PATHFINDER
Adventure Path™

SKULL & SHACKLES

ADVENTURE PATH · PART 5 OF 6

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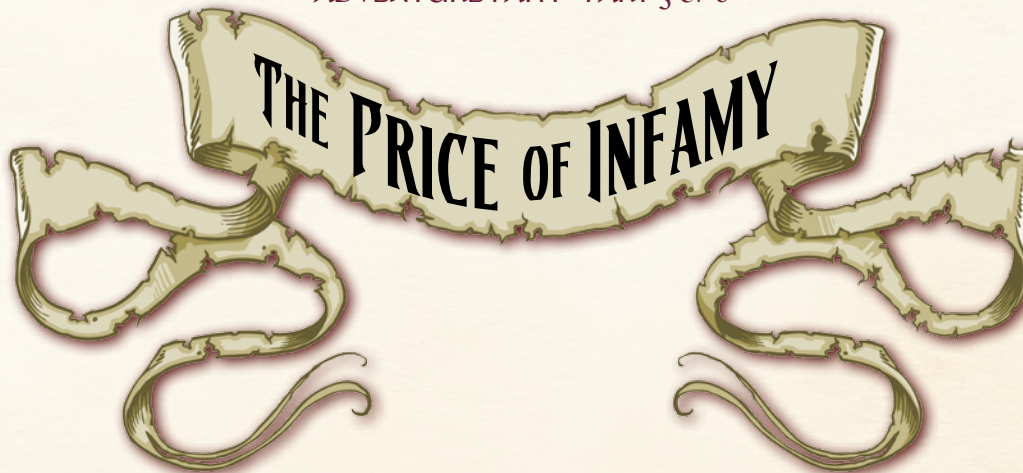
PATHFINDER

ADVENTURE PATH

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The Young Man and the Sea

I'll admit, last year at PaizoCon 2011 when it was announced that a pirate Adventure Path was on the schedule, I wasn't super-exited. I know, I know... to the lash with you! Keelhaul the swab! But wait—hear me out.

Raised on the Texas Gulf Coast, I had the opportunity to spend a good amount of time on the water. In some places it's not a particularly pretty body of water, but you can still easily get out there on a small boat and sail far enough away that land fades into the horizon, leaving you alone on the water with nothing but the sky above. I grew up going fishing with my dad on the Gulf. While most of that was just fishing from piers or wade fishing from the beach and whatnot, every now and then we'd go out and do some deep-sea fishing.

You'd get up before the sun and head down to the coast, get some strong coffee in you, and look for a good spot to start dropping lines in the water. Turns out, all the offshore oil rigs attract a lot of fish, so out in the Gulf you see boats camped out near them pulling up redfish, snapper, dolphin, wahoo, and other tasty sea fare. It was on one of these trips I spotted my first shark, and once witnessed a guy pulling one in that was bigger than me at the time. On one of the deep sea fishing trips, one of the other guys on the boat accidentally hooked an octopus. It was a fairly small one, with a head the size of a baseball, and before we threw it back they let me hold it. Its suckers felt weird on my skin, and it kept trying to crawl away, slithering its tentacles around my forearm. I even felt its beak drag against my open palm, and it was then that I announced I was done holding it. Back into the water it went.

As I got older, I fished less, but my connection with the Gulf of Mexico wasn't reduced. I merely transformed that relationship into other activities. My friend Kyle's family owned a 30-foot single-mast sailboat, a 16-foot Hobie catamaran, and a small Laser sailing dinghy. I'd never sailed before, but they taught me on the Laser before moving me

