

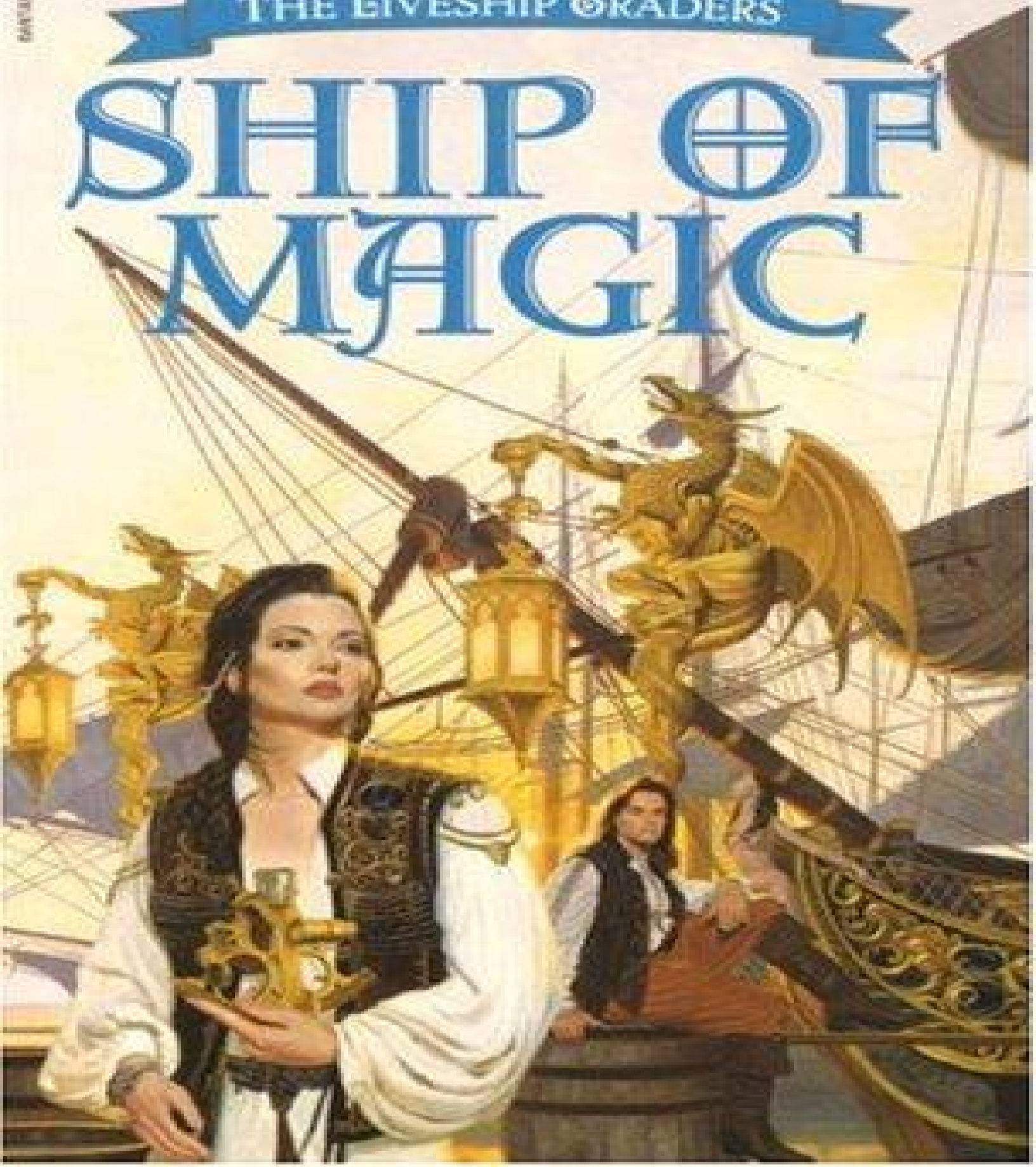
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ROBIN HOBB

AUTHOR OF FOOLS FATE

THE LIVESHIP GRADERS

SHIP OF MAGIC



Annotation

Not far from the Six Duchies lies Bingtown, hub of exotic trade and home to a merchant nobility famed for its liveships -- rare vessels carved from wizardwood, which ripens magically into sentient awareness. Bingtown's Old Traders, their wealth eroded by northern wars and the rapacity of southern pirates, now face an influx of upstart merchants who bring change to a complex society.

