

THE TERRIBLE SALT

AN ADVENTURE LOCATION BY MICHAEL PRESCOTT

THE SITUATION

East of Vincha is a tidal flat long hidden beneath **caustic waters**. Only the very old remember a when the tides would flow out, revealing a strange, short-lived landscape. Now, for reasons unknown, the tides have returned!

THE FLATS

Endless ripples of hard, wet sand. Sinuous pools of **caustic water** glint in the sun. Long crusts of rock covered in abrasive barnacles will cut skin and tear clothing. Each **square** is six hours' walk across, three if travelers risk a direct path through the pools and over rocks.

FIRST TOWER (E₅)

A tall ruin. At its base, an ill-fated **expedition boat**, its bottom dissolved by the **caustic water**. Inside, a butcher's smell and damp, pink **human bones** gnawed clean by crabs. Above the collapsed staircase is a **bounty of the tides**.

VINCHA VILLAGE (A₆)

Ending a long mountain pass is a cluster of **stone huts**, home to a few herders and potters. Greasy, goat-bacon **smoke** hangs like mist. The tides bring hope: collapsed huts are being rebuilt for weekly newcomers, prospectors and would-be oyster hunters come down from the mountains.

A lone expedition **survivor** begs for coins for a journey home. His party was eaten by **marauder crabs**. If paid, he can describe them in detail.

WEDDING ROCK (F₃-G₃)

At the austere but beautiful summit, a grove of slender trees surrounds an **altar**. Upon it is **bounty**. Engravings show a **salt lord** marrying a villager.

MOUNTAIN CLIFFS

East of column G, the jagged mountains have eroded into high cliffs and offer no place of retreat from the tides.

CITADEL OF THE SALT LORDS

The sea's impression of a fortress sprouts from a rock like a knife of coral. Spires drag across the rain-streaked sky. Its name is known only to the waves that crash upon it.

The five outer towers are empty, but the puddled and algae-streaked courtyard lead explorers inward to a pink, luminous hall lined with six **consorts**. Before four of them is a **bounty**.

Nine **salt lords** rule, dormant and camouflaged in various spots around the island and nearby shallows. They begin awakening if visitors arrive, and will expect marriage or tribute.

FLAT ROCK

Here rests a mighty clam-shell coracle, large enough for eight. Without keel or rudder it handles like a stone, but its hull of stony shell and six crab-leg oars are impervious to the **caustic water**.

THE FLOCK (MOVING)

A flock of **terns** nests in a **clifftop ruin**. Curious, they will fly to investigate anything they **observe**. Newly fed from the easy pickings at low tide, they are looking for amusement. Their eldest, Petryl, speaks for them. They enjoy making new friends, trying new meats, watching the crab swarm chase people, letting the **salt lords** know about visitors.

