



## DEAD SLAVE COVE

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

On a bench near the helm, Seagrave unrolled a sea chart. It would be a race to Dead Slave Cove, where the sea devils were to rendezvous with Kered Firsk. They had departed to the west, meaning that they would likely round the large isle of Motaku along its north face. From there we mapped their most probable route. It would take them deep into the Shackles, traveling west till they reached Shark Island. Twenty miles, give or take, separated its westernmost point from Raptor Island, where our destination lay.

Our ship would make its best time on the open waters, where our course would plot straight. No channels, shallow or narrow, would impede us. We faced a somewhat unfavorable wind—south-southwest where south-southeast would have served us best—but with able tacking we had a chance of catching up to them. Like infantry on land, a party

of swimming fish-people would be limited to the speed of the slowest among them: here, Queen Kless and her retinue.

The ship's priests struck up a prayer to the god of sea and storms. They did not seek his intercession; to beg Gozreh's aid is to risk his caprice. Instead they proclaimed merely their respect, and their hope that he would intercede neither for us nor for the fish-people, instead leaving air-and-water-breathers alike to their own devices. I added my own silent entreaty, to Shelyn the muse.

As if in response, the wind shifted a few degrees in our favor. The sky stayed clear and winds strong. The sun dipped below the horizon, replaced by a lantern moon. His spyglass on the stars, Seagrave kept us on course.

The *Aspidochelone* reached Raptor Island in the late afternoon. Dead Slave Cove jutted into its south shore. In the hope of surprising whoever we found there, we swung

## DEAD SLAVE COVE



wide and came in from the west side. We dropped anchor alongside a spit of land that concealed us from the cove. I was about to order a scouting party to row out there when the hissing of thunder lizards alerted us to the presence of Kered Firsk's crew.

Atop a grassy ridge, a trio of bipedal, human-sized beasts, part lizard, part bird, stared down a motley foraging party. The animals, which lent Raptor Island its name, swiveled their long necks at the intruders, baring rows of razor teeth. One balanced on a single leg, leaving the other free to brandish its scythe-shaped claws. The pirate group consisted of a hyena-headed humanoid, an olive-skinned bruiser with obvious orc ancestry, and a pale green goggle-eyed humanoid of uncertain provenance, clad in a long coat and tricorne hat. The hyena-man fired a crossbow. The bolt flew between the thunder lizards, which leapt at the pirates, who in turn pivoted and fled. The raptors landed on the humanoid and set to tearing him apart. His comrades left him without looking back, tumbling down the slope toward the cove.

There was no question to whose ship they belonged. Kered Firsk was named the Monster Captain because he crewed the *Slicer* with humanoids of exotic extraction, from kobolds to tengus. Half of his sailors fit this description; the other fifty percent were humans, or members of the common races. Their monstrousness lay in their deeds.

We gave the survivors of the raptor encounter time to return to their ship. Then Rira took to a boat, with the sailors Jumlet and Shoutt along for the rowing. This was our stealth boat, painted blue and chased with white, to blend in with the waves. I'd learned the trick from Seagrave, who used it against me when I first hunted him. It worked because watchers in a crow's nest tended to scan the horizon, paying only glancing heed to objects nearer their ships.

Lying low in the boat, the three headed out to a position past the spit, where they could see the *Slicer*.

Little more than an hour later, Seagrave, his spyglass trained on Rira's position, cried out. A shower of magical energy blossomed in the sky. She'd loosed her signal: the sea devils had come. By the time we'd unfurled our sails, the boat was back.

"They're handing over Twill?" I asked Rira, as she clambered over the rail.

"I detected a snag in the negotiations."

Either the sea devils had decided to hold out for more, or Firsk had insulted their arrogant sensibilities. Whichever explanation held, it bought us the time we needed. I ordered the crew to battle stations. The portside fire-throwers rattled in their heavy brass casings as the crew wheeled them to starboard.

Seagrave executed our planned maneuver: We would sail by fast and close, concentrating fire on their masts. Along with the wand-blasts, we would send ordinary fire in the form of blazing ballista bolts. These we would train on the

*Slicer's* hull, most particularly the stern, where we hoped to damage the rudder. A successful fusillade would cripple the *Slicer's* ability to maneuver before it even raised anchor. We would then control the pace and angle of subsequent sallies.

With the Treasure of Thallai aboard Firsk's ship, the use of fire gave me some pause. As he hadn't taken custody of Twill, I could safely assume that the treasure remained safely in its protective cask. In this hid an advantage I prayed the Monster Captain would not suss out: He would try to sink the *Aspidochelone*. To protect the treasure, I could not let the same happen to the *Slicer*.

