

Scrivener of Strange Worlds

A GAME DESIGNER'S NOTEBOOK

by Michael Curtis



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FOREWORD



he process of writing adventure modules produces many fragments of the imagination. Encounters that are too complex get simplified. Levels that take too long to complete get streamlined. Page counts and word count limits force writers to drop great ideas that just don't fit. And sometimes the brainstorming process generates terrific ideas that can't quite fit into the final adventure.

An experienced adventure writer has a lot of these fragments saved on his computer. And Michael Curtis is such an experienced writer. The book you hold in your hands is like an artist's sketchbook. It is a compilation of ideas, loosely organized, not quite polished, but interesting enough that the general public may enjoy reading them. What you will find here is "gameable" material for the most part, although not as thoroughly playtested as a published product. Some of these ideas may eventually appear again, more fine-tuned, in a future publication. For now, they are presented as-is, in the state that Michael left them when they fell by the wayside as he finalized other projects.

This work has not been edited. As noted, it is truly supposed to be a "writer's sketchbook." An artist sketching at a convention does so without the benefit (or hindrance) of an art director; here too, the writer works without an editor.

Gen Con 2016 marks our first publication of such an adventure writer's sketchbook. Let us know if you like it!

Joseph Goodman
July 2016

AN INTRODUCTION OR FIGHTING WORDS



his is a tome of echoes. A book filled with dusty artifacts, half-remembered dreams, and misunderstood declarations. It is a collection of almost-weres, could-have-beens, and one-day-might-bes. It's the literary equivalent of an abandoned house on the edge of town.

Writing is a solitary occupation. At best, it's you against the voices in your head, a bizarre mental one-ring circus where you're the lion-tamer surrounded by uncooperative man-eaters. You struggle to tame fickle language, fighting to make the words get in line and depict the pictures of your imagination. It's not the sort of job you can outsource, although many have tried.

In the process of writing anything, a lot of proverbial ink hits the page while you fight to make your visions come to life. Not all of that ink survives to the final draft though. Sometimes things get cut because the words lead you in unexpected directions or you find yourself hard pressed against your word count and something has to give. Other times projects implode before they reach completion, victims of forces outside of the writer's control. If you're lucky, that material lives on in other projects or expanded printings later on down the line. But that's a rare occurrence. All too often the cut words and abandoned projects scuttle off into the dark and dusty corners of your hard drive, turning feral and mean. It's best not to bother those wild sentences; you can lose a hand that way.

However, sometimes the opportunity arises to turn a bright light on those dark corners and to coax the wild words back into domestication. This is one of those chances, a break any writer would dangle his participles for. Joseph Goodman was kind enough to allow Harley Stroh and myself the occasion to throw open the shutters of our mental haunted houses and let the daylight in. Welcome and please step inside! Mind the cats, though, as they tend to bite.

This collection is comprised of material that either died on the operating table, was trimmed to make square pegs penetrate round holes, or sits patiently hoping to be born in a more comely form. It is flotsam and jetsam on the sea of creativity waiting to be salvaged by beachcombers. Maybe you'll find something pretty among the sea wrack.

Don't expect a lot of polish in the pages ahead. This stuff is ugly and raw, but there's beauty to be found in its wildness. If you're a fan of *Dungeon Crawl Classics*, *Metamorphosis Alpha*, or any old school roleplaying game, you'll find inspiration in between the covers of this book. And if you're a fan of my work (and if you're not, well thanks for buying this anyway), this is the closest you'll ever get to looking over my shoulder as I write. You're about to read things I never expected to share with anyone. I hope you still respect me when we're finished.

One last thing: You'll notice that "XX" turns up a lot in the following material. For those of you unfamiliar with the design process, that's a placeholder for a term, page number, or similar piece of information intended to be inserted later. I throw that in when I'm cooking along and don't want to lose momentum. I figure I'll get back to the manuscript later and put in the correct information. Usually, I do, but not in what you're about to read.

Michal Curtis
July 4th, 2016

For Mary, my starlight in darkness.



had a guinea pig when I was a kid. A couple of them, actually. When writing *The Android Underlords*, the first commercially-produced Metamorphosis Alpha adventure for the MA Kickstarter, I was casting around for unusual animals to mutate and place throughout the adventure. Many were loathsome, like the flatworm or the wetas, but the idea of a cute but potentially lethal guinea pig was too good to let slide. Unfortunately, word count prevented me from including it in the final draft. So, for your enjoyment, allow me to introduce the “chirper.” You can put him in your home game if you’d like. Please let me know if he kills anyone.

THE ANDROID UNDERLORDS FRAGMENT

Area 2-2—The Ductway: *Wisps of steam drift through a 3’ diameter grate in the wall here. Beyond the grate is a metal-lined tunnel that slopes down at a 45° angle. A pair of metal flanges, each with a small slot in their faces, keep the grate sealed.*

The flanges appear formidable, but time and neglect have taken their toll. Inflicting 4 points of damage on them or a PC rolling his Strength or less on 3d6 easily snaps them, allowing the grate to be removed.

The ductway beyond slopes steeply before leveling out, but PCs can prop themselves between the walls to avoid sliding. At the level portion, they discover the ductway has an occupant. Read the following:

The inclined tunnel levels allowing you to crawl freely now. A strange bubbling and purring noise sounds in the confines of the space. Ahead of you is a small, furry rodent creature. It gazes at you with bright eyes and it appears to be the source of the noise.

The rodent is a chirper, a mutant guinea pig. It appears identical to a long-haired specimen of unmutated stock. Although apparently harmless, it isn’t.

Chirper (NUA 1d10, AC 7, MV 6, HD 1)

Chirpers are identical to normal, long-haired guinea pigs and their ancestors originally hailed from the Warden’s medical and science labs. They have no physical attack, but possess the molecular disruption mutation and have a mental resistance of 15.

The chirper was crawling through the ducts of the Warden, purring happily, but not there’s someone blocking its path. A round after it encounters the PC, its purring turns to a low-pitched rumbling. The chirper doesn’t approach the PC, but the rumbling grows angrier each round for 1d6+1 rounds. Unless the PC pacifies the rodent, it uses its *molecular disruption* mutation at the end of this period.

The chirper likes sounds, especially music and singing. Any singing or other pleasing sounds made by the PC soothes the chirper, who changes its own noise to match the pitch of the PC’s noises. After a few moments, it purrs happily and moves to the side, allowing the PC to pass. Any irritating or obviously aggressive sounds made by the PC has a 25% chance of enraging the chirper and it immediately uses its *molecular disruption* ability.





Sometimes you get a great idea and start hammering away at it, working like the Devil to make it breathe and come to life on the page. You struggle and fight, and although you can see the solid ground off in the distance, you get bogged down in the morass of making the words work the way you want them too. That was the fate of *The Horrible Happenings in Huddle*. I had a grand vision of an adventure that mined ideas from Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space" and the tremendously-popular zombie fad, one that would work for both zero level PCs and adventurers with more experience under their belts. But although I knew where I wanted to go with it, I couldn't write a clear path there and other projects started demanding my attention. This one's been rotting on the discard pile ever since. I haven't given up on it entirely, however. One day, Goodman Games and the fans permitting, I might go back to Huddle and see if I can't find a way out of that bog.

One last note: You can tell this adventure predates the publishing of the rulebook. Look at the stat blocks and see if you can spot something that didn't make it to the final version of the rules!

THE HORRIBLE HAPPENINGS IN HUDDLE



The Horrible Happenings in Huddle is a *Dungeon Crawl Classics* adventure. Unlike other adventures that are intended for a specific party level, *The Horrible Happenings in Huddle* may be used with either zero-level PCs to begin a campaign or as a short scenario for 2nd level characters.

Background: Life thrives out in the cold hell of space: horrific, utterly alien life that is inscrutable to the minds that dwell on the worlds below. And unfortunately for those who live under those unforgiving skies, sometimes that life comes calling...

