

THE MAGIC ISLANDS

THE MAGIC ISLANDS

Steve Bell

iUniverse, Inc.
New York Lincoln Shanghai

The Magic Islands

Copyright © 2004 by Stephen Bell

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

iUniverse books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

iUniverse
2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100
Lincoln, NE 68512
www.iuniverse.com
1-800-Authors (1-800-288-4677)

ISBN-13: 978-0-595-30336-6 (pbk)

ISBN-13: 978-0-595-76278-1 (ebk)

ISBN-10: 0-595-30336-6 (pbk)

ISBN-10: 0-595-76278-6 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

For my children—I hope they always see life as an adventure

Many thanks to all those that helped me with this book. Once again, a special thanks to the editor at Scribendi for their wonderful help.

C O N T E N T S



| | |
|---------------------------------|----------|
| PART I..... | 1 |
| The evil awakes | 3 |
| An adventure begins..... | 5 |
| The Winds of Fate | 11 |
| The stranger in the dark | 15 |
| Farewell to home..... | 19 |
| The great storm..... | 23 |
| A strange place | 34 |
| Journey to the observatory..... | 49 |
| Old Thom..... | 56 |
| The stranger returns | 62 |
| The siren of Salina | 70 |
| Falzar | 80 |
| Lessons from the wizard | 89 |
| Close to the enemy..... | 98 |
| The story of Gazhul | 109 |
| Darkness approaches | 116 |
| Onto adventure..... | 127 |

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------------|
| PART II | 135 |
| Doom on Vulcano | 137 |
| Into the lair of the hag | 149 |
| Raiders in the dark..... | 162 |
| Time slips away | 166 |
| The giant forests of Filicudi | 175 |
| Escape from the Nargs | 185 |
| In the Pool of Tranquility | 194 |
| The winds of Alicudi | 204 |
| The stone of Arnak | 213 |
| Race to the abyss..... | 223 |
| Stromboli..... | 231 |
| The battle with Gazhul | 243 |
| A new beginning..... | 252 |

P A R T I



*When a thousand years are counted,
The fire will rise in the mountain.
With the stench of brimstone,
The dark master will return.*

—*The Ancients*

THE EVIL AWAKES

The sea lay flat, a black mirror reflecting a moonless night sky.

An immense black volcanic cone rose from the cold depths, towering into the sky. Suddenly, with a roar, great flumes of fire jetted from the top of the volcano, showering a million red and orange flares in a high arc. Red-hot rock fragments danced in the air and then fell back onto the cone, making it glow like hot iron.

Built on the steppes of the dark island, with its foundations deep into the living rock, stood a great fortress, its walls fashioned from monoliths of lava rock, black and rough. It towered above its side of the island, featureless except for one great blackened-iron door at its base.

Lava streamed down the side of the volcano, a bubbling and churning river of orange curving toward the sea. Just above the fortress, the lava river split and passed either side of it, forming an oval of defense around the great structure. It steamed and hissed as it flowed, but only the banks hardened, the river itself remaining a molten moat.

Inside the fortress snaked a labyrinth of unlit halls and corridors. Figures skulked amongst the shadows. They were human in shape, dark creatures with deep red eyes. They bent forward, in a seeming act of reverence, waiting for some dark event.

The main hall was a vast cathedral, its tall roof arching high above the black stone floor. Huge columns supported great blackened beams. Lining the hall were oversized flaming torches that, even so, cast only a dim yellow light across the hooded figures gathered below. They stood, still bent, chanting deeply hypnotic words in a guttural language and swaying to the rhythmic beat of drums

that echoed around the great hall. They faced the far end of the great hall and a sinister black altar on a large raised platform. Immediately beyond the altar opened a chasm that dropped hundreds of feet. At the bottom flowed a vast underground river of lava that, like the moat, bubbled and hissed and released great clouds of steam. Its orange-red glow illuminated the great altar and the far wall of the hall.

A large round hole had been hewn at an angle through the thick wall. It aligned the altar directly with the volcanic cone hundreds of feet above.

Before the altar stood a tall dark figure clad in black ceremonial robes that trailed behind. A hood covered its dark scaly head, but its deep red eyes reflected the lava light in the darkness. Standing with its arms held out, it beckoned beyond the great window as it chanted. Its voice slowly rose to a crescendo as the mantra of the crowd grew louder and the drums intensified.

From the crowd stepped one of the creatures. It jumped forward into the aisle of the great hall. Casting back its hood, it revealed red eyes, wide and staring. It thrust out its arms and held its long claws palms up. Suddenly it ran forward, bringing the crowd to a frenzy. It crossed the length of the great hall and jumped onto the raised podium. It paused and released a high-pitched scream before throwing itself over the edge of the abyss. The scream followed it into the lava—and then it was gone. The crowd roared and the drums unleashed a faster rhythm.

It was then the volcano erupted again, launching a great red plume into the night sky, brought to life by the sacrifice. The high priest at the altar screamed, too, as it watched the cone explode.

The drums and chanting fell silent, the scream died away, and only the deep rumbling of the volcano could be heard. Slowly turning, the dark priest held out its trembling arms. An evil smile crossed its dark, scabbed face and it hissed a single word.

“Gazhul.”

The crowd exploded into frenzied cheering and the drums beat a double-time rhythm.

The dark master had returned.

AN ADVENTURE BEGINS

Black clouds rolled across the bright sapphire sky, devouring the sun and casting the earth below into deep cold shadow. An unseen fire glowed beneath them as they consumed the entire sky. From deep within the ominous mass came the distant beating of drums of war.

* * * *

Marcus's intense blue eyes sprang open as fear gripped his entire body. He was back in his small bedroom, bathed in the sun's warm morning glow. The light streamed through the small open window, reflecting from rough white walls. A morning breeze drifted across Marcus's tanned face.

His body relaxed. He had returned again from the ever more intense nightmares that had haunted him for over a year. As always, he was relieved morning had come again and the vision of the volcano was gone. Quickly he jumped from his bed and ran down the stairs to join his father for breakfast.

Marcus's father was a huge man with dark brown skin, tanned in countless days under the scorching Sicilian sun.

"Good morning. I have something for you, Signor Adventurer," his father said with a smile as he turned to the table. "I thought you might need some things for your—adventure."

Marcus was a little embarrassed; the name the children in the village were calling him had reached all the way to his father. He blushed as the big man stepped around the table and slid a small bundle toward him.

“This is your present.”

Marcus looked at the bundle, grey cloth neatly tied with a piece of golden string.

“I’ve waited until you were a man to give them back to you.”

“What are they?” asked Marcus, unknitting the string.

“They’re your things, Marcus. They belong to you.”

Marcus was confused as he opened the bundle. He remembered owning nothing like this. Around it was wrapped a grey hooded cloak made of light and strong material of extraordinary quality. Inside was a small brown leather bag with a strap, well worn but still good. Lying next to the bag was a small dagger in a leather scabbard. Its handle was horn and its hilt silver. Marcus removed the dagger from the scabbard. Its still sharp blade gleamed.

“Don’t take your trip lightly, Marcus,” his father said in a stern voice. “There are many wicked people in this world, many liars and thieves. You have much to learn about this world, but my simple lesson is this: if it comes down to either you or another—choose them to die.”

The dagger suddenly felt cold and heavy as reality fell upon Marcus. He placed it back in the scabbard and gently rested it on the table. He took up the leather bag. It was heavy, with what felt like metal inside. Slowly and deliberately he opened it and removed a small soft leather pouch. Inside were silver coins, which he poured onto the table. It was not a great deal of money, but it was by far the most he had ever seen.

“But all this money. Whose is it?” he asked in wonder.

“Now it’s yours,” said his father with a smile.

Marcus looked at the money and then up at his father. He could see a light in those eyes and he suddenly realized what he was being given.

“No, father. This is your money for the new boat,” Marcus stammered as he tried to push the money away. “I can’t take it. I mean it’s taken you forever to save this money. All those years that you went without things.”

His father smiled at him before saying, “When you make your fortune, you can come and buy me a new boat. Until then, this is the present I choose to give to my only son.”

Marcus was both embarrassed and shocked at the incredible gift. It had taken his father all his life to save this money, and now, in a simple gesture, he was giving it to him.

“No, I can’t. Really,” Marcus stuttered. Tears welled in his eyes.

“I’m happy if you just come back to me. It’s yours. Spend it well,” his father said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Marcus felt overwhelming love for and deep gratitude to the man who had given him everything he had. Marcus then looked at the cloak, bag and dagger.

“But where are these from?” he asked.

His father stood and placed his hands in his pockets. “These are yours, and only yours. Let me say that your great grandfather was the only other adventurer in this family. He used them when he went to the north, and they’ve been handed down through our family. Now it seems you have a real need of them.”

“I hope not,” said Marcus nervously, rubbing a finger across the handle of the dagger.

A strong knock on the door brought both men from their thoughts. Marcus stepped over to the door and pulled it open. Standing waiting was Toby, Marcus’s closest friend. He was tall and thin, his hair jet black, falling in small curls. His skin was olive and his eyes large and deepest brown. He had a kind face that beamed when he smiled, creasing the small scar near his right eye.

Toby belonged, but Marcus looked very different and very out of place in their small fishing village. He stood at the same height but had long wavy blonde hair and dazzling blue eyes that penetrated when he stared. They stood out against skin that was not naturally olive but fair, tanned, though, to a deep bronze under the Sicilian sun. Marcus’s face was square and chiseled with a strong jaw. His body was strong from endless days of rowing the fishing boat and dragging in nets of fish. Looking so different, he had always been the favorite of the girls in the village.

Marcus and Toby had grown up together and were inseparable. To them it seemed forever they had laughed together, had found trouble together and above all—had dreamed of Rome together.

Although that great city was just now emerging from the ravages of the Dark Ages, Marcus imagined it would be the place he would find both adventure and fortune.

“It arrived today,” said Toby excitedly as he reached forward and hugged Marcus like a brother.

“Really?” asked Marcus. “Are you sure?”

Marcus’s father pushed past them, patting Toby on the shoulder. “I’ll leave you two young adventurers to your scheming,” he said. “Some of us need to go and catch the fish.” He then turned and walked off down the village path.

Toby spied the bread and cheese on the table behind Marcus. He pushed past, as he was always happy to scrounge a free meal. “Don’t mind if I just grab some breakfast, do you?” he said, already picking up the bread.

“Help yourself,” said Marcus with a laugh as he watched Toby stuff a hunk of it into his mouth.

“The old man stopped me yesterday near the village square,” said Toby, mouth full, breadcrumbs falling. “He told me the ship was coming in and it would give us passage to the north.”

“He’s a strange old man,” said Marcus, offering Toby a small cup of water.

Toby gulped down the water and then ran his hand across his mouth. “Yes. Strange how he just appears in the village. He’s always been keen to hear about our plans to go north.”

“A very mysterious man indeed,” said Marcus, thinking. “You know, I’ve never seen his face. It’s always buried deep in the shadows of his hood.”

“I always wondered why he wears such a heavy cloak,” said Toby. “Anyway, he said this ship would be coming and that a couple of young men like us could always find passage on such a ship.”

“Well, let’s go then,” said Marcus impatiently.

“A man can’t even eat his breakfast anymore,” Toby moaned, grabbing for a piece of cheese.

They stepped from the small white house, its façade punctuated by a bright blue door and shutters. It sat high in the village on the side of a rugged, black hill formed from an ancient lava flow. In the distance behind the hill loomed Mount Etna—the great volcano. Its towering black cone reached high, snow capped and remote. Streams of faint white smoke drifted from the summit into the blue sky.

Far below the house sat the wharf area of the fishing village, a cluster of white-washed dwellings grouped around a small natural harbor. The harbor was dotted with tiny scalloped fishing boats, resplendent in whites, blues and reds, always protected in the calm waters by the harbor wall. Over time, the villagers had built up what was the natural harbor wall and now it was a solid stone structure at which a ship could dock.

There now, berthed against the wall, was a splendid sailing ship, its sails furled against its rigging.

“Incredible!” said Marcus, as his eyes fell upon the ship. “It’s fantastic. I mean just so beautiful.”

It was the largest ship he had so far seen at the port. From up on the hill it seemed an army of ants was swarming around and over it. Its decks appeared alive.

“They’ve brought cloth from the north, fine woolens and silks,” said Toby with an air of great knowledge. “Some say this ship has even been as far north as England.”

“Come on! I want to see it up close,” said Marcus, grabbing Toby’s arm and pulling him along. “Let’s go down to the harbor before we lose our passage.”

They followed the path down to the wharf, almost running with excitement. The village seemed quiet. Many of the townsfolk had decided to go see what was happening with the ship. It was quite an event and an opportunity to maybe sell some local goods to the rich sailors. The ship had come on the newly formed trade route between their port and Rome. This was where the locals brought their olive oil, wine and oranges to trade for the goods brought by traders from the north.

A young boy sat in the doorway of his house. His hair was jet black and he had a front tooth missing. He was dressed in a scruffy white shirt and sun bleached short pants, the soles his feet bare and dirty.

“Where are you two going?” he called to Marcus and Toby. “To see the ship and dream of adventure?”

“Yes,” replied Marcus smugly. “Were going to ask about what’s happening in the far north and hear tales from across the sea.”

The boy jumped to his feet and ran over to them. “Are you really going to the north, to Rome?”

“Yes. Tomorrow we’ll sail north,” said Toby, nodding vigorously.

“Aren’t you afraid?” the boy asked, following them down the road.

“Of what?” asked Marcus.

“The old songs and tales of the sea.”

Marcus shook his head. “No. They’re just songs.”

Then the small boy started to chant one of the old rhymes.

* * * *

*Follow the wind over oceans deep
To where the magic islands sleep.
When the moon is full and the sea is calm,
The magic islands cast their charm.
Sail to catch them you may try,
But you’ll never reach where they lie.
On their shores you’ll never land,
For magic moves them from your hand.
And in their midst evil sleeps*

*From the island where darkness creeps.
A volcano smolders in the night,
And evil stalks beyond their sight.
Beyond the fog the islands keep
Their secret story hidden deep.
Follow the wind over oceans deep
To where the magic islands sleep.*

* * * *

“Save your songs,” said Toby. “There are no such things.” He turned to Marcus for reassurance.

The mention of the volcano had silenced Marcus. He felt deep down that something in this song was perhaps true. He grabbed at Toby’s arm and pulled him along. “Let’s get down there before I change my mind.”

THE WINDS OF FATE

They walked awestruck toward the port, eyes wide and mouths open. The area was bustling with activity, townsfolk shouting up to the sailors to come and buy some local produce, holding it out for display.

The ship's great wooden form dwarfed the harbor. Its figurehead seemed almost alive. It was carved in the form of a woman, her hands cupped to her mouth, her cheeks puffed out as she blew at the sea. Beneath her, written in bold gold letters, was the ship's name—*The Winds of Fate*.

The height of the masts, the complexity of the rigging and sails amazed Marcus. It was just so incredible, so massive, and to him it held great mystery, as it had come across the sea from far away in the north.

Eventually, Marcus and Toby walked half the length of the great ship. They stepped back closer to the shadow of the harbor wall and found themselves near a rough looking mariner.

He was leaning with his arms folded against the wall, a small pipe in his mouth. His face was reddened and coarse, his hair slicked back with grease and tied in a long ponytail. He wore black pants tucked into small boots that had shiny silver buckles on them. The boots were scuffed and old. Around his waist was tied a broad leather belt, well worn and dull. Hanging from the belt was a long, silver knife, its blade nicked along its length.

He glanced sideways and a smile crept across his face. Slowly he leaned toward them. "I see you eyeing up my knife," he said in a strange accent. He puffed on his pipe. "It's getting dangerous up in the north. A body needs to carry a weapon everywhere nowadays—just in case there's any trouble."

Marcus looked at him cautiously, but then ventured a little closer, curious to hear news of the north. “So what’s it really like in the north now? And more so, what’s it like in Rome?”

“It’s getting even darker up there,” he said after a moment’s thought. “Strange tales are coming down from the northern lands about happenings. Strange comings and goings they say.” He blew out a large pall of smoke from between his thin lips and leaned further forward. “Many say evil things are abroad again. Some are saying there are strange things coming from the distant north and are, as we speak, heading south.” His voice dropped until it was almost whisper. “Some say as it’s an old evil, an’ it may already be here in the south. There’s whisperings that things is gettin’ dangerous—even here.”

Marcus gulped.

The mariner’s eyes grew wide and he looked around cautiously. Then he added, “There’s some as say an old evil is returning and it brings with it a great danger for young men.”

Marcus and Toby stood spellbound, staring wide-eyed at the sailor.

The sailor looked at the expressions on their faces and then burst out laughing. “Don’t believe everything you hear from us old sea dogs,” he said, blowing out a cloud of smoke. He then slapped Marcus hard on the back and walked off laughing.

“Are you still sure we want to go to the north?” asked Toby. “What if he was telling the truth?”

“No. He was just teasing us. Let’s go book our passage before we both change our minds.”

“Well, we better find the purser then.”

“I think that’s him,” said Marcus.

At the bottom of the central plank stood a well-dressed sailor. He wore blue shorts and long white socks that ended in black buckled shoes, a blue and white striped shirt and a black three-peaked hat. His face was very thin and mean. The color, if it had once had any, seemed to have been drained from it. His lips curved in a thin line across his face and his tiny eyes glanced up and down the gangplank. In his gaunt hand he held a scroll of parchment. With the flick of his quill he took stock of what was coming and going from the ship.

Marcus walked to him nervously. “Excuse me, sir. But I was hoping...”

“Yes. Can I help you?” said the purser, looking up from his parchment and gazing down his long nose at Marcus.

“Er, we’re looking for passage to Rome on your ship, sir,” Toby mumbled, clearing his throat.

The purser scanned them up and down with an expression on his face that said he smelled something nasty. “Oh you are, are you?” he drawled. “Well we don’t let just anyone on our ship, my lads. This is a fine and respectable sailing vessel, and for all we know you could be a couple of young fugitives from the long hand of the law. I need to see some credentials.” As he said this, he looked beyond them, as if looking to someone on the far side of the harbor. After a few seconds he nodded slowly.

“Well, my lads,” he said with a change in tone that surprised the young men, “it looks as if you’re in luck today. I just happen to have two spaces on this fine vessel. And for the sum of nine pieces of silver each, I can guarantee you a passage to our fair capital.”

“Nine? Surely you mean five pieces of silver,” said Marcus, taken aback. “We were told by an old man we could get passage for five.”

Again the purser seemed to look to the far side of the harbor, as if to get confirmation from someone.

“Of course, my lad. My mistake. I meant five each,” he said, and a false smile crossed his face. “So if you’d like to pay, we can assure your places and we can have this transaction confirmed in writing.”

Marcus looked over his shoulder to see where the purser kept looking, but he could see no one. He turned back to the purser, who was now standing with his hand open. Marcus removed his purse and slowly opened it.

The purser leaned forward to get a look into the purse. He raised his eyebrows, obviously having noted the pile of money. He straightened up as Marcus quickly removed the ten silver coins and handed them to him. He took each one in turn, inspected it and then bit it. Each coin, certified real, then rapidly disappeared into his ample pockets.

“Right,” he started, “so if we can just have your names, we can get you on the ship’s log and everything will be above board.” The purser’s tongue popped from the side of his mouth as he scribbled their names onto the parchment. As he wrote he began to speak. “No animals on board. You sleep on deck. You do as I say, and you bring your own food. Water will be provided—in limited quantities. We leave with or without you tomorrow morning at seven. Any questions?”

The purser looked down at the names he had written and a strange look crossed his face as he read Marcus’s surname. He quickly looked up at Marcus and then stepped back a little. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have work to do,” he said rudely. “Be sure to be on time, as I’ll happily leave without you two as cargo.” With that, he stepped to one side and started to log the goods again coming and going from the ship.

Toby turned to Marcus and held out his hand.

“Well, now we’ve done it,” he said, almost shaking. “We’re really going. We’re really going.”

Marcus took his hand and shook it firmly. His dream was at last coming true. They were to head north to adventure.

THE STRANGER IN THE DARK

It was early evening by the time Marcus had finished his supper. He left his father with his friend, Tom, and walked outside to meet Toby. The sky was scorched red by the setting sun. Small horsetail clouds danced above Etna as it glowed in the sunset. The night air was hot. A southern wind had blown up, bringing humid air from Africa.

As night beetles played their hypnotic tune, Marcus walked up and away from the house toward Toby who was standing in the shadows.

They sat on the crest of the hill and turned to face the sea. Down below, the yellow lights of the village stood out against the dark rocks.

“Are you ready?” asked Toby.

“As ready as ever,” said Marcus.

“Is this what you really want to do?” asked Toby. “We’ve talked for so long about going to Rome. But this is it. Tomorrow we leave. Is this what you want?”

Suddenly a deep, calm voice spoke from the blackness. “What does your heart say?”

Marcus jumped with surprise. He got to his feet and peered into the darkness. “Who’s there?” he asked, clenching his fists. “Step out where we can see you, or you’ll get a good punch.”

Slowly, from the darkness, a bent figure stepped forward. He was very tall and thin, and he moved slowly, as if he was old. He was wearing a long, dirty, grey cloak and his arms were bent across his lap. His hands were hidden in his sleeves.

“It’s you,” said Toby, standing. “You shouldn’t go creeping up on folk in the night. It’s not—well not proper.”

The old man stepped closer, his head still bowed as he approached them. The hood of the grey cloak, as always, cast his face into dark shadow. “When you listen inside, what does your heart say, Marcus?”

“About what?” asked Marcus, stepping back.

“About seeking your adventure,” said the old man, as he laughed gently under his breath. “What is your heart telling you to do?”

Marcus looked at Toby and then at the old man. “I...” Marcus started nervously.

The old man placed a hand on Marcus’s shoulder. It was old and wrinkled but well manicured. On his index finger he wore a strange silver ring—it was a curious object, featuring a small square with a triangle inside it.

“Don’t wait, Marcus,” said the old man in a soothing voice. “Don’t wait until you are old like me. Go. Go and seek your adventure. Whatever they may say, you are no fisherman. And remaining here will only make you sad.”

Marcus stood with his mouth open, looking at the dark folds of the hood, trying to see the face beyond their shadows.

“And you, Master Toby,” said the old man, turning to the lad. “You have a large part in this adventure as well. You must also go. Go with Marcus. Go north, and together you will find that for which you are looking.”

The old man stepped back a little, looking around for eavesdroppers. “Your destiny is laid before you, and you should not fight it. For the hands of destiny are strong and determined. Sooner or later you will have to listen to fate’s call.”

Marcus stared, almost hypnotized by the old man’s voice.

“I have a long promised gift for you,” said the old man, reaching under his cloak. He pulled something out and slowly opened his fingers. In the palm of his hand sat coiled a delicately linked silver chain that weaved and snaked in a strange way. On it was a silver pendant, crafted within a small and delicate square frame. Suspended at the corner and inside the frame was a silver triangle—it was the same as the old man’s ring.

Marcus stared at the pendant in wonder as it glowed in the fading light. “It’s for me?”

“I was told to give you this on your eighteenth birthday. So here it is,” said the old man, offering the pendant.

Marcus felt compelled to hold his hand open to receive the gift. He watched, still hypnotized, as the old man slowly poured the chain into it. Finally, the pendant fell. It felt strange, as if it had no weight. It made him want to gasp.

“Wear this. It is a symbol of good fortune,” said the old man from under his hood. His voice was more commanding. “It will help you in your voyage. Wear it and never take it off. Heed me on this, especially during your sea voyage, as you will need all the luck you can get.”

Marcus felt a sudden cold fear at these words. He quickly fastened the necklace around his neck and the pendant fell onto his chest. It felt immediately warm and comforting.

“Will we really find what we’re looking for?” asked Toby hopefully.

“Oh yes, and probably much more besides,” said the old man, turning slowly and nodding. “Once you get on board the ship, stay out of the way. Many sailors are nervous of strangers on their ships. Many even think they bring bad luck. It hasn’t been unknown for some passengers to be thrown overboard in the dark night.” The old man looked at them for a moment and then turned and started to walk toward the path to the village. “Good luck, my young friends. And mark my words. Do not remove the pendant!”

Suddenly a branch cracked behind Toby and Marcus. They both turned, expecting to see someone standing there, but there was no one. They turned back and the old man was gone. They searched the hilltop for him—but he had disappeared.

“But how, what...he...” said Toby, as he shrugged.

Marcus stepped away, closer to the edge of the hill, his mind distant. He was muttering under his breath. “When I listen to my heart, it tells me to go. It’s always told me to go.”

“What?” asked Toby, straining to hear.

Marcus turned, shaking his head. A determined look had appeared on his face. “Nothing. Nothing,” he said, putting his hand over his heart. “I was just thinking aloud. Tomorrow will be a long day. It’s better we get some sleep.”

“Yes,” Toby agreed, coming forward and embracing Marcus. “This will be the greatest adventure ever. Tomorrow it begins.”

He turned and walked home.

Marcus turned, too, the words of the old man echoing in his mind. He quietly opened the door of his house and entered. It closed with a barely audible squeak. He could hear male voices coming from the back room. One was his father’s and the other—Tom’s.

For some reason he could not fathom, Marcus crept across the kitchen closer to the back room door, which was almost closed. He could smell the sweet scent of wine coming from the room.

His father was speaking. “I knew sooner or later he’d want to leave. Fishing is just not in his blood. And no matter what I say, he’ll never want to stay.”

Marcus put his eye to the crack in the door. His father was sitting opposite Tom, both leaning forward in the light of the oil lamp. Both were cupping wine goblets in their large hands.

Tom sniffed and then spoke in his gruff old voice. “You know, sooner or later he’s gonna find out ’bout all that other stuff.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Sooner or later the old man would have convinced him to leave. Better he leaves now, before that old fool takes him on one of *his* adventures.”

Marcus’s father thought for a moment and then sighed, rubbing a hand down his face. “I just hoped it wouldn’t be so soon. You know he’s just a boy and the north is becoming a very dangerous place. There’s all manner of tales coming on these ships about evil being abroad. All this talk of adventure from such a young boy scares me—it makes me think of...” Marcus’s father suddenly stopped and turned his gaze to the crack in the door.

Marcus stepped back, holding his breath, wondering whether his father knew he’d been listening. With his heart jumping in his chest, he quickly turned and crept across the kitchen toward the small staircase. Then he carefully and quietly climbed the stairs. He crept into his bed, the two voices resonating but unclear below. He strained to catch the words but they were whispered and he couldn’t make them out.

He tried to listen for a time, but slowly he started to drift into a disturbed sleep. Then the voice of the old man whispered in his head, “Follow your destiny. Follow your destiny.”

He could feel himself drifting into the darkness, falling into unconsciousness. In the blackness, he started to murmur, “I must go north.”

* * * *

He was suddenly standing on the side of a hill, the wind blowing from the north. Before him stretched the sea. It boiled and steamed, releasing a vile hissing noise. In the wind he could hear the rhythmic beating of drums of war, and below that he could hear a long slow rhythmic chanting. He stood gripped with terror, staring at ominous black clouds swarming from the north. Their great swirling mass blackened the entire sky. He suddenly felt a rush of icy air across his face that then passed through his body, slamming him to the ground.

At once he was consumed by the darkness.

FAREWELL TO HOME

Marcus's eyes sprang wide open and he clawed at the air. He was thrashing in his bed and screaming. His father ran up the small staircase, flinging open the door, bursting into his room. "What's the matter?"

"A bad dream. Just a bad dream," said Marcus, his voice trembling.

"All right, I understand. Today is a big day for you. Don't worry. Everything will be fine. I reckon even I'd be nervous going on such an adventure. At what time does the ship leave?"

Marcus stood from his bed and splashed some water from his bowl onto his face. "The boat leaves at seven, father. Will you come?"

"Of course I'll come," said the older man, dropping his head. "I want to see my son safely on his way. And I want to make sure the crew understands how precious their cargo is to me."

* * * *

It was nearly half-past six when Toby walked into the square with his mother. They said good morning to Marcus and his father, and then started to walk to the harbor.

The ship was already preparing to sail. Its crew was busy manning ropes and pulling up two of the huge gangplanks. Only the central one remained at the port with the purser standing at the bottom. He was still checking his parchment.

As they approached the ship, they could hear a hand organ and the crew singing a sea shanty.

* * * *

*Pull on the ropes and hoist the sails
for the wind is blowing and the tide is running.
The stores be stowed and the decks be scrubbed.*

Do dilly ay da do.

*Cast off the ropes and turn to the sea,
point us north and catch the winds,
Cross over waves and taste the spray.*

Do dilly ay da do.

*Crash of the bow and creak of the stern,
sound of the winds through the ropes,
Always out to sea go our hearts.*

Do dilly ay da do.

* * * *

To the rhythm of the shanty they walked to the bottom of the gangplank. The purser looked up and nodded wearily at Marcus's father. He acknowledged Marcus and Toby, again with a forced smile.

"Well now, lads. So happy you made it in time," he said in a false cheery voice. "Let's be having you on board. Time is running and we need to be on our way."

Marcus's father stepped forward and grabbed the purser's thin wrist. He held it tight, looking directly into his eyes. "Make sure these lads get there safely," he said in a stern, slow voice. "If not, I'll come looking for you, wherever you may sail. Do you understand me?"

The purser looked back nervously and nodded slowly. He gave a weak smile. Marcus's father released his wrist and the purser rubbed it slowly.

"Thank you," whispered Marcus, turning and hugging his father. "Thank you for everything."

"Be careful. Watch for thieves and liars. The world is a dangerous place and you are a young man. Learn your lessons well and always think of home."

"I'll be back in a few weeks..." said Marcus, smiling.

“Find your destiny and live a good life,” said his father, placing a finger on Marcus’s lips. He looked at his son and tried to smile a last time.

Marcus dropped his head and turned to the gangplank. His heart was aching.

Toby hugged his mother and said goodbye to Marcus’s father before he followed Marcus up the gangplank. They stepped carefully onto the clean deck of the ship.

A sailor on the far side turned to look at them. He had a large bushy black beard and greasy hair tied in a ponytail. Hanging from his right earlobe was a large gold earring. His right eye was missing and a dark red scar covered the hole. His face was gaunt and his skin almost grey. His thick arms hung from a dirty black shirt and were covered in dark green tattoos. He wore a thick belt, from which hung a large curved sword with a dull blade. He sneered as they stepped onto the deck and then whispered something to a no less dirty looking shipmate. The shipmate looked over and sneered as he nodded.

Marcus felt uneasy as he and Toby shuffled to the side of the ship. He could feel the stares of the sailors burning into him. Quickly he looked back down to portside toward his father.

The purser signaled with a thumb to the men holding the bow and stern ropes. Then he scaled the gangplank. He looked uneasily at Marcus and Toby.

“You should stand out of the way,” he snapped, looking at Marcus’s father from the corner of his eye. “Stay near the back of the ship until we’re underway. The last thing we want is for either of you to get hurt on this voyage.”

Marcus and Toby both nodded and immediately made their way to the back of the ship, walking around cargo strapped to the deck. Marcus watched as sailors busily worked around them. Some climbed up into the high rigging and others pulled on huge ropes to raise the sails.

Marcus watched in wonder as the great lines tethering the ship to the port were released and the ship was finally set free.

“This is it,” said Toby excitedly, tapping Marcus on the arm. “We’re finally on our way to adventure.”

With a loud ruffling sound, the mid sail caught the morning breeze and slowly the great ship started to drift away from the port. Marcus craned his neck to look up at the high crow’s-nest and the sailor guiding them out. The ship gradually started to move out of the harbor and into the sea.

Marcus looked back and could see his father waving, so he waved back. The bearded sailor, watching father and son closely, shook his head and grumbled. He then spat on the deck.

Marcus knew in his heart this was the last time he would ever see the village, their small boat and above all his father. He waved slowly and tried to smile.

Suddenly a flash caught his eye. It was something on the south side of the harbor. A silver object had flashed in the sunlight. Marcus strained to look and could see the old man standing on the rocks, just above the level of the sea. The thing below his neck flashed again in the sunlight—it was so bright Marcus looked away. Suddenly he felt a strange warmth under his shirt. He quickly slipped his hand inside and grasped the pendant. The smooth silver metal felt warm and reassuring in his grip. It made him feel tranquil. When he looked back, the old man was gone.

The ship lumbered out into the sea. Then slowly it turned to catch the full strength of the wind, carrying Marcus and Toby north. With the sound of the waves, the flap of a sail, and the call of a lone seagull, their adventure began.

THE GREAT STORM

The winds from the south blew strong and carried the great ship northward along the rugged coast of Sicily at a good clip. Marcus and Toby watched the rocky coast pass by, small port after small port and small village after small village. Neither of them had ever been this far north before. Each new vista brought more excitement, making them point and smile.

Etna loomed over the island, its huge towering cone with wisps of steamy cloud hovering around the summit. From the sea it looked even more magnificent. The coastline stood nearly as impressive, a mixture of jagged black and brown volcanic rocks jutting out and then dropping into the deep blue sea. By the time the ship had reached the ancient city of Messina, the sun had already passed its highest point.

“Look! Look!” called Toby, pointing toward the city. “I’ve never seen so many buildings before. Look how big some of them are.”

“It’s incredible, but it looks strange,” said Marcus, following the line of Toby’s finger. “It seems as if no one’s there. There are no boats in the harbor and I can’t see any smoke rising from any of the buildings. It’s as if the city is—dead.”

“Young Master Marcus is right,” said the purser from behind them, making them both jump. “The city is dead all right. Has been for a long while and will be for many years yet.”

“But why?” asked Marcus.

“They’ve been planning on rebuilding it for years,” said the purser in a cold voice. “Ever since the great earthquake destroyed it. However, people are too

scared to go back. They say that whenever someone starts to rebuild the ground starts to shake again. Everything new just crumbles.”

The purser sniffed against the wind. “If you ask me, it’s all to do with bad luck. They’d be better to leave it dead. Some things happen for a reason, my father always said. Better to leave it dead.”

“Are there many ghosts in the city?” asked Toby nervously.

“Oh, they say that there’s ghosts and all manner of evil things in there,” said the purser, shivering and crossing himself. “But there’s not a lot of people who have stayed there long enough to find out. Now there’s some as say that old evils have landed there and are planning dark things. Course there’s as many others as say there’s nothing of the sort and it’s a band of pirates that keeps everyone scared of entering so they can loot what treasures remained.” The purser lifted his hat and scratched his head. “So that’s enough about dead cities and ghosts for one day. I’d rather we parley ’bout lighter things. So what will you lads be doing when you get to Rome?”

Marcus looked at Toby. He was a little reluctant to talk about their plans, heeding his father’s words. He thought it wise to say they would be just seeing the sights.

“We’re going to find our fortune,” blurted Toby all of a sudden.

Marcus rolled his eyes and kicked Toby’s foot to silence him.

“Oh you are, are you?” laughed the purser. “And how do you intend to do that? I’ve heard many a body talk of looking for fortunes in Rome, and I can’t say as I’ve seen many sailing back past me in boats laden with gold.”

Marcus kicked Toby’s foot again to stop him from talking. He wanted to answer for them both. “Well, let’s not say fortune. I think Toby here is exaggerating a little,” said Marcus, trying to be casual. “If the truth be known, we’re going to see the city and what the world of the north is like.”

“Well, you can hardly say Rome is in the north,” said the purser in a worldly-wise way, pushing his thumbs into the loops of his trousers. “It’s still in the south by any count. And mark me: the barbarians of the north may have something to say if you go saying it’s the north. No. Rome is still squarely in the south.”

Toby couldn’t hold his excitement any more. “Is Rome bigger than Messina?”

“Oh yes. Oh yes, much bigger,” the purser answered. He smiled for a second and then looked around before continuing. “But don’t worry, young lad, there are less earthquakes and certainly less ghosts. However, mark my words, my young lads, it’s got enough of its own dangers. There are enough bad people in this world who don’t take too kindly to strangers such as yourselves. Especially

ones that have blonde hair like you.” He was looking at Marcus’s bright yellow locks. “Some people think it’s strange for someone from the south to have hair of that color. May think of you as one of those no-good, trouble-making northerners.”

Marcus looked at him wide-eyed as he came closer.

“Just for you to know,” the purser whispered. “Two of my sailors, over there, feel uneasy about you two. So my advice is to keep out of their way. Stay at the back of the ship if you can. I wouldn’t want anything untoward to happen to either of you two. Your father made it quite clear you should get to Rome in once piece, and I reckon on sticking to my part of that bargain. So keep out of sight, or who knows what may happen?” He gestured to the two sailors who had watched them board the ship.

The mean one with the beard was still staring across at them and this, and the purser’s words, made Marcus very uneasy. Marcus nodded. “Anyway, my lads,” said the purser in a fatherly tone as he tucked his thumbs into his belt once more and stood straight. “My advice is to take good care in Rome. I’ve seen many young lads enter the city with a purse of money like yours,” he signaled to the pouch at Marcus’s side and tapped his nose, “and never leave again.”

Marcus pulled his bag closer in surprise. He didn’t like the fact someone knew of his purse of money. He watched with suspicion as the purser winked, then turned and walked away toward the bow and a small group of sailors tending the rigging.

“I don’t trust him at all,” whispered Toby. “There’s something about him that seems for money he’d do anything.”

“I don’t trust any of them,” Marcus agreed. “He already knows I have some money, and if he knows, I’ll wager this entire crew knows by now.”

Marcus pulled the bag even closer to him and removed the cloak and the dagger. He pulled the dagger from the scabbard and the blade flashed in the sunlight.

“What are you doing?” asked Toby, looking at the knife.

“He knows I have some money,” said Marcus, re-sheathing the dagger, “so I also want him to know I have a dagger, and that I’m not afraid to use it.”

Marcus slipped off his belt and threaded on the scabbard. The dagger hung down his right leg. He took the cloak and wrapped it around the bag to try to conceal it a little. “We need to stay alert. Let’s be on the lookout for anyone watching us, especially anyone paying too much attention to our bags. I can tell you I’ll be using mine as a pillow to keep their thieving hands away.”

Toby nodded in agreement as he clutched his own bag to himself. “I might only have a little food and a small bottle of water, but I’ll not let anyone take it.”

Marcus watched as the bearded sailor leaned on a barrel. He was playing with his beard and staring straight at them.

* * * *

The ship glided ever northward, past the straits of Messina. To their left now lay the northern tip of Sicily and to their right Calabria, the southern tip of Italy. It was a notorious stretch of water where the seas came together and strong currents battled. Many ships in bad weather had found their way to the bottom of these straits.

It seemed bad weather would now test *The Winds of Fate*. The sea became agitated and the swell intensified, causing the ship to pitch and roll a little. The timbers creaked and water splashed on the hull of the ship as the winds became stronger.

The sailors called to each other as they dropped a third and final sail. Then the full force of the wind carried the boat north, out into the open sea. The air tasted saltier and felt cooler than it had near the coast. It rushed across Marcus's face as he stood near the stern of the ship.

The sun raced past mid-afternoon and fell rapidly to the horizon, chased by swelling clouds, the product of a hot afternoon. Marcus and Toby were crouched near the back of the boat, looking seaward, when a young sailor walked near them.

He was very tall and thin, his clothes hanging off him. His hair was almost red, chopped and scruffy with small lumps missing. His smile was broad but his two front teeth were missing. He had vacant brown eyes but they seemed kind.

"Good afternoon," he said in a polite voice, his tongue passing between the gap in his teeth. "Hope you're enjoying your thrip. Ith's a really nice day for sailing."

"Good afternoon," replied Marcus, rather surprised by the civility of the sailor. "Yes thanks, it's a nice voyage."

"Ah, then I'm happy for ya," said the sailor, grabbing for a bucket and brush.

"Excuse me?" asked Toby as the young sailor was turning away.

"Yes, my young sailing companion," said the sailor with a smile. He turned and leaned on the staff of the brush. "How may I be of service to you and your wealthy friend?"

Toby looked sideways at Marcus before he answered. It was now certain the crew knew of their money.

“With this wind and at this speed, how long will it take to get to Rome?” asked Toby.

The sailor looked at the sky and the horsetail clouds coming from the south. He then looked over the side of the boat and spat into the air, watching it blow to the sea below. “I reckon we could do ith in thwo days or less, however...” He pointed to the clouds that were forming high up in the sky. “Sthrange to see those clouds on such a day, with the wind coming from the south and all. If I didn’t know better, I might reckon we could have a sthorm coming.”

Marcus looked at the sky. He knew the weather well in their village and also thought it strange to see such clouds on such a day.

“Good day tha ya.” The sailor nodded his head and walked away whistling, with his brush in one hand and bucket in the other.

“I hope we don’t get a storm,” said Toby, looking at the growing mass of clouds. “I want us to get there as soon as possible, and a storm would slow us down.”

“Me, too. And I have to say, I find those clouds rather strange,” said Marcus. “I think he’s right; this could be the start of a strong storm coming. That’s that last thing we need late in the day.”

“Talking of late in the day,” said Toby. “Isn’t it time we eat something. I’m starving. In all the excitement today we haven’t eaten a crumb.”

As Marcus reached into his bag to take out some bread and cheese, he watched the young sailor walk down near the bow. The bearded sailor appeared from behind two large barrels and stopped him. The conversation that ensued was quite animated. The young sailor turned and pointed to Marcus and Toby. The bearded sailor shook his head strongly and then spat on the deck before turning away.

“I don’t like this,” said Marcus, closing his bag and breaking off a small piece of the bread. “He’s been watching us since we came on board, and he seems to be getting everyone agitated about us. I think we need to stay out of his way if we can help it.”

Toby had taken a small apple from his bag. He polished it on his leg and then took a bite. “I agree. I think it’s best we take the purser’s advice and just sit here quietly. I don’t want to end up in the sea.”

They huddled together near the back of the boat, eating their afternoon snack. Every so often Marcus glanced around to make sure the bearded sailor wasn’t spying on them. He grew more anxious as he looked at the sky and watched the clouds begin to form high thunderheads.

The day turned to evening, and the ship sailed further from the straights, away from the coast, out into the wide-open sea. Marcus looked at Sicily fading away behind him in the evening light. Etna looked magnificent, a great black shadow against a reddening sky. He thought it a little strange how the storm clouds seemed to be around them and nowhere else. Then this thought shifted as he began to think how much he might miss his home, his father and his life.

Toby stood beside him looking around at the sky. "This wind is blowing a lot stronger as we move out from the coast. And the sea's getting up a bit. I can already feel the swell under the boat. It's not like it was when we were close to Sicily."

Marcus looked around at the sea and the sky. Then he looked up at the sails the sailors were bringing in a little. He could feel the ship jolting as it headed into the growing swell. Each time it hit a wave there was a bump and a flow of spray. From the corner of his eye he could see the bearded sailor once again spying on them.

Marcus had been keeping an eye on the bearded sailor all afternoon. He'd watched him talking to all of the other sailors and pointing several times at them. He'd understood something was wrong and that the sailor was worrying the rest of the crew. This made him very uneasy. Marcus moved closer to Toby. He pulled on his cloak and wrapped it around him as the temperature rapidly dropped.

Marcus listened as two sailors passed by; they were talking to each other in loud voices, eyeing both Marcus and Toby. Marcus suddenly heard a word that gripped him with fear, making him turn quickly to Toby and whisper.

"I think they just said 'Jonah'."

Toby looked around, his eyes wide. "What, us? They think one of us is a Jonah."

Marcus knew that if the crew started to think they were bad luck, this would indeed be dangerous for them. Everyone had heard tales of people being thrown from boats when bad luck came.

"We need to really keep out of the way," said Marcus, realizing many of the sailors were now talking about them. "We can't give the bearded sailor any excuse to blame us for anything, or we'll surely be in big trouble."

Marcus and Toby moved to the furthest corner of the ship and once more huddled together, clutching their things. Marcus looked up into the blackening sky. The great storm clouds had joined together and the sky had become one mass of angry looking cloud.

The ship started to pitch in the rough waters. The wind became worse, making ropes thrash against the wooden masts with a slapping noise. Sailors were hurriedly gathering in the sails as darkness started to engulf the ship. Then huge drops of rain pattered on the wooden decks.

The sailors shouted to each other as the wind began to howl through the masts, and the sea boiled around them. The sky disappeared—totally obscured by the black storm clouds that hid distant flashes of lightning.

“The storm is upon us!” cried the bearded sailor into the wind, as the first huge wave slammed into the hull.

The ship suddenly lurched to the left with a violent thump.

The red-haired sailor had climbed into the rigging and shimmied out across one of the cross members. He was desperately pulling in the sails. This would stop them from ripping in the violent winds. Suddenly another huge wave slammed into the ship. A torrent of spray arced from the sea, showering him. The force of the freezing cold water made him lose his grip. Desperately his hands scrambled to grab something, but it was no good. He started to tumble, crying for help. At the last second he grabbed a rope and hung from the rigging. He screamed as lightning started to explode in the sky around him. Then the rain streamed sideways, driven by now raging winds.

Sailors shouted as they looked up and watched his dangling body. His silhouette danced like a marionette against the background of illuminated clouds.

Marcus and Toby cowered as waves plumed over the decks and the wind roared. Marcus stared at the rigging in terror as the sky exploded with a huge flash of lightning. He could see the sailor desperately hanging by his hands from the ropes, his legs kicking. Then blackness and the boom of thunder followed by another flash of terrible lightning. In the light, he could see the rigging was empty. The sailor had fallen and been swept away in the boiling seas.

“We’re going to die!” screamed Toby at Marcus. “This is a cursed storm and it’s going to sink the ship.”

Marcus had seen many storms, but never one like this. It had come so suddenly from nowhere and was more violent than he ever could have imagined a storm to be. Waves rolled and towered above the ship, tossing it around like a small toy. They plunged the bow deep into the sea, sending cascades of water across the decks. A huge wave crashed across the ship, knocking screaming sailors from their feet and dragging them to the rails. The lightning flashed again and Marcus could see the bearded sailor shouting at some others who had regained their feet. He was pointing wildly in their direction and egging the mob toward them.

Marcus clung to a small rope hanging from the rails of the stern. He gripped it, fearful of being swept away as the water washed over them. Above the sound of the howling wind and booming thunder he could hear the awful sounds of the masts creaking and moaning. The sails were torn, shreds flapping violently in the wind.

Then, as the sky burst with bright white lightning, he could see a pack of angry sailors upon them. They were standing around them in a circle, the bearded one pointing at them and screaming in the wind.

“Jonah! This is the Jonah! I knew it from when he came on board. I told you, didn’t I? I told you all that his hair meant trouble for us. You should have heeded me and not let him on, but look now ‘tis too late. The storm has come for him and his cursed friend. If we don’t do something, we’ll all die.”

The purser pushed through the crowd, wobbling on his feet as the boat reeled. Another huge wave smashed into the ship, making it keel hard over. The timbers creaked painfully.

“Then what should we do?” the purser asked the bearded sailor in terror. “The storm is here. It’s too late to talk of what we could have done. We need to do something now, before the ship is torn apart.”

The bearded sailor and two others lunged forward, grabbing Marcus. They gripped him hard by his wet shirt and dragged him to his feet. Marcus flinched in terror as they roughly handled him.

“Throw him overboard. It’s the only way to save ourselves,” cried the bearded sailor. “Throw him and his bad luck friend to the sea, and the storm will leave us. As long as they stay on this ship, the storm will come and take us all. Better to get rid of them.”

“But what of his money?” asked the purser, looking at the bag Marcus was clutching. “He has a fair sum of money. The least he should do is pay for our suffering.”

“No!” shouted the bearded sailor. “Nothing of his ill fate should remain amongst us. It would be blood money and that may bring us misfortune. Throw him an’ all his things overboard. Be quick about it, for the storm is getting worse and the ship is breaking apart.”

The crowd of sailors shouted in agreement as two other big sailors lunged forward and grabbed Toby by his arms and legs.

“No! No, please!” begged Toby as he was dragged from the deck. “We haven’t done anything. The storm’s nothing to do with us.”

The sailors lifted Marcus above their heads. His arms clutched his bag, and his legs kicked wildly. "No! No, it's not us! It's not us!" he screamed against the wind. "Please. Please leave us alone. The storm will pass, I promise."

"Sorry, my lads, but you have to go," said the purser, bringing his face close to Marcus's. "I also had a bad feelin' about you both when *he* asked me about your passage. I wish I hadn't listened to that old fool. Now, unfortunately, you two will need to pay."

They lifted Marcus and Toby over the rail of the ship and held them by their legs, dangling above the raging white waters below. The ship keeled heavily again and foam surged across the decks as lightning split the sky.

"One, two..." started the purser.

As Marcus was turned upside down, the pendant around his neck slipped forward and appeared from under his wet shirt. At that moment, a bright white flash of lightning illuminated the small silver square.

"No! Wait!" screamed the bearded sailor when he saw the pendant. "Don't throw him, for all our souls!"

The sailors stopped just as they were about to launch Marcus and Toby to their deaths. The bearded sailor stepped back, pointing wildly at the pendant.

"No! No! He wears the mark! He wears *his* mark! We cannot kill him," he screamed. "That mark is ancient, and all who wear it are protected."

Marcus gasped with relief, but was totally confused as the sailors dropped him onto the deck.

The purser crept forward, not daring to touch the pendant hanging on Marcus's chest, but standing close. "Yes! Yes it really is *his* mark," said the purser, trembling. "We cannot kill him, for if we do we will all die for certain. And our children will be cursed forever."

The bearded sailor grasped at his own hair, pulling wildly. Water poured across the ship again, slamming it sideways. The masts creaked and one of the cross members suddenly cracked and splintered, falling to the deck with a thunderous boom.

"What should we do? What should we do?" wailed the purser. He was torn between fear of the storm and fear of the pendant.

The bearded sailor turned and pointed to a small wooden boat near the stern of the ship. "Cast them away. Cast them away in the boat! Leave them to chance, and then if they die it is the work of the storm, not of us. Our hands will be clean. He could never blame us if they were to die in the boat."

"Yes. Yes," agreed the purser. "Let the storm take them. It's come for them anyway. Launch them in the boat."

Another huge wave crashed into the ship, almost turning it on its side, sending the sailors reeling. Water poured across the stern and one of the sailors leaning near the rear rail was hit with the full force. His legs lifted and he screamed as he tumbled over and his body was swept away in the raging foam below.

“Hurry. Hurry, set them adrift,” called another sailor. “The storm is getting worse. Let’s do it now before we all die.”

Marcus and Toby struggled wildly as the sailors violently dragged them across the slippery deck to the small boat. The sailors picked them up and dumped them in the boat, fiercely throwing their belongings on top of them.

“Please! Please don’t do this,” pleaded Marcus. “Take our money, but please don’t set us adrift. We’ll die for sure.”

“Let *him* save you, as you wear *his* mark,” sneered the purser. “Let *him* bring you through the storm by *his* powerful hand—if that is *his* will.”

The sailors grabbed at the ropes that held the boat and pulled hard against the winches. As lightning streaked across the sky, they lifted the little boat over the stern of the ship.

“Let it go!” ordered the bearded sailor.

They released the ropes, and the winches squeaked as the boat plummeted down the back of the ship. With a huge splash it crashed into the raging sea. Toby let out a howl as he banged his head hard on the small wooden seat.

Gigantic waves lifted the small boat high into the air and then dragged it back down. Water poured into it as Marcus and Toby held on for dear life. Then the raging waters grabbed it, making it spin wildly away from the ship.

Marcus stared up at the stern towering high above him. He could see the group of sailors signaling hexes at them even as the ship was tossed about viciously by enormous waves. Every so often it was slammed sideways, almost rolling. Just when the sky shone bright with lightning, Marcus watched one gigantic wave hit the ship. It started to lurch. It kept lurching and then suddenly it toppled—the masts and rigging dragged down into the wild, foaming water. Thunder boomed through the wind and the sky went black.

Again there was a blinding flash of lightning and Marcus could see the ship was going under fast. The bow had already gone down and the stern was protruding from the water.

Silhouetted against the sky was the bearded sailor. He had climbed over the railing as the ship had keeled. Even through driving rain, and with pitching waves and sporadic flashes of lightning, Marcus thought he could see the man pointing at their boat. Then a giant wave loomed over the ship, but the sky blackened

again before he saw it strike. Through the blackness came a single last word, screamed and echoing.

“Falzar!”

Marcus clung to the small boat with his eyes tightly closed as the raging sea flung it at will. The vessel rose and fell on the mountains of foaming water, spinning and almost capsizing. Marcus lay still, praying for salvation. He opened his eyes to look up into the centre of the raging storm. Lightning flashed across the bottom of the colossal clouds above him. Suddenly he could see the image of the old man above him, handing him the chain. The old man threw back his hood, revealing steel grey eyes and a tanned bald head. His mouth was stern. From his stooped position, he rose tall and strong. Marcus closed his eyes in terror at the vision, clamping his hands over his ears to block the roar of the tempest. Then loud and clear above the raging howls of the storm he heard the words of the old man, only now the voice was powerful and commanding.

“Follow your destiny!”

The boat spun, rolled and pitched, flinging Marcus from side to side. Eventually, through fear and exhaustion, Marcus could hold on no longer, and he collapsed into a disturbed sleep. His mind filled with dreams of the old man and dreams of his father that darkened. They became full of scorching dark clouds that streamed from the dark volcano. Through the howl of the wind came the sound of rhythmic beating drums.

Then darkness.

A STRANGE PLACE

Something was licking the side of Marcus's face. He could distinctly feel the animal's tongue lapping on his cheek. The tongue then moved across to his left ear, leaving his face wet and warm.

Marcus tried to open his eyes, but they remained tightly closed—sealed shut. His mind was swimming in and out of blackness. A feeling of a terrible nausea washed across him. His body felt cold and aching, and, strangely, he seemed paralyzed.

The licking on his face continued at a steady pace, but he could not drag himself from his state of semi-consciousness to find out who the culprit was. Then he drifted into blackness—but only for a moment.

Then, as his mind crawled back to wakefulness, the spinning ceased. He tried slowly to push his tongue between his dry lips to moisten them, but even this effort was too much. Slowly he became aware of something else besides the licking, something more distant, more vague—but something real. Second by second it came into focus in his mind. A mixture of hushed voices was moving around him.

Some were male and some distinctly female. Once again, Marcus tried with all his might to open his eyes but they remained firmly closed. Just the effort seemed to send him back into the blackness.

“Could it be?” said a voice clearly against the drone of the other voices.

“It may be. It really may be,” answered a deep voice.

“We need to check,” said the first voice. “We need to roll him over.”

“Yes. Let's be careful, but we need to check,” replied the second voice.

Marcus could hear the sound of feet approaching, crunching on fine gravel. He wondered if there were two or three of them. Marcus was alarmed, for he could not do anything to stop them. He tried desperately to shout for them to get back, but all that issued from his parched lips was a soft moan.

“Well, he’s alive. I think I heard him.”

“Are you sure? He hasn’t moved a muscle.”

The feet crunched closer and Marcus had the sensation of bodies around him.

“Pippin! Get away! Stupid dog!” ordered the deep voice. With that, the licking on the side of Marcus’s face stopped.

Marcus was alarmed to feel two sets of hands on him, but they were gentle. Very slowly they turned him over. Marcus realized now he had been lying face down, on what felt like a beach of rough gravelly stones. He could feel some of them stuck to his face. As he was slowly rolled onto his back, he felt the warm sun on his face. The sudden brightness in his closed eyes exploded pain into his head. Again he moaned.

“Easy, lad,” said the first voice calmly. “We just need to check.”

Marcus could feel one of the hands groping for the front of his shirt. He was alarmed. Then his mind filled with the memories of the sailors on the boat. He thought of them looking at his things. His mind flashed between the events of the ship and the great storm; the great storm and being cast away; the small boat and—Toby. When had he last seen Toby? Marcus became agitated as he struggled to move his paralyzed body—to no avail.

Where is Toby? he wondered, terrified he had lost him. *More to the point, where am I and who are these people searching me?* His head was spinning crazily as the nausea continued to rise. Marcus could feel something pull around his neck, and then there was a large gasp from a crowd.

“Look! Look! He wears the mark! He wears *his* mark! He has come at last!” an old woman’s voice shrieked.

“Yes. Yes, it’s the mark,” said a voice very close to Marcus. “Somebody needs to run and get Cornelius. He’ll know what to do.”

Marcus slipped in and out of consciousness. His body was aching more and his head was now pounding. Again, he uttered a small moan.

“Somebody get some water!” called a voice from the left.

Marcus could hear a commotion, and then the pounding of feet on the gravel. The feet stopped close to his ear and he could feel two hands lifting his sore head. Then he sensed a cool cup against his mouth and fresh water running across his lips. He tried to drink, but just inhaled the water. He started to choke, and with each cough his head burst into colors of pain.

“Easy, lad. You’ve had a busy night,” said a gentle voice close to him.

