



## Night of the Straw Men

A Side Trek for 1st-level PCs

“Night of the Straw Men” is a Dungeons & Dragons Side Trek for 1st-level player characters (PCs). This scenario is designed to be open-ended to the extreme: You must choose the ultimate antagonist if he decides to build upon the adventuring and roleplaying opportunities offered by this Side Trek’s main encounter. This piece works best, when fleshed out a bit by you, as a springboard for fledgling heroes to take on even grander and nobler quests.

This adventure uses a monster that appeared in *Dragon Magazine* #355—a scarecrow—but its full stats are reprinted herein.

### ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

The superstitious folk of the hamlet of Steeplefall and the surrounding countryside celebrate a strange holiday called the Day of the Straw Men. All day, each

villager carries around a small, crude, humanoid figure crafted from straw, whispering to it the sins he or she committed during the past year. At dusk, the villagers gather in the town square and throw their dolls into a bonfire, burning away the sins to either make a fresh start of things or make room for another year’s worth of debauchery (depending upon one’s personal outlook). Penitents then often meet with a village priest (to discuss spiritual matters) and/or the mayor (for more secular concerns), both of whom sit in chairs atop a raised wooden platform not far from the bonfire. Most of this is common knowledge, and the villagers freely explain the custom to outsiders. Thus, a PC may learn all the above details with a mere DC 3 Gather Information or Knowledge (local) check.

This year’s celebration is crashed by a most frightful and uninvited guest: a scarecrow who makes an ominous statement before attacking savagely. Who or what created the pumpkin-headed construct and why

it was sent to attack the priest are matters left to your discretion, but some suggestions are provided in the “Concluding the Adventure” section.

## ADVENTURE HOOKS

This Side Trek doesn't have adventure hooks per se—the PCs happen to be in Steeplefall on a local holiday. A deadly plot comes to fruition that night, and the PCs can either intervene or stay clear of the conflict as they see fit. The PCs might act heroically and step up to thwart the scarecrow attack, but more mercenary PCs might require motivation to get involved.

A village priest—Yanov Letru—is the target of the scarecrow's assault, so it behooves you to give the players some reason to care what happens to the man. If the heroes arrive in town fresh off another adventure, Yanov might heal any lingering wounds or ask to see any treasures they might wish to sell. Alternatively, the priest might approach the party saying that he has a potential mission to offer the group, which he'll detail the following day (since he's too busy preparing for his holiday duties currently; the actual mission is left for you to provide).

There's one simple hook that is almost guaranteed to at least get the heroes into the town square (if not step up and battle the scarecrow): a venerable villager hands a PC her straw man and asks that he or she take it to the bonfire after dark and burn it since she's too feeble to walk there herself.

## CHAPTER ONE: DAY OF THE STRAW MEN

This Side Trek focuses on a single encounter that takes place shortly after sunset on the unusual holiday known as the Day of the Straw Men, but you are encouraged to flesh out the day-long celebration with a few other noncombat events to help the PCs better understand the nature of the holiday, interact with a few of the locals, and just plain enjoy a bit of down time between adventures.

The PCs should witness this occurrence early in the day to get a better sense of the holiday and its rituals:

*At a small booth near the edge of the marketplace, a merchant and customer conclude a deal. The buyer skulks away with his purchase while the grinning merchant pockets his coins. For a moment the seller's predatory smile falters and he pulls a small straw doll out from underneath the counter, mumbling a few words to it before dropping it out of sight again.*

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Instantly, his grin returns with a vengeance as he awaits his next victim/customer. . . .

Or perhaps they see this instead (or after some time has passed from the text above):

A teenaged boy and girl rendezvous just inside the mouth of a narrow alley, holding hands, whispering, and giggling. A younger boy races up to the older, grabs his arm, and tries to drag him away from the girl.

"C'mon!" the little lad whines. "Pa's gonna be mad! You're supposed to be buying vegetables. Whatcha doing with her?"

The teenaged lovers both blush deeply, say quick goodbyes, and reluctantly go their separate ways, taking a moment to whisper something to a tiny straw doll each carries.

