

Call For The Dead

By Glen Cook

Glen Cook wrote "The Quiet Sea" (December 1978) and "Ghost Stalk" (May 1978); he is the author of two fantasy trilogies, DREAD EMPIRE, from Berkley, and THE STAR'S END TRILOGY, forthcoming from Avon. Here is another fine story about the crew of the Vengeful Dragon.

Call For The Dead

BY

GLEN COOK

I

The figure wore scarlet.

It had a small, hairless skull. Its face was as delicate as that of a beautiful woman. A rouge colored its lips. Kohl shadowed its eyes. Zodiacal pendants hung from its earlobes. Yet no observer could have sworn to its sex.

Its eyes were dosed. Its mouth was open.

It sang.

Its song was terror. It was evil. Its voice stunk with its own fear.

Its lips did not move while the words came forth.

A dark basaltic throne served as its chair. A pentagram marked the floor surrounding it. That Stygian surface seemed to slope away into infinity. The arms of the pentagram, and the cabalistic signs filling them, had been sketched in brilliant reds and blues,

yellow and greens. The colors rippled and changed to the tempo of the song. They surrendered to momentary flashes of silver, lilac, and gold.

Perspiration dribbled down the satin-smooth effeminate face. Veins stood out darkly at its temples. Neck and shoulder muscles became knots and cords. Small, slim, delicate hands clawed at the arms of the throne. The fingernails were long, curved, sharp, and painted the color of the fresh blood.

Torches surmounting the throne's tall back flickered, growing weaker and weaker.

The song faltered....

The figure surged, drew upon some final bastion of inner resource. A scream ripped from its throat.

The darkness gradually withdrew.

The figure slowly stood, arms rising, its song/scream transmuted into a cry of triumph.

Its eyes opened. They were an incredible cerulean blue, almost shining. And they were incalculably malevolent.

Then the darkness struck. A finger came from behind, swiftly, coiling round its victim like a python of night. Tendrils of the tentacle thrust into the sorcerer's nostrils and open mouth.

II

The caravel revolved slowly in an imperceptible current. The sea was cool and quiet, a plain of polished jade. Neither fin nor wind rippled its lifeless surface. It looked as unyielding as a serpentine floor.

I stared as I had for ages. It was there, but I no longer saw it.

Fog domed the place where Vengeful Dragon lay becalmed. It made granite walls where it met the quiet sea, but overhead it thinned. Daylight leaked through.

How many times had the sun come and gone since the gods had abandoned us to the spite of that Itaskian sorcerer? I had not counted.

Sometimes, when I tried hard enough, I drifted away from my body. Not far. The spells that bound us were of the highest order.

It pleased me that I had slain the spellcaster. If ever I escaped this pocket hell and encountered him in the afterworld, I would attack him again.

I could get free just enough to survey the scabby remnants of my drifting coffin.

Emerald moss clung to her sides. It crept a foot up from her waterline. Colorful fungi gnawed at her rotting timbers. Her rigging dangled like strands of a broken spider's web. Her sails were tatters. Their canvas was old and brittle and would crumble at the first caress of wind.

The decks were littered with fallen men.

Arrows protruded from backs and chests. Limbs lay twisted at odd, painful angles. Bowels lay spilled upon the slimy planks. Gaping wounds marked every body, including mine.

Yet there was no blood. Nor any corruption.

Not of the biological kind. Morally, Dragon had been the cesspool of the world.

Sixty-seven pairs of eyes stared at the grey walls of our tiny, changeless universe.

Twelve black birds perched in the savaged tops. They were as dark as the bottom of a freshly filled grave. There was no sheen to their feathers. Only the movement of their pupilless eyes betrayed their claim to life.

They knew neither impatience, nor hunger, nor boredom. They were sentinels standing guard over the resting place of old evil.

They watched the ship of the dead. They would do so forever.

They had arrived the moment our fate had overtaken us.

Suddenly, as one, twelve heads jerked. Yellow eyes peered into the thinner fog overhead. One short screech filled the heavy air. Dark pinions drummed a frightened bass tattoo. The birds fled clumsily into the granite fog.

I had never seen them fly. Never.

A shadow, as of vast wings, occluded the sky without actually blocking the light.

I suffered my first spate of emotion in ages. It was pure terror.

III

The caravel no longer revolved. Its battered prow pointed an erring north-northeast. A tiny swale of jade bowed around her cutwater. A shallow depression bordered her stern.

Vengeful D. was moving.

Dark avians wheeled round her splintered masts, retreated in consternation.

Our captain lay on the caravel's high poop, beneath the helm, clad in rags. Once they had been noble finery. He still clutched a broken sword. He was Colgrave, the mad pirate.

Not all Colgrave's wounds had come in our last battle. One leg had been crippled for years. Half his face had been so badly burned that a knoll of bone lay exposed on his left cheek.

Colgrave had been the worst of us. He had been the crudest, the most wicked of men.

Our fell commander had collapsed atop several men. His eyes still stared in fiery hatred, burning like the lamps of Hell. For Colgrave, Death was a temporary lover. A woman he would betray when his time came.

Colgrave was convinced of his immortality, of his mission.

Stretched on the high forecastle deck, in rags as dark as the loss of hope, lay another man. A blue and white arrow protruded from his chest. His head and shoulders lay propped against the vessel's side. His hating eyes stared through a break in the railing opposite him. His face was shadowed by ghosts of madness.

He was me.

I hardly recognized him anymore. He seemed more alien than any of my shipmates.

I remembered him as a grinning young soldier, a cheerful boy, a hero of the El Murid Wars. He had been the kind you wanted your daughters to meet. That man on the forecastle deck, beyond his obvious injuries, had wounds to the bones of his soul. Their scars could be seen by anyone. He looked like he had endured centuries of hurt.

He had dealt more than he had received in his thirty-four years.

He was hard, bitter, petty, vicious. I could see it, know it, and admit it when looking at him from my drifting place amidst the rigging. I could not from inside.

He was not unique. His shipmates were all hating, soulcrippled men. They hated one another more than anything else. Except themselves.

A seven-legged spider limped down my right shoulder, across my throat, and out along my left arm. The arachnid was the last living creature aboard Dragon. She was weakening in her relentless quest for one more victim.

The spider's odyssey took her out onto the pale white of a hand still gripping a powerful bow. My bowstring had parted long ago, victim of rot and irresistible tension.

I felt her...! My skin twitched beneath her feet.

The spider scuttled into a crack between planks and observed with cold, hungry eyes.

My eyes itched. I blinked. Colgrave shuddered. One spindly arm rose deliberately. Colorless fingers brushed the helm. Then his hand fell, stirred feebly in the slime covering the deck.

I tried moving. I could not. What a will Colgrave had!

It had driven us for years, compelling us when no other force in Heaven or Hell could move us.

A shadow with saffron eyes wheeled above us. It uttered short, sharp cries of dismay.

Tendrils of the darkness that could not be seen were weaving new evils on the loom of wickedness of our accursed ship. And the watchers could do nothing. The sorcerer who had summoned them, who had commanded them and who had charged them with watching and bearing tidings, was no more.

I had silenced his magical songs forever with a last desperate shaft from my bow.

The birds could fly to no one with their fearful news. Nor could anyone liberate them from their bondage.

One by one my shipmates stirred the slightest, then returned to their long rests.

Sometimes in darkness, sometimes in light, the caravel glided northward. The shadowweaver ran its shuttle to and fro. No foul weather came to gnaw on our ragged floating Hell. The fog surrounding us neither advanced nor receded, nor did the water we sailed ever change. It always resembled polished jade.

My shipmates did not move again.

Then darkness descended upon me, the oblivion for which I had longed since my realization that Vengeful Dragon was not just another pirate, but a seagoing purgatory manned by the blackest souls of the western world....

And while I slept in the embrace of the Dark Lady, the weaver weaved. The ship changed. So did her

crew. And the watchbirds followed in dismay.

IV

A dense fog gently bumped Itaskia's South Coast. It did not cross the shoreline. The light of a three-quarters moon gleamed off its lowlying upper surface. It looked like an army of woolballs come to besiege the land.

A ship's main truck and a single spar cut the fog's surface like a shark's fin, moving north.

The moon set. The sun rose. The fog dissipated gradually, revealing a pretty caravel. She had a new but plain look, like a miser's beautiful wife cloaked in homespun.

The fog dwindled to a single irreducible cloud. That refused to disperse. It drifted round the ship's decks. Black birds dipped in and out.

I began to itch all over. My skin twitched. Awareness returned. Straining, I opened my eyes.

The sun blazed in. I decided to roll over instead.

It was the hardest thing I had ever done. A physical prodigy.

Battered old Colgrave staggered to his feet. He leaned on the helm and scanned the gentle sea. He wore a bewildered frown.

Here, there, my shipmates stirred. Who would the survivors be? Barley, the deadly coward? Priest, the obnoxious religious hypocrite? The Kid, whose young soul had been blackened by more murders than most of us older men? My almost-friend, Little Mica, whose sins I had never discovered? Lank Tor? Toke? Fat Poppo? The Trolledyngjan? There were not many I would miss if they did not make it.

I climbed my bow like a pole. I could feel the expression graven on my face. It was wonder. It tingled through me right down to my toenails.

We had no business being anywhere but perpetually buried in that sorcerer's trap.

I scanned the horizon suspiciously, checked the maindeck, then met my Captain's eyes. There was no love between us, but we respected one another. We were the best at what we were.

He shrugged. He, too, was ignorant of what was happening.

I had wondered if he had not brought the resurrection about by sheer force of will.

I bent and collected an oiled leather case. Inside lay twelve arrows labeled with colored bands, and several new bowstrings. My bow, which had been exposed for so long, had been restored by careful oiling and rubbing. I strung and tested it. It remained as powerful as ever. I did not then have the strength to bend it completely.

A dozen men were afoot. They searched themselves for wounds that had disappeared during the darkness. I wondered how many had shared my vigil of impotent awareness, denied even the escape of madness.

They started checking each other. I looked for Mica. I spotted the little guy studying himself in a copper mirror. He ran fingers over a face that had been half torn away. Everyone was recovering.

