



## BECALMED

### Pathfinder's Journal: The Treasure of Far Thallai 5 of 6

The harpies had strewn an assortment of bones around their nest, mostly human, all well gnawed. As my adjutants stripped the monstrous corpses of their jewels, they tripped over rib cages and tumbled skulls from their resting places. Among the gruesome litter I spotted also the skeletons of elves and halflings. Not all of them had been adults. The large bones had been cracked open to get at the marrow. I wished one of the harpies would rise back to life, so I could send it right back to Hell.

A burlap sack, blotched with rusty stains, held a man-sized form. A dirty length of cord tied its mouth shut. I stepped my way through the pile of bones and slain harpies to tear loose the cord and open the sack.

My shoulders slumped in frustration—the pot-bellied, white-haired man inside appeared to be dead. Then came a flutter of movement. A blue tinge below the eyes

told the tale: He'd been dosed with a sedative. I waved Otondo over and dug into the supply pack he carried on his back. Though the healers back on the ship likely had a cheaper remedy, I uncorked a healing potion and dribbled its contents onto his lips. The man awoke with a start. Goggling in terror, he scuttled back, clutching at his hip and finding only an empty scabbard. His frantic effort to free his legs from the sack entangled him further.

I knelt down, placing a foot on the burlap to help him work himself free. Gently taking hold of his right arm, I pulled it clear of the sack. The forefinger was missing.

We'd found Twill Ninefingers.

"My name is Challys Argent," I said.

Comprehension eluded him; it would take him a few more moments to shake off the mind-dulling effects of the sleep draught. He held out his hands, as if afraid I was about

## BECALMED

to run him through. A shadow passed over my shoulder: it was Otondo. "What have I told you about looming?" I said. The ogre retreated, smirking. Twill's expression veered from abject dread to mere apprehension.

"We came here to rescue you," I told him.

"W-why?" he managed. Like the nest around him, he stank of carrion. A general pallor, coupled with inflammation of the eyelids, showed that he had not been properly fed in a good long time. Judging from his sagging cheeks, he'd begun his recent misadventures as a much portlier man.

"You are Twill Ninefingers, the famous lockbreaker?"

"Who wants to know?"

"As I said, I am Challys Argent, captain of the *Aspidochelone*."

"If you are she..." He swiveled his gaze to each of my adjutants in turn. "...then these are the Devil's Four!"

Otondo chortled at the term, which I had not heard before.

"If you have heard that much about them," I told Twill, "you are also aware that they now atone for their past crimes."

"No one believes that will last," he whispered.

"She does," said Aspodell.

I moved to block Twill's view of the others. "Whether you think they serve me or the devil, you'll have to admit we're preferable to a nest of ravening harpies."

"They weren't going to eat me."

"No, they were holding you for Kered Firsk. Who do you prefer to sail home with? Him or us?"

"Do not think me ungrateful." He finally made his way fully out of the sack, leaving it in a bundle at his feet. "But I'm not opening no treasure box for you."

"We don't have a treasure box."

"No, but the Monster Captain has the Treasure of Far Thallai, and you want it. I'm not getting mixed up in no set-to between the two of you. Just drop me someplace secluded, and you can tell whatever fool god you serve that you've added another good deed to your ledger book."

I held out my hand to him. "Perhaps we'll do exactly that. It's true I seek the treasure, but I won't force you to open anything. Did you hear the harpies say what they were supposed to do with you?"

He took my help, wobbling to his feet. "They were waiting for someone to arrive."

"Who?"

"Someone they didn't much like. There was a lot of squabbling over whether they'd go down to meet them, or would make them come up to the nest. They called them *nyoggot*, or some such. Any meaning in that?"

I scribbled the word in my small carry-diary, for later transcription into a logbook proper. "Harpy slang, I suppose, or a fragment of some long-lost tongue."

"Whatever a *nyoggot* is, the harpies didn't trust them. They argued about whether they should just fly me to the

destination themselves. But that wasn't what Firsk told them, and they feared him."

"Destination?"

"They mentioned Dead Slave Cove."

"That's on Raptor Island," Seagrave said. "South side."

"He'll slay me if he finds me with you," Twill said.

"You're worried that he'll do it anyway, once you've opened the Thallai case, or you wouldn't have fled Moonplum to escape him. You heard he was coming?"

