



Someone Else's Kingdom

BOOK II

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Scene I

The body of Prince Aralak lay in state, a dull gold-coloured veil covering half his head and face. The rest of his otherwise perfect body, naked barring a loincloth, shimmering in the mix of candlelight and dying evening sun. The oils on his skin giving the impression of sweat. His life-like form making his death seem even more surreal and hard to comprehend to the assembled crowd.

King Mizmeam cupped the head of the young Seaspell with his hands in a moment of sorrow, before reassuming his steely countenance. He glanced over at Drua Maleeva as he paced the floor, unsure what to do, almost oblivious to the mass of people and dignitaries watching on in unsettled silence. The discordance of the candles and the soft glow of evening light adding to the sense of chaos and uncertainty. Events had moved so fast that planning blended into action; the quickly arranged formalities happening in real-time, as King Mizmeam responded, broodingly, to the unfolding crises.

With the discovery of black powder the war had turned decidedly in his favour, but the strange death of his son had made this new found dominance seem hollow and disturbing. A cruel murder at the very moment when victory became visible. What was it all for if his very heir - his only heir - had been cut down in cold blood? His beautiful princely body robbed of its life, just as the whole world was opening up to be conquered.

No one present could fail to understand what a blow this was for the king, and few dared to break the silence for fear of his anger. Maleeva had much to discuss, but understood that now was not the time. The other courtiers and war leaders standing in attendance likewise knowing it was best to leave the floor to him - and him alone.

As the remaining daylight slowly crept out of their presence, fires blossomed on the distant hillsides. Whilst servants softly lit more candles, their solemn service, prayer-like in its silent motion. The oil on Prince Aralak's skin reflecting back the flickering light like a black, starlit sea.

King Kaspria, shadow-like, went almost unnoticed amidst the array of people watching King Mizmeam pace beneath the large vaulted ceiling, that now felt purpose built to shroud his departed prince. The wide stairway of the building, which led out to the open courtyard, the perfect stage to present to the world

this tragic scene. Kaspria's own small entourage of courtiers even further out of sight, just indistinct background players in the unfolding drama. Standing small atop this accidental amphitheatre he unwisely sensed that the long and dreadful silence was beckoning his words. He interrupted the quiet thoughts of the bereaved monarch.

"I've instructed my kingdom to enter a period of mourning for the prince. The war, and all other issues, have been put on hold. We'll extend this period of mourning however long you see fit, your majesty. King Brijsk remains in his kingdom, but I've no doubt when news reaches him his actions will be similar."

The words of the lesser king jarred with King Mizmeam, as he looked distantly at the body of his son. "No," came the firm response, "I want my people to grieve in anger."

As he spoke he raised his voice so that all within earshot could hear. The blurry crowded faces far off below could not hear the angry words, but for those close enough to see the form, his imperial body language carried the meaning. The war would not pause. As the fires burned, and the anger of the king rippled through the masses of people, warships with blood red sails left the coast of the Southern Kingdom.

Scene II

Queen Aglaia Fetterina Fiorina Maquella stepped up to the lectern in the House of Elders. The lone woman in a room of perhaps four hundred men. The sense of gloom was palpable, and the ragtag assortment of statesmen that now waited on her speech sat with shoulders hunched, clutching and shuffling their papers. Fretting over the way things had so quickly escalated. It was very late in the evening, which only added to the sense of dangerous tension. Usually the house sat during the afternoon, but in rare occasions of emergency sessions could run into the early morning hours. Some of the very elderly members looked ghostlike under the pull of night, but their lively eyes showed no concern for bodily demands, as the wider body of the state consumed all thought and concern.

The Maiden Land navy had just, without provocation or warning, decimated almost the entire fleet of the Eastern Kingdom. Every harbour torched, every ocean going vessel, large or small, burnt or boarded. The unsuspecting crews, until that moment compatriots - at least in theory - in their war of quarantine against the Western Islands, forced to abandon ship or cruelly put to the sword. Their guilty executors carrying out their orders from Queen Aglaia to the letter, though their hearts and sense of honour inwardly recoiled at the actions they were taking.

"History will judge me," opened the Queen, as she stepped up imposingly. "I know few of you agree with the executive actions I've taken today, but every one of those Eastern Kingdom vessels represented a potential threat to *our* peace and to *our* freedom. The mainland kingdoms now have black powder - at this moment in time we do not. I simply could not allow a situation to transpire that would result in us being completely surrounded by superior enemies; our supply routes cut off. Our people isolated and held hostage, no longer the masters over our own seas - as would've been the case once the Eastern Kingdom had equipped their ships with cannon."

"To those who say our actions were an unnecessary and unprovoked declaration of war, I say to you: *we are already at war*, and it is not a war of our choosing. The war began the moment the gilded arrow pierced Prince Aralak's skull, and the wheel of history turned the instant the mainland kingdoms acquired their knowledge black powder. War became not just threatened in those moments, but inevitable - and given this grave situation we have just two options: surrender, and take the servitude that follows, or fight. As our people will always

choose the latter it naturally followed that I had to take this dreadful decision the moment it presented itself. We stood at a pivot, where failure to act would've meant overwhelming odds and total defeat ..and I believe were any of you in my position you too would have made the same judgement. Yes, countless innocent lives were taken in these actions I ordered, and there is little honour in waging war under the cover of darkness, but again, I do not reign to see my people enslaved on their own shoreline. And as your Queen - and now your warlord - I take full responsibility for this violent act of war. May my conscience, our future generations, and the gods themselves judge me. I feel the weight of it, and I wish it were not so."

As the Queen spoke the final lines a few unexpected tears began to stray down her face, and as she spoke the last few words she collapsed into her seat, holding her head in her hands in exhausted despair. Not even lifting her eyes to gauge the response of the chamber.

As was standard with Queen Aglaia it was difficult to know if these emotions were true. Or if it was all just calculated theatrics, performed purely with political effect in mind. Still, no one watching, not even her greatest cynics, could've judged the tears insincere; and the force and feeling of her words carried the hearts (and heads) in the room. The gravity of the situation, and the magnitude of the decision she'd made, now transferring, through osmosis, to all the eyes upon her. Actions that, just a few hours earlier, had seemed wild and barbarous, now rationalised as a calculation on which the kingdom's very destiny depended. The bloody realisation of a war that had begun, taking over from fears that a war would soon start.

Following the very briefest of silences a roar organically erupted from those that already shared the Queen's view of the crisis. A multitude of other house members, many of whom, up until that point, had been far from on her side, cheered and patted each other on the back. Whipped up in their sense of collective fate. Some waved their papers and banged the seating. While some of her most loyal advocates simply stood in silent relief that she'd carried the house. As Queen Aglaia listened to the rallying support she wiped the wet tears from her face. The inky make-up adding to the sense of performance and theatre.

As this stoic resolve fomented, across the sea, fires raged in the harbour of Patina, burning bright against the now black night. It was a stark and cavalier

move, worthy of an angry response. News of which was quickly carried by horse to the mainland kings further west.

Scene III

"The Maiden Lands can't have killed him," exclaimed Maleeva, "It's impossible."

"He was killed *in* the Maiden Lands," replied King Mizmeam, matter-of-factly. The dim lighting of the room, and the absence of any other person, giving the conversation an almost conspiratorial tone.

"They weren't in the Maiden Lands," insisted Maleeva, with equal knowing.

"There is no Ouroborus. No one travels beneath the desert and comes out on the other side of the world. It's just a myth - a clever ruse. The desert is just desert; endless desert, nothing more."

"But I've seen it," replied the king, with a continued equanimity. "You forget that I too made the exact same journey that Aralak made. It's knowledge for kings and the heirs of kings. I understand it's hard for you to take. I too wouldn't believe it - had I not seen it with my own eyes - but it's the reality of the world. You too should make the journey one day ..perhaps with Seaspell, when it's safe to do so. You need to experience it for yourself to truly know it. But for now you have to believe what I'm telling you."

Maleeva stepped with menace around the room, as King Mizmeam sat weightily in his chair, exhausted by the recent events. His tired lounging a poor substitute for sleep. Maleeva, cat-like, remained alert, but the darkness of night allowed doubts to enter her mind that the daylight would normally forbid from entering. She stood firm in her worldview, but there was a nagging quiver of doubt in her heart.

"I don't know what you've seen, but it's not what you think you've seen," she forged on, "I have known it, straight from the King of Tunid's mouth - just as every Head Treasurer has had such knowledge - that it's a ruse. A ruse to keep lesser kings in line. They mock you that you fall for it."

"Perhaps it's you they mock," came back the quick reply from Mizmeam, unfazed by any suggestion that he was in error. "I travelled west beneath the desert, through tunnels of solid stone, as hard and as real as the ground beneath these floors. I ascended steps into blinding daylight, and tasted the air on my lips. I saw endless fields, vivid green with nature. Poppies - poppies that are found nowhere else in this world but the Maiden Lands - scattering their pale blood

red. Some in the very field where I stood - that I could and did touch with my very hands. Then beyond all that, in the distance, the sea. I stood in the east and looked out across the sea to the west."

Another slight shudder inwardly passed over Maleeva. The possibility that it was her that had been so deceived disconcerting her ever more so, but still, she couldn't accept it. She stared intently at the moonlight that shone through the window and reflected off the solid oak table that stood firm and anchor-like in the middle of the room. It's umber brown looking like two shades of black in the miserly dark.

"Perhaps you were taken round in a circle beneath the desert?" she proffered, searching hard for an explanation, "..Then ushered out into a fashioned garden, giving the illusion of the east."

"It was no garden," laughed Mizmeam, "It was an entire country. The whole kingdom stretched out in true realness before me."

The laughter irked Maleeva more. Disturbed, but unable to push on further, she moved things back to the more pressing issue at hand.

"Still, why would the Maiden Lands kill Prince Aralak? It makes no sense."

King Mizmeam looked regal, almost god-like - his heavy frame adding gravity to his words as he responded from the large sagging chair.

"It makes perfect sense, as an act of war - the world is changing. The Tunidan Kingdom is weak, it's desperate. Surely you see this. We now have black powder, they do not. These are desperate times, and don't think for a moment that the Maiden Lands are just a passive realm - an innocent pawn on the outer rim, hoping to stay on the sidelines. Do you think Queen Aglaia doesn't know these truths that I too know? Could the King of Tunid keep these truths to dole out like absolutions without her help? Guarding the gateway between east and west in her very kingdom. They can't hold down the Western Isles without our force - they know this. They grow weaker as we grow strong. Now they have robbed me of my only heir, at the very moment I threatened their eclipse. And now, as they have always ruled through secrets and intrigue, so too they seek to preserve their power through these means. The King of Tunid blindfolds men with these confusions. It's better for him that his enemies flail in darkness. It's the one way

a power so small can hold dominance over a force much greater. But now it's time these veils were lifted, and a simpler world order be imposed."

At this point the door of the room swung open. The glowing light momentarily stunning the already-dazed Maleeva as it swept into the room. The torch-bearing messenger spoke with a suppressed animation, "We have news from the Eastern Kingdom, my liege.."

Scene IV

"You've brought the weather from the old world with you," chided Gelkin, in jest, as he sat on the beachy shore. The sand stretching out in front of him.

The weather wasn't especially bad; for Essen and the young ship's boy it was warm enough, but the wind was slightly blustery, and it marred the tropical calm that Gelkin had grown used to. As the three looked on admiringly at the small sailing boat that they'd finally finished making, the little monkey that was now their perpetual sidekick hopped around spritely. The boat, sat there in all its glory, was a treasure to behold. They'd even daubed it with a crude green paint, made from crushed plants. The stated idea being that it would help aid camouflage when out on the seas, or moored in some secluded cove. The real reason to make it even more beautiful than they already believed it was.

They'd christened it the "Coo-Cal", in reference to the tropical birds that inhabited the trees and skies of the island. Their constant call of "*coo-cal, ca-coo-cal*" being an ever-present chorus as they'd hammered and sawed their wooden vessel into shape. It wasn't quite as magnificent, nor as large as the *Arbowlan*, but it was a pleasing little sister to the now wrecked ship that had brought them so far from home. The hope now being that this pretty little homage would take them back.



Essen in particular was eager to return - almost to the point of agitation. His sense of duty. The dismal thought that he was sitting peacefully on the outside, whilst war was raging back home, making it impossible for him to enjoy the pleasant surroundings. In contrast, Gelkin had an attitude completely opposite. He'd left his old life for a reason, and had no intention of ever going back. Even having heard the latest news of war that his new friends had brought with them. He was also sceptical. The idea that the little boat, freshly hewn with their own hands, could make such a treacherous voyage being a wildly optimistic one. Here, the outside, was his home now, and as he sat on the warm damp sand he was relaxed and content in a way that the standing Essen could never be.

The young boy fell somewhere in between. His sun-like disposition allowing him to tolerate adventure and non-adventure with equal measure. Like Essen, he too was definitely heading back. The thought that he would remain barely entering his head. The only question now being would the familiar little monkey follow him aboard the vessel when they left - it having taken a shine to him even more so than it had to Gelkin. A question that didn't just concern the monkey's fate - the desire to take things back from this strange world as proof of its veracity, a recurring topic in their planning.

As the final touches were being made for this return odyssey, Essen returned to the rudimentary shelter that had been his living quarters for the uncounted months. It looked even more primitive in contrast to the tiny, but perfected sailboat that would hopefully see them back to the civilised world. He quickly reappeared outside with Acalee's sailing charts. Somewhat miraculously they'd washed ashore, along with some other debris from the wreckage. They were worse for wear, but the small wooden box in which Acalee had kept them - a little vessel within a vessel - had protected them from the worst excesses of the seawater.

They were valuable not just for the information, but for their testimony. Essen had first-hand knowledge of the voyage, it was all there in his mind. He was even confident that he could navigate his way back unaided, but he knew that even in death Acalee's word would carry much more weight than his own. That the elaborate charts, etched in Acalee's own hand, would impress upon people more so than his own tales ever could. So the precious relic he now lodged in the *Coo-Cal* was grail-like as a cargo. It also carried with it the spirit of Acalee, and as he reminisced about his much-loved cousin he wondered if he would pass by his grave once more on the return.

Gelkin, in spite of not joining the voyage, added his own touch to proceedings. He'd planted a sapling of a tree in a wooden pot, which he strapped to the deck. It stood there towards the prow, almost like a plush green totem pole. It was unlikely that it would survive long into the sea journey, let alone the entire trek, but there was always the hope. That perhaps its strange fruit could be tasted on the shores of windy Brynnyfirdia. A delicious evidence to the world it had arrived from. A symbol of optimism, alongside all the other foodstuffs and provisions that had been loaded within the hopeful craft.

There was little ceremony as the two strangers that had washed up on the island climbed aboard to leave.

"Are you sure you don't want to come?" asked Essen with a grin, one last time. The fact that they were finally moving vanishing his restless nerves.

"No, I'm more than happy here ..just bring me back a woman."

Gelkin then helped ease the boat further into the water. The wind that his new friends had brought with them from the old picking up more as if to push them back. As he waded into the water the playful monkey hopped first onto him, then, using him as a springboard, onto the deck. A willing tagalong, completely oblivious to adventure lying before him. Gelkin sat back down on the sand and watched as the small boat slowly became a small dot in the distance. His calm and peace once again restored.

Scene V

As on the outside, the seas around Tunida weren't stormy, but neither were they calm. On the balcony of the royal palace the Queen of Tunida stood coolly, in a white dress, dotted with red hearts. She looked like a stern, but angelic peacock. The king stared out to sea as she stared at him, feeling the chill of the cold coastal air as he reflected on how things were going. Despite wearing much less, the queen stood untouched by the breeze.

"You've never liked her have you?" noted the king.

"And you like her too much," came the terse reply.

"Liked, not loved ..and that was a long time ago, before I met you. They were more peaceful times. Then, when I met you, things became even more peaceful - the height of peace. Now here we are. I've wasted that peace. My father, and his father before him - my ancestors, spanning centuries - they all kept a certain peace. Even in times of war. It was never perfect ..it's always been far from perfect, but the waters were always kept at bay. Now everything may wash away."

"They never had black powder to contend with," countered the queen, gently reminding him of the reality that they faced.

"They never had a female Head Treasurer either. I allowed this to happen. I should have thought about things harder - when I had the time to think."

At this point a slightly anxious Prince Reach arrived on the balcony. His state of agitation, and his familial likeness to the king, making him almost the mirror of his brother. The slight frost that still existed between him and the queen making him only more ill at ease.

"I can't stay on this island, I'm helping nothing here," he urged, "I need to be prosecuting this war out on the seas. I need to be doing something. -- You're back now, I have no purpose, you need to let me go."

The King of Tunid sympathised with his brother, and unlike the queen he laid no blame at his feet for the abduction of young Prince Estorie. "Give me one more day," he asked, "..then you can leave and lead our charge. I'm heading out to convene with Maleeva today. It will no doubt be nothing but a formality. War is all but declared, but I need to try it one last time. Once I return you can go."

"We'll put things right," insisted Prince Reach, hoping, in turn, to alleviate his brother's woes. "It's not lost yet."

"Hopefully."

The King of Tunid then looked back out to the sea and up across the misting grey skies.

"Must we be gatekeepers for these unseen gods," added Prince Reach, lamenting the responsibility on their shoulders as he turned to leave.

"It is the way it is," responded the stoic king.

Scene VI

The *Merbird* sat anchored, a good distance from the coast of the Kingdom of Caster. The small sailboat that carried Maleeva pulled in slowly alongside it. The fact that the King of Tunid could no longer even enter the harbour of Eldbee said quite a lot about how much things had changed. Whether it was a direct order from King Mizmeam, or simply the Eldbee merchant class recognising which way the wind was blowing, was unknown. Either way, it was a telling reflection of the situation.

Madame Maleeva was always indifferent to the sea. Neither was she in awe of it, nor was she fearful of it. It was simply another pragmatic consideration for her; a way of getting where she needed to be. It held no special romance, and the swaying waves and desolation added nothing to the occasion. As she stepped onto the deck of the *Merbird* she did so with the same mannerisms as she would were she stepping into a parlour or an assembly room. The King of Tunid couldn't help but notice this, and even in such dark circumstances he felt a brief moment of fondness for her idiosyncrasies.

"Why don't you just surrender, offer fealty, and we can move on with things," Maleeva asked curtly, not even offering the King of Tunid the chance of a formal greeting.

"That's not an option."

"What you mean is you can't bring yourself to pay homage," she pushed on, the bluntness excessive even by her usual standards. "It is the only option though. You don't have the black powder, and even if you forge some deal with the Brynnyfirdians - who are currently being crushed by King Mizmeam - you'll still be hopelessly outgunned and outnumbered."

"It's not an option," repeated the king, with a grimace, glancing out at the endless waves beyond the ship, as if to watch out over the entire world they were now discussing. "It's just not that simple, ..and you know that."

The king had the air of a beaten man, though he didn't feel as such, and his failure to recognise how weakly he was coming across was a large error in his judgement. It only made Maleeva more secure in her position. His world-bearing weariness offering a soft target for the cold steel of her purpose.

"It is simple though, this is your problem," she laid in, putting a heavy emphasis on the word "your," as if to amplify the personal nature of the criticism. "The old

snake-like order is over. Caput. I've now recognised this myself. The intrigue, the lies, the endless games. From now on things will be different. Perhaps this black powder is a blessing. One king, ruling from the centre, from the largest kingdom. Not through deception, but through divine kingly right. No more rituals. A simpler, more straightforward world. You must see the way the wind has blown."

It was difficult for the King of Tunid to counter this, especially given the venom with which Maleeva was speaking. It was true there were untruths, and it was also true that knowledge was withheld - hidden behind curtains and pageant. He knew this, as did she - they'd always both known this. Only now she knew she wasn't privy to everything, and that to some degree she also belonged to the ranks of unknowing pawns.

"Sometimes there are reasons for secrecy," intoned the king, after a moment trying to search for a justification.

"When you say secrecy you mean *lies*."

It was uncharacteristic of Maleeva to argue like this - with emotion, and appeals to higher ideals. Normally she was clocklike and precise. Pragmatic. The penchant discipline that the King of Tunid had noted as she stepped onto the boat - that was so typical of the woman he'd known for so long - had quickly disappeared.

"You've changed quite dramatically," he observed, almost without thinking, "You never used to be uncomfortable with lying."

"I've seen the light."

The king let out an exhausted laugh. It was beginning to dawn on him that any halfway accommodations, or tacit understandings were well and truly off the table. The mood in the world had changed. He expected the tone to be like this from King Mizmeam, he'd already gamed that into his thinking, but the new-found ire from the petite, but forceful Maleeva was something new. Inwardly he held out hope that her more calculated nature would return, once she'd expelled the heartfelt words from her system, but as she continued it became ever less likely.

"You've lied to me from the beginning. You've lied to every Head Treasurer - to me, to my people. *Your family* - you've used us all, from the very start. From time immemorial."

"It's not like that," protested King Tunid, wanting to explain more, but unable to do so.

"You've lied. You told me the other kings were just shown 'appearances' of distant lands. It seems they were shown more than appearances."

"Things aren't so simple."

"No, it's not that it isn't simple," she simmered, "This is just another lie you utter. You need the secrets, and the rituals, to keep the others in step. You need their ignorance ..and my ignorance. How else could one tiny island hold such sway? Year upon year, century upon century? I always understood the system. It's nothing new. Let's not pretend it's some noble endeavour."

The king hesitated again before replying.

"Sometimes lies are needed. You understood this perfectly well until you realised you yourself were on the other side of it. There are things you have not been told, and you will not be told, but believe me, it's for the best. States have secrets. What's important are not the lies, but the intention. Do you really think the intentions of Mizmeam are benign? As he rules over his kingdom of serfs and slaves."

"You come from a kingdom where you execute your own brother before you take the crown," snapped Maleeva.

The King of Tunid wanted to respond, but couldn't.

"And who killed Aralak?!"

"That is a mystery."

"It's a mystery to me, but you know - you must know. How can you not? King Mizmeam is convinced he was killed in the Maiden Lands, and that it could not have happened without your say so. I don't share his certainty regarding the place, but I'm inclined to agree with him regarding the motive."

"Why would I engineer the death of Prince Aralak? Where would the logic be in it?"

"He is the very heir to your rival. It's also given the Maiden Lands the perfect impetus for their pre-emptive attack. Don't act like you don't understand this. That arrow was the starting pistol for your war to reassert order over this world."

The advent of black powder was always going to change things, but unfortunately for you it was discovered on the mainland at precisely the wrong time for you to do that. Still, it's all history now. I've come with a simple message from King Mizmeam. He has declared war on your kingdom. You can offer homage, or you can be defeated."

"There will be no homage," remarked the king, regaining some of his composure. "I can promise you I didn't order the killing of Prince Aralak, but now this war has begun it will be prosecuted from my side to a resolution. There are still things you do not know. This fact you now understand yourself. So bear this in mind as you make your way back to the mainland. I will always be open to offers of peace. I do not want war, but aside from that there is little more to say. Hopefully, we may meet again under better circumstances."

That the meeting was over was the one point of agreement. Drua Maleeva returned to her ship. She gave a nod to the captain and hastened back to the Kingdom of Caster.

Scene VII

Coulema Galina had become accustomed to being both a guest and a prisoner. Eartaria, who'd brought him captive to the mainland, had headed north, leaving him alone and at the mercy of King Mizmeam. As a high ranking Tunidan guard he was a prized scalp, so even as the war raged he found himself far from mistreated, though he understood all too well that things could easily change. The king liked his presence. It was a welcome substitute to the usual counsellors and hangers-on. Still, for all the cordiality, he was sensible enough to keep the muscular Tunidan in chains.

"Do you trust Maleeva?" questioned Galina, the notable madame now, no doubt, on her way back from her meeting with the King of Tunid.

"Y'know," replied King Mizmeam, not quite liking the implication of the question, nor the temerity displayed by Galina in asking it, "..I preferred your friend, the islander. He was blunt and down to earth in his speech. There was no hint of dissembling. I should have kept him here."

"He wasn't my friend, he was my captor."

Mizmeam ignored the reply. The Tunidan was a useful sounding board, and with the putdown re-establishing the sense of hierarchy, he took the opportunity to air his thoughts. Speaking aloud as he got up from the table to walk over to the window. The gold beaker he was drinking from looking somewhat small against his large hand as he lifted it from the table.

"I don't trust Maleeva, how could I? But I don't have to, I'm tied to her - by the boy. I can see Aralak in his very features. The likeness was one of the reasons why it was so hard to blunt the rumours. Even were she to somehow dispose of me, the boy would still reign as king. I almost see it as providence. Bringing both treasurer and king together in one bloodline."

The sentiment surprised Galina somewhat. Until now it had never occurred to him that there was a grander philosophy marrying the interests of the two parties that had now united against the King of Tunid. The neatness of the unifying worldview briefly shook him from his own certainty.

"It pains me," motioned Mizmeam, thinking aloud further, "..But the truth is, the prince would've made a terrible king. He was hot-headed - much like me. But worse than that, he was never able to be serious. Perhaps I allowed him to be pampered too much, though I think it was just his nature. The boy though, he

has a good temperament. It's like someone poured sense into the vessel of his father's frame." He then checked his thoughts. "It's a long time before he will take the throne though. There's still plenty of fire in the old lamp yet."

Galina got up from his seat to stretch. His chains, not especially heavy, but noticeable all the same, restricting him from stretching as much as his body would've liked. This clanking-rattle of the chains further broke the king's meandering thoughts. The servant, who stood at the door, even more unnoticed than Galina, walked noiselessly over to the king and refilled his cup.

"What of Kaspria?" asked Galina.

"He's returned to his kingdom. Though what difference it makes is hard to tell. Hopefully he can restore some resilience, following the torching of his ships, but even with the black powder on his side I fear he'll struggle."

"..And the daughter?"

"The princess is still absconded. He's lost her like he's losing his kingdom. Again, perhaps it's fate that she did not fulfil her father's promise, to produce my now deceased son a princely heir."

Scene VIII

Princess Liofia let the arrow fly. It whipped through the air with speed, but sailed past its target.

"You need to relax a little, and adjust your arm a bit," advised Julen, moving her shoulder slightly with his one hand, as he grabbed the bow with his other.

"I don't need guidance, I just need practice," cut back Liofia, beginning to get annoyed with the eagle-eyed counsel. "I've only been doing this a few weeks, obviously I'm going to miss more often than not. I haven't been doing it since I was a child, like you have."

"I'm only trying to help," responded Julen, woundedly, "The sooner you pick it up the better. Plus, no one was stopping you from learning when you were younger."

"Yes, I was handed the royal bow the minute I turned seven.."

The mood between Julen and Liofia had soured somewhat since the first heady few months under the starlit forest. Overfamiliarity had brought with it ups and downs, with the frequent arguments usually being followed by seesawing periods of moodiness and warmth. It annoyed both Box and Goola. The gang of four that had arrived in Once Woods was now a more disjointed arrangement, with Julen and Liofia calving off into something somewhat distinct and separate. Their paired-up chemistry severing the chemistry they all once had as individuals. In counterpoint however, they'd also grown to know the various half-tail clans and families they'd been living amongst much better too. Though Goola in particular still struggled to remember all the names, so many were there, especially the younger ones.

"Dorsa; Airah; Applea; Lellet; Galoolal; Florizel; Marsa; Mopsa; Jasley; Celalah; Allakat; ..." Box reeled all these off, and more, trying to remind her. As if recalling a school lesson by rote.

They'd both been practicing their arrows too, and were further on than Liofia, especially so Box. Though even she was now rather tentative about using a bow given the growing situation. The ever onward encroachment into the forest by the Northern Kingdom had quickened the pace of violence once more, and the cat and mouse forest warfare that never truly stopped was heating up again. The half-tails knew the forest well, and were wily in their resistance, but the Northern Kingdom forces were simply relentless. Hungry as they were for ever

more wood to fight the ever on-going wider war. The half-tails more a nuisance, though a deadly one, than an official enemy.



Boxayla in Once Woods

Box, Goola and Liofia all felt an obligation to take part, but through lack of skill and lack of stomach so far hadn't. Julen, in contrast, had found his element. From the canopy of the trees he'd taken out three assailants so far in the various skirmishes. Which, in turn, had bonded him well with those he was fighting alongside in a way it hadn't the others. Warfare by arrow suited Julen much more too. Being so far removed from his victims didn't give his actions quite the same realness or consequence, and the memories of Patina were far removed from his mind. The half-tail losses he'd witnessed on his own side, along with the destruction of homes and habitat, further giving a sense of justification to his own barbarism. Had he more time to consider his actions it would no doubt have weighed heavily upon him, but with the fray of war a daily concern he was only focused on the practical. And was now eager that Liofia, Box and Goola could be equally effective in the fight.

As he left Liofia to practice, not daring to annoy her more, he shuddered slightly in the cold, as odd spots of rain began to penetrate the leafy cover of the forest trees. Further to the west a small boat was arriving on the coast, from the same direction as the rain. The mist of the sea casting across the green of the Northern Kingdom.

Scene IX

"Blood, mud and falling skies," she muttered in barely audible tones, unaware that the words were even leaving her lips, her speech and thoughts so mangled with delirium. The wet linen sail once again becoming a makeshift dress around her warm body. She then dragged the rowboat further up onto the shore; the dark black sand, heavy with water, more like a cloggy clay field than a beachy coastline.

Picking up a stick she then began to draw a large circle around the boat, but the sand being so heavy the stick snapped under the attempt. Not thinking to find a replacement she simply dropped to her knees and continued to etch the circle with her bare hands. The ring complete she then uttered more mumblings. The wet wood of the boat - which few would've believed could've made such a perilous journey, failing some act of supernatural benefaction - then burst into flames. The licks of fire sparkling and crackling against the damp mist.

She then headed further up the beachhead and into the nearby forest, out of sight. She lit a smaller fire, then sat down to wait.

Scene X

Elgiva looked quite different. Her face had slightly reddened due to the fresh air, and she was now much more comfortable in clothes that were more suitable to farm work than housekeeping. She had even grown to enjoy the outdoors somewhat, though today for the first time the weather made it a wholly unhappy experience. The wind and sleet cracking against every bit of exposed skin. Alongside her, Taxilian and Mayleen were working equally hard, entirely focused on bringing in the harvest. Indoors they fretted over the fate of Julen, Box and Goola - just as Elgiva fretted over Liofia - but the battle against the seasons provided a welcome distraction. Even Luteeay - Box and Goola's other grandparent - was giving a hand, though somewhat more huddled and slowly than Taxilian and Mayleen were.

Amidst the dreariness on the farm it was difficult to know if it was afternoon or still morning. The mud of the fields seeming to seep into the grey-blue sky, as if a single perpetual hour of rain had been stretched across the entire day. The repressed Sun never quite getting bright enough to add warmth. As they toiled this sense of drudge felt never-ending, but then, in a moment, the muddy brown monotony was broken by a strange blur in the distance. It quickly grew into the figure of a man. Mayleen, more clearsighted than the others, called over to Taxilian as she espied the outline.

"We have a visitor."

