



wretched

Something dwells in the reeking swamp near the village of Fimmoran. The locals say it's a witch who has cursed their children with an unnatural disease. The people of Fimmoran want the crone's head and are willing to pay for it. There is a twist in this black-hearted tale, though—a twist the characters will discover when they venture into the swamp. The adventure ends when the characters determine the true cause of the children's sickness and deal with the repercussions of that discovery.

Wretched is an adventure for expert characters who are willing to get their hands—and boots—very, very dirty. It was written as one of the Stretch Goals for Rob Schwalb's wicked and amazing Kickstarter. I count myself fortunate to join him and many others as we scurry futilely beneath the *Shadow of the Demon Lord*.

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shadow of the demon lord



ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Fimorran is a small village of a few hundred souls at the edge of a vast fen. It can be placed anywhere on the continent of Rûl, but is well suited for the region between Caecras and the Low Country.

Most townsfolk earn their living by working the brackish waters of the fen as fishers, and others make ends meet by cutting wood and hunting game in the nearby forests. A few venture beyond the marsh to collect eels, snails, and other delicacies in the deeper swamp. Some meager crops grow nearby as well, marked by haphazardly placed straw scarecrows.

A town council runs the town in name, but in reality the members rarely meet and are happy to let Sheriff Dalgren see to the day-to-day affairs.

CHILDREN IN PERIL

Two weeks ago, the children of Fimorran came down with a terrible fever. The town's priest called on the New God to save the little ones, but when his prayers had no effect, he declared that the disease was the work of witchcraft.

The Fimorrans have long known that a horrible old witch lives in the deep swamp. The few who have encountered her say the crone's name is Grûlag—and she is not friendly in the least. Although Grûlag has not troubled Fimorran before now, many in the community have preached that it was only a matter of time before the hag turned her attention in their direction. And now the townsfolk have become convinced that the witch must be responsible for this affliction.

Sheriff Dalgren has offered a bounty to anyone who can bring an end to this wretched hag, undoing her evil deeds and saving the children.

GETTING STARTED

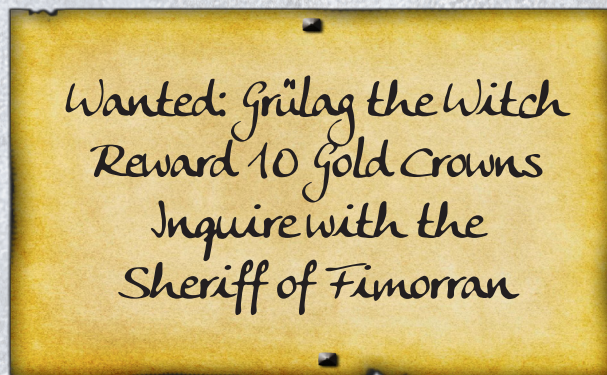
To get things under way, the characters need to find out about Fimorran's plight. This information could come to them from a wandering stranger who has been through Fimorran recently and knows about the sick children. The traveler might also know about the bounty being offered, or might not be aware of it.

Optionally, you can simply proceed with the following scene, which assumes that the characters are already close to the village when they discover a sign that Fimorran needs help.



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The adventure begins with the group traveling on a footpath through a forest along the edge of a marsh. Late in the day, they spot a handwritten sign tacked to a tree. It reads:



Judging by its pristine condition, the sign was recently written on fresh parchment. Any character who has a wilderness profession, has traveled through this area before, or has a map knows the town's approximate location, which is about an hour from the point where the characters see the wanted poster. They reach the town in early afternoon.

FIMMORAN

The characters find Fimorran to be a small community with a few shops in the center and numerous houses beyond that area. A temple to the New God stands at the far end of the village, and in the middle are a store, a blacksmith, the sheriff's office, and a baker's shop. Only a tavern appears to be open, with a sign above its door that reads "The Tattered Net." If the characters try to inquire about the poster at the sheriff's office, they find it locked up tight.

