

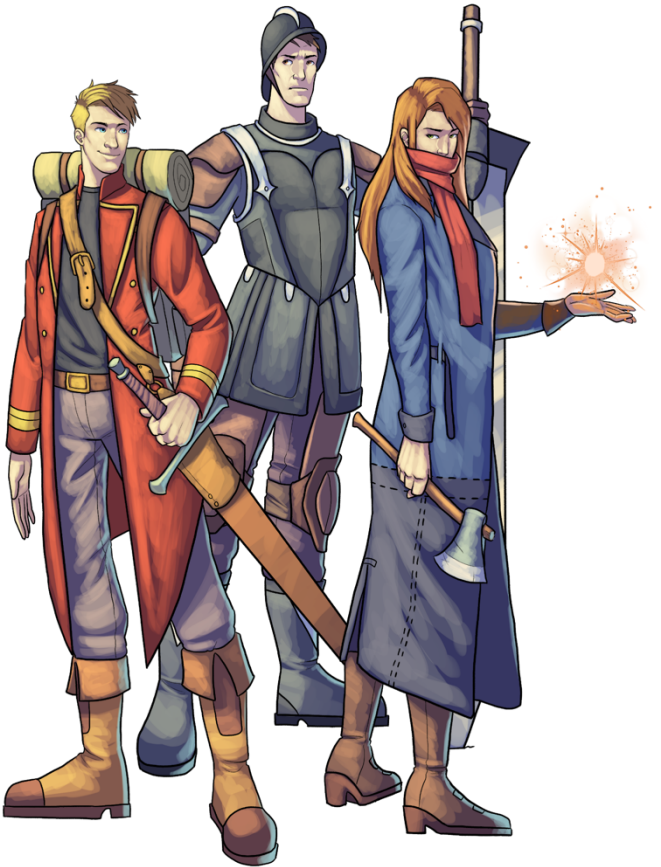
Tales of Mithrym

Skeleton Crew

Jimmy Clephane

Skeleton Crew

A Tale of Mithrym



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Skeleton Crew

<i>The Life</i>	6
<i>Becalmed</i>	14
<i>Tall Tail</i>	23
<i>Below Deck</i>	31
<i>Landing Party</i>	39
<i>Ashore</i>	47
<i>Hot Pursuit</i>	54
<i>Skirmish</i>	62
<i>Swash and Buckle</i>	71
<i>Perception</i>	80
<i>Back on Top</i>	90
<i>Power of Will</i>	97
<i>Blood</i>	105
<i>New Beginnings</i>	115

The Life

Dukki Reptan stood at the bow of the ship. Cold splashes of water washed across his face from the sea far below as the great ship ploughed its way forward.

The smell of salt water filled his nostrils and he breathed a deep sigh as a broad smile formed on his face.

This was the life.

This was how things should be!

Things seemed simpler out here, easier than they had been back in Angmark. There were no wardens here, no sneaky officers of the law hiding round every corner waiting for him to slip up.

There was no army here even, no officers barking out orders at the hired swords and expecting him to fall in line like a good little soldier.

They had not seen another ship for days now. Nothing but the open seas.

The last land had been miles back. Or was it knots? The sailors kept talking about knots. They seemed to be important somehow. Dukki made a mental note to try and find out what the knots were for. It did not matter right now though. No land, not even an island, had been seen in a long while. The winds were strong in the sails and the ship was pushing fast ahead.

Beside him, sat with their legs dangling over the side, were his friends, Elvin and Derville.

Elvin had finally shed his uniform coat and was letting the breeze and the wash cool him down in just his shirt-sleeves.

The weather was certainly getting hotter now. The sun on your face made you feel like you were going to melt right onto the deck.

Derville too, who usually wore a long, heavy frock coat, was now likewise dressed in shirt, breeches

and boots and had let her long red hair down to blow in the breeze.

Dukki himself was bearing the heat. His armour felt heavy on his shoulders at the moment and his helmet was making his head sweat. But he had been in harder conditions and he was blowed if he was going to let his guard down, even here.

“I’m bored!” Derville leant her head back to look up at Dukki. She was smiling though.

“What d’you want me to do about it?” Dukki smiled back.

“Bored?” Elvin broke in in mock shock. “How can you be bored!? Just look out there! The sun is shining! And just look at all that ...”

“Water!” Derville cut in. “Nothing but water as far as the eye can see!”

The three of them laughed. Just then a voice cut in from somewhere a mid-ships.

“If you’re all looking for something to do, I’ve a job for you!”

Dukki made his way over to talk to the man. The figure was short and stocky. His hair, such as he still had, was dark and curled and his eyes were keen. He was dressed in the same working clothes as the other sailors however he was in fact the first mate. He and Dukki spoke for some time as Elvin and Derville craned to watch. A few moment later Dukki went into a cabin room with the man then returned carrying a handful of poles.

He beamed as he walked back.

“Who’s up for a bit of fishing then?” Dukki called to them. Derville and Elvin both stood to meet him as he made his way back to the bow. They each took a rod and Dukki dropped the rest of the supplies on the deck.

“So the thing about casting a line,” Elvin began, pointing at the rod and the line on it, “is that you should ...”

He was cut off by a whooshing sound though as Derville scoffed and cast her line out into the water.

Dukki laughed a deep laugh then cast his as well.

Elvin shrugged then brought his line back and cast it out towards the sea. The hook arced through the clear air and came to land gently, some considerable way from the ship, where it sank just below the water. Elvin smiled a satisfied smile.

A long time passed as they sat and watched the water. Elvin thought to himself that the fast movement of the ship was likely too much for any fish to really be all that near but it was nevertheless very relaxing. He loosened his grip on the rod and began to lean back and bask in the sun. It really was getting very hot.

All of a sudden though, the rod shot from his hands. He sat bolt upright and stared out to the sea.

“Watch it!” Dukki shouted beside him. The tall man had spotted the movement and with a swift motion had brought his hand up to grab at it. Dukki was now holding Elvin’s rod tight in one hand as he reached to drop his own on the deck beside them.

As he did though, he felt a jerk forwards and nearly slipped from the deck completely.

Just as this happened, both Elvin and Derville grabbed him around the waist.

The three of them were scrambling hard to pull Dukki and the line in together. A way off ahead they could make out the break of waves that seemed to indicate a fish not far beneath the surface.

With a great effort they all fell backwards, Dukki still holding firm to the line. His arms came up sharply as along with them came both the line and an enormous fish. The creature was almost as long as Dukki

was tall and it landed hard on his chest as he fell backwards onto the deck.

Excitement from the crew was growing now as many of the sailors ran towards the bow. Cries of “catch it!” and “hold it fast!” could be heard from all around the ship.

Elvin lurched towards Dukki and attempted to grab it just as Dukki too brought his arms up.

The fish had flapped itself loose though and the two men ended up hugging each other as Derville rolled over them and attempted to grapple it.

The fish still fought hard and Elvin and Dukki both rolled over and scrambled to catch it too.

The three of them ended up in one great heap along with the fish, laughing a happy laugh, as the sailors came and took the creature away.

That night, they cooked it with lemons and herbs.

Dukki leaned back in his chair and looked up at the stars.

“Yes,” he thought, “this is definitely the life!”

Becalmed

A few days had passed and the weather had only gotten hotter. There was not a cloud in the sky as Elvin made his way out onto the deck to look out. He sat down next to a pile of metal that quickly began to stir and turned out to be Dukki. He had slept the night on deck to avoid the close heat of the cabins.

“Morning!” Elvin smiled.

Dukki pulled himself up to sit beside him.

“Is it?”

“Certainly is!” Elvin laughed. “How did you sleep?”

Dukki groaned.

“I didn’t really.” He grunted and spat onto the deck. “The air’s getting so thick now.”

“I know what you mean.”

“How much longer d’you think it’ll be?” Dukki craned to look at the horizon. There was still no sight of land in any direction.

“I could not say.” Elvin leant back, arms raised and hands behind his head. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath of the air. “Are you looking forward to getting there?”

“What, to Khannath? Sure!”

“I do wonder what it will be like. When I enlisted, they asked me if I wanted to serve there or in Gallio. I decided to stay close to home.” He sighed. “Things could have gone very differently.”

“So how much longer d’you think it’ll be?” Dukki asked again.

“Forever if we can’t get a good wind!” A voice boomed from behind them, startling them both to sit full upright.

They turned to look and met the gaze of the captain. A tall woman dressed in the same loose working clothes as

the crew. She had been wearing a long, gilded frock coat and a tri-corn hat when they first set sail. In the heat though she had doffed the coat but kept the hat. She smiled a friendly smile as she lowered her silk scarf and took a deep breath of the air.

“Is that so?” Elvin asked.

“Certainly!” The captain continued, walking past them and looking out at the sea. “It’s been calm as a millpond out there for two days straight.” She turned back to look at Elvin and Dukki. “Blimey! Hadn’t you noticed?”

Just then, the door to the cabins opened again and this time Derville stepped out. She wandered over to them and lent against the base of the mast.

“Noticed what?” She asked.

“We haven’t moved an inch.” The captain sighed. “We’re becalmed.”

Gesturing to the deck, the three of them noticed that the sailors were all either standing idly at their posts or resting in the heat. There seemed to be little-to-no activity at all on deck.

“How long does this usually last?” Derville asked.