At first the assumption was that it was a tribune, bringing news or instruction from the city. A tribune no doubt eager for shelter from the gale. In her mind's eye Mayleen had already started lighting the fire to brew the tea. An excuse for a break she was grateful for herself. On closer inspection the wanderer appeared to be a kytalyk though, unmistakeable in his hooded cassock. He politely acknowledged Taxilian and Mayleen as he splodged towards them, but headed past and on to Luteeay. After a brief, quiet exchange, inaudible to anyone else against the whoosh of the wind, Luteeay ambled back to his soaked co-workers.

"I have to leave," he stated, looking distracted.

He then pulled his own hood even more tightly around his face and headed off. As spritely as someone of such an age could.

Scene XI

The ship Prince Reach had taken to sea in was uncommon, as it used oar as well as sail. These ships were standard in Tunidan waters, where the sea was calm, and where swift manoeuvrability in battle could be prioritised. The very boat of choice when scouting back and forth along the channel, between Tunida and Outer Tunida. However, on the choppiest waters of the wider seas they were outmoded, with sail being king. On top of this, with the advent of black powder there was little room aboard ships for both cannon and oarsmen. Yet, for the time being, Prince Reach stayed true to type, and opted to hit the water in the manner he always had. His immediate aim to simply acquire the black powder; any thoughts of how to best utilise it could wait 'til later.

Luckily for him things were already somewhat underway. Feelers had been put out to the Brynnyfirdians regarding a deal, with agents of the Tunidan crown hopping back and forth from the Three Deserts. The Island of Erba acting as a lily pad for negotiations. There were also reports that mainland forces had landed in the Harbour Lands, and had begun to quickly push the Brynnyfirdians back from the territory. The rarely seen, and always useless, 'Pliant King,' the nominal head of the island in name if not nature; said to have already switched his allegiance back to King Mizmeam. A largely inconsequential gesture, but nevertheless a weathervane in regard the turning of the tides. It was bad news in general, but it served Prince Reach's purpose well as he sailed northward. It would pain the Brynnyfirdians to give up their black powder, but what choice would they now have, desperate as things were becoming. Still, it was essential that he sealed a deal, so a flutter of nerves knotted his stomach as he rehearsed his words for the envisioned rendezvous.

As he mulled it all over he also thought of his brother. Not his eldest brother, the King of Tunid, but his middle brother, Prince Twayen. The brother who lived, almost ghost-like, on far-off Outer Tunida. Manning that island, beyond the edge of the word battlefield. It was he that would be supplying the ships. Building a new Tunidan navy - hopefully with cannon and shot - far away, where only Tunida Birds fly. The ships would not be a problem he thought, as the chug of oars thudded against the ocean. Men though, they would be at a premium. Even with plans coming to fruition how could they compete with the vast Kingdom of Caster, and its endless supply of slaves and soldiery? Not to mention the manpower and resources of the Northern and Eastern Kingdoms to boot.

With all these thoughts turning like pages in a picture book, the places mapped in miniature in his mind, he momentarily disassociated from the wave-riding ship he stood upon. Lost as he was in the wider world. The rushing hiss replaced by silence, the spray on his face unregistered by his senses. He felt as though he was sailing ever further away from both his brothers in spirit as he travelled further north. Returning to reality, leaving this thoughtful gaze, he watched as a Tunida Bird that had perched on the prow finally got bored with its hitchhike north and took off. Lifting into the sky with grace, then heading back south. As it left Prince Reach felt like he was finally crossing into enemy waters. Unfriendly places that had once been subject to his family's Tunidan kingdom.

His galley tacked west as much as possible, staying far from the mainland and its ships. A vessel full of oarsmen being little match for an armed armada. He did have with him the 'flaming arrow' however. The one weapon that had been used to such good effect against the Brynnyfirdians he was now coming to forge an alliance with. So he readied his soul and focused on the world up ahead. Praying he wouldn't need to use it.

Scene XII

Trumpet and drum sounded in the distance. The ashy cannon smoke, that not too long ago swamped the landscape like low-hanging black clouds, left a clear scent on the still-warm air. The occasional body strewn, half-hidden on the landscape. The blood, so mired with mud and dust, only noticeable on closer inspection. The trampling of hooves and wheels further softening the focus of the scene. Further inland, away from the coast, fighting continued. Field and forest battlegrounds. The forests providing more shelter to the Brynnyfirdian warriors and their Harbour Land compatriots.

A decimated body lay visible as a farmer, grown used to little interference in the brief years of Brynnyfirdian dominion, was reminded of his subject status. The Caster general, with little consideration, demanding full compliance as his farm was checked off as the latest territorial gain. The fugitives he'd harboured just a half hour earlier now fled into the trees or dead upon the ground. He momentarily glanced over at the mangled man lying on his land, and salvaged a tiny piece of joy from the fact that this one was a mainland soldier that lay there dead. A pointless, but satisfying glimmer of revenge. With his wife and family hidden safely in the little farmstead he also found relief in the knowledge that the general and his men would soon be moving on to prosecute the war elsewhere. Meaning that at least he could return to some semblance of peace. His long memory of life on the inconstant island making him stoic in the face of such troubles.

..A few more loud explosions travelled on the windy air, reaching the now relative safety of the farm. The arrows, swords and lances that also made up much of the feuding, silent and unnoticed, except only to those close enough to suffer the effects. The lively clash of metal, the burning trees and crops, and the silence of the birds; a boisterous affront to the natural country, prefiguring dark death.

Scene XIII

"The shell is broken."

Though the words were seldom and strange, Luteeay understood the meaning. The embers of the fire were still burning, in the exact same place she'd started it, a moon or so ago; after she'd first torched the boat. Whether she'd kept the fire going by collecting wood or by some more otherworldly art was a moot point. Her dishevelled wind-sailed attire was at least dry now. But still, it nevertheless gave the air of distressed unreason. None of which concerned Luteeay, as he paused for a moment on the sparse words.

"Do you have any information about the girls ..and Julen?" he asked, hopeful for more, as he pulled his hood back up around his head. The cold salt air now threatening a heavier rain with its harsh bursts of ocean spray.

"The shell is broken, the word is spoken," came the refrain.

He looked at her familiar, but distant features, and momentarily felt a pang of concern for her state, but resisted any urge to ask further. He then nodded in gratitude for the words and turned to head back in the direction he'd come from. The long return journey as full of dread and concern as the journey there.

With the message expressed, the sea-swept woman he'd come seeking was now free to take her message to other places upon the mainland..

Scene XIV

The thousands of slave soldiers marching through the Eastern Kingdom gave the place a very different feel. Like a cloud of gloom casting over the entire land, swarming in from across the black mountains. King Kaspria had little say in the decisions being made now. War required strength and vigilance, and his weakness had left King Mizmeam with no option but to dictate.

As his men marched through the muddy kingdom, the torrential rain doing little to halt their onward progress, efforts on the eastern coast were being made to rebuild the navy that had been so recently vanquished. King Kaspria had promised that things were advancing with speed, but with black powder soon to be in tow Mizmeam needed to be doubly sure.

Across the sea in the Maiden Lands war efforts were being readied with equal vigour. The ships were rigged and the men were steeled. Queen Aglaia's spies and senses making her only too aware of the martial horde that was building on the mainland. As she hardened her nation for the coming storm she gripped her levers of power with a zeal matching that of Mizmeam. The ruthlessness she had shown in torching her enemy's ships not relenting within her own domain. The sea, which for now she was lord of, a timid moat against the expanding multitude.

Scene XV

"Why has Castle Edvard been commandeered?" asked the Eldbee official, somewhat put out. His tone having an air of formal disapproval, though he made efforts to emphasise his deference as he said it. The plump wrinkles on his forehead, and his rotund, well-tailored figure bowing with politeness, whilst standing on tiptoes with pride, all at the same time.

The grand Castle Edvard had been plush with splendour not too long ago, but now it stood as barracks for King Mizmeam's men. The lavish drapery replaced with dour measures of war. When the King of Tunid had last arrived on the mainland, what seemed like such a long time ago, it was there that the two rulers had discussed the war. Then as allies. But now, with the King of Tunid unable to even enter the harbour of the once neutral Eldbee, things were quite different. The men stationed very much viewing the once preeminent king, and his island to the south, as a veritable enemy.

As Madame Maleeva motioned to reply she reminded herself to be soft. The officials and merchants in the well-to-do port town were largely inconsequential, but even so, it was wise to avoid trouble by unnecessarily upending them. She looked down at the gentleman, even though he stood a few inches taller. Her business-like black apparel suggestive of serious intent. Like cold petals on poisonous flowers. Her dark hair, raven-like, framing her clear features.

"Wasn't it obvious that we would send men?" she questioned, not needing an answer.

The official grimaced as he gave a reply.

"But we weren't told. What about protocol?"

"We've sent countless thousands of men east, to fortify Kaspria's sickly kingdom," pushed Maleeva, quick in her words, "These few are nothing compared to what we've sent there. It's a shame we've had to use the castle, but we had to station them somewhere. In the future we'll make sure there's better communication. I assure you. We do have serious threats to contend with at present though, so these are not normal times."

This reply was enough to satiate the uncomfortable grandee. The acknowledgement of his concerns, plus the suggestion that more effort would be made going forward, enough to reassure, at least superficially, his sense of

importance. That Eldbee was a partner not a vassal, even if a junior partner. "Yes, we must do everything we can to thwart this dreaded Pox," he concurred, saying it with every appearance of sincerity, even though both he and Maleeva understood the words were merely placeholders for other things.

"I think we're past that now," voiced Maleeva, not feeling quite the same need to waste energy on the pretence. "We may need to more fully quarantine Tunida soon, however, so hopefully the ships here are coming along as quickly as the ones in the north."

"Our new ships are coming along finely," voiced the official, with high glee, pleased to boast of a success in contrast to the wider discord - and likewise pleased to keep receiving the funds that were sailing down from the north to build them. The rich harbour town booming with the blossom of war, even as troops were visible within their tender boundary. In the once ornate castle.

Scene XVI

The sea-swept woman arrived in Wedkarten. The capital of the Northern Kingdom was somewhat different in tone to the capitals of Caster and the Eastern Kingdom. It was slightly more rustic, and less imperial. Its relative magnificence half-lost in the sea of woodland that sprawled out in all directions. The rocky extinct volcano on which King Brijsk's portly castle stood, making it almost look as if the ancient earth was trying to rise up and reclaim the city from underneath itself. The intermingled stone and wooden houses, that ran along crooked winding streets, being large enough in total to create an impressive sight for any country-dweller that happened to wander upon it. Yet, nevertheless, it remained rural in feel to those more acquainted with other cities in other lands.

With her basic attire and natural, but ragged hair, the strange stranger didn't look entirely out of place. The dotted-about women that occasionally passed by her, as she headed towards the market square, looking only marginally more well-dressed. Though generally their hair, unlike hers, was usually neatly plaited. Adding a summery impression to the otherwise cold and windy streets.

Arriving in the Wedkarten market, its little stalls bustling with buyers and sellers, she immediately made a beeline to a pair of the king's guards that were patrolling the square. Their brisk steps, familiar and half-hearted, traipsing on the hard stone ground.

"I must speak with your king."

They glanced, but mindlessly ignored her.

"I must speak to him," she repeated, this time grabbing one of the guards by the arm.

Without care or annoyance the guard simply threw her to the ground. Her light frame, barely anchored by the slightly heavier linen drape she wore, providing little resistance. Unperturbed, she got back up and went seeking another route toward the king. Skulking through the market until she reached the rugged castle. Finally, she found a door used by serving maids that led through to the castle kitchens. A *loud knock*. A slat in the wooden door opened. "I need to speak with your king," her croaked voice repeated. A loud laugh came back. "No one meeting the king would come through this door."

She walked back out and sat on the little stone wall that lined the path to the door. Then looked up to the bluish sky, and out across the busy market, the blurring people silent in the distance. She then stared down at a small puddle on the stony ground. The clear pristine water occasionally disturbed by the quiet gusts of breeze that whittled down the path. Reaching into her matted dress she pulled out a small tincture. She uncorked the tiny bottle and poured its contents into the puddle; its clearness quickly replaced with a muddy bronze. The brown murk reflecting the bright cloudy sky on its sepia mirror-like surface.

Slowly a huge purple cloud came into view from the east. Its deep colour giving a reddish tint to the reflection on the puddle. As it crept across the sky it swirled and careened like the long claws of a dragon. The thorn-toothed spirals winding like knotted rose heads, vining against the gloomy blue of the sky. The white clouds a peppered backdrop. A market seller selling turnips to an old woman stopped midsentence as he raised his head to watch the strange spectacle. There was a murmur of chatter as others stopped and commented. Two guards came out the door to watch, followed by a serving girl.

The sea-swept woman - who had come to see the king - got up from the wall; dipping her toe in the puddle as she did so, destroying the shiny reflection with the ripples. A crimson rain began to fall. She then calmly walked through the open door and into the castle.

Scene XVII

"Help me out on your way back. Go see the half-tails. Tell them to settle in the city and pay their taxes like everyone else, or be killed. Or just leave the kingdom altogether. They might listen to you, what with you being almost as undomesticated as they are."

"How would it be in my interest to tell them to stop fighting?" answered Eartaria, as ever with a wry smile on his lips.

"I don't need you to tell them to stop fighting, I just need you to pass on the message. By all means try to persuade them to keep fighting if you want. I'd rather not have to wipe them all out though. So your choice."

Eartaria couldn't help but like the jovial King Brijsk, and as he got up to leave the stout castle he inwardly decided he would do him this one favour - though outwardly he gave no word of it. He didn't even thank the king for the hospitality he'd been shown on this second visit. As Brijsk himself slowly got up from his chair he hit Eartaria heartily on the back and followed him to the door. But then, as if from nowhere, the sea-swept woman suddenly walked into the room. The king momentarily braked as he clocked the unexpected visitor. His giant body like a stunned bear. Eartaria stopped too, and as the two men looked at each other there was a comedic pause, each finding the oddness of the situation and the haggardly appearance of the woman mildly amusing.

"You're the king?" she asked, already knowing it was so. Her strange accent and manner adding more to the pair's entertainment.

"Of course."

"I have a message for you ..and for all kings: *the sky is falling.*"

King Brijsk laughed out loud. "How did you get in here?"

He then looked to the guards that were standing by the door.

"None of that matters, you must listen as I speak.."

The wild, cat-like body language displayed as she said this momentarily spooked the guards as they moved to approach her.

The king, unflapped, yet still amused, reached for his purse. "I'm a generous man, I'll give you a gold ingkh to leave." He then pulled out a bright shiny coin and

threw it towards her. She caught it in her hand then took a step towards the king. Pulling back her hair she then reached up to behind her ear, as if to remove an imaginary necklace. She then stripped away a string of golden ingkhs, as if it they'd always sat around her neck. She held the ingkhs aloft and offered them back to the king. His face somewhat impressed by the magic trick as she dropped the golden jewellery into his open palm.

It failed to impress Eartaria however.

"A harpy, a palm reader. Or a streetwalker from the Three Deserts."

She looked at him with a calm glare, confident that at least the king would now hear her out. "The sky is falling," she pressed again, "..Do you want the whole world to end up on the ocean floor like your brother?".

This weird, but needless comment immediately induced an anger in Eartaria, but it also brought unsettlement. He wanted to reply, but couldn't quite find the words. The sea-swept woman quickly moved on..

"You need to stop this warring and go back to how it was."

"We can't just stop because some fortune teller turns up unannounced," interrupted Eartaria, re-finding his voice.

"Why must we stop?" asked King Brijsk, his amusement now seasoned with a hint of curiosity.

"..because the sky is falling."

"You need to cross her palm with silver again."

"The sky is falling, there's little more to say. You need to put things back to the way they were."

"We all want peace," replied the king, adopting a more serious tone - one similar to the tone with which he spoke about the half-tails earlier - "But we can't go back. The old order was chaos. Up was down and down was up. Yes, the new world will be bloody, for a time, but once we're through this, things will be simpler, and more straightforward. The sky is not falling."

The returning seriousness of the king reminded Eartaria of the message he was going to pass on to the half-tails, and as he looked scornfully at the peculiar woman it occurred to him that daylight was burning. "I'll leave you with your

harlot," he remarked as he stepped out the door. He gave a brief nod of adieu, looking again at the woman; her words about his brother marring him a little more than he cared to admit.

"I must speak to the King of Caster," insisted the sea-swept woman, completely ignoring the departing Eartaria, her eyes firmly fixed on the king.

The idea of sending such a demented woman to the court of King Mizmeam didn't find appeal in his mind, but her dubious message disturbed him enough that he couldn't quite dismiss the possibility. "I'll grant you safe passage through my kingdom, and send you through to the court, though I doubt you'll get the same welcome in the south you've been given here."

Scene XVIII

The Tunidan prince arrived in Brynnfirdia, his ship looking very much out of place on the craggy coast of the Free Sea. Colm greeted him warmly as he stepped onto land. It was cold on the approach to the island, but the cold wind that now sprayed Prince Reach's hair and nipped his skin felt slightly more biting, and stopped his body from feeling the nerves that might otherwise have troubled him. A sense of purpose steadying him on the rocky wet terrain. Still, all awareness of the weather was quickly abandoned as a further person came into view.

Prince Estorie, his nephew, and the King of Tunid's son, looked much taller and more adult than he had the last time he'd seen him - when the very Brynnfirdians he was now negotiating with had attacked his homeland unannounced. When he himself had given the order to escort the young prince to safety. A decision he quickly came to regret. In this moment though, the cherished, once-boyish prince looked healthier and stronger; his features visibly weathered by the gusty climate that Prince Reach was now experiencing for the first time.

"They've even allowed you to have a sword, I see," noted Reach, as he assessed - with both emotion and relief - the robust appearance of his much-missed familiar.

"He's one of us now," joked Colm, cordially, with a half-paternal air. The manner of the old Brynnfirdian further putting the mind of Prince Reach at ease.

As the two reunited family members embraced it was clear that all further negotiations would be a mere formality. As both parties headed inside, each felt a natural inclination to indulge the visit - to drink and to feast before getting down to more serious talk. Yet, in spite of this urge, both sides understood the pressing seriousness of affairs. Making hospitality a luxury that was at a premium. With the Harbour Lands on the brink of falling, and the ripples of mainland power ever-widening in the waters, seconds were precious. So drinks were few, and talk was plenty.

At daylight the next morning Prince Reach returned to his ship with a happy alliance secured ..and the secret of black powder in his numb fingers. Whilst Prince Estorie remained on the island he'd now grown so accustomed to - masking his longing to return to the island of his birth with mature measure.

Scene XIX

Eartaria had barely been in the forest for half an hour when an arrow zipped by his head. Too fast for the eye, the whoosh and rush of the leaves nevertheless left him under no illusion that he'd made a mistake in entering the forest so cavalierly. Before he had time to contemplate further ..*swiisshhh*. Another hit him forcefully in the shoulder. His vision blurred as he stumbled. He reached out his hand to a nearby tree to steady himself; the bark's rough texture more vivid to the touch than the swirling sights and sounds around him. It was no use, he slipped and buckled to the ground.

As he fell he felt a weight of water hit him, as if he was plunging into a deep ocean. His eyelids burst open and he looked out through the crystal clear water as he tumbled down. His irises like opals against the misty blue. On the seabed, a green, ghost-like form came into view: Meamya, his brother, lying deathly against the yellow sand. *The sky is falling*. A mermaid, her hair like links of gold, came wisping by; her pet sealion, with its dog-like face following at her ankles. Bright rays of sunlight cut through the water, and the crust of ocean floor beneath his floating body broke in two. In the canyon far below a river of lava gushed forth, winding as if through eternal valleys. As underwater mountains slipped their sides and crumbled through the foamy sea. Revealing in their wake the clayey under-bed with its rainbow colours: the kaolin white, the soft pinks and reds, the peach and pale greens, the blue clay with its deep petrol hue. Finally, he heard a voice .. *"We could've been at Aunt Ellever's house right now."*

As he came to, he looked up to see the faces of Box, Goola, Princess Liofia and Julen staring down at him. Along with countless half-tail faces, myriad in name. As he reached up to the bloodied wound on his shoulder the pain instantly came back to him. He grimaced at the feeling. "I have a message from King Brijsk," he uttered, almost spitting out the words, "You can either leave the kingdom, settle and pay your dues, or be wiped from the earth."

Scene XX

"We're not leaving," stated Allakat, the eldest of the half-tails, though he looked young in the eyes of Eartaria. The forest silence adding a solidness to the words.

"They have powder and shot ..you have arrows," Eartaria responded, now somewhat half-hearted in his efforts to make an argument. Caring not if they left, stayed or headed on to the city. He'd served his purpose. He'd passed the message on. Now he was eager to head on himself. Though as ever he couldn't help but give his advice and opinion. "You'll be wiped out if you stay here. Things aren't as they were before, there's no mood for half-measures now."

"Leaving isn't an option."

"Why not drop back to Terrella? ..or come to Brynnnyfirdia with me? We'll arm you; show you how to make black powder. Everyone has the damn stuff now, you need it too."

"We're not taking things to the shores of Terrella," shot back Allakat, quickly, "..the island half-tails have always kept to themselves. They have peace, we're not sacrificing their peace to fight our battles. That's out of the question ..the black powder though, maybe we could use that."

It was quite fitting that the smell of black powder pricked up on the air at this point. The industrious odour now lingered almost ever-presently thanks to the toing and froing of skirmish, with occasional wind currents bringing it more into focus. Its distinctive taste intermingled with the similar, but more natural smell of burning wood that equally carried on the breeze.

It didn't quite register with Eartaria, but all the half-tails noted it instantly. The blue sky above was clear through the green canopy of leaves, still, the linger of smoke always brought with it the dread of fire. Especially so now that the soldiers of the Northern Kingdom had resorted to the crude tactic of using fire to clear patches of land. Another sign, in support of Eartaria's claim, that the vigour of the assault had been stepped up a notch. The ship-building wood was precious, but the cover that the vast woodland scrub afforded made the half-tails an impossible target. Meaning the strategic torching of the very resources that King Brijsk was fighting to stake claim to was increasingly employed. A transpiration the half-tails were only too aware of.

This bouquet of war duly noted they quickly, and without conversation, decided to move deeper into the forest. Eartaria was now back on his feet and could

move with more ease, though the pain of his wounded shoulder tamed his agile instincts. So, like the rest, he simply followed on the lead of Allacat. The direction-less woodland being familiar to him and the other half-tails as much as it was disorientating to the outsiders. Sparing only Julen, who by now had acquired a slightly more feral knowledge of the sprawling terrain, and who headed on with a dab of impulse, in contrast to the other four, who followed in forest blindness. There was little sense of real panic, but they all stepped at pace. As they headed further into the brush however, the ashy scent followed on the zephyrs.

Suddenly, as Eartaria began to renew his conversation about black powder, a sound of gunshot boomed from the deep forest, echoing pinball-like around the trees. It was clear that somewhere in the far off distance another group of half-tails were engaged in battle with King Brijsk's men. A patch of wood in the tapestry of occupation and defiance no doubt falling to the mainland - or maybe holding out; perhaps with arrowheads from perfectly strung bows cutting down their louder opponents. The reverberations heard just hollow tones from the screaming weapons of dying men. The moving gang had no way of knowing, as they tried to gauge the situation and move towards safety.

Another shot rang out. A flash of blue sky as a brief clearing in the trees opened up, closing above them just as fast. A trail of smoke visible, but barely littering the blue.

Fearing the crack of fire the fleeing assembly hastened their pace to a run, and began to dash through the trees like stalked deer, eager to outrun the danger. The damp floor and crisp air seeming to now threaten sludge and flame in twin measure. Momentarily Liofia lagged behind as a heavy mutter of smoke caught on her lungs. She pulled her hooded cloak closer to her face as Julen grabbed her arm, dragging her along.

As the pace and anxiety advanced the smoke thickened; its black veil becoming a gauze to the darting eyes. "We're being smoked out," whispered Box, the feeling of attack making her overly fearful that some nearby soldier from the Northern Kingdom would hear her words. Goola didn't respond, she just kept on racing through the trees, making sure to keep close. Grabbing a loose clutch of Box's jacket hem to stay in touching distance. The trees themselves becoming like pitons, helping them climb and scramble across the landscape.

Finally, as the fright reached its ascent, a clearing in the forest opened up. The reappearing blue sky and the mildly clearer air giving an instant relief from the smothering undergrowth. The open space allowed them to view the situation

with more coherence. They'd ascended in altitude as they'd sped through the woodland. Now, down before them, was a beautiful sloping green pasture, across which they could see a grand ring of deeper green forest. Looking down the eyeline from which they'd come they could see huge flames rising from the treetops. Too far away to ever reach them, the conflagration nevertheless leaked black smoke into the windy sky, running like a rising river in their direction. It remained impossible to tell where the distant fighting had been. The endless forest surrounding the pasture as far as the eye could see. Only conquered by the equally endless sky.

For now the moment of panic was over, but with the danger not entirely extinguished, they headed onwards to safer territory still, trying to catch their breath. As Eartaria tagged along in his pain and exhaustion he remarked to himself with amusement how fitting it was that King Brijsk had repaid his favour in such a way. He liked the forest excitement, but it wasn't where he was meant to be, and all his thoughts were now on his return to Brynnfirdia.

Scene XXI

"We can't leave the half-tails," noted Box, later that day, sipping tea safely under the homely willow tree. The light forest rain not penetrating the warm interior circle of the vining branches, far from the smoky skies of earlier.

"We have a choice, it's time to move on. It's a losing battle, and we're not helping."

As Julen said this he didn't feel good about saying it, but he knew for certain it was the right thing to do.

"We should stay to help them," pressed Box, "Once Woods is a big place, there's still plenty of forest left."

"We can't fight," intoned Goola, with a sense of exhaustion, "We can't even shoot an arrow properly, we're fools in thinking we can. It's went too far."

"So, we started off heading to Aunt Ellever's house to avoid the Pox, and now we're heading to the Pox-riddled islands we were avoiding, are we?"

"There is no Pox," reminded Julen, not missing a beat.

"I know there's no Pox," snapped back Box with celerity, annoyed by Julen's stupidity and the helplessness of the situation. She took another gulp of tea. It reminded her of the warmth and goodwill that the half-tails had shown her since they'd arrived.

"I don't see why we can't just go back to the farm," lamented the weary Goola.

"You're forgetting about Liofia," perked up Julen again, "She can never go back to the Eastern Kingdom."

At this moment Liofia entered the secluded domicile, looking even more tired than Goola. Brushing the heavy branches of the weeping willow aside, like long waves of her own knotted hair, as she entered.

"It's decided - we're heading out to the coast with Eartaria tomorrow," announced Julen. The response from Liofia neither pleased nor displeased. "We'll find a boat and head out to Brynnfirdia. I guess we'll end up staying there. The half-tails that are coming with us - Allacat and Celalah. They'll bring back the black powder - perhaps that will change things here more than we can."

Scene XXII

The *Coo-Cal* drifted into the Inner Ocean. It had sailed back easily, almost as if the waves themselves had purposely pushed Essen and the ship's boy back to the old world from which they'd come. The little tree that stood on the deck near the prow, likewise had had an easy journey. It hadn't grown, nor did it bear fruit, but its still peachy green colour gave the impression of thriving life, as it bobbed on waters now foreign to it.

Indeed, the entire journey back had been a veritable mirror of the Arbowlan's original journey outwards to Gelkin's strange little island in the Outer Sea. The fighting, the bloodshed and the desperation all reversed into a peaceful calm. The only moment of sorrow coming when the little vessel beached upon the outcrop of land that had become the place of Acalee's grave. The disturbed earth still fresh and visible amidst the plenty. A single sign of human presence on the bountiful little paradise that had once given them succour on a desperate voyage.

They'd passed through the Tunidan Strait completely unnoticed too. No Tunidan ships or speedy pursuits. The now faded green paint of the *Coo-Cal*'s hull seemingly invisible on the dreamy waters. As they first entered the strait they caught a distant glimpse of Outer Tunida - the unmapped island, and twin to the other Tunida that, so long ago, Essen and his ships had once laid siege to. It reminded him of the story of the second eldest prince of Tunid, Prince Twayen. To all the world dead - in a splendid tomb, in some holy spot within the cloisters of the Ethereal Tower. Yet here he lived, on this unknown island, where only the Tunida Bird would fly. The fiendishness of the lie almost as fiendish as the thought that the King of Tunid would actually execute his innocent brother in cold blood.

As Essen finally entered more familiar seas though his only thought was *home*. He was back in the violent world he'd missed so sharply. War undoubtedly raging still, at least somewhere, if not in most places - and he hoped Brynnfyrdia would not be feeling the worst of it. As the ship's boy stepped out onto deck to join him, it reminded him painfully of how many men had been lost on this long endeavour of discovery. For all that had gone only two were coming back. A tree, a small monkey and a set of maps - a poor trade for such a long list of casualties.

As the two survivors looked out across the glistening ocean, the monkey - bored with life at sea - darted out and cheekily grabbed Essen's hat, then made a break

for the rigging of the sail with its prize. Essen barely noted it. The tranquillity of the moment undisturbed, as he crossed the threshold back to reality.

Scene XXIII

Prince Reach stepped out onto the hard wooden deck and released the Tunida Bird into the air. It darted south towards the orangey sky, carrying with it the secret knowledge he'd headed north to seek. He felt content as he watched it soar, and hoped with confidence that it would soon be put to good use.

As his own vessel sped swiftly in the direction of Tunida, sailing parallel to the great landmass of Caster, he made readiness to tack hard east – to round the tip of the great continent, dangerously close to the enemy shore. He wouldn't be heading back to Tunida, he had other orders to follow. "Tunida Birds don't fly north as we must," he thought, as he prepared to give the signal. The plump bird, his winged messenger, now gone from sight. A glancing touch, or skipping stone, passing on the softest brush of his presence, as he undertook to pass his natal island.

Scene XXIV

Elsewhere, King Kaspria stood self-pleased on the hard stony battlements of Castle Tori, looking over the vast coast of Patina. The newly hewn warships in various states of readiness, an impressive sight. He was little more than an under-king now, a deputy in the vast war to the mighty King Mizmeam. However, with the humiliation of his navy's sacking behind him, and a new one in bloom, he felt a renewed vigour, and took it upon himself to oversee all operations with a purposeful and beaded eye. A few ships had already left port, and the reports were good. The advantage of fire power - not to mention the great swell of men and slaves that King Mizmeam had sent east - a clear potentiate in the press for seaward domination. As he watched the darkened naval scenes he thought little of his daughter, the Princess Liofia, instead focusing wholly on the grand eastern war before him. The suppressed anger, frustration and insecurity finding medicine in the pursuit of violent victory. There would be little quarter given upon the waves. He'd learnt the lesson of complacency the hard way, he could not afford to behave weakly again.

