WATERS SHALLOW, ROOTS DEEP

by Annamyriah de Jong

Creature: *Dryad* | **Levels:** *3-5*

SYNOPSIS

The town of Rootstock is a quiet community, nestled just off a main road. It has bustling trade relationships and a happy population—people of all sorts find their place amongst the tall evergreens that make up the forest around them. They credit their health and safety to a natural spring, deep in the caves beneath town, and celebrate and drink from it twice a year. But when adventurers arrive in town, and participate in the Festival of Blessings, what will they find?

ADVENTURE HOOK

Rootstock can be placed along any road lined with forest, or any forested area with access to other towns one way or another; Rootstock is not a self-sustaining town as designed. It works well in the middle of a long journey—a small place of respite from camping and cold, or, perhaps, the party has heard of the Festival of Blessings elsewhere, and decide to go investigate.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

This is an adventure for 4-6 adventurers, levels 3rd-5th, but is adjustable to any party size or level by increasing the amount of monsters in the combat, and/or adding puzzles or other independent elements.

Rootstock was founded as a seasonal hunting camp, which became permanent when families settled down. Fifty years ago, the land was hunted to near extinction which lead to a famine. A few of the older members of the population remember that difficult time. Now, most of the population is in good health, but people die approximately ten years earlier than the average, and weaken quickly near their deaths.

Under Rootstock is a cavern where a large tree grows. At the base of the tree is a fountain, and inside of the tree is a lich's phylactery. The phylactery is fueled by small fractions of the souls of those that drink from the fountain. Those that have died from the effects of the fountain, their souls being siphoned away over time, are trapped inside the cavern in the form of "ghosts."

A dryad protects the tree and the phylactery. She was once a human woman, but the lich offered her the power to protect her town in return for the protection of their phylactery.

The Festival of Blessings is a twice-yearly event that lasts two days.

The first day consists of gathering items to burn in the fire that evening: furniture, worries written onto paper, anything and everything. A physical and emotional 'spring cleaning': giving up the things that weigh them down.

The second day starts at dawn with a gathering out front of the town's temple. As the day breaks, the doors are opened, and the attendees are guided down into the dark of a cave to drink from the fountain, and receive its blessings for the upcoming time.

CHAPTER 1 – FIRES BRIGHT

During the party's travels, they see smoke a fair distance off into the woods drifting above the treeline. With a successful DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check, they spot an overgrown dirt road leading towards the smoke.

The forest surrounding the path grows dense. Any diversion from the path through the underbrush becomes difficult terrain as it is nearly impossible to traverse. After a thirty minute walk, the party reaches a town that is the source of the smoke.

WELCOME TO ROOTSTOCK

Laughter, chatter, and music drift through the forest. Through the trees, a town can be seen, lively with people all having a wonderful time. The road comes to an inelegant conclusion in the center of this small town - buildings line this center, drawing focus to a small church, which stands directly like a haphazard sentinel over the entrance into Rootstock. In front of it burns a large bonfire, which most of the people seem to be paying attention to in some regard. The flames are filled with all sorts of objects, from furniture to books to clothes. A few older children are seated at the edge of the bonfire, roasting meat on sticks and chatting while others add to the fire. A woman is lugging a broken chair from her home toward the fire with her young son trailing behind her.

A few people glance towards the party as they enter the town with curiosity. They draw much more attention if they burst out of the underbrush than they do if they enter via the road.

After the characters have a moment to catch their breath, a middle-aged half-orc named Vanes greets them. She can answer many questions about the town and what's currently going on. She is more than happy to see visitors, which are rare, but not uncommon, especially around the Festival. She's less willing to discuss the events of the next day, eager for the visitors to be surprised, but advises them to wake early. She directs them toward The Silver Cup if they're looking for somewhere to stay.

The Silver Cup is an inn on the northwest side of the town center. It's rather nondescript in appearance - a wooden two-story building with a handful of windows squished between an unimpressive bookstore and a small, but delicious smelling bakery. Above the door of The Silver Cup is a tin cup hanging off a string. Two children are playing under it, trying to jump and hit it, but they scamper off if people want to enter the inn. It's run by an elven man named Horace, who is friendly, but impersonal. He's eager to sell them food from a small, but passably tasty menu, and beds for the night.

INDEPENDENT EXPLORATION

Within Rootstock, there's only a few businesses open on account of the festival. Once Vanes takes her leave, the party is left to explore on their own. There are bards to listen to, the fire to interact with, and people to meet. A few businesses that are open are a general store that sells basic goods, a restaurant that offers the Saif's Feast—a challenge to the party's appetites (If the characters can finish off the huge meal within an hour, it's free. Use a group DC 50 Constitution check for this challenge; otherwise, the cost is 10 gp total) and a man selling cheap magical fireworks out of his bedroom window.

DEVELOPMENT

The characters can find lodging at The Silver Cup or are welcome to camp along the edge of town when the hour grows late. If they've made connections with townsfolk, they might find lodging in someone's home. Wherever they rest, they rest well.