“It’s hard to say!” The captain sighed again. “Could be an hour, could be a week. My fear’s that it’s the latter. Not that we’ve got cargo as would spoil. Problem is we’ve got precious little left at all.” She moved in close to Derville, Dukki and Elvin and lowered her voice as she continued. “Truth be told, if we can’t find land or another ship or something else soon, we’ll be out of food in about a day.”

“Surely there is something we could do!” Elvin stood up, seemingly readying himself for action. The captain hushed him and glowered slightly.

“I’m all for it if you lot fancy lending a hand, but do me a favour try not to

stir things up.” She seemed to think for a moment. “Fancy another go at fishing? Number One should have a net or two, try casting them and see what you can get.”

Elvin nodded.

“Come on then!” He said, in what Dukki had come to recognise as Elvin’s ‘lieutenant voice’.

The captain muttered something and walked away.

With some effort, Elvin eventually convinced Dukki to get up and the three of them made their way to see the first mate. The nets on the ship were old and had been patched and repaired many times before but they took them and prepared to cast them out into the sea.

Far below them, the water was gently lapping at the sides of the ship and they could see movement deep beneath the surface that, as the eye adjusted, appeared to be seaweed and other plants.

For a moment, Dukki thought he saw something dart across but he shook it off as nothing more than the light of the sun working on the ripples of the water.

With a great heave, he cast one net out. Elvin and Derville held a corner each, firm aboard the ship, bracing against the sides. The thick ropes of the net hit the water hard and a small spray was thrown up that tinged the air with the taste of salt.

They watched as it fell beneath the surface and waited for any sign or sense of movement.

After a while they heaved it hard back onto the deck. Various plants seemed to have caught themselves in the lines but sadly nothing else. They cleared the nets and readied them again for another throw.

Three more times they cast and hauled the nets with nothing but a handful of seaweed to show for their troubles.

The sun was riding high in the sky as they debated trying again.

“I can’t keep this up.” Dukki growled, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“Once more,” Elvin insisted, “then we stop and wait for evening.”

There was a general grunt of agreement from everyone and they cast the net again.

They were about ready to haul up and go inside when all of a sudden there was a strong lurch as the net was pulled hard down into the water.

The corners held to the ship tightened hard against the railings and the whole vessel rolled hard to the side, throwing many of the sailors to the deck.

Elvin, Dukki and Derville braced hard against the side and each grabbed a hold of the ropes. Try as they could though, the net would not come up.

After a moment the crew began running to see what was happening. Many, quite instinctively, grabbed hard at the net too and soon a team of about ten were pulling hard to haul it in.

As they brought it up the ship began to roll back, causing some to lose their balance and likewise their grip on the ropes. Each time the ship lurched and rolled again as they all struggled to keep a purchase on it.

After a long fight they began to draw it out of the water.

As they did, they saw many plants and weeds wrapped around an enormous, writhing fish tail.

With one last, great pull they drew the whole thing over the edge and onto the deck.

Dukki, Elvin and Derville, along with the crew, fell down hard as they surrounded the haul.

There was a moment of confusion as they each tried to take in the image before them.

With a cry of surprise, one sailor reached in to remove some of the seaweed to get a better look. She soon regretted it though as she was pulled suddenly into it all.

“Was that an arm?” Elvin craned to see better.

“It looked like a” Derville began but her voice trailed off as they all caught site of a face, its eyes fixed on the crowd and its mouth opened wide to reveal rows of long, sharp, piercing teeth.

Another sailor gasped then shouted loudly.

“Mermaid!”

Tall Tail

Screams and cries erupted from the crew as the creature in the net began to tear at the ropes. A pair of long, thin arms could be seen, each with a set of sharp, piercing nails at the end of its long, silvery fingers.

There was a mad scramble as each sailor hurried backwards and began grabbing at any makeshift weapon they could find. Derville reached behind her back and pulled a small hatchet from her belt. Elvin thought fast, there was no time to go and get his sword from the cabin. He looked quickly around the deck and spotted a fishing harpoon in a rack mounted nearby.

He ran over and pulled it out then, spinning on the spot, flung it hard at the creature. The blade dug deep into the deck with a thud. The mermaid was free of the netting now and had begun to move towards them.

It could now be made out in full. A long, slender body that began with a head, the face of which might have been considered beautiful were it not for the enormous teeth that could now be seen as it gaped angrily. Long green-blue hair hung in wet lines down and onto its shoulders and back. Its skin was a pale silvery-blue, almost like a shark but with a faint pink hue showing through as blood pumped hard, driving the creature forward. From the waist down was a long, scaled tail ending in two fins.

The creature bounded forwards, pulling at the deck with its arms and pushing forward with its tail. It gnashed its teeth at each member of the crew as they backed away sharply.

Dukki squared up in front of the mermaid. It looked up at him and hissed at him, spraying water up into his face. He roared back and it seemed, for a moment, to pause.

“Grab the nets!” Elvin called.

Several sailors rounded the creature and seized the sodden net.

Others ran along the deck to take hold of the other.

As one sailor passed it though, he screamed in pain as the creature’s long nails cut through his leg. Falling to the ground, everyone could see the bright red of fresh blood spilling onto the deck.

The mermaid’s expression was almost a smile as it rounded on the fallen man. Another sailor jumped between them and raised an oar menacingly.

“Back!” She shouted and made to smack the creature in the head.

A silvery arm came up and grabbed the oar hard by the shaft. The creature pulled hard and the sailor fell back as it dropped from her grip.

The creature lunged at the two then suddenly gave a blood chilling

scream as it tipped to the side, an axe buried in its shoulder.

Derville pulled the hatchet back then kicked the mermaid hard so that it rolled across the deck.

Thick, dark, blue blood seemed to ooze from the wound as the mermaid righted itself and readied to attack again.

Derville and Dukki stood firm and stared it down just as Elvin and two of the sailors ran up with a net and flung it hard over the creature.

It landed true and they quickly made to bind it when shouts and cries from across the ship suddenly drew their attention.

“Another!” One cried.

“And another!” Came a voice from the other end of the ship.

Two more of the creatures were clawing their way up the sides of the vessel and within moments had flung themselves onto the deck.

The captured mermaid began to wail a noise that was soon echoed by the other two.

“Een preserve us!” Cried the injured sailor as he looked about.

“We’re not done yet!” Dukki shouted. “Quick! Derville, you stay with this one, Elvin, you take that one, I’ll go for the other!”

There was a fire in Dukki’s eyes as he looked about. Elvin did not stop to argue but ran hard across the deck.

“And do what?” Derville called after them.

Dukki had reached one of the other two mermaids and hurriedly picked up one of the larger boathooks from the sides. He brought it down hard on the creature’s body, seeming for a moment to stun it as it tried to find purchase on the deck.

“Push!” He roared.

Several of the crew rallied to him. Taking a hold of the staff of the

boathook they all rammed hard into the creature and began to push it towards the edge.

Its body, still wet from the sea, slipped and slid easily though its claws arced towards them. Then, with a roar and a splash it fell fast and hard back into the waters below.

“Well come on then!” Derville shouted to the sailors near her. “You saw how it’s done!”

She picked up the dropped oar and brought it down hard on the mermaid underneath the net. A silvery hand came up to meet it though and held it tight.

Derville felt the arm try to pull her down with the oar. She twisted with it, so that the end of the oar found its way into the creatures side. Bracing hard, she than began to push at it. The creature screamed with pain and anger.

“Come on!” Derville shouted again. This time the sailors joined beside

her and working together to brace the oar hard against it they began to slide the creature towards the edge. Once again, with a satisfying splash, it fell fast into the waves below.

Elvin, having reached the final creature, looked around for something to fight it with. There was nothing at this end of the ship save boxes and barrels. The mermaid eyed him hungrily and began to charge at him, bounding across the decking.

There was nothing for it. He knelt down and braced as best he could then grabbed it by its shoulders as it careened into him.

The face was inches from his own and it screamed. Its own arms came round and held Elvin hard by his shoulders. Sharp claws cut into his back and he could feel blood run down. But he held firm.

The two began to wrestle, pushing hard against each other. Neither seeming to gain any ground.

Cries and shouts came from all over the ship as people began to spy the other two climbing back up to the deck.

Elvin began to shudder as the pain in his back was causing him to falter just as the whole ship gave a great lurch.

Elvin and the creature were both thrown hard towards the edge. Elvin felt everything fall away as he tumbled, the smell of salt water coming up to meet him. He screamed at the pain in his shoulder though as a hand grabbed his own tight.

“No you don’t!” Came the voice of Dukki as he braced hard against the railings and pulled Elvin back up.

A splash behind him sounded the fall of the last of the mermaids. The other two dropped from the sides to join it as the whole ship began pitching through the waves.

The wind had finally come.

Below Deck

Several hours had passed and the sun was working its way down the sky now. The afternoon was still hot but the lowering rays gave the promise of a cooler evening soon. The captain paced up and down the deck, barking orders to the crew as they hurried to make fast repairs to the ship.

Below decks, Elvin and the sailor that had also been attacked – whose name it turned out was Sam – were lying on hard, wooden beds, their wounds bandaged, each nursing a cup of rum.

“For the pain,” the surgeon had said. It was strong stuff. A thick, dark, almost black coloured liquid that poured a bit like syrup. It felt like fire in Elvin’s throat as he sipped it down. It was certainly helping with the pain though. He had a warm fuzzy feeling all over him now.

