she wishes to lure the party into her clutches to dispose of them, but you might prefer to use her as a potential ally and patron who is testing the competence of the adventurers. A number of suggestions of alternative ways the adventure could proceed are given in an appendix.

In my campaign, her motivations were never revealed, as the characters killed her before she could even negotiate with them – the perils of trigger-happy players. On the other hand, they might have just been sick of the trials she'd put them through...

Adventure Background

There is a small village on the edge of a great forest. In the forest lives a witch; the Witch of Underwillow. Her given name, not that most people use it often, or indeed know it, is Katerina.

Katerina, early in her life, swore service to dark powers, and is known – and feared – by many in the village. On occasion, she sends minions – typically wolves – into the village to do her bidding. The villagers follow her commands and are silent to outsiders.

Katerina recently learnt that a party of novice adventurers were coming to “her” village. She knew full well what happens to witches who let adventurers get too powerful, so decided to lure the adventurers to her lair, weaken them with some tests, and finally kill them herself (if the tests don't do it first).

Katerina also gives the tests to anyone trying to ask a boon of her, as she values her privacy. That they can be used to weaken adventurers is just a bonus.

To lure the adventurers in, she arranged for her wolves to steal a prized possession from a simple-minded woman living on the edge of town, and instructed the woman's brother to hire the adventurers to find it.

Synopsis

The adventurers come to a small village on the edge of a great forest, where they learn that the baby daughter of the innkeeper's niece has been stolen. Unbeknownst to them, the baby is actually just a doll!

Their investigation of her home reveals that the child has been dragged by wolves into the forest. The adventurers are attacked by wolves as they follow the trail, before finally finding that the trail leads under a willow tree on the edge of a stream.

Beneath the tree, they discover two tests they must pass before they can recover the two halves of a magic key that leads to the witch's quarters.

Once they've dealt with the witch – in whatever way they deem necessary – they can return to the village, although a last opponent, a great dire wolf, will bar their way...



The Stolen Child

You have been in better inns, but at the end of a long day's travel, this one is good enough. The fire is warm, the ale is plentiful, and the food surprisingly good. A few merchants and their guards mingle amongst the villagefolk, and the innkeeper, who introduced himself as Imre Fekete, is very good at anticipating everyone's desires.

The front door bangs open suddenly, revealing a distraught young woman. "My daughter!" she cries. "They've taken my daughter!"

The young woman's name is Marika Tothné, the niece of the innkeeper. Marika is not married and does not actually have a daughter; instead she has a doll that she refers to as her child. She is very distressed and a little simple; although she is capable of looking after herself, she gets confused about what is real at times. If pressed about what happened to her, she explains that wolves took her baby from the back yard of her property while she was inside getting some more clothes pegs for her washing.

Imre knows that Marika doesn't actually have a daughter, but he has been ordered by the witch to play along, and to make sure that the newly-arrived adventurers search for the missing child. (He also doesn't want to distress Marika further). If the adventurers do not appear willing to just rescue Marika's "daughter", he will offer them a reward of 50 gold pieces.

If the adventurers detect that Imre is not being truthful about the "baby" – you could require a DC 16 Wisdom (Insight) check to determine the deception, possibly using Passive Insight – then Imre will reveal that several travellers have reported that the local wolves have been acting strangely of late, and he wants to get to the bottom of it. If the adventurers are still suspicious, and can persuade him to tell with a successful DC 13 Charisma (Persuasion) or DC 18 Charisma (Intimidation) check, he will tell them about the witch; although he is terrified

that doing so will cause his family to be killed by the witch.

Marika's property is on the edge of town, abutting the woods. The adventurers can get directions to it from Imre.

The other villagers are concerned by this happenstance, but none are brave enough to enter the woods alongside the adventurers, and the merchants and their guards believe they shouldn't get involved with the affairs of strangers: they have goods to deliver!

Marika's House

Marika's house would have been a delightful place when it was new – two or more centuries ago. Unfortunately, time has not been kind to the building. The chimney is askew, the guttering gaping, and the roof doesn't look that watertight.

You can see a line in the back yard from which a few items of ragged clothing hang. Nearby lies an overturned basket, large enough to hold a young child.

A dark forest runs along the edge of the yard.

