Chapter 1

My mother is a pirate

Are teacher Miss Burnside was trying very hard to be a teacher, while the holidays stood outside the classroom screaming at us to leave on the last day of school.

The longer the day went on the more easily she became distracted, as though we her students had become her friends, even the adults we felt we were about to become.

I watched her as she tried to pull herself back into teacher mode, practice tightening her face muscles, while talking in a stern manner.

But by the time we had screamed are final goodbyes her eyes told the truth, like two twinkling stars on the night of a full moon already moist with her tears.

Later that evening I went fishing on the River Whitch, with my mother Isobella, younger sister Teresa or Terri and me, myself, Katherine known as Kat.

My mother was still just "mum" then, a presence which could comfort and frustrate me until she held me so that I folded into her like well whipped cream.

Mother will always be mother to me but I have also come to know her as another person too, a pirate.

She told me that evening as Terri played her games on the strip of beach where we sat fishing that she had a secret for me.

She said that she had always been a pirate.

Her partner Wolfe was a pirate, my father had been a pirate and there were other pirates too on the coast around Whitchford where we lived.

“Should be called Pirateford not Whitchford” she said laughing and I laughed too.

“But aren't pirates from the old days; you know, drinking rum, with parrots perched on their shoulders. Saying things like hi ho me hearties”.

“Listen” she said and drew me closer to her, “listen, that is just a romantic story, the stuff of films, books and stories of buried treasure. Do not try to make to much sense of it right away, there is plenty of time to learn what needs learning when you are ready.”

So we sat fishing, eating are picnic, playing silly games with Terri, even catching some fish, until it was time to go home to our house near the river where the Sea Wolf is moored, the old ship which my mother owns with her partner Wolfe or Wolfie as we call him.

Wolfie is often away doing whatever it is that he does before returning home to tell his stories: "sailed too close to the wind don`t yer know, almost ended up on the rocks eh" then he laughs in that way he has like a character in some old film.

The river Whitch flows down to the sea from the hills of the high country in the twisty turns of a great snake to it`s mouth at Wreck Beach.

Not far from the beach is an island called Skiel, which has a causeway that is only accessible at low tide, where are friends Gale and Dave Seaward and their son Trin live.

The D`Artagne family are the ancestral owners of the island under an old royal charter, along with it`s castle.

The islanders: the Seawards, Trues, Swains, Bucks and Newers are fishing folk, along with Alex who looks after the monastery with its few remaining monks.

It was not long after I found out about my mother being a pirate that I went with Terri for a sleepover at Trin`s house on Skiel Island.

We were drinking Gale's special hot chocolate as a storm blew around their old house, making for perfect storytelling weather.

Which is when I learnt about the pirates of Whitchford and the story of Skiel Island.

“It is a long time ago when the pirates first came here” Dave said sipping at his hot chocolate.

“It was Phillipe D`Artagne the pirate who first came here”.

“Like D'Artagne, who has the island now?” Terri piped up.

“The very same, young Terri, the very same. See Phillipe D`Artagne was an aristocratic type, who were being hunted down in the olden times.

He along with some of his people had almost been wrecked on the island in a storm, just like the one that is blowing tonight.

They managed to save their ships but but when the repairs were finished, instead of leaving they decided to stay.

It was a wild out of the way sort of place in those days. It still pretty much is even now.

Folk had a way of ending up here like driftwood, with just a few monks from the monastery and the fisher families for company.

Ships would come to take on fresh water and supplie`s in those days, when it was far from the authority of the law.”

“Wolfie told me of people from far way that made their homes here Dave".

"Yes Katherine, often they where escaping persecution. Skiel is where they would wash up, literally sometimes when their boats were wrecked in storms, just like D`Artagne with his folk”.

We all stopped talking then. Sitting silently, huddled round the table, with the candles making fluttering patterns in the shadows, listening to the storm rattling round the old house.

"My family came from another island in another sea" Gale said breaking the silence.

"They belonged to a group being persecuted by the church who washed up here as Dave said, like many others have done.

An unlikely alliance developed between them and Phillipe D`Artagne when they arrived.

They decided to stay to build their houses using their boats timbers to build them, like the one we live in.

“A house boat” she said and laughed.

Gale was talking freely now, her dark eyes and hair touched with the flickering light of the fire, with the words of her story like the verses of an old song.

The storm outside was forgotten. We drank more hot chocolate and ate more fruit cake, while Terri slept on my lap.

“They were my ancestors you see who built a new life here. D`Artagne welcomed them as fellow travellers in a new land.

They had been people of the sea for a long time, taking what they needed to survive. Opposing any powers that sort to control them.

They were a strong, wilful lot, no doubt about it.

A tribe of stubborn, fearless people, like the rocks of the islands they came from. Survivors of storms, battle and invasion.

They believed in live and let live towards those who did not seek to threaten them, with compassion to those in need.

Their beliefs were the foundations of the Far Shore, which is what we call ourselves to this day”.

It was late at night or early in the morning by then, with Terri still fast asleep on my lap, while both father and son, Dave and Trin sat with their eyes closed, as though they were fast asleep too.

"It is alright young Katherine, you need keep no secrets from me" Gale said, looking into my eyes.

"Isobella and I are sisters in the Far Shore. Its doors are open to you if you decide you want to step over the freshold, it is your choice, yours only”.

There was a stillness in the room then.

A silence so intense that I could feelt the beating of my heart.

Outside the storm still raged.

I imagined I could hear people whispering in another language, the candles flames shadow dancing to the rhythm's of their words on the walls.

In the morning, as the sun came up I went to sit on my favourite rock by the sea shore, wrapped in a blanket staring at the horizon over a now calm sea, with only the slightest dawn breeze whispering its way up the coast.

The story Gale had told of the history of the Far Shore were still in my mind.

The Far Shore always looked after its own and that meant me now.

I found myself whispering the words; “and now I see the world differently”, before I stood, feet anchored on my blanket on the rock, so I could shout my words at the horizon, until I became breathless.

With the sky freshly cleaned by last nights storm, I lay down to hide in the comfort of the blanket, so I imagined it became like a white cloud I floated on, where I could hear singing, so beautiful that it made me cry.

When the singing stopped I heard the sound of soft voices, opening my eyes to see an old mans face smiling face looking down at me, with the creases in his skin like valleys on an old map.

“Am I alive or dead” I asked the man.

“I felt tired so I wrapped myself in the blanket.

I dreamt I was floating on a cloud, where there was such beautiful singing I cried”.

“No not dead, very much alive you are" the man said smiling.

"It was the monks you heard singing. They were concerned for you when they found you on the rock but could not wake you, so they brought you here into the old monastery.

My name is Alex, what is your name”?

"My name is Katherine or Kat. I am staying with my friends the Seawards. They will be looking for me soon but I still feel to weak to move just yet".

"Do not worry, we will let them know you are all right but I think you need some warm food, yes, a breakfast might help you feel better”?

I was in the monastrys old dining hall, where the monks served me the best breakfast I had ever tasted, made from produce from their own garden, while Alex told me the story of how he had come to Skiel Island.

"I was an important judge before I came here, also a very arrogant one” he said laughining.

“Then quite suddenly without any warning one day when I was in court, I saw everything in a new, perfectly clear light.

The foundations of who I thought I was just fell away from me.

I was in shock.

The judge with no clothes.

It took every bit of my self control to continue my duties.

My wife, my doctor, my friends told me everything would be alright, that I just needed to rest. Then I would be able to go back to work again.

But the longer I was away from the court I realised I could never return to being a judge. Something inside me had changed forever.

So I ended up here on Skiel island, where I have found true peace, having lost my sense of arrogance, self entitlement and importance, with just a few old monks for company”.

I had finished my breakfast by the time Alex had finished telling me his story and I started to tell him my own story; about how I had felt before I went to sleep in my blanket on the rock, even about my mother being a pirate in the Far Shore.

He sat very still listening to me, nodding every now and again, with a gentle smile on his face until I had finished.

“You feel better now Katherine, yes?" he said.

"Good food with honest talk usually helps I find.

Please remember your secrets are safe with me Katherine. You are always welcome at any time to come to talk with me if you want.

Now it is time for me to do some work”.

I met Gale looking for me when I left the monastry

We hugged each other tightly, tears in are eyes but with laughter too.

Chapter 2

The Tea Trip

Spring came late to Whitchford that year,with chill winds on the river, winter seemed to hang in hibernation like an old bear refusing to leave its den.

There were the storms, Then there was The Big Storm.

It became a legend in Whitchford: “It were just after the Big Storm, you remember when the old ferryboat broke its moorings and ended up on the beach” people would say, or relate some other story of the time, like their home being flooded or their car, which still smells of mud every time it rains; “ tried everything I have, nothing can get rid of that darned smell” they would say.

The storm was also remembered for the brewery, which stands on the banks of the river being flooded.

It filled the river with a torrent of barrels, bottled beer, wine and spirits, so great that as soon as the flood subsided there was frantic activity on the river, with all kinds of boats, plus the odd bathtub, loaded to the point of sinking with whatever the flood had deposited from the brewery.

Drunken laughter filled the surrounding countryside, as people tried to hide bottles or barrels wherever they could: in the basements of their houses, in farm buildings, on boats, buried in the earth or hidden in the tombs of church yards, before the authorities arrived to question the “usual suspects” but what little they did find was often undrinkable, soured by floodwater.

As the storm had grown in its fury, all sorts of vessels had limped into Whitchfoird to shelter. One vessel, an old sailing ship called The Eagle, had attracted a lot of attention.

In need of a good coat of paint but as they say on the river; “shipshape enough” recently fitted with a new diesel engine.

Local people were curious about The Eagle but her skipper but her crew were not inclined to talk.

The Whitchford locals knew well enough when to leave strangers alone; “Gossip is well enough left alone when the sails are filled with a fair wind” was a favourite saying on the river as the weather became calm again and people lost interest in the Eagle.

Kat had been kept much too busy helping to get ready for a sailing trip on The Sea Wolf to take any real interest in The Eagle.

Mother, had suddenly announced the trip one day when they had been sheltering at home from the storm.

“Time for a trip I think girls” she announced loudly, standing in the middle of the parlour, making a grand gesture with the tea mug in her hand, which resulted in a fair amount of her tea ending up on the carpet.

“Should have been a mug of rum not tea” Kat whispered to Terri and they both laughed.

“What are you two laughing at” mother said. "Oh the tea of course, how clumsy of me.”

So from that day the sailing trip became known as the Tea Trip.

But Tea Trip or not, there was still time for a fishing picnic at their favourite spot. Which is what happened late one afternoon on the first really warm day as spring started to turn to summer.

Released from the captivity of their chores there walk to the fishing spot was filled with random acrobatic acts as well as sudden bursts of song.

Isobella, who had started to complain about her sore back-the result of an attempted summersault-was relieved to sit down in comfort at the fishing spot when they reached it.

Terri made a boat out of an old piece of wood, with a plastic bag for a sail, which she set sailing gently on the river, with her one eyed teddy bear, Roger, as it`s captain.

The Eagle was moored not far away but there was no activity on deck, so Kat gave the old ship no more thought, with the fishing line in her hand she lost herself in the rhythm of the river until she realised that her mother was not fishing but spying,with her binoculars trained intently on the Eagle.

“Mother are you spying on The Eagle” Kat said in her in her best Miss Burnside voice.

“Quiet Kat” her mother said continuing to look through her binoculars at The Eagle.

When she put them down she still continued to study the ship, speaking to Kat out of the corner of her mouth.

“This is important Kat. I think the crew of the Eagle could be up to no good.”

“What do you mean no good, are they dangerous”? she said as her mother pulled her closer.

“Listen Kat. I do not want you getting all fearful but I think they may be. You know who we are now Kat. You should also know there is a code we live by.

I think the people on the Eagle could be a bad lot, up to no good”.

“Then why don't you call the police mother, you know, tip them off without revealing who you are”. Trying not to laugh her mother squeezed her hand tightly.

“Not a bad idea but that is not how we do things, no this situation is more complicated than that, which is really why we are taking the Tea Trip.

We are going to a gathering Kat. A gathering of what some people might call pirates, all of us together, the first one for you and for Terri.”

The excitement and the fear were too much for Kat.

“Where is the gathering” she exclaimed. "Where are we going to gather mother, tell me?”

“Listen to me, I will tell you but not before we leave Whitchfoird. It is a secret, which I am sworn to keep until we leave.”

“I am not a child mother” Kat said, her voice rising in anger as she pushed her away.

“I deserve your respect. How hard do you think it has been for me, to find out the truth, then learn more about it from Dave and Gale than you have ever told me, how dare you keep it a secret from me.”

Now Kat was standing over her mother before she started to run down the path, with her mother and Terri imploring her to come back.

She was quickly out of sight on the path, before she arrived at the diving tree, which leaned out from the bank over the river.

She was so upset that she did not see the tall figure of a man standing in the shade until she almost collided with him.

“Hey steady, what's the trouble, steady youngen, steady” the man said holding her gently by her shoulders, while she let him know what she thought of him and to let her go before he regretted it.

“Listen to me, I am not going to hurt you, but you need to take a few deep breaths before you hurt yourself, ok”.The strangers voice was gentle and he chuckled as he spoke.

Kat thought that he had a kind face, even though a scar that ran down his right cheek and his long hair was tied back in a pony tail.

She had to bite her lip to hold back the tears but the stranger helped her to sit on the trunk of the diving tree.

“You just sit here for a few minutes. Get yourself settled down, eh. My names Curnow by the way. If it don't bother you I am going to roll myself a smoke.”

Curnow took a leather tobacco pouch from his pocket and slowly rolled himself a cigarette.

Once the cigarette was lit he sat still on the trunk of the diving tree smoking, watching the river.

While Kat felt her breathing slow down, regretting what she had said to Curnow. Feeling embarrassed, empty inside herself at how she had upset her mother and Terri.

“My name is Katherine or Kat and I am sorry for what I said to you Mr Curnow. I did not mean to talk to you like that.”

He chuckled again. “Hey that is alright, no broken bones as they say. The name is just Curnow, no Mr required, ok” he replied slowly in his deep voice.

Kat nodded almost chuckling to herself.

“I got angry with my mother. I upset her as well as my sister. I should go back and put it right.”

“Yes, I saw all of you fishing, heard the shouting too.

These things happen in families, at least you can talk about it with your mother,

that is the important thing.

Better out than in as my old gran used to say.”

“She was right I think” she replied.

"You aren't from round here are you"?

He nodded in the direction of the Eagle where she sat at anchor on the river.

"No, I am from the vessel over there.”

She felt her self tense but she had no feeling that she should be frightened of him.

“Oh the sailing ship that came into Whitchford for shelter during the storm you mean?” she asked as though she had no real interest.

“That's the one, the one the locals talk about.

Its alright I know about the gossip, I get out and about in the area" he replied.

"I am The Eagles watchman, caretaker, temporary skipper, general handyman while the old girl is moored on the river. I have family in the area too, do you know Dave Lee”? and Kat nodded in confirmation.

“You mean Dave Lee, who has Stirrups Farm over in Luters Valley, with all the horses, I know his daughter Gilda.”

Curnow missed neither her words or thoughts because he chuckled again.

“He is, my cousin. A Romany like me of course or gypsy or gypo as some people still call us.”

The there was silence. Both of them lost in their own thoughts, watching the river, with the Eagle tugging at her anchor as the tide came in.

“Kat, Kat where are you? Come back and lets talk together” the sound of her mothers voice broke the spell of their silence.

“Well I must be going now” she said as they both stood. Curnow stood shaking himself, looking to Kat now even more like a gentle giant.

“Well, we will meet again Kat I am sure of that, all the very best to you” were his parting words to her.

"Well, well, Isobella`s daughter how about that" he said as he watched her walk back down the path.

It was two days after the fishing trip that The Sea Wolf finally slipped out of Whitchford before dawn on a full tide, with an audience of stars shining out of the clear nights sky.

As The Sea Wolf reached the sea the sails were raised with a dawn breeze to welcome them.

There was no idle chatter on deck, just the sound of the sea slapping against the ships hull as she moved through the water with Isobella standing at the wheel steering her course to the east of Skiel Island.

The island was still shrouded in darkness as they passed it, apart from a light at the monastery, where Isobella could hear the soft sounds of the monks singing their welcome to a new day.

“Thank you monks” she whispered to herself.

“Because if there is a heaven for me, it is in your singing, the feel of the ships wheel in my hands and the breeze of a new day filling the curve of the sails with the first glimmer of light on the horizon.”

When she saw the outline of her children huddled together on deck for warmth she smiled and added: “And my family of course. I am skipper of the Wolf, mother of two cubs, a sister of the Far Shore. Heaven would be complete if I had a strong cup of coffee and some toast to warm me up” and she shouted her order for “hot coffee and toast for the skipper as quickly as you can.”

Chapter 3

Beware

Thar be many kinds of danger

Curnow liked being alone on the Eagle. It gave him time to do any "tidy work" the ship needed; mending anything which needed mending or painting what needed painting to deny the salt, sun and the wind the chance to reduce the Eagle to a riverside hulk.

“Beautiful old Eagle” Curnow whispered to himself as he sanded back the woodwork ready for painting.

The ship was a living thing to him, just like an old relative.

Much loved and cared for was the way he thought of it to himself.

His job on the Eagle had found him, when he was most in need: almost broke, living on the generosity of Dave Lee, making himself useful around the farm in return for food and lodging.

“That's what family is for” is all Dave Lee had said to him when he had offered him lodgings in a room above the stables.

It had allowed him time to heal. To enjoy the peace of the river, the woods, the meadows. The freedom to ride the ponies and grow healthy again.

He chuckled to himself as he thought of his life; “how did I get here” he asked himself “looking after this old ship or perhaps I should say she is looking after me”.

He shivered at the thought of how close he had come to death when he had had to run for his life to this quiet place of sanctuary

In his own version of morality he was not a violent or dishonest man, neither was he a saint either but he knew he had crossed a line.

Instead of earning the riches he had dreamed of he had to run for his life.

“Not all bad” he whispered.“I have met young Katherine, Isobella's lass, how about that” and he put his paint brush down to go and make himself some tea in the galley.

Now many miles out to sea from Skiel Island, Isobella was steering the Wolf in a fair wind, while Kat sat on deck out of the chill., with the warmth of the early sun on her face, a cup of hot chocolate warming her hands. Thinking of why she had not told her mother about her meeting with Curnow.

Not long ago she would of told her in a rush of words, so that she would have asked her to; “slow down girl I cannot understand you” but something had changed.

She had a secret. Which somehow she knew was an important one, her very own special secret. One she would tell her mother but just not yet.

She drank more of her hot chocolate. The secret warm and comfortable sitting inside her, with the warmth of the hot chocolate swirling around it like a moat around a castle in an old story: “Thar be dragons” she whispered, “thar be wizards, sorcerers, heroines, heroes, magic, spells and thar be many kinds of danger”.

