

The Beast of Saltmarsh Cove

A mystery in three sessions that turns out not to be paranormal.

Overview

A glowing-eyed sea serpent has been seen in Saltmarsh Cove, lobster traps are being emptied, and the fishing families are too frightened to work. The beast is a fake, built by a pair of poachers who are stealing the town's catch and trying to raise something old from the bottom of the cove.

For the GM's eyes only: what's really going on

- **The poachers.** Wade and Jolene Corbett, a brother and sister from out of town, have been anchoring their dark boat, the *Night Heron*, in a sea cave at the cove's north end. At night, they empty the town's lobster traps and sell the catch in Boston.
- **The serpent.** To keep everyone away, they built a monster: a string of black buoys towed behind a small skiff, with a foam head, green LED eyes, and a waterproof speaker playing a deep, moaning recording.
- **The stone.** While diving, they found a carved stone on the cove floor. A quiet man in a gray coat paid them \$500 for charcoal rubbings of its markings, and offered \$5,000 more if they could bring the stone up. Trying to lift it, they cracked it and broke off a piece, which is now on their boat.
- **The real animal.** Not every sighting was fake. A young harbor seal is tangled in a piece of the Corbetts' discarded net and hiding in the rocks. Its crying at night adds to the legend.

The heroes right three wrongs: stopping the theft from the fishing families, freeing the trapped seal, and returning the broken piece of the stone to its place.

What the sightings really are

WHAT PEOPLE REPORT	WHAT IT REALLY IS
A long body with humps gliding through the water	Black buoys towed on a line behind a skiff
Glowing green eyes	Battery-powered LED lights in a foam head
A deep, mournful moan	A recording on a waterproof speaker; it skips at the same spot every time
Traps emptied, lines cut	The Corbetts, with a sharp knife
A high, crying wail from the rocks	The tangled seal
Wet tracks on the beach	Seal tracks, and boot prints from the poachers

Cast

CHARACTER	WHO THEY ARE	HOW TO PLAY THEM
Lenny Shaw	Lobsterman, 60s, saw the beast first	Proud, embarrassed to be scared, very grateful for help
Wade Corbett	Poacher, 30s	Loud, overconfident, a bully who folds when cornered
Jolene Corbett	Poacher, Wade's sister	Clever, quiet, the real brains; tired of Wade's schemes
Barnacle	A young harbor seal, tangled in net	Frightened, then curious and playful once freed
Captain Roy Tibbs	Ferry captain	Insists it's a real sea serpent, until it isn't
Jess Alvarez	Her family's bait shop is losing business	Eager to help; brings her camera
Gideon Shale	Antique dealer	Sketching on the beach; quietly sad

Places

- **Alvarez Bait & Tackle:** where the fishing families gather and grumble.
- **Saltmarsh Cove:** a curved beach of gray sand north of the harbor, with tide pools, salt marsh grass, a crumbling old boathouse, and a big rock called the Serpent's Tooth. Sea caves cut into the cliffs at the north end.
- **The *Night Heron*:** the Corbetts' boat, hidden in the largest sea cave.

A sketch of the cove helps, so players can point at where they want to go.

GM tools: cove happenings

Roll a die when things are quiet at the cove:

1. A splash out past the rocks, then ripples, then nothing.
2. A high, sad cry from somewhere in the tide pools.
3. The faint putter of a small motor, far away. Then it cuts out.
4. A lobster buoy floats loose, its line sliced clean.
5. Fog curls in from the sea and hides the far end of the beach.
6. Two green lights blink once out on the water, then go dark.

Session 1: Sightings

The heroes hear the legend of the beast, find the first signs that something isn't right, and see the creature for themselves at dusk.

Scene 1: The case file (15 minutes)

READ ALOUD

Ada's folder holds a photo so blurry it could be anything: a dark hump in gray water, two pinpricks of green light. A sticky note in Ada's handwriting reads: "Lenny Shaw swears it's thirty feet long. Lenny is not a man who swears to things lightly."

If this is the heroes' first mystery, use this scene to introduce Ada and the case board.

Scene 2: Alvarez Bait & Tackle (30 minutes)

The bait shop is full of worried fishermen in rubber boots. Jess is behind the counter, and Captain Tibbs holds court by the coffee pot.

READ ALOUD

“Serpent,” Tibbs announces. “Plain as day. My granddad saw one in ‘38. Long as a church, eyes like lanterns.” Across the room, a weathered man in a wool cap stares into his coffee and says nothing at all.

