

DUNGEON CRAWL CLASSICS

Death Among The Pines

#83.2: A LEVEL 3 ADVENTURE
IN THE SHUDDER MOUNTAINS
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INTRODUCTION



Death Among the Pines is a DCC RPG adventure set in the Shudder Mountains and is intended for four to six 3rd-level PCs. The characters can either be outsiders adventuring in the ancient hills or native Shudfolk seeking excitement and riches. Parties possessing one or more clerics with access to the *neutralize poison or disease* and/or *restore vitality* spells may fare better than those lacking them.

Death Among the Pines is centered on a small farming community situated in the hills northeast of Thundercrack. It was once a thriving Shudfolk hamlet, but it has since become a nexus for evil growing in the mountains. Serpent-men from deep under the hills have slowly infiltrated the village and now almost completely dominate Holler Hollow. The serpent-men's arrival has stirred up the restless spirit of a murdered woman whose ghost was well-known by the Shudfolk of the hollow and her unusual antics have been misinterpreted as attacks, leading the few surviving human residents to seek help in defeating the spirit. An investigation into the aggravated hauntings uncovers the serpent-men's schemes, but is it too late for the Shudfolk of Holler Hollow?

BACKGROUND



Sixty years ago, Wade and Pansy Roane ran the grist mill in Holler Hollow, grinding corn and wheat for the locals. Wade, however, often rubbed folks the wrong way and the farmers started using other, more distant millers, rather than deal with Wade. When his business began to fail, Wade became desperate, convinced that he'd be perceived as a failure by his fellow Shudfolk.

Desperation is opportunity to the serpent-men who dwell under the mountains, and it wasn't long before one of these scaly humanoids sensed opportunity in Wade. A deal was struck: the serpent-men would reward Wade with riches if he'd grant them use of his cellars as a meeting place for their sinister cult. Wade agreed and the serpent-men established a foothold in Holler Hollow.

In time, the serpent-men's demands grew and ultimately Pansy and her unborn child paid the price for Wade's pride and avarice. The serpent-men's hold on Wade tightened as they continued to watch the surface world from their hidden temple under the mill, planning for a time to dominate the sunlit lands once again. Wade vanished at some point as their power waxed, either slain himself or fleeing the site of his foul crimes to take up his life elsewhere.

The serpent-men maintained surveillance on Holler Hollow for decades, waiting for the time to strike. Just recently, the wellspring under the mill dried up, opening a new avenue of access to the mountain vale from the subterranean world. The serpent-men have taken this as an omen and their infiltration of Holler Hollow has begun in earnest. These sinister creatures are kidnapping and replacing the inhabitants of the hollow, gradually transforming the tiny community into a serpent-men stronghold. Soon, they'll control the entire vale and then they'll press forth to further infiltrate the upper world of the Shudder Mountains.

A single, unexpected sentinel stands between the serpent-men and their dominance of Holler Hollow: the ghost of Pansy Roane. As the serpent-men activity has increased in her former home, the restless spirit of Pansy has ventured forth from the area around the old mill in an attempt to alert the last few human residents of Holler Hollow. So far, her wails and cries have been in vain. Unless someone stops the serpent-men before they complete their takeover of Holler Hollow, the tiny settlement — and perhaps the Shudder Mountains at large — are doomed...

SHUDDER MOUNTAIN SERPENT-MEN

The serpent-men of the Shudder Mountains are a separate strain that evolved along a different path in the black caves under the hills. Their ability to disguise themselves in human and demi-human form exceeds the simple illusion of their brethren. Instead of merely being able to disguise their ophidian heads with an illusionary human appearance, Shudder Mountain serpent-men can cloak their entire bodies in illusionary disguises, allowing them to mimic the appearance of anything from small children to ancient elves to fat halflings. This otherwise acts as described in the serpent-men entry on p. 425 of the DCC RPG rulebook.

Additionally, Shudder Mountain serpent-men can produce a false skin over their scaly flesh to further disguise their true form. This human-like skin is warm to the touch, bears minute hairs, and is otherwise indistinguishable from the real thing. Because this artificial flesh is true matter, it cannot be detected by magic that banishes illusions and other enchanted disguises. Such spells and magical effects have only a 25% chance of noticing that something is amiss regardless of their normal spell check results.

BEGINNING THE ADVENTURE

Death Among the Pines begins with the party on a long overland journey, ostensibly bound for the busy town of Thundercrack. The purpose of their journey is unimportant; it is only necessary that they come across Holler Hollow near the end of their traveling day and need a place to rest for the night. They'll soon find themselves dragged into the events that plague the community. Read the following as they come across Holler Hollow:

The sun is slowly sinking behind the hills as you walk along the narrow footpath leading to the town of Thundercrack. You've been on the road for several days, heading towards that large settlement in search of work and excitement, sleeping in the pine-shaded hollows of the Shudder Mountains, and basking in the natural beauty of these ancient hills.

As you cross a ridge, you see a wide dale spread out below you, the footpath leading directly down into it. From your vantage point, you espy a handful of log cabins laid out in the gloaming and a bright white temple of the Sovereign catching the last of the fading light. Corn fields bound by snake-rail fences stretch away into the distance on both sides of the road and a creek winds its way through the vale on the far side of the hollow. An old grist mill is barely visible among the willows that crowd the banks of the creek. The sound of an axe splitting timber rings through the evening air and you can see a burly Shudfolk man chopping firewood in the yard of the nearest cabin.

This must be Holler Hollow, one of the small hamlets on the path to Thundercrack. The thoughts of a soft hay bed in a barn and a meal of homemade stew – maybe with a draught of good stump whiskey – fills your head as you gaze upon the tiny community. If you mind your manners, you can easily find both before continuing on your journey.

