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VILLAGE BACKDROP:
HARD BAY





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VILLAGE BACKDROP: HARD BAY

Hard Bay's fate has ever been tied to the sea. Although blessed with a natural, protected harbour and plentiful fishing, foul weather and a dangerous, unwholesome reputation have conspired to keep the village nothing more than a dreary, isolated place. A vein of smuggling and thievery ran deep through the village until the Sharkrazor pirates were crushed four decades ago. Now administered by three minor noble families, a darker horror than mere piracy lurks within the place. Rumours speak of strange fires set amid a circle of ancient, weathered stones atop a nearby shunned hill when the moon is new and of strange, abhorrent fishmen lurking in the abandoned, half-drowned smuggler tunnels beneath the ramshackle village.

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SYSTEM NEUTRAL EDITION

Welcome to this Raging Swan Press System Neutral Edition Village Backdrop. Herein you'll find evocative, inspiring text designed to help you—the busy GM—run better, quicker and easier games.

This book is compatible with most fantasy roleplaying games. It's impossible to create a truly system neutral book, though, and some generic game terms—wizard, fighter, human, elf and so on—lurk within. These generic terms are easily modified to the GM's system of choice.

One special note about the NPCs in this supplement. While some are wizards, fighters, clerics and so on, others are simply normal folk. Because different game systems handle normal folk differently we've made no attempt to note their "class" leaving them simply as "female human" and so on.

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HARD BAY AT A GLANCE

Hard Bay's fate has ever been tied to the sea. The village boasts a protected harbour, plentiful fishing and a natural place for offloading exotic goods while avoid the taxes of larger cities. Such advantages suggest Hard Bay should be larger than the village it has become, but the foul coastal weather and a dangerous reputation have conspired to prevent it from becoming more populous and affluent.

Nearly a century ago, Hard Bay was founded by the Sharkrazors, a group of pirates and thieves who sought to use the protected harbour to smuggle goods. At its height, the village boasted nearly a dozen taverns and half as many brothels, along with dockside warehouses crammed full of plundered goods.

It all came to an end four decades ago when the authorities came in force with an army and a flotilla of armed ships. Their vessels sunk and their crews rounded up and executed, the Sharkrazors' hold was broken. Hard Bay, damaged and burned, was given over to a consortium of three minor noble families, each with a storied and impressive name but with nearly no fortune to speak of. Little did anyone know, the coming of the families would bring darker horrors to the village than piracy.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Ruler High Councillor Afric Blufont

Government Aristocratic council (council made up of one representative from each of the three families)

Population 138 (80 humans, 5 dwarves, 12 half-elves, 41 other)

Alignments NE

Languages Common, Dwarven, Elven

Resources & Industry Fishing, pearls, smuggling.

NOTABLE FOLK

Most of the population are nothing more than hardworking peasants. A few, however, are of interest to adventurers:

Aldal Stronghammer (location 4; NG male dwarf fighter 3) Forgemaster of Stronghammer Metalworks, Aldal goes out of his way to gruffly encourage visitors to town not to stay past sunset. He is rarely seen without his overly large flask.

Councillor Ellagana Moisan (location 2; NE female tainted one human magic-user/thief 3/3) Ellagana is the beautiful and hedonistic leader of the wealthy Moisan family. Through her family, she controls the docks and most of the trade.

Councillor Reynard Gerou (location 3; TN male human) Reynard smoothly plays a dangerous game, paying lip service to the Cult of the Deep. He has wandered from the cult and now seeks only to further his family's position.

Fancy Tomnal Staggers (location 9; CN male human thief 5) Sent by the Sharkrazor pirates who once held Hard Bay, Fancy Tomnal is spying on the village to see how the buccaneers might regain control. He isn't sure what, but he has noticed

that something is not quite right in Hard Bay. Unfortunately for him, the cult has already marked him as the sacrifice for the new moon.

