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VILLAGE BACKDROP:
THORNHILL





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VILLAGE BACKDROP: THORNHILL

Standing on the fringes of a vast and noisome swamp, Thornhill is a miserable, hard place of cloying mud, grasping thorns and insular, superstitious folk. There is a little cheer to be had in Thornhill; the few visitors describing it as dull and dreary as the surrounding swamps. For all that, though, a steady trickle of adventurers visit Thornhill for the half-buried and drowned ruins of several tombs said to lie forgotten in the surrounding marshland and the villagers have friends among the nearby degenerate lizard man who make excellent guides in the trackless, far reaches of the swamp.

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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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THORNHILL AT A GLANCE

Standing on the fringes of a vast and noisome fen, Thornhill is a miserable, hard place. The folk are insular and superstitious, keeping to the old ways and worshipping the spirits of the marsh. Surviving on a mixture of hunting, fishing and desultory trade with nearby tribes of lizard men, the folk here care little for the world beyond their dismal domain.

Thornhill stands atop a large island in the centre of the deep, but sluggish waters of the Fenwater. A once formidable stockade of aged, sodden timbers surrounds the place. Stands of sickly, dense thorn bushes grow over much of the island; the villagers have deliberately let the bushes grow wild to form an almost impenetrable barrier around the island's periphery.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Ruler Aelfgar Wymer

Government Autocracy

Population 157 (127 humans, 15 half-orcs, 12 half-elves, 2 halflings, 1 elf)

Alignments N, LN, CN, NE

Languages Common, Draconic

Resources & Industry Fishing, hunting

NOTABLE FOLK

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

Aedwen Sirett (location 5; NG female human cleric 2) Kind hearted, Aedwen is well-liked by the villagers. She often preaches to villagers and travellers alike.

Aelfgar Wymer (location 4; LN male human fighter 2) This sullen, boring man is the village reeve.

Gyric Walwin (location 6; N male half-elf wizard 2) The longest lived of Thornhill's residence, Gyric cares little for his neighbours, most of whom he labels as inbred idiots.

Odda Kerrich (location 2; NE male half-orc cleric 1/rogue 2) Beset by a perpetual hacking cough, Odda is overly friendly to travellers staying at the Drunken Lizard.

Ricola Wymer (location 5; LN female human) Spiteful and deliberately rude to her fellows, Ricola is universally seen as ill-mannered and stuck up.

Sithric Siggers (location 2; NE male human fighter 1) A boorish, oft-drunk fisherman normally found at the Drunken Lizard. He has a reputation as a troublemaker and brawler.

Wulfric Isgar (location 8; N male human) This sour faced poet chants dirges and elegies while at his forge.

Zissren (location 10; NG female lizard man cleric 3) A tall, cunning lizard man of exceptional intellect, Zissren works to mollify her fellows' more savage instincts.

NOTABLE LOCATIONS

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

1. **Mud Bridge:** This often muddy, stout wooden bridge is the only way to easily reach Thornhill.
2. **The Drunken Lizard:** Thornhill's only tavern is a dank, shadowed place. The food and drink are adequate at best.
3. **Wennell's:** Thornhill's trading station is run by the family of the same name. Densely packed with all manner of mundane things, there is little of obvious interest here for adventurers.
4. **Aelfgar Wymer's House:** Here dwells the reeve and his spiteful, shrewish wife, Ricola Wymer. The house is well maintained.
5. **Hall of the Sun:** Dedicated to Darlen, elaborate carvings of the rising sun decorate this otherwise humble hall.
6. **Gyric Walwin's Home:** An elderly sage, Gyric Walwin, dwells in this ramshackle old building. Vines and ivy grow over much of his home, crowding out most of the light from the building's narrow windows.
7. **Osred's House:** Home to Ymma Winbow, this stone building is the oldest and largest in the village. The windows on the third floor command sweeping views over the locality.
8. **Blacksmith:** This large building features a workshop at the front containing not only the normal accoutrements of the blacksmith's trade but also a small pool.
9. **Yonwin's:** The stench of this place permeates the whole village. Here the villagers sell their excess catch to Yonwin, a crippled halfling merchant.
10. **Isle of the Lizards:** A single hut stands upon this island, which the lizard men claim as a holy place. Most nights, Zissren leads her fellows in worship to their primitive gods.

