



Someone Else's Kingdom
BOOK I

N R Scott

Introduction

Gelkin was lying on the grass. The Sun was blazing and it warmed his skin. We all know the feeling. When you stop for a moment to lie down on the grass on a beautiful summer's day. The one downside being that you know that sooner or later you have to break your peace to get up to go somewhere - to a job, or an appointment, or some other workaday calling. However, Gelkin had no such calling. No need to get up. No time to keep. He wasn't even aware what day it was anymore. Was barely sure what year it was. Or even what his age was in exact years. He didn't have a care in the world..

..though he was, finally, beginning to miss the company of other people.

Chapter One

"The world is round. Our land is surrounded by a ring of ocean. Which in turn is surrounded by a ring of desert. The ring of desert surrounded by a ring of fire."

"..But what's beyond the ring of fire?"

"Nothing, endless fire? Who knows? How could anyone pass through such a fire to find out? It is the edge of reality. The edge of the world. Created this way. Beyond our knowledge. A perfect creation - created for us ..for us to wonder at."

"..But there's water to the north. Julen says that it's all water up there, and that only fear stops men from sailing further."

"The world is like a gold ring with a diamond ring stone. The gold the fire, the diamond - water. Water enters our world to the north-west, via the great waterfall. Our ocean then flowing around our islands like a great river. The water then leaving our world to the north-east, via the great ocean of steam."

"..It's said that the ocean gets so warm in this region that eventually it begins to boil ..though no sailor has ever sailed so far. Eventually this leads to a tower of steam, like a waterfall in reverse. Like steam rising from a boiling cauldron. We call these entry and exit points the "Taps of the North". Between these two taps lies The Forest of Never. The sinking forest, where all the land, the world as we know it, slowly sinks into the waters, amidst a swamp of impassable vegetation."

"A knotted barrier of endless water. Making a perfect circle with the ring of fire. All of this, our reality, contained within. Like the yolk of an egg. A womb of existence. A board game for men to play upon."



The World In Its Entirety

As Box left Grandpa Luteeay's house she vaguely considered these words. Of course, she'd heard it all before, it wasn't anything new. It was the general view of the world that everyone had. A self-evident truth. It was undeniable that the world was perfectly formed this way, but it was unsettling nonetheless. "It is this way *..but why is it this way?* What's the point of it all? It's one thing knowing where you are," she thought to herself, "*..But the mystery of why anyone's here in the first place, what's the answer to that?*"

She preferred the musings of Julen, her uncle. At least he stepped out of these boundaries from time to time. His dim-witted ignorance was unbounded, but he had an adventurous energy. Plus, as he wasn't much older than her they were far closer in outlook. She just twelve, he nineteen. So they were much more like cousins than uncle and niece.

Like her, Julen also worked on the family farm, though he usually spent his days fantasising about life as a sailor or soldier, or as some other form of voyaging hero. A daydreaming desire that was firmly held in check by his father, Taxilian - Box's other grandpa - who understood only too well the limited opportunities afforded to normal people such as themselves. And the dull, hard truth that a tribute-paying farmworker was a huge step up in practice from a hired sword, or a ship's hand.

Box shared the thirst for adventure, but her horizons were even more limited. The chances that Julen would leave were slim. The chances that she would do the same even slimmer. A marriage to someone a few fields, or perhaps even a few miles down the road would be the likely limits of any exploration of the wider world for her. A prospect that, though distant, held little appeal.

Her sister on the other hand, just a year older, had a slightly different outlook. In many ways they were almost identical, looking almost like identical twins - in spite of the small age gap - but the more boyish personality of Box made a huge difference in regard to their ideas about the perfect life. Goola had a softer disposition, and a natural homeliness. She didn't have the same dog-like tenacity that Box had. Otherwise though they were very alike, and rarely apart, and Box was eager to catch up with her as she headed back to the farm.

Arriving in the yellow fields, Box immediately, and without thought, made her way over to the stack of wooden crates that were lying on the dry muddy ground, picked one up and started carrying it towards the farmyard. Freshly picked vegetables to be stored away. The crate was weighty and heavy, but she carried it with ease. A familiar job. As were all of the jobs on the farm. As she strode towards the storehouse she expected GrandpaTaxilian, Grandma Mayleen, Goola, or maybe even Julen himself to come striding out to collect another crate. However, as she continued on there was no one else there. A job half-finished.

Ditching the crate she went looking to see where everyone was and what they were up to. Heading straight to the kitchen she instantly grasped why the work had stopped. A state tribune was sitting holding court at the kitchen table. Tribunes had a range of formal and not so formal jobs. The main one being to collect taxes. However, they were also responsible for passing on information to subjects in their jurisdiction, such as news of new laws, or royal births. Or anything else touching such things. Usually they just came to gossip though, so whenever one arrived it was an opportunity to hear about the latest dramas from more worldly places.

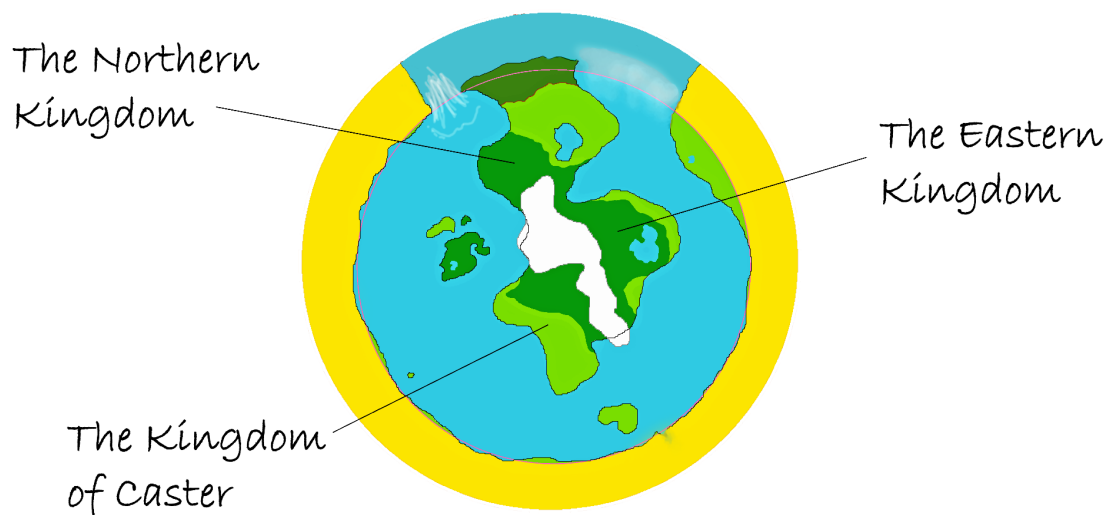
As Box entered the kitchen she quickly recognised the familiar face of this one. As he clocked her he gave a brief acknowledgement back, nodding his head at her, and calling her by her full first name, "Boxayla." In a very formal way, as if everyone he spoke to was a business acquaintance, regardless of age, sex or circumstance. He then without pause continued filling Box's grandparents up with all the latest tittle tattle and news from beyond their quiet rural world.

Box, eager to hear, pulled up a chair and started to listen in silence. Her family lived in the "Eastern Kingdom," though this was just the informal name for it that everybody used, and it had various more formal titles. Titles that were frequently changed or reformed due to the whims of state politics. Everyone just used the term "Eastern Kingdom" though, as it was much the easier.

The Eastern Kingdom was bordered by two other kingdoms. The "Northern Kingdom," and "The Kingdom of Caster" or "Southern Kingdom." Each also having more formal titles not worth remembering or making note of. The Eastern Kingdom largely consisted of the eastern section of the *world island* - and covered pretty much everything to the east of the snow-covered mountains. The Northern Kingdom, likewise broadly consisted of the northern part of this huge landmass. With the Kingdom of Caster covering all that lay southward.

The border between the Eastern and Northern Kingdoms often shifted. An endless blur of to and fro. With countless border skirmishes and land grabs. The Kingdom of Caster however, completely cut off by the icy mountains, was intact and unassailable. A realm separate to itself, and a realm with a somewhat more brutal reality than its two more northerly neighbours - a land with slaves and not just serfs.

No one was quite sure how it acquired the moniker "Caster", but it was generally thought that it simply referred to the way that it was cast off from the rest of the landmass. Though it was also sometimes suggested that the name came from the overcast nature of the place. The dark terrain, especially in the forested coves beneath the high mountains, being wet, foreboding and cloud-cast. With the black, gritty ice found on the southern side of the mountains only adding to this effect. The pure white snow of the peaks gradually blending into the cold darkness of the mountain slope. A cragged land of black and white, blending firstly into the dark greens of the forest, then further on; into the brown-green fields of the southern steppe.



The Three Major Kingdoms

As Box began listening the tribune was in the midst of explaining the latest goings-on regarding the quarantine. The Western Isles - a group of three windy islands, situated to the west of the mainland - had been quarantined for eight long months now. An outbreak of the dreaded *Pox*. A disease once a frequent blight across the kingdoms, long ago in the far distant past, but that now was a much rarer sight. Nigh on completely unheard of. But now, alas, it was back. The first time it had befallen the world in Box's short lifetime, and in Julen's too. So it was a serious matter, and Box, along with everyone else, paid attention with pricked ears.

Owing to this situation no one from the mainland was allowed to visit the Western Isles, nor was anyone allowed to leave. With only official personnel permitted traffic. Therefore a strict exclusion zone had been set up around all the ports and landing points on the western shore. With ships and soldiers from all three kingdoms mobilised to enforce the blockade.

Information about what was actually going on on the islands was hard to come by, but it was now quite well known, if not officially acknowledged, that a very large number of soldiers had been mobilised in the efforts to contain the outbreak. With many men leaving, but fewer returning home. There were also rumours of ships returning to harbour with significant fire damage, or in complete disrepair. With logging in Archer's Wood, in the woody Northern Kingdom, known to be at full tilt to keep up with the new shipbuilding demands.

Some were now even speculating that perhaps the Western Isles were in full rebellion against the blockade. A fear the tribune echoed, though in not so many words. Consequently, the panic that the pox would spread to the mainland was fairly heightened. Particularly in the port towns. The threat that someone carrying the virus would break through the blockade, or that a returning soldier would bring it back, leading some people to leave the western parts of the mainland altogether. Though the knowledge that even more soldiers were being drafted to help enforce the blockade was the primary worry of Grandma Mayleen.

"Julen will want to go."

"I'll go too," piped up Box, as she heard Mayleen utter this fear. Her words were just ignored and passed over though, as even had she wanted to go there was zero chance she would be taken, young and female as she was. Making the fanciful notion not even merit a response. Julen however was the perfect age, and he was at the forefront of the thoughts of both Taxilian and Mayleen. When the tribune mentioned that recruiters were heading further east it only heightened their concern. With perfect timing Julen then sauntered into the kitchen. "What have I missed?" he piqued, feeling annoyed to have been left out. "Nothing much," replied Taxilian, though noticeably that wasn't the case.

Julen didn't push for more details, he knew that Box would tell him everything anyway.

Chapter Two

The three main islands that made up the Western Isles were Terrella, Brynnyfirdia and the Harbour Lands. By far the largest was the Harbour Lands, a watery kingdom ruled by a king needing no description. A king so weak and feeble that he was effectively but a pawn. The "Pliant King", as he was known, who always bowed to whichever way the political wind was blowing, bending like a reed in the breeze. He claimed rule over the other two islands, though this was often disputed. A situation he was fairly comfortable with. The island derived both its power and its name from the fact that it was perfectly suited by nature to be the seat of a great seafaring power. The large inlet to the north east of the island provided a perfect natural harbour or minor sea, and faced outwards towards the mainland. So it was the perfect trade hub. There were also numerous other natural harbours around the outer edge of the island. Most notably Ink Bay, on the western edge, which was the small, but dominant trading post for all trade with the desert kingdoms.

In contrast to the Harbour Lands, Terrella was by far the smallest of the islands. Just a dot in the ocean. It had no king, nor any major towns or cities. Being mainly covered by dense jungly-forest. It was noted for being one of two places in the world where half-tails lived in great numbers. The other being the forests of the Northern Kingdom, on the opposing shoreline. The half-tails were people that were born with remnants of a tail. Not unlike that of a monkey. It was something that tended to be a family or tribal trait. Inherited haphazardly from older forebears. There were some families on the island where almost every member exhibited this strange trait. Others where just one or two were born with the extra appendage. It seemingly skipping generations with relative randomness.

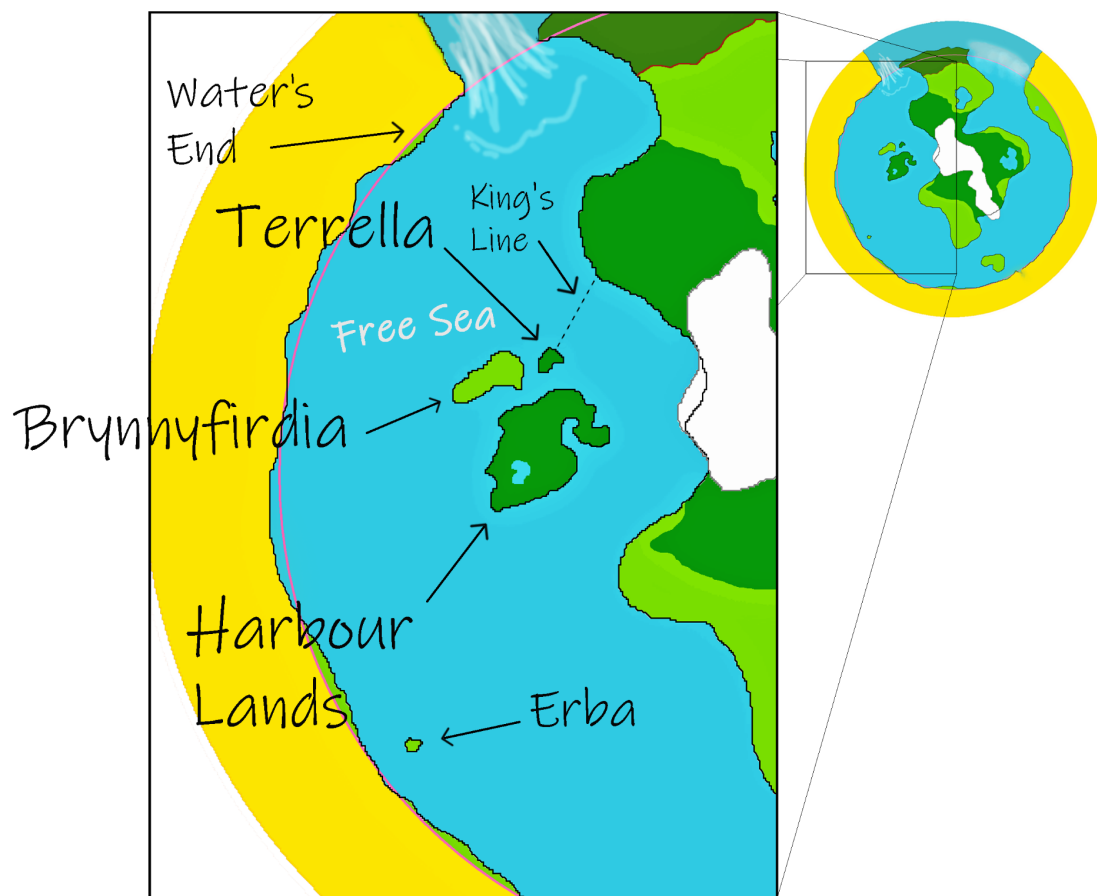
Most of those born as such tended to just have a small under-formed tail protruding from the bottom of the spine. Sometimes just a small bump even. However, occasionally some half-tails were born with a fully formed tail. Which looped upwards from the base of their spine and then down to the ground like a long rope. Tapering to the end. Though even these folk were still known by the general appellation "half-tail". The less developed version being so much more the common.

It was speculated by some people that during earlier times there were tribes or groups that were entirely this way. A *fully-tailed race*. That populated both the entirety of the northern mainland and all three of the western isles. There were also legends and myths pertaining to the idea. However, the general feeling, particularly on the mainland, was that it was just some kind of deformity. Or evidence of some unholy transgression with members of the animal kingdom. Consequently, most half-tails tended to hide their extra protuberances away under their clothes. It was not uncommon for many to have them removed altogether even. Either in adulthood or at birth. However, on Terrella there was no such inhibition, and it was one of the few places where it was a common sight to see such a physical peculiarity on display out in the open.

As a political entity the island itself tended to go a little under the radar. Too underpopulated to be of huge value in regard to trade or exploitation, and too insular to be a threat to the world beyond its shores. So it was well known, but rarely spoken of. Its sister island, Brynnyfirdia, stretching out to the West, was quite the opposite though. A cold, wet and boisterous island, it was very troublesome. Populated by earthy and unruly people. Slightly too large to be conquered easily, and far away enough from the mainland that it could operate with a degree of independence. The island had no single ruler, and its reputation on the mainland was one of lawlessness and rebellion. Making it a very visible problem in the eyes of every other realm.

Essen was twenty-four years old, and was born in the far west of the island. A place called Eldersway. A wind swept area with a craggy, rocky coastline, facing out to the sea known colloquially as the *Free Sea*. This was a cold, tempestuous body of water; difficult to sail, but beyond the reach or interest of the larger kingdoms. So it was the perfect place to play freely and to learn the art of sailing first-hand, without a glove on the shoulder holding a person back from the ocean danger. It also held little value as a trading lane, with just the thin slither of land known as Water's End to the far north-west, and then the dense woodlands of the Northern Kingdom to the east. So it held little real interest for the major kingdoms, though they nevertheless claimed dominion over the entire area.

The Free Sea was usually just busy with fishing vessels and *free sails* - the name given to boats and ships sailing independently, unaligned to any major power or state. Though any medium or larger sized vessels were generally thought of as being piratical or illegal under the codes of the mainland charters. Fortunately the unimportance of the sea, and its distance from the mainland, meant that more often than not a blind eye could be turned. With it only becoming a real issue when ships passed *the king's line*, an imaginary line stretching from Terrella to the western edge of the Northern Kingdom. Marking the point at which the Free Sea ended, and the inner seas began. Sailors understood that sailing beyond this point would usually result in trouble, but otherwise they could make their travails in the area largely unhindered.



(The Western Isles and the Free Sea)

Essen was well acquainted with the sea, but he'd spent the last six months or so on land dealing with other issues. He was now getting ready to return to the ocean once more though. Feeling optimistic and very much on the front foot. The war had been going well. Very well. The Brynnfyrdians now had almost complete control of all three islands, along with all the sea lanes in between. The battle now moving into the inner seas and towards the mainland. A struggle that would no doubt be extremely drawn out and bloody, but very much winnable now given their *new technological advantage*. Essen wanted to go for the jugular however. To attack the very heart of the enemy. A decision that didn't sit well with many of the older heads on the island, but one that had now been given a bright green light.

"If you get caught you sink the main ship," stated Colm, "It cannot be boarded - under any circumstances. Not by enemy, nor by friend, nor by stranger."

"Nor by mermaid."

"Certainly not by any woman. Even if you come across a drowning sailor you do not rescue him. Do you get me?"

"I understand."

"Look at me" stated Colm, adopting a more serious tone, "*..Do ..You ..Understand?!*"

"I understand," came the nodded reply.

Colm, the bearded soul instructing Essen, was a fisherman, though he was also much more than that. He was one of the most senior figures on the island. Albeit, like everyone else, he had no formal position or power. Brynnfyrdia being an odd place in terms of its societal structure. Certainly in comparison to all the various other realms. It was run informally, or *naturally*, by people that had simply acquired respect from the other people on the island. Meaning that it was effectively governed by a loose coalition of family heads and respected seniors, largely by consent and agreement. None vested with any written or formal power. In fact, it was often said by people from outside the island that it was governed by "fishermen with swords". Usually this was said derisively, but it was also in many ways just a statement of fact. Nearly every male on the island was a fisherman to some degree, and almost everyone in a position of leadership in some regard fitted this description. Though occasionally it was also farmers with swords. Which was more the case towards the eastern end of the island, where the landscape was slightly more rural, and tipped a little more towards agriculture.

This unusual style of rule was sometimes referred to as "consensus of the sword", extolling the general belief that by each man having a sword it forced a certain degree of democracy. Though they would never have described it with such a word. A basic understanding that the multitude could never be forced by the hand of the few if each man was individually armed. Although to outsiders this was often chastised as a chaos or barbarism. A system lacking formality and order. It seemed to work quite well on Brynnfyrdia however, and the rugged people took a certain pride in the fact that they alone were distinctly unruly and unable to be governed by any king or counsel.

"Acalee will be your eyes and your head," intoned Colm, breaking the salty ocean silence that had crept in. Making sure once again that his words were firm and well understood.

"C'mon, please, not Acalee," sighed Essen.

"You need someone that isn't a useless fool ..you're lucky it's just him going. I should be coming too, ideally. Would you prefer that?"

"..But he's a distraction. I'll have to keep a constant eye on him."

"That's a good thing, ..you can keep an eye on each other. This will be a long journey, and you'll need a second opinion. You can't just rely on instinct. There'll be a lot more traffic between Erba and the mainland too now that we've cut them off from here. So you'll need to watch day *and night*. And remember, *you can't be boarded*. So you can't simply fight your way out of any problems."

Essen begrudgingly acknowledged all this as he continued to load the ship. He was eager to just get on with things, but the insistence that Acalee would also be coming made him feel the weight of the voyage he was undertaking. Acalee was his younger half-cousin. He had a sensible disposition - much more so than Essen - but at the same time he was still quite green and child-like. Despite having just turned twenty. Meaning Essen felt a certain responsibility towards him. So he instantly knew that he would be far less likely to take any sort of risk during this adventure with Acalee on board. He also understood only too well that that was doubtlessly one of the reasons why Colm was making him come. To be an anchor against his own natural instincts. This fact alone, though it annoyed him, emphasised the seriousness of the situation. Acalee wasn't a natural warrior, but he was being sent out into this warring situation. Admittedly, he was well equipped to handle a sword, as were all males on the island, but it just wasn't his natural tendency. Books and heady ideas were more his thing. The mainland held a certain allure for him too that it didn't for other Brynnyfirdians. The brightness of the clothes and the costumes that people wore in the mainland cities. The culture and important affairs of state. If Brynnyfirdia had had court officials, like all the other dominions, Acalee would've made a good diplomat or man of state, but he was born amidst a tribe that disavowed such ostentation. So his nature was tempered by this more stoic, insular lifestyle. The coarseness frustrated him a touch, yet it also gave him a strong sense of the reality of the world too, and his admiration for the mainland didn't blind him to the flaws. He was still a Brynnyfirdian - and like Essen he felt primed for what lay ahead.

Chapter Three

Both Box and Goola lived with their grandparents. Their father, Julen's much older brother had died in the border wars between the Eastern and Northern Kingdoms. Not the usual skirmishes that sometimes took place, but the last *real war*. Where the two kingdoms had gone all out at each other's throats. Each wanting to completely annihilate the other. An impossible task in reality, that inevitably always led to ceasefires, minor victories and more endless border grabs and skirmishes. So it was very much a war - and a death - in vain, and it created a deep-rooted grudge on the part of Box's grandparents. Especially so Grandpa Taxilian. It was a well hidden grudge, and rarely expressed - and even then modestly so, but it could easily be garnered from his disposition whenever such topics popped up.

Compounding things, Box and Goola's mother had also disappeared around about the same time, and no one knew quite how or where to ..or if she was even still alive at all. She'd just gone. One day. Out of the blue.

Her side of the family had always been a little odd and unusual, as per their other grandfather, Luteeay, who was something of an unorthodox figure himself. So it was suspected that she had taken it upon herself to leave for some unknown personal reason, or on some emotional whim, rather than for reasons beyond her own control. People made lame excuses for why she'd left, but everyone, even Box and Goola, knew that they were just that, excuses. The general feeling being that she'd simply been selfish, and had decided to up sticks and abandon everyone. A feeling that wasn't felt with any real malice or ill will, more with just a resigned acceptance of the situation.

It was Grandpa Luteeay who made the most excuses for her. He would explain to Box how the universe worked, and all manner of other odd and irrelevant things, but when this topic popped up he tended to be somewhat hazy about it all. Almost nonplussed. "*She must have had her reasons,*" "*There's no point in worrying about things you can't control,*" and other such mantras.

Box always found this slightly annoying. Like he was childishly in denial, masking the seriousness and sadness of it all with platitudes. Things that only sounded meaningful and useful, but that in reality were just empty words. Others saw it more as a genuine attempt to keep the spirits up though, and to help people deal with a sad situation. He was after all a *Kytalyk*. So he did have a role in the community that required him to do just that - to offer some kind of seniority and worldly wisdom.

The *Kytalyks* were vaguely priest-like figures, but more with the aesthetics of hermits or village elders. In fact, village elder is perhaps the more apt likeness. As that's all they now were in actuality. Their general role being a bit of a hodgepodge of "local wise elder" type functions. They gave advice, performed strange ceremonies, helped teach the local children about the world and how it worked. They practised weird kinds of natural medicine. Told stories. Basically, they occupied the elevated role that wise old people tend to occupy in all cultures. With a little bit of esoteric mystique thrown in for good measure.

Though they still had the outward trappings of wisdom and seniority, these days the Kytalyks were quite impotent figures. They had no real power. Certainly no executive power to speak of, and they tended to avoid anything truly political. They were largely content to just carry out their ceremonial displays, give their personal advice, and keep their various peculiar traditions going. Still, there was nevertheless the distinct sense that at one point in history the Kytalyks must have had real, actual power and clout. That at some point, deep in the past, they were a real authority of sorts. Filling the role of tribal judge or leader, and forming counsels amongst themselves to decide important issues and serious affairs. Now, however, with the various states and kingdoms subsuming all these functions, they were essentially redundant. Meeting at their various counsels and engagements to perform their now meaningless rituals, and to discuss more abstract and altogether trivial things.

This lack of real power and importance also meant that they had become a little ridiculed too - though only endearingly so. With most people tending to tolerate them with a warmth and fondness, though nevertheless dismissing their doings and goings-on as something well past its usefulness. One particular point of ridicule was the Kytalyk fondness for eggs. To the Kytalyks the simple egg was an important and powerful symbol, and they would often begin their stories and allegories by holding an egg aloft in their hand. A visual prop to illustrate some abstract concept or natural phenomena. Their fondness for eggs also meant a fondness for chickens, so chickens were a common sight wherever Kytalyks were found. Pecking and bouncing around their yards and hovels. Once again, strengthening the comedic sense that now attached itself to their image. Especially in the eyes of younger people, like Box. Of course, there was nothing that unusual about chickens bouncing around yards and hovels, as pretty much everyone in this part of the Eastern Kingdom kept chickens, but with them it seemed to be *just chickens*. Mainly chickens. Always chickens. Whereas for everyone else chickens were just one of many animals kept to farm.

Box disliked chickens, which added another element to the minor friction between her and her grandfather. She thought they looked "ugly," especially when compared to all the other birds flying and gliding out and about in nature. Whenever she would point this difference out to Goola she'd get agreement. *They did look ugly ..and they did look especially ugly in comparison to all the other birds.* But though Goola agreed, she was never really that bothered. It didn't make her pause for thought the way it made Box pause. She could observe the difference when it was pointed out, but she would never have observed it on her own. This was another subtle difference between the two sisters. Likewise, Goola was never really puzzled about the way the world was when they heard the familiar descriptions of it from Luteay. Or from the other Kytalyks who came ambling through their part of the countryside.

The last time Box had been told about the world her grandfather had mentioned eggs that time too. "*Like the yolk of an egg.*" Surprisingly he wasn't actually holding an egg in his hand that time, but he may as well have been, it was such a familiar sight and routine.

In many ways it was quite striking that neither Box nor Goola had inherited any of the quirky leanings that could be seen in their grandfather and mother. That side of the family had always felt somewhat distant to them. It just wasn't their world. They were both much more down to earth. There was nothing flimsy or abstract in their worldviews. Even their dreams and ambitions were very much rooted in the real world. They both simply wanted more from life. Box wanting to see more of the world, Goola wanting more in general. This grounded attitude they had was inevitably a consequence of Grandpa Taxilian and Grandma Mayleen. Their straight-talking ways and lack of grandeur meant that Box and Goola always placed complete faith in them. They never questioned or doubted a word they said they way they sometimes doubted Grandpa Luteeay. Mainly because they never said anything especially far-fetched or doubtful.

Nevertheless, Box and Goola did both have a strong physical resemblance to the family members on their mother's side. Something that was often commented upon by other people. One feature in particular was their very translucent skin, which meant that, when close up, you could see the green-blue veins branching underneath it. Particularly noticeable were the soft blue veins visible on their foreheads, rivering from the corners of their eye sockets. Goola's fanned by her sunlight blonde hair, Box's by her ever-so-slightly more reddish flop of fringe. They would often note that if they were ever to meet their mother again they'd be able to tell it was her solely by this recognisable trait.

As Goola looked in the mirror admiring herself she remembered this, but didn't mention it to her sister, who was quickly drifting off to sleep. Strangely, they too, like their mother, would now both be leaving, and this sudden unexpected change in events made Goola pensive and restless. Usually it would be her drifting off exhausted, as Box struggled to suppress her boundless energy. This time Box was eager to sleep, looking forward to the next day, as Goola, over-thinkingly, wondered on.

On hearing that state head-hunters were coming east, looking for recruits, Grandpa Taxilian had acted fast. He'd decided it would be best to send Box, Goola and Julen further east, across the sea, to Maiden's Tower. Where his cousin, Ellever, lived with her family. The reasoning was simple. Get Julen as far away from the wars in Western Isles as possible ..and the story Taxilian had hastily concocted to justify this plan was straightforward enough. He was sending Box and Goola to live with Aunt Ellever for the next six months, just in case the Pox broke free of the quarantine. Julen would be their chaperone, ensuring their safe journey.

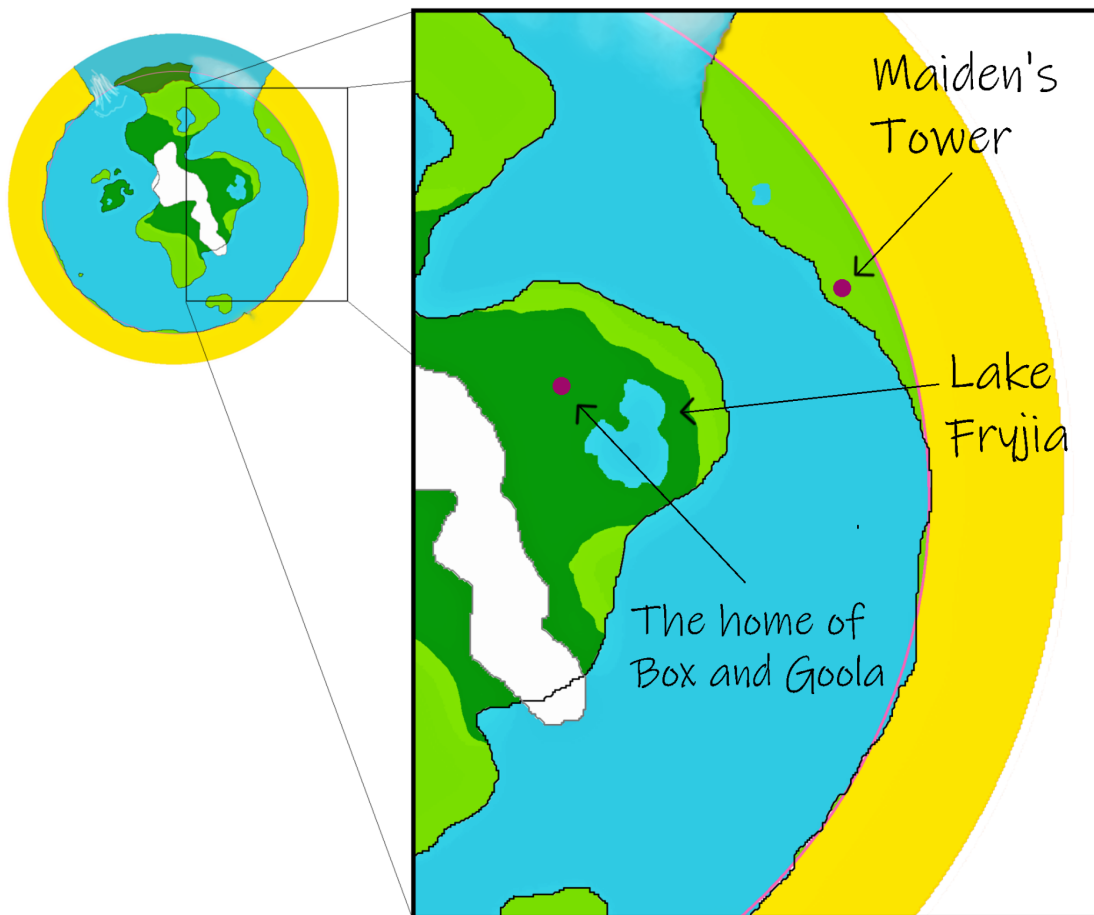
Naturally though, this news had come as a huge surprise to Box and Goola. *Why leave all of a sudden? If there was serious danger of the Pox spreading why wasn't everyone leaving?*

"We aren't leaving if you aren't leaving," was the incessant refrain. This unyielding protest finally led Taxilian to relent and explain to both the real reason for the journey. On the promise that neither would tell Julen. Once they both knew it was for Julen's sake they quickly changed their disposition. Consequently, for Box it now became a little mission. It had a neat purpose, and it gave her an excuse to be excited by the prospect. Goola too felt a touch of excitement, but she wasn't quite as certain about the prospect. Either way, it would

be a major change in fortune. Neither Box nor Goola had ever even seen the ocean before, let alone travelled across it. So to head all the way to Maiden's Tower was an enchanting endeavour.

For Julen it also represented a huge change in circumstance. Though he, being older, was slightly more well travelled than they were. Once before he had been to Maiden's Tower as a child. Plus, he'd occasionally made journeys to the east coast, or to Lake Fryjia, with Taxilian. Again though, these were rare exceptions to his normal, less well-travelled life. So a journey by land, then by sea. Followed by six months in a completely different part of the world represented a colossal switch of scenery. It would also be the first time he'd made such a journey on his own, without an older figure to guide his hand. And this was the thing that appealed to him the most.

So, like Box, he too slept soundly. Thoughtlessly eager for what was to follow.



*(The Eastern Kingdom, and across the sea
to Maiden's Tower)*

Chapter Four

It was only two hours into the journey when Julen cottoned on that everything had been engineered to remove him from the locale, and not Box and Goola.

"We're turning back!" he immediately snapped, as the realisation dawned upon him.

Unfortunately for him though, he was just sat in the wooden cart at the back with Box. It was Goola at the reins, guiding the horses. Meaning he could do little but moan.

"We can't go back now, we're too far gone. Plus, why would we even want to?" pipped Box.

Still, Julen moodily insisted they stop. His pique at being duped undiluted by the plea. It was an argument he was always destined to lose however, as the more time that passed the further forward they travelled, and the ever-more unrealistic turning back became. If he'd have been at the reins he'd have stopped there and then. He'd have still no doubt eventually conceded that it was stupid to turn back, and that they pretty much had to continue, but it would have been much more of a drama. Much more of a big kerfuffle. As he wasn't, it was an added drama they avoided, and the journey kept rolling on. Albeit with some sulking and surly debate.

Indeed, one of the good things about the Eastern Kingdom was the ease at which you could travel across most of it. It was the safest, but also the most expensive kingdom to travel through. Certainly of the three mainland kingdoms anyway. There were good roads, and it had an efficient system of relay in place, where people could hire horses, carts and carriages at various points along their journey. You'd travel on horseback for twenty miles or so, then switch horses, or stop over at some inn or tavern. Picking up your travel the next day. This was how Box, Goola and Julen were travelling, and it was a hint expensive, so it made sense to travel quick, and keep stops to a minimum.

"At least we'll be leaving the mainland just as King Tunid is arriving," noted Box, looking over at Julen, in an attempt to brighten his mood. "It's a shame," he quipped back, only half-jokingly, "I could have shot an arrow right through his eye ..that would shake things up a bit." As he said this he made a gesture, as if he was reaching for an arrow from an imaginary quiver on his back. Then he proceeded to mime firing it out of the cart and across into the passing fields - with a casual, lazy intent. His previous moodiness seemingly dissipated as he immersed himself in the vision. He was a good shot with a bow too. It was his one real skill or talent, so the daydreaming indulgence carried with it a dash of credibility. Mercifully it was just idle fantasy though, as in the Eastern Kingdom there were laws prohibiting people from carrying arrows whilst travelling. People were allowed to own and keep them at home, on their farms. To use when out hunting in the local forests, but carrying them whilst travelling was strictly forbidden.

In contrast, swords *were* allowed to be carried. So Box, Goola and Julen each carried one at their side. Solely for protection. The slender, but sheathed blades hanging picturesquely from their waists, making them look like a gang of trim little brigands. The general thinking was that swords could only cause harm at close range, so were allowable for self-defence, whereas arrows could be used unfairly from a distance. Giving criminals and vagabonds an easy advantage. This made a lot of sense, and it did add to the overall safety on the roads in the Eastern Kingdom. However, it also meant that its soldiers - who were allowed to use both swords and projectiles - had a huge advantage over anyone attempting to break the law or challenge authority.

As Julen's imaginary arrow disappeared into the passing green fields, Box wondered aloud about the King of Tunid.

"Did he really kill his brother?"

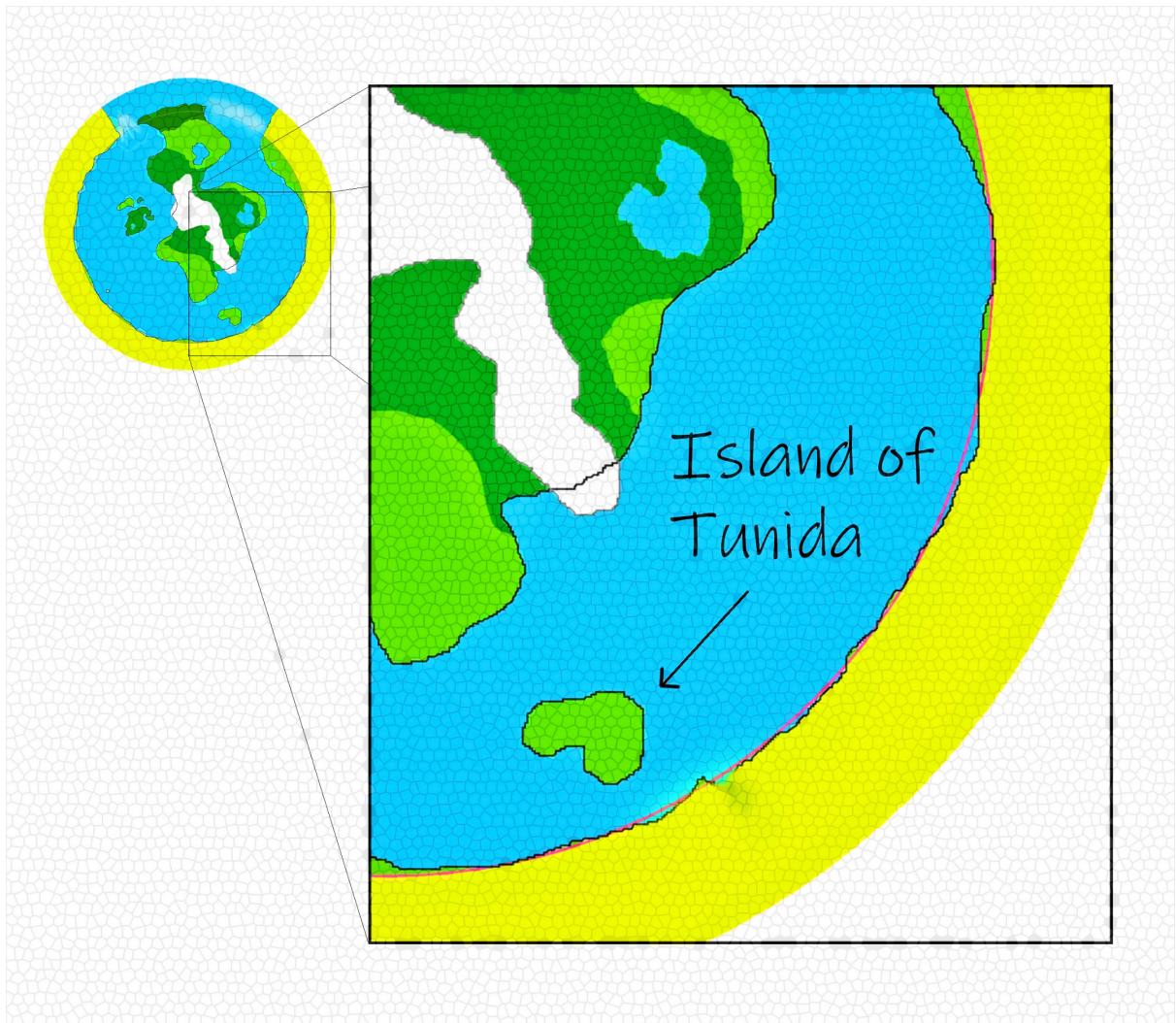
It was a question she was asking not for the first time, and she asked it with the same incredulity that she had every other time she'd asked it.

"It is required of him," stated Julen, with an affected worldliness, "Every king of Tunid must kill the second eldest when coming to the throne ..that's why they're such bastards."

"How could he do that though?" chimed in Goola, from the front of the cart, sharing her sister's unwillingness to believe such a callous tale. "It makes no sense."

"It makes perfect sense," continued Julen, insistently, "The Tunidans only care about power, and it sends out a message. If the king can do that to his own brother what will he do to you? Plus, it removes a rival. No one can rally around the second brother if he's dead, can they? And any others will be too scared to try it. *The First Rules. The Second Dies. The Third Bides.*"

Julen said all this with a storyteller's sense of drama. It was the familiar description of how the Tunidan royals, the most lofty, but feared royal house of all of the world kingdoms, ran their affairs. It was a particularly hot topic now too, as just a few months earlier the old king, King Edvard, had died. At the right old ancient age of ninety-seven. Meaning his eldest son, Prince Dogfael, himself now sixty-two, had taken the throne - and, as was his duty, had executed his brother, Prince Twayen. Beheading him publicly in front of a crowd of citizens, before taking the crown and being proclaimed the new *King of Tunid*.



(The Island of Tunida)

Everyone knew the stories concerning the Tunidan kings, but it was still generally met with a little surprise throughout most of the other kingdoms. Many had wondered if he would indeed do it. It was such a long time since it had last happened. Over sixty years ago now. With so few people still alive to actually remember it, and even those, for the most part, only hearing about it second hand. So it was almost like a distant myth. A scary tale, used to illustrate the awful power seated in that island, and in the family ruling it.

It was also generally thought by most that Prince Dogfael was much softer and more pleasant than his domineering father. So that too added to the doubts that he would actually do it. With some speculating that his coming to the throne would bring a break with such bloody traditions, and a fresh start of sorts. Nevertheless, he did indeed carry out the bloody act, and took his throne as tradition required. And now, just as our three travellers were journeying to leave the mainland, he was heading to it with equal purpose, to discuss the ongoing situation in the Western Isles.

The dislike Julen had for the Tunidan royals was not uncommon, though he perhaps expressed it with more open disregard than others would. In his, and in most people's eyes, the Tunidans were simply tyrants. The apex of everything that was wrong throughout all the kingdoms. Howbeit Julen, like most people in truth, only really knew all this through gossip and rumour. He wasn't really political enough to have a deeper sense of the situation. Absorbing his opinions and rebel leanings via osmosis, from the wider world around him. Though again, most of those around him would speak their opinions with a sensible discretion. Making sure not to draw too much attention to their potentially dangerous views. Whereas Julen was naively cavalier. Often speaking loudly opinions others would only express more circumspectly.

Both Box and Goola understood this only too well. So, as the tiny village they were stopping at for the night came into view they changed the conversation. Urging Julen not to say anything that would get them too noticed when they finally arrived. The warm evening was still young, but having travelled since early morning they were glad to have the chance to finally veer off towards one of the winding little settlements. To speak to the people, and to see something other than just endless farms and fields. As they clopped along the off-road, leading to the village, they slowed their pace, so as not to break the quiet with their noisy rattle.

"I'll do the talking," insisted Julen.

Chapter Five

King Dogfael, the King of Tunid, arrived in the Kingdom of Caster to great pomp and fanfare. Visits such as this were always ceremonial occasions, and the harbour was busy with people. Both officials, of varying degree and rank, and casual onlookers. As he came down from the main ship, his most favoured vessel, *the Merbird*, he was greeted firmly by King Mizmeam, the King of Caster. The two men each surrounded by their crisply-dressed entourages.

As they walked out along the harbour front, waving to the crowds - crowds that were kept a firm distance away - they continued to exchange warm and formal greetings to each other. As well as to some of the more senior dignitaries in each other's retinue. As this all played out, the King of Tunid noted and greeted, in a rather discreet manner, a woman dressed all in black in the King of Caster's assembly. She returned the acknowledgement with a brief period of eye contact, followed by a firm and serious nod. The king then proceeded to chat and exchange pleasantries with the other dignitaries, as the woman silently watched on, from a few paces behind King Mizmeam.

The chit-chat was largely for politeness and show; the standard formal exchanges that usually take place when famous dignitaries meet before onlooking crowds. However, once both kings entered the ornate horse-drawn carriage that awaited them, ready to escort them up to Castle Edvard, they quickly got down to business.

"One thousand years of war by spear tip and sword finally coming to an end," intoned the King of Tunid. A touch of lament in his voice.

"I know ..we're in troubled times".

"Have you mastered the art of this technology yet?"

"We're working - day and night," murmured King Mizmeam in reply, ".. We will get the breakthrough, I'm certain, but it'll take more time. They've kept the secret well guarded."

"Who would've thought the Western Islanders could be so organised," laughed the King of Tunid, his slight lament being supplanted with a gallows humour. "I certainly didn't see this coming. They'll upturn the entire world if we can't get a handle on it."

King Mizmean laughed cautiously in response. The relationship he had with the King of Tunid had always been good, and they shared many similar qualities. Yet, in some ways they were quite different too, with Mizmeam having a little less nuance. Furthermore, King Mizmean was more temperamental and prone to anger than the pensive Tunidan king, so, likewise, he was on his best form for the occasion. Making sure to mask his natural disposition. Well aware that the King of Tunid was now the king, and not just the eldest prince. A new dynamic that unsettled him slightly. Particularly the added gravitas that the

King of Tunid now projected. A gravitas that came off as genuine, but that nevertheless was wholly absent in his previous incarnation as the charmed and laidback heir to the throne.

The discussion about the Western Isles continued until their arrival at Castle Edvard, where more formal ceremony awaited them. This time a grand banquet with even more regional dignitaries. The castle itself was very old - hundreds, if not more than a thousand years old - and it was named not for the King of Tunid's father, Edvard, but for an even more distant King Edvard. His father just being the last in a long line of Edvards. Just as the King of Tunid himself was now the latest in a long list of Dogfaels.

Though technically the castle was in the territory of Caster it was generally viewed as being in the possession of the Tunidan kings. As was the harbour town of Eldbee, where the king's ships had arrived. In essence a foothold on the mainland for the Tunidan Kingdom. Though the conventions governing the relationship between the Kingdom of Caster and the Island of Tunida were so old and well established that it neither mattered one way or the other who held actual possession. Making it almost a state unto itself. Its position as a linkway between the two kingdoms giving the inhabitants, especially the merchants and grandees, a prestige and independence that few others in the Kingdom of Caster could lay claim to.

The formal dinner was largely for these attention-hungry dignitaries, though officially it was in honour of the visiting king. In truth though, both kings would've preferred to have just continued discussing their more serious concerns alone. The King of Tunid was especially eager to get first-hand information about the Western Isles. Along with updates about what the general feelings were in the other kingdoms. Ideally, a good night's rest before the long journey north to the capital Keneeshka would also have been welcome. However, a banquet was to be had, so rest had to be put on hold.

