

CHAPTER IV: BACKGROUNDS AND FORTUNES



BACKGROUND EXAMPLE

Jill creates a character named Anne Seymour. She imagines that Anne came from a high-borne background, but was forced into life among pirates. While Anne may have found more excitement in the New World than she had initially counted on, Jill knows that a restless spirit and a lust for adventure drew Anne there. Therefore, Jill chooses to give Anne the background of Lady Adventurer.

After talking about the campaign they're going to play, Jill and her GM decide that Jill's character, Anne Seymour (the Lady Adventurer mentioned above), rose to lead a pirate crew through a series of misadventures, coupled with a blend of cajoling, threats and promises. Initially there was resentment and occasional open rebellion as the rough pirates tested the mettle of their new leader (during which Anne suffered the -2 circumstance penalty for dealing with the lower classes). However, after they took several rich prizes together, her crew came to regard her as their lucky charm, and she eventually won their loyalty (the -2 penalty no longer applies to her crew, although it will still apply to any new recruits, as well as any potential rivals that may be hiding among the crew).

Backgrounds and fortunes are new character creation steps unique to the *Skull & Bones* setting. They are designed to flesh out a character's personality and motivations, and while they do carry mechanical benefits, they are primarily tools for roleplaying.

A character's background describes his upbringing and early experiences, and also defines his place in society. Each character may choose a single background.

Fortunes provide details about the character's personality and quirks, and make excellent roleplaying hooks. Unlike backgrounds, which deal with the character's past, fortunes define who the character is in the present. There are three types of fortunes (General, Good, and Ill), and each character can have up to four. Individual players and GMs should work together to pick the character's fortunes.

- BACKGROUNDS -

As the player is thinking about what class his new character will take, he should consider the character's background. Backgrounds come at the cost of 4 skill points and they must be selected at first level. In essence, characters are exchanging their 4 extra skill points for being human for a background. The game benefits of each background are described in the following pages.

SKILL RANKS GAINED FROM BACKGROUNDS

Each background provides a number of free skill ranks. Each skill is gained at the full number of ranks listed in the description, but backgrounds do not grant these as class skills. You must buy new ranks in these skills normally, depending on the skill list for your class.

Note that the granted benefit is skill ranks, not skill points.

CHARISMA CHECK MODIFIERS FROM BACKGROUNDS

Backgrounds provide circumstance bonuses and penalties to Charisma-based skills when dealing with certain other groups and individuals. These modifiers represent the initial reaction to a character, based on his background and social class. The character may lose either the penalty or the bonus with people who know him well, depending on their opinion of him (at the GM's discretion).

CONTACTS GAINED FROM BACKGROUNDS

Backgrounds are also an excellent source for contacts; any character of average or lower charisma will acquire more contacts through their background than by any other means. While superficially well disposed toward a PC, a contact is not necessarily a loyal friend, but is more commonly a useful source of information and the occasional favor. Contacts expect the same help in return. A long and prosperous relationship (or a short but intensely bonding one) may lead to a contact becoming an ally, but until such time contacts won't put their life on the line for a PC. They may be willing to part with "dangerous" information if they see a good reason for it, but that's about as far as most will go.

There is one small catch in regards to contracts gained from backgrounds and charisma: one of every character's contacts is out to kill him, but only the GM knows which one is the traitor, at least until the turncoat strikes. Trust is rare commodity to those "on the account," and even the firmest friend may just be a mask behind which lurks the deadliest of enemies.

BACKGROUND DESCRIPTIONS

This section describes the various backgrounds available to a starting character.

COLONIST

You were born in the New World or migrated there in your youth, and now consider yourself one of the local people. You might be a plantation owner, a shopkeeper, a craftsman, or even a religious leader.

Free Skill Ranks: Knowledge (local) 2, Profession (any) 2.

Bonuses and Penalties: You receive a +2 circumstance bonus to Charisma-based skills and checks when dealing with other colonists. You suffer from a -2 circumstance penalty to these same checks when dealing with native Europeans.

