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VILLAGE BACKDROP:  
ASHFORD



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# VILLAGE BACKDROP: ASHFORD

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*Once a prosperous village, Ashford now stands as a decayed shadow of its former self. A year ago, it was a busy place; its streets and gardens echoing with the sounds of life, love and commerce. Then the stranger came and death followed upon his heels. Plague had come to Ashford. In his wake, he left the hacking coughs and pain-filled moans of the dying and the wails of the survivors mourning their dead. Over half the population died, and many of the survivors packed and fled.*

*A few folk yet dwell in Ashford among the abandoned, deserted homes of their friends and neighbours, but it is now a quiet, mournful place. Weeds choke its abandoned gardens and untilled fields. Wolves, foxes and other less natural predators gnaw at the weathered bones filling the village's open plague pit. The surviving villagers are distrustful of strangers, shunning them whenever possible, and few find welcome, cheer or solace in Ashford.*

*Village Backdrop: Ashford is designed for use with the 5th edition of the world's most popular roleplaying game.*

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## CREDITS

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## CONTENTS

Ashford At a Glance.....	2
Notable Locations .....	4
Life in Ashford .....	6
Support Raging Swan Press .....	7
OGL V1.0A .....	7

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## ASHFORD AT A GLANCE

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Once a prosperous village, Ashford now stands as a decayed shadow of its former self. A year ago, it was a busy place; its streets and gardens echoing with the sounds of life, love and commerce. Then the stranger came and death followed upon his heels. The stranger—a well-travelled bard—stayed at the Jolly Farmer and regaled the assembled guests with many tales and songs as he walked among them. The next morning, he awoke with a high fever and coughed up blood over his bed-partner, one of the tavern wenches. Plague had come to Ashford.

Within a week the bard was dead and the serving wench lay dying. Within a month, the sound of hacking coughs, the pain-filled moans of the dying and the wails of the survivors mourning their dead echoed through the village. Before the winter snows began to fall, over half the population was dead, and many of the survivors had fled.

A few folk yet dwell in Ashford among the abandoned, deserted homes of their friends and neighbours, but it is now a quiet, mournful place. Weeds choke abandoned gardens and untilled fields while wolves, foxes and other less natural predators gnaw at the weathered bones filling the village's open plague pits. The surviving villagers are distrustful of strangers, shunning them whenever possible, and few find welcome, cheer or solace in Ashford.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

**Ruler** Baron Aelfgar Stannard

**Government** Overlord (anarchy)

**Population** 75 (68 humans, 4 half-elves, 3 half-orcs)

**Alignments** Neutral

**Languages** Common, Elven, Orc

**Resources & Industry** Farming, fishing

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**Lingering Plague** Every day a traveller spends in Ashford, there is a 5% chance he is exposed to plague. This chance rises to 20% if the character explores any abandoned building containing the corpses of plague victims.

### NOTABLE FOLK

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

**Ailred Lewin** (location 4; LN female human **commoner**) Landlady of The Jolly Farmer, she is never seen without a vinegar-soaked mask about her face.

**Baron Aelfgar Stannard** (location 1; LN male human **noble**) Ashford's liege lord, Aelfgar has not been seen in the village since the plague struck.

**Dunn Frewin** (location 6; CE male ghoulish cleric 2) Once one of Ashford's priests, Dunn has returned from the grave to revenge himself upon Waldere.

**Janaela Fiselond** (location 5; N female half-elf wizard [necromancer] 5) Consumed with her magical research—and

with no empathy for the villagers—Janaela rarely emerges from her tower.

**Praen Alston** (location 2; N male human **commoner**) The village miller, Praen hates Waldere—blaming him for his family's painful death—and stymies him whenever possible

**Waldere Elvery** (location 3; LN male human cleric 3) Radicalised by Ashford's horrific fate, Waldere is a raging alcoholic.

### NOTABLE LOCATIONS

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

1. **Ashford Manor:** Abandoned by its lord, Ashford Manor is thought unoccupied by the villagers. Unbeknownst to them, three plague survivors lurk within.
2. **Mill:** Although the mill's wheel still turns, Praen Alston spends most of his time protecting his young daughter.
3. **The Wailing Hall:** The village church is rarely visited now, except by a few fanatical worshippers who are led in their devotions by Waldere Elvery.
4. **The Jolly Farmer:** Little cheer is to be found here. Guests are served in their rooms and almost no villagers now drink here.
5. **The Burning Tower:** Home to the enchantress Janaela Fiselond, the tower stands amid the shattered ruins of a castle thrown down after its lord rebelled against his liege.
6. **Plague Pits:** While the plague savaged Ashford, the villagers dug two plague pits and dumped the dead within. Feral dogs, woodland predators and Dunn Frewin have uncovered these grizzly reminders of Ashford's fate.

