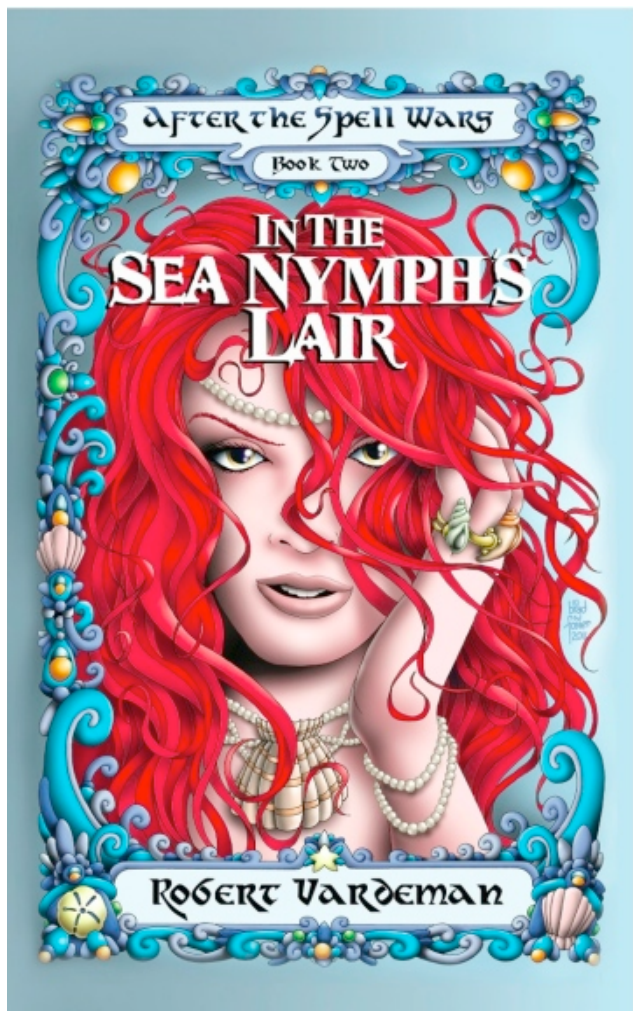


AFTER THE SPELL WARS

Book Two

IN THE
SEA NYMPHS'
LAIR

ROBERT VARDAMAN



**In the
Sea Nymph's Lair**

Book 2: After the Spell Wars

Robert E. Vardeman

ZUMAYA OTHERWORLDS
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AUTHOR NOTES

The strange eddies of the publishing world originally brought this, the second book of After The Spell Wars trilogy, to the light of day, following the reprint of Ogre Castle. The final volume (The Wizard's Spell Mirror) which has never been in print and is forthcoming. It is with great pleasure that I can now say that all three in the trilogy will see print from Zumaya Otherworlds.

Chapter 1

Durril watched the calm, glassy water with growing alarm. A sea this smooth was unusual in the Plenn Archipelagos. It was most disturbing because the weather mages had predicted this to be one of the worst storm seasons in memory.

After leaving Lord Northdell's preserve of Loke-Bor four days earlier, the company had traveled this becalmed water under clear skies and good winds. Loke-Bor lay far out of sight now—too far to reach if the ship wrecked.

"It's not right!" Durril muttered to himself, his wizard's insight irritated by something just beyond his detection. "Someone...some *thing* is behind this damnable stillness, and I mean to find out what it is."

The ocean was not Durril's realm, although his father had deeply loved it. Many times the elder mage had tried to share his joy of the boundless waves and thundering surf with his son. For Durril, however, the waters surrounding the Plenn Archipelagos had always been a

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necessary inconvenience over which he traveled to ply his trade on solid ground. Now he was confronted with a puzzle that caused as big an itch as if he were covered with drying brine.

Twice, very carefully, he cast spells to reveal the cause of the unusual tranquility. For reasons he could not put into words, the wizard felt compelled to approach the conundrum cautiously to prevent his own detection.

His circumspect work proved futile. Twice he was presented with a perplexing blank to his magical probing. The fair weather appeared to be natural. He looked over the rail and saw his own reflection, as if the water had turned into a mirror. Peaceful. Calm. Smooth sailing under full sail.

But Durril remained uncomfortable. It was the season for foul weather. Even in the calmer times of the year, Mother Ocean had never been so placid or soothing.