up to the catamaran. Kyle's dad taught me all the right terms (many of which I've since forgotten), and for that entire season it seemed like we were out on the water every day. The "big boat" named *Shi-Bui* (which they joked meant "stuck in the mud," because of its really long keel) had a fiberglass hull and deck, but the mast, rails, and other fixtures were wood. The summer between my junior and senior year of high school, Kyle and I sanded and refinished the deck, rails, and all the fixtures. While working on the boat, we slept in the cabin every night, the gentle waves rocking us to sleep. Each morning I'd climb up the mast like a monkey and stand on the spreaders looking out over the marina. Toward the end of that time, once we were mostly done with the work, we took it out a few times. The boat had a diesel engine, but the whole time I spent with that family and that boat, the engine never worked, so we'd have to raise the sail in the slip and push off, then strike the sail and coast into the slip when we'd return. This old salty sailor that lived on his boat in the marina was extremely impressed watching two skinny teenagers sail in and out of the slip without the use of an engine, and would tell us so on every occasion we'd run into him. We weren't going to spoil his pride in us by telling him we only did it because the engine was busted and we had no other choice.

That busted engine ended up being a major source of stress one weekend when we moved *Shi-Bui* from Sabine Pass to Kemah. The trip should've been short and sweet, but once we got fully out into the Gulf and started heading west, the wind died and we just bobbed there for hours. After night fell, I started seeing lights from the radio towers and realized we were drifting toward shore. Kyle and I stayed up all night doing what we could to stay on course and not end up beaching the boat. We took a lot of small tacks, rowed for a bit, and even jumped in and swam behind the boat pushing it (until a porpoise startled us into realizing that maybe it wasn't the best of ideas to be swimming a quarter-mile out into the Gulf at night.)

So, yeah, I've spent some time on the water. Strangely enough, though, I'd never been a huge fan of the pirate genre, and as a result I had mixed feelings about this Adventure Path during my previous months as a fan. But once I got here and started working on the Skull & Shackles AP, all of the emotions and memories about being on the water with the wind at my back came crashing back, and I fell in love.

It was weird. I liked pirate movies well enough, but I was never strongly connected to the genre. I guess I was having a disconnect relating my actual experiences on the water to a roleplaying setup, but all it took was immersing myself in what we were producing to rekindle my old romance with the sea.
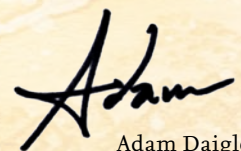
PLAYING ADMIRAL

A couple of weeks ago, Rob, Wes, and I took a few hours out of our busy workdays to play a game. We weren't

ON THE COVER

Druvalia Thrune, admiral of the Chelish Imperial Navy and commander of the Chelish armada sent to invade the Shackles, stands proud on this month's cover. Although the PCs will not face Druvalia and her armada until the final adventure, they'll get their first glimpse of the admiral and learn of her plans to annex the Shackles when they finally confront their old nemesis, Captain Barnabas Harrigan, in this month's Adventure Path installment, "The Price of Infamy."

just goofing off on company time: we were playtesting the fleet battle rules you'll find if you keep turning pages. We crowded into Wes's office and read through the rules James wrote, then collected a few stacks of the ship counters from the free *Skull & Shackles Player's Guide* (available online at **paizo.com**), and got to work building our fleets. Rob (or "The Admiral," as he's sometimes called these days) chose Tessa Fairwind as his fleet's admiral. (I think he has a crush on her.) I named my fleet's fearless, generic leader Admiral Soandso. We chose our ships and built our squadrons. Rob's fleet skewed more toward the PCs' side of things, and I built my fleet based on what the bad guys would be bringing to the battle. My fleet was weaker, but that's okay—you don't want to piss off The Admiral. Wes acted as an impartial observer and made notes based on our experiences and the outcomes of the battles.

Of course, as with any playtest, we rewound a few times, replayed a round or two, and made less than favorable decisions just to see how it would play out. While we were playing, I realized this would make a fine standalone game, and immediately wanted to find the constructible pirate ships I bought last year at Gen Con. I could even play this game with my friends who don't play RPGs but are fond of board games, since at its heart this system is a set of simple, streamlined rules that involves bits of chance and some strategy. So today I'll print up some ship counters to bring home, and see if my lady would enjoy a quick pirate fleet battle. Enjoy the fights you'll find in the adventure this time around, and good luck!

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