# Fleshing Out Curse of Strahd: Old Bonegrinder

Welcome to a fight that is absurdly over powered for your party of level 3-4 adventurers. This one is a doosie, folks. Luckily, I'm here for you! In this installment of my CoS series, I'll be telling you how to even the odds between your PCs and the hags OR how to turn the whole encounter into a role-play experience. Let's do this!

## Preliminary Notes

Before we go any farther, I would highly recommend that you trick your players into trying the Dream Pastries. They'll be positively mortified to learn that they've eaten children and that just fits so well into this campaign. I did a nice write up on tricking the party with Morgantha in my [Village of Barovia post](https://www.reddit.com/r/CurseofStrahd/comments/8xu9lo/fleshing_out_curse_of_strahd_the_village_of/), if you're interested. I also have a [post on the mechanics of Dream Pastry Addiction](https://www.reddit.com/r/CurseofStrahd/comments/91bv3n/fleshing_out_curse_of_strahd_the_mechanics_of/).

## What's Supposed to Happen at Old Bonegrinder

The creators of this chapter meant for this to be a warning for your PCs about the dangers of Barovia. Your players are supposed to walk up, see the hags, fight the hags, find out they're severely outmatched, and then make a run for it. They even put a convenient raven outside the front door to warn the PCs that this is a bad place to be.

The problem is, most players go into D&D with a pretty hardcore hero complex. What's more, if they find out children are involved, that hero complex gets cranked up to eleven. Suddenly, you've got a TPK on your hands as your players valiantly refuse to abandon the kids and leave such foul hags alive. I've come up with some ways to circumvent this almost completely inevitable outcome.

## Fighting the Hags

If you want to play this as an encounter, there are a few different ways for you to even the playing field.

### Morgantha's Not Home Yet

* + A single night hag is a pretty formidable foe. At this point in the campaign, one swipe from her claws can down a PC. Put all three hags together and they form a coven, getting extra spells and making them even more dangerous. So, a logical way to ease this fight is to break the coven.
  + When your players get to the windmill, Morgantha isn't actually there. She's on her way home, but it's going to take a little while for her to catch up to the PCs.
    - I took this idea directly from "Dice, Camera, Action." The series is on YouTube and they play through CoS.
    - When the fighting actually starts, Morgantha should get home in about 10-15 turns. Try to time her arrival right. If your players are in pretty bad shape and they're still trying to get their bearings at turn 10, hold off her arrival until they get their footing back. You don't want to kick your players when they're down.
    - When Morgantha *does* show up, don't have her immediately enter combat. Most likely, she won't even know her daughters are under attack right away. When she shows up, there's time for your players to maybe distract her for a turn before she actually becomes a threat.
  + Upon her homecoming, Morgantha comes fully disguised as the old woman and pushing her cart of pies, almost all of which are gone (presumedly sold). However, she has one major addition to her cart: a large wiggling sack containing a bound and gagged little boy named Lucien.

### Exploit Ireena's Safety

* + Ireena has a pretty high level of immunity to the dangers of Barovia. Strahd has commanded most monsters in his land not to lay a finger on her. The hags don't particularly care about Strahd or his agenda, but they know he's powerful enough to kill them and they certainly don't want to get on his bad side. They'll do their best to avoid harming Ireena, using their action to disengage from her instead of attack her. This could force them to waste turns that they might have otherwise used killing a PC.

### It's Raven Time

* + The Keepers of the Feather are watching the PCs at this point in the game. While it's a bit early to reveal that the raven at the front door was in fact a wereraven, that wereraven can still send the party aid during this battle if things get dire.
  + At a good time, three swarms of ravens might burst through the windows and flood the windmill with the flapping of their wings. These ravens can effectively distract the hags as well as do a little damage. It's also a neat thing to describe to your players, very cinematic.

### Children to the Rescue!

* + So many times, children are taken for granted in D&D. They're kids after all, so they're obviously little innocent babes in need of constant rescuing and care. Come on now. Kids can be such little devils when they want to be.
  + The module states that Reek doesn't have a soul, so he's not terribly helpful. But Myrtle and Lucian (the boy Morgantha brings with her when she arrives) should be smart enough to realize that some brave people have come to help them. If the opportunity presents itself, the children may try to help the party.
  + The kids don't actively fight the hags. They'd die in an instant if they tried. But if the hags go invisible, maybe the kids throw some flour around the room until the hags' location is revealed. Maybe the kids grab some rope and try to trip a hag, knocking her prone for a round.
  + The children are intelligent little things and can certainly help the party out if they're set free.

