



# BUTCHER'S ROCK

## Pathfinder's Journal: The Treasure of Far Thallai 2 of 6

A report of cracking wood echoed through the devastated town. The burned husk of a warehouse collapsed in on itself. Black dust mushroomed from it, joining the shelf of smoke overhead.

Otondo and Rira hove into view through the resulting cloud, skirting the bodies of murdered townsfolk. They dragged with them the elf who had tried to kill me less than an hour before. Rira carried his spell-spitter, tucked into a belt. For a moment, I asked myself if it was wise to leave it in her hands. But then, she could cast spells at least as potent as the device could store, with only gesture and speech. I would rely, as always, on the strength of the geas that my sword held over her.

Instead I trained my attention on the captive: "What is your name?"

"I'll not say," the ragged elf hissed. His lip was split, the left side of his face scraped raw.

"Do you not know who my first mates are?" I asked.

"What do I care?"

"You are either not very bright, sir, or new to these pirate isles."

"The last is true, and I have heard the other." He stuck out a defiant, pointed jaw. On closer examination I identified him as merely half elven. "What of it?"

"But even as a fool, and a new fish, it did not give you pause to be chased by an ogre and a woman in a mask. It did not occur to you that it might be Otondo and Rira on your heels?"

His impudence dropped away. "Otondo? Rira?"

"And this is Seagrave. And Adalbert Aspodell."



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"Aspodell the Lash?"

"Now that you know their names, perhaps you'd share yours, my friend."

"They call me Landson," he gulped.

"Kered Firsk left you behind, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"To see if anyone was after him."

"He said a lousy busybody of a Pathfinder was asking questions about him back in Hell Harbor. If she poked her nose here, I was to burn it off."

"And then make your way back to him?"

"We made no specific arrangement."

A gobbet of drool fell from Otondo's lip, striking Landson's shoulder and soaking into the silk fabric of his shirt. "Shall I soften 'im up some, Cap'n?"

"I'm not lying!" Landson said. "I don't know where the *Slicer* will dock next. That's what you're asking..."

"Keep talking," Aspodell said.

The man complied. "After serving on that hellish ship, I was happy to part ways with him. Me and Firsk didn't get along. This way I could leave and it wouldn't be desertion."

"And without him flaying you," Aspodell said.

"That as well."

"So you thought you'd sign on with Josiah Common and the *Whelk*?" I asked.

"Until some other, better chance came my way."

Seagrave roamed the lens of his spyglass along the coastline. "The *Whelk* has sailed," he said.

"Let me sail with you then, Pathfinder," said Landson. "I finally have my sea legs under me, and continue to master sails and rigging. Give me any magical device, and I can work it for you. Your ship is rigged with arcane flamers, I'm sure. Well, when I aim them for you, their blasts will fall upon your enemies straight and true."

"You would serve me with the same loyalty you showed to Kered Firsk?"

"Whoever you order me to kill, I will kill. Whoever you ask me to cut, I will cut. I am slaughter itself, remorseless and without quaver."

"I like him," said Aspodell.

"And," I asked, "you killed and cut and slaughtered as Firsk required?"

"All that and more besides. Yet he did not pay me fair due."

"What else can you tell about him?"

"His men—creatures more like—they're crazed and feral things, who treat the act of killing as treasure unto itself. They're no company for an honest privateer."

I queried him further, yielding nothing worth recording in this journal. Finally I turned from him.

"So am I in?" he called.

Cold Bendani, one of our healers, appeared at my side. "He has awakened," he said.

The young man, whom Firsk had suspended from the temple rafters and then partially flayed, sprawled on the building's steps. By cleaning his wounds, our healers had revealed their grotesque extent.

I knelt next to him. "What is your name, friend?"

"Aglund."

"Twill Ninfingers. You said the man who did this to you came here looking for him. He didn't find Twill. But he had been here at one point, you said."

Aglund made his best attempt at a nod.

"When he left, did he say where he was going?"

He gathered in air, then spoke in a burst of exhalation. "Butcher's Rock."