EVENT ONE: MEETING THE MASHBURNS



As the PCs descend into the hollow, Chase Mashburn, the man chopping wood, notices their arrival. He leans his axe against his splitting stump, wipes his brow with a handkerchief, and approaches the roadside fence. He gives the party a wide grin and a hearty welcome, asking them their names and making their acquaintance.

Chase is a 5' 11" tall male with shaggy brown hair that brushes his shoulders and a close-cropped beard showing the first touches of gray. He appears in his mid-thirties. Chase's eyes are pale blue, which sparkle in contrast to his berry-brown tanned skin. He wears homespun wool tunic and trousers and buckskin boots. His smile and soft chuckle are ingratiating.

Chase is in truth a serpent-man, a doppelganger of the real Chase Mashburn who has been abducted, thought-robbed, and transformed into a horrible new shape (see area 1-9 below). Serpent-man Chase's task is to watch for outsiders and keep a close eye on Trill and Nollie Mashburn. "Chase" wants to discover the PCs' purpose in town. To this end, he plays the part of friendly farmer and, assuming the PCs don't go out of their way to antagonize him, invites them to join him and his family for dinner. He hints that he might be able to find sleeping space in front of his hearth if they behave themselves and don't mind crowding together.

He leads the party into his home (use the average Shudfolk home map from DCC #83: *The Chained Coffin*), calling out to his wife as he opens the front door. A young Shudfolk woman cradling a four-month old baby on her hip as she prepares dinner turns and greets her unexpected guests with down-home hospitality. She introduces herself as Trill and her baby girl as Nollie.

Trill is a Shudfolk female in her mid-twenties. Her skin is dusky, her hair is a mass of dark curls held in place by a green scarf, and she dresses in a homespun linen dress of soft rose. A slightly stained house apron protects the dress against spills and the occasional spit-up from baby Nollie. Trill is polite if a bit exasperated, at first, but warms quickly to the party if they mind their manners and pitch in to help. Nollie shares all the best qualities of mother and (natural) father, and is simply as cute as a button.



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EVENT TWO: THE PREACHER



As the group is setting plates for dinner, there is a knock on the door. Chase opens it to see the local Sovereign priest, Braar Obray standing on the front porch. Braar Obray is a (seemingly) Shudfolk male in his late-fifties, dressed in a white frock coat and trousers, a golden circle dangling on a chain around his neck. His face is lined with sun wrinkles and clean shaven, and he has a soft, but powerful voice. Braar Obray's dark eyes dart about constantly as if uncertain where to look. Like Chase, Braar Obray is actually a serpent-man infiltrator and de facto leader of the serpent-men doppelgangers.

Chase welcomes the preacher warmly, inviting him in. Braar Obray says he saw the party arrive in the hollow from his temple and, when they didn't emerge from the Mashburn's house, came by to check up on the couple. He introduces himself to the group and the Mashburns add another setting to the table.

When dinner is served, Braar Obray invites the party's cleric to say a blessing over the food if there is one and the PC is also a Sovereign priest. Otherwise, Braar Obray does the blessing, seeming to stumble a bit near the end but quickly recovering. He then asks his own questions about the party, sizing them up like Chase to get an impression of their potential threat to the serpent-men's plans.

Midway through the meal, Trill Mashburn suggests modestly to Braar Obray that maybe the PCs—being adventuring types—might have some insight into the hollow's problem with Pansy Roane. Braar Obray and Chase exchange a meaningful look. A DC 10 Personality check notices the glance seems to be embarrassment mixed with some fear. Chase tries to downplay the comment with a *"Let's not trouble our guests, Mother."* If the PCs persist in asking for further details, Trill tells them the story of Pansy Roane (see following page).

Assuming the party agrees to help, Trill suggests they pay a visit to the old grist mill and the Pigsaw Creek in the morning. Both Chase and Braar Obray seem relieved, but they are in truth angry that the PCs might prove problematic just when the serpent-men are close to completing their dominance of the hollow. If Braar Obray is asked to accompany the party or if he could help them, he states that he's already attempted to lay the ghost to rest the night she stood outside the temple, but his efforts had no effect. He sighs and says guiltily that perhaps his faith wasn't strong enough to be rewarded by the Sovereign and he's had many a restless night struggling with this very issue. He wishes the party the best and says he'll pray for their success tonight before bed and during the day tomorrow while they investigate the mill and creek.

Eventually, Braar Obray departs and the Mashburns help the party get settled in. What the party does not know is that Braar Obray travels to the serpent-men fane beneath the Grist Mill to warn his comrades and prepare an ambush to meet the party the next morning.

EVENT THREE: THE GHOST



hat night, the spirit of Pansy Roane walks the hollow again, appearing at the Mashburn's gate and wailing. This unearthly cry automatically awakens any sleeping PCs. Anyone looking outside sees a translucent figure, its belly swollen with child and its hair bedraggled and bearing clumps of mud, standing in front of the house. It stretches out one arm towards the home, hand extended palm up with fingers twisted and claw-like.

The restless spirit cannot communicate directly with the living to warn them and, in its frustration, its attempts manifest as banshee-like screams. If anyone leaves

THE LEGEND OF PANSY ROANE

This is the tale of Pansy and Wade Roane as Trill Mashburn tells it:

Back in my Granny's time, there t'was a couple that ran the grist mill on Pigsaw Creek. They t'were Pansy and Wade Roane, happy a pair as you ken. Pansy t'was kindling a young 'en, tis said, and ol' Wade t'was happy as a hog in slop at the thought of being a proud poppa. But tragedy, as it t'will do here in the hills, well it paid a visit to 'em.

