

In Defence of Heartsfern

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Introduction

A TTRPG adventure compatible with Dungeons and Dragons 5e adventure for a party of level 3-4 characters.

The party has heard of disturbing tales where a parade of the damned, a macabre march of performers travel the land to perform their gruesome play. The few people that report such tales report butchering of those who still live at the behest of someone who calls themselves, Arbiter Zed. The party has also heard word that the town of Heartsfern may be at risk. As the murderous troop of performers left in that direction the party now must race against time to reach them before it's too late.

Heartsfern

Entering Heartsfern



The road to heartsfern was easy, calm even as they managed to find a wagon heading that way to a neighbouring village.

Dropped off an hour down the road from Heartsfern they proceeded on foot, crossing passed fenced off pastures they eventually saw the village in full.

A few dozen buildings, the largest being the mill or what looked to be an inn, it was rather quaint.

However as they started to get closer several men from the village approached them with pitchforks, maddocks and other farming instruments.

"Who are you?" barked a man at the front, "Did Arbiter Zed send you?" he asked as the growing tenseness in the villagers could be felt.

After a few minutes of talking it was clear that the party were both not working for the man proclaimed to be Arbiter Zed or, not undead.

As they moved into town they could see many people looking at them from windows fearfully or busy hurrying around like it was the end of time itself.

"Forgive us" a warm female voice rang out, "Buck had to make sure you weren't here to torment us. My name is Shelly and this is Heartsfern.

Unfortunately we would normally welcome you a bit more warmly but we had one of the undead walk into the middle of our street and foretell the end of this village." she continued. "It's probably a story best told over a hot meal and some ale. I run the inn and general store if you want to follow me." She said as she gave Buck a quick peck on the cheek.

NPC's:

- Buck Underbranch
- Shelly Underbranch
- Trent Barrowrought

Encounter: None

The Herald.

The afternoon had been productive and despite the unseasonable rain shower they had managed to bring in the crops before they were ruined. Drying off as best as he could he cleared the table and moved to make a start on dinner. A hearty soup with some dried boar and vegetables from the farm. What was missing was some grains from one of the neighbours.

The town of Heartsfern was relatively secluded at the edge of a forest. A tribe of elves guarded the forest and were fiercely protective of its plants and animals. This made gathering wood for the farm or new buildings difficult but also meant that they were guarded from bandits or worse from the forest. A neutral relationship that seemed to suit them both had formed and the elves even came to barter on occasion.

Making the decision Trent stood, stretched and scooped up a few silver pieces to take to get the last ingredients for the soup. Leaving the warmth of his single roomed house he walked down the short road that connected all the buildings in Heartsfern. The buildings were predominantly wooden with the inn

and general store having stone walls, but everywhere there were smoking chimneys. As the evening chill began to set in he hurried to reach the general store and walked in.

"Ah Trent. I was about to shut shop. I've been meaning to thank you for the boar meat you gave me the other week. It was a lovely addition to the family's meal." Shelly said as she beamed at him. "Think nothing of it Shell. You've looked after me many times before so I wanted to repay your kindness." he said with a warm smile. "I hope I am not intruding too late, I am making a soup and realised that I was wanting barley in it. Do you have any from Baz?" he asked as he approached the counter.

"I have a small bag left for a few copper," she replied thinking. "If it's just for one meal though I can give you enough for the meal for one Copper piece?" she offered.

"That would be perfect." Trent agreed as she fished out a copper from amongst his coin. But as the exchange was made a haunting voice rattled through the street.

"Come one, come all to the tale of Arbiter Zed." The voice began to thrum as Trent and Shelly left the store and looked at a figure walking down the road. It stumbled but hummed as if trying to remember the tune. After a moment though the humming turned into the man singing a tune.

"Although his boots are worn, and his arms are gone some may call him Dead. Yet he sends me here, to sing and cheer while you make your... bread!" the figure said after a moment's pause. "So listen well and listen true as he arrives when the moon turns blue. He brings his band, he brings his crew to make his performance true." The man was now stumbling into the middle of a ring of townsfolk, some having grabbed farming implements or some old weapons.