Morasha hugged the rail to Durril's left. Violently ill, the familiar could do little more than groan protests to anyone who came within earshot. Her giant ogre body rebelled against the slight rocking of the ship even on this tranquil sea. He took pity on her. Pressing his hands together and closing his eyes, he uttered a low chant then slowly separated his hands, sending forth a glowing golden fog the ogre inhaled without realizing it when she made a violent gasp.

"Ah," she sighed, standing straight and rubbing her hairy belly. "I hunger for the first time since boarding this hideous rat trap of a boat. Where's that bucket of slop?" She turned and took only a single step before halting. She returned to the railing, once more suffering *mal de mer*.

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The healing spell had lasted only a few seconds when it should have been effective for a week or longer.

That made Durril decidedly uneasy. At the beginning of his instruction, he had considered being a healer, and had shown a talent for such intricate, delicate spellcasting. Instead, he had chosen the more adventurous life of the itinerant wizard, exorcising the ghostly—and often ghastly—remnants of the Spell Wars. He smiled to himself. He had not strayed too far in his study of the thaumaturgic arts. This self-imposed task of removing ectoplasmic leftovers *was* a kind of healing.

But the smile faded, because Morasha's lingering condition worried him anew that something was not right about this too-comfortable ocean.

Arpad Zen came from below to stand between the ill-tempered Morasha and his frustrated master.

"Getting too close belowdecks for me to practice my spells," Durril's assistant said. "Nothing like fresh sea air to invigorate." His words were drowned out by the ogre's violent retching. Zen moved away and looked to his master, who shook his head.

"Can I practice on her?" Zen asked in a low voice.

"I heard that, you miserable little wart. Kill me. Just put me out of this misery, or I'll kill you and put you out of mine." Morasha gripped the rail so hard nails squealed loose.

Durril left his companions in the stern and paced toward the foredeck. He could find no trace of leftover remnants from the Spell Wars that had devastated the world so thoroughly. The wizard glowered at the unruffled waters encircling him and the ship, then shifted his gaze to the unclouded noon sky. He shook his head. Everything was perfect—too utterly perfect.

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Sails billowing full in the unfailing breeze, the good ship *Pitcairn* moved swiftly toward her destination. She was laden with Durril's treasure, payment for successfully ridding Lord Northdell's castle of its murderous ghostly inhabitants. The sweating crew worked about the decks under the suspicious Captain Crayken.

Durril studied the officer with a jaundiced eye. He did not like the captain or the way he ran his ship. He believed crafty Lord Northdell had taken the opportunity to rid himself of one last problem by providing Durril *this* ship to carry his extorted payment.

Crayken was too quick with the cat-o'-nine tails and too fickle in his judgment for easy liking. Durril suspected he drank on duty, too. The *Pitcairn* was not a happy ship, nor was it a tidy one, but that was the least of his concerns. He turned his attention again to the brooding calmness of the sea.

"Master," Arpad Zen whispered in self-pity as he came up behind Durril. "I do not like the look of things. It's Morasha. She will not let me come near her. She irrationally blames me for her unhappy condition."

Distracted, Durril reviewed his arsenal of spells once more, searching for the one that would reveal what was behind the peacefulness of the waters without betraying his scrying. Something was there; he was sure of it!

"Her ogre body is the problem, Arpad. Since becoming completely physical, it has grown oversensitive and does not tolerate sea travel well. Morasha will be alright when we reach Wonne," Durril answered, preoccupied with his search.

Momentarily, the wizard was caught up in remembrance of the memorable delights offered in that lovely city, the trading center of the Plenn Archipelagos. Darkly, almost in premonition, he wondered if he would

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ever reach port to spend his treasure on clever, subtle entertainments performed by women of unmatched beauty and amorous skill.

"Leave Morasha be for now," he instructed Zen. "Is she still aft?"

"She is lying on the deck like some beached, enormous hairy narwhal. Master Durril, I really think you should have a look at her," Zen pleaded.

Something in the apprentice's voice brought Durril's full attention to Morasha's condition. They were four days out of Loke-Bor and still three days journey from Wonne. The wizard did not want to lose his familiar. Not only had she proven useful to his exorcism, he had developed a fondness for her. In the ogre's body, she was captive to seasickness and perhaps something worse. But what?