In addition to the interludes like the pair above, you might choose to add a few other minor encounters to the adventure to fill out the PCs' day. Five such scenarios are outlined below. Only the first—the meeting with the priest Yanov Letru—is instrumental to the adventure.

**1. The Priest's Proposal:** Yanov Letru (fully detailed in Tactical Encounter A1) sees the PCs in town and recognizes them as adventurers. He greets them warmly, fills them in on the Day of the Straw Men if necessary, and tries to set up a meeting with the group the following morning at Olivar's Inn. Yanov hints that he has a mission or business proposal he'd like to discuss, but he's too busy tending to a couple of sick villagers and preparing for the holiday's ceremonies to detail it any earlier. (The mission is left to your discretion and might lead to a further adventure. This encounter's main purpose, however, is to give the heroes a reason to step in when the scarecrow attacks Letru that night.)

**2. The Fortuneteller:** See area A4 for more details.

**3. The Lost Child:** A young child is lost, and the parents are frantic. This situation might be remedied by something as simple as a DC 15 Spot check to notice the missing child amongst the crowd in the village square or as involved as tracking the child's footprints to a small stretch of woodlands north of town.

**4. The Pickpocket:** A 1st-level rogue named Renfaldo works the crowd in and around the village square, using his Sleight of Hand skill to pick pockets and lift unattended items. This scoundrel might target a PC, or one of the PCs could have an opportunity to make a Spot check to notice a theft from another victim. Renfaldo is ill-prepared for combat and attempts to flee if possible, making good use of his Run feat.

## RENFALDO

hp 7 (1 HD)

Male human rogue 1

NE Medium humanoid

Init +2; Senses Listen +4, Spot +4

Languages Common, Goblin, Orc

AC 12, touch 12, flat-footed 10

(+2 Dex)

Fort +1, Ref +4, Will +0

Speed 30 ft. (6 squares); Run

Melee mwk dagger +2 (1d4+1/19–20) or

Melee unarmed strike +1 (1d3+1, nonlethal)

Base Atk +0; Grp +1

Atk Options sneak attack +1d6

Abilities Str 12, Dex 15, Con 13, Int 14, Wis 10, Cha 8

SQ trapfinding

Feats Run, Skill Focus (Sleight of Hand)

Skills Appraise +6, Bluff +3, Disguise +3, Escape Artist +6, Hide +6, Listen +4, Move Silently +6, Open Lock +6, Search +6, Sleight of Hand +9, Spot +4

Possessions masterwork dagger, thieves' tools; 12 sp, 28 cp, and a crude silver necklace (5 gp value) stolen from locals; rapier, studded leather armor, potion of cure light wounds, 40 gp in his rented room at Olivar's Inn

**5. The Archery Contest:** A local bowyer (retired half-elf male ranger 2 named Jannek) sponsors an archery contest. First prize is a masterwork longbow the ranger crafted himself.

## THE HEART OF STEEPLEFALL

Steeplefall (Hamlet): Conventional; AL N; 100 gp limit; Assets 1,050 gp; Population 210; Mixed (human 92%, halfling 5%, gnome 1%, half-elf 1%, half-orc 1%).

Authority Figure: Mayor Olbrad Treska (N male human aristocrat 3).

Important Characters: Gregor Tavaros (NG male human cleric 3) and his assistant Yanov Letru (NG male human cleric 1) run the local church dedicated to Ehlonna; Pollaeus Kestellar (LN male human warrior 3) is both Steeplefall's constable and militia leader; Jannek Silverthistle (NG male half-elf ranger 2) is a bowyer, hunter, and guide-for-hire; Olivar Stelkov (N male human commoner 2) runs the hamlet's only inn and is a respected citizen and good source for rumors and information; Laurallus Bralithon (N male human cleric 3) heads a newer church dedicated to St. Cuthbert that stands near the eastern edge of the village.