High Councillor Afric Blufont (location 1; NE male tainted one human magic-user 8) Patriarch of the Blufont family, Afric is the senior member of the ruling council and the most powerful, ruthless member in the Cult of the Deep.

Old Moreg (location 7; CN male human magic-user 4) The crazed Moreg tends the lighthouse with his summoned "friends."

NOTABLE LOCATIONS

Most of the village comprises peasant homes. A few locations, however, are of interest to adventurers:

1. **Blufont Manor:** Family home of the Blufonts, much of the business of the Cult of the Deep is conducted within. Tunnels have been dug in its basement that lead into the Depths.
2. **Moisan Manor:** Formerly a large brothel, Moisan Manor is the most renovated building in the village and drips with excess. Most nights, it hosts raucous ball.
3. **Gerou Manor:** Small home of the Gerou family, it is notable for its roof mounted telescope.
4. **Stronghammer Metalworks:** The smithy is run by a family of dwarves that try to protect visitors to Hard Bay.
5. **The Driftwood:** The curio shop is owned by the Blufont family. Trading in unusual items and lore is always possible here.
6. **Docks:** The docks are the focus of trade in Hard Bay. The warehouses are in varying states of disrepair.
7. **Lookout Point Lighthouse:** Lookout Point is capped by a lighthouse that guards the bay and is reachable by a dangerous causeway.
8. **The Evening Mist:** The public house has rooms for let.
9. **Maritime Hill:** Topped by an altar and standing stones, the hill is clearly used for some fell purpose.
10. **The Depths:** In these secret tunnels the Cult of the Deep meet to worship their piscine gods.



VILLAGE LORE

A PC may know something about Hard Bay, its history and surrounds. Determine how knowledgeable the PCs are and then impart some (or all) of the information below:

- Once a smuggler's port that grew to a village, when the local Sharkrazor pirates were crushed, Hard Bay was given to three noble families to administer.
- The village has ample fishing and is still used as a trading port by some. Most notable are the unusual pearls recovered and worked into coral jewellery by the locals.
- Rumours persist, that the pirates still have an interest in Hard Bay, and indeed, its locals remain an independent and unfriendly lot with their own customs and religious practices.

VILLAGERS

Appearance Shaggy and wild dark hair is typical for both men and women, though the three families often tame theirs with a length of ribbon. Large eyes and thin lips are common among the tainted one populace.

Dress Utilitarian fishing gear such as thick gloves, aprons and boots are common. Due to the frequent inclement weather and thick mists, the villagers often wear layers.

Nomenclature *male* Aribert, Deverell, Varriel; *female* Anasielle, Coulette, Flouressa; *family* Bayne, Bellrose, Sanquon.



NOTABLE LOCATIONS

1: BLUFONT MANOR

This manor shows signs of age and decay, despite the Blufont's wealth. Affric (NE male tainted one magic-user 8), his wife Alisonda (NE female tainted one human magic-user 6) and brother Clarne (NE male tainted one human magic-user 4) are currently the only family in residence. Many of the manor's rooms have been closed off and given over to dust and rats. Only the library, kitchen, dining hall and the residents' bedrooms see any use. In a dusty second floor gallery, hang portraits of the family through the generations. Several depict "family members" who, though long since dead, are disturbing similar in appearance to Affric, Alisonda and Clarne.

The manor is the focus of the Cult of the Deep. The Blufonts always delved into the unspeakable, but coming to Hard Bay, Affric located secret smuggling passages leading into the Depths (Area 10). In these water-filled caves, he encountered the Yknath who worship the unspeakable horrors he had only read about in blasphemous tomes. Joining with them, his entire family has undergone rituals to become tainted ones. Now Affric controls the cult and provides sacrifices to the Yknath in return for the bounty of sea. The concealed passage to the Depths hides behind a secret door in the cellar.