GENERAL VILLAGE FEATURES

With the exception of Osred's House (location 7) and the Drunken Lizard (location 2) all the village's buildings are single storey and of wooden construction. They are low, rambling affairs and often in poor repair. As well as their human occupants, most buildings also house livestock—mainly pigs and chickens—which during the day roam about the village.

Worn wooden causeways snake their way through the village. In places, planks are missing or rotten and unwary travellers can find themselves unceremoniously dropped into the mud beneath.

A wooden palisade surrounds the village; between 6 ft. and 10 ft. high it would not stop a serious assault but the thick masses of bramble bushes growing up against it give even the hardiest of interlopers pause.

VILLAGE LORE

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

- Thornhill is a muddy, cheerless place. Its folk survive by fishing and hunting in the surrounding marshes. Occasionally, lizard men trade with the villagers.
- The villagers are insular, superstitious folk. They keep to the old ways. They are poor and have little of value. Most of their houses are ramshackle wooden affairs.
- An ancient stone house stands at the highest part of the village. It is said to predate the village and to once have been the home of a powerful, exiled (and blackhearted) adventurer.

VILLAGERS

Appearance Dark of hair with grey or brown eyes, the folk of Thornhill are often dirty; their clothes normally streaked with mud.

Dress Villagers' clothes are sturdy, of boring earthy colours and invariably muddy. Most wear well-worn knee-high boots.

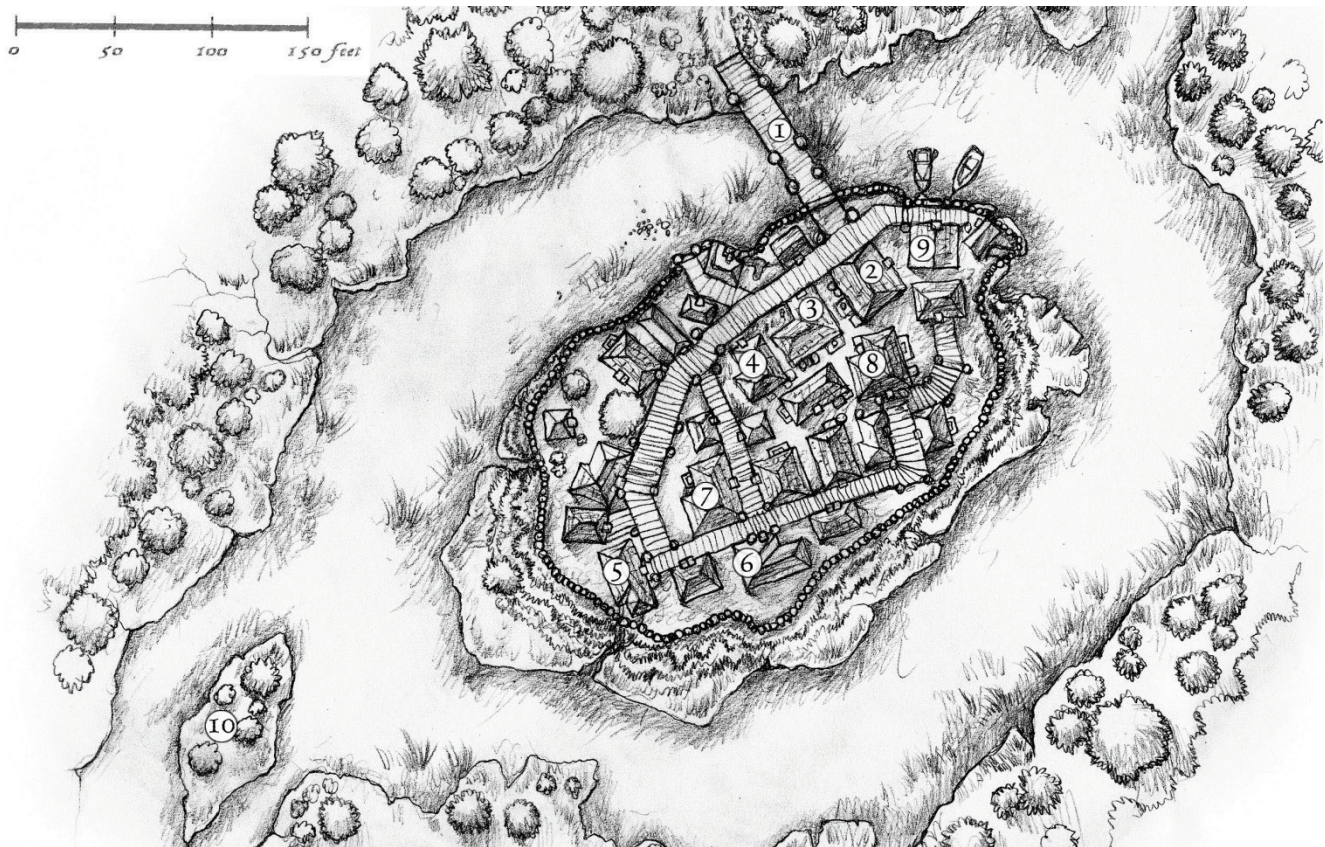
Nomenclature *male*: Aelfgar, Brid, Eadgar, Gyric, Liofa, Osgar, Sithric, Ulf, Wulfric; *female*: Aebbe, Bebbe, Ealhild, Heiu, Inga, Ricola, Saeith, Ymma; *family*: Almer, Elvery, Isgar, Kerrich, Osmer, Siggers, Walwin, Woolgar, Wymer.

