

# HELL COME ASHORE

## Pathfinder's Journal: The Treasure of Far Thallai 1 of 6

As we dropped anchor, Moonplum burned. Blanketing smoke rose from the outpost's ruins. Caught by a rare westerly harmattan, it drifted out over the blue-gray waters of the Fever Sea. Warm soot fell like hail onto the *Aspidochelone's* foredeck.

Seagrave, the saltiest of my four unwilling adjutants, offered me his spyglass. Lines of grime incised his bloated face. Shells, clay beads, and bits of golden coin hung in the tangles of his beard. His night-blue greatcoat, worn in cussed defiance of the tropical heat, smelled of mutton grease, old blood, spilled rum, ordure, and the combined sweat of several decades. He wore stink as a wizard wears a warding spell.

"Looks like the *Whelk*, ma'am," he said, pronouncing the word in the sailor's manner, so that it verged on *mum*. As

fully as Siren Call had bounded his will, I could never stop Seagrave from calling me that, to say *captain* as he ought. Where once I would have corrected him, now I recognized my annoyance as small-minded. To withhold from him this tiny rebellion would be ungriving.

"Who commands it?" I asked. No fact concerning a ship, captain, or crewman of the Shackles eluded Seagrave's mind. He absorbed the scuttlebutt of our piratical isles as a fish breathes through its gills.

"Josiah Common," answered Seagrave. "Otherwise known as Josiah Tongue-Cutter, Sy the Fork, or Tragic Joe."

"The one with the glass eye?"

"Aye, ma'am. Some say he has two glass eyes. But that's only a jest."

## HELL COME ASHORE

“And to which of the pirate lords does he owe his charter?”

“Used to sail for Tessa Fairwind. These days, the Wolf.”

Seagrave meant Avimar Sorrinash, lycanthrope commander of a lycanthrope crew. My argument today was not with him.

“Does this Tragic Joe league himself with our man?”

“They ran starboard-to-port against the Rahadoumi navy, and in raids as far north as Varisia.”

The *Whelk* was a low-slung war sloop. Spiraled tiles on its prow mimicked the shell of the predatory mollusk that was its namesake. A mere handful of sailors patrolled its deck. They spyglassed us as we spyglassed them.

Seagrave licked his sun-chapped lips. “Shall we blast it with fire-spitters, or just come along and board?”

“Neither.”

He communicated his disappointment in a *basso profundo* grunt. It would have carried great weight, were he still a captain.

“If the internal peace of our free pirate nation is to be disturbed, it won’t be our doing,” I told him. “But if the Fork’s crew come at us...”

A grin surfaced from the dark sargasso of Seagrave’s beard. “Aye, ma’am.”

The crew rowed ashore in five boats—I in one, one of my adjutants in each of the others. The debris of charred, shattered piers drifted by. We beached our boats near a mixed stand of palms and cottons.

Rira, the only woman among my adjutants, stalked toward me, boots sinking into silty soil. The pounding sun highlighted each strange detail on the mask that forever concealed her face. It grimaced at the world with a sea monster’s features: goggling eyes, fanning fins, and flaring, toothy lips. A green patina darkened its dull gray surface. Behind it trailed a bleached and dreadful mane.

From the neck down, Rira affected the prideful finery of a pirate queen. Her neckline plunged aggressively, daring others to stare. Tattoos whorled across her burnished skin.

With the tip of her cutlass she gestured down the shore. She moved with an exaggerated deliberateness, as if the magic of my ancient sword yoked her physically. “I found the *Whelk*’s boats. We’ll scuttle them, yes?”

I shook my head. “If we want Common’s crew to go, we must preserve their means of departure.”

Rira balled her fists.

“Were there signs of other boats?” I asked.

“Come and gone, Challys Argent.” Where Seagrave tweaked me by calling me “mum,” Rira dropped honorifics altogether, insisting on my full name. This odd expression of contempt washed over me now, as it did with the old salt.

I permitted myself a curse—a weakness acquired from my crew. “Then we’re too late.”

“We’re not turning around? Your crew keen for action.”

I led the procession into town. “We may not have him, but we can find out where he went.”

