



# Feasting at Lanterngeist





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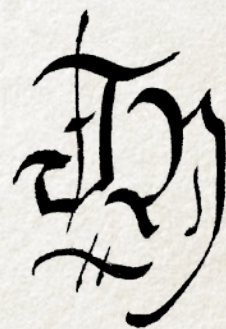


## WHAT YOU WILL FIND INSIDE *Feasting at Lanternegeist*

A simple harvest festival in an unremarkable village turns horribly, terribly wrong, in a way things can only do when adventurers are involved. A simple disappearance threatens to become a massacre as a hidden menace long slumbering in the bogs prepares to burst forth in the midst of this rustic revel. Will your heroes be able to thwart this menace, or will they too become a part of ravening doom that is the *Feasting at Lanternegeist*?

*Feasting at Lanternegeist* is a 5th Edition adventure for 9th to 10th-level characters, which can be easily inserted into any campaign with a hint of cosmic horror in the background, or to introduce a bit of horror when your heroes might have become a bit complacent. The Legendary Games tradition is to combine rich story and background, innovative layout, beautiful aesthetics, and excellence in design that is second to none. This product is the latest in that tradition, and we hope you enjoy using it as much as we enjoyed making it. Game on!

- Jason Nelson



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## Introduction

*Feasting at Lanternegeist* is a short adventure designed to be set in any isolated fishing village where 9<sup>th</sup>- to 10<sup>th</sup>-level PCs may find themselves investigating the rumors of missing persons. The adventure does not provide enough experience in and of itself for the PCs to increase in level substantially, but it provides several challenges and rewards, including catapulting the PCs straight into the plot of a larger adventure.

## Background

*Feasting at Lanternegeist* takes place in the village of Marshstown on a bay extending from a great lake the size of an inland sea. The town is about to celebrate its annual Lanternegeist Festival as the PCs arrive, and into this quaint gothic atmosphere is introduced the horror of the alien infestation seeking to feast upon the unsuspecting populace. As the PCs trace the tail of these horrific deaths they are eventually confided in by the town's mayor and led to the local Sea Temple where they learn that the clergy is involved in a much larger sinister plot involving the town and subhuman creatures that have been preying upon it for generations.

The PCs come to Marshstown on the trail of a sinister dark rider who has an artifact they wish to recover. In town they find everyone preparing for a festival and no trace of the rider they pursued. Questioning the locals turns up no clues and a stern warning from the town constabulary to not cause trouble during the festival. Having a while to poke around town and get an idea of its strangeness, the PCs are no closer to their quarry when quietly approached that evening and told of a series of murders that have taken place in the fen just outside of town—the latest victim being the town sheriff himself. The mayor and undersheriff deputize the PCs to help in the investigation before the murderer can strike again, a murderer that the undersheriff believes may be the ghost of a killer executed 20 years before.

As the investigation takes the PCs out into the benighted fens, they discover the executed killer's abandoned cabin and learn of an ancient ring of standing stones once used by barbaric druids long ago as well as a strange sluglike creature that attempts to prey upon them. They also discover

the rest of the town's militia slain with all evidence pointing to it being the work of the undersheriff and suspect that the ghosts of the ancient druids may be somehow involved.

Back in town the PCs begin to hunt the undersheriff through the throngs at the Lanternegeist Festival. In the process they must try to save townsfolk from wandering slugspawn and have a false alarm with an axe-wielding masked man. Eventually they locate Grumph as he attempts to enter the Sea Temple seeking healing for his infestation of feasting slugspawn and have a showdown with him on the temple steps where his infestation explodes into a spawning canker. With his death, the mayor confides in the PCs his suspicions of the involvement of the priests of the Sea Temple and suggest they investigate further, where they might discover an entire cult of humans and deep ones devoted to sinister and alien elder gods.

### PCs AS INVESTIGATORS

If you've ever played in a Lovecraftian game like Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* RPG, then you know that a good portion of any scenario, usually at the beginning, typically involves old-fashioned investigative work—visiting libraries and newspaper archives, interviewing locals, etc., before things really start to hit the fan. As *Feasting at Lanternegeist* is intended to emulate that style of adventure, there are points where all the action is actually good investigation, whether it is through questioning someone (an excellent opportunity for good roleplay) or making suitable skill checks to find out information. Regardless, it's not your typical sword & sorcery fare of kicking in doors, killing monsters, and taking their stuff. There are a few occasions in this adventure where detective work is necessary in order for the PCs to grasp what is going on and advance the plot as they get ever deeper into its workings. Since there is little chance for monetary or other rewards for these instances, XP awards have been associated with them in order to reward the PCs' efforts in pursuit of the adventure's goals, even if not in the traditional manner.



## Beginning the Adventure

The adventure begins as the PCs, who have already come to the village of Marstown on the trail of a strange dark rider, begin to ask around among the locals for the whereabouts of this mysterious figure. The locals are a suspicious and close-mouthed lot, and the PCs' queries eventually bring them to the attention of the village sheriff. This event describes the confrontation and the subsequent interview with the town mayor. All of the information in that event should be shared up until the mayor begins to talk about disappearances. Instead of going in that direction, he'll share only that a few disappearances have occurred with no leads as to the villagers' whereabouts. Then he'll nervously laugh and explain, "When you make your living on the turbulent waters of the sea, someone's bound to go missing from time to time from boating accidents and

storms and such. Just because no one's washed up yet or didn't leave a note before they went out on the water doesn't mean it has to be something sinister." The mayor will not, in this circumstance, share his suspicions of the disappearances or go into recruiting the PCs to search the Sea Temple. Instead, the mayor does not yet fully trust the PCs. He attempts to allay their suspicions and invites them to attend the town's annual festival being held that night. If the PCs have uncovered rumors of other foreigners or traveling merchants who are new to town and suspect them of involvement with the dark rider, they may decide attending the festival could be a good way to locate them.

More information about the festival and how the PCs can get involved in both the plot of this adventure and connecting it to the ongoing campaign is provided below. Allow the PCs to spend some additional time touring the town and asking questions if they wish.



# The Festival of Lanterngeist

*As night falls, the Festival of Lanterngeist gets underway, and soon the town square is ablaze with a massive bonfire as well as hundreds of glowing lanterns. In addition to the paper lanterns strung from cords above the ground, many of the townsfolk carry lanterns at the ends of long poles that they brace against their shoulders as they mill about. These they prop against rocks or tables as they dance or partake of the various offerings of the festival. A band of pipers and drummers plays merry dancing jigs at one corner of the square, and many of the festival-goers wear fanciful masks depicting angels, devils, and everything in between.*

The whole experience is one of gaiety and frivolity as the locals dismiss their cares for the night and indulge in the festivities. This is perhaps the one time of the year when strangers are more or less accepted in Marsttown, so the PCs are invited and encouraged to join in the fun and partake of the many free ciders and other victuals that vendors pass from trays, as well as more substantial fare such as roast game and ales sold from booths around the square.