2: MOISAN MANOR

The smooth and graceful Ellagana Moisan (NE female tainted one human magic-user/thief 3/3) and her large brood dwell in the largest home in Hard Bay. Ellagana has had more than a dozen husbands, all who sadly disappeared, died or otherwise met a foul end (all were sacrificed to the Yknath). However, these poor souls have blessed Ellagana with many capable tainted one children that run the docks and warehouses and generate significant amounts of coin she uses to fund her extravagant lifestyle.

As dusk falls each night, except the three nights of the new moon, the manor is filled with light and music as the family throw debauchery-filled parties for the aristocracy, upcoming gentry or those the family wishes to intoxicate before sacrificing the poor insensate fool to their unholy masters.

3: GEROU MANOR

Reynard Gerou (TN male human) and the rest of his family have never fully committed to the Cult of the Deep. Paying lip service, and participating in the rituals to maintain their position, they stay as aloof as possible from the works of the blasphemous religion, instead focusing on their jewellery business. Of the three families, the Gerou boast the fewest number who have undergone the tainted one rituals.

Their home is notable for its second storey, where the family works pearls and coral into jewellery, under a skylight that lets them watch the stars. On clear nights, Reynard is often on the walk surrounding the manor roof, gazing at the stars through a great telescope mounted atop the manor.

4: STRONGHAMMER METALWORKS

This stout, box-like stone building boasts a grand sign declaring it as the Stronghammer Metalworks and the sounds of hammering amid belching smoke emanate from within during daylight hours. Aldal Stronghammer (NG male dwarf fighter 3), his wife Agleif, sons Sigbert and Hilbert and daughter Hethena (all NG dwarf fighter 1) work the forge.

Aldal adventured for a short time before settling down, and the dangers he witnessed scarred him enough that he rarely moves beyond arm's reach of strong drink. Aldal is afraid the nightmares have followed him to Hard Bay, having noticed the odd behaviour of his neighbours, new moon lights on Maritime Hill and the many unexplained disappearances. The dwarves have become very insular and cautious as a result; afraid to venture from their walls except in the bright of day. However, still good at heart, Aldal might offer travellers a slurred, gruff warning to leave Hard Bay before it's too late.

WHISPERS & RUMOURS

While in Hard Bay, a PC may hear one or more rumours. The PC can learn this information in a number of ways: perhaps by overhearing two locals gossiping, chatting with regulars over a few drinks at the local taverns and so on. Use the table below, to determine which rumours the PC learns.

D6	RUMOUR
1	More than one voice is often heard at Lookout Point lighthouse, but only one sounds human.
2	There are caves in the cliffs below the tide line once used by pirates to hide their contraband.
3*	The Moisans have a fascination with elves. Visitors with elven blood are invited to the parties at Moisan Manor and have a night they will never forget.
4	Many visitors to Hard Bay disappear. Sometimes their loved ones come looking for them, and it is not uncommon for them to disappear as well.
5*	The lights seen during the new moon on Maritime Hill are caused by the spirits of the fey slain there by pirates in days long gone.
6	Something is wrong in Hard Bay and the three families have something to do with it. Many family members look especially odd, with large eyes or thin lips.

*False rumour

5: THE DRIFTWOOD

The Driftwood seems wildly out of place for a small fishing village. A small, dark shop filled with books and strange curios, one never knows what oddities might be found within. Staffed by Clarne Blufont (NE male tainted one human magic-user 4), the shop is the only place in the village where one might buy or sell magic items or tomes of lore.

6: DOCKS

The docks and the surrounding warehouses are Hard Bay's heart and see the most activity. Small ships offload their cargo here, hoping to get a better price by avoiding the heavier taxes of the cities. While fisherfolk cast their nets and salt their catch, divers, many of whom are tainted ones able to breathe water, gather pearls and coral for sale to the jewellers.

At the top of the bluffs stand two large warehouses and a collection of smaller buildings where the goods are stored and assessed. Illian Moisan (NE male tainted one human thief 6), eldest son of Ellagana, is the dockmaster and works from one of the smaller building. He is a deeply handsome man with dark eyes and a wry sense of humour, though rumours persist he and his mother have an unnaturally close relationship.

