

GHASTLY GRINS

by Judy Black

CREATURE: *Dullahan* | **LEVEL(S):** 13-15

SYNOPSIS

A city deep in the woods is plagued by a series of beheadings of the leadership. A twisted bargain and a dark secret are threatening to destroy this town forever. Your adventuring party finds themselves brought in to help stop the Dullahan who has been summoned against her will to enact political revenge. *Ghastly Grins* is intended for characters of 13th – 15th level.

ADVENTURE HOOK

The city of Ardara is in the woods. Perhaps you were sent by the king or are traveling through the woods on a trip. It can be added in as an adventure on a travel to a new destination.

As the characters arrive to Ardara (pronounced ‘Ardra’), it’s immediately clear that something is wrong. The windows are boarded up, and there is no one on the streets. Everyone that you do see wears a metal brace around their neck, despite it looking terribly uncomfortably. A guardswoman ushers them over and quickly into the Dry Forrest, the local inn and tavern. She wants to answer their questions and warn them of the dangers of the city.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

The town of Ardara is on edge as change is arriving after the latest elections to the town leadership. The first attacks began soon after the new officials took their positions. These attacks are fueled by the greed and petty anger of Andes, a councilmember who believes he should have been voted mayor. Andes is willing to do whatever it takes to assume his rightful role, even if that means killing everyone else on the council, the

mayor and the guards. He’s stolen the Dullahan’s head from Enelen, another long-standing council member and warlock who has made a pact with the Dullahan, that has allowed a creature to carry out his bidding and get rid of his enemies.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- **ENELEN:** Councilwoman and elf warlock whose patron is the Dullahan.
- **ANDES:** Old mayor who is using the Dullahan to stop his political rivals.
- **IRIS:** Guardswoman who knows all the good gossip.
- **TIBS:** Older elf, owner of the Dry Forrest Inn who has seen strange going ons and the Dullahan.
- **BRIX:** A young up-and-comer who has just been elected mayor and is ready to change the old city.

CHAPTER 1 – THE CITY

The smell of rich ale, cinnamon and a fresh fire greet you the moment you step inside. The Inn is grand, and old, but well-kept with furniture that's clearly seen its fair share of bar fights. Inside you notice: the bar-keep, an older elf male, two human patrons sitting at a table, and a single elf sitting by the fire and staring into it with intensity. All of them but the older elf male wear a strange collar around their throats. As soon as the heroes enter and the barkeep sees their exposed throats, he ushers them over.

"What are you, daff? Get over here and get on your guard before you lose your head!"

The guardswoman is Iris and the barkeep is Tibs. The two can provide the following information:

- A horsewoman is roaming the streets and beheading leaders and anyone who tries to stop her.
- Iris has heard rumors that it is a fey creature, an Unseelie bringing darkness.
- Tibs, the barkeep, claims he's seen strange happenings in the woods behind his house where councilwoman Enelen lives. He's seen the creature return from there.
- The attacks began shortly after the recent election two months ago when there was a massive upheaval as the current and long-serving mayor, Andes, was ousted by a newcomer Brix. Many of the council members were all voted out as well. A year of particularly bad crops, which the townspeople blame the leadership for, led to a shifting of politics and new leaders.

Iris suggests they talk to Mayor-elect Brix, the only person who has survived an attack.

THE TALK WITH BRIX

Iris agrees to take the party to the mayor-elect, who lives in a small, fairly simple house. There are only a few guards there. Iris explains Brix has insisted the guards stay in the city and protect the people, not her. They are greeted by Brix's wife, Gina, a human, who is relieved to see adventurers here to help.

Mayor-Elect Brix is a halfling with a bright smile, wildly curly red hair and a large bandage around her

throat. She speaks with a raspy voice and is difficult to hear at times.

WHAT BRIX KNOWS

She explains that the first attack happened a month and a half ago as she was returning home from celebrating her win at the Dry Forrest. She was walking home down the main road, late in the night. She was a little tipsy and walking with the captain of the guard when she heard the sound of horse hooves. Something grazed the side of her neck and she bolted to hide. Suddenly, something collapsed on top of her and she was pinned until she heard silence.

She saw dark, pure black, horse hooves in front of her and caught the image of a tall, headless horsewoman walking the streets. Brix stayed still and counts herself lucky that the creature didn't find her. She recounts that the creature had a long blade and that at her hip she wore a whip made out of a spine. Atop the rider's body sat not a head but a carved Jack o' Lantern with a horrifying grin carved into it. The Dullahan eventually remounted her horse and fled towards the forests.

