

MURKWOOD HORRORS

The verdant seas of trees covering the world have been respected since ancient times, prized, yet feared by humanity. Many creatures have called these untamed forests home. Hunters have braved their depths for resources, trailblazers have cut roads through serpentine valleys in the name of progress. But there are some forests deemed too wild, too evil to be explored. Dark places whispered in warning to children by their elders, hosts of corruption where dangerous monsters lurk. The murkwoods.

Murkwoods is not the name of one place, but a title given to any forest that has become an arboreal nightmare realm. Evil is present in every aspect, trees grow twisted and malformed, the canopies become dense and oppressively banish any light from the forest floors. The animals, once shy and skittish, turn aggressive and vile in temper. And at the zenith of its transformation, the forest spawns abominable mutants that will roam its wilderness.

Murkwoods manifest when a forest is touched by corruption. Many catalysts for a location's transformation into a Murkwood have been recorded. Be it a wicked curse, sites of profane rituals and blasphemy, or the intrusion of a great monster; each murkwood is a direct reflection of its corruption.

In hopes of quelling any risk of corruption, lords and locals alike are zealous in keeping their wilderness free from the foul presence of monsters and dark magics. Prevention is key, as freeing a murkwood from an evil that has set its roots firmly is a nigh impossible task, and in time the murkwood's corruption will only proliferate further.

Forgotten Foes: Murkwood Horrors THE FRINGE FOLK

In the age of the Crown Wars many monarchs abandoned the farthest settlements of their realm in the hopes of saving resources. These villages were left to defend themselves, and in the wake of the chaos of war, quickly lost contact with the rest of the world.

The Fringe Folk; or Frontier Folk, are people who were shut off from the rest of civilization. Most of these far off villages and hamlets can not be found on any modern maps. In terms of territory, they often still belong to the borders of a country, though Fringe Folk care little about outside seats of power, and most lords simply do not care to maintain contact with them. With only themselves to rely upon for generations, they have become self-sufficient and hardened people. Till this day they are left to their own devices, as their area is rarely protected by patrols...for good reason.

Due to the circumstances of their out of the way existence, a constant threat to the Fringe Folk has always been the presence of Murkwoods commonly manifesting within their lands. With little help from the outside and the threat of war ever constant, the settlers had to take matters into their own hands. Some communities became proficient in hunting the horrors of the woods, cultivating a culture of great tamers and trackers that would keep the evil of the forest at bay.

Yet not all fringe folks choose defiance against these looming horrors, as many did not have the strength; be it muscle or heart, to pick up blade and bow. Instead choosing to worship the powerful creatures crawling out of the Murkwoods, by proclaiming them their new lords.



MURK MARKED

Corruption always seeks to extend its reach, and the Murkwoods are perpetual fountains of corruption. Once the land is saturated with its aura, it will begin to affect its surroundings. The Fringe Folk learnt to live within its shadow, but those undeterred by the Murkwood, plunging its twisted depths for resources, would soon succumb to its corrupting force. It is a slow drawn out process, but the telltale beginnings of a settlement's corruption is heralded by the birth of corrupted humanoids among their kin. These creatures were called the Murk Marked.

Murk Marked are malformed Fringe Folk changed by the corruption of the Murkwoods. They are disfigured, twisted human shaped beings, but do not mistake their forms for frail, as the corrupting touch of the Murkwoods comes with its own strength. As if the forest is trying to convert the Fringe Folk into creatures more suited to survive and thrive within its horrid landscape.

Within the Murkwood Cults of the Fringe Folk, the birth of a Murk Marked is seen as a fortunate blessing. The child will be raised and enjoy privilege in their community. These cults are so deep in their delusional worship of the Murkwoods that they are oblivious to the foul nature of these fell beings. They often hold elevated positions within these cults, such as priests, protectors, or well kept secrets from prying eyes. In the wilds they traverse the dark forests, commonly in nomadic groups, possessing an animalistic cunning and supernatural strength. They are able to lay complex ambushes and traps, hunting unaware wanderers just as any other predator would do. Because of this they are considered among the most troublesome creatures to be encountered when forced to journey through the cursed woods.

