

# Bitter Song of the Black Mangroves



DESIGNED FOR USE WITH  
**OLD-SCHOOL  
ESSENTIALS**



*An Adventure into the Mangroves*  
by Jason Woollard

## About the Adventure

*Bitter Song of the Black Mangroves* is an *Old School Essentials* adventure set in a mythical delta loosely based on Southeast Asian fantasy. The adventure's background takes inspiration from [Centaur Games'](#) Kala Mandala setting, although it can easily be adapted to other rural fantasy settings. A *GURPS* version can also be found on [www.1shotadventures.com](http://www.1shotadventures.com).

In this adventure, a haunting song drifts from the mangroves beyond a village, carried on warm winds and black waters. Those who hear it become obsessed, drawn to their doom deep into the swamp. Fishermen abandon their boats, children wander off at night, and families wake to find loved ones gone. None who follow the song into the mangroves have returned. To save the village, the PCs must venture into the forest, uncover the source of the song, and break the curse before it spreads to other innocent settlements.

*Bitter Song of the Black Mangroves* is suitable for three-to-six 1st or 2nd level characters. The end of the adventure includes several pregenerated characters so groups can get started right away.

Characters introduced for the first time in the adventure are noted in ALL-CAPS. Suggested ability rolls are in SMALL-CAPS. Sections marked with a map  are side-quests and adventure hooks, and not important to the overall plot of the adventure. Sections marked with a person  are opportunities for specific PCs, notably the pregenerated characters from the end of this adventure.

## Adventure Background

Centuries ago, deep within the mangroves of the Thousandfold Delta, stood a small village of the Glass Ancestors, a beautiful and mysterious people whose fragile bones were said to be made of glass.

One of their daughters fell in love with a gentle Bearfolk fisher from a neighboring village. They pledged to marry, but his parents refused to bless the union. Though they admired the woman's beauty, they believed one so delicate could never stand beside their son.

On the day of the wedding, the bride waited beneath a stone shrine in the mangroves where the two villages were to meet. But no wedding procession ever came.

## The Land Where Rivers Forgot the Sea

The Thousandfold Delta, is a place that cartographers eventually abandon. Every year the monsoons arrive, and every year the rivers change their minds. Islands drift, channels vanish, villages wake to find themselves facing a different horizon, and old kingdoms quietly slide into the mangroves. The folk who live here do not speak of roads, only currents. They navigate by the songs of herons, by floating shrines tangled in banyan roots, and by the stories exchanged at river markets that appear for a week or two before dissolving back into the mist.

Great water buffalo carry entire libraries on their backs. Monkeys serve as temple bell-ringers. Some villages are built atop the shells of sleeping turtles so vast that no one remembers they are alive. In the delta, every bend in the river promises a wonder, a bargain, or a mistake.

Yet all the waterways eventually lead toward the Dreaming Estuary, where the River Sleeper stirs beneath the mud. Some say it is a serpent. Some say it is a god. The wisest insist it is simply a river that has begun to dream. Its dreams leak into the world like floodwaters. Fish emerge from the depths reciting poetry they have never learned. Ghosts arrive at their own funerals carrying gifts. Mangrove trees uproot themselves to wander beneath the moonlight, seeking forgotten lovers from centuries ago. Entire islands sometimes disappear for a season and return carrying unfamiliar stars. The people of the delta do not fear these things. For they know that the world is not meant to remain still. Rivers wander. Islands drift. Even the gods, given enough rain, may lose their way.

Only her beloved arrived, ashamed and alone. He apologized, confessed he would not defy his family, and quietly sent the bride away.

Heartbroken and furious, the bride fled wailing through the forest. It was said a hundred villagers heard her sorrow. Sadly, grief claimed her before she reached her village and her people buried her in her bridal robes, offering prayers and fragrant frangipani flowers that the river spirits would carry her safely into the next life.

But the spirits did not hear. The bride's sorrow and anger settled over the village like a cursed monsoon. Within a few years, the settlement was abandoned, and the Glass Ancestors slowly faded into legend.

Centuries later, the ruins drew the attention of the ambitious and cruel Captain Lembusura. Hoping to uncover forgotten treasure that he believed was under its stones, the pirate instead unearthed the jilted bride's glass skull. Believing it to be a powerful relic, he carried it back to his camp, where he soon discovered it could emit a terrible and haunting Bitter Song. Many of those who heard its mournful melody would fall under its spell and be enchanted to wander through the mangroves toward the skull, their minds clouded by confusion and nightmares.

With his "Skull of Lamentations," Captain Lembusura unknowingly twisted the very currents of the riverlands, filling the waterways with its terrible song. But he did not care. He only knew the skull brought him more prisoners every night... and that was only the beginnings of its power.

Yet the greater danger remained unseen. The theft reawakened the bride's restless spirit, and with each passing night her anger grows. Unless the skull is returned or destroyed, she will soon rise to reclaim it herself.

Ten days before the adventure begins, the Bitter Song drifts into Tambuk Laut, a humble fishing village perched on stilts above the brackish tides. One by one, its villagers vanish into the mangroves, following the melody toward a fate from which none have returned.

## Adventure Summary

The PCs are all travelers bound for Tambuk Laut – merchants, explorers, fisherfolk, or perhaps careless adventurers who paddled up the wrong river at nightfall and awoke a hundred miles from home. Such things are known to happen in the Thousandfold Delta...

Whatever brought them here, the PCs' boat has been badly damaged and cannot leave Tambuk Laut until extensive repairs are completed.

In the village the PCs learn that several of its people have vanished after hearing a haunting song coming from the mangroves. Fear and indecision have paralyzed the people of Tambuk Laut, and they seem unwilling to venture into the forest to find the source of the Bitter Song.

After earning the superstitious villagers' trust, the PCs secure a new boat and are asked to follow the song into the mist-shrouded mangroves, discover its source, and find the fate of those who have disappeared.

The PCs' journey on the river is dangerous, but they will no doubt find hints that something beyond spirits is at work here. Soon, they find clear signs that pirates have established a hidden base beyond the mangroves.

Tracking the pirates to their camp, they find the villagers who disappeared, caged and in bad shape. To rescue them, they must confront Captain Lembusura, the pirate leader who possesses the Skull of Lamentations, and will use it to chase off any would-be heroes who want to seize it from him.

To save Tambuk Laut, the PCs must defeat the pirates, recover the Skull of Lamentations, and find a way to stop its song, which might involve destroying it or performing a ritual to silence it. But if they do not act quickly, the vengeful spirit of the bride will appear, and menace all those who live. If the PCs fail to stop her, her melody will drift forever downriver, spreading its curse throughout the countless waterways of the Thousandfold Delta.



# Tambuk Laut

## Entering the Village

The small river village of Tambuk Laut is home to about 200 villagers. Most of its residents are fishers, crab catchers, or harvesters of mangrove fruit and medicinal herbs. They are a hardy, tight-knit community, deeply superstitious and wary of outsiders. The villagers are a mix of humans and riverfolk.

The houses in the village are simple wooden huts raised on stilts, connected by narrow, rickety walkways. Each hut has woven palm leaf walls and thatched roofs. Its platforms tremble slightly with each step, creating a constant creaking sound beneath one's feet. Beneath its walkways, dark, brackish water shifts with the tide, and mangrove roots form a tangled web beneath the surface.

The PCs enter the village in early evening, when the village is illuminated by oil lanterns, and the croaking of frogs grows louder as the sky darkens. The air is thick and humid and smells of salt and herbs.

Unfortunately, the boat that the PCs traveled in on suffered hull damage during their journey. It will take many days of repairs to be able to safely venture back out into the delta.

Most of the PCs will recall that Tambuk Laut is too remote to attract more than the occasional trader, but if it was famous for one thing, it would be its Moonroot Crab Paste, a pungent spread made from mangrove crabs, fermented fish, salt, and the fruit of the silver moonroot mangroves, which only grow in the handful of tidal channels nearby. The paste is aged in sealed clay jars and develops a rich flavor that is simultaneously salty, sweet, smoky, and slightly floral. Locals spread it on flatbread, stir it into soups, or use a small spoonful to flavor entire meals. Connoisseurs claim that a single jar can transform a bland pot of rice into a feast.

The village seldom receives frequent visitors, so as the PCs enter, they will get curious or even dumbfounded looks by the residents.

The children of the village, however, are often braver than the adults, and soon the PCs will be accompanied by a handful of young boys and girls who wish to hear their stories. The group is led by a talkative twelve-year-old girl, WULAN AYU, who welcomes the PCs and wonders if they are hungry.

“We don't often see folk like you, but now it's twice in a week with Ratu Singa here too. Although he smiles with crooked teeth and mumbles in his sleep, so we'll be glad when he leaves.

