

Ghost Stalk

by Glen Cook

Glen Cook, who had a short piece in our March issue, "The Seventh Fool," returns with a colorful and action-filled seagoing fantasy, about the crew of the Vengeful Dragon and their search for a phantom ship.

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by GLEN COOK

I

It seemed we had been aboard the Vengeful D. forever, madly galloping the coasts from Simballawein to The Tongues of Fire. We looked toward land with the lust of stallions for mares beyond a twelve-foot

fence. But our barrier was far less visible. It consisted solely of Colgrave's will.

"Going to the Clouds of Heaven next time I hit Portsmouth," said Little Mica, bending over his needle. He was forever patching sail. "Best damned cathouse on the coast. Best darned cats. Going to make them think Old Goat God himself has arrived." He giggled.

It was Subject Number One with Little Mica. It was with most of us. I had never met a sailor who was not drunk or horny. He would be both if he had his feet on dry land.

"Runt like you couldn't satisfy a dwarfs grandmother," Student remarked from behind the inevitable book. They dueled with insults awhile. There was little else to do. We were running before a steady breeze.

During the exchange Student's eyes never left his book.

It was one we had taken off a Daimiellian two-master months earlier. We were due to take another vessel soon. (Maybe The One. I hoped. I prayed. Colgrave had vowed to remain at sea till he found her.) Our stores were running low. There was mold down to the heart of the bread. Maggots were growing in the salt pork, which had gotten wet in a recent storm. There was no fruit to fight the scurvy. And we were down to our last barrel of grog. One lousy barrel would not last me long.

I had no stomach for a beach raid just there, much as I wanted to feel earth and grass beneath my soles. We were a half dozen leagues north of Cape Blood, off Itaskian coasts. Those were shores Trolledyngjans habitually plundered. And it was their season for hell raising. Coast watchers were, likely, considering us with cold, hard eyes at that moment.

"Sail ho!"

Men scrambled, clearing the decks. I glanced up. As usual, Lank Tor, our chief boatswain, was in the crow's nest. He was as crazy as the Old Man.

Colgrave stalked from his cabin. As always, he was armed and clothed as if about to present himself at court. The boatswain's cry, like a warlock's incantation, had conjured him to the weatherdecks. "Where away?" He would not go below till we had caught her. Or she shook us. That seldom happened.

I peered to seaward. There were always squalls off Cape Blood. That day was no exception, though the storm was playing coy, lying on the horizon instead of embracing the coast. Prey ships liked to duck in to escape. The rocky shoreline offered no hope better than drowning amidst wreckage and thundering surf.

"On the bow!" Tor shouted. "Just round the point and making the landward tack."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha," the Old Man roared, slapping his good thigh.

His face had been destroyed by fire. The whole left side was a grotesque lava flow of scar tissue. His left cheekbone showed an inch square iceberg tip of bare bone.

"We've got her. Had her before we ever saw her."

Cape Blood was a long, jagged, desolate finger of rock diddling the ocean across the paths of cold northern and warm southern currents. If the ship were round the point and on a landward tack, she was almost certainly caught. We had a strong breeze astern. She would have to shift sail for a long seaward

tack, coming toward us, piling onto the rocks round the headland. That turn, and bending on sail, would take time too.

"Shift your course a point to starboard," Colgrave roared at the helmsman. Toke, our First Officer, so summarily relieved of his watch, shrugged and went to watch Hengis and Fat Poppo, who had the chip log over the side.

"Making eight knots," he announced a moment later. The Old Man eyed the sails. But there was no way we could spread more canvas. With a breeze like the one we had we always ran hell-bent, hoping to catch somebody napping.

"She's seen us," Tor shouted. "Starting to come around. Oh! A three-master. Caravel rigged." We were a caravel ourselves, a stubby, pot-bellied vessel high in the bows and stern.

The Old Man's face brightened. Glowed. The ship we were hunting was a caravel. Maybe this was The One.

That was what we called her aboard Vengeful Dragon. No one knew her true name, though she had several given her by other sailors. The Ghost Ship. The Hell Ship. The Phantom Reeve. Like that.

"What colors?" Colgrave demanded.

Tor did not answer. We were not that close. Colgrave realized it and did not ask again.

I did not know if the phantom were real or not. The story had run the western coast almost since the beginning of sea trade, changing to fit the times. It told of a ghost ship crewed by dead men damned to sail forever, pirating, never to set foot on land, never to see Heaven or Hell, till they had redeemed themselves for especially hideous crimes. The nature of their sins had never been defined.

We had been hunting her for a long time, pirating ourselves while we pursued the search. Someday we would find her. Colgrave was too stubborn to quit till he had settled his old score. Or till we, like so many other crews who had met her, fed the fish while she went on to her next kill.

The Old Man's grievance involved the fire that had ruined his face, withered his left arm, and left him with a rolling limp, like a fat galleon in a heavy ground swell. The phantom, like so many pirates, always fired her prey when finished with them. Colgrave, somehow, had survived such a burning.

His entire family, though, had gone down with the vessel.

The Captain, apparently, had been a rich man. Swearing he would find The One, He had purchased the Vengeful Dagon. Or so the story went, as it had been told to us.

None of us knew how he had gotten rich in the first place. All we really knew about him was that he had a terrible temper, that he compensated for his disfigurement by dressing richly, that he was a genius as a pirate, and that he was absolutely insane.

How long had we been prowling those coasts? It seemed an age to me. But they had not caught us yet, not the Itaskian Navy, or the witch-mastered corsairs of the Red Isles, or the longshipmen of Trolledyngja, nor the warships of the many coastal city-states. No. We caught them, like spiders who hunted spiders. And we continued our endless hunt.

Always we hunted. For the three-masted caravel with the deadman crew.

II

"Steward!" Colgrave called.

"Half pint for all hands." The Old Man seldom spoke at less than a bellow.

Old Barley flashed a sloppy salute and went looking for the key to the grog locker. That was my cue. Grog had been scarce lately. I shuffled off to be first in line.

From behind his book Student remarked to Little Mica, "Must be rough to be a wino on the Vengeful D."

I threw him a daggers look. He did not glance up. He never did. He was not interested in observing the results of his razor-tongued comments.

As always, Priest fell in behind me, tin cup in hand. Service aboard Vengeful Dragon and a taste for alcohol were all we had in common. I suppose, though, that that made him closer to me than to anybody else. He was universally, thoroughly hated. He was always trying to save our souls, to get us to renounce sin and this mad quest for a phantom killer little more evil than we.

Priest was strange. He was blueassed hell in a boarding party. He went in like he meant to cutlass his devil right back to Hell.

The Kid and my friend Whale-boats jockeyed for the third position, till the Old Man turned his one ice-blue eye their way. The Kid did a fast fade. He was supposed to be on watch.

Kid had not been with us long.

We had picked him up off a penta-conter in the Scarlotti Gulf. We had taken her in full view of Dunno Scuttair's wharves. Their little navy had been too scared to come out after us.

Kid was crazy-wild, would do anything to get attention. He and I did not get along. I reminded him of the headmaster of the orphanage he had been fleeing when he had stowed away aboard the pentaconter.