### Two Out of Three Ain't Bad

* + If two of the hags fall in battle, have the third one attempt to flee no matter what her health is looking like. If even one gets away, there might be opportunity for her to return later in the campaign for a fun call-back.
  + Also, the party will be able to heal and maybe get some cheap shots at the third hag while she's running away. They may even be able to down her when her priorities change.

## Turning A Fight into Role-Play

Let's say you want to avoid the fight entirely and make this a nice role-play opportunity instead. I'll warn you that this next section is me shooting from the hip. I've only recently thought of this scenario and so never got the chance to test it in my game. But I think it's an interesting enough idea to do a write-up on it.

### An Unnamed Windmill

* + As just a quick reminder, don't ever say the same of this windmill out loud to your PCs. They should never hear the term, "Old Bonegrinder." If you're trying to deceive your players into trusting the hags, an ominous name like that certainly won't win you any points.

### Approaching the Windmill

* + When your players round the bend and see the windmill on the hill, try to turn down the ominousness of the whole thing. Instead of being decrepit in a scary way, the windmill is decrepit in a sad way. As your PCs eye its grey walls and stripped vanes, the whole building seems to lean to one side like a crippled old woman just trying to get by.
  + You can still have the raven perched above the doorway. It seems agitated and caws at the party. If they try and engage the raven, it flies around and grabs at a party member's hair. The raven is actually trying to pull the party away from the windmill, but in the disarray, it's unlikely that the party will realize this. If anyone tries to attack the raven, Ireena shouts at them to stop. Sensing the danger, the raven gives up and flies away. Ireena then tells the party it's bad luck to harm a raven.
  + Meeting Bella Sunbane
    - The players will likely try to knock on the front door. They'll hear some shuffling from inside before the door opens to reveal Bella Sunbane. If they try to just go inside, the door is unlocked and Bella calls out from upstairs, "Mother? Is that you?"
    - It's good to go ahead and have the party converse with Bella for this bit for a couple of reasons. If this meeting goes south and devolves into a fight, you'll still likely want to have Morgantha enter the battle much later, as I referred to earlier. And Bella's sister, Ofalia, has yet another very untrustworthy name. If you don't want to make your party suspicious, have them deal primarily with Bella.
    - Bella and Ofalia (though your party won't actually really meet the later) both appear to be in their late fifties. They're not particularly attractive ladies and, despite their age, obviously weren't terrible pretty in youth either.
  + When Bella opens the front door, the players are surrounded by the delicious smell of baking pastries wafting out from inside the windmill.

## Conversations inside the Windmill

### Minor changes to the first floor

* + In order to lessen the sinister air for this event, go ahead and change the following:
    - The acrid smell coming from the barrel of demon ichor isn't as potent. The chapter states that it mixes super uncomfortably with the smell of pastries. Instead, the PCs would only smell the ichor if they were to put their nose right over the barrel.
    - The windmill isn't filthy. It's certainly not clean, as it has a musty, lived-in air about it, but it's not horrifyingly the home of a witch.
    - Bones don't litter the floor. The hags keep all the kid bones in a sack next to the oven. When describing this area, say something like, "A large brick oven takes up most of one side of the room. The oven emits warmth and you can smell something sweet baking inside. Surrounding the oven on some shelves are several jars of condiments and ingredients. There's also a couple rubbish bins filled with animal bones and bits of discarded dough." Because of their size, the bones could be easily mistaken for animal bones. If a player actually picks up and investigates the bones, make them roll a survival check to see if they can figure out the bones are people bones... *small* people bones. ;)

### Bella invites the Players inside

* + There's not much room inside the windmill for everyone to be comfortable, but Bella makes an obvious show of trying to be hospitable. She may go to an unused chair in the corner, piled with old knick-kacks, and start trying to clear it off for a PC to have a place to sit.
  + Bella comments that they don't usually have guests and she's so very sorry for not making things nicer. This should make the PCs feel like a nuisance. They become more worried about themselves imposing on Bella than of Bella's possible sinister nature.