WHISPERS & RUMOURS

While in Thornhill, a PC may hear one or more rumours pertaining to the village and its surroundings. 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 tavern and so on. Use the table below, to determine which rumours the PC learns.

D6	RUMOUR
1*	Sithric Siggers has friends among the lizard men of the marsh. They lead him to many of the sunken tombs hidden in the swamp
2	A huge snake has recently been seen swimming in the lake. Recently, several chickens have gone missing.
3	The lizard men living nearby are angry about something and shun travellers.
4	Lights have been seen burning late at Gyric Walwin's house; the sage has started taking a much more serious interest in travellers visiting the village.
5	Osred's House has a hidden, deep cellar said to lead to a partially flooded cavern.
6	Ricola Wymer is the third daughter of a minor noble house. Caught in a youthful indiscretion she was married off to Aelfgar against her wishes.

*False rumour



NOTABLE LOCATIONS

1: MUD BRIDGE

So named because it is often covered in mud, this stout, aged wooden bridge is the only dry way to reach Thornhill. The bridge stands 10 ft. above the Fenwater and has no parapets; travellers must be careful not to slip and fall into the waters below during bad weather (or at night).

2: THE DRUNKEN LIZARD

The only inn in the village, the Drunken Lizard is a dank, shadowed place. The second storey features a half-dozen little-used, basic bedchambers available for travellers. The landlord, Odda Kerrich (NE male half-orc cleric 1/rogue 2) an overly friendly kleptomaniac dwells beneath the tavern in a small network of low cellars cut into the hill. Excavated by successive landlords, many of the tunnels are crammed full of little more than rubbish—discarded things of little value, but hoarded nonetheless.

The food, drink and accommodation at the Drunken Lizard are all of poor quality. Entertainment is sparse to non-existent.

- **Ale:** 4 cp per mug
- **Stay:** 2 sp per night
- **Meal:** 1 sp
- **Wine:** 2 sp per pitcher

3: WENNELL'S

This stout building is one of the best maintained in the village. Its affable, red-haired owner, Brid Wennell (LN male human), is a skilled woodworker and is often tinkering about the property or adding to the carvings at the Hall of the Sun.

His gossip-wife, Ealhild (NG female human), runs the shop and prepares all the foodstuffs sold within. Her comparative wealth puts her at the centre of Thornhill's social scene (such as it is) and she tries to ingratiate herself with visiting adventurers to enhance her status with her friends. She dislikes Aedwen Sirett (location 5) and suspects there is more to the priestess than meets the eye. In Thornhill's social scene, she is Ricola Wymer's (location 4) rival.

4: AELFGAR WYMER'S HOUSE

This large building houses Aelfgar's (LN male human fighter 2) extended family, which includes his wife, Ricola (LN female human), four children and his half-blind mother. The Wymers have held the position of village reeve for over a century and are an arrogant, prideful family. They are not well liked by their fellows. Aelfgar is particularly skilled at levying ancient, forgotten taxes on wandering adventurers and other travellers.