Scene XXV

The crown felt heavy as it was placed on Seaspell's wren-like head. It wasn't physically heavy, just a simple circlet of gold; his deep dark hair, and the glare of the assembled crowd, giving it a silvery-white look in appearance. The weightiness came more as a consequence of the situation and the overall burden now invested in him. As he looked out across the watching faces he felt something of an imposter. It was true he was the son of Prince Aralak, and therefore the grandson of King Mizmeam - who watched on gently. It was a fact, once unspoken, but universally known. Now that truth was being proclaimed openly it still felt mistaken. Here he was, *Prince Seaspell*. A name, like the crown, that felt unnatural to him.

His mother, Madame Drua Maleeva, stood a good distance from him, as if to emphasise his divine royalty in contrast to her lesser born status. The stretch of purple carpet separating them like a wide river to Seapsell's precocious, but still young eyes. When the loud, almost intimidating music began to play, he felt a great sense of relief that the long ceremony was finally coming to an end. His grandfather, seated next to him, in all his pomp and glory, looked down with a smiling nod, clearly pleased with how things had gone. The choreographed occasion an exemplar in its stately grandeur. Everything about it - from the beautiful setting, to the over-the-top music and dress, to the deliberate slow pace - averring *power*. Seaspell's clear intelligence adding a solemnity and gravity, in deep contrast to the casual disconnect with which his now-slain father had been crowned prince many moons ago.

The world was realigning, and this was a true reflection of the temporal mood. Coulema Galina, who stood amidst the assemblage, on the side opposite to Maleeva, looked on. A reminder of the old Tunidan order, in this, the coming of a new one. Still chained by the ankles, but neatly enough that it didn't mar the occasion. The dark crimson of his tunic, shrouded amidst the darkened audience. The illumination in the Grand Temple of Keneeshka focused on the majestic king and his starry grandchild. Not for the first time Seaspell made eye contact with the tall Tunidan guard as he glanced out across the gathering. Each time it brought a deeper discomfort. Yet there was also a note of mutual recognition. Both equally misplaced in a situation beyond their control.

As the formal ceremony came to a slow and formal end the holy choral music made transit through the walls, keeling out into the city. The deep hum of

strings a supernatural spectre on the wider landscape. Only the stormy seas beyond dense enough to extinguish the aural candle.

Into this eerily glowing city stepped a woman with a message for the king. She arrived at the city gates with a letter of free passage from King Brijsk. The reluctant sentry allowed her to enter..

Scene XXVI

The plump bird from the hand of Prince Reach swooped down and found the familiar nest of green Tunida, bringing with it the important message. The King of Tunid was greatly relieved to see its contents. Finally, the recipe for black powder had arrived in his grasp; the ingredients of renewal, the formula needed to return the world to order. The one secret that had eluded a kingdom built on secrets, finally known.

The Queen of Tunida sat calmly watching, her tight braided hair billowing softly in the wind. She could tell from the king's body language that the news was good, and though she was eager to hear specific details concerning her son she was content to be patient.

"I don't think it's wise to take the black powder to Outer Tunida," pondered the king out loud, as he considered what he'd read. "It doesn't quite feel right to disturb the outer peace. Twayen is readying the ships, but we'll make the final upgrades here.." He then looked across to his queen, as if looking for approval, before passing the message back to his aide, who went scurrying off.

"And what of our son?" she asked, with a mocking, but gentle tut.

"Sorry," came the hesitating reply, the king realising he hadn't even bothered to share the important contents. "He's good, and healthy looking. Pretty much a man now by all accounts. The whole trial has done him good it seems. The message wasn't long, of course, but it says he misses us and home, but wants to remain there to do his duty. So for now he'll stay and be our eyes and hands in the north."

The confirmation that he was staying brought a heavy shiver of disappointment to the queen's body, as did the knowledge that he'd apparently sprouted to near manhood in her absence. Her mind took pleasure in the facts though, knowing the news could've been much worse. She got up from the wicker chair she'd been sitting perched upon, feeling numb, but satisfied, and headed further out onto the balcony, casting her gaze out to the breezy sea.

"Y'know, I think it was a bad portend when Reach tried to send Estorie to Outer Tunida," reflected the king, the possibility of black powder being prepared in the outside realm reoccupying his thoughts. "We can't abuse it as a sanctuary. I think our selfish impulse triggered something. We tested the patience of the stars."

Princes and kings can't seek safety out there - only the innocent and the choiceless get granted the trespass."

"Had he asked me, I would've told him not to do so," opined the queen, in lament, "..but it wasn't for me to decide." A touch of anger broke in her voice, but it was tempered with a self-conscious forgiveness. "It was a foolish decision, though," she then added, unable to hold her tongue, "We all know the stories of the gods. It was a desecration to try to hide a prince - a prince born to guard the realm. It was his duty to be here; to follow his father. We can't prohibit others when we do these things ourselves."

"I can't lay the blame on him for my absence," retorted the king, "Plus, I specifically asked that above all he watch over Estorie when I left. I put more emphasis on the protection of you and my son than I did on the realm ..perhaps it was a blessing as well as a curse that he got the fortune to leave the burrow."

"A strange blessing, if it is so," nodded the queen.

With that the wind picked up again.

Scene XXVII

In the Maiden Lands there was a nervous quiet. A calm foreboding. The building goliath from the mainland was slowly growing like a giant stepping stone on the water. An exponential force, all number and no heart. A few ships had left Maiden's Tower and not returned. Others had returned with tales of defeat, on ships like tattered rafts, lucky to limp home.

A young man sat edgily on the cliffside, his eyes searching out across the menacing blue. A spyglass by his side. Amidst the grey clouds grey-brown boats intermittently hemmed and skated on the ocean top. Their sail and flag like specks of gold in frothy water. The eye, either naked or through the glass, begging for the prospect of a clearer view. As the young man spied one growing smudge in the distance he leapt to his feet with eagerness. His excitement increasing as he raised the glass to his eye and saw the clear spectre of several large ships.

He lit the fire that was next to him then ran down the hilly cliffside. His feet sliding and braking against the grass and mud as he tried to rein in his downward momentum. Finally, he reached the hut and banged open the door. The older gentleman that was sat eating reacted at first with annoyance, but quickly awakened to the alarm. He instinctively belted his sword around his waist as he followed the young man back toward the sea edge.

With equal spryness the two climbed the hill. As they reached the cliff summit the older man grabbed the glass and aimed it in the direction of the imminent smudge.

..Alas, it was a false alarm. The invasion would not be coming that evening.

Scene XXVIII

Liofia stood on the stone outcrop as Julen and Eartaria haggled with the owner of the boat. Her face was pale and wan, and she felt slightly sick as she contemplated yet another journey across a wavy sea. She pulled off her berry-brown cloak and tied it around her waist by the sleeves. The cold air on her neck a slight pick-me-up as she stiffened her resolve.

Box and Goola looked twin-like to her as they lolled about further down the shoreline; no doubt like her with similar feelings of apprehension. As she watched the choppy waters off the western coast she couldn't help but appreciate how different they looked to those of the Eastern Sea. Even the water itself looked different. It all belonged to the same body of ocean she thought to herself, but still, it had a different feel. Almost like each sea had its own personality. This one looked much rougher and coarser, though perhaps it was just the wind and the craggy rocks that give it such an impression.

As she looked back down towards Julen he looked young and naïve in comparison to it. The red silk of his neckerchief a keen little dot on the beachy-blue prospect. Finally, her thoughts returned to her father. How was he doing? And how were things faring back in the Eastern Kingdom? - *in her kingdom*. It was after all her home. And what about Elgiva? Would she ever see any of these people again she wondered. She dropped down from the stone outcrop, still somewhat cat-like in her movements, and toddled down towards the boat.

Scene XXIX

As Prince Reach arrived in the Maiden Land seas it was surprisingly dull. He'd been expecting a tad more action in this fishbowl of conflict, or at least to have seen a few ships on his journey, but so far it had been peaceful and lonely sailing. Cutting a wide path far from the coast of the Eastern Kingdom may have helped this, though with speed at the essence he hadn't been overly cautious on his approach. His eagerness hacking at the waves. Now, with the southern coast of the Maiden Lands coming into sight - flowering into greenery through the first-sighted murk - he tried to remind himself to stay alert, yet he felt calm and still. The false lull of security being almost impossible to cast off.

As the ship neared land it clipped its speed and drifted parallel to the coast. The green fields of the pleasant kingdom, a seeming stone's throw away, rolling out before him like an endlessly unfurling scroll. Glancing across the panorama he couldn't help but give thoughts to how poorly defended the country was, and this observation gave him a sense of heightened self-importance. The task at hand being even greater than he'd initially imagined. Some of his men peered upstream for a glimpse of Maiden's Tower, which still loomed beyond the horizon, but he simply watched out at the pastoral scene. Confident in the timing of his approach, and expecting that once one or two of the country's inhabitants had clocked his Tunidan sail, word would quickly spread of his arrival. A sight of great relief no doubt to a beleaguered people he thought. Unbeknownst to him, however, Queen Aglaia's spies had noted his presence long before he'd noticed the quiet scenery. In fact, his ship had been escorted, at a delicate distance, for nearly half the journey since he'd arched the southern tip of Caster.

Finally, after a further half an hour of coasting, one of her discrete vessels came gracing into view, its tassels and flags barely disturbed by the breeze. The sail of spotless linen like a neat handkerchief above the water. Before Prince Reach knew it he was being guided into harbour. The polite and well turned out captain shouting across to him with a formal but friendly welcome. As he followed this chaperone, the city of Maiden's Tower gradually rose into view, almost as unexpectedly as the immaculate ship. Reach ordered his men to drop sail, and left it to his oarsmen to keep the pace. The two so-different looking vessels a pleasing sight, symbolic of two peoples coming together in a dangerous endeavour. The once unseen inhabitants of the country now dotting about on the coast watching on. By the time the ships crossed into the harbour waters, throngs of people were waiting to catch a glimpse.

As Reach disembarked from his vessel he was taken by the captain to the beautiful horse-drawn carriage that stood awaiting him. Stepping up the little stair to enter he looked back at the gala-like commotion. The pretty display and fanfare once again taking him by surprise. As he sat down he felt as if he was on a strange carnival ride over which he had no control. The carriage door closed, and gently, but quickly it moved off. He looked out of the window at the passing houses. The pretty wooden homes and shopfronts. The little trees that lined the streets, and the newly lit lamps hung along the way. The brightness of the day now crossing into the bare beginnings of evening. With every turning corner a different, but similar impression. The stone cobbles and clicking hooves the constant track upon which the scenery reeled. A left and then a right, then a right again. With the ever-so-slight sense that with each street and avenue the carriage travelled further up hill. Before there was further time to think it came to a stop though. The door then re-opened.

The carriage was now inside the gates of Queen Aglaia's marvellous palace. After stepping back down the little stair and into the courtyard air he was escorted towards the main entrance. A foot soldier leading him in front, with two other either side. All dressed in redcoats with neat gold trim; their oversized headwear almost covering their well-drilled, but obeying eyes. Prince Reach instinctively straightened up his own tunic as if in response, then straightened his back and stood slightly more upright to better fit the formality. He looked up at the white and yellow facade of the palace, then walked up the steps and through the enormous door. The red carpet beneath his feet leading him into a hallway with huge arching ceilings. A chandelier hanging in the centre, like a giant orb of white light held captive in an upturned golden crown.

He crossed this hall and ascended a staircase, which then arched around under another domed ceiling. Where two further chandeliers, as large and impressive as the first, hung like lit stars, though daylight still poured through the large rectangular windows that framed the stairway. One hanging higher than the other, like snowy fruit on invisible tree branches. The dark wood spindles of the banister the only gloomy tone amidst the illuminating whiteness. Reaching the top he then passed by two door-sized mirrors, that reflected the bright light like flashlights. The details of any reflection blinded by the glare. He then entered through two actual doors, that opened onto a large, long white corridor; the red carpet still a guide-rail undertow. Pictures hung from the walls lining the way; all giving the impression of history and grandeur, though the walking pace made it impossible to focus the eyes upon any single image. Endless portraits and landscapes, their colours all slightly dulled with time. Over a minute later he

then turned the corner into another corridor. Yet more pictures. Thirty seconds later another turn and yet more. As he walked further he paused for the briefest of moments to stare at one of the portraits, more for show than inspection, straightening his tunic once again with his hand as he did so. As if to recover a sense of his own importance amidst the resplendence. He then turned one final corner and entered a room. A large, but business-like room with wooden walls. Yet two more chandeliers, slightly less brilliant than the earlier ones, hanging from the white ornate ceiling. There were two heavy gold plinths stood at the side of the room, on top of which stood two gold statues. The form of which were difficult to work out from the position where he was stood. Then, at the large desk in the centre of the room sat Queen Aglaia. Her dogs: *Four, Five and Six*, nipping about the table legs, perfectly out of place against the ornamentation. She stood up to greet his arrival.

"I think you have something for me."

Scene XXX

Prince Reach delved into the inner pocket of his tunic and took out a folded note. On it was listed the constituents of black powder. He handed it to Queen Aglaia. She gave the appearance of studying it intently before handing it on to her assistant with a nod. The assistant without needing further instruction quickly headed out of the room to put the information to good use, leaving the two royals alone. The guards that had accompanied Reach now standing vigil outside the door.

"So who killed him?" asked Aglaia, instantly moving on.

It took Prince Reach a few seconds to realise that she was asking about Prince Aralak, the arrow-slain son of their now mutual antagonist, King Mizmeam.

"We don't know."

"Has the circle been broken? Someone must have done it."

Queen Aglaia then looked down at Prince Reach like an inspecting school mistress: "I don't think your lot did it, but I have to ask."

Reach looked sheepish, though he felt somewhat put out by the suggestion. His innocent look immediately exonerating him in the eyes of the queen; confirming what she had already suspected of the situation. The put-out look tallying well with information she'd garnered by other means.

"So, there must be someone outside then - at least one person, if not more. No ships were spotted?"

"We have no information."

Prince Reach once again looked sheepish as he said this, only this time his look convicted him. A slight glare now reached out from Aglaia's eyes.

"There was fighting in the channel. A few Brynnnyfirdian ships, we think," he confessed.

Queen Aglaia paused seriously at this new information, then stood up and began to pace the room calmly, but with intent. The three little dogs stirred into animation by her bout of movement.

"Did you raise this with them?" she asked.

"No."

She looked at him, inquiring as to why.

"They don't know. If it was their ships they haven't returned. So even if it was their men who breached the gap - somehow - assuming it has been breached, they can't have knowledge of it. So it was needless to raise it."

Prince Reach inwardly congratulated himself as he gave this answer. The logic in the response rebalancing the power in the discussion a little. Queen Aglaia was satisfied - yet she wasn't finished.

"Y'know, when you brought his body back from beneath the desert you should have just disposed of it." A deadpan look now heavy upon her powdered face. ".Then, you could have just feigned that he had died at sea, in some shipwreck or other."

"*But his men* - the men that accompanied him to the Three Deserts, they would've given the game away."

"You should have just executed them," she blasély replied, "It would've been much the wiser."

Once more the innocent face of Prince Reach revealed a lack of stomach for such things.

"What?" replied the queen, noting his reaction, "It's better than this wholesale slaughter."

She then paused and reflected a little. Looking around the room as if to wonder at the passing years.

"I'm older, wiser ..and crueller than you and your two brothers," she stated, with a lament. She then touched Prince Reach gently on the shoulder. "I can be your foil. You can play to your noble character and I can play to mine."

Scene XXXI

"The sky is falling?"

Drua Maleeva watched on unimpressed as King Mizmeam repeated the strange words. With so many more pressing issues at hand, here they were, wasting time on an aberrant woman, who looked as though she'd crawled up from the ocean floor. Though he mulled the words himself the king was equally dismissive. The only thing stopping him from ejecting the woman at first sight was his slight wonderment that King Brijsk had even sent her his way in the first place.

"Idiot," uttered Maleeva impatiently, as they both wondered out loud at this. Her disdain for the northern king only outstripped by her instinctive dislike for the deranged woman now standing before her. Impatient with the conversation she turned and walked across the room, as if to mirror her dislike physically with the distance. Coulema Galina, a now constant companion of the king, stood by, observing this odd scene. Mildly more interested in the doom-laden words of the woman, but nevertheless not a million miles away in thinking from his hosts-cum-captors.

"*It's falling - and you are making it fall,*" interrupted the woman, in a steely tone, lecturing the king once more - with little regard for circumstance or protocol.

"*You're waging wars upon the sky,*" she shrieked. "*The shell is broken -- only penitence can heal it now.*"

With this last outburst the king's patience finally ran dry. Not wasting more words on the madness he waved his hand to have her removed. His guards grabbed her slender, branchy form and forcefully shoved her towards the door. Her eyes cursing the room as her wild hair and pitted attire swayed helter-skelter after her bones. As they dragged her out, however, one of the king's retainers came rushing in the other way, almost crashing into the guards in his haste.

"*Excuse me, sire, but the young prince has fallen ill ..He passed out in the hallway ..He's been taken to his room.*"

Before the king could respond Maleeva rushed out through the door, a stare of concerned panic on her face. "I can help him," shouted the strange woman as she overheard the message, turning her head to meet eyes with the king as the guards pulled her away.

"OUT," bellowed the king with anger. Heedless to her words. He then headed towards Prince Seaspell's room, with a concern almost equal to that of Maleeva's.

Scene XXXII

Having been unceremoniously cast from the palace gates the sea-swept woman was now free to take her message to the streets of Keneeshka. As the young Prince Seaspell lay in his half-sleep, inside the palace walls, she wandered without. The cloudy skies and the nip of cold a fitting cover for her prognostications. The roads were dark and busy, and the windy clime couldn't shift the feral children and stray dogs from the hardened earth. Passing one child she pulled her sprawling gown closer to her neck, as if to gain some respite from the cold. As if from a loosened purse, silver coins then fell from her matted hair. Crashing like moons upon the lousy ground. She ambled on, with seeming unconcern, the opportune children grabbing the starry droplets with their dirty hands.

An old man: bearded, bony, weak and ragged, noting her disregard, lent down to pick one up himself. His slow creaking back unable to match the pace of his greed. He looked up at the woman with large brown-green eyes, as if to offer the return of her fallen property, yet still with hope she wouldn't reach down to accept it.

"The shell is broken, the gods have spoken..," she whispered to him, ignoring the false-hearted offer. The charity adding a charm-like power to the garbled words as his hungry body listened.

She then stumbled on, maundering beyond his sight, before turning off into a more shaded avenue. The leaf-less trees barren and blackened to the branch. She tiptoed off the path, then through some hedgerows, before cutting through a fence. Finally coming to rest at the back of a small temple, the bushes and plants of the garth a semi-shelter by the stony backwall. She lay down on the hard ground and fell asleep. A sea green snake slithered forth from the herbs as she closed her eyelids. It came up beside her, licked her ear, then writhed off into the damp city. Rain then began to drop. As it soaked her hair and dress and feet and ankles she slept a dreamy sleep. Dreams of tempests, ships, and dark sea serpents.

Scene XXXIII

Land.

The *Coo-Cal* sailed into the craggy cove, unnoticed and unacknowledged. A peaceful ship in a war filled world. The murky grey water, and rocky green coast of Brynnyfirdia a welcome sight. As Essen moored the exotic, but bijou boat he felt the mossy grass with his hand, its realness as reassuring as the windy air that snapped lively at his cheeks and nose. He looked around the cove; it was little changed from how it was when he would seclude his boats here as a child. Sailing the Free Sea from this little spot on hewn together rafts and sails, or any other bark he could get a hold of.

As he dropped into the water to splosh the short distance to firmer ground the ship's boy followed, perhaps even more excited to be home than he was after so long an adventure. The smile on his face betraying a relief that his normal come-what-may optimism otherwise had hidden. Finally, in tow, the little monkey hopped onto the damp grass, in contrast looking somewhat apprehensive. The cold of the land, like the cold of the sea surrounding it, making him rue the impulse that took him aboard the hopeful ship so many months previously. As the cold on the approach to the northern seas had picked up the ship's boy had stitched together a tiny little jacket for the poor creature, but even this failed to insulate it from the shock of the Brynnyfirdian chill. Its little features grimacing at so rugged a destination.

Essen was eager to head inland, but he dithered as he pondered whether to leave things on the boat. He didn't want to carry the heavy chest that contained the charts - he would've much preferred to head home quickly, then go back the next day, but he couldn't leave them. After all this time to risk them now would be rash even by his standards. So, he jumped, knee-deep, into the cold swaying water to climb back on deck. The ship's boy, not wanting to be workshy, following. As Essen went below and grabbed the precious charts he grabbed the little tree that stood near the prow. Looking withered and half-dead it was barely worth the taking, but the symbolic value outweighed the pointlessness.

Having got this precious cargo they then waded back into the water and headed ashore, the items held high above their heads like new born children. They then quickly headed in the direction of settlement ..looking quite the ensemble. Essen with a box of charts, the ship's boy with a distinctly unimpressive potted tree, and an odd little monkey, angry at the bitter cold, wearing what looked like a scruffy waistcoat.

Scene XXXIV

As Essen and the ship's boy arrived at the edge of the settlement they paused to reflect, creeping on the outskirts almost like assailants. They'd been away so long, and there was simply too much to tell. The strange outer lands, the battle in the channel with the Tunidan ships, the death of Acalee, and the countless other deaths. Not to mention Outer Tunida, and the king's slain brother, who apparently still lived, out there, beyond the world's eyes. Likewise, there was no doubt much that they themselves had missed, that had taken place since they'd left. Who knew in what state the world was now in? As they peered through the trees at the still familiar dwellings this all flashed through their minds in garbled form, garbed in robes of near disbelief. The task of finding the words to express all this adding a further burden. Fortunately they had the charts - on which they could at least attempt to sketch the story. Essen grasped the box tighter as he was reminded of their importance; looking down with a momentary feeling of reverence. Though Acalee's grave and naked bones were now so far away, here were his true ashes. His spirit held captive in this wooden lantern; a box of light.

As Essen's eyes rolled back up and watched again through the forest brush he got another sense: a déjà vu-like feeling. A hazy notion of being unseen and of watching from afar. His thoughts were briefly stunned, but then, all at once, it clicked, and he remembered. That he had stood aloof and watched before, as Prince Aralak had emerged into the sun from a place below. Into grassy fields and open air - where red poppy petals skipped upon the swaying stalks of green. He remembered reaching silently for his bow, before violently flashing an arrow across the sunny field and into the eye of the forlorn prince. He remembered the distant thud, and then the thunder, and then the rain. He'd almost forgotten about it. So many other strange things had competed for the space. In the outer world this point of connection with the old had seemed almost dreamlike. Now he had returned it suddenly seemed so much more real. There was too much to tell. With a breath he stepped down from behind the trees and started descending the muddy, stony hill that led towards Colm's home. The ship's boy, and the little waist-coated monkey, following on his lead. With so much to speak about Essen hoped to catch Colm alone; to re-enter the old world at an easy pace, but as the three strangers slipped down the little hill they were instantly spotted. "Essen!" quickly came the cry. The passing woman so pleased and surprised to see his long absent face. It was no good sneaking, the return would be announced. She grabbed him by the arm and dragged him to the door of Colm's home, before swirling off to tell others.

Inside Colm was busy, though the evening was late, but as Essen entered they instantly spotted each other. Colm rushed over and gave an uncharacteristic hug.

"Just you?"

"Acalee is dead," came the immediate reply.

The pause that followed was somewhat shortened by the sheer length of absence. Colm already half-resigned to the likelihood that they'd met their doom. Yet still, it stung. There had been so many deaths. With the acceleration of war it was an hourly occurrence. But this pierced more acutely. All hopes, however dim, now fully extinguished in the three quick words.

As Essen watched the response it only heightened his own guilt that he had survived when so many had died.

"Only two of us have returned," he admitted, almost in apology. Colm then looked over at the ship's boy standing quietly in the doorway.

"Your mother and sister will be pleased, you should head to see them."

The ship's boy looked at Essen as if seeking permission. With a nod of approval he shot off down the path, leaving the dying tree like a thoughtless gift beside the door. The monkey, that startled Colm's eye as he first caught sight of it, following on, bouncing oblivious to the human drama.

Essen shut the door firmly, hoping the monkey would be the star attraction outside, whilst he spoke to Colm within. "We travelled far," he expressed, putting heavy emphasis on the far. He then took the wooden chest over to the large table on the other side of the room. He opened it up eagerly, then spread one of the charts across the table. "There's more land," he declared, joyful to get the words out, yet suspecting they wouldn't quite be believed.

"Beyond the desert - beyond Tunida."

He then traced his finger along the trail they'd originally taken all that time ago. Down to Tunida, then wandering lost upon the Eastern Sea, then down, along the desert's edge, to the strange channel of water - where only Tunida Birds fly. Then, outwards to even further and stranger places. As he tried to explain it all his tongue got tangled and confused. Colm didn't doubt the sincerity, but

struggled to follow the outpouring. Listening patiently and somewhat amazed as he himself perused some of the other charts in the box.

"Why is this chart so shoddy compared to all the rest?" he interrupted, with a laugh, as he looked over the one that depicted Outer Tunida, and the beginnings of the outer seas. "I did that one," replied Essen, matter-of-factly, "It's a copy of the original which was buried with Acalee. Plus some of my own additions as we headed out further." Colm laughed again. The inept draughtsmanship of Essen almost adding an extra layer of veracity to the entire tale.

At this point other people burst through the door, breaking the privacy, each eager to see the long returned explorer. There were endless hugs and smiles as more and more people arrived, though in each case their allure towards him was quickly stolen by Acalee's maps. The table of secrets gathering a local audience. Eventually, Prince Estorie entered the tightly packed room, a sword by his side and a look somewhat different to what Essen had remembered from when they had first brought him back as a prisoner from Tunida. As the questions continued bounding towards Essen he leaned over to Colm. "You have to tell me everything I've missed as well." The change in height and appearance of Estorie only illustrating the length of time they'd been gone.

"I will do," replied Colm, appreciatively, "There's a lot to tell ..but it's not as exotic and as exciting as the news that you've brought us."

Scene XXXV

"It was you that shot Aralak?"

After everyone had left Essen had originally planned to get some rest. It was a sensible plan, but with so much to speak about it was an impossible notion. He'd lain there silently for half an hour, his body glad of the rest, but his mind unable to consider sleep. He dragged himself up and headed back to the main room, where Colm, still awake, sat pondering the world and everything in it. A bright candle on the wooden table lighting the room like a yellow spectre. As Essen entered unannounced the shape of his shadow crept across the wall. Grabbing his blanket he lay down once more, exactly as he had in the previous room, his body once again thankful. Only now his mouth was free to talk.

The Brynnfirdians knew little of what had happened to Prince Aralak. They knew he'd been killed - an arrow to eye - and they knew it had happened sometime after he'd travelled to the Three Deserts. They likewise understood there were suspicions, aimed at the Tunidans and also the Maiden Lands. However, beyond that it was all somewhat murky. Exactly where he'd died, exactly why he'd died. It was an unknown. An unknown that had consequences in regard to the wider war, but that was otherwise largely baffling. Colm had spent some time trying to gain a sense of it, but little did it make. Though it certainly rooted the mainland kingdoms firmly against the Tunidans, which was now a blessing to their own cause.

When Essen offered his confession it only added confusion, albeit in a way that at least explained why it was all so confusing in the first place.

"I killed him," he coolly explained, his mouth much more lively than his body. "I can't really explain it. It seemed bizarre at the time to me too, but the opportunity arose and I just took it. We were in a strange patch of land on the outer desert - chasing deer. Then all of a sudden he was just there. Just stood there - out in a field. Looking like he'd stepped into the world for the very first time. I reached for an arrow and boom, the perfect shot. I heard the dull thud, then the heavens opened and we ran for the ship."

"But are you certain it was him? You've never even seen him in the flesh."

"The ship's pilot confirmed it. Plus, I just knew it at the time. I could feel it. I don't know why I was so certain, but I just knew it, ..and it was him, you've told me yourself. He's dead, an arrow to the eye, exactly as it happened."

As Essen was saying this Colm looked down at the candlelit chart spread open on the table, its island outlines barely visible in the dark. He traced a line from the Three Deserts, across the Great Desert, and finally out to the outer land where Essen was now claiming he'd killed Aralak.

"Did he cross the desert?" asked Colm, with curiosity. The thought a logical one, though the idea of land beyond the desert was still difficult to comprehend.

"Gelken - the guy who helped us when we were out there - he said that he'd crossed the desert. That's how he got there."

"How did he cross it?"

"He just walked."

They both started laughing at this sentence, the bizarre thought adding a comedic absurdity.

"You should check what I'm saying with the boy - and the monkey," laughed Essen, beginning to doubt his own words, "He'll tell you exactly what I'm saying. In fact, he'll tell you bits I've missed out. There are still a few other things on the boat too."

"You were lucky getting back," noted Colm, the mention of the boat returning the conversation to the here and now, "The Harbour Lands are almost completely gone. We've lost control of the seas. And this island will fall too if things don't change quite soon."

"It was plain sailing coming back," noted Essen, his aching body restless at this news. "I would have had no idea a war was going on had I not left one. Now I am back though, I'm here to fight. I just need one night's sleep. That's all. Then I'll need a ship..

..If I'd have wanted peace I'd have stayed out there."

Scene XXXVI

Across the island another boat was arriving. Liofia tiptoed over the stepping stones that led, like a jetty, to the forest cove, followed by Box, Goola, Julen, and Eartaria. Finally, Allacat and Celalah, the two half-tails that had come in the hope of powder, stepped onto the soil. Completing the squad. The muddy sea gave way to a rocky land, and the long branches of the trees overhung the water. The slippery forest womb a gaping doorway, offering a hiding place from the overbearing mainland.

They'd spied several ships from Caster and the Northern Kingdom on their trip across the sea, but their little vessel had made the pass unseen. Nevertheless, they still felt a sense of trespass as they made the crossing. Apart from Eartaria, of course, who, careless in his manner, held no such fears. Back on his native turf he quickly led the way, striding onward through the dampened grove. The others left feeling quite out of place - foreigners in an unknown land. Goola, perhaps the most apprehensive, inwardly wondering where they would stay, and how they would eat, sleep and live, as she dashed to keep up. With Box and Liofia having thoughts quite similar. The woodland itself giving a devilish feel, and a note of agrestal dread, to people so used to life over on the world island.

Unbeknownst to the strangers they were heading in the direction of Colm's house. The unassuming heartland, where Essen was finally finding sleep after his long jaunt through memories. Had Eartaria been more mindful he would've worried about the reception that was awaiting him, yet he stalked past the oak trees with abandon. He was home, and his only impulse was the one utmost in his mind. Here he was, back after his own long journey, equally hungry to put his own plans into action.

Scene XXXVII

A large cannonball crashed through the side of the ship. Tearing limbs, the bloody shock and darkened panic terrifying the hearts and minds of the men aboard. Between the throbbing, churning sea and the pursuing Eastern Kingdom fleet there was no margin for hope. A black cloud passed across the orange sun, adding to the dirge. Not a battle, but an extinguishing. Ships crushed like beetles on the wet, quilt-like ocean surface. At once fracturing and smothering all life. Another flash of noise. The fires and smoke a last brief, but torturous cry of the living vessels, before their erasure by the sea.

