

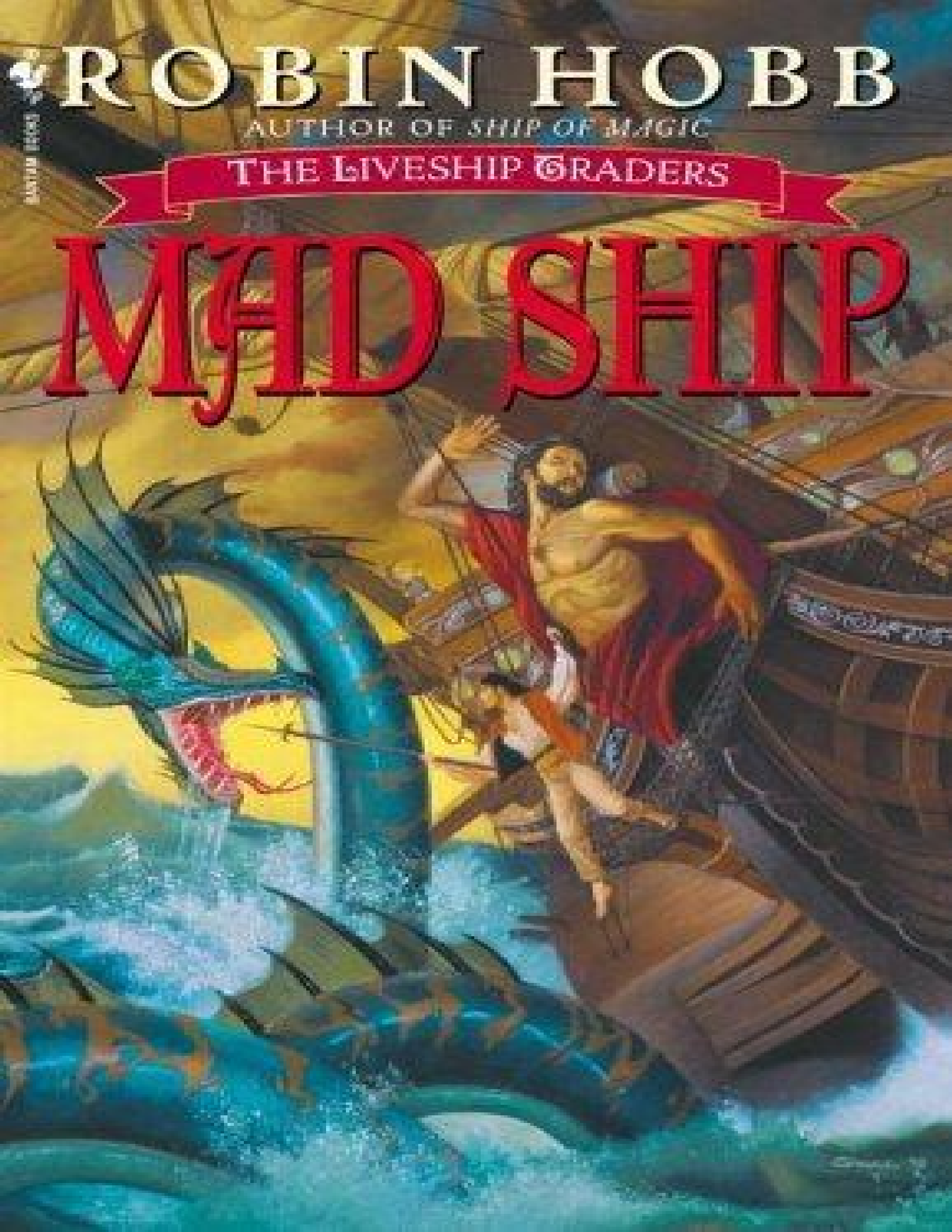
DAUMI BOOKS

ROBIN HOBB

AUTHOR OF SHIP OF MAGIC

THE LIVESHIP GRADERS

MAD SHIP



Liveship Traders 2 - The Mad Ship

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Description:

In *Ship of Magic*, the breathtaking first volume in her new fantasy trilogy, Robin Hobb wrote of the Liveship Traders of Bingtown. Now a new tide of glory and terror sweeps forward the story of the proud Vestrit clan, their priceless liveship *Vivacia*, and all who strive to possess her.

“If Patrick O'Brian were to turn to writing fantasy, he might produce something like this,” raves *Booklist*, and truer words have never been spoken. This is a tale of the Old Traders of Bingtown and their rare magic ships-carved from sentient wizardwood that bonds them mystically with those who sail them. Theirs is an ancient tradition, but one that is slowly eroding under the harsh realities of a cold new order.