Just outside the room he could make out the sound of voices and then in came Derville, Dukki and the sailor that had been defending Sam on deck.

“Bonny!” Sam shouted and winced from the pain in his side as he tried to sit up.

“Steady on,” Bonny said, coming round to stand beside him, “give that wound a chance to close up first.”

Dukki and Derville likewise came and stood beside Elvin.

“What were those things?” Elvin asked.

“They looked like” Derville began but Sam cut in.

“Mermaids!” He had a look of horror mixed with amazement as he said the word. “I knew it, I knew they were real! But I never saw one before!”

“Mermaids?” Elvin looked puzzled.
“I mean, sure they looked a lot like
.... Well”

“True enough,” Bonny sighed,
“Captain’s likely in a foul temper
now, we’ve strayed a lot further
south than we’d meant to!”

“What do you mean?” Elvin looked
even more puzzled.

“I mean,” Bonny said, “that we were
never meant to get near these
waters. We’ve ended up here a
couple of times, usually with a good
wind mind you. Captain’s brought us
here on purpose even. She loves to
give the new sailors a bit of a run in.
Watching ‘em swim alongside the
ship’s usually quite the eye opener.
Never been becalmed here though.”

“So where are we then?” Derville
asked.

“About twenty leagues off the west of
inga, I reckon. It’ll be a long sail
north back on track to Khannath.”

“So those really were mermaids?”
Dukki looked wide-eyed at the two sailors.

“Yep.” Bonny beamed.

Dukki gasped and his face formed into a massive smile.

“Even my granny didn’t know much about them!” He grinned.

“Well,” Bonny went on, “least ways that’s way we calls ‘em. They don’t tend to go far from here. Certainly I never saw ‘em near land or anything like that. They’re just a type of big fish really. Looks a bit like people so we calls ‘em mermaids.”

“Are Are there any other”
Dukki stumbled over his words. “Are there any other ... things? Like mermaids. Out here?”

“Loads!” Sam smiled excitedly.
“That’s what I came here for! To see ‘em all!”

“Nah,” Bonny laughed, “not really, not as you’d call real sea monsters or anything.”

Dukki and Sam both looked crestfallen. “There’s stories, mark you, stories about all sorts of things. Giant squids and great octopuses. Massive sharks and a great beast they call a Kraken. But I’ve never seen anything more than the normal sort. Well, save for the mermaids of course! I mean, you might call the squids we see giant, you might call the sharks massive, but they’re the normal sort of fish. Nothing too special.”

Sam lay back down on his bed and dropped his cup on the table beside him.

Bonny patted him on the head.

“Don’t you worry, my lad! There’s adventure enough out there. We’ve got to sail back round north yet and rumour has it there’s pirates round some of the ways we’ll have to go to get there from here!”

Derville gave Bonny a knowing glance but Sam seemed appeased by this and shortly dropped off into a quiet sleep.

“So how long do you think it will take us to get to Khannath now?” Elvin asked.

“If we can keep a good wind, maybe two weeks. Probably more like three or even four though.” Bonny sighed. “And I’m worried that we’re going to have trouble going that long at this rate. We haven’t built up supplies for long enough now.”

“Shame we didn’t manage to bag one of the mermaids.” Dukki snorted.

“You think?” Bonny scoffed. “They’re not human, I’ll grant you, but I’m not about to start trying ‘em with chips, no sir! They’re pack animals. You saw didn’t you? That way they called to each other? Can’t say as I wants to be always looking over my back to see if they’re out for revenge!”

“So what then?” Elvin asked.

“So we all better start getting used to the taste of biscuits if we’re going to make it to port! Just a shame we didn’t take on any fruit before we left. Could do with a lemon or two.”

“Well, it sounds like there will not be much excitement any time soon.” Elvin said leaning back on his bed and shuffling a little to try and get comfortable. “I doubt that anything is going to coax me out of this bed for a day at least!”

Just then they heard a sudden commotion on the deck above. Muffled voices shouted a message that seemed to be getting passed down the line. Scurrying feet ran this way and that as unseen messengers looked for people to pass it on to.

A series of thuds came down the stairs outside the surgeon’s cabin and the handle of the door rattled as an eager hand opened the door.

In stepped a sailor with a broad grin on his face.

“Bonny! Bonny, come on!” He called excitedly.

“What is it?” Bonny asked, hurrying round to the doorway.

“Land ho!”

Landing Party

“I tell you I am fine!” Elvin protested. “Let me out of here!”

The ships surgeon stood in the doorway, blocking his way.

“You have gashes down your arms and back! You need to rest!”

“The sea air will do me a power of good I am sure!” Elvin shoved hard and made his way into the corridor. He crossed over to the passengers’ cabin and pulled open the chest of his own supplies.

His back did ache but the rum was still masking that and he was sure he was not going to miss an event like this! He donned his long red coat and strapped his sword and belt over it. As he straightened up to leave there was a rustling from across the room.

A man dressed in long red robes rolled his way out of a hammock and

landed, rather ungracefully, on the floor.

“What, in Een’s name, is going on!”
The man shouted.

“Beg pardon, sir!” Elvin drew himself up stiffly and saluted. A wizard was a wizard and Elvin knew well enough to show proper respect. “They have sighted land and I am rather keen to join the party.”

“Blast it, are we finally at Khannath?” The robed man stood up and dusted himself off.

“Not quite, sir! It seems we are some leagues off of Inga. A course issue with ...”

“Damn their eyes! I will be late!” The man roared and pushed his way past Elvin. As he disappeared out of the door Elvin could hear him muttering complaints.

Elvin shrugged this all off and made his own way up to the deck.

When he got there he saw Derville, Dukki and Bonny standing listening to the captain as she laid out the plan. Not far off the starboard, Elvin could see a small island. It must have been only a few acres, he thought. It was mostly beach but towards the centre there rose a tall rocky hillock. Many tropical plants were growing all over it. Coconut palm trees, mango trees and avocado trees waved their leaves in the gentle tropical breeze.

“I need volunteers to go ashore,” the captain was saying, “and to gather what supplies we can. I’ve sent a boat over already to scout it out. They should be back any minute. There’s definitely fruit though, I can see that from here, and with any luck we can fish off the far side beach without upsetting anything with the ship. What we chiefly need though is any grain and any fresh water there might be.”

Elvin raised his hand ready to volunteer. Derville and Dukki saw

him and rushed over. Before he could speak though, the wizard pushed his way through and stood in front of the captain. His face was a picture of anger and annoyance.

“This is all well and good, I am sure!” He began in a haughty tone. “But what is all this I hear about us being off course? I have a council meeting in Khannath that I must be at! Am I to take it that I will be late? Do you suppose to pay my fees to the authorities there for my late arrival? This is an absolute disgrace!”

The captain sighed as she rubbed her forehead.

“Mr Notley, I ...”

“Chancellor!” The man roared.

“Chancellor Notley, I assure you,” the captain continued, “we will deal with everything!”

“It is simply not good enough!” the chancellor continued. “I demand ...”

With a heavy sigh the captain gestured towards her cabin.

“Come with me, Chancellor, I am sure we can work something out.” She led him away. Turning back though she called to the first mate. “Keep an eye out, Number One, and handle things from here, will you!”

“Aye, sir!” The first mate called back.

The two made their way away and most of the crew tittered as they heard the chancellor’s angry yelling even through the door.

“None of that!” The first mate barked. “Captain’s dealing with things! You lot should be too!”

Just then, cries of ahoy were heard from down in the water. The small boat of scouts had returned and they hurriedly made fast the rowing boat and climbed up onto the deck.

“You won’t believe it, sir!” One of the scouts said excitedly.

“What do you mean?” The first mate barked as he walked over to him.

“I mean ... I mean I mean, there’s a cache, sir!” He panted as he caught his breath from the hurry back. “An old one by the looks of it! No sign of anyone about. There’s rum and gin and wine.”

Another of the scouts broke in.

“That there is, sir!” She shouted. “And there’s salted fish and wheat and all sorts!”

Cheers erupted from the assembled crew.

“Are you sure, lad?” The first mate look incredulously at the scouts then he sighed and mopped his brow. “I don’t deny, that’s a strong bit of luck we’ve had if you’re right!”

“Praise Ibis!” Shouted several of the crew together.

“Well, who am I to argue with the will of the Crafters.” The first mate looked out over the crew. “I need

three boats for heavy lifting in that case. Strongest forward!”

There was a scurrying of crew as they all prepared for the landing.

Elvin made his way through the mayhem to the first mate.

“Sir!” He called. “Are you well are you absolutely sure this cache is going to be unguarded?”

“I trust my scouts, lieutenant.” The first mate scowled.

“Sure enough,” Elvin said in what he hoped was a reassuring tone. “I just mean ... do you want anyone ... perhaps ... to go too and just make sure everyone is ... well ... safe?”

The first mate looked him up and down.

“You look strong, so do your friends. If you want to volunteer then go jump on the boats. But don’t you worry,” he holstered a wand to his belt, the barrel seemed to crackle

with white-blue sparks, “I’m coming to keep ‘em safe!”

Elvin watched the first mate walk off, barking orders to the crew as they prepared the boats.

“Come on then!” Elvin said excitedly, turning to Dukki and Derville.

“I thought you were supposed to be resting.” Derville scowled.