Contacts: Two free contacts with colonists of your choice, or one free contact of the GM's choice with a highly influential



BACKGROUND EXAMPLE 2

Bald Jake is a 1st-level rogue with an Intelligence of 11. He has a total of 36 skill points (32 for being a rogue and 4 for being human), and spends 4 of them on the Sea Devil background, leaving him with 32. Sea devil provides one skill that is cross-class for rogues: Survival. Jake gains two ranks of Survival, as specified in the background. However, if he later spends skill points on Survival, he still only gets half a rank per skill point spent, and his maximum ranks in Survival are currently 2, just like other cross-class skills.

Unknown to Bald Jake, the pirate captain he gained as a contact is someone he wronged years before; he robbed him of some valuable booty, and to add insult to injury, the contact's sister killed herself after a man forced himself upon her.

Whether this man was Bald Jake or not is unknown and completely irrelevant. The contact believes it was Jake. When the contact recognized Jake but was not recognized by Jake, he decided to bide his time and wait for the perfect moment to gain his revenge.



colonist, such as the owner of a large plantation, or the owner of a local shipping company.

GENTLEMAN-ADVENTURER (OR LADY-ADVENTURER)

You grew up in privileged surroundings and benefited from a proper upper-class upbringing.

Free Skill Ranks: Diplomacy 2, Knowledge (any) 2.

Bonuses and Penalties: You receive a +2 circumstance bonus to Charisma-based skills and checks when dealing with legitimate authority or members of the upper class. You suffer from a -2 circumstance penalty to these same checks when dealing with lower classes (usually includes those with a buccaneer, indentured servant, pressed man, scum, or slave background).

Contacts: Two free contacts with upper class people of your choice, or one free contact of the GM's choice with a highly influential upper class person, such as a governor or even a king (very useful for getting Letters of Marque or pardons).

INDENTURED SERVANT

You were shipped out to the Caribbean for incurring debts or being convicted of a crime, and forced into hard labor on a plantation or work crew.

Free Skill Ranks: Listen 2, Bluff 2.

Bonuses and Penalties: You receive a +2 circumstance bonus to Charisma-based skills and checks when dealing with lower class workers. You suffer from a -2 circumstance penalty to these same checks when dealing with the upper classes.

Contacts: Two free contacts with indentured servants of your choice, or one free contact with an influential servant of the GM's choice, such as the governor's butler.

NATIVE

You are a member of a Native American tribe, possibly the Carib or Arawak, or even a North American tribe such as the Apache or Lakota. You are now far from home, and eager to make a name for yourself.

Free Skill Ranks: Heal 2, Move Silently 2.

Bonuses and Penalties: You receive a +2 circumstance bonus to Charisma-based skills and checks when dealing with members of one's own tribe and any allied tribes. You suffer from a -2 circumstance penalty to these same checks when dealing with enemy tribes.

Contacts: Although you might expect to have your entire tribe as an ally, in most cases this is not so: after all, you left your tribe, probably at quite a young age, for a life at sea. You get two free contacts (of your choice) with members of your own or allied tribes, or one free contact of the GM's choice with an influential member of your own tribe or an allied tribe, such as the chief or medicine man. Alternatively, if you prefer to play a native who is less integrated with colonial or nautical life, you can treat your entire tribe as contacts, half of whom will also count as allies. In this case, the reaction penalties are more severe: you suffer from a -2 circumstance penalty to Charisma-based skills and checks when dealing with anyone who is not either from your tribe or an allied tribe.

PRESSED MAN

You took to the sea not by choice, but after an encounter with a press gang. Navy life did not agree with you, and you jumped ship or mutinied at your first opportunity.

Free Skill Ranks: Profession (gunner) 2, Profession (sailor) 2.

Bonuses and Penalties: You receive a +2 circumstance bonus to Charisma-based skills and checks when dealing with all ordinary sailors. You suffer from a -2 circumstance penalty to these same checks when dealing with officers.

Contacts: Two free contacts with ordinary sailors of your choice, or one free contact of the GM's choice with an influential sailor (this does not include officers, but may include a purser's mate, gunner's mate, and so on).

SCUM

You were born in the gutter and grew up in the bilges, unable or unwilling to learn any kind of honest living.

Free Skill Ranks: Hide 2, Sleight of Hand 2.