I had heard that that headmaster had been murdered, and arson, that had taken a score of lives, had been committed on the orphanage. The Kid would not say anything one way or the other.

We kept our sins to ourselves.

Few of us got along. Dragon remained taut to her maintruck with anger and hatred.

Ah. A life on the rolling wave, a cruise on the Vengeful D., buccaneering with sixty-eight lunatics commanded by the maddest captain on the western ocean . . . Sometimes it was Hell. Sheer, screaming Hell.

Old Barley was having trouble finding the key. The old coot never could remember where he had put it so he would not miss it next time he needed it.

"Shake a leg down there, buzzard bait. Or I'll bend you to the bowsprit for the gulls."

That would get him moving.

Barley was a coward. Scared of his own shadow. You told him something like that, and if he thought you were serious, he would carve you into pieces too small for fish bait. He was the only man aboard meaner than Colgrave and deadlier than Priest.

Curious what fear could do to a man.

Little Mica, leaning on the rail, said, "I can see her tops."

"So who cares?" Whaleboats replied. "We'll see all we want in an hour." He had been through the stalking dance so often it was all a dreadful bore for him now.

Whaleboats had picked up his nickname long ago, in an action where, when we had been becalmed a half mile from a prospective victim, he had suggested we storm her from whaleboats. It had been a good idea, except that it had not worked. They had brought up their ballast stones and dropped them through the bottoms of our boats. Then the breeze had freshened. We had had to swim back to Dragon while they sailed off. That vessel was one of few that had gotten away.

Mica persisted. "Why's she running already? She can't know who we are."

"What difference does it make?" Whaleboats growled. "Barley, if you're not up here in ten seconds..."

"Ask Student," I suggested. "He's got all the answers." But some he would not tell, like how to retire from the crew.

She was running because she had to. Anyone beating round Cape Blood who encountered a vessel running before the wind did so. Nine times out of ten, the second ship was a pirate who had been lying in ambush behind the headland. I had never understood why the Itaskian navy did not keep a squadron on station there, to protect their shipping. Maybe it was because the weather was always rotten. That day's fairness was unusual in the extreme.

Nervously, I glanced at the squall line. Had it moved closer? I hated rough weather. Made me sick. Grog only made it worse.

Old Barley showed up with the bucket he had tapped off the barrel. There had better be some on the three-master, I thought. Doing without made me mean.

The Old Man stood behind Barley, beaming at us like a proud father. For that moment you would have thought he had completely forgotten his prey in his concern for his crew.

Dragonfeathers. The hunt was all that ever mattered to him.

He would sacrifice everyone and everything, even himself, to fulfill his quest. And we all knew it.

I thought, I could reach out with my fish knife . . . schlick-schlick, and spill his guts on the deck. End it all

right now.

I would have to remind Tor to get sand up from ballast before we closed with the caravel. To absorb the blood. He never remembered. He forgot a lot from day to day, remembering only his name and trade. He came to every battle with the eagerness of a male virgin.

It would have been easy to have gotten Colgrave. He was so vulnerable. Crippled as he was, he was no infighter. But I did not try. None of us ever did, though we all thought about it. I could see the speculation on a dozen faces then.

So easy. Kill the crazy bastard, run Dragon aground, and forget hunting spook ships.

You'll never do it, never do it, echoed through my mind.

Any other crew on any other ship would have strangled the insane sonofabitch ages earlier.

III

"I can see her mainsail," said Little Mica. "She's shifting sail again."

"Speed it up, Barley," said the Old Man. He put that cold eye on me as I tried to sneak my cup in again. A half pint was barely enough to warm the throat.

Better be hogsheads full on that three-master, I thought.

"Looks like she's trying for the squall," Tor called down. "I make her a Freylander. She was showing personal colors but got them in before I could read them."

Ah. That meant there was someone important aboard. They thought maybe we would not try as hard if we did not know.

Freyland lay west of Cape Blood, a dozen leagues to seaward where it came nearest the mainland. The caravel must have been making the run from Portsmouth to Songer or Ringerike, an overnight journey.

We seldom prowled the coasts of the island kingdom because the ghost ship seldom appeared there. We left Freyland to our competitors, the Trolledyngjans.

Colgrave's expression - what could be read through the scars - was deflated. Not The One. Again. Then he reconsidered. The flight and flirting with colors could be a ploy. He had done the same himself, to lull a Red Islander or Itaskian.

"Shift your heading another point to starboard," he ordered. "Bosun, come down and prepare the decks."

Lank Tor descended as agilely as an ape. Only the Kid scrambled through the rigging more quickly. But Kid sometimes fell.

A loud thump on the maindeck, waking you in the night, told you he had been showing off again.

As Tor hit the deck he began growling orders through a grin of anticipation.

He enjoyed those bloodlettings. They were the only times he felt alive. The boring interim periods were the devil's price he paid for his moments of bloody ecstasy. The lulls were not bad for him, though. His memory was so weak it seldom reached back to our last conquest.

One of his mates began issuing weapons. I took a cutlass, went below for the bow and arrows I kept by my hammock, then repaired to my station on the forecastle deck. I was the best archer aboard. My job was to take out their helmsman and officers.

"I'd shoot a lot straighter with a little more grog in me," I grumbled to Whaleboats, who had charge of the forward grappling hooks.

"Couldn't we all. Couldn't we all." He laughed. "Talk about your straight shooting. I ever tell you about the thirteenth-year-old I had in Sacuescu? Don't know where she learned, but she came well trained. Positive nympho. Male relatives didn't approve, though." He drew back his left sleeve to expose a long jagged scar on the roll of muscle outside the shoulder socket. "Two hundred fifty yards, and me running at the time."

I daydreamed while pretending interest. He had told the story a hundred times. Without improving it, the way most of us did. I don't think he remembered having told it before.

No imagination, Whaleboats.

The sea ran in long, yard-tall, polished jade swells. Not a fleck of white. No depth. I could not see in. It must have been calm for days. There was none of the drifting seaweed usually torn up by the Cape's frequent storms.

The next one would be bad. They always were when they save their energies that way.

The ship's pitch and roll were magnified on the forecastle deck, which was twenty feet above the main. My stomach began to protest. I should have saved the damned grog for later.

But then there would have been less room for spirits from the caravel.

The wind was rising, shifting. We were nearing the squall. Little rills scampered over the larger swells.

We were getting nearer Cape Blood, too. I could hear the muted growling of the surf, could make out the geysers thrown up when a breaker crashed in between rocks, shattered, and hurled itself into the sky.

The caravel was less than a mile away. She was showing her stern now, but we had her. Just a matter of patience.

Barley and Priest came up, leading several of the best fighters. It looked like Colgrave planned to board forecastle to sterncastle. That was all right by me. It was all over but the killing, once we seized their helm.

Whaleboats spit over the rail. He was so unkempt he was disreputable even among us. "Maybe there'll be women," he mused. "Been a long time since we took one with women."

"Save one for the Virgin." I chuckled. That was the Kid's other name. It got used mostly when somebody was baiting him.

Whaleboats laughed too. "But of course. First honors, even." Then his face darkened. "One of these days we're going to catch another wizard."

They had tried it before.