5: HALL OF THE SUN

Elaborate carvings decorate this simple place of worship. Here dwells the kind-hearted Aedwen Sirett (NG female human cleric 2) although few worshippers join her services—most of the village keeps to the old ways. Aedwen is not a native of Thornhill, rather moving to the village several years ago. Tight-lipped about her past, she is in the third daughter of a minor noble who fled to this dismal place to escape the drudgery and misery of an arranged marriage with a man three decades her elder. She knows little of the surrounding fens, but gladly helps adventurers in return for small donations toward the upkeep of her church. She dwells in a small, snug attic above the main hall and actively dislikes Odda Kerrich (location 2).

THE SURROUNDING AREA

Thornhill stands amid a small lake, the Fenwater. The lake's murky waters are placid but deep. Several fishing boats ply its waters and those of the nearby major waterways. Dense fens surround the lake, making reaching Thornhill difficult. Few tracks wend their way through the murk, but several wide, sluggish rivers flow into the Fenwater.

Tribes of lizard men lair in the fens. Most are indifferent to the humans of Thornhill, but a few of the more primitive tribes—whipped into a religious frenzy by their shaman—are violently opposed to the encroach of humanity. Occasionally, fishermen and hunters go missing—their disappearances are blamed on such lizard men, but their guilt remains impossible to prove as no remains are ever recovered.

Two notable rivers, the Blackwash and the sluggish Tanglebriar, wend their way through the mire. With a surprisingly strong current, the Blackwash often brings forth strange things from the deep marsh. After heavy rains, the river water turns black for an unknown reason and coats the nearby reeds and trees in a thick, ebon slime.

A narrow track also pierces the marsh, following an ancient dilapidated causeway. The causeway once served as a shortcut through the swamp but, with the development of a more profitable trade route, it has fallen into disuse.

Hundreds of creatures, from huge bull crocodiles living in the deeper pools to water-fowl, goblins, snakes and, of course, millions of flies, mosquitoes and other insects dwell in the marsh. Tiny blood red worms lurk in the swamp's many stagnant pools waiting for a source of warm, tasty blood to blunder into their home. Most of the swamp's denizens such as lizard men have tough skin and are generally immune to their attacks, although none are immune to the leech swarms endemic to the swamp.

6: GYRIC WALWIN'S HOUSE

Vines, creepers and a riot of ivy cling to this ramshackle, old building giving it a ruined, shadowed appearance. The elderly, curmudgeonly sage Gyric Walwin (N male half-elf wizard 2) dwells here alone among a large, dusty (and in some cases) rotting library of old books.

Fiercely intelligent, Gyric is dismissive of those of lesser intellect (which is basically everyone else in the village) and starved of intelligent conversation. If he hears of learned folk visiting Thornhill he seeks them out for stimulating conversation. He knows much about the surrounding marshland, but has no desire to actually go exploring therein. Although he hates the swamp, Gyric has no intention of leaving; he is hiding from a rich, powerful enemy and Thornhill gives him the safety and anonymity he so desperately craves.

Gyric has learnt the secret or making Red Fern Paste and sells it to adventurers at 1 sp a vial.

- **Red Fern Paste:** Local hunters have discovered a paste made from the prolific red ferns growing throughout the marsh repels the leeches and other insects lurking therein. The fern is readily available and a competent alchemist can make the paste. While the paste has no effect on giant leeches and other marsh denizens, travellers coating their exposed skin in it are not swarmed by normal insects while traversing the mire.

7: OSRED'S HOUSE

The horribly scarred Ymma Winbrow (N female human cleric 2) dwells in this old and stout three-storey stone building that has begun to subside into the hill. Friendly, but quiet, Ymma dwells on the upper floors and allows well behaved travellers to sleep on the ground floor (3 sp per night).

RED FERN BARROWS

These partially submerged barrow mounds are remnants of the fallen kingdom that once held the lands around Thornhill. Once on dry land, extensive flooding when the Blackwash and Tanglebriar rivers burst their banks centuries ago inundated the mounds. Occasionally explorers based in Thornhill dig here in search of ancient, glittering treasure. Most find nothing, but some disappear without trace. These excavations have created many deep pools in the surrounding locality and explorers must watch their step or suffer an ignoble, and muddy, bath.

