

Off With His Head!

This is an adventure suitable for a level 1 party of 4-6 adventurers. Please note this adventure uses monsters from *Volo's Guide to Monsters*.

Premise

King Reginald is holding a grand fayre in the town of Cobbleford, hosting all manner of competitions and performances over several days. But pandemonium ensues when, during a speech, the king's head detaches from his body and flies away! The party are enlisted to bring the head back, and are soon roped into a conspiracy involving demon summoning in the castle itself.

Background

King Reginald, of house Syde, has reigned over his kingdom for 20 years. He rules alone, swearing to never live another after the Queen died during the birth of his only son, Prince Patrick, 17 years ago. Generally considered a benevolent king, he hosts the fayres biennially, as a means to entertain his subjects while also finding the greatest craftsmen and fighters in the land. He keeps a close court of nobles, including some more distant relatives, but his main confidant is Mildred the Magnificent (LE human, uses the **Illusionist (VGtM)** statblock), the court wizard. Despite being relatively young for a wizard, Mildred has the respect of the regency and the local mages, and together her and King Reginald run a fair and prosperous kingdom.

Hooks

A personal invitation: one or more of the party are nobles that have personally been invited to enjoy the festivities by King Reginald himself.

A test of mettle: the party is attending the fayre in order to compete in the various events, to win coin and attract the interest of wealthy patrons.

A chance to swindle: the party are not the most honest and trustworthy folk, and with all the coin being exchanged at the fayre, there's abundant opportunity to skim some of it for themselves.

Maps: Maps for all scenes, including an optional one for the town Cobbleford, can be found here: <https://imgur.com/a/bFxt7Vc>

The Fayre

The inciting incident of this adventure is when King Reginald loses his head while addressing subjects and competitors at the fayre. If your players are familiar with Dungeons and Dragons, this address can happen in the evening before the opening of the fayre. If your players are new to the game, however, the fayre may offer a good opportunity to learn some of the game's mechanics through various events. It's recommended you examine your players' characters and

cater the events to their strengths and class features. Examples could include an archery range, a fighting pit, musical or acting performances, and crafting competitions (using tool proficiencies).

The evening of King Reginald's death

Regardless of when it happens in relation to the fayre, King Reginald will address his subjects in the town's feasting hall one evening, in celebration of the fayre. As a planned event, all attendees are aware of it and looking forward to the address. However, during the daylight hours prior, rumours start to spread that the King is unwell, and may not attend at all. A DC12 Charisma (Persuasion or Intimidation, where relevant) check with a guard or official reveals they believe he was bitten by a bat during the night, but King Reginald is insisting on attending all business today regardless. The King is thus far the only person to have seen this creature (and fleetingly, after chasing it off after it woke him in the night), but he is mistaken. Rather than a mere bat, he has been "kissed" by a **vargouille (VGtM)**. His apparent illness is in fact a curse, and no one in the castle has realised. With the curse not processing during the day, the king is convinced he can power through, but this will be a fatal mistake.

When King Reginald finally arrives for his evening address, it's very obvious he's unwell. His eyes are reddened, face misshapen and somewhat sinister, but he insists on proceeding. He will attempt to talk about how proud he is of the Fayre, the quality of the competitors, and the benefit it all brings to his kingdom, but it's both a physical and mental struggle for him. He takes random pauses, sometimes failing to finish a sentence, and at times he's irritable, or seemingly uncomfortable with being in front of a crowd. In one final pause, his neck elongating slowly before suddenly it sickeningly tears, King Reginald's head sprouting wings and detaching fully from his body, blood fountaining from his neck stump!

Roll initiative immediately. With this sudden turn of events catching everyone off guard, the **vargouille** has a surprise round, where it uses its *stunning shriek* ability before flying towards the exit. All NPCs should be assumed to fail the initial Wisdom Saving Throw, leaving only player characters that passed with any agency. Mildred, when no longer stunned, shouts out "20 gold to anyone who brings the king's head back!". The vargouille proceeds to flee, and if it is not killed, escapes into the nearby woods.