"Let's have a look," he said as he turned to lead Zen to the ship's stern. He had failed with a simple healing spell, but perhaps Morasha's ailment was of a more profound cause than inability to tolerate the sea's gentle rocking.

"If it's all the same to you, Master, I'll stay here. Morasha is sick, but I think she would throttle me if I got too close to her now." Zen looked about to see if any could overhear before proceeding. "And there is something else..."

Before Durril could ask what troubled his apprentice, a command rang from the crow's-nest.

"Now! If ye be men! Let's serve Crayken's guts to the hungry fishes!"

The crew on deck exploded into action. Durril and Zen found themselves fighting back-to-back against bollards, boathooks and belaying pins wielded by the *Pitcairn's* unsavory lot. Master and apprentice moved in harmony as they thrust and parried with the unskilled

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crewmen. It was easy enough to keep the sailors at bay, but the mutineers were too numerous to dispatch.

Durril deflected a cargo net thrown at them from atop the forecastle. With a blindingly fast slash of his sword, he sent the net flying away from them as Zen ducked out of its way. On three sides, the net lay in a tangle on the deck. The uneven footing it provided prevented Durril and Zen from going on the offensive, stranding them in the center of the angry circle of mutineers. Uneasily, the attackers contained wizard and apprentice, preventing their escape but making no effort to kill them.

No sooner had the mutiny started than it was over.

"We've got the blighter, mates!" came the triumphant shout from the bridge, proclaiming the crew's victory.

Captain Crayken stood in his accustomed place by the helm, but now he was trussed like a pig ready for slaughter. His eyes darted about, looking for allies. Finding none, he called to Durril.

"Wizard, you must save me and the *Pitcairn* if you wish to reach Wonne with your treasure. Use your powers. I can pay!"

Turmoil erupted once more as the burly mate knocked the captain unconscious with the hilt of his cutlass. Finished with his former commander, he motioned toward the wizard and his apprentice. The crew surged forward, weapons lowered for the kill.

Durril and Zen met the new attack with adept parries. A boathook narrowly missed Arpad Zen's face as he stumbled away from it to collide with Durril, upsetting his master. Durril dropped to his knees before recovering. Once more Durril and his assistant were stalemated. The circle surrounding them tightened as it was reinforced by new members.

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“Do not be hasty, Wizard,” the mate called to Durril from the bridge. “You will work for us now, unless you can sail this ship by yourself. And we’ll have the treasure, too! It’s owed us for what Crayken has taken out of our hides with his murderous whip and his maggot-filled gruel.”

“Watch your tongue,” Zen shouted angrily. “It’s foolish to speak to my master in such a rude manner.”

“We have nothing to lose, you sniveling lackey,” the mate bellowed at Zen. “We mean to give Captain Bloody-hand Crayken a taste of his own medicine before we butcher him. We can include you in our little party, too.”

“Easy, Arpad,” Durril cautioned his apprentice as he sheathed his sword. “Volatile situations and desperate men are not soothed by a spark.” He straightened to his full height and used his deepest commanding voice. “You there,” he addressed the mate. “What is your name? I will not work for a man whose name I do not know.”

“Chrestain to you, Wizard,” the mate answered. “*Captain* Chrestain now.”

“Well, Chrestain, whatever grievances you have with Captain Crayken, you have none with me. The treasure in this ship’s hold belongs to me and my confederates in payment for our arduous labors. It is not yours to take.”

Chrestain laughed harshly. “I thought you might see it that way, Wizard. Since you insist, I will persuade you to cooperate.”

A bedraggled Morasha was hauled up onto the quarterdeck. Her massive body bounced and tumbled down the ladder, her legs crumbling like stale bread under her. She glared at her captors but could do little else. Another violent wave of retching wracked her immense body.

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“We’ll cut her smelly throat, Wizard. You can watch if you like.” Chrestain laughed. “Or will you do as I say?”

“Master,” Zen whispered, “we cannot let them kill her. We have no new body for her to inhabit!”

“Do not worry, Arpad. I won’t let anything happen to Morasha.” He turned to the mutineer and asked gruffly, “What do you want from me, Chrestain? You have the ship and the crew. You can do what you like with Crayken. He is no friend of mine.”

“Mutiny is still the worst crime on the high seas, Wizard. I want you to make us invisible. I want this ship and all with her to disappear until she can be refitted under a new name.”