I descended to the maindeck and strolled aft. Dragon was in the best shape I had ever seen. She had been renewed...

I walked stiffly. The others moved jerkily, like marionettes manipulated by a novice. I reached the ladder to the poop as vanguard of a committee. Our First Officer and Boatswain, Toke and Lank Tor, had joined me. Old Barley tagged along, hoping the Old Man would order a ration of rum.

Barley was one of the alcoholic in group. Priest was another. He was watching Barley closely. Barley always did the doling.

Rum! My mouth watered. Only Priest could outdrink me.

Colgrave shooed his deck watch down the starboard ladder.

Why hadn't our mysterious benefactors done a full repair job on the Captain? I looked round. Several men had not been restored completely. We were as we had been the day we had stumbled into the Itaskian sorcerer's trap.

Colgrave was first to speak. He said, "Something's happened." Not an ingenious deduction.

My response was no more brilliant. "We've been called back."

Colgrave's voice had a remote, sepulchral timbre. It seemed to reach us after a journey up a long, cold, furniture-crowded hallway. There was no force in it. It had no volume, and very little inflection.

"Tell me something I don't know,

Bowman," Colgrave growled.

The lack of love between us was not unique. This crew had shipped together, and fought together, by condemnation of the gods. We cooperated only because survival demanded it.

"Who did? Why?" I demanded. Again I scanned the horizons.

I was not a lone watcher. We had powerful enemies along these coasts. Dread enemies, they had at their disposal the aid of men like the one who had banished us to that enchanted sea.

"We don't have time to worry about it." Colgrave threw a spidery hand at the coast. "That's Itaskia, gentlemen. We're only eight leagues south of the Silverbind Estuary."

The Itaskian Navy had sent that sorcerer after us. Itaskians hated us. Especially Itaskian merchants. We had plundered them so often that we used gold and silver for ballast.

We had preyed on them for ages, slaughtering their crews and burning their ships during our relentless

search for what, in the end, had proven to be ourselves.

The great naval base at Portsmouth lay just inside the mouth of the, estuary.

"Coast watchers have spotted us by now," Colgrave continued. "The news will have reached Portsmouth. The fleet will be coming out."

It did not occur to us that we could have been forgotten. Or that we might not be recognized. But we did not know how long we had been gone, nor did Dragon look the same.

"We better get this bastard headed out to sea," Tor said. "Head for the nether coast of Freyland. Hole up in a cove till we know what's happening." Some timbre entered the Boatswain's voice. It smelled of fear.

We had never been well known in the island kingdoms. Seldom had we plundered there.

"We'll do that. Meantime, check out this tub from stem to stern. Check the men. Tor, take a look round from the tops. They could be after us already."

Tor had the best eyes of any man I've ever known.

The crew milled below, touching each other, speculating in soft tones. Their voices, too, sounded remote. I do not know why that was. It soon corrected itself.

"First watch," Tor called. "Rigging. Prepare to shift sail for the seaward tack."

They moved slowly, stiffly, but sorted themselves out. Some clambered into the rigging. Lank Tor said, "Ready to shift course, Captain."

Colgrave spun the wheel. Tor bellowed to the topmen.

Nothing happened.

Colgrave tried again. And again. But Vengeful D. would not respond.

We just stood round staring at one another till Kid called down, "Sail ho!"

V

"Boatswain, see to the weapons," Colgrave ordered.

I looked at him narrowly. A fire was building within him. Action imminent. The old Colgrave flared through, despite what we had endured, despite what we had learned about ourselves. "See that sand is scattered on the decks. Barley! One cup for all hands. Bowman. Take yours first. Go to the forecastle."

Our gazes locked. I had had my fill of killing. At least for this madman.

But the compulsion was still there. The fire that forced a man to adapt his will to Colgrave's. I looked down like a kid who had just been scolded. I descended to the maindeck.

Mica caught up with me. "Bow-man. What's going on? What happened to us?"

He called me Bowman because he did not know my name. None of them did, unless Colgrave had penetrated the secret. It was one I could no longer answer myself.

Vengeful Dragon had a way of stealing memories. I could not remember coming aboard. I did remember murdering my wife and her lovers before I did. But what was her name...?

The curse of the gods lies heavy. To remember my crime, to remember the love and hate and pain that had gone into and pursued it, and yet to forget the very name of the woman I had killed.... And, worse, to have forgotten my own, so that the very cornerstone of my identity was denied me.... They award their penalties in cruel and ingenious ways, do the gods.

Some of the others remembered their names but had forgotten why they had committed their sins. That, too, was torture.

None of us remembered much of our life aboard Vengeful Dragon.

Colgrave and I had the murder of our families in common. That was not much of a foundation for friendship.

"I don't know, Mica. No more than you."

"I thought maybe the Old Man.... It scares me, Bowman. To be recalled...."

"I know. Think of the Power involved. The evils unleashed.... Come on up to the forecandle with me, Mica." He did not have anything else to do. He was our sailmaker. Our sails were in chandler's shop condition.

We leaned against the rail, staring over the quiet green water at the tops of a pair of triangular sails.

"That's no Itaskian galleon," Mica observed.

"No." I debated for several seconds before I hinted at my suspicion. "Maybe the gods are tinkering with us, Mica." A gull glided across our bows. For a moment I marveled at its graceful flight. A shadow followed. One of the black birds.

"Suppose they're giving us another chance?"

He watched the black bird for several seconds. "How patient are they, Bowman? We had our chances in life. We had them in limbo, while we harried the coasts. And we didn't even recognize them."

"And maybe we couldn't. This ship.... We forget things. We stop thinking. We get like Lank Tor, who can't remember yesterday. Remember Student and Whaleboats?"

They had been friends of ours. They had disappeared during a terrible storm shortly before the sorcerer had caught us. "Uhm."

We had never talked about it, but the suspicion could not be denied. There was a chance that Student and Whaleboats had found redemption. There was a connection between righteous deeds and disappearances from Dragon.

It had to be more than coincidence, Our memories were reliable only back to the time Kid had come aboard, but since then several men had vanished. Each had been guilty of doing something truly good shortly before. How Colgrave had screamed and cursed at Student and Whaleboats for not setting fire to that shipload of women....

"Student claimed there was a way out. Fat Poppo told me he figured it out too. I think there is. I think they found it. And I think I know what it is too, now." Mica did not say anything for at least a minute. Then, "Did you die in that place, Bowman?"

"What?" For some reason I did not want to tell him. "What place?"

"The foggy sea, dummy. Where we met ourselves and lost the battle."

Colgrave's habit was to destroy every vessel we encountered. We had entered that quiet place out of a deep fog, with a sorcerer's grim promise still ringing in our ears. Black birds had roosted in our tops and another ship had been headed our way. Colgrave, mad Colgrave, had ordered the attack. And when we had come to grips with the caravel, who had we found manning her but doppelgangers of ourselves....?

"Were you aware the whole time?"

"Yeah." The grunt like to choked me getting out. "Every damned second. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't even go crazy."

He raised an eyebrow.

"All right. Crazier than I already am."

Mica grinned. "Sometimes, Bow-man, I wonder if we're not just a little less wicked than we think. Or maybe it's pretend. We're great pretenders, the crew of the Vengeful D."

"Mica, you ain't no philosopher."

"How do you know what I am? I don't. I don't remember. But what I'm saying, man, is I think we all knew what was going on. Every minute. Even the Old Man."

"What's the point?"

"The sun rose and set a lot of times, Bowman. I didn't sleep either. That's a lot of time to think. And maybe change."

I turned my back to the rail. The crew were about ship's work. They were quieter than I remembered. Thoughtful. They moved less jerkily now.

How long had it been? Years?

"We don't look any different." Colgrave was the same old specter of terror there on the poop. He had changed clothing. He was clad in regal finery now. Clothes were his compensation for his deformity.

When he dressed this well, and kept the poop instead of lurking in his cabin, he meant to spill blood.

"I mean different inside." He considered Colgrave too. "Maybe some of us can't change. Maybe there's nothing else in there."

"Or maybe we just don't understand." I suffered an insight. "The Old Man's scared."

"He should be. These are Itaskian waters. Look what they did already."

"Not just afraid of what they'll do if they catch us. We had that hanging over us before. It didn't bother anybody. Won't now. I mean scared like Barley. Of everything and nothing."

Old Barley was our resident coward. He was also the meanest fighter on the Vengeful D. His fear drove him to prodigies in battle.

"Maybe. And maybe he's changed too."

"I haven't. Not that I can see."

"Look at your right hand."

I did. It was my hand, fore and middle fingers calloused from drawing bowstrings. "So?"

"Every guy here can tell you two things about your hands. If there's a ship in sight, your left will be holding a bow. And so it is. And your right, when Colgrave lets you, will be hanging on to a cup of rum like it was your firstborn child."

I looked at Mica. He smiled. I looked at my hand. It was naked. I looked down at the maindeck, that I had crossed without thinking of rum. Barley was almost finished issuing the grog ration.

The craving hit me hard. I must have staggered. Mica caught my arm. "Try to let it go, Bowman. Just this once."

I waved at Barley. "Just to see if you can do it." Why didn't he mind his own business? Gods, I needed a drink.

Then Priest caught my eye. Priest, the king of us alkies. The man who peddled salvation to the rest of us and remained incapable of saving himself. Priest did not have a tin cup either. He leaned over the starboard rail. His expression said that his guts were tearing him apart. His need for a drink was devouring him. But he was not drinking. His back was to Barley.

"Look at Priest," I murmured.

"I see him, Bowman. And I see you."

The cramps started then. They pissed me off. I whirled and planted myself against the rail, mimicking Priest, overlooking the bowsprit. I tried to shut out the world.

"No way that pervert is going to outlast me," I declared.

Our bow began rising and falling gently. The water was assuming the character of a normal sea. Our resurrection was about finished.

I did not look forward to its completion. I could get seasick in a rowboat on a lake on a breezy day.

The other vessel was hull up on the horizon and headed our way fast.

I reexamined my bow and arrows. Just in case.