It was our one great fear. Battles we could win when they were man against man and blade against blade. We were the meanest fighters on the western ocean. We had proven it a hundred times. But against sorcery we had no protection save the grace of the gods.

"Itaskia. We've hurt them most. They'll send out a bait ship with a first-rate witch-man aboard. Then what good our luck?"

"We managed before."

"But never again. I might take Student up on it." He did not say what.

The pirates of the Red Isles had tried it. It had been a close thing. We had been lucky, that time, that Colgrave was too crazy to run. Barley had gotten the sorcerer an instant before he could unleash a demon that would have scattered Dragon over half the Western Ocean.

Our competitors in the islands were not fond of us at all. We showed their vessels the same mercy we gave any others.

Each man of us prayed that we would find The One before some eldritch sea-fate found us.

I could make out faces on the caravel. Time to get ready. I opened their waterproof case and carefully considered my arrows. They were the best, as was my bow. Worth a year's hire for most men. Time was, I had made their price hiring them, and myself, out for a month.

I studied, I touched, I dithered. I finally selected the grey shaft with the two red bands.

Whaleboats observed the ritual with amusement, having failed to entice anyone into a wager on which I would choose. I always took the same one in the end. It was my luckiest shaft. I had never missed with it.

Someday I would exchange arrows with the archer aboard the phantom. They said he was sure death inside three hundred yards. I did not believe he could possibly be as deadly as I as long as I had the banded lady.

It would be interesting, if dangerous, meeting him.

The caravel was trying to trim her canvas. One of the cutlass men guffawed and shouted, "Fart in them! That'll give you all the wind you need."

I wondered what it was like to look over the taffrail and see certain death bearing down. And know there was not a thing you could do but wait for it.

IV

The caravel ran straight away, under full canvas. But the gap narrowed steadily. I could make out details of weapons and armor. "They've got soldiers aboard!"

"Uhm. A lot of them." That was Tor, who had the sharpest eyes on Vengeful D. He had known for some time, then.

I turned. The Old Man had clambered up to the poop, stood there looking like some dandified refugee from Hell.

" 'Bout close enough for you to do your stuff," said the boatswain, tapping my shoulder.

"Yeah?" It was a long, long shot. Difficult even with the banded arrow. Pitch, roll, yaw. Two ships. And the breeze playing what devil's games in between? I took my bow from its case.

It was worth a year's pay to most men. A magnificent instrument of death. It had been designed solely for the killing of men and custom-crafted to my hands and muscles. I ran my fingertips lightly over its length. For a long time the weapon had been my only love.

I had had a woman once, but she had lost out to the bow.

I bent it, strung it, took out the banded arrow.

They were making it difficult over there, holding up shields to protect their helmsman. They had recognized us.

The banded lady never missed. This time was no exception. At the perfect instant she lightnined through a momentary gap between shields.

The caravel heeled over as she went out of control. She slowed as her sails spilled wind. Panic swept her poop. We raced in.

Colgrave bellowed subtle course changes at our own helmsman. Our sails came in as we swept up.

One by one, I sped my next eleven shafts. Only two failed finding their mark. One was the treacherous blue and white I had threatened to break and burn, it seemed, a thousand times.

The Old Man brought our bows alongside their stern with a touch so deft the hulls barely kissed, as Barley, Priest, and their party leapt over. The shambles I had made of the other poop left no contest. We controlled her immediately.

Sails cracked and groaned as both vessels took them in. Our bows crept past the Freylander's waist.

Whaleboats threw his grapnel. I helped heave on the line.

Screaming, our men poured over the maindeck rail to assault the mob awaiting them. They were regular

soldiers, Freylander troops tempered in a hundred skirmishes with Trolledyngjan raiders. Once Whaleboats made fast, I resumed plying my bow, using scavenged Freylander arrows.

Crude things, they were unfit to caress a weapon like mine. No wonder they had not harmed any of us.

I dropped a score into the melee, probing for officers and sergeants, then took out a bothersome pair of snipers in the caravel's rigging. They had been plinking at the Old Man, who stood like a gnarled tree defying a storm, laughing as arrows streaked around him.

He would be some match for the dead captain of the phantom.

The caravel's poop was clear. Barley and Priest were holding the ladders against counterattacks from below. The men with them threw things at the crowd on the maindeck. I decided to recover my arrows before some idiot trampled them, went aft.

The uproar was overwhelming.

Shouts. Clanging weapons. Shrieks of pain. Officers and sergeants thundering contradictory orders. The sides of the vessels ground together as the seas rolled on beneath them. And the Old Man still laughed crazily on the poop. He and I were the only ones who remained aboard.

He nodded. "As always, well done."

I gave him an it was nothing shrug. When the sterncastles rolled together, I jumped across.

My feet came down in a pool of blood, skidded away. Down I went, my head bounding off the rail.

Colgrave laughed again.

It was nearly over by the time I came around. A handful of soldiers were defending a hatchway forward. Most of our men were pitching corpses overboard. They were eying that hatchway hungrily. Feminine wailing came from behind it. Priest and Barley were getting ready for the final rush.

I staggered up, planning to help with a few well placed arrows.

Damn! My head! And the Freylander seemed to be rolling badly.

It was not my imagination. The squall was closer. It would arrive in a few hours.

That was time enough for recreation. And to find the grog.

V

It had been another of those good battles. I sipped from a quart tankard I had found in the Freylander captain's cabin. No serious injuries for our boys. Lots of cuts and scratches, a bashed head here and a broken finger there. Nothing permanent. The gods must, as Colgrave claimed, have favored our mission. They seldom allowed any of us to come to harm.

The men were having a grand time down on the maindeck. Twelve women. A genuine princess and her ladies-in-waiting. What Whaleboats called a jackpot ship. The Virgin, I saw, was not anymore. He abandoned his conquest, scrambled into the Freylander's rigging, began dancing on a yardarm. He was naked from the waist down.

His sureness in the tops, his fearlessness, was his great talent. He showed it off too much.

Whaleboats, a priceless keg of Daimiellian brandy under one arm, a woman's satin bolster under the other, joined me on the poop. "Another master stroke." He nodded toward Colgrave, who still stalked Dragon's poop, muttering, cursing the luck that kept him from finding The One.

Student joined us, glancing at Whaleboats questioningly. Whaleboats shrugged.

Student had found himself some new books. "Squall's moving in," he observed. The water had become a bluish grey showing freckles and stripes of white. The seas were running closer together.

"Going to be a blue-assed bitch of a storm," I prophesied. "The way it's taking its time."

Little Mica was the next of the clique to arrive. He was half-naked, sweat-wet. "The chunky one's not bad." He grinned. His performance had been up to brags.

He was carrying several pounds of gold and silver. We had collected a lot in our time. So much we used it for ballast. Once we found and destroyed The One, we planned to return landside as rich as princes.

"That fool Kid's gonna break his neck yet."

He was hopping on one foot, on the tip of the yard, while hosing spurts of piss into the gap between ships.

He suddenly yelled wildly, threw up an arm, bounced his butt off the yard and plunged seaward, limbs flailing. The seamen roared as he did a perfect belly-buster. The ships nudged together. Everyone not otherwise occupied manned the rail.