“You ask a lot, Chrestain. A cloaking spell for the ship and crew will cost you dearly. I do not believe you have the payment. I also do not believe you can get away with it. Better for you to return the ship to Captain Crayken and take your lashes,” Durril said calmly. A smirk curled his lips, and he crossed his arms, sure of himself.

“Durril!” Zen shouted in alarm as Chrestain laid the sharp cutlass to Morasha’s throat.

“All the payment we need is right here, Wizard. If you value your friend’s life, you will do as I say. And no tricks!”

Morasha’s terrified eyes pleaded with Durril. She knew there was no available host for her. The death of this ogre’s body meant her final dissolution.

“Master,” Zen entreated, “I will start a powerful paralyzing spell—”

“Quiet!” Durril commanded. “We will not use any spells if we can avoid it.” Turning abruptly from his apprentice, who stared at him with incomprehension, Durril addressed the mate. “It is not wise to threaten a wizard, Chrestain. But...” Durril interrupted the

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movement of the sword toward Morasha's throat. "I will do as you say. I will conjure." He made a grand, sweeping gesture before ordering, "Arpad, my bag."

The apprentice leaped through the gap in the ring of mutineers surrounding them as they parted at Chrestain's nod. He returned with the kit holding the implements of Durril's wizardly trade. Durril rapidly flipped through his grimoire and found the proper incantation.

"I will need your aid, Arpad," he said quietly through clenched teeth. "Do as I say. Stabilize the illusion as I create it. Do not fail. Morasha's life depends on it!"

"Quit dallying!" Chrestain called as he slowly moved the cutlass from side to side, slicing a thin red line on Morasha's throat.

"Remember, Arpad, stabilize the illusion and *don't* interrupt me!"

Durril began to work. The circle surrounding the wizard and his apprentice widened as the sailors stepped back, separating themselves from magicks they did not understand.

Chanting, Durril faced the sea. Arpad Zen staggered from the shift and tingle of the conjuring as he followed his master's instructions. He became alarmed when he saw what the wizard was doing.

"Durril!" he whispered.

"Not now, Arpad! Do as I ordered!"

"But, Master, I've never—"

"Arpad!" Durril roared, silencing his unwilling, frightened apprentice.

The master wizard finished chanting. Now he softly hummed, an odd melody that slithered about the ears and confused the mind. Zen, a strained grimace on his

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face, fought to stabilize the illusion his master conjured so powerfully.

The *Pitcairn* lurched, her bow lifting high out of the water. It then descended onto the surface with a loud crack as the stern rocked upward. It crashed heavily back down onto the sea, jolting all on board.

A giant green-and-gold-scaled sea serpent coiled about the ship. It wriggled onto the deck amidships and wrapped around the mainmast.

Pandemonium broke out as the crew panicked.

“Hold fast, men!” Chrestain shouted, gripping Morasha even tighter in the fanged face of the monster from the deep.

“Chrestain! You were saying something about killing my companion and taking my treasure?” Durril faced down the mutineer.

Zen struggled to hold the illusion, which writhed about the deck and kept the crew in check. The apprentice shook from the exertion of his magical work as his grasp of the complex vision grew increasingly tenuous.

“Hurry,” he said. “Act quickly to accomplish whatever you would do, Master. I weaken quickly.”

Desperate, Chrestain flung his sword at the serpent, a throw that should have struck the blade deep into the monster’s writhing coils. The sword clanged onto the deck, passing completely through the creature to lie unharmed on the weathered boards.

“A trick!” Chrestain shouted. “It’s not real! Look, the sword is unharmed. It does not melt in the gorge of the damned sea monster. This is no true serpent!”

The apprentice could hold the spell no longer. The intricate illusion slipped from him, fading before the eyes of the mutinous crew and their captain.

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Durril, who had edged toward the bridge, found himself surrounded once more, this time by men intent on his demise. Zen fought for his own life.

Morasha chose that instant to vomit on the captain and the members of the crew holding her captive, scalding them with the fiery ejecta. Free now, she tried to flee but was thrown hard onto the deck as the ship rocked perilously on a great wave. This time, the *Pitcairn* crashed into a turbulent sea.

The roar of the water deafened everyone as the sea turned suddenly violent. Her sails ripped asunder by the instant gale, surging out of control, her masts twisted and splintered, the ship fought the angry water. The main stays snapped, clearing the decks as they cracked like berserk whips in the stormy air. Groaning in wooden death throes, the *Pitcairn* rode the torturous waters of a mighty vortex.