The Eldbeean political class were generally viewed by all as a pretentious and self-important people. Nestled in between the two most powerful kingdoms it was very easy for them to grow soft and indulgent in the safety it afforded them. They, of course, viewed themselves as altogether serious and important, but as they were so far removed from any real strife or danger, anything political in nature was but a money-making pastime to them. A topic of conversation that had no real immediate impact on their own lives. Consequently, all formal occasions were bright, glossy affairs, full of superficial glare. Hard for even kings to endure.

As the banquet began the woman from earlier, who was dressed in black, entered the room. At the formal greeting earlier her black clothing was rather sombre: black boots and trousers; a black jacket with a slight military feel; her dark hair tied up behind her head, but not too high. Now her clothing was equally sombre, but the military-style jacket was replaced by a soft knee-length blouse. Once again black. And her hair, though for the most part styled as earlier, now had a few loose tresses hanging about her neck.

There were many beautiful and elegant women at the large hall, so she slipped in largely unnoticed by the other guests. However, her presence was naturally caught by the King of Tunid. As before, they both shared a brief period of eye contact before sitting down in their

respective places. As the food began to be placed by the waiting servants a silence descended. Everyone waiting for King Mizmeam to start the proceedings. A few moments later, by which time every seat was filled by a rotund grandee, finely dressed lady, or some other ostentatious person, he rose to his feet and gave a short toast welcoming the King of Tunid to the mainland. Then, with good cheer, everyone began to tuck in to the dishes so lavishly put on before them. The noise quickly rising to a calamitous din.

Much of the serious talk at the various tables was about 'The Pox.' In fact, in between courses some dignitaries even stood up to give very serious-sounding speeches on the topic. The general tone always being that everything must be done to stop the outbreak, and that no option should be left off the table in the pursuit of extinguishing it. As the evening slowly moved on, and eating transitioned into drinking, this seriousness drizzled away into a merry drunkenness. With people leaving their assigned chairs and tables to mingle in the various rooms and corridors of the castle. As all this happened the King of Tunid finally got an opportunity to speak to the woman in black...

Chapter Six

The name of the *woman in black* was Madame Drua Maleeva. Her father had held the position of *Head Treasurer* until his death a few years earlier. Now he was gone, Maleeva filled the vacuum. The Head Treasurer oversaw all things financial, across all the various kingdoms. Executing this through a network of formal and not-so-formal channels. With each kingdom having its own bank and treasury. The Head Treasurer sat at the top, though he, at this precise moment, she, answered ultimately to the King of Tunid.

The system, if it could be called such, had developed organically, over the untold previous centuries, and it allowed the King of Tunid to maintain a degree of power and control over the other kingdoms. A subtle, but firm influence - through whispers and money - that helped to maintain the balance and keep the peace. Though this was not always the case. The velvet touch did mean that each individual kingdom still kept a large degree of leeway however. Allowing for a false sense of independence on each kingdom's part, and licensing each to pursue their own paths and policies. Policies that would at times run contrary to any whispers and nudges of advice. With some kingdoms, or rather one kingdom, eschewing the presence entirely. The currently kingless kingdom of the Western Isles, who had once again expelled all external influence from their shores. As they had done countless times before in their history. Mindless of the material cost, and almost as unperturbed by the physical one.

"I see you are still sitting pretty at the helm," noted King Dogfael, the King of Tunid, as he approached Maleeva.

"Yes, still."

She uttered the word still with a satisfied self-poise. The S-sound linking the two words pushed through the teeth with an attractive, snake-like hiss.

"I thought we were supposed to have someone else in place by now?"

"There is no one else," she smiled, with playful calm, "Who would you have run things?"

The King of Tunid understood only too well that she was for the most part right, and that in truth there was no other candidate capable of the task at present. Nevertheless, it was still extremely unusual for a woman to hold the position. In fact, it was completely unprecedented. So at the last meeting, over a year ago, when the king's father, King Edvard, had visited, it had been agreed that she would find a suitable figurehead, sooner rather than later. One that she could no doubt guide to some degree, but who would fulfil the requirements of the role in a way that was more concordant with established tradition.

It was normal practice that the role of Head Treasurer passed down through the male family line. And, in theory, it could pass to any male, provided they were from the *treasury caste* - another loosely defined and centuries-made social status - that one was born or married into. The Head Treasurer would nominate a favoured son or nephew to take his place upon his death. The emphasis being not on seniority, nor direct hereditary rights, but always on

capability. The task of Head Treasurer requiring such intelligence, craft and numeracy that able-mindedness was the primary criteria. And it was of utmost importance for everyone that a good choice was chosen.

Unfortunately for the last Head Treasurer he had no sons. Nor any other immediate male protégés worthy of the role. Just a single daughter: Maleeva. As able-minded as her father, with a similar flair for statecraft, but a daughter nonetheless. So for the two years following his death she had performed the role, but without the title. Simply due to the fact that she was the only one experienced and knowledgeable enough to do so.

In that time things had ran smoothly, with the exception of the recent uproar in the Western Isles, which was beyond anyone's powers of premonition. So it was a situation where no one saw any real practical need to change things. Likewise, her sex had never hindered the actual running of affairs, as it largely went unnoticed. Partly due to the fact that she was such a familiar presence from all the days she'd spent at her father's side. Especially so in his later years, when she shouldered so much of the burden. Making it in reality a seamless transition. A woman holding the position was still highly unusual and unorthodox though. So the official line was that it was expected to be only a temporary situation. Furthermore, disgruntled voices were beginning to talk and speculate about who would replace her. Such speculation worried the king, and like his father before him, he feared that even though she was accepted by the various kingdoms now there would come a time when this would not be the case. The disregard for custom, putting the whole system - so rooted in tradition - in a state of jeopardy.

There was also the problem of her son. The thirteen year old *Seaspell*. Who accompanied his mother everywhere she went, as she had accompanied her father. There were strong, though quietly spoken rumours that the boy's father was Prince Aralak. The unruly eldest son of King Mizmeam. Such gossip was given short shrift by all official voices, and it was unpolitic to even speak it aloud. Madame Maleeva simply making no comment on the situation at all - it was no one's business was the curt dismissal. So this was another major problem for the King of Tunid, and it created a clear potential for conflicts of interest. There was also a heavy taboo, though no actual law, against people from the treasury caste intermarrying with those from royal households. A social convention organically engendered precisely to stave off such problems. Meaning if it was indeed acknowledged that Prince Aralak was the father, ever more contortions would ensue. This is all created yet more good reason to advance the appointment of an actual Head Treasurer. It all bothered Maleeva very little though.

"Did you really execute your brother?" she asked, with a wry, but mildly flirtatious smirk. Enjoying the opportunity to now put the king on the backfoot.

"Yes, of course."

"I don't believe you."

"I had to, it was my duty. It's just the way it is. I had no real choice in the matter."

"..But you and he were so close ..I really cannot see you doing such a thing."

"It was my duty. It pains me, but we must all do our duty."

There was a brief pause in the conversation as Maleeva struggled to gauge the tone of the king. Though she then pepped up and prodded a little further.

"I remember now. You were always prepared to make personal sacrifices to fulfil your duty. That certainly is true, ..but still, this is much bigger. It surprises even me. Your father doing it, I could always believe that, but you? I always assumed you would end the barbarity. In fact, I was certain you would."

"And this is why it had to be done, and why it always has been done. If you see me as too weak, or too soft to do such a task, then how would the rest of these kings, rulers and warlords see me if I'd have failed to carry out the task? The world needs order, and this is how my family has always kept it. So sadly, sacrifices have to be made. Both me and my brother always understood this. My brother did a great duty to the world in dying. We were raised for that moment, and it was always inevitable."

Maleeva dropped the flirtatious grin. It being replaced by a rare look of puzzlement. An usual position for her to be in, and she disliked the feeling of confoundment. She always thought she knew the king so well. She really had believed that such an act was beyond him. Sure, she understood the rationality of the decision. It's something she herself might well have done in the circumstances, but not him. She felt a coldness as she thought about it. He looked much more callous now, though little was outwardly different. He was not the familiar confidant he once was, and it instantly put an added distance between them. Drying up the normal easiness of the conversation.

Suddenly she felt the age difference too. In their younger days their relationship had always been one of near equals. The natural chemistry making the decade or so years barely noticeable. The king, then just a prince, had always been youthful in outlook, and in looks. Whilst she, like most girls, had always been much the more precocious. They balanced out. It was an easy match. Now it didn't quite seem so even. Both had aged well. The king still young-looking at sixty-two. Herself, looking much younger still. Yet, to Maleeva, the king seemed truly older now. The stony cracks and wrinkles visible to her on his face and hands. A deader and less life-full person.

She also thought of the king's wife, the Queen of Tunida, who in many ways was the polar opposite to herself. A traditional woman, dutifully fulfilling the quiet, but visually vivid role common to royal females on the Tunidan island. A porcelain-skinned, well-dressed statuette, with pursed lips. Her opinions firmly behind a stoic veil. Expressed only in vague symbols and well-chosen fashion choices. The contrast to Maleeva, with her active tongue and dark attire, could not be starker.

Feeling the awkward lull in the conversation the king moved the discussion on to more state-orientated issues. The overriding one naturally being the situation in the Western Isles. The official line was that there had been an outbreak of the *Pox*. Necessitating a full quarantine of the islands. Yet, both the king and Maleeva knew the real picture. That it was something much more unexpected, though perhaps more deadly.

A strange development had occurred on the island of Brynnyfirdia. A chemical discovery. A powdery substance, that when exposed to sparks of fire gave rise to deadly explosions. Explosions unlike anything before seen. *Black powder*. Advanced in secrecy, perhaps even by accident, on the windy island. The mainland kingdoms now felt its force in their battles at sea, but its chemical make-up remained elusive to them. A mystery they were now desperately trying to solve.

For all of history war had been fought with sword, spear, bow and arrow. With basic devices such as catapults, trebuchets and battering rams the height of technical warfare. Now a new wizardry had appeared, and it threatened to turn the world upside down.

"How many people now understand the true situation?" questioned the king, eager to get a better view of the unfolding narrative. His firm grip on control held together by slowing fraying threads.

"There are rumours amongst the sailors and shipbuilders - that are now spreading to some of the soldiers and sailors still on land. The penalty of death is still in place for those that disclose anything they have knowledge of, but it's getting difficult to stifle the speculation. Too many people are seeing the state of the ships that are returning to the harbours. Plus, we can't afford to keep losing men."

"We need to keep the story in place," pressed the king, cautiously, "Until we can match the technology. If it becomes widely known how weak our position is we could have rebellions everywhere. When we reach Keneeshka tomorrow evening we must enforce a stricter quarantine across the whole arch of land adjacent to the Western Isles. Hermetically seal off the inland harbours from the rest of the kingdoms. We also have to make sure we up the contingent of ships in the Western Sea, especially around the Isle of Erba. As if they have the initiative to take that they'll then control all traffic to the Three Deserts."

Maleeva sighed with shared frustration. "I've already tried to impress this line of reasoning upon the other kings, but they can't think more than two steps ahead. Even when led by the hand. They continue to underestimate the islanders, too. They insist that Brynnyfirdia simply wants independence and nothing more. That it's an issue of containment, until we get the black powder ourselves. King Brijsk in particular wants to negotiate a ceasefire with them to buy us time. He doesn't understand that without the constant blockade they'll traverse the entire ocean and word will spread further. I've had to overrule him, but he begins to drag his feet in pressing ships and men."

"Have the Maiden Lands sent any ships?"

"No. As usual, only promises."

"We have to press them a little more too."

At this point a group of Eldbeean dignitaries shuffled across the room, ending the private tête-à-tête. The king quickly masked his concern and dropped back into more cordial mode. Feigning, with impressive effect, an interest in the empty words of the now rather tipsy dinner guests. Madame Drua Maleeva, the woman in black, made no such effort to change her facial expression. She turned, cat-like, then headed off to conduct affairs elsewhere.

Chapter Seven

Essen was in his element out at sea. His ship, the main ship of the four that made up his mini armada, was tearing through the waves at a pace, with the wind fully in its sails. His ambitious mission beginning with unbounded enthusiasm. His half-cousin Acalee - his unwanted accomplice - down below deck. The only member of the forty man crew opting to begin the journey asleep in his quarters. Though two hours into the voyage he was annoyed to find himself still wide awake, and filled with anxiety.

His plan, or at least hope, was to sleep during the daylight hours, to then watch the stars at night. Charting their southbound journey. He also deemed it wise that he should act as night lookout. Knowing full well that although Essen would doubtlessly spend little of the journey sleeping he would nevertheless burn himself out during the day. Further to this, he understood that the rest of the crew, though planning to rotate their shifts, could not be trusted to keep an eagle eye out when Essen was absent. Not for any lack of trust - they were all hardworking, down-to-earth Brynnfirdian men - but, like many Brynnfirdians, they were a little too honest. So he feared they lacked the guile needed to spot the more subtle dangers they might end up facing. Though with Acalee's own lack of real world experience, it was always more likely that he would need their worldly instincts more than they his.

Their ship had been christened the *Arbowlan* by Essen. Arbowlan was a legendary figure of Brynnfirdian folklore. It was said that he was the first man to fully sail the complete circumference of the entire ocean, and that he was the first man from the Western Isles to reach the Great Ocean of Steam. In some versions it was claimed that he actually sailed through the steam to reach Unanimaata, a mythical land beyond the realms of men. In others it was told that he'd held his bronze sword aloft in defiance, as he'd continued onward into the heat, his ship slowly catching fire as he headed forth. Dying in his quest to breach the bridge between gods and men. Ignoring the cries and pleas of his sailors to turn back.

Though Essen's mission was more rooted in reality, it nevertheless had a similar feel. He was indeed sailing south, just as Drua Maleeva had feared, but not to the Isle of Erba - the key to the Three Deserts. He was sailing even further still. To the island of Tunida itself. Replete with cannon and shot. In tow with the main ship were three others, also well supplied with men. Two medium sized vessels - the *Sleight* and the *Dew Elizabeth*, and a third, a small bark christened the *Dracette*. The four together making an ambitious salvo. With the King of Tunid absent, visiting the mainland, the dream was to hold captive the island. A strike at the heart of a nebulous enemy.

Even Essen knew it was a tremendous gamble though. Taking an entire island, with just one hundred or so men - even with the blessing of the unholy black powder - was a near-impossible task. In fact, the calculation was that the firepower alone would be so terrifying, and such an unworldly experience for the islanders, that surrender would come before any real attempt at conquest. That they'd simply take the island hostage through sheer awe. Though in his mind Essen secretly hoped for at least some hand-to-hand combat. The palpable dislike he had for the Tunidans making them a much more worthy foe than the

mainlanders he'd heretofore been fighting. The vision of putting them to the sword on their own virgin soil a prospect hard not to relish. To finally spoil their chaste and peaceful calm would be a striking contrast to the normal state of affairs, where Tunidan kings, from their distant island safety, would press foreign mercenaries to invade the islands of others.

Yet Essen's eager confidence wasn't shared by everyone, and Acalee, like several of the crew, had large misgivings. There were so many things that could go wrong, and even if the assault went well the dangers would only spiral. How could so few men govern an entire island? In moments of clarity it seemed ludicrous. Moreover, such an act of daring would never be forgiven. It would mean no quarter would ever be spared to any Brynnyfirdian going forward. It would be total and merciless war. Once such a line was crossed peace would be out of the question. So it wasn't just a gamble, but an all or nothing escapade.

An added fear was that the ship, along with its precious *black powder*, would fall into enemy hands. Or, more pertinently, that one or two of the crew members with knowledge of its composition - a list including Essen and Acalee - would be captured and forced to forgo its secret. Thus far the Brynnyfirdians had been especially careful. They'd not lost a single ship since the beginning of the so-called outbreak. Tailoring their strategy with particular regard to not surrendering their advantage. Having now reached a point of near dominance in their own waters however it was finally accepted that a strike further afield was of merit. A land attack on the mainland was simply out of the question. The three major kingdoms having such an endless supply of men and resources that the task would be futile. So the hope was in taking the major islands. Therefore dominating the sea.

The obvious next move would indeed have been to take Erba, as Madame Maleeva had foreseen, and then to slowly extend influence outwards from there. But the gains from taking Tunida so soon, and so surprisingly, were more attractive. A deadly strike at the jugular. The mainland kingdoms would also then have to split their forces of retaliation right across the whole ocean in response. Diluting their heavy numbers. So it was a brave, foolish, but potentially decapitating move. As Acalee struggled to sleep it all weighed heavily on his mind. He also thought of Colm back home, who shared these deep misgivings. Meanwhile, in the waking dreams of Essen it was already a *fait accompli*. He saw it all so clearly in his mind that he couldn't but wait to execute it. A tiger waiting to pounce, held back by nothing but the sullen waves.

The *Arbowlan* cut crisply through the water. If it kept its pace they would arrive at Tunida ahead of time, but there was still plenty of ocean left in which to ponder how it all would pan out.

Chapter Eight

As Box, Goola and Julen entered the tavern they immediately approached the barkeep and asked for two rooms for the night. One for Julen and another for Box and Goola. Neither Box nor Goola had ever been in a tavern before, so their lively eyes were curiously scanning the room. Especially so Box's, who stared with particular interest at every odd stranger sat drinking and talking.

Having sorted their rooms and parked their belongings they too found a little table and ordered something to eat. As they waited for their food to arrive they continued observing the jovial surroundings of the half-full tavern. Julen, with his slightly greater experience of the world, feigning a comfortable nonchalance. Trying to imitate the older regulars supping their ales. Still, like Box and Goola, he too was equally excited to find himself out unaccompanied in this mildly grown-up world.

As they sat waiting they overheard a conversation at the bar. A loud gentleman, of middle age, was telling the barkeep and another fellow drinker about how he had just arrived from further west. Stating he'd heard odd rumours about the ongoing situation whilst he'd been working as a logger in "The Nic". The Nic being the narrow passage of land between the Northern and Eastern Kingdoms. Hemmed in by the Icy Mountains to the west and the encroaching sea to the east.

In ordinary times, logging to supply the shipyards of the Northern Kingdom would be done in Once Woods. The densely packed woodland to the west of the Icy Mountains. However, given the now enormous demand for timber, and thanks in part to the relative peace between the Northern and Eastern Kingdoms, logging had vastly increased in the Nic. With the timbers being hauled through the mountain passages to the western front line.

"They're going through a helluva lot of timber," proclaimed the loud gentleman, "..they must be losing *a lot* of ships."

"It's strange," noted the barkeep in reply, as he polished a small tumbler with his off-white cloth, "They're fairly feral in the Western Isles, but you wonder how they're doing that much damage. Especially if they're ravaged with the old pox. Assuming it is them doing the actual damage, that is."

"Who else could it be?" insisted the loud gentleman, "Perhaps they don't have it quite as bad as we're being told. Maybe they really are going for it good and proper this time."

At this point Julen was about to butt into the conversation, to ask the gentleman if had seen any of the damaged ships himself, but before he could Box punched him quite forcefully in the arm. Sensing it was better that they kept their heads down and tried not to needlessly involve themselves with people they didn't know. As Julen turned round in reaction, Goola burst out laughing, which in turn made Box herself laugh. There was then some childish

jostling between Box and Julen. Fighting, as per usual, more like brother and sister than uncle and niece. A familiar sight for Goola, who rarely ever raised a fist in play herself.

As Box and Julen continued to push and shove each other the barmaid arrived, bringing their ordered food. She was youngish, perhaps early twenties, and pretty looking. Julen quickly tried to regain his composure, and once again feigned a degree of maturity. This amused Goola even more so. The barmaid placed their food down in complete oblivion to him. As she turned from the table, Julen, mildly irked, noted her appearance. "She thinks she's more attractive than she actually is." Box and Goola both burst out laughing again.

"What? It's true."

The lack of attention aside, the meals she had brought looked pretty tasty, and the three hungrily started to swallow it all down. As they did so, Box pulled out a map from her pocket. It was a map of their journey that Grandpa Taxilian had doodled for them. The tavern they were now at was somewhere near the northern tip of Lake Fryjia, meaning they were now more or less halfway through the Eastern Kingdom. With luck, another day's travel would bring them to the eastern harbour town of Patina, where they could then catch a ship to Maiden's Tower. Their distant destination.

As the three of them looked at the surprisingly well-drawn map they wondered out loud to each other about the wider world depicted before them. "We should be heading west to find *Middlemap*," mouthed Julen, as his mind began wandering for even more adventure; the petite barmaid quickly forgotten. He then intently looked at the mountains that Taxilian had artfully sketched in the middle of the world island. Middlemap, hence its name, was a mythical city that was said to exist at the very centre of the world. An imaginary place, right at the heart of the Icy Mountains. Rumour had it that this was where the kings and other royals headed when things got really bad, or just where they went to discuss their plans for the rest of the world's people. "It's just a myth, y'know," observed Goola, blasely, "..there's nothing there but ice and snow. Taxilian said it's just a story, told to get fools with too much curiosity to wander off to their deaths."

"Hmm.." murmured Box, looking at Julen, both of them clearly wanting a little too much to believe in the fable. It was at this moment that the loud, and now even more intoxicated, gentleman came wobbling over.

"It is real. *Quite real*."

He said this with an assumed authority, as if he expected everyone listening to just automatically take his word for it, despite the absurdity of the claim. To anyone more worldly he would've been dismissed as a teller of tall tales, but Julen was more willing to believe.

"How do you know? Have you been?"

"I haven't, but I know a man who's seen it. The most splendid city he'd ever seen, he said. Towers and castles, gleaming with jewels. Guarded by men in golden armour."

"So how did he get there?" quizzed Box, more sceptical, and sensibly disregarding her own desire to believe.

"He was a chef, a great chef - one of the best. He was especially recruited to work in the famous royal kitchens. Now, you see, normally, those summoned there, are - by oath I might add - required to spend their entire lives there. No one can leave, on pain of death - it's how they keep it so secret, you see ..but he escaped. He took his chance and scarpered. Clambering down the icy slopes half-dead, over several fearful days, to begin a new life, under another name."

Goola looked on with disdain, and Box shared the appraisal. Julen remained a believer.

"It's true," repeated the loud gentleman, "all true". At which point the barkeep sauntered over. Gently, with a warm hand, he escorted the loud gentleman to the door. "It's home time, old chap, we'll be closing things up rather soon."

This was the fortunate cue for Box, Goola and Julen to likewise leave the table, and head upstairs to their own beds. As Box and Goola entered what would be their room for the night they could see Lake Fryjia in the far off distance through the window. The now creeping moonlight reflecting off the still waters.

"It's a shame we can't visit the lake," noted Goola, with mild disappointment, as she climbed into bed.

"At least we've seen it from here," replied Box, "That's something - and we'll be seeing an even bigger lake in a day or so." She pulled out the crumpled, but well drawn map again, and dragged her finger from the top of Lake Fryjia across to Patina, which sat on the edge of the world ocean. "I hope we don't get seasick ..or shipwrecked," she then added, with a devilish grin. Her exhaustion outstripping the disorientation caused by the novel situation, she then quickly washed and settled down, like Goola, for a night of much-needed sleep. It was similar in the room next door, and with an even greater ease, Julen quickly crashed out. Recharging his batteries for yet another long day's adventure.

Chapter Nine

Having slept soundly, Box woke sharply, and very early. Just as the Sun was beginning to come up. Even in the soft light of dawn Lake Fryjia looked much clearer and more impressive through the bedroom window than it did the night before. Its size stretching so far into the horizon that it looked more like a calm inlet of an ocean than an inland body of water.

Goola, who rose, sleepy-eyed, not long after, got washed and dressed at a more dawdling pace. As Box headed out the door to rush downstairs for breakfast, she was still dreamily combing her hair in front of the round mirror on the dresser table. Then, all of a sudden, a senseless flash of fear overcame her. Panicking, just for the briefest of moments, that she somehow might get left alone in this strange location, so far from home. She instantly told herself how silly this thought was, and relaxed a little, but, nevertheless, she still picked up the pace to catch her sister.

When she caught up she found Box and Julen sat at the same table they'd all sat at the night before. Only this time the place was almost wholly empty. The morning calm settling Goola's needless nerves somewhat. With a touch of hurry they ate breakfast. Then ordered some more snacks to take on the road, and headed out to the stables. Box in particular was disappointed that they wouldn't be using the same horses they'd used the previous day, which by now they'd all become a little attached to. Even so, the two new ones were fresh and eager, and equally inspiring of fondness. Having hitched them to the cart, loaded with their few belongings, they all then began the next leg of their journey. This time Julen starting out at the reins.

The terrain was near identical to the terrain of the previous day. Lots and lots of fields, the odd copse of trees. The occasional little wooden bridge, crossing over a little twisty stream or beck. The roads, as usual in this part of the Eastern Kingdom, smooth and well maintained. So apart from the occasional switch of drivers - first to Box, then to Goola, then back to Julen, then back to Box again - there was very little to do other than watch the passing landscape. Goola, who now held possession of the doodled map, kept pulling it out from her jacket pocket in boredom, to double-check the general direction, not that it was needed. The way forward being little but a straight line; the occasional road signs clear and helpful.

It had also been surprisingly quiet on the roads. Perhaps in part due to how early they'd set out. This meant that they could gallop along at quite a pace. Both Julen and Box were racing the little horses so quickly on their turns at the helm that it was becoming clear they'd be needing another pit stop soon. As Box suggested this, they heard another horse galloping in the distance. Julen, turning round, could see a horse and rider quickly gaining ground on them, on the outstretched road behind.

"Who's that?" he exclaimed, overdramatically, moving his hand to his sword in readiness. Goola, in turn, crumpled her map, and shoved it untidily back into her pocket. Agitated by Julen's overly-concerned reaction. Box kept the horses steady, unsure as to whether to speed

up or slow down. Either way, the quick pace of the rider meant that he was going to catch them soon anyway. Meaning there was little point in fretting. As the figure got closer he looked vaguely familiar though.

He slowed his pace down as he approached and called out loudly, in a tone suggestive of a familiar old friend, rather than that of a stranger - or even a vague acquaintance.

"We're travelling the same way are we?"

It was the loud gentlemen from the tavern the night before. As he got closer his portly figure was unmistakable. His unfortunate, but impressive-looking horse arched under the weight.

"We're heading to Patina. To then catch a ship to Maiden's Tower," shouted back Julen.

"Me too," shouted the loud gentleman. "Me too."

It became instantly clear to all three that they now had a companion tagging along, who would be difficult to shake off.

"What's your name then, sir?" questioned Julen, the gentleman's horse now at a level pace with the cart.

"Elds-kee.. err, *Major* Eldskeep."

"I thought you were a logger? Working in the Nic," countered Julen, quickly.

"I do many things." shot back the loud gentleman, "Many things, ..and I now have some very serious business to attend to in the Maiden Lands. Big business."

"Dangerous business?" shouted Box, hoping for another tall story of some description.

"Could be. Hopefully not too dangerous though. Certainly nothing beyond the usual for me."

As he said all this he placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. Giving the impression that he was well versed in handling it. It was a rapier style sword, with a very ornate, sweeping cord-like guard around the grip. Julen leaned over the side of the cart to get a better look, and was instantly impressed. "That's a nice piece of metal, sir!"

"So it should be. I had it crafted in the Three Deserts. Specifically designed for my hand, and my hand alone. Perfectly weighted. It's been a great companion to me these years." He then tapped the hilt of the sword again.

Box was eager to hand the reins over to Goola, so she too could drop back and get a closer look. As she tugged at the reins to turn back she remembered that the poor horses needed rest and water though.

"There's a very nice tavern just over half a mile ahead, if I recall correctly," pitched their loud new acquaintance, "We should stop there, before we head on further." It was a timely plan. So, with the little burst of pace that naturally comes with knowing you're nearing a destination, they rattled along towards their respite.

Chapter Ten

The route from Eldbee to Keneeshka cut through the Black Kingdom like an arc. With the long train of carriages, cavalry and wagons traversing it like a long, slow-moving snake. All the various servants, horsemen and other hangers-on all in tow, creating a seamless chain. The King of Tunid seated in a large, well decorated carriage, pulled by a team of six horses. Surrounded by his finest guards. With just Madame Maleeva and her son, Seaspell, accompanying him in the carriage. King Mizmeam, the King of Caster, seated in his own carriage, perhaps half a mile further up the long caravan.

As the King of Tunid watched out of the silver-framed window he was greeted by the occasional scene of degradation and misery. Broken in between dark woodland, rusted farm settlements and brown patchy-grass fields. A far cry from the mild glamour of Eldbee, and its more gardened countryside. The carnival feel of the long carriage train drawing onlookers from the odd little villages and towns it passed. A rare sight for the country peasants.

Slavery was a heavy feature of life in the Kingdom of Caster, though it came in various graded forms. From rare, but noticeable outright slaves, sometimes even in literal chains, to semi-slaves, trapped in perpetual serfdom, to state eunuchs tending King Mizmeam's gardens and palaces. Many of the people watching on were of these lower castes. Observing the luxury and finesse from their field work as the endless procession passed by. The freer classes, such as the shopkeepers and farm owners, coming to the side of the road to doff their hats and wave at the luminaries. Often, their bright-faced children alongside; notably impressed by the display, and trying to spot with enthusiasm the carriages holding the most important passengers. The King of Tunid being the main star they were most eager to catch a glimpse of.

As he watched out however, he felt rather sullen. Even amidst the celebratory atmosphere the bleakness was too difficult to miss. "What do you think of all this?" he asked aloud, turning to young Seaspell, putting the question to him in a school teacher like manner. The dutiful child quickly racked his brain, hesitatingly, fearing to give the wrong answer. "No wrong answer," intoned the king, sensing his eagerness to give the right one, "I just want your opinion. Do you think this is a good kingdom? Does it look good? Do you like it? Would you change anything about it?"

"It's organised," noted Seaspell, wryly.

"Yes, it is organised. That's true."

"What are you trying to get at?" interrupted Maleeva, her teasing tone from earlier returning to the fore. "You don't like it, do you? You think this place could be run a little differently. That's your point, isn't it."

"Everything can be improved, but that never seems to happen here. It's always grim, and always has been. Little has changed since when I first arrived here with my father as a child."

"It is grim," replied Maleeva, "And grim for a reason. The territory demands it. The kings of Caster have always run things like this, not out of choice, but because it has to be like this. You know it too well, you just don't accept it. We can't have this kingdom weak - there would be chaos."

The King of Tunid mulled this over for a few seconds, glancing out the window again as he thought on.

"I'm not too sure."

"*Really?*"

"Truly." Then a slight mischief crossed his own face, "I think all these years have jaded you. You were always cold, but never quite this cold."

"I'm wiser," she smiled.

"Tired. You're tired."

As he said this he understood full well that the accusation of aged lethargy would irk her.

"I don't blame you too," he continued, "..It's an endless task, keeping all this in check. The Kingdom of Caster isn't the most cultured place in the world, but still, it's dizzyingly grim even given that. I'm sure things could be a little better ..with a little energy."

"So what should we do? Throw a party for all the slaves? Dress them up in fancy clothes? ..Or just set them free altogether? Plus, as you yourself know, it's not for me to tell the King of Caster how to run his own kingdom."

"I'm still surprised how comfortable you are with it. You seem very comfortable in this environment these days."

"And I'm surprised how comfortably you disposed of your brother."

Seaspell looked up aghast as his mother uttered these blunt words to the greying, but puissant monarch.

"That was my duty," stated the king calmly, repeating his earlier plea. Then, looking at Seaspell, he added, with a deliberate unseriousness, "I had to do it. Believe me, I really had no choice." Making sure to reassure with his tone that he wasn't the least bit offended by Maleeva's terse remark. The light quip from the king also brought a small smile to Maleeva

as well, which she tried to suppress, but didn't completely manage to. Her stern nature dissolving slightly in the moment.

With a pleasant calm returned to the carriage it continued to clack its way through the outskirts of Keneeshka. The city itself now very much apparent in the distance. It was a military city first and foremost, and the vast areas of surrounding lands were given over in large part to military needs. Be it barracks for the disposable slave soldiers, or the vast equestrian centres, where high ranking cavalry men earned their spurs. As the long wagon slowly weaved beyond the brown-green farmlands and into these outer areas this vast prowess became dominant on the landscape. The organised displays of slave soldiers, marching in unison, or training in one-on-one combat, a deliberate and impressive show of numbers and power.

In the Kingdom of Caster soldiers were purposefully selected for such a role at a very young age, and raised their entire childhood with this purpose in mind. In fact, it was usually deemed that anyone past the age of 18 was already too old to even take up training. Though occasionally prisoners of slightly older years could be fed into the system if they were deemed especially suitable. Or, as was sometimes the case, the supply of good soldiers was running low. The life for those selected for such a role was harsh and brutal. With early death a likelihood. If not on the battlefield, then in the training itself. The upside however was that those enlisted, if they survived these pitfalls, could rise up through the ranks, and, if especially successful, even escape their slavery entirely.

Such an array of eager fighting men, stretching out into the distance, was a vivid spectacle, even for the King of Tunid, who cast his eye over the sprawling scene with contemplation.

"You don't get this sort of military might in a country that isn't a slave state," asserted Maleeva, approvingly, as she watched his face, "Show me a free state that can muster something even close to this - and it's this that all our order and control rests upon. Admit it, we would struggle to keep things in line were all this gone."

"What use are land forces, when the battle is at sea?" replied the king, in retort, "We never have enough sailors ..because they're too hard to control. We have to let them out of our sight. We have to trust that they'll come back." He laughed as he made this last remark. "Why would they be loyal to us, when they fight for their own servitude?"

"We have enough sailors ..we just keep losing them. Were it not for the advantage that the Western Islanders have, we'd be as dominant at sea as we are on land. As we always were."

"We've never been truly dominant at sea ..it's always been an ebb and flow. A cat and mouse. Though we never say that out loud, of course. Both in the western and in the eastern seas. Especially the western one. The Western Islanders are better at it, and plucky. I admire their nature. It's just a shame they're like precocious children, that need reining in for their own good. With this latest development they've outdone themselves."

"When we do get on top of this we'll have to take full control of Brynnyfirdia, that is for certain ..and then we will need these men and their muscle," pressed Maleeva.

"I don't look forward to it."

The King of Tunid looked out again at the vast formations, blurring out into the distance. The grey-soaked clouds seeming to touch the tops of the forest trees on the far-off horizon, prefiguring his apprehension. With this heavy fog on his mind he then turned to another cause of concern.

"And what about Prince Aralak?" he asked, "What is he up to at present? Does he understand the fullness of this situation? Or is he still busy enjoying the pretence and grandeur of being a war leader?"

Maleeva looked back at the king with a shared worry.

Chapter Eleven

As the gang entered the tavern their boisterous new pal Eldskeep, or *Major* Eldskeep, as he'd insisted he be called, led the way, eager to find a table. He promptly ordered an ale and sat down, ignoring the fact that it was still very early in the day. Julen, anxious to also look the part, ordered likewise. Goola and Box, having an altogether different inclination, ordered something more appropriate. The cosy table they sat down at nestled nicely in the corner of the tavern.

"Ah, the first drink of the day," noted Eldskeep, as he took his first sip. The frothy white bubbles clinging to his whiskers.

"I wonder how much longer it'll be before we get to Patina?" wondered Box, prodding her finger in the murky juice she'd ordered, not sure whether to drink it or not. The slightly shoddy decor of the tavern making it feel much less welcoming than the previous one they'd been at.

"Not long, not long," reassured Eldskeep, "We're making great time."

With Eldskeep likewise hitching a ship from Patina to Maiden's Tower it was becoming clear that he'd be with them for the foreseeable future. This added another layer of discomfort. Especially for Box and Goola, who were beginning to feel a little out of their depth. As though their peaceful journey had been hijacked by forces beyond their control.

"Have you been to the Maiden Lands before?" asked Julen of Eldskeep, trying to look as much as possible like he was enjoying the ale he was now gulping down.

"I've been to all the kingdoms," replied Eldskeep, with a satisfied grin, "Every last one. Several times. Some so many I've lost count. But the Maiden Lands is a fine, - fine, country. One of the better ones. It'll be good to get back there."

Goola cursed her eyes around the tavern as she listened to the two. Watching all the various people sat at their tables engaging in conversation. A few playing cards and other games. Given how early it was it was surprisingly busy. She looked across to where three dowdy-looking men were playing some type of card game, intrigued by the scene. Eldskeep, noticing this, reached into his jacket pocket. He pulled out a very nicely illustrated pack of cards himself, then placed them on the table.

"Who's up for a game of '*Leaves, Arrows, Hearts and Stones*'?"

Leaves, Arrows, Hearts and Stones was a very common game that everyone, even children, knew how to play. The name referring to the four suits common to a card pack. Each suit had cards numbering up to seven. With three added *royal* cards to then take it up to ten. There were also numerous single cards, separate from the suits, looking very much like Tarot cards. In fact, fortune tellers and wise women would often use the packs to read fortunes or

predict the future. Though generally they were just used for gaming. Except in the Kingdom of Caster, where they were strictly banned - largely due to their association with gambling. Something also outlawed there.

Both Goola and Box weren't especially up for playing, their thoughts mainly focused on getting back on the road, but being too polite to decline they unenthusiastically agreed. Not that their response was needed, as before they'd spoken the feeble words, "Okay, then," Eldskeep had already started dealing out the cards. Clearly enjoying the atmosphere, Julen picked up his and studied the hand he'd been dealt. *Leaves, Arrows, Hearts and Stones* was a simple game, and was largely more a case of luck than judgement. However, both Eldskeep and Julen were intent on illustrating just how good they were at utilising what little judgement was needed.

As the quartet played through a few rounds of the game the time quickly passed, and before long they'd spent thirty-plus minutes at the table. By which time both Julen and Eldskeep were on their second jars of ale. Thus far, Julen had been quite unlucky in most of the rounds they'd played, though his will-to-win and enthusiasm remained unabashed. Box on the other hand had been very lucky, as she always seemed to be whenever they played any sort of game like this. Something both Goola and Julen were always quick to make note of.

"*You're too lucky,*" they'd complain, saying it as though she'd somehow cheated through some purposeful application of fortune. Of course, in reality it may just have been Box's natural confidence that gave her this air of success. Her positive outlook highlighting her wins and simply not drawing attention to the losses. Though even she was sometimes surprised by the uncanny ability she had when it came to garnering good luck. Eldskeep was suitably impressed by this too, and her winning ways earned from him an admiration Julen could've only dreamed of. With him now viewing her as a little protégé he could impart his vast gaming wisdom to. Something she was equally incurious of.

"Okay, one final more game, and then we'll go," he announced, dealing out the cards again, having impressively shuffled them for a good two to three minutes. The words came as a sharp relief to Box and Goola, but it was a relief that was quickly shattered, as a man from one of the tables across the room sauntered over. A well-dressed man, of young middle-age, with very neat short hair and a slightly waifish appearance. His drainpipe trousers and off-gold waistcoat, making him look especially spindly.

"*So you play cards, my friend?*"

"I do indeed, sir," came the confident reply from Eldskeep.

"*Howz 'bout a game, then?*"

The slight glint in his eye eager to entice Eldskeep, though he needed little enticement, and had already edged round in his seat to face the gentlemen, mirroring his body language. At

this point Box cut in to take a grip of the situation. "Sorry, we have to leave. We have quite a long journey to be getting on with."

"Come on - just the one game ..what do your friends say?"

Julen, by now mildly tipsy from the ale he'd drank, was, like Eldskeep, quite enamoured with the prospect, and didn't need much persuasion. Contrastingly Goola, like Box, could see where this was all going, and feared that they'd be sat in the tavern endlessly. Now with even more strange people they didn't know. Nor could trust. Including Eldskeep, who, however affable, was also a complete stranger. Goola said nothing though, and mournfully watched the situation unfold. Looking over at Box with a sorry glance. Each of them intuitively sharing the same concern.

Unable to brace the unstoppable force of drink and enthusiasm the game was then on. And this time it was *Yest*, a quite different game to *Leaves, Arrows, Hearts and Stones*. Essentially a two versus two game, involving just Julen and Eldskeep, who were now seated across from the waist-coated gentlemen and his friend - another rather dapper looking fellow, though ever so slightly stouter, with clothes that were moderately more grubby and well-worn. Eldskeep had wanted Box to play as his partner, but a point blank refusal meant Julen had to eagerly fill the gap. Box and Goola now just watching spectators as the game unfolded. An experience made more concerning when the first mention of money was uttered.

"First game: fifty ingkhs, let's say?"

Chapter Twelve

"Inkhs" was the colloquial name for coins. Across all the various kingdoms official coins came with a hole in the middle, so they looked like little *links* from a chain. In fact, often, though it was now uncommon, the ring-like coins would be linked together on pieces of string or chains and carried around this way. In effect, as jewellery on the body. A simple and easy way for people to carry their wealth whilst travelling. It was thought that originally this was the very purpose of the holes, though it was such an old-rooted practice that no one quite knew with any certainty. Still, even though it was something of an anachronism, all coins minted still maintained their hoop-like form. So the name "links", or its lazy morphed variant, "inkhs," was nevertheless rather apt.

Usually, when someone asked for "fifty inkhs" they meant just copper inkhs. The lowest grade coins in circulation. If gold or silver was meant this would be specified. Fortunately for Eldskeep and Julen - and definitely for Box and Goola - this time "fifty inkhs" did indeed just mean fifty copper inkhs. A decent amount to be gambling away, but not a worryingly large sum.

The game quickly began, with Julen, not entirely understanding the rules, trying his best to look like he did. *Yest* was typically a slower paced game, and it required a little more strategy than '*Leaves, Arrows, Hearts and Stones*,' so it was certainly unsuited to his temperament, and as the game progressed the more knowledgeable Eldskeep increasingly lamented him as partner. His rash moves and errors making defeat inevitable. When defeat did eventually come it was almost something of a relief. Still though, unperturbed, they happily embarked on another round. "*Another fifty inkhs.*" Box and Goola looked on with impatience; and an ever-larger degree of concern. The twenty-five ingkh share that Julen now slid onto the table, beginning to eat into the spare cash that he had earmarked for his general spending on the journey.

Luckily, both Box and Goola were rather more circumspect where money was concerned. So Grandpa Taxilian had made sure both were in possession of more than enough to get them to their destination. Knowing only too well that it would be something of a false move to give Julen full charge of the purse strings. Nonetheless, they still had no idea how much the ship journey across the Eastern Sea to Maiden's Tower would cost. Nor how much they would need when they eventually arrived there. On top of this, both had designed to spend as little as possible on the actual journey. Hoping to make sure they had plenty of money left to help pay their way when they finally arrived at Auntie Ellever's home. This was far from necessary, of course, as Aunt Ellever would never think to take a single ingkh from them. Still, both wanted to be as little of a burden as possible. Particularly as, unlike Julen, they had never even met Aunt Ellever in the flesh before. Though they had heard much about her, and had communicated by parcel or letter.

In this particular moment the thought of arriving at Aunt Ellever's house filled Box with a medicinal comfort. By now Julen was onto his third drink, and it was clearly affecting him. His lack of skill and slowness of thought dragging down Eldskeep's consistent, but almost

equally hopeless performance. The two gentlemen sitting opposite, clearly enjoying the ease with which they were taking the money from their two newly-met rubes. Smilingly offering encouragement in the hope they would stay at the table. As the lean man in the off-gold waistcoat swept his winnings from the table once again, he leaned over to the bashful Julen.

"Ah, unlucky, you're playing a good game, my friend, but you've been unfortunate. It seems we've had all the luck so far."

The words were lapped up by Julen, but they were beginning to niggle Eldskeep. In Julen's mind he believed he had indeed just been unfortunate, and that he was truly holding his own as an equal at the table. Eldskeep was in no doubt how bad things had gone though, and as he conceded this latest defeat he threw his cards down on the table with a touch of anger.

"One more game?!" nodded the wily gentlemen. His thick-bodied friend nodding in sync as he downed the last of his ale.

"No, we really do have to leave," jumped in Box, "We're already behind."

"Just one more game. How about it? Double or quits?"

The way the gentleman cut across her and aimed his response squarely at Julen and Eldskeep infuriated Box, but she bit her tongue as she watched its effects.

"Okay, double or quits," acquiesced the slightly agitated Eldskeep, unable to resist the offer.

He then turned to Box and requested that she take Julen's place for this one final game. Almost with a begging tone. She rejected the suggestion without a thought, her cheeks reddened with annoyance - *"We have to go."* With increasing desperation, and knowing full well that Julen remaining at the table meant certain defeat, Eldskeep begged some more.

"We'll definitely go after this game. For certain. Absolutely. Just this one game. I promise."

The off-gold waistcoated gentlemen watched her unimpressed response with his narrow eyes, knowing the pleas were pointless. Finally, it registered with Julen that he was being ditched.

"Why am I not playing? I've been playing fine."

"You're just slightly tipsy, that's all," intoned Eldskeep, "We need a fresh player. Someone with a fresh head."

"I'm fine," insisted Julen, his pride spiked more so.

"It's okay, I definitely won't be playing," pressed Box, unmoved. Her mood resolute. The atmosphere between her and Eldskeep now visibly frosty. A little alarmed by this, Goola finally piqued up to try to calm things down, "Come on, why don't we just all call it a day and go?"

"Oh, you can't go now," entreated the off-gold waistcoated gentleman, with added charm, "Just this last game. It'll round things off rather nicely. The gentlemen may even win their money back. It's only fair."

Easily influenced by the embracing tone of the waist-coated gentleman Julen then had a burst of exuberance: "I'll put down the full one hundred ingkhs, Eldskeep. If you don't think I'm up to it I'll take the risk. Besides I'm confident we can win it all back."

The two gentlemen looked rather gratified with this suggestion.

"I admire your bravado, sir," noted the grubbier, more portly one, "You're a true player."

Julen, pleased with this praise, enthusiastically rocked back in his chair and took a gulp of his drink.

"Well?" he quipped to Eldskeep.

"It is what he wants," added the grubbier fellow.

"Okay then, I guess," replied Eldskeep, "If you insist."

A hundred copper ingkhs was roughly equal to one silver ingkh, and as Julen reached into his money pouch to fetch out this round silver ingkh both Box and Goola got up and headed to the door.

"We'll wait outside."

Approximately thirty minutes later both Julen and Eldskeep joined them outside the tavern. A slightly solemn looking Julen now a shiny silver ingkh worse off. With Eldskeep doing his best to avoid eye contact with Box. The dour atmosphere that had began developing in the tavern now up a further notch as they hitched their trailer and horses and began the next leg of the journey.

Chapter Thirteen

King Dogfael, the King of Tunid, and King Mizmeam, the King of Caster, each with their entourage, arrived in the grounds of Palace Azilard. It was a far cry from the grim motley greens and browns of the surrounding country. Instead, the green grass lawns were lush and shady. The well-watered gardens something of a paradise in comparison to the bleak Caster landscape beyond. On the western edge of Keneeshka it was irrigated with streams and canals, cut from the River Verda. With ornate fountains and other water features a recurring decoration. The clear soft blue waters offsetting the dark greens of the vegetation, and the spritely outcrops of brightly coloured flowers. The vast palace itself situated in the centre. Perfectly balanced in proportion to the vast palatial gardens.

Prince Aralak had been holding court in the absence of his father, and he strode confidently down the palace steps to greet his father's guests. Making sure to greet the King of Tunid first, bowing, then grasping him firmly by the hand. He then hugged his father warmly, and in turn acknowledged Drua Maleeva, who was now in a loose black chemise, more fitting to the climate, with an equally loose head shawl covering the greater part of her hair. As he spoke to Maleeva he playfully ruffled the hair of Seaspell, who was quietly and intently observing the adults as they interacted with each other.

Prince Aralak cut a dashing figure. Now on the cusp of thirty he'd led something of a charmed life thus far. Very much enjoying the shade and protection afforded by his father. Currently he was overseeing the naval efforts against the Western Islanders. Though his lackadaisical attitude and overconfidence often meant that he was more of a nuisance to the more experienced admirals under his command. Not that he ever realised. Nor were such things ever spoken out loud. Fear putting paid to any such daring. However, the endless failures, on top of the terrifying fire power of the Brynnyfirdians, meant that morale amongst those prosecuting the war was at a dismal low. As the conversation moved in this direction, Prince Aralak expressed himself in his usual cavalier form.