THE TATTERED NET

True to its name, Fimorran's watering hole has a number of old nets hanging from the walls of the tavern. The menu includes several varieties of fish as well as frog's legs, eels, snails, and the like, for modest prices. Poultry is more expensive, and there's no beef or pork to be had.

The tavern has a few patrons, all of whom eye the characters as they enter. Some of the folk begin muttering among themselves. Not long afterward, a heavyset, hard-looking man approaches them with a nod. He says, "I'm Sheriff Dalgren. You look like experienced sorts. Are you interested in collecting a bounty?"

Assuming the group isn't dismissive or hostile, Dalgren continues. "We are beset by witchcraft. I can pay you 10 gold crowns plus food and lodging to solve our plight."

Dalgren waits for the characters to express interest, then goes on with his story.

"Two weeks ago many of our children came down with a terrible fever. The priest tried to cure it, but the miracles of the New God didn't work on our little ones.

“Clearly some curse is upon them. We believe it is the fault of a wretched witch that lives beyond the marshes in the deep swamp. Her name is Grūlag. We’ve known of her black sorcery for years and years, and some of us have long feared that the crone would do us harm eventually. Now it seems that day has come.”

“Some of our people are out looking for her even now, but they’re poorly suited for fighting such a creature. If your group can bring us her head and save our little ones, we’ll pay you everything I promised.”

The other locals in the tavern applaud the end of the sheriff’s speech and offer their encouragement to the characters.

THE PRIEST

If the characters seek out the priest, he can be found praying at the temple. Father Hining swears that his miracles usually cure the maladies that afflict the marsh folk, but not this one. He insists that the fever must be the work of dark forces.

THE CHILDREN

The characters can see some of the children if they like. Dalgren or the priest will accompany the characters to the houses of the afflicted children, all of which are on the outskirts of town. The children are nearly unconscious in their beds, tossing and turning in a raging fever while their worried parents dote over them. Most of the parents are simple fishers or swamp gatherers, fearful of the characters but hospitable, especially if they are told the strangers are there to help. None of them have any information that can help the group in their pursuit of Grūlag other than general rumors and dubious stories.

If anyone takes a tally, it appears that thirteen of the village’s young folk have been stricken with the fever. All are under twelve, and there is a near equal mix of boys and girls.

A MOTHER’S LOVE

One mother, Anastasia, becomes agitated as the group looks over her little Lucas. “Why aren’t you out there killing the witch now?” she asks. Soon she becomes even more relentless and irrational, calling the newcomers all sorts of names while Sheriff Dalgren or Father Hining attempts to calm her down. If any of the group are of a different ancestry from hers, she accuses them of being “blackhearts who don’t care for humans.”

Calming Anastasia down requires roleplaying with intimidation or persuasion—see Social Conflict in *Shadow of the Demon Lord*; she has scores of 10 in all four of her attributes. Characters make social attack rolls against Anastasia with 2 banes. She never relents, but can be driven off using deception and intimidation.

SECOND OPINION

Another villager, a skittish fishmonger named Ellsworth, is as upset about the fever as anyone else, but he doesn’t believe that the witch is responsible. Ellsworth is convinced that the scarecrows guarding the town’s crops have somehow become cursed and are the real source of the disease. Since Ellsworth started talking about tearing the straw men down, the farmers and Sheriff Dalgren have teamed up to keep him from doing any damage.

The characters might encounter Ellsworth as he comes into town to sell his wares, or they could hear about him from someone else if they visit the plots where the scarecrows stand. You can use Ellsworth as a red herring to add some depth to the situation (and to lend weight to the contention that the fever is not the witch’s doing).

WITCH HUNT

When the characters have finished with their investigations, or when the bedtime hour approaches, Sheriff Dalgren shows them to a small, empty lodging near the village usually reserved for traveling merchants. They can rest there in safety and store any gear they like. If the characters have horses, Dalgren arranges for their care at no cost—mounts aren’t usable in the swamp.

The rest of the night passes uneventfully.