Firsk's ship came into view: a low-slung sloop of purest darkwood. A sculpted wooden spider affixed itself to the prow. In its spearing legs, it held the figure of its prey, a gutted mermaid. With every curve, its design declared a speed superior to ours. Its slim masts wouldn't withstand direct hits, but at the same time made small targets.

The fish-people, gathered in the water between ships, were the first to spot us. A sea devil sentry blew alarms from a conch horn. Shouts arose from the *Slicer* as its crew scurried into position. On the aft deck, I beheld a tall figure of skeletal frame. As I did, he held a spyglass. This was Kered Firsk, spotting me as I spotted him.

Beside him cowered Twill Ninefingers. Whatever the nature of the initial delay, the sea devils had evidently completed the handover. Perhaps the fish-people would declare their interest in the matter done, and let the ships fight it out.

As soon as we were within thrower range, Rira shouted the command to fire. Overlapping bursts of flame appeared above the *Slicer's* deck. As we raced closer, the ballista crew loosed their missiles. Some fell short; others lodged in the enemy hull. A black-garbed sailor fell from the *Slicer's* rigging, his clothing aflame. But when the fire dissipated, the enemy ship stood largely unharmed. The wrappings on our ballista heads burned out. Neither masts nor rigging nor sails had been touched by the flame, arcane or natural.

"He's warded his ship against fire!" Rira called.

This I hadn't bargained for. The *Aspidochelone* enjoyed no such defense. Our throwers were useless; his could puncture our hull and send us to the deep.

As we completed our ineffectual pass, the *Slicer* crew hauled anchor and loosed their sails.

I ordered Seagrave to execute a turn, positioning the ship for a second pass.

Rira bounded up for revised instructions.

"Aim throwers at the crew," I told her. "If we can't burn his ship, we can certainly singe his crew. As for the ballistae, leave off the flaming rags and aim for the rigging. A lucky shot might bring something down."

"Aye, Captain."

The *Slicer* made good on its name, cutting through the water at a startling rate. Protection against fire was not the



only enchantment on Firsk's ship. Despite Seagrave's best attempt to angle away at the last moment, their helmsman outmaneuvered us. We passed the other side to side, with the advantage going to the fireproof *Slicer*. Motes of flame appeared above our heads. They spread out, consuming sail and mast. Flaming shards rained down.

Ballista bolts shot from our deck and at it. One such missile struck Young Hallegg a blow. Though glancing, it carried sufficient force to send him sprawling into the opposite rail.

The pass completed, our water-crews grabbed at bucket-lines. These, fixed by pulley mechanisms, upended containers arranged atop the masts. Seawater rained down, dousing the consuming flames.

I surveyed the damage: the best that could be said was that it was not as devastating as I first imagined.

The sea between the two ships frothed: the sea devils were coming for us.

Rira ordered the fire-throwers trained on the advancing wave.

I ran to her side. "Don't shoot until some have already boarded."

"Have you gone mad?"

"You'll see," I said.

She nodded, as if realizing what a boarding by the fish-people portended.

The crew girded themselves for a shipboard fight. Within moments, the first of the monsters were up over the railing. Cutlass met trident as the mass melee was joined.

Otondo dove from the rigging into a mass of sea devils. The first few he killed merely by landing on them. The next rank he hacked through with rhythmic cleaves of his great cutlass. Aspodell kept a quartet of fish-men at bay on the railing, until each in turn fell away from the hull, clutching slashed throats.

The black bulk of the *Slicer* barreled at us.

"He's coming alongside for boarding!" Seagrave yelled.

"That's the plan!" I responded. The sea devils were our shields against further fire from the *Slicer's* throwers. Even Kered Firsk didn't dare antagonize them by opening up with Queen Kless's soldiers on board. For the first time I found myself

grateful for the legendary spite of the sea devils, which had tempted them to this mistake.

The *Slicer* swung alongside, ready to board. Our fire-thrower crews got off a last fusillade. Flames enveloped the line of men along the enemy rail. Ballista bolts thudded into the *Slicer's* hull and masts, filling the air with wooden shrapnel. A new row of monster sailors sprung up to replace those the fire-throwers had burned. They dropped planks to bridge the two ships, or swung across on ropes. Seagrave barreled in, bashing at them as they tried to cross. A hunched goblin pirate came up from behind him to jab at his kidneys. He pivoted, smashed the creature with his gut, then grabbed him and snapped his neck.

