

HIDEOUS CREATURES

SERPENT FOLK

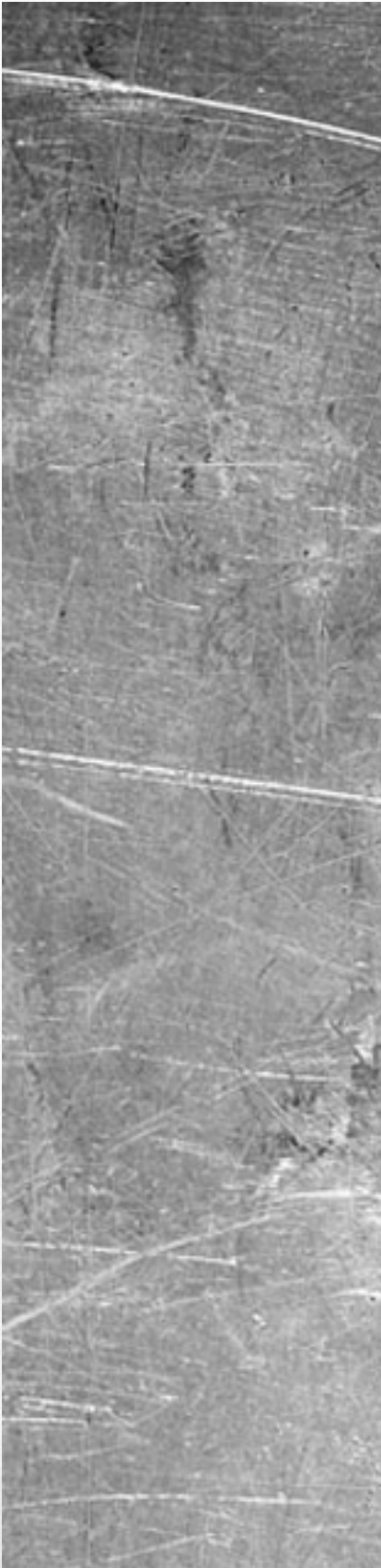
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TRAIL OF CTHULHU



Pelgrane Press



SERPENT FOLK

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KEN WRITES ABOUT STUFF

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Hideous Creatures: Introduction

Lovecraft created his various “shadowy congeners” because the stories of vampires, werewolves, and even ghosts had become too familiar and too formulaic to evoke true horror. Almost a century after he wrote, his own monstrous races have likewise begun to seem like comfortable story furniture rather than unnerving signals that the world is horrible and wrong.

Our goal with this series is to present a comprehensive look at Lovecraft’s hideous creatures, from as many angles as we can. Our goal is contradiction, surprise, and most especially the uncanny: the recognition of something familiar as something weird. As in the “Gods and Titans” section of the *Trail of Cthulhu* core book, this series deliberately contradicts itself, blurring boundaries and erasing certainties in the name of the uncanny. In your campaign, these variant truths might be misunderstandings, legends, heresies, or deliberate lies spread by the creatures to lull their foes into a false sense of familiarity.

Change anything and everything in these pages, most especially the ability scores. If you need a terrifying assassin, a brief but survivable fright, or a sanity-shattering horror, just add or subtract points at will.

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Serpent Folk

“THEY WALKED LITHELY AND SINUOUSLY ERECT ON PRE-MAMMALIAN MEMBERS, THEIR PIED AND HAIRLESS BODIES BENDING WITH GREAT SUPPLENESS. THERE WAS A LOUD HISSING OF FORMULAE AS THEY WENT TO AND FRO.”

- CLARK ASHTON SMITH, “THE SEVEN GEASES”

The squamous serpent folk resemble upright, bipedal snakes, with wedge-shaped heads and taloned arms. They can sense motion, have a keen sense of smell thanks to their forked tongues, and can detect heat like a pit viper. They range in color from green and brown to pale yellow or gray, often spotted or streaked with darker markings.

Changing the look of serpent folk seems almost pointless. Serpent folk (or serpent people, or just ophidians) derive so much power from their iconic appearance that it seems a shame to spoil the reveal. They likely spend most of their “on screen” time in adventures or campaigns taking human or other form anyhow.

That said, the serpent folk spent tens of millions of years evolving both naturally and unnaturally. Some possible new looks include:

- Horns on the head, like those of the horned viper, or like the basmu demon of Sumerian lore.
- A pair or cluster of tentacles extending from the snout, similar to those of the tentacled snake but implying specifically Cthulhoid taint.
- Feathered, spiky scales like those of the feathered viper. This can extend into actual feathers like those of dinosaurs or Quetzalcoatl.
- Try a bright coral-snake or king-snake pattern for a changeup, yellow and orange bands, deep ebony black, or glaring pink or green skin.

- A rattle, either on the tail or in an inflatable neck sac like the tuatara.
- The burrowing asp can fold its fangs to one side and “bite” without opening its mouth. Other snakes have poison glands in their spine or neck; poison can be anywhere on one of the serpent folk!
- Remember to mention the weird rainbow reflections and strange images playing along the ophidian’s scales.

Remember to utilize the strange, potent venom of the serpent folk when they bite:

- Being bitten by a snake is first of all sheerly terrifying. The tachycardia and shock of that event can kill, so imagine the horror of being bitten by a man-sized snake (5-point Stability test).
- Many viper bites cause multisensory hallucinations, while krait and rattler bites produce a minty or metallic taste in the victim’s mouth, and cobra venom can induce aphasia and tingling skin.
- Viper venom is highly coagulopathic, inducing bleeding from every orifice and even from old, healed wounds. Internal bleeding produces anomalous bruises, while bleeding from the brain produces bloody tears as well as swelling headaches and bloody vomiting.