The singing man bowed down low, his ragged clothes stretched over a heaving chest as it stopped walking. The humming began once again before turning into another cackling sing-song. "For if you like his play, you can stay to live your peaceful life. But if like his wife, you hate this band..." the

man heaved deeper before standing up taller. His rotten skeleton form revealed itself as the sun set behind it and the moonlight revealed his features. "Then you can join his carnival of the damned!" The man roared with laughter, shocking those around him when the body started to break, shatter and fall to the ground in great sloughs. Even when the herald of Arbiter Zed lay a broken heap of bone, worn fabric and dried flesh the townsfolk still swore they heard the laughter.

A heartbeat or two passed before the town was in an uproar of chaos. A bag of barley lay in the ground, tonight's dinner now ruined by the grim portents of next week's blue moon.

Trent finished his tale glumly. "This town is all I have, all I thought I would ever need. But it appears like someone else has other ideas for it and its people. I know it's a lot to ask but we're in dire need of some help." he smiled weakly at the party as he gulped down on some ale.

NPC's:

- Trent Barrowrought

- Shelly Underbranch

Encounter: Preparing for Defence

N/A

Map - 310ThDeOHe

This part of the adventure is about seeing what we can do to make the village defensible. There are some provisions available, bales of hay/ straw, Some lumber, rope nails. Things that would belong on a farm. There is also the woods nearby where the elves could be encountered and asked to either aid or provide materials or weapons to assist. If the elves can be convinced to help (druid or Elves get advantage on the rolls to persuade them) then the battle becomes quite a bit easier. Thematically. They will work with the town map to look at suggesting defences, etc. and they have a week to do what is required.

The Attack

Two days before the attack the following happens.



While Trent and Shelly fussed about the fortification of the town, with what little material they had, Buck stalked the edge of the town. Not much of a builder, more of a fighter he stalked with a longbow in his hand and a short sword on his waist. It was three days until the blue moon and despite the relief the town felt when the adventurers showed up he was uneasy.

A figure stumbled down the road ahead. The jittery, stumbling hop that the figure gave was all too familiar to Buck. In fact the horrible sing-song voice from his memory also carried along the wind from the figure ahead. The undead bard had appeared again.

"You won't enter this town again" Buck muttered to himself as he took off on a jog towards the figure. Stopping occasionally to check the range with his bow in case he needed to fire in a hurry.

"There once was a man that was brave and bold, his cloak was new but his sword was old..." the voice carried on the wind towards him causing him to stop and aim at the figure that was sixty feet away. "Despite his age he ran ahead, to gather glory and bring home bread. But the glory he sought was all for naught since he never made it home. A cunning bard holds the cards that will cut him to the bone." The figure stopped about thirty feet away, stumbling and breathing deeply. a low laughter could be heard coming from it. "There once was a man that feared the truth." he muttered, barely loud enough to be heard.

Encore

Buck leant in, his bow trained on the chest of the creature before him. So intense was his focus on the creature that he couldn't hear the shouting from behind him. "The man didn't realise that every step tightened his own noose." the figure stood up, the same rotting visage from last time greeted him, a laughter burst outwards. "There once was a man that feared no dead! But mark my words, the Ballad of Buck Underbranch ends with him losing his head!" As the final word sprang out, Buck's nerve snapped and he loosed the shaft towards the creature. But it was too late.

Two blades had been thrown from the rotting man and soared towards his head, cutting through the string of the bow. Both blades hit their mark as the arrow punched through the chest of the creature knocking it to the ground, in pieces. The blades bit deep, the left one into his shoulder but right one into his neck. As he dropped to his knees he gingerly felt the blade. A fatal wound.

Laying on the ground and waiting for the thundering footsteps to reach him he tried to apply pressure to his wounded throat. But even as the terrified look of Shelly's face, the concerned adventurers and his friend, Trent, appeared his consciousness dwindled.

The party are definitely able to save Buck with a successful Medicine check with a healer's kit, spell or healing potion.