## EVENT A: DIRE NEWS

Allow the PCs to join in the festivities or use this time for additional investigation as they please. However, the foreign merchant never makes an appearance if they are watching for him. At some point, either while the PCs are at the party or when they are near town perhaps for a break or to regroup, they are found by a clearly distressed mayor and a dour-looking man standing nearby gripping the hilt of his sheathed scimitar with white knuckles. They recognize the frowning man as Undersheriff Byron Grumph, one of the men who accompanied the town sheriff when he confronted the PCs earlier in the day. The mayor quickly draws the PCs aside where he can speak to them privately and relates to them the following.

*“This is horrible, just horrible. Some of the festival-goers were found murdered out in the fens just a little while ago. The sheriff went to investigate while he had the undersheriff here round up the town’s militia. But when Undersheriff Grumph and the rest went out to join the sheriff, they found him dead as well! Murdered!*

## FESTIVAL OF LANTERNGEIST

The Festival of Lanterngeist is a local holiday held annually by the folk of Marsttown. Ostensibly its purpose is to ward off the spirits of ancient evils that are thought to brood over the coast and surrounding swamplands as a holdover from the days when dark druidic barbarians held sway over these lands. The festival is characterized by lighting lanterns all around town, but especially in the town square around a huge bonfire, that are thought to hold back the evil spirits. Festive activities including dances, games, vendors’ candies and drink, and various competitions held in the light of the lanterns to drive the spirits away for another year with their merriment. Despite its ominous origins, few among even the superstitious Marstowners take the festival seriously and see it as little more than an opportunity for an all-night party filled with drinking and fun. Many couples adjourn to the nearby woodlands for private trysts, trusting in the alleged properties of the lanterns they carry to ward off any danger from evil spirits.

The date of the Festival of Lanterngeist is determined annually by the town priests through the conjunctions and positions of various celestial bodies, so that its exact date moves from year to year much like Easter in the real world. It is set in the autumn as a harvest festival in this adventure but can easily be placed at any time of the year to accommodate your campaign’s time table.

*outside of town and dozens of unsuspecting people wandering around in the dark, and on top of it all my sheriff is dead. If news of this gets out tonight, it’ll cause panic among the townsfolk, which will be just what the killer surely wants, providing him with more easy victims and using the confusion to mask his own movements. We can’t have that, simply can’t!*

*“I need your help. All I’ve got now is Undersheriff Grumph here and a handful of farm boys and deck swabbers who fancy themselves part-time militiamen. I’ve got nowhere else to turn and no way to contain this situation without a lot of innocent people getting hurt. Therefore, I am deputizing you to assist Undersheriff Grumph in his investigation and to stop the killer... or worse, maybe the killers!*

*“You will be rewarded from the town’s treasury—at least enough to gain your services for a single evening. Plus I know you’ve been*

*poking about...looking for something. I'm sure if you help us now, folks'll be a bit more eager to open up and help out those that they know they can trust.*

*"I'm beseeching you on behalf of the good people of Marstown. Will you help us?"*

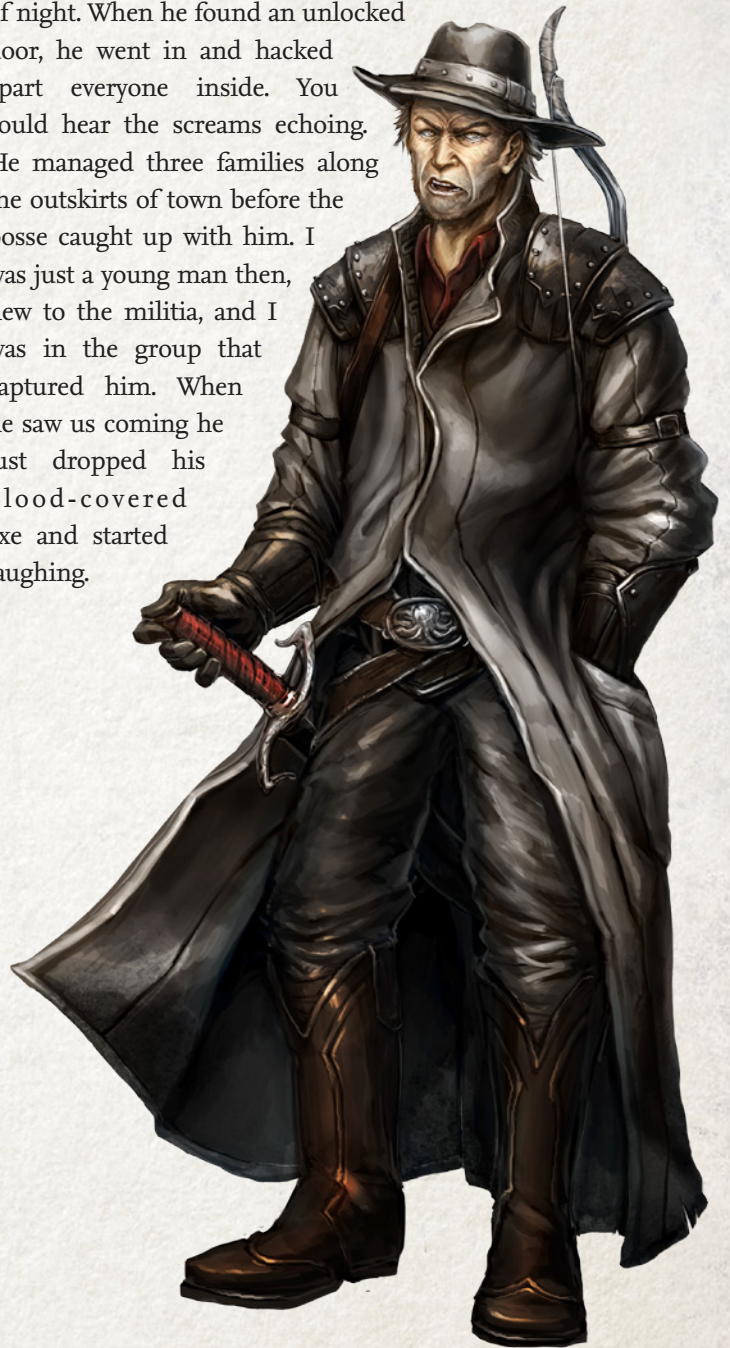
A DC 10 Wisdom (Insight) check easily confirms that mayor is desperate; in fact, he's not far from a panic attack. If the PCs try to dicker over a price, he quickly nods and hand waves their demand saying, "Yes, yes, come by my office in the morning. We'll take care of all the details." If they agree, he admonishes them once again to keep the whole affair under wraps until the killer is found so as to avoid a panic. Then with a near-maniac grin on his face he says, "That's it. No panic. I've got to keep everyone calm. I'm going to the festival, and I'm acting as if nothing at all has happened. No murders, nothing at all, everything is fine."

The mayor wanders off towards the town square mumbling nonsensical platitudes with a rictus grin frozen on his face. Undersheriff Grumph looks on with equal parts disgust for the mayor and for the PCs being brought in but finally says, "Well, I guess we'd better get you out to the scene so we can start making heads or tails of this."