- Some snakebites can induce dementia, epilepsy, or seizures.
- Neurotoxic venom paralyzes not only the lungs of the victim, but sometimes its muscles.
- Cytotoxic venom commonly swells the affected area into an immense blister, which pops with agonizing pain.
- Viper venom can also necrotize flesh, including the kidneys and long muscles. Supernatural venom like that of the serpent folk blackens flesh, bloats and then dries it to ashy rubber within minutes instead of weeks.

The first primate fossils appear 50 million years before mankind evolves; the dawn of reptiles is 250 million years before that. In short, the eons of the Carboniferous and Permian Eras hold more than time enough for the evolution of the serpent folk. Their civilization flourished on the subcontinent of Valusia (roughly where Europe, Egypt, and the Mediterranean basin are now) before even dinosaurs walked the earth. They built black basalt cities and fought wars, all in the Permian era or before.

They were then great sorcerers and scientists, and devoted much energy to calling forth dreadful demons and brewing potent poisons. The catastrophic Permian extinction, or a war with Cthulhu or the Elder Things, or the ophidian wizards’ own hubris (or all three) destroyed Valusia around 150 million years ago.

Their remnants primarily settled in the underground realm of red-litten Yoth

Serpent Folk

beneath North America. Later cataclysms (perhaps including the Curse of Yig) sent most of the serpent folk back down the evolutionary ladder, and human enmity destroyed the rest of their civilization and drove even their brute remnants to the brink of extinction.

A few sorcerers and atavistic Yig-favored throwbacks survive elsewhere, as do pockets of dwarfed degenerates and human-serpent folk hybrids. The degenerate serpent folk seek merely to eat, breed, and survive – the others have more complex needs, desires, and plans.

Serpent Folk

Abilities: Athletics 8, Health 6, Scuffling 11, Weapons 7

Magic: Serpent-folk sorcerers have Magic 10+ or even higher, and could have any spell a human magus might. Even those who do not worship Yig likely find it politic to have ContactYig among them.

Hit Threshold: 4

Alertness Modifier: +1 (for motion and smell, not sound alone)

Stealth Modifier: +1

Weapon: +0 (bite), +1 (scimitar); venom (see below).

In hand-to-hand combat the bite attack can be made simultaneously with most weapon attacks.

Serpent folk may use all weapons known to man, clutching them effectively in taloned hands.

Venom: A serpent-folk bite is venomous; in 15 minutes to an hour after being bitten, the victim must make a Difficulty 4 Health test. If she fails, she immediately loses a number of Health points equal to the ophidian biter's Athletics *rating* as she goes into convulsions and begins to suffer respiratory failure, losing 1 Health per hour until treated. If she succeeds, she loses a number of Health points equal to only half the biter's Athletics rating, but she will suffer the equivalent of **Hurt** status (worse if the loss puts her below -5) until she is treated.

Armor: -1 vs. any (scales)

Stability Loss: +0; +1 to see someone you know well transform into one of the serpent folk.

Degenerate Serpent Folk

“THIS THING WAS MORE LIKE A GIANT SERPENT THAN ANYTHING ELSE, BUT IT HAD ABORTED LEGS AND SNAKY ARMS WITH HOOKED TALONS. IT CRAWLED ON ITS BELLY, WRITHING BACK MOTTLED LIPS TO BARE NEEDLELIKE FANGS, WHICH I FELT MUST DRIP WITH VENOM. IT HISSED AS IT REARED UP ITS GHASTLY HEAD ON A HORRIBLY LONG NECK, WHILE ITS YELLOW SLANTED EYES GLITTERED WITH ALL THE HORROR THAT IS SPAWNED IN THE BLACK LAIRS UNDER THE EARTH.”

- ROBERT E. HOWARD, “PEOPLE OF THE DARK”

Most serpent people remaining in the modern world are the degenerate descendants of interbreeding with Neanderthals, Voormis, and isolated human groups over the last few million years. They live in barrows, caves, and waste places – or in sewer and subway systems in metropolitan anonymity. They live by cannibalism, kidnapping human brides when they can to replenish their dwindling genetic stock.

They come in two main varieties, a dwarfish and stunted humanoid form and a bloated snake form with vestigial limbs. (See the tylwyth corachaid on p. 74 of *Bookhounds of London* for more on the humanoids.)

By and large the snake form is more debased and less intelligent than the humanoid form, but the genetic lines are so twisted and coiled that any sort of atavism or progression is possible. This section arbitrarily uses the term “Children of the Night” for the humanoids, and “Worms of the Earth” for the serpentoids.

Children of the Night (Humanoid Form)

Abilities: Athletics 6, Health 6, Missiles 6, Scuffling 7, Weapons 5

Magic: 5+ for an ollave of the Children; spells include those related to Yig and Tsathoggua, Curse of the Stone, and Runic Target (*Rough Magicks*, p. 20)

Hit Threshold: 3 (4 in shadows or at night; 5 in pitch darkness)

Alertness Modifier: +2 (in darkness), -1 (in bright light)

Stealth Modifier: +2

Weapon: -1 (flint knife or axe), -1 (arrow + venom), -2 (bite); venom (as above; all Health losses are 2 less than full serpent folk venom).

Armor: -1 (reptilian hide)

Stability Loss: +0

Worms of the Earth (Snake Form)

Abilities: Athletics 6, Health 8, Scuffling 10

Magic: 5+ in rare circumstances; uses Magic for natural effects (1 point each): cave-ins, floods, controlling water and wind, or creating a will-o-wisp light to lure prey into the cavern.