On the river the peace Curnow had been enjoying did not last long. He was still drinking his tea on deck when the river was filled with the noise of boats motors, the owner coming aboard in a hurry, shouting for him to help load the stores and get them stowed away. So the next few hours became an organised confusion of readying the Eagle for sailing.

By noon she was underway along the River Whitch towards the open sea, watched by the curious glances of the locals.

The skipper of the Eagle, David Jones-a man of few words-who rarely smiled or laughed-stood at the ships wheel.

He knew that people found him withdrawn but he could see no sense in small talk. His religious upbringing along with his training as a priest, was a secret that he kept to himself.

Now he was a skipper, steering an old ship on a mysterious voyage, with a crew that he did not trust.

He had a feeling that the voyage could be a dangerous one too, on which he may well need support.

There was Curnow though. Whom he had hired to look after the Eagle while she was moored on the river who was now part of the crew. Considering himself a good judge of people he felt that he could trust him.

As soon as he could safely do so he would talk to him.

But as he had always done, he was able to put these thoughts aside to concentrate on his job of skippering the Eagle.

He felt the ship around him like a living thing, thinking that he was closer to the spirit of life than he had ever been when he had been confined by religious ritual.

Getting the ship with its crew safely through the voyage would be a challenge but he liked a challenge.

"If we survive” he said softly to himself “if we survive”.

Isobella had sensed the danger too because she had set a course which was not the most direct one to their destination but would keep them away from other shipping.

She cursed herself for bringing the children with her as part of the crew. Gale and Dave had agreed to join her on the voyage, if they could bring Trin with them and she knew they would sense the danger just as she did.

“This is not a game Isobella” she said out loud to herself. Then more loudly; “you always were a little crazy, you could have been something, anything but the pirate skipper of the old Wolf, taking your children and your friends on a dangerous adventure”.

And a voice singing to her in the wind said; "this is a time and a half to have a gathering Isobella, no doubt about that, a time and a half" and she took the words and sang a song to the sea, both fearful and challenging, her strong, clear voice rising into the sky, where dark clouds were beginning to form:

Gathering in the light

Gathering in the sea

Sailing by Skiel Island

In the light of dawn

To the sound of the monks

Singing in the new day

The wind and sound of gulls

Waving over me

With my children and friends

I am sailing to the gathering

Cursing myself for a fool

A mad woman screaming at the sea

For I am gathering in the light

Gathering in the sea

The sound of gulls and sea am I

Thar be many dangers

On this voyage

That I do not know

But we are the sea

And we are the wind

People of the Far Shore are we

Snuggled into her sea coat in the vessels bow, Kat listened to her mother singing as the day turned towards evening, with the wind began to grow stronger.

Although her mother often made up songs, she thought it was strangely beautiful; a prayer by the ship to the sea, to keep them safe to their journeys end.

She wondered what her friends would be doing in the holidays, certainly not listening to their mother singing songs while she sailed an old ship across the sea on a voyage of adventure to a gathering of people who were called pirates.

Then her mother shouted to her to get everyone on deck because there was a storm coming.

They were all soon on deck, securing anything that was not already secured, making the deck safe with the storms dark clouds moving towards them.

The Wolf seemed suddenly very small, almost old and frail amongst the waves, distant from the land in the waning light.

Across the sea closer to the land, Curnow felt the comfort of the worn wood of the wheel in his hands, made smooth by many other hands.

The skipper had asked him to take the wheel when he went down below to eat. It made him feel good that it was him he had asked, not one of the others.

But who were they anyway. Most of them were not real sailors, apart from old Jackobson and young Clunes.

He thought the crew were a pretty rag tag bunch but he should know because he had been pretty rag tag in his day too.

Then there was the owner, Mark Trevelyan Davis was his name. Curnow had crossed paths with him before, not that Trevelyan seemed to remember him now.

He thought him a "chancer", always ready for the next big thing, the next business venture, the next plan to make his fortune.

Far out to sea could he could still see the outline of the Wolf ploughing along through the waves. "Be careful Isobella" he thought, "those are dark clouds coming”.

"What's he about eh" Curnow said to himself, "what's he doing with the Eagle out here following Isobella? There must be money in it somewhere, no doubt about that".

As the clouds moved across the sky he felt the change in the air, which he knew would bring the skipper on deck soon looking for a safe harbour for the night.

When the storm came, it was like a giant cracking its whip against the Wolfs sides, bending and teasing the old vessel with her masts screaming in defiance as it tested for any weakness it could find in her old timbers.

Their was a brief respite before after before it came howling in again like an army of lost souls, its battle with the ship growing in fury.

On the deck of The Wolf, Dave and Isobella wrestled with the wheel together until there arms ached from the effort, then, as the wind dropped slightly Gale appeared on deck carrying hot drinks and food.

“Here you two, you need to eat and drink, I will stand at the wheel” she announced, cool and competent, as though she was serving food at a picnic by a gentle river on a summers day.

Isobella was first to surrender her place at the wheel to Gale to find a spot where she could hide from the worst of the storm.

She hungrily consumed as much as she could that was not thrown onto the deck by the storm before she relieved Dave at his place at the wheel.

"Are the children ok down below Gale” she asked as soon as she had steadied hersel at the wheel. Gale nodded in reply and said “we should find shelter quickly Isobella, this storm is growing stronger”.

“I know but where do we find shelter. I do not want us to be driven onto the coast”.

“How about old Gifford's Bay. I am sure we have not passed it yet. I know the entrance channel is narrow but we can shelter from the storm there.”

Isobella thought of the sheltered bay in her mind. It could be a dangerously narrow entrance even in the best of weather let alone a storm but Gale was right, they must find shelter. The old Wolf might not withstand a storm like this for too long.

“Good idea Gale” she shouted, so they both laughed together releasing some of their fear, conscious of their children huddled together below decks.

“What the hell are you two lunatics laughing about, in the middle of a storm" Dave yelled as he came back to the wheel but the laughter was so infectious that he joined in too.

“We are going to Gifford'sBay for shelter” Gale shouted.

“Well lets do it before this old girl has a heart attack and takes all of us to the bottom with her” he replied.

Chapter 4

Shelter from the storm

Isabella woke in the warmth of her bunk, coaxing movement back into her bruised hands, one joint at a time.Stretching her aching body against the tightly wrapped cocoon of sheets and blankets she had made for herself.

Reliving their run through the storm to the safety harbour of Giffords Bay in the dark of the night.

The entrance to the bay was a narrow slit in the coastline, the storm wrestling with the Wolf as she had scraped and shouldered her way to the safe haven, like an old sea dog demanding service in a crowded bar.

But the old sea dog The Wolf was would not be denied service. The sound of its groaning timbers mixing with the storms howling banshees.

Then she remembered her beautiful, brave Katherine, an angel appearing on deck to help them as they made their run for the narrow entrance.

She had shouted at her to go below again but she would not.

Tears came then for Katherine; her own stubbornness at putting the lives of the children at risk, her love for them and for Dave and Gale.

Opening her eyes she saw Terri's shining face, her hand moving the coffee mug under her nose as though she was offering her some rare, life giving medicine.

"Here mother you can be the child. Stay warm and I will feed you".

Accompanied by her dialogue of the nights storm, already an epic tale in her own mind, in which they had all become heroes, she fed her mother coffee.

Isabella listened silently to her daughters passionate, excited retelling of the nights events, thinking her and the coffee were the best medicine she could have had.

As soon as she had finished the coffee she found clean, dry clothing and went to stand on the deck with everyone else.

It was a quiet, bright, clear day she found when she stood on deck, with the sea almost calm now after the storm. The shoreline hidden under mountains of bright, bottle green and amber sea weed, which told the story of the nights storm.

The Wolf gently rubbed herself against the old wooden pier where they had moored, as though she were massaging her own bruised body, while the growling pumps slowly discharged water from her bilges into the bay.

Later she would check the ships hull for damage. Then they would start to make things ship shape again but before that she wanted to stand on solid ground. Find some hot breakfast and more biting hot coffee.

They walked towards the twisting smoke rising from the chimney of The Giffs Inn looking for breakfast accompanied by the sound of waves gently walking themselves to the shoreline, where screaming birds hunted for food amongst the debris of the storm.

Friendly stray dogs came to rub themselves against their legs, nuzzling themselves into the caresses of the children's outstretched hands along with the ghosts of Gifford's Bay to keep them company

Once a busy harbour for trading vessels or people, who for one reason or another wanted a quiet safe haven.

Once inside the Giff`s Inn, they stood tired and hungry amongst its clutter.

It seemed to be part bar, cafe, general store, ships chandler, community centre and silent, apart from the echoes of the past.

When they sat down together in one of the booths Dave announced that he would scout the place for signs of life and breakfast.

He walked behind the counter where he tripped over a very large, shaggy dog, which did not bark but simply rolled onto its back wanting its belly scratched.

Dave obliged. Once satisfied the dog managed to roll itself back over again and continued sleeping.

“What is it about this place” Dave muttered to himself; “the land that time forgot, Gifford's Bay Ghost Town, where is everyone”?

He pushed his way through swing doors into the kitchen, where a large woman was seated at the kitchens table, eating her way through a large breakfast, while a large man stood serenading her playing the violin.

Neither the man nor the woman seemed surprised to see Dave. The woman acknowledged him with a wave of the fork on its way to her mouth, while the man bowed to him playing his violin.

When the woman had finished her mouthful of food she motioned Dave towards a seat at the table.

“Sit e mon” she said, so Dave sat as she waved her fork loaded with a sausage and the best part of a fried egg in the direction of the coffee pot, mugs, sugar and milk on the table.

“Help yer self” the woman said “and I shall have mulk, four sugar and the music mon have black no sugar” then she dropped her head back to her plate and started to spear more food into her mouth.

Dave, relieved that she had not asked him to scratch her stomach too,

sat enjoying the coffee and the fiddle playing until the woman finished eating at exactly the same time as the fiddle player stopped playing. Before they both took large mouthful's of coffee and put their coffee mugs back onto the table in perfect time together.

Then they both sat very still,like two statues watching Dave for what seemed like a long time to him, before the man took a slice of toast from the women's plate and started eating it.

" Yous come through the storm yar" he said, through a mouthful of toast.

"Yes, yar, we did" Dave mumbled and then clearing his voice he said; "The rest of the crew is sitting in your dining area. They would like some breakfast if you could make us some".

Dave's voice seemed to fill the silence of the kitchen and he realised he had been partially deafened by the storm.

It certainly seemed to wake them up. Because the man stopped chewing his toast mid slice. Then as though they had both woken from a long slumber they jumped up from their seats and spoke together; "But of course sir please go and sit down and we will come and take your order immediately".

They were served a breakfast fit for hungry survivors, with the accompaniment of Terri and Kats constant chatter with their own versions of the story of the storm, told through mouths crammed full of food.

The tension of the nights drama was released before an audience of locals, which grew as the morning wore on, filling the inn with shouts of laughter and the sounds of eating.

The word had got around that the crew of The Sea Wolf had survived the storm and were eating and drinking their way through the Giffs Inns supply of eggs, bacon, bread, coffee and almost everything else they could put in their mouths.

By ten in the morning, it was almost as crowded as a New Years Eve, while its previously sleepy hosts, Sarah and Moses, were transformed into whirling dervishes who had found a couple of the locals to help them serve the crowd.

Coffee was soon being replaced by beer, wine, then spirits as two fiddlers were joined by a trio of singers, a guitar player, a piper with her homemade pipes plus an accordionist and the day really got started.

Isobella sat smiling as she watched the room fill, this was the Giffs Inn she remembered: full of life, music, chatter and laughter. How she had missed this she thought, as her daughters formed a chain dancing through the crowd.

Just as Isobella was considering joining the dancing herself to stretch out her sore joints a hand was placed on her shoulder.

"Please come outside with me sister, I am a friend of the Far Shore" a soft voice whispered into her ear.

Isobella decided she would trust her instincts to follow the woman outside and down to the shore where they went to sit on a rock.

" I know you are Isobella Carvair. My name is Truan Nutschell" the woman said as soon as they were seated together on the rock.

"I apologise for dragging you away but what I have to tell you is important".

Then the woman stopped speaking. Bowing her head as though she were trying to summon up the right words to continue, while Isobella was able to study her for the first time.

Truan sat with her head lifted back, her long auburn hair streaked with grey, searching the horizon as she summoned the words she needed to continue.

"You are in danger. Both you and your crew are in more danger than you know" and she turned to look Isobella in the eyes to make her point and repeated, "than you know" and sat silently looking at her.

Isobella had started to smile when she had talked of danger; "tell me something I don`t know", she had thought but now she found no reason to smile as a shiver ran up her spine.

"Thank you for your warning. We have not met before but I trusted my instincts to follow you out here to sit on this rock" she said.

"Good, what I have had heard of you was right then" she replied.

"You are a leader. I felt your shiver too, let us shake hands as the Far Shore shake hands and then we can talk freely".

And when they shook hands, both Isobella and Truan knew they had made a friend.

Truan spoke of what had been, of what was here and what was to come. She spoke clearly, with only a sigh here or there or to take a deep breath of the sea air.

Isobella just sat and listened. Her minds eye bringing forth images; collecting information that may prove to be the difference between life and death on the voyage she had embarked on.

She thought it already seemed like a long time since she had spilt her mug of tea

and they had all laughed together. Filled with the joy of the adventure to come in the cosy safety of her home when they had joked that it would be a Tea Trip that they were going on.

Now she was sitting on a rock in Gifford's Bay with a woman whom she had just met, who already felt like a friend for life.

She saw, not for the first time in her life, the hands of the weaver change the design of the rug she was weaving for her and smiled.

"Isobella, ground control to Isobella Carvair" Truan whispered into her ear.

"I am sorry Truan. I was listening but I was just, well let me tell you what I was doing" and she told her about the weaver. How everyone has a rug woven for them by the weaver that tell the story of there lives in the patterns she weaves.

"Well the weaver is going to have to work very long hours making your rug then Isobella" Truan said laughing. "These people I have been speaking of to you have no regard for the beautiful rugs of life or life itself for that matter.

They care only for all the greed and power they can get, which extends into every part of the world, into every part of every society.

They want to take over the Far Shore and use it as they choose. They have already found people they have been able to corrupt, which is what they are doing right now.

"They have the power to destroy whatever stands in their way".

And Isobella knew everything she had said was true.

She had been holding a nasty thought worm inside herself for some time, which had been twisting at her gut when she woken in the middle of the night unable to sleep.

Now the truth had been spoken she felt herself relax, with a sigh of relief a weight had been lifted from her. The truth had replaced the thought worm, giving her hope for the voyage ahead.

They both sat in silence for some time then, each lost in their own thoughts, gazing at the lip of the seas horizon, until a wave smashed into the rock where they sat shocking them from their reverie.

"I have felt it for some time too Truan. There were things said, whispers really, glances and nods but I felt the change deep down in my gut.

The Eagle sailing up the River Whitch to escape the storm but they were not just escaping the storm. They had come to see who they could buy to spy for them.

They are the small sharks who do the dirty work for the bigger sharks with the really big teeth but they already sense blood in the water.

It is what they crave and it is how they corrupt others to gain more wealth and more power for themselves".

"You are right Isobella, they are not the biggest sharks but they are hungry sharks all the same. We are facing a storm, just like the one you faced last night that brought The Eagle sailing up the river.

We are facing a storm from a powerful enemy and we will need all the skill and wisdom we have to survive".

Then Truan stood and stretched herself like a cat, shaking out her mane of hair and looked down at Isaella.

"You do not know what The Eagle has also brought to the quiet waters of the Whitch do you Isbella?

A man called Curnow, who I think you might know very well from the past".

The name Curnow spun around in Isobellas head, collecting memories as it went.

Yes, I know him very well she thought.

His name is Curnow Justinus and they had been friends, who had become lovers when she was young and wild. She smiled to herself at the memory and heard Truan laugh.

"Ahh, so you do know him" and she laughed again.

Standing up, Isobella took hold of Truans hands.

"You seem to know a lot about a lot don`t you Truan, well I have work to do to set an old ship to rights and a crew to collect from Giff`s Inn before the day is all gone".

"I know time is short for you Isabella but we can talk while we walk.

I will help you Isobella and there are others that will help you also".

They stopped walking then and faced each other; "You are right, time is short but it is also not a time to hesitate but a time to trust ones intuition and act on what it tells you, so thank you most kindly for your offer of help and yes I would like to meet these people. I am putting my trust in you Truan".

They went back into the Giffs Inn, where Isobella had to pull the crew away from the party that was now in full swing, to work through the day and into the twilight on the Wolf, putting right some of the damage the storm had done.

It was evening before they had finished to sit down to eat their meal together: the crew, plus two stout young locals Truan had found, who made their living from the sea talked into helping out by her charm.

Kat and Terri had barely touched their food before they went to sleep at the table, so goodbyes and goodnights were soon being said by everyone.

"There will be a lot more help tomorrow, you just wait and see, better get a goodnights sleep so you can be up at first light, just you wait and see" Truan shouted as she went ashore.

Isobella stood watching walk with the two men until they disappeared into the night.

It was silent then but for the sound of the pumps pushing out the water from the ships bilges. She was worried about just how strong the old ships timbers were after the battering the storm had given them.

Tomorrow she decided to find some helpers who knew what to look for.

Chapter 5

Boudiccas Army

The next day dawned with the smell of the summer to come before the sun had risen, with the Wolf alive with the smell of breakfast cooking.

As soon as she had her coffee mug in her hand, Isobella went on deck to see how the day looked.

Looking out to sea she decided it was going to be a fine day to finish the work that needed to be done and turned to look towards the land.

"What the, how many people has Truan brought with her" she exclaimed.

In the growing light of the day looking back towards the village, she could see Truan like Boudicca leading her army towards the ship.

She started to count but quickly gave up.

The answer she decided, was simply "a lot", and she would have to do a lot of organising to make sure that everyone felt that they were being useful with a job to do, without getting in each other`s way.

I need to feed the army that Truan is bringing to me.

I see some youngsters amongst them, so I will put the children in charge of securing more supplies and helping Gale with their preparation.

Feeling better, she drained the last drop of her coffee, with the makings of a plan forming;" Dave, Gale, Trin, Terri, Kat on deck quickly now please, we have work to do" she shouted.

By the time they took the morning break, Boudicca's straggling army had been transformed into a well ordered workforce.

Terri and Kat had their own crew of youngsters, as young as seven and the oldest a fourteen year old boy, who had started to follow Kat around as though he was her own blushing slave.

Isobella and Gale had decided that Kat was enjoying the attention, as she issued orders in her own imperious impersonation of an adult voice; "here you shift this, carry that and hurry up".

We will get there, Isobella thought as she stood watching the youngsters scurrying about setting up the makeshift dining table on the Wolf`s deck for the morning break under Gale`s direction, who had appointed herself: Chief Wellbeing Officer and Cook.