VI

Had we changed? The gods witness, we had. The two-master came in alongside, gently, and we did not swarm over her. We did not cast her screaming crew to the sharks. We did not set her aflame. We did not do any thing but hold our weapons ready and wait. Colgrave did not ask us to do anything more.

Mica and I surveyed our shipmates. I'm sure he saw as much wonder in my face as I saw in his.

We watched Colgrave almost constantly. The Old Man would determine the smaller vessel's fate. Like it or not, if he gave the order, we would attack.

"We're a pack of war dogs," I told Mica. "We might as well be slaves." He nodded.

Never a word escaped our mad captain's mouth. That astonished him more than the rest of us, I think.

The ship lay bumping against Dragon for fifteen minutes. Her strangely clad, silent crewmen studied us. We studied them. Not a one would meet my eye. They knew who and what we were. We could smell the fear in them.

Yet they had come to us, and they stayed. And that was reason for us to fear.

The vessel had a small deckhouse amidships. Its door finally opened. Two more strangers stepped out, stationed themselves to either side. They studied us with startled, frightened eyes.

A person in red came forth, looked up.

"A woman!" Mica swore.

We did not have a reputation for being gallant.

"I don't think so...." But I could not be sure. I had never seen a bald woman. "But.... Call it an it."

Its incredible blue eyes stared in slight bewilderment. Unlike its shipmates, it did not fear us. It was confident.

I got the impression that we had been a disappointment. Because we had not conformed to our vicious reputation.

The urge to let an arrow fly was as strong in me as the need for a drink. I did not bend my bow.

One glance into those weird eyes was all I could handle. Incredible Power sparked them. They proclaimed their possessor a sorcerer greater than he who had banished us to fogs and leaden seas.

The creature also had that aura of command that animated Colgrave.

"This's the one who called us back," I whispered.

Mica nodded.

I had myself in control. I tested the draw of my bow.

Black birds wheeled overhead, screeching their consternation. One dove at the figure in red.

The figure raised a palm. It spoke a single word.

Feathers exploded. They spun down toward ships and sea, smoldering as they fell. The stench of burnt feathers assailed the air.

The naked albatross smashed into Dragon's side. It broke its neck. It thrashed in the water briefly, then changed form. In seconds it became a thing like a snake of night. The thing wriggled away through water and air with lightning speed.

Its companions screeched once, then remained silent. They did not cease their endless patrol. They clearly preferred avoiding their comrade's liberation.

The figure in red said something.

Someone shouted orders in a strange language. Sailors threw grappling hooks over Dragon's rail.

I looked at Colgrave. An arrow lay across my bow.

He made a slight negative head gesture.

"He has changed," I told Mica. "He says let them come." I looked again. Colgrave was instructing Toke and Lank Tor. They descended to the maindeck.

They disposed the men in such fashion that they could attack the boarders from all sides. We waited.

One of the smaller ship's officers came up. He looked round, saw the lay of things. He was not happy. He glanced at me. I half drew my bow. He cringed.

I laughed. Old Barley giggled. The crew took it up.

We were not kind people. We enjoyed tormenting our captives.

Again Colgrave gave me that little headshake. A nasty grin smeared his face too. He liked my joke.

More of them came. And more, and more.

"Mica, they're all coming over." "Looks like."

They stood on the maindeck, nervously watched Colgrave.

"Slide back and tell the Old Man we can sneak down and knock a hole in their bottom when they're all up here. If he wants."

Mica grinned. "Yeah." It was his kind of dirty trick. He liked sneaking. I expect his sins involved some fancy sneakiness. He wasn't chicken, mind. Just the kind of guy who sees the advantages of backstabbing. A low-risk type guy. He could handle himself face-to-face, when the stakes were high. He shoved through the strangers. They twisted away from him like he was a plague carrier.

I watched a grin spread across Colgrave's battered face. It was as lopsided as the altars of Hell. The muscles only worked on one side.

He liked it. My suggestion did not violate his inexplicable armistice with the creature in red.

Mica almost danced back to the forecastle.

The sorcerer boarded last. Its crew surrounded it. It disappeared among them. They were all bigger.

I laughed, catching the creature's attention. I again half drew my bow.

It looked at me with no apparent fear, but I knew better. I knew I could take the sorcerer if just one instant's gap opened through those bodyguards. We had not been stripped of our defenses. I could get an arrow from here to there quicker than the creature could blink.

It knew too. That was why it had brought its whole crew. In the time it would take us to kill them, it could perform the sorceries needed to save itself.

It, too, concentrated on Colgrave. The Old Man's eye flicked my way just once, for a tenth of a second.

Mica and I rolled over the rail into the ratlines, transferred to the other vessel's stays, got down to her deck in seconds.

"Bowman, you see about sinking her. I'll go through the cabin."

"Good thinking. But look for something besides loose gold."

He gave me a look.

I looked back. Gold was Mica's weakness. Whenever we took a ship, he spent most of the victory celebration scrounging gold and silver. He brought it back, and we took it down and put it in ballast, never knowing what we would ever do with it.

That was one tough little ship. It took me twenty minutes to chop a decent hole through her thin planking. By the time I finished I knew she would not sink before the strangers could get back aboard.

I chuckled. That made the joke richer.

I hustled back topside. We were taking too long. "Mica!" I called softly. "Come on. We haven't got all day."

He poked his head out the deckhouse door. "Here. Take some of this crap."

He had gotten some gold, of course. But not much. The rest seemed to be books, papers, and the thing-gobbies sorcerers have to have to be comfortable doing their nasties.

VII

I rolled over Dragon's rail expecting all eyes to be looking my way.

None were. None did. The strangers were crowded against the base of the poop. Colgrave stood above them, a mocking smile on half his face. Everybody stared at him like he was some demon god.

Sometimes I thought he was myself. The men were impatient. The strangers felt it. Their fear was about to become panic. Only the will of the creature in red kept them from running.

Mica handed up our plunder. I concealed it beneath a spritsail lying on the forecastle deck. Mica rolled over the rail.

Colgrave's glance flicked our way. His smile stretched. He terminated the audience with a shrug and a turned back.

The creature in red started back to its vessel. Its followers surged around it, eager to be gone.

I half drew my bow for the third time.

The creature in red smiled at me.

That made me mad. I would have let fly had Colgrave not shook his head.

Nobody mocked the Bowman....

Then they were gone, their vessel turning away and heading back whence it had come. They stood around watching us, as if to make sure we did not change our minds about letting them go.

Their ship was a foot lower in the water already. Soon they would realize that she was not responding properly. They would discover the hole....

I had cut it too big for them to keep afloat by pumping. And I doubted that they would be able to get a good patch on it. I slapped Mica's back. "Let's take the stuff to the Old Man."

It was not a chore that pleased me. Though it was unavoidable, I plain did not like being anywhere near Colgrave. But with Student gone, he was the only reader left aboard.

Anyway, he needed to know what we had. If anything.

He stirred through the pile. Mica's personal plunder he pushed to one side. Mica took it below. The rest Colgrave sorted into three piles. A half-dozen items he just flipped over his shoulder, over the rail, into the sea. Then he examined the piles again. He deep-sixed several more items.

Toke, Tor, and I watched in silence. Colgrave kept dithering, poking. I don't think he knew what he had. But Colgrave was not the type to admit ignorance.

Finally, I could stand no more. "What did they want?" I demanded.

"The usual," Colgrave replied without looking up. "A little murder. A little terror. With his enemies on the bull's-eye, of course. Not ours." "His?"

"I think it was a he. You cut a big hole, Bowman?"

"Big enough. It'll stop them." He seemed so damned blase after what had been done to us. Was he still trusting in divine protection? After the Itaskian sorcerer? If so, he was a fool. That was one thing that had never been pinned on Colgrave.

"Tor, go to the masthead. Let us know when they go dead in the water. Toke, make sail for Freyland. I think she'll respond now."

I watched while Colgrave examined several books. He seemed awfully undignified, sitting on the deck with his legs crossed. Finally, "Captain, what're we going to do?"

He peered at me with that one evil eye till I thought he was going to have me thrown to the sharks. One did not address Colgrave. Colgrave called one to the presence.

He finally replied, "It would be a raid to belittle anything we've ever tried. Portsmouth itself. Burn the docks. Burn the town. Kill everybody we can." "Why?"

"I didn't ask, Bowman." His voice was cold and hard. He was tired of my questions. Yet I remained where I was. He had changed. He was more open than ever I had seen. "He ordered us. We haven't yet tested the limits of his control. We may not be able to do otherwise."

"And we do have our grievances." "Yes. We have scores to settle with Portsmouth."

Dragon shifted her heading to north-northeast. We were on course for the island kingdoms.

"The little sailmaker must have overlooked something," Colgrave said. "There's nothing here we can use. All we can do is deny this stuff to him."

"She's taking in sail, Captain," Tor called down. A vast amusement filled his voice.

The story had passed through the crew, spread by Mica. There was a lot of laughter.

I looked north. I could barely make out the other vessel.

Damn, did that Tor have eyes.

Excellent eyes. "Sail ho!" he called a moment later. "She's a big one. War galleon, by her look."

His arm thrust aft. Colgrave and I turned.

We could just make out her main tops. I looked at Colgrave.

I could see the torment in him. The need... He had to have bloodshed the way I had to have rum, had to use my bow.

"She's an Itaskian," Tor called a few minutes later. The bloodlust filled his voice. He, too, needed the killing.

Nervousness and uncertainty washed the maindeck. The men no longer had the absolute confidence that had impelled them before our capture.

Dragon had changed indeed. And was changing still.

"Maintain your heading, First Officer," Colgrave finally croaked.

It tore him up to say it. But he did.

A breeze came up. It took us on our port quarter, setting us to landward. The more we turned to seaward, the harder it blew.

The smell of wizardry tainted it.

Colgrave gathered Mica's plunder, took it to his cabin, then returned to

the poop. He said nothing more. The stubborn Colgrave of old, he kept Dragon's course inalterably fixed on Freyland.

We passed within three hundred yards of the sorcerer's ship. Its crew were too busy keeping from drowning to pay attention. Several called for help. We sailed on.