In a forgotten epoch of long ago, back when man wielded weapons of stone, not steel, tribes of men lived in what is now called the Menhir Hills. There, amongst the green, rolling hills, they erected cromlechs and standing stones to dimly-remembered gods and eked out a simple livelihood. One night, a star fell from the sky, a living meteorite that brought the Green Death from space. This emerald terror spread across the hills, infecting plants, animals, and men with equal ferocity. The tribesmen were unable to stop the greenery's horrible advance and would have perished completely had their primitive gods not intervened.

Just as all seemed lost, a vision came upon the tribal shaman and he led the last remnants of the tribe to a strange cave in the hills. There, the tribe gathered a slick, blue stone that glimmered in the darkness. Chipping away at the stone, they formed spearheads and esoteric idols that they bore into battle against the Green Death. The weird stone had power and the alien invader was defeated. Atop the rocky hill where the shaman had his vision, the tribe erected standing stones and interred in a secret chamber beneath the hill the knowledge of how to defeat this evil if it should ever come again.

The tribe is long gone, but their stones and secrets remain. And now, like the changing of unknowable alien seasons, the green evil from the stars has come again, falling just

outside the quiet village of Huddle that now stands in the shadow of the Menhir Hills. Can the Green Death be defeated once again or will it finally succeed in what it once tried long, long ago?

THE VILLAGE OF HUDDLE

The action of this adventure occurs directly in and around the tiny hamlet of Huddle. The PCs have spent their entire lives here and are familiar with the surroundings. The information provided in the section is known to them and can be recalled without the need to make Intelligence checks.

Huddle is well-named, being a meager collection of wattle-and-daub buildings perched closely alongside a rutted and often muddy track that leads to more interesting places. The village sits in the bowl of a flat land surrounded by the grassy, rolling Menhir Hills. Most residents are either farmers or goatherds, but a few practice skilled trades. Huddle has a population of just under a hundred and consists of twenty homes, a small temple, and a common barn that doubles as lodging for weary travelers. A small ill-trained group of twenty volunteer militiamen keep the village safe from wolf packs and the occasional roaming monster.

STARTING THE ADVENTURE

All your days you've lived in Huddle, an inconsequential hamlet in the hills regions of the kingdom. Life is dull here and there is little to do but mind the goats the town is known for and till the surrounding fields that yield more stones than grain. Your mind-numbing routine is only occasionally broken by adventurers passing through the village en route to exciting exploits and tantalizingly foreign towns: things and places you'll never see no matter how much you daydream while watching the herd or tilling the fields.

Last night, for the first time in years, something exciting happened in Huddle. A fierce storm struck the town, bringing thun-

der that sent the livestock cowering in their pens and sending winds that tore the sod roofs from some of the more ramshackle buildings. At the height of the tempest, Grandpa Thelamus, the oldest, wisest, and most respected villager, went from house to house collecting the hamlet's militia men. There was much whispering amongst the throng before they headed out into the lashing rain, grumbling about some fool's errand.

The storm ended at dawn, but as sun's cold gray light struggled against the lingering clouds, there was no sign of the militia men. It was as if the storm swallowed them up. The village elders have called the oldest of the Huddle's young men and women together this morning.

Encounter 1—The Fields: *The western fields of Huddle bear the wounds of last night's storm. The waist-high corn is whipped into frantic, wind-blown designs or pasted flat to the muddy ground by the torrential rain. Despite the damage, the tempest seemed to invigorate the growing crops. Vibrant emerald striations thread through the fields where the corn is now flourishing from the rain.*

As the PCs ventured further into the fields, they see what appears to be some of the missing militiamen standing in a motionless group closer to the lake. They turn towards the party is hailed, but do not reply or move. If the party approaches, read the following:

Ten of your fellow villagers watch as you approach. They seemed to have had a tiring night and their lethargy emanates from them in an almost palpable aura. Their faces and clothes are all wet, muddy, and scratched. The hands that hold their weapons bear angry-looking welts. Despite their apparent exhaustion, their eyes hold a vibrant gleam.

These poor souls have been infected by the Wormwood and are under its control. They attempt to allay any of the PCs suspicions (explaining their sluggishness as exhaustion and their scratches and welt the product of stumbling around in the undergrowth at night). Their goal is to infect more of the village, and they try to split the party into smaller groups to better overwhelm them. Their aim is to create at least one group where the infected outnumber the PCs by two-to-one. If they are able to do so, the characters in that group must make a Fort save (DC 12) or become infected. Pass their player(s) a note informing them of their new status. The newly infected PCs rejoin the party just before **Encounter 2** occurs.

Infected Villagers (10): Init -1; Atk club +1 melee (dmg 1d4) or thorn +2 ranged (dmg special); AC 12; HD 1d6; HP 4; MV 30'; Act 1; SP infection; SV Fort +1, Ref +1, Will +3; AL C; XP XXX.

These former normal residents are under the domination of the Wormwood and do its bidding unquestionably. They exist to infect others or destroy the enemies of their alien master. Twice a day they can spit a thorn-like projectile coated with alien sap. A successful hit by this dart requires the target to make a Fort save (DC 12) or suffer

the effects of the projectile. The sap can produce one of two effects:

Domination: The target falls under the sway of the Wormwood as if subject to a *charm person* with a spell check of 18. The target becomes lethargic, suffering a -1 penalty to initiative rolls, and their blood takes on a viscous, sap-like consistency. After an hour, the victim gains the ability to produce and spit thorns of its own.

Rage: The target becomes enraged gaining a +2 bonus to Str and an additional 1d6 hit points. He mindlessly attempts to kill any creature not under the control of the Wormwood and attacks until killed. Enraged victims cannot produce thorns.

Infection

Having the outnumbered PCs make a Fort save to determine if they get infected by the militiamen is meant to both speed up game play and to keep the rest of the players in the dark about what's going on in Huddle for as long as possible. In effect, it's not much different from having a PC make a saving throw against an undetected trap. Nevertheless, some groups may balk at this shortcut and consider it cheating on the behalf of the judge. If you suspect your group might take this attitude, you might allow the PCs a +2 bonus to their save if they state their suspicious of the infected villagers and are keeping a close eye on them, or you can simply play out the combat as normal. If possible, you should take the soon-to-be attacked PCs aside and run the encounter out of earshot of the rest of the group to maintain the mystery.

Encounter 2—The Muddy Lake: *The normally clear blue lake that serves the village's crops, livestock, and inhabitants is now a murky pond. The rains have turned the water muddy and scraps of wind-blown vegetation bob gently on its surface in the morning air. The winds must have been especially fierce here in the night because the plants along the lake's eastern shore are embedded deep in the muddy, churned up ground as if pressed down by a titanic foot.*

The disturbed shoreline is the result of the Wormwood slouching out of the lake to send out its tendrils, not the windstorms of last night. The muddy ground bears the footprints of the militiamen who came to investigate the glow and were infected. An Intelligence check (DC 12) reveals that the footprints' pattern shows signs of a struggle (at the judge's discretion, backgrounds such as hunter or trapper enjoy a +2 bonus to their check). If any of the infected militiamen are with the group and are asked about the struggle, they claim to not have been amongst the searchers who investigated the lake and have no idea what happened here.

Encounter 3—Green Hell: Run this encounter after the PCs have had a chance to explore the fields and lake west of town and encountered the infected militiamen. As soon

as they are wrapping up their explorations or decide to look elsewhere, read the following:

The early morning air is shattered by a high-pitched, terrified scream! Turning your heads in the direction it came from, your eyes alight on the village to see distant forms struggling in the muddy streets. Something is attacking Huddle!

Any character who specifically says they're looking about them notices that the emerald green striations the noted in the fields earlier have gotten larger and now reach as far as the village itself. PCs who do not take the time to look around them are allowed an Intelligence check (DC 9 for PCs with outdoors backgrounds; 13 for all others) to notice the same.

Chaos greets you as you reach the outskirts of the hamlet. The rest of the missing militiamen have come home and turned on their neighbors! Two of the no-longer missing men are tearing the village midwife apart like a wishbone, while more are holding strangely passive residents in an intimate, yet obscenely alien embrace. Even more astounding is that the vegetation of the village has sprung to unseemly life: a small boy is held in the thorny grasp of roses growing in a window box while a trio of goats beat in terror, their legs entangled by the now-lashing grass growing atop a sod-roofed home.