The spring thaw swelled the creeks and rivers that year, and the Pigsaw overflowed its banks. Pansy t'was coming back to the mill from temple and it's said she misstepped along the creek banks and fell into the swollen waters. No one saw Pansy go in, but they a'heard her screams all the way back in town. That t'was the last time anyone heard from Pansy...alive anyway.

After Pansy drowned, ol' Wade tried to make a go of things and kept the mill running, but t'is said his heart t'was broken and he just sort of drifted away one year, leaving the hollow for good. Wade might be a'gone, but Pansy's still here. Folks see her walking along the creek near the old mill from time to time, weeping and holding her belly as if cradling the young 'en she'll never have. Used to be Pansy's ghost never bothered no'un, but that time's past.

Last handful of months, Pansy's ghost has taken to walking down the main road of the hollow after dark, keeping folks awake with her wailing. At first, she only came a patch down the road, but as time a'went rolling along, she came further and further down the way. She since passed the church, the Coster's homestead, and even the Pebbly Stream bridge. Just last night, I heard her a'wailing and weepin' right at our front gate. To be honest, I'm a'scared for us. Something's changed with Pansy and I think it don't mean us well.

Would you all be willin' to try and see what can be done with Pansy?

the house and approaches the spirit, its wail increases in volume and ferocity, and all within 100' suffer 1d4 sonic damage and must make a DC 12 Fortitude save or be deafened for 1d4 hours. The spirit then departs, fading into the moonlight that illuminates the road. If slain or turned before it can deliver its wail, it fades away but will re-manifest in the mill where noted.

THE OLD GRIST MILL



he mill slouches besides Pigsaw Creek, crumbling and disused. The waterwheel still turns, wobbling on its axis, but the sound of the mill stone grinding is absent. Holes in its shake roof gape like open mouths awaiting the rain and the rib-like rafters are visible. A timber door still stands in the entrance, but it is askew and hangs on a single hinge.

Area 1-1—Mill Floor: *The interior of the grist mill is dim and cool, dappled with rays of sunlight filled with motes of dust. The grindstones stand motionless, but the sound of slowly turning gears is faintly discernible beneath the wooden floor. The upper floor of the mill has fallen, leaving piles of rotted planks scattered about the lower floor and jagged rafters overhead. A door to the south stands closed. A half-collapsed staircase once lead up to the former second floor, but now ends in midair.*

The mill looks empty, but a quartet of serpents are lurking among the fallen timbers. These snakes have been lured to the area by Braar Obray and entranced to attack whoever enters. One snake is coiled in the rafters above and drops on the PC with the worst Luck, gaining a +2 bonus to hit.

Rattlesnakes (4): Init +3; Atk bite +3 melee (1d4 plus poison); AC 15; HD 1d6; hp 4 each; MV 15' or climb 15'; Act 1d20; SP poison (DC 10 Fort save; 1d6 Stamina on

INVESTIGATING HOLLER HOLLOW

PCs may wish to try and question other residents of Holler Hollow prior to their explorations of the grist mill. There are approximately fifteen residents living in the various farms in the vale, most of whom are serpent-men dopelgangers. These false humans will do their best to verbally guide the party to the mill where an ambush awaits them. Their stories of encounters with the ghost of Pansy Roane are nearly identical to that described by Trill Mashburn the previous night.

If the party decides to pay a visit to Braar Obray, the faux preacher meets them outside of the temple, apparently seeing them coming down the path. He does not allow them to enter the temple for fear of the adventurers seeing the blasphemous décor that adorns the former Sovereign fane. Although reluctant to do so, if the party attempts to force their way into the church, Braar Obray uses his serpent-man abilities to combat them and can summon 1d4+2 additional serpent-men with a hue and cry to come to his aid.

failure, 1 Stamina on success; this damage heals naturally), scent; SV Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +1; AL N.

The room contains nothing of interest or value. Thumping the floor or a DC 6 Intelligence check reveals that there is likely a room beneath this one.

Area 1-2—Storage and Cellar Access: *This small room holds the remains of fallen shelves, broken crockery, staved-in barrels, and rotted leather and cloth. Leaning against one wall is a battered guitar, a pair of strings still entwined around its string posts and bridge. A closed trap door is set into the wooden floor.*

The room contains only debris from various supplies needed to operate the mill and household when Pansy and Wade Roane still lived. There is nothing of value among the litter.

The guitar belonged to Pansy and her ghost still maintains a connection to the instrument from beyond the grave. A few moments after the PCs enter the room, the guitar gives a sharp twang and one of the two remaining strings snaps. The note seems to hang in the air overlong as if sustained by some unnatural presence.

Anyone handling the guitar feels a sharp pain and the coolness of steel slide into their abdomen. The pain is enough to make them drop the guitar and clutch their stomach. If the guitar is handled again, the sensation does not repeat. If the party brings the guitar with them, it reacts one last time just before they enter area 1-5.

The trapdoor is wedged shut with age and dirt and it is obvious the no one has used it in some time (Braar Obray and the rest of the serpent folk come and go via area 1-10). Opening the trapdoor requires a DC 10 Strength check or bashing it in with axes and pry bars. A fumble on the Strength check indicated the floor gives way beneath the PC(s) attempting to open it, dropping them 10' into the cellar below.