Colgrave laughed at them. I'm sure his voice carried that far.

The breeze died soon afterward, as the other ship began going under. I guess the wizard needed to concentrate on surviving.

One round for us.

We took orders from nobody. Not even those who pretended to be our saviors.

That is what Tor said the thing in red had claimed when it had spoken to Colgrave. It had wanted to bargain.

To bargain? I thought. Then its hold on us could not be as strong as it would like.

I smiled. And stood on the forecastle looking forward to the coasts of Freyland. It had been a long time since we had sailed them.

The black birds circled overhead. After a time, one by one, they settled into our tops. They seemed less

outraged than they had been.

VIII

Spring had only recently conquered the western shores of Freyland. The cove where we anchored was surrounded by low, forested hills blushing green. The afternoons were warm and lazy.

There was nothing to do. For the first time since I had come aboard, Dragon was in perfect repair. Half the ship's work being done was stuff Toke and Lank Tor conjured up because they did not have anything to do either. For several days we just plain loafed.

But in the background lurked the nagging questions, the aching doubts. What would Colgrave decide? Would it be the right thing?

"Right thing?" Mica demanded. Pure amazement animated his features. "What the hell kind of question is that, Bowman?"

He and I and Priest had rigged us a couch of folded sail and were lying back staring at cloud castles while dangling fishing lines over the side. Fishing was something I had not done since boyhood.

I could not remember that far back. I just knew that I had liked to fish.

"It's a valid question," Priest insisted. "We have come to the crossroads of righteousness, Sailmaker. We stand at the forking of the way...."

"Oh, knock it off, Priest," I grumbled. "Don't you ever give up?"

"I think I got a bite," he replied.

"Take it easy, Bowman," Mica said. "He's getting better."

That he was, I had to admit. I used to loathe Priest because he insisted on being our conscience while remaining one of the worst sinners himself.

Priest dragged a small fish over the side. "I'll be damned."

"Doubtless. We're all damned. We have been for ages."

"That's debatable. I meant the fish."

It was a little speckled sand shark about sixteen inches long. Not exactly what we were after. I started to smash its head with my heel.

"Why don't you just throw it back?" Mica asked. "It ain't hurting nothing."

Trouble was, the shark did not want to go. Not with our help. Its little jaws kept going chompity-chomp. Its skin sandpapered the hide off my fingers when I tried to hold it so Priest could get his hook back.

It died before we could save it.

"You was talking about doing the right thing," Mica told me. "What made you say that? I never heard the Bowman talk that way before."

I gave him a look.

Priest took his side "He's right. Colgrave's the only man here meaner than the Bowman."

I did not agree. At least, I had never thought of it that way. I rated Priest and Old Barley meaner than me any day.

The Kid came up and joined us. He had been keeping a low profile lately. He seemed to be completely tied up inside himself. Ordinarily, he was our number-one showoff, our number-one mouth man.

I was at the end of the sail couch. He sat down beside me. Amazing.

I kind of liked the Kid. Really. He reminded me of myself when I was younger. But he had no use for me. I never understood, unless it was true that I looked like somebody he had hated before coming aboard.

"Hey, Bowman. What do you think?" he asked.

"Hunh? About what, Kid?" Why was he asking me? Anything.

"About this. About us coming back." He sat up, started making himself a fishing line of his own. He fumbled around. It was obvious that he had never fished in his life. I helped him get it right.

And I asked him why he was asking me.

"Because you're the smart guy now that Student's gone. Toke. Lank Tor. They're just zombies. And the Old Man wouldn't give me the time of day if I begged."

"Kid. Kid, I..." I let it drift off unsaid.

"What?"

I forced it. "I never much cared about anybody. But it hurts me to see you here, so young."

He looked at me strangely, then smiled. That smile was worth a ton of gold. "I earned it, Bowman."

"Didn't we all?" Mica mused.

"That we did," Priest declared. "The sins on our souls..." He shut himself off, said instead, "The question is, are we going to go right on deserving it?"

Mica got a bite. He hauled in another goddamned shark. This one was more cooperative. Or we had gotten better at handling them.

"Kid, I don't know what to think. That's the gospel. I'm lost. I go half crazy worrying about it

sometimes."

A body plopped down the other side of Kid. I glanced over. It was the Trolledyingjan, the final addition to our mad crew. We had picked him up off an Itaskian warship we had taken in our next-to-last battle. He had been confined to her brig.

He had a name, Torfin something, but nobody ever used it. He was one long drink of silence. I don't think he had spoken twenty words the whole time he had been aboard. He did not say anything now. He just looked at me and Mica.

We had tried to kill him once. Before he had become part of our crew. Back when we were raiders. We had attacked his ship. He had tried boarding us. Me and Mica had dumped him into the drink.

And then he had turned up aboard the Itaskian, and Colgrave had decided he ought to replace Student or Whaleboats.

A treaty of forgiveness passed between us without words being spoken.

Trolledyingjan said, "There be tales told in the Fatherland of the Oskoreien. The Wild Hunt. They be souls of the damned who ride Hell's stallions through the high range hunting the living."

The Kid passed him a hook and some line. He started fiddling with it. "What're you driving at?" I asked. "We be the Oskoreien of the sea." He baited his hook and flipped it over the side. We waited. Finally, he continued, "They tell of the Wild Hunt that they be hating none so much as they be hating one another."

We waited some more, but that was all he had to say.

It was enough. It made me think. He had stated a truth and had posed a question in a characteristically oblique Trolledyingjan manner.

Hatred had always been the one shared, unifying emotion aboard Dragon. And we hated each other more than any outsiders.

Only, we were getting along now. More or less.

The others saw it too. Even the Kid. "What's it mean. Bowman?" the boy asked.

"I don't know."

The changes were progressing. I no longer knew myself. If ever I had.

Fat Poppo laboriously clambered to the forecastle deck. His appearance was another declaration of how the crew regarded me.

"Welcome to the philosophy klatch, Poppo," I said. "What brings you dragging your ass all the way up off the maindeck?" He seldom moved if he did not have to, so fat and lazy was he.

He dropped to his knees behind me, whispered, "In the trees across the cove. Under the big dead one you guys been calling the hanging tree."

I looked. And I saw what he meant.

There were four of them, and they wore livery. Soldiers.

The honeymoon was over. "Mica, slide down and dig up the Old Man. Tell him to take a gander at what we've got under the hanging tree. Try to keep it casual."

Colgrave had been holed up in his cabin since we had dropped anchor. He was studying the wizard's things. He would not appreciate being disturbed.

But this was important. Maybe I made a mistake. The rest of us might not have been recognized. We were well-known, but there was nothing really unique about our appearances. Not the way Colgrave's was unique.

I reached for my bow and quietly strung it behind the mask of the railing.

IX

Jolgrave strode from his cabin dressed for a day at court. Mica dogged along behind him as he climbed to the poop. He turned his one grim eye on our watchers.

"The dead captain!"

It carried clearly over the water* Brush crackled. I leapt to my feet and pulled an arrow to my ear.

"It's them! That's the Archer!"

"Bowman. Let them run."

I relaxed. Colgrave was right. Wasting arrows had no point. I could not get them all. Not through the trees.

Still, a gesture seemed necessary....

One turned, stared back through a small opening in the foliage. He bore a spade-shaped shield. A griffin rampant was its device. I let fly with a waste arrow, a practice arrow. It pierced the griffin's eye.

I still had it. After however long it had been, my shafts still flew true.

The soldier's jaw dropped. I bowed mockingly.

"That wasn't smart," Priest told me.

"Couldn't help myself. I had to do it."

The black birds above cursed me in their squawky tongue. I glared my defiance.

My archery was my one skill, my one way of defying the universe and its perversity. The gesture had

been important to me. It was a statement that the Bowman existed, that he was well, that his aim was still deadly. It was a graffito on the walls of time, screaming I AM!

Colgrave beckoned.

I shook in my seaboots. I was going to catch hell for defying orders....

But he did not mention my shot. Instead, he gathered Toke, Lank Tor, and myself, and told us: "The decision is at hand. Within two days the whole island will know we've returned. They'll know in Portsmouth in three days, in Itaskia in four. They won't endure us anymore. Our return will scare them so much that they'll send out every ship they have. They won't trust warlocks this time. They'll destroy us absolutely, with fire, at whatever cost we demand."

He stared at the western sea, his one good eye gazing on sights the rest of us could never see. He said again, "At whatever cost we demand."

Tor giggled. Fighting was his only love, his only joy. He did not care whether he would win or lose, only that he would be able to swing a blade in another battle. He was the same old Tor. I did not think there was anything in him capable of change. He was a hollow man.

Toke said, "There's no hope, then? We have to depart this plane memorialized by mountains of dead men and seas scattered with burning ships?"

I sighed. "There's nowhere to run, Toke. Destiny's winds have blown us into the narrow channel. We can't do anything but ride with the current."

Colgrave looked at me strangely. "That's odd talk from you, Bowman."

"I feel odd, Captain."

"There's still the sorcerer who recalled us," he said. "And we aren't forgotten of the gods. Not completely." He glanced at the black birds.

The creatures strained their necks toward us.

I surveyed my longtime home. Forward, against the base of the forecastle, I could discern a tiny, almost invisible patchlet of dark fog. I had not noticed it since the day the sorcerer had boarded us. I imagined it had always been there, unnoticed because it stayed behind the corner of my vision.

"I'll give my orders in the morning," Colgrave declared. "For today, celebrate. Our final celebration. Tor. See to the arms. Toke, tell Barley to use his keys."

My guts snapped into an agonized knot. Rum...!

"We'll sail at dawn," the Old Man told us. "Be ready. I'll tell you our destination then."

He scanned us once with that wicked eye, and it seemed that there was pain and care in his gaze. He left us there, stunned, and returned to his cabin.

Emotion? In Colgrave? It was almost too much to bear.

I returned to the forecastle and plopped my ass down between the Kid and Little Mica. I leaned back and stared at the clouds, at the green hills where four terrified soldiers were racing to unleash the hounds of doom. "Damned!" I muttered. "Damned. Damned. Damned."

The Kid was first to ask. "What did he say, Bowman?"