"We'll have to put every elder to the sword once we regain control, of course."

"Will we regain control?" asked the King of Tunid, only half in jest.

"For sure. It's just a matter of time, your highness ..it looks bad at the moment, but we'll wear them down. We have an endless supply of men and ships. They do not."

"But they now have an advantage we do not, too," interjected King Mizmeam, correcting his son's overconfidence.

The King of Tunid keenly watched this father-son dynamic play out. "Are we edging towards a breakthrough?" he then asked.

"We're getting there, slowly.." returned a frustrated King Mizmeam, "We've dragged the finest blacksmiths and apothecaries over from the Three Deserts, in the hope that they may

be able to add something to the endeavour. So now we have every available mind on the task. It would help if we could take one of their ships." He looked over towards Prince Aralak as he said this. The prince, never fond of criticism - even of the mildest variety - taking it as a cue to switch his attention, and eject himself from the conversation.

"How about a spot of archery practice?" he motioned to Seaspell, who always relished the rare opportunity he got to do such boyish things. Maleeva gave a smiling nod of permission. The two then strode off in common step towards the practice range.

"When does he turn thirty?" queried the King of Tunid.

"Just a few months."

"So it's probably time for his de-veiling then. Is he ready for it, though?"

"Probably not," laughed King Mizmeam, with a comic lament, "..But I guess he's going to have to be. It may actually instil a deeper concern for the world into him. Though I have a feeling it may just wash him over."

As the two kings continued to talk Madame Drua Maleeva listened on in silence, staring at the cascade of water that was hissing and swishing down through the channel of a large bird-shaped water feature. Her vision slightly falling out of focus as she watched it roll over the blue mosaic tiles that paved the bottom of the curved fish pond it emptied into.

"I remember when I first discovered the truth about this world. It was quite a dislocation," reflected King Mizmeam, his pace slowing as he also paused to take in the scenery.

"I too ..it is indeed an odd world we find ourselves in. If only the rest of this world were to know these things we do."

Maleeva watched on wisely as she listened to the talk of secrets. Confident there were few, if any, that she was not privy to. As the two kings stepped past the elegant bird-shaped fountain, and on towards the white marble of the palace steps, they moved the conversation on to more mundane topics. Making sure to keep their arcane words away from earshot of the numerous helpers and servants inside the polished and pristine palace halls.

Chapter Fourteen

"I would give you those fifty ingkhs, Julen, it's just I'm a little shy at the moment," piped up Eldskeep, hesitatingly, breaking the silence. This being the very first mention of the card game since the four had left the tavern. Box wasn't too impressed at all, and still felt that their riding companion should have paid his share, or, more to the point, not played the game at all. Especially with him being so much the older and more worldly, and no doubt more wealthy too. However, she kept quiet, and just moodily glanced over at him as he said this. Julen, conversely, was rather unbothered about the whole money thing. It was more the mild embarrassment that still troubled him.

"I should've played the 'wounded king' card ..what was I thinking?"

"You had drunk a little too much," comforted Eldskeep, taking on the air of an older mentor once again, imparting wisdom. "You just needed a slightly calmer head on your shoulders. They could read your moves. You need to be like me. A steely expression. Never give them a hint."

"I was a little lightheaded, I guess. I think it was that third drink - I was completely fine until then."

"Pace yourself when drinking, pace yourself ..but don't be too hard on yourself, you'll learn. Plus, it's all experience. You'll be more than ready next time."

"*Next time?*" seethed Box.

"Well, not right away, of course. We will need to have a drink for sure though when we arrive in Maiden's Tower though. To celebrate a successful journey so far. It would be wrong not to. Plus, the clientele is of quite a different character in the Maiden Lands. We'll be the rogues when we get there. If a similar situation arises, I'm sure we'll comfortably win our losses back, and more to boot."

"I'm not too sure about winning any money back, but as long as we get to Maiden's Tower in one piece - with no more hiccups, perhaps we'll have the drink. Perhaps."

At this point Goola, who'd fallen asleep in the cart, awoke. She'd been asleep well over an hour. The boredom and the silence allowing her to drift off under the warm Sun. Now awake, she instantly looked around to get accustomed to their current location. The cart clattering along the cobbled road at a fair pace. Expecting the mood of the other three to be little changed to how it was when drifted off she was surprised to find a slight touch of normality had returned.

"You've been out quite a while. It's almost evening," bellowed Eldskeep, from his short distance away. His heavy horse alongside the bobbling cart.

The road they were currently travelling along was much wider than the earlier roads they'd used. In the far distance they could make out the odd horseman or carriage. The traffic noticeably busier. Julen, sat at the front of the cart, with his arms around his knees, lent over, and nudged Goola with his elbow. "If you look far enough forward, to the left of that hill, you can see Patina. Earlier, when we were higher up, we could even see the sea." Goola struggled to pick out the features he was pointing to, but feigned she could see them anyway. What she could see were the small homes and farmsteads dotted about to the left and the right. All looking not entirely dissimilar to her own, now missed, home.

In a nearby field they could see a scarecrow. Scruffily dressed, with a face more convivial than frightening. Clearly failing to do its job, as the surrounding field, of just mud and plough tracks, was filled with chickens. Clucking and pecking away at the ground.

"Quite a few kytalyk men in these parts," noted Eldskeep dryly. As if the chickens alone, along with the general scruffiness of the poor scarecrow, was enough to tell him that the field and its adjacent shack belonged to one.

"Our grandfather, Luteeay, is a kytalyk," perked up Box, As she said this she grabbed the reins of the horses slightly tighter, so she could turn back to engage with Eldskeep.

"I'll probably know him," stated Eldskeep in a casual tone, "In fact, I'm sure I do know him. The name definitely rings a bell."

"How would you know him?"

"Well, I'm quite well known myself. Like I said, I'm very well travelled. I've had dealings with most people. Many, *many* people. Often too many to keep track of. And that includes many kytalyk folk."

"What do you think of all that?" questioned Julen, eager to hear his view, "Do you think they really understand things? Or are they just old, peculiar guys?"

"Oh, it's all total nonsense."

As he said this Box turned back once again, instantly slighted. She herself shared his opinion for the most part, but it stung nonetheless.

"Don't get me wrong," continued Eldskeep, noting her response, "..They're good men, and they do a lot of good, but I just don't buy it."

"Do you believe the world is surrounded by a ring of fire?" inquired Box.

"No," came the emphatic reply.

"*So what comes after the desert then?*"

"I don't know ..perhaps it's just more desert, getting hotter and hotter. No one has tried and no one can try. It gets too hot. So how can we know? I've never been, and I've travelled through all the kingdoms."

"So, if it gets too hot, eventually it must become fire ..right?" quipped Box, with a firm logic.

"Maybe, but I'm a man of common sense. I only believe what I can see. I like to keep my feet on the ground. When I see a ring of fire myself, then I'll start believing there is one."

On hearing this, Box felt a touch more respect. The scepticism appealed to her own tastes, though she didn't speak it out loud. In contrast, Goola, only just awake, and less enamoured with such questions, brushed it aside. As it passed through her mind however she began to notice Patina rising up in the distance from the horizon line. The glowing fire of the evening Sun mirroring the imagined fire of the outer desert. As her eyes cast down across the city silhouette it pulled her back down to tangible reality. The numerous stone towers, that Julen had tried to point out to her sleepy eyes just minutes earlier, now clearly visible against the backdrop of the blue-red sky. Further down the road they could see the bustle of traffic increasing even more so. They were now perhaps forty minutes from the city's perimeter, and would very soon be within its gates.

Chapter Fifteen

BOOM! A huge shot thundered out across the sky, the noise and recoil of the cannon shaking the very ship itself. Acalee immediately leapt from his hammock, slipping on the floor as he tried to race out onto the deck in the panic. He got there to find Essen, along with most of the crew, saluting the ship's flag, ready to fire off another volley. The ocean air was beautiful, and the Sun was glistening off the water. The weather perfectly calm and peaceful. Everything good and shipshape, with just the cannon fire breaking the tranquillity. Acalee, quickly realising there was no real danger, charged over towards Essen; "What the crux are you doing?!"

Essen, nonchalant, and not understanding the fuss, was calm in his response. Pushing Acalee away with a single hand. The slight figure of Acalee brushed aside with ease by his much brawnier cousin, making it easy for Essen to simply ignore his concerns. The animated mannerisms of Acalee amusing some of the other crew members, who were all stood around watching the drama.

"We're commemorating a milestone in our journey," retorted Essen, with coolness, "We're now officially south of Erba - if our reckoning's correct. So we're over halfway towards Tunida. Surely a fitting point at which to salute our flag, cousin Acalee."

The Brynnfyrdian flag that was now billowing out from the mast was blue and green, and Essen saluted it once again as he said this. Doing so in a slightly mocking way, as if to deliberately annoy Acalee even more so. Acalee briefly looked up towards the flag, but remained unimpressed.

The rippling flag in many ways exemplified the basic simplicity of the Brynnfyrdians, and Acalee didn't quite have the same fondness for it that Essen and the other sailors had. Its top half was blue, just like the sky. The bottom, green, reminiscent of the dark green fields of Brynnfyrdia. The line separating the two halves like the horizon of a vast, but very basic countryside vista. An uncomplicated, but somewhat symbolic vision of a dear homeland. Though out at sea, the blue strip often blended into the backdrop of the ocean skyline, leaving just an elongated taper of visible green. Which still, nevertheless, inspired fondness on the part of the ship's inhabitants.

"Are you crazy?" asked Acalee, his tone unchanged from his earlier remark, "You'll draw attention to us. Every ship on the ocean will have heard that. They'll have heard it even out on land."

"There's no one around for miles. Besides, there's no harm giving the cannons a little test. We might as well get some practice in."

"What about all the ships travelling to and from Erba?"

"We're too far south now. Nearly all that traffic heads north-east. You know that. This is the quietest part of the ocean. There's no chance we'll even come close to another ship."

"What about ships sailing out from Eldbee?"

"From Eldbee to the Three Deserts? C'mon, ships rarely sail out this way from Eldbee - they're too lazy to try such a journey, and even if they spotted us they'd run and hightail it outta here."

"Exactly, they'd run ..and tell everyone we're here."

At this point Acalee was starting to calm down a little, and even though Essen was arguing his case, as he always did, there was at least the sense that he was getting through to him. To push the point further Acalee then noted that there could also be the odd ship from the Lower or Middle Desert lurking around, and that any one of them could be heading straight to Tunida. Then, as if to signify that he'd finished having his whine at everyone, he half-jokingly saluted the flag himself. As he did this a large bird landed on the prow of the ship. About seagull sized. It had a brownish head, with a tawny-orange ring of feathers around its neck, that then blended back into the same brownish colour covering the rest of the body, including the wings - though the very tips, in contrast, were a bright white.

"A Tunida Bird," noted one of the crew members, "We certainly must be far south."

"Perhaps we're a little too close to the tip of Caster," pondered Acalee, with a furrow of minor worry, "Unless I'm mistaken it's unusual to be seeing them in the middle of the ocean. We might have to check our course."

"At least it can't talk and give away our whereabouts," chimed in Essen. With this, he then started creeping towards the bird playfully, as if trying to catch it.

"Perhaps it came to see what all the noise was about," replied Acalee dryly, "After all, it's said they nest in fire. Plus ..and that's another thing, you could've caused a fire cracking these cannons unnecessarily. We sealed the black powder in the hull for a reason. One spark and we're up."

One of the older crew members stroked his scraggled white beard. "Perhaps the bird's an omen," he mused, "..I'll go and check that everything's in order down below, just in case." As he headed off another crew member had a thought. "We should try to catch it, it might be one of the King of Tunid's - they use them as messengers, y'know. It could be carrying something important."

"I can't see a ring or tag on it," observed Essen, moving ever closer as he said it, peering beneath its plumage to get a better view.

"Maybe it's the Tunidans that actually breed these birds," meditated Acalee aloud, his own mind clicking into gear further as Essen crept towards the feathered intruder, "They must be bred somewhere. They can't literally nest in fire."

He paused for a moment as he recalled hearing about the birds as a child. It was a well held belief across all the kingdoms that Tunida Birds nested in the desert fire. It was commonly observed that they flew south once a year to breed, flying directly into the increasing heat of the desert. Given this impassable heat, and that no one had ever seen them nest, it was something of a conundrum as to how they actually managed to produce their younglings. Naturally, the myth had grown that they nested in the fire itself. Their young being born amidst the very flames of the unseen and impassable outer desert.

"I've heard that they bury their eggs in the desert, like turtles ..the sand warming the eggs," noted the crew member.

"That makes sense," acknowledged Acalee, somewhat impressed by the idea.

At this point Essen was now within a few metres of the actual Tunida Bird. Fearing the talk would scare it off, he looked over his shoulder at the others, as if to demand silence. He then made his move. Springing forward, his arms outstretched.. he then missed by a comfortable distance. The bird, with calm buoyancy, taking off into the air. Soaring up briefly, then heading in the direction of Tunida.

"I should've fetched my bow," bemoaned Essen.

"It would've been quieter than the cannon shot," jibed Acalee, with a grin. They then watched the bird, now barely a speck on the skyline, vanish beneath the white clouds in the distance. The *Arbowlan* peacefully and swiftly bound in the same direction.

Chapter Sixteen

The setting Sun painted the perfect scene as they entered Patina. The city was old, but well maintained; the streets all stony-cobbles. Castle Tori stood at its centre, on the city's highest hill. Its large stone walls and turrets rising into the skyline, dominating the surrounding sprawl, like an extension of the steep jagged hill itself. Down below ringed by encircling walls, stairways and avenues. There were likewise numerous other towering buildings dotted across the city. Creating an impressive panoply.

Further behind this array, barely visible from the vantage point Box and her cohorts had as they arrived, was the equally impressive harbour. With its tall ships, loading and unloading, along with the countless smaller schooners and fishing boats gliding in and out of view. The ocean expanding endlessly into the distance. Castle Tori was the by far most magnificent edifice, but it was not the most famous. Patina being most well-known for its two huge lighthouses. One on the northern extreme of the city's coastline, the other at its southern edge. They were commonly called the "gold and silver" lighthouses, though the northern, "silver" one, was in actual fact just plain grey stone. It being named largely in relation to its more majestic counterpart. True to form, this wasn't made of actual gold either. However, it was indeed painted in a rich gold colouring, and had a ring of hammered gold plate around its summit, just beneath the blazing fire atop. Marking the way for seafarers in a halo of flame and reflection.

Arriving late in the evening, as these fires began to burn, the gang's immediate aim was the more mundane task of finding a place to stay for the night. Knowing they would need to find a ship the next morning, they elected to find somewhere close to the harbour. Dismounting from their horses and cart they grabbed their luggage, then walked the animals to the stables outside the city gates. Waiting in the long queue as various other visitors to the city did likewise. Yet again, saddened to say goodbye to the little steeds they'd grown so fond of over the latest section of their journey. Then, they entered the city proper, and began to wander towards a destination for the night. Naturally Eldskeep leading the way.

Meeting Eldskeep had been a blessing in this regard. Had they arrived alone they would've found themselves a bit dazzled and out of their depth. Still, they suspected his claims to know his way around to be largely bluster. With no better knowledge themselves they happily followed his lead alas. Listening as he pointed out local landmarks, with the casual air of someone who was born and raised in the city. All this in spite of the fact that he'd already led them down dead ends more than once, and had had to turn heel and track back on himself. Punctuated by outbursts of, "Ah, of course, I remember now," and, "They must have changed this part since I've been away." Luckily though, the overall direction of travel was fairly straight forward. Head towards Castle Tori, then, from there, with a nice high vantage point, head down towards the harbour. Making Eldskeep's overconfident and patchy grasp of the city's geography only a minor inconvenience. Plus, it allowed them to take in a little more of the city than they otherwise would've done.

As they sauntered, stranger-like, past all the little shops and taverns, it was quite a sight. Box and Goola in particular had never been anywhere quite so busy. Their wide-eyed little heads constantly turning to take in as much as possible. Their yellow-blond and red-blond bobs each respectively catching the glimmering light from the recently lit street lanterns. The buildings, the people, the steep little winding streets. The noisiness of it all - even at this softly-illuminated hour of the evening. The constant backdrop of chatter and loud voices.

Like the rest of the Eastern Kingdom, Patina was relatively peaceful, but the constant traffic that came in and out: the sailors, smugglers, merchants, and various gadabouts, meant that certain parts also had an unnerving undertow. With some streets giving the leery feel that you were always just a misstep from danger. The soldierly city wardens occasionally meandering the streets offering a degree of calm reassurance and orderliness, but also adding a slight air of menace themselves. Surprisingly Julen - not always the most perceptive of people - was the one that was most acutely aware of this undercurrent, and had been unusually quiet since they'd arrived in the city. Eyeing the countless strangers he passed with cautious suspicion. His mood swiftly changed as Box challenged him to a race up the steps leading to the main avenue that ran alongside Castle Tori though. Always competitive he immediately sprang into life as she raced past, goading him. The two of them rushing up the two or three hundred steep stone steps with child-like abandon. Goola following likewise, but with far less eagerness and intent. Happy to trail along in stops and starts.

As Box and Julen reached the summit, almost neck and neck with each other - Julen making up the slight ground he'd lost following Box's cheat start - they stopped and looked down over the harbour ocean now visible far out in front of them. The rows of streets and houses beneath them curving haphazardly towards the harbour front. They waited, slightly out of breath, first for Goola, then for Eldskeep, who was slowly struggling to make the ascent beneath his own weight. As he eventually arrived they again had to wait once more as he recaptured his breath. This brief stop gone, they then continued down the long avenue, which passed beside the southern side of the castle wall. The sheer scale so impressive up close.

As they walked past it, Eldskeep, with his trademark braggadocio, began to tell them about its reclusive inhabitant.

"The Princess Liofia, daughter of the Eastern King, lives here. *Very* beautiful, but *very* troubled ..I've met her on a few occasions. Several times in fact. Though that was long ago, when she was a child, and it's said she rarely, if ever, leaves the castle walls these days."

His three acquaintances already knew full well who Princess Liofia was, and that she lived in Castle Tori. Everyone knew this. It would be impossible not to know this, especially living in the Eastern Kingdom. However, they still enjoyed hearing the added details from Eldskeep, even if they were somewhat familiar and peppered with personal anecdotes that stretched credulity. The rumours were common gossip. It was said that Princess Liofia was earmarked as a potential marriage partner for Prince Aralak, but it was also said she had

stubbornly refused to entertain this prospect, and had consequently holed herself up in Castle Tori in protest. Her father, King Kaspria, now simply waiting, somewhat impatiently, for her to come out of her royal sulk. Insistent in his promise to King Mizmeam that she would eventually come round.

As Box and Goola ambled on past the castle boundaries they both hoped to catch a glimpse of this elusive and alluring princess, but sadly none was forthcoming. As they crossed from the large stone slabs of the avenue to the smaller cobbles of the nearby streets they kept turning their heads for an extra look. Trying to increase their chances. Straining, in hope, to spy any moving flickers in the castle windows. Unfortunately, it looked almost empty in the now increasing darkness of evening. With just the odd orangey hum of candlelight pressing forth against the occasional window.

As they pressed further down the gentle incline towards the harbour, they could increasingly smell the ocean air. The numerous lively little taverns they passed seeming to beckon Eldskeep to enter. Regardless, he feared to raise the prospect, even just for one drink, following the censure he'd received from Box. So they kept apace, looking for a suitable place to pitch down for the night. Finally, having inquired into a few places without success, they found a nice little inn that could accommodate them.

Relieved, they each headed up to their rooms. Box and Goola sharing as usual. The room they were given was on the third floor of the building, with a window facing out onto the harbour front, affording a fetching view. As Box peered out, and surveyed the panorama, she could see in the far-off distance to her left a faint glow above the rooftops, coming from the silver lighthouse far up the coastline. Its light creeping and curving quietly into the night. Then, to her right, much closer up, she could see the gold lighthouse. Its bright beacon lighting up the now pitch black sky. Its necklace of gold plate, half-blinding the rest of the tower with its reflection. Drawing her moth-like vision.

"The world is surrounded by a ring of fire," she thought, as she watched the bright fire weave and crackle above the dark and barely-visible ocean. An endless flood of darkness, which the lighthouse impressively attempted, but failed to conquer.

Chapter Seventeen

The next morning everyone woke in a yawning fashion. The previous day's journey taking more of a toll than any of them had realised. As they readied themselves, they decided it would be best to sort out their passage to Maiden's Tower as soon as possible. The plan being to leave that very day, and not have to stay in Patina an extra night. There were several options open to them. They could hire a boat and captain themselves to make the voyage. Or, they could find a place on some other ship. A merchant ship, or one of the more expensive ships specifically catering to passengers wanting to make the journey. Though these sailed a little more infrequently.

The option they naturally leaned towards was hitching across on a merchant ship, as this was the most common way that people normally made the crossing. It was also much cheaper than the other two options. Merchant ships were constantly heading in and out of Patina, and even the ones heavily laden with goods still usually had at least some extra space for passengers hoping to head in the same direction.

As Box, Goola, Julen and Eldskeep strolled around the harbour front they surveyed the scene, trying to get a sense of the busy port. Unsure how exactly to even go about finding a ship, let alone one heading to Maiden's Tower. After fifteen or twenty minutes of this pondering and wandering, Eldskeep finally took it upon himself to start asking around. Shouting over to the various seamen occupying the little boats. As well as questioning the odd passers-by who looked like they might know a thing or two about solving their problem.

After several dead ends one seaman finally offered his ship. An old sea captain, sporting the classic old sea captain look and demeanour. White in beard. Old, but not quite truly ancient. Blunt in speech; a witted lilt to his replies.

"Yes, this ship sails," he curtly responded to Eldskeep's initial query.

The vessel was small, and didn't look like it would afford a particularly comfortable journey over such a long distance, but it did look just about seaworthy and up to the job.

"Is there any chance this ship could get us to Maiden's Tower?"

"It could," came the further response. Leaving the four unsure as to whether he meant it theoretically could, but wouldn't. Or whether he was actually offering to take them. Feeling this confusion, Box stepped forward, knowing her naïve-looking youthfulness would give her a degree of leeway in not understanding the meaning.

"Could you take us there? .. we can pay you."

"Sure," responded the captain, unmoved, "We can leave right now, if you're in a hurry, but I'll need the payment upfront. Twenty silvas ..per passenger."

This was a bit more than they had hoped to pay, and it instantly put the four of them off the idea. Especially considering the cramped conditions of the boat. Seeing their hesitation the old sea captain at last showed a touch of personality.

"That includes your food, everything. You won't find a better offer than that round here."

"It's a fine offer, we may come back to you, sir," quipped Eldskeep, warmly, not wanting to decline the offer too firmly. They then left the old sea dog to see what other options were open, ambling onwards along the harbour front. Past the shops and the taverns and the rickety little workshops. Where rough-faced men in woollen hats hammered and inspected equally rickety little boats. The wood, salt, fish and knitted clothing infusing the air with a sense of the busy sea. There were larger vessels readying to leave port as well. With all classes of people, from urchins and vendors to well-to-do ladies, bustling around the adjacent streets and docklands. Some just like themselves, looking for a passage to some far off destination. Simply following everyone else they quickly found a largish vessel readying to leave for Maiden's Tower. Due to depart later that night. It also had a much more reasonable toll than the one demanded by the white-bearded sea captain: just eight silver ingkhs apiece.

It was the perfect solution, and fortunately there was still plenty of room. With the four not wishing to spend another night in Patina they booked their passage. They now simply had to return a few hours before departure, pay their fare, and board the ship. With it all sorted, and a sense of relief and achievement in tow, they were now left with a whole afternoon to waste.

Walking leisurely back along the harbour they discussed what they were planning to do. Box and Goola were simply content to spend the hours wandering round, catching the scenery. They liked the idea of heading back up towards Castle Tori, in the hope that this time they might indeed get a glimpse of the elusive Princess Liofia. Contrarily, and true to his nature, Eldskeep was much more anxious to head towards the nearest tavern. To spend the afternoon lazily in there. An option underwritten by Julen, who was by now getting quite accustomed to his new found status as Eldskeep's sidekick, out in the real world. Box and Goola weren't too enamoured with this idea, but with a degree of arm-twisting they agreed to head for just one drink. To quench their thirst and rest their legs a touch before more sauntering around the city. The fact that the much older Eldskeep was still somewhat worn out from the previous day's travel weighing on their acceptance.

The place they alighted upon was an inn called *The Ruined Boat*. A relatively dull place, though cosy. Largely empty, except from the odd old fisherman huddled over his ale. Even Eldskeep and Julen were rather disappointed with the drab sense of boredom it inspired. Having entered however they ordered drinks, as well as some food, and huddled in at a small table. Box, originally very eager to leave the place, quickly changing her mind at the thought of food. It all of a sudden dawning on her just how hungry she was. A feeling

shared by Goola and Julen. So, for the first five minutes or so all talk at the table was exclusively food related.

When it finally arrived it was brought over by the barmaid who'd originally took their order. A slightly haggard, but attractive woman in her middle years. As Box clocked her face she noticed the blonde hair and aged, but translucent skin of the woman. She nudged Goola a little. It wasn't their mother, in fact, the woman looked nothing like either of them, but the uncommonness of the features reminded them nonetheless. This, in turn, conjured up thoughts in both of how far away from home they now were. Not wanting to remain in such a contemplative state, Box immediately pitched to Julen and Eldskeep about how they should most definitely go back to Castle Tori. Expressing again her hopes to catch a glimpse of the spectre-like princess before they left. Overhearing this conversation the barmaid chimed in.

"Some say she wanders about these streets, disguised as a regular towns person, y'know. So you may have already seen her."

The curiousness of this remark held instant appeal, and a demand for more information.

"Really?"

"It's true, or so it's said. People say she sneaks out from the castle in disguise. Mainly at night. Giving the guards her father placed to keep her there the slip. She then wanders around, keeping a check on all us normal folk as we go about our lives."

"Have you ever seen her?"

"I haven't, but my son swears he did one time. Down near the harbour front one evening. She was covered up, and it was dark, but he could tell it was her. At least that's what he says, anyway. It's also said that there's a mini panic at the castle amongst the guards every time they realise she's missing."

Box turned to Goola, "After this we have to go to Castle Tori to have a look round. I want to see her."

"You two go," reflected Eldskeep, with languor, "We'll be staying here, or heading to the next nearest tavern for one more drink ..won't we Julen. You two can meet us back here at four o'clock. Before darkness begins to fall." He then asked the barmaid if there were any livelier places that they could visit nearby. Who then responded by giving him chapter and verse on every inn and tavern within a two mile radius. He listened intently. As interested in this as Box and Goola were in the talk of Princess Liofia. It wasn't the ideal arrangement, but the idea of meeting back up at *The Ruined Boat* was a happy trade-off for the pair. Any potential trouble Eldskeep and Julen might cause instantly eclipsed by their own little adventure. They quickly ate their food, sprinkled with more discussion about Princess Liofia, then left the other two at the table.

"We're going now," they both said in tandem as they got up. Eager to rush out.

"Don't forget, four o'clock," repeated Eldskeep.

"We won't, and you don't either."

As Box said this a real, but minor worry crossed her mind. The memory of the card game vividly flashing before her eyes. Seeing the slight apprehension on her face Julen snappily interjected.

"We'll be fine, we won't forget. Go on, go. We'll catch you later."

Chapter Eighteen

Box and Goola, having wandered in vain to catch a glimpse of Princess Liofia, decided it was now time to start making their way back to *The Ruined Boat*. They were at the ascent of Castle Tori, and had just made their second lap around the castle's outer wall. The princess-hunt had been enjoyable, but it had been rather duller than they'd hoped. Now, a little tired, they began to meander back down towards the harbour front.

Meanwhile, the other two were leaving the latest tavern they'd found themselves drinking at. A rather dingy place called *The Crooked Head*. True to their word they had been rather sensible. They hadn't drank too much, nor had they wasted any money gambling with vagabonds; and now, they were, in good time, making their way back to *The Ruined Boat* themselves. A place they now had a bit more fondness for, having witnessed the other options first-hand.

Leaving the side door of the tavern they came into a long, cobbled alley, that led all the way down to the seafront. Past the dankness of the dreary stone walls they could see, at the very end, the bright pleasant blues of the sea meeting the sky. At a leisurely pace, they began heading back towards the beauty. "We've plenty of time. We'll probably get there well before they do," observed Eldskeep.

'''Thwack !!'''

All of a sudden, out of nowhere, Julen felt a heavy fist to the back of his head. Instantly followed by an aggressive shove to the back that sent him flying forward and scraping across the ground. Before he knew it his assailant was coming at him to inflict more harm. Eldskeep quickly turned around, only to find two more thuggish-looking attackers coming his way. "Hand over your money. *All of it.*"

Eldskeep took a step back and grasped the ornate handle of his sword, pulling it free from its sheath. As he did this Julen received a swift, hard kick to his midriff. He crumpled over in pain.

With a speed and agility that surprised his attackers Eldskeep quickly kicked out at one of the men. Raising his leg and weightily pushing the man's thigh with the sole of his boot, forcing him backwards to the floor. As he did this he raised his sword to the other stranger, who, before he could reach for his own, felt Eldskeep's blade cut down through his right shoulder. As Eldskeep brought the sword back up on the back stroke he once again caught his assailant. This time slashing the man just under his chin. He then thrust this one to the ground with his boot too, and began to take aim at the first man who was now scrambling backwards, trying to push himself up from the floor.

As this unfolded Julen's attacker looked back, surprised to see his fellow cohorts so roundly put on the back foot. The small window of apprehension allowing Julen to pick himself up. Sensing the opportunity he aggressively ran headlong at the thief, crashing him against the

alley wall. Julen too then pulled his sword from his belt. As his opponent turned to face him Julen lent in with rage, thrusting the thin, rapier-like blade into the man's chest. Piercing his heart. With a short murmur of breath the man then went limp, and slumped to the floor.

Shocked at what he had done Julen looked up to see a strange woman looking down at him from one of the rooftops in the distance. She was wearing a hooded cloak that stretched down to the ground, and had a veil or shawl covering her mouth. Just her eyes, which even at a distance were expressive, visible to Julen looking on. Fearing a similar fate would befall them, the two men Eldskeep was contending with began to make haste. Eldskeep didn't attempt to follow. Julen then looked over towards him, and for the briefest of moments the two acknowledged with their eyes the seriousness of the situation. Julen then quickly looked back towards the hooded woman, who in the split second he had looked away, had disappeared.

"We need to get out of here," shrieked Julen, a blind panic overtaking him. He then tried to drag Eldskeep by the arm, attempting to run down the alley with him.

"Don't run! Just walk," insisted Eldskeep, with a firmness. He then, in turn, gripped Julen by the back of his shirt and helped walk him down towards the sea front.

"What are we gonna do?"

"Keep your voice down. We just need to stay calm and head out of here as quickly as possible, before any suspicions are raised. Remember, it's not our fault, they attacked us."

A plan then quickly formed in his mind, with a quickness similar to his actions just moments earlier.

"Which end was that old sea captain's boat again?"

Without waiting for a reply from Julen he then began heading in its direction.

Meanwhile, closer to sea, Box and Goola, in a very different frame of mind, had arrived at *The Ruined Boat*. Even though they were quite early themselves they were still a tad annoyed that Julen and Eldskeep weren't already there. Outwardly they gave the pair the benefit of the doubt, but there was an inner worry that they'd screwed things up yet again. As they found the same table, a little wearied, they parked themselves down.

"Did you see the princess?" asked the same barmaid.

"Not his time. We had a good old look around though."

"At least that's something."

They then ordered some more food to take their mind off the wait. As it finally arrived Eldskeep came sauntering through the door ..alone.

"Where's Julen??"

"He's fine, don't worry. There's been a slight change of plan though, so we have to get going.."

"Not staying for a drink?" cheered the barmaid.

"I'm very tempted ..very tempted," came the reply from Eldskeep, even more breezily than usual, "But I think I've probably had enough for the one day."

Eldskeep's extra-buoyant manner only made Box and Goola more uneasy. "Where's Julen???" they both asked, for a second time, as they anxiously followed him out through the tavern door. "He's fine, he's below deck ..we've decided we're going to make the sea journey with the old sea captain. Remember him from earlier? It just makes much more sense."

"What's going on?" asked Box, agitatedly.

"Nothing. Well, err, actually, we got into a little scuffle outside one of the taverns. Nothing major, but we'd rather not bump into the same guys again, you see."

"A scuffle??! ..is Julen okay??"

"Just a scuffle, and he's fine."

Eldskeep tried to appear as calm and as nonchalant as possible, but it wasn't convincing either of the two sisters as they raced down towards the quay.

"If he's fine, why's he below deck??"

"Well, hmm, ..he's minding the boat. We don't want the captain to sail off with a bunch of other people onboard. He's holding fort."

The anxiety, the rapid speed of the conversation, and the hurry of the walk meant it felt like only seconds had passed by the time they did in fact reach the tiny boat.

"Ah, we're here, are we?" moaned the captain, half-bored, "I suppose we can get going now."

"As soon as possible," clipped Eldskeep, with a sense of relief.

"Well, I'll just need the twenty-five silvas apiece, and then we can be off"

"Twenty-five?" shot Box, "I thought it was twenty?"

"No, my little lady, twenty-five it is."

"But you said 'twenty silvas to Maiden's Tower' just this morning."

"Yes," noted the Captain, grinning, "But you're not going to Maiden's Tower, you're going to Fools' Harbour - and that's an extra five."

"We're going to Maiden's Tower," demanded Box.

Eldskeep then looked at her, as she in turn looked to Goola, both now even more angry and confused.

"What's happened?!"

"There's been a change of plan," came the sombre response, "It's not a big change. Just a minor one. Julen will explain everything when you head down to see him. ..Oh, and by the way - I hate to ask, especially right now, but I'm a little light. Is there any chance you could lend me the twenty-five silvas to pay my fare? I'll pay you back as soon as we're in the Maiden Lands. It's just at the moment I have a minor funding issue."

Too tired to argue, and now desperate to get below deck to see Julen, both Box and Goola got their little purses out and counted out the money for both the captain and for Eldskeep. It was a very steep amount, but it gave them little concern in comparison to their wider worry. They then fretfully sped below deck. The captain, mildly amused by the goings-on, started to unmoor the boat, in readiness for a journey slightly longer than any of them had anticipated.

Chapter Nineteen

The weather turned stormy almost the moment they left Patina. With rain crashing down, and the boat increasingly seesawing on the waves. The entire expanse surrounding them an eternal grey. Julen, still in a daze from the preceding events, was equally gloomy. Lying down belly first on one of the bunks below deck, his head hanging over the side dejectedly. Box and Goola had been interrogating him for a good thirty minutes about what had happened, but with little success. Each time they pressed too hard Eldskeep interjected on his behalf.

"We just got in a little scuffle, that's all. Swords were raised, a few minor wounds inflicted. Now it's sensible for us to get out of the place, just - *just* in case anyone does kick up a fuss. They won't, but it's possible. So we might as well take the precaution. Just in case."

"Were you hurt?" quizzed Goola, looking down at Julen with concern, for what was now the third or fourth time of asking. "*I was fine,*" returned Julen, the emphasis firmly on himself.

"Yes," insisted Eldskeep again, "We certainly got the better of them. It's the last time any cutpurse will attempt to rob us in that part of the world. Make no doubt about it."

"So, if they were just cutpurses, why are we now heading to Fools' Harbour?" queried Box, still not quite buying the entire story that Eldskeep was telling.

"To keep our heads down. Maiden's Tower is a busy place. A very busy place, and the traffic between there and Patina is endless. Ships criss-cross daily, so someone might spot us. Best to take the scenic route. Fools' Harbour is nice and quiet. We can make our way there, then travel down to Maiden's Tower - at our own pace. By which time all this will have blown over."

"But if they were cutpurses, why are we the ones hiding??"

"Well," pondered Eldskeep, "These thieves operate in gangs, so they might have accomplices - that might be looking for revenge, and I'd rather avoid a 'round two' if you don't mind. Plus, even if the law did get involved, there's no guarantee of justice. We are strangers, remember, so it would just be their word against ours. Nothing more. No, much better to just keep our heads down."

"Did you see the masked woman?" cut in Julen, in a jaded tone, looking up briefly at Eldskeep, before returning to his previous detached position, staring down at the cabin floor.

"*A masked woman? It might have been Liofia.*"

The moment Goola made this remark she felt a little as if she shouldn't have. The current situation seeming so much more serious than when they were chasing glimpses of

princesses. Still, even in this concerned moment the day's earlier fascination petered through.

"Does Princess Liofia have a tail?" replied Eldskeep, quickly dashing the thought.

"I did indeed catch a glimpse of her," he then continued, "And she was definitely a half-tail. Probably a gypsy half-tail, wandering the streets and selling her wares. Or a common streetwalker - that would explain the clothing."

"She didn't have a tail," insisted Julen, looking up for another brief moment, "If she did it was well hidden. The cloak she wore fell all the way to the ground."

Just as Julen said this the captain returned to the cabin, soaked from head to toe. He noticed, with little care, that the conversation had frozen the second he'd entered.

"Don't mind me, I don't care what you've been up to, or why you're travelling, or where you're going. As long as I'm paid - and you don't cause me too much trouble." He then brushed some of the water from his jacket, inadvertently spraying the whole cabin. "It'll be an even longer voyage though if you all freeze up and stop talking each time I walk in. With these storms you'll be stuck below deck for most of the journey, so you better get used to it."

He then looked over at Julen, taking in the sorry picture. "What's the matter with the young man?" he grilled, with deliberate loudness, making sure Julen heard, "Let me guess, a woman? Has he had to leave someone behind? ..She hasn't run off with somebody else has she?" He laughed out loud to himself as he said all this, though no one else did. "Don't worry," he then added, with a rare show of warmth, "We've all been there. Plenty of nice girls in the Maiden Lands though. That might cheer you up."

Julen didn't acknowledge the words, and remained in his mire.

"He's had a long journey, he'll be back to normal tomorrow," quipped Eldskeep, filling the void. He then gave Julen a light, playful jab to the stomach with his hand, as if to jolt him back into life. Forgetting that Julen was still quite bruised and beaten from the fracas. The gentle jab reminded Julen how painful it still was where he'd been kicked. The pain made him wince, but it also made him feel a little less guilty about the revenge he'd inflicted on the stranger who'd kicked him. *"He deserved it. He attacked me,"* he thought to himself, *"And from behind too. What else was I supposed to do? Just allow him to kill me?"*

Still the image haunted his mind, and the endless replaying of it - along with the emotion it inspired - drained him further. He then, in this already delirious state, fell into an irresistible sleep, just as another large wave hit the ship. The churn of the cabin barely registered in his senses, and simply rocked him further towards nod. The captain rushed back above deck. Eager to clear their own thoughts, Box and Goola tepidly followed him. The fresh air, even amidst the howling turbulence, refreshing in contrast to the claustrophobic air below.

Eldsheep, not so inclined, and now almost as worn out as Julen, removed his heavy leather boots, and dropped down onto one of the bunks.

Julen was in a deep, restless sleep.

Chapter Twenty

Prince Aralak entered the darkened room, a blindfold around his face, dressed in a long cascading ceremonial robe. The robe was elaborately designed with a huge array of colours, primarily pinks and greens and blues - not that he could see it now - and it was trimmed and adorned with gold thread; stitched to create the impression of birds, tigers and other animals. The blindfold was likewise exotic in design, covering not just his eyes, but the rest of his head. Flowing down the sides of his face, the cloth then tapering down onto his chest, like braids of hair. With just his mouth uncovered.

He felt ridiculous dressed up in such a manner, and as with everything else in life, he struggled to take it with the seriousness it merited. The smirk on his face dimly visible to those around him watching on.

As he walked down the long corridor, guided by his father - who grasped him firmly by the shoulder - he could feel the increasing warmth of a large fire out in front. As he gradually and solemnly marched closer he could feel this fire beginning to warm the elaborate robe, and heat the skin around his smirking lips.

Just as it was beginning to burn he was stopped. His father then rolled up the sleeve on his left arm, and asked him to put his hand forward.

He stretched his arm out and it entered the flame. Not being able to withstand the heat, he instinctively withdrew it. His tempestuous nature responding with an anger that he'd been pressed into doing such a thing. Before he could lash out or express this he heard a booming ceremonial voice though:

"The world is surrounded by a ring of fire ..through which no man can pass.

BUT, there is a way. For beyond the earth, there is a fire, and beyond the fire, there is an earth."

At this point the people in this dark cavernous chamber chanted back:

"A serbhendh dhembhdhed Shhe, tu dhrae þe abhle, vrom þe dhre."

The loud tone and reverberation of this chanting disorientated Prince Aralak for a moment, and he began to feel an apprehension in his stomach. Still, in the fortitude of his mind he downplayed it as nothing but dramatics. He steadied himself, but then his feelings of unease were heightened once again, as he suddenly felt a large cold blade press upon his throat, beneath his chin.

"Do you wish to know the secrets of this world, stranger? The toll is secrecy, if you choose to do so."

By this point the heat of the fire was beginning to warm the blade of the sword, and his brow sweated beneath the material of the blindfold. He was asked the question again; the loudness, pitch and timbre identical to the previous asking.

"Do you wish to know the secrets of this world, stranger? The toll is secrecy, if you choose to do so."

"Yes," he answered in a croaking voice. Then, clearing his throat, and slightly embarrassed that he'd shown visible weakness, he answered more firmly - "Yes".

"If you fail to keep the secret, the price is death. Even princes die. Even kings."

At this point the assembled members chanted once more:

*"Whe sunles rives weebh
Dee waavs indhu þe deebh
Shhe sleebhs a dhyaamd sleebh
Awaagh hee nodh"*

"Just as I have become the snake. So must I die like the snake. The head taken clean off."

"Repeat."

The silliness of this last phrase dampened the seriousness once again for Prince Aralak, and in his mind he grinned a sigh of relief. Losing track of the exact wording of the phrase as he pondered its absurdity.

"Repeat."

"What am I repeating again?" he exhorted, with a renewed self-confidence.

"Just as I have become the snake. So must I die like the snake. The head taken clean off."

Hiding his mild amusement he murmured back the mantra.

*"Just as I have become the snake.
So must I die like the snake.
The head taken clean off."*

With this those assembled in the chamber began to chant over and over again. *"Serbhendh, Ervh, Vhrudh, Vhaeya; Serbhendh, Ervh, Vhrudh, Vhaeya"*. Banging the butts of their ceremonial staffs on the ground as they did it to amplify the racket. As this took place the master of ceremonies removed Prince Aralak's blindfold. As he dimly looked around he was confronted by a bizarre sight. All the people in the chamber were dressed in costume, with heads like that of dogs, birds, dragons and various other creatures. He knew they were just sacramental guises, but in the murkiness of the room, and with his eyes struggling to readjust after having had the mask on for so long, it was an unsettling sight. The fire, still roasting out in front of him, like a huge orange haze. A Sun-like blur. Blazing from a large, oil-filled dish, not unlike a genie's lamp, or an ornate golden platter. As the chanting

continued this fiery platter was lifted above head height by six of the animal-headed men, three on each side. Aralak was then enjoined to walk beneath this lofty flame.

"Enter the underworld."

He then stepped beneath the oily fire, the light reflecting from the dim ceiling, casting strange shadows around the chamber. As his bare feet negotiated the cold stone ground he felt a step downwards, which momentarily caused him to lose his balance. Checking this misstep he quickly understood it to be a stairwell, which he then began to descend. It took him to a narrower, and even darker passage. The flickering light now a backdropped veil behind him. His eyes once again struggling to pierce the blackness. He was then pushed through a heavy wooden door; that closed firmly behind him.

In the room he now found himself in was the King of Tunid, sat at a desk in rather plain attire. Alongside whom was Drua Maleeva, the woman in black, who stood quite formally to his side.

Prince Aralak was then asked to take a seat..

Chapter Twenty-One

Prince Aralak took a seat. The room was much better lit than the chamber he'd just left. There were no windows in the room, but the oil lamps dotted about, coupled with the whitewashed walls created a near similitude of daylight. As his eyes continued to adjust he looked around. It was sparse and basic. With the exception of a large mural on the wall behind the seated king, showing a highly stylised winged-serpent, eating what looked like a large egg or stone. As he finally began to make out the features of the King of Tunid and Drua Maleeva he relaxed a bit more. Returning fully to his natural, unserious state. It was all just pageantry and ceremony to him. Like a child in a school assembly, he viewed it simply as something to be endured. A pointless exercise, formally required of him. He could discern no deeper meaning in any of it, and he now felt a little regretful that he'd allowed himself to feel the momentary fear he'd felt just a few moments earlier.

"Do you think you're ready?"

"Yes," nodded Prince Aralak. He then looked over at Maleeva, in the hope that her face would give him a hint of what precisely he was saying yes to.

"This is serious, perhaps the most serious things you'll ever gain knowledge of," intoned the King of Tunid, wasting no time in getting to the issue, "I really can't stress this enough ..and the secret you are about to be made privy to can never - *never* - be told to anyone else. No one - and any revealing of it - *any at all* - will result in death. Immediate and indifferent death. There can be no escape from this, and no one - from any rank or seat of privilege - will be granted any reprieve or pardon. Are you still happy to accept?"

Once again Prince Aralak nodded a "Yes" in accordance.

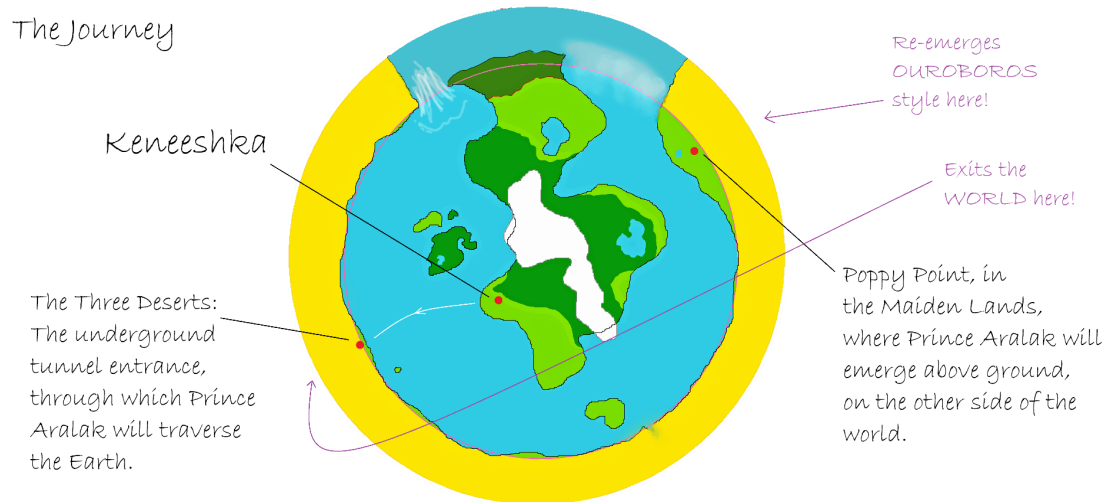
"The world is not quite the way you've been led to believe it is," continued the king, "There is a great secret that few have known. A grave one. The world, which is said to terminate, as you know, in impassable fire, far beyond the outer desert, in fact, has no end at all. There is a cyclic nature to our reality, Prince Aralak. Strange though this may sound. If you leave the desert by the east, you will return by the west. If you travel beyond the north you will re-enter from the south. It's true, the fire and heat are so fierce and intolerable that no man can pass the desert, but there are tunnels. Tunnelling beneath. Ancient tunnels. Tunnels that few know about, and that even fewer have permission to enter. That allow a man to leave from one side of this world, and by journey underground, return via the other."

For most people, such a huge and absurd revelation would inspire disbelief. Even outright mockery. Considered seriously it would be disturbing, and difficult to grasp. Yet, for the unthinking prince, absent of any philosophical concern, it was simply taken as a piece of practical information. That may be true, or may be false. His prosaic nature saving him the mental readjustment others had required, having gone through this bizarre initiation. Consequently, his first question was also simply a practical one, and an eminently sensible one given the circumstances.

