





# AMONG THE WILL-O'-WISPS

## HANDS OF THE DEVIL

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An adventurer upon the road, a wanderer seeking work, or a refugee fleeing war—all these people might find themselves in unfamiliar lands at the edge of dusk, hungry and terribly tired. Surrounded by long shadows at the end of a long day, a traveler's mind settles on a few understandable desires: shelter, food, and a friendly face to ease their troubles. Then, when hope sinks to its lowest ebb, the traveler spies the lights of a village, the lanterns of a caravan, or even just a lone candle burning in a farmhouse window. They follow the light, which leads them off their path. It seems a bit further away than the weary traveler realized, so they move deeper into the wood or the swamp. The straight path to the light curves, its movements subtle and strange, but it's too late. Lost far from the road, the doomed traveler dies, for they wandered to this area where a will-o'-wisp hunts and where, this night, the will-o'-wisp feeds.

Parasites of fear, the spectral creatures known as will-o'-wisps aren't spiritual beings, but physical, albeit strange. When seen in full light—a rare occurrence for these shadow-haunting creatures—a will-o'-wisp appears as a translucent, spongy, gelatinous sphere. Will-o'-wisps lack any features except for those they choose to take upon themselves via their illumination and internal refraction, most often darkened patches to make their spherical forms resemble mocking or leering skulls. They rise up to dance and feed as the sun first begins to fade, and they have full control over their ghostly light; they can cause it to burn brightly to be seen at a distance, or snuff it out, granting them near-total invisibility if they so choose.

## Genesis

The theories about will-o'-wisps' origins are a morass of conflicting mythology and contradictory sources.

The clerics of Ashava, the empyreal lord of dancers, lonely spirits, and moonlight, tell a morality tale in which Ashava the True Spark guides a wayward, despairing traveler to safety, opposed by the malevolent Lady Rushlight, an archetypal and perhaps original will-o'-wisp. Lady Rushlight drained herself in her efforts to lead the wayward mortal astray and died of starvation, falling into hungry fragments that became will-o'-wisps. Scholars who see some truth in the Ashavan tale speculate that Lady Rushlight was once one of the Eldest, the mighty and capricious deities of the First World. Certainly, many of the

Eldest—most prominently, the Lantern King—were served by powerful will-o'-wisp elders with baroque and fantastic titles.

In periods of lucidity, worshippers of the Outer God Yog-Sothoth claim that will-o'-wisps originated as paradoxical echoes of souls from a lost (or perhaps future) reality, despairing for what they once had (or can't yet have). This anguish drives their feeding. Some will-o'-wisps serve as agents of Yog-Sothoth, although many more follow a different Outer God: Nhimbaloth, the Empty Death. Some say that Nhimbaloth sees through will-o'-wisps as if they were like a myriad of cold and hungry eyes, using them as ravenous candles to paradoxically snuff the souls of those she hunts.

Even more fantastic legends claim that the original will-o'-wisps were imprinted upon the Material Plane in some bygone era by entities abandoned from

"They are the lost feeding upon the lost: mortality's autophagous, self-perpetuating a cycle of misery, older than myth and shrouded in a forgotten past. Listen as they sing a song both beautiful and cruel in the cold flickering of their ghost-light. Listen. Then ask yourself, which would be worse? That they were created out of malice, or simply arose by accident? I won't spoil the mystery."

—Tegresin the Laughing Fiend

another, adjacent reality or that they were created by sceeduinar (*Pathfinder Bestiary 2* 233). As creatures of the Negative Energy Plane, sceeduinar can't understand the complexities of life, but this origin might explain why will-o'-wisps are wicked, parasitical aberrations wholly unlike other creatures.

## Ecology

Rapacious, hungry creatures, will-o'-wisps are gripped by a spiritual dependency and physiological requirement to feed upon specific emotions. They need no other sustenance to survive, and how they transform emotion into nourishment remains a mystery. Most will-o'-wisps feed on fear, but some feast on other negative emotions, such as confusion or hatred.

Will-o'-wisps don't wait passively for prey with fearful emotions to stumble past. Instead, they actively instill fear in their victims, using their peculiar forms to lure wayward travelers into situations of abandonment and terror. Although will-o'-wisps can kill if they are in danger, they usually allow lone victims to die of exposure, natural hazards, or the fangs and claws of a monstrous predator.

Many will-o'-wisps have a favorite method to watch their prey die, relishing the "taste" that a particular type of death imparts. Others regularly alter their methods

of luring prey to add variety to their emotional diet. Such will-o'-wisps are often more dangerous, as travelers who have been warned by locals about distant campfires in a marsh might fall victim instead to what appears to be a bobbing lantern on the trail.