## A1. THE VILLAGE SQUARE

The following describes this area during the day:

*The village square in Steeplefall might usually function as its marketplace, but on this day the vendors have been pushed to the fringes of the area. A raised wooden platform has been erected near the western edge of the square, and two stout chairs rest upon it. It currently serves as a stage for a lute-strumming minstrel and an impromptu dance floor for a handful of young locals.*

*In the center of the square, some older villagers are slowly building up a great pile of wood, apparently for a bonfire. Jugglers and other entertainers pass through the area, performing for a few copper pieces the crowd tosses their way.*

When the PCs return to this area at night after the bonfire has been lit, Tactical Encounter A1 is triggered.

## A2. THE OLD CHURCH

When the PCs near the church, read:

*This low stone building sits north of the village square, and the vendors' carts and holiday revelers seem to keep a respectful distance from it. A large likeness of a holy symbol is carved into the wooden double doors that serve as an entrance.*

This humble church is dedicated to Ehlonna or a similar nature-themed god. It has two priests—Gregor Tavaros (a cleric 3 currently away on church business) and Yanov Letru (cleric 1)—who serve mainly the hamlet's farmers, hunters, and trappers.

## A3. OLIVAR'S INN

When the PCs approach the inn, read:

*This two-story stone and wood edifice is among the largest buildings in the village. The creaky wooden sign hanging near the door proclaims this place to be Olivar's Inn and promises "Good Food & Drink" and "Warm Beds." A small stable is located just north of the inn.*

The only inn in Steeplefall, this establishment is run by the paunchy Olivar (commoner 2), his equally stout wife Hannah (commoner 1), and their two plain daughters, Hilda and Vera (both commoner 1s). For most holidays and festivals, Olivar rolls kegs of beer and casks of wine out into the town square and sells drinks to revelers there.

## A4. EDNEA'S TENT

When the PCs near the tent, read:

*This colorful patchwork tent has a variety of stringed beads, dangling charms, and other strange tokens hanging near its entrance. A hand-painted sign outside indicates that "Ednea: Mistress of Mysteries & Fortuneteller Extraordinaire" waits within.*

An elderly woman named Ednea (commoner 1) offers her services for a single copper piece. She may read a person's fortune in his palm, in his tea leaves, by the bumps on his head, or via a card picked from a weathered deck. The accuracy of Ednea's predictions is left to your discretion; she might render a mystical telling that foreshadows the scarecrow's attack that night or, seeing a group of heavily armed and armored outsiders (the PCs) in her village, might instead invent a reading that foresees deadly consequences for the heroes should they cause trouble or get into any sort of altercation over the next day or two.

## CONCLUDING THE ADVENTURE

Should Yanov Letru survive the scarecrow's assault, he sincerely thanks any PCs who came to his aid, spontaneously converting remaining spells to heal injured heroes. You could contrive to have Yanov offer his rescuers a handful of low-level potions (such as *cure light wounds*) from his church's stores or promise future spellcasting services as needed, especially if they accept the priest's proposed mission the following day. Mayor Olbrad might even throw in a small monetary reward (25 gp) to each hero who stepped up to battle the scarecrow.

Letru's mysterious mission makes for an obvious hook to expand and continue this adventure. Another possibility revolves around the scarecrow's secret master. Who is he and why did he have his construct minion attack Letru? Could the attack be linked to the mission Letru plans to reveal to the PCs? Or could it perhaps be related to the reason why Letru's superior, Gregor, is out of town? The answer is in your hands.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen's only published works have all been in *Dungeon Magazine*, though it's been twelve years (Yikes!) since his last Side Trek. He'd like to make shout-outs to the classic **Mystara** game world (original home of the Day of the Straw Men holiday) and to his playtesters: Kirk, Patrick, and Paul. He lives in Massachusetts.

# THE BIGGER THE SIN. . . .

## Encounter Level 3

### SETUP

The scarecrow begins this encounter hidden beneath the hay in the wagon parked near the stables. Its mysterious creator—cloaked and disguised—whispers an order to kill the priest and then quickly departs the square. The scarecrow, however, arises and makes a beeline for Yanov, taking the dotted path shown on the map unless it meets with stiff resistance.

This particular scarecrow has a magic mouth spell cast on it, enabling it to address its intended victim as it draws near.