"How do I know you're not just lying to me?"

He then looked again at Maleeva, once again in hope of some visible clue. Though yet again, she remained blank and perfunctory.

The king looked down at the stone floor as he answered. "That's a good question ..and you will soon find out for yourself. For you, like everyone else that has passed through the fire, will have to make a journey. It's important that you *know* this truth. That you don't just take it from me. You'll be making the same journey your father made when this knowledge was revealed to him, and his father before that. You will leave for the Upper Desert by ship. Then you will travel beneath the desert's edge. Resurfacing out at Poppy Point, in the Maiden Lands. Once you've seen this truth with your own eyes you'll then return back the way you came so as not to arouse suspicion. | Of course, all this is made trickier by the ongoing situation with the Western Isles, but it's important that we do this soon. Your father will not be around forever, and you need to be ready to step into his shoes."



(Prince Aralak's proposed journey)

The thought of travelling across the Western Sea during the ongoing conflict didn't exactly appeal to Prince Aralak. He much preferred directing events from the shoreline. Yet, with pride at stake he offered no objection, and feigned a mild enthusiasm for the venture. He still spoke with a passionless disinterest as they discussed this new reality he was confronted with, but having roundly accepted it by default, he found the secret nature of it appealing. His natural fondness for status making him feel slightly empowered that he now knew something most others did not. Still, in his mind it was just another physical possession - a precious stone, a lump of gold, a gilded sword. It wasn't an intellectual delight, or a question to ponder; he had no desire to explore it conceptually. He just desired to see it first hand to confirm his possession of it. Quickly reasoning in the process that these strange revelations

must indeed be true if he was permitted to inspect them for himself. It then also swiftly dawned on him that he could shortcut this confirmation even faster, by simply asking his father once he returned to the palace.

As he thought about all this he looked at the mural on the wall once more. He now recalled that he'd seen this winged serpent symbol several times before. Sometimes in simple motifs, but more often than not in elaborately looped serpentine patterns. Usually when he'd seen such an image it had nearly always been worn by kings and other high ranking officials. In fact, even his father's battle standard carried the image, along with the *imperial eagle* of the Kingdom of Caster. In this depiction, the eagle, with a single wing outstretched, was framed inside this looped serpent, which was, in turn, devouring its own tail. The serpent or dragon then having a single wing outstretched itself, in the opposite direction. Posing in counterbalance to that of the eagle, as if to make two wings.

Some of the insignia of the Northern and Eastern Kingdoms also carried similar depictions. As did the flag of the Harbour Lands. That one being a particularly striking case. The serpent, again eating its own tail, rising from a blue ocean. The created semi-circle then framing the bright yellow of a setting or rising Sun. As all these images flashed before his eyes his mind instantly returned to the battles at sea with the Western Isles, which in turn pressed an urge to bring those kingdoms to heel. Whether it was this new found knowledge, or simply the mild euphoria created by the unveiling ceremony, he now felt slightly god-like. Like he'd ascended one step higher towards the top of a mountain. His ego expanding slightly, to fill this widened boundary of perception. Coming with it a larger desire to imprint his will upon the world.

Maleeva knew him well enough to perceive the pride it had inspired. Indeed, she expected it. The King of Tunid wasn't quite as observant though. To him it was simply another small job out of the way. More to the point it killed two birds with one stone. Completing an initiation that was long overdue, but also, perhaps more importantly, providing an excuse to remove Prince Aralak from the western war front. Allowing him to get more suitable men pressing the charge.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Julen was in a deep and restless sleep. Finding himself drifting aimlessly through the streets of Patina he wanted to run, but couldn't. Instead he just wandered, ghost-like, through the side streets and alleyways that he'd walked just half a day or so before. The sea in the distance was black, and the sky was a black-blue. With the dark red blood on his sword visibly reflecting back the white icy moonlight. He could see the 'masked woman' in the distance. Staring down in judgement. Her eyes, much larger than before, like huge sapphires. He felt his hands burning, and could hear the waves of the ocean roaring and crashing - as if they were hitting against the very alley walls beside him.

Looking down he saw his assailant. Powder white and deathly. Motionless. The moonlit blood on his sword creating a beautiful contrast in comparison. Like a fresh red rose petal against a bleached white skull. He now froze, unable to move, nor speak. The sense of guilt and despair filling him with an inescapable hopelessness. He wanted the waves to consume him. Looking back at the masked woman again she now looked taller. Perhaps fifty or a hundred feet tall. As he tried to comprehend this seemingly strange trick of perspective he scrolled his eyes down her long hooded gown, from the top of her head, where strands of soft white hair were visible, to the very bottom. Where the folds of material fell weightily on top of one another.

As he reached the foot of the gown it kept on falling. Falling and falling. Flowing over the ground around her feet, then the entire rooftop of the tall building she was standing upon. Then further still, out over the accompanying streets and inns and houses. Blanketing everything. Spreading ever further. Like an endless sackcloth covering the entire town. As he looked back up the masked woman now looked a thousand feet tall. Like a giant lighthouse with two blue beaming eyes.

Julen felt a great malevolence fall. As if a great flood was submerging the entire world. Sparing nothing. As the exponentially growing robe of this female lighthouse came ever nearer and faster towards him he saw a single shooting star zip across the sky like an arrow. He clutched his blood-stained sword ever tighter. In his other hand he now had a bright green apple. All went black.

Chapter Twenty-Three

All of a sudden, breaking the peaceful air, there was a huge thwack of noise, as a statue that had stood for six, or perhaps seven hundred years was hit by cannon shot. At the same time shot ran through several ships and buildings. A small vessel, that had been captured as the raiding party had approached the island, was then set ablaze and sent careening into the harbour. Within what seemed like seconds the whole waterfront was engulfed in flames and dust.

A few moments later the bells of the Ethereal Tower rang out across the city. Rousing those not already riled to action by the chaos. Where Essen was standing on deck these bells were barely audible amidst the cannon blast, but their deep distinctive tone cut dimly through from the distance, adding to the cacophony. The tower itself, with its tall stained glass windows, rising high into the sky, glinting, barely visible on the skyline.

The city of Woodville was the one major settlement on the Island of Tunida, and as it came under siege from this surprise attack its importance - and vulnerability - dawned quickly and heavily on its inhabitants. There were a few other villages and minor coastal towns dotted about the island, but all were dwarfed by their beautiful and dominant capital. It being both the jewel and the key to the entire island. Consequently, there was no obvious place to flee to. In fact, the entire island was little suited to defence at all. The land being largely just flat and fertile plains, with little in the way of mountain retreats. A perfect place to live and prosper, but not especially primed for guerrilla warfare or resistance.

With the island tucked away so safely in the Southern Ocean, and the Tunidans so ensconced in their strategic dominance, such thoughts were of little concern anyway. At least in normal times. There wasn't even an ancestral memory of an invasion, let alone a living memory. So the shock of the attack, and the breath-taking violence of the cannon fire used, was bewildering. As the panic and confusion spread, a few women and children were ushered off by their menfolk to inland farming settlements, or other more out-of-the-way locations. However, most Tunidans simply hid themselves away behind the walls and towers. Bravely peering out occasionally to witness the strange destruction. Trying to gather some context for what was now happening.

Essen had anticipated this, and he'd wagered that if they could just stun and capture the magnificent city they would, by extension, control the rest. Now seeing the city with his own true eyes though, the plan seemed a tad ambitious - even amidst the destruction he was wreaking. The idea that they could hold such a place with so few men feeling woefully naïve. With little time to think he pressed on with the onslaught however. The tall ships in the harbour a smoking wreck, he began to focus his fire on the city itself. Pulverising the city's sea front and meagre defences.

By this time the city guards and soldiery were standing flush, ready to defend the seaport. Yet, like the scrambling civilians, they too were stunned and clueless as to how to respond. Their weapons useless against the blast raining down upon them. Some arrayed themselves

courageously around the now smoking harbour front, aiming their crossbows inconsequentially at the distant ships. Acalee had been mindful of arrow shot, and had drilled it into both Essen and the rest of the crews to make sure that no easy windows were offered. Yet, even so, such talk was pointless in hindsight, given their huge advantage in reach. The arrows and their marksmen being barely noticeable, let alone felt. The Brynnfirdian ships entirely imperious in the battle, if it could even be called as such.

As the firing raged the heat and smoke combed back through the city, the scent of blood and burning timbers infesting the nostrils. Prince Reach stood in the palace, conversing frantically with his advisers, desperate to descry a course of action. As he hurriedly walked down the steps to the palatial gardens he headed to the aviary. He then took one of his prized Tunida Birds and attached a tiny, furled-up message to the leg. Cupping the bird in both hands, he then stepped out of the loft to release it into the air. It soared into the sky, circled once, then flew south at high speed. As he watched it vanish into the blue he then turned to the young boy beside him. He assigned his four most trusted guards to the boy, and told them to head for Om Bay - a tiny coastal village on the east of the island. As they unhesitatingly followed his orders he then marched with his remaining guards and advisers back to the palace. His brow furrowed with worry, as he watched over the distant scenes.

Prince Reach, the Prince of Tunid, was the youngest brother of the king, and in his absence it had fallen on him to defend the island. As he paced back and forth he gave the order that all men should retreat to a safe distance from the water's front. A sensible decision, but one which he now realised he should have made much earlier. It was a painful surrender of the city's edge to destruction, but there was little choice. It would now fall upon his enemy to decide their next move.

Essen and Acalee pondered this question as they looked out at the smoking city. Taking it would almost be impossible. Even with muskets they would struggle to contend with the sheer numbers, and they'd be open to arrow shot the moment they stepped on land. So they too were now suddenly burdened with a degree of apprehension. Just as the inhabitants of Woodville had been awestruck by the cannon fire, so too were they in awe at the scale of the city. There was also the slight pang of guilt that they'd laid siege to something of such beauty, though this minor pang remained firmly below the surface. As they both pondered what path to take they admired these aesthetic buildings through the black smoke. Though the name Woodville implied a settlement made of wood it wasn't a very apt one, with every building, even the dainty little houses, standing upright in solid white stone. The city walls and towers stretching off into the distance, ascending higher towards the city's plateau, which was home to the ionic columns of the king's palace, where Prince Reach now fretted with worry. Branching out were other buildings, of similar impression, including a large arching amphitheatre for sports and performances. All of this interspersed with tall trees and other vegetation. The only wood now visible. The unfitting name harking back to a much earlier time, when the first wooden precursors to these mighty buildings stood hoary and rough-hewn, as the cradle of an emergent civilisation.

Such a commanding vision was an unfamiliar sight to the Brynnyfirdian crewmen. None of whom had seen a depiction of Tunida before, let alone the living embodiment. Few had even stepped foot upon the mainland of the Three Kingdoms. In comparison to the settlements on the Western Isles, and the rather more pedestrian port cities on the western edge of the mainland, this was something different. Even if it was viewed through the eyes of those who'd come in the guise of pirates. As the novel vision settled on their minds the thought of a land excursion moved firmly to the backburner.

"We need to maximise our sea advantage," noted Essen.

They then made sure every ship in the harbour, from the largest to the very smallest was completely fired, then headed further east along the coast. Looking for more places to set to ruin. Hoping to completely obliterate the entire seagoing capacity of the Tunidans. Likewise, the thought of finding a less well-defended spot to attack, where they could land to take on food, fresh water and other spoils also held appeal.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The young boy that Prince Reach had ordered to Om Bay was standing on the shoreline, as the men that accompanied him readied a small boat. They'd arrived at quite a heady pace, but neither the boy, nor the men felt any need to pause for rest. A slight sense of adrenalin and urgency still rushing through them. As the boy stood impatiently, watching on, the word came. He headed down the small jetty and apprehensively stepped out onto the boat. Gauging the unsteadiness on the waves he felt a touch of panic as he placed his first foot down. The most senior of the four guards, Coulema Galina, head of the King's Household Guard - grabbed him firmly by the arm and helped him aboard. As they unmoored the little boat and pushed off they felt a few spots of rain spattering down. The boy was quickly ushered below deck and out of sight. Galina remaining up on deck, along with the ship's pilot.

As he looked around at the slightly greying horizon he wondered what state the city he'd just left would now be in. *Was it still being bombarded? Had a full scale invasion taken place? Were similar attacks besieging places in the mainland kingdoms too?* With so little information, and no way of knowing, he quickly put the thoughts away and refocused on the task at hand.

Out across the sea Essen also felt the few spots of rain hit his face. As he stood out on deck, his sea-going instincts told him just one thing: a storm was coming. They'd spent the previous hours hugging the coastline, harassing inhabitants and vessels. Even small fishing boats went unspared. Landing briefly once, terrifying the locals of a tiny finishing village, as they torched their petty sails. Now there was a possible storm brewing Essen wondered if it would be wise to find another inlet, where they could shelter and take stock until it passed.

The timing could not have been worse for Coulema Galina. As the four Brynnyfirdian ships came steadily lulling down through the water the first one distantly blurred into view. Looking out through the drizzle Galina could see the faded, but daunting image of the *Dew Elizabeth*. He hoped it would be a vessel from Eldbee, or perhaps one of the king's ships returning from the mainland. Yet, his gut feeling told him otherwise. An instinct amplified by the fact that the seas to the east of Tunida were normally some of the most empty. With nowhere for larger trading ships to be sailing to, making any large ship a rare presence indeed.

Fearing the worst he picked up the pilot's small telescope to get a better look. He then spotted a second, and what was perhaps a third ship. With the weather turning for the worse there was now a very pressing decision to make. Should they keep heading out as was their intention, and hope they'd go unnoticed? Or, should they turn around while they still had the chance? Ending their flight, at least for the present time. It was a shaky decision.

After calling the other men up to the deck there was a brief discussion. As they passed around the glass to look for themselves they all quickly came to the conclusion that these were indeed enemy ships - if not the exact same ones that had attacked Woodville. They

pulled the boat around and began a retreat to the shoreline. With the rain now falling heavier the boat began to bob on the water as they tried to pick up the speed. The young boy came out on deck, curious to see what all the raised voices were for.

"We're heading back to land for a while ..we'll try to make the trip again next morning."

The boy didn't ask any questions and simply returned below deck.

With the storm picking up further out to sea too, Essen and Acalee had little choice but to find anchor. Signalling to the other three ships they then began to head towards the gentle curve of Om Bay. Seeking refuge. As their pace was much the greater than Galina's small boat, they soon began to eat away at the distance in between. Still, at this point, they were wholly unaware of its presence. As the little vessel rocked onwards the dismal weather at least offered a paintbrush of camouflage. Helping to distract the crews of the tailing ships, who by now were focused solely on the increasing wind and rain.

As the tempest gathered apace the winds rattled through the bowels of the ships, and the rain lashed down upon the decks. The quickness with which the weather can turn is a thing familiar to all experienced shipmen, but even so, as the storm took hold an unsettling doubt crept in. That this may be the one that at last spells the end. It was a feeling foreign to Essen. He enjoyed the storms, and as he called out orders to his men he felt in his element. As the first thunder bolt cut through the cloudy churn of sky he remembered a phrase Colm would always use: "Godlike men love lightning; godless men love it not." The idea that a man of destiny would not fear the hand of Providence. That they exist with and within the worldly elements.

As the *Arbowlan* swirled on the spill he held tight, and strained his eyes into the distance to try to glimpse the other three ships that were further in front. The *Dracette* was the closest to the bay. Small and nippy, it eased its way through the wet and mist. It was captained jointly by two brothers - Meamya and Eartaria - who revelled in the storm almost as much as Essen did. The eldest, Meamya, was the captain in name, though the two were so joined at the hip that any distinction was seldom necessary. As their nippy bark rolled along, Eartaria snatched the scope from his brother's hand to see what he was looking at. Not too far away, and clearly visible, was Galina's small boat, rocking in hope towards the drizzled shoreline.

"It'll just be fisherman," noted Meamya, as he relinquished the glass, though by now, as they gained ever closer, it was barely needed.

As Eartaria put his eye to the lens there was a sudden flash, followed an impulse later by a loud rush of thunder and waves. The boat swayed heavily to the side. As Eartaria recomposed himself and repositioned the glass he could see that the small boat had pitched over - the bottom of the boat upturned, as it snaked, lost in the swells.

"They're gone," acknowledged Eartaria laconically.

"Maybe," laughed Meamya, "They're not far from the shore though, so they could be okay ..if they're good swimmers."

At this point, not wanting to get too close to the shoreline themselves they held their position and dropped anchor. As suddenly as the storm had begun it began to subside. The wind easing to a brisk, but manageable breeze. The heavy downpour almost stopping entirely. Through a gap in the black-grey clouds, the evening sunlight then cast itself down.

Chapter Twenty-Five

As calm returned to the bay and each crew got their respective ships in order speculation quickly turned to the upturned boat that had been spotted. Eartaria in particular wanted to go ashore to see if there were any survivors, so it was agreed they would drop a small boat over the side, and that he, along with five or six other men would head to the beach. As they began to row off they looked out across the stretch of cove. There were a few small homes not far from the shoreline, and about a mile or so down the coast another equally small little settlement visible.

Indeed, several people had survived the upturning. The young boy, most fortunately, had been carried ashore by the ship's pilot. Likewise, Coulema Galina, and another one of his guardsmen had somehow found their way to dry land. The other two guardsmen, alas, still missing. Presumably submerged.

After clambering ashore alone Galina had made his way to one of the homes near the bay, where a small fishing family had offered help. Distraught that he'd lost the young boy he was sworn to protect, and fearing the worst, he nevertheless felt the desperate need to return to the scene. The bearded father of the household, along with his ruddy-faced son, offered to search in his stead, while he regained his lungs, but refusing, the three of them headed out together to comb the bay. Meanwhile, further down the seafront, the boy, the other guardsman, and the ship's pilot were all recovering their own breath. Grateful that they'd somehow survived the capsizing, yet also somewhat anxious about the large foreign ships they could now see looming on the charcoal blue sea.

What was too small to see was Eartaria, in his own boat, rowing towards the pebbled beach. Aiming, as they were, in the direction of the few homesteads. As he closed in he quickly espied the three wreck-survivors trudging along the beach. He clutched his musket and signalled to the others. Had Acalee or Essen known he'd taken such weaponry ashore they would not have sanctioned it, but Eartaria was rather more lax in his thinking, and such was the advantage the weaponry gave him he felt little need to worry about.

As they rowed on they were afforded an increasingly good view of their quarry. Even soaked and bedraggled, the clothing they could see was rather a cut above what one would normally expect. Especially the young boy's and the guardsman's, who were clearly of a higher status. As Eartaria's boat ran upon the beach he stepped out into the cold water, still clutching his musket. His men following his lead. Creeping briskly he began to follow the survivors. The pursuing footsteps were quiet on the wet sand, but on the open seafront there was little place to hide as they gained in closer. Then, the ship's pilot glanced back. He spotted the figures in the distance. After a tiny pause of apprehension, he, the young boy and the guardsman began running. The guardsman dragging the young boy as he did so. Eartaria's wet steps turning into a sprint as he immediately gave chase.

The lay of the land left the three with little place to run. The stony beach ahead gradually narrowed, and the bank of earth leading up to higher ground was steep and brushy. Finally,

they opted to ascend the tricky slope, but it was no use. Already exhausted from their travails they lacked the guile to make the climb, especially so the young boy, who kept dropping behind the other two. Realising the writing was on the wall they slipped their way back down and turned to face their pursuers.

"Why are you running?" asked Eartaria, with a clear smirk.

"Because you were chasing us," came the quick reply from the ship's pilot.

"We only chased because you started running. Where are you going?"

"We're going nowhere," responded the guard, ".. We're just off home."

"You've been somewhere, we saw your ship overturn ..where've you come from? There's no land for miles around. Or have you come from the capital perhaps?"

"We're just fishermen," intoned the guardsman.

At this point Eartaria and the other men burst out laughing.

"You're not fishermen. Fishermen don't dress like this. You're clearly doing something more interesting than fishing ..and who is the boy?"

"He's no one."

"He's clearly someone ..we'll have to take him with us."

At this point the guardsman pulled his sword from its sheath. Eartaria lifted his musket and bluntly shot the guard in the neck. The noise reverberated around the bay. The guard instantly dropped dead to the ground. The crude blast of the musket shot leaving a bloody and disfigured mess.

After the slight period of shock the ship's pilot raised his hands in compliance. He and the boy were then quickly shepherded in the direction of the rowboat. The boy walked on in silence, not making a gesture. As the captives were pushed on Coulema Galina and his two companions came down onto the beach from the opposing end. Alerted by the noise. Seeing the young boy Galina ran swiftly down to meet the group, his relief to find the boy alive instantly cut short by the circumstance.

"Don't make me do to you what I've just done to your friend," cut Eartaria. He then ushered the young boy onto the boat. The musket firmly to his back.

"Surely you can leave the boy," pleaded Coulema, "..he's just the ship's lad. I'm a member of the King's Guard. I'm much more valuable. Take me."

"We'll take you both ..drop the sword."

With that Coulema Galina then pulled his sword from its sheath and cast it to the beach. He then took his place on the small, now tightly packed rowboat, alongside the young boy and the pilot. The bearded father and his red-faced son watching on with concern, but self-interested relief. Wondering what exactly they were witnessing. With an equally watchful eye Eartaria sat at the head of the boat, aimlessly waving his musket about, as his crew rowed his new found cargo back to the *Dracette*.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The newly found captives were moved from the *Dracette* to the *Arbowlan*. On discovering that Eartaria had shot and killed one of the hostages, Acalee was not too impressed. Contrarily, Essen was less concerned.

"We're at war. How many people do you think we killed when we attacked the city? Besides, like Eartaria said, the guy pulled out a sword. He made the first move. It's unfortunate, but it's just the nature of war."

Acalee understood the argument, but being familiar with Eartaria, and his often callous attitude, he remained sceptical of the necessity. Still, with the ship now sailing towards the southern tip of Tunida, he found himself more concerned with the mystery of where the small boat had come from. It was clear that the three prisoners were not simply fishermen. Thus far they'd remained silent however, and hadn't revealed a great deal of information. Especially so the young boy, who hadn't spoken a single word since he'd stepped onto the ship.

"Where were you travelling from? There's no land to the east," Acalee interrogated, thinking out loud as he did so. "Perhaps you were travelling from the capital ..but then, why not go overland? Likewise, if you were heading from other parts of the island it makes little sense that you'd be so far out to sea. Unless you were leaving, but then turned back because of the storm." He paused for a moment before continuing, not for dramatic effect, but purely fixated on his own chain of thought, "..But even then, where would you be going?? It's a little odd."

"We were heading back to the capital," asserted Coulema Galina, sensing Acalee had reached the end of his thoughts, "We took the short boat ride out just to take us quickly up the coast, so that we could then travel on horse from the bay - where you picked us up. We weren't even that far out really, though the storm did catch us off guard. That's it. We've been stationed in the south of the island and now we're heading back. Or at least we were supposed to be."

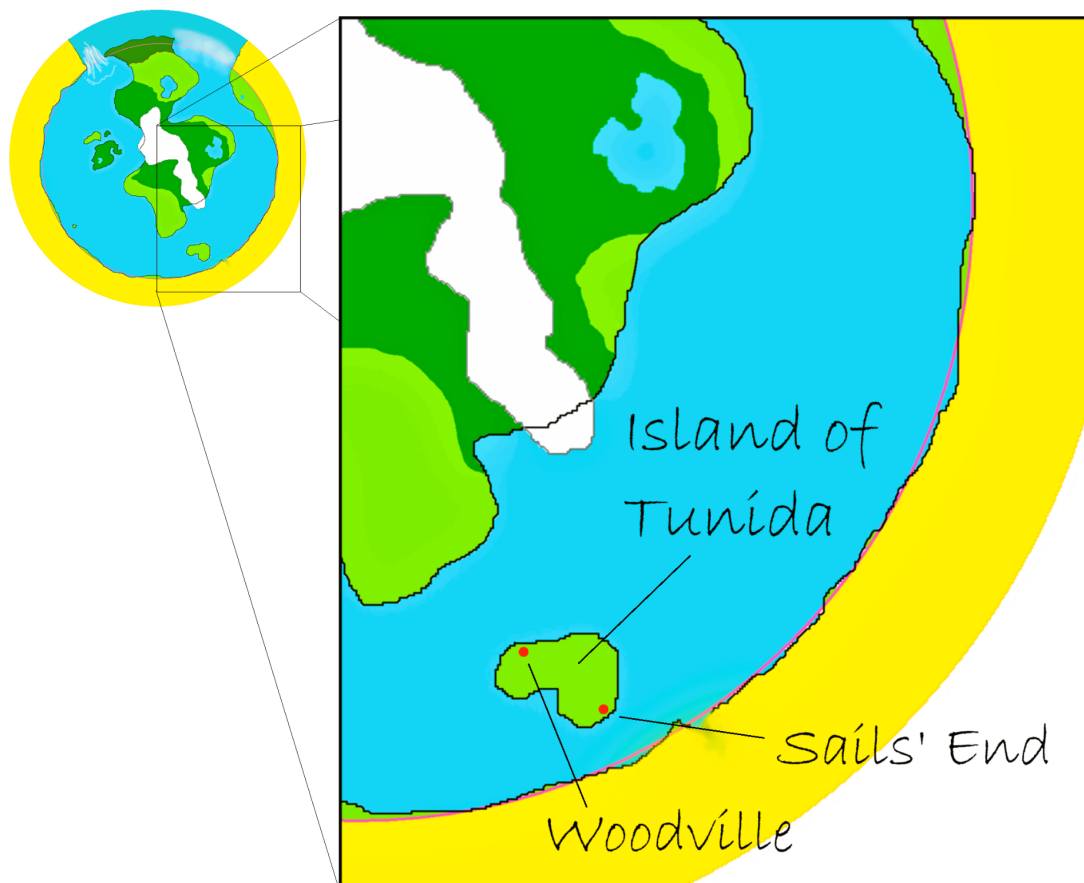
"And what about the boy?" cross-examined Acalee, the reasonableness of the response annoying him a little, "If you were just heading back to the capital, why did you lie and say you were fishermen?"

This last point lessened his annoyance somewhat; the quickness with which his brain had asked it reasserting his sense of self-confidence.

"The boy is just a boy. He was heading to the capital to begin his training. To be a guard some day, like me. As for why my fellow guardsman said we were fishermen I have no idea ..perhaps he didn't want to get shot."

As this sentence was finished the conversation was noisily interrupted. Out on the sea-edge another settlement was coming into view.

"Don't worry, no one else will be getting shot," expressed Acalee, as he left the cabin in response to the commotion, "Though I do think you're guarding the boy, and it would be sensible if you started being honest."



(Sails' End, on the Island of Tunida)

The settlement rising up from the sea was Sails' End. A peaceful harbour town, on the south-eastern edge of the island. Aesthetically it near-matched the capital Woodville, only on a tinier scale. Standing in the harbour there was one ornate, but very sea-worthy tall ship, along with numerous other smaller boats of varying style and design. As with Woodville, there were limited fortifications. As was to be expected, given it was one of the most southerly places in all the world kingdoms. And again, as the Brynnfyrdian ships sailed into view, as at Woodville, it was the first time the inhabitants had ever seen hostile ships in their waters.

The buildings these townsfolk lived in weren't quite as grandiose as those found in the capital, but they were generally stone built, and here were painted in bright keen colours.

With the exception being the few buildings where the marble was left naked, revealing the fractured, branching grains. The most impressive structure, and the one that immediately struck Acalee and the rest of the crew was the lighthouse. The bottom of its tower was spread out broadly like a woman's skirt. A billowing, almost-pyramidal shape; tapering, waist-like, up towards its higher parts. Where, at the top, it spread out again, to form a gentle plateau. From here a silver-coloured funnel or pipe extended metres into the air, which then spread out into a broad dish. The circumference about twice the width of the tower itself. At night the oil in this dish would be lit, creating a brilliant luminous flame. Though in the bright daylight the Brynnfyrdian strangers could only guess at its function and purpose.

The lighthouse tower itself was painted a soft, but vivid green colour, which offset the orchards and meadows that framed the entire town. Such picturesque beauty made the crewmen lament having to fire yet more ships, but Essen gave the order and they eagerly followed. With little sentiment. They did however refrain from striking the town itself though this time. So, as the harbour erupted in ruinous fire, and a panic engulfed the town, Essen gave the signal to simply pass on by. The four ships carelessly heading westward, in search of more things to wreck - to complete their circular pillage of the entire island.

Then something unexpected happened. As they began to roll on, the wind catching their sails in the now glorious sunshine, they spotted a strange sight in the far-off distance. Heading towards the harbour, from almost the same direction that they themselves had arrived from. It was six large ships, gliding across the peaceful blue; easy on the waves. The Brynnfyrdian crewmen took a moment to register the discordant sight. The appearance almost mirage-like at first.

Where have these ships come from? Have Tunidan vessels been out making manoeuvres in the eastern ocean? Were they ships from somewhere else entirely?

After a moment's pause Essen was the first to react:

"We need to engage them!"

The Brynnfyrdian ships then hightailed around, and quickly circled, as they once again readied their cannon. Slowly forming a loose battle line as they headed onward in the direction of the freshly spotted foe. Now they had a closer view they could see that the ships they were engaging were particularly large. With each as large, if not larger, than the *Arbowlan* itself. As they edged further they could see that on the decks of some of these ships were countless men. Armed and well equipped. As if reinforcements had arrived to bolster the little harbour town's defences. As the *Arbowlan*, leading the line, finally came side on with the first ship it fired off a volley of cannon. The opponent, not designed or prepared to deal with such an attack, found itself almost instantly obliterated. With smoke and dust clouding the air, those not flung into sea leapt overboard in an attempt to escape the sinking flames. This sorry ship quickly despatched, the *Arbowlan* then, with purpose, moved along

in readiness to engage the next. Followed in tow by, first, the *Dracette*, then the *Sleight*. With the doughty *Dew Elizabeth* pulling up the rear of the aggressive armada.

The second enemy ship suffered precisely the same fate as the first. Unable to cope with the brutal force of the cannon blast, it was instantly splintered to ruin. The smell of blood now caught on the air, and the preponderance of smoke began to lessen the visibility of those on both sides of the divide. With this, there finally came a response. One of the large, presumably Tunidan ships, showing some initiative, arched towards the battle line and rammed its prow into the *Dracette*, cracking its hull, and pushing it off course. The *Sleight* and the *Dew Elizabeth* were likewise forced to break the line, and headed out from the melee to circle back around for another attack. With the *Dracette* engaged, hoards of soldiers rushed across to board. Eartaria, with sword in hand, headed down onto the main deck.

The *Arbowlan* continued its pursuit. This time catching two more ships with a cascade of fire. Damaging both, but without quite delivering the fatal blow it had the previous two. It then pirouetted, to fall in behind the *Dew Elizabeth* and the *Sleight*. As the ship embowed, Essen looked across to the scenes on the *Dracette*. By now, most of the crew, outnumbered, had been forced overboard or put to the sword, with just a few battling on in desperate fight. Essen wanted to pull in alongside to help, but focusing on the wider task he resisted the urge. Certain as he watched on that the ship was now undoubtedly lost anyway. He then pressed on to aim another glance of cannon fire at the remaining rival ships. One of which, however, had sensibly avoided the dragon-like Brynnfirdians, and was now pushing on, full tilt, towards the Sails' End harbour. Hoping for safety.

The *Dew Elizabeth* clocked this motion and tacked off in pursuit.

As a loud blast rattled the ship that was still entangled with the *Dracette*, Meamya aimed his musket towards an oncoming soldier, hitting him fatally in the flush of the body. Turning to take aim at another, a heavy blade from somewhere unseen came down upon his shoulder. As he raised his arm to block a second sword blow with the shaft of his gun, yet another, this time from behind, pierced through his back. He dropped dead to the ground. Eartaria, fighting frantically in the chaos, looked across at his brother lying in a bloody pool on the deck. He cut through one last opponent with rage, then dropped his sword to the ground and dived overboard. His numerous opponents, although successful in winning the ship, equally at a loss as to their next move. Swamped as they were in smoke and blood. Sitting like ducks in the face of any further fire. With their own ship now redundant, most elected to take Eartaria's option, and threw themselves headlong into the deep.

With the ocean now swimming with men, both dead and living, the *Dew Elizabeth* followed in behind the one remaining ship. The escaping vessel making good ground towards the harbour, hoping to dock and at least save one shipment of soldiers from obliteration. As they raced on, a large crowd of inhabitants organised themselves on the harbour's edge. Ready to help their endangered compatriots. Hoping to somehow offer offence against the foreign assailants. The ship tapered its speed as it crossed in towards the haven. The *Dew Elizabeth* gaining with each moment. Then, out from nowhere, a huge arrow came whizzing from the

harbour's edge. Oil-soaked and ablaze. Driving spear-like from a huge wooden crossbow. Before the crew of the *Dew Elizabeth* could register the counterstroke it pierced the side of their vessel. As the flames ripped through the body they caught the black powder nestled in the hold. *Explosion!* Huge pieces of the ship flew hundreds of feet into the air. Fire engulfing the wooden shards of all that was left. The swampy all-consuming sea slowly taking with it the entire crew.

Eartaria heard the enormous blast from a distance as he struggled to swim to safety, but exhausted he didn't attempt to look round to witness the devastation. Powering through the water in his own desperation he eventually reached the *Sleight* and clambered aboard.

As Essen, Acalee and the rest of the remaining crewmen surveyed this strange carnage, set as it was against the beauty of the little harbour port, they decided it was time to head back to Brynnyfirdia.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Gelkin had had a typical lazy day. From where he was lying he could see the sea, a pristine blue. With the soft sky above him, dotted with the odd fluffy white cloud, sloping down to meet it in an aquatic blur at the horizon. As he pulled himself to his feet the small, macaque-like monkey that was now tagging along with him - dog-like - also sprung to life.

Thinking he might start work on the second shelter he was building, Gelkin headed into the interior of the island to find a suitable tree to cut down. Finding one he liked the look of he took out his rope saw; first to take off a few of the main branches, before cutting down the full tree itself. The little monkey, following his focus, playfully climbing the tree, up to the branches above his head. As he tried to shoo it down to sever the first branch a deer-like creature, with a blue streak of fur across its face, came wandering into an opening nearby. After a brief period of eye contact it then skipped back off into the leafy green undergrowth. Gelkin casually returned to cutting down the tree.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Princess Liofia stood naked, admiring herself in the full length mirror. Her nursemaid, Elgiva, who'd been at her side ever since she was a small child, and who was more like a mother than a nursemaid, stood by the door.

"You'll have to have it removed," she said, in a hectoring but sympathetic tone.

"But I like it, it's part of me," lamented Liofia, as she twisted her body to the left, to get a slightly different angle to admire.

"It can be completely painless, there are many ointments and medicines. It's easily done," continued Elgiva, pretending she hadn't heard Liofia's reply, "Plus, you'll have to have it removed before you marry Prince Aralak, that is a certainty."

"I won't be marrying Prince Aralak. That for certain won't be happening."

She then twisted her body around again to admire the other side.

"I'd rather leave and be with my people, in the woods," she then added, with a playful smirk.

"You have little choice in the matter. There are bigger things than you, I'm afraid. You have duties. And you've already stretched the patience of your father far enough."

"..But Aralak has a son."

"That's just a rumour."

"It's a true rumour."

"Most princes have sons, it's the legitimate ones that count."

"Funny how these rules we're all supposed to live by are so flexible when it becomes convenient."

Liofia rotated her body in the mirror once again.

"Well, that's the world we live in, and you can only play for time for so long. Soon you'll have zero choice in the matter *at all*. So best to just get on with things. Like a sticky bandage, rip it off."

"Clever," retorted Liofia, still fixated on her own reflection, bobbing her waist up and down.

Elgiva looked across at her with a cursory glance, "It should have been removed as a child, but your mother was far too soft."

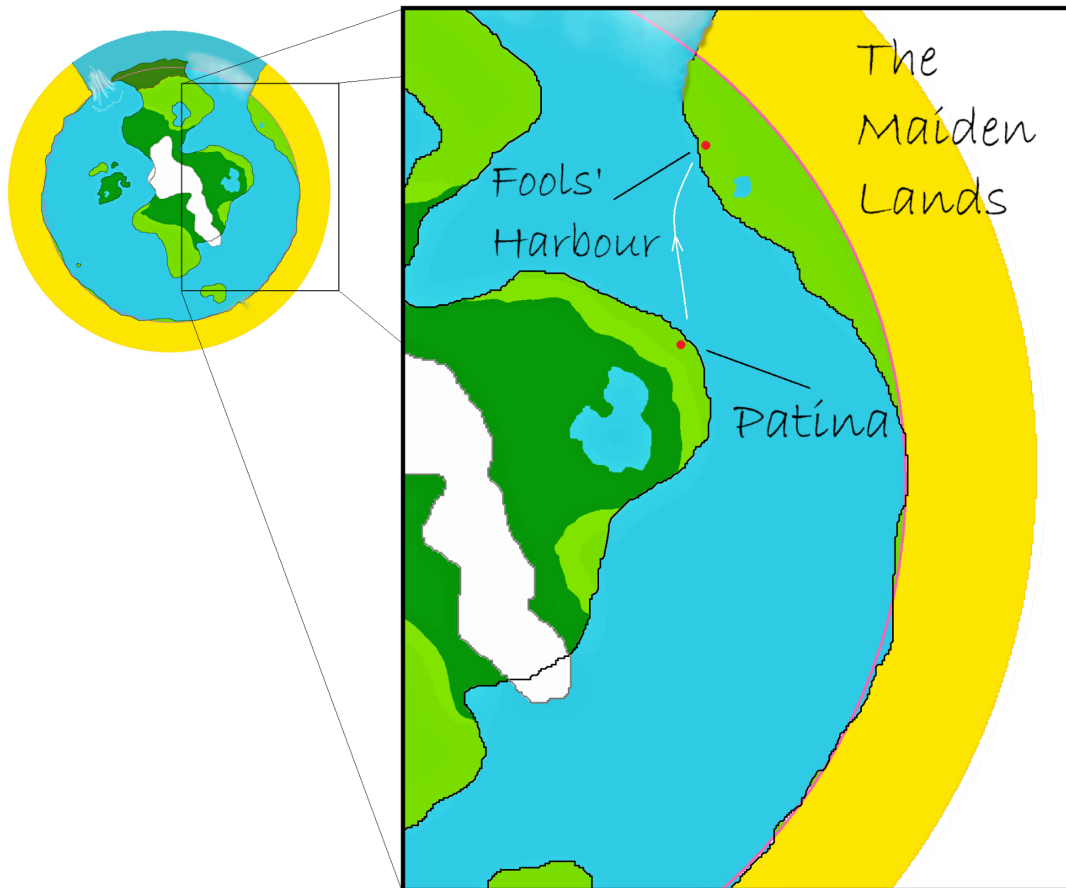
"If only she were alive now," sighed Liofia, shaking her head, in a mockingly-dramatic way.

"Well, your father will be arriving soon ..and with Prince Aralak, I believe. So you'll have to argue it out with him. And he won't be too happy."

Elgiva then threw a dress over towards Prince Liofia and told her to get ready, before heading out of the room. Shutting the heavy wooden door behind her. Liofia grimaced in the mirror as the door slammed, then quickly pulled on some clothes. Making little effort to neaten herself up. She untied her hair so it fell down loosely upon her shoulders, then followed and headed downstairs.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Julen, having slept and lounged around for most of the journey, was now much more like his usual self, and Box and Goola were relieved to see him back in his standard, idiotic mode - clattering about the place. So, as they pulled into Fools' Harbour they were struck by how quiet and beautiful it was in contrast to the renewed noisiness of Julen. The sight of peaceful, dry land giving things the slight air of a fresh start.



(From Patina to Fools' Harbour)

The harbour itself was smallish, and almost a perfect square in shape. On either side were long sandy beaches that quickly raised up into hilly little outcrops of beach grass. Beyond which were fields of more regular grasses and wildflowers. There were also numerous little shops, homes and inns dotted around the harbour, giving the impression of a small town, or a very large village. With the whole scene leading towards a gently sloping hill, a top of which was very small, and very old, church. Picturesque being the word. There could be no other.

As the sea captain tied the ship to one of the harbour posts, Box and Goola stepped out onto the wooden slats of the walkway, now feeling rather pleased that they'd made this little

detour on their journey. As Eldskeep followed, the weight of his large frame made his footsteps clack against the wood.

"Where next? ..food and drink, I think," he called out, answering his own question before anyone else had a chance to reply. Still, it was a sentiment shared by everyone.

His loud voice felt a little too much for the small community they'd arrived in, and as the five headed towards the nearest tavern they felt a million times more conspicuous than they did in Patina. Given that they were specifically trying to keep a low profile it instantly occurred to Goola that perhaps this wasn't the wisest way to go about things. Before she could share her concerns though a second thought entered her head. Perhaps if they tried too hard *not to be noticed* that may look even more suspicious, especially given how clumsy both Eldskeep and Julen were at concealing their intentions. So she kept her thoughts neatly to herself.

The bearded sea captain, who by now felt less of a stranger, planned to wait a few days to see if there were any other travellers in need of his services, then, failing that, simply make the choppy journey back to Patina. With hunger nagging him too though, he was happy to tag along for the time being. Luckily, it didn't take long before his desire was satiated, for as they stepped off the harbour boarding, and onto the stony cobbled ground of the street, their noses were quickly filled with the smell of fresh bread.

The cosy tavern they entered was run by an old married couple, and it was divided in two by little swinging wooden doors. On the one side the tavern itself, serving drinks to the few barflies and old sailors dotted about. On the other, a neat little bakery, that had a separate entrance out onto the harbour front, where it sold bread and cakes over the counter to the occasional old ladies popping in. As the three males perched themselves at the bar, Box and Goola made a beeline for the snug little table by the window. They also quickly eyed the treats beyond the partition.

The wife of the old couple, pleased to see such young faces, followed over, shouting to her husband as she did so. Ordering him to fetch some goodies. Completely oblivious to the fact that he was already busy serving Julen, Eldskeep and the old ship's captain. Or perhaps aware, but just expecting him to do everything at once anyway. As he finally arrived with an assortment of cakes and biscuits Julen had joined Box and Goola.

"Why's it called Fools' Harbour?" questioned Box, as he placed the array on the table.

"That's a long story."

The old man then walked back to the bar, poured his own drink, then pulled up a chair alongside them.

"It's said that, a long, long time ago, there was once a young duke." He half-whispered this, enjoying the opportunity to make himself raconteur. "From a very wealthy family, who lived

by the harbour. One summer, in his youth, a ship from the mainland arrived, bringing dignitaries and other important people. Amongst which was a young girl - the daughter of a rich merchant. She spent the whole summer in this little harbour town, playing and making friends with the local children, including the young duke. Smitten, he fell madly in love with her. However, as he fretted and wasted time umming and ahing as to whether to say something he missed his chance to speak, and one day, as the summer waned, she got back on the boat and sailed away back to the mainland."

He settled into his chair as he continued, taking a sip from his drinks to lubricate his words. Ever so briefly looking over his shoulder, just in case his wife had more chores with his name on them.

"Anyway, every summer it's said he would wait by the harbour, hoping she'd return. Hoping he'd get the chance to speak the things he never spoke. Yet, every summer, all he found was disappointment. Just waiting, lovesick, with an aching stomach. Still, he never let go of the hope. "Next summer," he'd think to himself, keeping her sweet image in his mind. Then, when he turned twenty-one, his father arranged a marriage for him with the daughter of a wealthy landowner, but he refused the offer and turned it down. No one could compare to the beautiful merchant's daughter. He was destined to be with her, or so he thought. He had to remain loyal. Then, finally, after twenty whole summers, miraculously, she returned to the harbour. On a ship from Patina - exactly where you've just come from. As she stepped from the boat and onto the harbour front, looking much the older and very different to how she once looked in youth, he nevertheless recognised her immediately.."

The old gentlemen then took a long pause and another drink for storytelling effect.

"And..!" insisted Box.

"And ..she never recognised him. She couldn't even remember him. Not his name, nor his face, nor the times they'd played together. Nothing at all. He'd never made any real impression on her whatsoever. He was just another child she'd briefly played for a few months one year when she was young. He meant nothing to her, ..and he'd wasted all that time waiting. All that longing and heartache. All that patience and aching stomach ..for nothing."

"Wow, what a sad story," sighed Goola, who'd been listening silently, "Is it really true??"

"I'm not sure," replied the old man, with a laugh, "It's certainly disenchanting enough to have the ring of truth to it, though." He then started laughing out loud more so, largely to himself. "It's befitting of this place too," he then added, with a droll smile, "The men play second fiddle here, that's for sure."

At this point his wife burst through the double doors, as if to punctuate his point, and ordered him to come through to help deal with another customer. He reactively leapt to his feet, leaving his drink half-drunk on the table. "In the Maiden Lands the men are little more

than fools, and little better than slaves. That's why we only ever have female rulers here," he remarked, as he headed towards the howled orders. The double doors still swinging on their hinges.

Though spoken in jest, the last line was a factual one. In the Maiden Lands the law was that only females were allowed to ascend to the throne. It had been this way since time immemorial, and it put the country in counterpoint to almost every other kingdom on the map. The current queen was the now ageing Queen Aglaia. Or, to give her her full name: Queen Aglaia Fetterina Fiorina Maquella. Who'd ruled the country, largely peacefully, for the last forty odd years.

"Don't listen to him," piped up the sea captain in counterpoint, "They know exactly what they're doing. There are many benefits to having a female ruler, which the men of the Maiden Lands are only too aware of. For a start it pacifies the people. Males generally resent having to kneel before another man - it pricks the pride, sparking rebellion. With a queen though, every gentleman in the *queendom* naturally bends over backwards to impress, just as they would for a beautiful young woman. Either that, or they show a respect and deference, as they would to their ageing grandmother. Likewise, the foreign princes and kings feel much less threatened, so it truly works wonders for diplomacy too. And these Maiden Landers have made quite an art of it."

"You have us figured out," joked the elderly gentleman, popping his head back through idly, as he listened in. Stealing a brief moment from his endless tasks.

"This is why they never get invaded."

The sea captain was now in full flow, "It's also why they can constantly weasel out of sending men and ships to fight the mainland wars. Not that I blame them for it."

"I think it's more just due to location," juttred in Eldskeep, not wanting to take a backseat on talk of political affairs. "I doubt they would have the same success with a female ruler were they closer to the action. I certainly wouldn't fancy their chances if a war did break out. You need a strong male ruler for that. They're lucky the mainland are always so occupied with the Western Isles."

"I'm not so sure," countered the weary captain, "They've done pretty well so far."

Box and Goola listened to these back and forth discussions with an eager intent, and as they listened they liked the sound of the Maiden Lands more and more so. Coupled with the beautiful flowery fields and the fresh bakery smells, it all seemed positively ideal when compared to the mainland. And on hearing about the wonderfully named Queen they had endless questions.

"Does the queen have any children? ..Who will be queen when she dies?" And so on and ever more so.

"She has no children," the old man calmly explained, as he stepped from the bakery and back through to the bar. " Only dogs: *Four, Five* and *Six*. Apparently one of her distant nieces is next in line."

"*Four, Five and Six??*"

"That's what the dogs are called - *Four, Five* and *Six*."

"What happened to *One, Two*, and *Three*?" quipped Julen, with a smirk.

"Well, dogs don't live as long as children, and the Queen is getting quite elderly now. Once upon a time the dogs had proper names, but those days are long gone." The old man laughed once more, enjoying the reaction of the three eager listeners.

"What's she called again?" asked Box, trying her best to remember the full name she'd been told just a few moments earlier.

"*Queen Aglaia Fetterina Fiorina Maquella*."