The attack

NPC's:

- Buck Underbranch
- Shelly Underbranch
- Trent Barrowrought

Encounter: Encounter linked to the scene:

Creatures: Set 1. 1.5 Undead Performer per party member attack initially. If there are walls or other barricade style defences reduce by 1. If they received aid from the elves, reduce by another 1.

Set 2. 1 Undead performer per party member attack. If they have barricades style defences they are gone now. If they received help from the elves, reduce the number by 1.

Set 3. 2 Undead performers and Arbiter Zed himself.

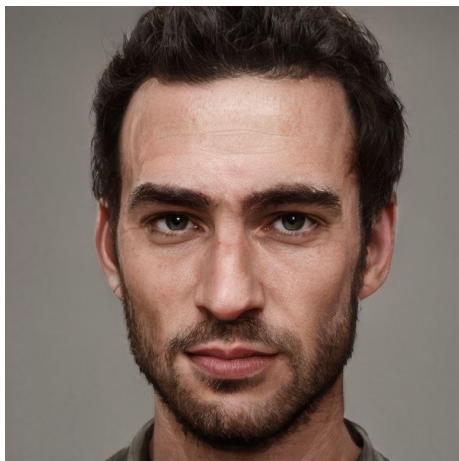
Map - 310ThDeOHe

Arbiter Zed: While not extremely durable, one good smite away from biting it he will hide behind props, in a wagon and use his performers as potential

shields. He isn't above losing one or two cast members to save himself. Targeting as many people as possible with sleep, those who survive the attack will need to deal with his other spells. Heat metal is brutal for any melee warrior. Command, Dissonant whispers and even phantasmal force are also not to be trifled with. However Minor illusion could be used to make it look like a zombie is him standing still, making a pseudo effective duplicate, if only for a turn.

Lore & NPCs

Trent Barrowrought



Trent's earliest memories are working the farm with his pa and their trusty barrow. This soon became the norm as he moved here to live with his grandparent when he was a teenager. This was to avoid him being conscripted as his grandfather was getting older and needed help in the farm. His grandpa lived for a few dozen more years before the reins of the old trusty farm-beast and the keys to the farm became his. Having spent most of his adult life on the farm he has helped many folk, his Pa always encouraging him to help his neighbours. This soon gave him a sense of belonging to the community and when he was suddenly, but not surprisingly found by himself in the old house the community banded around him. He owes a lot to the people here, Shelly most of all for she was his childhood friend. In fact she was his only friend for a good number of years and despite it never growing into something more they are still very close. As he has made a name for himself for

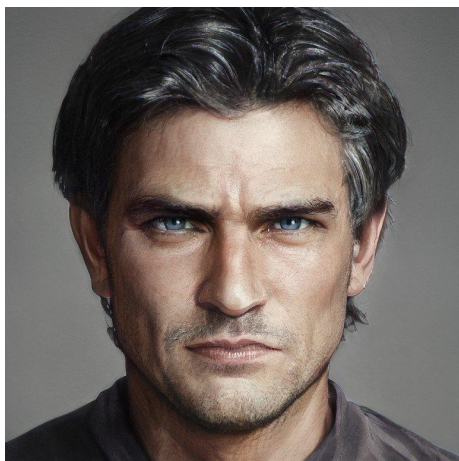
being reliable and helpful many of the town rely on him to help tend their own land. In return they share with him what he needs. But he never wants for more and believes that being in this community is enough reward.

Shelly Underbranch



Born and bred in Heartsfern her parents and their parents before them were the beating heart of Heartsfern. The small town is all she has even known except for when Trent visited. He would bring with him tales of cities, distant lands and people that she would dream about visiting. But she lost her parents quite early and with her grandparents stepping in to help run the general store she quickly fell into step. Running the general store at the age of sixteen was difficult. But she always could rely on Trent to sort out her back if she needed help. The two of them quickly became the centre of the town. Trent helping with the farms and Shelly helping with everything else that he couldn't do. This didn't change when she met Buck, her now husband, and after a lengthy courtship they wed. Trent was both the best man of Shelly and Buck and the three of them formed a close bond.