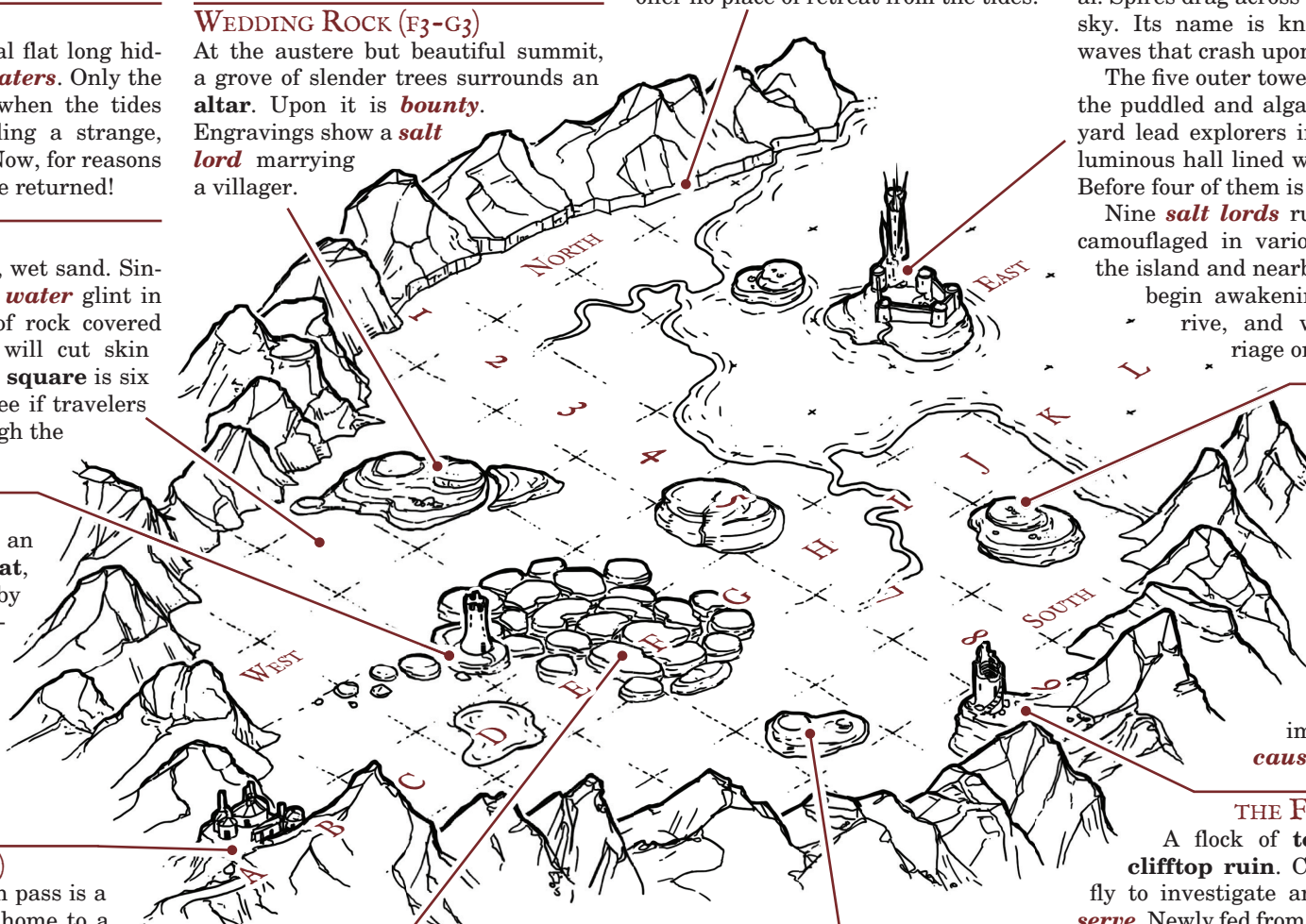
They fly swiftly (8 sq/hr), but only by day. They dislike strangers near their nesting place and will harass climbers. Visiting friends may receive **bounty**.

THE CRAB SWARM (MOVING)

A group of thirty **marauder crabs** looks for food. From afar they are a flock of white blobs flowing over the sand, moving into a random adjacent square every three hours. If they **observe** potential victims, they will pursue at walking speed without rest (3h/square). They are unharmed by the water, but lose sight if submerged.

THE ARCHIPELAGO (E₅-F₆)

A rocky island has eroded into a maze of steep, claustrophobic **ravines**. Down at sand level, an hour's search will reveal one of many water-filled **caves**, containing (d6) 1-2: nothing; 3-4: a horse-sized, vicious moray; 5-6: a soft, fresh-moulted **marauder crab**. 50% of these caves hold **bounty**. Returning tides are violent in the ravines.



THE TIDE (MOVING)

When the party sets out from Vincha, it is low tide (as shown on the map). Place two roving **flood points** at the ends of the permanent canals, in squares H2 and H7. When a flood point enters a square, it floods: **caustic water** slushes in quickly but gently, rising to waist depth in six hours.

Every six hours, roll d6 to determine how the flood points move: 1. west; 2. west two squares; 3. north; 4. south; 5. stationary. 6. a surge: every square north or south of water also floods.

Flood points can move into island squares (e.g. H5), but not mountain squares (e.g. E1), instead moving towards B6.

RECEDING TIDE

If either flood point reaches B6, the tide turns. Water drains column by column (B, C, D, etc.), one every six hours. When column J drains, the tide turns. Place new flood points at H2 and H7.

THE CAUSTIC WATER

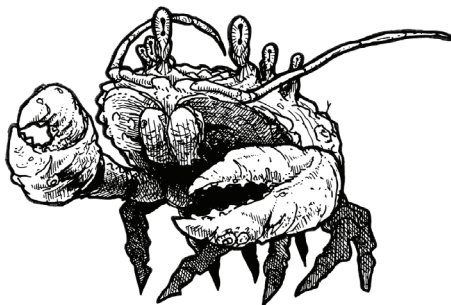
The water of the inland sea is rich in minerals that sting the eyes and skin. After a few hours of contact, bleeding cracks will form. Open wounds sprout parasitic, hair-like worms after a few days. Leather and wood are also affected. Travelers who walk through shallow pools will find the soles of their boots flopping behind. Metal is left gleaming but brittle. Boats leak and sink within days.