If they haven't made their move yet, the infected militiamen and PCs in the party now attack, attempting to either infect or kill their unsuspecting comrades (50/50 chance). Conduct that combat as normal.

After their infected party members have been dealt with, the PCs may attempt to rescue their fellow villagers. Huddle is in the grip of the Wormwood and the judge should paint as grisly a picture as possible. Everywhere the PCs look, they see the strangely vibrant eyes of their now lethargic neighbors boring into them. Horrible screams are heard from inside houses and the entire hamlet's vegetation is now aggressive, lashing at bystanders with thorny vines, grasping tendrils, or sap-smeared leaves. The PCs are free to remain in the village as long as they wish, but each round the number of enemies opposing them grows.

Encounter 4A—In Gods We Trust: The village's meager temple may look promising to the threatened PCs, but it quickly becomes a death-trap. Should they decide to seek shelter behind its stone walls, use the following encounter. It may also be adapted if the party holes up in another building, but there are no clues and the infected get in much quicker.

Encounter 4B—Run for the Hill!: The PCs must flee Huddle if they are to survive. If they attempt to go in any direction but Bald Hill, read the following:

You've never noticed how much plant life grows around Huddle until this moment. The vibrant emerald growth you detected earlier is now apparent everywhere. The corn fields writhe with unnatural motion and the heather-clad hills that once seemed like old friends are piles of green death alive with snapping brush and undulating grasses. From the underbrush come the plaintive cries of dying animals caught in the grasp of malicious plants. In a world of angry greenery, you're eyes are drawn upward to the rocky, weathered slopes of Bald Hill. That knoll and the ancient stones that stand atop it are an island of gray in the deadly sea of emerald that surrounds you.

Should the PCs insist on attempting to flee the village, they continue to encounter plants, animals, and villagers infected by the Wormwood. Keep inflicting encounters with the following until they either head for Bald Hill or perish.

Infected Villagers (1d6): Init -1; Atk club +1 melee (dmg 1d4) or thorn +2 ranged (dmg special); AC 12; HD 1d6; HP 4; MV 30'; Act 1; SP infection; SV Fort +1, Ref +1, Will +3; AL C; XP XXX.

Additional Ideas

There is a chamber beneath the Menhir Hill that contains a destroyed specimen of wormwood and the clues to using the salt against it.

When leached out, the sentient sap writhes and twitches before being absorbed by the salt crystal, which turns them black.



I ran an adventure called "A Night on the Town" at conventions for a couple of years. It was a city-based adventure that began as my homage to the film, "The Warriors." The PCs found themselves inside the city of Oolvanvar during the one night each year when the un-dead walk the streets. The party has to survive until dawn when the necromantic energy fades and the living once again rule the city.

"A Night on the Town" was a complete sandbox: the PCs could try anything to stay alive. I ran most sessions on the fly, coming up with encounters and interesting happenings off the top of my head, influenced by what the party chose to do. However, to be safe, I wrote down a couple of pre-planned events to pull out if things started to drag or I got judge's block. Since "A Night on the Town" can never be commercially sold (short of finding a way to clone me and include a copy of me with every module), this is probably the only time you'll see these encounters in print. Steal them, riff off them, or just enjoy them as stray high weirdness from my brain.

A NIGHT ON THE TOWN

OOLVANVAR STREET EVENTS

Event 1 - Fiery Troubles: *The gloom of this moonless night is broken by the sight of flames ahead. A four-story tenement, home to some of Oolvanvar's hard-toiling citizens is burning. Flames leap from the upper floor windows and the street is shrouded in roiling black smoke. Screams of terror and panicked cries for help sound from the windows as residents try to escape a fiery death. A young woman, her face streaked with soot, grips a wailing child in her arms as she leans from a third story window. "Help us! For all the gods' sakes, help us!" she begs, staring down at you with stark fear in her eyes.*

PCs wishing to help the trapped woman and child must dare the burning building, racing up rickety tenement stairs already alight. The heat inflicts 1d6 damage, but a DC 10 Reflex save reduces that by half. Each PC proceeding deeper into the building must make a Luck check. A failed check results in a hazard that potentially inflicts 1d8 damage (a burning beam fall on them, the floor gives way, dropping them into the floor below which is also on fire, smoke inhalation, etc.). The PCs have 10 rounds to save the woman and child. Otherwise, they perish.

Event 2—The Sopping Dead: *Your flight through the darkened streets has brought you closer to the River Oolvan, and the smell of mud, rotting fish, and refuse grows stronger the further you proceed down the cobblestone lane. Faintly, you hear the soft creaking of ships at dock and the groaning of the stout lines that tether them to their mooring places. But another noise sounds in the night around you: the slow, steady plodding of wet boots...*

A group of Waterlogged Dead is stalking the PCs, closing in from them from all sides. A DC 10 Intelligence check spots three separate groups of figures approaching the party from the gloom. The drowned zombies attempt to corral the party together. Flight back the way the group came results in an encounter with three more zombies approaching from behind.

Waterlogged Dead (12; 4 groups of 3): Init -2; Atk bite +3

melee (dmg 1d4) or rusted sword +2 (dmg 1d6); AC 9; HD 3d6; HP 25, 21, 19, 16; MV 20'; Act 1d20; SP un-dead, take ½ damage from fire attacks; SV Fort +4, Ref -2, Will +2; ALC

If the party stands and fights, allow them to make another DC 10 Intelligence check. A success notices one of the city's many sewer covers in the street nearby. These 3' diameter stone slabs have notches in their covers, allowing them to be pried open with crowbars. A DC 8 Strength check can lift one from above.

Unfortunately, another group of three Waterlogged Dead is approaching the party from beneath them, slinking through the sewers. If the sewer entrance remains unnoticed or ignored, the cover grinds open 1d3 rounds after the fight begins and the three subterranean dead emerge at a rate of 1 per round. They suffer a -5 penalty to initiative rolls due to the climb and having to stand up before attacking.

The Waterlogged Dead work in concert whenever possible. Two attempt to grapple a victim, allowing the third to score an automatic hit on a held opponent. If two zombies grapple a victim, they enjoy a +4 bonus to the zombies' roll to maintain the grapple. Otherwise, the opposed roll is unmodified.

Event 3—The Myth Is Real, Let's Eat: *The sewers of the city are stinking, dark, and filled with liquids best left unexamined by the flickering light you carry, but perhaps these maze of tunnels beneath the streets offers more protection on this night than walking abroad in the open air. By your best estimates, you're moving closer to your goal, but how much longer you must endure the fetid sluiceways remains a mystery. It appears you won't arrive there dry, however. Before you is a four-way meeting of the sewer tunnels. The smaller channel you've been following meets a 20' wide passage, ending abruptly at a narrow ledge overlooking dark, noisome waters of indeterminate depth. The wide tunnel runs off to the east and west as far as you can*

see in the limited light and a narrower passage stands on the far side of the river of waste.

Of course there's an alligator.

Albino Sewer Gator (1): Init -3; Atk bite +5 melee (dmg 3d4); AC 17; HD 3d6; HP 16; MV 30' or swim 40'; Act 1d20; SP camouflage; SV Fort +2, Ref -2, Will -2; AL N

The great beast lurks beneath the waters and attacks any creature entering them or tarrying too close to the edge of the ledge. The gator enjoys a +10 bonus to attempts to remain undetected and surprise opponents (opposed INT vs. d20+10 roll for gator's stealth).

Event 4—The Howling Cultists: *The dead quiet of the night is interrupted by a growing din of human voices howling in the distance. The sound of pounding feet on the cobbles is heard ahead of you and the volume grows louder. Whatever is causing this row is headed your way.*

The sound heralds the approach of a group of lay cultists dedicated to the lords of deaths. On Dead Night, the cult takes to the streets to kill any they find, confident their devotion will protect them from the predations of the rampant undead. The mob is under the effects of both religious fervor and sacramental substances that produce a state of frenzy.