Hit Threshold: 4

Alertness Modifier: +2 (for motion and smell only)

Stealth Modifier: +1

Weapon: +0 (bite), +1 (talons); venom (as above; all Health losses are 2 more than full serpent folk venom).

Armor: -1 (reptilian hide)

Stability Loss: +1

Reversions to Type

Seemingly normal humans may, of course, have such horrors tangled up in their bloodline. Bringing their serpent self to the fore may occur when they cast Mythos magic (or when the Investigator's Magic rating exceeds her Sanity rating), lose Pillars of Sanity, or even following a single traumatic exposure to teratogenic or mutagenic serpent-folk venom. After the trigger, such an Investigator loses Sanity faster than normal: add +1 to all Sanity losses. (“Kindly” Keepers may also lower Difficulties for climbing, scenting things in the dark, and similarly ophidian tasks.) When Sanity reaches 0, the Investigator's “serpent brain” takes over, and the new serpent gains a Magic rating equal to the previous Sanity score – an escape from the asylum becomes child's play.

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Possible Serpent Folk Abilities

“... THE FEATURES MINGLED AND MERGED IN A SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE MANNER. THEN, LIKE A FADING MASK OF FOG, THE FACE SUDDENLY VANISHED AND IN ITS STEAD GAPED AND LEERED A MONSTROUS SERPENT’S HEAD!”

- ROBERT E. HOWARD, “THE SHADOW KINGDOM”

Serpent folk have two million centuries of alchemical treatment, evolutionary variation, and magical experimentation to give them plenty of options against human pests. Even in devolved form, they may retain some of these advantages: [CN] indicates abilities open to Children of the Night; [WE] those available to Worms of the Earth.

Aquatic: There are many species of sea snakes; the sea krait is completely amphibious. Serpent folk suffer no penalties whatsoever when moving or attacking under water. They can hold their breath for an hour or more. [WE]

Assume Likeness: As in Howard’s original story, serpent-folk sorcerers know a spell allowing them to disguise their form and features as nondescript humans (1 Magic point) or as specific humans (2 Magic points). This is near-perfect disguise; any Sense Trouble test to detect the imposture is at Difficulty 6+, although it lowers with direct questions, etc. Only in death does this illusion end. This might be an innate ability for all serpent folk, or restricted to ophidian magi.

Chameleon: The Kapuas mud snake can change color to match backgrounds; it makes thematic sense for a serpent-folk infiltrator to do the same. Increase her Stealth Modifier to +2 against visual detection – including “hide in plain sight” attacks from woods, algae, or other stretches of semi-solid color.

Increase Hit Threshold by +1 in similar circumstances. A full “invisibility cloak” is a spell, not a biological power: for 2 Magic points, the serpent mage increases his Stealth Modifier to +3 and his Hit Threshold by +3 for a scene. [CN Stealth Modifier +1 vs. detection only][WE]

Climbing: Serpent folk can climb trees and rough walls faster than any human; they have contest advantage even without gear. For 1 Magic point or 2 Athletics points a serpent-folk climber can scale sheer walls or ropes of any height. [CN][WE]

Constriction: With a successful Scuffling attack at +2 to Hit Threshold, a serpent-folk attacker may wrap its body or limbs around a victim and squeeze (+0 damage modifier). Each round thereafter, continued constriction automatically does -1 more crushing damage. A character snared in serpent-folk toils must make an Athletics test against a Difficulty equal to the creature’s initial Scuffling attack result (die plus its spend) to break free (or at that Difficulty -2 to use weapons against it). A horribly strong ophidian can spend Athletics or Scuffling points against her in that test. A cobra-quick serpent-folk attacker makes the constrict attack against the target’s normal Hit Threshold. [WE]

Consume Likeness: After devouring a human body, a serpent-folk shapeshifter can take the appearance of that human at any time thereafter. (Its idle cantrips suffice to match the body with illusory clothing if need be.) This is near-perfect disguise; any Sense Trouble test to detect the imposture is at Difficulty 6+ although it lowers with direct questions, etc. A more horrible version adds the human’s memories; even questioning cannot shake the replacement. This ability costs either 2 Magic points or 2 Athletics points, depending on the specific campaign rules and cosmology.

Discriminatory Smell: Snakes use their flickering forked tongues to build a three-dimensional “odor picture” of their surroundings. Serpent folk do the same; raise their Alertness Modifier to +3 for odorous targets like living humans, gun oil, old parchment, etc. Worse yet, once a serpent-folk hunter smells a human, he can always recognize that person in any disguise or environment. [CN +1 to Alertness Modifier][WE +1 to Alertness Modifier]

Heat Detection: Pit vipers detect heat with an organ in their heads. Serpent folk can also see heat signatures, even through brick or wooden walls. Add +2 to their Alertness Modifier against warmer targets such as living people, vehicles, or recently fired guns. A serpent-folk lookout with both smell and heat senses might have Alertness Modifier +5 for human intruders! [CN][WE]

Hypnotism: Serpent-folk, like legendary cobras or pythons, may have the Hypnosis ability (*Trail of Cthulhu*, p. 43) usually at 8 or even 12+. Serpent folk Hypnosis can work on the unwilling (resisted at a Difficulty equal to the total of the mesmerist’s spend plus roll), and includes not just sending targets into trance but into deep sleep, or freezing them in place. They must make eye contact for the ability to work well; a hissed hypnotic induction is resisted at -2 Difficulty. [CN][WE]

Immunity to Poison: Serpent folk cannot be poisoned. [CN all anti-poison tests at -3 to Difficulty][WE]

Magic Gift: Serpent-folk sorcerers designed and created magic. Hence, serpent-folk spell-casting requires only half the Magic (or Stability or etc.) needed for human casters. For a slightly weaker version of this gift, all required spell-casting costs are at -2 for serpent folk.