MURK MARKED

Medium Humanoid

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 68 (8d8 + 32)

Speed 30 ft. climb 20 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
16 (+3)	11 (0)	18 (+4)	7 (-2)	12 (+1)	8 (-1)

Proficiency +2

Skills Survival +5

Senses darkvision 60 ft. passive Perception 11

Languages Common, Sylvan

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Brutal Strike. The first time in a turn the Murk Marked hits a creature with a cleaver attack and the attack has advantage, the creature must succeed a DC 13 Strength saving throw or be knocked prone.

Twisted Strength. A melee weapon or thrown weapon deals one extra die of its damage when the Murk Marked hits with it and the Murk Marked can drag or carry a creature one size smaller than itself at normal speed.

ACTIONS

Cleaver. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 12 (2d8 + 3) slashing damage or 16 (3d8+3) slashing damage if the attack has advantage.

Javelin. *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft. or range 30/120 ft., one target. *Hit:* 9 (2d6 + 2) piercing damage.





MURK MARKED HOOKER

Medium Humanoid

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 60 (8d8 + 24)

Speed 30 ft., climb 20 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	16 (+3)	17 (+3)	7 (-2)	12 (+1)	8 (-1)

Proficiency +2

Skills Survival +5, Stealth +5

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 11

Languages Common, Sylvan

Challenge 1/2 (100 XP)

Twisted Strength. A melee weapon or thrown weapon deals one extra die of its damage when the Murk Marked hits with it and the Murk Marked can drag or carry a creature one size smaller than itself at normal speed.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The Murk Marked makes two melee weapon attacks.

Hook. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (2d4 +3) piercing damage.

Hook (Thrown). *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, range 20 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (2d4 +3) piercing damage and the creature must succeed a DC 12 Strength saving throw. On a failed save the creature is pulled up to 10 ft. towards the Murk Marked and the next attack roll before the end of the Murk Marked's next turn against the pulled creature has advantage.

TITHE COLLECTOR

Simply known as the Tithe Collectors to the Fringe Folk are the connection between themselves and the heart of the Murkwood.

These creatures are shuffling beings, seemingly entirely constructed out of sprawling hands, hinting at a humanoid origin. They come at the darkest part of night, seeking to collect the Fringe Folk's offerings to their dark gods. With their many hands they identify any offering worth taking.

All Fringe Folk know Tithe Collectors must not be disturbed during their task, or worse: observed.

Lock your doors, and nail close the shutters, kill every candle and rest your palms against your eyes. Be it a curse of innate magical ability, the Tithe Collectors know when they are perceived by a living being. While seemingly blind, these creatures will immediately become aware of anyone that lays eyes on them. This will cause them to fly into a murderous rage, discarding any offerings they have collected to kill the poor fool who dared to look upon them. Tearing them limb from limb, but always going for the eyes first.

It is unknown why the Collectors react in such a way. But they appear to hold some form of sentience, wearing robes of tattered cloth or any natural materials that they can find to hide their unsightly forms, as if ashamed of their own bodies. Some say they were once human themselves, and are aware of their horrid state. Fringe Folk will say they do so to keep people from following them through the forests to their master's lairs.

TITHE COLLECTOR

Large Monstrosity, chaotic evil

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)

Hit Points 84 (8d10 + 40)

Speed 40 ft., climb 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	16 (+3)	17 (+3)	8 (-1)	15 (+2)	7 (-2)

Proficiency +3

Senses (See Curse of the Witness), passive Perception 12

Languages Sylvan

Challenge 6 (1,800 XP)

Blind. The Tithe Collector is blind and has no sight.

Curse of the Witness. When a creature sees the Tithe Collector with its eyes (meaning without using tremorsense or blindsight), the Tithe Collector becomes aware of the creature as if the Tithe Collector can see it, unless the creature is on another plane of existence than the Tithe Collector.

Great Grappler. Checks to escape the Tithe Collector's grapple have disadvantage and the Tithe Collector has advantage on attack rolls against creatures it has grappled.

