

Aunty MacKassa's Lair Environs

This map is centred on a spot approximately 340 miles (550 kilometres) off the northwestern coast of Errynor in Alarius. It shows an area of sea-bed around 1,230 feet (375 metres) below the Frigid or Equine Ocean's surface. The central feature is the cave entrance to the home lair of deep-sea hag Aunty MacKassa, a coral cavern in the northern part of the cold-water Hag Corals. Deep-sea hags are a particularly powerful type of hag, an essentially immortal, humanoid faerie creature. Aunty makes life uncomfortable for many of the intelligent creatures living within about 50 miles (80 km) of her home, most particularly the Kachaya or "Sea Devils" of the Ellenge Province, whose border lies a short way west and north of her lair. This is because centuries ago, she was driven from her former home in the Peak Corals, a separate region of sea-floor cold-water corals around 90 miles (145 km) west of here, by a force of Kachaya under their heroic leader Zakra. She has been slowly working out her vengeance little-by-little on the Ellenge Kachaya ever since. Aunty MacKassa is detailed further in the separate maps showing the interior of her home. In this map, the immediate near-surface environs around her sea-bed home are considered, extending a little over a mile (1.6 km) from that spot.

Using the toggle control in the FCW file, the map can be viewed with superimposed circular areas showing the zones around her lair where Aunty's influence is directly apparent on the sea-bed. In the outer zone, up to one mile from her lair, creatures and features are no longer quite as "normal" as outside this area. The corals and their reefs often look slightly distorted, as if reaching out to passing creatures with claws, as do others of the sedentary animals here. Mobile creatures in the water behave unusually too, sometimes clustering in swarms around intelligent creatures moving into this zone, or further towards its centre, clinging to such intelligent folk and their gear most unnaturally. Even ordinarily harmless animals may attempt to bite, scratch, slap or sting, often not enough to cause real harm, but to distract and unnerve those encountered. The larger, more dangerous animals may behave as if inspired by greater cunning and aggression than normal as well. Patches of unpleasant, sickly yellow-green algal slime are apparent on the sea-bed, reefs, occasionally floating in the water, or attached to the sea creatures seen here. It may attach to those encroaching the area too; harmless, though unpleasant, slick (problematic if on a weapon haft or wielding hand), and very difficult to fully remove until after leaving this zone. The sea-floor here is in permanent darkness, yet at times there can be weird beams of ill-looking sunlight seen shining weakly from above, like spotlight beams, palely illuminating small patches of the surface, especially unnerving to those who may be unexpectedly caught by its sudden appearance in one. While perhaps suspected as related, although in reality, and like the "sunbeams", due solely to Aunty's influence, there are also areas of sedentary life on the surface here which are found normally only in much shallower, properly sunlit, sea water, such as shellfish, anemones and seaweed. These have abnormal growth forms too, with sickly, odd colouring. Only the more extensive areas of these are marked on the map, shown with green symbols, and comprising the Soft Coral, Seaweed and Sponge Beds. Smaller clumps, notably of seaweed variants and shellfish beds, are scattered elsewhere across this one-mile region. All most off-putting, which of course is the point. The Cuttlefish Swarm shown with a green marker in addition, is another oddity, as these are free-swimming animals of the shallower seas, reliant on good lighting conditions when found elsewhere.

Aunty is made aware of significant events in, and newcomers to, this zone, reported to her telepathically by various of the living organisms, and she can see or sense through any of these she chooses in return. The one-mile zone extends spherically into the water column up to the sea's surface and below the sea-bed into the bedrock. One mile is 5,280 ft, and the sea here is 1,230 ft deep (1,600 and 375 m respectively), thus at the sea's surface, the area involved is only slightly smaller than on the sea-floor.

Still more weirdness can be found in the inner, half-mile radius (0.8 km), zone. Living creatures gain a pale, sickly, yellow-blue glowing "halo" whenever they move, around the moving limb, or their whole body and head, due to a profusion of bioluminous plankton in the water. This cannot be cleared, removed or prevented while in this area. Strange figurines, fetishes and mannikins, sometimes carved of stone, made of driftwood or dead coral, appear and disappear by magic among the coral reefs. Again, Aunty can see/sense through their eyes at will, and can make them appear or vanish similarly. Apparently open areas of sea-floor can have sudden new reefs or boulders appear in them, including dense coral tree thickets, each patch in an area about 100 ft (30 m) across. Barnacle-encrusted skeletons or drowned-looking spectral forms can appear from such freshly-blocked places as well. Any intelligent folk encroaching here who have had close friends or relatives die at sea, or any larger bodies of water, may recognise some of these forms; they may even recognise themselves among them. In all cases, such visions - including the skeletons and ghosts - vanish if any attempt is made to interact with them. More dangerously, any of the living giant coral trees can become animate creatures, inimically attacking any hostile intruders. Even without animating, the groves of these coral trees are more entangled and extensive across this inner zone than outside it, and the coral reefs here have notably sharper edges all over them. Illusory duplicates of Aunty MacKassa occur randomly in time and location here, sometimes in multiples. Aunty can use any such duplicate to interact with living creatures less than 60 ft (18 m) from it, as if she were really there. The illusion vanishes if anyone makes physical contact with it, however. Again, the half-mile zone's effects continue up to the sea's surface, and below the sea-floor, much as for the one-mile zone; half a mile is 2,640 ft, 800 m.