There is **no drinkable water** anywhere on the flats.

OBSERVING THE DISTANT

From the sand, travelers scanning the horizon very carefully can see water, crabs, or other travelers one square away. Heights like rocky islands add one to the distance; towers add two. From the heights of Vincha, therefore,

it would be possible to see people in B6, and careful observers will spot the tower at E5 just above the horizon. Towers like E5 and G9 can see each other 5 squares away (1, +2 for each tower).



MARAUDER CRABS

Huge crabs the size of mastiffs, relentlessly hungry. They attempt to eat anything that moves or smells edible, swarming, pulling, tearing and gnawing. They are nimble over rocks (though too heavy to climb sheer surfaces)

Their thick, stone-like shells are nearly impervious against cutting weapons. Crossbows, heavy hammers, axes and picks are best. They are completely encrusted with the terrible salt, and any blow that strikes them sends up a spray that can blind an unsuspecting attacker. Their rubbery eye stalks are vulnerable.

Crabs swarm and eat any fallen, including their own dead. Eating delays the swarm for several minutes until the carcass is picked clean.

SALT LORDS

When dormant, a salt lord is a mound of kelp and barnacles strung over the rocks, or tossed by the waves. When woken by passers by or news of intruders, they rise up into the sea's mockery of a mounted knight.

Salt lords have pale, clammy flesh drawn tight over strong sinews. On the move they can seem human, even

beautiful—but they are of the sea: hair and cloaks of kelp, skin and clothes studded with barnacles and crawling with snails. Their tall, black warhorses heave through the waves as easily as on land. On the flats, they gallop across a square in just an hour.

Salt Lords wield spears and knives of polished coral. They can be killed, but if left where the tide can find them, the sea will knit them together again. Each carries a **bounty**.

THE WILL OF THE SEA

It was the Salt Lords that set the tides moving again. In their alien way, revealing the flats is an invitation for the land people to visit. The Salt Lords' **consorts** have all grown quiet, and they are looking for replacements willing to join them in marriage.

Every day, there is a 1 in 6 chance a Salt Lord rides to Vincha to make a proposal to the first person they meet. If they accept (1 in 6 chance), the tides will end a week later.

CORAL CONSORTS

To marry a Salt Lord is to join with the sea. Stone fish venom slows the heart and mind, slowly petrifying them as they are enclosed in their thrones by living coral. For a hundred years they are freed of pain and fear, and speak only of the sea's beauty, mouthing words that take days to form. The Salt Lords delight to hear their realm praised, but eventually a consort falls silent, slowed to stone-like stillness. If you know what to look for, the citadel's shoreline and underwater slopes have scores of them.

This destiny is something few would choose willingly, but in every generation or two there is someone desperate or foolish enough to take up a Salt Lord's proposal.

'Marrying the sea' is a common theme in tavern songs nearby. In one,

a woman returns to land and finds her grandchildren grown old. The tale is true: if a consort is hauled back on land (no easy task), within a week they will quicken. The dreams last much longer.

BOUNTY OF THE TIDES

- necklace of intricately carved coral
- rotted leather cask, hundreds of gleaming silver coins
- huge hollow pearl, carved to contain a minuscule throne room
- wavy-bladed dagger, gleaming, razor thin, and venomous
- silver clockwork starfish that slowly crawls toward drinkable water
- camouflaging octopus-leather cloak
- black clamshell, shiny and etched into a filigree of nonsense runes
- vial of fishstink oil, attracts crabs from miles away
- circlet of water breathing
- jade fish; if submerged, it pulls forward with a swimmer's strength
- tub of unguent, heals caustic burns
- opal necklace; protects vs the water
- clay urn renders water drinkable
- deed to Vincha sewn into sharkskin
- message bottle fated to find any intended recipient; currently has a message for whoever finds it from someone they know
- life-sized golden statue of a long-dead sea priest, buried up to its hair
- animate marauder crab legs and harness; a mobility device

HEARD IN VINCHA

"I'd as soon kiss a fish." "Only the salt knows that." "Go marry the sea, you idiot." "Well, stick me in a chair and turn me to stone!"

TRILEMMA ADVENTURES