

A scene from Chapter Three of *Dark Seas of Maldrinium*

It had been warm in the hold of the clipper the past few nights, and I had not used the heavy blanket, though it always remained close at hand. Now I found it wrapped tightly around me as I sat up with a start, nearly ramming my head on the upper berth where Trovian snored restlessly. The nightmare had unnerved me, and I continued to shudder as I gazed around the tiny room. Suddenly I felt terribly confined, and I knew that I had to get out of the cubicle. I threw open the door and raced into the narrow hallway. For an instant I paused at the foot of the wooden stairway to assure myself that the stars beneath the dark cloak of night still flickered above. I then raced up the steps and out of the hold.

The night seemed no different than the previous ones; not even the least hint of a breeze. Yet I could not shake the chill that seemed to penetrate through to my bones. And worse, a strange sense of anxiety caused me to cast furtive glances over my shoulder, as though someone or something stalked me from the rear. Emerging from the hold I could immediately see the pilot house in front of me, and beyond it the prow of the clipper. Through the window of the wheelhouse I saw a tousled head of hair, and I knew that the controls were in the hands of Vassio's chosen crewman. I gazed around me, noting that the deck was empty. The nocturnal scene was one of tranquility, yet some unknown sense advised me that not all was right. The chill abated, the anxiety lessened, yet something was wrong here. Something...

The coastline! I stared at the shore in disbelief, knowing that my senses had not been wrong. We had been heading north, placing the Jennithusian coast on our starboard side. But now, by Ithantikor's light, I saw it off the port side. We were returning the way we had come!

Shaking off a brief lethargy I hurried to the pilot house. The crewman did not acknowledge my entry, instead keeping his eyes straight ahead as he guided the craft in the wrong direction. The fatigued Vassio lay sleeping on a thick woven mat in one corner.

"What are you doing?" I asked the seaman. "Why did you turn the ship around?"

"M-must return," I heard the fellow mutter. "Must leave this place...must return..."

Vassio, having been roused by my sudden entry, rose groggily to his feet. Despite his recent deep slumber the keen mind absorbed the situation in an instant. He hastened to the side of the helmsman and shouted angrily, "Fool! Do you see what you have done? Hammot only knows how much time we have lost. Resume the proper course now!"

"Must return," the fellow hissed to no one in particular. "No farther; we can go no farther."

The irate scientist grabbed the hapless seaman by the arm and hurled him away from the control mechanism toward the door, nearly bowling me over in the process. He then took the wheel, and after slowing the vessel down to about half speed he whirled it around in a sharp, 180° turn, a movement which must have surely caused havoc below decks. Only by holding tightly to the door latch did I manage to keep from falling. The seaman was not as fortunate, for he slammed headlong into one wall, a blow that stunned him.

Under Vassio's direction the clipper sped northward at top speed, the initial surge of energy again causing the ship to lurch. Within seconds of resuming our interrupted journey the deck became a scene of bedlam, for all aboard had been rudely awakened. Foremost among those demanding an explanation were Dencentus and Kendivak, who stood just outside the already crowded pilot house.

Anticipating their questions, I told the kev and his officer, "I arrived on deck, unable to sleep, and found a somewhat bewildered Kattak steering the *Hope* southward. Vassio quickly altered our course, though none too gently, I fear."

Before either could respond, a cry arose from amid the crewmen massed together on the deck. "Please! We must turn back!" a frantic voice urged. "We must go no farther! Please!"

While his mates attempted to calm the guy down, Dencentus turned his attention to the incoherent Kattak on the floor of the wheelhouse. The kev shook his head as he said, "So it begins, much as the others said. Let us face this together, and if Hammot sails with us we may yet pass through."

As the kev spoke, the dazed Kattak suddenly rose to his feet in a startling motion, his expression now revealing stark, unreasoning terror as he rushed at Vassio.

“No! No!” he shrieked, grabbing the scientist’s arm. “We must go no farther! *We must turn back!*” His cries were echoed by the frightened crewman on deck.

Vassio struggled vainly to rid himself of Kattak, once even losing his grip on the wheel, which caused the vessel to swerve. In the cramped space I managed to grab hold of Kattak and pin his arms behind his back. I should have handled the slight fellow easily. But fear and desperation brought forth remarkable strength, and not until Dencentus lent a hand could I fully contain him. We dragged him from the wheelhouse and turned him over to four of the *Hope’s* sailors.

“Lash him to the railing, or to one of the masts!” the kev snapped. “See that he is fully restrained. Do the same with the other one. This is not punishment, but rather for their own safety.”

As I watched Dencentus’s instructions being carried out I could not help but feel badly for the two quaking seamen, for as the ship forged northward I once again felt the icy chill that had snapped me rudely from my slumber, sensed the terrible anxiety of a thousand invisible eyes upon me. I wondered how long it would be before necessity saw me join them. Nor was I alone, for the early symptoms were being exhibited by at least six others nearby, including Trovian and Arged, the first mate.

“Dannus, what is wrong?” Despite the softness of the kev’s voice, I whirled about as if an enormous gong had been struck near my head, my fists up in defense. When I saw his concerned look I lowered my guard, though I could barely contain my shaking.

“Den—centus, please,” I gasped. “This will soon affect all of us. We must be restrained if we are to reach Vialk! I—”

The clipper suddenly lurched to the right, nearly depositing two seamen over the railing. Regaining our balance we realized that the ship was describing a slight arc as Vassio attempted to point its bow southward. Vassio! For a moment we had forgotten about him, alone in the pilot house. Now Kendivak and Dencentus hurried within. I did not have to guess what had happened.