As the burning structures of Moonplum grew clearer through the smoke, I saw how great an overstatement it was to call the place a town. It was less a port than a hope for the future. A sparse collection of storehouses and cottages huddled down the length of a muddied laneway, not far from the ruined docks. The lane terminated at the foot of a wooden temple, its vivid paint not yet scourged by alkaline air.

An earlier self might have mourned the folly of Moonplum’s founders. Its location near a wide river mouth would seem favorable for shipping, with ready access to riches hewn from the Mwangi Jungle. Instead, its accessibility to the sea merely placed it within easy grasp of my sea-raiding compatriots, whose home islands lay only a few hundred miles to the northwest. Well-placed ports were farther away, and better defended.

The attacking fleet waited till the aspiring magnates of Moonplum had taken in goods worth stealing, then landed with swords and fire. Only a single wonder pertained: that they’d disciplined themselves long enough for the locals to build this much.

A series of screams cut short my postulations.

At one time the terror and pain in them would have sliced through me as well. In the Shackles I learned to hide such reactions, which serve only to announce oneself as prey. Over the course of my years on the *Aspidochelone*, I perfected this concealment. Now my pity is so well hid even I cannot find it. I have transformed myself into a grouping of angles and calculations.

I sped my pace to a cautious trot, cutlass at the ready. The faint heat of the four active geas crystals in its hilt radiated into my hand.

Otondo loomed at my left, grinning. “A scrap,” he drooled.

Otondo, once captain of the brigantine *Ravager*, stood ten and a half feet tall in his shaggy boots. A bony ball of a bottom-heavy head, all jaw and little cranium, balanced on a frame of rippling muscle, with no neck visible between them. Corded veins crisscrossed gray-green flesh. They pulsed so strongly that an astute visitor could count out his heart rate simply by looking at him. Black pinprick eyes stared from beneath a thick and rolling brow. Otondo carried the largest cutlass I had ever seen, specially smithed for his ogre-sized hands. He was as heavy as my next three biggest men put together.

“Remember,” I said to him, “the Rule still applies.”

His blunt-toothed smile faded. “I hoped you wouldn’t say.”

“It always applies, universally.”

“How about a little leeway, Cap’n?”

The ogre’s attempts to ingratiate would induce shudders, were I still the shuddering type.



"No leeway whatsoever. No eating." I brandished Siren Call's hilt. His crystal, the one that held a sliver of his soul, brightened. Otondo's complexion dulled. He shrank back, his face that of a scolded dog.

"One day..." he growled.

When I increased my step, he fell back, muttering. A mocking chuckle whispered through the group. It could only be Adalbert Aspodell, the fourth of my murderous aides. Otondo responded with a canine growl. I plunged on; it was me their jockeying was meant to goad.

For a complement of fifty, we proceeded with admirable silence. The first of the buildings we passed had been reduced completely to smoldering planks. Up ahead, crew from the *Whelk*—and, for all I could tell, stragglers from departed vessels—lurched between still-extant structures. Each hunched under the weight of something looted: jugs of rum, kegs of ale, casks of salt fish. One pirate bore on his shoulders a plush, outsized chair. Two of the men carried young boys. Their immediate fates I declined to contemplate in detail. If they survived, they too would become pirates aboard the *Whelk*, perhaps one day completing the circle with like abductions in a similar doomed town.

Drunk on brandy and bloodshed, the crew of the *Whelk* took us in with molasses-slow comprehension. It dawned on them that they were dispersed, while we of the *Aspidochelone* stood in good formation. That they were tired and dulled, while we were square awake.

Otondo was at my side again. "A little provocation, Cap'n?"

Were incipient violence a perfume, he'd have reeked with it—as would the other three.

"At this revel, we are uninvited guests," I told them. "Let us act with matchless etiquette."

A portly, mutton-chopped pirate dropped an ornate sandalwood box and lunged our way. With one hand he wiped at his mouth; with the other, he drew his blade. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I am Challys Argent, captain of the *Aspidochelone*, and this is my crew."

He squinched his face in disapproval. "The Pathfinder captain?"

I bowed. "The same."