Chapter Thirty

King Kaspria, the king of the Eastern Kingdom, and the father of Princess Liofia, arrived at Castle Tori to little fanfare. It was to be a fleeting journey, consumed as he was with the war still raging in the west. The cover story that an outbreak of the Pox needed containing was beginning to wear thin. So more and more were asking questions, and more and more of his nobles were having to be let in on the secret. Making the secret increasingly less of a secret - much to the annoyance of his counterpart, King Mizmeam. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of men were being pressed into service to maintain the war effort - a war they were still largely losing.

Prince Aralak, likewise, had little time for dalliances. He'd raced on horseback, eager to get his formal marriage arrangements sorted before heading off to writhe beneath the desert. Hoping to see the world eat its own tail. His marriage to Princess Liofia had all but been agreed in principle, as far as the two kingdoms were concerned. The only sticking point was Liofia herself, who kept continually playing for time. So far, Aralak had quite enjoyed the gamesmanship of it all. Being so used to getting his own way, the surliness and strange behaviour of the princess made her an even more attractive prospect. A worthy prize. However, even he was beginning to lose patience, and both he and his father had now started to apply a lot more leverage to press King Kaspria into speeding up the process. Though, as Princess Liofia waltzed into the room, he quickly blossomed into charm mode.

As he greeted her he immediately launched into tales of his upcoming voyage to the Upper Desert, omitting the secret details, but not failing to omit any of the danger. Liofia play-acted a sense of impress. Lulling him into more details, and not wanting the conversation to move on to other matters. Oblivious to the falsity, but feeling teased by her natural reticence, Aralak continued on in the same form.

"You never know, by the time I return you may have given birth to my first heir."

"How so?" replied Liofia, feigning a complete innocence.

"Well, we are arranged to be married," answered Prince Aralak, nodding his head forward, as if trying to impel the issue, like a dog pushing its bowl forward in the hope of food.

"There's no point wasting time. Once a few heirs have been produced you'll be the most powerful woman in all the mainland. Your father will be happy, ..and you will too, of course. As I'm informed by both our fathers, the marriage ceremony will be over before I head off. Held in our capital, Keneeshka, ..if that pleases you."

"Perhaps after you return," responded Liofia, with a tone both blunt and polite. Maintaining her feigned dumbness.

"Why wait?" returned Prince Aralak, with a touch more snappiness, realising further persuading was in order. "It's the perfect time of year for it. The weather in Keneeshka is beautiful. You'll really love it. You've never been before have you. We'll have an amazing life there, and we can travel back here whenever you like. Royal duties permitting."

"But what if you die on your dangerous journey and never return. I'll be a childless widow."

Liofia said this is a playful way, so as not to be especially offensive, but it nevertheless provided yet another layer of blunt resistance. Leaving Aralak, frustrated and allured, at a loss as for what to say. As this all unfolded, her father, who'd been talking to another nobleman not far off to the side, felt quite the opposite. He'd been keeping a beady eye on his daughter's interactions, ever since she'd made her glancing way down the stairwell. As he listened in to her unserious mood a sense of anger began to overcome him. He recalled the assurances he'd given King Mizmeam, and felt the pressure he was under only too keenly. Seeing the conversation pause he marched over and asked for a private word. They both excused themselves, then headed out of the large ballroom, then back up the winding staircase. King Kaspria could feel his rage climbing as he climbed the steps, and as he got further from the ears of his guests he allowed it to reach the surface. Grabbing his daughter by the arm he barged her into her bedroom. Then slammed the door behind him.

"What was that!?"

"What?!" replied Liofia, trying to maintain the feigned innocence she'd employed in the ballroom.

"You will be going to Keneeshka, and you will be married to Prince Aralak. You have precisely no choice in the matter. It's been arranged. You've messed people around for far too long. If you do not go willingly, you will be forced. Do you hear me? It's that simple. You have a sworn duty to this kingdom."

Sullen, but composed, Princess Liofia began straightening her crumpled clothes and hair, "I won't be going. You'll have to kill me first." She then began to take the earrings out of her ears, before removing the shoes from her feet.

Witnessing this cool disobedience from his daughter Kaspria felt his anger deepen. An anger only compounded further by visions of the displeasure he'd in turn face from King Mizmeam, thanks to this ungrateful behaviour. He grabbed the door handle and opened the door to leave the room, but unable to contain his ire he slammed it shut again, then stormed back towards his unruly offspring. He dragged her by the hair, then threw her down onto the bed. As he pressed her face down hard into the soft bedquilt he dragged her long billowing dress up over her back. The long tail, which she'd promised several times to have removed sprang forth.

"And this goes! - It goes tonight."

He then got back up and smoothed his own clothes and hair down.

"My own personal surgeon has travelled with me. I'll send him up later. Then, in a few days time you will travel to Caster. Hopefully willingly, but dragged in chains if necessary."

He then left the room and ordered two guards to stand sentinel at her door. Liofia composed herself once again, forcing a mood of calm defiance ..but then, in a brief fit of wrath, almost matching her father's, she picked up a wooden jewellery box and flung it across the room. It hit the surround of the large looking glass, chipping the wooden frame, but without breaking the glass.

After another brief pause, followed by a sigh of breath, Liofia then got up and walked over to her wardrobe.

Chapter Thirty-One

Having said a hearty farewell to the old sea captain, the gang of four trundled onwards and inwards. Following the winding dirt roads through the pleasant countryside of the Maiden Lands. Everywhere flowers, wheat fields and gentle meadows. The odd stone windmill dotted about, where laid-back, but purposeful locals milled their wheat to make their flour. Streams and rivers were frequent features of the country, but almost always small and quaint. Trickling along at an unrushed pace. Even the hills were only gentle slopes. As the four breathed in these sights they remained mindful of their destination: *Poppy Fields*, or, the Poppy Mines, as they were sometimes known. A huge area of hinterland stretching many, many miles, where the landscape, as the name suggests, was pretty much just endless fields of poppies.

Long ago, in the long gone decades and centuries, the whole area had been intensively mined. For gold, along with copper and silver. Consequently, the locale was littered with underground shafts and tunnels. Cutting into the ground like giant rabbit burrows. As those in the Maiden Lands were generally careful and patient-minded, a great care had been taken to ensure that these didn't impinge too much upon the outward topography. So, the mine entrances were discreet, and endeavours were always made to mask the theft of nature's bounty with pleasing floriculture. Hence the abundance of poppies. One could find oneself walking through a flowery field or meadow, only to come across a cold stone staircase, invisible to anyone looking in from further afield, leading down to an underground mine entrance. Like a little doorway to another world. Most were now blocked, but a few were left open. With fewer being worked still; by aged miners, prising out the remnants of precious metal that were left.

It was Eldskeep who had insisted they come this way. He wanted to head to the *Poppy Mine Bank*, which, like the various other banks across the kingdoms, was run by an *Official Treasurer*, of the official treasurer class. In this case some distant cousin or other of Madame Drua Maleeva. In fact, she herself, on odd occasions, would visit this distant outpost when she travelled to the Maiden Lands. Inquiring into the latest, albeit quiet and slow-moving, goings-on. The quietness was sometimes deceptive though. This little out-of-the-way bank only second in status in the kingdom to the main bank situated in the capital, Maiden's Tower. Locked at the very heart of this local mining industry, it was entirely central to the valuable trade. So, though remote, it held a reserved prestige; and, as with everything in Poppy Fields, the bank's building was perfectly picturesque too, blending seamlessly into the surrounding countryside. Were it not for the twee, but well-maintained wooden signposts, situated along the soft dirt roads - hanging out like insightful scarecrows - it would be difficult to even spot.

As the four adventurers slowly wandered towards this destination it was easy to discern that they were heading in the general direction. As increasingly they found themselves amidst a growing red sea or carpet. All scattered with an undertow of greens, beneath a soft blue sky. As Goola looked back towards the direction they'd come from, the vision looked something like a painting. Only there was a crisp realness, and an added layer of perfume to

heighten the colours. The misty blue sea, upon which they had recently sailed, afar off in the distance.

Finding a peaceful spot they sat down, to eat some of the breads and treats they'd stocked up on in Fools' Harbour. They even took the briefest of naps beneath the soft amber Sun. Yet still, as they finally arrived in the tiny village, where the Poppy Bank was located, they all felt a little weary. Worn out by the novelty. Eldskeep quickly headed into the bank, as the other three waited outside. After a short period he re-emerged; and handed them back all the money he'd borrowed. They then crossed the street to a nearby inn. Almost as sleepy-looking as the Poppy Bank itself. They booked rooms, then settled down for another evening in another unfamiliar place.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Julen awoke the next morning somewhat earlier than the other three. His time in the Maiden Lands had re-energised him a little, and he was eager to get going on the next leg of the journey. He headed down from his room, out of the inn, and stood outside surveying the surroundings. The dewy lawns and colourful hanging baskets impressing even his basic tastes. As he stretched his arms out and brushed some of the sleep from his eyes he could see a few people sat outside at tables, already having their morning food. He decided to do likewise, so headed back to his room, quickly washed his face and hands, then headed back down to grab a drink and some breakfast.

As he sat alone at a small wooden table he looked around at all the stone cottages and other little buildings. Their gardens bristling with flowers; ivies climbing the walls. The little birds heading in and out of the trees and hedgerows at leisure. He noticed how the road all these dainty buildings were sat upon arched around, coming to a pivot at the Poppy Bank, then curving back over. Almost forming a cul-de-sac. He also noted the small stone bridge that crossed the river that arrowed in the direction they'd soon be heading. A river that would eventually wind all the way down to the coast, and through the city of Maiden's Tower itself. As he lazily observed all this an older gentleman wandered over. An ageing man, dressed in neat, but comfortable clothing. He held his morning tea in one hand. The dim gold ring on his finger, bright against the brown of the copper cup. In the other he grasped tightly the top of a long walking stick that he periodically lent upon. On the neck of which was carved a round-eyed owl, making it look like a spindly wooden totem pole.

Noticing Julen was a stranger, the elderly gentleman threw some local trivia his way.

"There are no roads east of the Poppy Bank, or so they say. They used to refer to it as 'The World's End' when I was younger."

"No roads?" answered Julen, little bothered, "So what's beyond? Surely we're still a fair bit away from the desert's edge?"

"Just miles of grassy meadows, then miles of desert meadows, then miles of sand. Miles and miles of sand. Never ending."

"So it's just the desert," replied Julen, unimpressed, the little curiosity he had dampened even more so, "No one wants to travel to the desert anyway."

"True, but still, it's a very long way to the desert. There's quite a lot of land between here and there. My father used to travel further out when I was younger. He'd head out miles to get a certain bark from a certain tree that grows on the far edge of the desert meadow. It was used to make perfumes and medicines. People would pay quite a lot of money for it. It was a *long* journey. He'd be gone for weeks at a time, sometimes months, but it would be worth it. At least it was back then. Still, no one would ever think to travel that far now, let alone do so ..and with no roads no one travels. Everyone just follows the roads you see. Just as you have

to get here. There could be all manner of secrets and mysteries in the world. Perhaps just beyond the very edge of your vision, but they'll remain hidden. Hidden forever ..because people just follow the road that's already been laid out for them."

All this went over Julen's head a little, and not knowing, nor caring what to say in reply, he just answered with a, "Huh."

The old gentleman, picking up on this, dropped the storytelling.

"So, where are you heading next?"

He sat down at the table as he said this, facing outwards towards the street, his back half-turned to Julen. Like he was placing himself down to lounge there for the remainder of the morning. The thin, light-grey hair on his head bobbing and waving in the slight breeze.

"Maiden's Tower," expressed Julen, "I'm travelling with friends - heading to my aunt's house. A holiday type thing, I guess ..I should really go and wake them up actually."

"Well, if you follow this road, that mimics the winding river, you'll get there soon enough ..unless you want to forsake the roads."

"I think I'm quite happy with the roads," laughed Julen, politely. Then, realising he'd been a little off-hand with the old gentleman, he tried to look a little more friendly, but wasn't quite feeling it. He then headed off inside with an awkward bounce, leaving the old gentleman to finish his tea.

By the time he returned, barely half-an-hour later, with the others now in tow, the old gentleman was gone. As they stepped out onto the street a light rain began to spatter the air. Drifting in from the distant coast, and casting its drizzle across the sweep of countryside. The red of the wet poppies in the distance now looking both brighter and darker. The sea in the very far distance now hidden behind the unnumbered droplets.

As they began to leave the village they considered making the long journey to Maiden's Tower by horseback, just as they'd travelled through the Eastern Kingdom. They even wondered if they could perhaps hitch a ride down the long meandering river. On seeing the colourful vista though, even in the light rain, they felt happy enough walking. Slowly winding their own way there. Plus, at the back of their minds it still occurred to all four that, given the incident that had befallen them at Patina, it might still be wise to delay their entry. Hoping the added time would leave the violent episode even more forgotten.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Queen Aglaia Fetterina Fiorina Maquella was in a large drawing room with two ambassadors from the Eastern Kingdom. The walls of the room were high and white, and the sparseness of the room - just a long table down the centre, with a few murals hanging on the walls - gave her voice a slight pitched echo. She always spoke with a deliberate clearness, and the ambassadors, who'd come with very strict instructions to get some assurances from her, were struggling to impress their case.

"When things get serious enough we'll send some ships, I can assure you of that," she promised, giving every appearance of sincerity. Yet, the ambassadors, having heard the exact same pronouncement barely a few months before, understood precisely what this was: another delaying tactic. Unable to think quickly enough to frame their concerns though, the queen once again took the reins of the conversation.

"Of course, there may come a time when *we* have to close our borders to the whole of the mainland because of this pox business."

Like the ambassadors, Queen Aglaia understood well enough that the entire Pox story was a ruse. Used only as cover for the ongoing tussles with the Western Isles. However, the doublespeak allowed her to use the false narrative for her own purposes as well, and she knew the ambassadors would not simply come out and flatly contradict it. Even though, right now, as they spoke, they were literally discussing sending ships to help prosecute the very war it was a ruse for. Such was the nature of inter-realm statecraft. Everything was by implication. The truth rarely spoken; the implications perfectly understood by everyone. That is, at least by all those privileged or intelligent enough to understand such things. The queen fell into both categories, though had circumstances been different they'd have no doubt kept her in the dark as well.

In fact, at first, the 'pox outbreak' narrative had been conjured wholly by intrigues on the mainland, and the queen and all her courtiers were very much excluded. Now though it was simply assumed that Queen Aglaia understood what was happening anyway. Either through her intuitive reading of the situation, or from information relayed by her own network of spies and ambassadors in residence on the mainland. There were also the hints and pressures that would come from the various mercantile interests. Spider-webbing out both formally and informally from the demonstrative Madame Drua Maleeva. So, though requests were made for money, ships, goods, resources - and very politely at that - it was understood only too well that if you refused such requests, there would be repercussions.

Consequently, when the mainland *asked* the Maiden Lands for ships and men the official line was that it was to help the efforts to stem the outbreak. When, in reality, with a nod and a wink, it was well understood what the real purpose was ..and that a lack of help would be heavily frowned upon either way.

Thankfully for the realm, Queen Aglaia was in a strong position to deal with such things. With the three major kingdoms fully occupied with the threat from the west they could hardly be poised to pick a fight in the east. The worst repercussions would perhaps be the false imposition of her ships, or the severing of trade. As was the standard reaction whenever tensions flared up between the Maiden Lands and the mainland kingdoms. Plus, such damage inflicted could be mutual too. Queen Aglaia could turn a blind eye to the exploits of her own privateers just as easily.

Her preferred course of action was to have as little involvement as possible with the western war, *and* to damage ties with the mainland kingdoms as little as possible. Hence all the promises of ships. It was highly unlikely that she would ever close the border, "because of the pox," but the threat alone gave her the leverage to delay the ships. Meaning she could now claim that by not closing the border she had already done them a huge favour to begin with, so another "promise" of *some ships ..at some point in the future*, didn't seem quite so measly. Naturally, the ambassadors from the Eastern Kingdom didn't buy this for a minute, but as it came with a certain amount of face value logic, she could use it to bat them down nevertheless. Making the case with a domineering air that made it look as if she actually believed it all herself.

As she stated her position the braver of the two ambassadors, dissembling in equal measure, tried to 'remind' the queen of the very real gravity of the situation.

"You do understand how serious this situation is, your majesty. There is very much at stake here. Very much."

"Oh, I understand it absolutely," came the royal reply, once more feigning sincerity with gusto, "This is precisely why I'm readying some of my ships as we speak. You can tell your king that we stand shoulder to shoulder. The seriousness is not lost on us, though we may be further away from it than he is."

With that Queen Aglaia then began heading towards the door at the far end of the drawing room. As the ambassadors followed, struggling to keep pace, the queen then turned the conversation to less formal things. Purposefully drawing a line under the discussion they'd just had. As she began asking them how they liked the palace, and pointing out various details about the art that hung on the walls, they knew their chance for any further assurances was past, and that they'd be returning home once again to simply relay more promises of ships. Ships that would be unlikely to be arriving any time soon.

Chapter Thirty-Four

It was easy for Princess Liofia to elude her father's dim-witted guards. She'd escaped from the castle so many times before it was almost second nature to her. Now, however, she wasn't just wandering the streets of Patina, she was leaving the city completely, and was already on a ship heading to Maiden's Tower. Before leaving she had considered trying to talk nursemaid Elgiva into coming along with her, but decided it was just too risky. She'd have no doubt refused, or simply wasted time trying to reason Liofia into staying. Plus, even if she had been dragged along, her age, slowness and lack of indiscretion would've made the flight from her father's kingdom near-impossible. Liofia was graceful, with a cat-like ability to slink around and go unnoticed - something she'd finely honed during her countless other breakouts and wanderings - but Elgiva was blunt and dog-like, and would've been like a heavy ball at Liofia's nimble ankles. So, with time carrying a heavy cost, the princess disappeared alone.

The prospect didn't scare her too much. She'd thought about it so many times before that her plan was fairly well mapped out anyway. She felt a slight apprehension, and could feel the goosebumps on her arms, but as she ran her fingers across the tiny, almost invisible hairs pricking out, she was calm in mind. She knew what she was going to do. Her plan was to simply vanish. To lie undetected, perhaps for years, before gradually transitioning into something of a simple, normal life. Ideally somewhere rural and pleasant. She'd toyed before with the idea of heading north-west. Of trying to etch out a living in the wooded areas, where half-tails like her were much more common. At least there she wouldn't have to completely disguise the long looping tail her father and everyone else had wanted severed. Yet she leaned against this notion. Partly due to the journey itself - it would've meant travelling across land, largely through the Eastern Kingdom - but also because, in reality, she was simply too refined, and though the idea held a certain romance, she knew she'd need at least some semblance of civilisation. She was a princess after all. Plus, aside from the tail, she'd look very much out of place were she to step into the far north of Once Woods, and begin living a new life under a willow tree. So the more regal Maiden Lands it was.

Fortunately, being a princess, she had the money to do this as well. Over the long months of confinement in Castle Tori she'd had the foresight to stitch jewellery into the lining of her favoured clothing. So much so that she now felt like a walking jewellery box. Her dowdy and common outside appearance hiding in the seams countless gemstones, rings, broaches, and other pieces of jewellery. She also had a purse, jammed with ingkhs, for more general use, which was strapped across her waist beneath her long flowing cloak. Along with two sharp daggers for protection. One tucked neatly down the leg of her long black boots, the other strapped by the left hand side of her waist. Perfectly positioned to easily grab with her right hand, just in case it was needed.

To complete the cunning disguise her hair, which was tied up around the back of her head in plaits and knots, was covered by a soft headscarf. That covered almost all of her hair, and hung down, draping across her shoulders. Wrapping it around her mouth at times as well, to further hide her visage when necessary. She'd also daubed her face with a touch of earth,

to dampen the royal gleam of her porcelain skin. Giving the impression of an average, and ever-so-slightly older, common woman of the street. Her bright lustre-full eyes being the one giveaway that behind the careful costume was a pristine princess.

With the small fortune she carried on her person she would easily be able to buy a cottage or a plot of land, and this was her overriding vision as she travelled onward. Nevertheless, she knew that simply doing such a thing would attract far too much attention. Especially if she was doing it with jewels smuggled straight out of a tsarina's treasure box. So she wondered how exactly she was going to idle away her time, waiting for her fugitive fame to fall from memory.

With the weather being so clement her first thought was that she would spend a few days just stalking the streets of Maiden's Tower, exactly as she had done in Patina. Keeping a silent watch over the people, and sleeping beneath the stars in some quiet unexposed nook. That way she could mingle with as few people as possible in the immediate aftermath of her escape, when the search for her would be at its greatest. Then, once things had cooled off, she could rent a room at an inn. Maybe somewhere a little more out of the way. Perhaps even get a job. As a washerwoman or farmhand. Or in some other unassuming role.

As she thought about all these things she grew a little more nervous, and wondered if she had made a mistake in leaving after all. She would certainly be throwing away a lot of certainty and comfort. Yet she also mused upon the fact that she'd spent the last six months under house arrest, like a caged bird. Now she was free, and if she returned back she'd only find herself envious of the birds she'd once watched from her window once more. Likewise, she reminded herself of the prospect of an enforced marriage, and the fact that she'd be bringing baby birds into such a caged environment. It steeled her will a little more for the lonely days that no doubt lay ahead. As the ship docked in the Maiden's Tower port she gingerly observed the other passengers. Stalking their lead, she then shuffled out onto the waterfront, and slipped away into the night.

Chapter Thirty-Five

It had been decided that an informal king's counsel was to be held, to discuss the various problems that were now spiralling out of control in the west. Prior however, the King of Tunid and Drua Maleeva were having a private conversation of their own. Word had just reached the king of the coastal attack that had befallen his own precious island. A very unexpected development. For a moment it instilled a sense of anxiety in the king. A feeling he rarely experienced. Quickly composing himself though he pondered a course of action. Deciding he would stay on the mainland, and prosecute the war efforts as planned, rather than return home flummoxed under the circumstances. The damage had already been done, and though it was clear more attacks were now possible, it nevertheless remained unlikely that the island would be taken. The problems in the Western Isles needed tackling at root he thought.

The king and Drua Maleeva also agreed that for the time being it was probably wise not to pass this information on to the other mainland kings. Aside from fears it would undermine authority, there was also the simple fact that it would be a distraction. Potentially causing even more disorderliness.

As the other kings and their advisers began to fill the room, the King of Tunid and Drua Maleeva hushed their words and took their seats at the central table. The others proceeding to follow. King Mizmeam first, looking content and imperial, then King Kaspria, looking visibly uncomfortable - expressing his polite courtesies with a degree of nervous agitation. Finally, the ageing and heavily bearded northern king, King Brijsk. He entered the room, then eased himself into his large wooden chair with a slow plodding effort. Like an elephant, or rather a woolly mammoth, sitting down to take a needed rest.

With an unconsidered disregard for protocol he instantly began the conversation.

"I trust we've yet to develop this black powder then?"

Brijsk was almost opposite in manner to his sometime rival King Kaspria, and he dealt with the problems he faced with a blunt, but good-spirited nature. He likewise felt rather less threatened by their southern counterpart, King Mizmeam. Though his kingdom, like that of the Eastern Kingdom, was equally a junior partner to the southern behemoth. As he watched the way King Mizmeam modified his behaviour, hiding his natural predisposition to anger in the presence of the King of Tunid, it only made him less inclined to feel inferior. Seeing in the dissembling body language weakness, rather than calculation.

His question about the black powder got an immediate response.

"No," came the lament from the King of Tunid, "And it sounds like it's unlikely that we will any time soon. We're going to completely lose control of the western seas if things continue at this laboured pace." He then turned to King Kaspria, "Will we be receiving any help from our friends in the Maiden Lands in the coming weeks and months?"

The Eastern King grimaced a little as he gave his reply, "It's unlikely, they've made more promises, but I can't imagine anything will be forthcoming."

"I think it's probably time we pressed them a little harder."

The King of Tunid looked over at Drua Maleeva, as if to signal a beginning of some kind. Then, turning back to Kaspria, he added more instruction, "Capture one of her ships and blame it on pirates. Say you can't police the waters, due to how overstretched you are in the west. She'll start to get the message."

Kaspria nodded in accordance, at which point King Mizmeam raised his own query.

"And what about your daughter, the princess, Kaspria? Has she returned yet, or is she still missing?"

This question pained Kaspria only more so, but he forced a reply out of himself. "She's still gone, but we'll find her, and when we do she'll be brought straight here. You can then take her as you please. Hopefully, her time in absconsion will have pressed some sense into her, but I fear her mind might now be beyond that."

"You may as well just leave her be, she'll always be trouble," interjected King Brijsk, with laughter, carelessly. "Women like this ruin kingdoms. If you think she's a problem now, she will be a bigger problem when she's the mother of an heir to the throne. Best find someone else, and let her go her own way. That's my advice."

"She's a great beauty though," noted King Mizmeam, not wanting to take the advice, "..and a royal beauty at that. She would be the perfect match for my son ..her headstrong personality denotes a royal constitution. It just needs to be tempered a touch."

"That's the problem," continued King Brijsk, again with a good loud laugh, "Beauty is dangerous to kingdoms. It causes problems, as it's doing now. You need a homely queen with large hips, who's happy to raise her children. Not a royal bauble or amulet to wear at regal galas. Not that I'm saying she's a bauble." He looked at King Kaspria, then laughed again, indifferent as to whether anyone else was laughing with him.

Inwardly, the King of Tunid was sympathetic to the laughter, but kept this feeling disguised. Still, with his mind half-consumed with the thoughts of his own kingdom, he was beginning to grow a little impatient with the chitter-chatter.

"I think all this can probably be sorted out *after* Prince Aralak returns from the Three Deserts," he asserted, "Hopefully, by then, the princess will be found safe, and we'll have a relative peace in which to hold a marriage ceremony. Ideally we'd have settled the issue now, of course, but it's not to be. So we must adapt and move on with things."

With this insistent point made the talk then turned towards the more mundane, but pressing aspects of the war. Such as the number of dead, and the enormous number of ships now lost. A number ever increasing at a steady rate. To give themselves time to re-arm, King Brijsk argued for a temporary truce with the Western Isles, but this was dismissed out of hand by the other rulers. As it was by Maleeva, who struggled to hide her disdain for the stupid and reckless proposal. Instinctually, the King of Tunid was less opposed to the notion, and privately absorbed the possibility into his thinking. Just as he privately enjoyed the bombastic jokes of the rotund, but uncouth northern king. He knew with certainty the idea could not be openly countenanced though.

As this discussion rattled on, Maleeva's son, Seaspell, entered the room with another message for the King of Tunid. He dismissed the other kings and then took the message in private. It was a further epistle from Tunida. This time relaying the story of how Sails' End, in the far south of the island, had been ransacked by the piratical Western Islanders. It also relayed how the young boy, who'd set sail from Om Bay with Coulema Galina, had been captured and taken away by the very same ships. The king looked shaken. He dismissed even his closest advisers, including Drua Maleeva, and headed to his chamber. Clutching the epistle tightly in his hand.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Nursemaid Elgiva opened the gate, and after struggling with a latch that was just about held on by a few rusty nails, walked down the path. Chickens bobbed around her ankles, and a small lively, but harmless dog sniffed at her boots. It all barely registered on her mind though, more distressed as she was by the wider drama. The general view in Patina was that Liofia had run away, and this fitted with Elgiva's instinctive feeling. Yet, she also partly worried that perhaps she'd been carted off to Keneeshka, in preparation for her marriage; and that the story of her running off was just a good distraction, to cover a barbarous kidnapping.

Having been interrogated briefly about the disappearance herself by the guards at Castle Tori, who quickly came to the conclusion that she knew as little as they did, Elgiva put it about that she would head out to try to find the princess herself. Which essentially was what she was now doing. What she didn't mention was that she likewise was in two minds about whether to up and leave as well. So, even were she to find Liofia, she was unsure as to whether she would encourage her to return, or simply join her in hiding. At present, with so little time to think, she just wanted to find her though, and as she had so little clue as to where to begin she had come to the one place that had sprung to mind in the panic.

"I had a feeling you might come here," said the crinkly-looking old man, who was busy searching for something, looking through drawers and cupboards in his hovel-like kitchen, "What's the problem? Let me guess, a missing princess?"

The way he spoke to her, as if she was a child in need of adult guidance, instantly irked Elgiva. Even amidst her desperation. She'd always disliked being spoken down to like this - though she did it often enough to Liofia. Even as a child this tendency on the part of Kytalyk elders annoyed her, and this particular one had been a family friend since before she was even born. The benefit though was that it pricked her to regain the composure that was missing as she'd come through the gate. She readopted her own, slightly haughty tone - the tone she'd usually use with Liofia - and replied.

"Yes ..she's trickled off somewhere. Either that, or she's been shuttled off - to the Southern Kingdom, without anyone knowing."

"I would guess, by the fervour with which the city wardens are now searching for her, that she's truly missing," observed the Kytalyk, "Given how often she sneaks out beyond the castle walls I would guess they're quite out of their depths in finding her too. If she really intended to leave, she'll be far gone by now. The question would then be, in what direction? - Are you looking to bring her back? Or are you just looking?"

The Kytalyk elder finally stopped looking for whatever it was he was rummaging around in the draws for and offered Elgiva the prospect of a cup of tea, which she gladly accepted.

"I'm not sure, I just need to find her."

"Did she take things suggestive of a long journey?"

"I think she must have been planning it. A small fortune was gone ..all her own stuff of course, nothing that wasn't hers. Though her father might disagree with that."

"Hmm.. ..if she's planned to go then she'll have planned where she's going."

"She did sometimes state that she'd like to escape and go live with the half-tails, but I don't think she really meant it. It was always more of a sarcastic threat."

Elgiva took a sip of the hot tea that was placed on the table, then tried to think a little harder.

"Would she have headed towards the Pox?" queried the Kytalyk, thinking further himself, "Most are heading in the opposite direction at the moment, unless they're heading to the front. Only enlisted sailors and swordsmen are heading inwards, so a princess with a bag full of jewels heading that way would be a little bit hard to miss. Though if she headed through the woods, and then round the Bite she could avoid a lot of that. That's a long journey on foot though. East to Maiden's Tower would be more realistic, but again, hard to go unnoticed."

"I don't think she'd be too bothered about the Pox," remarked Elgiva. "She thinks it's all nonsense anyhow. Though she's hoping Prince Aralak gets it, if it really is in the aether."

The Kytalyk paused and thought for a few moments before speaking. The little dog, which had been scratching at the door ever since Elgiva had entered, he now let in. It bounded over towards her and began jumping up playfully at her knee.

"For the time being there isn't really much you can do. It's probably best you simply wait to see if she comes back. In the meanwhile, I'll put my feelers out for any information."

Elgiva stopped pushing the little dog down and began to stroke its head. The thought of just sitting around doing nothing made her feel quite anxious, but she tried to not let it show.

"You can come 'round whenever you have any worries," consoled the Kytalyk, noticing her unease, with a soft, but slightly condescending smile, "I know it's hard, but running around like a headless chicken - just like the king's men and city wardens are doing - isn't much use. It's best to act on information. If you keep your ear out at the court, and I keep my ear to the vine here, we can compare our notes... until then it's just a question of patience."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The King of Tunid was still in a state of anger and turmoil, but by now he'd pushed that beneath the surface. He'd also shared with Maleeva the contents of the communication he'd received. Overwhelmingly his thoughts were concerned with the boy who'd been taken captive, but understanding that there was little he could do just yet, and with a large effort, he pushed it to one side and focused on more achievable aims.

The communication also contained the tale of the western isle ship, the *Dew Elizabeth*, that was sent to the ocean floor in flames, by the fiery arrow from the large ballista. "Why are we not using things like this here?" he immediately probed, impressed by the small victory, "If we can't access black powder ourselves we should at least be using it against them, utilising the things we do have. Fire the oceans, oil the waters. We need to stack the entire western coast with weapons like this."

Maleeva too felt roused by the tale, and with immediate vigour she began barking the same questions at various aides. As she did this it also struck her how dim and incapable of thought the mainland islanders were. After months of conflict they'd simply been ploughing the same furrow. Throwing man after man, and ship after ship, at the problem. Completely devoid of innovation. Yet, those on the small island of Tunida, when faced with the problem unexpectedly, had already taken a scalp with a novel mode of attack.

"We need to put these weapons on ships too," added the king, as he paced back and forth with purpose. Maleeva, again, in turn, passing these thoughts directly to people lower down the pecking order.

"Using siege weapons on ships. Why didn't I think of that?!" cried King Brijsk, as he lumbered into the room. His mouth moving faster than his trunk-like legs.

"Why indeed," responded Maleeva, with aimed condescension.

"It's true," he laughed, "We're not the most wily in the Northern Kingdom, but still, I don't recall you ever suggesting anything like this either. You had ample opportunity."

The annoyed Maleeva pretended not to hear, and continued on.

"Your captains have to start using a bit more thought. So far that's been lacking. You'll have to learn to play cat and mouse, drawing the Western Isle ships into our own fire."

"We wasted all our best captains in the early days of the conflict," rued King Brijsk, but with another trademark half-laugh, "We have fine ships captained by fools now. It's not their fault though, you can't make great sea captains overnight. We'd have much preferred to bed our sailors in the eastern seas. To let them learn their trade, but you - and Mizmeam too - kept pushing these idiot-boys into battle."

"Well they'll have to learn quicker."

The King of Tunid listened to all this, but added nothing. He was too eager to get to the coast to see some of these plans in action. As for the young boy, he expected to receive some kind of ransom note soon. Either that, or that he himself would have to reach out diplomatically to negotiate a release. This was all assuming the boy was still alive, of course - a question he refused to even ponder. Knowing he needed to be negotiating from a position of strength though, he understood it was essential that they exercised themselves from the current paralysis, and began putting the western islanders firmly on the back foot.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

News reached Queen Aglaia that one of her ships had been imposed on its return journey from the Northern Kingdom. It had been boarded by force, and though the crew had been left unharmed, its cargo had been confiscated. The value wasn't enormous, it mainly being just wools and furs, along with a few other goods. However, the message was clear, and though it gave the appearance of a random act of sea piracy it was obvious that it was meant as a shot across the bows. Pressuring Queen Aglaia into acquiescing a little more readily.

Unsurprisingly her reaction was one of anger and indignation. It was perfectly expected that the mainland would try to turn the screw in this way, but even still, the infringement was considered an absolute outrage by her. Her dogs - *four, five and six* - normally yappy and noisy little things, had sensed this change in temperament, and were now scampering around and nestling themselves behind table legs, and under the folds of gold-cloth hanging from her throne.

Her advisers couldn't hide themselves so readily, and had to contend full-on with her outrage. They knew it was inevitable that she would eventually take a considered approach to the problem. In fact, even in mid-rage they knew it was highly likely that she was pondering a rational response at that very moment - if she hadn't already planned one in advance. However, she liked the theatre and drama of an angry performance. Feeling it set the tone. Keeping everyone on their toes, and putting on a bold display for any mainland spy that may be watching or that word may get back to. It was good for her to get the ire and fury out too. She was indeed angry and indignant, and a volcanic production helped her to work through the ire.

"To acquiesce or to act of war," she said out loud more than once. Illustrating the general fork in the road the issue presented her with. To cede to the demand for ships and men, or to perhaps put those men and ships to her own proper use. Of course, there was a third option too, and that was to simply wait some more and play for time. The Queen's favourite strategy, and the likely course of action. *Would they push more and apprehend more ships?* It was likely, but at the same time the mainland powers would be aware that further incursions may have the opposing effect. Pushing Queen Aglaia into outright rage-driven retaliation, instead of cooperation. Or just plain insouciance, masked by anger. So, understanding this, she was especially tempted to just let the mainland make the next move. Hoping the incursion would be a one-off, and that the issue might just disappear under the rubble of other unfolding events.

The one problem with this strategy was that it risked inflaming tensions between the Maiden Lands and the mainland kingdoms in a way that would grow beyond her control. If merchant ships kept getting accosted, especially if lives were also lost during such attacks, then her loving public would become increasingly angry too. Making it in turn more difficult for her to send ships and men to the western war front (or pox-ridden hotbed, as most of the public would see it) if she did indeed decide to follow that route.

As the dogs pattered around her feet, albeit quietly, she paused mid-performance and pondered for a bit. Sitting down on the edge of her throne as she did so. When she stopped speaking like this it was always the cue for her advisers to step in and offer their various opinions and solutions, which they obligingly did. Some urging a course of peace. Arguing that it was sensible to send a few ships to the western arena. Others, slightly more hawkish, suggesting a show of strength, by increasing the presence of their own vessels in the north-eastern seas.

Aglaia listened to all these opinions with studied intent, asking the odd question to tease out some finer points. Finally, after each had given their opinion, she stood up and gave her course of action.

"We'll wait."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Essen, Acalee and their two remaining ships, the *Sleight* and the *Arbowlan*, had arrived back at Brynnyfirdia just a day before. They were now sat in council, pleading for another chance to sail south. Hoping that the loss of ships, plus the loss of life entailed on the previous voyage, wouldn't dampen the opportunity. Normally councils in Brynnyfirdia were held out in the open, in the fields or woodland, but due to the biting cold this one was taking place inside a large wooden banquet hall. An array of local elders stood around, including Colm, whom neither Essen nor Acalee had seen since they had arrived back. With Acalee in particular eager to tell him everything that had happened on their travels.

In the hall were the captives: Coulema Galina, the ship's pilot and the young boy. Along with Eartaria, who was still heavy with the death of his brother, Meamya. The gruesome death amidst the vicious fighting at Sails' End still fresh in his mind. His mood one of anger and bitterness. Of the three hostages only Galina was still shackled; with loose, but heavy chains cuffing his hands. His warrior physique and size inspiring enough worry in the Brynnyfirdians to forgo the risk of setting him at ease. The other two, however, were completely free of movement, with just the general threat of violence and recapture being used to douse any thought of escape.

Essen, having lost two ships, was very much on the defensive as he relayed the story of what had occurred. The long journey back had been particularly sobering. He'd left with naïve hopes of capturing the entire island, but returned having little more to show than three hostages, and a trail of strewn enemy ships. As he made the long voyage back he did so with his tail firmly between his legs. The deaths of so many crew members - many close personal friends - weighing hard against the slow ocean boredom.

The destruction he'd caused with his harrying of the Tunidan coastline was considerable though, and as they made their way back Acalee tried to spin things into an overall success. Furthermore, the young boy, who'd not yet spoken a single word since capture, was clearly someone of importance. So, whoever he was, his capture was a potential asset in regard the wider war ..and where exactly he was heading to, or indeed from, when they captured him only added a further element of mystery. A mystery that had occupied the thoughts of Acalee as much as the sense of failure had occupied Essen's. Consequently, as they sailed northwards, back to the Western Isles, it was Acalee that had convinced Essen of the need for another voyage - only this time with an emphasis more on espionage and discovery than warfare.

In fielding the endless questions Essen tried to relay this positive spin that Acalee had placed upon the expedition. The loss of ships and men, along with his own demeanour, made it a hard sell though. The elders and other listeners stood around only hearing a tale of wasted blood and resources. They appreciated the damage that had been done to the Tunidan ships, and listened to the adventure with relish, but even so, they suspected that there was perhaps a degree of exaggeration. Making both Essen and Acalee look especially young in the face of the more senior figures now weighing up their actions. They'd taken a

risk in sanctioning the first endeavour, especially when it came with the danger that the secret of black powder would fall into enemy hands. So a second journey didn't find great appeal in the noisy wooden hall. The reality that all the harbours and ships of Tunida had already been fired - if Essen's account was to be fully believed - making another trip somewhat redundant anyway.

It was Colm who delivered the final blow.

"What you've done will benefit us. It'll have sent the plans of the mainland into chaos - they'll now have to spread themselves more lightly across all of the ocean, just in case we attack from the south again. *But..* we really can't spare ships for more forays into that region. We need to press home our advantage here. These are our waters. Capturing the trade between Erba and the mainland must be our next step."

Upon hearing this Acalee stepped up, moving Essen to one side as he took the foreground.

"A small voyage, just two or three small ships ..one even. There are things down there that we need to explore. Six warlike ships arrived in those waters, as if from out of nowhere. The boy and the men we captured were out on an empty ocean. Sailing to, or from, an empty patch of sea."

He looked over, illustratively, at Coulema Galina and the boy, then turned back to face Colm, "A spying mission. To find out exactly where these people were heading."

"Can we not just ask them?" replied Colm, half in jest. The men in the hall, including Essen, broke out into laughter. Even Acalee himself couldn't hide the faintest of smiles. Nevertheless, he pressed on.

"Try asking them. They simply won't talk. We pressed them the whole return journey ..and even if they do speak, only a voyage will provide certainty."

"So, you want to risk yet more life?" butted in Eartaria, entering the conversation with a blunt tone, "To find out where a small boat was sailing??" He then sighed angrily, "There are countless reasons why they might have been out on that sea. The same with the ships. They could've been out on an exercise. Or they may have been returning from the Lower Desert. There's no great mystery."

"Six ships? Plush with armed men?! ..Plus, they clearly came from the east."

"So?" quipped Eartaria, "They could have arrived from any direction for any manner of reason." He then turned to the wider gathering and once more raised the spectre of lives lost. An appeal that had an extra potency given his brother's fate.

"Surely we cannot risk more life on games in a time of war."

An awkward pause followed.

At this point Coulema Galina broke forward from behind where Essen was standing, breaking the brief lull.

"That wasn't the case when you shot one of my men at point blank range," he forcefully intoned.

He did this in a way that conveyed a clear sentiment, but with a calm that didn't quite cross the line into outright aggression. The two men standing guard pulled him back reactively. He accepted the restraint, and, putting up no resistance, stepped back.

The accent of Galina sounded strange and foreign to the native Brynnfirdians gathered in the room, but the words were well understood, and his confident tone came with an air of authority that was unexpected. After another short pause Eartaria snapped back.

"I only shot him as he refused to cooperate *..and* he drew his sword on me. He'd already deceived me too, by claiming they were fishermen." He then laughed, much like he did the first time the guardsman had told him the lie.

"Fishermen!", he then repeated to himself, as if reliving the moment and justifying the action.

"So, you do think their being out at sea is a little suspicious," observed Essen, who was now feeling a tad more sure of himself.

Eartaria stopped for a moment, then responded, "Suspicious, in a basic military sense, yes. They are captives that are lying to us. They still lie to us now. My brother died because of these men. Yet, here you are more concerned with their safety than you are with your own people. We should be torturing the secrets out of these men, not sending more of our people to die to find what's buried in their skulls. It's odd that we're even contemplating another voyage. We could find out more with five minutes of firm interrogation than we'd find with five months of sailing."

As he made this point a few of the men nodded in agreement. Colm, sensing the room, offered his own words.

"Torture is a bit far perhaps, but we are at war, after all, and lives do depend on information. So we may have to robustly interrogate them. We should start with the boy maybe. He might be easiest. It might be best to separate them too."

Eartaria then walked towards the boy, grabbed him by the scruff of his long tunic, and started walking him towards the exit.

Galina, with visible concern, stepped forward, "You don't have to torture him. He's the king's son, Prince Estorie. A very valuable prisoner to you - if you treat him well - but he knows nothing, and it's pointless interrogating him."

Eartaria stopped cold as he heard this. The reaction in the hall one of both shock and glee. Some of the men even started cheering. "*We have the king's son!*", went the whispered exclamations. Essen and Acalee looked to each other with a smile. Even Colm's eyes seemed to brighten a little at the revelation.

As Eartaria turned the boy around and brought him back Colm walked over.

"Is this true?"

The boy refused to speak.

"You'll find out soon enough," interjected Galina, "The king will be eager to have him returned. So even if you do not send communication of his capture, sooner or later diplomatic enquiries will be sent here. He'll know by now that he's missing. The villagers that were with me - the ones you had the sense not to kill at point blank range - will have conveyed the news back. You'll need no more proof than that."

"So I guess we wait then," acknowledged Colm, as he patted the boy gently on his back, giving a clear indication he would be treated well. He then looked at Galina and the ship's pilot. "As for information regarding where exactly the boat was heading I guess we'll have to focus on you two." He moved closer to Galina, "You seem like an upright man, but we are at war with your kingdom ..and your kingdom, in league with the mainland, has inflicted much death and abuse on our people. So we really do need the information you have, and we may have to be firm ourselves to rectify the situation. It's nothing personal."

"Likewise with you, my friend," he then added, looking to the ship's pilot, who looked deeply alarmed at the prospect awaiting him. With that both men were then led towards the wooden door of the hall. Then, at this point, the boy, Prince Estorie, the king's son, finally spoke.

"There is an island in the Eastern Sea that is not on any maps. Royal Fields we call it. It's where my father moors many of his ships ..I can give you the directions, but if you head there you will be killed."

"I knew it," crowed Acalee, with a sense of vindication, "Now we just need to head out there to confirm it."

Essen nodded in agreement.

"The boy is conning you," quipped Eartaria, unmoved, "There's nothing down there. You're being sent on a wild goose chase - I do admire the boy's cunning though."

"It makes too much sense not to be true," rejoined Acalee, excitedly, "I always wondered how a small island like Tunida could command such a power over all these oceans. Now we have the answer. The boy was heading to the east ..to a secret safety. The ships coming at us, to help relieve Tunida, were returning back from the east. It fits like a glove."

"Or, it's all quite fanciful," objected Colm, coolly, "And I would be inclined to agree with Eartaria ..but, I guess stranger things have happened. So it might be worth double checking, just in case..

..you can have your small spying assignment."

Chapter Forty

It was getting late as Box, Goola, Julen and Eldskeep arrived in Maiden's Tower. The sun was winding its way down and out of sight, and along some of the more prominent streets, oil lamps were being lit. As Box turned onto the high street she saw a small girl lighting a candle in a window, above one of the shopfronts. The girl briefly stared down at her and the other three out-of-town strangers. Being another port city Maiden's Tower looked very similar to Patina, only it seemed much neater and cleaner. As Box and Goola walked they scanned the skyline for the actual 'maiden's tower' that the name of the city suggested. However, though there were plenty of tall and towering buildings none stood out as *the* tower.

Julen was quieter though. He'd been back to his upbeat self ever since they had arrived in the Maiden Lands, but the similarity of Maiden's Tower to Patina had reminded him of what had happened back there. The memory of which filled him with a sense of dread, and a hungry, aching feeling inside his stomach. He pulled his neckerchief up to cover his mouth, and thought to himself how good it was that they were arriving under the cover of darkness. The fear that he would be recognised and apprehended for his crime almost disturbing him as much as the vision of it ingrained on his memory. The sword piercing his assailant's heart. A sword that still hung by his side as he conjured these visions.

It also occurred to him for the first time since the event just how able Eldskeep had been with a sword. Up until that point he'd just assumed that all Eldskeep's tales were sprinkled with bluster. Especially given his paunchy figure. That he was a blowhard, though a likeable one. Box and Goola still thought this for sure. However, his actions in the heat of the moment were surprisingly impressive. In all the time since the grim event he'd barely thought about the part Eldskeep had played. So focused was he on his own grisly actions. If Eldskeep hadn't dealt so ably with the other two men, they would've surely both been murdered, or at least violently robbed, he thought. This realisation instantly made him feel a little better. *"They were the attackers. We were just defending ourselves. It was three against two."* He loosened up a bit, and though it didn't quite allay his guilty aches and fears, it allowed him to put those thoughts further back in his mind. He also felt a touch of sadness that Eldskeep would be parting ways with them once they'd reached Aunt Ellever's house - heading off further into the Maiden Land countryside for some other blustering reason. The strange, but larger-than-life person, that he'd gone through the experience with would be gone, and he'd just be alone. Carrying the secret with him, on his own more slender shoulders. He looked at Box and envied her buoyant innocence.

"Where's the tower??" she quizzed, still looking eagerly around to spot it.

Eldskeep sensed another opportunity to share his worldly wisdom. *"The tower ..the actual maiden's tower?"* came his reply, with a touch of incredulity.

"Yeah, the tower! Where is it?"

"..*There isn't one.*"

"Not a great name then, is it," noted Julen, beginning to inspect the skyline himself.