### Bella and the PCs might talk about a few different things in this time.

* + Bella freely says that her sister is upstairs, hard at work, though she doesn't call her by name, referring to her only as "sister."
    - "Sister! Come say hello to our guests!" "Oh, hush, Bella! I'm working! You know Mother will be home soon."
  + Bella's mother is Morgantha and she frequently goes into town for a few days at a time to sell her wares. They have a little place in town to stay, but they much prefer the windmill as their home. Bella and her sister are the primary bakers in their little business.
  + Bella is delighted when the players admit that they met her mother and even more so when they admit they tried the pies. Bella wants to know the PCs' critiques on the taste and what might possibly make them tastier. Bella would love to hear some baking tips.
  + Bella doesn't talk about the actual content of the pies unless she's specifically asked. She admits that it's a family secret passed down from her mother's mother.
  + If the PCs bring up the witch thing, Bella gets sad and says her mother doesn't really talk about her mother or how she died. But Bella knows that it was something terrible.
  + If the PCs bring up the deed to the windmill that they obtained from Death House, Bella looks suddenly devastated. She tells the PCs that the windmill was abandoned for centuries before their grandmother came to live there. "I-Is that why you're here? To kick three old women out of their home? Shame on you!"
  + Otherwise, Bella does her best to keep the conversation about the PCs. She asks them where they're off to and how they're handling Barovia. Better to talk about the PCs than them, after all.

## The Unanswered Letter

Somewhere along the line, Bella should be able to tell that the PCs have experience in battle. They're obvious adventurers and they've been fooled by Bella thus far. She sees an opportunity to use the PCs and she's going to take it.

* During the conversations, Bella suddenly becomes more reserved. She hates having to ask for anything, especially of random passerbys, but they don't get many visitors and Bella's mother would never ask for help on her own. Recently, a letter that Mother sent out to a friend in Vallaki was returned to the windmill unanswered. Bella hasn't told her mother about the returned letter yet, but she very much doesn't want her mother to worry. Bella takes out the letter and hands it to the players. It Reads:

*Vasili, My Dear Friend,*

*Yes, of course I would be more than willing to help you with such a horrible problem! I can only imagine what those poor dears in Vallaki are going through. You know very well that I've had my own bad encounters with witches... encounters that have left their marks on my very soul. Children, orphaned or not, should never have to face such evil.*

*If you find a way to get the little ones at Andral's Orphanage safely out of Vallaki, I'll be happy to house them in my windmill. There's not much room, here, true. But we have beds and pies to go around.*

*Sincerely,*

*Morgantha*

* Bella worries that something may have happened to Vasili... that perhaps the witch mentioned in the letter got to him. She also worries that if Morgantha sees the unanswered letter, she may go to Vallaki herself. And Vallaki is no place for a old woman like her.
* Bella humbly requests that the PCs look into the matter.

## The Witches' Evil Plan

Believe it or not, the hags actually have multiple copies of this letter that they keep on standby. The three of them are quite old (hags live longer than humans), and they've had brave adventurers come by their windmill before over the decades. Most of the time, these visits turn into fights. The adventurers end up dead or run for the lives. But every so often, the hags are able to fool adventurers into thinking that they're nothing but nice old ladies and they use the letter to trick the adventurers into helping them.

What does the coven at Old Bonegrinder want? Children, of course. They need supplies for their pies and a way to expand their influence further into Barovia, preferably to Vallaki since it's the biggest town. The hags are looking for a way to expand their consumer base and adventurers are a great way to get that done. They want the PCs to go check out the orphanage in Vallaki and hopefully bring them some kids for their pies. Even the mention of Vasili, Strahd's alter ego, is just a running joke in the coven.

## Fight Warning

Let's be honest, no matter how you play it, this is still a pretty precarious role-play situation. All it takes is for your PCs to snoop a little too much and get some wicked perception and/or insight checks to know that something is up. If they get even a whiff of danger, their defenses will go up and they'll feel the need to figure it all out.

There's a high chance that at any moment this conversation will devolve into a fight. If that happens, refer to the first section of this post on how to run that encounter like a forgiving DM who doesn't want to absolutely obliterate a party of level 3 babes.

## If Things Go Well

On the other hand, maybe your party is totally fooled. After all, a bunch of abused orphans can sound pretty stereotypically plausible in a campaign like this.

If the party happily agrees to help Bella, she sends them on their way saying that, "Mother won't like it if she sees you here. She doesn't like strangers seeing our mess, you see." And then the PCs are off to Vallaki with a side quest in tow.

I'll be writing a mini-adventure for the orphanage in Vallaki as an extension of this post. Because hey, it's not like Vallaki has anything going on, right? It'd be boring without yet another side quest. ;p

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Those are my notes on Old Bonegrinder. As always, I hope you enjoyed are excited for more!

- Mandy

# Fleshing out Curse of Strahd: The Mechanics of Dream Pastries

This'll be a short post. I was going to include it in my Village of Barovia and/or Bonegrinder posts, but it was just a bit lengthy for them. So here you go.