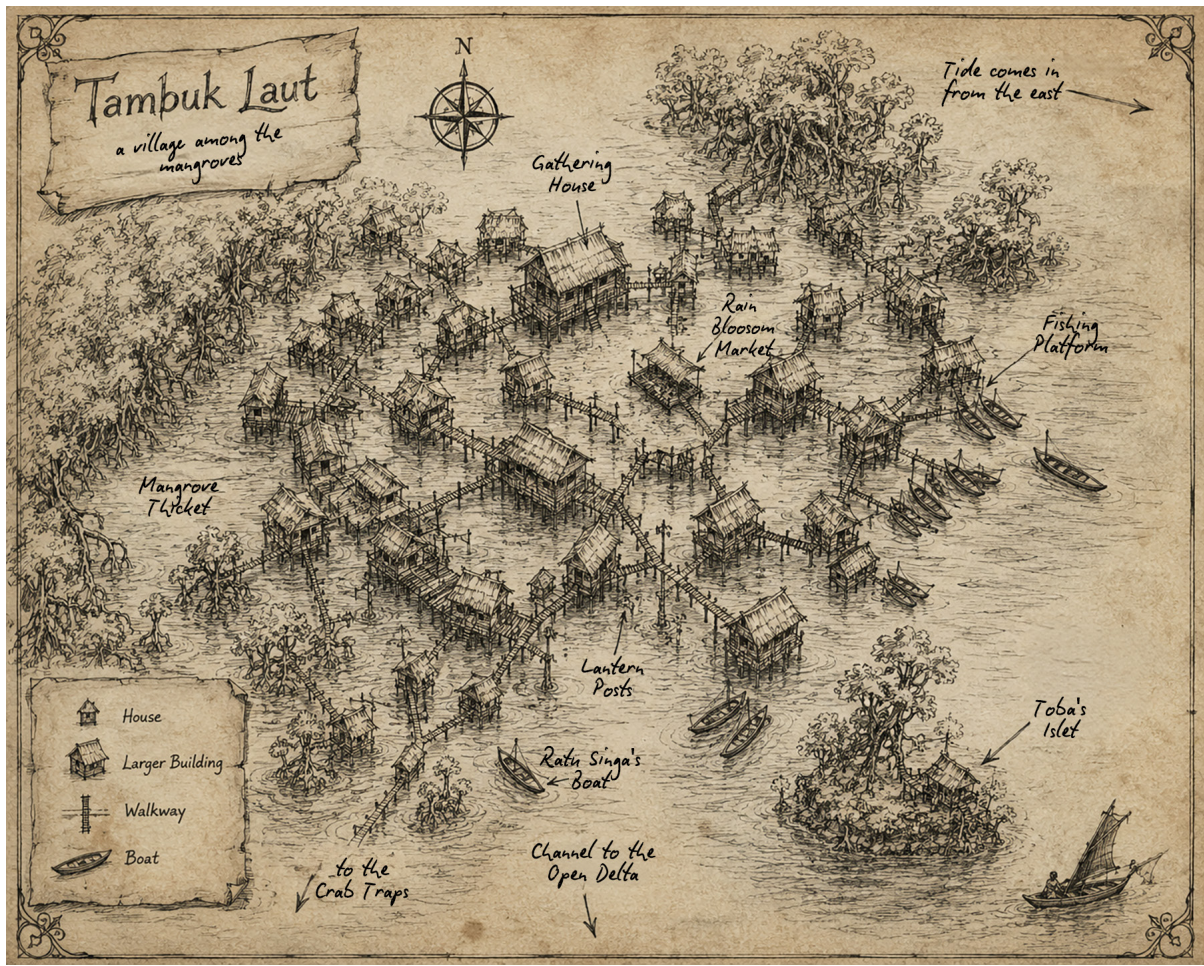
“You look hungry. Nolai has clay pots full of fresh moonroot crab paste, although she doesn't make flatbread and only uses rice which my mom says is the wrong way to make it.

“Oh, and before you find somewhere to stay, Elder Wira might want to look at your teeth. He did the same thing to Ratu Singa. Don't worry, though. He only pokes around a little.”

### **On Ratu Singa...**

“He grew up here, but he is gone more than he stays now. He's been back for a month or so, says he's a big trader and is rich now, but my mom says all his money must be invisible, because nobody's ever seen it.”

Wulan Ayu will also volunteer that Ratu Singa can arrange a place for the PCs to stay.



**On Nolaï...**

“She knows where to get the big fat mangrove crabs. She is as brave as her brother, though her brother went into the swamp and hasn’t been back for over a week... I’m not supposed to know about it.”

**On Nolaï’s brother...**

“Laka was a builder and stronger carpenter... I don’t know what happened... but people here say it wasn’t right and he shouldn’t have left. I am sure he could have fixed your boat up!”

**On Elder Wira...**

“He’s the oldest in the village and if he thinks you are sick he will sprinkle ash on your head and poke your mouth with twigs. We like him.”

At some point during this encounter, observant PCs may spot an older man with wild gray hair observing the PCs from the shadows of another walkway. This is TOBA, a shy fisherman troubled by the recent disappearances and the growing number of dead fish washing up along the riverbanks.

If noticed, he refuses to speak and quickly retreats to his sampan rowboat and pushes off into the darkness towards his islet home. He’ll return in the morning, but will only talk to the PCs if he hears another, older villager has befriended them and trusts them.

**On the shadowy man...**

“That’s just old superstitious Toba. He skulks around whenever strangers visit Tambuk Laut. His hut stands on a tiny island out among the trees, just five minutes by sampan.”

Wulan Ayu is quite talkative and will also share as much information as she has about the village and its inhabitants. Her mother has not told her about the disappearances, and so will not be able to share any stories of unusual events.

The PCs are free to explore the village, where they will discover more about the tragedy that has befallen its people.

## The Rain Blossom Trading House

This market platform is where the charismatic merchant RATU SINGA sells the wares he has obtained from elsewhere in the delta. It's a modest, open-air establishment under a faded canvas roof. There are only a few dozen items on display; colorful cloth hanging from ropes, clay jars of salt, dried exotic fish, and medicinal herbs of dubious quality. A locked chest in the corner holds the most valuable items, such as metal tools, fine needles, and imported lanterns.

Ratu Singa can usually be found here selling his goods. He is delighted to discover visitors to the village, hoping to fill his pockets with their silver coins.

"Ah, welcome, welcome! Please take a look. The Rain Blossom Trading House is the finest merchant platform in a hundred channels. Even a turtle-prince from the Jade Isles once bought a fishing hook from me. I'll give you a price so good you'll think I've gone mad."

Ratu Singa is a flamboyant, greedy, and pushy entrepreneur. There's nothing he won't try to sell the PCs.

### **On a place to stay...**

"I can rent you an empty fisher's hut for a just a few silver coins. Rough around the edges, but far better than sleeping in the heat. By noon you'll wonder how you ever lived without that breeze. East bank, near the fishing platform."

He'll also offer to guide the PCs should they ever want to leave the village.

### **On the village...**

"I know the mangroves better than my own face. I know of a secret pearl garden, and another cove where the seven river princesses come to smooth the wrinkles from their cheeks. For a small price, I'll show you the way."

### **On Nolai or her brother...**

"Poor Nolai. Beautiful as a moon lotus, sad as the low tide. Her brother Laka was a good friend of mine, but he disappeared from the village a week ago. For days I led a search party to find him, but alas, I could not. I gave Nolai a gift of white orchids, but she did not seem to like them as much as I hoped she would."

Ratu Singa is exaggerating; while he took his boat out for a few hours to look for Laka, he did not "lead a search party."

### **On the disappearances...**

"It is a strange thing. The villagers say that a song comes from the mangroves at night, one that draws people away. Maybe its a ghost. Maybe its an excuse for the poor fishing here. Whatever the cause, nine villagers are gone. If the number reaches ten, you'll find me selling cloth and spices in some other village."

He advises them to talk to Elder Wira if they wish to know more.

## Nolai and the Fishing Platform

While there are many fishing platforms in the village, this is the most popular. The fisherwoman Nolai can be found here, fishing during the day or repairing her nets in the evening.

Nolai is friends with an elderly rat-folk villager, PAK MINO. She often has conversations with him here while she does her repair work and he crafts fine reed flutes, often only to discard them when they do not meet his satisfaction.

### **On the disappearances...**

"Nine of our own have wandered into the mangroves, never to be seen again. My older brother Laka was among them. We woke up last week, hearing a song that can only be described as a song that sounded like a wedding chant sung beneath the water. While I was fearful and kept my mind, my brother's eyes became distant and he ventured out into the swamp without a word. I tried to stop him, but he pushed me into the water. When I returned to the shore, he was gone."

### On searching for the villagers...

“For two days I searched the swamp, but found no trace. Ratu Singa took his boat out too, but did not search long before he became afraid and returned. Elder Wira seems paralyzed with indecision. If there was another search, I would go with them.”

### On Fishing...

“It’s been harder and harder to catch fish this season. Dead fish wash ashore near the crab traps. Our village healer Darsa thinks she can brew an elixir that will clean the water, but I am skeptical that such a thing is possible.”

Nolai is brave but is too smart to venture out into the mangroves alone. If the PCs make a good impression, she will accompany them into the forest. Her friend Pak Mino believes this idea is foolish.

### On the village’s misfortunes...

“The village has lost its way, our roots are weak, and our children are unruly. Our best people are being lured away to a better village, I am sure of it. Look how the River Guardian has fallen in the water, and no one has the resolve to restore it. And how we haven’t made a sacrifice of flowers to the old stone altar in years.”

### On the River Guardian...

“It was carved a century ago out of an ancient hardwood trunk, stern faced and tusked to scare off the evil spirits. It fell under a walkway during a storm many years ago, and the village seems to not care.”

Any villager knows the location of the fallen totem, but it will be difficult to see at night.

### On the altar...

“An hour by sampan from here stands an old stone altar where we once held weddings, festivals, and springtime celebrations. Then the monsoon rains came, turning the ground to mud and swallowing the pathways. Rather than repair the place, Elder Wira forbade anyone from visiting it.”

Most villagers know the location of the altar, but will not take the PCs there because of the supposed dangers.