- The quiet man is Lenny Shaw. Getting him to talk takes a Talk card or Kind roll, or simply sitting nearby with a Wait card until he speaks up on his own. He tells it plainly: humps in the water, green eyes, a moan that made his hair stand up. And every one of his traps empty the next morning.
- Lenny shows the heroes a cut trap line. With Look or a Clever roll, a hero sees it was sliced clean, by a knife, not bitten or torn.
- Jess mentions her family’s shop is losing money, since nobody is fishing the cove. She offers to help, and brings her camera.

Scene 3: The cove by day (45 minutes)

Put the cove sketch on the table and let the players point where they search.

- **The beach:** with Look, the heroes find two kinds of tracks in the wet sand. One is a set of flipper marks and a dragging belly trail leading into the tide pools. The other is heavy boot prints leading toward the north cliffs, then into the water.
- **The tide pools:** a high, sad crying echoes from somewhere among the rocks, but the tide is too high to reach it today. Note it for Session 2.
- **The old boathouse:** half collapsed and full of junk. With Look or a Clever roll, a hero finds a candy wrapper from a Boston gas station and a coil of new black rope. On a 6, they also find a scrap of black rubber with a valve on it, like part of a pool float.
- **The Serpent’s Tooth:** the big rock gives a view of the whole cove. Climbing it takes a Bold roll. From the top, with binoculars, a hero might spot the dark mouth of a sea cave at the north end.

A stranger on the beach. As the sun gets low, the heroes meet Gideon Shale, sitting on a driftwood log with a sketchbook. He’s drawing the water.

READ ALOUD

“Beautiful, isn’t it,” he says, not quite to you. “I lost someone to the sea, once. A long time ago. I keep thinking if I look long enough...” He trails off, smiles politely, and closes the sketchbook. “Be careful out here after dark.”

With Look, a hero glimpses one page of the sketchbook before it closes: a circle with a four-pointed star inside it, drawn over and over.

Scene 4: The beast at dusk (30 minutes)

The heroes keep watch from the beach or the Serpent’s Tooth as the light fades. Dim the room.

READ ALOUD

The water has gone flat and dark as ink. The last gull has gone quiet. Then, out past the rocks, the surface bulges. One dark hump rises, then another, then another, sliding through the water without a ripple of sound. At the front, two green eyes open and turn toward the shore. And a long, low moan rolls across the cove, so deep you feel it in your chest.

- Each hero takes 1 Fright unless they play Wait (watching calmly) or Look (studying it carefully).
- A hero who plays Look or rolls Clever notices something odd: the humps all bob exactly the same way, like corks. On a 6, they also notice the moan skips at the same moment each time it plays.
- Jess’s camera clicks. If anyone thinks to use a flashlight on it, the green eyes go dark instantly, and the humps sink out of sight.

READ ALOUD

Then the beast is gone, and the cove is silent. But from somewhere in the rocks, small and sad, comes that crying sound again.

End the session here.

Session 2: The Night Watch

The heroes rescue a trapped seal, learn the cove's old legend, and follow the beast back to its lair, where they discover it's no beast at all.

Scene 1: The crying in the rocks (30 minutes)

At low tide the next morning, the heroes can reach the tide pools.

READ ALOUD

Wedge between two rocks, half in a pool of water, is a young harbor seal with huge dark eyes. A tangle of black fishing net is wrapped tight around its neck and flippers. When it sees you, it cries, a high, thin, frightened sound.

- Calming the seal takes a Talk card or Kind roll, or just sitting still with the Wait card until it stops struggling. Anyone who rushes in gets a sharp nip (1 Fright).
- Cutting the net free takes a Fix card or Clever roll, plus a knife or the toolkit.
- With Look, a hero notices the net is brand new, black, and the same kind as the rope in the boathouse.
- Once free, the seal splashes into the water, then pops its head up and stares at the heroes. Let the players name it (Jess suggests "Barnacle"). It follows them around the cove for the rest of the adventure, and can be treated as a free companion that helps once per scene.