“Must...turn...back...” the scientist recited blankly. “Can...go on...no more...must...turn...”

The ship’s master wrapped Vassio in an unbreakable stranglehold and tore him away from the controls, while Dencentus righted the vessel’s course. Vassio screamed as he struggled futilely, but Kendivak guided him past me and turned him over to some of his sailors. The captain and I gazed at each other for only an instant before turning our attention back to Dencentus, who now fought with himself to maintain the northward course.

“My kev, Dannus was correct!” Kendivak’s shout now rose above the pathetic wails of those already affected. “We must all be restrained if we are to survive! Come, Dencentus, please. I will tend to the wheel.”

The quaking kev managed to tear his hands from the controls before his increasing fear caused him to spin it about. Kendivak led him out of the pilot house, and after verifying by compass that the vessel sailed in the proper direction, he tore the steering mechanism from the shaft with a terrible gnashing of metal. He then removed the ball-shaped taps that controlled the elemental flow, exhibiting incredible strength by his actions. Now the *New Hope II* forged northward at top speed, and its course could not be altered, nor could it be stopped. The clipper would reach the harbor of Vialk some kimygs hence, but whether any on board would witness it remained in doubt.

A third of the regular crew had already been tied down on deck in one place or another, as had Vassio and Yaris. My own state of mind approached critical, but with the few threads that still remained I assisted Kendivak in restraining Trovian, the powerful miner whose strength matched any two men. After finally lashing him to the stern railing we turned our attention back to the center of the deck, where all but Dencentus and a single seaman were tied. This sailor appeared far less affected than anyone, and with sure fingers he fastened the struggling kev’s hands together after wrapping his arms around a mast. Then, inexplicably, the fellow raced to a side rail and leaped into the churning water below. The unexpected quickness of his actions prevented us from helping him, and within seconds he had been left far behind, likely a meal for the jaw tabons that had stalked our vessel nearly the entire way.

Icy fingers penetrated to the marrow of my bones, bringing me to my knees as I shuddered uncontrollably. I barely acknowledged being hoisted upon Kendivak’s shoulders and carried to the prow of the *Hope*, though the blur of panic-stricken faces that we passed on the way could not easily go unnoticed. I tried desperately not to fight the master as he fastened me to the railing. He placed a firm hand on my shoulder, as if in silent thanks for my cooperation, and then disappeared into the hold. He returned quickly

bearing a set of sturdy leg manacles. Only half a bivaik away from me he locked one end around the bottom portion of a heavy cleat, the other around his right ankle. He then cast the key into the open hold to avoid temptation. The necessary restraint of all those aboard the *New Hope II* had been completed.

At more than twenty-five vaiks a kimyg the clipper carried its unwilling, uncomprehending prisoners northward, deeper and deeper into the bowels of mind-wrenching horror. No fog enveloped us; no rain fell. Xava and Oriot hurtled through the clear heavens, while Ithantikor described its slow, graceful arc in the night sky. Yet in spite of this appearance of tranquility the air was indeed alive, charged with the quintessence of evil. The body froze, and then it burned, stricken with the unquenchable fires of fever. Heartbeats doubled, tripled, until the pulsating organs sought to tear themselves free from that which contained them. We heard no sound above our own shrieks and moans. Yet we knew that it laughed at us; we knew.

Chains rattled; fists and heavily booted feet pounded the wooden planking. Men reached back into the primordial past to clutch at instincts of survival they would not otherwise have known. Amid the terrible wails, my own included, some paused to observe their shipmates, and what they saw caused them to claw more tenaciously into their atavistic beginnings for some way, any way, to free them forever from that which they could not hope to comprehend. One crewman somehow escaped his bonds and managed three running steps before lowering his head and smashing it into the solid oak gaff rig that had held him. His desperate momentum caused his skull to split open, and when he sank to the deck, mercifully dead, it was in a bed of his own gore.

On the bow one man struggled against the thick rope that held him, succeeding in little more than wrapping it around his chest. Like some constricting reptile it worked its way to his neck, and as he fought blindly, his proximity to the bow rail caused him to topple over the side. He thrashed madly for long moments as his life was choked from him. Likely the jaw tabons had gathered below, eagerly anticipating the feast. But they were to be denied, for with life gone from it the body hung limp, the denizens receiving no more than the two eyes that bulged forth from their sockets within the ghastly white face. The tap-tapping of the corpse against the hull throughout the endless night was a ceaseless reminder of its presence.

A crewman, tied only a few ruvaiks from Yaris, managed to unfasten the lid of the nearby arms locker. The guy's left arm was knotted to a cleat, with no slack. With his other hand he fumbled in the locker for a while, finally withdrawing a razor-edged broadsword. As he held it up I saw that his hand shook violently, and he could not maintain control long enough to slice the confining knot. With a shriek of frustration he raised the blade and brought it down hard, severing his hand above the knot from the wrist down. He ignored the unspeakable pain as he raced into the pilot house in an attempt to alter the clipper's course. Once aware that this was impossible he went berserk, smashing every window with the sword before again emerging. He raced toward the starboard side of the vessel, where he attempted to top the rail. Another wide-eyed crewman begged him for release, to which the fellow complied. He held the blade behind his right shoulder, and with the strength of madness he described a wide arc, the momentum spinning him around twice. Blood spurted high in the air and over the railing, likely inciting the jaw tabons below to even greater frenzy. The severed head rolled along half the length of the deck, stopping about ten ruvaiks from me. Beneath the tousled hair I discerned the face of Kattak, the broad, permanently fixed grin indicating his pleasure at being freed. His comrade gazed at Kattak's remains for only a moment before releasing himself to the jaws of the predators that awaited him.