## Nolai

### Brave Fisherwoman

Armor Class 8 [11]  
Hit Dice 1 (4 hp)  
Movement 90' (30')

Morale 8  
Alignment Lawful

THAC0 19 [+0]  
Attacks Javelin (1d6)  
Saving Throws D12 W13 P14 B15 S16



**Notes:** Nolai is a brave local fisher-woman, and she and her now-missing brother Laka are much loved by the villagers. She’s also known to be an excellent crab cook. She wears a warm cloth cap, even in the summer, and usually carries fishhooks and line in a small bag. When in the wilderness, she carries a javelin.

## The Fallen Guardian

A great, 12-foot long carving of a river spirit once greeted visitors to Tambuk Laut, not too far from the mangrove thicket. The carving fell into the water after a storm, and now lies half submerged in the mud, at an angle. Intricate carvings of fish, herons, and crocodiles can still be seen on its back, now overgrown with algae.

The villagers have tried to drag the massive trunk from the water, but failed each time. They do not have the knowledge or the resolve to restore their River Guardian.

The PCs may be able to help, but it won’t be easy. The waterlogged trunk weighs over 5,000 lbs. A plan that is just people trying to haul the log out will automatically fail.

Recovering it requires rallying the village, first clearing the surrounding mud with poles and baskets, then using ropes, pulleys, boats, and water buffalo to haul

it free. This effort will take most of a day! Inventing a good plan usually requires an appropriate ENGINEERING roll.

With a good plan, there is a base 25% chance that the trunk is pulled from the water and stood up once again. Knowledge and skill rolls will improve the odds. For example, a successful activity (and maybe an ability roll) in these areas might increase the roll by +5% each:

- Strength – Strong carpenters can oversee the building of strong a-frames to lift the trunk.
- Dexterity – Skilled boat pilots coordinates the fleet to help lift the trunk.
- Intelligence – better secures the ropes and pulleys.
- Wisdom – Animal handlers can motivate the buffaloes to pull hard.
- Constitution – Swims out to measure the best tides.
- Charisma – Leaders better coordinate the team.

Restoring the River Guardian will win the PCs much glory among the villagers. Morale will lift considerably, and even the Elder Wira will be more open to suggestions on how to stop the disappearances.

Additionally, the feat earns the thanks and respect of Pak Mino. He gifts them a delicate reed flute that seems to play a wistful melody even with no musical skill of its user. The flute's song helps soothe restless spirits and animals, and anyone within hearing range receives +2 on saves to resist any sound-based magic.

## Darsa and the Crab Traps

South of the village are abundant crab colonies. Lately, however, the shores have seen dead fish washing ashore here. The crabs eat the dead fish and their natural sweetness has been replaced with bitterness.

The shy village healer DARSA is often here, brewing elixirs in clay pots that line the shore.

### **On her pots...**

“Each pot has its own variation, but most contain crushed mangrove bark, river ginger, bitter lotus root, charcoal, and the petals of the rare white saltflower, which Ratu Singa has found for me. I am hoping this purifies the water and restores the crab colonies.”

## *Event - The Bitter Song is Heard*

The PCs arrive to the village at nightfall, and have several hours to explore, talk to some NPCs, and discover that disappearances have been happening.

In the early hours before dawn, the PCs hear the song for themselves. It drifts from the mangroves – a haunting woman's voice, soft and sorrowful, rising and falling with the tide. PCs may recall echoes of a wedding song or the love ballads once sung during the old Lantern Festivals.

Either way, PCs must make a SAVE vs. SPELLS or be drawn under the spell, and mindlessly walk into the mangroves. With them is one of the NPCs they have befriended, such as Nolai or Wulan Ayu.

Unless bound or forcibly held, the subject wanders towards the area where Toba saw a “ghost-woman”. The recent rains have made this area dangerous, and anyone entering this area must make a SAVE vs. PARALYSIS to avoid its thick muds. Failure indicates that they sink into it! Every round, the victim must make a STR roll. Folks under the song's spell automatically fail! A success lets the PCs wade to safety. A failure costs 1 HP.

Someone trying to rescue a victim from the mud must first find a tool, perhaps some rope, or a branch or vine. Then, they can also make a Str roll to pull their friend free. Additional rescuers add +2.

Once they have escaped the mud, subjects under the spell automatically snap out of it, although they will be subject to nightmares for the next 1d6 days.

Clerics who succeed a WIS roll finds that her concoctions are effective, although could benefit from the addition of powdered river pearls. She will be impressed by anyone who offers her this knowledge.

Otherwise, Darsa is hesitant to speak to villagers beyond ordinary topics. However, if the PCs are accompanied by someone she trusts, like Nolai or even Ratu Singa, she will open up more.

### **On the disappearances...**

"I cannot say, but it scares me. My grandmother taught me that spirits are real, and she once said our Tambuk Laut has had issues with evil songs in the past. But it could also be a great crocodile, who lures good men into the swamp to devour them and gain their knowledge. Or worse."

If the PCs have earned Darsa's trust, she will supply them with a package of healing supplies. This includes clean bandages which are treated with medicine herbs from rare black mangrove trees (+1 hp / day due to natural healing). There is also a brackish-green elixir of her own making, which restores 1d8 hp and gives +2 to any roll to resist diseases for 24 hours. The elixir, however, tastes like rotten seaweed and old copper coins and requires a **SAVE VS. POISON** to fully gulp down. If this roll is failed, the elixir is only half as effective.

## **Toba and His Islet**

Grumpy old Toba lives in a ramshackle hut on a small islet located about 5 minutes away from the village. The PCs will need a canoe to get there, though one is easy to borrow from a villager with good roleplaying.

Toba is unwilling to talk to strangers unless either Darsa, Nolai, or Elder Wira vouch for them. Without that, he'll refuse to speak and eventually paddle away in his sampan.

### **On the disappearances...**

"Strong, that song is. Into the muddy mangroves it drew even me. Strange black ripples upon the water I saw, and a ghost-woman all in white walking where no path lay. A root I tied myself to with my grapple, for wrong in my heart the feeling sat. Free myself I tried all night long, but when the dawn at least came creeping, my mind came back to me."

Toba will tell the PCs the location that he saw the ghost-woman (see Toba's Sighting, p. 13), but he refuses to accompany them to that spot. Only if he is very impressed will Toba will lend the PCs his grapple.

### **On Elder Wira or the villagers...**

"The elders sit, and the elders talk. Much wisdom they claim, but little action follows. Elder Wira speaks as though this is merely another flood season come and gone. Only Nolai walks the channels and searches among the roots for her brother. Brave she is, but brave folk the mangroves often eat first."

### **On the mangroves or leaving the village...**

"Into a sampan I would not climb today. These waters, I've known them for decades, and wrong they feel. Strange, the tides have become. Dead fish wash upon the banks, and the crabs feast upon them and carry sickness back to us. The dark ripples I saw upon the water speak of something stirring below, and good it is not..."

On a good reaction (or if he is asked directly about them), Toba will warn the PCs of pirates in the mangroves:

### **On pirates or other helpful advice...**

"Among the mangroves, pirates hide. One I saw perched in a tree like a heron, though a much uglier one. Bright clothes he wore, and an old sword rested in his hand. When our eyes met, a wicked sign he flashed at me. Trouble he promised, that much was clear. So away I paddled. I told Elder Wira, but share the warning with the village, he would not."

## **Elder Wira and the Gathering House**

Elder Wira is a frail man who has led the village for decades. He is superstitious, and has become overly cautious in his waning years. Making any decision is difficult for him. Unfortunately, he is widely respected as the leader in the village, and no one is bold enough to challenge his thinking.

Elder Wira lives in a small hut just outside the Gathering House, the largest structure in Tambuk Laut. If the PCs approach, he will emerge and politely engage with them, although he will seem distant.

“Welcome to Tambuk Laut, one of the thousand villages in the delta, and one that is not so significant I think you will find. But we are kind here, our crab paste is excellent, and our mangrove fruit the sweetest. If you need a place to stay, you will find empty fisher’s huts on the east bank which you may rent from Ratu Singa at the Rain Blossom Trading Post.”

#### **On the disappearances...**

“It is a concerning village matter, but one I am handling, thank you. I expect to see the missing return to the village in a few days, with a good story or two to share with us. If you wish to look for them yourselves, the villagers would appreciate it, but I assure you it’s not needed.”

Although Elder Wira seems unconcerned, he is quite a frightened and over his head, which empathetic PCs will discern.

#### **On the song...**

“Our mangrove forest is home to many spirits, and most mean no ill-will. Centuries ago a jilted bride fled from the altar in embarrassment and died the mangroves. It’s possible that the bride is calling to new suitors, but such a spirit has no way to really harm the living.”

PCs with magical capabilities remember that that a Pontianak is a vengeful spirit, typically described as having pale skin, flowing hair, and a pearl-white gown. They are said to emit the scent of frangipani flowers followed by the stench of a rotting corpse. They are dangerous when angered.

#### **On his plan...**

“The river spirit has protected this village for decades. While it’s true that we have lost some of our people, there is nothing we can do. The river spirit will either guide them back, or lead them to another fate, perhaps at another village. What we need now is thoughtful patience.”

## *Village Rumors*

If the PCs talk to the villagers of Tambuk Laut, they will find that most villagers think the Bitter Song comes from an angry ghost. But on a good reaction or better, they’ll get an additional rumor or two:

1. “Old Toba saw strange pirates are gathering in the forest. They are scaring our men away with hopes of raiding our village.” (Somewhat True)
2. “If you hear the Bitter Song three times, you’ll be lost forever.” (False)
3. “Pak Mino says that the river spirit is angry because we stopped making offerings at the old altar in the mangroves.” (False)
4. “There are men that lurk in the swamp who worship a strange sea god. It is their evil magic that is luring our villagers away.” (False)
5. It is the song of a Pontianak Bride Ghost that we hear at night. She sings to lure our men away to marry them in the place of the lover who jilted her years ago.” (Somewhat True)
6. “Elder Wira is under the sway of the spell. That is why he does nothing, even when we ask him to find the source of the song.” (False)

#### **On the mangroves or leaving the village...**

“If you venture into the mangroves, beware the black mud, for the rains this season have been heavy. Old Toba claimed to have seen pirates in the mangroves, too, but in my experience pirates are best dealt with by giving them your coin and walking away.”