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### BUBONIC PLAGUE

The typical sign of infection with bubonic plague are a painful, swollen, and very tender lymph node, which occur 2-10 days after infection. The swollen gland is called a "bubo" and such swellings can appear in the groin, armpit or neck. (Generally, most folk developed these swellings in their groin because this was the closest lymph node to the bite point of the fleas carrying the disease). High fever, chills or extreme exhaustion can also manifest themselves at this time. Other symptoms include red spots that turn black as the disease progresses, heavy breathing, vomiting of blood, aching limbs, gangrenous extremities and unbearable pain. Often, victims slip into a coma before death. The appearance of the plague is often accompanied by hysteria and panic or—sometimes—sullen resignation to one's fate or bizarre religious practices designed to ward off a gruesome death.

## VILLAGE LORE

A PC may know something about Ashford, its history and surrounds. A PC making a DC 10 Intelligence check knows one or more pieces of information from the list below. A successful check gains all the information revealed by a lesser check.

**DC 10:** Ashford was a prosperous village until last year when the plague struck. Now most travellers avoid the village.

**DC 15:** A handful of folk still live in the village. The few travellers to visit Ashford have spoken of quiet, distrustful folk and strange religious practises.

**DC 20:** At the height of the plague, terrible deeds were wrought. Some families were burnt alive in their homes in a desperate attempt to halt the contagion's progress.

## VILLAGERS

**Appearance** Of sullen countenance, most villagers have long, dark brown or black hair and either brown or grey eyes.

**Dress** The villagers wear old, muddy clothes. Most wear thick fur cloaks, believing such garments ward off the plague.

**Nomenclature** *male* Ahlred, Ceol, Daela, Gyric, Praen; *female* Bebbe, Hild, Oshild, Saeith; *family* Burch, Eanith, Isgar, Sirett.

## WHISPERS & RUMOURS

While in Ashford, a PC may hear one or more rumours. A PC making a DC 10 Charisma check learns one rumour from the table below. A PC exceeding this check learns an additional rumour for each 5 points by which he exceeded DC 10.

D6	RUMOUR
1	Janaela Fiselond (a local wizard) slew several villagers with her magic when they tried to break into her tower.
2*	The village was cursed by a witch!
3	The local priest, Waldere Elvery, survived the plague—although most of his congregation died. He is a drunk.
4	The old burnt-out Eanith home is haunted by the vengeful spirits of those that died within.
5	Something unnatural has been disturbing the plague pits.
6*	A necromancer lich desires some ancient treasure buried deep beneath the village. He sent the plague to kill everyone, so he could search for it undisturbed.

\*False rumour



## NOTABLE LOCATIONS

### 1: ASHFORD MANOR

When the plague came to Ashford, its lordling (Baron Aelfgar Stannard [LN male human **noble**]) panicked. Having lived here for only a decade or so, he felt no compulsion to stay and help his people. Packing up his wealth and jewels he fled along with his family, men-at-arms and trusted family servants to a secluded hunting lodge. He has not returned, and none of the villagers have bothered to learn his fate.

Ashford Manor thus stands abandoned and has remained unlooted simply because the villagers assume Stannard will one day return. Unbeknownst to them, three villagers who escaped their burning homes (and subsequently survived the plague) skulk in the manor.

### 2: MILL

The mill wheel stills turns, but little grain is ground here anymore. The miller, Praen Alston (N female human **commoner**), lost his wife and all but one of his children to the pestilence. He dwells here with his young daughter Saeith (N male human **commoner**) because he has nowhere else to go. Saeith is only ten-years-old, but worries about the anger consuming her father. He blames Waldere Elvery (Area 3) for his loved ones' deaths, and doesn't understand why anyone would still believe that misguided charlatan. He stirs up trouble for the priest whenever he gets the chance. Praen is out of his depth bringing up a young daughter and worries about everything. He is overprotective of Saeith; she is not allowed to meet strangers and is rarely seen playing with other children. She loves swimming, though, and often plays in the river.

### 3: THE WAILING HALL

Once known as the Chapel of Song, this church was at the centre of the villagers' attempts to save themselves from the plague. Here, at Waldere Elvery's (LN male human cleric [Darlen] 3) urging, the populace gathered daily to sing praises to Darlen so that he might cast out the plague. The effects of this were predictable and plague swept through the congregation, killing over half. The survivors of this insane practise renamed the church for the laments of those who mourned their dead within.

