

Harbour City: Midland



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**Dedication**

Thank you to my husband, Nick, who supported me through it all.

Without all the encouragement of my Twitter friends, who know me as Nettie Sars, I would never have made it.

I owe a big thank you to my neurosurgeon Prof.J.J.Van Overbeeke, who saved my sight nearly 20 years ago.

Chapter One- A beautiful day

No one would have thought this beautiful sunny morning would end like it did. One of those days in April could make you believe summer had already arrived.
Gulls, squealing like a bunch of squabbling fishwives, were swooping around the cliff tops, now and then diving into the glistening water in the hope of catching their breakfast.

Two small figures, more falling than running, came tumbling down the high dunes, racing each other for the vast expanse of the deserted beach.

 Waking up that morning, they had taken one look out of the window to make up their minds about either doing their chores or sneaking down to the beach below the castle cliff using a passage they had found while exploring the cellars. It had not been a hard decision.

"Wait for me, Astrid!" Marion yelled, her shorter legs not being able to keep up with the long strides of her friend.

Impatiently undoing her head-dress and shaking out a mass of tangled auburn hair, Astrid threw her cloak aside and started to strip her nightgown off with hasty determined movements.

"You’re not going in, are you?" Marion asked incredulously ", you will freeze to death. It might already be warm outside, but the water will still be ice cold. Besides, youwill never hear the end of it when your mother finds out".

"They are all far too busy getting everything ready for the wedding tomorrow to miss us. We were so lucky not to have a Morning meeting today, as they have to decorate the chapel. I feel as if I have been locked up forever in that smoky house this winter. Especially now they won't let me hunt with the men anymore because I have become fifteen and a woman". She practically spat out the last word.

" If I see another piece of embroidery or have to listen to one more of father Sirio's lessons I will jump from the highest tower of the house! You are lucky; you like sitting around the fireplace gossipping with the other women. I don't know how you do it!"

With these words, she gave her friend a playful push and crashed into the invitingly shimmering sea. At first, the cold made it nearly impossible to breathe, though as she started to swim with long, firm strokes towards the church steeple, it got a bit better.
A wonderful feeling of washing away all the smoke, grime, and boredom of winter made her spirit soar. It had been so kind of John, her brother, to teach her how to swim all those years ago. Life would have been far more unbearable if it had not been possible now and then to escape the restrictions of being a young woman by immersing herself in this blissful feeling of being free, of being able to swim away from it all. Alas, she always had to go back. She had reached the steeple of the old church and had a rest at the railing floating on her back, feeling the warm rays of the sun on her face. Strange to imagine that once there had been a whole community of people living right below the waves.

Before the Exodus, as brother William, or Billy as they called him still, Marion’s youngest brother, had told them, the earth had suffered many big storms, changes in the weather made all the seas rise to cover vast proportions of the known world. Wars, plagues and famine had further decimated the population. When offered the chance many had volunteered to leave earth for good on one of those Life ships.

He was strictly forbidden to talk about these mysteries, but he wanted the attention and admiration of his friends too much not to show off a bit with his knowledge. He had been studying at the monastery since he was twelve and loved it.
Now and then he missed his friends though. Whenever he could sneak out, he escaped the watchful eye of his teachers and joined his friends. She adored the serious young man.

'What would it be like to drive one of those 'automobiles' Billy had told them about?' Why was it so wrong to know about how everything worked before the Exodus? It must have been great to be able to communicate with people far far away in an instant instead of waiting for the ships or the postmen. If she believed Billy, everyone in those days had access to all the knowledge they wanted.

Every Sunday, father Sirio preached passionately about the dangers of Technology and how it once had ruined life on earth and caused the Exodus.

"Only when we turn away from Technology and follow the path of the Tree of Life, we will rebuild this earth ", he had taught them”.
She knew all too well what the path meant for her! He didn’t explain what exactly would be so awful about studying ancient knowledge. Only monks and the Guild of Medics, mainly nuns, were allowed to learn about the old arts and use some of it when needed.

Here on the Island, most diseases that apparently used to kill a lot of the Elders didn’t exist anymore. It was one of the reasons the Gene programme was followed so religiously by all the people of the founder families. The people in the rest of the Archipelago, she had heard, didn’t care much for their rules. She wondered how it was possible to do that and not be punished by the Prior.
At this moment in her life, it sounded like a rather good idea to her. She would be able just to ignore the stupid Path thing and marry Nick!

Peering at the shore, she saw that her friend Marion had given up worrying about her and was lying halfway up the sandy dunes enjoying the warmth of the sun.

Marion was more like a sister than a friend. She had come to live with them after her mother died in childbirth, something that rarely happened anymore, but when it did, they saved the child. Marion’s mother had been accompanying her husband during a Raid Marion hadn’t been due for another month. They were ambushed and narrowly escaped with their lives. The stress had brought on early labour. Without a nun to help with the birth, she had died on the ship of complications. First Master Selby, Marion’s father, hadn’t wanted to let Marion out of his sight. She was the last connection to his beloved wife. Marion was already eight years old when he finally was ready to let her go. Master Selby, her father, had been finally persuaded it would be better for his daughter to grow up under the strict but kind rule of Ingrid, Astrid's mother, who had two daughters of her own. His household, with only five older brothers, wasn’t very suitable as he had no clue how to raise such a frail female person.

At first, Astrid had felt great pity for the shy girl and very protective of her even though Marion was two years older. Every time anyone spoke to her new friend, she looked like she was going to burst into tears. Eventually, after she had settled down and got to know their family a bit better, she turned into a sunny and talkative girl, ready to join Astrid in all her adventures. They became inseparable. They were the complete opposites of each other. Auburn-haired Astrid tall, golden-skinned and athletic, always looking for trouble and finding it, Marion tiny, pale and with a mop of curly hair that looked more silver than gold.
She was forever trying to keep Astrid out of danger, not always with success.

Now they couldn’t imagine being apart from each other or not sharing each other's secrets and plans. With those weddings tomorrow though that time was looming very close.
The girls had always known they were not in control of their destinies. The Tree of Life or more specifically, the monks and their parents would decide their future.

"I wish I could have been a match for Nicholas instead of some old guy from the North. Or I could convince him to run away with me. What is wrong with his bloodline that we are not a match? He is handsome and strong.”

She blushed thinking about the night a few days before yesterday when she had persuaded him to meet in the old cemetery outside the walls and pleaded with him to run away with her. He had first been quite shocked she would be willing to defy her father and their community in such a blatant way.

"No, I can't ever be your husband. We will always be best friends. When you need me, I will always come and help you. Sorry, it is impossible

He had then turned and fled, leaving her first embarrassed and then angry at his rejection. She knew he loved her too. What had changed? Had he found someone else? Before her father had announced she would be marrying his best friend Henry, they had often snuck away and kissed and cuddled and explored each other’s bodies. It had always left them both breathless and wanting for more. Without the threat of expulsion from the Island, were they to take it to the next level, they would’ve already done ‘the deed’ as Marion always called it when they were whispering about boys. She felt even worse, thinking about her desperate action last night.

‘Marion is so lucky to be marrying John. They love each other too. It’s not fair! I have to do something. Tomorrow will be too late. That Henry will take me up North to live on those freezing islands. The sun shines there only a few months a year. I will die!

Thinking about John made her hurry to swim back. Her brother had promised her that today, she could have the first choice of the litter of his favourite wolfhound Speed as her wedding present. She was so looking forward to selecting one. They were so cute. She never had a proper hunting dog before. It would be a comfort to take it with her and would make her feel less alone when she had to leave home. She rapidly swam back to the beach.

Once out of the water, the wind felt like icy breath on her wet skin. She ran as fast as she could in the direction of the protection of the dunes and her warm clothes. Seeing Marion had dozed off, she wrung a bit of water out of her hair right above the face of her unsuspecting friend. With a shriek, the poor girl jumped up, but once recovered immediately started to hurry Astrid back into her clothes and made them return through the tunnel to the house, before somebody found out. It was strictly forbidden to use the secret entrance unless there was an emergency. Being found out would have them scrubbing pans until kingdom come.
Soon the only sound on the beach was the screeching of the gulls and the soft swishing of the waves.

Chapter Two-On the cliff

High on the cliffs above the dunes, a small figure rose up and hurriedly made his way back into the forest.

The boy ran along a path that would lead him to his best friend and crewmate. He never knew girls could look so beautiful and, and what? The only thing he could come up with was ‘ shiny ‘. Women and girls in the Midlands didn’t look like that. Compared to these girls with their golden and silver skins, they seemed either drab or scary. It was strange they had been allowed on that beach without any men to protect them. That would never be okay at home. Far too dangerous.

To stay out of the clutches of horny men, a lot of the women in Midland made sure no one got any stupid ideas about them by making themselves look as frightening as possible. They were tattooed within an inch of their life and had piercings in practically every part of their bodies. Most of them would have no trouble in a fight to do considerable damage. They scared the hell out of him. They had formed a close group within the tribe and looked out for each other and their weaker friends. His big sister Yaya belonged to these Vixens as they called themselves. The men had different words for them. She had used her influence to be allowed to join the scouting group of her mate Solo.

"You need looking after little bro, too soft for your own good. If you don't watch it, you will end up in Big Damian's harem. You are too handsome and too weak-hearted."
The thought of that happening made him break out in a sweat.

Damian was the self-appointed ruler of Midland. Since the man’s two older brothers had died during raiding parties, Big Damian ruled the inhabitants of Midland with an iron hand.
Everyone knew he was always on the lookout for additions to his circle of intimate friends or as he called them ‘ my sons’. For all his cruelty, he looked like a jolly monk though his innocent exterior fooled no one. He was said to be one of the meanest and cruellest men in Midland, maybe even the whole of the Archipelago. Gossip ran that when Damian was a young child, his family had been evicted from the Island.

Unadulterated hate for everyone from their home country and specifically for the Harringtons had been a constant incentive for the whole family to do as much harm to them whenever the opportunity arose. Damien had the reputation of being the worst of the lot. He was a very vindictive man with a terrible temper. As no one of that whole family would win any prizes for good behaviour, Jonah thought the islanders must have had good reasons to expel them, and they didn’t all have to do with their genetic makeup. It made Boy's guts turn to water just thinking about getting anywhere near the man or catching his attention in any way.

He had sent orders to Solo to go on this scouting session they were on, to find out more about this large gathering families. Solo told them Damien saw it as an excellent opportunity to get some revenge on the islanders who cast him and his family out all those years ago. They were supposedly only to check out how tight the security was and report back. For himself, it was a chance to earn a proper name.
He could not let anything or anyone spoil it even if they looked like bloody goddesses. He hoped Solo would see his information as an opportunity to take matters in his own hands instead of just waiting for Damien’s men to come and take all the glory.

Solo needed money for his brother’s treatment.
At the thought of maybe being part of a surprise attack with little risk and hopefully a big reward, he worked his way through the woods even faster. The trees and shrubs were just recovering from last winter and had not yet grown as impenetrable as they would be in a few more weeks.

Despite still being nameless, Yaya’s scouting group had taken him in. The speed and stamina with which he could run and his sailing skills had been reason enough for Solo to allow him in. The relation the latter had with his sister, Yaya, had probably clinched the deal.

"You have to be smart and fast when you’re not strong", he always said to Wulf, his best friend, only half-joking.

He stopped for a moment to get his bearings. The heady smell of early spring and the bright green of the new leaves made him somehow think of those girls again. How would it be to bed one of those? He felt himself growing hot just thinking about it. Especially the one who had gone into the sea ass naked! She had looked like a mermaid when she came out, her skin glistening like one of his mother's copper pots. He had bedded some girls at home. It hadn’t made much of an impression. He might as well stick to his hand for all the emotion they showed.

Suddenly two massive arms encircled his body and lifted it off the ground.

"Daydreaming is for corpses! Anyone could have sneaked upon you, you little squirt. Wait till your big sister hears about it".

After planting a big wet sloppy kiss on his head, Wulf kept holding him in a great bear hug, all his bright teeth showing through his bushy red beard. Being two heads taller and already given his name two years ago, you would never guess he was six months younger than the boy.

They had trained in the same set from the age of six after which they had to leave the Women's house but were not yet allowed to live in the Men's. They couldn’t be more different. The one slender and short, but with the wiry built of a man who had to make his living outdoors, the other looking like a massive bear with arms and legs the size of tree trunks. Right from the start, this large, boisterous boy had become his friend and protector. It lasted until today. He knew he would always have his friend at his back, no matter what.

Wulf was an only child and spoilt by his mother Freya, who was the chief of the Women's circle and the wife of one of the village elders. She had become a good friend of Boy's mother Sara, the latter working as the village herbalist and midwife. Her husband, the boy’s father, had one day not come back from one of his foraging trips when her children were still small. She’d had a hard time trying to provide for her family while at the same time warding off the advances of some of the single men in the village.

It had been a hard life, and the boy would love to make enough money he could in his turn look after her so she could take a well-earned rest. In the meantime, he would leave it to his sister Yaya to protect her.

After eight years of learning to hunt, to fight and read maps, Solo, one of the group leaders, invited both of them to join his band. They counted themselves lucky as scouts travelled widely to find resources for the village and make sure no unexpected threats were waiting around the corner.

They had not yet joined Solo on one of his notorious raids. Their only hope of escaping their perilous life without first having to go with Solo on his rampage was the yearly lottery in the Summer, set up by the White Fort. During the year you could use part of your savings to buy tickets.

"More chance of being hit by lightning, but it keeps most of us under control", Solo used to joke.

Trying to wriggle free from his friend’s bear hug, he wanted to get word to his scouting group as soon as possible, he croaked while trying to get his breath: "This isn’t funny, Wulf. I nearly stuck you with my knife".

"Which hands were you going to do that with?" Wulf laughed.

The boy immediately threw his head backwards into Wulf's face, nearly cracking his nose. He let Boy go with a yelp and clutched his nose, which had started bleeding profusely.

"I would have used these hands," the boy said starting playfully to use his friend as a punching bag.

Wulf pretended to be mortally wounded." Hey, you little punk. That hurt! Why were you running the wrong way?"

"I have good news for Solo. While I was checking out the cliffs near the big house on top of the hill, I saw these girls come running down the dunes. They came out of a crevice at the back of the cliffs. One of them was swimming stark naked! It was amazing. The girl, I mean! They disappeared in that direction again. There must be a hidden entrance up there. We should check it out this evening and see if we can get in that way and get the loot ourselves instead of waiting for Damien’s guys".

Wulf scratched his head."Lucky you. Did you have a good look?? Maybe we should both go back, and I can have a look too."

"No, be serious for a change! Don’t you get it? Delivering all that stuff on a silver platter will be my chance to make an impression. Even on Solo!"

The boy was getting more and more impatient, seeing his friend’s doubtful expression. This information would be more important for their group than ogling naked women, as lovely as they had been. He wanted to go back to their boat, hidden in a cove not too far away, and tell Solo what he’d found. His sister would be so proud and realise she’d made an excellent decision to let him join the group.

Wulf looked even more worried now. "We had strict instructions not to leave our posts until someone comes for us. You will never get a name if you keep trying to do your own thing. Shit boy, Solo already has it in for you because of your sister being so protective. As if he wants to prove to his men, she doesn’t have any influence on him. Let me spell it out again: We don’t make the decisions. We follow orders, nothing more nothing less. If you want to stay out of trouble, that is, you must know what happens to people who don't. The last ones are still digging latrines”.

"But what will Solo do to us, eh, if he finds out later we had this one chance to get into the castle ourselves and we didn’t tell him? You can stay on your post if you want and I will run back and tell them. Let them make the decision. It won't take long. Then there will be at least one of us keeping an eye on the house, so what’s the difference?"

"All right then", Wulf knew when he was defeated, but he worried his friend would still get into trouble with Solo, "but I am coming with you. I’m not letting you do this alone. You know what a bastard Solo can be about discipline. At least we will be digging together”.

" Come on, then, let's hurry. I promise you; Solo will be pleased, I’m sure of it ”. With these words, the boy raced off not waiting for his friend, who was trying hard to keep up with him, while hoping Solo would be happy enough with the boy’s report not to punish them for leaving their post.
As so often, Wulf wished Yaya had chosen another man. Someone more like himself.

# **Chapter Three-Back in the castle**

As the girls were rushing onto the courtyard, they had trouble squeezing through all the people milling about there. There seemed to be more servants about than usual. Some stable boys were leading a group of magnificent horses away.

Trying to be heard above the general noise of all those people talking and laughing, Marion shouted excitedly: "Hey, I think that your master Redwood has arrived".

"First of all, he is not my master yet, and it seems you are more eager to meet this guy than I am", said Astrid, the glow of her morning swim disappearing.

"Well, I, for one, am curious to meet the man you will be marrying, even if you’re not! I can't believe your father agreed to it. You never even met him properly. Your fiancee must be quite old to have been friends with your father when they were young."

"Oh, stop rubbing it in. When Henry and my father met at my mother's court, Henry was just a little boy. Just because you are going to marry my brother, whom you happen to love, is no reason for me to go against my father's wishes. He sought advice from the monks, and they read the Gene charts. He was one of only two matches. It will destroy my father if I refuse to follow their ruling. Anyway, my father has promised me I can invite Nicholas to travel with us as far as Salisbury. He will do his internship with the Wood Nation there. We will be taking the inner route to the North because of the spring storms ".

Marion started to giggle about that. Astrid knew it was no secret to her friend she had been madly in love with Nicholas ever since she was a young girl. His mother had been her nurse. She and Nicholas had practically grown up together. He had always been there and treated both of them as his sisters. It had all been so lovely until she started to have certain feelings for him that she knew were forbidden. He had reciprocated those feelings and life had been beautiful when they could still ignore their duties and enjoy each other‘s company. They used to hang out together where and whenever they wanted.

As of tomorrow, they both would have to take up their responsibilities as grown-ups and start following the laws of the Tree and leave all those feelings behind them.
It felt impossible though after that disastrous night she knew she would have to. It would have been so lovely if she could have kept her childhood friend with her for a bit longer, but as it was now between her and Nicholas, it would never happen.
She tried to put a brave face on it and decided to change the subject to save some of her dignity.

"Don’t know if you know it, if it hadn’t been for Redwood I could have become your stepmother!"

"What!! Who told you that?"

"I am not allowed to say, or he would be in a lot of trouble. "

"Billy has been talking again, has he? You should not make him tell you about the charts; he could get into a lot of trouble. You are taking advantage of his crush on you. That is not fair!" William was her favourite brother and closest to them in age.

" I only wanted to know if they could have matched me with Nick and were just not telling me ".Her voice trembled a bit.

Marion immediately felt guilty having attacked her like that, but she loved her brother and knew what would happen if he got caught telling people outside the order about the Mysteries.

"Ouch watch where you are going!" While chatting, Astrid had turned facing her friend, not watching out where she was going. She was used to people making way for them and was virtually walking backwards.

"Young lady, I think it is you who should be watching out where you're going. I think an apology is in order. Be quick about it if you don't want your master to punish you".

The man she had bumped into had just gotten off his horse. He was dressed like a Northerner, far too hot, and was trying t take off his coat. His bright blue eyes looked down on her sparkling with humour. Though his hair already had some grey streaks in it, he looked very fit and strong. He must have thought the girls, dishevelled as they were, they hadn’t bothered to dress this morning and just thrown on their cloaks, two of the house's maids.

" Sir, I’m so sorry", Astrid said making a small curtsey, poking Marion in her ribs not to say anything," please don't tell the master!"

The stranger looked her up and down and suddenly started to smile. It changed his whole face, and the girls could not help smiling back.

"You got me there for a minute, cheeky lass. You are the spitting image of your grandmother! It is little Astrid if I am not mistaken? You probably won't remember me. You were about four years old when I saw you last. Let me introduce myself, Henry Redwood, at your service." He made a good impression of taking a courtly bow before the two girls.

Astrid stunned, was speechless. So, this was the man she would be marrying tomorrow and would be following to the far north. She just stared at him and tried to take in as much of him as she could, while he turned to Marion.

"And who is this other fine young woman?"

"Marion Selby, sir", stammered Marion who was utterly overwhelmed by the attention of this very handsome man.

"Ah, you must be the daughter of master Selby, Protector of the West and the famous commander of our troops. I’m looking forward to meeting him at the wedding tomorrow. Speaking of which, we’d both better be on our way, as I don't think Ingrid will be very pleased about me meeting her daughter, my future bride, in such state of undress. Even if you two aren’t, I am still scared of her!!" He winked at them and hurried toward the keep.

The girls looked at each other and immediately started to giggle so hard that they practically collapsed in a heap.

" By the Lady", gasped Marion," he is gorgeous!! I would almost trade John for him. We are not even wearing shoes".

"I wonder why he waited so long to get married", said Astrid, “and why he chose to wed someone so young from a Province so far from his homeland? There must have been suitable matches for him with more northern families? Why me? I didn’t have much choice, but in the past decades, he could have married ten times. He is one of my parents’ oldest friends but still".

"Stop being so practical. You are a great match. Did you see how he was looking you up and down? Lady, my legs are like jelly. What did you think of him? Isn't he lovely? I am sure it will be easy to fall in love with him and forget all about Nicholas. He doesn’t look old at all. His voice sounded so nice!"

The silly girl was practically swooning.

"Stop babbling. What does love have to do with marrying someone? It will be only a business arrangement. I will never love anyone but Nicholas ", with these words, Astrid ran to the kitchen entrance as she didn’t want to show her best friend how this impromptu meeting had affected her. It had all become too real and too near. Before this meeting, she had managed to somehow not think too often about getting married and leaving her home and Nicholas.

Now she wasn’t so sure about it all. Maybe she should try to talk to Nicholas again about eloping with her before the wedding? But no, where would they go? And he didn’t seem so keen anymore. Nicholas had acted so weirdly when she begged him last time to leave with her and the Tree be damned. She cringed, thinking of that last encounter. She loved her father very much and didn’t want to make him break his word to one of his best friends, though she could just not see herself marrying anyone else but Nicholas.

Her father had told them the story about how Henry had saved his life in the last war with the Seafaring folk. When he came back from the selection meeting at the Monastery, he had looked so pleased. Her father had probably never even noticed how much she loved Nicholas. Or maybe he thought her affection for her childhood friend as something easy to forget once she took up her life as a married woman.

Ignoring the whispers and chatter of the kitchen staff, she rushed through the dining hall, where the preparations for the big day were in full swing under the watchful eye of her mother, Ingrid. Before her mother could call her back to help set up the tables for lunch, she ran up the East tower to her room, took her cloak off and threw herself on her bed. She saw her wedding dress hanging on one of the hooks on the wall, all foamy cream lace and the softest of Sinese silk. She buried her head in her pillow.
Did everybody and everything have to remind her of her wedding tomorrow?

"Hello, dear", said Trudy, coming in with a big pile of laundry." Did you have a nice swim?" She smiled as she said it and Astrid decided not to deny it as her nurse knew her better than anyone in this house except maybe for Marion.

"It was so great, and I felt fine until I bumped into Henry Redwood", she grumbled and threw herself onto her bed, already covered with a pile of clean and ironed dresses which she was planning to take to the Northern Province.

"Please be careful, dear. You will make those clothes all crumpled and dirty before I can pack them. What is wrong with Henry Redwood? You could do far worse. As far as I can remember, he is a charming and handsome man. He has a beautiful mistress so that he won't be expecting too much from you too soon," said Trudy, who knew about Astrid's infatuation with her son.

A few days ago, she first tried to have a severe talk with Nicholas about his duty to Master Harrington trying to remind him how much he owed him for everything. When he resolutely refused to listen to her, she finally told him the truth. They had always let him believe his father died at sea. Now she could no longer continue the lie. It would be for his own good.

“Your father is George Harrington, which makes Astrid your half-sister. If the monks got the slightest whiff of a romantic relationship between the two of you, you would find yourself in the furthest corner of Midland like a shot. They might even lock you away on Luton island ”.

He had gone all quiet and pale immediately realising all the implications this would have on his plans, his life.
She had hated herself doing it in such an abrupt way, but what choice did she have? Astrid was such an impulsive, willful child, and it wouldn't be long before she talked Nicholas into something stupid like eloping. After the wedding, it would be the responsibility of Henry to keep the girl in check. The man had enough experience to make a young girl like Astrid forget about a silly childhood romance. The remoteness of Scotia would help too.

Astrid shot up, interrupted her memory of that fateful conversation, and shrieked:” Our Lady, please help me, why can't everybody just stop talking about these weddings all the time. It is driving me mad!"

"Well, child, it’s a bit too late to stick your head in the sand and hope it is not going to happen. If I were you, I would enjoy my last day of freedom. Why don't you get dressed and find your brother to tell him which little pup you have chosen?"

In all her dismay about the coming events, she had forgotten all about John and his puppies.

" You always know how to cheer me up, Trudy", Astrid said as she went up to her and hugged her. She brushed her hair, fastening the chestnut plaits with a sparkling gemstone clip then selected a dress covered with a small green pattern of ferns, which emphasized the green colour of her eyes. Subsequently, she hurried downstairs to find John, who would be in the back of the stables where the dogs slept, making sure his Speed got the best of care. He adored that dog, who’d been his faithful companion for the past six years. Marion always half-jokingly told everyone that she would come second place if he had to choose between her and Speed.

The dog just had a litter of three pups, her first and only one. John had just wanted to make sure he would have a successor when he would have to let go of her. These large dogs, alas, didn’t live very long.

# **Chapter Four-The stables**

"John, John !!", she shouted, as she tore open the stable door.

" Shush...", he said, turning to her. He was sitting with his long legs stretched out in front of him. Speed, the puppies’ mum, was lying on top of them with her grand grizzled head. John was a very tall slim lad with long ginger hair and a very ready smile. Like Astrid, his eyes were of an astonishing green colour. His sister often drove him mad with her impetuousness and total neglect for her own and others’ safety. Once she got an idea into her head, she just charged ahead without giving the consequences a second thought.

He, on the other hand, liked to look at everything from all sides before deciding what to do, which in turn made Astrid sometimes want to give him a big push to hurry him along. Their parents often sighed with relief that this calm and sensible young man was their firstborn. Motioning her to sit down next to him, he pointed out the three puppies, who were playing with their mother’s tail in the straw.

" Speed is trying to rest. These puppies are wearing her out. So stop shouting. She is nervous at the best of times without people making a lot of noise around her and her babies."

Astrid kneeled in the straw stroking Speed. Her puppies were crawling all over each other, trying to get into her lap. It was crazy to think these cute little balls of fur would one day grow into the same huge dogs as their mother. There were one female and two males. One of the males was nearly all black with a distinctive white Y-shaped patch on his chest and a bit larger than the others. He was her favourite because he was always trying to get away from his watchful mother to explore the world.

" Have you named them yet", she whispered, picking up her puppy, as she called him, kissing his little face. He frantically tried to wriggle out of her embrace.

" No, I decided to leave that to you and Marion as I have decided to give her the little female as a wedding present. Then you two can practice comparing babies", he teased.

She punched him in the shoulder but was soon too busy cuddling all the puppies trying to make a final decision which one to choose. The two male ones were very alike; the lighter coloured male a bit smaller than the dark one. The look, though, in that adventurous black one's eyes was very kind and she had known from the start that he was the one for her. She lifted him to her face, and he tried to suck her nose. She giggled and covered him with more kisses.

"I will have this little rascal. What will you do with the third one?"

"That one I will keep for myself, as Speed is getting a bit older she will need some help with the hunt. I will call him Lefty as he was the leftover one. Have you already decided on a name?"

"Well, I first need to know what Marion is going to call hers", she said generously.

" I hope you understand that these dogs can’t be lapdogs. They are powerful and can be unreliable if not trained well. They can’t be kept inside and must learn to obey and follow you at all times. You will need to be very strict and let them know who is the boss at all times".

She sighed. She sometimes wondered how they could ever be related. Her brother was so sensible!

" I know, I know, but I want him to get used to me first, so he will not mind leaving his brother and sister when I depart for the North. I will come and see him every day. I can take him with us, can’t I?".

" Well, that all depends on when you will be leaving. Those little guys are not weaned yet for another two weeks. I’ve heard they want to use our wedding as an opportunity to discuss a new raid on those thieving Midlanders. Most of our allies will come for the event. They might decide to go straight after the festivities. I am sure Henry would like to join us, so it will be two to three weeks before they are back and you guys can depart for the Noth".

"...What?! "Astrid jumped up, staring at her brother." Nobody told me anything about a raid! Will you be going? And will Nicholas?"

"Nicholas with Marion's two younger brothers and the House Captain Carl will probably be staying behind to run the defence of our House. But the rest of us will be joining the company ".

"I want to go too. I shoot ten times better than Marion's brothers, and I ride my horse faster than any of you."

"I don't think so. As you will be a married lady after tomorrow, I doubt they will let you come with us. From tomorrow on it will be your responsibility to keep safe and make lots of babies. You can help with the defence though. Wouldn't you like to spend some more time with Nicholas before you go?"

Immediately forgetting her disappointment, she felt her face burning, thinking about the last meeting she had with Nicholas. It had been a disaster.

"Why would I want to spend time with him? I’m not a silly child anymore. I might be a married lady tomorrow, but I don’t see why that makes it impossible for me to still go with you guys. I can make those stupid babies any old time. I should be allowed to have some adventure before I get shipped off to that nasty cold place ".

John moved a bit back and looked at his sister, understanding her disappointment but wondering why this sudden change of attitude towards their childhood friend. She had been in love with Nick for as long as he could remember.

Astrid seeing his surprise, quickly changed the subject.
“It's not fair! The last time I was too young, and just now I am old enough, they think of something else to keep me from having fun".

John was still pondering why she was so against spending time with Nick all of a sudden. They must’ve had one of their many quarrels. They were both as stubborn as each other. He knew she had always convinced herself she was different, and things would not be the same for her when she grew up. One day she would be free to do what she wanted, and her plans had not involved sitting by the fire knitting baby socks. Maybe he shouldn’t have indulged her, teaching her to ride and shoot like a boy. He knew he shouldn’t have given her the impression it was okay for a woman to have these masculine skills. He had never been able to say no to his sister. She could be very persuasive, the little minx. Thank the lady she hadn’t succeeded converting Marion to her crazy way of thinking. His eyes grew warm thinking about his little bride to be. He was one lucky sod!

He needed to prevent his sister from doing something stupid like running off and breaking their parent's heart. It would mean big trouble if they found out he’d known about it all along and had been complicit by teaching her to be an ace shot and a fearless horsewoman. First, he had to try and talk her out of this notion of thinking they would allow a young woman to join an army.

 "Adventure? I wouldn't be so keen to go if I were you. It will be days in the saddle, lousy food and lots of damp clothes and bedding. With those wild men continually trying to kill us. If people didn’t expect me to go, as father’s heir, I would stay here with Marion in front of an open fire. Maybe it won’t even come to any action. I was just guessing ".

Speed growled and got up, her hair standing on end. They both looked up as the door to the dog pen was opened. It was Nicholas, coming to tell them lunch was ready. His mother, Trudy, must have sent him to find them. He had the same auburn hair and green eyes as Astrid, but his hair was tightly curled like a woolly sheep, bound up in a thick topknot to keep it under control. He was usually very easygoing. Astrid seemed the only person ever to manage to wind him up.

John thought his friend's laid-back attitude was what attracted his sister most. It was so different from her own constant state of turmoil and emotion. Hopefully, it was an immature crush that would soon disappear when she married and started to understand that life was less about being in love and more about doing your duty and making their community stronger. Those travelling minstrels with their love songs had a lot to answer for.

"Hey Astrid, are you sure you want such a monster around all the time?" Nicholas, seeing her discomfort, teased her.
"Henry won't be able to come near you."

She blushed again furiously and said haughtily, hiding her embarrassment: "I will need a proper dog to protect me and help me on the hunt. I am not going to be one of those women who stay at home all the time doing boring things. In the North, the women are in charge, so I will be able to do all the things I like, like hunting and going where I please!"

She felt awkward, trying not to look directly at him, hiding her face in the soft fur of the puppy. She was still smarting from the unexpected way he had stopped her trying to lie with him a few nights before. She had risked everyone’s wrath by sneaking to his room after everyone had gone to sleep.

A while ago, after she heard her father’s plans for her wedding, she’d begged Nicholas to flee with her. He had been as enthusiastic about it as she was.
But later and specifically that night a day ago, he had suddenly changed his mind. She had slipped into his bed in the middle of the night and crawled under his covers stark naked. Instead of making love to her, he had gently wrapped her up in one of his sheets. He’d told her they could never be together like that, not now nor in the future. She should listen to her parents and marry the man they had chosen for her. If they eloped, they would never be able to see their loved ones again. He couldn’t do that to his mother nor could she to her family. He’d sounded like some stranger. It crushed her. The shame of being rejected, making her angry too.

It wasn’t as if no one had ever run away with someone against the will of the Church. What did those old farts know about love anyway? They probably never had anybody in their life whom they loved and just didn’t want anybody else to be happy either. She’d heard whispers about ways to get across the Channel to the mythical city of Perris where one could still see the wonders of the olden days. People said Perris was a bit like London City but better as it was easier to get inside and enjoy life without all the rules of the Island. She’d never understood this anti-tech thing anyway. No matter how the monks, or in her case, father Sirio, tried to explain it to her. Why not use some of the good stuff from the past? Surely the world wouldn't come to an end?

Why should she marry a man she had never seen before in her life even though he seemed nice when she already loved someone else with all her heart? She knew it would devastate her parents if she followed her heart and ran off with Nicholas.T he monks would blame them for not raising her properly. Surely, anything was better than to give up the boy she’d been in love forever?

Him pretending not to want to disappoint her father was just an excuse. She was sure of it. When they were together before, kissing and cuddling, everything had felt so good and just how it should be. She had felt so hurt that night when he firmly told her it would be impossible for him to go against her father and betray his trust. What about her trust? Her feelings? The only credible reason she could think of was that he must have found someone else. Or he’d never loved her as much as she did him. She hated him!

Nicholas, pretending not to have noticed the daggered looks she was giving him, decided to make himself scarce and before closing the stable door, called over his shoulder: "Okay you guys, I’m starving. Lunch won't start until both happy couples are present."

Using a last cuddle with her puppy as an excuse not to have to leave together with the boys, Astrid followed them a few minutes later, feeling suddenly very reluctant to go to the dining hall. She was not looking forward to meeting Henry again while everyone would be watching them. Not with Nicholas there.

# **Chapter Five- Henry and Gregory**

“Welcome. I didn't think you would make it this early".
Gregory Harrington got up from his chair, where he had been going over the estates' accounts with his steward. He was a powerfully built man with hair that had turned steel grey in the ten years or so they had not seen each other. His eyes shone behind steel-rimmed glasses. He embraced his old friend Henry. They had both had their training in the household of Ingrid's father in Kent. By the time Gregory was about to finish, Henry had started his apprenticeship. Gregory had immediately taken a liking to this fierce, proud boy from the North. They had kept in touch over the years, and ten years ago Gregory had visited the Queen of the North and arranged for his then six-year-old daughter to be betrothed to her only son. The age difference would only be good for his strong-willed daughter. She wouldn't run rings around his friend so easy. He pulled another chair to his desk and motioned his friend to sit down.

"How was your trip? Did you come overland or did you come by sea?"

"I came with a Kentish trader because we wanted to use this opportunity to bring our pelts and wood directly to your Easter market. Will save us a lot of taxes. On top of that, there was talk of a lot of unrest amongst the Midlanders. They attacked the freight train at least two times last year. That scoundrel Damien seems to be losing his grip on his men. Though maybe that’s just an excuse and he has been behind these attacks. You never know with that guy. Trust him as far as I can throw him. We had a great year of hunting in the North, and we had an early spring so that we could cut down some of the older trees already. Anyway, I thought it would be safer to use a ship. My dear mother gave me a long list of shopping to do in London as well. I hope I’ll still have a little money left once I finish buying all of that lot ".

"How is the old battle-axe?" smiled Gregory, "still in charge of everyone and everything?"

"Well, that will never change. Until now, my mother’s decisions haven’t let us down. It makes up for her need to control everything and everybody. Especially me. Speaking of bossy women, how is your lovely lady wife? Or are you still pretending that you are in charge? "

They both laughed at the old joke.

"She’s fine and excited to be organising two weddings at the same time. If you ask me she's more interested in the whole thing than the actual participants."

"Well, speaking of participants," Henry smiled, "I just bumped into your delightful daughter and her friend. Astrid has certainly grown since I saw her last. She’s the spitting image of Ingrid. I hope she’ll not be too bothered to have to marry an old guy like me."

"She was brought up better than that, Henry. We have to abide with the choice of the Tree though, truth be told, I was delighted to hear you were one of the candidates. She must be a difficult match as there was only one other choice. A fine man, but I don’t think she would have been keen. A solid alliance between the North and the South will make it easier to control those pests in the Midlands. Let's talk about that some more later tonight after dinner. First, there will be lunch. Ingrid has made a special effort for you. We have some serious drinking and eating to do. I’ve just sent one of my boys to call everyone to the dining hall. Why don’t you go and have a quick wash in your apartments? There can’t have been much chance of that onboard the ship. Richard, here will show you the way."

Henry followed the steward to his appointed rooms while Gregory got up and made his way to the second floor where his wife Ingrid was putting the last touches to tables laden with food. How she managed at the end of winter to provide such a spread, he could not imagine.

With her almond skin, her long dark hair just barely touched by some streaks of silver and her slim figure, she was still a stunning woman. The moment he had seen her at the Kentish court, he knew he wanted her to be his wife. Bless the Lady, Ingrid had been a match, but then most of the Kentish people were.

Looking appreciatively at the centre table, Henry let out a long whistle." Woman, that looks delicious! And I am not only talking about the food."

His wife smiled indulgently. He could still be such a boy.

"Thanks, darling. Have all the others been called to lunch?"

"Yes, and Henry has arrived in time to join us as well. The winds were with them all the way".

"You did remember to tell Richard to put Henry in the East Tower, I hope? We moved the boys to the rooms above the stables."

"Richard is taking care of that as we speak. I told Henry just to have a quick rinse and then come to straight to the hall. He smelled a bit ripe after spending weeks on board."

"Greg!! I hope you didn’t say that to him!"

"No, I did not, though even if I had, he wouldn’t care. We have been telling each other the truth since we were both farmed out to your father".

"You were both still boys then. I was hoping for a bit more manners at your age", she said, kissing him on the top of his head after he sat down at the head of the table. After 19 years of marriage, they still were very fond of each other.

The door to the main hall opened with a bang.
John, Astrid and Nicholas came rushing in and took their places at the table. Marion following at a more sedate pace.

The rest, guests and servants alike, started trickling in as well. Gregory believed in eating together with all his staff. He liked to make everyone feel part of his family. Everybody took turns to serve the others himself included. Though everyone knew who the boss was. He had proven himself many times to be the best man to lead them and to keep them safe and well-fed. Every five years he was practically unanimously chosen as the director of the Island.

People kept looking at the door; they’d all heard or seen Henry arrive with his men. They were all curious to find out more about the man was who was going to marry their Astrid.
The house had been buzzing since the proclamation.
The love they had for George Harrington included all of his family. They had seen her grow up from a boisterous child to a cheerful, passionate young woman never too pretentious to chip in.

By the time everyone was seated, there was a knock on the door. Richard opened it and announced, as the ceremony dictated:" Master Henry Redwood would like to join our company".

Henry, looking a bit sheepishly, was standing at the door with all of his men waiting for Gregory to ask him to join them formally.

"Come in, my friend and take a seat," said Gregory, pointing at the empty chair on his right,” please all find a seat”.

"Joel, a large beer for my friend and his men”.
When all were seated, Gregory got up and raised his beer mug: “Let's bring out a toast to my dear friend Henry Redwood, who will soon truly be a part of our family!"
Everybody cheered and drank to their guest.

“And to everyone arriving safely here to celebrate the weddings of my children. Welcome, thank you for making an effort in these busy times. Let us make it a memorable event!”

After another applause, with some men whistling and banging the tables, the guests started talking to their neighbours while enjoying Ingrid’s delicious food.

At the head of the table, the two old friends first talked some business until Ingrid interrupted them.

"How are your mother and your sisters?"

"Very well, thanks, they are looking forward to welcoming and getting to know your daughter. Mother felt too old to make the sea journey. She is very sorry not to be able to attend the wedding. She wanted me to tell you that you're always welcome to visit your daughter”.

George and Ingrid had both met with the Matriarch many times. She came from a long line of strong women. Their daughter would fit right in there in the North.

"I will take her up on that later in the year after the harvests. I only wish the trains wouldn’t be so expensive. Someone really should do something about that. The prices have doubled in the last few years. Just because the Rail Union are the only ones who know how to run the trains, shouldn’t mean they can ask whatever they want for the tickets!"

"Well, they have had to put more guards on them, every trip they make now. That isn’t cheap. Damien makes them pay protection money as well", Henry said.

"So you heard about the troubles in Midland as well? Visitors to our island, travelling overland, told us, it had gotten quite bad. Going by train has never been riskier let alone on horseback. I prefer the sea any day", said Gregory.

Henry, not wanting the others to hear, put his head close to them, lowering his voice.

"I heard there are some groups on the move somewhere near the ruins at the north side of Diggers Peninsula. Maybe they heard we were planning something. They seem to have spies everywhere. Their population has been growing much too fast, and food is scarce. Damien is supposed to keep them under control. The Prior pays him for this, with our money, I may say. Don’t know for the life of me why we don’t exterminate that two-faced rat!”, he didn’t elaborate which of the two he meant.

Gregory knew the North didn’t have much truck with the current leader of their Church.

"His Excellency probably thinks it’s better to fight fire with fire. Here in the South, we just don’t have the men and women to keep that lot under control. We’d never get around to making a living. Talking about spies, we have been keeping our eyes and ears wide open. On the Custom islands and in our harbour, they are checking everyone who comes through. The cliffs will have to stop anyone trying to get onto the island via another route. We are well protected.

For keeping them away, the monks do seem to be the best deterrent. They have embargoed anyone from Midland coming onto our lands uninvited under punishment of complete annihilation. The Midlanders, to their sorrow, have learnt the monks don’t make empty threats. We all remember the Massacre of the Cornish.

Tomorrow, if there is time, we could discuss with the other families if there is more we can do. The Prior might grant us permission for a Raid if we can convince him our trade is suffering and we can’t pay our taxes. That should sway him if nothing else does".

They continued eating while talking about merrier things such as who was coming and the preparations.

Listening to her parents talking about the Midlander troubles and her wedding, Astrid could not contain herself any longer.

"It's not fair! Why am I not allowed to join the campaign this time? Everyone seems to know about it but me. You said the last time you went that I was too young to come with you. Now I am old enough I still can’t go, because I will be married then. John said that’s not allowed. Why? Can't we postpone the wedding and go before?"

A shocked silence fell at their table. Ingrid was happy the others made enough noise not to have heard Astrid speaking so disrespectfully to her father and insulting their friend in the process. She started to apologize for her rebellious daughter, but Gregory put his hand up with a warning look to his wife. His eyes were blazing behind his spectacles. He adored his daughter, but would never allow her or anyone else to be rude to a guest or question his decisions, definitely in front of others.

Knowing his friend's quick temper, not wanting the lovely meal to end in a raging argument, Henry interrupted him before things could get even more out of hand. He hated quarrels.

"Gregory, why don't Astrid and I go for an afternoon trip to London City to digest some of this lovely food and to get to know each other better? She can bring her friends if she wants or a chaperone".

Ingrid shot him a grateful look and said quickly:" That sounds like a great idea. Marion, do you want to go with them?"

" I would love to see the Market again, aunt Ingrid, if only John and I hadn’t planned to meet up with my father in the village. Dad never seems to spend a lot of time in the same place. I want to take the opportunity to catch up with him. Besides, you know how I feel about sailing".

Despite feelings running high, they all had to smile thinking about Marion always spending even the shortest boat trip with her head over the gunwale. For a child having grown up with water all around her, she was hopeless.

Henry glad for the distraction continued:" It will give me the chance to get my mother’s shopping list out of the way. Astrid would be a great help. I don’t know what a lot of those things even are. I will look after her and make sure she doesn’t get into trouble ".

Seeing her daughters bristle at that remark, Ingrid quickly said, she thought it a great idea but still felt she should make sure he actually wanted to go.

"That’s a very kind offer, Henry, to undertake another sailing trip after just arriving from one. Are you sure about it? Gregory won’t mind, would you dear? I’m sure Astrid will love to see London again before she leaves us".

 Before her husband could make any objections, Ingrid pushed her chair back practically dragging her daughter from the room, fiercely whispering in her ear: “That was a fortunate escape young lady. While still living under our roof, you will never be too old for your father to give you a whipping! Go and make sure our guest has a good time this afternoon or else I will take a belt to you myself. Henry saved your skin and is offering to go on a lovely trip even though he must be tired. Count yourself very lucky!".

Astrid, meekly following her mother, was shocked into silence as she’d never known her mother to get so upset with her. She barely recognised her. Ingrid was usually the calm parent, settling the arguments between her headstrong daughter and her husband before they escalated. She decided not to make her mother angry as well and forbid the outing. The idea of escaping to the sea with the added benefit of seeing her most favourite city sounded better than moping around the house being confronted by all the preparations for tomorrow. S

She turned to Henry, who had followed them out.
"The fastest way to the harbour will be by the Main Gate. We can take my sailboat, the Swan. It is faster than the others and will get us across in no time. It’s a small ship with only room for two crew and us. We’ll have to help them a bit. You do know how to sail, don’t you?”.

She felt quite audacious to be visiting her favourite city with a man without her usual escort. Her parents must trust him a lot, or they would never have allowed her to go alone unchaperoned. If this were an example of the freedom she would have after tomorrow, it might not be such a bad thing.

# **Chapter Six- Henry and Astrid**

Henry shook his head at the smart way she had deterred anyone from coming with them. She was bright and not the immature, unworldly Gen girl he had expected. But then she was Gregory's daughter. His friend had never been one to suffer fools gladly. It would be hard for her to leave her own family to join another one such a long way away. Somehow he felt, she would cope with it all beautifully. The difference in climate would be hardest for her. The harsh northern temperatures, cold and wet for most of the year, would take some getting used to in the beginning. Speeding up to keep up with the girl, he decided to use the trip to find out a bit more about her.

Astrid felt a bit happier now, going to London with a trip on her beloved Swan as a bonus. She loved the busy markets. All these foreign-looking people, bustling about the water lanes and narrow alleys. It would be bliss to be away from all the stupid wedding preparations. For an older person, he was very understanding. She had known that changing the wedding plans when everyone had already made an effort to join them for the festivities would be impossible. Some families had travelled for days with a large crowd of people. She had just wanted to get back at her father and had still felt upset about Nicholas’ sudden change of heart.

Looking sideways at Henry, she thought Marion was right; he was not bad looking and not as old as she had imagined.

"Thanks for organising this trip. My father always treats me like a small child. If I’m old enough to marry, I should be old enough to do what I want, don’t you think ?"

"Your father is just trying to protect you. When you meet my mother and sisters, you’ll see that the women up north don't let anyone tell them what to do. They are in charge; us poor men just have to follow".

He had such a wicked smile when he said that she just had to smile back.

"Before we go, I’d like to change into something a bit warmer? You’ll probably want to do the same too. That dress, lovely though it is, doesn’t look warm enough for sailing ".

"I’ll be right back!", she said as she ran off to tell Trudy she needed other clothes. He was right. It would be still cold on the sea.

He followed her upstairs, wondering if this whole idea of marrying his best friend's daughter was such a good thing. He never had any inclination to be at the back and call of a wife. He hadn’t been kidding when he told her women were in charge in the north. When the news came from the Monastery, they had found a suitable match for him; he had not immediately acted. The realisation she was the daughter of his two best friends had made it more comfortable but at the same time more difficult. He knew Gregory well enough to know he wouldn’t have agreed if he didn’t think it would work out. He just wanted to live a quiet life spending as much time as he could on his studies without being harangued by some female. Living with someone would have consequences for the freedom he thus far had to explore the history of their people. That kind of pursuit strictly forbidden on the Island. It had always been a great source of dispute between him and Gregory.

The age difference didn’t bother him too much. The girl's maternal grandfather, Jafar Saadiq, apparently just married a girl 24 years younger. It was not unheard off amongst the ruling families.

Gregory had written him how relieved Ingrid and he had been to be able to entrust their daughter to someone he knew so well.

Henry found his room and changed into his outdoor clothes a servant had already cleaned and made ready. It would be useful before tomorrow to try and get to know the girl a bit better.

# **Chapter Seven- The outing**

Hearing her sister talk to Trudy about the sailing trip, her little sister Lily, as usual following her like a puppy, joined them in her bedroom and started to jump up and down with excitement. Her bright red locks were bouncing up and down like rusty bedsprings.

"I want to go with you, Astrid! I’ve never been to the City! Please, please, please."

"No, Lily! Trudy, tell her she can’t come! There won’t be enough room, and besides, I don’t want to have to look after you. You can go another time ".

Astrid hurriedly changed and tried to escape downstairs to get away from the little brat. She did love her, but she could be such a pain. Far too spoiled.

Her sister now looked at Judith, using her big blue eyes, for a more favourable answer.

This time Trudy did not give in to her to Astrid’s relief.

Lily tried to get her way one more time.

"It's not fair, why does Astrid always get to do nice things. No one ever lets me have any fun. I will tell mum that she is mean to me".

Trudy, who did feel a bit sorry for Lily, knew she had to find something to distract the little girl before she had one of her famous meltdowns. She thought Astrid deserved this outing and it was an excellent idea to let her get to know Henry a bit better without having anyone else there.

"Why don't you come with me to the Convent, my pet? The sisters have made a lot of pastries for tomorrow. I bet they need someone to try them".

Lily's round little face lit up, she was known to have a sweet tooth and usually only got pastry on special days.

Giving Judith a thankful look, Astrid made herself scarce before her sister could change her mind.

"Alright then, I am off".

She fled downstairs to join Henry, always keen to show new people her sailing skills. After being in the water, being on it was the next best thing.

None of her other friends was as passionate about it as she was. Marion always said just looking at waves made her feel queasy. Nicholas liked it but preferred hunting and riding.

She must’ve been a mermaid in a previous life. She loved everything about the sea, the everchanging colours, which could change from light blue to dark grey and all the clours in between within minutes. Its fickleness. One moment smooth as a mirror then rough with waves higher than your mast.

At night, listening to the sound of the waves crashing against the cliffs beneath her bedroom window, she always felt safe. The waves were telling her that they were watching out for her, protecting her.

She saw Henry was already at the gate, patiently waiting. He started to chat straightaway aware of her awkwardness about going on a trip with a near stranger.

" The sun seems quite hot for this time of year. We don’t get that in the North. A few weeks ago, we were still shovelling snow from our roads”.

She tried not to shiver, thinking about it. She had asked her father to tell her a bit about Scotia after she heard she was going to live there. It hadn’t done much to make her look forward to the prospect. If any it had made her even more desperate to avoid that fate.

"Won’t it be good to spend the afternoon outside and get to know each other? I don't think tomorrow there will be much chance for that. After tomorrow we will probably only have a few days before we leave for my home".

Lady! If he was going to keep talking about that wretched wedding, she might as well stay here and let her mother and friends go on about it!

She abruptly changed the subject.

"We will have to walk through Market Square, then follow Harbour road to go down to the ships. It shouldn’t take us longer than an hour to reach the City. The Swan will be ready to go. We can be on our way before the wind changes and while the tide is still in our favour. We have to go back before they change again. Can I see your list? Then I can make a plan".

Henry realising she thought he had never been to the City, gave her the list and listened patiently to her explaining which shops they would have to visit. Showing him, she was a woman of the world, quite used to a big city like London, seemed to give her more confidence. He started to look forward to the outing as well.

Not long afterwards they found themselves slightly out of breath down at the Harbour. There were lots of boats moored at the floating quays. Many guests had taken advantage of the lovely early Spring weather to come by sea.

The inns and hostels in town would be making a roaring trade this week. Lots of citizens had opened up their houses for guests in the hope of earning some extra money and hearing news from other parts of the Archipelago.

"Miss Astrid, sir, a good day for it, isn’t it? We’ll have a speedy trip over there. We are ready for you”.

Captain Finn was an imposing figure, all dressed in black made a little less sinister by a yellow bow adorning his long ponytail. Before he lost his arm, he had sailed along every coast in the New World. Some said not always in the best company.

Onboard, they stood on the front deck to be out of the way while the crew cast off. The wind was whistling around their ears, making them grateful for bringing their jackets and scarves.

Astrid was quite impressed by Henry’s knowledge of sailing.

He explained: "We might not live close by the sea, but the Wasting Loch is large enough to have its share of storms. Our estate lies on an island in the middle of the loch, or lake as you would call it. If you don’t learn how to handle a boat, you’ll never be able to get off the island in spring. During the summer, when it’s dry enough, there’s a narrow landbridge. People always talk about how it’s a lot colder up there. The mountains around our lands though are the most beautiful in the world. You will love them".

He sounded wistful. Astrid sensed how much he loved his home. She wondered if one day she could feel the same for that faraway, chilly place.

On the horizon, they could already spot the towers of the ancient city of London glittering in the sun. Everyone just called it the City now. There was one very high building that had survived all the wars and the passage of time, looking like a shard of glass. Always the first sign you were approaching that fantastic city.

She had only ever seen some of the original Londoners once. Their faces were always covered by a sort of masks, while they hid their bodies behind voluminous robes. Even their breathing sounded strange.

 “They’re all ugly monsters with long, sharp teeth and red eyes”, they used to say when they were kids trying to scare each other.

“Don’t ever go near them, or they might snatch you and take you inside”, their parents and teachers would tell them.

Entrance to the old city was restricted. Visitors had to stay at the hotel boats of London town. People from all over the Archipelago had come to make a living around the towering walls adding ever more rafts to the existing ones. London town was by now more extensive than the old city. It lay like a horseshoe around the westside of the city.

The Main City harbour lay on the eastside, only accessible for the colossal continental freighters from the Continent.

Anyone who tried to enter city limits without a pass would soon see himself escorted back outside. A second offence would get you hauled away, never to come back again.

The inhabitants of that fascinating place exuded a distinct fishy smell, noticeable from a mile away. It added to the rumours they were not wholly human but merpeople: part fish and part man.

The deep natural harbour on the eastside was a haven to ships from the continent delivering all sort of goods from abroad. These were said to consist of old and new technology. Though forbidden, sometimes these found their way to some dealers outside.

 The Hotel boats each faced their own quays, lying in a star pattern around the perimeter of the town. A lot of the Island's families and traders from other parts of the Archipelago had permanently rented rooms there.

The Harrington family always used the Dolphin, a six-story high, blue painted villa with wrought-iron balconies clinging like barnacles on all its sides. It looked very festive with the many colourful flower baskets hanging under those balconies.

Captain Finn planned to moor there to let the pair go on foot to the Market which lay right at the foot of the City walls. The next half hour or so they were all too busy with mooring their boat having to tack sharply upwind to overcome the tide going out. It was trying to push them sideways. Henry was helping where he was needed.

Astrid was content just to watch this man, with whom she would have to spend the rest of her life, skillfully jumping ashore and tying up the ropes. The Book could have chosen someone far worse for her. She and her friends had heard enough horror stories about how some families did not give a fig about who their daughters were to marry, to realise he could have been the right partner, were it not for Nicholas.

‘Besides, I would’ve run away if they had forced somebody horrible on me. Preferably with Nicholas if he hadn’t been such a coward’.

She decided there and then to pretend to have fallen in love with her new husband to teach that stupid boy a lesson. Maybe he would change his mind if she could make him jealous.
He did love her; she was sure of it. She was still not convinced he meant what he said when he broke off with her.

"We are ready for you to disembark, miss".

She startled out of her reveries. They were finished mooring, the boat already tied up and the gangplank out.
Henry was standing at the bottom of it, waiting to escort her into town.

# **Chapter Eight- Jafar’s arrival**

Not long after Astrid and Henry’s departure, a short procession could be spotted going up the road to Harrington House.

Soon, Ingrid's father Jafar, who had come up from Kent, arrived at the square of the big house accompanied by his new young wife and a party existing of Kentish family members and their staff. Sedan chairs, each painted in more vivid colours than the other, carried the women of his household.

The land connection between Kent and the Island being impassable, there were only two ways for him to travel: the South or the North Sea route. They had taken the South Sea route, first sailing to the city of South Gate on the opposite side of the island, then continuing overland through the mountains up to Sevenoaks.

It had taken them only two days, the weather being so glorious this early in the year. Jafar had thought it would be interesting for his wife, Leila, to see a bit of the lovely, verdantly green, island, his daughter had moved to when she got married.

Ingrid had offered to be at South Gate to meet them, but her father hadn’t wanted to hear of it.

"You’ll be far too busy with all the preparations. Knowing you, you’ll want to check everything yourself. Just like your mother".

Jafar adored his daughter as she reminded him so much of his first wife, Cassandra. For a long time, their union had stayed barren until, nearly giving up, this miracle had appeared. The moment he saw her in her mother’s arms, he was smitten. She had always been like his little shadow.

He had always been happy Cassandra got to see her only daughter happily married to Henry'. She had been very ill at the time, and the wedding had been a very sober affair. Everyone had been too sad, seeing her looking so frail, to enjoy it. These weddings would mean a lot to Ingrid. He was sure she would make a big success of them organising them like a general his campaign.

That brought him back to his recent nuptials. The only reason he had consented to remarry finally was to appease his advisers.

"Leaving the Estate without an heir would completely destabilise the area", Ivan, his counsellor, had told him frequently.
"Youare still young enough at 59 to provide us with an heir from your branch".

Six months ago, he did finally marry a young woman, called Leila, from a decent Dover family.

On the trip over here, he’d been a bit apprehensive about introducing her to his daughter.

'I wonder what Ingrid will make of her. Leila being only a few years older than Astrid and our little surprise’.

He grinned proudly.

A long line of villagers had gathered along Castle Drive. Sevenoaks could be very dull during the winter months. The spectacle of the caravan, therefore, made a welcome diversion. Everyone wanted to see the redoubtable Jafar Saadiq Mathewson, Governor of the large Kent estates, father of their beloved mistress Ingrid.

The gates of Harrington House were already wide open as they arrived at the top of the road in front. Richard accompanied Jafar and his wife to the main house, while the other servants took charge of the rest of the party under the strict supervision by Trudy.

Leila, shyly, stopped, not sure of the reception she was going to get. Jafar held out his arm for her and patted her hand.

"Don't worry my dear, once she sees our surprise she will be thrilled to welcome you in our family", he whispered.

"Dad, it’s been far too long", Ingrid was overjoyed seeing her father again."You came right on time to join us for our afternoon tea".

Ingrid looked at him, clearly waiting for her father to introduce his companion. He had written Ingrid about his marriage but hadn’t gone into much detail. He realised it would be a bit awkward for both of them and thought it better to wait until they met.

"Daughter, meet Leila, my wife. Leila this is Ingrid. I’m sure you will become great friends once you get to know each other".

Ingrid embraced the young woman kissing her on both her cheeks. She suddenly pulled back her eyes round as saucers looking accusingly at her father. She immediately recovered herself and turned with a friendly smile again to the mortified looking young woman.

"Welcome into our home, Leila. Well, my father sure is good at keeping a secret, what a lovely surprise. If I’d known, I would’ve sent a comfortable carriage to pick you up from the South Gate. Much better than wobbling about in those sedans. I hope the trip hasn’t been too hard on you in your condition? Before joining us for lunch, I’m sure you would like to freshen up first, maybe even have a rest before meeting the others?”

Without looking up, Leila nodded gratefully.

Ingrid looked around for Trudy to accompany Leila to the South Tower where she had put her father's entourage.

“We will come and collect you once you’ve had a rest. We can easily hold back tea for another half hour”.

Leila looked very relieved not to have to meet any more new people. She realised how she had dreaded this first encounter with Jafar’s daughter. Hearing all his stories about her, she knew how much he valued Ingrid’s opinion. She gratefully followed Trudy.

"That was neatly done, Ingrid. Now I hope you will take pity on your old father and not scold me for springing Leia’s pregnancy on you. We first wanted to be sure it all would go well. Then it wasn’t worth to write. We would probably arrive before the letter. Now please, take me to that nice husband of yours. I’d like to get a quiet word with him before the others join us".

Ingrid took his arm and kissed his cheek.

"Seeing I’m to have a little brother or sister soon, I would say not that old! Why wouldn’t I want to see you happy again, silly baba? Knowing Ivan’s thoughts on the matter, you’ve held him off much longer than I thought possible. He must’ve been frantic to keep Kent in the Mathewson clan."

"Him? You’re damn right. Ivan’s over the moon! Now there’s a child on the way to keep Kent in our family. She’s from good stock. We will have healthy, strong babies ".

"You're such a romantic father", she said laughing, squeezing his arm, "but let's go and find George. I will let the two of you talk while I get the tea ready."

# **Chapter Nine- London Visit**

The first thing they noticed when approaching the Market was the smell of smoke and the noise. Hundreds of small boats were bobbing around the surrounding islets and the high walls of London. People were calling out at each other, praising their goods. After the fresh sea breeze of the last few hours, the smell of gutted fish and other offal overlaid with that of human waste was overwhelming.

Astrid wrinkled her nose. Sometimes she hated her perfect sense of smell.

"It is at it's worst now the tide and the wind are right in our direction".

Henry nodded in agreement.

"Every time I come here, I wonder why they’ve not found a solution for this stench. It isn’t as if we don't pay enough taxes. They have access to all this tech from the continent. I can’t imagine them having this problem in the cities".

"Dad says they don't care about the people outside the walls".

They looked up at the towering buildings rising from behind the city walls. Some were looking like tall flowers, and some seemed like green waterfalls, plants trailing down the sides. Skyways connected most of the buildings.No one knew what it was like down below the grand edifices.

The first city dwellers had built the city on land reclaimed after the big flood. Over time an impenetrable wall had risen around it. The only way to get in was via huge lifts designed by the city's engineers.

On the western side, open to the North Sea, only possible ships from outside Albion were allowed to moor. When they caught you, trying to enter uninvited, they had no qualms in dropping you down from the city walls or vapourising your vessel.

"We'd better get a move on, or we won't be home before dinner, and your mother will kill me".

From their mooring at the Dolphin pier, had taken them some time to get to the Market Place, which consisted of an enormously wide canal where small boats bobbed in long rows and stallholders traded their goods. Long wooden gangways between the floating shops formed an unstable road.

Even though it was not allowed to set up business unless you had a permit from the Counsel, a lot of small kiosks on tiny rafts and canoes popped up everywhere only to disappear when they heard the town's guard was doing his rounds in the area.

People in all sorts of cheerful, tribal apparel were either selling their wares or looking to buy some.

Diminutive Sinese, whose women hardly distinguishable from their men, all were showing off their gorgeous wares, bolts of shot silk and the pretty brightly painted slippers and scarves.

Tall, dark, proud farmers from the south of Kent were balancing in boats filled to the brim with every fruit and vegetable under the sun. Astrid had met some of them at her grandfather’s court and knew them to be a peace-loving, cheerful people.

There were lots of other folks she didn’t know from which island they originated. They were from all over the Archipelago of Albion.

Little scruffy kids were trying to grab their hands to take them to a specific shop.

Above the cry of the seagulls, there was a loud buzz of voices calling out, laughing or singing. After the silence of the sea, it was deafening. Astrid had to shout to make herself heard.

"Shall I take that shopping list? I know the best shops to get a good bargain. For cosmetics, I know the perfect place. They sell beautiful clothes too. Some of them come from as far as the Mainland and will never wear out. I know my parents probably told you not to let me out of your sight, but it will be boring for you to come with me to all these women’s shops. Didn’t you say you have some other business in town, besides your mum’s shopping? I can easily go by myself. With the City Guards everywhere, I’ll be as safe as anything".

She looked at him with such imploring eyes; he simply had to give in to her. He hoped they could keep it from her parents.

"Alright, but stay within the main walkways. I have some boring business in the village with a merchant in dry herbs. How about I give you my mother's list and money. We will meet here at this food barge in one hour?"

Henry saw her face light up with the prospect of this surprising amount of freedom. It was probably a nice way to get into her good books.

The City had the market under tight supervision anyway. Not so much for their denizens safety, but more to prevent illegal trading. It would keep her safe.

He needed to search for a particular trader he’d heard of in the hope of finding some more books about tech. A bookseller in Scotia had given him the names of some stores to try. They would not be selling them openly. He would have to ask around carefully and couldn’t risk having Astrid involved.
He thought how shocked she would be to find out about his interest in tech. The islanders were known for their strict adherence to the laws.

"If you’re worried, you won't find me later I can ask one of the town guides to go with you. They know every street and alley and will stop sellers bothering you".

Astrid, bristling, pulled herself up to her full height.

"I think I will manage, thank you very much. I’ve been here before, you know!"

"My apologies, I just thought it was forbidden for unmarried women of your Families to go anywhere without an escort off the Island. I don’t want us to get into trouble with your parents or worse with the Monastery".

"Well, there’s no one here to tell on us, are they? I will see you here in one hour, bye".

Before he could protest, she stormed off. He shrugged, knowing better than to try and catch up with her.

‘Women, young or old, were impossible to deal with. Whatever you do or say, they will find something to get their knickers in a twist about. I should’ve learnt by now not to try and reason with one".

# **Chapter Ten- Contraband**

His man in Scotia had told him to find a certain Mama Wawa's stall. She would be able to point him to the kind of shops he wanted to visit.

He started walking following directions from the porter of the Dolphin. It didn’t take long before he heard a loud voice: "Welcome to mama Wawa’s business centre! Looking for a nice scarf for your woman, goggles that will keep out the brightest rays, tested in the Mediterranean deserts, sweets for your children, fruit juices from every berry you can think off and whatever else you need?"

There she was, mama Wawa herself, larger than life, showing a sparkling white grin that simply made you want to smile back. Decked out in a tentlike dress decorated with the fruit patterns distinctive for the southern Kentish tribes, she looked like a walking fruit stall. She had topped her outfit off with a jaunty, bright orange turban wobbling on masses of steel-wool coloured hair.

"Hello handsome fellow, can I tempt you with a glass of tea on this warm afternoon? Or maybe a cool beer?", she called out to him.

"I am looking for some information, dear madam."

"O, I sell that as well. But only to good customers. I can tell you all about the weather, who is going to be the new City leader this year, what the Midlanders are up to, which family had a new baby. You name it, and mama Wawa will give you the news of today. Alas only for faithful clients".