#### **On a place to stay or fixing their boat...**

“You’re welcome to stay until your boat is mended. There are a few empty fisher huts along the walkway. Nolai will show you one. We don’t charge travelers for a roof over their heads... so don’t let Ratu Singa convince you otherwise. He’d try to sell rain back to the monsoon.”

**IF the PCs have experienced the song themselves...**

“I heard about your experience in the dark. It’s a dreadful and terrible thing. I would understand if you decided to leave the village once the next riverboat arrives. I ask that you do not share your story too far and frighten the villagers. They cannot handle more such stories as the one you might tell.”

**On the River Guardian...**

“It fell into the mud a decade ago when a strong monsoon hit the village. We tried raising it, but I feared too much that someone might drown in the effort, so I told the village to leave it be.”

If the PCs have raised the River Guardian, Elder Wira will truly be thankful, for he thought such a thing was not possible. If the PCs go to leave the village, he will hand them a pouch of white **Sungkara Ashes**, which he says if sprinkled into a circle might help keep evil spirits at bay. There is enough ash for a single 15’ radius circle. Spirits and other evil supernatural creatures will hesitate to cross the circle (typically taking 2d6 rounds).

**On the altar in the mangroves...**

“In my youth, it was a beautiful place. Flowering trees shaded the old stone altar, and the air was filled with music and laughter during our festivals. But the tides shifted, the waters rose, and the paths disappeared beneath the mud. For the safety of the village, I asked that no one go there anymore.”

It will soon become obvious to the PCs that Elder Wira does not have a real plan to deal with the disappearances, and seems content to let life in the village go on. However, if intimidated or pushed hard, it is likely the elder finally breaks down and admits the truth of what he knows.

**IF intimidated, interrogated, or broken down...**

“The song frightens me. The pirates frighten me. Most of all, it is the things we do not understand that frighten me. My grandfather taught that every river carries two currents... the one upon the surface, and the one beneath. The song, the pirates, the disappearances... these are only the surface current. What moves beneath them, that is what I fear. Long ago, a curse emptied village after village until an elder walked alone into the swamp with nothing but a stick and his courage. Each night I ask if I am that man. Each night the answer comes back as clear as a temple bell. I am not.”

Once broken, the elder retreats to his hut and is not seen again for days.

### *A Cry for Help*

After the PCs meet with Elder Wira, they will be approached by a handful of scared villagers, curious as to what happened during their meeting with the elder.

If the PCs have not made many allies yet in town, the villagers will summon the courage to ask general questions about whether the elder communicated a plan to either stop the disappearances or rescue the missing villagers. If the PCs are honest and tell them that Elder Wira seems to have no plan, they will mumble in disappointment and wander off deflated.

If the PCs have made some allies in town, for example, earning the trust of Toba or Nolai, or even repaired the River Guardian, the villagers desperation is clear. They plead with the PCs to take matters into their own hands, venture into the mangroves, and discover the fate of the missing townsfolk. While most of the villagers are too nervous to go themselves, they’ll promise supplies of medicine, food, and tools to aid in the adventure.

# Into the Mangroves

## Leaving the Village

Eventually the PCs will head out into the mangrove swamp to discover the source of the Bitter Song and the villagers' disappearances. They'll likely have one of two destinations in mind: the old stone altar and the area where Toba heard the song and saw the ghost-woman. This second area is not too far beyond where the PCs heard the song and might have gotten caught in the mud.

Venturing into the mangroves requires a boat of some kind. While the villagers will lend the PCs some of their small sampans, they will only hold two people and can easily be overturned if the weather turns bad. The better option is to rent Ratu Singa's bigger boat, which easily holds eight people, has a cover, and is more stable. Even though the village is desperate, Ratu Singa will charge for its use. He will definitely not let the PCs take the boat without him as its captain.

## Traversing the Channels

The waterways of Kala Mandala twist and wander like dreams. While a rough map of the mangrove forest can be found on p. 13, it captures only a single moment in time. Within hours, channels shift, hidden passages appear, and familiar routes drift elsewhere as if guided by the whims of the river spirits. Skilled sailors will still reach their destination, but the journey rarely unfolds as expected, and the delta's waterways always have a surprise or two waiting among the roots and mist.

If the PCs are traveling on Ratu Singa's larger boat, they will not experience any wilderness hazards. However, if they are traveling on foot or on a small sampan boat, their leader must make a WIS roll every 12 hours. A failure inflicts 1d2 damage from insect bites, minor accidents, heat exhaustion, or something similar.

## The Stone Festival Altar

The altar lies about one hour from the village, although if they do not have a guide, there is a 25% chance they'll get lost and get into trouble (see Additional Encounters, p. 15).

The path to the altar is muddy and dangerous. PCs must make a SAVE vs. PARALYSIS to avoid the deep, sticky mud. If they fail, they get stuck for a time and are covered in horrible black mud that smells like old fish oil. Worse, unless the subject bathes, the flies of the mangroves will be attracted to them (see p. 15).

### Ratu Singa Flamboyant Captain

Armor Class 9 [10]  
Hit Dice 1 (2 hp)  
Movement 90' (30')

Morale 5  
Alignment Neutral

THAC0 19 [+0]  
Attacks Sling (1d4)  
Saving Throws D14 W15 P16 B17 S18

**Notes:** Ratu Singa is a talkative merchant who always has something else to sell. But he has a good heart and does in fact care for his village.

Ratu Singa's boat is a large, covered sampan, big enough to hold half dozen or so passengers plus several crates of trade goods. He carries a sling on the boat to fend off the monkeys he is afraid will rob him.





The altar is carved from weather-worn gray stone carved with images of river spirits and lotus blossoms, but its surface is cracked by centuries of rain. Moss and vines cling to its edges. The clearing smells faintly of frangipani flowers.

A great and proud tiger, PADUKA BELANG, lives in the area near the altar. A few minutes after the PCs arrive, he leaps atop the altar to assess the PCs.

“Lost, are you? Good. The jungle prefers those who arrive by accident. Once there was laughter here. Once there were weddings and drums. The river carried those sounds away long ago. And three nights ago, the ghosts followed after them.

“But my hunger still remains. Stringy pirates make such poor meals. So, run where you will through the mangroves! Cross the bridges and leap the roots. The river teaches many lessons, and one of them is this: no creature stumbles at the beginning of the journey. The stumble comes at the end. And I have all the time in the world to wait for it.”

The tiger licks his razor-sharp claws, and then leaps in the middle of the PCs, testing to see which of them runs first.

The tiger attacks, but he is too smart to be outnumbered. If the PCs stand their ground (which will be muddy and slipper in this area), he will only fight for 3 rounds before leaping into the trees and disappearing, promising that he will return soon. He’ll also flee if he takes more than 5 hp of damage.

Investigating the altar finds that it is quite old and has not been disturbed in some time. There is no sign of any ghosts.

### Toba's Sighting

If the PCs return to the site where Toba tied himself to a tree after seeing a pale ghostly woman, they’ll find an unusual site – the tree where Toba tied himself is burned from the inside out.

PCs with magical backgrounds will identify the warped tree as a supernatural sign of ill omen. Lo-

cal superstition holds that touching it invites bad luck, and only powerful magic could have twisted it into this black shape.

Anyone touching the tree must make a **SAVE vs. POISON** or get terrible chills and a fever for 24 hours. During this time, they suffer -1 to all rolls. This condition can be treated by magic or a skilled healer who spends an hour gathering some appropriate healing medicines.

Investigating the area finds tracks in the soil that lead a hundred yards away to the riverbank. There, the PCs find a small, **colorful sampan boat** hidden behind tall grass and mangrove roots. The make of the boat is unusual and does not match the wood used by the local villages.

In the boat is a sack filled with bananas, fishing gear, and several spiny *bulan duri*, or moonthorn fruits. About the size of a melon, these pale blue fruits are covered in soft thorn-like protrusions and smell faintly of honey and rain-soaked flowers. Locals (such as Ratu Singa or Nolai), or anyone making an **AREA KNOWLEDGE** roll, recall that *bulan duri* are seasonal delicacies and grow only in a grove deep within the mangroves, several hours west of the village (see Grove below).

*GM's Note: This boat belongs to one of Captain Lembusura's pirates, who was told to capture some of the men who fell under the spell of the Skull of Lamentations. Unfortunately, the pirate fell into the water, washed down river, and was eaten by the great tiger, Paduka Belang.*

## **Bulan Duri Groves**

The rare blue *bulan duri*, or moonthorn fruit, grow in the tall bushes here, scattered among the crumbling ruins of an ancient riverside shrine. Old stones and broken carvings peek through the undergrowth, and knowledgeable PCs can deduce that this forgotten place was sacred centuries before the mangroves claimed it.

Exploring the groves reveals several sets of tracks in the dirt. Examination finds that the tracks belong to at least a dozen men and were made in the last two weeks. Some lead to the tall moonthorn bushes, while others continue deeper into the ruins, ending at a **man-sized pit**. In it is a dirty, white bridal dress, scattered bones made of glass (but not skull), and a broken shovel. It's clear that something was dug up here.