They were a good team of youngsters she decided. About ten or twelve in number but that changed, depending on who had decided to throw a line-or "loin" as the local kids called it in their dialect-over the Wolf`s side and try their luck fishing or get involved in Terri`s complicated game of Pirates and what she called The Badders, which the kids had now started to call the Confusicators, because the rules of the game were constantly changed by Terri,who had forgotten most of the original rules she had made anyway to cause much confusion.

At the morning break Isobella sat next to Spencer Patternoster and his son Leeward, who were known respectfully as:" Shipwrights and Carpenters to the sea and all that sail upon it".

They could also build you a house, make you a bed to sleep in, sell you the sheets and pillowcases for it, fix your plumbing, tractor or washing machine.

But their real passion was working with wood.

To see them working with wood was like watching people in some kind of worship, as though they were in contact with something greater than the everyday passage of lifes "this and that".

Spencer was talking to her about his boatyard, which sat on the shore near the wharf where the Wolf was moored, using his fork, with a rasher of bacon he had just speared, as his pointer.

The rasher of bacon was the size of a healthy young child`s arm and large enough to seem like a decent sized pair of wings when Spencer made a particular point, particularly strongly.

Isabella amused herself thinking that pigs really could fly but she was more interested in the large dry dock that stretched down to the water from Spencer`s Boatyard.

Spencer had just started to describe in much detail the store of rare wood he kept at the yard, some of which he proudly told Isobella his grandfather, Sevenson and father Segerdur had procured.

She was not really interested in Spencers forbears or the store of the rare wood but whether the state of the Wolf`s timbers were really good enough enough to get to them to their gathering place without drowning everyone.

Spencer was building up steam talking about the qualities of some African woods his father had bought from a ship that had come into port after it`s long voyage. It sounded to her as if it might be a very long story, so she made a decision:

"Spencer" she said, and then, when he kept going with his story, a much louder "Spencer" than she had intended.

It was loud enough to bring conversation and eating around the table to a stop instantly, apart from the sound of Terrie`s voice trying to explain the latest rule change of her game to her young crew.

Spencer-who had stopped his dissertation on the qualities of African mahogany in mid sentence-sat with his mouth open and his fork "pointer", with it`s now cold rasher of bacon pointing skywards, as though he was making an offering to the sky.

Isabella felt her cheeks flushing, something which she had not felt for a very long time, so when she started to speak again she stuttered; "Spencer, I er, well, well is your dry dock available and if it is how much, I mean what sort of cost, well what sort of cost would there be to use it"? she managed to say in a whisper.

Spencer kept his pointer with it`s rasher raised to the sky with everyone holding there breath waiting to see which would be first: the rasher or the answer.

Spencer turned to speak to his son Leeward but Isabella heard no words she could understand.

When they had finished he turned back to her; "If you can bring people to help, we will fix it for you, no cost for the wood, just any other materials, alright"? and they shook hands on it.

The conversation and eating recommenced, as though nothing had really been interrupted in the first place, while Spencer spent quite some time eating the cold rasher of bacon before he could discuss the dry docking of the Wolf further with Isobella.

By the time the days work came to an end, with the old Wolf was starting to look something like the grand lady she had once been, Isabella realised just how careless she had been.

She realised it could just as easily have been the Miss Trip, not the Tea Trip.

The storm had been a blessing in disguise, with fresh paintwork, equipment already checked and repaired.

Two old ship`s engineers, who swore they had worked on the finest marine engines ever known to man, had serviced the Wolf`s engine, passing it fit: "to circle the globe" as many times as she wanted.

Worn ropes had already been replaced, the decks thoroughly cleaned to what one old sailor told her was; " proper fleet standard missus, you better believe it".

Under Gale`s close watch every piece of bedding had been taken away to "someone who has a proper laundry".

Below decks had been cleaned thoroughly. Every pot, utensil, the galley, dining area scrubbed until it shone in the last of the late afternoon sun.

When the days work finally finished Truan had been the last to leave with her two friends from the night before.

Isabella had insisted she take some money to make sure that everybody that wanted; "got a bloody good drink at the Giff`s tonight".

Now the crew sat on deck with steaming mugs of Gales tea or coffee in their hands, a little shocked at the changes that had taken place to both the Wolf and them during the day, watching the orange orb of sun disappear towards it`s sleeping place behind the curtains of the horizon, chatting idly away about the days work and the people that they had met.

"Who would have thought it" Dave said-not for the first time that day-and they all laughed, "no really" he said standing and stretching his sore muscles, "who would believe it, just magic it is, they were all magic people".

"Tomorrow" Isabella said "we get the old girl up the slipway at Spencer`s boatyard and see what really needs doing. In fact if the truth be told" she continued, "I am more frightened at what we may find when the ship is out of the water than anything else on this voyage. I have a nagging fear, a knot in my guts that things may be so bad, that they will take a lot of time and money to fix. Even though Spencer had said we would not have to pay for his people`s labour, I would insist that he take my money as a question of honour, if it is really bad. Then there is the question of time, we still have a lot of sailing to go, if, and it is a big if, the weather is good to us".

Then she was silent for a moment before she spoke the words that she had never believed she would say.

"I think we should all consider the possibility that we may have to turn round and go back home".

After the shock of what she had just said had sunken in it was the usually softly spoken Gale who leapt to her feet

"No, no and no Isabella, you are the skipper but we are your friends as well as your crew.

We will overcome whatever fate seems to have placed in our way to get to the gathering place. We know, the children know, that this is more important than anything. We are taking this old vessel on her voyage, not slinking back into the sanctuary of the River Whitch to live out are lives in fear and regret.

And furthermore as the self appointed Well Being Officer and Cook, I am going below to cook us a tasty meal in my now sparkling galley so we can all go to bed with full bellies to get a goods night sleep. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow everything will seem different, you see if it is not, you are just overtired and overwrought".

And with that Gale went to cook the evening meal.

"I say we take a vote in the time honoured way " Dave said.

One by one they all raised their hands.

"So it be settled then, we continue on the voyage, does anyone have anything to say before we go to eat Gale's food made in her gleaming galley"?

Only one hand was raised and it was Terri's.

"If it pleases you mother, sorry I mean skipper" and with this she stood, the smallest of them all, clearing her voice as she opened the rule book of her game.

"In the case of unforeseen circumstances, including I might add cases of knotted guts, old ships timbers, rule fifty six and one half states that going back is usually much more difficult and not as much fun as going forward" and it was settled in proper pirate fashion, with Terri carried on their shoulders to eat a fine meal which tasted even better for being cooked by Gale in her a gleaming galley.

Chapter 6

The Sea Wolf is Reborn

When Terri woke in the dark she went onto the deck carrying her torch along along with her book of rules for the game.

Last night they had all laughed together when she had read out rule fifty six and one half but later in her bunk, she realised that this was more than just a game.

She needed to be useful. To fill the space inside herself-which otherwise could be filled with her own fear and anxieties-with something which made her useful.

The rule book would become a proper journal of the Tea Trip, her own journal recording not only the events of the voyage but also new rules to be attached to them.

And she, young Teresa, could be fulfilled,with a real role in the crew and to one day become the journalist she wanted to be, not just someone who has its head patted or was treated like a slightly annoying child.

"Yes, I know I am a child. But I do not feel like a child a lot of the time anymore. Sometimes the adults are more silly than I am, doing a lot of stupid things" she said out loud.

She felt better when she had spoken her words of truth to the vast sea, with the first inkling of daylight showing on the horizon.

Her mother and Kat had little time to talk to her these days.

She spent more time helping Gale in the galley. They were both good listeners and they made each other laugh.

She looked out to the sea. Today would be an important day when the real voyage would begin she felt.

The light was still not yet full yet when Spencer and Leeward arrived at the ships side in two stout skiffs rowed by four stout men.

It seemed to the crew of the Wolf that Spencer and his men took over the ship with barely a word spoken, while the crew were still cramming their last slices of Gale`s toast into their mouths with the dregs of her tea and coffee.

Once ropes had been attached to the rowing skiffs hey cast The Wolf off from the wharf to allow her to be taken slowly to the boatyard.

Like grandmama at a family gathering, the old ship was gently guided to the dry dock. Then winched into place to the accompaniment of the belching of the winch`s motor, its monster roar breaking the peace of early morning Gifford's Bay.

Dave had barely finished his last slug of tepid coffee when the ship was pulled up the long slip, to have supports placed against the hull.

He, who had spent his life on and around the sea since he was barely walking, was impressed by the way that Spencer with his team went about their business, with everyone doing his job with few words spoken.

Once the vessel was secured on the slip out of the water, he joined Lester and Isobella in their inspection of the Wolfs hull. It was not a pretty sight Dave thought; seaweed competed with barnacles for space, with many timbers looking like they needed repair.

He went to stand next to Isobella, where she stood with her hand resting on the wet timber, placing his own hand next to the hers as though they were listening for a beating heart together.

He spoke softly to her; "It will be alright, you see if isn't. Spencer and Leeward know their stuff, they will make her as good as new".

After a long silence she replied. "I hope and pray they do Dave. Do you really think that is true Dave or are you just trying to put my mind at rest"?

"Yes, I am trying to put your mind to rest to reassure you but I also think it is true. I know that we both know now that we have set out on one hell of a voyage but I just feel, well I feel we are in good hands if you understand my meaning" he replied.

"I do understand your meaning. I am glad that you feel it just as I do too.

I have felt we are in safe hands since the first morning we sailed out onto the sea from the Whitch, when I heard the monks singing on the island, even though I often wake in the night feeling the very opposite".

Then their conversation was interrupted by the noise of people.

When they they looked up to the sides of the dry dock, it now seemed to be covered by a great audience of people, far greater than the one they had working with them the day before.

They were carrying tools, with food baskets, tables, chairs and children in their parents arms, as though the whole of Gifford's Bay and surrounding countryside had turned out to help.

There was one huge fellow with a great stomach, a cask of beer resting on his shoulder smiling down at them and next to him Sarah and Moses from The Giff`s Inn, with what looked like a large cart laden with more supplies of food and drink.

Then shining like a beacon their own Boadicca, Truan standing next to a smiling Gale with the children.

Dave sighed and said; "well we really do have some work to do lets get to it eh".

Soon he and Isobella-with Terri taking notes like a seasoned journalist-followed Spencer with Leeward in tow making a thorough inspection of the ships hull.

He stopped often to speak softly to Leeward along with two of the leading hands, before they would all nod together to confirm something that he had said, as he prodded, poked and thoroughly surveyed the hull of the ship.

When they had finally finished they all went to stand on the deck where Gale presented them all with tea and coffee, which were currently the main source of fuel driving the Wolf.

Spencer took a great gulp of his coffee, then put his cup down to before wiping coffee from his large beard, which Terri wrote; “made him look even more like an old walrus”.

"Ah", whispered Isobella and Dave at the exact same moment: "now for the bad news".

But Spencer, disappointed them by taking his old leather tobacco pouch and pipe, with its bowl carved in the shape of a bearded man who looked like Lester from his waistcoat pocket, delicately using his big hands, as finely as any surgeons to fill the its bowl and light it.

"Let the ropes loose you two" he finally said when he had taken a puff on his pipe. "I can hear you worrying yer selves to death from here, it is not as bad as you and I thought it might be. In fact this old girl is in very good condition for a craft of her age.

Thing is she was built right by whoever built her. We will probably know who that was by the time we slip her back in to the water, whoever it was, was real born and bred craftspeople. Not from round here I bet. Foreigners of some variety but craft folk they were, real craft folk.

Should take us about three days to finish, the gods willing, with all my people and all the folk who have come to help,got quite a shock when I first saw them all this morning I can tell you, then you will be able to sail her through the ice seas, the warm seas, through the storm seas as well as the calm ones orso, without any trouble, anywhere you wants to go.

Young Leeward should be just about ready to get started" and they all looked over their shoulders towards the boatyard where young Leeward was leading his team of workers, plus some of the helpers that had arrived that morning, as well as one or two stragglers who seemed more interested in sharing a smoke catching up to gossip with friends whom they had not seen in a long time.

And so the morning progressed, until there were people at work on every part of the hold, as well as scouring other parts of the ship looking for work. Painting almost anything that stayed still and some that did not.

If the previous days work on the ship had been a well contained, mostly organised day of work, the dry dock was that and more; like a circus act that made the audience hold their breath when the performers were high up in the big top, it felt as though things could go very wrong, very quickly.

A sign writer was at work with his brush repainting the Wolfs name. Adding more scroll work to the stern and bow with a couple of local artists to help him.

Two old sea dogs, who were not satisfied with the state of the ships rigging had there team working as though they were afraid of being accused of being malingerers and tied to the mast to receive ten lashes.

In fact every part of the old ship was being attended to or as someone had joked; "a full face with body lift she is getting, who is going to look after the toe nails"? And in the shared good humour that seemed to be everywhere, one of the artists made a grand new sign which read; "The Gifford's Bay Ships Beauty Parlour".

The sign was presented to Spencer and Leeward at a ceremony at days end and erected next to the existing sign for "Paternosters Boatyard”.

Spencer had insisted that alcohol would only be drunk in moderation at days end. Adding that anyone who wanted to drink more should go to the Giffs Inn when they had finished work.

The big man who had brought the cask of beer seemed about to object to this but then thought better of it.

Amongst, and through all of this activity the children had continued to play when they were not engaged in work.

Terrie`s game had quickly become: "The One and Only Pirate Game". With her as chief adjudicator in questions of rules and disputes.

When she was not adjudicating or helping Gale prepare food, drinks and generally looking after the welfare of all, she was "observing" as she liked to tell everyone who asked what she was writing in her new book, which she now called The Journal of the Tea Trip.

The new book had been given to her by a teacher from the Gifford`s Bay School,

which had decided to send a school teacher to the boatyard because so many of their children would be there.

It was after all the biggest thing that had happened in Gifford's Bay since a passenger ship had sheltered there from a storm.

The teachers name was Miss Rose, who seemed almost too young to be a teacher but both Kat and Terri agreed that she was like a younger, more delicate version of Miss Burnside and spent as much time with her as they could.

Terri`s new book was a very handsome, handmade one.; covered in fine soft leather, which had been going to be a prize at the school for something or other but had finally ended up becoming Terri's notebook to replace the one she had already filled up.

Befitting its fine leather binding she decided she would now call it her journal.

She particularly liked the comforting feel of it under her arm.

She thought it gave her a professional, adult look, along with a slightly used pencil case, complete with pencils, which one of the artistes had given her; "only been used a bit" as she told everybody.

And so the day progressed towards its finish.

The time was decided by the big man with the beer cask, who began to pour ale from the cask for those who had a "thirst".

A number of people began sighing loudly as they stretched their backs, until an unspoken consensus was reached as everyone began packing up and said their goodbyes.

Spencer`s request was heeded, so it was not long before the last thirsty workers were winding their way home or in the direction of the Giff`s Inn if they still had a " real thirst", leaving the crew seated silently on the deck, feeling in awe at just how much had been achieved that day.

Their eyes wandered over the ship, resting on freshly polished metal, freshly painted timbers, reborn rigging with the comforting thought of the renovation of the ships hull beneath them.

"Well Nelly got a new frock, we really got the ball across the line" Dave finally spoke for all of them, although Terri and Kat really had no idea what he meant, though they sort of got it.

Terri made more notes in her new journal writing; "requires further translation" next to her record of this obviously important statement.

Gale was the first to rise.

"Well I no longer recognise this ship as the one we left Whitchford on, perhaps we should think about re-naming her The Lady Isobella.

Come on you lot lets get some food, I am already thinking about my bunk and sleep".

So the tired but happy crew left Terri sitting alone on deck.

Gale's comment had got her thinking.

Not even hot food or a comfy bunk could stop her writing; "New name competition? Prize to be decided".

Then she too went below to help prepare the food.

She suspected she would be carried to her bunk already asleep after she had eaten, like the dormouse she remembered reading about when she was younger, even though she did not feel like a dormouse felt, however that was, nor did she feel like what she supposed it felt like to be a young adult but she did feel something all the same.

Finally the ship was alone. It sighed deeply from right down in its bilges as it stretched its great wooden self.

Then it chuckled like a child with a deep voice might, because The Sea Wolf was feeling like a child again but feeling something different; sometimes old and sad, longing for the memories of her youth when she had been beautiful, swift and admired.

Yes, she did feel new again.

And yes, she would like quite like a new name as The Lady Isobella.

Soon she joined the crew in her belly, drifting into a sleep that only an old ship being reborn can enjoy.

When the third day dawned there was a feeling of expectancy; would the Wolf be ready for the last leg of her journey?

From mid morning a crowd steadily grew around the ship from Gifford`s Bay and the surrounding countryside.

It was a fine excuse for a day off from whatever people should be doing to catch up to gossip with friends as they explored their picnic hampers together.

Sarah and Moses had brought the Giff`s Inn to the people, providing their finest ales, wine, spirits with their famous baked pasties and suckling pig on the spit.

By the mid afternoon the crowd had grown quieter, with snoring replacing conversation and laughter, as people enjoyed a quiet siesta resting their heads resting on someones lap.

Then as the sun started to sink towards the horizon Lester appeared on deck to let Isobella know that; "the hull is as tight as a tight drum down to the last plank and the last seam, fit to travel to the far corners of the world on every sea in any weather".

Isabella broke into tears, hugging Lester who blushed as the crowd rose in applause cheering, as though they had just witnessed a fine performance that the cast should receive several encores for, which they did, bowing to their audience, casting caps and hats into the air, embracing each other.

Finally, Lester and his men re-floated the ship to be returned her to her place at the wharf

Gifford's Bay had also been reborn when the old Sea Wolf had limped into town.

The next year the day was celebrated again, with people coming from up and down the coast, so in years to come: "The Gifford's Lady Isoabella Festival" became a famous event; a festival week of all things nautical, as well as music, theatre, food and art.

That evening, when the crew had the ship to themselves again, they all sat down to eat but Isbella stayed standing on the deck.

"I just wanted to say" she said, then stopped, "oh heck I have already cried enough today, I can never say thank you enough to all of you, you have been extraordinary. When I proposed this voyage, this adventure, this Tea Trip" and they all laughed, "not one of you ever questioned me. You are all so brave.

I have a fine bottle or two of wine made from the D'Artagne's own grapes by the monks of Skiel Island for us to drink a toast with".

It was indeed a fine rich, red wine, with the hint of the wild seas of Skiel Island and the smokiness of the old monks holy candles, with which they toasted their voyage.

Trin, Kat and Terri took a sip too.

When Terri went to make a note in her journal about the toast, she decided that her hand could not quite control the pencil and her mind seemed to have taken her to other places that were far more interesting than making another journal note.

The next morning the crew all felt the excitement of the voyage beginning again but it was a slow start to the day after the frenzy of rebuilding, the crew slumbering in their bunks.

The old ship slumbered on too, enjoying the feel of her new planks and the joy of having a firm, tight skin once again.