Dalgren has a hearty breakfast brought to the group when they wake the next morning. As he eats with them, he says that three families have reported to him that their children have gotten worse overnight. Then he implores the characters to get on the witch’s trail as soon as possible. The best route to her domain, he says, is a path that trails around the marsh to the northwest. When the trail ends, the characters should head due north, making their way through the murk and mire of the deep swamp while looking for signs of Grūlag’s presence.

TO GRŪLAG’S LAIR

The air around the marsh is humid, and the mosquitos are thick. Large fish are occasionally seen in the brackish waters, greedily feeding on tadpole swarms or smaller fish that dart out from the thick reeds.

A forest of tangled trees edges the trail to the group’s right. Occasional sounds are heard coming from within, as if something is following the group by traveling through the cobwebbed branches. If the characters search the forest near the trail, they find nothing but nets of spiders’ webbing and freshly broken tree limbs. There is no sign of the group’s stalker, if one exists.

Eventually, the trail ends and the marsh meets an area of fetid ground dotted with cypress trees, marking the edge of Grūlag’s swamp.

REEKING AND SHRIEKING

Pushing north through the swamp is pure hell. Dank muck clings to boots, and the pungent odor of rot assaults

the nostrils. Solid ground is rare, so the group must push through the muck.

After an hour of travel in this fashion, the group is wading through a shin-deep pool of gray water when one of the characters (chosen randomly) steps on a pod of 2d6 + 3 immature shrieking eels (noncombatants, each with 5 in all attributes, Defense 10, and Health 1). The creatures are less than a foot long and are not dangerous, but the moment the designated character steps into their hole, the slimy things splash and wiggle frantically. Then they emit an ear-splitting shriek. Give the characters a moment to realize the danger and attempt to deal with it. If they act quickly, let there be a few moments of quiet—perhaps they silenced the creatures in time.

But of course they didn't. After 1d3 rounds of inactivity, 3 **swamp trolls** (see the end of the adventure for statistics) emerge from their hiding places and come lurching out of the gloom to attack. The trolls are hungry and fight until killed.

THE HAG'S HOVEL

Once the trolls are dealt with, the group can press on. After an hour or so, the character with the highest Perception score notices strange markings on the trees. Any character who studies the markings and gets a success on an Intellect challenge roll made with 1 bane can identify them as hex signs of some sort, protective wards, perhaps designed to ward off certain creatures of lower intelligence—such as trolls. A character who has magic as an area of scholarship in an academic profession automatically gets a success.

The characters can follow a trail of marked trees that leads to a clearing where a moss-covered hovel sits on a slight rise at the heart of the swamp. Pale smoke rises from a squat chimney, and the outside walls are covered in more bizarre sigils. Rabbits, giant frogs, leeches, and crows hang skinned or gutted on leather straps from racks around the hut. Skulls and tiny animal bones lie everywhere. Clearly, this is the lair of a witch.

Grülag hears the group tromping through the swamp long before they arrive and is ready for them. She stands at the door of her house, staff in hand, and challenges the intruders. She's an ugly woman with green-blue skin, dressed in brown rags. She leans on a hardwood staff

covered in strange runes and eldritch signs and decorated with tiny animal skulls hanging on leather straps. She screams, "What are you doing here? Get out of my swamp!"

If you see fit, the first character who tries to speak to the hag should receive Fortune. Grülag, however, is not much interested in discussion. She listens to whatever the newcomers have to say for a few moments, then screams again for them to leave. This time she adds, "*I warned you! This is my home! MY HOME!*" With that, she runs back into her hovel, screaming what can be taken only as incantations of foul black sorcery.



A heartbeat later, the shallow pools around the house begin to spout forth brown newts with soft, white bellies. Each one expands and rises, its torso curling upward to stand on two bent legs, becoming a grotesque combination of man and amphibian called a newtling (a new creature; see the end of the adventure for statistics). There are 2 newtlings for each character in the group.