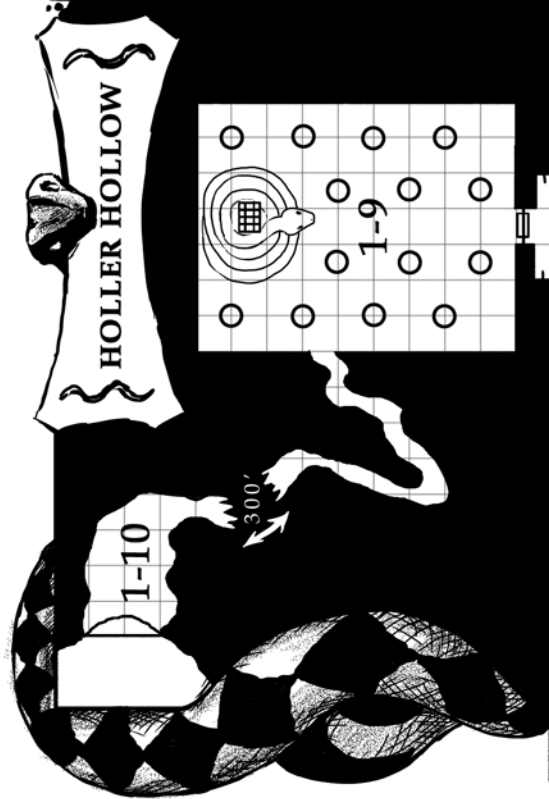
A rickety ladder beneath the trapdoor leads down to the cellar.

Area 1-3—Cellar: *A rectangular, gloomy and musty cellar lies beneath the mill. The walls are lined with stone grown fuzzy with mold. Towards the northern end of the room is the drive shaft and gears of the grist mill, slowly grinding away in the darkness. One drive shaft vanishes into the northern wall, presumably connected to the waterwheel outside. The hum of Pigsaw Creek and the slow turning of the waterwheel echoes mutedly through the cellar.*

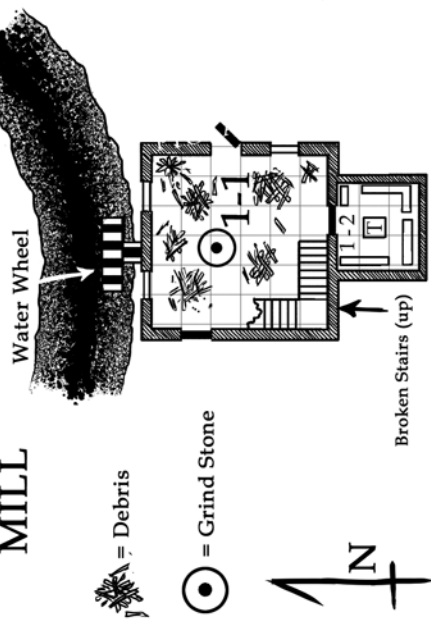
The gears and drive shafts are in poor repair and are nearly rusted together. An examination of the machinery reveals the drive shaft connected to the grindstone above has corroded entirely and no longer turns the millstones. The floor is dirt and stinks of stagnant water and rot.

The mold is dangerous if inhaled. Scraping away the black-green growths requires a DC 10 Fortitude save unless the PC covers his mouth with cloth or other filter. If the check fails, he takes 1 Stamina point of damage. Oil instantaneously dissolves the mold.

A door in the southern wall is covered with the mold. Scraping it away automatically reveals the portal, as does a DC 5 Intelligence check. An old lock secures the door (requires either a DC 5 pick locks check or 10 points of damage from a slashing or blunt weapon).



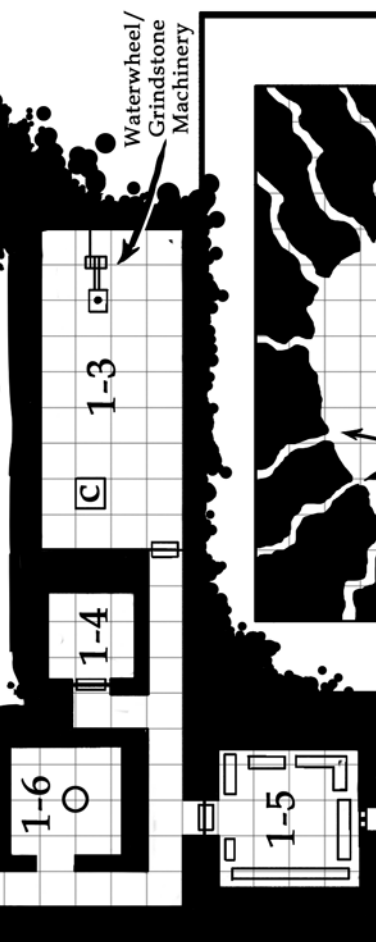
THE RUINED MILL



MAP KEY

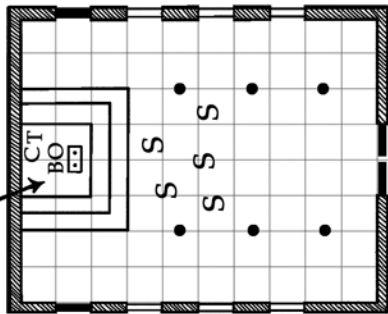
- [Square] = 5'
- [Double Line] = Window
- [Double Line with Arrow] = Door
- [L-Shape] = Shelves
- [Brick Pattern] = Wall Niches
- [Circle] = Well
- [T-Shape] = Trap Door
- [C in Square] = Ceiling Shaft
- [C in Circle] = Ceiling Shaft
- [Brick Pattern in Square] = Bricked-Up Cavity
- [Grate Pattern] = Grate/Covered Pit

