



FOES OF FIN AND FEATHER

Pathfinder's Journal: The Treasure of Far Thallai 4 of 6

As I died on the mossy deck of the Drowningtide ship-fortress, an utterance registered at the brink of awareness. With a last spark of curiosity I worked to perceive it. Words, guttural and outraged, cut through the mental assault of the ghosts ranged around me.

It was Seagrave, bellowing. "Curse the mewling lifeless cowardly lot of you!"

In my fading bones I felt the heat of his fury. The ghostly mass reared back from it. Its enveloping wall of soul-stuff broke up. *It* became a *they*, reverting to distinct, individualized spirits of the drowned.

Solidity returned to me. Seizing on glimmers of strength, I pushed myself up to my knees.

Seagrave swung on a translucent rope, landing on the feasting table. He kicked, punched, and slashed with his

sword. The ghosts fell away from him, pushed not so much by the material force of his blows but by the steel of his will.

"You wish me to lie down and die with you? I will not!" His words struck them like a wall of surf. "I am Seagrave, and I will live!" Spittle flew from his mouth. "I will eat and drink and fight!"

I made it to my feet, Seagrave's wildness filling me with exultation. My own reasons for living—the protection of others, the joy of discovery, and justice grimly dealt—flooded my soul. The doubts instilled in me by ghostly assault—what the scholars would call a psychic attack—visibly fled my body, manifesting as motes of sooty energy.

The ghosts groaned in chorus. Seagrave's display gave heart to the others. Otondo's scything cutlass dispersed a trio of incorporeal sailors. Rira drove ghosts before her

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with arcing bolts of arcane force. They quavered at the weaving point of Aspodell's rapier.

As we rallied, a near-perceptible wave of enervation swept through our attackers. Their soul-forms dimmed and shrank. Their wailing dropped an octave, to congeal into pitiful sobbing. As a last few fainted ineffectually our way, their speaker, Geor Whalespotter, held out his arm in a gesture of truce.

"We meant only to embrace you," Whalespotter said, his voice now reduced to a wheeze.

"Take your embrace and shove it in the bilge," said Seagrave. He held his cutlass as if he wanted to use it some more.

"My adjutant speaks harshly, but overall I endorse the sentiment," I said. "If you typically attempt to keep your guests forever, it is little wonder you get so few of them."

The stump of Whalespotter's missing arm twitched. "We are not the only jailors here," he sulked.

"One day I'll cast off her yoke, as today we cast off yours," said Seagrave.

A change of subject seemed apt. "You promised to produce Twill Ninefingers," I said. "Bring him forth."

Geor's features lost another degree of sharpness. "I did not promise that, exactly."

"Where is he?"

"Not here."

"You deny that you paid the cyclops Megeus to take him into your custody?"

"That I do not deny. But we were cheated before our ghost-boat reached these shores."

"You tell your tale in dribs and drabs, drowned one."

"Harpies flew overhead, plucking him from our boat, when we were nearly home. They were gone before we could stop them. We were left with only this." Twill's kit of thieves' tools floated in the air before him. The leather case folded open, showing that one tool was missing—the one Rira had used to find our way here to Drowningtide.

"Your isle moves about," said Seagrave, as if it were an accusation.

"Indeed," answered Geor.

"You were here when the harpies got him?"

"No. Further south, near the Fever Sea."

"When did they take him?"

"Just last night."

Seagrave's grudging murmur indicated that he had run out of questions.

I took the kit from Geor. "A mystery remains. This whole island and everything on it—it's ghost stuff, just like you. As would be any locked door or chest. What need do you have of a lockbreaker?"

"I brought him here not for what he does, but for who he is." A blue tinge bathed Geor's ghost-form. "Twill Ninefingers is my brother."

"And you planned to bring him here and kill him?"

"When you express it so, it sounds cruel. What good have the realms of the living done him? At least then he would be here with me. I miss him."

The ghosts let us go without further interference. We rowed back to the boat in the silence of our own thoughts. Of all that we had seen on Drowningtide, it struck me that the most chilling was not the weird town or its dead inhabitants, but Geor's casual lack of concern for his brother's life. Such was the logic of ghosts.

Once aboard the *Aspidochelone*, we made our way to a wine cask in wordless agreement. We'd dulled ourselves before going there, and now we did it again, to forget.

Only after several cups were drained did I stir myself to speak. "Our quarry, Kered Firsk, is not called the Monster Captain for merely figurative reasons. He may well command, or have allied himself with, a nest of harpies. We know he wants Twill. If we fail to find him before Firsk makes his rendezvous with the nest, we've lost both trails."