But there was still much to do; stores needed replenishing, presents needed giving, which were mainly in the form of the remaining bottles of wine and Skiel Island Monks Liqueurs, along with plenty of hugging, shaking of hands, including the official one of thanking the towns mayor and council, who had been very helpful during their stay.

Then their was the young man called Byorn who had asked to join them on the journey on his own smaller boat to be discussed, as well as many more things to be done before they could set out on the Tea Trip again.

Trin and Kat had their own very separate concerns to deal with.

For Kat it was saying goodbye to the "man boy" who had attached himself to her and whom she now felt attached to in return.

He had gone from being plain annoying, to being:" that boy who I sort of like. The one I hope will be around each day, the one I like to be around. A boy called Caster, who was in fact not annoying at all, kind of nice in fact", someone whom she would miss.

For Trin, it was a secret he knew could not remain a secret. One he had to share with Isobella very soon.

It was frustratingly uncomfortable.

He felt as though he could burst at any moment but there never seemed to be just the right time to tell it.

But Trin did not have to wait much longer to share his secret.

As soon as breakfast was finished Isobella and Gale set out to buy provisions, distribute thanks and presents, taking Trin along with them to help.

As soon as they had left the he stopped Isobella to explain his secret to her.

He was so nervous that it came out in a torrent of words that did not seem to be in anyway connected to each other in his head.

"Trin, Trin just stop, take your time if you have something important to tell us" Gale said.

"We can`t understand a word you are saying".

So Trin stoped, taking a deep breath before he was able to tell them what his secret was.

"I met this boy called Rohan who he told me that he had heard two of the men that had come to help talking. They did not know he was listening into their conversation of course but they were talking about spying on us. They said that they could get a lot of money for the information if they could see a man called Mark something, maybe, David Truhelen, he said he could could not hear that part properly but anyway he said that they had to get to the ship the man owned, which was somewhere out at sea near the entrance to Gifford`s Bay and they had been sent to spy up and down the coast to get information for this man Mark, I am pretty sure that is what Rohan said".

"Thank you Trin, you have done well, very well indeed, I have heard something about this from Truan, the man is called Mark Trevelyan Davis, so we must be on are guard.

I will be seeing her today so I can talk to her about it then."

Trin felt much better after he had told them and thought he might work as a spy when he was older, so that when he went to sleep that night he dreamt about being a spy.

In Gifford's Bay they bought provisions but even though they had arranged to have some of them delivered to the ship they decided that they would still have too much to carry back on board The Wolf, so Gale told Trin to go back to the ship and bring the rest of the crew into town to help with all the supplies.

Then they sat down to drink their morning coffee in the Giff`s Inn as soon as all the well wishers had left them alone.

"I talked with Dave last night" Gale said as soon as they were seated, "and he agrees that we should change the ships name to The Lady Isobella and see if we can`t get that signwriter back to the dock today to change it, if you agree Isobella".

She did not know what to say right away, it was one of those things that had started out as a joke and grown into something that looked as if it was about to become a reality.

She took a sip from her cup and played with her saucer before she could answer.

"Oh why in gods name not" she said, "it seems like an important thing but after everything we have been through and what we might be facing just why not. Lets see if we can get hold of that signwriter and get it changed, I am sure The Wolf would like a new name to go with her makeover" they both laughed together and Moses brought them cake to celebrate on the house.

"Then there is the question of the boat that wants to come with us Gale, what do you and Dave think about that.

"Well Dave talked to the skipper Byorn and seems to think he is alright, it would be good to have another vessel join us on the voyage, you never know what help we might need but in light of what Trin and Truan have said.

I think we should invite him and his crew to a meeting as soon as we can don`t you"?

And so it was done, with a nod of their heads, a piece of cake and coffee they agreed to get hold of Byorn and his two shipmates for a meeting.

And as it often seemed to happen in the community of Gifford`s Bay, Sarah and Moses seemed to know everyone and messages were soon on their way to both Byorn and the signwriter.

By the time that the crew had arrived at the inn to help, Walter Von Plettenberg the signwriter, was already on his way to the ship, carrying all his equipment and his dog called Myrtle in the sidecar attached to his motorcycle.

And before their lunch was served, Byorn arrived with his crew for a meeting to discuss joining them.

Isobella had decided that she would not talk to Byorn about the Far Shore or the gathering yet but if they were to travel together, she would need do it in private.

When Byorn arrived with his crew, Moses had already started putting together extra tables to fit everyone in and Sarah was in the kitchen, which she liked to call, "My Place of Worship", busy cooking while she sang a wistful song that had been a favourite of her grandmothers.

She had a fine voice, the song providing the accompaniment to everyone getting seated, with the scraping of chairs, clearing of throats that is the time honoured ritual of meeting new folks.

Once they were all seated introductions were made and the joined tables were made into one.

Gale, who sat next to Isabella at the head of the table, looked down the table to get a sense of how everyone seemed to fit together.

The secret news of Trin and Truan, was foremost in her mind. Only a short time ago she had been preoccupied with what they would eat for dinner or whether the fishing would be good or when they would be able to see her ageing parents again, who lived on an island that was that was some away distance from them.

Now she was considering Byorn and his two crew members as potential travelling companions on what could become a dangerous voyage.

Isobella was talking to him about the work they had just been carried out on the newly named Lady Isobella.

Byorn struck Isabella as having a good knowledge of the sea, as well as being what she thought of as a solid type who would be unlikely to panic if things got tough.

She considered herself a pretty good judge of character, with the exception of some of the relationships she would rather forget about from her youth.

We will see she said to herself. I will not make up my mind until I have seen Truan later.

As the meal progressed people were able to relax together while David told some of the many stories he knew, which created laughter.

Terri was busy recording as many of the stories as she could in the journal on her lap, which got confusing when she mixed the pencil up with her cutlery but she decided it was almost as efficient an eating implement anyway, while she tried not to let her food go cold, as often seemed to happen when her journal took up so much of her time.

The meal was an opportunity for Trin to work on his spying skills, developing his powers of observation on Byorn and his crew.

He also looked enviously at Terri and her elegant new journal, making mental notes: one get his own even better journal as soon as possible, two talk to Terri about her journal keeping skills as much as possible without making her too suspicious.

He also considered the first step in his Training to be A Spy Manual: being able to keep a secret and being able to tell the secret efficiently when required to do so, without it coming out sounding like a flock of seagulls fighting over a dead fish.

But the most important thoughts whirring about in his young head were the men that Rohan had tole him about.

How would they identify them before they left Gifford`s Bay, if they were to leave tomorrow or the day after tomorrow?

He was starving, so he decided there were too many questions to be answered. He would just keep his eyes open for two men who looked up to no good, occuping himself with eating, leaving the questions for later.

Chapter 7

Dancing Assassins

"You might think you are tough and can intimidate me or anyone else you choose to intimidate but you just think you are tough, which does not mean you are tough. I have been intimidated by people who are tough right down to their toes matey, so just stop invading my space and bugger off"!

And so the conversation went on in Curnow's head, as he stood at the wheel of the Eagle in sight of the entrance to the harbour at Gifford`s Bay.

If it was anyone else he might have spoken his thoughts out loud but this was the owner standing so close to him that he could spell last nights whisky and cigars on his breath. There was a time when that would of made no difference to him but he knew when too keep his mouth shut these days.

The Eagle had been circling round this same area for two days in what Trevelyan liked to call "his holding pattern".

"Holding pattern is that what you like to call it eh?" and Curnow smiled to himself.

"Well I could tell you what you are holding and it aint no damn aircrafts controls or ship`s wheel matey. I know exactly what you are up to, Your Dishonourable Lordship.

You are looking for Isabella and The Sea Wolf or anyone else you fancy trying to stop from going where they want to go. Just a plain old gangster is what you are. That is the truth don`t you mind, as my gran used to say".

"Just keep her like that steersman, steady as she goes, that's the fellow" Trevelyan said as he left the deck.

Curnow managed to hold on to the gob of spit in his mouth until Trevelyan had disappeared back to his cabin, so he could aim it at the deck, along with a string of oaths.

He threw his shoulders back and took several deep breaths once his Lordship, as the crew called him, had left.

"Steersman is that what I am" Curnow spoke out loud "steersman" he said again and a familiar voice answered.

"Steady now Mr Curnow, steady, there may only be you and me plus one hungover deckhand topside now but we cannot be too careful, capiche senor"?

It was the skipper standing next to him now, just about as close as Trevelyan had been but he had made no sound and brought no smell of whisky or cigars with him.

He had given Curnow quite a shock but he did not show it.

"Well skipper, you are as quiet on your feet as a dancing assassin, there's no doubt about it".

"I will take that as a compliment from you" the skipper said laughing.

"Not often I hear you laugh skipper, in a good mood are you?"

"Well we can talk here, quiet like, without much risk and we can trust each other Curnow.

I think we both know what is going on. I would not trust him or most of this crew if my back were turned.

You would be wise to do the same, like a dancing assassin as you say, if you want to return to dry land in one piece" and Curnow turned to look at the skipper and nodded his head.

"Skipper it is time I think I should tell you everything I know or think I know.

Gloves off and all that stuff eh, we are headed into a big storm.

I do not mean the sort with wind and waves. No this is human made, Trevelyan is part of a criminal group or at least he wants to be.

He is desperate to show them how useful he is. Get in on the game of the power and wealth that he knows they have.

Not just ordinary old power either, these people are prepared to use whatever dark powers they can to get what they want, evil is what they are, plain evil. Greed is their god skipper".

Then their was silence until Curnow spoke again. "Have you ever heard of The Far Shore skipper"?

"I have Curnow, thought it was just an old tale, a bit of sea whimsy or some sort of folklore about pirates, pirates I ask you what next sea monsters"?

"No skipper, this is no myth or whimsy or silly gossip or whatever you want to call it, they do exist but not as we think of pirates, they are not the criminals, although they might of have been in the past to stretch the law from time to time. Trevelyan`s lot are after them for what they have, they want to use them for their own ends.

They would be happy to turn the sea pink. Fill it with more rubbish then you can imagine if it makes them money and brings them more power".

"So Curnow, tell me everything you know".

Almost in a whisper Curnow told the skipper what he knew as he steered the ship, while both of them kept their eyes open for anyone who might report back to Trevelyan.

When he finished they were both silent for some time before the skipper spoke.

"Well let me tell me what my plan is. At the moment it is us against Mr Trevelyan with his crew of thugs but there are two of the crew that I think we can trust.

Old Jackobson, who knows more about the sea than any one of us and Clunes that young lad from the northern isles.

I think we should sound them both out, so we know where they stand.

Then with regard to The Wolf, we will need to think about how to put Trevelyan of his game.

He is a tight with his money. Refused to do the work I wanted done to the ship before we left port. The rudder is not as strong as it could be, nor his beloved new motor, which could be prone to break down under hard use, as well as plenty of rigging that could cause some problems".

"So we should make sure that it is possible that we might experience problems at the worst possible moment skipper, is that it, rudder, motor or rigging whatever it might be that could take us out of the game"?

"Exactly Curnow, exactly, we will need to move like the dancing assassins to avoid trouble though".

There were no more words after that, just a handshake before the skipper left the deck with Curnow at the wheel.

Well, well you has boxed yourself into the corner against a tough opponent and now you have to get back in to the centre of the ring, no doubt about it. There is not much time either, the Wolf could appear out of the inlet to Gifford's Bay at any moment and then the game would be on.

And so The Eagle carried on in its holding pattern while another ship was preparing for its journey. No longer The Sea Wolf but The Lady Isobella, was the centre of attraction in Gifford's Bay.

Lester Patternoster had sent two of his apprentices onto the ship with the order: "To make yourself useful in any way you can and don`t let me see you lounging about or you will be scraping barnacles till Christmas".

The lunch meeting had finished in the Giff`s Inn and Byorn and his crew had departed.

The crew of were in agreement that they would be joining them on the next leg of the trip but Isobella said that a final decision would be reached that afternoon after she had talked to Truan.

General ships business was discussed and it was decided that they should take one more day to get the ship ready, just in case. No one was in any real doubt about what "just in case" really meant.

The Tea Trip had become a serious sort of voyage rather than a jaunt and they would all be happy to have another day in the safety of Gifford`s Bay.

So it was a quiet crew who were joined by a couple of locals to help carry the provisions back to the ship, one of whom was Caster who managed to position himself as close as possible to Kat.

They left Isobella behind at the Giff`s Inn to meet Truan, with Terri to take some notes and prepare a brief precis of what she had written so far in her journal.

Terri or Teresa or even "young Terri", which she did not like being called and all the parts that she felt she was, were in shock.

Did mother, her mum really want her to stay and be a sort of official, non official journal keeper and not just: "that kid with the book"?

"Is that alright Terri" her mother asked when she failed to react, "you know you don`t have to do it if you don`t want to but I think your journal could be very useful, I don`t want you to stop keeping it, ok"?

She nodded and smiled at her mother who kissed her.

"Mother" she finally said, "I would love to give you a precipice or precis or whatever you want, it`s just that I am a bit shocked and a lot proud to be the official journal keeper of the Tea Trip or The Journey to Thar be Buried Treasure or Thar be Danger, as I sometimes think of it" she said, in her best pirate accent and they both laughed together.

The crew arrived back at the ship Trin as the straggler deliberately taking it slowly so he could see who might be taking more than a passing interest in what they were doing. He had seen nothing that he thought was suspicious until he arrived at the dock.

There was a small fishing trawler sitting at a mooring which had not been there when he first went to the cafe that morning, with two men working on deck, although they did not seem to be doing much of anything really, so Trin stopped pretending to look as though he was rearranging the provisions he was carrying. He saw them watching him and the rest of the crew who were now on the deck of the ship.

They are suspicious, he thought to himself deciding to gather as much information about the men and their trawler as he could.

Truan had arrived at the Giff`s Inn where Isobella ordered more coffee and juice for Terrie, who had taken the time to wash her face,check her nails to see if they were clean and thoroughly brush her hair because that's what she thought a good assistant would do.

Isobella tried counting the number of cups of coffee she had had that day but lost count at five, deciding it did not matter anyway, even if she did feel a bit sick and her nerves were jumping around like the ball in an old pinball machine.

Truan`s cool and calm self helped her to calm down and for awhile they chatted as though they were just a couple of friends meeting for an early afternoon cup of coffee together.

But the chat stopped when Truan started to tell her what she had found out about the threat they were facing.

The news was no better or no worse than she had expected as she thought of Terri sitting beside her diligently writing in her journal wondering if they should not all stay in Giff`s Bay for awhile longer until things were safer.

But the thought passed away as the pinball stopped pinging in her head.

The crew were keen to get out to sea and test the ship in open waters and Isobella nerves had settled down, so there last day in Gifford`s Bay was a day of checking and rechecking that everything was in place ready for their departure on the morning tide the following day.

Byorn`s little craft, The Fair Lady, had joined them now, sitting alongside them at the dock where she was dwarfed by The Lady Isobella but Byorn assured them that his vessel was fast and would surprise them with her speed and manoeuvrability at sea.

On The Eagle, Trevelyan had ordered the skipper to move the ship closer to the coast and set a lookout for any ships coming or going from Gifford's Bay.

The skipper had put their plans in place with two willing allies in Jackob and Clunes, who had no more time for Trevelyan than they did, were ready and willing to help with the skippers plan to exploit the weaknesses he had identified in the ship, should it be needed.

Late in the twilight of their last day in Gifford`s Bay father and son, Dave and Trin watched the little fishing boat with its crew of two leave its mooring and set out to sea. They made no secret that they were watching and were soon joined by the rest of the crew.

Now the last leg of their journey was about to begin it was time for the games to stop and Byorn and his crew joined them on the deck of The Fair Lady to also watch, while on shore Lester and his son Seaward and some of the boat builders also stood watching, in the still and silent twilight.

As the trawler started its journey down the narrow inlet to the sea, the crewman on deck dropped his pretence of preparing for a nights fishing turning to look at the watchers.

His scarred face soon turned into an ugly scowl baring a mouthful of bad teeth like an animal hunting prey.

"Gloves off then" Dave spoke for all of them with murmurs of recognition for the uncomfortable truth.

As an uncomfortable as that truth was, they all felt better with the expectation of leaving their hiding place and going out into the open sea.

Isabolla had finally spoken with Byorn about the true intent of their journey to the gathering or as much of it as she was prepared to share with him until she got to know him better.

He was not as surprised as she thought he would be and again she felt strengthened for the task ahead by the support she found for her trip from the people of the coast.

"I understand Isobella, so do my crew, we support you and that is why we wanted to travel with you. We want to help you reach your destination" he told her as they shook hands.

And, yes of course it was alright, that had always been the way of the Far Shore, the meeting of eyes and shaking of hands was a contract not to broken.

On shore there were silent prayers spoken for The Lady Isobella and her crew by Lester, his son and the boat builders.

They were the prayers that the people of the coast had been saying for the safe journey of those who go to sea since the time of their forebear's, still whispered to children to put them to sleep, sung quietly by the fisher folk to ask for a good catch to bring home.

There was little conversation on The Lady Isobella that night, with everyone wanting to guard their own fears and dream their own dreams without any nightmares.

Terri was the last person to go to sleep on either of the two vessels, where she wrote her journal by torchlight, snuggled into the nest of her bunk. She was getting to enjoy this "journal stuff" as she called it, but it did take a lot of work to keep up with everything that was happening and make sure it was recorded before she forgot it.

She was determined to write her "precipice" or precis of all that had happened to them since the storm had sent them running to the safety of Gifford`s Bay. As she wrote she saw the story of their stay unfolding along with all the characters who had become part of her journal.

Even though her eyes kept wanting to shut before she was finished, she just had enough but only just enough energy to finish and turn of the torch to blissful darkness and sleep, until she dreamt that someone had put her fully clothed into a washing machine.

Chapter 8

Song to the Sea

"I will take my own clothes of, thank you very much, before you put them in the machine" Terrie woke up shouting but it was only Kat, who was always one of the first up in the morning, shaking her awake, laughing so much that she could hardly stand.

The day had started. Not just any day but the first time they took The Lady Isobella out to sea in her new skin.

By the time they had cast off and were in the narrow channel heading towards the open sea, it seemed like everybody on board had shaken hands with all the people of Gifford`s Bay.

They had received presents of coils of almost new rope and almost unused sweaters; "it were my Dan's before he left and I ain`t seen his ugly face since then but it will keep you warm see if it don't" and many fruit cakes which were all claimed to be: "the best recipe for miles around, my grans" and several kilos of homemade fudge, homemade beer and cider, jars of jam, honey, chutney, bottles of wine and curiously a beautiful pair of high heel shoes for; "the Lady Isobella herself, you never know when they might come in handy, you see if they don't my lovely", which came from a lady who was said "to have been be quite a star in her time" and so on and so forth until their was a shared sigh of relief from all on board both vessels when they finally cast off.

