



LEAGUE OF DROWNED GHOSTS

Pathfinder's Journal: The Treasure of Far Thallai 3 of 6

Still groggy from a blow to the head, I rushed to the edge of the rocky shelf, from which Otondo had pulled the cyclops Megeus. He'd plummeted with him more than a hundred feet to the coral shore of Butcher's Rock. My first thought was of suicide: Otondo had freed himself from his magical indenture by taking his life. Not to mention that of Megeus, whom we had come merely to speak with. Another addendum, I saw, would have to be added to the lengthening terms of the geas.

Although it was a sound idea, I realized as soon as I looked down that Otondo had maneuvered toward a less permanent conclusion. He lay sprawled in the gravel below, dazed and groaning. He'd let Megeus wrap him in his arms, then pushed off, so that he landed on the cyclops. It was only his opponent his rash move had killed.

Then I saw Megeus briefly stir, before slumping again. He might breathe, even now.

I remembered Megeus's ally, a younger cyclops. As I wheeled on him, he held up his arms in supplication. "What's your name?" I demanded.

"Phagon." Singed welts, marks of the wizardly lightning bolt he'd taken during the scrap, were rising across his body.

"Is Twill Ninefingers here, Phagon?"

"The human?" He shook his one-eyed head.

"You didn't eat him, did you?" Aspodell asked.

"Some of us argued for it."

"Then what happened to him?"

"Ask Megeus. If you haven't murdered him." He slumped sulkily against the limestone cliff face.

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"Aspodell," I managed. "Take Seagrave with you and search these ledges. Make sure he's telling the truth."

Phagon produced an affronted grunt. Though he took imputations of cannibalism in stride, it was apparently a more serious matter to suggest he might tell a lie.

Aspodell pointed his rapier tip at Phagon. "You lead us to Megeus's tent. Wouldn't want to step in any traps, would we?" "You've no cause to trouble us," Phagon complained.

"We fly the black flag. You have no cause to deny us your loot."

Rira led the way as we climbed down. By the time we reached the shore, a group of twenty or so cyclopes had gathered around Megeus and Otondo. I braced, ready for them to rush us; they stepped away as we approached. Why they gave us this freedom, I could not tell. I guessed that Megeus had been their strongest champion, and that they feared us because we'd bested him. Other explanations stood as equally likely: that they deemed him unpopular and not worth fighting for, or that they would wait until they knew more about us before staging a true assault. I kept on guard against abrupt alterations in the crowd's demeanor.

Otondo pulled himself to a sitting position. Kneeling beside Megeus, I saw that the cyclops's chest still rose and fell. Aware of the risk of leaving myself alone with the cyclopes, I instructed Rira to take the boat to the ship and come back with healers. Equally aware that I might get myself killed, Rira complied, her equanimity swift.

That both ogre and cyclops had survived a drop that would have ended any man was a wonder, but scarcely inexplicable. The old saw tells us that the bigger they are, the harder they fall; however, in my previous life as a cloistered scholar, I learned that the larger and denser the skeletal structure, the more evenly the impact of a fall is dispersed through the body.

Megeus recovered consciousness before the healers even arrived. Our expenditure of salves and prayers on him seemed to sway the crowd in our favor. I still could not divine their full attitude toward Megeus. Perhaps, after dispatching a thousand and one higher priorities, I will one day dispatch a junior Pathfinder to research a treatise on cyclops politics.

"You got pigs aboard your ship?" Megeus asked, as our salves ebbed his bruises away.

He would take some easing before we reached the subject of Twill Ninefingers. "Pork, but no pigs."

"I reckon it's heavily brined."

"How else to preserve it?"

"You humans and your salt. You spoil everything. What else you got to eat?"

"Megeus, you should be grateful for the repairs we've done to your accursed carcass."

He caressed his throbbing skull. "Not when it was you who made the need for them."

"A not unreasonable point. Tell us what you did with Twill and perhaps I'll find a morsel or two for you."

Megeus stared wistfully at the blue horizon. "I traded 'im."

