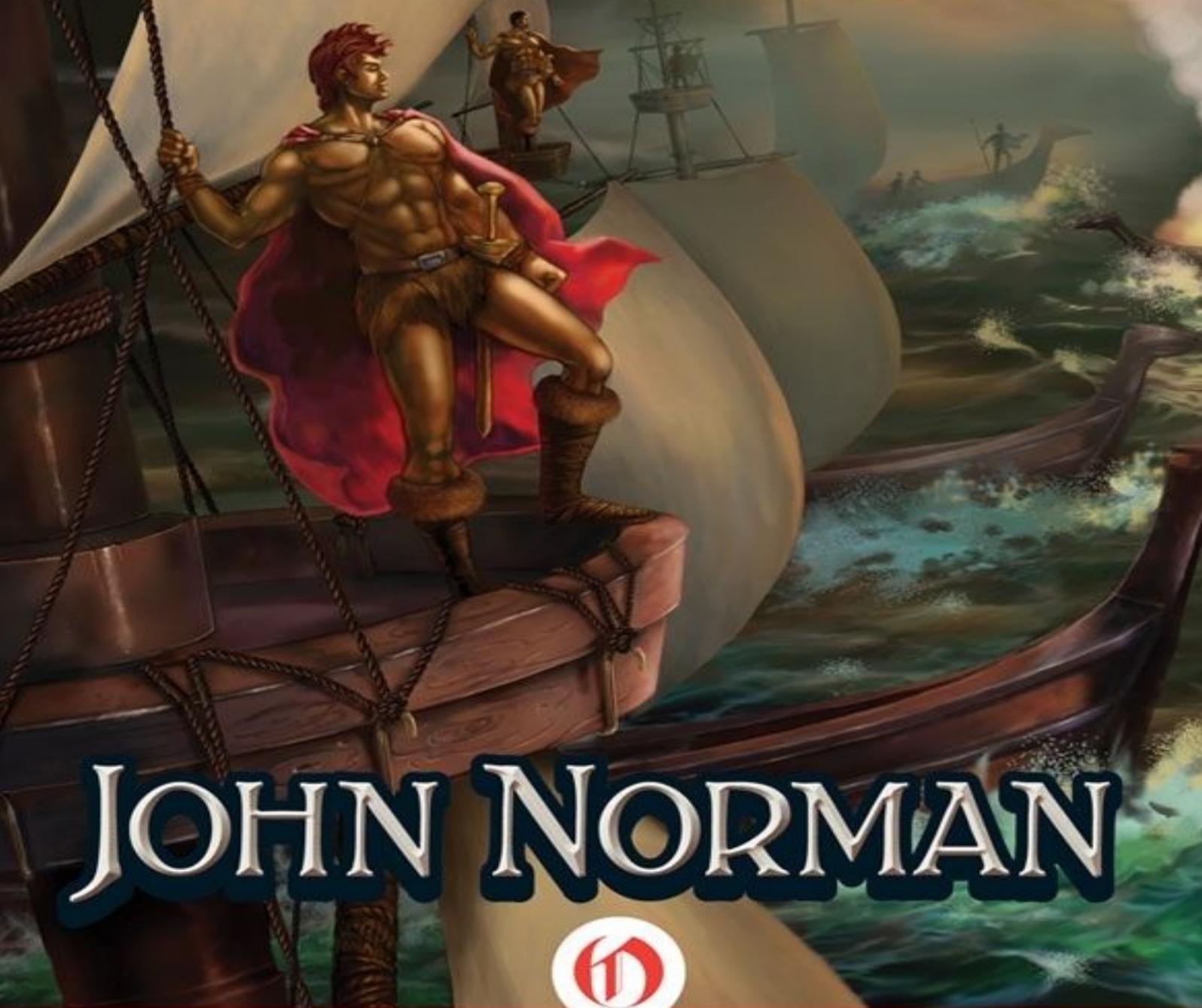


GOREAN SAGA • BOOK 16

GUARDSMAN OF GOR



JOHN NORMAN



Guardsman of Gor

The Gorean Saga: Book 16

John Norman

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Ships of the Voskjard

Most Gorean ships have a concave bow, which descends gracefully into the water. Such a construction facilitates the placing of the ram-mount and ram.

I watched, fearfully, almost mesmerized, as the first of the gray galleys, emerging from the fog, moving swiftly, like a living thing, looming now, struck the chain.

Battle horns sounded about me. I heard them echoed in the distance, the sounds first taken up by the *Mira* and *Talender*.

There was a great sound, the hitting of the huge chain by the galley, a sound as of the striking of the chain, and then the grating sound, scraping and heavy, of the chain literally being lifted out of the water. I saw it, fascinated, black, dripping water, glistening, slide up the bow, splintering wood and tearing away paint. Then the whole galley, by its momentum, stopped by the chain, swung abeam. I saw oars snapping.

"The chain holds!" cried Callimachus, elatedly.

Another galley then struck the chain, off the port bow.

"It holds!" cried Callimachus. "It holds!"

I was aware of something moving past me. It was swift. I almost did not register it.

"Light the pitch!" called Callimachus. "Set the catapults! Unbind the javelins! Bowmen to your stations!"

I saw, amidships, opposite our galley, on the enemy vessel, two bowmen. They carried the short, stout ship's bow. They were some forty yards away.

I looked upon them, fascinated.

They seemed unreal. But they were the enemy.

"Down!" called Callimachus. "Protect yourself!"

I crouched behind the bulwarks. I heard again, twice, the slippage of air, sliding and divided, marked by what I now recognized was the passage of slender, flighted wood. One arrow struck into the stem castle behind me and to my left. The sound was firm, authoritative. The other arrow with a flash of sparks struck the mooring cleat on the bulwark to my right and glanced away into the water.

I heard the snap of bow strings on my own vessel, returning the fire.

"Hold your fire!" called Callimachus.

Lifting my head I saw the enemy galley back-oaring on the starboard side, and then, straightened, back-oaring from the chain.

Some fifty yards away I heard another galley strike at the chain.

A cheer drifted across the water. Again, it seemed, the chain had held.

Across the chain I heard signal horns.

Callimachus was now on the height of the stem castle. "Extinguish the pitch!" he called.

I tried to see through the fog. No longer did there seem enemy ships at the chain.