“What? And miss a chance to explore a desert island?” He winked. “Not on your life!”

Ashore

The first mate was shouting orders in all directions as the three boats landed in the water and their teams took up oars. Dukki, Derville and Elvin began to row but soon found it hard to keep pace with the sailors beside them. By the time they were drawing up onto the sands the sun was nearing the horizon and long streams of sunlight cast far reaching shadows from the trees up onto the hill in the centre of the island.

They all jumped out and pulled the boats right up onto the beach then, at a call from the first mate, they gathered together.

“Listen all of you!” He called. “We’ve not got long until sunset and I don’t want to be stuck here when the sun goes down. I wouldn’t have any of you rowing out to sea after dark and I don’t fancy spending the night on this island so pay attention! The cache is about a hundred yards

inland under a pile of palm leaves. Got it?”

There was a murmur of agreement from the crew.

“Right, you three!” He pointed to three of the sailors. “Guard the boats. The rest of you, with me!”

They made their way up the beach and in land. The trees were tall and Dukki felt very tempted to grab some fruit as they passed. Cries from the first mate to hurry up prevented him, although he growled somewhat under his breath.

Right enough though, the cache was exactly where the scouts had said. Beneath the leaves they found a small, naturally formed cave that lead under the hill to a rough, round room in which aged boxes and barrels were piled.

One box’s lid lay beside it, doubtless opened by the scouts. Inside the box they saw bottles of wine and whiskey. Everyone cheered.

Three to a crate, they hauled out wine, grain and a few barrels of fish. Dukki hoisted one crate of rum up on his shoulder and heaved it out single-handedly. Derville and Elvin brought one barrel between the two of them.

Making their way back down the hill, the sun was still visible but its light was now a deep orange. Despite themselves, the crew all began to sing for joy as they approached the boats.

“We’ll row back with these now, lads!” Called the first mate. “Then we’ll come back tomorrow for the rest!”

Shouts of joy erupted again and the singing grew louder.

Dukki was dancing along with the crate on his shoulder. Enjoying the sound of the song.

Suddenly though, he stopped. He seemed almost to be sniffing at the air like a hound.

With his free arm he stopped Derville and Elvin, though the crew all continued on down to the boats.

“Something’s not right!” He whispered.

“What do you mean?” Elvin asked. Letting the barrel drop and rubbing at his sore arms.

Derville surveyed the beach. She watched as the crew began loading crates and barrels onto the boats. Then it struck her. “Where are the guards?”

At that moment several things happened.

Dukki dropped his crate of bottles and spun round, pulling Derville and Elvin to the ground.

All across the beach, dark shadowy figures rose from the sand and drew swords on the sailors.

The first mate, dropping his own package, pulled his wand from his belt and emptied the barrel onto

their assailants. White-cold ice spread out from it and hit one squarely in the chest, sending them flying backwards. As he went to reload though, two more leapt up and grabbed him by the arms as a third ran him through with a cutlass.

Several more of the crew dropped to the ground, victims of the sudden and vicious attack. Some attempted to fight back with whatever they had but were quickly despatched or caught and bound up.

“Pirates!” Elvin whispered as they lay on the ground and watched through the shrubs and brush.

The attackers did indeed appear to be pirates. They were dressed in mismatched pieces of various naval uniforms and common clothes. Some were quite tattered, as if they had been well worn for quite some time in ambushes like this. Each assailant wore a scarf around their face and a hat low down on their head so as to make their faces quite

impossible to make out. Some fought with cutlasses and short swords, others with knives and daggers. One even seemed to have a harpoon.

It was not long before the sailors were all either slain or taken captive.

“What do we do now?” Whispered Derville.

“Back to the cave?” Dukki whispered back.

Something in Elvin’s mind clicked. This was a battle. He knew how to live on a battlefield.

“No,” he began, “that must be their trap. That must be how they lure people here. If we go back there then they will only find us when they come to reset things.” He surveyed the beach. The pirates were leading the crew away. A handful though had been left behind to take the crates back.

“Follow me!” Elvin called to the others. He lead them quietly up away from the path and they watched as

six or seven pirates passed them on their way back to the cache.

“Three ... Two ... One ... Now!” Elvin counted and steered them round and back to the shore. Running hard towards the boat he brought his fist up and punched the remaining pirate hard in the face. The figure crumpled down to the ground and lay there.

“Push the boat!” He called. Dukki and Derville did so. It slid down the sands and into the water with a gentle clink from the few bottles still left aboard.

They leapt in with an effort and a cloud of sand and dust settled in with them as they hurriedly set oars to the rowlocks and rowed away to the ship.

The sun dropped below the horizon.

Darkness enveloped them.

Everything around fell deathly silent.

Hot Pursuit

The chill air hit them with a sober solemnity. As they continued to row, they held a close eye on the ship to try and keep their bearings and stay on course. Looking back to the island for a moment though they saw other lights spring up. At first it appeared to be from the island itself but ... no ... It was ...

“Ahoy there!” A cry came from the ship as they neared it.

“Ahoy!” Derville called. “Throw us a line!”

There was a pause as a figure up on the deck appeared to be counting them.

“Where are the others?” The voice came again.

“Back on the island!” Derville shouted. “We can explain ...”

“Did you get the supplies?”

Elvin looked down into the boat. They had indeed brought back several bottles and at least one barrel.

“Some!” He called up. There was the sound of cheering from the deck. His heart fell. “We need to explain though!” They could not hear him though. The applaud was too loud.

Ropes were thrown down and the boat was winched up.

“Where is the captain?” Elvin shouted, leaping from the boat onto the deck.

“I’m here, lieutenant!” The captain called as she made her way through the crew with a broad grin on her face. “And congratulations! We’ll make sea dogs of you yet!” Now bring that haul on board and we’ll get ready for the other ...”

“Captain!” Elvin panted. Bending double and catching his breath. The pain in his back was all the worse for

rowing back so hard. Derville and Dukki helped him to stand straight.

Something in the panic of their faces got through to her and she called for quiet from the crew.

“Captain,” Elvin continued, “it was an ambush! At least half a dozen of the crew are dead, including the first mate.”

Gasps came up from the sailors. The captain looked sternly at Elvin.

“And how did you three survive?” She held his gaze hard. “I’d not known that soldiers ran from a fight so easily.”

“It’s not like that!” Derville protested. “They came out of nowhere! They missed us but ... but ... we couldn’t have stopped them, there were too many!”

“So you ran!” Shouts erupted from the crew.

“Shut up!” Dukki roared. “Or they’ll all be dead!”

The whole deck fell silent.

Dukki pointed out to see. In the distance, the faint, flickering light could still be seen.

“Do you have a spyglass, captain?”
Elvin pleaded.

The captain duly pulled a small telescope from her belt and looked out in the direction Dukki was pointing. She looked back at the three of them.

“We can still save them!” Derville implored.

The world seemed to slow to a standstill then the captain turned on her heels and shouted to the crew.

“You! Get that boat emptied and secured! You! Raise the anchor!” She began walking up to the poop where she waved the helmsman aside and took the wheel. “Stand by to make sail!”

Minutes passed but they felt like an eternity. The ship began to build up

speed and was soon ploughing through the water. The lanterns were cloaked as the captain tried hard to keep a watch on the pirate vessel.

At first it seemed that there was no chance of finding it. The lights were so dim and distant that Elvin, Derville and Dukki wondered if they really had seen them.

After a while though, they spotted them again, as did the crew. Shouts and cries erupted around the deck.

In time the lights even began to be growing visibly brighter and bigger! Beneath them they could now make out the shape and texture of the timbers of the enemy ship.

“Ready the grapples!” The captain roared.

She signalled for the helmsman to retake his post and re-hooked the spyglass to her belt as she drew her own sword.

“Come on then you three!” She called.

Elvin saluted and drew his sword.

Dukki cracked his knuckles.

Derville drew her hatchet and spoke some soft words over the blade. It began to billow with a thick, black smoke.

They could hear the crew of the other ship now. Hurrying and scrambling about their own work. They did not seem to be fully under sail yet though, a matter that the captain was ready to take advantage of.

With a single order they launched the hooks across and held fast the two great ships.

The captain, Elvin, Dukki and Derville along with several members of the crew leapt across and struck down the first of the pirates that they met.

They stopped though as a hollow laugh rang out and cut through the night like a knife.

Down from the poop of the pirate vessel came a figure dressed in a long black coat edged in silver frocking. She wore a wide tri-corn hat and held in one hand a sword that glinted in the moonlight and, in the other, a loaded fire wand that crackled with orange sparks in its barrel.

“Looks like we’ve got a few more for market!” The pirate captain called.

Her crew cackled with delight. Something about the sound sent a chill up Dukki’s spine.

Two of the nearest pirates leapt at him and tried to hold him by the arms. He batted one aside with ease and punched the other square in the face.

The figure dropped hard to the deck and for a moment did not seem to move at all.

A strange clicking sound followed and the figure stood back up. Its scarf had fallen to the floor revealing grey skin underneath.

Dukki almost vomited.

The figure was dead. At least, it looked to all the world as though it were dead.

The skin was lifeless, one eye was missing and what once must have been scars had opened up to reveal sinew and bone underneath. The zombie smiled at Dukki then punched him hard in the face, sending him stumbling backwards.

“Welcome aboard!” Said the pirate captain with a laugh. Then, turning to her own crew, each dropping their scarves to reveal their dead faces to the cold night air, she cried “get them!”