"Explain."

"Twill came here to hide out from someone who was chasing 'im. He brought two barrels of pickled eggs, a cask of jerky, a—"

"Skip the inventory part."

"Then let's say we ate what he brung us, and then he let slip exactly who he was fleeing from."

"Kered Firsk the Flayer, the Monster Captain."

Megeus blanched. "We had no wish for a fight with the likes of that."

"So you traded him to Kered Firsk?"

"We would've, but we got another offer first. Ghosts. Their isle, Drowningtide, arose from the depths in the wake of a blistering storm. They came at night, all green and see-through. They offered us shark meat, deep-water oysters, and a family of merfolk. It seemed a worthy trade, so I put Twill in a sack and handed 'im over."

"They sensed you had a human with you?"

"They called 'im by name."

"And how can you be sure they weren't in cahoots with Kered Firsk?"

He shrugged, then winced at the effort. "Maybe they were. I cared not about their intent, but the quality of their provender. Those merfolk were firm and fresh."

Aspodell and Seagrave returned from their search of the hills, hauling sacks of loot. "Wait now!" Megeus rose in protest, then wobbled, seized by dizziness.

"The man we seek? You sold him to ghosts. When we came to talk, you attacked and tried to kill us. If you'd won, you'd have drunk our blood and chewed our flesh. All of these offenses warrant punitive action. You're lucky we only care to confiscate your goods, and not those of your neighbors." I spoke this last part clearly, for the benefit of the crowd. One by one, Megeus's neighbors slunk off to their caves and tents. They proved themselves ready to defend their own hoards, but not to form a united front.

As we left for the boat, Otondo leaned down and grinned. "I'd never eat a merman," he said.

"Stop talking now, Otondo."

"Too fishy."

Once back on the ship, I met with my adjutants in the captain's quarters.

Aspodell lounged with his bony backside in one chair and his long legs slung over the arms of another. He drank port from a tiny crystal glass. It was among the liquors we'd confiscated from the confiscators back in Moonplum.

Otondo paced like a caged bear, as he did when no better distraction presented itself.



Seagrave and Rira sorted through the bag of treasure we had taken from the cyclops. Seagrave stacked coins and counted pearls. Rira poked through potion bottles and assorted gewgaws. Among them she identified a magic ring, which one of our sailors could use in place of armor. The bottles, she said, contained doses of water-lung. They would prove themselves useful, likely sooner than not. Many of the Shackles' predicaments grow easier when one can breathe underwater.

I knew of Drowningtide from accounts in books, none of whose authors had set foot on any isle of the Shackles. "What can we say for certain about this ghost isle, Seagrave?"

He answered without slowing his counting. "Never been there, ma'am. It moves around, perhaps in keeping with the moontides. It's an isle of drowned men."

"You've not been?"

"Thank the sea fates, no." Like several of the crew—who may well have picked it up from him—Seagrave subscribed to a peculiar sort of faith. It held that pirates and sailors were more tightly bound by the forces of destiny than land-dwellers. These forces he personified as sodden hags called the sea fates. After long years sailing together, I still had no idea whether he regarded the sea fates as genuine entities, or only metaphor. Perhaps one day I will learn the truth, and write it in another journal like this one. "And how does one wind up on this ghost isle?" I asked him.

"Gozreh the ocean-god is a possessive deity. When the waters of the Shackles claim a man's life, Gozreh cleaves to him and does not let him go. When the sailor's soul swims to the surface from its watery grave, he sometimes finds himself on Drowningtide's misty shores. That's as close to land, life, or celestial rest as he'll ever get."

"And what can we expect when we get there?"

Otondo stopped his pacing long enough to shudder. Seeing that I observed him, he went on as before, pretending to be untroubled.

"Hard to separate guess from truth, as them what lands there never comes back, even if they still breathed when they arrived. Safe to say only that it's a melancholy place, more of the sea than the land. They say that drowning is contagious there."

"What does that mean?"

"Hanged if I know."