## ***The Bitter Song is Heard Again***

While out in the mangroves, the PCs will hear the song more frequently. It usually begins at dusk, although pieces of it can sometimes be heard during the day.

Like before, the song drifts from the mangroves, although this time PCs can tell that it is emanating from the north, in the hills that lie a day or two travel from the village.

PCs who hear the song must make a **SAVE vs. SPELLS** roll or be drawn under the spell. They will leap from their boat and swim to the nearest islet to begin walking towards the source of the song.

The mangrove islets are dangerous, and GMs should consider adding encounters with giant fiddler crabs or mangrove monkeys, **clever** little things that will pickpocket valuables off of unwary travelers (see p. 17).

If a PC under the sway of the song takes damage, GMs should allow another save to break the spell. However, anyone who has been caught by the spell will suffer nightmares for 1d6 days.

The PCs may recall legends of the Glass Ancestors, a mysterious and beautiful people whose fragile bones were said to be made of glass

Also, in the fruit trees above, there are a few loud monkeys (p. 17), one of which is carrying a small shiny object. If the PCs can recover it from the monkey, usually with food, trickery, or another smart plan, they find that it is a bronze betel nut box carved with Captain Lembusura's name (see **Handout A**). The inside is empty and smells of spices.

*GM's Note: Centuries ago, these ruins were the village of the jilted bride. Fleeing the wedding, she returned here and died of grief. For years, her resting place was undisturbed. But then Captain Lembusura arrived after hearing old tales of treasure buried beneath the ruins. Instead of gold, he unearthed the bride's skull. During his expedition, however, a clever mangrove monkey stole one of his prized possessions.*

## River Encounters

It is a two day journey northward towards the hills, where Captain Lembusura and his pirates reside. Along the way, the PCs will have one or two river encounters, although GMs can place these in any order, or between visits to the other locations in the mangroves.

### Fiddler Crab Island

Ahead in the mangroves, the PCs hear a shout for help. Rounding a bend, they see an exhausted man on an island, surrounded by dog-sized fiddler crabs who claw and peck at him. The man bats at them feebly with a thin staff. If a villager from Tambuk Laut is with the PCs, they will recognize him as MUSA, a respected Ferret-badger crabber and walkway cook, who also disappeared one night.

Musa is weak and his defenses are failing. He does not see the PCs approaching, but calls out to the his attackers:

“I have lived as a crabber for decades, my end will not come in the same way!”

The crabs will continue to attack the man until the PCs intervene. If the PCs defeat the crabs, they will notice that, oddly, one of their shells is hand-painted with blues and reds. *GM's Note: This crab was painted by the pirates who were training them, but this crab didn't take well to his training and wandered back to the mangroves.*

If rescued, the exhausted crabber explains his location:

#### On his circumstances...

“The song lured me into the mangroves, and for days I wandered north, unable to resist the pull. But then I sank into some deep mud, and for days more I was stuck and unable to move. Soon, my senses returned and I was able to pull myself free. But I was lost, never having wandered this far from the village, and these cursed *ong cang do* found me and decided to make a meal of me!”

As thanks, Musa offers to prepare a meal out of one of the crabs.

## Additional Encounters

To extend the adventure, GMs can improvise additional encounters as the PCs travel the river:

### Strangling Roots

As the PCs pass under hanging vines, they animate to life and try to grab and strangle travelers. PCs must make a DEX roll to duck under the vines, or else they will be grappled and lifted into the air. Escaping the vine requires a STR roll. Each turn, the vine will squeeze and pull at its victim for 1d3 damage. Vines have 4 hit points if they are hacked at.

### Buzzing Flies

A cloud of insects covers the boat, biting and stinging those inside. This does 1 point of damage to PCs, targeting the least-armored body part. Worse, bitten PCs must make a SAVE vs. POISON or suffer horrible itching for 24 hours (-2 to rolls, although one turn of scratching will alleviate the itching for a turn); this also prevents a night of sleep! A healer can concoct an antidote.

### Shadow of the Glass Ancestors

Far away in the dense mangroves, one of the PCs sees a tall and skinny man (easily half again as tall as a normal man) with a glass-like head. The man locks eyes with one of the PCs and then points to the north. Suddenly, the body of the man vanishes and the glass head falls to the ground and rolls into the water. Searching the water only finds a single rotted sandal.

#### On the other villagers...

“Laka was with me for a while, but he kept wandering when I got stuck. On my second night in the mud, I heard the song again, and glimpsed a woman in white in the distance. But she was gone in the blink of an eye.”

#### On the pirates...

“I know they are in the area, I heard them shouting to each other in the distance one day. But I haven't seen them with my own eyes.”

Musa will accompany the PCs, but he is wounded, tired, and prefers to stay in the boat.

## The Basking and Glittering Crocodile

A massive crocodile with glittering, chromatic scales basks in the sun on a nearby shore. The crocodile is as large as Ratu Singa's boat, and can easily swallow a man whole. It stares at the PCs with contemplative, difficult to read eyes.

The awesome crocodile is the grandson of a river god. He has fed recently, and is curious who travels up the river towards the Bitter Song's origin. He is mysterious and speaks in a very slow, old tongue that is difficult to understand. PCs must focus to fully comprehend his words.

The crocodile asks the PCs their names, the name of their village, and their destination. He likes to collect information about the residents of the mangroves, and always has more questions than he has answers.

### On the song...

"The song irritates me, as it is older than even I am. You do not understand its words like I do. But it is calling for the ancient mothers under the ground, which lures men and angers spirits."

### On pirates...

"I almost devoured one a week ago, but cannot remember why I decided not to. They are loud and looking to replace their crew, if I understand such things."

If the PCs have been polite and respectful, he may say more:

### On the secrets of the mangroves...

"The ruins of the Glass Ancestors, where the bulan duri fruit glow under the moon, were disturbed by the pirate leader, and they still sail up and down the river looking for treasures that they should not seek."

Soon, the crocodile grows bored slips under the water back to his home in men's dreams. Observant PCs who will spot a single glittering tooth left behind. PCs with magical abilities may recall such things are good luck charms. Indeed, it grants the PC carrying it the PC a +6 bonus to AC for the next attack against them. However, once used, the scale turns gray and loses its magic.

## The Proud Tiger Returns

If the PCs encountered the great tiger, Paduka Belang, at the stone altar and drove him off, the proud beast takes offense. He begins stalking the PCs, waiting for the perfect opportunity to ambush and devour them.

If a PC is keeping watch, have them make a PERCEPTION (VISION) roll opposed by Paduka Belang's Stealth-16. The tiger moves through the trees and overhanging branches, seeking to leap directly onto the PCs' boat.

"Ah, you did not expect to see me again, did you? But as they say along the Seven Thousand Channels, hungry tigers always return. A tiger who misses one meal simply waits for the next."

The tiger then grapples the nearest victim and attempts to throw him in the water. Then he springs on to the next victim, intending to grapple him and carry him off to be eaten.

However, like before, Paduka Belang is clever and too smart to be outnumbered and beaten to the death. If he drops below 8 HP, he will leap into the water and swim away.

"Go then. Celebrate your victory, boast of it in the villages, and tell everyone how you chased away the great Paduka Belang. I hope the pirates capture you, rob you, and throw you into the river. It would spare me the effort of hunting you again!"

If the PCs have encountered the great river crocodile, this might make for a good moment for him to suddenly appear under the tiger and devour him in one gulp!



# Strange Denizens of the Mangroves

## Ong Cang Do Giant Fiddler Crabs



Armor Class 6 [13]  
Hit Dice 2 (9 hp)

Movement 90' (30')  
Burrow 30' (10')  
Morale 8  
Alignment Neutral

THAC0 18 [+1]  
Attacks Claw (1d6)\* or pincer (1d4)  
Saving Throws D12 W13 P14 B15 S16  
XP 30

**Big Claw:** Save vs. Paralysis or be unable to move!

**Notes:** These crabs can often be found scavenging dead fish near their nests. They are territorial and communicate by waving their claws in elaborate displays that villagers jokingly refer to as "crab arguments." Fishermen claim these crabs can hold a grudge for years.

## Paduka Belang The Proud Tiger



Armor Class 6 [13]  
Hit Dice 6 (22 hp)

Movement 150' (50')  
Morale 7  
Alignment Neutral

THAC0 15 [+4]  
Attacks 2x Claw (1d4), Bite (1d6)  
Saving Throws D10 W11 P12 B13 S14  
XP 175

**Notes:** Proud and boastful, Paduka Belang only picks fights he knows he can win. He is prone to leaping in the middle of villagers and hoping they all flee... so he can track down and hunt the weakest one.

## Mangrove Monkey Too-clever Filchers



Armor Class 7 [12]  
Hit Dice 1-1 (3 hp)

Movement 120' (40')  
Climb 120' (40')  
Morale 6  
Alignment Neutral

THAC0 20 [-1]  
Attacks Bite (1d3) or throw nuts (1d2)  
Saving Throws D12 W13 P14 B15 S16  
XP 5

**Notes:** Annoying and clever, mangrove monkeys leap atop strangers, grab loose gear, and dash off into the trees laughing.

## Lost Embo Pirate Lookout



Armor Class 7 [12]  
Hit Dice 1 (5 hp)

Movement 90' (30')  
Morale 7  
Alignment Chaotic

THAC0 19 [+0]  
Attacks Machete (1d6)  
Saving Throws D12 W13 P14 B15 S16  
XP 10

**Gear:** In addition to his machete, he keeps a hunting horn nearby.

**Notes:** Lost Embo just wants to nap in the sun, fish, and admire his fine machete, which he inherited after his grandmother died.

