

# Imperilled by the Sea

By Erin D. Smale

An OD&D adventure for 4-6 player characters of 3rd- to 5th-level.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

Since its founding, the seaside town of Saltmarsh has played an important, albeit peripheral, role in the commerce between Keoland and The Hold of the Sea Princes. While geographically situated on the border shared by these powers, Saltmarsh feeds both, and its immediate proximity to the sea has ensured a steady stream of outgoing wares and incoming profit.

During recent months, however, Saltmarsh's stability as a commercial centre has wavered dramatically. All signs point to the swampy expanse of the Hool Marsh to the west, which has grown far wilder and more dangerous than in recent years past. Whereas Saltmarsh's wards could expect (and repel) the occasional and disjointed lizard man raid with relative ease, attacks against the town have become more frequent and better organised. Town residents—men, women, and children alike—have replaced livestock and food stores as targets of choice, and the lizard men have taken a new and sudden interest in plundering trade goods and hoarded monies from Saltmarsh's docks and warehouses. In the last month alone, Saltmarsh has lost a score of its citizenry and some 5,000gp worth of hard goods, not to mention a king's ransom in cash and gems.

Clearly, the priorities of the swamp raiders have changed, and Saltmarsh is in greater peril than ever before. Indeed, the violent (and highly successful) forays conducted by the emboldened lizard men have left a sting on Saltmarsh's merchant constituency, which no longer views the seaside town as a safe or profitable haven in which to conduct business. Simply put, if the raids are not abated, Saltmarsh and her citizens will perish.

The Town Council, unable to solve the problem with the resources at their immediate disposal, have put out the call for intrepid adventurers to take the battle to the lizard men themselves and put an end—once and for all—to the fatal threat these marauders pose.

## Author's Notes

Imperilled by the Sea was originally written in the fall of 1991 as a one-shot adventure for my OD&D group. To save time in those busy days of school and work<sup>2</sup>, I adapted a lot of published material, namely TSR's World of Greyhawk setting, to suit my purposes. Commercial modules were used in whatever capacity seemed most expedient to our group's schedule and style of play. Thus, the campaign was set in Greyhawk, arbitrated by the guidelines set forth in the Rules Cyclopeda, and featured many published adventures in part or in whole.

Those familiar with *Greyhawk* and the U-series of AD&D modules will no doubt recognise the names "Saltmarsh" and "Hool" above. Indeed, to save time, I used the 1st- and 2nd-level dungeon maps from the AD&D module *U3: The Final Enemy* to depict the primary areas of exploration. The town of Saltmarsh itself (described in *U1: The Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh*) served as the characters' home base. In this particular adventure, the OD&D supplement *PC3: The Sea People* inspired the use of the aquatic merrow as the ultimate antagonist.

The anticipated course of the adventure was for the party to investigate the lizard man raids. In so doing, it would naturally venture into the Hool Marsh and perhaps trigger one or more of the keyed encounters therein. Eventually, the adventurers would find their way to the lizard man outpost and, soon after, discover the guiding hand of the opportunistic merrow themselves, who had their own well-considered plans for Saltmarsh.

With that simple course in mind, it came as somewhat of a surprise when the entire party perished before the module's objectives had been achieved. Sadly, *Imperilled by the Sea* has the unique distinction of being the only

"party-killing" dungeon I've ever created, and that's not a peculiarity of which I'm proud.

Initially, I felt at fault for generating unfairly powerful opposition in the form of the merrow and their lizard men minions (the party was lucky enough to avoid most wandering monster encounters within the Hool Marsh). Even so, there were monster spell-casters, a harsh environment, and this nasty animated statue of a 4-armed merrow deity . . .

In review, however, I attribute the module's difficulty to the problems associated with aquatic adventuring and their consequential influence on party cohesion and planning. After all, it wasn't until the party ventured to the submerged lair of the merrow that it began to court serious trouble. Looking back, I cannot see why a party of 3rd- to 5th-level characters could not succeed in the commission, provided that the party was well played by its members.

Regardless, this adventure should prove sufficiently challenging for the average party of 20 combined levels, but not impossible for PCs who pay attention, think carefully before acting, and (ahem) do their best to keep their heads above water.

Good gaming!

—Erin D. Smale, September 2002

## DM Notes

Much of this module is standard fare for the average adventuring party, but the real challenge is to overcome the merrow in their underwater lair. The town of Saltmarsh serves as a home base for gathering information, securing supplies, and providing shelter for rest and healing. Within the Hool Marsh and amongst the air-filled corridors of the lizard man outpost, the party is likely to succeed with tried-and-true tactics. Upon venturing to the outpost's second, submerged level, however, the party will meet with real difficulty in the form of an unfamiliar environment populated by tenacious opponents quite adept at acting (and reacting) in their home territory.