Grülag fights from inside her home, firing blasts from her staff through the front window at anyone she can see. (See her statistics box at the end of the adventure.) To foil her tactics, the characters can flank the mound and break through its crude mud walls, or simply barge in through her front door to cut her down. Grülag isn't a particularly powerful foe in direct combat—she should be easily slain during the encounter. In fact, it's critical to the plot that she's killed and not merely captured or subdued in some way. Therefore . . .

When the death blow is struck (or she would be knocked unconscious or is about to be captured), Grülag falls backward and knocks a clay jar off a nearby shelf. The jar explodes on impact, and Grülag's mud hut becomes a massive bomb, throwing up flame and debris in a 20-yard radius centered on the jar. Each creature in the area takes 4d6 damage. This blast kills the remaining newtlings, their squirmy guts flying in all directions and covering anyone who survives the blast in gory mush. Characters in the area can make Agility challenge rolls and take half the damage on a success.

Grülag is also dead, of course. Her broken corpse—or her head—can now be taken back to Sheriff Dalgren to collect the promised bounty.

TREASURES

In addition to her relic, which is described at the end of the adventure, Grülag has three enchanted objects (which you can choose, devise, or determine randomly). All four of these items survived the blast, and they can be found with a simple search. In addition, a character who searches the ruins of Grülag's ruined home and achieves a success on a Perception challenge roll made with 1 bane turns up a cracked jug of a reeking mixture. It contains ground-up bloodworms, maggots, berries, and various leaves. A character who has the profession of apothecary, healer, or one similar automatically identifies the mess as a healing poultice with special properties as described below; anyone else can do the same by achieving a success on an Intellect challenge roll made with 1 bane. The jug contains 20 applications. A creature can use an action to apply the poultice to a living creature, causing that creature to heal damage equal to half its healing rate. The poultice can also be used to treat fevers, such as the affliction suffered by the children of Fimmoran. If it is used on them, the sickness fades over the next several hours, then disappears.

A MUDDY DISCOVERY

Once Grülag is defeated, the characters can take some proof of her death—such as her head—back to Fimmoran. It's up to you to determine if the return trek through the swamp results in any further encounters with trolls, larger shrieking eels, or other dangers.

In any event, when the group comes within a mile of Fimmoran on the return trip, the character with the highest Perception score spies something the characters missed

earlier. A footpath leads off the main trail, and small footprints going in both directions are visible in the dirt. If the characters follow the short detour, they come to a clearing filled with . . . men made from mud!

Though the characters might be alarmed at first, they quickly see that the "creatures" are inanimate. The low ground here is soft and muddy, and someone—children, almost certainly—has sculpted crude figures from the dank earth. Branches protrude from the torsos like arms, acorns serve for eyes, and red berries form the outline of their mouths.

Characters who inspect the berries can make Intellect challenge rolls to identify them. A character who has a wilderness profession makes the roll with 1 boon, while a character with the apothecary profession or a similar one automatically gets a success. A success reveals that the berries are a rare fruit called "blood bells" for their unusual shape and color. Blood bells are poisonous by contact or ingestion, resulting in increased heart rate, extreme fatigue, and a virulent fever. This sickness usually lasts several days and, like any fever, can be dangerous if untreated or the victim is infirm—or young.

Characters with the healer profession or a similar one who identify the berry know the most dangerous thing about blood bell poisoning is that it cannot be healed by magic—another sign of these apocalyptic and evil times.

From the number of footprints here, it's apparent that at least a dozen village children took part in creating the mud men. The berries, not the witch, are the source of the children's ills.

BACK TO TOWN

The characters likely now know the witch did not cause the children to become sick. What they do with this information is up to them. If they head back to town, night has fallen by the time they return. There, they can confront the sheriff or the priest and take issue with the village's hasty judgment of the hag, but of course they are just as guilty of killing her either way.

They can also attempt to question the children to ensure that they're the ones who made the mud men and touched the blood bells. Most are too groggy to answer coherently, but a few quiet nods confirm the group's suspicions.