Meanwhile, ships laid siege to the northern shores of the quaking Maiden Lands, not far from Fools' Harbour. Their troops cascading hard upon the land. A village ransacked. A pointed sword, a father's stomach; children fleeing in directionless terror. The speed too quick for response. The brave dispatched before their thoughts could reach for a sword. Across the sea King Kaspria stood looking out. He could not see the destruction he had ordered, but its effects were full to the desire. The invasion had begun, and his dominion at sea was vast and total.

Scene XXXVIII

Liofia stood looking at herself in the mirror. Her haunches were round, and her slight distaste at the sight made her feel captive once more. She'd come so far to escape, only to find herself prisoner to fate again. It was the early hours of the morning, and as she looked over at Julen sleeping soundly in the bed, she pulled on her cloak and headed delicately to the door. The morning sunlight spilling in beams through the window, like keys offering freedom from the cloister.

As she closed the one door behind her she then opened the door of the neighbouring room with equal gentleness. Peeking her head round to check on Box and Goola, mother-like. The two sleeping like doves in the warm nest of the room.

She felt a touch of guilt as she noted how easily the other three slept. They'd been welcomed with generosity since arriving. In fact, having met some of the people already it occurred to her that the Brynnfyrdians couldn't have chosen a worse diplomat in Eartaria, who appeared to be by far the least tolerable of the lot ..and even he wasn't so bad. The foreboding of the creeping forest quickly dispelled by the rough-hewn, but comfortable settlement. Still, in spite of the hospitality, and her own need for rest, she couldn't fully accept the good fortune.

Stepping out of the little wooden home she was instantly reminded of her night-stalks around Patina, where she'd wander for hours, watching the city below from the rooftops above. Alone, but free. Unseen and unrecognised against a starlit sky. Now, under the bright rays of daybreak she felt a similar sense of disappearance. She followed the desire-path that shot from the garden, to where the edge of the village met the wood, careful not to rustle the odd blade of grass that popped out from the hardened mud. She then hopped over the little wooden fence with equal grace. Her ankles nimble under her curved figure. A magpie sat silent on the fence just a short distance away, but remained undisturbed by her presence. Her bare feet moved on, entering a lea that was not quite woodland, but not quite field. She began to notice the birds singing, and the scent of the outdoor air. She pulled down her hood and felt the sun on her face, walking widow-like across the grass.

For twenty minutes, maybe more, she walked and wandered. Careless as to time or dislocation. She grabbed an apple from a tree and took a bite. It tasted slightly more bitter than the apples from the Maiden Lands, or from the Eastern Kingdom, but still, the wet juice felt sweet against the climbing sun. Across the field she noticed a single horse in a fenced-off enclosure; sandy red, just as

awake as she was in the early morning hours. She gave it the apple and smiled as she watched it eat. Its mane glossy in the natural light. On the fence sat a pigeon, that watched her as she watched the horse. Then, at last, she turned and headed back in the direction she'd come from. Pulling the hood back over her head as she did so, as if to end her little chapter of flight.

Suddenly though she stopped. Far across the field and through the trees she could see Julen, walking calmly through the pasture. "How had he risen so quickly when he'd just been deep in sleep? And where on earth was he heading?" she thought. Perhaps he'd realised she'd left, and had come out looking. She dropped behind a tree, instinctively not wanting to be seen. The privacy of her private meander taking precedence over any desire to shout his name. Her woodland boudoir seemingly invaded by his unexpected presence. She then crept in tow, following his journey from behind the trees. Peeping out from behind each trunk, and puzzled by his nonchalant gait and purpose of direction.

Finally, she watched him slip down the little hill and towards the home of Colm. He then opened the door without knocking and entered. Confused, Liofia pattered down herself, then slinked round the back of the house. With feline ease she climbed up onto the roof and looked down through the window, careful not to call attention. From this higher vantage point she could see the large village hall that sat at the settlement's centre - its roof pointing skyward above the other homes. However, her eyes, peering out from her berry-brown hood, bent down solely towards the window. Through it she could see Eartaria, along with an older man that she hadn't yet seen before. She could also hear their voices as they spoke, seemingly animated. Yet she was unable to make out the words. She stretched down a touch to get a broader view. There was a map on the table. Then, from across the room walked Julen. But, as she watched with mystification she realised it wasn't him *..it was someone else*. Someone who looked like him, of similar height and frame, but not him. It was Essen. Suddenly things made sense. She'd just been mistaken. Yet, with her curiosity piqued, she couldn't help but listen in further. She strained her eyes to see the map, as the voices in the room raised their tone.

The talk was about "black powder" and "treason," and journeys across the sea. After her peaceful morning she was quickly reminded that the world was at war.

"How many gold ingkhs did they pay you?" she heard the aggrieved voice of Essen ask.

Eartaria was insulted, and answered back harshly with disdain. Placing his hand on the hilt of his sword as he raised his own voice to match the aggression of Essen. Before the words went further Colm stepped in between the two, demanding quiet. His own speech rising with uncharacteristic ire to excel the pair. As an uneasy silence broke Liofia stretched her neck to get a closer look at the map on the table. Unfortunately, a wooden slat then fell loose. It slid down the roof and landed with a light clatter on the ground. All three men looked up from their dispute. Turning their attention to the noise.

As Liofia leapt from the roof Essen raced out from the side door, alert to the potential threat. As she dropped and rounded the corner the two came face to face. There was a brief pause of eye contact, then the startled Liofia spoke.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else."

Essen didn't buy it. He grabbed her firmly by the sleeve. Eartaria then came round from the other side of the building. "It's okay, she's one of mine," he said laughing. Liofia's face flush with red.

Annoyed she'd been caught, it again dawned on her that she wasn't quite as fleet of foot as she once was.

Scene XXXIX

Prince Estorie stood there with a questioning look on his face. His time on Brynnyfirdia had been long, and by now it was a home from home, but still, some of the customs and ways confounded him. The latest drama especially so.

"But why are we letting him go free?" he asked Colm, not for the first time.

"Because I believe him," came the calm reply, "...He did it out of anger. He admits this himself. So it's all forgotten."

The heavy talk was of Eartaria, and his jolt across to the mainland. Taking with him the captive Coulema Galina. The young prince's loyal protector. A rash episode, and one that could only look like an act of betrayal to any casual observer.

"But the black powder," pleaded Estorie, furthering his point, "Surely it was him who funnelled it to them. Essen's right, it can't be a coincidence that they now possess it."

"I don't think he gave them it, I take his word," continued Colm, unfazed, "Plus, let's say he did give it, what then? We could hold a court and try to ascertain the truth, but it would take time - time we don't have. And what then? It wouldn't change the situation. The mainland kingdoms would still have it."

"So, we just trust him?" answered Estorie, only mildly placated and still largely unconvinced.

"He's a hot-headed idiot, he's not a traitor. At least not intentionally, anyway," cracked Colm. His casual air adding a confidence in his appraisal. "Still though, you don't have to trust him. You don't have to do anything. We just have to concern ourselves with the here and now."

Colm then headed over to the now infamous map lying on the table, this time more concerned with the inner world than the outer. He ran his hand around the entire landmass of the Harbour Lands. Everything but the far northern edge closest to Brynnyfirdia lay conquered.

"He's not the only hot-head," he lamented, as he overlooked the dire situation, "Essen is insisting he be given a ship to cross the narrow straight, to help fight the rearguard action. I've asked him not to. I think we need to concede that that

island is lost. Re-focus on the sea to protect our own ..but he's determined to die. His absence has grown a guilt in him that makes him desperate for honour."

"I want to go," gestured Estorie, the mention of honour stirring in himself a similar need. The hunger in his voice stiffening with the words; his now full grown frame mirroring the ambition - forgetting the higher tasks his father had requested he fulfil.

"You for sure can't go," stated Colm, in a deliberate tone. He then looked down at the map again. "But don't worry, when the war comes here you'll get your chance to die as well. Not even your father can stop that. Essen leaves at first light tomorrow. You should wish him well, it's unlikely he'll return."

Scene XL

Eartaria stood as overseer as Julen and the two half-tails loaded the boat, readying for the return journey back from Brynnyfirdia. Still, even as the few weapons and precious black powder were being taken aboard, the exact destination was unclear. As Julen listened to the back and forth he felt a sense of guilt that he wouldn't be going with them. As did Box, who stood alongside Goola and Liofia, watching from the shoreline.

"It's one thing knowing the ingredients of black powder," noted Eartaria, airily, commanding the scene, "..but it's a different issue getting hold of the ingredients, and that's before you think about mixing it up, or making the actual weapons. What you have here won't last long."

Allakat listened, but returned to a previous point of discussion, as he waded once again through the water. "We can't go to Terrella. It's out of the question."

By this point Eartaria had been making the case for heading to Terrella repeatedly, and though the words of Allakat were strong in sentiment, they were becoming more desperate in tone; worn down as he was by the constant haranguing. Eartaria, sensing victory, pressed on further.

"You'll be wiped out before these things can be put to use. Stop on Terrella, build up your supplies. Then start launching attacks from there. You don't need to enlist the half-tails, you just use it as your base."

The logic was sound, but the morality was doubtful. Celalah looked over at Allakat, as both began to wilt under the weight of the argument.

"I guess we could stop off and speak to them," conceded Allakat, a glum look on his face, "It is on the way, I suppose."

A grin came over Eartaria's face in chorus. It was clear his plan was to rabble-rouse the half-tails on Terrella once there, but it was a problem they could head off later. After all, the situation in Once Woods was looking dire, so maybe a dash of cunning was necessary.

"There's no time like the present," affirmed Eartaria, breaking these sour thoughts, as he loosened the rope that moored the dainty craft to the dock. The yellow sun shining with promise on the water. Julen looked on with ambivalence. As he stepped back off the boat to remain, however, Box stepped forward into

the water to put one foot upon it. Liofia, in quick response, leapt forward and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her away.

"Why are we staying here?" groaned Box, the sense that they were abandoning the cause teasing her to leave. "We can't just retreat and hideout on an island - an island where we don't belong - forever. We should be helping."

"We have our own path," insisted Liofia, thinking of plans that were now fermenting in her own mind.

"No, she's right," countered Eartaria with eagerness, nodding in the direction of Box, "You should be returning with us. Especially Julen." He prodded Julen gently in the stomach with his sword as he said this from his elevated position on the prow. "Plus," he then added half-jokingly, aiming his words at Liofia, "You're Queen of the Half-Tails, you could be very persuasive. You should be with your people."

"Our hearts are with you, but we have our own journey to be making," came Liofia's reply, one hand gripping Julen, the other still having a tight hold on Box's jacket sleeve.

Eartaria looked down at her growing figure as he lent over the prow of the boat. "I know," he commented sardonically. He then ushered them all away from the boat with his hand, as if to punctuate the conversation. Allakat then reached over to the clodden mud of the cove with his oar and wedged the little vessel deeper into the waves. The lemon sun and evening shadows calling them in the direction of the little island of Terrella.

Scene XLI

Back in the room, Box was somewhat dejected. She felt lost. The long, long journey they'd all been on had been long indeed, but it always felt like it had some kind of purpose. A destination - Aunt Ellever's house; the trek to Once Woods. Even the voyage across to Brynnfirdia had a sense of escape, but now there was nothing. No reason. No purpose. Just an empty feeling. She lay on the bed with a dull, hunger-like ache in her stomach. She thought back to the farm - to Grandma Mayleen and Grandpa Taxilian. It must have been worrisome for them too, not knowing where her, Goola and Julen were - and now, with nowhere to go herself, for the first time she considered what they were feeling. Sat waiting, without a message to even give a note of existence. What were they thinking? Perhaps by now letters had passed back and forth from Aunt Ellever's home, telling news that they hadn't arrived. She imagined the sense of panic and concern. It inspired a surge of guilt, which compounded with the inkling of guilt she still felt about leaving the half-tails. Who, like a second family, had given unconditional shelter and care when they needed it too. Now here they were, in yet another home. Living off more hospitality that they would never get to repay.

Goola, in contrast, just looked out of the window. The bright evening sun had changed to a dark, late evening twilight, and the view out onto the fields and forests was slowly dimming and retreating to the garden lawn. A sunken shadow now hanging on the little wooden windowsill she sat at. Like Box her thoughts occasionally turned homewards too, but hers were more just momentary memories. Passing visions. Her earlier distress at being so far from home now replaced by a numbed stoicism, and a feeling that things were simply beyond her own control. As she looked over at Box lying on the bed she noted this difference in spirit, and wondered who was the worse off. At least they had each other, she considered, with a touch of relief.

Then a knock came at the door.

Before either could react Liofia walked in. She closed the door behind her, then sat down on Goola's bed. Immediately she pulled out a large piece of paper, spread it across the bed, then drew a large circle upon it.

"I have a journey for us," she whispered, with a slight smile.

Then, in a surprisingly neat hand, she drew the vague outline of the mainland kingdoms, followed by the outline of the Western Isles. Placing a big, plump dot where they currently were.

"There is more land beyond the outer desert," she then said impishly, her smile deepening, as she enjoyed the opportunity to take her little friends on a mental treasure hunt.

Neither Box nor Goola understood quite what she was getting at. A feeling that she was playing some kind of silly game the overriding impression given.

Liofia continued to etch in further parts of the map. The Three Deserts, each one arching out into the wide ocean. The Island of Erba, a blob in the sea. Next, the Island of Tunida, far off in the southern ocean. Then a quickly sketched Maiden Lands, just for good measure. She paused, giving the pair a few seconds to take in the wholeness of the map, before drawing a little arrow that pointed out across from the Three Deserts. It went over the Outer Desert, then into more ocean - which she marked with cute little wavy lines. She then scribbled in some more islands to carelessly fill this great void of outer water, that lay beyond the original circle.



"I overheard them speaking," she revealed, her voice dropping into a more hushed whisper, "I even saw their charts. There's extra land. The world isn't how we were told it was. The desert is large, but it's not forever. It ends, and after that there are new beginnings."

Box and Goola kept listening, unable to process what she was saying. Liofia's playful words skipping over their heads. They stared blankly at the drawing that was sprawled across the bed, as Liofia waited for a response. A question, or some look of amazement, but little was coming. Then, in a sudden flash, Goola was reminded of the map that Grandpa Taxilian had given them - now so long ago - when they'd first began their journey from their homely farm. She walked over to her jacket, which was hung over the chair by the dresser, and reached into its

pocket. The map was ragged and worse for wear, but there it was. She unfolded it and laid it on the bed, next to Liofia's. The image was faded, but the contours were clear to see. She looked at icy mountains in the centre, that even now were much more seriously depicted than the carefree sketch that Liofia had doodled.

"All that time we were wondering about 'Middlemap,'" she voiced, her eyes slightly widened, "When really we should have been looking out to the edge."

Liofia cast her eyes over this second map. Its aged look making her own look almost cartoon-like. "I know it's hard to believe," she remarked, doubting the idea of outer lands herself, in response to Goola's burst of enthusiasm. "Perhaps it isn't true at all ..but the boy - the one with the odd little monkey - he claims to have been there. To have been on the outside."

Box looked up with added interest as she said this. The exotic little monkey, that she'd seen just hours earlier, bobbing about the village, adding a realness to these unreal notions.

"Tomorrow I'll find him, so we can ask him to tell us more," continued Liofia.

"What does Julen think?" asked Box, still in disbelief, but now with a slight uptick of excitement.

"I haven't told him yet. It may be a little too surreal for his mind. We might have to tell him gently. We can do it tomorrow when we find out more."

Scene XLII

Grandpa Taxilian and Grandma Mayleen were in the kitchen. It was another blustery day in the rainy kingdom, but most of the harvest had now been gathered. Some still lay rotten in the sodden fields, but given the terrible weather and the lack of farmhands they felt they'd done as best they could. It hadn't helped that since returning from his sojourn Luteeay had been nowhere to be seen. He rarely helped on the farm at the best of times, but this year even his aging frame would've been a handy boon. Contrariwise, Elgiva had been a blessing. Slowly but surely adapting to her newfound life, in a way that surprised everyone given first impressions. A palace nursemaid from the royal household in Patina, half-lost and overwrought when she first turned up at the door - and almost as aged as Luteeay himself. Yet now she was a hardy babushka. Picking turnips. Untroubled by the biting wind.

As Taxilian looked out through the little square kitchen window, Mayleen sat and sipped her tea. The prospect outside grim. The brown fields and greying sky offering a dismal picture. Now, with the harvest finished, thoughts were turning back to the wider world. The war, and, of course, the missing young'uns. Who, for all they knew, were somewhere off in the far Northern Kingdom. Hopefully safe.

"They'll be fine," reassured Mayleen, noting the obvious concern of Taxilian, though she too had similar doubts. The thought that something terrible might happen to Box, Goola or Julen a recurring dread. Though she tried her best to hide any outward appearance of it. As she said the hopeful words Elgiva stepped into the kitchen, fully wrapped up and ready to head out into the drizzle. Hiding her own worries about the princess Liofia.

"I'll come with you," noted Taxilian, not for the first time, as he realised how intent she was on going.

"No, it's fine," she answered briskly, "I need something to do. He must be up to something. If I don't come back, then you can come looking for me."

She then braced herself to open the door, much to Taxilian's disapproval, and headed out into the rain. The heavy specks instantly berating her exposed face the minute she hit the cold. She gripped her coat tightly to her chin and hunched over as she headed down the path. Taxilian watched from the window

as she bustled onwards. Her elderly frame slowly shrinking in relation to the wooden frame. She then stepped across the muddy field. Her boots feeling the suction of the cloggy wet ground with every purposeful stride.

She pressed on to the end of the long field. Far beyond the sight of the rain-washed window. Then down the hard mud path that clung along the thorny hedgerow, slightly drier for its sparse shelter. The prickling branches occasionally reaching out and snagging her clothes. Then, she ambled over the little stony bridge that hopped the now flooding beck. The grassy banks half drowned by the heavy, rushing torrent that surged beneath the rain. Then through yet more fields and down more winding paths that led along more prickling hedgerows. Until, finally, she reached Luteeay's little hovel of a home. She struggled briefly with the iron gate then hurried down the path and to his door. She knocked, but the knock went unheard amidst the cacophony of animal noises. Chickens squawking and birds chirping and little dogs barking. She knocked again, this time louder: still no answer. She stood and waited a few moments, trying to shield herself from the rain beneath the tiny shelter of the door frame. Huddling against the wooden door as if the building was a tilted umbrella. Finally, impatient, she grabbed the handle and pushed the door. It flung open with a rattle. The noisy kitchen was empty of humans, but through the squawking racket she could hear the equally noisy discord of human clanking. She headed across the kitchen and into the next room, to find Luteeay working busily. The scene a veritable artist's workshop; of potions and strange devices. Still he remained oblivious to her presence. She tapped him on the shoulder and he turned around startled.

"What are you doing?" she asked, hen-like, but intrigued.

"I'm busy," came the hurried reply. His focus remaining fully on his work, as he inspected whatever it was he was inspecting.

"I can see that. What are you busy doing is the question. What's going on here?"

"The shell is broken, so I need to be busy. That's all you need to know."

Elgiva, now fully confused, felt a tad put out. "I've travelled through a torrent to be here. We've been wondering where you've been. People are concerned."

"I can't explain what I'm doing, I'm sorry. Perhaps one day, but right now that's all I can say. I have important work to do, and I need to be getting on with it."

He uttered all this without looking once at Elgiva, his eyes entirely on the task.

"But we haven't seen you for weeks."

"I know, but it is what it is. I need to crack on."

Elgiva headed back into the kitchen and stood in silence for a moment. Feeling the need to do something she then rummaged around the cupboards and drawers. Finding the kettle she then lit the little stove and started boiling some tea. She sat down, grateful at least to rest her legs, but nevertheless flummoxed by Luteeay's odd behaviour. The soaked landscape outside certainly wasn't inviting, but she instantly felt like heading straight back to the farm to tell Taxilian and Mayleen about the blunt reception she'd received - hoping they could make more sense of it than she could. As the tea slowly boiled she calmed her thoughts though. She took off her cloak and hung it over the chair by the stove to dry, then took some tea through to Luteeay, who was still completely fixated on his endeavours.

As she put the cup down he looked glad of the refreshment, but said nothing.

"Do we have any news about the little chicks?" asked Elgiva, this time in a softer tone. "Taxilian and Mayleen are worried sick ..as am I."

Luteeay reached for the tea and finally stopped his work.

"The most recent I've heard is that they were heading for the Western Isles by boat," his tired words echoing her worry. "They might be safer there than the Northern Kingdom, for now, though that probably won't be the case for long. There are no kytalyks in the Western Isles too, so the line is dead."

"At least they're safe for the time being," answered Elgiva gratefully, pleased that Luteeay had somewhat returned to civility. "I'll let Taxilian and Mayleen know when I get back."

She then sat down and looked around the strange room, trying to make sense of what lay before her.

"Before I go though I'll make you a good meal and tidy this house."

Scene XLIII

It seemed the whole world was wet with rain, as the last dozen ships of the Maiden Land fleet slowly fell to ruin upon the rainy sea. Yet then, a clarion call: from the south, ships, flying Tunidan flags, swiftly arriving on the tide. Their newly forged cannons, bleak and deathly in colour, greedy to enter the heat and spit of war.

As this blaze of battle intensified, far off, in the Northern Kingdom, King Brijsk was getting battle-ready. His huge body heavy and grave upon an even larger horse, black as night and perfect in frame.

Meanwhile, south, the sea-swept woman awoke from her strange slumber. The seas wept as she strayed the war capital's streets, telling all who cast eyes upon her willowing mode the news of the coming devastation.

"The sky will fall, the nest in tatters, the featherless hatchlings ugly and without form."

Her hair more wild from sleep, her words more potent as they dripped upon ears. The serpent that whispered in her ear now a thousand serpents rippling out in every direction. The supernatural indistinguishable from the natural world. Her eyes like mermaid pools, offering deep reflections of the sky. Blood and war and rain reached out across the land. Yet further still, in the comfort of Eldbee, troops pitched their flag, as ships were decked and hewn for war; bringing the dull martial hand of the Keneeshkan king, King Mizmeam, to the very doorstep of the guilds and merchants; who now felt the grisly eye of watching clouds, as they weighed their gold and silver and copper ingkhs, besides the fattening harbour. A growing net, for the fishes that swam freely still, around the throne-like world island.

Scene XLIV

Eartaria, Allacat and Celalah arrived on Terrella to find it strangely quiet. Sure, the birds were singing, and the lush semi-jungle habitat was green with life, but the half-tails themselves remained aloof. The three weary visitors had been travelling for over an hour now. From the long sandy beaches of the coast, around the tricky mangrove swamps, and now, finally, up the jungle ascent towards the more mountainous middle of the island. For Eartaria it was his first visit, but Celalah and Allacat knew the island well, and the quiet was noticeable. As they headed further into the canopy the heat began to take its toll. The damp wet of the jungle and the sweat beading from their foreheads being as one beneath the shade. The surprise at the lack of activity adding to the tiredness and frustration.

As they stopped to ponder their whereabouts Eartaria gulped down the last of the water in his flask. His determination remained resolute, but the last few empty drips tempted his body to turn back. He wiped the sweat from his brow, then scanned the forest surroundings. Noting the strange fruits that hung from the trees, and the brightly plumed birds that hovered in and out of them. Then, at last, in a dash of fortune, he caught sight of what he'd come to find. Up ahead, in the distant green, two half-tails came wandering through the trees. A tall male carrying what looked like rope over his shoulder, and a shorter female, who carried a large jug of water. The male was largely unremarkable, but the female had a long tail that snaked out from the base of her back. It bobbed and undulated with every footstep. The heavy jug a weight against the swaying rhythm. Relieved to find life, the three strangers picked up the trail again and began heading in their direction. As they caught up Celalah shouted over. The two half-tails looked around, then genially ambled towards them.

"Where is everyone?" asked Celalah, in a familiar tone, "We've come from Once Woods - we want to speak to the head."

"Everyone's further inland," came the reply from the male. "We're moving things further up the mountain. Building." He looked at the rope he was carrying in gesture.

"Why?"

"Signs," noted the female, with a smile. Her pleasing form instantly catching the eye of Eartaria, though the answer confused him. He looked across to his Celalah and Allacat, in hope of an explanation, then back again at the woman. As he did

so the two island half-tails looked at him with a drift of apprehension, realising he wasn't one of them.

"C'mon," said the male, politely hiding the drop of unease, "Let's head on in, it isn't far. We can talk more when we get there."

Scene XLV

After about thirty minutes of walking Eartaria was beginning to feel annoyed. The half-tail had said it wasn't far to the settlement, but that clearly wasn't the case. Uncharacteristically he only expressed this inwardly though, focused as he was on his hopes of persuading them to aid his cause. Celalah and Allakat, on the other hand, had begun to enjoy the excursion, and now they were back amongst their own kind - and far away from the war - it was becoming a refreshing holiday. The earlier tiredness disappearing like a forgotten dream. As they made the trek each offered to carry the large jug of water that the female half-tail carried effortlessly on her head, but each time the offer was deferentially declined. Eartaria gave no such offer.

The uphill nature of the journey especially added to his annoyance, and he kept thinking of the boat plush with weapons that they'd left far below. Hidden away, and undoubtedly safe on the Terrella coast, but still, a little too precious to be left unguarded. Pressing the war in the Northern Kingdom was why he was here he kept reminding himself. A commission he'd taken upon himself. Like an orphan among strays. His sense of purpose solely derived from circumstance, rather than any sense of forethought. As he brushed another sweep of branches from his face he could now feel the wound in his shoulder reawaken too. The pain stabbing intermittently in the damp heat. It reminded him of when he first entered Once Woods. The arrow that took him down, then the strange submerged fantasy that followed. Of golden-haired mermaids and rainbow coloured clays; of lava and tumbling mountains. Not to mention his brother, ghostly in the ocean deep. In turn it brought to mind the sea-swept woman ..and King Brijsk. He felt a brief light-headedness as these thoughts skipped by, and he braced himself to go tumbling again, but this time it passed. The pain in the shoulder coming back stronger as his senses recharged to full power. Then, just as his mind regained the turf of reality, he heard voices off afar. The dense jungle opening up before him to reveal a near city, half built. Wooden huts and tree houses. Freshly cut timbers lying ready to finish those still being crafted. Rope bridges and pullies, all hanging like vines from the endless mesh of demi-forest. And most noticeable of all the countless half-tails working away.

An army Eartaria thought to himself.

The two half-tails that had guided them quickly disappeared into the throng. The woman eager to take the water wherever it was needed, her bobbing tail now

just one of many in the crowd. Then, just as quickly, as if by magic, the head half-tail came out to greet them. As friendly as the other two.

"Let me guess, you want to bring the rest of the half-tails here? No problem, bring them. Tell the northern king he can have his Northern Kingdom. Give up the war. We have the space, you're much better here than there."

"Not quite," replied Allakat, "We want your help to win the war."

"We want you to join us in the fight," interrupted Eartaria, eagerly, "We have black powder now. We can source it here - this place looks perfect. We can use this island as a springboard. Then we can take back all of Once Woods."

The head half-tail didn't look impressed; his facial expression dropping from friendly to doubtful. Allakat and Celalah read the response and gave a sheepish look in return.

"You do realise that when Once Woods falls this island will be next," pushed on Eartaria, the slight falsehood of this statement making Allakat and Celalah feel further abashed.

The head half-tail pondered for a moment, thinking for a reply. "Follow me." He then led them deeper into the forest village, speaking as he walked. "We don't need the distraction of war. There are signs in the sky. The war is nothing. You should come here and wait for it to pass."

As they headed towards the centre they could see half-tails weaving and hammering boats up in the tree branches. Like huge canoes that sailed amongst the tree tops. From the high vantage point the workers could see down across the green island. The sea rising to the eye in the steamy distance.

"Why are you building boats up here, in the higher ground? You should build them down river," noted Eartaria, instructively, with little thought as to why they would be constructing them up-mountain in the first place.

"The river may come to us," replied the head half-tail, only mildly aware himself of how odd this comment sounded to the three visitors. It reminded Eartaria of the brazen sea-swept woman once more, but he ignored his thoughts.

"So you won't help us?" he bemoaned.

"We *can* help you - you can come here. All of you."

"No. We want real help - help to fight the war that's at our throats right now. Our lands - all our lands - are being conquered. Not just the half-tail lands, my island too. Everything will be gone. We need to come together. The mainland are rolling over everything like a giant wave ..everyone will end up in the chains of slavery."

"We can't help you fight your war. I'm sorry. You should stop fighting. Forget it. Come here."

"What if we just use this island to source the materials - for our black powder," pleaded Eartaria, "You won't have to do anything. Just a few men as helping hands, that's all we'll need."

"No," affirmed the head, his words finding an added stubbornness, "The war is not our problem. We have things to build, to protect our animals as well as our people ..and time is running out." At this many of the male half-tails came silently over, as if to emphasise the point being made by their tribal leader. Their serious faces aimed fully in the direction of the Brynnnyfirdian stranger.

"The war isn't our problem," repeated the head, "There are more important things to contend with. You can come and live here peacefully if you wish - we'll welcome you openly - but we'll have no business with your war."

For all the embarrassment they felt over Eartaria's careless, war hungry words, the dismissive words of the head half-tail rankled Allakat and Celalah a little too. The idea that they should abandon their homeland en masse, and make an exodus over the sea to the tiny island feeling almost a tad heartless. The added notion that, "signs in the sky," were more noteworthy than the relentless bloodshed they'd experienced on the mainland making it feel even more so. They had always known that the island half-tails were different, with different ways - and they still felt a sense of guilt for attempting to bring the war to their peaceful shores. However, the five minutes of conversation quickly made the small differences seem much larger. The previous hour or so of happy reacquaintance a false prelude to a truer reality. In many ways the Once Wood half-tails did indeed have more in common with the other mainlanders than they did with their tree-hopping cousins.

"We need to head back," said Allakat disappointedly, realising how much it had been a mistake to have listened to Eartaria. The detour bringing nothing but delay and bad feeling. Still, at least the pleasant nature of the half-tails they'd met reminded them what they were fighting for. The Once Wood half-tails

would have to be the sword that guarded the edge of paradise he thought to himself with diligence as he turned to leave. He then looked back at the chief. The two men made eye contact, then stepped towards each other for a warm embrace. "Thank you for your hospitality ..and your offer," Allakat expressed, with a sincere gratitude. Celalah nodded in agreement and hugged the chief in turn. Eartaria, not one for hugs, just shook his hand. He then looked around one final time at the busy community to lament the wasted potential. If he had these hands just sourcing the raw materials it would've been a huge advantage. Whether they actually fought or not. It was a futile plan though. Like trying to persuade the birds in the trees to join in the war effort. The three fighters then headed back down the mountain to their boat. The Once Wood half-tails would be fighting alone.

Scene XLVI

The large horse and heavy frame of King Brijsk seemed to dwarf the trees, so large a figure did he cut. Even the soldiers of the northern forces stood somewhat in apprehension of his presence. Following at his lead like dogs following a hunt. The scent of carnage always at his rear and never near his nostrils. For him it was a relief to finally return to battle, and though his body had aged much since his youth he quickly discovered his swiftness. His sword cutting down the rebellious half-tails with blunt ease, as his colossal black horse rode through the wood with gravity. The pools of dark blood a meek testament to the appearance.