I glared at the hills as if my gaze could drop those Freylanders in their tracks. "We sail with the morning tide.

He hasn't decided where or why."

The Trolledyngjan hooked a sand shark. We went through the routine, dumped it back.

"Think it's the same one?" Priest asked. "It don't look any different."

"Why would it keep coming back?" Mica wanted to know.

The Kid asked me, "What do you think he'll decide. Bowman?"

"To spill blood. He's still Colgrave. He's still the dead captain. He only knows one way. The only question is who he'll go after."

"Oh."

"Give me a line." I baited my hook and flipped it over the rail. "Priest, Barley's passing out grog." I needed a drink something cruel. But I was not going to give in first.

I watched the torment in his face. And he watched it in mine as he replied, "Don't think so, Bowman. Too far to walk. Besides, I'm getting a nibble."

He got the nibble, but I caught the fish. It was the same damned shark. What was the matter with that thing? Couldn't it learn?

Dragon rocked gently on quiet swells. A breeze whispered in the trees surrounding the cove. We kept catching that sand shark and throwing it back, and not saying much, while the sun dribbled down to the horizon behind

X

Toke, Lank Tor, and I clambered up to the poop. The crew gathered on the maindeck, their eyes on the Old Man's cabin door. The sun had not yet cleared the hills to the east.

"Tide's going to turn soon," Toke observed.

"Uhm," I grunted.

Lank Tor shuffled nervously. The blood-eagerness in him seemed tempered by something else this

morning. Had the changes began to reach even him?

Colgrave came forth.

The crew gasped.

Tor, Toke, and I leaned over the poop rail to see why.

He wore old, battered, plain clothing. It was the sort a merchant captain down on his luck might wear. There wasn't a bit of color or polish on him.

A new Colgrave confronted us. I was not sure I liked it. It made me uneasy, as if the man's style of dress were the root of our failures and successes.

He ignored everybody till he had reached the poop and surveyed his surroundings. Then, "Make sail, First Officer. North along the coast, two points to seaward. They're watching. Let them think we're bound for North Cape."

Toke and Tor went to get anchor and sails up. I stood beside Colgrave, searching the shore for this morning's watchers.

He said, "We'll keep this heading till we're out of sight of land. Then we'll come round and run south. We'll stay in the deep water."

I shuddered. We were not deepwater sailors. Though hardly any of us had set foot on dry land in years, we did not want to let it out of sight. Few of us had been sailors before fate shanghaied us onto this devil ship.

And deep water meant heavier seas. Seas meant seasickness. My stomach was in bad enough shape, having had no rum.

"What then?" I asked.

"Portsmouth, Bowman."

"The wizard wins? Dragon runs to his beck? We do his murders for him?"

"I don't know, Bowman. He's the crux. He's the answer. Whatever happens, it'll revolve around him. He's in Portsmouth. We'll take our questions to him."

There was uncertainty in Colgrave's voice. He, the megalithic will round which my universe turned, no longer knew what he was doing. He just knew that something had to be done.

"But Portsmouth? You're sure?"

"He's there. Somewhere. Masquerading as something else. We'll find him." There was no doubt in him now. He had selected a course. Nothing would turn him aside.

I could not fathom Colgrave's thinking. He wanted to take Dragon into the very den of our enemies? Just to confront that sorcerer again? It was pure madness.

No one had ever accused Colgrave of being sane. And only the once had he come out loser.

We sailed north. We turned and ran south once Tor could no longer discern land from the maintop. A steady breeze scooted us along. By nightfall, according to Toke, we had come back south of the southernmost tip of Freyland. But Colgrave did not alter course till next morning. Several hours after dawn he ordered a change to a heading due east.

He shifted course a point this way, a point that as we sailed along. He had Toke and Tor put on or take off canvas.

A plan was shaping in his twisted mind.

Time lumbered along. The sun set, and it rose. Tension built up till we were all ready to snap. Tempers flared. Some of the old hatred returned. We were not very tolerant of one another. The sun set again. I had seen Colgrave's matchless dead reckoning before. I was not overwhelmed when he brought Dragon into the mouth of the Silverbind Estuary with the same accuracy I showed in speeding a shaft to its target.

We were all dismayed. To a man we had hoped that he would change his mind, or that something would change it for him.

We had not seen one ship during our time at sea.

They had taken our false trail for true. The fleet had cleared Portsmouth only that morning, heading north in hopes of catching us in the wild seas between Freyland and Cape Blood. The only vessels we saw now, as we eased along the nighted Itaskian coast, were fishing boats drawn up on the beaches for the night.

Watchfires burned along the Estuary's north shore. They winked at us as if secretly blessing our surreptitious passage.

Those winks conveyed messages. A steady flow were coming from the north. Fat Poppo tried reading them, but the Itaskians had changed their codes since he had been in their navy. No one noticed our little caravel creeping along through the moonless night.

The lights of Portsmouth appeared on our starboard bow. Little bells tinkled over the water ahead. Then Poppo softly announced that he had spotted the first channelmarker buoy. Its bell pinged happily in the gentle swell.

Colgrave sent Tor to the forecandle to watch the markers.

He meant to try the impossible. He meant to take Dragon up the channel by starlight.

Colgrave's confidence in his destiny was justified. Dragon was surely a favored charity of the gods that night. The breeze was absolutely perfect for creeping from one bellbuoy to the next. The current did not bother us at all. We penetrated the harbor basin two hours after midnight. Perfect timing. The city was asleep. Colgrave warped Dragon in to a wharf with a precise beauty that only a sailor could appreciate.

Fear had that ship by the guts. I was so rattled that I don't think I could have hit an elephant at ten paces. But there I was on the forecandle, ready to cover the landing party.

Priest, Barley, and the Trolledyngjan jumped to the wharf. They searched the darkness for enemies.

Mica and the Kid jumped. Others threw them mooring lines. They made fast in minutes. The gangplank went down for the first time in anyone's memory. Toke and Tor started ushering the men ashore. Tor made sure they were armed. Some did not want to go. I was one. I had not set foot on any land in so long that I could not remember what it was like.... And this was the country of my birth. This was the land of my crimes. This land loved me no more, nor wanted its sacred soil defiled by the tread of my murderer's feet....

Nor did I want to do any sorcerer's bloodletting.

Colgrave beckoned. I had to go. I relaxed my grip on my bow, descended to the maindeck, crossed to the gangplank.

Only the Old Man and I remained aboard. Toke and Tor were trying to maintain order on the wharf. Some of the men were trying to get back to the ship, to escape stable footing and everything that land meant. Others had fallen to their knees and were kissing the paving stones. Some, like Barley, just stood and shook.

"I don't want to return, either, Bowman," Colgrave whispered. "My very being whines and pules. But I'm going. Now march."

The old fire was in his eyes. I marched.

He had not changed clothing. He still wore rags and tatters. Following me down the gangplank, he looped a piece of cloth across his features the way they do in the deserts of Hammad al Nakir.

Colgrave's presence made the difference. The men forgot their emotions. Toke quickly arranged them in a column of fours.

A late drunk staggered out of the darkness. "Shay...." he mumbled. "What're.... Who're...." He almost tripped over me and Colgrave.

He was an old man young. A beggar, by his look, and a cripple. He had only one arm, and one leg barely functioned. He reeked of cheap, sour wine. He stumbled against me again. I caught him.

"Thanks, buddy," he mumbled. His breath was foul.

My god, I thought. This could be me if I keep on the grog.... I forced honesty. I was looking at what I had been when I had committed my murders, and most of the time since. All I could see was ugliness. The drunk stared at me. His eyes grew larger and larger. He glanced over the crew, peered at the Old Man.

A long, terrified whine, like the plea of a whipped cur, ripped from his throat.

"Priest!" the Old Man snapped.

Priest materialized.

"This man recognizes us. Man, this is Priest. Do you know him too? You do? Good. I'm going to ask some questions. Answer them. Or I'll let Priest have you."

The drunk became so terrified that for several minutes we could pry no sense from him at all.

He did know us. He had been a sailor aboard one of the warships that had helped bring us to our doom. He had been one of the few lucky survivors. He remembered the battle as if it had taken place yesterday. Eighteen years and a sea of alcohol had done nothing to erase the memories.

Eighteen years! I thought. More than half my lifetime.... The life I had lived before boarding Vengeful D. The whole world would have changed.

Colgrave persisted with his questions. The old sailor answered willingly. Priest shuffled nervously.

Priest had been the great killer, the great torturer, back when. He had loved it. But the role did not fit him anymore.

Colgrave learned what he wanted. At least, he learned all the drunk had to tell.

A moment of decision arrived. The old sailor recognized it before I did. It was the moment when a man should have died, based on our record.

A black bird squeaked somewhere in Dragon's rigging.

"There is a ship at the wharf," Colgrave said. "Barley! The keys." Barley came. Colgrave gave the keys to the drunk. He stared at them as if they fit the locks in the one-way gates of Hell.

"You will board that ship," Colgrave told him. His tone denied even the possibility that his will might be challenged. "You will stay there, drinking the rum behind the lock those keys fit, till I give you leave to go ashore."

The watchbird squawked again. Excited wings punished the night air.

Fog started drifting in from the Estuary. Its first tendrils reached us.

The drunk looked at Colgrave, stunned. His head bobbed. He ran toward Dragon.

XII

"Bowman, come," Colgrave said. "You've been to Portsmouth before, You'll have to show me the way to the Torian Hill."

I did not remember ever having been to Portsmouth. I told him so, and suggested that Mica be his guide. Mica was always talking about Portsmouth. Mostly about its famous whorehouses, but sometimes about its people and their strange mores.

"You will remember," Colgrave told me. He used the same tone that he had directed at the drunk.

I remembered. Not much, but enough to show him the way to the Torian Hill, which was the area where the mercantile magnates and high nobility maintained their urban residences.

Dawn launched its assaults upon the eastern horizon, though in the fog we were barely aware of it. We began to encounter early risers. Some instinct made them avoid us.

We passed out of the city proper, into the environs of the rich and powerful. Portsmouth was not a walled city. There were no gates to pass, no guards to answer.