# The Pirate Camp

## The Grassy Hills

In the afternoon of the second day of traveling north, the PCs will find the mangrove forest thinning. Two large and grassy hills are in front of them, separating the mangrove river from a river-that-might-also-be-a-sea.

As the PCs pass in this direction, they'll see smoke rising from behind the hills. Observant PCs who are on watch will also spot a man lazily lounging on a large rock. He's wearing bright sailing clothes and has both a cutlass and a horn strapped to his side.

This lazy pirate, LOST EMBO, is a lookout for Captain Lembusura. He is charged with keeping watch for more villagers who have come under the influence of the Bitter Song, as well as any other dangers that might emerge from the mangroves. He is tired and a poor lookout, so it's unlikely that he'll spot the PCs until they leave their boat and head towards the hills. It likely that the PCs can surprise or ambush him.

If the PCs subdue Lost Embo, he will do everything he can to preserve his life while not betraying Captain Lembusura:

### **On the pirates...**

"Our ship foundered in the mud in the river-that-might-also-be-a-sea, and we've been stuck for weeks. Some of us traveled into the mangroves to find food and supplies while we find a way out of our predicament. I will admit, everyone is a little sun-addled these days, though."

If asked more about the pirates, he goes on to say that they have grown frustrated about their predicament, but are still loyal to their captain.

### **On his captain...**

"Captain Lembusura is a great and brave man, scourge to a thousand villages. I would not anger him if I were you, for he has trained fiddler crabs to pinch his enemies apart."

### **On the villagers...**

"Yes, several of them have wandered our way and we have taken them prisoner. Captain Lembusura will either put them to work freeing our ship or ransom them back to their village in exchange for spices and tools."

### **On the song...**

"I have heard it at night come from the heart of our camp. Captain Lembusura tells us that the song brings us good luck, but I have not yet seen that for myself."

### **On the ruins or the stone altar...**

"Captain Lembusura took us on several trips deep into the forest, for he had heard the marshes are home to old ruins that might contain treasure. My friends said they spent days digging and only found a small trinket."

He doesn't know about the Skull of Lamentations, as Captain Lembusura has kept it hidden from most of the pirates.

If he's asked to lead the PCs towards the pirate camp, he'll agree, as he believes that the captain and dozen or so pirates could easily overwhelm any travelers.

## The Camp Among the Ruins

The pirates have made their camp over the grassy hills and on the edge of the river-that-might-be-a-sea. It is about a mile from where Lost Embo keeps watch.

The pirate camp occupies the middle of a ruined complex, now little more than a handful of crumbling stone walls. Haphazard shelters of cut branches and colorful old sails provide shade for the pirates. A hundred yards away, the pirates' small sloop lies half-embedded in the muddy riverbank, listing slightly.

Observers can spot a **small sacred altar** in the ruins; it is being used by the pirates to hold clay pots, rope, and nails. The swirling patterns on the altar are reminiscent of the stone altar in the mangroves.

A dozen pirates wander through the camp. Some lounge atop the old stonework staring into the sky, others tend a large bonfire as if confused by its presence, and a few struggle to raise a larger tent amid much shouting and little progress. In the center of the camp stands a crude cage of wood and rope. Inside are ten exhausted villagers, pale from days in the mangroves and troubled by nightmares from the Bitter Song.

Oddly roaming the camp are two giant fiddler crabs, their shells painted with swirling red and gold patterns. They are the pirates' new pets, though the creatures seem more interested in stealing food and starting arguments with one another. There is no sign of CAPTAIN LEMBUSURA, who is resting in his tent.

Any commotion will cause Captain Lembusura to emerge from his tent and order visitors captured and imprisoned in the cage. A direct attack into the camp will be difficult, given the number of pirates.

The PCs will have to have a good plan to free the prisoners. Some options might include:

### Causing Unrest

The pirates are mostly loyal to Captain Lembusura, although a few believe he has no plan to actually escape the river, and are wondering what to do if that's the case. These pirates are also disappointed that the captain has not yet ransomed off the prisoners. This contingent is led by a strong man named RED TAGAR. He is good friends with Lost Embo, and is the easiest to negotiate with. With good roleplaying, he might be convinced to let the villagers free in exchange for refuge

### Captain Lembusura

#### Villainous Pirate



Armor Class 6 [13]  
Hit Dice 4 (18 hp)  
Movement 90' (30')  
Morale 10  
Alignment Chaotic

THACO 16 [+3]  
Attacks Sword (1d8+2)  
Saving Throws D8 W9 P10 B10 S12  
XP 125

**Gear:** Captain Lembusura carries a master's broadsword and several throwing knives (1d4 damage). He wears hardened leather armor.

### River Pirate

#### Villainous Raiders



Armor Class 8 [13]  
Hit Dice 1 (5 hp)  
Movement 90' (30')  
Morale 7  
Alignment Chaotic

THACO 19 [+0]  
Attacks Hatchet (1d6)  
Saving Throws D12 W13 P14 B15 S16  
XP 10

**Gear:** Most of the pirates carry hatchets and small knives. Two have short bows within reach and are quite good with them (THACO 18 [+1], 1d6 damage).



in the Tambuk Laut. Or, he might be able to convince some of his men to stay out of any potential future fight with the pirates, but only if the PCs promise to avoid killing them.

### **Stealth**

The pirates have been having bad dreams thanks to the Skull of Lamentations, and so they are restless at night. This means half the pirates are awake at any given time, but they are also drowsy. Stealthy PCs might be able to sneak into the camp and free the prisoners from the cage, sawing the ropes with a sharp knife. While most of the prisoners are too weak to fight alongside the PCs, there is one strong man who will stand with them – Laka the Builder, brother of Nolai.

### **Distraction with the Ship**

The pirates plan on freeing their ship from the mud, but they have not yet figured out how to do this. Some think it's just a matter of waiting for the right tide, others think that once they get enough prisoners, they'll be able to use ropes to free the vessel. If the PCs interfere with the pirate's ship in some way (i.e., catching it on fire), the pirates frantically rush to save their ship, with only one or two left behind to protect the prisoners.

Note that if the PCs search the ship, they'll find that it's been mostly gutted of useful supplies. A quick search will dig up some simple, cheap weapons (like shortswords, knives, or bows). A careful search finds something more valuable, like a fine pirate's hat, a bag of small blue gemstones, or a heavy crossbow hidden in the rafters.

### **Trickery**

The PCs might pretend to be dazed villagers, lured by the Bitter Song to the pirate camp. In this event, the pirates will be delighted, disarm the PCs, and push them into the large (and now cramped) cage. Escaping the cage requires a small character squeezing through the bars, sawing through the ropes with some knife or other sharp object, or making an OPEN DOORS roll to break the bars! GMs may allow skilled climbers to first reach a weaker part of the cage in its top, providing a bonus to the next roll in the escape attempt.

### **Parlay**


Captain Lembusura loves to negotiate, but only when he knows he can win. PCs who strike a good bargain might get him to agree to free the prisoners in exchange for freeing his ship from the mud, which is an impossible task without a hundred more men, a storm that

brings floods, or direct help from the god crocodile. The best the PCs can do with great roleplaying is getting him to agree to free a couple of villagers in exchange for food or supplies. However, as soon as the PCs leave, he'll use the Skull of Lamentations to lure them back again and imprison them.

## Captain Lembusura and the Bride

Captain Lembusura has no intention of surrendering the skull. He believes he has only begun to uncover its secrets, and he is not entirely wrong. Each night, he uses the relic to lure more victims into his cages with its song. He also claims the skull whispers to him in his sleep, teaching him the lost wisdom of the Glass Ancestors, the legendary river-kings who supposedly ruled the waterways before the monsoons reshaped the world. Lembusura believes these visions are making him wiser, stronger, and destined for greatness.

Eventually, the situation may devolve into a battle with the pirates. If the PCs attempt to take the skull, Lembusura orders his pirates to kill them without hesitation. Drawing his curved parang, he boasts that the spirits of the old river-kings guide his hand and eagerly demonstrates how little mercy he intends to show. Whether his pirates join him against the PCs will depend on how the PCs have handled the pirates up until now.

 *GM's Note: Captain Lembusura's sword is the sword that the pregenerated character Niran has been looking for!*

Once engaged in combat, Lembusura uses the skull to protect himself. Pulling it from his coat, he is suddenly surrounded by a ghostly white light that protects him (treat as a DR 6 force field) while he clutches it!

While Captain Lembusura is a challenging opponent, the real danger is that his use of the skull has a dreadful cost. **1d4 rounds** after he activates its protection, an Echo of a Lamentation appears nearby. The Echo is the vengeful incarnation of the Pontianak bride whose skull was stolen from her grave. She hates all mortals, especially men. However, because Lembusura possesses her skull, she cannot harm him until he releases it.

The key to defeating both the captain and the Echo is destroying the Skull of Lamentations. To do so, the PCs must first seize the skull from the captain and then cleanse it through an appropriate ritual.

### *Echo of Lamentation*

#### **Pontianak Spirit**

Armor Class 2 [17]  
Hit Dice 3 (14 hp)

Movement 120' (40')  
Morale 12  
Alignment Chaotic

THACO 17 [+2]  
Attacks Shriek or touch (see below)  
Saving Throws D10 W11 P12 B13 S14  
XP 75

**Immunity.** Immune to non-magical attacks.

**Weaknesses.** Cannot cross a circle of blessed salt. Suffers 1d4 damage per second while within 5' of a holy ritual site. She hates the sound of blessed reed flutes, and suffers -2 to all rolls while hearing one.

**Shriek of Lament.** All those within range must **SAVE vs. PARALYSIS** or be mentally stunned. She cannot do this while a reed flute is playing.

