



The Horror of Ochre Grove

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The Cornelius family has lived in Ochre Grove for generations. Wealthy owners of the Rusty Mist Distillery, the family brews a renowned corn-mash whiskey. The sleepy farming town lies on the wooded outskirts of a massive forest, and the Cornelius Manor and surrounding estate lie just beyond the settlement on the far side of the Ochre River Bridge. The farm is occupied by the head of household, Victor Cornelius, his wife Amelia, teenage twin daughters Elise and Eliza, and elder son Samuel.

By most accounts the family is prestigious and well-liked by the locals. However, Victor harbors a dark secret unknown even to his family – he’s a murderer.

Hammond Gresham owned the neighboring farm and founded his own distillery, and his product was becoming popular enough to outsell the Cornelius stock. Hammond and his mistress, Margaret Weber (who is also sister of his late wife, Anna), worked feverishly to keep pace with their more experienced neighbors. Their success was something that Victor Cornelius could not stand for.

Falsely accusing Hammond of working land owned by the Cornelius estate, Victor attempted to thwart his competition through legal subversion. However, when the land warrants he presented were discovered to be forgeries, the town council dismissed his claim. A few weeks later Hammond Gresham disappeared.

Margaret accused Victor of foul play, but neither a sign of struggle nor a body were to be discovered. Since Hammond had no wife or heirs, when the Gresham farm inevitably fell into tax debt it was auctioned by the council to settle the balance.

The Cornelius family won the bid. In retribution for the claims of forgery levied against Victor, he evicted Margaret from the property and had the farmhouse razed.

That was ten years ago.

Margaret is actually an evil enchantress (use **oni** statistics but treat as Medium size) who jealously poisoned her sister and seduced Hammond, with whom she had fallen madly in love.

When Victor murdered Hammond and banished Margaret, she fled into the forest to bide her time, scheming her ultimate revenge. She eventually summoned an incubus named Keuxahl, who swore a pact to do her bidding. Keuxahl carries a rope of entanglement, with which it tries to capture foes for experimentation and manipulation, and a book of profane ritual magic.

Using the fiend's dark power, Margaret has now summoned the restless spirit of Hammond and commands him to take vengeance upon the Cornelius family. The invoked spirit of Hammond takes the form of a **wraith** riding a **nightmare** as a mount.

The witch intends to have Hammond tend to Victor and son while she kidnaps the Cornelius daughters. She plans on taking them back to the site of the old Gresham farmstead, where she intends to sacrifice them in a rite that will curse the surrounding farmland.

The adventurers have come across Ochre Grove in their travels, and find the town quaint and inviting. With only a small pub and a four-room inn to offer, the settlement is little more than a wayward stop during travels.

It is late evening and the adventurers are leaving the pub and making their way towards the inn to settle in for the night. To the north they see a bright flash a roiling green-hued fireball burst into the sky before dissipating. The spectacle is quickly followed by the loud sound of an explosion that rattles the very ground.

In dismay, denizens of the town rush out of their homes to investigate. With the telltale glow of fire looming in the wake of the blast, the townsfolk begin to scramble about gathering spare pails and rushing towards the river.

The grain dust in the bins on Cornelius estate have exploded, and the manor has been set afire.

A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check hears the faint and distant sounds of a few women screaming from the direction of the blast.

1. OCHRE RIVER BRIDGE

When the crowd reaches the river, the only bridge has been destroyed – leaving a 20 ft. gap across rushing whitewater. A few remnants of the bridge remain intact. The only villager daring enough to attempt crossing falls into the river and is washed away. The remaining villagers ask the adventurers to go across the river to help while they rush downstream to save their comrade.

The bridge framework supports no more than 300 lbs. at once before it collapses. To cross the ruins of the bridge without falling off requires a successful DC 15 Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics) check by

each creature; failure results in falling into the river and being washed downstream where rescue by the gathered townsfolk awaits. If the bridge collapses, those upon it may make a DC 16 Dexterity saving throw or DC 18 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check to scurry across the framework as it collapses; a creature who fails the save or check falls into the river as described above.

Use the standard jumping and skill check rules if characters on mounts wish to try and jump the river while riding.