"And what would they want with Twill? Why would a ghost want a lock broken?"

"I would not care to guess, ma'am."

Rira spoke up. "It won't be that, Challys Argent. The possessions ghosts carry with them are only memories, as half-substantial as the stray souls themselves. A flesh-and-blood man could no more open a ghostly lock than wield a ghostly sword."

"I have seen that said," I allowed. I recalled the fact from the tattered copy of Maleg's *Realms of the Dead* once housed

in the archive of my youth. "But let's not decide ahead of time what ghosts can and cannot do."

Rira slowly nodded her mask at me, admitting the point. "So then how do we find Drowningtide?"

From the pile of assorted loot she plucked a tool consisting of a flat handle and a long, thin spike. The spike terminated in a small circular form.

"A lock pick," said Aspodell.

"Yes," said Rira, "One item from a matched kit. Well-kept. Not encrusted with dirt and mildew like the rest of Megeus's hoard."

"And therefore Twill's, mostly likely," I said.

Rira rose from her chair. "If we are lucky, I can focus on it and behold its mates." She withdrew from beneath my bunk a copper cask I required her to store with me. Through her months of magical captivity, I kept to my promise to leave it unmolested. I suspected that it would not open if I tried.

We retreated from my cabin. Seagrave lingered at the threshold long enough to jab meaningfully at the stacks of counted coins. Rira's mask muffled a contemptuous snort.

I closed the door; we stood close by and waited. A low clattering sound marked Rira's unpacking of items from her cask. Arcane chanting followed, in her sharp and husky voice. At length a vapor curled over the doorjamb. It smelled of seaweed and cinnamon. We heard the bang of a small gong, after which the incantation ended. After a few moments to repack her oracular implements, Rira opened the door. "Southwest," she said. "Two hundred degrees."

For ten hours we sailed. Rira repeated her magic, whatever it was, twice more. After her last divination, she announced that we'd reached our destination. I climbed to the aft deck to survey a placid ocean. Sunset threw flecks of gold- and salmon-colored light onto the Fever Sea. By the charts we were on the northern edge of the island cluster we call the Shackles. The closest land was a large island about twenty miles to the south.

"There?" I asked Rira, pointing to it.

"No, there," she said, indicating the empty ocean just ahead. "Not yet, but there. Drop anchor. We'll have time to fortify ourselves. It's always best to be well fed—and more important still, halfway drunk—when rubbing shoulders with ghosts."

We did as Rira said. I ordered the anchor dropped and joined my adjutants at table. We ate oysters and conch with pickled cabbage. From my cabinet I withdrew a bottle of muscat I'd been saving. We finished it and another lesser bottle besides. Otondo, for his part, turned up his nose at the wine, sticking to his usual ghastly rum. It was strange, to drink with them as might a friend. Under the influence of the vine, Rira and Seagrave softened, seeming to despise me less. Aspodell and the ogre balanced the equation with ever more vicious snarls and glares.

A shaft of moonlight speared through a porthole.

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"Now," said Rira. We rose on just slightly unsteady feet and strode to starboard. Above, the moon had slipped from behind a bank of clouds. It shone down on the waters, illuminating a floating city of the dead.

Indistinct and contradictory, Drowningtide shimmered, a place from an ever-shifting dream. Luminous spires rose up from a coral base to fill the sky. They recalled, in hazy detail, the styles of a dozen towns. A looming bulwark styled itself like a fortress of Mendev. Turrets evoked a Brevic keep. Beside them jostled a Qadiran minaret, a bronze mantis dome of Mediogalti, and an echo of Fortress Fangspire. Amid them thrust assortments of masts and sails. Loops of rotting rigging, festooned with seaweed, hung between them. There were more towers and roofs than foundations; many of the structures, as if left unfinished by a distracted painter, faded out where their foundations ought to have been.