These will-o'-wisps most often dwell in desolate, but not impassable, locations. They hunt near trade roads, animal trails, and other paths of least resistance through forbidding terrain. These places funnel travelers to points where will-o'-wisps can most easily lure them astray.

The manner in which will-o'-wisps spawn remains a mysterious and debated subject. According to the Ashavan holy text *Chronicle of the Healing Dance*, will-o'-wisps form new members of their kind from their victims' spirits, but the good of heart are immune to such entrapment. Perhaps that distinction simply serves as a morality tale that isn't rooted in fact, but Ashavans insist that having yet another reason to live a good life is helpful for many and harmful to none. Planar scholars speculate that will-o'-wisps form naturally within the First World as ephemeral orbs. They believe the orbs then migrate through natural portals to the Material Plane and, once there, can't help but hunger for the vibrant and compelling emotions they briefly tasted in the faerie realm. This theory explains why some will-o'-wisps are such tricksters, but not their malevolent cruelty. A rare and shunned text titled *Singing the Candles' Litany* details occult rituals and blood sacrifices to create them from

fragments of souls lost to despair and terror, but this daemonic text spends more time on the taste of such souls than on the actual creation ritual. The wild disparities between these claims suggest will-o'-wisps likely can spawn through multiple methods, which might explain why so many unusual varieties exist.

## Society

Because will-o'-wisps depend upon emotional nutrition derived from fear, their culture revolves primarily around instilling terror. Will-o'-wisps are solitary when hunting in places where victims rarely traverse to avoid having to share sustenance. Where opportunities for prey are many, such as on desolate stretches of trade roads that skirt dismal swamps or on forested trails between large settlements, will-o'-wisps congregate in groups called strings. Will-o'-wisps in strings rarely communicate with one another; they can produce intelligible words by wavering their spongy bodies, but they use language almost exclusively to communicate with other creatures.



String of Wisps



Strings instinctively synchronize their light and movement together in enticing patterns. Musicologists who have witnessed these motions recognize them as a form of music, and when played on other instruments, these haunting tunes induce paranoia, aggressive behavior, and compulsions toward isolation. This eerie movement appears to be the signature, if not only, art form that will-o'-wisps produce.

Rarely do will-o'-wisps gather in larger groups (sometimes called "chandeliers"), such as for religious ceremonies among adherents or during rare cosmological conjunctions. These gatherings aren't always solemn affairs since will-o'-wisps also take part in macabre remembrances and even recreation of past hunts. Will-o'-wisps who follow a deity often do so zealously, waging wars against unbelievers, particularly other will-o'-wisps who follow a "false path" in their faith.

While will-o'-wisps don't consume flesh to survive, they sometimes collaborate with other predators in their environments, such as marsh giants, hags, and undead. The undead hags called witchfires are among their most favored hunting companions, as witchfires' spectral flames generate a delectable form of terror. As a result, most witchfires can call upon nearby will-o'-wisps and expect their deference or even their adoration. Additionally, will-o'-wisps sometimes act as servitors to powerful and malevolent fey.

Exceptionally long-lived, will-o'-wisps have good memories and hold long grudges. Spiteful wisps might not simply take revenge upon those who wronged them, but retaliate upon the transgressor's family, friends, and offspring down through generations. Some will-o'-wisps enjoy a particular mortal family's "taste" so much that they work to isolate such family lines in remote villages, creating a carefully curated banquet of terror. These will-o'-wisps act particularly aggressively toward outsiders who might taint their larder's flavor.

## Will-o'-Wisp Varieties

Will-o'-wisps have a distinctive luminous form, but they exhibit regional variations. These changes sometimes arise from natural evolution to better suit their preferred climate or targets, but some differences result from magical tampering. While hardly comprehensive, the following list details some of the most beautiful and deadly kinds of will-o'-wisps.



**Groetan Candle**

**Dread Wisp** (*Pathfinder Adventure Path #165: Eyes of Empty Death*): These Darklands will-o'-wisps emit a sepulchral glow and haunt moist areas deep beneath the surface. They flit from shadow and sap their victims' life energy with a draining touch. They feed on despair as well as fear.

**Dune Candle** (page 62): These desert-based will-o'-wisps deal fire damage rather than electricity and delight in setting their victims aflame, relishing the resulting screams that echo across the landscape. They can quench their glow like other will-o'-wisps, but the nearer they remain to their burning victims, the more obvious their heat shimmer appears in the air.

