

# **A TALE FROM THE DEEP**

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**COLLECTIVE STUDIO BUNDLE 4**

The mixed smell of gunpowder and seawater still lingered in the air. As he closes his eyes, Krog Thickshell could almost imagine what would happen in his deck - Half-Pint Delloit would swing down the crow's nest, nimble as halflings are wont to be, with the ropes coiled in his torso turning like a spinning top; Grub, the cook of the ship, would exit the cargo hold and throw his cleaver in the first forehead he'd seen; Ferdinand Aguja, as always, he would stay in the main deck, defending the ship against invaders.

Krog loaded his musket and fired against the corsair that tried to rappel from the topsail's enemy ship to his side. He was simply amazed by the feat of acrobatics displayed, wishing he could do that. The man was graceful and precise, and he seemed to be born to do that.

"Hm, how I wish I could do that", Thickshell thought, knowing it was impossible. His shell alone would easily weigh two hundred pounds. The pellets landed on the flying pirate square in the chest, making him land on his back right beside Aguja. Ferdinand quickly glanced over his side to register the enemy down, and quickly went to the next target, cutting the ropes that tried to lock one ship to the other.

One of the attackers was almost climbing the rails, when a cleaver hit him right between the eyes - Grub ran heavily towards the body before he lost yet another weapon. This was the last good cleaver he had lying around in the kitchen. Aguja pulled the ropes and threw them against the enemy's ship clamp.

Krog took hold of the rudder once again, to maneuver the ship so they were side-by-side. When he managed a good position, he rang the bell to notify Dyna that they were good to go.

Below decks, Dyna ran yelling to the sailors to open the gunports; the second yell was to position the cannons properly and to put a sandbag right behind the cannon's wheel, and at the third one she yelled as she ran through the whole deck with a torch at hand, lighting them all up, anxious to get everything ready for the show.

When all the cannons were properly set, half of the hands on deck would go up to help fend off the boarding party. At that moment, all eight canons of the great King's Creek would fire, "Precisely every three minutes", said Dyna, beaming.

Usually, in Imperium's waters, corsair ships were as frequent as seaweeds, but days before a cyclone that came raging from Mitramar's shore dispersed the whole fleet, and the Pride, which was this very ship they were fending off, was one of them. All of them lost, near the Triangle of Malathor, which was an excellent opportunity for Krog and his band to thin the herd of blue sails while getting provisions for the trip. Water, food and tools were all invaluable where you couldn't find either, even now that this was the third clash of King's Creek after undocking, and the first that was going favorably. The crew left Safeport with fifty sailors but now only thirty were still onboard safe and sound.

"Fortunately, Lady Luck is smiling at Krog once again!", the turtle man thought, laughing when he was aiming at another poor sod.

With the reinforcements coming from below decks and the cannons and ships properly positioned, it was a matter of time before they could obliterate all resistance. Using more ropes to attach the ships against each other, they started to throw the corpses to the empty ship and came back with loot and spoils. Between them, a map of the region, which made a deep impression on Krog - sea charts were very few and far between, even so depicting the triangle of Malathor.



The legends told that Malathor was a great sea monster that sported nine heads, longs as serpents and they could swallow ships whole. Its eyes could petrify the ones who stared at it and the tongues lashed like whips and they could spit poison from afar. Its nest lay somewhere between the Malathor islands, and no one could even fathom the treasures it kept.

Dunno, Cap'n - said Grub, spitting tobacco over the rails, while he heard the men discuss the next steps. - Thar's reason that scallywags ne'er chased aft this one legend. They be legend 'cause no one was stinkin squiffy enough t' go aft 'em, 'n I doubt these morons could.

Oy, fatso, shut up - retorted Aguja, his hand on his rapier - I am the leader o' these 'morons' ye call, 'n I won't be acceptin' shit from ye.

Between Ferdinand and Grub, it was always like this. Aguja was a tall human, but he could only reach Grub's torso in height, and always being looked down at ticked him off.

Hm, silence you two - Said Krog slowly, with a low voice, hitting Ferdinand's knee with his musket. - I am the captain of this ship, and I will not tolerate useless blabbering on my deck. You may eat each other's fist outside of this ship, but here I'm the one calling the shots. We left Safeport with one objective and one objective only. We will discover whatever lies in the triangle of Malathor.

After a long pause of effect, Krog holstered his musket in his shell. Everyone knew to not talk after he gave the final word, and Aguja learned this the hard way, waking up two days later the last time he felt brave enough to talk back.

Five days' worth of sailing were left to these sailors, the sun chastising everyone beneath its rays in the tropical climate. Upon hearing some sailor complaining about the heat, Aguja retorted.

One day in the southernmost sea 'n ye'd be changin' yer tune handsomely enough. Warm 'n wet be way better than cold 'n wet, take me word for it. We lost a few good sailors thar... - The fencer yelled to the crow's nest, where Half-Pint was lying in his tiny hammock as lookout - Oy, Half! How many sealegs we lost in Faith's Waters?

Twenty, I'd wager. - The hafling yelled back - Twenty-five if we account for each of Dyna's fingers!

God knows if it's 'cause 'twas too cold or if 'twas playin' wit' fire 'cause 'twas too cold... - Aguja laughed back, complaining.

Land ahoy!