CELLAR and SECRET TEMPLE



TEMPLE of the SOVEREIGN

Dias w/ Altar

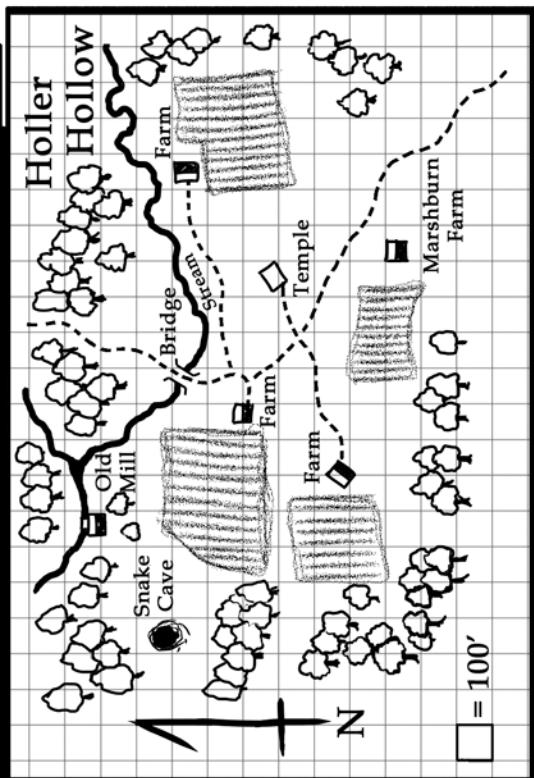


- = Pillar
- BO = Braar Oblay
- T = Trill
- C = Chase
- S = Serpent Man

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DRY SPRING CAVE





Area 1-4—Fake Prisoners: The door to this room is locked with new lock that smells of oil. A DC 10 pick locks check opens the lock. Anyone listening at the door automatically hears the sound of muffled cries coming from beyond the door. If the door is opened, they see the following:

This small chamber is unlit and walled with stone. Five small figures wriggle on the earthen floor, their limbs bound with rope and their mouths muffled by gags. They are all young children, none older than 12 years of age. Their homespun clothes identifies them as Shud-folk. They look at you with a mixture of terror tinged slightly with hope.

This chamber is normally used to hold captives until their thoughts can be stolen and their identities assumed. When Braar Obray alerted his allies in the temple to expect the PCs, they concocted a cunning plan. The “children” are in truth serpent-men using their illusion-generation power to appear as helpless captives. Treat the illusion as a spell check 30 for purposes of disbelieving or dispelling. They use their hypnotic power on whoever attempts to rescue them (the judge should make the PC’s saving throw roll secretly). If successful, they compel the affected PC(s) to take them to area 1-9 where they say more children are being held captive. If others PCs see through the compulsion, the serpent-men instruct the charmed characters to attack their friends, allowing the entranced heroes another Willpower save to break the hypnosis. The serpent-men then reveal their true forms and attack.

Serpent-men (5): Init +1; Atk bite +3 melee (1d4 plus poison); AC 12; HD 1d10+2; hp 9 each; MV 20; Act 1d20; SP poison (DC 14 Fort save; 1d6 Strength loss on failure, 1 Stamina on success; this damage heals naturally), illusion 1/day, hypnotic gaze (+6 to spell check, Will save to avoid or 1d4 hours charm); SV Fort +2, Ref +1, Will +2; AL L.

Area 1-5—Root Cellar and Secret Grave: Before the PCs open this door, the guitar, if they have it, snaps its last string, sending a final sharp note that sustains just a bit too long, through the air. This is Pansy’s ghost responding to the nearness of her grave.

This narrow room has free-standing shelves pushed up against each of its walls. Glass jars containing indistinct objects suspended in cloudy liquid, ceramic jugs, and pottery bowls line many of the dry-rotted shelves.

When Wade Roane killed his wife, he concealed her body in this root cellar, walling up the corpse behind the old stone walls. Interred in this crude grave, Pansy’s ghost has been unable to rest and only the discovery of its body and subsequent burial in a churchyard will end its un-dead existence.

Entering this room causes Pansy’s ghost to manifest, forming gradually in mid-air like frost on a window pane. Once its translucent form is fully present, the ghost opens its mouth to speak and blasts the room with its banshee wail, damaging all present. The following round it attempts to strike a character (a female PC if one is present; otherwise determine randomly) in order to possess one of the party. If it successfully possesses a subject, the ghost uses the target’s vocal chords to relate its tale, but the voice is so unearthly, all who hear it (except the possessed PC) must

make a DC 8 Fortitude save or have their hair turn white from the experience. After speaking her story (see Appendix A handout), the ghost releases the subject from possession and points towards the southern wall. It then vanishes.

If the possession fails either due to a missed attack or a successful save, the ghost rages again and uses its scream. The following round it once again attempts to possess a PC. This process repeats until the spirit has failed three attempts to possess a victim and it has used all its hourly screams. It then disappears, but can re-manifest after an hour has passed.

Ghost of Pansy Roane (1): Init +2; Atk possession touch +6 melee (DC 12 Will save or be possessed); AC 10; HD 2d12; hp 15; MV 40' fly; Act 1d20; SP un-dead traits, immune to non-magical weapons, critical hits, disease, and poison, banshee scream (1d4 sonic damage; DC 12 Fort save or deafened for 1d4 hours); SV Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +6; AL C.

