

THE DECAPITATED CHILDREN OF RECOLTE



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ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Centuries ago there was a woman, her name long forgotten, who longed to have a child. After years of fruitless attempts to bear her husband an heir, he abandoned her and the woman fell into a state of utter despair.

A green hag feasted upon the woman's anguish, compelling her to abduct an infant. Fated to never possess a child, the infant died in the woman's arms. Thus the creation of the barren hag began. Year after year the green hag induced the woman to steal a child. Some young, some older; all soon perished in the woman's care.

In the sixth year, the woman's crimes were uncovered and she was executed, but the curse was complete. The woman's soul was finally free, but that of the child she had been courting to claim was bound to take her place.

The new barren hag moved far away, found a child of its heart's desire, and took it for its own. And so the cycle began anew.

It is not known how many times this cycle repeated before the current barren hag took up residence in the forest bordering the farming community of Recolte. For five years it has been taking children here. Knowing the child will not live, the barren hag takes the child's head, leaving the rest of the body at the edge of the forest.

Helpless to prevent these terrible murders, the farmers of Recolte have built a piece of their religion to embrace it. When the harvest time comes, one child will not survive. The crops must come in, however, and fear makes the work faster.

The barren hag must fulfill its annual compulsion, but deep down it senses that its soul might somehow be freed from its ongoing nightmare.

OVERVIEW

The adventure is divided into the following sections:

A Strange Tradition. The adventurers arrive as a harvest festival is beginning, partake in the festivities, and learn a terrible truth.

Headstones and Gemstones. A puzzle reveals a hag's lair and might even help the characters prevent the next victim from being taken.

The Barren Lair. The hag calls upon the children it could never possess to help destroy its adversaries.

CREDITS

Crafted by **Paul Metzger**. @metzpaul and **Kathleen Harrington**. @KatnBR

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A STRANGE TRADITION

The first decapitated corpse of a child appeared on the edge of the forest next to the farmlands of Recolte at the close of harvest season five years ago. After three more seasons and three more headless corpses, a common thread was discovered.

The harvest season in this agrarian community means day after day of hard work for all, and in order to gather in the crops before autumn's cold sets in, all children over the age of 6 are expected to contribute to the all-day-every-day drudgery.

Children don't enjoy chores and are bound to do a bit of griping, but the parents of the four children murdered realized that, as the harvest progressed, their child had grown unusually insolent and uncooperative that year.

The village elders, fearing the children were somehow incurring divine wrath for their unwillingness to participate in the harvest, appealed to the elder of the local chapel of Chauntea for help. With his blessing, the adults instituted a new tradition intended to both frighten and bribe their children into compliance.

The move was a partial success. On the whole, the children were more well-behaved than ever and the outright defiance ended. But obedience didn't solve the greater problem—every year another child would disappear and their headless body would be found on the outskirts of the forest.

The adventurers happen upon this village at the festival on the eve of the harvest. Will they uncover the secret of the decapitated children of Recolte and prevent another victim from being taken?

The sun hangs low in the western sky on this crisp autumn afternoon as you travel through farmlands ripe with grain. As you crest a hill on this infrequently traveled dirt road, a lone crow caws loudly. About a mile ahead, you see a small village and the thought of a hot meal and a warm bed for the night cheers you as you press onward.

It is twilight by the time the party reaches the village. As they draw near, they see that there are around 50 people, both adults and children, milling around on a broad lawn outside a small

wooden building, and the mood appears to be both jovial and somber. (If a character questions this, a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Insight) check will reveal that the people seem worried about something but are trying to ignore it.)

The building around which the people are gathered is obviously a religious structure. It is topped by a short bell tower, and carved above the door is a symbol of a rose on a radiating sheaf of wheat. If any character is a follower of Chauntea or if any character is proficient in religion, no check is required; otherwise, a DC 10 Intelligence (Religion) check is needed to identify it as a temple dedicated to the Great Mother.

All of the children capable of walking on their own are busy at work constructing crude scarecrows from sticks and straws. The children are spread out, working in an area that spans from the edge of the road to the churchyard a few hundred yards in. A couple of the older—and clearly more artistically gifted—children have managed to create scarecrows with striking resemblances to themselves.

The adults stand around a small bonfire, drinking from large mugs. As the characters approach, an old man with a white beard beckons them forward.