The eastern warehouse has suffered over the years and has not been repaired. It leaks badly in storms and is easy to sneak into, should someone be so inclined. On more than one occasion Fancy Tomnal has met privately here with visiting members of the Sharkrazors to plot ways to take over Hard Bay.

7: LOOKOUT POINT LIGHTHOUSE

The Lookout Point Lighthouse is avoided by all Hard Bay's residents. Not only is the causeway difficult to negotiate in the best of weather, with waves and sharp rocks beckoning below, but it is home to Old Moreg (CN male human magic-user 4), who's sense of sanity has long since fled. Moreg tends the light and it has never failed, but villagers have often noted shadows playing against the light that are not entirely natural.

Their fears are well founded. Moreg has a significant personal library of things best left unremembered, and he spends his time summoning creatures he finds described in those books. The things he has witnessed have driven the old man beyond the bounds of sanity and left him shattered and thoroughly unpleasant. He attempts to drive anyone that bothers him into the sea or back across the slick causeway.

Moreg is aware of the Yaknath and the tainted ones and he does not trust anyone that seeks his knowledge. Should he be won over, he is a powerful ally against the three families and their unspeakable creatures.

8: THE EVENING MIST

A weathered sign depicting a mist-shrouded lighthouse over the Evening Mist's front door creaks in the wind. The inn's clientele almost exclusively comprises superstitious humans. The tainted ones are more likely to spend their evenings at Moisan Manor or in the Depths and the dwarves are too afraid to venture from their home. While technically owned by Afric Blufont, the inn is rented by a large half-elven family, the Starweathers.

The inn's most notorious resident is Fancy Tomnal Stagger (CN male human thief 5), a hard-drinking gambler who always seems to have enough coin, despite a lack of an obvious source. Unknown to the villagers, he is in Hard Bay at the behest of the Sharkrazor pirates, looking for an opening for the pirates to gain less overt control over the village than they held in the past. So far Fancy Tomnal has concentrated on gathering information and eventually plans to buy one or two houses and to set up some criminal enterprise under the cover of a gambling parlour. He is unlikely to get the chance, however, as his questions have aroused the attention of the three families and they have marked him for the next sacrifice atop Maritime Hill when the new moon comes.

9: MARITIME HILL

The stones atop the lightly forested Maritime Hill are avoided by all sane folk. Popular myth says it is a ruined faerie hold which explains the lights and fires seen there during the new moon. Most members of the three families claim it is an ancient monument to lost mariners, with no features of interest.

Those climbing the hill find a circle of standing stones around an altar of strange black stone whose sides are carved with tentacles, fins, eyes and fangs. The top is scarred with hundreds of blade marks and is deeply stained by old blood.

On the night of every new moon, the Cult of the Deep climbs the hill to pay homage to the Yaknath, often with a representative of that fell race in attendance. They dance, chant and sacrifice in the name of the giant fishmen and their dark gods. In turn, the most faithful are rewarded with the chance to couple with the fish folk and become one of the tainted ones.

10: THE DEPTHS

Caverns, some inundated, run through the bluffs under the village. The main entrance is just below the water line to the east of the causeway leading to Lookout Point and may be spotted from the water. They can also be accessed via a secret entrance in Blufont Manor's cellar (Area 1). Here the cult meet to celebrate their twisted beliefs or converse with the Yaknath.

Near the secret entrance is a large cavern where the cult stores robes, torches and cages for sacrificial victims. Yaknath are often in this chamber, as the creatures frequently visit to drop off pearls or other things recovered from the sea.

LIFE IN HARD BAY

Life seems normal on the surface, but it is clear to perceptive observers Hard Bay suffers from some deeper rot. Most of the architecture remains a ramshackle mesh of whatever the smugglers built, with only the aristocracy having made any efforts to repair or improve their homes.