Callimachus, twenty feet above me, his hands on the stem-castle railing, peered out into the fog. "Steady!" he called to the two helmsmen, at the rudders. A sudden wind was pulling at the fog. I heard the rudders and rudder-mounts creak. The oar master set the oars outboard, into the water.

"Look!" cried Callimachus. He was pointing to starboard. The wind had torn open a wide rift in the vapors of the fog.

There was a cheer behind me. At the chain, settling back, its concave bow lifted fully from the

water, its stern awash, was a pirate galley. Men were in the water. Beyond this ship, too, there was another pirate galley, crippled, listing.

"They will come again!" called Callimachus.

But this time I did not think they would attempt to so brazenly assault the chain.

This time, I speculated, they would attempt to cut it. In such a situation they must be prevented from doing so. They would have to be met at the chain.

"Rations for the men!" called Callimachus. "Eat a good breakfast, Lads," he called, "for there is work to be done this day!"

I resheathed then the sword. The Voskjard had not been able to break the chain.

It seemed to me then that we might keep him west of the chain. I was hungry.

* * * *

"They are coming, Lads!" called Callimachus from the stem castle.

I went to the bow, to look. The fog now, in the eighth Ahn, had muchly dissipated. Only wisps of it hung still about the water.

"Light the pitch!" called Callimachus. "Be ready with the catapults! Bowmen to your stations!"

In a moment I smelled the smell of burning pitch. It contrasted strongly with the vast, organic smell of the river.

I could see several galleys, some two to three hundred yards away, approaching the chain.

I heard the creak of a catapult, being reset. The bowmen took up their positions behind their wicker blinds.

Here and there, on the deck, there were buckets of sand, and here and there, on ropes, some of water.

I heard the unwrapping and spilling of a sheaf of arrows, to be loose at hand behind one of the blinds. There are fifty arrows in each such sheaf.

A whetstone, somewhere, was moving patiently, repetitively, on the head of an ax.

I saw Callimachus lift his hand. Behind him an officer would relay his signal. On the steps of the stern castle, below the helm deck, the oar master would be watching. The oars were already outboard.

I doubted that any of the enemy galleys would be so foolish as to draw abeam of the chain.

I could not believe my eyes. Was it because the flag of Victoria flew on our stem-castle lines?

I saw the hand of Callimachus fall, almost like a knife. In an instant, the signals relayed, the *Tina* leaped forward.

It took less than an Ehn to reach the chain. The iron-shod ram slid, grating, over the chain and struck the enemy vessel amidships. The strakes of her hull splintered inward. Men screamed. I had been thrown from my feet in the impact. I heard more wood breaking as we back-oared from the vessel, the ram moving in the wound. I heard water rushing into the other vessel, a rapid, heavy sound. She was stove in. A heavy stone, from some catapult, struck down through the deck near me, fired doubtless from some other galley. A javelin, tarred and flaming, snapped from some springal, thudded into the stem castle. Arrows were exchanged. Then we had backed away, some seventy-five feet from the chain. Some men were clinging to the chain. I heard a man moaning, somewhere behind me. I snapped loose the javelin from the stem castle and threw it, still flaming, overboard.

Here and there, along the chain, we could see other galleys drawing abeam of it, and men, in small boats, with tools, cutting at the great links.

Again, in moments, the hand of Callimachus lifted, and again fell.

Once more the ram struck deep into the strakes of an enemy vessel.

Once more we drew back.

~~A clay globe, shattering, of burning pitch struck across our deck. Another fell hissing into the water off our starboard side. Our own catapults returned fire, with pitch and stones. We extinguished the fire with sand.~~

"They will lie to now," said Callimachus to the officer beside him. "We will be unable to reach the ship with the ram."

I could see, even as he spoke, several of the pirate vessels drawing back, abeam of the chain, but far enough behind it to prevent our ram from reaching them. Off our port bow we saw one of the pirate vessels slip beneath the muddy waters of the Vosk, a kill of the *Mira*.

Small boats again approached the chain.

We edged forward again. A raking of arrows hailed upon our deck, many bristling then, too, in the stem castle.

"Bowmen!" called Callimachus.

We spent a shower of arrows at the nearest longboat. Two men fell from the boat into the water. Other men dove free into the river, swimming back about the bow of the nearest pirate vessel.

"Do not let them near the chain!" called Callimachus to the bowmen.

We swung to port, to threaten another longboat. This one did not wait for us to approach, but withdrew behind the shelter of the nearest galley.

I watched the long, looping trajectory of a bowl of flaming pitch, trailing a streamer of smoke, near us, and then fall with a hissing splash into the water nearby.

"Save your fire. Steady!" called Callimachus. Then, later, he called, "Back oars!"

An occasional stone, or globe of pitch, was lofted towards us, but fell short.

Callimachus, with a glass of the builders, surveyed the chain.

"Look, Lads," called he. "See what small respect they have for you!"

I, and some others, went to the bow. Some five longboats were crossing the chain.

"Places, Lads!" laughed Callimachus.

I had no station, so I remained in the bow. The others, mostly oarsmen, returned to the benches, and the stern.

The men in the longboats carried swords and grapnels. Did they truly think to engage us? Our galley, like most of Gorean construction, was low and shallow drafted, but still its bulwarks would loom above the gunnels of a simple longboat.

The *Tina* knifed toward the chain. We rode over the first longboat, shattering it, its bow and stern snapping upward, its crew screaming and leaping into the water. Another was fouled in the oars of our starboard side and capsized. The other three fled back toward the chain.

I saw then that their action had been diversionary, to occupy us while other longboats, fixed with wicker shields, of the sort used for naval bowmen, lay along the chain. Behind those shields, like shapes and shadows, distinguishable behind the wicker, men tore with saws at the chain.

The diversion, though, had been too brief.

Once again the *Tina* approached the chain, swinging about now, broadside to the chain.

"Fire!" cried Callimachus.

Arrows lanced into the heavy wicker but, though several pierced it by a foot, they did little damage. The shafts were caught in the heavy wicker. Too, now, from the pirates' galleys, protecting their longboats, there sped a fierce counterfire. The wicker shields of our own archers were now bristling with feathers and wood.

A heavy stone broke away the railing of the stern castle of the *Tina*.

"Closer! Closer!" called Callimachus.

I heard the hiss and snap of our catapults, the twisted ropes snapping loose. When the largest one fired I could feel the reaction in the deck boards beneath my feet.