If the party is able to kill the vargouille before it flees, they can immediately claim the reward, and will then be asked by Mildred to arrive at the castle in the morning. If it escapes, the party can find out from the locals that there's a cave within the woods that bats love to roost in. Though the monster is being misidentified, it has indeed hidden itself among the bats to lay low for a time. The cave is around 1 hour walk from the town, contains 5 chambers, and is currently full of bats. Award inspiration for any player(s) that suggest plugging their ears to avoid getting stunned by the vargouille's shriek. Proceeding through the cave, roll a D10 to determine which chamber the vargouille is hiding in (1-2 for the 1st chamber and so on). In order to spot the vargouille, a member of the party must succeed in a DC12 Wisdom (Perception) check to see it among the bats. Proceeding through the cave, if the party does not succeed on a DC11

Dexterity (stealth) group check, or use a light source such as a torch, a **swarm of bats** will descend from the cave ceiling and accost the party. They have one chance to pacify the swarm with a DC11 Wisdom (Animal Handling) check before the swarm attacks. The stealth check can be re-attempted when entering another chamber after disturbing the bats. Any attempt to attack or deliberately provoke the bats causes 2 swarms to attack, while the rest flood out of the chamber. When the *vargouille* is eventually found, it again attacks initially with its *stunning shriek* before moving into combat range. Once defeated, the *vargouille* can be taken back to the *fayre hall*, where Mildred will pay the party, then discreetly take it away to study and find out what afflicted the late King.

Searching for the culprit

The next day, the party are summoned back to the castle to meet with Mildred again. Somewhat sleep deprived, she has been researching most of the night in the castle library. She believes she may now understand what's happened, but wants proof first. As the party have already shown themselves competent to her, she wants to hire them again, offering a 10gp reward to find the original so-called "bat" that bit the king. As there have been no sightings outside the castle, and the first floor rooms of the castle were busy during all of the day yesterday, she believes the "bat" is hidden somewhere on the second floor. Prince Patrick has already left the castle to stay with his uncle for safety, but all other castle residents have been forbidden from entering the second floor until they have been searched. As they will be searching private royal chambers, Mildred insists the party is discreet, and do not cause damage or interfere with royal matters.

Castle second floor

There are 6 rooms on the second floor of Syde Castle. Roll a d6 to determine which room the original **vargouille** is in, or simply decide which one it's in based on how the party's investigations go. The party can use Perception to try and find the *vargouille*, but successful Wisdom (Survival) and Intelligence (Investigation) checks, where appropriate, grant advantage to the Perception roll. Once found, the *vargouille* will again shriek as its opening attack.

Mildred's Chambers: this bedroom contains a 4-poster bed, a wardrobe, and a desk with drawers. The wardrobe contains a large number of cloaks and robes befitting a court wizard. On her desk are an array of letters she has been writing to inform nobles across the land of the king's passing. In one of the desk drawers is Mildred's diary and an iron key. Her diary details her ongoing duties in the court, including grumblings whenever the king didn't take her advice. It's also apparent she's been courting the young Prince Patrick, as she lavishes him with dreamy compliments when detailing their encounters, even at one point commenting wistfully about being Queen. The iron key is for a chest in the undercroft (see later).

Prince Patrick's chambers: this large bedroom contains a grand 4-poster bed that sits almost isolated at one end of the room, with a wardrobe and desk at the other side. A dresser sits against the wall with a quiver and several arrows inside it. Portraits of ancestors, including his

father, line the room, but a DC12 Intelligence (Investigation) check shows a light layer of dust on them, as well as the occasional cobweb. The wardrobe contains an array of royal outfits which show almost no signs of wear, while the drawers contain leathers and an array of hunting gear. On the desk is his diary. In it, he talks about his disinterest in court life and ruling in general, bristling any time his father pushes him to live a more regal life. He's also very aware of Mildred's pursuit of him, offering no reciprocation but worrying that he will not have a choice, especially as the alternative could be being shipped off to some random Princess.

The late King Reginald's chamber: the king's chambers are suitably resplendent, with animal skin rugs, drapery in rich shades of red, purple, and gold, and finely crafted furniture. On the wall opposite the grand bed is a large portrait of Reginald and Queen Susan in their finest outfits for their wedding around 2 decades ago. The painting doesn't have a hint of dust or dirt on it.

Guest chambers: this bedroom is meant for a royal guest being hosted at the castle. As such, the furniture in this room is less personal and impressive than the others, and the wardrobe is empty. A DC12 Intelligence (Investigation) check of the desk reveals some scrunched up, half-finished letters from a prince who last stayed in the room, and was apparently desperate to get back to make amends with his lover, despite having trouble remembering their name.