Very slowly Marcus focused on opening one of his eyes. He needed to know what was happening and who were these people. He strained on his left eyelid, and gradually it opened a fraction. The intense light made him close it immediately. After a second he slowly tried again. The eye opened a fraction, and before him, in a totally blurred world, was a face. Even with no ability to focus, Marcus could sense it was the face of a woman. She was smiling. Marcus closed his eye and felt a sense of relief.

“Just rest. We’ll help you soon,” she said, wiping his brow.

Marcus could then hear more commotion—hurrying feet coming from a distance.

“Out of my way. Out of my way. Let me see it. Let me see it,” puffed a croaky voice.

Marcus opened the eye again, and the world became a little more focused. Approaching him was a short fat man dressed in a plum colored suit with calf length britches. The suit had shiny silver buttons down the front. Under it was a white ruffled shirt with a small black collar tie that was tied in a bow. His socks were white and on his feet were heavy black shoes with large square silver buckles. His stomach was large and round, and matched his large round face, which featured two big puffy red cheeks. On his head was perched a small flat hat, in the same color as the plum suit. From below the hat grey hair sprouted. The hair continued down the side of his face in the form of two big pork-chop side-burns.

The fat man kneeled close to Marcus. As he panted heavily, the folds of fat under his chin wobbled. If Marcus had not been in such terrible pain he would have laughed at such a strange man.

“Is it the mark, Cornelius?” asked the woman.

“Well let me see,” said Cornelius, between the puffs. “I need my glasses.”

Marcus watched as the fat man patted down all his pockets, desperately looking for his glasses. Then he watched the woman point toward his bulbous nose.

“Oh!” he said, realizing the small half moon glasses were already on his face. “There they are.”

Marcus watched as Cornelius reached down and lifted the pendant from his chest. He examined it closely. Marcus then noticed that a large crowd was standing in a broad semi circle around him. They were on what appeared to be a beach. It was hard for Marcus to tell exactly, because his eye blurred continuously and the nausea made him drowsy and faint.

After what seemed an age, the fat man stood and turned to the crowd.

“Well?” someone called.

Cornelius removed his glasses and placed them in his pocket. Then slowly he raised his hands. “I will need to take council. However, the first signs seem to be—that this is the sign we have been waiting for.”

Marcus watched the crowd explode into wild and excited chatter. Cornelius raised his hands again to calm the people and slowly they regained composure. It was all too much for Marcus. He closed his eye and was once more slipping into blackness. In a last effort he opened the eye again to look at the throng. There, amongst the faces, he noticed one in particular. It was a thin face—set off with an eye patch. The skin was grey and clinging to pronounced cheekbones, the hair slicked back and greasy. The man’s lips drew an evil line across his face—thin and mean. Marcus felt deep unrest as the man’s one unblinking eye stared at his. Marcus closed his eye again—his head swimming, waves of nausea passing over him. His last efforts had exhausted him and he could no longer hold on. He relaxed and drifted into the blackness.

* * * *

For two days Marcus remained in deep sleep, his dreams carrying him to many places, but in every direction he looked and wherever he stood, eventually he would see the dark volcano, its huge black cone standing above the boiling sea belching vast black clouds that blotted out all of the sky. Within the clouds he could see the bearded sailor screaming from the back of the boat—but his word had changed. Instead of “Falzar!” he was screaming “Marcus!” before the ship sank, again and again, beneath crashing waves. Over the days the bearded sailor changed. His beard was gone, then he wore an eye patch, and eventually, his face was that of the thin man in the crowd. Finally the clouds cleared and he could see the old man in the village. He was handing him the silver pendant. As he did there came faint laughter. Then Marcus drifted into dreamless sleep.

* * * *

On the third day Marcus awoke with a start. His head was clear and he could feel his body whole again. He rejoiced that he could wiggle his toes. He found himself in a large airy bedroom. Brightly decorated ornamental pottery filled the space, delicately made in bright yellows, reds and blues—it was not a style he had ever seen in his village. He was lying in a grand wooden bed that had a firm, but comfortable, mattress and bright white cotton sheets. His head was resting on soft white pillows. The high ceiling above him was painted with watercolors. And

from his right, sweet air drifted in through the open window, past the white curtains.

He felt incredibly tranquil.

A gentle tap came on the wooden door. Before he could answer the door opened and a woman entered. She was about forty years old and had fair delicate skin. Her blonde hair was tucked neatly in a bun. Her eyes shone pale green with kindness. She had full lips that smiled when she looked at Marcus. She was wearing a light blue dress with a white apron tied about her waist. In her hands she carried a large wooden tray with covered plates on it.

She smiled at Marcus as she walked over to a small table at the side of the bed. She placed the tray on it. "You seem a lot better today," she said, removing the covers from the plates. "I thought you might like some breakfast. You need to rebuild your strength."

Marcus suddenly realized she was the woman who had been next to him when he had awakened on the beach.

"Where am I?"

"Safe. Now I've been told not to let you ask too many questions until you're stronger. You'll be very weak—as they all are."

"But..." She gently laid a finger on his lips and smiled at him. "No questions until tomorrow," she said, removing the finger and taking up a bowl of food. "Eat this and you'll feel better."

Marcus looked at the bowl. It was full of a creamy cereal Marcus had never seen before. It gave off a wonderful, sweet smell. He took the bowl and the spoon that was offered him, and tried a mouthful. It tasted very sweet and rich. It made him feel almost instantly stronger.

"Eat it all and then rest awhile," she said. "The fog sickness should last only until tomorrow they say. And then you'll feel even better."

"What sickness?"

"Fog sickness," she answered, matter of fact. "All those who go into the fog or come through the fog get it. But surely everyone knows that."

Marcus opened his mouth to ask another question, but she stopped him before he could speak. "No more questions! Eat and rest. Tomorrow we'll see if you're strong enough to be up and about. Now, I want to come up later and take away a set of clean plates."

With that she turned and walked across the room to the door, opened it, looked back, and closed it behind her. Marcus stared at the door and then down at the bowl of food. It was really good and he felt he hadn't eaten for days. So he

finished everything in the bowl. He didn't stop until he'd finished the eggs and bread on the other plate.

When he'd eaten his fill he felt much stronger but was very sleepy, as if he'd been drugged. His mind drifted; he wondered what had happened to Toby, and where he was. Nothing seemed familiar in the room, different styles to anything he'd ever seen in the village. His mind kept wandering back to what she had said about the "fog sickness", but he couldn't remember any fog. He thought she must have been confused. He'd never heard of people becoming sick from fog.

With his belly full, and such a comfortable resting place, he drifted into peaceful sleep. He slept through the whole night.

On the fourth morning he awoke warm and relaxed. He opened his eyes and looked around the bright room. He could feel the tranquility of the place and felt safe. He cautiously stepped from the bed and then dressed himself. He could hear muffled voices coming from the rooms downstairs. He crept to the door and gently opened it. Outside the room he found a small corridor with three other doors leading from it and a set of elegant wooden stairs in the far corner. Marcus slowly descended the stairs to another door. He opened the door and found himself in the kitchen of the house. It was well lit, with a large round wooden table in the middle, and a large hearth near the window. Standing at the hearth was the woman. Sitting at the table was a boy of about his age. They had been chatting when Marcus entered.

The woman turned from the hearth and smiled at Marcus. "Good morning, Marcus. How do you feel today?" She wiped her hands on a small towel. "Please come in. Sit down and I'll fix you some breakfast if you like."

"I feel much better, thank you," replied Marcus politely, as he walked over to the table. "Some breakfast would be great, thank you."

The young man stood from the table. He was very skinny with a pale face, which seemed even milkier against his jet-black hair, thick and curly, falling to the level of his ears. His eyes were also pale green, large, and friendly. As they stared at Marcus, they seemed full of wonder. He had full lips like the woman, and he too was smiling widely. He wore a fine white cotton shirt and grey cotton trousers. On his feet were strapped a pair of sandals.

"Hello," he said excitedly, holding out his hand. "I'm James. I'm very happy you feel better. Is there anything I can get you?"

"Nice to meet you. I'm Marcus," said Marcus, shaking his hand.

"What an honor," said James as he held Marcus's hand, shaking it for a long time. He stared wide-eyed. "I can't believe you're staying in my house, and that I

actually shook your hand. Just wait until all my friends hear that I shook *his* hand.”

“Oh be quiet, James, and leave poor Marcus in peace,” scolded his mother. “Here, have some breakfast. The more you eat, the better and stronger you’ll feel.”

She placed a large plate of bacon, eggs and sausage on the table in front of Marcus.

Marcus looked down at the plate of food and then at the woman. “What about my friend? I was wondering if anyone has seen Toby.”

“Oh young Toby. He’s fine now, so don’t worry,” James’s mother said in a soothing voice. “He had a nasty knock on his head and drank too much seawater, but he was up and around this morning.”

“Can I see him?” asked Marcus, trying to stand but forced back down into his seat by the woman.

“Not until you’ve eaten, my young guest,” she said. “I have strict instructions from Cornelius himself to make sure you are fighting fit and rested. So eat and drink, and then we’ll see about you visiting Toby.”

Marcus looked across at James, who was beaming back at him in amazement. He hadn’t taken his eyes off Marcus since he’d entered the room. “Where exactly am I?”

The woman continued to work her way around the kitchen, cleaning the pans and ordering things. “You’re in Lipari,” she said very factually without looking across at Marcus. “Where else would you be?”

“So is that in Sicily?” asked Marcus. He’d never heard of the village before, and didn’t know the names of many other places.

“You’re the first outsiders we’ve had here,” said James, leaning forward. “Well at least for a generation. No one’s come through the fog before.”

The woman glared at James. Then she turned to Marcus and smiled. “No it’s not Sicily. It’s the main island of The Islands.”

“Where’s Sicily?” asked James. He looked to be amazed at Marcus’s every word.

Marcus was a little confused. He started to think how far he’d come in the ship. Then he tried to work out how far the storm could have possibly blown them. He was also confused, as they had talked of the fog again. He didn’t remember any fog, and besides, it was high summer. There was never fog at this time of year.

“Where’s Sicily?” asked James again.

“Oh. It’s the big island at the foot of Italy. It’s where my village is,” replied Marcus, slightly bemused that James had not heard of it.

“Incredible! Where’s Italy?”

Marcus paused, looking between the woman and James. He didn’t understand how someone so close to Italy could not know about it.

“Which islands did you say these were?” asked Marcus, trying to get a better answer.

“What do you mean?” replied the woman, with a frown. “These are *The Islands*.”

“Yes. But what’s the name of the islands, and where are they?” asked Marcus, feeling these people were not so strong on their geography.

“They are *The Islands*, and this is the capital of them,” laughed James. “I guess you don’t know your geography.”

Marcus nodded slowly and continued to eat his breakfast, still unsure where he was. Everything was very different, and the people spoke with such a peculiar accent. “So where are the nearest places—besides the other islands? I mean...I’m trying to work out how far the storm blew us.”

“Oh! You mean where is there besides The Islands,” said James, seeming to suddenly understand. “Well there’s here, that’s The Islands...and then there’s the outside—the place we don’t really talk about. Well, we ask Old Thom and *him*, but we soon forget about it. It’s not really important to us as we know we’ll never go there.”

“What do you mean outside? Outside what? The Islands?” Marcus questioned, finally feeling he was getting somewhere with these slightly strange people.

“Outside for us means outside of the great fog,” James’s mother said. “To The Islanders, anything outside of the fog is of no real interest. It’s sort of a myth, a tale some of the travelers have told us from when they came here. The last to come was Old Thom, and, well, he’s a bit—you know.” She gestured to her head, spinning her finger.

“That’s why everyone’s so excited about you coming,” added James. “Not just because they think *you’re him*, but because you can tell us all about the outside.”

Marcus was now totally confused: the fog, the outside and The Islanders. And now what did they mean by *you’re him*.

“Anyway,” said James’s mother briskly. “It’s not for us to be telling you these things. There’s a time and place to find out about all of this, and, well, now it’s not our...” She collected up the plates with a small shake of her head.

James stood from the table and looked hopefully at Marcus. "Can I show Marcus around?" he asked. "I mean he seems fine, and, well, some air might make him feel better."

Marcus was hopeful to get out of the house and maybe find someone who could give him a sensible answer as to where he was and how he could get to Rome, or home. He was starting to think that maybe he'd found the "not so bright" family on the island.

James's mother paused for a second before answering. "Well, all right. It can't hurt. But if you feel tired, Marcus, then promise you'll come back. You may be over the fog sickness, but you still had a rough journey. I hope Cornelius won't be mad, as he said you had to rest until he comes. However, I suppose he didn't say you had to stay in the house."

"Great!" squealed James "I'll show you around the town. There's a lot to see."

"Only if you want to go, Marcus," confirmed James's mother.

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine. It'll be great to get some air. I feel I've been indoors for weeks," replied Marcus, trying not to sound rude by wishing to escape from the house.

James's mother nodded and smiled. She then returned to cleaning the table. James dragged Marcus out of the kitchen and through the front door. They stepped from the house and were standing in a narrow street that lead down to a much broader street. The houses stood tall and very solid, with fancy swirling black ironwork on their façades. All of them shone in the morning light. They were painted in bright sands and oranges, with neatly trimmed white window frames. It was quite different from the village in which Marcus had grown up.

James led him down toward the main street, which bustled with the comings and goings of daily life. Big shops lined the length of the street with all kinds of foods, pottery and an assortment of other goods. In the door of the baker's shop stood a large man in a light shirt. His sleeves were rolled up on his forearms. He had a thick black moustache and a bald head. He wore a long white tunic, which was covered in flour, and perched on his head was a big floppy baker's hat. He was leaning against the door with his huge arms folded and he was smoking a long white pipe, which issued bright purple smoke. Marcus looked in amazement at the purple smoke. He'd never seen this before and wondered what it was.

The baker lifted one of his big hands and pulled out his pipe as they approached. "Morning, Master James." He nodded his head at them both. "And to you, young Master Marcus. I'm very pleased to see you're up and about. There's a lot of folks will be happy with this news. Many people are expecting great things of you, I'm sure."

“Morning, Signor Tinner,” replied James. “Can you believe I get to show *him* around our town?”

“Morning,” said Marcus quietly, as he was almost dragged up the street by James.

“Take good care of him, James,” said the baker, puffing on his pipe again.

James nodded and smiled.

“This is our main street. It’s the biggest in The Islands,” boasted James, as they walked in front of the strange shops. “It’s got the most shops, and sells so many things. Some folks say you can buy almost anything in Lipari Town. And that if you can’t get it here, then you don’t really need it.”

Marcus had never seen a place like it. His village had just the small square, where every Wednesday there was a small market. He was amazed by all the strange objects behind the windows. Most things he’d never seen before; he had no idea what they were for.

They walked to the far end of the street, James showing each of the shops and all of the shopkeepers greeting both him and Marcus. Marcus had no idea how they all knew his name and he felt very embarrassed at the way they all talked to him so reverently.

“So do you like it?” asked James, gesturing back down the street. “Some folk from the far islands come here just to look in the windows, you know.”

“Yes. Yes, it’s amazing,” said Marcus in bemusement. “Really, I’ve never seen anything like it. And everyone is being so nice to me.” As he looked back down the street, he noted all the shopkeepers were still standing in their doorways. All were looking at him. Some had grouped together and were obviously talking about him excitedly. It made him feel uneasy, but it was a different sort of uneasiness than the bearded sailor had produced.

“You can see the castle up there,” said James, pointing beyond the far end of the street to the top of a rocky hill. “Well, it’s not really a castle any more, it’s just a bit of a ruin. But next to it is our town hall, where Cornelius and the town council meet. It’s very impressive. We can take a walk up there one day if you like.”

Marcus nodded but had no idea what James meant by town hall or council—these were things he’d never heard of. He was still just trying to work out exactly where he was.

“I guess when *he* comes,” continued James, “they’ll want to talk to you in the town hall. Everyone is so excited. You’ll be so lucky to go inside, and they may even show you the mural. Well, I’m sure they will, as that’s what everyone is talking about—you and the mural.”

Before Marcus could ask any questions, James had started to walk again. He walked past the last building in the street and then to the right. Marcus had to almost run to keep up with him as they started to climb. After a few minutes they were standing outside the town on a hill.

The town sprawled below them. It was built around a small curved harbor. At the other end rose the rocky hill with the ruin of the castle. Next to it stood a large square building that Marcus presumed must be the town hall. It was two stories high with the walls made from great slabs of stone painted cream and white. On top sat a pointed red roof with a decorative weather vane. It had large windows, some with clear glass and some with finely crafted stained glass.

From the hill, it was very clear they were on an island. The island had once been a series of volcanoes but now the cones lay half collapsed after all the years of being scoured by the winds. Lush green grass blanketed the gentle slopes all the way across the island.

Marcus turned to look at the large mountain behind them. It rose tall and steep. A single footpath lead up away from the town and wound in a zigzag to a small white house perched at the top.

“Who lives up there?” asked Marcus. “In the little white building.”

“Oh that’s the observatory. You can see all the islands from up there. No one really lives there, as it’s not a house, it’s kind of—well—it’s an observatory.”

“What do you mean no one—*really*—lives there? People either do or don’t live somewhere.”

“Well, *he* goes there whenever he visits The Islands,” James started to explain. “He used to go there maybe just once a year, or once every two years. However, it’s funny, he’s been coming a lot more often in the past few years. It’s something everyone in town has noticed. My mother said it makes everyone a little nervous, what with all the talk of the other thing and all.”

“Who is *he*?” said Marcus, a little frustrated. “Everyone keeps saying *he*. ‘When *he* comes. *He* lives there’. But who is *he*?”

James looked at Marcus as if in a state of shock. “*He*’s the most famous person who ever comes to The Islands. It’s impossible that even an outsider has not heard his name.” He paused for a long time. “Falzar. Who else?”

The name exploded in Marcus’s head and the chain around his neck suddenly felt heavy and hot. The pendant seemed to drag him down. He grasped it as he fought to keep his breath. “Falzar. Falzar,” mouthed Marcus, thinking of the scream of the bearded sailor. Marcus’s thoughts were immediately broken by a shout from behind them. It was a voice Marcus knew well.

“Toby!” shouted Marcus with delight as his friend ran toward him. They embraced. He was glad to see a familiar face in this strange place.

“I’m so pleased you’re well,” said Toby. “So happy we didn’t die in that boat. It’s great to see you alive.”

“Yes. I thought when they lowered us from the ship we were doomed,” said Marcus, nodding wildly. “I remember hitting the water, and then everything after that is a strange dream-like blur.”

“Well, I must have banged my head,” said Toby, showing Marcus a gash on his brow. “I don’t remember anything from the moment they threw us into the boat.”

James politely coughed.

“Oh, I’m sorry. How rude of me,” said Marcus. “This is James. James has been showing me around, and his mother has very kindly been looking after me.”

“Very pleased to meet you, Toby,” said James, shaking Toby’s hand vigorously. “Incredible! No one’s going to believe me when I tell them I’ve been spending all day with not just one, but both of the famous outsiders.”

Marcus and Toby exchanged glances.

“James was being very kind and showing me around,” said Marcus. “I’d like to know a little more about where we are, so we can get to Rome or back home.”

“Me, too,” agreed Toby. “No one seems to be able to explain to me exactly where we are, or how we could get back home. I’ve asked everyone so far, and they just laugh, saying we’re in *The Islands*. They keep telling me everything will be explained when some mysterious person arrives.”

“James, can you help us to understand?” asked Marcus.

James turned and started to point to the various mountains across the island. He started to tell them about the people living out in the countryside. He continued to tell them the name and story of virtually every islander without stopping to draw breath.

As James was speaking, something inside Marcus drew him to look out to sea—to the north. James’s voice drifted away as he looked across the town and out over the water. He could see, very faintly in the distance in a white haze, a small shape on the horizon—like a small wedge of cheese.

“What’s that, another island?” asked Marcus, pointing out to sea.

“Oh yes. It’s Panarea, or, well, that’s its real name,” said James. “But now everyone just knows it as the colony. You see, it’s where a group of islanders ventured to many years ago. They grew some crops there and some vines in the summer. But the main thing they brought from there was fish. They’d then bring the food back to the market here to sell it. Anyway, after a long time, and when

they'd realized there was no real danger any more, they decided to just stay there throughout the whole summer. I have a good friend who lives there."

"Are there any islands beyond it?" asked Toby, squinting into the distance.

James's face changed to a look of fear. He turned away and his head dropped. "It's better we don't ask that," he said in a low nervous voice. "I think I've said too much already. Maybe it's better we go back to the town. Really, I shouldn't say too much."

James immediately started to walk back down the hill as Marcus and Toby looked at each other in surprise.

"This is a very strange place," whispered Marcus to Toby. "No one can tell me where we are and how to get back to Sicily. They all seem to talk in riddles and avoid my questions."

"I was thinking exactly the same," agreed Toby. "I've asked a lot about getting home. They just tell me it's the outside, and they know nothing about it. They keep telling me this Falzar person will come and answer our questions. It's all very mysterious."

"Well let's hope we meet this Falzar soon," said Marcus, as he started to walk after James. "If not him, then at least someone who can tell us something."

They walked down the steep hill and turned the corner into the main street. James was saying hello to the fat man in the purple suit Marcus had seen on the beach.

Cornelius looked up and a huge smile crossed his fat red face. He strode over to them, grabbing their hands and shaking them wildly. "Well, bless me! Well, bless me!" he boomed. "You two look much better now that you've had some rest and food. Oh, we almost thought you'd died when we found you like two wet fish on the beach. Nasty business that fog sickness. That's why most of us keep away from it. Not wise to go into the great fog." He stopped for a second and a frown crossed his face. He placed a finger to the side of his mouth and mumbled. "Oh yes! Oh yes!" he burst out. "I nearly forgot. I'm Cornelius Dorma—the town mayor. And what a pleasure it is to be acquainted with two such fine boys."

His face beamed even more as he looked at Toby and then at Marcus. It looked as if it was about to burst. He paused for a few seconds. "Oh and such an honor to meet you, Master Marcus. Such an honor. We've waited a long time for you to arrive. People were starting to get a little nervous you wouldn't arrive in time. But old Cornelius knew what would be, would be. And that *he* is never wrong. Oh yes, some doubters in the town council, but never old Cornelius. I said have faith and he will come—just as is written."

Marcus had absolutely no idea what the man was babbling on about, but he thanked him for his warm welcome.

“I do hope they’re looking after you both well. Enough food?” asked Cornelius with a concerned frown. “I mean you need to have enough food. A man can’t live without a full belly and a good glass of ale.” He slapped his rotund belly with both hands and laughed heartily. Then he pulled out a small silver pocket watch, flipped it open and listened to the soft chimes.

The watch intrigued Marcus. He’d never seen anything like it before.

“Well, is that the time? Pie and ale sounds good to me,” said Cornelius, licking his fat lips. “I need to be getting along—important town duties to perform and all that. And bless me if it doesn’t make me hungry.”

“Excuse me, Signor Dorma,” interrupted Marcus. “I was hoping you might be able to answer some questions for me.”

Cornelius looked shiftily at James, and then his gaze moved back to Marcus. “Now, now, lad. You must call me Cornelius,” he said with a wry smile. “I mean you’re practically one of us now. And well—it’d not be proper for us not to be very hospitable to you both. But it is a little late and I do have some things to attend to of an urgent matter. If you get my drift.”

“We really need to know about getting home,” said Marcus before Cornelius could escape.

“Ah,” said Cornelius, shifting his weight from one foot to another and looking very uncomfortable. “That’s maybe not a question I can answer in a straight way. Well, for one main reason, well, maybe two. But anyway, where were we?” He paused and looked at Marcus and Toby, hoping his answer had resolved the situation. From the look of anticipation on both their faces, it was apparent it hadn’t. “Well,” he continued, “the answer to such a good question requires a good answer...and so needs a lot of counsel as well. If I can put it in this simple way—I don’t have a clue.”

Marcus and Toby were visibly deflated by the answer.

“But aren’t you the head of this town?” asked Toby, outraged. “If you don’t know, then who does?”

“Look, lads. The council has had very strict instructions and very little other information from *him*,” said Cornelius, ushering them to the side of the street. “He told us that when you arrived we were to look after you and make sure you were healthy and comfortable for when he arrives. That’s all I know. These things are in the hands of greater and wiser powers than me.”

Marcus thought greater and wiser were easy. He thought the dog that had been licking his face on the beach had been a greater and wiser power. “When who arrives? Are you talking about this Falzar person again?”

Cornelius beamed a big smile again. He was visibly relieved they had mentioned Falzar. “Yes. Yes. Of course—Falzar. He has all your answers and he’ll be here soon. Then he will tell you how to get home. Very wise old bird, Falzar. If he can’t tell you, then trust me, lads, no one can. Well not me anyway.”

Cornelius pulled out his watch again and started to fidget with it. His left hand darted into his trouser pocket and pulled out a white handkerchief with which he mopped his moist brow. “Well, lads, it really is my lunch time and I have a council meeting to attend this afternoon,” he said, backing away at a pace. “Please enjoy our town and our hospitality. Young James will be an admirable guide, I’m sure.” With that, he looked at James and tapped a finger against his nose, turned and waddled off down the main street. As he walked, he saluted all of the shopkeepers.

James looked up at both Toby and Marcus and shrugged as he forced a small smile. “Sorry. I just think no one from here knows how to get you home. You see, it’s not something we know a lot about. Maybe Old Thom could tell you. If we see him, we can ask him.”

“Then I guess we need to wait for this mysterious Falzar,” said Marcus.

* * * *

It was early evening when they parted company. Toby returned to the house in which he was being kindly looked after. Marcus and James returned to James’s house. Marcus felt very tired, as if he was still under the influence of a drug. Before following James into the house, he glanced up the street. He thought he could make out a figure moving in the shadows. It was a thin figure that clung stealthily against the wall. Marcus squinted against the darkness, and although not completely sure, he was convinced it was the shape of a man. Then he was sure the person was watching him. Marcus felt suddenly afraid as a chill raced across him.

“Everything all right?” asked James.

Marcus quickly stepped through the door and closed it after him. “Everything is fine.”

JOURNEY TO THE OBSERVATORY

Toby arrived at James's house early. He was keen to explore the island, to try and understand more of the strange place. Marcus was already sitting in the kitchen with James. He, too, was very keen to get out to try and discover something more of where they were.

"Come on then, let's go" said James as he ushered them from the house and out into the warm morning air. "The day is short, and I have a plan. I know you're keen to see more of where you are, so I thought I'd take us for a tour."

As they stepped out, James's mother cautioned them all not to become too tired and to be home for supper.

They walked up through the main street and soon were standing on the hill overlooking the town. Most of the shops had been closed, and few people had been in the streets to bid them good morning, which made Marcus feel relieved.

"So, I thought today you might like a little adventure," said James, clapping his hands and rubbing them together. "It's going to be a really clear day, so I thought you both might like to climb up to the observatory and get a good view of the islands. On a day such as today, you can see for miles, so it'll be worth the long climb. I mean you've both asked me so many times about The Islands, I thought it might be simpler just to show you."

"Yes. Great idea," replied Marcus. "Can we see the whole of the island from up there?"

“We should be able to see *all* of The Islands,” said James, turning to head toward the path. “Come on. The sooner we get going, the sooner you can see everything. But, be prepared, it’s a long and hot climb. We need to get up the path before the sun gets too high.”

They started on the dusty rock footpath that led from the hill to the foot of the mountain. Then they began the walk up the steep twisting path toward the top of the mountain. The ground around them undulated like a thick green carpet; the full summer sun had not yet scorched it. Bushy dark green olive trees punctuated the lower slopes of the hills.

As they climbed the winding path, James asked many questions about where they were from, what they did and what life was like outside. Marcus and Toby were happy to tell him and delighted at his wonder about such simple things. Really, Marcus was a bit embarrassed that they really knew little of what was beyond their small fishing village, but James was excited all the same.

After a few hours they turned a corner and came to the top of the mountain. From the summit, the scene was spectacular. The emerald green island of Lipari floated in the dark inky sea. Ripples of breeze danced across the waters far below.

The island was quite large, formed from at least four ancient volcanic craters. One of them dazzled white, a seeming mountain of sugar. The whole island looked ancient, worn by the hands of time.

As they stood catching their breath, gazing around the island, a light breeze blew across their faces. It felt refreshing after the tiring climb. Fortunately James had carried a small sack with him, and in it were water and some fresh bread and cheese. He took each out and in turn offered them to Marcus and Toby.

Perched on the top of the mountain in front of them sat the white observatory. It appeared mysterious, with its strange domed roof atop a squat square building. Strangest of all, there were no windows and no doors in the building. Around it stood a small white wall with an opening through which the path passed. And there, next to the opening, sprouting from the ground was a hand-painted sign. The red writing simply stated *I advise you to keep away!*

The path approached the observatory and then stopped abruptly at the foot of a wall.

Marcus looked and could see that directly above the path, painted in silver on the wall, was a symbol. It was the square with the small triangle inside it—the same sign as his pendant. He reached under his shirt and felt for the pendant. As he did, it seemed to become heavier. He was about to ask James what the sign meant, but James was already walking away to a higher piece of ground on the edge of a steep drop off.

“Look. Look, you can see all the other islands from here,” said James, dragging Toby along with him. “The day is so clear you can even see the furthest ones. I haven’t seen it like this for months. Just be careful not to get too close to the edge. It’s a straight drop to the sea below, and I don’t want to be explaining to Cornelius that you’re lying at the bottom of The Great Abyss.”

Marcus walked over to where James was standing. From there he could see several islands scattered in the distance. The closest rose just a few miles across the sea from Lipari. It was a huge yellow and orange sulfurous volcano. It had one giant cone high in the sky, and, nearer to Lipari, a smaller cone that seemed almost a miniature version of the giant one.

“Which island is that?” asked Marcus, pointing at it.

“Ah, this is our closest neighbor. It’s called Vulcano,” answered James. “But it’s certainly not the nicest place in The Islands.”

Toby scanned the barren yellow and orange landscape. “Does anyone live there? I can’t see any houses or anything.”

“No. No one lives there. In fact no one even goes there,” replied James solemnly. “Well, some brave fishermen venture to the far side from time to time, when the volcano seems quiet.”

Marcus looked across to the top of the volcano. It had a wide lipped crater scarred with streaks of bright yellow, red and orange. A fine white mist seeped from the ground. It then crept into the air and drifted away on the breeze. It was nothing like the black volcano that had haunted his dreams for so long.

“It looks like a nasty place,” said Toby.

“It is,” warned James. “Not everything in these islands is as calm as it seems. No. Many men have ventured onto that island and have suddenly been overcome by the fumes. They’ve wandered around, lost and confused, until the darkness came.” James moved forward, lowering his voice. “They say there lives on the island an old witch. A crone who takes the people who are lost and drags them into her cave.” His words were chilling. “They say she eats the sailors and enjoys gnawing on their bones.”

“I don’t think I ever want to go there,” said Toby, shuddering. “I mean with all the nice places in the world, why would anyone want to go to such a vile place?”

James turned and pointed in the opposite direction to a large green volcanic island with a single cone. “Well if it’s nice places you prefer, then that’s the next closest. It’s called Salina, and there are people living there,” said James before Toby could ask. “It’s one of our colonies. There’s a small group of islanders there

called Salinians. They grow great vines, which make a delicious wine Cornelius is very fond of. In fact I think he's their number one customer."

"What are the Salinians like?" asked Marcus, looking at the lush green island. He could feel something deep within him about this island, but it was something he didn't recognize. It was something that made him want to go there.

"They keep themselves to themselves," answered James. "They like to stay where they are. They only really meet with the townsfolk here when they bring their goods or we take supplies and empty barrels to them."

"And those islands in the far distance?" asked Toby, pointing to two islands beyond Salina—one in the distance and one just visible on the horizon.

"They are known as the wild islands," said James, his tone mysterious. "The closer of the two is called Filicudi. No one goes there, for it's too dangerous. There are still wild tribes on the island. Tribes that hide in the great forest that grows there. Some even say the wild tribes are—cannibals. Some have said many people who were fool enough to go there have... Well let's not think about it."

Toby shuddered, shaking his head slowly.

"And then beyond that," James continued, "you can see a shape of great swirling clouds that always covers the island of Alicudi."

"Does anyone live there?" asked Marcus.

"Oh no," said James. "It's a haunted island—haunted by the spirits of many shipwrecked sailors. They say the demons protect the island and summon a great wind that would smash any boat against its rocks. No one even sails near it for fear of being swept up by the great winds."

"Then I agree. Better we don't go there," said Toby as he waved a hand at the island.

James again turned to face north. "Now there is Panarea," he said cheerily. "I said yesterday it's another of our colonies. The Panareans are very friendly and we always like to go there. They have a happy life, growing food and catching great bounties of fish, which they regularly bring to Lipari. One of my best friends lives there, and maybe we can go and see him one day if the wind is right."

Marcus heard nothing of this conversation. He was staring beyond Panarea. He could see a shape rising from the sea—dark against the haze of the sky. From the top, he could see black smoke billowing high into the air. And what seemed to be a faint red glow under the black clouds.

Marcus's heart felt suddenly chilled. It was the volcano of his dreams. His body burst into a cold sweat as he pinched his arm, hoping to drag himself from what must be a dream. But his feet stayed firmly on the ground. It was real. His incubus was before him.

James looked at Marcus's face. It was obvious upon what he was looking. He turned his face to the ground as quickly as he could. "It's an evil place," said James coldly and quietly. "It's better you don't look at it. It's better no one looks at it."

Something made Marcus reach beneath his shirt and clutch the pendant hanging at his neck. It gave him a sense of security. "I know this place," he said, looking at the volcano in the distance. "It's been in my dreams—my dark dreams. I even know its evil name, Stromboli."

"No! No! Don't ever say its name. It will bring the evil upon us," said James, clapping his hands over his ears and shaking his head violently. "No one should ever utter that vile word. Take it back, Marcus, and spit on the ground."

From the sky above them suddenly there came a screeching caw. They all looked up to see a single large black crow circling menacingly overhead.

"You see. Evil follows its name," said James, crouching to the ground. "Take its name back and spit on the ground, Marcus, before more evil comes."

Marcus whispered the name of Stromboli and then spat on the ground. He then rubbed at it with his foot to ward away the evil. Instinctively he moved closer to the observatory. It seemed to offer protection of some kind. The others followed him, staring at the bird as it cawed again. Then it turned, beating its wings and heading north—toward Stromboli.

After a moment Marcus felt relief, as if a cold darkness had passed. They stood looking at each other as Marcus released his pendant and again looked at the symbol on the observatory. His heart was still pounding. "That symbol on the wall. It's the same as the one on my pendant. What is it? What does it mean?"

"It's the symbol of the Ancient Ones," said James. "But surely everyone knows that. Falzar placed it there—he's one of the Ancient Ones...But you must know this, I mean he sent you..." Suddenly James stopped and bit his lip, as if he knew he'd said too much and he would be in big trouble.

"Carry on," demanded Marcus. "Tell me more about this Falzar, and what you mean by 'he sent you'. No one sent us."

James's face went crimson. He shook his head nervously and then looked away. "I can't. I can't say any more. I shouldn't have said that. I'm already going to be in big trouble for telling you that. Please don't tell anyone and please don't ask me any more."

"No one sent us, James," said Toby. "As we said, we were traveling to Rome when a storm wrecked our ship and blew us here."

Marcus was again fumbling with the pendant and thinking about what had happened to them since they'd left home. "Maybe the old man in the village stole it from this Falzar."

"I don't think so," said James. "Falzar is no ordinary person. He's one of the Ancients, and the greatest of the wizards. No one could steal anything from him. The only reason you have his pendant is he wanted you to have it. He must have made the old man give it to you."

"But I've never even seen this mighty Falzar," Marcus protested. "An old man gave me this pendant on the day of my birthday. He never mentioned anyone called Falzar."

"His magic is strong. He can bewitch people. He can cast powerful spells," said James, gesturing with his arms. "His magic brought you here and we should leave it at that. It's really better we don't talk anymore about it. Wizards are powerful people, and you don't want to make them angry."

Toby looked at James then at Marcus and then again at James in disbelief. "What are you talking about? Magic, spells and wizards—there's no such things."

"But of course there are," said James. "What do you mean there are no wizards? What would the world be without wizards and magic? Are you crazy?"

"No. Toby is right," added Marcus. "My father has told me many times there are groups of con men that pretend to be magicians. They use mirrors and smoke and slight of hand to take people's money. They say it's magic, but it's just tricks and lies."

"Right. If this wizard is so interesting, then I'm taking a closer look at his house," said Toby, striding toward the little wall surrounding the observatory. "Magic, wizards, and such nonsense. I'll get in and show you how he makes his magic."

"No!" shouted James. "It's protected by his magic!"

Toby neared the small white fence. There was a sudden bright blue flash and he was launched backward. He yelled with pain as he landed with a large thump on the dusty ground.

"He's protected it," said James, rushing over and helping Toby to his feet. "Do you not think every child on this island has tried to see what's inside?"

Toby was standing wide-eyed, rubbing the bump on his head. "What happened?"

As Marcus watched, he could feel something growing at his back. It felt like a heavy cold shadow, which made him shiver. He closed his eyes and could almost feel himself falling toward Stromboli. He felt nausea wash over him.

“He must be guarding something in there,” said Toby, looking at the observatory. “It was obviously some form of trick. There must be a good reason he would guard it like this.”

“Everyone thinks he guards something precious in there. All we know is that when he comes to the islands, he somehow goes in. And after a while he somehow comes out. Many say he is always anxious before he goes in and relieved when he comes out. As if what he’s guarding is still there. It used to be about once a year he did it, but recently he’s been going in very often. Many of the townsfolk are saying he’s very concerned about something.”

The sky behind them inexplicably seemed to grow darker and colder. Marcus almost thought he heard the soft beating of drums on the air. “I think we should go from here. I feel something coming from the dark island. It’s something evil and I don’t like it.”

“Is it the shadow?” asked James, not daring to look north. “Many say in these days they feel as if a shadow is growing in the north. That something evil is coming toward us. What do you feel?”

“It’s cold,” said Marcus, staring at James. “It’s cold and it’s dark. It’s as if something is looking at me—something evil. I really think we’re exposed here, so easy for it to see. We should get down from here, as I think it’s gazing at the observatory.”

Toby looked at the observatory and then out across the sea toward Stromboli. “I’m very happy to get down from here as well.” He started on the path. “I’ve heard enough of cannibals, witches, magic and evil for one day. I’ll be happy to get down and settle for a warm meal and a soft bed.”

Marcus looked back at the observatory. It seemed strange, almost mystical to him. It felt as if something was hidden deep inside it, something with a strong but good power. He glanced north, and felt as if the darkness was gazing at the observatory, trying to see what the secret was that lay inside. He looked at the small sign, and knew it would not allow this. He turned and crossed over the scrubby grass to the path. Turning, he followed Toby and James back down to the town.

OLD THOM

It was early evening and the sun had lazily dropped below the horizon, casting the town in darkness. Marcus and Toby were sitting on the end of the dock, looking out across the calm flat sea. It had turned from deep crystal blue to almost black, with stars reflecting and sparkling from its surface.

“Well it all seems so strange to me,” said Toby, throwing a small stone into the water and listening for the faint plopping sound. “I mean all this strange talk of wizards and magic and evil and all that. I don’t like any of this nonsense.”

“Yes, I know. But the observatory—I mean when you tried to get near,” said Marcus as he nodded slowly in agreement. “Even you must admit it was strange what happened. The cold shadow, the crow and the blinding blue flash that hurled you backward.”

“Well, I can’t explain it, but I’m sure it’s some kind of trick that I just didn’t see,” replied Toby as he rubbed his head, remembering the shock.

“Well, I just don’t know what to think of this place. I mean I’ve never seen nor heard of any place like it,” said Marcus, looking back at the odd town. “The buildings are strange, the people are strange. I mean how is it that no one here knows anything about things beyond these few islands? How can they not know about the rest of the world?”

“Yes, and the strange story of the fog sickness,” added Toby. “They kept telling me that I’d got an awful dose of fog sickness. I don’t remember the fog and I’ve never heard of people getting sick from it. I agree. Everything here is just so strange. As far as I’m concerned, the sooner we can get home, the better.”

Marcus suddenly thought back to the small boy in their home village on the day they went to the ship. “Do you remember on the way to the ship we met Nick?” asked Marcus excitedly. “Do you remember the rhyme he sang of some magic islands? Some magic islands that seemed to move if ever you came close.”

Toby sat for a while thinking, a frown across his face. And then he too remembered. “These can’t be the magic islands, can they?”

“Yes, they are,” said an old rough voice from behind them, making them jump.

Marcus and Toby turned in surprise to see who had been listening to their conversation. Standing behind them on the dock was a short old man. He was wearing faded blue pants that came down to his calves. Across his shoulders was an old and faded blue jacket, which covered a very scruffy black and white sweater. The sweater was patched together with oddments of material. On his feet were scuffed old leather sandals. And perched on his head was a battered old sailor’s cap, cocked slightly to one side.

His face was like old leather, deeply tanned and deeply wrinkled. It was peppered with thick white stubble the same white as the tufts of scruffy hair protruding from under the cap. His eyes were a deep grey and they stared without blinking.

“So you must be them then,” he said as he puffed on an old clay pipe. “I’ve been keen to cast my eyes on you. Long while since I talked to people that is not from the islands.”

Marcus and Toby jumped to their feet at the sight of the salty old sea dog. They stood silent.

“In case you were wondering who I am,” he continued. “My name’s Thom. But all of ’em call me Old Thom—on account as I’ve lost track as to how old I am.” He hobbled over toward them, puffing on his pipe, sending whips of smoke spiraling into the dark. “It’s not so polite to keep your names from me,” he said, nodding at them. “It’s a sad day when outsiders forget their manners.”

“Oh. Oh sorry,” said Marcus. “I’m Marcus and this here is Toby. And I guess if you mean we’re them, as in them that are not from here, then yes—I guess we are.”

Old Thom smiled, creasing his face further. He held out a hand, which Marcus shook. Then he did the same with Toby. “Well, in that case,” said Old Thom, coughing a little. “It makes it *us*, and not *them*, by all accounts.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t follow you,” said Marcus.

“Us—not them,” repeated Old Thom. “We’re all outsiders. Not islanders. All three of us. I’m like you: I’m an outsider shipwrecked here many many years ago when I was a young sailor.”

“Oh. Oh so you know what we mean when we talk about outside and home?” asked Marcus with great surprise.

“Of course I do. I know about all the places of the world. I’ve sailed them all—from the far cold north to the distant south and back again. I sailed everywhere. Well that was until the night of the storm that brought me here.”

“Great!” said Toby. “At last, someone who might actually help us to get home. So, where actually is here?”

“It’s as you said,” replied Old Thom, drawing deep on his pipe. “You’re on the magic islands.”

“Yes, but where are the magic islands?” asked Marcus.

Thom paused for a moment and drew a hand to his pipe. “Well, that’s the funny thing. You see, I sailed all the waters of the known world, and I knew every map that ever existed. And the funniest thing in all these years is I’ve realized the islands were never on any map. Never.” He shuffled between Marcus and Toby and sat down on the edge of the pier. “Sit awhile, boys. We have much to talk about.”

Marcus and Toby sat one either side of him. Marcus had immediately liked him because he was one of them—an outsider.

“So,” Old Thom started again, in his strange deep accent. “One night we were sailing south across the great Mediterranean, and out of nowhere comes a violent storm. Was the worst storm I’d ever seen. Great black clouds, raging winds and a sea that was up and down like a fish wife’s tongue. The ship was smashed like a toy made of sticks. I found myself cast into the boiling sea, but managed to climb aboard a big floating hunk of wood. For days I drifted, for days, and then one day I headed into a fog the like of which I’d never seen in England.”

“England?” asked Toby.

“Yes, lads. Yes, that’s my old home,” answered Old Thom, with a wistful look in his old grey eyes. “I was a sailor in the British merchant navy. It was on *The Mary Jane* that I was serving when the storm came and changed my life forever.”

Marcus and Toby were spellbound. His voice drew them deeper into the story.

“So,” he started again. “There I was on this old sort of raft, thirsty and hungry, when I drifted into the fog. As soon as entered, I felt so sick. It was like I was breathing a strange poison. Soon I was unconscious, with deep dark dreams. I don’t know how long I drifted, but eventually I came here. They say they found

me floating just over there.” He pointed out to a small group of rocks just beyond the edge of the harbor.

“Oh there was a lot of excitement around me—as it’s not often they get an outsider here. They were all very keen to check my jewelry. Kept looking for something around my neck, but obviously didn’t find it, as the excitement soon died.”

Marcus placed his hand over the pendant under his shirt. Old Thom lifted some tobacco from his pocket and repacked his pipe before re-lighting it.

“So why are you still here then?” asked Toby. “Haven’t you ever wanted to get back home to England?”

“Oh course I wanted to go home, but that’s the strange part of my tale,” said Old Thom looking out to sea. “Nearly every week for the first ten years I was here I tried to sail home. I left in every direction, with every type of wind. But you know what?”

Marcus shook his head.

“Every time I sailed, I always found the fog. In every direction, on every day,” he said, shaking his head. “And each time I went in to the fog, I got sick—really sick. And no matter how hard I tried to sail through the fog, I always ended up back at The Islands.” He leaned closer to Marcus and Toby. “It’s the magic—the powerful magic. Nothing leaves these islands. Well, nothing but him and that’s ’cause he’s one of the Ancient Ones.” He winked.

“So what are you saying?” asked Toby desperately. “Are you saying we can’t ever leave here?”

“I’m not saying anything. The only one as can tell you that is Falzar. I’m expecting him to be showing up any day now,” said Old Thom. He sniffed and rubbed one of his fingers across his rather bulbous nose.

“Has anyone else ever come here?” asked Marcus.

“Oh yes. There was one outsider here before I arrived, another sailor brought here by a storm. Now what was his name?” Old Thom drifted into deep thought. “No. No, can’t remember his name. Anyhow doesn’t matter. All I heard was that one day he went exploring the distant islands. They say he ended up in the pot of some cannibals on one of the wild islands.”

Toby grimaced and swallowed as he listened in disgust at the talk of cannibals again.

Marcus was listening in disbelief. It had already been a strange day. Now with what Old Thom was saying things were getting stranger. He was determined to put a stop to this talk. “So what’s all this nonsense about magic and wizards and

magical fog and things? These strange people here have some strange ideas about the world.”

“Well,” Old Thom started. “If you’d a asked me before I ever came to these islands, I’d a laughed at you and called you mad for ever even asking such a question. But now, after all these years, I can tell you both—magic is real. Yes. It’s as real as you and me. These islands are full of it. I’ve seen things here I’d only heard about in fireside tales.”

Marcus shook his head in disbelief at what Old Thom was saying. He refused to believe any of it could be remotely real.

Old Thom looked long and hard at Marcus. “You have the same disbelieving look on your face I had when I first came here. Believe me, my young lad, the magic is real. Just as real as the evil that’s here—and it’s a great evil, a dark evil. So open your minds sooner rather than later an’ accept things for what they are. Especially you, young Marcus. I have a strong feeling that you need to be extra mindful of such things.”

The air turned cold as Old Thom said the words, and Toby shuddered.

“Oh and yes,” Thom added. “There are wizards in this world. One named Falzar comes and goes to these islands, as he will. But now that you’re here, I have the strange feeling he’ll be staying a bit longer the next time he comes.” Old Thom pointed to where the necklace was hanging beneath Marcus’s shirt, making Marcus feel uncomfortable. “People have waited for you for a long time, young Marcus. And now they expect great things of you. So I hope you don’t disappoint.”

“What do you mean?” asked Marcus. “Why do people expect great things of me?”

“Well now,” said Old Thom, climbing slowly to his feet. “This old fool has said more than he should. So it’s better I find my bed before Falzar gets angry with me and turns me into something a tad unsavory.”

“Wait. Wait,” said Marcus, jumping to his feet. “Please tell me what I’m supposed to know. Tell me what I’m supposed to do.”

“Oh. Only he knows that, my boy. Only he knows that,” chuckled Old Thom. “But don’t fret, as I’m sure as eggs are eggs that he’ll soon be here, and this old fool will find out why I’ve been kept here all these years. I have asked him many times why he wouldn’t help me leave and he always says, ‘When it happens you’ll know.’ I guess it’s happening.”

Old Thom started to walk away down the harbor side, whistling as he plodded along. He turned back and winked at Toby and Marcus. “Rest well, boys, for I feel you’ll be needing all the energy you can get.”

Marcus and Toby watched as he disappeared into the town.

“This riddle gets stranger and stranger,” said Marcus, scratching his head. “I think only this mysterious Falzar will be able to help us.”

“But do you believe what he’s saying?” asked Toby.

“Well, I’m hoping he’s as mad as the rest of them,” said Marcus, feeling for the pendant. “But by the looks of everything, it seems like the only one who has any answers for us is this mysterious Falzar. I guess we won’t know anything until he arrives.”

THE STRANGER RETURNS

There came a brusque knock on the door, which made Marcus turn sharply from the breakfast table. The door swung open and the big red face of Cornelius appeared from behind it. He mopped his brow with a bright yellow handkerchief as he waddled into the house.

“Good morning. Good morning, all,” he said in his most officious voice. “Today is an important...” Suddenly he spied the table with the half empty plates on it. His eyes grew large and his mouth fell slack. “Oh! Am I interrupting your fine looking breakfast? Oh! Sausages, eggs and bacon—what a fine sight for a man to see at breakfasttime.”

“Can I offer you a plate of breakfast, Cornelius, before we get to the official business?” asked James’s mother as she smiled and wiped her hands on her apron.

“Well, official business is hungry work, I must confess,” Cornelius smiled, his fat tongue passing across his lips. “And as my wife has me on such a strict diet, I fear with such an important day a hearty breakfast may be in order to ward off any faint spells.”

Marcus watched as Cornelius sat down and tucked into a full plate, with extra bread and a double helping of tea.

“So, Cornelius,” asked James’s mother after a while. “What was the official business you were here for?”

“Oh. Oh yes,” said Cornelius with a small burp. “Oops. Pardon, all, but in some islands that’s considered a sign the food was good.”

“Compliment accepted.” James’s mother smiled wryly, clearing the plates from the table.

“So, yes. The official business,” said Cornelius, standing and placing his thumbs in his pockets. “I need you to come with me to the town hall. The time has come to speak with you and young Toby. It’s time to explain a little of what is going on. We have a visitor today with news of Falzar.”

“Well, it’s about time,” said Marcus, standing from the table. He was quite relieved that eventually he was going to discover something of the great puzzle. “It’s been driving us mad, all this mystery. I have a list of questions—with the first being *why all this mystery.*”

“Well I’m sure this person will have a heap of answers,” said Cornelius as he allowed himself another small burp and smiled politely. “Anyhow. Let’s not dally a second longer. Please follow me. Good day to you, and my compliments on such a hospitable breakfast.”

Marcus followed Cornelius from the house and they walked down into the main town. They turned left in the high street and started to climb the steps toward the old castle. At the top of the steps they headed right and walked toward the town hall. The big blue wooden doors were already standing open with what seemed to be an official, or rather an old man in an old tatty uniform, sitting next to them.

As Cornelius and Marcus approached, the old man stood, blocking their way with his bent walking stick. He was as skinny as a rake with thinning grey hair and enormous bushy grey eyebrows. Perched on his nose were great thick glasses with lenses made from the bottoms of milk jars. They were held together with string. He rocked precariously backward and forward as if about to tumble to the ground at any moment.

“Identification please?” he asked in a stern voice.

“It’s me, Sydney,” said Cornelius, pushing his fat face closer to Sydney’s thick glasses. “It’s me. It’s Cornelius.”

Sydney peered through his great thick lenses at the fat round face of Cornelius. He frowned for a moment and then peeped over the glasses, squinting. “Oh, it’s you, Cornelius. Why didn’t you say? All this sneakin’ around and strange comin’s and goin’s. I need to stay as sharp as a sausage, you know. In future, you should just say instead of sneaking up on me. You never know what injury I might have caused you. Anyhow that’s you and you can come in but I don’t know these other two.”

Cornelius looked around for the other mysterious person, as there was just Marcus and himself standing there.

“But there’s just us, Sydney,” said Cornelius, shaking his head. “Me and my guest, Master Marcus.”

“Oh!” said Sydney, looking around. “Could have sworn there was another fella. Tall with a cloak. Just standing next to this young un.”

Cornelius placed a hand on Sydney’s shoulder and gently guided him back into his seat saying, “You do a good job, Syd. Keep up the good work.”

Cornelius and Marcus walked past Sydney and entered the large reception hall of the town hall, Cornelius quietly gesturing to Marcus that Sydney was a bit mad.

The reception hall was a magnificent sight, lofty ceilings painted white and cream with fancy decorative plasterwork. The walls stretched before them with many side doors and alcoves. They ended in a large fanned out staircase of pure white marble. Adorning the walls were many fine oil paintings, most of which were of Cornelius as he aged through the years. Notably, each canvas got wider and wider as time went on.

Marcus was in awe. He’d never imagined that such fine buildings even existed. It seemed to him to be something from another world. He followed Cornelius along the hall to the big staircase, his mouth open in wonder.

They climbed the curving staircase and at the top came to a small black door with a big brass handle. Cornelius turned the handle one way, and then the other, then a final way, and the door opened with a click. They entered a dark chamber. It had a wide wooden floor and a small stage area at the far end. On the stage was a long official-looking table with six fine chairs behind it. Above the table, on the wall, hung a large pair of red velvet curtains with a long gold pull.

“This is our official town meeting hall,” Cornelius informed Marcus. “Very important place, where we do all of our important town business and where I oversee proceedings.” He puffed out his chest like a big bird as he smiled at Marcus, who politely nodded in agreement.

“Morning, Marcus,” said a familiar voice from his left.

Marcus turned to see Toby sitting in the gloom on one of the many seats in the public area of the hall.

“Oh, morning,” replied Marcus. “I didn’t see you there in the shadows.”

“Good morning to you all,” said a deep strong voice from the stage.

Marcus turned to look at the stage. He was amazed at the sudden appearance of a tall, menacing figure wearing a dark hooded cloak that cast his face in shadow. He had not been there just a second before and Marcus could not see where he had come from.

“Good morning,” said Cornelius, removing his hat and sweeping down with a low bow. “Right on time as usual.”

Toby had walked over to Marcus and joined him below the stage. "I never saw him sneak in. Isn't he the old man from the village?" he whispered.

"Yes. Yes it is. What is he doing here?" said Marcus as he stared long and hard at the dark figure. "Maybe he brings more gifts from the wizard."

Cornelius walked toward the stage and climbed the small wooden staircase to greet the stranger. The man bent close to Cornelius and whispered something in his ear that neither Marcus nor Toby could hear.

"What are you doing here?" asked Marcus. "Do you bring us news of the wizard or is this just another day of mysteries and games?"

The stranger slowly lifted his hands and reached for his hood. Slowly he pulled the hood back to reveal his face, old and wizened, but kindly. He had steel grey eyes that were oriental in shape and they pierced the darkness as he looked at Marcus. His head was completely bald and as tanned as the rest of his face. That face was long and slender ending in a pointed jaw. His lips were thin and stern, regal. He was indeed "their" stranger, the man from the village.

"Yes, I bring you news from Falzar," said the stranger with a faint smile. "And I trust you'll listen, for he is a wise wizard and would not send me in such dark days to speak to you without good cause. So why not join us up here and we shall tell you more of what you need to know."

Marcus exchanged glances with Toby and then walked to the stage, climbing the steps and standing before Cornelius and the stranger. He stared at the stranger's face, and from deep within him he felt a sense of familiarity, greater familiarity than having seen his face that once before.

The stranger smiled at Marcus and then gently pulled the necklace from under Marcus's shirt to let it hang down on his chest. Light seemed to radiate from it and the room seemed much brighter.

"I see you took my advice and wore his gift," said the stranger with the light sparkling in his eyes. "This is indeed a precious gift and few others would be given such favor from Falzar to wear it."

"Do you want it back?" asked Marcus, starting to lift the necklace over his head.

"No, my young adventurer," said the stranger, stopping him immediately. "A gift is a gift. Always remember that this pendant is yours and that you should never give it to anyone."

Marcus dropped the pendant back onto his chest with a sense of relief. He'd become very attached to it after it had saved their lives on the ship and then had been such an object of curiosity in the town.

“I have been sent to give you news of your destiny,” said the stranger solemnly. “You need to be prepared, for what I am about to tell you will not be easy and it will set you on a yet more dangerous journey. A journey from which you may never return.”

Marcus felt a deep foreboding. Now that it had actually come to it, he didn’t know whether or not he wanted to hear his destiny.