**Flickerwisp** (*Pathfinder Adventure Path #163: Ruins of Gauntlight 83*): These twisting, floating ribbons of light feed on confusion rather than fear. They prefer to haunt shorelines for their victims, where they resemble a group of fireflies.

**Groetan Candle** (below): Nearly always adherents of the grim deity Groetus, these will-o'-wisps resemble the leering skull-faced moon of their namesake. They often gather in grim choruses that work together with eerie synchronicity. Groetan candles deal cold damage rather than electricity.

**Spellvoid** (page 62): Feeding not on fear but on the ephemeral potentiality of magic lodged in the minds of their victims, these will-o'-wisps are a bane to casters of all types. They usually leave non-spellcasters alone and sometimes follow adventuring groups without spellcasters on the hope of being led to creatures they find more appetizing.

**Voidglutton** (*Pathfinder Adventure Path #163: Ruins of Gauntlight 87*): These powerful will-o'-wisps bear seven-fingered tendrils. They're malevolent hunters who often work to advance Nhimbaloth's plans.

**Will-o'-the-Deep** (page 62): Aquatic will-o'-wisps, will-o'-the-deeps dwell within oceans and even terrestrial lakes, and strings of them can create profoundly beautiful vistas. Their propensity to draw ships toward reefs and whirlpools or to swarm smaller vessels makes them a deadly hazard.

## WILL-O'-WISP VARIANTS

Some variant will-o'-wisps have the following alternate rules that adjust the standard will-o'-wisp stat block on page 333 of the *Pathfinder Bestiary*. Despite these changes, their level remains the same.

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### Dune Candle

Dune candles replace the melee Strike, Feed on Fear, and Go Dark abilities with the following abilities.

**Melee** ♦ flare +17 (fire, magical), **Damage** 2d4+4 fire plus Light the Living Wick

**Heat Mirage** ♦ (concentrate) The dune candle extinguishes its glow, becoming invisible. It can end this effect with another use of this action. Its body reflects creatures on fire (but not other fires) while it's invisible. As a result, when any creature within 20 feet of the dune candle is taking persistent fire damage, the dune candle is hidden to observers rather than undetected.

**Light the Living Wick** (arcane, evocation) A creature damaged by a dune candle's flare Strike must succeed at a DC 24 Will save or catch on fire, taking 1d4 persistent fire damage. If the creature is already taking persistent fire damage, a failed save increases the persistent fire damage by 1d4.

### Groetan Candle

Groetan candles deal cold damage with their melee Strikes and gain the following ability.

**Show the Looming Moon** ♦ (concentrate) **Requirements** The Groetan candle is invisible; **Effect** The Groetan candle ends its invisibility and flashes with cold brightness. Creatures within 20 feet of the Groetan candle who can see it must succeed at a DC 24 Fortitude save or become dazzled for 1 round (1 minute on a critical failure).

### Spellvoid

Spellvoids have the following ability instead of Feed on Fear.

**Feed on Magic** ♦ (concentrate) **Requirement** A creature who can cast spells is within 15 feet of the spellvoid; **Effect** The spellvoid feeds on the creature's magic. The spellvoid regains 2d8 Hit Points, and the target must attempt a DC 24 Will save. The target is then temporarily immune for 1 hour.

**Critical Success** The target is unaffected.

**Success** The first time the target Casts a Spell before the start of the spellvoid's next turn, the spell is disrupted unless the target succeeds at a DC 15 flat check.

**Failure** As success, but the effect applies the first time the target Casts a Spell within the next minute.

**Critical Failure** As success, but the effect applies each time the target Casts a Spell within the next minute. In addition, the spellvoid doubles the Hit Points it regains.

### Will-o'-the-Deep

These creatures gain the Amphibious trait, a swim Speed of 50 feet, and the Aquatic Ambush ability (*Pathfinder Bestiary* 242).

## Will-o'-Wisps on Golarion and Beyond

For all the dread that will-o'-wisps bring upon adventurers or lone travelers far from the safety of civilization and shelter, these creatures thankfully hunt in very specific locations. Wilderness-adjacent thoroughfares, desolate swamps near frequented waterways, and places exposed to chronic or single enormous expenditures of necromantic magic are common homes for will-o'-wisps. The following locations in Golarion see their activity most often.

**Candlemere:** Will-o'-wisps commonly appear within the River Kingdoms as a whole and especially within its newest nation, once called the Stolen Lands. From the center of Candlemere Lake rises an island shrouded by rumors of curses and tales of travelers vanishing into thin air. The planar boundaries around Candlemere Island are especially thin. During autumn months, great strings of will-o'-wisps appear on the island's shores, weaving their way in ritualistic patterns to the ruined tower at the island's center. Adventurers seeking to discover the nature of this activity face deadly attacks by ancient will-o'-wisps that cackle and sing to the Key and the Gate.