We broke from fog into dawnlight halfway up the Torian Hill.

It was not like I remembered it. Mica's expression confirmed my feeling.

"There's been a war pass this way," he said. "Only a couple years ago."

It was obvious. They were still picking up the pieces. "Where are we going?" I asked Colgrave.

"I don't know. This's the Torian Hill?" Mica and I both nodded.

Colgrave dug round inside his rags, produced a gold ring.

"Hey!" Mica complained. "That's...." He shut up.

A glance from Colgrave's eye could chill the hardest soul.

"What is it?" I asked Mica.

"That's my ring. I took it off the wizard's ship. He said I could have it. I put it down in the ballast with my other things."

"Must've been more than just gold."

"Yeah. Must have been." He eyed Colgrave like a guy trying to figure how best to carve a roast.

He would not do anything. We all had those thoughts sometimes. Nobody ever tried.

Colgrave forced the ring onto a bony little finger, closed his eyes.

We waited.

Finally, "That way. The creature is there. It sleeps."

I caught the change from he to it. What had changed Colgrave's mind? I did not ask. During the climb he had become the mad captain again.

People began to notice us. They did not recognize us, but we were a piratical-looking crew. They got the hell away fast.

Some were women. We had not laid hands on a woman in ages...

"Sailmaker." Colgrave said it softly. Mica responded as though he had been lashed. He forgot women even existed, let alone the one he had begun stalking.

We came to a mansion. It skulked behind walls that would have done a fortified town proud. The stone

was grey, cold limestone still moist from the fog.

"Bowman. You knock." He waved everyone against the wall, out of view of the gateman's peephole.

I pounded. And pounded again. Feet shuffled behind the heavy gate. The shield over the peephole slid aside. An old man's eye glared through. "What the hell you want?" he demanded sleepily.

Colgrave dropped the cloth concealing his face. "Open the gate." He used the voice that had made Mica forget a skirt, that had driven a drunk aboard Dragon.

The old man croaked, "Gah... Gah..."

"Open the gate," Colgrave told him.

For a moment I did not think that he would.

The gate creaked inward an inch.

Colgrave hit it with his shoulder. I lunged through after him, knocking an arrow. Colgrave seized the gateman's shirt, demanded, "Where is he? The thing in red?"

I do not think he knew the answer. But he talked.

Something growled. Barley eased past us and opened the mastiff's skull with a brutal sword stroke. Priest silenced a second growler.

Men charged toward us from between shrubbery, from behind trees. They had no intention of talking things over. They had blades in their hands and murder on their minds.

Yet it was not an ambush. Ambushers do not pull their pants on as they attack.

"I don't think we be welcome," the Trolledyingjan drawled laconically.

I sped a half dozen arrows. Men dropped. The crew counter-charged the rest.

"Do it quietly!" Colgrave ordered.

They did. Not a word was spoken. Not a warcry disturbed the morning song birds. Only the clang of blades violated the stillness.

I sped a couple more arrows. But the men did not need my help. They had the defenders outnumbered. I turned to Colgrave.

He had the gatekeeper babbling. Aside, he told me, "Lock the gate." I did.

"Come on, Bowman." Colgrave stalked toward the mansion. He left the gatekeeper lying in a widening lake of blood.

A black bird scolded from the limestone wall.

This was the Colgrave of old. This was the mad captain who killed without thought or remorse, who fed

on the agony and fear of his victims....

The creature in red was not going to be pleased with him.

I recovered my spent arrows, running from victim to victim so I could keep up with the Old Man. I recognized some of the dead. They had crewed the sorcerer's ship.

The thing they dreaded had overtaken them after all.

"Where are we headed?" I asked Colgrave.

"Cellars. The thing's got to be hiding under the house somewhere."

"Hey! What's going on?" A sleepy, puzzled, powerfully built gentleman of middle years had come onto the mansion's front porch. He still wore his night clothes. Servants peeped fearfully from the doorway behind him.

I never found out who he was. Somebody important. Somebody who had thought he could get the world by the ass if he allied his money and political pull with the magical might of the creature in red. Somebody driven by greed and addicted to power. Somebody laboring under the false impression that his mere presence would be enough to cow lowlife rogues like ourselves. Somebody who did not know that deals with devils never come out.

He was in for a big disappointment quick. Nobody faced Colgrave down.

The Old Man grabbed him exactly the way he had grabbed the gateman. The man lunged, could not break Colgrave's hold. "The thing in your cellar. What is it?"

The man's struggles ceased. He became as pale as a corpse. "You know?" he croaked. "That's impossible. Nobody knows. He said that nobody would ever find out...."

"He did? Who is he? What is he?" Aside, "Tor. Toke. Surround the house. Be ready to fire it if I call."

"No! Don't burn...."

"Colgrave does whatever he damn well pleases. Answer me. Where is he? Why did he call us back...."

"Colgrave?"

"Colgrave. Yes. That Colgrave."

"My God! What has he done?"

I bowed mockingly. "They call me Bowman. Or the Archer."

He fainted.

The servants scattered. Their screams dwindled into the depths of the house.

"Priest. Barley. Mica. Bowman. Trolledyngjan. Come with me." Colgrave stepped over our host, into the house.

"Catch one of the servants." Mica came up with one in seconds. She was about sixteen. His leer betrayed his thinking.

"Not now," Colgrave growled. Mica, too, was reverting. "Girl," Colgrave said, "show us the way to the cellar."

Whimpering, she led us to the kitchens.

"Barley. You go down first." Barley took a candle. He was back in a minute. "Wine and turnips, Captain."

"Girl, I'll give you to Mica if..." Something screeched. Lamps overturned and pottery broke in a room behind us. I whirled. A black bird waddled into the kitchens.

I said, "She probably doesn't know, Captain. It's probably a hidden doorway."

Hatred flamed from Colgrave's eye when he glanced my way. "Uhm. Probably." He fingered the gold ring he had plundered from Mica's hoard. "Ah. This way."

We surged back into the front rooms. Everyone pounded panels. "Here," said Colgrave. "Trolledyngjan."

The northman swung his ax. Three resounding blows shattered the panel.

A dark, descending stairway lay behind it. I seized a lamp.

"Barley goes first," the Old Man said. "I'll carry the lamp, Bowman. I want you behind me with an arrow ready."

It would be tight for drawing, but I had my orders.

XIII

The stair consisted of more than a hundred steps. I lost count around eighty. It was darker than the bottom side of a buried coffin.

Then light began seeping up to meet us. It was a pale, spectral light, like the glow that sometimes formed on our mastheads in spooky weather. Colgrave stopped.

I glanced back up. The servant girl stood limned in the hole through the panel. The waddling silhouette of a black bird squeezed past her legs. Another fluttered clumsily behind her, awaiting its turn.

We went on. The stair ended. An open door faced its foot. The pale light came splashing through, making Barley look like a ghost.

He went on. He was shaking all over. There was nothing in the universe more deadly than a terrified

Barley.

Colgrave followed him. I followed Colgrave. Priest, Mica, and the Trolledyingjan crowded us. We spread

out to receive whatever greeting awaited us. Barley was a step or two ahead.

The creature in red reposed on a dark basaltic throne. The floor surrounding, it had been inscribed with a pentagram of live fire. The signs and sigils defining its angles and points wriggled and gleamed. The floor itself seemed darker than a midnight sky.

This was the source of light. The only source. There were torches atop the red thing's throne, but they were not alight.

The creature's eyes were closed. A gentle smile lay upon its delicate lips.

"Kill it?" I whispered to Colgrave. I bent my bow.

"Wait. Move aside a little and be ready."

Barley started forward, blade rising. Colgrave caught his sleeve.

At the same instant one of the black birds flopped past us, positioned itself in Barley's path.

"We're here," Colgrave said softly; to himself. "So what do we do now?"

He had altered again. Once more he was the mellowed Colgrave. The old Colgrave did not know the word we.

"You don't know?" I whispered.

"Bowman, I'm a man of action. Action begets action, till resolution... My goal has been to get here. I haven't thought past that. Now I must. For instance, what happens if we do kill this thing? What happens if we don't? To us, I mean. And to everyone else.

Those aren't the kinds of things Colgrave usually worries about."

I understood. Tomorrow had never mattered aboard Dragon. Life on that devil ship had been a perpetually frozen Now. Looking backward had been a glance at a foggy place where everything quickly became lost. Looking ahead had consisted of waiting for the next battle, the next victim ship, with perhaps hope for a little rape or drunkenness before we fired her and leaned back to enjoy the screams of her crew. Tomorrow had always been beyond our control, entirely in the hands of whimsical gods.

They had taken remarkable care of us for so long, till they slipped us that left-handed one with the Itaskian sorcerer....

Here we stood at a crossroads. We had to decide on a path, and both went down the back side of a hill. We could only guess which was the better.

If we could even glean a hint of what they were. The trails were virtually invisible from this side of the crest.

"Ready your arrows, Bowman," Colgrave told me. "If he needs it, put the first one between his eyes. Or down his throat. Don't give him time to caste a spell."

"What'll your signal be?"

"You make the decision. There won't be time for signals."

We locked gazes. This was a new Colgrave indeed. Technique was my private province, but the decision to shoot had never been mine.

"Think for Dragon," he said. And I realized that that was what he was trying to do, and had been for the past several days. And Colgrave was unaccustomed to thinking for or about anyone but himself.

As was I. As was I.

A tremor passed through my limbs. Colgrave saw it. His eyebrow rose questioningly.

"I'll be all right." I nocked a different arrow. The motion was old and familiar. My hands stopped trembling. "You see?"

He nodded once, jerkily, then spun to face the creature in red.

It remained unchanged. It slept, wearing that insouciant smile. "Wake him up," Colgrave ordered.

Barley started forward.

"Don't enter the pentacle!" the Old Man snapped. "Find another way."

The Trolledyngian took an amulet from round his neck. "This be having no potency here anyway," he said. He flung it at the sleeper.

It corruscated as it flew. It trailed smoke and droplets of flame. It fell into the sorcerer's lap.

The creature jumped as if stung. Its eyes sprang open. I pulled my arrow to my ear.