The Vestrit family's only hope of renewed prosperity is the Vivacia, a liveship they have nurtured for three generations. Now, as old Captain Vestrit lies dying in Bingtown, the Vivacia cuts homeward through the waves, about to quicken into a living being. The ship carries Vestrit's daughter Althea and the conniving son-in-law he has named as the Vivacia's next captain.

But lovely, wild-spirited Althea, sailing the Vivacia with her father since childhood and sharing its half-awakened memories and ocean secrets, has bonded with the ship in her deepest soul. Joined by Brashen -- her father's first mate, now demoted by the Vivacia's new commander -- she will stop at nothing in a bitter quest to claim its captaincy.

Meanwhile, in the rocky cays known as the Pirate Isles, a ruthless man lusts after his own kind of power. The pirate captain Kennit, in his scheme to be king of this outlaw realm, has vowed that he will wrest a liveship from its owners and turn it to his own use. His twisted ambition will bring him into a strange partnership with a boy-priest turned seaman -- and into violent conflict with the wizardwood magic of Althea and Brashen.

From the peculiar magic realm of the Others to the bawdy, raucous lair of the pirates, *Ship of Magic* sweeps a dazzling cast of characters into an epic of terrible beauty and mysterious sorcery.

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Robin Hobb

SHIP OF MAGIC

THIS ONE IS FOR

The Devil's Paw

The Totem

The EJ Bruce

The Free Lunch

The Labrador (Scales! Scales!)

The (aptly named) Massacre Bay

The Faithful (Gummi Bears Ahoy!)

The Entrance Point

The Cape St. John

The American Patriot (and Cap'n Wookie)

The Lesbian Warmonger

The Anita J and the Marcy J

The Tarpon

The Capelin

The Dolphin

The (not very) Good News Bay And even the Chicken Little

But especially for Rain Lady, wherever she may be now.

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PROLOGUE

The Tangle

Maulkin abruptly heaved himself out of his wallow with a wild thrash that left the atmosphere hanging thick with particles. Shreds of his shed skin floated with the sand and muck like the dangling remnants of dreams when one awakes. He moved his long sinuous body through a lazy loop, rubbing against himself to rub off the last scraps of outgrown hide. As the bottom muck started to once more settle, he gazed about at the two dozen other serpents who lay basking in the pleasantly scratchy sediments. He shook his great maned head and then stretched the vast muscle of his length. "Time," he bugled in his deep-throated voice. "The time has come."

They all looked up at him from the sea-bottom, their great eyes of green and gold and copper unwinking. Shreever spoke for them all when she asked, "Why? The water is warm here, the feeding easy. In a hundred years, winter has never come. Why must we leave now?"

Maulkin performed another lazy twining of himself. His newly bared scales shone brilliantly in the filtered blue sunlight. His preening burnished the golden false-eyes that ran his full length, declaring him one of those with ancient sight. Maulkin could recall things, things from the time before all this time. His perceptions were not clear, nor always consistent. Like many of those caught twixt times, with knowledge of both lives, he was often unfocused and incoherent. He shook his mane until his paralyzing poison made a pale cloud about his face. He gulped his own toxin in, breathed it out through his gills in a show of truth-vow. "Because it is time now!" he said urgently. He sped suddenly away from them all, shooting up to the surface, rising straighter and faster than the bubbles. Far above them all he broke the ceiling and leaped out briefly into the great Lack before he dove again. He swam about them in frantic circles, wordless in his urgency.