The lizard men do not go here and it is rumoured undead kings of the fallen kingdom yet sit upon their sunken thrones in the depths of the barrows and jealously guard the last remnant of their fallen kingdom.

An iron-bound, triple-locked door provides access to the house's extensive, cellars; Ymma never opens the door and perceptive PCs may realise she is terrified of whatever lies beyond. The cellar's lower-levels are partially flooded. Once the home to a paranoid adventurer, a long, water-logged tunnel passes under the Fenwater but its far exit has long since collapsed.

8: BLACKSMITH

Here works Wulfric Isgar (N male human) a sour-faced, deep of voice poet whose chanted dirges and elegies echo through his forge. He owes Aelfgar Wymer a large sum of money and is desperate to pay off the debt. Consequently, he is happy to work on commissions for travellers, but charges over the odds to do so. Dour Wulfric is single—a condition which baffles him.

9: YONWIN'S

The stench of fish emanates from this large building and smoke constantly rises from several battered chimneys; here Yonwin (CN male halfling) prepares his renowned smoked fish for sale. The lizard men of the fens love the taste of them (which they view as a delicacy) and Yonwin (a half-crippled drunk) cannot keep up with their demand.

10: ISLE OF THE LIZARDS

This small, muddy island lies to the south of Thornhill. Here dwells the lizard man shaman Zissren (NG female lizard man cleric 3). Lizard men often visit Zissren to pray alongside the respected and well-loved shaman. Misunderstood by the villagers who see her as a crackpot, drug-addled figure, Zissren works tirelessly to keep the fragile peace between the humans and lizard men intact. Few of Thornhill's human inhabitants willingly visit Zissren's isle during the day and none come here at night; strange things are said to happen here under night's ebon veil. Use the table below, to determine what strange events occur at night on Zissren's isle:

D6	EVENT
1	Loud voices—indistinct but nevertheless full of anger—argue back and forth for an hour or so.
2	Strange bobbing, multi-coloured lights are observed on the island. In their lurid, flickering shadows, strange shapes dance and cavort.
3	A sullen drum beats for half the night and a chorus of croaking voices are raised in some kind of primitive song.
4	Aedwen Sirett reports seeing a half-dozen lizard men slink onto the island at dusk. By dawn, they have disappeared.
5	A single spluttering torch is seen moving about on the north end of the island, as if someone is searching for something in the Fenwater's shallows.
6	A scream—obviously from the island—pierces the night.

LIFE IN THORNHILL

Life in Thornhill is hard. Isolated from other villages, its folk have become insular, inbred and fearful of their lizard men neighbours. Tensions over the looting of ancient tombs hidden deep within the fens with the degenerate Red Jaws and Jagged Claw tribes have been steadily rising over the last few decades. The lizard men are suspected (correctly) of several unsolved murders.

TRADE & INDUSTRY

Thornhill's main (and indeed only) industry is fishing. Most of the fishermen in the village sell their excess catch to Yonwin, who exports his smoked fish to nearby villages and several lizard man tribes who view them as a delicacy. Occasionally, adventurers use the village as a base from which to explore the fens—such folk are a source of great wealth to the impoverished villagers.

LAW & ORDER

Thornhill is a rough and ready place and there is no watch to speak of. Theoretically, Aelfgar Wymer is in charge of law and order, but in practise the villagers sort out their own problems and do not view meddling outsiders kindly.

EVENTS

While the PCs are in Thornhill, one or more of the below events may occur. Choose or determine randomly:

D6	EVENT
1	A small group of lizard men are seen swimming to the Isle of the Lizards. That night, their weird chanting echoes through the night.
2	A travelling pedlar or impoverished merchant arrives at Thornhill. Likely, he is selling rather than buying but he may bring interesting rumours from the outside world.
3	Thornhill's fishermen return with a bumper (50%) or terrible (50%) catch.
4	Heavy rain lashes the settlement for much of the day. Mud covers much of the island and the Fenwater rises noticeably.
5	An argument quickly escalates into violence. At the GM's discretion, this could lead to a wider brawl, grievous bodily harm or murder. Petty crime or an old rivalry could be to blame for the incidence.
6	Screams echo across the lake as a giant constrictor snake attacks a fisherman. Unless the PCs intervene, the snake kills the man and carries him deep into the lake to consume his body in peace.



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