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Motion Sense: Snakes can also sense vibrations, mapping moving targets in the air near their bodies or on the ground within several yards. Add +1 to serpent-folk Alertness Modifiers for moving targets, or to detect approaching or waiting foes. [WE]

Movable Heart: Snakes can move their hearts out of the way when they ingest a large meal. The serpent folk have a similar ability, now honed for use in combat. Once per scene, a serpent-folk fighter may refresh half its lost Health to indicate those vital hits ... weren't. [WE]

Parting Shot: Rattlesnakes can strike up to an hour after their death, thanks to energy built up in the muscles. Even after going to 0 Health (or even -12), one of the serpent folk can still bite if her jaws are intact. This attack is made with all remaining Scuffling points, at -1 to Hit Threshold. [WE]

Photosensitive: Children of the Night must make a Difficulty 4 Health test to move into or use their abilities in bright, direct sunlight. For Worms of the Earth, the Difficulty is 6. [CN][WE]

Resurrection: The undecayed serpent folk are immortal: there are literally millions of years' worth of protective spells wrapped around their life lines. Anything that would kill one of them outright doesn't happen for some reason, no matter how unlikely. If killed in front of witnesses, the serpent-corpse sheds the death and resurrects when alone. Only burning the entire body to ashes and encasing the head in rock keeps this cycle from recurring – and the head remains alive, waiting for the rock to erode away ...

Spit Venom: Like a cobra, a serpent-folk attacker can spit his venom (Scuffling attack) at a foe within Close range. Spit venom takes effect in 1-6 rounds; all Health losses are 1 less than full bite effects. Spit venom can also coat camera lenses, act as

acid on surfaces, or blind targets (+2 to Hit Threshold to hit eyes). Blind foes resist the venom in their eyes at Difficulty 5; on a failure, in addition to the normal symptoms, add +2 to all visual Difficulties including enemy Hit Thresholds. [WE to Near]

Torpor: Like all reptiles, serpent folk cannot regulate their own body temperature. For every 5°F below 40°F reduce all ability ratings by 1. His Hit Threshold drops to 2 at Athletics 1. When either Health or Athletics reaches 0, the ophidian enters torpor, a state of lassitude and inability to move or concentrate. [CN and WE begin decline at 25°F]

Toxicompositor: The serpent folk find their own venoms quaint and insufficiently various. A serpent-folk poisoner (give him a Poisons ability of 8+) can develop toxins for (and from) anything organic, quicken the onset of poisons, replicate seemingly innocent symptoms, or brew salves that advance rust or otherwise weaken and destroy inorganic matter. Each formula costs 1 point from the ophidian's Poisons ability. By spending Poisons points, he can increase the Difficulty (+1 for 1 point spent) for all tests against his own venom or that of other serpent folk. [CN for organics only]

Vapor Breath: Serpent folk can breathe poison out into a vapor cloud similar to tear gas (Scuffling attack, Close range). The cloud hangs in place for 1-3 rounds and can block passages. It takes effect one round after inhalation; victims resist as normal serpent-folk venom; all Health losses are 2 less than full venom bite effects. [WE to Near; hangs in place for 3-6 rounds]

VARIATIONS

As with the "Gods and Titans" section in the corebook, this compendium is intentionally self-contradictory. Its facts and theories

come from Lovecraft, from later writers, and from the universe of possibilities opened up between them.

- If a serpent-folk assassin or warrior kills a human, he can command that human's ghost forever.
- Serpent folk can take human appearance at will.
- Serpent folk must devour a human to take his shape.
- Serpent folk can mate with both true snakes and with humans.
- Serpent folk reproduce by laying eggs. Thanks to the curse of Yig or some other ineluctable racial doom, very few fertile eggs appear even in a century. Tampering with or threatening an ophidian clan's egg guarantees centuries of malevolent vendetta, poisonings, and revenge.
- Serpent folk now prefer to implant their eggs in healthy human hosts, both for concealment and because newborn serpent people devour the "mother" for sustenance.
- Before the fall of Valusia, a clade of serpent folk took to the water (like sea snakes) where they warred with the Deep Ones. Yig's curse on them created degenerate blends of serpent people and Deep Ones lurking in deep ocean trenches.
- At their height, the serpent people searched and excavated the ruins of the other races including Elder Thing cities in Antarctica and Pnakotus in Australia; from one such expedition, they recovered the Shining Trapezohedron.
- The Trapezohedron converted a powerful cult of serpent people to the worship of Nyarlathotep. This cult continued as that of Set-Apep

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in Stygia and Egypt, various Gnostic cults in Europe and America, and the Petro tradition in Vodou.

- Like dinosaurs, serpent folk are warm-blooded, with sharp vision and powerful quick-twitching muscles and reflexes.
- Serpent folk hate cats. The feeling is mutual.
- Serpent folk devour, swallow, and digest live prey. In a pinch, they will dismember a grown human and swallow his limbs and torso, usually leaving the relatively meatless head.
- Serpent folk have long abandoned the eating of impure natural foods, and now confine themselves to synthetic types of aliment.
- Serpent folk cannot and may not resist riddles, and hold themselves irrevocably to the outcome of a riddle contest.
- The so-called “serpent people” are actually evolved Troodons, roughly humanoid dinosaurs of the Cretaceous. They escaped their extinction into hyperspace, dwelling in parallel dimensions and curves of time.
- Over the millennia, serpent-folk geneticists altered and re-coded stretches of the human genome, inserting Trojan horses for further manipulation of all kinds: sorcerous, psionic, sensory, reproductive, evolutionary, and cognitive. “Nordic” humans descended from Hyperboreans are especially vulnerable to such rescripting and control.
- The mighty ophidian city of Valusia gave its name to first the kingdom, then the empire, and finally the subcontinent. It stood

on the site that is now London, or Cairo, or Los Angeles, or Mexico City.