When she freed herself, she found the body of the guard captain headless on top of her and her own neck gushing blood. She was patched up by the local doctor and has been told to not leave the house again.

However, Mayor-Elect Brix plans to break this promise. She's idealistic and believes that someone needs to talk to the people, listen to their concerns and assure them that something is being done. She plans to head to the town hall to speak the next day, going in the middle of the afternoon and planning on being home before dark.

"I didn't become mayor to sit in my house and do nothing! Confirmation process or not, someone needs to listen to everyone who lives here!" Brix bares a lot of guilt for the death of the guard captain and is trying to find an answer to these attacks before any more lives are lost. Since she was the first person attacked, she believes that she is the target and is willing to give herself up to this beast if it will save her city.

She's not sure who would want her dead, but points to current mayor, Andes. She disagrees with him politically and could see him as someone potentially involved. However, he's rubbish at magic, and an old paladin who wouldn't commune with dark spirits.

With a DC 13 Wisdom (Perception) check, the characters notice Brix's wife Gina ushering them over. As the characters leave, Gina approaches the characters and begs them to please make sure Brix doesn't get herself killed. She begs them to solve this before tomorrow so Brix can speak without having to worry about the Dullahan. Gina believes that Enelen is responsible for all this. Enelen lives in the woods and is rumored to have made a deal with dark spirits to remain in power.

DEVELOPMENT

Brix points to Enelen's home and tells them to be careful and that the old woman is paranoid.

CHAPTER 2 – ENELEN'S HOUSE

The trail to Enelen's house is easy to follow but as they get closer there will be traps that can trigger along the approach. The traps require a DC 16 Wisdom (Perception) check to notice. Roll a d4 to determine the type of trap. After 3 traps, the party reaches the house.

HOUSE TRAPS (DC 15 DEXTERITY CHECK TO DISARM):

D4	DESCRIPTION
1	Mechanical trap. A net falls from the trees above. DC 15 Strength save to escape the net.
2	Hidden Pit. A pit hidden by leaves is revealed. 2d10 damage from the fall.
3	Poison Darts. Hidden darts shoot out from the trees. +8 to attack; 2d4 + 2d10 poison damage.
4	Swinging Log. A log drops from the trees and swings down. +6 to attack; 5d10 bludgeoning damage.

When the party arrives at the house, read the following:

Enelen's home is a cozy cottage in the forest. A well-kept garden out front grows vegetables, nightshade, and strange black orchids. The house is quiet but a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check reveals someone left in a hurry, the door is still open.

DEVELOPMENT

The inside of the house reveals someone left in a hurry out the backdoor. ADC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check reveals many books about fey and a map with a marked location deep in the woods but not too far from the cottage. The books are all strewn about as though gone through in a hurry with notes about how to protect against fey, it points to cold iron as the best weapon.

A DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check finds several pieces of cold iron on a workbench.

A DC 15 Wisdom (Survival) check reveals a humanoid set of tracks running into the woods and a second humanoid tracks following behind them. The tracks are very recent and screaming breaks the silence of the evening.

When the party follows the trail, it leads to a cave near the woods. Read the following:

The trail ends in a dark cave that smells of decay and rot. Moaning and groaning echoes from within.

THE AMBUSH

As the party enters the cave, they are ambushed by a 1d6 + 3 ghaists. After completing combat, read the following:

The tunnel opens into a small clearing filled with moss and a small dripping waterfall.

THE PUMPKIN

In the center of the clearing sits a simple pumpkin and a simple steak knife. The walls have horrible, ghastly grins drawn on them. A search reveals no exits in the area and no other way forward. A DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check reveals pieces of pumpkin on the ground. After a face is carved into the pumpkin, a trap door opens beneath the pumpkin.

THE BASEMENT

When the door opens, read the following:

The stairs spiral down into the darkness where the smell of moss and blood hangs heavy in the air.

At the bottom of the stairs, a simple room is discovered. An older elf woman with dark skin and golden hair sits on the floor, holding her hands to a wound at her side. She holds up a dagger up at the character's approach but is obviously outmatched and will not attack.

Enelen is hesitant to talk but willing to answer questions. She explains that:

- Andes stole her tome and has been forcing her patron out after he stole the Dullahan's head.
- Enelen has just gotten away and come here to die to free herself and her patron.
- She tells them that her patron's tome and head are in Andes' home in his office locked in a cold iron-lined box that the fey can't touch.
- Andes is doing this to kill Mayor-Elect Brix and retain power over the city.
- If they can get the head back, they can free the Dullahan.
- Enelen warns them that the Dullahan wields a Vorpal Sword that can behead creatures in one swing.