"Why there?"

"Someone would shelter him," Aglund coughed.

"Who?"

"He kept saying the name..." Aglund's eyes drifted shut.

"The name, Aglund."

"Megeus. The name was Megeus."

"Did you give this name to Kered Firsk?"

"I would not tell him." Aglund went still. At first I thought him dead, but then I saw his chest rise and fall.

Cold Bendani took me aside. "He won't last long. And there's dozens of other wounded survivors. We can't heal them all, or look after them. Also we must decide what to do with the corpses. Many dozens dead."

I issued the necessary orders. We would bury the dead at sea, in accordance with the rites of Gozreh. The living we could take as far as Port Peril. They'd likely not prosper there, but it was what was within our power.

Otondo still held a squirming Landson. "What do we do with this one?"

"He willingly served Kered Firsk," I said.

"And so...?" the ogre asked.

"Kill him and take his stuff."

Butcher's Rock took its name from the great flat slab of gray sedimentary stone that lay atop the rest of the isle. Through the spyglass it indeed resembled a behemoth's cutting block. At a thirty degree angle, this rectangular shape leaned over a vast mound of stone that might have been limestone or ancient coral. This block extended from the waterline to reach a terminal point perhaps a thousand feet above it. Below the waters it continued. From its top edge to about its midway point, a fissure split the stone. One could imagine it as the scar left behind by the strike of a cleaver, as might have been wielded by some titanic god.

The rest of the isle, large portions of which the block permanently shaded like an overhanging awning, arranged itself in layers. A ring of jagged rocks composed the shore. Beyond this lay a rising slope of gravel, a patrolling ground for red-shelled crabs the size of ponies. This led to a cliff side perforated by dozens of cave mouths. Above





the cliff sat a network of crags and rock shelves. Some were vegetated by nothing but moss, while others held enough soil to grow twisted trees and sharp-leaved bushes. Gray, billowing shapes flapped behind them. After a moment of study I identified them as oilskin tents.

An absence marked the isle: Though its shelves and crannies seemed perfect rookeries for nesting seabirds, Butcher's Block stood bare. Someone hungry lived here.

After ordering the rest of my crew to keep watch for the approach of Kered Firs's ship, I put ashore in a single boat, along with my adjutants.

Aspodell wrinkled his nose. "This Twill must be a peculiar fellow, to think this forlorn place a shelter."

"Would you want to seek someone in those caves?" I asked. "Or, for that matter, up on one of those shelves where the tents are?"

"Isn't that exactly what we're doing?"

"Each of us, then, must concede the other's point."

As we approached the shore, eddies seized the boat, threatening to dash it against the rocks. Seagrave and Otondo worked the oars, pushing furiously against them. We found a break in the stony shoreline, where gravel spilled down to the water's edge. After we scrambled from the boat, Otondo picked it up and moved it up the slope single-handed.

Blocks of worked stone, a foot long on each side and nearly three inches thick, dotted this pebbled beach. Ducking down to examine them, I saw that they were covered with carved figures. The crude images spoke through the ages with a terrible clarity. Each stone depicted a scene of violence. Large figures, their frames distorted and not entirely humanlike, attacked, mutilated, or sacrificed humans half their size. Several standard images dominated. In one, the giants stood before an altar, holding aloft a severed human head. In another, a big-bellied man roasted on a spit, as giants danced nearby. The giants displayed a common aspect: in the middle of each massive forehead, a single eye bulged.

"Cyclopes," Seagrave groaned.

"It doesn't mean there are cyclopes here," I said.

"Nor does it mean there aren't, ma'am."

The stones survived as remnants of a cannibal empire, Ghol-Gan, which ruled the region uncountable millennia ago. Traces of this primeval civilization could be found throughout the islands of the Shackles, and beyond, especially to the south. Found among them would be the degenerate descendants of their cyclops rulers, who sometimes gathered around themselves the relics of their forgotten past.