- After the fall of Valusia, the serpent people removed to the underground realm of red-litten Yoth beneath North America, where they achieved if anything an even higher degree of sadistic, brilliant civilization.
- When the ophidians of Yoth began the worship of Tsathoggua (imported from neighboring N’Kai) the anger of Yig destroyed them and drove most serpent folk down the path to degeneracy.
- Tsathoggua-worshipping serpent folk who fled from Yoth into the Dreamlands remain largely penned inside the Vaults of Zin by ravenous ghastrs, although serpent mages and dreamers wander the Dreamlands as freely as (and often in the guise of) human dreamers.
- Some serpent folk clans, staving off degeneration by desperate magics and blasphemous sciences, enslaved human kingdoms like Lemuria, Kambuja, and Stygia.
- Sss’haa, the high priest of Yig, led a saving remnant of serpent folk out of Yoth into Hyperborea 5 million years ago, to settle below Mount Voormithadreth. This city vanished with the coming of Ithaqua.
- The covert serpent folk hold on the human successor empires of the Thurian Age was finally broken in 18,000 B.C. by Kull, the Atlantean emperor of Valusia.
- Yig created the Serpent People 250 million (or 150 million) years ago, shortly after His own emergence from the First Egg.

- Serpent folk epigraphy is inherently repellent to human eyes.
- Serpent folk cannot utter the words “ka nama kaa lajerama” as their mouths are the wrong shape. This shibboleth became a talisman during the wars of humans and beast folk in the older world.
- The serpent folk were the last of the old races to fall to the rise of man. Their final redoubt, the city of Yanyoga in what is now Africa, finally succumbed to Cimmerian raiders approximately 10,000 years ago.
- The geneticist Ssruthaa and the hierophant Ssathasaa are rival immortal serpent men; most other survivors follow the lead of one or the other. Either could topple, reshape, or rule human society without the other’s interference.
- Serpent folk infiltrators have interbred with the royal families of Europe and Asia, the founders of the great family banks and industrial concerns, and humanity’s major magical adept bloodlines.
- Spirits of dead serpent folk can possess humans, eventually transforming them into serpent folk by racial atavism. This can take generations; the ghost is patient.
- Serpent folk can hibernate for years or even millennia with little ill effect.
- Some serpent-folk sorcerers, defeated or balked in ancient wars, cast themselves into hundred-million-year slumbers in hidden rock cysts or sarcophagi. When they awaken, they are often impatient with modern constraints and human contamination.

Serpent Folk

MYTHIC ECHOES

“AMONG THE MEN OF THE YOUNGER EARTH STOLE THE FRIGHTFUL MONSTERS OF THE ELDER PLANET, SAFEGUARDED BY THEIR HORRID WISDOM AND MYSTICISMS, TAKING ALL FORMS AND SHAPES, DOING DEEDS OF HORROR SECRETLY.”

- ROBERT E. HOWARD, “THE SHADOW KINGDOM”

As with the variations and possible powers above, the serpent-folk might more closely match their various mythic depictions than Howard’s or Smith’s fiction.

According to Howard, the degenerate serpent folk described above as the Children of the Night are the historic origin of the legends of “little people”: not just bogies or goblins, but dwarves, sprites, and fairies of all kinds. For example, the Welsh *tylwyth teg* (“fair folk”) are described as beautiful, but this may be a result of pheromones and hypnosis. More likely, the name is only terrified flattery, just as their other atropotaic name of *Bendith y Mamau* (“mother’s blessing”) actually refers to the Curse of Yig birth defect. Their green garb and underground dwellings give the game away. Such “little folk” legends are global – this section restrains itself to examples of colorably serpentine humanoids or shapeshifters.

Attorcrope (Saxony)

These malevolent, poisonous spirits also appear in Anglo-Saxon England. Bipedal upright snakes, they dwell wherever regular snakes are plentiful. Their ill-temper is only exceeded by their curiosity. The unke, a crowned serpentine fairy found in western and southern Germany, may be related.

Fuath (Scotland)

The general name for malign, hateful, and dangerous spirits in Scots folklore, fuath more specifically appear as long-



haired, deformed, noseless folk with tails. They generally live in water, but some lurk inland. As with many coded legends of serpent-folk, the fuatha wear green. Specific fuathan include the beithir or behir (a sprite associated with snakes and lightning), the fachan (a fuath with one hand, one leg, and one eye), and the web-footed, shapeshifting vough, which has inexplicably married into a number of Scottish noble families including clan Munro.

Lamia (Poetic)

The classical Lamia of Homer was a beautiful woman stricken hideous and childless by Hera; her vast appetite

led her to devour children. By the 3rd century A.D., Philostratus’ poetic lamia was a vampiric, shapeshifting creature occasionally described as a metaphorical serpent; John Keats (1819) established her ophidian true form. Whether this indicates that Philostratus and Keats uncovered the serpent-folk role at the heart of the original legend, or borrowed the name of the classical devourer to describe a predatory serpent woman, is unclear. The poetic lamia provides intellectual stimulation and knowledge, even inspiration, to philosophers and artists – a possible indication of superior serpent-folk lore offered to human servants.

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Mama Dlo (Trinidad)

This beautiful snake-woman has mermaid traits: combing her hair and dwelling on the rocky seashore. She makes deals like the poetic lamia; her favors cause sterility. As the mermaid she appears in Jamaica and Guiana.