“The winds did not bring you here by chance, Marcus,” continued the stranger, his voice hypnotizing. “Fate’s hands are determined, and it is your destiny that lies in these magic islands. You have seen the dark clouds, Marcus. You have felt them approaching and you know that the mountain is alive again.”

Marcus felt deep fear clench his heart. He knew the dreams would be mentioned and he knew the volcano had drawn him there. He started to take short fast breaths to hold down his fear. Now that another had mentioned the volcano, he knew it was indeed real.

“The darkness is approaching these islands,” said the stranger, pressing a hand onto Marcus’s shoulder. “You are the one who has been chosen to deliver these islands and maybe the whole world from this darkness.”

“What, me? I think you must have the wrong person. I don’t think I’ve been delivered anywhere for anything. I mean I’m just a...nobody, the simple son of a fisherman. You must have me confused with someone else.”

“But you are the one,” said Cornelius strongly. “You are the one prophesized to be brought by the sea, bearing the mark of the Ancients. There’s no doubt in that, young Marcus.”

Cornelius walked over to the gold rope pull and drew it back. The curtains glided open, revealing an ancient mosaic embedded in the wall.

Marcus stepped back in disbelief.

Toby uttered the single word, “Marcus!”

The scene on the mosaic showed the sea’s arms bringing a man toward an island. Behind him towered a great black volcano belching out a great black cloud. From deep within the cloud peered a set of yellow demonic eyes that burned into the onlookers.

Marcus stared in disbelief at the man in the mural, his bright blonde hair and blue eyes, his clothes and the silver pendant around his neck. His head started to spin and feel light. He felt himself being swept up into the mural. He could feel the sea surrounding him, smell the ash of the volcano and hear the pounding of the drums. The chain around his neck pulled like a great weight, as if keeping him in the room.

“It is you,” said Toby, looking between the mosaic and Marcus. “Really it is you. If I wasn’t seeing it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t believe it.”

“This mosaic is nearly a thousand years old, Marcus,” said Cornelius. “Once we saw the volcano alive again, we knew the legend was coming true and for many generations we have been awaiting your arrival.”

The stranger stepped forward and closed the curtains, looking around to make sure no one had crept into the room to listen to their secret conversation.

“You have been sent to stop the evil, Marcus. That’s why you wear the mark of the Ancient Ones,” said the stranger quietly. “But time is shorter than we thought and you have many things to learn before you can sail on your adventure. You are set in the ways of the world and have so much to discover if you are to survive this quest.”

“We have prepared a house for you both,” said Cornelius. “It’s a small house out of the town, on the path to the observatory. We were instructed that you’d need privacy for your preparations. You’ll be both comfortable and safe there until you depart.”

“What? Depart for home?” asked Toby hopefully.

“No. Not for home,” said the stranger coldly. “Depart on your quest. For if you do not succeed in this, there will be no home to which to return.” The stranger suddenly stood very tall and powerful, his eyes burning with a distant fire. “For if you fail in this quest, be assured there will be no more home for anyone again.”

Marcus and Toby stepped back, afraid. They were both confused and unsure of what to say in response to these grim words.

“But what can I possibly do?” asked Marcus eventually, his voice quavering. “I mean...I know nothing of these matters.”

“You will learn many things and you will follow your heart,” said the stranger. “But what is important, is that no one outside of this room knows what we talk about. Our strength will be in our preparation and the fact that the dark one will overestimate his strength. So keep this quiet. Remember, he has his evil servants everywhere.”

Marcus stood trembling. He knew from his dreams there was a great evil. He had seen the dark creatures summoning the dark evil from within the volcano. Even worse was this evil appeared to be real and he was plummeting out of control toward it.

“I’ve seen it in my dreams,” whispered Marcus. “The island and the dark servants within who call to their master.”

“Then you know of the dangers,” said the stranger. “It is a good sign that you’ve had these visions. But now you must clear your mind, because, as you can see them, they can see you. If you linger in that place too long they will be able to know your thoughts and our plans. It’s good then that we have prepared a safe place.” The stranger nodded at Cornelius.

“Oh! Right, me. Well now,” said Cornelius in his most officious voice. “You’ll need to follow me and I will show you to your new home. There you can rest and settle down. Falzar will come in a few days and I think you will begin your training.” Cornelius turned and looked to the stranger for agreement, and the stranger nodded slowly.

“Why two days? Why not now?” asked Marcus impatiently. “I don’t want to speak to messengers anymore. I want to speak to the person who has dragged me into this. I want to speak to Falzar.”

“You must be patient because,” said the stranger calmly, with a sly smile, “some things in this world must run their course. Some things need to happen in sequence, and in two days you will have learned your first real lesson. Only then can your training begin.”

This just frustrated Marcus even more. He crossed his arms and shook his head. “But what lesson? What are you on about? Everyone here speaks in riddles and rhymes, and I’m fed up with it. Why can’t someone just give me a straight answer for once?”

“Patience, Master Marcus. Patience,” said Cornelius, ushering the young men down from the stage and across the floor. “It wouldn’t be wise to go and upset Falzar. It seems he’s set his plans and he always knows what’s best. So let’s all just keep calm and do as he wishes. I’m sure everything will work out for the best.”

Marcus turned, ready to protest to the stranger, he was gone. He’d simply vanished. He looked around the room and then at Toby expecting some kind of answer, but Toby remained dumbfounded. He was then ushered down the stairs and out of the town hall to stand in bright daylight.

“Ah, a beautiful day,” said Cornelius, breathing deeply and plopping his hat on his head. He pulled out his pocket watch and looked at the time. “Ah, just enough time to get you boys to the house and then back here for elevenses. I reckon after such a hard mornin’s work I rightly deserve some of Signora Murphy’s finest home baked muffins.”

Cornelius pointed toward the mountain of the observatory and Marcus followed his gaze to meet the path some way above the town. There sitting next to it was a low white house surrounded by a white fence.

“There’s the house. Right on time,” said Cornelius, as he clicked his pocket watch closed. “Oh and it does look fine. He always does such a nice job.”

“Did you see that house the other day when we climbed to the observatory?” whispered Marcus to Toby.

“No. No, there was no house,” replied Toby. “I think I’d have remembered if there had been one.”

“Do you think there really is magic here?” asked Marcus.

“I don’t know, I really don’t know.”

Cornelius led them through the town, bidding good day to all the shopkeepers. They had come out in curiosity as they passed along the main street. Cornelius puffed out his chest as he waddled along, feeling his own importance growing every minute.

As they walked, Marcus noticed standing on the corner of the main street an alert Old Thom. He was puffing on his pipe, his eyes never leaving them.

* * * *

Old Thom watched the three walk up the main road and disappear around the corner. He looked back toward the town hall and could see a hooded figure gazing after the group. He drew long and hard on his pipe. “I guess the time is at hand,” he said under his breath. “I guess I have work to do.”

THE SIREN OF SALINA

Marcus walked slowly around the small house examining it closely. He was absolutely certain it had not been there when they climbed to the observatory.

The house was one story high, a small cottage with bright white walls. It had an orange tiled roof and a small chimney perched on top of that. The window frames were wooden, highly polished, and it had a low front door also of the gleaming wood. Strangely, it seemed much larger inside than it appeared from outside. Marcus paced out the sizes of the rooms, and when he did the same outside it was indeed smaller outside than in.

Marcus also noticed the grass around the house was exceptionally green. In fact, the grass within the white fence of the property was so much greener than it was anywhere else on the island it stood out, very peculiar.

There was also something very strange about the sense of protection the house gave him. With the alarming news of the day before, which had been quite a shock to him, he was amazed he was able to sleep at all. However, he slept well—in fact very peacefully—as if the house were enchanted, protected from the evil of the volcano.

It all added up to be very mysterious.

The next morning Marcus completed his circuit of the house and stood in front of the deep brown wooden door. He looked at it carefully and then noticed something just above it. The something was engraved in the wall. He moved closer to see what it was, and saw clearly it was the same symbol as on his pendant—the same as on the observatory.

“I think he’s protecting you,” said James from behind Marcus.

“You shouldn’t sneak up on people,” said Marcus, turning with fright. “I’ve had enough surprises in the past few days.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I’ve come just to ask a couple of things of you and Toby.”

Marcus invited James into the house with him and offered him some breakfast.

“Nice place,” said James, with his mouth full of bread. “I was a bit sorry you had to move from our house, but if Falzar offers you a home, you can’t really say no. Still, shame. It was quite a talking point with my friends having you in the house. So what did Cornelius tell you?”

“Nothing really,” said Marcus, shrugging uncomfortably, not really wanting to lie to his new friend. “We were just told to stay here until Falzar came and then we’d know something more about what was happening.”

“Well, it’s a nice home,” said James. “I’m sure Falzar has everything under control.”

“Good morning,” said Toby, yawning and stretching as he appeared from the bedroom. “What are you two talking about?”

“Oh sorry. Did I wake you?” James apologized, as he smiled at Toby. “I just wanted to see the house and to invite you somewhere today for a bit of a change. I thought you might like a bit of an adventure again.”

“Oh no. I was already awake,” said Toby, scratching his head.

“So what’s the adventure?” asked Marcus nervously. He’d heard enough of adventures yesterday and hoped this was not a real one.

“My uncle’s sailing to Salina today,” said James. “It’s one of the colonies and my uncle has the wine boat. He goes every month to the island. He thought you both might like to come today for a trip.”

“Oh yes. Of course,” said Marcus immediately. He thought the trip might take his mind off the grim news he had received. “That’d be great to see something more of the islands. I already feel I’ve been landlocked forever. A trip in a boat would be perfect.”

“Yes a trip would be great,” Toby agreed. “Let me get my things and we’ll be ready to go.”

“That’s settled then,” said James. “I’ll go down to the port and wait for you there. I need to help Uncle get the empty barrels on the boat and the supplies for the colonists. See you in say—half an hour?”

It was less than half an hour later when Marcus and Toby excitedly reached the port. On one of the far pontoons they could see James and a big burley man lifting a last wooden barrel onto a large flat boat. They hurried.

The big man dropped the last barrel on the boat and then turned to greet Marcus and Toby. “Well, me lads. You’re a bit late to help with the barrels, aren’t ya?”

“This is my Uncle Chester,” said James.

The man’s huge frame almost filled the back of the boat. He was tall and extremely wide, with a huge broad back and rotund belly. Two enormous arms appeared in scruffy red shirt sleeves and at the end of them were giant hands—like shovels. His hair was mostly gone, except for a thin black ring that just about completed a circuit of his well-tanned head. His face was round and jolly, and under his large potato like nose sprouted a thick black moustache that almost hid his whole mouth.

Uncle Chester removed a red scarf from his neck and wiped his brow as he stepped from the boat. He stretched out his hand and shook Marcus’s, nearly breaking his arm.

“Pleasure to meet you both. Real pleasure to meet you both and a real honor to have such fine lads on my boat for the day,” he boomed.

“Thank you for the offer of the trip,” said Marcus in a squeaky voice as he retrieved his throbbing hand.

Toby winced as Uncle Chester grabbed his hand and squeezed it as if trying to get juice from it.

“Now, me lads, we need to get going while the wind’s favorable. So if you’ll be so kind as to get on board, we’ll get underway.” He ushered them onto to the boat.

Within half an hour they had rounded the headland from the town and could see in front of them another of the great mountains of the island. This glowed bright white and where it plunged into the sea, it turned it a light turquoise. Under the baking sun it looked very inviting. And as they passed over the shallow water, the white bottom blazed in the sunlight. Uncle Chester slowed the boat and they took the opportunity for a quick dip in the warm water. Then, when they were refreshed, they continued on to the channel between Lipari and Salina. As they sailed westward, they saw the end of Lipari and then looming ahead of them across the short channel was Salina. Its massive volcanic cone was green and lush, soaring up from the sea into the bright sky.

The water below their boat dropped away into an inky blackness and the surface changed from smooth calmness to rough and choppy. The currents from either side of the island converged, boiling the sea and whipping up waves. The boat rocked gently from wave to wave. The barrels knocking against each other gently tapped out a rhythm.

Uncle Chester sat back in the boat, his hand guiding the tiller. Then, to the rhythmic tapping of the barrels, he began to sing.

* * * *

*Over the sea and away, my lads,
to the islands of a distant place
With the wind a blowin' at our backs
to our fate we'll race
An' in those islands you will find
treasures spoke of old.
Only a few will venture there,
the careful and the bold.*

* * * *

*For danger lies upon their shores
and you had best beware
For many evil creatures in the dark
will drag you to their lair
So bring your sword and take your axe
and upon your head a helm
And battle hard with all your heart
when you enter in their realm.*

* * * *

*After all is said and done
and all the battles fought
Upon the hill in a circle drawn
the treasure can be sought
But many men have tried to find*

*the treasure in this song
But none have ever taken it
for they knew their intent was wrong.*

* * * *

*Over the sea and away, my lads,
to the islands of a distant place
With the wind a blowin' at our backs
to our fate we'll race
But heed me well as I sing this tale,
for many men have tried,
And all that ever ventured there
have met their fate and died.*

* * * *

Marcus was a little subdued by the rather morose song. He decided to talk of other, brighter things.

“What’s the wine like?” he asked as he rubbed his hand across one of the rough wooden barrels.

“It’s a very good sweet wine we call Malvasia,” said Uncle Chester, his eyes lighting up. “It’s a very special wine and the colonists won’t tell us the secret—so as we need to rely upon them for it.”

“Eleven barrels are for the town,” added James. “The other one is just for Cornelius. He’s quite partial to it.”

Marcus laughed but was not sure whether or not James was joking. As the boat slowly bobbed and reeled its way across the channel, Marcus felt quite sleepy. He stretched out on the deck of the boat and let the cool sea breeze flow over him.

Uncle Chester sniffed as he looked across at Marcus. He could see something in the boy’s face. “Do you like to sail? I mean I was watchin’ ya square away those ropes in a proper fashion. You sort of seem at home on a boat.”

"I've spent my whole life on boats," replied Marcus, thinking of his father and home. "My father is a fisherman and I always helped him. It's funny—I never thought I'd miss our little fishing boat, but I really do. In fact, I think if I knew what I knew now, I'd maybe have stayed in my little village and been happy to catch fish all day."

Uncle Chester could see sadness in Marcus's eyes. He knew he was carrying a deep burden. He, like all the villagers, knew Marcus was there for a reason and that the reason would take him to an unknown danger.

"Well, young Marcus, fate is a funny old lady, and you never know what's on her mind," said Uncle Chester kindly. "Everything in this world happens for a reason and normally it happens so that good things happen. An' no matter how things look today, they always seem better the day after."

Marcus looked at Chester and then at the water flowing past the boat. "I hope it'll be all right tomorrow."

They had now crossed the channel and Salina loomed large above them. Its steep volcanic sides were covered in row upon row of vines up to a high level. Above them, the volcanic cone was covered in dense green forest. At the base of the cone on the side of the channel was nestled a small port with a single small grey shack. A narrow dusty track left the port and meandered a long way south on the island toward a village. The village crouched low to the base of the volcano, almost hidden from view. It was really just a few low white dwellings.

A long spit of land made from great fallen boulders jutted from the island forming a strong natural break for the port. Inside the spit, the sea lay flat, calm as glass.

Marcus looked up across the spit. For a second his eyes caught the form of what seemed a siren standing on it. She stood with long flowing black hair lifted by the sea breeze. Her white cotton dress blew back, silhouetting her curved shape against the bright sky. Her face was slender and deeply tanned with large brown eyes and full red lips. The beauty of the sight before him made his heart race.

"Get the ropes; we're comin' to the port!" called Uncle Chester to Marcus.

Marcus turned and grabbed the bow line. Quickly he glanced back to look for the siren, but she was gone.

"Concentrate, lad!" boomed Chester as the boat neared the port wall.

Two men were standing there, waiting for the ropes. Both were thickset and had stern expressions on their faces. The older of the two grabbed the line from Marcus and pulled hard to bring the boat against the wall with a bump.

"Good day, John," Chester shouted.

“Good day, Chester,” replied the sour faced farmer as he eyed Toby and Marcus suspiciously.

He was short and broad, with a round red face. His hair was cut short to his head and then grew down his face to form a thick grey pilgrim’s beard. His eyebrows were joined in the middle, and above them were etched thick furrowed frown lines. His mouth curved downward making his face look bitter. His eyes were deep set and narrow; they burned at Marcus. He wore a heavy leather apron and heavy sandals.

Chester watched as John eyed the boys and then looked at the other man who shook his head disapprovingly. “These are some friends of ours. They’re two very special visitors to the islands. They’ve come a long way.”

“Strangers only mean trouble in these parts and they’re not welcome here,” sniffed the farmer disapprovingly. “Dark times are coming as we all know, and strangers from beyond the fog should leave us to our business. Especially strangers bearing *that* mark.” He pointed at the pendant below Marcus’s neck. “I know who he is,” the farmer said, spitting on the floor. “And we have no need of his help on this island. We just need our simple life and simple ways. There’s no need of magic here.”

Marcus stared at the farmer. He wanted to say something, but then was suddenly distracted as the girl from the rocks appeared behind the large wagon. The two horses whinnied as she glided past them, running her hand along one of their flanks. Marcus was entranced as she looked up and their eyes met. In that instant something passed between them.

“Sabrina!” shouted the farmer angrily. “Get the bread and food from these folk, and get it loaded in the front of the wagon. And don’t get in our way or there’ll be hell to pay.”

Marcus stood rooted to the spot, his legs like jelly as he watched her approach the boat with her head bowed. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest and his mouth opened.

“Well, pass her the bread and the rest of the food, Marcus,” said James in his ear. “She won’t bite. Not like her father.”

“Oh. Oh yes,” replied Marcus, unable to take his eyes off the girl. He bent down and picked up the food as she approached. He stepped from the boat and stood in front of her.

She kept her head bowed and held out her arms to receive the bundle of fresh food Marcus gently lowered for her. She looked up and gave a faint smile, making Marcus’s head swim. She seemed like a goddess—with perfect skin and eyes that sparkled like jewels.

Marcus stood with his mouth open, staring at her as she turned and walked away from the boat, back toward the cart.

“Hurry up! Hurry up!” the farmer shouted at her as she walked past. He turned to Marcus and a sneer crossed his face.

Marcus turned away. He quickly jumped back on the boat and started to help untie the barrels. He knew the farmer had seen how he had looked at his daughter.

The farmer and the second man from the island laid two large planks of wood from the back of the cart to act as a ramp for the barrels. They heaved each one of the twelve in the cart onto the ramp and down to the port side.

Uncle Chester and his crew for the day pushed out the empty barrels and other stores they had brought to the island. They lined them up along the quay-side to make room for the full barrels.

The work was hard under the scorching midday sun and all of them stooped to take water to replace the sweat they had lost. The farmer, his friend and Sabrina stayed under the shadow of the wagon whilst Uncle Chester and the boys sat under a tree.

Marcus looked longingly toward Sabrina, hoping she would look up at him. He wanted to stare at her but feared the farmer, who gave the odd glance in his direction.

“Forget it,” said James, watching where Marcus’s gaze was falling.

“Who is she?” asked Marcus, trying not to sound too interested.

“She’s the farmer’s daughter and her name is Sabrina,” said James as he shuffled closer to Marcus and lowered his voice. “I can see the look in your eye. But I have to tell you straight away she is not available. So just forget it.”

Marcus blushed, feeling he had been discovered too easily. “But what do you mean—forget it?” he asked after a second. “Surely a pretty girl can make her own mind up, can’t she?”

“Well besides anything else, she’s the farmer’s daughter,” answered James, taking a swig of water from his bottle. “And by the way he was talking this morning, I reckon he doesn’t like you. I can’t say he was giving you a warm welcome.”

“Oh,” said Marcus. “Well I must confess I wasn’t looking at him. I was actually wondering how such a beautiful creature could be the daughter of such a man.”

“Wait. If the farmer isn’t enough to put you off,” continued James, “she’s already promised to be married to someone. And you should know that *someone* is not just *anyone*.”

“Why? Who is he?” asked Marcus. His heart sank as he looked toward Sabrina.

“His name is Erik,” said James. “And Erik is the son of the richest man in the islands. The family is said to be from a bloodline of Viking warriors, and before this conversation goes too far, I’ll tell you up front they are very nasty people. Sabrina is not happy with how things are, but there’s little she can do about it or will do about it. You see, Erik’s father owns the land of the farm of Sabrina’s family. And Erik has threatened to take the land back if she doesn’t marry him.”

Marcus looked in helpless shock. In a short time he had felt something very deep for Sabrina. It was something he couldn’t explain and it now pained him to hear about this.

“So you see,” said James, as he lay back against the tree and closed his eyes, “she wouldn’t want to see her family starve, lover boy. So you should just forget it. Don’t start trouble with Erik is my advice.”

After some time the men resumed their work and the last of the barrels were loaded onto the boat and secured with strong ropes. Uncle Chester wiped his brow and walked over to the farmer to bid him goodbye.

“Well, John, thanks again for the wine,” said Chester cheerily. “It’ll be much appreciated as always, especially by Cornelius.” Chester laughed a large belly laugh, but the farmer simply looked over his shoulder toward Marcus.

“If this really is him, as all the folk are saying, then be wary. For it’s the sign that danger is already upon us. Take this message back to Lipari: no one should come to this island except for your regular wine boat. The colony is afraid in these dark times and anyone found coming ashore will find no warm welcome—not anyone. All they can expect is the sharp end of a pitchfork in the belly. So mark these words and tell all to heed them.”

Chester looked back and swallowed when he saw the look in the farmer’s eyes. He watched as the farmer turned and climbed onto the cart, grabbing the reins and flicking them hard on the horses’ backs. The horses pulled forward and the cart trundled down the track sending dust into the air.

Marcus stood on the bow of the boat staring longingly at the cart, hoping he would see Sabrina look back—but she never did.

“Come on, lover boy,” laughed James, making Toby look between Marcus and the cart. “I told you already, you need to forget it.”

The heavy boat slipped from the port, past the spit of land and started into the channel. Marcus looked to his left and saw a small boat bobbing in the water. It appeared to have nets behind it. He hadn’t noticed it before, but could see a scruffy looking man in it watching them.

He was very skinny, almost spindly—like an insect. His face was thin and drawn with sunken cheeks. His skin was a dirty grey color and seemed to be stretched over the bones of his face. His hair was black, thin and greasy, slicked back on his boney head. On his face was a black eye patch covering his right eye. His lips were thin, cracked and dark, and behind them lay gnarled yellow teeth. He was hunched over in the boat, wearing dirty grey clothes that hung from his skinny body.

“Who’s that?” asked Marcus suspiciously.

“That’s Gaut,” said James. “He’s been watching us with his one eye since lunchtime. Take no notice. He’s just a strange old hermit who lives on Lipari. He keeps himself to himself and just sells his fish in the market.”

Marcus looked across with more concern. A chill ran over him. He thought back to the day on the beach and remembered him in the crowd. He thought of the stranger’s warning—to be careful of the enemy’s spies.

The boat bumped its way from Salina and out into the rough channel. Marcus looked toward Gaut and then at Salina. His heart grew heavy. He could see the small dwellings of the colony and his mind filled with images of the beautiful Sabrina. Then he thought of James’s warning and finally the burden of his task. He sat silently with his head down for a moment and then looked north. He knew the volcano lay over the horizon and it filled him with a sense of dread.

“Things can change,” whispered Marcus into the wind. “Things can change.”

FALZAR

The second day came and went. There was no sign of the arrival of the mysterious Falzar, as had been promised by the stranger. Several days drifted by and Marcus heard nothing more about his adventure. This actually lifted his spirits, as he started to think maybe the ill tidings had been wrong and Falzar no longer needed to see him. This grew over the next few weeks into hope he would no longer need to go on this dangerous adventure and he could soon think of returning home.

Marcus and Toby talked at length and after a comfortable three weeks of fishing, relaxing and touring the island, they had almost conceded the new life there was not too bad. Above all, they were happy all the nonsense of magic and adventure had subsided.

It was during breakfast one day there came a rather loud knock at the door. Toby opened it and standing there was the stranger from their village—the very same who had told them to wait for Falzar.

“May I come in?” asked the stranger after a few seconds.

“Oh, I’m sorry. How rude of me. Of course you can come in,” spluttered Toby, showing the man into the kitchen.

“You?” said Marcus in surprise. “Why are you here again? Do you bring us news of why this Falzar never showed up?”

The stranger dropped his hood and sat at the table, glancing between Marcus and Toby.

“I do find it rather amusing,” said the stranger, smiling, “that neither of you two has yet worked out that I am Falzar.”

Toby rocked backward on his chair, his eyes almost popping from his head.

“You?” spat Marcus, eyeing the stranger suspiciously. “So why all these stories and misdirection?”

“Well, you never once asked me my name,” said Falzar, laughing. “So I thought if you were not civil enough to ask, then I would not tell you. After this long, I was sure you must have guessed.”

Marcus sat with his arms crossed, visibly hurt. He thought it really bad form for the stranger to have misguided them. He felt such grave matters did not warrant this kind of misbehavior.

“Come, come now, lads,” said Falzar kindly. “There was no ill intent in it, and well, it amused Cornelius no end.”

“And you think this is a time for jokes?” spat Marcus angrily.

“I do apologize for offending you both,” said Falzar humbly, bowing low. “But yes, there is always time for humor and jesting—especially in the darkest hours we face. A man’s spirit is not nourished by fear and anger, but by mirth and laughter.”

Marcus folded his arms in protest. “And why did you promise it would be only a few days before you came to see us, and then leave it for three weeks?”

“Ah. This was not a jest and not with intention,” said Falzar, sitting at the table. “I have traveled far to the north to seek advice from an old friend. However, times have fallen darker than I had feared and that old friend is sadly no longer alive.” Falzar looked truly sad as he spoke. His face dropped and his eyes seemed to glaze. “But that is now a tale for another day,” he said more cheerily. “However, it makes our work here even more important. For if we fail here, you will not be able to help in the north and that is something you must do.”

“So what is your news?” asked Toby. “What do we have to do? I mean after what you told us in the town hall, well, we’ve done nothing but sit here and worry.”

Falzar stood and walked from the table beckoning both Toby and Marcus outside. They followed him into the bright morning sunshine.

“I prefer to talk of such things out in the light,” said Falzar, tapping his nose. “The less darkness, the better for such matters.” He sat down with crossed legs on the ground and waited for Marcus and Toby to join him. After a moment they did. “Ah. That’s better,” said Falzar, breathing deeply through his nose. “Much closer to nature here. There’s nothing better than feeling the earth below you. It’s one of the places from which we take great power.”

Falzar closed his eyes and breathed deeply again, savoring the fresh air. Eventually he opened his eyes and looked at Marcus, and a big smile crossed his face.

He then looked at Toby and raised his eyebrows. "Interesting. Very interesting," he said after a moment. "Well, yes. To set the record straight, I am indeed Falzar. Wizard, sorcerer, magician and even," he stopped and smiled at Toby, "fireside trick maker."

Toby's face changed to a crimson red. "That wasn't exactly what I was thinking."

Marcus had been thinking the same. This magician had no wand or star covered cape. He had no long white beard. In fact, he was the plainest looking wizard he could have imagined.

"Your eyes can deceive you, young men," said Falzar. "Don't always trust to what you can see. For your entire lives your elders will have told you magic is not real. It does not exist, and in fact, from where you come from, it seldom does anymore. Times have changed greatly in the south since the last evil passed. Men are happy with simple lives and simple things. If they do see something they can't explain, they say it's a trick or a hoax." He smiled broadly as Toby and Marcus stared at him.

"People have lived for so long without the threat of real evil," said Falzar, his eyes narrowing, "they have forgotten the need for magic and wizards to protect them. The old ways have fallen into legends and mystery, especially here in the south. The magic has indeed gone north to the lands of the Celts and the wild northern men. Still there, magic is embraced and used in the fight against evil. One day, young Marcus, you will hopefully follow your path to the north, as the time is coming when they will also need your help."

Marcus felt deeply uncomfortable about so much of his destiny being spoken about without him knowing very much of what people he meant.

"Yes. Yes," continued Falzar, with hardly a pause, "where you come from has grown comfortable and I'm the only one left here who keeps an eye on the south. I've been watching for many years, in case somehow the great evil ever managed to emerge again. And sadly now it seems my watch has not been in vain." Falzar turned north and looked out to the sea, his eyes narrowing. "Yes. It is good I was still alive to foresee this. Alive to set plans in motion, to do something to protect these islands—the last magic places in the south."

He shook his head before continuing. His mind seemed to have wandered again to another place. "But even these islands will one day lose their powers, and they will become just more islands in the sea with a forgotten past. The great irony is that your adventure will bring that time closer, Marcus."

"What is the evil?" asked Marcus after a moment. He sensed the whole conversation was leading to that.

“Ah,” Falzar sighed. “It is an ancient evil that is awake again. His name is long forgotten in this world—Gazhul Ankarnnak it is pronounced in northern tongues. It is a good enough name for him, for it means the evil with no mercy in some northern tongues, and the dark prince in others.”

“Is he in the volcano?” asked Marcus.

“Yes he is,” said Falzar, staring at Marcus. “But now he is awakening and he knows his time has come. For the world here is sleeping and not expecting him. If he can escape the power of these islands, he knows there will be little to stop him spreading his vile darkness across the world.”

Toby shuddered.

“But there is hope. One last hope,” said Falzar, turning and looking back up toward the observatory. “There is a powerful magic here that protects these islands. A magic that has kept Gazhul contained for a thousand years. A good magic that brings the great fog and stops him from ever leaving this place. But should that magic fade, he will indeed be free to leave. This is his burning desire—to be free to dominate the world.”

“Where does he come from?” asked Toby.

“I will speak no more of him today,” said Falzar sharply. “It is true that even speaking his name brings his servants to spy on conversations. And although the magic of this house is strong, we cannot underestimate his reach.”

Marcus looked around nervously, expecting to see someone spying on them.

“You are wise to be wary,” said Falzar, nodding. “It will serve us all to keep this information to ourselves. For even though he has suspicions and news, he does not know of our plan. So, I will speak no more of him today, but of much brighter things.” He smiled. “Marcus, I will need you to open your mind to another world, a world into which you have just ventured. It is a world you will learn to know well.”

Marcus again felt very uncomfortable.

“You have lived in a world and a time bereft of magic,” said Falzar. “You do not believe in magic yet. You both feel it is the tricks of old conmen and nothing more. You think science is the new way to explain all you see in the world.”

Falzar reached down and plucked a small red flower that had been growing amongst the lush grass. He placed it carefully in the centre of his hand and held it before the faces of the young men. Suddenly the petals of the flower started to move—slowly at first and then faster. The delicate petals beat rhythmically and the flower rose into the air. It moved slowly from Falzar’s hand and hovered just in front of their faces. Then slowly it started to transform. The petals grew larger until they were delicate wings; the stem shrank and darkened until it was a slen-

der body. There before them was now a beautiful red butterfly that drifted into the sky. It fluttered for a second and then was off into the distance.

Marcus and Toby sat with their mouths open.

“Now, Master Toby, would you like to tell me that was a fireside trick?” laughed Falzar. “I don’t think science will explain that so easily.”

“I can’t...” Toby started.

“The world you know is based upon the mind,” said Falzar as he tapped on Toby’s head. “Everything is about what you think. Science is a skill of the mind but you must learn that nothing in magic comes from the mind. Magic comes only from your heart. You can’t think magic; you can only feel it from deep within.”

“I really don’t understand,” said Marcus, shaking his head in disbelief. “I mean none of this can be real. Can it?”

“Oh, but you do understand,” answered Falzar, his eyes wide. “You already feel a magic. It’s a magic many feel and never realize it is one of the basic forms of magic. You can’t see it, you can’t taste it and it makes no logical sense—but you know it’s real. It’s a deep magic everyone knows comes from the heart, and it is a very powerful magic—it’s love, Marcus.”

Marcus sat back a little, embarrassed, wondering how Falzar could know what he had been feeling for Sabrina these weeks.

Falzar simply raised an eyebrow and smiled knowingly before continuing. “And then there is the second form of magic and again it is a magic straight from the heart.” He pointed to Marcus’s heart. “It has no reason or logic, but again it is a strong magic. It has played through history and defined the world in which we live. Many great people have felt this magic. It is the magic of courage. Once you have really found love and courage and you accept them both, your heart will be open and ready to accept much more powerful magic. Great magic you can control.”

“But I’ve always been told that magic is just not real,” said Marcus.

“Yes, of course,” said Falzar, his voice animated. “Many times when men cannot explain what they see, they say it is a trick or not real. They deny the existence of these things much as with love and courage. You cannot hold *them* or feel *them* when people talk of such things. Moreover, in this world there are many that will even deny they exist—until they too feel them. If every man could open his heart and close his mind, he too could feel the magic. But not every man can. Only the special few—only people like you, Marcus.” Falzar swept his hand close to Marcus’s head.

Marcus suddenly felt very strange, as if his head was very light and his heart very heavy. His mind lingered on Falzar's words and he thought about the feeling of love. Then his mind filled with images of Sabrina.

"Maybe you have started to listen to your heart, Marcus," said Falzar as he stood, a broad smile crossing his face. "It means your journey is beginning and this is indeed good. For we do not have the luxury of too much time."

Marcus stood and stared at Falzar. His head was still spinning and he was unsure about what he had heard. He'd seen so many strange things in his dreams that he couldn't explain. Now he felt something stirring in his heart, but he couldn't explain what he was feeling.

"But I still don't know what to do. I mean no one has ever told me of these things and I'm scared I won't know."

Falzar looked up at the sky and pointed to a group of birds flying over them. "In the winter, the birds fly south. No one tells them. No one guides them. But they just know what to do. Be like the birds, Marcus. Release what you know and concentrate on what you feel. Follow your heart and you will find all your answers."

Marcus and Toby watched the flock of birds fly out to sea. After a moment they looked back for Falzar. Amazingly, he was gone. They scanned the horizon, but there was no sign of him anywhere.

"He has a bad habit of doing that," said Toby, scratching his head. "I have no idea what he's been talking about. Magic, love, courage."

"I think I'm starting to understand," said Marcus as he stared beyond Toby in the direction of Salina.

"Open your heart, Marcus." Falzar's voice drifted on the wind, making Marcus jump. "Let the magic begin."

* * * *

That evening Marcus and Toby decided to go down to the town. They were standing in the busy square when suddenly, through the crowd, Marcus spotted a bright red dress that shone like a beacon. He tried to follow it as it meandered through duller colors. He couldn't see clearly, but he could make out long dark hair and a flash of green eyes against olive skin. His heart pounded with even the hope it was Sabrina. He tried desperately to see beyond the crowd, but it was no use—she was gone.

"I told you. Don't even think about it," laughed James as he placed a hand on Marcus's shoulder. "It'll bring nothing but trouble for you, lover boy."

“Oh. Hello,” said Marcus, a little surprised and a little embarrassed James had caught him again. “I didn’t see you there. I was just...I thought I saw Cornelius.”

“Yes, it was her and she is with her father,” said James in a patronizing voice. “But they are about to leave, as they have everything they need. So, lover boy, don’t try anything.”

“But I’d just like to say hello,” said Marcus desperately. “I mean a person should be able to just say hello.”

“It’s not advisable,” said James, looking around. “There are many people here who know Erik. It wouldn’t be too long until he found out that the stranger had been talking to his future wife. I can assure you it really wouldn’t be too good for you.”

“I’m not afraid of this Erik,” shrugged Marcus, puffing out his chest.

“Well you should be,” said James, raising his eyebrows. “For one, he’s very big. For two, he’s very strong, and for three, he’s very nasty. I can imagine he’d like nothing more than a reason to bully someone new. And trust me, that’s what he does best.”

* * * *

In a dark corner near one of the shops, a single eye reflected in the torchlight. From the shadows appeared the twisted face of Gaut. He was watching Marcus and his friends, and he’d noticed where Marcus had been staring. This pleased him a great deal and he smiled, revealing his gnarled blackened teeth. His hand slipped down toward the small twisted dagger hanging from his belt.

“Not yet,” whispered a dark voice in his head.

“Yes, my master,” whispered Gaut, as his hand released the dagger.

* * * *

“Anyway,” continued James, “she’s spoken for. So you may as well forget her and come and have a fine meal with your two friends.”

“I think it’s too late to tell him to forget her,” said Toby, laughing and fluttering his eyes at Marcus mockingly. “Marcus is in love.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Marcus angrily, pulling away from James.

“Oh maybe he does,” said Falzar, suddenly appearing from the crowd. “Maybe he knows better than you do, Marcus.”

Marcus could see that Falzar was not looking at him but beyond toward a dark corner. It was as if he was looking at someone. Marcus turned to look but whoever it was had disappeared back into the shadows.

"Tomorrow we need to start your training," said Falzar, placing a firm hand on Marcus's shoulder. "Things are moving faster than we think, and you need to be ready. From now on, Marcus, you must stay close to your friends. There is a spy on this island, but for some strange reason I'm not able to discover who it is. I fear that if he knows anything, he may try to make a move on you. Be careful, Marcus."

Marcus nodded slowly, suddenly feeling the threatening presence. Toby, James and Marcus all looked back to the dark corner, as if expecting to see a face looking at them from the blackness. But there was nothing. Marcus turned back to ask Falzar who it could be, but again Falzar had vanished.

"I really do hate it when he does that," said Marcus, shaking his head.

"Oh you get used to it," said James. "Falzar comes and goes all the time."

"But who is Falzar? Where does he come from?"

"Well, no one really knows where he comes from," explained James. "There are many stories and legends about him, but most seem to think he comes from a long way in the north. They say from an ancient land where dragons and other creatures still roam the countryside—a place where wizards are more common. Some say he is now the last of the great northern wizards, and when he's gone there'll be great danger for us all."

Marcus's mind raced. He started imagining dragons and wizards in far off lands. He could see the great flying lizards swooping down to the ground, breathing great plumes of fire. But it didn't seem strange to him. He could sense them, almost see them as if he'd seen them before.

"And how long has he been coming here?" asked Marcus.

"Oh, for a long time. Hundreds of years many say."

"Hundreds of years?" spluttered Toby. "But how old is he?"

"Oh they say he is Ancient. They say the race of the great northern wizards has been around for thousands of years. Falzar is said to have led a great army of wizards in olden days against a great evil."

"Armies of wizards?" said Toby with amazement in his voice. "Is it true?"

"Well, I don't know, but I can believe it. Falzar is a very powerful wizard. But many also say he is growing old and tired and he can no longer keep going. Talk of this makes many islanders nervous."

“So why does he come to these islands?” asked Marcus, unsure as to why such a great legend like Falzar would bother with the place. “I mean they seem so insignificant.”

“Well, that’s the question no one ever really dares to ask,” whispered James as he looked around. “All we know is that he has been watching the dark island for many years. Lately they say he’s become very concerned. They say something ancient is appearing again and Falzar is very worried about it—and it shows. He started to come here more in the last few years. He’s no longer light and happy, how he used to be when I was a child. He’s become stern and cautious, and he does look tired and worried.”

“He told me there’s a great evil and a great danger,” said Marcus.

James placed a finger against his lips, saying, “It’s better we don’t talk about such things when it’s dark. It’s better we stay light and happy, and have a good meal and joke as friends. For something tells me we should do it now—whilst we still can.”

Marcus nodded in agreement. He too felt the darkness was coming and soon it would be upon them. He shivered.

* * * *

From the shadows, Gaut looked on as he rubbed his grimy hands. The corners of his blackened mouth turned up into an evil smile. His dark master had spoken to him, and now he knew what he must to do.

LESSONS FROM THE WIZARD

Marcus awoke with a start. Falzar was standing over his bed holding the point of a long silver sword against his throat and smiling.

“Come on. After last night I think I need to teach you how to fight. So get dressed.”

“What a fright you gave me,” said Marcus, stepping out of the house to meet the wizard. “You could have given me a heart attack.”

“You should be scared,” said Falzar, handing Marcus a sword. “Our enemy is stronger than I thought, and you are in more danger than we had imagined. At least if one of his servants comes to get you, you will be able to put up some sort of fight.”

Marcus looked down at the broad silver sword. It was the first time he had ever held one—it made him feel very uneasy. “So I’m to learn the honorable art of sword fighting?”

“There is no honor in having your head hacked off or your bowels skewered by a sword. No, nothing of honor. Instead I’m going to teach you a much more valuable lesson. The lesson of how to live by any means.”

Falzar swished his sword in the air and then across the ground, gouging a thin line.

“Many dead men thought fighting was about honor. Honor is usually laid upon the dead. Remember that your enemy is evil and has no honor. It would

sneak upon you in the darkest night, if it could, and slit your throat while you slept. Its aim is nothing but victory—at any cost.”

Marcus gulped and rubbed his hand across his throat.

“Your enemy will not fight fair and hence neither will you. You will fight with every dirty trick I can teach you and then some more. Let us begin. Now on guard.”

Marcus gripped the sword tightly and lifted it to what he thought was a ready position, just as he had done with sticks as a child.

“Good. Good,” said Falzar, bending down and grabbing a handful of soil from the ground. “Do you know what this is and what it means?”

Marcus looked at the handful of earth. “Is it the earth and the place from whence comes all our strength to fight?”

“No. No, it’s actually your first lesson,” said Falzar, smiling. He suddenly threw the handful of dry soil into Marcus’s eyes.

Marcus yelled as he started to fall backward gripped with pain and confusion. Immediately he could feel the cold sword against his throat.

“You are now dead, my young adventurer,” whispered Falzar coldly in his ear. “Lesson number one: always be prepared.”

Marcus rose to his knees, rubbing desperately at his stinging eyes. Immediately Falzar waved his hand across Marcus’s face, and the soil and the pain were gone. Marcus looked up in anger, his jaw tight and fists clenched. Slowly he stood.

“Good. You’ve just learned your first lesson on the road to survival,” laughed Falzar as he stepped back. “Now let’s start again. And this time be ready for anything.”

Marcus smiled from the corner of his mouth. His right hand was full of soil. Quickly he raised it and attempted to fling the soil into the eyes of Falzar. But to his great surprise his hand opened and small white feathers came out. They simply danced in the wind and blew back against his face.

“Lesson number two,” said Falzar, blowing at the feathers. “Surprise is very important.”

Marcus watched in amazement as the feathers drifted away on the breeze and floated up into the morning sky.

“Now, let’s try once more,” said Falzar, placing a hand on Marcus’s shoulder. “And as I said, be prepared for anything.”

* * * *

The entire day passed with Falzar teaching Marcus how to fight with a sword. At first he was slow and clumsy but he quickly got the feel of the sword and his movements became fluid and natural. The day hurried by with few breaks, but Marcus never tired. Each hour he felt strangely stronger and more confident.

Toby watched them dancing backward and forward with their swords for many hours. Eventually, when he could watch no more, he went to see James. At dusk, when he returned, they were still fighting, as fresh as ever.

“Watch and learn, Toby,” said Falzar as the swords clashed again. Falzar suddenly spun quickly and covered the ground at an unnatural speed for such an old man. Marcus could not follow him, and before he could move the wizard was behind him with his sword at his throat again.

“Tomorrow I’ll bring a sword for you,” said Falzar, releasing Marcus and starting the fight again. “You, too, are part of this great adventure and you will also need to fight.”

* * * *

The week passed and each day, from morning to dark, Falzar taught Marcus and Toby how to fight—and above all, how to live. He was pleased that each day Marcus grew faster, stronger and more skilled. Falzar was contented at how much he had learned, but he knew these were just the basics he needed for the first part of the adventure. He knew he would need to acquire something much harder to survive the final test.

* * * *

One day, at about midday, the three of them stopped for a brief rest to take some water. They moved from beneath the blazing sun to the shade of a small olive tree.

“Toby, I think you may like to rest awhile. So why don’t you go inside to take some shade,” said Falzar as he took the sword from Toby. He then waved his hand close to Toby’s face.

Toby nodded slowly in agreement as if in a trance. “I do feel strangely tired. I think forty winks wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

"I'm not tired in the least," said Marcus, breathing in deeply and raising his sword. "In fact I've never felt so well."

"That's good," said Falzar. "So if you feel so fit and healthy, I'd like you to run a small errand for me."

"Certainly," said Marcus. "What do you want me to do?"

"I would like you to go the market in the town and collect for me four ripe oranges."

"We have some oranges in the house. I could fetch one," said Marcus, frowning.

"No, thank you," replied Falzar. "There is a stall with particular oranges exceptional at this time of year—and it's those I'd like. So if you don't mind."

Marcus didn't want to argue with Falzar so he put down his sword, nodded and walked from the house down toward the town. As he approached, he saw a small dog sitting near the corner of the main street. It was panting and wagging its tail. As Marcus walked closer, he suddenly remembered where he had seen the little dog before. It had been licking his face the day he was found on the beach. Someone had called it Pippin. Marcus looked fondly across at the dog and whistled to it.

Suddenly a big oaf of a lad appeared around the corner. He had a big square face with short, roughly cropped blonde hair. His blue eyes were small and sunk deep in his cheeks. His head sat on a thick neck, which joined a massive body. His clothes were of finest light-blue cotton, with large wooden buttons. On his feet were elegant calf length sandals made from expensive leather. A rich brown leather belt with a fine handmade brass clasp encircled his thick waist.

He walked past Pippin and casually glanced down. A few paces past the dog, he stopped and turned. Then he walked over to it, the little thing wagging its tail furiously. Without warning, he kicked it hard with his great foot, making the little dog yelp and run toward Marcus. The oaf simply laughed as he watched the dog scamper with its tail between its legs.

"Hey! What did you do that for?" shouted Marcus at the thug.

The boy stopped and then walked over to meet Marcus. He stood towering in front of Marcus, staring down at him.

"What does it have to do with you?" the boy sneered.

"You can't just kick a poor dog that's done nothing to harm you," said Marcus cautiously, as he took in the dimensions of the hooligan.

"I'll do as I please. When I please," sneered the thug as he grabbed Marcus's shirt roughly with both hands and lifted him onto his toes. The lad then looked

at Marcus carefully and grabbed his shirt even tighter. He was scanning Marcus when an evil smile crossed his face.

"I know who you are. Oh boy, you're in trouble. My friend Erik is dying to meet you. He's heard all about you and what you've been up to. He's got a welcoming present for you."

"I don't know what you mean," said Marcus, trying to wriggle free.

"Oh, but I think you do. We've heard about your little trip to Salina and that you made all goo goo eyes in the market. We have our sources of information, you know."

"What's going on there?" Cornelius shouted across the street, making the boy release his grip. "Jonas! Take your hands off him now and go away or the council will be calling on your parents again. I don't think they'd appreciate another large fine on account of your antisocial behavior."

Jonas pushed his face against Marcus's and sneered at him. "Oh, you're in for so much trouble." He turned and walked away muttering.

Cornelius bustled over and pulled out a large yellow handkerchief with which he dusted down Marcus's clothes. "I'm sorry, Marcus. That's one of our resident bullies. Part of a rather unsavory trio that think, because one of their fathers has some money, they can do as they please. I hope there's no harm done. That's the last thing we want."

"Thanks, Signor Dorma," said Marcus, genuinely relieved Cornelius had saved him. "No harm done. I'll just try to avoid him and his friends if I can."

Cornelius smiled and looked down at Pippin sitting next to Marcus wagging his tail. "I think you have a new friend."

Marcus bent and stroked Pippin's head, making the little dog dance around. Marcus thanked Cornelius again and then continued down to the market. When Marcus found the fruit seller he said hello and looked at the oranges. They didn't seem much different than the ones he had in his house. He shrugged and reached for one, when his hand collided with another hand that came from the opposite direction. The hand was delicate and slim with smooth olive skin.

Marcus froze for a moment and then looked up—straight into the eyes of Sabrina. They stood looking at each other for a moment, saying nothing, simply gazing at each other, their hands touching.

"Oh! Please, after you," said Marcus, a little embarrassed as he pulled his hand away from Sabrina's.

"Oh thank you," replied Sabrina in a soft voice as she collected a couple of oranges. She took each one and slowly put it in the basket draped across her arm.

"Why are you here?" asked Marcus after a moment.

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?” said Sabrina with a smile as she walked slowly around the fruit seller’s stall.

Marcus again felt embarrassed and awkward. He felt as if he was making it very obvious how he felt about her. “Oh no. I meant...I was just saying...”

“It’s all right. I’m playing with you,” Sabrina smiled as she fluttered her eyes. “I come here once a week to collect fresh food for the family. I come to buy things we don’t have on Salina.”

“Oh. Can I help carry your basket? I mean it looks really heavy.”

“No! No you mustn’t,” said Sabrina quickly as she pulled away from Marcus. She glanced around nervously.

Marcus looked around and understood Sabrina was nervous about being seen with him. From his encounter with the thug, he already knew someone had been telling Erik. He didn’t want to cause any trouble for her.

“Oh, yes. I understand,” agreed Marcus as Sabrina started to walk away to another stall. Cautiously he followed her. He stayed a short distance behind, trying to be discreet, and then he moved closer when she came to the stall. Marcus pretended to be looking at things on the stall as Sabrina looked nonchalantly through the food.

“Many people are talking about you,” said Sabrina after a moment, without looking up at Marcus.

“I don’t know why,” he answered, without looking at her either. “I mean there’s really nothing to say.”

“They say you’re different. They say you’re someone special and that you are close to Falzar.”

“People say much about things they know nothing about.”

“My father said you’re dangerous and you’re going to bring bad luck to the islands.” She glanced sideways at Marcus as she moved around the stall.

“As I said, people say much about things they know nothing about,” he replied, still following her. “So what do you say about me?” asked Marcus as she started to move away from the stall.

Sabrina looked back and her face suddenly became sad. She turned away and started to walk faster. “Please don’t ask me. I’m to marry someone. That’s my duty and that’s what I’m going to do. I can’t think anything about you. It’s probably better that we don’t speak to each other. I don’t want to cause any trouble for you.”

Marcus stepped forward quickly, his heart racing. He reached down and grasped her delicate hand, holding it tight. “Tell me that you feel the same. Tell me that even though you’ve only just met me, you feel like you’ve known me for-

ever. Something passed between us the day we met and we feel something for each other.”

Sabrina turned and pulled her hand away, walking away without saying anything. She pushed past some people and headed down to the port.

Marcus wanted to follow her but knew he would put her at too much risk. Then, as he glanced around, he noticed Gaut stood near him, staring right at him. Marcus turned to walk away but Gaut placed a spiny hand on his shoulder pulling Marcus around.

“You should be careful talking to another man’s woman,” hissed Gaut, his one eye wide and staring. “I mean decent island folk wouldn’t think it proper.”

“What do you want?” asked Marcus, pulling away, repulsed at the touch of the evil looking man.

“Be careful about what that old wizard tells you,” sneered Gaut. “Not everything he says is true. You need to be wary as to who is who in this place—as not everyone is as they seem. Before you know what’s happening, that old fool will be telling you a pack of lies and sending you on a foolish quest—a quest from which you and your friends will never return. Mark my words, my young friend, if you leave on this journey you will die.”

“Why are you saying this?” asked Marcus in anger as he stepped back from Gaut.

“You still have time to escape. Go now with your friend while you can,” said Gaut as he walked backward into the crowd. “Remember—not everyone is who they seem to be.”

Marcus watched as the vile figure disappeared into the crowd. He felt very nervous that Gaut was watching him so closely. He started to wonder if speaking to Sabrina had been foolish. Quickly he turned and walked back to the fruit vendor to collect the oranges.

Marcus almost ran back from the town, his heart heavy as he thought of how much he longed for Sabrina. He knew she also felt something for him and this made his sadness greater. But the worst pain came from knowing she was trapped and suffering.

Falzar opened an eye as Marcus stood before him with the oranges. He smiled knowingly up at Marcus as he stood. “Ah! I can see from your face the magic has really started. I hope you found what you were looking for in the market.”

“When I was in the marketplace...” Marcus was about to tell Falzar about Gaut, but then he decided not to say anything.

“Yes?” asked Falzar, lifting his sword and taking the oranges from Marcus.

“Oh nothing,” lied Marcus as he walked over to collect his sword. “I just think I need more practice.”

“Indeed you do,” said Falzar, throwing one of the oranges into the air and swiping at it with several fast strokes of his sword, before catching it.

Marcus looked in amazement as the skin unwound from the orange in a single long piece and then the fruit fell into segments in Falzar’s hand.

“Orange?” asked Falzar, smiling.

* * * *

For the remainder of the day they practiced with the swords. Marcus was determined to improve and Falzar was pleased with his progress. At the end of the day they walked back toward the house.

“Well, my young apprentice,” said Falzar, as he sheathed his sword, “I think that after today you are ready to take the next step on your journey. I feel that your heart has now opened up enough to learn some of the basics of magic.”

Marcus placed his sword down and looked at Falzar. His face seemed to be glowing in the evening light. There really was something ancient in his eyes and it was something that made Marcus feel warm.

“So what am I to do?” asked Marcus.

“I will teach the very first spell I learned,” said Falzar, handing Marcus his sword. “It’s something that indeed may be useful on your adventure. I’m going to teach you how to make light for when you travel into the darkness.”

“So what do I do?” asked Marcus as he held the sword firmly in his right hand. “Do I need to say hocus pocus or something?”

“No, no,” said Falzar, and burst out laughing. “Magic has nothing to do with speaking or incanting things. That’s what these so called conmen say—people who have no clue about magic. As I said, magic does not come from the mind, but from the heart. You don’t think magic—you feel it.”

“Oh,” said Marcus, a little embarrassed. “It’s just that I’m not used to all this magic stuff.”

“Don’t worry,” said Falzar. “Just close your eyes and do as I say, and the magic will flow. Now hold the sword with both hands above your head, and as you do so, you must start to feel there is light coming from the sword. Feel the light—don’t think about the light. This is the way.”

Marcus stood with the sword above his head and started to imagine light coming from the sword. He screwed his eyes tightly and tried as hard as he could to think of that light shining.

“No, no,” said Falzar. “You’re thinking of the light. You need to clear your mind and actually feel the warmth of the light on your face.”

Marcus’s mind suddenly did clear, and with it he actually felt as if a bright light were coming from the sword. He could feel the warmth of the light on his face.

“Now open your eyes and look,” said Falzar excitedly.

Marcus opened his eyes and looked up at the sword. It was very faint, but he could definitely see a blue light radiating from the blade. Marcus smiled and in his excitement released the feeling of the light. It immediately faded.

“Good! Good!” said Falzar, clapping his hands. “On your first attempt as well. That’s very impressive. It took me two attempts to get any light. Indeed this is a good sign.”

“Well, it was a bit of a pathetic light,” said Marcus, feeling a little embarrassed at the glow.

“Not at all, Marcus,” said Falzar, clapping him on the back. “Remember only a few can ever perform magic and you have proven that you certainly can. You should be very proud of yourself. This is just the beginning. In the next few weeks I will teach you many other simple spells and then this will unlock the door for you to reveal a much greater magic. Be patient and you too will have this great power.”

With that, Falzar raised his hands and bright white light shone from him, so strong that Marcus had to look away. Then, as the light disappeared, he looked back and Falzar was gone.

CLOSE TO THE ENEMY

“Good news! Good news!” said James, panting, as he stepped into the kitchen. “Today you have a day off from all of these sword fighting and magic lessons.”

“What do you mean?” asked Marcus, standing straight, with a smile on his face.

“We’re going on a trip today—if you want to come. But we need to be quick, as the wind is going to be blowing in the right direction only for the morning. Then it’ll change by midday to bring us back. Wake up your sleepy friend and let’s run down to the port.”

“But where are we going?” asked Marcus in excitement. “Where’s the trip to?”

“We’re going to the colony,” said James, gathering some food from the table and wrapping it in a piece of cloth.

Toby appeared around the door. He was half asleep, with a big red line across his face. “What, we’re going back to Salina?” he yawned, as he sat at the table. “I’m happy as long as we don’t have to take our swords with us. I’m tired of all these lessons.”

“Err, not exactly,” said James, looking down sheepishly. “I was thinking of the other colony. And with the wind being perfect to go there, it seemed a great idea.”

“Then where are we going?” asked Marcus.

“I thought we could go to Panarea. It’s really the perfect sailing day. We can go to see my friend Dario. I mean it’s so long since I’ve seen him and he’d be delighted to meet you both.”

Marcus looked at Toby with a frown. He was a little concerned that they should be going so far north, as they had been constantly warned by Falzar they should take great care and not stray too far from Lipari.

“But has Falzar agreed that we’re to go there?” asked Marcus, sure that he would not allow them to go so close to Stromboli. “It seems unlikely after everything he’s said to us in the past few weeks.”

“Well, he sort of agreed in principal. I saw him last night and asked if we could go for a short sail to the colony. He said it was all right, but that we were to be careful.”

“Are you sure he knows which colony you meant?” said Toby, resting a hand on James’s shoulder.