"I knew it wasn't right!" Durril shouted in vindication as he stood, his green eyes flashing in the midst of chaos. "Now, Arpad, sustain me," he called to his apprentice over the deafening hiss of the sea. "We will need *all* our strength. The power behind this ruse is clever and almost has us! Morasha's ogre body knew all along—that's why she was so ill."

Durril fought the spell powering the vortex with all his skill. The parry-and-thrust of the magical match drained the master wizard's resources, but still he could not see the cunning that had created such a complete disguise. He fought blindly.

The wizard felt Arpad Zen lent his skill to sustain his master, but he, too, was rapidly failing, his reserves almost gone. Durril felt Zen sinking into a blackness from which there could be no salvation. The ship moaned in agony, caught between the two great forces of spell and counterspell.

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Slowly, Durril gripped the might behind the maelstrom. With a clever, unexpected turn of spell, he succeeded at last in blocking the incantation, deftly removing it from his opponent's grip as if it were a sword in a fencing match.

But the *Pitcairn* could not withstand the opposing forces pulling at it. Just as Durril wrested the rolling ship from the grasp of the enchanted sea, it broke asunder between the pounding malice of two gigantic water-spouts. The vortex was replaced by the keening wrath of storm wind.

With a final loud protest as its planking shattered to splinters, the *Pitcairn* delivered all remaining hands to the unnatural turbulence of the deadly sea.



Zen searched for something to grab but saw little debris from the ship. He had even lost sight of Durril. The stormy waves tossed the unhappy pair willy-nilly.

He struggled to support the ogre, but her bulk and the unpredictability of the water made the task almost impossible. Frequently, Morasha choked on the brine. He knew that if they ever got out of this watery grave, she would never let him forget her discomfort—and would blame him for having caused it.

Chapter 2

“Help Morasha,” Durril shouted to Arpad Zen over the angry howl of the storm. “I must get to my kit!”

He released the spar they clung to. He swam hard, fighting with all his remaining strength to reach a hatch cover where his bag hung, caught on a nail but precariously close to being swept into the ocean and lost forever.

All the tools of his wizard’s trade were in the kit, including his grimoire and his most important treasure, the skull of his own master. Without access to the power locked in his kit, Durril stood little chance of rescuing them from the churning, evil waters. Even if his companions somehow escaped Mother Ocean, he would be severely hampered in his trade without the kit.

Weakened by combat with the power behind the vortex and the storm, the wizard gulped water, choking as he went under, only to be thrown upward and then slammed onto the hatch, his head banging against a

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sharp corner. Senseless, he clung by instinct to the safety of the wreckage now serving him as a small raft.

Some distance away, Arpad Zen gave up trying to direct the spar to where Morasha was floundering. Clumsily, the bulky ogre fought a losing battle with the water. When Zen reached her, she was almost spent but still had enough energy to curse him.

“Stay away from me, you cur,” she groaned weakly at the apprentice. “You’re trying to kill me again and leave me to the cold world of the fishes. You can’t do anything right! If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be in this miserable mess.”

Zen grabbed her just as she went under. He almost retched at the stench emanating from the ogre body. Water released the worst possible smells from the mottled skin.

He was barely able to hold her head above the churning, frothy sea as he tried to keep the familiar afloat.

But Zen was not sure he would have to worry about Morasha’s haranguing him. The water and the storm beat at him relentlessly, sucking away his strength. Too soon, his hands and arms turned leaden and numb. He could barely feel the familiar in the chilly water. This time when he killed Morasha, she might have her revenge. She could undoubtedly find a haven in some sea creature or a fish. Zen could not. He would be dead. Would she dine off his waterlogged flesh? He did not doubt that would please her.

The apprentice held on grimly, fighting Mother Ocean, hoping for rescue. None came as he and Morasha rode the unhappy waters late into the day.

As the last of the autumn twilight began fading, he saw that they had drifted far from the shipwreck. They bobbed alone on the vast, merciless sea. Zen kept talk-

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ing to Morasha, seeking the reassuring sound of her rancor since he could feel nothing with his hands.