Bonuses and Penalties: You receive a +2 circumstance bonus to Charisma-based skills and checks when dealing with criminal classes. You suffer from a -2 circumstance penalty to these same checks when dealing with officials and authorities of all kinds.

Contacts: Two free contacts with underworld characters of your choice, or one free contact with an underworld leader of the GM's choice, such as a smuggler boss or racketeer.

SEA DEVIL

You are a second-generation pirate, born on the beaches and totally unused to civilized life. Your associates are fellow outlaws and outcasts.

Free Skill Ranks: Profession (sailor) 2, Survival 2.

Bonuses and Penalties: You receive a +2 circumstance bonus to Charisma-based skills and checks when dealing with others who live on the fringes of society, including buccaneers, natives, barbarians, and pirates. You suffer from a -2 circumstance penalty to these same checks when dealing with members of the middle and upper classes.

Contacts: Two free contacts with buccaneers or pirates of your choice, or one free contact of the GM's choice with a highly influential buccaneer or pirate, such as a pirate captain.

SEAMAN

You went to sea by choice and have served on one ship or another for your entire adult life.

Free Skill Ranks: Climb 2, Profession (sailor) 2.

Bonuses and Penalties: You receive a +2 circumstance bonus to Charisma-based skills and checks when dealing with anyone who has ranks in the Profession (sailor) skill, except pirates and buccaneers. You suffer from a -2 circumstance penalty to these same checks when dealing with pirates and buccaneers.

Contacts: Two free contacts with seamen of your choice, or one free contact of the GM's choice with an influential seaman or person associated with sea commerce, such as a captain, or the owner of a fishing fleet.

SLAVE

You were forcibly taken from their homeland, treated like an animal, tortured, and finally worked to exhaustion in the New World. You escaped at the earliest opportunity, and now seek a life as an outlaw or pirate to wreak revenge on your former oppressors.

Free Skill Ranks: Escape Artist 2, Bluff 2.

Bonuses and Penalties: You receive a +2 circumstance bonus to Charisma-based skills and checks when dealing with other slaves or former slaves. You suffer from a -2 circumstance penalty to these same checks when dealing with slaveowners and the upper classes.

Contacts: Two free contacts of your choice with slaves or former slaves, or one free contact of the GM's choice with an influential slave or former slave, such as an escaped slave turned pirate captain, or the leader of a band of escaped slaves now turned to outlaw and rebellion.

- FORTUNES -

Fortunes are extra details that round out a character's personality, providing some details about his habits, or some quirky trait dealt to him by Fate or experience. Starting characters can select up to four fortunes. Any or all of a character's fortunes may be of the general variety, but each good fortune chosen must be balanced by an ill fortune. Additionally, some fortunes may be gained or lost during play, at the GM's discretion.

GENERAL FORTUNE DESCRIPTIONS

General fortunes provide a mix of good and bad game effects.

CODE OF HONOR

You have a strong code of honor that guides your actions. You must work with your GM to define this code, and you should both have a good idea of your character's attitudes towards key *Skull & Bones* themes such as slavery, piracy, colonialism, Christianity, Voodoo, the taking of life, the treatment of women and minorities, and the relationship between the Old and New worlds. This code must include at least one provision that is difficult to follow: you might be a fiery abolitionist or believe that all of the New World belongs to the Catholic church—in any case, this belief should be something that brings you into conflict with commonly-held conceptions of the world.

Benefits: You receive a +2 circumstance bonus on all Charisma-based skills and checks when dealing with any other character with this fortune—even if your codes directly clash. You also receive a +4 morale bonus on Will saves if failing the save would cause you to break your code. Finally, you gain a +1 bonus to Fame so long as you faithfully follow your beliefs.

Special: If you ever knowingly violate your code of honor you suffer a -3 penalty to Fame and suffer one point of temporary Wisdom damage per day until you perform an act of contrition. Furthermore, no Wisdom damage is recovered until the act is performed. What constitutes an appropriate act of contrition is up to the GM.

DOLL'S EYES

You have the cold, predatory eyes of a shark. While they are menacing, they do not invite sympathy.

Benefits and Drawbacks: You receive a +2 circumstance bonus on all Intimidate checks, but suffer a -2 circumstance penalty on all Bluff or Diplomacy checks made to gain someone's trust.