Twill tottered to the edge of the volcanic crater, where he surveyed the formidable slope below. "A spice trader putting in at Moonplum said he'd heard that Firsk had the Thallai case but needed someone to open it. I needed to hear no more than that. Sooner or later word would get back to him I was living there."

"So you sought the protection of a cyclops?"

"Easy enough now to call me a fool. I thought even Kered Firsk might think twice before raiding an island teeming with one-eyes. And whatever Megeus's faults, I'd dealt with him in the past. It was a point of lunatic pride with him, how he'd never violated an oath. And he swore up and sideways he'd never betray me to Firsk."

"He didn't."

"But the ghosts..."

"They weren't working for Firsk. They wanted you for themselves."

"I don't understand."

"Your brother is now a grandee of Drowningtide. He misses you. And would like you at his side, forever."

"Geor?" Twill grimaced. "He never cared for me in life."

"Death exists, for some, as an eternity of pondering and regret. At any rate, they weren't delivering you to the harpies. The bird-bitches intercepted you."

Twill leaned against the crater's edge. "That explains it. They were all set to open me up and feast on my liver, till they saw my face and counted my fingers."

"Firsk has more than one set of monstrous allies scouring the Shackles for you. If we drop you off on a lonely atoll, how long do you think it will be before you're sniffed out by a sea drake, draugr, or something worse?"

The lockbreaker noticed an overlong fingernail and commenced to neatly clip it off with his teeth. "I see your point."

"And, in a more urgent vein, how long before more harpies return to this nest?"

Even in the best of health, no one would mistake Twill for a climber. We nearly lost him twice on the way down Sarenvent's slopes. Nonetheless we conveyed him to the boat, and from there to the *Aspidochelone*. After turning him over to the ministrations of the healers, Jeffret and Cold Bendani, I consulted with Old Hallegg.

"Any trouble?" I asked him.

"Shapes move beneath the waters, captain."



“Haul anchor and ready the sails.”

“Where to?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?”

I met with the Devil’s Four—a term that lodged itself in my head, despite its idiocy—in my quarters. “Where do we take him?” I asked. “At first I’d thought we hide him inland, at Neruma.”

Seagrave’s beard appeared to writhe with disapproval. “An overland journey? As tough on us as it would be on Firsk.”

“Right. Other suggestions?”

“We’re using Twill as bait, yes?” Rira asked.

“Well-protected bait.”

“Then north, to the edge of the Abendego storms?”

Seagrave twitched. “Firsk’s crew is as able there as we. If we’re to fight an even battle, let’s not do it on the skirts of a hurricane.”

“We take him to Port Peril, then,” said Aspodell. “Firsk doesn’t dare invade the very city of the pirate king. He’d have to come at us by stealth, alone or with a handful of crew. And when it comes to subtlety, my wager’s on us. By which I mean, me.”

I left a moment’s pause for objections, nodded my assent, and left the cabin to order a course for Port Peril.

A good wind cleared the sky and filled our sails. As the *Aspidochelone* bore down on the Terwa coast it grew stronger. The ship’s hull and decks sang in harmony as we cut the water, carried on the waves. Seagrave took the helm, belting out a ribald shanty about a ship besotted with a mermaid. I’d heard the song before, but never so many verses of it. The crew bellowed the chorus and left the verses to him. I joined him on the aft deck, not to better hear what rhymed with “weatherduck,” but to scan the horizon for signs of Kered Firsk’s vessel, the *Slicer*. From my eavesdropping on the harpies before we slew them, it seemed more than likely that they’d already alerted the Monster Captain to Twill’s presence. His dark ship could be waiting for us behind any island.

Twill stumped up beside me. The set of his brow suggested that he’d also mulled the chances of an ambush.

“You look haler already,” I said.

“Salt cod and hardtack. Now I remember why I promised myself never to sail again.”

“When we get to Port Peril, we’ll feed you better than that.”

“Your healers say you’re a Pathfinder.”

“That I am.”

“So you care more about discovering facts to put down in your little books than you do about the fates of others.”

“These goals are one and the same. The soul needs knowledge like the belly needs food.”

“There’s nary a lesson I’ve learned that I don’t wish I hadn’t,” he said, almost to himself. “How to break locks most of all. Things are put behind lock and key for a reason,

that’s what I’ve discovered. Best to leave secret doors secret and closed chests shut. Ain’t nothing I e’er opened wasn’t more trouble than good. It’s a curse, a punishment for curiosity and greed. For caring more about ill-got riches than my own kinfolk and comrades. They say I’m among the best in the world. Near as good as Vitta of Mendev, they say. And what’s it got me? Bad company and worse grub. What’s money? It runs through your fingers. What’s lore? A bunch of words. Dead thoughts about dead men.”