Portals appeared in these uncertain structures. Figures issued forth, translucent, their edges overlapping. Phantasmal water streamed from them to pool around their hazy feet. Their forms testified to the grotesqueries of death by drowning. Some were bloated and blackened, swollen heads lolling on overwhelmed necks. The incorporeal flesh of others bore the bite marks of scavenging fish. Gobbets of skin and flesh floated from them as if they were still underwater. A few appeared relatively intact; I imagined that they'd been pulled from the water shortly after dying. Ghostly costumes varied from the pirate motley of the Shackles to those affected by the merchant and naval fleets of Rahadoum, Chelixa, Varisia, and Absalom.

In a mass, the ghosts milled toward a point on the shore closest to the *Aspidochelone*. They stood silently, arms at their sides, expressions at once weebegone and expectant.

"We're taking a boat," I told my adjutants.

"Are you certain?" asked Aspodell.

"You don't want to invite them here, do you?"

"On second thought, no."

The five of us clambered down to a boat.

Otondo hesitated by the rail. "And men who drown in the Shackles ends up here?"

Seagrave had climbed only a few feet onto the rope ladder. "So it is said."

"This will be bad."

"Why is that?"

"How many men have you had drowned, Seagrave?"

They exchanged trepidatious looks, shrugged, and joined us in the boat.

As the two of them rowed us toward the shore, a chill suffused the tropical air. By the time its nose touched the ephemeral island, my arms were a landscape of goosebumps. Seagrave tested the island's solidity. To our collective surprise, it held his weight unyieldingly. Otondo hopped out, great cutlass in hand.

"Stow that," I said, my lips unmoving.

After the standard show of reluctance, the ogre complied. The rest of us stepped from the boat; he and Seagrave pulled it farther up onto the eerie shore.

I took a central position, flanked by the others.

A gaunt, shirtless ghost in a whaler's cap separated himself from the pack and bowed to greet us. His left arm was missing, along with a good chunk of shoulder. The adjoining portion of his torso showed the slashing scars of a shark attack. In his extant hand he carried a long harpoon. He held it with dignity, as one might a ceremonial staff.

I was glad of the wine coursing through my veins. Middling drunkenness lent a leavening absurdity to the proceedings.

By emphasizing the unreality of the situation, it somewhat blunted the horror. "I am Challys Argent, of the *Aspidochelone*," I said, bowing in return. "We have no wish to disturb your rest, but—"

"You cannot disturb what we do not have, pirate." The ghost's voice reverberated, out of synch with the movement of its lips. "This existence is far from restful."

"I sympathize with your plight."

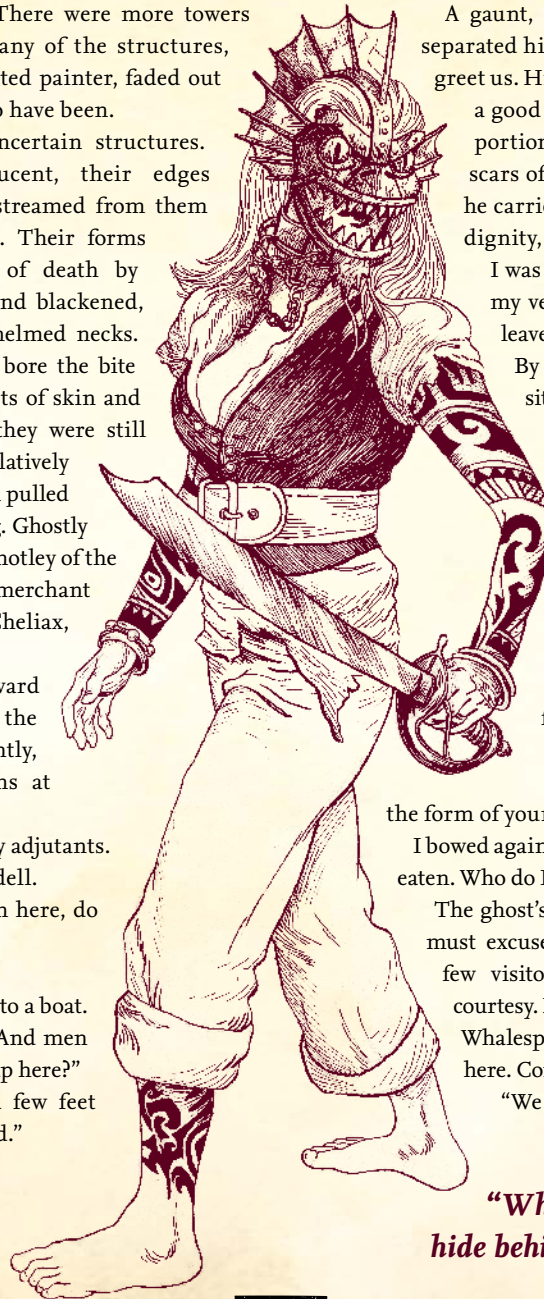
"Then you will grant us solace, in the form of your company. We shall lay on a feast."

