THE HAUNTING OF COLDWOOD MANOR

by Shannon Lewis

Creature: *Banshee* | **Level:** *4*

SYNOPSIS

The dead are rising from the grounds of Coldwood Manor, and Lord Cunningham is looking for enterprising adventurers to take care of the problem. Lady Cunningham is ill, and the ceaseless cries of the banshees have only made her condition more fragile. He considers the wailing apparitions a simple nuisance; his wife believes they portend her death. The party may discover a truth that defies them both.

ADVENTURE HOOK

This adventure is intended for a party of 3-5 4th level adventurers who have traveled to Coldwood Manor at Lord Cunningham's request, either as an established party or as individuals responding to an open call for adventurers.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

Coldwood Manor is a remote estate. In nearby villages, little is known of the people who live there beyond that the family is very old and has occupied the manor house for as long as anyone can remember. It is widely accepted that the place is haunted—not as superstition or caution but a longstanding fact. Once there, it becomes obvious the manor is not a place anyone would want to live, and not many people do: the house is large but only occupied by the Lord, Lady, and a small personal staff.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- **Lord Cunningham:** NE male human **vampire spawn**. The self-important Lord of a crumbling manor, he gives lip service to his wife's health but seems more irritated with the situation than concerned for her wellbeing. He is secretly a vampire whose many murdered wives have returned to haunt him.
- **Molly Beck:** LG female human **commoner**. The butler of Coldwood Manor and former lady-in-waiting to Lady Cunningham. She is deeply concerned for the wellbeing of her friend, and unsettled by the atmosphere of the estate.
- **Matthias:** NG male human **guard**. The young groundskeeper of the Manor who holds more loyalty to the place than its master.
- **Lady Cunningham:** LN female human **noble**. Lord Cunningham's young bride; suffers from a "wasting disease" that has her confined to bed.
- **The Banshees:** CG female human **banshees**. Victims of Lord Cunningham's appetite, these apparitions seek to prevent him from killing again.

CHAPTER 1 – ANSWERING THE CALL

In the last village you heard that Coldwood Manor was remote, but you travel for the better part of a day before you reach the gates. The nearest neighbor is already a distant memory.

The estate is carved out of dense woodlands, a wide rectangle of lawns and gardens and a lone manor house bordered by forest. It is clear that the property was once incredibly grand, but it hasn't been kept up for some time. The house is sagging and gray with age and the garden, while still lovely, is overgrown.

You approach the manor just as the sun begins to set. A chill settles on your skin, and an unearthly wail fills the air, echoing all around you. The sound follows you to the front door, where a young woman in a formal suit is waiting for you. Looking both worried and relieved she says, *"Have you come to help us?"*

The woman is Molly Beck, the butler of Coldwood Manor. She is young, perhaps early twenties, and professional but clearly nervous as she escorts the party to Lord Cunningham's study. The manor is richly decorated but, as with the exterior, not well-kept, and the party sees no other staff. The study is lined with old books and decorated richly, but is noticeably dusty and has a faint musty odor.

Lord Cunningham is seated, reading. He is an older man, a silvery mid-forty, and acts as though the party has kept him waiting unduly. He should be roleplayed as haughty and terse—right on the line between understandably stressed and irritable, and suspiciously evasive and dismissive. When questioned he provides the following information:

- The banshees began appearing about a month ago and with increasing frequency ever since. They haven't physically harmed anyone yet, but the sound is constant and maddening.
- His wife is ill, and the noise is disturbing her—she superstitiously believes the sound portends her death. He reluctantly admits the banshees' appearance coincides with her illness.
- This isn't the first time the banshees have appeared—he doesn't know the cause, but apparently the last group of adventurers didn't do a very good job of getting rid of them.
- If pressed about when or why the apparitions have appeared in the past, he hastily recounts the explanation he was given: the manor has been haunted for as long as anyone can remember, and the banshees are some long-forgotten women cursed by their own vanity to wander the earth causing ugliness and misery. On a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) or (History) check, a character will recall hearing of a similar legend, but one with an elven rather than human origin.