Undersheriff Grumph guides the PCs to the edge of town where a group of six nervous-looking young men (neutral male commoners), unarmored and ill-armed await, holding pikes awkwardly (**Pike. Melee Weapon Attack.** +2 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. **Hit:** 5 (1d10) piercing damage) and hoisting lanterns as high in the air as they can get them to beat back the darkness of the night. Without further ado, Grumph takes one of the lanterns for himself, hands another to the PCs, and heads out into the murky darkness of the sodden forest marshes surrounding the town.

Along the way, he speaks to the PCs under his breath in order to keep the already-fearful militiamen from overhearing. He says, "I know the mayor thinks it's just some local gone off his rocker that done this, but I know better and that's the only reason I allowed you folks to be brought in on this investigation. Otherwise we may be in over our heads a bit, and I just hope you're as good as the mayor thinks you are. Cause what we've got here is no ordinary killer...we've got us a killer ghost, and I'll bet my eye teeth its old Crandle Dreeley back from the dead, making good on his death curse from 20 years ago."

Assuming the PCs ask for more info on this alleged ghost, Grumph makes sure to keep his voice down as he guides the PCs along the swamp trails, the militiamen strung out in a line behind them. "Old Crandle Dreeley was cousin to the current owner of the village inn, though they didn't associate much. Crandle, he was a lumberjack, and he did go off his rocker. Folks said he butchered and fed his wife to a mermaid for good luck, but it never came his way. Finally he just snapped, took up his wood axe and started walking from house to house in the dark of night. When he found an unlocked door, he went in and hacked apart everyone inside. You could hear the screams echoing. He managed three families along the outskirts of town before the posse caught up with him. I was just a young man then, new to the militia, and I was in the group that captured him. When he saw us coming he just dropped his blood-covered axe and started laughing.





We brought him in alive, but he wouldn't ever say a word about why he did it. He was tried and sentenced to death, and we put him out on the Sea Rocks 20 years ago to let the gods o' the sea sort him out. I was on the rowboat as we pulled away from the rocks, and that's when he finally spoke. He said, the town done it to 'em, not him, and the town was gonna' get its due, that he'd see to that. That's the last we saw of him. Next day, the rock was empty of all 'cept blood. But I always figured he'd come back some day to do what he promised, and it looks like now he has."

By the time Grumph finishes his story, the group has reached the first crime scene just a mile outside of town. Refer to the area map for the crime scene locations.

### 1. THE FIRST CRIME SCENE

This spot is where Undersheriff Grumph says the first murders were discovered. Lying among the crushed swamp bracken is a young couple from town (Tam Breckege and Laurel Sills); obviously out for a private tryst. Their lantern lies broken and extinguished nearby. The bodies are battered and covered in blood. Grumph allows the PCs to examine the bodies and the scene while he and the militiamen wait nearby and light the area with their lanterns. A DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check while examining the bodies notes that there is a great deal of bruising, especially around their throats. A DC 15 Wisdom (Medicine) check discerns that they both died by strangulation and that much of the blood on their bodies is apparently not theirs—the wounds they bear do not account for all of it. A search of the surrounding grounds yields no further clues and reveals

that the ground itself is too soft and wet to hold footprints well; tracking the killer is not going to be easy. *Speak with dead* attempts only reveal that the murdered couple is strangely unable to describe their killer, as if too horrified to grasp what occurred.

If asked why Grumph thinks the killer is the ghost of an axe murderer when these two were strangled, he simply tells them to wait a moment and they'll see and then heads off down the trail towards the next crime scene.

## 2. THE SECOND CRIME SCENE

A short distance from where the couple's bodies lie is another murder scene. Lying on the trail, his staring eyes looking blankly into the sky, is the town sheriff. Unfortunately his staring eyes are some distance from his body, as his head has been brutally removed from his shoulders and tossed aside. The body is withered and shrunken as if drained of its very life essence. A DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check is able to pick out the sheriff's fairly recent footprints coming up the trail the PCs just followed and then a hodgepodge of confused and overlapping tracks (it also reveals the second body described below). It appears that a scuffle ensued here, but it must have been fairly short because the sheriff's blade still rests in its scabbard unused. A DC 20 Wisdom (Medicine) check confirms that the head of the sheriff was removed by main force—not severed. The body and head are too withered and mangled for a successful *Speak with dead*.

The undersheriff states that when the murdered couple was found, he left the sheriff there while he returned to town to gather the militia. When he returned, the sheriff was gone. He left the militia at the first scene and followed the sheriff's tracks up the trail. He found the sheriff here and, after a quick look around, hurried back to the others and then back to town to inform the mayor. It was the mayor's idea to bring in the newcomers, he snorts, but admits that if it's the ghost of Dreeley at work he can use all the help he can get.

Grumph then directs the PCs' attention to the underbrush beside the trail (if they haven't already found it on their own). There hidden among the crushed foliage is a second corpse, this one a human male dressed in the clothes of a merchant, though now stained by mud and blood. This corpse's head is also missing, ending in a gory stump that looks like the work of a maniac wielding an axe. It is not withered like that of the sheriff. The head itself is nowhere to be found, either

carried off after its severing or completely destroyed by the axeman. Grumph states that he thinks the sheriff had found this additional victim and was examining it when attacked by the killer, probably hidden nearby. It is the condition of this one's shattered neck and missing head that led to Grumph's theory that the deed was done with an axe and made him think of old Dreeley. Plus the sheriff's unnatural drained state made him think of something supernatural like a ghost, which further reinforced his theory.

The PCs may examine this body for clues as well, if they wish. As they do so, Grumph states that he believes it to be a foreign trader (who may have come up in earlier conversation with the mayor or other townsfolk) based on the man's clothing and the fact that no one has seen him all day. He has no lantern with him, and what he may have been doing out here Grumph has no idea. While the neck is mangled and yields no real clues, a *Speak with dead* obviously will not work. A DC 15 Wisdom (Medicine) check or DC 20 Intelligence check notes that there is insufficient gore splattered upon the surrounding ground for the total destruction of the man's head to have occurred here—one would expect to see great spatters of blood as well as obvious pieces and debris from the apparently hacked apart cranium. Instead, it would appear that either the head was taken as a trophy or else the merchant was viciously murdered elsewhere and then dragged to this spot, where he was left and subsequently found by the sheriff—possibly as part of an intentional ambush? A DC 20 Wisdom (Medicine) check notes that the merchant's corpse has actually been dead for most of the day.

A search of the foreigner's pockets turns up little of note other than coins totaling 22 gp (which Grumph confiscates as evidence) and a small ceramic egg—perhaps a good luck charm or favored bauble worth maybe 5 gp. A DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check made on the egg, however, reveals a hidden seam. A DC 10 Dexterity check (thieves' tools apply) is able to open the egg along this seam revealing that, the interior has been molded into the shape of a cultic symbol carried by the mysterious dark rider the PCs have been pursuing. However, the merchant has been around town the last several days, so he cannot be the dark rider that the PCs seek. Grumph truthfully claims no knowledge of this affiliation of the merchant (few of the humans of Marshtown were party to the bargain made between this cult and the subhuman beings of the bay), but will take on a thoughtful look as he considers its implications.