"It wasn't enough to kill me three times in one day, was it?" she chewed at the apprentice. "It wasn't enough to trap me in this gross, ugly, clumsy body when I'd had a perfectly fine dog's body or that exquisite hawk's body. Because of you, I had to endure that wretched sickness on the ship. Now you've caused me to be thrown into this disgusting water—"

"Durril will save us," Zen said, having had more of Morasha's reassurance than he could take for a while.

"You don't respect your master properly," she corrected. "Master Durril is our only chance. You certainly would bungle our rescue and forever doom us to the watery grave yawning beneath us even now."

They floated for endless hours. Although the storm had abated, the ocean remained rough and choppy.

A great wave broke over them, causing both to sputter and choke. Zen felt the swelling of a second wave and prepared by sucking in a lungful of air. As he looked upward, trying to time when to hold his breath, he saw the wave throw something black and substantial at them. Letting go of Morasha, he grabbed for the dark cylinder as it crashed downward toward him.

He missed, but his hand tangled in a trailing rope. As he surfaced, a bollard slammed into the side of his head, momentarily stunning him. Zen had captured a part of the mizzen mast, or more accurately, it had captured him. Both he and Morasha could ride upon it if he could find her again and pull her aboard.

"Morasha," he called frantically into the murky gloaming. "Morasha, where are you?"

"There you go again, chasing off and leaving me to be eaten by sharks," She sputtered querulously from somewhere on his right.

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“Sharks!”

“Yes, sharks, dunderhead. They’re all around us. Can’t you feel them?”

A violent blow shook the mast, almost unseating Zen. The pressure of a sleek, powerful body raked against his leg. With the second blow, he lost his grip and went sprawling back into the water, this time with his foot tangled in the line.

“Sharks!” Zen yelled hysterically as he clambered back onto the mizzen. “Morasha! Where are you?”

Again his refuge was battered, this time by *two* powerful bodies. The mast rolled over, dunking him. Zen had to release his grip once again to climb terrified back atop the debris.

“Don’t stop talking, Morasha,” he pleaded. “Keep answering me. Swim toward my voice. You must get to the mast. It’s your only chance.”

“Keep answering you! Answering you! You are determined to drown me. You want me to keep talking so I can swallow more water, as if you haven’t already caused me to swallow gallons enough to float a navy.”

“Don’t preach at me, Morasha. Just swim! Come toward my voice. This is our only chance of surviving,” Zen shouted urgently as the mast was struck again, causing it to shudder and buck beneath him.

“We wouldn’t be in this fix if it hadn’t been for you,” the familiar snapped. But the sound of her voice was louder. She swam toward him as he had directed.

“Whatever you say, Morasha. Keep swimming. I think I can see you.”

Then she was beside him, ineptly splashing about but at last coming abreast of the mast.

“Grab hold,” he ordered. “You can quit wasting your breath on me now. We’re lucky to have this piece of wreckage to cling to. I couldn’t have held you much

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longer, and with these sharks about this is our only chance." He slipped off, sputtered then struggled in the water, kicking to keep his head above the churning waves. He awkwardly scrambled back onto the wooden spar. "You're lucky I grabbed it," he said, taking the offensive in the perpetual sparing match with the familiar.

"Of course you couldn't continue to hold me! What else can I expect from you," Morasha snarled. "As for the sharks, Arpad Zen, I've saved you from them. They don't appreciate odor of wet ogre any more than you do."

In spite of her sarcasm, Morasha held on to the mast and stared at Zen with renewed hope as the sea and the remnants of the storm moved them toward their fate in the dark night.



"What is that?" Morasha demanded as she rudely shook Arpad Zen awake.

"What?" he asked groggily.

"That, behind you. It looks like a light in the distance. If you hadn't been sleeping...but that is typical of you at a time like this," she said in disgust.

Zen stared into the night at the tiny pinpoint of light. It did not move, and it did not fade.

The storm had passed hours earlier. The two companions rode the mast as it bucked in the hard sea under a cloudy, moonless sky. Zen studied the light for some time. It grew infinitesimally larger and brighter.

"Morasha, that's a lighthouse. We're near land!" he cried jubilantly.

"Are you sure?" she asked, forgetting to berate Zen in her hope of gaining landfall.

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“It must be! The light is stable. We are moving toward it. There has to be land!” He spat out a mouthful of foul water and tried to squeeze off the annoying dampness in his eyebrows. He failed. “All we can do is ride this mast and hope the current brings us to the shore soon.”