The nure-onna of Japan is similar: a serpent yokai with the head of a woman. She, too, washes her hair by the shore obsessively. Like the pauna'a (below), she attracts victims with a false baby, this one in a bundle. She then drains their blood with her tongue, like the lamia.

Naga (India, South-East Asia)

The various Hindu and Vedic epics describe the naga as immensely powerful (and sometimes simply immense) serpents, capable of dealing equally with the gods. Usually malevolent, they can be tamed or converted – a note of typically human optimism. Buddhist naga often take human form, and are more likely to act as philosophical conundrums than as evil sorcerers. Naga (especially multi-headed naga) are associated with rivers or oceans, sometimes embodying them; naga often provide legitimacy to royal families. Naga in India, Thibet, and Java rule an underground realm; in other countries, the naga kingdom is under water.

Pauna'a (Oregon, Nevada, Arizona)

This Paiute name translates to “water babies,” because they mimic the sound of a crying baby to lure human meals to them. They have long green or black hair and large fanged mouths; they live in streams and caves. Their underground cooking fires create hot springs. Northern Paiute pauna'a resemble mermaids or half-snakes; Panamint water babies are grotesquely deformed; Shoshone pau'ona are invisible. The creatures are intimately associated with magic, or *puha*.

The Seminoles of Florida also have their *nak-ne-chen-te* “human snakes,” malevolent tricksters of the deep swamps.

Xana (Asturias)

In Galicia and Portugal, these beautiful snake-women are called the *mouras encantadas*. They live in caves under the hills, in isolated towers, and prehistoric dolmens and barrows which they or their vanished menfolk built. They keep treasure, and spin and weave eternally; a possible reference to the continuous weaving of spells by serpent-folk sorcerers. They can be “awakened” by a ritual act or question; in some tales they kidnap human babies.

INVESTIGATIONS

Keepers should treat this section, and use these elements, even more idiosyncratically.

Clues

Perforce, the clues in this section mostly point to “conventional” serpent folk as painted in Howard’s stories. Feel free to adjust them at will.

Accounting: The signature on this form is a bad forgery, but to get at the safe deposit box, he would have had to appear in person – and the bank manager would definitely have recognized an imposter.

Anthropology: Among the Pueblo, Hopi, and other American Indian tribes of the Southwest, the Snake People were the first people, emerging from the interior world of Sipapu at the dawn of time. The To’ahani clan of the Navajo, the Tsu’ngyam of the Hopi – either of them might have traditions that could give us a handle on what we’re dealing with here.

Archaeology: The Great Serpent Mound in Ohio sits on top of a cryptoexplosion, a geological formation resembling a volcanic crater with no volcanism. If the stratigraphy is right, this explosion dates back to the Permian Era – could the mound builders have intended this not as an image of the Great Serpent, but as its gravestone? (Geology)

Architecture: The rock around the foundation of Tolliver’s house is weirdly fused into glass, possibly by directed high heat. An open fire would have burned down the building; this was something intentional, possibly something ritual. It reminds me of the “vitrified forts” in Scotland, dated to the time of the Picts. (Archaeology)

Art History: Going through the litter of records and wax cylinders and sheet music in her study: the Irish fiddle lament “Bonaparte’s Retreat,” “Bonny Bunch of Roses,” the French street song “Colin Prend sa Hotte,” the 17th century Algerian melody “Kradoutja,” “The Streets of Cairo,” “Sheik of Araby,” the Louis Armstrong number “Tight Like This” – they all share a certain motif, often called “the snake-charmer song.” Could Marie have been trying to find a sort of musical defense or exorcism against these things – or is her research what attracted their attention?

Assess Honesty: “He is highly intellectual and a good companion except for a slight aloofness and a rather callous indifference which may serve to mask an extremely sensitive nature.”

Astronomy: No, wait – if Sir Henry is correct in dating these megaliths to 2900 B.C. they don’t point to Polaris at all. In the third and fourth millennium B.C., the pole star was Thuban, Alpha Draconis. This wasn’t a bear cult, it was a serpent cult.

Biology: Snakes become torpid after a large meal – it sounds horrible, but now might be the best time to rush the thing. (Outdoorsman)

Bureaucracy: There’s something odd about the councilors for the National Trust and Office of Works commissioners and the local antiquarian society; it’s almost like one small group has passed membership around amongst itself. And here’s another thing, their names, back to the 1300s -- Linton, Longwitton, Dunton, Laidley – all names of dragon sites. (+Occult for dragon sites)

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Chemistry: This poison can't be natural. It's too perfect, too all-encompassing. A long-chain protein like ricin, symbiotized with something like botulin – some kind of latent anaerobic bacterium, anyhow – in a thallium carbonate shell. This was built, and built to last; it could poison someone a million years from now.

Cop Talk: That sounds like the ravings of John O'Donnel, hung in 1932 for the strangulation murder of his friend David Ketrick. He claimed Ketrick was "marked with the brand of the beast," an atavism inheriting the blood of a reptile-human hybrid race. (Law)

Credit Rating (5+): "When I was a boy working my way through a certain university ... This is in strictest confidence, you understand. But my roommate talked in his sleep. I began to listen and put his disjointed mumbling together. And in his mutterings I first heard of the ancient cult hinted at by Von Junzt; of the king who rules the Dark Empire, which was a revival of an older, darker empire dating back into the Stone Age; and of the great, nameless cavern where stands the Dark Man—the image of Bran Mak Morn, carved in his likeness by a master-hand while the great king yet lived, and to which each worshipper of Bran makes a pilgrimage once in his or her lifetime."