“Men prosper when they learn, and suffer when old truths are lost.”

“How many truths are my life worth?”

Before I could answer him, the ship lurched. I flew against the rail, catching myself just in time to avoid a nasty bang on the head. Twill landed face-first on the deck. From the corner of my eye I saw a sailor plummet from the rigging. A loud splash announced his fall into the sea. I looked to the anchor, wondering if some fool had let it drop. But it remained in place, drying and swinging, its chain still well secured.

The *Aspidochelone* continued to slow until finally we were becalmed altogether. The winds blew as powerfully as ever, rattling in the sails to no effect. It seemed like magic, so I called for Rira. In the meantime, men leaned over the port rail, looking for the fallen sailor. They cried his name. It was Feddick, a recent recruit who signed on with us at Hell Harbor, bringing with him a haunted look and a history of having been press-ganged.

We waited for him to break up through the waves. They ran fast, so he could easily have been pulled out ahead of our inexplicably halted ship. Old Hallegg took command of the detail, leaving me to deal with whatever had stopped us.

“What is this?” I asked Rira.

“I don’t like it,” she said.

“I’m not asking you to like it, I’m asking you to account for it.” This outburst I immediately regretted. An angry captain is a weak captain. I wondered what sly expression hid behind Rira’s mask.

She wove a looping pattern in the air with the fingers of her left hand while muttering a barely audible arcane formula. A faint hum followed her movements. It stopped when her hands did. “Whatever it is, it’s not a spell.”

“The work of an enchanted object?”

“Not that, either.”

“Battle stations!” I called. The crew broke from the search for Feddick to take up the cry. Soon they were arrayed with swords in hand, or behind ballistae or fire-throwers.

The waves broke into a white froth. Creatures bubbled up from below the waves. Fishy heads appeared, framed by fans of red gill-fins. Some were drably colored, others splendid. It was the sea devil war-party we’d outdistanced on our way to Sarenvent, back to greet us again. How had they stilled our ship, if not by magic?

## BECALMED

The most outrageously patterned of the sea folk, whom I took to be a queen or the like, rose up from the water, held aloft by two lesser subjects. Droplets of water fell from the tips of her face-spines, some of which extended to a yard in length. Her enormous shark and its aquatic howdah were nowhere in evidence. We'd last seen the sea devils as they fought off a squid-thing; presumably her mount and its apparatus were now in its gullet.

"Who leads you greasy airbreathers?" the sea devil queen called, her voice a distorted burble.

I swept to the rail. "I am Challys Argent, captain of the *Aspidochelone*."

"Your appearance disgusts me. The sound produced by your useless lungs and lips is like unto the coupling of clawfish. To address you is to demean myself. So I shall merely specify my name, which is Kless of milting Snasn, breeding Shalligilat, lineage Sho-ese. The remainder of this parley shall be undertaken by one of lesser worth, the herald Drid, of milting Lellij, of breeding unspecified."

As captain of a pirate vessel, I should have perhaps interrupted her insults and asserted my authority. As a Pathfinder, I'd won a priceless opportunity to observe the speech patterns of southern sea devil royalty, and to record them accurately for future posterity.

A mottled specimen, its headdress of fins thin and punctured, bobbed up in the waves ahead of Kless. "Though I am but a worm, I am still of the true race, and thus infinitely superior to all else who swim the waves, and, it need not be said, landwalking nonentities such as yourselves. Yet at the behest of the great and merciless Kless, I command you to obey."

This had gone far enough. "Show respect, sea-trash, or I'll boil the water around you with our battery of fire-throwers."

The drab fish-people darkened; the vivid ones grew even more so.

"Let me demonstrate," said the herald Drid.

The prow of the *Aspidochelone* rose into the air, seemingly pushing itself up out of the water. Sailors tumbled down from the fore deck to the aft. They dangled from the rigging. A few thudded to the deck. The prow then fell, abruptly released. A shockwave ran up through the ship and into our bones. Loosened nails jutted up through the planking. A fire-thrower fell from its housing to clatter and roll. Rira stopped it with her foot.

"Were it our desire, pathetic motes," continued Drid, "we could, with a shrug, tear your ship to shreds. This will become our desire should you make any untoward or hostile motion, or speak in such a way as to offend the supremacy of our race. Is our position clear, ape-spawn?"