Skirmish

Back on the ship, Chancellor Notley paced about in the passengers' cabin. He was not pleased at all with this delay, no sir he was not. This was the sort of thing that could ruin a chap's reputation. It could see him posted to an even more remote outpost.

He shuddered. The ministers might even think it fitting to send him to Pulvisia! No. No, he was not going to allow any of that to happen. By Ibis, he knew he was not the smartest of civil servants but at least he could make a meeting on time!

He stopped his pacing for a moment and looked up towards the ceiling. There seemed to be some great commotion going on there. Doubtless another delay! Another hold up on the way to Khannath. Well this was too much! He stomped out through the door and up onto the deck.

The crew were running around in a panic.

“Listen!” He shouted. No-one seemed to pay him any heed though.

He grunted with annoyance then straightened up and cleared his throat.

With a flick of his wrist and a click of his fingers he bent his mind to a small piece of magic. Something to remind these simple sailors just who they were dealing with.

A passing sailor jumped backwards as a small, bright flash erupted directly in front of them.

“Ah, good!” Notley called stepping over to the bewildered woman. She rubbed her eyes and looked at him with astonishment. “What in Een’s name is going on here?” He bellowed.

“Pirates, sir!” She shouted and ran off again.

“Pirates?” He whispered. What in all the lands was going on that they should have run into them? There were no such brigands on the route from Angmark to Khannath! No. No, none of this was adding up. He grunted with annoyance.

As he made to walk away though he stopped and paused in thought. He gasped. Unless they had come for him? Pirates had heard that an agent of the king was travelling on this ship! They were plotting to abduct him and ransom him off to the crown! He began to panic. That was the only possible explanation, surely!

Looking about, he saw many of the crew taking up swords and axes and heading towards Towards the pirate ship! There it was! He gaped at the sight of it. The tall black sails were fluttering in the night breeze. And there, he could see, it was held ... held to this ship by ropes!

His mind was working fast. Sadly though, it was running in entirely the wrong direction.

“Stand back!” He shouted to the whole deck. His voice quavered slightly but he had been practicing his ‘commanding tone’ ready for his new office. “I see it clearly enough! We need to break those beasts’ tie on our vessel! You will never break through such ropes as these with simple axes! Stand back and I shall show you how a gentleman of Angmark deals with brigands like this!”

Several of the crew called out and tried to stop him but it was too late.

Once again he flicked his wrist and snapped his fingers. His tutors, he thought to himself, who had despaired in him for how long he had taken to learn such cantrips, would be amazed to see his keen head working under such pressure!

From his hands there came a splash of green that shot out and settled on

the ropes. A fizzing sound and a smell of burning rose from them. After a moment, they began to snap.

“What are you doing?” Sam cried, grabbing Notley by his shoulder and spinning him on the spot. “Half the crew are over there!”

Back on the pirate ship, the crew were still reeling from the site. The pirates, quite openly now, were shedding their disguises and gnashing their teeth. Many seemed not even to be zombies but bleach-white, animated skeletons, dressed in the tattered clothes they had worn in life. Even still, they seemed somehow to glower.

Elvin cursed under his breath. He hated necromancers. His hand clutched hard at his sword hilt and he screamed a battle-cry. Running forward he brought his sword down hard at the nearest of the zombies.

It clanged hard against the pirate captain's sword, which she swung in as she leapt from the side. Cackles of

laughter erupted from the ghastly crew who then leapt forward themselves and brought up swords, daggers and knives as they attacked the sailors.

Dukki punched hard at each pirate that came close to him. Yet even as he knocked them down they got straight back up again.

Derville tried with her axe but found it only lodged itself in the ribs of the skeletons, who would snarl and pull it straight back out.

About them, several of the sailors likewise tried to attack but many were simply far too shaken by the site and backed towards the ropes, ready to cross back to their own ... but what was this?

Cries and shouts came up from the crew. Many turned backs on the pirates to gape in horror at the sight. Sadly, for several this was punished with a blade to their back.

The ropes had been cut!

The ships were beginning to drift apart!

Turning back, the pirates' laughter was all the louder and even harsher than it had been before. A vicious fight broke out, many of the sailors feeling they had no choice but to try. Some tried leaping back towards the ship. A couple managed it. Several tried to grab at the ropes, their hands burned at the touch though and they fell hard into the waters below.

At that, Elvin gave another strong cry and rallied all those that were still at hand. The pirates encircled them and jeered.

Derville and Dukki found themselves alongside Bonny, who was brandishing a harpoon menacingly at the nearest zombie.

Elvin raised his sword and squared on the pirate captain.

“You vile fiend!” He shouted. “You black-hearted devil! I will kill you!”

“Steady now!” The pirate captain chuckled. “You may try if you wish, but you are on my ship now!” She beckoned to a small man that came over and stood patiently. Very definitely a man, not a zombie or a skeleton, his face was red from exertion. She doffed her coat and handed it to him. “Pop that in my cabin!” She raised her own sword and winked at Elvin. “Come on then!”

Elvin growled.

He ran forward and made to swing hard across her body. As he raised his arms though, the pain in his shoulders cut at him like a knife and he faltered. Losing his balance for a moment he stumbled on the deck and dropped his sword.

Around him the pirate crew laughed again. But he could not hear it for long. For as he fell forward, the pirate captain had been bringing her own sword up ready to parry him.

Instead, Elvin's head - brought down low as he doubled from the pain - hit her hard in the bellow and the two of them rolled on the deck and went tumbling down into the sea.

Elvin tried to see but the night was dark and the waters about him were murky. Far above he could have sworn there was a blast of white-hot fire.

But he could not see it for long.

As salt water filled his mouth and nose, his vision sunk into oblivion.

Swash and Buckle

On the deck of the pirates' ship, its ghastly crew stood rigid as they looked out at the roaring waves. The first mate, still holding the captain's coat, turned from shock to white hot fury. With a roar he turned back to the sailors and in particular to Dukki and Derville whom he rounded on and snarled at.

“They killed her! They killed her!” He shouted. The pirates around him began to snarl too and ambled towards the sailors. “There's no coming back from that water grave! Get them! Kill them!”

The blades of swords and knives glinted in the moonlight as the pirates rallied and rounded on the sailors. The first mate smiled an evil smile.

“Don't let them get away! Re-grapple their ship! Don't let any of them flea!”

Dukki and Derville looked uneasily at each other. What about Elvin? How were they going to ... ?

“Sampson! Stop them!” The first mate’s voice drew them back.

“We’ll look for him, and we’ll find him.” Derville nodded. “But first ...”

“Yeah,” Dukki snarled, “first we deal with this!” He drew himself up and roared at the undead creatures in front of him.

Back on the other ship, Notley was pacing up and down. Holding himself as tall as he could and waving his hands at the shouting sailors.

“It’s no good!” He was shouting. “One cannot reason with pirates! And our cargo - dare I say, our mission! - is far too valuable to allow such brigands as this to steal it!”

“What cargo?” Sam protested, running through a quick mental checklist of the grain and rum they had on board. “Let them have it! It’s

not worth our lives!” He rounded on the Chancellor.

“How dare you, sir!” Notley exclaimed. “Take him to the brig!” He pointed a shaking finger at Sam. The sailors did not seem too keen to obey though. “Blast it all!” He shouted as loud as he could and, with a flick of his wrist, sent a ball of white light erupting out and around them. “I am in charge of this ship! As the most senior member of his majesties government aboard, I demand you obey orders!”

Still the crew did not seem to move however, after the brief display of magic, they were not too keen to get in the way of another spell, especially as the man seemed quite happy to throw them around just to prove a point.

Notley grunted.

“Very well then!” He exclaimed, throwing his hands up. “Let me show you what a gentleman of Angmark can achieve!”

With that he stormed up to the poop and grasped the ship's wheel hard. Coughing slightly from the effort and from the dust in the air, he wrenched at the wheel to turn hard away.

Something caught however. Whether it was the rapid water below or something in the mechanism, the wheel did not seem to want to turn.

On the deck of the pirate ship, the sailors and Dukki and Deville were now surrounded.

“We’ve got two problems!” Derville said, turning to look back. “Even if we win the fight here, we need a way back to our own ship!”

Dukki punched a zombie hard in its face. It laughed as it brought up grey hands and cracked its jaw back into place.

“One problem at a time!” Dukki roared.

“No, that’s not good enough!” Derville shouted. “Listen! Hold them

back, okay? Just hold them!” She pointed to a handful of sailors. “You lot, follow my lead.”

Dukki kicked at a skeleton that was bearing down on them. Its knee bone crumpled and it fell to the ground, biting at the ankles of the sailors.

“Where are you going?” Dukki looked puzzled. Derville was already gone.

Dukki shrugged.

“Hold ‘em it is then!” He looked around and grabbed at a length of wood nearby. “Grab on, lads!” He called to several of the sailors. They all did so. “Now ... Push!”

Unsteadily at first but with increasing unity as they all realised the plan, they ran forwards and rammed the board hard into the chests of the oncoming pirates. Many of the skeletons crumpled under the attack. Several of the zombies were knocked prone. One though grabbed hard onto the board

and, as they stopped, swing itself up and over and onto Dukki!

Man and zombie fell to the deck in a scrambling brawl.

Up the rigging, Derville and several of the sailors were watching the events below.