TRADE & INDUSTRY

The village survives almost entirely on the trade centred on the docks, supplemented by revenue brought in by the Stronghammer smith and Gerou family jewellers. Fishing is everything to almost everyone in the village.

TAINTED ONE

The spiritual taint that accompanies worship of the Deep Ones can result in several strange physical deformities and odd abilities. Tainted ones are known to exhibit strange powers. Choose or determine randomly deformities for each tainted one:

D10 TAIN

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1 | The tainted one develops a gurgling, phlegm-choked voice that makes communication hard, but allows the tainted one to talk to fish. |
| 2 | The tainted one develops bulging, fish-like eyes, but can see perfectly clearly even in the muddiest water. |
| 3 | The tainted one's shadow is blurry, as if seen through water. |
| 4 | The skull of the tainted one changes into a more angular, moray-like shape. Arms and legs also shorten slightly. The tainted one moves slower and more sluggishly, but can once per 10 minutes exhibit a burst of surprising speed. |
| 5 | The palms of the hands of the tainted one conceal octopus-like suckers that make climbing easy, but get in the way of wielding weapons with a round shaft that require a firm grip. |
| 6 | The skin of the tainted one begins secreting a sticky, oily residue when agitated. The residue adheres to everything and leaves a slimy trail. |
| 7 | Gills sprout on the throat of the tainted one when the clock strikes midnight on every new moon and remain until dawn. During this time, the tainted one can only breathe water. |
| 8 | Avian creatures consider the fishy smell of the tainted one delicious and are more prone to being caught. However, some avian predators may attack as soon as they smell the tainted one. |
| 9 | The tainted one grows a red pearl on some part of his body on every New Year's Eve. The pearl must be surgically extracted. |
| 10 | The tainted one grows a second set of retractable shark teeth, but can only eat meat and fish. |

LAW & ORDER

Hard Bay largely polices itself. The oldest sons of the three families enforce their parents' will with a few stout clubs. Since the three families own nearly all the land and employ all the citizens, the threat of eviction keeps most folk in line.

EVENTS

While the PCs are in Hard Bay, one or more of the below events may occur. Choose or determine randomly what happens:

D4 EVENT

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 | On the night of the new moon, a bonfire illuminates robed figures and very large humanoid figures atop Maritime Hill. A guttural, blubbery chant can be heard intermingled with screams of pain and fear. |
| 2 | Aldal Stronghammer tries to entice the PCs into his family's shop. Any who enter are promptly encouraged to flee before nightfall, lest they disappear. |
| 3 | The Driftwood has a strange, symbol-covered coral decorated goblet for sale (300 gp). It radiates magic. Anyone carrying it for more than an hour feels an overwhelming urge to walk into the sea. |
| 4 | A strong storm comes in off the sea, lashing the village with high winds and pouring rain. Oddly, a thick mist fills those streets and yards protected from the wind. |

YAKNATH

This giant-sized fish man has a single large eye above its fanged maw. A pair of tentacles sprout from its sides, below long, scaled arms that end in huge claws.

- Consuming a draught of the residue of a Yaknath coupling with a humanoid can restore the imbiber's fertility. Children born as a result have a 50% chance of being a tainted one.
- Removing the ominous eye of a yaknath and washing it in brine generates a strange, bubbling red foam that ostensibly allows a glimpse through the eddies of time.
- After drinking a distilled version of the yaknath's mildly hallucinogenic, poisonous blood, one experiences crippling cramps, but nearby sea gulls begin whispering strange secrets to the imbiber.
- Yaknaths are said to be able to steal the breath of sleeping or drugged mortals, choking victims at will.
- Inserting the eye of a willing, living yaknath into a killer clam and leaving it there for a year and a day makes it turn into a red pearl that acts as a powerful divination tool for the magic user. Using such a yaknath pearl does open mental doors to their dread whispers, though.