**Development:** Whenever the party has finished their investigation of the crime scenes, Undersheriff Grumph informs them of his plan. He believes that the killer is likely still in the vicinity, as it's difficult to move around quickly in the marshy forest at night. He also reiterates that the killer may be the ghost of an axe-murderer, in which case the PCs' presence is of particular importance (the local militiamen all pale at the mention of the possibility of a ghost being involved). He drops the final bomb when he adds that the faint trail through the marsh on which these murders have occurred is none other than the very trail that leads to the abandoned cabin once inhabited by Crandle Dreeley, no more than a mile further along.

His plan is this: He and the militia will fan out and begin a sweep of the area around the crime scenes to make sure there are no further clues or perhaps a killer hiding about. He assigns the PCs to continue on up the trail to the cabin to check it out. As far as he knows, no one has been there in 20 years, and he doesn't fancy leading a group of green militia into the potential haunting grounds of a vengeful ghost. If the PCs refuse this plan, he reminds them that they have been deputized to follow his orders. If they insist on leaving somebody behind or double back to spy upon the group of militia, you will have to contrive to have them separated from Grumph and the others or modify **Event B** so that Grumph still escapes. Before the PCs depart, Grumph hands one of them a signal whistle after blowing it once so they will recognize its sound. He tells them that he and each of the militiamen have such whistles in order to remain in contact as they split up. One whistle is just to check in and get their bearings, three sustained blasts means trouble and for everyone to converge upon the sound.

**Treasure:** Other than the bauble and coin in the merchant's pocket, the only other items of value are the sheriff's +2 *chain shirt* and his +1 *longsword*, Shatterspike. Undersheriff Grumph initially claims these. If the PCs make a case that they will be of use in dealing with a possibly ghostly murderer and make a DC 10 Charisma (Persuasion) check, he reluctantly agrees to allow the PCs to use them for now. He reminds them, though, that they are the property of Marshtown and will have to be returned after the investigation.

**Ad Hoc XP Award:** If the PCs succeed in determining that the merchant was killed elsewhere and brought to this site, award them 2,300 XP. If they realize the merchant has been

dead for quite a while and/or manage to convince Grumph to allow them to hang onto the sheriff's equipment, award 3,900 XP instead. If they discover the merchant's connection to the cult through his symbol, award an additional 2,300 XP.

### SO, WHAT THE HECK IS GOING ON HERE?

The PCs have stumbled into a situation that they are just beginning to scratch the surface of in their investigation. The killer is no vengeful ghost or axe-murderer as Grumph suspects. Rather the killings are the result of skum introducing the moits of Shub-Niggurath into the population of Marshtown. In particular, the moits were introduced to the cult agent posing as a merchant yesterday. The merchant was driven insane by the slugspawn that infested his skull, and wandered aimlessly through the marsh all day. After dark, he stumbled upon and surprised the couple from town and brutally slew them in his mindless rage. He stumbled off into the marsh again where shortly thereafter the slugspawn matured into a spawning canker. Around this time, Grumph and the sheriff discovered the bodies of the murdered couple. While Grumph headed back into town, the sheriff started to look around a bit. The spawning canker in control of the merchant's body found the sheriff a short distance up the trail and ambushed him. The canker was able to feed off of the sheriff (while constricting his head off in the process) and then spawned into nearly a dozen new slugspawn that scattered into the surrounding swamp. The PCs have no real way of knowing this right now, but events will soon direct their investigation in this direction until they learn the whole horrific truth.

### 3. DREELEY'S CABIN (5,000 XP)

*The swamp trail rises onto a low knoll covered in ancient, gnarled trees, some with trunks so large half a dozen men would have to hold hands to stretch around them. Curiously, several of them have the images of crude faces carved into their trunks, carvings so old that the tree bark has almost completely overgrown them. In the midst of these trees lies the broken timber of a rough dugout cabin, a stair cut into the earth leads down into its vine-draped interior.*





Crandle Dreeley built a dugout cabin here among these ancient trees to more easily harvest timber from the forested marsh. Originally he lived here with his wife, but after her mysterious disappearance he lived out here alone. Always seeming a bit “off,” he grew more and more introverted, sometimes disappearing into the marsh by himself for days at a time. As his own mental stability declined, Dreeley became obsessed with the tales of the old druids that once ruled these woods, and he carved the faces in the trees to hearken back to their old ways. Whether as the result of his own obsession, or perhaps ancient malevolent spirits that found a willing host, his mind snapped and he went on a killing spree. When captured and executed, his last words were in reference to the fact that the town’s founding encroached upon the demesne of an angry nature spirit and that they would have a reckoning. He was slain by a reefclaw that fed upon him as he was chained to the Sea Rocks and has remained quite dead ever since, despite the undersheriff’s misgivings.

The interior of the dwelling lies 5 feet below the level of the surrounding terrain and is accessed by a set of stairs

dug into the earth and paved with sawn logs. The log walls of the cabin rise another 5 feet above this, ending at a roof of sagging beams, many of which have broken and collapsed leaving the dugout’s interior exposed to the elements. As a result, the dugout’s interior is a riot of plant growth covering the floor and walls in a tangle of creepers, flowers, fungi, and ferns, while vines and mosses dangle from the few remaining rafters and dip into the stagnant puddles that collect on the floor. Barely visible among this verdant profusion can be seen the rotten remnants of simple furnishings and possessions, with a stone hearth being the only intact structure left in the cabin’s interior. The odor of dankness and rot is almost overpowering.

**Creature:** Though no ghost haunts the abandoned cabin, it does harbor a menace in the riotous profusion. Lying in the puddle floor of the cabin, and looking just like the rest of the flora, is an overgrown tree stump that is actually a giant bog creeper. Its thorny tendrils intertwine with the other undergrowth, looking like so many brambles, and its single woody limb resembles a hoary root protruding from the muck. A PC must actually enter the cabin in order to

have a chance to see through its camouflage, but doing so provokes it to attack. It lies quiescent until somebody enters the cabin, at which point they provoke opportunity attacks for coming within its reach. It attempts to grab and constrict the first target to come within range. Whenever the bog creeper is struck for the first time, it uses its acid spray to hit as many people as possible in the cabin. It chases anyone that leaves the cabin, but will not go beyond the ring of trees that surrounds the hilltop, retreating back into the cover of the dugout if all of its prey manages to escape beyond that boundary.