"It's a very old name," illuminated Eldskeep, now in full raconteur mode, "It's said that a very long time ago. A very, *very* long time ago. In the time even before written records began. When the mainland used to rule this area as a fiefdom - or so it's said. There was a huge stone tower next to the harbour, where the beautiful girls of the Maiden Lands would be imprisoned, before being shipped as slaves across to the mainland. The tower, they say, was destroyed and smashed to pieces by the inhabitants, who rebelled, and who, ever since, have never been slaves again ..though they do get leaned upon from time to time."

"So no tower then."

"No tower. Hence it may be worth looking for a place to stay instead."

The interesting tale slightly made up for the lack of a tower, and Box imagined the scene in her mind as they wandered on. Talk then turned to how many more days' travel it would be before they reached Aunt Ellever's house, in the not-too-far-off Maiden Land countryside. The lush verdure of the city already making them feel halfway there. The patches of grass and the dotted trees between the shops and public houses, some heavy with fruit which they couldn't quite identify in the darkness. The flower baskets and window boxes, spilling over with colourful petals. This all framed an impressive canal that cut through the heart of the city. Its slow running water barely visible in the evening dimness, with its reflection only flickering into view under the street lamps, or from the low light of a window or opened door. As Julen tagged along, behind the other three, he felt a sudden sense of being watched as they tracked along the water. He moved his hand to his sword and turned around to take a glancing panoramic view. High above, on a flat rooftop he saw some familiar eyes looking down at him. A woman, shrouded. Her silhouette barely apparent against the blackness. As he looked she instantly dropped to the rooftop floor and disappeared from view. Julen kept looking as he walked, but she was gone. He said nothing to the others, as they headed to the small cosy tavern that would be their bed for the night. Pretty soon they would be at Aunt Ellever's house.

Chapter Forty-One

The King of Tunid and King Mizmeam surveyed the preparations that were being made on the edge of the Western Ocean. This particular port was further north than Keneeshka, and as a consequence the weather was brisk and blustery. Not far from the ice-capped central mountains it had become the busiest dockyard in the Southern Kingdom - mainly due to its proximity to the dense forests that surrounded it, which were slowly being eaten into by the constant demand for more ships.

Both rulers were impressed with the rate of work as they watched on - the large ships settled in the dock now being supplied with heavy wooden crossbows, much like the one used at Sails' End. Ready to head out to engage the enemy in the choppy waters, just beyond their field of view. Likewise, weapons and devices were being carted south by road to fortify the rest of the coastline in a similar manner. With trains of horse and wagon trundling the fully assembled pieces of kit southbound, aided by slaves and yet more soldiers. The only thing not sufficiently supplied to the King of Tunid's satisfaction being the quantities of oil, which were needed to maximise the incendiary attacks. This meant such things would have to be used sparingly until more could be supplied. Howbeit, efforts were underway to fix this problem too, and large amphorae, sealed and filled with oil, were beginning to arrive from the interior of the country. Along with rope, other materials and the huge wagons of food needed to feed the countless men aboard the ships.

"Prince Aralak is on his way south, too," commented King Mizmeam, as he looked out across the blue-grey skyline, now bespeckled with tiny drips of rain, "He'll then leave for the Upper Desert from one of the safer ports."

"Things are picking up pace nicely," noted the King of Tunid in happy reply, "I have a feeling the tide is turning. If we can get the Western Islanders to exhaust themselves, we can then begin the long process of putting them back in their box." He then patted one of the large wooden crossbows with his hand, as it was being readied to be lifted atop a grand-looking vessel. "It'll be a relief when some semblance of normality returns."

King Mizmeam shared the sentiment, and looked on with satisfaction. Unbeknown to him the King of Tunid was already drawing up alternative plans as well though. Plans that Drua Maleeva was currently putting into motion. A secret line of communication was being opened up with the enemy, firmly focused on securing the return of the king's son. With the aim of perhaps even striking a deal: the independence of the Western Islands would be recognised, in return of the boy, along with the secret of the all too-important black powder. A secret the various alchemists, apothecaries, blacksmiths and other experimenters on the mainland had so far failed to unmask.

For the King of Tunid, keeping the mainland kingdoms in the dark was crucial, and he thought little of doing so. There were no feelings of betrayal or guilt. It was just what needed to be done. It was essential to make sure that all three mainland kingdoms were pressing the war effort as much as possible. It was also essential that the Western Islanders be in as weak a position as possible. Everything had to be leveraged in favour of the future synthesis he

had in mind. For he now sensed an opportunity to manage this dangerous technological innovation that had come to pass. Black powder heralded a new age, requiring new arrangements. Originally, the situation in the west had necessitated that the mainland kingdoms take part in the quest to find its secrets - to stop the Western Islanders from overturning the entire world order. However, allowing these kingdoms to also have access to such a powerful weapon would perhaps be more foolish. So now he sensed a way to neutralise this fear.

If it was just the Tunidans and the Brynnyfirdians that held the secret, a balance could be struck. He could then, in turn, keep the Western Isles in check with the threat that he would furnish the mainland with the secret if they ever strove to upset it. The one major danger to this plan only being his worry that the Brynnyfirdians were simply too unruly to conspire in such a way. Plus, it meant allowing them a prominence and power on the world map that they had seldom had before. Elevating them from a rogue tribe of seafarers, to an exponentially bigger player. Still, they were achieving that status now without such compact, so a lesser devil it was, and it appealed to him much more than the brute force policy he'd so far been pursuing. Especially as it would mean the return of his much-loved son. It would be a fine balancing act though, and at present the sea-war against the Western Islanders was the primary thing that needed executing.

As he paced along the coast with King Mizmeam, making further inspections he also thought about King Brijsk, the Northern King, who had by this point headed home to oversee the naval build up on his own side of the vast icy mountains. In previous meetings Brijsk had been open to an accord with the Western Isles, so perhaps he could be utilised if a time came when a ceasefire would be needed. He'd need to make absolutely certain that the Northern Kingdom and the Western Islanders didn't get too cosy though.

Chapter Forty-Two

"Apples," perked up Goola.

"*What?*"

"Apples. Look. They were the fruit on the trees by the canal."

As the four left the inn and began to head off towards the city's edge, and then on to Aunt Ellever's house beyond, they once again beheld the scenery of the city. In the raw daylight it looked even cleaner and more attractive than it did the night before, everything having a peaceful and leafy appearance. The apples on the trees red, and perfectly round.

They'd enjoyed their short time in Maiden's Tower, it almost had a holiday feel. In the Eastern Kingdom they'd felt the impulse to travel quickly, to push on with a purpose, but here they drifted along at leisure. Without a worry about making good time. As they followed the route of the canal they saw a few small boats wafting along. There were also people out and about, passing by. The daily business of the city visible in their faces. It was warm too, and the heat of the sun added a laziness to the sense of time. The drowsy speed of the four, as they lulled along, making them look a little like vagabonds in contrast to the more acclimatised city folk. With only Julen, still slightly agitated with the same worries that had disturbed him the night before, displaying any sort of unnecessary energy.

After walking not too far they sat down for a brief break. Dropping onto a grassy lawn peppered with white clover and dandelions. Eldskeep sat down with a heavy thump, crushing and arching the grass blades and flower stems beneath him. He then edged himself over to lean his back up against a large, but gangly apple tree. Box lay on her back and looked up at the white sleepy clouds, whilst Goola lay front down on her belly, looking over at the puddle-like surface of the canal water. Her head propped up on her hands, her bare elbows pressed into the springy grass.

Julen sat, then lay down, then got up again. Then kneeled, then finally sat.

After a long, dreamlike ten minutes Goola rolled over, reached into her bag, and pulled out a crumpled up piece of paper: the map - the map that Grandpa Taxilian had sketched for them all those many weeks ago. She unfurled it and placed it on the grass. Trying to smooth out all the creases with her hand. The tattiness making it look almost ancient in comparison to the fresh, full-coloured lawn. As she smoothed it fully Box and Eldskeep lent in to look. Goola traced her finger across the map to illustrate the long journey they'd made. The detour up to Fools' Harbour, then back round through the flower-laden countryside. Finally, down on to Maiden's Tower. The large detour diverging from the straight line that Grandpa Taxilian had pencilled in originally.

"From west to east," noted Goola, "..from colder to hotter." The summery weather they were now experiencing giving this observation an added emphasis.

"I've been thinking," she then picked up, "Perhaps it's as cold at the very centre, as it is hot at the very edge. So maybe there's no heat whatsoever at the centre, just as there is nothing but fire at the very edge ..so nothing can exist there. Meaning there can be no *Middlemap*." As she said this last bit she looked towards Box and Julen with a teasing smile, knowing she was tearing down a myth they were both so emotionally invested in.

Box acknowledged this slight jab with an impressed, but dismissive, "Hmm." Julen, however, didn't hear it. Lost in his own world, staring down at the canal. Watching the bright, but murky browns and greens of the reflected trees, along with the wobbly, shimmering reflections of the buildings on the other side of the canal. For a fleeting, half-sleeping moment he thought he saw the masked woman once more. Her cloaked image, upside down, hanging bat-like from the roof of a white stone town house, mirrored on the water's surface. The spectre snapped him into wakefulness, and he quickly looked up, but there were just the white walls of the building, and the clear blue sky.

"Julen," shouted Goola, drawing his attention, as if to wake him more so, "There's no Middlemap! Did you hear that?" Julen looked nonplussed, he did at least return to the conversation though, if only to listen.

"I've told you," insisted Eldskeep, re-taking seniority, "I have it on excellent record that Middlemap exists. Just look at all the riches in this kingdom alone. Now imagine the entire wealth of the three major kingdoms ..including everything they've stolen. It must be hidden away somewhere."

"Have there ever been any floods?" asked Julen ponderously, as he stared back down at the water.

"*Floods?*"

"Y'know, with the icy mountain tops melting maybe ..and I don't mean small floods, or the avalanches we sometimes hear about. I mean big floods. Like, really huge deluges."

"I've never heard of anything like that happening," commented Eldskeep, surprised at the question, "..at least I don't think that's ever happened." He then pulled an apple from the tree he'd been sitting leaning against and took a bite from it. As the tree branch sprang back a few more apples fell down and rolled along the grass.

"Should we get moving then?", he asked.

With that Goola carelessly scrumpled the map back up and stuffed it into her bag. The thought of finally pulling herself back up to her feet draining her a little in the tiring heat. Nevertheless, it also reminded her that they were now on the final leg of a huge adventure. An adventure that they'd nearly completed. The sense of completion giving her weary legs an extra push.

The four dreamy wayfarers got up, and continued on to Aunt Ellever's house.

Chapter Forty-Three

Naked from the waist up, and with a shemagh-type headscarf wrapped about her head, she was kneeling in the soft warm mud. Almost in a half-sleep, her eyes closed with calm poise. The headscarf was an orangey, terracotta colour, and in between the rag-like tassels of the fabric, and the few silky strands of hair that hung down upon her forehead, a branching rivulet of bluish blood could be seen beneath her grimy, but clear skin. Streaming down from beneath the headscarf, then fading from view just above the corner of her left eyebrow.

A large waterfall, that from her vantage point was out of sight, hissed in the distance. Its light misty spray, which she could feel on her skin, offset by the heat of the desert that lay just beyond the slither of lush, but muddy greenery on which she now lived. Hemmed in, oasis-like, between the vast ocean and the endless sand. As she opened her eyes and looked outwards from the shallow cave she was sheltered in, she could see the dark sandy beach down in the distance. Along with a small wooden boat tied to a post, where the yellow sand met a small headland. In her hands was a green stone. She looked down at it impatiently, as if eager to do something ..but she knew it was not yet the right time.

She closed her eyes again and started rocking back and forth on her knees, clutching the stone. She then began to hum and sing. Uttering strange words and incantations. Her voice a piercing echo in the cave, against the bassy backdrop of the hissing waterfall.

Chapter Forty-Four

It was the second time Liofia had seen Julen, third if she included the incident in Patina. Not that she had any idea who either he nor Eldskeep were. From her elevated position, perched up high upon the roof tops she'd witnessed the whole event in Patina. From start to finish. From the moment the first assailant attacked Julen, to the moment that he returned the favour, piercing him with deadly aim through the heart. She'd seen other incidents like that on her incognito night-time wanderings. The city was a dangerous place. However, there was something about the incident with Julen and Eldskeep that struck her more fully. Perhaps it was the despair she'd seen etched on Julen's face after he'd plunged the sword point in. It may also have had something to do with their slightly atypical clothing. With Julen in particular looking very much like an out of town country boy. Something she'd picked up on quite easily; giving the pair a mild air of naïve otherness, piquing her royal curiosity.

As she saw the pair again by the canal, along with Box and Goola, it piqued her curiosity further. It had been a lonely journey since her fugitive escape from Castle Tori, and she latched onto these familiar faces keenly. Partly out of boredom. Covertly following the gang since she'd first spotted them traipsing the streets. It gave her something to do; to pass her time in exodus - but also, subconsciously, it gave her a strange sense of reassurance. It was something familiar in a foreign place, and though she'd never exchanged words, nor knew anything about them, she felt a degree of empathy. They'd made the same journey she had, and their histories were now a tiny bit entwined. Though she obviously felt this more so than they did.

As she raised herself up from her crouched position, she peeped out over the small wall of the terraced roof. Trying to espy in which direction they were now heading. She'd always preferred to tiptoe around by rooftop. Enjoying the lofty vista it offered. Even as a fugitive she felt like a princess looking down on her people. Though now, seeing that the four travellers were beginning to head beyond the city's edge, she realised she'd have to surrender that vantage point, and follow on at street level. Hugging the peopled ground. She quickly crossed from one rooftop to the next, then, with agile lightness, dropped onto the stairwell below. The weight of her cloak, still heavy with jewels, anchoring her body as she landed. A cold breeze nipped at her skin as she headed out onto the street. The lazy clamminess of the morning now overtaken by overcast clouds and the anticipation of drizzle.

The change in weather added a slight urgency to her steps. To make herself less conspicuous she pulled down the hood of her cloak to reveal her loosely tied hair. She now looked like a young woman rushing home to get out of the rain. Not unlike the other passers-by that were angling about in different directions, trying to shield themselves from the oncoming bluster. Julen, and the other three, ambled along an adjacent street, running parallel to the one she was now walking down. Turning onto a little side street, she quickly cut across to theirs. Once again she could see her quarry. They were heading down the long road, and out

towards the wooded green on the hem of the city. She kept a clear distance behind as she followed their lead.

Chapter Forty-Five

As the four travellers tramped ever onwards, the streets gave way to scattered little settlements and farmsteads. Increasingly they could feel the wind and the rain and the openness. Along with the mud. The plan was to just keep walking until they reached Aunt Ellever's house. The expectation being that they'd reach their destination later that day, or, if not then, certainly by early the next morning. Had the weather stayed clement, that one final night beneath the stars would have made a whimsical final campout. But, alas, now, with the depressing change of season, it wasn't quite so appealing. So after pushing on a further half an hour through the muddy bluster they spotted a disused barn at the bottom of an equally empty field, and decided to take shelter.

It was sparse, but surprisingly dry and comfortable. Meaning yet again, the four had found an opportunity to put their feet up and waste some time. Julen, who'd eaten barely anything all day, suddenly noticed the pang of hunger as they stopped. The others had collected apples, anticipating they might stand as a handy snack, but he hadn't thought to bother. Occupied as he was with his thoughts and daydreaming. Eldskeep, pleased to show off his own foresight, opened his bag and rolled six or seven apples across the straw-covered floor. He then took the bag, padded it into a pillow shape, and lay back on the straw himself. As he closed his eyes the crunch of Julen biting the first apple cracked and echoed slightly in the airy barn. The sound of the rain pittering down creating a distinct divide between the calm inside and the downpour without.

As Box and Goola set themselves down on the straw, Julen, having finished the first apple, walked over to the open door of the barn, then threw the apple core as far as he possibly could across the wet field. He enjoyed throwing it. The isolation of the place allowing him to get some aggression out. As he started on the second apple he crunched it extra quick, so he could throw that one too. Hoping he could throw it even further than the last. As he turned back round to face the others he noticed that Eldskeep had fallen fast asleep. He then went back to the barn door and sent the second apple core speeding through the air. As he threw it he heard a rustle and a clank at the back end of the barn. Turning again he could see a goat, with treacle-coloured fur, that had wandered in from round the back.

Box and Goola instantly leapt to their feet, and headed towards it. Gleefully stroking and petting the damp, but adorable creature. Julen wondered where it had come from and inspected the other end of the barn to see if more were on their way. The entrance at the back just led onto the same field the barn was situated in. Further beyond which were just more fields, presumably where the stray goat had arrived from. Except for the few goats and cows dotted about very far off in the distance he could see no others though, so he wandered back inside, where he found Box slicing an apple in half against the blade of her sword. She gave half to the goat, then took a bite out of the other half herself. Julen, finally feeling a touch of tiredness, sat down next to them, stroking the back of the goat as he did. The damp fur feeling slightly more disgusting to him than it did to the other two. The goat bleated, happy with the food and attention. Then, at that moment, Julen thought he heard another rustling sound in the barn.

"I heard it too," noted Box, as she saw him turn his head in reaction.

Julen stepped back up to take a second look around, thinking perhaps another goat had wandered in to find its friend.

"I think it's coming from up there," gestured Box, nodding towards the small ledge at the top of the barn. "It's probably just a bird."

"I'll check."

Julen then started climbing the short wooden ladder that led to the top. Even from where Box and Goola were sat it was clear that there was nothing but a few bales of hay up there. As Julen reached the ledge he could see much the same. Hay bales, stacked two and three high, leading back into the wooden beams of the roof. As he walked the ledge to check behind the bales he heard another slight rustle. He put his hand to his sword in readiness, though he felt mildly stupid for doing so. Then, he popped his head tentatively round to inspect the final little corner. Only to be greeted by the sight of a masked and hooded woman, crouched hidden in the hay. He took a shocked step back and instinctively drew his sword.

"Don't kill me as well," quipped Liofia, calmly.

Julen, startled, paused for a moment, not sure what to say.

"I'll come down," she said gently, picking up on how dumbfounded Julen was, and realising that she'd have to lead the conversation. Julen then headed back down the ladder, still dumbfounded, sword still in hand. Box and Goola stared puzzled at the person following him. As Julen reached the bottom Liofia put one foot on the ladder, took another step down a rung, then dropped, squirrel-like to the ground.

"Who are you?" quizzed Julen. As he said this he discreetly gave a nudging kick to Eldskeep, to try to wake him. He remained soundly asleep.

"I'm .."

Just as Liofia opened her mouth three men from the Queen's Guard burst into the barn. Swords raised. Followed by the two more coming through from the back. This noisy commotion finally woke Eldskeep. He surveyed the scene around him as he tried to lift the haze from his eyes.

"Just put down your sword, Julen."

Julen dropped his sword to the ground.

Chapter Forty-Six

Box, Goola, Julen, and the now wide awake Eldskeep, found themselves locked, and confused, in one of Queen Aglaia's dungeons. Princess Liofia had been separated and taken elsewhere, for reasons they knew not. The arrest hadn't been especially rough-handed, and the stone-walled cell they found themselves in wasn't overly dingy or despairing. Yet still, it was a strange and uncomfortable experience. They'd accepted their fate peacefully, though Box, Julen and Liofia in particular had protested verbally all the way back to Maiden's Tower. Vociferously questioning the guards as to what was going on, and why they were being taken when they were completely innocent. Answers that weren't forthcoming, with the guards speaking nothing but basic instruction.

As they sat on the cold, hard floor - with the exception of Julen, who, as usual, energetically paced back and forth - they pondered their situation. Box and Goola had little clue whatsoever as to what was going on, but both Julen and Eldskeep were somewhat more suspecting. Though the involvement of the masked woman, who they were still yet to know the identity of, confused things further. *Had she been helping the queen's guards to find them?*

"You know what all this is about, don't you?" intoned Goola calmly, in the direction of Eldskeep, but also looking over at Julen as she said it. Julen finally sat down and put his face in his hands, as both pretended not to hear the question.

"What exactly happened in Patina?" she pressed. Eldskeep and Julen gave a glancing look at each other.

"The scrape we got into wasn't quite as mundane as we first told you," admitted Eldskeep. sheepishly. He then looked again at Julen, who was now staring at the ground.

"Do you want to tell them, or shall I?"

He paused, and then, assuming Julen's silence would continue, began to share the story. Just as he was about to speak, however, Julen broke in.

"I killed someone."

"What?!"

"It wasn't really my fault, ..they attacked us. We were innocent ..though I probably shouldn't have quite stabbed him like that. I should've just maybe tried to injure him, or something."

"They were very violent criminals," stated Eldskeep, authoritatively, but in a hushed tone, aware that the guards could be overhearing, "They would've killed us both had they gained the opportunity. Unfortunately for them they weren't quite the match." He did a little swooshing sword motion with his hand as he said this, unable to resist dramatising the skirmish. "We put them to the sword, quite literally ..you now see why we had to leave."

Neither Box, nor Goola, knew what to say, and their obvious shock only made Julen feel worse. Box got up and walked over to the wall of the cell, running her fingers along the stonework. Trying to process the information. The roughness of the hard stone wall physically cementing her feelings of imprisonment. High above was a small, narrow window in the wall. She looked up at it, then looked down at the rays of sunlight that passed through to illuminate a rectangular patch on the ground. After a moment's more reflection she wandered back over to Julen. "It wasn't your fault, they attacked you," she said sympathetically. Goola nodded in agreement.

"Personally, I think we should all just keep quiet about this," whispered Eldskeep, still speaking with a hush of concern, "Our arrest here could have nothing whatsoever to do with that."

"*..But she saw us*"

"Who?!"

"Her ..the woman who was just with us. The woman in the mask. She saw it all. That must be why she'd followed us."

"Perhaps," conceded Eldskeep, "..but still, say nothing unless asked. Play it as innocent as possible. Act as though you have no idea why you're in here."

They all nodded in agreement, accepting Eldskeep's advice, though Julen deemed it futile anyway. Deliberately putting the issue to one side they all felt the urge to still keep talking, but there was little to say. So silence slowly overcame the chamber. Box lay down on the floor and tried to position herself so she could get a view through the little window, hoping for some distraction, or outlook on the world, but all she could see was a slither of blue sky. As they sat despondently in the cool dungeon, waiting to discover their destiny, Princess Liofia was high above them, in much more luxurious surroundings. The queen's guards leading her up a long spiralling staircase. After reaching the top the guards led her into a room. They then left, closing the door behind them. As Princess Liofia stood there, unsure what to expect, a tall woman walked in, accompanied by three small dogs.

Chapter Forty-Seven

As Queen Aglaia entered the room Princess Liofia recognised her immediately. She'd seen her before at ceremonies and on other such occasions, though the last time was many years ago, when she was but a child. She'd even spoken to her briefly, but only in the most formal of ways. Liofia was royal herself, of course, but in the presence of Queen Aglaia she felt something of a commoner. Even in the more casual setting she was now in, the queen looked every bit a monarch. Her posture and general demeanour having a deliberate and unrelenting regal air to it. She breathed monarchy, and never was there a moment when she didn't behave monarch-like in the presence of others. Even other royals. Had Liofia been completely unfamiliar with her she would've easily guessed who it was she was now standing before. The three little dogs - *four*, *five* and *six* - the famous companions of this most peculiar queen also being something of a giveaway.

Unfortunately for Liofia the queen also recognised who she was too.

"I've heard all about your issues, Liofia ..Princess of the Eastern Kingdom".

She stated Liofia's title, as if to emphasise how certain she was of her identity. Liofia curtsied in response, though she felt a little inappropriate doing so, given how she was dressed. Her long cloak muddled and discoloured by her travels; along with her face and hair, which were now genuinely grubby and dirty, in comparison to the artificial grubbiness she'd doused herself in when she first left Patina.

"My spies are everywhere," continued the queen, in a purposeful tone, "I've known your whereabouts from the minute you arrived on these shores. I have some sympathy though. There are not many like us in this world."

The queen then paused and glanced up at a large portrait of herself that hung on the wall.

"Obviously you can't stay here. It's not in my interest to have a fugitive princess on the run in my kingdom. Especially if it's discovered that I'm aware of you being here. Plus, we can't guarantee your safety, and I will not be held responsible for it." She then paused again, being careful to suppress any appearance of emotion or kindness, "I should really notify your father, but I'd rather not do that, so I'm willing to turn a blind eye, if you leave with quick effect."

Liofia nodded, surprised and pleased to receive the leniency.

"You'll have to take the two children and the young man with you. Likewise, you can take that old beagle Eldsheep. My guards will escort you to the coast ..from there you can take a ship to wherever you please. I think it would be wise to return straight home, but I'll leave that up to you."

The three little dogs by this point were sniffing around at Liofia's long cloak and jumping up at her. As the muddy hem brushed against their clean white fur she feared the mud would transfer across. She bent down to stroke the head of one, then curtsied to the Queen again, daring not to speak.

"It's best you leave tonight ..if there's anything you need before then, or for the journey, just ask."

The queen then called for her guards, who escorted Liofia back out the door, down the long twisting staircase, and finally to the dim dungeon that contained her four new friends.

Chapter Forty-Eight

"We all have to leave."

As Liofia said this there was a momentary pause, as Box, Goola and Julen tried to grasp her meaning. Slightly puzzled as to why she'd been brought back to their cell.

"We can't leave," replied Box, stating the obvious.

"No, we can - and we have to. We've been told we have to leave the Maiden Lands. We'll be taken to the coast. From there we can head by sea to wherever we please."

"So we've been banished," observed Eldskeep, grinning.

"Correct."

The other three still looked confused.

"But we can't leave. We need to head to Aunt Ellever's house. We were almost there when we got arrested."

These words felt hollow as Goola uttered them.

"Why must we leave?" Julen then interrupted, suspecting he knew the reason, "Did you tell them what you'd seen in Patina?"

"I didn't tell them anything, but they probably know already and don't care anyway."

"So you told them."

"No," laughed Liofia, taking a degree of satisfaction in how wrong the accusation was.

"So why do you have to leave too?" asked Goola, more politely, "And why are we leaving with you? Are you escorting us back to Patina?"

"We're definitely not going back to Patina," laughed Liofia, again enjoying the fact that she was so much more clued up than they were. "I have to leave for my own reasons. I may tell you on the journey out of here, if I choose to - there'll be plenty of time. As for you lot, you'll be free to go off on your own travels when we reach the mainland. I'll probably be wanting to part ways with you by then anyway."

"But who are you? And why should we listen to you?" queried Julen again, getting evermore wound up by the enigmatic answers she was giving.

Liofia looked at him.

"Perhaps I will tell them what happened in Patina, after all."

She enjoyed winding him up, but as his cheeks flushed red with annoyance, she began to take pity. Conversely, the light humour made Box and Goola both warm to her, and they felt an instinctive liking. Albeit, still, the puzzlement remained.

"But why should we trust you?" Goola asked, repeating Julen's question. Her calm dolour eliciting a less sardonic response.

"You don't have to trust me, but we all have to leave. It's a royal commandment, from Queen Aglaia herself. I'm no different to you. We just have to go. That's it. If you don't take it from me you can take it straight from the guards when they come to collect us."

"So who are you?" quipped Box.

"You can guess on the journey."

Resigned that more answers weren't forthcoming, Box tried to weigh up the situation in her mind. The realisation that they now would not be going to Aunt Ellever's house hadn't quite sunk in, though an instant sense of disappointment came at the thought. As for returning back to the mainland? Where would they be heading? *Would they just go home?* What else could they do? It was such an odd set of circumstances, and it left her feeling disorientated. Goola, likewise, felt the same. Here they were, sat in a dungeon, far from home. Julen had killed someone. It was almost dream-like. For Julen himself this was even more so the case.

The guards entered. By now night-time was fully falling, and the only illumination came from the oil lamps dotted around the dingy dungeon hollow. The little window, high above Box's head, offering nothing but the darkness of the night.

"Where shall we be heading off to then?" wondered Eldskeep, as they were escorted out and down a long passageway, towards the crisp starry night.

"I say the Northern Kingdom," stated Princess Liofia, with confidence.

"I agree," concurred Eldskeep.

The other three, by now stoic in their endless uncertainty, didn't try to argue. The gang of four now a gang of five, as they travelled to the port, to hitch another ship back across the Eastern Ocean.

Chapter Forty-Nine

The boy, aka, Prince Estorie, the son of the King of Tunid, was well taken care of on Brynnfirdia. Living almost like a family member - albeit a quiet family member - in the household of Colm. The weather was cold and biting, but he nevertheless felt just about comfortable on the island. Inwardly, his plan was to simply endure the situation as best he could, until the situation was resolved and he could return home. As that was unlikely to be anytime soon he accepted the goodwill he was given with politeness, though he still spoke little. His compatriot, Coulema Galina, received hospitality as well, though without quite the esteem. By day, he was allowed to reside in relative comfort with Prince Estorie and Colm. The shackles nevertheless remaining around his ankles - just in case. At night, he was guarded and imprisoned, not too far away, in an adjacent dwelling.

As the windy day began to end, and night began to drop onto the world, Galina finished the last gulp of his wine. It tasted harsh, and not as sweet as the wines he once enjoyed back on Tunida, but during the cold weeks he had grown accustomed to it. As he placed the goblet down on the heavy wood table his two guards, who had both also been enjoying their drink, came over and led him back to his quarters. Saying a cordial goodnight, not just to Prince Estorie, but also Colm - who he'd grown to admire somewhat - he left the fire-warmed room and headed out into the darkness.

As he left Colm continued the conversation, speaking to the young prince as if speaking out loud to himself. Knowing that, as the prince offered so few words, replies would be seldom forthcoming.

"You're a good-natured child," he observed, "And, I trust, like your father, you also have younger brothers. Will you be able to do what your father did? It would quite surprise me." As he spoke this, a young girl walked into the room - one of Colm's own grandchildren - carrying a large pitcher of water. Which she proceeded to heat gently over the fire.

The young prince, who was now watching the girl warm the water, didn't answer.

"It's a strange thing. Your friend Galina, likewise, seems an honourable man. Not what I was expecting from such a calculating tribe. Your father - in fact, your family in general - has waged war on this island for centuries. Usually it's the mainland kingdoms that do the actual warring, of course, but still, that impulse comes from your island ..and the fear from there too. A kingdom - so ruthless, it is said, that even the king himself must kill his own brother to come to the throne."

At this point another granddaughter of Colm's came into the room. This time with a small baby, who the two girls proceeded to bathe. The first girl testing the water she'd warmed dotingly on her arm before using it to wash the child.

"Yet, here you are ..a gentle boy, no different to my own grandchildren. How is it possible? Your father, a cold murderer. A murderer of his own brother, no less. How has he produced a child such as yourself? Have I missed something?"

"It was his duty."

These rare words of reply brought silence to the room. The two girls looked up as he vocalised them, suddenly paying attention, but only to the sound, not to the content. He spoke so infrequently that his voice had a novelty. As if a bird had landed unnoticed upon the window ledge, then had caught them off-guard with its piercing squawk. The words surprised Colm a little too, but landed in a way that they didn't for the two young girls.

"Duty?" he wondered - again, almost aloud to himself, "A strange duty. In a fit of anger, yes, I can see it. I can imagine someone killing a brother in a fit of rage. Or over a woman, maybe. Or some other feud ..but in such a cold and crafted way? I can't quite imagine it."

"If you can imagine a man killing for a woman, then why not for a whole kingdom," came the crisp reply from the prince. His scarce, bird-like words once again piercing and unsettling the toastie air of the room. "A kingdom is filled with many women," he went on, now with a natural confidence, "Isn't it more perverse to sacrifice one person for a small matter, than to sacrifice a person for an entire kingdom of people?"

The weight of the answer felt disproportionate to the previous lack of speech. It likewise stood in stark contrast to the youthful appearance of the young, island prince.

"You may have to do it one day," pressed Colm, admiring the argument, though not convinced by it.

"It will be my duty."

Prince Estorie then stared pensively towards the rosy-cheeked and contented child being bathed by the two girls. Colm, in turn, looking down at him, observing the precocious seriousness.

"Shame," he lamented, "..If you could end such practices we could have peace. We could avoid these wars."

"Or, perhaps there'd be more war and destruction."

As Prince Estorie spoke this last sentence, one of the girls, who'd been listening a little more intently to the conversation than the other girl, looked over, slightly puzzled. Colm was also a tad intrigued by the reply. Yet, as the two girls finished bathing and wrapping the child, before the red, crackling fire, he purposely changed the conversation. It was getting very late, and such serious talk needed to give way to lighter things ..and a goodnight's sleep for everyone in the household.

Chapter Fifty

The woodlands of the Southern Kingdom always had a slightly desolate feel. However, this did mean they were a good place to find a degree of sanctuary. It also meant they were an ideal location for private conversation. Away from prying eyes, court gossips and anyone else that may be watching or listening. The coldness and the drizzle only amplifying this sense of isolation.

Seaspell, who understood only too well that he was set to be given important information of some kind, was ushered into a small clearing by his mother. She sat him down on a small tree stump in its centre.

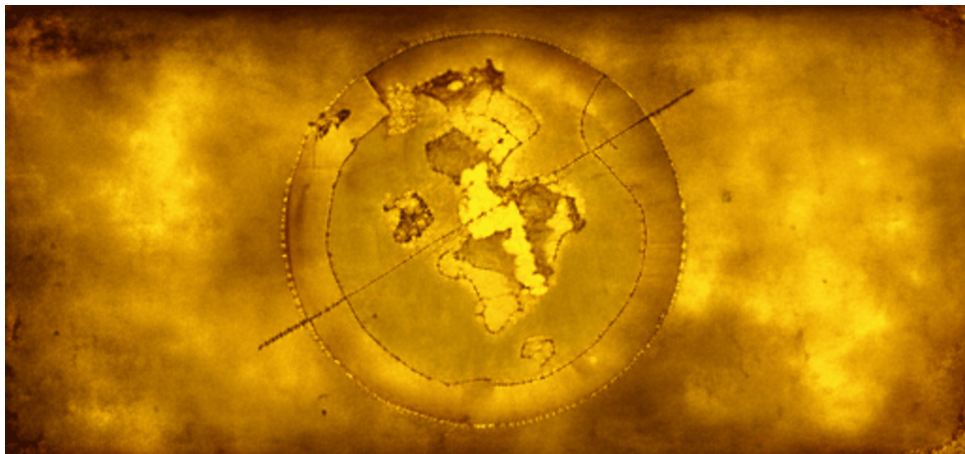
"I'll be heading to the Western Isles tomorrow."

Seaspell already knew this. His position, constantly at his mother's side, meant he always had a front row seat to whatever she was involved with. However, up until this point he hadn't been sure if he himself would be accompanying her. Now he realised that he would be staying.

His mother looked around again to see if anyone was near. Though, secreted away so deeply in the wet forest, it was highly unlikely anyone would be.

"I need you to hold the fort while I'm gone, my little one. But, before I go, I think it's time you learnt the things you need to know to do that fully. Just in case I don't return. You know Prince Aralak is heading to the Upper Desert very soon. Well, when he gets there he will be the victim of a great deception. An important deception. He will be taken down into a great tunnel beneath the desert. After a long journey in darkness through it, he will then be shown what he believes to be the Maiden Lands."

Maleeva then took out a neatly folded piece of paper from the breast of her blouse. Unfolding it to reveal a map showing the great circle of the world, with a long line running through it, bisecting both the Upper Desert and the Maiden Lands.



"He will believe he has travelled in a straight line from the Upper Desert to the poppy fields of the Maiden Lands. As if, by going off the one side of the world, he will simply arrive at the other." She then gave a small laugh, looking around once more to again make sure of their seclusion.

"It's by this deception that all the order in the world is kept - and all the peace - at least as much peace as is possible. By keeping the rulers of this world in this fantasy, we keep them disorientated and docile. The sense of status the arcane knowledge gives them keeping them content in their privilege. Bonded in a brotherhood of secret truth. Prince Aralak will be travelling back the way he came too. As neither him, nor his father, nor any of the other princes and kings, ever had the sense to insist upon travelling the full circle round. We tell them it must be this way. That if he was seen travelling from the Maiden Lands and back to Keneeshka it would risk giving away such a precious secret."

Maleeva laughed with disbelief as she finished relaying all this. Seaspell looked up and simply nodded as he listened. He then looked down at the map that he now held in his hands, before giving it back to his mother. As he did this a loud rush of wind rattled through the trees, rustling the paper. The long black cloak Maleeva wore billowing in the gale.

"You can tell no one these things."

She then reeled off a list of other treasurers - nearly all near or distant family members - who were likewise in possession of this secret she was now sharing. A roll call of people Seaspell was already well familiar with.

"What I'm telling you now is very serious," she intoned, "If you tell anyone outside of this circle of people you will be killed. I weep to say this to my only boy, but it's the simple truth. A truth I know you understand. The King of Tunid may seem a pleasant man, but forget not, he, like all his forebears, murdered his own brother just to take the throne. No heart is shown when affairs of state are at hand. Good rulers are ruthless when they have to be, and such acts of violence have a purpose: to keep secrets such as these - to keep peace upon the world."

As Seaspell soaked in all this he noticed a red fox slinking through the woodland. Its muddy paws silently gliding over the wet grass. As Maleeva turned around to see what he was looking at it became aware of their presence and sped off into the undergrowth; spooked to find it was being watched in this lonely location. Maleeva folded the map and placed it back inside her clothing.

"Keep a watchful eye on things while I'm gone."

She then hugged Seaspell tightly, before they returned to the bustle of the kingdom.

Chapter Fifty-One

Prince Reach had been in a deep state of despair since Prince Estorie had been captured. The decision to shroud him away to safety by sea was a colossal mistake, and it weighed heavily. In an effort to lighten the anxiety and guilt he focused on the one thing he could do: repair the kingdom. Busy efforts had been made to fix much of the damage that had been done to Woodville by the Brynnfyrdian raiders. He'd also made sure that efforts to replace the ships that had been lost in the carnage were well underway.

Now, as he walked through the streets of the great city, the bells of the Ethereal Tower rang out once more. Over the weeks that had passed the bells had rang out mainly for the deaths of the men lost in the attacks. However, today they were ringing out for a wholly different reason. It was the Day of Water. An annual celebration, where the regenerative feminine aspect, personified in the person of the Queen of Tunida herself, was venerated. Throngs of people were gathered on the streets, and a carnival atmosphere was in the air.

Relations between Prince Reach and the Queen of Tunida had been frosty since the abduction of her eldest prince. So he was not looking forward to having to spend time in her presence during the day's pageantry. Normally, on Tunida, women were suppliant, taking on roles antipolar to those of the men. Calm, forbearance, patience, quiet poise - all the hallmarks of ideal female behaviour. Naturally, the queen, as the premier woman in the land, embodied this to the height of perfection. Her entire life lived under such a purpose. Understandably though, now, in private, her anger and grief had occasionally spilt over in the aftermath of the events. With Prince Reach the focus of these rare moments of frustration. Nevertheless, in public she masked her sorrow, fulfilling her role as the symbolic vessel of the nation.

As the bells finished ringing out she entered out onto the balcony. In a soft blue dress. No make-up. Her long hair tied back in a long braided ponytail. She didn't speak, nor wave; acknowledge the crowd in any other way. She simply stood there calmly. The still image of a woman. Icon-like. As was the way on Tunida. It was expected that she was to be figurine-like. There to symbolise the high ideal of motherhood. This was her duty, and after taking a moment to pose before the multitude, she then slowly descended the stone steps, and took a seat to watch the scenes below. This minor public display acted out, it was then Prince Reach's turn to step out and take his seat. He cast an unnoticed shadow in comparison to the beauty of the queen. His impressive, but dour clothing incapable of pulling the eye from the colourfulness of all the various courtiers and handmaidens. Still, he preferred it this way. As he looked at the queen he felt another pang of guilt, which in turn led him to think once again about the problems that existed beyond the merry fete. He forced it from his mind as he approached his allotted place.

Then, just as he was about to take his seat, one of his advisers paced towards him.

"We have word that ships have been spotted. Heading perhaps here, or out further east."

He bowed in the direction of the queen in a polite, but abrupt, way, then headed through the crowds of dignitaries to the palace.

"It looks as though they're heading into the Eastern Ocean. Just two ships, similar in appearance to the ones that accosted our island last time."

"Why that way?" wondered Prince Reach, as he rushed back, "Perhaps they're just circling round in readiness for another assault?"

Two ships was hardly an armada, but given the impressive damage done the last time it caused concern. There was also the worry that this was just the start, and that more ships might be lurking just beyond the horizon. Reach looked at the large chart on his desk. As he tried to mentally parse the situation he then wandered out onto the terrace, overlooking the palace gardens. Stepping into the open air he could hear the multitude of people in the far off distance, celebrating the festivities. "We should put the island on alert just in case," he ordered.

"Also, what of the ship that spotted these vessels?"

"It's still following, sir, though at a distance."

"Good."

In his mind's eye he conjured a picture of the entire southern ocean. A picture more vivid than the simple and limited chart that lay spread atop his desk. *Where are these ships heading?* he thought, trying to map their direction. "Keep following."

"Should our ships attack if they get the chance?"

"Just follow. We'll see where they're heading. If the ships become separated we can pick them off, but we'll take things as they happen. Give the captains leeway to use their own discretion. Perhaps the sea battles that are raging in the Western Isles are now on our doorstep too."

As he said all this he paced back and forth across the terrace, soaking in the panorama of the city with paternal worry. The joyous hiss of noise rising up from the streets growing louder and quieter with the changing breeze - quite at odds with his own feelings. The thought of further attacks weighing anchor-like, rooting him to the hard palace floor. Whilst these thoughts charged through his mind the queen was likewise toying with worry and woe. She watched the pretty spectacles. The palm trees lining the streets, strewn with ribbons and flowers. The young soldiers dressed formally with their shining shields. The dainty and healthy-looking girls singing in procession. It barely registered past her eyelashes though. She thought of her eldest son, his fate unknown out across the waves.

With little more to do Prince Reach headed back out to the celebrations. Before doing so though he quickly scribbled two messages, then raced to the royal cages. Taking two birds; he released one into the air, then the other. One went north to his brother, the King of Tunid, the other went elsewhere.

Chapter Fifty-Two

The battles in the western seas had been ferocious. The renewed vigour, along with the innovation in weaponry that the King of Tunid had instigated, had helped the mainland push back a tad, and even sink a few ships. Yet still, the Western Islanders held the field, as they had done from the outset. Their explosive black powder, along with their tenacious skills at sea, helping them to endlessly outmanoeuvre their mainland opponents.

Initially the use of fire and ballistas had surprised the Western Isle ships. It was this that led to the first few losses - losses that had a heavy impact. The Brynnfyrdians didn't have an endless supply of men as the mainland did, so they couldn't simply throw countless numbers to their deaths as cannon fodder. Nor was that their natural inclination anyway. Meaning the wounds struck deep on both levels. Spurring them to adapt, fox-like, out on the cold ocean. It was amidst this tactical carnage that Drua Maleeva was sailing to Brynnfyrdia. On a small ship, flying a white flag with a gold ring in its centre - the symbol of embassy. Her itinerary said to rendezvous at Ink Bay, on the south-western tip of the Harbour Lands, from where she hoped to be ushered around the western coast to Brynnfyrdia itself.

As her ship approached Ink Bay she stood still and silently out on deck, almost like the ship's figurehead - a dark mermaid, or baying dragon. Her eyes like opal sponges, soaking up each drop of the watery scene. Both the ship and the flag had been spotted by Western Island ships long before she had fallen in sight of land, making safe passage assured. She wondered if this would be the case though. She'd visited the Harbour Lands before, but this was the first time she'd ever seen the western half, and as the rocky inlet of Ink Bay came into view it impressed her little. A sparse, damp outcrop. The beach itself an almost soil-coloured brown. The settlements equally frugal and uninspiring. It was all a far cry from the coastal settlements on the mainland. The bitter cold weather and screech of seagulls only adding to this effect.

As her ship inched inward, a smaller vessel came out to intercept. In an impatient and business-like manner she shouted over to its captain. With zero intention of staying in the town, not even for a brief respite, she demanded, with firm words, to be escorted on. The captain entered into a brief conference with the other men aboard, then acquiesced. He pulled back into harbour, then sent out two ships to shepherd Maleeva's vessel along the lengthy stretch of coast leading north.

Chapter Fifty-Three

"Where are we?!"

By this point both ships, the *Arbowlan* and the *Sleight*, had sailed deep into the Eastern Ocean. Each tacking the other for fear of getting separated. Fortunately for the crews the sea was calm. Still, their general lack of direction, and the confusion as to where exactly they were, added a mild underlying dread. They were also aware that they were being tailed by enemy ships. Though this concerned them less at this point, and as they drifted further eastward, into the vast, and now seemingly empty sea, they felt like they'd escaped the sight of their unwanted pursuers.

Essen and Acalee felt a sense of frustration, but each in a different way. Acalee, still enthusiastic, spent his time beavering away, hoping that success lay just beyond the sea's edge. Plotting his charts and straining his eyes beyond the ever distant waves. Essen, on the other hand, just spent his time lounging on deck. Watching out for any sight of ship or land, and occasionally bursting into fits of rage. The weeks at sea, and the meandering lack of purpose, eating into his patience. Feeling this frustration once more he stormed down into the ship's quarters. The ship's pilot, who they'd brought along to act as guide, swaying carelessly in his hammock. Essen, without warning, dragged him from it; then forced him up the stairs and onto deck.

"Where in hell is this eastern landmass your prince promised? These 'Royal Fields'?"

The ship's pilot tried to speak, but struggled to think up a quick response.

"Where??!"

Essen grasped the ship's pilot by the scruff of the neck, "We've been sent on a goose chase here, haven't we."

The ship's pilot knew this was the case. He'd always known ..there was no 'Royal Fields,' there was no veiled landmass in the Eastern Ocean, hidden from the maps. The young Tunidan prince had simply made it up. Of course, the pilot couldn't betray his prince and reveal this fact. In part, due to loyalty, but more so for fear of what would happen to himself, or his family, if he was to do such a thing. Albeit, with Essen and the other crew members now increasingly a danger to him as well, he was between a rock and a hard place. Consequently, he tried hard to think on his feet.

"It's out here somewhere. We've probably just lost our bearings. It's a big ocean - you can't expect to chart the entire thing in a few weeks. Plus, it's not my fault your crews are unfamiliar with these seas. We just need to keep heading east, I think."

Little episodes such as this had now become a recurring feature of life aboard the ship, and though such deflections and excuses would buy the poor ship's pilot some brief reprieve, they sounded less and less believable with each utterance. This latest response did little to assuage Essen's worries that they'd been duped by the crafty Tunidans. Nevertheless, he let

go of the pilot's collar and reined in his ire. Were it not for Acalee's zealous eagerness to keep looking, Essen would have surely turned back by now. Perhaps razing a few more Tunidan ships and settlements along the way as a conciliatory prize. Yet, though Acalee still had his way, there were some problems even he could not paper over. Particularly with regard to supplies. The diminishing reserves of freshwater being of especial concern. So their days left exploring were now most certainly limited in number anyway - whether Acalee liked it or not. The ship's pilot, being acutely aware of this, hoped that eventually a decision would be made to give up the ghost. Allowing him the leeway to keep paying lip service to the young prince's ruse. Keeping the elusive *Royal Fields* alive and well, somewhere out there in the imagined ocean, just beyond a journey's reach.

As these ever more troubled days at sea passed, his likelihood of his success increased. The louder calls from crew members to return west and head home buoying his hope. That Essen was now in accord with this feeling leaving everything hanging on the finest of threads of Acalee's hope. But, alas, as this final thread was about to break a propitious sign appeared. For the first time in weeks they spotted a bird overhead out at sea. It circled the ship a few times then dropped calmly onto the crow's nest, almost oblivious to the exhausted crew down below.

"This time I will get the bow," quipped Essen, looking upwards, recognising the unmistakable colours of the Tunida Bird's white-fingered wings. He then headed with a skip in the direction of the cabin.

Acalee turned to stop him, at which point another crew member juttred in: "They say it's bad luck to kill a Tunida Bird."

"That's just another little scare story to stop you from shooting their little messengers," mocked Essen, continuing on to the cabin.

Acalee smiled as he gently blocked Essen from the door. "You can't kill it. We need to see where it goes. Land can't be too far away."