2. THE FOREST FORK

Once across the bridge the adventures can follow the dirt road toward the manor to a fork, where one path leads towards the estate and the other towards a forest hunting trail. They see a massive black horse with flaming tufts of mane with a rider wreathed in dark wisps of shadow. The rider drags a young man (Samuel) by a rusty chain wrapped around his neck. Lagging behind in pursuit is a heavy-set and balding farmer (Victor) riding a packhorse.

As the two riders gallop up the hunting trail into the forest, the PCs can hear screams from the manor: "No! Not my daughters! Please!"

3. TREE OF RECKONING -

If the adventurers follow the riders the following events unfold. If instead they rush to the manor, skip to the section 4.

The adventurers follow the long-unused trail to its end. There they find the battered and bloodied Samuel hanging from the chain, which is tossed over the high branch of a lifeless ancient black oak. Unable to breathe and near death, Samuel struggles and kicks.

The packhorse lies lifeless and emaciated on top of Victor, whose legs are broken. He reaches helplessly towards his son while

gazing in horror at the wraith, its ghastly face now clearly visible as it approaches him. "No! You're dead! I killed you! You're dead! Dead!" he shouts hoarsely.

The adventurers automatically win initiative in this encounter, and have two objectives:

1. They must rescue Samuel, who is unconscious. Samuel takes a turn on Initiative count 15 each round, and will die at the end of his 3rd turn if not cut down and resuscitated.
2. They must defeat or drive off the wraith of Hammond.

If Samuel survives, give each adventurer an extra 150 xp as a bonus. A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check finds the skeleton of Hammond Gresham in a shallow grave, along with identifiable articles.

If the PCs do not pursue the wraith into the forest, then both Samuel and Victor are killed, and the wraith joins the encounter in section 5.

4. CORNELIUS MANOR

The grain bins have been totally destroyed and the two-story manor is ablaze.

If the adventurers pursued the riders first, they arrive to find a woman (Amelia) stabbed to death. The trail of sanguine suggests she crawled from the manor to the edge of an unharvested cornfield.

Otherwise, in the front yard the adventurers see Amelia crawling towards cornfield. She has been stabbed in the stomach several times and is bleeding profusely. A character who uses magic, a healer's kit, or succeeds on a DC 10 Wisdom (Medicine) check will stabilize Amelia, otherwise she will bleed to death in one minute.

When approached Amelia frantically begs for her daughters to be saved while pointing at the cornfield. The only information she can provide about their captors is “The stick men took them!”

Elise and Eliza have been kidnapped by scarecrows (use **animated armor** statistics). Animated by Margaret, the constructs have taken the girls to the ruins of Gresham farm.

A character who succeeds on a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check uncovers a swath through the corn stalks. When walking through the rows, the adventurers are attacked by six scarecrows (use **animated armor** statistics). Having completed their task and captured the girls, the scarecrows now stand guard protecting the ritual.

5. RUINS OF GRESHAM FARM

Only a pile of overgrown rubble remains where the farmhouse once stood; in front of the debris roars a large bonfire. The daughters are bound to sun-bleached beams in the pile, and both scream hysterically. They have been blinded by blood pouring down their faces from wide gashes in their foreheads.

Margaret stands between them chanting and has used the blood to paint hellish sigils over her nude body. Upon any attempt to interrupt her, Keuxahl the **incubus** descends from the night sky and intervenes. If the wraith or nightmare were not destroyed at the reckoning tree, then they join the fiend’s defense.

If the fiend is destroyed first, the sigils painted upon Margaret’s body burst into flame, inflicting 3d6 +3 points of fire damage to her. If she survives, she attempts to kill both girls.

Each adventurer receives a 150 xp bonus for each girl saved. If both are killed, the ritual was completed.

CONCLUSION

After speaking with the townsfolk, the adventurers should be able to easily discern Victor’s crime. If he survived the encounter at the reckoning tree, the town authorities will take him into custody to be tried.

If the ritual was completed, the entire breadth of the Cornelius estate is cursed with a blight that causes all plants on it to become diseased and poisoned – nothing will grow in the soil. The blight lasts for 100 years, and can only be negated via *wish* or similarly powerful magic.

If the ritual was not completed, the council offers the adventurers half of the surviving Cornelius family’s estate (4,500 gp value) as reward and recompense; otherwise they offer lifetime free room and board in Ochre Grove.