"I told you..."

"Hold it." The Old Man was peering intently with his one eye. I saw it too, then. Coming out of an arm of the squall that had reached landward north of us. Two of them. "Longships. Trolledyngjans."

They were no more than three miles away. Their sails were fat with wind and distinct as they spotted us and altered course. One was a black sail bearing a scarlet wolf's head. The other was a yellow-red striped one bearing a black ax.

They were coming after us. Already they were putting their shields on their gunwales and taking in their sails so they could unstep their masts. They looked quick and practiced. Old hands.

Gloating, no doubt, about having caught a competitor with his pants down.

The Old Man bellowed, bellowed, bellowed. Not much sense came through, but the men, drunk though they were, reacted. A storm of booty flew from vessel to vessel. Fat Poppo chucked the naked princess over. She screeched as she bounced on her shapely little derriere. Lank Tor, laughing, planted a

slobbery, wine-dark kiss on her tender young lips, tossed her back. He clouted Poppo when the fat man protested.

"Fire time," said Student. He looked at Whaleboats in a way that must have had meaning. My friend hurried down the ladder after him.

In moments cutlasses were chopping at lines. Bow and arrows in one hand, half empty tankard in the other, I watched the deck force make sail. They kept tripping over plunder.

When the proper combination of rolls arrived, I casually stepped from rail to rail without losing a drop of my drink.

"Fo'c'sle," Colgrave growled. I nodded. "Wolfs Head first." I was not so far gone that I could not remember which had been which before they had gotten their sails in.

The Old Man was going to fight. Of course. He always fought. He would fight if the whole damned Itaskian Navy were coming down. He believed in his mission and that he was invincible because the gods were on his side.

The northmen were just a mile away when we finally got under way. Their oars worked with the swift precision of a centipede's legs.

Old hands. They needed no drummer to keep the cadence. They would be tough fighters.

Smoke poured from the Freylander. Naked women reached out to us, pleading.

"She's not burning right," said Mica, who had followed me to the forecandle.

As we drew away, the women abandoned the rail, began scurrying around with buckets.

"Student and Whaleboats better keep out of the Old Man's way," I replied. Colgrave would not be pleased.

He set a course angling seaward, squallward, across the bows of the Trolledyngjans. Any fugitive would have done the same, hoping to evade their first rush and get into the weather before they could come round and overhaul. The ax ship sheered to cut us off and to maneuver so they could board us over both rails. Less than a half mile separated us.

Old hands, yes, but they did not know us. They must have been used to working the coasts of Freyland. Seemed to me there was a good chance they had come over specially to take the fish we had caught already. There was a big king at Songer, and a scattered gaggle of smaller ones who, nominally, owed him allegiance. The little kings plotted against the big one, and one another, constantly. They were not above tipping the Trolledyngjans to an opportunity to plunder their rivals.

Politics is one specialized field of sin I haven't the wit to comprehend.

A quarter mile. I caressed the banded arrow. Except for Mica, she and I were alone this time. Any fighting would take place on the maindeck because the longships had such a low freeboard. And it would involve only the ax ship. I kissed the arrow. After all our time together, I thought, we were finally going to part.

Time. The Old Man threw the helm over hard. Dragon staggered. The sails rumbled and cracked as they spilled wind.

I sent the banded arrow on her final flight. Ever faithful, as that slut of a wife in Itaskia could not be, she sped to the northern helmsman's heart. He sagged against his rudder arm. Wolf's head heeled and bucked.

We took her directly amidships, our bows surging up and over, grinding and crunching her into driftwood and halves. Her mast, which had been shipped lengthwise atop her deck thwarts, levered up, speared through, and tangled in our sprit rigging. As we ploughed the wreckage, we staggered and shuddered like a fat lady donning a corset.

Little Mica yipped. A huge, incredibly hairy barbarian with mad blue eyes came up the mast one-handed, lugging an immense battle-ax. He sprang over the rail, howled. While he chased Mica, I dug up a boathook, then smacked him behind the ear. He was so huge it took both of us to dump him overboard. The water revived him. He splashed, cursed. The last I saw of him, he was swimming strongly toward the Freylander.

Our turn brought us round on a southerly course once more. We plowed through the wreckage. I stared down at bearded warriors busy drowning, clinging to debris, calling for help. The other Trolledyngjan had turned to pick up survivors but had second thoughts now that we were coming back.

They surely thought we were berserkers then, mad killers. Losing some of the precision they had shown earlier, they stepped their mast, made sail, and fled toward the squall.

I groaned, rubbed my stomach in anticipation. Colgrave would not turn loose. No matter that we were shipping water forward and a dozen men had to go to the pumps. No matter that we were drunk on our asses and exhausted from a battle already fought. He had been challenged. He would respond if it meant chasing the Trolledyngjan off the edge of the world.

VI

The waves stood taller and taller, the sea became leadish grey with ever more white running the ridges and faces of the swells. Spray salted my lips even there on the forecastle deck. Dragon bucked and rolled, her timbers protesting. Splatters of rain beaded on the decks. The air grew cooler. The Trolledyngjan entered the squall and gradually faded from visibility.

This was more her sort of weather. Her high, curved bows, broad beam, and shallow draft made it possible for her to ride up and down even the most awesome waves - as long as she met them bow on. With her low freeboard she could ship a lot of water fast. I suspected she would put out a sea anchor once she was safely concealed in the storm.

Dragon's altitude, fore and aft, had not been designed with waves in mind. The castles were meant to provide an advantage in battle. They made us a tad top-heavy and wind-vulnerable. In rough weather they existed solely to compound my misery.

There was a lot of wind in that squall. And Colgrave had reduced sail only as much as absolutely

compelled by the need to keep Dragon from being torn apart. The rigging crackled, screamed, groaned, as if a hundred demons were partying there. A topsail tore with a sh-whack! Like the fist of a giant whooshing into a stone wall, began popping and cracking in the gale. Only ribbons remained by the time they got it in.

The Kid was up there, helping cut parts free. Some thoughtful soul had remembered to fish him out as we were getting under way. He was a lucky little bastard.

I was rather pleased. Though he had little use for me, I liked him. As much as I liked anyone. He reminded me of myself when I was a lot younger.

He knew that he had been lucky. He was not clowning anymore. He was even using a safety harness.

I collected my weapons and cases. I had to take them below and care for them. Moisture and salt could ruin them forever. Colgrave did not protest. Everyone else, cook included, had to drop everything to work ship, but I was exempted. I was the thunderbolt, the swift, deadly lightning, that determined the course of battles the moment they were joined. Colgrave did not value me as a human being, but he did value my skills and weapons.

The seas were thirty feet tall and grey-black when I dragged myself back topside. My guts were flooding back and forth between my toes and ears. But I had to help with the work. We had reached a point where we were not only pursuing our mad captain's mission, we were fighting to survive.

Every man had found some way to rope himself to his station. Floods raged round the tossing decks, threatening anyone not securely tied. It was a long, watery walk home.

A caravel was not designed to endure that.

I staggered, splashed around, lost a stomach full, snagged the rail in time to save myself. Fat Poppo handed me a safety line. I joined the men trying to control the canvas the Old Man insisted we show.