Essen had no argument for this. They were obviously close to somewhere dry if birds were now appearing. Still, he brushed Acalee aside and continued to the cabin. Re-emerging, he then fixed an arrow, drew the string back to the limits of tension, then sent the arrow flying hard into the mast of the ship. The whoosh of the arrow, and the ricochet as it buried itself into the wood, spooked the bird; which then lit off in fright and darted swiftly south.

Acalee, with relief, followed its path with his gaze. The bird had swung the pendulum back in his favour. He gave the order to chart south. The tired crew reluctantly followed, and within moments both ships were heading in the bird's direction. With the weather still calm, a gusty breeze pushed on them generously. Within barely an hour two more birds had been spotted. Now confident that land was somewhere near Essen and Acalee headed below deck, taking the ship's pilot with them.

"I think we're simply reaching the outer coast," lamented Essen, "There will be land, but it'll be little more than desert."

Acalee pulled out his chart and spread it on the table. Their long path, all the way from Brynnfirdia and into the Eastern Ocean plotted out neatly - though tentatively in the latter parts. "I agree." He then turned his words to the ship's pilot.

"We've easily sailed as far as your little boat escorting the king's son would have managed; perhaps twice as far, or greater. There is nothing in these seas that would've been within reach of the Island of Tunida. We've charted it all."

He then paused for effect, making it clear that he knew with certainty that both the ship's pilot and his young prince had lied to them. He then looked at Essen.

"I had to take us this far, to make sure. Hopefully, if these birds are anything to go by there may be some slithers of land on the coast that allow us to take on supplies. Perhaps our pilot friend here and his prince were heading to one of these little pockets on the desert's edge."

He once again turned to the ship's pilot, "You can tell us all you know now. There's little point continuing to conceal things. We know with certainty there is no *Royal Fields*. We know with certainty that you have deceived us, my friend."

As Essen fixed the ship's pilot with a glare, waiting for a response, a cry came from above.

Land ho!

As they headed out on deck land was indeed there in the blurry distance. Barely visible with the naked eye, but clear to see nonetheless. Acalee grabbed the looking glass and scanned the long stretch of coast. A small outcrop of green against a seemingly endless desert was apparent. Both he and Essen were familiar with the desert's edge, thanks to their travails on the Free Sea, and it looked much the same here. However, there it was simply a long wall of yellow sand, rising up out of the sea and infinitely towards a dead horizon. In contrast here it seemed there were the odd oases of land, jutting out just far enough to be temperate. Like versions of the desert kingdoms to the south-west in miniature, the so-called Three Deserts.

As they approached closer they could see that the first patch of green was so small it would be pointless landing there. Just the odd tree, with a small notch of shrubland. Further southwards there was another outcrop however, this one slightly larger. They pushed on. Finally, they dropped anchor, and put rowboats over the side to check it out. To their great relief they found fresh water. The lush vegetation also suggested the possibility of other quarries, though the unfamiliarity of the trees and plants made taking advantage of this unlikely. Either way, the vibrant greens were a welcome sight, and stood in stark contrast to the sea of sand it was half-surrounded by. With joy most of the crew took the opportunity to head ashore. Taking time to relax and feel steady ground again. They also took the time to hunt some of the Tunida Birds that flitted about in the trees. As minor repairs were made to the ships Acalee made sure to mark this noteworthy discovery on his charts. Interesting and useful as these outcrops were though, they were hardly sizable enough to be a hideaway for a prince. Or indeed a landing place for a fleet of large ships.

Still a touch puzzled Acalee approached the ship's pilot, "Surely you can't have been heading east simply to come here? There's hardly anything. Is there more along the coast perhaps?"

The ship's pilot refrained from answering. Acalee took his looking glass and lifted it to his eye. He then looked along the stretch of desert coast as far as he could see. The green of the tiny bay they were anchored at quickly receding into the more familiar sandy vistas. As he pulled the glass back down another Tunida Bird took off into the sky and zipped away - vaguely in the direction he'd been looking. "Maybe there is more along the coast?" he repeated, this time primarily to himself.

"There's nothing more down there," assured the ship's pilot, finally speaking up. He then looked out ponderously along the coastline, following the path of the bird as it disappeared beyond the limits of his vision.

"Certain, are you?" laughed Acalee, assuming the pilot's assertion was another bluff, though also mindful that it could indeed be a double bluff, "Perhaps there are *Four* Deserts, and not Three Deserts."

After the briefest of consultations with Essen, Acalee decided it was time to start readying the ships. When all was complete, he issued the order.

"We're returning home ..but hug the coast."

Chapter Fifty-Four

The second part of Maleeva's journey north was a little choppy. The northern winds rocking the boat, the roaring waves continually washing the deck. The cold was biting, but she didn't feel it, and the traffic in the waters, both by day and by night, was enough to keep her lively eyes occupied. The opportunity to view the Western Island ships operating in the region - the region known colloquially as the 'Free Sea' - not going to waste. In point of fact, she was much more impressed by the Western Isle sea vessels than she was by their windy little wood-built settlements, which were dotted along the coastline.

Before reaching Brynnfirdia she changed her attire. Donning a practical, but stylish black blouse and trouser suit. With long leather boots, a large fur coat - fitting for the climate - and a matching grey fur hat, which she wore tightly around her hair and head. Finally stepping onto the green terra firma she braced herself against the blustery wind, then quickly got down to business.

Colm, meeting her for the first time as she stepped from the boat, felt an instinctive apprehension, but his manner was polite. Whilst the rest of the assembled cast of Brynnfirdian inhabitants, including Eartaria, looked on intrigued. Their ingrained distrust of mainland dignitaries, especially conniving ambassadors, offset by the impact of her obvious beauty.

"Welcome to Pox Island," greeted Colm with a jesting smile.

"May I see the prince?" Maleeva curtly replied, ignoring the humour, and eager to get to the matter at hand.

Colm, doubly amused by the dour response, motioned for Prince Estorie to be brought forward. The young prince didn't recognise Maleeva, though he instantly understood who she was. In contrast, Maleeva instantly recognised the prince. His father's square looks being unmistakable.

"Are you being looked after well?"

"Yes, fairly."

"Were any more of the king's men taken?" she then asked sternly, looking to Colm, as they entered the large wooden hall that stood at the centre of the village. Colm nodded in the direction of Coulema Galina, who was standing calmly, but still shackled, by the open fire. She exchanged a respectful glance, then pressed on.

"We have an offer. If you return the prince ..and give us the secret of this black powder, we'll make peace ..we'll also recognise the independence of your kingdom."

A couple of the Brynnfyrdian men in the room laughed out loud as she said this, including Eartaria. Maleeva stood firm and unmoved.

"That isn't much of a deal," commented Colm.

"How so?" came the po-faced response, "We won't destroy you. You will get peace *and* independence. Sovereignty over all three islands of the Western Isles. Then, finally, it will mean that the black powder stays out of the hands of the mainland kingdoms. Something that's very much in both our interests."

The offer sounded a little less insulting after this short explanation, but still, it didn't quite cut the mustard. The haughty tone of Maleeva only further entrenching the initial feeling.

"What if we just return the boy?" inquired Colm.

"Then we will still need to develop the black powder ..and the three mainland kingdoms will continue to be enlisted to help do that."

Maleeva then paced over to the fire and warmed her hands. The first visible sign of weakness she'd shown since her long journey had started.

"We do not have it in our grasp quite yet," she uttered, "But we have people from across the kingdoms working on it as we speak. Night and day. Hour by hour. It may take time, but sooner or later we'll get there. After all, we've watched you use it. Then, at that point, it will be *very* bad for you. Again, the King of Tunid would prefer that it remained out of the hands of the mainland kingdoms. So an accommodation would be welcome, but with no agreement in place we'll have to pursue the current path."

"But how do we know you won't just arm the three kingdoms to destroy us the minute we give you the secret," queried Eartaria, with an aggressive undertone.

"It's not in our interest ..why would we want four kingdoms to have such power instead of just one? They could band together to push out our own interest. Destroy ourselves even. Just think about it. What I'm offering is a new order of the world. Our states, the island states, holding the power, and the large mainland kingdoms kept in check. Hemmed in by a fiery sea This new technology brings a different era. An elevation in status for your kingdom - your independence will be assured. It makes perfect sense for you, and it's preferable to us."

"The mainland kingdoms could've always banded together to destroy Tunida," countered Eartaria, "But they never have, nor never will, precisely because of your intrigues. Black powder will make little difference. You lead them. You play them off against each other, or all of them off against whomever else. It's we - *we who can't be led* - that will always be the problem for you, and your target." He then turned defensively to Colm, "We can't trust these people."

"What if we gave you the black powder, but kept the boy ..as insurance?" questioned Colm, bypassing Eartaria, and trying to tease out more detail. His ear slightly turned by the words of the beautiful Maleeva.

She paused before speaking, as if in thought. "The prince is really just a side issue," she then pressed. "You could keep the prince, and what? What value is he to you? The king loves his son, but he is a ruthless man, and will not trade him for an entire kingdom. Only weak states give in to hostage takers. So returning the prince is just a gesture of goodwill on your part. The black powder however, that is different. Our mutual possession of it will guarantee peace. If you do not share it with us, it must be war. Naturally, if you choose peace, you'll return the king's son."

"You don't understand," stated Eartaria, butting back in, "We have your prince. If you do not do as we ask, *we* will kill him."

"So be it," replied Drua Maleeva, casually, "If you do it this island will be obliterated, and when the sword is finally at your neck not a single man, woman or child will be spared. This is *your* reality."

The bluntness of this statement led to another lull in the room. The crackle and flicker of the fire filling the deadly silence. Some of the Brynnyfiridian men brooded with anger, others stood more pensively. Maleeva looked around silently, observing each and every one.

Then, the turned-ear of Colm finally turned back. "Or, we might destroy the Island of Tunida with a similar completeness," he declared.

"You have options," reiterated Maleeva, with confident poise, unmoved by the counter-threat from Colm. "I've gave my message, I'll now be returning to the mainland. If you choose to acquiesce to the king's offer, simply send a messenger. Indeed, it would be easier if we once again placed a treasurer on these isles. I could send my son. He's very able."

"We have no need for treasurers here," quipped Eartaria, his annoyance at Maleeva's dictatorial tone spiralling ever higher.

"You will need one if we come to an agreement."

She then began to head towards the door and back to her ship, neatly readjusting her fur hat with her hands as she went. Sensibly pre-empting any chance that the raging wind would blow it off as she left.

"What if the mainland kings find out about this little meeting?" shouted Eartaria after her, as she walked.

"If we both have black powder that won't be a problem."

"Still," she then added, checking herself, as her long dark boots crossed the muddy green turf, "It would be sensible to keep this quiet - and remember, the clock is ticking. We will have black powder one way or another. So don't be wasteful with your time."

The Brynnyfirdian rain started to drip as she said this. She noted the drops, but as usual paid no outward attention. The slight dampness of her clothes ignored and contrasted against the sharpness of her sense of purpose; as she headed back out onto the Free Sea.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Prince Aralak arrived in the Upper Desert with his usual swagger. As he walked through the colourful bazaar, with the two guards his father had sent to accompany him, he stopped before one of the stalls, and bought a white headscarf. The most expensive the market seller had, which he then wrapped around his head with panache; partly to shade his head and neck from the blazing heat, but more to fulfil the dashing image he'd envisioned on the sea journey there. As he strode past the stalls the dusty sand skipped up off the ground with each step, and the scent of peppers and spices filled the air. Through this aromatic haze he watched the crowds of people as they passed. In particular, the beautiful women, dressed similarly, covered from the tops of their heads, shaded from the heat. Their eyes peeping out mysteriously; their hair loosely hanging beneath their head coverings, almost indistinct from the folds of material.

Thirsty with the heat, he headed towards the centre of the bustle. The Upper Desert, like the Middle and Lower Deserts, had just one major city. Which, organically, had blossomed around the small nearby port, the main route in and out of the territory. To outsiders the city was simply synonymous with the region itself, and the term Upper Desert was used interchangeably to refer to both the city and the wider land. To those who lived in the Upper Desert it was simply called *The City* though.

As the bazaar blended into the interior the market stalls were gradually supplanted with thickset stone buildings. Along with numerous tent-like dwellings. Prince Aralak, followed by his two guards, entered one of these tents and sat down for a drink. He had plenty of time to indulge himself. He would be heading beneath the desert the next day, and luckily, the journey to the entrance itself was just a short distance. He also had the fortune of not having to think too much, as everything, as it often was in his life, was prepared for him. He would be spending the night at the Palace of the Upper Desert. This was the main residence of the official consul, whose job it was to administer the region, by appointment of the King of Tunid. From there he would then be escorted to the entrance by royal guards, likewise loyal to the King of Tunid, who guarded the sacred entrance at all times.

As Aralak ordered a drink he again looked around, soaking up the exotic atmosphere. The drink - a mildly alcoholic, but cold and refreshing lemon drink, served in a long tall glass - was brought over by a petite serving woman. Under the canopy of the tent, and shaded from the blistering sun, she had her hair uncovered, and tied back in a middle-parted ponytail. The jewels strung along the waistline of her dress glinting in the sunlight that was peering through the open doorway. His two guards were ordered the same, and dehydrated from the midday heat they quickly drank them down, before ordering more. Prince Aralak lounged back in the soft-cushioned seating as he listened to the two guards make idle chit chat to each other. He then removed the expensive white headdress, which by now was beginning to itch with the heat, and tossed it to one side.

In the far corner musicians played. A female tambourinist; a drummer; and two exotically dressed, but slightly rotund men playing pipe instruments. The shrill sound pervaded the air and carried into the distance well beyond the confines of the tent. Aralak didn't

particularly like or appreciate the harsh cacophony, but its effect, along with the dancing girls that moved to its rhythm, was mildly hypnotic. As he reached the bottom of his second drink he ordered another. His guards, mindful of their wider duties, declined the offer of a third. As the afternoon cooled into evening, Prince Aralak had a fourth, then a fifth, then a sixth.

Seeing this zest for indulgence, and the money the prince was eagerly spending, a man, who had also been sitting watching the girls dance, wandered over. Looking not unlike the market traders that had sold and plied their wares earlier that day, he had a well worn and faintly hunched appearance; coupled with vigorous eyes and a quick, avaricious energy.

"You like the girls I see."

Aralak nodded in agreement.

"There are more. Even more beautiful than these, if you can imagine that. I can take you to them if you'd like."

By now Aralak was eager to satisfy the desires that had been stirred in him, and needed little encouragement. He rose, slightly unsteadily on his feet, and followed the gentleman out of the tent; into the moonlit city. His guards rose in turn and followed in tow.

As they reached the nearby destination he realised the man had not lied to him. There were many women, each seemingly more attractive than the next. Aralak understood the situation only too well, and with price not being a concern, he cast his eye over the various alluring bodies and faces before him. Each hungry for his custom. As he surveyed the options one in particular arrested his attention. A woman, standing across the road, separate from the rest. Her saucer-like, orange-brown eyes, reflecting the street lamps in the encroaching darkness. The gentleman, seeing Prince Aralak's gaze averted from the beauties before him, tried to usher him back in their direction, but it was little use. Aralak confidently wandered over to the woman and summoned his charm.

"And what's your price?"

"I don't do that," laughed the woman dismissively. She then began to head back inside the nearby tent she'd previously emerged from, the inner candlelight adding a soft silhouette to her face as she turned.

"What do you do then?" persisted the prince, ever more allured.

"It will cost you five silver ingkhs to find out ..though I doubt it's the sort of thing you're looking for."

Aralak followed her into the tent and dropped the silver ingkhs on the wooden table that was down in front of him.

"Sit down."

As he sat he noticed other things on the table: a perfectly round and clear crystal ball; various stones and coloured crystals; and, to the side, a chalk white human skull, that in the darkness looked artificial, though he wondered if it was real. The woman, who now appeared less beautiful to the prince's pining inspection, took her time to prepare herself. She then finally sat down in opposition and pulled out a pack of cards. As he realised he was being conned by a simple fortune teller, a smug look of dismissal became visible on his face. Mirroring how he felt when he'd witnessed the rituals of his initiation just weeks earlier.

The woman pulled out some cards from the deck and placed them face down on the table. She then turned over the first two. *The Desert Nomad* and *The Bird*.

"You've been on a long journey, I see," she noted inquisitively.

The prince looked on nonplussed, more focused on her face and eyes than the cards, which had now lost more of their allure and mystique. As his thoughts returned to the other women waiting outside she focused intently on her reading. Another card was overturned: the *One of Arrows*. Followed by the *Prince of Leaves*. She considered this for a while, then began scrying over the large crystal ball on the table. Her brown-orange eyes now looking like stones of polished amber. "I see a vision," she stated, her wrinkled skin shrinking back from the glass before her, "...poppy fields and blood. A storm, a tempest ..a flood." She then turned over the last card: the *Circle of Fire*.

"You should return to the mainland, stranger," she implored. Her now aged looks breathing a smoky dread into the dim-lit air.

"I'll stay," quipped Aralak, unimpressed. The fortune teller shook her head with disrelish, and snatched her silver ingkhs from the table. The orange candlelight again flickering off her face.

"Is that it?"

Aralak got up and left the tent. As he called his guards he headed over to the array of women he'd foolishly abandoned in favour of the crystal gazer. He chose two with little fanfare and headed back to the Palace of the Upper Desert. The gentleman with the quick and beady eyes gratified with his payment.

Chapter Fifty-Six

Eartaria, frustrated and disappointed that Colm would even consider an accord with the King of Tunid, was not content to just sit back and accept the possibility. As he arrived, in the dead of night, upon the shores of the Northern Kingdom, he was clear in his intention. Journeying by boat, he'd travelled with just a few co-conspirators, with the sole aim of sowing as much discord as possible.

His plan was simple. He would inform all three mainland kings of the secret compact that had been offered on the King of Tunid's behalf. Causing chaos, and making any dream of secrecy impossible. Whether it forced a wedge between the mainland and Tunida, or just ended up forcing them closer together, he simply didn't care. He just wanted honest chaos. Fearing that his information wouldn't be believed though he'd also brought Coulema Galina along, bound and chained, stolen away in the dark hours, as a token of his veracity.

King Brijsk, the Northern King, was far from happy when he was awakened at such an early hour. Slowly plodding down the stone steps that led from his chamber he chastised his footman for not waiting until daylight. As he entered the room to find Eartaria, along with the captive Galina, his scepticism shifted little. Eartaria felt a slight doubt in his stomach as he witnessed the mood of the king, but quickly proceeded to explain what had occurred in explicit detail - not failing to leave out any of his own angry feelings about the situation. As he reached the part about capturing the King of Tunid's son - noting how they'd taken the boy on the very coast of Tunida - the sleepiness of the king dissipated somewhat.

"You have the king's son?"

Up until now Eartaria had simply assumed that it was commonly known that the king's son was missing, so the disbelief in the question back slightly surprised him too. The evident surprise in his own reaction adding to the credibility of his story. Brijsk turned to Coulema Galina to seek some sort of confirmation.

"Is this true? The king's son captured?"

Galina remained silent.

"He's loyal to his king and prince," noted Eartaria, guardedly, with a touch of condemnation. He then pulled out a short dagger from his belt and prodded Galina gently below the rib to get a response. Again, silence. His grumpiness shifting, King Brijsk laughed as he watched the scruffy and agitated Brynnyfirdian try to force some words of speech. "Leave him. He looks like a Tunidan guard, I'll take your word for it."

Eartaria then continued to describe the offer made in the negotiations, along with the female treasurer that had come to do the negotiating. Her black boots, blouse and trousers. Her fur coat and hat. Her confident and assertive attitude.

"That certainly sounds like Maleeva, too," laughed the king, aloud, now confident he could at least somewhat believe the scenario being relayed to him.

"Personally, I would happily take a period of peace," he then went on, "I'm too old and too lazy for these wars - black powder or no black powder. We'll have rebellion here soon too if our losses continue."

"Why don't you rebel against the Tunidans? They play you for fools."

King Brijsk laughed again.

"They don't play us for fools. Our biggest problem is your islands, and their endless rebellions and anarchies. If that disorder spreads here, especially with that damn black powder, then my head will be for the noose. That's why I'm fighting this war. No other reason. I'm surprised the King of Tunid would be stupid enough to think that any sort of orderly agreement could ever be arranged with you lot. He struggles enough with us. His missing son must be playing with his judgement - if indeed he is missing. And don't get me wrong. I admire your fighting spirit and free-spirited ways. I do ..I have it myself a touch ..but it leads to nothing but blood and drama."

Eartaria liked the straight-talking nature of the king, who proceeded to lower himself down into a large, comfortable chair as he kept on speaking.

"Peace would be welcome, for a time, but we need this black powder you have if there's ever going to be a lasting peace. If you and the Tunidans have it and we don't, we can't sleep safely. We can tolerate your independence if we all have it. Maybe ..but nothing less than that."

The king then stopped talking as he felt an ache of hunger in his stomach. He called his courtier and ordered breakfast be brought in. As he did so the early morning light began to pierce through the window, illuminating the dust in the room. "This information you've given, it's useful - if it's true. Still, I'd rather spread the worry around than leave it on our doorstep here. I'll arrange passage for you to head south, to take it to the other idiot kings. At least if you're lying they'll be lied to too. I'll sit here, fill my stomach, and wait to see what they make of it."

Chapter Fifty-Seven

The *Arbowlan* and the *Sleight* continued homebound, hugging the coast as they went. The plan was to simply sail around the southern tip of Tunida and then head northwards, back to Brynnfirdia. Essen, feeling the whole voyage was something of a wasted endeavour, was eager to carry out some fresh raids. To at least make the journey of some overall purpose. However, Acalee, too keen to keep mapping the coast, overrode him. Disappointingly the terrain so far had been rather unspectacular though. After the useful, but somewhat small oasis they'd watered their ships at earlier there had been nothing of note, and the ship's pilot was now eagerly pressing home how right he'd been about this fact. A fact that Acalee was slowly conceding. Still, he pressed on in the quest for thoroughness, much to the annoyance of other crew members.

Then something changed.

As ever, it began with another Tunida Bird. It landed, as was common, on the crow's nest of the *Arbowlan*, and then, not too soon later, was joined by another. The pair perched casually, hitching a ride atop the ship as it soared over the pale blue crests. As the brief novelty of staring up at these winged visitors wore off, two crew members, in contest, playfully scaled up the mast to give chase. Each racing the other. The creatures, startled, then spread their wings and took to the sky. The white wingtips of the birds, along with their orange-gold collars, being brightly visible above the two men as they climbed upwards. The sunlight illuminating their outstretched wings against the blue canopy. Before the men had dropped back down one the birds had darted off, southwards, into the desert. However, the other dropped with a thud to the deck. Essen had finally succeeded in spearing one with an arrow.

"You've done it now," cracked one of the crewmates, in teasing condemnation.

Essen reached down to pick up the bird, just in case it carried a Tunidan message, but before he had a chance to look another happenstance occurred. The sea appeared to open up port side of the ship, and what appeared to be an enormous bay or niche into the desert ever-so-slowly rolled into view. Soon the oceans currents changed. As the ship sailed further along, into this opening expanse it appeared more like an estuary. Acalee, excited by the unexpected change, gave order to keep going. Essen, equally intrigued, took a quick glance at the dead bird's spindly legs and seeing no ring casually tossed it overboard. They then signalled to the *Sleight*, which was not far behind, urging them to follow their lead.

The size of the opening seemed vast, and as Essen looked on he was impressed by the picture now before his eyes. The estuary didn't appear to taper into a bay or a river, but opened out more so. A huge channel of water, heading vaguely southwards, bearing out ahead of them. The ship's pilot looked on sheepishly, as Essen glanced in his direction. He then sensibly headed down below deck, keeping out of sight of the two half-cousins, whose appetites at this point were more whetted by discovery. Nevertheless, Acalee headed down below to fetch his chart. He then brought it back out onto the breezy deck and spread it across the wooden floor. Pinning it down firmly with his hands as it flapped in the wind. By now the entire crews of both ships were reflecting on their whereabouts. As Acalee tried to trace this new passage on the map, a crowd of crew members gathered round. Essen

listening on as this rabble speculated about where this mysterious channel of water led. He looked out to the far horizon, captaining the ship into the unknown, as others peered down at the simulacra of it. To his left he could see the edge of the land: a parched brown sand that rose up from the water and into still more desert. Only occasionally being broken by exposed white rocks and small cliffs of mud. To his right all he could see was water stretching outwards, the far side of this vast opening being so heavily far from view.

He could also feel the increasing heat, and as he wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead he wondered how much warmer it would get. They were heading south after all. It had already been exceedingly warm as they had travelled the perimeter of the desert's edge. Now, as they sailed further into these strange waters the heat intensified. Some of the crew members speculated aloud, fearing, like the fabled crewmen accompanying the legendary *Arbowlan* himself, a fiery demise. Acalee, too, couldn't fail to note this heat as he plotted their journey - his sketches now breaking through the circle's edge marked 'ring of fire.'

"The water will begin to boil," noted one voice, pessimistically.

"The heat will kill us before we begin to see it boil," came another opinion, matter-of-factly.

Slowly a sense of panic descended. The dreamlike absurdness of the situation, seeming to contradict the known reality of the world, a struggle to process. Acalee tried to pour cold water on these concerns, but struggled to articulate it himself. The heat making it difficult to think. His slovenly thoughts, like a thick honey, sliding over the events much more slowly than they were occurring in actuality. Before he could check himself he was quickly snapped back into reality. *Cannon fire.*

The *Sleight*, which by now had tagged a little further behind the *Arbowlan*, was under attack, and had unleashed its cannons erratically in response. The shot had damaged one of the two Tunidan ships that had, to their surprise, followed them into the channel. Robbing their balmy, confused minds of the disturbing calmness. The cannon shot did little to deter the assault alas. As Acalee and the other *Arbowlan* crewmen responded to the noise, the *Sleight* was boarded - by dozens of men from the undamaged Tunidan ship, who quickly began putting the severely outnumbered Brynnfirdians to the sword.

Essen, responding more quickly than Acalee, gave the order to turn around and head back up the channel. Their own cannons manned in readiness as they tacked ahead. The Tunidan ship that had been blasted by the *Sleight* was effectively immobilised. As it edged, sinkingly, towards the *Sleigh*, its men, heavy in their kit, dashed over to join the fray. Some jumping ship and swimming over to share in the glory, others waiting to clamber over the tangle of masts and sails. Their glinting swords drying quickly in the warm air as they entered the carnage. As the last of the Brynnfirdian trespassers were bloodily cut down, the captain of the remaining Tunidan ship made note of the approaching *Arbowlan*. He called back some of his men and pitched his ship forward. Hoping to ram and rout another foe. Yet his thoughts were quickly dashed. As the *Arbowlan* came creeping within range, Essen gave the order to fire a volley. The Tunidan ship was instantly ripped apart in several places. Essen then angled back round to finish off the wounded beast, this time from the other side. As they

made this grand arc Acalee looked out across the sea through his scope. The *Sleight* was dead in the water, a bloodied mess, with little sign of resistance.

"Surely it's not because we killed the bird," quipped Essen, sardonically, as he briefly paused and took in what they were witnessing.

"*You* killed the bird," returned Acalee with equal dryness. He then turned round to bring the enemy ship back into his scope's sight. Essen lowered his arm, a second volley of shot rang off - catching Acalee off guard. He slipped backwards and fell to the ground; the looking glass careening across the deck. He quickly pulled himself up as shot and explosion rang in his ears. Looking back over the water unsteadily, the second Tunidan ship had been lost in a cloud of fire and smoke. Its ultimate destination the bottom of the murky channel.

Without lament the *Arbowlan* sailed on in readiness to deliver a similar fate to the other ship, which by now was floundering, almost completely devoid of crew. Then another thought crossed Essen's mind. The *Sleight*, now manned almost entirely by Tunidan soldiers, was in sailing condition and stocked with black powder. Acalee, ever more pragmatic, grasped the problem in tandem. "Even if a few of our men are still holding out, we'll be outnumbered if we try to save them. We'll lose both vessels; the powder, on both ships, will fall into foreign hands. We need to sink it."

As the *Arbowlan* soared within cannon reach of the two ships Essen struggled with the dilemma. Finally, with grimness etched on his face, he made the decision.

"Fire."

Cannon shot ripped through the Tunidan vessel, shredding it on the sea; leaving the *Sleight* unharmed. He then guided the *Arbowlan* in alongside the *Sleight*.

"Prepare to board."

Grappling hooks crossed the short chasm, pulling the *Sleight* closer in. The Brynnyfirdians raced hungrily across the divide, swords raised in hand. Essen, conducting things from the helm, pulled out his bow and started picking off enemies with terse accuracy. The smell of blood littering the air that hung in the air. Acalee, tentatively, raised his sword, and followed in, unsure and panicked amidst the carnage. A crewmate ahead of him was cut down in a cruel instant. Then another fell to the floor. Paralysed and frozen in the moment he felt he could only move in a slow plodding motion. The cries and calls of the men, some screaming at him, an indistinct blur he was unable to process. Finally, he felt a forceful blow as a sword tip slashed across his cheek. Then another firm blow to his body, which sent him impacting into the hard wooden sidewall of the deck. An arrow from Essen's bow ploughing into his assailant. The force of the strike dropping the man dead to the floor with a heavy clatter.

Acalee brought his hand to his face and felt the wet of the blood running from his wound. Still in a dumbfounded haze he pulled himself to his feet, staggering, his sword still clutched hopelessly in his hand. As he took another step forward he felt another hit, this time on his

shoulder, as if from some ghostly aggressor. In response he instinctively jabbed his sword forward. It pierced his attacker's stomach. At last his senses returned to him. In a flash of clarity the realisation came to him - if he didn't begin to fight his end was imminent. It was fight or die. He aggressively pulled back his weapon, and with a backhand swipe slit through his adversary's throat. The adrenaline now finally pumping he pushed his lifeless victim aside and headed on to join his compatriots.

Essen by this point had likewise dropped his bow and had entered the fray. A sword in each hand, fighting in close combat out on the deck of the *Sleight*. There were more dead than living as he stepped across the bodies. He slashed one adversary across the top of the thigh, then kicked him over the side of the ship. Another victim came at him. He swung around and severed the charging swordsman through the waist. Falling, he then brought his second sword down to his head. The body of the man thudding on the rancid wood.

As Essen charged on Acalee found himself alone on deck. The blood still rivering down his face. As he looked across the ship through his unclear vision he saw a fellow Brynnyfirdian under desperate assault, fighting hard near the prow of the ship. He charged across and pierced the Tunidan enemy below the rib. He and his fellow countryman then heaved the bleeding foe over the deck. They looked at each other with relief. Then, it suddenly occurred to them. *Silence*. The din of battle - the voices, the shouting, the clang of swords - it had completely disappeared. Anticipating more enemies they looked around, but it was over. Another bloodied, but intact Brynnyfirdian crew member came wandering towards them. Exhausted.

"Are we done here then?"

The man with Acalee shrugged his shoulders unsure. "I hope so."

Essen then came running up from below deck, accompanied by a younger crewmember from the *Sleight*, who likewise had a bloodied sword in hand, looking exhausted from the action.

"I think that might be it," noted Essen wearily. He then noticed the wound across the cheek of Acalee and wandered over to inspect it. "It's a bad one, you'll need to clean it." Then he energetically hopped back across to the *Arbowlan*, where he found another bruised, but intact Brynnyfirdian, lying dog-tired on the deck.

"Is it just you??" he asked the sole survivor, still shocked at the sheer scale of the death and slaughter they'd witnessed.

"I think so, ..we might wanna check below though, just in case."

With that the ship's pilot arrived up on deck.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Were it not for the sheer stench of blood on the *Sleight* they would have scuttled the *Arbowlan* and continued their journey on that. A smaller ship being more manageable for such a meagre crew. Just six men, including the young boy, seven, if they included the ship's pilot. However, the state of the *Sleight* made such a prospect untenable. Plus, the sentimental attachment Essen had for the *Arbowlan* was just too great a pull. In consequence, they now had a struggle, whichever way they were heading. They loaded the *Arbowlan* with everything they deemed of value, then sent the smaller vessel to the ocean floor. A wooden casket, burying at sea the numerous dead it still contained.

Even after all this loss and carnage, and still with the gaping wound on the side of his face, Acalee was eager to head forwards into the unknown though. He'd charted so much new territory, but there was still a great mystery.

"If we turn around and head north we could come into contact with more Tunidan ships," he proffered, attempting to make a case for continuing on, "Which we certainly won't be able to fight off this time."

The others, simply relieved to still be alive, didn't quite have the wherewithal to dispute him. The young boy from the *Sleight* was happy to keep going, his optimism unabated, but the rest were unmoved. Even Essen was more pensive than usual. On one hand they'd come so far already, and what lay beyond was too enticing to turn back. On the other, it seemed foolish and almost certain suicide to wander on. The journey home in such dire circumstances seeming almost equally daunting, but at least offering the dream of familiar sanctuary.

"It's futile whichever option we choose," interjected the ship's pilot, his clothes and visage still immaculate in comparison to the others, "Whatever we do now we'll be killed or captured. We may as well just head back towards Tunida and hand ourselves in."

Essen felt incensed that the ship's pilot had even spoken, and, in the weary moment, finally lost his patience. Racing over, he grabbed him by the neck, then dragged him across the deck and hit him hard in the face. In his wild rage he considered killing the Tunidan pilot there and then. A fate he felt would have been perfectly deserved given the continual lies and actions, but somehow he pulled himself back. He cast the pilot down to the hard floor, then headed back over to Acalee and the others, who would have done nothing if he'd followed his instinct and killed him dead. The ship's pilot picked himself up and went and sat behind the wall of the cabin, out of sight of the others, checking for blood from his nose and lip with his hand, as he considered the fate he was now shackled to.

"We may as well head on forward then," intoned Essen, the suggestion of handing themselves in kindling enough belly fire to make him want to press on further. "We'll discover where this passage leads - or die trying, I guess. Then with luck we'll get back home with an incredible tale to tell." He looked up at the blue and green Brynnfyrdian flag that still fluttered, luminously, from the top of the mast. "We can drop this Tunidan back on his own island when we pass, if we haven't thrown him overboard first."

The brave crew then cast sail once again and headed further into the heat.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

As the others manned the ship Acalee headed down below to once again chart the course. He unlocked the wooden box he kept all his charts in, and reached for the latest. Pinning it to the table he then sat down to add his latest observations, his wounded face throbbing in the repressive heat. He stared at the map, trying to focus his eyes, but an aching sleep overcame him. Losing consciousness, he passed out, head down on the table. The blood from his face smearing across the precious paper. Later, when Essen found him, he was still in this feverish state. Essen lifted him from the chair and carried him to his bunk. He then shouted the young boy to bring water to wash the wound.

Essen too was struggling with the heat, as were all the remaining crewmen, and as he headed back out onto deck he pondered turning the ship around. Just as this thought crossed his mind though yet another Tunida Bird travelled overhead. As Essen watched on, the bird briefly looked back in his general direction, as if acknowledging he was straying too far. It then headed heat-wards, into the south. As Essen watched the bird soar he thought of Acalee below, and his will to follow these birds, omen-like, to their point of genesis. So he pushed on. The *Arbowlan* gliding effortlessly across the water as he looked out at the desert's edge, to the far side of the channel.

"How much hotter will it get?"

The sight of the desert only heightening his sense of heat and exhaustion. All the stories about the world he'd been told as a child streamed through his thoughts. Boiling oceans. The fiery edge. Steaming cauldrons. The ring of fire.

As these visions gushed through his mind they seemed to blur and merge with the watery desert itself. The shimmering heat and currents of air, along with his fatigue, playing tricks on his consciousness. The colours beyond the wood brown of his crib-like ship, blinding him in their increasingly abstract fury. Flourishes of desert yellows and ocean blues. A flicker of green against the azure blue sky. He steadied himself as he gripped the ship's wheel and tried to bring his world back into focus. Scared reality was disappearing altogether, as he slipped into this unknown river void on the edge of nature. The feeling of fire warming all these colourful tones with a deathly orange glow. As he battled back towards realness he brought all these rivulets of colour back into something nearing focus. The ship seeming to steady beneath his feet, as he steadied his vision and held back the dizzy spell. The panic and disorientation subsiding, his pulse slowed a little and he regained his grip on the world ..but still the small dancing flicker of green remained pinned in his eyeline. Coruscating on the horizon.

He looked down at the deck to re-centre his vision fully. The crispness of the wooden deck pulled sharply into view. With renewed confidence in his material senses he looked back up and watched across the waters. In the far southern distance the vivid green remained. He fetched Acalee's looking glass. The lens of which was now scratched and marked due to the battering it had taken during the long voyage. As he scrolled along the topography a small wedge of green came into view on the banks of the ocean channel. As the boat crept further on it finally widened into view. *Trees.*

By now the other crew members, with the exception of Acalee, were out on the hot deck, straining their eyes. The battered telescope passed around so each could get a better view.

"Is this where you were heading?" asked Essen of the ship's pilot, with undisguised glee. Now fully sure of his senses, and breathing with renewed life thanks to the lush vision that whet his appetite.

"Will I be assaulted for speaking this time?"

Essen glanced back at him, but didn't reply.

"Given you've made it this far I may as well be truthful. Though now you'll surely disbelieve me anyway. Especially given what I'm about to tell you."

The ship's pilot then paused with needless effect, as the other crew members pricked their ears.

"At this end of this channel, there is an island - not unlike Tunida, though smaller. Here lives the king's second brother. The one you believe is dead. When the king ascends to the throne, he sends his brother here. To rule this island, along with the strips of land that adorn the two sides of this channel. He takes over from his uncle, who ruled before him. Just as the king takes over from his father. The king doesn't execute his own brother. *Obviously*. That's just a ruse to keep your world sane."

As he explained all this the vegetation on the side of the channel came more fully into view. Birds, including more Tunida Birds, clearly visible as they swooped and flitted about the tree branches. The desert in their wake equally diminishing behind them.

"More lies, surely," noted Essen, plainly.

"No lies," expressed the pilot, with equal plainness, "This is the final truth. It's why I can tell you this now. The king's brother, Prince Twayen, who rules this island - that we call Outer Tunida - patrols this channel, along with the wider perimeter. As is his duty. Soon, his ships will capture this vessel. Very soon, I would imagine. That's if we don't starve, thirst or get wrecked in storms first. So, as I said before - as I've always said - it would be wise to just head to the island and hand yourselves in."

Essen gave the outward impression that he was just ignoring the ship's pilot, and looked on.

"You'll be given mercy. You'll be able to live out the rest of your life here, in relative peace. You might even get to marry and have children - if you don't rebel too much. However, you can't return home. Not now you've come this far and seen what you've seen.

"Saying you are correct. What gives you the right to decide who knows these things, and who doesn't?" interjected one of the crew members, a slight disbelief etched on his cracked and tired face.

"There will be reasons. The king is a good man, and he will have his. There are things I don't know too. I'm not hugely different to you, but I know what the king orders is a lesser evil."

"What reasons could there be for such lies? Other than sheer duplicitousness and theft," quipped Essen dismissively, unwilling to proffer any goodwill; gripping the ship's wheel ever more sternly.

"Again, I don't know the reasons," reaffirmed the ship's pilot, passively, "Perhaps it's little different to a father keeping his children within the garden gate to keep them safe. Or a shepherd protecting his flock from the steep cliffs and river valleys."

"We don't need protection. Certainly not from lying kings and brigands."

Essen found a renewed sense of purpose as he uttered aloud his opinion. His simple values giving him a moral rooting in the ground as he traversed this strange world.

"Maybe ..but, then again, maybe you're naïve. You can't deny that your people, like most people, are wild, unruly and childlike."

"Free ..*free*." Essen stated it twice, as if to emphasise the importance.

"No, child-like," returned the pilot, "..and emotional. Too honest, and too impulsive."

"Yes, *honest*."

"*Child-like*."

"I think it's fairly clear that your people are the dangerous ones."

As the conversation unfolded the young boy approached Essen and handed him back the looking glass. "*To the left*," he pointed out discreetly. Essen pulled the glass to his eye. Far in the distance, on the port side of the ship, were what looked like two Tunidan vessels. Their dim outlines blurring gently on the calm sea. "We'll make a course further out," briefed Essen, with quiet concern.

The ship's pilot shook his head in disapproval. "It's pointless trying to evade them. You have no idea where you're going. We're simply heading to our deaths."

Chapter Sixty

Nursemaid Elgiva left Castle Tori. The night was pitch black, and as she stepped the stone clad streets, dimly illuminated by the stone-grey "silver" lighthouse, which beamed out from the coastal distance, her footsteps clapped clumsily against the ground. The noise being annoyingly audible to those lying awake in the nearby homes trying to get some sleep.

When she finally arrived at the ramshackle home of her Kytalyk friend, on the edge of the Patinan city, she was slightly out of breath. As she huddled inside the small dog that had energetically leapt up at her on her last visit was sleepily sniffing around her feet. Reacquainting itself with the flummoxed late night visitor.

"I have some news," spoke the Kytalyk, quietly, smiling, as he pulled out a chair for her to finally sit down upon. "She's returned to the mainland. Arrived by ship in the Northern Kingdom yesterday, and is heading further inland." He scuttled around the little kitchen as he continued to talk, "Perhaps it would be wise to assume that she's now heading to the woodlands of the half-tails after all."

As she took a seat and caught her breath Elgiva listened with interest. The simple knowledge that Liofia was safe and well being the overriding thing that pleased her. The last time she had visited she was all at odds, and completely unsure what was going on. Now, sitting in the rickety wooden chair, she felt more secure. The time that had passed had also allowed her to mull things over more, and she'd decided that, whatever happened, she'd simply follow Liofia - wherever she had gone. Without the young princess around, her presence at the castle was entirely pointless, and more to the point the fret and worry that had plagued her since she'd left was hard to bear. Liofia, to all intents, was more like a daughter than a patron. So she now simply needed to know where to go in order to find her.

"She's most certainly not returning to the castle then?" she asked, in a half-query, already understanding that this was the case.

"It would appear so."

"Well, I'll be leaving too ..though I'm not quite sure how I'll be doing that."

"I expected you would."

The Kytalyk then poured himself and Elgiva a small cup of tea. The metal teapot making a ringing clunk as he placed it back down on the table. "There's no rush, you'll reach her eventually, it just may take some time and patience. There's little point trying to follow her through the woodland right now. Much better to know where she's heading, then head her off at the pass. It might be a good idea to start travelling west, towards the central mainland. I have friends you'll be able to stay with. That way you can stick to the roads, and if any more information pops up we can keep informed and adapt."

"So I'll be heading towards the Pox lands?"

These words came with a noted apprehension. Rumours about the spread of the dreaded Pox had increased in recent days and weeks, and the thought of heading to the cities further west didn't appeal in the slightest. She brushed her hand down the front of her coat, as if to brush off imaginary bugs, then warmed her hands frettingly around the little teacup.

"You'll be fine, I wouldn't worry about that. Just keep to yourself and follow the main tracks. My friends will help you. They'll keep you safe and sane."

Elgiva patted the little dog, which was now settling down, curled up at her feet. As she drank the warm tea she tried to stiffen her resolve for the journey that now faced her. The old Kytalyk, with reassuring simplicity, explaining everything she would need to do in plain and uncomplicated language. The prospect seemingly less daunting with each sentence he spoke.

The following morning, with little sleep, she then grabbed all her important belongings and hit the road. Taking the first steps on her pilgrimage westwards.

Chapter Sixty-One

"There is no Pox," declared Liofia with a coolness.

Box and Goola looked at her doubtingly. "It's just a device, a stratagem," she continued, "There'll be more rebellion. That's the virus they don't want spreading. I overheard my father say as much more than once."

By this point both Box and Goola were well aware that Liofia was indeed *the* Princess Liofia, and that fact, along with the constant stream of disclosures she shared with them, were a constant source of fascination. As a consequence their journey by sea to the Northern Kingdom, and then their subsequent disembarkation at the small port on its eastern coast, simply raced by. All in a blizzard of mild excitement. Eldskeep and Julen weren't quite as impressed, but even they gained a certain degree of enchantment from the fact that they were now travelling, incognito, with a wanted member of the Eastern Kingdom's royal family.

As they pattered through the woodlands that covered much of the Northern Kingdom, the time flew equally quickly. The muddy floor was damp and wet, and the occasional gust of wind caused a sharp nip of cold, but otherwise the travel was largely pleasant. As Liofia walked through the endless trees, Box and Goola were like two shadows either side of her. Whilst Julen and Eldskeep lagged behind, picking up the rear.

"But my grandfather," proffered Box, in a playful manner, "He said the pox is *very* real. It's why we were sent to the Maiden Lands in the first place."

"Or rather, to keep Julen out of trouble," added Goola, with equal mirth, the sense of irony not lost on her.

"Well he's wrong ..on both counts," laughed Liofia.

With that Julen arrived, galloping, his neckerchief round his face like a bandit. "The Pox is very real. Keep your distance!" he cried. The sword swinging down by his side now accompanied by a bow he gripped in his hand; making him look every part the country outlaw. In the Northern Kingdom the bow and arrow wasn't prohibited the same way it was in the Eastern Kingdom, though as they were already on the run it seemed little worth the worry either way. Julen had purchased it from a man in the port town where they'd docked, and ever since he'd been desperate to use it. His romantic notion being that he could hunt should they become hungry on the long journey. So far they'd barely seen an animal though. Certainly not one worthy of being hunted.

Fittingly the woods they were now passing through were called Archer's Wood. *Once Woods*, the place they were aiming for, being further westwards; though in reality the two blended into one. The vast woodlands in the Northern Kingdom stretching right from the eastern coast all the way to the western edge. So one could journey the entire length of the kingdom without ever stepping foot into open field. This was the plan the five travellers set upon, hoping to avoid people as much as possible. The problem with this though was that they

would have to spend the nights out alone, in the sylvan darkness. Something they would have to start getting used to if they planned to live amongst the half-tails. With darkness now beginning to fall they sized up a nice spot and began to set up camp. Julen, still eager to test his bow, heading out still further from the site, to see if he could spot something while there were still drops of daylight. Eldskeep, following behind, as ever, offering his worldly wisdom.

"Stay quiet, don't move so much."

Julen was an excellent shot with an arrow, and had plenty of experience from his time in the woodlands back home, around the farm. So he found these constant banal instructions a little irritating, but he said nothing. Much more focused was he on trying to espy something. As they stepped deeper into the undergrowth they felt the calm of the forest. The evening drift bringing a gentle lull. Their steps growing shorter and softer as they staked out the brown-green landscape in front. They peered out into a small clearing, from behind a large oak tree. *Silence*. Eldskeep moved to speak, but Julen raised his hand as if to signal quiet. Then Eldskeep spotted what Julen had spotted just a fraction earlier. A large deer, ambling innocently through the brush. Julen lifted his bow to take aim, pulling the arrow back with his right hand until he could feel the tautness of the string. *More silence*.

Then *..thud*.

From behind. Suddenly. A sword came down hard across Eldskeep's shoulder blade, sending him violently to the ground. The arrow from Julen's bow flying waywardly across the clearing. The deer, panicked, but reprieved, disappearing into the greenery. As Eldskeep fell hard upon the forest floor he turned to see two forest bandits. Their aggressive, scavenging eyes preying down upon him. He reached for his trusty sword, and swung it in hope, catching the first assailant across the kneecap.

Julen, rattled and too slow to reach his sword, instinctively punched out towards the second bandit. Fortunately catching him square on the mouth. He then swiftly followed this with a punch to the stranger's stomach, which doubled the man over in winded agony. He then dragged this unexpected foe by the scruff of his shirt and threw him across the grove. The man's head and back cracking firmly against the trunk of the large oak tree. Julen then unsheathed his sword and rushed over to finish the job. He raised it up to make the final blow ..but then paused. His thoughts flashed back to the moment in Patina, and the feeling of dark despair he'd felt after he'd plunged the sword point in then. The man looked up, his head bloodied and smashed, wondering why Julen wasn't putting him out of his misery.