A booming voice called my name. Kered Firsk ran the length of my deck, scattering his and my crews before him. A red headband wrapped around his temples, just above his flaring ears, leaving exposed a nearly hairless scalp dotted with black, cancerous moles. In its center appeared an embroidered mouth supported by spider's legs—the emblem of the mad god Rovagug. Only a hide vest adorned his torso. Below the waist, black silk pantaloons puffed over a pair of high black boots. He carried a bulbous black cudgel, had slung a crossbow over his back, and kept an array of butcher's knives in the various pockets of his vest. These last were more implements of torture than of combat.

Lines of catgut stitching traversed his exposed skin, from the cheeks of his face to the chiseled muscles of his lower abdomen. In keeping with certain rites of Rovagug, he had sliced open his own flesh and allowed it to be sewn hideously back together. A few irregular patches of skin either had died and been permitted to remain as cured sections of human hide, or had been transplanted from some other being entirely. On his arm bristled a hairy patch that might have originated on a giant caterpillar or tarantula. From his shoulder sprouted a patch of canine fur. The Monster Captain should long ago have fallen prey to



**"The Monster Captain's epithet is well deserved."**

## DEAD SLAVE COVE

fatal infections—that he had not was surely a reward from his god for his nihilistic exertions.

Around him a smoky aura radiated, shooting out writhing protrusions recalling the hair of a spider's leg. He clawed his way through my crew, breaking limbs and smashing in skulls. Wherever they tried to strike at him, the aura gathered, turning away blows and blunting blades.

He bellowed my name and swung at me with his club. I parried, the power of his strike vibrating through the steel of Siren Call and into my bones.

Firsk's spidery aura flared. "I had no quarrel with you, woman, until you made one with me!"

His club grazed my elbow, shooting needles of pain up my arm. "You've been on my list for a while," I said, through gritted teeth. "When I heard you had the Treasure of Thallai—"

"So what they say about you is wrong." He pushed into me, keeping me on the defensive.

"How so?" I labored to defuse his strikes.

"It's greed that drives you, too."

"True, but not the kind you'd understand."

An enemy crewman swung by on a charred rope. I kicked him into Firsk, then grabbed the rope myself. It carried me toward the foredeck. I dropped onto a bugbear, slashing his forearm open to the bone. Kered Firsk pursued, once more tearing through his crew and mine.

Rira leaned over the rail, attention fixed on the sea devils remaining in the water below. A ball of flame appeared, then plunged into the water they swam in. For yards around this central point, the ocean boiled. Fish-people shrieked and vanished beneath the bubbling surface. Sharks went belly-up. Rira had carefully placed her fireball, so that it touched down mere feet from Kless, the sea devil queen. The heat rendered her ostentatious face-spines translucent. They drooped and slipped off her head entirely, taking with them great chunks of overcooked fish flesh. Half-poached fish-people swam clear of the boiling circle, only to expire in horror as their muscles came away from the bone in white flakes. Steam rose from this swirl of death, wafting over the ship as the tantalizing smell of a seafood feast.

Then Kered Firsk was upon me, striking a blow to my shoulder that sent me stumbling into Shoutt. Firsk aimed a blow at me and hit the crewman instead, audibly cracking his skull.

I tried to catch Firsk while he was off balance, but he recovered too quickly and retaliated with a surprise blow. The force of it threw me against the foremast.

Firsk barked like a hyena. "You're no match for me, woman."

"I only need to hit you once."

"Ridiculous! No one can down me in a single blow. Not the mightiest warrior alive—and certainly not you!"

"The others said the same." I ducked an overhead swipe. His club smashed through a length of sturdy rail.

"Give me a free hit," I said, "and prove me wrong."

His gaze traveled to the hilt of Siren Call. I fainted; he shrank back.

Sensing movement behind me, I pivoted to avoid the dagger of a backstabbing dark elf. He jerked and fell into me, one of Aspodell's throwing knives buried between his shoulder blades. His leg tangled between mine. As I stepped free, Firsk smashed my sword-hand.

Siren Call arced from my grasp.

Smiling, Firsk clutched my throat. "That was the weapon that would fell me? That would enslave me, as it did the others?"

As one, my adjutants stiffened and stopped fighting. Firsk's men stepped back from them, either instinctively aware of what had happened, or simply grateful for the respite. Rira laughed. Seagrave straightened his hat. Otondo licked his lips.

Their pause in the fighting rippled outward, until all the blades on the ship were stilled. The remaining sea devils took the opportunity to slip over the rails and vanish beneath the waves.