"You have articulated it precisely," I replied, hands curled tightly around the rail. In the hilt of my cutlass, a crystal pulsed with cold blue light. Of the five stones, it was the one that held Rira's geas. Its sudden gleam meant

that she was fighting its hold over her. My adjutants always chose inopportune moments to test their magic bonds. This struck me as particularly ill-timed.

Drid gurgled on: "Be it also clear that the true race never acts out of mercy toward inferiors."

I caught Rira in a sidelong glance. Her position mimicked mine—spine straight, gripping the rail as if to strangle it, quaking with contained rage. Was her rebellion aimed at me? Was it even conscious? As fully intent as I should have been on Drid's demands, I couldn't help but consider her mask. Of its origins, Rira refused to speak. Its metal lips and flaring gills certainly bore a striking resemblance to the creatures below.

"If we do not destroy your ship," Drid said, "it is merely because we do not wish unnamed others to count themselves over-pleased by our cooperation."



**"It appears the lockbreaker has a sense of honor."**



"You mean Kered Firsk. If you hate all humans, why do—"

"Do not inquire of us!"

The queen flared her face-spines. In response, the prow of the ship again pushed itself up, though not quite so high or for as long as before. The crew let me see its collective fear. If it were only me in danger, I'd have restated the question. Instead I fell silent.

"Inutile landwalker Challys Argent, you will do as we command. We intuit that on board your laughable vessel quivers a contemptible bag of flesh known by your people as Twill Ninfefingers. For reasons we do not deign to enumerate, we demand this chattel. It will be surrendered to us forthwith. We will then depart, without feeding any of you to our sharks. Though you might be inclined to fall to your knees and weep with gratitude, we eschew such displays. Give us the Ninfefingers, and consider our business transacted."

At some point during the parley, Aspodell had eased up next to me. "They can't tell one inutile fleshbag from another. Tell them I'm Twill."

"I can't let you sacrifice yourself."

"Nor am I suggesting it. That queen's last meal will be the steel of my rapier."

"Even you can't take an entire sea devil war party."

Twill Ninfefingers appeared at my other elbow. "Nobody's going in my stead."

"Twill—"

"This is my doom. That's plain to see. I should never have opened that first lock. Anybody taking my place dies for nothing." He leapt up on the railing. "I'm Twill Ninfefingers! You want me?"

I grabbed for him, but Aspodell pulled me back.

"You got me, you rotten nyoggot!" Twill leapt from the rail into the sea below. Unprepared for this, the sea devils swam in a confused pattern. Ninfefingers hit the waves on the outer periphery of their formation. One of their great white sharks lunged at him. Sea devil soldiers leapt on it, grappling its slippery hide. It bucked and snapped at them. A soldier cried out in thrumming tones, the underside of his arm stripped to the ulna. Blood pooled in the water, sending the other sharks into frenzy. The sea devils fell on them, hauling on reins of seaweed, or prodding them with long poles. The ends of these devices glowed when they made contact, and seemed to exert a pacifying magic. One by one the sharks succumbed to docility. In the meantime, Drid and several other of the queen's attendants had plucked Twill from below the surface. They yanked his head up and

back as still others produced a drinking vessel fashioned from the ornate shell of some deep-sea mollusk. Holding his mouth open with their webbed claws, the attendants poured a saffron-colored liquid. It spilled across Twill's face and into the water. Having thus dosed him—undoubtedly with waterlung—they ducked his head down and out of sight. Still working to calm their sharks, the entire party disappeared into the depths.

The crew held its collective breath, waiting for the force holding our ship to release it. Though fresh gusts rattled the *Aspidochelone's* sails, it did not budge. Pressure built in the masts and booms; they groaned as if ready to crack.

"Lower the sails," I shouted. The crew rushed to seize the halyards.

A yell from the aft deck sent me running, to see Feddick's upper half bobbing in the waves below.

"Shark bite?" I asked Seagrave.



***"Never argue with a sea devil—especially not a queen."***

"If so, it's no shark I've ever seen. See how the bite is shaped like a narrow V?"

I nodded, though in truth I could make out nothing more precise than a gruesome smudge of severed entrails.

"What did this was more beak than sharky jaw," Seagrave said.

"Giant squid? Kraken?"

"Or the like."

A dark mass snaked under the surface of the water. Feddick's remains jerked and were gone, pulled below.