Mine were the first eyes it met. It looked down the length of my shaft and slowly settled back to its throne, its hand folded over the amulet in its lap. We had dealt it a stunning surprise, but after that first reaction it hid it well. It turned its gaze from me to Colgrave.

They stared at one another. Neither spoke for several minutes. Time stretched into an eternity. Then the thing in red said, "There is no evading fate, Captain, I see what you mean to do. But you cannot redeem yourself by killing me instead of those whom I desire slain. In fact, unless I misread you, you have slain to reach me. Wherefore, then, can you expect redemption?"

His lips were parted a quarter inch, still smiling. They never moved while he spoke. And I was never sure whether I was hearing with my ears or brain.

I do not know what was on Colgrave's mind. The sorcerer's remarks did not deflate him. So I presume that he had seen the paradox already.

"Nor can you win redemption simply through performing acts. There must be sincerity." There was no inflection in his voice, but I swear he was mocking us.

I remembered an old friend who had disappeared long ago. Whaleboats had never been very sincere. Unless he had hidden it damned well.

"The damned can be no more damned than they already are," Colgrave countered. A grim rictus of a smile crossed his tortured face. "Perhaps the not-yet-damned can be spared the horror of those who are."

My eyes never left my target, but my mind ran wild and free. This was

Colgrave, the mad captain of the ghost ship? The terror of every man who put to sea? I had known him forever, it seemed, and had never sensed this in him.

We all have our mysterious deeps, I guess. I had been learning a lot about my shipmates lately.

"There is life for you in my service," the sorcerer argued. "There is no life in defying me. What I have once called up I can also banish."

"This be no life," the Trolledyingjan muttered. "We be but Oskoreien of the sea."

Priest nodded.

Barley was poised to charge. Colgrave caught his sleeve lightly. Like the faithful old dog he was, Barley relaxed.

I relaxed too, letting my bow slack to quarter pull. It was one of the most powerful ever made. Even I could not hold it at full draw long.

I stopped watching the sorcerer's eyes. There was something hypnotic about them, something aimed specially at me.

His hands caught my attention. They began moving as he argued with Colgrave, and I ignored his words for fear there would be something compelling hidden in his voice. His hands, too, were playing at treacheries.

I whipped my shaft back to my ear.

His hands dropped into his lap. He stopped talking, closed his eyes.

A wave of power inundated me. The creature was terrified of me! Of me!

It was the power I had felt as Dragon's second most famous crewman, while standing on her poop as we bore down on a victim, my arrows about to slay her helmsman and officers. It was the power that had made me the second most feared phenomenon of the western seas.

It was the absolute power of life and death.

And in that way, I soon realized, he was using me too.

I had the power, and he did fear me, but he was playing to my weakness for that power, hoping that it would betray me into his hands. In fact, he was counting on using all our weaknesses....

He was a bold, courageous, and subtle one, that creature in red. Whatever the stakes in his game, he was not reluctant to risk losing. Not one man in a million would have faced Dragon's crew for a chance at an empire, let alone have recalled us from our fog-bound grave.

He spoke again. And again he made weapons of his hands, his eyes, his voice. But he no longer directed them my way.

He chose Barley. It made a certain sense. Barley was the most wicked killer of us all. But I held the power of death, and Barley would have to get past Colgrave and Priest to take it away from me.

He whirled and charged. And the Trolledyngjan smacked the back of his head with the flat of his ax. Barley pitched forward. He lay still. Colgrave knelt beside him, his eye burning with the old hatred as he glared at the creature in red.

I nodded to the Trolledyngjan. I was pleased to see that I was not alone in my awareness of what the sorcerer was doing.

"I think you just made a mistake," Colgrave said.

"Perhaps. Perhaps I'll send you back to your waiting place. There are other means to my ends. But they're much slower...."

"You shouldn't ought to have done that," Priest said. "Barley was my friend."

What? I thought. You never had a friend in your life, Priest.

One of the black birds shrieked warningly. Colgrave reached out....

Too late. Priest's left hand blurred. A throwing knife flamed across the space between himself and the creature in red.

The sorcerer writhed aside. The blade slashed his left shoulder. His left hand rose, a finger pointing. He screamed something.

"Wizard!" I snarled.

And loosed my shaft.

It passed through his hand and smoked away into darkness. He looked down the length of my next shaft. His bloody hand dropped into his lap. Pain and rage seethed in him, but he fought for control. He wadded his robe around his hand.

My gaze flicked to Colgrave. We had a standoff here. And unless the Old Man did something, that wizard would pick us off one by one. Colgrave had to decide which way to jump.

Colgrave had to? But he had told me.... But....

XIV

All the black birds had joined us. They were big. I called them albatrosses, but their size was the only thing they had in common. They lined up between us and the wizard. Their pupilless yellow eyes seemed to take in everything at the same time.

They were doing their damndest to make sure we knew they were there.

I had always been aware of them. For me they had become as much a part of Dragon as Colgrave or myself. What were they? Lurkers over carrion? Celestial emissaries? Sometimes, because I sympathized with their plight, I wanted to make them something more than what they were.

Those sentinels posted by a dead man were as trapped as we. Maybe more than we were. Their exit might be even narrower.

Neither Colgrave nor the creature in red paid them any heed. To those two the birds were squawking nuisances left from another time.

Those squawking nuisances had been trying to guide us since our recall. We had seldom heeded them. Maybe we should have.

Why were they trying to intercede? That had to be beyond their original writ. That, surely, had been but to keep their summoner informed of what was happening amongst things he could only banish, not destroy.

I suppose his lastsecond death compelled them to interpret their mission for themselves.

One squawked and threw itself into the pentagram.

There were sorceries upon that bird. It was nothing of this world. The spells shielding the thing in red were less efficacious against it than they had been against arrow, dagger, or amulet.

Nonetheless, it fell before it reached the sorcerer. The stench of smoldering feathers assailed my nostrils. Smoke boiled off the writhing bird. It emitted some of the most pathetic sounds I had ever heard.

Then, like the bird the sorcerer had downed at sea, it became a snake of smoke and slithered off like black lightning, through air and cellar wall.... I presumed.

The thing in red had begun some silent enchantment. We now faced it amidst a vast plain, walled by mists instead of limestone.

A second bird threw itself into the pentacle the instant the first changed and hurtled off.

It penetrated a foot farther. Then a third flopped clumsily forward, achieving perhaps fourteen inches more than the second.

Mica's voice echoed eerily from the mist behind us. "Captain. Bowman. Hurry up. There's a big mob in the street. They're armed. We're in trouble if they break in."

Another bird hurled itself at the sorcerer. This one managed to sink its beak into an ankle.

The sorcerer called down a thunderbolt. It scattered flesh and feathers.

Another leapt.

The Old Man said, "Have Toke and Tor gather the men behind the house, Sailmaker. If we're not up in ten minutes, go back to Dragon. Tell them not to wait for us. They'll have to clear the estuary before the fleet gets back from Cape Blood."

"Captain!"

I could read Mica's thoughts. What would they do without Colgrave? Dragon would become lifeless without the dead captain's will animating it.

"Do as I say, Sailmaker."

Two black birds threw themselves into the pentacle together. The sorcerer got the first in midair. The second landed in his lap, tearing with beak and talons.

They had to be driven by more than their original assignment. Maybe the gods were interceding....

Barley clambered to his feet with the Old Man's help. He was groggy. Colgrave dithered round him.

The grumble of a crowd working itself up reached the cellar.

We were in trouble.

"Maybe we ought to run for it," Priest suggested.

Colgrave hit him with that one cold eye. "Colgrave doesn't run." Then, "We have an enemy here." He indicated the thing in red. "He's decided to send us back. We have to stop him. Sixty men counting on us.... I don't want any of us to go back. It's for forever this time."

"I'll buy that," I muttered. It reflected my thinking of the moment. But I was surprised to hear it from the Old Man. It was not his kind of thinking.

It seemed that the black birds had been trying to stop us from compounding our sins. That was all I could get their admonitory squawks to add to. "Sorry, guys," I murmured. A sin or two looked necessary for the greater welfare.

I did not want to see that quiet, fog-bound sea again. Eighteen years was long enough. The others felt the same.

I could see just one way to get out of it. Kill the sorcerer in red. Another murder.

What was one more death on my soul? I asked myself. Not a pennyweight.

The last black bird hurled itself into the pentagram.

The sorcerer was covered with blood, reddening its clothing even more. Pain had destroyed the delicacy of its face. And yet a tiny smile began to stretch its lips again.

I drew to my ear and let an arrow fly.

The others had the same idea at the same instant. The Trolledyngjan hurled his ax. Priest and Barley flung themselves against the waning Power of the pentagram. Colgrave drew his blade and followed at a more casual pace. The Trolledyngjan whipped out a dagger and joined him.

My arrow and the Trolledyngjan's ax did not survive the smashing fist of a lightning bolt. Both weapons touched the creature in red, but only lightly.

The last bird became another serpent of night and slithered off to wherever they went when they devolved.

The spells protecting the sorcerer gnawed at Priest and Barley. They screamed like souls in torment.

And kept on.

They were Colgrave's favorite hounds, those two. Because nothing stopped them.

They had been the two most dreaded-in-fighters on the western seas.

A continual low moan emanated from the Trolledyngjan. Colgrave made no sound at all. He just leaned ahead like a man striding into a gale, his eye fixed on the sorcerer's throat.

Priest and Barley went down. They writhed the way the birds had. But they kept trying to get to the creature in red. Barley's blade struck sparks from the stone beside the wizard's ankle.

Its smile grew larger. It thought it was winning.

I sped three arrows as fast as I could.

The first did no good at all. The second pinked him lightly. It distracted him for an instant.

His attackers surged at him, threatening to bury him.

I sent my third arrow beneath Colgrave's upraised arm. It buried itself in the creature's heart.

The Old Man's blade fell. It sliced the flesh away from one side of that delicate face.

The thing slowly stood. A mournful wail came from between its motionless lips. The sound rose in pitch and grew louder and louder. I dropped my bow and clapped my hands over my ears.

That did not help. The sound battered me till I ached.