## BOG CREEPER

*Large plant, unaligned*

**Armor Class** 16 (natural armor)

**Hit Points** 126 (12d10 + 60)

**Speed** 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
23 (+6)	8 (-1)	21 (+5)	3 (-4)	16 (+2)	6 (-2)

**Senses** passive Perception 12

**Challenge** 9 (5,000 XP)

**False Appearance.** While the bog creeper remains motionless, it is indistinguishable from normal marsh vegetation.

**Marsh Move.** The bog creeper does not treat marshes as difficult terrain.

## ACTIONS

**Multiattack.** The bog creeper makes two tendril attacks.

**Tendrill.** *Melee Weapon Attack:* +10 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 16 (3d6 + 6) bludgeoning damage and the target is grappled (escape DC 14). The bog creeper can only grapple one creature at a time.

**Acid Spray (Recharge 5-6).** All creatures in a 30 ft. cone must make DC 16 Dexterity saving throws or take 14 (4d6) acid damage, or half as much on a successful saving throw.

**Development:** Searching the cabin turns up little of note,

but a DC 20 Wisdom (Perception) check locates a secret niche in the stone hearth. Within is a small iron box with a padlock (DC 15 Dexterity check to unlock, thieves' tools apply). Inside is Dreeley's life savings of 47 gp and 65 sp and two other items of interest. One is an irregular, 4-inch-diameter lump of polished amber with a small, perfectly preserved tree frog suspended in the center—its bulging eyes staring lifelessly into eternity. This item was found by Cradle Dreeley in the swamp and became both his greatest treasure and his obsession. It is a cursed item of the ancient druidic order that once dwelt in these woods and functions as a *crystal hypnosis ball*. The entity connected to this item is both ancient and alien and seeks to implant the suggestion in the gazer's mind that the folk of Marshtown are interlopers on ground sacred from a time before even the gods were born and that a terrible vengeance awaits all who refuse to bow to the will of those ancient ways.

The second item in the box is an old leatherbound journal—the fenman's diary. It talks of his life with his wife, Savannah, and contains page after page of mundane details of their everyday lives. It mentions his discovery of the "frog globe"—as he calls it—which serves as the eye of something far greater than man can fathom. After this discovery, the writing begins to ramble, becoming progressively more paranoid and delusional, and mentions Savannah's growing unhappiness with his new frog globe and her attempt to hide it in the fens. This is followed by a mysterious reference to a "feast of the reefclaws," and then there is no further mention of Savannah. The writings continue to spiral into chaos, often being little more than jumbles of letters and crudely rendered images. The last entry is the one of greatest note to the PCs, and is reproduced in the player handout below.

### DREELEY'S JOURNAL PLAYER HANDOUT

"It be too late...we've been here too long. The trees whisper of a reckoning and I know their voice. The old druids once danced in their stone ring and cavorted in blood before the Black Goat, seeking its favor. Now it be angry that the old folk don't come to the ring no more. It demands new blood, and the trees whisper it is I must slake it. Me hands and me axe will do for the job, but I must get the blood to the dancing stones to complete the calling.

"It is time."



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The trees whisper of a reckoning and I  
know their voice. The old druids once  
danced in their stone ring and cavorted  
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Me hands and me axe will do for the job,  
but I must get the blood to the dancing  
stones to complete the calling.*

*It is time.*

After the PCs have had a moment to look through the journal and read its last entry, have them make a DC 20 Wisdom (Perception) check. If successful, one of them notices as a slugspawn makes its way through the undergrowth of the dugout and prepares to leap at one of the PCs. This is one of the slugspawn created when the foreign merchant's spawning canker spawned after killing the sheriff. It has wandered this far through the swamp and now attacks a random PC. If not noticed, it attacks with surprise.

## **SLUGSPAWN**

**CR5**

**XP 1,800**

Bloated alien worms the length of a man's forearm, slugspawn are the basest form of a moit of Shub-Niggurath. These repulsive creatures possess slug-like bodies the color of rotting algae, covered with thick mucus. Vulnerable to the predations of larger creatures, slugspawn rarely venture forth on their own. Although they can move at a speed of 10 ft. per round, slugspawn frequently hide themselves in dark pools or shadowy

crevices, waiting for the warm flesh and pliant brains they crave to come to them.

Upon entering a square with a slugspawn in it (or if attacked by a slugspawn), a creature must make a DC 10 Wisdom (Perception) check to note that a slugspawn is something other than a normal slug (although hidden slugspawn can be more difficult to detect). If this Wisdom (Perception) check is failed, the slugspawn leaps upon the creature and burrows into its flesh. The creature can attempt a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw to avoid the slugspawn, but only if the creature is aware of the slugspawn's presence. Resistance to piercing damage grants immunity to infestation. If a slugspawn is detected and is not able to infest a host before the party gets a chance to react, any PC can dispatch the slugspawn with no roll required.

Once a slugspawn has infested a living body, it burrows toward the host's skull and wraps around the lower brain, growing and feeding upon the energies generated by thought. On the first round of infestation, dealing cold damage to the victim can kill the slugspawn and save the host—but only if the victim takes 10 or more points within 1 round of being infested. Cutting the slugspawn out also works, but the longer it remains in a host, the more damage this method does. Cutting it out requires a slashing weapon and a DC 20 Wisdom (Medicine) check, and deals 1d6 points of damage per round that the host has been infested. If the Wisdom (Medicine) check is successful, the slugspawn is removed. After 3 rounds, though, the slugspawn has reached the host's brain and cannot be surgically removed without killing the host.

After a slugspawn has reached a host's brain, it proves to be a beneficial parasite—at least initially. A slugspawn's host benefits from complete immunity to being charmed or *dominated*, as the slugspawn's presence confuses and devours such magic. This benefit doesn't last long, though, as after a variable period (typically lasting 2d6 days in humanoids, though sometimes more or less in other creature types) the slugspawn matures into a spawning canker, a new stage in its lifecycle that begins with it violently devouring its host's brain, erupting from its skull, and taking over the beheaded host body—a near-instantaneous process that immediately kills the host. The result is a new creature, a spawning canker garbed



in its former host's skin. If the host is killed before the slugspawn fully matures, the parasite undergoes a rapid, emergency maturation, taking control of the host body as if it had fully-matured, though such spawning cankers rarely prove as long-lived as their fully matured brethren.

One final development occurs while the PCs are at Dreeley's cabin after dealing with the slugspawn. Have the PCs make a DC 10 Wisdom (Perception) check. If successful they detect the faint sound of one of the militia's signal whistles blowing three long blasts. It is soon joined by another and another as if every one of the militiamen is blowing his at once and it no longer requires a Wisdom (Perception) check to be heard. Just as suddenly, the sounds of the whistles begin to taper off as one after another goes silent. If the PCs make their way back to where they left Undersheriff Grumph and the militia, they should hear the dwindling sounds of the madly blowing whistles until only one is left; even it goes quiet shortly before they reach the site of the previous murders so that they arrive to find an eerie silence awaiting them.