**Crown of the World:** In the ice-shrouded latitudes surrounding Golarion's north pole, the long and dark winter months are haunted by will-o'-wisps who conceal themselves in the shimmering auroras. They prey upon travelers along the Path of Aganhei, the trade route that winds its way across the High Ice. The Shining Sea, which abuts the Crown of the World east of Avistan, is home to aquatic will-o'-the-deeps that shine within the waters like bioluminescent plankton. The ice-covered Nameless Spires play host to eerie progressions of will-o'-wisps burning like stars of alien constellations that swirl about the spires but never enter the city itself. Some say they're called there to feed upon the terror of the ancient dead suffused into the ice, or perhaps to sup upon the alien emotions of something that lurks below the surface.

**First World:** While will-o'-wisps aren't fey, they're common within the First World. There, they congregate in small groups and often have atypical appetites, feeding on wonder or anger just as much as fear—as they've attuned to the often mercurial moods of the fey for sustenance. Most First World wisps that feed upon fear do so by trailing fey as they enter the Material Plane and preying upon the wayward victims of fey pranks. Elder will-o'-wisps serve within the courts of the Eldest as messengers and toadies, especially in service to the self-titled Lantern King.

**Ghostlight Marsh:** Situated at the border of the Belkzen and the Gravelands, Ghostlight Marsh is



notable for its will-o'-wisps' curious habit of drifting beneath the new moon in strings numbering more than 30 at a time. They supplement the natural defenses of the marshlands, as they not only prey upon orcs and humans, but also aggressively target—and occasionally usurp control of—the Whispering Tyrant's undead servitors, lodging themselves within undead victims' hollow skulls to shed an eerie nimbus of light through their empty eye sockets.

**The Mana Wastes:** The blasted, magic-scarred wilderness between Nex and Geb hosts a unique variety of mutated spellvoids known locally as Geb's eyes or Nex's lanterns, depending on the speaker's national origin. Warped by the region's twisted laws of nature, or possibly originating from escaped arcane experiments, these wisps are a bane to traveling spellcasters but seem wholly incapable of leaving the region's borders.

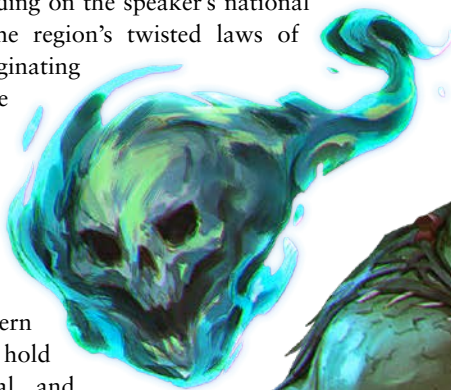
**Mushfens:** Southern Varisia's marshes hold a variety of natural and unnatural dangers, and its will-o'-wisps are notable for their eagerness to hunt together with creatures other than fellow will-o'-wisps. The Mushfens' wisps often collaborate with marsh giants in hunting pairs, leading victims to the giants and then feeding off their captives' fear before being finally cooked and eaten by the giants. Will-o'-wisps also congregate around the many Thassilonian ruins that dot the marsh, somehow attracted to the sense of ingrained loss and terror that still echoes from Earthfall, which occurred many thousands of years ago.

**Ninshabur:** The ruins of ancient Ninshabur host sadistic will-o'-wisps that have slowly and perniciously mutated due to the energies leaking from the Pit of Gormuz. The oppressive fear that followed the spawn of Rovagug emerging from the Pit originally attracted Ninshaburs, who now haunt the ruins left behind and prey on would-be explorers or scavengers.

**Thuvia:** Prowling the central and eastern deserts of Thuvia and the furthest western areas of Osirion, dune candles beguile caravan guards and itinerant druids alike, leading

them from trade routes into sand pits or areas prone to landslides. Many Thuvian will-o'-wisps hunt in unusually precise patterns extending outward from the div-haunted House of Oblivion, like hungry iron filings in the lines of a powerful magnet's flux.

**The Uskwood:** Will-o'-wisps haunt the deepest reaches of Nidal's somber Uskwood, tempting travelers with the suggestion of isolated cabins or secluded campfires where they could find refuge. The Uskwood's wisps sometimes act in concert with the forest's evil druids and redcaps, but they keep one rule as absolute: they don't prey upon followers of Zon-Kuthon.



Hunting Pair

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