She looked at him with raised eyebrows.

He moved as close as he could get to the counter and said under his breath: "Where can I find some continental tech that still works or maybe books about it?"

She looked him up and down her brows nearly disappearing into her turban. She lowered her voice, as well.

"Don't get many gentlemen from your persuasion asking me that question. Who referred you to me? I don't want to get into trouble with the Church."

“The owner of a bookshop in Scotia, Magnus, told me it might be possible to get what I want by looking you up. I will make it worth your while if you could provide me with one or two addresses of trustworthy traders. I don't have much time. I am meeting someone in about an hour ".

Henry kept looking over his shoulder. He took his wallet out and showed her an IOU for 20 hours of work. Most traders preferred such a payment instead of coin. The latter often not much use when there was nothing to buy.

"I will pay this for that sea-green scarf up there and information".

Her eyes lit up at the considerable sum he was offering.
Looking around first to make sure there were no guards around, she got the scarf down and wrapped it in some tissue paper. When she handed the package to him, she whispered: "Behind the Temple barge of the Buddhists in a small lane, you’ll see a red door in the back wall of a garden. Knock three times, wait, and then knock three times again. You never heard this from me".

Henry tucked the scarf in jacket and with a quick thanks dashed to the church. It was well-known to everyone who had ever visited London City. The Buddhists had been in Albion for thousands of years, even before the Exodus. Compared to other old beliefs, it's philosophy had continuously managed to keep faithful followers.

He believed it must have something to do with the fact they welcomed everyone in their church. Their creed was more about a particular way of life than dogma. You could find their temple just by looking up and using the enormous golden Buddha as your guide. He had always wondered how it kept afloat until one of the monks explained it was completely hollow.

Arriving at the temple complex, he followed mamaWawa’s directions and soon found the red-painted door she mentioned. It looked quite inconspicuous. Only the gleaming coat of crimson paint made it stand out from the crumbly walls of the dilapidated building.

At first glance, he couldn’t see how one could open the. He proceeded to go through the required knocking sequence, feeling a bit silly.

The door opened, gliding soundlessly into the wall. Henry stepped through and felt like he had walked into a treasure trove of all sort of objects from earlier eras. They towered over him like so many heaps of metal and cables. He’d never seen so many pre-Exodus objects seemingly still in one piece.

"I’ll be right with you, sir", a high voice called coming from somewhere in the back of the cavernous depot.

Henry made his way to where he surmised it came from, all the while openmouthed gazing at the weird-looking objects. For many, he could only guess their purpose. His heart was beating faster. What a treasure trove!

"Ah, here you are!", a tiny man, who would have never passed the Gen criteria, so must be a Midlander, came towards him peeking from behind a large metal contraption with four wheels, rubbing his hands clean of black grease.

"My name is Shocker. Can I help you in any way, sir? Do you already know what you want, or would you like a look around first? No need to tell me your name. We are used to anonymously conducting business".

Henry felt a bit embarrassed. He knew Midlanders found their fear for corruption by anything technical rather stupid.
They reasoned if it makes your life more comfortable or helps you in any way, why not use it?

The young monk, who had been his teacher, had been a bit of a rebel. He’d taught him about the wonders of the past ages. When their mother found out, she promptly fired him.
Knowing he had sparked Henry’s interest, he had gifted him with one of his books from the past. It was now his most prized possession. Henry took his backpack from his back and lifted it out to show the shopkeeper.

"I have a book here about old tech. If possible, I’d like to acquire more like it. Here’s also a list of parts which I hope you can help me with."

"That's a fine manual sir. Trevor Baylis! Are you planning to build one of them radios? Thought your people aren’t too keen on that sort of enterprise. Maybe as it doesn’t need electricity, it will be allowed. If you leave your list with me, I will try and find the parts for you to collect tomorrow at the earliest, but it will cost ya".

"I don't have that much time I’m afraid. I would be willing to pay you a bonus if you could have a look now and get me whatever you’ve got from that list now. I’ve got less than an hour. I can look around for some books in the meantime".

The little guy scratched his head and studied him intensely.

"You look like an honest man to me. As I’m a careful man, maybe it would be a good idea if you pay me some cash upfront? Wouldn’t be the first time I went through a lot of trouble only to find my customer had done a disappearing act on me ".

Henry already pulling his wallet out of his backpack, waved a pile of notes in the man's face. He must get on with this. He didn’t want Astrid waiting for him.

"Thanks", the notes swiftly disappeared down the mechanic's apron, "Follow me then I will show you where the books are.

I never put them in any kind of order, but see what you can find. People don't seem to be that interested in them anymore. Guess not many know how to read them. Here, let me show you. I store them in this box to keep them dry ”.

He proudly showed Henry a beautiful chest with strange writing on the sides.

"You’ll never guess how this opens", he beamed and triumphantly shoved a panel on top of the box aside revealing two keys.

"Clever, ain't it?"

Careful not to show Henry which one he took, he stuck one of the keys in the lock and opened the lid with a flourish.

"These are the best-preserved ones. The box keeps its content sealed. I’ve other manuscripts in that rack over there though they are just loose pages. A lot have been water damaged. My brother, who lives in Midland, sends me new stuff regularly. If you would like, I could keep a lookout for others like these and let you know when they are available? I’ll need to know how to reach you, though ”.

Friendly as he seemed, Henry was not planning to give the man more information than he needed.

"Maybe you could find me my parts while I can see if there is something here that I can take with me now. In the future, just leave a message with Mama Wawa and tell her it’s for the gentleman from the green scarf. I promise I will regularly have someone check in with her. Right now it will be time soon for me to leave. I don’t want to do that emptyhanded.”

Would this guy ever stop talking? And no way was he giving him his address. The books could too easily fall into the wrong hands during transport.

The sun was already halfway down the sky, so he might have about half an hour left before he had to meet up with Astrid. Why did everybody today seem intent on keeping him from being on time?

"Alright, alright, I am on it".

Shocker swiftly disappeared into the bowels of his emporium. Soon a lot of clattering and things banging on the floor could be heard.

Henry browsed through the books in the box and was amazed at their pristine condition. Alas, the chest didn’t contain any technical books. He did find a rolled-up ancient map with the letters Europe' written large at the top. Wasn’t that what the ancients used to call the Continent? He unrolled the beautifully detailed map carefully. It was made of paper but had some sort of shiny coating. He felt a bit guilty, as someone must have stolen it either from one of the monastery’s libraries or someone’s private collection. Sometimes he wished he could be free from all those regulations.

He nearly jumped out of his skin, hearing Shocker’s voice right behind him. The man looked away, trying to hide his grin at the effect his sudden appearance had on the young man.

"Ah, I see you have found the pride of my collection! Are you interested in maps as well??"

"I am in this one. The books are nice but not what I’m looking for at the moment. I will take this map, but as far as books are concerned, I am going to have to wait until something more to my taste comes into your shop. I must go now as I have a meeting".

"That’s a shame. You’ll be happy to know I got most of the parts on your list. I wrapped them up and put them in this box. I’ve put a rope around it so it will be easier for you to carry. It all adds up more or less to what you gave me. So shall we call it even?"

The clever man had him over a barrel as he didn’t have any time to spare to haggle. Henry sighed and nodded his head.

"Okay, fine. Hope my order is really in there or else I will have to come back with some of my men".

"No need for threats. Shocker has always been as good as his word or else I would’ve been out of business a long time ago. I bid you a good day, sir. Let me open the gate for you".

Henry saw them sliding sideways again as if by magic. Next time he would have to ask the man how he did that. Now was not the time. He needed to find Astrid as soon as possible. He gave the man a quick nod and hurried on his way.

# **Chapter Eleven- Going back**

When he reached the Great Market Place, he found Astrid sitting on a bench, surrounded by colourful packages looking very pleased. Why did shopping make a woman so happy? Even if it was for someone else?

“I managed to get all the things on your list", she said proudly waving her arm over the pile of bags and small boxes.

Did you finish your business?"

She eyed his parcel with curiosity but didn’t feel comfortable enough yet to ask him what was in it. He might think her one of those nosy women. She would hate that.

"Yes, thanks, maybe we can have a bite to eat here instead of going back to the Dolphin. We shouldn’t have too much. Your mother has a large family meal planned for this evening ".

"Oh yes, let's have it here at one of the food stalls, please. I absolutely love exotic food. The Dolphin will just have the usual stuff. I just came past this stall around the corner from here, where I saw they serve lovely fish wraps. They were selling pineapple juice as well. It’s been ages since I had some of that. Mum says it is far too expensive".

He smiled at her enthusiasm.

"The fish wraps it is. With all the juice you can drink. You have saved me so much time with your shopping. That deserves a reward. Just stay here with all the shopping. I’ll put my box down here as well. Let me go and get the food !"

When he walked away, Astrid’s gaze followed him. She felt she was slowly warming to him.

After they finished their snacks, they slowly rewound their way to the hotel. The skipper had already got their boat ready to leave. He shouted at them from the upper deck to hurry.

"We better get going because the wind and the tide are just right to get us home in under an hour."

They dashed on board. Astrid decided to stay on deck.
Henry, who by now was very tired after the long day, went down below for a nap.

The weather continued to feel quite warm for the time of day. Astrid didn’t mind to be alone for a while. Her mind was whirling with thoughts about Nicholas, Henry and her wedding tomorrow. Time was going so fast now. There was no stopping it. Somehow this afternoon had gone a long way to making her feel less anxious about it all.

Her hair blowing with the wind, she stared at the smooth water, for the moment just enjoying being on the water. The sea always had that effect on her.

Henry had fallen in a deep sleep. He was woken up by one of the shipmates tugging at his arm.

“Sir, we have arrived back. Miss Astrid has asked me to wake you”.

Straightening his clothes and throwing some water in his face, he felt ready to face the rest of the day, or what was left of it.

At the port, a pony trap was waiting for at the top of the stairs.

Astrid was up the steps in a few seconds, apparently not tired at all from the outing. Not willing to be outdone Henry followed her swiftly. They climbed in, and Henry let Astrid take the reins. She knew where she was going. On the ride, she looked at him.

"Thanks for a lovely day. I never thought I would have one more chance to visit my favourite city. My mother would never have allowed it if I had asked. You must be a good influence on her. Let’s not tell her that you let me go shopping alone".

"Yes, that will be a good idea. I don’t like lying to your parents. We can just not mention it. Thank you for your hard work in getting all my mother's and sisters' shopping done. I would have probably got all the wrong things if left to myself. Here’s a little something to remember this lovely day by".

With a flourish, he handed her the scarf Ma Wawa persuaded him to buy.

Her face lit up. She coloured slightly accepting the unexpected gift.

"Can I unwrap it now or do you want me to wait until tomorrow?"

He laughed.

"I really should say tomorrow", he teased."But I think you might want to show it off to your friends tonight at dinner. If you like it, that is. If not, I can always replace it with something else later".

She tore the tissue paper off, impatiently like a child. Shaking out the shimmering shawl, woven in many shades of green, she gave a big sigh.

"'By the Lady it is beautiful. It will so go with my dress for tonight. Thanks!"

She quickly gave him a peck on his cheek and fled, flushing to her roots, to her room.

"Well, that went well. Mission accomplished".

Henry bounded up the stairs two at a time, feeling very satisfied with himself.

# **Chapter Twelve- Evening dinner**

Astrid, still excited by her outing, tore into her room like a whirlwind nearly colliding with Trudy.

"Somebody had a good outing, I see. I’m glad. Everything was better than you just hanging around here until tomorrow feeling miserable. I’ve put your burgundy dress out with the flowers as you asked me. Hey, that’s a lovely scarf. So he’s already spoiling you? You lucky girl. If I were twenty years younger, I would have a go at him myself".

She took the scarf from Astrid and admired its softness.

"It will look great with your dress. It matches the green in it perfectly. You would think he knew what you would be wearing tonight. He has a good taste, or did you help him choose it?"

"No, Henry gave it to me just now. He bought it while he was away doing some business. He let me do the shopping for his mother and sister all by myself".

"Better not let your father hear about that, young lady. He doesn’t believe unmarried girls should be gallivanting around by themselves in the big bad city".

"There is not much he can do about it now, can he? I’ll be married tomorrow and not his to tell what I can or cannot do anymore. Why does he always have to be such a spoilsport? Mum’s much easier. She understands you don't have to be a man not to get into trouble when you go out by yourself".

Astrid sat down on the bed, her arms crossed in front of her looking defiantly at her nurse.

"He’s not that bad, Astrid. He’s always given you girls the run of the island".

"Yeah right, because he knows that everybody here recognises us and will keep an eye on us so no one would dare to harm us. Imagine me suggesting to him that Marion and I go to London without an escort. He would have a fit!"

"He’s just looking out for you, my child. Though now is not the time to discuss your father’s supposed shortcomings. Go and have a quick wash and change into this lovely dress. We have to be downstairs in ten minutes. Before you head for the dining hall, it might be a nice gesture to go and say hi to your grandfather's new wife, Leila. She arrived with your Baba right after you two left for London. She won’t be joining us this evening as she wasn’t feeling very well. Did you know she was pregnant? Poor thing must feel rather alone, not knowing anybody here except for your grandfather. She’s not much older than you".

"Grandfather is here already? Why didn’t you say straightaway? Mum told us he remarried, but I didn’t know she would be that young nor that he wanted more children. Isn’t he a bit too old to be a dad again? I wonder what mum thinks about it."

Before Trudy could explain, they heard the dinner bells going once, telling them they only had ten minutes to assemble in the dining room. Glad to have a good excuse not to visit this strange lady, Astrid promised Trudy she would go and visit this newcomer after dinner.

“I will call on her later together with Baba. She probably won’t be too keen anyway to talk to some girl she’s never seen before in her life ”, seeing Trudy starting to object,” I will go, I swear by the Lady, cross my heart ”.

"As long as you keep your promise. Make sure to comb your hair. You look like the Captain hauled you under the keel on the trip. Not wearing your hat again outside, I guess? You’ll be the death of me one day. I am off now to see to Lily, whom your father has given special dispensation to join us this evening. She wants me to do her hair ‘like a real lady’ she said".

"I hope the little madam will not make a nuisance of herself. She is spoilt rotten. She is going to spend the whole meal making cow's eyes at anything with trousers on, I bet. Just you wait, next thing a big crush on Henry. I’ve never met someone so addicted to all that romance stuff. It won’t do her much good in the Convent when she joins the sisters".

"The more reason to be kind to her. Let her have her fantasies for a little while longer. We can’t be all as wild as you, with your disregard of everything properly. Life in the Convent is just right for gentle girls like her. She will enjoy all the learning. Anyway, she’s still too young to worry about all that. For now, she’s a proper little lady and far more pious than you. She would never make such a fuss about marrying a nice man ".

"Pff, she can take my place any time she wants! I would much rather go on raids and live on a farm with my dog and horse. I always wanted to be a soldier and traveller. Visit other parts of Albion. Who wants to die of boredom, tied to a house and a husband with a brood of children. That has never appealed to me. I guess there is no escaping now. At least there’ll be a nice trip to the North first. Maybe I can even persuade Henry to show me around Scotia first before settling down at his house. He might be too old already to have offspring so we won’t have any at all".

"Girl, girl, you can talk such nonsense. You know it’s your duty to the Tree to provide it with more shoots. You probably wouldn't be talking like this if the groom tomorrow was Nicholas".

Trudy immediately felt sorry when she saw all colour draining for Astrid's face leaving her cheeks bright red from outrage.

"That’s not fair! He always loved me, he said. Now suddenly he changed his mind. Do you know why? If you do, you have to tell me so I can change it. You know him best".

Her lips trembled, eyes glittering from unshed tears. Trudy could kick herself for even mentioning it. Nicholas had told her about Astrid's desperate deed a few nights ago. He had asked what he should do to stop Astrid without her getting hurt so much. She’d felt awful seeing her son so miserable. He had always tried to do ger proud. She didn’t know how to mend this. She decided to be resolute and hoped it would help Astrid to pull herself together.

"That was all child’s play. You knew from the day of the decision you two were not a match. Better put it out of your mind before it ruins the rest of your day. Let's enjoy this evening and try to appreciate your parents choice of a husband. It could’ve been far worse. Henry is a lovely, handsome man. He showed you today how considerate and flexible he can be. I’m convinced he will keep doing so in the future. You must forget being with my son, or youw ill never find happiness. He’s not the right one for you. We should’ve separated you far sooner".

Before Astrid could say anything back, Trudy held up her hand to prevent any discussion and left the room.

Astrid slowly got ready to join the other diners, not caring if she would be late or not. All the excitement of the wonderful afternoon seemed to have evaporated. She decided to skip her visit to her Baba's apartment until after dinner. She would surely see him at dinner. She could meet his lady tomorrow, surely? All her curiosity about her grandfather’s new wife had disappeared.

When she came downstairs and entered the dining room, all the others were already there and seated. She couldn't see her grandfather yet. Maybe he had decided to stay with his wife.
All faces turned to her as she made her way to Henry's side, mumbling a quick apology without looking at him.

"You’re late, child", trust her father to call her that in front of Henry.

"Have you got nothing to say?"

Ingrid put her hand on her husband's arm and whispered something in his ear.

"Your mother says you’re late because you had to help her. I still find that no excuse to make guest our wait. Henry, I do apologise ".

Henry gave her an encouraging smile.

" My apologies Henry. We were a bit late back from our trip. Your daughter was such a help with getting all the things my mother and sisters ordered. I couldn’t have done it so fast by myself. I do have to take some responsibility for her tardiness. Plus you must admit it must take one quite a bit of time to look so lovely".

He gave her a wink, and everybody smiled at his chivalry.
Astrid gave him a grateful look. He was so nice to her. She nearly felt guilty for loving someone else.

"That scarf looks very fetching with that dress Astrid. Did you get it in London?"

Ingrid, glad to steer the conversation into another direction, stroked the beautiful shawl.

"Henry got it for me while he was doing some business and..., "she stopped, colouring suddenly when she realised she nearly told them about Henry letting her go shopping all by herself, unchaperoned. That would surely set her father off again. Friend or foe, he would be angry with anyone who flouted his rules so blatantly.

"And she has been waiting so patiently for me to finish those boring conversations that that scarf has been well and truly earned", Henry finished her sentence saving her yet again.

Her father looked a bit doubtful but decided it wasn’t worth it spoiling an excellent dinner. He stood up to address the room.

"Now everyone is here, let's make a toast to the festivities which have brought beloved friends and family to our table today and will bring us joy tomorrow. Raise your glasses. May the Tree bear fruit and stay healthy"!

Everyone shouted “Healthy!!”

Immediately the room was filled with people talking, laughing and calling out to friends or family across the room. It looked like a sort of rehearsal for tomorrow's feast when not only her Harrington Family and their closest friends but practically the whole island would be attending the big party after the ceremony. Long tables, festively decorated, had been set up in and around the Main Market square. Her father had hired the best minstrels and musicians.

Her mum and the kitchen staff had been very busy preparing all the food and ordering enough ale and fruit juices. All the while, they were praying for the dry and warm weather to last just a bit longer.

The actual exchange of contracts would happen in the Monastery. The eldest family member, in this case, her grandfather Jafar would perform the ceremony. Her father’s parents weren’t alive anymore to officiate, so he had asked her Baba instead. He seemed to have been delighted with the offer and had accepted straight away. Her grandfather had officiated at the weddings of his two daughters. He was familiar with the rituals.

That reminded her to ask her mother where he was.

"Your grandfather decided to have supper with Leila. In her condition, the trip was more taxing than they thought. Which is not surprising with her expecting a child very soon".

She laughed at Astrid's suggestion he would be a bit too old to want another child.

"He’s not that ancient, you know. Only fifty-seven. And I will love to have a new baby brother”, she added with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes knowing her daughter thought anyone older than twenty-five truly past it. And that included procreating.

In Astrid’s eyes, her grandfather was just old Baba, who always spoilt her and her siblings. She just didn’t want to think about him as a man with that sort of desires. Before she could further discuss the subject with her mother, the latter had turned to her father, who was sitting on her other side.

Ingrid let out a long breath. Happy to escape any more questions from her daughter about her father's love life. She finally felt a bit of the pressure of the last few weeks lifting from her shoulders.

She squeezed George's hand and whispered, "Look at our little girl so grown up. I will miss her energy".

"Well I won't miss her 'adventures' and stubbornness, that's for sure", he grumbled trying to hide his feelings. He would miss the little terror dreadfully. He was so proud of her intelligence and fearlessness.

He loved his son, who with his kind-hearted nature took after his mother. Still, the fact that Astrid, while looking nothing like him from the outside, had his own passionate, tenacious character, had always given her a special place in his affection. Not wanting to show any preference when dealing with his offspring and not willing to spoil her, he had always been extra strict with her. She often would drive him mad with her daring exploits. He didn’t think she would make anybody an easy wife. If there was one person, he trusted to be able to control if not her, at least her escapades, it would be Henry.
The man could charm the skin of a snake. Knowing his daughter and taking her age into account, that would help a lot.

When they were at Jafar's court together, Henry, barely twelve, always had the ladies fussing around him. Being blessed with the voice of an angel helped as well. Women of all ages would swoon when he got his guitar out and sang the ballads of the North. His broad northern accent didn’t seem to put them off. On the contrary, he often thought women associated his rough dialect with the strong, adventurous men of the frozen steppes.

‘He seems to have made a bit of an impression on my girl already, the rascal. Hopefully, that will cure her soon of that nonsense with the boy Nicholas ‘, he mused.

Trudy had come to him with her worries about the two.
They decided it would be best to tell the boy the truth about his father in the hope it would shock him enough to make a clean break with Astrid. It seemed to have had the desired effect.

He smiled at his wife, ”Henry will soon have her eating out of his hand”.

When he saw that everyone had finished and looked at him for a sign that they could leave, he turned to Henry.

"Why don't you sing us a song or are you too tired after your busy day?"

Henry, always willing to entertain the crowds didn’t need much persuasion and called for his guitar.

" Maybe you should warn them and say they don’t have to stay and listen to my caterwauling".

"No, please play for us. It will make us all sleep better", Ingrid encouraged him as well, "I’m sure your voice is still as wonderful as when we used to listen to you at our court in Kent".

"I wouldn’t be so sure about that. It’s been about twenty years, after all. My voice has suffered a lot in the cold northern winds", Henry countered.

"Don’t be so modest. You must have sung hundreds of times since then. Astrid has never heard you sing. Do it for her. You would love to hear Henry sing, wouldn’t you darling?"

Astrid was trying to make herself as small as possible.
Her parents were simply too embarrassing! She had become a bit curious to hear him sing as long as it wouldn’t be some stupid romantic song. She would die!

"Alright then, if someone can bring me my guitar. I left it in the hall."

Henry usually didn’t need too much persuading as he loved to play, and when it would help to make a good impression on the girl, the better. He got up from where he had been sitting between Ingrid and Astrid walking to the front of the room. Richard handed him his guitar. It was one of his most cherished possessions, a wooden copy of an ancient Iberian model gifted to him by his late father. The latter had been a professional singer of note and used to travel through the width and breadth of Albion entertaining small and large crowds.

The court of Scotia had been a favoured spot for him to perform his art. Henry’s mother still blushed when people talked about him. Henry had been the result of one of those visits to his mother's court. Soon after his birth, his father seemed to have disappeared. His mother sent scouts everywhere to find out his whereabouts but to no avail. Travelling in the Archipelago was even more dangerous then than now. She had refused to have any more children after he was born.

Henry started with a ballad: “Love for the earth” about the beauty of the earth and one of the oldest songs in people’s memory. He continued with a very famous love song called “Take a look at me now”.Y ou could hear a pin drop in the Dining hall.

Gregory and Ingrid looked at each other, remembering their courting days when they often had the pleasure of listening to their friend.

Astrid swept entirely of her feet, could not keep her eyes of Henry. If only Marion could have heard this!. She had goosebumps and felt so strange, quite wobbly. It must be the cider she’d been drinking a bit too much of feeling so sad seeing Nicholas looking so miserable.

Nicholas, feeling her looking at him, felt desperate and lost. He knew there was nothing he could do to makes things better. The lovely music made tears come to his eyes, remembering their carefree times, taking her sailboat out on the sea or riding their horses all over the Island, laughing and telling each other everything. Their feelings had grown into something far more intense than those between friends. Only their strict upbringing had stopped them from going further than some kissing and cuddling when they were sure nobody would find out. Before that fateful talk with his mother, they had been so sure they would be together forever no matter what.

Nicholas stood up, his chair nearly toppling over and, swerving a bit as he too had drunk far more than he usually would. He tried to hurry out of the room, bumping into tables and not caring.

Gregory and Trudy both noticed him leaving. A glance passed between the two. The latter quietly left her place at the table to see if she could find her son and take him home.
Tomorrow would be even harder for him.

After the last sound of his guitar died away, Henry jumped to his feet, ready to go back to his rooms and finally enjoy a good long sleep.

Everyone seemed to wake up mesmerised as they had been by his warm voice. Loud applause broke out with some people stamping their feet and whistling or asking for an encore.

Henry bowed but shook his head. He had needed to get some rest if he were to be ready to take on the next day. He made his way back to his friends.

"If you don't mind Ingrid, Gregory, I’m turning in and will see everyone in the Monastery tomorrow".

As if on a signal, the room started to empty all the people making their way home. Some went up to the guest apartments of the manor. The rest of them went to stay at one of the many large inns Sevenoaks prided itself on. Soon the whole complex was dark, except for some lights still burning in the kitchen. Not much later, even those went out.

# **Chapter Thirteen- The attack**

Astrid woke up a few hours later, not quite sure what had woken her. She was very thirsty, got up and went to the sideboard where they always kept a few bottles of water.
Lily was vast asleep. She was covered entirely with all the bedsheets. The little minx had crept into her room, begging her to let her stay this one last night. She had looked so sweet in her pink cotton nightgown with her hair sticking out all around her chubby little face. Astrid had let her crawl in beside her. She would miss their nighttime cuddles too.

She heard her bedroom door open and started to turn, smiling. That must be Nicholas! He must have changed his mind, probably a bit jealous after seeing her getting on so well with Henry. She knew it!

Instead of his dear face, she saw a tall figure looming up in the darkness. For a split second, she hoped she was dreaming but was soon abused of this idea when a pair of large hands pulled her against a body encased in hard leather smelling of smoke and fish.

"One word and it will be your last, do you hear me? Do as I say and no one will get hurt".

The only thing that was foremost in her mind was to stop him from finding Lily. She had to stay quiet, as much as she wanted to scream and fight. The brute shoved a gag in her mouth and tied a dark cloth tightly around her face. He threw her over his shoulder as if she weighed nor more than a bag of feathers. His grip was so tight she could barely move. Her head was bouncing on his back, making her feel sick. She felt him running down the backstairs and going outside. The air was cold on her bare legs. She smelt the distinct scent of smoke.

She heard another voice, a woman’s.

"Hurry, we got most of the presents and some weapons. What are you doing? Who is she? Leave her. She will only slow us down”.

The man holding her just grunted and told the complaining voice to fuck off and get her ass to the basement.

‘Basement??’, Astrid’s mind reeled, ’We must have left the gate open in our hurry not to get caught’. She didn’t understand why there were no guards to strike the alarm.‘Thank the tree. Lily always sleeps like a log’.

Another voice, a man this time.

"We took care of the guards. We have to go now before anybody wakes up! I have created the diversion, as you told me, but it might not hold them back that long".

An acrid smell of smoke started to become ever more noticeable. Astrid heard everyone beginning to cough. The cloth covering her face at least prevented her from having to do the same. The man carrying her started to run. She heard by the hollow sound of their footsteps and the musky smell they must have reached the basement.

There was a cold salty draft coming from the door leading to the outside route.S he endured some more uncomfortable jerking up and down before she was thrown unceremoniously into what must be their boat getting drenched in the process.

"Get your ass back in the boat Boy, and you guys heave! They’ll be a bit busy not letting their place burn to the ground, but I still want to be out of sight of those towers before someone starts shooting at us".

She heard the men swearing and the creaking of oars as they rowed their party away from the shore. Her instinct was telling her to try and get away before it was too late, jump overboard, but her mind told her she wouldn’t stand a chance against these people.

They had taken the hood off once they were out of sight of the island. Even in the dark, she could tell these were savage people, rough-looking brutes who probably wouldn’t hesitate to get rid of her if she proved too much trouble.
Midlanders, she’d heard stories about them.

“Pirates and thieves, all of them”, her father always said.

Cold, wet and tired, she gave in to utter despair, not understanding why all this was happening to her. The worst was not knowing if her family was okay.

Her innate rebellious streak, that determination that often had gotten her into trouble, came to her rescue. She would just have to find a way to get back home! No matter what it would take.

“You can sum up survival in three words — never give up. That’s the heart of it. Just keep trying”, an old philosopher once said. She was a full blood Harrington, and that should count for something.

Soon, after all the excitement and despite feeling miserable, she fell into a restless sleep.

# Chapter Fourteen- The aftermath

The first thing that woke her were the church bells ringing the code for fire.

"Marion! The Harrington house is on Fire!", her father’s voice bellowed.

Her sleepiness evaporated. She heard her dad shouting for her brothers to get dressed.

As the High Commander of all the Gen armies, it had taken him no time to get dressed and armed within seconds of hearing the church bells.

"I’ve sent our guards ahead. Let's hope it hasn’t spread outside the Harrington house walls. It has been so dry lately. That could turn into a disaster. Hurry, the maids have loaded our cart with every bucket we could find. Marion, you have to stay here until we know what has happened. It might just have been an accident but could just as well have been an attack by those bloody Midlander scum. Why don’t you start organising beds and linen? The nuns might need them. We first need to determine what has happened. I can’t be worrying about you and do my job".

Marion flushed with anger, and her voice trembled: "No, I need to know if John and the others have are fine. You can’t make me wait here. The maids can do all that. I’m coming with you!"

Not being used to his gentle daughter going against his wishes, he first wanted to give an angry refusal. Though seeing all that determination and fire in her eyes plus wanting to leave straight away, he gave in.

"I have no time for this. Get in the cart but stay out of the way. You can only go and look for your friends once I say so, do you hear?"

She rushed past him before he could change his mind, and settled between the buckets and blankets in the cart, her father, brothers and their men, running beside it. Being trained soldiers, they had no problem keeping up the fast pace.

The sight that met them up at the house was one of complete chaos. Black soot was drifting from the top of Harrington house where they could still see the flames coming from the upper windows of one of the towers. Men and women, in a long line stretching to the river Lint, were already passing buckets of water up the hill to the house.

Marion searched desperately for a glimpse of her friends.

"Marion!".Two little arms clamped around her waist as Lily hung on to her for dear life sobbing her heart out.

"Lily, why aren’t you with Astrid? Is she helping with the fire?"

"I have looked for her, but can't find her anywhere".

Nicholas, looking like he just climbed out of a chimney, appeared behind Lily. He turned to the little girl, gently releasing her arms from Marion and crouched down in front of her.

"Lily, why don't you go to my mum? She is at our house, setting up a meal for everyone. She would be glad of your help".

Marion kissed the girl and promised to come and see her the moment they had found everyone. Unusually meek, she left to find her nurse.

"Have you spoken to John yet?"

Nicholas looking everywhere but at her, shook his head.
She felt her legs go weak.

"What are you not telling me? Did he get hurt?”, she cried, feeling tears starting to roll down her cheeks," I saw the east tower hadn’t burnt at all. That’s where they always sleep when there are guests, isn’t it?".

"Come with me”.

He started to pull her rather roughly in the direction of the barracks.

“I will take you to see him”.

His mouth set in a straight line, still not answering her question, he strengthened his grip and strode in the direction of the garrison. Nuns standing out amidst all the black soot in their bright blue and white gowns were visible from far away. She pulled her arm violently out of his grasp, fear, making her strong.

"No, tell me! I want to know! Why are we going there?" she started weeping fearing the worst.

"It will be easier for them to explain. You want to see John don't you?" Nicholas looked more and more desperate, "All I can tell you is that he was outside when the fire started. We don’t even have an inkling where Astrid is. How do you think that makes me feel, not knowing where she is?"

His voice wavered as if he was trying not to cry as well.
Marion now started to run as she never ran before in the direction he had been taken her and nearly collided with one of the nuns, Sister Rosita, coming out of one of the doors.

"No running child. We have enough to do as it is without you bashing into things", then recognising her, she looked at her with great pity understanding why she was here.

"Let me take you to him ".

Marion felt sick in her stomach. All around them, people were moaning and even screaming. Some burned beyond recognition. The nuns were putting heaps of wet bandages on them trying to soothe what must be terrible wounds. Stable boys were busy going around with buckets ladling water onto the dressings looking white-faced with the horror of it all.
Along the left wall of the room, she noticed the silent white bundles. She fought the urge to run away fast far from all this suffering. She didn’t want to know yet if her darling John was one of them.

"Here he is, dear", the nun was ushering her into a screened off cubicle. There he was lying, silent and white, like one of the monastery's marble effigies of his long-dead forebears.

"We don't know if he can hear you. He must have had a hard knock on his head. We found him like this not far from the house".

Thoughts swirling in her head, she wondered, how that had happened to him? Who had done this to him? He seemed to be still breathing.

“ John, John I’m here, please look at me", she was desperately stroking his face and kissing it.

"I will get the Matron to have a word with you. She will be able to tell you more. Until then, maybe you can stay here and make sure he doesn’t choke".

Before she could ask her any more questions, Sister Rosita left her alone with John.

"Is he still the same?" Nicholas joining her, asked even though he saw his friend looked possibly even paler now than before.

"He’s still unconscious. Do you know what happened? He was supposed to stay with us this morning. Though after dinner he decided to go home to see his dog and her pups were looked after properly, He even joked about it being bad luck to see the bride on the day of the wedding before the ceremony".

The memory brought fresh tears to her eyes already red from grief.

Despite his dreadful worries about Astrid, he felt he owed it to her to tell her what he knew before rushing off to continue looking for his friend.

"I spoke to Richard, who was still in the kitchen quarters when it happened. The first thing he noticed was the smell of smoke. He just thought someone had left a cloth drying to close to the fire and went to the kitchen to check.
Then he heard a lot of yelling outside and saw three of the towers were on fire. After that, everything went too fast for him to ask questions. He was too busy getting everyone outside. All he could tell me was that the North Tower seemed hit the worst. The other two only had some damage at their base.".

"Oh, no, aunt Astrid and uncle Gregory. Their apartment is there. They must have managed to come out. They are only on the first floor".

"Nobody has seen them, not amongst the survivors nor the deceased", Nicholas closed his eyes for a moment and sighed.
“We don’t know precisely how John came to be wounded. Let’s hope he will soon be able to tell us himself. I have to go now. I have to find Astrid. A small group of townspeople have organised a search party. Lily told me she wasn’t in the room anymore when she woke up."There is some talk some intruders might have entered the castle through the basement, but that can’t be possible. We always double lock and barricade that door ".

All the blood drained out of Marion's face. She immediately realised if that were true, their illegitimate outing yesterday, using that same door, could have been partially responsible for the disaster around them. She never thought to check if Astrid had locked it again. She had been too busy hurrying her along afraid to be caught out leaving the grounds unchaperoned.

Unaware of her panicked thought, Nicholas continued.
"If someone managed to break in that way, there must have been a traitor inside”, seeing her worried face, ascribing it to her fear of invaders being able to just walk into the place, she had always thought the safest in the world, he quickly tried to ease her mind.
” It might just as well have been an accident. There were a lot of fires going in the kitchens. Maybe a kitchen boy fell asleep instead of keeping an eye on them".

Bending over John to hide her burning face, she swore then and there never to tell anyone about their outing until they found Astrid and they both could decide what to do. They were both startled by a soldier from her father's army entering the enclosure, addressing Nicholas, trying not to look at her.

"Sir, Miss, the commander would like to see you both as soon as possible".

Marion's father, after arriving at the castle with his men, first organised the pandemonium into a well-drilled rescue operation. One lot helping to put the fires out and the other making a tally of the people who had escaped the inferno.

The problem was that no one precisely knew who had been staying at Harrington House or in the town. The tower which had housed Astrid Lily and some of the guests had been mostly spared. From the other three, the main keep, the north tower, had suffered the most damage.

To his experienced eye, the fires must have been set on purpose by persons unknown. Though he could make a good guess who the culprits were and why they had done it. It would’ve been the best way to create as much chaos as they could when they had to flee. It would stop people following them straightaway. These bastards were as devious as they come. He had dealt with enough of them to recognise their tricks.

When he’d heard that Gregory and Ingrid hadn’t been found yet under the survivors, he knew the news would never be good.
Then one of his men had run up to him, his face white as a sheet under all the grime, to confirm his worse suspicion.

"Sir, we have found them".

He didn’t need to explain who he meant. The soldier was one of two men he had ordered explicitly to go and find the Master and his wife.

Soon he stood looking upon the bodies of his friends.
He had to swallow a few times to suppress the intense feelings of grief and hopelessness that were overwhelming him. He had loved Gregory like a brother and adored Ingrid, the latter being such a comfort to him after his own wife died in childbirth. Only his long career on the battlefield stopped him from breaking down in front of all these people.

"They don’t seem to have been as badly burned as some of the other people?. Where did you find them?"

"We found them on the first-floor landing. The fire on the ground floor must have stopped Master Gregory and his Lady getting out through the side door. When we wondered why they didn’t turn back and go out through the roof, some of the survivors told us their master insisted on checking if everyone on the lower levels had managed to escape. Many of the people who were sleeping or working in the North tower made it because of their sacrifice".

The man's lips trembled, and he had started to shake like a leaf.

"I am so sorry, sir. I grew up in Harrington house before joining the army. Master Gregory and his wife were always so kind to my parents."

"Ashton, isn't it?" Selby always prided himself of knowing the names of all his men," though I know it won’t be easy for you to do this after the shock you had, I need you to find Nicholas and Marion as soon as possible and bring them to me. I don't want them to hear this terrible news from others.
Last time I saw them, they were going to the barracks. Probably to see how John is doing".

It didn’t seem possible, but the face of the man turned even paler than before. You could see that he would rather throw himself in the smoking ruins surrounding them than facing the two people who would surely be the most devastated by this news. Extensive training and the habit of obeying orders compelled him to bow to his commander and leave for the barracks at once. He found the two young people sitting by John's bedside staring at him as if to make him wake up just by the force of their will. He told them his commander wanted to see them both urgently.

"What do you mean both? I will not leave John for one second!"

"Is there more news?"

Nicholas and Marion both spoke at the same time while the poor man just stood there looking straight ahead.

"Sir, Miss, he just asked me to bring you to him as soon as possible. Please don't make him wait or I will be in trouble".

"Where is he then? Come on, don't stand there like a dummy. Speak man!”

Their shock and fear made them neglect to notice that the soldier was trembling all over barely able to stop himself weeping.

"Sssir, he is in front of the North Tower. Please".

Ignoring the poor man’s distress, they both rushed in that direction, hoping the best but fearing even more bad news.

Taking just one look at the deep creases in her father's face and the pity in his eyes, was enough to stop Marion in her tracks. If Nicholas hadn't been right behind her holding her up, she would have fainted there and then.

"I won’t beat around the bush. I hate to tell you both we just found Gregory and Ingrid in the North Tower. They didn’t make it".

His wooden face showed no emotion.

"How can that be. Did you check properly? The fire started at the bottom. Their rooms are on the second level. I heard a lot of people did escape through the roof of their tower. You can’t be right", Marion's voice became more and more shrill as she was shouting at her father.

Nicholas said nothing as he knew master Selby would never give someone news like this without being two hundred per cent sure of the facts. He was the first to notice the commander was trying to hold himself together with all the power he could muster.

"Sorry for your loss, sir. You and Gregory have been good friends all your life. It can't have been easy to find out nor to have to tell us".

Marion was feeling guilty now for not only doubting her father’s word but not taking his feelings into account at all.
He had always been that super-strong hero who now and then visited the Harrington's, to ruffle her hair and bring her presents. Now he suddenly e had aged decades and looked very old.

"Sorry, dad. You must feel awful. I’m horrible. Seeing John like that and hearing Astrid is nowhere to be found has made me forget how close you all were.”

She put her arms around him, something she usually would never have dared to do in front of other people. He hugged her hard without any words and let her go. He straightened his back and looked again the indestructible father and commander they all expected him to be.

"In case you're wondering, Jafar and his household are fine. Their tower was hardly touched. Still no news about Astrid? She is not on any of the lists of wounded nor survivors”.

He carefully didn’t mention, she wasn’t on the list of the dead either, knowing they would expect him to tell them if she was.

“We have an island-wide alert out to look out for her. The search party has strict instructions when they find her, not to tell her anything about her parents. I think it would be better if she is surrounded by her friends and family when she hears this terrible news. One of you should go back to my apartment in town in case they bring her there".

His daughter looked imploringly at Nicholas.

"Please, can you go? I don't want to leave John. He might wake up and will need to see me when he does”.

"I have another idea. Nicholas, why don't you go and relieve Henry of his duties. He has been on the go since he woke up by the alarm. He already had a very tiring trip coming here. He must be exhausted. When he refuses to stop, tell him, I’m ordering him to go to my apartments to rest and await news from Astrid. If he needs more convincing, send him to me. You’ll find him in the town square. Marion, dear, you go and be with John.".

Gerard Selby had pulled himself together and was again the experienced field officer used to have his commands obeyed at all times.

Marion went back to sit at John's bedside. Nicholas feeling a bit better to be doing something, anything, went off to the square where the commander had last seen Henry. The commander had guessed correctly. It took a bit of persuading to make Henry leave his post when so much work still had to be done. AS the future son-in-law, he had already been told the bad news about Master Gregory and Ingrid before the others. Though he didn’t want to leave the scene, he, knowing his body would soon give out to extreme fatigue, instructed Nicholas to keep an eye on the clearing up. Having been on his feet for over a day, he felt bone-weary.
He would have a little rest and return as soon as possible.

Chapter Fifteen- Astrid and the Midlanders

After what seemed like forever, she saw the coastline of Digger's peninsula rise out of the sea. She had never been there but seen pictures and drawings in their library.
Sailing the Strait west of London city was strictly forbidden to inexperienced sailors as the ancient underwater structures posed too much of a threat to your boat if you didn’t have proper maps or a pilot on board.
While she was sleeping someone seemed to have taken pity on her and thrown a woollen blanket over her.
Even though it smelled of sweat and grease, she was grateful for its warmth.
Her hands and feet were bound now.
She couldn’t feel them.
They must have been worried enough she would jump out of the boat when she woke up.
She tried wriggling her toes and hands.
It hurt so much she gave up.
She flicked her hair out of her eyes and looked to the front of the boat.
There seemed to be seven men on board and one woman.
If she had hoped that a woman would at least be a bit nicer to her than the men, she was soon abused by that idea when she asked for some water.
"You can wait until we land. It’s a good exercise for such a high and mighty brat to learn what it’s like not to get everything the moment you want it. Islanders! Always thinking you’re better than the rest of us!"
The tall woman spat in the water.
"You will soon find out we do things very differently here".
She had then smiled, which somehow felt worse than her scowling.
Only two harbours were deep enough for most sizeable ships to moor on the Midland eastern coast, Penn Station and Reading Station.
On Digger's peninsula, there were a lot of little coves protected by hundreds of small obstacles sticking up out of the sea.
Most of these were remnants of high buildings and some sort of metal trees from before the Exodus.
For all pirates and other lawbreakers of the Midland, they were very convenient.
Trying to follow anyone to the shore is extremely hard as you have to know the fairways well in order not to drive a hole in your boat.
People who tried anyway and survived after their shipwreck would be taken care off by looters onshore.
"Right Boy, here is where you come in", the giant with the scars and tattoos, who had dragged her here, called out, making way at the rudder for a slender young man.
"Make yourself useful. I want to be home and to sit behind a large beer within the next half hour. Raiding is a thirsty business. Hold on to your horses, princess. We don't want you to go overboard before we had some use out of you", he sat down right beside her at the back of the boat.
She tried to make herself as small as possible.
Of all those terrifying men on board, he scared her the most.
There was something about him that made her skin crawl.
Before she could do much more thinking, the boat suddenly seemed to pick up speed.

The boy’s ministrations made it tack sharply left, and right, sometimes catching the waves smack on the side.
The ey entered the surf, making the boat sometimes teeter high hanging motionlessly to then plunge at a horrifying speed.
Used to being on the water since she was a tiny child, with all the pitching and rolling she felt the contents of her stomach coming up in her mouth.
She tried to stop it to no avail.
Suddenly she threw up all that good food from yesterday right over the big man's back.
"What the fucking hell, you little bitch!", he sprang up right at the moment that the boat was making a sharp turn and nearly went overboard.
"Hold on Solo, nothing you can do about it now. We are nearly there. Then you can jump overboard", the boy who was skilfully piloting them into calmer water tried very hard not to laugh as that would probably infuriate the big man even more.
His sister was not that careful.
"Green definitely suits you, Solo! You should wear that colour more often".
"The others started to laugh now as well, which didn’t do much for the big man's temper.
"Let me see if you will all find it so funny when you’re cleaning my boat from all that crap! Bunch of assholes!"
In one swoop he picked Astrid up who was cowering in her corner and jumped overboard dragging her behind him.
Water filled her nose and mouth.
Just when she thought she would drown, he hauled her up again and stuck his face into hers.
She could count the hairs on his face and felt petrified by the pure hatred that shone from his coal-black eyes.
"Let's see how well you can swim!".
He suddenly let go of her, her hands and feet still tied.
She started to sink below the surface.
For a moment, she wanted just to let it happen.
Her will to live and her determination not to be beaten was just too strong, so she started thrashing around trying to free her limbs.
As by a miracle, she felt herself floating on her back, gulping for air, while someone was pulling her along one strong arm holding her up.
"Stay still until we get to the beach then I can untie you. At least you are clean now. Try and do what Solo says or it will just get worse for you."
It was the slender boy who had brought them safely through the breakers.
Somehow his soft brown voice, so different from the snarling of the brute, made her follow his advise and let him take her onto the beach.
He sat her up on the sand, which already had started to warm up with the morning sun.
She saw him pull a knife from his belt to cut the bonds on hands and feet.
With the blood flowing back, came the pain.
She involuntarily let out a cry.
When she tried to get up, she fell back onto the sand as if her bones had turned to jelly.
"Here, let me help you", his voice had not deepened yet into a man's.
"Stop pussyfooting around with that Gen whore, Boy!"
The big man, whose name she now knew was Solo, shoved the lad aside and dragged her up and threw her like a sack of coal over his shoulder.
"Don't get any ideas about this one. Damien has her down for a high ransom. If we lose her on the way to the Fort it will be your guts, he’ll rip out not mine. The boss wants her in one piece. Go and help your mates drag the boat ashore. I will look after Missy from here. And you!”, the ogre gave her a whack on her behind,” If you barf on me once more, I will make you regret ever to be born, ransom or no ransom!"
He turned around and strode away from the others.
Some villagers having heard all the commotion were already approaching, each of them holding some sort of weapon.
Bows, axes, hammers and knives.
Most of them looked very rough, and coming closer didn’t seem to be that interested in personal hygiene.
For the second time that day, she felt nauseous.
"What a nice welcome, guys. Say hi to this visitor from the island".
He dropped her on the sand in front of a strangely shaped tent, making a mocking bow.
"Welcome to Hell's kitchen. Here will be our first stop before we take you to Damien. Take her to Sara’s house and tell her to clean her up. She will need some suitable clothes and shoes before we leave for the White Fort tomorrow". This to two of the men who had by now lowered their weapons and were clustering around them.
"Tell your women to prepare food for my men. They’ve done well and will be up here soon. And you, my treasure, don't give any of them any grief or I will come over and deal with you myself".
With this, he abruptly turned his back on them and strode into the village.
After some more staring, two of them took her to another of those spherical tents, this one embroidered with pictures of animals and plants.
A woman stepped outside, heard what they wanted and shooed the men away. She fussed and tutted taking Astrid inside, removing her bonds and sitting her down on some soft woollen blankets. It smelt like a herb garden, eucalyptus and garlic fighting for dominance.
Before Astrid could say anything, the shock of her abduction and the horror of the near-drowning suddenly took its toll.
Astrid fell in a dead faint.

Chapter Sixteen- Selby’s House

The evening started to draw in, and the Selby's, father and sons, met with Henry in the dining room of Gerard's apartment. The latter seemed to feel much better, his eyes bright, and his hair still wet from his bath. Only his downturned mouth, usually showing a big smile, showed his worry and grief. Gregory had been the older brother he’d never had. Losing him and Ingrid had shaken him to the core. They had both seemed indestructible. Added to that, not knowing Astrid's whereabouts had kept him from sleeping deeply.
Every time he heard someone coming into the house, he had sat up to listen if it was her.

The commander told him Nicholas had been invited too but decided to stay with Marion as had Jafar.

The older man, still reeling from the death of his beloved daughter, had wanted to keep Leila company as she had suffered a great shock. He was anxious about her and their baby’s safety. He told the Commander he wished they had heeded her midwife’s advice and staid in Kent. She had advised them to postpone all travel until after the birth. Laila had not wanted to hear from it.

“This is such an excellent opportunity to meet all your relatives in one go. I’m as healthy as a horse. They have good medical care on the island, don’t they? I heard the Sisters are renowned for their knowledge of midwifery”.

He had given in finding it already hard to refuse her anything.

Henry had experience with Midlanders fighting them many times. He knew that if, or maybe he should say now they had taken her, her prospects were not very good. The best scenario, the one he hoped for, was them putting her up for ransom keeping her unharmed. The others did not bear thinking about.

They all sat around the table, toying with their food, or just nibbling at it.

William started with news about the survivors. The medics and nuns at the field hospital had treated them, and most of them had returned to their quarters or Inns. He added there was no news of any improvement in John's condition.

"We’ve seen cases like this before after someone hit their head, falling off a horse or getting it knocked too hard in some other way. The nuns can keep him alive in their Convent for a little while longer. We will have to ask father Sirio to get us a special dispensation to use Tech from London if we want to do this for very much longer."

A silence fell as they were all thinking about the implications of this. The Brothers wouldn’t do it without exacting a very high price

. "Well, tell Sirio to do everything to save that boy and bring him back to us. I owe that to his parents. I don't give a shit about religion or other rubbish. I will sell my whole province if that’s what it takes". Gerard's voice was hoarse from all the shouting and grief. He never was a true believer and didn’t care who knew it. William sighed.

"Father, we have at least keep up the appearance of complying with the rules. How else can we ask our people to do the same? When everyone starts doing what they want, it will be chaos. We will end up like those savages, Midlanders. Nor do we want the sickness to come back, do we?"

"I don't care. In my opinion, it is all bullshit anyway—just another way for those so-called holy men to keep us under their thumb. I will personally arrest anybody, priest or prior who will not help us do everything to save that boy".

William winced at his father's complete lack of respect for the Creed though he should be used to it by now. It had always been evident, growing up in his house, that his father didn’t have much patience with any doctrine but the one of staying alive. When he was born, his father’s fifth son, his mother finally could persuade his father to let at least one of his offspring enter the monastery. It was unusual none of his previous sons hadn’t been sent there already. Usually, a family sent off their second son to join the Brothers as a way to keep their numbers up and give the family a direct line of communication with the Monastery.

Gerard had stood his ground, not sacrificing any of his sons to the men he despised for the iron grip they had on everyone’s life. Father Sirio was an exception. It had been one of the last things his wife asked from him before she died.

Henry decided to interrupt before Gerard came with more blasphemous statements and steer the conversation in a safer direction.

"Sir, what about Astrid? There has been no sight of her anywhere. We should have had some news by now if she were still on the island. I heard some of the guests already talking of bringing the raid forward to go and see for ourselves if they’ve got her”. He didn’t need to explain who he meant with ‘they’.

“ Most of them have brought quite a few of their men with them. They are waiting in their camps. Jafar told me he too had sent messages to his fleet to sail through the Surrey Strait from Tonbridge. They can collect all of us here at the latest by tomorrow morning. We will need to get someone to guide us at Digger's. Those gulleys are too dangerous to pass without good maps. The ones we have here are not detailed enough".

He was holding his breath, looking straight at Gerard, knowing that the older man would do nothing rather than get into action. Though never without taking his own good time to think about it. And time was something they didn’t have. He would have a word later with William about John’s situation.

Gerard’s shoulders drew back. He appeared to grow taller at the perspective of being able to do what he did and liked best. He sat up straighter. "Captain Finn knows those waters like the back of his hand. The old rascal has a very checkered past if we can believe all those stories he tells everyone in the Inn. For all I know, the man started his career as a pirate. He can be our pilot. I’m sure he’s as keen to help us as everyone here. He has known the family for ages".

After planning more of the details such as who would be on which ship, which weapons they needed, and other practical matter the meeting broke up. The commander sent out some of his men with orders for staff and soldiers at Harrington House. Everyone made their way to their respective rooms.

Marion had let them know Nicholas and her were not coming home tonight. She would stay with John in the hospital, and he would join his mother, Trudy. None of them had much hope that sleep would come to them quickly, but extreme exhaustion and grief soon made everyone drop off into a welcome slumber.

Chapter Seventeen- West Drayton

When Astrid came to it was to find herself lying on soft blankets feeling cleaner and drier than before.
On the inside, the walls seemed to be curved as well, covered with some kind of shiny material. She sat up slowly when she heard voices coming towards her.

"So you're awake? Would you like something to eat?", the voice belonged to the woman who had taken her in after arriving at the village. Her face, though wrinkled by a life outdoors, still showed the features of a once beautiful woman.
"My name is Sarah. What is yours, dear?"

Astrid could only just stare at her not quite knowing who to trust. Maybe the awful man had changed his mind and would not come back, and she could persuade this nice woman to let her go.

She swallowed as her mouth was parched and managed to whisper: "Where am I? What do you people want from me? Can you help me to get home, please"?

"Mother, I told you not to talk to her. Just to tidy her up and give her something to eat so she will be fit enough to walk. She needs some travelling clothes and shoes. You and Jonah are too tender-hearted, for fuck’s sake! Can’t you for once do as I ask. Solo will be here soon. He has just gone to have a bite to eat and to check on Eric. He’ll want to get a move on as soon as he’s ready. Have you at least packed our food as I asked?"

It was the girl who had been so vile to her on their way here. She took up a large part of the room, towering over them scowling. Even in the dim light of the oil lamps, Astrid could see that she looked as frightful as she sounded. There wasn’t one part of her body that she could see, not covered in black and red tattoos depicting horses, stars and whole texts in a strange language. Even on her forehead, three words were forming a triangle. Her tightly braided tresses were dyed a vivid green, making her look even more barbaric. She wore a tight leather bodice and woollen leggings embroidered with more symbols, these in all kind of colours. On her back, she carried a sword that looked ancient but shone like it had a light within. Leather thongs crisscrossed her upper arms.
Heavy black boots studded and capped with metal finished her remarkable apparel.

Yesterday on the boat, she had been in shock and too miserable to pay much attention to her. Unbelievable, this powerful young woman leaning over her mother and Astrid, was in any way related to that boy from before. She hadn’t caught his name. Everyone seemed to call him Boy.

"Stop barking at me, girl. I’m still your mother no matter how high and mighty you think you are. I was just about to offer her something to eat before you so rudely interrupted me".

Squatting down in front of Astrid, she gently took her hand. "Don't mind her, dear. Her bark is worse than her bite. I’ve made you a nice warm potato soup and even managed to get some eggs to add to it. There beside you in that brown jug, you’ll find some ale. You must be hungry by now. Eat and have a drink. It will make you feel much better".

"How long have I been asleep? Is this village called Hell's kitchen?" Astrid needed to know where she was and how long she had been missing from home.

Looking at her daughter with a stern frown, the woman, Sara, patted her hand: "That must have been one of Solo's stupid jokes. You are in West Drayton at the moment. You arrived here late yesterday afternoon, and it’s very early in the morning now. The sun will soon be up. Please do eat and drink something before Solo has finished and comes and gets you. I will get you some of Jonah’s clothes. You are both about the same size".

The awful girl satisfied when she saw her accepting the soup, left. Astrid started to eat, but the gentle voice and kindness of the woman Sarah broke something in her.
She started to weep silently, feeling as if she would never be able to stop. After a while, she regained some calm again and gratefully finished the food which tasted unexpectedly good.
The ale returned some of her resilience. When she had finished the simple fare, she looked around again, admiring the beautifully woven tapestries showing the beauty of Nature in vivid colours. The room was plain but clean.

Sara noticed her interest in the decoration. "I don't know if you’ve ever seen a yurt before? That’s what we call our homes. We use them because the quakes and following tsunamis in autumn make it dangerous to live in a proper house living soo close to the sea. With these, we only need a few hours to pack it all up and rebuilt it on safer ground". The woman sounded quite proud.

"You must have heard only awful things about us Midlanders, I guess. We don't do much to persuade people to think otherwise as it seems to keep most unwanted visitors at bay. I wasn’t born Midland myself. My late husband told me he and his men found me floating on a raft in the sea after a great storm. For a long time, I couldn’t remember anything about my past. I ended up staying with the man who rescued me, the boy’s and Yaya’s father. He was a very kind man, just like my son. Life here is not as bad as many outsiders try to make it out to be. Most of us just want enough to eat and to be safe like anybody else in this world".

"Mama has she...? The boy, who had saved her from drowning, stopped in his tracks when he saw her. His eyes widened at the sight of her. He looked to be her age, maybe a bit older, now she could look at him more closely.

"And this is my youngest who has not got a proper name yet. After yesterday hopefully, that will change soon. Have some soup too, Baby, or if I know Solo, you’ll go hungry for the next two days. After you finish, you should take the packs of food and some more clothes outside so I don't have to see Solo coming in here bullying that poor girl ".

"Don't call me that", the boy shot a glance at their guest with his cheeks burning. His mother handed him another bowl and stroked his head. He pulled it head back looking a bit embarrassed to be treated like a little boy but accepted the food gratefully and started to wolf it down, succeeding at the same time to talk continuously. He reminded Astrid of her sister Lily, who always became mortified when people treated her like a child in front of strangers.

"This time, Damien has to name me. I’ve already chosen my name. I’m sure you will like it. Yaya convinced Solo to take me with them to see Damien. Wulf can’t come, his mother forbade it".

"Freya is a wise woman. I wish you weren’t going either. No good will come of it. Why your sister chose to set her sight on that lout, I can’t imagine. His only redeeming point is that he looks after his brother Eric so well. Eric’s the only person he has ever shown any feelings for. And maybe your sister. He always wants what is hard to get. I guess there is no talking you out of it. We can wait for a travelling priest to do it. It will be just as valid as having that awful man do it".

Turning to Astrid, frowning: "Don't ever mention his brother to Solo because he blames all his problems on your island. Boy, if you get the chance during your trip north, try to tell her why. Now up, you two get. Young lady, get changed and then join him outside. And you, Boy, go!"
With these words, she started to usher him to the door and Astrid to a screened of partition to change.

Before Astrid left the room and was standing doubtfully in the entrance of the yurt, Sarah gave her shoulder a gentle tap and whispered: "Keep your head down and try to stay near my lad. He’s a good boy". She didn’t come with them to see them off.

There was nobody around this early to see them go. It was getting day already. Still, it was hard to get an idea of the size of the village. Trees and bushes half hid most of the dwellings. Through openings in the top of these so-called yurts, some smoke was already spiralling up in the air. Dogs barked at the sight of their small group. In the distance, she could hear the sound of waves crashing onto the reefs.

Oh, only to be able to go back now while she still was not so far from home. She remembered from some of her geography lessons in school, which she had always found excruciatingly dull, that the east coast of Midland was not so far from London City. If they were going to travel to the White Fort, she would be ever further from home. She didn’t even know who this Damien was. She had always heard a guy named Daryl was in charge.

A rough voice barked: "What are you two standing around for? Let's step on it. I want to be in Amersham before nightfall". Without looking back, the man, who had stolen her from her home, set off leaving them to follow.

Chapter Eighteen- Henry and Nicholas

The morning after the attack was another beautiful spring day which felt nearly like an insult to the people who had lost friends and family in last night events.

The servants and cooks alerted by Gerard’s men had started early, preparing food for everyone.
Many citizens had volunteered to join them on the raid. The Commander thanked them and told them they could be more useful, clearing the debris and supporting the people who had lost their relatives.

"Please look after yourself, son", Trudy could not stop herself touching Nicholas and telling him things he should or shouldn't do to stay alive. He knew she meant well but still felt embarrassed to be treated like a child.

Jafar, who was going to stay behind to organise the clear up and keep his wife company, smiled indulgently. "You never grow too old to be worried about by your mum".

Turning to Judith: "He is a strong lad. The more seasoned men will make sure he stays safe. The commander is probably the most experienced soldier any recruit might wish to start his first fight under".

After the last embrace, Nicholas practically ran to the harbour.

The moment he had disappeared out of sight, Jafar gently touched Judith’s shoulder. "We have to talk about our situation here before he comes back. With Gregory gone and John so ill, he’s now the only male survivor of the Harrington family. You and I both know that the chance that John regains his conscientiousness is very remote. Henry would have been an option if Astrid hadn’t disappeared. Sorry to be so practical as I know you must be heartbroken from Gregory's death. Even more so because you have to grieve in silence, the situation being what it is. I,m prepared to stay here until the men return. Hopefully, with good news about Astrid, though the Midlanders' treatment of female hostages, makes me fear the worst. The best we can hope for is a ransom request from that demon in the north. Her abduction can’t have been a chance event".

At his kindness, Judith took a shuddering breath. "Do we have to decide this so soon? Anything can happen. Gregory might have told you that I had to tell Nicholas about his father. He didn’t take it very well. He and Astrid have been so close all their life. When they found out about her having to wed Enry, Astrid nearly persuaded him to elope with her. He came to me with it, and I had to tell him about Gregory and me. He split up with her quite abruptly. He has suffered quite a bit with their breakup because he just couldn’t tell the real reason and she has been giving him a lot of grief about it. He had already decided to leave the Island after the wedding. Seeing her with someone else would have been too hard. He was going to leave without telling anybody. I don’t know if this trip will be wise. Even if they find her, it will only be for another man to marry her”.

"We should discuss this further when we find out more after the raid. The moment the men have news, they’ll let us know. In the meantime, we’ll both have our hands full sorting this mess out. First, I am going to see how Leila is holding up. Thank the Lady we were staying with you last night and not in the house. Leila is of strong stock, but I don't think the shock of the fire has done her and the baby any good. She has been asleep through most of it finding it hard to cope just hearing about it this morning. She didn’t know my daughter and Gregory very well, but their dying in such horrible circumstances has affected her very much".

After he left, Trudy went to see how Lily was doing. Hearing about her parents and Astrid had been nearly too much for her. Maybe she should take her to the nuns today. The girl was always happy to visit the convent with the nuns making a big fuss about her. Judith gave a deep sigh, and for the first time in her life, feeling her age, slowly walked to the old nursery to take care of her charge.

The sight that met Nicholas at the harbour did excite him despite the dismal reason for it. The orDinalily quiet quays were swarming with people. Pennants were waving in the wind from every ship, giving them almost a festive air. Jafar's trireme warships must have had a favourable wind as he could see them moored in the harbour with the crew in the process of distributing the men waiting on the quay on to their two ships. It would be a tight squeeze to get them all on. In the middle of all the folk, milling around, one person was dominating the scene. The commander had jumped on a large crate and was shouting orders to the men, his own and everyone else.

"Only experienced soldiers first! I know you all want to help. Every ship has a steward who will check your papers. No pushing or I’ll send you away immediately!"

Further away, Nicholas saw Henry already on board the largest ship telling the Harrington soldiers where to stow their belongings. On the other two, Jafar's men were doing the same. Seeing Nicholas, he waved for him to come over and join him.

"Why don't you put your things in the captain's quarter. We will all meet there once we have sailed outside the harbour to discuss our route with captain Finn. He is assisting the ship's captain. We hope to have left within the hour. According to Finn, there is a storm brewing. If it were not for Astrid, we would have waited it out. We don't want the trail to get too cold, so we just have to risk it ".

Looking at the older man, Nicholas could not help grudgingly admiring him. Yesterday, Enry was within sight of getting married to a beautiful girl. Today, his best friends dead, and his girl taken by Midlander scum. Nicholas could not for the life of him, imagine how he still managed to look so calm and in control of the situation doing everything to find her and punish the perpetrators.

‘No wonder Astrid liked him. Still can't think of her as my sister though. Would it have made any difference if I’d never found out and we just had run away and been happy? That guy is a born leader. No wonder Gregory chose him for his son-in-law. I wonder what it would be like to have to kill a person’. Soldiers had told him you never forgot the first time. It changed you as no other experience did.

Nicholas went to the back of the ship where he knew the captain's cabin would be. He was the first to arrive and felt a bit awkward going into someone's private quarters. Deciding Henry had sent him so it should be okay and went in. Still tired from yesterday he sat down before the large window at the back of the cabin thoughts tumbling around his head.

"No one here yet?" Lowering his large frame under the door opening the Commander entered the captain’s quarters.
Nicholas jumped up, looking a bit guilty at being caught doing nothing while everyone seemed to be busy. He felt he had to explain himself to this awe-inspiring man.

"Henry told me to bring my travel things here, sir. Is there something else I can do now?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, you could go down to the galley and get us some ale and maybe a bite to eat. Word has come in from fishermen working west of the city they saw a small vessel go very fast to Diggers' Peninsula. From what they could see at a distance as it was just a small party. I hope this Finn will be as good as his word and will be able to get us through those reefs. We will take one of the lifeboats with about 15 men to try to get through. The rest of the ships will stay on the other side of those rocks. If all goes to hell and we don't come back within a day, the rest have orders to go South and land in the Port of Penn Station and march northward". He sat down with a sigh at the head of the table and started to peruse the maps scattered on it.

Nicholas practically ran to the galley and soon came back with the requested refreshments. When he arrived, the meeting had just started. The ship's captain Atanur in his colourful robes sat next to the commander with on his other side Henry. Captain Finn was standing over the table pointing the route he was suggesting on the map. To his delight, Marion’s brother William had joined them as well. He had no idea he was coming as well. He had never been one for fighting. William looked up when he saw him and gave him a wink and mouthed the word ‘later’ to him.

"The surf will be entirely wild in that area, so I suggest we take one of the larger rowing boats to get on land. There are only two small villages in that part of the peninsula. It’s been a while since I have been there. Let’s hope they are staying put this early in spring. In autumn and winter, they tend to set up a long way inland. As for Astrid, it usually doesn’t take long for them to move prisoners to the White Fort. There’s been a change in leadership a few months ago. The youngest of the Noons is now in charge. If you thought his two older brothers were bad, he sounds even worse".