"Ho, travelers! Welcome to Recolte! Please come share our fire and join us in a mug of spiced autumn tea. I wish I could offer you something stronger, but there's too much work to be done on the morrow. Visitors on Harvestseve are surely a sign of Chauntea's blessing! Please stay and enjoy our hospitality. Kenné has slaughtered two sows and there will be plenty of the feast to share."

The characters are able to gather the following information from the man, who warmly introduces himself as Elder Queque Deneuf.

- Recolte township's temple to Chauntea serves more than 20 farms in the surrounding area.
- Their particular faith dictates that the final harvest of the season begins on the eve of the new moon in Marpenoth. This festival currently in progress marks the occasion.

- Since the hard work begins tomorrow at sunrise, this festival isn't as much fun as Chauntea's Feast, which comes when the harvest is finished. That's when they break out the whisky and party all night before hunkering down to survive the winter.

- The pay probably isn't enough to entice adventurers, but they surely could use more farm labor. In fact, even the children are required to...

That last piece of information is interrupted by the church bells ringing and adults shouting.

"He's coming!" "Children, inside, quickly!"

Children start running inside. One little girl of about 6 or 7 years old ignores the order and continues trying to braid some pieces of hay onto her scarecrow. Her mother grabs her by the arm and drags her, crying, into the chapel.

Amidst the frantic ringing of the chapel bell, you hear the thunder of galloping hooves as a figure on a midnight-black horse approaches from across a field to the south. It's wearing a flowing black cloak, has a large, lumpy pack slung over its shoulder, and brandishes a flaming sword. In place of its head sits a large orange pumpkin.

A toddler runs out of the chapel and shouts "Doll man!"

"No, Timothé! He'll cut your head off!" his father yells, running out after his child. Scooping the boy up, the man returns quickly to the chapel.

The horseman rears up and the horse whinnies! A voice from within the chapel booms:

**Dawn to night till Chauntea's feast
Children toil with man and beast**

**Accept rewards I give you now
Remember, when behind the plow**

**Cry, complain, or loaf in bed
I shall return to claim your head!**

The horseman gallops forward and begins smashing scarecrows, setting them ablaze with its sword.

Roll Initiative!

Part of the fun of this adventure is having one of the characters kill "Santa Claus," and as every DM knows, players are conditioned to the words "roll initiative" like Pavlov's dogs to the bell.

Aside from the toddler who remembers only last year's doll, all the children are terrified of the pumpkin-headed swordsman. As this is the villagers' attempt at ensuring the children's compliance with the harvest work (not to mention hopefully preventing their child from being the one murdered this year), all of the adults feign terror as well. The characters would be right to jump to the conclusion that the farmers are under attack.

Clues that not all is as it may seem:

- The horseman is not doing the speaking—it's someone hiding in the chapel's bell tower. A character locates the man with a successful DC 12 Intelligence (Investigation) if they attempt to find the source of the poem.
- A character who focuses their attention on the villagers rather than the horseman notices that no one is making any effort to defend the village, even though crossbows and other weapons are stacked near the church door. A successful DC 14 Wisdom (Insight) check reveals that a few of the adults are unable to mask their amusement at the situation.

The horseman is Malchanceux Gonze, a human **commoner** playing the role of the sinister-yet-benevolent object of the children's terror. The pumpkin on his head is freshly harvested and carved, but allows him only partial sight (causing disadvantage on attack rolls and ability checks). The flaming sword he wields is made of wood and has been wrapped in linens soaked with lamp oil. The sack on his back contains crudely made sackcloth dolls, each bearing a tag with the name of a farm child.

If the horseman is left to his work, he smashes each scarecrow, setting it ablaze and leaving a gift for the child who created it, and then gallops off into the night. After few moments, the parents of the village nudge the children out to claim their gifts, with assurances that all will be fine if they behave themselves during the harvest.

If all goes as planned and your players kill Santa Claus, all hell breaks loose. A woman runs to the character dealing the killing blow and wails, "You killed my Mal! By Chauntea, how could our nightmare become worse!" The sentiment of the town is vengeful, which would be taken immediately were it not for the obviously superior abilities of the adventuring party.

If the party revives and heals Mal, the farmers are somewhat mollified, although they mutter about outsiders meddling in what they don't understand. If the party doesn't choose to try to remedy their mistake, the villagers are overtly hostile. With hate-filled glances, they gather their children and return to their homes, leaving Elder Deneuf alone with the adventurers.