Lord Cunningham quickly tires of the party's questioning and summons the butler to lead them to the gardens. If they request to wait until morning, Lord Cunningham indicates the banshees are most active at night and insists they proceed immediately. Any attempt to speak with his wife is firmly rebuffed. If the party questions Molly while she escorts them to the garden, she is nervous but chatty and will readily provide the following information:

- She and Lady Cunningham are close friends; Molly took this position when the Lady wed.
- There are very few staff members. Most of them joined the household at the same time Molly did.
- Lady Cunningham's health has been steadily declining since they arrived at the Manor.
- The banshees don't seem to have caused any damage and haven't attacked anyone, but wail at all hours of the day and night.

If the party asks to see Lady Cunningham, Molly also refuses them: her condition is too delicate, and only the Lord's physician has access to her—even Molly hasn't been allowed to wait on her. The party can attempt to convince her that they might be able to help with a DC 15 Charisma (Persuasion) check. On a failure, she clams up and hurries them outside. On a success, Molly leads the party to Lady Cunningham's bedroom door but allows them no further while she's present. If the party chooses to continue to investigate the manor, they find it eerily empty and the Lady's bedroom lived in (with signs her illness is being tended to) but unoccupied.

INTO THE GARDEN

Molly promises to answer the door if the party knocks but has no desire to go into the garden herself, and locks the door to the garden behind them.

> Dusk has fallen on Coldwood Manor, bathing the grounds in shadow. The gardens stretch out before you in full view, rose bushes growing wild and ornate statues covered with moss. Faint wisps of fog creep in from the forest, obscuring the not-too-distant trees in haze. Another plaintive wail rises up from the garden before you.

The party encounters the first **banshee** shuffling listlessly through the garden. She appears little more than a bundle of rags and bones that echo hollowly as she moves, alternating between quiet sobbing and piercing wailing. She does not attack the party unless provoked, and she only uses her Wail or Horrifying Visage attacks if attacked first.

Almost any act of kindness or attempt to reason with the banshee will calm her, particularly if the party attempts to persuade her that she is harming Lady Cunningham. This banshee appears mummified and desiccated on inspection and is unable to communicate with the party, but indicates the far end of the property if asked why she is here.

Note: if the party does decide to attack, she responds with her Wail. It is entirely possible that this results in a total party kill. If this happens, the party awakes in the groundskeeper's small cottage home, and with his hospitality, receive the benefits of a long rest over the course of their interaction.

DEVELOPMENT

Once the banshee is dealt with, the groundskeeper appears to assist fallen or wounded party members and question the party's presence in the garden.

CHAPTER 2 – THE HAUNTED GARDEN

The groundskeeper Matthias is young, twenty at the most, and lives in a humble cottage on the grounds. He is hospitable but hesitant to reveal too much to the party. If questioned he tells them:

- The grounds are full of spirits, but they've never attacked him and don't seem to mean any harm.
- Previous adventurers have tried everything from fighting to religious rituals, but the banshees always come back eventually—usually within weeks or months.
- The banshees congregate—and seem to get lost—in the hedge maze in the heart of the garden.
- Matthias was born on the grounds and is the longest-standing staff member. A successful DC 12 Charisma (Persuasion) check convinces him to admit that he's still here because he believes he has seen his mother among the ghosts.
- Pressing him on the matter reveals his mother died of a wasting disease—much like the current lady Cunningham...and the former lady Cunningham. He is too young to remember, but he thinks there was at least one more.

Once the party is patched up and have their questions answered, Matthias directs them to the maze.

THE PHANTOM MAZE

> The grounds of Coldwood Manor are too extensive to be maintained by a single man, but the hedge maze is clearly the greatest fruit of his labor. Though it has lost its shape in places, the walls are impressively tall (too high to see over easily), and judging from the size, it is both large and intricate. Dusk has begun to fade to evening, and the maze itself seems to murmur, echoing muted sobs punctuated by sharp, bone-chilling wails. The nighttime fog has grown thicker, winding its way into the maze as you pass through the opening in the tall hedges.