Aunty has a number of servants that normally reside in her lair. However, when she becomes aware of an incursion into her domain on this map, she may send some out to spy upon or attack the group, if that works to her advantage. If so, they can simply appear in, or emerge from, any coral reef surface within the inner half-mile zone, and may initially be disguised as natural features, creatures or the artificial figurines, by illusion. The servants that may be used in this way comprise Underwater Gargoyles and Shadow Killer Rays.

Underwater Gargoyles are similar to those gargoyles encountered on land, except that instead of wings, they have propulsive fins, and a fish-like tail instead of legs, which allow them to swim at what would ordinarily be their flying speed in air. As they do not need to breathe, their underwater environment here is not a problem, and they are used to remaining stationary and stone-like for many years at a time. Their stony skins help them blend-in with the reefs typical for the local corals found across Aunty's domain. She has seven such Gargoyles in her service presently. (For RPG statistics, these can be treated as normal D&D-type gargoyles with a swimming speed equal to, and instead of, their flying one; once called kopoacincths in earlier versions of D&D than 5e.)

Shadow Killer Rays are creatures of shadow with fluid forms that resemble large marine rays, with vertically-flattened forms, ragged-edge fin-"wings", and a snaking tail. Despite this, they have very sharp teeth, and can inflict a painfully damaging bite, as well as slamming against creatures with their "wings" or tail, which can inflict an oddly

similar, bite-like, wound. They can blend in with shadows, and hide in darkness, as if they are invisible until they move or attack. They have very keen senses, and can detect invisible and incorporeal creatures. They are purely marine, and shun bright light, especially daylight. Aunty has a pack of four in her service, using them much like savage watch-dogs. The pack's leader is larger and stronger than the rest, and can emit a horrifying, penetrating shriek that stuns and terrifies hearing opponents within a couple of hundred feet (60 m or so). (Originally heavily influenced by my reworking of the creature in the 1953 short story "Slime" by Joseph Payne Brennan, these have been further adapted here, drawing on aspects of the 5e D&D Shadow Mastiff in "Volo's Guide to Monsters" from 2016.)

Other features listed in the map's Key are further described in order below. The parenthesized numbers in the Key listing indicates how many of each type are shown on the map. Note that several symbols have been used to illustrate the extent of those items covering a significant area of the sea-bed.

Aunty's Cave Entrance: In the centre of the map, showing the south-facing entryway into Aunty MacKassa's coral cavern home. The cave itself is detailed by a separate map in the Community Atlas.

Blocky Rubble: A single area on the northwestern edge of the One Mile zone where the sea-floor has been cracked and shattered into unusually blocky forms. These might be taken for ruins needing more careful exploration, though they are perfectly natural features. The area is a useful landmark, as being unique in Aunty's lair environs.

Cave Entrance: A collapsed lava tube leads down into a small series of volcanic caves below the sea-bed in the southern outer zone on the map. The caves are presently unoccupied.

Cold-Water Coral Reefs: Also, if misleadingly, known as deep-water corals, as they often occur in deep, dark, cool, high latitude seas. They form reefs on the seabed, averaging 50 ft high by 150 ft wide (15 by 50 m), though in places they can grow to be tens of miles/kilometres long and a couple of miles/kilometres wide. Sometimes, the corals can form separate mounds scattered over areas around 40 square miles (100 square km) in extent, each mound about 330 ft (100 m) in diameter and 15 ft (5 m) tall, with a "tail" of sand extending for 1,000 ft or more (300+ m) down-current, looking somewhat like a sand volcano. About 60% of all such reefs and mound-clusters occur beside or within seafloor pockmark craters caused by natural gas-escapes. They are found in water depths from around 660 to 9,800 ft or so (200 to 3,000 m). Individual giant corals within these structures can be equally impressive. They may be home to many creatures. The map only shows a tiny part of the northern Hag Corals, although much of the reefs elsewhere are of a similar nature.