James looked a bit cross at all these questions. “Look, if you two don’t want to come, then just say so.” He folded his arms in protest. “I mean I came here to get you a day off to come and see a friend, and all you do is ask questions. But look, if you really want to stay here with Falzar and work under the hot sun all day, then it can easily be arranged.”

Marcus really wanted to go and see another one of the islands. He’d felt almost like a prisoner and he’d worked so hard for Falzar that he did feel a break would do him good.

“Well, if Falzar said we could go to the colony, then I suppose it’s all right,” Marcus answered slowly and deliberately.

“I’m good for going,” said Toby. “I’ve been stuck here far too long. I crave some open seas.”

“Then it’s agreed,” said James firmly, with a big smile on his face. “So let’s get our things and get going while the wind is right.”

* * * *

Soon Marcus was hoisting the mainsail of James’s little boat and they were speeding on a good wind away from Lipari. James had been right: the wind was blowing them straight toward Panarea. The boat sped effortlessly across the blue, mirror like waters.

The journey was swift, taking little time, and soon they were approaching the beautiful island of Panarea. It was one of the oldest of the volcanoes, extinct for many thousands of years. The weather and sea had distorted the island into a low flat wedge shape. Against the bright blue sky, it looked like a light jewel sitting in the sea. Upon one side of the island sat a cluster of small white dwellings that shone in the brilliant sunlight.

The rocky seabed suddenly appeared from the inky blue water and they could see schools of fish flashing around the boat as the waters became crystal clear. In the natural rocky bay there were fewer than ten small boats that belonged to the colonists. They were tethered to long wooden poles that jutted from the sea. James guided the boat carefully between the rocks and against the small wooden pontoon in the harbor.

A young man of their age was standing and waving. He was short and thin, his muscles well defined. He wore only white calf length trousers and a red bandana. The bandana covered his jet-black hair and a few curls escaped from the back. His skin was tanned deep brown, bordering on black, and a bright white smile stood out on his square face. He stood barefoot on the hot pontoon.

“Hi!” he shouted to the little boat as he grabbed the bow rope and pulled it close to the pontoon. “I’m so pleased you could come. As soon as I felt the winds this morning, I just knew you would set sail for here.”

James jumped from the boat and embraced him, both of them dancing around with pleasure at seeing each other.

“It’s been so long,” said the stranger to James. “I thought you’d forgotten all about us out here.”

“Too long, my friend. Far too long,” said James happily. “Yes as soon as I saw the winds change last night, I knew this morning would be perfect for a visit. I must confess it’s as if we sometimes have a link between us when we think the same.”

Marcus secured the ropes of the boat and climbed out onto the pontoon, followed by Toby. He looked around the tranquil bay and felt he really liked it there. He knew instantly why James was so keen for them to come.

“May I introduce my new friends?” said James, gesturing to them. “This is Marcus and Toby—the famous outsiders. And this, my friends, is Dario—the famous octopus hunter.”

They shook hands firmly and beamed smiles at each other. Dario was such a lively soul. He almost danced as he walked up the pontoon, chatting wildly about what had been going on in the colony and asking about life in Lipari.

“I’ve already heard about you both,” said Dario with a sparkle in his eyes. “I hope it’s all true. ’Cause if it is, then it’s going to be exciting around here for you both.”

“Well not everything is as exciting as it seems,” said Marcus as he thought of what he would need to do. “I’d be quite happy to have it boring really.”

They walked up from the rocky bay on a single shale track toward the colony. Twelve white dwellings lay on the lush green hillside—each one short and squat,

with a small blue door. They each had fishing nets with cork floats draped across the front of them.

“How many of you live here?” asked Toby when he could get a word in between James and Dario.

“There’s not too many of us, and we only stay here in the summer,” said Dario as they wound their way up the hillside. “In winter the sea becomes too rough to go back and forth to Lipari, so we go to live there. But in the summer the fishing here is great and we can sell to the main town, who are always willing to pay handsomely.”

Marcus looked back and could see the tranquil bay below with its clear inviting waters, the rocky bottom swarming with shoals of brightly colored fish. The sun was now high and the day extremely hot; even the light breeze offered no respite. He followed as Dario beckoned them into his house and offered them some cool water.

“So what’s the main news here then?” asked James, after he glugged down the water.

“Well, as always there’s lots of talk,” whispered Dario, “about all kinds of things that make people very uncomfortable.”

“Such as?” asked James.

“Well only the other day one of the other colonists chased a shoal of fish north around the island. He came so as to face you know where. He swears he saw shadows across the water. He says he’s certain they were small black boats, and that upon the sails was emblazoned the sign of the dark island.”

“What, they have boats?” asked James. “You mean they’re sailing from the island.”

“He said the light was fading and he wasn’t too happy to stay on the north side of the island to check, but he feels certain they came from there.”

James looked at Dario wide-eyed. “I’ve heard many tales of who inhabits the dark island, and that they are indeed evil creatures. But this is new. The fact that they now have boats and they may be daring to leave the island is something all islanders have feared. When we were children our parents often frightened us by saying ‘Be good or they’ll come from the island for you.’”

Dario placed his cup down. “We’ve talked enough of such dark matters. I hope the fisherman was wrong. Anyway, the day is young and the sea is clear, so let’s go get an octopus.” He smiled as he led them from the house. “There’s a small bay around the coast where they breed like crazy. Nothing tastes better than fresh octopus.”

They stepped from the house out into the dazzling sunshine and climbed across a rocky patch of ground until they joined a narrow path. They stayed on the path for about twenty minutes. It wound around the island between twisted olive trees and scrubby plants. Eventually it turned over the rise of a hill and then curved down steeply into a shaded cove. They all ran to the clear water and dived in, shouting with a loud splash, making a school of small silver fish dart away from them. The water was cool and refreshing after the baking heat of the mid-day sun.

* * * *

Dario was holding a short metal stick and he sucked in a lungful of air before disappearing beneath the surface of the sea. He kicked and dove deep to the bottom of the pool. He swam to the seabed and thrust the stick sharply into a hole under a rock. He felt it strike deep into the octopus, which released a cloud of black ink. Dario pulled on the stick and dragged out the wriggling creature, which he brought to the surface. Quickly he swam to the shore, climbing up onto the rocks where he began to flog the octopus to make it tender. He then spread it out on a rock.

He looked up and could see his friends were swimming some way out and were about to pass from the bay. He suddenly realized where they were heading and started to shout for them to stop. It was too late: they had already passed out of the bay and were turning the corner. He quickly dove back into the sea with his heart racing, fear gripping him. He swam fast, hoping to stop them from passing too far beyond the edge of the bay—but it was again too late.

He arrived behind them and found all three staring into the distance. The dark cone of Stromboli towered from the sea, black plumes of ash rising from its top. Streams of lava flowed down its sides, creeping into the sea, sending up great clouds of steam. It was black—a lightless black that made it look cold. It seemed to draw and extinguish even the warmth from the sky.

They bobbed in the water, simply staring at the evil object, listening to the booms and hisses that floated across the sea.

“You can see the lava from here,” said Toby, his eyes not leaving it. “It’s strange. It just makes you want to—stare at it.”

“You shouldn’t look at it. You shouldn’t. It’s evil,” said Dario, his voice trembling. “We need to go back to the bay. No one ever should cast their eyes upon it. Please come back to the bay.”

* * * *

Marcus floated, his eyes fixed on the volcano. His mind was drawn toward it, his spirit feeling weakened by its proximity. Something was dragging him toward it—mentally and physically. His body began to drift in the water. He could almost taste the ash in the air, which seemed bitter in his mouth.

“I need to go there,” whispered Marcus in a dreamy voice. “It’s calling me toward it. I need to go.”

“What are you saying? Are you crazy?” shouted Dario.

“No. It’s my destiny,” said Marcus, falling deeper and deeper into a trance. He floated, too quickly for the current, away from the group. “I must go to the island. It’s calling me.”

* * * *

“Oh no. He’s drifting away from us. Help me!” said Toby, swimming after him and grabbing him by the arm. “Marcus! Marcus, wake up! Please wake up! Pull yourself away from it!”

Toby could feel the force dragging Marcus toward the volcano, which terrified him. It was as if other hands were about his body, pulling him through the water. He kicked hard, but the pull was getting stronger, and he too was dragged through the water. Then he could hear the dreadful noise. It was the sound of distant drums beating rhythmically.

James suddenly arrived. With trembling hands he grabbed onto Toby. “Dario! Dario, help us! Something awful has got him.”

Dario thrashed in the water and grabbed hold of Marcus who was now floating with his head in the water, face up, mumbling incomprehensible words in a strange language.

They thrashed against the force as the drums intensified. They fought the water, swimming hard as the volcano belched out great clouds of ash. The force pulling Marcus was too strong and all four were being dragged further from the shore. All were screaming and shouting to awaken Marcus—but he was deep in a dark trance, his heart beating in time with the drums.

They could no longer hold him for fear they would all be dragged to Stromboli. Just at the moment he was pulling from their grip and they feared he was lost, Marcus heard the distant voice of Falzar.

“Fight, Marcus! Fight! This is your destiny, but this is not the time. You are not ready yet.”

At these words, Marcus suddenly escaped the dark trance and realized where he was. He closed his eyes and turned his back to the volcano. The force pulling on him immediately stopped. At that moment the sound of the drums ceased and all that could be heard was a long wailing cry in the wind that eventually faded.

Seizing the moment, they grabbed hold of Marcus and dragged him around the headland and to the shore. They pulled him up onto the rocks where he sat trembling, his knees to his chest and his arms wrapped around them.

“What happened?” asked Toby. “What was pulling you?”

“It’s the darkness,” said Dario, his voice trembling. “Its power has grown and now it is stretching beyond the dark island.”

“There’s something evil there all right,” said James as he glanced back nervously. “I could feel it, as if cold hands were upon him. Long cold hands.”

“It may have been something even more evil and powerful than the Strombolians,” Dario added.

“Who are the Strombolians?” asked Toby. “Or maybe I don’t want to know.”

Dario checked over his shoulder before answering. “They say they are half human and half some other creature. They’re evil souls awaiting the return of their dark master. They live in their dark halls, eating the flesh of unwary sailors who venture near the islands. Of late here we have felt the shadow of the volcano and some of us say it is time to leave. They say the Strombolians have been seen abroad and that is the sign he has finally returned.” He stopped and looked upon Marcus’s face. “I hope you are who they say you are, and I hope I live long enough to see the prophecy come true.”

Suddenly a large boom from the volcano echoed around the bay, making them all cower close to the rocks.

“Enough talk,” said James in a trembling voice. “We must leave and leave now. I was stupid to bring us here in such dangerous times. We can’t be on the water when darkness comes.”

“I agree. You need to sail back to Lipari now and don’t even look back,” said Dario. “The darkness has indeed left the island and now we are all at risk. It is better that you all get back to the safety of Lipari and the protection of Falzar.”

“What of the Strombolians?” asked Toby, his hands trembling. “What if they follow us?”

“Beware of any boats that lie between here and Lipari,” said Dario as he started to guide them back to the path. “Remember, the fisherman said they were

small black boats with black sails. Emblazoned upon the sails in red is the sign of the volcano. If you see anything like that, sail as fast as the winds will take you.”

* * * *

It was an hour later when they hoisted the sail and the little boat started to move from the pontoon. Dario stood waving solemnly as he watched his friends sail from the island.

James looked back with a heavy heart. He knew this was no longer the fun filled colony he had always loved to visit. It was now the last civilized post before the darkness.

The wind had moved again to their backs and was blowing directly from the direction of Stromboli and toward home. They could smell the foul stench of sulfur. And every so often they could hear strange whisperings in the wind that thankfully faded as they made good speed across the sea. All three sat silently in the boat just hoping to be back on Lipari.

Marcus seemed to have changed after what had happened. He was now quiet and lost in his thoughts, his face full of fear. It had been so long since he had even thought of the dark volcano, and now that he had seen it so close and felt its power he was terrified of his destiny.

* * * *

Dusk was falling as the small boat reached the harbor in Lipari Town. They tied off the lines and walked back to the main town close together, not daring to speak, all happier they were now back safely.

As they walked, Marcus could see some way ahead of them near the small square three large figures huddled together. He immediately recognized one—it was Jonas, the thug who had kicked Pippin. He was unmistakable.

The one in the middle was the biggest and meanest looking. He was a towering figure with shoulder length blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. His blonde eyebrows curved sharply down in a V on his forehead, making him appear to constantly frown. He had a long nose that was slightly bent to one side, with a bump in the middle. He wore a tight cotton sleeveless shirt and on his wrists were broad leather bands. His tight black trousers were tucked inside heavy leather boots that had small leather wings stitched to them.

Marcus then noticed that in the gloom behind them slunk the skinny hunched figure of Gaut, his one beady eye looking at them. He was whispering into the ear of the thug with blonde hair.

“Oh, oh. This is trouble,” said James as he gulped. “That big blonde one is Erik.”

Erik and his henchmen suddenly left the side of Gaut and came striding toward them. Without a word Erik punched Marcus in the mouth, making him sit with a splat on the ground.

The other hooligan, somewhat shorter with darker hair that was long on top and cropped close to his head just above the ears, grabbed Marcus and pulled him to his feet. He held him firmly as he sneered. He wore a large gold earring in his right ear. From that ear trailed a long scar to his top lip. He too was broad with powerful arms.

“I don’t care who they say you are,” Erik spat in Marcus’s face. “I’m telling you to keep away from my woman. If I even see you looking at her, you’ll end up with broken legs. Understand?”

Marcus was still dazed as the thug dropped him and turned to walk away. Jonas laughed as he slapped Erik on the back.

Marcus’s head was spinning and his bottom lip was pulsating. He watched as from near the wall the blonde thug reached and grabbed Sabrina, pulling her from the shadows. He could see she had a hand shaped bruise on the side of her face.

“I told you to keep away from his woman,” said a thin whispery voice in Marcus’s ear. It was Gaut.

“Get out of here, you,” said Toby, pushing Gaut backward. “You no good evil snitch. Get back to your masters.”

Gaut smiled and his dark tongue passed across his yellow teeth as he turned and walked away.

James pulled Marcus to his feet and dusted him down, shaking his head. “Some day you’re having.”

“I’ll get him for that,” said Marcus as his head cleared a little. He was furious that he’d not seen the punch coming, that they were out muscled and that the thug had hit Sabrina.

“Not now. Not now,” said James, watching them walk away into the town. “Just wait. Remember every dog has his day.”

Suddenly there was a loud barking sound and Pippin jumped from the shadows, snapping at the thugs. He gnashed his teeth, making them all jump sideways. Erik stumbled with fright and fell into a cart of ripe tomatoes, squashing

them as he tumbled to the floor. Laughter burst from the crowd as they pointed at him covered from head to foot in tomato juice. One of the other thugs kicked at Pippin, but was too slow. Pippin escaped and came bounding up to Marcus excitedly barking and licking at Marcus's hand.

Marcus smiled at the little dog and was grateful for what he'd done. He bent down, patted the furry hero on the head, making him roll on his back and kick his legs in the air.

"I think he's becoming your dog," said James, patting Pippin on the stomach. "I guess today was this dog's day."

They all laughed as they watched Erik, soaked in tomatoes, disappear into the crowd with his cronies. Gaut rubbed at the juice with a dirty grey handkerchief.

"So that's the mighty Erik," said Marcus as he rubbed his bruised lip and watched them disappear.

"Yep, that is the infamous Erik, and he's the one who's going to marry Sabrina. I tried to warn you that he's a thug and a bully."

"But how can he be allowed to behave in such a way?" asked Toby as he tickled little Pippin under the chin.

"His father is so rich that no one says anything for fear he'll repossess their lands," said James. "Once, the town council took them to task and fined the parents. Erik's father just paid the fine and then had everyone except Cornelius thrown from the council."

"He doesn't look like he's from here," said Toby. "He's so big, blonde and oafish."

"No, he doesn't," said James. "That's because his family are said to be the descendents of Norsemen shipwrecked here many years ago. Actually, he's a Viking. I guess that's why he's so big, aggressive and stupid."

"And his friends?" asked Marcus. "They seem to be Vikings too."

"Oh the local thugs are Jonas and Niklas. They're cousins by blood and equally as unsavory. My suggestion is that you listen to him and keep away from Sabrina. And if you have any sense in that thick head of yours, you'll turn and walk away when you see them coming."

"I'm not afraid of anyone," said Marcus.

"Well you should be!" said Falzar angrily from behind them. "What kind of fool adventure was it today to go so near to the enemy?"

James looked down and shuffled his feet.

"You! You!" said Falzar, prodding James's shoulder. "You should know better than these fools! Just be glad that from today Marcus has no more than a bloodied lip. If the enemy had grasped him, all now would be lost." Falzar waved his

hand over Marcus's lip and suddenly the pain and bruise was gone. Falzar then laid a heavy hand on Marcus's shoulder. "What you did today may have cost us these islands. You are not ready yet to face him—not yet. Now he knows for sure that you are here and that you are the one. He will move sooner now, and that is not good for us. Return to the house. Tomorrow we need to double our efforts, for we have no time to waste."

Falzar suddenly spun with his cloak and vanished before them in a blinding flash.

"Are we in trouble?" asked Toby.

"More than we think," answered Marcus as he thought of the dark volcano and the power he'd felt earlier. He had mixed feelings of fear and guilt for having been so stupid as to go to Panarea. Now the evil knew who he was. Suddenly he could feel something was searching for him—something from the dark island.

THE STORY OF GAZHUL

The morning's sword practice passed in a somber mood. Falzar was stern and brutal, forcing Marcus to practice harder than ever. Marcus and Toby fought in silence, not daring to say anything in case they further enraged Falzar. They had seen him dark and menacing the night before and it had scared them both. Falzar was no weak old man; he had an air of power neither had sensed before.

At lunch they sat under the shade of a tree and ate in silence, Falzar glancing up now and again at both Toby and Marcus. At once he caught Marcus's eye and gave a small smile.

"You're a brave young man, but equally foolish."

Marcus smiled, feeling a sense of relief as the anger in Falzar had melted away. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause any trouble for anyone, honestly. The last thing I would ever want to do is put myself or anyone else in any danger."

"I know. It's no one's fault, but you three should know better. I mean you all know these are dark times and the enemy is abroad, looking for you. I've tried to warn you but perhaps now you have felt his power you will accept he is real and his reach is long."

Marcus felt threatened by these words and looked around nervously. He could almost sense he was now under the gaze of Gazhul and at any moment one of his agents could be spying upon him. His mind raced back to bay. He shivered as he thought of the many unseen hands that had pulled him through the water.

"Yesterday I could feel something, a power from Stromboli. What was it?"

Falzar breathed in deeply through his nose and then nodded slowly. "I'm convinced Gazhul now knows for sure you have arrived in the islands. I'm positive

Gazhul has guessed I am preparing you for this adventure.” He rubbed a hand slowly down his face. “I think it’s time you know more about why you are here. I guess you have a right to know, and now it can do no more harm. So let me begin.”

Falzar cleared his throat and started on the tale. “Stromboli is something of evil. It is known as a black volcano and it has its roots deep down in the earth. Some say its roots actually go all the way down to hell and the fire that comes from it comes from hell itself. Many say each black volcano contains its own dark spirit, an evil being that wishes to hurl death from its peak with burning rocks and lava. Stromboli is no different.

Over a thousand years ago a group of dark druids preached an evil magic. It’s said they learned of the powerful spirits of the black volcanoes. After many years they created a way to release the spirit of the volcano and bring it into a dangerous, evil, living form. They believed they could control this evil spirit—make it do their bidding—but they were to be proven very wrong.”

Marcus shivered as he listened intently.

Falzar looked at the fear on Marcus’s face. “In the north there is a great island filled with volcanoes that soar above its great snow covered plains. The dark druids spent many years trying to summon the spirit from the biggest of the black volcanoes. Eventually their wicked work released one of the cruelest spirits—from the great volcano called Ankarinak. However, they were deceived, for the spirit was stronger than they had imagined and they could not control it. Instead, it made *them* serve *it*. Any who would not bow before it were killed and flung into the fires of the volcano.

“Many served the creature, making it stronger and giving it the name Gazhul—which, as I said, in the northern tongue means *evil with no mercy* or *dark prince*. Fortunately for us, one of the druids realized the mistake they made. He foresaw the destruction that would come to the world and decided to try and get help. Through great danger, he escaped and crossed the great Northern Sea, where he managed to come to the western islands and the white druids.

“It had been a tranquil time in the world for many centuries. We were many, good druids, who used our powers to make the world a better place.”

Marcus watched as peace flitted across Falzar’s face. It seemed as if he was younger and lighter as he thought back to the past. Then he watched as Falzar leaned forward and released his memories.

“Gazhul and his dark wizards soon moved from the great ice lands and across to the mainland of Europe, spreading evil and corruption. They preyed on the weak minded and recruited evil servants with the aim of waging a war of evil. We

were many in those days and as his forces grew, we entered into a greater war. It was Gazhul and his dark forces against us—the Ancients and our army of wizards.

“A great battle raged across the north and eventually, through no more than good fortune, we turned the tide and the evil ones were forced to the south. They were driven across the mountains and then funneled toward Italy. We knew the only way to destroy Gazhul was to send him back to a black volcano. Our scouts had gone ahead and found one dark volcano in the south—it was the island of Stromboli.

“In a great final battle we forced Gazhul onto Stromboli and eventually he was cast down into the fires of the volcano. Once more he was trapped. Many of his dark servants were killed, but a handful escaped and dispersed across the world. Although we hunted them down for many years, many were never found.

“It had been a great long war and many of the Ancients were destroyed, and with them slipped away much of the good they had brought to the world. This evil had left a stain on the world and never again would there be the same peace there had been before.

“Although Gazhul was now trapped, he was not gone. And there would always be a threat from him if any of his servants ever returned to try and release him. So we decided we needed to hide these islands away from the world. In those times no one lived on these barren pieces of rock, so we thought they would make an ideal prison for this dark creature.

“Those of us who remained used a powerful magic to hide and protect the islands. We created the great fog, an impenetrable barrier. No one would ever be able to escape from these islands, as the fog would always overcome them and deliver them back here. However, our magic was flawed: we had not realized it was powerful in only one direction. We had not foreseen that a strong storm could bring people from the outside to the islands. This was our greatest mistake.

“For the past one thousand years his dark servants searched for him and eventually his dark will brought them to the islands. He guided them to the fog and summoned dark storms, which delivered them to him. However, when they arrived, they found the dark barren rock of Stromboli had no food and no shelter. Again he had deceived them.

“Over time the dark druids became less powerful and his evil twisted their minds. The only way they could survive was to transfigure each other into half human creatures that could feed off the sulfur and lava.”

Falzar’s eyes widened as he lowered his voice.

“But still they need flesh to nourish themselves. It’s told they create storms to bring sailors through the fog so they can feast upon them and nourish their putrid bodies. They create great rumors of treasures that lay in the islands to entice their prey.”

Toby grimaced. “I can imagine the creatures lurking amongst the ash and lava of the black volcano. I don’t want to think of them eating the flesh of the poor victims of a storm. How horrible.”

“In all this time,” continued Falzar without pausing, “their skin has turned black and their eyes have turned red, like the fire of the volcano. Their teeth are sharp and their minds are even more depraved. Their only desires are to serve their dark master, escape from the islands and dominate the earth. We must beware, for these creatures are children of the deepest evil and will show no mercy.”

“After his defeat, Gazhul became weak. It would take nearly a thousand years for him to return. We knew this and it concerned us greatly. We now know time was our enemy—for many things happened in the world in the last thousand years.”

“The first thing was that people were shipwrecked on the islands. Unable to escape from the fog, they settled here and found a good life. The volcanic islands had become fertile and the seas were bountiful. Many people came over the years, and soon the colony became an established community. They spread to Salina and then eventually to Panarea.”

“However, in those years other things were drawn to the islands by his dark power. They gravitated to his evil, and now many dangers lie in these islands. Dangers you will have to confront if you are to fulfill your quest.”

Marcus felt a chill down his back at these words. He could feel the evil around him and he knew he would come face to face with it. He gulped slowly as Falzar continued.

“When we returned to check on the islands we were concerned and felt we needed to protect the people here. We understood we needed to make the fortress of the fog stronger. We also decided we needed a greater magic to protect the islands from possible attacks of the Strombolians.”

“Near these islands were created two stones of great power. Arnak, the mighty southern wizard who had a great skill in the way of stones, created them. These twin stones were given to us to defend these islands from his evil. One was brought here to Lipari, for its power is designed to repel all evil magic. This is the blue stone of Arnak, and as long as it is on Lipari, Gazhul cannot set foot here and so cannot break the magic of the fog.”

However, as I said, there are two stones. The other one is the red stone of Arnak and it is the opposite of the blue stone. It actually strengthens evil and, if possessed by Gazhul, would allow him to invade this island. He could then break the magic of the fog and escape into the world.”

“So why create the red stone?” asked Marcus. “I mean it seems to serve no purpose other than that of evil.”

“As with everything in life, there needs to be a balance and an opposite. So to create the blue stone, Arnak also had to create the red stone to make the balance. Arnak was told to hide the red stone and make it secure so no one would ever find it or be able to reach it. Before he died he assured us he had protected the stone with the help of many of the Ancients.”

“Why keep that stone at all?” asked Toby. “I mean once the blue stone was here, why not just destroy the red stone?”

“For the blue stone to exist, the red stone must exist. And it must be close enough for the magic to be linked. Should the stones ever be brought together, they would destroy each other and Lipari would be defenseless.

“In the last years, one of the last of the Ancients, Haldar, went to Stromboli to spy. However, Gazhul’s servants were much stronger than we had thought and Haldar was captured. Our fear has been that Gazhul will have used his evil powers to drag information from Haldar. I fear he may have discovered how he could escape. I am convinced he now knows about the stones and if he is to escape, he must destroy them. Then he will destroy Lipari and the colonies before escaping through the fog. I am sure his creatures are now looking for the red stone with all speed.”

Falzar reached down into his shirt and pulled out a pendant. It was similar to the one he had given to Marcus. He held it by the chain, and as it slowly spun it seemed to glow.

“This is our sign. It is the sign of the Ancients. It once held great power across all the lands. Now, with the passing of Haldar and with the sad news I bring from the north, I know I am the last of the Ancients. It is a sad time and a dangerous time. As our strength disappears, his grows stronger. Even I am now too old and weak to risk this last great adventure. I must remain here as the last defense of the blue stone—should you fail.”

Falzar pointed up the mountainside to the white observatory.

“There rests the blue stone of Arnak—the last defense of the free world. He will try to breach the building and destroy the stones. Should this happen, these islands will be lost and the great fog will be lifted. Then he will be unchallenged

to spread his evil across the world and everything will be lost. There will be a great age of pain and misery.”

The sky seemed to darken at these words. The air fell chill and silence fell across the island. Falzar placed a hand on Marcus’s shoulder.

“This is your burden now. This is your quest. You are to find the red stone of Arnak and bring it to the deep abyss between here and Vulcano. You are to cast the stone into the depths, where even he will not be able to retrieve it. This is the last safe place and our last hope. But there is a grave risk. The risk is that the abyss is so deep the two stones will no longer be connected and their power will be lost anyway. But this is now a risk we must take, for if he gets the stone first our doom is sealed.”

“But why don’t you just destroy him before he can get the stones?” asked Marcus hopefully. “I mean you stopped him once. Why not stop him again?”

“A thousand years ago I would have tried,” said Falzar, smiling. “However, even someone like me grows old and fades with time. I am not who I was, and even my spirit grows tired of adventure. No. No, this now is your adventure, your test. Should you prevail, you will bear the mark of the Ancients and take it north, for greater adventures await you there.”

Marcus stood and backed away, shaking his head. He was scared and confused. He had no wish to hear of such things and be involved in such matters. He couldn’t understand why he had been brought here.

“But what can I do? I’m just the son of a fisherman. Why me?” he stuttered. “I may have learned some simple spells from you and how to hold a sword, but I’m not who you think I am. If I go, I know I’ll fail.”

“Marcus,” said Falzar, standing, “search your soul and you will know this is your quest. There is no mistake. You must know that if you fail, all those you hold dear to you will suffer at the hands of this evil. Gazhul takes great pleasure in the suffering of people. Do you want him to make your father, your friends and Sabrina suffer?”

Falzar laid a hand on Marcus’s head and suddenly Marcus looked in horror. Images of death and destruction filled his mind. He could see his father and all the friends of his village lying dead, their bodies scattered in the dirt. The sky fell to blackness and filled with the stench of burning flesh. He could hear screams in the blackened sky and then he could see Sabrina. She lay, dead, at the feet of some giant beast that laughed at its glorious destruction. On the wind he could hear the beating of drums and booms from Stromboli. His knees buckled and he fell to the ground, looking up at Falzar.

“It’s terrible...So terrible. Please make the visions stop.”

Falzar removed his hand from Marcus's head and the horrific visions passed.

"This is why you must take this burden," said Falzar. "You are the chosen one. There is no mistake."

Marcus felt as if a great weight had been lifted from him. He rubbed a hand across his face and closed his eyes. "If this is my burden, I must take it. But I really don't understand. Why me? Why me? I never asked for any of this."

Falzar pulled Marcus to his feet and strength returned to Marcus's body. Warmth ran from Falzar's hands and he felt at once energized.

"You are not who you think you are," said Falzar as he held Marcus and looked deep into his eyes. "Only through this adventure will you know who you are. Be strong and search your heart for the power you need. You will prevail."

Marcus dropped his head and then looked back into Falzar's eyes. Something began to stir in his heart, and against his instincts he felt the strength to accept the quest. "Tell me where the stone is and I will find it."

"There is only one on this earth who can tell you that," said Falzar. "The hag called Heberdina is the last of the seers. Only she will be able to tell you. When the time is right I will give you all the knowledge you will need to succeed in your adventure. Now is still not our time. You have much to learn if you are to survive. So we must double our efforts."

"Will you come with me?"

"I cannot. I must remain at the observatory as the last defense should you fail and he wins the stone. Maybe in the end I will need to fight Gazhul again. But, don't fear, I will not send you on this perilous journey alone. You will need the help and courage of others. Many of you may perish, but one may actually complete the quest."

Falzar turned and looked north, his face seeming old and tired, as if a weight was suddenly on his spirit.

"The darkness is here, Marcus, and Gazhul has awakened. The hour to fight is approaching. Let us train."

DARKNESS APPROACHES

Sabrina's eyes opened slowly and she stared up into the darkness of her bedroom. She wondered what noise had disturbed her from her deep sleep. After a few moments her eyes closed again and she settled to sleep.

Again the noise disturbed her. It was a quiet hissing from outside her window. It made her sit up in her bed, listening intently.

"Pssst."

Once more she heard the hissing from outside the window. She was afraid but curious. So she slipped from her bed and crept to the open window. The moon waned but there was still enough light to see the pallid shapes of the vineyard.

Sabrina stared into the shadows of the long grass surrounding the house, but couldn't make out from whence the noise had come. Although anxious, she was determined to find out who or what was making the noise. She looked around and grabbed her shoes, lacing them on her feet before climbing through the window. Carefully she lowered herself to the ground, listening intently. All she could hear was the rhythmic sound of night crickets as she walked toward the long grass.

A light breeze blew from the sea moving the grass from side to side, making it impossible to see whether anything was creeping about. However Sabrina thought she could hear something shuffling there, something large. She stopped in the half-light, afraid.

"Who's there?" she whispered into the grass.

"Pssst," came the reply, making her heart pound.

“Who is it?” she asked, now more afraid and suddenly feeling very vulnerable. She started to wonder whether she should call for her father.

Suddenly something moved in the grass behind her and pounced on her, placing a hand across her mouth. She almost screamed but then turned to see the smiling face of Marcus.

“Shhh,” said Marcus as he pulled Sabrina down into the grass.

Sabrina looked at him furiously as he removed his hand. “You idiot. What are you doing? You could have scared me to death.”

“I had to see you,” he replied with an excited smile on his face. “All I do is think about you day and night. I had to come and find you and lay my eyes upon your face.”

“If my father finds you here, all you’ll do is think about the pitch fork in your back.” She looked around nervously. “You’ve taken a big risk to come here.”

“I don’t care. I feel so strongly for you I had to see you one more time before I go. I don’t care if an army of Strombolians were here, I would have come to see you. I just have to tell you how I feel about you before I leave.”

Sabrina looked at him with a concerned expression on her face. “What do you mean before you leave?”

“I can’t say. But I just wanted to see you before I go.” He reached for her hand. “I just know there’s something in our destiny. It’s something I knew from the second I saw you. Tell me you feel the same.”

“Marcus!” said Sabrina, pulling her hand back. “I’ve told you, I can’t. I just can’t.”

“But why? I know you feel something for me. I know it. Just tell me you don’t and I’ll leave now and you’ll never see me again.”

Sabrina paused and looked into Marcus’s bright blue eyes. She glanced at the contours of his handsome face, thinking how she had always dreamed of him. She smiled briefly but then shook her head. “I’ve told you, I’m to marry Erik and that’s the end of it. Even if I did feel something for you, I’d have to deny it.”

“No!” protested Marcus. “You’re free to choose what you want, and I know you don’t want him. Just tell him. Just tell him what you really feel in your heart and you’ll be free. No one can force you to do anything.”

Sabrina turned away. Her heart was now even heavier. She knew the sacrifice she was making was cruel, but she could not see her family thrown from the land.

“It’s not that easy. There are reasons I need to do this. There are things you’ll never understand.”

“I know all about his family and the land,” said Marcus, grabbing her hand again. “That’s no reason to spend your life trapped. Falzar will help you. I mean

he's a mighty wizard. He's bound to be able to help. If he doesn't help, then I'll help. I'll do something. Just please don't throw your life away on account of Erik."

Sabrina smiled as tears formed in her sparkling eyes. She squeezed his hand as she looked at him, feeling a deep love for him.

Marcus smiled back and gently rubbed her hand. He stared into her deep brown eyes and gazed at her perfect olive skin and full lips. "I've always dreamed of you. Even before ever leaving my village." He squeezed her hand and then dropped his head. "I'm going away soon on an adventure and I don't really know if I'll ever come back. I've promised myself that before I die I must kiss you. Please let me have this one kiss."

The smile faded from Sabrina's face. She knew something of the legend and that Marcus was not here by chance. She knew if he were *the one* of the prophecy, he would be going to face a great danger. She squeezed his hand and leaned forward, kissing him firmly on the mouth.

Marcus closed his eyes and savored the long kiss. They separated and stared at each other for what seemed an eternity.

"Who's there?" boomed a voice from Sabrina's house. It was her father standing at the door in a nightshirt, holding a pitchfork and looking out into the grass. "If there's someone on my land, then be warned, I'll run you through with my pitchfork." He stepped forward and parted the long grass, looking for the intruder. But, to his surprise, sitting on the ground in front of him was Sabrina. "What on God's earth are you doing out here?"

"I thought I heard the cat," said Sabrina sheepishly.

Her father frowned and grabbed her arm, pulling her to her feet. He looked around suspiciously to see whether there was anyone about, but he could see no one.

"Get back to bed!" he ordered as he marched her back to the house. "I'm not sure what's going on, but half of me suspects something to do with that infernal outsider. Be warned, Sabrina, if I find anyone on my land, they'll taste my pitchfork."

Sabrina looked down to the beach and could see in the half darkness Marcus climbing into a small boat. She watched as he pushed it from the shore. It was in that moment she knew she loved him. Her heart grew heavy, for she suspected she might never see him again.

* * * *

Marcus had crossed the channel from Salina, his head swimming from the kiss and his heart still pounding. It exploded with love for her and made him feel even stronger, as if a deep power was growing inside him.

"I think I'm starting to understand," he whispered to himself.

His small boat skirted Lipari and silently headed for the port. As he entered it, he saw a large commotion in the square. People in their nightshirts were moving around excitedly with lamps. They seemed to be huddled around something on the ground.

The small boat bumped against the pontoon and Marcus secured it. He was concerned he had been missed and Toby had alerted the townsfolk. He was now scared that Falzar would go crazy and ban him from ever leaving the house again. He then noticed James and Toby standing at the edge of the crowd, waving for him to join them. Quickly he ran from the harbor to the crowd.

"What's happened?" asked Marcus, panting. "You didn't tell Falzar I was missing, did you?"

Toby simply shook his head, his face full of fear.

"It's grave news from Panarea. It's Dario," James said, his face white and solemn, his voice quavering and his hands visibly shaking. "They found his boat drifting near the harbor. He seems to be in a bad way. I hope he'll be all right."

Marcus pushed through the crowd and could see Dario lying motionless on the ground, his head cushioned with a small pillow. His eyes were closed and he didn't move. His clothes were torn and streaked with blood coming from a large cut on his head. Suddenly from the other side of the crowd Falzar and Cornelius pushed through. Falzar dropped on one knee next to Dario.

Marcus watched, afraid, as Falzar took Dario's hand and pushed his ear close to Dario's mouth. With all the noise and commotion, Marcus could not hear anything as Dario whispered something to Falzar.

"It's evil, 'tis," said an old woman to Marcus. "Mark my words. This is the start of the darkness. It's been long prophesized that this evil would come. I hope you are the one to deliver us, my boy. For all our skins."

Marcus turned as other people grumbled agreement. He looked back and could see Dario was struggling to speak to Falzar. Then a grave look passed across Falzar's face. Dario gave a last effort and then his head dropped to the cushion, his eyes suddenly wide open and staring. Falzar listened for his breathing and then shook his head. He placed a hand over Dario's face and closed the young

man's lifeless eyes. The crowd fell into a stunned silence as Falzar looked first at Cornelius and then at Marcus.

"Grim news," said Falzar, as he stood. "We must meet in the great hall tonight. It has started."

The crowd exploded into hysterical chatter at the woeful tidings. Cornelius hopped from foot to foot, clutching his handkerchief to his mouth.

Marcus looked at Dario's lifeless body and then at Falzar. He started to shake with fear. He knew something terrible had happened on Panarea, and he knew it was the Strombolians. He felt his quest was now imminent. He watched as Falzar pushed through the crowd and stood before him, his face grey with worry.

"You must come to the great hall and bring your two friends," said Falzar, pointing at both Toby and James. "Go there with Cornelius and await my return. I could be some time, but no one is to leave the hall without me. Is that understood?"

Marcus nodded slowly without saying a word. He watched as Falzar looked around cautiously and then walked away into the darkness of the port, his cloak swirling about him. Marcus looked between Toby and James, fear gripping him. Then he turned and watched as Dario was carried away.

Immediately Cornelius bumbled over to him, his face not as purple as normal. "You heard him. Oh, this is terrible. Mind you, it was to be expected. I mean we've all been talking about it for so long. And now, well, it looks like it's finally happened. I do hope Falzar returns soon and tells us what to do."

Gaut stepped from the shadows wringing his hands, a smile across his thin cracked lips. Then he released a low croaky laugh. "Soon, my master. Soon."

James stood with tears coursing down his cheeks. "It's too much to see his lifeless body being carried away. All I can think of are the good times we shared together on Panarea. I can't believe it's happening." He buried his head against Toby's shoulder as Toby placed a comforting arm around him. They then turned and slowly walked up toward the town hall.

* * * *

The entire town had crammed into the hall's large meeting room and everyone was talking excitedly. Cornelius stood on the stage trying to field questions he had no way of answering. He looked nervous as he hopped from foot to foot, every so often looking at the door in hope of Falzar's return.

Suddenly a large flash of lightning illuminated the room, casting silence across the crowd. Cornelius walked over to the windows and pressed his fat nose against

the glass of one, looking out to sea. He rubbed his glasses and stared out to see great unnatural storm clouds stream across the sky. They were coming from the direction of Panarea. Huge flares of lightning leapt between the clouds, and moments later distant rumbles could be heard.

“There’s a strange storm coming from the sea,” announced Cornelius to the crowd. “It seems to be approaching rather quickly.”

People pushed to the windows and gazed at the rapidly approaching storm. It was vast and violent, climbing high into the night sky. The sea beneath it boiled and whipped into foam in the great winds. Outside, leaves and grass started to dance as the roar of thunder boomed across the island. And then huge drops of rain began to splash upon the ground. At first they were individual drops and then they came thicker and thicker as the wind increased.

Suddenly the storm hit and the full force of the wind blasted the building, making the roof resonate violently. The rain turned into a torrent as the boom of deafening thunder echoed around the town hall. People grabbed each other in fear. The shutters rocked backward and forward, banging against the windows as lightning flashed into the room. Pippin, who had been crouching under a chair in the back of the hall, raced forward and jumped into Marcus’s arms, shaking.

The vicious storm rocked the island, shaking the building and flinging the boats in the harbor into each other. The sea raged about the island, the waves capped with white foam that formed spirit like shapes as it lashed at the harbor.

Suddenly the main door of the hall blasted open, banging against the wall, allowing wind to blow fiercely inside.

A hooded figure stood silhouetted against a bright flash of lightning as it cracked across the sky. Drenched from the rain, it stood with its strong arms folded across its chest. The figure suddenly raced down the hall and jumped upon the stage, turning and dropping its hood. The crowd erupted into hysterical chatter and then the figure shouted.

“Silence!” boomed Falzar, holding up his hands.

Marcus watched as Falzar lowered his arms and scanned the crowd, which had fallen silent. At once he felt the real power of the Ancient One. He was no old man from the village or friendly teacher—he was a truly powerful wizard.

“The news from Panarea is worse than I thought. The colony is lost and everyone is gone or dead.”

This drew a gasp from the crowd and low mutterings spread throughout the hall.

“Dario told me,” he continued, “that they were assaulted in the darkness by the Strombolians. They had come in dark boats and attacked the colonists whilst

they slept. They dragged them from their beds, screaming. This woke many of the islanders, but it was too late. Any who resisted were put to the sword. The rest have been taken as captives to Gazhul.”

With this a woman at the side of the room whimpered and fainted, sending ripples through the crowd. Falzar calmed them and continued.

“I have been to the island to see if there were any survivors, but the attackers burned the entire village. Dario was the only one to escape and he too is now dead. This is a great tragedy.

“Whilst there the Strombolians attacked me, but I hacked them down, and sent them back with great fireballs. However, they have grown strong and their power is greater than I had feared. Even I had to flee and they tried to follow me to Lipari. Without any doubt, I know they are a great army now. I summoned the great storm to smash their boats and many have drowned, but many have returned to Stromboli. They’ll now feel strong, and they will be back.”

Fear raced around the room. Everyone had heard tales of the dark Strombolians and what they were said to do with those whom they took prisoner.

“What of the Panareans now?” called a voice from the crowd.

“They will suffer the fate of all victims of Gazhul,” said Falzar. “The Strombolians will take them to feed their master. Their blood will make his physical form stronger. It is a cruel fate.”

“What can we do now?” asked Cornelius as he shook in his boots. “Surely they’re planning to attack us and it will be only a matter of time.”

“The prophecy is coming true, but he has become stronger than even I had guessed. Things are moving much faster than I thought. Indeed the darkness is upon us all.”

“What of the boy?” asked Cornelius, pointing at Marcus. “What of his part in the prophecy?”

The whole crowd turned to look at Marcus, who was standing next to James and Toby, all of them looking very afraid.

“Yes, what of the rest of the prophecy?” called a voice from the crowd, echoed by others.

“I don’t know that the boy is ready!” shouted Falzar above the noise. “The dark one has moved much faster than I anticipated. He is stronger than I feared and I don’t know whether Marcus is yet ready for this ordeal.”

There was silence again as everyone looked hopefully at Falzar.

“However,” he added, “I think we have no more time. Gazhul has called the hour and now we must move to stop him if we can. We must set our plans in place.”

“Yes! Yes!” Cornelius shouted excitedly, pointing at the velvet curtains covering the mural. “We need our six brave warriors as was said in the prophecy.”

Falzar beckoned Marcus onto the stage and turned, gesturing at the curtains. They fell immediately to the floor, revealing the great mural. The crowd gasped.

As Marcus stepped onto the stage, he watched again as Falzar gestured at the mural. Bright golden letters suddenly appeared around it, mystic runes that glowed brightly.

Falzar read the runes aloud. “When a thousand years are counted, the fire will rise in the mountain. With the stench of brimstone, the dark master will return. In the days of darkness, a young warrior, carrying the sign of the Ancients, will be delivered by a great storm to the islands. He will lead the six upon the quest and bring light to the darkness. Or he will fall and darkness will consume the world.”

The crowd mumbled, agreeing they should follow the prophecy and send the six as soon as possible.

Falzar turned to Marcus. “Your time has come, my young adventurer. You must lead the six and find the stone of Arnak to save the islands. Do you accept this dangerous quest?”

Marcus looked across the crowd and his mind turned to his father, his friends and then to Sabrina. He looked down before answering solemnly. “Yes, I accept.”

“Good,” said Falzar as the crowd cheered. “Now we need our other five warriors to complete the prophecy.”

Toby pushed through the crowd and climbed upon the stage. He had a determined look on his face. “Wherever Marcus goes...I go. Whatever Marcus must do, I’ll do with him. If he is to stand or fall, I will be with him.”

Falzar smiled and nodded, agreeing, but before he could speak another voice spoke from the crowd.

“I too will stand with my friends,” said James, pushing forward. He climbed onto the stage and the three friends embraced. “We have known each other only a short time, but already we feel like brothers. I’ll stand with them both and I will avenge the death of Dario. If I can do my part, this evil will fall.”

“Good! Good!” boomed Falzar. “The bond of friendship will indeed be hard for evil to break and it will be a strong weapon.”

The crowd burst into wild applause and there were shouts of agreement. Falzar looked across the crowd and spied a group of three boys talking in the corner.

“Good, now he’ll never come back,” said Erik to Jonas and Niklas, who were sniggering. “I’d like to see a dead man lay eyes on my bride.”

Falzar's eyes narrowed as he looked at them. He disliked them intensely for their attitudes, but he knew their bloodlines and knew their spirits were strong. For all that he distrusted their intentions, he knew they were natural fighters and would be great assets on the quest.

"We have only half our number," said Falzar as he stared at Erik. "Who else is brave enough on this island to take on this quest and join these three brave adventurers?"

An older man limped forward from the back of the crowd. He had a huge grey beard that ended in two plaits. His eyes were old but gave a regal stare. His nose was noble and his mouth stern. In his great hands he carried a magnificent double-bladed silver axe. He wore a heavy leather tunic and great brown boots. On his chest was emblazoned a golden dragon. He pushed to the front of the crowd and raised the axe above his head.

"My family is of the line of the great Vikings of the north!" he boomed, his voice as noble as his nose. "If I was a few years younger and my leg was not dead I would go with these brave young men to fight. Alas, I would do nothing but hinder these fine warriors. Now the head of my house falls to my son, Erik. So, in our family's tradition, he will go and he will take on this dangerous quest. The time has come for my son to show he is actually worthy of being my son, and bloodline of our ancestors."

He turned and pointed to Erik, who had stopped laughing and was now standing with a pale face and open mouth. His two friends suddenly distanced themselves from him. Erik's father stormed over and dragged him from the corner, thrusting him forward.

"But, father," whined Erik, "wouldn't it be better for me to stay here? I mean to defend the island from any surprise attacks. I doubt these peasants will even encounter the enemy. At least if I stay here I have a chance to fight."

"You will go and fight like a nobleman or never be a son of mine!" boomed his father as he noticed Erik's friends slinking into the shadows. "And those two that feed from my table every day and say they are your friends will go with you. As Falzar says, the bond of friendship is a strong weapon, and you will need more than Viking axes. Yes, now is the time for courage and death."

Jonas and Niklas looked to their parents for objection, but their Viking mothers and fathers agreed with Erik's father, nodding vigorously. They too looked back to tradition and felt pride that their sons would go to war.

Marcus smiled, knowing Erik had not escaped. But inside he felt concerned he would have to work with Erik. He distrusted him greatly and hated him for what

he had done to Sabrina. He knew it would take all of his strength not to strike him down.

“Then it’s settled,” said Falzar above the crowd. “We have our six brave warriors for the quest for the stone of Arnak. It is as prophesized.”

The crowd cheered wildly as Erik and his friends dejectedly climbed onto the stage to join Marcus, Toby, and James.

“You little squirt,” whispered Erik, as he passed, knocking Marcus’s shoulder.

Cornelius was hopping from foot to foot and clapping his hands excitedly. “Oh, it’s so exciting. We need to prepare a boat, food, weapons and maps.” He then paused and looked at Falzar. “But where exactly are they going and what do they have to do?”

“I will explain only to them where they must go and what they must do. For it is to be a great secret. None of our enemies are to know. They could already be on this island, trying to gather information that will help him. For the safety of us all, it will remain a secret.”

Cornelius suddenly looked at Falzar wide-eyed. “If they got to Panarea, then they can get to Salina. Oh my, we need to warn them! We need to warn them now! They could be attacked at any moment and who knows what could happen.”

“Yes. It is no longer safe for them there. Send a boat to them and take the message that they are to come to Lipari. It’s now the only safe place left in the islands. Tell them to bring all the food they can carry, for we may be besieged here for some time.”

“Oh and all the wine they have,” added Cornelius with concern.

Falzar turned to the crowd and silenced it with his hands. “Go home and lock your doors during the nights! They will not dare come in the day, for they are cowards at heart and they fear to be seen. Prepare stocks of food and set watches over the island. Be prepared that the dark forces may land here with surprise.”

He then turned to the six young adventurers who stood silently. “Come with me. It is now time for you to learn what you must do. I fear that time is short and at first light you must be on your way.”

He ushered them into a small room off to the side of the stage before turning to Cornelius. “Prepare their boat with weapons and food for five days. Ensure there is water and medical herbs on board. And don’t forget to send a messenger to Salina.” With that he disappeared into the room with the six young men.

* * * *

Cornelius bumbled around the stage for a while and then followed the crowd out of the hall and into the late night. He eagerly searched the crowd for a messenger.

“Is anyone brave enough to sail to tell the people of Salina?” he asked nervously, fearing no one would go and he would be forced to make the dangerous journey himself.

“Yes, I will go,” said a thin weedy voice from behind him. “I am prepared to risk my life to let them know the news.”

Cornelius turned and saw Gaut standing in the shadows, his one unblinking eye staring at him. He wore a slight smile on the right side of his thin mouth and he rubbed his grimy hands.

“Oh! Oh, that’s very kind of you, Gaut,” said Cornelius with great relief. “I’m pleased you are so brave to do this.”

“It’ll be a great pleasure,” said Gaut, as the thin smile on his face grew broader. “It’s always an honor to help out the islanders.”

“You know what to tell them?”

“Oh yes. I know exactly what to tell them,” Gaut sneered, as he turned and walked toward the port. “I know exactly what to do.”

Cornelius tucked his thumbs into his belt and breathed a sigh of relief as he watched Gaut walk away. He felt pleased he had found a messenger and that news would soon reach the colonists. He raised his shoulders and shivered as he thought that somewhere out on the water might be the Strombolians preparing to land on the island. He shivered again and then turned toward the port, rubbing his hands.

“Right then, I’d better get their boat prepared.”

ONTO ADVENTURE

“Please sit,” said Falzar, beckoning them to the red velvet chairs that edged the dim round room.

This was an ancient chamber of the town hall. It felt oppressive, clad in deep red velvet with gold embroidery along the walls. Dark oil paintings of the town through the ages hung on the walls, making the atmosphere more claustrophobic.

Each of the six sat in silence, their faces full of fear and their heads low.

“This will not be easy,” began Falzar. “It is time for you all to fulfill the prophecy. The dark one has chosen the hour and now you must rise to his challenge. I have waited many centuries for this time and I have followed the prophecy to bring Marcus here to lead you on this adventure.”

Erik shuffled in his seat, huffing loudly and shaking his head. “I don’t think so.”

Falzar turned sharply to Erik and cast a look in his direction. “The first thing you need to understand, my young Viking friend, is that Marcus is not the enemy. The enemy is out there, dark and evil and he will be hoping for you to fight amongst yourselves. Don’t help him. As tempted as you will be on this journey, you must not turn on each other.”

Erik sneered and looked away from Falzar’s gaze. “He’s not my leader,” he whispered under his breath.

Falzar turned and faced the rest of the group. “Do you all understand that you are now bound together? You will either survive together or you will all perish together. Your journey will be hard and perilous. Only working together will you

have a hope of success. I beg you all to consider these words, for in the darkest moments you will need to make choices. You can stand together or fall together.”

Falzar reached deep into an inside pocket of his hooded cloak and pulled out a large yellowed scroll of paper. He turned and placed it on the small table that sat in the middle of the room. Then he carefully removed the golden ribbon that bound it. Slowly he unrolled the paper, smoothing it across the table. The six stood and gathered around Falzar to see what the mysterious document was.

The map was made of heavy yellowed parchment, browning at the edges. Drawn in black ink were each of the magic islands, with their secret paths and hidden places. In the far right corner sat the ominous shape of Stromboli.

“This is the Ancients’ map of the islands and it has not been seen for a long time.”

“Incredible!” said James, looking at the map in awe. “I’ve never seen a map of the other islands before.”

“Nor will you see one again like this, for it has many of the secrets of the magic islands. It shows hidden paths and magic places that have been known only by a few. I hope it will guide you well on your adventure, and I pray it will not fall into the hands of the enemy.”

Falzar slowly ran a finger across the map and placed it upon Lipari. “Your journey will begin here tomorrow at first light, in the small port. You will sail from Lipari toward Vulcano, and this means you must cross the great abyss. Be wary, my friends, for as you know, in the cold black depths of the abyss lurks Corag. Take heed, for it is a terrible creature that remains from the ancient world. Corag does not like to be disturbed, and I advise you to stay silent until you are across the channel. Any noise and you will surely lose your lives.”

Toby glanced wildly between Marcus and James at the mention of Corag. “Even the name scares me.”

“I’m not scared of old sea stories,” sneered Erik with bravado. “I’ll take its head off with my axe if it dares to come near.”

Niklas and Jonas sniggered moronically with him, their bulky shoulders moving up and down.

“Your bravery is admirable, but your foolishness will be your death,” said Falzar angrily. “Corag is nothing to laugh at. It is a terrible leviathan that would crush your boat with its breath. Your axe would be no more than the bite of a mosquito. So I advise that you keep your mouth closed, hard as it will be.”

Marcus fought hard not to smile.

“Oh don’t be so smug, Marcus. For if he makes a noise then you will surely die as well. The six of you would not make a mouthful for this ancient beast.”

Toby gulped and his face turned pale.

"You must stop this flippancy, all of you. Only Toby seems bright enough to be scared. Now. You must land in the black bay of Vulcano then make your way across its barren landscape to climb the great crater. Again, beware of sickly vapors and gases, for they can overcome you in minutes and this is a great danger. Watch each other at all times and keep each other moving. When you reach the summit, you must traverse the crater and you will find a small worn path—this is the path you must follow. At the end of the path you will find an opening to a cave and it is in there you must go, my friends."

"I've heard stories of the hag who lives in the volcano," said James. "Stories that she is a wicked and vile creature who likes nothing more than to eat the fresh flesh of unsuspecting travelers. We don't have to go to Heberdina, do we?"

"Ah, you have heard of the hag called Heberdina," said Falzar, nodding his head and raising his eyebrows. "That's good, for you will all be more wary, knowing that she is indeed dangerous."

"But why do we need to see that old crow?" asked Erik, shaking his head.

"That old witch is one of the last of an old race. She is one of the last of the seers, and she is the one creature to help you find what you seek."

"Why, what are we seeking?" Jonas asked Erik. "I have no idea what this is all about."

"I don't know," said Erik, shoving Jonas. "All I know is I'll be carrying my axe, and anything that displeases me," he continued looking sideways at Marcus, "will lose its head."

"You are looking for the red stone of Arnak my young warriors. You are to bring it to the great abyss and throw it in."

"What? Is that it? We're just looking for a stupid stone?" asked Niklas, shrugging his broad shoulders. "I think you could send a couple of children to go find a stone."

"Yes," said Falzar impatiently, "you must find the stone. And the only one who knows of it is Heberdina. For she is a seer."

"What's a seer?" asked James.

"A seer is a creature who can see the unseen. They are from a clan of old witches of the north. Heberdina is one of the last. She has the ability to see things and tell you what is past, what is now and what is to come. She can see what things are and where things are, and, importantly, how to get to them. She will be able to see where the stone was hidden and she will be able to tell you how to get to it."

“But why would she tell us that? I mean I’ve heard she is a dangerous and evil creature,” asked James.

“She is bound to tell you by ancient ways and ancient powers. She must follow the ways that have been since the beginning of time. But these ways demand a fee and the price for this knowledge is the price of your blood. Two drops for each question, and you may only ever ask one of the seer. That is the way.”

Marcus looked on repulsed by the idea of this creature who lived in a dark damp cave and drank blood to answer questions.