Before the plague, the church had two priests. One, Dunn Frewin, died of the plague. Ignoring his last request to be buried in the church, Waldere cast Dunn's body into one of the plague pits. This betrayal will cost Waldere dearly; Dunn Frewin has returned as a ghoul (Area 6).

Most no longer visit the church, but Waldere yet holds sway over a small, but fanatical, congregation. The dozen members, led by an inebriated Waldere, parade daily through the village singing hymns to ward away the plague.

### ABANDONED HOUSES

Many of Ashford's buildings stand empty and abandoned, their owners having either died of plague or fled the village. Some homes yet contain the decomposing corpses of the plague's victims. The surviving villagers do not enter these buildings believing certain death lingers within. Common belief holds the spirits of many of the dead yet live in their homes and infect or drive mad any venturing into their "tomb."

An aura of neglect and decay hangs over these homes. Weeds choke the gardens and yards; no smoke issues from their chimneys. Feral dogs use some of the buildings as shelters, but the apathetic villagers have not bothered to root them out.

#### D10 FEATURE

1	A bloody blanket lies twisted on the floor. The bloody is dried and from the pattern of the stain looks like it was coughed up.
2	The remains of a meal—a plate holding some mouldy bread and hard cheese—lies near a fallen pewter cup.
3	The door to this room has been crudely nailed shut from the outside. Within, lies the rotting corpse of a villager—abandoned in her final days by her family.
4	The stench of rot pervades the house; The stench gets stronger as the PCs get closer to the deceased's body.
5	The building's windows are all boarded over...from the outside. Inside, gloom fills the house and dust sifts down through the thin cracks of sunlight piercing the interior.
6	Much of the furniture lies scattered about out of place. Either someone was enraged and took out his frustrations on the furniture or someone has searched everywhere for loot.
7	Dust and grime covers most surfaces in the house. Faint footsteps lead toward a back room.
8	The rotting corpses of three rats lie on the ground near the body of one of the house's occupant. The body lies with one arm stretched; many small bite marks on the arm are evident.
9	A man hangs from a makeshift noose thrown over a rafter. Clearly dead, his neck is broken and insects swarm over his decomposing corpse. In a nearby room, the party find his family's rotting bodies laid out in state together, under a blanket.
10	A body—wrapped in sack cloth—lies in state on a long table. Burnt down candles surround the suppurating corpse and its bloody, grimy wrappings. A nearby chair has been pushed back from the table; a blanket lies at its feet.

## BURNT OUT HOMES

At the height of the plague, as hysteria gripped the populace and the pestilence raged through the village, hotheads desperate to contain the contagion took to burning down the homes of the infected with their inhabitants within). Although this practise only lasted a week, it has left an indelible scar on the village. Although most of the perpetrators subsequently died of plague, several murders resulted from this practice as the relatives of those burnt alive exacted their bloody revenge.

### D10 FEATURE

1	The building's blackened chimney rises from the surrounding piles of scorched and burnt wood. Debris chokes the fireplace.
2	Bizarrely one section of soot-stained wall survived the fire relatively undamaged. Someone has written graffiti—the names of the people who died here—in the soot.
3	Part of a bed's wooden headboard sticks out of a pile of burnt and scorched debris.
4	The fire that destroyed this building was clearly powerful. The building's stone foundation stones are scorched, and several cracked in the intense heat. Similarly, the branches of a tree nearest to the building are blackened and burnt.
5	Pieces of partially melted iron lie amid the ruins. One is reminiscent of a cauldron or pot, while others nearby might have once been utensils of some sort. All are worthless except as scrap metal.
6	Birds now nest amid the scorched rafters of this once fine home. The rafters rang over the ruin like blackened bones reaching up into the sky. If disturbed, the birds fly up out of the building into the air; perhaps their sudden appearance could alert nearby raiders to the PCs' presence.
7	Three crude grave markers of blackened wooden planks stick out of the muddy earth behind the house. Bunches of dying flowers lie upon each grave suggesting at least one person cares about the people who once lived here.
8	Rubble and the scorched remains of two wooden beams partially cover a hole in the ground. Investigation reveals, the hole leads down to a root cellar. The wooden stairs leading downward were badly damaged in the fire and collapse if any meaningful weight is put on them.
9	Attempts have been made to salvage useable materials from this ruin. Near what was once the front door, someone has dumped a pile of wood that survived the fire in relatively good condition; another pile of scorched and burnt offcuts lies nearby.
10	The soot-wreathed bones of one of the building's unfortunate residents lies pinned beneath an unstable pile of debris. Trying to reach the skeleton is dangerous; the pile could shift or collapse if disturbed.