The shelves hold canned fruits, vegetables, and similar stored foodstuffs, many of which have turned. If the south shelves are moved and the stone wall behind it examined, it's evident that several of them have been mortared together relatively more recently than the rest. Breaking through the stonework reveals a shallow cavity excavated into the earth behind it. Concealed in the cavity, its bones still wrapped in a faded homespun dress, are the mortal remains of Pansy Roane. Once the bones are uncovered, a ghostly sigh, heavy with relief, sounds through the cellar.

PCs examining the bones notice that, despite her pregnant state when she was murdered, there is no sign of the bones of an infant amongst Pansy's remains. The child's bones were interred in area 1-8 after grisly rites were performed.

Area 1-6—The Well Room: *This chamber lacks a door allowing you to easily see inside. A modest sized well stands in the center of the room, a rusty pulley set into a rotting wooden frame set above the well's mouth. There is no sign of a rope or bucket and the smell of water is noticeably absent. Instead, the dry stench of snake hangs in the air. Several rough-hewn timber posts are wedged between floor and ceiling, providing support to the limestone slabs that cover the chamber's roof.*

When the spring that once fed this well dried up, it left a deep dry cave behind. This room and the cave tunnels below have become the primary avenue of travel between the serpentine underworld and Holler Hollow. A DC 15 Intelligence check detects the tracks of many scaled feet and slithering bodies coming and going from the well.

The ceiling is in poor repair, compromised by the yearly spring floods which have eroded away the earth above the stone ceiling slabs. A DC 10 Intelligence check or anyone with stoneworking or mining experience notes that the timber supports are the only things keeping the roof from caving in. Knocking out a support has a cumulative 25% chance of causing a cave-in (4d6 damage, DC 10 Reflex save reduces the damage by half). A cave-in has the unexpected benefit of sealing the well shaft and (temporarily) preventing the serpent-men and their allies from emerging in Holler Hollow.

The well is 5' wide and 45' deep. The stones lining the shaft are loose and have many handholds. It can be scaled with a DC 10 Agility or climb sheer surfaces check. Note that if a character secures a rope to one of the supports, he must make a Luck check. If the check fails, the support comes loose when he puts his weight on it, potentially dropping the character down the shaft (5d6 damage) and possibly triggering a cave-in as noted above.

Area 1-7—Dry Cave: *A wide, dry cave, with walls stained by old water marks, lies at the bottom of the well's shaft. The limestone is dark and the cave stinks of snakes. A 20' wide tunnel exits the cave to the northeast and many, many smaller tunnels, most no larger than rat holes, honeycomb the cavern at floor level.*

This cave once held a spring-fed pool, but it has dried up. The former watercourse now connects with a cave system that is home to a tribe of serpent-men and the great beast they venerate like a god made flesh. This creature, the Slithering Shadow, is a 50' long, 8' diameter rattlesnake, with scales of brown, yellow, and black. Entering this cave attracts the great serpent, arriving 1d3 rounds after the first PC steps onto the cavern floor. It emerges from the large tunnel and attacks.

The Slithering Shadow (1): Init +5; Atk bite +6 melee (2d4 plus poison); AC 14; HD 4d8; hp 30; MV 30'; Act 1d20; SP poison (DC 12 Fort save; 1d4 Stamina loss on failure, 1 Stamina on success; this damage heals naturally); SV Fort +6, Ref +4, Will +2; AL N.

The serpent can slither up the well shaft, constricting its body to wriggle up the narrow tube. It pursues its prey into the cellars above unless the well is somehow sealed (such as by causing a cave-in in area 1-6).

The large tunnel leads deep into the caves under the Shudder Mountains, the ancestral home to the serpent-men and other horrible things. The wonders and horrors found therein are beyond the scope of this adventure, but the judge may elaborate on them to expand this scenario if so desired.

Area 1-8—Fane Antechamber: *A small antechamber stands between the door just opened and another larger and more imposing-looking valve set opposite it across the room. The door is decorated with a relief carving of an open-mouthed snake. The lintel and posts of the door frame are adorned with a knot work of entwined serpents. The walls to the left and right each contain a dozen small tiles that protrude from the stone. There is also a small dark niche among the tiles in the right wall.*

The door to area 1-9 is trapped. A close examination of the door handle or a DC 10 find traps check notices that the handle bears a scaly pattern embossed into the bronze. A roll of 15+ on the find traps check also detects that the snake carved on the door has minute stone flaps set inside the serpent's nostrils.

Unless the door handle is turned by a hand with scaly flesh, the nostril flaps open and a blast of toxic gas billows into the room. All inside the antechamber must make a DC 12 Fortitude save or suffer 1d6 Strength loss. The next round, a DC 6 Fortitude save must also be made by affected PCs to avoid losing an additional 1d6 Strength. The gas then disperses. Serpent-men are immune to the gas' effects. Setting off the

trap alerts the occupants in area 1-9 and they open the doors to attack the party.

The 24 wall tiles are actually stone panels covering small niches set into the wall behind them. Each cavity contains a small wooden box the size of an infant's cradle. Inside these plain, crude containers are the skeletal remains of a human infants between 4 and 6 months of age. Numerous small serpent skeletons are entwined among the tiny human bones. These are the victims of the serpent-men's foul rites. The open niche contains a wooden box filled with a dozen infant rattlesnakes. This box will hold Nollie Mashburn's corpse if the serpent-men's final rite is completed (see Event Four below).

Area 1-9—Serpent-men Fane: *Beyond the serpent-faced door is a vaulted, low-ceilinged chamber. Sinuous columns carved to resemble snakeskin hold up the 7' tall ceiling and obscure sight across the chamber. In between the pillar, you glimpse a strange altar, rounded and curving across the back of the room. The smell of odiferous incense barely obscures the stench of serpents.*

The serpent-men are lying in wait for the party, alerted by Braar Obray of their imminent arrival. If the party triggered the door trap, half throw the door open, while the other half fires their envenomed arrows at the intruders. Otherwise, the serpent-men strike once the party has entered the chamber, springing an ambush from among the pillars.