I'd known a few of them in my day, but they were the acculturated ones, who drifted to cities and learned their ways. There was a bouncer, Eriboe, at the Faded Seahorse in Hell Harbor, who told dirty jokes and was pleasant

enough—until she had to cave a skull in. Eriboe would never speak of her early life on an island of her kinfolk. I wondered if it was Butcher's Rock. I tried to imagine her lurking in a cave mouth up ahead, and couldn't quite bring the image into focus.

Reality mimicked imagining: Movement blurred in the closest cavern, about a hundred yards off. Before I could command otherwise, the others had their weapons out.

"We're not here to fight," I said.

"Never assume a warm welcome, Challys Argent," replied Rira.

I took point, clambering up the slope, cutlass still stowed in my scabbard. I called out to the figure in the cave. "We mean you no harm."

A round object arced from the darkness. As it came at me, tumbling end over end, I could see that it was a rusted cook pot. It fell a yard short and half a yard wide.

With an exultant howl, Otondo charged the cavern.

"No, hold!" I called.

He surged past me, his rippling muscles a fury of forward motion.

"Otondo!"

He did not stop, so I gripped the hilt of Siren Call, centering my mind on its power of command. The gear crystal attuned to the ogre captain glowed. Its heat suffused my palm. Otondo slid to a halt, spraying shards of broken coral before him. The sudden stop overbalanced him, sending him to his knees. When I walked past him, his face knotted with humiliated rage.

I had to keep the hand on the hilt of my sword to maintain magical discipline over Otondo. To show that I did not mean to draw it, I wrapped my hand over the pommel. It was not the clearest gesture of peace but I hoped it would make the statement I needed. The other hand I held extended, with open palm. "See? You needn't fear me. If I meant you harm, I'd not have prevented my man from coming at you." I kept moving, at what was meant to read as a calm and deliberate pace. "A cook pot is not such a terrible weapon. I do not think you are a warrior. Please, step into the sunlight so we can talk."

I could now see the outline of the figure in the cave. If I was seeing her right, she was nearly nine feet tall. A glimpse of a wrinkled, nut-colored hand flashed into a beam of light. It held a sword, which in her grip looked more like a knife.

"I know that one." The voice crackled like a fire. "He is a bad one."

With a twist of my shoulder, I indicated the ogre. A backward glance told me that he'd returned to his feet. "Otondo?"

"No, the fat one." A pointing finger emerged from the dark. Evidently, she meant Seagrave. "He is a pirate captain. When I lived on Undersquare Isle, he attacked us, killing for gold we did not have."



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"I have no doubt that he did. But he is under my command now, by the might of a legendary sword. You have perhaps heard of Siren Call?"

"I have not," the cyclops croaked.

"You saw me use it to stop Otondo. He is also a bad one, but you saw me bring him to heel." As I said this, I felt the ogre's loathing as a hot prickle on the back of my neck. "Your fear is understandable, but you need not worry."

"Until you decide to unleash your dogs."

"Which I will not do. If you wish to be left in peace, I will leave you. But I have coin for you, if you have use of it here."

She stepped an inch or so beyond the threshold of her cave. "There is nowhere so distant in this world that a bit of gold won't help." The cyclops was nearly bald, with only odd wisps of bent and wiry white hair encircling her head. Each was anchored by a raised mole the size of a human thumb. Her skull ended in a bumpy point. Drooping lobes swung from the bottom of her sharp-tipped ears, and a collection of rags covered her torso, leaving her arms and legs bare.

I tossed a purse at her feet. The coral gravel muffled the pleasing clanking sound I'd aimed for. She reached down to pick it up, and thick fingers teased open the neck of the purse. Her single eye slowly blinked. She touched the coin and trembled. "I see your future," she said.

"I am Challys Argent. Tell me your name."

"Come closer, so they will not hear."

I did as she asked. Up close, she smelled of dried fish, coconut milk, and curdling sweat.

The croak left her voice when she whispered. "I have not used a name in years, but when I did, I was Xanae."

"Xanae, we are here to find someone named Megeus. I guess from the sound of the name that he is a cyclops, too."

She closed her eye to me. "That's not what I will tell you."