The clothes line contains clothes both for a woman and a young child. The basket is lined with a blanket, and the adventures can easily discern wolf tracks all around it, as well as signs of something having been dragged away from it. The trail is quite clear, and adventurers can determine which direction the wolves went without needing to make a check.

A successful DC 10 Wisdom (Survival) check will determine that whatever was dragged away was wrapped in a blanket; if the check beats a DC 15, then the presence of ten wolves can be determined, two of which seem to have been dragging the child, while the others accompanied them. The investigation will reveal that the child does not appear to be harmed, as there is no blood.

The interior of the house displays the life of a single mother. Most of the house is quite messy, although there are areas, such as the spice racks and kitchen table, where some semblance of order has been achieved.

If the adventurers search the house, it may be possible for them to determine that the “child” is actually a doll. I suggest a DC 18 Intelligence (Investigation) check.

Into the Woods

The sun has no more than an hour to go before it sets as you head into the woods, following the trail of the wolves. The woods feel old; the trees loom high overhead, and brambles and thickets are everywhere. The wolves, however, have followed a path that avoids the worst of the brambles; perhaps an animal trail of some kind?

Four **wolves** have split off from their pack to ambush any followers. Two wolves stand on the trail ahead of the adventurers, while each of the other wolves are hidden in the forest on either side of the trail, ready to ambush the adventurers from behind.

A successful DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check will notice the wolves on the trail, but a DC 18 Wisdom (Perception) check is required to notice the wolves in the forest.

If you'd like to heighten the tension a little, you can describe how there's one pair of eyes gleaming at the party from the dim forest in front of them... then describe it joined by a second pair of eyes. And you can take the number of eyes watching the party even higher if you believe the characters are strong enough to take on additional wolves.

Four wolves can be a difficult encounter for a first-level party. If the party does badly, all the wolves flee when two of their number are slain, and individual wolves flee when their hit points are reduced to half or lower of their maximum hit points. A higher-level party can handle

more wolves, but I wouldn't add more than two – the effect of Pack Tactics means that wolves are a lot more dangerous than you might initially assume. This encounter should let the party know that the adventure is dangerous, not end it when it has barely started!

Underwillow

Ahead, you can hear the sound of burbling water. Soon, a river flanked by overhanging trees comes into view in the fading light. A great willow tree dominates your view, and it seems that the trail leads to a dark hole beneath its trunk.

The entrance is shrouded by a wall of hanging roots that will part for the adventurers as they approach. The roots are unnaturally tough, and can only be severed if they take ten or more slashing or fire damage in a single hit. The roots will lose all magical resistances if the witch is slain.

Most of the remaining wolf tracks divert at the entrance; only the two wolves dragging the bundle go down below (and can be determined to have left without the bundle later, with a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Survival) check).

The adventurers may determine that the realm below the willow does not entirely exist on the material plane; parts of the witch's chambers are contained in the Feywild, although this makes no difference to the conduct of the adventure. It just means the chambers take up more space than would logically be beneath the willow!

Beyond the wall of roots, the tunnel slopes downward at a 30-degree angle for about forty feet, before levelling off and continuing for a further twenty feet before ending at three wooden doors.

The doors to the left and right are unlocked; if the adventurers listen, they hear no noises beyond. The door straight ahead is magically locked and possesses a golden key-hole. This

door cannot be unlocked nor broken down by any means other than its proper key (which can be found beyond the other doors). If the characters listen, a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check will hear a female voice singing a lullaby. The witch will not respond to any knocking or shouting; she only wishes to deal with “worthy” petitioners, which is to say, those who have overcome her challenges to find the key. However, if the adventurers use a *knock* spell (which will fail to open the door), they’ll hear her laughing at their efforts.

Behind the Left Door

Behind the door is a large room, the ceiling and walls festooned with roots. After ten feet of level ground in front of you, the floor drops away into a pit, twenty feet deep, its bottom containing many bones, the flesh scoured from them.

On the other side of the pit, thirty feet away, you can see a ledge. On the wall there is a golden key.

A great root, perhaps one foot in diameter, forms an unstable bridge between the door and the key.

Crossing the root is likely to be easier than the players will believe. Using it as a tightrope is possible, and requires a successful DC 15 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check; treat the root as difficult terrain. A failure on this check pitches the character into the pit below.