From around the corner comes a large mob of screaming people. The faces of this howling mass are discolored by ashes, turning their visages into crude painted skulls. Tattered garments likewise streaked with cinders flutter about their bodies and each member of the mob carries a cudgel, sickle, or a jagged human femur as an improvised club. The crowd rushes along the street headed in your direction.

Cultist Mob (1): Init -2; Atk improvised weapon +2 melee (dmg 1d4); AC 10; HD 20d4; HP 44; MV 30'; Act 1d20; SP attack all targets in a 20'×20' space; SV Fort -1, Ref -2, Will -1; AL C

The mob overwhelms small groups, attacking all targets within a 20' square area. Half-mad with religious fervor, substantial casualties (loss of 50% or more hit points) cause the mob to break off, fleeing into the night in search of easier sacrifices.

If the party attempts to hide from the mob, the crowd has a -3 penalty to its Intelligence check to notice the adventurers.

Event 5—Eyes of the Gods: *A quick flash of motion on the periphery of your vision startles you. At the mouth of a narrow alley, perched atop a half-broken crate, sits a cat, the first living creature you've seen in some time now. The black feline regards you impassively with golden eyes, seeming interested in your presence, and displaying no sense of fear.*

The cat is a normal alley cat, albeit slightly better fed and groomed than its raggedy counterparts. It has an AC of 9 and 2 hit points. However, on this night, many cats are the agents of the gods, providing guidance and protection against the dead. A successful DC 10 Intelligence check (DC 5 for clerics) allows a PC to recall that in some religions, cats are holy guides and observers of the divine. If attacked and killed, any PC participating in the assault loses 1d4 points of Luck, which cannot be regained by thieves and halflings as part of their class ability.

If the group makes overtures of friendship to the cat, it hops down from its perch and approaches them, winding its way between the party's legs before taking position at the group's vanguard. The cat then looks back at the group before slowly moving down the street in the direction they are headed. Should the group follow, the cat leads them safely to the next district. Any random encounters that occur during their travels through the current district are negated. The group still encounters the wandering threat, but the cat screeches and hisses at the monsters appearing, causing the creatures to flee back into the night. Once the group reaches the next city section, the cat turns to regard them one last time before vanishing down a convenient alleyway, sewer grate, or gap in a fence as appropriate. The party is once again left to their own devices.

Event 6—The Wrath of Beef: *A ramshackle building to your (left/right) displays a hanging placard above its shuttered door. The sign depicts a grinning cow with the words "Emphir's Meats" inscribed around the smiling bovine. From within the sealed building, you hear the sound of low, yet somehow unsettling mooing. A moment later, the building's front door splinters and cracks, as if struck forcefully by a great hoof within and the mooing grows louder and more enraged!*

Decades of the agonies of slaughtered steers and their spilled blood have been given a frightening semblance of life on this night, producing an undead abomination comprised of horns, hoofs, rotting meat, and congealed blood. The PCs have one round to act before this unholy menace bursts through the door and stumbles unsteadily out onto the street. It chooses them as the first target of its rage.



A few years ago (OK, let's be honest: several years ago), when I was just starting out as a professional game designer and was willing to work really cheap, I was approached to contribute to a megadungeon that would be parceled out with a line of old school miniatures. Each box would contain monster minis plus a write-up of a single dungeon level that used those miniatures in its encounters. The project ultimately went nowhere and my manuscript vanished into the Black Hole of Failed RPG Projects – until now. Here's a couple of my more fiendish rooms from the Dark Labyrinth level. They make more sense if you know that "Ormasha" was an ogre mage that dwelled on the level and he had a rod of containment, a magic item that would shrink and encapsulate monsters inside small magical eggs. Ormasha would carry these eggs with him, hurling them at intruders to unleash the monster therein.

THE DARK LABYRINTH

AN OLD SCHOOL DUNGEON LEVEL

Room #4—Blood Light: A grim-looking pillar stands in the center of this chamber, its surface adorned with carvings of leering demonic faces. One such face's mouth is a hollow cavity leading into the center of the pillar. Anyone reaching into this space finds a spiked metal ball at its center. Gripping the ball slashes the PC's hand, the drops of blood accumulating in his palm. Each round the PC grips the spiked sphere, he loses a single hit point, but discovers that his shed blood is crystallizing into crimson crystals that produce a hellish glow similar to a *light* spell. For each hit point lost, the blood glows for one hour.

Any hit points sacrificed to produce this blood light are deducted from the character's total until the illumination's duration has ended or the PC loses all his remaining hit points. No amount of healing, magical or otherwise, will restore the sacrificed health. If the PC's hit point total is reduced to zero or less, the blood light is immediately extinguished and the character regains the number of hit points sacrificed to produce the light. Of course, this might suddenly leave the party unable to see and in the middle of combat...

Room #7—Jelly Trap: The stone doors in this room are heavy and inflict a -2 penalty to any Open Doors rolls. Six-inch iron rods extend from the walls, floor, and ceiling of this chamber at 10' intervals. The ceiling possesses a decorative pattern of pebbled, egg-shaped protrusions. The room is otherwise empty.

As each PC crosses the chamber there is a standard 2 in 6 chance that they trigger this room's trap, causing two of the decorative "eggs" to crash to the floor, releasing *contained* ochre jellies. These creatures awake from their magical stasis ravenous. The round after the jellies are released and each round thereafter, a bolt of electricity randomly arcs from one iron rod to another, electrocuting anyone standing within a 5' radius of it. Roll a d6 to determine what 10' square section of floor is affected: 1- SW portion of the room; 2-SE portion; 3-W portion; 4-E portion; 5-NW portion; 6) NE portion.

This bolt inflicts 2d6 points of damage (save vs. spells for half) and causes any jelly in its area of effect to divide in

two. The blasts continue until all living creatures have fled the area or are slain. The Labyrinth Lord should remember to check to see if the trap activates each time the party passes through the room. Although the ochre jellies will only be released once, the electric effect persists.

Room #11—Flooded Room: The sound of trickling water echoes down the corridors approaching this room. Inside, a cracked fountain spills filthy water across the floor, flooding the room to seemingly ankle-depth. The fountain is in the shape of the Demon Idol and is made of the same matte black stone as the labyrinth.

The water conceals two 20' deep open pits and anyone carelessly approaching either trapped exit of the chamber plunges suddenly into water above their heads. Metal-clad adventurers sink to the bottom of the pit and must make a CON check each round to stay conscious. This difficulty of this check increased by 1 each round after the first. A failed check indicates the PC has fallen unconscious and drowns three rounds later.

If Ormasha is lurking close by when the PC reach this area, he waits until a party member plunges into a pit. He'll then blast the party with his cone of cold, inflicting damage upon any caught in the cone and quick freezing the room's water. Unarmored or leather-clad PCs who have fallen into a pit become entrapped in the surface ice and must make a STR check at a +2 negative modifier to escape. Metal-armored PCs are trapped beneath the ice layer and risk drowning as above. Two STR checks at a +3 penalty are required for them to break through the ice.

The ogre mage follows up this attack by throwing either a pair of *contained* trolls or an ochre jelly into the room before retreating. All bipedal creatures fighting or moving on the icy floor must make a DEX check each round to stay on their feet. Treat the trolls as if they had a DEX of 12 for this purpose.

At the bottom of one pit are the remains of a drowned fighter. Amongst his rusted possessions are a *sword* +1, +3 vs. *undead*, a gold ring (60 gp value), and a *potion of treasure finding*.



This adventure was originally intended for *Tales from the Shudder Mountains* Vol. 2 (which will come out someday). I was looking to write an adventure that was less fighting and more thinking, a good old murder mystery in the mountains that featured ghosts, a possibly cursed swimming hole, and a bunch of people with something to hide. I plunged into the Swimmin' Hole a few times, but I never could find the bottom of it and solid rock to stand on. Eventually, the hole went dry and I moved on to another tale. But, like the ghost in this adventure, not every part of the story rested easy. Pick up a copy of DCC #83.2 *Death Among the Pines* to see who and what lived on in another form.