"And we seek Megeus to find a human, a man who unpuzzles locks: Twill Ninefingers. We believe that he came here to be sheltered by Megeus. We bring no danger to either. In truth, hazard surely comes their way—and perhaps to all on this island. We're here to warn them, and fight against their enemy if needed."

With a surprisingly gentle touch, Xanae reached out to pull me into her cave. Puddles of brackish water seeped up through its natural flooring. "I am an oracle," she said.

"As are many of your people."

Her tongue swept out to wet her rubbery lips. "A doom is upon you."

"I am thankful for your—"

"I see your death, Challys Argent. I see it in threads and possibilities. Unlike most, you have many possible deaths. But none are good."

"Are any deaths good?"

"Yes, but not those that await you. Through pride you have sealed your fate." Her gentle fingers became a clamping vice around my wrist. "You hold a dragon by its tail. When you let go, the dragon will devour you. You cannot outlast it. The conclusion is foregone. Only the circumstances remain in doubt. And the number of waves that will wash against the shore until it happens."

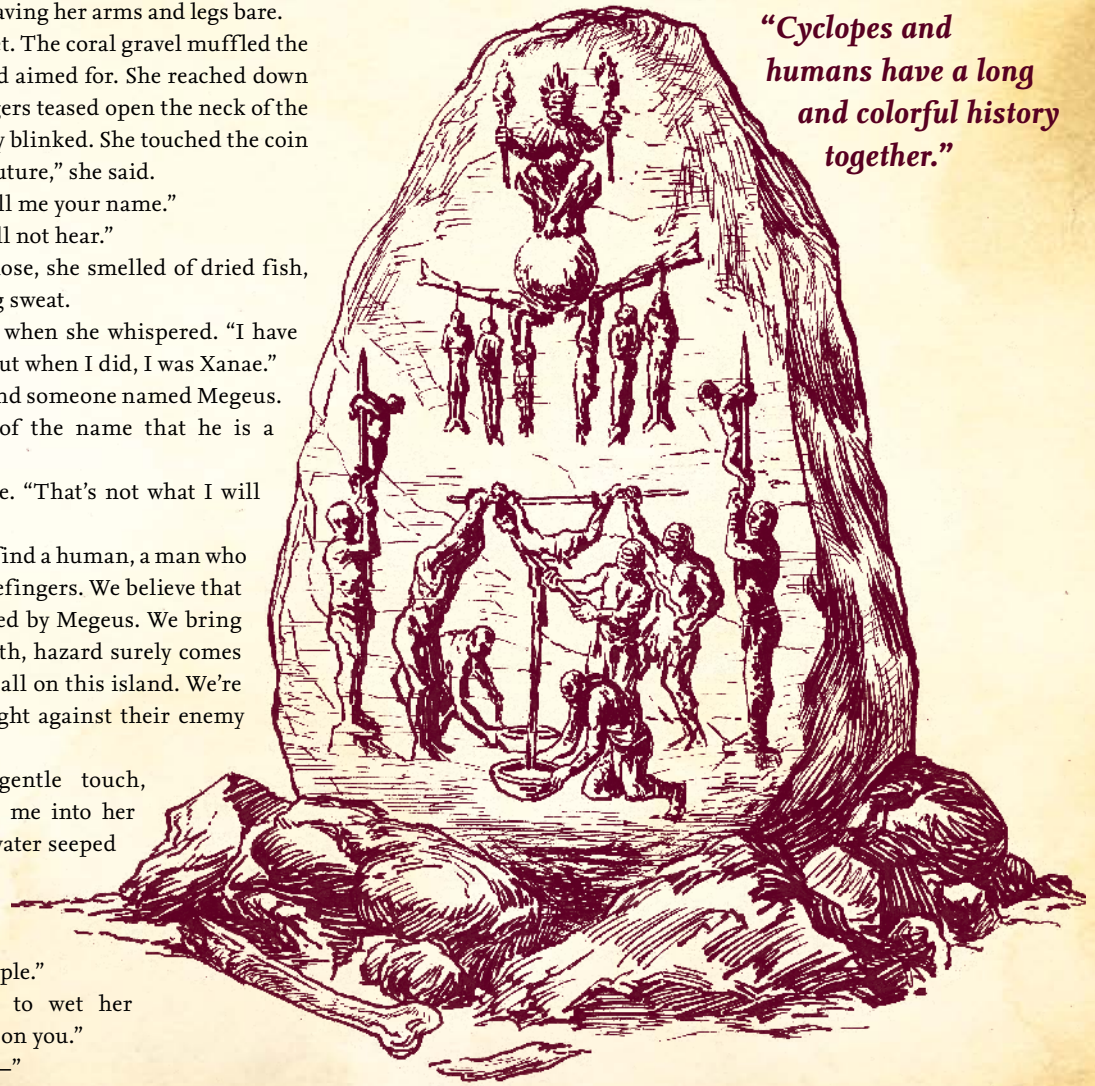
"You are concerned for me."