"That’s news to me", the Commander was frowning. "The last thing I heard about a year ago was that one of the Noons and the Patriarch got killed in a clash with the Cotswolders. Daryl Noon then became their leader proving his worth by slaughtering practically all of that Cotswold's party. What happened to him then?”

"Word goes, he got food poisoning. Took him quite a while to die and it wasn't pretty".
The Commander didn’t seem too unhappy about that.

"Well bad things happen to bad people. Bless the tree, there’s some justice in this world after all. Only a shame there’s one more of that viper's nest still alive. Heard he at least will not surprise us with more of that rotten seed".

They all chuckled at that and started laughing even more when they saw the surprised look on Nicholas's face.

"Don't worry about it, young man. Someone will explain it to you one day. Better you don't know about such sins against the Tree".

After that everyone drank their ale and hungrily tucked into the bread and cheeses cook had provided for them.

Feeling a bit out of his depth, Nicholas mumbled an apology and went to the main deck to check if he could see the coast of Midland already. He turned when he heard someone coughing him. It was William or Billy to his friends.

“ I never would have thought to find you here. You never said anything during the meeting.”

“My father had forbidden me to come on the raid, but when he found out, we were on our way, and it was too late to do anything about it”. William sounded quite proud of his deed.

” He has told me though I have to keep away from any fighting. At the moment I’m here representing the Church. Guess he thought he would find it easier to manipulate me to agree to his plans than one of the other monks. I just wanted to help to find Ilvy. She’s my best friend”, he voice wavered.

Before Nicholas could say anything else to his friend a shrill whistle from the lookout had everyone outside straightaway. There it was, a long line of rocky shore with some beaches here and there. Still too far away to see any signs of habitation. The sea here was very choppy. Nicholas could see white heads of the surf between them and dry land. It didn’t look as dangerous as they all had been making out.

"It doesn’t seem too hard to sail through, does it?" Captain Finn was smiling, making his eyes practically disappear in his grizzled face. William seemed to have made himself scarce. "Below that smooth looking water there are a lot of old buildings from the time before, waiting to rip a hole in your ship for the surf to smash it to pieces. When by any chance you make it to the shore after that, They kill you or take you prisoner. Don’t know which one is worst. But don't worry, son, I will get us ashore in one piece. We’ve agreed to land a few miles south of a village called West Drayton. We think it the likeliest place for them to have gone ashore as the passage is easier there. The plan is to surround the village and search it, with or without their help. If they get even a whiff of us coming, they will disappear in no time. Would you prefer to sit this part out on the ship? We have enough experienced men without having to risk the life of a young lad like you, who still has a lot of living to do".

Nicholas was very tempted to accept the offer and join William. Astrid had Henry now to save her, why would she need him to come along? He would probably be more of a hindrance than a help. If he stayed on board though, everyone would think him a coward. "No, thanks sir, I want to help get her back. We lost eighteen of our people. If we don't let them find out what happens when they ride rough shot over the law, they would just do it again".

Captain Finn, fiddled with his moustache and bit his lips. "I’m a bit worried, as you are not eighteen yet, they haven’t told you about the culling".
"Culling? What do you mean? I mean I know what culling is as we do it with the deer when their number becomes too many. Are we going to hunt after the raid? I don't understand ".

Finn was looking ever more uncomfortable, "Maybe the commander should explain it to you. I have spoken out of order. It might not come to that. Forget what I said". He abruptly walked away, finding something to busy himself with on the other side of the deck, leaving Nicholas even more rattled than he already was. He decided not to insist on an explanation. Bothering the Commander at a time like this with his ignorance was not an option. Soon they would be boarding the boat. The whole venture would start, and he would get an answer to all his questions.

Captain Finn, fourteen of the Commander’s finest, Nicholas, Henry and the chief himself dropped down in the sloop that was bucking up and down the waves like a wild horse.

The trip through the surf, trying to evade the many underwater obstacles, was a great spectacle to behold. Nicholas had to close his eyes now and then, fearing for his life. Captain Finn, his plaits whipping in the wind, was at the helm shouting his directions to the two sets of rowers, seven on each side, who were pulling for all their life’s worth their faces taut with the strength it required to keep their boat on a steady course. After many hair-raising moments, they reached a narrow pebbly beach rimmed by ancient oak trees and large holly bushes. Here and there a lone pine stood sentinel. They left two men to guard the boat in readiness to make a quick getaway if needed. The rest formed two lines, and they set off in a fast tempo, not making any sound but the creaking of their leathers. The commander had impressed on them the need for stealth. Not one of them wanted to be responsible for giving their location away to the Midlanders.

On spotting spirals of smoke, the commander held up his hand. Everyone came to a halt.

"Jorge and Atuan, go and scout ahead. I need numbers and locations. It should be mainly women, children and the old ones in the village. At this time of day, most of the men will have gone out to sea. I will stay here with the lad and half of you while Henry will take the others round to the other side of the settlement! If someone sees you, kill him or her! We can’t have anyone sending out a warning to their men".

The two scouts hurried away, and Henry with his group soon followed.

Once they left, the Commander addressed Nicholas and the others: "We will move a bit closer. I have arranged a signal with Henry when to start approaching the village. One of the scouts will go to their group. The other will come here, so we both have the information we need to progress. The only thing we have to do now is the hardest, wait".

Nicholas was a bit shaken by the cold order to kill anyone they met. He knew the commander hated the Midlanders, but surely women and children should be exempt from being slaughtered? They could never be held responsible for what their men did. He had heard Midlander women often were victims of kidnap themselves. The words of the captain sounded in his mind. "They have never told you about the culling". Though now was not the time to voice his doubts about the order given either.

 The rustling of leaves and fast footfall of a scout made them all tense up. Jorge, one of the scouts, was entirely out of breath and could barely get his words out: "You were right, Sir. There were not many boats on the beach. We only saw one meeting house and five yurts in the village. There are only two paths out of the village. One leads to the sea and the other inland".

"Good, we will put three of you on the beach to catch any runaways. The others can take the path to the village. Do we all know what the orders are? We only need one to tell us where Astrid is, the rest is a waste of space", seeing Nicholas going pale," Nicholas why don't you join those three on the beach? You can keep an eye on the sea in case their men return early".

He took a bird whistle out of his pocket and blew it once. "That will let Henry know to go to the entrance of the village on the land side as we discussed".

They all started to run in the direction of the village and Nicholas, still stunned by the cold order to kill and the eagerness of these men to follow it, could only follow the three men to take a position on the beach. It was not as he had imagined a raid to be. He had seen himself heroically waving a sword, vanquishing Astrid's abductors and punishing the men responsible for the fire and subsequent deaths. He did not come prepared to slaughter of people who in his eyes were defenceless. His mouth was dry. He Bile was rising in his throat. He wished he had stayed on board now.

Arriving on the beach, he suddenly heard women and children screaming and crying. Then and he felt that was worse, silenced one by one. Maybe some of the women and children had gotten away. He knew he should not root for the villagers, but this went against all his ideas of fighting a war.

Am older woman clutching two small children, appeared on the edge of the beach looking frantically around for a boat hoping to reach them and get away. Before Nicholas’ shocked eyes, one of the men ran at them and within seconds hacked down both children. The woman her eyes blazing screamed and threw herself at him, scratching his face and kicking him. He just laughed cruelly and gave her a big shove pushing her to his colleagues.

"Shall we first have some fun with this hellcat?" To Nicholas’ relief, the oldest amongst them shook his head and said: "The commander will have our heads. You know he doesn’t approve of that sort of thing". The first one shrugged his shoulders and brutally put his sword through the poor woman cleaning it afterwards on her apron.

Nicholas felt as if his head was exploding. He was in some sort of nightmare and would soon wake up. Surely?
Looking inland, he saw thick black smoke coming from the village. One by one, the men gathered on the beach. All of them spattered with blood. The commander saw the three pitiable bodies and ordered Henry to take them to the village, adding them to the others on the pyre.

"Some of the women gave us some resistance, which I hadn’t expected. It gave one or two of their people a chance to escape. I would have liked not to leave any witnesses, but we should get back to the ships as soon as possible. Henry has been able to get some information about Astrid. She was here last night but has left early this morning with a few of their men. They will be taking her to the White Fort, just as I feared. Before she would say what route they took, she managed to get a knife and cut her own throat. By the Tree, these people are real savages!"

Henry came back through the opening in the trees and looked quite sick. At least he had the decency not to look as pleased as some of the other men did. He didn’t look Nicholas in the eye feeling the latter’s shock at all that had gone before. Captain Finn, feeling responsible for not having been brave enough to explain the phenomena to this young lad, pulled Nicholas aside.

"Don't take it too much to heart, lad. Except for the woman we interrogated it was all swift. Culling is a necessary evil, but we must do it every so often. On this occasion, it also will leave a message to those thieves and murderers not to mess with us. Do you think they were sorry after killing our people yesterday? "

Before he could answer that question, Nicholas, all of a sudden, ran into the sea and emptied the content of his stomach. He heaved until only yellow bile came out. Tears were streaming down his face. Why was everyone so callous about this? He felt so dirty as if he would never be clean again. Behind his back, he heard the Commander bellowing out his next orders.

"Right! Listen up. We can’t follow them overland. Firstly, we don't have enough men to go via Diggers up to the White Fort. The locals will be warned by those who got away and spoiling for revenge. Secondly, Astrid and her captors are a whole day ahead of us. We don’t know which way they took. It will take us far too long to follow them on foot. I plan to return to the ships and send one back to Sevenoaks to tell our people back home the news about Astrid and that we are going to Luton to as the Prior’s help ”.

Somehow the previous events made the trip back seem nearly uneventful. The crew pulled their boat up, and the Commander called for another meeting in the captain’s quarters.

Nicholas saw that William again had joined his father. The latter immediately explained why he had done so.

“ My apologies for not letting you all freshen up, but time is not what we have a lot off. We are sailing to Luton to have the Prior intermediate with Damien. William, we’ll stop at the Fort. You can contact the local man from the Monastery and hopefully delay them before they do anything foolish. You have immunity being from the Church. As far as I know, no Midlander has yet dared to harm anyone under the protection of the Prior".
"I have not yet given my final vow, sir, and I’ve never been present at any negotiations. How will I even find this man?" William was holding his hands up as if to ward himself from this proposal.

"Well, you're all we've got at the moment, and we need to be sure Astrid stays unharmed until we can get word from the Prior to them. Damien will be more careful with a member of the clergy around. Just use your imagination to find this guy. They must have taught you something about their methods, haven’t they? I heard you were such good friends with the girl, so you must want to help? I know you don't have the stomach for it, but I hope I didn’t raise a coward?"

William, his lips a straight line in his face, bowed his head and nodded, feeling everyone's eyes on him. He had joined the monks so that he would never have to put himself in the frontline like his father and his siblings seemed to enjoy. It didn’t make him craven. He just didn’t see why he couldn’t achieve the same result with using your head instead of your sword.

"Sir, why don't I go with him", Nicholas wanted to do something positive after the spectacle he had made of himself on the beach. He felt sorry for William, who they used to tease as children for being such a tenderhearted soul.

"The warrior monks often accompany their brothers on peacekeeping missions. It will make him look more like a genuine messenger from the Faith ”.

The Commander looked from one to the other. How he wished his son had been more like that fine young man. " That might be an idea. What do you think?” He looked at the others.

“He will need someone to give him the Warrior tattoo, sir. It won’t be without pain, and I don’t know what his mother would think of that. They are both still not confirmed ”. Henry looked a bit sceptical.

Nicholas and William exchanged a quick look. They hadn't thought of that. The left arm of the warriors always depicted a famous soldier of the past. Every time a warrior made a kill, a tattoo of the weapon he used, was added to the image.

Henry continued, "Do we have anybody on board skilled enough to make one convincing enough to fool Damien? They are not easy to do, and it will hurt like hell. I hope you know what you are setting yourself up for?" He was looking the two boys up and down with his arms crossed in front of his chest.

Nicholas stiffened. Now more than ever wanting to show this man that he could be a warrior just like him.

“If there is anybody on board who can do it, I will gladly join William. I’m not afraid of a bit of pain”.

"I will do it", a voice rang out. Captain Finn stepped forward. He stroked his sleeve up, and to everyone's surprise, he showed them he had an intricate tattoo on his arm, a picture of a warrior surrounded by lots of small weapons.

Even the commander was surprised. "Here I thought you had only just been a pirate in your former life! Right, let's go back outside and tell the purser what you need. And for fuck's sake give the boy some whiskey. He looks already green about the gills".

To his relief, Nicholas saw William following Finn and him down below. He would need a friend for this challenge.

He felt the anchor lifted straight away. The captain presumably wanted to get at least halfway to their destination today before it got too dark to sail. The seas, with all the dangers lurking underneath, were too treacherous to hazard the crossing by night. It had been a harrowing day with more terrifying experiences to come tomorrow.

Chapter Nineteen- Astrid ‘s trip to White Fort

It was hard to keep up with Solo and Yaya who had joined them just outside the village. Thank the Lady she always had made a habit not to take her horse for every little trip into the countryside. She had always enjoyed walking the coastal paths for days on end never tiring. The food and rest she had in the small village had restored most of her strength.

Still by midday, when the sun had risen high in the sky burning remorselessly on their heads, she started to feel tired and very thirsty. Her feet not used to the simple leather sandals they had given her, were killing her. She could feel the chafing had already started to give her blisters.

"Can I have some water?", she whispered to the boy, who had not left her side and been a comforting presence all morning. They had both been quiet in order not to attract the unwelcome attention of Solo, who was striding ahead with Yaya. Only now and then saying something to his companion. Away from his men, he seemed a bit less inclined to throw his weight around and make her life miserable. Boy surreptitiously pulled a bottle of water from a pouch attached to his belt and gave it to her, putting a finger to his lips with a nod to Solo. She took a deep draft and felt immediately better.

"Thanks", she mouthed, handing him back the bottle. He took a sip too before putting it back on his belt.

Sometime after midday with the sun moving west, they were allowed a short break at the side of a small river. If she hadn’t felt so worried, the sight of the clear water running over the multicoloured pebbles would have made her happy to stay there forever.

Solo scurried off into the small wood behind them to relieve himself. She heard him tell Yaya to keep an eye out for the two love birds.

Astrid sank onto the soft grass on the bank and took her sandals off to cool her feet in the water. "Are you crazy! Don't they teach you Gens nothing! ", Yaya yanked her back from the water before she could douse her blisters in it. "Your feet will get soggy. You won’t make the next mile without ripping open your feet! Show them to me!", she grabbed hold of Astrid's right foot and started to put a tight bandage on it after having applied some greasy ointment. It hurt like hell at first, but soon the burning was gone entirely. She meekly gave the girl her other foot to treat.

"Boy!, give her some bread and water and you, you better keep up, or we’ll be late getting to Amersham and Solo won’t be pleased ".

"Thank you, sis, I forgot about the elk grease. Why the hurry to get to Amersham?”

Looking round to see if Solo was still out of earshot, Yaya said under her breath: "Eric was not well when we got back. He’s had one of his turns again. This time mum couldn’t do much for him. Solo heard from one of the other women, who have family in Amersham, there will be a monk in Amersham only stopping there one day tomorrow. He seems to be famous for his knowledge of the Healing Arts. Solo hopes the man can give him something to make Eric well enough again at least until they can go to the City. I think it’s the heart problem again and this time medicines won’t help. But don't tell him I said that. Even I can't say anything negative about Eric. If that one dies, we’re in for a lot of trouble. It’s the only thing keeping Solo on this side of sanity. I know you don't like him. Hardly anyone does, but you know about his past. It would be enough to drive anyone over the edge. He has kept it together until now just to look after his brother. I admire that". She sat down and began to eat some bread with hard cheese sipping water in between bites.

"What was she talking about?" Astrid said to Boy the moment Yaya had returned to Solo. Boy moved even closer to her.

"He’s a compatriot of yours, Solo, born on your island. His parents were fisherfolk, but when his brother was born, they found he was defective and had to hide him for the monks. They...., he suddenly took a bite out of his bread and said loudly:" This is the River Gade. It was tiny before the floods but now crosses from the top to the bottom of Diggers".

Astrid looked over her shoulder and saw Solo walking up to them.

"If you have enough energy to jabber, we start walking again. This time I will keep the little bird company to make sure it doesn’t fall behind. You can walk with your big sister".

With a grin on his face, Solo practically dragged her up to the path. She had to run to keep up. Thank god for the bandages. She owed the sullen girl an enormous thank you.

After many more miles and hours of monotonous tramping through woods and heathland, she finally saw the signs of a settlement. Fields with cabbage, onions and kale coloured the side of the road a variety of green. Further afield people were preparing the soil for planting. Some of them looked up but seeing their small group went straight back to work. The fertile time between the harsh and wet winter and the furnace heat of high summer had to be taken advantage off. There was no time to waste. Soon fast-growing wheat and other grains would be shooting up competing with the long stalks of the grapevines.

"Imagine having to break your back on a piece of earth each year every year. I'd rather drown myself", Solo was talking more to himself than to her. Since their break, he had only spoken to hurry her along while never forgetting to tell her what a useless person she was.

"You are happy enough to eat their produce though, especially when it is in liquid form", Yaya teased from behind encouraged by his apparent good mood. "Yeah, but I only pay for it, preferably with other people's money", he grinned.

They reached the walls surrounding the small town of Amersham. As it wasn’t evening yet, the gates were wide open. Two dishevelled looking guards were standing in the shade, chatting with each other.

"Father would never allow our guards to be so sloppy", she thought when they waved them through after a cursory glance at a sheaf of papers Solo showed one of them.

"We will stay beside the square. I see no reason to waste good money on an inn with this nice weather. "Here, Solo handed Yaya some money, "go and get something for our evening meal. I will find you after I have done with my business".

Yaya went in the direction of the food stalls while the boy set up camp on the meadow behind the town square. Astrid was more than happy just to sit and look around. Any thoughts she might have entertained of escaping disappeared, as soon as she had a good look at the inhabitants of the town. They looked just as dangerous and untrustworthy as Solo and his mates. On top of that, the boy had told her if she ran away, Solo would hold him fully responsible and probably kill him. Despite the fact he had been involved in the attack the night before she felt he was not as bad as the others and was trying to make things easier for her.

"The gates will close at sundown. If you manage to get out before they do, he will get the whole town to chase you down. You wouldn’t get very far as you don't know this area as they do. It’s a tradition that the person finds a fugitive can do what he or she wants with him. They will not treat you well and possibly sell you on to the next person coming through here, seeking to make an impression on Damian. The rule in Midland is losers weepers, finders keepers. Please promise me to hold on until we get to Damien. He is horrible, but the thought of a high ransom will make him protect you from the others. In case you were wondering what he would do to you, Damien is not into women".

"What do you mean 'not into women?".

"Well, some men prefer to be with other men. You must have heard of that?". He sounded a bit surprised a flush creeping around his cheeks.

" No, that is crazy. I know you Midlanders are no believers in purity. Why have such a thing when it could never result in children? What would be the point? Is he a monk, maybe? They don't take wives and live with only other monks. I never knew this meant they didn’t like women or would want to be with them".

Boy involuntarily had to laugh at the idea of Damien as a devout monk.

"He definitely isn’t a monk. I forgot how isolated from the real world you grow up on the Island. Let's leave it at it; he will never harm you physically. He will probably decide to trade you back to your family for a large ransom. Which will be the larger when he can confirm you are still in one piece. I’m not so sure if Solo will be able to control himself. His hate for your people runs deep. He would love to humiliate your family. Keep away from him and try not to make him angry. Hopefully, Yaya being here as well will keep him from harming you. He is still trying to get her to be his woman. I hope she’ll realise before that happens what a dreadful person he is. The only reason I run with their pack is that they are the best scouts of Diggers. We get the highest price for our stuff", he said not without pride.

Her mind was whirling with all these strange ideas. Men with men. Women, deciding who they wanted to marry. She decided to lie down somewhere out of the way and have a good rest before another march further north. Bone tired from the trek she didn’t take long to fall into a deep sleep lying against the wall of one of the stables that bordered the grassy area they had set up camp. The stones were still warm from the sun and made her feel safe.

Yaya soon came back with the food she had gotten them and shrugged her shoulders when she saw that Astrid had gone asleep already. "She will have to eat tomorrow. More for us, I say".

Her brother looked up to her from where he was lying next to the fire he had made. "Yes, let’s keep some for her. It will be harder for her tomorrow with her muscles all sore. She will need her strength to keep up with us. Solo won’t want us to be late reaching the fort. He hates spending money on this trip".

"Don't get attached to that little wench, brother. She just means a large sum of money for us and nothing more. On top of that, Solo will not be able to keep his paws off her if he has even the slightest notion you're sweet on her. Just to show you who is boss. Your job is to keep her moving and get her to Damien in one piece. She’ll be worth nothing to Damien if Solo doesn’t leave her undamaged. Damien will just sell her to the first customer who comes along. She’ll be in even more shit than she is now".

"Alright, alright, I get it. You don’t have to keep on about it” Boy glanced over at the girl sleeping soundly now twitching in some dream. He hoped it was a nice one as on waking she would have an even more miserable day ahead of her than the previous one. While his sister wasn't looking, he slipped some of the food she had bought, in his pack before Solo came back and she changed her mind.

As if he had conjured him up with his thoughts, there he was. "Hope you left me something to eat, I am starving", Solo dropped beside Yaya and looked to be in a bad mood. Yaya hastened to provide him with some of the food she bought, adding a small jug of ale to it. She hadn’t offered any to him.

"How did it go with the monk? Could he give you something for Eric's condition?" She didn’t call it by its name as everyone knew that a problem with your heart unconditionally led to death. She had seen it happen to some of the elderly in their village. It had surprised everyone Eric had this problem as well at his relatively young age. He was older by a few years than Solo and had always seemed healthy. Mentally he had never reached adulthood. Something that happened now and then in their community. Unlike the Gen people, no one seemed to mind as long as the family had the means to look after them.

"No!" Solo growled, hiding his despair behind his usual gruffness. "When I told him what he was taking at the moment, he said there was nothing more he could do for him here in the Midlands. We must keep him calm and not let him do heavy work. That might keep him alive a while longer. It will always mean death in the end and not a pleasant one. The guy suggested that I might want something to prevent him from suffering when things got tough. I struck him for suggesting it".

"Shit, why did you do that? The monks don't like their people harmed by anyone. If he makes a complaint against you, their warriors will always find you. The townspeople will do nothing to help us, as they count on the monastery for a lot of things. Maybe we should wake her and set up camp away from here?"

Solo looked contemptuously at her. "Fuck that. They couldn’t arrive here before tomorrow at the soonest. We will leave early again. The moment the Gates open”. He burped loudly, wrapped himself in his blanket and was soon snoring hard enough to frighten the horses leaving Yaya and Boy to look at each other in disbelief.

"Crap! He’s such a stupid idiot. Now Damien will keep a big chunk of the money to pay our compensation to the monks. And that‘s if we're lucky enough to get to the Fort before the Warriors catch up with us. You take first watch brother, wake me when you get too tired to be alert".

Soon all Boy heard were the horses softly snorting and shuffling around in the stable behind them and the various sounds his companions were making while asleep. His thoughts kept him awake for a while. He had always felt he didn’t belong growing up in West Drayton. He had told himself it was because his mother was an outsider. She had strange ideas about what was right or wrong. After his father died, he and his mum had become very close. It allowed her to instil in him respect for people weaker than him and to try and help instead of taking advantage of them. Yaya had learned to be more ruthless as their father had been around when she grew up. His 'survival of the fittest' creed was deeply ingrained in her.

When he felt he couldn’t keep his eyes open any longer, Boy crept to his sister to wake her up. Before he reached her, he felt a big hand dragging him away from her.

"Let her sleep. I will keep watch until tomorrow. I have a lot of thinking to do ". Knowing it would be no good to argue, Boy left him to it to lie down next to his sister and was out for the count in seconds. The lack of sleep the night before finally caught up with him.

"Lie still and don't make a sound or I will kill you, Damien be damned". Astrid woke with a hand clamped over her mouth and nose like a vice and froze with terror. She could barely breathe. The weight of a large body bearing down on her told her Solo must have changed his mind. Or maybe he had just been waiting for an opportunity.

"It’s time to get to know each other a bit better, I think. I’ve seen the lad making eyes at you all day. I can't blame him. After I’ve finished with you, I might let him have the leftovers. Damien wanted you undamaged but didn’t mention it was to be on the inside too".

He had whispered the last words, licking her face. She started to feel faint, nauseous at the thought of this brute crawling all over her. His teeth were gleaming close to her.

"Now, I will let go of my hand. Nod if you will not scream when I do so. If you lie, I will put this knife into that lovely body of yours".

She felt something sharp sticking through her shift into her side. Solo’s breath smelled of beer and garlic mixed with the oily smell of fish and sweat. She felt her food rise in her throat. Petrified, she nodded. His hand let go from her face. Gulping air into her starved lungs, she could only stare in horror as she felt his rough hands lifting her shift and tearing at her trousers. This just wasn’t happening! Should she scream? Who would come? She decided first to try to make him see sense.

"Please don't do this”, she whispered,” Let me go. My parents will pay you anything. You wouldn't like them to find out if you molest me ".

"Well I won't tell anyone if you don't", he grinned.

Desperately she looked at the two small mounds that were her other captors, wishing she could do something to make this nightmare stop.

"Waking them will do you no good. Yaya won't care, and the boy is no threat to me. You will only make one more person suffer if I first have to give him a beating before attending to you".

Even though she was terrified, she was still trying to wriggle out from under him. He didn’t even seem to feel it. Meanwhile, he had managed to undo his trousers as well. His weight was enough to stop her from moving. She felt his hands groping her everywhere as he was trying to mount her. It shook her awake. She'd rather be dead than let this beast defile her. She opened her mouth. Before she had any chance to utter a sound, his eyes narrowed. He let go of her with one of his hands and reared up. The only thing she could remember later was a big fist striking her head catching her right eye and everything going dark.

Some time through all this, Yaya had woken up by the muffled sounds of a struggle. Groggy with sleep, she sat up gripping her knife, thinking some men from the village might be trying to earn some easy money by capturing them for the Warrior monks. Peering, in the direction the sounds were coming from, she saw what Solo, who was too busy noticing her, was up and decided not to interfere. What did she care about that Island wench, who would only bring trouble for her brother with her fancy ways? And her beauty. The latter being the main problem as far as she was concerned. Boy had become besotted with that girl. It would only mean grief if he woke up by her intruding on that idiot’s bit of fun. Knowing her brother and his attitude towards women, she just knew he would try to come in between Solo and the girl. He would want to save her, for fuck’s sake, and get himself killed if he wasn’t careful. Despite feeling a bit guilty to let a fellow woman be abused like that, she turned her back to the scene, plugged her fingers in her ears and waited for it all to end praying Boy wouldn’t wake up or all hell would break loose. She told herself she would have to make a very difficult choice when it came to choosing between her brother and Solo. She knew in her heart who it was going to be. They would probably all end up dead. Solo, when thwarted, could be a force of nature. Yaya never went back to sleep that night. She heard Solo come back to the fire and start snoring. From the girl, she didn’t hear a sound or saw any movement. Yaya hoped Solo hadn’t killed her. That would truly mess everything up.

Boy woke with the first morning light to find his sister already packing up their gear and Solo nowhere to be seen. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Where is he?

"He went to take a piss and will be back soon. Go and tell your girlfriend to do the same as we will leave the moment he is back".

Boy found Astrid already awake sitting with her back to the stable wall staring ahead, barely acknowledging him. Her clothes were torn and dirty, and she was shivering uncontrollably. Her right eye sported a big bruise and was entirely closed by a dark purple swelling. She was white as a sheet and didn’t look him in the eye. He handed her a wet cloth to wash her face and rummaged in his bag for his spare clothes. She silently accepted them and stumbled like a zombie to the back of the stable, barely able to keep upright. Boy felt his blood run hot and cold. He looked over his shoulder to where Solo and his sister were having their breakfast, his eyes narrowing. He rose to go and have a word with Solo. A small ice-cold hand stopped him.

“Please, don’t!”

"What happened? Has Solo...?"

His sister, who had seen him talk to Astrid and recognised his intention, hurried over to them shaking her head. She took the girl’s arm and started to walk in the direction of their fire. "Mind your own business Boy! She got up in the night and walked right into the stable door. Her body must hurt from all the walking we did yesterday. Just keep her away from him and don't ask any questions. That would make it harder for her and you. Come and eat something or at least pretend you do".

Determined to get to the bottom of this he turned to question Astrid some more, but she walked right past him and went to sit close to their things letting her hair hang in front of her face. Where was that feisty, brave girl from yesterday? She looked like a shadow of her former self. He decided to have it out with his sister later.

The latter had followed the girl, bringing her some food and drink urging her to at least eat something. Astrid just looked up at her in dumb silence. "Are you in pain?, he heard his sister brusquely ask Astrid. She nodded and Yaya dove into her bag and dug out a vial of medicine.

"Take this, and it will ease your aches and pains. You won't feel your blisters from yesterday. When we get to the fort, we’ll have a medic look at that eye. Can you see anything with it ?”

Astrid shook her head but did take the vial. It tasted vile, but nothing would forever be worse than the taste and smell of that man this morning when she woke up. Her head was aching less, and she could think again. She understood very well now what would happen if she told the boy about the abuse last night. His sister already knew, she was sure of that, and was trying to protect him. She had seen the blood when she changed and knew he had molested her. It made her feel very dirty, wishing she could wash him off. She thought of stories she had heard at home and with a sinking feeling realised, she was now one of these fallen women people whispered about.

‘I can never tell anybody. The monks would erase my place on the Gen tree. There was too much risk of ruining the path for everyone else on it. My family would have to cast me out.’

Astrid put her hand up to her eye, carefully feeling the swelling there. ‘My eye! I can't see anything with it. What if it stays this way? What good would I be? Maybe it’s only the swelling.‘ In a way she was relieved, she couldn’t remember much after Solo had knocked her out. The pain and the bruises spoke their own story. One she wasn’t ready yet to confront. There was no more time to think about her future. Everyone shouldered their pack, except when Astrid tried to put hers on, she nearly cried out in pain. The boy hurriedly took it from her and motioned her to follow him. Alas, Solo decided to have her by his side again. He was whistling and hustling her along now and then giving her a leering wink. She felt the bile come back in her throat, thinking about that brute even touching her. He was not going to have the pleasure of seeing her cower. She straightened up, looked straight ahead, ignoring Solo completely.

Yaya seeing how her brother was watching them, moved up to talk to Solo. She waved the girl away to walk with her brother.

Boy tried to start a conversation with Astrid about their route and the surrounding countryside. Unlike yesterday when she had been very interested to learn about all these new sights, she just bit her lip and tried to move as fast as she could never looking up. He felt powerless to cheer her up. He had a very nasty feeling about the night before. He was not stupid, but he also knew that here on the road there wasn’t much he could do. Because of Solo’s altercation with the monk yesterday, they probably had some Warriors on their tail. They would have to stick together to survive an encounter with those bastards. So he fell silent too and was trying to imagine how Damien would react when he heard that his prize might be worthless after one of his men had not been able to follow his orders. He didn’t think the stable door would be a believable excuse. Damien was far too smart for that. Damien was a stickler for people keeping to his rules with no exception. One of those rules said loot or other prizes won in raids or scavenges, first were appraised by Damien and his lieutenants before he paid up. A large part of the spoils found its way in Damien’s own pockets.

The Boss appreciated Solo because of his loyalty and strength, his complete lack of fear and the large bounties he always brought in from his trips. He might get away with the abuse, but the thing with the monk would definitely have some repercussions for him and therefore for both Yaya and himself. Solo always took most of the money for himself. Their share would be small for all the work they had done for it. At least his naming would not be affected. Damien could break with every tradition, but this one was too important for Midlanders. A name given by their current leader gave you more status than one handed out by the village elder or town mayor.

"The tracks!" His sister’s excited yell broke through his reverie."We should see if we can get on one of the trains. I can't see her going much further".

The moment they stopped walking Astrid crumbled to the ground, her face white, streaked with the dust of the road. Yaya looked at Solo accusingly. They had been going at a pace that was hard to keep up. Even fit and healthy people like herself and her brother were starting to feel the strain. Hadn’t he tortured the girl enough?

Solo had been aware of Ilvy’s struggle to keep walking. Pretending to do Yaya a big favour, though he was getting tired as well, he grudgingly said: "We can have a look at the next water tower. I can't see her jumping onto it though in the state she’s in. How do you suggest she is going to jump on a moving train? It will be less risky just to walk on. I can always carry her".

Astrid visibly shuddered just at the thought of him touching her again in any way, which made him roar with laughter.

Yaya called her brother over. " Boy, you and I can pull her aboard. We’ve done it before. We don't want her to croak before we even get to the White Fort. Then we’ll get nothing!"

Solo bristled. "Who made you in charge? We will only wait for a train the time she needs to recover and can walk again not any longer. I want to be in the fort before nightfall. Don't want these warrior bastards to catch us before we cash in. She’d better hope the last train hasn’t passed yet".

Astrid gratefully accepted Boy's arm around her shoulder letting him half carry her the next hundred meters to a tall wooden contraption with a round vat on top. She had read about the only train track in Midland running from Penn station in the south all the way North to the White Fort, Damien’s lair. It was ancient tech, but the monks allowed it as there was no electric involved. In any other circumstances, she would have been so excited to try it out. It was what she always had dreamed of, discovering more of the world and its wonders. Now it seemed just another obstacle to overcome and to listen to them, not without danger to herself. At least she could have a rest now.

Solo wanted to make sure they understood he made the decisions and again warned them: "We’ll wait until the sun is halfway down the sky. If it hasn’t shown up by then, we’ll walk. I’m not…". He didn’t get to finish his sentence when they heard voices behind some of the bushes on the other side of the tracks. Quick as a flash, he drew his weapon. Yaya and Boy were ready with theirs too. Surely the Warriors couldn’t have caught up with them that fast?

"That's a nice way to great your friends, Solo!", a high voice piped up. A face grinning with mischief appeared through the leaves.

Solo dropped his weapon a rare smile, making him look nearly human. "I’ll be damned, Peter the Piper! Waiting for transport too, I guess?"

A second figure appeared behind the first.

"And Jo, of course. You guys must be joined at the hip. Long time, no see. Last time I came up you were on tour westward. How did that go? I have often thought of exploring that way". Solo sounded more jovial then she had heard him before. Everyone seemed to be relieved to break the oppressing silence that had accompanied them for the best part of the day. To her surprise, he embraced both men. The first man was the smallest Astrid had ever seen. He was shorter than her little sister, who only came up to her chest! The other one was extremely tall and skinny. He wore a white robe reminding her of the Untouchables. His hair tucked into a topknot was decorated with colourful feathers. From his right ear, an intricate jewel dangled, sparkling in the afternoon sun. His face had so much metal piercing; it was hard to see his features. His eyes looked very kind, though.

The tiny man, Peter, swept his large hat in a mock bow and made a curtsy to her. "And who have we got here? Boy, did you get married to this delicious creature without telling me? I am devastated you didn’t invite me to the wedding. And to an Islander, am I right?" He was observing her with sharp dark brown eyes. She could see he saw she was not there of her own free will. He must have noticed the bruise on her face even though she was trying to hide it with a scarf Boy had given her this morning.

Before Boy could answer, Solo stepped between her and the new men, puffing himself up. "She’s a present for Damien. So hands-off. You may have a nice voice and that friend of your splays like a demon, but any nonsense and you’ll be looking for other jobs".

"Keep your shirt on. When have we ever pulled one over you? Just making conversation. Hey! Do I hear something?"

They all heard it now. A roaring sound like a hundred horses galloping towards them all dragging metal chains behind them. The ground started to tremble a bit. Soon the screeching racket was accompanied by a high piercing whistle and the hissing of a thousand snakes

Astrid, for one moment, forgot her misery as the sight that filled the horizon took her breath away. The pictures in her schoolbooks had not done it justice. Seeing it hurtling towards them, towering over the trees, made her realise she had never really understood how big it was. Still, quite a distance away, it started to slow down. Everyone except her began to run towards the tracks.

"Come on, you stupid girl! Come over here!" Solo was beckoning her looking his old furious self.

Astrid didn’t want to be touched by Solo again ever and didn’t move from her spot.

"Come here, little one. I will get you on that train in a jiffy".The taller of the two walked back to her. He guided the petrified young woman gently but determinedly to the metal tracks all the while making calming noises as if she were a nervous animal. Solo looked as if he was going to interfere, but the closeness of the train and the short window they had to get on made him decide to leave her in Jo’s care.

Astrid felt herself swept up by one of the man's arms while he gripped one of the ribs of the carriage swishing past them and swung them both through an opening into a dark space.

Chapter Twenty- The train ride

They landed in a tangle of limbs. "Well done. You can let go now. We don’t want to give Solo a reason to start making trouble. Not that he needs one". He gently undid the white-knuckled grip she still had on his lower arm.

Only now did she dare to open her eye to see that everyone had made it safely on onto the train. Despite her soreness and her profound grief about all that had happened the day before, she couldn’t help feeling exhilarated at the enormous speed the train was going. The wind was whipping through the open doors making everyone’s hair whip around her head, drying the sticky sweat of the long walk in the hot sun. No wonder people paid lots of money to the train masters to travel onboard one of these though she expected not many of them had to do it this way.

" Ah, the best way to get home, dear, I say", the small man leaned back against the one called Jo and to her surprise the latter kissed him lovingly on the top of his bald head winking at her. Solo spat on the floor."Get a room, you two. I will see enough of that when we get to Damien's. Don't want to corrupt my little girl here". They ignored him.

"We’ll be at White Fort Station soon", Boy had managed worm his way between her and Yaya. "You’ll get a chance to rest and eat some good food. Damien always makes sure his ransomed prisoners are kept in good condition to make sure he gets the full price. We all know your father will pay well".

Astrid swallowed, thinking of how her father would react when he found out what that animal had done to her. "How long will it take for a message to get to my parents?"

"Damien won’t deal directly with them. The monks usually will take care of the payment and the exchange. Someone will have to alert the monks on Luton. They often intermediate in these cases".

She stared at him, not wanting to believe what she was hearing."Often? What are you talking about? I’ve never heard of this. Surely the monks would take steps never to let this occur to anyone? It must be against the law. "Her voice became shrill. Looking at her but unable to meet her eyes, he glanced at her with great pity. The wind had blown the scarf away from her face. He could see there was considerable damage to the right side of her face. The bruising was looking black against her golden skin. Her eye was nearly completely shut. Damn, Solo! He was such a screwed up excuse for a man. He had seen her cringe every time that brainless shit came near her. He sincerely hoped the physical abuse had been the end of it but feared the worst. She seemed so clueless. What must it be like to grow up so completely sheltered from all the bad things happening in the world? He didn’t think it was a good thing. First of all, it made you weak. His sister or any of her friends would never have condoned Solo to treat them like that. He had a big mouth but knew they would simply kill him in his sleep. Secondly, he realised how much freedom he had compared to her even while striving every day to be the strongest, the fittest or the cleverest simply to survive. On her Island, they tried to achieve the same level of excellence by breeding those traits into their children. Seeing this girl’s bewilderment and incomprehension of things he had learnt from the moment he was born, that strategy did not seem to work very well.

Boy patiently explained: "The monks allow us to sell prisoner, back to you under the condition that we never set foot on your lands. In the Midlands outsiders are free game as they are on the sea".

"So what will they do when they find out you did go onto our island and into our house?" Her cheeks were flushed, and her eye had some of that spark back that he thought lost forever.

He sighed. "I know. It’s all a big mess. We were supposed to raid your house just for the wedding presents and leave without harming anyone. I don’t think any of us knew Solo had other plans. He must’ve been planning to take a hostage all along. He wants to have enough money to take his brother to the Mainland for treatment. There is a big ship before the coast of the Continent where they can cure Albions with specific diseases. It costs tons of money. How he is going to tell Damien he crossed the rules I don't know. Damien must have known or maybe was the one to give him the order. There must have been a reason why he wanted you to be abducted and ransomed. What puzzles me is the role of the monks in this. Guess we will never find out. Solo will not tell us".

They both looked at the big man, who seemed quite relaxed for someone who had just broken some of the strictest rules in the Midlands. He was talking more animatedly than she had ever seen him with the pair of strange men who had joined them.

"Are those two such men who love other men? You mentioned it yesterday when we talked about Damien. Are there many people like that here?", she just could not get her head around the idea.

"No, not many but some. We don’t think it weird or wrong as your priests probably tell you. My mother told me it hales from the time when there were only very few people just after the Exodus. I think it’s just what it is. Peter and Jo are two of the nicest people I know. They met at a festival while touring Albion and have been together ever since. You must hear them play. There will be a party tonight, and they are bound to sing. They are the best". Suddenly realising she couldn’t be in the mood to talk about a party, he shut up and was relieved when the train slowed down again. This time it came to a full stop."We're here. Let's get off before the guild train guards do their rounds. The Fort pays them well to leave this cart always last, but you never know if some bureaucrat from the company is checking up on them and changes the routine".

Jo lifted her off the car again. She smiled her thanks at him. He softly squeezed her arm and nodded at Boy.

"Young man. Look after this young lady for us. And happy naming day tomorrow". Astrid looked questioningly at him. "Didn't you know. This fine lad is finally getting a proper name tomorrow as he has done so well during this raid".

Astrid stumbled realisation dawning on her. Immediately recognising his mistake, Jo turned around and practically ran back to his partner.

"Well, I hope you will have a nice NAMING day", she spat the words at him finally finding a target for all the fury that had building inside her. "Glad to have been of service!" With those words, she pulled herself up as tall and forbidding as was possible with her sore body and filthy clothes. She then strode off to where Solo and Yaya were getting on to a cart driven by a slightly dimwitted looking person. Jo was miming 'sorry" to Boy over Peter's head, but the damage was done.

The driver took them from the station over a pebbly road through the high walls surrounding the White Fort. It was lying in a vast lake from which it took its name, looking impregnable.

Everything around her seemed cold and dark even though the sun was just setting, the heat of the cobbled road making her sweat. She didn’t feel ready to meet this man, who would hold her fate in his hands. She felt so alone.

Chapter Twenty-one - Marion and John

Marion awoke with a shock unaware for one blissful moment where she was. She looked around, rubbing her neck, which was so from as she realised, falling asleep in a highbacked chair. Beside her, John’s unmoving form brought it all back to her. The fire, the chaos following it, her beloved hurt without any prospect of waking anytime soon. And Gregory and Ingrid! The silent bodies and unimaginable grief. Her throat closed and she held herself close trying to stop the shaking while despair washed over her.

‘What if he never wakes? How will he eat? He’s already looking thinner. He’s so white! Maybe it’s better for him never to find out what happened to his parents or Astrid. Oh, lady Astrid! She must still be missing. Or else she would have been here with her at John’s side’. Marion bent over John’s still form stroking his hair and cheeks.

Maybe she should get something to eat and then find out what had happened to his parents. She got up and swept the screen aside to find someone who could tell her what had happened to their remains. She found one of the older nuns rolling up bandages in the front room. The sister told her the bodies had been conferred to the Harrington chapel.

Still unsure what to do, Marion hesitated to rush over there. Surely John needed her here when he woke up? On the other hand, it was so hard to believe she would never see them alive again until she had seen it with her own eyes. Then it would not be possible to pretend anymore that they were just missing like her dear friend. She came to a decision.
"Sister? Can someone sit with John? I need to the Chapel".
The nun, guessing what she wanted to do, sent one of the younger novices to hold watch over John.

Marion gripped the girl’s arm before she could enter the cubicle. "Don't leave him alone under any circumstance! When he moves, or even just blinks his eyes, I want you to come and get me immediately, do you hear?"

She knew how rude she sounded. She usually treated others with more respect. The whole disaster seemed to have let a completely different Marion come to light.

"No, my lady, I will", the girl meekly said, sitting down next to the bed.

The Harrington family chapel lay in one of the corners of the sea wall. Coming out of the temporary hospital, she tried not to look at the South tower, which was still smoking and blackened by wet ash. Uninvited images came into her head of her foster parents trying to get out and succumbing to the smoke and heat in the inferno of the lower floor. She tried to shake off these horrid thoughts. They had been so brave and had to pay for it with their lives.

It was like losing her mother all over again. She’d been only six, but could still remember her bewilderment not being able to find her mother anywhere. Her father had been too wrapped up in his own grief to give his little girl much attention. Ingrid had taken her in and been like a second mother from the start. And Astrid..., thinking of her, her lips trembled, Astrid had become the sister she always wanted.
Please, Lady, let her be still alive and safe. Bring her back to us, unharmed".

She’d heard people speaking in hushed tones about the Midlanders when they thought she wasn't listening. How young women, falling into their hands, very rarely returned and if they did, they were hidden away in one of the Convents, never to be seen again.

"Nobody is allowed in, the commander said".
A powerful voice shook her out of her reverie. She was standing at the chapel portal which was guarded by one of her father’s men. He, looking very imposing, set a heavy spear in front of the entrance, double bronze doors, green with age and intricately decorated.

"Don't you recognise me, Alex? It's Marion. The last time you saw me, I was only six, but I remember you very well. You always gave me toys you carved out of stone. I used to love them and was always pestering you for another one".

The guard looked a bit closer, frowning in concentration.
"I wouldn't have recognised you, Lady Marion. But now you say it there’s a lot of your late mother about you, bless her. The commander didn’t want people to snoop around here out of idle curiosity. Are you sure you want to go in alone? Shall I send for one of the maids? Or I can go in with you myself".

He sounded unsure about what would be worse: to let a young woman confront the scene awaiting within by herself or to leave his post. The latter being a punishable offence.

"That is very kind of you, Alex, but I will only be a short while. No need to trouble yourself or someone else. Everybody has enough to do as it is". She patted him on his arm and slipped through the doors without looking back.

Morning sunlight was streaming through the large mosaic windows turning the interior into a colourful, almost festive looking space not appropriate at all for the sight that met her.

Marion felt her legs becoming weak as she saw the shadowy form of the bodies side by side on the stone altar usually reserved for flowers and other offerings to the Lady. Slowly she moved forwards, her tears starting to roll down her cheeks. When she reached their biers, she looked at their dear faces left unmarred by the fire. Marion was weeping softly by now. It was true. Now no more pretending would be possible.
It wasn't fair! These lovely people had done nothing wrong, and now they were dead! They were both wrapped in dark velvet cloaks, only their heads uncovered. The logo of the Harrington Company embroidered on it in bright green. It was the same as the coat of arms of Sevenoaks. Seven trees in a grassy field.

"My dear child. I didn’t think anyone would be in today. We haven’t had the chance to lay them out as is proper for the head of the Family and his wife".

Marion turned to father Sirio who had quietly come in through a door behind the pews. "How long can they stay here? I know the law tells us to have the funeral within three days of their passing, but Astrid is not here, and John is still in a coma. We can’t bury their parents without them. They would never forgive us. Can’t we make an exception and wait a bit longer?"

" The family has suffered a great loss indeed. Alas, we must perform the ceremony of Passing within the prescribed time. We have our reasons. Would you happen to know how young Lily is holding up? She must be distraught having to experience such a tragic loss at such a young age".He deftly was trying to steer the conversation away from the matter of the funeral.

"She has been staying at Trudy’s. Jafar and his entourage have relocated to her villa. I heard Leila, has taken quite a shine to her and has been trying very hard to comfort her. I haven’t had time to check up on her, as I didn’t want to leave John, but one of the nuns told me. Can you tell me if there’s anything more we can do for him? What if he doesn’t wake up? Surely he would die of hunger and thirst. He hasn’t been eating or drinking anything since yesterday? How long can a person be like that?”

All her questions and worries came pouring out. She had always respected father Sirio’s wisdom. He always seemed to have an answer to everything even though Astrid sometimes made a bit of fun of his long lectures.

" We can keep him comfortable for a day or so. I spoke with the medics who have examined him. The plan is to move him by boat to Luton monastery where they have ways to keep him alive for quite a while longer. We are in the process of asking the Prior dispensation to move him to the Hospital Schip. There is old tec there with which they can save people's lives. The problem is it usually means he can never come back to the island or even Albion. But let’s first wait to see if he wakes up without any of that. The most important thing now is to keep his body from deteriorating." He smiled at her as if trying to reassure her.

"Do you think that’s possible? Has that happened before?"
She sounded so eager. The priest just couldn’t take that one little spark of hope away from her. She would have enough to cope with the next days attending the funeral of who had been her parents in all but name.

"It will all rest in the Lady's hands. She can often be very kind to those who have always followed her path. Let me escort you to Trudy’s place. Lily will be so happy to see you. Let us take care of the preparations needed for the funeral. I just had a message that one of the ships we sent to follow the raiders to Midland has just come back with news from your father, Master Selby. When I know what they found, I’ll let you know as soon as possible. Or are you going to go back to the hospital? Maybe you should go to your father's house first and rest or at least have something to eat. There’s nothing you can do for John at the moment. I will send one of my men to take you to Jafar after we’ve heard what’s going on. Only then can we make some decisions. You will have the opportunity there to say hello to Lily".

He ushered her gently out of the chapel nodding to the guard before going back inside, closing the doors with a soft but definite click. Marion thanked the guard again for letting her in. After checking that nothing had changed in John's condition, she decided to be sensible and walk downtown to her father's apartment. Hopefully, the fresh air would do her some good. The day was as beautiful as yesterday. It seemed much longer ago Astrid, and she had enjoyed themselves on the beach. Her mind abruptly recoiled from that thought. She would go mad if she gave those feelings of guilt space in her head. She needed Astrid!

Chapter Twenty-two - Jafar’s plan

Jafar was reading some reports. His captains had them brought to him before his ships went out to sea again to support the rescue expedition. Leila had woken him up early still very upset by all the events the night before. She had slept on a cot in Lily’s room. The girl had been inconsolable when she had heard the news about her parents and her siblings. Leila had come up with the grand idea to let her look after Speed and her three pups. The young girl didn’t want to leave them in the stable when it was time to go to bed, so Leila had them all brought into the house, to lily’s room. Trudy hadn't too happy about it, but seeing the smile on Lily's face, she relented and said that it would be okay as long as the girl cleaned up after them.

‘I’m a lucky man. You can tell she comes from an extended family with lots of younger nieces and nephews. She will make my son or daughter a wonderful mother. We’ll now have to stay here until Henry and Nicholas can come back and take over. We might not make it back home for the birth though. I will have to send for her mother and aunts".

Looking at the pile of paperwork in front of him, he mused: ‘My own business is too much for one man as it is without adding Harrington's as well. I will just have to hang in there until everyone is back again and then worry about who is going to go where and do what ’.

It had always been a silent agreement between Gregory and himself to get Nicholas more involved in the Kent side of the business, so he would be ready to be in charge when Jafar kicked the bucket. He was Gregory's son, after all. John, being the legal heir of the Harrington business, would take the reins of the family when it was time for Gregory to take a step back. Both firms could stay in the family. An election usually decided who would become the new director. The company board, though, more often than not, allowed the current director to appoint a successor. For them, it was important just to keep the business turning smoothly and everyone earning good mone. Besides everyone knew that the Harrington line had been breeding for commercial success for ages. Elections cost money and would sometimes drag on while business was suffering.

Astrid would be well provided for through Henry and by inheriting her mother's properties. He had made sure his daughter, Ingrid, had an ample dowry.
Gregory confessed to his father in law about his affair with Trudy years ago. About the time Ingrid had been going through a rough patch after losing a child. His daughter had been inconsolable, and her health had been suffering. Everywhere in Sevenoaks, reminding her of her loss. She had gone to stay with her father in Kent to recover. While Ingrid was away, Trudy had been looking after Henry’s household.

When Ingrid came back, she told Henry she was pregnant again. It must have happened before she left. Henry had been so happy, only to be told the same thing by Trudy. He had told Jafar, he offered Trudy the permanent position of the housekeeper to still his conscience about letting her deal with it alone. It would give her status and was a manner to look after her and his other child. Trudy must have felt taken advantage off at the time. Being pregnant by Henry and then hearing of Ingrid's pregnancy couldn't have been easy. She took the offer to protect her baby. Illegitimate children were always sent off the island. Paternity had to be known. In their case, it would have devastated his daughter, who had just more or less recovered was deliriously happy being pregnant again.
Gregory must have pulled some strings to legalize his bastard. They had come up with the drowned sailor story.

Henry had called on Jafar on one of his business trips down south. They agreed Jafar would accept Nicholas as his successor.

‘Who then could have thought I would be a father again one day? Nicholas can still take his place in the Kent business and lead it until this new baby, by the Tree may he survive, is old enough. Now there’re so many uncertainties which will change all our careful planning’.

Jafar shook his head as if to clear it from those old memories. He had more urgent business to attend to.
Will John survive? Will Astrid come back? In the worst-case scenario, Henry could take over the Harrington corporation if neither one of them did return. It would be an excellent opportunity for him. In Scotia, he would never have gotten such a managing position with the Redwood company. Women are in charge there.

And what about Lily? Would the monks be willing to put her in Astrid's place when the worst happens? So many variables.
He sighed and set to work again only to be interrupted by a knocking on the study door. He stood up to open it and found one of his captains requesting to come in. One of the ships had returned. He gave up on getting any more work done and addressed the tired-looking man.

" Before you start telling me your news let me send for our priest or else you will have to tell the whole story again".

He rang a bell and told the servant coming in, that the captain would like some refreshments and to please serve it to him in the dining room. The good captain looked like he could do with some sustenance.

"Father Sirio and I will join you in a minute. Make yourself comfortable. You must be hungry".The man accepted gratefully and followed the servant downstairs.

Jafar went quickly to tell Leila there was news and he would come back to her as soon as the meeting ended to fill her in. Could she please in the meantime make sure she kept Lily away from the dining room?

She acquiesced in her usual patient way. They had learnt a lot about each other in such a short time. She knew he valued her opinion even though she was so many years his junior. Having looked after her siblings from a very young age, her parents always working, she was wise beyond her years.

Jafar told the kitchen staff he was going to join their guest and one other for an early supper. He hurried to the dining room and saw father Sirio had arrived as well.

"Welcome Father and captain Llazlo. I see they have been looking after you. Is there anything else I can get you? There is some lovely rum here".He pointed at a table loaded with decanters.

It was the priest who answered him. "Thanks, that’s very kind, but we’d better keep our wits together as we have to make some difficult decisions. Maybe the good captain first can tell us the news from our men while you, yourself, take the opportunity to have a bite to eat as well?"

The captain hastily swallowed his last mouthful and started to tell them what had happened at Diggers’ Peninsula.
Father Sirio looked shocked’s eyes had widened hearing the story of the killing. It was not what he had expected.

"You realise that the culling was illegal? I know revenge is a powerful feeling but had expected some more restraint. We are supposed to be the civilised ones. Now I’ll have to send word about this to the High Prior in Luton. There were tribes higher on the list of eliminations than that one in ...what was it called again?

"West Drayton, your excellency", the captain was a bit amazed they took the news of the obliteration of a whole village so businesslike.

"Ah yes, West Drayton. Not too many people were living there. They were never candidates. We could have ruined a whole experiment". In his dismay, he was thinking out loud forgetting this was Monastery business only.

Jafar didn’t pay him much attention. He was pleased to hear there had been no loss of life on their side. The news that Astrid was probably still alive and held for ransom made him breathe a bit easier. He would have to talk to the bankers as soon as possible. They would need extra funds. There would be the fine the Prior would demand as well for their illegal culling.

"So Captain Atanar has set sail for the harbour of the White Fort? They won't let him moor obviously, but the plan of sending young William as a representative of the Monastery supported by Nicholas could work. Maybe, Father, you could send a message to Luton. It would get to the Prior before our ships. Hopefully, he will agree to send a more experienced emissary to Damien for the negotiations than our brother William. Do you think that would be possible?"

Seeing the captain glancing from himself to the priest his eyebrows practically disappearing under his wig, he decided the following discussion should be for Sirio's ears only. "My dear captain. You must be exhausted. Why don't you go and let one of the guards show you a room in the Barracks via the baths?" The man was more than happy to leave them to their meeting, having heard enough to be afraid of the ruination his soul. Bowing deeply, he scurried out of the room.

Father Sirio wasn’t surprised such an astute scholar as Jafar knew about his secret communications with the Impure of the city using their forbidden tech. His excuse had always been that he didn’t operate the devilish machines himself so was not in breach of the rules. He wondered how many more people knew about this arrangement. It could not be many as he’d never heard anyone comment on it.

“I will do my best to set it up. Let me get in touch with the London Monastery first, and I will let you know. I’m sure the Prior will help. Not for free of course. The Stewardson boy pretending to be a Warrior monk gives me more of a headache. These warriors are trained soldiers. I don't know if Nicholas will be able to convince those Midlanders he is one. Couldn’t one of your men have gone with William instead, Jafar?"

"There are not many if any, warrior monks who hale from our southern lands I'm afraid. He would’ve stood out like a sore thumb. Nicholas has always excelled in swordsmanship and at least understands the mainland dialect. Though William will have to do all the talking, all Nicholas has got to do is stand behind him looking menacing". The men had to smile about this despite the seriousness of the situation. Nicholas had always been teased with his baby face as had his father, Henry. The curly hair and open face they both shared made them look very beatific. Both had made a great effort to prove they were the opposite. Nicholas had grown a beard just to look more mature.

Sirio had known about Nicholas heritage from the day he was born, but had decided to keep quiet."The lad is looking more and more like Gregory. Sometimes I’m surprised not everybody sees the likeness between those twos straight away. Lucky Nicholas got his colouring from his mother ".

Jafar nodded, remembering seeing the boy for the first time when Gregory brought him to the Kent residence at the age of six. That was when Gregory had told him about his indiscretion all those years ago. When he saw how much fun Astrid and Nicholas had together, he decided to let sleeping dogs lie and not make his daughter miserable. He’d never regretted his decision.

Father Sirio, seeing that Jafar had finished eating, gratefully accepted a glass of excellent whiskey, made by an ancient recipe from the north of Albion. It must have been a gift from Enri.

"Let’s get to the next matter at hand. Do you agree to send John to Luton and if necessary to the Hospital Ship? I will have to arrange the dispensations. We shouldn’t have trouble receiving them as we pay the exemption tax. Our Prior is always quite keen on filling the Church's coffers".

Father Sirio was a devout Tree Unionist, but the election of the last Pope had been a nasty surprise. He still wondered how the monks could have elected such a vain, greedy man for the mightiest office in the whole of Albion.

The power of the Family directors was quite considerable, but the Church of the Tree and therefore its leader had all the real power. Even the Midland governors would never act without his approval.

Sirio was convinced Prior Pendrini, who had many connections with the mainland and strong relations within the ultra purist factions, had been elected aided by their monetary and political support. No good would come of it.

" You should know by now I never voted for that man. His love for money will at least come in handy in our situation. We just need to pay him enough to give us his blessing".

" How are we going to keep John alive until we get the go-ahead? He’s wasting away before our eyes", Jafar sounded very anxious. When he had seen his grandson this morning, he was shocked about his condition. The nuns did their utmost to get some fluids in him. Nevertheless, he still looked more dead than alive.

Seeing him, Marion had just sat there and looked at him hopefully. He had told her of his plan to try and move John to Luton and maybe the Ship. Her face had lit up. She had immediately urged him to let her accompany John there. He’d told her that decision would have to be made by her father. It was not to him to send the commander’s daughter to an uncertain future. Quite a few people seemed to disappear after they left the Archipelago to search for healing.
The ship, named the Sanctuary, floating there before the coast, had many secrets. He was certain father Sirio would do his utmost to keep John safe.

The latter stood up and clapped his hands together. "I‘ve already contacted one of my colleagues in the London Monastery. He in his turn has reached out to his friend up in the city. We can pick up life support equipment from the Buddhist Temple. If we can get John over there without too many people involved, our indiscretion will not attract unwanted attention and stir up the factions. I've decided not to wait for permission for this part of our plan. The boy’s life is at stake here”.

Jafar had risen as well. "What shall I do about the commander's girl? She’s adamant not to let John out of her sight. We can at least let her go with him as far as London. The Temple is outside the city walls. She can wait with the Buddhists until the Commander lets us know what he wants her to do. I promised to let her know today. As you’re going back to the House, could you send one of your people to the hospital to bring her here?"

" She’s gone to her father’s house in town. I think it might be better when we send Trudy with the news. She can persuade her to spend some time here with us. Marion trusts her. Plus Lily has been asking for her "’
The two men agreed to their agreed tasks and meet up again the next morning when they hopefully would know a bit more.
When all went as planned, they could move John to the Temple the next day where he would have a better chance of survival. Marion would be happy that we're at least trying to do something to save her beloved even if it involved bypassing the church rules. She was the Commander's daughter. He never had much truck with the Priory and the restrictions they laid upon their flock. Some of that hopefully had rubbed off on her.

Moving John to the Sanctuary, without it becoming general knowledge, would be more troublesome. Organising that would just have to wait until tomorrow. He was bone tired, feeling every year of his the sixty he was on this earth. He decided he would join Leila and tell her what was going on. She was a sensible woman and wouldn’t be very troubled by their heresy. He knew she was not very pious. The fisherfolk she haled from, always had been a very independent lot and didn't let the Church dictate how to live their lives. They were a very close-knit community with eyes and ears on the other side of the Channel by dint of often working with continental fishermen when those needed help with their catch. He banked the fire and with some regret put the whiskey bottle back on the sideboard. He slowly made his way upstairs. It had been a very long day.

Chapter Twenty-three - Astrid meets Damien

The security at the gates of the Fort was very thorough. Guards bristling with weapons checked their papers at both portals before they reached the courtyard. Astrid saw quite a few people standing around talking, some pointing at them.
She noticed there were few women amongst them. She didn’t get much time to take in her surroundings as Solo marched her to the entrance of what looked the main house. Yaya and Boy making up the rear. Peter and Jo had somehow managed to make themselves scarce the moment they arrived.

Again Solo had to identify himself and his group before he was let in, which annoyed him no end. "Don't you bastards know by now who I am? I've been here so many times. Is your brain so small you can't remember anyone's face if you didn't see it a minute ago? Idiots. I bet Damien won't be happy when he hears you were wasting my and his time".

The warden just shook his head, used to the abuse when he was just doing his job. He would be more worried if Damien found out he hadn’t been careful who to allow into his chief’s home. "Sorry, we’re just doing our job. Damien will even be more unhappy than you when we let people in without checking their papers properly. We see two here we've never seen before. One is an Unnamed, who, I see, is travelling under your stamp, but that young woman, who the hell is she? The boss doesn't like it when you bring strangers into his living room, not after what happened to his brother. That was a woman as well I don’t see her on any of your documents".

Solo’s face became nearly purple. Patience had never been his strong point. He balled his fists and would have struck the man, were it not for Yaya’s hand on his arm. She squeezed it hard and told him to calm the fuck down. It had the desired effect. Solo growled at the servant: "I have strict orders to bring this woman to him as soon as we arrived, so stop pissing us about and let us in". Not able to control himself anymore, he shoved the guards aside and entered the building without even looking back if the rest of them were following.

When he saw them hesitating, he shouted: "Come on, don't stand there like a bunch of morons !"

Yaya grabbed them both by their sleeves and ran after Solo, trying to catch up with him. Solo by that time had disappeared into the dark shadows of the entrance hall. Here there reigned an eerie silence. Knocking loudly on a door at the right, Solo pushed it open and barged in. He blinked his eyes, trying to adjust to the bright lights coming from a wonderfully colourful window behind the speaker.

"Still the ill-mannered peasant I see? What have I told you about waiting until I tell you to come in? If you weren’t bringing me such a nice package, I would have you whipped for disrespecting me. You did bring it?"

Without answering, Solo looked over his shoulder, beckoning Yaya to bring the other two forward. He pulled Astrid in front and gave her a push towards the grossly fat figure sitting behind an ornate desk. The man looked up with slitted eyes, not looking very impressed.

"Doesn't look like much. You're sure it’s one of the Harrington devil's brood?"

Solo stuck his chest out: "She’s the eldest daughter, and I reckon she’ll make us a nice sum. We managed to grab a lot of nice stuff from the house as well. That will be following later with some of my men. Thought you wanted no delay getting your hands on this one. This lad found us a secure entry to the house. It was a piece of cake. We even had time to leave a nice token of our appreciation. Twenty of them!" He grinned, pulling Boy in front of him by his neck, giving him a little affectionate shake.

Astrid wondered what he meant by that. With Boy standing beside her, she finally dared to look up only to see that this mountain of a man had gotten up from his desk and was limping towards them. She had never seen anyone so large in her whole life.

Standing in front of her, she could see he had a large, bald head with multiple rolls of fat in his neck, making it nigh impossible to know where his head ended, and his torso began. He had wrapped himself in dark grey robes edged by beautiful embroidery. The lovely clothes did nothing to make him look less frightening. His wide-set eyes were so pale they looked white. His ears looked weird like someone had put them on the wrong side of his head.

When he put out one of his pudgy hands to tilt her face up, she jumped back feeling nauseated by the look of his fingers which had blunt bulbous ends. The thought of those touching her made her nearly lose the little breakfast she had that morning.

"Now, now, child. I’m not going to hurt you, yet. But I will if you don't step back over here and let me have a good look at you. Your father will be paying me a substantial sum of money, so I have to check if my merchandise is undamaged and worth his trouble". Trembling she let him lift her face to the light. "What the fuck!! How did this happen?" baring his teeth, he glared the other three.

Solo started to sweat but decided to bluff his way out of the situation. He gave Yaya and Boy a warning look.

"She fell on the boat and hurt her eye. Nothing that won't disappear in a few days. These pathetic islanders bruise easily. She will still be worth the same to her father".

"To her father maybe, but not to those shitty monks. You know seeing this, they will have one of their medics check her health first before they agree to intermediate?"

"What! I thought they were just the messenger boys. You never told me that. Still, she should be fine by the time they finally make it over here. For the rest she’s fine". Solo started to sweat even more now. It was going to get worse for him.

"Well, I can't take your word for it. As far as I know, you are not exactly famous for your medical knowledge! I will let my man have a good look at her and ask her some questions." Damien, his face now showing red spots on his cheeks, after seating himself back to his desk, pulled a tasselled cord. A door, hidden behind him, opened and four young men dressed similarly as their chef, hurried in. They all had the same pallor as their boss. With their eyes rimmed with kohl and their mouth scarlet red, they looked like nothing Astrid had ever seen. They formed a cordon around her.