"Some of the other tangles have already gone," Shreever said thoughtfully. "Not all of them, not even most. But enough to notice they are missing when we rise into the Lack to sing. Perhaps it is time."

Sessurea settled deeper into the muck. "And perhaps it is not," he said lazily. "I think we should wait until Aubren's tangle goes. Aubren is steadier than Maulkin."

Beside him, Shreever abruptly heaved herself out of the muck. The gleaming scarlet of her new skin was startling. Rags of maroon still hung from her. She nipped a great hank of it free and gulped it down before she spoke. "Perhaps you should join Aubren's tangle, if you misdoubt Maulkin's words. I, for one, will follow him north. Better to go too soon than too late. Better to go early, perhaps, than to come with scores of other tangles and have to vie for feeding." She moved lithely through a knot made of her own body, rubbing the last fragments of old hide free. She shook her own mane, then threw back her head. Her shrill trumpeting disturbed the water. "I come, Maulkin! I follow you!" She moved up to join their still circling leader in his twining dance overhead.

One at a time, the other great serpents heaved their long bodies free of clinging muck and outgrown skin. All, even Sessurea, rose from the depths to circle in the warm water just below the ceiling of the Plenty, joining in the tangle's dance. They would go north, back to the waters from whence they had come, in the long ago time that so few now remembered.

MIDSUMMER

Chapter One

Of Priests And Pirates

Kennit walked the tideline, heedless of the salt waves that washed around his boots as they licked the sandy beach clean of his tracks. He kept his eyes on the straggling line of seaweed, shells and snags of driftwood that marked the water's highest reach. The tide was just turning now, the waves falling ever shorter in their pleading grasp upon the land. As the salt water retreated down the black sand, it would bare the worn molars of shale and tangles of kelp that now hid beneath the waves.

On the other side of Others Island, his two-masted ship was anchored in Deception Cove. He had brought the Marietta in to anchor there as the morning winds had blown the last of the storm clean of the sky. The tide had still been rising then, the fanged rocks of the notorious cove grudgingly receding beneath frothy green lace. The ship's gig had scraped over and between the barnacled rocks to put him and Gankis ashore on a tiny crescent of black sand beach that disappeared completely when storm winds drove the waves up past the high tide marks. Above, slate cliffs loomed, and evergreens so dark they were nearly black leaned precariously out in defiance of the prevailing winds. Even to Kennit's iron nerves, it was like stepping into some creature's half-open mouth.

They'd left Opal, the ship's boy, with the gig to protect it from the bizarre mishaps that so often befell unguarded craft in Deception Cove. Much to the boy's unease, Kennit had commanded Gankis to come with him, leaving the boy and boat alone. At Kennit's last sight, the boy had been perched in the beached boat. His eyes had alternated between fearful glances over his shoulder at the forested cliff-tops and staring anxiously out to where the Marietta strained against her anchors, yearning to join the racing current that swept past the mouth of the cove.

The hazards of visiting this island were legendary. It was not just the hostility of the "best" anchorage on the island, nor the odd accidents known to befall ships and visitors. The whole of the island was enshrouded in the peculiar magic of the Others. Kennit had felt it tugging at him as he and Gankis followed the path that led from Deception Cove to the Treasure Beach. For a path seldom used, its black gravel was miraculously clean of

fallen leaves or intruding plant life. About them the trees dripped the second-hand rain of last night's storm onto fern fronds already burdened with crystal drops. The air was cool and alive. Brightly hued flowers, always growing at least a man's length from the path, challenged the dimness of the shaded forest floor. Their scents drifted alluringly on the morning air as if beckoning the men to leave off their quest and explore their world. Less wholesome in appearance were the orange fungi that stair-stepped up the trunks of many of the trees. The shocking brilliance of their color spoke to Kennit of parasitic hungers. A spider's web, hung like the ferns with fine droplets of shining water, stretched across their path, forcing them to duck under it. The spider that sat at the edges of its strands was as orange as the fungi, and nearly as big as a baby's fist. A green tree-frog was enmeshed and struggling in the web's sticky strands, but the spider appeared disinterested. Gankis made a small sound of dismay as he crouched to go beneath it.