"And with it, the Treasure of Far Thallai," said Seagrave.

"So, where does one find a harpy?"

"I've oft found them in my bed in the morning," said Aspodell, "mysteriously transformed from the lovely creatures they were the night before."

I had long ago learned that the best way to combat his woman-hating jests was to ignore them. "Seagrave?"

"I've seen harpies on Poison Coin and heard of 'em on Footless Isle and Clubber's Point. But I'm thinking it has to be Sarenvent. They've nested there for generations."

"And it's within flying distance of Drowningtide's likely location."

"That's my guess."

With dawn light on our sails we laid course for Sarenvent. I plotted two routes: a longer path that would circumnavigate many of the Shackle's more dangerous isles, and a more direct approach that held greater threat of unrelated trouble. On another day, caution might have won. But now we raced Kered Firsk and the *Slicer*, and could afford no tarrying. Assuming no interference from the fearsome residents of islands various, it would take eight hours to get there. From a small cloth bag that hung on my belt I took my weather predictor, a miniature ship of wood and cloth fashioned by a Sargavan artificer. Its sails shook, predicting strong winds ahead.

They came an hour later, pushing the ship through glassy water. The sun chased early clouds from the sky, turning the sea a brilliant cerulean. In the depths we saw disporting dolphins, fast-moving rays, and a great silvery mass of wahoos. The ship glided over the notorious wreck of the *Dusk Poacher*, whose crew still guarded its shattered hulls as barnacle-encrusted skeletons. A few hours into the journey, Seagrave shouted from the crow's nest: He'd spotted something huge with tentacles—perhaps a



giant squid or devilfish, maybe even a kraken—waiting in a narrow channel. We altered course to avoid it. The correction would cost us over an hour, a loss preferable to a confrontation with a monstrosity large enough to sink us.

Not long after, Seagrave, climbing down the rigging, spotted another obstacle ahead. He jumped down to the aft deck to pass me his spyglass. I scanned the horizon and saw nothing. He pushed the end of the glass down.

Below the surface surged an armada of the fish-people known colloquially as sea devils. I spied several variants among the fast-swimming horde. Most numerous were the common sort, boasting fishy, toothed jaws and blood-red fins that fanned from heads and limbs. Reptilian tails, also lavishly finned, jutted out from their hips. While swimming, they kept their legs tucked in tight, using the tails for propulsion and balance. Across their backs they had slung tridents and crossbows lashed together from lengths of bone. Among them swam dozens of sharks: I spotted makos, hammerheads, allmouths, and a quartet of great whites, easily twenty feet long. A specimen of a type I have never seen before dwarfed them all. Black as the ocean depths and fifty feet long, it opened jaws large enough to bite off the prow of a galleon.

Bizarrely, this massive shark, which I mentally dubbed the bigtooth, was caparisoned with an assortment of belts and harnesses. These accoutrements appeared from a distance to be made from seaweed and polished coral. They held in place a sort of carriage or howdah, in which sat a splendid party of exotically colored sea devil grandees. Their scales flared with the bright blues, golds, reds, and oranges of tropic fish. These alternated in variegated patterns that dazzled and confused the eye. The leaders' fins jutted out in an assortment of spines and projections. Concentrated around the head, they resembled the crowns and ruffs of peacocking kings. The creature occupying the howdah's highest, central seat—who for no good reason I took to be a female—had a face reminiscent of a scorpion fish. Others in her retinue glowered through visages like those of sharks or morays. I could also swear that I fleetingly glimpsed one that looked more elf than fish.

The sea devils swam roughly parallel to us, on the port side, heading south as we did.

Rira stood alert on the rail, trembling strangely, a long knife in each hand. In this reaction I sensed a story—which I would have no hope of drawing from her, now or later.

I called the crew to battle stations. Every sailor learns to fear sea devils, because they come at you with no ship to sink. A battery of fire-spitters does nothing against an underwater force. When the fish-people attack, they can simply proceed to board, climbing up your hull and over your rails. To hurl them overboard is simply to return them to their natal waters, allowing them to refresh themselves and then surge at you again.

"If Kered Firsk is the Monster Captain," asked Seagrave, "does that mean he commands sea devils, too?"

"I hope not." Every treatise on this fierce underwater people begins with their overweening hatred of all other beings. But if any human could convince the shark-riders he was their peer, it would be Firsk. Commanding would not be the right word, but I would not put an alliance past him.