Cryptography: These symbols resemble those on the enigmatic Phaistos Disk discovered in Crete in 1908. It dates from the Minoan era, an era of snake-worship and (if the legends of Daedalus are true) uncanny technology. (Archaeology)

Evidence Collection: There, pinched in the join of the hidden door, a few dry disks, possibly rubbed off while pushing against the counterweight. They almost look like shed snake scales, but they're pretty big for that.

Forensics: There were two large punctures in the throat, with only a trickle of blood near them. The blood remained tacky for an unusually long

period post mortem. The skin around the punctures is friable, almost necrotic, and emits a greenish oily liquid. (The examining assistant got some on his hand, and it tingled for several minutes.) The extremities were bluish, and the face engorged with blood and bright blue. The protruding tongue was swollen and black, and the eyes purpled. Cause of death was paralysis of the chest muscles.

Geology: "Exactly where the entrance should have been, my fingers detected a difference in material, a section which was rougher than the rest of the wall. I was convinced that it was of comparatively modern workmanship; the tunnel had been walled up."

History: It's a little alarming how many ancient cultures had half-snakes as their founders: Fu-Hsi, the serpent emperor of China; Cecrops, the serpent king of Athens; Nirah, the demi-snake adviser to the Sumerian kings; Kulkulkan, the Mayan "feathered serpent" culture-hero; the Nagas of Funan, Champa, and elsewhere in Indo-China.

Languages: The language on the recording might be Ubykh, which has the most sibilants (27) of any known tongue. Nobody knows where that language comes from, and Czar Alexander III deported the Ubykh en masse in 1864 for reasons nobody quite knows either.

Law: I talked to the probate clerk and got copies of the Devenish family's wills going back to 1655. All of them have the same incredibly loose standard for inheritance: present yourself to the estate's steward (or, recently, to the senior partner of the firm) and "upon his convinced testimony," you were declared the heir.

Library Use: If we're looking for 16th-century records of "Pictish survival," petroglyphs, or snake-carvings, they'll be in the papers of Sir Robert Sibbald, the Royal Geographer of Scotland. In 1683, he announced a volume called *Scotia*

Antiqua, but he never published it despite gathering material for forty years.

Medicine: When she shoved past you to retrieve the glove, her hand accidentally brushed yours -- her body temperature is barely 60 degrees. If she were human, she'd be dead.

Occult: The sigil sketched on the floor is that of the Goëtic demon Valac, "who reveals where serpents can be seen, and delivers them harmless to the magician." Looks like Viola was looking for the same thing we're looking for ... if not in quite the same way.

Oral History: "The country folk were predominantly Celtic; here the Saxon invaders had never prevailed, and the legends reached back, in that long-settled countryside, further than anywhere else in England ... The Little People, of course, had their part in the lore. Legend said that this cavern was one of their last strongholds against the conquering Celts, and hinted at lost tunnels, long fallen in or blocked up, connecting the cave with a network of subterranean corridors which honeycombed the hills."

Outdoorsman: No poisonous snake has a head big enough to have made those two punctures in one bite. (Biology)

Pharmacy: These leaves are for the hallucinogenic drink ayahuasca or yagé. Used in South American shamanism and the Brazilian Santo Daime sect, yagé reveals visions of serpents inside and surrounding the shaman; could she have been trying past-life regression, perhaps? (Anthropology, Biology, Occult)

Photography: Look at the shadow in this street photograph: it's shaped like a snake's head, not a human head. Whatever keeps it looking human slipped a bit – the silver nitrate in the processing, the time delay, some quirk of the lens? We might just have a way to find them. (0-point spend if the method is irreproducible, 1-point spend if

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photographs are tricky, highly delayed detectors, 2-point spend if reliable)

Physics: Under the electron microscope this obsidian blade reveals single-molecule striations of heavy metals and radioactives – deadly toxic, and completely outside the realm of natural mineral formation. (Geology)

Sense Trouble: This apartment smells like the snake house at the zoo.

Streetwise: I don't know what happened to Murray on that house job up north, but when he came back he was like a different bloke. That's when he started his own crew,

and got his hands on that primo junk, then ran off the Greek from the whole of Hyde Park. Won't stop till he runs the whole riverfront, is my guess.

Theology: It's extremely dangerous to follow the serpent-thing into Bombay just now – this is the fourth day after the new moon. Since this month is Shraavana in the Hindu calendar, that means tomorrow is Nag Panchami, the snake-worship festival.

SCENARIO SEEDS

Serpent folk appear in the original stories either as devious infiltrators or

bloodthirsty degenerates. These two seeds present a bloodthirsty infiltrator and a clan of devious degenerates.

Ten Little Sapiens

To gain scientific prestige for Mussolini's regime, the Italian research ship *Attanasio* sails the Ionian Sea mapping and probing the oldest sea floor in the world: 200 million years old or more, a crust laid down in the Permian Era! But something is wrong with the radio – it neither sends nor receives. Perhaps it began when the dredges pulled up that strange green crystal – from one perspective, it almost looks like the eye of a baleful serpent!

The scientists and military men on board have been hastily assembled from many nations by a lavish if scientifically ignorant propaganda machine. And now, one by one, they are dying mysteriously: poisoned, throat cut, electrocuted with no visible mechanism, choked to death, strangled, etc. Nobody, however, has been thrown overboard. That would profane the soil of Valusia, which lies 3,500 meters below.

Use these ten sample suspects/victims:

James Marston: British oceanographer and geologist.

Estelle Roger: French journalist and occultist.

CdF Giovanni Maccartorio: Italian naval commander of the expedition.

Ruggiero Tomassi: Italian hydrophonics and electrical expert.

