

CHAPTER FOUR

The Captain had developed a psychic bond with the old man. It started when they were discussing what would happen to the damaged sailors, and the two who were missing. The Captain was sure they met their death when they dived into the ocean to fight the snakes for control of the rudder. The old man had custody of their spirits and promised bodies for them. Alarmed, he put the matter aside, thinking it to be another twist to a confounding voyage. As the bond strengthened there was often no need for conversation, each knowing the other's thoughts. He was becoming part of whatever it was that drove the ship and controlled the sailors.

After spending many of his waking hours seeking the logic that best fitted who had hired him, the Captain concluded it was the righteous. It was unthinkable that evil would entrust him with such power.

Though not a strongly religious man, he was relieved to have resolved the question. the Captain held clear views of right and wrong.

The black cloud must have sustained considerable damage and exhausted its power. For the first time since the start of the attacks, the ship sailed in the calm waters of nature, not in the spirit world created by the old man.

During this period of peace, the old man, true to this word, placed the souls of the two men into their new bodies which he had created. To do this he had floated towards the heavens, surrounded by a green glow until he was too far away to be seen. A small white cloud drifted down to the

bridge and stopped in front of the Captain who was steering the ship. The old man stepped out of the white cloud holding two pairs of winged sandals. He placed them on the deck and pointed his staff at them. Each pair was enveloped in a green cloud that expanded before evaporating to reveal the men, complete with their canvas shoes. The Captain hugged them as he thanked each one for his unselfish dedication.

There was a sharp thunder Clap. The white cloud collected the winged sandals and drifted back to the heavens.

This period of calm was ending. The Captain wasn't surprised to see all the men converted to spheres, sitting in their chairs, eating breakfast through mouths that had been converted to scoops.

Breakfast taken, they spun rapidly into the sky. Each expanded to a quarter the size of the ship. They skimmed across the surface of the ocean, scooping water into their sphere-shaped bodies. Time and time again they would empty their load onto the ship, saturating it from stem to stern. They then formed a straight line above the ships prow, and kept pace with its progress, as it sailed toward the black cloud. The Captain thought it a little closer as the old man asked him to go to the bridge. The rat looked up from studying a map and, preening its whiskers, spoke to the Captain.

'Bad challenge today, Captain. You'll need all your strength. We may not survive. Come, look at the map. You know the black cloud stationed on the horizon ahead of us. It controls the land we are trying to reach. We're well on the way but the closer we get to our goal the more desperate the enemy

becomes. You'll have noticed the blue and green lights fighting for supremacy. Our force is strong. So far, we've managed to keep the black cloud away. Today it will turn into a massive fire ball and leave its position from where it protects the land. If we've done enough, we may sail through the fire. We must reach the other side, or we'll be incinerated.'

The black cloud was rapidly turning red, with licks of flame dancing around its edge, and others shooting into the sky. It looked as if part of the sun had fallen to earth. The sea around the cloud was steaming.

Each sphere was now about the size of the ship, and full of water leaking from its scoops. They had formed a ring around it, ready to extinguish any fire.

'Captain, you must keep strictly to the course I've set. It goes through the thinnest part of the inferno. We have one advantage. Should we reach the other side, the cloud cannot reverse onto us. It will change back to its black form and create gale force winds to send it back to the island. It will be very weak and take a long time to regain its powers. It's unusual for the cloud to leave its station, normally relying on its servants. This will allow time to repair damage and perhaps even find shelter or reach our destination. I suspect the reality is that we'll have more challenges.'

The rat squeaked, its black tail being the last the Captain saw of it as he took hold of the wheel. The sea was now boiling, steam lifting like geysers into the air. The ship was being kept wet by the spheres drenching it with the ocean. The old man had again placed a protective green dome around the

ship, preventing the flames and any airborne creatures reaching it.

The sea outside the envelope was cyclonic, the giant waves now flames, flicking fingers of red, burning high into the sky.

Each sphere was twice the size of the ship. The old man was standing on the prow with his staff pointing at the firewall, spewing out a deep, deep green light in all directions. The magpie was circling the old man, saturating him with an uninterrupted stream of water coming from its beak. The Captain looked at the compass and saw he had strayed. He heaved on the wheel. The ship reluctantly responded. Something was fighting him. Was it more of those creatures from the sea driving the rudder? He was sweating with the severe heat and the exertion of bringing the ship back on course, which he did.