“Be careful though, my friends, for she may seem like an old slug, but she is wicked, deeply wicked. She can move like a gazelle, so I must warn you of three things. Firstly, as you know she likes nothing more than to eat human flesh, so she will try to trick you and catch you and she will be loathe to let you escape.

Secondly, her skin oozes a dangerous poison. Just one drop and you will be paralyzed, and she will have you for her supper.

Finally, she is bound to answer only one question. However, she can see many things and her wicked mind enjoys nothing more than to hurt people. She may tell you things that will hurt you, or will hinder you or things to drive you against each other. So beware, for all of these things are to divert you and create confusion.”

“What do we do when we know where the stone is?” asked Marcus.

“Ah. That is why we have this map, or rather why you now have the map. For she will tell you where the stone is and you will need to follow the map as best you can to find it. Then, if you can recover the stone, you will need to sail at full speed back to the great abyss and cast the stone into its depths. It will sink down to Corag and only there will it finally be safe from Gazhul.”

They stood for a moment in silence, all staring at the old map. Marcus glanced up to Toby and they exchanged worried expressions. Then Marcus’s eyes were drawn down toward the map and Stromboli.

“You will face many dangers,” said Falzar. “Many of you will not return, maybe even all of you. But this is already written in your destiny and you will not be able to change it. If you fail, Gazhul will indeed be strong and I will be the last defense, but even I may no longer be enough.”

Falzar looked in turn at each of them.

“Now you should all rest, for tomorrow will be here soon. Tell no one of your quest, for any information will help Gazhul and our enemies. Also, beware of everyone, for his assassins could be on this island and they would delight to stop you before you even start this adventure. Go home and collect your things and I will see you at dawn in the port. Rest all you can, for your journey will be hard.”

Falzar turned and strode to the door. He opened it slowly and peeped outside before stepping through. Before closing the door he turned back and looked at them. "And remember, *he* is the enemy."

The door slammed, leaving the six standing in silence looking at the map. A dark expression crossed Erik's face and then he raised his eyes to stare at Marcus.

"Don't have any delusions, you little squirt," sneered Erik maliciously. "You may have Falzar with you, but don't ever forget that I have my sturdy axe. It would be a shame if your neck managed to get in the way of my axe when I was swinging it."

Jonas and Niklas chuckled dumbly.

"I don't think you understood Falzar," said James. "We're all in this together. We need to act as a team and Marcus is our leader. That's how it's been described in the prophecy."

"Firstly, we are no team," said Erik. "Secondly, this little maggot couldn't lead a dog, never mind a team. I said, have no disillusion, I am my own leader." Erik stared down at Marcus and huffed before turning and walking through the door, followed by his two chuckling henchmen.

"This is going to be hard enough without having those clowns with us," said Toby, shaking his head. "Why on earth did someone as wise as Falzar allow those three knuckleheads to be involved?"

"It is how it is," said Marcus. "I think once we reach danger they'll realize that if we don't fight together we'll all perish."

"I don't think they're smart enough to think about it," said James.

"Well, there's no point in talking about it. We all need to go and prepare our things and try to get some sleep," said Marcus, opening the door and peering out cautiously. "We will see whether they are with us or not in the morning."

James placed a hand on Marcus's shoulder. "Well I, for one, am glad you'll be leading us."

"Me, too," added Toby with a smile.

Marcus smiled back weakly. He felt deeply unsure as to whether he could lead anyone and less sure he could face this ordeal.

* * * *

The first rays of morning sun touched the water when Toby and Marcus slowly walked toward the boat. The entire town was crowded around the small harbor. As it watched them approach, it fell silent and everyone smiled and nod-

ded as they walked past. Standing on the wooden pontoon was Falzar. He was close to James who was stowing items on a small boat, not his.

“Good morning, my young adventurers,” said Falzar. “This is your boat. It is strong and fast. The town has given it a good name for you. The boat is called *Hope*, for all our hopes will sail with you.”

“It’s a good name,” said Marcus, looking at the boat. He could feel the weight of his burden growing as he looked around at the hopeful faces in the crowd.

“Where’s Erik?” asked Toby. “Hopefully he’s decided not to come.”

“Here they come,” said Falzar as he looked across the crowd and pointed.

Erik’s father strode in front of the three young men. He was swinging a huge double-edged axe and laughing heartily. On his head was a leather Viking helmet with two large white horns jutting from the sides. Around the rim ran a broad band of grey fur.

“Make way! Make way!” he boomed. “For we march to war, and woe betide our enemies.”

Then he began to recite an ancient war rhyme from the north.

* * * *

*Swing your axe and slay your foe,
Beat the drum as to war we go.
Our enemy will run away
Or we will gladly kill those that stay.
We’ll tear their hearts out from their chest,
Lop off the heads from the rest.
And when victory is finally here,
You’ll hear a mighty Viking cheer.*

* * * *

Behind him marched Erik, Jonas and Niklas. All were wearing heavy leather tunics with broad leather belts and brandishing long double-bladed axes. As Erik’s father finished the rhyme, they let out a deafening cheer, clashing their axes. The crowd began to cheer along with them and pat them on their shoulders.

“Well, at least they seem fierce enough,” said Toby. “If nothing else they might intimidate some of the creatures.”

The crowd parted to let the Vikings pass and then regrouped behind them. The three young Vikings stood before Marcus, James and Toby. Their faces were stern and fixed as they gripped their axes tight.

“Listen up! Listen up!” boomed Erik’s father. “As is the way of my family, we gladly march to war and we hope if we die, we die with honor and with an axe in our hands. Let all our enemies hear that we march to face them and all those who do not wish to be slain should run from us now!”

The crowd roared with approval and clapped wildly. Some of the young boys whooped and whistled, making Erik puff out his chest proudly.

“It’s time for you to go,” said Falzar as he looked at Marcus. “Be brave, and in times of darkness remember all I have taught you. If all seems lost, open your heart and your hopes will be answered.”

Marcus looked up at Falzar’s face and suddenly he felt warm. The pendant felt heavy around his neck and filled him with sense of serenity.

The six young men dropped their things into the boat and stepped in, James taking the tiller and Erik standing at the bow with his arms folded across his chest.

“Be careful,” warned Falzar. “Our enemy is dangerous, but if you search your hearts, good will prevail.”

Cornelius pushed through the crowd puffing, sweat running down his fat face. He had crumbs around his mouth and a little sauce on the side of his face.

“I’m sorry I’m late, but I was having breakfast.”

This made the crowd laugh and the atmosphere lightened a little.

“Well, good luck,” said Cornelius with a huge smile on his face. “All our hopes and prayers sail with you. In moments of darkness, when all seems lost, think of...well think of something.”

The young men smiled at his speech and nodded in thanks. Then Falzar pushed the boat from the pontoon with his foot.

“The Ancients travel with you,” said Falzar as the boat glided away.

Niklas grabbed an oar and started to paddle the boat across the mirror like water of the harbor.

Marcus looked back at the whole town crowded around the harbor. They were silent and their faces solemn. Again he felt the weight of his burden. He understood their fate was now in the hands of his leadership. He closed his eyes and suddenly he could see Stromboli, black and ominous. Great plumes of smoke billowed into the sky; fire leapt from the crater. In his mind he could hear the

steady beating of the drums. In that moment he knew the enemy was also abroad and racing to reach the stone of Arnak.

P A R T II

*In the days of darkness, a young warrior carrying the sign of
the Ancients will be delivered by a great storm to the islands.
He will lead the six upon the quest and bring light to the darkness.
Or he will fall and darkness will consume the world.*

—*The Ancients*

DOOM ON VULCANO

The small boat crawled along the coast of Lipari, passing below the high grass-topped cliffs that stood to the east of the town. The morning sea lay calm and flat, disturbed only by the wake of the boat. A warm light breeze blew from the west, carrying them toward Vulcano.

Erik stood at the bow of the small boat, his arms folded across his chest. On his head sat his family's Viking hat—complete with long white horns and fur-covered rim. Near his feet sat Jonas and Niklas, their faces solemn as they watched the coast pass by.

James steered the boat, concentrating on making the most of the light winds. A stern look sat on his face as he grasped the tiller firmly. Toby sat close to the mast, gazing back toward the rocks that signaled the end of the harbor. In front of him sat Marcus, his head buried in his arms, his knees close to his chest.

The atmosphere had been solemn since they'd left the safety of the port.

"Well, someone needs to speak," said Toby after a long time. "This silence feels like we're going to our funerals. At least someone tell me how long it will take us to get to Vulcano?"

"About two hours with this wind," James answered.

"But we need to first cross the great abyss," said Jonas, turning to face Toby, his eyes narrow and menacing. "Maybe some of us *will* be going to our funerals."

"What actually is the great abyss?" asked Toby. "I didn't like the sound of it when Falzar talked of it last night."

"It's the very dangerous channel between Lipari and Vulcano," said Jonas, his voice low. "It's the root from which the two islands grow. Some say it's bottom-

less, with the waters delving deep to the centre of the earth itself. It's cold and black."

"So why is everyone so scared of it?" asked Toby.

"Everyone is so scared of crossing it because they say it's the resting place of Corag," said Niklas, looking at the water nervously.

Marcus looked at Toby and then at Niklas. He had heard Erik talking bravely about fighting Corag, but somehow, deep down, he knew it had all been talk. Corag seemed to be something terrible.

"And what actually is Corag?" asked Toby.

"Corag," said Niklas, looking around nervously as he crept closer, "is said to be a Leviathan of the deep. An ancient giant sea creature with the body of a serpent and a head like a dragon."

"Some say it can breathe fire and boil the seas," added Jonas as he gestured flames coming from his mouth. "My father said once many years ago he heard a large ship had sailed from Lipari to explore the other islands. As it crossed the great abyss one of the sailors just sneezed—and the sound was enough to bring Corag. My old man told me it burst from the sea in a mass of boiling foam, and before the sailors could scream in terror it dragged the ship, sailors and all, down into a watery grave."

"It may be better we don't talk of such evil creatures," said Erik, turning to look at them. "Many boats foolish enough to make noise and awaken Corag have been dragged down as a light snack."

"Well, you seemed brave enough last night," said Marcus. "Lopping his head off with that axe of yours. I guess now that we're here, you're not actually so brave."

"Oh, I'm brave," answered Erik, lifting his axe and running his finger along the blade. "I'll stand as brave as any man—should that creature come. However, unlike you and your idiot friends, I'm not stupid. No one in his right mind would provoke such a creature. So as Falzar said, I'll be staying nice and quiet. And I suggest we all do the same."

"It may be easier for me to keep my mouth closed," jibed Marcus.

James suddenly stood and pointed to the headland. Two large rocks dominated the horizon in the distance, two towering pillars that soared from the sea, old remnants of a long collapsed arch. Their silhouettes against the bright sky seemed two giant old men with deep frowns, large hooked noses and beards.

"The sentinels," whispered James. "It means we're about to cross into the channel. They're the last pieces of land on the east of Lipari. Below us now is

nothing but a bottomless abyss. Now is the time to sit and stay quiet. We should all hope we cross without bringing Corag.”

Niklas and Jonas nodded in agreement and dragged their axes closer to them for comfort. Marcus looked from the boat as it edged forward, watching as the water began to darken and almost change consistency. It seemed thicker, colder, and so much deeper. Marcus could sense something—a dark presence somewhere in the depths, moving in the blackness.

Toby peered over the side, his eyes scanning the surface nervously as he looked at the still black water. He shuddered and looked to James.

Slowly the boat slipped away from Lipari and out into the wide channel between it and Vulcano, the sentinels watching as they made their perilous voyage. The wind had now dropped to almost nothing, but every so often the sail ruffled against the mast, the noise making everyone nervous. The sound seemed to float across the quiet water.

Marcus’s gaze turned toward Vulcano as they drifted. Its towering main cone scorched in reds and yellows seemed void of any life. The crater towered above the rest of the island, huge and steep with scars of bright yellow running down its immense slopes to the sea. They were fresh sulfur flows that had not long ago spewed from the gaping mouth of the crater. The only thing moving on the island seemed to be steam that issued from the land near the top of the great cone. It lingered near the summit and then slowly drifted into the air, carried away by the light winds. It danced in an eerie way, like some tormented ghost.

Marcus then turned to look into the boat as something caught the corner of his eye. He looked down to heavy white sacking that covered their supplies. He wasn’t sure, but he thought something had moved under the sacking. He watched intently as his hand slowly moved toward the handle of his sword. Then, as he watched, the sack seemed again to move a little. His heart began to pound in his chest as he reached over and tugged at Toby’s shirt. He pointed at the sacking.

Toby looked to where Marcus was pointing. He shrugged as if to say he saw nothing unusual. Then he too saw the sacking move. His eyes widened as he watched the shape—there was definitely something alive on the boat. Toby pushed backward with fear as he watched the sacking rise and fall. He stretched out his hand and fumbled for his sword.

Already the rest of the group had followed their stares and were watching the movements from under the sacking. Each had drawn back, raising his weapon, ready to strike at whatever had crept onto their boat. Niklas and Jonas started to signal to each other; they were gesturing wildly, making pretend striking move-

ments with their axes. Erik looked around the back of the sacking and then signaled to Jonas to pull back the sacking so he could have a clean shot at whatever it was. Jonas shook his head fiercely as he stepped as far from the supplies as possible without falling into the water. Erik again signaled, but this time with fury in his face. He demonstrated his axe, to show what he meant to do to whatever it was.

Jonas reluctantly crept forward to the corner of the sacking, his arm stretching out slowly. His hand reached forward and grabbed it firmly, ready to throw it back. As he crept he kicked one of the oars, which creaked loudly, making everyone jump.

James signaled to them both to be quiet, and then pointed to the water, as they had now arrived right in the middle of the channel.

“One, two, three...” mouthed Jonas slowly. Then, as fast as he could, he flung the corner of the sacking back. As he did, he leapt out of the way for fear of what was lurking beneath.

Erik raised his axe, ready to unleash a fatal blow, but then stopped just before he delivered it. His mouth fell open with relief and disbelief.

Marcus looked wide-eyed at the creature lurking below the sacking. He too felt a huge surge of relief to see it was only Pippin. He almost shouted with joy as he saw the sparky little dog, busy wagging his tail.

Then without warning Pippin let out a shrill bark of excitement. Marcus dived forward and grabbed at the dog, wrapping a hand around his snout to stop any more noise. Terror filled his heart, as the bark had seemed to roar across the water.

Erik gritted his teeth in rage and pulled out a long dagger. His eyes burned, showing he intended that the little dog would not make another noise. He moved menacingly forward as Marcus struggled to hold the wriggling Pippin.

Marcus followed James’s stare out across the inky water. He knew the bark had indeed been loud and he was terrified that Corag could have been disturbed. An eternity passed as he watched the water, then something seemed to move near the surface, some way off to the left of the boat. Something big had glided by, making ripples dance across the mirror like surface. Eventually the ripples lapped against the side of the boat.

No one dared to breathe or move as the ripples passed by them. James sat with his left hand on the tiller, his right on his sword. Marcus and Toby held Pippin tightly to keep him from barking. Niklas clutched the side of the boat, crouching low. Jonas sat still, holding the sacking and almost covering himself whilst Erik stood tall and proud, his dagger in his right hand and his axe in his left.

And that was how they stayed, motionless for the longest time as the small boat inched across the channel. Eventually the water began to lighten and small waves appeared again. They looked back and Lipari was some way in the distance. Then the boat passed beneath the black lava cliffs of Vulcano.

“Give me that dog!” ordered Erik as he lunged forward. “I’m gonna slit its throat and feed it to the fish! It nearly got us all killed!”

“Calm down. It’s just a little dog,” said Marcus, releasing Pippin. “It didn’t know we were across the channel. We probably scared him as much as he scared us.”

Pippin started to growl at Erik as he approached.

“I’m going to wear its skin for gloves!” boomed Erik with fury. “Give me that pathetic creature! I’m going to kill it!”

“No, you’re not,” said Marcus, standing, his hand on his sword. “I’m in charge and I decide what happens. Somehow Pippin managed to sneak on board and we’re well underway, so all I can do is make him officially one of our crew.”

“What?” asked Erik with a look of utter disbelief on his face. He shook his head wildly. “I told you, boy, I don’t take orders from anyone—especially some squirt like you. That dog got on board and it was the biggest mistake it ever made. And just so we’re clear, I don’t see you as the leader and I don’t follow your orders. The only thing we listen to is the swish of our axes. Now, crew member or not, that dog has barked his last bark.”

Niklas and Jonas stood next to Erik, brandishing their axes—seemingly in total agreement with Erik. This caused James and Toby to immediately jump to their feet, raising their swords, bringing the group to a dangerous standoff.

Erik raised his axe and looked straight at Marcus. “I’ll take you first, boy.”

Marcus stared back, sweat in his hands. He could see Erik meant to end this now. “If you strike, then we all lose, including your family on the island. The enemy has already won if you do this. You may not like me, but our destiny is now intertwined. I can assure you, I don’t like it either, but in my heart I know whatever is between you and me is nothing compared to the evil we must fight together. If you strike me down, you will lose anyway.”

Erik stared at Marcus, his axe raised.

Marcus at once read his eyes. Erik knew he could swipe them all off the boat in one go, but something in his heart was stopping him. He also knew Marcus spoke the truth and his striking them would spell his own doom.

Suddenly the boat grounded on the sandy bottom of the cove. No one had been watching where they were going and the abrupt stop sent Niklas spilling from the bow. He plunged into the water with a yelp. Toby tumbled onto the

provisions with a crunch. Marcus and Erik grabbed the mast to steady themselves.

“We’ve run aground!” shouted Jonas.

“Very astute of you,” said Erik.

Niklas suddenly appeared in the water shaking his head. He had a bemused look on his face. “What happened?”

They had come aground in a wide bay of tumbled lava rock nestled at the edge of a spit of land that separated the main island and a smaller part. A smaller, yellow volcanic cone rose from that smaller piece. Steam bellowed from its top, filling the air with the pungent smell of rotten eggs. The sand of the bay was jet black, giving the water a dark, mysterious appearance. All around them gas bubbled up through the water, making it fizz.

“The water’s really hot,” said Niklas as he swam to the boat. He had a disgusted look on his face. “And it really stinks.”

“It stinks nearly as bad as you,” said Erik, as Niklas hung to the side of the boat.

“Be wary of the fumes,” said James, wafting his hand in front of his face. “They say people have become overcome by them. We need to keep an eye on each other whilst we’re here.”

Marcus looked at Erik, who was staring back at him, his axe still in his hand. “Are we to fight each other or do what has been asked of us?”

Before Erik could answer, a deafening hiss rolled down from the big volcano. A huge plume of steam had been released near the summit and it swirled into the sky.

Erik lowered his axe and pushed his face close to Marcus. “When this is all over, and if you’re still alive, we’ll settle it. Before then, I’ll not kill you, but neither will I protect you in any way. So, I suggest you keep an eye on yourselves.”

Toby nodded slowly and raised his eyebrows. He edged closer to Marcus. “I feel a little better that he won’t be killing you yet. Although I think he underestimates what Falzar has taught you.”

“We can take the boat ashore there,” said Jonas, pointing to a shallow area near the spit of land. “Niklas, take the rope and pull us across. It’ll be easier to get ashore. The sooner we get on here, the sooner we get off.”

Niklas waded ashore and then dragged the boat across the bay. Soon the boat was secured with its bow on the beach.

“This smell is awful,” said James, holding his nose. “It makes me feel sick. The sooner we get away from here the better.”

“Yes, the sooner the better. The smell is disgusting—like bad eggs,” agreed Toby with his face screwed up. “If this is just the smell, then I can’t begin to imagine what the hag must be like. I mean choosing to live here.”

“The ground is so hot,” said Niklas, dancing from foot to foot. “This has to be one of the nastiest places on earth. How can anything live here?”

“It’s the volcano,” said Erik as he glanced up at the great cone. “Many who have been here say it’s a terrible, evil place where no man would want to stay. Some say the hag doesn’t choose to live here, but was banished here many years ago by the Ancients. They say Falzar had something to do with it. Maybe that’s why he didn’t come.”

“Well, we need to go up there if we’re to meet this hag” said Marcus, pointing to the summit. “It looks like a long hard climb. If we’re to be up and down before darkness, we’ll need to get moving. I really don’t relish meeting a creature who has spent her life banished on this foul place, especially by someone who has sent us on this quest. If she is a seer, as Falzar said, then she’ll know exactly who is behind sending us.”

“Someone will need to stay here and look after the boat,” said Erik, scanning the island. “We have no idea who is on here beside the hag. We don’t want to come back down to find the boat missing.”

“Especially if we need to get off in a hurry,” added Toby.

“Well it can’t be one of you three,” said James, pointing a finger. “I mean we can’t trust that one of you cowards won’t leave at the first sign of trouble.”

Jonas turned in fury and almost leapt forward. “What?” he boomed. “You are the cowards. You only want to stay so that you don’t have to face what’s on the volcano. The second we start up the path you yellow livered runts will be sailing back to Falzar.”

“Yeah! I don’t trust any of you!” Niklas shouted from the shore.

Again, they all reached for their weapons as they hurled abuse at each other. The two sides squared up for another fight. They raised their weapons again.

“All right! All right!” said Toby, trying to calm the situation before someone lopped someone else’s head off. “It looks like we don’t trust you and you don’t trust us. So it’s simple. One of you stays.”

James was about to protest, but Toby stopped him so he could continue.

“And one of us stays. Fair?”

Erik looked at Jonas and Niklas. Slowly they nodded in agreement.

“All right. It’s fair,” said Erik, as his eyes narrowed. “There’s no other way we can do this.”

“It’s also sensible,” said Marcus, looking across the channel. “If we don’t make it back down, then it’ll need two people to get the boat back and warn the others that we’ve failed. I suggest that any time we leave the boat we need to leave two of us to guard it. That way, if some of us don’t make it back, at least two can go for help.”

There was a sudden silence across the group as the fear of what they were about to do sank in again. The stories of this island were oft told. They had all heard that many people had visited the island and been overcome by the fumes. Rumors said the hag had come and feasted on the victims.

“Toby, you stay,” said Marcus, as he pointed at him.

“Niklas you stay and watch him, while he watches the boat,” Erik smirked.

“But I...” Toby started, but Marcus simply glared at him. “Well, if I must. I was hoping to meet this horrible hag that gnaws on bones...”

“I imagine,” said Niklas.

“Enough,” said Marcus, pulling out the old map and unrolling it across the supplies. He moved his finger across and brought it to rest on Vulcano. There was a small dotted trail marked that began at the bay and wound up the side of the volcano. “We need to find this path and follow it to the top. Then we need to cross the crater and find the entrance to the lair.”

James shivered at this word. “That word sounds sinister and dark. It rings of a trap.”

“Then we need to move,” said Erik, reaching for a small sack and filling it with water and food. “By all accounts it looks like a long hard climb, and in the midday heat it’ll take a lot out of us. I want to have some strength left for when I meet the hag. I can promise you, if she tries anything, she’ll meet with my axe. Whether or not she’s told us what we need to know.”

The others nodded as they prepared their supplies and grabbed their weapons. Soon they were standing on the island, the sun beating down on them, sacks on their backs and their weapons in their hands.

Toby shook hands with Marcus and then James.

“Good luck and don’t be any longer than you need to be. My suggestion is that at the first sign of trouble you run.”

“Well that seems sound advice,” said Marcus as he smiled at Toby. “But seriously, if we’re not back by morning, you need to leave and tell the others we didn’t make it.”

Toby looked down. “And what if you don’t make it?”

“Then it’s destiny. If we do fail, then I’m sure Falzar will know what to do.”

“Blood and honor!” Niklas suddenly shouted at Jonas and Erik. They clashed axes above their heads.

“I’ll bring that hag’s head back in a bag,” boasted Jonas as he smiled at his friends.

The small band walked from the beach toward the main part of the island. As they walked from the cooler cove inland, the temperature climbed dramatically, almost taking their breath away. Scrubby yellow sulfur rocks reflected the strong sun, making the air even hotter. Vegetation sprouted in coarse patches, small stubby bleached plants that withered in the foul air.

Heads down they trudged along the rocky path, easy to find it turned out, that lead from the spit of land between the small volcano and the large cone. Their throats burned from the acrid fumes that seemed to come from everywhere.

“This is unbearable,” grumbled James, rubbing at his sore eyes. “The fumes make me feel so sick. It makes my head spin.”

“We have a long climb in this,” answered Marcus. “Our lungs will be ruined if we survive. It’s no wonder people have been lost in the fumes.”

After a while they entered a clearing and the ground became dramatically steep. The path turned and started its torturous climb up the side of the volcano. The small group began the arduous workout amongst bright yellow and orange rocks. Any plants were left cringing at the base of the volcano—nothing was prepared to grow on the barren landscape.

The sun beat down as they meandered heavily, trying to follow the barely trodden path. Every so often they stopped to take water from their bottles and wipe drops of sweat from their brows. They climbed in silence for fear of disturbing anything lurking in that inhospitable and unforgiving place.

After some hours Marcus stopped and turned to the rest of the group. He was weary, his eyes stinging and his throat burning. His head felt light from the fumes and heat.

“We need to stop and eat. We don’t know when we’ll get the chance again. I suggest we stop here and break for a while, just long enough to recover.”

“I really don’t feel well,” said Jonas, wiping sweat from his brow.

“If you think you’re going to faint, then call out,” said Marcus, after he took a swig of water from his bottle. “We need to watch each other. If we all go down with this foul air, we’ll be easy pickings for the hag.”

“Vikings don’t faint,” said Erik, walking over to Jonas and slapping him hard across the face. “We come from a line of men, not girls like you, fish boy.”

Jonas shook his head in surprise. It seemed the clap across his face was ringing in his ears. It may have hurt but he was again wide awake.

Looking around cautiously, they chose a spot on a turn in the path. They sat with their backs to the slope and removed their provisions from their sacks.

The silence of the island was unnatural, even birds didn't want to fly over it for good reason. The only sound was the distant hiss of the steam from the crater. They were already more than halfway up the volcanic cone and they had a clear view back toward Lipari. It looked green and inviting.

Marcus looked down; he could clearly see the spit of land connecting the main island to Vulcanello, so the map called it, the small volcano. Fumes were pouring from it; their yellow haze lingered across the bay. In the bay he could see the boat on the shore with the deep black sands beneath it. Toby and Niklas were nowhere to be seen.

"I guess they're taking what shade they can," said James, following Marcus's gaze. "I wish I'd volunteered to stay down now."

"It's so hot here. At least they can take a dip in the water," replied Marcus.

Suddenly, some way above them, a melon-sized rock bounced down the mountainside and came shooting past them. James fell flat on the ground in fear. Marcus turned abruptly to see what had dislodged it. Erik was on his feet with his hands firmly around the shaft of his axe, his body ready to swing at whatever it was.

"I think it was a goat," said Jonas, shielding his eyes from the sun to get a better look.

"Are you sure?" Erik growled. "I doubt any goat could survive here. Those scrubby little plants would kill whatever ate them."

"I'm not sure. But what else could it be?" asked Jonas.

"Could be the hag," said Marcus, reaching for his sword and standing to his feet. "Keep your eyes open for anything moving. Remember that Falzar said her skin is poisonous. If it *is* her, don't let her near you."

"I doubt she'd venture out to meet us head on," sneered Erik, spinning his axe. "But if she does, she'll get more than she bargained for."

Suddenly another rock fell past them some way off to the left. They all turned sharply at the clattering noise.

"That's a sprightly old goat," said James.

"I think it's a goat that can throw stones," added Marcus as he scanned the horizon. "If it is the hag, then she's watching us. I suggest we be even more cautious. We don't know what's going to be waiting around the corner for us."

"This is a fool's errand," spat Erik, as he looked around. "A fool's errand that was given by a bigger fool."

“Don’t call Falzar a fool,” said Marcus, his sulfur reddened eyes blazing with rage.

“He’s a stupid old fool and who will stop me saying it? You?” said Erik, squaring up to Marcus.

Marcus raised his sword. “Maybe I will.”

“Then let’s settle this once and for all, fish boy,” said Erik, stepping forward and raising his axe.

“Stop it!” ordered James. “Just stop it! This is exactly what our enemy wants. This is exactly what that hag is trying to do. Spook us into making a stupid mistake. This is really not the time or place for this.”

A child-like giggle came from some way above them. It made them stop in fear.

Marcus looked at Erik as he slowly lowered his axe. He knew the young man wanted very much to swipe his head off. But again, he knew Erik now understood the enemy was around them. And just maybe he understood he needed Marcus alive.

“You’re lucky I’m in such a good mood today,” said Erik as his own red eyes burned into Marcus.

“Good. Then I suggest we go on.”

“But it’s better my axe takes something today. Unlucky for the hag—when I find her...”

“Good. Well, let’s go and face her head on,” said James, putting his sack back on. “I don’t like the fact she’s stalking us. Let’s take the fight to her.”

“It’ll be my pleasure to rid the world of such a horrid creature,” said Jonas as he pulled his sack back on.

The small group continued up the torturous path, sometimes finding it hard to follow and often losing it. They spent some time traversing the side of the volcano to re-find the path and continue toward the summit. All the time the sun beat down on their backs and the stench in the air became worse, making them feel giddy.

After some hours the track became so steep they had to climb on all fours, grabbing at the loose rock to pull themselves up. Often they slipped back down the crumbly sulfur. Finally they reached the summit. Marcus was the first to peer over the rim of the great crater.

“We’re there. We’ve made it to the crater,” he called down triumphantly.

“Shhh,” hushed James. “Don’t let her know where we are. I’d like to have some element of surprise.”

“Very bright,” sneered Erik, as he strode past James. “The idiot boys want to surprise a seer.”

Soon all four were standing on the rim, looking far down into the crater. They could see nothing but dense white steam.

Standing at the top of the great volcano, Marcus could clearly see the other islands. Slowly his eyes turned north, toward the evil shape of Stromboli. It stood clear against the horizon. The sky around it was black with smoke.

“We need to hurry,” said Marcus, looking for the path. “Every moment he gets stronger. Just look how dark the sky has become. His reach is getting longer every minute.”

They set upon the path again. It took a good while to follow it around the rim of the great crater. Every so often great clouds of noxious steam would billow from far below them, sending their heads spinning and deafening them with great roars.

Eventually they reached the end of the path. It turned abruptly some way down from the rim and then disappeared into a dark opening in the side of the volcano. It was the opening to the cave. It was the opening to the lair of the hag.

INTO THE LAIR OF THE HAG

Marcus stood trembling. The dark cave entrance seemed dangerous, foreboding. He knew somewhere deep within lurked the hag. He could see by the looks on the others' faces they were also feeling scared—whether or not they would admit it.

“So what now?” asked Jonas, his voice quavering. “I think I’m too tired and hot to go any further just now.”

“Oh, be a man for once,” said Erik, lifting his axe and stepping toward the cave.

“Well, I guess we’re here to go in and ask the hag about the stone,” said Marcus. “I’ve not climbed all the way up here in this foul air just stand and peer into a cave. And I’m certainly not waiting for it to get dark.”

“Are we sure she’s home?” asked Jonas as he looked back along the crater path. “I mean if that was her throwing stones at us, maybe she’s still out there.”

“Well, sooner or later she’ll come home,” said Marcus. “At least we will get a chance to check out her cave and find the best ways to escape—if we need to.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea that we all go in?” asked James, “It feels like a trap.”

“We all go in. Men and cowards,” said Erik, nudging Jonas forward. “The more swords and axes that go in, the better chance we have of defending ourselves. You heard what Falzar said, she may look like an old slug, but she can move fast. We all go.”

“Well, as I said, it’s getting late and I don’t want to be up here when it gets dark.” said Marcus. “The sooner we get in the sooner we get out.”

“After you—leader,” smirked Erik, raising his eyebrows.

Marcus took a deep breath and held his sword in front of him. Then he stepped into the cave. Before him was a long dark passage, carved into the sulfurous rock, leading deep into the mountain. Once his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see a small flickering orange dot in the far distance.

“There’s a light at the end,” he whispered.

“What kind of light?” asked James. “Maybe the hag is home. Maybe she’s lit a small fire to entice us in, like moths to a flame.”

“Looks like it is a fire,” whispered Marcus as he started down the passage. “Come on. Let’s try and stick together.”

Slowly they edged down the passage. The relative comfort of the entrance disappeared behind them. Then the foul sulfur smell disappeared as well, replaced by a strange musty odor.

“Oh no. This smell is worse,” said James, holding his nose. “It smells like dead animals.”

“If this is what she smells like,” said Jonas, covering his mouth, “then I dread to think what she looks like.”

After some time they reached the far end of the passage and Marcus peeped cautiously around the edge. Beyond the passage a large circular cave with a low ceiling opened into the orange rock. In the centre stood a large fire that was the source of the orange glow. The eerie light danced across the rugged walls, casting strange moving shadows. Above the fire a large black iron cauldron perched on a thick tripod. Steam bubbled from the top of the pot and drifted down the sides, spreading out across the floor.

Rough wooden shelves lined the entire cave. They held thousands of small bottles. Each one was dark and mysterious. Small dried animals hung in groups from metal hooks. But most disturbing were the bones scattered around the room. Many of them were clearly animal bones, but some were much bigger. And stacked in a small cranny were the skulls of long lost sailors. Marcus gulped when he noticed definite signs the bones had been gnawed.

Slowly Marcus stepped into the cave, his heart beating hard in his chest, his sword held high. The other three soon followed him; all had terror on their faces, all were holding weapons that were visibly trembling. They slowly moved around the cave, looking for anything that might be lurking in the shadows. They all jumped when Marcus dislodged a small pile of bones that clattered to the floor.

All of a sudden a shadow passed across the cave as something large stirred in the far corner. They turned wide-eyed to see what it was.

“Oh, my darlings. My little darlings. So long it’s been,” hissed, and, strangely, croaked a voice from the far side of the cave. It sounded like a female voice with a male voice whispering under it. “Oh, my juicy little things. So sweet, so sweet the meat.” She allowed herself a hideous cackle. “Oh, it’s been awhile since poor old Heberdina has had company. Oh, delighted I am that you dropped by.”

They all drew back, looking to where the vile voice came from. In the light of the flickering flames, a large body lifted itself from what seemed to be a bed. It slowly turned and they could see it was a huge woman-like figure with long wild grey hair matted with finger bones and tiny black rodents. Her skin was a dark yellow color, deeply wrinkled and sprouting coarse white hairs. Her face was long and twisted, with a huge hooknose that also sprouted thick hairs.

She shifted in the light, and Marcus could see her eyes were like two white boiled eggs—her lizard-like eyelids never blinking. It made him step back in revulsion as the seemingly dead eyes looked across at him. The huge body shuffled around the cave. It was wrapped in rags, but large hairy feet could be seen underneath. She had long black toenails that scraped the floor as she changed speed and scuttled forward.

“Oh, you are so sweet,” she hissed. As she spoke, Marcus could see sharp long yellow teeth behind blackened lips. Then a large black wet tongue passed across those cracked lips. “I am so happy you decided to come. It’s my pleasure to welcome you to my humble home.”

She then started to chuckle under her breath, whispering to herself. Marcus couldn’t hear what she was saying as it seemed to be in another language. Then she continued to shuffle closer to the group, which made them step backward with fear.

“Come closer, my boys,” she beckoned, as two long arms appeared from under the rags. The skin was loose and hanging in folds; the hands were large and grasping—with long twisted black nails.

“They are so young. So young and tender,” she cackled to herself. “I do miss the company of such meaty people.”

The group of four shuffled away from her, trying to keep the fire between them and the horrible hag. Marcus feared the long grabbing hands that kept reaching forward every time she spoke.

“So, my sweetkins. Why have you come to visit poor old Heberdina?”

Marcus tried to speak, but his voice cracked with fear and revulsion, and he couldn’t get the words out.

“Oh do tell me, my sweet. Come here and whisper in my ear.” She laughed.

“We’re here to...” Marcus started slowly.

The smile suddenly dropped from the hag’s face and her head lolled back. A strange gurgling came from her throat, as if she were talking to herself. Then she looked back at Marcus, her white eyes burning into him.

“I know why you’re here, my young adventurers.” She smiled and then licked her lips. She hissed every s. “So why not ask me your questions. Then we can put business to one side and get on with our pleasantries.”

“If you know what we want,” said Marcus nervously, “then why not tell us what we want to know? You must tell us what we want to know—it’s the way of things.”

“Oh! I must, must I? ‘Tis the way of things, is it?” she taunted as she shuffled forward, making them step further backward. “Know a lot about these things, do you, my little mouthful?”

Then suddenly she stopped, as if someone had grabbed her. She nodded slowly, as if listening to a distant voice speaking in her ear. Quickly the smile fell from her gnarled face.

“Yes. Yes,” she whispered under her breath. “I know. I know that it’s what I must do. I know it’s the way of things, but they must know that there’s—the price.”

“You mean our blood?” said James. “Falzar told us of this vile price.”

The hag reared back at the mention of his name. She hissed like a wildcat and spat a black liquid on the fire, which crackled and filled the room with a sickening smell.

“Never mention his vile name when you are in my house!” she shrieked across the cave. “Of all that still walk this earth, he is the most evil. It was him that brought me here and him that cast me upon this putrid island. He is the one who punished me for things I never did. All who walked in the shadow of the dark one were punished, but I never deserved it. One day I will eat his putrid heart, and my revenge will be complete. Be wary of him, my little boys, for he is not to be trusted.”

James looked at the others for support as the hag edged closer, a wicked expression upon her face. Then after a moment she regained her composure and smiled her sickly smile again.

“Yes, my sweets. Of course I must tell you what you wish to know, but the way is this,” she said, her voice calmer. “The ancient right of mine is two drops of your succulent blood for each question. Only then can I tell you what you need to know.”

The four exchanged disgusted glances. Marcus didn't want to give any blood to the vile creature, but he knew it was the way of things. If they wanted their answers, then they needed to give her the blood.

"If this is the only way, then so be it," said Erik at last. "But mark me, old witch, one move too close and it will be *your* blood we will see." He lifted his axe and it shone in the flickering firelight, making the old hag nod slowly.

The hag sneered then turned and shuffled to a shelf. She reached up and removed a small silver bowl and a slender curvy dagger. Its handle resembled the head of a snake, its eyes jeweled with two small red stones. She ran her fingers up and down the blade three times and whispered under her breath before turning to them.

"Prick your fingers, my little children, and put two sweet drops of blood each in this bowl." She offered the knife and the bowl to them. "But don't be mean with your blood. Two full drops, so that I can savor your juice. Or should you feel generous, feel free to open a vein and give poor old Heberdina a long waited feast."

"Place it on the floor and step away," commanded Jonas, his eyes not leaving hers.

She crouched down and placed them on the floor, shuffling back hunched over. She cackled to herself under her breath.

"Further," ordered Jonas. "If it's my life or yours, hag, the decision will be simple." He showed her his axe before bending down and picking up the bowl and dagger. Slowly, without taking his eyes off the hag, he stepped back to the group.

"Just prick your fingers. That's all," offered the hag quietly. "As I said, two drops are needed, but should you show charity, you can offer me more—and I won't complain."

Jonas lifted the dagger, holding its point upward. Then he moved his finger slowly toward the point. The hag's eyes widened as she watched him. Her dark tongue darted across her lips.

"Stop!" shouted Marcus. The dagger shone in the firelight. "It has something on it. Some kind of—liquid."

"Poison," said Erik, looking at the dagger. "She must have smeared it on when she rubbed the dagger with her fingers."

The hag hissed wildly and Jonas flung the dagger into the fire, making the embers crackle wildly.

"I said no trick, hag," said Erik, lifting his axe. "This is my final warning. The next trick and I'll take your head off."

“She’s wicked to her heart,” said Marcus, offering Jonas his small dagger. “We must expect this from such a vile demented creature.”

The hag looked across at the dagger as Marcus offered it to Jonas. She lifted her hands and released a low hiss. “Oh, such a dagger I haven’t seen for so long, for so long. Maybe the wind speaks the truth. Maybe the times are changing and the old ways are indeed returning.”

Marcus looked at the dagger and then at the hag. A frown crossed his face, but he was weary of her treachery.

Jonas took the dagger from Marcus and quickly pricked his finger. He squeezed out two drops of deep red blood onto the bowl. The others copied him, whilst the hag hopped from foot to foot, rubbing her grubby hands and licking her black lips.

Erik placed the bowl on the floor and they stepped back as the hag moved forward. She fell to her knees and grabbed the bowl with both hands, her black tongue licking at the blood wildly. As she relished the liquid she made guttural slurping noises.

“Oh, so sweet,” she hissed. “Oh, for a little more. Oh, for a little more of this sweet juice.” Then she began to shudder wildly and deep gurgling noises issued from her throat. “The deal is the deal. The Ancients say you may have your questions, and that I must answer you. So ask me now or leave in silence.”

Marcus did not want to stay a moment longer than he had to. He was keen to ask the questions and leave as fast as possible. The hag scared him and he’d noticed they had now been moved to the far side of the cave, away from the safety of the tunnel.

“Where is the stone? The red stone of Arnak?” asked Marcus.

A hot wind suddenly blew around the cave. Small bottles fell over and the hag stepped back, her head lolling to one side as the wind passed through her.

“Ah, my young adventurer.” She spoke with a deep male voice that seemed to come from another place. “You wish to protect these poor people, to live your legend, to fulfill your prophecy. Oh, you who think you are the son of a poor fisherman. I see so much for you, my young warrior—if only you are to survive this fool adventure.” She started to laugh a deep laugh. “But even you, the great savior, are too late. For Gazhul is now too strong and the stones can no longer stop him. His darkness is great and his evil is already abroad. You cannot stop him now from destroying the stone. Lipari is all but his. And soon he will stride out into the world and his darkness will descend upon everyone once more.”

“Then how do I stop him?” asked Marcus.

“Oh, my sweet. You paid in blood for one question. You asked me of the stone, so this is what I choose to tell you. The stone lies on the island of Alicudi, protected by a great magic. Only those sent by the Ancients may take the challenge and make the leap of faith. Believe and you shall live—doubt and you shall die.”

She edged slowly forward toward Marcus, her hands, with their black nails, outstretched. “That is all I shall tell you, my little friend. Even though I tasted something in your blood that I have not tasted for such a long time.”

“Wait, hag,” said Erik, brandishing his axe. “You also had my blood. So I too get a question.”

The hag sneered and turned to Erik, her evil white eyes burning into him. “Oh, my Viking warrior, you may ask and I shall answer you, for it’s true you have paid with some of your northern blood.”

Erik stepped back a little, keeping his axe raised in case she pounced. “If Gazhul cannot be stopped by the stones, then how do we now kill him?”

The hag burst into wild laughter as the wind raced around the cave making the flames flicker. “Oh, my helmed warrior from the great northern lands. You who seem so brave, and you who are...betrayed by your lover. You whose lover belongs now to another.” She turned her dead white eyes toward Marcus and smiled a sickly smile. “But you must know she is already as good as dead. You must know she has given her heart to another more worthy of her love. This other laughs at you when you turn your back, for he has stolen her from your hands. Already he has stolen a kiss from her, but it will be her last.”

“Just answer my question, you old witch,” said Erik through gritted teeth as he eyed Marcus.

“Very well,” she giggled. “There is only one ancient weapon, long forgotten, that can penetrate his hide. It is made of a strong magic, for the blade is the horn of a unicorn. It is a magical dagger. It is the dagger of Serbulus. Only this pure weapon plunged into him can turn his evil against him and kill him. But mark my words, he is no fool and you will not simply walk up to him and plunge it in his back. You must also know, should he return to the volcano, then he will be saved and will return yet another time. So beware, my fools.”

“Where is it?” demanded Erik.

“You have had your question, fool, and you have wasted the real question: how to take your Sabrina back. This would have been much greater fun, for I would have gladly told you that it is too late for both you and Marcus.”

“Then tell *me* where the dagger is,” said James, stepping forward with his sword held out. “I too have paid with my blood, so I too get a question.”

The hag hissed and hid her face under her arms. Again the winds raced around the cave and she cackled in her throat. "This may be one of the last things you will ever know, my delicious little friend. For you have taken up with fools on an errand with which you had no business. Your friendship will cost you your stupid life, and you will end up nothing more than food on a plate."

"My friendship is worth my life. Tell me the answer and we can leave this foul place," said James as he looked toward Marcus.

"The dagger has been lost for many centuries," she said. "It lies at the bottom of the Pool of Tranquility. The pool lies hidden on the forest island of Filicudi. But you shall never leave once you enter, for you will know it is a fool's errand." The hag dropped her head and then turned slowly to Jonas, a broad smile spreading across her face. "So do you have a question for me, my plump and tasty friend? For yours was by far the tastiest blood and it has given me the clearest vision of what is to come."

Jonas stepped back nervously against the wall. He stammered and then swallowed as he looked away from her grotesque face.

"No. No, I have no question for you, old hag."

"Oh that's a shame," she said, rubbing her foul hands together and grinning to bare her sharp yellow teeth. "Then I shall ask a question *for* you, and a question to which I already know the answer."

Jonas looked at her with wide eyes as she stepped slowly closer.

"The question you should ask is: How will my flesh taste when she eats me?"

Her black tongue darted from her lips and suddenly, for the first time, her eyes blinked. Immediately she darted forward with uncanny speed, her legs kicking at the cauldron, sending it toppling onto the fire. Its vile contents poured across the flames. The fire let out an almighty hiss and was doused, releasing a pall of acrid steam that filled the cave. All was plunged into darkness.

Terror gripped Marcus, as he could hear the hag moving quickly around the cave. He could hear wild, panic-filled screams coming from his left.

"Get out! Get out!" screamed James as he madly searched for the exit. His arms flailed in the darkness, spilling bottles and potions from the shelves. "Where's the way out? Where is it? Oh God, my lungs burn! They burn!"

Marcus could suddenly hear the sickening sound of the hag's breath in the darkness. He began to wildly swing his sword.

"Oh! I'm going to crunch your bones, my young lads," hissed the hag in the blackness as she lunged toward them.

"Run! Run!" cried Erik as he suddenly pushed his hand into the opening of the tunnel. "Follow me! Follow me, the entrance is here!"

“Where are you?” coughed Marcus as the steam burned his throat. “I can’t see anything.”

“I’m here!” called James in the darkness. “Quickly, follow my voice! I’m at the tunnel.”

Marcus could sense the voices coming from his right, and he could hear the hissing and thrashing from his left. Something passed close to him and then he stumbled into the tunnel. Through his stinging watering eyes he could see in the distance the faint light of the way out. Then he could make out two shapes moving down the tunnel ahead of him.

“James is that you?” he called, unsure.

“Yes! Yes, quickly this way!” James called back. “Run for your life! She’s coming! She’s behind you!”

Marcus turned back to the cave. He could hear wild screams coming from the blackness. Then came a terrifying scuffling noise behind him.

“Help! Help me!” screamed Jonas from within the blackness, his voice shrill. “She’s got me! She’s got me. I can’t escape!”

Marcus stopped and reached back into the darkness, groping to grasp Jonas. From the cavern, Jonas managed to grab his hand. The hag suddenly wrapped her long powerful fingers around Jonas’s arms, her twisted nails digging painfully into his skin. Then her hot moist breath rasped near his neck in the blackness.

“Help me! Please, Marcus. Help me! Don’t let go!” begged Jonas, as he grasped desperately Marcus’s hand.

“Fight her!” shouted Marcus. “Stab her and pull yourself free! Just don’t let go.”

“I have you now,” cackled the hag in the blackness as she tightened her grip on Jonas. “Oh! I can feel your juicy arm. Hmm, it smells so tasty.”

Marcus could feel the weight of the hag on Jonas. She was moving like a giant spider on a fly. Marcus pulled with all his might on Jonas’s arm, when suddenly, there was a muffled crunching and the arm came free—bitten away by the hag. Jonas howled in the darkness.

Marcus gasped as he dropped the lifeless arm. He could hear the muffled screams of Jonas as he was dragged back in to the cave. At once he knew it was too late. Marcus turned and screamed as he ran. He didn’t dare look back into the darkness, but could hear something moving fast behind him. Something was scurrying up the tunnel close to him. He breathed hard and pumped his legs to run as fast as possible, his heart beating wildly, his lungs burning and his eyes streaming with tears. In an instant he was clear of the tunnel and sprinting along

the rim of the crater, still not daring to look back. He could hear the desperate screams of the hag behind him, calling from the tunnel.

“When the sun goes down, I’ll come for you, my sweet! I’ll come for you. And in the blackness I’ll crunch your bones!”

Marcus could see Erik and James doubled over some way ahead, urging him toward them. As he approached, Erik looked at him desperately.

“What about Jonas?” he asked, looking back at the cave.

“She got him,” panted Marcus. “I tried to drag him, but she had him. It was so terrible. I tried to help him, but I couldn’t do anything. She was just too powerful.”

“We can rescue him,” said Erik. “We must go back in and get him.”

“We have to go! We have to go now!” said Marcus, trying to catch his breath. “She wants us all. And as soon as the light fades she’ll be after us. It’s too late for Jonas—he’s dead.”

“She’ll find my axe at her throat,” said Erik, his voice full of rage. “I’ll avenge Jonas, as is the Viking way.”

“Not here! Not now! She has the element of surprise; we won’t see a thing,” said James, looking back nervously at the cave. “If darkness comes—we’re doomed.”

“Let’s go while there’s still light,” said Marcus, pulling at Erik. “You can avenge him later. But now we need to get off this cursed mountain.”

Erik reluctantly nodded and they turned to start across the crater. They ran along the rim and dropped over the edge, following the path that led down the side of the volcano.

The sun soon dropped below the horizon and the group found it harder and harder to follow the scrubby path through the rocks. Every so often one of them would stumble and yell as he crashed to the ground. Their descent was hard and dangerous, but they were driven on by the thought of the vile hag.

They stopped about halfway down the path to rest and take some water. The faint crescent of the moon gave them just enough light to see the way ahead. Suddenly they heard a cackling a short distance above them. Then it turned into a haunting rhyme.

* * * *

*Swift on their feet
Flees my sweet meat,*

*So nice to eat,
For me a treat.
By light of the moon
I'll catch them soon,
And sing my tune
As I seal their doom.*

* * * *

Marcus looked back up the path and could make out a large dark shape hunched over. It was shuffling down the rocks toward them. "It's the hag! Quickly, run! Run as fast as you can!"

The hag cackled behind them in the darkness. They all started to sprint down the path, stumbling and falling in panic. Marcus clutched his sword, every so often glancing back over his shoulder with fear of seeing the claw like hands of the hag stretching for him.

For nearly two hours they scrambled down the mountain, fear driving them on to the bottom. They finally reached the spit of land behind the beach. Exhausted, they staggered toward the boat, awakening Toby and Niklas.

"It's them! They're back!" Toby shouted, jumping from the boat and running over to help them. "What happened? What's the matter?"

"Get in the boat! Get in the boat now!" James cried as he collapsed on the beach. "She's not far behind us. I saw her as we reached the bottom."

"Where's Jonas?" asked Niklas as he looked back hopefully toward the path.

Erik shook his head solemnly and looked down as he staggered to the boat.

Marcus fell to his knees and dropped his sword. "The hag got him." He tried not to think of the haunting screams he had heard from the cave. "I tried to save him, but she was too fast and too strong. She pulled him into the darkness. It was so terrible."

James scrambled into the boat and looked back in terror. Then he could do nothing but collapse into the bottom of the boat. "We need to go! We need to leave here! Please get in the boat and get us away from here!"

Niklas and Toby helped to heave Marcus and Erik into the boat. Niklas untied the rope and pushed the boat away from the beach as fast as he could, glancing back.

"Something's coming down the path. I can hear it!" said Niklas.

“The hag is coming after us! We need to sail now!” said Erik, as he grasped for a water bottle.

“But it’s too dark to go now. There’s not enough light, we’ll founder on the rocks,” said Toby, looking out across the dark water. “If that happens she’ll get us for sure.”

Suddenly Pippin started to growl as he looked back at the beach. In the half moonlight, they could see a dark shadow stepping onto the beach.

“The hag!” said Marcus. “She won’t stop until she’s feasted upon us all.”

Then the hag’s cracked voice drifted across the water, making them all fall silent.

* * * *

*Young adventurers far from home,
On a quest to steal the stone,
But they on this journey are alone,
And this knowledge I do own.
That on this journey they will cry,
As one by one they will die,
And beat Gazhul they may try,
But in the hands of fate they will lie.*

* * * *

This cruel poem was followed by a long hideous cackle that trailed off as the hag turned toward her cave. She knew they were now out of her reach on the water, but she felt satisfied in the knowledge of their fate. Her mind turned to Jonas, paralyzed in her cave. She licked her lips and headed back to her supper.

* * * *

“Do you think she’s gone?” whispered James as he looked into the blackness.

“I don’t know. I just hope she can’t swim,” answered Toby.

“Look! There, on the side of the volcano,” said Erik, pointing. “It’s her, and she’s climbing back up to her cave. I think we’re safe for now.”

“I suggest we drop anchor here and keep watch until we can sail in the morning,” suggested Niklas. “If we see her come back down, or try to come into the water, then we sail and risk the rocks.”

“Yes. Yes it’s all we can do,” agreed James as he crammed some bread into his mouth, his hands visibly shaking. “I’m sure that with the curse Falzar and the Ancients put on her, she’ll not be able to leave the island.”

They dropped anchor some way from the shore and sat watching for any signs of movement on the beach. Eventually, James, Marcus and Erik collapsed into an exhausted, disturbed sleep, whilst Niklas and Toby took turns on watch. As their small boat rocked gently in the water, some distance from the black beach other dark boats were moving toward the shores of Salina. They were dark boats that carried the evil servants of Gazhul.

RAIDERS IN THE DARK

Dark boats glided silently toward the shore. One by one they came to rest on the shingles of the beach. A dozen evil creatures manned each. Their eyes burned red and their mouths hissed with excitement as they landed.

The leader of the Strombolians crept ashore and hunched over, hugging close to the ground. As it sneaked up the beach, it sniffed the air and looked around. The other Strombolians followed, also keeping low to the beach. Their short daggers were drawn as they sneaked forward.

From behind a rock, near the edge of the beach, a slender figure appeared. He had been watching the boats come ashore with his one eye. He was waiting for the leader of the Strombolians to cross the beach.

Gaut stepped from behind the rock and crept over to the leader; a broad smile crossed his twisted face. He began to whisper in their vile tongue, turning and pointing to the houses of the colony. The group of creatures became excited and started to brandish their weapons, making the leader call for silence.

“It will be a pleasure to watch you cut their throats in the night,” croaked Gaut.

“Oh no,” hissed the creature, “we are not here to kill them. We are here to take them as prisoners. Our master now needs their blood to become stronger. We will be taking these pathetic people as a sacrifice.”

“Does he hurt them when he feeds on them?” asked Gaut hopefully.

“Oh yes. Oh yes. He sucks their blood out through their eyes.” The creature grinned, revealing gnarled teeth. “It gives him more pleasure to feel his victims struggle for their lives.”

“Good. This pleases me greatly,” laughed Gaut. “Then let’s not waste more time. Let us take them whilst they sleep and deliver them to our master.”

“He will reward you for your treachery, Gaut,” said the leader as he led the Strombolians from the beach.

* * * *

Sabrina slept as the gentle sea breeze blew through her window, cooling her as she lay on her bed. Something seemingly distant disturbed her and dragged her from her deep, dreamless sleep—something unusual. Her eyes opened and she looked about her room, trying to understand what strange noise had awakened her. Then something outside her door made the wood of the floor creak. It seemed someone was moving—inside the house. Her thoughts suddenly went to Marcus—*has he actually come into the house this time?*

Sabrina slipped from her bed and crept across to her door. She slowly turned the handle and gently opened it a crack so she could peep out. Her eyes sprang wide open and she struggled to hold in her scream. She could see three dark creatures carrying the body of her struggling father from his bedroom. One was holding its long scaly hand over his mouth; the others were carrying him by his arms and legs.

She stepped back as she saw two more of the vile creatures moving toward her door, their red eyes glowing in the darkness. She scrambled backward and turned to her window to escape, flinging her legs through and then lowering herself to the ground. As she dropped she heard her door opening behind her, but she had been too fast.

She kept low as she quickly moved through the long grass, her whole body shaking with fear. Tears streamed down her face. She scrambled away from the house, disorientated and terrified. Her only hope would be to hide until they had gone. Maybe then she could try to get help from Lipari.

She dropped to the ground and lay in the long grass, looking around for a refuge. Suddenly screams erupted from one of the houses. The entire colony was alerted to the raiders and this sent the Strombolians into harsh wild war cries. Houses suddenly leapt into flames as gangs of wild creatures threw burning torches into them. As the occupants fled the dark creatures greeted them with brutal kicks and blows. They bore down on the villagers, pummeling them with their scaly fists. Then the creatures spat at them before dragging them away, screaming, toward the shore.