DEVELOPMENT

The characters are pointed towards the town and Andes' house, the largest in the city square. They're urged to hurry before Brix is out of her house again and vulnerable.

CHAPTER 3 – THE CONFRONTATION

With the information, the characters go to confront Andes.

The home appears empty, not even the hired help can be found around the house. It's a lavish home filled with extravagant luxuries. Following Enelen's instructions, the characters find Andes in his office.

In his office, the characters can find Andes. He summons the Dullahan. Andes wears heavy armor and a shield. He shouts a prayer before welcoming the characters to best him and his silent champion.

TACTICS. Andes is focused on taking down the characters and keeping them from the cold iron-lined box with the head that he keeps on his person. The Dullahan protects Andes and attempt to keep him alive. If her head is collected and returned to the Dullahan, she and her horse are no longer be hostile to the characters. Until her head is back with her, she follows Andes' commands. Upon the return of her head, the fight ends as the Dullahan beheads Andes.

DEVELOPMENT

Once the fight has ended, proceed to ending A if the Dullahan is spared and/or if Andes is killed by the characters and ending B if the Dullahan has been killed.

CONCLUSION, PART A

Enelen joins the party, limping towards the office.

Andes is defeated and the Dullahan is reunited with her head. She puts it back on when she and Enelen are reunited. It becomes clear the two are lovers and not just a patron and warlock. Enelen thanks you profusely and asks you to please join them in swearing in their new mayor. The Dullahan offers her Vorpal Sword as gratitude for helping her and Enelen.

The party is free to enjoy the ceremony and the city.

CONCLUSION, PART B

Enelen does not join the party, dying quietly where she was left. The threat of the Dullahan has been dealt with and Brix can be sworn in as the city starts a new path.

Brix and her wife thank you profusely and the characters are guests of honor at the ceremony to see Brix sworn in as new mayor. Her first act as mayor is to honor the heroes and name this day a new holiday in their honor. The characters can help create the holiday.

REWARDS

Characters who complete this adventure may earn the following rewards:

XP REWARDS:

Add the total XP of creatures defeated by the party, then divide by the number of characters to determine individual rewards.

OBSTACLE	XP
Ghasts	450 (per ghast)
Dullahan	25,000
Andes	20,000
Nightmare	700
Solving the Jack o'Lantern	50 (per person)

TREASURE REWARDS:

ITEM	VALUE
A Cold Iron-Lined Box	15 gp
Town Reward	2500 gp

VORPAL LONGSWORD

Weapon (Longsword), legendary

You gain a +3 bonus to attack and damage rolls made with this magic weapon. In addition, the weapon ignores resistance to slashing damage.

When you attack a creature that has at least one head with this weapon and roll a 20 on the attack roll, you cut off one of the creature's heads. The creature dies if it can't survive without the lost head. A creature is immune to this effect if it is immune to slashing damage, doesn't have or need a head, has legendary actions, or the GM decides that the creature is too big for its head to be cut off with this weapon. Such a creature instead takes an extra 6d8 slashing damage from the hit.

DULLAHAN

Medium humanoid (fey), neutral

Armor Class 17 (half plate)
Hit Points 262 (35d8 + 105)
Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	18 (+4)	16 (+3)	17 (+3)	21 (+5)	22 (+6)

Saving Throws Con +9, Wis +11, Cha +12

Skills Insight +11,
Perception +11,
Religion +9,
Stealth +10

Condition Immunities Charmed, frightened,
poisoned

Senses Darkvision 60 ft.,
passive Perception 12

Languages Elvish, Undercommon
Challenge 20 (25,000 XP)

- **Fey Ancestry.** The Dullahan has advantage on saving throws against being charmed, and magic can't put it to sleep.
- **Innate Spellcasting.** The Dullahan's innate spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 20). She can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:
At will: *dancing lights, detect magic*
1/day each: *clairvoyance, darkness, detect thoughts, dispel magic, faerie fire, levitate (self only), suggestion*
- **Fey Resilience.** As a bonus action, the Dullahan can restore 5d8 of health every turn unless she has been hit with necrotic damage in the previous round.
- **Magic Resistance.** The Dullahan has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.
- **Spellcasting.** The Dullahan is a 20th-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Wisdom (spell save DC 19, +11 to hit with spell attacks). The Dullahan has the following cleric spells prepared:
Cantrips (at will): *guidance, mending, resistance, sacred flame, thaumaturgy*
1st level (4 slots): *bane, command, cure wounds, guiding bolt*
2nd level (3 slots): *hold person, silence, spiritual weapon*
3rd level (3 slots): *bestow curse, clairvoyance, dispel*

magic, spirit guardians

4th level (3 slots): *banishment, death ward, freedom of movement, guardian of faith*