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Spider Climb. The Tithe Collector can climb difficult surfaces, including upside down on ceilings, without needing to make an ability check.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The Tithe Collector makes four slam attacks. If two or more attacks hit the same target it is grappled, escape DC 14.

Slam. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (1d8 +4) bludgeoning damage.

Frenzied Flaying. The Tithe Collector can only use this action if it is below half of its maximum hit points. The Tithe Collector makes six slam attacks with disadvantage.

REACTION

Kill Witness (1/Short Rest). When a creature sees the Tithe Collector, the Tithe Collector moves up to its speed towards the triggering creature and makes two slam attacks against it. If both slam attacks hit, the creature is grappled, escape DC 14.



STRYGA

The Stryga commands both fear and reverence. This beast prowls the dim twisted woodlands and strikes unseen from the crooked canopies, commonly swallowing its prey whole and leaving no trace behind.

Stryga were once normal owls, twisted into new forms by the corrupting powers of the Murkwood. Their bodies grew and assumed a faux feline form not unlike a griffon. Their slender heads end in long gaping maws capable of dislodging and stretching to capture and swallow their prey. Only the small owl-like head akin to a mask echoes the memory of its original form.

Its owl face tip is used by the Stryga for camouflage. While lurking within the treetops and scanning the forest's floor for prey, an untrained eye might only see a common owl. Not a powerful predator in ambush. One should consider it a mercy to be slain by the Stryga's talons. As creatures that the Stryga eat find themselves within the beast's foul guts. The Stryga's innards are filled with a necrotic sludge. Creatures swallowed alive by the beast drown in its stinking stomach. The remains are then unceremoniously regurgitated into stench ridden pellets. Foul energies cause these pellets to rise as shambling undead, a pitiful amalgamation of animal bones and fur that could not pass the Stryga's innards.

Stryga nests are tainted with the sickly sweet smell of decay. Groups of wandering undead patrolling an area are telltale signs of a Stryga's nest, who prefer to rest after a successful hunt to digest. Their undead victims will attack anyone on sight - their screams alerting the Stryga to another meal conveniently delivered on its doorstep.

LAIR: STRYGA NEST

Commonly Strygas return to their nests to nurse their injuries or to digest their prey. If attacked within their own nest a Stryga will fiercely protect its territory to the death.

LAIR ACTIONS

When fighting a Stryga inside of its nest, it can take lair actions. On initiative count 20 (losing initiative ties), the Stryga takes a lair action to cause one of the following effects:

Foul Winds. The Stryga beats its wings and spreads its nest's foul stench. Each creature within 20 ft. of the Stryga must succeed a DC 14 Constitution saving throw or be poisoned until the Stryga's next turn. A poisoned creature that fails the save by 5 or more spends its next action coughing and retching.

Gorge. The Stryga feasts on one of the many morsels stored within her nest, regaining 20 (6d6) hit points and regaining a use of its Regurgitate action.

Spawn Pellet. The Stryga regurgitates a pellet that animates as a Stryga Pellet. If the Stryga used its Regurgitate action inside of its lair, 1d3 Stryga Pellets rise from the area of its effect instead.

Territorial Screech (1/Day). The Stryga lets out a piercing screech audible within 2 miles. Each creature within 60 ft. of the Stryga must succeed a DC 14 Wisdom saving throw or be frightened for one minute. A frightened creature repeats the saving throw at the end of each of its turns, ending the condition on a success.



STRYGA PELLET

Medium Undead

Armor Class 11 (natural armor)
Hit Points 19 (3d8 + 6)
Speed 25 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
14 (+2)	8 (-1)	14 (+2)	3 (-4)	9 (-1)	5 (-3)

Proficiency +2

Damage Resistance Acid, Necrotic

Damage Immunities Poison

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 9

Challenge 1/4 (50 XP)

Bothersome Pile. Unless the Stryga Pellet is destroyed by fire damage or a critical hit, the Stryga Pellets body remains after its death. Its body is difficult terrain for any creature moving through it.

Trapping Bodies. If two or more Stryga Pellets grapple the same creature, the creature is restrained in addition of being grappled.