He spat. The wind blew his sputum toward me. Otondo tensed. He checked my boots. The missile had landed short of its target. I held out my free hand to him, keeping him in check.

The *Whelk* crew assembled themselves behind their spokesman.

"You did not sign on to our raid. You are nothing but late-lilies. We did not fight and die so that a pack of sea hyenas might show up to trump our loot."

"I would surmise that you fought and your victims died. Regardless, you may rest assured. We are not here to

steal from fellow fliers of the black skull flag. Such would contravene the code of our Hurricane King."

"Save your lies for fools. Why else would you come here?"

"For what Pathfinders always seek. Information. Where is your captain?"

Mutton-chop straightened his spine. "I am captain of the *Whelk*."

"I am told that honor belongs to Josiah Common. And, as everyone knows, one to two of his eyes are made of glass. Whereas yours, one as bloodshot as the other, do not fit the description."

"I am Captain Strane Trafton. Joe Fork-Cutter met his final tragedy in the course of the raid. We now mete out vengeance, for the crime of undue resistance."

"And I don't suppose Josiah might have been done in by a confederate's blow?"

"What do you insinuate?"

"Was your raid not designed and led by Kered Firk?"

The name had scarcely left my mouth when a line of flame burst from the back ranks of the *Whelk* crew. I caught a flash of a brass spell-spitter—fashioned, as per the local vogue, not as a normal wand, but with a grip like that of a crossbow or pistol. I ducked the burst, though it grazed the brim of my tricorne hat, setting it ablaze. As I pulled the burning item from my head, battle cries rang and the two sides ran to engage. My hair flew free, impeding vision. I leapt back to miss the arc of an incoming ax. It was Trafton, engaging captain to captain with a most uncaptainly weapon.

I weaved and turned in search of a patch of unimpeded ground. The Moonplum laneway became the stage for a wild scrum. Though the battlers had as much room as could be desired, they fought like pirates, instinctively clumping themselves into a space the size of a galleon's deck. But here there was no rigging to seize, no railings to climb upon, no shark-filled waters to heave the foe into. Flashing my cutlass in a series of unpredictable feints, I forced Trafton back. My blade caught his weapon hand. He shrank from me, grimacing in pain. A white line across his knuckles transformed into a red one. I planted a boot on his leg and sent him toppling. He landed on his spine in the mud and slid, coming to a halt near Otondo, who exchanged blows with a burly counterpart. The ogre glanced back to note the rival captain's presence. Trafton saw his vulnerability and tried to roll. As he thrust at his primary foe with his enormous cutlass, Otondo casually stepped on the new captain's throat. Trafton's larynx cracked, sending a qualm through friend and foe alike. As he choked and died, the melee resumed. The death of a second captain in one day buoyed my crew with homicidal glee, and the *Whelk's* with vindictive rage.

This fight offered us nothing. I needed distance from it, to see if I could call it to a truce. Sidestepping an incoming

## HELL COME ASHORE

rapier thrust, I leapt onto the porch of a smoldering, emptied warehouse. Charred planks wobbled beneath my heels.

My crew arranged themselves to support their four most potent killers. They gave Otondo a wide berth as he muscled his way through the opposition. He sliced a man's head clean off, then kicked the decapitated body to down a second enemy. The ogre speared his cutlass through the slaughtered man and into the live one, who then joined his comrade in death.

Seagrave waded into the thickest concentration of foes, parting them as a prow cuts through waves. He took blows unflinchingly, the armor hidden beneath his foul greatcoat turning blades aside. The old salt leveraged his bulk to power his blows. Striking as often with elbows, fists, and kicks as with his sword, he bowled down pirates to and fro.

Crew from the *Aspidochelone* ranked around Rira to protect her spell-weaving hands from jostling distractions. She conjured balls of multicolored force and sent them spinning through the fray. They unerringly sought her chosen enemies. With each anguished cry or welling bruise, a spiteful chuckle echoed from her mask.

Adalbert Aspodell, who favored a nobleman's rapier over the expected cutlass, danced lithely around the fight's periphery. With a dolphin's grace he stabbed opportunistically. His attacks set aside force in favor of cruel precision. He flicked his blade's razor tip between ribs, across throats, into eardrums. Throughout the display he held his high-cheeked, mocking features in an attitude of wry detachment.