THE OL' SWIMMIN' HOLE

The Ol' Swimmin' Hole is a Dungeon Crawl Classics RPG adventure suitable for any number of PCs of any level. It can be played through in a single session. During the course of the adventure, the party encounters tales of a cursed lake outside of a small Shudfolk hamlet and are drawn into solving the mystery behind an unnatural number of deaths that occurred there recently. If they are successful, they uncover the truth behind a tragic death, but if they aren't careful, the adventurers might join the ranks of the drowned.

BACKGROUND

Pru Covell wasn't the most beautiful girl in Hoot Owl Hollow (that'd be Pansy Roane), but she sure was a pretty one, with eyes the color of cornflowers and hair like glowing coals. There was a freshness and innocence to Pru that even the hardscrabble life of the Shudders couldn't dim. Unfortunately for Pru, that same innocence caught the eye of Sanders Ramitt.

Sanders was the son of Braar Ramitt, Hoot Owl Hollow's priest, and too handsome for his own good. Sanders had cut a swath through the young ladies of Hoot Owl Hollow and Husk, discarding one as soon as another sweet young thing crossed his path. The more worldly Shudfolk girls new of Sanders' reputation, but Pru knew nothing of his snake-in-the-grass ways and fell victim to his honeyed tongue and green eyes. She might have been just another one of his conquests if Sanders hadn't kindled a baby in her belly.

When Pru learned of her condition, she revealed the truth to Sanders at the site of their trysts, the old flooded quarry and swimming hole outside of the hamlet. Sanders, cad that he was, refused accept his responsibility and accused Pru of knowing other boys. Pru grabbed at his arm, overwhelmed by the betrayal of her emotions. Sanders, seeing his carefree bachelorhood vanished before him, pushed Pru—hard. She stumbled, fell, and dashed her brains out on the rocks below. Sanders fled the scene and convince his best friend, Bode Scruggs, to provide an alibi for him. Pru's body was found the next morning and her death was concluded as an accidental fall while visiting the swimming hole for a midnight dip.

A year has passed since that tragic day and Sanders has escape any repercussions for his crime of passion. On the anniversary of her death, Pru's spirit returned to the sight of her murder and now haunts the waters of the swimming hole. Her ghost, angry and blinded by her hate, has caused the drownings of three innocent inhabitants of Hoot Owl Hollow, and the locals now believe old quarry is cursed. When the PCs arrive in the hollow, they soon hear stories about the recent deaths and rumors of witchcraft and undiscovered treasure around the swimming hole. Digging deeper into these rumors draws them into realm of the supernatural and an unpunished crime...

STARTING THE ADVENTURE

The Ol' Swimmin' Hole is set in Hoot Owl Hollow by default, but can easily be relocated to any small Shudfolk community. The adventure works best if the PCs are visitors to the place rather than inhabitants as most of the scenario involves investigation and uncovering old secrets—information the PCs might already be privy to if they lived in the Hollow. *The Ol' Swimmin' Hole* should take place during the hot months of summer to add emphasis on the locals' desire to cleanse the only swimming spot of whatever trouble in plaguing it.

The adventure begins with the PCs arriving in Hoot Owl Hollow. The summer night is growing dark as the sun begins to drop behind the mountains. Luckily, the party spots the glowing windows of a handful of cabins scattered ahead on the roadside. With some good manners, they know they can easily find a good meal and a place to bed down for the night.

The "town center" of Hoot Owl Hollow consists of five ramshackle buildings erected close to one another on either side of the dirt road that passes through the area. These buildings are a general store ("Red's Sundries"), a blacksmith's shop, the local church of the Sovereign,

Good Folks and Good Conversation

- There is a flooded rocky dell in the hills that the locals have used as a swimming hole for as long as anyone can remember. It's a popular meeting place for youngsters out courting and the blessed relief from the sum-

mer's heat. Almost everyone in the Hollow has gone out there.

- Three people have drowned in the swimming hole in the last month. Poor Axle Weaver drowned first but he always had a taste for corn liquor and everyone assumed he went swimming with a gut full of mountain dew. But then Vel Mawks drowned the next week and little Clay Shook was founded floating there just three days ago.
- Most people think the swimming hole has "gone bad." Maybe a witch put a curse on it!
- Legend has it that some robbers, pursued by a posse hellbent on hanging them, threw their ill-gotten gold into the deep waters of the swimming hole to avoid being caught. People have tried to find that treasure for more than a hundred years, but the waters too deep for anyone to swim to the bottom. In fact, some say the swimming hole has no bottom!

THE SWIMMIN' HOLE

The locals provide directions up to the swimming hole if asked. Just north of the general store is a trail that leads up into the hills surrounding the hollow. Shady trees grow close to the winding path and it seems almost abnormally level. Should a PC dig down in the dirt a bit, they discover ancient paving stones below, hinting this path was once a much larger road built by skilled engineers.

A half-hour's trip into the hills ends in a rocky cul-de-sac. Three high, smooth walls of granite rise up 40', enclosing a roughly square-shaped lake. The trail ends at the fourth side of the square when a rocky ledge overlooks both the blue waters of the lake and a narrow shore of broken blocks of stone. An old pine tree extends out at an angle from the ledge, protruding over the still waters of the swimming hole. A length of thick rope tied to the tree creates a simple rope swing.

Any PC experienced with stonework readily identified this an old quarry and can see where blocks of stone were cut from the rocky cliff walls. Other PCs reach the same conclusion with a DC 12 Intelligence check. Any dwarves experience the strange sensation their race feels whenever near one of the old Hsaal excavations, as it was indeed this long-vanished race that quarried this stone and built the old roadway leading here.

If a PC searches the area around the ledge, a DC 14 Intelligence check (elves gain the benefit of their heightened senses) uncovers a crude heart carved into the bark of an oak tree. Within the boundaries of the heart is the inscription "S + P". Pru carved this declaration of love.

Pru's Ghost: Init +2; Atk special (illusion); AC 10; HD 8, HP 56; MV swim 40'; Act 1d20; SP un-dead traits, immune to non-magical weapons; SV Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +6; AL C.

THE RESIDENTS OF HOOT OWL HOLLOW

Like most Shudfolk communities, Hoot Owl Hollow is a small one. Barely XX people live in the hollow and most of the families are at least distantly related. The following NPCs are important to this scenario and the PCs are likely to interact with them as they seek the truth to the haunting's mystery. If the judge wishes to prolong this adventure or to further obfuscate the truth, he can introduce additional residents to serve as red herrings or to provide new clues for the party to pursue.

NPCs with information pertaining to Pru's death are provided with Investigation Points, a bullet-point list of particular information they possess and how they might respond to questioning by the party.

Pansy Roane

Pansy lives on her family's farm a mile from the town center. Although just 16, Pansy is an experienced young woman and possesses both the haughty attitude and sense of self-entitlement that only great beauty can impart on a girl. Her father, well-versed in chasing off boy callers from his land, is bound to greet the PCs with suspicion and only allows them to talk with Pansy with him present. Although Pansy is a red herring, the adventurers might find her father suspicious.

Investigation Points

- Pansy knew of Sander's involvement with Pru, but she (nor anyone else) is not aware she was pregnant with his child when she died.
- She knows Sander's reputation as a lady killer and prides herself on never falling victim to his shallow flattery. Pansy half-harbors the notion that she might make him her husband once he sows all his oats. Just think of how gorgeous their babies would be! (Pansy's father appears less than pleased at this notion).
- Pansy knows Sanders and Bode are best friends. In fact, she thinks Sanders might have help Bode purchase the land he's now farming. What a good friend!

Pru's Illusions

Pru's ghost uses its ability to alter the perceptions of anyone in the swimming hole's waters or on its banks to avenge itself. These hallucinations appear very real to the victim and they can die from shock and fright just as easily as if they were real events. The victim is then found floating in the swimming hole and believed drowned. This is what truly killed the previous three victims.