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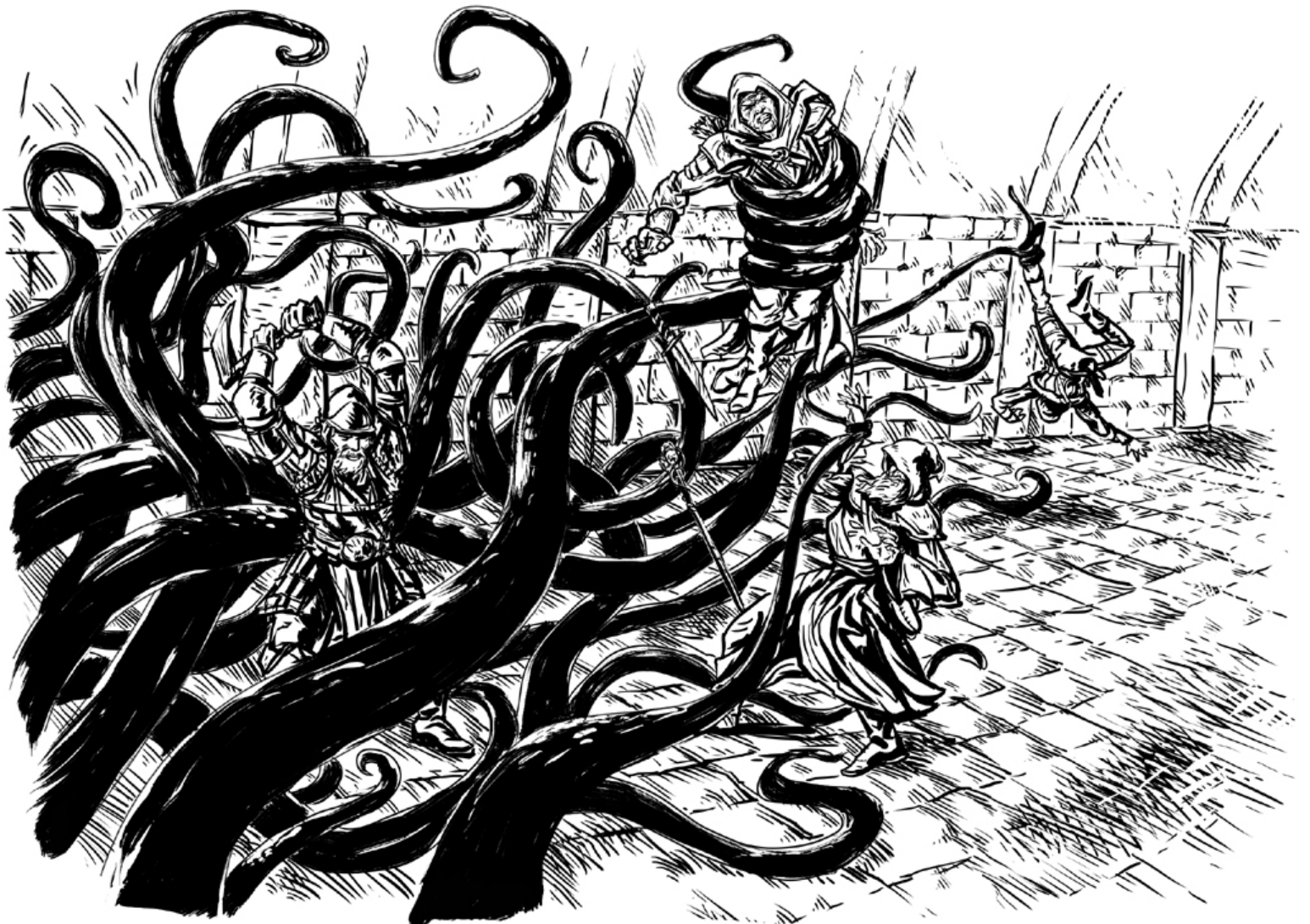
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