CHAPTER 2 – A JOURNEY BELOW

The festival begins a half-hour before daybreak, with the citizens gathering in the center of town.

> The air holds a quiet buzz of anticipation; amiable conversations are being held, hushed in the early morning darkness. Talks about what things people are hoping the fountain will bring them luck over, what new things will be in the general store this week (preserved peaches and small copper toys, if the rumors are anything to go by), and what sort of bird it is that's calling from the trees.
>
> And then, all at once, as the doors of the church open and Bertrand steps out, everyone quiets.
>
> He says nothing, just turns and heads back inside, the doors left open.
>
> The unorganized mass files inside, funneled through the main doors and down the aisle. Bertrand waits by the unassuming door in the back corner, made of old wood with a heavy lock. The crowd is restless, but polite, as they wait for him to unclip the heavy ring of keys from the belt around his robes, and slide it into the lock.
>
> The room beyond the door is small with a few boxes stacked against the walls, a small shelf of books, and a few robes hang on hooks; however, they're all secondary to what's in the middle of the room. Centered is a wide staircase of rough hewn stone, dug down into the earth. It descends, though its impossible to tell how far as darkness swallows the steps after about two dozen.. No one seems to pay any mind. Any lingering whispered conversations die down as the town descends.

Bertrand Rylands, a human male in his early fifties, has been the presiding cleric the small temple for twenty years. He's kind and well liked in the community, but stubborn when it comes to the church. He rarely accepts ideas concerning it that aren't his own.

Bertrand is aware that Dechtire exists, and believes that she wants to protect the town. He supports her in this effort. He believes that she's ultimately good, and that she is the direct reason for the fountain's powers. He does not know about the ghosts, the phylactery, or the lich.

INTO THE CHAMBER, PART ONE

Three-quarters of the way down the staircase, any non-magical light is extinguished by a magical darkness that fills the space. If any magical light is on a character, they are asked to put it out or leave the object behind in the room by Bertrand. The rules are strict around this ceremony, but enforcement is kind. The darkness continues throughout the underground.

> The path you are led down is as dark as tar, and the footing is uneven. Hands pull and catch at your robes as people stumble, keeping themselves upright, but they pull away when they're steady, for the most part. Even with darkvision, it's impossibly dark. Unnaturally dark.

The path is roughly a mile long and remains dark. It's cold, and sound echoes slightly before fading out.

At some point near the end of the walk, the crunching of leaves can be heard beneath the party's feet with a successful DC 15 Passive Perception check. Shortly after, the tunnel reaches the fountain chamber. It's a room shaped like an irregular circle, about 40 feet across and 45 feet high.

In the center of the room, unseen in the darkness, is a large tree. Nestled in a round divot in the roots is the faintly bubbling fountain.

> The mass of people that had been surrounding you starts to thin out. Hands grab at your arms, and at others, everyone sorting themselves out into a line in the pitch black. The room is almost uncomfortably chilled, and occasionally a small draft sweeps by, ruffling clothes and hair.

The party finds themselves directed into a loose single file line, which moves towards the fountain as people take their drink from it. As each character approaches the fountain, they are directed to kneel by Bertrand's sturdy hand on their shoulder. A wooden bowl filled with water is put into their hands.

After drinking the water, the character must succeed a DC 17 Constitution saving throw. On a success, nothing happens. The water is cool and delicious, but harmless.

On a failure, the character is filled with confidence and peace that they have never known before. Unbeknownst to them, part of their soul is sucked away by the phylactery. Any worries they held previously seem meaningless. Any problem is conquerable. They gain +1 to Constitution and Strength. The feeling lasts for about an hour, but the buff is (optionally) permanent.

The mass of people make their way back through the cave and into the church when all have drunk from the pool. If the party or anyone else decides to stay, then their absence is not noticed until the NPCs reach the church again.

DEVELOPMENT

If the players leave, and aren't naturally drawn back down to investigating the cave further on their own, some guiding might be necessary. However, move on to *Chapter 3* once they decide to investigate the cave.

CHAPTER 3 – PAST THE DOOR, DOWN THE STAIRS

The door leading to the room with the staircase to the tunnel is non-magically locked. Bertrand tends to keep the keys that open it hooked on his belt. Non-magical light continues to be extinguished at the same spot on the stairs.

INTO THE CHAMBER, PART TWO

If the characters have a way to see through magical darkness, then give the description of the path into the cave, the fountain, the tree, and the ghosts as they travel back down into the cavern.

The Ghosts: There's a few dozen of them, of varying appearances and ages. They don't seem to notice the party or care that they're there. They aren't capable of communication. These ghosts are not technically creatures—they cannot be killed. If intentional, their touch can paralyze a player for a round on the failure of a DC 12 Constitution saving throw.

If harm comes to the tree, immediately proceed to the "Combat" section.

If harm comes to the fountain or the cavern itself, or if the party lingers for too long, Dechtire emerges from the tree which cracks and shifts to allow her through. She is not immediately hostile.