In either case, the elder explains the purpose of the charade and implores the adventurers to help:

- Each year for the last several, one child has gone missing right after the harvest concluded. Its decapitated corpse would be found the next day near the edge of the forest.
- The ones gone missing were always the difficult children, the ones most inclined to insolence and disobedience.
- The villagers invented the pumpkin-headed, sword-bearing horseman who brings gifts in an effort to convince the children to do their share of the harvest chores with a minimum of complaint.
- The first child, a preteen boy named Marteau Rosser, disappeared during the harvest 5 years ago. His body was found at the edge of the forest, decapitated but otherwise intact.
- The family set a grave with a headstone for him there, and shortly thereafter a bowl containing two gemstones, each of a different color, appeared nearby.
- The following year the decapitated corpse of a missing girl named Collette Rassembler appeared next to the grave at the edge of the forest.
- The family buried the girl's body in the family plot in the churchyard, but the next day they found that the grave had been disturbed and the body was missing. Upon investigation, the child's body was discovered lying beside the first grave at the edge of the forest.

- They returned the body to the churchyard, but the same scenario was repeated again the next night: the girl's rotting, headless corpse lay again by the woods.

- Hoping to prevent further desecration, the family dug a new grave beside Marteau's and reinterred Collette there. A headstone bearing her name and dates of birth and death marks her resting place. A third gemstone of another color appeared in the bowl.

- Scattering the gemstones about seemed to do nothing; the next day they would reappear in the bowl. Eventually the villagers decided to leave the bowl and stones alone.

- In the 3 years since, three more children have disappeared during the harvest, despite the introduction of the pumpkin-headed bogeyman.

- Experience has taught them that there is no point in burying the children anywhere but beside the forest, so now there are 5 small headstones at the edge of the dark woods.

- After each annual tragedy, one more gemstone appears in the bowl; there are 6 stones in the bowl at present.

If the characters are shocked that the villagers seem to care more about bringing in the harvest than in getting to the bottom of the annual death of a child, Elder Deneuf explains that these people are loving parents, but pragmatic: life is hard in rural communities and deaths from accident and disease occur all too frequently. The birthrate outpaces deaths, however, so the population continues to grow.

It takes full effort from everyone to ensure the survival of the village during the harsh winters and early springs until the land and livestock begin to produce again. It is terrible that children are still being killed, but at least the children are frightened enough to work diligently in the fields.

HEADSTONES AND GEMSTONES

The edge of the forest where the decapitated corpses appear is thick with brambles and seems nigh impenetrable. For several miles in each direction there is no visible means of entering the forest. Not even a game trail leads into its gloomy depths.

The villagers do not believe that whatever is taking their children could have come out of the forest; no tracks have ever been seen and no vegetation has ever been disturbed. After the second child's body was found, they attempted to hack their way in with axes, but after a day's hard labor, they were left with dull blades and little progress. When they discovered that the forest had completely regrown the next morning, they abandoned their efforts.

The gemstones in the bowl represent the birthstones of each child taken, although the villagers haven't realized this.

The stones presently in the bowl are a dark red garnet, purple amethyst, pale blue aquamarine, green emerald, yellow canary tourmaline, and an orange topaz. The purple amethyst is the stone that appeared most recently. This indicates the birth month of the child doomed to be taken this year.

The headstones, from left to right, read:

Marteau Rosser
b 13 Hammer 1475 DR
d 11 Uktar 1487 DR

Collette Rassembler
b 21 Uktar 1479 DR
d 5 Uktar 1488 DR

Citrouille Potiron
b 6 Marpenoth 1482 DR
d 28 Marpenoth 1489 DR

Mai Pouvoir
b 28 Mirtul 1478 DR
d 1 Uktar 1490 DR

Jeu d'Echecs
b 13 Ches 1481 DR
d 11 Uktar 1491 DR

The characters are, of course, familiar with the calendar of Harptos, so provide the players with the corresponding Gregorian calendar months. This alone may be enough to clue the birthstone connection.

If the players need help from their characters, they can make an Intelligence (History) check. On a 14 or higher the character knows the birthstone for their own birth month (at your discretion, that character may share a birth month with one of the deceased). On a 20 or higher they know all months.

If the players don't make the birthstone connection on their own, their character may with a successful a DC 18 Intelligence check. A 10 or higher at least gives them the bright idea that there may be a pattern to the colors. The gems do in fact go in rainbow order from red to blue. This approach will not allow them to connect the purple stone to the next victim, however.

When the gemstones are placed on their corresponding headstones, an opening appears in the bramble wall of the forest.