“We need to get back before it’s too late!” Derville called to the others. “Everyone grab a knife and start cutting!”

They each did so, the ropes were thick but old, they held their tension well but it did not take much to cut through them. As each was broken the sailors began to hang free. A couple found it too hard to grip and slipped back down to the chaos below. Derville and two of the others though successfully held on and began to swing this way and that.

High above them the masts creaked.

“Now!” Derville shouted as they approached the zenith of an arc. They all let go and for a moment

seemed to hang in mid-air as they barrelled towards the poop of their own ship.

In that moment several things happened all at once.

The sailors landed hard on the deck of their ship, throwing up a cloud of dust that caught in the air and drifted away.

Derville landed behind Notley who turned on her and brought up his hand to cast a spell.

Sam ran up from the main deck and grabbed Notley from behind.

Derville, jumping up as quickly as she could, punched Notley hard in the face.

The man fell to the deck with a soft thud.

“Take him below!” Derville called to Sam.

“Aye! Aye!” He saluted.

She grabbed the ships wheel hard in both hands and steered it firmly back towards the pirate ship. It spun with ease and rounded sharply on the vessel.

With a loud crash and the splintering of wood the two ships collided.

Back on the main deck of the pirate ship, Dukki and his opponent both fell hard to the floor.

Dukki looked up, waiting for a blow to come, but it didn't!

The zombie had stood up and was moving over to the first mate, who was laughing with an evil grin on his face.

“Tie her off, lads!” The first mate called. Many of the zombies and skeletons did so, jumping across with long lengths of rope that they tied fast between the two ships.

Then Dukki saw something that chilled his blood.

On the breeze there came a cloud of dust which seemed to settle next to the first mate. At first it looked like a pile of sand but then, slowly but surely, it formed into the shape of a human. Specks were blowing off it and returning in small gusts but its shape remained quite sure. It smiled and the first mate smiled back at it.

“Good work, Sampson.”

Perception

Elvin's head was ringing. His throat felt like it was burning and every muscle ached. He rolled uneasily as he tried to stretch, occasionally recoiling from the pain. After a few moments he dared to open his eyes.

He wondered for a moment if he actually had. Perhaps he had gone blind. Then small pin pricks of light came into focus and he realised he was staring at the sky. Far above him the stars were twinkling. Rolling his head on to one side he could see the far horizon, now glowing with the coming dawn.

He sat bolt upright with a gasp. In the distance he could just make out, silhouetted against the coming dawn, the two ships. Blasts of bright light glimmered like the stars and did not bode well for the sailors on board.

Feeling around he realised he was on firm, albeit wet, ground. He was lying on a sandbank. Out to the east was the sea and the battling vessels. To the west though, he could see lines of palm trees that went in towards the centre of this small island.

All along the shore there was various flotsam and jetsam, much of it well-aged and likely lost from ships many years before. Slowly he pushed himself to standing. Checking over himself, he still had his clothes, his boots, his belt, just about everything he had when he'd fallen off ... except he had lost his bandaging. The pain in his shoulder was still there, it had melted into the general discomfort though and he continued anyway.

Walking along the beach he took in his resources. There had to be a way back. He just had to think. There was plenty of wood. There seemed to be a case or two of rum even! Not much in the way of food though. Just lots

of splintered wood, smashed glass and ...

He stopped.

What he had at first taken in the dark as a pile of old cloth turned out to be moving. It was human! The pirate captain rolled and groaned from the pain. Elvin froze as he looked at her. Moments later, though it felt to him like a lifetime, she opened her eyes. She gasped as she looked at him and leapt unsteadily to her feet.

Both of them scrambled to find something to wield. Elvin brought up a thin length of drift wood, whilst the captain grabbed at an aging bottle of something dark and syrupy.

“You!” She cried and leapt at Elvin.

He jumped backwards, avoiding the blow, then bringing his improvised club down on her.

She turned on the spot and struck hard at it with the bottle. Glass shattered and they both leapt back to avoid it.

The captain leapt forward and barrelled hard into Elvin's chest, knocking him backwards.

He steadied himself then raised the club again.

"You monster!" He shouted. "You devil! You ... you ... necromancer!"

He swung at her as she leapt backwards and hunted round for something to fight with.

Her searching hands found a fallen tree branch which she brandished at him.

"Me?" She screamed. "You chase us down? You attack my crew? I will not let you kill them! They are mine!"

She brought the branch down at him hard. Elvin brought the plank up to meet it. The two held their positions and stared hard into each other's eyes.

"Your crew?" Elvin snarled. "Your crew is dead!"

They pushed hard and each was pushed backwards. The captain brought the branch round hard again, this time hitting Elvin in the head. He fell to the ground but gripped his club and brought it up to parry the follow through.

“You boarded my ship!” She barked.
“You attacked my crew!”

“As you attacked mine!” He snarled.
“You ambushed us on the island!”

“Our island!” She hit down hard with the branch again. Elvin kept to his position, blocking her blows whilst trying to find an opening to stand up again. “You stole our provisions!”

Elvin scoffed.

“Since when do the dead need to eat!”

“They are not dead!” The captain shouted. She turned on the spot and walked away. Throwing the branch down onto the ground.

“Well they are not alive!” Elvin shuffled to stand up. He dropped his club too and stood firm as he called to her. She rounded on him.

“What, you think they don’t count? I would do anything for my crew! I made a promise to keep them safe and that’s what I’m doing!”

“By casting dark magic?” Elvin scoffed again.

“I’m not a magician! I’m no wizard’s pupil, nor am I a priest.” She pointed at him. “I swore to Immu, sure enough, because Immu was the only crafter that would listen. I saved my crew!”

“Saved them? Is that what you call it?”

“What are you? You’re not a captain are you, lad?” She looked him up and down. “A soldier boy on leave? You don’t know what it is to swear you’ll keep ‘em safe, to fight tooth and nail but still lose! You don’t know what loss is!”

Elvin felt a chill run through him.

“You don’t know what happened! You weren’t there!” She continued. “Tell me, soldier boy, is there no-one you would bring back if you could? If all you had to do was ask?”

Elvin’s mind raced. Images of his platoon at Talek Valley. Their faces. Cold and dead. He would have done anything to save them. He did do everything. It still was not enough. Grief gripped him as he thought too of his parents. Ill and in pain, until death was all that could bring them peace. For that moment he felt so very much alone.

But he was not alone, was he? The faces of Dukki and Derville came to him. The harsh reality of the moment rolled over him. They were still fighting for their lives! Fighting in a battle that he had to get back to!

His eyes lit up again.

“Listen,” he said, his voice changing from anger to concern, “you say you

care about your crew, yes? Well I care about my friends. You do not want us fighting and killing yours? Fine by me! Truce ... “ he held out his hand “... Help me get back and we can end this. You can take your crew and go. Just leave my friends!”

The captain seemed to consider this. She was still brimming with anger and fury but something in his words cut through. The cold air whipped around them both as she held back her rage then, with a sigh, untensed and took his hand.

“Truce.” She said gruffly.

It was as if a heavy air had lifted. They looked at each other and then at the beach around them.

“How are we going to ... ?” Elvin began.

“Grab that wood from over there! And there’s some rope here!” The captain barked.

Elvin saluted.

“Aye, sir!”

In a matter of minutes they were tying fast the planks into a makeshift raft.

As soon as it was ready the captain began pushing it into the water.

“But how are we going to paddle against the current?” Elvin asked.

“Don’t you worry about that, soldier boy!” She leant down by the rear of the raft and placed one hand under the water line. “Just hold on tight.”

Elvin felt the whole thing jerk and only just kept his balance as the raft suddenly surged forward. Squinting, he could make out a ring on the captain’s finger, glowing a bright blue as a jet of water shot out behind them.

Despite himself, he could not help but feel the whole thing quite invigorating.

They sped towards the ships as the light of dawn grew brighter.

Suddenly a cold realisation hit Elvin like wash from the sea.

“Captain?” He began.

“Yes?”

“I will hold to the truce, sure enough, but I must say ...” he paused for a moment “... I have fought dark magicians and I have seen things like this before. Immu has not walked on the earth of Mithrym for long enough now ...”

“What’s your point, soldier boy?” She was starting to get annoyed with Elvin again.

“Well,” he continued, “you may not be a necromancer ... but someone on your crew is.”

Back on Top

Dawn was continuing to race across the horizon as Elvin and the captain approached the two ships on their makeshift raft. The sea was quite calm and the winds had almost died away as the chill morning air cut at them. Aboard the ships, the sound of battle was still raging. High above, they could make out the figures of the sailors and of the skeletons and zombies moving this way and that, swinging swords and knives that glinted in the early light.

“Steady her here, I think.” The captain said, drawing her ring up from the water and grabbing a hold of a loose rope to steady them between the ships.

They looked up to see teams of sailors feverishly cutting at ropes that joined the two together. There were many now, short lengths winding back and forth between the two decks. The vessels were closer at

their bows though. Splinters in the wood of the pirate ship showed signs of its impact from the other.

In a flash of pale, bleach-white movement several skeletons could be seen leaping across and swinging at the sailors to push them back from their work. The ships creaked as the ropes tightened then slackened between them and a gush of wash was thrown up on to Elvin.

Back on the pirate ship, the zombies had re-doubled and were now pushing hard against Dukki and his team. A long length of wood held out between the two sides, they were shoving hard and giving little ground as they each attempted to push their opponents overboard.

