



## MYSTERIES OF THE SHACKLES

Seems like pirates have a story for everything, and if we don't, we'll make one up, because we're always trying to one up each other while sharing cups down at the tavern. These tavern stories end up spreading around the docks, sneaking onto ships like rats, and before long everyone in ports across the Shackles're retelling the stories and addin' their own flourish just to make themselves seem bigger and stronger than they actually are. Buncha gossips pirates are, I'll tell ya! Thing is, sometimes the wildest stories are true and the simple ones are easily dismissed lies. Stick with me, and I'll set you straight on what's what.

—Darby Ripfin, notorious gossip



## MYSTERIES OF THE SHACKLES

### INTRODUCTION

Ancient ruins, reclusive sects, and pirate hideouts make the countless islands of the Shackles almost a world unto themselves. Old salts say that one could sail the archipelago for a century and not see it all—and there are elven mariners who would back that claim.

The rugged jungles of the islands conceal more than just pirate treasure, though. The vile deeds of the primeval Ghol-Gan empire still scar the land, their ruins and monuments standing as the physical symptoms of deeper, arcane maladies. In this chaotic string of islands, monsters hold sway and threaten the humanoids making their life upon the seas. Like the currents and winds that feed the region, the region's politics, too, move in ways far more complex than one might expect from a loose confederacy of rogues, with master manipulators hiding behind the brutal rampages of their minions.

More than anything, though, the Eye of Abendego shapes the Shackles with its brutal winds and driving rain. Because of the Eye, what might have been a temporary haven for a few rapsallions has grown into a paradise for the lawless.

What follows is a collection of legends, tales, rumors, and outright lies that might draw a group of adventurers to the Shackles. Any of them are suitable for a quick jaunt, or for incorporation into a longer Shackles campaign. The table below lists a series of rumors, while the other sections each provide a tale, reveal the truth of the matter, and show how to use that story in your campaign.

### GENERAL TALES AND RUMORS

It doesn't take much to get a story out of a sailor. Getting a reliable story is another matter, though, as adventurers visiting the Shackles quickly learn. The following table lists some tales of questionable veracity told in waterside taverns and marketplaces around the Shackles, as well as other ports where pirates call.

d%	Rumor
1–10	"Nalt Tarbrow's power came from a pair of devil's wings that he fished out of the sea."
11–20	"Juju pirates make zombies by sewing the heads of slain crewmates to the bodies of their captives."
21–30	"The bones of Captain Colvaas see everything that comes and goes from the mainland coast. They'll tell their secrets to such as visit Colvaas Gibbet with a gift of rum and speak the right words."
31–40	"Half a dozen merchant ships have run into the rocks near Parley Point in the last year, despite the lighthouse there. That's too many to be accident."
41–50	"The halflings of Bag Island ain't nearly so saintly as they put out. No one's ever met any of these slaves they claim to have freed, and you can bet the temple

of Norgorber at Beachcomber has something to do with it."

51–60 "The ruin on the Devil's Arches called the City of Bleeding Stones harbors a gateway to the private demiplane of a potent cyclops sorcerer. Her deeds were so vile that her name has been stricken from the ancient records. The demiplane beyond the arch is populated by the results of her awful experiments."

61–70 "You think the Boles family got rich on purple dye? Oh, the snails in the swamp around Bogsbridge on Motaku Island do make a pretty purple. But they're also known for brewing a rare drug that the Chelish nobles fancy. It's the damned Chelaxians who're stuffing the Boles family coffers."

71–75 "There's Ghol-Gan ruins on Motaku Island, all right. What nobody wants you to know is that they're underground—right under the town of Quent. I can feel the vibrations through me peg leg!"

76–80 "Deaf Piet thought he was clever going up the River of Knives to bury the loot he double-crossed me for. Harpies ain't such bad lasses if you can't hear 'em, eh? But he didn't hear the beast that ate him on his way home, neither. When they found his boat drifting in the delta, it only had a few bits of Deaf Piet in it... and this here map!"

81–84 "Pirate lord? Free captain? Fah! The Master of Gales means to have the laugh of us. The Eye of Abendego is a wound on the world, and he's been healing it! Good for nature, good for civilization—bad for pirates! Why do you think he keeps what he's doing so quiet? And the reason he ignores the Cult of the Eye is because he knows he'll soon be giving the lie to their prophecy of a new god rising from the maelstrom."