Flaming pitch was flung at close quarters. Arrows traversed the air in swift menace.

An arm suddenly appeared over the bulwark. Then a man, wet, scrambled aboard. I met him with the sword and, grappling, kicking, I forced him back overboard.

Burning pitch spattering and exploding out of a clay vessel skidded across the deck.

I could hear battle horns to port and starboard.

Not more than a dozen feet away I could see a pirate longboat behind the chain, protected by wicker shields.

Stones and pitch, at point-blank range, pounded and exploded between ships.

I could see, clearly, the eyes of pirates, no more than a few feet away, we separated from them by the chain, and a few feet of water.

A man rose from behind the bulwarks of the enemy vessel, bow in hand.

Then he was reeling back, an arrow in his chest.

I heard the chain scraping at the side of the *Tina*, then the shearing blade on our starboard side, swinging to starboard, struck the wood of a longboat. We slid along the chain, then, the oars on our starboard side striking loose the wicker shielding of another longboat, too close to the chain, and spilling men into the water.

I saw pirates, on the galley opposite, shaking their fists at us.

But the *Tina*, the chain cleared, was now swinging about. There was the wreckage of two longboats in the water. Half submerged, a wicker shield floated behind the chain.

I heard men behind me extinguishing the flames on the *Tina*.

"Back oars," called Callimachus. And the *Tina* backed away again from the chain, her bow facing in.

The pirate vessels, too, had withdrawn from the chain. It was near the tenth Ahn, the Gorean noon.

Callimachus descended from the stem castle, leaving his officer at that post. He took some water in his helmet and, using it as a basin, splashed his face with it.

"We have held them at the chain," I said to Callimachus. He wiped his face with a towel, handed to him by a fellow.

"For the time," he said.

"Do you think the Voskjard will now withdraw?" I asked.

"No," he said. He handed back the towel to the fellow who had given it to him.

"What will we do now?" I asked.

"Rest," he said.

"When do you think the Voskjard will try again?" I asked.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"Tonight," I said.

"Of course," he said.

Slowly, in the darkness, the *Tina* prowled the chain. The sound of the oars, softly entering the water drawing and lifting, was almost inaudible.

"They are out there, somewhere," said Callimachus.

"Still?" I asked.

"Of course," he said.

Two ship's lanterns, suspended on poles, thrust over the bow, to port and starboard, cast pools of yellow light on the water. In the light of the starboard lantern, here and there, where the chain was visible above the water, as it was between certain pylons, we could see the dark links; generally, however, it was invisible, concealed by the surface.

"Quiet," said Callimachus. "Hold!" he called, softly, back to the oar master, who stood now behind the stem castle. The oars of the *Tina* lifted and slid partly inboard. The ship, with its momentum, drifted forward, south along the chain. We heard the chain grate then, on the hull, below the starboard shearing blade.

"What did you hear?" I asked.

We looked over the side, at the chain, suspended some six inches here above the water, and at the water, flickering in the lantern's light. "They were here," said Callimachus. "I am sure of it. Do not enter the light."

I drew back.

"It is hopeless," he said, dismally. "They may come and go as they please, withdrawing at our approach."

"There is little we can do about it," I said.

"Extinguish the lanterns," said Callimachus. "Wait! Bucklers and swords! Bucklers and swords, Lads!"

Almost at the instant that he had spoken grappling irons looped over the bulwarks and snapped back the points anchoring in the wood. We saw tension in the irons as men climbed the ropes secured to them. But they were met, as dark shapes at the bulwarks, screaming and cursing, by fierce defenders, thrusting them back with bucklers, darting steel into their bodies. They were emerging from longboats and must climb up and over the bulwarks; they could not, bulwark to bulwark, leap to our deck; the advantages were fully ours; only one reached the deck, and we threw his lifeless body, thrust through in a dozen places, back into the *Vosk*, after its retreating fellows.

Callimachus wiped his sword on his cloak. "Additional insult have they done to us," he grinned. "Do they think we are an undefended merchantman, to assail us so boldly, so foolishly?"

"As you slew a man," I said, "you cried out with pleasure."

"Did I?" asked Callimachus.

"Yes," I said.

"When you, too, drove your blade into the body of a man, I thought you, too, cried out with pleasure," said Callimachus.

"I could not have done so," I said.

"You did," grinned Callimachus.

"I do not recall it," I said.

"In the press of battle," said Callimachus, "it is sometimes hard to be aware of all that transpires."

"You seem exhilarated," I said.

"I am," said he, "and so, too, seem you."

"No," I said, uncertainly, "it cannot be."

"But it is," said Callimachus.

"I do not think I know myself," I said.

"You are a man," said Callimachus. "Perhaps it is time that you made your own acquaintance."

"We were as fierce as they," I said, wonderingly, "as swift, as vicious."

"It would seem so," smiled Callimachus.

I was silent.

"Do you fear to look upon the hunter, and the killer, in yourself?" he asked.

I did not speak.

He clapped me on the shoulders. "We have now, I suspect," said he, "taught the men of Ragnar

Voskjard some respect for honest men."

"Yes," I said, "let us think of it in such terms."

"Do you not wonder, sometimes," asked he, "why honest men, honest folk, such as ourselves, permit pirates, and such, to exist."

"Why?" I asked.

"That we may have someone to kill," he said.

"Are we so different from them, then?" I asked.

"I do not think so," said Callimachus. "We have much in common with them."

"What?" I asked.

"That we are men," said Callimachus.

"It is not the killing," I said, "for executions would not suffice."

"No," said Callimachus, "it is the sport, and the risk, and the killing."

"One must fight for causes," I said.

"Causes exist," said Callimachus, "that men may fight."

"I am troubled," I said.

"Extinguish the lanterns," said Callimachus to a fellow. "The pirates may still be about."

"Let us put down the longboat," I said to Callimachus. "With muffled oars we may patrol our sector of the chain."

"Why would you do this?" he asked.

"Our vessel, even with the lanterns extinguished, cannot approach the chain as silently as a longboat. The pirate boats, at the chain, need only draw back."

"The longboat," said Callimachus, "should be west of the chain, that it may approach the pirate boats less suspiciously."

"Of course," I said.

"Why will you do this?" he asked.

"Why, to defend the chain," I said.

"True," smiled Callimachus.

"You have tasted blood," said Callimachus. "You want more."