Serpent-men (6): Init +1; Atk bite +3 melee (1d4 plus poison) or short sword +3 melee (1d6) or short bow +3 ranged (1d6 plus poison); AC 12; HD 1d10+2; hp 10 each; MV 20; Act 1d20; SP bite poison (Fort DC 14; 1d6 Strength loss on failure, 1 Stamina on success; this damage heals naturally), envenomed arrows (DC 14 Fort save or additional 1d6 damage); SV Fort +2, Ref +1, Will +2; AL L.

The altar is carved to resemble an albino rattlesnake, coiled to strike. Its head serves as the altar proper and is adorned with a trio of candlesticks carved from garnet (each worth 50 gp), a snakeskin altar cloth (worth 100 gp as a curiosity), and a strange musical instrument resembling a clarinet.

The instrument summons serpents as the spell *snake charm* with a spell check result of 26-29. However, if played by a non-serpent-man, the musician must make a Luck check. If successful, the snakes obey his commands. If failed, the serpents attack their summoner. The instrument can be played once per day.

In the center of the altar's coils, obscured by its stony body, is a 16' deep pit, its mouth covered by a barred gate. Inside the pit slither a dozen grotesque creatures—6' long serpents with bodies as big around as stovepipes. A human head crowns the body of each serpent. Two of the heads are immediately recognizable to the party: Chase Mashburn's and Braar Obray's! The serpent-men use fell magics granted by their horrid religion to rob the memories from their captives and, once this interrogation is completed, enjoy transforming the replicated prisoner into horrible man-snake forms. The cursed victims are left to go mad in the pit.

The human-headed serpents wail if light shines into their cage. Pitiful, crazed whispers and mutterings spill from their mouths. The human-snakes cry, "Not



us. Not our bodies. Kill us. Save them” before descending into animalistic hissing and tail rattling, their minds finally snapped. If anyone enters the pit, they attack. The magically transmogrified creatures can be returned to their true forms with a *remove curse* with a spell check of 27+ or a *dispel magic* with a spell check of 32+. There may be alternate ways to return the transformed Shudfolk to their natural forms if the judge so desires.

Men-snakes (12): Init +1; Atk bite +1 melee (1d3); AC 15; HD 1d6; hp 4 each; MV 15'; Act 1d20; SP none; SV Fort +1, Ref +1, Will -2; AL N.

Area 1-10—Snake Cave: *A low-ceiling limestone cave is set into the hillside, its mouth leading back above ground. The cave floor is covered by a litter of sticks and leaves. Numerous scaly forms slither about the debris, forming a twisted skein of rattling serpents.*

A dozen rattlesnakes dwell in the cave, lured and compelled to remain here as guardians by the serpent-men. They attack any non-serpent-men entering the cave either from the outside or via the tunnel connecting to area 1-9.

Rattlesnakes (12): Init +3; Atk bite +3 melee (1d4 plus poison); AC 15; HD 1d6; hp 4 each; MV 15' or climb 15'; Act 1d20; SP poison (DC 10 Fort save; 1d6 Stamina on failure, 1 Stamina on success; this damage heals naturally), scent; SV Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +1; AL N.

EVENT FOUR: THE RITUAL



Hopefully the PCs will discover the serpent-men's plot and understand that at least Braar Obray and Chase Mashburn are not what they appear to be. If so, they may rightfully surmise that Trill and Nollie Mashburn are in danger and race back to the Mashburn's home to save mother and child. In the meanwhile, Braar Obray has deemed that the PCs' presence is too much a risk to delay the final stage of the serpent-men's infiltration of Holler Hollow. He, Chase, and a handful of other serpent-men drag Trill and Nollie to the former temple of the Sovereign to perform one last dreadful sacrifice to their scaly gods.

As the party heads toward the house, a piercing scream is heard from the Sovereign temple: the terrified cry of Trill Mashburn! The serpent-men are performing their final unholy rite and preparing to sacrifice baby Nollie to the Serpents of the Earth. Sibilant chanting and the shaking of rattles sounds from inside the white-washed building. PCs rushing inside or peering through the windows see the following:

The interior of the temple has been decorated in blasphemy. Gone are the trappings of the Sovereign faith, their absence replaced by the regalia of an older and fouler religion. Instead of the Unbroken Circle of the Sovereign hanging over the altar, a skeletal ouroboros, its bones stained rust-red with gore, is affixed to the back wall. Green, stinking candles burn pungently on the altar, now draped with the shed skin of a tremendous serpent. Smaller snakeskins and bare bones litter the church's floor.

Beside the altar is Trill Mashburn, her arms pinned behind her by the brawn of her husband, Chase. However, even in the smoky interior of the church, it is evident that Chase is no human spouse. His beard is half-sloughed off, revealing scales of yellow and green beneath, his true guise of abhorrent man/serpent hybrid. Trill wails in terror, struggling against her false husband's grip.

Standing at the altar, his scaly arm pinning the tiny form of Nollie to the serpent-skin covered surface, is Braar Obray. Like Chase, his human guise has slipped revealing the true ophidian form beneath. His other arm, covered with tattered human flesh, holds a dagger fashion from a tremendous serpent's fang aloft, ready to plunge it into the small body of his intended victim.

The nave of the church holds a handful of other beings that share snake and human features. Each is dressed in the simple garb of the Shudfolk. The congregation chants and shakes gourd rattles as the foul ritual reaches its crescendo.