Up on the poop of the pirate ship, the figure of the first mate could be seen, shouting orders to Sampson. His ghostly figure floated in the air with a quiet menace as the mate pointed over to the sailors aboard the other ship. In a moment, the figure of

Sampson shrank into a ball of dust that began to float on the breeze between the ships. Sailors battling hard against the mass of skeletal figures found themselves shutting their eyes tight as the dust and spray cut into them. They stumbled back, wheezing then, with many a misjudged swing, leapt at their attackers again.

“We have to stop them!” Elvin called out.

“We’ll need to get their attention first.” The captain nodded to him. “You take yours, I’ll take mine, okay?”

Elvin looked up at the great height of the ships, still tired from the events thus far, he grabbed at a nearby rope and pulled it firm.

“Okay!”

The captain began pulling herself up the side of her ship. Swinging this way and that as she went, taking in

the push and pull of the vessel itself as it swayed in the water.

Elvin began to do likewise. He had trouble gaining his footing though and found it hard work making his way up, slipping further down the rope several times.

Above him the two crews were still fighting hard. He could make out the shapes and faces of the sailors and the skeletons on the edge of the deck.

“Oi!” He called to them.

With great relief he saw the face of Derville looking down. She beamed with joy at the sight of him.

“Elvin!” She called. “How ... how did you ... ?”

But she was pushed hard to the deck as the butt of a dagger slammed into her head. A Skeleton stepped forward and seemed almost to grin down at Elvin.

“No!” He cried, tugging hard at the rope and pulling himself up as hard as he could.

It got worse though, as the skeleton then brought its dagger round and began cutting at the rope that Elvin hung from.

Elvin tried all the harder to hurry up the line. His hands burnt as the rope slipped once again. He screamed in anger and pain then heard a clatter and a commotion from the pirates’ ship. Another face showed itself, beaming wide, it was Dukki!

The great man barked out to the sailors near him to let go of their ram and then, with one almighty jerk, he lifted it above his head and threw it hard at the skeletons on the main ship.

Elvin closed his eyes as the beam flew overhead, waiting for it to miss and fall hard on him. It did not! He gasped and sighed with relief as he saw that the skeletons were no longer trying to cut his line.

On the pirates' ship though, the zombies were pushing again and had begun to wrestle with Dukki and the crew. A few even made it to the edge and, spotting Elvin, began to throw knives and daggers at him!

He shook and slipped again as he tried to avoid the blades, several of which stuck hard into the side of the ship.

Without so much as a moment's hesitation, Elvin tried them for their strength, placing a foot on one and pushing. It was not too strong but it gave him just enough purchase to pull himself up more.

Inch by inch he made his way up the line, walking up a ladder of knives stuck into the hull, until he grabbed a hold of one of the banisters at the edge of the deck itself. With an almighty heave, he threw himself up onto the decking and lay for a moment panting and aching all over.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder. Derville was pulling him up.

“Quick!” She started, “we need to ...”

But Elvin cut in.

“We need to end this!” He smiled at her then ran up to the poop. Looking over to the pirate’s ship, he saw the captain there, shouting to her first mate then signalling across to him.

This was not going to be easy but even through the chaos of battle they had to be heard.

The two of them drew themselves up and roared to the crowds on each ship.

“STOP!”

Power of Will

Elvin drew himself up and looked out over the deck of the ship. Cracked and splintered wood, spilt barrels and broken fixtures littered the whole area as the early light of day and the still flickering light of the torches cast odd shadows across it all.

“This does not have to end with blood shed!” He shouted to the assembled crews. His voice cracked slightly as he tried to be as loud as possible. “I have spoken to their captain. We can leave. We can all just leave and be done with this!”

The cold dawn air hung around them quite still. Over on the other ship, the pirate crew looked to their captain who nodded down to them.

“It’s true, lads! I agreed. This fight ain’t for us! We can down tools, walk away and find better hauls than this elsewhere!”

Elvin nodded.

“See? This has been a crazy night, but we have what we need to get to Khannath now. We can still survive this! We can all get back to see our loved ones!”

At a nod from their captain, the skeletons on the deck straightened up and began to walk back and cross to their own ship. Likewise on the pirates’ ship, the zombies backed off from the sailors there and stood in lines before the poop looking up at the captain.

“What?” Came a shout from the sailors that stood in front of Elvin. “Are you serious?” The voice was filled with anger and pain. “See them again? They killed our crew! They’re still lying on that forsaken island away back yonder! Are we gonna see them again?”

There was a round of mumbling that slowly turned into cries of agreement. The sailors on both ships began shouting with angry cries to

Elvin and to the undead. Tensions were still running high and one sailor lashed out at a nearby skeleton. It leapt back and continued to follow the command to return. Other sailors ran forward to attack too.

“Stop! Please!” Elvin called again. “Please! This has gone far enough already!”

“You heard him!” Dukki’s voice cut through the air, he began pushing the sailors still on the pirates’ ship back towards their own. “Back across, now!”

“You too, lads!” The pirate captain called. “We’re leaving! We’re done!”

Back on the main ship, the skeletons redoubled their efforts to cross back as Derville, following Dukki’s lead, stood defiantly between them and the sailors.

“No!” Came a sudden, sharp cry. It was the first mate! Back on the pirates’ ship he had stepped in front

of his captain and was angrily stamping his feet. There was a defiance in his tone and a deep anger. "I won't let you leave prey when you've caught it!"

"What are you ... ?" The pirate captain looked in amazement at her officer.

The first mate turned on the spot and called out to the undead crew across both ships.

"Stand fast!" He shouted. His voice boomed with a deep echo that seemed strange in the stillness of the air. As he called though, the pirate crew all did so. "We have to finish this!" He yelled, turning back on the captain. "Give the order! End this!"

The pirate captain looked taken aback.

"Very well, if you won't, I will!" He said turning back. "Finish it, lads! Kill them!"

As one man, the pirate crew began lumbering towards the sailors. There

seemed to be a pale blue glint in their eyes as they all drew weapons and swung at the sailors.

Many parried, some leapt out of the way, others turned and ran as far as they could. The two ships creaked as the crews shifted on top of them.

The sailors felt the weariness in their muscles as the image of another fight loomed in front of them. Many called again for a truce and a ceasefire. The undead hoard seemed to be all the more focused now though and continued to advance on them.

“No!” The pirate captain’s voice rang out. “No! I won’t allow it. Stand down! Stand down!”

For a moment it seemed that the undead faltered. They stood motionless for a few seconds and one or two turned to look at her, the blue fading from their eyes and small smiles forming on their faces.

For the briefest of moments it felt as if the whole thing was about to stop.

Then, with a power that pushed many backwards where they stood, a burst of blue light erupted and struck out in all directions.

The first mate stood, hands raised and eyes fully black.

“No!” He shouted. “For Immu, this must be finished! Blood is demanded! And blood there shall be!”

The eyes of the undead now glowed again with a bright blue fire and they rounded on the sailors. Elvin, Dukki and Derville all held their breath and readied for a battle.

But the captain’s voice came again.

“Stop it!” She cried. “Stand down! I won’t let this happen! We’re a crew! We look out for each other! We save each other! Now stop this madness and come back!”

The air was thick with the sticky taste of magic.

The undead and the sailors alike readied attacks.

Then one zombie, for a moment, slumped. The light flickering in its eyes. It looked at the sailors, at its fellow crewmates and up at the captain. Then, with a slow, deliberate tone, it spoke.

“No,” it said, sounding the word out carefully with a tongue that had long since lost its full ability, “no, I won’t ... I won’t do this.” It looked hard at the captain. “We follow you, captain!”

Like a ripple then as a large wave, the others lowered their weapons and did likewise. Shouts and cries of “we follow you, captain!” echoed around the ship as zombie and skeleton alike saluted their captain.

“No!!!” The first mate stamped his foot and swore to the sky. “No! Immu demands blood! If you won’t see this through then I will!”

The captain ran to stop him but it was too late. Another burst of blue energy erupted from him as he started to chant deep, harsh words. Both crews looked on in horror as they realised the sea around them was bubbling. A deep rumble filled the air and the bubbling turned into a roar as water flew up in all directions.

“Immu demands blood!” The first mate repeated as from the seas a tentacle rose.

Blood

A tentacle erupted from the sea, bright purple and covered in suckers. It rose high into the air, illuminated by the early morning sun. All assembled stood motionless as they waited to see what would happen next. Over on the pirates' ship they could hear the cackle laughter of the first mate.

“Kraken!” Bonny shouted. The tentacle came down hard on the main ship, hitting the deck and splintering many of the planks. Most of the crew fell hard to the boards but several found themselves slipping towards the edge and over into the cold waves beneath.

More tentacles erupted from the sea and began reaching out in all directions as the first mate's laughter continued to ring out over even the roaring of the waters.

People began to scramble in all directions as another tentacle came down hard on the deck. Several more felt themselves sliding as they fell over the edge and joined the others in the wash.

At last, the head of the great beast became fully visible too. A large, pointed head with two great eyes set in it that blinked for a moment in the light of the early sun then focussed on the crew.

Somewhere beneath the mass of writhing tentacles, a mouth opened.

The kraken roared!

Derville still in the middle of the deck, had fallen with the others and was sliding towards the edge as a hand quickly grabbed hers. Elvin had rushed down and was bracing against the rails to pull her back up.