"Take her to Mallory, my lovelies. When he’s done with her, let him come to me for a full report. First, bring her to the women's basement for a wash. She smells! Don’t want Mallory to complain ".

Turning to Solo and his companions: "I’ll deal with you lot later when I’ve heard back from Mallory. For now, you’re free to go to the kitchens and get something to eat, but on no account, try to leave the compound. I’ll be watching you!"

There was nothing for them to do but meekly leave the study, relinquishing Astrid to her guards. Boy looking very worried when he saw Astrid disappear into the bowels of the house tried to catch her eyes. When she caught his look, he mouthed:” I will find you”. She was gone before she could acknowledge his message.

He wished he could have stopped all this at the time. Too late now. They would find out what had happened. He was sure of that. They would be in deep shit. Damien wouldn't give a damn that it was all Solo. They would all be found guilty by association. He worried about his sister too. They didn’t see eye to eye about many things, but she was still family, and he didn’t want anything bad to happen to her. Solo didn’t seem to be too worried or was pretending not to be.

He whispered to them: "Let's get something to eat and decide what we are going to say. I hope the little bitch keeps her mouth shut. I told her what would happen if she doesn't. She can kiss her ransom goodbye and never go home again, as the monks will just tell her parents she died. They don't want someone who has been fucked by a Midlander to come back into the Gen line. I know that much".

" Why do you always have to ruin everything, Solo? Even for yourself. What are you going to do about Eric, when Damien decides she’s worth nothing anymore and just sells her on to some farmer or raider and hangs us from the walls of the fort?
You can have any woman you want at home, but no you just couldn't keep your hands off that skinny islander!"

Yaya was shaking with rage. She had been stewing on what she saw and was now kicking herself for not interfering at the time. She could have held Solo under control. Why hadn't she done it? Her fear Boy would try to defend the girl’s honour? Or did she just not want to know what he really was?

Boy, who by now had his worst fears confirmed tried to say something too. They both told him to shut up. Yaya wanting to keep him out of it hadn’t finished.

"You, my boy, will be lucky if we can convince Damien you at least knew nothing of this whole stupid disaster. Hopefully, when he sees the rest of the booty, he will still be willing to let you have your naming tomorrow with the others".

"I don't care about my name. What about Astrid? Where have they taken her? What will they do to her if they find out?"

Boy sounded desperate, so Yaya took pity on him. "It's all up to that doctor of Damien, Mallory, and the girl herself. He might conclude she just got a beating and leave it at that. If she doesn't tell the truth, we should be able to get away with just a hefty fine for damaging Damien’s property. When she talks...well, you just have heard what will happen".

They had reached the kitchens, where one of the cooks showed them the way to the mess hall. None of them had much of an appetite even though it had been a long time since lunch.
They ate as much as they could get down rinsed down with a lot of sour beer after which Solo went to join some of the people he knew from his other visits.

Yaya and her brother went for a walk along the ramparts. They were too nervous to rest. People were giving them pitying stares. They probably all agreed that they were happy not to be in their shoes. News spread fast in the fort.

Elsewhere in the fort, a much cleaner Astrid was looking up at Mallory, the local medic. He had taken one whiff of her and had agreed with Damien she needed a bath before he examined her.

"And give her something decent to wear ".
The servants had given her a soft grey robe similar to what her escorts had been wearing. Mallory had ordered her guards to stay outside the sick room. They had grudgingly agreed.

She saw a dark-skinned man with a short grey beard and a halo of wispy white hair around his head. His face was wrinkled and brown like a walnut. With his soft manner, he didn’t look like he belonged in a horrible place like this.

"Now my dear, Astrid, isn't it? My name is John Mallory, but everyone calls me Mallory. Let me first have a look at that eye of yours. It looks very nasty. Have you been able to open it at all since you hurt it?"

She shook her head, looking at her feet.

"I am going to try and carefully open it. I want to see if there’s any damage to the eye itself. Try not to pull away if you can. I will be gentle".

Very carefully, he lifted her right eyelid and winced when he saw her eye.

"Did you see anything when I did that?"

She shook her head, trying not to cry. That part of her sight had been in darkness since that harrowing night. All this time she had hoped it was because of the bruising. The compassionate look in the doctor’s eyes told her what she didn’t want to know.

"When all the blood in that bruise has drained away, it might get a bit better, but I'm afraid you could have lost most of your sight on that side for good. Sorry, I can't be more optimistic, no use giving you false hope. Though looking at the rest, there won’t be a lasting scar in your lovely face. I will have to report this to Damien and that young man, Solo, will be in quite a bit of trouble. Luckily the monks don't count physical disabilities acquired later in life as a reason to deny ransom. In a way, you can count yourself lucky. Knowing Solo, it could have been far worse". He smiled friendly at her, trying to put her more at her ease.

"I now need you to undress, so I can see if there is no other damage, or you could just tell me. Have you "fallen" over onto something else?"

His kindness was too much for her and she suddenly found herself sobbing. Her shoulders were shaking. She desperately wanted to tell him about what Solo had done to her that night, but she heard his warning in her head. What if he was right? Only by keeping quiet, she would at least have some sort of a chance of getting home. Father Sirio had always been kind to them. She knew the other monks were extremely strict, and he had been a bit of an exception. A fallen woman had no place in the Gen community.

Mallory now really started to get worried. "Are you in pain anywhere else? I’m so sorry I couldn’t give you better news about the eye. I will give you some ointment with Arnica for the bruising and a bottle of boiled water with the juice of berries to rinse your eye, three times a day. It might give some improvement. Are you sure you don't want to tell me anything else? It will stay between you and me, I promise. I can’t treat you well when you don’t give me all the information". He started to fear the worst, seeing her extreme distress.

"You know the monks will bring a physician to make sure you didn’t get hurt? She will be adamant about doing a full examination. Whatever you’re not telling me will come out. Maybe I can help to hide it before that. Damien will be furious enough about the eye".

She felt she just had to confide in somebody. It might as well be this kindhearted man who might be able to help her. The others would just be worried about their own hide. That Yaya was out of the question. She would just tell her to get a grip and be happy that she didn’t have to go back to the island. The only other possibility was that boy. She had seen him looking at her when he thought she was not paying attention. Somehow he seemed to like her. She had been furious when they last spoke, but if anyone in this forsaken place could and would be willing to help her, it would be him. But what when he found out about it? Would he still want to help? Wouldn't he be disgusted by it all?

She took a shivering breath, wiping her face with her sleeve: "No, for the rest I'm fine, I‘m just exhausted. It’s all been so horrible. Could you maybe do one thing for me?"

Still worried, but relieved he didn’t have to tell Damien Solo had abused his hostage, Mallory was happy to promise he would give the boy a message to come and see her.

"You can stay here in the sick room. The guards will still be outside while I'm away, but I will tell them to let the lad enter. They will do as I ask. Sometime they might need me themselves. Now I will have to tell Damien the bad news about your vision. Hopefully, he will not shoot the messenger, and with Damien, I mean that literally. The last medic here didn’t last very long when he failed to cure his favourite pet. Let's be grateful the news isn’t any worse. Why don’t you go and lie down while I’m away and try to have some rest".

He hurried out of the room. Astrid could hear him talking to the guards standing outside. With a sigh, she lay down on the bed, exhausted but too worried about her future to sleep.

She must have dozed off for she woke up with a start with someone standing over her. She cowered down in the blankets, thinking it was one of the guards coming to take her back to Damien.

"And? How did it go? Why didn't you call out to me when he did it?" It was the boy sounding quite indignant. "I could’ve helped you. I am not frightened of him. Yaya would have helped me. What did the doctor say?"

Astrid sat up and held up her hands as if to ward off all these questions. "I said nothing about that. I don't want to ever talk about it again. That man Mallory was very nice. He’s gone to speak to Damien. He will tell him about my eye, and that will be bad enough".

"What do you mean about your eye?"

She told him what Mallory had told her and he sat down beside her on the bed shaking his head and putting his hands over his face.

"Oh shit! I’m so, so sorry. Does it still hurt? What will this mean for your ransom? I heard from the soldiers a messenger has gone to Luton Island. The monks will have to select a delegation. That will give us some time".

Ignoring yet another barrage of questions, she asked him one herself. "Some time for what?"

" You will have to leave before the monks arrive or we all are screwed! I haven’t been able to think of anything else after I heard what he did to you. I could kill him! Yaya didn’t do a thing! Do you know where they will put you?"

"Mallory told me I could stay here until they come. Those four men are still going to be in front of my door, though. Are you going to help me get out of here? Help me escape?"
Astrid looked at him with so much hope in her eyes. He would have fought Damien himself to save her.

"I will try! But it might be more dangerous than taking your chances with the monks. If Damien catches us trying to get away, he will have us both killed ransom or no ransom. He likes to set examples".

Astrid felt herself go hot and cold. "I don't care. If I stay, the monks will find out I’m not a virgin anymore and make me disappear. I’d rather kill myself and save them the trouble. If we can get away and I can get back home without getting them involved, I’m sure my family won’t ask questions. I don't mind if we’ll have to walk all the way. And you know how we can get there, don’t you?"

"To be honest, I've never been further than Amersham. We will find a way, don’t worry. First, we have to get out of the Fort".

He felt awful having to admit to his ignorance. She must think him such a silly boy with all his promises and no real plan how to escape.

"There must be maps in this place. Couldn't you at least try to get one? If you can’t, we’ll just go as long as we are away from this place. If I have to stay here, it will be the end of me".

The lad tried to look more sure of himself than he was. “I’ll try to find out. But we’ll need some help. You think this Mallory can be trusted?"

"He was very friendly to me. Maybe he can help us without getting into trouble himself. He should be back soon. I’ll ask him".

" And tell him too to let Damien know he needs to treat your face, so you’ll look at your best before the monks get here. That will make sure he can keep you here in sickbay. Much easier to get away”.

At that precise moment, the subject of their conversation opened the door and gave them both a big smile, seeing their guilty faces.

 " Don’t look so worried, children. Damien was livid when he heard you might have permanent damage. I managed to calm him down a bit by telling him it wouldn’t show. Tell Solo and your sister to stay well out of his sight. Tomorrow night there’ll be a big party and minstrels will be playing. I heard you met them on the road? That’ll usually put Damien in a better mood. He so likes to see his boys dance. Now, young man, it’s time for you to leave. And you, lassie, Damien wants me to take you to the women’s quarters in the basement".

“Can't I just stay here with you? I would feel a lot safer. Maybe you can say you want to see if there is something more you can do about my eye. Damien would want me to look as good as possible, don’t you think?"

Mallory rubbed his head again, frowning."I’ll send one of the guards to Damien to check if that’s okay with him. He’s in a foul mood, and I don't want to aggravate it by deciding something like that without his knowledge. Using your medical condition might do the trick. He’s still keen to persuade the monks to pay up the full ransom".

The doctor went outside to ask one of her guards to take a message to Damien to get his permission about the change in plans. They heard one of them leave. Mallory came back in looking as if he’d made a decision.

"Until we get word back, do stay here, but you, boy, will have to leave. I will let you know what Damien decides. Where will I find you?"

"I"ll go to the stables. It's the place where I"ll be least likely to run into Yaya or Solo. They went off together to be alone for a bit. I"ll be in the hayloft if you need me".

After waiting for an anxious half-hour, the message came back that it would be alright for her to stay in the Sickroom as long as the doctor understood she would be his full responsibility".

"I"ll not ask you what he really said, as I wouldn't like you to frighten the girl. I will take care of her for now. Did he say anything more than threatening me with all sorts of ways to die a miserable death?"

Having no problem frightening Astrid, the boy said: "He wants you to know that you'd better make her look pretty before the end of the day. There’s a big party planned tonight, and he wants to show her off to the other guys. He told me they might give him a better price than the monks. Two of us have to stay outside here just in case".

At these words, Astrid's blood ran cold her face blanching paler than a ghost. Her hope of escaping with the help of the monks seemed to become more and more unlikely. Mallory felt sorry for her. He took her ice-cold hands and warmed them between his.

"Even Damien wouldn’t dare to antagonise the Prior. Don't worry dear. He will wait for their offer".

With these words, he gave the messenger a light push towards the door, asking him to go and fetch Mattie shutting it firmly behind him. He got Astrid some chamomile tea to settle her nerves a bit. Her teeth were rattling on the cup.

"Don't look so worried, flower. It’s been a long time coming, and now I think the time has come for me to leave this shithole. I know how to get out of the castle unseen but still will have to get the help of two of my friends, you met them. I believe? Peter and Jo, the minstrels. Crossing Damien equals signing your death warrant, but I’m sure they’ll want to help. The last person who got in Damien’s bad book took five days to die. That man happened to have been a good friend of theirs. Outside I know others who might help us stay out of sight of his men for as long as it takes us to get you out of Midland".

Astrid’s shoulders slumped with relief. "Are you willing to do that for me? It will be very dangerous. You’ve just met me. I thought all Midlanders hated us?" She felt hopeful and frightened at the same time. Maybe it would be better to stay put and take her chances with the monks? It could just not be true they would leave her with these animals just because of some old church rules! Her father wouldn’t allow it! It wasn’t her fault she’d been abused by that monster. But then she hadn’t known about this ransom thing either.? The monks colluding with outsiders?

"I’ve been here far too long. I stayed because I'm old and needed a place to hide for a while. Things happened that made it necessary for me. I was born on the Mainland. When I was a boy my parents sent me to Luton, to the Academy there".

Astrid pulled back from him with a start. "No, that can’t be true. Continentals never mix with people from Albion. Our Father Sirio told us, you would get sick by just touching us. How can you live here without getting ill?"

Mallory closed his eyes and sighed. "That's a very long story, too long. When we have more time, if we get more time, I will one day tell you the truth about Albion and the Mainland".

Astrid was utterly confused and bewildered. Her mind was whirring with all this news. At the same time, she felt excited he was willing to help her escape. She couldn’t believe her luck.

Chapter Twenty-four - Meeting Mattie

A soft knock on the door interrupted their conversation.

"Come in", Mallory growled. "And where have you been all this time, my little pup? Wasting all my money again on those card games, I bet?"

"I didn’t waste it. I won!", the little girl, who had slipped in, piped up proudly. One could have easily mistaken her for a boy, dressed as she was in yellow trousers and a red shirt far too big for her, were it not for her delicate features and mop of long messy golden curls. The gold was a stunning contrast to her nutbrown face. Her dark, nearly black, eyes had such a sparkling, mischievous look they even made Astrid feel like smiling.

Mallory shook his head, trying not very successfully to keep a stern look on his face. “I’ll believe you this time. I could’ve done with your help with this young lady this afternoon. Astrid, meet Mattie, full name Mathilda, but don't call her that or she might put one of those wretched pins she carries about her in you, the little she-devil. Mattie, this is Astrid Harrington. She’s our guest for the moment. Now you’re here, I’d like you to get a boy, hiding in the stables up in the loft. Look out for a young man with light, curly hair and tattoos of the Pirate clan. You remember from your lessons what they look like?"

"A wave with a skull above it on his right arm", she said, beaming with pride to show off her knowledge to this beautiful lady. Astrid could not remember seeing any tattoos on the boy, but then she hadn’t particularly been looking for one.

The girl Mattie stared curiously at her, not ready to leave this wondrous new person yet. "How did you get that black eye? I hope you killed the person who did that to you? I would’ve done ".

"That's enough, Mathilda! What did I tell you about all this talk about killing people? Go and find the boy, as I told you. Bring him here through the bedroom passage. Tell him Mallory sends you. I don't want our friends outside to know he’s here".

With shiny eyes, already excited about sneaking around the guards, she shot away like an arrow, leaving Mallory to shake his head indulgently.

"Guess she still has a lot of learning to do. She was given to me by Damien after I managed to cure him of a horrible backache. They had found her a few days before wandering around somewhere after ransacking a farm far out on West side of the Towers. At a guess, she was about four when I saw her the first time. She doesn’t remember much from her previous life, which is a blessing. The lady knows what happened to her before they finally found her. But she could tell me her name, Mathilda. She’s a lively little thing with a good heart, but has learnt a few bad habits from the men around here who treat her like some mascot most of the time ".

"Wouldn’t you be putting her in danger as well, by helping me? She might be better off staying here, where she feels at home? Surely they would never blame her for your actions?"

Mallory shook his head."She’s twelve now and believe it or not under all that dirt hides a beautiful girl. I think I know where she comes from originally and would very much like to bring her home. If I leave her, she would never forgive me. She has become very attached to me, and I to her. The men treat her like one of their own now, but when she becomes a woman, it will be a whole other story. Don't worry too much about her safety. She can probably look after herself better than we can. She's had enough experience here in the fort. The kids here are sometimes worse than the grown-ups. It is the law of the jungle. Eat or be eaten. Most of them have learnt the hard way that they shouldn’t mess with Mattie. Damien doesn't care what those kids get up to, as long as they don't bother him. The boys can either join his entourage or become one of his servants, as for women… those are only good for having children and serving the men. For her sake, it will be better to leave with us ".

From behind them, Boy appeared into the room tugged along by Mattie, who looked as proud of herself as a dog bringing her master a bone. Mallory smiled at her and patted her head.

"Ah thank you, Mattie. Well done. Boy, I hope you could stay out of Solo and your sister’s way? Better if they don’t find out what we’re up to. Or do you think you can trust your sister to help us? I need to know before I involve other people and put them in danger for nothing".

"We can't tell either of them. Both have their own reasons to want that ransom badly. Yaya’s my sister, and I love her, but since she has been part of Solo's crew and became his lover, she has changed. Were you saying about involving other people? Are you sure they can be trusted? They don’t know Astrid and me. The fewer people know, the fewer can betray us. There’s a large sum of money and status involved".

"You know them as you all arrived together today and I would trust them with my life".

"Peter and Jo? They are minstrels, not fighters. What can they do to help us get away?"

"I’ve known both of them since they were small boys when they were studying the arts in the Monastery school in Luton".

"You were a monk?"

"Yes I was, but let's not go into that now, we have some more planning to do if we are to come out of this place with our lives”, the doctor turned to his protegee, “Mattie can you get us some bags and fill them with food. Try to get some water pouches as well. Don't forget to add a blanket each. Never though your thieving little ways would come in handy one day.” The girl grinned at him.

“Boy, why don't you go and find your sister and Solo and spend some time with them or else it might look suspicious. Join them at the Party tonight. It will be your naming they’ll celebrate amongst other things. It starts at sundown. I plan to get the minstrels to sing a long ballad at the end of the evening to distract everyone. Most of them will be either drunk or stoned out of their minds. The only ones who won't be drinking are Damien's wards, the Angels. With such a large gathering, they’ll be extra alert their master is safe. Hopefully, their attention will be more on people entering the room than leaving. I will be there at the start with Mattie. She will go and leave first. I’ve always insisted she does at other gatherings when they get too rowdy and the men might forget she’s only a child. I’ll follow her pretending I want to get Astrid to bring her to the party. I’m sure Damien will want to show her off. He’ll enjoy showing everyone how clever he was, stealing the daughter of the mightiest man of the Island. Boy, you will follow soon afterwards. Just tell your sister you need to take a leak or something."

The boy nodded his agreement but stuck up his hand as if to ask permission to say something. "I would like to be called Jonah from now on", the boy interrupted him looking a bit sheepish, “We might not make it to the naming, and this is what I would have chosen”.

" I think that's a splendid idea. Sorry, you won’t get the celebration you have been waiting for all that time. I know how important it is for your tribe. To continue, we will meet in the stables. I don't expect many people there during the festivities. Mattie will deal with them if necessary. But no killing, Mattie!! Add some pies to the provisions and bring them here. We will then join the party. After we’ve all gathered in the stables, we will leave through an old underground passage I found on an ancient map while searching for medical books in Damien’s library. Lucky for us he’s practically the only one who can read here and likely as not knows about this tunnel, but Peter and Jo’s performance will give us the time we need to be gone before he gets wind of it and sets his hounds after us".

Mallory looked around at three young people whose lives now depended on his plan. There was so much that could go wrong. He couldn’t see any other option. First, he would have to talk to Peter and Jo about helping them. Knowing his two friends, they wouldn’t hesitate. Besides, it would be hard to prove they had anything to do with it.

"And what do I do?", Astrid felt quite useless not having some sort of task that evening.

"The best thing you can do is rest as much as you can and eat so that you’ll be as fit as possible this evening. You’ve already had a difficult journey coming here. I don't want you to fall behind. We will have to go off the road as much as we can and won’t have much opportunity to rest until we get to the woods. I’m planning to get us as close we can go to the Badlands. It will make them less eager to follow us. They’re very superstitious about entering that area. But that’s for later. We will have to get out of here first without being caught “.

He looked at Jonah and Mattie, pointing to the back entrance. “Let's go, children. May the Lady watch over you!".

Chapter Twenty-five - Saving Astrid

The time had come to get into their canoes. They decided to take those instead of a rowing boat, so at least one of them would have a better chance of getting back if their plan failed. Besides, they would be harder to spot while they were making their way to the harbour.

Coastguards would be patrolling the White Fort shoreline. Damien always wanted to make sure no products went in or out his fiefdom without levying hefty taxes. To that effect, he had an agreement with the Railway Guild and spies in every large harbour community in Midland. Most products had to be sent up to the White Fort his agents taking their ten per cent. Smugglers would be put to death without any exception. The only reason people accepted his iron rule was that he did protect them and their families from most of the raids by outsiders.
There were still, some remote groups in Midland that had never bowed to his dictatorship. Every time he sent a band of his men to subdue them, they never were heard of again. Damien seemed to have decided to leave the situation as it was. It cost him too many men.

 Nicholas and William wrapped up warmly, were soon paddling away from the ship aiming to land at the southern side of White Fort Harbour.B y the time they reached the pebbly shore, the sun was low in the sky. They hid their canoes in some shrubs and unloaded their packs.

William helped Nicholas to transform himself into a warrior guard travelling with his master.

Nicholas winced when he pulled the dry, soft woollen tunic over his recently tattooed arm. After an excruciating session with the captain, the latter had slathered it with a quick healing salve, but it still looked inflamed and hurt like a bitch. By the time they would arrive in the fort, it would be dark. No one would notice it.

He put the finishing touch to his outfit by attaching a genuine Warrior long sword to his back

A sigh of real awe had gone up that morning when the captain had unwrapped a parcel and presented Nicholas with one of the most beautiful swords they had ever seen.

"Take it. It will make your story more credible. An old codger like me has no use for it anymore".

Nicholas had drawn the sword out of its scabbard admiring the feel and balance of the unique weapon.

"I swear I will bring it back to you sir..it’s beautiful", he stammered releasing an appreciative sigh.

He knew there had been only a handful these made from a metal that never rusted. His hand gripped a handle engraved in pewter and gold with birds and symbols from the days before the Exodus. It was double-edged. The guard had a sharp point on each side handy to rip open your opponent's skin.

"I hope it will save your life as many times as it has done mine for more years than I can count. Now put it away, before I change my mind". With these words, the captain abruptly turned around and went down below.

Now this magnificent sword was resting on his back and made him feel a bit more relaxed about impersonating a Warrior monk.

William was wearing his usual outfit but had exchanged his white novice habit for a black one as was the right apparel for a certified monk.

They had found a small brook near to their landing spot. They took the opportunity to rinse the salt and sweat from their journey off and fill their bottles for their trek to White Fort harbour town.

William laid out their plan again. "We shouldn’t take more than an hour to get to the white Fort town. The commander has drawn me a map. Once there, I will see if I can find if our message has reached the Prior in time to send a delegation. Monks arriving always is news in a small town like that. When nobody has heard anything, it will be time for our performance. Let’s hope they will believe us". Despite their nerves, the boys grinned at each other.

"Maybe we can say we came from one of the trading ships and are on our way home to Luton?"

"We might. The main thing is that our disguise will work. Let's get underway. We’ve already lost a whole day getting here. This Damien will not wait forever for an answer to his ransom demand. Hopefully, we can delay things until the Luton party lands and takes over".

It took a while before they were out of the smelly swamp. It was a relief to start climbing the steep clifftop path above the harbour getting them away from the hungry mosquitoes and the foul-smelling water. The wind was tugging at their clothes and smelt of salt, smoke and fish. The ships down below looked like toys. There were quite a lot of them, the docks teeming with activity. Mingling with the crowds of people from all over Midland would make them less conspicuous.

Walking down again along the path to the harbour, they were greeted by the impressive sight of a Midland steam train just arriving at the station. It looked like a steel dragon breathing fire. Notwithstanding the uncertainty of their situation, they were both very excited to finally see this contraption for themselves. Father Sirio had shown them pictures during geography. Witnessing this wonder with their own eyes, they momentarily forgot their predicament and were only young delighted people seeing one of the miracles of their world for the first time. They whooped and clapped each other on the back, running down the path as fast as their legs could carry to see this monster from up close. The railroad ended right there at the docks, and they could see all the clouds of steam still enveloping the carriages.

"Wow! I always wanted to see that! I never thought it would be this huge!" William seemed to have forgotten why they were there and practically dragged his friend over to the platform. Luckily it wasn’t hectic, so not many people saw him completely ignoring his role as a seasoned monk travelling with his bodyguard.

Nicholas was just as impressed, but the worry about Astrid kept him a bit more focused on what they were supposed to be doing there. "William! For goodness sake, pull yourself together. I bet real monks don't behave like country bumpkins who’ve never seen a train before! Let's go to that Inn over there. We might learn some more about what's happening in the Fort. We might even find out about monks arriving or not".

William, looking like a child whose favourite toy had been snatched out of his hands, duly let Nicholas led him to a large dark wooden building with a thatched roof. It was three stories high and had a large veranda bustling with people. Though the front had been blackened by smoke, you could still make out the words: The Waggon Inn.

When they entered the taproom, they could barely see where they were going the contrast between the sunny wharf and the gloomy interior blinding them for a moment. Once their sight adjusted itself, the boys could see the place was full of merchants, sailors, farmers and a lot of unsavoury looking types.

"Be careful. Those men in the corner must be Damien's. Try to stay as far away from them as you can. Order something to eat and drink, while I find a table on the other side. Come and join me as fast as you can. We have to try and blend in".

Seeing his friend disappearing into the gloom, Nicholas straightened his back and tried to look as fierce as he possibly could. He leaned one arm as casually as possible on the sticky surface of the bar. The Innkeeper was barking orders at his barmaids and had his back to him. "Exc....Hm Some beer and food for my patron and me!", Nicholas tried to sound as churlish as he could.

The man looking like a survivor of many barroom brawls by the scars all over his face turned around and looked at him as if he would sooner kill him than serve him. "We've got ale, whiskey and pasties. I might have some soup and bread. What will it be?"

Nicholas swallowed. "Two jugs of ale and two pasties. We are in that corner", pointing to William who had managed to confiscate a small table tucked behind a large pillar.

The innkeeper, a believer in curiosity killed the cat, hardly glanced at him and shouted to the girl standing nearest: "Angie, get your lazy ass over here. These gentlemen need serving".

He gave Nicholas a calculating look. "She’ll bring it round to your table”. He held up a large hairy hand. “That’ll be 5 Oro's upfront". It was an extortionate sum for just a bit of food and drink, but Nicholas decided it was not worth it to haggle. It would only arouse unwanted attention. He quickly joined William at the corner table he had found. His friend had just stopped talking to some men at the table behind him and motioned him to take a seat.

"I've just heard from these sailors there’ll be a big party in the fort tonight. According to local rumour, Damien is celebrating something. We might be able to join the crowds and get in that way".

They were interrupted by the serving girl bringing their order and went quiet for a bit enjoying the fresh drink and finally something hot to eat. The pasties were unexpectedly tasty and the ale better than they ever tasted on the Island.

Swallowing his last bite, Nicholas looked around again. He saw two of the rough-looking types, whom they guessed Damien’s men, walk out the back of the Inn. He assumed they were heading for the outhouse.

He got up, shoving his seat backwards. "Let me go and see if I can hear if they’re saying anything about tonight."

William shifted in his chair, looking a bit doubtful.
"Are you sure? They could take offence or start asking you questions".

" There is more chance of getting in the fort if we know as much as we can before we try". Nicholas was already on his way and pretending he was a bit unsteady, followed the other two out of the back door. It was very dark and the courtyard only lit by one oil lamp swinging in the wind creating eerie shadows on the walls.

Nicholas was a bit shocked to find the latrines were just a long wooden board with holes every half a meter or so.
It smelled like a pigsty though that was probably an insult to pigs. He had to stop himself gagging going in.

The men were quarrelling, standing side by side over the board, splashing their pee all over the place. They were quite drunk and talking very loud.

"Hey, man. We'd better stop drinking now. Booze will be free tonight at Damien's. The guy is weird, but he does know how to give a good party."

"Don't you worry, my friend. It’s still a few hours until it starts. If we stop now, we’ll be practically sober by then. Can’t have that, do we? Did you hear about Solo delivering this fancy package? He’s such a lucky guy! And one of his crew will be named tonight. Fuck, the party will never end!"

Nicholas settling for a spot out of the splashing zone pretended he had trouble undoing his trousers.

One of the men gave the other one a push and pointed at Nicholas with his chin. He pretended to whisper: "Hey Ricko, look who've we got here.”

A lot louder looking at Nicholas: “Are you allowed out by yourself, mate? Thought you always had to stick to your patrons like flies to a turd".He cackled with laughter at his joke.

His mate gave him a shove seeming a bit worried. He appeared less drunk than his companion. He looked apologetically at Nicholas. "Sorry sir, he’s not from near here. Come on, Jazz. We're done here".

The first man was not planning to make it easy. "Shit, Arno, I always heard you North Midlanders were a bit soft. Are you scared of that little twit? Look at him. He’s just started to shave. That’s a mighty big sword you got there, boy, I think a bit too good for such a brat. It will be far more useful to an experienced fighter like me". He tried to reach for the sword on Nicholas back, but his mate kicked him in the backside and told him to shut up.

"Don’t be such an idiot, shit for brains. This guy is a warrior monk. They learn to kill from the moment they can walk. Damien doesn’t want any shit tonight with any monks. He’s expecting a whole delegation from Luton. When he hears you’ve been bothering one of their people, you’ll spend tonight in his dungeons but not before having your back whipped to shreds. So come on. Let’s go back to the others".

Nicholas was happy he didn’t have to put his fighting skills to the test. He could probably have gotten the better of the drunken hooligan. It might have put their chances of getting into the Fort at risk. He waited a bit to make sure the men had gone and then sneaked back into the inn to tell William he thought Astrid, for she must be that fancy package, was probably still in the fort.

Chapter Twenty-six - Airships

William and Nicholas decided to return to the harbour and have a look at all the ships. They now knew the monks from Luton were coming soon and going to do the negotiations, and they hoped they could just join them. They both felt lighter.

One thing though, was bothering Nicholas."Do you know how they will get here so fast? The Commander’s messenger can’t have arrived in Luton yet. Even if Damien can contact them by bird, it would still take a while for the delegation of monks to reach the Fort by boat".

William sighed. He’d hoped his friend would not have figured this out." They can get here in half an hour because they will come by air".

"By air!! What magic is that?" Nicholas’s eyes were gleaming.

"I’m telling you this in the greatest confidence. The monks have found a way to use old tech devices, called zeplins, which can rise in the air and fly to any destination they want. Until now they’ve only used it here in North Midland. For some reason, they don't want the Gen people to know about this. Maybe it comes too close to blasphemy. It’s not exactly elektrik, but it is old Tech. I’ve heard they still use it a lot on the Continent".

Nicholas was bewildered, and a bit cross too that his friend had never trusted them enough to share this fantastic information. The younger generation had always been chafing under the multiple rules concerning Tech though followed the creed because they believed it must be the right thing to do to keep their health and keep the country safe. He felt a bit betrayed.

"So you’ve known that people can fly all the time?"

"Well, not exactly fly everywhere. It’s not possible to go very far with the zeplins. The monks are using them to keep the Midlanders under control. We’re lucky Damien knows that the monks can help him with his dealings with the outside world. They can just as well remove him from his throne. They have tremendous powers and won’t hesitate to use them".

©"I never thought the monks did more than pray and teach and keep themselves to themselves. Now you are telling me they have all this power? "
" I only know because I’ve become one of them the moment I signed on. It’s one of the things they teach you before you even take your vows. It’s their way to warn you that you can never leave the Brotherhood if you change your mind about your calling".

William shivered thinking back at the dire warnings father Sirio had given him when he asked about leaving the academy. His father had managed to withstand the pressure of the Monastery to send one of his sons to the order four times. It should have been his second son as the scripture said, but he always managed to be on a campaign when his wife had to give birth. Even though his father wasn’t very religious and would have been just as happy to have produced another fighter, he needed to keep on the right side of the monks just like everybody else. Too much depended on it. His mother had made his father promise to send at least one of his sons.

William decided to take his friend's mind off any other awkward questions about his calling.

"We can make our way to the landing strip on the north side of the Lake. There’s a tower there next to an inn reserved for visiting monks. We can rest there and watch them arrive from the top of the building. You’ll love it. I'm sure they’ll allow us in ".

On their way to the outcrop of rocky land surrounding the large White Lake, they had to watch their step as the path was unlit and it was a new moon. Once out of the little town, William led them eastwards. They tried to stay away from the ever-larger groups of men making their way to the fort no doubt for the party. Some of them were a bit worse for wear from their time in the pub. The boys didn’t want to have to answer any questions.

The ground was sandy and dry. The bushes of gorse and broom on the side of the road made it a bit difficult to stay off the path that ran to the north side of the lake. They reached a large cobbled square with on one side a tall tower that at its feet housed a small building. The hostel that William had mentioned.

They had come precisely at the right time. Judging by the activity around the mast, something was about to happen soon. Lights were blazing from the tower and beacons set all around the square pulsed a strange green light. It lit the night up like a spray of falling stars.

Willam pulled Nicholas by his jacket. "Let's stay on the outside edge of the square where it’s dark. I don’t want to have to explain why we’re here to the keepers of the mooring mast. By the time we’ve explained ourselves, we might miss the landing. We just have to see it. According to the journals, I read, it will blow your mind to see one of those things arrive for the first time".

"So what’s the tower for then? How do they stay in the air? When did they start using these zep-thingies?"

"They’re called Zeplins. It is tech from way before the Exodus. I shouldn’t tell anyone about it, but there’s no one we know out here, so no one to find out”.

Deep down, William wasn’t quite as sure about this, but he was keen to show his friend who’d always been better than him in everything, this wonder. In a few minutes, he was going to see it anyway.

"The top bit, which we call the balloon, is made from very light wood like a big open cage. Inside there are bags with some sort of special air in them which keeps the whole thing afloat. The carriage dangling below is the cabin for the crew".

He didn’t want to admit he didn’t know all the fine details himself. One of the few things he had looked forward to of being sent to Luton, was to learn even more about the wonders the monks had free access to.

“That cabin must be as light as a feather to be able to hang there without falling". Nicholas was getting more and more excited and curious. "How do they steer that thing?"

"I think it’s a bit like a sailing boat, with a rudder and vanes to catch the wind".

To William’s relief, a loud siren sounded. The boys looking up, saw, just like William explained, a large object with a smaller receptacle attached beneath it, its tiny windows lit up, slowly drifting downwards to the mast. For such a big airship, there was practically no sound. It hummed like a thousand bees. Before they had a chance to recover from their awe, the ship had already anchored to the mast.

During all the activity around the landing, they managed to approach the tower unnoticed by the keepers who were too busy bringing the passengers safely to ground level by way of a pulley platform. The captain and his crew stepped onto the courtyard first. A party of five monks followed them all looking quite ancient and forbidding. They all made their way inside.

"Astrid must be very important to them to send a full Quintet", William was whispering.

"What do you mean?" Nicholas was speaking softly as well. His friend's deferential attitude was catching.

"The prior works with a council of twenty-five monks. Most of them have a lot of experience and knowledge of the five Arts. The twenty-five makes up five Quintets. Each Quintet comprises of one representative from the five Arts of Knowledge. A full Quintet has the power to make decisions without even deferring to the Prior himself. When a new prior is selected or for other big decisions, they do not only need the majority of the single votes of all twenty-five, but you also need a majority of three or more Quintets to win ".

Nicholas mind had gone numb. "When do you think we should go and introduce ourselves?"

"I think we should go now. I don't know if this group already knows what happened on the Island or in Midland. If they’ve come here on Damien’s request all they know is that Astrid is in his hands, and he wants to give her back for a ransom. We might have to give them some more information, so they know what they’re dealing with”.

The guards at the door first didn’t want to let them in. Only when William showed them the Commander's letter, which he had written for Damien, one of them went inside with it and soon came back with one of the younger monks of the Quintet. He must have done very well with his studies to be a part of a Quintet. He greeted them and told them his name was Jeb.

"Our servant here, tells me you’ve more information about the situation here? All we know from Damien is that the eldest daughter of Gregory Harrington is up for ransom. We’ve tried to learn a bit more about how she came to be in their possession but didn’t get very far. It all looked a bit dodgy to us. We decided to act with haste without a lot of information to go on."

He ushered them inside and sat them down at a large circular table in the middle of the room only lit by a large fire.

"Now introduce yourselves to my brothers. Their names are Lars, Pieter, Abraham and Jacob. As I already told you, my name is Jeb. I deal with communications".

The boys told them who they were. Nicholas let William tell them about the attack, the aftermath, the razing of the village and their plan to rescue Astrid. The monks looked quite disturbed by their story but not surprised. Having Damien as their neighbour, nothing surprised them anymore.

The oldest monk, Abraham, a very ascetic looking man, spoke first. "We must at least try to prevent Damien from finding out about Gregory's death and if possible, about the sacking or his price will go up. The girl will be an heiress and worth more".

Nicholas was a bit disturbed to hear them talking about bartering his best friend in such a cold and calculating way and was about to interrupt them. William, who understood his indignation, shot him a warning glance shaking his head slowly. He started asking a question to prevent his friend from making the mistake of questioning the decisions of a member of a Quintet.

"How will you stop Damien knowing about that? New people are coming in by boat and train every day, bringing news from everywhere?"

Abraham shook his head. "The train has stopped for the night and the same counts for new ships being allowed to more before morning, so if we go now, we might close the deal before he hears of these events".

"Sir, we heard in town there’s a big party tonight at the fort. Some sort of Naming feast? There’ll be a lot of people there. Won’t that be more dangerous?"

"No, even better. Knowing Damien, it will put him in a good mood. The man’s no better than a big child. He doesn't drink so ready to talk with us and discuss the ransom with a clear head. We’ll insist on seeing the girl first to find out if she is Astrid and not some random girl they took from the Island. We need to confirm too if she hasn’t been hurt or violated in any way. That would have farfetched repercussions for our negotiations".

"Will they just hand her over like that?",Nicholas sounded a bit unsure about this whole plan. He thought they’d be better off with a contingent of Warrior monks standing by to get Astrid back when all these talks came to nothing. How could these five learned men have any power to bring to bear on that horrible man?

"The Prior has given us a letter with the price he’s willing to pay. Damien knows if she’s untouched, he won’t get a better price. Nobody outbids the Prior anyway. That wouldn't be very good for their health".The monks nodded at each other, smiling a bit.

More and more, Nicholas and William came to understand the absolute power of the Prior. Not only at home, but everywhere in the Archipelago.

The monk named Lars, a short, rotund man without any of the jollity one usually associates with plump people clapped his hands together and exclaimed they should at least have a bite to eat before they set out. They solemnly invited the boys to eat with them—an invitation they gratefully accepted.

Chapter Twenty-seven - The Escape Plan

After everyone disappeared to prepare for their flight that evening, Astrid tried to have her prescribed rest. Tossing and turning, she sat up again as she just couldn’t settle down with all these troubling thoughts going through her head.

Had it only been two days since she woke up that dreadful night only to be hauled out of her room? And barely one day she’d been…? She didn’t want to finish that thought. She’d always dreamed her first time to be with her best friend and love of her life, Nicholas, looking forward to the time they were old enough to marry.

The realisation a few months ago it was not going to be him, but Henry had devastated her at the time. After the first panicky plans to run away, she’d realised how impossible that would be. Especially when Nicholas had told her he was not going to have any part of it. She still felt the pain of that moment. She had to admit that getting to know Henry a bit on their trip to London had gone a little way already making her accept the decision of her parents.

Thinking about what that horrible man did to her, the bruises, the pain next morning not only her head but down there, her despair grew. Who’d want her now? Even if she told nobody at home about Solo's attack, her eye must look awful, even with the swelling gone down considerably. It was possible to open it now though all she saw was a large black spot mostly obscuring her sight. She’d seen the looks on people ‘s faces when they saw her.

She got up off the couch and went to see if she could find a mirror. The room was filled with bookcases and had a large table in the middle with all sorts of strange contraptions standing around it, the purpose of which she couldn’t even start to guess. She had heard that the Midlanders didn’t heed the rules about using old tech even though everyone knew it could make you ill if you got too close to it. Father Sirio had warned them enough times about the effect Elektrik would have on their health. Your immunity to the Sickness would disappear. The sickness that made your muscles petrify one by one with you ending up a prisoner in your own body until your heart gave up. There was no known cure for it except to abide by the Gen rules and keep away from tech, especially Elektrik.

"Ah, you are up already. Would you like something to eat?" Mallory came into the room carrying a bottle of wine and a tray of pies. "You can have one of these. The cook was very generous when I told her I was hungry".

Astrid first thought she would be too nervous to eat, but the delicious smell of the pies made her mouth water and persuaded her to try one. They were so good. She surprised herself by having a second one. During the whole journey, she’d only been thrown some leftovers by the others. The boy had tried to share some of his own.

Mallory nodded approvingly, happy to see his patient eat. She would need all her strength tonight.

"Good girl. Make sure you drink some of that apple juice I left for you. I have to prepare these for the stable guards".

Seeing her look of surprise at his generosity, he told her he was going to put a strong sleeping draft in the food and the wine. Mattie, who was friends with most of the guards, would bring the refreshments to them under the pretence she wanted them to have some fun as well excluded from the festivities as they were.

"Knowing them, they‘ll have no problem scoffing all the pies. As for the wine, that will be drunk by all of them. I added it in case some of them wouldn’t like pies".

It started to dawn on Astrid, he must have been planning this for a long time and hadn’t come up with this plan just for Jonah and her. Her face lit up. She looked up at Mallory, her eyes looking at him questioningly.

“How did your talk with those minstrels go?"

"They were happy to help. Jo has taken quite a shine to you. He’s the most sensitive of the two, and Peter will do anything for him. They‘ll wait for me to leave the party and then start to perform the ballad of the Apocalypse, a Midlander favourite. Have you heard it sung before?"

Astrid nodded enthusiastically. It was a favourite of hers as well. "Yes, we had to learn the lyrics in school. The monks and nuns thought it would serve as a warning for us to stick to their rules about Technik, following the Gen guideline as dictated in the Book of Generations. They never would’ve allowed being put to music. That would be a mockery of the seriousness of the subject".

" That’s a shame. It is a wonderful song, especially sung by those two. Alas, you won’t hear it tonight either as we’ll use the distraction of their performance to slip away. The song takes at least half an hour. Maybe more with all the encores they usually demand, when drunk enough. Even Damien won’t want to interrupt their concert. He’s let me know that near the end of the evening he’ll want me to bring you in to pick the lottery ticket with you as the prize. The bastard will find it very entertaining to see his men spending money to buy the tickets to win such a trophy. He’s a sadistic son of a bitch and a greedy one. On top of probably making more on the tickets than he would be allowed to ask for your ransom, he’ll get to enjoy seeing your fear at the possibility of being handed over to the winner. He’s planning to let the monks do their ransom negotiations with the new owner instead him, pretending it’s all out of his hands. He might be meaner than the devil himself, but he is a clever one!"

Seeing the horror in her eyes, he realised how insensitive it all sounded to her.

"Don't worry, dear. It will never come to that. We’ll be long gone before the lottery even starts. A little bird told me the monks have arrived at the air station and are planning to come to the fort this evening to rescue you. If we’ve disappeared by the time they arrive, Damien will be too busy explaining your absence to make a decent plan for going after us. Are you sure you don't want to wait for the monks? They’re very influential and will most certainly pay your ransom to whoever is asking for it. The prior won’t take no for an answer. It might be your safest ticket out of here and back to your family".

Astrid thought about what Solo had told her about being damaged goods and the possibility of the monks not even wanting to waste any money on her after they found out about it and shook her head frantically.

"No, please. I will go with you. It will be possible for us to travel south and get me back to the island that way, won't it?"

"As much as I’d like to, I can't give you any guarantees. I’ll do my best. There’s one thing I’d like to ask you in the off chance anything ever happens to me as I’m an old man. Please look after Mattie for me. Take her to the mountain tribes in the Towers. Damien’s men found her in the forests not very far from there. She has the same colouring as the people living there. Someone might know who her family was. She’s a handful, but I’ve grown very fond of her over the years and pride myself she has the same feelings for me.
Once you’ve managed to get to the north of the Towers in the Badlands and crossed the Ravines, you’ll be more or less out of reach of Damien. Don’t go near any of the towns and stay away from the railway, and you’ll have an excellent chance to reach the southern coast to find passage home. Here, I’ll get you a map of Midland which shows the main landmarks of Midland. It’s an old one. Jonah, being a seaman, should have enough knowledge of navigation to keep you going in the right direction".

Shuffling through the piles of papers lying on his desk, he pulled a leather tube from under the mess. He shook a scroll out of the container and rolled out the most beautiful map Astrida had ever seen onto the desk securing the corners with some earthenware cups.

She had never seen such a detailed map of the Midlands. It might be old, but the colours were still as vibrant as if it had been drawn yesterday. The monks probably had cards like this as well. Travelling outside Gen countries was not encouraged, and information like this was not made available to the public. It must have been stolen from one of the monasteries.

Mallory was pointing out the places he mentioned."See this small fishing and mining town in the south? That’s Upavon. My sister Plaxedes lives there. She was married to a miner who had the misfortune to die in a mine collapse. Even though it’s only eighty miles from here as the crow flies, it will take at least a month to travel there with nothing coming in our way to hold us up which would be a small miracle".

"Us? You will go with us?"

"I definitely will, but fleeing born hunters like Damien’s men will take a lot of endurance, something which an old man like me might not be able to produce. The last thing I want to happen is to hold you young ones back. If it comes to a choice between me keeping up or you three making it out of here, I want you to promise to do the sensible thing. I’ve had a long and full life while you three are just starting yours".
He looked at her with a very austere look in his eyes, holding out his hand to confirm her promise with a shake. Deciding not to contradict him but vowing she would never let it come to that, she gripped his hand firmly and solemnly shook it. She was sure the boy and Mattie would feel the same. They too would do everything not to leave this kind and generous man behind.

"Right", Mattie will have packed food for us. I think you need some warmer clothes for the trip. Let's find you some".

Looking much relieved at extracting this promise, Mallory started to busy himself with the preparations leaving Astrid to mull over all that had been said.

Chapter Twenty-eight - The Party

Jonah, as he now thought of himself, it would be his name in a few hours, had been wandering around the fort. He didn’t want to go back to the stables. He didn’t want anyone to remember him being anywhere near it. After a while, he went back inside the barracks to find his sister and Solo playing cards with some members of Damien's permanent troops. He left them to it, glad they didn’t even notice him.

The place was heaving. Word had spread about the big party. A lot of men and women had come up from the town already. They wanted to take this opportunity to meet up with old friends and be first at the festivities. There were quite a few sailors from the ships anchored in the harbour and shopkeepers, hoping to sell their wares during the party.

Outside, servants were running around, attaching torches to the walls and putting oil lamps on any surface that would hold them. Barrels of beer were being rolled to the main hall and set up inside on trestle tables. Trays of food were making their way from the kitchen quarter and put on the long tables set out in front of the low dais, where Damien and his Angels were going to sit. Above it was a balcony that spanned the width of the hall. Later singers and musicians would be sitting up there to perform for the crowd. Some of them were already strumming their instruments.

It would have given a very festive feel to the place was it not that he knew what was in store for them if they could not manage to escape this fortress.

After touring the extensive gardens for a while longer, Jonah went back to the hall and peeked in to check if Solo had already staked out a place for himself and Yaya. The room was still empty of party guests. He decided to see if his sister and Solo were ready to join him.

Solo seemed to be in a much better mood than when he left him a few hours ago."Hey, little brother come and join us. Where have you been all the time?"

Good sleep as well as some food and by the looks of it a lot of beer had made him nearly affectionate. Yaya just looked up from her cards and said nothing. She was always a bit grumpy after having to spend too much time with Solo. After her huge rows with Solo, she had come home and confided in him why she felt so conflicted when it came to Solo. The great sex often didn’t make up for the total lack of respect he had for her. She could not understand this combination of tenderness for his little brother, Erik, and his brutality towards anyone who would stand in his way. She told Jonah, she still wasn’t sure what would happen if she ever went entirely against his wishes. Solo had told her, he loved her, but she didn’t believe he would ever treat her as an equal. And that’s what she wanted. Afterwards, she never had wanted to mention their conversation again.

Jonah saw she was drinking wine and still looked tired.
He worried about her and wished she would take up with some decent guy instead of Solo. He decided to join the game. To his surprise, Solo gave him some coins to put on his cards.
After a while, he was actually enjoying himself as he had an excellent memory and had no trouble remembering which cards everybody had drawn. He decided to make sure to lose now and then in order not to get into trouble and attract attention. Some of these men were very sore losers.

When darkness started to draw in the mess hall began to empty. People were making their way to the main building in small groups laughing and talking, looking forward to the upcoming bash.

Outside everything looked quite magical in the soft, yellow light of the oil lamps. The torches made the shadows jump about as if they were already dancing to a merry tune.
Solo happy having won more than he lost, pushed himself up from the table. He seemed to be a bit unsteady on his feet. Yaya got up just in time to stop him colliding with some rough-looking types. She appeared determined this night was not going to end in yet another fight. Solo could be violent when drunk. She no doubt hoped he would drink himself into oblivion at the party and stay out of trouble.

Jonah followed them staying close doing his best to shepherd them to a table as near as possible to a side door Mallory had pointed out to him. Sitting there, instead of in the middle of the hall would make it easier for him to leave after he saw Mallory departing the room to set their plan in motion.

From the balcony sound of various drums and flutes was whipping up the crowd. The music was deafening but still not enough to drown out the cacophony of about sixty men and women having loud conversations and arguments interspersed with laughs and screams.

It was complete bedlam making Jonah happy they were sitting on the edge of the crowd. Solo and his sister had fallen silent and seemed to be satisfied just continuing their drinking, eating copious amounts of food while watching the others having fun. Groups of them were dancing whirling around going crazy with the rhythm of the drums. Suddenly they fell silent. Glancing around for a place, one after the other of the revellers sat down at the sound of an enormous gong set up behind the dais. It sounded like a messenger of doom. Slowly everyone else stopped whatever they were doing too. Within a few minutes, you could hear a pin drop.

A door at the back of the hall opened and out came Damien with his twelve so-called Angels, their faces painted to represent various insects or reptiles in sharp. The colours in sharp contrast to their pitch-black clothes: skintight trousers and shirts made of a shimmering material. Silver chains adorning every part of their bodies. No one dared to laugh or make a comment. They looked too creepy and unnerving, their faces like masks with only their eyes seeming alive and moving. They took place behind the chairs to the left and the right of the enormous, winged one covered in gold cloth. Another sonorous sound resonated from the huge gong.

Damien ascended the dais. In honour of the party, he had exchanged his usual silver-grey robes for a garish white suit covered in coloured stones. It nearly made your eyes hurt to look at him. On his head, he was wearing a strange peaked cap with symbols. Jonah had never learnt to read so he could not make out what they said.

Damien’s eyes were sweeping over his guests as if to check all was to his liking. With a big grunt, he sat down in his chair.

In the continuing silence, he didn’t even have to raise his piping voice to be heard.

"My dear, dear fellows. Nice to see you all enjoying yourselves tonight. The past three months, everyone has worked hard for our community. To honour that I decided to throw you a big party. Cheers".

He raised his glass and saluted the crowd, which resulted in a roar of approval. People were shouting, clapping and stamping their feet until Damien clapped his hands together. The noise stopped immediately.

"We have more treats for you in-store tonight my friends. Our beloved minstrels, Jo and Peter, will perform one of their gigs later tonight. But before that, we will be naming a fine young fellow, stand up boy, give him all a great applause".

Jonah, his face going red and white, after a push from Solo, had no choice but to stand up. He felt like disappearing into the ground. Everyone was looking at him and shouting lewd suggestions for names he might choose. He gave a small bow to Damien and sat down again as soon as he could.

Damien enjoying being the centre of adoration, continued: "But first let's eat and drink some more. On top of these treats, I have another huge surprise for you this evening. Our man Solo there has managed to capture us one of them Islander girls. And not just any girl but the daughter of that pain in the arse director of the Harrington Corporation! Instead of keeping this prize all to myself as a lot of other bosses would have done, I have decided to allow at least one of you to win a lottery with her ransom as the main prize! My boys here will go round to sell tickets. One Oro a piece!"

The noise level after his announcement immediately went through the roof with everybody clapping and shouting. Damien nodded at his boys. They rose as one to go round the room, selling tickets to all who wanted some.

Jonah saw that even Solo bought a handful though it must be very sour for him to see his hard-won prize being raffled to all and sundry whose only contribution had been purchasing some pieces of paper with a number on it. Damien must have rewarded him handsomely for the rest of the spoils of their attack with maybe a bonus for Astrid’s capture. He was probably planning to keep most of it for himself. Solo had never been good at sharing, but Yaya might know. It was all moot now anyway. Jonah was under no illusion he would have seen a penny of that money even if he had stayed.

He hoped his naming would be soon, so he could make his exit before Damien sent Mallory to fetch Astrid. He didn’t have to wait for long. When all the Angels had sat down again, having sold each and every ticket, Damien rose again. The excited chattering faded away.

"Just to leave you in suspense a bit longer, we will first get to the business of naming our brave young man. Come forward, boy!"

This time Jonah couldn’t get to the front of the room soon enough eager to have this in the past so coveted event behind him.

Get right up here, boy. So we can all see you".

Jonah was lifted onto the dais by some helpful men and tried not to stare at Damien like a frightened rabbit caught in the light. Up close, the man was even more repulsive.

"Come to me so that you can whisper your choice in my ear. I won’t bite".

Damien leaned forward over the table and Jonah had no choice but to put his face next to Damien's and say:" I would like the name Jonah, sir". With a triumphant grin, Damien heaved himself out of his chair and came round the table. He grabbed Jonah’s arm and stuck it into the air. "His name is Jonah from West Drayton. Happy naming day, Jonah!" At which point he planted a kiss on both of the boy’s cheeks, looking him in the face and saying teasingly: "Are you sure you wouldn't like to join my Angels? There’s always room for another beauty like you”.

Trying not to show his abhorrence at the question, Jonah had his answer ready: "I’m very honoured, sir, but I’m already betrothed to a girl at home". Jonah had been told by Mallory what to say in the event of a proposal like this. It seemed to be enough. The big man threw his hands up in the air. "What a waste! I guess we need to create new boys and girls too. Tell her from me she is one lucky woman, and if you get fed up with her, there’ll always be a place at my side. Now go and enjoy the rest of the evening". With a playful slap on his bottom which nearly made him fall off the dais, Damien sent him back into the crowds.

On his way back, people were slapping him on his back and offered to join them at their table. They were probably remembering their own naming day and feeling sentimental.

He sat down at his table and Yaya hugged her brother.
"Happy Naming, Jonah. Mum will be so happy when she hears you finally got your name. And especially this particular name. I love you, little brother”.

He hugged her back and felt touched by her happiness for him. It made him feel even worse about what he was going to do. It felt like such a betrayal to her and all the other people who loved him. Would he ever see his mother or Wulf again? He swallowed and tried to give a good impression of having no care in the world. Until looking up, he saw that Mallory had been called to the dais by one of the Angels.

Chapter Twenty-nine - The Escape

Mallory had expected this moment all afternoon but still felt uncomfortable following the young man to the main table.
Once he reached it, Damien beckoned him to come round so he could talk to him without the others hearing them.

"The time has come to show these guys what they have bought the tickets for. I want you to go and get that girl. Make sure she looks as nice as possible. We don't want to disappoint this crowd."

Mallory feeling it would look more genuine to offer a bit of resistance, asked: "Were we not going to wait until the monks get here?"

"No, I’ve decided it will be more fun to see them trying to haggle with one of those brutes. Plus I can stay out of the whole business and safe from the wrath of the Prior. The monks won’t arrive until later this evening. I want to have this over and done with before they come".

"I hope you know what you're doing, Damien". Mallory knew Damien had a secret pact with the Prior whereby each of them made sure the other stayed in power. This reason for the lottery was a load of crock, but he had to pretend to believe it. It fitted nicely into his plan.

"Alright. I’ll go and bring the girl down. Are you sure you can keep those yokels off her? You wouldn't want her to get even more damaged at the last minute, would you?"

"Are you suggesting I can't keep these bumpkins under control?" Damien's eyes turned into slivers of ice. He seemed ready to burst into one of his famous rages.

Mallory hastened to suss him."I beg your pardon. I was only thinking about your interest. I’ll go and get her right now". Trying to look repentant, he scrambled off the dais hurrying to leave the hall. He made sure it was by a door as close to Jonah as possible. Their eyes met for a moment. Mallory gave Jonah an almost imperceptible nod. Jonah hid his relief by taking another swig from the beer he had been nursing all evening.

Solo and Yaya, fortunately, had left the table to join the other dancers in the middle of the room. The music had swept to an even more frantic beat. Alcohol and drugs made sure that most of the onlookers were too incapacitated to remember seeing him leave.

On his way out, he bumped into a few of the cardplayers he had met previously, who called out congratulations at him and invited him to come and have one at their table. Jonah mumbled something about having to piss and being right back and made his way to the stables without anyone noticing.

Mattie was already there and showed him with a grand flourish where the guards were lying. She was jumping up and down with glee. "Look at these sweetlings. Sleeping like babies! Let's drag them in this empty box, so no one will notice them straight away. Shit, they are heavy!" She seemed to be enjoying herself tremendously, notwithstanding the danger. The ignorance of youth! Once the men were hidden, they went to the last horsebox, where she’d already swept the straw to one side to reveal a large wooden hatch. That same moment Mallory arrived accompanied by Astrid wrapped in a cloak rather too big for her. She looked as pale as a ghost.

"Mattie, I take it there was no trouble getting the guards out of the way?" She shook her head and proudly swept the door to the box that held the sleeping men, open.

"Right. Well done, my dear, I knew I could count on you. Let's get ourselves down as soon as possible. There’s a tunnel from here under the lake leading to the shore. As these corridors are ancient, it will be wet here and there. They hale from before the Exodus. I read they used to keep vehicles used for transport down there. The fort was built in those days as well. When Damien arrived here, he turned it into the fortress it is today. He’s the only one who knows these tunnels exist and will do anything not to let anybody else know. In case he will need them one day. I’m counting on that a long way away from here before he finds out we are gone. He will have to take some of his men into his confidence if they're to go after us through here. Don’t think he will but guess he might think he can always kill them afterwards to keep his secret. Shall we?".

One by one, Mattie first, they climbed down a long shaft using a rusty ladder stuck to the slimy green wall by even rustier nails. Mattie climbed down like a monkey and disappeared into the dark. The other three took it a bit slower but finally reached the bottom as well. Mattie, who had run ahead, suddenly appeared out of the gloom looking a bit worried.

"Doctor, they’ve blocked the grate! Somebody put a big, fat lock on it".

Mallory didn’t seem too perturbed by the news. "As long as it’s an iron one, I can open it. Don't worry. Let's continue". Mallory tried to sound calmer than he was. Mattie must have run to the end and back as it took the rest ten minutes or so to reach the grate they mentioned. Mallory had told them, it would take them to an even lower level. He stepped forward and made a bright light appear out of nowhere. They heard him sigh. "Thank the stars! It is iron. Stand back and don't breath in to deeply".

He pulled a small stoppered bottle out of one of his many pockets and poured a liquid over the lock. The metal immediately started to sizzle. An acrid fume filled the corridor making their eyes water. The lock seemed to dissolve in front of their eyes.

"You must be a magician!" Astrid gasped when she could breathe again.

"No, my dear. As you will soon find out, science is not all bad. I’ll explain later. Now let’s walk as fast as we safely can. Make sure you keep your eyes on the person in front of you as I can't keep this light on very much longer. There’ll be some area's we have to wade through water, some of it quite deep. I presume, living with so much water around us, everyone can swim?" They all made confirming noises.

After that, everyone barely had enough breath to do more than run and in some parts swim until they finally saw a circular light in the distance. It felt like they’d been going for hours, though Mallory told them it was less than that. Halfway their flight, they heard a loud rumbling above their heads and the walls around them would tremble. Mallory told them not to worry because it was just the trains running close overhead. He looked round at his travel companions once they exited a large stone gate.

"First part completed, but don't get too comfortable yet. We have to get to the Badlands before we can have a proper rest. Most of the Midlanders are superstitious about entering that area. They’ll never agree to follow us there even under threat of Damien punishing them".

Jonah, who always believed too that entering that part of Midland would cause a person to erupt in blisters, followed by a terrible death, looked slightly uncomfortable.

Mallory was about to explain why it was safe to go there but thought the better of it. He hoisted his pack higher on his shoulders, setting off at a fast pace, calling out: "No time for worrying about it. Once we're a bit further into the woods, you can all have a drink. After that, no more talking, you will need your breath for the march. If any of you feels they can't keep up, let me know. I’ve some herbs in my pack to give you some extra strength. We’ll have to use them sparsely. Once you stop taking them, after an hour you’ll not be able to do more than sleep for hours".
They had gotten out of the tunnels into a small clearing.
The night sky was lit up by millions of stars. Entering the woods, it became pitch-dark. It seemed like continuing to flee through a tunnel—this time smelling of rotting leaves and pine. Mallory seemed to know his way well and took the lead followed by Astrid then Jonah with Mattie making up the rear end.
It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Thirty – Damien’s Fury

Damien was getting restless. He’d been enjoying the ballad beautifully sung by Peter and Jo. He might be a cruel man, but everyone knew he loved good music. It seemed to make him forget being a monster for a bit. The moment, however, the lovely voices stopped their jubilant song, he started to look around the room realising Mallory had not come back nor was there any sign of the wretched girl. Looking around the room, he couldn’t find the wretched man anywhere. He then called for Manuel, one of his boys and his right hand, and whispered something in his ear. Manuel's head shot up, and he jumped off the dais. Damien watched him shaking Solo, who was lying with his head on the table sunken in a drunken stupor. Solo first tried to throw him off, but Manual was very persistent and kept telling him to come and speak with Damien now.

Yaya, who was far more sober than her mate, looked for her brother without seeing any sign of him. She felt a creeping doubt coming in her mind. On hearing Manuel's message, she got up and approached the high table, not even bothering to see if Manual was succeeding in waking her companion.

Damien didn’t look too pleased with her presumptuous behaviour. She knew he thought women had only two duties in life and should be seen but not heard. Seeing him looking worried and furious at the same time, gave her the shivers.
She still hoped Jonah had just passed somewhere. Damien didn't take long to relieve her of that idea. He was again speaking under his breath, not wanting everybody to hear what was going on. He didn't like to be played the fool in his own house.
"Where’s that brother of yours?"

"Last time I saw him, he went outside. I thought he wasn't feeling well and needed some fresh air", Yaya who had been busy keeping an eye on Solo, realised she had not seen Jonah since he went out hours ago.

'Oh shit, I hope he hasn’t been so stupid to try to get that girl away from here' she thought, trying frantically to come up with an excuse to get out of here as quickly as possible to see if she could find him and drag him back before he did something that could get them all killed.

"Shall I go and find him for you? He’s probably passed out somewhere, or he might have gone back to the barracks."

But Damien was having none of it. "Don't bother. I’ve sent my boys. They’ll find him if he’s still in the compound. Don't say anything to anybody and go and help Manuel wake that lump, Solo. My medic Mallory seems to have disappeared as well If I guess right, the girl you brought us has disappeared with him. Better pray it's only that old fool trying to be a hero. Doctor or not, when I find out he’s tried to slip away taking her with him, I’ll let him rue the day he was born. His dying will take a very long time. And your brother will join him if he had anything to do with this shit".

Damien was getting more and more beside himself. He was practically foaming around the mouth with rage.

Yaya fled to get Solo. While Damien had his rant, people had started to look up wondering what all the noise was about. Yaya felt all the eyes in the hall on her. She pushed Manuel aside and wacked Solo over the head with his tankard. He wasn’t too pleased to be so rudely woken up.

"What the fuck, woman! You better have an excellent reason to wake me."He rubbed his head.

Yaya told him what was going on and he stood up from the table so fast, the whole thing toppled over. Sweating and all of a sudden looking as pale as she’d ever seen him, he growled at her: "You and I both know that that stupid brat, who you convinced me to take with us, has gone and done something stupid. He’s been making puppy eyes at that girl since we got her fancying himself a man rescuing a lady in distress. You’ve always been too soft on him. Now I have to go and sort this out". It hadn’t taken long for Solo to blame someone else.

While the room was buzzing with rumours, he gripped Yaya’s arm half dragging her back to Damien. With his head high, he looked the by now apoplectic Damien straight in the eye determined not to show himself cowed by the man even though he knew what Damien could do to people who had upset him. ‘Never show an animal that you're afraid’ was Solo’s motto.

Damien beckoned them to sit next to him at his table, all the while smiling at the crowd, hoping to give the impression nothing was wrong. He hissed at Solo to do the same. The vindictive man kept Yaya standing below them to show her her place. When he saw his men, most of them worse for wear anyway, continue their partying, he motioned Solo to start talking. Solo didn't need much encouragement and launched into an explanation straight away.

"Look, I went to a lot of trouble getting the girl to bring her here and hand her over. I can't be held responsible for you guys losing her. If your men are wasting time looking for the boy, you can tell them to stop looking. I don't need to be a betting man to assume that stupid son of a bitch has gone and taken the girl with him. Yaya told me you suspect that medic of yours to have been helping them get out of here?"

Damien just nodded, seemingly admiring Solo’s fearlessness. Yaya guessed he had played on Solo's greed to execute his plant take some sort of revenge on the Harrington family, but never had expected Solo would go as far as kidnapping a member of that cursed nest of vipers and try to torch the place. Now it had all been for nothing.