### **EVENT B: THE MARSH FOREST MASSACRE (2,900 XP)**

When the PCs arrive back at the crime scenes where they left the rest of the militia (**Areas 1 and 2**), they find only silence—no militiamen and no lanterns glowing in the darkness to mark where they might be out searching in the fens. The situation is even direr than it seems, however. A simple DC 10 Wisdom (Perception) check is sufficient to locate an object lying on the trail; it is one of the militia's signal whistles—covered in blood. Once this has been found to indicate the proper area to search, further Wisdom (Perception) checks (DC 15 each) begin to turn up bodies belonging to the militiamen, their lanterns lying extinguished in the marsh near where they fell. Each of the six militiamen is present, and their causes of death are apparent: Four have red-fletched arrows buried in their necks or backs, and two have vicious slashing wounds that cross their necks and torsos. A DC 10 Wisdom (Perception) check recognizes the red-fletched arrows as being those carried by the undersheriff in his quiver. A DC 15 Wisdom (Medicine) check is able to identify the slashing wounds to be distinctive to those caused by a scimitar—a weapon relatively rare in this part of the world but one that was

conspicuously carried by Byron Grumph. The final damning bit of evidence is that the undersheriff himself is nowhere to be found, though a DC 10 Wisdom (Survival) check does identify a single set of recent tracks heading along the firmer ground of the trail back towards town.

Though the PCs do not yet know it, Byron Grumph has fallen to a slugspawn, also one of the ones that spawned from the corpse of the foreign merchant. As he and the militiamen spread out to search the surrounding fens, Grumph stumbled and fell into a bog. As he struggled to pull himself from the swamp pool, he was surprised by a lurking slugspawn that managed to infest him. As the merchant before him, the undersheriff went insane and entered a homicidal frenzy, going on a killing spree of the hapless militiamen who slogged unawares through the swamp nearby before heading back toward town.

**Creature:** All of the recent commotion has attracted the attention of one of the marsh forest's more reclusive denizens, a giant ape. Ordinarily this creature resides deeper in the thickets, but its hunts have brought it closer to Marstown this night where the loud sounds of commotion, multiple lights, and smell of death have brought it to investigate for a possible meal. The PCs can hear its approach—the sound of something large and heavy moving through the trees in the darkness—if they make DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) checks. Otherwise, they are surprised as it leaps from the darkness to attack.

### **GIANT APE**

**CR7**

**XP 2,900 XP**

**hp** 147 (statistics in 5E SRD)

**During Combat** The ape attempts to pummel one individual before retreating up a cluster of nearby pine trees where it throws its rocks. If one PC separates from the others, it attempts to leap down and pummel that one as well.

**Morale** If any PC is downed by the ape's savage beating, the ape attempts to grab that PC and retreat deeper into the marsh to feed at its leisure. If reduced to 20 hp or less, it likewise retreats deeper into the forested depths to find an easier meal.

**Treasure:** The militiamen carry little of value beyond their studded leather armor and longspears. If the PCs choose to rifle through their pockets, they can find 1d6 sp on each.

## Back To Town

Eventually the PCs' investigations should lead them back into Marhshtown during the height of the night's Lanterngeist Festival, likely in pursuit of the apparent serial killer that has escaped them. Arriving in town, they find the Square full of townsfolk wearing crudely fashioned masks of assorted animals and fanciful spirits participating in a masquerade dance in full swing.

If the PCs search for the mayor, he can easily be located holding court at a kissing booth where he wears a mask of imported peacock feathers and sells pecks on the cheek for apples or other treats from the festival. If drawn aside and updated on what has occurred in the murder investigation, he pales and appears on the verge of apoplexy as he realizes that with these latest developments he has no constabulary left in his town; the PCs are truly his only hope to save Marhshtown from the depredations of what is obviously a psychopathic murderer who has been committing these crimes under their very noses all along. He begs the PCs to stop Grumph and bring him to justice before any more innocents are hurt. He follows the suggestions of the PCs within reason and can provide the following information.

If the PCs ask about the slugspawn (if they happened to keep its remains) he honestly has no idea of what it might be, having never seen one before. If asked where Grumph lives, he can show them to the undersheriff's cottage, though it is currently unoccupied. If told about what was discovered at Dreeley's cabin, he will theorize that whatever madness seized old Dreeley must have afflicted Grumph as well. If asked about the stone ring of the ancient druids, he can confirm its existence but states that it disappeared centuries ago. The original lord of Marhshtown built his manor house on the site of the stone circle. The house has been a ruin since the noble's family line ended with the disappearance of its last scion three generations ago.

The mayor fears that Grumph may use the festival as an opportunity to commit more murders among the unsuspecting populace and begs the PCs to search among the festival-goers for the madman. He suggests that they don masks to circulate among the festivities without giving away their positions to the madman. He can provide a number of masks of paper and fabric if asked—a wart-nosed giant,

a wrinkled witch, a dog with lolling tongue, a feather-haired sprite, a squint-eyed goblin, a goggle-eyed fish, and so on. If they do so, **Events C–E** occur as they make their rounds among the masked inhabitants of Marhshtown. If they refuse to wear masks, then the creatures involved in these encounters automatically gain a surprise round against the PCs since their presence is so noticeable.

### **EVENT C: BOBBING FOR APPLES (1,800 XP)**

This event occurs as the PCs begin to search among the dancing festival-goers at the masquerade.

*Dancers circulate together in a quaint country dance to the tune of zither and fiddle. The swaying lanterns held aloft by ropes strung between tall poles create a swaying, shadowy light that plays across the masked faces of goblins and sprites, ogres and hags. Your quarry could be anywhere within this tumult.*

*Suddenly the dancers part for a moment and give you a clear view across the square. On the far side, a large wooden tub has been set up for apple bobbing. As you watch, a slug-like creature departs the shadow of a nearby building and quickly climbs into the water-filled tub. Nearby, a townsman removes his mask to try his luck at bobbing for one of the floating apples. Apparently neither he nor the man running the apple-bobbing tub noticed the arrival of the slimy intruder.*

**Creature:** The PCs have just witnessed the arrival of a slugspawn that has crawled into the apple-bobbing tub. It is 30 feet through the crowded square to reach the apple-bobbing tub. If the PCs are masked as they traverse in and among the festival-goers, they have no problem moving surreptitiously through the gathering. In this case roll initiative for the apple bobber (+0 modifier) to see if they arrive before he dips his head into the tub prompting a readied action from the awaiting slugspawn. If the PCs are not wearing masks, then the dancers are disturbed by the armed strangers in their midst and make a bit of a scuffle as they try to scramble out of the way. The net result is that the PCs are slightly delayed before they can reach the apple-bobbing tub or get another clear view of it, giving the apple-bobbing townsman an action in the surprise round in which he unwittingly dunks his head into the clutches of the slugspawn.

If the PCs beat the townsman's initiative and reach the tub before he has a chance to dunk his head, they can deal with the slugspawn themselves. It has a readied action to attack anyone who comes within a foot of the water. The tub is only 2 feet deep, though unless a light source is placed inside the water, the slugspawn cannot be seen due to the lantern light reflecting off of the water's surface. The tub can be tipped as an action, though doing so will provoke an attack from the slugspawn against anyone who bends over to lift the tub. If the townsman manages to act in the surprise round, he is infested as soon as he dunks his head (he does not receive a saving throw), and the PCs can begin to act in the first round of his infestation as the creature disappears into his open, gagging mouth.