As the party makes its way through the maze, each member should make a DC 15 Wisdom (Survival) check in turn. Both successes and failures count as progress toward the center of the maze, but on each failed check, the party comes to a dead end and a **specter** solidifies from the mist. The specters are formless,

ghostly shapes that emanate soft, feminine sobbing and do not attack unless provoked. They are unable to communicate with the party, but should be increasingly unsettling—weeping and following along behind the party as they move through the maze. Sobs also seem to come from the hedge itself, and tendrils of mist grasp harmlessly at the party like cold, clammy fingertips, as though the maze is completely filled with specters they can't see. Characters who succeed on a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) or Intelligence (Investigation) check to take a closer look at their surroundings as they navigate the maze will notice paved memorial stones throughout—each inscribed with a woman's name and a date, spaced one to twenty years apart and dating back hundreds of years. Any attempt to detect or discern magic will reveal that the maze itself is non-magical but filled with spiritual energy. After enough survival checks to navigate the maze (1-2 per party member, at the DM's discretion), the party emerges from the hedge and the ghostly forms behind them dissipate into mist.

THE HEART OF THE MAZE

A grand fountain occupies the center of the hedge maze, and a spectral woman kneels before it. She is dressed in regal clothes, but her dress is torn and stained with blood. From where you stand, the fountain appears to be filled with blood, and the woman is frantically scrubbing cloth in the wide basin, sobbing and wailing.

Once again, the banshee only fights to defend herself, and only uses her special attacks if the party attacks her first.

If desired, a **specter** or two can be added to increase the difficulty of this encounter. In the event of a party-devastating Wail, Matthias once again comes to the rescue, but this time provides only a short rest (and perhaps a stern reminder that the banshees hadn't attacked anyone until the party showed up).

If the party chooses to try to speak with the banshee and gets a closer look at her, she appears more "alive" than the last—emaciated rather than withered and unable to speak but expressive. She, too, indicates the far end of the property if asked why she is here. If the party examines the banshee herself (and got a close look at the first one), they notice similarities in coloring and build, but this one has a distinctive facial mole the previous one did not.

On a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) or Intelligence (Investigation) check of the area, the party notices memorial plaques embossed around the edge of the fountain—newer and better cared for than the stones in the maze. If questioned, the banshee gestures to a specific plaque: the most recent, Elaine, dated the year prior.

BEYOND THE GARDEN WALLS

The "central" courtyard of the maze turns out to be most of the way through it, and the party is able to navigate the rest of the way with relative ease.

A small but well-kept mausoleum stands before you, emblazoned with the Cunningham name. There is no surrounding graveyard, only a single ornamental stone building. As you approach, you catch a whiff of old death on the air. The door to the tomb is standing ajar.

The smell inside the mausoleum is terrible, and the party quickly identifies the source: a body is laid out on a central pedestal, covered by a simple white sheet. An inspection of the tomb reveals a few sealed but unlabeled internment niches, one of which has the front slab removed, as if in preparation to receive a body. An inspection of the corpse, with a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Perception or Medicine) or Intelligence (Investigation) check, reveals the body to be the same woman as the banshee found in the center of the maze (though desiccated to the point of mummification), and the cause of death to be a pair of suspicious puncture wounds on her throat.

DEVELOPMENT

Once the party finishes investigating the area, they hear a human scream coming from the garden.

CHAPTER 3 – LADY CUNNINGHAM

The cries of the banshees are unearthly and all-present, but the scream you hear now is sharp, clear, and distinctly human—and coming from deeper in the garden. As you rush towards the sound, you discover a small, dingy greenhouse at the edge of the property, the windows crusted with grime. Inside, a woman is screaming. Outside, a banshee with the form of a starved, matronly woman is clawing at the glass, echoing each scream with a piercing, desperate wail.