" I don’t know the guy, but you do. You must have trusted him. These monks are as slippery as eels. I take it he knows ways to get out of this place without going past the security guards?", Solo continued.

"Yes, I thought I was the only one who knew about it. I should’ve known that the snake would find out. Always sniffing around in my study, pretending to look for books in my library on healing. The guy reads better than I can. I’m warning you. I don't want anyone here to know of this disaster. I’ll think of some excuse to pick the winning ticket a bit later. That’ll give us time to find them and get her back. I’m pretty sure they’ve taken the underground route. It ends in two places, in shrubs close to the water tower or the woods northeast of here. I bet they’ve taken the one near the rails. It would make it easier and faster for them to leave with the first train. I want you two to go to the station and take the train to the tower. It will win you time. I heard you hitched a ride from there yesterday. I’ll let the station master know he has to make an extra stop there. But first, see my weapons master. You might need some better gear than that old shit you are carrying. Now go!"

Insulted about the remark about his weapons, he’d always been so proud of them, but at the same time excited to be allowed the use of one of the fabled Teck guns everybody knew Damien owned, Solo turned on his heels.

Yaya followed him. She had to run to keep up with him. She hissed in his ear: "Solo! You have to promise me I can talk to Jonah first when we find him. Please, it will break my mother's heart to have anything happen to him. You can do with the rest what you want. I’ll make Jonah disappear. Damien will never hear or see him again. I’ll swear to be yours for the rest of my life if you do this for me!" She hoped this promise would be enough. He had asked her often enough.

Yaya tried to make Solo look at her before they went into the armoury. He shrugged her hand off and stepped up to the vault.

"We can talk about that later. Time is running out. If you can't do as you're told, stay here. I don't need someone slowing me down while I'm trying to catch a boy, a stupid bitch and an old fart! I’m not making any promises before we find them ".

Yaya had no option but to follow him in and hope she could do something later to save her brother after Solo had calmed down a bit. At the moment he was too pissed about losing the girl. It wasn’t only about his part of the spoils They had made him look stupid in the eyes of the man he hoped to impress. With Solo, it was all about looking good and be in control. She knew he had a hard time protecting his brother Eric, who could not fend for himself. It had turned him into a ruthless man.

She hoped Damien would be satisfied if they returned just Astrid and the medic and forget about Jonah. She knew enough about that monster to realise Solo, and she would pay the price instead of the fugitives if they didn’t find them and bring them back. Midland wouldn’t be big enough to hide for his wrath.

It took little time for Solo to go through the explanation of the gun. He was a quick learner. She often wished he would use that great brain of his to make life better for everyone instead of worse.

As she expected, they didn’t entrust her with one of the new weapons so she would have to rely on her own. Not that she minded. She heard those things more often than not either stopped working when you needed them most or exploded in your face. No, with her reliable bow and arrow she knew where she was. She had inherited hers from her father, who’d been the best shot in the village. Not that that meant a lot, most people there were fishermen and not warriors. They only used weapons like clubs and sticks when the town needed protecting.

After stocking up on water and food in the kitchen, they went on their way. Hurrying through the gates, she noticed they were already open. Manuel must’ve been a busy little man.

They were going so fast they barely noticed a group of men approaching the fort on the other side of the road and just ran past them without engaging with them.

Chapter Thirty-one - Monks Visit to the Fort

"I wonder why they're in such a hurry?", one of the monks said as two shadowy figures shot past them in the direction of the station.

"Maybe they have to get back to their ship before it sails. I heard there would be quite a few people from the ships coming to this party. But we have business to attend to. Let's go inside", the eldest of the Quintet, Pieter, showed the guard on the gate their papers and they were soon ushered inside and taken to the great hall.

"Don't you find it weird that it’s so quiet?" Nicholas whispered to William.
The other men had noticed the absence of the expected raucous noise of a party as well. Coming in, they passed small groups of people on their way out, looking very disappointed, softly talking with each other. No one was laughing or even curious about them.
Jeb was the first to speak up. "The news about the sacking must have arrived before us, I think".

Brother Jacob stopped in his tracks. "That's impossible! They don't have the tech to farspeak. And to my knowledge, they’ve never had the patience to rear messenger birds. Besides, one would think it more reason to party. Maybe one of the kidnappers told Damien about the kidnap on the Island. He hates the Harrington corporation, but he knows it would be bad for his dealings with the Prior when it became common knowledge that his favourite dictator can’t control his men".

"The only thing to do is to find out how we can get Astrid out of here as quickly as possible. So come it’s this way".
With these words, Pieter pushed open the doors to the big hall with the rest following on his heels.

Above a nearly empty hall with tables littered with leftovers of a considerable party, silent as the grave, sat Damien on his throne, drinking a large tumbler of what looked to be wine. Pieter frowned. The sight of this man indulging himself didn’t bode very well. The man never drank. His usual contingent of adoring young men seemed to be missing as well.

Damien looked up when he saw them and got up and stepped down from the dais. His face looked thunderous, and when he came closer, they could smell the alcohol on his breath.

"If you're coming for a party, you’re too late! If you're coming for that Harrington wench, you are even more too late! The little birdy has flown the coop together with one of your old colleagues, the eminent doctor Mallory. I will tell you now, and you can let the Prior know as well, being a monk won't save him when I catch up with him. You lot have always been a treacherous bunch of assholes. I should kill all of you here and now just because it would make me feel better!"

Nicholas and William looked wide-eyed at Pieter, who seemed to be entirely unperturbed by Damien's rant. Pieter knew Damien hardly ever drunk or used anything intoxicating, too worried about losing control. In a steady voice, as if to calm a rabid dog, he gave a little bow.

"I am very sorry to hear about your troubles and so will be the Prior. How long ago have they left? Is there anything we can do to help you recover them?"

"Are you fucking kidding me? For all I know, you are in cahoots with that lot and you are just here cover their tracks and find out what I know. The Prior would do anything not to have to dig in his coffers for the ransom and have her presented to him on a silver platter".

Pieter continued to stay unperturbed. "As you well know, our Prior always keeps his word and would never behave like that. Why don't we wait here with you until they bring them back? Your men will undoubtedly catch up with them in no time. A young girl and an old man?"

"It is not just them!. One of my wards, a mere girl, Mallory's protege, and one of my guests, a guy called Jonah, went with them. When we catch them, the prize for Harrington's daughter has just gone up to double your first offer for all the trouble they have caused. If you don't pay that, she’ll go to the highest bidder. I don’t give a shit anymore what the Prior thinks of that", with these words he turned his back on them. He returned to his chair to continue his drinking, refusing to even look at them.

When they didn’t leave at once, he shouted:" Now fuck off back to that stupid balloon of yours and tell your boss what I said. I will get compensation for this. I don't care from whom!"

The other monks started to talk all at once, but Pieter held up his hand to silence them and looked up at the moping tyrant.

"We will go back to Luton but know that the Prior won’t take this lying down. He has lost twenty-two of our best people, Islanders all, and wants reparation for that as well. It might cost you more than you bargained for when you allowed those men to go and set foot on the Island. There is an explicit agreement about everyone’s territory. You were the one to break it first. The Prior will have no regret to take measures that something like this will never happen again. The least you can do is make sure the girl returns to her home unharmed Threatening or ignoring the Prior has never been a healthy idea. For no one".

Damien seemed to sober up at once and looked up again, all his chins trembling.

"What are you talking about? I didn’t know they were going to kidnap the girl. Those guys acted without my approval. When I heard about it, I made sure they brought her to me. I was only trying to get her back to you. For a sum, I admit. But that is in our agreement too.The Prior can’t hold me responsible for other people dying. I wasn’t even there".

Pieter shook his finger at him accusingly. "They started fires at Harrington house after the kidnap. It destroyed part of the house. We lost a lot of fine people, not the least Gregory and his wife. Their son and heir, John, lies in a coma having been knocked out by one of your people. So if you proclaim not to have known about this, we might conclude you’ve lost your touch. The Prior might decide it could be time to put a man in charge here who can keep his people under control".

Nicholas saw the man, known as one of the most dangerous criminals in Midland, positively shrink into his chair. All his bluster was gone.

Pieter, turning on his heels to the door while motioning them to follow him, took one last parting shot: "The life of that girl is off now sacrosanct for the Prior, so you better get her to us alive, or there will be consequences, and they won't be nice!"

The moment the door closed behind them, Damien started to shout for Manuel. He had told Solo to bring the girl back dead or alive. Now he had to make sure it would be alive. He had witnessed the wrath of the Prior once when he was a small boy.
The town he directed it at didn’t exist anymore. In one flash, it had melted in front of his eyes. The only thing left was a charred, black area, where nothing would grow anymore.

"Send our fastest horseman to the exit of the catacombs near the water tower. Go with him and make sure between the two of you that Solo doesn’t kill that girl. I don't care what he does with the rest. Hurry!"
Being used not to ask too many questions, Manuel did as he was told and was soon on his way accompanied by the captain of the guards, who was one of their best horsemen and fighters. The captain’s reputation under the soldiers in the fort alone would guarantee Solo handing over the girl without putting up a fight. He just hoped they would be on time.

The monks and the boys reached the balloon station without any problems. The monks didn’t want to linger any longer and prepared the airship to go home, to Luton island.

"But maybe we could try to follow Astrid and bring her home ourselves?' Nicholas couldn't believe they were just going to leave. He needed to do something.

Jacob put an arm around his shoulder."Young man, it’s now the business of the Priory. We don't want to lose two fine young men as well. Leave it to us. It will all be alright. It’s better if you two come with us. We’ll take you to Luton and make sure you get back on your ship. I heard they are waiting quite close to Luton. We’ll need you to go home after all that’s happened. I don't want any more difficulties. We might lose the girl altogether. If she’s with the Mallory I know, she has a good chance of staying out of Damien’s hands. We expelled him from the Monastery, but he’s the best tracker and swordsman I’ve ever met. And very smart with it".

William more used to the authority of the monks, persuaded Nicholas to accept the invitation of the monks. They entered the lift that would bring them to the contraption hanging under the flying machine. When they saw the interior, all thoughts of their adventures or their doubts about leaving just vanished. They couldn’t believe their eyes. There were all sorts of wheels, dials and other strange looking objects wherever they looked.

The monks smiled at their wonder. The pilot of the airship kindly took them to the front of the cabin and explained a little bit about the way balloons, or zeplins worked.

"Isn’t it dangerous to work here? Doesn't tech make you ill?" Nicholas just couldn’t take it all in. All his life they warned him about using unnatural machines. His whole world, his health had relied on heeding those warnings. Now these people, monks, were completely okay using that same technology he’d only heard about during Father Sirio's preachings.

" We’re not using electricity, only wind and air. All the parts of this ship are made by us, using materials reclaimed from sites all over the Archipelago and the Mainland. The Prior has blessed the vessel. It’s totally safe ".

They had something more to eat and drink before the crazy day took its toll. The boys were happy to be shown a small room in the back of the airship, where they could lie down and finally sleep. Being young and extremely tired, it didn’t take very long for them to be out for the count. The cabin rocking gently in the winds helped them to stay that way until they arrived in Luton.

Chapter Thirty-two - The hunt

The town lay silent in the night with just a few torches throwing long shadows. Even the dogs ignored their passing.

At the station, the next day’s train locomotive was already under steam. The stationmaster explained it would only go as far as the water tower to drop them off and afterwards return to town to reconnect with the waiting freight waggons.
Wreathed in steam and the thunder of the engine in their ears, they didn't notice the messenger boy rushing towards them. He was sweating profusely, his steaming breath competing with the train.

All three turned to him as one, wondering who the hell sent him at this time of night."Sir, I have a message from the south!" The lad had to take a few panting breaths before he could go on. "I have come from Amersham. An army of Islanders has sacked the village of West Drayton. They torched the village. Everyone id dead. They sent me to let Damien know as soon as possible. What is the shortest way to the Fort?"

Yaya felt her legs give way. She had to use all her strength not to collapse in a heap and scream out her shock.
Solo looked stunned but still kept it together enough to start asking the lad some questions. "Are you sure it’s West Drayton you’re talking about? Did no one escape?"

"As far as we know in Amersham, no one has been found alive. Some fishermen from the next village saw the fire and went to see if they could help. They only found ashes and bodies too burnt to recognise". His voice shook.

The stationmaster, shocked but still able to put first things first, told the boy to go and tell Damien straight away. He had to know about this calamity. He helped Solo lifting Yaya and spoke with a gentle voice: "I’m so sorry about your loss, but if you want to catch the fugitives, you really have to board now. We’ll need the locomotive back before the first morning train ".

They were both too devastated to demur and followed him to the engine. He helped them up the steps onto the locomotive where the fireman and the driver gave the stationmaster questioning looks. He told them he would explain later. Yaya and Solo, too numb to say anything, just sat silently against the back of the cabin each sunk in their own thoughts.

Yaya was the first to say anything: "I'm so sorry about Eric, Solo. I’ll do everything to help you find who did this".
"My mother....", her voice broke. She had to swallow a few times to be able to continue, "my mother and all our other people will have to be revenged!"

She decided not to mention leaving Jonah to her now Solo's grief was so fresh. She’d never seen him so sad. It was as if he’d shrunk to half his size. She knew this wouldn’t last long. Soon his anger would take over, and he would want to reckon with everyone even slightly connected to the tragedy. Her brother included.

The fact that it was all his fault for taking the girl would never come up in his mind. But she would be damned if she let that stupid decision harm the last person she had left in the world. He could do with the girl whatever he liked, but Jonah was not his to judge. If the time came, she wouldn’t hesitate to kill Solo before he lay a finger on Jonah.
She felt surprised to realise how strong her feelings were for her little brother whose gentle nature she usually mocked and tried to remedy.

Hearing about her mother's death seemed to have opened her eyes to make her realise she’d always loved him dearly from the first day he was born. She still remembered that day.

The midwife had woken her in the middle of the night and practically ordered her to witness the whole thing, even though she was just thirteen at the time. "One day you’ll have to do this yourself, girl! Better know what to expect".

Before that time, she had sworn never to have children herself for she’d seen what it did to women who did have them. Their freedom was gone. Somehow these children made them vulnerable in a way she never wanted to be. She’d worked too hard to be without fear of losing. Her mother had no trouble giving birth to him. Once the baby was there, Yaya was shocked at how rather disgusting it looked covered in mucus and blood. However, the moment the midwife wiped him off, wrapped him tightly in a bundle, the woman had handed the little package to her with the words: "Now go and show your beautiful brother to your mother".

One look at the red, crumpled, little face was enough to melt all those carefully built up defences. So this was what real love felt like. He had looked her straight in the eyes, which were blue as the early morning sky.

Her mother had to go back to work nearly straight away, so the care of the little creature had fallen almost solely to his sister. She couldn’t imagine a world without him in it anymore. It had been like that ever since. Even though she always pretended he was a pain, she had always watched over him. She was certainly not going to stop doing that now.
He was all the family she got left. She loved him and would protect him. Solo better watch his back!

Her thoughts occupied like this, she’d hardly noticed the locomotive had reached the Watertower. With a mighty jolt, the engine stopped right in front of it.

"Right people. Off you get. James, let's fill her up here. It will save us doing a top-up when we go south again later", the engineer sounded relieved to get rid of them. He didn’t seem to like the look of them.

" We’ll never find them at that tunnel. They’ve had a head start while we were wasting time talking to Damien. This train ride might reduce it a bit, but not much “. Solo didn’t sound very hopeful about the whole undertaking. "Let’s hope we catch up quickly. At least we’re not hindered by some little girl and an old guy. Do you think too they went the southeastern route? It would be the fastest one to the southern harbours, but there’d be a greater chance of being spotted. Going north-west though could be very dangerous. Those forests there are so thick they’re nearly impenetrable. Even if they manage to cross those without any mishap, they ‘ll have to cross the Towers! Jonah hasn’t ever even been near mountains his whole life. I always heard the tribes there won't let anyone pass their boundaries. Even Damien's men are not keen to go there. Some tried in the past and never came back. And no one travels through the Badlands! No, I’d guess we should stick to the southern route to find them. Jonah will want to find somewhere on the coast from where they can cross to the girl's home. What do you think?"

"It's your decision", Yaya answered to let Solo believe he was in charge to mollify him."Let's first check that tunnel near here Damien told us about ". She didn’t think they had gone that way, but anything slowing Solo down would give Jonah a better chance to escape.

Solo shook his head, pursing his lips. "Nah, it’d be a total waste of time. They must have passed through there while we were faffing our time away. I want to go straight down south to the coast".

Yaya countered quickly:" I don't think it would be a good idea to have to tell Damien we didn’t check all possibilities, do you?" She was terrified Solo might change his mind altogether and go north. She was sure her brother would choose the least obvious route. He might not be the strongest or most ruthless boy in the village, but he sure was the cleverest.
To make sure he would decide to follow them southeast, she pretended not to be sure they should go south and go north instead. Solo had always been a pigheaded bastard convinced his way was the only way. It had the desired effect.

Before they set off in their chosen direction to their great surprise, they noticed Peter and Jo, the minstrels from the party, who appeared by the side of the road where they must have been lying low in the ditch. They’d wisely kept themselves hidden while Solo and Yaya were arguing, waiting for their decision before showing themselves.

Jo whistled for their two horses, who’d been grazing nearby. It explained why they’d managed to reach the tower before them.

"Hallo, we must stop meeting like this", Peter tried to joke.

But Solo wasn’t having anything of it:" What the fuck are you two doing here? Did you see anyone on your way here? Why are you here, anyway? The party seemed still in full swing when we left"

"Answering your first question, my dear fellow, we just got here. With the road so dark, we were happy to find our way here without having an accident. We had to keep our eyes on the trail. We would’ve only seen someone if we’d tripped over him. As to your second question. We realised we had another appointment in Amersham early tomorrow or is it today already?. A wedding. They wanted to select the music with us and promised us a good meal if we came early".

It all rolled from his tongue like he had rehearsed it many times. He even managed to give Jo a naughty wink.

Solo gave him a suspicious look. Not being completely stupid, he’d noticed the attention Jo had given the girl Astrid the first time they met. "You better not be shitting me about. When later I find out you did see that lot and didn’t tell me, I’ll track you down and kill you, both of you".

"Hey man, calm down. It's true that on top of having to play at that wedding, we thought it might be a good idea too to skedaddle before the master's fury landed on our innocent heads. You know how Damien gets when something like happens to annoy him. He’ll be looking for a scapegoat when he doesn't find them. Anyone will do. He’ll just select some unlucky bastard to vent his rage on. We were not planning to be there when that happened. No, thank you, sir!"

Peter sounded very convincing. With a friendly smile, he asked Solo: "May we ask where you two lovely people are heading? We might travel together for a bit".

"We’ll be travelling north until we reach the foot of the Towers. Damien has ordered us to find the fugitives and their trail starts there." Looking at Yaya's surprised face, "I changed my mind. If we don't catch them up there before they hit the Towers, we’ll come back south. I don't care what Damien wants. Screw him. I'm not about to get myself killed by those savages in the mountains so that he can get his revenge. I’d prefer to go to West Drayton first to see if anybody did escape, but we’d lose too much time ".

She didn't like what she was hearing but challenging him in front of the minstrels would make him all the more determined to do the exact opposite. She hoped Jonah and his band had made it out of the catacombs before they arrived at the exit.

The minstrels exchanged a glance. Mallory had told them about his plans and asked them to send any followers in the opposite direction. "So you’ll be going to the Towers, are you? Are you sure they’ll go that way? With the Badlands and the Mountain people in their way? Seems highly unlikely to us".

Yaya not knowing why they were so helpful, inwardly wished him to go on giving Solo a reason not to go north.
Though Solo was getting a bit warier again, he wasn't stupid. "It is none of your business what where we’ll go. It will be best if we each go our own way. Didn't you two have a wedding to go to?"

But Peter wasn’t taking any chances and pushed a little further. "Well, I'm just saying, I know Mallory to be a very cunning man and he knows his way around Midland better than most of us. If I were a betting man, I would guess the good doctor will take them south. If he wants to assist the girl in going go back home, they’ll want to find the nearest harbour with an agent of the Harrington company. That would be Reading station. Why would he want to risk their lives taken a longer route through some of the most dangerous places in Midland?
No, any man with a grain of sense would try to get in contact with the girl's family as soon as possible. But it's your own choice of course, and I don't want to tell you what to do—just giving some friendly advice. After the wedding, we are going to Reading Station too for the big Spring Fair. So, I wish you two luck with your endeavour. We might meet again if you come south later after you have realised the north has been a wild goose chase. Don't be too harsh on the girl when you find her. You guys did kill twenty-two Islanders with your fires, amongst whom the girl's parents".

Yaya was shocked at this news but decided not to let on she hadn't known this. She always thought there hadn’t been any casualties from the fires. They told her they were very small and aimed to distract people from following them not to kill anyone. They had underestimated the speed with they could spread. Lady, this many and the girl's parents?

Before she could react, Solo snarled: "Well, I’ll be happy to tell that girl, when I catch up with her, it was Jonah's idea to set those fires. He might not have been there to light them himself, but the result was the same. See how much chance he will have with that bitch after that! If it weren't for that little cow, we would all be going home by now with a big bag of money. Good, we got at least a bunch of them. It didn't take very long, did it, for those islander thugs to come and kill all of our people. They’re a bunch of snivelling, holier than thou criminals, who think only lives coming from their precious tree are sacred, scum, all of them! I bet those bloody monks were behind the whole thing. May they rot in the Plague pits ".

The two troubadours shook their heads at his ranting. After untying their horses, they went on their way, to Reading, as the Amersham story had just been a rouse.Yaya shrugged her pack back on and trotted into the dark forest. Solo followed. Silently they made their way north-west from the water tower.

Chapter Thirty- three - Luton Monastery

A strong humming sound and people calling out at each other woke the young men up out of a deep slumber.
At first they didn't know where they were and why everything looked so strange.

After earth's population had been decimated by war, climate changes and the Exodus, life for the people left behind had seemed to have become a bit better at first. It was survival of the fittest again because most of the old knowledge had disappeared or was kept hidden. People had to relearn old skills with a little selective help of the monks.
To make matter worse, about two centuries after the Exodus, an fast spreading illness had started to kill a lot of the people. First on the continent and later in Albion, which first had been protected by the sea.
People who survived were still carriers of the virus and contact with them could infect those who had not had the disease yet.
Over the centuries the monks and the leaders of various more advanced groups on the continent had moved the infectious survivors to Albion, a group of large and small islands, easier to quarantine.
The rest of the population who were still susceptible to the disease and didn't want to find out if they were immune or not, either quarantined themselves in London City behind high walls and with weapons only available to the elite. Many moved abroad to one of the other great harbour cities such as Calais, Brussels and Paris.
Later when they seemed to have successfully banned the disease from the continent, some of the people on the mainland had moved out of the cities again to live a life closer to nature.
They were now important providers of food for the urbanised areas.
The cities had become centres of knowledge and learning. Modern Tech had become a large part of society again.
Merchant companies and bankers, who made sure products and money kept flowing from one city to the other,lived either in the cities or in large villa's around it.
To keep the infected from wanting the same advantages of modern technology and in doing so become a threat to the city folk and the Mainland, they had set up a sort of religion for the Archipelago around the belief that Technology and specifically electricity was a sinful thing that could destroy the land and their health.
Because of mounting numbers of unruly Midlanders, who scavenged tech where they could and posed a real threat to the Mainland, a plan was set in motion to cull their numbers on a regular base.
The islanders and other groups of people in Albion, who over time had managed to become a strong race through careful breeding, were taught they were special and were part of the Tree of life whose branches only bore the best people. The rest of the population of Albionwere called Impure and painted as savages to be kept under strict control.
After all this time a cure to stop making Albionese infectious still had not been found. There was only one way the so called Pure could mix with the rest was by using a special tincture.
It was made from a very rare fish, the Albicore,whose oil could make you temporarily immune. Ithad to be taken every time there was a chance you came in contact with one of the survivors of the plague.
The Prior and other men high up in the organisation of the Tree Union were all Mainlanders. By throwing up a curtain of religion and mystery, they managed to keep their contact only via their monks.
These were enlisted from the Albionese themselves and were not all informed about this set up.
They rarely actually had direct contact with each other.The monastery in Luton and the government in the main cities all had a sore of Albicore vials in their vaults which was as good as having gold in your bank. It made them very powerful indeed.

During the last centuries there had been voices going up on the continent to just wipe out the infected survivors from Albion in one fell swoop.
The Purists had formed strong factions in the cities and monasteries, in Albion as well as on the Mainland.
There were rumours that deep in the desert of Italy a group of extreme purists was near to devising a weapon of mass destruction.
More moderate scientists and intellectuals opposed this plan. They were convinced that this would be catastrophic for the survival of mankind.The people of Albion were the only source, they had, to find a definitive cure for the Sickness.
They tried to explain to those who were in favour of extermination that over the centuries infected had reached the Mainland illegally and were living in hiding in the countryside or on floating islands on the sea.
It would take only a few of those to come in contact with a citizen to have the Sickness spread faster than it had done all those centuries ago.
The population of the cities had grown exponentially since then,thus trying to stop the disease spreading by transporting the survivors to another island community quarantining them, would be impossible. There would be far too many.The measures they had taken to stop them getting the technical knowhow to fight back were slowly becoming less effective.
The Purists constantly spread propaganda how uncivilised these Albionese are.How great the threat of the Infected multiplying and overrunning their cities.

Nicholas goes with him to the Island. His mother needs him.

william decides to find out more about the Prior's plans to work with the Mainlanders to erase all the population from the Archipelage to claim the lands and kill all the Plague.

While searching he finds Marion being kept against her will. John has been taken to the Hospital ship for research against the Plague.

W finds out the plan and he and Marion decide to save John first and then all three will go back to the island.
Astrid will find them on the ship before that happens.Three years?????

Chapter Thirty-four – The Badlands

The sounds of this dense forest were so different from those she remembered from the woods at home. It never got so dark either as it was here. Her father had told her the woods on the Island were all man-made, planted by generation after generation.

”Before the Exodus, men had practically chopped up most of the forests in the south of Albion to make room for farmland and housing. It’s one of our tasks to plant enough trees to create a safe haven for deer, rabbits, swine and birds. Nature should be in balance or the bad times would start all over again”.

All of a sudden, she missed her family so much it almost hurt. Was it only a few days ago, the only thing she was worried about was her impending wedding with Henry. She would give anything to turn back time to that morning five days ago when she was floating in the sea and looking forward to choosing a puppy. She remembered the smell of smoke. She’d heard some men laughing about a diversion and taking care of the guards. ‘I hope the fire did not reach the stables. They are luckily not connected to the house. And Lily! What had happened to her little sister. Please, Lady. Let everyone have come out safely”.

Wrapped up in her thoughts, she bumped into Mallory’s back. He had abruptly stopped. Only seeing clearly with one of her eyes, she had been too busy trying not to stumble over roots or rocks, to pay attention to where they were going.

“We need to have a short rest here. Have something to eat and drink. There will be no fire. It will give us away. Afterwards, we have to push on again. Mattie, you know which bag contains our food. Everyone can have some bread and cheese and a sip of water. Until we get to the Towers, we won’t be able to refill our flasks”.

With a sigh, they all dropped where they stood. Mattie, who didn’t look tired at all, went round with her pack handing each of them one of the pies she had picked up before the party. She was a tough child. Mallory was more and more convinced she must be a child of the Dinali, a hardy mountain tribe. The strange combination of her golden tresses with those dark, nearly black eyes was quite common amongst them. Maybe they could find out which one of the numerous tribes she came from and even how she had landed in a group of slaves brought in by one of Damien’s men.

After what seemed like only a few minutes, Mallory urged them to get going again, setting a relentlessly fast pace for such an old man.

It was getting light by the time they broke out of the dense forest and saw before them what looked like an enormous desert. Strangely curving rolling hills of the whitest of sands were shining in the early sunlight. Between the dunes were large areas of water, coloured various shades of brilliant blue, black and green with all sorts of vegetation around their edges.

“Welcome to the Badlands! The wet season is still going, I see. Has anyone of you heard about these lands before? I would think you all might have at one time”.

They all nodded their heads looking in awe at the majestic dunes. Some were more than 12 meters high. They were beautiful in their eerie emptiness. And the contrast between the blue, green lagoons and the whiteness of the hills was mind-blowing.

“Believe it or not these were once the rocky shores of the Silver Sea but constant Western winds have blown the sands deposited here a long time ago by two rivers, land inwards. A layer of rock hidden beneath the sand stops the water from draining away, instead of capturing the rain to form these pockets of water. The rivers used to come down from the Towers and contained melting water and debris from the peaks. The rainy season which lasts until June will keep filling these lakes. We can hunt and fish to get ourselves food and fresh water. In the summer all this water will evaporate, and the lakes dry up. The plants will hibernate until next spring. Most of the animals will disappear back into the forest again”.

Mallory sounded quite enthusiastic, talking about these lands. It was interesting, but now they’d rather sit down and have a well-earned rest instead of being lectured about nature. But Mallory was having none of that yet.

Exhausted as they were, he made them go further into the dunes only stopping when they reached a large area of green grasses and some stunted trees. They spotted some bright orange birds with long curved pointy beaks wading on the opposite side of the enormous body of water.

Mattie took one look at the sparkling water and practically tore her travel-stained clothes off, dropping them on the sand and with a whoop of joy ran straight into the sparkling water.
In a few seconds, she yelled even louder and came running back to them as if being chased by a demon, dripping and shivering.
“It is fffreezing!”, she said with chattering teeth.

“If you would have been a bit more patient, I could have told you that it is a bit early in the wet season to go in at this time of day. Plus this lake is very deep as you can see by the dark colour in the middle. It stays freezing until later in the season. Let’s eat first and then we’ll find you some shallower pools a bit later which will have a more pleasant temperature”, Mallory said smiling.

“Won’t they catch up with us if we stay too long in one place?” Astrid looked in the direction they had just come from with a worried frown on her face.

Mallory put her mind at rest. “The advantage of this place is that there are still so many horror stories about this area, telling people that staying here any length of time will kill you, we’ll be safe for quite a while. On top of that, I made sure our trail will difficult to follow. I lived here quite a while ago, in my younger years. I know the forest and the dunes like the back of my hand. I grew up here. It’s easy for strangers to get completely lost in these lands”.

“You are from here?” Mattie looked around her at the seemingly empty space,” What did you eat?”

“Oh, there’s fish here, through all the seasons, if you know where to look. I’ll show you later. There'll still be many who haven’t reached the lake yet. After the fishing season was over, some of us would go to the woods to hunt. There’re lots of edible plants around here as well. We can stay here until it gets dark again and we’ve had a good rest”.
With these words, Mallory opened his pack and took out some parcels wrapped in oilcloth.

“Why don’t you young people go and find some dry wood. You will find some higher up along the edge of the pools. It looks like they didn’t have a lot of rain yesterday so the wood should be dry enough to build a fire with. We’ll have some lovely warm food in our bellies today. It will make us all feel a whole lot better and stronger. Mattie, as you are so keen on water, go and fill all our flasks for our trip this evening. I intend to reach the foothills of the Towers by tomorrow morning. While I, I will get us some fish!”

With these words, he strode away into the dunes. There was nothing to do but follow his instructions. When they all arrived back at their camp, he seemed to have disappeared.
They looked around, wondering where he had gone. Jonah told the girls to stay put and maybe start the fire, while he was going to see if he could find Mallory. Astrid, who like all Islanders, had learnt at an early age to live off the land and not depend on any technology, was happy to show herself useful for a change. She used two of the twigs and some dry grass and soon had a small fire going. Mattie quickly fed it with more of the wood they had scavenged. They wrapped themselves in their cloaks and fell beside the flames, happily roasting their weary bodies.

Climbing the high dune next to their encampment, Jonah saw the weirdest thing: Mallory on his knees with his hands stuck deep into the mud on the edge of one of the neighbouring pools. Had the man gone mad? He called out to him, and to his surprise, Mallory suddenly stood up with a big wriggling fish in his sandy hands.
“I still haven’t forgotten how to do some sand fishing”, he beamed, looking very pleased with himself. When Jonah reached him, he saw Mallory was holding a peculiar-looking fish, with markings over its whole body, looking like it was wrapped in a sort of net. Its teeth looked quite ferocious. Mallory was panting a bit. The fish must weigh a few kilos.

“We call this the Wolf Fish. At the height of the wet season, these fish usually all disappear into the lagoons. At the start of spring, however, you can still catch some hibernating in the mud, where they hide from the heat of summer. They were a delicacy of my youth and the chief of our tribe would give you extra coins to spend on the travelling circus, if you caught one for him. Let’s go and eat, boy!”

He pushed the slippery fish in Jonah’s hands, slapped him on his back and laughed when he nearly toppled backwards. “A nice fat one! We’ll eat well today”.

Back with the others, who werevery impressed with the catch, Jonah didn’t need much time to clean the big. Living in a fishing village, he had done so many times. Soon, they were gorging themselves on the lovely, oily fish, grease dripping down their arms. Mallory distributed some more of the bread they brought. They washed it all down with the fresh, clean water of the lagoon.

When everyone had had their fill, the doctor used the empty wrappings of the bread to pack the rest of the fish. It would still be edible for another day. It would stop them having to spend time hunting the next day. He sincerely hoped, by tomorrow they would have reached the foothills of the mountains where he hoped to find Mattie’s kin. Rabbits usually were abundant there, and the mountain streams would keep their bottles filled.

Rummaging in his backpack, he found what he was looking for. He unrolled the colourful map he had shown Astrid in his apartment in the fort. He prevented it from blowing away by putting some rocks on the four corners.

“Gather around, so I can show you all which route I intend us to take. Just in case anything happens to me, always try to save this map first, it’s your best bet to get down south without getting lost. We’ll probably have to hide in the mountains for a while until our trail has grown sufficiently cold. After that, we’ll decide on the best route to the south coast. I think it will go like this”. Three pairs of eyes were following his finger tracing the proposed route.

“Are the mountain people not going to be a problem?” Jonah said. He seemed to know quite a bit of the geography of Midland. Not many of his people could read, but he’d told Mallory his mother had taught him while he was still living in the women’s house. Jonah’s told him his dream was to get on one of the large trading ships and see what’s outside the borders of Albion. His mother had always encouraged him to leave and explore the world, but he had wanted to wait until he was confident she could manage on her own.

“My parents used to have a treaty with the Dinali. When I was young, I became friends with the son and daughter of one of their hunters, who sometimes came to our farm with their father. We traded our produce for their meat. Christopher, the son, and I both joined the monks together. It was a sad day when he died”.

Mallory sighed, thinking back to that black moment when he had to tell Chris’s parents their son would not be coming back. He looked up to see his young friends looking at him, waiting for him to continue his story. He shook the sand of the map and tucked it back in his pack.

“But that’s a tale for another time. Once we get to the Dinali, I’m sure there’ll still be people who remember Christopher. They loath Damien for a good many reasons, so we better not tell them how I lived in the Fort for a long time tending to him and his men. They wouldn’t understand. When they find out were running from Damien, they’ll help us, I’m sure”.

He’d contemplated telling them Mattie might be one of the Dinali folk, but he didn’t want to give the girl false hope. She’d fantasized about where she came from many times. Usually, from one of the great Warrior families.

First, they had to find the mountain people and talk with them, without them killing them on sight.

“Why aren’t we going to visit your people?” Mattie asked.
He had expected that question and had prepared an answer.

“I doubt if there’ll still be people around who knew my family or me. We abandoned our farm a long time ago. The plains people don’t settle anywhere. They tend to go where the grazing is good for their deer. With the weather getting dryer every year, I would guess they moved further north, maybe as far as to the Peak District or maybe even Yorkland. I was an only child, and my parents died a long time ago. I never stayed in contact with the others. My life was too different from theirs”.

Hoping they would accept his explanation, he started busying himself, gathering his camping gear and stowing it away. He asked his companions to do the same. Then, clapping his hands together, he said: “Who wants to have a nice swim before we move on?”

Mattie didn’t need more encouragement. Jumping up and down and giggling, she yelled:”Me, me, me!” her eagerness and joy very infectious. They all followed Mallory to one of the smaller lagoons, which had already warmed up in the midday sun. Within a few moments, they were all splashing around in the cool, clear water.

 Astrid, though, was a bit worried about letting people see her bruises. She had no shame being naked in front of the others, but the bruising in her face was still visible, so the ones on her body would stand out like a flag. They might tell everyone what had really happened that night. The longing to feel clean again persuaded her, so she stripped as fast as she could and rushed in soon swimming in circles around the others. They had all seen her waver and noticed the damage but as one decided not to mention it. It was bad enough for her to have had to endure such abuse. Having people commenting on it would be worse. When she was ready to tell them, they would listen.

Jonah, remembering the glorious vision that morning on the beach, felt sad, angry and a bit guilty. It was him who had told the gang about the easy the way into the castle. At the time he’d thought it was only going to be a quick break-in to snatch the wedding presents. Their scouts had heard people talking about them. Never did he believe Solo had this vile plan of abducting her. That the guy would end up abusing her didn’t enter his mind at all. He felt so powerless. He wished he could turn back the time. He swore to himself he would make it up to her by getting her home no matter at what cost to himself.

Mattie, having had her share of beatings, didn’t give the marks she saw on Astrid’s body, any thought and had great fun trying to make everybody throw her around in the water and playing catch with her. Her joyous laughter was bouncing off the dunes and made everyone feel a bit lighter.

Afterwards, they all put on their spare clothes and washed the ones they had been travelling in. While those were drying, they sprawled on the hot sand. Everyone slept except Mallory, who was kept awake by his memories.

Chapter Thirty-five– The Towers

It took them still five more days to travel through the foothills of the Towers before the road became narrower and steeper. After a day of trudging uphill, Mallory made them halt at a small stream surrounded by grass and pine trees. "Right now, I want you three to listen to me carefully. The Dinali have already noticed that we are here". They all started to ask questions at the same time until Mallory raised his voice and told them to be quiet and listen.

"Only when you’ve lived so close to the mountains as I have, would you have noticed the calls of birds that don’t live here. Those calls are made by the Dinali, warning each other that there are strangers on their lands. We’ll stop here. I don't think it will take long before they make themselves known to us. When they do, just follow my lead. They’ve become very wary of outsiders since Damien has become self-appointed ruler of Midland. Some time ago he sent a band of his men also here to collect taxes. The Dinali sent them back in the boxes they were carrying to collect their produce. Damien then sent an even larger group, this time, soldiers. He never saw them back either. For the moment Damien has given up. He knows now the Dinali will shoot first then ask questions".

"So why do you think they’re not going to kill us on sight? Why do we even want to travel through these harsh mountains? There must be a way around them?" Jonah gave voice to what they all were thinking.

"We are just a small group consisting of an old man, a child, a woman and just one adult male. I’ll use the whistling codes I remember from my youth, to let them know we mean no harm. Perhaps they let us stay, as it will be the safest place for the time being until we can figure out how to escape Damien for good. There’s another reason why I need to speak to them, which I can only tell you afterwards. I have to be certain my hunch is correct".

He dug once more in his bag and came out with a small bronze object, which looked like a folded piece of metal with two holes in it. He placed it in his mouth. The air echoed with the most fantastic bird sounds. It almost seemed like he was singing a song.

"Most of the people here don’t need a whistle. They just use their tongue or their hands, but it has been a long time since I’ve tried this. This device makes it easier to make the whistles loud enough for them to hear. I just told them we mean no harm and that I had some good news for them".

They all wanted to hold the device and study it, but Mallory didn’t let them blow on it. "Better not confuse them".

As out of nowhere a group of five people, all clad in dappled green appeared on the opposite side of the stream, all of them holding bows with arrows strung and pointing right at them. They had made absolutely no sound coming out of the woods. One of them, a tiny grey-haired woman, spoke first: "Who are you? What are you doing here? How do you know our code? You spoke of peace, but everybody can claim that. Did you speak of news? We usually are not interested in news concerning outlanders. Tell me why we shouldn’t shoot all four of you right now and be rid of you".

Mallory made a deep bow and tried to look as respectful as possible. "My name is Mallory. I am a doctor. I know we are trespassing, but we had no other option. Damien, or to be precise his men, are trying to apprehend us. We stole someone from him", pointing at Astrid, "this young lady, daughter of the Harrington family, your lifelong allies. The young man standing behind her aided us in escaping the fort and this child", he pulled Mattie to his side," I think she is one of yours".

On both sides of the creek, there was a sudden absolute silence. Neither group had expected this revelation.

The leader wasn’t immediately convinced they boded no threat. “How do you know she is one of us? She has our colouring, I’ll give you that, but there are enough people outside the Towers who do. How do I know if you are not just trying to soften us up into taking you in, so you can tell Damien exactly how to get to our homes?"

"She was found in the woods on the south side of the mountains near the rail tracks about eight years ago. I was working at the White Fort at that time...", he stopped as an arrow was shot right beside his head to land in the tree behind him.

"Just what I thought, you work for that demon’s spawn, Damien", one of the men accompanying the old woman shouted while knocking his next arrow to his bow. She, her face a mask of fury, without looking back at him, spat: "Ronald, you stupid idiot! You shoot when I tell you to shoot. I want to hear more about the girl first. One more mistake like that and I’ll never take you on surveillance again. You can stay with the women and children, you oaf!" Turning to Mallory: Continue, old man".She stared at Mattie with a pensive look in her eyes.

Mallory put his arm around Mattie, walking a bit closer to the creek. "I’ve been looking after this young lady ever since Damien’s men brought her in. The only thing I know for certain about her is her name: Mathilda. We call her Mattie. Does that mean anything to you?"

The woman staggered a bit and nearly went through her knees were it not for the impetuous Ronald holding her up and steadying her. The latter looked shocked, too and hopeful at the same time.

"Men, put your weapons down! We are going to cross the creek. I want to ask this man some more questions. Why won’t we all sit down except for the little one".

Mattie balled her fists at hearing herself called little and was about to say something. Mallory pushed her forward, telling her to be quiet.

The small band of Dinali crossed over not letting their group out of their sight. Mallory sat down, and so did the others except for Mattie whom he told to go up to the lady.

She studied Mattie’s face and spoke to Mallory: "My name is Elder Jones, and as it happens, my name is Mathilda too. Eight years ago, my grandchild went with her parents to herd their goats in one of the outermost valleys. None of them ever came back. We did look for them for days. Later we heard some of Damien’s tax collectors had tried again to find us. A very black day for our Tribe and especially for my own family. Do you remember anything from before you came to the Fort, my child?"

"She doesn't", Mallory interrupted, "the shock of being left to fend for herself must have wiped her memory. The mind can do that that a certain memory is too harrowing for a person".

The woman addressed herself to Mattie again. "It could all still be a coincidence. May I check something before I can be sure you’re my granddaughter? Can you let me look at your back, child?"

Mattie was getting a bit impatient with all that talk about lost children."I’m not a child. My name is Mattie. I am already twelve, Mallory says".

The elder look gave Mallory a questioning look and beckoned him. "Maybe you can help? Or do you already know what I’m looking for?"

"I think I do. Come on, Mattie, you’re always so proud of them! Let the lady see them too".

With a sigh, Mattie pulled her vest down to reveal a lovely colourful tattoo a flight of butterflies. When they were swimming, she had been wriggling about so much, Astrid and Jonah had not even noticed them. They had been far too busy anyway to pretend not to be seeing each other.

Mattie shoulderblades showed a delicately drawn tattoo of a flock of butterflies. The brightest reds and blues made them look nearly lifelike. They were not alone. Above and below them were two small tattoos, a green and red mountain.

Tears started to roll down Mathilda's cheeks though her face was smiling. She called the other four to come over and look. That was going a bit too far for Mattie, who pulled her shirt back up determined not to be pawed by these strange people. She sat down next to Astrid, her face looking like thunder, and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

Mathilda grabbed Mallory's hand, looking ecstatic:" Thank you! We had lost all hope of ever finding one of them. I wish her parents had made it back too and could see her now".
Her companions were looking at the small band of Mallory with something like awe now. Astrid and Jonah, who had been listening to the exchange, got up pulling Mattie with them and joined Mallory and the Dinali people.

The woman, Mathilda, looked at everybody around her and seemed to come to a decision. "Charles, why don't you run ahead to the village and tell everyone we have a big surprise for them. Ask the people on kitchen duty to prepare food for our guests. I bet they haven't seen a decent meal for a while. Am I right?"

This to Mallory, who nodded his head eagerly. One of her men whispered something in Mathilde's ear. She looked up, looking a bit uncomfortable.

"Before we go, I have to ask you to let us blindfold you. The rest of the tribe first has to agree to let foreigners into our village. In case they want you to leave us. We are cautious not letting strangers know the way to our homes. My apologies".

Mallory assured her it wouldn’t be a problem at all with only Mattie mumbling something about it being stupid. She still complied after Mallory gave her a stern look.

Chapter Thirty-six – Family Reunion

If they thought the last part of their trip hadn’t been easy, they soon found out climbing up narrow mountain paths without being able to see, was a whole other story. Fortunately every time one of them stumbled or nearly walked into a bush, a helping hand shot out to guide them and keep them safe. After what seemed like an endless ascend, their legs burning, they finally heard Mathilda calling them to stop. Around them, they heard exclamations of wonder and anger. The air smelled of cooking fires. After Mathilda had explained why she had brought strangers in their midst vouching for them, each had their blindfolds removed. Blinking their eyes, blinded by the sharp light, Mallory and the rest looked around astonished at what they could see.

Into the steep rocky mountains, people seemed to have carved out complete dwellings for themselves and their life stock. Some of the houses appeared to melt halfway into the rocks and were three or four stories high. Mountain goats and sheep were milling around with the people. Shepherd boys were whistling their dogs trying to herd their flocks to the stables.

Mathilde looked to be in a heated discussion with a grumpy looking man, who was gesticulating wildly and didn’t seem to be pleased with their arrival. The other villagers were just ogling them, murmuring amongst themselves.

"I thought that lady was glad to have found us. Why are they arguing?" Mattie was wondering out loud. On the climb up, she had slowly been absorbing the news she might have found her people. Bright as she was, she had immediately picked up the past tense, when Mathilde mentioned her parents. She didn’t remember much about them, which sometimes made her sad. However, seeing what some of the parents in the fort did to their offspring, not that sad. She always thought herself lucky to have Mallory looking after her. He was strict but never cruel.

"They must have had a lot of trouble with other Midlanders and very wary of outsiders. The others might still think we’re trying to use you to deceive them and give away their position. Let's hope Mathilda can change their minds. If things don't work out, we might have to leave sooner than we planned. But first, let's see what will happen".

 Mallory saw Mathilda, with a thunderous frown on her face, motioning them to come over to where she was confronting the angry man. The powerfully built man was standing with his arms folded across his chest, his face set like a stone mask.
"This is Richard, our leader. Richard, this is doctor Mallory and his companions Astrid, a Harrington, and Jonah, from the village of West Drayton. And this", pointing at Mattie, "Is my granddaughter, Mathilde, who wants to be called Mattie. She has returned to us after eight long years, which should be cause for celebration, not for your grumbling. They’ve escaped imprisonment by Damien and been fleeing ever since. I want them to join us and see how we can help them. I will stand guarantee for them if you want".

Richard didn’t look happy. "The girl, if she really is one of us, can stay. The others will be taken to the foothills. They will have to leave our territory and never come back. I can not be fooled as easily by a sob story as you. You're getting soft, Mathilda, In old age. Damien will never give up trying to find us. This would be just the thing he would cook up. I hope you have at least made sure they didn’t see the path coming up here? If you didn’t, we could never let them go. We don't need more hungry mouths to feed".

"They never saw anything. I will take this issue to the council of the Elders! You might think you can boss us around, but the last time I looked this was still a democracy!” Mathilde was shaking with wrath. "It’s getting dark now. I'll call for a meeting tomorrow w when everyone has learned the good news. We can at least show them some hospitality until then. They can stay with Ronald and me. When my husband was still alive, we never treated people like this. I was making decisions with my husband about the clan when you were still in your cradle so you can stop trying to bully me around. Now, you four, come with me. We’ll give you a nice dinner, but first I would recommend a visit to the bathing cave", she wrinkled her nose in a very suggestive way.

Leaving the thunderous looking clan chief to stew, Mallory and the others followed Mathilda to her home. Stepping inside, they found it looking like a proper house with rooms stretching far into the side of the mountain with a huge fireplace already heating a large copper pot from which delicious smells made their mouths water.

"Margie! Take these good people to our bathing cave. Make sure they have everything they need, I’ll hunt down some more appropriate clothes for them to wear."

A little, round woman, cheeks bright red from excitement, shot forward and beckoned them to follow her. Mathilda seemed used people obeyed her without any questions. Mallory hoped that would be the case tomorrow as well when the elders would get together to decide over their fate.

Margie was nervously chatting away, telling them she was married to Roland, the eldest son now of Mathilde, which would make her Mattie's aunt. Charles was her own brother. He had lived with Mathilda’s family since she married Roland as was the custom.

"And now I will be a proper auntie! I’m so excited! Roland always looked up to his big brother, Mattie’s dad, and was inconsolable after his brother went out one day with his family and never came back. We have never been blessed ourselves with children. It will be so nice to have a little girl in the family!" She looked so hopeful and happy at Mattie that the latter decided to let the remark go.

They took all their dirty travel clothes off, to slowly sink one after the other into a hot pool lying at the back of a cave. Margie in the meanwhile busied herself with soap and towels and then disappeared with their clothes only to arrive a little later with a pile of clean ones. After asking if she could do anything else for them, she left them to enjoy a hot bath in peace.

"So, what do you think? Will they let us stay? What if they decide against it? " Jonah sounded very worried. He knew they would have to hide with Astrid for at least a few weeks. The people of Midland would be occupied with their summer raids soon and not willing to put much time and effort in being on the lookout for them. Damien's promise of a reward would soon pale against the profits of a successful foray into the lands of their enemies. The enemy as in people who were willing to work hard and prosper.

Mallory not wanting to worry them, had already been thinking about the worst-case scenario of having to leave the Dinali tomorrow, decided to postpone telling them his plans.
"Let's cross that bridge when we get to it. Mathilda seems to have a lot of influence. We should thank our lucky stars I was right and Mattie is related to her. What I remember about the Dinali is that they are very strict but also honourable. The way they treated us today comes from having to live in constant fear. They must have heard the stories about his men extorting vast amounts of money and goods, making it difficult to survive, or hauling children away to the slave markets.
It takes a certain ruthlessness to keep your people safe in these circumstances. Let's hope that Robert can be persuaded by the more tolerant people on the council to take us in for at least a few days. We might have to promise to stay within the boundary of the village or maybe even confined to this house. It will make it easier for them to let us go later if we don't know the exact location of this place, so don't go and try to be smart by sneaking off without telling me first. Our lives could depend on it".

"Okay, but I will tell you right now, I am not going to stay with these people, who treat me like a baby, who needs looking after! When you all leave, I’m coming with you!"

"But, Mattie, these people are your family. They will love you and keep you out of danger. Keep you safe", Astrid looked at the scowling young girl not understanding why anybody wouldn’t rather be with their relatives. She would do anything to be at home again with her’s.

"They don't feel like family. Mallory is my family. They didn’t keep me out of danger six years ago, did they? That lady, who's supposed to be my grandmother, seems very nice and all that. Still, I will die of boredom if I have to stay here cooped up between the mountains and constantly looked after". Mattie sounded more and more desperate. Her eyes were filling with tears, which she swiped away with an angry gesture trying to look determined but looking more like a frightened child.
She jumped out of the pool, tore a towel out of Margie's hands. Without so much as a thank you, the girl accepted the bundle of clothes her aunt handed her and stormed off. Margie with a hurt expression in her eyes shook her head and left them to it.

Astrid wanted to go after Mattie, but Mallory put a restraining hand on her arm.

"Leave her. It must have been an enormous shock for her, finding out about her parents and meeting her family. She must have always imagined it to happen very differently, and so did I. She’s a very resilient child. Once she’s had the chance to get to know her family a bit better, she might change her mind. She’s never known anything but fighting her corner in the fort. I don't know what happened to her before they found her. It has given her little cause to trust anybody she doesn’t know well. I’m getting out and will see you in the main chamber" “. Mallory got out with a groan and helped himself to the towels and another pile of clothes, leaving Astrid and Jonah still luxuriating in the warm bath.

Being alone just the two of them for the first time in the past crazy days, they both felt a bit shy. Jonah was the first to break the silence.

"We should get out as well, I think. How are you feeling? Your eye looks nearly normal again and your other bruises seem to have gone as well", he blushed realising his words meant he had been looking at her body.

Astrid, who’d never before felt any inhibition about bathing in mixed company, felt a bit conscious of her body and quickly rose from the fragrant water covering herself with one of the large towels. She did answer him though:" I feel much better, thank you. My sight is still blurry. Mallory said my eye might take a bit longer to heal. I’m going to look for Margie and see if I can help with the food or something. Maybe you could find Mattie and persuade her to join us in the main chamber?", at which point she fled the bath chamber, leaving Jonah with a whole lot of feelings.

She’d attracted him from the first moment he saw her on that beach. She’d seem like a vision, coming out of the sea all golden and glinting with seawater. He felt his body stirring at the thought and decided it was time for him to get out too and stop thinking about her in this manner. He refused to be like Solo! He felt Astrid liked him back a little. He sincerely hoped it would become more than that.

‘We’re so different. I will try my hardest to make her like me. First, there’ll be a lot of problems to solve, so I better stop being an idiot. I am too soft. Yaya is right. Wonder where she and Solo are now? I hope Damien hasn’t punished them for our escape. Solo deserves everything he gets, but she is still my sister. Not much I can do about that now’.

He shrugged his shoulders, got dressed and went to join the others. There was work to do.

Chapter Thirty-seven– Family dinner

Returning to the main cave, Jonah found Mathilde hadn’t only invited her own family but all her Dinali friends, whom she hoped to persuade to stand by her tomorrow during the meeting.
The table was laden with food. Everybody seemed to be in a festive mood with the diners all trying to talk to the newcomers. It was so rare to have outsiders in their midst, and they juggled to start a conversation with their guests. Everyone seemed to want to know who they were and where they travelled from. It seemed more like a big party than an assembly of people who tomorrow were going to help decide their fate.

Jonah saw that Astrid surrounded by young men and women from the Dinali. He decided to join her ostensibly to give her some support but to be honest with himself, to make sure none of the young men became too friendly with her. He sat down right beside her, worming his way between her and some village lout.

Astrid gave him a grateful look and introduced him as 'my friend Jonah, who has saved me from my captors' which gave him a warm glow inside. Trying to make it look like Astrid and he belonged together didn’t deter some of the more forward girls to throw him coy looks and attempt to get his attention under the ruse of offering him a drink and some food. Jonah was not to be distracted and waved them away, only having eyes for the lovely girl next to him. Margie, who had spotted him coming in, brought him some refreshments and winked at him to let him know she had his back.

Astrid, who caught the exchange, took his hand under the table and squeezed it. Her cheeks were glowing from the rather strong apple cider she was having. For the first time, her eyes shining, she didn't look exhausted or sad. She was just a young girl having fun.

Jonah’s breath caught in his throat at the beauty of her smile. At that moment, he knew, he would do everything in his power to make her happy and keep that smile on her face even if she was way out of his league. He looked over at Mallory, who’d been sitting next to Mattie. Either to protect her from all the attention of her newfound family or to protect them from her habit of puncturing holes in people who got on her nerves.

The doctor stood up to approach Mathilda and said a few words to her after which the latter rang a small gong and in the ensuing silence addressed the whole company with the words: "Good people. Tomorrow will be an important day for us all. I know we’ve suffered from the hands of outsiders in the past years, and I’m sure Richard is just trying to keep us safe, but I hope too that we’ve not forgotten our old laws of hospitality and decency. These good people here, have, with danger to their own lives, brought my granddaughter Mathilde back to us. The only thing they ask from us, a few weeks of respite while staying in our community, we should be able to allow them at least. Tomorrow we will put this to the vote in the village council meeting. I hope you’ll all remember what they did for my family and show these travellers that the Dinali know how to behave in a civilised way. Now let's all bid each other goodnight. I’ll see you all tomorrow at noon in the square where the elders will decide if we can keep these people safe. I hope you’ll not let me down. Thank you!"

Margie popped up behind Astrid and Jonah asking them to come with her. She led them to a large bedroom with Mallory soon joining them. The girl had more or less politely declined Mathilda's offer to sleep with her cousins. She dangled on Astrid’s arm, begging her to sleep with her and no one else.
The room looked very comfortable with one large bed in the corner and two couches draped in colourful plaids. There was even still a fire glowing in the hearth. Hidden behind a beautifully embroidered tapestry, they found a small washroom again supplied with everything they might want to refresh themselves.

The men left the double bed to Astrid and Mattie and made themselves comfortable on the couches. All the exercise and excitement of the day, feeling safe for not having to keep a constant eye open for people trying to take them, soon had everyone fast asleep. Even Mallory's loud snoring could not keep them awake.

Chapter Thirty-eight – The Dinali

The next morning, long after sunrise, Astrid woke up with a jolt. She desperately needed to pee. Seeing Jonah and Mallory still fast asleep and not wanting to disturb them by using the privy in their room, she silently slid out of bed, got dressed and found her way downstairs. Mattie had already disappeared somewhere. Following the delicious smell of freshly baked bread, she found the kitchen where Margie and Mathilda and two other women were already preparing breakfast for everyone.

Mathilda looked up, smiling fondly at her:" Young Mattie was up early and has eaten with the children. Most of our men are still busy with the animals. The women are milking the goats. They’ll soon join us for breakfast. Are the others awake, too?"

Astrid shook her head in denial and shyly asked where she would find the bathing cave as she’d forgotten being too tired last night to pay attention.

"Oh dear, yes, yesterday and the days before must have been exhausting for you. Margie here, will take you there again and provide you with soap and a towel to freshen up. This place is like a maze for people who didn’t grow up here".

Margie dried her hands on her apron and beckoned Astrid to follow her. She seemed such a lovely woman, doing so her best to make her feel at home.

Margie stayed with Astrid while the latter washed her hands and face and tried to comb the tangles out of her hair. It was a mess after not being brushed for nearly a week. It was almost impossible to get a comb through it.
Chattering throughout about nothing and everything, Margie, offered to do brush hair for her.

Stroking it, she admired Astrid’s hair."It’s so lovely. I bet you never had it cut. The colour reminds me of autumn leaves. I wish my hair were like that".

Astrid glanced up at her, taking in the homely figure with the kindest face she’d ever seen and said generously: "Your hair is lovely too. That silvery-white, in contrast with your beautiful skin, is awesome. I’ve never seen anything like it".

Margie laughed. "Well, there’s nothing special about it here. Everyone’s hair is like mine. It's probably why your doctor presumed Mattie belonged to our people. She has the beauty of her mother to go with it. Joan was an exquisite woman. She and my brother Paul made a beautiful couple. Joan was Mathilde's daughter. I met my husband at their wedding."

Astrid nearly lulled back into sleep again by the gentle combing of her hair, and the soft voice of Margie suddenly felt sick in her stomach and flew up to stand retching over the sink. "I’m sorry", she gasped, "Must’ve been all the rich food yesterday. Drinking all that cider hasn’t helped either, I think. I’m not used to eating a lot anymore. The last few days we’ve been surviving on what we could find in the fields". She kept heaving until she felt she was empty down to her toes.

Margie was studying her intensely with a small frown on her face. "Have you been feeling sick before?"

"Well, before in my old life only after eating something that had gone off. But you mean recently? No, this is the first time. Why do you ask?"

Margie suddenly busied herself with the wet towels and didn’t look her in her eyes, mumbling: "Never mind. It was probably all the rich food. You’re not used to the spices we use either. Let me give you some fennel tea to settle your stomach. Just have a light breakfast this morning. You’ll soon feel as right as rain again".

Astrid straightening up, felt rather hungry again even though she’d just been sick. She rinsed her mouth and followed Margie back to the dining room.

Jonah and Mallory were already helping themselves to large quantities of the crusty bread topped with homemade cheese, washing it all down with the blackest of teas. They made room for her between themselves.

Astrid decided to heed Margie's advice and ate heartily but slowly and was glad when Margie poured her the fennel tea without remarking on what had happened. When she wondered aloud where Mattie could have gotten to, one of the women told her the girl had gone outside. She’d some of her cousins, who wanted to show her their dogs and cats. Even at the ripe old age of twelve, she couldn’t resist this invitation.

"I was never able to let her have a cat or dog while we were living in the fort. Some of the other children were very cruel to animals. It would have meant nothing but heartache to her if something horrible had happened to them. She’s still a child at heart, but don't tell her I said that! We’ll probably see her later in the square. I've told her yesterday not to go wandering outside the village perimeter and hope she’ll heed me. I made it clear to her it could endanger us all if she didn’t heed me".

After breakfast, all three of them offered to help clear up the kitchen but were shooed away by the women, who probably wanted to have a lovely natter about these mysterious guests.
Before they left Mathilda insisted they put on some lovely, warm, colourful felt coats. Stepping outside, they were very grateful for Mathilda’s foresight as the weather this high up was still very cold this early in the morning.
They found Mattie outside, surrounded by a gaggle of children, who, she told them, were going to show her the view from the highest window in the village.

"They said we could see the whole village with the square from there. We’ll be able to see what’s outside the village without going there. Please come with us! Please?"

All three decided it would be a good idea to get some exercise after all that eating and followed the group of children chattering like a flock of little birds.

It was so lovely to see Mattie so uninhibited, not continually looking out for danger and only having fun. After quite a bit of a climb, which made their sore muscles felt, they took in a magnificent view all over the high valley where the village was situated. They could see the main square was at the bottom of a rocky bowl with on all sides the doors and windows of the cave houses hewn out of the grey-streaked rocks. Looking westwards they could see a large, cobalt blue lake, fed by many streams burbling down the surrounding mountains. The peaks of which still golden in the morning sun hovered over them like majestic sentinels.

"I wondered how Mathilda and her family managed to have such a marvellous supply of clean water running straight to their house. They must have rigged up some pumping system to here", Mallory mused.

Though the village itself was already on a very high altitude, there were still higher mountains towering over it providing a natural barrier for the Dinali to keep them out of sight to the outside world.
Looking down in the square, Mallory could see a large crowd gathering, which reminded him that they should make their way back down to be on time for the meeting. It would decide their fate.

Chapter Thirty-nine – Solo and Yaya follow the trail

By the time Solo and Yaya arrived where according to their instructions, the exit of the catacombs would be, they still had to spend precious time rooting around trees and shrubs before actually finding it. It was still dark. They started to feel the exhaustion from having been awake for more than a day and the stress of having to face Damien if they failed in finding the fugitives.
Yaya was only giving the appearance of looking properly, while Solo was stomping around messing up any trails the fugitives could have left behind. The finally discovered the exit of the tunnel, but it was too dark to see any telltale sign their quarry had been exiting the underground passage here. Only after the sun became strong enough to filter through the leaves of the dense forest, Yaya heard Solo give a triumphant shout.

"Here! I was right! They did go east. I can see their footprints".

"Their trail will be cold by now, are you sure we should keep following them towards the Towers"', Yaya couldn't help herself trying once more to persuade Solo to go back. She wanted to give her brother a better chance to escape caption. Besides she was desperate for news from her village which they would only find in Amersham.

Solo didn’t even deign to answer her but strutted with renewed energy into the forest, leaving her no other option but to follow. The following night after a whole day, wrestling through the undergrowth, they made camp in a small clearing, both too tired to argue about the fruitlessness of their search or anything more than eat some of their rations and fall asleep rolled up in their blankets.

Yaya felt she’d only slept a few minutes when she felt a hand clamping over her mouth and before she could pull her knife, she heard Solo whispering in her ear: "Quiet! I hear people!"

Yaya fully awake immediately rolled off her blanket, took her bow and nocked an arrow, all the while keeping low and following Solo who was crawling out of the clearing into the bushes. The latter had his axe in one hand and his gutting knife in the other pushing himself forward on his elbows.
He must have forgotten Damien's tech weapon or preferred his own. He must have been sleeping with one ear open.

"They’ll be coming from the other side of the clearing", he whispered, "Let's split up, so we can come at them from two sides".

After moving some distance apart, they each hid behind one of the many enormous trees. They didn’t have to wait too long before they saw their nightly visitors. Four men appeared on the other side of the clearing. One of them was Marcel, one of Damien's inner circle and his right hand.

Yaya didn't think Damien sent them to help Solo and her in their search. It was more likely that after he had calmed down a bit, Damien must have decided not to trust them after all and sent some of his men after them to make sure they did what they promised or to make them vanish. She looked in the direction of Solo and saw him making a throat slash with his hand nodding at the men. He must’ve come to the same conclusion.

Everything that had stood between them disappeared, and they moved in position. It was what they, as Midlanders, trained for since they were children. Yaya felt a calm coming over her and knew she was entering the state she would not come out off until she’d removed the threat to herself and hers or died.

Moments like this, she felt such a strong bond with Solo, feeling they were one unit, both willing to go to the utmost to save yourself and the other.

The idiots didn’t seem to be worried about anyone hearing them coming. They must feel safe in the knowledge they were double the numbers. She wondered if they carried tech weapons.
They sounded like a herd of swine. One of the four was complaining loudly about being tired and not having had anything to eat yet.

Yaya heard Marcel, who was walking in front, say:"Stop your fucking moaning! We can't be far behind. They were lucky to have hitched a ride with the train, but we made good time using the underground route. You’re all making enough noise to wake up the dead. I wanted to surprise them, but they must have heard you coming a mile away. Be prepared for them to put up a good fight. No one wants to die before their time if they can help it ".

It confirmed what Solo and she thought. Yaya, after one more look in the direction of Solo, pulled back on her bow and let the first arrow fly. Even though it was still nearly pitch dark and her target had been wearing dark clothes, she heard a thump and a gargle. Marcel dropped like a block. An arrow was piercing his throat. In his vanity or stupidity, he had omitted to take off his sparkling brooch of office, giving her the perfect target.

The other three froze before hurrying back to the relative safety of the tree line. But not fast enough to evade Solo’s axe cutting the arm of one of them off at the elbow. Spurting blood he fell not far from Marcel, crying and grabbing his arm. It wouldn’t take long for him to bleed out.
Yaya and Solo both knew they would have to kill the others too before they could get back to report to Damien, who would undoubtedly call an all-out hunt for them.