Leaving to three cheers with the accompaniment of the musicians from The Giff`s Inn playing a hearty jig or two, with a speech by the mayor which was drowned out by the noise of the crowd until he gave up and kissed his wife for the joy of it all and the crowd cheered some more.

Standing above the crowd on an old ship, which had been dragged ashore many years ago to become the office and beating heart of the boatyard were Lester, his son Leeward, Truan, Moses and Sarah from the Gifts Inn, as well as all the workers from the boatyard.

As the two vessels made their way to the sea, the crowd became silent, until Lester and his son started to sing in unison in fine deep voices, an old song of the sea to protect all those who go out on ships to reach their journeys end.

It was a song well known to the people of the coast and quickly taken up by one voice after another until the whole crowd of well wishers had become one great choir accompanied by the musicians, the sound of their voices reaching the vessels where Dave took up the song until everyone on both vessels had become the choir on the water, in heart if not in voice, if they really did not all know the words to the song.

Only Terri was not singing but scrabbling to find a place where she could sit to write the words down in her journal:

Song to the Sea

My course will be set

That I may sail swiftly

The gods that we know

We ask for your respect

This sailor on your seas

This sailor on your seas

That I may reach my journeys end

And safe return

This sailor asks of you

This sailor on your seas

This sailor on your seas

And to the gods of the Sea

Wind and Light

The space above our heads

The map of stars

Which charts are course

Which charts are course

From this sailor on your seas

This sailor on your seas

Who asks for your respect

To use what you have given

Of glorious silver bounty

In my days work

This grateful sailor on your seas

This grateful sailor on your seas

Winds that carry us

I sing to you

For my safe return

And ask for your respect

This sailor on your seas

This sailor on your seas

With the end of the song the crew set about their work.

Terri hoped that she had written down all the words correctly and turned her mind to help sailing The Lady Isobella, who released from captivity was eager for the voyage.

When the sails had been set and the last gift of fruit cake, chutney or fudge was stowed below decks, each member of the crew found there own place to rest on the deck to enjoy the chill of the wind on their cheeks as the ship reborn beneath them played with the waves.

Isobella stood at the wheel singing the leaving song almost in a whisper thinking that she would never have a finer send off or feel her heart more full and as Dave had said: "the gloves are off" and the real voyage is begun, come what may be.

Chapter 9

The Open Sea and Come What May

Curnow was at the wheel of The Eagle, with only the skipper and a hungover sailor on watch. They both watched as the drunken sailor`s head came once more to rest on his chest. They were too far away to hear any the snores but that suited them fine, with Trevelyan's watchman asleep they could mount their own watch and speak freely.

Curnow asked the skipper to take the wheel and took an old telescope from the inside pocket of his sea coat.

Not for the first time since first light that day he trained the telescope on the coast around the inlet to Gifford`s Bay and saw the trawler that had been siting there since last night.

"That trawler is still there skipper but they still don`t appear to be doing any fishing" and the skipper chuckled.

"Likely to fishing for vessels eh, not fish. Lets hope they are about as good at that as are friend the watchman over there is at watching, eh".

But Curnow was not interested in fishermen who did not fish or a drunken sailor who did not watch, because he could see what looked like two vessels coming out to sea from the entrance to the inlet to Gifford`s Bay. One was quite a lot bigger than the other but they were sailing together.

He felt his heart race and he knew even at that distance that the bigger of the vessels was the old Wolf and he imagined that at her wheel was Isobella, with her long hair tied back under her sea cap with her eyes shining bright.

"That's them skipper, that's them by all the powers, that's them skipper" and try as he could, he could not keep the excitement or the passion of the moment out of his voice.

"Well thank the lord for that" the skipper said and surprised himself by speaking of the lord, which was something he had not done for a long time and did not believe in anymore.

"Old habits David, old habits" he whispered to himself and found comfort in his hands tightening on the smooth, worn wood of the ships wheel.

"Take the wheel, I need to go below and have a quiet word with Jackobson and Clunes, battle stations and all that stuff " before taking a small bottle from his pocket and pressing it into Curnow's hand.

"Just a couple of drops mind you under are sleeping friends nose and he won`t be waking anytime soon but careful now just two drops and no more Curnow it is powerful stuff" and the skipper went to find their two shipmates.

Not for the first time the skipper had surprised Curnow with his foresight and his cunning.

"You clever bugger" he said out loud as the skipper left the deck set about securing the wheel so that he could administer the drops to the drunken sailor.

"They have seen us Isobella" and Dave pointed to the trawler and the two men who stood on the deck watching them.

"Well Dave there is nothing we can do about that now, we have a voyage ahead of us of at least six or seven days or perhaps more, depending on the weather, before we reach the gathering place. We are running late but there will no doubt be later arrivals who are coming from far away and I have not told you about the meeting I had with Truan at the Giff`s Inn yesterday Davy.

She said it will be the biggest gathering since the great one many years ago, when The Church of the Blessed Believer tried to unite the world`s powers against us. It was only are good friends and allies in high places and good luck that saved us from great danger then. This time it is even more dangerous for us, if we are to overcome those who want to us to be fellow travellers with them in their plans".

As Dave listened to Isobella for all his love of words, song and story, he found they had deserted him and all that he was left with was a feeling of emptiness.

He thought of his love for Gale and Trin and the fish he took from the sea being replaced by rubbish in his nets when he pulled them up from the depths.

He looked at Isobella, her eyes fixed on the horizon as she steered the ship and thought of Gale and the young ones down below and Byorn with his crew sailing ahead of them and finding the words he was looking for he spoke them out loud.

"It will be alright, you see if it isn't, we will stand together, together we are stronger than these people who corrupt and care nothing for our world but only for their own greed".

Curnow had delivered the knockout drops to the watchman and made sure that he was made safe from falling and returned to his place at the wheel. They could not wait too long to report seeing the two vessels to Trevelyan and he wondered how long he would have to wait for the skipper to return.

But not long after he had returned to the wheel the skipper came back and then almost immediately Trevelyan appeared on deck himself, looking rather the worse for ware Curnow thought.

Not being one for breathing the bracing sea air, Trevelyan stopped to light one of his cigars. With a fresh wind blowing and his own fumbling, it took quite some time and a lot of cursing from him before it was lit, which gave Curnow time to rehearse what he would say and have a whispered conference with the skipper.

"What are you two whispering about"? Trevelyan said when he finally came to join them at the wheel.

"Nothing really Mr Trevelyan, we did not want to disturb you like, when you was lighting your cigar" Curnow said in his best nothing to see here, everything is fine here voice.

"Nothing, well let me know what this nothing is, do not forget that I am the owner of this ship and therefore ultimately responsible for everything, so I will decide what nothing is, and what it is not if you do not mind" and fixed his I am in charge gaze on him.

But it was the skipper who answered after clearing his voice.

"Of course Mr Trevelyan, absolutely sir, but we were just discussing the two ships near Gifford`s Bay, probably cruising their way up the coast to one of the ports no doubt sir".

"Ships, ships" Trevelyan shouted and dropped his freshly lit cigar to the deck, from where Curnow went to retrieve it after handing the wheel to the skipper.

"Change course now skipper to close up to them so that I can see what ships they are. I will decide what ships are important and what ships are not important and where they might be going while on the deck of my vessel, understand that" and then he went to stand and study the two ships with the cigar, which Curnow had given back to him, now firmly in his mouth again.

He seemed to have puffed his chest out and be standing on his toes as though he was trying to make his small body larger, his profile: a study of our leader deep in thought.

"The great dictator" Curnow whispered and wondered how easily the owner seemed to have forgotten the sleeping watchman and his "crew", who seemed for the most part to have little knowledge of seamanship and were more interested in sleeping and drinking than working.

It was not long before Dave reported sighting the Eagle and its change of course to Isobella. "Could be any vessel at this distance but I would put money on it being the Eagle".

"Yes Dave I do not doubt that, run up the flags to let Byorn know and get everyone on deck, the game has begun" and Isobella wondered what Trevelyan might do.

His ship was certainly the largest and he would undoubtedly have a crew of ruffians but that could work in their favour: were his ruffians also sailors or just ruffians?

Did he have weapons and if so would he really try to shoot at them or was it a step to far, this close to land, with the risk that other vessels might be witness to any attack he made.

She thought from what she had learnt of Mr Trevelyan, that he would be more likely to try and bully her, with bluster and threats but she would not let him bully her into running back home now.

The Fair Wind had soon closed on them so that they were in shouting distance and a discussion was held and tactics discussed with Byorn.

They decided that the Fair Wind would easily outrun the Eagle and the Lady Isobella- now that she was in good shape-should also outrun her and skill might beat the bullies they decided.

"I also have a surprise if they get to close Isobella" Byorn shouted and pulled a tarpaulin back to reveal a small cannon on his deck.

"She is not big but makes a lot of smoke and noise if you know how to load her.

Isn't that what pirates do? Create fear and confusion, smoke and noise. A shot across their bows might just be enough to make them change their minds and let us get on with our journey".

Isobella was shocked by the sight of the cannon but quickly reasoned that Byorn might be right.

"As a last resort Byorn only or as I believe you are called Byorn the Viking" and both crews cheered; Byorn`s nickname was the Viking, another piece of information that Truan had told her at their last meeting in the Gifford`s Inn before they left.

"Let us use are sea skills, let the us show the bullies what real sea folk can do with the fair wind like we have today and courage not bluster".

And with that they got down to their work.

Isobella felt as though her and the vessel were as one and it was not just the old Wolf that had been reborn with her new skin but herself.

The doubts and fears that had beset her for so long were gone and her skills as a sailor took over.

She gave orders but the crew already knew what needed doing, both quick and measured in their work with the Lady Isobella soon picking up her pace. She felt the joy of the vessel beneath her and the excitement of the challenge, for that is what it would be, a challenge of skills.

The skipper and Curnow had been watching the two ships and immediately saw the pick up in their progress as soon as they had parted.

Their own deck had turned into a place of activity but it was clear to both of them that the only people apart from them on the deck who real sailors were old Jackob's and young Clunes.

Trevelyan had decided to assume full command, striding round the deck like a sea lord shouting out orders but it really was chaos that he created and they could not be happier.

"They will try to outrun us, what do you reckon" the skipper said.

"No doubt skipper and I think they will probably do it too. You know as well as I do that the Eagle is not in the best condition and without a proper crew and with what we have planned I think they just might do it".

But despite all the confusion and the crews capacity to get in each others way and not know what they should be doing, the Eagle managed to draw closer to the two ships.

Curnow put the telescope to his eye and saw immediately that the old Wolf had certainly had some work done on her since she left Whitchford.

"She is fairly bouncing through the water and what's this, well I never, The Lady Isobella is it now, a new name" and chuckling to himself he passed the telescope to the skipper and took over the wheel.

It did not take the skipper long to confirm what Curnow had said was right.

"So that`s what happened when they were in Gifford`s Bay. There has been a lot of work done to that vessel in a very short time. She is sailing beautifully and that would be Isobella herself at the wheel, a tidy ship indeed".

Then he trained the telescope on the Fair Wind and recognised her and her skipper immediately. "That's the Fair Wind and her skipper Byorn. They call him the Viking and it is a name well earnt I can tell you and I should know because he sailed with me when he was just a lad.

He knows his stuff and that little vessel of his is as fast as any I know. This is a race and one we are unlikely to win Curnow, given what we have planned and the crew we have".

Then they were interrupted by Trevelyan shouting; "skipper, skipper here now man, I want you next to me here on deck" and with a wink at Curnow the skipper went to join the owner who seemed to have lost most of his swagger, his face the colour of beetroot.

"With any luck we will be putting him in his bunk and heading to port to find a doctor" Curnow said to himself and at that moment he caught the eye of old Jackobson and young Clunes and exchanged a nod and a wink with both of them.

The skipper had taken over the ship once more and Trevelyan had found a comfy spot in the bow where he could smoke a cigar and try to strike the pose of a confident though somewhat dishevelled ship`s owner.

The skipper had no option but to direct his crew as a skipper should do.

"Neither you nor I signed on to join a gang of thugs, my conscience as a skipper is clear on that count and so should yours be" he had said to Curnow when they had first seen the two ships.

But nonetheless things had settled down on the deck of the Eagle once Trevelyan had handed command over to him and they were closing on the ships to the point that they were within haling distance of them.

Then things happened very quickly.

Trevelyan seemed to suddenly come out of his slump in the bows and ran onto the deck issuing orders in a loud voice, which allowed the skipper to re-join Curnow at the wheel.

Jackobs and Clunes joined them, having found a very important job that suddenly needed doing very close to them and Trevelyan demanded that someone bring him the megaphone.

When the megaphone appeared, it was a battered, old tin one, which the owner of The Eagle refused to put anywhere near his lips until someone bought him a piece of tissue to cover the mouthpiece.

Standing as steadily as he could on the deck of the ship he addressed the two vessels, like a silent film director and told them to hove to as quickly as they could and for both skippers to come on board the deck of the Eagle for a conference.

His request was met with a quickening in the pace of both vessels leaving Trevelyan standing on the deck with his battered megaphone and no audience.

He threw it down in disgust and demanded that the skipper get the ship sailing faster and accused him of deliberately neglecting his duties.

"Yes sir" the skipper responded and set about shouting out orders in a loud voice.

Curnow had already called over Clunes and Jackobson to him and instructed Clunes to partially disable the rudder and Jackobson to do the same to the motor and then make sure the skiff was got ready for a hasty retreat if needed.

There was not much chance that either man would be noticed, given that the skipper was in charge again.

The two ships had both moved ahead of the Eagle by now and the much smaller and swifter Fair Wind began a series of manoeuvres which were designed to slow down the Eagle and then the wheel became difficult for Curnow to use and he shouted for someone to come and help him and panic seemed to take over on the deck of The Eagle.

Trevelyan flew into a rage when the skipper told him that there might be a problem with the rudder and threatened the skipper with instant dismissal and confinement below decks if men were not sent directly to inspect the rudder and the problem was not fixed immediately.

"We are falling behind, start the engine and then we will soon catch them" he ordered and took one of his ruffians aside where the skipper heard him tell the man to get the rifle.

There was the sound of the motor being started and Trevelyan rubbed his hands together with glee and said; "now we will catch them, just you see, the motor in this ship is big enough for a vessel many times bigger, just you see".

And it seemed that he was right, because once the motor was started, they started to move at a good rate of knots and Curnow wondered if Clunes had done what he asked him to do.

But it was only a brief reprieve before the big motor began to cough and miss like an old smoker and the vessel started to almost hop forward rather than make any real headway.

For some reason Trevelyan had ordered lifejackets be distributed and he made a lonely figure standing on the deck struggling to get his lifejacket on, until one of the crew went to help him but he swatted him away like an annoying fly and went to stand at the rail looking at the two vessels in the distance.

The ship was becoming more difficult to steer and Curnow used this as an excuse to let someone else take over the wheel to give him a rest and this allowed him to move to where the skipper and Clunes stood with Jackobson near the skiff at the stern.

"So what now" he said to the skipper, who took his time answering.

"I hope I talk for all of you when I say that I would never desert any ship I am the skipper off and I believe all of you would agree". There were nods and grunts of ascent at this and the skipper continued. "Anyhow, it would be mutiny. I heard the owner asking one of his ruffians to get a rifle but he must of thought better of it, because I have not seen it on deck yet, so rest easy and I will go and talk with him and I think he will make no objection to us going into port for repairs" and at this point the skipper smiled to himself, and they all looked towards the lonely figure of Trevelyan, still slumped against the rail of the ship in his bright yellow safety jacket.

The skippers conversation with him was a short one and it was agreed that they should make for port as quickly as they could for repairs.

" Anywhere but Gifford`s Bay skipper" he said, "they are all thief's and pirates there. I will be going below now to reorganise my current planning and further I would like to apologise for my, umm, comments earlier regarding your capabilities as the captain of this ship".

Then he went below deck. The skipper thought not unlike a man that has lost his own rudder, his intention:" to reorganise my current planning", which meant getting very drunk and staying in his cabin, still dressed in his bright yellow safety vest.

It was a slow, difficult journey and almost dark when they finally reached port.

The four "conspirators" as they now thought of themselves, then went to an inn where they were the only members of their crew, for a pleasant drink and discussion of the day`s events and what their plans were for the future.

It was a weary bunch that made their way back to a quiet ship and slept the sleep of angels, as they felt they were.

Dave and Isobella had witnessed the change in the Eagles course as she had started to head for port earlier that day.

"We is outrunning them Isobella" Dave1 had said, "something must have happened on board to slow them down but I reckon that they would have found it hard going to catch up on us anyway. The Lady is flying along and no mistake.

Never mind the hull and all the other work that was done, them old fellows sure knew what they were doing with all the rigging as well, no doubt about that. Anyway it looks like they be heading for port but I bet it won`t be Gifford`s Bay and that is for sure".

Isobella nodded at his comments but she was concentrating on looking through the glass of her telescope at the Eagle and the figure at it`s wheel.

She knew that tall figure well, with his black main of hair tied back with a red ribbon. It was Curnow, a little older with some streaks of grey in his hair but their was no mistaking him all the same.

She kept the glass on him for longer than she needed, until a kind of shiver ran through her and she slowly put it down.

She was only aware of the feeling inside her, everything else was just dull sound and movement around her and she stood staring at the Eagle lost in her reverie.

"Are you alright Isobella" it was Dave`s voice bringing her back to the sounds of the sea and the ship.

"I am ok Dave, just someone on the Eagle that I knew a long time ago and if he is anything like he used to be he might have a lot to do with why they suddenly slowed down" and she prayed that it was true and he had not joined a gang of criminals.

And if Dave did give her a questioning look, she had no wish to start telling him any stories about her past now.

The strength of her feelings when she had seen him at the wheel of the ship had surprised her and she could not keep the smile from her face.

"Steady as she goes Dave until we get closer to the Islands of Grief, where we can stop for a day at Guinivre and then set course for the gathering place. I am going below to get some grub".

Chapter 11

Grief and Hope

They enjoyed fair weather as they left the coast behind them and set course for the Islands of Grief, more benign than their name suggested.

The name came from a young admiral, Roland Grief, who through family influence had been made admiral at the age of thirty five and placed in charge of a fleet of ships, which had been wrecked off the islands two hundred years ago.

The survival of many of the ships crews was due to the courage of the inhabitants of the islands risking their own lives to rescue them from the rocks which they had foundered on.

Many of the sailors decided that the islands and their inhabitants were far more pleasant than there service in the navy and had stayed.

Dave had been fishing there and always found the people to be friendly and the food delicious, which made him hungry and he hoped that Gale would come and take over the wheel from him soon, so he could go below and eat.

The weather was good and allowed them to enjoy the freedom of the sea and organising the storage of everything they had taken on board in Gifford`s Bay.

Dave and Isobella held long discussions on how they sailed the ship, which was very different to the old Wolf.

For Trin, Kat and Terri there was some time to just mess around as they liked.