I bowed again. "There is no need, for we have just eaten. Who do I have the honor of addressing, sir?"

The ghost's pale brow knitted in dismay. "You must excuse my lapse. Drowningtide receives few visitors. We have lost the knack for courtesy. I am Geor. Known in my day as Geor Whalespotter. Though that name is not used here. Come with us to our banquet hall."

"We do not wish to trouble you."

**"Who knows what thoughts
hide behind Rira's iron mask?"**





Crimson undertones pulsed through his transparent frame. "We insist."

I gave him a third bow and trooped after him. "We come in search of someone."

"Let us spend frivolous time at table first, and speak of weighty matters when the port is served."

"His name is Twill Ninefingers."

A gout of seawater dribbled down Geor's lips. "That name may hold significance. Reward us with your fellowship, and I'll say more."

"Is he here, then?"

"Come along."

The ghosts thronged around us, whispering and chattering. The sound crawled across the back of my neck like a bug. They pressed in tight. They smelled us and tugged at our garments. I flinched as ghostly hands came near. When I could not avoid their touch, they seared my skin with cold.

We proceeded to a weird building I had not seen from the shore. It was a keep constructed from the remains of wrecked ships, fused together by some unknowable undead process. A trio of prows jutted from the asymmetrical structure, two to the left and one to the right. An assortment of crow's nests competed for supremacy atop its gabled roof. Chalky barnacles dotted its surface. The front doors, which now swung open, were fashioned from rudders sized for seafaring giants.

They opened into a vast hall composed of several decks, laid on top of one another. Rope ladders connected the levels. We walked on sodden velvet carpet to the nearest ladder. The ghosts floated up; we climbed, fearing for the structure's solidity. On the highest deck, a long table stretched before us. Tarnished silver cutlery flanked chipped and mismatched plates. Nautilus-shell goblets awaited the pouring of wine.

A good four dozen places had been set, with chairs to match. On the decks below, more ghosts gathered, faces forlornly upraised. I found myself wondering what protocol they used to award the coveted spots at the head table. Then I reminded myself that the social strata of phantasmal society was the least of the questions I ought to be asking.

The pushing ghosts separated us from one another, surrounding us to enact a bizarre parody of a grand soiree. They herded me toward a railing. Each of my adjutants they buttonholed in like fashion. I saw Otondo baring his teeth, Seagrave clutching his stomach, and Aspodell disguising his discomfiture behind a barracuda grin. Rira alone, hidden behind her mask, maintained a semblance of composure.

In hissing tones, the Drowningtiders barraged us with questions:

"Does Naleno Long-Tress still dance at the Red Dolphin?"

"What year is it?"

"My name is Komak Kos Sab. Do any now sing of my deeds?"

"I beg you to take a message to my mother at Maquino. It is a small village on the northern—"

"Are there any of the old faith still left in the Cinderlands?"

Geor appeared at my shoulder. "Those four. They stand beside you, but not freely."

"No."

"You have enslaved them?"