Led by these four, my crew sent the *Whelk's* reeling. As one, the losers dispersed. Bruised and bleeding pirates ran for the beach, for the jungle, and into the remains of buildings.

"We hunt them down?" Otondo asked.

"Only him." I pointed. A tall pirate of elven aspect dashed for the palms, silk tunic billowing. From a scabbard on his hip, the hilt of his spell-spitter gleamed. It was he who tried to set me aflame. "He's one of Firsk's, I'll wager." Rira sprinted after him, followed by Otondo. "Keep him in condition to talk!" I called.

The crew fell to looting, plucking up the prizes dropped by our rivals. As rightful as these appropriations were, I tasked them to delay in favor of a search for survivors. They took the wounded to a warehouse the fires had only lightly touched. Our priests, Jeffret and Cold Bendani, attended the injured. They venerated green-haired Gozreh, the ever-changeable god of seas and sailors. They incanted her healing magics, sealing wounds and washing away pain.

I left them to their work. The raiders had dealt with their victims savagely; it seemed unlikely that any would be in immediate shape to speak.

Alert for reprisals, we strode to the temple. The four sides of its tower bore the colorful sigils of deities. Gozreh's faced the coast, as is customary, represented by an inward-curling length of seaweed. Also represented were the golden key of Abadar the merchant, the blue butterfly of Desna the traveler, and Erastil the provider, who was locally symbolized by a golden boat, its sails filled by Gozreh's winds.

"I enjoy being teased as much of the next man," said Adalbert Aspodell. "More so, in fact. Yet isn't it past time to tell us what you're after here?"

"We seek Kered Firsk," I told him.

"Yes, yes, that you've said. But there must be a good reason behind this. You don't follow the wake of the Monster Captain on a whim."



**"Otondo isn't pretty, but he's effective."**



"I'll tell all when fact has been sifted from speculation."

A laugh purred in his throat. "You think me a gull."

"In what sense, Aspodell?"

"You might tell something. Never all."

A foreboding creak issued from behind the temple doors. They hung askew on their hinges. The sound mingled a wooden groan with a metallic clatter.

I stepped into a vandalized foyer, over the shards of a mirror knocked from its frame. A version of myself stared back at me from each of the pieces. In this strange context my own features surprised me. I saw hollow cheeks, raised veins, wires of muscle, and gold-flecked eyes. My face was all edges and planes, its former softness jettisoned long ago. Years under the pitiless sun of the Fever Sea had bronzed my skin and worn into its surface a network of tributary wrinkles. What I beheld, I did not dislike. On the deck of a pirate ship, austerity begat authority. Yet there had to be swagger, too, and this was supplied by a cascade of coppery hair. Garments of fine fabric and simple cut bespoke both wealth and practicality. Top salts will sign on with a hard captain, but never a poor one.

Velvet curtains clung tenuously to a bent and broken rod. When I beheld what waited inside, I swayed as if physically struck.

Nearly a dozen people hung from the temple rafters, suspended on lengths of chain. Rust and gore reddened the links. The victims had been stripped bare, or nearly so. Then their skin had been flayed from their bodies. Most had none left at all. A few had been flensed selectively, as if their torturer had grown bored or distracted partway through.

The tableau of carnage summoned a tumble of buried recollections. With them coursed phantom sensations: the cooler ocean breezes that swept the coast of Varisia, and the goosebumps they brought. I pictured myself as but a strip of a girl, kneeling on the rocky shores near the towering archive where I was born and raised. My mind's eye laid them out before me: dozens of lifeless bodies, blood soaked through their scholars' robes. My mother, my father, my uncles and cousins and friends. The raiders had come when our protectors were gone. They sacked the tower, burned the books, threw the tapestries into the sea. They destroyed that which was priceless, and exulted over the few coffers of coins they pried from our meager

treasury. For murder's sake they murdered. Of all of us, only I had successfully hidden from them.