When the riggers were in place, I ordered them to tack. Otondo relieved the helmsman. He responded to my signal to veer with a ferocious pull of the wheel. Groaning, the *Aspidochelone* obeyed, angling away from the shark flotilla. The winds favored us; within moments we were outpacing the sea devils by a speed of three to four knots. With Seagrave I dashed to the aft deck. Through the spyglass, they appeared as a dwindling collection of black dots beneath the surface. Then they seemed to speed up.

They were indeed giving chase. This did not prove they served Firsk; their intentions could easily be opportunistic. If they caught us, the question would be largely academic.

Then a frothing arose behind them, sending the tight swimming formation into disarray. Black tentacles lashed up into the air. They rose and fell, coming up each time curled around a squirming sea devil, who was then hurled into the far distance. It was a great squid—surely the one we'd adjusted our route to avoid. As I lost sight of them, the tentacled beast had wrapped itself around the bigtooth shark, hauling a third of its bulk above the waterline.

For hours afterwards we remained on uneasy watch for a return of the sea devil legion. Later, we had to duck down below the rails to avoid the spearing noses of a school of flying fish. This thankfully proved our sole remarkable incident as we closed the rest of the distance to our destination.

The isle of Sarenvent rose abruptly from the sea. Steep slopes covered with lush green vegetation converged on a central, bowl-shaped depression. Identifying it as a geographical anomaly, I called for Young Hallegg, the ship's artist, to sketch it. Where I knew the Shackles in general as the remnants of a sunken landmass, Sarenvent, on their periphery, showed all the traits of a volcanic island. Its central depression could be nothing other than the crater of an extinct volcano.

I spied a swift shape swoop down from the sky and past the crater's lip. It could only be a harpy, headed to its nest.

After gathering the four for a conference, I braced Seagrave on his knowledge of harpies. This would not be my first time encountering the beasts; during my days of early wandering, after the destruction of my cloister but before I came to the Shackles and adopted the pirate flag, I'd blundered into a nest of them. However, the prepared Pathfinder readies herself for local variation. "The harpies I recall captivated their prey with a song that pierces the soul. Should we expect the same from these?"

"Aye, ma'am. Or so go the tales."

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“Can we hope to negotiate with them?”

“They like pretty baubles,” he said.

“And thus will have plunder,” said Rira.

“Given the chance, you’ll get your loot,” I said, “but it’s Twill we’re here for.”

“If they don’t serve Kered Firsk, as you guess they might, Ninefingers is already a jumble of stripped bones,” said Seagrave. “What they covet more than wealth is the flesh of humans and their kin.”

Otondo licked his lips.

Seagrave paid him no heed. “Harpies favor meat that’s had a soul in it. They say they can taste the lingering tang of thoughts and dreams.”

“What rot!” spat Otondo. “It’s not the mind that makes the meal. Whether man or pig, the flavor’s in the roasting.”

The ogre saw my grimace and responded with a wink.

Ignoring the provocation, I continued. “I acknowledge that they may have taken Twill for the simple reasons you state. Still, we must chance it.”

“Their gold is reason enough to fight them,” said Rira.

“But if they’re holding him for Firsk, he’s paying them in the jewels and rich adornments they covet. Perhaps we can outbid him.”

“Why start with talking?” Otondo grumped. “If there’s to be stupid palavering, do it after we’ve crushed them, and they’re weak and begging.”

“The big one has a point,” said Aspodell. “Rudely stated, but salient.”

“You’ll be glad to hear that I agree. If we take the nest by stealth, we may be able to snatch Twill away without a fight.”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Otondo.

“But let’s not count on it. Harpies sense keenly and may sniff us long before we reach the summit.”

“We’ll smell ‘em afore they smell us,” said Seagrave.

“What does that mean?” asked Aspodell.

“Just you wait.”

“You mean there’s an odor *you* find offensive, Seagrave?”

An obscene gesture supplied Seagrave’s answer.

“That leaves the matter of the song,” I said. “They’ll try to steal your wills, forcing you to fight each other as they shriek and flap above the fray. I believe I can prevent this, by the magic of my sword and its geases upon you.”

Their expressions darkened, the glee with which they anticipated a scrap giving way to resentment of their enthrallment.

“Perhaps, Challys Argent, it would be better to be controlled by a harpy’s song,” said Rira.

“It wouldn’t be as much fun to skewer you while puppeted by some feathered hellspawn,” said Aspodell.

“But I’d delight in it anyhow.”