## SLUGSPAWN

Challenge 5 (1,800 XP)

See Area 3

## EVENT D: THE HORSELESS HEADSMAN (2,900 XP)

After dealing with the slugspawn, the PCs have a few minutes to continue searching the festival before the next encounter occurs.

*A shrill scream of terror arises from the eastern edge of the square. A look in that direction shows a man hooded and cloaked in all black raising a bloody axe above his head. Before him a villager crouches on the ground, his hands tied behind his back, his head lying upon a wooden stump awaiting the headsman's axe. A group of small children watches, paralyzed with fright, as the axe swings downward and takes the head from the crouching victim in a spurt of red blood. The severed head thumps to the turf as the children scatter screaming, and the headsman turns to seek out a new victim.*

The PCs have just witnessed one of the townsmen dressed as an executioner perform a fake execution on another townsman who is in on the trick in order to jokingly scare some of the local children. The stump is actually a

hollow prop in which the victim safely placed his head while a carved wooden head set on a pair of fake shoulders with a waterskin filled with goats blood was placed on the stump above and seemingly severed in a gory display.

**Creature:** The headsman is actually a villager named Compton Rowe, a former mercenary who spent years fighting bandits in the forest kingdoms to the east. As the PCs run up to the scene, the supposed victim raises his unharmed head from concealment in the stump with a shouted "ta da!", bringing a scattering of applause from a few adults standing nearby that now laugh and tease the children who had panicked and started to run. If the PCs are masked when they arrive, they quickly ascertain that the entire scene was merely a sideshow for the festival. However, if the PCs were



not masked, their armed and unfamiliar presence causes Compton to momentarily panic and assume they are bandits come to attack during the confusion of the festivities. Even though the PCs quickly see that the whole thing was a prank, Compton gains an attack with his axe on the first one to arrive during the surprise round. A DC 10 Wisdom (Insight) check is sufficient to discern that his attack was a panicked reaction to their sudden arrival, and he quickly becomes apologetic and tries to assist anyone he hit. But if he is attacked in return he defends himself to the best of his ability, fighting until the mayor arrives 2 rounds later and attempts to defuse the situation. If Compton is killed, the witnesses will confirm that he attacked first and prevent the PCs from being charged with any crime, but their standing in the eyes of the villagers will certainly drop quite a bit.

## COMPTON ROWE

CR7

XP 2,900 XP (use Assassin statistics, 5E SRD)

hp 78

Wields an axe instead of a shortsword.

**Development:** Two rounds after the confrontation with Compton ends, his horse picketed at the edge of the Square nearby to haul his props to and from the festival gives a sudden squealing neigh of pain and drops to the ground. Rushing over to it reveals that its throat has been cut by a slashing weapon (like a scimitar). A DC 10 Wisdom (Survival) check locates tracks in its blood that lead along the edge of the Square towards the Sea Temple at the southern end. While the PCs were dealing with the goings-on in the festival, the infested undersheriff was skirting along the edge of the area unseen by all. The horse became startled by his presence, and he struck out at it in his enraged mania. He is making his way towards the Sea Temple where he hopes the clergy will be able to heal him of the infestation that he can feel rooting around at the base of his brain. Following his trail leads to **Event E**.

**Ad Hoc XP Award:** If the PCs kill Compton, do not award them XP since he was no true enemy. However, if they solve the encounter without killing him, award them XP for defeating a CR 7 encounter.

**Development:** If you wish to increase the horror of the situation, when the prankster brings his head out of the “execution stump,” you could have another slugspawn crawl out of the stump and attack the unaware villager, or it could be seen burrowing into the villager’s skull even as he removes his head from the stump.

## EVENT E: UNMASKING THE MADMAN (8,800 XP)

This event occurs as the PCs near the front of the Sea Temple while following Byron Grumph’s trail.

*Sudden screams arise from the south end of the Square. On the steps of the Sea Temple a man wearing a horned stag mask lays about himself with a bloodied blade as he makes for the front door of the building. He pauses to remove the mask, and you see that it is your quarry, Byron Grumph, with a mad gleam in his eyes. He turns to survey the crowd, his face twisting into a leer of rage, sheathing the dripping scimitar.*

**Creature:** Undersheriff Grumph has been infested by the slugspawn, and the effect upon his psyche has been to reduce him to a homicidal psychopath bent on murder. However, a part of him deep down is still sane and is horrified by the creature that has infested him and the effect that it has had upon him. As a result, even as he kills indiscriminately, he has instinctively made his way towards the Sea Temple in hopes that the priests there can somehow heal him of his condition. Unfortunately, he associates the PCs with the cause of his condition (they were helping him in the investigation when it occurred), and as a result sees them as being somehow responsible for it. Therefore, even as he is about to enter the temple he pauses to see if the PCs are present. If they are masked, the PCS can make a normal initiative roll to determine if they can act before he begins banging on the temple doors demanding to be let in (they are not currently locked, he is just too far gone to realize that). However, if the PCs are not masked Grumph recognizes them and gets to act in the surprise round before they can enter the initiative order to take action against him. His first action is to his bow fire his bow at them. He continues to fire his bow as he is able until the PCs close for melee at which point he switches to his scimitar. During the battle, the mentally unstable Grumph cries out to the PCs to heal him or to let him reach the priests so they can “fix what is broken inside.” Regardless

of whether the PCs attempt any healing or try to allow him to enter the temple, Grumph's homicidal mania compels him to continue the battle and ignore any opportunities for escape. See "Development" below.

## UNDERSHERIFF BYRON GRUMPH, SLUGSPAWN INFESTED

Medium humanoid (human), neutral evil

Armor Class 16 (studded leather)

Hit Points 150 (20d8+60)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
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16 (+3)	18 (+4)	16 (+3)	11 (+0)	13 (+1)	8 (-1)
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Saving Throws Strength +6, Dexterity +7

Skills Investigation +4, Perception +4, Survival +4,

Senses passive Perception 14

Languages Common

Challenge 7 (2,900 XP)

### ACTIONS

**Multiattack.** Grumph makes 3 melee or 3 ranged attacks.

**Scimitar.** *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 13 (2d8 + 4) slashing damage. Humans, half-elves, elves, and half orcs take an additional 9 (2d8) damage.

**Shortbow.** *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, range 80/320 ft., one target. *Hit:* 13 (2d8+4) piercing damage. Humans, half-elves, elves, and half orcs take an additional 9 (2d8) damage.

**Development:** The slugspawn within Grumph has been maturing quickly within his body. As soon as his infested body is reduced to 0 hp or someone is about to cast *lesser restoration*, *greater restoration* or *heal* upon him, the slugspawn suddenly matures into

a spawning canker. When this happens, the undersheriff's head suddenly breaks apart and explodes in a shower of gore as the tentacled horror that is the spawning canker emerges from the base of his neck. It assumes control of the body and continues the fight. Anyone that witnesses this horrific transformation must make a DC 16 Wisdom saving throw or become frightened for 1 round.