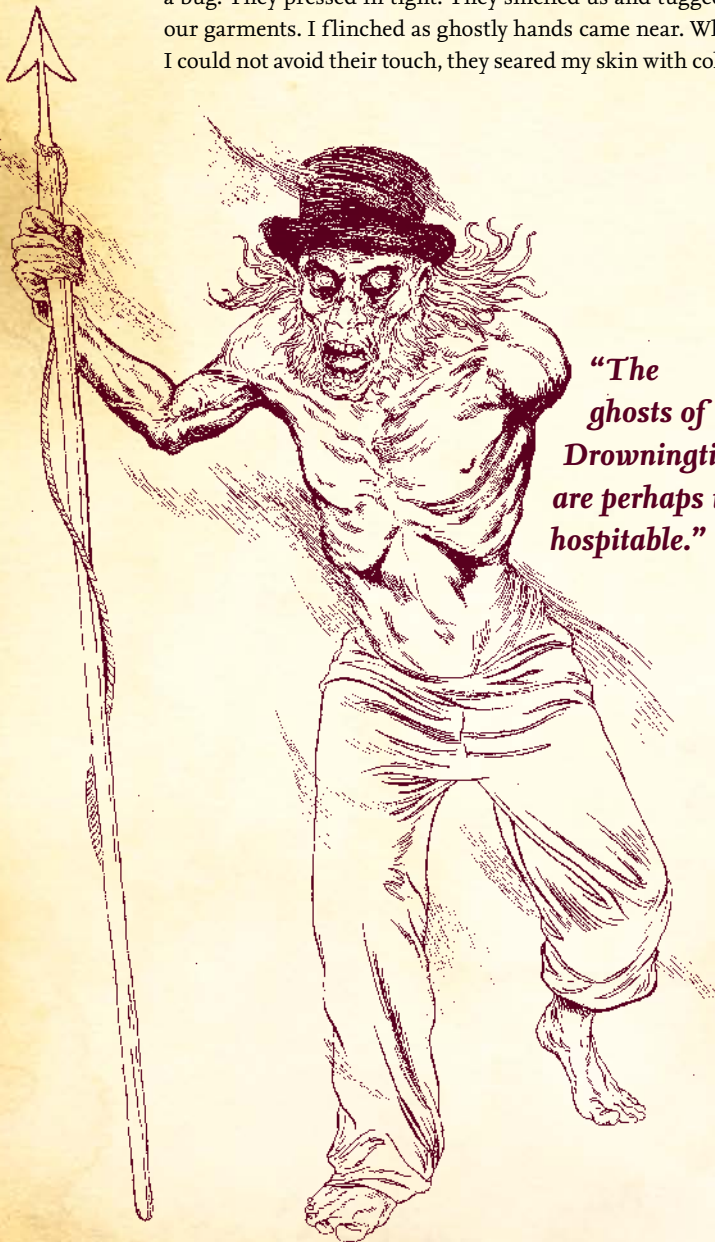
"I prefer to say that they are imprisoned, and furloughed to my care. My sword—"

The ghost waved an impatient, blurry hand. "Ghosts find many subjects uninteresting. The mechanics of your dominance over them would be an example. You may care to know that you have dulled our days in Drowningtide."

"How so?"

"We depend on new drownings to swell our ranks. Few flesh-folk visit our lonely home. With a flow of newcomers comes fresh experience, no matter how vicarious."

*"The
ghosts of
Drowningtide
are perhaps too
hospitable."*



“What has that to do with me?”

“No one sent more sailors to the sea’s damp embrace than those four. You prevent them from pirating now?”

“I bend their savagery toward positive ends.”

Geor’s inner light flickered. “You deprive us of fresh souls.”

I backed into the railing, conscious of how far I would topple if I lost my balance. “If fewer are dying than would have otherwise, I find it hard to reproach myself.” A curious elation added itself to my fear and disorientation. The dead man had confirmed my greatest hope. By collecting my band of adjutants, I’d saved lives, and many of them. Whatever happened to me when the final toll came due would be worth it.

Geor pushed himself closer. “You shine with a lovely madness.”