- 1) The PC appears to step or swim into a mass of water moccasins that angrily bite the trespasser.
- 2) The waters of the swimming hole begin to spin like a whirlpool, forming a maelstrom in its center. From the heart of the funnel comes the stink of brimstone, the glow of hellfire, and the shrieks of the damned. The current drags the victim(s) toward this tunnel into hell.

Bodean "Bode" Mashburn

Bode owns a big patch of land southeast of the town center. His home appears of realitively new construction (less than a year) and there are only the beginnings of a fieldstone wall around the fields. Anyone with farm experience easily recognizes this as a sign of a new farmstead. Bode is likely clearing stones from his plot to add to the wall or lounging on his front porch after a long day's work when the PCs visit him.

Bode is coldly polite to non-Shudfolk until they show some manners, but is genial and welcoming to Shudfolk adventurers, inviting them to pull up a chair and sit a spell with him. Like most farmers, Bode is prone to discussing the weather and his hoped-for seasonal harvest. He's very proud of his farm and gushes about all the hard work he's put into it since he bought the land.

Investigation Points

- Bode got the money to purchase the land from Sanders as a reward for providing him an alibi and as "hush money." He still feels guilt over this and it wars with the pride he has of his farm and the hard work he's put into it.
- Bode repeats the story he told a year ago: Sanders and he were out frog gigging the night Pru had her accident. They spent the entire evening in the creeks out on the east side of the Hollow and came home tired, wet, with only a few "croakers" to show for it. They didn't hear the news of Pru's death until the following night, having spent most of the day sleeping.
- He tries to change the subject if any supernatural causes are attributed to the drownings. Bode is terrified by supernatural events of any type, but the idea that Pru's ghost is haunting the swimming hole terrifies him. A DC 10 Intelligence check notices he goes ashen if this topic is raised. If questioned, he explains that "ghosties and haints scare me fierce. My mother told me hair-raisers when I was a boy that still keep me up."

Getting Bode to Crack

Bode is the key to getting to the truth of Pru's death and exorcising her spirit. Although magic might be used to make Bode tell what he knows, doing so could backfire on the party (see sidebar). A better way to break him down is to scare him into revealing the truth.

One way is to scare him is to bring him to the swimming hole and force him to confront Pru's ghost (see below).

Sanders and Braar Ramitt

Sanders and his father, the hollow's Sovereign priest, live in a clapboard house located behind the church. The construction of the home and its gleaming whitewash indicate the priest and his son are comparatively much better-off than their neighbors. Braar Ramitt conduces morning services each day and a second twilight service on the last day of the week. During that time, both the priest and his son can be found at the church. At other times, Braar Ramitt is 50% likely to be visiting parishioners around the hollow. Sanders is home most of the day, but goes out in the evenings with

friends and lovers.

The Ramitts have three large hounds that are fiercely loyal to their masters; anyone threatening violence to either Braar or Sanders will be attacked by the hounds with the need for a command to be given.

Sanders is a nineteen, handsome, and cocky in a way only looks and youth can explain. A psychopath, Sanders is egotistical and self-centered, believing him to be better than his neighbors. He is incapable of emotional connections, but canny enough to manipulate the emotions of others to his advantage.

Investigation Points

- Sanders doesn't admit to knowing Pru unless presented with evidence otherwise (such as revealing that Pansy told the party he and Pru were lovers).
- He states that Pru and he stopped seeing each other a few nights before she died when he told her he wasn't interested in continuing their relationship. Maybe she became distraught and killed herself. A DC 10 Intelligence check reveals he shows no emotion at this thought.
- If questioned about his whereabouts the night Pru died, he sticks to his alibi. He's told that story enough times that he displays no signs of falsehood when repeating it.

[Author's Note: The following lines (I believe) were intended to be part of a song that would be sometimes heard on the night breeze, acting as a clue to Pru's fate. They were never developed past this point.]

The waters are cold and dark, my love.
Come swim them with me
The rocks are hard and sharp, my dear.

Compulsions & Confessions

The PCs might very well resort to magic to get Bode to reveal the truth of Sanders whereabouts on the night Pru died. A successful *charm person* spell, for example, results in a cooperative witness for the prosecution and would seem to make bringing Sanders to justice a simple matter. However, the judge should remember the Shudfolk's prejudice against magic and those who use it.

If the PCs present an obviously *charmed* witness or otherwise even hint that magic is used to compel a confession, they are greeted with overwhelming suspicion and barely-concealed hostility. After all, who's to say the adventurers aren't forcing the witness to falsely confess in order to claim the reward? The residents of the Hollow denounce the party's use of magic and likely turn against them, decrying them as witches come to stir up trouble. The current thought is that the swimming hole has been cursed by black magic and the PCs might easily become scapegoats. It wouldn't take much for the Shudfolk of the Hollow to decide that one way of ending the curse might be to tie some heavy rocks to the bound-and-gagged PCs and toss them into the flooded quarry to break the spell!



played around with the Cataphract, the vault containing the Yokeless Egg, when first writing DCC# 80 Intrigue at the Court of Chaos. Originally, I had a different idea where the PCs followed a winding trail throughout the vault, facing guardians and challenges along the way until they reached the Egg's resting place. For one reason or another, that idea didn't work for me on paper and the concept of a staircase that grows each time the party defeats a challenge took its place. However, I didn't throw the baby out with the bathwater entirely. Relics from the initial design survived into actual print. See if you can spot them!

INTRIGUE AT THE COURT OF CHAOS ALTERNATE ENCOUNTERS

Area 1-1—Prism Guardians: *The shimmering stairs terminate at the bottom of a 30' diameter spherical chamber. Soft, silvery light bathes the room in artificial moonlight originating from an unseen source. The room is fashioned from pink marble veined with white striations that glitter in the mystical glow. Suspended in the air above you at the room's center are three faceted crystals, each the size of a large barrel. The crystalline stones orbit one another like errant planets. Two exits from the chamber are visible; each set high up on the room's "walls" at points approximately 135° from the stairwell. Mirror-bright runes are inscribed around the lip of these circular egresses.*

This spherical room obeys an ancient law of gravity, one written by the gods long ago, but discarded on less perfect planes. The "floor" of this area comprises the entire surface of the chamber. A PC walking around the inside of the sphere discovers he can circumnavigate the chamber in any direction he choose, effectively walking "up the walls" to peer upside-down at his comrades from the room's "ceiling." Thus, reaching the room's exits poses no difficulty.

This gravity effect stretches from the interior surface of the room to a point 15' above the "floor," stopping at the chamber's exact center. Any creature who reaches this point through either mundane or magical means finds themselves suspended in mid-air. Extending themselves (an arm, leg, head, sword, etc.) beyond this point subjects them to gravity once again, pulling them down to the floor in the direction the extremity was pointing. PCs unprepared for this sudden gravity change must make a DC 8 Reflex save or suffer 1d6 points of damage as they fall to earth once again.

The "crystals" orbiting the mid-point of the chamber are

prism watchdogs tasked with preventing beings from progressing further into the XX unless they bear the proper sigils or passwords. As the party has neither, the prism watchdogs "unfold" into their man-like forms and drop to the floor to attack two rounds after the party enters the room.

Prism Watchdogs (3): Init +3; Atk bite +2 melee (dmg 1d4) or swamp water vomit +3 ranged (dmg choking); AC 14; HD 1d8+2; HP 10, 8, 8, 7, 6, 5, 3, 3; MV 20' or fly 40'; Act 1d20; SP vomit swamp water up to 20'; non-bludgeoning attacks suffer a 1 step reduction on damage die; SV Fort +3, Ref +4, Will -2; AL L

[Author's Note: You'll note the above stat block in no way represents the watchdogs real power. It is, in fact, cut and pasted from The Croaking Fane manuscript, a short cut when I don't feel like writing out the whole stat block from scratch. Simply cut, paste, and revise.]