Firsk addressed them. "She can't control you when her sword's over there, can she?"

"No," answered Rira. "She cannot."

"What do you bid, then, for the right to slay your captor?"

I thought about the knife in my boot, and how little chance I had with it.

"I can lead you to a buried cache of fifty thousand gold sails," said Rira.

"My best cache is twice that," Seagrave bid.

"I'll serve you for a year and a day," said Otondo, "and from my cutlass you'll earn more than either of them can give."

"Attractive offers all," Firsk said. "But I'm still inclined to do her myself."

Young Hallegg leaped at him from the rigging. Firsk downed him with his off-elbow, jabbed into his larynx. He released me in order to casually kick at him, smiling at the sound of a cracking rib.

"There's one offer you haven't heard." Aspodell had eased his way through the halted scrum, and now stood a few feet behind us. At his side, he held Siren Call. Crew from both ships stepped out of his way. Through his fingers, I could see that the light in the crystals had gone dead—the sign that its geases were suspended.

"You'll give me the sword?" Firsk asked.

"Yes and no."

Aspodell winked and threw it to me. Before Firsk raised his club, Siren Call was back in my hand. Before he could lower it, I'd buried my weapon in his breastbone. Pale blue energy surrounded it as I pushed it deeper. Firsk went limp. His falling weight freed him from the blade.



As I wiped Firsk's blood from it, the enthrallment crystals in the hilt blazed back to life. The four grimaced in discomfort as their geases took hold again.

Deprived of their captain, the crew of the *Slicer* surrendered. I let them leave in its boats. The ship itself we would sail to Port Peril, where we would sell it, dividing the proceeds in accordance with our charter.

Twill Ninefingers was borne on a stretcher from the *Slicer* to the deck of the *Aspidochelone*. On the right side of his face, patches of bone showed through a mess of black, burned flesh. A shard of wood, most likely a piece of railing shrapnel, protruded from his chest cavity. Remarkably, he clung to consciousness still. His hand reached out in a futile attempt to clasp my wrist.

"Captain Argent," he wheezed.

"Don't try to talk."

I directed a searching gaze to the healers, who replied with empty-handed gestures. There was no need to ask further: they'd used up all our healing draughts, and exhausted for the moment their entreaties to the gods.

"I told you my doom was coming," Twill coughed. "Sensed it for months now."

"Let's have none of that."

"I won't last the hour. I won't be able to open Firsk's treasure after all."

"Never mind that."

"You don't owe me nothing, but I ask a favor anyways." He paused to choke on blood. "Throw me in the ocean."

"Of course we'll bury you at sea."

"No, throw me in the water now. That way I'll not die from bleeding."

I began to ask, but then understood.

"I'll drown instead..."

"...and go to meet your brother, on the island of ghosts. Twill, hear me out. Is Drowningtide truly where you wish to spend eternity?"

His fingers closed over my sleeve. "Better than the likely alternatives. Leastways I got a brother there." At this he lapsed into the sleep that precedes death, his chest barely rising and falling.

"Otondo!" I cried.

He limped to my side, a long gash still untended on his upper thigh.

"Throw this man overboard," I commanded.

"With pleasure."

The ogre tossed Twill over his shoulder, took him to the rail, and subjected him to an undignified dumping. The inevitable splash soon followed. How long would it take, I wondered, for his soul essence to migrate to Drowningtide? I envisioned him on the deck of that eerie ship-fortress, raising a goblet with his brother Geor. They would have until the end of time to bridge the gap that separated them in life.

Seagrave dropped a brass cask, chased in gold and silver, at my feet. Pewter suns, moons, and stars dotted its face. "So it's all for naught, then."

"Why would you say that?"

"We were after Twill, as Firsk was, to open this outer shell and gain the Treasure of Far Thallai. The entrance to a fabulous realm, where maidens fair cry out from desire unslaked. Where nectars beyond earthly intoxication wait for the swelling. Where gems and rubies lie about for the scooping."

"About that, Seagrave..."

The others gathered around. Aspodell pressed a rag to his forehead, staunching a wound. Otondo held his great cutlass as if ready to slash the cask open. Rira pretended that she wasn't studying it.

"With the lockbreaker gone, we can't open it, can we, ma'am?" Seagrave asked. "It's so much jetsam."

"I said that only Twill could force it open," I said. "He was Firsk's only way to get at the treasure. Which is why we sought him, because he would lead us to the Monster Captain. As indeed he did. But if, in another life as a cloistered scholar, I studied plans for the cask's design, I might happen to know the combination, and not need to force it at all."