This path led right through the midst of the Others' realm. Here was where the nebulous boundaries of their territory could be crossed by a man, did he dare to leave the well-marked path allotted to humans and step off into the forest to seek them. In ancient times, so the tales told, heroes came here, not to follow the path but to leave it deliberately, to beard the Others in their dens, and seek the wisdom of their cave-imprisoned goddess, or demand gifts such as cloaks of invisibility and swords that ran with flames and could shear through any shield. Bards that had dared to come this way had returned to their homelands with voices that could shatter a man's ears with their power, or melt the heart of any listener with their skill. All knew the ancient tale of Kaven Ravenlock, who visited the Others for half a hundred years and returned as if but a day had passed for him, but with hair the color of gold and eyes like red coals and true songs that told of the future in twisted rhymes. Kennit snorted softly to himself. All knew such ancient tales, but if any man had ventured to leave this path in Kennit's lifetime, he had told no other man about it. Perhaps he had never returned to brag of it. The pirate dismissed it from his mind. He had not come to the island to leave the path, but to follow it to its very end. And all knew what waited there as well.

Kennit had followed the gravel path that snaked through the forested hills of the island's interior until its winding descent spilled them out onto a coarsely grassed tableland that framed the wide curve of an open beach.

This was the opposite shore of the tiny island. Legend foretold that any ship that anchored here had only the netherworld as its next port of call. Kennit had found no record of any ship that had dared challenge that rumor. If any had, its boldness had gone to hell with it.

The sky was a clean brisk blue scoured clean of clouds by last night's storm. The long curve of the rock and sand beach was broken only by a freshwater stream that cut its way through the high grassy bank backing the beach. The stream meandered over the sand to be engulfed in the sea. In the distance, higher cliffs of black shale rose, enclosing the far end of the crescent beach. One toothy tower of shale stood independent of the island, jutting out crookedly from the island with a small stretch of beach between it and its mother-cliff. The gap in the cliff framed a blue slice of sky and restless sea.

"It was a fair bit of wind and surf we had last night, sir. Some folk say that the best place to walk the Treasure Beach is on the grassy dunes up there... they say that in a good bit of storm, the waves throw things up there, fragile things you might expect to be smashed to bits on the rocks and such, but they land on the sedge up there, just as gentle as you please." Gankis panted out the words as he trotted at Kennit's heels. He had to stretch his stride to keep up with the tall pirate. "An uncle of mine -- that is to say, actually he was married to my aunt, to my mother's sister -- he said he knew a man found a little wooden box up there, shiny black and all painted with flowers. Inside was a little glass statue of a woman with butterfly's wings. But not transparent glass, no, the colors of the wings were swirled right in the glass they were." Gankis stopped in his account and half-stooped his head as he glanced cautiously at his master. "Would you want to know what the Other said it meant?" he inquired carefully.

Kennit paused to nudge the toe of his boot against a wrinkle in the wet sand. A glint of gold rewarded him. He stooped casually to hook his ringer under a fine gold chain. As he drew it up, a locket popped out of its sandy grave. He wiped the locket down the front of his fine linen trousers, and then nimbly worked the tiny catch. The gold halves popped open. Saltwater had penetrated the edges of the locket, but the portrait of a young woman still smiled up at him, her eyes both merry and shyly rebuking. Kennit merely grunted at his find and put it in the pocket of his brocaded waistcoat.

"Cap'n, you know they won't let you keep that. No one keeps anything from the Treasure Beach," Gankis pointed out gingerly.