Soft Coral Bed: In the southwestern outer zone, and towards the outer edge of this One Mile zone on its eastern side, are two substantial areas of sickly-looking, non-reef-making, smaller corals, the kind ordinarily encountered only in shallower, sunlit seas. They each have a plant- or miniature-tree-like growth habit, and are scattered across significant patches of the sea-bed, making distinctive landmarks. They come in various shades of pink to red, when there is sufficient light to tell. They also look rather like small, thin, grasping claws reaching up from the surface, up to almost a foot high in places (*circa* 30 cm).

Giant Coral Trees: Thickets of individual giant cold-water corals of branching ivory form, resembling great white, leafless trees, reaching up to 100 ft tall (30 m), occur all across the mapped region. Not many are so tall as this, but their sharp, often claw-like branches can give deadly cuts to the unwary, while the thickets are impenetrable, unless

cut away (the coral is essentially stone in strength and texture). The thickets in the inner, Half-Mile, zone can become animated and attack intruders passing close enough to them. Creatures of various types, including Aunty's Gargoyle and Shadow Killer Ray servants, commonly frequent such thickets, which can result in those not from the region feeling the "trees" are watching them, even when still a short way outside the area affected by Aunty MacKassa.

Cuttlefish Swarm: On the northern edge of the Half-Mile region is an area between two larger coral reefs that is often frequented by small, squid-like cuttlefish. Each creature is about a foot long (30 cm), though its two longest tentacles can make them seem at least twice this length. Their skins are mottled in variable, colourful, camouflage patterning, in sufficient light at least, and the patterning changes with their mood, being used as a form of communication between them. When frightened, they can emit a jet of ink into the water to allow them to swiftly escape. They occur in profusion here, and nowhere else close-by. Ordinarily, they should not even exist at such depths as these, since they prefer shallower, well-lit, seas, having excellent eyesight. They do seem quite at home here for all this, and will cluster around strangers abnormally closely, which is not what those familiar with them would expect. They can cling, or even bite, though they will act more typically to distract attention away from others of Aunty's servants and spies that may be also in the vicinity.

Fish Shoals: Shoals of ordinary, edible fish cluster among the coral reefs in the western portion of the outer zone here. While not abnormal to find them in such deep water, it is most unusual to find them frequenting an area so near the sea-bed so persistently.

Hydrozoans: These are types of sedentary, filter-feeding animals that sometimes occur naturally in obvious clusters on the deep-sea-floor; useful as landmarks for intelligent creatures. A variety of plant-like individual growth-forms are apparent, including the three listed here, the Fern types (which have "branches" extending laterally from their main stalk at levels up the whole stalk; they can reach 6 inches, 15 centimetres, in height in bushy groups), the Ornaments (like miniature trees; a single stalk "trunk" with tentacular "branches" sprouting from the top; may reach 8 in, 20 cm, from the sea-bed), and the Quills (like a quill pen, with numerous very fine "branches" extending out from their main upright stalk; these can reach 20 in, 50 cm, tall). The creatures are protected by hard calcareous or horn outer casings. There are two main areas of the Fern Hydrozoans, one on the southern edge of the outer zone, the other on the southeastern edge of the inner zone. The Ornamental and Quill Hydrozoans occur locally in one area each, the former on the eastern edge of the inner zone, the latter on the sea-bed around 2,000 ft (600 m) beyond the outer zone's southern limit. Those found within the affected zones typically have twisted, unusual growth patterns, with the Ornaments especially often having a grasping-claw-like appearance.

Jellyfish: Two kinds of Jellyfish are found here, both commonly noted in Errynor's seas anyway, and both able to produce bioluminescent displays at times. One is a giant type, normally found swimming alone, or in a small group, towards the northwestern edge of the outer zone here. The others are smaller, and occur in unusually substantial shoals in two areas of the southeastern quarter of the outer zone. All are noticeably inquisitive regarding intruding humanoids.

Nautiloids: Like the Jellyfish, two types of free-swimming, coiled-shell Nautiloids occur in this vicinity as well, the ordinary form of up to roughly a foot in diameter (30 cm), and a much larger Giant kind, which can reach up to nine feet across (nearly 3 m). The smaller ones congregate in swarms just beyond the northeastern edge of the inner zone,

while the larger, seen rarely in groups of more than two or three, collect in a similar direction, just beyond the edge of the outer zone. All are relatively harmless to average human-sized or larger creatures, although the larger Nautiloids can cause physical damage, should their shell collide with one. All can act as a distraction, notably the oddly numerous smaller Nautiloids, within Aunty's lair environs. The Giant Nautiloids rarely cross into the affected zones, though they may become more aggressive should they do so.