Let this scene unfold however the players like, from a simple and successful investigation, to a heavily roleplayed moral argument, to accusations that might even lead to violence.

The moment the tension begins to wane, or two rounds after a fight breaks out, a horrible shout sounds throughout the village. "*MURDERERS! I COULD HAVE SAVED YOUR LITTLE BRATS! BUT YOU KILLED ME! NOW YOU WILL PAAAAAY!*"

A moment later the characters hear movement in the woods and the marsh around the town. Somewhere in the darkness a villager screams. Soon it becomes apparent to the characters that an army of freshly raised newtlings,

like the ones they saw at the hag's hovel, are attacking Fimorran. Some claw frantically at the humans, while others stagger forward already wounded, spilling their innards over those who fight back.

After a few rounds of assault by the newtlings, Grūlag's tattered spirit appears, having clawed its way free from Hell. She goes directly after whoever delivered the last blow against her in the swamp.

The immediate danger to the group are **2 newtlings** per character plus Grūlag's spirit (as a **wraith**). The rest of the village contends with the other newtlings. You don't have to roll dice for the fight ranging around the characters; just describe it.

There are two possible results of Grūlag's assault—either the group defeats her spirit, or she chases them down and sends them to their pitiful deaths.

If the characters are victorious, Grūlag's demise causes the remaining newtlings to burst open in a tidal wave of squirming gizzards. The surviving villagers stand in shock, eyes wide at the horror of what they have seen.

A child staggers into the carnage, a blonde-haired girl with sallow eyes. Black bile drips from her mouth. She falls to her knees, gives one last cough, and lies still on the ground.

If the group brought the poultice from Grūlag's hovel, they can use it to cure the children. Most of the children are those of the town's merchants, but the little blonde girl is Sheriff Dalgren's daughter. If he finds out the strangers have a cure for her, he'll stop at nothing to make sure she is the first one saved. Anastasia, the relentless mother, will do everything she can to ensure that her little Lucas is saved as well.

If the characters don't have the poultice, the little ones worsen and die within another day. The town grieves for a day or so and then shifts the blame to the characters for failing to act fast enough in dispatching the witch. The characters should feel unwelcome and be encouraged to move along.

NEW CREATURES

This adventure introduces several new creatures to *Shadow of the Demon Lord*. For guidance on how to read a creature's statistics box, see **chapter 10** in *Shadow of the Demon Lord*.

GRÜLAG

The mysterious old woman of the swamp, Grūlag has an unsavory reputation among the people of nearby Fimorran. Her past is a mystery, but she has lived in the swamp for generations, keeping the company of her weird creations. She's an ugly woman with green-blue skin, dressed in brown rags. She has a relic, the *Balefire Staff*, and three enchanted objects. She uses these items to protect herself from nosy neighbors and hungry trolls.

GRÜLAG

DIFFICULTY 25

Size 1 human

Perception 13 (+3)
Defense 12; **Health** 23
Strength 9 (-1), **Agility** 12 (+2), **Intellect** 10 (+0), **Will** 13 (+3)
Speed 10

ATTACK OPTIONS

Balefire Staff (melee) +1 (1d6 + 1)

SPECIAL ATTACKS

Balefire Grūlag looses a blast of howling green flame from her staff at a creature or object within medium range. Grūlag makes a Will attack roll against the target's Agility. On a success, the flame hits and the target takes 3d6 damage. In addition, a target that takes this damage must get a success on an Agility challenge roll or catch fire, taking 1d6 extra damage at the end of each round until it or another creature uses an action to put out the flames.

MAGIC (POWER 2)

Curse *hex* (3), *frighten* (2)

Nature *magic acorns* (3), *overgrowth* (2), *ensnaring vines* (1)

Transformation *mask* (3), *animal shape* (2), *bounding step* (2)

BALEFIRE STAFF

A crooked length of black wood festooned with eldritch signs, this relic functions as a staff. A creature that has a Power score of 1 or higher can use an action to loose a howling blast of green fire from the tip at a creature or object within medium range. The wielder makes a Will attack roll against the target's Agility. A success indicates the flame hits, and the target takes 1d6 damage plus 1d6 damage per point of Power. A creature that takes this damage must also get a success on an Agility challenge roll or catch fire, taking 1d6 damage at the end of each round until it or another creature uses an action to douse the flames. Each time a creature other than Grūlag uses the staff in this way, it must roll a d6. On an odd number, the staff cannot be used again until the creature completes a rest.