For these once proud Traders, it is a humbling lesson to learn that the foundations of their world, which had seemed immutable, are resting on shifting sands. Their corrupt ruler is deeding away their ancestral lands to upstart newcomers, and a growing traffic in human flesh is eroding the boundaries of civilized society. A plague of sea serpents and pirates off the coast is destroying the established trade routes, and ancient fortunes are dwindling. Old debts are coming due, and talk of rebellion is growing. And added to this uneasy mix, ancient powers are stirring on the banks of the mysterious Rain Wild River.

At the center of the conflict lies the Vestrit clan and their liveship *Vivacia*. The Vestrits long for the *Vivacia* to make port, certain that her arrival will restore the family fortunes. And Althea Vestrit, beautiful and dauntless, yearns more deeply than any. For she lives only to reclaim the liveship as her lost inheritance and captain her on the high seas.

But unknown to Althea, the lovely magical vessel has been seized for a slave galley and a privateer by the ruthless pirate captain Kennit, and now the *Vivacia* sails, her decks washed with blood, through the perilous southern passages of the Pirate Isles. Held captive onboard is Althea's nephew, Wintrow, who has made a desperate bargain: he has promised to

heal Kennit of a mortal wound using arts learned in his monastic boyhood- or forfeit his life and that of his father.

Meanwhile, in Bingtown, Althea finds her onetime sea mate Brashen still struggling to redeem his wild past and out to prove himself a ship's master. Though wary of each other since their brief, ill-fated flare of passion, they now make common cause in a quest to find the Vivacia. But should they risk all they possess to rescue a liveship who may not want to be rescued? For the Vivacia is far from unhappy in her new life- and for Althea and Brashen, the method of Vivacia's liberation may prove more dangerous than leaving her in Kennit's ambitious grasp.

Mad Ship is a rich, tapestried epic of enchantment that will set your imagination ablaze, proving that Robin Hobb is a writer not only working at the top of her form, but constantly surpassing it.

SPRING

PROLOGUE - A Recollection of Wings

BELOW THE SERPENTS, THE BEDS OF WEEDS SWAYED GENTLY IN THE CHANGING tide. The water was warm here, as warm as it had been in the south before they had migrated. Despite Maulkin's declaration that they would no longer follow the silvery provider, her tantalizing scent hung in the salt water. She was not far away; they trailed her still, but at a distance. Shreever considered confronting him about it, but decided against it. She eyed their leader anxiously. The injuries Maulkin had taken in his brief battle with the white serpent were healing slowly. The gouges disrupted the pattern of his scales. The golden false-eyes that ran the length of his body and proclaimed him a prophet were faded and dull.

Shreever, too, felt faded and dull.

They had come far in search of One Who Remembers. Maulkin had been so confident at the beginning of their journey. Now he seemed as confused as she and Sessurea were. The three of them were all that remained of the great tangle of sea serpents who had begun the migration. The others in their tangle had lost faith in their quest, and had fallen away from Maulkin. The last she had seen of them, they had been following a great dark provider, feeding mindlessly on the unresisting flesh it distributed to them. That had been many tides ago.

"Sometimes," Maulkin confided to Shreever quietly as they rested, "I lose my place in time. It seems to me that we have come this way before, done these things before, perhaps even shared these words before.

Sometimes I believe it so strongly that I think that today is actually a memory or a dream. I think, then, that perhaps we need do nothing, for whatever has happened to us will occur again. Or has, perhaps, already occurred.” His voice was without strength or conviction.

She flanked him. They undulated gently in the current, finning no more than they must to maintain their position. Beneath them, Sessurea shook his mane suddenly, releasing a thin waft of toxins to alert them. “Look! Food!” he bugled.

Silver and shimmering, the school of fish came gliding toward them like a blessing. Behind the fish, shadowing them and feeding from the edges of the school, was another tangle of serpents. Three scarlets, a green and two blues they were. The hunters were not a large tangle but they appeared lively and healthy. Their gleaming hides and full flesh contrasted markedly with the slipping scales and sunken sides of Maulkin's tangle.

“Come,” Maulkin bade them, and led them to join the others in their feeding. Shreever made a tiny sound of relief. There would be, at least, full bellies for them. Perhaps the others might even join Maulkin's tangle, once they realized he was a prophet.