Carlo-Emmanuele Brentano: Italian paleontologist and expert in Permian fossils.

Dr. George Edwards: American doctor, dilettante, and amateur ichthyologist.

Wilhelm-Heinrich Blücher: German marine biologist and Ahnenerbe member.

Filippo di Lombardi: Italian journalist and undercover agent (for Italian OVRA or SIS, or French Deuxième Bureau, or British SIS, or NKVD).

Vera Clayton: British chemist and popular writer of murder mysteries.

Oliver Arlington: American physicist (Ph.D., Miskatonic U.) and mathematician.

The actual killer is a serpent woman, shapeshifting at will to conceal the

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time of death, fake her own murder, or anything else needed to throw suspicion off herself. She considers the murders a game, but takes her cause very seriously: the Eye of Yig must not fall into human hands. She gained access to the ship at Civitavecchia (the port of Rome) before launch (possibly killing and replacing one of the ten), and magically rendered the radio inert until her project is complete. Once she kills everyone on board who demonstrates any scientific or Mythos knowledge, she takes the Eye, destroys any record of its discovery, and then disguises herself as one of the murder victims, or simply hides out and slips away when the ship docks.

There's space in the roster for military divers, scientists, spies, journalists, etc. The Investigators might have been brought aboard with the promise of research funding or access to the Vatican archives, or this might be the introductory scenario for a campaign – the survivors team up to hunt down the serpent woman and enter the world of the Mythos. Adventurous groups can play this as a round robin, with players switching to new characters as old ones get killed off.

The Hills Have Nictitating Membranes

Construction of a new dam by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation changes everything in the little town of Anasazi Trail, Arizona. Lots of single young men have flooded in to work on the dam, among them Zuñi, Navajo, and Hopi Indians from the state's reservation network. Money comes from the federal government and from the new construction businesses; bars are full and fights are common. People appear from nowhere and vanish on the bus – or into the desert hills. Suitable historical dams include:

- Mormon Flat Dam (1923-1925) 51 mi E of Phoenix; hydroelectric
- Stewart Mountain Dam (1928-1930) 41 mi NW of Phoenix; hydroelectric

- Parker Dam (1934-1938) on the Colorado River, 61 mi SW of Kingman; hydroelectric; workers' colony becomes Lake Havasu City in 1946

- Bartlett Dam (1936-1939) 48 mi NE of Phoenix; irrigation

The dam has also disrupted a degenerate serpent folk warren in the hills above the town. But rather than pull even farther back into the wastes, this nest has decided to sink their fangs into the town. Using Spanish gold and threats to consolidate control over the local marijuana business and the semi-criminal Stedman clan, the serpent folk steal materials and drug or coerce migrant labor into building an impregnable warren high in the hills near a ruined Anasazi kiva. Eventually, they plan to run the whole town through their Stedman proxies, but right now they need slaves, brides, and meat for the immense, slowly waking Worm under the mountain.

Investigators could stumble on (or be asked to solve) anything from a rash of missing girls (blamed on all the new workers) to the torture of a Navajo medicine man (blamed on local racists) to exhausted workers (fairly-led by poisoned reefer and the serpent folk) and weird sightings at the dam site. Suddenly prosperous Stedmans and worried Navajo clan leaders give leads; the serpent folk give ambushes and poisonings and teeth in the night.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

As with some of our previous Hideous Creatures, the received wisdom on the serpent folk comes more from RPG scenarios than from the scant Mythos literature on the topic. Lovecraft mentions the Valusian serpent people in passing in “The Shadow Out of Time,” “The Haunter of the Dark,” and “The Diary of Alonzo Typer.”

Lovecraft was tipping the quill to his friend Robert E. Howard, who invented and introduced the serpent people as shapeshifting prehumans plotting against

Kull's control of Valusia in “The Shadow Kingdom.” Howard then worked their degenerate implied descendants into his ongoing “Pictish mythos” in four main stories. In “Children of the Night,” Aryan warriors hunt the titular debased snake-people; Bran Mak Morn deals with the serpent-descended “Worms of the Earth” for vengeance against the Romans; the ophidian “People of the Dark” harry three Celts; in “The Little People” it is the Picts who have interbred with the serpent-men and now threaten Joan Costigan.

The elegant primordial serpent-folk came on stage again in “The Seven Geases” by Clark Ashton Smith, but then survived only in decaying pastiche: “Shadows in the Skull” by Lin Carter and L. Sprague de Camp pits Conan against the last redoubt of the serpent people, while Lin Carter sets his own hero Thongor on them in *Thongor and the Wizard of Lemuria*. Considerably better than either is Karl Edward Wagner's Bran Mak Morn continuation, *Legion of Shadows*, featuring immortal serpent-wizard exposition.

The Yig tales Lovecraft ghost-wrote for Zealia Bishop -- “The Curse of Yig” and “The Mound” -- are only tangentially related to the serpent folk. Bishop and Lovecraft's lamia tale “Medusa's Coil” has a stronger thematic connection, although its racist “revelation” drowns the story.

In the modern Mythos cycle, “Snake Oil” by Matthew Baugh handles Yig in *Frontier Cthulhu*; “Serpents of Albion” by Adrian Chamberlin appears in *Sword & Mythos* and takes us back to Howard's legendary Britain.

Keepers with a fondness for antique conventions of storytelling will find much to appreciate in *The Face in the Abyss* by A. Merritt, featuring a heroic snake-mother priestess. The opposite in every way, and at points barely a novel so much as an unhinged yawp, is Bram Stoker's last novel *The Lair of the White Worm*. And yet it has a bizarre beauty of its own, and Lady Arabella March is one of serpentdom's great villains.