MONTHS AND BIRTHSTONES

Month	Harptos	Gem	Color
January	Hammer	Garnet	Dark red
February	Alturiak	Amethyst	Purple
March	Ches	Aquamarine	Pale blue
April	Tarsak	Diamond	Clear
May	Mirtul	Emerald	Green
June	Kythorn	Pearl	White
July	Flamerule	Ruby	Red
August	Eleasis	Peridot	Light green
September	Eleint	Sapphire	Dark blue
October	Marpenoth	Canary Tourmaline	Yellow
November	Uktar	Topaz	Orange
December	Nightal	Zircon	Bright blue

THE BARREN LAIR

The 10-foot wide section of forest behind the grave markers magically dissipates, revealing the **barren hag's** lair. The irregularly shaped clearing is roughly 50 feet by 50 feet and was clearly created by magical means. The walls of the lair are formed by dense trees and impassable bramble; a thick canopy of vegetation 50 feet above roofs the clearing. If the day is sunny, enough dim light filters in to provide some illumination; on cloudy days or at night, it is quite dark.

At regularly spaced intervals around the lair, about ten feet in from the walls, hang 5 small skulls. The skin still clinging to the heads is leathery and pulled taut, and glassy-looking eyes gaze soullessly ahead. The hair of each has been braided into vines hanging from the canopy above, leaving the disembodied heads dangling 5 feet off the ground.

The barren hag is invisible and waits until a character approaches one of the heads. When they do, the hag appears and screams "I knew you would come for them, wretched mortals — stay away from my children!"

Any character unaware of the hag's presence is surprised in the first round of combat, unable to move or take an action and unable to take reactions until their turn ends.

LAIR EFFECTS

The barren hag's power is derived from the souls of the children it has abducted over the years. Whenever a lair effect is activated, describe an incorporeal body appearing below the dangling head and colored light streaming between the child and the hag. These effects are described in the **barren hag in lair** stat block.

Damage Immunity. When the barren hag takes nonmagical damage, dark red light connects the barren hag and the skull of Marteau Rosser. Describe the damage appearing on the incorporeal body and the child screaming and writhing in pain.

Magic Immunity. When the barren hag takes magical damage or is subjected to a magical effect, orange light connects the hag to the skull of Collette Rassembler, which similarly appears to bear the brunt of the magical attack or effect.

Parent's Vengeance. When the barren hag deals extra psychic damage, yellow light beams from the skull of Citrouille Potiron and the hag's staff, while the image of the child's body appears to mimic the attacking motion.

Thunderwave. Green light flows between the skull of Mai Pouvoir and the spell's point of origin when the hag casts this spell. The child's body appears to be ripped from its head and exploded into the clearing as the thunder booms.

Guardian Shriek. Blue light flows from the open mouth of Jeu d'Echecs to that of the hag's, as both emit an ear-piercing shriek.

TACTICS

The barren hag expects intruders to be unworthy brutes bearing swords, and as such moves to protect the trophy that grants it damage immunity.

However, the hag is deeply emotionally attached to its "children," and is quick to use its *parental sacrifice* reaction to protect them. If a character destroys one of the skulls, the hag's blind desire for vengeance against that character overrides its tactical judgment for that round.

NEUTRALIZING THE SKULLS

From your descriptions of the lair effects, it will be obvious to the characters that the skulls need to be dealt with. The threat can be addressed in one of these ways:

Destroy the Skull. The skulls have AC 10 and 10 hit points. If a skull is destroyed, it no longer provides a lair effect.

Remove the Skull. A character can take an action to cut down or untie a skull (no check required). It continues to provide its effect while inside the lair, but if removed, the leathery skin wrapping the skull turns to dust and the skull can no longer provide any effects.

Reach the Child. If a character addresses a skull by its name, have the character make a Charisma (Persuasion) check. On a 15 or higher, the lair effect no longer functions. On a 20 or higher, the character can also immediately take a bonus action to enact the lair effect themselves one time only. In the case of damage immunity or magic immunity, the effect lasts until the start of the character's next turn.

On a failure, the skull provides no effect until the end of the barren hag's next turn, after which it returns to its former function. After a character has failed to interact with a skull in this way, the skull can no longer be persuaded.

AFTERMATH AND REWARDS

With its last breath, the hag cackles:
"Yes! Yes! Finally my soul is free, and the chosen one can take its rightful place!"

If any of the trophy heads remain, they fall to the ground as their leathery skins turn to dust. The skulls and other remains of the children are no longer under any spell, and their families can do with them as they wish without consequence.