Sabrina watched, horrified, as a young boy wriggled free from the clutches of a Strombolian and started running. Before he could escape, the sword of another creature brutally hacked him down. This provoked wild cheers among the creatures, making Sabrina hold her hands to her head in despair.

She looked back away from the house and could see her father's vineyard; it was dark and she knew it had many good places in which to hide. She crawled on her belly through the long grass and eventually reached the edge. Checking around her, she bolted from the grass into the vines, diving for cover. She landed hard, face down upon the ground.

Wide-eyed she looked back and could see flames leaping from her house. She started to sob deeply as she watched her home engulfed, two of the vile creatures danced around it waving their swords.

From down on the beach a great horn sounded in the darkness, signaling the creatures to retreat with their prey. Sabrina watched as they filed from the burning colony—like soldier ants carrying their captives.

Sabrina collapsed in despair as she watched her family and friends loaded into the small black boats. The flickering light of the burning houses illuminated their terrified faces. As the flames crackled higher, thick smoke drifted across the island and filled the sky. The entire southeast side of the island glowed orange.

Sabrina decided to wait until morning to sail across the channel to Lipari. She hoped to reach Marcus and Falzar—they would have a plan to rescue the colonists.

Suddenly a spiny hand reached through the vines and grabbed her hair, dragging her from between the vines. She turned on her back, screaming in terror as she looked up into the one shining eye of Gaut.

"You!" she screamed as she kicked wildly. "You have betrayed us all, you evil creature!"

"Aaah, got ya," beamed Gaut, his yellow teeth visible behind his dark lips. "You didn't think we were going to leave our prize here, did you? I mean our master asked specifically for you—seein' as you're the love of his nemesis. I mean the sweetest thing of all will be when he drinks your sweet blood."

Sabrina kicked wildly, catching Gaut on his knee and making him fall to the ground. For an instant his spiny hand released her. She jumped to her feet and started to run but four strong scaly hands grabbed her and flung her to the ground, knocking the wind from her. Two Strombolians held her firmly as Gaut walked over, his face angry as he rubbed his throbbing knee.

Gaut hissed at the creatures and they followed his command. They lifted her head up and Gaut pressed his face close to hers.

“This is the beginning of the end for all those who didn’t follow my master,” spat Gaut at Sabrina. “First he will feast on you and your family, and then those on Lipari. He is waiting with great pleasure to serve revenge to that old fool, Falzar. Then he will wipe out all of the people in these islands—before he claims the world.”

Sabrina spat in his face. “Marcus will stop him. The prophecy will come true.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Gaut as he wiped the spit from his face. “My master has already told me the prophecy is just a lie created by the Ancients—a lie to bring hope in this time of his great darkness. Your beloved Marcus is no more a wizard than me. He was just found by Falzar because he looked like the boy in the painting. You see, Falzar has sent him on a fool’s quest, making him believe he is someone special...But he will die—like them all.”

“You’re a liar!” screamed Sabrina.

“No. Falzar is the liar. He tried to bring hope to you all by bringing here the foolish son of a fisherman. And now you will all know the truth. Remember my words when my master is sucking the blood from your pretty little eyes.”

Gaut’s dark wet tongue flicked from behind his stained teeth and he licked the side of Sabrina’s face, leaving a thick trail of saliva on her cheek.

“Oh, you will taste so sweet,” said Gaut as he stepped away from her and signaled to the two creatures to take her away.

“You’ll pay for this, Gaut!” screamed Sabrina as they dragged her toward the shore. “Marcus will make you pay for this!”

Gaut watched for a moment and then turned to take in the burning village. His head lolled back and he started to laugh.

TIME SLIPS AWAY

Cornelius bumbled back into town. Eventually his rumbling stomach had dragged him from his vigil at the harbor. He'd been expecting to see the colonists from Salina and was surprised no one had appeared. He knew the old farmer was stubborn, but he also knew he was not stupid. So if Falzar had ordered them to come to the safety of Lipari, he would come.

It was now the second day since he had sent Gaut to Salina, and neither the colonists nor the thin messenger had returned.

"I just don't know where they are," said Cornelius to the grocer as he wiped his brow. "I mean they should have come by now. They must have got the message. Oh, I do hope nothing has happened to them."

"It's too late," whispered Falzar as he appeared alongside Cornelius, making him jump.

"What do you mean: it's too late?" asked Cornelius.

"I have been watching from the observatory," said Falzar, pulling Cornelius to one side. "Late last night I saw the colony on Salina burning. I could see the colonists being dragged away into their dark boats. It's worse than I had at first feared. I have greatly underestimated the power of the enemy, and now the colonists have paid for my miscalculation—probably with their lives."

Cornelius gasped and placed his hands on his ruddy face. "But Gaut. I sent Gaut yesterday. Oh no. What happened? What has he done?"

"This was my mistake. It appears that our spy on the island was indeed Gaut—as I'd feared. My mistake was not to warn you and the others he should

not be trusted. I have been watching him for some time and I had my suspicions, but could prove nothing. Our enemy had concealed his actions too well.”

“Oh my! But if I had known, I would never have sent him. I thought he was a bit of a skulking fellow, but I never could have imagined he was an evil spy. Oh, it’s all my fault.”

“It’s not your fault. Our enemy will seize any opportunity to take advantage,” said Falzar. “If you had sent someone else, I’m sure Gaut would have followed to make sure that person never arrived. At least this way we have spared the life of one other person.”

“But this is so terrible. What will they do with them?”

“It’s better we don’t think of what will happen to them. But for now we must keep everyone here calm. Once word gets out that Salina has been attacked, everyone here will panic. Remind them well we have strong magic here to protect the island and I will stay and fight to the end—if it comes to that.”

Cornelius nodded slowly. “Oh my. Oh my. The thought of such evil beasts being so close. Oh my.”

“Don’t panic. We will be safe for now,” said Falzar, looking down to the harbor. “I need a boat to take me to Marcus. I have an urgent need to speak to him for I have seen things this night that have made me rethink.”

“What, and leave the island undefended?” asked Cornelius with alarm in his voice.

“I’ll be just a few hours and they will never dare to attack in the light—it’s not their way. They will now be waiting for their master to feast and become stronger before they dare attack here. They are strong, but not yet strong enough for a full assault. Many things are now becoming clear to me about what his plans are.”

“Why? What’s happening?” asked Cornelius as he mopped his brow with a bright purple handkerchief.

“I have understood that Gazhul may no longer have need of the other stone. He has found a way to become stronger, and I think it involves the colonists. I fear he may be sacrificing them to gain strength to make a full assault on the island. I fear he may have found another way to destroy the blue stone and remove the great fog. He will need time to grow, but then he may be too strong for us to stop. It is no coincidence he has taken these prisoners—for Gazhul would happily kill them in their beds. He takes a great risk to have them come to Stromboli. No. I am convinced he has found a dark magic that uses their sacrifice to make him stronger.”

“This is terrible,” said Cornelius with his hand to his mouth. “This is just so awful.”

"I need Old Thom to sail me to Marcus. I need to talk to him before he continues on his adventure."

"He's down there." Cornelius pointed. He was sitting outside a small bar with his hat cocked to one side and his clay pipe hanging from the corner of his mouth, looking toward Falzar. "He's the fastest and greatest sailor on the island."

"I know," said Falzar, as he walked toward the bar. "That's why he's remained here for so long. Now his time has at last come."

* * * *

Marcus awoke from sleep stiff and damp. The others had drifted into sleep and no one was watching the beach for the hag. Marcus sat up in a panic, looking around. He was relieved to see Pippin lying on the bow of the boat, looking across the bay to the beach, keeping guard.

"Hey! Hey!" said Marcus, waking Toby. "So much for watching us. It's lucky for us Pippin was here. At least he may have warned us before we were all dragged to our deaths."

Toby roused and rubbed his eyes. "But it was Niklas's turn. I watched until a few hours ago. That stupid oaf has fallen asleep." He kicked at Niklas, sleeping on the floor of the boat. "Hey you! What are you doing sleeping? We could all be dead now, poisoned by that old hag."

Niklas jumped abruptly, shaking his head and looking around. "Don't kick me, you little squirt! I'll knock your head off if you touch me again."

"Oh yeah. Then let's just see," said Toby, stepping forward and putting up his fists. "Just 'cause you're a big lump doesn't mean anything. The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

"Hey! What's all this commotion?" Erik looked at Toby and Niklas squaring up to each other. "If you two clowns want to fight, do it without waking me. Just make sure he doesn't squeal too much when you kill him."

Marcus's mind was elsewhere, disturbed by the vivid dreams that had awakened him. "Salina has been taken!"

Everyone turned to look at Marcus, the fighting immediately stopping.

"What?" said Erik. "What do you mean, Salina has been taken? How on earth do you know?"

"I saw it in my dreams last night. The colony is lost," said Marcus, staring into space. "I could see great flames reaching into the sky, and I could see Gaut laughing as dark creatures took away the townsfolk. It was...horrible."

"Are you sure?" asked Toby.

“Yes I’m sure.”

Pippin suddenly started to bark as he looked out across the channel toward Lipari, his little tail wagging frantically. Everyone jumped. They grabbed for their weapons and stood ready, imagining the hag was upon them.

“What’s he barking at now?” sneered Erik. “This stupid dog. It’s obvious the hag’s not there.”

James looked across the channel toward a small boat. It was approaching at high speed, its sail full.

“I think,” said James as he squinted, “that is Old Thom’s boat and it seems to be coming this way.”

They stood and watched as the boat sped toward them, perfectly balanced on the wind. It crossed the great abyss with hardly a ripple and before they could imagine, the boat was almost upon them.

“There’s great trouble,” said Marcus, looking at Falzar, who was standing at the bow, his cloak flowing behind him.

“Why do you say that?” asked Toby.

“Falzar would never leave the island unless he was bringing important news to us.”

The boats came together and Erik grabbed for the bowline of Old Thom’s boat, pulling it in tight, allowing Falzar to step across into their boat.

“I have grave news,” announced Falzar. “Salina is lost; the colonists have been betrayed by Gaut. And now I fear things have changed for the worse.”

“You knew it was lost. You really knew it was lost,” said Toby as he looked at Marcus in awe.

Erik looked sideways at Marcus and raised an eyebrow. “I bet you knew because you were part of the plan. I knew we should never have trusted you.”

“Be quiet, Erik!” said Falzar. “He knew because his powers are awakening and he can see more than most. The one person you can trust above all is Marcus.”

“Is everyone lost?” asked Marcus as he felt a deep churning inside.

“Yes—everyone.”

“I’ll kill Gaut!” exploded Erik, brandishing his axe. “I’ll take his one good eye and I’ll cut it out! I never trusted that weasel,”

“You seemed good friends with him last I looked,” said Toby. “The night you attacked Marcus.”

Erik narrowed his eyes at Toby, but said nothing.

“Are the islanders all dead?” asked James.

“No. No, not all dead,” said Falzar, placing a reassuring hand on James’s shoulder. “It seems Gazhul has made new plans, and he wanted the colonists

alive. My fear is he is using them to feed himself and grow stronger. It may be he has discovered a dark magic that could mean, with or without the stone, he may be strong enough to escape from the islands.”

Marcus shook his head, thinking of Sabrina being dragged away in the darkness, terrified. Suddenly his heart filled with rage. “What can we do? We must stop him.”

“Yes,” agreed Falzar. “But time is very short. He may be strong enough, in just a few short days, to launch an attack. We have a choice to make, for we cannot be sure he still does not need the red stone. To be certain, it must be destroyed in any case. Also we need to find a way to kill him. My hope is the hag would have said something about such matters, for she may be a crazy old witch, but even she fears the cruelty of Gazhul. Even she knows he would have much use of her powers again and she could be his slave—which would be a terrible task for all eternity.”

“She told us of the dagger of Serbulus,” said Erik. “She told us it is the one weapon that can kill him. And she even told us where it is.”

Falzar smiled for a second, and then the smile fell from his face. “This is indeed good news. Better than I had hoped, that there is such a weapon. I think the witch would have told you of it for she has already tasted his cruelty once, and she may hope he will be stopped.”

“But how can we trust what she said?” asked James.

“She must tell the truth, my dear James,” said Falzar, looking back at Vulcano. “Some things in this world are more ancient and powerful than you know. Great traditions still ring and great mysteries still spin the world. And if you fulfill this quest, a new age of such great things will be born.”

As Falzar spoke, a strong wind blew across the boats, sending shivers down Marcus’s back.

“So what are we to do now?” asked Toby. “I don’t suppose it involves going back to Lipari and finding some others to finish the quest.”

“You must find the dagger and also find the stone,” said Falzar. “You will need to throw the stone into the great abyss to make sure it will remain hidden from Gazhul. Then you will need to sail to darkness—and go to Stromboli itself. It is not certain, but maybe if the winds are kind you will reach there before all of the colonists are...”

“What, us go to Stromboli?” protested Erik. “You are crazier than I first thought. It’s the place of evil. His lair.”

Again, wind blasted across the boat and Falzar seemed to grow, a power appearing to come from within him.

“If you do not do this, all will perish at the feet of his evil!” boomed Falzar, his voice powerful. “You have all been given this task as part of a greater story, a story set in the past and the future, and this time now is the critical link. For if you succeed, a new age of light will be born, and there will be hope and peace. But if you fail, the world will be plunged into an age of unimaginable darkness and cruelty. Of some things there is no choice. Some things must just be done.”

Erik shrank back, suddenly struck by the sheer presence of Falzar.

“But can’t you come with us?” asked James. “Your powers would make this quest easier.”

“No, my young adventurers. As I have had said: this is *your* adventure and *your* time.” Falzar stared at Marcus. “Many things in the future depend upon the actions of now. And one day I hope these things will come to pass. I must stay on Lipari, for should you fall, I will stand as the last defense. But this I promise: if total darkness comes and all hope is lost, I will not abandon you, my friends.”

Marcus stepped forward and stood before the group. He felt a growing strength within him and a great sense of adventure. His heart pounded with excitement and fear as his mind flashed to Sabrina.

“Then if this is our time, we must act and act now. For every second that passes, he grows stronger. I will take the dagger to Stromboli and drive it into Gazhul’s black heart. If not, then I will die trying.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Falzar with a warm smile on his face. “Half the battle is believing you will win.”

“I’m not going to Stromboli,” sulked Erik as he folded his arms, “no matter what greatness it will earn us. Suicide is not my idea of heroism.”

Falzar turned and jumped back into Old Thom’s boat. Old Thom had been listening intently to the conversation.

“So, Erik. Ya won’t go to Stromboli. Even to save your future wife?” said Old Thom as he puffed on his pipe and smiled wryly. “An’ I thought you had a Norseman’s blood running through your veins. I think your father would have some words to say about it. I’d wager he’d be sailing there as fast as he could to meet the enemy head on. Guess young Marcus here has your portion of guts as well.”

Erik stood with his arms still folded on his chest and his face red with anger. He then leant forward and pushed the boats apart. Pippin started to bark as the two boats drifted from each other.

“Wait!” cried Marcus. “Take Pippin! He’ll only get in the way here.”

“No! It may be better to have him with you,” said Falzar, looking back and raising an eyebrow at Marcus. “Remember that everything has a purpose. And everyone.”

Marcus looked back a little confused. However, in his heart he trusted Falzar. He smiled and waved.

“Good luck, my brave young adventurers,” said Falzar as Thom turned the boat into the wind. “And remember: even in the darkest moment there will be hope. Even if all seems lost, good will prevail. You just need to open your hearts and believe.”

James sat down in the boat shaking his head. “Well, if it wasn’t dangerous enough, we’re now planning to sail to his island and attack him in his own fortress. I trust Falzar, but there’s only so much we can do.”

“We’re all going to die,” said Niklas, nodding his head in agreement with James.

“I hope some of us will,” sneered Erik, as his eyes burned at Marcus. “It may save me having to do the job myself.”

“Hey!” said Toby. “Just remember as long as Gazhul is alive we’re all on the same side. As much as you may hate us, and we hate you, it’s important to know we are in this together.”

“Then after Gazhul is defeated, I’ll deal with him,” spat Erik as he looked at Marcus. “Don’t for a minute mistake my not wanting to do something stupid with cowardice, like that old fool did. I’m as brave as any man and will face death gladly, but setting foot on Stromboli is not how this fight should go. Bring Gazhul to us on Lipari, where we can have a fair fight.”

“And don’t mistake Falzar for an old fool,” said Marcus without looking at Erik. “There will be a good reason he wants us to go to Stromboli. Maybe he knows something of the power of the volcano that we don’t.”

“Well, I think our path is clear, whether we like it or not,” said James, grabbing the tiller. “Raise the sail and let’s be on our way. We have a hard journey ahead and time is slipping away from us.” He pointed to the north and all of them could see the black smoke of Stromboli stretching high into the sky.

They sailed around the coast of Vulcano and then turned west and headed along the side of the channel until after some time they passed the western coast of Lipari. From around the coast they could see Salina in the distance, its green cone sharp against the sky. From where the small colony had once stood, there rose a steady column of smoke from burning embers. It drifted in a grey haze above the island.

“They burned the entire town,” whispered James. “Not a single building remains. They even burned the farmer’s...”

Marcus looked at the column of smoke and then turned his eyes north to the horizon. He could see faintly in the distance the shape of Stromboli, the sky all around it now darkened by smoke, creating a blackness that stretched south beyond Panarea.

Suddenly an icy wind blasted from the north, slamming into the boat, pushing it over onto its side. They all gasped and grabbed onto the gunnels for fear of the boat capsizing.

As the wind blasted across Marcus’s face, his mind was wrenched to another place. His head filled with horrific visions. He could see the colonists being brutally murdered at the feet of a great dark creature, blood spilling onto the black lava stone. Then he could see Lipari being invaded by a great army of Strombolians who swarmed across the town hacking down villagers with short swords. Dead and burning bodies lay in the street as blood ran through the town, and children screamed in terror.

His mind then shifted to his home. He stared as great hoards of evil creatures swarmed from their nests in the dead city of Messina where they had been biding their time, awaiting the return of Gazhul. He stared in horror as great troops of Strombolians and other evil creatures destroyed his village. Then he watched helplessly as his father was hacked to the ground.

Finally, with great clarity, he watched as Gazhul spread his darkness across the world, killing and maiming. It was a vision dark and horrid. It was a vision that filled him with a new urgency.

Pippin barked at the wind as it passed over the boat and then was gone. The boat came back upright in the water.

“I could hear screams,” said James coldly, his eyes wide.

“Me too,” said Toby. “Screams within the wind.”

“We need to hurry,” urged Marcus as his mind cleared. “We must move faster. Gazhul is winning. And if he does win, then the world will fall into a terrible darkness.”

Marcus closed his eyes again and he could see an image of Sabrina. It was clear and real in his mind. She was lying on a black lava stone floor. Licks of orange flame reflected in the tears streaking down her cheeks. Dark creatures were dragging a screaming man away through a cell door. He was kicking and fighting wildly.

“They’ll devour us all! They’ll devour us all!” he screamed as he was dragged away.

Sabrina closed her eyes, sobbing heavily under her breath, and then she spoke quietly. "Please save us, Marcus. Save us."

THE GIANT FORESTS OF FILICUDI

It was late afternoon when the boat came within reach of Filicudi, a gigantic volcanic island that rose high from the sea. Dense green foliage smothered its steep slopes, making it a giant emerald encrusted dome. Great black birds circled high above the island. They had bright red heads and long, slender, pointed wings. They seemed almost prehistoric as they swooped around the canopy of trees. As they circled in the warm air, they called to each other with high shrill cries, as if warning of the approaching boat.

Marcus could see why this was called the forest island. Great, ancient trees covered the entire landmass, forming one enormous forest. The trees had broad, gnarled trunks that stretched almost a hundred feet high. Strong thick branches covered in dense green leaves sprouted from the trunks. The foliage was so thick that no light penetrated to the forest floor. A thin white mist hung about the great trees, giving a calm but eerie feeling to the whole island.

“Does anyone or anything live in this forest?” asked Toby, scanning the trees. “I hope it’s just those birds.”

“I don’t even like the look of the birds,” Marcus added as he watched two of the great black birds sweep low to the canopy.

“Well, they say there are strange things in the forest,” whispered James as he gazed upon the island. “Some brave people have gone in, but few have ever returned.”

“Those few who returned have brought back tales,” whispered Niklas. “They say the island contains strange men-like creatures, tall and strong. It’s said: all that can be seen of them are the great bulbous eyes, staring from within the dim forest. They say they are cannibals and they will gladly eat anyone they find in their forest.”

“I don’t know them as cannibals,” said Erik, stroking his axe blade, “but our family has heard them called Nargs. It’s a word from the north, meaning tree dwellers. Whatever they are, my axe will make short work of them.”

“I’m not so sure we want to get near them,” mumbled James, shaking his head as they sailed closer to the island. “We just need to get to the pool and find the dagger, then get away as soon as possible. I say we leave the Nargs to themselves—be they cannibals or not.”

Marcus unrolled the old map, laying it upon the supplies. Then slowly he traced his finger across to Filicudi. Pippin bounced forward and placed his paws on the map, wagging his tail. Marcus gently pushed him back and patted him on the head.

“There seems to be a marked forest road here,” he said as the others gathered around. “It follows this river north—through the forest to the top of the island. If we can see where the river comes out on the coast, we can follow it inland and back to this cave that’s marked over the pool. It seems to be the only river marked on the map, so it must be easy to find.”

They sailed around the coast of the island until eventually they found the river for which they were looking. A huge light-brown, rough cliff towered from the sea, hundreds of feet high. It curved around and came to a small bay where its slope was gentler and the crest lower. A great waterfall cascaded from the top of the cliff, pouring down into the sea. As the water from above hit the sea surface, it roared and boiled, sending clouds of white spray into the air. The noise was almost deafening.

“I guess we found the river,” said James above the roar as he guided the boat around into the bay. “But the question is: how do we get up there to the river?”

Marcus looked from the bay and could see what seemed a rough path winding from the beach to the top of the cliff. He wasn’t sure it went all the way to the river, as halfway up the slope its path disappeared into the darkness of the forest.

“I think we can follow that path,” he said, pointing. “I hope it joins the river somewhere within the trees. It seems to be the only river and only path on the map.”

The boat slowly came to ground on the shingles of the beach and Erik jumped from the boat with a rope. He walked to a big rock and tied it fast. The others

picked up their weapons and bags then stepped onto the island, gazing up the slope to the giant trees.

Strange noises issued from the edge of the great forest—small animal hoots and birdcalls.

“So who stays with the boat this time?” asked Erik, looking at the group.

“I think we all stay together,” said Marcus, turning to look up at the forest. “If we find a group of these Nargs, the more of us to fight the better.”

“Fight! Sounds good to me,” said Erik, spitting on his axe blade and swinging it by its handle. “It’s time we had a fight. My spirit is high and my axe is ready. I have no fear of these tree dwelling men. Bring them to me and I’ll cleave off their heads.”

“Don’t be so eager,” said James. “If it’s true what they say of these Nargs, you’ll need to stand on a box to cut off their heads.”

“For all his talk I doubt he could cut the grass,” Marcus jibed.

“Well you didn’t do a great job in the cave with the hag,” replied Erik, stepping forward. “If I had been the last, I’m sure Jonas would still be alive and we would have the hag’s head as a trophy.”

“So what about the boat?” asked Niklas. “Any creature could come from the forest and eat everything we have. Then we’d be in real trouble.”

As they looked at each other, Pippin started to bark and wag his tail. He jumped up and stood upon the supplies in the boat.

“I guess we have a volunteer to stay with the boat,” said Toby with a laugh. “He may not be big, but he’s certainly fierce.”

“Certainly fiercer than his master,” laughed Erik, making Niklas chuckle.

“Are you thinking of going now? I mean we won’t make it all the way to the top of the island before dark.” said Niklas. “The light is already starting to dim. I don’t fancy being in the forest in the darkness. Not with all those strange creatures lurking in there.”

“We don’t have time to wait,” said Marcus, looking at the map. “We can reach about halfway to the cave by nightfall, sleep in the forest and then press on at first light. It’s not what I’d prefer, but I think our time is running out. Every minute I can feel Gazhul is getting stronger.”

“Then there’s no time to waste,” said Toby, shouldering his sack of supplies and turning to the steep slope. “I also fear being in the forest at night. But I fear Gazhul becoming stronger more.”

The others grabbed their supplies and weapons, and headed after Toby, starting up the loose gravel path from the bay.

“Pippin, make sure you guard the boat,” said Marcus, patting the little dog.

Pippin settled down on top of the supplies, wagging his tail.

Marcus turned and started the climb. The base of the slope was gentle, but it soon became steep and the loose rocks made it perilous. The group wound its way up, dislodging rocks, which tumbled down into the bay with a loud clatter and splash. Soon they came to the level of the first trees, which loomed above them, casting dark shadows across the slope. Marcus peered into the gloom and could see the rocks soon became covered by deep soft ground and a mass of tangled roots.

"I really don't like the look of it in there," said Marcus, listening to distant animal noises in the darkness. "It'll be hard to escape through that mass of trees if anything attacks us."

"Well, we may as well get it over with," said Niklas as he stepped under the trees. "The sooner we get up through the forest, the sooner we get back down. I think the less time we spend on this path, the less chance there'll be to meet any of those Nargs."

The others followed him in and immediately the light changed to a green dimness, only a few shafts of light penetrating the dense canopy. The thick undergrowth and soft foliage suddenly absorbed all sounds and all echoes were deadened. They could no longer hear the pouring of the great waterfall or the gentle lapping of the sea. All they could now hear were the distant noises of creatures that called out in the woods and from above the trees the shrill call of distant birds.

The path wound on upward, but the slope became gentler as it continued deeper into the forest. The thick mass of tangled roots that criss-crossed the path made their going very slow. Undergrowth snagged at their legs and pulled at their sacks; it was as if the forest was alive and slowing them down.

"It's so humid in here," complained Erik, wiping his brow. "There's not a breath of air. I feel as if I'm suffocating."

"Yeah. And it's so dense," said Niklas. "If we lose this path, we'll never find our way out again. I really don't like it. It's as if these trees are watching us and...pulling at us."

"And it's getting dark fast," moaned James. "I doubt we're going to make it halfway up the path before it becomes so dark we can't continue."

"We'll go as far as we can," said Marcus, stumbling over a root. "The path should come close to the river, and then if we lose it, we just follow the river up—and if need be, back down."

It was a long while before the meandering path began to swing toward the river. At first they could barely hear the water in the distance. Then, as they

approached, they could hear the river had a strong flow. They stumbled upon it and almost fell in, as it was so crowded by a wall of trees. The high trees formed a perfect arch over the water, which wasn't very wide but seemed deep and flowed fast. Small branches were swept along the current at speed toward the great waterfall.

At the river, the path turned directly north and began to track through the trees, a few feet from it. It followed the river's course, meandering left and right as it steadily climbed. Again it had become steeper, and the going was slow and difficult.

"Who do you think made this path?" asked Toby after a while. "It seems pretty well worn. You'd think in this forest it'd be overgrown in a few days."

"I guess it must be the Nargs," answered James.

"Well, don't you think they still use this path?" asked Toby. "And if they do—then don't you think it's a bad idea for us to be using it?"

The group stopped still and thought for a moment. They looked up and down the path and then deep into the forest.

"I think we have no choice," said Marcus, again looking at the map. "It seems to be the only path on the map and, well, I doubt we could ever find our way through the forest without following it."

"I'm concerned," said Erik, looking into the darkening undergrowth, "that we may just step out into wherever the Nargs live. Or even worse—they'll bump into us or at least hear us."

"It's a good point," said James, now whispering. "I think even deaf Nargs would have heard us shouting so loud and clambering along this path. Maybe we need to be more careful."

Suddenly in the distance, through the trees, there came a loud cracking sound like dry wood being broken. Some small birds leapt from the undergrowth and disappeared into the trees.

"What was that?" whispered Toby, his eyes wide as saucers.

"Sounded like a branch," said Marcus, his heart pounding.

"Could be just an old branch falling from one of the trees," said Erik, gripping his axe.

"Or," whispered Marcus, "it could have been something standing on a branch—something big."

The group crouched low, holding their weapons, listening intently for anything moving in the forest. It was difficult, as the dense tree trunks made good cover for anything that wished to hide there. For all they knew, a hundred Nargs could be gathered around them.

After some time, Marcus dared to speak. “Well, whatever it was—it’s gone. We’d best press on as far as we can. If it gets any darker we won’t even see the path. When that happens, we stop wherever we are on the path and sleep—if we can. Then we’ll press on at first light.”

“I think it was a bad idea to come in here now,” grumbled Erik. “But as we’re here—I agree. We need to get as far as we can tonight. I don’t relish sleeping in this spooky forest. The thing I don’t like the look of the most are the great big bugs. I think we’re going to be a feast for every creature on the forest floor tonight.” With that he swatted a large creepy bug from his leg. It was long and brown with ample spindly legs. It landed on the floor and scuttled off into the dense undergrowth.

They moved as fast as the growing darkness would allow. The mass of roots tripped them all and the branches became thicker, slowing them down even more. Soon they were just falling in the darkness and not making any progress.

“Enough!” said James as he fell again in the blackness, cracking his leg on a root. “That’s it! We can’t go any further in this rotten forest. I suggest we make the most of where we are and stay here for the night.”

“Fine,” agreed Marcus. “My knees are broken too and I’m tired. It’s been such hard work trying to get along this path. It feels like the forest has been trying to stop us all the way. At least we haven’t seen any sign of the Nargs so far.”

“Oh! That’s great,” snarled Erik. “Why not bring bad luck on us by saying it again!”

“The only bad luck here is you, oaf,” replied Marcus.

“I do hope nothing happens to you in the darkness,” said Erik. “It’d be such a shame to wake up and find you gone.”

“Do we make camp here or not?” asked Niklas as he sat heavily. “I mean it’s hardly the comfiest place I’ve seen what with all these twisted roots. There doesn’t seem anywhere to lie down.”

“Yes. We stay here,” said Marcus, dropping his sack and sitting down. “I think we must be more than halfway to the cave by now and I haven’t seen anywhere that looks any more or less comfortable. It’s only going to be one night here. So I think we will just do the best we can.”

“It’s humid in here and quite cold,” said Niklas, wrapping a cloak around himself. “It’s going to get cold in the night with these trees and the river near by. Should we risk a small fire?”

“Yes,” said Toby. “It’ll help us keep watch and we can cook something warm. I’ve hardly eaten anything all day.”

“Are you crazy?” said Marcus abruptly. “Why not just write a giant sign in the sky saying: come and find us here. Here we are. Dinner is served!”

“Then what do you suggest?” complained Niklas. “We just sit in the dark, waiting for the morning, getting cold?”

“Better than attracting every creature in this horrid forest,” said James, wrapping a cloak around his shoulders. “If it’s not the Nargs, then the fire will bring every crawling, bloodsucking insect to feast on us.”

“Let’s just huddle together and do our best to keep warm,” Marcus suggested, to the grumbles of the group.

“We need to take turns keeping watch,” said Erik, pulling a cloak from his bag and wrapping it around his shoulders.

“Right, who first?” asked Toby.

“Well volunteered, idiot,” Niklas scoffed, with an inane grin on his face.

“Just be quiet, oaf,” Toby snapped. “Let’s hope the Nargs are not just after brains or they’ll leave you alone, bonehead.”

“Look. Stop squabbling or you’ll bring all the Nargs here,” said Marcus as he tried to find somewhere comfortable to lie. “Toby first few hours, then me.”

“Then me,” said Erik, “followed by Niklas. We Vikings don’t shirk our share of the work. Unlike some lesser-blooded folk. If need be, James can take last watch. But I hope by then we’ll have enough light and enough blood left to walk up the path.”

“It’s hardly going to be a watch,” said James, waving his hand in front of his face. “I mean you can’t see anything in here.”

“All right, smart boy,” said Erik, prodding at James. “Then have a listen.”

“And if we hear something?” asked James.

“I suggest we shake the others, but don’t shout,” said Marcus, not knowing what else to suggest. “We don’t want them to know where we are or how many of us there are.”

“And then when we’ve woken each other?” asked Toby. “What do we do then?”

“I’ll think of something if it happens,” said Marcus, hoping nothing would come in the night. “Until then, let’s try and get some rest.”

“Well goodnight, little girl,” scoffed Erik.

They huddled down in the blackness of the forest, trying to keep warm and get comfortable on the mass of lumpy roots. They could feel all manner of insects crawling over them and biting them, which made them even more uncomfortable. Through the trees to their left they could hear the distant churning of the river, which offered them some comfort—knowing where to run if they needed.

The forest then came alive with the songs of thousands of insects chirping in the darkness.

Toby stayed awake and listened intently, but he could hear nothing more than the insects. There were strange animal calls and sporadic rustles as leaves fell through the canopy. After a few hours he turned and whispered for James.

“James. James, are you sleeping?”

“What? On this bed of live bloodsucking insects. I don’t think so.”

“Is anyone sleeping?” asked Marcus from the blackness.

“Not me,” said Niklas.

“Nor me,” said Erik, as he swatted another huge insect from his leg.

“Then all we can do is wait for morning,” said Marcus, as he shifted his weight again to his other side.

The night dragged on and became colder and more humid. The insects of the forest had their best night feed in years, and the group moaned and cursed into the early hours of the morning.

Marcus suddenly sat upright. Something had sharpened his senses. He listened intently into the darkness, and then heard it again—a shuffling in the distance. A hand grabbed his shoulder in the darkness, nearly making him shout with fear.

“I can hear something,” whispered James in his ear. “It’s coming from the left. I think I can hear someone or something moving in the darkness.”

“Shhh,” whispered Marcus. “I heard it, too. Something’s moving in the forest.”

The whole group was now listening intently and staring into the darkness, trembling with fear. They could hear movement in all directions, but could see nothing. Whatever was moving, was moving slowly and deliberately. It sounded as if it was getting closer.

Marcus reached for his sword and held it tight with both hands. He was trembling from head to foot, straining to hear what was creeping around them in the dark.

“What are they?” whispered Marcus.

“I think it’s the Nargs,” whispered Niklas. “There seems to be something moving all around us. I think we’re surrounded. It’s going to be hard to fight our way out of this.”

“How will we fight in this darkness,” said Erik, pulling his axe close.

“We need some light to have a chance,” said James, feeling for a flint in his bag. He fumbled for a few seconds but couldn’t find it. “I can’t find my flint. Without a light, we’ll never stand a chance.”

“I think I can make a light,” said Marcus, remembering one of Falzar’s lessons, which now seemed so long ago.

“I’m not sure I want to see what’s there,” whispered Niklas.

“What’s the plan?” asked Toby. “Run or fight?”

“It depends what these Nargs are like,” said Erik. He held his axe firmly with both hands. “I’ll take as many with me as I can.”

“From the stories I’ve heard,” said James, getting to his feet, “we should run as fast as we can.”

“But which way? Do we run up the path or down the path? Should we try and make it back to the boat?” asked Toby.

In the blackness, creatures were now moving closer—all around them.

“Well, I’m going to make a light,” said Marcus, standing and raising his sword with both hands. “If we can, we should get back to the boat. At least we can get away and try again in the daylight.”

They stood, back-to-back, in a circle. The shuffling sounds edged ever closer. Marcus stood with his sword held aloft, preparing to cast the spell.

“Are we ready?” asked Marcus.

Slowly, the blade of his sword began to glow. At first there was just a faint blue glow from the metal; it was barely visible. Then, as Marcus concentrated, the sword began to shine brighter. They could now see the shapes of the trees in front of them and then they could see each other. Suddenly, as Marcus invoked the full spell, the blade shone bright and a great blue light emanated into the forest. It was as if daybreak had come.

Marcus could now see giant slender creatures were virtually surrounding them, moving closer. The sudden bright light dazzled the Nargs and they stopped in their tracks—standing frozen amidst the trees. They were tall and dark, their limbs elongated and hairy. Their legs were long and spindly, with knees that bent backward, making them look like strange birds. Their faces were long and pointed, with huge round eyes that shone blue in the light. Their hair was long and matted on their heads, with assortments of bones and shells interwoven into it. Their mouths were cavernous and filled with long sharp teeth that sat behind thinly stretched lips.

Some were holding long wooden spears, some had giant nets and some had bundles of coarse rope.

It seemed an eternity that the two groups gazed at each other in the glowing, blue light. And then one of the Nargs let out a shrill cry, and the ungainly creatures suddenly pounced.

“Run!” screamed Marcus in terror.

He turned and started to run along the path, his comrades behind him urging him to run faster. He could sense the creatures thundering toward them through the undergrowth. But, it was hard to run on the uneven ground. He stumbled and twisted his ankle twice, but dared not look back as he could hear the Nargs scrambling ever closer behind them.

“Faster, Marcus! Faster!” screamed Niklas, who was running at the back. “They’re right on me!”

The beasts were moving fast behind him, their outstretched hands grasping for him.

Marcus ran as fast as the path would allow. His heart pounded as he tried desperately to stop from falling over the roots. From some distance behind him he could hear Niklas calling, then scream and fall silent.

“They’ve got Niklas!” shouted Toby as he glanced back.

Two of the creatures dragged Niklas to the ground. Then one of the Nargs jumped back wildly from Niklas’s swinging axe. It held the end of its arm and screamed in pain. Then two more Nargs piled on top of Niklas.

Toby looked back toward Marcus when two great hands grabbed him around the shoulders. The full weight of the Narg hit him, sending him sprawling to the ground.

Erik was running close behind Marcus. He clutched his axe, ready to fight. But then a lasso of rope landed over his head, fell to his feet and closed tightly around his legs, sending him bowling head over heels with a shout.

Marcus continued running. He heard a loud thump and then a faint cry from James. Eventually he turned to look behind him and could see that all of his friends were gone. He was alone in the forest with a swarm of Nargs gaining on him. He gasped as terror gripped him. But then his foot caught under a high root and he went spilling through the air. He fell forward and struck his head violently on one of the great trees.

ESCAPE FROM THE NARGS

The first sensation Marcus had was the painful throbbing coming from his head. As he lay on the damp ground, his eyes remained closed. Slowly, as he stirred, he noticed several things.

The first thing was the rhythmic beating of drums and the second was low chanting. Then he noticed his hands and feet were very firmly bound with some kind of thick cord. Finally, when he opened his eyes, he noticed there were two enormous, hairy feet, with great long nails, standing close to him.

Suddenly two powerful hands grabbed him and he was unceremoniously thrown over the shoulder of the Narg. As the Narg walked along, Marcus's head exploded with pain, bounced as it was up and down. They continued between some wooden dwellings and then out into a large clearing in the trees.

The drums and the chanting suddenly became louder and Marcus could see a great number of Nargs in the clearing, banging drums and dancing a strange dance. Small fires burned around the clearing, throwing yellow light on the faces of the Nargs, which looked just as unpleasant as they had deep in the forest. Their large, bulbous eyes stared at him and their great tongues licked their lips—as if the main course was being carried before them.

Without warning, Marcus was suddenly pulled from the shoulder of the Narg and lowered into cold water. The water smelled strangely fragrant, and even stranger, he found he was wedged in amongst what felt like—other people.

The shock of the cold water brought him to his full senses. And all at once he realized he had been lowered into a giant earthenware cooking pot, and that around him were the rest of his companions.

“Welcome to the party,” said James with a forced smile. “Shame it took you so long.”

Marcus looked at his companions and could see they were, at best, a little bruised and bashed. James had a rather nasty cut under his right eye where a Narg fist must have caught him.

“Where are we?” asked Marcus as he frantically looked around.

“Well,” said Erik sarcastically from behind his bruised lip, “I’d say we’re at a dinner party and it looks like we’re the main course.”

Marcus could now see the Nargs dancing wildly around them, gnashing their sharp teeth and laughing with delight. They were at the centre of the clearing in a huge brown cooking pot filled with water. The pot stood upon a great pile of branches stacked around them. The Nargs stood in rows around the pot; some carried sharp knives and some carried what looked like plates. Marcus felt scared and sick at the same time.

“But what happened?” asked Marcus.

“It seems we were trapped,” answered Toby. “They were just too fast for us. They managed to pick us off one by one, and I guess you were the last.”

“I managed to get one of them,” said Niklas with a smile as he looked at the Narg that had lost a hand to his axe.

“I’m sure he’ll enjoy eating you even more,” said Erik as he looked over at the Narg, brandishing a knife in its one remaining hand. “They say revenge is best served cold. Well, I guess he wants his served hot.”

“But what can we do?” asked Marcus, watching a large Narg step from the crowd.

It was wearing a tall, ceremonial headdress and holding a long stick that looked like a torch. It walked closer and then lit the torch from one of the small fires.

“I guess we can cook,” said Toby.

The large Narg came closer to them, holding the burning torch.

“We need to escape,” said Marcus, straining against his bonds as he watched the Narg raise the torch above its head. “But I’m bound too tightly. Can any of you get free?”

The drums at once stopped and the Nargs fell silent. The large Narg scanned the crowd and then spoke.

“Yatgga, canatch, Tch Tch. Jecker, ennan flasit!” it said as it turned to the crowd, brandishing the burning torch.

The crowd suddenly went wild and the drums began to beat quickly. In time to the drums, the Narg turned and started to dance a little jig. Then it flung the

torch into the fire beneath the cooking pot. The Nargs started to whoop and let out shrill whistles as the flames suddenly took hold and licked around the pot.

"We really need to escape!" said Marcus.

At once they all struggled to break free of their bonds.

Niklas began to blow at the flames desperately. "Arrghh! I can feel the heat. It's coming through the pot! Help! Help! I don't want to be eaten by these beasts!"

"Marcus!" shouted James. "We're stuck, Marcus! Really in a fix. You need to do something. You need to get us out of this."

"But what can I do?" asked Marcus desperately, as he too could feel the water starting to get warm around his feet.

"I don't know," said James, wriggling wildly. "What did Falzar tell you? He must have told you something to do."

"He told me many things," said Marcus, desperately trying to think whether Falzar had told him any simple spells or tricks to undo his bonds.

"Then please, Herr Hero," said Erik behind gritted teeth, "try and remember something, because this water is getting hot—very fast!"

The Nargs were now dancing in a circle around the pot. Some were brandishing burning torches, whilst others were holding long spears. Some were clashing long knives together, goading their meal.

"Do something," pleaded Toby as the hot water rose past his legs. "The natives are getting very restless and I'm getting very hot."

Marcus closed his eyes and focused on the ropes. He thought of everything Falzar had told him, but nothing came into his mind—it was totally blank. The fire crackled wildly and the water started to become unbearable. His skin was starting to redden and he began to sweat profusely. Soon his head was lolling from side to side; he felt weak.

"I'm burning," said Toby, trying desperately to lift his bound feet from the bottom of the scorching pot. "I can't take this hot water much longer."

"This water is just getting so hot," said James as he winced with pain. "Get...us...out of this...water!"

Marcus's eyes suddenly sprang open as he had a flash of inspiration. "Water! You idiot! You need to make water to put out the fire!"

"What?" said Erik as he fought against the rope. "What did you say?"

"We need water. It needs to rain," said Marcus, looking up in despair at the clear sky. It seemed to him almost impossible that he could imagine rain coming from such a clear sky.

Erik looked up to the sky. “But it’s impossible. There’s not a cloud in the sky. Think of something else, you idiot!”

“Marcus, don’t listen,” urged Toby. “I know you can make it rain. You have to make it rain.”

“Yes. Please,” said James weakly, as steam started to rise past his face. “I believe in you, Marcus, and I believe Falzar will have trained you well enough—or he wouldn’t have sent you.”

Marcus closed his eyes and started to think about rain. He started to imagine great drops of it falling from the sky. He imagined great clouds forming and deluges of rain, but for all his efforts nothing happened.

He opened his eyes and looked up and could still see bright stars in the clear, night sky. He closed his eyes again, but his mind was blank—a black void. He started to lose hope. Then from the depths of his mind came a vision—it was the face of Falzar.

“My young apprentice,” said Falzar, smiling. “Did I teach you nothing in our time together? You do disappoint me.”

“I can’t remember,” said Marcus to Falzar. “I can’t think what to do. I’ve tried to make it rain by thinking about it—but nothing happens.”

“This is where you fail, my friend,” said Falzar. “Remember that magic comes from the heart, not the mind. You must feel what you desire to happen and it will come. Stop thinking and start feeling, my young apprentice.”

With that, the image of Falzar disappeared and Marcus’s mind was blank once more. He breathed deeply and then relaxed. He started to feel great drops of water fall on his face, huge cool splashes of rain that became stronger and stronger. He could feel the wind blowing strongly and then he could feel himself being covered by a deluge of rain.

He opened his eyes and could see all the Nargs staring up into the deluge pouring from the clear sky. The trees circling the clearing were blowing violently in raging winds. Suddenly, lightning arced across the sky illuminating the confused faces of the beasts. The huge raindrops fell upon the fires and they hissed, as the water began to douse them.

“It’s working! It’s working!” shouted James with great relief. “Keep going, Marcus! The fires are starting to die!”

“You did it, Marcus,” said Toby as the storm struck with full force, making the Nargs squat down against the ground. “You’ve stopped the fires. Now you need to get us away from the Nargs.”

The fire below them began to immediately fade as the storm became even stronger. The trees moaned and cracked as they were smashed by the raging

winds. The small dwellings of the Nargs were blown sideways and the Nargs shouted in panic as the rains lashed them. Then, in the distance, from amongst the trees came a huge roaring sound that grew with ferocity as something unseen approached.

“Something’s coming through the trees!” shouted Erik as he looked with wide eyes. “What is it? What have you summoned, Marcus?”

The fires now died completely as the rain bounced off the sodden ground. The sporadic lightning illuminated the clearing and the roar grew ever louder.

Then it broke through the trees.

An immense wall of water poured out across the clearing, at once sweeping the screaming Nargs away. The water slammed into the giant pot and lifted it on the wave. It bobbed and rolled as the flood of water swept across the clearing. Then, with a bang, it wedged against two crossed tree trunks as the waters poured around them.

“Make it stop, Marcus! Make it stop!” screamed James in the wind. “It’s enough. If it doesn’t stop, we’ll be drowned with the Nargs.”

Marcus released the sensation of the rain, and as quickly as the great storm had appeared, it vanished. The rain immediately ceased and the winds stopped thrashing them. In an instant the water subsided and the pot came to rest on the ground, where it lolled to one side and then tipped over, spilling them out onto the mud.

Marcus blinked in disbelief at the desolation before him. In the first rays of morning light he could see the Nargs had been completely swept away, their flimsy dwellings destroyed and the clearing flattened. Amazingly, he could see their own weapons and bags that had somehow remained wedged against a tree.

“That was amazing,” said Toby, struggling to his knees. “No. Really amazing. I thought we were dead for sure. I knew you could do magic—but I never expected anything like that.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” said James. “It was a really strong magic. The strongest magic I’ve ever heard of. I mean you brought a storm from a clear sky.”

“I doubt it,” said Erik with a hint of uncertainty in his voice. “It must have been a freak storm or something. You must have sensed it and it made you think of it raining.”

“I don’t think so,” said James, shaking his head. “That storm came from a clear sky. There were no clouds or anything.”

“It’s all very fascinating,” said Niklas, getting to his feet. “But I’d rather we discuss it when we’re away from here. The Nargs may be gone, but I’m sure some

will come back. And when they see their little village has gone, I think they may kill us before they cook us next time.”

“He’s right. Let’s grab one of our swords and cut us free,” said Marcus.

In minutes they were standing free of their bonds and looking cautiously into the woods for fear of the returning Nargs. The sky was bright and light. The forest all around them was dark and intimidating.

“So which way now, Herr Magic,” asked Erik sarcastically, leaning on his axe. “I’m sure you’ll have some magical way of knowing which way to go—and you’ll amaze us all.”

“This way,” said Marcus confidently as he peered into the forest and listened intently.

“Are you sure?” said Erik, looking at him suspiciously. “Have you got some magical method of divining where the path is?”

“No. You just have to shut your big mouth sometimes and listen.”

They all listened and could hear the faint rush of the forest river in the distance, beyond the trees.

“If we get to the river,” said Marcus, stepping into the forest. “We’ll find the path again. Not magic, just simple common sense.”

* * * *

It was only a few minutes until they found the path again, some feet away from the riverbank. They checked carefully there were no Nargs waiting for them before they stepped out onto the path.

“Well, we’ve found the path,” Erik sneered at Marcus. “The question is, now what do we do? It won’t take us long to get back down to the boat from here.”

“We have daylight. I say we go get the dagger,” suggested Marcus as he pointed up the path. “If anyone wants to return to the boat, I understand. But I’m going for the dagger.”

“We came this far and I want the dagger,” agreed James.

“Oh well. In for a penny, in for a pound,” sighed Niklas, as he watched Marcus start upward on the path.

Erik looked down the path with a twisted look on his face. He then looked up the path and watched the group. Niklas looked back and shrugged at him. Erik dropped his gaze, shook his head and then trudged after them.

* * * *

For some hours they climbed the forest path, always quiet, always looking for Nargs. Only once did they stop when they heard something moving deep in the forest. They never saw whether it was a Narg or some harmless forest creature; they just continued as fast as they could on their journey.

Eventually the dark forest became thinner as they reached higher up the island, and soon the path was crossing open ground. Large grey boulders jutted from long lush grass and bright red flowers were in full bloom.

“Well this is much more pleasant,” said Toby. “I’m glad to be out of that grim forest. I feel I can breathe again with the sun on my face.”

“Look!” said James, pointing ahead. “I think it’s the end of the path. We’ve made it.”

The path curved around a large grey stone and then stopped abruptly at the foot of a giant smooth rock. They checked around the back of the rock and there was no more sign of the path. Some way to their left there was the river that amazingly appeared to be coming from straight out of the ground.

“How very strange,” said Marcus, looking at the river. “The river seems to be coming from nowhere. I’ve never seen anything like that before. Maybe it’s an enchanted river.”

“So where’s the cave?” asked Niklas, as he looked around. “What does your map show?”

Marcus pulled out the map and studied it. He looked around and concluded they were in the right place—only there was no cave and no pool.

“Well this is just great,” said Erik, shaking his head. “We came up all this way and there’s no cave.”

“Maybe we need to go in the river?” suggested Toby, looking at the water flowing from the ground.

“No. The map shows clearly a cave *next* to the river and the pool in the cave,” said Marcus, turning the map. “It must be here somewhere. We just haven’t found it yet. We need to look harder.”

They searched the entire area. Near the river, near the trees, high and low, but they found nothing. The sun climbed in the sky and the day began to get hot. Soon they started to get more nervous about surviving Nargs.

“I think that old witch tricked us,” said Erik, shaking his fist. “She sent us on a fool’s errand, just like that idiot Falzar.”

“Hey!” protested Toby, “I told you never to say that Falzar is an idiot.”

“Falzar is an idiot,” said Niklas, squaring up to Toby. “There’s no cave here, no pool, no dagger and probably no stone. So in my book that makes him an idiot.”

“I mean it!” said Toby, gritting his teeth. “You just dare say that once more and I’ll swing for you, you thick-headed Viking idiot.”

Niklas stared straight at Toby and smiled.

“He’s an—idiot!”

Toby suddenly ran at Niklas and shoved him hard in the stomach. Niklas doubled over and staggered backward toward a giant rock. The group watched in amazement, as Niklas didn’t stop at the rock, instead he disappeared into it.

“I didn’t push him that hard,” said Toby, aghast.

Toby walked over and felt the hard stone. It seemed impossible Niklas had disappeared through it.

“Hey! Hey!” said Niklas’s voice from inside the rock. “I think I found the cave.”

Marcus stepped forward and touched the rock, which seemed very solid. He was confused.

“But how did he go through?” asked James, looking at the smooth stone. “I can’t see any way through.”

“What can you see in there?” shouted Erik through the rock. “Is there any way in?”

* * * *

Niklas looked around in the dim light. He was standing in a big cave with a smooth, arched ceiling. It was clear this was just the entrance and he could see a passage running from the back of it deeper into the hillside.

He could clearly see the group standing outside, touching what to them seemed to be the rock. To him it was an open mouth of a cave, and it appeared they were touching nothing but thin air.

“Just come in,” said Niklas as he watched them. “It’s an open entrance. But surely you must be able to see it?”

“But how do we get in?” asked Erik, tapping on the rock. “It’s solid.”

“It’s simple. Look,” said Niklas, and he reached out and grabbed for Erik.

* * * *

They were all amazed to see Niklas's disembodied hand appear from the rock and grab Erik by the belt. Erik was then yanked forward and he too disappeared through the rock.

"Unbelievable," said Toby. "What on earth is this?"

"It must be some kind of enchanted rock," said James, feeling the surface of it. "It must have been made like this to hide the secret cave. But how did they get through?"

"I think you need to go fast," said Marcus. "It must be a magic cave and this is a magic rock. I suppose the last thing anyone would do is run at a rock."

"Well I hope you're right." Toby shrugged and then launched himself at the rock. He too disappeared into it, landing inside the cave with a bump.

At last both James and Marcus jumped through the rock and rolled into the cave, joining the rest of the group. Then all were standing in the cave looking back outside in wonderment.

"Amazing! A real magic cave," said Toby in awe as he looked around. "Who could have believed it? I think if I wasn't convinced these islands were magic, now I'm in no doubt."

The cave ran some way back and became a long, narrow passage that curved around a corner. But it wasn't dark at the back of the cave. There seemed to be some kind of blue light ahead.

Marcus inched forward. "Well. Let's see where it leads."

IN THE POOL OF TRANQUILITY

They crept deeper into the cave and slowly turned the corner. The passage continued running deeper into the ground, the blue light becoming stronger. They turned another corner and the cave ran straight, seeming to come to an opening at the far end. It was from there the blue light was emanating.

Nervously, Marcus approached the end of the tunnel, and then carefully he popped his head out. Beyond the tunnel was the most amazing thing Marcus had ever seen. It was a vast cave with a great, domed ceiling. Hanging from the roof were giant, crystal stalactites that sparkled like a thousand diamonds in the marvelous blue light. Water ran down the sides of the cave making a glittering curtain that ran into small gullies. There the water collected and eventually ran into a beautiful pool of water.

It was from the pool the light radiated, a calm and tranquil blueness that was soft and inviting. It made them all gasp as they entered the cave.

“I think we’ve found the Pool of Tranquility,” whispered Marcus, not wishing to disturb the silence. “It’s so beautiful.”

“It’s fantastic,” said Toby, looking around in awe, pointing at the stalactites. “Are they—diamonds?”

“Maybe, but you could never carry one away,” said Niklas as he looked at the huge structures. “Each one must weigh more than a house.”

Marcus walked over to the edge of the pool and looked down into its crystal-clear deep-blue waters. Strangely, they seemed warm and inviting, not icy cold as he had first imagined. "It's perfect." Marcus's voice was slightly dreamy.

"So what do we do now?" asked James, staring into the water, his eyes fixed on it.

"I guess I need to go in and try to find the dagger," said Marcus as he removed his sandals. "The hag said it is in the pool. It's not that big, so I should find it."

"Maybe I should go in," said Niklas. "It looks...so...inviting."

"No!" snapped Marcus, to everyone's surprise. "I must go into the water."

"Fine, but be careful. I'm suspicious about this place," said James, placing his things down. "It just seems too peaceful, almost—unnatural."

Marcus pulled his eyes from the water and looked around. He could see they were all transfixed on the water; none but he could take his eyes away. He too was now suspicious about the tranquility of the cave.

"Look. If I'm not up in two minutes, come and get me," said Marcus to Toby. Then he took a deep lungful of air and plunged into the clear blue water.

The water felt very strange. It seemed so warm, soft and—comforting. Immediately Marcus felt extremely relaxed and calm as it caressed him with a very strange sensation. He turned and kicked toward the bottom of the pool, feeling around the bottom for any sign of the dagger. He turned and kicked hard again, moving along the bottom, searching with his hands. From the corner of his eye he could see something white lying on the bottom. He arched his body and started to swim toward the object. All of a sudden he wondered why he should make such an effort to go for it.

His mind cleared; he had to get the dagger. He knew it was their only hope.

He swam across the bottom and reached down. There it was, the dagger of Serbulus, shimmering pure white on the bottom of the pool, just as the hag had said. He lifted it from the bottom; the handle felt smooth in his hands. He ran his finger along the sharp, white horn blade and then carefully tucked it into his belt. Strangely, he didn't feel very excited that he had just found the weapon that could kill Gazhul.

"But where are you going?" whispered a tranquil female voice in his ear.

It didn't alarm Marcus at all. In fact, it seemed quite natural to hear the voice. It did nothing but make him feel even more comfortable and relaxed in the water.

"Why not stay awhile?" suggested the voice calmly. "Why leave when it's so peaceful here?"

Marcus couldn't disagree. It *was* so peaceful in the strange waters, warm and relaxing, making everything seem so—distant.

