

REVENANTS OF SALTMARSH #1: NED SHAKESHAFT

n.b. Revenants of Saltmarsh is a series in which I dig into a change or revision I made to the adventures from Ghosts of Saltmarsh for my two ongoing groups (one of which being where this series gets its name). Needless to say, these posts will include spoilers for the classic U-series, their 5E versions printed in Ghosts of Saltmarsh, and some of the other adventures bound to that series by appearing in that anthology. If you are currently playing through (or plan to someday play through) the adventures in Ghosts of Saltmarsh, you should go find some other content on this site to read instead of this post and the series to follow. Furthermore, this series assumes you have access to the adventures being written about, so if you are a DM preparing to run these adventures, make sure to have read them first before turning to this series for suggestions on what to change.

I am usually not the type to worry about spoilers when it comes to books, movies, and TV. My opinion is, if the example media is actually any good then knowing what happens shouldn't "ruin" it. And furthermore, you only need to be even mildly aware of narrative structures, character arcs, and common tropes to be able to have a sense of what is going to happen. That said, when it comes to D&D adventures, my opinion is totally different because D&D is experienced in a world where plot points are bound with random results, leading to surprises that almost no mainstream movie or TV show (or even book) can match. As such, this is your final warning. . .

A MAN ON THE INSIDE

U1 – The Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh is as close to perfect as modules come. It has a great set up—the haunted house—and a great plot to uncover that leads not only to a series of diverse adventure experiences, that can be linked up to local politics and more developed political play. Furthermore, the town of Saltmarsh itself is a great home base for a group of adventurers to regularly return to and eventually care enough about to want to protect when the real threat—revealed in *U2 – Danger at Dunwater*—is addressed in *U3 – The Final Enemy*.

And while there are a variety of small things I have changed and added the many times I have run these adventures, there is one aspect of *U1* that seems the most egregiously in need of fixing in order for it to both make more sense and be a more interesting encounter: Ned Shakeshaft.

As written, Ned, whom the PCs can find bound and gagged in just his skivvies in area 15 (though you may want to move him to area 6 on the first floor, so he can be more likely encountered), was sent to the house by a

Saltmarsh merchant profiting from Sandbalet's gang of smugglers to await the party's arrival and secretly sabotage their exploration of the house, discouraging them enough to abandon their quest.

This is a silly set-up to the scenario.

First of all, adventurers are unlikely to be dissuaded from their desire to search the house by the kind of mischief Ned can try while not giving himself away—not even 1st or 2nd level ones. Certainly, what he can accomplish in this way is not worth the risk of putting himself in such a vulnerable situation.

Who is going to agree to be stripped down, bonked on the head, and then tied up to wait for some adventurers to arrive in order to sabotage their efforts to explore the house in an effort to get them to leave? Not only is no one going to willingly make themselves that vulnerable to notoriously paranoid adventurers, but if he can get there ahead of them and await their arrival, why would he not simply inform the smugglers and set up a deadly ambush? The original version of the module at least presents the excuse that Ned and the unnamed merchant don't know exactly where in the house the smugglers are located and thus cannot warn them, but this does not seem like justification enough for willingly putting himself in the position the party finds him in.

Which is not to say I am suggesting that such an ambush be awaiting the PCs. I think it would not be very fun to arrive simply to be jumped by bandits (at least not until after the player experienced the potential sense of a haunted and infested place that marks the early part of the adventure).

Ultimately, the timing and the scheme are absurd as written unless you run a world where there is no sense of NPC inner life and self-preservation.

A BETTER BACKSTORY

Instead of a spy sent ahead to potentially wait forever unarmed, bound, and naked in a dangerous house, I make Ned be a victim of bandit justice. A member of Sandbalet's crew, Ned is a layabout, disliked by most of his compatriots for his effort to do the least, shirking responsibilities, and frequently taking more of the band's food and drink than is his share.

Ned was caught sneaking sips of grog from a jug reserved for everyone when he was supposed to be working, and his peers, tired of covering for him, beat him up, stripped him down, and tied him up. He looks banged up and bruised because he has been, and while he woke up confused, once he realizes that he was found by adventurers exploring the house, he uses his

skill at coming up with cover stories to make one up to explain his presence and predicament.

The story he tells is basically the one the module would have you give (on page 44 of GoS) with some slight changes. He claims to be an adventurer who had been on his way to Saltmarsh from a nearby town (I used the Styes) to find work, when he was caught in a freak rainstorm while still a few hours from his destination. As such, he ducked into the house (which was closer) to wait out the storm but had hardly been there when something or someone struck him hard from behind. The next thing he knew he was waking up where the PCs found him.