I ordered Old Hallegg to fetch our own supply of waterlung. We'd liberated several doses from Megeus the cyclops, and so had draughts to spare. When he came back with the chest containing the potions, he said, "You wouldn't be going yourself, would you, captain?"

Otondo growled over Old Hallegg's shoulder. "We don't need you talkin' 'er out of things. Do we?"

Hallegg withdrew a step.

"I need one to come with me," I said.

Rira stepped forward. "It should be me."

When Hallegg offered her the potion chest, she waved it away. In response to my questioning stance, she tapped her mask. "What do you think this does? Who do you think put it on me?" Before I could turn these rhetorical questions into an occasion for further inquiry, she plucked up one of the specialized crossbowlike weapons the crew sometimes used for spearfishing, strode to the rail, and jumped over. I quaffed the waterlung potion and followed her, doffing superfluous items of clothing along the way. An instant of vertiginous suspension followed. Then I angled my body to mimic a knife, and in this shape sliced down through the waves. I rode the force of my dive until it dissipated, then curled around to view the underside of the ship from a vantage dozens of yards below the surface.

An enormous creature, half fish, half octopus, dangled below the ship, seven spined tentacles wrapped around our rudder and much of the hull's aft section. Its skin, mottled and fibrous, was the color of a blood blister. Bony projections protected its glowing cerulean eyes. Muscular, elongated flippers extended past its vestigial tail. These fluttered in tandem with a prominent anterior dorsal fin, holding our ship in place. They would have worked harder still when the sails were up. My memory flashed to a page from a long-destroyed copy of the second folio of the *Abyssal Synoptic*. The author, Praligeus, called it a devilfish. He identified the term as a misnomer, however: It was an escapee not from one of the layers of Hell, but from the aquatic regions of the demon-haunted Abyss. Praligeus also claimed for it the rudiments of a mind. But then, he also assured readers that it grew no larger than a horse. This specimen was nearly as large as my ship.

If it was capable of thought, it could have received and carried out instructions from its sea devil masters—or it

could choose to disobey them. However, I had no means of divining what its instructions were, or plumbing the extent of its loyalties. Nor could I communicate with it while underwater. We would have to dislodge it the simple way.

Rira, a string of bubbles pouring from her mask, directed a barrage of complex gestures at me. She swam toward the devilfish, enacting a spell. A pulsing, white energy rippled from her fingertips. They traveled outwards in a series of expanding circles. As each ripple struck me, my muscles spasmed in agony.

She was throwing lightning bolts beneath the water. Rira had been struck by the force of her own spell, and seemed worse off than I. She floated in the water as if stunned.

The first of the white circles reached the devilfish. Energy danced along its rugose flesh. Instantly, it released the ship's hull. It collapsed into a defensive ball, with its tentacles wrapped protectively around its body. Each time an electric ripple struck it, the beast shuddered. As badly as it had hurt us, Rira's spell had clearly done greater harm to the creature.

It remained in its ball as the last ripple washed over it. With sluggish movements, Rira seized the crossbow she'd slung across her back. I swam forth, cutlass ready.

As I neared it, the first of Rira's projectiles struck the creature. Guided by enchantment, the spearlike bolt homed in on a spot between tentacles, lodging in the devilfish's eye. The behemoth uncurled itself from its ball, emitting a black liquid. This billowed out to fill a sizeable volume of water centered around the nexus of its tentacles—what would have been its nose, had it been configured like an ordinary fish.

I reversed course too late; clouds of the dark substance washed over me. As soon as it made contact with my flesh, my gut erupted with the urge to vomit. Fighting this with all my will, I swam back, out of the cloud. Concentrating my strength into my legs, I dove behind and beneath the devilfish. Above me Rira had done much the same, avoiding the cloud. A succession of bolts already pierced the thing's spine. I stabbed my cutlass into the muscle fixing its flipper to its body.

The creature rolled over, grazing me with its half-severed flipper. It skittered through its inky cloud and made a foolish attempt at flight. In the panicked effort, it caused its flipper to detach entirely from its side. Only a threaded cord of nerves connected the creature to it. Gouts of blood blackened the water. The devilfish pitched onto its side and bobbed to the surface.

Rira and I clambered onto the ship to the cheers of the crew. She leaned against the rail. I lay on the deck, gasping. My next command was issued flat on my back and heedless of my dignity.

We would make speed to Dead Slave Cove, and a decisive reckoning with Kered Firsk.