Terri put her journal aside and joined Kat and Trin in making up increasingly long, complicated games that often ended in helpless laughter at their own stupidity.

Gale spent many hours in her galley, where she, like Sarah at The Giff`s inn, enjoyed her temple of cooking by making delicious food, ensuring that everything was stored correctly so she would not waste time and the crew would always be well fed.

She made a special, secure place for some of the gifts from Gifford`s Bay, particularly the plentiful fudge and fruit cake after she had found Trin trying to hide a large slab of cake in his pocket; as he said "just for later mum ok".

Being a much smaller and swifter vessel, The Fair Wind spent a lot of time sailing ahead exploring as the Viking liked to do, with partner and first mate Shashti and crewman Anders.

The fish were plentiful and they had soon filled up what storage they had and Anders was responsible for setting up a fish smoking and drying area on the ships deck.

They ate fish at breakfast, lunch and at dinner, when desert was usually Gifford`s Bay homemade fruit cake or fudge.

They were excited to be sailing with The Lady Isobella and her crew on an adventure across the sea to a secret gathering place.

They spent a lot of time discussing where it was being held and whether any of them might actually be able to attend, which they doubted.

They also discussed the state of the sea they passed through and put whatever rubbish they found they put into the skiff which they trailed behind them like a floating rubbish collector.

They were old friends who all came from the same town on the coast of Godshaplund and managed to survive on very little: eating the fish they caught with some types of seaweed and whatever stores they had on board.

Sometimes they found work somewhere when they stopped for awhile and sometimes they sold what they made.

Byorn The Viking collected information on the sea and the environment for various groups and wrote articles for the media and web.

Shashti was many different things: a painter and jewellery maker based on her own designs made from her study of the sea, it`s creatures and of the spirits, gods and goddesses of the old religion.

And she was also a musician, who liked nothing better than to play her accordion or any other many instruments she could play and sing the songs of the sea, which she had learnt or composed: shanties, jigs and reels and what she called "her blues of many colours, the blues of the sea".

Anders nickname was Mr Adaptable or Just Fixit, because that is what he was and what he did.

There seemed to be little that he would not try to fix, repair, or make useful once again.

He was a young man who had survived his childhood and his family.

A student who was constantly in trouble at school where learning was an almost impossible task for him.

And as he liked to say he was headed for "a dark place", until a chance meeting with Anders and Shashti and invitation to join them on Fair Wind.

He found a place for his boundless curiosity and his skills and need to be constantly active. A place where his need to be involved was a gift and not a burden and he could be at peace.

They had heard of the Far Shore, which they thought might be based on some old myth or legend like some of Shashti`s art. That was until the Viking met Truan and then Isobella in Gifford`s Bay and here they were on an adventure with "pirates".

But not like any pirates they could have imagined and Shashti was already busy designing some artwork around them.

The Viking described them as: "benign and freedom loving people who would stand up for what they believed in".

Which suited all of the crew of the Fair Wind very well indeed.

Chapter 12

Tourists and Hunters

With fine weather and fair winds, on the fourth day after they had set out from Gifford`s Bay, the two vessels arrived at the port of Guinivre on the main island of the Islands of Grief, Chanelle.

Dave was in a great hurry when they arrived to take up his duties as a tour guide and the crew had hardly stepped ashore before he was describing the towns "outstanding" features for them.

He set off at pace to the fish market, being quick to call out to any stragglers to; "keep up you slow lot at the back, lots to see".

Given the amount of fish they had managed to catch on the trip they made quick work of the fish market and they were soon winding up a steep hill out of the town to the old fort led by Dave.

"This will soon get your land legs going and just wait until you see the view" he said several times to mumbled complaints about the pace they were walking at but they kept going to the fort and breathless or not the view was worth it when they arrived.

Dave stopped his tour guide chatter for awhile, so they were able to enjoy the vista over the town and the whole island.

The land was rich and green, dotted with farms and small settlements as far as they could see towards the inland mountain range.

Terri wrote in her journal: "The main island of Chanelle is a beautiful place, nothing like the name The Islands of Grief portrays, The Islands of Beauty is a better name I think".

Then they were off again at pace, down the hill into the town with Dave keeping up a commentary on some of "the main features and places of interest", he was a good and enthusiastic tour guide but there were soon murmuring's of: "the coffee smells good Dave" and "oh, just look at those beautiful pastries" and from the young ones: " ice cream is so good", which quickly turned into a kind of chant until Dave gave in.

"Mutiny is it, I will hang the lot of you from the yard arm or I should I say lamppost, I give in" he said in his best pirate voice and with a mock shrug of his shoulders he and took them to the town`s main square.

After a tour of the square they decided that the Admiral Grief`s Rest Cafe looked like a good place to stop for coffee and pastries and Dave remarked that he was sure the young admiral got plenty of rest after he returned home after having wrecked most of his fleet.

They were soon enjoying coffee and pastries at the café`s outside tables in the square and the young ones set out to explore the town eating their ice creams.

"Don`t go to far you lot" Dave said as they left with Kat as their leader and responsible teenager.

"I am a tour guide not a tracker of lost children" were his parting words.

As they sat at the cafe, they heard many different languages being spoken around them and also a dialect, which included words from the island`s own language and from other languages, including some African ones.

David explained that not long after the Grief`s fleet was wrecked two ships carrying African slaves had also been wrecked.

The Islanders had saved most of the crew and the slaves from drowning by rowing out to attach lines to the vessel`s, where they had foundered near beach, so people were able to get to safety ashore.

It was agreed by the community that both the crews and their cargo of people were welcome to stay if they wished.

And many of them did stay, bringing their own customs and culture to the Islands of Grief or as their descendants came to call them The Islands of Hope.

Dave had suddenly stop talking and stood up, looking round the square; "where are those youngens eh Gale, where have they gone. I think I should go and look for them and check on the vessels, be back soon" he said.

As he started to leave Byorn stood to leave with him; "I will come with you Dave and look for the children. You do not need to worry about the vessels, Anders will be looking after them" but Dave put his hands gently on his shoulders.

"Please stay and enjoy your coffee and the company, I will be fine Byorn" he said and was gone, disappearing amongst the people in the crowded square.

Isobella had grown increasingly irritated listening to the discussion of the islanders language and Dave`s history lesson and found the anxiety and frustration she had been feeling growing inside her again, until she could not bare it any longer and suddenly interrupted the discussion flowing around her.

"We are not tourists, have you forgotten what happened at sea outside Gifford`s?

We are on an important mission and an increasingly dangerous voyage to the gathering.

I repeat, we are not tourists and I don`t have time for this chatter" but before she was able to continue, Gale put her hand on her shoulder and spoke, firmly pulling her round so that they faced each other squarely.

"Isobella, Isobella listen" her voice was soft but firm and demanded everyone's attention.

"You are both my friend and my skipper. I think we all understand the situation but to be tourists for a few hours maybe exactly what we need, including you with all the concerns that you have. Dave is out checking on the children and the vessels, you just take it easy, ok"? there was silence then until Isobella spoke again.

"Gale, you are right and I apologize to you and everyone for what I have said. I have been under a lot of pressure and some time as a tourist might be exactly what I need too".

Then she ordered more coffee and pastries and the conversation returned to the islanders and their customs.

At the quay Anders had been working on the deck of the Fair Wind keeping an eye on both the vessels. He had just taken a break and was studying a small fishing boat, which had come into the harbour not long after everyone had left on their sightseeing tour.

The vessel seemed familiar to Anders and he was sure that this was the fishing boat that had been spying on them at Gifford`s Bay.

Their were two men on board the boat, which was moored opposite the Fair Wind and the Lady Isobella but he knew that only one of the men remained on board, because he had seen the other one go into town.

He had made no secret of letting the two men on board know that he was watching them and they had done their best to deliberately ignore him but with no way of contacting the tourist party, he decided to continue his watch and wait for everyone to return.

The children had left the square not long after they had left the adults, with Kat as responsible teenager leading the way with Terri and Trin in tow

After the voyage from Gifford`s Bay and their escape from what Terri called the "Badders", they wanted to enjoy being on land and explore Guinivre.

Even though she loved sailing, Terri sometimes longed to be on land, doing stuff you do when you are on land and not rolling around the sea being part of a pirate crew.

She had managed to learn a lot about real pirates and it seemed to her that they were definitely not anything like those sort of pirates.

Firstly they were kind of ordinary in a lot of ways and mostly good to each other and other people, which was nothing like the cannon firing, rum drinking, cutlass carrying, parrot on the shoulder type pirates she had been reading about.

If they had all been talking less and paying attention they would have realised that they were lost and that the man walking along behind them had been following them for some time.

He was the man from the fishing boat whom Anders had seen going into town and he had not expected to be lucky enough to come across the youngens by themselves. He fancied he might be able to get one of them onto the fishing boat and that would certainly stuff up Lady Isobella's plans.

"Who does she think she is anyway" he thought to himself, "they are a strange lot of buggers and no doubt. Well they might be prepared to hand over a nice wedge of cash and go home with their tails between their legs for us returning one of their brood. Just imagine that, nice bit of money that would be worth" and the man licked his lips.

Dave had checked the square and started to look further into the town for the youngens.

He was starting to feel more and more concerned and thought he would go back to the square to get the others to help him search, after he had checked with Anders at the dock.

"Everything ok Anders" he asked when he stepped onto the deck of The Fair Wind.

"There is one thing Dave" Anders said and pointed at the fishing boat.

"They came into port not long after you had left and moored over there. Just the two of them on board and one of them went into the town awhile ago".

"That`s the fishing boat that was spying on us in Gifford`s Bay, tell me how long ago did the other man go into the town" and Anders told Dave how long ago it had been and then to answer what he knew Dave's next question would be he gave him a description of the man and what he was wearing.

Then Dave told him about looking for the youngens and how concerned he was for their safety now he knew the fishing boat was in port.

As he talked to Anders he took his phone from his pocket and rang Isobella, it was a short conversation and he could hear her relating the information to the rest of the group and then the sound of scraping chairs and the bill was called for.

He had managed to let Isobella know where he would like to meet her, as he climbed back on to the quay telling Anders to keep his eyes open.

When the group left the cafe they stopped at the fountain in the middle of the square

depicting the goddess of the sea with her children, where they split up and took a different area of the town to search.

Guinivre is not a large town but big enough and it would take them some time to search and they knew time was not on their side if the man from the fishing boat found the children.

Isobella had set of in the direction of the port where she had arranged to meet Dave outside the port authority building.

It had been a brief rest as a tourist Isobella thought as she scurried to the meeting place, trying not to think what the man from the fishing boat might do to the children. The worst of her thoughts were too terrible and in her anguish she almost cried out.

She reasoned that he would take one child, if as she suspected, they wanted a hostage to bargain with. Not all three children but just one and immediately she saw Terri`s face in her minds eye and the shock was too much for her.

She was passing through an old part of the town, not a street really but a large laneway and when she reached out to steady herself against the wall of a house she crumpled to the cobble stones and lost consciousness.

Dave was pacing outside the port building; "Where are you Isobella" he said to himself and an old man sitting on the steps of the building heard him.

"You are lost mon ami" he said and in spite of the drama unfolding around him Dave found himself chuckling.

"No, not me, a friend, who maybe lost on their way here to meet me" and the old man smiled, his clear blue eyes emerging from the soft leatheriness' of his face.

They were kind eyes Dave thought and decided to sit down next to him on the step.

"You are a sailor sir" he asked and the man chucked and replied "once mon ami, once, now I just have my memories and my pipe and a few old teeth to keep me company" and they both laughed together.

"My name is Jean" the man said and they shook hands.

"Well my name is Dave and I am going ask a fellow sailor to help me in a very important matter" he said and the man nodded.

"I am waiting for a women" he said and the old sailor chuckled again and said "mais oui but please continue".

"Well we are on a voyage Jean, our vessel is moored at the quay and we have three children with us. They went to look round the town together when we was having coffee in the square and now I cannot find them.

The woman I am meeting is the mother of two of the children and I am the father of the other one. She is late and I cannot wait any longer for her and I want you to give her a message from me if you would please, it is very important Jean, there are bad men who are our enemies, who may do them harm if they find them before we do, could you please do that for me".

The old man was tapping his pipe clean on the step when he answered; "I will do it for you Dave and this woman how will I know her"?

Chapter 13

Angels of Mercy

A deep, beautiful voice was talking to her; "lady, lady, open your eyes, are you all right, talk to me, wake up, wake up" and Isobella`s eyes opened to see an angel with a blurry face looking down at her, who seemed to be floating in the sky above her, fluttering her wings, which she could not see clearly but felt in the cool air against her cheeks.

There were several people standing round her and she realised that she had feinted and felt embarrassed.

"Please let me help you to sit up" the angel face said and Isobella felt hands helping her to sit against a wall.

She remembered the children and started trying to stand but the woman said; "not yet madam, not yet, gently now, perhaps we should get the doctor to look at you"?

"No I do not need a doctor, I need to find my children, all the children, we have lost them''.

The there were a lot of voices talking at once and she could not understand most of what they were saying but she thought that they were discussing what they could do to help find her children.

Someone gave her a delicious drink, which tasted of cinnamon, lemons and honey. She drank the whole glass and it was immediately filled again.

Most of the faces around her were dark and she realised that these were the people Dave had been talking about in the café; descendants of the African people who had been wrecked on the island and stayed.

The woman, who Isobella had thought was an angel, was kneeling next to her now and holding her hand, looking at her as though she knew what she was thinking.

"You are not from here madam, my name is Sheba and we are Les Africans de Guinivre and this is where many of us live. Tell me all about your children and how you came here and we will help you to find them".

The drink had helped to clear her head and she was able to stand.

She was outside a cafe and there was quite a crowd round her, who were all talking at once and looking at her.

A man, dressed like a waiter, was standing next to her with a jug of the juice she had been drinking and he kept replenishing her glass.

Isobella started to tell the woman where she was from and that their ship was moored at the quay and what the children all looked like and the crowd was silent listening to every word she said.

She felt she must tell the angel woman and all the people about the voyage they were on and the people who were trying to stop them and kept talking.

When she stopped, she took a deep breath and all the people in the crowd seemed to take the same breath with her and a small child, who was standing in front of her took her hand and told her that everything would be alright, because the children of the town would help her to find her children.

She tried hard to stop the tears coming but she did not succeed and she was swept up in the arms of the crowd of the people of Le Place Africans, who went out to look for the children, in every part of the town of Guinivre in The Islands of Grief, also known as The Islands of Hope.

When Dave had left Jean sitting on the steps of the port building smoking his pipe, he knew he would keep sitting there all day waiting for Isobella if he had to.

He had started to look for the children in the area around the port which he knew from his past visits to Guinivre.

This was the oldest part of the town, full of hilly, twisting paths, alleyways and streets which wound round the old warehouses and buildings towards the central square and he was soon sweating with the exertion and the fear he felt.

He stopped on a corner, where a shops merchandise spilled out onto the pavement and took of his jacket, tied it round his waist and wiped the sweat from his face with the old bandana he always carried in his pocket.

"You are sweating monsieur, why don't I get you a drink of our local juice, made with fruit, water and spices" the shopkeeper said standing at his door, watching Dave. "It will give you some energy to continue your search for the children".

"How do you know I am looking for the children" Dave said.

The shopkeeper smiled at Dave and opened his arms wide embracing the street around him.

"Guinivre is not a big place my friend, news travels faster than the rats here.

There are lots of people looking for the children. I will get you your drink and then you can continue your search refreshed".

He sat down on a chair on the pavement and the shopkeeper brought him his juice, which was the same type of juice that Isobella had been drinking not far away from where he sat.

A group of children came running past him, talking and laughing together but stopped when they saw him and one young girl spoke to him: "please sir are you also looking for the children " she asked.

"Yes I am, have you seen them" he said as he got up. "No sir but someone told us they thought that they may have seen them, three foreign kids who may of being followed by a man".

And he felt the fear rising inside himself again.

"Where was this, please you must tell me quick, they are in danger".

The little girl had felt the fear too and said a few words in the local dialect to her friends and then to Dave she said; "follow us sir, we will show you" and he had to run after the children who had already started running down the street.

The shopkeeper came to the door and watched them disappear shaking his head.

"Just like a sailor to leave without paying. I hope the juice will give him energy to find his children".

Byorn and his first mate and partner Shashti were looking for the children in the northern part of the town, towards the old fort they had visited when they were still a carefree bunch of tourists and not a search party looking for lost children in danger.

They too had spoken to people who were also out for looking for the children and their spirits had been lifted but now as time had passed they were both growing more anxious.

They had stopped to rest at the edge of the town where the fruit trees and fields of crops began.

"Shashti, unless the children have decided to go to the castle or take a walk in the country, which is very unlikely, this is about as far as we should go, don't you think" he said.

"I think so, we should head back down into the town and start looking there again" she said.

They were sitting high above the town and Byorn could see the Lady Isobella and the Fair Wind moored at the quay, with the shape of Anders crouched over something on the deck.

"The cannon" he shouted so loudly that Shashti jumped in shock. "The cannon" he repeated, this time in a quieter voice.

"We must use the cannon to let the whole town know of danger and to warn the children. They are always asking me to fire the cannon and I told them that the cannon is only used for ceremony or to warn of danger. They will hear the cannon Shashti".

"But Byorn" Shashti said, the concern showing on her face ", are you mad, you could end up in jail".

Then Byorn the Viking threw back his head and roared at the sky with the laugh of a Viking and Shashti could not stop herself laughing too.

He took Shashti, his first mate and partner in his arms and kissed her.

"We are Vikings Shashti. Are blood is the blood of the followers of Odin and of Thor and the keepers of Valhalla.

We will fire the cannon and we will take what happens after we have fired the cannon as the Vikings took their fate also".

So it was settled and they started to run back to the Fair Lady, laughing and yelling on their way to fire the cannon and meet their fate.

The fisherman with the scared face, was hiding in a stand of trees on the shore watching the children at play on the beach at the eastern end of the town near the port. Where they were busy wading at the edge of the sea, throwing stones at the waves.

He had found a rag, an old a piece of canvas sail and some rope when he had followed the children to the beach and was talking to himself as he wound the rope into a loop.

"This rope will tie up the smallest of them monkeys" the man muttered to himself "and this here scrap of oily rag"-which he had picked from the gutter-"will make a fine gag, none too clean mother but who cares and the old piece of canvas will hide her well enough when I carry her back to the boat. Now my lovely, I will soon have you on board the trawler and we will be on our way to a little island we know not far away, where we can hide and wait for the ransom money".

Then the man sat on the ground, where he became lost in his great dreams of what he would do when he had the ransom in his hands.

He saw himself dressed in a fine suit of cool summer linen, somewhere far away, perhaps running a bar or two, with a bit of other business on the side with some of the locals, who were not too bothered about where money came from.

The sort of place where you could always buy off the local police and one or two of the local big wigs and live like a king.