Shooting a quick look at the bleeding man confirming he was a goner, Solo was already crashing ahead of her in the direction the men had taken. Shit! He never stopped to think first. For all she knew, those two could be waiting for him just behind the tree line. They had to stay together now the numbers were equal. The thought hadn't left her mind before she heard the unmistakable sounds of a fight. Forgetting her own counsel, she ran to where she’d seen Solo disappear. Before she reached the trees, one of the men, a fat brute, came charging out of the woods right at her. He was waving a mace bellowing his rage.

Yaya threw her bow down, no time to nock another arrow, and ran full speed at him fast enough to dive under the arm holding the weapon, getting close to him, which he clearly didn’t expect. On her way ducking past him she stuck one of her knives in the armpit of the arm holding the mace. He dropped it with a confused look on his face. She knew a lot of Damien's bullies relied only on their strength and weren’t used to use their head during a fight.

Always being smaller and lighter than most of the men she had sparred with, in the village, she’d learnt to be smart and fast. Before the man had a chance to realise he had underestimated her, she’d turned as quick as a flash behind him and planted her other knife deep in his neck. Without making a sound, he crashed to the forest floor.

Still earing the sounds of weapons clashing together from within the trees, she pulled her knives out of the now very dead man and carefully approached the two men still fighting

Solo was a great fighter, but like the man she had just brought down, he trusted too much on his strength and made mistakes letting his anger get the better of him. The man who’d decided to tackle Solo was another giant of a man, though he seemed to be a bit more wily than her own opponent had been. The men were both bleeding from various cuts and kept slashing at each other. Solo with his axe and knife, the other with a very dangerous looking scimitar. He must be a dropout from Kent. Those guys were renowned fighters and horsemen.

To her horror, she saw Solo was already limping. He had taken a deep cut in his upper thigh. She didn't want to distract him, so silently crept around them until she got behind Solo's assailant. Just after he’d slashed another gash in Solo, this time cutting his chest, she yelled and jumped forward neatly sticking her knives on both sides of Solo’s opponent’s torso. Before he realised what happened to him, Solo sprung forward practically decapitating him with his axe. For good measure, he kicked the head away from the body and addressed her in his usual grouchy way."What was keeping you, woman?" he panted.

Yaya knew he probably felt a bit annoyed she had to come to his aid but decided that if she wanted to wait for a thank you, she would wait forever. "I had a bit of clearing up to do myself, mate. Let me have a look at those wounds. A few of them will need stitching. I’ll have to find water somewhere to wash them out before I do anything else. These guys use their weapons for all sort of shit. I didn’t have time to take my medicines with me. I’ll need to collect some. Give me your bag and waterbottle".

Too tired to resist starting to feel faint, Solo didn't argue and just handed his bag and weapons to Yaya.

"I’ll wash out your wounds with our drinking water for now. When it gets light again, you can rest, and I’ll look for the nearest brook. Keeping on following Jonah in your state will be plain stupid now. You wouldn’t get very far".

Solo looked up at her starting to say something but probably thought the better of it. She put his head on his bag and blanket and began to tend to his injuries. The only thing she could do now was clean his wounds tying them tightly with the bandages she had made from one of his shirts. Tomorrow she’d cut some oak bark to stem the bleeding even more. Thank the Lady, they were in a forest and not in some dessert. That nasty cut in his leg she would treat with Goldenrod and if she could find it, some wild garlic. This way, Solo had a chance to keep it from getting infected.

Yaya now felt very grateful for her mother’s lessons. The latter had been known throughout the village for her knowledge of herbal lore. At the time she had to sit through them, she’d always protested how boring they were and couldn't she go outside and be with her friends. Their family never had the money to pay for treatment in one of the convents. No one in their community had, so Sarah's skills had been much in demand. Thinking back to her mother's never-ending love for her and her brother, she got tears in her eyes. She wiped them away angrily. She would go back to West Drayton! She had to know if her mother had survived the raid. Solo could do what he wanted, but she had made up her mind. He probably didn't have much choice either than to stay with her, the condition he was in!

They had more or less burned their bridges anyway here in Midland. After she had made sure about her mother, they would have to leave, the faster they got out, the better. Damien would not rest until he caught them after they had killed his men. She hoped with all her heart Jonah would make it out too. She would so much like to see him again, no matter what stupid things he had done. But first, she needed to find out about what had happened in her village and who had made it. Feeling a bit safer now they had dealt with this latest threat, Yaya lay down close to Solo, who had already succumbed to deep sleep. His body felt hot. She hoped she could sort out any infection he might have caught.But that would have to wait until the next day.

Chapter Forty – The Decision

Down in the square, Mallory and his troupe had to push through the crowd to get in front.

A high dais sat on the square whereon he could see five people seated behind an intricately carved table. Mathilda was amongst them and gave them an encouraging smile when she saw them arrive. Robert looked very red in the face and was still whispering to his neighbour, an ancient wrinkly man. Silence fell when one of the men standing beside the dais hit a drum, making the deep sound reverberating between the mountains.

Astrid felt all eyes directed at her and her friends. It made her feel very uncomfortable. Jonah pretended not to be bothered and took her hand, squeezing it as if to say:" I’m here, don’t worry." Mallory looked as unperturbed as always and stepped right in front of the five elders as if deciding the best course would be not to show their judges any fear.
The reception by Mathilda's family yesterday and the many friendly faces around them gave him hope they would come out of this meeting unscathed. It all depended on how much clout Mathilda had with the other council members.

Robert rose from his seat and pointed at the four of them. "Here before you are four people from outside our borders, who claim sanctuary. They say they are fleeing from Damien, the monster from the North. One of them an Islander girl, the other two Midlanders, the little one may be a Dinali. These people and the Butterfly clan claim her to be Mathilda's granddaughter, stolen from us, all those years ago, when we were under attack from Damien's thugs. The only way we’ve been able to survive to today is by not letting anyone get out again after trespassing on our territory. It would take only one person to get out and tell the world about us, and we’ll be doomed. Paying crippling taxes and living in poverty, or being exterminated by that monster. Our children led away into slavery. I swore never to allow that to happen!
Therefore I want to propose to keep the child here, we can hopefully still retrain her, but put the other three to death. The fact they have the child proves they must know Damien. How else did she end up in their company? It would be the perfect ruse, pretending to return her, to make us trust them and then to leave here to go back to tell that villain where we live. As this is a crucially important decision for our whole community, I want to leave the final verdict to every adult in our compound instead of letting the Council of Elders make the decision!"

This announcement made the other council members sit up straight looking around as if startled by Robert’s proposition. Mathilda rose from her seat, clearly seething with anger.

"As much as I respect the opinion of our fellow Dinali as you do,Robert, this is a matter of life and death. Never before have such all critical judgements been dependent on the whim of the general populace. These three people have risked their lives and suffered hardship to return my granddaughter to me. I am sure she belongs to my family. I’ve seen the proof. She has our family’s totem on her back. Look at her. Have you ever seen hair and skin like that on outsiders? I have listened to these people and seen with my own eyes the scars, Damien and his minions have given them. The eldest of them is a doctor, who once worked in the monastery and has been instrumental at the little one's safe return. The young woman is the eldest daughter of the Harrington family. Even here in our remote village, we know that name. The young man with them? Yes, he is a Midlander, but", and here she stopped to silence the grumbles at her admission Jonah was one of their enemies," he is just a simple fisherman. He got caught up in this situation and has given up everything he loves to help others survive. It would cost him his life if he ever had to go back to his people, so there won’t be any chance of him betraying us. I vote to let the elders decide on their fate because I know they represent the will of our people!".

After Mathilda sat down again, Astrid heard a lot of discussions starting behind them until Robert stood up and called for quiet for him to speak.

"The council shall first decide if we’re going to have a general ballot or if they want to take this decision themselves. I trust my fellow council members to do their best for all of you and not just for their own family!", here looking pointedly at Mathilda. "Do you want to be safe and live a good life? Vote to have these liars put to death for trespassing our territory. Do you want to risk your family's future and every day look over your shoulder for Damien's men to come and destroy us, let them stay or even worse stay and later leave to tell everybody our location? I want to remind the council members when they decide to think hard about the risks to their family and friends. Their lives might depend on it. I, Robert, think it would be better to leave it up to every man and woman to decide on this issue but I’ll let you honourable members to decide for yourselves".

The elders, except for Mathilda and the ancient man beside Robert, looked very uncomfortable. They could hear a lot of people yelling "we want to decide" or " we have a right to make this decision" or just chanting "ballot!ballot!"

Robert smiled and looked very satisfied with himself.

Mathilda had not seen this coming and was expecting the worst. If only her husband had been here, things would have gone quite differently. Most Dinali still had trouble excepting a woman as head of a family. She worried it would make the outcome of a ballot not go in her favour. Before she could repeat her appeal, the councilmember next to her rose from his seat. He looked very frail but surprised our friends by bellowing with a booming, deep voice:" I have never heard such balderdash in my life! Even though I’ve been around longer than any of you! As Mathilda here says, the elders decide on life and death. Especially when the decision does not only affect one family but the whole community, we will not set a precedent for the future by leaving judgement to every man and his dog. We might as well do away with this council altogether! No, as the eldest on the committee, I have two votes, which I will cast now in favour of keeping these fugitives alive and give them temporary sanctuary. If Mathilda believes the girl is her granddaughter, I see no problem welcoming her back into our tribe. Concerning the others though, and here I must side with caution, they can stay here until they are ready to travel again. We will blindfold them and bring them to the Silver Showers falls from where they can go south. Have we become mindless animals like Damien and his ilk? I trust my colleagues here on the council to agree with me and decide likewise". He sat down again after giving everyone on the assembly a stern look.

Mallory turned to Astrid and Jonah, looking more relaxed:" Let's hope the old boy can convince the others. I don't know if a ballot would be in our favour. Too many families have lost dear ones to outsiders. They’ve only known peace by being ruthless. Robert won’t be willing to diminish his power on the council by abolishing it. The chairman cleverly played that! Now we can only wait. Mathilda explained to me the council members are going to put a black or white marble in a bag. If black wins, we die, if white wins, the rest of us besides Mattie will have to leave here sooner than I wanted. At least Mattie will be safe any which way they decide".

Mattie, who’d been listening, pulled him down by his sleeve and whispered loudly in his ear: "I will NOT stay here!"

He stroked her hair and whispered back: "Shall we first see what the verdict will be? We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it".

Astrid pulled the girl in front of her and put her arms around her to comfort her.

One of the villagers reached out to the judges with a pole, a red velvet bag dangling from it. Each of the councillors dropped their ballot into the bag without showing anybody the colour. The decision would be anonymous. After collecting the votes, the same man took the pouch of the pole and handed it to the village elder.

In front of him stood a clear glass bowl. One by one, the marbles were taken from the bag and put into the bowl. There was a general gasp from the public when they saw all the balls were white except for one, no guesses whose it was.

With the same loud voice, the chairman proclaimed the result of the ballot. "Five white, one black. The council has spoken! I won’t have to point out to Mathilda these people will be her full responsibility while they are here. I think three days should suffice to make these people ready to travel. I’ll appoint the men and women who’ll escort them to our border at the Silver Falls ".

Looking at Mallory and his companions:" We hope we haven’t put our trust in you only for you to betray it later. Once you leave our borders, you’ll never return. Next time I’ll kill you myself. And you, little lady, your grandmother is one of the bravest and kindest people in our tribe. Obey her, and she will make sure you will turn out to be an excellent addition to our community".

Before Mattie could say anything about the subject, Mallory bowed and thanked him. He shooed them back to Mathilde's house people making way for them with some of them clapping him on his shoulder while others looked a bit disgruntled. In a way, it would be good to leave here soon. Their mood might swing the other way one day when Robert had had more time to stir them up.

Back at the cave house, he told Astrid and Jonah he needed to have a serious talk with Mattie. They should go and make themselves scarce for a bit.

"Make sure you to take one of Mathilda's relatives with you if you want to go further than the village. I don't trust Robert and his followers not to take the law into their own hands ".

He signalled Mattie to follow him upstairs to the room they stayed last night. Her face looked like a thunder cloud. She didn’t like people to tell her what to do. Mallory sat her down on one of the chairs in front of the fire. He took the one opposite it.

"Right, I understand you want to have some say about what’s going to happen to you when we leave here", holding up his hand when he saw that Mattie immediately wanted to say something," wait! I have not finished yet. You must realise by now I’ve always looked out for you since Damien brought you to me. You were so small but still had managed to survive for weeks on your own. It took me a long time to make you trust me, to even speak to me. I found out you couldn't remember how you got to where they found you. You could barely remember from where you came. I’ve tried to raise you to become a good human being. Not easy in that place. When you stay here, I will miss you very much, but I’ll never ever forget you. Haven’t we be lucky to find your kin and find out what had happened to you all those years ago. Now you have the opportunity to grow up to become the beautiful and decent woman I know you’ll be. Your grandmother is respected here. Life will be far more comfortable for you than it has been before. You’ll never want for anything. Most important, you’ll be safe. I can't offer you all that on the road ahead of us. Jonah and I need to get Astrid home, which will make this trip dangerous and our lives uncertain. I sometimes even fear there is a chance we won't come out of this alive. Knowing you to be safe will make it much easier for me to keep going. I don't care much about saving my own skin, but the thought of one day having to choose between your safety that of Astrid or Jonah's would be impossible. That hesitation could cost us all our lives. Please don't immediately decide now what you want. We have three days to get our strength back. Do me a favour and join your cousins and their friends and try to get to know your grandmother and your aunt and uncle. These people love you very much too. They have suffered a lot the past years, not knowing where you were or what had happened to you. Can you at least try it? I promise before we leave we will have another talk, and you can tell me if you still want to come with us".

During his speech, Mattie’ face had relaxed, her body slumping. When he finished, looking at her with such love in his eyes, there was nothing else she could do but give him a big hug, promising she would do what he asked. "But if I want to come, you will let me, won’t you?" Promise? She still wasn’t sure if he would, though wanted to believe him.

Mallory cuddled her back and scraped his throat. Definitely. I’ve never lied to you and am not going to start now. Go and see if you can find your friends while I’ll let your grandmother know what we have discussed. I hope I can convince her you’re mature enough to make this decision for yourself".

Mattie ran off, leaving Mallory to have a challenging conversation with Mathilda.

Chapter Forty- one – Getting to know Jonah

"Shall we have a look at the lake?" Astrid looked at Jonah, hoping he would join her. She needed some fresh air as she still felt a bit queasy but didn’t want to go there by herself, followed by this Roderick guy. According to Mathilda, he was there to make sure the other Dinali didn’t try to get rid of them before anyone could prevent it. She had the feeling he also had to make sure they didn’t wander too far and give those same people a genuine reason to assassinate them and spiriting their bodies away.

Jonah, who wanted nothing more than to spend time with this lovely girl, who again looked like the goddess he had seen rising out of the sea that day, readily agreed and they set off in the direction of the lake.

As the village was high up in the mountain, you could see the lake from practically every street. After a short stroll, Astrid and Jonah were gazing at a vast expanse of azure waters surrounded by majestic, snow-topped mountains mirroring themselves in the clear waters.

"It’s called the Chilly Lake", Roderick seemed finally have got up the courage say something. He was a skinny young man, no more than sixteen or so, and one of the large brood of Mathilda's clan. "There used to be just low hills here called the Chilterns. Plus the water stays ice-cold even in the summer".

He blushed and looked nervously at them as if hoping he had not spoken out of turn. Feeling a bit sorry for him, they asked him a few more questions about the village and the valley, which seemed to put him more at ease. Soon the conversation petered out, and he sat down on the edge of the boardwalk with his feet dangling above the water, pretending he wasn’t keeping an eye on them.

Seeing a bench slightly higher up on the shore, Jonah and Astrid sat down, both not sure what to say to each other.

It was Astrid who broke the silence first: "Do you miss your family? I mean, why did you come with us? You could’ve just stayed with your sister and her friend". She needed to know if she could trust him. He’d been one of the Midlanders, who robbed her home and hauled her away from everything dear to her.

Jonah swallowed a few times, not sure if he should tell her everything. Saying the wrong thing might completely destroy his chances of ever making her take any interest in becoming his friend.

"You’ve met my whole family. I do miss my mum. I even miss my sister. You’ve only seen her from her worst side. Solo has that effect on her. She just wants to show him she’s as unscrupulous as he is. My mother and I always wonder why Yaya chose him as her mate. But she has looked after my mum and me, making sure the other people of the clan leave us alone. She sorta loves us but at the same time hates us as her feelings for us make her vulnerable", he looked wistfully out over the water as if to find inspiration on how to tell her the reason he left with their little band, sacrificing his own future and life for a stranger.

"As for not staying in the fort with Solo and my sister. All my life I’ve felt I didn’t belong in West Drayton. I was the only one in our village, who wanted to know what lay beyond it or Midland. You see, my mother is not from there. One day my father returned from a raid and brought her with him. He kept her as his consort. My father was the guardsman of our village. Before he died, Yaya was completely another person. I never knew him. I was just a baby when he died. My mother practically raised me on her own and often told me stories about her birthplace. Listening to my mother’s tales, Dorset seems to be a magical place even though their village chief mistreated everyone. She told me she was relieved my father stole her away from there. She taught me to read and about herbs. Not many in West Drayton have any knowledge either. They often called her a witch but never in my father’s hearing. They had no problem though finding her when one of them needed medical help. Being her son wasn’t easy. If not for my best friend Wulf, the other children would have bullied me every day of my life just for being different. I miss him too. He’s looked after me when Yaya was not around. You would have liked him", he turned to look at her his eyes crinkling with a smile thinking about his bighearted friend.

"I’m rambling. You wanted to know why I decided to stay with you? Somehow I feel I have to make up for what we did to you. Taking you from your home and letting Solo hurt you. I was guilty just by being there and later by not being able to protect you. You don’t trust and even might hate me for it. I totally understand that. Nothing I will do can change what happened to you, but I hope and will try my utmost to make sure, nothing bad happens to you ever again. I swear on my father's grave that I’ll do everything in my power to help bring you home again. It’s the least I can do", his eyes were bright with tears and with a fire she had not seen in him before. He sounded so sincere.

But he had been there and had been part of it. He must know too the basement door had been left open by Marion and her in their hurry to get back to the house. The guilt had been eating away at her. She needed to know if that was the reason they had been able to come inside and take her, and her life had started to go so horribly wrong.

"How did you manage to get in? There are soldiers at all the gates, and the walls are too high to climb without being spotted".

Looking even more uncomfortable, he gave a deep sigh:" I saw you and your friend on the beach and told the others about it. When we went back later, the door was still unlocked. I thought it would stop anyone getting hurt if we could just walk in, steal what we could and get out again without anyone noticing or starting a fight. I was wrong. I didn’t know Solo had made a deal with Damien as payback to your father for what he did to Damien's family. He was planning to ask a very high ransom and promised Solo a large cut. Solo needs money to take his brother for an operation. Still, if I wouldn’t have said anything, all this wouldn't have happened. We were only there to get information out about your next raid on the Midlanders. There was talk it would probably take place after your wedding. Large gatherings of the Gen people often result in an attack on us. We needed to know if this was true so we could move our village away from the coast".

Here was her confirmation. Jonah had been instrumental in getting Solo and his gang in, but she was just as guilty. Normally that gate would have been closed securely. Not many people even knew about it.

"When they took me, I smelt smoke. Do you know what happened exactly? I need to know if anybody was hurt that night".

"I stayed with the boat, as I normally do because they all know I have no taste for killing. My group needs me to pilot the boat through the straights, so I don't know what happened up in the house. Solo nor Yaya wanted to tell me. They just told me things had gone as planned and that no one would be quick to pursue us".

She wanted to believe him. She desperately needed a friend. He had only been kind to her ever since she woke up to find herself in that boat. She needed to talk about this with somebody who wasn’t part in any of it. She was going to speak with Mallory after dinner. He might know if she could trust Jonah. She stood up and straightened her clothes.

"We'd better get back and give that poor boy a break. He must be bored by now. I promised Margie I would help with the preparations of the meal. I don't want to be seen as a scrounger", she hurried off before he could say anything else followed by Roderick.

He hoped their talk had gone some way to at least becoming friends. It had felt good to confess to her what his role had been in her abduction. It had been like a dark cloud threatening to burst and wipe any idea of them becoming closer out. Would she ever be able to forgive him? They had yet to talk about that night he fell asleep, and Solo had hurt her. He simply knew it had been worse than giving her a black eye. He would have to be patient until she was ready to tell him. He wondered if Mallory knew. He would like to ask him but felt the doctor wouldn’t feel free to share this information with him without Astrid's consent.

He joined Astrid and Roderick, deciding to go and find Mattie. He liked the tough little girl and wondered if she would stay here in the Towers with her family or not.

Chapter Forty-two – Astrid gets terrible news

Astrid was helping the women in the kitchen when she heard a lot of excited voices outside the house. She looked at the other women who had noticed all the shouting in the square as well. They all stopped what they were doing and agreed to go and see what all the commotion was. They wiped their hands and trouped outside to find a bunch of people clustering around someone. She couldn't see who it was. She noticed Mathilda and Mallory were amongst the onlookers as well.
Astrid hoped it wasn't news about Damien finding out where they were hiding.

She’d just recovered a bit from their gruelling flight from the Fort and was nearly feeling like her old self again.
She still hoped something else would happen in Midland to divert the attention of Damien. Or maybe he would get bored and find something else to occupy his mind. Though Mallory had told them, oceans would dry up before that happened.

"I know no one as vindictive as this man. It's what makes people so afraid to double-cross him. He would sacrifice everybody and everything to get his vengeance on anyone who dared to try and escape his power. I’ve seen enough examples while living in the fort".

Astrid always wondered why Mallory had done so for such a long time. Still, any question about the reason he’d been living in the company of a man, he clearly despised, was deflected by abruptly changing the subject".

Outside, Astrid could see Mathilda talking with an exhausted-looking woman. Mallory standing beside her, looked up, seeing her at the back of the crowd. He tapped Mathilda on her shoulder as if to warn her of Astrid's presence. They both looked at her with great pity in their eyes. With a few more words, Mathilda sent the woman on her way and walked up to Astrid.

"We just have heard from one of our messengers. Let's go inside to my quarters where it’s less noisy as the message concerns your kidnapping".

Judging by their serious demeanour, it didn’t look to be good news. Astrid felt her whole body freeze, and she stumbled, trying to get inside as fast as possible.

Mallory, made her sit down in one of the comfy chairs in Mathilda’s private quarters and took the one next to her. Mathilda, who was already seated, her face looking drawn, spoke.

"I’ll come out with it straight: the night after they took you, there was a big fire at your house. Quite a few people have, unfortunately, perished .Your assailants managed to completely burn down one of the towers killing quite a few of the people in it. I’m sorry to have to tell you your father and mother were amongst the victims".

Astrid felt as if all the blood was drawing from her body which was strangely numb all over. This could not be happening to her. Just when she felt hopeful about getting home and being with her loved ones again. Now she would never see her parents again.

It was all her fault! Jonah had told her how they had seen them on the beach that day and found out about the basement entry door. He never said to her there’d been a fire!
Thank god John and Marion had been in the village, but what about Lily? And Trudy? Grandfather!

With a trembling voice, she asked:" What about the others? You said quite a few. How many? Who? One of the towers? You mean the rest was okay?", feeling more and more afraid she wouldn't like the answers.

"Dori, the messenger you just saw me talking to, said she heard your brother was hurt too and taken to the monks in London. She wasn’t sure what exactly happened to him. As far as she heard the only people who got hurt besides your brother, were the ones staying in one specific tower, the one that burned down. We don't know their names. The total death toll was twenty-two. She also told us your grandfather and fiancée, have taken control over your family’s firm for the moment. A fleet is out looking for you, but we don't know where they are at the moment".

"You said, messengers. Is there any way I can contact my family through them?", she felt angry at herself cowardly running away from the monks. She had the chance to get home sooner and didn’t take it. Why had she cared so much about what people would say about her? Surely they would be happy just to know she was alive? At this moment, becoming a nun seemed the least of her worries. As long as Lily was okay. And Nicholas. They must be okay. He wasn’t staying at the House that night but at home with his mum. Lily had been in her bed in the Eastern Tower. John must have come back from the Commander’s house because he‘d told her he was going to stay in town with Marion. He’d probably been worried about his dogs. The thoughts of anything horrible happening to those sweet puppies strangely suddenly made her realise the enormity of it all.

Mallory had poured her a cup of Tatra tea, a strong alcoholic drink brewed locally, and Astrid gratefully took a big sip. It seemed to melt the ice she felt all over her body a bit. She finished the rest in one swallow.

Mathilda sighed again. "We might try, but she’ll never get to the Island before you have to leave here. The girls regularly fly down with their kites and hide them with the plains people. The latter would then have to send your message with one of their caravans heading for the Reading station. After which it shouldn't be hard to find a travelling monk or captain to take it on the next available ship. They don’t report to Damien, though he does have his spies everywhere.

All in all, it would take a few weeks for your letter to arrive. Why don't you write your message down? We will send it the next time one of the girls goes down".

Mallory leant over to take Astrid’s hand, looking worried."Why don't you do that, Astrid? Maybe we can depart a bit sooner? That would make it easier for you and you Mathilda. Half of the Dinali want us gone anyway. Less hassle for your family".

Mathilda nodded admitting he was speaking the truth but fearing her granddaughter would be lost to her again if she didn’t at least have a few days to convince the girl not to leave with the others and stay with her family.

"Do you think that’s wise? There is still Damien to worry about. The longer you stay here, the better for his men to lose the scent. Plus you’ll have to take the northern route. That side of Midland his control is far noticeable. Your chance of reaching a safe harbour to get this girl home will be considerably higher. Don’t worry about our people. I can take care of them. They ‘ll feel more predisposed to let you stay here for a few more days after hearing about Astrid's loss. They are lovely people, but often they let their fears rule their hearts. A few days wouldn’t make too much difference to your trip surely? W’dhave a better chance persuading Mattie to stay with us ".

Astrid, feeling that to delay going home by one minute, would be nearly impossible, at the same time felt Mathilda’s anxiety being robbed of her grandchild again. You only realise what family means to you after you’ve lost them. Mathilda had lived so long thinking she’d never see her son and his family again. With Mallory leaving now, she risked losing her granddaughter all over again.

Astrid looked at Mallory, torn between asking him to leave right now or, which would be the kind and sensible thing to do, delay their departure for at least one or two more days to give Mattie a chance to realise what she meant to these people.

"Child, I know you’re hurting and would like nothing more than to go home straight away, but we have to get provisions together, and as Mathilda says, we really cannot take the most direct route to Reading Station. Damien's watchdogs will be everywhere. We’ve constantly been travelling for more than a week and still have a long way to go. One more day wouldn’t matter much to us but would mean the world to Mathilda, who’s been so good to us?"

Feeling exhausted with the alcohol not helping, Astrid slumped back in her chair. It was all too much. She felt sick again. The room seemed to be closing in on her."Alright, I guess we can stay a bit longer. I’d like to be alone now, please. I need to think. I don't feel very well and want to lie down for a bit. ".

"That sounds like a good plan. Shall we wake you when dinner is ready, dear?", the old woman sounded relieved.

Feeling that she would never be able to eat anything ever, she declined. She needed to think!

Mallory and Mathilda both got up and went downstairs to the others. Probably to discuss the news that everyone would’ve heard of by now.

After she found the room, they’d stayed in last night, she threw herself on the bed and sobbed. The kidnapping had been a shock. When Solo had hurt her, she’d felt destroyed but had not wanted to give him the satisfaction of knowing that.
Then finding out her eyesight would never be the same again and the exhausting flight through the country nearly had finished her. Still, she had been able to go on, not giving in to the despair she felt. The hope of reaching her home again had kept her from completely falling apart. But this!

Memories of her parents and the love they had always showed her were flooding her mind. They’d had such a good time the evening before it happened. Her father, proud that she had been so graceful in accepting his decision and her mother, so happy to see her daughter marrying a good man. Whatever she’d undertaken, they’d always been there to hold her hand or to give her advice.
She’d been such a silly girl moping around because she was turned down by Nicholas. It now all seemed so childish. At least her Dadi was in charge at home. He would take good care of Lily. Henry must be supporting him. She’d never get the chance to marry him or anyone else for that matter. Lady! They always say 'beware what you wish for' and she had so passionately wished to marry Nicholas instead of Henry. Nicholas! He would be looking for her no matter what had happened. She was sure of it. If only she’d given herself up to the monks when she had the chance.

And Jonah. Had he known about the fire? Was that why he’d had been so kind to her? He told her he’d stayed with the boat so that they could make a quick getaway. Was that the truth or had he just been trying to cover his back? People had been right all along. All Midlanders were scum! Why would she believe him? Mallory should never have involved him. He might betray them anyway, side with his sister.

Tired of all these thoughts making her head spin, her mind merely seeking oblivion, she, at last, fell in a deep, troubled sleep not even waking when the others joined her many hours later.

Chapter Forty-three – Healing Solo

When Yaya woke up the next day, her body was aching all over. She hated to think how Solo must be feeling. She saw he was still asleep. His face was very white, and he tried to turn over moaning. Covering him with her blanket, she decided to go and find what she needed to tend to his wounds before he woke up. Last night’s bandages had stemmed the worst flow of blood, but she was worried when she saw the one on the cut in his leg was saturated with his blood. She decided to head in the direction they had been going the night before.

The birdsong on this early, bright morning was so loud and varied it made her smile despite her worries. It sounded so different from the screeching of seabirds she always heard in West Drayton.

She didn’t have to walk far before she heard the sound of running water. It was like music to her ears. She pushed through some undergrowth following the bubbling melody. A tiny stream was struggling to make its way through the forest. Around its border, there was an explosion of beautiful colours. The day suddenly felt so much better. Her trained eye soon found the Blue Flag Water Iris, good for reducing inflammation, waving gaily in the breeze. Lotus flowers in multiple shades, which her mother had told her, would stop any kind of bleeding, were floating silently on the water. This place was a right treasure chest! Yaya detected Woolly Lambs Ear to use for a bandage and to her even greater delight a tall willow tree guarding the waterfront.

She should see if she could get Solo to this place. It would be so much easier to fix him up with all these herbs and running water within reach. She'd better get back. Solo might think she’d left him there to go home without him.

Gathering as many herbs as she could hold in her pack and after filling their water bottles, she, now with a spring in her step, set off back to her mate.

Solo had already woken up and was unsuccessfully trying to get up muttering to himself. He looked up his face relaxing a bit. Yaya knew he would never admit it, but he must have been worried if she would return. His experience with people staying when the going got rough hadn't been too good. She knelt at his side and pushed him down again.

"How are you feeling now? Don't try to get up yet! It will just reopen that wound in your leg. I’ll make some crutches after I’ve prepared a new bandage. I found this great place quite close by that has all we need to get you up and going again. First I’ll make us some hot tea with these herbs I found. Proudly she pulled them out of her bag.

"Going to try and poison me now?", he tried to look as if he wasn't hurting like a bitch. Knowing him better than he knew himself, she laughed.

"Come on. You know as well as I do my mother knew all about healing. Count yourself lucky she thought it would be a good idea to teach me. I don’t know as much as her, but she was adamant that one day it would come in handy if I at least some knowledge about treating injuries. Now relax, while I boil some water. I’ll need it to soak off the bandage I put on yesterday. I won't touch the smaller cuts in your arm or face as they seem superficial. That Kentish beast must have been off his game yesterday. Encountering one of those madmen you could have ended up like minced meat. If you’re planning to walk any distance soon, you must rest that leg for a few days and make sure there’ll be no infection. We all know about what gangrene can do. You remember David?"

Solo who had started to open his mouth to complain closed it again. His friend had taken a long time to die, and the end had been even more brutal. They’d been out on their boat when one of the tackles got caught in his back. David never had a chance as they had been too far from shore to sort him out on time. They tried amputation, but being on a small boat without the right medicins, he had to watch his friend die in agony.

Satisfied, she’d scared the shit out of him so that he would listen to her, Yaya set about making a fire and treating his wounds as good as she could. They still had some pies from the party left. Solo wasn't hungry, but she persuaded him to eat something anyway. If they wanted to make it to the brook, he needed his strength.

Using the crutch she had made him and leaning heavily on her, they finally made it to the bank of the creek. Leaving him to rest, she went back to the corpses of the men they slew yesterday and stripped them of anything useful. The coolness of the forest had prevented them from starting smelling too badly. Still, she covered her face with her scarf. Flies were having a feast and judging by the gaping sockets, so had the birds. They were too heavy to move them on her own, so she covered them with branches and mulch leaving nature to do its work in making them disappear.

By the time she had finished, she was sweating profusely. The generously filled packs they had been carrying at least freed her from having to hunt the next few days. She doubted she would be able to restrain Solo from leaving for longer than two days if that.

"Good job, girl! What did you bring?", he stretched his hands out to her haul. Happy to let it keep him busy for a while, she dropped her prize next to him.

Before they went on, she wanted to collect as many healing herbs as she could. Seeing Solo look disgusted at the bloody shirts she had taken off the men, she explained: "They will make good bandages after I have rinsed them out and dried them. Knowing you will want to walk far too soon, so we’ll need plenty of those".

"You got that damn right. I don't want to leave here later than tomorrow morning. You’ll be glad to hear I’ve decided to go home first after all. Jonah and his buddies are too far ahead of us now to catch up with them. Our village is gone, but you’re right, we must find out who survived. Eric probably never had a chance if they caught him in the village. I still hope though he might’ve been on one of his freaky wanderings in the marshes when it happened. If he’s still alive, he will be so scared to find the village and everything in it gone! Fuck knows what could happen to him".

He looked up at her. For the first time since she had known him, he looked afraid. His bond with his older brother was one of the few things that proved to her he was capable of loving somebody else besides himself. His parents perished during a shipwreck before the shore of Diggers Peninsula not far from their village. The men who rescued them still talked about this giant young man swimming with all his might with his little brother clinging to his back. She always assumed Solo had hooked up with her because Eric had taken such a shine to her. The man-child followed her like a puppy. She had come to love that gentle giant too. It was as if all goodness in the world had gone into Eric, leaving very little for his brother.

Her feelings for Solo always had been ambiguous. When they were alone, and he was in a good mood, he could be fun to be with. To his brother, he was generous and loving to a fault. To other people herself included, he could be gruff, always suspicious of anybody trying to cheat him. He had terrible trust issues. His rages, especially when he had been drinking, were the reason she knew she might one day have to leave him despite the feelings she had for him.

Until now, the protection he had offered her and her family had kept her by his side, hoping that one day, he might change and show his better side more often. Besides, the sex was fantastic! Her body reacted, just thinking about it.

"We’ll have to wait and see. Try to keep off that leg in the next few days as much as you can. I need to go now and collect more stuff for our trip. I’m glad you changed your mind about going home. It is the right decision. We can always decide what to do next when we get there".

Before she left, she helped him to a bush to relieve himself. When he came back to his bedroll, his face was a mask of pain. He stretched his body on the soft moss and was soon asleep again. Even this short walk and the conversation had worn him out again. It would be a small miracle if he would be well enough to travel tomorrow. She didn’t think he would.

Chapter Forty-four -Astrid’s flight

Astrid wasn’t sure what caused her to wake up. Next to her, Mattie lay, still curled up like a kitten, only her hair sticking out from under the covers. The regular sound of Mallory's snoring gave her a few moments feeling secure.

Then everything that happened the day before hit her anew like a sledgehammer. She couldn't breathe. Had it really happened? Or had it just been a nightmare? The pain she felt in her whole body belied that. She’d never known grief would hurt so physically.

She looked outside and saw it was still pitch dark. The ashes in the hearth were still glowing a bit. She’d go down to the kitchen and make herself a cup of tea. Her mouth felt parched. It would be nice to sit by the fire downstairs to ponder about what she wanted to do.

She remembered her promise to Mathilda and Mallory to stay a bit longer and suddenly felt she just couldn’t do it. Her only thought was to get home and find out exactly what had happened. To see her family, or what left of them, again. To be amongst her own people.

She bitterly thought about her conversation with Jonah the evening before. 'I’m such a gullible idiot. He must have known about this. He was there! The others must have talked on the way back. I smelt the smoke when they carried me out. He must’ve seen the fires while they were getting away, surely? You can see Harrington House from miles away. I want him to leave us. Go back to his murdering people. To think, I nearly started to believe he wanted to help me. He’s probably just waiting until he’s gained our trust, to lead us in some kind of trap. They must have wanted to prevent the monks from finding us in the Fort. Damien is probably in on it and ordered him to keep us away for a good while until everyone assumed I was dead. Then he would simply tell them where to get her. And what about Mallory? Was he in on it too?'

The more she thought about it, the more she felt she had to get away as soon as possible. She felt strong enough again.
Making sure not to wake the others, Astrid got up and got dressed. On her way to the door, she spotted the Midland map on a table right next to it. Remembering Mallory's words, she grabbed it and tucked it into her tunic.

Downstairs she found the kitchen empty, but the glowing fire gave enough light to find some food to take with her. Their bags lay still piled in a heap in one corner of the kitchen. She took her own. She found someone had put clean clothes in it, probably Margie. She felt like a criminal, thinking about the kindness of that good woman. She had no choice, did she?

In the hall she put the coat on, Mathilda had given her, and carefully opened the front door. Before stepping outside, looked around if she could see someone watching the house.
The square lay in front of her, silent and completely deserted. It didn't look like it. They must have thought, after all the trouble Mathilda went trough to let Mallory and his group stay a few days, no one would try and leave earlier Not after Mathilda had practically begged them to let them stay longer. Astrid hurriedly made her way back to the small jetty on the lake they had visited that afternoon. She vaguely remembered seeing a small boat tied at the very end of it. Despite the ice-cold wind, her back was wet with sweat. She heaved a sigh of relief. There it was, bobbing lightly on the dark water. It was similar to her sailboat at home.

Taking advantage of a constant wind coming from the east, she soon had put a good distance between her and the village. She had no clue where she would end up as it was too dark to take the map out and read it, but the wind blew her directly west, and that was where she wanted to go. Hopefully, it would take them a while before they discovered her gone and came after her.

'Lady, she had to pee like mad!' It would have been too risky to spend precious minutes to go to the bathroom before she left. Besides, her mind had just been on getting away as fast as possible. Her bladder felt like bursting. Tying the sail to the rudder, she felt around the bilge and found the bucket every boat had on board in case it needed baling. It would have to do for now.

Feeling much relieved, she was overwhelmed by a great feeling of freedom. Sailing had always been her escape from reality, just like swimming. Handling the ropes and the sail all felt so familiar and nearly made her forget why she was there but not for long. The wind and the cold radiating from the freezing lake conspired to make her shiver. She huddled deeper into the lovely warm coat she’d picked up from the house before leaving.

After what felt like hours, the dark was dissipating, and even though the sun was still behind the mountains, it became light enough to see she had sailed far enough away from the village she couldn’t see it anywhere behind her. Good! That meant they couldn’t see her either. The light brought the realisation too of what she had done. If they caught her now, it would mean certain death. With a slight pang of remorse, she thought about the others. Her departure could mean the death penalty. She might have lost them the little bit of goodwill they had with the Dinali.

She hardened her heart. Too late to worry about that now. They could look after themselves. Mallory could talk his way out of any trouble, and Jonah deserved anything he got. Surely Mattie being one of their own and a child to boot would be spared from any repercussions her flight had? She trusted Mathilda to make sure of that.

A sound like soft thunder shook her out of her reverie.
It was now light enough to see she was heading to a cloud of mist. There was a steady current now fighting the wind, keeping her boat nearly stationary. She opened her bag and looked at the map. Holy shit! It showed her a colossal waterfall, called the Clearwater Falls. She must have already come farther than she thought. She was heading straight for it! Getting a bit closer, she could see a wall of water tumbling down from hundreds of metres above her. If she kept on this course, it would shatter her boat to smithereens.

In one instinctive move, she tacked around and let the now ever more powerful growing stream take her to the left bank of the lake. She would have to abandon the boat here for the Dinali to find.

It would mean tracking through some steep mountainous terrain before she got to the Silver River. There should be somewhere she could cross once she got to it.

Having had more time to think during her sailing trip, she’d decided to take the longer but safer route to the east coast of the Midlands, as Mallory had planned. Her first instinct had been to head south as soon as she could. Mallory might not be trustworthy, she didn’t know who was anymore, but she did believe him when he said the chance of being recaptured would be less by trying to travel to a small town named Sinatown on the east coast and get some help from a good friend. The man could get them safely to the southern harbours. She still had enough food for a few days. After that, she’d have to rely on the goodwill of the people she met on her way.

The only thing she knew about Sinatown was that they produced the marvellous silk cloth you could sometimes find on the markets in London City. It was the most beautiful stuff she’d ever seen and very expensive. Her wedding gown had been made from it in a stunning sea green colour. She had been so looking forward to wearing it. Even if it was to marry someone she hardly knew. She shook herself. Stupid! Her parents were dead. She wasn’t that innocent girl anymore, and no man of her own people would ever want to tarnish his bloodline with hers.

Her boat bumped against the bank. She stretched her stiff limbs and jumped ashore, making sure to keep holding the line.
She would tie the boat to one of the overhanging trees. Someone might find it and return it. She didn’t want to prove them right to think they were a group of scoundrels who would steal their possessions.

She shrugged her backpack higher on her shoulders and started the next part of her journey, a track over the steep mountains.

Chapter Forty-five– Following Astrid

Mallory woke up with his mouth feeling parched. Fuck! That Dinali booze was strong stuff. He had needed it after telling Mathilda her granddaughter had the right to chose what she was going to do when he left with Astrid and Jonah. He informed her Astrid had agreed to stay the full three days after which she had come around, perhaps hoping to convince Mattie her place was with her family.

He went over to the side table to get himself a cup of water. In passing, he looked at the bed they had given up to the girls and noticed Astrid's side empty. She must have gotten up already after going to bed so early last night. She would be downstairs contemplating the news they had yesterday about her loved ones.

Poor child. Life had not been treating her well lately.
Maybe he should join her. She might welcome some company as everyone would still be asleep for a few more hours. He would try and take her mind off things a bit by showing her how he had planned their return trip. He felt for his map on the little table he left it on, next to the door in order not to forget it. Strange? It wasn't there! Maybe he left it under his clothes? He went to the chair they were on but found nothing there either.

He rapidly got dressed in his hurry toppling a stool against one of the couches. Jonah shot up. Even Mattie was sticking her head up out of the bedclothes.

"What are you doing?" Jonah said.

"Shh! I am just getting dressed to go downstairs. Astrid has already gotten up. Has anyone of you taken the map I put on this table?"

They both looked a bit confused and shook their heads.

"Why? Do you think she took it downstairs?" Jonah, who had felt Astrid's grief and despair, deeply last evening and had been willing to leave with her the next day if she only had asked him to, started to feel a bit worried.

Matie and Jonah were both wide awake now and starting to get up as well.

"Let's not start thinking the worst. I’ll go downstairs and check on Astrid. Maybe she was getting some comfort in studying the map to see how we would go home. She must have been hungry too missing the evening meal. I don't want to wake anyone else up, so do get dressed but stay in this room. I’ll let you know when I find her or not".

He was saying loud what the other two were already thinking. "You really think Astrid left us behind?", Mattie sounded very young.

"She was feeling devastated by her parents’death. She did tell us she was ready to wait a few days longer, but on waking, she might have changed her mind". Mallory was beginning to have some doubts too, hearing the others immediately assuming she had left. "Maybe you’re right. Why don't Jonah and I both go downstairs? If in her desperation, she has decided to leave us, we can’t hang around here either. The Dinali would kill us without giving it a second thought. Mattie, they would never harm you. I beg you to go back to bed and pretend you never saw or heard us. You would be safe and be with your family".

"No! You are my only real family. My parents are gone. I don't know these people. I don't like them if they want to hurt you".

"Mallory, I could go and follow Astrid. You could stay here with Mattie", Jonah felt they were wasting time while they could be on their way saving Astrid from herself. He didn’t know if she knew how to survive on her own in these rugged mountains.

"That’s not an option. The Dinali would make me pay for our breach of promise. Please, Mattie. Are you sure? ", Mallory too knew they didn’t have much time before someone would wake up and raise the alarm. He hoped they all had it wrong and would find her quietly sitting in the kitchen. They all collected their belongings and tiptoed downstairs. One look into the empty kitchen told them what they feared had come about. Her bag had gone too.

"Let's pack what food we can and leave as soon as possible. Astrid took my map, but I know of a way we can get out of the valley undetected. As boys, they taught us about certain underground paths cut out of the rock by rivers in the time of the great Wet. Though the Dinali were not at war with us, they still didn't like us to hunt on their lands and sometimes when the drought was at is worst we just had to. We used these trails to sneak in and out quickly".

"We need to get our weapons ", Jonah whispered," Do you have any idea where they put them?"

Mattie put her hand up, whispering, "I know! They are in a chest in the pantry. I’ll get them".

Before they could hold her back, she shot away and a few minutes later triumphantly came back clutching all their armour.

Just as they were about to leave, through a side door in the bathhouse, Margie came out of one of the stalls. She went white as a sheet when she saw them all dressed to go outside but didn’t make a sound. Mattie ran at her and threw her arms around her waist.

"Please, aunt Margie, we need to go. Ou friend Astrid has gone so we can't stay here. We need to go and protect her. I need to go with Mallory. He is the only father I know. Please, don't call the others, I beg you".

Margie looked at the grownups and down at the child. She had come to adore her niece in the short time she knew her. How she would have loved to look after her and cherish her. She felt her eyes tearing up.

Kissing Mattie on her head, while giving her a tight hug, she made her decision:" The others will be up in about two hours. Go now! Don't tell me where you’re going. Sweetling, I love you too much to have you unhappy. Promise me one thing, though. If you ever get the chance, send us a message to let us know you are safe. We have worried about you for such a long time. Please don't let us have to go through that again. Did you get provisions? I will go and prepare breakfast, and I never saw you ".

Margie looked at the other two, who nodded and both hugged her as well before they slipped out of the door as silently as possible.

Mallory didn’t take them to the outskirts of the village, as they thought he would, but took them up the steep mountain behind Mathilda’s house. Even though it was still dark, he seemed to know where he was going. After a lot of scrambling, following a narrow goat path through the scraggly trees and bushes, he stopped before a big Hawthorne. It was huge! Looking back down at the village in the first light of day he still couldn’t see anything stirring. Margie must have held her word.

He turned to his fellow travellers: "This will hurt a bit. Try to cover your face and arms as much as possible. It does not look like anyone has been here for ages. My father never told anyone about these paths. It seems no one else has used them in all the years I was away. Hold your pack in front of you when you push through the thorns. We don't want to disturb the bush too much, or people might see where we went through". He went first with the two young people following.
After fighting their way through the scrub, they had a very narrow crevice to worm their way through. Mattie made it through first. Her small body was making it easier to squirm through the prickly branches and the narrow fissure. They emerged in a small cave from where a low tunnel made its way deeper into the mountain.

"There won’t be a lot of space to move at some points, and we can't make a light yet. Just follow me and make sure you keep your eyes on the person in front of you".

He was right. Sometimes Jonah thought he would be stuck in the darkness forever. He’d always been a strong, stocky lad, but now his broad shoulders were not the advantage they had been while hauling in the nets or dragging their yurt from one place to the other. After what seemed like an eternity of crawling, half crouching and here and there, thank the Lady, walking parts upright, they emerged at on the other side of the mountains realising the valley the Dinalis lived in, was bordering close on the green hills south of the Badlands, where they’d been before.

He looked up at a dizzyingly high granite wall forming a natural obstacle to anyone wanting to get to the village from the north-western side. In front of him, there was a narrow river winding its way through the lowlands.

Mallory was panting from the exertion and clutching his back."You see now why it used to be necessary for us to send kids? My tribe moved to these hills when the drought dried up the Badlands. They used to send us smaller boys across. You now know why". He grimaced, massaging his back and shoulders. Jonah knew what he was talking about, feeling like he had been locked up in a tiny box for a very long time.

"We’ll cross that river down there, where it’s practically at it narrowest. You’ll see later when we get to the Stokesend Cascades, why. Prepare yourselves for a sight to be seen! I doubt we’ll be followed that far from the valley, but I can imagine they might think we travelled by water and chase us that way. I hope and think Astrid might have gone over the lake. Like you Jonah, Astrid grew up knowing how to sail before she could walk. If so any route she takes from the other side of the lake will have her crossing the Silver River at one point. That will be impossible at the Cascades themselves so she’ll first have to follow the river south for a bit, which won’t be good. That route will take her in the direction of the Ravines. Have you heard about them?"

Jonah who knew quite a bit about the Midlands, had never heard or read anything about these Ravines. He raised his eyebrows, shaking his head.

Mattie, who had never been a great reader at the best of times and found geography lessons always the most boring, shook her head as well.

“While we’re having a little breather before we go down and cross the river, I’ll tell you something about them. During and after the Exodus, many of the people left behind, fought each other for land. There was a group, called the Military, who was still in possession of old weapons capable of mass destruction and not afraid to use them. When threatening their enemies with them didn’t have much effect, they used them to destroy everyone standing in their way. It resulted in a large piece of the land imploding and becoming infertile. The area is an arid, rocky desert. But that isn’t the real problem. Under all the scrubs, hidden ravines hide going down deeper than anyone can fathom. No one knows how to cross that area without dying from the poisonous fumes or ending up at the bottom of the crevices. Anyone who tried has disappeared forever".

"Where are those Military now?' Mattie suddenly looked very interested in Geography. Any mention of fighting or disasters still had a great appeal for her.

" The monks dealt with them. One day they were there, and the next they’d all disappeared. No one, but the Order knows what happened to them. I always wondered about it. But enough talk. Let’s go down and fill our bottles at the river. After we’ve crossed, we can have some food. We still have a long way to go before we reach Sinatown. Keep your eyes on the other side of the river, in case Astrid has made it past the mountains without being caught. I never thought she’d be so bold to escape on her own. She must’ve been frantic as she doesn't strike me as a person who treats people who’ve tried to help her so callously. If I hadn't woken in time, we could’ve been in a lot of trouble".

"She’s been through a lot these last few weeks for a girl who's only ever known an easy life. She can’t have been thinking clearly", Jonah immediately felt he had to defend her. He felt only he knew what had really happened in West Drayton. Even though she hated him now, he still hoped to make her see he hadn’t meant her or any of her family any harm. It had all been such a shitshow.

They stripped and put their clothes and coats on a small raft made from all the driftwood lying around. The water was still freezing and only having had plenty of food the day before, stopped them from getting hypothermia. Mallory suffered the worst of the cold though he was strong for his age. He practically had to drag himself out of the water on the other side.

Feeling safe for the first time in a quite a while, they made a small fire to dry off and get warm again. Mallory decided to keep the food packed by Margie for later in case they went through an area where it was harder to find something to eat. Mattie went off with Jonah to hunt, and they soon came back with two rabbits, which they skinned, cleaned and cooked. It tasted better than anything they had before.

Pointing a bone dripping with fat at the river, Mallory spoke, "We’ll go straight to the Falls and rest again there. Let's pray Astrid managed to outrun the Dinali hunters. They will think we are with her if Margie kept her word. Thank the Lady, they are a people of shepherds and not used to track people. The chance of running into some of Damien's men, who’re undoubtedly after us as well, might stop them from wandering too far from their valley risking exposure of the whole community".

None of them had a lot of energy left after that after their escape through the cliffs followed by an exhausting swim. They quietly trudged along following the river south.
The sun was right above them when a sound like thunder became louder and louder. Dense vegetation had made it harder and harder to navigate. The air was beginning to have a very damp feel to it. Soon a fine spray of mist surrounded them.

The quiet river they had been travelling along had gradually become a wide expanse of foaming water. Suddenly their path seemed to stop in midair. When they looked left at where the river should be, their breath stopped. It had disappeared. Mattie and Jonah carefully looked over the edge of the path and below them saw an array of waterfalls dropping energetically down as far as they could see. The water, coming from other rivers than the one they had been travelling along, fell in ever-widening terraces, to end up in a pool as vast as a small lake.

They could barely hear each other over the deafening sound of all that powerful water throwing itself down over the rocky ledges.

Mallory motioned them to get away from the edge and started to follow a crooked path, which led them sharply down to a sandy beach on one side of a lake, formed by all the copious amounts of water tumbling down. You could barely see the overside.

Once arriving there, though they were exhausted, they still kept looking up, not being able to let go of the magnificent sight. Soon even the fantastic view could not keep the little band awake. They sank on the soft sand of the beach to get some well-earned sleep.

Jonah offered to keep the first watch and to wake the next person in a few hours. His hope of seeing Astrid again, safe and sound, preventing him from sleeping anyway as tired though he was.

Chapter Forty-six – The Cascades

The last two hours, Astrid had been continuously walking uphill. After what seemed like forever, she arrived on a small plateau at the top of the mountain. Her legs were trembling. AS the sun was already high up in the sky, she was sweating like a pig. Looking down, she stopped for a moment to take her coat off and most of the upper layers of clothes, stuffing them into her pack.

This high up, she was relieved the flies had given up on her. She scanned her surroundings and could see the lake she’d been sailing far below. To her shock, she also spotted a band of Dinali men arriving on the shore of that same lake. They seemed to be heading up the path she’d just taken. They must have found her tracks. She hadn't done much to hide them feeling too tired and pressured to get away from the village.

Below her on the other side of the mountain, she saw a steep rock face with the tiniest of paths, more of a goat trail, carving its way down to another river. This one was flowing west. She took out her map and traced it as a narrow river running west towards yet more waterfalls. She decided to head in that direction. It might be easier to lose her followers there. Maybe she could get herself to the other side of the river. There would be strong currents so close to a waterfall, but she’d always been a strong swimmer. Hopefully, no one would dare to follow her. Despite her tiredness, she sped up her pace and hurriedly scrambled down the narrow path.

As a child, she‘d loved to climb anything, walls, trees and the vertical cliffs surrounding the northern part of the island. It took her only half the time it had taken her to get up the mountain to get herself down it.

Reaching the river, at the point where it was getting near to the falls, she immediately saw that swimming across here would be nigh impossible. She had misjudged the enormous speed the water was hurtling along pulled by the waterfalls.

Glancing up to the mountain she’d just come down from was enough to see her pursuers were already beginning their climb down. They must have spotted her at the same time, as she could see them shouting and pointing down.

Trying to seek another way down to find an easier crossing, now wasn't an option anymore. Tired as she was, they would soon catch up with her. She had to go in here.

Frantically looking around, she spotted a sturdy branch of driftwood. Not seeing any other options, rather dying trying to get away than at the hands of those men, she dragged the wood close to the water. With a hefty push, she managed to get it in. She had to cling on to the wood for dear life in order not to lose it, the pull of the river being that powerful. In a few minutes, the torrents swept her away from the men following her.

Water was foaming around her head, making it nearly impossible to breathe. She prayed it would hide her too from anybody trying to come after her. She remembered from the map that the river made one sharp curve before emptying itself in the waterfall. It should be possible to catch herself in the bend to get out before she went over.

She tried pulling herself up the trunk a bit more to see where she was going. The branch turned over, and she found herself on the underside, doing everything in her power to hold her breath while turning back up. Just when she thought she would have to let go, black spots appearing in her vision, they hit something. The shock was hard enough to turn the branch again. She gratefully sucked in the air. The collision had been hard enough to drag her higher up. She could see they were approaching the bank of the river in the last bend before it went over. The roaring sound of the waterfalls warned her they were much closer than she‘d hoped. While she’d been dragged under, she must’ve drifted further than she thought.

It was now or never. She let go of the wood and dove as deep as she could underwater to feel less of the drag of the current. She fought with what little power she had left to keep in a straight line for the bank. At last, she was rewarded by feeling the branches of a prickly shrub under her hands. With her last bit of strength, she managed to pull herself on the shore to lay there gasping for air. Not feeling safe from her hunters, she looked around and discovered with a sinking feeling, she’d landed on the wrong side of the river.
If the men decided to pursue her along the river path, they could still catch up with her!

Her backpack weighed like a ton of bricks. Everything was soaked. She wrung out the sodden clothes as best as she could deciding to wear the wet coat and carry the rest in her pack.
She didn't know how she still could manage to walk, but fear seemed to give her wings.

The sound and the thickening spray told her which direction to go. Like her friends, she made her way down a track beside the cascading water. Looking out over the vast basin that had formed below, she found herself staring at Jonah sitting beside two unmoving forms in the sand.

She couldn't believe her eyes. She nearly cried from exhaustion and relief. There they were! How was this possible?
With a sinking feeling, she realised she didn’t have enough energy left to swim across to the other side. She didn’t have much time left. The Dinali would soon find her which direction she had gone. If they were still chasing her, it wouldn't be long before they would intercept her. Neither did she think she could outrun them. Her eyes were flitting across the water gauging the distance and back up the track fearing to see her pursuers coming down any moment.

On the other side Jonah, who’d been nearly dozing off, suddenly saw a small figure on the other side of the lagoon. Rubbing his eyes to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. He felt a jolt of happiness go through him. It was her! Thank the Lady! She’d made it. Keeping his eyes trained on that dear image, he shouted to the others: "Mallory, Mattie, wake up! It’s Astrid! She made it!".

The others shot up. Soon they all stood on the little beach, waving their arms and jumping up and down trying to get Astrid to notice them.

"I wonder why she keeps standing there?" Mattie wondered.

"Maybe she’s too tired or too afraid to cross here. She must’ve been going all day", Mallory sounded very worried.

By this time Jonah had started stripping his clothes off. He threw himself into the freezing water and began to swim to the other side. He would have crossed oceans to save Astrid and be with her again. She could hate him all she liked, but he just needed to speak to her at least one more time, to explain.

Astrid, suddenly hearing voices above her on the path to the top of the falls, turned to look up again and saw she’d been right to worry. She saw that one of the men was stringing an arrow to his bow. They were not going to let her get away again this time.

She threw her heavy coat down and lept in the water her backpack somehow still attached to her back. Fear of being caught was giving her wings. She didn't know if she would make it to the other side but would die trying.

Thwack! She felt as if something had hit her back hard. They must be shooting at her while running down the track. Only her pack had stopped them from killing her outright. She felt herself grow weaker and weaker. Lack of sleep and food on top of the ice-cold water were all starting to take their toll.

‘Mum, dad I might be seeing you soon after all’, the last thought as she felt herself sinking deeper her arms and legs feeling like lead. She closed her eyes and just let go.

"Astrid! Hold on! I’ll tie you to me!", never was she happier to hear the sound of his voice. Vaguely she remembered she shouldn't be, but the feel of a pair of strong arms holding her and pulling her along away from danger and towards her friends, made nothing matter anymore. She fainted.

Chapter Forty-seven - Badlands

When Astrid opened her eyes, it was to find three pairs of them staring down at her with a mixture of wonder and worry.

"Welcome back, my dear", never she felt happier to hear that kind, warm voice. What had she been thinking, leaving them, her only real friends behind? The shock of hearing about the horrible events on the Island must’ve driven her momentary insane. She’d only been able to think about getting home as soon as possible. She felt ashamed at the danger she could have put them it. And here they were saving her again.

"How long have I been out?"

"Not very long. Why don't you try to sit up, so we can give you something dry to put on instead of those wet clothes? Your own things are all still wet, but some of Jonah's stuff might fit you. Then do have something to eat. You’ll be happy to hear the Dinali men have given up and seemed to have disappeared to go back to their homes hopefully."

It was as if a weight lifted from her shoulders. "Are you not mad at me? I only left because I thought they wouldn't harm you after the council had spoken. I just wasn't thinking, I...", here Mallory put his hand on her arm.

"All three of us realise what a shock the news about your parents and the other people at home must have been for you. Let's not waste time on looking back. We now have to concentrate on getting you home safely. Maybe not as fast as you wanted", here he smiled and winked at her, "but we will get there in the end. Now eat this, while we have a look at that map, that you have been keeping safe for me".

Feeling a little embarrassed, she opened her backpack and took everything out to let it dry in the sun

The map hadn’t suffered much in the water, thank the lady, she’d put it back in its container, but to her dismay, there were several small holes in it. They must be from when the arrows had punctured her pack.

"Saved by a map! That must be a first. Don't worry, Astrid, it’s still perfectly readable", Mallory said taking it out of her hands and spreading it on the sand between them.

"Lucky it is a plestik one. The old ones once upon a time worshipped this stuff as it is waterproof and lasts forever. Later they found it had some nasty side effects. They got rid of most of it when they found out. Though when you’re lucky, you can still find pottery, utensils and even clothes made of the stuff. There’s a museum on Luton island, where you’ll find quite a lot of artefacts made of it. One day I would love to take you all there. It is a wondrous place".

"But isn’t that sort of knowledge forbidden when you're not a monk?",Astrid had finished her meal and had perked up quite a bit.

"I’m afraid that differs from where you are. I know Islanders don’t want to teach their people about the past for fear of them making the same mistakes the Elders did. In Midland, though people have had to learn some of it to survive as life over here is a lot harder than on your beautiful isle. The monks are a far stronger presence where you grew up. The strict genetic rules and their effect on your people are of great interest to them. It wasn’t possible to make the population follow those rules in Midland. There just were not enough monks and nuns to cover the whole of the Archipelago. They made a pact with Damien, who to keep his power, keeps an eye out for them. This way, the monks still have some sort of control. In my opinion, they made a pact with a monster. I know all about it as I had to do the same when they evicted me from the Order".

Mallory looked around at the surprised faces of his little band. "Yes my friends, I would like to tell you more about how that came about, but then I’d have to start at the beginning. I'm afraid we just don't have the time for that. We should find ourselves past the Ravines and sheltering in the forest before nightfall. Let's pack up and get going. Astrid, are you feeling up to it? We won't have to go fast if we go now".

Astrid assured him she was ready and keen to be on her way again. The fear of being caught by the Dinali had not left her just yet.

Their route took them through a small copse of trees into a very arid area. A strange, smelly smoke hung in the air making their eyes water.

"Sulphur", Mallory said, "the wars raging here in the past have left the earth crust very brittle resulting cracks going down further than we can fathom. Right at the bottom, all that was standing here before has melted, through the constant fires there. We don't know what causes it to keep them burning, but we do know that inhaling the smoke for a certain time can make you very ill".

None of them needed much encouragement to pick up their pace. Covering their faces with their scarves, they practically ran for the green line of trees and shrubs beckoning them in the distance.

"I was so afraid, Astrid, you would have travelled on further south on the other side of the Silver River. That road connects the Cascades to South Bay. It goes past the Ravines for a very long time, and you probably wouldn't have made it. We were fortunate to get you back when we did".

The concern and relief in his voice filled Astrid with a warm feeling. He was such a decent person! Why had she been so terribly stupid? From now on, she would follow his lead no questions asked because if anyone could get her back home, it would be this wise, kind man.

Feeling Jonah's eyes pricking in her neck, she turned to give him an intense stare upon which he dropped down on his knee, pretending to remove a pebble from his shoe. She knew he had saved her yet again though she still found it hard to forgive him for being part of the destruction of her home and her loved ones. How did one ever get over that? Again, maybe he had not been lying when he told her that he’d had no part in the arson and the following disaster. She would very much like to believe that as she did feel a strong attraction to that resourceful and kindhearted boy. His strong features surrounded by that mane of tawny hair going riot in every which way had become dear to her in ways she couldn't explain. When he smiled, his bright blue eyes sparkled, making you smile back. All her life, she thought she could only love Nicholas. After all that had happened, she realised she‘d been quite a silly girl in love with being in love. She thought of Jonah's strong arms carrying her on land twice, first when they landed at Amersham and secondly when he saved her from certain death in the lake by the falls. It had made her feel so safe despite the dangers everywhere. She shivered, thinking back at that moment when she’d been ready to let it all go.

"Are you cold? Would you like my coat? I'm too warm anyway", he looked at her practically imploring her to let him do something for her. She relented and shrugged his coat on, one of the beautiful woollen ones, they’d been gifted by Mathilda. Sadly she had to leave hers behind on the shore.
His smelt of sweat and grass still warm from his body. It did give her the same feeling of safety as when he‘d been holding her.

"Thanks", she mumbled not looking at him and walking briskly on to join Mattie, who, as per usual, was more skipping than walking in front of them.

"Give it time, my boy", Jonah heard from close behind him where Mallory had been following their exchange. The latter was well aware of the attraction between these two young people. It had become even more intense by being cut off from their loved ones. Danger had strengthened their bond. Jonah had been the only constant presence since she’d lost all that was familiar to her. Hearing about the demise of her parents had done considerable damage to the trust she’d had in Jonah. Still, Mallory was sure that could be repaired in time. The doctor had become quite fond of this serious lad, who’d already shown himself to be an honest and warmhearted person. A rarity in these times. Especially in Midland!

Jonah looked back at Mallory blushing furiously and grinning a bit sheepishly. "Do you think she’ll ever believe I had nothing to do with any plan to kidnap her? Or was even aware of Solo planning it?"

"Just keep looking out for her as you've been doing all along and I’m certain at one point she’ll realise you only have her best interest at heart. Even if that could mean letting her go", Mallory said, looking a bit sad at the thought that Astrid would break this boy's heart if she decided to go back home to take on her responsibilities as one of the Harrington scions and leave the boy behind. She’d been taught to do her duty to her Family no matter what, since she was tiny and it would take a lot more than this adventure to change that strong alliance.

Jonah, trying not to imagine that eve could come to pass, took a deep breath, tried to smile and then followed the others. Ready to take on the world for his girl.

Mallory shook his head at the indomitable optimism young people in love had. He vowed to do all to help these children. Fate would have to do the rest.

That night they aimed to camp in the woods, which were thankfully far less dense than the ones in the north. There was enough light coming through to give grass and a multitude of shrubs the change to grow. Mattie had a great time collecting fresh berries and stuffing her mouth as full as she could. She was running ahead of them and back like a young puppy, covering more than twice the distance the others did. Her exuberance lifted everyone’s spirits to the point they all sang along with her when she started to belt out an utterly inappropriate tavern song. When night fell, none of them had trouble sleeping with Mallory keeping watch. “I’m an old man. We don’t sleep a lot anyway. You three better get your beauty sleep”. No one objected. Soon the campsite was quiet except for the rustle and small sounds of woods at night time.

Chapter Forty-eight- Finding Eric and other friends

It had taken three more days before Solo had been ready to travel. He had been the worst patient ever. Yaya was glad when she could declare his wound healed enough for him to walk on it. Thank the Lady he healed so fast, or she would have finished where the scimitar wielding fiend had left off.