Upon hearing the miracle words, Ferdinand ran to the ship's bow, but could only see the tip of a mountain in the horizon, smaller than his fingernail. And it looked like it was calling the King's Creek, with the wind boosting it's sails right after Half-Pint yelled.

When they got near the shores of Malathor's islands, they could see several masses of land dotting the horizon, and some were hidden beneath others, with hills and forests rising from the sands. However, right in the middle was a great black mountain that could be seen from miles away.



After Krog anchored the ship near the main island's shores, the sailors debarked the ship and began to explore the island. For many of them, it was the first time exploring new places in this world. Even Dyna usually didn't leave the ship's cabins, generally too absorbed in her own projects with chemicals while the others left to drink and eat.

Half-Pint quickly began scouting the place, being the one with the most adventurous spirit. He knew deep down that whatever was precious in this island, was in the black mountain.

And it wasn't that hard to get there. Grub took one of his largest knives to cut his way through in the direction pointed by the halfling. They saw some weird looking insects and animals, but they went mostly unperturbed.

In the foothills they found a cave entrance, which could easily swallow the King's Creek whole. Since they seemed to be alone in the island, they decided to enter the cave as a group. "Unless one o' ye poor souls wants t'stay behind 'n check out fer beetles 'n bugs!", Aguja laughed, going in. When they entered the cave, the sound of running water could be heard, and clinking sounds of metal along with the steps from the pirates going in echoed in the damp stone floor.

Half-Pint nodded with his head and led the way in, conjuring a globe of light to illuminate the path. However, with just a few turns in the meandering tunnels, the bard could see light crystals dotting the stone walls, glowing in colors he had never seen before.

The light always finds a way - He laughed, looking at Ferdinand right by his side.

Shuddup, we don't know if we 'ave company yet!

The halfling just nodded and kept walking. With the natural light from the crystals, Half-Pint decided to dispel his, and the crystals started to glow even more. The stone labyrinth became simpler, since some intersections only had one way lit, "Pointing either to the right way or the one with the death trap", he thought, but preferred to keep quiet and take the scenic route. With a smile from ear-to-ear the group happily followed him, sure of their steps.

The more they went inward, a humming sound started to fill the background of sounds in the cave, louder and louder until they reached a huge

domed cave, big enough to house thirty times their ship. The crystals still dotted the stone walls, and their light was reflected in a lake that surrounded a small isle in the middle of the room. Krog calculated that it would easily take a solid two hundred strokes to get there. On the island, a heap of gold and loot glowed.

The golden light was reflected in those dark waters, making the treasure stand out more. Laughing madly, Half-Pint started to take his boots off and swim.

Aguja yelled once more "Oy stupid! Wait fer a bit, will ya!", but his advice fell on deaf ears. Everyone started to jump in the waters, swimming to the island shore. The halfling reached the short soon enough, and dove in the mountain of treasure.

Guys! Take a look! Look at this gold! - He yelled, his laugh echoing in the cave.

Everyone who reached the shore started to laugh and dance - even Krog was laughing, looking at Aguja right beside him, while he dumped his belt with the weapon and his backpack so they don't get wet. Every one of them hugged the nearest treasure, hugged the nearest pirate and danced and laughed.

Swords, jars, shields, troves, coins from a thousand countries laid there, waiting for the taking. Some of them looked like being centuries old, others looked like they were coined yesterday. The visage of that mountain of treasure was seducing, and all of them were taken away by the euphoria of having fulfilled the pirate lifelong dream. Aguja laughed under his breath, thinking "Sink me, I can't believe we did it!".

Suddenly, a cry made all the party stop. It was the sound of surprise but with fear, soon being muffled by the sound of the waves. Grub was quick to go to where it took place, but he couldn't find anything but a small golden lamp right by the waters, and a small bandana, used by one of the crew mates they picked up at Safeport. He looked to his sides, without understanding what happened. The waters looked calm, the lamp seemed ordinary enough, even though he heard of tales of artifacts taking this shape.

Then he began to feel the lake's waters on his shins, and rapidly rising.

Oy! We 'ave t' bail, the sea be risin'!

The others, taken aback by the situation, began to pull as much as they could on their pockets before leaving to the exit. "Let's go, let's go! Leave everything or you will sink, you fools!", yelled Krog while he dipped in the waters.

As they were swimming, the water began to fill the place up to the ceiling, getting more and more claustrophobic. Before his last breath of air, Krog yelled "Take a breath, and let's dive to the entrance, and we keep going for the crystal path!".

As soon as Krog dived, he could see the beast. Grub was gasping for dear life while a tentacle as big as a ship's mast constricted him. The beast's face, thrice the size of his ship, lurked below the waters, eying him with a mocking eye the size of a tower shield, as black as the ocean's depth. He tried to swim away, but the scene scared him enough to make him swallow water up to his lungs, his heart beating like a drum.

"And, a thin veil was pulled in front of his eyes, a pain so great that seemed akin to being torn in half. And it was the last time anyone has heard of Krog and his merry band of the Safeport pirates", the bard finished his tale, sitting on a tavern's table while sipping in mead, surrounded by men, women and children. He rested his lute on his lap, and made a bow to the audience, while being showered with praise, people throwing coins at his hat, clapping.

And how did you learn of this tale? - A kid asked, still sitting in his legs.

The bard just smiled:

Some create stories, my dear. Others, lives them.