The party can choose either to fight their way past the banshee or open the door and let her inside with them. The banshee is not blocking the party's progress and, like the others, does not attack unless provoked.

If the party attacks and kills all three banshees proceed to *Part A*.

If at least one banshee is left unharmed proceed to *Part B*.

PART A

You enter the greenhouse and find Lord Cunningham bent over the body of a thin, pale woman—his wife, by her dress. Her throat is marked with two small puncture wounds, and as he rises, he wipes a bit of blood from his lips. *"Ahh, quiet at last. Have you come for your payment?"*

If the players accept Lord Cunningham's compensation, skip to *Conclusion A*.

If the players refuse or attempt to question him, skip to "The Fight."

PART B

As you open the greenhouse door, a beam of light shoots past you, striking Lord Cunningham and repelling him from the prone body of his wife. There is blood on her throat to match the blood on his mouth, and he smiles bitterly. *"I see you didn't take care of my problem, either."*

If the players attempt to talk their way out of fighting Lord Cunningham, skip to *Conclusion A*.

If the players decide to attack, skip to *The Fight*.

THE FIGHT

Egad! Lord Cunningham is revealed to be a **vampire spawn**! That explains all the lady-ghosts on his property. If the party spared even one banshee, Lady Cunningham gains the protection of the spell spirit guardians. For each additional banshee spared, consider the spell cast at a higher spell slot, increasing the damage by 1d8 per banshee. This spell excludes the party and deals radiant damage.

Note: for a party of three that did not spare any banshees, this encounter is potentially deadly, so consider scaling down the difficulty by lowering Lord Cunningham's health or not using either his Regeneration skill or Multiattack.

If the party spared at least one banshee, read this before beginning combat:

Lady Cunningham's body is surrounded by light, and the haggard, withered women you saw out in the garden are revitalized, their terrible cries turning into a beautiful, wordless song.

Tactics: At the start of the fight, Lord Cunningham casts spider climb and attempts to get out of range of the *spirit guardians*, if any.

DEVELOPMENT

When Lord Cunningham is defeated, his body turns to ash, the barrier around Lady Cunningham (if active) dissipates, and she revives. If all three banshees were spared, as they fade away, the light dims to a single point and leaves a *driftglobe* in its place. Skip to *Conclusion B*.

CONCLUSION A

If the party overlooks Lord Cunningham's nature and past indiscretions, he is happy to reward them each with a potion of healing and 5 gold pieces before sending them on their way.

CONCLUSION B

Lady Cunningham is disoriented and weak, but with Matthias' assistance, the party is able to escort her out of the greenhouse and back through the garden. Outside, the wailing has ceased and the fog has dissipated. The night is crystal clear. Back at the manor, Molly rushes to aid Lady Cunningham.

When Lady Cunningham has recovered, she thanks you for your service...and your silence. With the Lord of the house gone, she intends to revitalize the estate and would rather atone for its sordid history without it being made public. If the party agrees to keep quiet about what happened, she rewards them by doubling her husband's offer and giving each of them 10 gold.

REWARDS

Characters who complete this adventure may earn the following rewards:

XP REWARDS

Add the total XP of creatures defeated by the party, then divide by the number of characters to determine individual rewards.

Obstacle	XP
Banshee	1,100
Specter	200
Vampire Spawn	1,800

TREASURE REWARDS

If all three banshees are spared, the party also receives a *driftglobe* (*DMG*, "Treasure").

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

While in our world the dead—especially victims of violence—are often robbed of their voice. In a setting like *D&D*, they retain power and agency in the afterlife. Tales of the Banshee have taken on many forms over the years, but many modern depictions are almost completely removed from their origin: women who mourn. This adventure seeks not only to return banshees to their mythological origins, but to allow these women to use their powerful voices not for violence or revenge, as is popularly depicted, but to protect other women and stop the violence against them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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