"Such thoughts are too terrible to think," I said.

"The sword must drink until its thirst is satisfied," said Callimachus. It was a Gorean proverb.

"I will not think such thoughts," I said.

"Consult your feelings," said Callimachus. "Do you find yourself desperately committed to this bold venture, that you may imperil your life in order to protect the chain? Are your motivations those of

discharging a dangerous and unwelcome duty, one which no man has placed upon you?"

"No," I said.

"What then?" he asked.

"I have met the enemy," I said. "I am eager to meet him again."

"I thought so," said Callimachus. "I will put the longboat down. I shall call for volunteers."

* * * *

"Who is there?" called a voice, in the darkness.

We rested the oars in the oarlocks.

"Ready," I said to the men with me, softly. We approached the chain from the west. The longboat had been put down across the chain, the *Tina* abeam of it, a quarter of an Ahn ago. We had actually passed within a few yards of pirate vessels, anchored in the river.

"Who is there?" called the voice.

"Now!" I said. Five men, behind the gunnels, suddenly rose up, bows in hand. The arrows were discharged at almost point-blank range into the other boat, as we struck against it. I heard men scream, tools cast down. I, and five others, swords drawn, boarded the other craft, hacking and slashing about us. We did not speak. The cries, the screams, were those of the pirates. More than one saved himself by leaping into the water. I thrust the body of another over a thwart, and then rolled it, sprawling, over the gunnel into the water.

"What is going on out there?" called a voice, from one of the pirate vessels, back from the chain.

We struck down with an oar, driving back a man trying to reach into the boat.

"What is going on out there?" called the voice again, as we slipped away.

* * * *

"Be off! Be off!" cried a voice, frightened, in the darkness.

"Back oars," I said. Then I said, "Steady."

The longboat rested on the waters, rocking in the darkness, silent.

"We know you are out there!" cried a fellow in the darkness, near the chain. "We are armed! Approach at your own risk! Identify yourselves!"

I smiled, discerning his fear. I gave no orders.

"Identify yourselves!" called the voice.

We were silent.

I saw no point in attacking. The element of surprise was no longer with us. We had taken three longboats in the night. That there was danger at the chain was now well understood by the pirates. They had thought to work with impunity, and had found that we had not chosen to permit it.

We were silent.

"Return to the ship," said the voice in the darkness. "Return to the ship!"

We let the longboat move past us, some yards to starboard, judging by the sound of the oars.

I then had the longboat move to the chain, where I felt the links. In one of the great links I could feel a concave roughness which then gave way, as the tool had bit in, to a sharp, geometrically precise crevice, too small to feel inside. I felt about the link, to the limits, on both sides of the link, of the crevice. It was diagonal, and, at its deepest point, toward the link's center, about an inch in depth.

"What is it?" asked one of the men with me, an oarsman, behind me and to the right.

"They must have been working here about a quarter of an Ahn," I said.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

"The chain has been weakened," I said.

"What shall we do?" he asked.

"We shall continue to patrol the chain," I said.

* * * *

"Did you hear it?" asked one of the men with me.

"Yes," I said.

"A fish?" asked one of the men.

"Divers, I think," I said.

"What are you doing?" asked one of the men.

"Return for me in five Ehn," I said.

I put aside my weapon, in its sheath, in the bottom of the longboat. I removed my sandals and tunic.

"Give me a knife," I said.

"Here," said one of my fellows. I put the blade between my teeth and, silently, lowered myself over

the side of the longboat. I treaded water. The longboat, almost noiselessly, the oars muffled, the wood

wrapped with thonged fur at the fulcrum points, the oarlocks similarly served, moved away.

It was cold and dark in the waters of the Vosk.

After a few Ehn the longboat returned, and I was hauled aboard.

"Here is your knife," I told the fellow who had loaned me the weapon.

"Was it a fish?" asked a man.

"No," I said.

"The knife is sticky," said the man to whom I had returned it.

I spit into the Vosk. "Rinse it," I said.

"How many were there?" asked a man.

"Two," I said. "They were not patient. They returned to work too soon."

"What shall we do?" asked one of the men.

"Return to the *Tina*," I said. "We shall need our sleep. There will be war tomorrow."

"Was the chain damaged?" asked a man.

"Yes," I said.

"Seriously?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"It could have been done in a hundred places," said a man.

"I think so," I said.

"Then, tomorrow," said a man, hesitantly, "the chain will not hold."

"I do not think so," I said.

"Perhaps we should flee while we can," he said.

I shrugged. "Let the crews and their commanders make decision on the matter," I said.

"The divers," said a man, "did you kill them both?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then the Voskjard will not know that the chain is weak at that point," said a man.

"No," I said, "he will not know that it was weakened at that point."

"But there will be other points," said a man.

"Of course," I said.

"It is impossible to protect the chain," said a man.

"Sooner or later, if not this night, it will be cut," said another man.

"The Voskjard has been delayed," said one of the men. "It is said he is not a patient man."

"We are not naval personnel," said another man. "In a free battle, on the river, we will stand little chance against the swift ships of the Voskjard."

"We have with us the ships of Port Cos," said a man.

"There are too few of them," said another man. "Presumably, if the chain is cut, they will withdraw to protect Port Cos."

"If the Voskjard should join with Policrates," said another man, "and the forces of Port Cos and Ar Station are divided, no town on the river will be safe."

"Pirates will own the Vosk," said another man.

"We must flee," said another man.

"Decision on that matter can be made in the morning by the commanders and their crews," I said.

"But single men can flee," said another.

"I will kill the first man who deserts his post," I said.

"What manner of man are you?" asked a man.

"I do not know," I told him.

"Command us," said one.

"Put about," I said. "Return to the *Tina*. We shall think further on these matters in the morning."

"Do you think that the urts of the Voskjard will discontinue their nibblings at the chain because we choose to rest?" asked a man.

"No," I said.

"Then we must remain at the chain," he said.

"No," I said.

The longboat then put about and, slowly, made its way northward along the chain. The fate of the river, I had learned, did not lie in the fate of the chain.

We were hailed by men in pirate vessels, as we passed near them, but we did not respond.

"We have encountered no further evidence of work at the chain," said a man, as we neared the location of the *Tina*, east of the chain, a single lantern swinging on one of her stem-castle lines.

"Perhaps the Voskjard has given up," said a man.