“Can’t you think of anything else?” Morasha asked caustically, back to her old self again. She fell silent, and both watched the beacon grow in size and brightness like their hope.

At last, the two bedraggled pieces of flotsam heard the roar of the waves pounding on the darkness-cloaked shore. The light lay to their right down the coast. They finally made out the beach as the ocean carried them swiftly toward it.

The boom of the pounding water increased as they approached the shoreline. Too late, Zen realized it was far too loud to be the sound of waves hitting the beach.

“There’s a reef, Morasha! Hold tight!” he shouted over the din of the breaking waves.

Before the familiar could retort, they smashed into the unforgiving barrier, almost losing their grip on the mast. Dragged back out to sea, they were flung a second time at the offending rock. This time, the mizzenmast broke apart against the stony undersea barricade.

“Swim for it, Morasha,” Zen called as she lost her hold. “Swim for it,” he shouted again in despair as the ocean current carried him away from the reef and out to sea once more. “If I live through this,” he said aloud to himself, “she will never let me hear the end of it.”

Morasha lunged up out of the water, sputtering and spitting angrily. Her shoulder was shredded where she

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had battered it against the reef. Thick black slime oozed into the salty water from the wound. But she was inside the barrier and the sea was calmer here. She got her bearings with the light to her right and struck out for the shore.

Her ogre body had not been made for swimming. Even the buoyancy of the water did not help counter its unwieldiness. Morasha persevered, fighting the tide and the scattered rocks in the lagoon. Several times she was thrown into them, tearing and bruising her flesh each time. The body she inhabited was in growing difficulty.

At last she achieved the beach, tossed upon it like a deformed piece of driftwood. Morasha lay there for a long time, exhausted. Silently, she cursed Arpad Zen.

The fool! she thought. He always muddles the simplest task. Even getting us to land was too big a chore for him.

Eventually, the familiar pushed herself into a sitting position and angrily spat sand from her mouth.

"It serves him right," she said out loud. "He is completely inept. The sharks will probably choke on his putrid flesh."

When dawn pricked the eastern sky, Morasha cast about for a place to hide. She did not know whether this island was inhabited. It probably was, like most in the Plenn Archipelagos. That would mean a hostile welcome if anyone saw her. Since the Spell Wars, ogres were not given gracious hospitality.

She found walking difficult at first, then impossible. The seasickness and the soaking in the ocean had taken its toll, leaving her weak and dizzy. She crawled into a small sea cave partially hidden by wave-smoothed boulders. There, she slept fitfully, muttering angrily only once in her dreaming.

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“That fool apprentice never could do anything right!”



“What’s this?” questioned a raspy voice as calloused hands jerked Arpad Zen upright.

“Looks like the sea didn’t throw us any treasure this time,” came a high-pitched response close by Zen’s left ear.

I must be on land, he thought, the wonder of it filling him with joy. The last he remembered was clinging to the broken mast as waves battered it against jagged rocks under the lighthouse.

He had swallowed water and vomited. He had held to the mizzen with all his might even as his hands were beaten between it and the sharp rocks. After that, he remembered...nothing.

The raspy voice sounded again, this time directly in front of him.

“Who are you? And what brings your scrawny carcass to our shore?”

Zen opened his swollen, sand-caked eyes to see the brown, weathered face of a scraggy little man looking back at him. He shivered, not because of the clothing plastered to his frame but from the sea-cold blue eyes staring at him. There would be no mercy from this quarter.

“I am Arpad Zen,” he said through cracked lips, “apprentice to the master wizard Durril.”

“A wizard’s apprentice, eh? Maybe Mother Ocean has brought us some treasure after all, boys. You couldn’t tell by looking at him, though.”

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A chorus of laughter greeted the diminutive man's remark. Zen looked about to find himself surrounded by a gang of rough, unsavory men. The mutinous crew of the *Pitcairn* were courtly gentlemen compared to this lot.

"Thank you for rescuing me," Zen said in his best aristocratic manner. *Always take the offensive*, Durril had battered into him during their time together. *Fight from the high ground. Seize the nettle. Never surrender.*

Zen decided to appeal to the venal nature of the gang surrounding him.

"I am sure my master will have a reward for each of you when he returns for me."

The troop broke out in renewed laughter.

"And when might that be?" the raspy-voiced man taunted. "After he has been served to the octopussies for their dinner?"