## UNDERSHERIFF BYRON GRUMPH, SPAWNING CANKER

*Medium aberration, chaotic evil*

**Armor Class** 17 (natural armor)

**Hit Points** 190 (20d8+100)

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
22(+6)	20(+5)	20(+5)	7(-2)	12(+1)	15(+2)

**Senses** passive Perception 12

**Challenge** 10 (5,900 XP)

**Spawn.** When a spawning canker has drained 10 Charisma, it bursts apart into 2d4+2 slugspawn. These wormlike terrors crawl into nearby shadows and lurk in wait for any potential hosts to come nearby. The spawning canker is destroyed when this occurs.

### ACTIONS

**Multiattack.** Grumph makes 3 scimitar or 3 shortbow attacks, plus an additional tentacle attack.

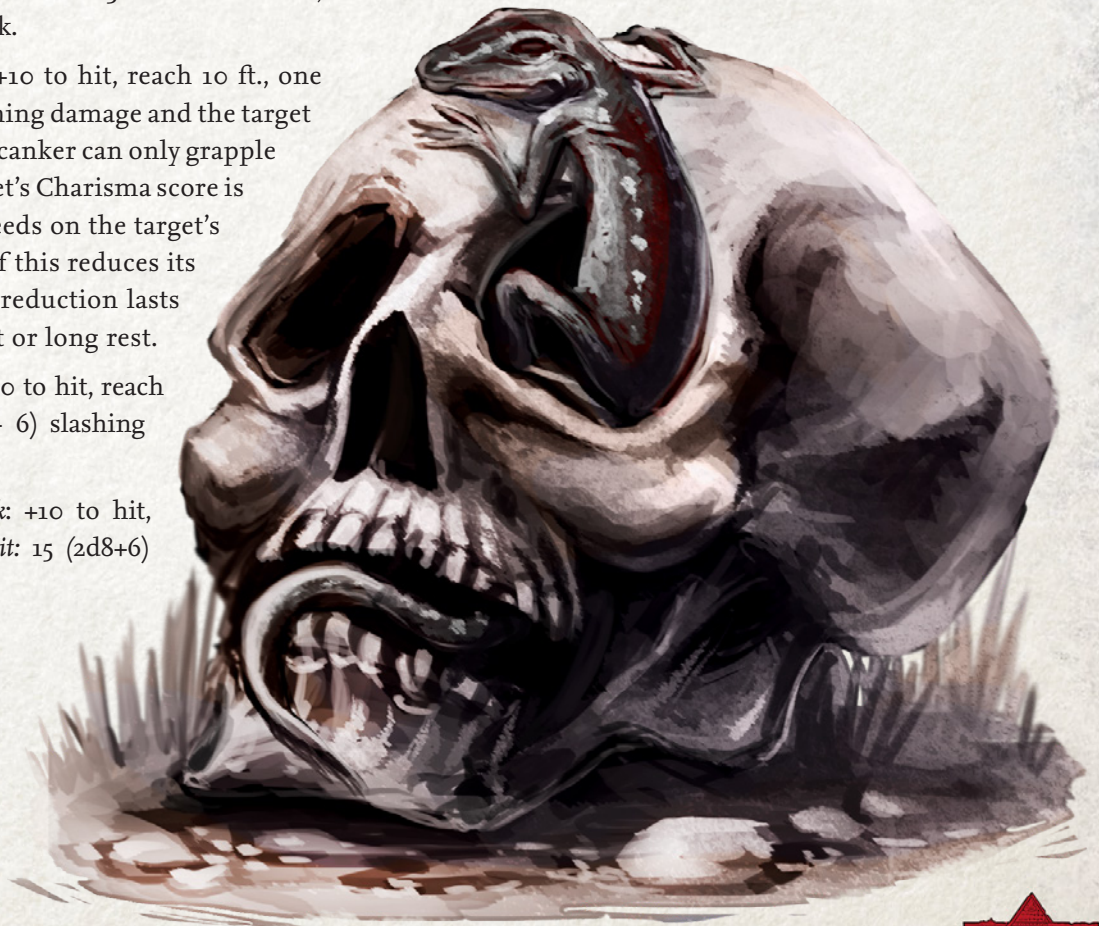
**Tentacle.** *Melee Weapon Attack:* +10 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 19 (3d8 + 6) bludgeoning damage and the target is grappled (escape DC 14). The canker can only grapple one creature at a time. The target's Charisma score is reduced by 1d4 as the canker feeds on the target's vital essences. The target dies if this reduces its Charisma to 0. Otherwise, the reduction lasts until the target finishes a short or long rest.

**Scimitar.** *Melee Weapon Attack:* +10 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 15 (2d8 + 6) slashing damage.

**Shortbow.** *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +10 to hit, range 80/320 ft., one target. *Hit:* 15 (2d8+6) piercing damage.

## Epilogue

When the spawning canker is slain, Grumph's headless corpse at last falls dead, the final victim of this otherworldly murderer. If the canker managed to feed on enough Charisma to spawn, then the battle likewise ends, but half the slugspawn scatter into the surrounding countryside seeking to find their feast elsewhere while the other half attack the PCs. Regardless, once Grumph falls, this mini-adventure is over—the cause of the mysterious Lanterngeist murders horrifically revealed. The festival-goers have fled in a panic during the battle, and the PCs find themselves alone in the Square save for themselves and the mayor who cringes nearby. At the battle's conclusion the now-desperate mayor, convinced by Grumph's actions and lunatic ravings during the battle, believes that the priests of the Sea Temple are somehow involved. He quickly approaches the PCs and now makes his final appeal to urge the PCs to search the temple to get to the bottom of the town's disappearances. In addition, he will pay them 1,000 gp for their services so far and allow them to keep the treasures they have recovered even if they are items that technically belong to the town.





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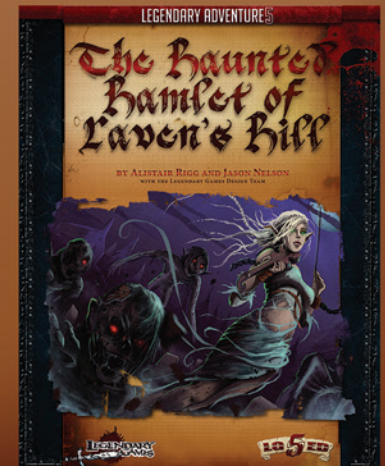
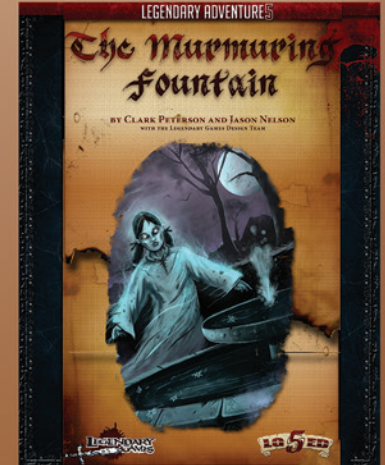
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