"Perhaps no further work has been done," said another man.

"Perhaps," said another, "the work has been completed by now, to his satisfaction."

"The chain must hold," said one of our oarsmen. "It must!"

"What do you think, Jason?" asked a man.

"Let us hope, fervently," I said to him, "that it holds."

"But do you think it will?" asked a man.

"No," I said.

"We must flee," said a man.

"Would you surrender the river to men such as Policrates and Ragnar Voskjard?" I asked.

"No," he said.

"Is that you, Jason?" called Callimachus.

"It is," I responded.

The *Tina* then, in a few Ehn, came abeam of the chain. We threw lines up to her.

The Chain has been Broken in the North

The long galley, some eighty feet Gorean, sped toward the chain. Its bow as lifted, unnaturally, from the water, did not even touch the water.

"Superb!" cried Callimachus, commending the enemy.

"What is it?" I called up to the stem castle.

"They have redistributed the ballast," called Callimachus. "Splendid!"

The vessel continued to approach the chain. I could hear the stroke of the hortator's hammer even on the *Tina*. Such a speed could be continued for only a few moments. I saw more of the hull, and its keel, dripping, lifting out of the water.

"Are they mad?" I called.

"It is their intention to ride over the chain," said Callimachus.

I clutched the rail, in wonder. Every bit of sand in the lower hold must have been thrust to the stern of the vessel. Gear, too, and catapult stones, had been slid to the stern deck. Even the crew, other than oarsmen, their weapons ready, had congregated there.

Then the concave prow of the vessel had cleared the chain. There was a great scraping as the chain tore at the keel. Then the galley, half on the chain and half off, moved eccentrically, teetering, like a ship caught on a bar, stranded and buffeted, assailed by conflicting currents.

"Out oars!" called Callimachus. "Ready!"

We saw another galley from the west, too, its prow high, speeding toward the chain.

The first galley, its oars stroking, slashing at the Vosk, its hull twisting, careened forward and to the side.

"It will clear the chain!" I cried.

"Two points to port!" cried Callimachus. "Stroke!" His officer, by hand signals, conveyed his message to the helmsmen and oar master at the stern.

"It is clearing the chain!" I cried.

Already the *Tina* was speeding toward the intruder. I flung myself to the deck. We took her in the starboard bow, as she slid, grinding and splintering, from the chain.

"Back oars!" called Callimachus.

The impact had slid me back on the deck for a dozen feet.

"Back oars!" called Callimachus.

The *Tina*, shuddering, backing, with a splintering of wood, freed her ram.

I, crouching, peered over the side. The forward deck of the enemy was already awash.

I saw men there, in water to their knees, clinging to rails. The catapult on the enemy's stern castle had broken loose from its large, rotating mount. Its ropage hung down, dangling in the wind. The strands seemed narrow, from the distance from which I viewed them. The largest, however, would be some four inches in diameter. I saw a man leap from the stern castle into the water.

"Look!" cried out a man, in misery. He was pointing to starboard. The second enemy galley had ridden over the chain.

"The first of the Voskjard's ships has crossed the chain!" cried another.

We saw other galleys, too, approaching the chain.

"Another has crossed!" cried a man, pointing to starboard. Beyond that ship we could see another galley, too, but this one was striking at the chain.

The *Mira* was hastening to engage the galley which had ridden over the chain.

The *Mira* made good her strike. There was a cheer from our vessel. The starboard rudder of the enemy galley had been torn away in crossing the chain. The galleys of the Voskjard, like most Gorea ships, were double ruddered.

"Hard to starboard!" cried Callimachus.

As we came about a pirate galley knifed towards us.

"To starboard!" cried Callimachus. Then he cried, "Oars inboard!"

Her ram missed us. Her port shearing blade tore at our strakes.

"Oars outboard!" called Callimachus. "Come about!"

The two ships had slid past one another. As the ships passed I had looked into the eyes of a pirate. He had not been more than five feet from me.

"Two more ships are over the chain!" called the officer with Callimachus, pointing to port.

"Ships of Port Cos are approaching!" cried another man. There was a cheer on our vessel. Ten such ships were at the chain. Twenty others lay to in the waters near the south guard station, which post was held by Callisthenes. These ships, those of Port Cos, were our hope. It was only these, we feared, who might be able to match the forces of the Voskjard in even combat. The ships of Ar's Station could bring numbers to bear in our favor, but we did not regard them, ship for ship, as the match of either a galley of the Voskjard or of Port Cos. The naval tradition of Cos is an ancient one, and many of the officers of Port Cos were native Cosians, mercenaries or veterans of the Cosian navy, on detached duty to the colony, that the interests of the mother island might be defended on the Vosk.

"There is a ship of Ar's Station!" called out the officer on the stem castle.

There was a cheer at this cry.

We had now come about, but already the galley which had nearly torn us open was facing us.

"She has quick lines," said a man.

"Why has she not attacked?" asked a man.

"She is waiting for support," said a man.

"No," said another. "If we move to the chain, she can ram us amidships."

"She is defending her sisters," said a man.

"We can no longer protect the chain," said another.

But then we saw the galley swinging to starboard. Another galley, one flying the pennons of Port Cos, was speeding towards her.

There was another cheer from our men. "Back to the chain!" called Callimachus, elated.

"Another has slipped over!" cried out a man, angrily, pointing over the bow.

It was free of the chain. We could not catch her. She slipped behind us on the waters of the broad, muddy Vosk.

"How many have passed the chain?" asked a man, glumly.

"Who knows?" asked another.

Here and there, at the chain, again and again, pirate galleys were striking at the great links, and the backing away, and then again, patiently, renewing their attack.

"Doubtless they are hammering at points where they know the chain was weakened in the night," said a man near me. He had been with me in the longboat last night.

"Yes," I said. "Look there!"

I pointed to one of the truncated pylons rising out of the river. It had been splashed with yellow paint.

"Catapults!" called Callimachus.

Two stones looped into the air and then, gracefully, began their descent toward one of the pirate ships.

Huge spumes of water rose into the air as the great rocks plunged into the Vosk.

"Bowmen!" called Callimachus.

We neared the first of the galleys and flighted arrows toward her.

She drew back.

"There are others," said a man.

We moved along the chain. We came upon the wreckage of a pirate galley, broken in two, deserted. It had broken, attempting to ride over the chain.

