

# THE RED CORN HORROR

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The grain around Gansvelt grows exceptionally tall, with plump, reddish heads. Each year brings a rich harvest, but this abundance doesn't translate into wealth for the Gansveltters. The grain has a bitter taste, and this bitterness even carries over to the flesh of livestock fed on it. The villagers use a lot of salt to mask the taste, and the saltiness of the food as well as rumors of disappearances among travelers staying there make Gansvelt an unpopular stopping place. While they never go hungry, their only source of coin to buy the things they can't make themselves is salted meat, packed in barrels and carted to market each fall.

In centuries past, the elders of the village of Gansvelt made a pact to save the village from famine. The dark powers they pacted with provide plentiful grain, in spite of droughts, blights, or other mishaps that plague farmers, and in exchange demand the sacrifice of a child at the spring equinox and an adult in the prime of life at the fall equinox. The cultists prefer to sneak sacrifices from travelers rather than permanent residents, for obvious reasons, but occasionally must grab a villager if no strangers present themselves at a convenient time. The party can get involved by either being targeted for kidnapping and sacrifice, witnessing an attempt, or being asked by a distraught mother of a missing child.

Hidden in the fields is a small structure that looks like a well with a movable lid/cover. A narrow, ladder-like stairway leads to a cavern where the semi-annual rituals take place. This area is known by all the locals, although not all are members of the cult that maintains the rites. PCs might track cultists to the area after seeing them snatch a suitable sacrifice, or might find a sympathetic informer among the villagers who is willing to forgo the assurance of a full belly to end the abominable sacrifices.

Once, many years ago, the villagers missed a sacrifice – no suitable travelers happened along, and no one had the heart to sacrifice a local child. The devil emerged from the cave, enraged at the breach of the pact, and took every child under the age of five; since then, the cultists have never missed an offering, and non-cultist villagers have been reluctant to interfere.

There are actually two devils, Agarex and Xeraga. Agarex receives the spring offering and ensure the crops grow lush; Xeraga takes the fall offering and causes the stubble to rot into fertile compost as well as ensuring crop-eating pests die out. Not even birds, rodents, or deer remain in the area to steal grain.

The combat statistics of the devils should be chosen by the referee to provide a challenge to the player characters, with the standard strengths and weaknesses of devils. Additionally, when the devils successfully hit, the target must make an appropriate saving throw to avoid contracting a disease that drains 1 Constitution (or similar characteristic) per week, only healed with magic, which kills the character when 0 is reached. Xeraga inflicts a wasting disease, whereas Agarex inflicts tumors and bloating. On a critical hit (or 3/day if your system does not use crits) Xeraga drains an energy level as a wight; Agarex inflicts a pregnancy on the target (gender of the target is immaterial) which progresses as normal until the birth, when the imp in the character's body claws its way out. A Remove Curse will end this parasitic pregnancy.

The two devils are linked in such a way that even if one is destroyed, a successful ritual at the opposite equinox will allow it to regenerate its material form the next year. The only way to permanently banish the devils and end their influence on Gansvelt is to prevent the cultists from performing the rituals at both equinoxes and defeat each devil. If the ritual is interrupted in the fall, but not in the spring, Xeraga will appear the next fall in a fury. If one devil is slain but the other is not, the curse remains in full effect. The devils have never met effective opposition in Gansvelt, so the villagers know nothing of this. Scholarly PCs or those with an interest in lore might be able to piece this information together over time, for example, after defeating Xeraga, but (hopefully) before Agarex appears in the spring.

Once the curse is lifted, the crops of Gansvelt will fail spectacularly; nothing edible grows in the cursed fields that year. The PCs can earn the undying goodwill of the village if they assist in some way in staving off famine. The following year, crops will grow normally, subject to natural hazards, but without the bitterness or reddish tinge, and Gansvelt will be free.