"You revel in the withholding of information," Rira said.

I squatted beside the cask. "I admit to a wide range of flaws, but would argue this is one of the charming ones."

In fact, it took me several attempts to remember the exact sequence. Each of its celestial bodies was mounted on an interior peg and could be moved either vertically or horizontally. With a sequence of five movements, the lock would unlatch and the lid pop open. This, under the near-palpable stares of my adjutants, I finally achieved. "And here it is," I said.

Inside the cask lay a scroll, browned with age. Dampness had fused its pages together—though with expert work, these could be prised apart.

"That's the incantation?" Rira asked. "That takes us to Thallai?"

"Again, in the interest of keeping your motivations keen, I have failed to cure you of a misapprehension. This is a poem."

Otondo and Seagrave uttered contrasting obscenities.

"This is *Thallai*, an epic once thought lost to the ages, and known now only in this single copy. Written in the days of legend, by Zeneus of Azlant."

"Zeneus," Aspodell mused. "I believe my tutor mentioned him, when I was a boy."

"And what did you learn?"

"That I was more interested in the pain thresholds of various milkmaids."

I returned the document to its cask and pressed shut the lock. "Yes, it transports you to a land of beauty, opulence, and eroticism. In your mind's eye, as you hear it recited. Through ages past scholars have spoken of it as the greatest

triumph of Azlanti letters. To have lost this forever—as surely would have happened if Kered Firsk opened a cask and found only poetry inside—would have been our age’s greatest tragedy. He would have torn it to shreds.”

Aspodell walked away. Otondo and Seagrave ran out of common swear words, and switched, respectively, to the languages of giants and dwarves.

“We shall convey this to a college in Rahadoum, so it may be safely copied, and then dispersed to all the peoples of Golarion. Lest you consider mischief—heaving it overboard—I hereby charge you, by the power of your geases, to protect *Thallai* and its cask with full and unstinting diligence.”

A strange sound rang from Rira’s mask. After a moment, I recognized it as laughter.

At my hip, I felt a stab of heat. The fifth and final crystal in Siren Call’s hilt flickered to full illumination. I made quick progress to Kered Firsk’s body, which some sailor had naively covered. With the tip of my scabbard, I pulled the blanket from him.

Kered Firsk emerged grimacing from the sword’s transformative sleep. Like four others before this, an interval of confusion and spluttering attended this awakening. When he calmed himself, I bid him rise.

He snarled. “I take no orders from you, woman. No matter how trivial.”

“Incorrect.” I tightened my grip on Siren Call’s hilt, concentrating on the fifth crystal. Kered Firsk trembled, as if shocked. He stood, crying out in disbelief as his body betrayed him.

“You’ve made a puppet of me!”

“In some senses, yes. Yet some portions of your free will you’ll retain, so that you can best serve life, and justice, and knowledge—the very interests you’ve fought all your life to destroy. Without inaccuracy, you may use the word cruel. I would instead call it a deserved irony.”

Spittle flew from his lips. “I’ll slit you stem to stern. I’ll dance on your corpse.”

“Perhaps some day you will. Provided one of the others doesn’t beat you to it.” I gestured to his four colleagues, who huddled in colloquy on the aft deck. “Until then, you’ll strive to balance all the destruction you’ve sown. Summon what patience you have,

Kered Firsk. Over the next days you’ll need it, as I explain the terms of the geas. You can save yourself much useless effort by committing them to heart. Rest assured that your predecessors have thoroughly tested its provisions, resulting in a comprehensive list of improvements and codicils.”

Kered’s acceptance of these facts was less than instantaneous. As I let him ramble through the expected litany of imprecations, my attention drifted to the other four. They stood too far away to hear, but as I have already mentioned, I read lips. Rira was immune, of course, and Otondo gave me only a view of his muscular back. He and Seagrave took turns shoving Aspodell. The nobleman bore these assaults listlessly, his shoulders slouched in apparent sympathy with his tormentors. It couldn’t go too far. Among the aforementioned improvements and codicils, the first to be adopted had concerned hostilities between the geas’s co-sufferers.

“You idiot!” Seagrave kept saying.

“I can’t argue,” answered Aspodell.

“Why did you do it?”

“I don’t get it either.”

“It wasn’t the geas. If she’s that far from the sword, she can’t assert it.”

“I knew that.”

“And yet you didn’t slay her?”

“I should have, yes. I should have.”