"The world is bad out there, Marcus," continued the voice calmly and slowly. "Think of all the pain and suffering. Think of the dangers you need to endure. You can stay here forever and not have to worry anymore about your adventure. Just stay with us."

The voice drifted into his mind, hypnotizing him. And with each word, Marcus relaxed more. His body felt heavy and his mind ever sleepier. The voice was so right, that the world was bad out there. He agreed that this adventure and the burden he had been given were just too much for him. He thought of the dangers he would have to go through and then he wondered why, when he could stay there, forever, warm and protected.

"You know you should stay," urged the voice. And then warm velvet hands enveloped his body, pulling him away from the surface. "We will look after you. We will protect you. You can forget everything about the adventure and everything about Gazhul. He will be just a memory."

Marcus could no longer resist; his body became limp and it drifted to the bottom of the pool. And there he lay with a broad smile on his sleepy face.

"There. Stay with us forever," whispered the voice.

* * * *

Toby stared into the blue water. He was starting to get anxious, as Marcus had now been a long time and he had a strange feeling about the enchanting waters.

"He's got another thirty seconds and then I go in after him."

"We should have tied one of our ropes to him," said James, pulling one from his bag. "How stupid to let him go in un-tethered."

"Tie it to me," said Toby, offering his belt. "If I don't come out in a few minutes, then drag me out. If something's wrong, I'll tug twice on the rope. If you feel me tug, pull me out."

* * * *

Marcus lay on his back, his eyes staring into the deep blue waters above him. His mind drifted at peace as the waters caressed him.

"This has been no task for the son of a fisherman. This has been a fool's errand. Stay. Stay and rest," said the voice as the last of Marcus's will evaporated.

Marcus lay in place, his mind floating free. Then, as in a dream, he could see a figure coming toward him through the water. It moved like a mermaid, floating in front of him, pulling him—but he didn't want to move. The face seemed familiar but Marcus couldn't remember—he didn't recognize Toby's face anymore.

* * * *

Toby frantically tied the end of the rope to Marcus's belt. He could see Marcus was incapable of moving, so he worked as fast as he could. He suspected he was under a spell and maybe the water had somehow caused it.

"Hey. Why try so hard?" whispered the voice to Toby.

Toby had to agree; it was all so much hard work. It would be so much nicer to just lay still and relax for a while.

"Stay with your friend. Stay here in peace. Stay in the warmth," the voice encouraged him.

Toby fell still. The thought of staying was so pleasant and he was so weary of the journey. He so much wanted just to let all the evil outside pass away. His will disappeared and he too started to succumb to the waters.

"These are hard times, Toby, dangerous times, and you now have the choice to stay here with us," whispered the voice gently. "Be still and join us in our beautiful dream."

Toby started to drift, his mind becoming calm. But deep inside him, he knew they were somehow in danger, that the water was cursed. Then, with his last fragment of will, he tugged on the rope before he too fell into the trance of the pool.

* * * *

"Pull! Pull!" urged James to Erik and Niklas. "He tugged twice—it's the signal. Pull hard. We need to get him out. Something's wrong."

They pulled hard as if hauling in full nets of fish. They strained at the rope, and then from the blue depths they could see the figure of Toby appear. They reached down and dragged him from the water, pulling him onto the land. Then they kept pulling the rope, and after a moment Marcus appeared—his body limp. They dragged him from the pool and turned him on his back.

"No, no," moaned Toby. "It's too cold here. I need to go back. I need the waters. Please put me back."

“He’s under a spell,” said James, slapping Toby’s face. “Wake up! Wake up! You’re out! This water must be enchanted.”

Toby slowly emerged from the trance and the beautiful voice in his head drifted away. He started to feel desperate.

“Where am I?” said Toby as he sat up, longing for the enchanted voice. “What happened? Where is she?”

“You’ve been bewitched by the waters,” said James. “I’m concerned for Marcus. He was down a long time. I hope we can get him back.”

“They say magic like this is very powerful and very dangerous,” said Niklas.

Marcus lay on his back with his eyes wide open and an inane smile across his face. He hadn’t moved a muscle since they’d brought him from the waters.

“Marcus! Marcus!” shouted James as he slapped Marcus’s face. It had worked with Toby. “Come back to us! You have to let go of the waters and come back to us!”

“It’s no good. He’s gone,” said Erik, looking down at the dagger tucked in Marcus’s belt. “These waters have bewitched him and there’s nothing we can do to bring him back. We’ll soon run out of light, and I want to get away from this island before darkness falls again. Look, he has the dagger. He did his work. We need to leave him if we have any chance of getting out of here alive and completing this quest.”

“We don’t leave anyone,” said James, his face enraged. “This is your companion. He would never think of leaving you.”

“He would,” said Erik, curling his lip. “I know what he really wants. For her he’d leave me here. He’d like nothing more than for it to be me lying here in this trance of death. There’s no way we can get down if we try to take him. I say we take the dagger and throw him back in the waters. It’s the only sensible thing to do.”

“No. He wouldn’t leave you,” Toby added. “Marcus is not like that. He has honor. I guarantee he would carry you out of here no matter what he felt for you.”

“Then what do we do?” said Niklas. “We can’t just wait here. It may take years for him to break the spell. We promised Falzar we’d get the dagger to Stromboli.”

“Then we have to carry him out of here and back to the boat. We can take turns,” said Toby as he started to pull at Marcus’s limp arms. “Someone help me get him on my shoulders.”

“You first and second—and third,” said Erik, standing up and walking away from them toward the entrance of the tunnel. “I’ll be waiting for you all at the

boat. Though somehow, with that dead weight, I don't think you'll be coming. Let me just warn you: at nightfall I sail from here—whether you're on the boat or not. If you want, I'll take the dagger and finish this like a real hero."

"No, you won't," said James, putting himself between Erik and Marcus. "He took the dagger, and as long as he lives, it stays with him. You can be a coward and run and leave him, but if that boat is gone when we get to the beach, I'll hunt you down, Erik."

"If we gave you the dagger, you'd run away," said Toby, shaking his head. "You wouldn't have the guts to go to Stromboli. You're nothing but talk."

"What about you?" asked Erik of Niklas. "Are you coming, or do you want to help them?"

Niklas looked at Erik and then at Marcus's limp body. He turned and shrugged. "I suppose I'd want him to help me. And well, he did try to help Jonas. I think the least I can do is carry some of their things."

"You're as pathetic and sentimental as those two," spat Erik. He shook his head and stepped from the cave.

"Thank you," said Toby to Niklas, as he helped Marcus onto Toby's shoulders. "It took real courage to say that to Erik."

* * * *

It was slow going as they left the cave and headed up the tunnel. Toby plodded along with Marcus weighing heavily across his shoulders. The others did their best to help, but it wasn't easy—Marcus might as well have been a sack of stones. Eventually they reached the entrance to the cave and stepped out of the magic into the bright sunlight. To their amazement, Erik was still standing nearby. He was peering into the darkness of the trees.

"So you decided to wait?" asked Toby. "Not like you, Erik. Seems you just think of yourself."

"Shhh. I saw something when I came out of the cave," whispered Erik, holding his axe and scanning the trees. "No matter what you think, I'm no coward. I stayed because I knew that without me you'd never finish this quest. And if you don't finish the quest, I don't have the pleasure of killing him."

"Right, well for whatever reason, I'm glad we still have the use of your axe. So let's get down the path as fast as we can," whispered James, looking toward the forest. "I hope whatever you saw was just an animal in the woods."

Without warning, something in the trees moved—something large, making them all freeze in their tracks. Then two large, pale eyes peered from behind one of the mossy trees.

“It is the Nargs,” Niklas whispered, pulling his axe from his back. “We need to get out of here now. There could be more of them.”

Suddenly two large Nargs broke from the trees and came charging across the clearing. They held flashing knives above their heads and made a fearful howling noise. They ran with amazing speed, brutish ostriches, their strange, backward-bending legs covering the ground fast.

“Run!” cried Toby, as he staggered backward, trying to hold Marcus up.

“Toward the river! It’s our only hope!” screamed James, helping Toby carry Marcus.

“We’ll never out run them with Marcus,” said Toby as he pumped his legs as fast as they would go. The weight of his friend was too much for him.

Erik and Niklas stood firm, their Viking axes raised as the Nargs sprinted toward them. The first arrived and Erik swung his axe, the sharp blade biting into its neck and slicing its head clean off. There was a violent thud as the blade of Niklas’s axe found the chest of the second Narg. It let out a deafening scream as it fell to the ground; its legs kicked for a second and then stopped. Niklas stood on its shoulder to lever the axe from its chest as Erik raised his bloodied axe above his head.

“Bring me Nargs!” shouted Erik to the trees, his eyes wide with excitement.

All of a sudden, within the trees, there appeared hundreds of Nargs. With terrifying screams they broke from the trees and hundreds came thundering across the clearing toward them.

“Run!” called Niklas. “Even we can’t take them all.”

“This time I think you’re right,” agreed Erik as he lowered his axe.

They turned and sprinted toward James and Toby, now standing on the edge of the raging river.

“Get across!” shouted Erik as he ran toward them waving his arms frantically. “Quickly! Get across the river! The Nargs are coming!”

“It’s too fierce!” shouted James. “We’ll be swept away. We’ll never make it.”

“Get in the river,” urged Toby. “We have no choice. We either take our chance with the river or the Nargs, and at least the river has no knives.”

The Nargs were now closing in, screaming, with spears and knives held above them. They ran toward the river, their large eyes bulging with rage as their heavy, hairy feet thundered across the ground.

“Good luck to us all!” shouted Niklas, plunging feet-first into the torrent. Immediately, he was whisked away by the fast flowing waters.

Toby held Marcus around his chest as he rolled into the river. Both were dragged downstream by the flow. At once Erik and James plunged in after them—carried away by the ferocious current.

The water coursed in a powerful torrent. Its force carried them along at a frightening pace. Within seconds they passed from the clearing and entered the dark canopy of the forest. The huge, dark trees were just a blur as they raced by. The Nargs were left standing on the bank above them, screaming wildly as they watched their prey disappear into the tunnel of trees.

They raced through the forest, tumbling and struggling to breathe as the foaming waters rushed them along. The river curved slightly this way and then that—it was a turbulent and terrifying ride. Toby tried his best to keep Marcus’s head out of the water, but it was a struggle just to keep his own head out as they rushed along.

It seemed an eternity they thrashed in the cold river water. They were battered like small logs as they sped the length of the island. Often the strong current dragged them to the bottom of the river before spewing them forward again.

James lost his breath and spluttered wildly. His life flashed before his eyes.

Niklas cracked his head on a large stone and let out a great shout. He cursed the river as the foaming waters dragged him down the island.

At last, in front of them, they could see the trees had finished. Beyond the arched tunnel they could clearly see open blue sky. They were at the bottom of the island and the end of the wretched river.

Then, before they could do anything, they were flung over the edge of the great waterfall, plunging to the sea below.

Niklas caught a glimpse of their boat down in the bay before he slammed into the sea.

Toby could no longer hold Marcus and he plummeted over the edge alone. He fell for some time before plunging into the sea. After what seemed an eternity he broke the surface and could see the others flailing in the water. Marcus had bobbed to the surface on his back, his eyes now blinking in the bright sunlight. The violent fall seemed to have broken his trance.

They struggled through the water and reached the boat. Pippin danced on board, barking crazily at them. Toby was the first to climb into the boat. He turned and grabbed Niklas by his shirt, dragging him like a giant fish from the water. Then they dragged Erik and Marcus into the boat.

Pippin barked wildly at James, who was still struggling in the water near the back of the boat. He was about to grab onto the gunnels, when suddenly two giant brown hands broke from the water, either side of him. One of the Nargs had followed them down the river and now grabbed at James, pulling him under the surface.

James thrashed in the water as the beast gripped him tighter. In sheer terror he tried to scream, but the weight of the Narg dragged him further down. The scream became nothing but a bubbling gargle as his head vanished below the surface.

“James! No!” screamed Toby as he watched in horror.

“Look!” shouted Niklas, gesturing up at the path that led from the beach. A hoard of Nargs poured from amongst the trees and swarmed down the path toward the bay. They screamed and bayed like a pack of wild dogs as they spilled onto the beach, brandishing long spears and knives. They turned and started to run toward the boat, splashing knee deep into the water.

“Sail! Sail!” called Erik as he hoisted the sail and then cut the bowline with his axe.

Toby slammed the tiller hard to the left, bringing the boat to the wind. Quickly it headed away from the beach. One of the Nargs lunged forward and grabbed the stern. It wailed and gnashed its teeth as it tried to climb up at them. Erik ran to it, swinging his axe with great force. The blade sliced through the arms of the Narg and it screamed as it fell from the boat. The quivering hands released the boat and fell into the water.

“Look!” screamed Niklas.

Behind them, near the beach, the water broke and they could see a Narg emerge—it was dragging James in its clutches.

“James!” called Toby.

But it was too late. There were too many Nargs on the beach. They surrounded James and lifted him above their heads like a prize. James struggled and kicked, but there were too many of them—he couldn’t escape. Other Nargs lined the beach and goaded the boat as it sailed from the bay.

James raised his head and looked toward the boat. “Go! Save yourselves. Find the stone!”

Then the Nargs carried James away. He was still fighting as they bore him up the path and into the darkness of the forest. Finally the last Narg disappeared into the darkness of the trees, rattling a knife menacingly against a trunk.

“I hope it’s quick,” said Toby, with tears streaming down his face.

“Oh no!” cried Marcus, punching weakly at the boat. “Not James.”

“Can we save him?” asked Toby.

“It’s too late,” said Erik, washing the blood from his axe. “James will pay a heavy price for what has happened. There’s nothing we can do about that now, there’s too many of them. Our only hope is to press on with the quest. If we go back, we’ll all die.”

“He was our friend,” said Marcus. “It’s my fault he came on this adventure. It’s my fault he’s dead.”

Toby shuffled from the back of the boat and embraced Marcus. They both sobbed deeply on each other’s shoulders.

“This is the price of what we have to do,” said Toby, comforting Marcus. “It’s no one’s fault.”

“And it’s not over yet,” said Niklas, gazing back at the island. “I fear more of us will die before this quest is finished.”

Marcus looked back in despair at the forest island. Suddenly a mass of birds leapt from the canopy, as if some chilling noise from within the trees had disturbed them.

THE WINDS OF ALICUDI

They journeyed away from Filicudi in silence, morose at the thought of another lost companion—trying not to imagine the horrible fate of either.

“Poor James. Poor James,” sobbed Toby. He held his face in his hands. “How horrible. I just hope I don’t end up like that. It’s just as the hag said.”

“It’s the same we feel for Jonas,” said Niklas. “He has been our lifelong friend. He was one of us. A Norseman.”

“But you didn’t seem so upset,” said Toby, wiping tears from his face.

“It’s not our way,” said Erik coldly. “We are a warring people, and that means we lose kinsmen. We rejoice that at least they have died in battle and will find their way to Valhalla. All I can hope is when my end comes I will die with my axe in my hand. Then I will hear the welcoming horns.”

With these words, they fell silent.

Marcus was still dazed from the magic of the pool. He yearned for the warm waters that had caressed him. Their peace and serenity ran through his veins like a drug. Although he didn’t know it, it was to be a feeling that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

* * * *

Westward they sailed, and within a few hours strong winds and favorable currents brought them to within reach of Alicudi—the island of winds.

A mass of swirling, black clouds completely enveloped the island. Marcus could see nothing beyond the wall of the tempest. At the base of the clouds the

water foamed wildly, whipped up by the great winds that raged around the island.

"They say the island is just full of ghosts," said Erik. "The souls of dead sailors smashed on the rocks by the great winds, tormented and driven into madness by the never ending scream of the wind."

"The old hag was right," said Niklas. "We're all going to die before this adventure is finished. Her words have sealed our doom."

"Indeed it's madness," said Erik as they sailed closer to the raging winds. "We have the dagger. We've done a good job. Why not just sail back to Lipari and give it to Falzar. Why not let him take all the risks? I mean look at what's happened to Jonas and James. Niklas is right. That old hag saw our futures. If we carry on with this ill-fated task, we'll all die for certain."

"This is our job," said Marcus, his head still swimming. "This is what we have been set to do. And we must finish it. It doesn't matter what the hag has foreseen. What will be will be, and we can't change it. All we can do is continue."

"Pah! Why don't we say we couldn't get the stone," said Niklas. "Who will ever know?"

Marcus suddenly stood tall in the boat. He had purpose in his eyes as they looked onto Niklas. "James will know and Jonas will know!" There was a new sense of power about him. Whilst in the waters, something had changed in him. "Would you have that our friends died in vain? They came this far and gave their lives. Others will no doubt give their lives, too. And you want to coward out when we are almost there?"

"What would you know?" shouted Erik, lunging at Marcus. "You—the nothing son of a fisherman! You collapsed at entering the water in the pool. You know nothing of strength and courage." He grabbed Marcus by the shirt and lifted him. "You're a coward and a fool. For this Jonas and James are dead. For this I blame you and so will their parents. I see nothing of your magic or power in you. I will follow you no more."

Marcus's eyes shone bright with a new spirit. "We will find the stone! We will finish the quest! And you will help us!" He raised his hands. Suddenly Erik was flung backward to the bow of the boat, landing with a bump. "If we die trying, then that is our fate! But at least we will have faced our fate like men! Don't speak to me of cowardice! You are from a noble bloodline and you have done nothing but doubt yourself! Be strong! Be who you can be and finish this quest!" Marcus's voice now boomed against the winds. "We need you and your strength to complete this journey! One day they will sing great songs about what you have done as you enter Valhalla! Now, are you with me?"

Niklas and Erik looked in surprise at this new power. It was something strong and inspiring. Marcus's words seemed to dispel their fears and bring a new hope to their hearts—they sensed there was now magic in his words.

Erik pulled himself up, lifting his axe to his shoulder. "Then let us finish this adventure. We will fight and stand with you for honor and glory. I will follow your words, and do my part, so that the tales may be sung of a Viking's honor in the face of the enemy."

"Then into the storm we sail," said Toby, steering the boat straight at the wall of clouds.

"They say no one can sail in these waters," said Niklas, bracing himself against the mast. "They say all boats are smashed upon the rocks by the hands of the ghosts."

"Then this is a one-way ride!" shouted Toby as the wind suddenly grabbed the boat, shaking it violently.

It seemed as if they'd hit a wall. The boat jerked violently and began to keel precariously as they entered the bank of clouds. The water foamed and spray lashed them as the wind suddenly roared all around them.

"Head for the land!" shouted Marcus into the wind. He pointed toward the now visible island.

"I'll try my best!" Toby shouted back into the raging winds. "But the winds are so fierce and the current treacherous! The boat has a mind of its own! I can barely hold the tiller!"

The violent seas flung the small boat about like a toy. It creaked and moaned as it edged closer to the island. Great waves swept across it, nearly knocking them all into the sea. The winds tore at them, almost ripping the shirts from their backs.

"Keep fighting!" shouted Marcus to Toby, who was struggling with the tiller. "We're going to make it!"

Marcus could see large, jagged rocks jutting from the sea. Strewn about them were the remains of all kinds of boats long since wrecked on the island. Masts with torn and tattered bandanas poked out from the water. Whole sides of smashed ships lay near the land like massive, half-submerged skeletons.

Suddenly from within the wind Marcus could hear long, drawn out moans and whispering voices—the voices of the long dead sailors.

"We know why you come. We know what you want. You will never take the stone, for it is now ours," they taunted as the boat moved closer to the rocks.

They were slammed from side to side, almost overturning in the waves. Marcus held on to Pippin to keep him from being washed away. The bit of fur cowered in Marcus's arms as the winds continued to rage.

"We'll never make it," said Niklas. "We'll be smashed on the rocks before we can land."

"We need to leave the boat here. Look!" said Marcus. He was pointing to a long thin piece of land that jutted out into the sea. "If we can swim to there, we can make land. We can take a long rope and leave the boat free to ride out the winds. If we even try to bring it near the land, it will be destroyed on the rocks, and then we'll be stranded here forever."

"Then throw the anchor here!" Erik ordered Niklas.

Niklas picked up the large, iron anchor, swung it to his left and cast it from the bow. It disappeared below the waves with a splash.

"Take everything you can carry," said Toby, grabbing his sword. "It'll be hard to swim with the weight, but I'm not going there without my sword."

They collected their things and strapped them to their bodies. Marcus turned and grabbed Pippin from the front of the boat.

"This time you come with us, my little friend. You can wait for us on the shore," he said, patting Pippin and then tucking him under his arm.

Toby stood on the edge of the boat looking into the raging waters. He hesitated nervously, as it was some hundred feet to shore and the sea was wild and dangerous. He closed his eyes and plunged into the cold, foaming waters. He surfaced and was immediately force fed mouthfuls of the salty water. He thrashed toward the shore as waves crashed over his head.

Erik followed him into the water and then Niklas. Marcus came last, with Pippin under one arm. The swim was hard. They could barely stay to their course as waves crashed over them.

Toby felt he had drunk half the sea by the time he reached land. He tried several times to scramble up onto the rocks, but the thrashing waves either knocked him back into the sea or just bounced him painfully against his goal. Eventually, half dead with exhaustion, he scrambled from the sea and fell on his back, his eyes tightly shut as the winds raged across him.

"Let me just lie here," he gasped. "No. Please, somebody, wake me from this terrible nightmare."

"Come on, you! We need to move!" barked Niklas in his ear.

Toby opened his eyes. He looked at the others, who somehow had made it to dry land—even Pippin. They were all battered from the ordeal but alive. Toby looked out from the land back to the small boat. It was still tethered, bouncing

around in the raging sea. When he looked back to talk to the others, he could see they were already walking inland toward what seemed to be a wide stone path.

“You stay here and guard the boat!” shouted Toby to Pippin.

Pippin whimpered and crawled between two large flat rocks to escape the winds. He snuggled his muzzle down into his paws and closed his eyes.

By the time Toby had joined the others, Marcus was holding onto the map for dear life, fighting the wind for it. Erik was pointing at the road marked on it.

“It looks like we need to follow this road up and around to the north!” shouted Erik against the roaring wind. “It seems to lead to the ancient circle, and that is where the hag implied the stone would be!”

Marcus nodded, his hair blowing about his head, dust bouncing off his face and driving deep into his eyes.

“This wind is infernal,” he said, tucking the map into his belt and pulling his shirt down to cover it. “I think I’d rather be back in the forest with the blood sucking insects than here with all this grit blowing around. I can’t see a thing, and my mouth is full of dirt.”

Toby nodded and placed his hands over his ears to stop the deafening roar of the winds. “I can hear a voice calling in the wind.”

Then they all heard it. “You are all doomed,” it said as it laughed a deep laugh. “You should never have come to our island, for we will never let you leave. You and your dark-hearted friends will have your souls torn from your bodies. This is our promise.”

Marcus turned and could see the foam of the sea had been whipped into the shape of an old sailor. He floated in that ghostly form, with a broad hat and a great beard that flowed down onto his chest. He laughed and pointed at them as he spoke. “You are all doomed! Doomed!”

“This place is cursed,” said Niklas as he walked quickly to the path. “Let’s get moving. The sooner we leave here, the better. Nargs are one thing, ghosts are altogether another.”

As the path turned north, the slope became steep and winding. Walking against the wind was almost impossible. The dust and grit bit deep into their skin, to the point of scratching them. Looking to follow the road was painful and almost out of the question. The winds raged and attempted to tear the clothes from their bodies. They stooped low making walking easier, but it was of little help.

After some tormented hours they came to a seemingly abandoned stone dwelling near the side of the road. It had no windows, but a sturdy wooden door and a heavy stone roof.

“We need to rest,” said Erik, shielding his face from the wind. “This wind is too much. We need some respite before we all go mad.”

“Let’s be careful. We don’t know who’s home,” called Marcus.

They edged toward the cottage and Niklas reached for the rusted catch of the door. Erik stood with his axe raised above his head, ready to swipe at anything that came out. Niklas’s trembling hand released the latch and the wind grabbed the door, flinging it open, taking them all by surprise. Erik instinctively stepped forward, swinging the axe wildly. But, to his relief, nothing came out.

“Thankfully, it seems empty,” said Marcus, peering inside.

“Good. Then let’s get out of this wind,” urged Niklas as he pushed them all forward.

They struggled to close the door behind them, and eventually managed to secure it against the thundering wind. They sat on the floor, their ears ringing from the deafening wind, their hair wild and blown, and their skin coated in fine, grey grit.

They sat for some time just listening to the raging winds. Toby had taken some food out and was eating small amounts, trying to regain strength. He grimaced as the grit in his mouth crunched between his teeth.

“This place really is cursed,” said Marcus after a while. He sat leaning against a wall, his eyes closed.

“Oh yes. You can be sure of that,” an ethereal voice piped from the far corner of the room. “It’s cursed in every sense of the word.”

They all jumped to their feet and raised their weapons, looking in the gloom to see who was speaking. There seemed to be no one.

“Show yourself!” demanded Niklas.

A thin mist started to swirl in the corner and form into the shape of an old man. He was tall and slight and dressed in a long, red tunic with black britches. On his head was a black three-cornered hat. His shirt was white and frilly about the collar and cuffs. His face looked to be kind, with wide eyes and a pleasant upturned mouth. He was well manicured—bordering on dandyish.

“You have no use for weapons with me.” He chuckled at the sight of them. “I’ve been dead for over a hundred years. You can hardly kill me again.”

For a moment, they remained rigid, weapons raised, but one by one put them down, eyes fixed. The specter floated a few inches above the floor. He stared back at them with a broad smile on his face.

“Who are you?” Niklas barked eventually.

The ghost removed his hat and bowed low, presenting himself in a very gentlemanly manner. "My name was Cedric Barnstable, first officer on the frigate, Basingstoke, and I am eternally at your service."

They looked on silently. None of them had seen a ghost before today, and certainly not one so civil.

The ghost looked at them from his bent position and raised an eyebrow. "And you are?"

Marcus looked at Toby and then Erik before speaking. "Oh, I'm sorry. How rude of us. It's just that...we've never talked to a...a ghost before. You might say we're a little surprised."

Cedric laughed as he straightened up, replacing the hat on his head.

"Err...my name is Marcus. This is Toby, Erik and Niklas," said Marcus.

"Charmed to meet you all I'm sure. And for what little good it will do, may I warmly welcome you to the island of Alicudi. I'm sure you haven't had such a welcome from some of the other...shall I say—residents."

"Well, not exactly," said Toby. "I think the other ghosts here aren't very happy about us being here."

"Well, I'm sorry you weren't welcomed in a civil manner, but I'm afraid, my lads, you'd best get used to it," said Cedric, placing his hands behind his back. "The other spirits here are furious with having so many people come ashore in the last few days. They don't like visitors."

Erik looked sideways at Niklas. *Other visitors?*

"You should be glad to be in here for a while," continued Cedric, pointing to the door. "I can tell you, this infernal wind will drive you crazy—just as it has all the other ghosts on this dashed island."

"Oh! This is your house," said Toby. "We didn't intend to intrude, but we needed some shelter for a while."

"Oh no," replied Cedric with a smile. "I just come here, like you, to get away from the cursed winds and the constant moaning of all the other ghosts. I can at least hear myself think in here. Anyway, it's nice to have some sociable company for a change, instead of all that 'woe and doom' the others go on about all the time. All this moaning and cursing is enough to drive anyone insane. I'd question why any of you would bother coming to such a miserable island, but I think I can guess. It'll be the stupid stone, won't it?"

"What do you know about the stone?" asked Marcus, as he glanced at Toby and then back at Cedric.

"Oh, everyone here knows about the stone. It's why many of us are here. We heard there was a great treasure on this island. Over the years we all came sailing

here to try and find it. Well, it turns out to be that stupid stone. No value to anyone.”

“Do you know where the stone is?” asked Toby. “You may be surprised, but for our island, and us, it has real importance. It’s crucial we find it.”

“What, that old thing? Oh, you just need to follow the path. It’s in the circle at the top of the plateau. You really can’t miss it. Oh, but I wouldn’t bother hiking all the way up there in this infernal wind. You won’t be able to get to it.”

Marcus looked at Toby with concern. Cedric sounded pretty definite. “Why can’t we get it?”

“Because only the Ancients have access to it,” said Cedric as he leaned against a wall, gesturing with one hand and brushing his leg with the other. “You see, they put a very powerful magic on this island many centuries ago. Only the Ancients can come and get it. And, well, none of them have ever come back for it. Anyway, I also think now even if one of them did come to collect it, the ghosts here are so attached to looking after it they would never let it go.”

“How would you know if one of the Ancients was coming for it?” said Marcus, fumbling under his shirt.

“Oh. They’d be wearing the sign of the order of the northern wizards.”

“Do you mean this?” said Marcus, flashing the pendant at Cedric.

Cedric stood with his mouth open, the most ungentlemanly pose he had adopted by far. “Well, bless my windblown soul. It looks like the time has come at last. Oh, this will cause big trouble amongst the higher ghosts. I doubt they are going to just let you take it. I mean with all those dark creatures that have come here in the last few days, they are very angry at the moment.”

“Which dark creatures have been here?” asked Erik. He allowed himself a nervous glance toward the door.

“Why, those evil Strombolians. Hundreds of them have tried to come here. Most were smashed on the rocks, but some are searching the island as we stand here.”

“Then we need to go now, before they beat us to it. It’s very important we get to it before them,” said Marcus.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” said Cedric, waving a hand at them. “Really. Only those sent by the Ancients, those with pure intentions, will ever be able to reach the stone. They can try all they like; they’ll just end up squished at the bottom of the cliff.”

“Sorry, but we really have to go,” said Marcus. “It’s vital we get to the stone first. It was really nice to meet you.”

“Oh, and it was a pleasure to meet such well-educated young men,” said Cedric, bowing again. “Even if some of you do carry such fearsome weapons.”

Erik flung the door open and the winds poured inside, scattering Cedric and sending a shower of dust across them all.

“You must have faith, Marcus,” called Cedric’s ethereal voice in the wind. “Only he with the pure heart can leap and survive.”

Cedric’s voice trailed off into the winds as they forced their way outside. The winds had grown even fiercer and they found it hard to stand against the full force of them. Spirits were moaning and shrieking at them as they struggled to shut the door for Cedric’s sake and turned to head up the path.

“Be careful!” shouted Marcus. “The Strombolians could be anywhere, waiting for us! They may have seen us land and could be watching us even now!”

Cautiously, they turned onto the path and headed up against the raging winds, all watching carefully for signs of Strombolians. They walked for nearly another hour, the winds becoming ever more violent as they moved higher. The path then flattened off and they were on a wide-open plateau at the foot of another steep climb.

On the plateau stood a wide circle of low stones spanning a few hundred feet. Dividing the circle exactly in half was a deep chasm that dropped with vertical walls into blackness. They approached the circle, stooping low against the howling winds.

“This is the ancient circle marked on the map,” said Marcus, pointing to the stones but not taking out the map for proof lest it be whisked away in the gale. “We have to presume it is a place of strong magic. I don’t know what we should expect.”

Toby looked closely at the perfect, square stones that formed the low circle. He pointed at one of the stones. “Look. Carved on each stone is the symbol of the Ancients.”

“This is it!” shouted Marcus. “We’re nearly there! We need to have some last strength. But we must be careful. Not only are the Strombolians here, but according to Cedric, the ghosts will try to stop us, too, from taking stone.”

Carefully, Marcus stepped up onto the small wall and then inside the boundary of the mystical circle. As he crossed the threshold, something very strange happened to him. At once he felt he was taken back to a more ancient time.

The winds suddenly disappeared and the air was still.

THE STONE OF ARNAK

“What happened?” said Toby, looking back at the edge of the circle as he joined Marcus.

Behind them the air shimmered, as if they were looking through a curtain of slow moving water.

“We’ve entered the place of the Ancients,” said Marcus. The hairs on his neck suddenly stood on end.

“It feels almost holy,” said Niklas. “You can feel a...a deep...power here.”

As Niklas spoke, Erik looked back out of the circle. Through the shimmering light of the boundary he could see four dark figures approaching. “The Strombolians have found us. They must have been lying in wait near the path.” He gripped his axe tight with both hands.

The four dark figures moved in a strange, disjointed slow motion as they approached the circle. It took an eternity for them to reach the border before they stepped up onto the stones.

Then they were in.

Four hideous creatures stood with their red eyes burning under dark hoods. In their hands, each held a stubby, dark sword. As the leader affixed its gaze upon Marcus, it let out a hideous scream. At once the creatures ran toward them, raising those black swords.

Marcus jumped sideways, swiping with his sword, but it caught just one of the creature’s cloaks as it passed. It turned and came again, clashing swords with him, the steel ringing loud. Marcus stepped back before the powerful creature struck once more, nearly knocking the sword from his hands.

* * * *

Niklas stepped back and swung his mighty axe at the head of a creature. It ducked and slashed with its sword, slicing a deep gouge across Niklas's leg. He howled in pain and fell to the ground, dropping his axe near the feet of the dark creature. It quickly bent down and grabbed the axe. It stood tall over Niklas, gnashing its gnarled teeth at him as the young Viking grimaced with pain. The creature then shifted its weight to raise the sturdy axe—ready to cut through Niklas's neck.

Niklas looked up in desperation, but before the axe could fall, Toby's sword sliced clean through the neck of the creature, sending its head toppling. Niklas watched wide-eyed as the creature collapsed next to him, dropping the axe.

Toby stood over Niklas, offering his hand to help him up. Niklas took the hand and stood, trying to keep the weight from his bad leg.

"Thank you. You saved my life." He squeezed hard on Toby's hand.

"Now we're a team," said Toby, smiling.

"A team," said Niklas, smiling back as Toby bent down and returned the fallen axe to his companion.

* * * *

Erik battled two of the creatures, spinning and swiping with his axe, trying to make contact with at least one. But for all his ferocious efforts, both the lithe Strombolians dodged his blade.

Suddenly, as Erik stepped off balance, one darted forward and lunged with its sword. The point was about to strike Erik's chest when Niklas's axe blade cleaved the arm off the creature. The creature howled in pain just before Toby's sword plunged deep into its back—silencing it.

Erik stepped forward with rage and lifted his axe toward the other Strombolian. The creature reeled backward from his wrath, cowering before him. With all his might, Erik drove the axe downward into the top of the creature's head, splitting the body in half. The two parts slowly peeled apart and fell from each other.

"Great strike!" said Toby, as he watched the halves flop onto the ground and thick, black blood ooze from them.

* * * *

Marcus lifted his sword again, but the creature flicked it from his hand, sending it spinning to the ground—out of reach. Marcus doubled in pain as the creature kicked him hard in the stomach. He rolled back and fell to the ground, struggling to get his breath back. The creature stood over him, its sword raised, ready to strike. Marcus rolled and grabbed a handful of earth and then looked at the creature.

“Do you know what this is?” said Marcus, his eyes burning brightly.

The creature looked at him with a confused expression on its face.

“Your last lesson,” said Marcus as he opened his hand and the earth flew into the creature’s eyes, momentarily blinding it.

It shook its head wildly. Suddenly, Toby’s sword plunged deep into its side, Erik’s axe slammed into its head, and Niklas’s axe took its legs off. The remains of the creature slumped to the ground, motionless. The three of them cheered in victory.

“Now we’re really a team,” said Niklas, offering Marcus his hand.

Marcus took it and stood, adrenaline rushing through his body. “Yes! Now we’re a team!” He turned and held out his hand to Erik.

Erik looked at it for a moment and then turned away. “It’s time to get this stone. We can rejoice when Gazhul is dead. And not before.”

Toby looked at Niklas and sighed. He turned to look at Marcus, who was clearly disappointed by Erik’s reaction.

“It’s all right. I’ll get the stone,” said Marcus as he turned. “You need to watch to ensure no more of these vile creatures come whilst I’m getting the stone. If they do come, I think you all know what to do.”

“Look,” said Toby as he pointed to the bodies of the creatures.

Ghosts had appeared and descended upon the corpses of the fallen Strombolians. They were pulling what seemed to be the mist-like spirits from the dead bodies. The spirits of the Strombolians at once became animated. They struggled and fought, issuing wailing cries as the ghosts dragged them out of the circle.

“No evil shall remain in this pure place,” said one of the ghosts as it looked at Toby.

Toby turned from the ghost and ran quickly to catch up with the others as they stood at the edge of the great drop. The chasm stretched some hundred feet across from one side of the circle to the other. Its sheer walls plunged into the darkness below. On the opposite side was a small ledge, barely big enough to

stand on. Above it, carved into the wall was a small recess. In the recess, something glowed red like a hot coal.

"The red stone of Arnak," whispered Marcus as he stared across the void. "This is what we've come for."

"But how do you get to it?" asked Niklas. "There's no bridge, and you can't walk around. What are you thinking to do? Fly across like a bird?"

"This is a leap of faith," said Marcus, remembering the words of both the hag and Cedric. "Only those of pure intention will be allowed to take the stone. Only those sent on an errand by the Ancients. It means that if I'm meant to get the stone, then somehow the Ancients will get me across."

"But what if she was lying?" asked Toby as he cautiously looked down over the edge into the blackness below. "You'll just plummet to your death for sure. There must be some other way."

"This is the reason I was sent by Falzar," said Marcus, edging closer to the drop. "This is why he gave me the pendant—their sign. I trust him and know he will keep me safe."

"I'm not so sure," said Erik, looking down the side of the cliff. "There is nothing to stop you falling. Do you really think your faith in these Ancients will save you?"

"There's only one way to find out," said Marcus as he reached under his shirt and clutched the pendant. "There's been something my whole life that I could never explain. Something has always driven me on. And now, for the first time, I think I'm starting to understand. Something in my heart tells me to trust Falzar. Something tells me to trust myself. I know this is my purpose."

He closed his eyes, raised his right leg, and—stepped off the edge of the cliff.

Marcus reeled forward and fell; nothing stopped him as he plunged deeper and deeper into the abyss. As he fell, images raced through his mind: his father, his village, Sabrina and then, finally, Falzar.

"This is your time, Marcus," said Falzar, smiling. "Now you will know the power of the Ancients."

Suddenly a great wind raced up the chasm. It grabbed Marcus and hurled him upward. He felt as if great hands lifted him, propelling him back up the chasm at an incredible speed. Then they slowly lowered him onto the ledge on the far side.

Marcus opened his eyes and found himself gazing at an incredible red stone. It was no bigger than a plum, but it shone like a piece of hot metal. Its strange light seemed to pulse, as if it had within it the rhythm of a beating heart.

Marcus stared deep into the stone and then slowly reached out and closed his hand around it. Suddenly warmth raced across his hand, up his arm and through

his entire body. He mind went blank and then he could feel himself flying across the sea at great speed—just a few feet above the water.

He could see he was approaching Stromboli quickly, the dark volcano spewing out plumes of molten rock. Then he was standing within the great black fortress of Gazhul, staring at the altar. A huge figure draped in a dark robe was crouching over what looked to be a twitching body.

“Ah! You have the stone,” hissed Gazhul in a voice that seemed to come from deep within the ground. “Well, you are too late, little fool, for I no longer need it. And soon the world will know I have returned. My time has come again.”

Gazhul cast the body to one side. At once, Marcus could see he had sucked all the blood from it—through its eyes. Terrified, Marcus suddenly plunged the stone into his pocket and released it. Immediately he was back standing on the ledge.

He turned and looked across the great divide toward his friends. They seemed to be desperately beckoning him to come back. Marcus looked down into the blackness and with his right hand held the pendant tightly. He once more closed his eyes and stepped from the ledge, plunging into the darkness. As before, the great wind scooped him up and delivered him gently to his comrades.

“What on earth were you doing?” demanded Toby, placing his hands on Marcus’s shoulders. “It’s nearly dark and you spent forever there.”

“Why did you stay so long?” asked Niklas. “You stood there holding the stone for nearly an hour.”

“What?” asked Marcus, a little confused. “I held the stone for no more than ten seconds.”

“Then it must have been some form of strange magic,” said Toby. “You stood rigid for a long time, as if in a trance. We’ve lost much time. Now we need to hurry before it gets dark. Already the sun is dropping.”

“Come on. Let’s get moving!” barked Erik. “I’m sure we haven’t seen the last of the Strombolians.”

They raced away from the chasm, toward the edge of the circle. Cedric suddenly appeared just in front of the boundary, raising his hands in caution.

“This is the limit of the realm of the stone. It has stood here, guarding these islands, for over a thousand years. It will not leave easily. Once you pass here, there is no turning back. The ghosts that have long coveted this object will not let you go easily. They have grown accustomed to the stone and they feel it is theirs. They will protect it with all their power. Once you step from this sanctuary, run and don’t look back—no matter what you hear.”

Marcus placed his hand in his pocket and grasped the stone. Then he looked at Cedric and nodded before he stepped up onto the circle of stones. Immediately the ground began to tremor violently.

“Run!” shouted Marcus, as he stepped out of the circle and into the full force of the raging winds. Passing across the boundary, he felt as if he was again propelled forward into another time and place.

The others followed him.

Marcus glanced back and was shocked to see hundreds of spirits had appeared in the circle. Without doubt they were crazed with rage. Some pointed, whilst others tore violently at the earth—as if trying to release something. As Marcus stepped from the wall, he caught a glimpse of a giant insect-like leg break from the ground—black and hairy. He looked forward and began to run as fast as he could.

“Bring back our stone! Bring back our stone!” wailed the ghosts in the wind.

But Marcus was not listening. He was running as fast as he could along the path, desperate to escape the island.

Erik and Niklas ran behind Marcus. But it was clear Niklas was struggling, the wound in his leg deep. He dragged the leg painfully behind him. Erik propped him up under his shoulder to help, but Niklas was a heavy burden.

“I can’t make it,” Niklas admitted, his face screwed up with pain. “My leg is too badly injured. I’ll just slow you all down. Maybe it’s better that you just leave me here.”

“Come on, you can make it. We’ll help you. Just keep going,” said Toby, as he grabbed his other shoulder.

They bowled along as fast as they could, supporting Niklas and driving him on. The wind blew at their backs making the going easier and the downhill slope helped them move faster. However, even with this help they began to grow weary. Niklas was indeed slowing them and he was a heavy burden. Marcus took turns in bearing his weight, but the going was slow—too slow. By the time they had reached the stone dwelling they had rested in on the way up, they had almost come to a standstill.

“I can’t make it any further!” gasped Niklas as he collapsed on the path, holding his bad leg. “Leave me. It’s your only hope. I can’t go on.”

Marcus suddenly sensed that whatever he had seen emerging from the ground in the circle was now following them. He looked back up the road, and to his horror he could make out a giant black shadow scuttling after them. Through the haze of the windblown grit he started to see that it looked like some kind of horrific giant insect.

“We just need to get to the boat,” said Toby, hiding his face from the wind. “Come on. It’ll take us less than an hour from here.”

“Something is coming after us!” shouted Erik as he stood doubled over, breathing hard. “It’s something...”

The giant shape was approaching fast. Its gargantuan legs were pounding the ground, making it vibrate.

“We’ll never outrun it,” said Marcus as he searched for some better way of escape. “We need another way to get to the boat or we’re all doomed.”

“We can hide in the dwelling,” said Toby.

“What, are you mad? That thing will rip it apart in seconds,” said Niklas.

“Look! Look!” shouted Marcus, stepping to the side of the road. He was pointing down to the bay. “The edge of this path is directly above the bay where we left the boat. I can just about see it bobbing in the water. It looks all right. The slope leading down from here to there may be a few hundred feet, but look, it’s scree and loose rocks. We may be able to go straight down to the boat. It’ll be hard and very dangerous, but we have no choice. It’s too late to try and outrun that creature.”

“Are you mad?” said Erik, looking down the immense slope. “It’s at least two hundred feet. We’ll never make it alive. We’ll be smashed to pieces.”

“We have no choice,” said Marcus, pointing toward the giant insect that was now almost upon them. “It’s not easy, but we have no other choice. Sliding on the loose stones will break our speed and we might make it to the bottom. The slope is steep but wide. We can try and weave from side to side.”

“We’re going to fall to our deaths,” said Toby as he peered down the slope.

“Better than being mangled to death by that giant thing,” said Marcus.

Marcus stepped the edge. “I’ll go first. If I just plummet to my death, then think of something else. If not, then I suggest you follow me” The scree immediately started to give way under his feet, the loose rocks falling away. Faster and faster, he ran to try to keep up with the breaking slope, but eventually he could no longer keep his balance and tumbled head over heels. He fell faster and faster, banging and bumping.

There was no time for the others to think, as the giant insect was upon them. They could see its sharp maw gnashing at them as it approached.

“Let’s go!” screamed Erik, stepping off the edge. “It’s our last hope.”

The others followed, but Niklas fell straight away—unable to stand on his bad leg. He landed on his back and slid painfully down the slope, great clouds of dust blown up by the wind.

They all tumbled faster and faster, bouncing across the rocks, screaming with pain every time they bumped to the ground, controlled weaving out of the question. Toby cracked his head and twisted his arm as he fell awkwardly on his side. Niklas jarred sideways and there was a sickening crack from his leg, which made him almost pass out.

After what seemed an eternity of falling, they crashed in a pile at the bottom of the slope.

Marcus lay on his back, winded, struggling to catch his breath. Niklas was screaming as he held his leg, which was now not only gashed, but also badly broken. Toby had blacked out for an instant, but was now conscious again. And Erik was down with no major injury, just badly bruised.

“Is everyone alive?” asked Marcus, as he looked back up the slope. He could see the giant creature standing at the top, its long black legs reaching over the edge and probing the stability of the surface.

“It can’t follow us,” sighed Marcus, as he watched the giant shape stabbing the ground with frustration. “Come on, let’s...”

Marcus was still looking at the creature when it started down the slope, placing its immense legs one at a time onto the scree. Then it was balancing precariously, trying to walk down. Suddenly, the scree gave way and it struggled to keep its balance—even with six giant legs.

“Quickly. Let’s get up there, to the path,” urged Marcus.

The slope ended at the rocks that formed the edge of the bay. Standing upon the rocks, wagging his tail, was Pippin—who had waited for them patiently. Now, seeing them return, he was dancing around wildly and barking at the slope.

Niklas tried to scramble to his feet, but the pain was too much for him and he screamed, collapsing again.

“Come on!” urged Erik, as he struggled to help Niklas. “That thing is coming down the slope. We need to get off this island.”

The insect lurched precariously before starting to tumble down the scree. It flipped over onto its back and its huge bulk slid toward them, showering scree before it.

“We have to go!” shouted Toby.

“Leave me. Save the stone and finish the quest,” said Niklas as he held his axe tight. “I won’t go without a fight. Now go!”

The creature landed with a boom, showering scree all over them and making them jump backward. Erik nodded at Niklas and shook his hand in a last gesture of friendship. Toby then reached forward and also shook his hand.

“It’s been an honor to fight with you,” said Toby.

“We’ll see each other again—one day,” said Niklas, smiling. “After this, we will all have the right to enter Valhalla.”

Marcus turned to see the immense creature lying on its back. It suddenly kicked its giant, black legs and flicked itself upright onto its feet. Now he could clearly see the beast. It had a hard and shiny body like some giant black beetle. Its head hung below the body, with large, gnashing mandibles that dripped with slime. Staring back at him was a cluster of shiny black eyes that looked like a bunch of blackberries.

The creature scuttled forward, its feet clicking on the ground before stopping inches from Niklas. It watched the others scramble up to the rocks before it turned its gaze down toward the helpless young man.

He lay beneath its gargantuan legs, staring in abject horror at the monster above him. It paused for a second, cracking its mandibles together, and then lunged at him, grabbing him with one of its legs and hoisting him upside down. Niklas screamed in pain as the claw cut into his flesh.

Marcus turned, glancing back to see Niklas suspended upside down, swiping valiantly with his axe. Marcus turned away before there was a scream and then the sound of snapping as of a dry twig. Niklas fell silent.

Marcus stopped next to Erik and Toby; both were standing with their hands to their heads in despair. Immediately he could see what had their attention. It was the remains of their boat, flotsam and jetsam in the turbulent waters—nothing more than shattered wood and torn sail. The spirits laughed at their cruel joke as they danced around the wreckage.

“You thought you had escaped,” they mocked. “You thought you were safe. Well, we have taken your boat, and now you will feel the death blow of our beloved beast.”

The wind roared as they looked back toward the scree slope. The giant creature had finished with Niklas and was now advancing menacingly toward them.

“If we stay and fight we’re doomed,” said Marcus, clutching his sword. “If we jump in the sea we’re doomed.”

“I’d rather die fighting with an axe in my hand,” said Erik, raising his weapon. “I want revenge for Niklas. If we all attack at once, then just maybe we stand a chance.”

Marcus looked across at Toby and smiled. “Well, I guess this is it. You wanted adventure, and you certainly got it.”

“It was a good adventure,” said Toby as he smiled back. “More than I’d ever imagined. No one in the village would have believed us. I just wish I could be there to tell them the tales.”

“Yes, it was a good adventure.”

They turned and could see the giant creature was right upon them. It rose on its back legs and roared into the wind.

RACE TO THE ABYSS

All seemed lost.

Their boat was smashed against jagged rocks, they had lost another of their comrades and the giant insect that had killed him was now bearing down on them, ready to deliver its fatal blow.

Marcus braced for the assault of the creature, holding his sword high, his weight on his back foot. At the moment he was about to lunge forward and attack, he heard Pippin barking excitedly. He looked and could see that Pippin was not barking at the creature, but at the raging sea. Marcus followed Pippin's gaze and there, coming through the waves, was a boat under full sail—it was heading straight for them.

“Old Thom!” cried Marcus with great relief, making the others look.

“I can't believe it,” said Toby. “We're saved.”

The creature was poised to strike at Erik. As the great claw swooped down, Erik jumped to the ground, rolling away from the deadly blow that now struck only rocks.

Marcus saw this was their moment to escape.

“Come on! Get to the boat while you can! Erik!” he shouted as he ran and plunged into the foaming sea.

Toby followed Marcus into the water. At this Pippin darted from the rocks and launched himself in.

Erik scrambled to his feet as another giant leg came smashing down at him. He stepped to the side, and this time swiped his axe with full force. The blade struck its mark, cleaving the bottom of the leg away and sending thick yellow

blood spilling onto the rocks. The creature reeled back, letting out a high-pitched and shrill cry. "That's for Niklas!" Erik shouted. He then swung again, chopping the claw from another of the creature's great legs. "And that's for me!"

Then he, too, ran and plunged into the foaming water to escape the beast, for it may have been injured but now was enraged and had a few good claws left.

Marcus struggled to the boat and Old Thom reached down, dragging him up over the side. He turned to see Erik break the raging surface and swim toward the boat. Behind him on the shore, the creature scuttled back and forth on the rocks, limping on injured legs.

"Welcome aboard, lads," said Old Thom, slapping Marcus on the back. "Seems Old Thom made it here just in time."

"But how did you know we needed help?" asked Marcus as he coughed out a mouthful of seawater.

"Falzar said ye might be needin' my help," said the sailor, returning to the tiller and turning the boat into the raging winds. "Seems he was right—as usual. Only three of you, are there? And the little dog?" He shook his head sadly at their affirmation.

They all hung onto the bottom of the small wooded boat as the winds flung them from side to side. Great waves crashed over the bow, almost dragging them back into the sea. Old Thom stood strong at the back of the boat, the tiller held firmly in one hand, a rope in the other. As the boat surged forward, he simply puffed on the pipe in his mouth.

"No one can sail in this sea!" shouted Erik, clinging for dear life as water poured into the boat. "We'll be smashed on the rocks for certain!"

A huge smile spread across Old Thom's wizened face. He let out a long laugh as spray poured over him. "The sea will never beat Old Thom. Not never and definitely not today!"

For the longest time the small boat fought the brutal wind. Angry spirits raged about them in the great clouds, pulling at the sail and mast. They screamed and whipped the sea into a white frenzy, but Old Thom, one of the greatest sailors of his day, guided the boat away from the raging storm. The spirits wailed and moaned, as they knew the stone of Arnak was surely slipping away from them.

Battered and bruised, the boat and its occupants finally emerged from the great clouds and raging winds of Alicudi. At last they were in calm night seas.

Marcus grabbed the gunnels of the boat and looked back at the raging tempest. There, floating on the edge of the great clouds, he could see the misted form of Cedric.

"You have claimed the stone. You are truly one of the Ancients. Now fulfill your destiny," Cedric called after them before he disappeared back into the clouds.

Marcus slumped into the bottom of the boat, exhausted, his heart racing and his mind swimming. "I thought we were done for. Really, I thought that was the end."

"Rest easy, lads. We have a long night's sail to the great abyss," said Old Thom, drawing on his pipe.

"It's too late," moaned Marcus from the bottom of the boat. "I saw him when I was on the ledge. He's become too strong, and he doesn't even need the stone now. It's all been a waste of time."

"What are you saying?" asked Toby, kneeling beside him. "What do you mean it's too late? If it is too late, then why don't we sail straight to Stromboli? We still have the dagger."

"What did Falzar say to do?" said Marcus, turning and looking up at Old Thom.

Old Thom gazed down at Marcus and cocked his hat to one side. "Well, Falzar said to me no matter what, we was to go to the great abyss. No matter hows it was looking, we had to go and throw the stone in. He said it was very important, even if Gazhul no longer needed it."

Marcus looked to Toby; his heart was very heavy and he doubted they could now win, but something in his heart still trusted Falzar. "Then Falzar will have his reasons. He wants us to throw in the stone and I trust him. We'll do what he says and go to the great abyss."

"But if we delay any longer, it may be too late for everyone on Stromboli," said Erik. "Maybe it's already too late for Sabrina."

"There's always hope," said Marcus, raising himself on his elbows. "We can make it to the abyss and then to Stromboli. If there is any chance to save them, we must try. I trust in what Falzar has told us to do and I know that if anyone can get us there, Old Thom can."

"These have been grim days," said Erik. "I have lost my two greatest friends. From this point on I will name my axe *Revenge* and carry it to Gazhul. Woe betides all who stand in my way."

Suddenly there was whistling in the air, and with a thud, a crooked, black arrow struck their mast, making Old Thom duck.

"What the blinkers was that?" he said, looking around.

Skirting the edge of the clouds came a massive black warship. It was fashioned from gnarled wood and featured a high twisted central mast. Flying from the top

was a great, black flag that had the outline of Stromboli emblazoned upon it in red. Its wide black sails billowed full of wind as it raced toward them. From the ship came the high-pitched cries of dark Strombolian sailors.

"The dark ones! They're upon us!" shouted Erik as another black arrow struck their boat, making them all dive for cover.

Rows of black hooded archers lined the bow of the Strombolian ship. They unleashed volley after volley of arrows that passed close to their targets' heads.

"Right, lads. It's time for us to move," Old Thom ordered as he pushed the tiller hard to the right. "Raise up that other sail!"

Marcus dove forward. He grabbed the sail, tying it onto the rope before signaling to Erik. Erik sat and pulled hard on the rope and the large square of canvas unfurled, grabbing the wind.

"Looks like we have a race," Old Thom beamed as the small boat accelerated away from the black ship. "None'll ever beat Old Thom, I'll tell ya that!"

He turned the boat a few degrees to grab the full power of the wind. It keeled over hard and accelerated even more. Marcus had never felt a boat move so fast, as if some extra, unseen force powered it. He watched as the water whipped past the gunnels.

The Strombolian ship itself released another sail and then long oars appeared from its sides and splashed down into the water. From the bowels of the great ship began the rhythmic beating of drums, and in time to the pounding, the oars began to row and propel the dark ship faster.

"I think they're gaining on us," said Toby, looking back at the menacing black shadow.

"Don't worry, lad. Old Thom'll keep 'em at bay."

They sailed hard to the east, the wind blowing constantly. Then, as they reached the lea side of Filicudi, Old Thom shouted and turned the boat sharply, making it flick to its other side. The boom swung across wildly, making Toby duck.

"Whoa! What are you doing?" said Erik, as their speed suddenly dropped.

"Trust me, lad. I know these waters like the back of me hand."

They all looked in fear as the great ship closed on them at great speed, the giant oars splashing into the water as the drums beat out a faster rhythm.

"You're going to get us all killed, you old fool!" screamed Erik as the warship loomed over them.

Old Thom's boat now slowed to almost a stop as it neared the edge of Filicudi. They braced themselves as more arrows flew overhead, missing them by

inches. Old Thom relaxed and leaned on the tiller, simply scratching his head and looking between the water and the sky.

“Just about there then,” he said as he gripped the tiller with both hands.

The great ship loomed close behind, poised to ram them. Marcus could feel the bow wave as the dark shape towered above them. Toby cowered low in the boat and closed his eyes, preparing for the impact of the ship. Then, suddenly, as they passed the edge of Filicudi, the sails caught a powerful wind that blew from the north side of the island. It slammed into their sails, filling them and sending them away with great speed from the dark ship.