Lank Tor, the crazy bastard, was in the crow's nest, watching for the Trolledyngjan. He should have been down on the maindeck showing off his sea wisdom, not up there proving he had a pig-iron gut. My stomach revolted just at the thought of being up where the mast's height magnified motion horrendously.

We did not regain contact till the weak light began fading from the grey, thick storm. In the interim I found too much time to think and remember, to be haunted by the woman in Itaskia.

She had not been bad, as wives went, but had been short on understanding. And too willful. The conclusion of the El Murid wars had made jobs for bowmen scarce. You had needed to be related to someone. I had not been. And had not known anything else but farming. I had had enough of that as a boy. She had nagged about the money. It had been good in the war years and she had developed tastes to suit. So I had done a spot of work for Duke Greyfells. Some men had died. She had sensed their blood on my hands. That had led to more nagging, of course. There is just no pleasing them. Whatever you try, it's wrong. It had gotten so bad that I had started spending more time at the Red Hart than in our tenement room.

In alcohol I had found surcease, though more from a critical self than from a wife who, despite making her points in the most abrasive manner possible, had been right. But a man can't shake the pain he carries around inside him. All he can do is try deadening it. In my case that just made the wife situation worse.

There had come an evening when I arrived home early - or late, considering I had been gone three days - and had learned how she had been able to maintain our standard of living, how she had been obtaining the silver I stole to maintain my alcoholic tranquillity.

It had been a double blow. A gut-wrecker and a rabbit punch. Your wife is seeing someone else. That is a decker, but you can get up and learn to live with it. But when you find out that there has been a parade, and you're living off the proceeds...

I swear by the Holy Stones, for all our troubles, I never laid a hand on that woman before, not even when roaring drunk. Not once, even provoked.

A couple of men died, and the woman, and I went on the run, bitter, never quite sure just what had come over me, why, or what it had all been about. Not long afterward, Colgrave had scavenged me off a ship he had taken and shanghaied me as replacement for a man who had been washed overboard earlier.

There were sixty-eight stories as shameful, or worse, lurking aboard.

The Vengeful D. Few of us talked about them. The Old Man's tale, if he had one, was his alone. All we knew was the story about the fire.

Student, though, thought he had guessed it. And claimed he knew how to get off Dragon, to where he wanted to be. He caused a lot of frowns and nervous questions when he talked like that.

He never would elaborate.

VII

The men were grumbling seditiously by the time we spied the Trolledyingjan again. For hours we had been pushing westward, either into the heart of the ocean or onto the rocky coasts of southern Freyland. We had left the waters we knew far behind. Though not one of us had been ashore in a long time, we liked it handy just in case. We were not deep-water sailors. Losing all touch seemed a nightmare.

Colgrave stood on the poop like a statue, staring straight ahead, as if he could see through the spray and waves and rain. Reports of cracked planking, broken frames, and water gushing in as fast as the pumpers could bail, bothered him not at all. He persevered. That, if any one word ever did, encapsulated him perfectly. He persevered.

Dragon larked about on the shoulders of seas as huge as leviathans.

"I see her!" Lank Tor cried. How? I wondered. I could barely see him. But it was my cue. Daring the vengeful sea, I recovered my weapons, repaired to the forecastle deck.

I could see her from there. She was a specter fading in and out almost dead ahead.

The problem was the size of the seas. She swooped down one side like a gull diving, vanished in a trough, then staggered up the next wave like an old man in an uphill race. Her sail had been torn to tatters. Her crew had been unable to unstep the mast. Now they huddled on their oar benches, trying to

keep their bows into the waves. They had no protection from Mother Ocean's worst. They were brave, hardy men. What would they do if she swamped?

I never had much use for Priest. But when he clambered up to join me, he looked so puzzled and pathetic that I could not ignore him. "What's up?"

"Whaleboats and Student. They're gone."

"Gone? What do you mean, gone?" Whaleboats. My only friend. He could not abandon me.

Where the hell could he go? Dragon's rails were the edge of our world.

"Over the side, I guess. Where else? Nobody has seen them since they fished the Kid out." He paused, stared at the sea with the look that usually presaged a sermon. Awe, I think you could call it. "The Old Man wanted to talk to them. About why the Freylander didn't burn. One-Hand Nedo says he saw them dump most of the oil into the drink instead of on the deck."

"Whaleboats?" Student, maybe. He had been spooky, unpredictable. But not the biggest womanhater on the Vengeful D. The screams of a tormented female had been like the voices of harps to Whaleboats.

"Yes."

"Strange. Very strange." The man who had fished the Kid out of the drink at Dunno Scuttair had also gone over the side within a few hours. Was the Kid a jinx? I did not think so. Losing someone was unusual, but not unprecedented. In fact, the Old Man had kept the Kid mostly because we had lost another man a week earlier.

And the rebellion? Their failure to fire a captured vessel? That was beyond my comprehension.

"Whaleboats? Really?"

There had to have been more there than met the eye. I could feel it. It was something outside the normal ken, something almost supernatural. The same something that had gotten Priest into such a state.

I could sense some terribly important revelation hovering on the marches of realization, teasing, taunting, a butterfly of truth on gossamer wings. Gods were trying to touch me, to teach me. I pictured Student's dusky face, peeping over the inevitable book. His eyes were merry with the mockery he had always shown when he hinted around his secret.

Maybe he had known the way home. But miles at sea, amidst a storm, seemed a strange place and time to start the journey. There was nothing off Dragon but drowning and the teeth of fishes.

Or had they swum to the Freylander? They could have expected no mercy from possible rescuers.

Nobody died on the Vengeful D. Not in my memory, anyway, though that gets cloudier as it goes back toward my coming aboard. The battles might be fierce, gruesome, and bloody. The decks might become scarlet and slippery. Toke, who doubled as our surgeon (a profession he once had pursued), might stay busy for days sewing wounds, cauterizing, and setting bones, but none of us passed into the hands of Priest for burial with the fishes. All his prayers he had to save for the souls of our enemies.

We, like Dragon herself, wore a thousand exotic scars, but, as Col-grave said, the gods themselves

guarded us. Only restless, treacherous Mother Ocean could steal a soul from Vengeful D.

It was no wonder the Old Man could hurl ship and crew against odds that would have assured mutiny on the most disciplined Itaskian man-o'-war. We believed ourselves immortal. Excepting Old Barley, we dreaded only the completion of our quest and the wizard trap that someone, someday, surely would spring.

What would become of our band of cutthroats if we found The One, or if the gods withdrew their favor?

We closed with the Trolledyngjan. Descending darkness, more than the storm, obscured her now. Still, when we were both at wave crest, I could see the pale faces of their chieftains. They showed fear, but also that dogged determination to die fighting that animates all northmen. We could expect them to turn on us soon.

A creak-clump sound drew my attention. The Old Man had come forward. How he had managed, I could not guess. He leaned on the rail while we ran up and down several watery mountains. The ship's motion did not discomfit him at all.

My guts were so knotted that it had become impossible for me to keep heaving them up.

"Can you do it?" he finally asked. "The helmsman?"