5th level (3 slots): *contagion, flame strike, geas, mass cure wounds*

6th level (2 slots): *blade barrier, harm*

7th level (2 slots): *divine word, plane shift*

8th level (1 slot): *holy aura*

9th level (1 slot): *gate*

ACTIONS

- **Multiattack.** The Dullahan can make two attacks with her Vorpall Sword.
- **Vorpall Sword. Melee Weapon Attack:** +10 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 4d6 + 7 slashing damage. When you attack a creature that has at least one head with this weapon and roll a 20 on the attack roll, you cut off one of the creature's heads. The creature dies if it can't survive without the lost head. A creature is immune to this effect if it is immune to slashing damage, doesn't have or need a head, has legendary actions, or the DM decides that the creature is too big for its head to be cut off with this weapon. Such a creature instead takes an extra 6d8 slashing damage from the hit. The DM can also allow characters to make a death saving throw to avoid decapitation and instead take the 6d8 extra damage.
- **Summon Servant (1/Day).** The Dullahan magically summons a nightmare. The summoned creature appears in an unoccupied space within 60 feet of its summoner, acts as an ally of its summoner. It remains for 10 minutes, until it or its summoner dies, or until its summoner dismisses it as an action.

Legendary Actions

The Dullahan can take 3 legendary actions, choosing from the options below. Only one legendary action option can be used at a time and only at the end of another creature's turn. The Dullahan regains spent legendary actions at the start of her turn.

- **Spine Whip.** (1 Action) The Dullahan makes one additional attack with her spine whip. It has a reach of 15 and a +8 to hit. It deals 2d12 slashing damage.
- **Lucky.** (2 Actions.) The Dullahan can reroll an attack with the Vorpall Sword and take the higher result.
- **Cast a Spell.** (1–3 Actions.) The Dullahan expends a spell slot to cast a 1st-, 2nd-, or 3rd-level spell that she has prepared. Doing so costs 1 legendary action per level of the spell.

ANDES

Medium humanoid (half-elf), neutral evil

Armor Class 15 (18 with *mage armor*)
Hit points 225 (30d8 + 90)
Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
15 (+2)	20 (+5)	16 (+3)	18 (+4)	15 (+2)	18 (+4)

Saving Throws Dex +11, Con +9, Cha +10
Skills Acrobatics +11, Athletics +8, Stealth +11
Senses Darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 16
Languages Elvish, Undercommon
Challenge 18 (20,000 xp)

- **Fey Ancestry.** Andes has advantage on saving throws against being charmed, and magic can't put him to sleep.
- **Innate Spellcasting.** Andes' innate spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 13). He can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:
At will: *dancing lights*
1/day each: *darkness*, *faerie fire*, *levitate* (self only)
- **Spellcasting.** Andes is a 11th-level spellcaster. Its spellcasting ability is Intelligence (spell save DC 18, +10 to hit with spell attacks). It has the following wizard spells prepared:
Cantrips (at will): *mage hand*, *message*, *poison spray*, *shocking grasp*, *ray of frost*
1st level (4 slots): *burning hands*, *mage armor*, *magic missile*, *shield*
2nd level (3 slots): *gust of wind*, *invisibility*, *misty step*, *shatter*
3rd level (3 slots): *counterspell*, *fireball*, *haste*
4th level (3 slots): *dimension door*, *Otiluke's resilient sphere*
5th level (2 slots): *cone of cold*
6th level (1 slot): *chain lightning*
- **War Magic.** When Andes uses his action to cast a spell, he can make one weapon attack as a bonus action.

ACTIONS

- **Multiattack.** Andes can make three scimitar attacks. Scimitar. Melee Weapon Attack: +11 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 8 (1d6 + 5) slashing damage plus 18 (4d8) poison damage. In addition, the target has disadvantage on the next saving throw it makes against a spell Andes casts before the end of Andes' next turn.
- **Hand Crossbow.** Ranged Weapon Attack: +11 to hit, range 30/120 ft., one target. Hit: 8 (1d6 + 5) piercing damage, and the target must succeed on a DC 13 Constitution saving throw or be poisoned for 1 hour. If the saving throw fails by 5 or more, the target is also unconscious while poisoned in this way. The target regains consciousness if it takes damage or if another creature takes an action to shake it.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

I want to thank my Roll for Trouble crew for being such a huge help with this. The story of the Dullahan was one my grandfather, Tibs, would tell me when I visited him as a girl. I loved the monsters of his home in Ireland so this game is dedicated to him. Clann Mhig Fhionnghaile Abú!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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