A more sensible way of crossing the root is for the character to wrap their hands and legs around it and progress in that fashion. This requires a successful DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check for each round of movement, but due to the prone nature of the movement, treat it as one foot move for each three feet of movement expended. Once again, a failed check pitches the character into the pit.

Climbing into and out of the pit is actually quite easier, requiring only a successful DC 8 Strength (Athletics) check. The greater danger comes from the bones, which assemble into

skeletons when characters enter the pit. There are twelve skeletons in total, although they do not all animate instantly. One skeleton animates immediately for each character entering the pit. While characters remain in the pit, one additional skeleton animates each round thereafter until all have animated.

The skeletons will climb out of the pit (requiring no check) to follow and attack characters.

If a character’s fall into the pit is arrested (from a well-placed rope, for instance), the skeletons still begin to animate.

The key is easily removed from where it hangs. When examined, it proves to be half a key, with protrusions indicating where it can be matched with its other half. If the adventurers match both key-halves, they magically merge to become one key, which can be used to unlock the witch’s door.

Behind the Right Door

Behind the door is a room of about thirty-feet square. It is dominated by two armoured statues, each of which has a golden key hanging from a chain around its neck. Both stand on pedestals with the word “False” written on them.

A short column stands between the statues. A plaque inset into it reads, “The statues can only answer ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. You may ask only one question”.

Perceptive players may realise this is a variant of the old Knights and Knaves puzzle. Unfortunately, it’s complicated by the fact that neither statue actually has the required key hanging around its neck; instead, the key is set into a niche behind the plaque on the pedestal, which a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check can detect.

It’s likely that most players will try a variant of “Do you have the correct key” or “Does your partner have the correct key”. The statues will always lie. The best question to ask is “Do

either of you have the correct key”, but it’s almost certain that the players won’t think of that.

If the adventurers attempt to remove the key from either statue, they both animate and attack. Treat them as two suits of **animated armor**.

A group of first-level adventurers is likely to find such a battle overwhelming. In this case, although both statues animate, they are treated as one creature – they share hit points with the damage that one takes appearing on the other. Only one of the statues may attack each round, except in the case of a multiattack when each statue attacks once.

The gold keys the statues are wearing do not fit together or with the other half-keys, but they are worth 10 gold pieces each.

The correct key is easily removed from the secret niche; the statues will not attack as this is done. When examined, it proves to be half a key, with protrusions indicating where it can be matched with its other half. If the adventurers match both key-halves, they magically merge to become one key, which can be used to unlock the witch’s door.



The Witch of Underwillow

The witch’s lair is full of clutter, with the true dimensions of the room being lost behind a lot of freestanding shelves, tables and piles of things both valuable and strange. You hear the sound of crying from a nearby cot.

The witch herself stands behind a table upon which are piled several vials. She has long auburn hair, and is dressed in a grey woollen dress, spotted with mud. Nearby, a large wolf studies you intelligently.

Exactly how **Katerina, the Witch of Underwillow**, reacts to the adventurers is up to you. Her pet **worg**, Tural, follows her every command, although he will happily act independently to protect his mistress.

Katerina has lured the adventurers here to dispose of them. She has been observing them in a **scrying crystal** as they’ve explored her lair, thus gaining an understanding of their abilities and tactics. If the adventurers attempt to negotiate with her, she will lure them into a false sense of security, perhaps offering the baby back, before attacking with surprise if she succeeds with a Charisma (Deception) check against the adventurers’ passive insight scores.

If Katerina begins to lose the combat, she will warn the adventurers that she serves powerful spirits who will seek their revenge on them.

The crying baby is actually Marika’s doll, enchanted by the witch to cry occasionally when it is not being held.

The witch’s table holds three **potions of healing** and two **vials of alchemist’s fire**, in addition to a number of valuable potion ingredients worth 50 gold pieces in total.

The floor is covered by thick rugs (bear pelts) worth 20 gold pieces, and the shelves hold a variety of keepsakes, trophies, strange roots, and scrolls of bad poetry. A wooden screen depicting a mountain view divides off her bed

and clothing chests, which hold both fine and utilitarian clothes worth 30 gold pieces if sold.

Returning to Town

The journey back to town would be simple, but for the presence of a **dire wolf** that ambushes the party if it can. (This is the third of the “there’s always a bigger wolf” encounters).

Why is there a dire wolf? If they slew Katerina, this is the revenge of the spirits she served. Alternatively, if Katerina has hired the adventurers, it has been sent by one of her rivals.