As mentioned, several published sources were used to provide detail for the setting. First and foremost, the DM should have on hand a copy of the *Rules Cyclopeda* (RC); unless otherwise noted, all rules and guidelines are taken from this volume. Second, the DM will find the OD&D supplement *PC3: The Sea People* (PC3) to be helpful, both in its general description of the merrow and in its guidelines for adventuring underwater. Capsule information regarding both is included in Appendix A.

The adventure itself is set within *The World of Greyhawk* hexes W4-124 and W4-125. If the DM is using his own world setting, the adventure should be set in an area neighbouring both the sea and a salt marsh; a temperate climate is suggested. Ownership of the AD&D module *U3: The Final Enemy* is not necessary, as the pertinent maps are included as Appendix C. However, a quick consult of *U1: The Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh* might prove helpful for its brief description of the town of Saltmarsh itself (U1, pp. 3). Of course, if this resource is not available, the DM may substitute any average-sized, but commerce-oriented, seaside town of his own devising.

It is assumed that the party came to Saltmarsh to accept the commission offered by the Town Council, namely to stop the raids originating from the nearby Hool Marsh. For this purpose, the Town Council is prepared to offer the party a maximum reward equal to 150gp per member (though the initial offer will be much lower). Since Saltmarsh is the PCs' base of operations, the DM must "stock" it with whatever vendors, suppliers, temples, hostelrys, and NPCs deemed necessary to help (or hinder) the party.

It is suggested that the party be given time to acclimate itself to Saltmarsh before pursuing the Town Council's commission in earnest. Allow the party enough time to locate equipment suppliers, healers, and any NPCs the DM considers important. It is likely that the PCs will spend some time in Saltmarsh, so the DM is encouraged to flesh out the town as required.

Before embarking, the party should have the opportunity to consult the locals for information regarding the raids. Particular details may be gleaned from the Rumours Table in the next section. Note that no maps of the Hool Marsh interior exist, though guides generally familiar with the area may be hired; while these worthies are incapable of leading the party directly to the lizard man outpost, their talents are nevertheless sufficient to prevent the party from becoming lost.

<sup>1</sup> First Printing: September 1991; Second Printing: September 2002

<sup>2</sup> After 11 years, little seems to have changed.

All residents of Saltmarsh can offer the certain fact that, until a short time ago, the town guard and irregular militia was able to repel the lizard man raids easily. Now, for whatever reason, the lizard men are far more organised and determined than before. Raiding targets used to be livestock and food stores, with an occasional razing or two of an outlying homestead. In recent months, however, the lizard men have made specific targets of town residents (who are captured alive), trade goods, and cash. The motivation behind the lizard men's material bent is unknown, but not really worth speculation—the bottom line for Saltmarsh is that the raids must end.

What the Town Council does not know is that the Hool Marsh lizard men—normally a disorganised lot interested only in surviving and thriving within the swamp—have fallen under the indirect influence of an evil merrow cult, which **charmed** the lizard man chief into leading his charges into their marauding ways. The merrow cult, driven by divine promises of greatness, believes it can achieve local supremacy through secular means, namely by supplanting Saltmarsh as a local centre of commerce.

To this end, the merrow cultists, ousted by their Azure Sea brethren for their unorthodox beliefs, occupy part of an ancient fortress that has been consumed by the Hool. The lizard men lair in the first level, accessed via the swamp, while the merrow orchestrate their plans from the second, submerged level that leads out to the open sea.

From this egress, the merrow traffic purloined wares and stolen cash to nefarious contacts within the Azure Sea's thriving kna merchant consortium. Using the lizard men as muscle on the surface, the merrow plan to ruin utterly the town of Saltmarsh. When Saltmarsh falls, the merrow will enact phase two of their scheme: trading openly along the Azure Sea in Saltmarsh's stead whilst maintaining the lizard men as the exterior guardians of their submerged trading hub.

Before embarking on their mission, the characters should gain enough information to warrant a bold foray into the Hool Marsh in search of the lizard man outpost. The Town Council is willing to cede up to four of the town's militiamen to the party as guides and sword arms (deducting, in the process, 150gp per militiaman from the party's total reward if successful; see below for stats). Whilst exploring the Hool, the party should gather enough clues to lead them to the ruined fortress, though the party is allowed, of course, to return to Saltmarsh to replenish supplies and obtain healing if necessary. In such cases, the party, upon returning to Saltmarsh, should be encouraged strongly by the Town Council to resume their expedition as soon as possible—after all, time is money.

All monster statistics are based on the formatting conventions and rule modifications described within the author's website at: <http://dnd.welshpiper.com/>.