The priest Letru and Mayor Olbrad are on the raised platform at the western edge of the square. Dozens of villagers are gathered in the center of town for the Straw Men ritual. The PCs can begin almost anywhere on the map.

- Scarecrow (S)
- Letru (L)
- Mayor Olbrad (O)
- Villagers (V)

When the PCs visit the village square after dusk, read:

*Most of the citizens of Steeplefall are gathered to celebrate the holiday. Some watch a variety of entertainers (jugglers, minstrels, fortunetellers, puppeteers, and the like) along the fringes of the square, while others are gathered in and around Olivar's Inn to the east, where the proprietor has rolled kegs of beer and casks of wine and cider outside to sell drinks to anyone who has a cup, flagon, or waterskin. More have congregated around the blazing bonfire in the center of the square, chatting, warming themselves by the fire, or dropping their little straw men into the roaring flames. To the west a growing line has formed of townsfolk who wish to speak briefly with the village priest and/or mayor, both of whom sit on chairs atop a raised platform there.*

When the scarecrow emerges from hiding and moves to slay the priest, read:

*A disturbance ripples through the crowd and panicked townsfolk part to let someone through. Judged solely by its shabby clothes and herky-jerky gait, the party-crasher might*

*be mistaken for the village drunk, but the causer of this ruckus has a carved pumpkin atop its shoulders! Inside the orange gourd, a mystical flame dances madly.*

*Pointing to the priest on the platform, the living scarecrow shrieks, "The bigger the sin, the bigger the straw man! I am your straw man, priest—living testament to the number and gravity of your sins!" The creature approaches the platform unchallenged while the mayor leaps off the side and runs for his life.*