Suddenly, the ship was engulfed by fire as the dome was breached. The huge surge of flames burnt the hair from the Captain's head, and his clothes. He could not see. The incredible screaming of fire and laughter from the enemy burst his eardrums. He collapsed to the deck as the sea creatures ripped the wheel from his hands forcing the ship off course. the spheres were working as fast as they could; down, scoop, up and release. There were creatures in the water, trying to prevent the spheres from filling their cavernous bodies.

Shrieks of pain coming from the cargo area pierced the air. The old man pointed his staff at the covers to the cargo bay, which were burning fiercely, and removed them. He called

on a sphere to hover and spray the hold with water. With a converted shute, now operating as a shower rose, it sprayed fine drops of cold water onto the cargo, and the screams stopped.

Sometimes the spheres, each now three times the size of the ship, would gather creatures in their scoops and, along with the water, would spew them onto the ship which was burning fiercely, the stench of burnt flesh adding to the conflagration.

The Captain woke in a waterfall as a sphere dropped its load, extinguishing the flames.

The bridge was bathed in both green and blue light. The Captain's mind was melting, as each colour fought to control it. Gradually the green dominated, the blue disappeared. The Captain regained control of his mind and control of the wheel. He had created a bubble of green which gave him protection from the fire and heat. He replaced his hands, which had been burnt back to stumps, by pincers which grasped the spokes. The sea creatures were powerful, and it took his remaining strength to bring the ship back on course.

The flames were less intense, and the Captain glimpsed a calmer ocean ahead and clear blue sky. Having sailed through the fire, he looked back and saw it slowly dying as the cloud changed back to its usual form.

The damage was extensive. All the rigging and sails were, consumed by the flames. The prow and gunwales had gone, the bridge had lost one side. Small timbers such as doors, and hatches had also been destroyed.

The Captain looked for the spheres. They were lying on the deck, small and flat like a disc. The magpie was lying alongside the old man's prone body, featherless, the claws of its feet gone and most of its beak. There was the occasional faint flicker of light coming from his staff.

The telepathic voice told him to breath on the old man, the magpie and the rat, which had shrunk to a normal size. He didn't have time to think about it then, but later realized he hadn't heard the voice before, and it had sounded distant.

Inside his green bubble, he glided to the old man. Opening his mouth, The Captain filled his lungs and breathed out, the green air flowing over the old man, the magpie and the rat. He repeated this, lung after lungful until the old man stirred. The rat's tail and fur had grown back as well as the magpie's feathers, beak and claws. The Captain was shivering with cold, his skin like ice to the touch. He staggered before falling to the deck alongside the old man.

The magpie was the first to stir. It flapped about on the deck, testing its wings as a fledgling would before it took off and landed on a burnt piece of timber. The rat was slowly growing, and it was not long before it had again grown to the size of a man. Its new fur was dark green. With its tail pointed at the old man and the Captain, the fur turned black as a green burst of light from the rat's tail played on their bodies.

The old man woke, and with the power of his staff, the light now steady and strong, he floated the Captain to his cabin, repairing his body on the way. The magpie and the rat nodded as the old man told them the Captain must not be

disturbed until he had fully recovered which would take a day. He had saved his ship and all aboard. As the unconscious Captain floated past the discs, they could be heard in unison saying,

‘Thank you, Captain, you saved us. Your spirit was strong and withstood the test. Sleep well, repair your mind, there will be more to come.’

The Captain’s sleep was uninterrupted, and he woke fresh and hungry. He went to breakfast, but before he entered the galley he saw the ship was again on dry land, the ocean being held back by the green dome. The rat, standing on the prow, held the old man’s staff in its long tail from where it sprayed green shafts of light.

The crew were outside the mess deck. They were now back in their proper shape as sailors but were the thickness of a thin disc, scoops for mouths. The old man was bending over them, breathing green air into their scoops, which reflatated them. They were now complete, with normal mouths except for faint pinpricks around the mouth of the sailor who had sprayed the cargo.

After breakfast, the old man and the Captain followed the last crew member onto the deck. The day was warm and windless. Even the sea beyond the green dome was flat. The Captain looked skywards and saw a large mass of black cloud racing across the sky in the same direction as the ship. Looking ahead he saw land, with high peaks, and ocean waves raging against the shore line.

The crew scrambled over the side. Collecting timber, they set about repairing the ship. By night fall the repairs had

been completed and the ship was again afloat and sailing, eight knots, towards the land. The pin pricks around the sailor's mouth had gone. The horizon, where the Captain had glimpsed the Island, was again hidden by the black cloud.