“It was of course indelicate of me to mention the matter at all,” I said. “But necessary.” We exchanged further plans, then prepared a boat. As usual, I left Old Hallegg in charge.

That the harpies might attack the ship while we sneaked onto their island was a danger we had little choice but to accept. Old Hallegg listened intently as I laid it out for him. His sharp-eyed son, the sketcher, would watch the isle from the crow’s nest, shouting an alert at the merest hint of aerial movement. A full complement of sailors were to vigilantly man the fire-throwers. These would be unscrewed from their brass mounts to permit free firing at sky-borne targets. They were to avoid damage to the sails and masts where possible, but to shoot down harpies at all costs. The man-eaters were fast, so the rest of the crew would keep harpoons ready to spear up at them as they dived down.



“Seagrave is surprisingly graceful.”



“No bright plumage can compensate for a harpy’s stink.”

The crew bid me a silent, anxious farewell as we clambered down into the boats. Again I was reminded of the bravery it took to sail aboard the *Aspidochelone*. Though I treated my sailors better than any captain of the Shackles, I also steered them into worse scrapes, for less money. They’d signed on fully aware of the diciest of propositions: When I fall, the adjutants will be freed and ready to vent their wrath. I was not the only one who had steeled herself for a terrible reckoning.

Otondo and Seagrave bent their considerable strength to fast rowing. If harpies spotted us on the boat, all our scheming would be for naught. As fliers, they’d have every advantage over us. We’d be unable to stand, much less swing a sword, while in the rowboat. They could grab us up one by one and take us off to be digested at leisure. We’d agreed that if they did spot us, that we’d jump overboard and take our chances, swimming either to the boat or on to Sarenvent, depending on which was closer. This eventuality would not be a happy one: they might have a harder time snatching us, but as the sea devil sighting showed, the sea held surprises equally carnivorous.

The task of keeping watch fell to me. Constantly compensating the angle of the spyglass against the motion of the rowboat, I kept the volcano mouth in view. Several times I thought our attack doomed, only to realize that the moving specks I saw were not harpies but ordinary seabirds.

Sarenvent offered us no real shore, only a treacherous slope covered with mangroves, white-barked palesaints, and a carpeting of grab creepers. We all climbed out of the boat, finding the soil dry, thin, and loose.

It slid out from under us, sending our boots slipping. We fought for balance; Otondo lost, tumbling into the water. He boiled up moments later, damp and fuming. Only by some miracle of restraint did he strangle the cries of outrage we could all see swelling in his throat. Still furious, he seized the boat and, with Seagrave’s unsteady help, shifted it onto the rock. It immediately slid; as we all grabbed at it, it became my turn to lose my footing. I winced as pain slowly manifested from the scraped skin of my left leg. Rira and Aspodell gathered stones while Seagrave and Otondo kept the boat in place.

I kept my spyglass trained on the island’s summit. A harpy emerged from the crater and proceeded to circle the island. In response to my hissed warning, the others flattened themselves against the slope. Several of the freshly gathered boulders bounced down to plop into the water.

Pressed against the rock, I couldn’t see where the harpy had gone. Only after five or so minutes did I slink out to scan the sky, to find no sign of it. It had either dived back into the crater—perhaps alerting its sisters to our presence—or flown off to a destination unknown. For all I could say, it was flapping its way to an appointed rendezvous with Kered Firsk.

Finally we stabilized the boat, building a cairn of rocks to hold it in place. We peered up the slope; from this angle, we could no longer see the summit. We’d chosen the spot that seemed to offer the best climb. Just how relative a measure that was now became apparent. We would ascend on foot, without the need for ropes. But by the time we reached the top, we’d be well fatigued. The longer we took, the greater the chance that the harpies would gird themselves to raid the ship. Our sole advantage lay in the density of the thinly rooted vegetation. It might shield us from airborne observation.

With all due urgency, we embarked on the climb. Hot winds buffeted us from the Fever Sea. It took only moments for sweat to drench us. The scent of our perspiration attracted biting flies. Scarlet centipedes crawled up our legs and tried to bite us with toxic mandibles. Thorny creepers and nettle ferns clawed our ankles.



“Let’s see to it,” said Aspodell, “that the next fool you set out to rescue lives in a nice city, and is perhaps held prisoner in a brothel.”

Aside from this witticism, the four made their way up without comment or complaint. At the end of their trek they would find enemies to slay, and perhaps good loot besides.