I shrugged. "In this? I don't know. I can try." Anything to end the chase and get Dragon out of that grey sea hell. He would not break off till we had made our kill.

"Wait for my signal." In a journey that was almost an epic, he returned to the poop. As darkness thickened, he brought Dragon more and more abreast of the Trolledyngjan.

She crested. He signaled. I sped my second-best shaft.

She was not the banded lady. She wobbled in the gale, failed the clean kill.

The helmsman had to drown with the others.

Out of control, the Trolledyngjan turned sideways as she slid into a trough, broached.

She survived one wave, but the next swamped her.

One arrow. One deadly shaft well sped, and our part was over. The terrible, terrible sea would do the rest.

Now we could concentrate on surviving. And I could look forward to respite from that constant soar and plunge.

VIII

Smooth sailing was a long time coming. We had to wait for a lull before putting about, lest we share the

northmen's fate. Then we drove back into it, the wind an enemy as vicious as the waves. We made headway only slowly. Three torturous days groaned past before we staggered through a rainy curtain and saw land and quieter seas once more.

The Old Man's dead reckoning was uncanny. He brought us back just two leagues south of Cape Blood.

But the caravel, that we had halfway hoped to find still adrift, had vanished. We would get no chance to finish plundering her.

Colgrave growled, "Tor, up top. Quick now." He surveyed the sea suspiciously.

Someone had come along. There was no other explanation. The caravel was not on the rocks. And those women, courtiers all, could never have worked ship well enough to have sailed her away. Itaskians summoned by the coast watchers? Probably.

They could be hanging around.

The work began. Dragon had taken a vicious pounding. She was leaking at a hundred seams. We had cracked planks forward from the ramming of the Trolledyngjan. Their condition had been worsened by days of slamming into heavy seas. The rigging looked like something woven in a mad war between armies of drunken spiders. Dangling cables, torn sheets, broken spars were everywhere aloft. We needed to pull the mizzenmast and step a spare, and to replace the missing foretopmast. We had enough replacements on board, but would have to plunder new spares off our next victim.

And stores. We had not gotten much off the Freylander.

What had become of the keg Whaleboats had plundered, I wondered. I doubted that he had taken it over the side with him.

That was a good sign. I do not worry about alcohol when I'm seasick.

We had the mizzen half pulled, the foretop cleared, sails scattered everywhere for Mica's attention, and half the lines and cables down.

It was the perfect time.

And the enemy came.

As always, Lank Tor saw her first. She came out of the foul weather hugging the cape. Matter of factly, he announced, "Galleon, ho. Two hundred fifty tonner, Itaskian naval ensign."

Equally calmly, Colgrave replied, "Prepare for action, bosun. Keep the repair materials on deck." He climbed to the poop. "And watch for more."

It was my turn. "Signals ashore. Mirrors, looks like." There were flashes all along the coast.

"Coast watchers. They'll be calling everything out of Portsmouth." Colgrave resumed his laborious climb.

We wasted no time trying to run. In our state it was hopeless. We had to fight, and count on our fabulous luck.

"Could be three, four hundred men on one of those," Barley muttered as he stalked past with the grog bucket. He was so damned scared I expected him to wipe them out single-handedly.

"Sail!" someone cried.

A little slooplike vessel, long, low, lateen-rigged, had put out from a masked cove. No threat.

"Messenger boat," said Fat Poppo, who had been in the Itaskian Navy at one time. "She'll log the action and carry the report to the Admiralty."

We did not like one another much, we followers of the mad captain's dream, but we were a team. We made ready with time to spare.

The Itaskian came on as if she intended ramming.

She did! She was making a suicide run with the messenger standing by, if needed, to collect survivors.

The Old Man bent on a main-topsail and a storm spritsail, just enough to give us steerage way. At precisely the appropriate instant, he dodged.

The galleon rolled past so closely we could have jumped to her decks. She was crammed with marines. The snipers in her rigging showered me with crossbow bolts.

I leaned back and roared with laughter. Their best effort had but creased my right seaboot.

Each of my shafts took out a Crown officer. Our men drew blood with a storm of javelins.

To ram had been their whole plan. Going away in failure, they seemed at a loss.

Wigwag signals came from the sloop. They were in a cipher Poppo could not read.

"They'll be back," Priest predicted. It was no great feat of divination.

Already they were taking in sail, preparing to come about. This time they would not roar past like a mad bull.

"Find me some arrows!" I demanded. "Tor..."

"On the way," the boatswain promised, gaze fixed on the Itaskian.

I touched the hilt of my cutlass. It had been a long time since I had had to use one. I expected to this time, though. We had to take that galleon so I could recover my arrows. And get at their grog. Itaskians always carried a stock.

Our luck had held that far. There was but one casualty during the first pass. The Kid. He had fallen out of the rigging again. He was just dazed and winded. He would be all right.

The crazy little bastard should have broken every bone in his body.

The moment the Itaskian was clear, Tor put everyone to work.

Colgrave was crazier than I thought. He meant to try dodging till we completed repairs.

They let us get away with it one more time. They had little choice, really. We had the wind. I put down as many officer-killing shafts as I could. But they were prepared for me. Their decision makers remained hidden while they were in range.

The repair parties succeeded in one thing: freeing most of the men from the pumps. We needed them.

Third time past, the Itaskian sent over a storm of grappling hooks. Despite flailing axes and busy swords and my carefully targeted arrows, they pulled us in, made us fast.

It began in earnest.

How long had it been since we had had to fight on our own decks? I could not remember the last time. But Itaskian marines overran the rail, swarmed aboard, coming and coming over the piles of their own dead. My god, I thought, how many of them are there? The galleon had them packed in like cattle.

I expected them to drive for our castles, to take out Colgrave and myself, but they disappointed me. The point of their assault was the mainmast.

I soon saw why. A squad of sailors with axes went to work on it.

The Old Man thundered at Barley and Priest. They went after the axmen. But the Itaskian marines kept ramparts of flesh in their path.

It was up to me. Ignoring the endless sniper fire, I sped arrow after arrow. That eventually did the trick, but not before they had injured the mainmast grievously.

A grappling hook whined past my nose. What now?

The Itaskian sailors still aboard the galleon were throwing line after line to tangle in our rigging.

It was insane. Suicidally insane. No ship, knowing us, tried to make it impossible for us to get away. No. Even the proudest, the strongest, made sure they could escape.

At least two hundred dead men littered Dragon's decks. Blood poured from our scuppers. And still the Royal Marines clambered over the hills of their fallen.

What drove them so?

The assault's direction shifted from the mainmast to the forecastle. Despite vigorous resistance, the Itaskians broke through to the ladders. I downed as many snipers as I could before, putting my bow carefully out of harm's way, I drew my cutlass and began slashing at helmeted heads.

It had been a long time, but my hand and arm still knew the rhythms. Parry, thrust, parry, cut. No fancy fencing. Riposte was for the rapier, a gentleman's weapon. There were no gentlemen on the Vengeful D. Just damned efficient killers.

The Itaskian captain sent the remnants of his sailors in after the marines. And, a grueling hour later, he came over himself, with everyone left aboard.