The Trolledyngjan was down with Priest and Barley. I did not expect them to rise ever again.

The creature in red touched Colgrave. My captain started to drop too.

He fell slowly, like a mighty kingdom crumbling.

"Go, Bowman," he told me in a voice that was hardly a whisper, yet which I heard through the sorcerer's wail. "Take Dragon back to sea. Save the men."

"Captain!" I seized his arm and tried to drag him away. The thing in red touched him. The touch anchored the Old Man.

"Get the hell out of here!" he growled. "I'll handle him."

"But...."

"That's an order, Bowman."

He was my Captain. These were my comrades. My friends.

"Will you get the hell gone?"

He used the old Colgrave's voice. It was strong. Compelling. I could defy it then no more than ever before. I seized my bow and fled.

XV

The others had needed little urging to make a run for it. Mica and the Kid were the only ones hanging around when I hit the mansion's door. Not counting the owner and half an army of citizens headed our way.

It was your basic mob. A ravaging killer monster made up of harmless shopkeepers. An organism without fear because it knew its components were replaceable.

Mica screeched, "Come on, Bow-man! You going to wait till they tie you to a burning stake?"

I was not as numb as I looked. I was looking for the thousand-eyed monster's brain cells. I had eight good arrows left.

But Mica was right. The mob did not have a brain. Random fragments had begun vandalizing the grounds.

I took off round the side of the house.

As we loped along, the Kid asked, "What happened down there? Where's Barley and Priest and the Trolledyngian and the Old Man?"

"Down there. All gone but the Old Man and the sorcerer. The thing is all chopped up, but it's still alive." "You left him there?" "He made me, Kid. You ever win an argument with Colgrave?" He just grinned.

"Hold up for a second, Bowman," Mica panted. We were in the street now and drawing some startled looks. "What happens when they go?"

"What?"

"Colgrave runs us. What do we do without him? And that wizard called us back. What happens when he dies? To his spells?"

"Oh. Man. I don't know." I was no expert on wizardry. Some sorceries devolved with the death of the sorcerer, and some did not. I could not tell him what he wanted to know.

There were shouts behind us. I wheeled. Part of the mob was after us.

"Let's take them," the Kid said.

There were about twenty of them. For a Dragon sailor, protected by the Bowman, the odds did not look bad.

The earth started quivering like a bear in restless slumber. The timbers of nearby buildings creaked.

Our pursuers stopped, looked back.

We could see the steep tiled roofs of the mansion. Cracks lightening across them. They began sagging, as if some huge invisible hand were pressing downward....

The cracks leaked a black fog that looked first cousin to the one that dogged Vengeful D. The breeze did nothing to disperse it.

"Let's hike," I said. "While they're distracted. Maybe we can catch the others."

I was afraid Toke and Tor would sail without us.

Could anger be an absolute? The cloud over the mansion said it could be. I felt it from a quarter mile away.

That shadow was a being. It echoed the feeling I had been given by the creature in red. I now understood our ambiguous reactions to the sorcerer. He or she had no meaning if the thing were not human at all.

It was not alone. A second being held it in a deathgrip. That being radiated an absoluteness too, an utter refusal to yield to any other will.

"Colgrave," I whispered.

Colgrave had been a man, of that there was no doubt. But he had been larger than life and animated by a determination so unswerving that it had made him a demigod.

"Children of evil," Mica muttered.

We resumed walking toward the waterfront. No one interfered. We were forgotten.

The Torian Hill shook like a volcano about to give birth.

"What?" I asked.

"We are all children of evil," Mica said.

"What're you talking about?" He was off on some sideways line of thought, saying the obvious and not meaning what he was saying. "Keep stepping. I don't think the Old Man will win this one."

"He already has, Bowman. He's forced that thing to take its natural form. Look. It's fading. It can't stay here that way."

He was right. The thing was evaporating the way a cloud of steam does.

So was the thing created by the will of my Captain.

In minutes they were gone.

There were tears in my eyes. Mine. The Bowman's. And I was the deadliest, coldest, most remorseless killer ever to sail the western seas, excepting only the man for whom my tears fell.

I had hated him with a passion as deep and black and cold as the water in the ocean's deepest deeps. Yet I was weeping for him.

I averted my face from the others.

I had not wept since I did not know when. Maybe after I had killed my wife, when I had been alive and still one of the smaller evils plaguing the world.

We reached Dragon. They had the mooring lines in but the gangplank still down. The crew manned the rail. Their eyes were on the hills behind the city. Their faces showed relief when we raced onto the wharf. Then dismay when they realized we three were the last.

They had the drunk at the head of the gangplank, holding him like a hostage against Portsmouth's ill-will. "The others?" Toke asked. "They won't be coming," I replied. "What do we do?" "You're asking me?" He was First Officer. He should have taken charge.

He looked me in the eye. He did not have to speak to tell me that he was no Colgrave, that he was incapable of commanding Vengeful Dragon.

I glanced around. Every eye fixed me with that same expectant stare.

I am the Bowman, I thought. Second only to Colgrave... Second to none, now. "All right. Mica. Take the old guy and leave him on the wharf. Healthy. Tor, standby to make sail."

Some of them looked at me oddly. Letting the drunk go was not Dragon's style.

But Dragon had changed. We had learned, just a little, the meanings of pity and mercy.

"Give him something to tell his grandkids," I remarked to Tor, whose disappointment was obvious. He was the most bloodthirsty and least changed member of the crew.

A breeze rose as the gangplank came in. It was a perfect breeze. It would carry us into the channel at

just the right speed. I assumed Colgrave's old place on the poop and peered at the sky. "You still with us?" I murmured.

I started. For an instant I thought I saw faces in the racing clouds. Strange, alien faces with eyes of ice, in which no hint of motivation could be read.

Was this what Colgrave had seen? Had he just looked up whenever he wanted to know if the gods were still with us?

I had a lot to learn if I was going to replace the Old Man.... I looked at the clouds again. I saw nothing but clouds. Imagination?

I paused to reflect on the fact that I was the only survivor among Dragon's four great evils.

Why? What had they done that I had not? Or was it the reverse?

The crew seemed thin. How many had been redeemed? "Toke, take a muster."

"I have, Captain. We lost five besides those you know. One-Hand Nedo, Fat Poppo...."

"Poppo? Really? He said he knew.... I'm glad for him. But we'll miss them all."

"We will, Captain."

Mica's "We are all children of evil" returned to me. I think I understood now. He was stating the reason why I could not understand why some had been redeemed and some not. The evil in us was such that we could not recognize facts laid openly before us. It would take a moment of truth, an instant of revelation, to drive the message home.

I remembered sitting with Priest and Mica and the Kid, fishing, pulling in a sand shark that just could not quit hitting our hooks. I glanced at the clouds and wondered if they would quit the way we had quit trying to teach that stupid shark.

XVI

The dividing line between the sea and the Silverbind's flood is as sharp as a pen stroke. Turgid brown against slightly choppy jade. The two do not mix till you are out of sight of land.

Dragon is in the brown, straining toward the green. We have bent on every piece of canvas we can find. Lank Tor is up top yelling things nobody wants to hear.

"Another one. Captain. On the starboard quarter."

Their sails crowd the north. They came back in a hurry.

I try to think like Colgrave. What would he do?

Colgrave would fight. Colgrave always fought.

I try to remember his face. I cannot. The forgetfulness of Dragon is at work. Before long he, and the others, will be completely forgotten and we'll have a whole new style.

It is necessary. Colgrave was incapable of backing down. But Dragon is no longer invincible. These Itaskian's fathers proved how vincible we are. They just have to be willing to pay an extreme price.

I look at the clouds. "You tired of hauling in the same stupid sharks?"

A distant cloud wears a face for an instant. I swear it sticks out its tongue.

The tongue is lightning. It stabs the sea. "Steer for that," I order. The helmsman shifts our heading.

Another bolt falls. Then another and another. The sky grows dark. The wind picks up. Dragon fairly dances toward the sudden foul weather. The sails in the north seem to bounce in anger as this slim chance to escape develops.

"Damn you!" I shake a fist at the sky. For an instant I think I hear mocking laughter.

The seasickness is grinding my entrails already. It will be tearing me apart after we hit the storm.

The gods do have senses of humor. But the level seems to be that which ties the tails of cats for draping over clotheslines.

Lightning bolts are falling like the javelins of a celestial army. The helmsman is nervous. He keeps glancing my way, awaiting the order to turn away. Others join him.

Nobody asks questions.

My predecessor trained them well.

Now they are hitting the sea around us. We have never seen anything like this....

"Tor?"

"They're coming after us, Captain."

Those bold, brave fools. They would be. They know the game well now. They know they have to be as determined as we.

The granddaddy bolt of them all hits the mainmast. Tor shrieks. The mast snaps. Topmen scream. The Kid tumbles through the rigging and hits the maindeck with a thud I can hear over the roar of wind and sea. The masts, the spars, the lines and stays all begin to glow. Dragon crawls with a pale, cold fire that must be visible for miles.

She rides up a mountainous wave and plunges down its nether side.

Darkness comes, sudden and sharp as a swordstroke.

I am striding across the poop when it does, intending to take a look at the Kid.

I trip into the rail when the light returns as suddenly as it went. I catch myself, look around.

We are in a bank of dense fog. The sea is absolutely still. "Damned! No."

The fogs thins quickly. I can see my command.

The men are scattered over the decks, motionless, eyes glassy. I know where we are, what has happened. We have returned to the beginning, and Colgrave's sacrifices were in vain.

The jokes of the gods can be damned cruel.

The fog gives way. We glide into the heart of a circle of lifeless jade sea. Lethargy gnaws at me. It takes all my will to take up my bow so I can use it as a prop on which to lean.

I will not go down. I will not fall. I refuse. They do not have the Power....

Dragon eases to a stop and begins revolving slowly in the imperceptible current. The featureless face of the fog slides past. The mist overhead is light sometimes, and sometimes dark. It does not make an exciting sky. Before long I lose interest in counting the days.

It will not be long before I cease to think at all.

Till then, I must try to find the answer. What did I do wrong?