NEWTLING

Warped by strange magic, newtlings are ordinary amphibians that have been transformed into horrid, twisted humanoids, with slimy skin and thin arms that end in needle-like claws. Their teeth are blunt and drip with black swamp mud. Most notable are their distended bellies, transparent enough for a viewer to just make out a mass of squirming guts beneath the pallid white flesh.

Newtlings are little more than wild animals, aggressive but incapable of complex thought.

NEWTLING

DIFFICULTY 5

Size 1 frightening monster

Perception 11 (+1); darksight

Defense 13; **Health** 5

Strength 12 (+2), **Agility** 8 (-2), **Intellect** 6 (-4), **Will** 12 (+2)
Speed 10

Immune gaining Insanity

Gory Guts When a newtling becomes incapacitated from a weapon attack, the creature's potbelly splits open and its guts spill out in a reeking mash. Each creature within 1 yard of the newtling must get a success on an Agility challenge roll or become impaired for 1 round from the disgusting mess.

ATTACK OPTIONS

Claws (melee) +2 with 1 boon (1d6 plus Poison)

Poison A living creature must get a success on a Strength challenge roll or take 1d6 extra damage and become poisoned for 1 round.

TROLL, SWAMP

While not as strong as other trolls, swamp trolls are certainly the foulest of their kind. They trudge through the marshlands stuffing everything that swims or slithers into their foul gullets. Like other trolls, they turn to stone when exposed to sunlight, but they transform more slowly than their kin. This benefit affords them enough protection to be able to move about in such areas by day for brief periods.

Swamp trolls stand 8 feet tall and weigh 800 pounds. Specks of petrified skin spot their shoulders and torsos. They have webbed toes and hands, stooped bodies, flat noses, and wide mouths filled with chisel-like teeth, much like a frog's. They wear animal hides as clothing and carry large clubs and nets.

Swamp trolls speak Trollish.

SWAMP TROLL

DIFFICULTY 50

Size 2 troll

Perception 7 (-3); darksight

Defense 15; **Health** 70 (Regeneration)

Strength 15 (+5), **Agility** 10 (+0), **Intellect** 7 (-3), **Will** 9 (-1)
Speed 8

Swamp Gas When the swamp troll becomes injured, it releases a fetid cloud of gas from its rotten bowels to fill a 5-yard-long cone originating from a point within its space. Each living, breathing creature in the area must get a success on a Strength challenge roll with 1 bane or become dazed. While a creature is dazed, those attacking it make their attack rolls with 1 boon. At the end of each round, a creature dazed by swamp gas makes a Strength challenge roll with 1 bane. On a success, the creature removes the affliction.

Once the troll uses swamp gas, it cannot do so again until after it completes a rest.

ATTACK OPTIONS

Big Club (melee) +5 with 1 boon (3d6)

SPECIAL ATTACK

Net The troll throws a net at a Size 1 or smaller creature within short range. It makes an Agility attack roll against the target's Agility. On a success, the net covers the target and the target becomes immobilized. While immobilized in this way, a creature makes Agility challenge rolls with 1 bane. A creature can remove the net and the affliction by using an action to cut the net away or to make a successful Agility challenge roll.

END OF THE ROUND

Petrified by Sunlight If the troll is in an area lit by sunlight, the troll makes a Strength challenge roll. On a failure, its Defense increases by 1 and its Speed decreases by 2. These changes are permanent. If its Speed drops to 0, the troll turns into a statue and dies.

Regeneration The troll heals 1d6 + 2 damage if it is not incapacitated.