Night watch room: this room is for guards on night duty to start and end their shifts, refill their lanterns, and the windows also provide a view from within the keep. One of the lockers contains a set of dice that, if examined using a DC13 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check (or check using proficiency in Games Sets (dice)), is revealed as being weighted towards rolling 6s.

Bed Maids room: this room is for the maids and servants of the castle to clean and prepare bedding for the residents of the castle. Searching through the lockers, there is a book on demons. A DC10 Intelligence (Religion) check reveals the book is almost entirely fictitious and fanciful.

Hunting down the summoners

Bringing the vargouille back to Mildred will confirm her worst suspicions. Taking the party to the library, she will explain that vargouilles come from the Abyss, but don't generally appear in the material plane. No one would ever summon one deliberately, but they do sometimes appear in conjunction with demons being summoned. That last point is what has Mildred very concerned: if the vargouille was brought here by accident during a summoning, where is that creature now?

The party have proven themselves twice now, so Mildred is prepared to up the stakes: 200GP if they find and slay the demon, and bring back evidence of its demise. Working for the crown, they can mete out justice against any conspirators as they see fit. Mildred believes the root of this evil lies somewhere in the castle, but is at something of a loss as to where. Her only lead is that there's rumours of a hidden passage in the castle dungeon that leads underground, built before the Syde family moved in, and used to escape siege. While Mildred runs the castle, and thus kingdom, in Prince Patrick's absence, the party is instructed to check the dungeon first.

If Mildred is presented with her diary and/or the key from her room, she will be furious, refusing to engage with inquiries about them and demanding them back, threatening them with punishment for theft. If they show her the demon book, she will promise to do her own investigating to find out who owns it.

In the dungeon, one guard is sleepily standing watch over a single prisoner locked up in one of the cells. The guard, if stirred, says they haven't seen anything untoward, but many guards alternate the jail shift, so they can't account for most of the watch. The prisoner, Borren (CN male halfling), was until recently part of the cooking staff in the castle, but was arrested after being caught stealing fine cutlery, to pay off his gambling debts. His punishment was to have one of his hands cut off, but his sentence has been delayed due to the king's death. Feeling dejected and world-weary, he'll only help the party if they succeed on a DC 12 Charisma (Persuasion) check, he'll say that a couple times since he was interred, someone in a robe has gone to the far end of the dungeon and not returned. He thinks it was a woman, but not someone he recognises from the castle. Going down to the far end of the dungeon, a DC12 Intelligence (Investigation) check reveals a slightly strange stone in the wall which, when pressed, opens a hidden door in the corner that leads to a narrow staircase downward. If the party are unable to find this entrance, they can go out into town to ask regarding strange goings-on, where eventually someone will mention that they've occasionally seen robed figures at night heading westward into the woods. Following this will eventually lead the party to (3) Main Entrance (see next section).

Syde Castle undercroft

The narrow staircase descends down into pitch darkness, eventually setting down onto a stone floor. The walls are smooth and the ceiling 7ft high. The tunnel pushes onward for 50ft before turning eastward into (1). For every 15 minutes spent in the undercroft, there is a 25% chance that 1d4+1 **cultists** will arrive through the tunnel in (3), congregating in (2) unless they find any obvious evidence of a fight, in which case they systematically search every room except (8) The party can attempt to hide during this search, in or behind crates and barrels, making a group Dexterity (Stealth) check against the cultists' active Wisdom (Perception) rolls.

(1) Side entrance

The pitch black tunnel opens out into a small room with several crates and barrels. A warm, flickering light can be seen through the cracks in the wooden door at the end.

Creatures with a passive Wisdom (Perception) of 13 or higher can detect muffled voices coming from the next room. Going up to the door and listening, 2 **cultists** in the next room can be heard talking while playing cards. During their conversation, they unwittingly divulge the following information:

- The cultists successfully summoned a demon 2 days ago, but couldn't control it, so they barricaded it in the summoning room. A "bat" escaped before the barricade went up, and they don't know what happened to it

- The leader, referred to as "Queen", was not present or aware of the summoning, and they fear the repercussions
- Guards are in the room to the south, while several sleeping cultists are in the room to the east

The crates contain basic provisions like clothing and candles. The door to (2) can be opened silently with a DC10 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check.