Scene 2: The legend of the cove (30 minutes)

The heroes can learn more back in town. Lay out option cards:

- **Tibbs's tale.** With a Talk card or a little encouragement, Tibbs tells the story his granddad told him: in 1826, a silver fog rolled into the cove and swallowed the schooner *Constance* whole, crew and all. "And here's the strange part. Nobody could remember the crew's names afterward. Not their wives, not their mothers. Like they'd never been."
- **Ada's archive.** Ada finds a scrap of an 1826 newspaper about the *Constance*. Every name in the article has faded to blank paper, though the rest of the ink is crisp. **Campaign clue: The Lost *Constance*.**
- **Jess's photos.** Developed or enlarged, Jess's dusk photos show the "serpent" more clearly. With Look or a Clever roll, a hero spots a thin line running from the last hump into the dark, and the faint outline of a small boat.

Scene 3: Following the beast (60 minutes)

The heroes keep watch on the cove at night: from Tibbs's boat, from a rowboat, or from the cliffs. Dim the room.

- The beast appears again. This time the heroes are ready. Getting close without being seen takes a Sneak card or Clever roll. Barnacle can help.
- Up close, the truth is obvious: the humps are black buoys, the head is painted foam, the eyes are LED lights, and the moan is coming from a speaker. A low outboard motor hums somewhere ahead in the dark.
- Following the skiff takes a Sneak roll. On “Yes, but,” the heroes are spotted for a moment and have to hide; on “Not yet,” they lose the trail, but Barnacle swims ahead and leads them back.

READ ALOUD

The skiff slides into a black opening in the cliffs: a sea cave, big enough for a boat. Inside, moored in the dark, is a long, low fishing boat with the name Night Heron painted on her side. A lantern glows in her cabin. You hear two voices.

The *Night Heron*. The heroes can listen first, then sneak aboard when the Corbetts take the skiff back out.

- **Listening** (Sneak or Wait): Wade complains that the town is “too scared to come near the cove, perfect.” Jolene says, “The buyer wants the whole stone, Wade. He says it has to be before the full moon. After that, he doesn’t care.”
- **On deck:** crates of stolen lobsters, the serpent kit, dive gear, and an inflatable lifting bag.
- **In the cabin:** a large chunk of carved granite wrapped in a tarp, with part of a four-pointed star cut into it. With Look or a Clever roll, the heroes also find a receipt in Jolene’s tidy handwriting: “Rubbings of cove stone: \$500 paid, cash. Remaining \$5,000 on delivery.” No name.

The heroes can take photos, take the stone piece, or both. Either way, they need to get out before the Corbetts return.

READ ALOUD

The putter of the motor grows louder, echoing off the cave walls. A flashlight beam swings across the water toward the boat.

Escaping takes a Sneak or Bold roll. On “Not yet,” Wade spots them and shouts. The heroes get away, but now the Corbetts know someone’s onto them, and they’ll try to raise the stone tomorrow night. End the session here.

Session 3: Unmasking the Beast

The heroes see the carved stone for themselves, rally the fishing families, and catch the poachers in the act, then set the stone right.

Scene 1: Making a plan (30 minutes)

The Corbetts will try to raise the stone tonight. The heroes have the day to prepare. Lay out option cards; they have time for any three:

- **See the stone.** Tibbs has old diving gear and a calm day. A Bold roll takes a hero down 20 feet into the clear green water (others can watch from the boat with a glass-bottomed bucket). See Scene 2.
- **Rally the fishermen.** Show Lenny and the others the photos or the stone piece. A Talk card, a Kind roll, or just laying the evidence on the bait shop counter does it. Every boat in the harbor agrees to come out tonight with lanterns.
- **Call the harbormaster.** Bev Thibodeau, the harbormaster, will come with her patrol boat, but only if the heroes bring proof: photos, the receipt, or the stone piece.
- **Set a trap.** A Fix or Clever roll rigs something clever: a net across the cave mouth, sabotaged lift bag valves, or a camera on the Serpent's Tooth.
- **Make a signal plan.** The heroes agree on flashlight signals with the fishing boats: one flash for "wait," three for "now." No roll; it just makes Scene 3 easier.

Scene 2: The stone (20 minutes)

READ ALOUD

Down here, everything is quiet and green. Sunlight wavers across the sand in ribbons. And there, half buried at the bottom of the cove, is a standing stone taller than a person, leaning badly. A fresh crack runs down its middle, and a chunk is missing from one corner.

- Carved into its face, under a skin of tiny barnacles: four symbols, a lighthouse beam, a bell, a standing stone, and a flame, arranged around a curling wave. Beneath them, the words "WHEN ALL FOUR SLEEP, THE GRAY WAKES." **Campaign clue: The Third Watch.**
- Barnacle the seal swims around the stone once, very slowly, then stares at the heroes, as if to say: fix this.
- This adventure has no ghosts, but let the stone feel important. The water is a little colder around it, and very still.