85–90 "The cecaelia octopus folk of Besmara's Throne guard a chest of loot buried by the Pirate Queen herself during her mortal days. The goddess's mortal booty would be a priceless treasure, but who'd dare despoil such a cache on Besmara's own holy ground?"

91–100 "When adventurers 200 years ago defeated the lich Raugsmauda on Motaku Island, they never found her phylactery. But Raugsmauda never recovered it, either. Scavengers who visited the lich's lair after the adventurers cleared it out found it and, not knowing what it was, pawned it. The phylactery has made its way through a dozen treasure caches since, and could be anywhere. Raugsmauda's monthly predations are a cover for the her desperate hunt for it."

### EEL'S SKULL AND THE THRONE OF NALT

*"Ah, yes, you're very clever. You must be, to have taken me unawares. And now you'll breeze past the stone giants, surmount the sea cliffs, prance into the Eel's Skull, and, what,*





carry the Throne of Nalt back down those same cliffs in your tatty haversacks? Truly, I am humbled by your stratagems.

“Perhaps you’ll rely on bravery? You were fast with your blades, I’ll grant. Maybe you can overcome the giants and scale the cliffs. But once inside, you’ll want for advice. We could reach an arrangement.

“No? What do you mean, no?”

“I was to be a queen! Die with your eyes burnt out, you scrag. You’ll never reach the Throne.”

—Eleuthyxia, captured lamia

**The Tale:** How Nalt Tarbrow rose from smuggling dodgy goods in his rotbucket sloop to commanding the most infamous pirate flotilla of his day remains a staple of tall tales in wharveside taverns even now, 100 years after he died in a fire that he himself set. One point upon which no talespinner disagrees, though, is that when the ships of Admiral Nalt—layabout, rotter, pirate prince—hove to below his castle, the Eel’s Skull, their holds routinely burgeoned with such loot that their siege ports kissed the waterline.

Questions about the seaworthiness of a vessel so heavily laden aside, it’s well established that Nalt was successful—too successful. He took so many merchant ships that other pirate princes were left with naught but the bones. They laid siege to the Eel’s Skull, vowing to cut him down to size, but Nalt put his own castle to the torch rather than let it be taken.

More than a few adventurers have had a go at the Eel’s Skull, but only two ever emerged alive, and they were never the same afterward. Gold and gems don’t burn, which keeps adventurers coming, but the real draw is the *Throne of Nalt*. With an artifact that could turn a layabout like Nalt Tarbrow into a pirate prince, a person of true ambition might lead an empire.

**The Truth:** Reaching Eel’s Skull requires crossing the stomping grounds of giants, then scaling a forbidding sea cliff to the eye sockets of the Skull. The party may also encounter the lamia **Eleuthyxia** (CE female lamia bard [archeologist] 2). She wants the throne, too, but will try to gain the party’s confidence by sharing information about the ruins.

Crumbling walls still surround Nalt’s castle, but the bailey is a blackened ruin haunted by undead pirates. Spending time on the parapets is also likely to attract hungry pterosaurs.

In the wreckage of Nalt’s great hall is a trapped replica of the throne that curses anyone but Nalt who sits on it. The real throne is in a subterranean audience chamber only reachable by a magical portal.

Nalt was a coward, and didn’t let the fire consume him completely. He staggered through the portal to the lower delve, deactivating it behind him, and there succumbed to his wounds. His fiery death and the throne’s influence turned what was left of Nalt Tarbrow into a thing of hatred and sickly flames. He haunts the throne chamber to this

day, coveting the power he once had, but unable to make any use of the throne in undeath.

**In Your Game:** Nalt’s sailors patrol the ruin and the winding passages beneath it as wights, although their horribly burnt appearance may make them difficult to identify at first. They’re led by one of Nalt’s captains, a jann in life who now roams the tumbledown halls as a ghul, cursing the name of his former master.

One of these unfortunates carries a clay token onto which is scratched the command word for the portal to the audience chamber, “thithereshim” (a nonsense word Nalt chose because it would be hard to overhear). The portal activates from either side when someone whispers this command word to its doorpost, staying open until deactivated by the same command.

Beyond the audience chamber (and possibly accessible through other entrances) is a winding maze of passages concealing more booty, heavily trapped and guarded by more of Nalt’s undead crew.