Buck Underbranch



Buck may be described as impulsive and prone to acting without thinking. But this generally works out in his favour.

Strong and born to a labouring family he learnt to handle himself well from an early age. Devoted to his wife, Shelly, and friend, Trent he wont forget how he was welcomed as an outsider to Heartsfern by these two above all.

The urge to defend what he loves and holds dear drives almost every interaction that Buck has with anyone. He is a provider and stout ally.

Maps

310ThDeOHe



The town of Heartsfern isn't much more than a collection of houses localised together, a general store-come inn and a few smaller farming families. As there isn't a standing guard, hasn't had need of one for generations, or any form of fortification the thought of being under attack is distressing to say the least. It just so happens that the town has been visited by a group of heroes who may be their salvation.

The trees in the forest could offer resources in a pinch. However the guardians of the woods, the elves, may need to be convinced that their trees are worth sacrifices for the town. There is plenty of hay and straw bales that could work in makeshift defensive structures, as long as fire isn't involved. The buildings themselves are sturdy and robust but not designed for the defence of Heartsfern.

The general store run by Shelly doesn't have much but there are some who may know the art of fletching and who could make bows in a pinch. There are also plenty of farm tools.

Monsters

Adventure Encounters

These stat blocks relate directly to the progression of the adventure (and will likely be encountered in order of them laid out below).

Herald / Undead Performer

Zombies that still remember some of the zest of life. Some are so twisted by the necromancy of Arbiter Zed that they will even speak as they move like circus or street performers as they move about the battlefield. Though not wise or smart they are prone to throw blades or other throwing weapons at their target as if it's all part of some sick act.

UNDEAD PERFORMER

Medium undead, neutral evil

Armor Class 9

Hit Points 22 (3d8 + 9)

Speed 25 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	9 (-1)	16 (+3)	3 (-4)	6 (-2)	5 (-3)

Skills Acrobatics +1, Stealth +1

Condition Immunities poisoned

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 8

Languages understands the languages it knew in life but can't speak

Challenge 1/4 (50 XP)

Undead Fortitude. If damage reduces the undead performer to 0 hit points, it must make a Constitution saving throw with a DC of 5+the damage taken, unless the damage is radiant or from a critical hit. On a success, the undead performer drops to 1 hit point instead.

ACTIONS

Club. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d6 + 1) bludgeoning damage.

Arbiter Zed

A clerk for a garrison for a number of years, Arbiter Zed grew tired of the petty crimes that he had to process. Eventually the monotony and desire for thrills sent him down the path of a serial killer. Born with a gift for words and a talent for acting Zed made this his call sign. But when the guards couldn't catch him or ignored the people going missing (or being found in

gruesome settings) this drove him to necromancy. Eventually the lifestyle he led caused his own mortality to cease and he joined his undead performers. Cursed to forever act out his plays and performances he did whilst murdering.

ARBITER ZED

Medium undead (any race), Neutral Evil

Armor Class 12 (leather armor)

Hit Points 39 (6d8 + 12)

Speed 25 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
11 (+0)	12 (+1)	14 (+2)	14 (+2)	12 (+1)	14 (+2)

Saving Throws Int +4, Wis +3

Skills Performance +4, Sleight of Hand +3

Senses passive Perception 11

Languages any one language (usually Common)

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Dark Devotion. Arbiter Zed has advantage on saving throws against being charmed or frightened.

Spellcasting. Arbiter Zed is a 4th-level spellcaster. Its spell casting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 12, +4 to hit with spell attacks). Arbiter Zed has the following Bard spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *thunderclap*, *vicious mockery*, *minor illusion*
 1st level (4 slots): *command*, *dissonant whispers*, *sleep*
 2nd level (3 slots): *phantasmal force*, *heat metal*

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Arbiter Zed makes two melee attacks.

Dagger. *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, reach 5 ft. or range 20/60 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 1 (1d4 + 1) piercing damage.