When the Viking fired the cannon the man leapt to his feet forgetting all about the kidnapping kit he had collected.

"By all the fires of hell" he screamed.

The children may have heard him too but they were more concerned with what the sound of the cannon meant.

"The Viking`s cannon you two" Kat shouted, suddenly remembering that she was the responsible teenager in the group and they must have been away far longer than they should have been.

"Grab your shoes, that sounds like trouble and we may be in it, lets run back to the quay".

And run they did, not like little monkeys but perhaps more like scared rabbits back to the ship.

The man watched them take off and started to scrabble round on the ground collecting his kidnapping kit but as he finished collecting everything into his arms, he raised his head too quickly-not looking where he was like a good fisherman would-and slammed his head into a tree trunk.

His head rang from the impact and when he put his hand to his forehead, it came away covered in blood, from the place where his old scar was.

He could not see so well but he could see his dream`s of fine suits and bars disappearing along the beach. So he stumbled to his feet.

"Oh well I will just haves to make it up as I goes along mother" he repeated to himself and started to stumble along the beach in a sort of leaning to the left way, leaving his kidnapping kit with his dreams under the shade of the trees, while the children were already in sight of the dock as the Viking fired his cannon again.

There were other people around them now who were moving in the same direction as they were, all shouting about the noise and what it could mean.

Was a boat on fire or had a gang of "boocaneros" landed and were now going about their business of robbing the good citizens of Guinivre such as themselves?

As the second cannon fired Isobella was arriving at the dock as Gale and then Dave arrived with a crowd of excited children, who were all loudly shouting out his name and the names of the missing "youngens" as Dave had called them.

The youngens had been gathered up in the whirlwind of the crowd`s excitement making their way towards the two vessels and had not been seen yet.

Behind them was the sideways shambling shadow of their pursuer, moving more crablike as the fever of exhaustion and concussion started to consume him.

"Can do it, can do it mother" he repeated like a prayer, as he started to imagine the fine material of his expensive suit start to fold round his blood and sweat stained body and smell the fine perfume of the beautiful woman who stood next to him in his dreams. When he was suddenly stopped by something not unlike the tree that had concussed him but softer in places, which brought him to his knees.

And above him there was a face but he could not tell how far, because his vision had become close and far away in pulsing waves.

"If this is heaven it is plan A" he thought from his prayer posture on his knees beneath the face.

"Then I will be the servant of the almighty evermore but if it is the other place it is plan B and I will leg it first chance I gets and don`t you worry about that mother".

"Well fella, why are you chasing the children, eh" the face above him said.

"I have someone here who would like to ask you a few questions" and the face, which was Sheba`s, stepped aside and was replaced by the face of a man who was much, much larger than her.

Now that he could see the man more clearly and the waves were becoming much calmer, he knew that plan B was his only choice.

"Leg it mother" he said to himself and the man, who represented the police force of Guinivre and was indeed from the other place.

The policeman pulled him up from his position of prayer as easily and gently as he might pick up a young child and placed handcuffs on him in one fluid and soft movement to lead him away.

"It had all happened so quickly", the man in the sanctuary of his concussed mind thought, "another dream but not the one I wanted".

Then he spoke out loud; "So close and yet so far mother" he said and the police officer spoke for the first time. "What did you say fella" and the man replied "nothing officer sir, thanking you for asking" and started to look for opportunities to leg it.

When the children arrived at the vessel`s, they had to push their way through the crowd to where there parents stood with the Viking, Shashti and Anders.

There were a lot of uniforms around them, several of them senior officers of the police, port authority, customs and border control by the weight of gold braid which hung from their uniforms, who were questioning the Viking on why he had seen fit to fire his cannon on an otherwise peaceful day in their town.

The berserker, that the Viking had become, when he ran down the hill yelling with Shashti had disappeared, to be replaced by Byorn`s softly spoken, carefully considered self.

The discussion, for that was what it was, continued for sometime, a discussion of concerned voices and not the shouting of an argument or the noise of a crowd.

Which though considerable in size was well behaved and quiet, listening and watching with interest, for this was rare entertainment for the citizens of the town Guinivre.

Jean, the old sailor had done his job and joined the crowd with Dave and the woman he thought of as; "La belle Isobella" from the moment she had first shaken his old, worn hand.

He was talking, almost whispering in fact, to an old friend on the edge of the crowd, about when they had, had an event such as this before in the town.

His friend said he thought it was the arrival of the pod of whales and school of porpoise that had made the bay and harbour of Guinivre it`s home for several weeks.

They discussed how long ago that was and then Jean talked of the great storm. Not just any storm but the great storm, which they both agreed would have it`s tenth anniversary very soon.

And around the crowd there were several other similar, whispered conversations taking place, about what, when, who and how long.

Questions were also asked about so and so from such and such an island and there was shaking of heads when they heard that they were not well or had died and real joy when they heard of the birth of a child or the success of a child who was living over the seas.

Such was life in Guinivre, that when the commissionaire of police and the other important people of gold braid decided that they should go to police headquarters and continue their discussion and take statements, most of the crowd stayed to talk to people they had not seen for awhile and gossip.

Gradually the crowd left to go to a local cafe or someone's home in town, or a farm somewhere inland or at a small village on the coast.

There were even a few people who hurried back to work or to some important task, which had to be done but these were only the over anxious souls amongst the crowd.

After all, it was after already afternoon and such was life in Guinivre that there were very few of these souls.

When everyone had finally gone Anders was left as watchman again.

It had been decided he could go to the police station to give his statement later and so he sat quietly on deck, enjoying the late afternoon sun and harbour`s calm water again.

He thought about the scarred man from the fishing boat being led away by the policeman, and why he had not said anything about the fishing boat suddenly leaving it`s mooring to head out to sea after Byorn had fired the cannon, which he decided could wait for later, if ever.

He remembered his own life, before his lucky meeting with Byorn and Shashti and thought he might of seen the men from the fishing boat before and if not others like him: some worse, some better, some very bad and some just a mixture of mostly good and a little bad like most people.

The coffee and cigarette he was having with it tasted good together and Anders felt that he was lucky to be where he was, so he gave thanks to something that he gave thanks to from time to time, which had no name, when he felt like he felt now.

It was already evening before everyone finally left the police station with Terri and Trin already asleep, being carried by the adults, who were feeling greatly relieved and fortunate for the good treatment they had received at the hands of the police.

Byorn had been expecting to be kept in the cells of the police station for firing the cannon. He sensed that his and the whole group`s freedom had been due to more than just good luck. He mused that that this might be more of the magic he felt seemed to surround the Far Shore.

He wondered what had been discussed when Isobella had disappeared with the commissioner of police and the mayor to the commissioner's office during their time at the police station.

Now they were free to meander back to their vessel`s and their bunks, with the order that they remain in port until the police had finished their enquiries.

When they arrived back at the quay, they found Anders sitting on deck talking with a young police constable, who introduced herself as Oliva Nazier and said that she would be on guard duty until the morning.

"I am here to guard you and your vessel`s until such time as enquiries are completed" and she patted the butt of the weapon slung from her shoulder.

Isobella felt that there was something very familiar about this tall and imposing young constable.

"Please feel free to talk to me if you have any questions and I believe you are madam Isobella, is that correct" she said addressing her directly.

"Why, yes that is correct constable" Isobella said.

" Then I believe you have met my mother Sheba Nazier, is that right"?

"So that is why I feel I know you" Isobella replied with a smile, offering her hand to the constable.

After they had shaken hands Olivia said that her mother had told her all about her and the children and the voyage which they were on.

"You are most welcome" she said addressing all the group." I must take my post now on the quayside, a bon nuit, I trust you all sleep well. I am sure that you are very tired after your adventures today" and then she stopped.

"Who is the one you call the Viking" she asked the group.

Byorn stepped forward ."I am the one they call the Viking but please call me by my real name, Byorn".

Olivia smiled again. "Well monsieur Byorn, if you do not mind I will call you the Viking. You certainly look like one and you behave like one too, so no more firing the cannon ok" and she waved a finger at him and left the deck.

Although they were ready for their bunks the day had been too full of happenings for any of the adults to sleep yet and they were joined by Kat who felt that she needed to apologise for going too far and staying away too long as the responsible teenager in charge that day.

The adults all said they quite understood and Dave said that they had all learnt a lesson; "We must be vigilant all of us, whither we be sailing or being tourists. You was right skipper" and he looked at Isobella. "We has too be ready for action, we are on a dangerous voyage, be sure of that and no doubt".

Everyone had discovered just how hungry they were and they ate on the deck of the Lady Isobella, with a hatch cover as the dining table.

Gale had made a feast of what she called; "the galley whatever's", which meant whatever she could find to eat in the galley, which as hungry as they were was just delicious.

They drunk some of the wine that had been a gift to them when they left Gifford's Bay and toasted the Viking "berserker" for firing the cannon and then each other for being a good crew and finally the skipper for as Dave put it; "being a right canny one and don`t you doubt it".

Olivia had been joined by Anders on the quayside with a glass of wine to join in the toast with him, which at first she had refused, until Anders said it would be good luck to drink it.

So the young police constable called Olivia Nazier drank a toast with the man called Anders, once been homeless who knew quite a lot about good fortune and luck.

Chapter 14

Freedom in waiting

Dawn brought a storm sky with it and wind that was beginning to whip up waves inside the sheltered harbour of Guinivre.

Everyone agreed that this was a good day to be in port and set about making sure both vessel`s were ship shape.

On the quay, constable Olivia Nazier had been relieved of her post by another young constable and had returned to the police station as it began to rain.

It was what Dave described as mizzle; so light that you can hardly feel it until you put your hand to your face and it comes away wet.

When Olivia reached the police station she was surprised at how busy things were for the time of day and was glad that she would be able to make her report and return home to her bed.

The commissioner had had little sleep. He had been in discussions in the night with the mayor until late and then the commissioner and the mayor had both been in contact with people outside the islands to confirm everything that they had learnt from the crew and in their meeting with Isobella.

They found that everything they had been told was true and there was more, which the commissioner learnt from people far away from the small chain of islands that he looked after.

He gained clearance at the highest level through his contacts who told him that their was indeed:" a powerful criminal organisation engaged in various matters of an illegal nature and against the public interest on a worldwide basis".

The commissioner had shaken his head and smiled at the sort of language that he had once dealt in, when he had worked in the world outside the islands.

He thought he may of escaped it when he took up his post in Guinivre, which seemed to him like a peaceful place, with little serious crime of any kind.

He had had no murders to investigate, few bodies to be autopsied at the local hospital and apart from the fierce storms that the island experienced no natural disasters to speak of.

Well the world had found him after all and to his surprise he did not mind that it had.

It would be good to see if he could brush of his old skills and use his network outside the islands again.

It would also be a good test for the whole police force too.

He had called a meeting that morning to talk to his staff and also examine any information that had come in overnight.

Then there was the man with the scarred face to interview and the sailor called Anders from the Viking`s vessel still to give his statement.

As for the Viking himself he had quite probably saved at least one of the children from being kidnapped by firing his cannon but he would have to think very carefully about what, if any further action he should take.

The mayors office, the local newspaper and radio station had already been taking calls from the media outside Guinivre and the mayor was extremely concerned about how the incident was reported and the effect it might have on their reputation and the tourist trade.

Yes he decided, the world had come to him and to Guiniver, if only for a brief visit and hopefully it would not cause any great harm and in fact it might do him and the islands a great deal of good.

He rang the duty sergeant and told him to have Nazier come to his office to report on her shift guarding the two vessels at the quay.

He had asked for her to be put on duty there because he knew she was the best junior constable he had and he had heard from Isobella, about how her mother Sheba had helped her when she had feinted in the street.

"Let us see if she has found out anything that could be helpful to us" he thought and then answered another call.

Olivia was just sitting down to drink her coffee and finish her report when the duty sergeant called her to his desk.

"Nazier, the commissioner wants you now" she said when she had arrived at her desk.

"Take your report and go to his office now but I will have to drink your coffee for you. I was just going to get myself one anyway, of you go".

"My report is not quite finished sergeant" she said.

" No time for that. He just wants to know what you can tell him and he will understand ok, quickly now" the sergeant said dismissing her.

So Olivia made her way to the commissioner`s office on the first floor of the building.

She did not often get nervous. Her mother had been a good teacher on how to be confident and talk to people no matter how important they were.

She could hear her mothers voice as she walked up the stairs: "now child, we is all the same mighty or small, rich or poor, yellow, brown or white when we laid to rest under the earth to the prayers of whatever god we worship".

She knocked at the door of the commissioner`s office and it was answered by his assistant, whom she had been at school with.

"He`s ready for you Oliva" he said" as he opened the door to the commissioner`s office for her.

"Just finished your shift Nazier, please sit down" and the commissioner asked his assistant to get coffee and croissants.

'It must of been pretty cold and damp out there last night Nazier, is it ok if I call you

Olivia in this office"? and when Olivia said yes it was ok, he continued.

"I doubt you have had time for breakfast yet but I just wanted you to report on what you learned last night while it is still fresh in your mind and what you think of that bunch of" and then the commissioner paused briefly before he continued with a chuckle, "sailors, boocaneros as they are called sometimes on the islands, pirates even? You tell me what you think Olivia. I know your mother helped their skipper, when she feinted in the street yesterday. I am sure she will have talked to you about her too, that is another reason I wanted you on guard duty there last night, that and the fact that I have had good reports of you and that I think you will make a very good officer".

Olivia thought of her mother after the commissioner`s words, of how proud she was of her mother and the respect she had in the community.

"Well sir, commissioner I have not finished my report yet but here is what I have done so far" and she placed the report in front of him but before she could say anything further he spoke to her.

"That is fine. I understand that you have only just come back from the harbour, I can read the report later, I would rather hear your observations and thoughts from you in person".

So Olivia started to tell the commissioner what she had observed last night at the quay and her conversations with Anders before and after everyone had come back from the police station.

She told him about the toasts they made and what she thought of the Viking and the respect that Isobella was held in by both crews and what her impressions were of her and what her mother had said about her.

Then she told him about what she had overheard when she was on duty next to the vessel`s.

She said that she thought that they seemed to her like people who cared about each other and were proud of what they did. That they were most concerned with: the voyage they were on, not being late for what they called the Gathering, that the Viking was not put in prison and lost his beloved cannon and they all arrived home safely at the end of their voyage.

"I do not know a lot about pirates or as some people say "boocaneros" but they do not seem like any pirates that I have ever heard about or read about or seen in a film but

care very much about the sea, which is so much part of their life.

I overheard Byorn, the one called the Viking talking with Isobella and he said that when he and his partner had reached the edge of town and the children had not been found, he had the idea about firing the cannon to get the children and everyone else's attention.

He was worried that the men from the fishing boat would get to the children before they or any of the local people found them".

When she had finished the commissioner did not say anything immediately but when he did, what he said surprised her.

"You have made a very good report Olivia. Tell me what you would do about the people from the two vessels and particularly about the man called the Viking that fired the cannon?"

"Tell the truth out of your own self child and do not try to make it neither too pretty nor too ugly, just the way it is will do for the truth, because the truth is self evident".

That is what her mother had said and would still say, so that is what she did.

She told him that the Viking had of course broken the law by firing the cannon but he had done it for a very good reason, which had worked: the children had been found and they were safe. It may not be good or serve any useful purpose for him or any of his friends if he was taken to court and it may also not be good for the islands reputation.

But the law was the law and had to be seen as such, so she would make no further comment on the fate of the Viking.

She said that he would know a lot more about the whole situation than she did but she felt that the two vessel`s should be allowed to continue their journey and be welcome to return to Guinivre.

When she had finished the commissioner was silent again while the coffee arrived before he spoke.

"I have to talk to the mayor and prosecutor about this before any decisions are made.

The Viking acted rashly and broke the law but you are right in that I think he did act in the best interests of the children to protect them, so we will see about that in due course.

I agree with you about Isobella and her crew; they should be allowed to leave and as you say and be able to return as they need.

After we have had a taste of spring as so often happens in the islands a big storm is forecast, so I think that they will be delayed at leas two days more anyway, by which time the fate of the Viking will be decided. Now, please enjoy your coffee and croissant".

Not long after Olivia had met with the commissioner a message arrived for Isobella instructing her to come to the police station in company with Byorn and Anders.

It was lunchtime by the time the police had finished taking Anders statement and interviewing Isobella again but Byorn was to remain at the station for further questioning while Isobella and Anders were to return to their vessel`s and remain there until further notice.

Since they had been at the station the storm had worsened and the streets of Guinivre were deserted. Even in the shelter of the harbour the waves were sweeping in from the sea, where the crew who had been busy securing both vessels against the storm were now enjoying the warmth of the main cabin below decks.

As soon as Isobella returned she explained the situation to everyone and tried to calm Shashti`s fears for Byorn but the truth was she was also concerned for him and had no doubt that the police would follow the due process of the law.

It could mean that their traveling companions on The Fair Wind would not be able to leave with them after the storm had finished, which she thought had seemed likely before Byorn had been kept at the station.

Perhaps the storm was a blessing after all Isobella reasoned. She would not want to be on the open seas in it and doubted that any other vessel`s on their way to the gathering would be either, so she would be patient and wait it out, keeping everyone as occupied as they could be.

They had been joined in the main cabin by the young constable who was on guard duty. The children had finally managed to persuade him to get out of the storm by offers of a warm and dry cabin with as much hot food and coffee as he could manage.

He had quickly made himself at home and was now keeping everyone entertained by giving an informal tutorial on his equipment as he carefully dried and cleaned each piece of it.

Terri was acting as the journalist, asking questions about the equipment as he worked on it, with Trin taking a particular interest.

The main cabin was a cosy place and Isobella soon found that it was impossible to keep her eyes open and concentrate on what the constable was saying and she was soon asleep.

She dreamt of being out at sea in the storm, with waves which were almost as high as the tallest of the ships two masts.

She was standing at the wheel alone but felt no fear, as though she was filled with a superhuman strength that allowed her to make the ship do whatever she wanted it to do.

Then the Wolfe appeared standing on the deck with an axe ready to cut down the masts. She tried to shout at him but she had no voice and her hands seemed as though they were glued to the wheel, while the Wolfe sang and laughed at her and then she thought of the children and the man with the scarred face and the Viking firing the cannon and woke up sweating in the heat of the cabin.

The constable had gone and the children were playing a game on the floor together, while Dave was sitting with an open book in front of him, snoring loudly, while Gale slept with her head on his lap.

There was no sign of Anders and Shashti and the wind was still howling outside.

The dream had really disturbed her and she realised what she wanted to shout at Wolfe was: "I have never really trusted you Wolfe" but then she could not keep her eyes open and she went back to into a sleep with no dreams.

Early the next day she received a message for everyone to report to the police station for a meeting with the commissioner and the chief prosecutor of the islands at ten that morning.

The storm was not as strong as it had been but there was still heavy rain and the commissioner had sent a police van to pick them all up.