"Yes."

"Could I not then convince you to tell me what I need to know?"

"One of those four outside—one of them is the one who will kill you. Sometimes they kill by inaction. More often, by piercing you with blade, dosing you with poison, or

*"Cyclopes and humans have a long and colorful history together."*







scourging you with magic. You have done a terrible and foolish thing, and have left yourself without means of escape."

I have never been the sort to justify myself. Had this lumbering oracle provoked an urge to unburden, I might have shared the mathematics of my choice. By entralling the four, I had saved countless innocents from their depredations. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, would survive because my adjutants were occupied obeying me, and no longer plied the seas as free-willed captains of their own vessels. Would I prefer to have killed them? Perhaps. But had I not used the magic of Siren Call, each would have killed me. If one day my time runs out, and I pay the price for all those lives with my own, there will be no disputing the value of the trade.

So instead I asked: "If my die is already cast, why are you telling me this?"

"So you might best spend your remaining time."

Aspodell's continental accent reverberated down the tunnel. "Is all well down there?"

"Leave us be, Adalbert."

Silhouetted by the sky behind him, he cocked an insouciant hip. Whether at me, or the cyclops, I could not venture to guess. "I've been listening."

Xanae whispered into my ear, her breath as hot as a Rahadoumi sirocco. "He might be the one to do it."

"That he might," I said.

She shrank back as Aspodell swaggered in. "Tell me, oracle: when you see a person's doom, as you see my captain's, is it your usual impulse to share it?"

The oracle hid behind me, the difference in height rendering the action sadly absurd. "Go away," she said.

"That we shall, as soon as we learn where Megeus is. You may simply nod, which is not the same as telling. Deeper in the caves? Up in one of the tents?"

"You might be the one," she said.

"The one who kills her?" Aspodell smiled at me. "I harbor no more fervent hope. But to the business at hand, my dear. Megeus."

Xanae clutched my shoulders and said nothing.

"Let me explain why you needed to spill your poisonous omens. You are a

pathetic and frightened creature, on an island where all are mightier than you."

"I said go away."

"Your only power is the power to frighten. Your only weapon, your dim peerings into the future. Yet none of your one-eyed brethren fear you, do they? I am no oracle, but these truths I see plainer than the blue sky above."

"I don't like you."

"Then send us on our way, never to bother you again. Or I'll tell you more about yourself."