I slid along the railing, evading him. A witty retort nearly came to mind. I have never been as good with them as I would like.

“You could be my bride,” he said.

“I refuse all such proposals, from the living and the dead alike.”

Geor slid through a mass of ghosts to ring a ship’s bell suspended near the table. The clang cut through me like a blade. I checked my adjutants; they too winced in pain.

“It is time to sit with our guests, and eat, and drink,” Geor announced.

The ghosts shoved us until we sat, arranging us so that none were near any of the others. Geor took his spot at the head of the table. The drowned whaler positioned me to his right. Clay amphorae appeared, borne by phantom cabin boys. They poured a red liquid into the goblets. It was the red of wine on the verge of turning to vinegar, and smelled like brackish water. Geor raised his goblet. “To a cessation from our solitude, no matter how brief.”

As the ghosts consumed the ethereal liquid, a compensating quantity of water poured from their noses and ears.

I raised my goblet, but did not drink. “There are hundreds of you. How can you call yourselves alone?”

Geor’s ghost-form wavered. “Without the spark of life, it is not the same.”

“Again, I express my sorrow at your plight. It is not right that souls should be kept on Golarion, simply because they have the misfortune to drown. Now, if I might ask you about Twill Ninefingers...”

“He and I have much in common,” said Geor. “And much to settle, between us.”

“Why did he not join us at this feast?”

Geor edged toward me, his ghost-vapors fading through those of the table. “You did not drink.”

I adjusted my position, ensuring an unimpeded draw if I needed my sword. “As I said from the outset, we have come here neither thirsty nor hungry. Please do not consider it a slight against your hospitality.”

An angry groan hissed from the drowned host.

“You will drink, Challys Argent, and you will command your slaves to do the same.”

I wrapped my fingers around the goblet. “I am sorry to say it, Geor Whalespotter, but I suspect that this is a drowning potion, and that if we partake, we’ll be with you here forever.”

Geor swarmed at me through a suddenly dispersing table. Ghosts clawed my arms and back, the chill of their touch now multiplied tenfold. I swept my cutlass free. It slashed through them, its magic granting it at least some purchase against their soul-stuff.

My adjutants, like any pirate captains worthy of the title, also wielded weapons of some enchantment. These slashed through ephemeral bodies, which dispersed and then reformed, somewhat diminished.

Despite these swipes, the ghosts swarmed in. They struck back at us not with fist or blade, but with solitude. It weighed me down, buckling my knees, pushing me to the deck. The others folded, too. Aspodell dropped his rapier, hands clawed and teeth clenched. Rira went limp against a railing. Otondo gibbered, weaving on his feet like a drunken man who has forgotten how to fall. Seagrave I could not see at all.

With each gelid touch their bitterness invaded me. Dead and thwarted aspirations cracked through my certitude. My own thoughts turned traitor. *Yes, they said, this island of ghosts is where you belong. You killed yourself the moment you enslaved the first of your adjutants. One day one of them will get you. But if you let yourself die here, on your own terms.... At least then it will not be one of them that slays you.*

In a vision, I beheld myself as a ghost, among the legion here, dining at their table, forever drinking their wine of drowning. The four of them would sit at my side, prevented forever—more decisively than by the geases of Siren Call—from wreaking murder in the lands of the living. If I wished to sacrifice myself, I could do it now and here and permanently.

I fought these false thoughts. They were not my own, and only felt as the result of ghostly trickery. The enthrallment of the four captains, I reminded myself, was only a means toward the true goal, the quest for lost and stolen lore. In an eternity on Drowningtide, I’d recover not a scroll, not a scrap of a footnote...

The ghosts subsumed themselves into a single suffocating mass. The fortress of ships lost substance. The ghosts had fashioned it from their unslaked desires. Now they shifted its essence to their foremost wish: our demises.

I’d stopped breathing, I realized, and wondered if my last breath had already been taken in and exhaled.

My fingers spread out on the deck. I could see through them. They withered and flickered.

I was becoming a ghost.