A NOTE ABOUT THE WEATHER

A clever player may ask about the weather the night before to see if it corroborates Ned's story. If they don't remember any rainstorm, Ned will explain that small freak storms come inland from the nearby coast all the time. (Whether or not there was actually a storm, this fact is not a lie).

If you want to play Ned as very cowardly and opportunistic, he will ask the group to escort him back to town. If for some reason the party actually agrees to abandon their quest to accompany him back to town, Ned will use contacts in Saltmarsh to get the party ambushed by bandits on the road if they should decide to return to the manor.

One other minor change: As printed, the Alchemist's house is about four miles from Saltmarsh, but I made it a four-hour march (three along the road, and another up the steep overgrown path to the estate), as to limit how often PCs can easily get back to town.

If offered the opportunity to leave the alchemist's house on his own, Ned refuses. He explains that chastised by the experience of being waylaid, he would rather stick with the group. If allowed, he joins up with the party in hopes of retrieving his gear and "getting revenge" on "whoever did this" to him.

As written, Ned's ruse automatically works and no one can detect his lies—"it is not possible for the characters to discern Ned's true motives"—but rather than deprive players an opportunity to use their skills and senses, allow for an Insight check against Ned's Deception (use a static DC of 16). Ned is good at deceiving others and keeps his lies simple, telling as much truth as possible. If asked, for example, how he knows so much about the house, he might explain that he grew up in the area and explored it as a kid. (In my set-up for this adventure, many townsfolk remark that local children used to dare each other to approach or even enter the house but that it has gotten too much of a reputation as actually dangerous for anyone to let their children anywhere near it.)

OFF THE WAGON

Anyone who gets into Ned's personal space, or any character or animal companion with the Scent ability in his general vicinity will be able to detect the sour smell of alcohol sweat on the bound man. This may rouse some suspicions.

ON USING INSIGHT

Insight is not a lie detecting skill but for perceiving details of tone, expression, and body language to get a sense of the target's attitude which the player then needs to interpret. It is the kind of skill that is best rolled for the player behind the screen (or if players want to roll their own dice, have them roll into a cup where the DM can see the result, but the player cannot). In this way, the players have to use the information gained from Insight (not the die roll) to decide how trustworthy Ned might be.

Use the degree to which the player's roll beats Ned's Deception DC (16) to determine how much information they glean from what Ned is saying and how he says it and leave room for deniability. Limit skills rolls to one per character per scene talking with or interrogating Ned and don't suggest they use Insight. Let the players decide for themselves if they want to be wary.

INSIGHT VS. NED'S DECEPTION

Insight Check	Result
15 or less	Ned's lies are believable.
16 to 19	While Ned's story seems believable, something about his demeanor makes it fishy. He seems to be holding something back about why he was in the area. He does not seem to trust the party's motives and may not be trustworthy himself as a result.
20 to 24	Some element of Ned's story is false. Maybe he saw who jumped him. Maybe he wasn't really at the house to duck out of a rainstorm. Maybe he doesn't really want to go back to town.
25 or more	Ned's story seems like a total fabrication. He seems a little too eager and the details change when pressed. He is clearly and deliberately trying to deceive the PCs.

Remember! Ned's nervousness and fear should be presented as reasonable on the surface. He has been assaulted, stripped nearly naked, and bound for hours. If he is wary of the PCs, reluctant to lead the way, and complaining that he is cold and vulnerable, those are all reasonable given the experience he claims to have had and to some degree, the experience he did have.

WHAT DOES NED WANT?

The changes to Ned's story I am suggesting here make him much more interesting and fun to play in my estimation. But I am also holding back from giving him a definitive course of action. Instead, weigh his opportunistic, lazy, and cruel persona against how the party treats him and what happens over the course of exploring the house. Ned holds a grudge against his fellow bandits but also understands the dangers the PCs could pose to him and the whole operation.

Will he bring the PCs into an ambush or find a way to deal with them as a means of getting back in Sandbalet's good graces?

Or will he, seeing the PCs are a force to be reckoned with, turn against his compatriots in hopes of a cut of whatever treasure the party collects (certainly more than his low rank and reputation earned him as a smuggler)?

Or, if you want to complicate the scenario slightly, you can have Ned help the party defeat the bandits in area 21 (who he holds responsible for his predicament), but then—after doing his best to have them push forward without rest or healing—turn against the party when they face off against Sandbalet and the others in the sea caves. This course of action might lead to him quickly moving up the ranks given the deaths of members of his crew.