"There is a pirate galley behind us, a pasang back, lying to!" called out a man, aft on the stern castle.

"We remain at the chain," said Callimachus.

"It seems to list," called the man. "I think it is crippled."

"We remain at the chain," said Callimachus.

I smiled. He was a good commander. He would not be lured from his post. A ship can be made to seem to list by repositioning the ballast in its lower hold. If the ship were truly a cripple I did not think it would be lying to. An oared fighting ship is seldom helpless. Too, if the ship were crippled, it posed no immediate threat. And, if it were not crippled, it needed only be kept under observation. Isolated ships can be dealt with on a piecemeal basis. Our duty lay at the chain. He who thoughtlessly abandons his defenses strikes a poor bargain with fortune.

"Look there!" called the officer on the stem castle with Callimachus. He pointed ahead, half a point off the starboard bow.

Callimachus took the glass of the Builders from the officer. "It is the *Sita* of Jort's Ferry," said Callimachus, "and the *Tais* of Port Cos."

"They fly distress signals on the stem-castle lines," said the officer.

"Bring her about," called Callimachus.

"It can mean but one thing," said the officer.

Callimachus snapped shut the glass of the Builders.

I could now hear the sound of the horns drifting towards us.

"Acknowledge," said Callimachus. Flags were run on the stern-castle lines.

I could not interpret the horns.

"What is it?" I called up to Callimachus.

"It had to happen," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"It happened to the north," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"The chain has been broken," he said. I held the rail, looking astern.

The *Sita* and the *Tais* were now clearly visible.

"Where are the *Talia*, the *Thenta*, the *Midice*, the *Ina*, the *Tia*?" asked the officer.

"I did not see them," said Callimachus. He handed the glass of the Builders back to the officer. "Do you see them?" he asked.

"No," said the man. "No."

"Quarter stroke," said Callimachus.

"Quarter stroke!" called the officer to the oar master.

"Quarter stroke!" he called to his men.

The *Sita* and the *Tais* were now abeam, to port.

We moved southward, along the chain.

~~Callimachus descended from the stem castle and made his way back, between the benches, to the stern castle. I accompanied him. He carried the glass of the Builders.~~

"There were seven ships," I said. I stood beside Callimachus on the stern castle.

"Perhaps some survived," he said.

"I see ships," I said, pointing astern. There were specks at the horizon line, marshaled specks.

Callimachus handed me the glass of the Builders. "Ships of the Voskjard," I said.

"Yes," said Callimachus.

"Apparently the Voskjard has more than fifty ships," I said. I had counted at least forty. And there were several others, I knew, here and there at the chain.

"The information of Callisthenes was apparently mistaken," said Callimachus. "That is a sore and unwelcome flaw in our intelligence."

"How many can there be?" I asked.

"I do not know," said Callimachus. "Sixty, a hundred?"

"We can never match such ships in open battle," I said.

"Port Cos must fight as she has never fought before," said Callimachus.

"They are not hurrying," I said to Callimachus. I had been counting the strokes per Ehn.

"They do not wish to tire their oarsmen," said Callimachus. I handed the glass of the Builders back to him.

"Port Cos is the hope of the Vosk," said Callimachus. "We of Ar's Station and of the independent ships must support her in her battle."

"The odds are overwhelming," I said. "Can she win?"

"She must," said Callimachus.

"At least she is commanded by men such as Callisthenes," I said.

"His twenty ships, summoned from the south guard station, will be crucial," said Callimachus.

"We shall need each of them if we are to make a showing," I said.

"Without them," I said, "it would be a slaughter."

"With them, in spite of the odds," said Callimachus, "the tide might be turned in our favor."

"You seem troubled," I said.

"I am only hoping," he said, "that the chain has not been cut south of us."

"We have protected it as well, and as long, as we could," I said.

"Let us hope that the time which we have invested in that work will prove itself to have been well spent," he said.

I shuddered. "I shall hope so," I said. If our fleet did not have time to group, or if our flank were turned, it would be indeed a tragic day for our forces upon the Vosk. The planks of our fleet might litter the river to the wharves of Turmus.

"Have you orders for me?" I asked.

"Sharpen your sword," he said. "And get what rest you can."

"Yes, Captain," I said. I turned away from Callimachus.

"Do you look forward to the fight?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, not turning to regard him.

"That is interesting," said Callimachus.

"Is it significant?" I asked.

"Perhaps," said Callimachus.

"What does it mean?" I asked.

"Do you think you will be able to sleep before the engagement?" he asked.

"Of course," I said. "Why? Are these things significant?"

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I do not know," I said.

"Sharpen your sword," said he, "and get what rest you can."

"Yes, Captain," I said, and then descended the steps of the stern castle. I made my way toward the bow. The rowers were working only at quarter stroke. I sat down near my gear and, for a time, with a stone, whetted the blade on the weapon I carried. When I was finished I set a light coat of oil on the steel, that it might be protected from rust. Then I lay down on the smoothed deck, near the starboard rail, and, near a coil of mooring rope, fell soon asleep.

The Wedge; Rams and Shearing Blades

"How many are there?" I heard an officer inquire of Callimachus, above and behind me, on the deck of the stem castle.

"Forty-two," said he.

We lay to, twenty-two ships, in a double line. Our oars were inboard.

"The chain held," said a man near me.

"Yes," I said. It had been broken in the north, but here, closer to the southern shore of the Vosk, it had held. This had permitted us to group. Too, the left flank of our position was protected, still, by the mighty links of the Cosian chain, transported to the Vosk, slung between its pylons.

"Where are the ships of Callisthenes?" inquired an officer of Callimachus.

"They will join us shortly," said Callimachus. "We must hold our lines until they arrive."

Even this far south, and from the height of the stem castle, one could not see the southern shore of the Vosk.

"They are forming the wedge," said an officer beside Callimachus.

Our right flank was protected by seven ships of Port Cos, seven of the ten which had been originally abroad on the river. The *Midice* and *Tia* had been lost. The *Ina*, her starboard oars sheared, had been boarded and taken as a prize. The *Talia* and *Thenta*, the first of Point Alfred and the second of Jort's Ferry, had been lost in the same action. Both had been merchant ships, acting in support of the ships of Port Cos. Of the group the *Sita*, of Jort's Ferry, and the *Tais* of Port Cos, had escaped. In this first engagement, in the north, we had lost five of seven ships. The Voskjard, as we had learned, had lost four.