ACTIONS

Slam. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target.
Hit: 5 (1d6+2) bludgeoning damage.

Trap. A creature within 5 ft. of the Stryga Pallet must succeed a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw. On a failed save the creature is grappled, escape DC 12. The trapped creature has disadvantage on Dexterity saving throws for the duration of the grapple.



STRYGA

Huge Monstrosity

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)
Hit Points 142 (15d12 + 45)
Speed 40 ft., flying 80 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
21 (+5)	19 (+4)	16 (+3)	5 (-3)	16 (+3)	7 (-2)

Proficiency +3
Skills Perception +9, Stealth +7
Senses darkvision 240 ft. passive Perception 19
Languages Understands Auran, Sylvan but doesn't speak
Challenge 8 (3,900 XP)

Ambush Predator. The Stryga has advantage on attack rolls against surprised creatures. The first time in a turn the Stryga hits a surprised creature with an attack, it deals an additional 10 (3d6) damage.

Keen Eyes. The Stryga has advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on sight.

Owl Camouflage. While the Stryga hides within a tree or similar vegetation that is large enough to conceal its body, it appears as a tiny Owl.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The Stryga makes three attacks; one with its bite and two with its claws.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 14 (2d8 +5) piercing damage plus 4 (1d8) necrotic damage.

Claws. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 15 (3d6 +5) slashing damage.

Consume. The Stryga makes a bite attack against a Medium or smaller creature. If the attack hits in addition to dealing damage, the creature is swallowed. A swallowed creature is blinded and restrained, has total cover against attacks and other effects outside the Stryga, and takes 9 (2d8) necrotic damage at the start of the Stryga's turns. The stryga regains hit points equal to the necrotic damage dealt. A creature that dies within the Stryga's stomach is regurgitated as a Stryga Pellet after 24 hours.

The Stryga can have only one creature in its stomach at a time. If the creature is Medium or larger, the Stryga's flight speed is halved for as long as the creature is in its stomach. Whenever the Stryga takes damage when it has a creature swallowed, it must succeed a Constitution saving throw or regurgitate the creature, which falls prone in a space within 5 ft. of the Stryga. If the Stryga is airborne while regurgitating, the Stryga falls before regurgitating the creature. The Constitution saving throw is equal 10 or half of the damage taken, whichever is higher. If the Stryga dies, a swallowed creature is no longer restrained and can escape from the corpse using 5 ft. of movement, exiting prone.

Regurgitate (1/day). The Stryga regurgitates the contents of its stomach in a 10-foot-radius centered on a point within 30 ft. of itself. The area is difficult terrain and any creature that starts its turn in the area or enters it for the first time in a turn takes 9 (2d8) necrotic damage.

If the Stryga has a creature in its stomach when using this action, the creature is regurgitated and lands prone and restrained by tangled fur and bones in the center of the area. The regurgitated creature takes no falling damage being regurgitated, as its fall is cushioned by the Stryga's stomach contents. The restrained creature can make a DC 14 Strength check to escape the restrains.

The Stryga regains a use of this action when it successfully consumes a creature.

LORE, CONCEPT, GAME DESIGN

DM TUZ

ADDITIONAL WRITING & EDITING

J. ALICE BOWN

ARTWORK

DM TUZ (COLORING) & BEN FLEUTER (INKS)

GUEST ARTIST - BEN FLEUTER

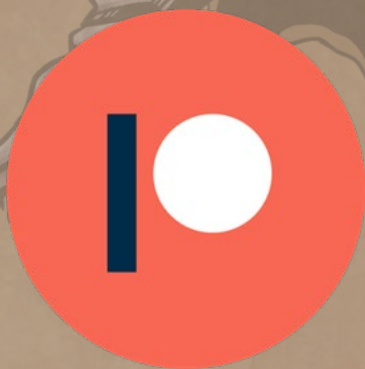


Ben Fleuter is a US Webcomic Artist (Derelict, Sword Interval). If you enjoyed his contribution to this content update, consider following him on social media and perhaps support him on Patreon. He wrapped up his latest Webcomic [Sword Interval](#) this year and is going to launch his next webcomic later this year!

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