Use the following rules if any PC is foolish enough to sit in the false throne.

**FALSE THRONE TRAP** **CR 4**

**Type** magic; **Perception** DC 28; **Disable Device** DC 28

**EFFECTS**

**Trigger** location; **Reset** automatic

**Effect** A creature that sits on the throne suffers one of the following (50% chance of either): spell effect (*bestow curse* [–6 penalty to Dexterity], Will DC 16 negates) or spell effect (*blindness/deafness* [blindness only], Fort DC 16 negates)

Nalt Tarbrow himself now haunts the audience chamber as a witchfire (*Pathfinder RPG Bestiary* 2 284), although he lacks the witchfire’s usual affinity for hags. Additionally, Eleuthyxia knows about the false throne, and will seek an opportune moment to betray the party.

See page 66 of *Pathfinder Adventure Path* #12 for more information on the true Throne of Nalt. The throne crumbles to dust if sat on by one who wants nothing and bequeaths all he has to another.

**JUJU CULTS**

*“The fence of severed hands? They’re from lawbreakers. If they decide to cut off your hand, you’re usually allowed a priest on hand to stanch the blood. If you don’t know one who will show for you, know how to make a tourniquet. Just try not to break any rules, and be ready to guard me at the crossroads tonight.*

*“Now I must go and see Mosi and Ajuoga for advice. Don’t follow me. They might be insulted if I bring ben kudu with me.*

*“And for Sister’s sake, don’t go near Qelhetat’s house. You won’t miss it. It’s the one with all the fingers and... other things nailed to it. She cuts a piece off when one of her zombies displeases her.*



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*"Thank you, my friends. I do not know what I would do without your help."*

—Lakunle Charthagnion, the day before he left to sing with the Journeyer

**The Tale:** It's no surprise that **Lakunle Charthagnion** (CG male human rogue 3) is in trouble. A year ago, the smuggler drunkenly boasted that he could play a song so sweet that Qelhetat, Mgange Cove's notorious oracle of the Night Lord, would fall in love with him. Word got to Qelhetat, and she decided to hold Lakunle to his boast.

Many Mwangi sailors revere the three oracles at Mgange, so when Qelhetat called Lakunle out, the smuggler had to accept her terms. Lakunle had a year to bring back a song equal to his boast. While Qelhetat scoffed at the idea that any song could win her love, Lakunle must at least bring one that the town's three oracles judge pleasing. If he succeeds, he's forgiven. If he fails, he must serve Qelhetat as her zombie.

Running away isn't an option, unless he plans on never returning home. Also, being half-Chelaxian, Lakunle has something to prove. Worse, he can't play music! But he may have found a way to save his skin.

**The Truth:** Juju lore says Mfuello, the Journeyer, shares his music if a petitioner goes to the right crossroads at midnight. But the jungle wildlife, Qelhetat's followers, and any lesser wendo spirits drawn by the presence of Mfuello might have other ideas. Lakunle recruits the PCs to help him while he learns the songs from Mfuello. If they agree, he says he will give them the location of a cache of treasure he saw some pirates burying just the week before.

If the party agrees to his deal, they have a day in Ngozi before they must head into the jungle to aid Lakunle. During this time they hopefully follow the advice Lakunle gives in the quote above.

The crossroads where Lakunle will meet Mfuello is an intersection of two trails, miles into the jungle. If Lakunle arrives by midnight and begins to play his lute (very badly), an apparition of Mfuello does indeed appear. The PCs must protect Lakunle while Mfuello teaches him three songs.

**In Your Game:** The first song draws a gang of three chupacabras (*Bestiary* 2 57). Fascination draws them from their usual stealthy prowling, but they flee if reduced below half of their hit points.

Mfuello's second song attracts a trio of saci, minor wendo spirits (use the statistics for leprechauns; *Bestiary* 2 177). The saci are tiny, one-legged, pipe-smoking pranksters. They hide in the brush and play illusory pranks unless given an offering of sweets or liquor.

During the final song, four of Qelhetat's juju zombies (*Bestiary* 2 291) attack. They fight until destroyed.

If in any encounter Lakunle spends more than 2 consecutive rounds within melee reach of an enemy, Mfuello becomes annoyed and leaves, and the lesson fails. If the lesson succeeds, Lakunle receives a boon from Mfuello, giving him the skill to play a song as sweet as he claimed. This boon only lasts 3 days, so Lakunle mustn't tarry. He thanks the PCs for aiding him and discloses the location of a cache of treasure (worth approximately 5,000 gp) on a nearby island.