"Yes," said Callimachus, handing the glass of the Builders back to one of the officers, "it is the wedge."

From my position at the starboard rail, near the bow, below the stem castle, I could not well see the arrangement of the Voskjard's formation.

"There are other ships of the Voskjard west of the chain," said a man, glumly.

These were the ships which, for better than a full day and night, beginning with yesterday's dawn, had been essaying the chain in our sector.

"We can no longer keep them out," said a man.

"True," I admitted.

The chain could now be cut with impunity, behind the shield of the Voskjard's northern fleet, that now some half pasang off our bows.

We had not been able to make a determination on the ships west of the chain in our sector. It was speculated, however, that the southern fleet was larger even than the northern, which had been successful in its strike against the chain.

Acting on the information supplied by Callisthenes we had conjectured that the Voskjard commanded in the neighborhood of fifty ships. This intelligence had now been revealed as substantially in error, perhaps by a factor of two.

"By now," said a man, "the chain has probably been cut."

I recalled the yellow paint, splashed on the pylon. Doubtless, too, other points of weakness had been similarly marked. Even now, behind the shield of the northern fleet, it was not improbable that the

ships of the southern fleet were proceeding unimpeded between the pylons. The chain had held long enough, however, to permit us to draw southward along the chain and group. Too, of course, it held, still, protecting our left flank, in our immediate area.

"We have little hope," said a man.

"They are forming the wedge," said another.

"Where are the ships of Callisthenes?" asked someone.

"They will be here," said another man.

"Captain," said one of the officers to Callimachus.

"Yes," said he.

"Shall I order that the ships be chained together?"

These signals could be conveyed by flags and horns.

"No," said Callimachus.

"How else can we withstand the weight of such a wedge?" inquired the officer.

"We will not impair our mobility," said Callimachus. "We will not render our rams and shearing blades useless."

"We must be a floating fortress of wood," said the officer. "At such a citadel the wedge must pound in vain."

"The ships of our interior line would be prevented from engaging," said Callimachus. "We would be then nothing but a tethered, placid target, one impossible to miss. If our flank were turned, too, we could no longer protect ourselves. Only our undefended strakes could be presented to the rams of the enemy. In an Ahn your floating fortress of wood could be a wreckage, awash, of timbers and chains."

"Then let us withdraw," said the officer.

"It is too late for that," said Callimachus.

The officer, white-faced, looked over the rail of the stem castle. "The fleet is moving," he said.

"Yes," said Callimachus.

"What can we do!" cried the officer.

"We must hold the line until the arrival of Callisthenes," said Callimachus.

"We can never withstand the strike of the wedge," said the officer.

"Here are my orders," said Callimachus.

* * * *

It was a galley, heavy class, fit for the open sea. It was the point of the wedge. I had never seen a galley move with such speed. There were two men to each oar. Our bow was aligned, as though to take its ram on the ram shield. The strike, should it occur, I feared would snap our keel.

To our port side, gunnels almost touching, lay the *Mira*, our sister ship, from Victoria.

I saw, some hundred yards away, on the stem castle of the speeding galley, her captain move his arm. Almost instantaneously the galley, responsive at that speed to the slightest rudder pressure, veered a point to her starboard. It was her intention not to be stopped at the *Tina* but to shatter between us and the *Mira*, opening the line. At her stern quarters, like running, heeling sleen, were two other galleys, to exploit the opening the point must make. Fanning out, too, behind the supporting galleys, were others. And, in the wake of the first galley, plowed several others. Our line, it seemed, must be cut. Our communications, it seemed, must be disrupted. Enemies would be among us. Flanks to be defended would be multiplied. We would be divided, handicapped in our attempts to reinforce and support one another. Divided, hunted, we could be herded, and surrounded. We might then make good

sport for the pirates. The Voskjard had been held at the chain in the south. I did not think that this would have pleased him. I did not expect that prisoners would be taken.

"Now!" cried Callimachus.

There are three poles which, customarily, with Gorean ships are used in casting off, in thrusting away from the wharves. There were, of course, three such poles on the *Tina* and on the *Mira*. Our oars were inboard.

Suddenly, as the enemy galley veered to knife between us, and the *Mira* men with poles, and, too, with oars, on our ship, and on the *Mira*, thrust the ships apart. There was a shattering and a scraping but the enemy galley, which had thought with force to press us apart, meeting little resistance was, by her momentum, almost immediately astern of us. Almost simultaneously other men, on the *Tina* and *Mira*, with ropes and grappling irons, drew the ships more closely together. The two ships following the first galley had intended to follow her into our line, exploiting the breach. But now there was no breach. The point of the wedge, harmlessly, save for splinters and paint torn from our hull, was behind us. The two supporting ships ground their hulls together. Burning pitch and arrows rained upon their decks. I heard rams clash to port and starboard. Then one of the supporting galleys was struck in the stern by a following ship, unable to check its momentum. The pirate galleys began to back oars, frantically to extricate themselves, but, clumsily, half swung about, they must accept our fire. Two other ships from behind them, unable to slow themselves sufficiently, struck into the milling ships.

I turned about. The first galley, isolated behind our lines, was trying to swing to the southeast, to avoid the chain and find the open water to the east. As she did so the *Tais*, come from our right flank to reinforce the line, circling about her, took her full in the port side. The strike was high, but water poured into her hold. I saw men dive from her decks. She lay then in the water, listing, unmanned. As she lay the rupture in her hull was lifted above the water line. I saw men from the *Tais* board her, moving about on the tilted deck. Then, in a short time, they returned to their ship.

"Run flags on the stem-castle lines," called Callimachus. "Blood for Port Cos!"

There was a cheer from our benches.

I watched the *Tais* draw away from the disabled vessel. Then I saw the stern of the vessel swing eccentrically about.

"She is caught on a bar," said a man near to me.

"Yes," I said. No longer did she move sluggishly, turning, carried by the current, toward the chain.

"It is the *Tuka*," said a man near me.

"Is that a well-known ship of the Voskjard," I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"It is the wedge again!" cried a man.

I looked out, over the railing, northward. The enemy fleet had reformed.

The crew of the *Tuka* had swum west of the chain.

"They are approaching at only half stroke," said a man.

"They will not repeat their first mistake," said another.