The dire wolf follows the party stealthily for a while, before leaping out to attack the weakest adventurer; it makes a Dexterity (Stealth) check against the adventurers’ Passive Perception rolls to remain undetected. By now it is night time, so take that into account when determining perception scores.

You may wish to have the dire wolf speak to the party in a deep, guttural voice, taunting them as it tries to tear them apart.

A third-level party could possibly face two dire wolves, but given the damaged state the group is in after the rest of the adventure, you might want to go easy on them!

Ending the Adventure

If the players return the doll to Marika, she will be overjoyed, showering the adventurers with attention and gratitude, which may be just a bit too much for certain people. Marika *does* cook well, however, and gourmands are likely to be happy. She will resist any explanations that her doll is not a real child.

Imre, in addition to the 100 (or 150) gold piece reward, gives the adventurers free room and board at his inn for the next week, as well as offering them an old map drawn on parchment... said to be to an old treasure

hidden away in the forest. (You can determine what it actually leads to...)

If the adventurers do not return Marika’s doll, she is inconsolable. Imre respects that the adventurers did try to find it, but expects them to leave town soon, in case the disappointed Marika tries to get revenge for the loss of her “daughter”.

Variations

This adventure can be run in several different ways; here are a few variations you could make to the basic plot.

The Doll – The basic plot has the players seeking a doll, although they believe it to be a baby. The design intention is to keep the players a little off-balance and to get them used to the idea that not everything is as it seems. Having Marika as delusional also brings in some of the horror theme of the *Ravenloft* setting.

The more traditional approach would be to make the baby real, and Katerina has stolen it to raise it as her own (in the way of the witches).

Katerina could also have taken the doll to give it a voice (so it cries), but the delusional Marika doesn’t realise that Katerina is doing her a favour; in this case, you have the potential of role-playing with a kind-hearted Katerina at the adventure’s climax. In this case, perhaps Marika’s memories have been tampered with by one of Katerina’s rivals; the same one who sends the dire wolf after the adventurers.

The “Kindly” Witch - If you would like to use Katerina as a patron of the adventurers, she could have arranged all of this as a test of their competence. Marika and Imre are fully complicit in the scheme. In this case, if the players kill Katerina, they’ll be very hostile

towards the players. Treat Marika as a **commoner** and Imre as a **veteran** in this case.

Katarina could actually be good-aligned, or perhaps she's still evil, but wishes to manipulate the adventurers for her own ends.

Further Quests – Katarina has a rival named Charani who is attuned to birds and lives at the top of a tree in the deep forest. Katarina wishes Charani destroyed, either by killing her or by having her tree cut down.

Katarina also requires the gathering of strange ingredients – the tongue of a cockatrice, the feather of a harpy, and the tooth of a werewolf, for instance. She may send the characters on a quest to gather the ingredients.

As you can see, there are a number of possibilities as to how you could frame the adventure... and likely more I haven't thought of. Have fun with it and enjoy!

Appendix: New Magic Items

SCRYING CRYSTAL

Wondrous item, rare (requires attunement)

A scrying crystal is a lesser version of the crystal ball. It is typically about one or two inches in diameter and can be held in one hand. While holding it, you can use the *clairvoyance* spell (save DC 15), no more than three times per day. While the spell is active, you may change the location of the sensor as an action, as long as it follows the normal restrictions on its placement.

Appendix: Monsters

KATARINA, WITCH OF UNDERWILLOW

Medium humanoid (human), chaotic evil

Armor Class 10

Hit Points 16 (3d8+3)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
7 (-2)	11 (+0)	13 (+1)	14 (+2)	11 (+0)	12 (+1)

Skills Arcana +4, Perception +2

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 12

Languages Common

Challenge 1/2 (100 XP)

Spellcasting. Katarina is a 3rd-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 12, +4 to hit with spell attacks). Katarina has the following wizard spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *mage hand, prestidigitation, ray of frost*
1st level (4 slots): *animal friendship, sleep, thunderwave*
2nd level (2 slots): *alter self, invisibility*

ACTIONS

Claws (Requires Alter Self). *Melee Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d6+1) slashing damage. This attack is magical.

Dagger. *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +2 to hit, reach 5 ft. or range 20/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 2 (1d4) piercing damage.

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