Braar Obray, Serpent-man (1): Init +1; Atk bite +3 melee (1d4 plus poison) or dagger +3 melee (1d4); AC 12; HD 1d10+2; hp 10; MV 20; Act 1d20; SP poison (DC 14 Fort save; 1d6 Strength loss on failure, 1 Stamina on success; this damage heals naturally), illusion 1/day, hypnotic gaze (+6 to spell check, Will save to avoid or 1d4 hours charm), spit magical venom (30' range, caustic substance causes 1d8 damage the first round, 1d6 the second, and 1d4 the third; DC 12 Reflex save avoids), innate *snake charm* (+6 to spell check); SV Fort +2, Ref +1, Will +2; AL L.

Chase Mashburn, Serpent-man (1): Init +1; Atk bite +3 melee (1d4 plus poison); AC 12; HD 1d10+2; hp 12; MV 20; Act 1d20; SP poison (DC 14 Fort save; blinded on a failed save until magically healed), illusion 1/day, hypnotic gaze (+6 to spell check, Will save to avoid or 1d4 hours charm); SV Fort +2, Ref +1, Will +2; AL L.

Serpent-men (5): Init +1; Atk bite +3 melee (1d4 plus poison); AC 12; HD 1d10+2; hp 7 each; MV 20; Act 1d20; SP poison (DC 14 Fort save or additional 1d6 damage); SV Fort +2, Ref +1, Will +2; AL L.

Unless stopped or distracted, Braar Obray completes the sacrifice on the third round of combat, filling the temple with Trill's horrified screams. "Chase" kills his wife the following round unless he himself is stopped. Braar Obray and Chase then turn their attentions on the party, aiding their fellow serpent-men.

Optional: If the PC are demonstrating an easy time defeating the serpent-men and it hasn't been slain or trapped by a cave-in, the judge may decree that the Slithering Shadow (see area 1-7) is attracted by the rite and bursts through the church floorboards at a climactic moment. Everyone inside the temple must make a DC 8 Reflex check or be knocked prone. Anyone rolling a "1" falls into the hole, suffering 1d6 damage.

If the serpent-men are defeated and the corrupted temple is searched, a wooden chest is discovered underneath the altar. The chest contains the worldly riches once owned by the impersonated Shudfolk of the hollow. Inside is a mixture of silverware, personal jewelry, coins, and other household treasures worth 250 gp in total.

ENDING THE ADVENTURE



Although the final serpent-men ritual has no demonstrable supernatural effect, if it succeeds, the last of Holler Hollow's human residents are swiftly overcome by the divinely-inspired serpent-men infiltrators and the settlement falls utterly under their sinister dominance. Conversely, saving Trill and Nollie Mashburn, slaying Braar O Bray, and discovering the serpent-men fane under the mill causes the subterranean race to abandon their plans for Holler Hollow and to pursue their schemes elsewhere. After several years, the few remaining human residents rebuild and reclaim their community and life goes on as it always has in the Shudders.

If the bones of Pansy Roane are buried in the churchyard or otherwise properly interred, her spirit goes on to its final rest and all the PCs gain 1 point of Luck for restoring the proper balance between life and death.

Judges wishing to build upon the events of *Death Among the Pines* may do so in several ways. The PCs might wish to continue their crusade against the serpent-men, perhaps by leading a counter-raid into their subterranean home via the tunnel in area 1-7 or similar means. The PCs might also become sentinels against serpent-men infiltration into the surface world, investigating other small communities throughout the Shudders for signs of the serpents' sinister schemes. Lastly, the fate of Wade Roane has been left undetermined. He may still live, granted long life by the serpent-men's magical gifts, or be long dead, but with a horrific legacy left behind to trouble others. In any event, there never a lack for adventure in the Shudder Mountains or on the other worlds of Dungeon Crawl Classics!

APPENDIX A:

PANSY'S STORY

The judge should give the following handout to whomever becomes possessed by the ghost of Pansy Roane.

You are possessed. The ghost of Pansy Roane has taken control of you, using your body to pass on a desperate message to the living. Read the below in your best scary, ghostly, and/or disturbing voice and the judge will reward you with two points of Luck.

Breath. Breath. At long last, I have breath to speak. Breath to tell my tale and utter the secrets my husband wished hidden. Breath to declare his shame and his blasphemy. Breath to warn the living of a horror that lurks among them unnoticed.

Wade was a petty man, a cowardly man. He concerned himself more with what strangers thought of his fortunes than what I, his own wife, did. When the mill began to fail, Wade grew frantic, fearful he'd be seen as a failure by the people of Holler Hollow. That is what doomed him...and me.

Something met with Wade in the old caves under our lands. A creature from another, older time. A thing that should have crawled, yet walked like a man. That creature promised Wade a fortune in return for unspeakable service. My craven husband agreed all too readily, sealing the fate of both his wife and unborn child. He murdered me at the behest of that creature and sealed my bones in the root cellar's wall.

I watched from beyond the Pale Shroud as that creature and others like it built their unholy chapel beneath my home and called up foul things from the eternal night under the earth. They plot and scheme and dream of a time when they once again shall walk beneath the sun and moon and twist the minds of men to serve them. Their time is almost here...but my efforts to warn those who live in the Hollow have been in vain. Please, save me and save those who still live in the hollow.

Long have I awaited the day my bones would be found and the tale of my husband's crime told. Look for me behind the wall and lay my bones to rest in the churchyard.

Only when this is done and Holler Hollow is safe may I at long last sleep.

You are no longer possessed.

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