

The Smiling Dead Thing

How to use this adventure

This is a system-agnostic adventure outline, a road map to get your imagination started so you can write your own story in your own setting. There are no maps, no concrete NPCs, no hard numbers – that’s all for you to decide.

1. Overview

The Moneylender is an avid hunter and recently slew a truly great creature. The Taxidermist is a chronic gambler, indebted to The Moneylender. To alleviate the debt, The Taxidermist undertook a grand task for The Moneylender: to taxidermise the Guardian of the Forest. But The Taxidermist botched the operation and now needs the party’s help to hunt the Guardian’s mate as substitute and make amends.

2. Adventure hooks

But I’m not a hunter!? The party sees The Taxidermist being taken away by The Moneylender’s two goons. They’re taking him to forest to hunt the Guardian’s mate alone. When the Taxidermist sees the party, he begs for the party’s help.

I need a favour. The Moneylender hires the party to recover a debt from The Taxidermist: either cash or a “special order”. If he can’t pay, The Moneylender wants the party to bring Taxidermist to his backstreet office to be “handled”. The Taxidermist, of course, begs the party to help hunt the Guardian’s mate.

3. The Smiling Dead Thing

When the party visits The Taxidermist’s storefront, it’s impossible to escape the terrifying visage of the botched Guardian of the Forest. It’s a unique animal that the craftsman had never seen alive, and it’s been preserved unnaturally, a smiling dead thing, mocking its own anatomy. It requires a Nature check to even tell basic facts about the creature. And even then, friendly Dungeon Master, try to maintain some mystery about the creature’s origin.

The Taxidermist begs the party to help hunt the Guardian’s mate – the last of a legendary pair. Keep in mind: The Taxidermist is almost useless in combat and a nervous wreck.

Something happens! (in the forest)

1. The Taxidermist either shows up or runs away!
2. The party finds remains foresters or hunters!
3. The party receives an omen from the forest!
4. Vines try to take the party’s equipment!
5. Someone pukes! (*my wife’s suggestion...*)
6. BEES!

3. A Forest Skill Challenge

Abstract the forest travel into a skill challenge – don’t make the whole party roll for every obstacle, just one player for each. The party needs to get four successes before three failures. Success means they arrive at the Guardian’s Sanctuary without incident, but failure means they arrive with some kind of disadvantage or setback.

The kinds of obstacles the party could face include: a raging river, a looping paradox path, BEES BEES BEES, a predator, noxious spores, or even The Taxidermist having a panic attack.

4. The Guardian’s Sanctuary

The final area is solemn, sacred site. There are rare plants here and animals behave unnaturally reverent – reminiscent of a fey place.

Ask the party to describe the way they carry themselves and how they approach. If they are threatening and ready for combat, the Guardian’s mate will attack. If they are more peaceful, the Guardian’s mate will observe before revealing itself.

The Guardian and its mate can be any creature you like – a Unicorn, a Basilisk? Perhaps there’s a ritualistic way to activate a line of communication with the Guardian’s mate. If it can communicate and the party is peaceful, it would be willing to offer a Druidic boon in trade for the Taxidermist.

5. Breaking Kneecaps

If the party decides to hand The Taxidermist over to The Moneylender, he insists on bringing along the botched Guardian, hoping it will suffice as payment. Presuming the party is ignoring the actual forest hunt, in The Moneylender’s presence, the botched Guardian vengefully quickens and attacks!

6. Outcomes

If the Taxidermist lives, the party has access to a free trophy-maker, someone who can train the party in harvesting components from dead beasts. If The Moneylender is alive, the party has a criminal contact. If the Guardian’s mate was spared, the party might receive some Druidic boon.

NPCs to make

The Taxidermist

The Thugs

The Moneylender

The Guardian’s mate

Combat encounters to prepare

Potential clash with the thugs

Potential challenge on the road

Showdown with the Guardian’s mate