The town's three oracles are described in *Pathfinder Campaign Setting: Isles of the Shackles*. Qelhetat is attended by juju zombies and may call on pirates from Ngozi. She has several doses of zombie-making laubo powder (*Pathfinder Adventure Path* #39 71).



Mfuello



## LAKE OF SCALES

The feathered dinosaurs set upon us from nowhere, carrying away one of our bearers, Rava. We heard her screams from the treeline as she was devoured, but could do little with the camp in disarray from their attack.

How had beasts taller than humans escaped our notice? Why does the sun shine so much brighter? And why is the air, already damp with the monsoon's breath, so heavy? The Lake of Scales retains its curious, hourglass shape, but the landscape is rougher, the plants unfamiliar.

Since learning about arrows, they come at night. Our party dwindles. The answer must lie with the rude stelae dotting the shore, but my desperate study of them reveals nothing. And we

were not the first victims—this morning we found an elf's bones, picked white, and a cutlass corroded almost beyond recognition.

—from the journal of Parvani Ramsekhar, Explorer

**The Tale:** Only the most pathetic and desperate of buccaneers brave the sahuagin-infested waters off Shark Island. So when a small, lateen-rigged vessel captained by an elegant Vudrani scholar put in at Ollo for supplies, the rough and tumble pirates took notice.

The scholar gave her name, **Parvani Ramsekhar** (LN human female wizard 6), but not her destination. A local crew followed her ship, the *Marid's Whisper*, from port, hoping to make easy prey of it, but limped back to Ollo when the scholar, who turned out to be a quite capable wizard, set their ship aflame. They did find out where the expedition was headed, though—the mouth of the Greenscale River.

This left little doubt that the expedition's goal was the Lake of Scales, making it the latest of several attempts to explore the Ghol-Gan ruins at the river's dinosaur-infested headwater. An overgrown islet in the center of the queer, hourglass-shaped lake is said to be the resting place of ancient Ghol-Gan priests.

Ramsekhar's party has now been gone a month—perhaps it's worth finding out what she was after. And if she's run into trouble, she appeared to have no shortage of coin with which to reward a rescue.

**The Truth:** Rescuers arriving at the Lake of Scales find the *Marid's Whisper* at anchor, but no sign of the crew other than recently excavated ground along the shore near an ancient stela.

Seven other stelae, most partly buried, stand at the corners and waist of the lake's hourglass-shaped shoreline. Ramsekhar and her crew came to investigate the tombs but inadvertently punched their way into a pocket dimension created by the stelae. This breach persists, and creatures that come near any of the stelae become ensnared, snatched away to this hidden world. This pocket dimension spans about 2 miles in diameter and seems centered on the lake and stelae. Creatures can see a greater distance than this, but any attempts to move beyond this invisible barrier fail.

Ramsekhar inadvertently triggered the breach when she used a *scroll of move earth* to dig fortifications too close to a stela. Strong effects from another spell, or any comparably powerful focused release of magical energy near the same spot, would be enough for this rift to right itself.

Ramsekhar and one other survivor have held out in a makeshift fortification in the vine-covered Ghol-Gan tombs, which the cryptic Ghol-Gan writings suggest were used for their oracles and priests. But she has yet to discover a way home, and even if she does, the local megafauna stand in her way.



Ghol-Gan Stele



## MYSTERIES OF THE SHACKLES

**In Your Game:** The fauna of the Lake of Scales are very territorial, but careful PCs can steer the party clear of them using their Stealth or Handle Animal skills.

The Ghol-Gan tombs are inert, but approaching within 30 feet of any of the stelae activates the rift, pulling the character who activated it and anyone nearby into the mirror dimension.

A pack of megaraptors (CR 5 each; apply the giant and advanced templates to a deinonychus [Bestiary 84]) have claimed the area around the stelae. Other threats the PCs might face include gigantic insects, elasmosauruses in the lake's murky waters, and assassin vines (including one that Bala "tamed" to protect the tombs).