His speed of reaction had dimmed little too; his peripheral vision giving him an almost three-hundred and sixty degree view of the landscape. The everyday politics he normally had to deal with caused trouble - there was too much to think about - but in the toil of war he found an easy speed. Thinking little of those he cast down. An arrow zipped through the trees and hit his metal breastplate, but it barely registered as he continued onwards. The smoke of nearby fires like bonfires cheering him on.

When he'd made the decision to enter the field the day before, back in Wedkarten, that was the last decision he'd made consciously. Now it was pure instinct. An animal processing of information, that by nature severed any sentiment from his view of the enemy. In the castle walls he hesitated about sending more of his men to cut down the living insurgents. To set flame to their women and babes. The moral see-saw difficult to balance, and heavy on the conscience. Yet now, as another simple soldier he could leave the mental strain behind. Hanging it on a shelf where he once hung his armour. He cracked down on another skull, then heard a cry of terror from a female half-tail witnessing the barbarity. He ignored the wail and plundered forth into the willow trees. The sharp blade of his sword cutting through the hanging branches. Children ran screaming. Others staying huddled against the hollow tree bark.

He raised his sword to lead the charge further on. His horsemen, catching up, trying to imitate his dread. Each one wielding their own swords with fury. A rally of arrows ripped through the leaves once again, one catching one of his men directly in the throat. The stunned man fell down upon his horse, briefly clinging on, before falling dead to the ground. The horse itself bolting on violently into the forest, trampling more carnage amidst the homely trees. King Brijsk cut down another half-tail that leapt out from the brush to escape. Then a second.

Then a female half-tail. His sword fatal with every blow. Another horseman then cut through the stomach of a half-tail who'd bravely drawn his own sword in defence of his terrified wife and child. King Brijsk, rounding in, cut down the woman and pressed on. A third horseman coming in to skewer the innocent child. Brijsk briefly pulled back in a pang of conflict, the gait of his horse momentarily awkward in its stride as it struggled to gauge the desire of its royal rider. As the moment of hesitation passed it was ever forward though. More death, more slaughter. The fires burning brighter against the evening approach. The king cut down another rebel, then another. The dead uncounted in his wake. There was much more of the forest to conquer, but the day had been a good one for securing his kingdom.

Scene XLVII

King Brijsk's mind was troubled as the late evening quiet set in. His tent had been prepared, and as he headed back through the trees the day's toll grew in appearance. To cap it off the half-tails were now burning the forest in their retreat. They too resorting to a scorched earth terror. The floods of fire that once chased them now walls of fire holding back the king's men. It was a foolish policy in the long run, allowing the Northern Kingdom forces to more easily sweep across the land once the forest had been diminished, but for now, as the slaughter was in its swing, it stood as a blazing shield. King Brijsk looked down at the rivers of blood that now mingled with the heavy rain as he walked, stepping over the muddied bodies. Most of which were half-tails - young and not so young, male and female. Though occasionally one of his own men, armoured and heavy, lay gory in the soil. He turned back and briefly watched the billowing fires and smoke that cackled through the dark skies before he entered his tent. The increasing rain unable to duly quench it.

"Perhaps it's time to offer truce," he said in exhaustion as he entered. He then thudded himself down in his chair, thinking little of drying off his soaked figure. His wet armour shining in the candlelit space. An attendant quickly poured him a drink, surprised to hear the words that fell from his mouth. The day's campaign had been a glorious success. Just another week, perhaps even days, and the entire woodland would be fully under control.

"Send a messenger out to reiterate my terms," Brijsk continued, "They can have free passage to leave. Or they can continue living here in my kingdom - providing they pay fealty. Or they can be wiped out, as they have been today."

"But they weren't your terms," countered one of the king's knights, politely, "The original terms stated that they must live in settlements and cities, not out in these backwards forests."

The normally boisterous king felt mildly grated by this truthful utterance, but restrained his irritation.

"I think today we've put down a marker stronger than any statement. It should be clear to them now that our jurisdiction extends to the very ends of the forest. Send out the new terms. When we receive a response we'll then decide the next course of action."

With that a messenger headed out into the pelting rain, under the flag of parley.

Scene XLVIII

The ship's boy entered, as ever the spritely monkey tagging along at his feet, not too far away. "Where's Essen?" he asked, already suspecting that his long-time companion had left the island.

Colm was concise in his response.

"Gone."

The confirmation was a relief to the young traveller, but he felt disappointed nevertheless. He didn't want to leave the island himself, especially so soon after returning, but still, he felt slighted that he hadn't been asked.

"He knew you didn't want to go, so didn't ask ..in case you said 'Yes,'" reassured Colm, "So there's no point wasting worry over it."

This longer sentence pleased him more so. Satisfied, but still feeling mildly abandoned, he then turned to head back out of the door. However, as he turned, another thing crossed his mind.

"Yes?"

"I'm not sure whether to mention this, but the Northern Kingdom folk - the ones that came over with Eartaria. They know about the outer lands. I'm not sure how they've found out - I don't suppose anyone's told them - but they've been asking me about it. The woman called Liofia in particular. She's even talking about leaving and going there."

Colm laughed. "It sounds like a nice plan. Maybe we can use it ourselves as a back-up when things get really bad here."

"You don't mind them knowing?"

"We're not in the business of patrolling the world and hiding its secrets. Who are we to say she can't know what we do? I only knew of it a few short days ago - that's even if it's true. I'm still not sure I know it now."

"It's true," insisted the boy, not wanting Colm to doubt the very real, but strange adventure he'd been upon, and looking more lost knowing he was now the only one on the island who could vouch for the tale. As he said this the little monkey, as if in protest, leapt up onto the table. Then, from there, began scaling the shelves, knocking books and ornaments to the floor.

"I don't doubt what you've told me," said Colm with patience, ignoring the clatter, "You need to remember though that others haven't seen what you've seen. They don't have your eyes. So, when you speak again to these strangers bear that in mind. Be careful you don't sell them false dreams, or undersell the dangers of heading out into such dangerous seas." The ship's boy nodded his head, trying his utmost to absorb the counsel. He looked at Colm for a moment, then finally disappeared out the door. The mischievous monkey scampering down and bounding across the floor to follow.

Scene XLIX

Seaspell lay there on the huge bed, still in a feverish state of unconsciousness. The ornate beams and hanging drapes a royal frame for his delicate and dislocated soul. His room had now become the war room, and as his mother Maleeva sat doting and concerned at his side, all talk was of the expanding conflict.

"The rolling conveyer of new ships continues - the latest armada is ready to sail against Brynnyfirdia, as soon as the weather clears," noted one royal attendant, his voice terse and suppliant, "..though the supply of wood from the north is beginning to halt."

King Mizmeam stood there stoutly, listening, his mind forever reweighing the various fields of battle. He mulled over the lack of supplies from the Northern Kingdom with a drop of annoyance, but his own words focused solely on plans moving forward.

"Once we have conquered Brynnyfirdia we can at last move on to Tunida," he stated with confidence, his glee tempered by his own concern for the royal child lying febrile on the bed. He cast his black eyes down at Seaspell as he spoke, his mind briefly distracted before he continued on. "The beauty of leaving Tunida until last is that they'll hold their own ships back. They'll never fully leave the island undefended to save the Western Isles. So they'll just sit there, as we press forward." He looked again at Seaspell's cherubim face, as if repeatedly reminded of the boy's precarious state. As he did so the tall Tunidian captive, Coulema Galina, entered the room, accompanied by a guard. He likewise looked down at the young prince with care. The light, but strong chains around his ankles still a constant aide-memoire that for all his growing familiarity he remained both a stranger and an enemy in the royal household. Maleeva looked up at him as he entered, almost in an appeal for some words of help, but none were forthcoming.

"The boy is improving, we are sure," stated the king aloud, in a burst of forced optimism, trying to reassure himself as much as everyone else that the boy would recover. He then paced across to the window and poured himself a drink. The navy blue Keneeshkan skyline was shaded with grey and daunting clouds through the glass. As he looked out across the vista he could see the coming victories in his mind. The news that the Harbour Lands had almost fallen completing a piece of the jigsaw in his ambitious imagination. Yet again he turned and looked down at the sweet boy.

"When he awakes he will be the prince of a much larger kingdom."

Scene L

Out on the Harbour Lands the campaign tents dotted the muddy fields. The Brynnyfirdian flags brazen in the wind, pointing skyward from the tent-tops. The blue and green a picture of the wider landscape, pivoted for warcraft. Peerless in the daylight. Essen sat brooding, eager with rage. On this last finger of land they stood hemmed in against all odds. Sandwiched between conquered land and hostile sea. Numbered six and seven to one. The wind whipped blood and salt upon the air, as swords and horses stood ready to pitch final battles in the open field. The rowdy noise of those left living daubed with apprehension.

Meanwhile, across the sea, on the shores of the Northern Kingdom, Eartaria had arrived to find equally stoic minds awaiting death and conflict. Though this time the half-tail warriors were not just men, but women and children too. Hardened by siege, none now unfamiliar with the terror of desiccated bodies and bloody wounds. Word had come of King Brijsk's offer of terms, but the call had been sent back firmly:

"We refuse all terms, we have the secret of powder now; we will fight for our homes, in the sleet and in the rain, come fire or sword. We'd prefer to see every half-tail's throat slit than to see a single one on the leash of slavery."

Scene LI

The fighting in the eastern seas was fierce, and no matter how hard the Tunidan and Maiden Land ships fought it seemed that for every one enemy ship they destroyed another two arrived in the water. Such was the relentless nature of the mainland manpower and industry. It wasn't as bad on land, but still, the march of the Eastern Kingdom troops, supplemented with the ever-so-many slave soldiers from Caster, was eating up territory. The flowers and pretty meadows of the countryside increasingly marred by skirmish and powder shot. The open fields an easy pathway towards the capital, Maiden's Tower - though the line of encroachment still lay a good deal off.

Within the capital Queen Aglaia was imperious in defiance. Screaming orders and arraying her defences. Day and night intermingled by lack of sleep. As she sat at her desk she stared aimlessly at the various papers and battleplans, more focused on her thoughts than on the actual information. The melted candles, like dim fairy lights at the wooden desk corners, still burning, though morning daylight now crept into the room. Then, just as her eyelids began to reach for a moment's rest, suddenly, Four, Five and Six - her three little dogs - sprung up from their collective nap and started barking alertly; scurrying around the room.

"Quiet," she snapped, annoyed that her dozing train of thought had been disturbed. They stopped their yapping, but continued to scamper in circles. The nails of their paws clacking on the hard wood beams.

Her mind off-track, but reawakened, Queen Aglaia pushed herself up from her seat to stretch her aching frame. But suddenly, as if on cue, a huge tremor pushed her back. The palace itself, and the earth beneath, beginning to quake; the stone walls rocking under the pull. She steadied herself. The little dogs now silent, hugging close at her feet. Then, just as quickly, the shaking stopped. She regained her composure and headed over to the window, to look out across her kingdom. Two guards came rushing in. Before either could inquire about her safety she issued another command.

"I think it's time we executed 'Twelve-Fifteen'," she stated firmly.

The two loyal guardsmen looked back grimly in response.

"That's my order," she reiterated.

She continued to watch from the window. Within a few minutes a large wave, triggered by the earthquake, washed over the western edge of the kingdom. It swept over the harbour walls of Maiden's Tower, then flooded deeper into the country. Before eventually receding out again. In the initial aftermath the full damage and destruction was difficult to gauge. Queen Aglaia looked on as this slow devastation unfolded. Its awesome power confirming in her mind the need for her decision.

Scene LII

King Brijsk stepped outside the tent. The earth was sodden and rain was still pelting the ground. His first footstep beyond the loose cover of the canopy sank a few deep inches into the mud. With the second he slipped slightly, but the weight of his towering body held him steady.

"The heavens really are falling," he exclaimed loudly. The natural shelter of the forest helping little to shield him from the downpour, "I think the wild woman may have been right after all."

His aide stood soaked by his side; a small, shivering flake in contrast to the bellicose king.

"I admire the grit of these tree people," continued Brijsk, anticipating the question the aide was wanting to ask. "They want to fight for this rain soaked jungle - much more than I do, but I won't give them the option this time. Yes, send word that I give ceasefire. We'll go no further into their weeping willows. They can keep their powder too - if they can keep it dry in this flood."

He looked around the wet landscape again as he said this, his beard and face already decked with raindrops.

"And get me my horse!"

His horse was then led out into the mud by another aide. It stood large and dominant in the hollow grove - the breath from its nostrils like warm spirits dancing through the cold damp air. Its coat like blackest silk; the mane an oily black with the rainy dew. The giant king struggled to climb atop his giant steed. His two aides slipping and heaving in the mud as they tried to jockey him into position. Finally his foot caught the stirrup and he landed plum in the seat. The awkwardness of the climb immediately forgotten in the now perfect symbiosis of king and beast. With a small kick of his heel the horse then stepped out through the mud and into the forest clearing.

King Brijsk was joined by two of his bravest knights, likewise on horseback. With a rush of wind the rain swept across the open clearing with added violence, but all three stood upright against torrent.

"We're heading east," declared Brijsk, as he poised to leave, "Hold the fort 'til we get back ..and make sure to keep the peace."

The two drenched aides stood like tattered ensigns, willing to do their duty, but hampered by the elements. They held their salute until the king and his two knights had rode off into the distance, then quickly headed back into the sanctuary of the campaign tent.

Scene LIII

The guards gripped the girl by her arms and dragged her from the room. Just five minutes earlier she'd been sitting combing her hair before a broken looking glass, that had a huge crack down the middle. Half watching the damp and dredged streets from her window, between bouts of self-admiration. Now the door to her little home was barged open, and she was being told she had to leave. To where and why for she knew not.

The lower floor of the house was still soggy from the foot of water that had rushed down the cobbled lane, and the dank smell of sea-ruin added to the overpowering duress. Her mother screamed at the guards, as her little brother punched and grabbed at the back of one frantically, but to little avail.

"It's on orders of Queen Aglaia ..every girl in the city between the age of 12 and 15 is to be taken."

The girl kicked, screeched and bit as the guards forced her out of the door. They then bound her hands and feet, and ushered her into the waiting carriage. As she was pushed inside she found another girl seated, who had accepted her fate more passively. She vaguely recognised the girl from a few roads down. She then turned and looked back – she could see one of the guards holding her mother at the door, stopping her from leaving and coming to the rescue. She then briefly thought of her father, away in the bloodied fields, fighting Queen Aglaia's war. Too far away to save her. The horses quickly clopped off, and the wheels of the carriage began moving. On their journey towards the palace tower.

Scene LIV

"Are we back to paying tribute in flesh, like our weak and mythic ancestors?"

"Is this our peace??"

The cries and questions came at Queen Aglaia from all sides of the house. She stood at the lectern, fishing for a break in the din to reply. Outside, on the streets of Maiden's Tower, people were equally angry, and her imperial guard were alert and prepared to use heavy force if necessary to keep order. All this as war plagued her crumbling kingdom.

"We demand to have details of the negotiations with the mainland kingdoms!" came one call, bellowing from across the front benches.

The word 'demand' especially pinching a nerve in Queen Aglaia's metaphorical back.

"I'll do as I deem - I AM A TYRANT ..and WE are at war."

Roars and condemnations came loudly from the chamber as she snapped back. She stood taller against the furor, and looked down condescendingly on the mobbing scene. Turning almost full circle as if to fix her teacherly eye upon each and every member of the house. Those on the streets outside could almost feel the tension doling out from the building. Its ancient beams now conjuring echoed moments from its old, deep history: long forgotten terrors, and the heavy disagreements that preceded them.

"First you cowards refused to fight," she screeched, further gaining her voice, "Called me a war-monger - a monster - for torching our enemy's ships. Now, apparently, I am the appeaser." She paused for a moment, but not so long that her shrill words could be interrupted by further harrying. "Here we are - on the edge of this world. Our gentle flower of civilization on the brink of being trampled under foot. Crushed by harder things than we. I will do what I must to make sure we will re-flower."

As she gave these words one of the more elderly members of the house shot back in response, his ancient skeletal frame trying to muster every sinew in his voice, like a dying soldier striving to make one more heroic pitch in battle. *"What civilisation is it that throws its flowers to the sea??"* he asked, hoarily, *"Sacrificing the fair and the innocent that the aged might sleep safely?!"*

"Those girls will be safer than anyone in this realm - safe from war and this failing world. I do not lie," cut back Aglaia.

"She confirms it with her very words," muttered the ancient house member, hoarser still in response, exhausted from his initial outburst.

Queen Aglaia looked across at him with steely eyes. Then turned and motioned to her guards to have him removed. Without hesitation they headed to the old man and dragged him from the chamber. Further roars of protest wailed. From the balcony above Prince Reach watched everything below. He banged the wooden rails audibly with the hilt of his sword as the old man was forced from the chamber. Then, in a strong voice, he called down to those assembled. His words deep and hollow with reverb beneath the lofty ceiling.

"We don't have to do this, we have more ships and supplies coming. Lots more ..and more soldiers. We need to fight on. We must fight on. To the death if needed. And I believe we can - and will - win."

The queen looked up, shocked and affronted by the disobedient outburst. Cheers tinged with gratitude, in direct antipathy to her, went up around the chamber. The credit Prince Reach already had for his kingdom's support now amplified by his plea to battle on. The heroic tone in stark contrast to the queen's seeming surrender. She stared at him angrily, then stormed from the house. Her long embellished dress trailing behind her.

Scene LV

King Brijsk's horse clip-clopped through the Nic – the vague and narrow borderland between his kingdom and King Kaspria's Eastern Kingdom. His two loyal knights never far behind, galloping along at equal pace. The speedy journey like a quick whisper on the wind, reaching across a landmass now almost totally framed by conflict. The western and eastern seas like wings of a giant butterfly, flittering with war.

The ground beneath his horse's hooves was firm, and the very lightest of rain added sparkle to a glowing sun, holding promise of a better day. Confident in the endeavour, he rode on with clear-minded vision. The previous nights in the Once Wood forest had brought troubled portents to his dreams: rainy teardrops, like exponential numbers in the worried skies of his mind; or, as countless stepping stones across rising waters – dark and boundless and impossible to skip. Now though, he understood lines needed to be drawn. The thought of peace had brought sense to his mind, and with this sense he now intended to bring peace to firmer realms. He was not alone in these thoughts, though the few that shared his vision were to be doomed by similar fate.

Under darker clouds, in far off Caster, the shores were flush with yet more ships, readied to bolster the coming onslaught on Brynnyfirdia. The thoughts not peace, but total conquest. Peace simply an ideal that only followed the oneness of victory.

In the Maiden Lands a single ship sat sullen in the harbour. Its pretty hull and sail heavy on the water with the guilt of theft. Slowly, under cover of secret proclamation, the maidens held captive in Queen Aglaia's palace were transported to the ship.

Finally, ripe with fullness, it left the harbour and headed out onto the misty sea. Disappearing from the motherland.

Scene LVI

Essen's sword slid through the stomach of his opponent, who slumped to the sticky ground. The clangour of battle so incessant it competed and blended with his vision: armour, silver, flesh, blood; skies and clouds. But most of all the dark, trampled fields beneath him, and the boots and feet that moved upon it. Far above, swarms of starlings murmured in the sky - like graceful iron filings in stormy fields. Flux, deluge, death and discharge. The natural world spooked, matching man's appetite for dread and destruction.

In the swirling cauldron Essen lived as pure instinct. The flow of information from his senses processed through his stomach, heart and lungs. A swoosh of his sword, a duck, a twist, a pant of breath. Every bodily move a perfect response to the terrible data. From the corner of his eye a coming assault from behind. A turn, a sweep, another enemy slain and disposed of. Every battle won. Neither cut nor bruise laying claim to his skin. Only the mud that caked his legs and the blood of others that sullied his form. Not to mention the profuse sweat that ran in beads from the drenched hair beneath his bronze helmet. Yet alas, with each individual victory came a growing terror. The mainland soldiers, like a devouring infestation, kept cutting through his fellow men. With a cruel and unrelenting hunger.

As Essen cut down another foe he scanned the messy scene for fellow fighters. The odd one, two or three dotted about, here and there, bravely holding out - or falling to their fate. The flicker of a Brynnyfirdian standard stood tall against the tumult, but quickly fell from view. The Harbour Lands had fallen. The 'Pliant King', far, far away from battle - as far away as it was possible to be whilst still being on the island - now undisputed king in name. King Mizmeam undisputed king in reality. Essen screamed to the few stragglers in his vicinity to fall back, but none could hear. He looked to cut a path for himself from the carnage, but suddenly, a large sword blow came heavy against his armour, knocking him off balance. As he stumbled to brace himself he quickly turned and replied. His sword cut up through the body of his aggressor, ripping out the insides. The bright piercing weapon screeching and scraping against the underside of the breastplate. Essen cut down a further mainland soldier, this time his sword roaring across the head and neck with violent temper. He then dropped back deeper.

Eventually, another Brynnyfirdian joined his attempt to retire, tall and exhausted from battle, a bloody wound marring his face. Together they covered their retreat. Their eyes watching the grand scene as they moved backwards towards the forest

cover, before slinking into the trees. Their lives were a hollow consolation. The Harbour Lands were lost.

Scene LVII

Queen Tunida stood silently as the ground murmured beneath her feet. The city of Woodville gently rumbling as the tremor passed; the calm ocean roar in the distance familiar once again in the quiet aftermath. It was the second tremor in as many days, and fortunately, like earlier ones, only nerves were frayed. The queen's normal stoicism having a touch of sullenness, her eyelids and eyelashes drooping ever-so-slightly, like heavy boughs. Her flowing red dress; a dampen to its lustre. Worried by the groaning earth, a few serving maids came rushing out to attend her, but she ushered them away, preferring the ocean drone.

Meanwhile, a mere mile away, her husband, the King of Tunid was busying himself to leave, overseeing his small ship. A pilgrimage was in the reckoning, and though uneasy storm clouds hung over his kingdom greater things were at play. All necessary preparations had been made, yet still, the ship that lulled on the earth-churned sea before him looked inadequate. So small beneath the larger world. Likewise, there was a dull feeling of desertion inside as he stepped aboard, grieving to leave his queen alone and so abandoned. Nevertheless, with the wider world in growing chaos the time had come. Word had already gone out to his brother, Prince Twayen, that, as always, he must remain on Outer Tunida - no matter what befell the inner island. The perimeter needed its royal and ancient guard more than ever, as ominous omens loomed in the heavens. The rumbles of the ground felt most heavily in the stomach. Marrying mindful worry to the physical world, in knots of living, fleshy matter.

Naturally thoughts then turned to his youngest brother, Prince Reach, out defending the realm on the eastern front. Manning the eastern lands that separated the warring spectres of gods and men. He had doubted these myths so many times himself, so strange they'd seemed, but now he regretted his lack of faith. His ancestors had been wiser than he'd been, and he'd failed to rule as they'd taught. His liberal ease and younger reluctance to spill blood now a glaring weakness, as viewed from the bloodier moment of total war.

As his lonely ship cast off the queen watched voiceless from the palace gardens. A perilous journey across the waters - hopefully to join her cherished son, on his dangerous isle of exile, in the northern mist. With everything she loved most dearly now out at sea she thought less of herself and her island, even as invasion and conquest grew ever closer. The sea seeming to swallow her soul as she opened herself to the sorrow; the grey clouds darkening above her regal brow.

Scene LVIII

"I'm sure the constant logging of trees has in part caused this," opined Taxilian, casually, as he pondered the turmoil from the safety of the farmhouse kitchen: a cocoon from the wider warring world. The news that Lake Fryjia had flooded its banks thankfully seeming like something distant, that was happening in a faraway place, though it was near enough to be disturbing. Grandma Mayleen instinctively felt the sense of threat though, as if the breached lake was another army of troops heading to the wars, travelling, fluid-like, in her general direction. Troubling the thoughts as she juggled the rumours in her mind.



"I think I'm going to go and stay with Luteeyay for a bit," interjected Elgiva, as the words unfolded. Her mood more positive, and her mind less willing to conjure the flooded fields in abstract. Though the reports of it gave her plans an added sense of urgency. "I feel he'll need my help more than you two do. I'm not entirely keen on spending a few weeks in that ramshackle hovel of his, but I must find something to do now there's no harvest to distract me." She then looked out from the window, and across into the drizzly fields, remembering her last rain-sodden journey to Luteeyay's home.

Taxilian and Mayleen didn't argue with the plan. After all, there was little better to do, other than sit and ponder the world outside. Beneath the rain-rattled roof. Plus, like her, they too felt concern for Luteeay. Now even more so, as he was the one link left between them and Box, Goola, and Julen.

"I suspect he knows much more than he lets on," noted Mayleen, contemplatively, reflecting on the strange figure they all knew so well, but knew so little.

"He's certainly doing something over there," nodded Elgiva, with the air of mild disapproval. Supping her tea with a shake of the head. Giving the clear sense that she planned to tell him exactly just that when she finally reached him.

"If he is up to something- something important - let him know I can help him if he needs me," chipped in Taxilian with steadiness, feeling the need to take the aged kytalyk's side somewhat, given he was being henpecked in absentia.

"There's always work on the farm, but nothing hugely important at this time of the year. If he's working flat out like you said it must be something important. Whatever he's doing."

"He said something about 'eggs hatching,' or 'broken shells,' or something or other. Perhaps he's going a bit cuckoo in his old age."

Elgiva didn't quite believe this as she said it, but the peculiarity of the potions and trinkets she saw in his scruffy workshop, not to mention his manic behaviour, could forward no better explanation. As Mayleen heard these words they gave her another jerk of internal worry. She'd wondered about the faculties of Luteeay herself, but someone else raising the point made it a deeper concern. Inwardly she briefly considered joining Elgiva on her sojourn, but quickly remembered the animals on the farm. The comfort of the goats and the cows a poor, but necessary substitute for the missing younger ones.

As Elgiva took the last of her now lukewarm tea she likewise thought of Liofia, so far away. What did her royal face now look like after such a long time? How had her cunning, but goodly heart grown in a world of prickles and thorns? At least they were now both further from the over-spilling Lake Fryjia, she thought. Perhaps the urge to flee the castle walls had served a timely purpose.

All the while, as these three spoke and wondered, nearer Castle Tori, another torrent was rushing through the Eastern Kingdom. As heavy waters washed across grassy pastures, threatening to make covenant between lake and Eastern

Sea, King Brijsk was on his weighty horse, heading to make conference with Liofia's father, King Kaspria. A king now rising like a tide with each stony victory. His own thoughts of Liofia occulted from his mind. Painful and distant. Like treacherous emissaries threatening to arrive from distant lands.

Scene LIX

A small boat docked in the chill and pretty Woodville harbour. Its chief occupant, after much pleading and insistence, was ushered to the palace. After an hour sat waiting he was finally given license to face the Queen of Tunida. He bowed down before her, but she remained seated. His manner obsequious, but prideful.

"Is it not working out?" asked the queen, curtly.

"Things are fine ..just not quite perfect. We're here to put out some feelers. To see if potential avenues of cooperation can be re-opened."

"So things *are not* working out."

The Eldbeean official looked down at the floor briefly whilst choosing his words.

"Things are fine, we do well, but the war is becoming a tad wearisome. So we would prefer peace ..at some point."

"Let me guess," questioned the queen with an admonishing sigh; her long, thick dress heavy in the room, the red and browns of the weave like broad tree branches, deep-rooted in the earth. "You now have martial law - most, if not all, of your town commandeered; some of your goods confiscated; the privileges you once had squeezed evermore. Now you come here, in the hope of some wider peace, or, at least, for something to use as leverage to untighten the grip."

The needy official from across the sea looked small and ineffectual as he stood in the glossy palace chamber.

"Well.." intoned Queen Tunida, awaiting a response, "What is it that you actually want?"

"We just want to open up a discreet channel. To pass messages back and forth. So we can perhaps find a way out of this mess."

"You want to be go-between again. Sadly, however, for you, that has passed. Poor instincts. You saw which way the wind was blowing and you went with the wind. You could've sailed more wisely, but you took the easy course. There's nothing I can do now. I don't control the wind. Our message to King Mizmeam remains the same. He needs to lower himself, for the good of all the kingdoms. You are free to come back with information if you choose, but the leverage you had is gone. You are chattel in a simpler system. It's only your poor instincts once more that allows you to think you could come here and be anything other. When mere

word of this visit could see you executed ..and I would need poorer instincts myself to view you as having any agency in such circumstances. But I wish you well."

With that the guards escorted the once hopeful Eldbeean back from the palace, and down to the salt air of the harbour. To make his journey back to the dark Kingdom of Caster.

Scene LX

Tempers were frayed. There had even been riots in some parts of the capital. Everyone across the house, and in the wider country stood desperate to know if the rumours circulating were true. If the Maiden Tower maidens – their precious native daughters – had been shipped, by secret, in the dead of night. As tribute to pacify their ever swarming enemy: the ruthless Eastern Kingdom and Caster forces. The entire northern half of the Maiden Lands now lay occupied, and the more populous regions of the south waited in fear of conquest and slavery. Though, with this latest grim news, death languished far below dishonour in the ranking, the anger so taking over. Peace on such terms a truly filthy word. The very suggestion a rallying cry for suicidal push back.

Queen Aglaia looked imperious as ever as she entered the house and strolled towards its centre, to once again explain her actions. Her long, flowing dress brightly adorned with stars and sequins, her hair large and stiff; making her look like a plump, proud pheasant. As she appeared a brooding silence cast over the chamber. Her villainous presence eliciting a seething communal glare from its members. With even her most sycophantic followers choosing quiet distance over any possibility of perceived allegiance. Though one or two inwardly agreed with the realpolitik of her decision – after all, what were a hundred or so girls in comparison to the very kingdom itself. If it meant saving their own skins to boot, all the better.

Aglaia looked loftily around the room, taking in the confrontational atmosphere. For a few seconds she felt a slight disappointment at the stupidity of the men assembled, but then smiled with a relief that it made things so much more simple. She cleared her throat loudly to grab their full attention, though she already held it in completion. Then, finally, she went to speak, but hesitated – a slight nervousness overcoming her. A feeling she would never normally feel in such moments of drama.

Over her long reign there had been many crises, but her stone-hard psyche had always remained unflappable. As she went to speak again a rush of déjà vu flashed against her inner eyelids. In the single blink and flutter she gripped the lectern firmly. Suddenly, visions of her first ever address to the house came flooding back. From time long ago, when she was so much the younger. A delicate flower-like maiden herself. She remembered she had felt nerves then too, yet had hidden them to do her duty. The memories pulsed through her brain as she braced herself to deliver the tirade. *Then she fell down to the floor.*

The angry silence of the house was replaced by an even deeper, deadening silence. Then, a long, shocked half-second later the Queen's loyal guards went running to her side. Her body still and unmoving on the hard wooden floor.