I chilled in that hot Moonplum temple, feeling the ghost touch of the rain that pelted my skin so long ago as I waited for the return of the Pathfinder ship. I heard again the vow I mouthed when finally they appeared. No longer would I follow the tradition of my family and my ancestors, seeking truth in the pages of books. I would be like our patrons, the men and women of the Pathfinder Society, who went out into a brutal world, seizing knowledge with sword and spell. And along

the way, when I found those who followed the creed of pillage and destruction, I would visit their cruelty upon them tenfold.

"Hooves of Asmodeus!"

Aspodell's exclamation pulled me from memory. His face had lost its usual sardonic aspect.

"Not quite," I said. "This was certainly homage to an evil deity. But not the God-Fiend. It was a priest of Rovagug that did this. Note the patches of exposed bone."

"I'd prefer not to."

"No?"

"A man of my proclivities respects certain boundaries. Butchery of this ilk goes far beyond them. I would not like to do this to anyone. Except you, of course, when the magic of that damnable sword lapses and I'm free to avenge my enslavement. But that goes without saying."

I treated the provocation as unworthy of reply. Pushing away revulsion, I peered closely at one of the hanging bodies. There I saw a sigil I despised, a yawning mouth from which the legs of a spider sprouted. "Whoever did this carved the sigil of Rovagug into the surface of their bones. While they lived."

"Ghastly." Aspodell swallowed. "And the fellow who did this—you're sure we wish to encounter them?"

"That I am."

To my shock, a splutter vented from one of the supposed corpses. Blood spurted from his nose and into his mouth. He moaned, barely conscious.

"Get the priests," I told Aspodell. He slipped from the temple; I remained with the survivor. He was young and had been well muscled before the flayers started in on him. Blood obscured his features, and the extent of his injuries.

Unintelligible words spilled from the wretch's faltering lips.

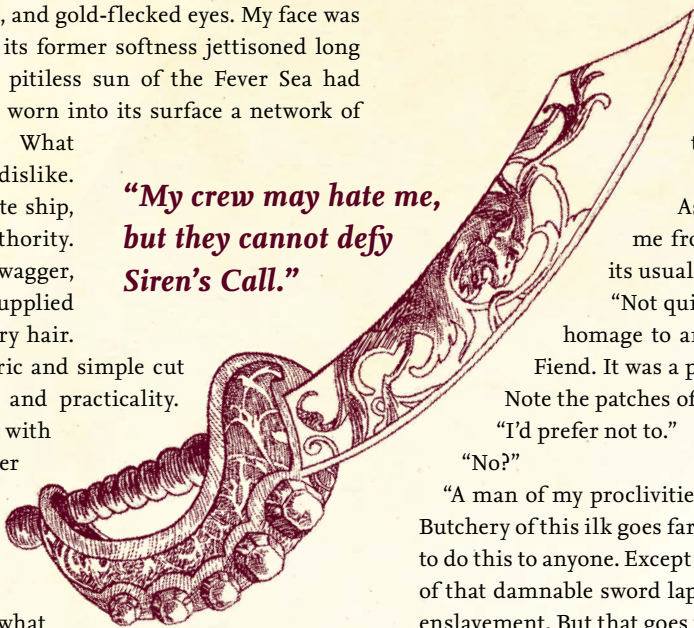
"Do not try to speak. Let us heal you first."

"Ww-wwon't l—lll..."

I searched my mind for soothing words but found none.

"Won't live..." he managed.

***"My crew may hate me,  
but they cannot defy  
Siren's Call."***



“Hush, boy.” Had there been a part of him that was safe to touch, I would have laid a calming glove on it.

“Twill,” he said.

“Twill?”

“Www—wanted to know...”

“He was looking for a man named Twill?”

He assayed a slight nod of the head.

“Had Twill been here?”

His next gesture I took also for a nod, though it could have been a twitch.

“But he was not here when the pirates came.”

He seemed to shake his head, then stopped moving altogether. I took him for dead, but when Jeffret and Cold Bendani arrived, they set to work reviving him.

“Better without the chains, Captain,” said Jeffret, a wan man with hair the color of a pantry moth.