### SCARECROW CR 3 hp 47 (5 HD); DR 5/slashing or bludgeoning

Always N Medium construct

**Init** +5; **Senses** all-around vision, darkvision 60 ft., low-light vision; Listen +0, Spot +4

**Aura** unsettling presence (60 ft., DC 12)

**Languages** understands creator's orders; magic mouth

**AC** 14, touch 10, flat-footed 14 (+4 natural)

**Immune** cold, construct immunities, cannot be flanked  
**Fort** +1, **Ref** +1, **Will** +1

**Weakness** vulnerability to fire

**Speed** 20 ft. (4 squares)

**Melee** 2 claws +5 (1d6+2 plus cowering touch)

**Base Atk** +3; **Grp** +5

**Special Actions** cowering gaze, cowering touch

**Abilities** Str 15, Dex 10, Con —, Int —, Wis 11, Cha 10  
**SQ** camouflage, construct traits

**Feats** —

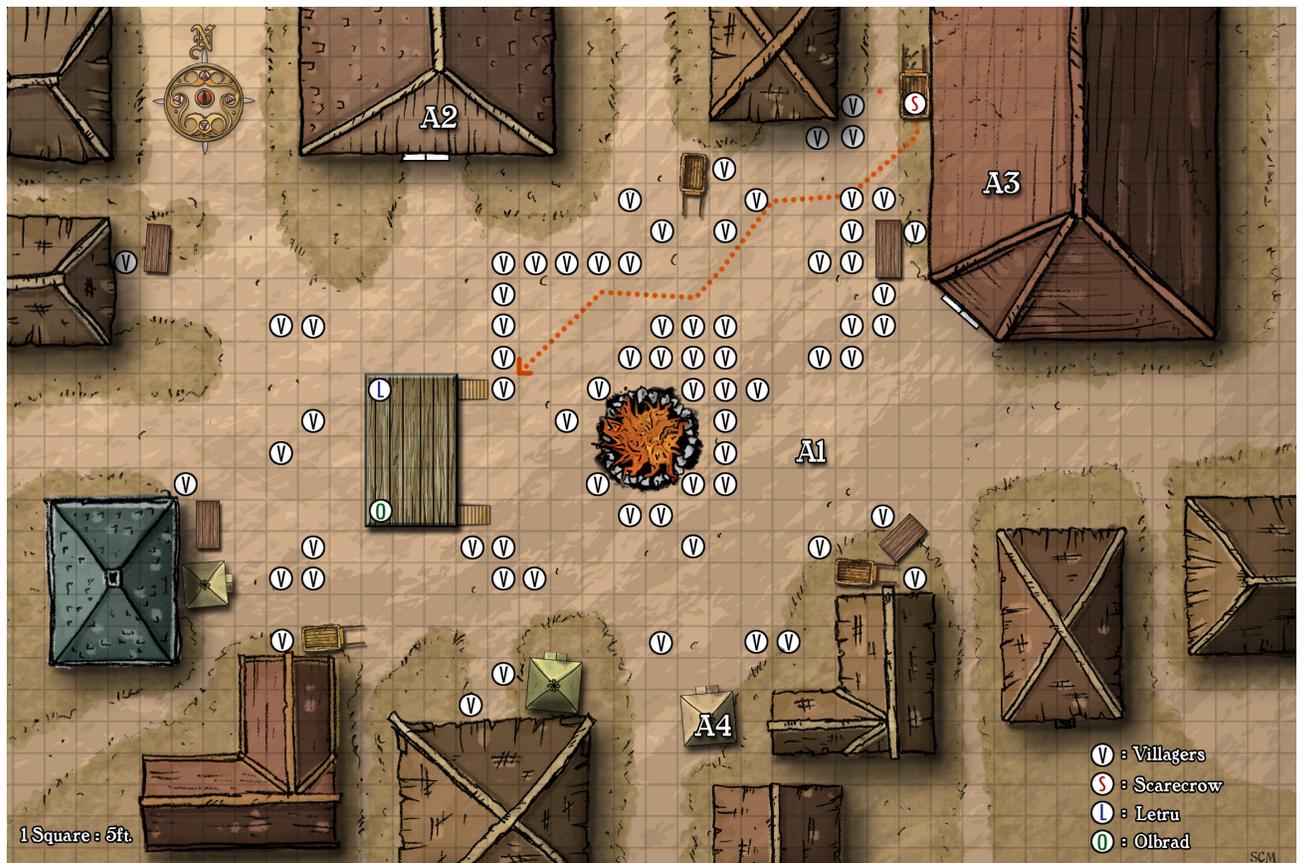
**Skills** Listen +0, Search +4, Spot +4

**Advancement** 6–10 HD (Medium); 11–15 HD (Large)

**All-Around Vision (Ex)** A scarecrow's rotating head gives it a +4 racial bonus on Spot and Search checks, and it can't be flanked.

**Unsettling Presence (Su)** A scarecrow can unsettle foes with its mere presence. The ability takes effect automatically whenever it attacks. Creatures within a 60-foot radius with fewer HD than the scarecrow must succeed on a DC 12 Will saving throw or become shaken for 2d6 rounds. A creature that succeeds at this save remains immune to the scarecrow's unsettling presence for 24 hours. The save DC is Charisma-based.

**Cowering Gaze (Su)** Once per round, as a standard action, a scarecrow can focus its gaze on one creature within 40 feet. Any intelligent humanoid that meets the scarecrow's gaze must succeed on a DC 12 Will



saving throw or cover for 2d4 rounds. The save DC is Charisma-based.

**Covering Touch (Su)** If a scarecrow hits with a claw attack, the victim must succeed on a DC 12 Will saving throw or cower for 1d4 rounds. The save DC is Charisma-based.

**Camouflage (Ex)** Since an animated scarecrow looks like an ordinary scarecrow when at rest, it takes a DC 20 Spot check to notice anything unusual before it attacks. Anyone with ranks in Knowledge (arcana) or Knowledge (nature) can use one of those skills instead of Spot to notice the scarecrow.