Parvani Ramsekhar and her colleague **Bala Maroti** (N human male druid 5) have barricaded themselves in the Ghol-Gan tombs on the islet; they're tired and somewhat unkempt but otherwise intact. Getting home will require comparing notes with Parvani, researching the Ghol-Gan carvings, and experimenting (while warding off dinosaur attacks). Any spell of 4th level or higher that can target the stelae or their immediate environment is potentially enough to reverse the effects of the breach, returning everyone back to the real lake shore. The key is to use a spell that releases a large amount of targeted energy, regardless of school. *Stoneshape* or *cone of cold* cast on a stela might work, for example, but *dimension door* or *summon monster IV* wouldn't. The stelae themselves are otherwise nigh-indestructible.

### YOHA'S GRAVEYARD

*I am determined to establish myself at this nameless isle northeast of the Devil's Arches, the better to strike against the freebooters. Here are game, water, even trees for masts. Best, a steep rise commands the cove; fortifying it is proving simple.*

*My crew, however, grumble that demons haunt the ziggurat at our backs. Brance Yoha doesn't sail with gutless children, I told them—usually an efficacious tack with sailors!—but they persisted. I've had a few of them flogged, to no avail.*

*Mere savage ruins, I tell them, and useful for our defense! But they fear them, fear the statue at the peak, which is nothing but a bloated spider—and poorly rendered, at that.*

*I'll teach them that it's I, not some rotting statue, who rules Yoha's Fist! (I rather like that name... just came up with it now. Genius!)*

—from the journal of Brance Yoha, privateer

**The Tale:** Seven decades ago, Absalom hired the headstrong Captain Brance Yoha, Pathfinder and Taldan navy veteran, as a privateer against the Free Captains.

Given the difficulties of resupply from Absalom, Yoha determined first to build a base in the Shackles from which he could wage his campaign. The captain decided to claim the once-abundant isle now known as Yoha's Graveyard,

dismissing his sailors' warnings about the imposing Ghol-Gan ziggurat dominating the harbor as dull superstition.

Exasperated by the crew's refusal to build against the ziggurat, forage far into the jungle, or harvest timber and pitch, Brance Yoha vented his spleen against his apparent rival—the bloated, spiderlike statue at the summit of the ziggurat.

He paid for his arrogance. When he toppled the statue, Yoha opened a portal that the Ghol-Gan priest-kings installed at the top of the ziggurat. Whatever came through is responsible for the terrifying mists that shroud the island to this day, and presumably the deaths of Yoha and his crew.

Yet somewhere, under the mists of Yoha's Graveyard, remains the portal itself, a valuable tool just sitting there for the taking.

**The Truth:** The *well of many worlds* is just a sea story; the reality is grimmer. The statue on the ziggurat depicts not a demon, as commonly thought, but Moxix, a thulgaunt qliphoth. Red mist poured from its pedestal when Yoha toppled it, enveloping him and rolling down the ziggurat to cover the island faster than his crew could flee.

In the mist, Yoha witnessed visions of vile dimensions beyond the Abyss, where the qliphoth had broken through into a sideways mirror of the demon realm. These visions transformed Yoha into a bodak; the mist turned his crew into ghosts.

The ghosts carry Moxix's delectation, an affliction that impels its victims toward cannibalism. The mists of the island carry the delectation, too, and those who linger here inevitably succumb. Fortunately, the toppled statue acts as a literal stopper if placed back on its pedestal, halting the mist, which ocean breezes will gradually clear.

**In Your Game:** Yoha's undead crew infest the rotting fortification of Yoha's Fist. Treat them as fiendish ghosts, but rather than ghoul fever, they transmit Moxix's delectation. The mists carry the affliction as well. Characters on the island must save against it once per day. Yoha himself is a bodak armed with a bloody scourge. If the PCs replace the statue on its pedestal, they're free to look for a more permanent way to seal it. Fortunately, Moxix cares nothing for this shrine.

#### MOXIX'S DELECTATION

**Type** disease, injury; **Save** Fortitude DC 15

**Onset** 1 day; **Frequency** 1/day

**Effect** 1d3 Con and 1d3 Wis damage; **Cure** 2 consecutive saves  
A humanoid afflicted with Moxix's delectation must attempt a new Will save each day. If the humanoid fails, it attacks and attempts to eat the weakest humanoid nearby. If the save is successful, it resists. A humanoid who dies or is killed while afflicted rises as a ghost at the next midnight. The save DC is Charisma-based.