The strong winds slammed into the Strombolian ship—with its sails set completely wrong. In an instant the black material ripped sideways and was violently torn from the rigging. Three dark figures were flung into the sea, screaming as they arced through the air. With a huge crack, two of the great oars splintered, causing a large boom from within the ship, followed by the sound of screams. With this, the ship came to an abrupt halt.

Old Thom laughed and shook his head. “They’ll need to be up earlier than that to catch Old Thom!” He leaned forward and slapped Erik on the back. “Old fool indeed.”

The small boat was once again balanced perfectly on the winds, and by only the light of the stars, it sailed eastward toward Salina and onward to the great abyss.

Through the night they sailed, ever eastward. The boat never left the perfect line, with Old Thom at the helm. The dark ship had reset its rigging and was now moving after them, its crew now driven by a great desire for revenge.

The sun had peeped over the horizon by the time Old Thom’s boat reached Salina and passed the spot upon which the colony had once stood. Marcus looked across the calm sea toward the burned out village—it was no longer smoking. It filled Marcus’s heart with great sadness. He thought of Sabrina. He was scared, as he could no longer sense what she was doing. He knew any hope of making it to Stromboli in time was fading.

Toby awoke and moaned as he moved. “When will this nightmare end? I’m black and blue from my fall down the slope. I’m hungry and thirsty. I’m cold and stiff. Oh, what a night.”

Marcus ignored Toby’s grumbles. He looked back and could see the great black ship had gained on them in the night—it was again coming within striking distance.

Many of the crew pushing the oars had been whipped to death in an effort to catch Old Thom’s boat, their bodies cast into the sea to reduce weight.

“We’re nearly there. Marcus, it’s time you have that stone ready,” said Old Thom, looking over his shoulder. “I’ll tell you when we’re over the deepest part of the abyss.”

“I don’t think we’re going to outrun them,” said Erik as he gazed at the ship advancing on them.

Pippin stared at the ship and growled softly, his tail between his legs.

“Better shut that mutt up, Marcus,” Erik whispered, raising a fist. “We’re in the channel and not far from Corag. If that dog makes any noise, he’ll waken the sea creature for sure.”

“Shhh, Pippin,” urged Marcus, pulling the glowing, red stone from his pocket. It felt warm in his hands and filled him with strength. The energy seemed to have become stronger as they drew closer to Lipari. Marcus turned and looked up toward the observatory; it stood glowing white in the bright morning sun.

“Nearly there, lads,” said Old Thom softly as he looked to Lipari for his familiar markers. “I’ve done my job; now it’s time for you fellas to do yours.”

A black arrow whisked past Toby, taking a piece from his hair and sending him reeling backward with a shout. “They’re really upon us. Do it now, Marcus!”

Pippin began to bark wildly at the approaching boat, a shrill sound echoing across the channel. Toby lunged to grab him, to stop him from barking, but it was too late.

“Oh no!” said Erik, as he looked into the deep black waters.

Over to their right the surface started to ripple. The ripple became a stream of white bubbles. The bubbles turned to foam and then, in a dramatic explosion, the sea erupted as the mighty Corag broke the surface.

Its great head was like that of an ancient, green dragon. Its eyes were black, like those of a shark, and they stared at the black ship just in front of it. Its immense body stretched hundreds of feet, a giant, sleek serpent. A long, scaly red fin ran down its spine, ending in a point on its powerful tail. As it broke the water, it sent out a great wave that lifted the small boat and sent Old Thom falling to the deck with a bump.

The creature’s mouth gaped open and a deafening roar issued forth.

Standing on the bow of their ship, the Strombolians not rowing stepped back in fear as the giant sea serpent turned toward them. Their archers let fly with a volley of arrows, but they simply bounced like pine needles from the thick hide. Corag raised itself out of the water in anger, towering hundreds of feet over the surface of the sea. Before the great creature, the ship seemed nothing more than a toy.

The leader of the Strombolians let out a cry for another volley of arrows, but it was too late. Corag slammed into the ship with its full might, splintering it like matchwood and spilling the occupants into the water, screaming as they fell.

It turned and surged toward the wreck, its mouth wide open, hundreds of gallons of water pouring in, and along with it, hundreds of dark Strombolians. They screamed in terror as the giant mouth closed and the giant throat gulped them down.

Fear seized Marcus as he watched Corag turn from the empty wreckage and fix its gaze upon their small boat.

“He’s coming for us!” screamed Toby. “What can we do? Sail, Thom! Sail!”

Corag began to power through the water toward them, its black eyes fixed on the boat. A great bow wave pushed before it that towered above the little boat. Marcus stood to his feet and held the stone firm in his hand—it glowed like fire. All at once, he knew what to do.

Corag reared from the sea, looming above them. It opened its mouth and let forth another deafening roar. Marcus uttered three words in an ancient language and then hurled the stone with all his power at Corag. The stone glowed like a bright meteor sweeping through the air, and it hit well inside Corag’s cavernous mouth. As it struck it exploded in a brilliant red ball of light, making Marcus and the others avert their eyes.

Corag reared back, its eyes now seeming to glow red. It closed its mouth and then slowly tumbled sideways, slamming into the sea, creating a vast wall of water and a roaring splash. With that, it disappeared below the foaming surface.

Their small boat was flung around for a few minutes on top of the great wave until eventually all became still again. There was no sign of Corag and no sign of the dark ship.

“Well I’ll be blowed,” said Thom, sitting up and rubbing the bump on his head. “That was an exciting night.”

“I think I understand,” said Marcus, turning to look at the group.

“Understand what?” asked Toby.

“Why Falzar insisted for us to come here. He knew. He knew everything. Don’t you see? He knew the Strombolians had this great ship. This is what Gazhul was planning to use to launch his attack on Lipari and escape from the great fog. Gazhul sent it to get us, and Falzar must have known we could never have beaten it.”

“And we didn’t,” Erik huffed. “I’d say it was Corag that beat it.”

“Exactly! Falzar knew the only way to destroy the ship was to invoke the wrath of Corag, and to use us as bait to bring them to the great abyss.”

“Well that’ll be a big hole in Gazhul’s plans,” Old Thom laughed.

“If Gazhul was mad before, now he’ll be furious,” said Toby.

“No. That’s the point. Gazhul can never have imagined we could destroy his ship. He could never guess they haven’t killed us all. He doesn’t care whether or not the stone is lost because he thinks he’ll lead his army to Lipari and take the island by force—but he didn’t count on Corag. At best, he thinks he has both the stone and the dagger, and at worst, both are lost in the sea. Anyway, he thinks we are all dead for sure.”

“So what do we do now?” asked Old Thom. “You know me. I’m happy to sail anywhere.”

“I’m still a little confused,” said Toby as he looked between Marcus and Thom.

“I understand,” said Erik, nodding slowly. “We have this one chance to take the dagger to Gazhul and stop him whilst he revels in his premature victory.”

“We strike to Stromboli whilst we have the element of surprise,” said Marcus with a glimmer in his eye. “He will be overconfident and preparing his invasion. If we reach there by darkness, we can approach unseen.”

Old Thom looked up at the northern sky. It was already shrouded in a great blackness coming from the direction of Stromboli. The blackness now stretched across all of the islands, casting them in semi darkness.

“I don’t think we need to wait for nighttime for the darkness to be there,” said Old Thom. “This is an evil indeed. His reach is long and powerful. We need to stop him now or never.”

“Then sail, Thom,” said Marcus, hanging onto the mast, a new hope in his heart. “Let’s set upon Stromboli and take the fight to Gazhul. This is the end of our running away. We sail to fight and to kill him in his lair.”

Marcus pulled out the dagger of Serbulus and held it aloft—it seemed to glow in his hands. At these words, that new hope spread across them all. Marcus seemed to now radiate strength in his leadership. For the first time, they started to believe they could really win. Old Thom turned the boat, and with a strong wind at their back, they headed north past the coast of Lipari and out across the sea to Panarea—the last post before the straight sail to Stromboli.

STROMBOLI

The sky had turned completely black by the time they sailed to within reach of the coast of Panarea. The darkness seemed to weigh on them like a heavy velvet blanket. The stench of sulfur was thick and the air tasted of foul, bitter smoke. As they sailed past the rugged coast, Marcus looked sadly at the burned out shells of the houses that had once stood there. No longer the bright white dwellings where Dario and the others had lived, but now burned out ghosts. He thought of Dario and then remembered James and his heart grew heavy again.

The boat crept ever northward and soon they turned around the most northerly point of the headland, bringing them in clear sight of the great black volcano. Plumes of acrid smoke belched from its summit. Flares of bright red lava streaked into the sky, landing back on the great rocky sides. Marcus's eyes fell upon the black island and he suddenly felt giddy. His heart began to feel heavy and images of the dark, evil fortress filled his mind. He dug his nails deep into the palms of his hands and fought hard against the nausea-inducing images.

"Are you all right?" said Toby quietly to him. "Is it the power of volcano again?"

Marcus closed his eyes tightly. "This is it, Toby. The vision of all my nightmares is now real. He's preparing for his final assault from within his dark fortress. I'm so scared. I'm so scared." He breathed deeply as he held to the side of the boat for balance.

"I'm scared too, my friend," said Toby, reaching for Marcus's arm. He grabbed it and squeezed it reassuringly. "But I just know we'll come through this."

Search inside and find your strength. I believe you can win, Marcus. We have surprise on our side, and above all, we fight for what is right.”

Old Thom guided the boat ever northward. Pippin had now stopped wagging his tail and was cowering on the bottom of the boat. Even he was afraid of the evil place.

“Look here,” said Old Thom, pointing east and then tracing a line west. “This is known by the fishermen as *The Line of Fear*. There’s not many has ever sailed north of here and come back to tell the tale. Once we cross, we’re within his evil realm.”

They all watched solemnly as the small boat traversed the line, no one daring to breathe. In moments, they had crossed and were within the dominion of Gazhul. The sky had become totally black, obliterating the stars. The only light emanated from the lava of the volcano, bathing them in an eerie red-orange glow.

The small boat headed straight toward the ominous black shadow that towered above them. On the wind they could hear the slow rhythmic beating of the drums and the low chanting of voices. Each moment, fear closed its grip on them. Eventually, Thom steered the boat in close to the rugged black coastline and guided them around to the north of Stromboli.

The island was bleak. Huge jagged black lava rocks fell to meet the sea, and nothing grew upon the foul earth. It seemed to suck the very spirit from them as they gazed upon it.

“There’s a good spot,” said Old Thom, pointing, as they turned into a secluded cove. “It looks like the only shallow cove so far and seems the only place as I can set you down safely.”

He pushed the tiller and the boat crept across the black water, coming to rest close to some low rocks. The lava boulders were just the right height to stage their landing, and there appeared to be no one in the bay. As the boat bobbed in the water next to the rocks, they could hear clearly now the distant low beating of the drums of war and the haunting chant of the Strombolians. It filled them all with dread. Only Old Thom seemed to remain calm.

“Well, lads. This is about as good as I can do,” he said as the boat gently nudged the rocks. “Best be quick. They’ll soon realize the ship isn’t comin’ back and it won’t take ’em long to reckon we’re here. Be brave and do the best job you can. Everyone is counting on you.”

“I’m so scared,” admitted Toby again as he stepped from the boat, crouching low. “The hag, the Nargs and the ghosts were bad. Even the giant insect, but something of this place makes me terrified. You can just feel the evil here.”

"I know. I can feel it, too," said Marcus, placing a comforting hand on Toby's shoulder. "This is the last part of journey. We must do what we came here to do." He stepped from the boat, gripping his sword tight, his stomach doing somersaults.

"Well, Toby. Even I am afraid of this place," admitted Erik as he jumped from the boat and landed square on the shore, his axe held firm, the blade glowing in the low red light. "Anyone would be a fool not to be. This is the nest of evil, and anyone fool enough to enter into this lair must know what awaits him."

Pippin jumped from the boat and onto the rocks, wagging his tail at Marcus. Marcus turned and collected him in his arms.

"Not this time," he said as he placed him back in the boat. "You should stay here with Old Thom where you'll be safe. I don't think you can help us, my little friend, not with what we need to do. We need to be ready to escape if this all goes wrong, so I want you on the boat."

Pippin lowered his head and whimpered as Marcus handed him to Old Thom, who collected him in his arms and gave him a small pat on the head.

"Don't you worry," said Old Thom, puffing on his pipe and winking. "I'll be here waiting with little Pippin. Soon as you say, I'll get us away from here."

Marcus smiled at Thom and then checked under his shirt for the dagger. It was safely wedged into his belt. He sighed deeply and then turned to Toby and Erik.

"Right. The map shows that somewhere over that rise should be a path that will lead us to the fortress. It looks as if it passes over some kind of bridge across a lava flow, and onto what looks like an island."

"We need to be careful: there could be guards everywhere," said Toby, looking around nervously. "I'm just not sure how we'll get there without being caught. We can't fight every Strombolian on the island. It must be full of them."

"I don't get that feeling," said Marcus as he started to climb from the bay over the jagged black rocks. "I think they have become overconfident and we have the element of surprise. I doubt they will believe we destroyed their ship."

"I hope so," said Erik as he took the rear position. "The fewer Strombolians I have to deal with, the better. It's not their swords that scare me so much as their smell."

They carried on up the steep jagged cliff toward the rise above them. The landscape was scorched and nothing grew against the dark lava. Cautiously they came to the top of the rise, Marcus peeping over first to ensure there were no guards.

From the top he could see up toward the north side of the island, which curved ahead of them. He could make out the bright orange lava flow that streamed down from the cone high above. It divided for a time, he noticed, and reformed again some way lower down the island. Between the divided rivers of lava was an island of flat black rock. There, against the red glow of the sky, towering above the island stood the monolithic fortress. It seemed to grow from the very rock, reaching up into the black sky.

The sides of the fortress surged hundreds of feet from the ground, made of great blocks of lava capped by great spikes of sharp, black iron pitted by the sulfurous air. There were no windows that could be seen, only a single colossal riveted iron door on the south side. One great tower rose from the centre of the mass, topped by a great black flag that lifted on the breeze. Emblazoned upon it was the red shape of the volcano—the war banner of Gazhul.

Just below them ran a wide black path that curved down to a dock at the shore, a great square construction that plunged into the sea. It was obvious the dock was where they had built and launched the great warship.

Marcus could see only a few guards holding flaming torches as they walked up and down on the dock. They seemed to be looking seaward for the return of the great ship.

“Quickly, the path is clear. Let’s move,” whispered Marcus as he scrambled over the ridge. The rest of the group followed him down toward the path, both moving cautiously, staying low to the ground. They then crossed an ancient flat lava flow that brought them to a clump of huge, black boulders next to the path.

“It seems too easy,” panted Toby as he stayed close the rock, looking up and down the empty path. “I thought there would be guards everywhere, overconfident ones, but there anyway.”

“Don’t speak too soon,” warned Erik as he crept forward. “Evil creatures could be lurking around any corner. So have your swords ready.”

They snuck along the path and followed it around two sweeping curves before climbing another rise. Again, Marcus cautiously looked over the top and this time he could see the bright red lava much closer, glowing against the blackness of the earth and sky. Great clouds of steam rose from its bubbling surface.

Where the lava passed nearest to them, Marcus could see a great arched bridge made of the smooth cooled lava stone. It spanned the boiling river of lava. The only way on or off the island, it was also the only means of getting to the fortress. To Marcus’s amazement, there seemed to be no guards on the road or on the bridge.

“Well, it seems a pretty open approach,” he said suspiciously. “I can see where we need to go. We need to cross a bridge and then it’s an open run to the fortress. But it’s strange: there are just no guards on the path.”

“Is there any way we can make a surprise approach to the fortress?” asked Toby.

“Seems not,” said Marcus as he looked between the bridge and the great iron door of the fortress. “But I think they really have overestimated in their plans and just expected their ship would have taken us. I can see a few guards up near the door. Other than that, it seems clear.”

“So where are they all?” asked Toby.

“I think they may be making final preparations in the fortress,” said Marcus, “which unfortunately is where we need to go.”

“How will we get in?” asked Erik. “We can’t just walk up and knock. And I’m sure those guards won’t just wave us in.”

“My plan hadn’t got that far,” admitted Marcus, rubbing his chin. “I just hope I can think of something when we get there.”

“Well that’s brilliant,” said Erik. He then walked over the rise, crouching low to the ground. “I can’t stand to stay on this island any longer than I have to, with the smell of this choking air and the sound of those infernal drums. I can promise one thing: if we ever get into the fortress, the first Strombolian to die will be the one with the drum.”

They moved quickly down the path, taking great care to be silent. They followed the curves of the path, keeping as low as possible and hugging close to any rocks that afforded them cover.

After a while they turned a last corner and just in front of them arched the great stone bridge. It looped high above the river of lava, its underside glowing a deep orange red.

“I can feel the heat from here,” said Toby, wiping his brow. “This really feels like hell. Only something so evil would live in such a place.”

Marcus looked at the bridge and could see it was high and open, within direct line of sight of the guards at the fortress.

“We need to get across fast. If not, for sure the guards at the fortress will see us. Once we’re on the other side we can hide near those boulders.”

They jogged down to the base of the bridge and once they confirmed there were no guards, they began to climb the steps of the high arch. They tried to stay as low as possible to avoid being seen, cautiously looking for movement. When they reached the top, they could see down to the other side, and to their horror two guards were standing with their backs to them at the bottom of the bridge.

The guards held long jagged spears and were meant to guard the bridge, but, fortunately, they seemed to be engrossed in a heated discussion.

Toby lay flat on the bridge trembling with fear. "What now? What now? I was sure the way was clear. How do we get past them?"

"Well, did you really expect there'd be no one?" whispered Erik. "Leave this to me, boy, and I'll show you how a Viking gets past them."

Marcus and Toby watched as Erik snuck down the descent of the bridge. He was holding his axe low to the ground as he crept to within striking distance of the two guards. "Oh, no," whispered Toby, his voice quavering. "There'll be such a noise the guards at the fortress are bound to hear. Then what will we do?"

Erik was almost upon them, but just before he could deliver a blow, both of the creatures suddenly stopped bickering and turned. Their red eyes glowed with surprise.

Erik stood like a thief caught in the act. He stared straight back at them, motionless.

Marcus immediately understood he needed to help. He stood and held up his hand, concentrating hard. He waved his hand at the guards, and to his relief, their spears were magically flung away from them, making them look in amazement.

Erik didn't need a second invitation. He used the moment of surprise and lunged forward. With one mighty swoop of his great axe, he cleaved the heads from both the creatures. Their bodies stood motionless for a second as their heads rolled to the ground, startled expressions still on the faces. Then the knees of the guards' bodies buckled and the corpses tumbled to the ground.

"Fantastic!" said Toby as he scurried down to join Erik. "That was a great shot. Two heads with one swing and not a single noise."

"Magic boy here may have some tricks," beamed Erik as he leaned on his axe. "But that was some old-fashioned Viking magic."

"You still needed my magic to help," said Marcus.

"I needed nothing from you," sneered Erik. "All I need is my trusty axe and my Viking spirit."

"We need to keep moving," said Marcus as he passed between Erik and Toby. "Let's gloat when you take off Gazhul's head."

Erik sneered as he and Toby crept low, following Marcus along the winding path. They were now on Gazhul's island at the foot of his great fortress and all knew there could be no greater danger. They slipped silently along the path and came to a large rock from where they could see the entrance to the fortress.

There was the black iron door that stood some fifty feet high, resting on great bronze hinges. Emblazoned upon the door, in red, was the mark of Gazhul. Standing at the foot of the door were at least ten guards, all heavily armed and looking down the path.

"We'll never fight our way in," said Toby in a defeated voice as he slumped back against a rock. "We've come this far and now it seems impossible to get in. We'll be their prisoners before we can even reach the door."

"Hope is never lost," said Marcus as an idea flashed in his mind. "Prisoners! Wait here. I'll be back in a moment."

Marcus turned and quickly disappeared back down the path toward the bridge.

"So what's the magic fish boy doing now?" asked Erik as he looked back toward the guards.

"You know, he is trying his best," whispered Toby. "He got us this far and he has helped you. Why can't you just admit we're on the same side?"

Erik looked at Toby and shrugged. "Maybe fish boy did some magic and had some luck. And maybe he did help me...but I'm Erik."

After a few minutes, Marcus came creeping back up the path. He was carrying a large bundle of clothes and two long black spears. As he approached, Erik could see he was carrying the blood soaked robes of the Strombolian guards.

"Erik, put this on," said Marcus, offering him one of the guards' black hooded robes. "I think it's your size—oaf size."

Erik sneered and took the robe. He then dropped it immediately, shielding his face with his hand.

"But it has such a bad smell," he said with a grimace on his face. "I think I'll be sick if I wear it. It's so disgusting."

Marcus had already put on the other dark robe and was securing the belt around his waist. He too was grimacing at the foul smell. "We have no choice. It's the bad smell...or the painful death."

Erik shook his head and picked up the robe again. "But we have only two robes: one for you and one for me. What should Toby do? Wait here?"

"No," said Marcus as he saw the hope in Toby's face. "I'm sorry, my friend, but you need to be our prisoner. We need to bluff our way into the fortress."

"But this is madness! They'll know we're impostors straight away," protested Erik. "I don't think a black robe and a spear will convince anyone we're Strombolians. We'll be slaughtered instantly."

Marcus looked around and picked up a handful of the thick, black dust from the ground. He then scraped some of the black, sticky blood from his robe and mixed it into a paste.

“Rub this all over your face,” he said, offering some to Erik. “It’ll help us look like these evil creatures. If we stoop low and keep the hood up, it might just work.”

“This is so disgusting,” moaned Erik as he took some of the paste.

They daubed the black ash down their faces and on their hands until they were completely covered. Then they raised the hoods of the robes and bowed their heads.

“So do we look good enough to fool the guards?” asked Marcus of Toby.

“I’m actually very impressed by how you look. I might almost imagine you actually are Strombolians. You may look like them, but you can’t speak their language. That’s the big problem.”

“I can speak enough,” said Marcus, looking down, embarrassed to admit it.

“What? You can speak their evil tongue?” asked Erik. “It’s a language only of vile creatures.”

“It’s been in my dreams for a long time. I’ve always been able to understand it. I don’t know how and I don’t know why, but that’s how it is.”

Erik looked at Toby and then at Marcus. “Maybe then there is something dark in your heart. Maybe you are not who you think you are.”

“Maybe,” replied Marcus, staring straight into his eyes. “There are many things I have realized I don’t know about myself. All I can hope is I live long enough to discover the truth.”

They stood either side of Toby and began to march him along the path toward the great door, their heads bowed. They trembled as they walked, their breath fast and shallow. Erik had tucked his axe under the robes and every second step he reached under to feel it and reassure himself.

One of the guards, a rather fat Strombolian, watched them approach. Its red eyes glowed and it hissed a low hiss as it gnawed on the rotten carcass of a rat, the juice running down its chin. It spat out a bone and handed the rat to one of the lesser Strombolians.

“So what have you two found?” it spat in its vile language as it stepped toward them.

“We have a prisoner,” hissed Marcus, hoping his pronunciation was passable, “we caught down by the dock in a small boat. He was trying to creep onto the island when we found him. We questioned him, and he said he was just a poor fisherman who had become lost.”

The fat guard strutted over to them with its big belly pushed out, making both Erik and Marcus bow even lower. Toby drew back, repulsed by the creature as it grabbed him by the face with its long fingers.

“Oh a scrawny little one at that,” it hissed as it squeezed Toby’s face harder. “He’ll hardly make a morsel for our master.”

The other guards started to laugh and cackle, which pleased the fat guard. Marcus pretended to laugh and he nudged Erik, who then joined in.

“So where do we take the prisoner?” asked Marcus after a moment, hoping they would direct him inside the fortress.

The fat guard came closer and pulled out a long black dagger. It lifted it and pressed it firmly against Toby’s throat.

“Maybe we should just slit his throat and eat him ourselves,” it sneered, looking at the other guards, who were licking their lips. “He may be scrawny, but he certainly looks tasty. I wonder if he’ll be as nice as those from Salina.”

“Oh yessss,” hissed one of the other guards. “Cut his throat and let him bleed. It’s so long since I’ve had man flesh.”

“But catch the blood, it’s my favorite drink,” cackled another.

Toby started to panic as the knife pressed hard against his throat. He pushed backward, pulling away from Erik.

Marcus had to think fast to save his friend from certain death and not give away their plan. There were far too many guards to fight.

“Better we don’t! We were told we should be on the lookout for this one. Seems he might be one of the enemy accompanying him of the prophecy. And we all know that means trouble.”

The fat guard pulled his knife away immediately and looked around nervously. They had all been told to keep an eye out for any people coming to the fortress. They had been warned that Falzar was helping *him* of the prophecy. All Strombolians had a fear of the Ancients, for the legend of their power had been passed down since the last great battle.

“Really? This could be one of them?” the guard said, stepping back, afraid. “There’s been talk that they might come here. Others have said the ship will have taken them by now. But who can ever tell, eh? Who knows how powerful they really are.”

“Maybe it’s better we get him locked up and talk to the big boss,” suggested Marcus. “Just in case he is one of them. He could do something strange at any moment.”

“Hmm. Maybe I might get great favor from taking him myself,” said the fat guard, rubbing its chin in thought. “Maybe Gazhul will honor me for this prize.”

“And if it is just an islander who drifted here?” goaded Marcus. “Maybe it *is* better that one of you takes him. I mean I certainly don’t want our master’s wrath if I waste his time. Yes. Better one of you risks saying this *could* be one of those of the prophecy.”

The fat guard backed away, reconsidering the situation carefully. “Gazhul does not think twice of tearing the head from Strombolians who displease him or waste his time. No. No, you’re right. He’s your prisoner. Better that you take him.” It beckoned to one of the other guards. “Take them to the dungeons. Get him locked up straight away. He’ll be safe in there ’til the master deals with him.”

“Best be on your guard,” said Marcus, turning to walk away. “He may not have been alone, and who knows, maybe the one of the prophecy is closer than we think.”

This sent waves of panic across the guards. They huddled close and raised their spears and swords, staring down the path. This made Marcus’s confidence grow. He could see they really were scared of him and the Ancients. His necklace became warm below his shirt and he started to feel strong.

“Better hurry!” ordered the guard as the great door clanged and then began to swing open with a loud creaking. “You won’t want to keep our master waiting. We’ll keep vigil down the path, just in case there are others. I can guarantee none of them will get past me!”

Beyond the doors opened a great torch-lit entrance hall. It was tall, arched and long. The far end was dark. Smaller corridors opened along its length and they too disappeared into darkness. Some of the openings had stairs leading up, and some had stairs leading down. Torchlight flickered beyond some of the openings. Halfway down, on the right, hung a set of wooden doors also some fifty feet high. Emblazoned upon the doors was the red outline of Stromboli. Marcus looked on, disgusted, as it seemed to have been drawn in blood. From beyond the doors came the loud sound of the rhythmic drums and the low chanting.

Marcus and Erik followed the guard into the hall, looking across at the great doors. They then turned left and began to escort Toby down a staircase to the dungeons below. The air became colder and damper as they descended the winding stone stairs, the sound of the drums fading.

At the bottom they found a dimly lit corridor lined with iron cell doors. All of the doors stood wide open, and this filled Marcus with dread, for he knew there were no longer any prisoners there.

“You can put him in that cell,” said the guard roughly. Then it uttered a long gurgling sound, its red eyes wide and staring. At once, the guard fell to its knees,

a pained expression on its face. Then it flopped flat on its face—dead. Marcus could see Erik had plunged one of the black daggers deep into its back.

“Well we’re in,” said Erik coldly, pulling out his axe from under his robe. “That’s one down and only a few hundred more to go. I hope they all die that easily.”

Marcus happily discarded his robes and kicked them away; he was glad to get rid of the smell, most of it, anyway, for some was bound to linger. He then pulled his sword from where he had strapped it to his leg.

“I guess Gazhul must be up there, behind those great doors,” said Marcus, glancing back toward the stairs. “There’s nothing more to do than go and take the fight straight to him.”

“I thought they were going to slit my throat,” said Toby, rubbing his neck. “Was the fat guard saying he wanted to eat me? If we survive this, I’m going to slit *his* throat.”

“I think we’re too late to save any of the colonists,” said Marcus as he looked again at the open cell doors, his heart heavy. “I think Gazhul has killed them all by now. We are too late.”

“Then all that is left for us to do is avenge them,” said Erik as he started back toward the stairs, swinging his great axe. “Let’s go and push that dagger as deep as possible into his evil back. The plan is simple. We go in and I start hacking at Strombolians. You get to him as fast as you can and use the dagger.”

“And then we all run away?” said Toby, hopefully. “We get on Old Thom’s boat and sail from the island. Get to Lipari and have a hero’s welcome with a great feast?”

“Let’s hope so,” said Erik, placing a hand on Toby’s shoulder and offering a faint smile. “All that magic boy has to do is drive the dagger home.”

“Do you still have the dagger?” asked Toby. “You can avenge her and James.”

Marcus lifted his shirt and showed the brilliant white dagger; it seemed to glow with pureness, making Toby almost gasp. It was as if the dagger had become brighter as it got closer to the evil. Marcus dropped his shirt back over it and looked at Toby’s terrified face. He smiled nervously and then embraced Toby.

“I guess now this is it,” said Marcus as he held his friend. “We can’t go any further on this adventure. We’ve reached the end.”

“Then we better do our best,” said Toby, smiling weakly. “There are many people expecting great things from us. Let’s not disappoint them.”

They turned and followed Erik up the staircase toward the great hall. It was hard to see in the dim torchlight, and a few times they slipped on the steps. As they reached the top, they could once again hear the continuous beating of the

drums and the low chanting. The tempo was now quicker and the chanting had started to rise, as if the Stromboliens were expecting something to happen.

The young men held their weapons ready as they crept across the huge entrance hall, the great door to their right still open and the guards beyond still staring down the path. They inched toward the great wooden doors and then stood before them, their hearts racing and the drums beating ever faster.

Marcus could hear the power of the voices beyond the doors and knew there were hundreds of enemy minions inside. He stood tall with strength in his heart and all fear suddenly left him. The pendant weighed heavy around his neck and at once it felt warm. He breathed deeply and reached below his shirt, pulling out the pendant. It glowed brightly in the darkness.

"This is our moment!" he said in a powerful voice, and then he turned to the doors, holding up the glowing pendant. "In the name of the Ancients, I command you to open!"

There was a deep clunk, and then with a loud creaking the great doors began to swing slowly inward. Immediately, the great drums stopped and the voices ceased. The hall before them was plunged into near darkness and nothing from within stirred.

THE BATTLE WITH GAZHUL

As they peered into the darkness, all they could see was the deep red glow of the lava at the far end of the hall casting an eerie light upon the high ceiling. They cautiously advanced into the gloom. Then, with a loud bang, the doors suddenly slammed closed behind them. Through the blackness boomed a great deep voice—its sound of the darkest evil.

“So at last you come to fulfill the prophecy!”

Marcus’s heart froze with fear.

Then came a great roaring laugh that sent them reeling to the floor. All of a sudden, hundreds of torches burst into flames around the great hall. A deafening chorus of cheers and clattering of weapons burst into the air.

Marcus sat up and looked around the great hall. Lining it, all the way from the door to the great altar, were hundreds of Strombolians. Their red eyes glowed like hot coals as they stood with swords raised.

There, crouching before the altar, was the immense shape of Gazhul. He was kneeling over what seemed to be three bodies laid at his feet. He reached down with a giant, claw-like hand and picked one up. To the surprise of Marcus, who thought they must be dead, the person began to scream wildly as Gazhul brought the face to his great mouth. Then, with a horrific sound of screaming and crunching, he sucked the blood through the eyes of his victim. When he was finished he simply discarded the body over the edge of the raised platform into the lava below.

Laughing, he turned and stood to his full height, which brought greater terror to his would-be attackers. He was some twenty feet tall, a huge demonic head on a great muscular body. His face was long like a dog's and blood dripped from sharp white fangs. His legs were strong and powerful, like those of some giant horse. And behind him trailed a long black snake-like tail. In the flickering torchlight, his narrow evil eyes burned yellow.

"You are too late, Marcus. You have failed your quest. Now you, your friends, and your lover will all die together—as I have planned. Did you really believe it would be so easy to enter my domain? Could you not smell my trap? Young fool."

Gazhul stepped forward, rolling over one of the bodies that lay close to his feet. As the face came into the light, Marcus could see it was Sabrina. She laid half unconscious, blood running from a cut on her forehead.

Again the Strombolians released terrifying war cries and howls.

"We're doomed," said Toby, his sword visibly shaking.

"I just need enough time to get to him," said Marcus, feeling his belt for the dagger. "If you can distract him then I can maybe..." His eyes widened and his heart raced with panic. He could feel his belt was empty.

Another great laugh boomed from the mouth of Gazhul as he stepped down to the floor of the great hall, making the very rock shake.

"You fool! Did you really think you would just come in here and I'd let you plunge this dagger into my back?" Gazhul laughed, opening his hand, showing the glowing white dagger. "You had much to learn from that old fool Falzar. All is lost, and the greatest irony will be that *he* of the prophecy was slain by the weapon he brought to kill me with."

The Strombolians danced around excitedly, laughing and gnashing their teeth. Marcus looked back toward the great wooden doors to see if they could still escape, but the Strombolians had closed in behind them. There, standing amongst them with a broad smile on his face and holding a short sword, was an evil figure they all knew.

"Gaut," said Marcus.

"That evil rat!" cursed Toby. "What a traitor."

Gazhul menacingly moved closer, and with one of his great hands, signaled to the Strombolians to move in for the kill.

"Your time is over, apprentice. Now you will all taste death, and I will stride out into the world and claim it as my own. These islands are the last barriers to my never-ending dark reign. Once Lipari falls to my great army, I will be free to

take back what is rightfully mine. Now that you, the last of the Ancients, will fall, a new order will come to the world.”

Marcus looked around at the Strombolians and noticed they did not just surge forward as he had expected. Something was making them cautious, despite Gazhul’s forceful command. His mind was suddenly drawn to the weight around his neck—it was the glowing pendant. It shone in the darkness. The fear of the sign of the Ancients seemed to be holding them back.

Gazhul stepped forward again, making the floor shake. He released another deafening roar and this made the Strombolians bold again. They gnashed their teeth and started to close in. Marcus, Toby and Erik raised their weapons and braced themselves for the onslaught. Marcus reached for the pendant, holding it high. Then he uttered a single word.

“Falzar!”

Suddenly there was blinding light and a blast that ripped through the great hall, sending many Strombolians spilling and screaming with fear. Even Gazhul stepped back from the blast, shielding his eyes.

Marcus turned from the blinding light. As it died he looked back. There, standing in the centre of the hall, was Falzar, his hands raised.

Falzar turned to Marcus and smiled.

“Falzar!” said Marcus with great relief. “I knew you’d come! I just knew it!”

“This is your fight, Marcus. Be strong,” said Falzar as he smiled at him again and winked. “Be who you are, the last heir of the Ancients. Make your name and claim victory in the name of the great northern wizards. I am merely here for moral support and to show that this *old fool* is not finished yet.”

In rage, Gazhul rolled back his head and let forth a great roar that shook the foundations of the fortress. The Strombolians returned to their feet and cheered as they flooded like a swollen river toward the four figures.

Falzar held out his hands and a blast of white lightning erupted from his fingers, carving through swathes of Strombolians, blasting them backward. Many fell to the floor—instantly dead.

Erik drew strength from Falzar’s attack and began to unleash the might of his axe, cleaving dark creature after dark creature, black blood spilling onto the floor.

Toby stabbed one of the creatures through the chest and it wailed as it thrashed to the floor. Then the sword of another clashed with Toby’s as he was pushed backward.

Marcus stabbed, lunged, and caught one of the creatures in the leg, but too many were about him. He closed his eyes and a blast issued from him, sending dozens of the creatures flying through the air. His magic began to flow stronger.

Falzar unleashed another great blast from his hands and more of the creatures were slammed backward—dead. Others turned and ran in panic as the wizard fixed his gaze upon them.

Suddenly Gazhul rose tall, and from his yellow eyes a stream of light exploded. The blast struck Falzar full in the chest, lifting him from his feet and sending him flying across the hall. Falzar slammed into a wall and his body slumped to the floor.

“No!” Toby screamed.

Then Toby released a higher scream of terrible pain as a short blade was plunged deep into his shoulder. Holding the blade was Gaut, with a smile on his face.

“Got ya,” he cackled, as Toby fell. “Your days are over, my little friend. Ever since I saw you and your companion, I wanted to plunge a blade deep into your hearts to serve my master. Now we will seal our victory and a new age of darkness will come.” He twisted the blade, making Toby scream again with agony. “Killing you will be my pleasure. Just like killing all of those on Panarea and those worms on Salina.”

Saliva ran from Gaut’s grinning mouth as he applied pressure to the blade.

“And killing you will be my pleasure, you traitor,” said Erik from behind Gaut.

Gaut turned, but never saw the axe blade that bit through his neck, sending his head spilling to the floor.

Erik pulled Toby up and yanked the dagger from his shoulder, throwing it to the floor.

“Now we’re a team,” said Erik as he spun his axe.

“Now we’re a team,” said Toby, smiling. Then he grimaced with pain, holding his injured shoulder.

The Strombolians had regrouped and the next wave surged forth toward their enemy. The three heroes stood back-to-back, ready to clash with the dark warriors. Again, Marcus unleashed a devastating blast and the Strombolians were beaten back, many slain by the power of it. But it was to no avail, as Gazhul was upon them with all his might.

Erik turned and raised his axe, but the great hand of Gazhul slammed him to the floor. His neck twisted violently with a sickening crack.

Marcus looked down. Blood seeped from Erik’s ears as his body twitched. Erik stared up at Marcus, his trembling hand desperately trying to reach his axe.

“Please! My axe. I want my...right to enter...Valhalla.”

Marcus kicked Erik's axe toward him and Erik closed his hand around the shaft.

"Win! Win, Marcus. For...you really are...the one of the...prophecy," strained Erik from bleeding lips. "I have done all...I can in this fight. And now...I go to Valhalla to...join my kindred. Take Sabrina...for you have earned her love better than I ever could. Above all...tell my father I died like...a warrior."

Suddenly one of Gazhul's mighty legs came down with a crunch, taking Erik's life. The force sent Marcus spilling backward. Gazhul turned, laughing as he bore down upon Marcus. He slammed him to the stone floor, and for a brief moment Marcus lost consciousness.

As Marcus came to, he felt he was hanging upside down by one leg, Gazhul's giant hand around his ankle. He could see Gazhul was carrying him toward the far end of the hall. He looked back and saw Toby still battling with dark figures, but eventually they overpowered him.

Gazhul dumped Marcus onto the altar, knocking the wind from him. Then a huge hand pinned him against the stone. Gazhul stood over him with a wide smile on his evil face.

As Marcus felt the crushing hand of Gazhul across his throat, he could see in his other hand he held the dagger of Serbulus. Its razor white tip gleamed above him in the darkness. At once all his hopes faded.

"And so it comes to pass: the Ancients are no more and I am free to rule the world. The one of the prophecy has lost, and the last hope of man has slipped away into the dark songs my servants will sing. Indeed, for the dark ones this is a great day."

Marcus looked up, hardly able to breathe, knowing death was certain. But something in his spirit begged him to hold on for a few more seconds. As his vision blurred, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. Something white flashed across the hall at great speed toward Gazhul.

Gazhul turned in the instant the white creature leapt across the altar. Pippin barked as he sunk his teeth deep into the hand of Gazhul. The sharp, sudden pain made Gazhul drop the dagger. Gazhul stared in amazement at the little dog. Then with great anger he swatted him from the altar. Pippin yelped as he slid across the floor and tumbled over the edge of the abyss to the lava below.

Gazhul turned back to Marcus and raised a giant closed fist over his head, ready to bring it down and crush his skull. The giant growled, his great sharp teeth glistened with saliva and his yellow eyes burned with rage.

"This is your end!" he boomed.

Then he gasped.

A look of great pain slowly spread across his face. He released his crushing grip on Marcus and staggered sideways, his arms desperately flailing as if to grab something from his back.

Marcus sat up and looked beyond Gazhul. To his amazement, standing behind the monster, her eyes wide and staring, was Sabrina.

As Gazhul turned to look at her, Marcus saw that she had plunged the dagger of Serbulus deep into his back. From within his dark hide the dagger glowed brilliant white. From the wound where the blade lay buried in his back, a white light was spreading rapidly across Gazhul's foul skin, making it boil and blister.

Gazhul staggered backward gasping, desperately reaching to remove the stinging dagger. His huge head thrashed from side to side, issuing a grotesque scream. He lurched backward and his great feet skittered close to the edge of the drop above the lava. He released one last great scream that made the Strombolians cower in fear. Then he pointed at Marcus, his evil yellow eyes wide and burning.

"I will return and I will come for you! I will come for you!"

Then, his face frozen, his glowing white hulk tumbled backward over the edge of the abyss as he continued to scream. Gazhul plunged hundreds of feet to the lava below. As his body struck the lava, there was a great explosion that gushed lava in a great ball upward. At once, the ground began to shake violently.

As the Strombolians looked up out of the great round window above the altar, the volcano began to erupt—violently. They dropped their weapons and pointed, screaming, as huge jets of lava exploded from the volcano. With the violent earth tremors, huge pieces of the ceiling began to come loose and fall, crushing many fleeing Strombolians.

"We need to run!" shouted Marcus to Sabrina above the deafening noise. "This place is going to explode and we don't want to be here when it does! Quickly! Come this way!"

She seemed to awake from her trance. "Wait!" she shouted as she ran to the edge of the abyss. "I can hear something. Let me check."

Marcus followed her to the edge and peered over. There, just a few feet below the lip of the floor, jutted a small ledge, upon which Pippin had fallen. He was whining, but still wagging his tail at them. Marcus reached down and grabbed him. As he did, he could see that the level of lava was rising fast. He tucked Pippin under his arm and grabbed Sabrina by the hand, dragging her to where Toby was standing over Falzar.

Falzar sat rubbing his head and staring up at the three of them; he seemed a little dazed.

“Did I miss something?” he asked as he stood to his feet, brushing black dust from his cloak. “What happened to Gazhul?”

“I’ll tell you everything later. Let’s go!” urged Marcus as he looked up at the roof of the great hall. It was breaking apart quickly as the earthquake rocked the fortress. “I think the whole island’s going to explode. We need to get back to the boat before it does.”

They staggered across the great hall toward the shaking wooden doors. Suddenly, with a great splintering crack, one of the doors came free from its hinges and began to tumble sideways. They all ran, screaming, as the great door slammed into the floor, the blast of wind knocking them from their feet.

“That was too close,” said Toby, helping Sabrina to her feet. “But at least the door’s open. Now’s our chance; let’s escape while we still can.”

“What about your parents? Where are they?” asked Marcus of Sabrina.

“It’s too late. They’re dead. I’m the last of the prisoners,” said Sabrina. “Everyone was killed by Gazhul.”

Marcus grabbed her hand and they ran through the great doorway of the hall and then sprinted past the iron doors of the entrance. Strombolians ran alongside them, now panicked at the loss of their leader and in great fear of the violent explosions.

As they left the fortress, Toby noticed the fat guard was standing in panic, too, trying to hiss orders at the fleeing Strombolians. As he ran past the creature, he gave a quick flick of his sword and sliced straight through its throat.

“But I won’t be eating you!” said Toby, watching the guard tumble to the floor.

They fled in terror down the path. The ground shook violently and great boulders began to rain down from the top of the volcano. Powerful explosions leapt from the ground as the burning boulders crashed down around them. Lava gushed up from the abyss and poured out across the floor of the fortress, consuming the altar and then the great wooden doors before spreading out into the entrance hall. The bodies of the fallen Strombolians ignited like matches on a fire.

Following the path, they ran as fast as they could up the bridge and down the other side. All around them Strombolians screamed as they looked back to the exploding volcano. As the last of the four stepped from the bridge, there was a great boom and the ground shook violently, sending them spilling. With a mighty crack, the bridge collapsed and fell to the lava below, hundreds of Strombolians meeting fiery deaths.

“Quickly! Quickly!” said Toby, struggling to his feet. “The whole island is blowing apart.”

They followed the path away from the collapsed bridge, running side by side with fleeing Strombolians. Burning rocks continued to rain from the sky, exploding as they struck the ground.

Marcus eventually stopped them. “This way! Get across to the ridge. On the other side Old Thom is waiting for us!”

They stopped and left the path, heading back across the old lava flow. Suddenly a giant rock slammed into the path behind them, knocking Strombolians to the ground. The force of the impact sent everyone sprawling. Sabrina screamed as Marcus took her hand and dragged her up the slope. Then, as he stood at the top of the ridge, he looked back toward the shore. He could see the Strombolians had unwisely fled to the dock and were now clearly panicking further, for there was no sign of the great ship as they seemed to have expected.

“They will pay a heavy price for the work of Corag,” said Falzar, smiling, as he followed Marcus over the ridge.

They cleared the ridge and scrambled down into the bay. Old Thom’s boat bobbed, a welcome sight. Rocks rained down into the water around it, sending plumes of foam into the air. Wizard, warriors and dog scrambled over the jagged black rocks, often stumbling, desperately trying not to fall.

“You lot took your time,” said Old Thom as he helped them on board. “Oh, and I might have expected to see you here, Falzar.”

Falzar smiled and simply pointed at the sails as he stepped into the boat.

“We can have sarcasm later. First we need to sail away from here before the island explodes,” he said calmly, taking a seat.

Fiery rocks streaked above their heads, leaving glowing trails in the sky. As they hit the water, they exploded in great balls of steam. The boat rocked violently as the waters boiled around it and the air resonated with the deafening booms of the volcano. And then, behind them, they could hear the wild screams of pursuing Strombolians.

Old Thom turned the boat and raised the mainsail as fast as he could. The wind was strong and the boat moved quickly out of the cove and away from the island.

Flumes of lava spewed from the exploding crater of the disintegrating volcano. It ebbed and flowed in great fiery rivers, turning the entire night sky orange.

Sabrina slumped to the bottom of the boat holding her head. Marcus grabbed Pippin and laid him next to her. Toby was crouched at the bow of the boat hold-

ing his shoulder; blood stained his shirt. He looked very white and seemed in great pain. The dagger of Gaut had bitten deep.

“Don’t worry about Toby,” said Falzar, following Marcus’s gaze. “I’ll fix him in a moment, once Thom gets us safely away from here.”

Marcus looked back toward Stromboli and could see the dock with its hundreds of stranded Strombolians. Huge glowing rocks rained down on them, blasting them into the sea. The lava river around the fortress consumed the entire island, completely covering the base of the black fortress. A great explosion suddenly leapt from the fortress and its high, black walls crumbled and folded. The mighty tower crashed to the lava below, the black flag instantly bursting into flames, destroying the mark of Gazhul. Then the remains of the fortress tumbled into the fiery river and were consumed.

At once, with an almighty boom, the volcano exploded, sending out a million bright red stars into the black sky. It blasted a shockwave that ripped across the island, killing everything.

“Brace yourselves!” shouted Old Thom, grabbing hold of the tiller tightly.

The blast hit the boat from behind, and with a great roar, sent it surging away from the island at high speed. The roaring wind flattened Old Thom to the bottom of the boat, pushing him on top of Falzar and Marcus.

From within the blast a deep dark voice could be heard.

“I will come back for you, Marcus!”

The hot winds of the blast passed over them.

Then the night fell silent.

A NEW BEGINNING

The dawn sky glowed red by the time they had sailed around the headland and entered the port of Lipari. A crowd had gathered on the wooden pontoon, and in silence stood watching the small boat with its bruised and battered occupants come alongside. At the front of the crowd stood Cornelius in his bright purple suit, his face drawn with concern.

Old Thom's boat had glided in across the tranquil waters, sending out small ripples that crossed the harbor. Softly it came to rest against its berth. Marcus looked up as he held Sabrina's hand firmly, and he could see Cornelius was now hopping from foot to foot.

"So what happened? What happened?" asked Cornelius, as he tied the boat off. "We saw the explosion of the volcano last night. Oh my! Oh my!"

Falzar stepped from the boat and raised his hands to calm the now chattering crowd. "The danger is passed. But many brave deeds have been done and many have not returned from this great adventure. It will be some time before we all may rejoice in this great victory."

Erik's father, who had been standing near the back of the crowd, removed his great horned helmet and slowly pushed through the crowd to stand before the boat.

"Then I gather my son will not be returning," he said in a strong voice as he looked into the boat. He then looked directly into Marcus's eyes. "Tell me one thing: did he die with honor like a great Viking?"

Marcus nodded. "Yes. Yes, he died with honor and courage, fighting the enemy." He then turned and looked at the crowd, toward the families of Niklas

and Jonas. "They all walked through a great darkness and served you well. They fought and died as brave men. The story of your sons will be sung in many songs, for many years."

Then Marcus turned back to Erik's father. "Your son fought greater than anyone I have heard of in stories, and he died with his axe in his hand. Many will tell great tales of Erik and the battle of Stromboli."

Erik's father placed a huge hand on Marcus's shoulder and bowed his head. "Then I am a happy man. I will honor my son and his friends, always. They have passed to Valhalla and they await me there. It will be a proud day when I meet them all again and we rejoice in this victory."

Marcus turned and looked into the crowd again. He could see James's mother. She was standing with her hands to her face and looking into the boat. A ghost passed across her face as she looked at Marcus and tears began to fall on her cheeks. Before Marcus could say anything, she turned and walked from the crowd.

"These are hard times," said Falzar, following Marcus's gaze. "They are hard for us all." He then looked at Sabrina, who was still sitting in the boat, sobbing at the loss of her friends and family. "Time will heal some of these wounds, but it will be a long and sad process. We must always remember and honor the dead, and make their sacrifices worthwhile by always thanking them for our freedom. Now the storm has passed and we need to rest. Not until our mourning is complete can we tell the tales that need to be told."

* * * *

It was some two months later when Falzar knocked on the door and stepped into the kitchen of the small house. Marcus stood in the kitchen, talking with Toby and Sabrina. He turned to see who was at the door and was clearly pleased it was Falzar.

"You're back! Where have you been?"

Falzar placed his cloak on the back of a chair and sat; he had a broad smile on his face. He was pleased to see time was indeed helping to heal their grief. He could tell from their eyes that the shadow of the darkness was passing.

"I've been to the north to check on matters that are of concern there. But we can talk of these things later. I came to see you were resting well and getting your strength back."

They all nodded, for the house had a magic about it that made them feel well and strong again. It even helped ease Sabrina's suffering at the loss of her family.

“Good. Then I’m happy to see it,” he said as he took a piece of bread and joined them for lunch. “Time has a magic all its own.”

* * * *

Falzar had left the day after they had returned to Lipari, and they had not yet had a chance to tell him of their great adventure. It was during lunch they told him all, and it was then they learned of Falzar’s part in the story.

Falzar explained he had seen the great black ship from the observatory the night Salina was taken. It was from the ship the Strombolians had launched their daring raid on the colony. Having seen such a great warship, he understood Gazhul’s plans, and that the ship was crucial. After he had returned to Lipari from their meeting on the second day, near Vulcano, he had sent Old Thom to follow them. He had foreseen they might be in need of a boat fast enough to race the great ship. Believing the warship would be used to launch an attack on Lipari, Falzar had realized they needed to destroy it, and that the only way to do this was to invoke the wrath of Corag.

* * * *

Marcus was pleased he’d understood Falzar’s plan and was even more pleased with himself for realizing the stone had the power to stop Corag.

Falzar listened intently to the tales of Nargs and their escape from the cooking pot and he was mesmerized by the tale of the Pool of Tranquility.

“Such a strong magic as that of the pool can stay with someone for his entire life,” said Falzar, leaning back in his chair. “Many times will you think of that enchanted place before your adventures are finished.”

When the tales were told to their conclusions, Falzar smiled and thanked them all for their courage and sacrifices. He felt grief for Sabrina, as her family had perished at the cruel hands of Gazhul. However he could see something in her eyes; it was something he had not seen for many ages, and it brought a secret hope to him. He knew something had happened when she plunged the dagger into the back of Gazhul and he was keen to keep an eye on her. Finally he stood from the table and asked if he could speak to Marcus alone outside.



They sat on the grass, as they had done for many weeks before the adventure. Marcus felt it was one of Falzar's old lessons again.

"There are many things to tell you," said Falzar with a smile as he played with a long blade of grass. "I'm sure you have many questions following your adventure."

"It's true. I have many questions. But there is one I've asked since I arrived in these islands," said Marcus with a deep frown. "I mean I'm just the son of a fisherman. So why me? Why has all this happened to me?"

Falzar looked at Marcus and nodded slowly. "The time has come for you to be told the great secret. I'm sure you'll now understand the truth. Marcus, you are not the son of a fisherman, as you believe. As much as this may be a shock, the father you know is not your real father. You were left with him and your mother when you were a baby—for safekeeping."

Marcus sat in silence for a moment. He searched deep into his heart and something he had known all his life suddenly became very clear to him.

"But who left me?" asked Marcus in a quiet voice. "And why was I left?"

"It was I. I left you there."

"Then who is my real father?" asked Marcus, looking to Falzar.

"I can read your mind, but no, it is not me," said Falzar immediately. "However, your father was also one of the great northern wizards. He was said to be even greater than me, if you can believe that. He was known as Sucram, and he and your mother were killed in a great battle in the north, just after you were born. I carried you south and placed you in the small village to stay far away from the troubles of the north until you were old enough to look after yourself."

Many more things all at once became clear to Marcus. Many questions he always felt deep in his soul seemed somehow answered.

"So I am a descendent of the Ancients. I am from the line of the great northern wizards," said Marcus in awe.

"Oh yes. The pendant you wear really is yours. It comes from your father directly. I was to give it to you on your eighteenth birthday. And that's what I did—as promised."

"So I am really a...wizard," said Marcus with deep realization.

Falzar laughed loudly and ruffled Marcus's hair. "Absolutely you are a real, certified wizard. But you have much to learn before you go off on your next adventure."

“What next adventure? What do you mean?” asked Marcus.

Falzar stood and placed his hands behind his back. “You have lifted the darkness here, but away in the great northern lands lie many adventures—and many enemies. You and I are the last of the great northern wizards, and I, as I have said many times, am too old for these adventures. It is now your time, Marcus. It is for you to go north, to live the adventures and start a new glorious age. My time lies in the past, in another age and another history. And, if one day we have enough time together, I will tell you the great tale of the army of wizards.” Falzar’s eyes sparkled as his mind drifted momentarily through the ages. Then he was back.

“No, the future is for you, Marcus, and as soon as I can teach you what you need to know, you will venture to the north and start on an even greater adventure.”

“I’ve had more dreams of this,” confessed Marcus. “I’ve seen high, snow-covered mountains, great green dragons and vast forests containing thousands of warriors. And above all, I dream of a golden book that glows in the darkness.”

“Again you see the future, as you did with Stromboli. This is your calling and this is how it will always be. They will write great tales about you and many will sing songs, and when I’m gone you will be the last of the great wizards—before all magic passes from the world.”

Falzar looked sad and distant as he said these words; he seemed to talk of something certain to come to pass.

“What about Sabrina?” asked Marcus as he looked toward the house. “What will happen to us?”

“She will learn to wait for you,” said Falzar kindly. “She is a strong person and she loves you deeply. It will pain her to see you go, but she will know it is for a greater good. Who knows what the future will bring for her?”

* * * *

Falzar thought again of what he had seen in the eyes of Sabrina and his heart once more filled with hope.

* * * *

“And Toby?” asked Marcus. “Will he come with me?”

“I don’t think an army could stop him going with you,” laughed Falzar. “And you will be glad of it, for Toby is keen with a sword and a great friend. And as I said before, friendship is a strong force against evil.”

Marcus stood and walked with Falzar toward the house. He knew he had changed and many great adventures lay ahead.

Suddenly they heard the shrill bark of Pippin as he bounded out of the house to greet them.

“Ah! That reminds me,” said Falzar as he looked at the little hero, who was, as always, wagging his tail. “I also came to remind you that tonight, in the town, is a great feast in your honor, all of you, including little Pippin. I have no doubts it will be a great feast, maybe the best ever seen in the islands. From what I hear, Cornelius has organized everything.”

“Well if Cornelius is arranging it, then there will be no doubt it will be an excellent feast,” Marcus laughed as Falzar stepped into the house.

Marcus stopped at the door, looking out across the island toward the sea. He closed his eyes and suddenly his heart raced with excitement as his mind filled with visions of the future. Soon they would travel to the mystical north. He opened his eyes, smiled and stepped into the house.

978-0-595-30336-6
0-595-30336-6