**Soul-draining Touch.** 1d6 damage. Victims will take another 1d4 damage 5 rounds after the initial attack (but only if the spirit is still alive).



However, anyone who takes hold of the skull immediately hears the Bitter Song rattle terribly in their mind. The eerie melody clouds their senses and compels them to preserve the artifact rather than destroy it. The bearer must make a **SAVE vs. SPELLS** to resist the song's influence. Failure leaves them stunned as the skull's song overwhelms their thoughts.

Once the spell is resisted, the PC can try to destroy it. There are many ways to do this, including:

- If the PCs bring the skull to the ruined altar, a spoken prayer causes thin cracks to spread across its surface. Each round the prayer is spoken, chanted, or sung, there is a 25% chance the skull shatters. Add +5% for each additional person joining the prayer.
- If the PCs received the white Sungkara ashes from Elder Wira, sprinkling them over the skull causes the glass to slowly crack and splinter. The skull shatters 2d4 rounds later.

- If the PCs received the blessed reed flute from Pak Mino, this can also destroy the skull. Each round the reed is played, there is a 25% chance the skull shatters (35% if the PC is a skilled musician!).
- The tooth of the God Crocodile carries potent magic. A single scratch from the tooth is enough to doom the artifact. Once marked, the skull starts to vibrate. It shatters 1d6 turns later.
- The skull can also be destroyed through brute force, though it is remarkably resilient. Treat it as having 16 hp, taking half damage from blades and piercing weapons. If placed upon the altar, its protection weakens to 10 hp.

Clever players may come up with more ways to destroy the skull!

Once the skull shatters, the Echo of Lamentation wails, cries, and then collapses into a pile of pure white, gauzy robes. Superstitious folk say such remnants are blessed garments for future brides. More importantly, the Bitter Song is no more.

## Finale

With the villainous captain defeated, the skull destroyed, and the song ended, there is great rejoicing among the villagers, and likely many of the surviving pirates. A count of the prisoners finds that all of the missing villagers are accounted for. Indeed, there are a few more souls from other nearby villages, that are delighted to invite the PCs to their own homes to celebrate, and perhaps help with some other troublesome, local villains.

For completing the adventure, the PCs should receive typical experience points. They should receive an additional 50 XP character points for destroying the skull, and another 50 XP for good roleplaying. If the PCs successfully rescued all of the villagers, they will have likely earned a good reputation as well. And if they embarrassed the proud tiger, Paduka Belang, they might have earned themselves a very powerful enemy!

## Adventure Notes

This adventure was written by Jason Woollard and developed by J.C. Connors. The pregenerated PCs' portrait art was illustrated by Darkwings on Fiverr.

Some of the pregenerated characters in this adventure use classes from *BX Options: Class Builder* by Erin D. Smale.

For VTT assets for this adventure or more free one shot adventures, please visit [1shotadventures.com](https://www.1shotadventures.com). If you enjoyed this adventure, or ran it for a group, all the authors ask is that you give a shout out and let me know how it went. Post a note on [1shotadventures.com](https://www.1shotadventures.com) or give a shoutout to [@1shotjc.bsky.social](https://twitter.com/1shotjc.bsky.social) on Bluesky.

### *Munkao's Kala Mandala*

*Bitter Song of the Black Mangroves* takes inspiration from the wonderful and dreamy Kala Mandala setting written and illustrated by Munkao and published by [Centaur Games](https://www.centaurgames.com). If you're looking for an imaginative setting that will surprise your players, check it out!

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### *Update Log*

1.0 - Original OSE version

# Handouts



Handout A - Betel Nut Box found at the ruins of the Glass Ancestors. It was stolen by a mischievous monkey while the pirates were digging up the bride's gravesite.




### HIT POINTS


CURRENT	HD
MAX 6	d4

NAME: PELEKO

CLASS: THIEF & SAILOR

ALIGNMENT: NEUTRAL





LEVEL 2

XP \_\_\_\_\_

DESCRIPTION + NOTES  
Monkey-folk sailor and smuggler

---

### ABILITIES

	SCORE	MOD
STR	12	+0
INT	10	+0
WIS	12	+0
CON	11	+0
DEX	16	+2
CHA	13	+1

Open Doors (2 in 6)      Hear Noise (2 in 6)

Climb Sheer Surfaces 88%      Find/Remove Traps 15%

Hide in Shadows 15%      Move Silently 25%

Open Locks 20%      Pick Pockets 20%

Backstab (+4 to hit and double damage)

### SAVES

13	BREATH
14	POISON/DEATH
13	PARALYZE
16	WANDS
15	SPELLS

### WEALTH

10 gp

### SPECIAL STUFF

- Leather armor (AC 12)
- Compass
- Jewelry and trinkets
- Fishhooks and line
- Lantern w/ oil
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### WEAPONS

	ATK	DMG	AMMO
Machete	+0	1d6	_____
Dagger	+0	1d4	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

MELEE MOD      RANGED MOD      COMBAT NOTES

+0      +2

You drifted into Tambuk Laut with the evening tide, your leaking sampan barely reaching the village before taking on too much water. The villagers helped pull it ashore, muttering that the hull will need proper mending. An unlucky voyage, perhaps... but delays have a way of leading to fortunate discoveries! You introduce yourself with an easy grin - you've been in worse places before. You've wandered the delta chasing tales of forgotten shrines, cursed relics, and hidden treasure. As the villagers whisper of something haunted in the mangroves, you wonder if fortune is waiting just beyond the next bend in the river...

# THOUSANDFOLD DELTA



**HIT POINTS**

HD d8

CURRENT 13

MAX 13

NAME: BOK

CLASS: FIGHTER

ALIGNMENT: LAWFUL

LEVEL 2

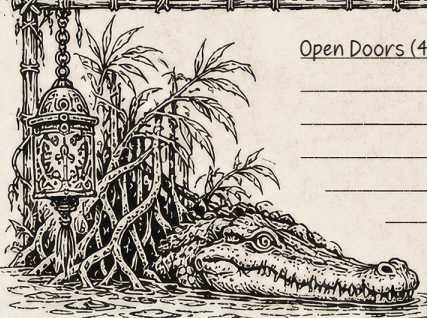
XP \_\_\_\_\_

DESCRIPTION + NOTES

*The most renowned Buffalo-folk merchant guard in the delta*

**ABILITIES**

	SCORE	MOD
STR	17	+2
INT	10	+0
WIS	11	+0
CON	14	+1
DEX	10	+0
CHA	8	-1



Open Doors (4 in 6)

**SAVES**

12	BREATH
13	POISON/DEATH
14	PARALYZE
15	WANDS
16	SPELLS

ARMOR CLASS

15

**WEALTH**

40 gp

**SPECIAL STUFF**

- Segmented armor (AC 14)
- Shield (AC +1)
- Canteen
- Rations
- Haversack
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

**WEAPONS**

	ATK	DMG	AMMO
"Monsoon Father" Sword	+2	1d8+2	
Javelin	+0	1d6	3

MELEE MOD	RANGED MOD	COMBAT NOTES
+2	+0	




You have guarded merchants and river barges across countless waterways, and your code has never changed: protect those in your care, keep your blade clean, and let your deeds speak louder than your words.

You arrived in Tambuk Laut just before the afternoon rain. The trading barge that carried you through the delta is taking on water, its hull split by a jagged hole that may—or may not—have appeared when one of your great horns caught the planking during a tight turn through the mangroves. The others grumble, but no one was hurt. You quietly offer to help pay to repair the damage. It is only right.

# THOUSANDFOLD DELTA



## HIT POINTS


 CURRENT  
 MAX 9  
 HD d4

NAME: TARRIQ  
 CLASS: BARD  
 ALIGNMENT: LAWFUL  
 LEVEL 2  
 XP \_\_\_\_\_

DESCRIPTION + NOTES  
Bear-folk wandering poet  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

## ABILITIES

	SCORE	MOD
STR	12	+0
INT	14	+1
WIS	12	+0
CON	14	+1
DEX	11	+0
CHA	15	+2

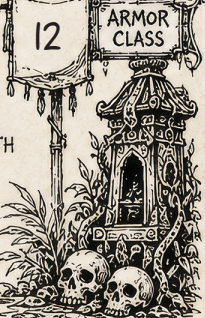


- Open Doors (2 in 6)
- Hear Noise (2 in 6)
- Climb Sheer Surfaces 88%
- Hide in Shadows 15%
- History & Lore (2 in 6)
- Pick Pockets 20%
- Find/Remove Traps 15%
- Move Silently 25%

Cast Protection from Evil once per day

## SAVES

- 13 BREATH
- 14 POISON/DEATH
- 13 PARALYZE
- 16 WANDS
- 15 SPELLS

12  
 ARMOR CLASS  


## WEALTH

10 gp

## SPECIAL STUFF

- Scribe's kit and paper
- Miniature sundial
- Canteen
- Rations
- Haversack
- Bamboo flute
- Leather armor (AC 12)
- 
- 
- 

## WEAPONS


	ATK	DMG	AMMO
Short staff	+0	1d6	
_____			
_____			
_____			
_____			

MELEE MOD +0  
 RANGED MOD +0  
 COMBAT NOTES \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_



You arrive in Tambuk Laut with a well-worn instrument and a head full of songs gathered from villages across the Delta. The ferry that carried you here limps into the docks after springing a bad leak somewhere upriver. The others curses the river. You suspect it simply wished for you to stop here.

You wander from village to village, trading songs for meals and stories for a place to sleep. Your sharp eye quickly notices that something is wrong. Conversations fall silent when the mangroves are mentioned, and no one sings on the docks. It feels as though Tambuk Laut is waiting for someone to change the ending of its story.