(2) Rec room

The brazier in the middle of the room illuminates this stone room with its warm flickering light, the numerous pieces of furniture and containers casting large shadows on the walls. Each wall is dotted in the centre with a wooden door. In the far corner, 2 people sit hunched over at a table, playing cards.

The two people are the **cultists** mentioned in (1), and if opening the door did not alert them, then they are unaware of the party for now. A successful group Dexterity (Stealth) skill check against the cultists' Passive Wisdom (Perception) of 10 allows the party to reach the northern and southern doors, but beyond this they will move into the cultists' eyesight. The doors again require a successful DC10 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check to open silently. If a fight breaks out and lasts more than one round, the 2 **guards** in (3) will hear and join the fight. If the fight lasts more than 3 rounds, the 4 **cultists** in (4) will wake up and also join the fight. All will act aggressively, but will attempt to flee into (3) and out the passageway when 50% or more of their allies have died.

If any of the above NPCs are captured rather than killed, under interrogation they give the following information, in addition to that laid out in (1):

- The cultists are mostly from the town, though a couple come from the castle
- Their aim is to summon demons and either bargain or subjugate them under their control, so they can take power in the kingdom
- Their leader works in the castle, but no one knows who she is. She claims to be a maid

(3) Main entrance

Multiple crates and barrels lie around somewhat haphazardly, with 2 chairs sat in the centre. 2 torches in sconces light up the room from the south face, and flank a passageway that turns right before descending into darkness, a slight draft coolly blowing from the depths.

If they haven't been disturbed by noises in (2), then 2 **guards** sit in the chairs, facing towards the southern entrance. They man the entrance to make sure only other cultists enter, and will attack anyone they don't recognise and that is not escorted by another member. The passageway to the south travels for around a mile or so before reaching the forest at the edge of town, and is used as the entrance to the cultists' lair by those living in the town.

The barrels and crates contain drinking water, rations, and some makeshift robes which do not appear to have a consistent design but look "cult-like" enough for their purposes. A successful

DC12 Intelligence (Investigation) check reveals a *potion of healing* tucked away by one of the guards.

(4) Sleeping quarters

Lit by a single dull candle, this room houses 8 bedrolls laid out on the cold stone floor. The top row is split in two by the door in the north wall.

If they haven't been awoken by fighting in (2), then there are 4 **cultists** sleeping in this room. A successful DC10 group Dexterity (stealth) check allows the party to move through the room without waking any of them up.

(5) Congregation room

This large room has 4 worn pews facing a lectern in the centre. On the western wall are 2 blazing torches that illuminate the room, including a haphazard stack of crates and furniture that create a makeshift barricade in front of the stone door at the end of the room.

This room is for the cult leaders to talk to the rest of the members, usually to either prosletise or organise them, but no one is currently in the room. On the eastern wall is a wooden door to (6), and south is a door leading to (2). On the western wall, a successful DC12 Intelligence (Arcana) check reveals that both torches are lit by a *continual flame* spell, though any interaction with the torches reveals that it emits no heat and cannot be snuffed out. The two torches flank a hidden door to (7) in the wall, which can be opened with a DC12 Intelligence (Investigation) check to find the hidden switch. The barricaded stone door to the north leads to (8). If the party chooses to avoid going into (8) and instead moves to leave the undercroft, the demon inside should break through the door and barricade (in an appropriate number of attacks/turns) and then come after the party.

(6) Library

This already narrow room is choked by bookcases stacked with a ramshackle assortment of tomes, the central one having collapsed under its own weight. In the corner, under the light of a solitary candle, is a hunched figure poring through texts.

The figure is a **cult fanatic** who is effectively second-in-command, after "Queen". Present at the demon summoning 2 days ago, they are now frantically searching through the books to find out what they have summoned, and how to avoid such a mishap in future. As soon as they spot the party, they attack, but then attempt to flee if it becomes clear the group is too tough for them. They have a +1 *dagger* equipped.

The books are a broad assortment that all at least touch upon the topic of demons and the abyss. A successful DC12 Intelligence (Religion) check reveals that the veracity of the books, with regards to demons, varies wildly, and that someone without prior knowledge would have a difficult time discerning fact from fiction.