“That wasn’t the puppet Aspodell then. That was you, the true Aspodell, who returned that accursed cutlass!”

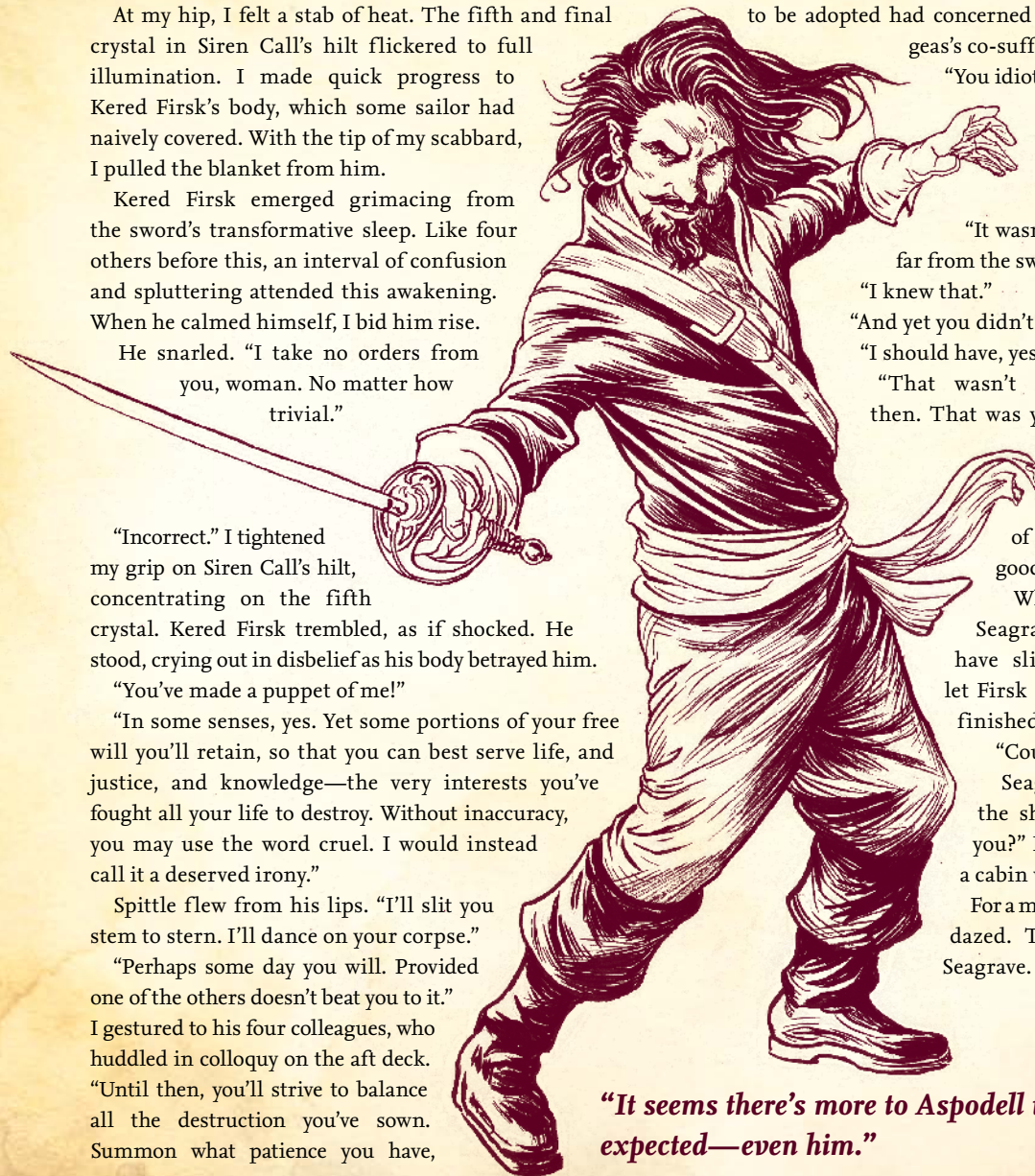
Then Rira took charge of the excoriations, for a good long time.

When she was finished, Seagrave said, “You could have slit her throat. Or just let Firsk end her, and we’d have finished him.”

“Could have,” said Aspodell.

Seagrave seized him by the shirt. “Then why didn’t you?” He threw Aspodell into a cabin wall.

For a moment, Aspodell seemed dazed. Then: “I wish I knew, Seagrave. I surely wish I knew.”



*“It seems there’s more to Aspodell than anyone expected—even him.”*