As Julen stood frozen he heard a cry from Eldskeep. The bandit, incensed with more animal rage due to the slashed knee, bore down with ferocity. Violently cutting away at Eldskeep with his iron blade. The first heavy blow severing right the way through Eldskeep's left arm. He tried to squirm to avoid the following hard thrusts, holding up his sword to take the brunt, but it was little use. Finally, the outlaw's weapon was brought down with firmness into his soft flesh, piercing his stomach. Eldskeep lay dead upon the muddied ground.

Julen went hollow as his ears registered the death, but still he stood frozen. He didn't even turn his head to witness the scene. He just looked down at his assailant, who by now had fallen unconscious from his own wounds. The blood from his head dripping thickly upon the roots of the tree he'd crashed down against. The other attacker turned and looked towards Julen, barbarously eyeing his second victim; completely unconcerned for the fate of his collaborator lying immobilised on the ground. As he rushed to make his prey - *unexpectedly* - a jewelled dagger came through the dim light of the forest. It pierced his midriff and blood gushed from his belly. Reacting to the painful blow he turned back and slashed his sword firmly in the direction of the unseen attacker. The sword ripped through the cloak of his foe, but fortunately didn't quite catch the skin. As he doubled over in agony, blood spilling between his fingers as he clutched his stomach, he dropped his sword and fell to the ground. His body and bloodied clothes falling down upon the jewels that had spilled from the cloak of his killer.

Liofia, ignoring her fallen possessions, looked around with cat-like sharpness for any other predators lurking in the forest. As she did so, Box and Goola came running to join her, their swords held tentatively, just in case they were needed. The pair immediately flew over to Eldskeep as they entered the clearing. His body lying lifeless on the damp black floor. Julen, his sword now hanging limply by his side in his weak grip, turned round to finally view the scene. He headed over in despair, looking down at the maimed body of his friend. As the three mourned, Liofia remained alert, keeping watch. All was silent.

Later that night, in the pitch black darkness, they buried the portly body of their fallen companion. His sword dug erect in the ground as a makeshift grave marker. Grief-stricken and exhausted they settled to take a brief rest before making haste again at first daybreak. Liofia cradled the head of the despairing Julen, as both Box and Goola headed back to the scene of the conflict, to collect the jewels that had spilled from the lining of her cloak. Liofia brushed the hair from Julen's face and kissed him on the forehead. *"It's okay. I saw what happened in Patina. It wasn't your fault."* Julen looked up, making eye contact, but then put his head back down. When Box and Goola returned they handed Liofia the collection, some still encrusted with blood and mud from the sodden ground. Taking the weighty purse in her hand she opened it up and took out two rings, giving one to each. A ring with a bright amber stone for Box, and a ring with three red rubies for Goola.

As the morning daylight fully broke, beneath the arching trees, the four mourners wearily got to their feet. Liofia went and picked up Julen's bow from the forest clearing, as the other three took one last moment by the grave of Eldskeep. After saying a few words they then trundled on, heading west towards Once Woods, the land of the half-tails.

Chapter Sixty-Two

As the *Arbowlan* sailed beyond the estuary that branched out from the long channel; the long channel that had taken them through the fiery, and once-thought impassable desert; they caught the slightest glimpse of Outer Tunida. Through the scratched and smudged looking glass they could see the dim outline of its north-western coast. A faint grey outcrop in the distance. Just above the pale sea. Fortunately no one from the island had spotted them in response, and the two vessels they'd espied the day before had not been seen again. Their quiet course under the starry night helping them to peacefully evade detection. Still, all wasn't so well aboard ship, and Acalee, having fallen into a deep fever from his rotting wound in the days preceding, was much worse for wear. Still in an unconscious and feverish slumber, that made Essen fear the worst.

Adding to this misfortune, one of the other crew members was now sick and had taken to bed too. The long journey on the briny sea finally taking its toll upon the crew's health. Leaving just five men to struggle with the ship's operation. One of whom being the ship's pilot, who never ceased from insisting that they turn back and surrender themselves to the Tunidan forces.

"Ships patrol the perimeter day and night," he reiterated to Essen, not for the first time, nor for the last. "So, even if someone actually crossed the desert itself, which is impossible besides, they would get picked up. So it's pointless pressing on. The only other option you have is to sail off into the wide open ocean beyond, which even as far as we can tell is just endless ocean and nothing more. So that would mean an even more certain death."

"We were told that about the 'endless' desert," retorted Essen, earnestly. He then looked out into the infinite blue, as if to contemplate the proposition.

"Yes, but that time we were lying," laughed the ship's pilot. He then waited for a reply, but didn't get one. Tired of the games Essen didn't attempt to second guess the pilot, and just kept the ship steady as it glided its parallel course along the coast. By now they'd already sailed a fair deal. So much so that the beautiful green vegetation that had hemmed the estuary was now replaced once again by shifting desert. Essen, seeing this change, considered heading below deck, to etch in this latest bit of geography on Acalee's sea charts. Yet more terra nova to add to the ever-growing artistry. Yet his lack of technical ability, along with his general lack of energy, put him off the idea. His thoughts then hung wholly upon Acalee himself, down below in bunk, hovering close to death. It suddenly all seemed quite hopeless. They had sailed further than any Brynnfyrdian had ever sailed. To the very edge of the world. Finding truths that would've seemed inconceivable just a few shorts weeks earlier. But, it would all be worthless. The unimaginable discoveries disappearing on these strange outlying waves. Snuffed out by death and their inability to return home. Briefly the idea of turning back returned to his mind, but the journey home, a journey as long as the journey that had taken them here, now felt too epic to undertake. Perhaps turning themselves in would save their lives - maybe that would be the wise thing to do - but even that would completely snuff out the fire they had stolen. Their knowledge kept prisoner, as they would be.

Finally, he thought of the war back home, and his people fighting unflinchingly against the onslaught from the mainland kingdoms - all much richer and bigger than the little island he'd come from. He thought about how little he'd helped the actual cause with this pointless endeavour. For all he knew, his people had been conquered and put to rout by now. Chained under the yolk of the same people that now pursued him through these concealed seas. That he'd broken free and into these uncanny waters brought a fleeting moment of satisfaction, but it was instantly drowned in the wider gloom. As he hit the bottom of this woe the young boy, who was the one person aboard the *Arbowlan* still brimming with vigour, came out on deck.

"*Acalee is dead.*"

As Essen rushed below, on the heels of this fateful news, the young boy took the wheel of the ship. Like Essen, he too now wondered what fate would hold for them, in this strange uncharted netherworld.

Chapter Sixty-Three

The ocean waters were calm, but the mood was heavy. Having sailed a few more days along the desert edge things had only deteriorated further. The second crew member who had taken ill had now also perished, and to add further woe another had taken to their bunk. Strangely, Essen, though exhausted with grief, still felt relatively strong. As he stood at the helm of the ship his thoughts lay empty. He was now simply travelling onward for the sake of travelling. Knowing not what else to do. With the feeling that he was sailing beyond the edge of the world, almost into the realm of the dead.

The young boy, likewise still robust, sat with his legs hanging over the side of the ship. His hair fluttering in the warm intermittent breezes. Hoping to catch a fish, he'd cast a line into the water. With so few men left on board, the remaining supplies were ample, but somewhat rotten and unappealing. Making the thought of fresh food a bright allure. Every time the young boy got up to carry out his ship's chores he immediately raced back to check the line when he'd finished, hoping for some luck. As Essen watched this little routine, uplifted by the wishful zeal, it gently woke him from his slumber. Bringing him back into the world of the living.

The *Arbowlan* soared along like this for much of the day; the stillness of the ocean, and the flatness of the blue sky making it difficult to measure the passing of time. Finally, after hours of plain sailing - and eager waiting - there was a hook on the line. The young boy, noticing the twitch, gleefully began with haste to pull in the catch. The sunlight glistened on the water as the fish struggled on the yarn. Watching the young boy battle, Essen headed down to help out, but as he did so he noticed something else. *Land*. Jutting out from the uninterrupted coast. As he took a closer look he could see the grey-yellow of desert fade into a greying-green, as the land cut out into the sea. The boy, blissfully unaware of this distraction, continued his fight, eventually reeling the fish, with a splash, up onto the deck. He looked down with joy. The fish was a strange silvery colour. The sun's rays reflecting off its scaly skin like wet moonlight. Neither the boy, nor Essen, had seen such a fish before. As it struggled on the deck Essen patted the young victor on the back. "We're approaching land," he noted, "...lush, green land by the looks of it, ..with lots of vegetation". The boy looked out to where Essen was pointing. Then, taking pity on the strange fish, he picked it up and threw it back to the ocean.

Not too long later they were beaching their ship upon the soft sands. The first port of call was to bury their dead shipmates. Heading to the grassy interior of the cove, they dug two graves and lowered the two in. Their unpreserved, but heavy bodies wrapped haphazardly in old linen sails. As Essen and his fellow crewmen toiled with this task the sweat dripped from their foreheads, and their clothes became soaked in the heat. Even the ship's pilot endeavoured with dignity, doing his part to give the two men the most fitting burial possible. As Acalee's body lay there, solemnly in the grave, Essen went and retrieved the final sea chart he'd been working on when he'd collapsed. The mapped out contours of the land they'd sailed still besmeared with the blood from his fatal battle wound. He placed it by his side before they started covering the bodies with the loose soil.

Having completed this sombre work they then rested on the cool grass, shaded beneath the tall leafy palms. For the moment peaceful in the novel paradise they'd found. Once their energy was recouped they then skulked out nature for victuals, with a degree of fortune. The bounteous land they'd fallen upon seemingly rich in all things good. Suitably impressed, they contemplated staying indefinitely. However, the appealing prospect was quickly snatched. From the sandy beach they spotted two large vessels far out on the ocean, heading back in the direction that they themselves had arrived from. Luckily, the *Arbowlan* lay half-concealed in the niche of the cove; and went unseen by the Tunidan watch-ships. Still, the danger was present. As they looked out over the white sandy shoals, bridging up beneath the sweet clear waters, they lamented having to leave, but refreshed from their brief vacation, they began loading the ship in preparation.

After waiting for the enemy vessels to pass safely from view, they then sailed the *Arbowlan* out of the bay and ever onward into the unknown. Rounding the horn of the green wedge of paradise they'd landed upon. As they passed this marker point there was a brief, sullen lull in mood, and the weather quickly changed. The once calm and endless sea giving way to misanthropic storms. The open waters, once shielded by the outcrop, now threatening to hurl the foreign Brynnfirdians from its kingdom. The small band struggling to manage the plucky vessel through the treacherous stretch. With providence they pressed on through though. Finally catching the wind in their sails, as the sea became more lenient. The rich vegetation at their rear, in time, once again being replaced by the familiar sight of impenetrable, golden desert. This repeating pattern feeling strangely reassuring as they headed, gypsy-like, deeper into obscurity. Lost strangers on the waves.

Chapter Sixty-Four

When King Mizmeam found out that Maleeva had met with the Brynnfyrdians he was somewhat displeased. Unlike King Brijsk, who'd responded with mirth and measure, King Mizmeam's reaction was one of pure anger. An anger that began with mild disbelief, and that then led up into a crescendo of outbursts and prognostications. As he was finally coming down from this peak of rage King Kaspria entered the room. He too felt aggrieved, but instead of expressing his own feeling he paused and considered his options, eager to see what the general feeling was before offering his own.

"What was King Brijsk's response?"

"The Northern King was not too pleased," offered Eartaria, stepping forward and speaking up, in a way that slightly irked both kings, unaccustomed as they were to hearing interjections from unruly Brynnfyrdians. Nevertheless, Kaspria took the information and digested it into his thinking. As the scene played out Coulema Galina stood watching on; still chained and captive, but enjoying the opportunity to see these royal heavyweights in close action.

"We must be upfront with the King of Tunid at our next meeting," stated King Kaspria, in a considered tone, as he tried to read and mirror the mood of King Mizmeam. He then waited for a response, which came, but not in a direct way.

"Is your daughter, the princess, still missing?"

"Yes ..our search goes on."

"And Queen Aglaia, I'm guessing she has still not sent her ships."

King Mizmeam paced around agitatedly as he said this, as if deep in thought. His anger subdued into a brooding, calculated cunning. Kaspria nodded.

"The King of Tunid could also send some ships to our aid, but likewise doesn't," admonished Mizmeam, "He directs our affairs here with confident indifference. Yet, as we know, we three kingdoms, together, by far outweigh not only his, but the rest of the kingdoms combined. Our land, our men, our ships, our resources. We exceed in every arena. We should be unassailable ..but here we are, besieged and contorted by these ragged islands. Like mighty lions cowered by tiny and scattered mice."

A light smirk crossed Eartaria's face as he heard the king say this, but fortunately, so focused on pacing the room, the king didn't notice. Meanwhile, King Kaspria felt a touch of terror as he heard the heretical words from his counterpart king. He looked over at Coulema Galina. The statuesque physique and composed manner of the Tunidan guard, even in chains, evoking the regal glory of the one island that stood astride all others. Not knowing who to fear more he retreated more so into silence.

Mizmeam poured himself a drink. As he began to do so a panicked retainer rushed over, to carry out the task for him, so unusual it was to see the king serve himself. The king brushed him away with an ireful look. Continuing to pour it himself, he then headed out onto the balcony. High in the wild mountains, the castle was a good distance from the coast. The perfect place to receive noble visitors, like King Kaspria, that had crossed through the icy mountains from the east or north. Perhaps fittingly, its situation also meant that cold winds and rain often battered down on the castle walls. King Mizmean felt the bluster of the weather as he stepped out. The rain had not arrived, but looming clouds gathered in the distance. He looked down on the wide landscape before him. The overcast hills and fields below looking ominous shades of green in the shadow. He gently swirled the dark wine in his glass before taking a deep swig. Its colour seeming to mirror the reds and greys of the storm clouds smothering over. The evening sky a bleary, bloody red.

"It's a bad omen," cursed Eartaria, as he walked out to join the king, a self-poured drink in his own hand. The brashness of the Brynnfyrdian again causing annoyance, though the rare experience of honest conversation found a reluctant welcome. "Perhaps," acknowledged the king stoically in return. He then looked up once more to the billowing quilt of grey cloud and incarnadine light. The supernatural aspect of the weather imbibing a sense of savageness.

"So, the war against us continues, does it?" questioned Eartaria.

"Of course. We'll keep putting your people to the sword until you completely surrender."

"And what about the Tunidans?"

"We'll see how things fare with the Tunidans."

King Mizmeam then looked down at his drink before sinking the last of its contents. The sweetness of the wine clashing with the bitterness of the skyline.

"So no alliance with us?"

The king pondered a little, for the first time seriously wondering if such a thing was possible.

"I'll take that as a "No," quipped Eartaria, misreading the king's pensiveness for disinterest. "Is there no other message I can take back?"

"You're our enemy, why would we let you return?" laughed the king, as his mood lightened, enjoying the chance to remind his impetuous acquaintance what the true situation was. "I'll be returning," insisted Eartaria, reactively, his feisty words bringing a touch more amusement. "You can return, you're not worth keeping. Besides, it might be useful to have at least one channel open. The King of Tunid certainly has enough of his own. We'll be keeping the guard you've brought us though."

"Keep him," mocked Eartaria, his pique rescinding, "*..we have the king's son.*"

Chapter Sixty-Five

As King Mizmeam was raging beneath the red sky in the north, the King of Tunid was heading south, on his way to Eldbee. He'd decided that his stay on the mainland was long overspent. Word had also made it to him from Prince Reach, regarding the situation in the southern seas. Such messages relayed via bird were always somewhat enigmatic when they related to Outer Tunida, and for good reason. Even so, the message was clear enough. There had been a *leak*. Two ships had crept into the proscribed channel, one of which had been destroyed. Needless to say, the pressing issues back home now outweighed any issues further afield. Though the king would have to contend with both.

Before his carriage took the final road back to Eldbee he was meeting Madame Drua Maleeva for one final time, who was fresh back from her own journey to Brynnfyrdia. News had already spread that a native from the island, the wily Eartaria, had relayed the full contents of her meeting to King Brijsk. The unwelcome information travelling quickly through the network of spies and treasurers that webbed in and out of the various towns and villages on the mainland. The details, ironically, reaching the king via Seaspell, who had filled in almost seamlessly in his mother's absence. For once Maleeva herself being uniformed and the last on this long grapevine. As she finally received the news she was at first peevish, then defensive.

"See, we can't deal with the Brynnfyrdians," she snapped, "A nation of children. They need to be schooled rather than conversed with."

"Did you see my son?" enjoined the King of Tunid, in a much more sombre tone.

Maleeva recomposed herself accordingly, but couldn't quite shift her mood to accommodate the king. "They treat him well. One of their elders, a man going by the name of Colm, has particularly taken a shine to him. So he's well looked after. That elder in particular was somewhat open to our offer, but it would be like herding cats getting the rest to agree. They also had one of your guardsmen captive."

"Not anymore. The islander that brought word of our conference also hitched him to the mainland. No doubt to convince Brijsk of the veracity of his claims. By now Mizmeam and Kaspria will also have word of all this. I can imagine their reaction."

"I can fix it," stated Maleeva, with her normal steely confidence.

"*Let's hope so.*"

The king then climbed the steps to his carriage and gave the signal to leave. As the horses galloped off, and the carriage train rolled on into the distance, Seaspell arrived from the opposite direction. Maleeva hugged him tightly. He could smell the ocean on her clothes. Further south the king's ship, the *Merbird*, waited impatiently in the harbour. Ready to take him back to his natal island.

Chapter Sixty-Six

The gang finally reached their destination - the far west of Once Woods. The home of the half-tails. Not knowing quite what to expect. The half-tails of the Northern Kingdom weren't quite as wild in their mode of living as those on the tiny island of Terrella, but still, they lived in a way that was far from the norm. As the four muddied travellers crossed into half-tail territory - a territory that had no distinct border or border markers - they initially had no idea they'd even entered it. Their first sign being the sight of feral half-tail children, almost as muddied and dirty as they were, climbing the tall forest trees. The children looked down at the strangers, as they traversed the branches acrobatically, but paid little attention. Busy as they were with their play.

Heading further the gang eventually found some adults. Firstly, three women, with even smaller young ones playing at their feet and hanging at their bosom. Followed by two men, who both came across to meet them. The men each had a bow across their shoulder, and one had a small knife slung around his waist. The half-tails were generally peaceful. Usually only fighting to guard their ever-shrinking territory in the north-west woods. So, though there was a touch of apprehension, the weapons gave little threat. Cutting to the chase, Liofia immediately asked if they'd be able to stay and take refuge in the forest, offering some ingkhs and precious jewels as way of recompense. The apprehension on the faces of the two men increased a little. They shuffled off to speak amongst themselves, eyeing the four muddy visitors up and down as they did so.

The forest trees were the home of the half-tails, quite literally. For they had an unusual way of assigning territory. One that was quite out of keeping with the rest of the wider world. When a child was conceived a weeping willow was planted. Which then grew and reached maturity in tandem with the youngster. The circumference marked out by the hanging branches then notating the little circle of land the child would eventually call his or her home as an adult. The drooping branches, like a shady curtain around the tree, sheltering the hollow space inside. A semi-private patch, that lay as living-space and personal sanctuary. Though often families would choose to share and use their leafy quarters in commune.

As a consequence each willowy abode had its own unique appearance. Some half-tails would dig neat little homes into the ground beneath, or even into the tree trunk itself. Replete with all manner of tidy conveniences. Others would just live under the tree as nature intended. Perhaps hanging a hammock across one of the wider branches as a place to sleep at night. Their bows and other transient possessions hanging shelf-like from the branches above. The doming tree above the earth, like a floral womb, offering embrace beneath its draping branches.

Box, Goola, Julen and Liofia had never seen these homes before in person, though they were well acquainted with the idea, thanks to the arcadian stories they'd heard. They looked on enamoured, peering through the trees at the little dwellings. After some whispered huddles the half-tail men returned. Smiling, they granted the asylum, but waived the offer of

payment. The one request they had in return being that the four leave their weapons before entering. They would be restored to them when they left. Or, when they were more trusted.

Julen was hesitant, but a simple touch on the wrist from Liofia suppressed his unease. Her right hand coming over his left, as if to stop the surly raising of it in protest. They then left their weapons on the dusty forest floor. Three swords, two daggers, and a bow. Some used, some unused. Their new half-tail acquaintances then led them further into the communal woodland, to what would now be their interim homes.

At last, and after passing various other little clans of half-tail broods, dotted along the way, they reached their rest. Four willowy homes, each one next to the other. Unaccustomed as Box and Goola were to being alone, they naturally made the decision to share just the one. Though Julen was almost equally of a mind to stay with Box and Goola himself, rather than spend a lonely night beyond their view. Once the half-tails left the four then lit a small fire beneath one of their drooping willows and brewed some tea. The ring with three red rubies on Goola's finger glinting in the fire. The amber stone on Box's ring, which now hung on a chain around her neck, silhouetted against her unwashed skin. As they chatted in the warmth they could see the orange glow of fires flickering through the hanging leaves and branches of similar homes in the distance. Like little fireflies in the dark. They sleepily made their beds for the night. Tired, but safe, in their newfound idyll.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Prince Aralak had been travelling for some time now. Following the wide cavernous tunnels as they snaked beneath the hot desert. In the near darkness he'd lost track of time, and was unsure how many days and nights he'd been down there - unsure as to whether it was day or night, in fact. Though the desert fire was raging above, down below in these long winding subways it was much cooler. So the torch he carried had the dual benefit of both lighting the way and warming the upper half of his body. His cold feet aching as they marched along the hard stone ground. There were also occasional oil lamps strung at intermittent points along the caverns, helping to guide the journey.

For most of the kings and princes that had made this journey before him it had been something of a pilgrimage. A life changing experience, forcing the wayfarer to consider deeply the world and their place within it. The darkness, along with the loss of a sense of time, imbuing a feeling of near-death. Where troubling thoughts, spirits and hallucinations would fill the sensory void. A literal journey to the underworld, followed by a rebirth into day-lit reality. However, for Prince Aralak it was simply a necessary chore. Were it not for the four Tunidan guards accompanying him he would've turned back already. The mind-numbing boredom, coupled with the toll the endless walking placed on his body, making the whole thing a dull and unpleasant endeavour.

"Can we not just turn back? I'm more than willing to take your word for it. I'm happy to just believe the Poppy Fields of the Maiden Lands lie at the end of this godforsaken tunnel. I don't need to actually see it."

This was not the first time he'd uttered such a sentiment, but the guards, unmoved, once again just dutifully reminded him of his obligations. Insisting he continue. Prodding him on, by force if necessary to complete the important journey. A political reality that annoyed Prince Aralak even more, but that he at least had the sense to obey as he continued further into the darkness. He'd always wondered why there was such a heavy Tunidan presence in the Upper Desert, and why the position of official consul carried so much weight. At least now he knew why he thought. They guarded this all important passage - a passage that looped from one side of the world to the other. Keeping it secret from all but the chosen few. He then wondered what else he might not know. The first and only flash of inspired reflection he'd had on the journey. *Were there other tunnels he wasn't aware of? Were there other secrets beyond this one?* Either way, he lacked the effort to explore these thoughts further. Expecting the answers would simply be given to him by other people. Content to take their word, and quickly return to his cardinal life.

More often than not it was this lustful life that occupied his thoughts as he stepped onward. His time spent in the Upper Desert - the girls, the dancing, the music - had at least made the journey somewhat worthwhile. He would've certainly preferred to have been back there. He then wondered if his own guards were enjoying such spoils as they awaited for him to return from this colourless underworld. He would not blame them if they were. He then remembered the strange fortune teller. With her hideous, but beguiling beauty. She was

correct with her prognostication. This was indeed a doom-filled torture. He should have listened and turned back. Perhaps the harlot had some magic about her after all. As he thought these thoughts a large bead of water fell from the rocky ceiling of the tunnel and onto his forehead. It was a rust-coloured red, giving it the momentary appearance of a droplet of blood. Mildly irritated, he wiped it from his brow. The flame of his torch shimmering against the wall.

Finally, as his footsteps echoed on, he thought of his bride to be, the beautiful Princess Liofia. A fine prize for a fine prince. The prospect of returning to her spurred him on softly. Just as the thought of the beautiful women of the Three Deserts did likewise. Once he returned the whole world would seemingly be in his possession. This current imposition was just a brief distraction, and soon it would pass. He just needed to keep going. Then all the richness of life would be returned. As these appetising dreams swam through his mind he then remembered the aloofness of Princess Liofia. Her unwillingness. The fact that he couldn't quite hook her in. Somewhere deep down it nagged away at him. Angering him even.

Suddenly as these emotions swirled around his mind and his stomach the four guards stopped. One putting his arm out in front of Prince Aralak to halt his motion. Lost in his own thoughts the prince had not been paying attention to the dim vision ahead. As his focus snapped back he saw why they'd ceased. A set of stone steps, leading up to a stone doorway.

"We've reached the exit," noted one of the guards formally.

Aralak was relieved to finally be at the end of the monotonous trek, and was equally eager to head up the stairway and into daylight. As he impatiently made his way forward two of the guards rushed before him to move open the heavy stone door. As the invincible daylight bloomed in through the gap it briefly blinded Aralak and the four guards. The flash making him drop his flaming torch onto the stony ground. The flame sinking, with the oil, into the seams between the stones. Though temporarily deprived of sight he could instantly smell the sweet fresh air. Recomposing himself, he gripped the cold stone steps and found his balance, then stumbled up the last few feet. He then stepped out into the open space.

As his eyes un-blurred a glorious panorama came into view. Endless poppies and a perfectly blue sky. The fair blue sea meeting it in the far off distance. "The Maiden Lands," he thought to himself as he took it all in. The awe of such a view even impressing him with its colour and wonder. As he drank in the vision he looked out across the horizon line and thought of his kingdom - the Kingdom of Caster, the kingdom he'd left behind - now far beyond sight, but nevertheless somewhere out there in front of him. Gladdened to have returned to the land of the living, he took a deep breath of fresh air. It rejuvenated him. He had traversed the ends of the earth.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Having sailed further on, patiently arching past the outer edge of the great desert, like the pointer of a slowly moving clock hand, the *Arbowlan* eventually happened upon yet more clement land. Another faraway refuge the small crew were happy to find. Though by this point their absent-minded state meant that it had arrived upon the shores of their world, before they'd even started looking for its shores. Carefree as they now were upon the waves.

Since the earlier landfall, where they'd buried their two dead crewmates, the journey had been nothing but smooth and peaceful. Saving the brief storm that had overtook them as they'd left the previous bay. Even the crew member that had taken ill in the deathly days following the passing of Acalee had now fully recovered. The fruits and other provisions they'd taken on board during that docking, along with the tranquil sabbatical air of the place, having had a miraculous effect. Reinvigorating the five remaining shipmates to a point of near perfect health.

When they landed upon this latest territory the feel was somewhat different, though not unpleasant. The weather and sandy beaches being almost as beautiful as at the earlier spot. Making a stay of at least a few days an obvious attraction. Having made a few minor repairs to the ship two of the crew members began setting up camp, whilst the others headed inland. Luckily, a source of freshwater had been found almost immediately upon landing, so after making a few short trips to fill their flasks, the two setting up camp had little to do. Dawdling around in the shade, collecting scraps of dry wood for fire, and creating a small clearing where they would rest for the night. Knowing full well that if the weather turned sour they could return to the ship.

"If only we had a few women with us we could simply stay here and start again," noted one half-laughing, as he looked out over their surroundings. The other echoed the sentiment, though it instantly made him wonder what their real prospects were. "We will probably never return," he replied soberly, "Even if we could make such a long journey back, there's no way the five of us alone could pass through that channel unnoticed. It would be impossible."

"We're on the outside now," reiterated the first. He then paused for a moment and considered once again the weird situation they found themselves in. "All the wars going on in there, all the action and the violence, yet here we are, out here, not a care in the world. It could be that we're the fortunate ones."

The second crewman acknowledged the oddness, but preferred not to ponder on it too long. "I do miss the women and the violence," he joked, trying to lighten the conversation, "Perhaps even if we don't make it back we can at least do a little damage by trying." He then tapped the handle of the sword that hung at his waist. "Definitely," came the firm reply. The first then gripped the handle of his own sword in brotherly concurrence, as the balmy Sun blazed down through the yellow-green palm leaves.

Deeper inland the other three were having a somewhat different conversation. The younger crew member had stumbled upon two rickety pieces of wood that had seemingly been

lashed together. "There must have been someone here," he exclaimed, a tad excited, to the ship's pilot, as he took a closer look. The ship's pilot lifted the pieces of wood from the ground to inspect them himself. There was no obvious reason as to why they'd been tied together, but he concurred they'd been notched together by design. "Perhaps they're from a wrecked boat or something," he noted casually. The aged and eroded nature of the wood giving him some certainty that it wasn't part of a freshly made structure.

Essen, who'd drifted away from the pair, returned to see what the interest was. His bow slung across his shoulder cavalierly. The ship's pilot handed him the wooden construct. "Signs of life," he commented laconically. Essen prodded the fibres that lashed the two pieces of wood together. "This is a strange place," he expressed, with mild apprehension as he turned it over in his hands. "I was hoping we could simply come out here, hunt, then head back to fill our bellies, but now I'm wondering if we should perhaps just go back."

He then guided the other two further out to where he himself had been wandering. Ushering the pair beyond the trees to reveal something that he had found. As they stepped through the uneven brush it came into view. Fields and fields of poppies stretching outwards. Ever-distant. The continuation only broken by the odd coppice of trees jutting upwards between the rosy meadows, or by the blunt horizon of odd hills that gently climbed to eye level.

They'd noticed these fields from the distance as they'd arrived by sea. The shimmery red haze being visible even from the ocean. At the time they couldn't quite make out the reason for this red tinge, so hadn't quite envisioned the scene. Now it was up close and apparent. An arresting sight for the three wanderers. Considering the view for a moment they then petered back into the shade of the jungly woodland.

"I think it's unlikely we'll be finding any animals," conceded Essen, "It might be time to head back." His bow now hanging forlornly in his right hand. "I guess," replied the ship's pilot, who by now was beginning to tire a little in the heat. Then the younger crew member noticed something else. Inspecting a nearby tree, he could see that a word or marking had been etched into the bark. What looked like a large letter "G", followed by some other badly carved letters. As he traced his finger over the grooves he tried to read what it said. Essen and the ship's pilot followed over to take a look. Just as they honed in, however, two strange looking deer ambled innocently into the nearby scrub. Barely thirty paces away from the three. Essen, noticing the animals first, gripped his bow tightly; hungry to take aim. Eager to not let such a piece of good fortune go to waste. Within a split second the ship's pilot had also caught a glance of the beasts. Less vigilant than Essen, and surprised at the sight, he took an instinctive step back. The rustle of the leaves and the crack of twigs spooked the animals, and they shot off into the trees.

Essen, not wanting to lose the opportunity, sprinted off after them. Striding across the firm ground with a similar animal vigour. It was futile trying to catch the deer, and landing a shot mid-run would simply be impossible, but he followed nonetheless. Enjoying the opportunity to put his strong frame to the test. The exhilaration and adrenaline instantly raising his mind and body to its peak. As the deer left the safety of the forest and pushed out

into the billowing red poppies he stuck to their trail. They outpaced him as they swept through the stalks and grasses, but the open vista allowed him to keep the majestic pair in his vision. He breathed hard as he swiftly cut through the fields.

The younger crew member and the ship's pilot followed, but just as Essen couldn't keep pace with the deer, so too could they not keep pace with him. The poppies were high, and they bobbed up around the chest of the pair as they ran; their heads above the waterline, trying to behold the determined head of Essen, who now raced out far in front. Finally, as Essen continued on, the deer eventually escaped his sight. Even the rippling of the grassy poppies as they cut their path disappearing from his view. As he stopped he went to shoot his bow in their general direction, but, accepting it was pointless, spared his arrow and returned it to the pouch. As he caught his breath he could hear the other two faintly in the distance, now walking rather than running. When they finally caught up the three sat down in the field and tried to assess their location. They'd travelled a good distance in pursuit of the animals and were now a touch lost. Their entire circumference almost nothing but meadow. Fortunately, they could just about glimpse the fair blue sea in the distance, so elected that as their compass.

Essen rose to his feet first, the gentle breeze tousling his hair and clothes as it did the surrounding poppy stalks. Then the younger crew member tugged his sleeve. He could hear what sounded like voices in the distance, carried and distorted on the drifting wind. Essen heard nothing, but crouched back down in response. "I think I heard something too," whispered the ship's pilot. Essen eased his head back up above the flowers to look around. In the distance he saw a man standing in the field amidst the lolling red petals, staring out in the direction of the sea. He urged the ship's pilot to take a look. The form and figure of the man stood out clearly against the fluffy blue sky. "It's Prince Aralak," the ship's pilot noted with great surprise.

"What?" asked Essen, puzzled.

"I'm certain," repeated the ship's pilot. It then suddenly dawned on him why the prince was here and where he had come from. Essen looked down at the young boy, who by now had also popped his head up slightly to take a discrete view. As the pair made eye contact they each shared a look of bemusement.

"A better opportunity than the deer," joked Essen, though as he said this the sentiment became more vivid. He thought about the war back home. About Acalee, his beloved half-cousin, more like a brother, dead in the ground. He slid an arrow from his quiver, set it tightly against the string, then raised the bow. Taking aim through the swaying poppy heads.

"You can't kill him. Think!" exclaimed the ship's pilot, in a panic, using his arm to lower Essen's bow back down.

"We're at war," replied Essen calmly, "...the prince is a tyrant". He then repositioned his aim, nudged the ship's pilot to one side and focused on his prey. The bow wobbled slightly as he

brought the tension to the string. With a relaxed breath he then held his arm steady and released the arrow.

"Zouuuusssshhhhh"

It struck Prince Aralak in his left eye, smashing through the bridge of his nose. He dropped down dead to the ground.

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Her eyes opened suddenly as she awoke. She'd been lying on the cave floor, on her side, in a rare period of sleep. The rain still greasy on her skin. An off-white linen cloth wrapped around her body - the only thing between her and the wild cold. As she bolted up, sweat and rain dripped down her forehead, and above her wide, witchy eyes the distinctive ichor bough ran a soft blue beneath the wet gleam. Her hair matted and mangled, clinging to the floor.

As she got up and walked quickly from the cave the white linen sheet dragged at her feet. Adding a muddy hem to the damp and filth. She clutched it tightly at her chest with her left hand to keep it from falling as she headed to the small boat that was rocking in the wind and spray. She stood on the edge of the ocean and looked out. The sea was tempestuous and grey, and rain and clouds fell in layers across the sky, right down to its dark blue edge. She plucked an eyelash from her left eye and cast it to the wind. She then took a precious red stone from a small pouch that was tied around her waist and cast it into the ocean. Before sprinkling a powdery mix of strange herbs and dried flower petals onto the foam. She could feel the damp sand beneath her feet as the rain lashed against her face. As she untied the boat from its mooring she bent down and drew a circle in the firm wet sand with her finger. Finally, she took a small vial of potion that was hanging loosely from a string around her neck and poured its contents to the sea. She then stepped into the rickety boat and pushed herself off.

The waves were swelling and swirling, and the boat tossed about helplessly on the undulations. She stripped the wet linen sheet from her body and fixed it to the small mast. A soaked sail on the damp sea. The wild wind dragging her, with purpose, into the storm.

Chapter Seventy

Meanwhile, in the Eastern Kingdom, nursemaid Elgiva was reaching the end of her long journey. She knocked at the door of the farmstead she'd been directed to by her latest Kytalyk helper, and waited for an answer. As she stood there, tentatively, she heard a clutter from within. The door swung open. Taxilian and Mayleen, the grandparents of Box and Goola, and parents of Julen, were stood there smiling. She explained her arrival and they welcomed her with grace. As she was ushered into the kitchen to sit down, and, as usual, rest her weary legs, she was greeted by a third unfamiliar face: Luteeay, the other grandfather of Box and Goola, who knew all about her trip and why she'd come.

"So you'll be staying here until we have further news," he teased, cordially.

"Yes, in pox territory, I guess," she joked nervously in return, easing herself down at the table.

"Don't worry," interrupted Taxilian, seeing the mild concern, "..the Pox hasn't arrived quite this far yet."

"I'm glad to hear it."

As she said this Grandma Mayleen brought Elgiva some tea, and reminded her once again of how welcome she was. Explaining the workings of the farm, almost like a hotelier showing hospitality to a treasured guest. It reassured Elgiva as she sipped the tea, and she felt a sense of gratitude that her hosts were just as kindly as she'd been told they would be.

As Taxilian went to fetch her bag from the doorstep, to take it up to her room, Grandpa Luteeay picked up the conversation. "Your princess has been on quite a journey," he intoned, expressing his full knowledge of the situation. He was likewise well aware that Box, Goola and Julen had been on an itinerant journey themselves, thanks to information from his friendly Kytalyk sources - though the exact details of everything that had happened were still somewhat foggy.

When Taxilian and Mayleen had found out about these wanderings they'd been just as shocked and distressed as Elgiva had been. That the pleasant holiday to the security of Aunt Ellever's home had turned into a trouble-filled quest had been quite the unwanted surprise. Their fretting only slightly appeased by the revelation that refuge had been found in Once Woods; amongst the peaceful half-tails. The second safest place they could be ..after Aunt Ellever's home.

"They'll probably stay there a good while now," stated Luteeay with confidence. He then took a large gulp of his own tea. "Hopefully they'll stay there until this is all over. Then they can come back here. Or, if needed, we can go to them, to bring them back. For now we can wait though - these young ones move too fast for us older ones, so we can spare our legs. It's the wisest thing to do."

Elgiva was happy to agree as she looked around at the place she'd now have to consider home. The pleasant countryside of the farm visible through the kitchen window. She finished sipping her tea, had a small bite to eat, then headed up to her room. A room that was Julen's, but that now had been given a gentle makeover. Flowers in a tall vase on the table. The large round window that looked out over the back fields hung prettily with flowery-patterned curtains. With matching floral patterns on the cover of the freshly made bed. Taxilian and Mayleen then left her to get comfortable, whilst Luteey, his little bit of good work done, headed back to his own homely hovel, a mile or so from the farm.

That night, as Elgiva slept peacefully in her new bed, Liofia, Boxayla, Goola and Julen slept gracefully in theirs. Their little hammocks swaying gently in the mild forest breeze. Like little rocking chairs hanging from the sleepy willows. All was pleasant and restful at their journey's end.

Chapter Seventy-One

An explosion in the night. In the sleeping hours a tired looking alchemist entered the bedchamber of King Mizmeam. His long grey beard and wrinkled face hovering in the candlelight, against a backdrop of darkness. "We've succeeded, Your Highness," he declared, with quiet aplomb.

"We've discovered the secret of black powder."

Chapter Seventy-Two

As the arrow struck the skies almost instantly turned dark and cloudy, and before Essen, the young boy and the ship's pilot could even begin to take stock of what Essen had just done, a light rain began to fall. Sensing a quickly approaching storm they started heading back to camp, trying to discuss the events as they went. Yet, as the light rain that hit their skin morphed into a heavy downpour all talk of the strange happenstance was made impossible, and they began fleeing. Running for cover. First through the wet, rain-pummelled poppies, then on through the relative shelter of the jungle canopy. By the time they finally arrived at camp, soaked through and exhausted, all thought of remaining on land had evaporated. The muddy and semi-flooded ground oozing beneath their feet as they reached the shoreline; slipping and sliding in the hammering rain towards the beachfront. With difficulty they found their way back to the *Arbowlan*, to join the other two crew members for the night, as the continuing rain lashed and rocked the ship on the ever swelling waves.

"How did he get there?" asked the younger crew member to Essen, as they arrived back on deck. Still wondering how a prince from the mainland had ended up here, wherever here was, so far from the world they once knew back home. It went unheard though, as the problems now posed on ship by the storm completely outweighed any such concerns. The four older shipmen instantly perceiving the graveness of the situation much more acutely than the optimistic young boy. As he fetched a bucket to help out, the onrushing rain continued to flood the deck, and the violent swells and winds increasingly tossed the ship around on the ocean top. Even under anchor it swirled and listed like a leaf on a breeze. The heavy black storm clouds creating an ominous mood, as its occupants struggled to maintain some sense of order; the wind-lashed hail stinging their bare skin as they tried. As they laboured to fight this losing battle they contemplated giving up the ghost and heading below deck, to hunker down and hope for the best. They could then assess the damage once the storm had passed. But, alas, the ferocity of the weather gave them little option but to keep going. The danger being there'd be little left to assess when - and if - they returned from their shelter.

Finally, with the wind ever-growing in violence, the ship ripped from its anchor; the vessel casting headlong into chaos. Further and further from the coast. Veering and turning on the large waves that endlessly washed across the deck.

As the tempest increased it became impossible to see beyond the swarming waters of the drowning sky. *Panic*. The force of the gales ripped through the ship. Cracking the wet wood. Essen, blinded in the flood, clung to the ship's wheel. Hopelessly trying against all reason to hold the ship steady. Even the voices of his fellow shipmates now lost to the wind. The noise of the all-conquering tumult overpowering his senses. The ship filled with water - a flash, *a lightning strike* - the hull ripped open, but it still felt light upon the waves. As it listed heavily once more the weight of the fall nearly pulled Essen from the wheel, but he somehow held on. Then the vessel tilted too far. The mast and her heavy sails plunging to the water. The ship went under. *Darkness*.

Chapter Seventy-Three

Essen awoke to find the face of a strange little primate staring down at him. As it swung casually from the beams of the wooden hut his eyes struggled to make sense of the unfamiliar vision. His head ached and his throat felt dry and groggy. His mind, lumbering slowly back into consciousness, struggling to place the surroundings he now found himself in. Or to recall how he'd ended up there. As this somnolent haze from his eyes fell, and the palmy branches of the shelter above broke sharply into view, the small monkey's cute, but looming features came with sharpness into focus. At first he was wary in his waking state, but he quickly calmed himself. As if trying to rouse from a nightmarish sleep. He then heard voices to his right hand side. He strained his head up from the leafy pillow and looked around to see two figures. One, reassuringly, was the younger crew member from the ship, who looked bright and sprightly. The other, a complete stranger.

"This is Gelkin," spoke the younger crew member, immediately answering Essen's obvious confusion and curiosity. "When we wrecked upon the shore he found us and brought us here. Helping us back to health. I was exhausted, but still conscious when I hit the beach, but you've been out for days." The young boy then attentively brought over a drink, which Essen sipped thirstily, the sweet watery taste whetting his dry mouth.

"What about the others?"

"There's no sign of them, ..they must have perished in the wreck. We looked again this morning, as we have every morning, just in case, but nothing."

"It was quite a storm," chipped in Gelkin, introducing himself, his ragged clothes and castaway look giving the appearance of someone even more shipwrecked than they were. The little monkey, now playfully hanging upside down above his head, adding to the picture.

"Pieces of your ship keep washing ashore each day. It must have been completely obliterated. It's a miracle that you survived."

"Where are we?" asked Essen, his senses beginning to fully restore.

"Here, nowhere, my island," replied Gelkin, nonchalantly, shrugging his shoulders, as if to amplify the exotic remoteness. "We're far away. Far beyond the realms of man. Out in wild nameless nature."

"Are there more people here?"

"Just me."

"I don't understand, where are we?"

As Essen said this he pushed himself up off the ground and to his feet, then struggled to the door of the small shelter to take a better look outside. The beach front looked quite different to the land they'd left before the storm. The land where they'd been soaked to the skin -

where his crisp arrow had pierced the royal skull of Prince Aralak, in the now blood-wet poppies. Still, his logical instinct was that they'd been washed back there, only to a remoter part. Disorientated he tried to locate a familiar clue on the landscape, but it all looked as fresh as the lush vegetation that surrounded him.

"This is an island, apparently," intervened the young boy, "...an island opposite the land we've just left, and a fair far distance out to sea at that. Supposedly as distant from that land as that land was distant from the inner seas."

"Where no men have ever been before," aided Gelkin, again trying to impress the sheer distant nature.

"So how did *you* get here?" quizzed Essen, still confused.

"That's a long story." Gelkin then poured himself a drink of the sweet-tasting water, and took a long swig. The little monkey now following his footsteps as he ambled around upon the sandy ground.

"If you sit back down I'll tell you.."

"I lived on the inside, like you. I was born on the island of Erba. My family were traders, but as a young man I found myself disillusioned with the chaos, and the constant politics and strife, so I left, looking for something better. First, I headed to the mainland, but that was worse. Much worse. Nothing but misery and debt. So I drifted home again, then headed out to the Upper Desert, but even there the endless toil just brought me dejection. The constant struggle. The burdens and demands of other people. There was nowhere I could just stop and *be*. Nowhere I could lie down for the night without having to owe someone else for it. Or pay a healthy sum for the privilege. How can men live like that? How can they raise a family - knowing that their children will be forever beholden to the whims of others? Where there is no peace, and you must work and battle for every moment of rest.

"I felt despair, but worse than that I had no hope. So I just left. I packed some things and headed out into the desert. I knew that eventually I would burn, or simply dehydrate from the heat, but I didn't mind. I'd reached my limit, and I knew there could never be a life for me back there - in that world. So that was it. I'd decided. I was always told not to go into the desert, not to head out that way. Not to go too far - "The heat will get you." So I took a morbid pleasure in doing the opposite. It would give my death at least some final satisfaction. Plus, I'd always been curious. What was it really like? I began fantasising and fixating on what lay at the edge. Maybe I would see the true world's edge before I died. Perhaps no one else had ever seen it. Would there be fire in the skies? What did it look like? What if it just kept going. Perhaps it wouldn't even be so bad. What if it wasn't? I had to know. Either way, I made my decision and left.

"But the journey was long and lonely and deadly. As I made my way further out the heat became overbearing. My body struggled to cope. I'd prepared well. I brought water - lots of it - and had studied all the ingenious methods of finding water in arid places, but still water was the major problem. The thirst sapping the energy from my aching body more and more

with every step. Sleep was near impossible. Eventually the only thing stopping me from turning back was the knowledge that I'd travelled so far I would die anyway, whichever way I headed. So I kept eking my way onward. To my continuing surprise however little changed, and though the brutal heat was truly unbearable, it plateaued. There was no fiery sky. No flames, no edge. No blinding light. Just endless desert. Going on and on and on.

"I lost track of the days. Even now I have no idea how long it took me. I would struggle to hazard a guess at the number of days or weeks. Such was the endless and delirious monotony. Finally though, one night, I noticed it was slightly cooler. Just ever so slightly. I wondered if perhaps I was beginning to acclimatise to the heat in my languid state, but no. My exhausted senses were correct. The following days the trend continued. Even in my deathly state the joy this brought was overwhelming. It occurred to me at first that perhaps I'd just circled round in my calenture, and that somehow I'd found my way back to the Upper Desert. Something that wouldn't have been at all unwelcome given how hungry I was to live. That was not the case however.

"Bits of green and signs of life slowly began to meet my tired wandering. At last I reached the land that you have just come from. A land for a time that I made my home. Having survived so long in the desert it was easy to survive there - in such bounteous nature. The strange animals and fruits, not entirely dissimilar to those back in the mainland, but somehow better. I thought I'd found paradise. Unfortunately, my state of peace was not to last for long. Large ships would occasionally pass by, scouting out the area. Not wanting to be found by these strange vessels I had to hide out in the interior. I had no idea where they were coming from, but chanced it better not to make contact. What could I, one man, do against an entire ship of men if their intentions were malicious? So I made a small boat and started exploring further out. Out into the stormy oceans even further beyond where I'd travelled before. Eventually, and with a degree of joy, I reached here.

"To my comfort I discovered that the ships never sail this far. It lies beyond the reach of all other men it seems. A pristine, unspoiled realm. So here I am, in perfect peace. In a calm and timeless utopia. Had I the sense and fortune to bring a woman along with me on this strange journey it would be true paradise. It really is the only thing missing. There is even greater land beyond this small island too, which I haven't even begun to explore. Though this little patch is more than enough for me. So I've been happily building my one-man civilisation here. A civilisation more free and tranquil than the last.

"Then finally, when you washed up, the world re-found me.."