(7) Mildred's hovel

This cramped, hidden room is limited in its furnishing, with a writing desk against the north wall, a wardrobe opposite, and tucked in the corner is a heavy ironbound chest with a large lock on the front.

On the desk is 50GP worth of inks and materials required to transfer spells into a wizard's spellbook. The wardrobe contains an assortment of relatively plain robes. The ironbound chest in the corner is locked, but can be unlocked using the iron key found in the desk in Mildred's Quarters. Otherwise it can be picked with a successful DC15 check with Thieves' Tools. Contained inside are 2 *scrolls of Disguise Self* and "Queen's" diary. Inside, she writes about how the cult is trying to slowly build up their demon-summoning skills so that they can eventually overthrow King Reginald and take control of the kingdom. She would then forcibly marry Prince Patrick, to help legitimise her rule. In one entry, she rants about the ineptitude of the cult, lamenting their over-eagerness, and commenting at the end that she may have to "throw the whole cult under the horsecart if they do something that truly jeopardises my position". If the party have either Mildred's diary, or one of her letters to other nobles, they will recognise immediately that it's the same handwriting, otherwise a successful DC12 Intelligence (History) check can be used to recall how it looked.

(8) Summoning room

After clearing the debris, you're finally able to open the heavy stone door into a deep, dark room. Torchlight only reaches partway into the darkness, first catching the glinting of broken glass, and as your eyes begin to adjust, you pick out bloodstains and gouges in the floor. Raising your gaze slightly, you see a demonic circle gently pulsing with light, the energy illuminating a muscular, hunched figure. Its head sharply turns around to glare at you, a gorilla-like creature with burning red fur and golden bracelets. It bellows out a roar, thumping its enormous fists into the ground, then charges at you!

Roll initiative immediately. This demon is a **lesser barlgura** (statblock at the end) and attacks all other creatures indiscriminately. After one round of combat, it turns itself invisible then leaps around the room, attacking erratically and until it is slain. Once slain, its bracelets can be prised off, and if taken to a blacksmith, can be reworked to fit a humanoid. These bracelets together then function as a *ring of jumping*.

Aftermath

With the demon slain, the party have technically completed their quest, and can return to Mildred and collect the reward. However, if the party found (7), they have enough evidence to get Mildred arrested for occult activities and high treason.

If Mildred is arrested, Prince Patrick soon returns to rule, but with a heavy heart, having lost both his father and the court's most important confidant. Having never wanted to rule anyway, many other nobles will now vie and compete to claim as much influence as they can. Prince Patrick will, however, be immensely grateful towards the party, and may have further jobs for

them. Meanwhile, it would be trivially easy for Mildred to escape her incarceration and flee, setting up a potential recurring antagonist.

If the party do not, or cannot, show Mildred to be a traitor, she will just give them the reward promised, hail them as heroes of the kingdom, then send the party on their way. With her cover-up a success, she will move to marry Prince Patrick and become the eventual Queen. With her dream achieved, she may be satisfied to leave her demon-summoning days behind her. On the other hand, the power it could grant her might be too tempting, falling back to her cult ways, except this time with less scrutiny.

Lesser Barlgura

Medium fiend (demon), chaotic evil

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 38 (5d8+16)

Speed 40 ft., climb 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
16 (+3)	14 (+2)	14 (+2)	6 (-2)	14 (+2)	9 (-1)

Saving Throws Dex +4, Con +4

Skills Perception +4

Damage Resistances cold, fire, lightning

Damage Immunities poison

Condition Immunities poisoned

Senses blindsight 30 ft., darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 14

Languages —

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Innate Spellcasting. The lesser barlgura's innate spellcasting ability is Wisdom (spell save DC 12). It can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

1/day each: *entangle*, *invisibility (self only)*

Reckless. At the start of its turn, the lesser barlgura can gain advantage on all melee weapon attack rolls it makes during that turn, but attack rolls against it have advantage until the start of its next turn.

Running Leap. The lesser barlgura's long jump is up to 40ft and high jump is up to 20ft when it has a running start. A jump from standing can only go half this height and distance.

Actions

Multiattack. The lesser bargura makes two attacks with its Fist.

Fist. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d8 + 3) bludgeoning damage.