Scene 3: The trap is sprung (60 minutes)

READ ALOUD

Midnight. No moon yet, only stars. The Night Heron creeps out of the sea cave with her lights off, towing a fat yellow lift bag. She stops right over the stone. You hear a splash as someone goes over the side.

The heroes and their allies spring the trap. Lay out option cards for what each hero does:

- **Signal the boats.** A hero flashes the signal. One by one, lanterns blaze up all around the cove as the fishing boats close in. No roll needed if they made a signal plan; otherwise, a Clever roll to get the timing right.
- **Stop the lift bag.** A Fix or Bold roll lets the air out, cuts its line, or ties it down. On “Not yet,” the stone tips further, and the heroes have to try again fast.
- **Cut off the escape.** A Bold roll gets a boat or a net across the cave mouth. Barnacle can help, tangling the Corbetts’ tow line in their own serpent.
- **Talk Jolene down.** Jolene never liked this plan. A Talk card or Kind roll gets her to drop her end of the rope and put her hands up. “I told you, Wade. I told you this was stupid.” If a Listener has used Heart Sense on Jolene at any point in this mystery, they already know she’s ashamed and wants out, and talking her down needs no roll.

Wade tries to bluster his way out (a 1 Fright moment as he shouts and swings a boat hook at the air), but once he’s surrounded by lanterns, he gives up.

READ ALOUD

Sitting in the harbormaster’s boat with a blanket around her shoulders, Jolene finally talks. “It was never about the lobsters, not really. A man came to us in July. Quiet. Gray coat. Paid five hundred cash just for rubbings of that stone. Said he’d pay ten times more for the stone itself. Said it had to be up before the Hunter’s Moon.”

Campaign clue: The Buyer. If the heroes ask, Jolene can’t remember the man’s name, and Wade never asked.

Scene 4: Setting it right (20 minutes)

- **The stone.** With Tibbs, Lenny, and the lift bag the Corbetts brought, the heroes set the stone upright and fit the broken piece back in place. Lenny's cousin, a stonemason, seals the crack. This takes one team Brave roll, with each helper adding a die, and always succeeds in the end.
- **The catch.** The harbormaster seizes the stolen lobsters and the Corbetts' boat. The money from selling them goes back to the fishing families.
- **The cove.** Lenny sets his traps again. In the morning, they're full.
- **Barnacle.** The seal stays in the cove. Every time the heroes visit, it pops up to say hello.

READ ALOUD

The next morning, Tibbs stands on the beach with his arms crossed, looking at the deflated serpent spread out on the sand. "Well," he says at last. "My granddad's was real."

Campaign clues in this mystery

- ☐ **The Third Watch:** the stone's carving (Session 3, Scene 2)
- ☐ **The Lost *Constance*:** the faded newspaper (Session 2, Scene 2)
- ☐ **The Buyer:** Jolene's confession (Session 3, Scene 3)

Gideon's sketchbook page is a bonus hint, not a required clue.

Keepsake moments

- **Compass:** points straight down at the stone from the boat above it.
- **Pocketknife:** cuts Barnacle free from the net.
- **Sketchbook:** a hero's drawing of the beast at dusk clearly shows the line to the boat.
- **Lucky stone:** fits exactly into a small round hollow carved in the standing stone.
- **Film camera:** the photo that convinces the harbormaster.
- **Silver whistle:** Barnacle comes when it's blown.

Spotlight Checklist

Glance at this between sessions to make sure each hero gets a moment to shine, whatever their role.

STAT OR ROLE	MOMENTS IN THIS MYSTERY
Brave	Climbing the Serpent's Tooth; diving down to the stone; slipping aboard the Night Heron
Clever	Noticing the cut trap line; realizing the serpent is buoys; setting the trap
Kind	Getting Lenny to talk; freeing Barnacle; talking Jolene down
Seeker	Sharp Eyes spots the sea cave, or the line running to the skiff
Defender	Stand Firm when Wade swings his boat hook
Listener	Heart Sense on Jolene (her shame), or on Barnacle (pure fright)
Tinkerer	Rig the trap, or sabotage the lift bag
Wanderer	Lucky Break escaping the Night Heron before the Corbetts return