Zen was still being restrained by the hard grip. The hold on his upper arms was beginning to hurt. It chafed his sunburned, salt-stained skin.

"Remove your hands," he ordered. "I do not wish to harm you."

These statements provoked a new round of hilarity. The apprentice tried to break the strong grip, but his futile efforts only brought more laughter at his expense.

He then attempted a personal defense spell but could not remember the sequence. His head throbbed, and his vision turned momentarily blurry. From what he could tell, it was almost evening. He must have lain on the beach unconscious for most of the day.

Nausea tugged at him. Zen gave up his effort at the spell. The headache lessened but continued to pound behind his eyes.

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"I am Mister Tukker," the raspy-voiced little man said by way of introduction. "Me and my good associates here have a great respect for the sea, ain't we, men?"

Tukker's gang nodded in agreement.

"You might say that we appreciate the paltry gifts she sends us. It's a way o' makin' our fortune, you see."

"You're wreckers," Zen blurted.

"Salvors, Arpad Zen, salvors. We salvage what the sea gives us, and we sell it to make our living. We work in harmony with the more fickle elements of Mother Ocean." He smiled crookedly and stared at Zen to see if he believed this lie. "It's an honest line of work," Tukker said in mock offense when he saw Zen's skepticism.

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Zen.

"You might just be our best salvage job yet. Now, look, your mate is gone. Few men survive a storm at sea, especially like the one what hit the coast yesterday. Mother Ocean saved you and gave you to us, it seems to me." He smiled, showing broken, yellowed teeth. "What shall we do with you?" Tukker winked and nodded at his scruffy comrades.

A burly man growled, "He ain't no good to us, Tuk. But he knows where we're workin'. We'll just have to kill him and give him to the crabs to nibble on. We can't take no chance he would spill our location."

"Yeah, Tuk," a second cohort chimed in. "This shore's been good to us. We can't let this piece of drowned rat ruin our operation. Let's kill him and get it over with."

Zen trembled. He had been saved from the depths only to be murdered by a gang of wreckers. He shook his head in disbelief, attempting a paralyzing spell. The headache banged into full force. He could not complete the spell.

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"Wait," he croaked, voice breaking from his parched throat. "You don't want to kill me. I am a wizard's apprentice. That's not like being a wizard—not exactly—but I do know some things."

"I dunno, Tuk," a tall, weasely fellow said. "He might be of some use. Some wizard's tricks might come in handy."

"I can do any number of tricks," Zen said, "and I have even employed some minor banishing spells by myself. Are you afflicted with poltergeists?"

"Quiet!" Tukker roared.

Arpad Zen bit his tongue. The gang stepped respectfully back as the wiry little man paced up and down in front of him. After what seemed to Zen an interminable length of time, Tukker stopped in front of him, juted out his stubbled, scarred chin and nodded slowly.

"He might come in handy. If he don't, we can always kill him later," he said. He crossed his arms, rocked back and looked at Zen with utter contempt.

Zen was lifted bodily up off the beach and carried to the thieves' den, where he was set to cooking under heavy guard. He was allowed to eat what leftovers there were.

After he finished gobbling them, Zen sought to make the best of the situation. For the time being, he was alive. He just had to stay that way.

Hoping to ingratiate himself with his captors, he attempted some conjurings of simple, humorous illusions, but again, his head ached and his vision blurred. Instead, he performed sleight-of-hand tricks he had learned for the warm-up to Durril's raree show.

First he pulled stones from behind a pudgy man's ear. Then he played "Hide the Button" with three of the crew's cups. They liked the game and spent some time

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betting against one another until tempers flared and Tukker called an end to it.

For a finale, he tied knots in a borrowed scarf and challenged the owner or anyone in the group to untie them. None of the lot could get them to budge. Zen released the knots with a touch. Throughout the performance he was careful not to make Tukker or his top assistants the brunt of any joke.

The company relaxed into a merry evening. They even offered Zen some watery, bitter grog. He pushed away thoughts of Morasha. Too many times already he had caused her death. This time he willed her to be alive.

The tall weasely man refilled his cup, causing him to think that perhaps life with the wreckers was not too terrible after all. It was at least drier than foundering at sea.

“Say, do you know the one about the traveling salesman and the peg-legged whore from Pin?” he began.

“Tie him up and gag him,” Tukker ordered.

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