Their prey were not separate fish, but a school, silver and glinting, baffling to the eye. They moved as one creature, yet it was a creature that could separate and stream around a clumsy hunter. The serpents of Maulkin's tangle were not clumsy hunters, and all three flowed gracefully after the fish. The other tangle trumpeted warnings at them, but Shreever saw no danger. With a lash of her tail, she drove herself into the school, her gaping jaws engulfing at least three fish. She distended her throat to swallow them.

Two scarlet serpents suddenly turned aside and struck Maulkin, battering him with their snouts as if he were a shark or other mutual enemy. The blue came after Shreever, jaws gaping. With a swift coiling she eluded him, changing direction to dart away. She saw the other scarlet try to wrap Sessurea. The scarlet's mane was distended, spewing poison as he trumpeted obscenities and threats. There was neither sense nor syntax to his curses, only fury.

She fled, shrilling her fear and confusion. Maulkin did not follow. He shook his great mane, releasing a cloud of toxins that near stunned the scarlets. They backed away, shaking their open jaws and pumping their gills as they strove to flush his poisons away.

“What is the matter with you?” Maulkin demanded of the strange tangle. He twisted himself through a spiral, his mane distending threateningly as he rebuked them. He summoned a faint gleam to his false-eyes. “Why do you attack us like soulless beasts fighting over food? This is not the way of our kind! Even if there were few, fish belong only to the one who catches them, not to those who see them first. Have you forgotten who you are, what you are? Have your minds been stolen completely?”

For a moment the other tangle hung motionless, save for the slight flicks of their tails stabilizing them. The school of fish fled, forgotten. Then, as if the very sanity of Maulkin's words had incensed them, they turned on him. All six converged, jaws wide to display their teeth, manes erect and streaming toxins, tails lashing. Shreever watched in horror as they wrapped him and bore him struggling down to the muck.

“Help me!” Sessurea trumpeted. “They'll smother him!”

His words broke her paralysis. Side by side, they arrowed down, to butt and lash at the tangle that held Maulkin captive. The other tangle savaged him with their teeth, as if he were prey. His blood mingled with his toxins in a choking cloud as he struggled. His false-eyes glimmered through the rising murk. Shreever cried out in horror at the mindless brutality of the attack. Yet, she found herself slashing at them with her teeth while Sessurea used his greater length to whip at them.

At an opportune moment, Sessurea wrapped Maulkin's lacerated body in his own and snatched him from the midst of the enraged tangle. He fled with Maulkin in his grasp, and Shreever was glad to break off the battle and follow him. The others did not pursue them. In their poisoned frenzy, the other tangle turned upon their comrades, roaring insults and challenges. Their cries were rote sounds, uttered without sense as they tore and lashed. Shreever did not look back.

Some time later, as Shreever smoothed healing slime from her own body onto Maulkin's lacerated flesh, he spoke to her. “They have forgotten. They have forgotten completely who and what they were. It has been too long, Shreever. They have lost every shred of memory and purpose.” He winced as she nudged a flap of torn skin into place. She sealed a layer of mucus over it. “They are what we will become.”

“Hush,” Shreever told him gently. “Hush. Rest.” She twined her long body more securely about him, anchored her tail against a rock to secure them from the current. Entangled with them, Sessurea already slept. Or

perhaps he was merely silent and impassive, prey to the same discouragement that gnawed Shreever. She hoped not. She had barely enough courage left to shore up her own determination. Sessurea would have to rally himself.

Maulkin concerned her the most. Their encounter with the silver provider had changed him. The other providers that moved within both the Lack and the Plenty were merely sources of easy feeding. The silver one had been different. Her scent had wakened memories in all of them, and they had pursued her, certain that her fragrance must lead them to One Who Remembers. Instead, she had not even been one of their own kind. Still hoping, they had called to her, but she had not answered. To the white serpent who begged from her, she had given flesh. Maulkin had turned aside from her, proclaiming that she could not be One Who Remembers and they would follow her no longer. Yet, in the tides since then, her scent had always been present. She might be out of sight, but Shreever knew she was no more than a brief journey away. Maulkin still followed her, and they still followed him.

Maulkin gave a dull groan and shifted in her grip. "I fear it is the last time any of us will make this journey as anything more than beasts."

"What do you mean?" Sessurea demanded abruptly. He twisted awkwardly until his eyes met theirs. His own injuries were many, though none were serious. A deep score adjacent to one of his poison glands just behind his jaw hinge was the worst. If it had penetrated, his own toxins would have killed him. Sheer luck had kept their tangle intact.