WHAT MIGHT NED DO?

Since Ned and his fellow smugglers have been operating out of the house for months, he knows it fairly well. Here are some other things you can have Ned try:

- Have him stowed in area 6, which is below area 15. He can claim he heard footsteps walking around upstairs, in hopes that if the party goes to check it out, one or more of them will fall through the weakened floor. Also, if for some reason the PCs check area #15 first and one of them falls through the floor, describing Ned's sudden awakening when an adventurer falls through the ceiling can provide a light moment that might help him seem less suspicious.
- He refuses to lead the way without his gear or some appropriate substitute. His clothes, his studded leather armor, and his weapons (a short sword, three daggers, and a hand crossbow) are in area 17.

- If given a weapon and healed up some, Ned will ineffectually fight against some of the house's monstrous vermin if the party encounters them, playing up being bumbling and cowardly in hopes of getting an advantage when underestimated later. He will also flee the fight if he takes any damage. If the party suggests he let them do the fighting, he acquiesces and offers to watch the rear.
- He might try to sneak away to warn and/or retrieve others if the party tries to take a short or long rest.
- He might "accidentally" make way too much noise when "discovering" the secret door to the sea cave in area 21, or in opening the trapdoor in area 4.
- The smugglers avoid the attic (area 19) because of the stirges ("mosquito-bats") that live up there. Ned might explain that he remembers an old story about this house having a treasure hidden in the attic to get the PCs to explore it.
- He can try to get the party to stumble upon his fellows by dropping stories about the alchemist's secret underground lab, "accidentally" making too much noise when checking a secret door, coming down a staircase, or searching an adjacent room.
- He will try to appear helpful and offer to check for traps on any doors the party is suspicious of and if lent thieves' tools can even pick locks. Since he knows none of them are trapped, he is not worried about setting one off, but still acts cautious and will allow others to actually open doors, cabinets, and enter rooms first.
- If pressed on this, he explains that without his armor and gear he feels too vulnerable. He will make a show of taking bigger "risks" if his gear is retrieved or he is lent some equivalent gear to use.
- He will refuse to touch the cloak in the wardrobe in area #11, as he knows about the yellow mold within it. "That's not my cloak." In fact, he will work to not even approach the wardrobe at all if he can manage it without drawing suspicions, perhaps by checking the bed or the window in that room first.
- If asked about previous adventures, he will admit he is a novice, but did once help roust xvarts out of a mine. (This is true, but as part of a gang slaughtering the xvarts for their resources, not because they were an actual threat).
- If he decides to get some revenge on his fellow smugglers, he will make it a point to stay out their sight while the party fights them and using his sneak attack when possible, out of a fear of having his cover blown.

NED'S STAT BLOCK

The spy stat block works for Ned, but I changed his skills and got rid of the poison he is supposed to be carrying. Not only are player characters bound to find it—as PCs are generally the type to be so paranoid, they will even strip search a man already in his skivvies—but since he is not a spy sent specifically to deal with the party, it'd make less sense for him to be carrying it.

NED SHAKESTAFF

Medium human, neutral evil

Armor Class 12 (or 14 with his studded leather)

Hit Points 33 (6d8) [current hit points: 11]

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	14 (+2)	11 (+0)	10 (+0)	11 (+0)	14 (+2)

Senses passive Perception 10

Skills Deception +6 (ex), insight +4 (ex), perception +4, persuasion +4, sleight of hand +6 (ex), stealth +4, thieves tools +6

Languages Common, thieves cant

Challenge 1 (200 XP)

Cunning Action. On each of his turns, Ned can use a bonus action to take the Dash, Disengage, or Hide action.

Sneak Attack. (1/turn). Ned deals an extra 2d6 damage when he hits a target with a weapon attack and has advantage on the attack roll, or when the target is within 5 ft. of an ally that isn't incapacitated and he doesn't have disadvantage on the attack roll.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Ned makes two melee attacks.

Shortsword. Melee Weapon Attack: +4 to hit. Hit: 1d6+2 (piercing).

Hand Crossbow. Ranged (30/120) Weapon Attack: +4 to hit. Hit: 1d6+2 (piercing).

NED'S FATE

Ned's fate is really up to the events at your own table. He may escape to become a recurring antagonist or end up killed by the PCs or even his own fellow smugglers. Heck, he might also end up being a party follower, whose predilection to selfishness and cruelty will eventually come to a head.

Next: Exploring religious schism among the Dunwater Lizardfolk, their customs around guests, and the role of the God-Touched Crocodile, Thousand Teeth for U2 - Danger at Dunwater.