> She's tall—you're not sure if it's natural or not, but she definitely isn't shortened by the branch-like horns growing from the nest of moss that makes up her hair. Tangles of branches and leaves are tucked into it. She holds a large sword, five or six feet in length, and it doesn't, somehow, dwarf her. Her skin is split and mottled, thin sections of bark clinging—or growing—on her bare arms. Her face is strange, inhuman just as much as it is human. Her eyes are the one thing that assures you that she was at some point human, pale blue and looking between you all.

Ultimately, it is up to you how malevolent Dechtire is portrayed. But here are some things she is not: cruel without reason, unwilling to listen despite her stubbornness, unsympathetic to other's plights. She is, however, also determined to protect this forest at any cost to her, and at her idea of reasonable cost to others.

If she is given a chance to explain, continue with the following dialogue options from Dechtire, broken up and supplemented as need be to allow it to be a conversation between her and the party.

"I am doing nothing wrong. I am not taking anything that isn't owed.

"They hunted this land to near extinction—and, gods, I wish I could say that I was anything but complacent. But I wasn't. I watched as my husband brought home anything he could sink an arrow into. It was to eat, at first. Just to eat. Just to eat, and to keep us through the winter. But then they started hunting for the fun of it- hunting for sport, not for necessity. And I did nothing as stuffed heads started decorating our walls. It was a game, a competition, and I told them to stop. I warned them. But they did not listen. I remained complacent until there was nothing left. People went elsewhere or starved. There wasn't a deer or mouse in these woods, by the time they were done. The birds learned to fly past elsewhere. I was complacent for too long, and they did so much harm in the wake of that -- but unlike them, I promised that I would return things to how they should be.

"And I have, and I am sworn to keep it this way. This land should not pay for the sins of the greedy. It is my influence that keeps wandering children from being taken by bears, my influence that keeps their hunts good, my influence that keeps their gardens bountiful. This is better for them than any alternative."

This is possible to resolve peacefully: maybe the party finds her actions justified, and leaves the routine alone. Maybe other solutions to what she sees as necessary are found, or the party convinces her that the debt has been paid. Combat is not necessary, if the tree is unharmed. She is her definition of just. She is not vengeful.

COMBAT

Three to four **eagles**, Dechtire, and one **giant eagle**. Add more giant eagles for high level parties. The eagles come sweeping out of the branches of the tree and attack upon the tree taking harm. They care only about protecting the tree, and vanish into ash upon their death. Dechtire is more eager to talk and have herself understood than fight, but she is not unwilling to participate.

Dechtire uses the **revenant** stat block with the following changes, most of which are from the dryad statblock.

- **AC:** Reduced to 10.
- She loses the Multiattack ability.
- **Innate Spellcasting:** Can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components, with a spell save DC of 14.
  - 3/day: *entangle*
  - 1/day: *shillelagh, pass without trace*
- **Magic Resistance:** Has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.
- Can speak with beasts and plants as if they share a language.
- **Actions: Sword of the Dryad.** *Melee Weapon Attack* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 12 (3d6)+3 slashing damage.

CONCLUSION

If the tree was destroyed, the population of the town seems tired and worn down as the enchantments that have been upon them most of their life fade away. They will recover in a few days.

If Bertrand is told of or figures out what happened, he makes it clear that the party is to leave.

The situation, whatever it is, leaves the party with a feeling that they're not welcomed here any longer.

REWARDS

Upon completion, characters may earn the following rewards:

XP REWARDS

Add the total XP obstacles overcome by the party, then divide it evenly amongst the characters to find individual earnings.

Event	Reward
Giant Eagles—Combat	200 each
Eagles—Combat	10 each
Dechtire—Combat	1,800
Resolving without combat	1,800
	200 per player
Saif's Feast	10 per player

MATERIAL REWARDS

Sword of the Dryad

At one point, this heavy sword must have been beautiful—intricate work has been done on the handle, but now it's worn down with age and covered by bits of clinging moss. It has seen some better days, but a small amount of work would put it back into pristine condition. As it is, it's usable—it would be worth a good amount if sold.

Suggested worth: 40 gp if sold as is, 50 gp if restored.

3d6 slashing damage, heavy (two handed). Attacks with this weapon count as magical in regards to resistances or immunities.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

I set out to do two things with this adventure. The first was to create a story without a right or a wrong solution to let the character's stories and morals color the end result. The second was a bit trickier of an undertaking: write an adversary that challenged the traditional idea of a female 'villain' by using the traits often stereotyped onto female characters and allowing her to use them in a way that defies those stereotypes. Hopefully I did those both some amount of justice.

Thank you to everyone who helped me throughout the process of refining this, and, to my own campaign group - thanks for playing through whatever I throw you into as enthusiastically as you do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Annamyriah de Jong is currently a student in the PNW, where she lives with her cat, Yam, and plays a lot of games. Other *D&D* work of hers can be found dmsguild.com under the same name, other games can be found at annamdejong.itch.io, and she can be reached on Twitter at @annamdejong.