"Get back!" screamed one of the guards to the crowding peers, desperate to give the monarch some space. The silent shock quickly replaced by an all-consuming panic. Some members walked from the chamber in response, unable to process the scene. Others watched down from the benches. The frantic guards, so much more executive than the helpless elders watching on, busy trying to revive the prostrate queen. It was little use.

The Queen Was Dead.

Scene XLI

Having stabled his horse, King Brijsk entered Castle Tori, and began the climb up the steps to meet King Kaspria. In his heavy armour he felt out of breath as he made the march. The sky above his head a turbid grey. Finally, reaching the top, he found Kaspria stood with his arms behind his back, staring out to sea. As the clunk of armour signalled his presence Kaspria turned around, startled, even though he'd been informed of the northern king's arrival barely a moment earlier. Seeing the large neighbouring monarch, right there before him, on his castle battlements, dis comforted him somewhat. It was an out-of-place omen. Reminding him of his former weakness, whilst standing in his current lordship.

Brijsk instantly noted the change in the king since the last time they'd met. Leaner, yet larger, and darker in soul. A steeliness in his eyes. A brooding weight to his demeanour, replacing the former passive tone of appeasement. The openness of the castle roof, and the darkening sky, bringing an air of duel and confrontation.

"It's strange that you've come," uttered Kaspria, still startled, "Could you have not just sent a messenger?"

"The message I'm bringing is too important."

Kaspria didn't respond and looked on, waiting for further words.

"I think it's time for peace," stated Brijsk, bluntly, "Things are going too far. Far too far. It's getting out of hand."

"But we're winning..," replied Kaspria, visibly affronted at the suggestion. He then paced around in a circle looking downwards, before locking his steely eyes back onto the distant sea.

"I think we should both implement a ceasefire," continued Brijsk, boldly, though now he adopted a slightly passive edge, "I already have in my territory. Then, after that, we should head to Caster, to persuade Mizmeam to tack things back too."

The Eastern King stood astonished at the statement. He simply couldn't understand the desire to cease now. In his mind he conjured visions of his current successes - the Maiden Lands almost buckling to complete submission. An entire sea dominated by his ships. He then contrasted it to the relatively easy task that the Northern Kingdom had to contend with. Putting down a few feral

half-tails; supplying the docks with wood. He instantly assumed madness on the part of the bounding king, though he sensed fear was the greater driver of his crazed dash across the mainland. He looked over his rival trying to gauge him further. The huge stomach and shoulders and legs of the man. The domineering size. There was no tell of dissemblance, though he understood only too well that Brijsk was more intelligent than his straight language gave impression to. Perhaps he felt concern that once all the other kingdoms had fallen his would be next? What need would a northern king be once all the world was ruled from a single throne? Of course, the same could be said of his own eastern crown too, though surely things were different here. The possibility had never thus far occurred to him, but now, as it did, it troubled him a little. Still, his inner monologue quickly dismissed it as absurd. "Look at the sheer size of the forces under my control," he reminded himself internally - the cannons and the guns and the black powder. In months, perhaps weeks, he would have full domain over the entire Maiden Lands. How could such a vast territory be managed by King Mizmeam alone, without his acquiescence?

"What will be left to rule if things continue on like this?" interrupted Brijsk, in his natural bellow, oblivious to the reflections that raced through his counterpart's mind. The basic stark sense of the question hanging in contrast to the grandiose concerns of King Kaspria,

"..And this infernal weather too?"

This last observation sounded nonsequential, but Brijsk couldn't hold it from the conversation, hoping it was not just himself that felt the discord and foreboding. He stood like an unmoveable rock atop the castle as he raised the point; the black night above him like the inky dot of a monumental exclamation mark, infinitely greater than the world it stood in.

"Weather?" asked King Kaspria, grimly.

"Look how your lake floods. It's rained in my own kingdom for sixty days."

"It's just a flood," noted Kaspria, matter-of-factly.

As he heard this response Brijsk regretted bringing it up, realising it only undermined his pleas. In contrast, it emboldened Kaspria, and he returned to his assessment that a drop of madness had touched the rotund ruler before him. As he looked again at him he seemed somewhat weaker. A wet, fat warlord from a rainy kingdom, who'd travelled so far to beg for peace. He turned this thought

over in his mind, and wondered what King Mizmeam would think; or even do. He then paused with adult consideration before speaking,

"Our kingdoms will both be at the mercy of King Mizmeam if he does end Tunidan rule," he conceded with a note. "Over half the men I have here come from Caster, so, in reality, I myself am only half in control. Maybe a pause to the war would be wise. I must admit, I share your worries. Nevertheless, I'd like to complete the conquest of the Maiden Lands. A few more weeks may do it - we're very close. Then I can begin to return Mizmean's troops back across the icy mountains. When that has begun I could send word to you, and we could then both head to Caster, with proposals for a resolution. I need to have confidence in you too though."

King Brijsk was pleased, yet slightly surprised at this speech.

"First, however," continued Kaspria, his eyes looking distinctly less steely, "You should stay a few nights and enjoy my hospitality. Castle Tori is a beautiful building, even in a flooding kingdom that's waging a violent war. I can show you the advances we're making, and we'll be able to discuss our plans further before you travel back north."

Scene LXII

A tree, a leaf, a breeze, a tempest. With word reaching King Mizmeam that the Harbour Lands had fallen, his fresh wave of ships left their own harbours. The wet and stormy sea dotted with a wooden swarm. A thousand hornets on their way to Brynnyfirdia. Meanwhile, not a million miles away, the King of Tunid manned his own ship, the Merbird, through the torrid waters. Like a tiny spider on a blustered wind. Fated by direction.

Only fools would attempt to make such journeys, but kings, in their wisdom, refuse to wait for calmer days. In the mind of Man the wind blows, like a breath from some bearded god, but in reality the sky sucks the air. Like a vacuum hoovering the world away. The high pressure of living life pulled towards the low pressure of nothingness. Atop the Earth the clouds turned in strange whirlpools; and the ocean flickered between dead stillness and sudden un-sailable torrents.

Within half an hour one thousand ships were but four and ten. The terrible sea and sky, a deadly serpent, rising from above and below to devour the mere men and their crafted endeavours. The few straggling ships dashed off course in wild direction. The King of Tunid, beautiful and craggy against the spray, tied himself to the mast, as the Merbird bobbed on the chaotic waters. Only the grip and suction of the sea beneath stopping the winds from ripping the little vessel up towards the pitch black night.

Further off on land, a sea-swept woman stood in the howling wind and rain, and watched on from the shore. The power of her prophecy manifest in the destruction. The people gathered near in awe and wonder. Amazed and terrified that her words had been so far-seeing. The angry mainland king, for the first time in fear of her magic, responding with unrestrained rage.

"Arrest this sorceress, we must have her killed."

Scene LXIII

"We can conquer the world, but we cannot conquer the weather," noted King Mizmeam, woefully, as he considered the losses at sea.

"The world is the weather, my lord."

Coulema Galina stood pensive at the king's side as he made this remark. The king listened but didn't hear it. The other assembled men said little either, each waiting for the king to further express his own thoughts on the glaring catastrophe. He had few to speak however, and sieved his own mind for answers, as if he alone was in the room.

"The strange woman," asked Galina, "Has she been detained?"

"We have her in the dungeons."

"She'll be executed?"

The king stood large as the question of punishment arose, and though he knew his answer he doubted himself internally.

"Eventually," he declared, "..but first Maleeva wants her to attend the prince. Just in case she can help him."

"And if she does?"

"She won't ..she's just a common conjurer. She shouldn't be allowed anywhere near the boy, but Maleeva is desperate, and I cannot blame her for hoping."

Galina paused before asking the next question, staring at the wine in his cup as if searching for self-assurance. He already knew the answer, but wanted to press the conversation to a further destination, and could see no clearer route. Yet, he worried that the king would feel the measure of his intention. As he gently swirled the cloudy red wine it made him think of blood and death. He moved his lips with a minor dread.

"So, if she is just a fortune-telling trickster, why detain her?"

The king was quick and certain with his response.

"Because of the effect she's having on the kingdom ..the slaves, the peasantry, the soldiers. Their wives ..their whores. We can't have a population fearing magic

more than the rule of law. Just because she hasn't swindled me, doesn't mean she can't swindle the world outside."

"But perhaps she has a point," touched Galina, tepidly, "The weather grows grim. The days are strange."

"Not you too," laughed Mizmeam, the laughter giving him a momentary uptick in mood. "You only prove my purpose. If you and Maleeva have fell for these false charms, heaven knows how hoodwinked the common people will be. I should've had her executed the minute she stepped foot here. For all I know she's a Tunidan plant, sent here for that very purpose."

Coulema Galina gulped his bloody drink, his Tunidan stomach feeling an instinctive relief that the king hadn't turned an accusing eye on him as well, as he condemned the preternatural woman. As he noted this relief though he felt a guilt in his bones, and in his mind. Here he stood, now a pliant servant of a foreign sovereign, as the world fell apart at the seams. A pleasant drink in his hand. His stomach more fearful for his own life than for the fate of his home kingdom. He remembered his master, the King of Tunid, and wondered how he was now faring in this great struggle. Likewise, the boy-prince, Estorie, that he'd left on Brynnyfirdia. He looked down at the light, but secure chains around his feet, and felt a disappointment in himself. Along with a disappointment that Mizeam had dismissed the ominous signs of nature so blithely.

"We are in a great war," he thought, prosaically, "..and I am a soldier."

Scene LXIV

Drua Maleeva sat fretting at the side of the bed, as the bedraggled woman entered the room, heavily escorted by the king's guards. Standing up in response, she turned and faced the strange seer. The two women eyed each other with mistrust. In her simple black clothing Maleeva looked just as much a sorceress as the unkempt woman now standing before her, though her powers were weakened by her despair for her son. Her poise and devilment lessened like a dampened fire with the worry. The black clothes that would normally give an air of severity taking on an air of mourning.

The blessed Seaspell lay on the bed, frozen in form. A beautiful wax-like figurine. His shallow breathing, and the heat from his skin the only evidence of a living child. As the haggard woman looked down at the boy a protective glare crossed Maleeva's face. A hatred that, without permission, she had dared to look upon her precious and wounded son. "You said you could help him," she snapped, annoyed by the wild carelessness, and the clear unwillingness to give due respect.

"Let me see the boy, I will tell you what ails him."

The irritated Maleeva gave a nod to the guards and they allowed the woman to come closer to the bed. She cast her eyes across the boy slowly. Her matted and knotted hair almost brushing against his tender skin as she inspected his ears and eyes. His closed eyelids and delicate lashes rippling slightly in response to her natural breath. She placed her hand on his forehead. Maleeva leapt forward to interrupt, but then pulled herself back and refrained. Her eagerness to hear the diagnosis overriding her protective instinct. Though her beaded eyes remained fixed with hawkish intent. The sea-swept woman then gently ran her fingers around the neck of the boy's chemise, before moving back from the bed.

"The crown is killing him. It isn't his," she uttered, with complete confidence.

The words angered Maleeva.

"He doesn't want to be king," reiterated the strange woman, evermore insistent in her appraisal.

At this point Seaspell began to twitch and jerk in his fever, and a stream of blood began to run down from one side of his nose. Maleeva fell upon his body in a fit of panic, one hand gripping him tightly, the other caressing the warm white cheek of his face.

"Out!" she screamed in fright. "Leave Him!"

The guards violently dragged the woman away, and back towards the castle dungeons.

Scene LXV

Lake Fryjia continued to flood its banks, the small towns and villages in its near vicinity knee high in water. The poor, un-helped, their homes unlivable. The occasional body, dead and grubby upon the heavy waters. Still, the war continued apace. The swollen harbours filled with ships and soldiers heading back and forth to the table of conflict. King Brijsk woke breezily on the damp morning. Fresh to start his journey back to the Northern Kingdom. The previous few days of discussion with King Kaspria had been productive, and required the utmost secrecy.

As he and his two loyal knights clopped beyond the gates of Castle Tori, and towards the wet green countryside, King Kaspria spoke to his own men. He brought his head guard close and whispered in his ear. The guard received his instruction, then walked briskly to his garrison to ready his men. One hundred and eighty horse. His finest troop. Heading outside the city walls on a critical mission.

Scene LXVI

Prince Reach stood there in his full regalia as the funeral procession took place. He was now Commander of the Maiden Lands - the people and the house elders had demanded it, there could be no other man to lead. *Man* being the defining word.

There had been no male ruler on the Maiden Lands in recorded memory, but the switch from perpetual diplomacy to total war had flipped a primal dial. With no obvious heir to fill the hollow, the choice had been obvious. The queen's one distant niece thought to have been cruelly cast off with the other maidens on the now infamous ship. Another aspect of the drama that had poisoned so heavily the queen's image. So, Prince Reach - his sword in hand, and a simple, but brutal message - united in his person the Tunidan and Maiden Land war effort. Their two peoples symbolically wed against the barbarous forces of the mainland horde.

The sudden and shocking death of Queen Aglaia Fetterina Fiorina Maquella had already exonerated her a touch in the public eye, but the suffering they'd seen, along with the cruel theft of their innocent daughters, hadn't stifled the rage and bloodlust. The call of war ever-present even amongst the crowds that watched the procession of carriages that led her aged body to the tomb. This pageantry was equally lost on Prince Reach, who, distracted in the moment, watched on vacantly as he remembered her words. Her remark that she was, "Older, wiser, and crueller," than both he and his brothers. As he stood poised to lead her people in one final charge he couldn't help but reflect that his family had failed. It had been their duty to preserve the world, to keep some sense of order, even if not a perfect peace. They certainly hadn't done so, and with his men and ships arrayed, ready for battle, he felt desperate to put this right. To repel the great tide that threatened to overturn everything in its wake.

Barely a few miles north his troops - her troops - were fighting hard on land to hold back the Eastern Kingdom advance. Whilst out at sea, more Tunidan ships, cannon ready, spilled out from the still un-assailed south to help the cause. He felt eager to lead from the front - the queen's funeral the starting pistol for his burst of aggression - but he was also mindful that it would be selfish to indulge his ego and need for redemption. He had a role to fill, as Queen Aglaia had had hers, and he needed to stand as the focus of her people's war lust. To cast off the flowers of ambivalence and stand in defiance.

As the long procession slowly dwindled into the distance, the clouds in the sky opened up, and the orange sun burst its rays. A rare moment of clemency amidst the tempers and the gales.

Scene LXVII

The tempest had rattled the land - not as severely as it had rattled the sea, and the ships that had been wrecked upon it - but it had rendered quiet the war and the slaughter. Essen had hunkered down; cold and at its mercy. The forest cover a poor home for him, his compatriot, and the few others they'd picked up in their retreat. Now, finally, after a period of camouflage, they'd found a break from their misery. The light drizzle being like blazing sunlight compared to the previous weather. And further luck, they'd found a small boat, barely a rowboat, near the beachy coast, on the forest edge.

As Essen sat waiting for cover of night to leave the conquered land he felt a pang of defeat. A hard sense of guilt that he hadn't died trying to stop the fall. As he played with soil from the earth in his hands, anxious with boredom, a small colourful bird flew out at him from the trees - red, grey, green and black. Like a pretty apple in the dewy air. Startled at his sight it quickly darted back into the green hush of leaves. As it disappeared one of the shivering men suggested they should start a fire - the cusp of evening bringing the threat of harsher cold - but the danger they would be spotted was too great a fear. Essen looked down towards his sword and felt his heart beat in the silence. In just a few hours they would be out on the sea, and heading back to Brynnyfirdia.

Scene LXVIII

An arrow whisked by as King Brijsk's mighty steed trampled its way back through the Eastern Kingdom. He turned in slight surprise at the sound, and looked over to his knight, who was galloping to his left. The loyal deputy turned in equal puzzlement, having heard the whoosh himself. The second knight, who travelled not too far behind, perceived nothing, but quickly caught notice of his king's discomfort. Both attendants gripped their reins with concern and picked up speed. Almost instantly another arrow hit King Brijsk's horse squarely in the rear. They were under attack. A quickened panic; the tiny-looking arrow protruding from the upper back leg of the powerful mount. Then they saw it; high to the west of their intended path: twenty, perhaps thirty horsemen waiting on the hillside, ready to cut them off. It was an ambush.

Without thought King Brijsk turned east and headed into the more forested brush. The trees added a degree of cover, but now they heard the gallop of horses that came in tow. Arrows whizzed as they pelted on - followed like stricken foxes through the woodland. An arrow tip rattled off the hem of King Brijsk's armour, then another thudded into his horse. The giant beast raced on regardless. Its natural fury undisturbed by the second piercing wound. Then, the wooded cover opened up again, and suddenly it became an open pursuit. A huge troop of men on horseback hounding hungry at their tail. The sound of hooves a deafening raid, louder in the open air. Meanwhile, the horsemen that waited on the tor ahead thundered across from their post to close the exit.

Another arrow clipped the shoulder of the first knight as he steadfastly covered his king's left. More stray arrows raining down intermittently. They pressed on, but it was a baleful task - slowly it dawned that they were completely encircled. As they came fully into open field a ring of enemy troops hemmed them in. With nowhere to go they came to a weary stop, and dismounted, ready to surrender. Unfortunately that wasn't an option. As they reached for their swords to lay them to the ground the order was given. Their adversaries raised their bows in readiness to shoot. It was not a capture, but an assassination. As King Brijsk grasped this dark truth he grasped his sword and barged headlong towards the encircling forces. The assailant leading the ambush quickened his instruction in response. An instant bike wheel of arrows filled the grassy field. One timely arrow ripped into the skull of the second loyal knight. Grimly, he fell to the ground. Another ripped through the arm of the first, though as the rest volleyed down he was largely spared by his heavy armour. Without fear he charged onward in tandem with his burly king.

King Brijsk's huge sword ripped through his first victim as he headed bullishly into the crowd. He then aggressively cut down the next. A bloody gory terror. His enormous stature brutal in its capacity to deliver destruction. One horse panicked and cast its rider from the saddle in response. Another turned in an attempt to avoid the maddened monarch, but only succeeded in cascading further into the rush. The wounded first knight in brave mimicry followed his king, and gloriously cut in half the head guard. A blunt act of vengeance for his cowardly order. In the closeness of battle arrow shot became futile, both men shielded by the melee of flesh. In delayed response the enemy horsemen unsheathed their swords to harry at the renegades. One hundred to one they lurched at the northern king and his loyal kinsman. The two cut down foes with rapid speed. Prophetic in their animal instinct. As the bedlam heightened the king's horse, arrows still pointing from its bloodied hind, hurled through the mass of men. Spooked with terror, it careened headlong, trampling men under foot. Its heavy build monstrous battering ram.

King Brijsk took a deep gash on his knee and briefly stumbled, before gathering his momentum and pressing on again. Another two men quickly slain, as he and his knight moved on to further victims. Their desperate endeavour like a bloody dream, where only violence could find the door to wakefulness.

Though a giant in size, and heavy with age, the king's limbs moved with grace. Dispatching each foe with swift athleticism. One, then the next. Then another. His broadsword cracked the temple of one adversary. Delivering certain death. He then forced the blade through the stomach of another that came charging at him on horseback. However, this time, though the wound was fatal, the effort to remove the blade came hard. As the horseman tumbled weightily towards him the king strained to re-wield his weapon. For the first time he struggled to respond in the chaos. A further enemy came at him from the side. He freed the blade and turned to swipe. Clipping the armour of the oncoming rival ..but it was not enough. A long, pointed sword came sharp into his back, impaling his large torso. The elephantine king fell forward, face down into the mud.

His faithful knight caught sight of the tragic blow as he too swung vigorously in the mayhem. For the slightest of moments his instincts fell dumb. Then a cowardly arrow from afar pierced his eye. The king, and his two royal protectors had been executed.

Scene LXIX

Seaspell lay there, still in a state of feverish unwell. It looked something like a triptych. His pale face in the sea of white bedding; his dark soft brush of hair a stark crown, slightly damp with sweat. On the panels either side: his mother, dressed in pagan black, backlit against the gloomy window; and Coulema Galina, a shadow of his form; the dark crimson of his frugal tunic looking a dingy black in the corner of the room. He had waited a while to be alone with Maleeva, and as he spoke he made doubly sure that the guards were beyond earshot, outside of the door.

"I think she's right, y'know."

Maleeva wasn't pleased to hear this observation, and an uncomfortable frown overtook her brow. She listened on as he continued, eager for the opinion nevertheless.

"Not the crown itself, but the stress. The discomfort with the situation. He's a gentle boy, he was never raised to be king. He has none of the arrogance. I think, perhaps, he even hears us now."

The words disturbed Maleeva, and she didn't respond in the hope that it would end the conversation. The captive Tunidan continued to overstep his bounds though.

"Look at this wild weather, too" he noted, in a dull and truthful tone, "These are strange times. That work against us all."

"It's just rain," replied Maleeva, finally responding to the provocation, her voice louder and more casual than his, as if spoken to threaten the drawing of the guards.

"You're scared of a little weather?" she pressed.

Galina drew close in response to the chiding question, and lowered his own voice further.

"I have an offer."

She listened with impatience as he spoke.

"I suspect there may be things in this world that are beyond our knowledge. The King of Tunid is the true king. We need to make peace with him - to stop all this.

The weather, the wars ..the endless misfortune." He looked down at Seaspell with genuine concern as he added these last words, before glancing towards the sunless window behind Maleeva's back. "But we both know Mizmeam will never countenance a peace," he averred, "So here's my offer ..if you free me from these chains, I'll kill him. Then we can bring all this to an end."

"This is treason!" snapped back Maleeva, aggressively. Her words firm, but deliberately hushed. "King Mizmeam is your true king ..and my son will rule with honour in his succession. The age of intrigue - of dishonour and dishonesty, is over. So you would do well to keep your Tunidan whispers silent."

"Just think about it," uttered Galina, his air of dry stoicism just about restraining Maleeva from calling the guards there and then.

As if to break the dread, Seaspell then stirred a little in his unconscious slumber. His head turning, and his right arm stretching out beneath the white bed sheets. With motherly love Maleeva bent down to embrace his restless body, then gently wiped his princely forehead. Galina moved back towards the darkened corner, and returned to his servile state.

Scene LXX

A messenger entered and handed a sealed letter to King Mizmeam. Mizmeam broke the seal and began to read the contents. The messenger also brought a large box, which he placed on the table. As Mizmeam carefully and seriously read the letter he walked over to the table, and ordered his aide to open the box. The aide carefully tilted open the lid. Beneath it sat the large, severed head of King Brijsk. The lid was swiftly closed again. Mizmeam ordered everyone out of the room, except for Maleeva. She came over and peered into the box herself, making an effort to disguise her disgust response.

"Kaspria states that Brijsk offered a treasonous compact," articulated King Mizmeam. "That he's paused the war effort in the Northern Kingdom, and was advising Kaspria to do the same. In an effort to 'bring peace' and solicit an agreement with the Tunidans. Kaspria ordered his men to have him killed as he made his journey back from the Eastern Kingdom."

"That's surprisingly decisive - on his part," noted Maleeva, shocked that the once weak king had manoeuvred so independently, and so barbarically.

"It indeed is," replied Mizmeam, equally confounded. "It was a good decision, though."

"So, what now?"

"We'll have to send forces north to take the reins up there for a start. It shouldn't be too difficult, providing we're quick enough to fill the void."

"Perhaps I should go?" noted Maleeva, her natural instinct to fill the role immediately restrained by thoughts of Seaspell, who still lay ailing in the room next door.

"It would be sensible," advised Mizmeam. Though he too felt the sense of conflict.

"We need to make preparations."

Maleeva peered into the box again as she said this, before turning to leave the room. However, as she turned to go she stopped for a moment. Something else was on her mind, and the spur to action focused her sense of purpose and vision. "Brijsk is not the only traitor," she stated, damply, "Your Tunidan captive -

yesterday, he made overtures to me to the same effect. Urging we make peace with his enemy king. He even suggested violence to yourself if I should free him."

King Mizmeam was doubly shocked by the words. Even more so than by the crucial deeds of King Kaspria. He genuinely liked the tall Tunidan guard, and that, coupled with the belated and offhand way that Maleeva had told him this news, left him momentarily dumb.

"He should be executed before I leave," she advised.

As the king paused, straining to ponder why she hadn't told him this earlier, the silence was suddenly broken by cries and commotion from the next room. Drua Maleeva raced out in response, her mastery of the political domain once again shattered by a motherly heart. As she reached the scene she found Seaspell sat up in bed, awake, but delirious.

"We need to conquer them," he screamed, as if still lost in night terrors, "To stop them leaving."

Maleeva wrapped her arms around him, relieved to find him conscious and speaking.

"We need to stop them."

King Mizmeam followed quickly behind, likewise grateful to see his heir and grandson freed from oblivion.

"The waking prince now has a kingdom," he grinned. He then looked over to Coulema Galina, who was standing watching from across the room. The chains of shame still round his wrists and ankles. The king looked at him briefly with discomfort, then gave a grim instruction to one of his guards. His men headed over to the proud Tunidan and escorted him from the room.

Scene LXXI

Bedrizzled, bearded and shoddy, the King of Tunid finally made fall upon the Brynnyfirdian coast. His ship, *the Merbird*, looking remarkably pristine and beautiful given the severe journey it had made. Its heavy linen sail a stunning white totem upon the light breeze as it settled to dock. As he left the ship and stepped foot on land few recognised him as royalty. By sight alone he could have been just another fisherman or sailor returning to shore. Even as he announced himself and requested conference the people remained unsure if it was even he. They ushered him on towards Colm and the other island elders, in a state of casual doubt. The muddy path towards the centre of Eldersway fittingly un-kingly. Adding to the lack of confidence.

Colm headed down to meet the possible king, and as he spied the small coterie of foreign men from afar, he himself did sense something of a regal air. Though his internal thoughts could divine no particular reason for this. It was more just a gut sense, based on subtle cues. Then, as the two groups came closer, all doubt was cast.

"Father!"

Even through the autumn beard, and eons of time, Estorie instantly recognised his father's face. He gripped him firmly by the hand as he moved in closer, forgetting all formality - though on the rainy island little was expected anyway. It took a second longer for the king to return the favour, his now-tall son grown beyond all memory. Still, the eyes and features within the wider frame were unmistakeable. The young prince, his flesh and blood, still so true to his mother's beauty, even in the flush of adulthood. To Estorie it brought recall of when his uncle, Prince Reach, had arrived on the island many months earlier. This element of slight strangeness making him briefly doubt his joy. He looked out to the sea's edge, to his father's bright ship, as if double-checking that the scene was real.

"The sea was like a dragon," noted the King of Tunid, his haggard temples and reddened cheeks giving truth to the utterance, "Only the gods have stopped it from swallowing me."

"How is my uncle doing?"

"He's off fighting in the eastern seas - hopefully with success."

Colm clocked the greying clouds that were dragging across the sky as he listened to the two Tunidan royals. Anticipating heavier rain he welcomed the

king warmly and insisted that they head inside. The King of Tunid grateful for the hospitality, but much more eager to speak, and not just with his son. He too perceiving the damp clouds with a sense of foreboding. His desire to bridge the situation quickening. The crowd of men headed onwards to the grand hall. Where warmth, drink and conversation awaited. As they hurried along some of the Brynnyfirdian men were already eager with their own questions.

Simultaneously, not too far away, Essen had arrived back on the island too. The very eyes of the earth seemed to be looking in its direction.

Scene LXXII

"Where's the support? We gave the black powder, yet we've got nothing in return."

"I'm sorry," lamented the King of Tunid in response, his obvious sincerity just about placating the rather angered Brynnfyrdian posing the question. Colm looked on, feeling somewhat sympathetic for the foreign, dishevelled king, but nevertheless sharing the want of answers.

"We had to support the Maiden Lands first," pressed the king.

"Your brother, Reach, said nothing about the Maiden Lands."

"I don't know what my brother said, but the Maiden Lands would've completely fallen. So we had.."

Before the King of Tunid got a chance to complete his sentence another Brynnfyrdian jumped in, "But the Harbour Lands *have* completely fallen." All the faces in the room looked towards the tired king, as if to accentuate the point.

"If the Maiden Lands had fallen we'd have lost control of the entire eastern ocean."

The king sounded slightly more imperious as he raised his tone and stepped into his argument. Suddenly the local sense of a local war was forced to contend with a wider politics. "Here the situation is different," he continued, "The Three Deserts are completely safe, and you - as you have shown - are capable of holding out. Had the east fallen quickly, they'd have been able to focus their entire force here, in the west."

"And in the south," chimed in the same Brynnfyrdian, laconically.

"That's true, it benefits us as well, I don't deny that, but either way, by sending our ships to the east we have helped you, though, I admit, it may not quite seem like that."

This answer only partly satisfied the crowd, and the lack of further information, along with the sense that they were just part of a wider game was jarring.

"So, what now?" asked another of the men.

"We fight on," insisted the king, "..Or, at least that's what I'll be doing, and I hope you will too."

At this point the King of Tunid headed over to Colm and spoke to him more quietly. "It would be good if we could have a private conversation."

"Can you not speak it to everyone?" questioned Colm, not raising his voice, but not lowering it either.

"I will tell everyone of the consequences, but I'd like to speak to you about the details."

Colm felt a degree of hesitance at the thought of private words, but gleaning the desperate desire on the part of the king he nodded his head in reluctant agreement. The king was pleased, but his expression didn't fully show it. At just this point Essen entered the doorway, along with the small ragtag of men he'd brought back from the wars in the Harbour Lands. He looked at the slightly animated assembly and wondered what was going on.

Scene LXXIII

"Essen can stay, ..come sit at the table."

Essen walked over to the table, but remained standing. As ever, his natural energy making him reluctant to settle. The crowd that were in the grand hall had retired for the night, and now Essen found himself in Colm's humble residence.

"Sit," repeated Colm, this time pressing the instruction. At the second request Essen pulled out a chair and sat down. At the small table, either side of him, were Colm and the King of Tunid, and across from him sat Prince Estorie.

The room in Colm's tiny house was quiet, and, as Essen poured himself water from the large jug that sat on the table, its clunk sounded louder than it would've done had he made the exact same motion sitting there on his own. That, and the fact that Colm had told him to sit, only added to the sense of seriousness. The King of Tunid couldn't help but notice the awkward punctuation of the clunk - its woody echo, and the slight galonk of the water as Essen placed the jug back in the centre, pulling the silent focus of the room. The peaceful bell having broken the still, the king took it as a cue to speak.

"You know about the outer lands, I take it," he asked, a demure tone in his voice.

Colm and Essen both nodded in confirmation.

"How many more people know?"

"Many," stated Colm, "We don't keep secrets here."

The King of Tunid looked despondent at this reply. He already understood full well that many on the island would've known, but the cavalier lack of discretion for such an astounding truth deepened his sense of the problem. Colm noted the disappointment, but felt little sympathy, though as he watched the disappointment echo in Estorie's face, it pulled him closer to it.

"You must have noted the weather?" came the next question from the Tunidan monarch.

The sentence puzzled Essen, though Colm had anticipated it somewhat.

"The strangeness of it," pressed the king once again.

"You're going to need to explain it to us," nudged Colm, hoping the King of Tunid would spell it out more plainly. Growing a little impatient with the leading questions.