IX

As always, we won. As always, we left no survivors, though in the end we had to hunt a few through the bowels of their ship. An enraged Barley had charge of that detail.

The long miracle had persisted. Once those of us who were able had thrown the Itaskians to the fishes, it became apparent that not one man had perished. But several wished that they had.

I paused by Fat Poppo, who was begging for someone to kill him. There was not an inch of him that was not bloody, that had not been slashed by Itaskian blades. His guts were lying in his lap.

Instead of finishing him, I fetched him a cup of brandy. I had found Whaleboats' keg. Then, accompanied by Little Mica, who did not look much better than Poppo, I crossed to the galleon.

I wanted to find a clue to the cause of their madness. And a chance to be first at their grog.

Priest had had the same idea. He was wrecking the galley as we passed through.

Screams came from up forward. Barley had found a survivor.

We found the brig.

"Damned," said Mica. "Ain't he a tough one?"

Behind bars was the Trolledyngjan we had thrown overboard. Must be important, I thought, or he would be sleeping with the fishes. Probably some chieftain who had made himself especially obnoxious.

My banded arrow lay in his lap.

I gaped. She had found ways to come home before, but never by such an exotic route.

Mica was impressed too. He knew what that arrow meant to me. "A sign. We'd better take him to the Old Man."

The Trolledyngjan had been eying us warily. He jumped up laughing. "Yes. Let's go see the mad captain."

Colgrave listened to what I had to say, considered. "Give him Whaleboats' berth." He turned away, eye burning a hole in the southern seascape. The messenger vessel still lay there, watching.

I returned to the Itaskian for the banded arrow's sisters.

Ordinarily I did not do much but speed the deadly shafts. I was a privileged specialist, did not have to do anything unless the urge hit me. But now everyone had to cover for those too sliced up to rise, yet too god-protected to die. Not being much use in the rigging, I manned a swab.

They had caught us good, had tangled us thoroughly. It would take all night to get free, and another day to replace the masts. The main, now, would have to go too.

"They'll be here before we're ready," said Mica, passing on some errand.

He was right. All logic said we had sailed into a trap, and even now the ladies of Portsmouth were watching the men-o'-war glide ponderously down the Silverbind Estuary.

The Old man knew. That was why he kept glaring southward. He was thinking, no doubt, that now he would never catch The One.

Me? All I wanted was to get away alive.

I hoped Colgrave still had a trick or two up his elegant sleeve.

Poppo waved weakly. I abandoned my swab to fetch him another brandy.

"Thanks," he gasped. Grinning, "I know now."

"What's that?"

"The secret. Student's secret."

"So?"

"But I can't tell you. That's part of it. You've got to figure it out yourself."

"Not Whaleboats."

"Smarter than he looked, maybe. Back to your mopping. And think about it."

I thought. But I could not get anything to click. It was a good secret. I could not even define its limits, let alone make out details.

It had caused Whaleboats and Student to do something completely out of character: fake the fire aboard the Freylander.

Darkness closed in. It was the most unpromising night I had ever seen. Signal fires blazed along the coast. The messenger moved closer, to keep better track of us.

Those of us who were able kept on working. By first light we had stripped the Itaskian of everything useful and had freed Dragon. The Old Man spread the foremain and, creeping, we made for the storm.

"There they are."

This time I paid attention to Mica. This time it was important.

Lank Tor and the Old Man, of course, had known for some time.

There were sails on the horizon. Topsails. Those of seven warships, each the equal of the one we had taken. No doubt there were smaller, faster vessels convoying them.

The messenger stayed with us, marking our slow retreat.

The gods were not entirely with us anymore. The squall line retreated as we approached, remaining tantalizingly out of reach. Soon it broke free of Cape Blood and began drifting seaward.

"We could try for Freyland ..." I started to say, but Mica silenced me with a gesture.

There was a second squadron north of the Cape. Three fat galleons eager to make our acquaintance.

"We're had. What's that?"

Something bobbed on the waves ahead. Low, dark. Gulls squawked and flapped away as we drew nearer.

It was a harbinger of what Itaskia's navy planned for us.

Trolledyngjan's from wolfs head had managed to assemble a raft and start paddling for land. They had not made it. Itaskian arrows protruded from each corpse. The gulls had been at their faces and eyes.

"Always the eyes first," said Mica. He glanced at the wheeling birds, shivered.

"That," I said, "is the only ghost ship we're ever going to see."

The repairs went on and on. The Old Man stood the poop as stiffly as if this were just another plundering-to-be. Not till after they had drawn the noose tight did he act. And then he merely went below to change into fresher, dandier clothing.

Ten to one, and all of them bigger. How much can the gods help? But they took no chances. They surrounded us carefully, then slowly tightened their circle.

When it was almost time, I paused to speak to my banded arrow. This time, I told her, we were going to have to do a deed that would re-echo for decades. It would be our only immortality.

But they gave me no opportunity to employ her.

Two fat galleons moved in on our sides. We killed and killed and killed, till the sea itself turned scarlet and frothed with the surging to and fro of maddened sharks. They cut us up one by one till, like Fat Poppo, we could do nothing but squat in our own gore and watch the destruction of our shipmates.

The first pair of vessels eventually pulled away so another pair could put their marines aboard. And so on. And so on. Such determination. That Freylander must have been far more important than we had thought.

There came a time when I was alone on the forecastle, Col grave was alone on the poop, and the Kid was alone in the rigging. Then even we had been cut down.

The Itaskians cleared their countless dead while, unable to interfere, we lay in our own blood. Would they fire us, as we had done to so many victims? No. Gangs of sailors came over and took up the repair work we had started.

I supposed they were planning to take us into Portsmouth. Our trials and executions would make a huge spectacle.

It would be the event of the decade.

X

The Itaskians worked a day and a night. Dawn proved my pain-fogged speculations unfounded.

The messenger ship then drew alongside. Just one man came aboard. He wore the regalia of a master sorcerer of the Brotherhood.

This was the man we had feared so long, the one against whom we had no defense. His was the mind, no doubt, which had engineered our destruction. He had been subtle. Not till now had we suspected the presence of a magical hand. Knowing he was there, Colgrave might have gone another way.

He surveyed Dragon with a pleased look, then went aft to begin a closer inspection. He started with the Old Man.

One by one, working his way forward, he paused over each man. Finally, he climbed the forecastle ladder and bent over me.

"So. Archer," he murmured. I clutched the banded arrow beneath my broken leg and wished I had the strength to drive her into his chest. I had not felt so much rage, so much hatred, since the night that I had killed my wife. "Your long journey is almost done. You're almost there. In just a few hours you'll have your heart's desire. You'll meet your ghost ship after all."

He must have said the same thing to the others. Dragon fairly quivered with anger and hatred. Mine was so strong I half sat up before I collapsed from pain and the weight of the spells he had spun about us.

"Farewell, then," he chuckled. "Farewell all!" A minute later he was aboard his sloop. Her crew cast off. By then the galleons had fled beyond the southern horizon.

I could still hear his voice, singing, as the sloop pulled away. At first I thought it imagination. But it was not. He was chanting up some new sorcery. The old began to relax.