Area 1-2—The Straight and Narrow Path: *The floor of this large room is a lattice of light. Glowing gold beams of light transverse the chamber in a broken grid-like pattern. Several end abruptly; others meet another beam to create winding pathways to an open archway at the room's far end. Ten feet beneath the lattice is a swirling silver liquid mottled with rainbow-colored globs of oily fluid. These globules float atop the surface, meeting occasionally to mix together, producing pools of new hues.*

Show the players Handout #X when they enter this area. This illustration depicts the various pathways available to them by which to cross the room. Some seem to easily lead to the exit, but all is not as it appears. As the tenets of Law teach us, it's best to stay on the straight and narrow path; deviating from it results in calamity. This tenet is true in this room.





any times, an adventure begins with a pitch to the publisher. The hopeful writer submits a short outline summarizing the adventure's plot, playing up the cool and/or unusual aspects of the adventure in hopes of sparking the publisher's interest. If the spark is there, the writer gets the OK to proceed and then starts in on a first draft. The following is an example of such a pitch, specifically the letter I wrote Joseph Goodman proposing *DCC #75: The Sea Queen Escapes!* Of course, this was before the adventure was known as *The Sea Queen Escape!* Back then, we were simply calling it the "Turtle Dungeon Adventure."

THE TURTLE DUNGEON ADVENTURE PITCH

Joseph,

Below is a rough outline of the unnamed Turtle Dungeon adventure. Although it features three adventure sites, I see each as being small (4-5 area) mini dungeons with an equal mixture of traps, monsters, and "specials" to overcome. Some aspects have been salvaged from the previous adventure ideas I submitted, mostly because I think they work well with the aquatic theme involving a big turtle and because they'd be memorable.

The most unique aspect of the adventure (aside from the giant turtle) is something that was inspired by the old TSR module "Ravager of Time." I don't know if you ever had the chance to play through that one, but it was a rather straightforward dungeon/overland crawl with one small twist: the PCs had been magically aged to near senility and overall crotchety old men. It made an otherwise average adventure stellar.

In my home games, I've experimented with swapping personalities between characters, having them play each other's physical bodies or transferring minds into a singular creature to good effect. My hook for this one is to scramble the PCs' classes and racial abilities around so that they have to complete the adventure as patchwork heroes with abilities they might not normally get the chance to use (more on this below). It will be challenging to come up with a system that's balanced, but once I do, I think it will definitely stand out in the DCC line (provided nobody has done this already – a true concern).

The outline is still a little sketchy, but I wanted to show it to you before I went any further to get your opinion. Unlike *Emirikol* which jumped almost fully formed into my head, this second adventure is playing a bit more "hard to get."

Mike

Outline

- Party contacted to retrieve the adventure's MacGuffin, which is located inside a flooded temple or tomb deep in a vile swamp. It is secure behind an impenetrable defense that only a singular object will breach.
- This object in turn was secreted away by a long dead wizard inside an immortal turtle that slumbers deep under the waves. A special lure exists that can bring the turtle to the surface for a short period of time, long enough for a quick and lucky party to enter the dungeon crafted inside its shell, find the object that unlocks the barrier and escape.
- The lure is located in the dead wizard's former lair, a series of sea caves along a foreboding stretch of beach. In addition to whatever magics/traps left behind to protect the lure from thieves, the caves are now occupied by a band of Deep Ones up to their own brand of evil.
- In addition to the Deep Ones, the party must make it across a series of levitating sea turtle shells that hang above a pool teeming with sharks. Deep One priests and spearmen hurl spells and javelins as they cross.
- The lure itself is inside a chest that is inside a giant clam. Just getting the clam to open up is a Mighty Deed in itself, never mind getting inside the chest before the clam eats those trying to recover the lure.
- Once the Deep Ones and traps are defeated, the party can row out and use the lure to bring the turtle to the surface. Getting in is easy; getting out with the key before the great turtle returns to the deeps is another issue.
- In addition to the drowned undead who stand between the party and the key is also a powerful curse – one that fragments their very identities.
- In short, the curse scrambles the PCs and their abilities. The total number of class and racial abilities and powers get reassigned amongst the party as the curse takes effect. You might end up with a fighter who temporarily lose his Mighty Deeds of Arms, but gains the ability to cast spells, or a Dwarf who now has an Elven weakness for iron. I want to make a system where nobody gets shafted, but rather gets the opportunity to do things there character normally would be able to. It's a temporary shift that the PCs can restore by the end of the adventure. I'm not sure if a random chart(s) system or small cards drawn would work best and/or be most entertaining.
- The scrambled PCs escape the turtle with the key item and venture off to the flooded tomb. They deal with the final guardians/hazard and retrieve the artifact.
- The wizard shows up to collect the item and the inevitable double-cross occurs. The PCs can attempt to defeat the wizard in their scrambled states or use the artifact's powers to restore themselves while the sorcerer tries to demolish them with spells and minions.
- If all goes well, the PCs are victorious, either with or without the artifact, are restored to their proper selves, and earned some treasure in the process.



CC # 83 *The Chained Coffin* began with a singular image in my head: a party of adventurers dragging a bound coffin up a mountainside during a lightning storm. I had no inkling why they were doing so or what was inside the coffin when this mental picture came to me, but it was something I wanted to explore. However, I wasn't sure if a coffin was the right vessel for this adventure. Joseph tries to get us to frame things in the Appendix N genre of swords & sorcery, with the weirder or the unique usually being the better. Even though I originally pitched him the idea of a coffin, on my first attempt to write the adventure, the casket became a sorcerous capsule containing an ancient scientist. Luckily, Joe asked what happened to the coffin idea and, with his blessing, I got back to an old fashion casket bound with orichalcum chains. The rest is DCC RPG history. Below is the original beginning of *The Chained Coffin*—or, perhaps, “*The Chained Capsule*” had history gone another way.

CHAINED COFFIN ORIGINAL BEGINNING

BACKGROUND



Millennia ago, the Zkijian civilization reached its apex in the then-jagged peaks known as the Shudder Mountains. The Zkijian race was distantly related to mankind biologically, but vastly removed in their accomplishments as a civilization. While mankind was still struggling to erect monoliths to the ill-tempered gods they venerated, the Zkijians were pushing the boundaries of engineering, science, and magic, building a majestic empire in the hills and river valleys of the Shudder Mountains.

Despite their advances (or perhaps because of them), the Zkijians proved no less immune to the hubris that led to the dissolution of other great empires. Their successes in scientific and magical exploration compelled the Zkijians to tread in the footsteps of the gods, goading them to attempt a feat only divine powers had managed to master: the creation of life.

The Zkijians were not content to merely craft homunculi and golems, but wanted to recreate the primordial spark that empowers all natural living things. To this end, the best and brightest of Zkijian sorcerer-scientists constructed a special laboratory beneath one of the many peaks in the Shudder Mountains. Dubbed “The Cradle” by its creators, this complex would house the necessary implements and materials believed necessary to replicate the work of the gods.

After years of experimentation and setbacks, the Zkijians' labors bore fruit, but it was of the bitterest flavor. The sorcerer-scientists succeeded in creating life, but not in the form they intended. Instead of an animating soul, the Zkijians manufactured life in the form of a horribly virulent virus, one never before seen in the world. With no natural immunity to this laboratory-crafted germ, the virus swiftly spread through the Cradle and escaped into the Zkijian population as a whole. It would be only a mat-

ter of days before the virus killed every last member of the Zkijian race and wiped their civilization from the annals of history.

As an artificially-created virus, the plague that destroyed the Zkijian displayed attributes unknown in natural diseases. The initial germ, dubbed the Primal by its creators, displayed a partial sentience and even a malicious intent. The subsequent strains of the virus spawned by the Primal that spread throughout the Zkijian race were of an inferior, albeit no less deadly, variety. Powerless to contain these secondary strains, the infected sorcerer-scientists could imprison the Primal germ within the lab to prevent it from spreading and replicating itself in its initial malignant form. Three of its creators managed to survive long enough to enclose themselves within capsule-shaped machines that powered and defended the Cradle, thereby shuttering the complex and erecting an energy prison around the Primal germ. Once inside their capsules, the machines granted them a vastly extended existence, transforming them into something not quite alive or dead.