With an effort he heaved but the splashing wash on the boards was making it hard to hold steady.

Just then though there was a thud as a figure swung in on a rope and landed beside him.

It was Dukki! The great man grabbed Derville's other hand and together they pulled her up.

The three stumbled together up the stairs onto the poop of the ship.

"What is that thing?" Derville panted.

"I," Elvin caught his breath, "I do not know!"

"I don't know but it's huge!" Dukki added, looking up at it. The tentacles rounded again and struck the ship. They held fast to the railing beside them as the ship creaked and splintered once more.

"It's a kraken!" Came the voice of Bonny. She and Sam ran up to join them. "I," she looked stunned, "I didn't think they were real!"

Another figure swung across from the pirates' ship and landed beside them.

“Real enough!” The pirate captain said with a growl. “And that damned fool has summoned it! Question is, how do we stop it?”

“We?” Sam looked taken aback.

“Aye, lad! We!” The pirate captain smiled. “I’m sorry I ever harboured that wretch but things are what they are. Now how do we get rid of it?”

There was a moment of confusion then Bonny spoke.

“I can’t say as I’ve ever heard much about them,” she began, “mostly what they looks like ... but it seems to me that the problem we’ve got is those arms of its!”

She pointed up at the great tentacles.

“Right,” Elvin said, looking around them, “take these!” He grabbed at several dropped and discarded cutlasses on the deck. “Two by two!”

He began handing swords to those without them. “Dukki and Derville, you two together! Sam, Bonny, you two take one. Captain?”

The captain smiled at him and raised her sword.

“You are with me!” Elvin smiled back.

“Aye, lad!” The captain cried and sprang forward with Elvin.

They all made their way up the rigging. Dukki pulled Derville and Derville guided Dukki until they were directly over one flailing tentacle. Dropping hard onto it they began to hack with their weapons. The beast let out a great roar and shook itself violently. Derville held fast but Dukki was thrown down to the deck.

Likewise, Sam and Bonny stabbed at the beast but quickly joined Dukki on the deck as they were thrown down.

Elvin and the captain had barely landed when they heard the first mate's voice boom once again.

“Harder! Stronger!” He cried. They could see wisps of blue magic surging over the creature as he did. “Beat them down!”

The tentacles all came down hard, throwing the attackers down hard onto the deck and splintering the wood even more.

They each pulled themselves up and saw as the beast was rounding for another attack.

“I don't know about you,” Dukki said, taking it all in, “but the sea's looking like a better bet to me at the moment!”

“Don't kid yourself!” Derville called out. “That thing would swallow you up if you fell in!”

“I think,” Elvin panted, trying hard to focus, “I think I have a plan, if we can just ...”

He stopped. There was no end to that sentence. He desperately thought for something they could do.

“I’m sorry,” came the voice of the pirate captain, “I, I never meant for this ...”

“Captain!” A voice called, it sounded slow and laboured. The pirate captain looked around to see her crew standing on-deck beside them.

She made to speak but the crew began together ...

“We ... cannot hold ... for long.” As each struggled to speak, another took up the line. “We have little ... will ... left. He will ... command us and you ... will die.”

“No!” She cried. “We’ll stop him! We’ll keel haul him!”

“No!” The chorus continued. “We ... can save ... the living ... can be saved. We have lived ... long ... enough. We ...”

“No!” The captain cried again. “No, I won’t ...”

“We can ... save ... you. Like you ... saved us!”

“Lads!” The captain called. The crew stood straight and saluted.

“Goodbye ... captain!”

And with that turned and began climbing and leaping up onto the flailing tentacles of the beast. Each in pairs, two-by-two as the others had tried. Landing and hacking and slashing at the creature.

As they did, it seemed to Dukki and Derville and Elvin that the eyes of the undead looked almost alive again. They seemed to smile. And then, one by one, they began to glow with a radiant light. In a flurry of bursts almost like a chorus of fireworks they each exploded with light and disappeared as the beast recoiled in pain, its tentacles burnt. At last, even the ghost of Sampson flew straight at the creature and,

with an enormous burst of light, blinded it, pushing it back into the water.

“Goodbye!” The captain called.

There was a cheer from the sailors as they watched this but it was quickly silenced as the voice of the first mate cut through again.

“No!” He cried, landing down on the deck of the main ship himself, looking at the kraken and commanding it again with all his anger. “Harder! Stronger! Immu demands blood!”

The beast reared up again. Seemingly all its might was bearing down hard on them.

“Abandon ship!” Dukki cried, pulling Elvin and Derville with him as he leapt off the deck.

Many followed his lead.

The first mate cackled.

“Immu demands blood! Immu demands ... !”

Then he turned and saw as the tentacles came down hard. Crashing in to the already heavily beaten deck. Splintering it further and splitting the ship in two.

His cries and his anger could be heard all around as the ship finally broke apart and was dragged far below ... with the first mate rigid on its deck.

New Beginnings

The sun was well up now. Elvin and Derville resurfaced from the waters. Breathing deeply as they caught their breath again.

“Looks like that’s about it.” Derville called up to the deck.

They each grabbed a hold of a rope ladder that had been dropped over the side of the pirate ship. The ship itself no longer bore the black jack though, it had been withdrawn and replaced with a hastily thrown together white flag and promptly thrown overboard in the hopes it would not be seen that this had been a pirate vessel.

Dukki reached down and lifted each of them up onto the deck with a grin on his face.

“Good job down there!” He smiled.

On the deck there were the figures of Notley and their own captain,

bandaged and being checked over by sailors. They had all made their way onto the remaining ship and, after several dives to the splintered wreckage of the ship, they had retrieved those that had remained below deck.

Derville led the others up onto the poop where the, now former, captain of the pirate ship was standing, looking out at the rising sun.

“They’re all gone.” She said, not turning to look at the newcomers. Elvin made to step forward but Derville pressed a hand against him and he stayed. “What do I do now?”

“That’s up to you.” A voice picked up behind her. It was Dukki.

She rounded on him.

“Is it?” She shouted. “I’ve lost my ship! I’ve lost my crew! And when we dock, it’s off to the mines for me!”

She kicked at the deck and a small piece of wood arced off and landed in the water.

“Well ... no, actually.” Derville broke in. “The captain’s come round now and here’s the thing. You can be crew or you can be a passenger that gets put down at the dock. As far as everyone’s concerned, the pirates all went down with our ship.”

She took off her tri-corn hat and looked it over. A true pirate’s hat. She flung it out into the sea.

“So it’s up from the bottom again then, is it?” She sighed.

“Well, there’s one more thing.” Elvin stepped forward. “You see, it would not be right to just take your ship. Even if a ship is owed.” He brought round a hand and held it out to her. “I spoke with the captain and I think this should ... cover the expense.”

She looked at the purse of monies he had handed her.

“About ten times over!” She shouted angrily. “I don’t want your charity! I want ...”

“A ship and a crew to run it.” Elvin cut in. “And it seems we are responsible now for you having neither.”

She hesitated.

“It’s hard,” Elvin said, looking her in the eye, “getting back up after you get knocked down hard. And there is nothing that can ever really replace a loved thing that has been lost ... but,” he looked at Dukki and Derville and felt his own pangs of grief as he remembered how many people he had lost, “but you need to find new beginnings. Otherwise you get lost in the endings.”

Not much more was said after that.

The former pirate captain, who gave her name to the passenger list as “Eliza”, went below to gather some things.

Up on deck, all hands did their best to sail the ship in to dock.

It was still several day’s journey on to the port city of Alexia where they had

been due to dock. There was much to do to bring the ship in.

In time though, they sighted land and, as the sun was riding down towards dusk again. They pulled in to the harbour and moored up.

When they lowered the gang plank, a host of wardens was waiting ready to board and search the vessel. The captain, still only partially recovered, gave as good an explanation as could be managed. Telling the tale of the pirates and the battle with the necromancer and the kraken.

It seemed that some of this was already known to them and they had been alerted to the possible arrival of the necromancer himself. The cabins were all searched and many of the first mate's belongings were confiscated.

Some time later though Dukki, Derville and Elvin made their way ashore with Eliza.

They said their farewells and she disappeared into the crowd of the busy port.

“So what do we do now?” Dukki asked, looking back at the dock and the busy loading and unloading of cargo.

“Another ship?” Elvin asked.

“No, thank you!” Derville exclaimed. “I’ve had about enough of the high seas.”

“Well, there is only one way to go then, I guess.” Elvin shrugged and turned to look at the sprawling city ahead of them.

Tall sandstone structures rose in all directions. Ornate archways and intricate stained-glass windows seemed to cover every avenue and highway. Stalls selling fruits and meats and furs and all sorts of other things lined either side and many people on foot and with wagons were rolling up and down the main roads.

Elvin shouldered his pack. He had kept to his shirt sleeves and bundled away his coat. Derville had done the same. The heat of the day seemed to even be getting to Dukki who slipped off his helmet, rubbed his forehead and thought for a moment.

“Well come on then,” Dukki said with a smile, “let’s go!”

The three of them disappeared into the throng and were soon lost in the hubbub.

Meanwhile, back at the docks, a bag of money changed hands and an old ship was given a new name and a fine new jack at the top of its mast.

After all, you couldn’t keep a sea dog on land for long.

And the sea was calling.