"Search your memories," Maulkin commanded hollowly. "Search not just the tides and the days, but the seasons and the years, back decades upon decades. We have been here before, Sessurea. All the tangles have swarmed and migrated to these waters, not just once but scores of times. We have come here to seek those who remember, those few entrusted with the memories of all our kind. The promise was clear. We were to gather. Our history would be restored to us, and we would be led to a safe place for our transformation. There we would be reborn. Nevertheless, scores of times, we have been disappointed. Time upon time, we have swarmed, and waited. Each time, we eventually gave up our hopes, forgot our purpose, and finally we returned to the warm southern waters. Each time those of us who have a handful of memories have said, 'Perhaps we were mistaken. Perhaps this was not the time, the season, and the year for the renewal.' But it was. We

were not wrong. Those who were to meet us failed. They did not come. Not then. Perhaps not this time, either.”

Maulkin fell silent. Shreever continued to anchor him against the current. It was a strain. Even if there had been no current, there was no soothing mud to sink into here, only coarse sea grasses and tumbled stone and block. They should find a better place to rest. However, until Maulkin had healed, she did not wish to travel. Besides, where would they go? They had been up and down this current full of strange salts and she had lost her faith that Maulkin knew where he was leading them. Left to herself, where would she go? It was a question that was suddenly too heavy for her mind. She did not want to think.

She cleansed the lenses of her eyes and then looked down on her body tangled with theirs. The scarlet of her scales was bright and strong, but perhaps that was only in contrast to Maulkin's dull hide. His golden false-eyes had faded to dull browns. The suppurating slashes of his injuries marred them. He needed to feed and grow and then shed a skin. That would make him feel better. It would make them all feel better. She ventured the thought aloud. “We need to feed. All of us grow hungry and slack. My toxin sacs are nearly empty. Perhaps we should go south, where food is plentiful and the water is warm.”

Maulkin twisted in her grip to regard her. His great eyes spun copper with concern. “You spend too much of your strength upon me, Shreever,” he rebuked her. She could feel the effort it cost him to shake his mane free and erect. A second shake released a weak haze of toxin. It stung her and woke her, restoring her awareness. Sessurea leaned closer, wrapping them both in his greater length. He shared Maulkin's toxins, pumping his gills to absorb them.

“It will be all right,” Sessurea tried to reassure her. “You are just weary. And hungry. We all are.”

“Weary unto death,” Maulkin confirmed tiredly. “And hungry almost to mindlessness. The demands of the body overpower the functioning of the mind. But listen to me, both of you. Listen and fix this in your minds and cling to it. If all else is forgotten, cherish this. We cannot go south again. If we leave these waters, it will be to end. As long as we can think, we must remain here and seek for One Who Remembers. I know it in my stomach. If we are not renewed this time, we shall not be renewed. We and all our kind will perish and be ever after unknown in sea or sky or upon the land.” He

spoke the strange words slowly and for an instant, Shreever almost recalled what they meant. Not just the Plenty and the Lack. The earth, the sky and the sea, the three parts of their sovereignty, once the three spheres of ... something.

Maulkin shook his mane again. This time Shreever and Sessurea both opened their gills wide to his toxins and scalded his memories into themselves. Shreever looked down at the tumbled blocks of worked stone that littered the sea bottom, at the layered barnacles and sea grasses that were anchored to the Conqueror's Arch in an obscuring curtain. The black stone veined with silver peeped through only in small patches. The earth had shaken it down and the sea had swallowed it up. Once, lives ago, she had settled upon that arch, first flapping and then folding her massive wings back upon her shoulders. She had bugled to her mate of her joy in the morning's fresh rain, and a gleaming blue dragon had blared his reply. Once the Elderkind had greeted her arrival with scattered flowers and shouts of welcome. Once in this city under a bright blue sky ...

It faded. It made no sense. The images wisped away like dreams upon awakening.

"Be strong," Maulkin exhorted them. "If we aren't fated to survive, then at least let us fight it to the end. Let it be fate that extinguishes us, not our own lack of heart. For the sake of our kind, let us be true to what we were." His ruff stood out full and venomous about his throat. Once more, he looked the visionary leader who had seized Shreever's loyalties so long ago. Her hearts swelled with love of him.

The world dimmed and she lifted her eyes to a great shadow moving overhead. "No, Maulkin," she trumpeted softly. "We are not destined to die, nor to forget. Look!"

A dark provider skimmed lazily along above them. As it swept over their heads, it cast forth food for them. The flesh sank slowly toward them, wafting down on the current. They were dead two-legs, one with chain still upon it. There would be no struggle for this meat. One needed only to accept it.

"Come," she urged Maulkin as Sessurea unwound from them and moved eagerly toward the meat. Gently she drew Maulkin up with her as she rose to accept the bounty of the provider.

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