Millennia passed as the encapsulated scientists kept watch over their creator and protected the Cradle from discovery and looting by the lesser races that inherited the world in the wake of the Zkijian collapse. In time, all but one of the sorcerer-scientists eventually died within their capsule prisons, leaving a sole survivor of the Zkijian race to keep his lonely vigil.

Unfortunately, forces even the sorcerer-scientists could not predict would intervene to end his watch. An underground river coursing through the bowels of the mountain beneath the Cradle eroded away the limestone roots of the peak, eventually undercutting the chamber containing the guardian's capsule and breaching the instillation. When the stone collapsed, the last cradle fell from its berth and plunged into the river. The current carried the capsule and its semi-living occupant downstream, where it became entangled in a fisherman's nets. Now, separated

from his charge and desperate to return to the Cradle to keep the Primal from escaping, the last Zkijian sorcerer-scientist needs brave souls to carry him back to the forgotten laboratory before the deadly germ reawakens.

STARTING THE ADVENTURE

The judge can introduce *Shudder Mountains* any time the PCs find themselves in a riverside community, optimally one located near a large mountain range. The party may be full-time residents of the community or simply passing through on their way elsewhere.

At an appropriate juncture, either while walking near the river or in a location to notice a riverside commotion, read or paraphrase the following:

A raucous choir of voices suddenly fills the air, followed swiftly by the pounding footsteps of excited residents rushing towards the sound of the clamor. From your position, you observe a large crowd gathering on the riverbank, pointing excitedly at some person or object obscured by the throng of onlookers. Several faces in the crowd bear visages displaying more concern than excitement.

An investigation of the commotion reveals the following:

The crowd is gathered around a strange sight. Resting upon the shore and entangled in a fishing net is a 7' long oblong object made of ghost-pale wood. A nearby fisherman scratches his head in wonder at the odd catch he's snared. The capsule-shaped oddity bears a thin seam along its circumference, leaving a shallow

runnel around the object close to its uppermost side. A continuous sting of weird glyphs, symbols, and other characters runs parallel to the capsule's seam. Overall, the object suggests a weird coffin or sarcophagus.

If questioned, the fisherman explains he just drew in his nets and was both amazed and crestfallen when he discovered what he believed to be a catch of tremendous size turned out to be this strange capsule. He, nor anyone else present, has any inkling what it might be. A DC 15 Intelligence check (DC 12 for those PCs with learned or outdoorsman type occupations) identifies the capsule's wood as *dremados*, a rare and believed to be extinct species of tree. A similar DC 15 check by spellcasters identifies some of the characters etched on the capsule as arcane lettering common in some old forms of written magic. The remaining characters are unidentifiable (they're scientific and mathematical symbols written in the Zkijian language).

Eventually the PCs may try to open the capsule (if not, one of the onlookers attempts to). As they prepare to break the capsule's seam, a voice rings out in their heads, speaking in the character's native language. "STOP!" it cries, "Lest you wish to bring about your own deaths, attempt not to open that which lies before you!" This is the voice of XX, speaking to the PCs and the onlookers via telepathy. Many of the crowd flees the vicinity when this occurs in terror, leaving just the PCs and a few of the bravest locals behind. Attempts to communicate with the unseen speaker, either mentally or vocally, are successful and XX begins to regale the PCs with his tale.



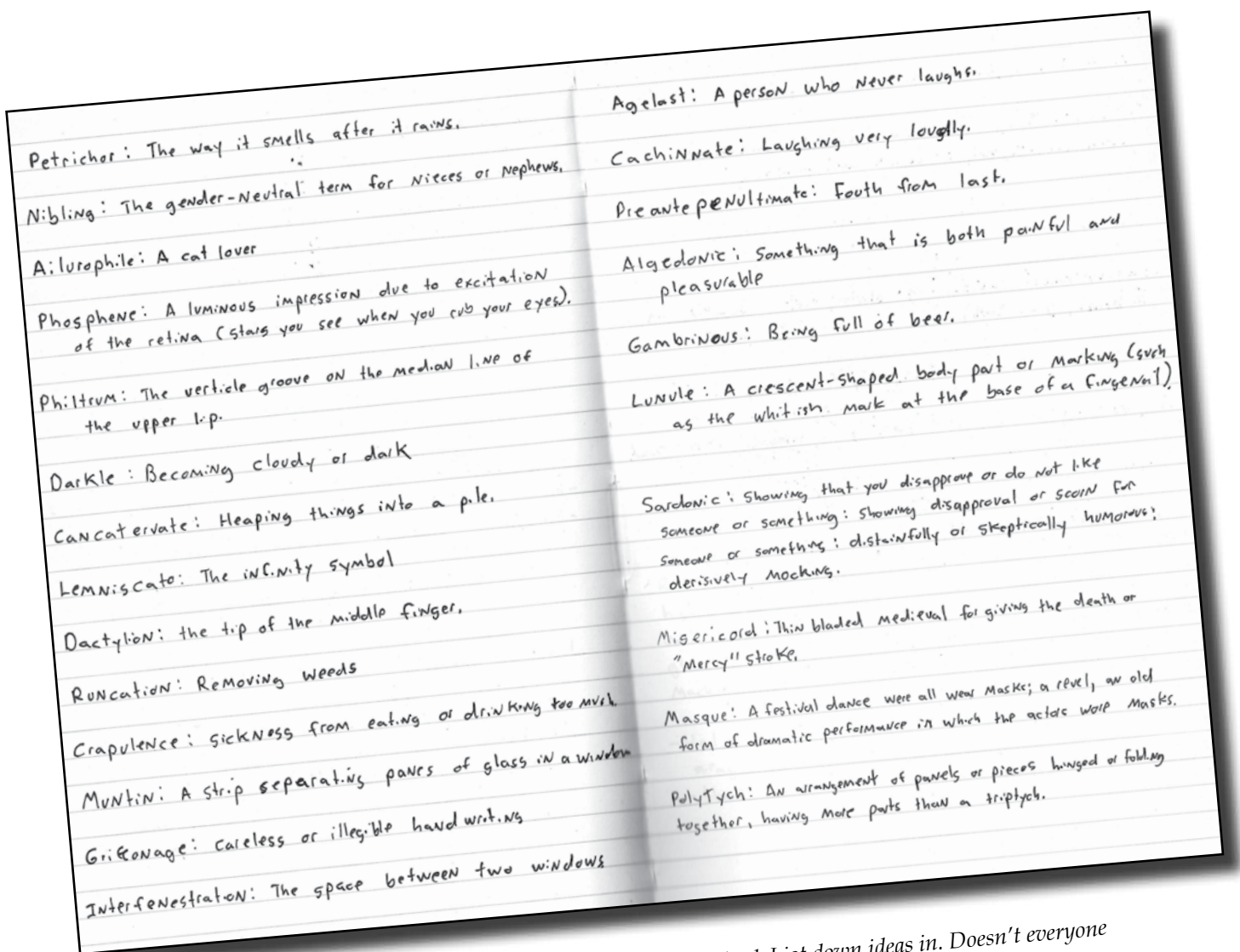
AFTER WORDS



hope you've enjoyed this look into the raw state of my writing. You don't know how difficult I found it to share these unrefined versions of my work with the public. Writers are like aged prostitutes: we look a lot better when we've had time to hide our blemishes and we keep the lights dim. In the full glare of daylight, the flaws are all too obvious.

For those of you curious about how adventures get written, I have faith that the above gives you some insight into the rarely-easy process of creating adventures and putting them down on paper. I purposely didn't show you all my tricks, but study these excerpts hard enough and you'll have a good idea of how to begin. For everyone else, I dearly hope you've enjoyed this trip to my personal writing madhouse. With any luck, it hasn't put you off my adventures for good. Sometimes you should just enjoy the taste of the sausage and not ask too deeply about how it gets made, after all.

Thanks for visiting my head. Watch your step as you approach the egress and please visit the gift shop on the way out. I'll see you again sometime in your dreams and — far more likely — your nightmares.



A pair of pages from my commonplace book, the notebook I jot down ideas in. Doesn't everyone keep a list of unusual and/or cool words they discover?