My anger broke that enchantment's limits. I rolled. I found my bow. Ignoring nerves shrieking with the pain in my leg, I surged upward.

Three hundred yards. He had his back to me, his arms raised in an appeal to the sky. "This's the flight for which you were made." I kissed the banded lady goodby.

I fell as she left the bow, cursing because I would be unable to follow her final flight.

She was faithful to the last.

The skull-pounding chant became an endless tortured scream.

All the thunders of the universe descended at once.

I had let fly seconds too late.

The first thing I noticed was the gentle whisper of the ship moving slowly through quiet seas. Then the damp fog. I rolled onto my back. The mist was so dense I could barely make out the albatross perched on the foretruck. I sat up.

There was no pain. Not even the ache of muscles tormented by the exertions of combat. I rubbed my leg. It was whole. But I had not imagined the break. There was a lump, no longer tender, at the fracture site. My cuts, scrapes, and bruises had all healed, their only memorial a few new scars.

It takes months for bones to knit, I thought.

I stood, tottered to the rail overlooking the maindeck. The bone held.

My shipmates, as puzzled as I, were patting themselves, looking around, and murmuring questions. Fat Poppo kept lifting his shirt, fingering the line across his belly, then flipping his shirt down and glancing around in embarrassed disbelief. Lank Tor stared upward, mouthing a silent "How?" over and over.

The sails were aloft and pregnant with wind.

I turned slowly, surveying the miracle. Maybe we were beloved of the gods, I thought.

The fog seemed less dense a-head. Light filtered through.

The Old Man sensed it too. He began clumping round the poop in suspicious curiosity, leaning on the rails, the sternsheets, trying to garner some hint of what had happened.

He paused, stared past me.

In a voice that was but a ghost of his usual thunder, he called Toke and Lank Tor, conferred. In a minute, quietly, they were about their work. He called to me to keep a sharp lookout.

The boatswain and First Officer took in sail.

XI

And now we drift, barely making steerage way. Every man remains self-involved in the mystery of our survival.

The fog is thinning. I can see the water now, like polished jade, an algae-rich soup in which the only ripples are those made by Dragon's cutwater.

Yet there is a breeze up top. Curious.

A dozen birds are perched in the tops, silently watching us, moving only when the Kid or another topman pushes by. Spooky.

The Old Man is as much at a loss as anyone. He is ready for anything, expects nothing good. He sends one of Tor's mates round to make sure we are all fully armed.

The fog gradually breaks into patchlets. But the low sky remains solidly overcast. It is no more than two hundred feet up. It is so thick, the light is so diffuse, that there is no telling exactly where the sun stands. Sometimes the cloud dips down, and the maintop ploughs through, swirling it like a spoon does cream in a cup of tea.

I check my arrows, mourn my banded lady. She was a truer love than any I have ever known, was faithful to the end. Not like this blue and white. She is as fickle as that bitch I killed in Itaskia.

Heart's desire. The dead sorcerer promised it. Then what am I doing here, sailing to a rendezvous with the ghost ship? A queasiness not of wind or wave stampedes through my stomach. I will face a grim opponent, if the wizard did not lie. And without my deadly lady. The Bowman there, they say, is at least as good as I.

This is my desire? Then I have fooled myself more thoroughly than anyone else.

I wish I could talk to Colgrave, to make sure there aren't any last-minute changes in plan.

Like a chess opening thoroughly planned beforehand, our initial moves will go by rote. We have discussed them a hundred times. We have taken a score of vessels in dress rehearsal.

I am the Old Man's key piece, his queen. He relies on me heavily. Perhaps too heavily.

I am supposed to take out that legendary Bowman first. Before he can get me. Then I take the dead captain, the helmsman, anyone taking their places, and, as we go hand to hand, their deadliest fighters.

Dragon's prow slices through a final cloud.

I see her! A caravel emerging from a fog bank directly ahead, bearing down on us. I wave to Colgrave.

It's Her. The One. The Phantom. I can smell it, taste it. Its taste is fear. The sorcerer did not lie. Even from here I can see the Bowman on her fore-castle deck, glaring our way.

The butterflies grow larger.

Colgrave shifts our heading a bit to starboard. The reever immediately does the same. We have barely got steerage way, but it seems we are rushing toward one another at the breakneck speed of tilting knights. I glance at Colgrave. He shrugs. How and when I act is up to me.

I take my second-best arrow and lay it across my bow. "Now, if you ever aspired to greatness, is the time to fly true," I whisper. My hands are cold, moist, shaky.

We proceed in near silence, each man awed by what we are about to attempt. The ghost makes not a sound as she bears down, evidently intending a firing pass similar to our own. Even the birds, usually so raucous, are still. Colgrave stands tall and stiff, refusing to make himself a difficult target. He has complete confidence in my skill and the protection of the gods.

He is positively aglow. This is the end to which he has dedicated his life.

Momentarily, I wonder what we will really do if by some chance we are the victors in this encounter. Will we beach the Vengeful D. and haul our treasures ashore as we have always said? But where? We must be known and wanted in every kingdom and city-state fronting the western ocean.

Four hundred yards. The phantom seems a little hazy, a little undefined. For a moment I suspect my eyes. But, no. It's true. There is an aura of the enchanted about her.

There would be, wouldn't there?

Three fifty. Three hundred yards. I could let fly now, but it does not feel right.

There is something strange about the reever, something I cannot put my finger on.

Two fifty. The crew are getting nervous. All eyes are on me now. Two hundred. I cannot wait any longer. He won't.

I loose.

As does he, at virtually the same instant.

His shaft moans past my ear, knicking it, drawing a drop of blood. I stoop for another, cursing. I missed too.

The butterflies have grown as big as falcons. I send a second arrow, and so does he. And we both miss, by a wider margin.

Does he have the shakes too? He is supposed to be above that, is supposed to be far better than he has shown. The Phantom has never met a foe she needed fear.

But she has never met us. Perhaps fear is why we have never been able to track her down. Perhaps she has heard how terrible her stalkers can be.

One fifty. I miss twice more. Now it has become a matter of pride. He can miss forever, so far as I'm concerned, but I've got a reputation to uphold and a nervous crew to reassure.

Another miss. And another. Damned! What is wrong with me?

Student's mocking grin comes haunting. I frown. Why now?

One hundred yards. Toe to toe. And I'm down to just one arrow. Might as well kiss it all good-bye. We have lost. This feckless blue and white will miss by a mile.

But a dead calm comes over me. Disregarding my opponent, who, I suppose, has been toying with me, I ready the shot with tournament care.

It goes.

A thunderbolt strikes me in the chest. The bow slides from my fingers. The crew moan. I clutch the

arrow...

A blue and white arrow.

I can hear Student laughing now. And, with blood dribbling from the corners of my mouth, I grin back. So that's his secret.

It's a good one. A cosmic joke. The sort that sets the gods laughing till their bellies ache and then, ever after, when they remember, is good for a snicker.

My opponent falls as I fall. I wind up seated with my back against the rail, watching as the grapnels fly, as the ships come together, as the faces of the men portray a Hell's gallery of reactions.

I suppose we'll drift at the heart of this circular mile forever, tied to ourselves, to our sins.

It's too late for redemption now.