## Mechanics of Dream Pastry Addiction

Having a PC eat a pastry and immediately drop into sleep is a bit sudden for my tastes. I wanted to make the pies a bit more subtle in their execution. In my mind, eating the pies is already like voluntarily failing a wisdom save, so there's no need for PCs to drop where they stand.

### The First Taste of Pie

* + When a player eats a pie, it doesn't affect them right off the bat. You may, if you wish, have them feel a bit drowsy. But it doesn't knock them out.
  + That night, they have wonderful happy dreams that are so realistic and wonderful, that waking up the next day leaves them feeling hallow. They sleep a full eight hours and cannot be woken while under the influence of the dream pastry.

### Addiction Day 1

* + On the day they wake feeling so sad, by about noon, have the PC roll a DC 10 Con save.
    - On a success, nothing happens.
    - On a fail, the PC suddenly finds themselves eating more pie. Don't tell the player that they have to take out the pie and eat it now. Just describe it happening so that the PC feels powerless in the act, much like a real addict might.
  + If the PC has no more pie on their person or easily available (maybe in another PC's bag or something), they have disadvantage on all their skill checks until they acquire and eat more pie. You may actively tell them they have a hardcore craving for dream pie as well.
    - If they go to sleep without having eaten dream pie, they have horrible nightmares that night.

### Continuing Days After Only Eating Pie ONCE

* + If a PC has literally only had a single helping of pie ever, the withdrawal will be much easier and shorter than for those who have had multiple helpings over the course of many days.
  + Addiction Day 1 Happens, but the PC does not eat pie that day. The next day, the PC awakes from horrible nightmares. By noon, have them roll another con save, but with a DC of 4.
    - On a success, the PC is no longer addicted and is alleviated of their disadvantage if they had any from the previous day.
    - On a fail, the disadvantage on skill checks continues BUT DOES NOT WORSEN. They will again have nightmares that night, but wake the next day totally free of addiction, disadvantage included.

## Becoming Addicted

* Addiction Day 2
  + If the PC ate a second helping of pie during Addiction Day 1, they wake the next day from yet another night of wonderful dreams. At this point, they are **addicted**. Yes, this is technically only 2 days. But 2 days in-game in dnd can be quite a bit of time, as we're all aware. It's going to feel like longer during actually game play.
  + By about noon, have them roll another con save, but this time with a DC of 12.
    - On a success, nothing happens. Their con save the next day will simply go back down to a DC 10 unless they voluntarily eat more pie, in which case it will go up to 12.
    - On a fail, they once again find themselves suddenly eating more pie. If no pie is available, they have disadvantage on all skill checks until they eat more pie.
* Following Days of Addiction After MULTIPLE Helpings of Pie
  + Each day the PC eats pie, their con save DC the following day will go up by 2, making it harder for them not to feel the effects of their addiction. This can continue to a maximum of DC 25.
  + Each day the PC goes WITHOUT eating pie, their con save DC the next day will be reduced by 2, to a minimum of 4.
  + Each day the PC goes without eating pie and is still addicted to pie and fails their con save, they get the following accumulative disadvantages:
    - Day 1: Disadvantage on all skill checks
    - Day 2: Disadvantage on all skill checks and saving throws
    - Day 3: Disadvantage on all skill checks, saving throws, and attack rolls
  + Eating pie at any point during this time will lift all disadvantages and increase the next day con save DC by 2.

## Getting Rid of Addiction

### Con Save Success

* + If a PC doesn't eat pie enough consecutive days, their con save DC will eventually drop to 4. If the PC succeeds on their DC 4 con save, they are no longer addicted.

### Going Cold Turkey

* + If a player goes 7 consecutive in-game days without eating pie, they are no longer addicted. This happens regardless of their save DC amount and immediately alleviates any and all disadvantages they might have had as a result of their addiction.

## Relapse

Should a former addict ever eat a Dream Pastry again, their starting con save DC will be 15 instead of 10.

## Eating More than One Helping a Day

Eating one pastry in a day or shoveling a whole wagon down in a couple hours does NOT effect addiction levels. The pies work in conjuncture with sleep and dreams, which of course only happens once a day and for a forced eight hour sleeping period. Essentially, a PC has either eaten or not eaten a pastry in-between the times of sleep.

## Expiration Date

Due to their magical properties, one dream pastry lasts ten in-game days before expiring and becoming too rancid to eat. If eaten anyway, the player is poisoned for 3 hours due to food poisoning and their addiction level is not affected.

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And that's all! Hope this helps somebody.

-Mandy