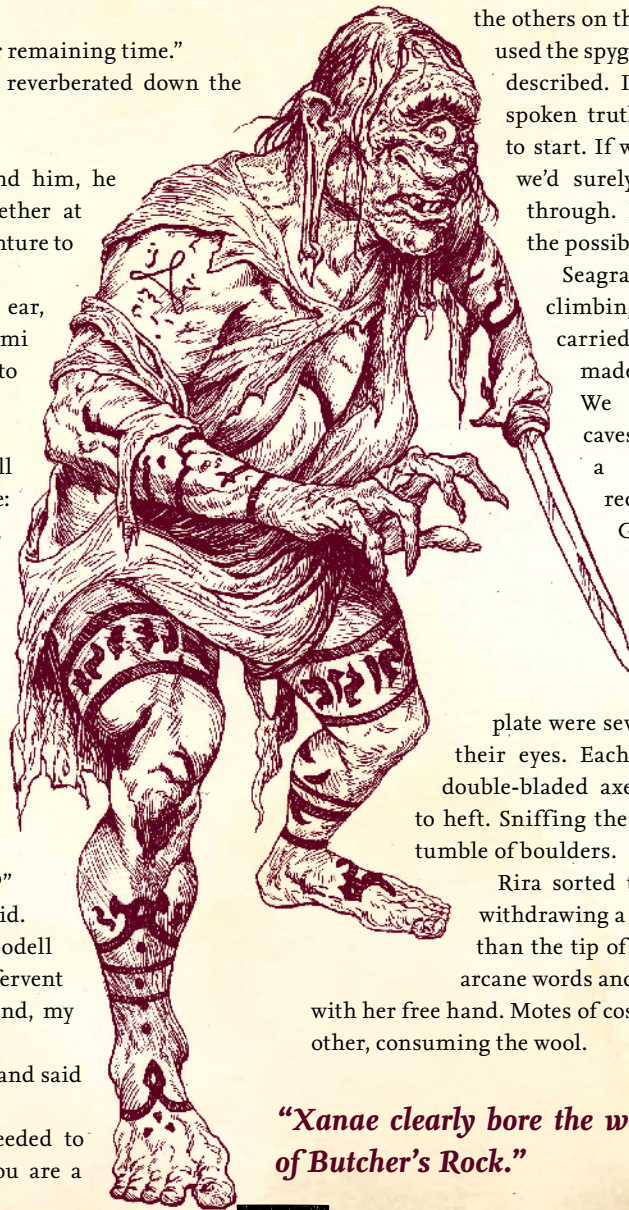
She turned her back on us. Scars, some old, others fresh, crisscrossed the patches of flesh visible through the rags. Xanae clearly bore the worst of Butcher's Rock. "He dwells on the island's highest shelf, shadowed by the top of the block. Purple protea flowers ring his camp."

We took a wordless leave of her and rejoined the others on the graveled slope. Seagrave used the spyglass to find the spot Xanae described. I could not assume she'd spoken truthfully, but it was a place to start. If we combed the caves first, we'd surely have to fight our way through. Here we enjoyed at least the possibility of stealth.

Seagrave and Otondo unfurled climbing gear from the boat and carried the heavy ropes as we made our way to a spot below. We saw movement in the caves and hunkered behind a low wall haphazardly reconstructed from Ghol-Gan stones.

A trio of cyclopes ventured out into the sun. They wore motley hide armor, into which jagged pieces of metal plate were sewn. Leather visors shaded their eyes. Each dragged behind him a double-bladed axe too large for a human to heft. Sniffing the air, they jumped down a tumble of boulders.

Rira sorted through a leather pouch, withdrawing a section of fleece no larger than the tip of her thumb. She muttered arcane words and made fluttering motions with her free hand. Motes of cosmic force surrounded the other, consuming the wool.



***"Xanae clearly bore the worst of Butcher's Rock."***



Cyclopean heads turned as an albatross—or rather, the consummate image of one—alighted down the shore. It preened the feathers of its fat and inviting breast. The cyclops trio pushed and shoved one another to be the first to give chase. As they bounded jostling toward it, it took flight, rounding the isle on a low trajectory suggesting that it would land again, just out of sight.

As soon as their view of us was obstructed, we ran toward a section of the cliff face adorned with promising footholds. Seagrave swung a grappling hook, wrapping it around the trunk of a thorny tree. We were already well up the rock wall—Seagrave in the lead, Otondo bringing up the rear—when the sound of a fight arose from down on the shore. We were exposed to the three, if they'd thought to look up. Instead they gave their attention to an axe-swinging brawl: they'd failed to catch the nonexistent bird and blamed it on each other.