The purple amethyst gemstone represents the child chosen as this season's victim. Only one child in town, Chanceuse Pasmort, was born in Alturiak, and she has become increasingly—and uncharacteristically—surly this year.

With the barren hag destroyed, Chanceuse will disappear at some point during the harvest, never to be seen again, and destined to become the new barren hag. This can be prevented if a *remove curse* or similar magic is cast on Chanceuse before her fate is sealed.

The gemstones remain where the characters left them, and can now be removed. Each can provide a magical effect. Once the effect has been used, the gemstone loses all magical properties and becomes a nonmagical gem worth 100 gp.

Marteau's Ruby. When you take nonmagical damage, you may use your reaction to take no damage and become immune to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks until the start of your next turn.

Collette's Topaz. When you take magical damage or are subject to a magical spell or effect, you may use your reaction to gain immunity to magical damage and effects until the start of your next turn.

Citrouille's Canary Tourmaline. When you hit with a weapon attack, you may deal an extra 3d6 psychic damage to the target.

Mia's Emerald. You can use an action to cast *thunderwave* as a 3rd-level spell; if your spell save DC is 13 or lower, the DC is 14 instead.

Jeu's Aquamarine. As a bonus action you let out a blood-curdling shriek. All creatures of your choice within 60 feet of you must succeed on a DC 14 Wisdom saving throw or be frightened until the start of your next turn.

If the characters were able to free Chanceuse Pasmort from the barren hag's curse, the purple gemstone gains this effect:

Chanceuse's Amethyst. You can use a bonus action to cast *mass healing word*. Charisma is your spellcasting ability modifier for this spell.

BARREN HAG

Living in solitude in hidden lairs, barren hags plot the abduction and murder of their next child victim. A living curse itself, a barren hag fulfills its annual compulsion to take a child it can never possess, all the while longing to be freed so that a new victim may take its place.

Unrequited Desire. A barren hag is originally borne of an infertile woman desperate to bear a child. When a green hag finds such a person, it uses the woman's longing to manipulate her into abducting child after child, who all quickly perish. The barren hag is fated to have its greatest desire unfulfilled.

A Living Curse. When a barren hag is killed its soul finally finds a sweet release, but the creature lives on as its curse. The hag's next chosen victim disappears to a faraway land where it eventually matures and steals a child of its own and the cycle begins anew.

Victim Powered. Although any child it takes soon dies, a barren hag takes part of the body, often the head, as a trophy. It loves this trophy as though it were a living child, and the trophy grants powerful magic to the barren hag while both reside in its lair.



BARREN HAG IN LAIR

Medium Fey, neutral evil

Armor Class 17 (natural armor)

Hit Points 112 (15d8+45)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	15 (+2)	16 (+3)	16 (+3)	14 (+2)	16 (+3)

Skills Deception +7, Insight +6, Perception +6

Senses darkvision, 120 ft., passive Perception 16

Languages Common

Challenge 9 (5000 XP)

LAIR EFFECTS

While in its lair, the barren hag gains benefits from the trophies kept from the children it has abducted. Each of those trophies has AC 10, 10 hp. If destroyed or removed from the lair, the trophy ceases to provide its benefit.

Damage Immunity. The barren hag is immune to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks.

Magic Immunity. The barren hag is immune to magical damage and effects.

Parent's Vengeance. Once per turn when the barren hag hits with a melee attack it deals an additional 3d6 psychic damage.

Thunderwave. As an additional action on each of its turn, the barren hag may cast *thunderwave* as a 3rd-level spell, save DC 14).

Guardian Shriek. At the start of the barren hag's turn, all enemies in its lair must succeed on DC 14 Wisdom saving throw or be frightened until the start of the barren hag's next turn.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The barren hag makes two attacks with its staff.

Staff. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 13 (2d8+4) bludgeoning damage.

Invisible Passage. The barren hag magically turns invisible until it attacks or casts a spell, or until its concentration ends (as if concentrating on a spell). While invisible, it leaves no physical evidence of its passage, so it can be tracked only by magic. Any equipment it wears or carries is invisible with it.

BONUS ACTIONS

Mommy's Here! The barren hag teleports to an unoccupied space within 5 feet of one of its trophies.

REACTIONS

Parental Sacrifice. When one of its trophies is attacked, the barren hag can move up to its speed towards it. If it is then within 5 feet of the trophy the barren hag redirects the attack to itself.