Octopodes: The Giant Octopus which has its lair in the coral reef barely 1,200 ft (370 m) northwest of Aunty's Cave Entrance in the inner zone is essentially another of Aunty's servants, in that she often controls its actions when outsiders enter the inner zone, should they prove hostile. The two swarms of more typically-sized octopodes in the eastern quadrant of the outer zone are less inimically active, though their numbers and investigativeness are abnormal when intruders are nearby.

Ribbon Fish: Solitary or small groups of deep-sea Ribbon Fish - fish with an almost eel- or snake-like form, though with larger heads, and often several yards/metres in length overall - may be found in the southern part of the outer zone. They have a viciously sharp bite, and use bioluminous markings to lure and confuse both prey and intruders. They can be unpleasantly aggressive against intruders, rather than more normally simply fleeing.

Seaweed Beds: Two more extensive areas of these are mapped, in the southeastern region, one on either side of the Half-Mile boundary line, albeit on the sea-bed, these are separated chiefly by an intervening linear coral reef. Since seaweed requires sunlight to live, finding any at this depth, let alone in such profusion, should be recognised as somewhere between exceptionally unusual to deeply disturbing, particularly given the grasping-claw-like forms many of the branched weeds exhibit, along with their tendency to sway towards passers-by even in the absence of any discernible water current. The mix of types - green, brown and red - is also most unexpected, and their placement, with radically different kinds next to one another, instead of particular types forming discrete patches, is equally concerning for those familiar with such things. Some of the brown weeds can reach between 6 and 20 ft long (1.8 to 6 m), commonly those having one or only a few fronds, with many of all three colorations liable to occur in branching forms between 1 to 4 ft long (30 cm to 1.2 m). Smaller humanoids passing close or into such a bed may find themselves snared by the grasping weeds, particularly those in the inner zone, which are often more animated thanks to Aunty's increased influence there.

Sharks: Two varieties congregate inside the southern outer zone's limit, groups of ordinary Sharks, and the rarer, more dangerous, Giant Sharks. They seem less affected by Aunty's influence than other creatures hereabouts, albeit they already enjoy strong reputations for their deadly attacks ordinarily.

Sponges: The Glass and Giant Sponges found here are typical of those specimens normally met with in Errynor's deeper seas, though the extensive Sponge Bed just within the outer zone's east-southeastern extent are of types known only from much shallower waters. These latter are no more than a foot tall (30 cm), but they do form an obvious landmark because they are just so unexpected. The Giant Sponges have a mushroom or puffball shaped habit, occurring in dense mats, each individual up to two feet in diameter (60 cm). They occur chiefly in two places. One is near the centre of the inner zone east of Aunty's Cave Entrance, whose array of surface openings seem to behave unnervingly like eyes, following any passing humanoids, for instance. The other, exhibiting quite normal behaviour, lies just beyond the east-southeastern border of the outer zone. Glass Sponges come in several different tubular, upright columnar forms, commonly cylindrical, vase- or barrel-shaped, a mixture of which is typical for the four areas of them mapped here. All

grow up to about 20 inches (50 cm) tall, with column diameters ranging from a few inches/centimetres up to a yard/metre or more for the barrel forms. They are often translucent to transparent, with an internal silica skeleton that frequently remains long after the animal has died. One “grove”, the largest, lies beyond the northern limit of the outer zone. Two more are in that outer zone, one near its northeastern outer extent, the other in its mid-western part, while the fourth is in the inner zone west of Aunty’s Cave.

Standing Stone: An ancient, round-topped, cylindrical, black basalt pillar stands on the sea-bed a short way inside the limit of the inner zone, north of Aunty’s lair. What its purpose may have been is unclear, though it bears crude Ketorkan (Sea Orc) pictorial carvings across much of its surface. It is about 9 ft tall (2.7 m), with a maximum diameter of 18 inches (45 cm).

Wreck: Two old shipwreck remains can be discerned still in this region, although both are heavily encrusted with coral growth now. That right on the southwestern limit of the outer zone was once of ocean-going-canoe form, carved from a single, huge tree trunk, albeit only a small part of its stern can be readily identified as such currently. The second one, a short way outside the outer zone’s southeastern extent, was a longboat, whose prow is missing, and whose stern is effectively part of the coral reef, leaving only part of its mid-section, with the stump of its otherwise lost mast, on show.