“I’ll see to that, ma’am,” said Seagrave, who had returned with the healers and Aspodell. “No luck so far finding the fire-thrower,” he said incidentally as he sized up the arrangement of columns, joists, and rafters. Withdrawing a pair of spikes from his belt, he hugged a wooden pillar and began to shift his bulk improbably up its length. I had seen him perform acts of unlikely balance many a time before, never ceasing to marvel at his agility. He reached the rafter and swung himself up on it with graceless ease. The rafter trembled, setting the suspended bodies to juddering. He clambered on hands and knees till he reached the chains that held the perhaps-living victim. With his left hand he found a new equilibrium. With his right, he pulled loose his cutlass. “Ready down there?”

“Aye,” replied Jeffret. He and Cold Bendani positioned themselves to catch the poor fellow.

Seagrave brought his cutlass down on the chain. Sparks flew. The magical blade howled like a mistral wind, and the chain fell in two pieces. The sea-priests took the wretch’s weight. On contact, he convulsed, without regaining consciousness. They carried him out of the temple on a sling of scavenged canvas, and the rest of us followed as Seagrave shinnied back down the column.

“Another dead end, then?” asked Aspodell.

“Quite the contrary,” I said. “Before we lost him, he said the one word that explains all: Twill.”

Aspodell knocked drying muck from his boots. “The significance of which you will now go on to explain.”

“Twill can only be the famed lockbreaker Twill Ninefingers. No other Twill could be worthy of Kered Firsk’s attention. He’s the best lock man within a thousand miles.”

“I believe I heard him spoken of as such, back in Drenchport,” interjected Seagrave. “Never met him.”

“And what does it tell you,” asked Aspodell, “that he seeks this locksmith?”

“When Kered Firsk returned to the Shackles, a rumor came with him. Right, Seagrave?”

“Word has it,” gruffed the fat pirate, “that he dug himself up a legendary treasure, out on some far atoll.”

“If he seeks Twill Ninefingers, I know what it is. The Treasure of Far Thallai.”

Aspodell’s pose of studied disinterest melted away. “Thallai?”

Seagrave’s features widened. “Thallai,” he whispered, as if it were a name that did not bear too loud an airing. “Many have sought it.”

“So much so that doubt pertains to its existence,” said Aspodell.

“The sea coughs up many a wonder,” said Seagrave.

“A golden cask with an impregnable lock?”

I nodded. “Impregnable to ordinary folk, but to one as skilled as Twill...”

“Which, if opened,” continued Seagrave, “becomes a gateway to an unearthly paradise. Where untold wealth lies scattered about, gold and gems as common as sand, ready for any man brave enough to scoop it up.”

“And there is nothing a worshiper of Rovagug, who is mindless destruction personified, would like more than to find and completely despoil an untouched paradise,” said Aspodell.

“Absolutely so,” I answered.

Aspodell lit up with uncharacteristic rapture. “If legend is to be believed, Far Thallai is much more than a beach scattered with gold and gems.”

“You say that like it’s nothing,” said Seagrave.

“Thallai is a place of innocence and beauty,” said Aspodell. “Inhabited by beings of stunning physical perfection, to whom distrust is foreign and wariness perverse.” He drifted into a pensive pause, then started. “We cannot allow Firsk the Flayer to open that cask.”

“Naturally not! We must be the ones!” A fresh flood of sweat boiled from Seagrave’s sooty face. It ran in rivulets, soaking into his noisome greatcoat.

I moved upwind of him. “I’m not sure I’d trust you, Aspodell, with lissome beings incapable of suspicion.”

The ex-nobleman scowled. “I was not always corrupt, you understand. In a place like Thallai a man could remake himself.” His voice grew faint. “Perhaps that’s what Kered Firsk seeks as well.”

“You would reform, in Far Thallai?”

“After my last bad act—which, my dear, would be gutting you.”

In the hilt of my sword, his geas gem glowed. I reached for it, prepared to exert its discipline on him, but he stilled himself. “At any rate, you can now explain what Kered Firsk seeks, but we are no closer to finding him.”

“Not so.”

“No?”

“The way to get Firsk the Flayer is through the man he seeks. Instead of chasing the Monster Captain, we find Twill Ninefingers.”