This time it was their intention to force our line apart with consistent pressure, not as a shattering bolt, but as a flood, a pressing, an avalanche of wood and steel, regulated, controlled, responsive to the tactical situation instant by instant. Not again would the point of the wedge be lost fruitlessly behind our lines, spending itself in vain against emptiness and spray.

Flags, torn by the wind, snapping, sped to our stem-castle lines. Signal cloths, pennons and squares in mixed colors and designs, acknowledging these commands, ran fluttering and streaming onto the stem-castle lines of the *Tais*.

"She is at full stroke!" said a man.

The *Tais*, her stern low in the water, her ram half lifted from it, knifed to the northeast.

"The wedge of the Voskjard approaches!" called an officer on our stem castle.

"Let us chain the ships together, while we may!" begged another officer.

"No," said Callimachus.

"Look!" cried a man, miserably, clinging to a projection on our stem castle. "Look!" he cried. He was pointing to the east. "The *Tais* is leaving our lines! The ships of Port Cos attend her!"

"Our flank is unguarded!" cried a man in fear. There seemed consternation on our benches.

"The Voskjard is committed to the wedge!" I said to the man next to me.

"Our flank is in no immediate danger," said he. He set an arrow to the string of a short ship's bow.

"No!" I cried laughing. "No! Look! It is the flank of the Voskjard which is now unguarded!"

The *Tais* and her swift, lean sisters, emerging unexpectedly, circling, from behind our lines, stern quarters low in the water, rams half lifted from the water, wet and glistening in the sun, at full stroke oars beating, drums pounding, like loosened weapons, sped toward the wedge.

Our oarsmen stood on their benches cheering.

The lead ship of the wedge was trying to come about, swinging to starboard. Her immediate support ship, fifty yards astern, could not check her flight. Her ram took the lead ship in the stern, tearing away wood and breaking loose the starboard rudder. Almost at the same time the seven ships of Port Cos, fanning out, each choosing an undefended hull, exposed, helpless before the hurtling strike of the ram's brutal spike, to the tearing of wood, the rushing of water, the screaming of men, made contact with the enemy. Efficiently did they address themselves to the harsh labors of war.

I did not see how Ar, in her disputes with Cos upon the Vosk, could hope to match such ships and men. The ships of Ar's Station, with the fleet, seemed more round ships than long ships. Some lacked even rams and shearing blades. All were permanently masted. Few of these ships boasted more than twenty oars. All seemed undermanned. Ar, I thought, might be advised to tread lightly in her politics on the Vosk.

The ships of Port Cos, led by the *Tais*, backed from the subsiding, shattered hulks they had smitten. The Voskjard's fleet was in confusion. Ship struck ship. Signal horns sounded frantically. Ships struggled, crowded together, trapped in the wedge, to come about. Again, and again, hunting as single marine predators, the *Tais* and her sisters, prowling the outskirts of that confused, sluggish city of wood, almost at will, almost fastidiously, selected their victims.

How could Ar, I asked myself, compete with such men and ships upon the mighty Vosk?

Laughable were the miserable, squat ships of Ar's Station when compared with the sleek carnivores of Port Cos or, indeed, those of Ragnar Voskjard.

"The *Tais* has made her third kill!" cried a man.

There was cheering upon the *Tina*.

On each of the ships of Ar's Station there were long, heavy sets of planks, fastened together by transverse crosspieces. These heavy constructions were some twenty-five feet in length, and some seven or eight feet in width. They were mounted on high platforms near the masts, one at each mast, and could be run out on rollers from the mast, to which they were fastened by adjustable lengths of chain. At the tops these constructions leaned back toward the masts, to which, at the top, they were secured by ropes. Projecting outwards from the top of each of these constructions there was, like a curved nail, a bent, gigantic, forged spike.

"The fleet is coming about!" cried a man.

To be sure, amidst the wreckage and crowding, and even grinding against the chain, the fleet of the

Voskjard had managed to come about.

"Flee!" cried a man near me to the crews of the *Tais* and her sisters, as though they could have heard him over the water. "Flee!"

"They must run or they will be crushed!" cried a man. The rams of the Voskjard's fleet swung toward the *Tais* and her sisters. Between them, drifting apart, listing or awash, lay what must have been the wreckage of some eighteen ships. Several had already gone down.

"Run! Run!" cried more than one man near me. But the *Tais* and her sisters of Port Cos lay to.

"The fleet of the Voskjard has been marshaled," said a man next to me.

"Pity the brave lads of Port Cos," muttered a man.

"Stroke!" called Callimachus.

"Stroke!" called his officer.

"Stroke!" cried the oar master. The ringing of the copper-covered drum struck with the fur-wrapped wooden mallets suddenly rang out behind us.

"Yes, yes!" I cried. "The Voskjard has exposed his flank to us!"

The *Tina* and her line moved forward.

* * * *

"Withdraw! Reform!" called Callimachus.

That island of wood in the midst of the Vosk, those grating, striking ships, twisted at the chain. Rams now, and concave bows, threatened us.

We backed from the wreckage.

We, the line of our ships, had caught the fleet of the Voskjard in its right flank, as it had turned to confront and punish the *Tais* and her sisters of Port Cos. This audacious act on our part had taken the fleet of the Voskjard by surprise. That ships such as those of Ar's Station and of the independent towns, mostly refitted merchantmen, would dare to leave the security of their lines to launch their own attack, not bolstered by the ships of Port Cos, had not entered its ken. They did not know, perhaps, that one named Callimachus stood upon our stem castle.

We backed from the wreckage, much of it flaming. The smell of pitch was in the air.

Dozens of ships, trying to come about, maneuvering, milling, struck by other ships, had been trapped against the chain.

There were hundreds of men in the water. Hundreds of oars, like sticks, had been snapped in the stresses involved, even against the hulls of their own vessels.

Archer shields, of heavy wicker, floated in the water, and ruptured posts and strakes, and parts of oars.

Vosk gulls dove and glided among the carnage, hunting for fish.

"Back oars! Reform our lines!" called Callimachus.

I saw a pirate galley slip under the water, near the chain.

"Back oars! Reform our lines!" called Callimachus. He was no fool. He would not risk open battle, not even on even terms, with ships such as those of the Voskjard.

"We have been fortunate," said a man.

"Yes," said another.

"The Voskjard will be angry," said another.

"I fear so," said another.

"There is still time to flee," said another.

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