As much as they could, they stayed off the beaten track to avoid meeting anyone who could tell Damien they were still alive. A lot of people would be happy to turn them in as Damien, no doubt, had put a fair sum of money on their heads.
The last thing he would expect them to do was to return home to Diggers Peninsula. He must know by now their village didn’t exist anymore neither did its inhabitants. But you could be damn sure he had everyone keeping an eye out for them as well as for her brother and his friends. Hell had no fury, but Damien thwarted.

After carefully skirting around Amersham the going got much more relaxed once they travelled on the peninsula. Most of the people here were not very fond of the Monster in the North, as they called Damien. Plus having both lived there all their lives, they knew every little backway to get to their destination unseen.

Solo, having the constitution of an ox, was walking with greater ease each day. The herbs and her care had done the trick. He was so relieved to feel whole again, he treated her like a real companion instead of some drudge. When Solo lay with her at night, it felt like he really cared for her and wasn’t just seeking some physical relief. Long may it last, but she doubted it. It was nice while it lasted, though.

A few miles out from the village, they could smell it.
The onslaught had happened nearly two weeks ago, but the smell of smoke and ashes was still strong. Somehow not wanting to have their fears confirmed, they walked ever slower. Yaya had to grab Solo's hand when she first saw what they did to her home. She gasped, feeling her throat constricting. Everywhere they looked, they could see nothing but the black skeletons of their yurts and her people. Even the boats had been set on fire.

Scraping her courage together, Yaya walked through the devastation, only one thought playing through her mind. Who could have possibly survived this?

"Have you noticed something as well, Yaya?" Solo looked at her, tears in his eyes, which he probably would explain away by the smoke.

"What? Besides that, it’s all gone?"

"Not enough bodies!"

"What do you mean not enough? How can you tell? They’ve all burned to nothing". Her voice trembled.

"Even with a fire like this, there should have been more evidence of their remains".

"What are you trying to say?" Yaya looked at Solo, wondering what he was trying to tell her.

"Come on! There should be more left if they burned everyone. Some of our people must have gotten away".

She didn't dare to hope but felt herself starting to breath more freely. Looking around her more carefully, she saw what Solo meant.

"If they got away, there’s only one place they could have gone to be safe. You would know it too if you think about it". His eyes shining, Solo willed her to come to the same conclusion as he had. He was waiting for her to confirm his hope.

Yaya swallowed, her throat feeling dry.

"Wakeware?", she whispered.

"Yeah, I know what you’re going to say. We never mixed with those freaks, but even Damien, let alone those fucking islanders would risk trying to travel to their domain. No one knows how to get through the bogs without drowning in the quicksand but them ".

"So how would any of our people, if they escaped, have made over there?" Yaya felt her hope to find anyone alive disappearing again.

Solo was smiling widely:"Eric!"

Yaya had no idea what Eric had to do with it all. Solo’s fever must have come back looking at all the devastation around them. He was talking nonsense.

"Eric used to wander off all the time and never wanted to tell me where he went. So one day I stayed at home without him knowing and followed him. He went to the edge of the Bog and started to make some kind of sound, like a bird call. He did it a few times every time waiting for a while. Just when I was about to go and get him and tell him off for going somewhere so dangerous, this strange girl appeared. She was all covered in grey rags. From the little I could see of her she was so pale I first thought he had conjured up some ghost. Her face was hidden behind a veil, but I could see her arms and legs. They were talking and laughing. She gave him some stuff to put on, after which I saw him follow her right into the Bog. Before I could go after them, they were gone. I had to wait nearly the whole day before Eric appeared again still with that girl. They hugged, and then she was gone. It was as if she’d disappeared into thin air. I was very angry with Eric and told him never to go into the swamp again as it was too dangerous. He usually does what I say, but this time, he told me he was going to do what he wanted as Tish was his friend. She made the swamp safe for him. He tried to explain to me that the swampers, he called them Bunyip, were weird like him but nobody in Wakeware treated him like an abomination or like he wasn’t normal. I knew he had often been teased by the villagers and glad he had come to no harm, so I made him promise to be careful and always come home before dark".

It started to dawn on Yaya why Solo looked so relieved.
It must have been Eric who had helped the people who escaped the inferno to get to safety aided by his swamp friends.
Her face lit up.

"We have to try and find them, Solo. My mum might be with them. Can you remember how to call out to them? No one has ever seen those mutants up close. They must have felt a kinship with Eric. Those people are never keen to meet outsiders unless covered from head to toe. I remember when one of our fishermen once tried to land on the beach of their compound because he hoped to get some freshwater. They shot him down immediately. Nobody has even tried after that. Enough beaches that don’t get you murdered by savages”.

Yaya was looking bright-eyed nearly bursting with renewed energy. “Shall we get some more food before we set out? I’ll try to find something to keep your wound dry. Swampwater is poisonous. You could get us something to eat. First, it would be wise to rest before setting out".

Solo's mood had so improved. This time, he was ready to listen to her. They left the village and rested awhile hidden in the shrubs at the edge of the beach. Before starting their journey, Solo went to find some crabs for dinner.

Yaya knew where to get some more medical supplies. She’d gone with her mother often enough. She would clean his wound before they left to find the others. She might still find some canvas that escaped the fire to put around the bandage or otherwise she had a tin of wax she could use to waterproof his bandages. She’d heard from her mother that the water in the swamps was so poisonous, your skin practically melted when you had the bad luck to fall in. The possibility of finding some of their loved ones alive had changed everything for her. With a spring in her step, she set about finding more herbs for her medicine pouch, praying Solo was right. When they met up again, they decided to wait until the next day because neither of them fancied crossing the swamp in the dark. Their lovemaking that night was tender and filled with hope.

The next morning, they set out as soon as they woke up.
Solo was so excited she could hardly let him sit still long enough for her to change his bandages. His leg wound seemed to be healing at an extraordinary speed. She’d never seen anything like it. The need to know who had survived was burning in both of them. Solo was so confident his brother was among the few who had come out of the disaster unscathed, he seemed another person. Yaya hoped, with all her heart, he was right, and her mother had made it to safety too.

They reached the edge of the Bog of Wakeware, an extensive, poisonous area filled with rust-red water. It was a rumour amongst the Midlanders that the people of the remote fishing village of Wakeware were scary-looking monsters who were the only ones who knew a way to travel between the small islets and over the narrow hidden footpaths crisscrossing this dismal area.

They often could be seen going out in their iron boats to fish. If you were as brave as to get near them, you could catch a glimpse of them hauling in their nets. All of them always had their faces covered with masks. According to lore, it was because they were so deformed, it would frighten a person to death to look upon them.

Yaya had never seen any of them, not even from far. She hoped Solo's assumption about Eric having survived and taken the others to Wakeware, would pay off. Just looking at the stunted growth of the trees and bushes, draped with strings of yellow moss, gave her the shivers. The smell wasn't helping either. It brought a metallic taste in the back of her throat.

Solo had stopped."Here was the place I found him last time. Let's hope they keep an eye on their border”. He formed a funnel of his hands and let out a long hard ululating call.
It rang out across the still waters and seemed to reverberate against the trees surrounding them. A deafening silence met it. They waited.

"So what do we do now?” Yaya said when there was no reaction whatsoever for quite some time.

"Now we wait", Solo sat down and started to root in his bag for his water bottle.

Yaya didn't feel comfortable sitting down so exposed in the open space beside the green water. She made sure she had her bow within easy reach and leaned against a large leafy tree, looking out of place between its deformed relatives, before sitting next to it.

At the sound of a lot of loud splashing, Solo shot up staring in the direction of the splashing. A yell of delight rang through the silence. There was Eric, his face split by the happiest smile ever running at them with his arms spread wide. He was followed at a more sedate pace by a slight figure covered from head to toe in rags with only her eyes peeking above strange contraption masking nearly all of her face. She was holding a similar one, which Eric, in his joy, had ripped off his face.

The brothers were embracing each other laughing with such joy, Yaya felt a smile coming on her face as well. Eric and Solo were so excited. Soon Eric was wrapping his big arms around her neck as well, giving her loud smacks on her cheeks. He was continually repeating her name with each kiss.

Solo had tears rolling down his cheeks his face lit up with such delight, Yaya realised how frightened he must have been that his hopes would be false. Yet again she was confronted with how deep his feelings for his brother, this big man child, went.

The girl accompanying Eric had been silent all the while. When Eric let go of Solo and Yaya, she spoke, her voice sounding a bit muffled behind her mask.

"Welcome siblings of our friend Eric. My name is Tish from the Bunyip clan".

Turning to Solo, she went on," You are Eric’s little brother? You look very big to me".

She winked at Eric, who was looking at her with complete devotion.

"And this is Yaya, his girlfriend and my best friend too", Eric shouted, too ecstatic to have found them again to let Tish finish.

All of a sudden Eric looked very nervous, not wanting to look at Yaya anymore. He pulled at his brother's arm, bringing his mouth close to his ear whispering something in it. Yaya saw Solo's body stiffen. He stepped in front of her, gripping her arms so tight it hurt saying without any preamble:" I better tell it to you straight, my love, your mother didn’t make it out of the village. Eric just told me only he, Wulf and Freya managed to get away, as they were not there at the time but gathering berries in the forest. I’m so sorry. These cretins have a lot to answer for!"

Solo knew better than to try and comfort Yaya now. She was trying her utmost to hold it together as it was. She couldn’t move. She felt a tiny hand on her arm. Small as she was, the little woman managed to hold her up when Yaya crumpled like a wet piece of paper.

The first time she heard about the destruction of her village, she’d been devastated. Though in the back of her mind, a little voice had kept saying, maybe..? Hearing Solo’s theory about the missing bodies, she couldn’t help putting her hopes up again. Now, her worst fears were confirmed. Her mother was dead.

Thinking of Jonah having to hear this devastating news while he was amongst strangers, she decided there and then, she had to be the one to tell him. It was the only thought that kept her from completely falling apart.

All the while, the girl held her tight cooing soft words in a strange dialect. It felt strangely comforting.

Yaya got up, gently took off the girl's hands and straightened her shoulders. She would find Jonah. That is what she wanted to live for now. Nothing and nobody would be able to stop her. Her new purpose in life was giving her the strength to push her grief deep inside her. Now wasn't the time to mourn her mother while she had work to do in finding her brother.

The girl called Tish spoke a few sentences in her dialect to Eric, sounding quite urgent. The latter was standing close to his brother holding on to his hand. He looked unsure about what to do about Yaya’s grief. He told his brother they had to follow Tish if they wanted to cross the bog before high tide.

"A lot of the paths will be underwater soon. We’ll have to hurry. We brought you some masks to wear. I’ve been coming here every day to wait for you. I knew you would come! Just like you always do".

"I’ll never leave you, big brother. What do we always say?"

"I‘ll always come for you no matter the cost", Eric proudly recited.

Solo clapped him on his back. "Now let's follow your friend Tish".

The girl had already taken some masks out of her sack. She helped them adjust the straps to fit their faces.

"We shouldn't take too long walking through the bog. These masks only last a short while before they’re saturated and let the fumes through. There was no time to bring more air". Tish was pointing to a metal canister on her back. Eric was carrying the same.

Solo gave one last worried look at Yaya as if to check she was okay before stepping onto the muddy trail, following Eric and Tish who were leading the way.

All, feeling Yaya's sorrow, were subdued and concentrated on not falling in the holes filled with smelly water.

The girl set a quick pace, clearly very worried about the tide and the status of their protective masks.

Chapter Forty-nine - Sinatown

After one more day of walking through trees and shrubs with a few stops to eat, they arrived on a vast grassy plain at the other end of which they observed a gate, flanked by walls stretching to both sides as far as their eyes could see.

"We have arrived. This is Sinatown, or Silktown as some call it. Here live the only people who’ve kept the art of making silk alive after the old civilisation collapsed. They guard their secret jealously. No one is allowed to enter the town uninvited ". Mallory opened his arms as if to enfold the whole edifice in them, looking as proud as if he owned the place.

Jonah had never seen silk but had heard of it. People who had seen it, always spoken of it in awe. Not affordable for poor fisher people like him and his family.

Astrid let slip her wedding dress had been made of silk and that it was the most magnificent stuff she’d ever seen.

Mattie immediately was full of questions such as 'who were you going to marry?', 'when were you going to?', which made everyone feel uncomfortable as it reminded all of them of the reasons why it never happened.

Astrid knew she had to say something to stop all the questions, patiently told her about Henry and that it would have been soon. She tried not to look at Jonah, who was also studiously looking elsewhere.

Mallory cut in to stop Mattie grilling Astrid relentlessly: "I have friends here, who will help us to reach Upavon, where my sister lives. She’s a midwife there and knows practically everyone in town. It won't be hard to find you a passage home from there, Astrid. There is no harbour in Sinatown as the sea before their coast isn't deep enough because they're a lot of obstacles hidden underwater. The Sinese find it used to export their silk via the Red River south to Upavon and load it there onto trader ships. But ever since Damien has built an ore mine there, using his enemies as slave labour, the Sinese now bring their products south via the desert route. My friends will shelter us until the next caravan goes south. It will take us to Upavon".

His words had the expected effect of drawing Mattie’s attention away from poor Astrid.

Coming closer, they found those walls, were made of thick, black wood. Gazing up at the colossal gate towering above they saw two very lifelike, copper creatures, Mallory called them ‘dragons’ whose tails curled around the gate posts as if guarding the entrance with their fierce look. By now, twilight had started to obscure their surroundings.

Mallory knocked loudly on a small door set into the gate with his staff. After a few minutes, they heard a voice from above: "Who goes there? We have closed for today. Come back tomorrow at dawn.

"With a large smile on his face, Mallory shouted to the invisible guard above: "Hey Cheng, I’ve been so looking forward to drinking that wine you owe me from our last chess game! Are you sure you want to let your old friend Mallory stand outside all night?"

They heard some loud. A few moments later, the little door was thrown open and a small brown figure shot out to throw himself on Mallory, giving him two big smacks on his cheeks and hugging him fiercely.

"Mall, my dear friend. I never ever thought I would see you again at this side of the pearly gates! My shift is nearly over. Come and keep me company for the last half hour and then we’ll celebrate".

Suddenly spotting the youngsters, he stopped in his tracks. "And who are these lads? You old goat, did you finally manage to convince some poor woman to take you on and give you some children to support you in your old age?"

"My dear Cheng, if you wouldn't be so vain and wear your glasses, you would see I brought two lovely ladies and one nice young man. Fortune has brought them into my path. Let me introduce them".

He pointed at them one at the time and told the little man their names. "But are you going to let us in or not? It’s getting dark. I've heard it wouldn't be wise to stay on this plain at night time. We’ll tell you all about why we're here hopefully while having a nice warm meal. Show us a cheap inn, so we can freshen up before having that drink".

"Don't even think of it. You’ll all come to my house and be my guests. My wife will be delighted to meet you as will be my son. Come, I will ask the other guard to finish my watch by himself. Follow me".

He ushered them through the door, taking great care at closing it and securing the entrance with a metal crossbar. He whistled and told the man who appeared he had to go home straight away and would explain tomorrow.

Astrid had not seen Mallory like this before, so animated and smiling as if he had just won the lottery. He looked decades younger walking in front of them, joking and chatting with his friend.

Cheng was updating him on all his adventures since their paths had split up. He told Mallory how he’d always wanted to visit his birthplace. Meeting his wife during that stay and having a child had kept him put for all these years. Now, seeing his friend Mallory again made everything complete!

"My daughter will be happy too to see new people from outside. Especially when she hears you're from the Island", he looked back at Astrid with a broad smile on his face. "She’s been dying to get out and see something of the world, but being an only child and her parents not getting any younger, it's been hard for her to leave. We expect her to join and lead the Family company when we are gone".

"Cheng and his family own one of the largest silk farms in Sinatown", Mallory explained to his companions.

"The best one! " sticking his chest out, Cheng looked very proud. They all laughed.

On their walk to his house, they found the town to exist of mainly confusing wide and narrow canals, strung along with colourful houses, all with a narrow, wooden covered pier attached festooned with long covered canoes. The houses had curved, sloping roofs, built from some sort of pipes.

Cheng explained when asked, that the material was called bamboo. "It’s light but durable and easy to work with. We don't have many trees we can chop down here, so it’s cheaper than wood. This whole area used to be a swamp, which our people have partially drained over time. Our forefathers planted lots of Mulberry trees around the larger water holes. They’re used to feed our silkworms. Ah, here we are my friends", he threw open another slightly smaller gate and motioned for them to enter a bright, peaceful courtyard.
Even though it was already dark by now, they could see the yard was full of beautiful flowers and small fruit trees in multicoloured pots shimmering in the light of the many lanterns hanging everywhere. It made a deep impression on our young people. The fragrance of the blooms reminded them of summer days at home.

"Anna, Anna, my love, look who I’m bringing you!"
A delicate-looking woman, her jet black hair done up in elaborate curls and plaits came hurrying out into the yard. After having been introduced to everyone, she insisted they all had a nice warm bath and fresh clothes before they joined her and her husband for supper.

She ushered Mallory and Jonah to the men's bathhouse. The girls she led to a bedroom where they could enjoy a wonderful soak in a deep copper bath.

All freshened up and feeling much the better for it, a servant led them to a long porch looking out on the exotic courtyard, where Cheng and his wife were waiting for them. The couple was kneeling at extremely low tables. Mallory took one look at them and said: "Dear Cheng and dearest Anna, this old man has been hiking far too much over these last few weeks. If I have to fold myself down for any amount of time, I’ll never be able to straighten myself later. Could you please let me have the guest place? The young ones, being more supple than me, probably, will be fine kneeling. Astrid, you can always join me here if I’m wrong".

Their hosts both thought it hilarious and pointed him to a place at the table, where, as he showed the others, there was a hole under the table, where he could put his legs in instead of kneeling.

The servant brought the most delicious Sinese food round accompanied by quite a bit of a fiery liquid called Berry made from fermented mulberries. Their hosts warned them to mix it with a lot of water as the wine could make one very drunk if you were not used to it.

"Some of our people even mix the ripe berries with unripe ones, to give them good dreams. But don't worry, Anna does not allow that in this house".

Mallory filled the couple in on their adventures and the reason they had come all this way. Astrid and her friends listening and eating, soon felt extremely sleepy. Anna noticing this got up, and led them to their quarters herself, leaving the men to catch up and spend some time together.

Mallory told Cheng, who he hadn't seen since he had left the monks, about his life after they had each gone their own way. Cheng knew why his friend had had to leave the Monastery and was the one who helped him escape on one of his caravans.

"How did you end up with that devil Damien? I know you didn’t have many options left, but living there in the White Fort must have been a desperate choice. You could have fled away from Midland and maybe gone further West?"

"I planned to do that until his men caught me one night. When they heard I had medical knowledge, they took me to their boss. The leader of that crew happened to be Damien's right hand at the time. An evil big bastard called Zion. Damien had these debilitating back pains but didn't want anyone to know about them as they would make him look weak. I had no choice but to find out what was wrong with him and try to fix it in exchange for keeping my head. After examining him, I discovered he had kidney stones and was able to get rid of them. After that, he didn't want to let me go as he was afraid they would come back. He would have no one who would know how to cure him. On top of that, he was probably worried, word would get out about his health. After finding some maps in his library, I soon found a way out through a secret tunnel".

"So why didn't you? You stayed for more than five years?"

Stalling Mallory filled his cup again:" I'm getting quite fond of this Berry stuff and telling a story is thirsty work. Shall I top you up too?"

Cheng declined: "No thanks, you guys can sleep late tomorrow, but our caravan south will leave in two weeks. I have to get up early every day to make sure our production is high enough to fill our orders. Why don't you stay with us for those two weeks and rest up? If you do, I’ll come with you on the caravan and bring my daughter. She’ll be so excited. She’s been wearing us down wanting to go south and see something of the world. I’ll have to ask Anna for permission naturally. Though I don't doubt she’ll give it. It is preferable to Li taking matters in her own hands and just decide one day to go south on a trip with her friends without telling anyone. She’s been a bit spoilt being an only child. But tell me more about how you managed to land on our doorstep and why it took so long to leave the Fort. Mind you. It gives me great joy to see you again".

"Well, one night soon after Damien's men took me, I was woken up by one of the kitchen maids. She told me another group of his men had found a small child, who wouldn't talk, but only made strange sounds. Damien wanted to know if she was a mute or just didn't want to speak. He was planning to sell her on. It would affect her value if she couldn't talk. The maid took me to the kitchen where, sitting in front of the fire, I found this scruffy, emaciated little kid looking at us with terrified eyes. I immediately could tell by her colouring that she belonged to the Mountain people. You know how they have that white hair with their very dark skins. I spoke to her in her own language. She jumped up and flew at me and held on to my knees for dear life, crying and saying: Dada, Mama. It nearly broke my heart. She must have gotten lost or something. She couldn’t recall what had happened. I asked Damien if I could keep her. In exchange, I promised I would stay put and not try to escape. He knew I could have left without too many problems with the training I had in the monastery as a monk. A medic trained in the Luton Academy was too good a prize to let go, so he allowed me to take her under my wing. I sort of settled there, trying to keep her out of trouble. The others in the Fort soon got used to me. Even after I patched some of them up, they grudgingly accepted me as one of them. The little one had to learn at a very young age; it was a matter of to eat or be eaten in that place. Even though I have tried to teach her some morals, she’s too familiar to my taste with killing and maiming people without any sense that it's wrong to do so. When we left the mountains I had hoped to leave her with her people, the Dinali I told you about, but she didn’t want to leave me and has taken quite a shine to Astrid, the Island girl. It might be good for her to be in the company of a girl who had a very different upbringing. I would like to arrange for Mattie to accompany Astrid to the Island, where she can have a proper education and live amongst normal people. I will miss the little demon but can't keep her with me forever. Too dangerous for both of us".

They both stared into the embers of the dying fire, thinking about how different their lives had turned out from the plans they’d made as trainee science monks in Luton.
They were just about to turn in as well when the front gate opened again with a bang, and a shadowy figure came walking in, slightly listing to one side. Like most drunk people she, as it appeared to be a young woman, tried to walk in an exaggerated careful way in order not to show that she was inebriated, which made her look even worse for wear.

When the latecomer came closer, Cheng gave a shout of dismay: "Li!!"

"Oh hello, father, I didn't know you would still be up. Don't you have to get up early tomorrow?", she, as it seemed to be Cheng's daughter, was slurring her words slightly. Even though she was trying to seem sober, they could both see and hear she was utterly wasted. She burped loudly and then started to giggle.

Cheng looked furious but was trying to restrain himself in front of his old friend.

"Well, Mallory. Let me introduce you to my daughter Li, who was supposed to have come home early to help me with the loading and checking of the caravan tomorrow. I apologise for her condition. You are lucky my girl, we have a guest, my old friend Mallory, whom I studied with, or else you would have been in a lot of trouble. For now, just go to bed and sleep it off. I expect you at the factory at first light sobered up one way or the other. If you aren't there on time, you will not come with us to accompany my friend and his wards who need to go to Upavon".

The girl who was the spitting image of her mother, no one would even guess she had initially been born the couple's son, gave a shrill cry. She threw herself around her father's neck, not paying any attention to his stern face, which soon melted into a grudging smile.

"Thank you, thank you. I’ll be there, I promise. I always wanted to come with you on the caravan!"

"Don't thank me yet. Make sure you help me first these coming two weeks, or you can stay here. At least on the trip, I’ll be able to keep an eye on you. There’ll be no drinking or drugs if I can help it. You’ll get a chance to get to know some young people who’ve had to learn the hard way that life is not a joke to be wasted away on foolishness".

Not wanting him to change his mind, the girl quickly left her father and his friend to, undoubtedly, discuss her wicked character. Parents were such a tedious nuisance!

"We might have transformed her into a girl, but she still behaves like some irresponsible young buck. Did you forget about our tradition, old friend?" Cheng asked when he saw the puzzled look on Mallory's face.

"You told me about it at the academy, and I’ve read about it later in the Fort's library, but as so many traditions have changed over the years, I didn't think your people still adhere to these old customs. So property still goes through the female line? Similar to the Northern tribes. Though they allow a man to inherit if there’s no female in the family as long as he’s married so his wife can be the heir. Is she yours?"

Cheng looked a bit uncomfortable at this direct question. He moved closer to Mallory and practically whispered:" She is. When we took her to Luton for her change, I had her tested. My Anna doesn't know, and she can never know. It would be too hard for her. She prides herself for loving me for who I am and not for being Li’s father. Luckily we had various visitors that week, so in her eyes the anonymity of the father is safe".

Mallory, who at the time they were in the academy together, had thought it a weird custom of the Sinese not to want to know who fathered a child. For them, it was only relevant who its mother was. Later he understood that it all had to do with diversity and to keep the bloodlines healthy. The Sinese community of silk farmers had started out with very few of them, so they made it a rule that the women would welcome visitors to the village in their bed. Their husbands would accept any issue as their very own without knowing if the child was theirs.

"Do you and Anna have more children?”

"Alas, no, she was already a bit older when we met. It took a while before she had Li. We met as children, but then I left for Luton. She decided to wait until I came back instead of marrying someone else. Her family was very cross with her, but as she soon became their matriarch, there wasn't much they could do about it. When you had to leave the Academy, I found the other monks mistrusted me as we had been friends, so I decided to leave as well and go home".

Mallory felt guilty hearing his behaviour had ruined not only his own career but also the stellar one of his best friend. When he mentioned it, Cheng refused to accept any kind of apology.

"You did me a favour. The way they treated you opened my eyes for what is going on in that place. I couldn’t be happier now, married to my beloved Anna. I love my daughter dearly, even though she still has a lot to learn. I’m only sorry you never met a soul mate and had children of your own. You would have made a good father, just like your own. You seem to have taken these three youth to your heart, though. They are a lucky lot to have you to guide them”.
On this note, he showed Mallory his room and bade him goodnight.

# **Chapter Fifty - The caravan**

The next two weeks, Astrid and Jonah finally had a chance to recover from their journey. All the attention they got from of Li and her friends made the two sometimes forget their differences and join in with the daily activities of the young Sinese such as helping with the harvesting of the silkworm cocoons. In the evening they joined them in all sort of games. Some of their new friends indulged in copious amounts of Berry and smoked a weird weed Dama that made everyone giggle uncontrollably.

Li, despite her promise to her father, had no qualms in joining them and was always trying to persuade them to try it.

The last evening, before they were due to leave the Sinese, Astrid let Li persuade her to take a little puff. Not in the least because she saw Jonah showed no inhibition in accepting the pipe that was going around. At first, she felt no different. She was a bit disappointed as the others seem to be thoroughly enjoying themselves, rolling about at the most stupid jokes or even for no reason at all.
Throwing all caution she had before in the wind, she let Li fill her glass with a large amount of Berry, and when the pipe came round again, she took a deep draft nearly choking herself to great hilarity of the others. If it was the alcohol or the Dama or the combination of both, she couldn’t tell, she felt herself floating away on a big cloud. Why was she so worried about everything? She couldn't remember. Looking at Jonah, she was struck by an intense longing to be near him and touch him.
Mother, he was a very handsome man. Why hadn’t she noticed it before? He seemed to be a bit worse for wear himself. She’d never seen him laugh so uncontrollably. It made his face light up like a bright fire, and she yearned to warm herself on it.
He was sitting far too close to that girl who kept touching his arm and leaning into him, the little hussy!

When Astrid saw Jonah glancing at her over the girl’s shoulder, she beckoned him to come over. He didn't waste any time to do so. The other boys and girls were laughing and calling out ribald encouragements which under normal circumstances would have made her cringe with embarrassment. The girl sitting beside her, shuffled aside to make room for him, calling her a lucky girl.

Jonah dropped next to her, feeling soberer all of a sudden at this surprising change of her mood. Astrid looked at him with eyes shining with such inner joy and tenderness he felt himself go warm all over. For weeks he had only dreamt of her one day looking at him this way. A small voice at the back of his mind tried to tell him she was under the influence of the weed and Berry. He ignored it. He was used to drinking with his mates from an early age and didn’t feel very intoxicated yet. He remembered how she had reacted to the little bit of alcohol in the cider she had when they were at the Dinali.

When she suddenly gave him, under loud cheering of their new friends, a loud kiss on his cheek smiling that beautiful smile, he decided against his better instinct:" Fuck this. What harm can it do?" He pulled her closer to return the favour, but she turned her head, so their lips touched. After that, he was lost. How could something that felt so great, so right, be wrong?

Only Cheng barging in, to tell them to go home and rest for tomorrow, frowning at his daughter who tried in vain to look as if she was sober, stopped Jonah from taking things further. She probably would have regretted it the next day and be even madder at him. He dropped her off at her door and indulged himself one last time, giving her a long, deep kiss before sending her, giggling and wobbling a bit, into her room. Fortunately, he was still intoxicated enough from everything not to worry about what Astrid would say the next day and fell asleep within seconds.

Astrid woke up early as her bladder was bursting. Her head felt very strange. She tried to remember what happened the night before. Her last memory was of drinking that lovely juice and trying to smoke a pipe. After that, everything was hazy. She could vaguely recall Jonah coming over to her and spending time with her. He had probably tried to convince her of his innocence again. She shook her head. It wasn't important. Today, after two pleasant but slow, stagnant weeks, she would yet be closer to home. That was much more important than moping around over a boy. Seeing her sister and her grandfather again, finally being able to share her grief with people who had known her parents and loved them. She swallowed a big lump in her throat and hurried out of the room.

When Astrid came back from the washroom, she heard a lot of commotion outside her window and opened the shutters to peer down. She saw a mosaic of colours. Brightly clad people were laughing and working hard to put huge rolls of silk wrapped in oilcloths of various colours on a row of animals she’d never seen before. Amongst the cheerful crowd, she spotted Cheng walking around ticking off items on a list, now and then turning to a young girl who was slouching after him. Even from this far, she could see that Li was still a bit worse from wear. She couldn’t see Mallor or Jonah down there. Mattie was hiding under the covers.

Astrid was keen to have an early start as every step would bring her closer to getting home and shook her shoulder. "Wake up, lazybones!" When Mattie just mumbled something and tried to go back to sleep, Astrid said teasingly: "Well, I guess you can always stay here. They seem to like girls, and Mallory wants you to be safe". It got the expected reaction.

Without a word, Mattie got up and quickly pulled on her clothes and shoes. She didn't bother to wash. Astrid thought that one of these days, she would have to have a serious conversation with that girl about personal hygiene. It had been practically a religion on her island. At least the girl's clothes were cleaner than Astrid had ever seen them. Mattie smelt of lavender now instead of a small furry animal. She

Astrid stuffed her meagre belongings into her backpack and encouraged Mattie to do the same. Leaving their room, she heard the voices of Jonah and Mallory coming from one of the rooms adjoining theirs. She knocked a few times and stood in the door opening, Mattie slipping around her like an eel.

In her impatience to be on her way, she admonished them to hurry up. "When will we be leaving? Are you ready yet? We have packed our stuff already. Cheng said we would leave very early".

"Yes, we’re ready to go", Mallory was smiling at the girl's apparent hurry to get going, "Last night Cheng told me we’d be provided with breakfast to take with us so that we won't lose time. Or do you need to eat something before we leave?" They all shook their heads trouping downstairs to make their way to Cheng and his caravan.

Outside, everybody out of politeness pretended not to notice the strangers and kept on with their tasks. Staring at people was seen as an insult here and often ended in a fight.
Still, Astrid felt very conspicuous. Jonah, Mallory and herself were like giants towering over these dark-haired short men and women. Mattie seemed to be enjoying the fact she

looked like she belonged with the adults for a change.
"Ah my friends, did you have a good sleep last night? Mallory and I shall go over our preparations for this journey and the one following I, which will bring you, Astrid, home. We’ll have to take some special measures to make sure we won't get into trouble if we happen to run into Damien's henchmen. Come, Mallory, I see the caravan leader with his guard over there".

Li, looking a bit embarrassed about her state of dishevelment, bowed to Mallory.

 After he had left with her father, she took a good look at her travel companions, her eyes twinkling. " And how are we all feeling today? Hope you made it to your rooms, alright? Or was it just the one room?"

Astrid and Jonah both tried not to look at each other, cringing at the assumption they‘d spent the night together. Some other young people, some of whom would accompany them too and some others who’d just come to wave them out, saved them from having to answer the question. Li’s friends were milling around them, laughing and chattering.

 Astrid saw Jonah staring open-mouthed at a delicate little figure, who looked ridiculously beautiful in her coloured silk dress, her hair tied up in a very intricate arrangement of loops and plaits, ending in a triumphant ponytail streaming down her back. It was her from last night!
The girl was chattering like a little bird trying to get Jonah’s undivided attention, telling him to come back soon. Astrid felt a slight pang of jalousie but reprimanded herself. Why would she care what he did or didn't do? It would be a nice change for her, Astrid, to have him run after another girl like a lovelorn puppy dog. They could never be more than friends anyway after all that happened if that. She quickly pushed the painful thoughts about her family's catastrophe away. It would never stop hurting. The sooner she went home to salvage the business and join her family, the better. A few more days and she would never have to see him again.

Mattie, never the shy one, had already pushed herself forward to explain to the group of young people who she was and where they were going. "My name is Mattie. My Dinali tribe name is Jones from the Towers. I am nearly thirteen", she said proudly. As nobody said anything, she went on:" Astrid is my best friend. We're bringing her back home, at least as far as the harbour. She is from the Island, from the Gen people! Her family name is Harrington. Do you know she was to be married, but Jonah's people stole her from under her family's nose!"
She almost sounded as if she admired the bold deed.

Jonah felt it was time to interrupt the girl before she told the delightful vision in front of him, any more things that would put him in a bad daylight. "You guys probably have a lot of stuff to do before we leave. Mattie, let's not stand in their way and bore them with our stories".

The girl in front undeterred by the fact he might be a kidnapper, maybe even attracted by it, told him she, Shao Mei, would be delighted to be bored by him under great hilarity of her friends. Jonah’s face shone with a hot red colour. He might be an experienced seaman and fisherman, looked upon as a man, now he had a name, but his experience with women was not very significant. Shao, who apparently found the big bumbling boy rather cute, fluttered her eyelashes at him and tittered delightedly at the effect it had on the young man in front of her.

"It would be wonderful if you would come back after you’ve delivered Astrid to her people. I am already looking forward to it. Why don't we go and see which waggon you're on?" With a naughty look at the tall girl, who was definitely not enjoying this development, Shao clung to Jonah’s arm and led him in the direction of the caravan. There wasn't much else for the other two to do but follow them.

When asked by Astrid, Cheng told her the strange-looking animals were lamas. "They’re much better suited to take us over the steep paths in the Angry Mountains. Have you heard of these mountains? They have very high peaks that often have the habit of erupting with fiery lava streams. There is a mine there belonging to one of Damien's disreputable friends of the Mineral Reserve Company. Today, though, we’ll take a detour in order not to come under his radar. The mine is guarded by the roughest Midland elements, who treat the miners like slaves. Which they effectively are. Midlanders get sent to the mines as a punishment as an alternative to a death sentence. However, it isn’t much better as most of them die before their time is up or shortly after. The air in the mine is poisonous, and no one can survive in there for more than a few years without proper gear. We better stay well clear of that area."

Mattie immediately fell in love with the two lama's that were going to pull the cart she would be travelling on. "What are their names?” Upon hearing, they only had numbers, to everyone's amusement, she christened them there and then 'Woolly and Puffy, as they look so soft'. She insisted on riding with Jonah and Li, so Astrid joined Mallory and Cheng on their cart.

Looking back down the caravan, Astrid saw the traders were mainly female, while the men were mostly there to defend them and do the heavy lifting.

After everyone and everything was in their rightful place, the man leading the caravan blew a small horn and the procession of about ten carts, leading additional lamas behind them, set on its way.

Astrid felt relieved to be moving in the direction of her home again. After a while, the swaying of the cart and her empty stomach started to make her feel very queasy. When she told Cheng and Mallory, they made her go in the back to find the food packs and have some breakfast. The strong smell of the sausage meat made it a bit worse, so she stuck to eating just the crispy dark brown bread accompanied with some fresh apple juice—the latter tasting like she had bitten in a sweet apple. Mallory and Cheng made short work of the sausage rolls rinsing them away with some light cider.

Staying in the back of the cart looking at the rest of the caravan, Astrid could see Li having an animated conversation with Jonah. He was laughing a lot, his white teeth shining. Mattie her head stuck between the other two, was sharing in their chat. They all seemed to be having fun. She wouldn’t know what they could be talking about so animatedly. They barely knew each other. Trying to put them out of her mind, she started to take more of an interest in her surroundings.

They were ploughing through a steppe of tall grasses here and there interspersed with clumps of bright purple or yellow flowers. Now and then a startled rabbit and once a fox ran off away from the noisy caravan.

She was just nodding off when a shout went up from the front. She sat up and peered around Cheng to find they had arrived at a place with an abundance of green through which she could see the unmistakable crystal glitter of water.

Chapter Fifty-one -Darkwater Oasis

"Darkwater Oasis!" Cheng sounded relieved.
"Remember Mallory when we were last here? We still were in our prime and beautiful".

"Speak for yourself, old man, I can still attract the ladies", Mallory sounded more carefree than she had heard him before.
Being with his old friend, sharing stories about their days as disciples at the Monastery, must have made him feel young again.

It was nice to see this serious, solemn man having a good time with Cheng like two frivolous young men with no care in the world. It made her hopeful that in time, she could leave her bad memories her behind her too. Astrid looked back at the wagon following theirs feeling a bit more predisposed to be a bit more gracious towards Jonah. That was until she saw him swing that Li girl from their cart. The hussy was screaming with laughter and fell against his chest, pretending to have stumbled. Jonah put her down laughing uproariously too. He was making his way to the front stretching his hand out to her, smiling as he did so. With a sniff, turning her face away, she completely ignored his outstretched arms while jumping over the sideboard to stride away with her chin up in the air.

Mallory and Cheng looked at each other and shook their heads. "Young love. I so don't miss all that shit". They slapped hands and Cheng went off to help to unhitch the lama's, who were eager to get to the water. Mallory followed, giving his friend a hand after which they sat down, smoking their pipes, talking about their plans. They would spend the night at the oasis and the next day, finish the last leg of their journey to Upavon.

Astrid, feeling a bit at a loss, wandered to the edge of the broad stretch of water of the oasis. Despite all that had happened to her in the past weeks, she could still enjoy the beautiful vista of the sparkling blue water surrounded by palm trees set against the arid plains surrounding it. Her home looked so very different. All lush greens and colour, the water in the lakes and rivers grey-blue reflecting the often cloudy skies. Though the summers could be warm, they never became as scorching as spring seemed to be here. It must be impossible to live here in the middle of the year.

In school, they taught her there used to be such dry and arid regions on the Island as well a long time ago, but the careful planting of trees and following the rules of farming set out by the monks had turned her whole island into a lush and fertile land.

No matter what family you belonged to, everyone helped with the harvest to make sure there would never be a lack of food. The short, soft winters and temperate springs brought enough rain to replace what they used during the warmer times.
Their forebears had built long aqueducts to bring the water from the mountains and lakes to the towns and villages. There was always a cool sea breeze blowing. In Midland, it always seemed to be hot and muggy. The people here all seemed to live on a diet of meat and fish supplemented with a variety of cheeses and bread. It made her remember her mother's wonderfully fresh salads and vegetable pies, making her sad and hungry at the same time. She turned around to see what the others were doing to discover Jonah coming her way. He just didn’t get it, did he? She wanted nothing to do with him. Let him go back to that Li person.

Ignoring her scowling face, he said: "Hey, Astrid. We were wondering if you wanted to join us. Li has brought her playing cards, but we need a fourth person for the game".

His friendly blue-grey eyes looking directly at her, made her feel so strange. Before the message about the fire, they’d started to get on well with each other. If only because he was her age and deep down, she felt he meant well and would do everything for her if she but asked.

She sighed and relaxed her shoulders only then realising how tense she had been those last few hours. Trying to hate someone you felt so attracted to was exhausting. On the one hand, she wanted to blame Jonah for the disaster that had befallen her parents and friends. There was still that niggling thought though telling her that if she was honest, she was just as guilty. Probably more than him. Suppose they hadn't been so careless leaving the basement door open maybe none of it would have happened. He had just taken the opportunity she had handed to him. It was all he knew.

Seeing her waver, Jonah tried another approach. "I understand you don't want to be with me, but please don't punish Mattie. She’s had nothing to do with it all. She adores you".

Her eyes strayed to the other two who were trying to pretend not to look in their direction. Mattie, with her sharp ears hearing her name mentioned, gave up all pretence and waved enthusiastically at them, shouting:" Come on, Astrid! We are waiting! You can play with me against them!"

Astrid waved back. "Alright, then. Just to make Mattie happy. I will do one game. What are we playing?"

"Some Sinese card game. It sounded a bit complicated when Li told us about it, but she’ll explain it to you. We need to play it with four people".

Astrid swept past him to join the other two. Jonah followed her, careful not to show the smile on his face.

After Li explained the game of Sheng Ji, as she called it, Astrid soon started having fun trying to outwit the other pair assisted by a boisterous Mattie who kept hugging her every time they won a hand. Life at the Fort had given the child a cunning beyond her years. She now showed her impressive memory skills helping Astrid wipe the floor with Li and Jonah. There were a lot of calls about cheating and ‘you can’t be serious!’

When Cheng came to tell them the evening meal was ready, he found four young people simply having fun together. To his relief, Astrid had rediscovered some of her joy again. He ushered them to the campfire, where the others were already happily eating the pies and roasted hare, getting to know Mallory. The latter looked up at his friend, who winked at him, pointing his chin at the kids, as they called them. Mallory answered with a hearty thumbs up.

By the time the meal they finished the meal, it had gotten very dark. The bumpy track through the steppes in the wooden cart, combined with the food and a cup, only one this time, of the fiery Berry, made it easy for Astrid to fall asleep the moment she lay down her head. Her last thoughts were of going home. She felt so much better than this morning. She was getting closer to going back. That was all that counted in the end.

Jonah looking at her lying across the fire, seeing her face relax, felt overwhelmed by such tenderness and hopefulness, he had to swallow back his tears. He wished their trip would take another month instead of one more day. Jonah was sure he could win her over if only they gave him more time. He was a born optimist. His mind was whirring with plans on how to keep in contact with her, maybe even follow her. Holding that thought, he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Fifty-two– The Raiders

By morning when everyone had just gone back to their wagons to leave, the caravan leader raised the alarm, shouting something unintelligible. He was pointing to the right where they could see a cloud of dust becoming larger and larger.

Cheng swore, he had just sat down on their cart. "Miners! Or to be precise their guards. They come from the camp north-west of here. I had hoped to evade them by taking the dessert route. Let me do the talking. We’ve dealt with them before".
He ordered the rest of his crew to form a half-circle with their carts putting the lamas behind them. The lake and surrounding shrubs protected their backs. All the drivers, men and women, made sure their weapons were within reach hiding within the protective circle.

"Mallory, it might be a good idea when you and your charges make sure they don't see you. Damien has an extensive reach. Word about your escape might have reached this far south. The lure of a large sum of money might be enough for them to ignore whatever I can come up with and attack us".

Mallory, already taking out his sword and was trapping on some knives for good measure, saw the sense of this. He admonished Astrid, Jonah and Mattie to stay out of sight behind the bales of silk. He hid in one of the waggons.

Astrid seemed petrified. She meekly let Jonah lead her to the other side of the caravan, where they would be out of sight for the raiders.

Mattie, her cheeks blazing, looked at Mallory as if he had lost his mind. "I want to fight with the others! I don’t want to hide. I’m not scared! We will look like cowards letting others do our fighting for us".

Mallory squatted down in front of her and explained what Cheng had said. "You’ll be much more useful while watching over Astrid. She’s not used to all this and will need you beside her protecting her. Jonah has to stay with me. We’ll try not to let them see us. We might have to help Cheng if he can't reason with them. We won't be far away. Let's first see if Cheng can make a deal with them. He’s done this trip many times before and is known to these men".

“Alright. But if those bastards try to get us, I will be allowed this time to use my knives, won't I?"

In the past, Mallory had made her promise never to stab anyone again unless her life depended on it. This, after a few mishaps at the fort which had nearly caused her to be hanged. She had grudgingly agreed to this rule.

"You have my permission. However, the safest thing will be not to show yourselves until this is all over. If everything else fails and you see we can’t hold them off, you have to promise me to get Astrid out of here and follow the trail to Upavon. Take her to my sister. You do remember my sister's name?"

She nodded. Mallory had told her stories about his youth when she couldn't sleep at night. She loved to hear about the pranks the twins would get up to. He and Plaxedes, his sister, used to be inseparable. When he joined the monks, she entered the convent in Luton at the same time so she could be near him. Mattie remembered something had happened to there that made Mallory’s sister break off all contact with him. She’d always wondered if it was for the same reason he left the monks.

"My sister will help Astrid and you. Take this bracelet. She will recognise it and help you get Astrid home. She made one for us both when we were children".

He handed her an intricately plaited leather bracelet, the laces entwined with copper thread. Then he gave her a big hug, kissing the top of her head. "Now go and get Jonah". She must have realised the urgency of his request and shot off to do his bidding.

 A few moments later, Jonah joined him in the main waggon without querying his decision. You could tell the boy was used to obey his leaders in times of danger. It must have been hard for him to leave the girl instead of standing by her. Mallory knew the discipline in Midland villages was tight. Not following orders was never an option. The boy nodded at Mallory, hunkering down beside him behind the canvas flap of the waggon.

Sweat was rolling down their faces, the sun and tension making them incredibly hot. Both had their weapons within hand reach. They saw with a sinking feeling the cloud of dust turning in to a band of ferocious-looking men riding their horses as if possessed.

"Shit! That doesn't look to me like men come to barter. Let's hope Cheng's plan works, and they will settle for a bribe. I see there’re about two of them to one of us. The Sinese women are strong though won’t stand a chance against these assholes".

"Do you know who these guys are then".

"Not personally. But I do know the men working in Damien’s mines are some of the worst criminals in Midland, even the Archipelago. The men guarding them are often even worse but under the protection of Damien. Midlanders, who somehow threaten his position, upset him in any other way or he doesn’t like the look of, is sent to the mines to dig for iron ore. The monks have an agreement with Damien and send all who they determine to be lawbreakers to these penal camps as well. The mines here lay under live volcanoes. No one lasts longer than a few years working there because of the atrocious conditions and appalling treatment. It was one of the things I hated about the monks".

Jonah knew about the mines. Their leaders used it as a deterrent to keep them in line. He was shocked to hear this punishment was doled out to outlanders as well with the blessing of their church. He didn't get to give it much thought, though. A horde of ferocious-looking men had arrived in front of the caravan.

Cheng stepped forward, looking every part of the leader he was. He kept his eyes on the men and didn’t blink once. "Greetings, what can I do for you, gentlemen?"

One of the men, a massive brute with so many tattoos on his body there was barely any skin visible and enough metal pierced through his body parts to make him clang when he moved,snorted loudly, looking at a few men around him adorned in much the same way.

"Ha! You can stop right there little imp. You don't have to do anything for us but hand over all that beautiful silk you’ve got there and your women. You can leave the silk on those fine animals. If you're lucky and don’t make a fuss, we’ll let the rest of you keep their lives”. His men started to move forward, as well.

Cheng held up his hands, still trying to do his best to avert a fight.

"But we, Sinese traders, have an agreement with Damien! We pay our taxes, so he leaves us to get on with our business, in order to keep paying them. He won’t be pleased when he hears one of his men breaking our deal", Cheng kept his voice loud and steady.

The mountain of a man spit on the ground, barely missing Cheng, and laughed his men joining in.

“Damien? He can go and fuck himself, the little fairy! It is time someone takes him and his girly girls down. Midland needs a real man as a leader".

He banged his chest as if to make sure they all understood who that leader should be.

Cheng sighed. Why did strong men always have to be so stupid? Everyone with even a single brain cell knew Damien was where he was because he had the full support from the Monastery, or at least the Prior. The number of the raiders and the fact he didn't see any of the men he usually dealt with, started to worry him a bit. He decided to give it a last shot and try to educate these mongrels. It might change their minds.

"Why do you think Damien and his family have been in charge for so long? Have you ever heard of anyone challenging them and coming out of as a winner or even alive? Hell, quite a few of your prisoners know what I'm talking about".

His speech didn’t have the effect he hoped it would. The men in front of him started to laugh harder as if he’d just told them a great joke. Even their leader was grinning.
Cheng gave the secret hand signal to some of his men to cover him. He had the feeling the time for negotiations would soon be over.

The big man spoke again. "I do know what you’re talking about. I am one of them prisoners and so are all of my friends here".

Seeing a look of horror appearing on Cheng's face, he continued: "I see you’re starting to get it, little mouse. Better step aside and tell your crew to do the same. We’re not unreasonable people. We’ll take your caravan and have some fun with those little ladies I see over there and then let you go home with your head still on your shoulders".

Mallory whispered to Jonah:" Prison uprising! Not the first time. What these sad cretins don't know is that when Damien hears of it and he will, he will get help from the Prior and they will annihilate these fools. Get ready to fight, boy! These men are too desperate to reason with".

Cheng seemed to have gotten to the same conclusion and let out a whistle using the volley of arrows his people rained on the raiders to jump behind the barricade.

Practically all the arrows met their targets, bodies dropping of their horses, but it didn’t do more than stir up the rest of the band like sticking your hand in a wasp's nest.
All the attackers were on horseback, giving them a longer reach and adding the strength of the horses to theirs. They were emaciated but hardened from a life in the mines. Harsh physical labour and abuse at the hands of their wardens and each other had sucked all humanity from them. They knew that going back would always end up in death. It was a very uneven fight.

Mallory and Jonah, jumping out of the waggon to stand on each side of Cheng, ceaselessly chopped and hacked their way through wave after wave of men. Mallory felt all his former training in the monastery flowing back into his muscles. He fought like a machine. Never losing his footing, he killed so many of their attackers, he could barely see through the blood covering his face. His body was bloodred, and he looked like a demon.

The Sinese gave as good as they got too, using skill and speed to overcome their far larger opponents. But the fight was weighed against them. Mallory made a decision.

"Cheng, leave this to Jonah and me. Go and get as many of your people out as you can. Your lamas are small enough to take you through the bushes. Take Astrid and Mattie with you".
Jonah looked at Mallory and nodded as if to say 'I hear you and will stay'.

Cheng hesitated until Mallory gave him a big shove towards the animals in the meantime taking down the next person unlucky enough to come within reach of his sword. With a last look of despair, Cheng ran to the back of the caravan. Soon to be followed by the rest of the Sinese.

"Boy, are you with me?!", Mallory shouted. For an answer Jonah stuck his sword in the throat of a tall lumbering monster, who’d been one of the cronies of the big man. Mallory grinned, his teeth looking very white in his blood-covered face. Against all odds, they managed to keep their stand until the last brute was down. They were surrounded by mangled bodies, using them to stand on higher ground. Just about when they thought it was all over, they heard a roar and the sound of galloping horses.

The large guy had been staying out of the fray until this point as had two of his men. Seeing their unexpected defeat, they were now coming at them swinging brutal-looking maces and howling like a pack of rabid dogs.
Mallory realising they were outnumbered and these guys were still fresh as a daisy while they were both exhausted, shouted at Jonah:" Go! Follow Cheng! I've got this. I will keep them at bay long enough for you to get away from here. No use us both risking our lives!"

Jonah, clamping his jaw, furrowed his brow. His eyes widened in total disbelief. Seeing the boy didn't look like he would follow his order, Mallory bellowed, "Astrid needs you! Mattie needs you!".
The men, who had stood away from the fray, were nearly upon them. Jonah still seemed determined to stay and fight to the end, so Mallory added despair seeping into his voice: "I’ll be fine. I will find you guys when I'm done here. Astrid needs you. She’s pregnant!"

It was as if he had hit the boy in his face with a sledgehammer. All fight went out of him. He stumbled backwards.

"Go!" With Mallory's voice ringing in his ears, Jonah finally unfroze and fled, leaving his friend to save another.

Mallory relieved he got the boy to leave, turned back to his attackers, giving Jonah the chance to jump over the waggons and run in the direction of the others, letting angry tears flowing freely over his face. Not daring to look back at Mallory, the last thing he heard was the clash of weapons and the shouts of the attackers trying to kill the man he had come to love as a father.

Chapter Fifty-three - The Revelation

They were all covered with dust looking like cornmeal covered ghosts. Nobody spoke very much as they made their way to Upavon. There were not many left from the cheerful caravan that had left Sinatown yesterday. They all had friends to mourn.

One of the scouts keeping an eye out in the event of anyone following them, let out a shout. At the top of a high scraggly hill behind them, a rust coloured figure appeared staggering down the incline towards them looking like a ghost from the underworld.

Cheng sent two of his men to ride their lamas towards the figure. They all waited and then saw the man or woman pointing at their group. They saw one of the Sinese helping him up on his lama and riding towards their small train. Coming closer Mattie and Astrid had a shock. It was Jonah! And he was alone.
He looked like death warmed up.

Seeing him without Mallory and covered in dried blood, they had to restrain Mattie from running back into the desert.
She was screaming to let her go. She needed to go back and help Mallory. When she heard Mallory had still been fighting when Jonah left him, she flew at him cursing and swearing like a hellcat.

"You’re a coward!", she ranted at Jonah, pummelling him with her fists, "I would never, ever have left him! Why did you? I thought you liked him".

Astrid ran up to them and pulled the distraught child into her arms. She held on to her as tightly as possible crooning little words like she would do when her little sister had hurt herself. Over the sobbing child's head, she gave Jonah a cold, accusing stare. He started to say something but then turned abruptly to go and speak to Cheng. To think she’d been ready to forgive him. Like all those dirty Midlanders, he was not to be trusted. In these few weeks, Mallory had always been there for them. How could he leave their friend behind?
How could he save himself and let their friend die?

Li looking as shocked as everyone came over and persuaded Mattie to go with her and sit with the other survivors. She had become very fond of the friendly boy and just didn't believe he’d left Mallory without good reason. She urged Astrid to go and ask Jonah to explain how he came to arrive here all by himself.

"We’re all shattered by the news. After losing half of our people, I didn't think it could get any worse. Father was so sure they both would survive and join us back here. He’s taken it very hard as well but is at least talking with Jonah to find out what happened and if there’s anything we can still do for Mallory. I think you should join him".

Berating herself for not thinking about how Cheng might feel, Astrid, swallowed the huge lump in her throat and suppressed the intense rage shaking her body. She would like to know what lies that craven deserter had come up with now.
With long strides, she stormed at the little group questioning Jonah, who was white as a sheet under all the blood and looked ready to drop down with exhaustion.

Jonah looked at her as she stepped in front of him moving his body away from her as if waiting for her to start beating him as well. She definitely felt like it. Never before did she have this compulsion of wanting to annihilate another human being like she did now.

Her voice trembled with pent up rage. She had enough! They had stolen her from her people and abused her, and now this.

“So! What’s your excuse? On my island, we’re taught never to leave our friends behind, no matter what. You Midlanders are a bunch of uncivilised barbarians, but you must have some sort of honour when it comes to protecting one of your own? Did they kill him? Is that why you left? Or did you run at the first opportunity you got?"

Jonah's face, if possible, became even paler than before. He tried to say something but couldn’t speak. Cheng, who’d already heard from the boy what had happened at the oasis, decided the boy had suffered enough. He knew what had made Jonah go against all his instincts and flee the battle. Cheng, trying to prevent everyone from learning the real reason his friend had decided to order the boy to go and fight on alone, directed himself to the girl.

"Astrid, why don't you come with me. We’re all exhausted and still have half a day to go before we reach Upavon. I’ll tell you what happened but want to do so in private". Jonah, you go to the others, to get something to drink and let them tend your wounds. Mattie is best left to her own device for a bit. I’ll talk to her later and tell her the truth".

In her anger and distress, Astrid had failed to notice some the blood covering Jonah was his own. His body had small cuts all over it, with a nasty head wound dripping more of it into his eyes. He didn’t look like someone who had run at the first opportunity but more like someone had put him through a meatgrinder. Jonah gave her one more desperate look before turning to go to find Cheng’s people.

Astrid, let Cheng lead her to his lamas, who were waiting peacefully a little away from all those shouting humans. Cheng seemed to have aged half a century in the last few minutes. The loss of nearly all his caravan and half of his tribesmen had carved deep lines in his face. Knowing that Mallory had most likely succumbed to the criminals, Jonah had to leave him with, had been the final blow. His voice sounded still strong, though.

"I know you're still young and you haven’t known that young man for a very long time, but from what I’ve heard from my dear friend Mallory, he’s an honest lad and has always behaved with bravery and honour all the time you were together. The least you could’ve done was not jump to conclusions and give him the benefit of the doubt before judging him. Mattie’s still a child. She was closer to Mallory than any of us. Her grief can explain her behaviour towards Jonah when he showed up alone without Mallory. I would’ve thought better of you. You should be the last one to blame that boy for anything as he just did what Mallory ordered him to do, which was taking care of you!"

Astrid reared back as if he had smacked her in the face. She hadn't expected to be scolded by Cheng.

"What do you mean? I wasn't even there. How can I be responsible for what has happened? I still don't know for sure if Mallory is dead. Did Jonah tell you? So why did he leave him?"

" Mallory insisted that he leave him to finish the fight and go after Mattie and you. He never wanted to from his own accord. Jonah tried to stay, but Mallory told him something so important, the lad had to go and find you. He didn't see Mallory die before he left him. He was about to be attacked by the leader of those rebels and two of his lieutenants.

Mallory is one of the greatest warriors I know, but I don't think with those odds and the exhaustion he must’ve been feeling, even a born swordsman like him could have survived. If he had, Mallory would have found us by now or joined Jonah unless he was wounded too severely to make it to us. I’ll send a search back as soon as we reach Upavon. We are all too tired. It might still not be safe out there. My agent will send some men, who’ll be able to track him down if there is the slightest chance he’s still alive. I’m am not too worried he’s been taken as prisoner. First, because he would never let that happen and secondly what would they do with him. It would only slow them down. But that’s not why I needed to see you alone".

Astrid, who had started to feel a glimmer of hope, Mallory might still be alive! blinked her eyes and looked at him curiously.

Cheng decided not to beat around the bush. He was dead on his feet, and he’d been very shocked himself when Jonah divulged the reason he’d fled.

"Mallory told Jonah that you’re pregnant. Besides being an excellent fighter, my friend has always been an even better medic. He must have noticed some telltale signs. He wouldn't make this up only to get the boy to leave him. Are you okay?"

Seeing her practically reeling, he realised how stupid he had been to assume she had known. Astrid was an islander girl. They married mainly for genealogical reasons and from what he’d heard, she’d been on the verge of getting married the night they took her, so must’ve been a virgin. Seeing her with Jonah and recognising their attraction, he’d just assumed the boy was the father. It would have made the desertion of Jonah understandable.

A feeling of great despair and disgust came over Astrid. She understood what had happened that night with Solo. Her body had told her the story as had the bruises. Why had she never even contemplated that this could be the result? Is was as if all that time she had blanked it all out. The loss of sight, she’d thought, WOULD BE the only consequence of that man's filthy assault. The rest, she never wanted to think about for the rest of her life. He had put a child in her! She felt bile coming up in her throat.

The pitying look in Cheng's eyes made it even worse. And Jonah knew too!

She wanted to rip this thing growing in her out of her body like the abomination it was. Now, she never could go home! They would treat her like an outcast.

Cheng gripped her by her arms and gave her a little shake. He felt terrible.

"Child! Didn't you know? I am so sorry to have been the one to tell you, but you gave me no choice. I wish I’d been more gentle about it. I thought it was Jonah’s and you hadn’t told him yet. Is there anything I can do for you now? It is a lot to take in, but we’ll find a solution, I promise. We’ll soon continue on our way to Upavon. First, I’d like to set the search for Mallory going. I might be able to get a party of scouts together there this evening. Then we can discuss this predicament you’re in. I’m sorry there isn’t much more we can do now, here in the desert".

Biting down on her bottom lip to stop screams of despair escaping, she numbly pointed to the others as if to say they should join them. Hugging herself tightly, Astrid started to trudge in the direction of the others. A pale shadow of the girl yesterday laughing with her friends at the card game.

Cheng, with a heavy sigh, took the lamas' halters and led the animals with the paltry possessions left to them to the others.

Jonah looked up when Astrid came back and realised Cheng must have told Astrid what Mallory said. He’d been holding Mattie's hand and speaking softly to her. The little girl seemed to have calmed down a bit and seemed to have accepted that his desertion hadn’t been his own idea but Mallory’s.

Astrid wondered what Jonah was saying to her. Had he told her? Who else knew? Her life was ruined. Unless she could make it all go away. She shivered at the thought. On the island, life was sacred even when a child was born out of the bloodlines. Women, who followed their heart instead of their duty, would be banished from the community. They had to leave the island. If the child had already been born, they took it away and its mother would never know where it was. The nuns in school always told them it was the will of the Lady. They should pray for these poor ladies. They would never find happiness again.

Astrid thought about what she had been willing to do that night with Nicholas. It could have had the same result. At least the child would have been from someone she loved and not from that savage. They could have left the island.

She could go back and throw herself on their mercy, but her reputation would be irreparably damaged. A child from a Midlander? No one would want to be associated with her, even her own family. If she were lucky, the convent would take her in as a maid. All her rights in the family firm would go to Lily, as would Henry. It was one of the clauses in their marriage contract.

Still, she needed to get home to see if her sister was alright. She would be so alone now. Their parents gone, John very ill and her sister lost. Grandfather Jafar would do his best to keep everybody going. She was sure of that. But he had his own country to look after and a new child on the way. Henry would wait before marrying Lily until she came of age. He might stay on to help out with the Harrington firm.

It had been nearly a month since they heard from her. The monks must have told them by now she escaped Damien's fort. With no word from her, they probably thought she was dead by now. She might as well be with this thing inside her! She needed to talk with someone, but who? Nobody would understand if they didn't grow up in the shadow of the Tree of Life.

In Midland, people didn't care about who they married. Those unbelievers just seem to make children with anybody like animals. It was one of the many reasons they were taught to keep well away from them. And now she was growing one of their bastards in her body! Her thoughts went to Mallory. That sweet man would have understood her despair. He might have come up with some kind of solution. She didn’t know why he hadn’t told her sooner.

No, she was on her own now. Her only hope was to find Mallory’s sister. She was a midwife and might help her get rid of it one way or the other.

She straightened her back, swept her hair out of her face and walked to the end of the line of pack animals. She decided to deal with all these questions after they had arrived in Upavon. She needed more time to come to a resolution. The long walk would give her that at least.

Chapter Fifty- four- The Bunyip

After about an hour of trudging through the swamp, Tish had brought her guests to a mangrove forest. The sea couldn’t be far away as they heard the screams of the seagulls and the roaring of the surf. The air had taken on a briny smell which was a significant improvement to the putrid smell of the swamp. It was a relief to finally get away from the hungry mosquitoes which had become more and more of a nuisance the higher the sun rose.

The masks didn’t do very much to hide the stink filling their noses and throats. Yaya and Solo were both coughing, tears streaming from their eyes, by the time they got out of the marsh. Eric and the girl didn't seem too much affected by the inhospitality of their surroundings. Yaya became more and more aware of the harshness of the terrain.No wonder no one in their right mind ever tried to cross this area on their own.

Solo just kept slapping his arms and face and muttering about having to cross a fucking swamp. He had apparently already forgotten how lucky he was to have found his brother alive. Not to mention a safe place to hide from Damien.

Tish and Eric stopped when they reached the white sands of the beach. In no time, people appeared from crowding around them.

Solo was reaching for his weapons but was stopped by Eric pulling at his arm. Solo took his mask off when he saw Yaya removing hers. They were both happy to breathe in the clear sea air. They looked around at the new arrivals all wrapped up from head to toe in various coloured rags. It was impossible to see if they were men or women. Even the tiny figures, which Yaya assumed to be children, were all covered in pieces of material in various shades of red and orange. They looked like a field of marigolds.

Tish searched the crowd of onlookers. She waved to a tall figure towering above them, approaching the small group of strangers. She hurried to get to him, and started talking to him, now and then looking and pointing at them.

Finally, the figure approached them and started to speak to them in halting Midlands. He must be the village elder.

"Welcome to our Bunyip community, brother and friends of Eric. My name is Pinnodh, the community eldest. I’m sorry Tish and Eric had to bring you such sad news. Losing family is one of the heaviest burdens to bear. May their way to the next life be easy. Grief shared is grief halved so maybe it would be best if we head back to our village so that you can reunite with your other two friends. They’ve been anxious about you and praying for your safe return. Our friend Eric here never doubted his brother would come and get him. He’s been keeping his vigil at our border every day since he arrived. We’re very happy for him his faith has been rewarded. You did come back to him. You can stay with your fellow countrymen at our village guest house as long as you need. We hardly ever get guests anymore, but have never forgotten how to treat them".

The other Bunyip had been listening as if understanding every word he spoke. Later they would find out all the Bunyip learnt Midlandisch as a child. They hoped one day to be accepted again by the other Midlanders and wanted to be ready.
Following their leader and his guests, everybody trooped to a large village house, which was a built out of palm leaves and grass, looming high over the beach standing on bamboo poles.
Word must have reached the village as a group of villagers was busy setting out a meal in the shade under the building. Cocos mats covered with colourful pillows had been scattered around the cool sand.

Pinnodh motioned Yaya and Solo to sit down either side of him. The other people sat themselves down too in a circle around them while looking at them out the corners of their eyes with great curiosity. It felt strange not to be able to see their faces, just the glimmering of multiple pairs of eyes.

"Apology for the staring", Pinnodh said glaring around him, "They’ve never seen many outsiders from this close. And now two more in such a short time. Please help yourself to the food. You must be hungry after your walk here. When you‘ve eaten your fill, I hope you would regale us with the stories of your travels. We love tales about the outside. We do get to hear some news now and then when our traders visit London. But that is far and few between. We have to be careful in the city to keep our presence secret. Outsiders are frightened of us and would rather kill us before talking to us". He sounded quite resigned to it.

Yaya, looking round, saw that some of the smaller figures had started to unwrap their veils. A short, abrupt command from Pinnodh in their own language was enough to stop them. Pinnodh looked at Eric," Will your companions be okay to see our faces?"