We hauled ourselves up, nearing the first of several rock shelves we would have to traverse to reach Megeus's supposed dwelling place. As Seagrave neared the trunk bearing his grapple, the line swung wildly, dashing me against the cliff. My elbow struck rock, sending shivers of pain through the bone and into my shoulder. I looked below: Aspodell had lost his grip on the rope and slid down.

Below him hung Otondo. The ogre had never learned to mask his expressions. Each of his thoughts played clearly across his great ball of a face, and remained readable even from my precarious angle above. I could see him deciding whether to catch Aspodell if he landed on him, or to do nothing and allow the nobleman to fall to his death. My adjutants extended little more affection to each other than they had for me. I'd given them a blanket command against actively lashing out at their fellows. But acts of omission, especially those requiring instantaneous decision, introduced unfortunate ambiguities into the operation of their binding geases.

Before I could cry out or attempt to communicate a command through Siren Call's hilt, Aspodell's boots gained purchase on the cliff, slowing his descent. He brought himself to a halt mere feet above Otondo. The ogre twitched, as if he'd decided what to do and just as quickly forgotten it.

With the rope steady again, Seagrave hauled himself onto the rock shelf. He pulled us up: me, then Rira, then Aspodell. Otondo required no help; he raised himself onto the ledge in a flourish of bulging muscle.

Foliage now hid us from the view of onlookers from the shore below. We had four ledges to cross in all. The same leaves that concealed us veiled what might or might not lurk on the other shelves.

Seagrave beckoned me close for muttered advice. "Time to make noise."

"Why?"

"These ledges are easier to defend than attack. Soon as we try to enter one with an enemy on it, we're in a scrap. If they come at us while we're still crossing, they can push us off. Make them charge us, and we can take solid positions and hit at them while they're crossing. They'll be jumping down, so their disadvantage won't be so great as we'd face, defending against repelling action while climbing up. But so it goes."

I conferred with the others, assigning Otondo to the forward edge of the shelf, where he could grab attackers and hurl them down the cliff. Rira found a vantage behind the bushes. Seagrave and I took spots in the middle of the ledge, with Aspodell lurking to one side, ready to score opportunistic blows.

"Megeus!" I called. "Ho, Megeus! We would speak with you!"

The brush of the ledges ahead stirred instantly into lashing motion. We braced ourselves, as we would for a boarding.

One-eyed heads emerged from the foliage. There were at least three cyclopes. Otondo anticipated their angle of arrival and crouched down. The first cyclops leapt across the gap between ledges with distressing ease. He landed on Otondo's back. The ogre thrust himself up like a lever, sending the cyclops tumbling over the edge and out of sight. In the meantime, his mates made it onto the ledge. One seemed young and hale, his flesh unmarred, his fangs gleaming and sharp. His companion looked old and worn, the tufts hair surrounding his ears as white as sea-foam. Something about his bearing, perhaps the way the younger one looked to him for cues, told me that he was Megeus.

I shouted that we hadn't come to fight—words soon swallowed by the clash of combat. Lightning arced from Rira's hiding spot to course around the younger cyclops's body. Aspodell took advantage of the creature's convulsions to leap behind him and stab him in the back. The cyclops dropped down into a crouch of surrender, scuttling from the fray.

Loosing a string of imprecations in the ancient Ghol-Gan tongue, Megeus swung his fist wide. I reared, avoiding the blow's full force, yet was thrown to the ground nonetheless. Butcher's Rock spun around my addled head. I saw Seagrave thrown through the air. He landed in the bushes that concealed Rira, ruining the casting of her next spell. Aspodell subjected Megeus to a blur of rapier-stickings, to no visible benefit. A backhanded blow sent him staggering.

Otondo roared at him, flailing his great cutlass. Megeus deftly ducked into the blow, grabbing and twisting the ogre's arm. The cutlass dropped. Ogre and cyclops wrestled, each trying to lock the other in a chokehold. Their grappling took them to the shelf's crumbling edge. As I tried to muster a warning cry, Otondo let Megeus place him in a bear hug from behind. Then he pushed off, the two disappearing over the side.