## 4: THE JOLLY FARMER

Ashford's inn was once a happy place. Although the landlady, Ailred Lewin (LN female human **commoner**) still accepts paying customers she has closed the common room and serves guests (meagre and bland) food and drink in their rooms. Whenever meeting newcomers, she wears a rudimentary mask over her face soaked in vinegar for protection.

- **Food & Drink:** meal (typically a thin stew with stale bread) 6 sp, ale 4 cp, wine (pitcher) 2 sp.
- **Accommodation:** A room—sparsely furnished sleeping two—4 sp.

## 5: THE BURNING TOWER

The so-called Burning Tower is the only intact portion of the castle that once protected Ashford. The demesne of a rebellious lord the castle was sacked two decades ago. The villagers carried off much of the stone to use in rebuilding their own homes and the castle's shattered ruin remained uninhabited until the Janaela Fiselond (N female half-elf wizard [necromancer] 5) claimed it as her own. A skilled but aloof practiser of magic, when the plague ravaged Ashford, Janaela simply locked herself in her tower and made no effort to aid her neighbours. As they died by the score, and their moans and hacking coughs echoed through the village, Janaela became wholly obsessed with her research and paid their suffering no mind.

At the plague's height, a few villagers tried to storm the tower—convinced her research had brought the pestilence to Ashford; she incinerated them with a *fireball* before returning to her work. Their blackened bones still lie nearby amid the tangled weeds choking the castle's ruined courtyard.

## 6: PLAGUE PITS

At first, the plague's victims were buried like normal in the church graveyard, but as death swept through the village, it became impossible to honour the dead in the proper way.

Two burial pits were dug and filled with plague-ridden corpses but were not properly filled in. Feral dogs and other predators promptly dug up the graves and no one as yet has the inclination, courage or strength to re-bury them. Thus, the long grass and incongruous wild flowers growing about the pits hide the plague's grizzly flotsam.

**Dunn Frewin:** One of Ashford's priests, Dunn Frewin (now CE male ghoul cleric 2) died of the plague and was betrayed in death by his friend and colleague Waldere (see Area 3). He has risen as a ghoul and now lurks in the southernmost pit, in a cramped burrow among the suppurating corpses of his dead congregation. As yet, he does not trouble the villagers or his former friend; plenty of meat yet remains to be had from the plague's decomposing victims before he dines on Waldere's succulent, warm flesh.

## LIFE IN ASHFORD

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Life in Ashford bears little resemblance to that of the more prosperous (and plague free) neighbouring villages. Ashford—with its mass graves and decaying buildings—has more in common with a ghost town than a vibrant country village.

### TRADE & INDUSTRY

Trade and industry have virtually ceased. Few people travel to Ashford and those that do rarely stay long. The villagers do enough to keep body and soul together, mainly by tending their gardens and scattered plots in the fields surrounding the village, but little else.

### LAW & ORDER

With the (rapid) departure of Baron Stannard, law and order broke down in Ashford. Luckily, most of the villagers are too apathetic to commit any serious crime. Waldere Elvery sees himself as the moral guardian of the village and his congregation is the only organised group left in Ashford. Thus, issues of law and order now fall to him. However, even Waldere—backed up by his flock—will be no match for Dunn Frewin when the ghoul finally emerges from his plague pit-home to wreak his terrible revenge on his former friend.

### EVENTS

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

D6	EVENT
1	A villager suddenly starts to cough and hacks up a great globule of phlegm. Other nearby villagers draw away, fear etched on their faces.
2	A sudden wailing from one of the houses shatters the quiet. (A villager has just discovered the signs of plague upon her body and realises the terrible fate awaiting her). Moments later, her husband and three children emerge from the house with looks of sheer terror on their faces.
3	Two feral dogs bark at the party from an overgrown field. One holds a human leg bone in its mouth. If approached, they run off to enjoy their grizzly feast in private.
4	Two villagers are loudly talking about “the hungry man.” Apparently, he was seen again last night gnawing on the bones of the dead.
5	With a wet thump, an abandoned building’s roof collapses. Few villagers pay any attention to the collapse.
6	Waldere Elvery and his deranged congregation parade through the village, singing. If they see the PCs, they march toward them as their singing grows ever louder and more frenzied.





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