Before Eric could answer, two familiar figures appeared under the canopy of the house. Yaya soon felt enveloped by the strong arms of Freya. She felt her grief overwhelming her again and hid her face to hide her tears in the ample bosom of the woman, who’d been her mother's best friend and her second mum.

"My sweet child", Freya said, stroking her hair as if she still was a small child, "Your mother was the bravest and loveliest woman I will ever know. My heart is broken. They caught her trying to save some children, the bastards! But so typical of her. I’m so glad you and your brother were away when they came. No one understands why the islanders did this to us even when we heard you and your friends took one of their children. It isn't the first time we seized an outsider. They usually just pay the ransom. Never before did they slaughter a whole village for it like this. In the olden days, I remember villages disappearing, but since Damien took over something changed. Solo! You must be relieved your brother made it and was so clever getting us to safety as well".

Solo had the decency to look a bit ashamed, knowing quite well he’d been the instigator of all their troubles and grief. He and his group of scouts had started this whole sorry sequence of events just because he’d been so eager to get his hands on enough money to help his brother. Setting the fires might not have been his idea, but making sure they did as much damage as they did, had. Abducting Astrid had not been part of the original plan either. Damien’s messenger had convinced him that Damien would pay enough money for her to get Eric the treatment he needed. He mumbled something and pretended to be wholly absorbed in his food.

Eric, unaware of all the undercurrents of the conversation, was nodding and smiling at the woman he knew as auntie Freya. He stuck his chest out, proud by her praise.

Wulf looked at Solo and quietly shook his head as if to warn him not to say anything. He wasn't worried about Solo’s standing with his mother but was well aware it had been Jonah's idea to use fire as their diversion tactic. That had resulted in the many deaths and the revenge of the Islanders.
Looking at Yaya, Wulf now spoke up. He needed to know!

"Do you two know where the boy is now? And the girl? Your mother told us you were just going to the White Fort to hand her over to Damien for ransom. The boy only went to get his name".
Solo shifting uncomfortably on his pillow, answered for her.

"We lost Harrington’s brat in the Fort. Some old guy, I heard later he used to be a monk, decided it would be a good idea to let her escape while joining her. We hoped they would return to West Drayton taking the east coast route to get the girl back home. Her name is Astrid, and she must’ve heard by now what has happened to her family. What I don’t get is why she didn't wait for her people to pay the ransom to Damien. He would've returned her to her island. Damien never got the chance. She was gone by the time the intermediaries reached the White Fort. Damien, blaming us, sent us after them to bring them back. He then must’ve decided Yaya and I were involved in their escape. He sent some cutthroats after us. We had to finish them off on our way here. We can’t stay in Midland anymore. You know what Damien’s like".

A gasp of alarm went through the listeners around him.
A storm of whispers erupted until Pinnodh held up his hand and they all went quiet again. The fear of Damien, even amongst this remote tribe, was so ingrained in the Midlanders, the sheer mention of doing something so undoubtedly sure to incur his wrath, was enough to shock each and every one of them.

Shocked, Wulf hardly dared to ask the question that had been weighing on his mind since he had to flee the village.

"What does this have to do with the boy? Where is he? Yaya you wouldn't be here if she knew he could still be in trouble at the Fort. Please tell me he didn't do anything as stupid as getting himself killed?"

Yaya who had managed to pull herself together wiped her wet face. With her eyes flashing, she nearly shouted at Wulf.

"You know I’d never in a million years leave him behind anywhere! He didn’t die either. No, he decided to be the hero of the day and went with the fugitives. The old guy, he was Damien’s doctor, took his little protegee with him, some mountain girl by the looks of her. By the way, the boy did manage to get himself named before he ran off. It's not Boy anymore but Jonah".

Freya looking from one to the other seemed extremely pleased with that news and just couldn't help herself.

"Your father's name! Yaya my girl, your dear mother would’ve been so happy to hear that! She missed your father so badly after he died. If only she could be here with us now".

Yaya's face softened. In a quieter voice, she continued: "Well, we appeared to have guessed wrong. Jonah and his friends must have taken the western route probably hoping Damien will find something else to be outraged about before they reach one of the harbours. Fat chance, I say. Still, by the end of the day, they will have to leave Midland. The girl will want to go home to her island. If she thinks she can take Jonah and the others with her, she can think again. Those islanders think everyone who doesn’t come from their bloody Tree is human. No, if I were them, I’d try to get to London. No one would notice a few strangers more in that city".

Yaya looked at Solo to support her opinion. But, he had to be difficult as usual. Any idea, not coming from him, was a bad idea in his mind.

Solo stopped eating for a moment to growl, "I’m not going to waste any more of my time on those idiots. I’ve already made an enemy out of the most powerful man in Midland. I’ve saved enough to pay Eric’s and my fare to London. Eric, did you go to our secret place to get our things as I always taught you to do?"

Eric dug in his backpack and proudly produced a dirty bag still covered in mud and handed it to his brother.

Solo gave him a quick hug and looked inside. He seemed satisfied with the content and continued to lay out his plans.

"Eric, we’re going to London!"

Turning to the others:" I need to take Eric to London. I have been waiting too long already. Freya, it might be better when you and Wulf join us. I’ll lend you the money. You can pay me back later. There is a lot of work for anyone who wants to make a living in London. Yaya, I take it you’ll join us? As you just said you think Jonah will go there if he’s smart ".

Before Yaya could answer, Wulf spoke up.

"Yaya, instead of going straight to London in the hope to find them, I’m planning to track down your brother before he even gets there. I can help you by bringing him back as long as you and Solo promise me to keep my mother safe until I come back with Jonah! Or you might want to join me?"

Solo's face nearly went purple, the veins standing out on his forehead. How dare this young buck challenge him like that in front of everyone!

Yaya, who had been planning to do this anyway, was glad to have someone fighting in her corner.

“I will go with you, Wulf. There’s not much I could do in London, and just sitting around waiting would drive me mad.No one in Midland connects you to any that happened, while there is a price on my head. You could do all the asking around while I can cover your back”.

With everyone, even the villagers, waiting for him to refuse her to go with Wulf, Solo, seeing her challenging stare, decided not to fight a losing battle. He knew Yaya enough to accept that changing her mind when it was made up, was impossible.

Wulf's strength and reputation as a fighting man would be an asset were they to encounter some more of Damien's goons. Plus Wulf knew Jonah much better than he, Solo, did and might persuade him to come straight to London with the girl. Maybe he could do something about getting a reward or something. He needed to think of Eric now.

Pinnodh, who’d been following the discussion, clapped his hands together and got up from the meal. He said a few things in Bunyip. Everyone got up as one and started to drift away from the meeting. Turning to his guests, he promised to help them get across the sea to London on condition they would do one thing for him.

"It would be a great service to me if you can take my granddaughter Tish to London with you. She’s one of the Pura, using a term not known to Solo. Pura have to leave the village for a while to learn about the world outside. Later they will become our messengers and traders. Most of us can’t. We are the Malpura, unclean".

He went on to explain Tish was one of the few exceptions born to their tribe without any facial or bodily mutation.

"She looks just like everyone else outside Wakeland, so she can leave this place, get an education and then come back to us to become a contact with the rest of the Archipelago or help us with skills such as Medicine. We call someone like her Pura, spotless. Eric has seen us without our scarves and never thought anything of it, but he is exceptional. Others turn away in disgust or fear it is contagious. In the beginning, just after the curse, we tried to maintain contact with the outside world. We were only met with hate. It's what people usually turn to when they’re scared. Some of us, when caught, were burned". Pinnodh’s eyes looked very sad.

Tish, who’d been sitting beside Eric's took off her headscarf and veil. Yaya was stunned to discover a face of nearly impossible beauty. Her eyes commanding her whole face were of a grey, blue competing with the sea behind her. The kindness in them lent her face even more grace. Her lips were full and pink. Solo and Wulf could do nothing but stare. Lady! They were practically drooling. She had to admit to herself Tish looked amazing. Beauty like that, however, could be a liability considering the Archipelago's obsession with breeding. Everyone looking upon her would not easily forget that face, nor maybe those of her companions. They would stand out.

Pinnodh smiled at their wonder.

"Yes, my friends, the ones who spared our curse, seem to be blessed with the opposite of it. The Pura still cover themselves in public in solidarity with their kin. Outside, it might be a good idea to do this too not to get any unwanted attention". He must have read Yaya’s mind.

Pinnodh took his headdress off as well. They saw a very handsome older man with handsome features only marred by an enormous swelling under his chin.

"I am one of the more fortunate of our people. Some of us wouldn’t be so easy for you to look upon. They’re all lovely, talented people but alas, all society, except ours, always judges the outside first. We only take our veils off in the privacy of our own homes, so we don't even know what our fellow villagers look like. Only when a Pura is born, she or he will be made known to the village elders ".

Eric was very excited, not paying any attention to the conversation since Pinnodh had mentioned his wish for them to take Tish to London. He kept saying," Tish must come, Tish, must come!", making them all smile.

Solo wanting to leave as soon as possible had his doubts about this request. Like Yaya, he recognised the difficulty in keeping such an exquisite creature safe. He didn’t think it would be wise to bring her. He didn’t say anything, but his face said it all.

Wulf, still in awe by seeing that perfect face, encouraged the others to give the village elder his wish.
Maybe he would be able to get to know her better after he’d found his friend.
When Pinnodh added they would be able to leave for London the next day. He felt that leaving Midland as soon as possible was now Solo’s first goal.

Pinnodh told them he would contact one of their traders to make their next trip to London a few weeks earlier than planned. The difference in profit would be reimbursed by himself.

Seeing Solo looking keener after this generous offer and not wanting him to change his mind again, Freya answered for all of them.

"We’ll be honoured to do this for you and your village. You’ve been so hospitable and helped us in so many ways. I’m happy to return some of your kindness. I promise to look after Tish as if she were my own daughter".

Pinnodh looked relieved but decided to add some more incentives.

"The Bunyip have a longstanding arrangement with the Buddhists in London town to accept our children in their academy. You’ll only have to escort her there. So you won’t have to carry the responsibility for her safety for too long. I can still pay you something extra if it sways your decision?"

With Solo not daring to contradict her, Freya told Pinnodh, they wouldn't think of accepting any payment. They would look after Tish and deliver her safely to the school. It was the least they could do.

Chapter Fifty-five- Upavon

A group of bedraggled people rode or stumbled silently into the town of Upavon. It was the only harbour in this part of Midland where large trading ships could moor. It was still busy in the streets even at this late hour.

There must be quite a few ships currently tied to the quays because the inns and bars heaved with people from all over Midland and beyond. Errand boys were running to and fro for their masters.

Jonah tried not to look up at the painted boys and girls hanging from their windows and standing on balconies, displaying their wares to all and sundry. He had heard of them from Solo, who after one of his first visits to this harbour had described these whores, as he called them, with great delight. Solo and Yaya had a big fight about it. At the time, Jonah hadn't been sure why.

He looked around to see if he could spot Astrid. He saw her at the back of the caravan her eyes not straying from the lama in front of her. She still looked in shock. Jonah wondered what it would be like to have grown up so innocent, only surrounded by people who meant you no harm. She’d told him she was allowed to visit the city of London now and then. Never alone, though, but always in the company of a chaperone from her community. It must be nice, though it didn’t do much to prepare you for the pain and disappointments of the real world.

Jonah still felt terrible about what Solo had done to her even though he knew he wouldn’t have been able to do something about it at the time. Solo would have killed him. Still, he should never have trusted that mongrel Solo.

He wished he hadn’t been the one to suggest starting the fires to distract the Sevenoaks people. He had never given the risk of them getting so out of hand a thought.

Jonah moaned softly. Astrid would never forgive him. The last four weeks, the vulnerable but brave girl had wormed her way into his heart. Yes, she was beautiful, even with the scar in her face, but the way her spirit kept bouncing back, no matter what life threw at her made him adore her. Knowing what she knew now might destroy her for good. Every chance he might have had having Astrid return his feelings Hd been dashed by the news her molestation by Solo had not been without consequence.

She was with Solo's child! He should just go on with his life and forget about her. Let Cheng put her on a boat home.
He would go back to his mother and be a simple fisherman again.

No, look at her. Astrid would need his help now more than ever. The island people didn’t look favourable on pregnancies outside their precious tree. Enough fugitives from the strict hand of their law arrived in Midland often enough to prove that. He had to stand by her and help her, even if it was from a distance.

Jonah saw Mattie not far away from him chatting with a driver. He hoped the bubbly girl could cheer Astrid up a bit.

"Mattie, why don't you go to Astrid? She looks like she could use a friend. I want to ask Cheng where we’re going to stay tonight".

Mattie didn't need much persuading and ran to the back of the caravan, where he saw her say something to Astrid. The latter bent over and gave Mattie a huge hug. Even from this distance, he could see Astrid's posture relax a bit.

Cheng must have had the same idea

"By the Lady, I have never been so glad to see Upavon again! Normally I'm not too keen on these harbour towns: too much noise and far too many uncouth individuals. I've sent Li to contact our agent and ask him to bring us some money. We can't all stay at his place, and I suggest we let Astrid and Mattie go with Li to stay the night there, while we go to an inn. I've sent one of my men to book the rest of us into our usual one, the Jade Dragon so that everyone can have a bath and proper rest. We usually don't bother with inns but prefer to sleep with our caravans, but the few animals we have left we can stable at the same inn. The drivers will be happy to have a soft bed for the night. They’ve been through enough. Would you tell Astrid?"

Seeing Jonah looking a bit dubious, he added, "You’ll have to speak to her sometime, now’s your chance if you want one". Cheng squeezed Jonah’s shoulder.

Taking a deep breath, Jonah pushed his way to the back to find himself face to face with Astrid. Mattie, wise beyond her years, made herself scarce saying she was going to see where Li was.

Jonah, seeing Astrid’s discomfort, spoke first, stammering a bit. He felt cold sweat running down his back.

"Cheng has asked me to tell you he arranged for you, Li and Mattie, to stay with his agent. The rest of us will stop at a place called the Jade Dragon. After we’ve all had a chance to freshen up, we’ll get together again for a meal at the Inn".

Astrid didn't say anything but looked at him as if she’d never seen him before. He felt his heart shrinking and didn't quite know what to do next.

Jonah searched her eyes, trying to see something of a response. Seeing her focusing a bit more, he pushed on, his voice trembling a bit: "I can understand you don't want to speak to me, but, please, is there anything I can do for you? I'm so sorry about everything. The last words Mallory spoke to me were to look after you. And I didn't want to leave him to his fate. I’m no coward. I would have fought with him to the end. But he told me I had to. It’s when he told me about you being pregnant. I desperately want to do something, anything, to make all of this easier for you. Maybe today is too early for you to decide if you can let me help you. I’ll stay here in Upavon as long as you need me to. You’ll only have to say the word me and I'll be there…", looking over her shoulder he saw Mattie tearing through the crowd towards them, he continued, "Mattie is coming to collect you. Will I see you later in the inn?"

To his surprise, she nodded. He felt his heart leap.
Maybe all was not lost. Walking away, Jonah looked back over his shoulder. He caught Astrid looking down on Mattie's golden head, even smiling a bit at the girl's irrepressible energy.

Mattie seemed to have bounced back from the terrible news about Mallory. The doctor had been, in anything but name, her father. She just wouldn’t believe he was dead and kept telling everyone who would listen. He hoped her faith in Mallory survival wouldn’t be in vain. He doubted the outcome of that fight was anything but tragic. Mallory had been so tired, and those men had just waited their chance.

Jonah let go of the breath he hadn't known he was holding. Why was everything Astrid did and said so incredibly important to him? They’d barely known each other a month. She was an Islander and came from such a different culture. What could they have in common? At least he might have a chance to speak to her this evening about her plans.

He'd better get himself to the inn to clean himself up before the meal and seeing her again. Feeling a tiny bit relieved, he strode in the direction of their inn.

Later that day, everybody looked much better, having washed and put on the clean clothes provided by Cheng's agent.
They fell upon the table well-loaded with food as if they hadn't eaten for a year instead of one day. Hearing about their disastrous trip, the innkeeper had generously offered them some bottles of his best wine on the house. Soon everyone was chatting freely except for Astrid and Jonah.

The latter had installed himself opposite her in the hope she would talk to him. The other caravan people surrounded Cheng and Mattie. All seemed eager for this chance to forget the awful things that had happened and just enjoy this moment.
Feeling Astrid’s eyes resting on him, Jonah, who’d been looking at his plate as if he’d never seen one before, decided it was time to say something.

"Have you had a chance to think about what you’re going to do now?" The word 'now' holding more meaning than that little word could ever contain.

Putting her fork down, not looking at him, she gave a big trembling sigh that broke his heart.

"I want to find Mallory's sister and ask her if she can help me. Mallory told us to contact her if we were in trouble," she took another quivering breath her eyes shining with tears.

Jonah didn't understand how this Plaxides could be of any help in getting Astrid back to her people. That’s what she wanted, wasn’t it?

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to ask Cheng to arrange transport back to your family first? Who knows how long it will take to find a ship going straight to London City. From there you could contact your people, and they can come and get you. When you know how long it will take, you might ask this Plaxedes if she can take you and Mattie in until you travel. I am planning to leave after that and hopefully find my mum and my sister. There’s nothing for us here in Midland after all that has happened. It might be a good idea with Damien still on my tail to leave this place with my family and try to get as far away as we can. I do understand if you never want to see me ever again. I'm sorry it has ended like this’ and hoped we could become friends".

Eyes blazing, she bent forward over the table, putting her face so close to his, he could feel her hot breath on his cheeks.

"Home, going home?! I thought you knew at least something of our people. You told me how you read so much. I can never return home carrying a child by that son of a whore. They would ban me from society, and for the child, it would be taken away and dropped on a beach in Midland. If I had any inclination to keep it, which I don't, I would have to leave the island too, and my name would be erased from the Book of life".

Astrid spitted those last words out and sank back on her seat all the while looking at him as if he was something she’d found under her shoe in the farmyard.

Realising how deep her hate for Solo went, which he understood, Jonah still felt her total contempt for any child not deriving from that precious tree as a direct accusation of himself. He didn't think he deserved that and started to get a bit annoyed against his better judgement.

"I understand you hate Solo’s guts, but we’re not all monsters. I’ve tried to help you get back home even though I know you detest anybody who had anything to do with your abduction. My mother is the nicest woman you’ll ever hope to meet. Even my sister Yaya might be a hard woman, she had to be to protect us, but she is capable of great love and loyalty. You islanders don't own those qualities".

They were looking at each other with near hatred, their faces white, red masks.

"Hey, you two. People are watching. Maybe you should both go and have some sleep before tearing each other's throats out. We are all still shattered by Mallory's disappearance and you, Astrid, will have some serious thinking to do. I sent word to Plaxedes about Mallory, before gossip would reach her, to tell her to expect you tomorrow morning. I’ll bring Mattie around to my agent’s house later. I don't have the heart to interrupt the nice time she is having now. The young have such a capacity to bounce back. Jonah, go and ask the innkeeper what I owe him and to put it on my tab. Then go upstairs. You need to rest after the day you had. It must’ve been tough to leave my friend. I know you’re still trying to cope with that. Please don't be too hard on yourself. I’ve known Mallory for a long time and know that if there had been any other solution, he would have taken it. I have not yet given up on him. Now both go!"

Before he would make a spectacle of himself bawling his eyes out at the kindness of this man, who had lost one of his best friends, Jonah fled the room in the direction of the kitchen.

Astrid with slumped shoulders slowly got up and without looking at anyone around her, made her way outside.

Cheng sent one of his girls to accompany her to his agent’s house. The state she’d been in when she went there before, she might have forgotten the way.

Chapter Fifty-six- Wulf and Yaya travel South

Before leaving the Bunyip Yaya and Wulf stocked up on food and drink for their journey to Reading station.
They were not too worried about bumping into any more of Damien's men, as the southern tip of Diggers Peninsula was under the supervision of a religious garrison, under the command of a warrior monk with a fierce reputation. The only people allowed entrance to Midland from that side of the Swamp had to go through an exhaustive investigation.

Yaya and Wulf agreed to pretend to be south Digger’s farmers on their way to buy seeds in Reading. Harvests in Midland relied heavily on seeds imported from Kent and Surrey, the gardens of the Archipelago.

There was a regular ferry service between the garrison and their guard tower on the other side of the sound. With the correct amount of money, they could persuade a ferryman to take them across clandestinely.

Freya kissed her son goodbye, admonishing him to be careful and wishing him luck finding his friend.

Yaya tried to hug Solo, but he shrugged her off and walked away without looking back once. She knew he’d hoped for her to choose him over Jonah and join him in going to London.
His feelings were hurt though would rather die than to admit it. He never exhibited any feelings of affection in public if he could help it.

Eric didn't have that problem and sprinted after her not stopping until she had given him a big hug and told him ‘that yes, Yaya loved him a lot and he would soon see her again’.
The Bunyip all found it very endearing. His total lack of inhibition when it came to showing his love made them accept this friendly outsider as one of their own. His deviation of what people saw as normal lived inside him but made them treat him just as unjust as they dealt with the Bunyip. They were sad to see him go.

Freya agreed with Pinnodh her group would depart Wakeware the next day on one of the trader yachts. London would be the best place to live unnoticed by the authorities. The city was a melting pot of all races of the Archipelago. They would be safe from Damien’s wrath as his influence didn’t reach to the city.

Bunyip rarely made it as far as London. And if they did, no one ever went off the ship, except the trader. After a few nasty incidents, which ended in two of their people stoned to death, they decided only Pura could deal directly with outsiders.

Tish went to say goodbye to her family, taking Eric with her. Solo had allowed him to stay the night with them.

Freya and Yaya stayed with Pinnodh, who’d offered them his hospitality for the night. Solo stayed outside, to sleep under the meeting house, happy to be left alone with his thoughts.

The first part of the track Yaya set a gruelling pace. It was as if she expected to have a better chance of finding her brother as long as she got to Readin as fast as she could.

Wulf didn't have much trouble keeping up with her. He was glad there wasn’t much chance to talk. He had a lot to think about after hearing about Jonah’s plight.

Jonah! Wulf never would’ve thought his friend would choose his dad’s name. It was usually seen as unlucky name yourself after one of your dead forebears. Ever since he met the little squirt, who’d taken his side against the bullies in the village tiny as he was, he’d loved him like a brother. It didn't matter that at the time, he didn’t need any help being bigger and stronger than all of his assailants. It was the thought that counts. The other kids had always taken his kindness for weakness but stopped making that mistake again after he bloodied a few noses. He made sure too they understood Jonah was off-limits as well.

Not that his protection was needed either as they were all afraid of his big sister Yaya.

Over time, first in the boy's camp and later in the scouting group, their friendship had deepened. Their mothers being friends had strengthened their bond.

That day, when Jonah had left with Solo, Yaya and the girl, he so wanted to go with them. His mother had begged him to stay, using the excuse that at least someone had to stay behind to look after Sarah, Jonah's mother.

"She’ll feel very lonely. You know how much she loves her boy. Besides, you never know what that wretched young man will come up with to get himself and whoever travels with him in trouble. They’ll come back after delivering the girl to Damien. That greedy bastard will not waste much time to return her to her folks for a nice ransom. It can't be soon enough. I’ve heard stories about the wrath of the islanders if someone hurts one of their own. They won't be taking this lightly. I have a very bad feeling about it. Sarah told me she is a Harrington. The most powerful family over there. I want you to stay well away from that shit storm. If not for Sarah, do it for your mother. If they come for us, and they will, we’ll need strong men to protect our village".

That last argument had finally persuaded him to stay behind, be it with a heavy heart.

The day of the attack, his mother had taken him with her to get mushrooms for their village. Sarah, when she heard they were going to be away for a bit, had asked Freya to take Eric with her. She always looked after him when Solo wasn't around and had become very fond of the manchild. But Eric could be a bit of a handful when you had to get on with things.

"I’d like to finish a few of my potions and clean up in here. I can't do that with Eric hanging onto my skirt, asking me questions all the time and touching stuff".

Freya who liked Eric too and would do anything for her soul sister, as she called her, had agreed to take him.

The first thing they noticed was screaming. Wulf wanted to run back to the village to see what he could do to help.
Freya, her worst fears confirmed, having more sense, persuaded him to stay back and to flee deeper into the woods. She told him about the stories his father had told her about islander raids. Nobody stood a chance.

Wulf had felt like such a coward and had begged her to let him go. His feelings of guilt had multiplied after they went back the next day and only found heaps of smouldering ashes, a few desolate souls wandering around the wreckage trying to salvage what they could. They heard how the islanders had just killed anyone in cold blood if they wouldn’t or couldn’t tell them where the girl was. Ironically, the only person who could have told them where she went, Sarah, had fled to the beach with a few of the smaller children in the hope to escape in one of their boats. She’d never stood a chance. Those monsters didn’t even spare the children.

Wulf again felt tears coming into his eyes. His body hurt when he thought of this dreadful news reaching his friend, while he had no one close to comfort him. Looking at the straight back of Yaya striding in front of him, he couldn't help giving a deep sigh of admiration.

She was such an incredible woman!

He’d had a crush on her as long as he could remember. He still had to come to think of it. Her strength reminded him very much of his mother’s. Both never gave in to any feeling of hopelessness or despair but immediately started to plan how to could solve their problems.

Why Yaya’d ever teamed up with that swine, Solo, he’d never understood. He and Jonah had tried to figure it out quite a few times. The latter trying to explain his sister always felt she had to keep his mother and him safe. Having Solo at her side, made that a lot easier. She defended Solo’s behaviour using his dedication to Eric as his one saving grace.

Yaya must know and have accepted by now she would always come second place if Solo had to choose between her and his brother. Him deciding to go to London, instead of going with her to find Jonah or even waiting for her, only proved it.

Wulf nearly walked into Yaya’s back when she suddenly stopped and pointed. Majestic grey boulders lay directly ahead of them like a barrier between them and their destination. Finding a way to cross them didn't look very promising to Wulf.

"Look! Behind those stones lies Bouldertown. Everyone who lives there is connected to or works for the Digger’s garrison. It’s not much of a town. Mainly whore houses and bars. A few farmers life spread around in the countryside. They are nothing more than yeomen who have to donate half of their harvest to the garrison. The commander lets them cross to the station to peddle the other half in Reading station market. The soil here is so fertile, they still manage to make some kind of living for themselves. In the woods we just came through there are a few trappers, living like hermits. Nobody knows them well enough to, so we’ll be able to pretend to be one of them if anybody asks. Solo to my surprise gave me some of his money this morning. We’ll pretend we want to go across to Reading to buy some goods from the market. We might get away with it. We’ll have to pretend to be a couple. That way they’ll leave me alone. The men from the forest don’t allow anyone to look at them, let alone bother them ".

"But how are we going to get over those huge things?",Wulf asked, pointing to the huge boulders. They seemed impassable.

"We’ll go to the right via a goat-path cut out of the side of the boulders. A long time ago, the people who lived in Digger’s peninsula, cut stairways out in the rocks making it easier to get to the other side. Time has made a lot of them disappear. Here and there you’ll see some still exist. Those are the good parts though still a burden on your leg muscles. I hope yours will be up for it. It is all upwards to start with".

Wulf tried not to look at Yaya’s legs beautiful as they were. Would she manage it? At least he had some days of rest, but she had been on the go for weeks. Seeing him looking doubtful at her, Yaya snorted, punching him playfully on his arm and set off not looking back to see if he was following.
Man, what an absolutely amazing creature! His heart was pounding and not only from the exertion.

Reaching a narrow strip of land, barely deserving the name beach, he looked up at a path so narrow, he wondered how goats managed it let alone two chunky humans.

"You see what I meant?" Yaya pointed to the first part of their trail, which looked like the deeply worn treads of stairs going up so high he could not see where they ended.

Shrugging their packs higher on their shoulders, after sipping some water from their bottles, it didn't seem too hard going at first. After every turn of the path, Wulf thought they must be near the top now, only to find there were yet more stairs or gravelly uphill trails to follow. His thighs were burning.

Only seeing Yaya not giving any sign of tiredness or stopping to have a break, gave him the incentive to keep going. Fucking goatherd, he always thought he was fit, but this sucked big time. Sweat was covering his whole body, drenching his clothes and seeping into his boots. He tried not to think of the blisters this would cause.

After an hour and a half of torture, Yaya finally stopped and turned to him not even breathing hard.

"How’re you doing? We’ve reached the last few steps before the top. We’ll have a little rest there and a drink. But not for long as your muscles will cool down, which will make going down worse. Believe me".

She was smiling a bit as if she seemed to take some pleasure in proving she could outclimb someone stronger and quite a bit younger than her.

Wulf granted her this little victory. She deserved it.
With a groan, he sank on a small boulder at the side of the path, just happy not to have to stand on his poor legs for a moment.

Yaya took a deep draught of her water bottle. "Don't get too comfortable, my friend, you might think going down will be easier, you just wait. Your knees will soon be crying for help. There’ll be a lovely surprise on the way, though. Not afraid of heights, I hope?"

Wulf shook his head. "How do you know about all these places? I never knew any of us ever came this way".

Happy to distract Wulf from his sore legs, Yaya explained, "Just after I joined Solo’s scouting gang, we were fishing south of the Peninsula, just the two of us, when a storm dumped us on the coast at about those woods we just walked through. We couldn't risk going via the Bog, so we travelled this way, as we are doing now, and found this path. We were lucky at the time the garrison was still small. There was no inspection to speak off. The townspeople helped us to get back home. The situation has become terrible now, with the soldiers of the garrison treating them like dirt. We might not get the same reception, so we’ll try to stay out of sight and make our way directly to the harbour".

Wulf nodded, thinking how she and Solo had a lot of history together. They seemed to be closer than he thought. He might as well stop pining for the unattainable and focus on getting his friend back. There was still the lovely Tish of the Bunyip.

Yaya’s prediction about his knees was correct. That there would be a surprise was too. Halfway down the path was a narrow ridge from which the cliff took a steep plunge into the dark blue sea foaming white around the base of half-submerged boulders.

Wulf usually had a good head for heights but still found himself shivering a bit when he looked down at the violent waves crashing loudly on the cliff.

The view further out was absolutely breathtaking and made him forget his discomfort. In the distance, the low hills that bordered the marsh looked pale as smoke. The water was taking on all sorts of blue and green wherever you looked.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Yaya sounded so delighted. He had to agree with her; it was a fantastic view. Wulf felt unexplainable joy filling him. For a moment all their troubles were forgotten by the splendour of the sun slowly turning the sea in molten gold.

Realising it would get dark soon, Yaya started to descend the rocks even faster than before. Wulf had no choice but to follow her panting like a smith's bellow. She must have the genes of a mountain goat!

Finally, they reached the bottom. They could see the town from afar and decided to hole up for the night in one of the many deep crevices between the boulders. It wouldn’t be very wise, even dangerous to travel on in unknown territory.

Chapter Fifty-seven- Penn Station

Spreading their blankets out, Wulf and Yaya both didn’t bother to eat before lying down exhausted on their hard beds. It didn't take long for them to fall asleep only to wake up a few hours later by being poked with a stick.

A creaky voice sounded in their now pitch dark cave:
"This is my cave! You better get out of here. I saw some soldiers coming this way. They’re not nice people, I can tell you that for free. They know me and won't bother me. They don't like strangers, though".

Their eyes adjusting to the dark, they saw a small crooked man, dressed in rags, standing over them, holding on to a long staff. He had been followed in by a herd of pathetic looking goats, which were soon filling the cave milling tightly around them. They smelt to high heaven, the man and his goats.

Yaya saw that Wulf was ready to defend their lair and put her hand on his arm.

"Let's listen to him, Wulf. For all we know, Damien's alert has reached al the way here as well".

To the man: "Thank you for the warning. We’ll leave now. Please, don't tell anyone we were here".

The man huffed pinching his nose to deposit a blotch of snot on the floor.

"I wouldn't help that idiot in the fort whatever the bounty. He has cost me my family and my home. Don't you young ones worry. I’ll very helpfully point them the other way. May the Lady protect you".He grinned, showing his four brown stumpy teeth.

Yaya bowed at him and urging Wulf to follow her, she quickly got up to leave the cave. Now fully awake, they collected their things and wormed their way around the old goatherd and his flock. Diving in her bag, Yaya handed him an Oro before they stepped outside. His lined face lit up, but before he could thank them, they’d left him to his cave and hurried making a detour around the town in the direction of the harbour.

They didn't talk needing all their breath to run as fast as their unfamiliarity with the terrain allowed. Stopping to get her bearings, seeing the dark shapes of buildings not too far away, Yaya gasped, "That’s the garrison. We better hide somewhere out of sight of their guards. Let’s see if there is already a ferry waiting for the first ride in the harbour. We can pay the ferryman to keep his mouth shut and let us get on board for the first run across tomorrow. It would be the safest place for the night".

Creeping around the large boxes piled up in the small harbour, they did manage to find the ferry it's master willing to help them for a sum of money that made Wulf grumble about fucking thieving sons of whores. Yaya shushed him. The bribe made quite a dent in their stash, but, as she told him when they got killed, the money would be no good to them either.
Seeing the ferryman was eager to keep talking to her, his wait must have been boring up to now, Yaya took the opportunity to pump him for some information. She was careful not to mention any names or their destination.

"Been very busy, lately?"

"Just the usual. Could do with a few more customers like you two", the captain grinned at the sour face Wulf was pulling.

"Anything exciting going on in Reading? We’ve been travelling for quite awhile . We don't get much news in the back of beyond in Digger’s woods".

"Reading is Reading. Nothing much going on as per usual. We did hear of Damien having a bit of a bother with some islanders. The monks even got involved. Apparently some girl was snatched, and they want her back big time. Damien has put the word out he is looking for a few of his own people too. They pulled a fast one and snatched that same girl right out from under his nose. They probably wanted the ransom for themselves. Damien now has put an even larger price on their heads. Even just bringing him information about them will earn you a pretty penny. Wish I wasn't stuck on this boat. With that money, I can go and buy myself a nice whore house and retire in style. Did you guys hear about this too?"

Pretending to be impressed by this new information, Yaya snuggled up to Wulf and said:" Darling, once we've done our shopping, maybe we should join the search for those people. We sure could do with the money".

Wulf pulled her against him with a lot of enthusiasm and planted a kiss on her head. She would pay him for that later!

Holding her in his arms, he cooed: “But kitten, you know we have to go back. Your mother would never let us forget it if we upped and left without saying goodbye. Besides, what chance have we poor slobs when all of Midland is looking for them. Has somebody even spotted them already ?"

They were both holding their breath, waiting for the ferryman’s answer.

"There’ve been more rumours about that lot than I can count on the fingers of my hand. They went to the mountains, some thought they saw them with one of the caravans, others spotted them when they were visiting London City. Personally, I think they’re dead, with Damien not telling anyone. He is probably afraid of the wrath of the Monastery. They don't like to be fooled. Don't know who is worse Damien and his men or that lot". He spitted over the side of the boat.

"Glad to live far away from both down here in the south".

They both mumbled their agreement and went into the tiny cabin which was stuffed with crates and ropes, to try and get some rest. Early in the morning, they waited there listening to the harbour coming alive around them. The sounds of more cargo being dragged aboard and people shuffling into the passenger's cabin meant they would be leaving soon.

Feeling Wulf becoming restless, he was suffering squashed in such cramped quarters, Yaya tried to distract him by laying out her plans for their arrival, in more detail.

"We have to get off the ferry while they’re unloading the crates and the passengers. The guards in Reading Station harbour will be too busy checking the freight lists to pay us much attention. No one will expect us to come from this direction. We‘ll just have to pretend to be a young couple going to the Reading market a bit longer".

Winking at Wulf and laughing when he blushed, she added: "A couple very much in love with each other apparently. People usually leave those alone".

Even in the semi-dark of their confined space, she saw his face got even redder. The bashful look he gave her nearly made her laugh out loud. She’d always known he had a crush on her. Being her baby brother's friend, she’d ignored it or made jokes about it with Jonah. Looking at this kind bear of a man, to her surprise, she felt touched by his infatuation.

"Don't worry Wulf. We can always pretend to be mother and son if you prefer".

Knowing she was just trying to take his mind of their situation by teasing him, Wulf looked a bit more comfortable.
The boy must know that Solo if they ever met up again, would be far too dangerous to cross.

Wulf tried to pretend he had been joking too, "It’s okay. I don't mind sacrificing myself, having to smooch with such an old woman".

Yaya slapped his arm and continued to talk about what they would do after arriving at Reading Station. They were both relieved to feel the boat bumping against the quay.

Despite Yaya’s misgivings, they had no problems getting off the boat and walking to the outskirts of Reading undetected. From there they could reach the rail tracks which led to the next main station, Penn.

"We’ll follow these tracks on foot until we get to Penn. It's a shame we can't use the train. Damien has a countrywide call out for me, Solo, Jonah, and the others. It would be too risky. Hopefully, by travelling with you, we’ll confuse them enough not to recognise me. Going on foot will make our trip take much longer but safer too. I want to see if we can find out more about what's been happening to Jonah since I saw him last. The Dinali could have been a problem. I heard the young girl who Mallory took with him is from that tribe. That might have helped. We need to get more information".

"How?"

"Wulf, you are not on Damien's wish list. Maybe you could go back to Reading market and see if you can get some more information? While you’re there, try to buy some food and something to drink for our trip. I don't want to waste time hunting. If there’s no news to be had here, we’ll travel to Penn. That’s a long way from the Fort. The people there are no great fans of our Damien. He has squeezed them practically dry with all the taxes he puts on the goods coming in and going out of their city. It should even be easier to get information there. The caravans, ships and trains bring news from all over the Archipelago. If that doesn’t pan out, we’ll have to rethink our plans. But let's cross that bridge when we get to it. Be back here in about an hour. We’ll still have plenty of daylight to get at least one-third of the way when we leave on your return. I’m going to have a rest in this orchard. I’m still tired from yesterday. I’m an old woman after all".

 Wulf, glad to stretch his legs, hurried on his way to the town centre where a colourful crowd was milling around buying and selling goods from the many stands set up in rows with little space between them. He smelled the mouthwatering smell of fresh bread and decided to first stock up for the trip to get it out of the way.

Feeling a bit guilty, he stuffed a large meat pie in his mouth the moment he bought a few of them from a little vendor who was carrying them on a large tray on his head. He followed it up with a jug of cider and found the owner of the beer stand eager for a chat. It wasn't very busy yet. The drinking wouldn't start until the afternoon after most of them had sold their wares or done their shopping.

The vendor was very curious about where Wulf was from and why he was in Reading. Wulf gave him his rehearsed story of doing the shopping for his hunting community. The man seemed satisfied with that.

"I hope you haven't come to buy anything from the Sinese? You don't look like a silk man to me, but you might have a girl who needs some persuading?"

The jolly guy found himself very funny his belly shaking with laughter. Wulf joined in and casually asked him why.

"Well, there was a prison break in the Miners camp and those bastards attacked this caravan from Sinatown. They were unlucky because some guy, who used to be a warrior monk and his pal, some Midlander, rode with that same caravan and practically killed them all. That must have been a surprise."

Feeling his heart starting to beat so loud, wondering the man didn't notice it, Wulf felt himself grow hot and cold.

"You know the names of those fighters? I wonder if they were the same men who took those two girls everybody is looking for".

"Nobody said anything about girls being with them. And if they were, they will be likely dead too. I heard only a small number of the Sinese escaped to Upavon. The monk didn't make it out of there. No one knows what happened to him in the end. Maybe the convicts took him. It would be better if he died. Those miners are the worst animals. Damien has already sent new troupes and more slaves to restart the mining operation. Probably trying to take his mind off being screwed. Why you're asking?"

"Oh me and a few friends of mine were thinking of trying to find them and return them to Damien. He might even offer us a job with a ransom".Wulf tried to look as ruthless as he could.

The man's face darkened. He abruptly turned around, pretending to be busy cleaning some crockery. No, Damien wasn't loved down here. Wulf was happy he hadn’t used his excuse earlier in the conversation. He felt lighter hearing the news.

He hurried to bring this enormous news to Yaya. It must be Jonah! He was, no is, always a great swordsman even though he doesn’t enjoy fighting. The monk, the guy mentioned, must be this Mallory doctor guy he heard Solo say!

Wulf wasn't too bothered about what had happened to the islander girl nor the other one. The mountain girl. That islander’s family and friends had destroyed his whole village! She could rot in Damien’s darkest dungeon for all he cared.

Chapter Fifty-eight- Wulf and Yaya travel to Upavon

Wulf found Yaya fast asleep under a tree. She looked so peaceful, and he felt almost sorry to wake her. But his news couldn't wait. She’d never forgive him.

He shook her as gently as he could. Yaya still jumped up, her knife half out of its hidden place in her sleeve. Wulf told her the news and saw her face trembling. He could see she was trying to hide her emotions. It didn’t take long to see her jumping up and down. She looked like a little girl who’d just been promised a new doll. She couldn’t contain her joy.

"It must be Jonah!"

Hurriedly Yaya packed her things while planning out loud what they were going to do.

"Let's follow the rail tracks west until they curve south. From there we’ll have to make our own way west. We’ll have to ask some directions once we get there as I’ve never been this far from the coast. Not many rich pickings and the people not very friendly to strangers. Or did you manage to get find out too where this Upavon is?"

"No, once the guy heard I was planning to try to get the ransom, he didn't want to talk to me anymore. Stupid of me. I thought it better not to attract more attention to me and left to tell you the good news".

Seeing him looking a bit sheepish at his mistake, she decided not to waste any more words on it, already having decided to ask about Upavon on their way. After receiving the news about West Drayton, the world had looked so grey and dreary. Now it was as if the world seemed brighter than ever before. Walking ahead with her usual long strides, she felt better than she had for days. Looking around her, she noticed the trees showering them with pink, white blossoms like a pleasantly warm snowstorm. The sun had come out now, warming their stiff joints. This time of year it was a kind warmth instead of the boiling heat of midsummer.

Heartened by the good news, having no doubt it was Jonah the man in the bar had spoken about, it only took them only a few hours to reach the bend in the tracks, where they would leave the railway, which had been showing them the way, to follow their route due west.

They were lucky on their way to meet some fellow travellers, coming from one of the hamlets along the Silver River. A man travelling with his daughter and two cows pointed at a nearly invisible track and said in his strange accent: "Follow this here track until you get to a big river. That will be the Silver. You can cross it under the rail bridge. That be for the walking folk such as you and me. Follow the road some more until you smell the stink. That be the Ravines. Whatever you do, don't go near it but stay on the road keeping the mountains on your left. It will take you to an oasis. Darkwater Oasis. There be usually traders there to point you to that town you're after. Upavon was it ?"

Thanking him for his help, Yaya and Wulf went on their way again. Everything panned out as the farmer had said. It was nearly dark when they started to smell a foul odour.

Yaya decided to stop before they got out of the forest.
"We’ll camp here tonight within the tree line. Tonight we will have a warm meal if I can help it. How about you collecting some wood while I catch us a juicy rabbit. I have seen plenty of them scooting around", she was so excited and needed the exhilaration of the hunt to get rid of all the nervous energy that was still making her restless. The long march had done nothing to abate it.

Coming back with not one but two rabbits, she found a neat campsite with a cheerful fire burning and heaps of wood promising a comfortable night.

As an old married couple, they prepared the meal, each doing their bit without having to say much.

They accompanied their meal with clear water from a small stream nearby. Without being told, Wulf had already filled their bottles for tomorrow.

Yaya looked at the tall boy feeling quite warmly and grateful.

"If I would be fifteen years younger, I would ask you to marry me right away, Wulf. Never known you were such good husband material". She laughed when she saw she had made him shy again.

Wulf wanted to say something but decided not to and went to stir the fire and add some more branches to it, keeping his face away from her. The silly lad still had his juvenile crush on her! She thought that by now, he had given up.

Yaya nearly laughed again, imagining telling Solo she had chosen Wulf as her mate instead of him. That wouldn’t end well. She often hated Solo’s total lack of empathy and his ruthlessness.

Most of the time, Solo showed her respect and sometimes even some affection. They’d grown up together and shared a lot of adventures since then. She knew he screwed other women once in a while. She hated that, but it never changed her feelings for him though sometimes didn't understand why she had any.

Yaya sighed, despite her misgivings, she was attracted to Solo and always went back to him no matter what.

She got up to have a last pee in the bushes and wash her hands in the stream to give Wulf a chance to pull himself together. When she returned, he had rolled himself up in his blanket on the other side of the fire. He kept his back to her pretending to be sleeping not fooling anybody.

Yaya decided to follow his example. She was dead on her feet. He would have forgotten all about it in the morning.

Chapter Fifty-nine – Market day in Upavon

It was market day in Upavon.

The big square in the middle of town was a colourful sight with a jumble of market stalls displaying their wares. The owners were trying to outdo each other, shouting for people to come and buy their produce.

Townspeople and farmers who’d come in from the area around were jostling the sea merchants and sailors. They were all milling around generating a soft buzz now and then interspersed with the cries of the vendors.

Yaya and Wulf decided to find an inn to freshen up and wash the grime away of days of travel. It had taken another few days to reach the town of Upavon. Having to backtrack now and then when getting lost or Yaya felt it was too dangerous to take the shorter way.

Wulf had given up making eyes at his friend's sister and was starting to look forward to seeing his friend again. It would be so good if they were right and he was here!

Yaya just was nervous and almost couldn't wait to go and find her brother. Wulf felt for her.

"Yaya, we'd better make ourselves look more respectable. It might be a good idea if you could cover your body. Those tattoos are very recognisable. We should split up and meet up again this afternoon at the inn. We can cover more territory that way. You'd better go and ask people on the outskirts of town, while I’ll do the market again".

Yaya grudgingly had to admit he was right. After her bath, she went on her way to see what if she could find out something about the whereabouts of Jonah.

Before starting to ask questions, Wulf decided to wander around a bit so see what he could pick up listening to other people’s conversations.

It was nice to have the leisure to look at all those weird things displayed in some of the stalls. A few sold old Teknik, which he wouldn't know what to do with, but looked very interesting. There were stands piled with bolts of silk, balls of wool, pyramids of spices and dyes in every colour.
Above it all the pleasant smell of exotic food of all flavours and origins.

Wulf’s mouth was watering, and he decided to try some of the pasties that were smelling like heaven. He ignored the warning of the stall keeper that he might find them too spicy and bit the warm, greasy delicacy in one bite in half. Bugger, that was hot! His eyes watered and snot came pouring out of his nose. He felt he would have to suck up a lake to extinguish the fierce burning in his mouth and throat. The baker, laughing uproariously, took pity on him and gave him some dry white bread to chew.

"Better than water, young man. I did warn you, didn't I?”

Wulf gratefully bought a whole bag of the white rolls and was about to throw the rest of his pie from hell away.

"Sir, sir, can I have that please?"

Before he could answer a small hand snatched the undesirable snack from his hand and to his amazement, a little boy, looking very grimy, had stuffed the whole thing in his mouth looking absolutely delighted.

"Don't bother waiting for a reaction, my friend", the baker laughed, "these little vagabonds are used to much spicier fare, as are most of our townspeople. The hotter, the better. They claim it keeps us healthier than some other folks".

As Wulf was about to try to get some information from the friendly man, his keen eyes caught a glimpse of a head of tawny, wild curls, which he would have recognised anywhere.

His breath caught in his chest. With a quick thanks to the stallholder, he hurried to where he thought his friend Jonah, he was sure it was him, had disappeared.

Getting angry looks from the people he was practically throwing out of his way, he barged in the direction he had seen him go and was happy when he saw that his friend had stopped at a Fishmonger’s handing the man a large basket of fish.

It didn’t surprise Wulf Jonah had taken up his old craft. It was the best way to make money. He was even more convinced now that it must be Jonah he’d spotted.

The look on the face of the fishmonger became quite alarmed when he saw this giant of a man storming at him and his customer.

Wulf, remembering their day in the woods on the island, threw his arms around his friend from behind, trapping him in a bear hug.

Jonah first seemed to stiffen, but when he heard the cry of joy from this so familiar voice, he wriggled out of his friend's arm lock and turned around to hug him back.

Soon the friends were laughing, crying or both. Each trying to get a word in too ecstatic to see each other again to make any sense.

Jonah was first to get his breath back and asked the questions that had been foremost in his mind ever since he’d heard the news about Astrid's parents and friends.

"How’s my mum? Have you guys heard from Solo and Yaya? What’s been happening at home? Did Damien come and bother you? Tell me!"

All the joy fled out of Wulf's eyes. He just didn't know how he could destroy the hope in his friend's voice. He decided to let Yaya tell him. She wanted to be near when Jonah found out. Feeling a bit of a coward, he answered: "I did meet up with Solo and Yaya. You know what? She’s here too and dying to see you! Let's go and find her. She’s looking for you further out of town".

Jonah, with the prospect of seeing his sister again, didn't realise his friend hadn't answered the first part of his question. His mind filled in the gap that his mum must be okay as well or Wulf would have surely said so?

Quickly walking in the direction Wulf thought he would find Yaya, he kept Jonah from asking more questions by talking about his adventures all the while hoping they would find Yaya before Jonah started to suspect something. He knew it was cowardly of him but seeing his friend's happy face he just wished to give him as much time as he could before he found out what had happened to the village and his mother.

To his utter relief, they soon recognised Yaya's straight back and long stride from afar. Wulf shouted for her to stop.

First, she looked alarmed, but that look changed to the same joyfulness Wulf had seen on her brother's face.

The two, forgetting all their differences, fell in each other's arm repeating the scene with Wulf and Jonah. Immediately sensing her brother's reaction was not of someone who’d just heard nearly all his people were gone amongst whom his mother, Yaya looked Wulf straight in the eyes over Jonah's shoulder.

Upon seeing him dolefully shaking his head, she held her brother at arm's length and as gently as she could, broke the news to him. As Wulf had foreseen, all happiness went out his friend. For Yaya, it felt as if she’d stabbed him right in his heart. He probably would have collapsed had she not held him up and pulled him against her, her own tears welling up again as she knew what he was feeling. She had felt it herself. Seeing her little brother first so happy and having to take that away from him so soon nearly killed her. She realised again how much she loved this boy. A little boy was what he would always be in her eyes. Her little brother who she had sworn to protect. She had to be strong for him.

"I just passed a small tavern on the outskirts of the town. Let’s sit down there. I need something stronger than water as I am sure you both could do with as well".

Her wounds felt ripped open again, having to tell the whole sad story to the person who meant most to her in this world, the only person left from her family. She had so many questions for him.
Why had he left with that doctor and the girl?
What had happened to her and the others?
Was it true he fought those miners and did Mallory die?
How had her brother survived?
What was he doing here instead of being on his way home?

It was too soon to bother him with these questions. He looked so white and quiet.

Yaya took him gently by the hand as she had done many times when he was still a small boy and led him gently to the tavern.

Chapter Sixty- Jonah makes a decision

As the inn was a long way from the crowded centre of town, the place was nearly deserted.

Yaya sat her brother down and seated herself opposite him to be able to see his face. All the life seemed to have drained out of him. He had looked so thrilled to see her. Now he was but a shadow of himself.

Wulf went to order them something to drink. He bought them some food as well though he didn't think they would be able to swallow anything and neither by the looks of it would Jonah. He was right. Jonah didn’t even seem to notice the food set before him.

"Jonah", Wulf urged, "have at least something to drink. It will make you feel a little bit better".

Jonah shrugged his shoulders but did take a small sip of his brandy. Wincing at the strength of it, he poured the whole cup down in one go with an abandon born out of desperation.
Wulf hastened to get him a refill.

"I understand you don't feel like talking much now but can you at least tell us why you’re still here? Wulf and I heard that you got into some fight with the miners, but escaped and arrived here a few weeks ago with the Sinese caravan. They didn't mention your name, but we guessed it must be you when we heard the other person in the fight was a monk. That must have been Mallory from the Fort, wasn’t it? They also said the girls who were travelling with you died. Did they?"

Yaya saw Jonah thinking how about to answer her question trying to make his mind up about something.

"You’re right. The monk's name is, ‘was’ I should say, Mallory. He gave his life for me", her brother’s lips trembled, saying it out loud. The girls did make it and are with me here. Astrid and that young kid called Mattie You must remember her. She’s a Dinali orphan, who Mallory had taken under his wing living at the fort".

He looked her straight in the eyes some of his spirits returning to him. He sat up straighter, his lips a straight line.

"Before I tell you two more about them, I need your solemn oath, on the grave of our mother, that what I’m about to tell you, will never be repeated to anyone else ever. I need your promise".

Surprised at his sudden resoluteness, seeing this was extremely important to him, Yaya and Wulf both nodded.

"I need you both to say it", he sounded nearly frantic.
She had never seen him like this.

"I and I’m sure Wulf as well will keep this amongst us. I give you my oath. I wonder why these two are so important to you or why they are still here as well? They should’ve been on a boat to her island by now, surely? Maybe arrived there already?"

Jonah looked a bit accusingly at his sister.

"Especially you, Yaya, as I know you and how you are with Solo".

Yaya wondered what the heck Solo had to do with all this. He hadn’t been near the fugitives since they escaped the White Fort. Did he think she had Solo hiding somewhere in the wings? Jonah was starting to worry her. Grief must have made him feverish and paranoid.

"Listen, Jonah, Solo has left with Wulf's mum and Eric to live in London town. He’s planning to take Eric to the Hospital ship for treatment. Eric’s sickness has become worse. Solo needs to earn a lot more money for that and plans to do that by working in the harbours. We, however, are here to find you and take you with us to join them. It’ll never be safe for us to live in the Midland anymore. We can all leave this shit behind us and start a new life. I’m sure you and Wulf can find yourselves work there too. There’s always a market for good fishermen".

Jonah started to shake his head wildly as if to ward off her plans.

"I can't come with you", and upon seeing their shocked faces," Astrid and Mattie are still here and I need to look after them. I promised Mallory. I won’t go back on a promise I made to one of the most decent people I ever met in my life. If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be sitting here today with you. I love you both a lot, and it’s so incredibly good to see you both again and to find out at least some of our people escaped with their lives. Your plan would’ve been fine with us, were it not for my vow to Mallory to keep Astrid and Mattie safe".

Yaya still couldn’t get it

"But why didn't you put her, with or without this Mattie, on the next boat to her Island? That would’ve surely been the best solution for her? You would’ve kept your word to your friend and free to join us, your family? You can't want to stay with her. Her people killed our mother!".

Jonah winced at her words. He clearly had not had enough time to take in what they’d told him. His voice took on a pleading tone.

"There are two reasons I have to stay here with her.
One, her family and fellow countrymen might have carried the attack on West Drayton, but Astrid didn't know anything about it. She still doesn’t as I didn’t want it to come between us. How can any of that be her fault then? She does know our little visit that night resulted in the death of her parents and quite a few of her friends. Her brother lies mortally wounded. We, Solo, you and I did that. It was my idea to set those fires that night to make sure you guys could get out of that place. It never occurred to me that Solo would tell his men to pour oil on the kindling to make it burn faster and spread more widely. I know I wasn't there, but that doesn't make me less guilty. The responsibility for all those deaths has weighed on me every day and night".

Jonah had started to shake uncontrollably. Yaya realised it was all getting too much for him. She should have given him a bit more time to digest what had happened to heir mother and the village. She needed to leave Midland as soon as possible, though, and join the others, so she pushed on:

"You said there was a second reason?"

Jonah went very still all of a sudden.

"This is why I wanted you two to swear not to tell anyone. Yaya, you are not going to like what I’m about to tell you. No matter how much you hate the islanders or Astrid, Solo must never find out!", Jonah took a big breath as if to steel himself.

"Astrid is pregnant".
It hit her like a hammer, and she immediately knew. Solo! Images of that terrible night whirled through her mind. Solo sneaking off and later seeing him near her. She’d known what he was up to but decided not to interfere with what was happening. She did it to keep her brother out of trouble. Fat lot of good that had done as now she’d lost him anyway because she‘d kept silent.

Yaya understood too, why he never put Astrid on that boat to her island. People there would never accept a bastard child from a Midlander father. They would cart the mother to a nunnery and drop the child off at the nearest village in Midland. It had always been their way if one of their daughters had lain with somebody excluded from the Eugenic Tree and got pregnant. It was one more reason to despise them.
She felt a sort of wonder why the girl wanted to keep it.
She knew as no other that there were ways to get rid of unwanted pregnancies. She did it herself when after a wild night with the crew she’d been too drunk to take precautions.
Her mother had immediately recognised her daughter was pregnant and helped to get rid of it. It had taken swallowing some very bitter herbs which made her as sick as a dog and nearly cost her her life. The bleeding had seemed to go on for days. Only her mother's skills had saved her.

Yaya understood the danger it would have put Astrid in. Still, she had to ask.

"Why did she keep it? It must be hell for her to know who the child is from? I know it’s a bit late now, but surely, when you arrived a few weeks ago that midwife could have given her a way out? I know the procedure is risky, but at least it would make it possible for her to go back home again. Why did she not do it?".

"She had been through hell on our trip.s The midwife, Plaxides, decided the risk was too high Astrid wouldn't survive it. She was far too weak. You should know even a strong woman like you can succumb to the effect. I know what you went through at the time".

Yaya’s head shot up.

Jonah had been so little when it happened to her. She never thought he understood what had happened to her.

" Plaxedes, the midwife, refused to give her the herbs. Even when Astrid was begging her, she didn't care about dying. The pregnancy just keeps reminding her of what Solo did to her that night in Amersham.You knew what he did and never told me, did you?"

Yaya looked up and stared at him, feeling very defensive.

"I was trying to protect you, my brother! If I had told you, you would have wanted to interfere. Solo would have finished you. He was drunk and angry. You should never have got yourself involved with that girl! Solo did it too to hurt you. He knew you liked her."

 Jonah didn't want to fight anymore and gave a big sigh.
Everything was so damned complicated. There was a lot he was blaming himself for, not the least ever telling Solo about that back door. Everything had gone wrong after that. He knew too that his sister was right. He should never have let on to Solo he liked Astrid. The man never wanted anyone to interfere with his plans or to criticise him. Let alone touch what he saw as his property.

He decided to eat some of the food they bought and ordered another drink. He needed some strength to convince them he was going to stay with Astrid.

Chapter Sixty-one -Saying goodbye

His thoughts went to Astrid, who’d been so disappointed not to be able to make a new start and go back to her people. She was adamant that no one should ever find out what had happened to her or about the child.

He had tried to persuade her just to go back home and tell her people she’d no choice in the matter. Solo forced her. Surely they would want to help her out and send her to London for an abortion? They had the money.

At any mention of throwing herself at the mercy of her folks, Astrid became quite hysterical. He had to promise never to let anyone know about her. She’d made up her mind. After the child was born, she would leave it behind in Midland. Then she planned to go home. Plaxides had told her, she knew a good family, that would love to take it.

Astrid, nowadays, seemed a shadow of her old self, listlessly wandering around the cottage with a pale face. Even Mattie had given up trying to cheer her friend up and got herself a new friend. He was the son of the farmer, whose cottage Plaxedes was renting.

Plaxides had told people when they were asking about them, that Astrid and Jonah were her cousins, who had adopted Mattie and were now expecting their second child.

Every day Jonah strove to make Astrid feel a little less miserable, buying her books when they were available, from the market, and encouraging her to join Plaxedes when the midwife went out to collect her herbs and visited other mothers to be.
He hoped she might feel some kind of kinship with those young women and strike up a friendship.

Astrid blankly refused to go with Plaxides. She just roamed the woods and fields around the cottage. Him, Astrid only tolerated up to a point. Some evenings she liked to talk about her youth and her friends staring into the fire. His heart shrank when he heard the wistfulness and longing in her voice describing her girlish pranks, always in the company of her best friend, Marion.

Jonah shook his head. His mind was drifting. He simply had to convince these two to leave them alone and never tell anyone they even met. He stopped eating, shoving the plate away from him and took another draught.

"I promised Astrid no one would ever know about her predicament. She’s planning to leave the child and me behind after it’s born", his face twitched feeling again how much it had hurt hearing her say that without giving any hint, she understood what that would do to him.

"Astrid told me she could never bear to look at it. Plaxides knew a family who would adopt it. Instead, I’ve decided to keep it and when it’s old enough to travel, take it to London. You’ll have to wait for me until then. You can’t convince me to leave now. Don’t waste your breath. I don't even want her to find out we met. She would never forgive me if she found out I told you two her secret. Especially not you, Yaya. Her fear of Solo hearing about the child could drive her to more desperate measures. She is very fragile at the moment. She might take her life".

They both looked at him aghast.

"Why would you sacrifice yourself like that?" Yaya seemed beside herself, "You’ve only known this girl for little more than one month! I’ve been your sister for your whole life. Wulf has sent his mother off alone, just to find you, his best friend".

Wulf put a calming hand on her arm.

"Yaya, he’s entitled to choose for himself. What use would it be to us for him to join us now and feel guilty for the rest of his life?"

He put his arm around Jonah and hugged him.

"At least promise us you’ll send us a message now and then to let us know how you’re faring. We’re so happy to have finally found you safe and sound and would hate to lose you again. There must be a way to keep in contact with us, what with all those ships going up and down between here and London?"

Jonah felt his throat close up, trying not to cry. Here was his best friend sticking up for him yet again. Even when it meant he had to leave him here, but he’d been giving this a lot of thought over the last few weeks. He would stay to look after the child even after Astrid left. For him, it would be like holding on to a part her. She wouldn't or maybe couldn't understand that. He knew he would cherish it and give it all the love he would have gladly and passionately given its mother.

"After travelling with the caravan, I've kept up contact with Cheng via his agent here. He has been of great help getting me a job on one of the fishing trawlers. The company has an office in London not far from the big market in the Sinese quarter. I’ll try to get a message to you there but only under one condition".

Yaya and Wulf both seemed to know what he was going to say but he said it anyway.

"These letters will be for your eyes only and have to be destroyed after you’ve read them. Promise me on all that is dear to you, or you won't hear from me again".

They both solemnly promised. Yaya not without some more grumbling but Wulf with all his heart.

Jonah got up.

"Now, I’ve got to go back. How much longer will you two be staying in Upavon?"

Yaya answered him straight away, sounding a bit bitter.

"We’re staying in this inn tonight. As you won't be coming back with us and I know we can’t change your mind, there’s nothing for us here. We’ll leave with the first ship to London".She turned away from him.

Jonah couldn't let her leave this way. She had to know. She was important to him.

"Yaya, you know I’ve always loved you and love you even more now. You’re all that’s left of my family. Please let me do this and don't be angry".

She’d already turned to walk away, but at his words, she turned back and stepped right in front of him embracing him with such force he felt his ribs cracking.

In his hair, she mumbled, "I’ll always love you too and look out for you. Come back to us soon, you silly boy. Too loyal for your own good you are. Stay safe until we meet again. I hope that girl appreciates what you are willing to give up for her".

Wulf didn't say anything just gave him one of his bear hugs and send him on his way with a big clap on his back.
It would be a long time before they would see each other again. Jonah’s promise to keep in contact with him would make his decision not to go with them a lot more bearable.

Astrid would feel betrayed if she heard about it. He would have to make sure she never found out. He felt more determined than ever to make it work for everyone. It would all work out. Astrid might come round and even join him. He still had more than seven months to convince her.

Epilogue

"The island!", a loud voice was shouting.
The wind must have struck up overnight as the captain had told her they wouldn’t be arriving before midday the next day.
She’d already packed her belongings, what little that she had, and thrown on her cloak, eager to get a first look at her beloved island. She was a bit apprehensive of what she would find, coming home after such a long time.

The sun was just coming up, painting the sea a liquid gold. Seeing the harbour with her home, Harrington House, looking out over it, took her breath away.

Her first thought was how she would have loved to share this moment with Jonah. She mustn't. She’d made her choice. Looking back would only cause pain.

When she arrived above deck, the captain looked at this austere, beautiful young woman. Locks of her auburn hair had been swept from her hood and softened the sharp features of a lovely face with its blue-green eyes. Even after a few weeks at sea, sharing their meals and conversation, she was still an enigma to him.

Since they left Upavon, she had kept herself to herself during most of the trip spending a lot of time just standing on the deck staring out at sea, or when the weather was rough reading her books in her cabin.

The captain had gotten paid handsomely by the young man who had booked her passage. It meant he had to sail a bit off his usual route to deliver this young woman to the Island.

To his surprise, no one had been at the dock to help her onboard or to wave goodbye. It was all a bit of a mystery.

After they had sailed out of sight of Upavon, he’d caught a glimpse of her face before she went downstairs. It was so full of sorrow that it had affected him deeply at the time.

The captain turned to her, "You must be glad to be rid of us after all these weeks at sea?"

She looked at him, smiling.

"On the contrary, you’ve all been very nice to me, but it makes me happy to see my own home again finally. A lot of things will have changed. I have been away too long", her face crumpling like a small child's.

Only her proud bearing and knowing the islanders' dislike of being touched by outsiders, kept him from putting an arm around her.

"It shouldn't be that bad, surely? We normally don't do business there as it's easier to bring our goods to London City and let them do the distribution. Besides your folks are not too keen on strangers coming ashore. I can't tell you what the situation is right now. However, we've all heard the stories about the fire and the abduction of Harrington's daughter. There has been a change of management they told me. A man called Redwood, I believe"

Seeing her wince at his, as he now realised, callous remark, his suspicion she was the Astrid Harrington everyone had been talking about, was right.

She must have felt his questioning look and gave a big sigh.

"Yes, you have guessed right. I am that Astrid Harrington. It’s been more than a year since I was taken from my home. It seems more like a century to me. So many things have passed. It will be bizarre to see my home and the company under new management. I know Henry Redwood to be a good man. I’m sure he has taken care of everything satisfactorily".

Astrid could hardly believe it herself. Her parents gone and Henry now in charge!

So much had happened since that fated night. She wasn't that silly, innocent young girl anymore.

News about what had happened after she had disappeared, had trickled down to Upavon. She’d been living with Jonah for the best part of the year. Oh, Jonah! But no, she shouldn’t think about him, it was too painful.

She straightened her back, pushing all that emotion to the back of her mind. A bit later today, she would be home again. That was what was important now.

How come she didn't feel as happy, she thought she would? She had finally reached her goal. She was coming home. For such a long time it looked she would never get to see Harrington house again. Now there it was, standing proudly on top of the hill as if she‘d never been away and everything was still the same! Her cheeks felt wet. Too many memories were crowding in.

That fateful day had started so lovely. Who could have thought it would end up with her coming home like this, damaged and alone.

Like that day on which her story began, today too was one of those early April days that seemed more like summer than spring.

#  **THE** **END**