As a final, cautionary note, not all encounters described within are meant to be won: some creatures wandering the Hool are difficult to overcome (e.g., the hydra and the troll) and opposition within the ancient Hool fortress is stiff. As the DM, you are tasked with playing monsters intelligently and leaving players to judge the prudence of continuing a given fight. If players opt to extract themselves from the swamp, rest, recuperate, and enter the breach later, you should allow them to do so. If, however, the party insists on pushing forward foolishly, you are certainly free to leave it to its fate.

- ❑ **Town militiaman** (NA 1-4; AC 12 (leather armour); HD F1 (M); hp 4; #AT 1 weapon; THMod +1 short sword (IR 0), THMod +1 short bow (IR 0); Dmg 1d6 (short sword), 1d6 (short bow); MV 90' (30'); Save F1; ML 6; AL N; XP 0 [F1]). Each carries a quiver of 5-20 arrows, belt pouch, flint & tinder, 2 torches, and 1 miscellaneous piece of equipment.

The adventure sections are:

- The Town of Saltmarsh: notes on the town of Saltmarsh, including available rumours.
- The Hool Marsh: keyed encounters within the Hool Marsh and wandering monsters.
- The Hool Fortress, Level 1: the surface level of the ancient fortress, occupied by the lizard men.
- The Hool Fortress, Level 2: the submerged level of the ancient fortress, occupied by the merrow.

## Start

After receiving your commission from the Town Council of Saltmarsh, your mission is clear: enter the Hool Marsh, find the source of the raids, and stop it from continuing. Secondary objectives are to rescue any of the town's still-living inhabitants kidnapped during previous raids, or bring back an accounting of their demise.

The Town Council, being merchants at heart, naturally request that you recover any trade goods or cash plundered during earlier raids. As incentive, you are offered a bonus equal to 10% of the value of any goods returned. Items or treasure captured by the party that do not obviously belong to Saltmarsh may be kept, of course.

The Town Council adds that merely locating the lizard man outpost and mapping a reliable route to it would be helpful. If the party returns with this intelligence alone, however, the Town Council will reduce the commission's value to 10gp per party member (after all, Saltmarsh, if desperate enough, could have directed its own militiamen to do the same; in this instance, the party is free to leave Saltmarsh upon their return, and the Town Council will ultimately hire another, stronger band to destroy the lizard men).

With little fanfare, you set out on foot, having been told that mounts would only impede travel in the largely trackless swamp. Heading west for a few hours over the gentle seaside slopes, you come to Bog Edge Camp, a dilapidated outpost on the fringe of the Hool Marsh.

The camp is now a crumbling stone ruin, where, as the Town Council has told you, huntsmen and swamp trappers once made their camp. Looking to the west, you see nothing but brackish water, clouds of stinging insects, and rotting stumps mixed with thriving plant life, all stuck in soft mud. Having had little guidance from the Town Council as to where to find the lizard man raiders, you strike out west along what remains of a packed earthen trail, wondering hopefully how you'll manage, laden with the treasure you expect to capture, to cross the muddy track upon your return to civilisation.

## The Town of Saltmarsh

The specifics of Saltmarsh are left to the DM, who needs only to generate a rough outline of the town, the services it offers, and a few important NPCs as they are needed.

Above all else, the DM should create a town committed to its mercantile role. Unlike most mediaeval settlements, Saltmarsh supports an abundance of bureaucrats, free craftsmen, traders, and itinerant merchants; a total population of no more than 250 is suggested. To a one, these residents are used to living off of what money can buy them instead of what they can cultivate from the land or its resources. Consequently, for the greater part of its full and part time residents, Saltmarsh's economic well being is paramount. In fact, only those families who have lost loved ones in the raids demonstrate anything more than a mercenary interest in the party's success.

When devising the details of Saltmarsh, the DM's thinking should be guided by the town's anticipated role in the adventure and, later, as a permanent fixture within the campaign. If Saltmarsh is to be nothing more than a place for the party to buy supplies, sell treasure, and rest, then the DM need not invest much effort at all in establishing the town. If, instead, Saltmarsh is to become a long-term centre for the party's continued exploits, the DM must, obviously, devote more care to the town's creation.

As a minimum, the town should include a travellers' inn or hostelry; a few smiths and provisioners to provide armour, weapons, and equipment to the party; and at least one temple or shrine to provide healing. For enterprising DMs, or for groups that emphasise role-playing in their gaming style, more intriguing possibilities exist:

- A Town Council member lost his daughter/wife/mother in the most recent raid; he offers a minor magic item as a personal reward for the safe return of his loved one.
- A local sage knows of an ancient fortress that stood along the seashore before the swamp's encroachment; if, after hearing the appropriate rumour (#3 or #8; see below), the party inquires, he suggests (amid much unnecessary detail) the strong likelihood that it serves as