**Skills** A scarecrow has a +4 racial bonus on Search and Spot checks.

**YANOV LETRU**  
hp 10 (1 HD)

Male human cleric 1  
NG Medium humanoid  
**Init** +0; **Senses** Listen +2, Spot +2  
**Languages** Common

**AC** 10, touch 10, flat-footed 10  
**Fort** +4, **Ref** +2, **Will** +4

**Speed** 30 ft. (6 squares)  
**Melee** light mace +1 (1d6+1)  
**Base Atk** +0; **Grp** +1

**CR 1**

**Special Actions** spontaneous healing, turn undead 4/day (+1, 2d6+2, 1st)

**Cleric Spells Prepared (CL 1st):**

1st—bless, protection from evil<sup>P</sup> (CL 2nd), shield of faith

0—create water, light, mending

D: Domain spell. Deity: Ehlonna. Domains: Good, Plant

**Abilities** Str 12, Dex 10, Con 14, Int 8, Wis 15, Cha 13

**Feats** Combat Casting, Lightning Reflexes

**Skills** Concentration +6 (+10 casting defensively, grappling, or pinned), Heal +4, Knowledge (religion) +1, Listen +2, Spot +2

**Possessions** light mace, silver holy symbol, 2 sp, 11 cp

## TACTICS

The scarecrow has a solitary goal: to kill the village priest, Yanov Letru. As soon as it gets within 40 feet of the priest, the scarecrow uses its covering gaze ability on Letru; then it closes for the kill. If anyone steps between it and its prey, the scarecrow counts on its covering gaze to neutralize the threat and keeps moving toward the priest, even if this provokes attacks of opportunity against it.

## SCARECROW LORE

Characters with ranks in Knowledge (arcana) can learn more about scarecrows. When a character makes a successful skill check, the following lore is revealed, including the information from lower DCs.

### KNOWLEDGE (ARCANA)

DC	Result
13	This is an animated scarecrow, a mindless construct. This reveals all construct traits.
18	Both a scarecrow's gaze and touch have a power that causes victims to cower in fear.
23	A scarecrow can remain perfectly motionless to appear mundane, and it can rotate its head fully to see in any direction.
28	Scarecrows sometimes gain consciousness and hunt living beings. Others can be crafted with special powers to track and slay a chosen victim.

Yanov stands his ground, not wanting innocents to be targeted by the scarecrow. He casts *shield of faith* on himself and prepares to face his foe. If the PCs join the battle on his behalf, he also tries to cast *bles*.

## DEVELOPMENT

Should the scarecrow succeed in killing Letru, it becomes free-willed and immediately turns its assault on the nearest living being. It now switches tactics and concentrates its attacks on anyone who dares oppose it. If it is unengaged, the scarecrow begins to ruthlessly pummel nearby cowering victims.

## FEATURES OF THE AREA

The village square has the following features.

**Illumination:** The blazing bonfire provides the equivalent lighting of a daylight spell: bright illumination in a 60-foot radius and shadowy illumination out to 120 feet.

**Bonfire:** Anyone entering (or bull rushed into) any of the bonfire squares takes 1d6 points of fire damage and must make a successful DC 15 Reflex save or catch fire. Burning creatures and their flammable items take an additional 1d6 points of fire damage each round until they succeed on a DC 15 Reflex save, totally immerse themselves in water, or otherwise extinguish the flames. See "Catching on Fire" (*DMG* 303–304) for full details.

A PC might use a burning branch or piece of wood from the bonfire to battle the scarecrow. Such a makeshift weapon should be treated like a torch—a one-handed improvised weapon (–4 penalty on attack rolls) that deals

bludgeoning damage (1d2 for Small creatures; 1d3 for Medium ones) plus 1 point of fire damage.

Note that a scarecrow has a vulnerability to fire and thus takes an extra 50% damage from fire effects.

**Crowd:** The gathered crowd parts swiftly for the attacking scarecrow, surging as far from it as possible. PCs trying to move against the crowd cannot run but may attempt a DC 10 Dexterity check to move their full speed through the gathered villagers; those who fail this check may move at one half normal speed.

One or more PCs may also attempt to direct the crowd with either a Diplomacy check (DC 15; full-round action) or an Intimidate check (DC 20; free action). Success on either checks results in an open path to the scarecrow.

**Raised Platform:** The platform is 3 feet high. It can be accessed by stairs at its northeast and southeast corners or with a successful DC 12 Jump check. It provides a +1 attack roll modifier (higher ground) on melee attacks against creatures on the ground.