The king leaned into the table. "We can't leave," he said coldly, in an almost whisper. He then tried to elucidate. "If we go beyond the desert edge - to the unspoilt, outer lands - we get pushed back, destroyed ..by the gods. By forces of nature."

Both Colm and Essen sat rooted with looks of disbelief. Prince Estorie looked at them, trying in his expression to give credence to his father's words.

"If people leave, it will lead to destruction - devastation."

"Surely nonsense," replied Colm.

"It's true," pleaded the king, "There are reasons for our secrecy - we aren't just fiends. We don't enjoy keeping the world in this state of darkness, but the world depends upon us doing it. It's a duty, not a luxury. That's why I'm begging you to share this responsibility. Now it's fallen to you by fortune."

"Explain it to me," inquired Colm, with unwilling curiosity, "These gods, have you seen them with your own eyes?"

"No, I haven't seen them. I don't suspect anyone has ever seen them. We just see the effects."

"So, you've just seen weather? ..the same weather we all see."

"Not just weather - storms, floods, tempests, quakes, fire. We have traditions and histories going back millennia. Whenever man leaves, and the circle is broken, we get destruction. Pure carnage and devastation. Total and utter destruction. Wiped back to zero. I was always sceptical too. To me they were also just myths and stories, but now we clearly see that dark storms are coming."

"It's just weather," reiterated Colm, bluntly.

"But surely it can't be a coincidence that we have these strange storms and tempests now, as the world tears itself apart ..and as men sail beyond waters known?"

"There's always war. When has there not been war? And you yourself sail beyond waters known."

Essen nodded in agreement. The dull reason of Colm cutting through more than the scary tales the King of Tunid was offering. Even Prince Estorie felt the mild tug of the logic as he watched his father argue the case.

"The water clock drips," stated the King of Tunid, finding a poetic calm, "We're a petal in a bowl slowly sinking."

"So," questioned Colm, his curiosity ticking upwards, "You've spent your entire life guarding these secrets, managing the world, enforcing this rule, but it's only now that you believe with your own eyes the necessity?"

"Yes."

There was then a short hesitation. This time Prince Estorie grabbed the large jug of water and filled his cup, though now the clunk on the table went largely unnoticed amidst the conversation.

"You're asking me why I did it?" followed the king, disheartened to feel his intentions so questioned. "Why I kept the world in darkness, though I didn't believe the need? Firstly, it was my duty. Furthermore, even though I had my doubts, who was I to go against all my forebears to risk the entire world. Plus, as well, I'll freely say that there was a desire to protect the unspoilt world from Man's carnage. That at least gave some sense of purpose."

"Who are you to decide where other men can sail?" piqued Essen.

"That's a fair question ..but again, it isn't me. My motives were mainly to placate my own feelings. Ultimately, it's the gods who will decide. Clearly it's they that want Man to stay his place. My one regret now is that I didn't take things *more* seriously."

"You say the gods deny men passage, yet they didn't stop Essen, and his men. And again, they haven't stopped you from occupying your hidden island on the outside."

"I don't know the mind of the gods," lamented the king, almost thinking to himself as he answered. "There seems to be a certain sense to it though. A sense we can't fully work out. The number of people that leave. The intentions of those people that are leaving. Somehow it all gets aggregated. Somehow they just know. They know what's in the hearts of men."

Though fascinated, as Colm followed the rationale he increasingly came to the belief that the Tunidan king was simply trying to dupe him. The entire Tunidan Empire had been built on lies, he thought - it had always been lies, so why wouldn't they be lying now. Yet, as he made this judgement he kept it to himself, and refrained from being overtly hostile as the discussion dwindled towards its close.

"We'll think about what you've told us," he replied, with kindness. He then ruffled the hair of Prince Estorie - a gentle display of affection, underlining the lack of personal animosity. The King of Tunid was then shown to his small, but homely quarters for the night. It was far from a kingly abode, and it stood small in comparison to the splendid rooms of his Woodville palace, but it was warm, and a reef of peace; where sleep could be had before oncoming battles. Be they with gods or men.

Scene LXXIV

"Remember, even though I'm dead, you can still come to me for advice," smiled Queen Aglaia. Though, of course, she was no longer queen, though she was indeed living. Her three little dogs - Four, Five and Six - still equally full of pep at her slippered feet. The east wing of her palace, now a living tomb, sealed from the rest of her kingdom by this living secret. Her trusted intelligencers, the mirrored wall between reality and alter-reality. It annoyed her slightly that she now had to tone down her extravagant dress, but with the creep of age - and tidal wars threatening ruin anyway - a rumpled retirement was only a minor inconvenience. The lack of plumage giving a simple disguise for when she chose to walk the palace gardens. It was just the dogs that would be a problem. Their fame only second to Queen Aglaia's regal outfits in the public consciousness. Consequently they yapped with boredom as Prince Reach detailed the plans of his counter offensive. Whilst the ex-queen sat listening ..and giving pointers.

Her recent state funeral was fresh on the air of Maiden's Tower. The pomp and emotion mangled with the guns, and ships, and troops that were being readied. The calls for vengeance in perfect marriage with anticipations of war and violence. The flags that flew from every street and ship's mast, like bloody sponges, soaking up the fervour with their flutter.

Prince Reach, decked out in his own pomp, bowed to the artful former queen before secreting himself from the east wing and back into the main palace. The palace where he would now be leading the kingdom. He took a few brief updates from his advisors, before giving the order to begin the wider pushback. With the order relayed, tens of thousands of extra troops headed north, hoping to break through the Eastern Kingdom's frontline. A frontline that was slowly rolling over the precious fields of his now adopted country; the little farms and villages falling by the day. Meanwhile, at sea, ships left the safety of their coves, and joined with ships newly streaming from the southern Tunidan seas. Before pressing north, hoping to reclaim dominion over their sullied home. Their kindling on an already burning heath adding to the carnage. The smoke of war like volcanic ash, following a violent eruption.

A slight quake rocked the landmass as the order was given, as if in echo of Prince Reach's words. Aglaia's cosy chair slipped across the stone floor of her condominium. She paid it little mind, then poured herself another drink. Everything was going precisely as she had expected. Prince Reach, out of sight,

but just a short walk away, was slightly more perturbed. He ploughed on with his plans regardless. The final flood of war had begun.

Scene LXXV

Ship, lumber, mast, hourglass, past. Tattered Brynnnyfirdian ships slowly ruined on the high seas. An old cat with tired reflexes, fending off the pecks of a thousand soulless birds; in the last moat of water around their green, sodden island. Were all the slain ghosts from previous wars to rise, to make battle against the living, they would be but a drop in the turmoil. The enemy so numbered, the war so total in its reach. In the far away mainland harbours more were yet ready. More sail, more soldiery. Only the hope of a second tempest giving promise to halting a second swarm.

The eastern seas were a near mirror. From the far red skies came ever more galleys of war. The endless forge of men, wood and metal. The entire Eastern Kingdom a mine dug for the rocks of siege. Still, Prince Reach's counter-offensive managed somehow to burst through the massy line. The cannon ends a crimson glow, as they crushed stray ships with heavy shot. And where ships collided, so too did men. The Maiden Land sons, with angered sword in hand, fighting through the smoke for their blessed daughters. The cry raged, the flags billowing: "Death or Glory!" The shallow thoughts - the lemming-like rush to throw bodies onto the naval pyre, or into the swampy deep - allowing for depths of bravery and honour that no thinking man could aspire to. Which side had the higher hand was impossible to tell, but as the blood, in its endless effluence, failed to taint the blue-grey sea, it was clear that nature could be the only winner.

On land nature did however feel the mar of Man. The bloody fields red with glory, and shiny with blooded metal. A testament to the violent advance of the vengeful Maiden Landers. Their lycanthropic fury bowling through the conquering Eastern Kingdom troops. The pageantry now manifesting a thirsty, murderous lust.

As the Queen sat in her cool, concealed parlour, her men, partly inspired by her golden casket, went forth to reclaim her land. The rout being far from complete, but at least on land, where nature remained under foot of man, the tide was turning.

Scene LXXVI

Strange skies swept over the Northern Kingdom. Word had not yet reached Wedkarten regarding the death of King Brijsk, though a message had arrived from the south on his behalf. The king's seal was absent, but the message was clear: restart the subjugation of the half-tails; reclaim the king's land.

Despite the slight air of confusion, the orders were duly followed. The attack, paused for so long, quickly revived. The ceasefire and forest peace once again broke.

With cunning apprehension the recommencement was met with equal counterfire. Eartaria, Allakat and Celalah had used the tranquil lull well. The half-tails now a throng with powder and shot. The fiery woods would provide an incendiary resistance. No matter who was giving the order to suppress them.

Madame Maleeva would soon be on her way to fill that task. In the name of her son: the newly made Prince of the Northern Kingdom,

..though first there was other important business to attend to.

Scene LXXVII

The days and weeks that Elgiva had spent housekeeping for Luteeay passed like a flickering montage. As she cleaned the house, and washed the cups, and tidied the garden, he worked unflinchingly on his alchemical avocation. Like an old master adding ever more delicate brushstrokes, day after day, night after night, to perfect a lifelike painting.

Baffled at first, Elgiva slowly came to behold what he already beheld in the eye of his mind. Each time she entered an extra glimmer added to the shining portrait.

Amidst the vials and murky materials and strange concoctions; the diagrams and scattered tools, a vision emerged. Like an ice-white sculpture in a cluttered green forest, or an angelic face amidst the haggard and wrinkled horde. There it was - something like a dragon. Standing full in the room. Its oily wings, like a weeping of rainbows, full of glorious colour. A realness to its fashioned form. Light as helium, monstrous in size, but as gentle as a dove.

Elgiva beheld the creature, but didn't open her mouth to express her wonder. Fearful to disturb the endeavour.

A bird, a graceful bird - a spirit of the aether. A swan-like golem. A pearly opus.

Scene LXXVIII

"Would you like to go for a flight?" asked Luteeay, impishly. The feeling that the work was complete transforming him, instantly, back to his normal character. The feverish obsessiveness of recent weeks banished completely.

Elgiva looked on clueless, still somewhat in awe.

"It's perfectly safe, ..hopefully," he added. He then brushed his hand across the feathery down of the life-like bird, pulling it back like a curtain: a huge inner concavity opened up. He then motioned her to get inside, before waxing lyrical about his strange creation.

"See how graceful the real birds of the air are," he enlightened, "How beautiful they are in comparison to these clumsy chickens of mine, that bobble about on the ground. The secret of flight is in this beauty. Their hollow bones; their light-as-a-feather feathers; the sacs of gentle air within their bodies. They're like blown bubbles with angel wings. People will say they're dumb - "bird-brained" they'll say, can you believe that? - But their brains aren't small, it's just that their bodies are so relatively big - so they can be buoyant. Like inflated balloons. To soar like a bird you need buoyancy, you see, just as fish must find buoyancy to rise and fall in the water."

"You're telling me this will fly?!" queried Elgiva, in stark disbelief, ignoring the lecture. As she looked on at the large construction, its beauty alone far from enough to convince her.

"We kytalyks have our secrets too," smiled Luteeay, with satisfaction, "Though, I must admit, this is the first time I myself have put these secrets into practice." He then urged Elgiva towards the entrance again, this time his hand gently on her back in further persuasion. She aggressively resisted, unwilling to even countenance the outlandish prospect.

"It's no time for fear," stated Luteeay, calmly, and unable to hide his amusement, "There's a purpose to all this, and I need some help in trying it out. One day I may need to carry passengers, perhaps Liofia. Your weight might stand in for her ..plus one or two others."

This cheeky comment, along with the mention of Liofia, softened Elgiva's dread a touch, but she remained entirely dubious.

"If you can fly," she submitted, "And I don't believe for a second you can. Then why hide it 'til now? Why not share this wonderful knowledge with everyone?"

"If men could fly, they would fly away."

"And you want to fly away now - and to take me up there with you."

"I'd rather not, to be honest, that's the difference," replied Luteeay.

"Y'see," he then pressed on, enjoying again the chance to elaborate, "Man should really perfect the spirit before taking on the wings. As I've told you before - as I worked in my frenzy - 'The Shell Has Broken.' The egg has hatched prematurely, before Man has matured enough to be ready for it. Giving a child a beautiful toy like this wouldn't help things at all."

"I have no idea what you're going on about now."

"I know," sighed Luteeay, defeated, "I can't really explain it to you. Not in a way that would make things make any sense. Like I said, we kytalyks have our secrets. Perhaps one day you'll get it, but for now you'll have to just trust me. You don't have to believe me, but it would help if you gave a little faith."

The sentiment made sense to Elgiva on an emotional level, even if everything else didn't. Plus, it was all so bizarre that there must be some rhyme and reason to it, she figured. So, thus, after being ushered in the direction of the aperture for a third time, she stepped across the threshold. It was spacious inside, and surprisingly cosy. Almost nest-like. Luteeay stepped in behind. He then made a few quick adjustments and eased the controls. The pretty bird lifted effortlessly into the air, leaving the little hovel. Elgiva felt a rush in her stomach as it took off. It sailed gently into the sky, its outstretched wings perfect in execution. The bird ascended, then swooped. Gliding above the country fields. The patches of green and brown, and the little roads and rivulets visible down below. Elgiva gaped at the handsome scene. From this bird's eye view she observed the endless Eastern Kingdom countryside. She could even see Taxilian and Mayleen's little farmhouse. The beautiful home, and its surrounding barns and fields, perfectly situated in the muddy earth.

Suddenly the bird soared up higher still. The green landscape rolled infinitely into the far-off horizon, blending into the swampy blue sky. The white clouds like foam on an airy sea.

Elgiva felt a sense of peace with the world.

"You'd never guess the whole world was at war from such a peaceful viewpoint," commented Luteeay, as if reading her thoughts.

She nodded in agreement.

Their angelic escort, with equal gentleness, then began its journey back down. Circling, swift-like; scything the air with its wings. The whole scene below magnifying once again. The tiny fields and houses slowly getting bigger and more distinct with the drop. With a sense of both relief and exhilaration it finally brought Elgiva back into the yard of the unassuming hovel. The bird's plump, plumed body once again nestling amidst the maladroit chickens, that fluttered around its feet, captive on the ground. The yapping of confused, but excited dogs snapping Elgiva back to normality with their noisy pitch.

Scene LXXIX

Coulema Galina lay there in a pool of blood. The rain on the wet stone intermingling with the washed out gore. It pained Drua Maleeva to see the tall sturdy Tunidan lying dead on the ground, but she put it beyond her mind as she calmly walked past his body. Instead, she looked up at the greying sky, and out at the dampened castle courtyard. "Even from a dungeon cell her malevolent powers spew forth," she said aloud, as she appraised the dour scene.

As she entered the courtyard proper she found King Mizmeam and his array of aides standing impatiently in the cold. Mizmeam too felt an uncomfortable ache that Galina had had to pay the price for his treason. With no heart to prolong the torture, the king had ordered that he be dispatched quickly and unceremoniously on his way to the execution. A sharp knife in the back; the dark crimson of his clothing darkened further with the wine-coloured effusion; the whites of the Tunidan's eyes unseen and unmet.

The king spared no heart for the other maker of treachery, however.

As the sea-swept woman was dragged before the small assembled crowd she struggled and kicked. Squirming with animal verve. Completely unwilling to accept her fate. Ideally, she would've been executed before the entire kingdom, but fears of the public effect kept it to a small coterie of notable onlookers. As the king's guards tried to tie her to the stake she violently thrashed her body around, wrestling against the temporal power; her clothes ripping and coming loose as they pinned her down to finally tie her hands. Her wild and mottled hair wailing in the wooden hoarding. Maleeva and the attendants watched on, as one would watch a snake or a dragon, being accosted by its slayer.

Finally, fixed in place, the guards stepped back. Even throttled to the timbers she continued to fling herself back and forth; her naked body writhing. Her living figure beautifully alive against the dead wooden stakes.

Then one of the guards lit the fire.

It blushed into combustion. An explosion of fizzing red, and flickers of black ash. The heat instantly manifest on the faces of those watching the trauma. The supernatural woman undulated even more manically, though more in contempt than in pain. Her truculent skin, revealing its blue-blooded glow, through the beaded, snaking sweat; the blaze of the orangey fire reflective in the slimy glimmer.

Then she stopped her motion and shrieked.

"Hear the wild waters, the very sea bids thee: obey. Sunken worlds, a white cold virgin snow dashes out the Sun. The hour will soon come.."

King Mizeam stood and watched the flames consume her with a stony heart. Her twisted mutterances only adding certainty to the necessity of her execution. Drua Maleeva too looked on with detesting eyes, willing herself to share the same hardened conviction. Yet, in the pit of her stomach she felt a nag of unease. She looked up at the sky again, and wondered if the strange incantations of the woman would somehow free her from her torment. The clouds seemed to threaten rain, but none came.

Very soon Maleeva would be heading north beneath those clouded skies, to douse the half-tails with a similar fire. Everything was falling into place, but there was a thread of displeasure that she couldn't quite put her finger on, marring her clear-sighted vision. She thought of Seaspell, recovering in his bedchamber. Still delirious, but now healthy and vital. It elbowed the thread of doubt aside. Things were going to plan, she thought.

At last, the sea-swept woman fell silent, as the fire cackled high into the air. A treason had been extinguished.

Scene LXXX

Brynnfirdia stood alone in the dark sea. Night had fallen, and the fires burned, as the island inhabitants made their plans to defend against the coming invasion. However, a few on the island were making plans to leave. Liofia, Julen and Goola had all fixed their hearts: they were going. Of the gang it was only Box that hadn't come around to Liofia's way of thinking. She looked like a hard, but tiny pebble as she stood there defiantly. Yet, her weight was like a boulder to the three others. They simply couldn't contemplate leaving without her.

"I can't leave," she insisted, "We left the half-tails, now we're leaving again. I can't do it. Look around at the people preparing to make a stand. I don't want to run away and leave them alone to fate as well."

"Most of these people know it's futile trying to fight," retorted Liofia, her tone soft and heavy, "I share the sentiment, but there's nothing we can do. Nothing at all. We can't help."

"It really is foolish to stay," added Goola, insistently, as she tried in desperation to peck at Box's stubbornness, though the words only rang bells in her own mind. Reminding her of long ago, when they'd first trundled into the Maiden Lands - before they'd even met the Princess Liofia.

"Remember the fool, sat waiting in Fools' Harbour," she pleaded, "Throwing his life away for a hopeless cause."

Box remembered the story equally well. The foolish young duke, who'd waited and yearned for the return of the merchant's daughter, only to find disappointment after so many wasted years. It was a corny tale, for sure, but it had left an impact. The sad, but no doubt apocryphal, story now having an air of poetry beyond the blood and war they'd all witnessed.

"I took a different meaning from it," replied Box, determinedly, "I think he was wise."

"Wise?" interrupted Julen, finally entering the conversation, "He wasted his life waiting for a girl who had no idea who he was."

"Well, maybe not wise ..but noble. Heroic, kind of."

"But she didn't even know who he was. He allowed himself to believe in something that wasn't real, based on barely anything ..and he wasted most of his life for it."

"But he loved her, *his* love was real," noted Box, finding resolve in the tale, "Just because she didn't feel it back doesn't mean his wasn't real. He took the chance. He remained dedicated and never abandoned her. Kinda brave. Plus, imagine if it had worked out. Imagine if she had felt the same and he'd given up on her. If anything the fact that he went to that length at such cost to himself proves the realness of love more. Sure, I know, not everyone can be that idealistic. Most people have to be practical - not so foolish - but surely someone has to take the risk. Someone has to prove that love is worth wasting your life for. That things are worth dying for."

"So, you want to die on this island, just to prove that someone will die for it?" piqued Liofia.

"I'm not saying I want to die. I'm just saying I feel like I need to be brave enough to take the risk."

"And we'll all die needlessly with you too, because of this," added Goola, moodily. Still finding the idea of leaving Box almost impossible to envisage.

"The fool didn't want other people to stay and waste their lives with him, and neither do I. I want you to go, because that's what you want to do. I'm just explaining me."

"You should take the fool as your standard," laughed Julen, "Perhaps the blacksmith will carve the image into your sword hilt if you're quick."

Box laughed, and as she did she felt a touch embarrassed that she was being so dramatic. Still, her desire to stay was unshaken. She looked up at the starry night sky and wondered if she was indeed being foolish. *What was the purpose of all this? Why was she here?* She then remembered the half-tails, who were no doubt fighting hard in the cool forest air at that very moment. They knew what they were fighting for. Still, nevertheless, the bigger questions remained. She then looked back at her three friends. For the first time she noticed how different Liofia looked. Her once girlish figure more adult and clumsy. Far more practical than ideal. The shawls around her body, like rugged waves on a rounded earth. The stars above her head a sparkling holy crown. She did indeed look royal, but not as they had once imagined her to be, in the days long before, when they'd

wandered the streets of Patina, hopeful for a glimpse of her enigmatic presence. Now she looked more living, and less like a fairy story princess. In fact, even Julen and Goola looked older and more earthy. As she surveyed her sister with affection she noticed the still-bright red rubies in the ring on her hand. The ring that Liofia had given her after Eldskeep had been killed. She then held the ring that hung on the chain around her own neck between her fingers, pondering their twin-like connection. Her amber stone a more pallid hue. She knew their lives would now be branching off. It was a hard moment of realisation, but it just felt meant to be.

Scene LXXXI

An arrow ripped through Eartaria's heart. The woodland his muddy grave. As the archers, and horse, and swordsmen, and artillery – supplemented and aggrandised by forces from the south – swept through the forest resistance. The sound and smoke, the din of swords and thunder of hooves, hellish and lurid in war.

Drua Maleeva followed by ship across the sea, to take up the reins of direct command – though little instruction was needed. Her coming presence giving only added conviction to the intent. Her travel north, like the galloping hordes advancing before her, a howling wind cutting north across the mountains. A natural force; a king's proclamation of war. A blunt stone crushing entire peoples underfoot. Celalah ran, a stray mother-less child underarm, as he tried to find refuge in the forest darkness. Allakat had fallen long ago, back when at least some hope remained that it was worth the fight: a horseman's sword ripping through his thin frame as he readied another round of fire. The black powder, in the end, only helpful in quickening the cruelty.

The whole Northern Kingdom was fully under submission, from its southern border to the swampy north. Once Woods a sun-less, blackened forest – no longer a home, nor a heartland. The surviving half-tails scattered to the wind, like so many leaves. Hiding, that they might live or leave at some future time. Though as Celalah ran his mind could not think beyond the moment. All he could do was keep running.

Meanwhile, in the cloudy east, King Kaspria watched out across the turbulent sea, from his flooded realm. His high castle walls not high enough to give him vision across the waves, to the bloody Maiden Land fields and seas. Though in his mind he envisioned the slaughter, just as he knew that with King Brijsk slaughtered also, it would be heavy in the north as well. He'd never seen Once Woods with his own eyes, but he could easily imagine the scenes of carnage. As a heavy rain began to fall a conception appeared to him. He remembered Liofia, and the long sweeping tail that swept out from her pretty, daughterly form. The tail that she herself, and her long late mother, had refused to have removed. As the persecution of the half-tails presented itself in his vision, a deep dash of concern appeared for his wild princess, but he pushed it quickly back into the undergrowth. He focused out at the grey-black sky with penetration – the silvery clouds just about visible on the prospect. He then headed down to inquire of the latest news from the frontline, oblivious to the rain that drenched him.

Scene LXXXII

Essen, on the very front of the frontline, pounced like a lion and slammed his sword into one of the invaders; the smell of Brynnyfirdian black powder desperate in the air. In the melee of battle he remembered how Acalee had once told him that *port* meant door, making a seaport a *doorway to the sea*. As the slurry of ships beached on his dear island, spilling their bloody-thirsty men, the image stood fast in his mind. A door had been opened that couldn't be closed. The ocean seemed to tower over the land, and here was the huge crack that brought it rushing in. The soldiers, the sea, the ships, swords and guns, all one body of the deluge.

The plan was to suck the enemy into the woodlands, where the odds would be better, but in the anger and tempo such plans felt pointless. The black thud of cannon against armour dulled Essen's ears as he fought on. The battle on the coastal edge a harvest of wriggling creatures. The island had been invaded before, but this incessant dirge of mainland force - now with black powder as well as numbers - made it feel wholly different this time. In the past the island had never been truly conquered. The forest trees, with the stealthy arrowshot they disguised, had always been a swampy puddle for any enemy that dared to trample it. Now, alas, such woody cover felt hollow against the industrial fire.

For a brief moment the wind picked up, blowing in Essen's favour. The huge, shrill gust seeming to charge him with electricity. The noise of the gale eclipsing the sound of battle: the heavy wind knocking men to the ground in their weighty metal garments. Perhaps the gods were watching over the island, thought Essen, as he continued headlong toward another mainland soldier, though the sheer numbers that kept coming suggested otherwise.

Meanwhile, further inland, Box was sharpening her sword. It didn't have *the fool* on its hilt, but in her mind the tale played over as she looked despairingly at Liofia and Goola. They were preparing for the inevitable onslaught too, but their hearts were clearly elsewhere. Even Julen, who gripped his sword as tightly as Box did, was more of a mind to flight than fight.

As the brave island folks around them tended to their own weapons and preparations Colm came wandering over. The news from the front was not good. Julen looked at Liofia.

Scene LXXXIII

"This is all futile," stated Liofia, glum, but purposefully.

"It's not looking good, if that's what you mean," came Colm's sympathetic reply.

At this point the ship's boy arrived. The familiar little monkey jumped up into the arms of Goola. Its impish presence providing a moment of endearment amidst the wider foreboding.

"Why stay and face certain death, when there is a more hopeful option?" pushed Liofia, with pointedness, "Hope far beyond the reach of King Mizmeam ..or indeed the Tunidans."

"The other side?"

The ship's boy looked up as Colm asked this. Gelkin - out there in his calm, but lonely escape - instantly appearing his mind. Part of him envied the exile, but a deeper part felt the tug of loyalty to his besieged homeland. Liofia had already demanded every bit of information about the exotic outer realm. His long and strange journey; the story of Aralak emerging from the desert - only to be cut down by the wily arrowhead from Essen. She'd even pestered him about a return trip - a request he'd summarily turned down. A daring trip across the ocean to the Three Deserts, and from there a trip across - or perhaps beneath - the desert, to the uninhabited land beyond. Though how they'd find such a passage beneath remained a mystery.

Colm glanced over at the Eldersway settlement. The small, unruly children playing as the adults bustled around making provisions for the war. From the wooded clearance it looked a picture of paradise. The light breeze, and the birds still singing, giving an innocent air in the face of the approaching dread. The jagged brutality humming in the minds of the more worldly adults.

"I take it that you want to leave yourself then?" asked Colm of Liofia.

"Yes, naturally," came the quick reply.

He then paused. "Perhaps we should make provisions for such a thing," he pondered, "We have ships on the western coast, and we still have a degree of free passage in those seas. So maybe four or five can be laden for those that wish to go. Women and children mainly, but I suppose men will be needed too."

He then looked at the ship's boy. "I think you should probably lead the endeavour."

"No, I'd rather not, I don't want to leave just as we're getting started."

"Leaving will be dangerous too. You have the experience ..that no one else has. So I'm going to have to overrule you. Head west to the harbour and start some preparations ..you can take that poor monkey back to where it came from."

Liofia looked pleased, as did Goola and Julen. Box, on the other hand, didn't look quite so grateful. She looked down at the muddy ground, and felt the cold breeze on her bare arms. A lonely feeling crossed her helpless heart. She felt the weight of fate, like the small, but heavy sword that hung at her side.

The ship's boy looked equally lost in thought, though he accepted the clear words of Colm. It was true that only he, along with Essen, had first hand knowledge of the lands beyond. Now, as Essen fought bravely in the east, he would be heading west. He felt a guilt in his bones, but it was quickly overtaken by a sense that black, dark clouds stood hovering over both of them.

Scene LXXXIV

The ship's boy swept back the large leafy branches that hid the *Coo-Cal*, in the cove where he and Essen had left it. The faint specks of daubed green paint still just about visible: a faded make-up from more optimistic days. Liofia instantly felt a liking for it. Its pleasantly curved form and cute size giving an air of tropical escape. Though, sadly, she herself wouldn't be sailing on it. Her passage would be on one of the larger ships, that were now sat eager in the beachy Eldersway harbour.

"We'll sail out first on this, with a small team, to lead the way. Then the other ships can follow," stated the ship's boy.

"Then what?" asked Liofia, hungry for further preparation.

"I've asked about crossing the desert - both the king and Prince Estorie - but they didn't give answers. Aralak came from beneath the ground, so, I agree, there must be tunnels, but I don't know how we'll find them."

"The Palace of the Three Deserts should be the key," surmised Liofia, with an instinctive confidence. "It's where the consul appointed by the King of Tunid sits. So if there is a route, it may be somewhere near there."

The little monkey, bored with the conversation, jumped up and clambered onto the boat. This time almost knowing where it would be heading.

"I do recall once being told by Prince Aralak that he was heading to the Upper Desert," pressed Liofia, fixing her hair with her hands as she spoke. "Not long before he was killed ..and that's where the palace is."

She then tied her hair back into a long ponytail, before fixing it up into a bunch behind her head. As if streamlining herself for the coming ocean voyage. The young boy, with his cropped hair, standing a good few inches shorter. Now clearly second in command to her lead.

"It's unlikely the Tunidan guards will give up their secrets," he noted with hesitation. Not quite having her wilfulness. "They'd rather die than fail in their duty."

"I have a feeling we'll find it," smiled Liofia. The memories of how far she'd travelled since her cloistered days at Castle Tori bringing an added conviction. "We'll storm the palace if we have to."

Scene LXXXV

The King of Tunid stepped out ready for war, his aging frame far from impressive in the heavy, finely wrought armour. The long sword by his side shining with underuse. As he headed to join his cohort there was a touch of commotion in the damp air.

"Everyone should stay," pleaded Prince Estorie, his son - who looked much more robust and warrior-like in his own battle garments. His normally quiet voice finding force in the pre-war ferment.

Liofia, Goola and Julen stood there, listening, knowing that they themselves were bound to leave. Along with a multitude of others, who preferred to press their fate on the dangerous waves instead of the sinking craggy island.

"It's our duty," continued Estorie, "We all need to fight. We have to fight this."

His words were strong, but few paid real attention. Apart from Box, who, like a stray cat watching a stranger offering food, felt the pull of the plea. She'd already made up her mind to stay, but the words gave an added conviction. Though it barely lessened the sadness she felt for Goola and Julen, especially Goola. It pressed deep down in the winy depths of her stomach, far from the thinking mind. She tried to force a necessary coldness, but it was a coldness heavy with feeling. The feeling was mirrored in the stomachs of many of the others who stood waiting to leave.

As the King of Tunid ambled into the crowd he made a beeline for Colm. The old man's bearded figure looking dim and small beneath the tall masts of the harboured ships. Their sails flush and white as the provisions kept being loaded.

"People shouldn't be leaving," lamented the king.

"Why? The gods will not like it?"

"They will not."