### HIT POINTS

CURRENT	HD
MAX 7	db

NAME: PURNI


CLASS: CLERIC

ALIGNMENT: LAWFUL

LEVEL 2

XP \_\_\_\_\_

## THOUSANDFOLD DELTA



DESCRIPTION + NOTES

Respected herbalist and healer

### ABILITIES

	SCORE	MOD
STR	11	+0
INT	10	+0
WIS	15	+2
CON	12	+0
DEX	11	+0
CHA	14	+1

Open Doors (2 in 6)

Turn undead

One spell (usually Cure Light Wounds)

### SAVES

11	BREATH
12	POISON/DEATH
14	PARALYZE
16	WANDS
15	SPELLS

### WEALTH

10 gp

### SPECIAL STUFF

- Healing herbs x2 (heals 1d4 hp)
- 10' cord (holds 90 lbs)
- Canteen
- Rations
- Haversack
- Bandages
- Leather armor (AC 12)
- 
- 
-


### WEAPONS

	ATK	DMG	AMMO
Quarterstaff	+0	1d6	

MELEE MOD	RANGED MOD	COMBAT NOTES
+0	+0	

You arrive in Tambuk Laut in a half-sunken sampan, its hull split open on just beyond the village. You click your tongue, pat the broken boat as though apologizing to it, and declare that the river has "taken its fee." Boats can be repaired. People are harder.

You came because word reached you that sickness had settled over Tambuk Laut. For years you've wandered the waterways gathering rare herbs, talking to plants as if they were old friends, and collecting remedies that most healers have forgotten. You know you have work to do here. Some illnesses come from bad water. Others grow from old grief.



### HIT POINTS

CURRENT	HD
MAX 8	db


NAME: SENYA


CLASS: SCOUT

ALIGNMENT: NEUTRAL

LEVEL 2

XP \_\_\_\_\_





DESCRIPTION + NOTES

Outcast fisherwoman

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### ABILITIES

	SCORE	MOD
STR	13	+1
INT	10	+0
WIS	14	+1
CON	12	+0
DEX	15	+2
CHA	9	+0

Open Doors (2 in 6)    Wilderness Survival (1 in 6)

Wild (-2 to reactions in large towns)

Familiar territory (+1 to surprise, surprised on 1 in 6)

Hide in Shadows 20%    Move Silently 30%

Climb Sheer Surfaces 89%

### SAVES

13	BREATH
14	POISON/DEATH
13	PARALYZE
16	WANDS
15	SPELLS

### WEALTH

10 gp

### SPECIAL STUFF

- Fishing hooks and line
- Lantern and oil
- Canteen
- Rations
- Haversack
- Great grandfather's paddle
- Leather armor (AC 12)
- Fishing net
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### WEAPONS

	ATK	DMG	AMMO
Machete	+1	1d6+1	_____
Javelin	+2	1d6	2
Fish knife	+1	1d4	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

### ARMOR CLASS


14

MELEE MOD    RANGED MOD    COMBAT NOTES

+1    +2

You returned to Tambuk Laut with the last of your belongings lashed to a small trading boat. Your canoe is already waiting in the village, where you left it before making one final trip home. On the journey back, a submerged snag tore open the hull, forcing the other passengers to limp into the docks while bailing water. You take it as the river testing your resolve.

You've spent your life fishing waters few others dare to enter, returning with catches that made rivals jealous. Now you're starting over in Tambuk Laut, carrying little besides your gear and your great-grandfather's hand-carved oar, a treasured heirloom said to bring generous currents.




### HIT POINTS

CURRENT	HD
MAX 12	d8

NAME: NIRAN

CLASS: FIGHTER


ALIGNMENT: LAWFUL



## THOUSANDFOLD DELTA

DESCRIPTION + NOTES


Boar-folk warrior of the river tribes



### ABILITIES

	SCORE	MOD
STR	13	+1
INT	9	+0
WIS	10	+0
CON	12	+0
DEX	11	+0
CHA	11	+0

Open Doors (3 in 6)

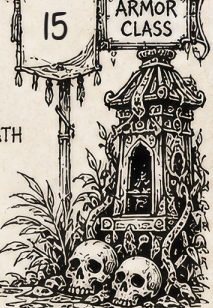


### SAVES

12	BREATH
13	POISON/DEATH
14	PARALYZE
15	WANDS
16	SPELLS

15

ARMOR CLASS



### WEALTH


10 gp

### SPECIAL STUFF

- Fur boots
- Lantern and oil
- Canteen
- Rations
- Haversack
- Scale armor (AC 15)
- 
- 
- 
-

### WEAPONS

	ATK	DMG	AMMO
Tusks and teeth	+1	1d4+1	
Balanced ngao (2H, slow)	+2	1d10+1	
Spear	+1	1d6+1	



MELEE MOD

+1

RANGED MOD

+0

COMBAT NOTES

You are Niran, a Boar-Folk warrior of the river tribes, raised honorably among winding waterways and dense forests. You speak little, follow the old ways, and trust your instincts more than words.

You arrived in Tambuk Laut with an empty stomach and a damaged boat. A hidden sandbar left a long crack in the hull, forcing you to pull ashore for repairs. You do not mind. You came for the village's famous Moonroot Crab Paste, a rich, pungent spread said to be made from silver moonroot fruit found only in these tidal channels. If half the stories are true, it is worth the journey.

# THOUSANDFOLD DELTA



## HIT POINTS

CURRENT HD  
 MAX 5 d4

NAME: ALIA  
 CLASS: ASSASSIN  
 ALIGNMENT: NEUTRAL  
 LEVEL 2  
 XP \_\_\_\_\_

DESCRIPTION + NOTES  
 Exiled noble dancer from the House of Flowing Sleeves



## ABILITIES

	SCORE	MOD
STR	10	+0
INT	13	+1
WIS	11	+0
CON	14	+1
DEX	17	+2
CHA	16	+2



Open Doors (2 in 6)      Disguise 98%  
 Assassinate (+4 to hit unaware targets, target must save vs. death!)  
 Climb Sheer Surfaces 88%      Hear Noise (2 in 6)  
 Hide in Shadows 15%      Move Silently 25%

## SAVES

- [13] BREATH
- [14] POISON/DEATH
- [13] PARALYZE
- [16] WANDS
- [15] SPELLS

14  
 ARMOR CLASS

## WEALTH

30 gp

## SPECIAL STUFF

- Dancer's shoes
- Veil
- Canteen
- Jeweled anklets
- Small pouch
- Silk robes (AC 12)
- 
- 
- 
- 


## WEAPONS

	ATK	DMG	AMMO
Royal knife	+1	1d4	2
Hairpin Dagger	+0	1d4	

MELEE MOD      RANGED MOD      COMBAT NOTES  
 +0      +2



You arrive in Tambuk Laut aboard a river barge forced ashore by a cracked hull. The village is humble and untidy, but it will do until the boat is repaired. Once, you danced in the House of Veiled Sleeves, where every graceful step concealed a deadlier purpose. Publicly, you were a court dancer. Secretly, you served as one of the princess's bodyguards, trained to hide blades beneath silk. After defying the court to save her from a noble conspiracy, you were exiled to protect the kingdom's secrets. Though a touch high-born and forever judging poor manners, your sense of duty remains unwavering. When danger appears, you instinctively place yourself between it and those under your care.



### HIT POINTS

CURRENT	HD
MAX 14	d8


NAME: BONTO RONTO


CLASS: BARBARIAN

ALIGNMENT: NEUTRAL

LEVEL 2

XP \_\_\_\_\_





DESCRIPTION + NOTES

Poor but cheery crab farmer

### ABILITIES

	SCORE	MOD
STR	14	+1
INT	9	+0
WIS	13	+1
CON	13	+1
DEX	13	+1
CHA	11	+0

Open Doors (3 in 6)

Hunting (5 in 6)

Cure Poison (allows a second save)

Climb Sheer Surfaces 88%

Hide in Undergrowth 15%

Mistrustful of magic

### SAVES

13	BREATH
14	POISON/DEATH
13	PARALYZE
16	WANDS
15	SPELLS

### WEALTH

30 gp

### SPECIAL STUFF

- Crab gloves
- Small crab trap
- Canteen
- Leather armor (AC 12)
- Small bag
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
-

### WEAPONS

	ATK	DMG	AMMO
Ekū (big oar)	+1	1d8+1	
Hatchet	+1	1d6+1	
Dagger	+1	1d4+1	

### ARMOR CLASS

13

MELEE MOD

+1

RANGED MOD

+1

COMBAT NOTES

You're a cheerful crab farmer with an uncanny streak of luck. Your traps are always full, and somehow the biggest crabs find their way into your baskets. You hate spending money, insisting that "a shell saved is a shell earned."

You arrived in Tambuk Laut with a sampan full of woven baskets packed with mangrove crabs. The journey ended with a mysterious cracked hull, and you spend the last stretch bailing water with your new friends and grumbling about the cost of repairs. But when you heard a villager child on the platforms whispering of an eerie song and folks disappearing into the mangroves... even you wonder if luck can run out.

**Peleko**  
CURIOUS SAILOR



**Bok**  
RENOWNED MERCHANT GUARD



*Tarriq*  
BEST POET IN THE DELTA



*Purni*  
HERBALIST



*Senya*  
OUTCAST FISHERWOMAN



*Niran*  
HONORABLE WARRIOR



*Alia*

THE HOUSE OF FLOWING SLEEVES



*Bonto Ronto*

CHEERY CRAB FARMER