When we were within striking distance of the summit, we found a natural alcove in the slope, left by two parallel flows of ancient lava. We crowded ourselves into it, regathering breath and force for the battle to come. As soon as we were rested enough to fight, I signaled to Seagrave. With his usual awkward deftness he shinnied up to the crater’s edge. He held up a warning hand, then waved me to follow. Hugging tight to the rock, I made slower progress.

As I crouched by his side, I heard why he’d summoned me: the harpies were talking.

“The spider-god man said not to do it,” shrilled one voice, high and fluting.

“Whatever his powers, he’s just a human,” chirped another. “They’re all the same, when you taste what’s between the ribs.”

“He said guard this gristled old one, and we would get a dozen better in return. All soft and healthy and raised on sweetmeats. He said he would bring an emerald pendant, shiny as you please, and a hundred silver bracelets, and rings of electrum and platinum.”

“He’ll never know.”

The first speaker cawed in irritation: “I flew over that ship, and they are ready, with harpoons and magic. What if the spider-god man comes when we’re at it?”

“That happens later. We hunger now,” a third voice shrieked.

Having heard enough, I waved the others up. Rira stood and blasted lightning into the crater. It forked in two, striking a pair of harpies.

The kidnapers looked like human women, save for their flaring wings, talon-like hands and feet, and feathery patches on their arms and legs. The feathers were bright green and red, like parrots. Blazing yellow crests flared from their heads in place of hair. They each wore a modest fortune in jewelry, slung around their necks, encircling their wrists, or piercing their ears. Their cruel, distorted features flared in anger as they flew at us, swinging primitive morningstars.

Their smell reached us before they did, a wave of nauseating carrion stench. Even Seagrave faltered.

Otondo threw a weighted net of merfolk manufacture. It landed on two of the screeching bird-women, bending back their wings and sending them tumbling into the crater. As they struggled, he bashed another’s head with the side of his cutlass. The neck snapped audibly; he pivoted to spear another harpy behind him.

Aspodell leapt down, aiming the fire-thrower we’d confiscated back in Moonplum at the netted harpies. The blast set the net aflame, burning them to death.

Feathers filled my field of vision as a sinewy harpy clawed at my face. Siren Call slashed at her, forcing her back. She brought her morningstar down on me; I parried each strike with decreasing ease.

“They look to you,” the harpy skirled. “You lead them.” She opened her throat. A wrenching, high-pitched sound poured out of her. Her sisters, each raking or flapping at one of my adjutants, joined her in chorus. They rose into the sky, disengaging from their skirmishes.

One by one, my adjutants stiffened, expressions glazing over, as the hypnotic cry washed over them.

The sinewy harpy hovered nearby. “See, human? You lead no one and nothing.”

The others kept up the song. As it crescendoed, my four allies moved with jerky steps into a line.

“We will make them kill you. When the last of the flesh is off your bones, we’ll have them slay each other.”

Seagrave grabbed me, pulling me into the crater. The others formed a circle around me. They tottered my way, blades outstretched. The harpies slowed their approach, savoring their control. A wobbling laughter entered the harpies’ song. They landed in a tight circle around my adjutants, anxious to see the bloodshed close up. They pushed their singing faces close, as if hoping some of my blood might spray in.

I clutched Siren’s Call, mentally focusing on the power of its geases. The four crystals corresponding to each adjutant glowed but dimly.

“Enjoy your helplessness, pirates!” the senior harpy shrilled. “You will mourn inside, as we force you to your captain’s slow murder.”

Otondo fought their control, managing to shake his head.

The harpy’s face fell in confusion.

“You. Don’t. Force,” the ogre managed. “You. Allow.”

The song faltered. Otondo shuddered. The harpies shook off their bewilderment and resumed their cacophonous outcry. Otondo stiffened again, as did the others. The bird-women pressed in closer, putting aside the ogre’s disappointing cooperation in my coming demise.

He raised his great cutlass. Rira readied a spell. Aspodell placed himself for an ideal rapier blow. Seagrave readied a decapitating strike.

I clutched tight the hilt of my sword, reaffirming my superior hold over them. The heat of the crystals grew, then cooled, then spiked again. It shook in my hand, vibrating to the frequency of the harpies’ song. I felt the breaking of their mesmeric hold as a piercing surge, blazing through my palm, up into my neck and shoulder, and around the back of my skull.

My adjutants pivoted and fell upon the harpies. The first to fall died with surprised expressions still plastered on their faces. The rest tried to fly off, but were too closely gathered. They sang, but to no effect. Their slaughter came in a chaos of tangled wings.