The king hesitated a little as he heard his own words fall from his lips. They sounded somewhat ridiculous in the cold light of day. He doubted them himself for a moment, but the moment quickly passed. He then added flesh to the strange bones.

"If hundreds ..thousands, try to leave, and head outwards - especially in a frenzied rabble - it will just whip up this tempest and carnage further."

"Perhaps you too are just duped by your own myths," replied Colm, benevolently, noting the hesitation in the king's reaching response. The wild words only giving a greater confidence that the ships were indeed right to leave. That at least some may be saved from the slaughter. For a moment he wished that he himself was leaving as well, but he knew his role was to stay on the beleaguered island.

"You don't believe me, do you? Not even in the slightest," sighed the King of Tunid, looking ever more forlorn and unready for the coming battle.

"No ..say I did believe you though, what would you expect me to do?"

"To do our duty, to at least try to restore some order. To put these dangerous things away. To think of the whole world, and not just our own circumstances."

"And what about those on Tunida?" asked Colm, "What about the queen and the rest of your family back home? Will they do their duty when war comes to your island, or will they too sail for the safety of the lands that they know about, that other do not - or did not?"

"She will do her duty. Just as I, and my son, will do ours here. If I had the numbers I would physically stop these ships from departing, but as I don't I must simply try as best I can to hold back this tide of war from the mainland. As my brother, Prince Reach, is doing right now in the east."

The deliberate tone from the King of Tunid gave Colm a jarring pause of doubt, but it didn't fully move him.

Suddenly, as if manifesting from this very doubt, there came a flash of light. As, far off in the distance, giddy lightning left heavy black clouds. Followed, many seconds later, by the deep and disturbing rumble of thunder. Colm looked with concern at the harboured vessels. The women, children, and the men that would be boarding to protect them. The black powder, cannon and shot - as black as the clouds in the sky. The weather would indeed be as dangerous to them as any standing army.

At this point the ship's boy came back down the gangway of the nearest tall ship. His natural optimism again on display, replacing the disquiet he'd first felt when Colm had ordered him to leave, and then later when Liofia had spoken to him of storming Tunidan palaces.

Everything was looking shipshape he declared, and besides the weather, he was confident of success. He then left the men-at-arms, and headed towards the little *Coo-Cal*.

Scene LXXXVI

"You must come," begged Liofia loudly, as the ship left Brynnyfirdia. Trading the dark green island for the dark grey sea. Julen shouted repeated words to the same effect. Whereas Goola just looked out at Box, with sad, stoic eyes; teary in their stillness. Deep down all three had believed that, when push came to shove, Box would follow them and leave too, but no. Looking, and feeling like the little harbour fool, she stood there and watched them off. Her quiver at her back, and her sword at her waist. The rain making her look like a dour vagabond, lost and destitute. She watched the ship disappear, the last of the five to make the exodus, then trampled off to join the forces heading east. The King of Tunid, the glowing Prince Estorie, weary Colm, and countless other Brynnyfirdian men and women. All to defend their little island. She thought of the half-tails, beset, and no doubt vanquished, by the terrible forces of the mainland kings, and finally she thought of Taxilian and Mayleen, back home. The muddy flowerbed at the centre of the world; the animals and the crops; the cosy warm beds with their rough, but snug sheets. The hay in the barn, yellow with summer. It was a far cry from the greying whirlpool she found herself in now. The rain and sleet and gales and sludge. The clank of battle that grew nearer with each forest step.

Meanwhile, far away, the Queen of Tunida looked out longingly at the snaking sea. The waves impassable and unwilling of peace. The fires that were lit broke the snap of cold, but even she felt the nip beneath her rich, billowing dress. Her dragon's blood and heavy eyelids, stony and unmoved against the wind. Flashes of light criss-crossed the dark ocean sky, and its slow thunderous tremor was matched by tremors of the ground. The firm belly of the earth, awaking from an eternal slumber. The queen could dimly hear the crash of war, travelling on the air; and could smell the scent of blood on the ocean foam.

It was the Day of Fire, but the males were far away from the island, and few felt the need to celebrate.

Scene LXXXVII

"Only birds survive floods," observed Luteeay, as he prepped his flying machine in the onset of the downpour.

Elgiva made little note of the observation. "We're old, go and help Liofia and the young-uns," she pressed, watching on, the slight electricity in the wet air adding a click of drama to the scene.

"I didn't like to say that you were too old to be worth saving," replied Luteeay, with an irreverent grin playing on his lips - that then quickly receded again, as the gravity of the situation reasserted itself. "You need to head back to Taxilian and Mayleen - do what you can." As he said this he then pushed a few jewelled buttons and levers to take flight, but before fully doing so he stopped and spoke again. A touch of concern overcoming him.

"Try to head to high land. The central mountains if you can. You might find safety there."

"What?" queried Elgiva, confused, "Just head off to the mountains?"

"It's up to you, it may be pointless, but that's my advice. Again, only birds survive floods."

"So you're telling three old hands to just go off on whim? In the rains and the storms, in search of Middlemap?"

"I think you should try to head in that direction at least, you may find refuge ..and there is no Middlemap." He gave a final wink as he said this. "It's nothing but very cold, high mountains up there. There's certainly no comfort, but it's better than the seabed. Middlemap is just a myth - if every curiosity seeker is focused on the middle, their eyes aren't on the edge, you see." He then tinkered with his trinkets and levers once more. Taking one last look at the intemperate sky.

"Time really is at the essence, so I do need to get going."

He pulled one last lever. The seraphine bird took flight, leaving Elgiva alone, on the stony, muddy earth.

Scene LXXXVIII

The strange bird soared. Its grace upon the firmament soul-like above the material realm. A petrol-hued kytalyk, rising with life, under the cloudy vault. The gold-blue ceiling of the sky hidden by a murky serpentine silver.

Below water pelted the earth, like large raindrops on delicate butterfly wings. As war, in endless flowers, blossomed across the islands of the world. So many tall poppies and scattered petals. The fish, wild at sea; the animals, spritely on the land. The birds, but this one, absent from the sky.

Everywhere on the wheel below a swirl of swords and blood.

*On the eastern half of Brynnyfirdia 10,000 lay slain.
Still thousands more lay slaughtered and dismembered in the wooded mainland north.*

*In the Eastern Seas, 4,000 men, expired in the water.
And on the Maiden Lands, 20,000 more of every banner, slept in their reddened grave.*

*Yet still, like marching skeletons, thousands more headed to the ragged pits.
The war and wild weather as bone and flesh-filled cauldrons on the unsteady ground.*

Scene LXXXIX

A crash of lightning and a grimace of thunder. Of the five ships that had left Brynnyfirdia one had been wrecked upon the waves; another scattered to the wind, presumably lost as well. Of the three that remained, two, including the plucky Coo-Cal, approached the coast of the Upper Desert; as the third – the ship carrying Liofia, Goola and Julen – wallowed far behind, middling in the ocean.

Even with the storm raging Liofia remained calm and focused. Her mind unwilling to contemplate a failure to make the journey. Almost in oblivion to the howling waters she waded through her thoughts, remembering when she was a child and her father had left for the Three Deserts. Had he made a similar pilgrimage? She felt a royal pull. A sense of fate. Goola and Julen, on the other hand, just stood in hope. The dangerous moment freezing their minds, as their hands gripped the fixings of the ship – Julen more concerned for the broad and determined Liofia than for himself. His wide eyes sucking in the drama. Everything on the small ship looked so light and frail against the giant ocean surrounding it, as if any piece could be ripped away in an instant: suckled towards the ends of the world by the bellowing gales. Like loose brittle leaves, ripped down long and winding autumn streets. Yet, Liofia looked heavy on the solid wooden boards of the deck. A plum stone in the flesh of the earth.

As a bright flash of lightning lit up a section of the black sky she steadied herself further. Once again trying to envision her exit. The great seas of the realm a watery passage; a natal canal for her fleeing soul.

Scene XC

Beautiful blood pulsing through veins. Uprooted trees. The gunky trenches of the soggy forest floor. The swaggering wind, tearing at the leaves and branches. Even this far on land the hiss of the sea carried on the currents. Threatening violence in its mood. Corpses, occasionally strewn, but overwhelming in their stench and presence. Box clasped her sword, a lonely, tiny spirit in an un-fond world. She'd yet to see fighting, but everywhere the evidence of battle oozed and lingered on the cold, cold air.

"It's only death," spoke Colm, with a quiet air. The coming dark and coming clash of war bringing an unmovable dread. A dread that couldn't be hidden or avoided. Staining reality with its indelible dirt. "It's tragic when the young die early," he continued, "But death is nothing in truth. Suffering requires consciousness - and in death you lose consciousness quickly. Like falling from your horse and getting knocked out cold - you may break a few bones and be in a bad way, but as you pass out you don't consciously experience the pain. It's only when you awake in your recovery a week or so later that you realise the damage you've suffered, by which time you're well on the mend. That we faint so easily is a blessing. And death too is a blessing - in that it means we always have an escape route from suffering. It's a neat system. The dread we feel now is worse than the battle. God never burdens a soul with more than it can cope with."

These words in the wild tempest stilled Box a little. It also made her feel a little less guilty at the prospect that she herself might take life when she reached the melee. She looked around at some of the men - and women - readying themselves for the onslaught. All as trepidatious as her, though most hiding it more so. The quiet steely-eyed men, and the verbose cocky boys - with their cries of bloodlust and victory; all tinged with the same hum of fear. Of feelings of endings and blackness.

Then the trumpets sounded, and a rush of panic and noise ran through the encampment. Death, on its smoky horse, was arriving under the mainland banners.

Scene XCI

Far across the land and sea Prince Reach too was tethered by the hum of death. Hardened by the blood and horror. The cruel sickness and dismembering normalised in his numb experience of the world. Still, he strained his heart to remember his earlier, more innocent soul. As he gave the order to charge the enemy once again - sending countless men to the agony of metal and fire - he looked out at the perilous vista. The vast sweep of sea and country; all in tumult and swarming doom. The swollen sea so high and mercurial. Every once green field now marred a colourless brown with mud. Like lakes of muddy water, cleaving from the darker ocean. The blood of countless thousands seemingly visible on the skyline, giving an under-paint of glowing red, all but hidden by the swampy darker colours of conquering nature.

The din of clashing swords and blast of cannon pitted the aural canvas similarly. Reach felt the urge to draw his own sword and rush headlong into the fray himself - the sense of perpetual death inspiring a madness and impatience - but he held firm to his duty, directing the torment from afar. Standing on the hillside: a lofty precipice under the writhing sky. The rain pelting down like hail from angry angels. The occasional stone or icy rock obliterating men and earth little differently to heavy cannonballs. Crushing the war in its own warlike tantrum.

Then, finally, a huge wave washed over the coast, cutting away a chunk of land. The men upon it as ants, easily washed away by a spilling bowl or cauldron. Prince Reach cursed the earth .. but continued the fight. Ceaselessly endeavouring to defeat the mainland, even if the territory was but a single stone in an endless water. A stepping stone above the eternal abyss.

Scene XCII

As the battered ship finally docked in the harbour it found a storm equal in measure to the one left at sea. Sandstorms and dust devils, daylight skies darkened by the mist, frenzied mobs, and blood on the market streets. Somewhere far off inland a knife plunged into the stomach of a Tunidan guard. "The world is ending, why hide things now?" pressed the assailant, as the other guard stepped back in shock. Shuddering as his dying compatriot slid to the floor. Yet still, he kept his lips tight.

As Liofia stepped off the ship an energised Brynnyfirdian came forward to meet her. "The rest have pushed onwards, to the palace, as you suggested. They told me to wait here for you. We found chaos when we arrived. Gales, crushing heat, unbreathable air. Violent criminals creeping through the dusky cover. The locals had hunkered down to escape the cutting sands, and at first were unable to help with our questions. Now, however, they, like us, clamour for escape. The growing hunger and terror causing panic. The idea of refuge beyond this hell, or of some secret oasis within the palace walls being too much a temptation. Everywhere is fighting and rebellion. But, with good fortune, the path may be clear. We think we know the way, and we now need to quickly head on to catch up."

As Goola and Julen followed Liofia down the steps they listened on open-mouthed. Not expecting the chaos here to eclipse the war and danger they'd left behind. Goola pulled her cloak over her face to shield it from the abrasive winds. As did Liofia, who instantly turned and started ushering people from the ship. The exodus of men, women and children finding little refuge in the hot desert sand. Julen gripped the handle of his sword as he readied himself for the journey, as if bracing to fight the storm itself.

There was little time to waste. As the winds circled a heavy rush of bluster rolled in from the sea, spraying mist against the arid dirt. The strangers in a foreign world were eager to keep moving. Heading to the desert's edge.

Scene XCIII

Prince Estorie looked tall and graceful. His bloodied armour still bright in the dark of war. The Brynnnyfirdians had somehow managed, with the help of these few Tunidans, to push back the flood of forces advancing across the island. Now, as they strolled through the scene of earlier battles, they prepared for another onslaught.

Box trailed in the rear. Her loose arrows had been only a minor use in the wild tumult. Trying to pick off opponents from the forest canopy, as the crush of battle played out in the greater open before her. She replayed the action in her mind, unsure if a single shot had made its target. The forest felt strangely quiet in the aftermath. The stillness, even of the leaves, unsettling in its chill. Finally, she spotted Colm, who looked increasingly tired and worn by the feud. She headed over, cat-like, to tag along and listen to the conversation. The plans for the next assault; whether, and where, they would make encampment; and the inevitable re-advance of the mainland forces, relentless in their number.

As her little paws followed through the wet sludge she couldn't help but notice the multitude of bodies dotted throughout the woodland. Brynnnyfirdians and mainland fighters alike, but mainly Brynnnyfirdians. Their ragged, boggy frames and porcelain faces. Slumped or mangled carelessly in the earth. Some so precious and intact that they seemed to be in a soft and gentle sleep, others just brown and bloody carcasses, neither animal nor man. She felt cold to it now, but anticipated the horror it would cause her dreams. She compared the dead to the green trees still living. The vivid difference between life and death stark in its depiction.

At this point her eyes were then turned by the arrival of the King of Tunid, who cut through the brush to seek counsel with his tall son. Like Colm, he too looked weathered by the battle. Tired, more ancient. Hanging on to life. His blood stained sword lank and aching by his side. He looked barely a king, just a man. Another soul out in merciless nature. Prince Estorie looked flush in comparison. His bright youth unrelenting in the grim situation. As Box observed this radiance she noted another radiant figure lying on the ground, partially obscured by weeds and bushes. The pale body perfect, except for a large blade wound in the torso. She instinctively walked over. It was Essen. His expired blood-less physique in a puddle beneath the forest scrub.

Colm and the others followed her curious lead, and looked down at the unmistakable figure. It was a hallowing image. Only silence could meet the vision. A solemn, sound-less bell tolled in the broken clearing.

..Then the storm whipped up, and another rush of war and sludge came roving in.

Scene XCIV

With victory total in the Northern Kingdom, Drua Maleeva was far from content. For though the half-tail resistance had fully dissolved in the beating rain, the rain itself fell heavy on the conquered earth. The blizzard-like winds, and the ever-increasing mud, clogging the sense of control. That kings and men must wait for clearer days to make plans, and that royal decrees lay second in command to obstinate nature. There were reports that frogs had rained down from the sky on the outskirts of Wedkarten. Supposedly swept in from the ponds and swamps further north. A report that would've been less believable were it not for the rains of small fish that had earlier pelted down from the west. Their silver bodies eeling and half-swimming in the squelching ground.

Maleeva felt disconcerted by this torrential drizzle. Hemmed inside the castle walls that once warmed the hearty King Brijsk. His jolly presence entirely vacated from the country with his death. The large fire in the room burned, but it felt limp in comparison to the cold outside whirl. With little to do but wait, Maleeva sat and penned an epistle to King Mizmeam. The scratching ink the focus of her thoughts as she tried to ignore the imperious dictates of the elements.

..the half-tails put up little fight, it's hard to understand how King Brijsk found such trouble. I shudder to think of the time wasted as he played with these sylvan rebels. Once this eternal hailstorm subsides we can press on doing what he should've done, and use this land as the staging post to truly yoke the Western Isles. Then, from Caster we can focus our effort on Tunida. The weather truly is something terrible though, and for now it's impossible to execute a single decision. I occasionally wonder if that wild woman was right. Had we let the serpent live she'd have certainly won more followers to her cause. Still, good sense says this will pass sooner or later.

Please, watch over Seaspell. If the storms worsen keep him from the harm. I know you will, but you must forgive my asking. His precious waking head, I wish I had him here with me now. To rule as Prince over this forsaken kingdom. As you rule as King over all these worldly lands. I await any further news and instruction..

Maleeva pressed her seal to the letter and handed it to the guard. He hurried down the stony steps to the waiting courier. Who then headed out into the sodden darkness; his head hooded, his horse as thunderous as the night.

Scene XCV

The Taps of the North spilled forth. The huge waterfall, mountainous in size, burst violently beyond its customary flow. The huge rocks of its frame crumbling under the gushing water to the dark, tea-coloured sea. The currents, bilging and heaving with the added volume. The world ocean throwing itself onto land like a huge seal. Weighty and unthinking. Pressing the earth with its heavy arrival.

From Brynnyfirdia to Tunida, from the southern tip of Caster to the swampy north, billowing floods invaded fields and beach and jungle. Woodlands and scrubby wastelands. The stony creeks and marshy beds. Even unto the feet of rocky mountains and the sea green hills. As men waged war and mothers milked their babes, the tumult of a wider nature interrupted. In the Eastern Kingdom, Lake Fryjia finally weaved a path to meet the sea, whilst the milky meadows to the east, in the Maiden Lands, found themselves submerged under the slumbering deep. The fishy waters; the squids and shells and tangled seaweeds, all dragged upon the submerged shore. The starfish mirroring the wondrous night; the icy starlight, the snowy mountain peaks piercing the blackest sky. Prince Reach pressed his men further still, though many turned and hid with disquiet.

Meanwhile, far, far south, in the Tunidan seas, a dainty ship, with wooden mast, carrying virgin captives, sailed towards the Tunidan channel. A precious epistle, a vessel of vessels. Fresh as unripened fruit and as innocent as lambs. To find safety beyond the cursed wet earth. That it might re-flower when the storm had passed..

Scene XCVI

A huge wave from the coast washed over the Upper Desert. It wasn't the first, and this time it sent Liofia, Goola, Julen, and the countless others that were fleeing, aiming for higher land. Though with the flat, undulating landscape it little mattered: the entire desert now looking like a long damp beach. Where pools of sticky sand intermingled imperceptibly with firmer ground and deeper trenches. In the lawless rush occasional skirmishes broke out, but with nature to contend with little worry was given to the threat of men. Either the now-absent forces that guarded the desert, or the hoards that overran it.

A dour-looking man lunged at Liofia, in the wild hope that he could steal anything that might be nestled on her person. Her loose cloak and rotund figure promising something worth looting beneath the quilted attire. In a dash Julen pounced, and ran through the stray with his sword. Thinking little about the quick death he'd doled out, as they headed ever on towards what they hoped would be escape. Goola tripped in panic as she watched the violence unfold, flying headlong into the salty sand. She picked herself up, soggy and wet, and dragged herself onwards.

Another wave, this time bigger, rolled along the wide expanse. Its white foam visible and imminent in the distance. Sweeping all in its path. The three tried to quicken their speed in response, but racing as they already were the attempt only made things more clumsy. Liofia stumbled, heavy on her feet, but managed to keep her ground. Then, at last, with relief, rocky outcrops came into view. The outcrops that, hopefully, led to somewhere safer. Somewhere beyond the known, turbulent world. They willed themselves on, dreaming of the higher ground. The water, now a quickly rising tide, lapping at their ankles.

Finally, as they reached the ascent, the hollow entrance to the tunnel came into view. There it was, a gaping cave towards the summit. Nondescript and boring in comparison to the secret it promised. They were also blessed with another image: the ship's boy, standing diligently near the entrance, awaiting his late-coming friends. The little monkey, high on his shoulders, agitated by the chaos. Goola climbed first, finding a burst of agility as she caught sight of the familiar faces, as the ocean continued to eat the desert. Then Julen and Liofia followed up the step-like rocks and stones that led the way. Liofia struggled on the final step, but Julen grabbed her by the wrists and dragged her up. Just as a large plume of water rose to climb the tor itself. Washing the stragglers further below away in its cruel and unemotive torrent. The waters then lapped at the

base of the tunnel entrance. The surrounding ocean that was previously desert now threatening to leave not even a speck of land.

The four climbed higher, to the rocks above the entrance, as they watched the waters flood into the tunnel. No doubt chasing through the darkened chasm those that had already made it this far. Drenched, and now hopeless, the gang stood stranded atop the rugged crest. Watching the sea cut off their only salvation. The cavernous tunnel now a giant sinkhole, trying and failing to drain the flood. The unrelenting wind, still holding its rough sand, cutting at their skin, as it sprayed the dark sea. Julen looked across to the ship's boy, who was now separated by the gushing currents, on the opposing part of the outcrop. The once playful monkey gripped the boy's hair and jacket, unable to offer any optimism. Julen grabbed both Liofia and Goola more tightly in response.

As the waters climbed higher a sense of final desolation took hold.

But then, as if in a dream, a strange saviour descended from the heavens. A large bird swooped from the yellow sky. The huge, winged-creature landing gently on the torrid precipice. As the four clocked the odd sight a hollow appeared in its plump body ..and just like that, there was Luteeay. Goola and Julen recognised him in an instant. The bizarreness of the moment only tethered to reality by the bizarreness of all the other things they'd experienced so far.

"I can get you across the desert," he said, with little explanation.

He then quickly and physically dragged Liofia, Goola and Julen into its yawning belly; their sense of dislocation not enough to even question the action.

As they found refuge a further heavy wave washed over the desert peak, this time nearly washing the last of the rock into the newly birthed sea. Luteeay, responsively, made some adjustments. The bird lifted into the air. The feral, grainy wind ripping at its pretty exterior. As it hovered skyward it angled in towards the ship's boy. Julen reached down in an attempt to grab his hand, but another gust of sea and gale ripped at the rock. The small monkey leapt from the boy's shoulders and scrambled up the human ladder. As it found safety a last deadly surge of seawater swept what remained of the ground. The boy was lost. The gyrating sea snatching him with its weight. The bird lurched, nearly crashing headlong into the whirling sea itself, but retained its angelic grace and soared, with sorrow, into the sky.

As it headed further into the Outer Desert the ravenous ocean reached its zenith. The watery hand of the earth failing to grip the tail feathers of the aerial fugitive.

Scene XCVII

Swords clashed as the waters ravished. Five-pointed stars and fathers of death; fathoms further than the deep. The dreary seabed. A jewel box, with a copper lock and a golden seal. Black lamps of fire. Clouds, as horses across the sky: dark, grey, and white. The starry winepress; the ocean a swampy purple.

A hermit stepped onto his rickety rowboat, and headed out into the lashing storm. To escape the warring world, and find peace upon the lonely sea. Calm in heart, he pressed his oar to the swelling waves, his aged body still healthy to the task, as if striving to leave all earthly care. Finding a lull in the heaving tempest he reached down to pull a bottle from his tattered bag. He uncorked it and took a swig. The alcohol tasted sweet and refreshing upon his tongue and lips. He exhaled and took a moment to enjoy the exalt. Sitting there as in a garden. The hissing rain, the turbulent waves and clouds, like birds and their birdsong in the lively trees. He took in another brief moment of the discordant scene, then a billowing wave came sweeping over. A comforting blanket bringing dreamy sleep. The wooden boat cast to oblivion.

Back on land. The crushed skulls of contending angels. All dust and mud. The heavens raged. In its right hand seven stars, in its left, a sharp-edged sword. Metal burst flesh as men fought for their sinking countries. The glug and goo of snaking blood running rivers through the wettened lands. The chariots, horses, slaves and souls of men, pressed hard against the entombing drench. The world - the bridewell of mud and clay - a churning mess of dying killers. Flickering against the dark like tired candlesticks. One endless abyss, growing with exponential dread. The dragons of sea and sky wrestling in their violent currents.

King Mizmeam trudged up the incline as the rain fell. The half-sleeping Prince Seaspell beautiful, but heavy in his arms. His escorting men at arms, falling underfoot, lacking the will that now kept him going. As he headed from the worldly ocean he remembered a story his mother had told him when he was a child. The story of Prince Apple, the son of the ancient King of Trees. It was foretold by a haggard witch that the young prince would die by drowning, so his doting mother, the Queen of Vines, took him up to the highest mountain in the kingdom, to keep him safe from fate. She tended him with care and vigilance, confident she had done well, but one day, tired, she fell asleep. The prince wandered off. When she awoke from her moment of absence she found him dead, in the spring at the summit of the mountain. King Mizmeam felt darkened as he recalled the tale. He then heard a sprig of thunder. A little crown of sound, that gave the mountain he now climbed a

thorny cap. The dark, grape-red sky above briefly lit with lightning. A silver key, as white as wool, opening the vault to some celestial city. Where the harp of heaven found its voice through the waters.

All around the rocks of the starry mountains fell to earth like timely figs, shaken in gusts of wind. Dark black horses, carrying pails of water - numbering a thousand by a thousand, and a further thousand still - cantered across the remaining peaks of land, shedding their downpour. In a single hour so many great riches and works reduced to naught. Every shipmaster, and every company of ship and sailor, cast hard against the stones. No soldiers left to fight. The damp carpet of death, rolled out as a text-less scroll. Blotting from the earth the names of men. Somewhere in the sunken fields Box's little sword lay bright and unclenched. An amber ring around her precious throat. Her wisp of holy breath now clothed in white raiment. Submerged beneath the tree of milky starlight.

Still, in the east, on the highest land, on the pinnacle of his high castle, King Kaspria stood yet raging against the weather. His face disturbed and distorted. Lost in his own madness. Careless to the countless animals now being punished for the crimes of man. The earth shook beneath him, but he dismissed its power, and wailed against its impetuousness. His fists shaking at the tumult in the skies. The season of glass: the icy crystals and shrill sleet and cold, barely noted by his angry skin. His ragged, bearded cheeks red against the endless night. His ships; once out of sight beyond the pleasing horizon, now out of sight beneath the water's rim. He screamed his orders to his briny crews of skeletons below. To muster their bones to take up sword and cannon to fight the howling wind. The Maiden Land enemy now almost totally defeated in his mind - not by nature, but by his own omnipotence. Finally, the weight of water that pressed against his castle walls flooded atop the parapet, knocking him from his feet. He gathered himself up, then began raging again, but the waters kept coming. His unchained will unable to halt the tide.

At the world's edge, far beneath the outer desert rocks, the waters rushed. The influx chasing the fleeing souls through the doomy catacombs. Their desperate legs little use against the crushing deluge.

The flood had overcome, and all was quiet upon the face of the earth.

Scene XCVIII

It soared through the air, the desert below - scorched and hot and dusty - a seemingly endless, barren red. As if they had taken flight into the very Sun. Only hope providing any impression that it would ever end. The dizzying ascent and strange mode of travel making near-zombies of the absconding passengers. Luteeay, alone, scanned the horizon; the others, glaze-eyed sheep, trusting to his shepherding.

Then the scenery began to change. Eventually, seeping in at the discernible edge of reality, a faint green hue of inky field. The tiniest hum of greenery where the desert met the sky. The world beyond the world. The land where Prince Aralak had been slain. Where strange deer stalked through scrubby trees, unmolested by man. As the green grew further detail came into focus. Grasses and trees. Peppered with flowers, an altogether deeper red than the red of the desert rock. As if an infusion of lifeblood it quickly re-awakened Liofia, Goola and Julen. Their thoughts reconnecting with their open eyes, to gulp in the new dawn.

The sight almost begged the crew to glide down, to leave the danger of the air for the comforting oasis, but it was still not far enough.

"We can't land here."

They soared on. Across the land, then deeper out, above the glistening ocean. Below a tall rigged ship drifted by the fertile coastline. Its white billowing sails restful on the waves. Its soft wooden hull, gentle on the crest. Patrolling the natural hem. A last symbolic barrier, bottling away the great beyond.

The airy contraption spread its wings and cut above the ship unseen. The pacified ocean happy to see them cross. Its sparkling fish - gold and silver and rosy-bronze - leaping at the foamy surface. After what appeared to be endless dewy blue, finally, the white sand beach that climbed out from beneath it - rising up to form Gelkin's island. A seamless transition from waves to tall palms. In the toe-wetting waters where mermaids play between sea and aether. Or where aquatic angels weave between the worlds. From spirit to earthly flesh and back.

The feathered vessel skimmed down, to land quietly near Gelkin's little hut. An alien sight, even in this exotic and fruitful land. Its buoyant belly, full of strangers, thankful to find refuge. Except, of course, the little monkey, who sprang down first, to find its familiar home.

It burst into the peaceful hut, and up into Gelkin's unexpected arms.

Scene XCIX

The new born child lay there, crying healthily, its long, monkey-like tail bouncing with life, like its hands and eyes and feet. Liofia lay there tired, but relieved. Whilst Julen, much more emotional, looked down at the two with joy. The dainty hut, in this unmarked paradise, now an idyllic scene of father, mother and child.

As Goola, Gelkin and Luteeay re-entered to join the three, the picture expanded from family to tribe. A tiny civilisation in the great outer world. A little harvest set aside for the continuation of Man.

"Now it's all over," opined Luteeay, "You'll have to return to the old world, to start it all again. With this fresh life." He looked around at the others, as if excluding himself from the prospect. His barky age in distinct contrast to the youthful saplings he was directing. "Only in time, once you're ready," he then quickly redressed, noting Liofia's exhaustion. The craggy feet around her eyes on her glowing skin suggesting need of sleep, more so than need of youth.

"I guess we should return to the land of the half-tails," expressed Liofia, as she cradled her perfect child. Her eyelids angling down like canopies, swaddling the new arrival in dotting rays. The "coo-cal" of birds outside chirping their lullaby.

"Will everything be gone?" queried Goola, not fully sharing the same sense of hope, though she too could only feel elation in the afterglow of nativity. Her delight tinged, rather than extinguished, by the guilt she felt for leaving so many loved ones behind. Especially so Box, whose memory was a constant in her mind. Propagating, like quickly growing vines, into every gap between her more worldly thoughts.

"There will be so few land animals left when the waters recede that birds will forget to fly," responded Luteeay, with gentle lament. Hiding his own cares behind his usual exterior. The old kytalyk then looked towards Gelkin, who was lost in thought himself. Of them all it was Gelkin who'd been away the longest, and the idea of returning felt far from an instinctive thought.

"You have the chance to make a better world, in your image," pressed Luteeay, seeing the hesitation. "So go back, with Goola, and with Julen and Liofia, and this child, when the waters recede. Help them rebuild."

Gelkin nodded in accord. The words only echoing what he had already decided in his heart. In spite of his misgivings. He'd left the old world worn by its ways, now that it was washed asunder he had no excuse. As the world had fallen apart

he'd sat in idle paradise. Now it was time to do good work again. To attempt to find a way to go forth and thrive with nature once more.



Fini