There were some comments from Dave as they boarded the bus as to whether this was a good or bad sign and would the bus driver be taking them straight inside the courtyard of the small jail which stood next to the police station to deliver them to their cells.

There spirits were lifted when they were all seated inside the commissioner`s office and asked if they would like coffee and the children soft drinks and Byorn was brought in to be seated with them.

Almost immediately they were seated, the commissioner introduced the chief prosecutor who sat next to him at his desk before he addressed them:

"I do not want to keep you any longer than is needed. I know that we all want to bring this matter to an end as quickly as we can and after due consideration we have decided" and he turned to look towards the prosecutor "that you will be free to leave Guinivre as soon as you are ready.

We have considered the case of Byorn, in the light of the threat of danger to the children and other determining factors and decided that there will be no further action taken against him at this time and he is free to leave Guinivre but also, however" and the commissioner paused and looked at the prosecutor again, "however if he ever wishes to visit the Islands of Grief again he must place his cannon with us for safe keeping", and then Isobella rose and thanked him and the prosecutor on behalf of both of the crews.

But before the coffee was served, the commissioner stood and asked for their attention once more.

"My friends, for that is what I and the people of Guiniver consider you to be now, there is just one more thing that I need to tell you. We have been in touch with the people who are convening the gathering you are to attend" and at this news there was some murmuring and the commissioner held his hands up for silence before continuing.

"We may only be a small group of islands in the vastness of the sea but because of our location and the safety of are harbour, there are many people who visit us and amongst them are the people who are holding the gathering you are to attend.

Due to the threats made against your safety they have agreed to are offer to provide are largest patrol boat to travel with you for your protection and if required, for the protection of all the people who attend the gathering.

I will discuss the details with Isobella but I strongly urge you to accept are offer.

The fisherman we took into custody is still in are cells and has been extremely helpful providing information to us in the hopes of getting his early freedom.

Please believe me " and he stopped for a moment and looked round the room "be under no illusion, there is a very real and present danger to you.

Now let us have are coffee and then you will be taken back to your vessel`s and get them ready to leave tomorrow, as the weather forecast is for better weather".

Isobella had known that the offer of the patrol boat may be made but as much as it ran against her most basic instincts and beliefs, she knew in her heart that it was in all their best interests to accept it.

If anything, she felt a release of the anxiety and fear she had been holding onto since they first escaped from Trevelyan`s pursuit.

If she seemed to be overly concerned with the threat of danger surrounding their voyage, then so be it. It was her job as their skipper and she did not think that anyone would be feeling like being a tourist again so soon after the man with the scarred face had tried to kidnap Teresa.

They had a close call and it was only thanks to Byorn`s quick thinking that all the children had been kept safe in the end.

It was a quiet journey for the crew back to the vessel`s after they had left the police station, without Isobella who had stayed to talk with the commissioner.

"Looks like we will be leaving first thing in the morning with the tide so lets look lively and all hands to it we have work to do" Dave said when they were back on deck.

There was little talk on the deck of the Fair Wind.

Shashti knew that Byorn would talk to them later at supper about what had happened at the police station.

She was just glad to have him back and if there were tears then they would have to wait because there was work to do.

She watched him and Anders struggling to carry the cannon below deck and was glad to see it gone from the deck.

"A good place for it but we might need it again before this journey is finished" she whispered.

By the time Isobella left the police station it was early afternoon and had not taken the offer of a lift back to the quay but instead set of in the direction of Le Place de Africans to visit Sheba.

She stopped at the cafe in the main square, where they had coffee and pastries on their first day in Guinivre and bought pastries to take with her for her visit before she crossed the square to the florist to buy a bunch of flowers to give to Sheba.

It did not take her long to walk to the cafe where she had feinted: "was this barely two days ago that I was here " she thought "It feels like a dream or a nightmare more likely" and immediately she saw her dream of yesterday, from which she had woken in a kind of fever.

There was the Wolfe again menacing her with his axe, trying to chop the mast down and she was not able to shout or move from the wheel to stop him.

Have I always been frightened of him she thought and are the children frightened of him too. I think they might be.

It must be at least five months since he was last at home and it is no good pretending that I do not trust him any more and somehow and I do not know how exactly, he is mixed up with the enemies of the Far Shore.

"Madame Isobella, madame Isobella are you all right madame" it was the waiter from the cafe talking to her, she had been lost in her dream standing at the entrance to the cafe.

"Yes thank you, I am fine just a bit tired" she said

"No wonder you are tired madame, it is big news, not only here on the islands but outside also, everyone is so glad that the children are safe and your are all ok".

Then the waiter and the owner took hold of her to lead her into the cafe where all the patrons stood to give her applause until she was seated at an empty table being served with coffee and the very best cognac, as the owner proudly told her.

So this is what it is like to be a celebrity she thought, as she sipped her coffee and then the cognac which was so strong it made her cough and everyone laughed and smiled at her, so she stood and held up her coffee in a toast to thank the waiter and the owner of the cafe for helping her when she had feinted and then toasted all the people of Guinivre for their help in looking for the children and the whole cafe applauded again.

She tried to talk to the owner and the waiter but it seemed as though everyone wanted to talk to her and shake her hand, so she explained to them that she could not stay long as she was visiting Sheba and could they tell her the way to Sheba's house.

The waiter insisted that he would show her the way and walked with her to a large house standing back from the street behind a high fence.

Once she was inside the grounds, she walked up a driveway to the house through a garden filled with all kinds of plants and many trees standing together like a great crowd.

At the entrance doors to the house there was a bell pull but before she rang the bell she looked back at the overgrown garden, which she decided, was all the more beautiful for that.

"After all that has happened since I started this trip, this is the most the most beautiful and fanciful thing that I have seen" she said and then rang the bell.

Isobella had expected the bell to be a gentle sound, just enough to let the household know that there was someone outside but when she pulled the woven rope of the bell pull there was the loud, sonorous chiming of a bell peeling out through the interior of the house.

Then silence, more deafening than the bell echoing away in the last vibrations of it`s sound.

Then just more silence apart from the sound of the birds in the garden, while from outside in the streets of Guinivre there was hardly a whisper.

She waited; it was so loud she thought, they must of heard surely, it was like a great ships bell and then she heard a sounds, a slow sort of rhythmic shuffling and the door was opened.

"Bon jour madame what may I do for you".

The voice came from a woman, like a little bird who Isobella decided could have been fifty or sixty or even eighty years old. She could not be sure, because she seemed to shimmer and waver as she stood looking up at her with a great smile on her face and eyes that were almost emerald in colour and twinkled at her like a young woman's.

For a moment she felt as she had when she had feinted outside the cafe but then she said; "my name is Isobella Carvier and I believe this is the house where Sheba Nazier lives and I have come to thank her for her help and her kindness" and she held up the flowers in front of her as she spoke as an offering.

"What beautiful flowers" the woman said "please come in madame, I know all about you of course, everyone in Guinivre knows who you are".

"News travels fast here I think" she said to the woman and she laughed.

"This is not such a big place madame, what is news in the morning in Guiniver is news in all the islands in the afternoon as they say" and the woman led her through a large entrance hall down a corridor to the back of the house and into a large room with two sets of French windows, which looked out onto a garden nothing like the overgrown one Isobella had walked through at the front of the house.

It was well tended, with beds of flowers and many fruit trees, with sculptures standing amongst them.

A pebble path wound through the garden to a large pool of water, which seemed to be fed by an underground spring.

"The garden , it is so beautiful" Isobella exclaimed as she looked at it.

"It is" a voice behind her said and it was Sheba, who had been sitting hidden behind her in an elegant old high backed chair reading.

"Sheba" Isobella said and they embraced like they were old friends.

"Have you met Chantelle" said Sheba and the old woman shook hands with her.

"She is my aunt and helps me to look after this old place. I could not do it without her, especially since Olivia, whom you have met is working for the police.

Who would of thought that my little girl would become a gendarme but she has always had such a sense of justice for looking after people, so perhaps not such a great surprise really".

"I am sure that you are very proud of her" Isobella said and gave Sheba the flowers.

"These are for you, to say thank you for everything you have done for me and for all of us, I will never forget your kindness".

Sheba thanked Isobella for the flowers and smelt there before Chantelle took them away to put them in a vase and get them all some coffee.

Isobella sat next to Sheba in another high backed chair, so that they both were able to see the garden.

"This house, these gardens and the sculptures is like another world to me, especially after what has happened over the last few days".

"Yes Isobella, it is another world. I am very lucky to live here and to live the life I live. Chantelle is not just my aunt but she is like a grand-mere to me and to Olivia. She is our guide, our helper and our confidant, an extraordinary woman. The wise one, a seer or psychic but I think you know something of this yourself, yes"?

Isobella answered, without taking her gaze from the garden.

"Yes it is true, I know something of what you say and being part" and when Isobella hesitated, Sheba finished the sentence for her; "part of the Far Shore also, is that it? I too know of the Far Shore, my family has known them for a long time. It is alright Isobella you are amongst friends here on the islands. We have been providing safe harbour for your people for a long time: we have supplied your ships with provisions and sometimes we have even hidden some of your crews when they were being pursued.

Why do you think that you have been allowed to leave with your Viking friend and his cannon with the commissioner providing an escort vessel for your safety".

When Isobella looked at Sheba, she continued.

"Yes I know this and not because my daughter is a gendarme; he came to see me to talk about you and your voyage. He is my friend, a good man, believe me a very good man and a friend to your people as well, although he must be very careful about who knows these things as you must be careful about who knows about you and your own journey. There are some bad, bad" and she tapped her fingers on the side table next to her to emphasise the words, "les mauvais hommes, who want to do you harm".

Then Chantelle came into the room with the flowers in a vase and then returned with a tray of coffee and the pastries which Isobella had brought with her.

She poured coffee for all of them and then took a chair with them.

"So here is a toast to The Lady Isobella" she said and they raised their coffee cups together " to the Lady Isobella".

"Well tell me what is happening Isobella"? It was Chantelle who spoke first when they had each chosen a pastry.

"We still have a long trip before we reach are destination Chantelle, my this pastry is delicious".

Chantelle's laugh surprised Isobella and then Chantelle reached over and gently squeezed her hand.

"Olivia is always telling me that I have the best eyesight of anyone she has ever known, old or young and I always tell her that I can smell pretty well to ma cherie, so why don`t you tell me the full story. I am sure that Sheba has told you that you are amongst friends, real friends" and she winked at Isobella.

"You have already had an adventure have you not, well I can tell you that there is much, much more to come. So perhaps it would be a good idea to talk openly and maybe we can help you, eh".

She thought of her talk with Truan when they first met on the shore of Gifford`s Bay when she had drifted away into the workshop of the great weaver and Truan had called her back and she had told her all about the weaving of the rugs that we all have in life and decided that she would trust these women.

Now she was sitting here in this beautiful old house, with it`s gardens of great trees, tangled roots and fruit trees, sculpture and spring water and knew that it showed no respect to this wise old lady, who was aunt to Sheba and grand mere to both her and Olivia, to try and hide the truth.

This is just what I need, to talk to these two women, seated on either side of me like the two pillars of the wise, who seem to know everything about everything and a hell of a lot more besides. It will help me to clear the decks and get ready for the real voyage and the real adventure to start.

"Of course you are right grand-mere" and at this they all laughed, "would you take me as your grand daughter also. A grandmother like you is exactly what I need right now".

So the loom was set and the colours of the wool selected and the hands of the weaver moved across Isobella`s carpet as they talked, laughed, drank their coffee and ate their pastries together.

What had been a short visit to say thank you, became a long visit and when she finally looked at the time it was late in the afternoon and it was very hard for her to leave.

She felt that she could have stayed for days or weeks with these two extraordinary women in the old house, with it`s beautiful gardens but her crew would be wondering where she was and there were things to organise and work to do before they left in the morning.

She left Sheba and her "new grand mere" standing at the gates onto the street, waving and wishing her bon voyage and when she looked back at the end of the street they were still waving to her.

"Friends well met are friends for life" she said to herself and set forth for the harbour and the voyage beyond it.

Chapter 15

Captain of the Sea

Terri wrote in her journal: "We left Guinivre in the early morning. I think everyone was glad to be starting on the last leg of are voyage but a bit sad to leave Guinivre and the islands. I know how close I came to being kidnapped by the man with the scarred face but I am also sad.

I like Guinivre where the people are a kind and honest folk, who reminded me of the people of Whitchford, which made me feel very homesick.

When I told Kat she said it made her homesick too but I think she is also feeling another type of sickness for Caster, the boy she met in Gifford`s Bay.

Like Gifford`s Bay, there was a crowd to see us off with the commissioner, the prosecutor, the mayor, Sheba Nazier and her aunt and a lot of the children and townspeople who had looked for us when we were lost.

Well not so much lost really, as we were having fun playing on the beach when the Viking fired his cannon and a good thing he did too.

We have a new crew member called Jean, who is an old sailor that Dave met in Guiniver when he was out looking for us.

I overheard Dave talking to Isobella about him.

He said that Jean had asked, well almost begged him to help him make one last voyage. He said that he had spent his life at sea and is getting too old now to get work on a ship. He knows that we are good people and he promises that he is still able to work and pull his weight as he put it.

She said yes, as long as Dave looked after Jean and took responsibility for him.

The Lady Isobella and Fair Wind were already well out to sea when they were joined by the police patrol boat that was to travel with them to the gathering.

It had left port the previous afternoon under the pretext of carrying out a patrol to the outer islands in search of smugglers.

When they met both vessels rung their ships bells and the patrol boat sounded it`s siren and then the patrol boat and Fair Wind took up position on either side of Lady Isobella, as though she was the flag ship, so that the crew started to address Isobella as; "Admiral Skipper", which Isobella decided she rather liked.

On the patrol boat Olivia waved her greetings to both vessels.

The commissioner had placed her on the patrol boat as the liaison officer and to gather information.

She had received a full briefing before she had left and understood that she had been given an opportunity to prove herself.

Olivia knew that it would not be an easy job but she was determined not to be intimidated by anyone.

Both vessel`s were in radio contact with the patrol boat and would receive updates on the weather and the movement of other vessel`s in their area of travel.

Throughout the day the wind increased and it started to grow colder as they journeyed northwards.

Jean was standing at the wheel of the Lady, thinking of what he had told Dave when he asked him if he could join them on their voyage.

"I am dying" he had said "but it must remain our secret my friend. I will go quietly when I go but I want it to be at sea, not on land.

I asked you to take me on board The Lady Isobella because you are a sailor too and I think you will understand. It is in our blood mon ami and I will not let you down" and then Dave had agreed to talk to Isobella.

Dave had thought carefully about what he would say to Isobella, who was the skipper and his friend.

When he had talked to her he thought that she would refuse but then he had he told her that Jean`s voyage would be as he said; "His last voyage Isobella, do you understand me, there cannot be another voyage" and then she had looked away from Dave before she had answered in a soft voice.

"I understand, because I know what it means to Jean, to you and to honour the oaths that I have sworn Jean can join our crew. It is your responsibility to look after him to care for him as you would your own blood, do you understand, your own blood"?

And Dave had said yes, he did understand.

Then she had asked him to swear his oath and they had shaken hands as people of the Far Shore shake hands to seal an agreement.

Jean, standing at the wheel knew none of this but just the feel of the wheel in his old hands with ship around him, as though he were part of it, a living thing within the waterfall of all his memories.

He thought of his first voyage, when he was not much more than a poor boy, full of the limitless dreams of youth, looking for adventure and excitement. Then later as a mate and then as the skipper of his own vessel.

"Yes me, Jean," he yelled at the sky. "I was skipper of my own ship, of many ships with money to spend, good wine to drink, the finest clothes to wear and the finest women to love".

But there were none to hear him, even though his time at the wheel was long over. Dave had asked Isobella and the crew to let Jean have the wheel for awhile and they were happy to give the old sailor his wish.

When it was time to leave the wheel it was Isobella who came to relieve him as he handed her the wheel with the words, "it is yours Captain Isobella, treasure it" and

went to stand at the bow, listening to the sound of the music the waves made as the ship moved them aside, sometimes turning to Isobella to smile, holding his hands out as though his joy was like a prayer.

And Isobella felt the warmth of his hands in the wood of the wheel with something else too in those precious hours she spent at sea with him until dusk threw it`s cloak over the day.

During the night the wind increased and the crew, were called on deck more than once and they blessed their good fortune at having Jean with them. For the old man that had slowly climbed aboard the ship was grown as fast and as strong as any of them, with his skill and understanding as a sailor obvious to all of them.

At dawn the patrol boat sent a storm warning and Isobella told everyone to make sure that the ship was secured and that they had eaten and were ready when the storm came.

Jean had wanted little food; "just coffee, tobacco and some bread and cheese" he told Gale with a smile that made her laugh, when she had asked him to sit and eat with them.

He sat with them to tell them stories as they ate: of places he had been to, the storms he had been through, old friends and enemies, good skippers and bad skippers. Telling the story of his life between cups of coffee, the filling of his pipe and the munching of bread and cheese between the few teeth that remained in his mouth.

"I was a street fighter, I learnt from my shipmate Carlos how to fight" he said at one point.

"He taught me the martial arts and the street fighters skills together, so that I could protect myself and others you know, to survive also. Some men enjoy fighting but for me to fight is only to survive and sometimes for the enjoyment of the skill, like a craftsman you know".

Then he talked of being a skipper and the owners; "some were good but most did not care for us, just for money, money and power, that is all they cared for" and then he was silent for awhile before he talked of the mountain village he came from and his family, until his voice was a whisper softened by memories.

They sat listening to the old mans stories in wonder at the life he had lived and the change that had taken place in the old man who had crept on board in Guinivre and the storyteller who entertained them now.

Terri sat feeling the soft comfort of the leather cover of the journal in her lap and

thought how Jean seemed to have grown younger, with his eyes sparkling and how the old skin of his face seemed to glow with a new bloom of life.

She knew she would write about him later, when there was time and place to express the respect she felt for him listening to his stories, which made her both sad and happy, sometimes at the same time.

Both Isobella and Galeknew Jean would die soon and had discussed it together.

"I think he is ready" Gale had said to Isobella, "he wants to join the sea now and we should let him Isobella, it has been his life and his great love".

The crew did not have long to stay in the warmth of the cabin to listen to the stories that Jean told them before he went to join Dave on deck, where the storm was starting to throw itself at the Lady.

When Dave left the deck, Isobella joined Jean at the wheel but the old man did not need her help just yet.

Isobella thought he seemed to be enjoying his struggle with the sea, as though he was at play with a puppy, for all the concern his face held.

The seas were so high at times that the Fair Lady was almost lost to the sight of the patrol boat and as the storm grew in intensity the skipper of the patrol boat brought his vessel closer them.

The Fair Lady was not a big vessel but the people who had built her "had built her well and strong" as Byorn liked to say.

He loved his boat and he loved Shashti and being at sea was what he was made for, so he said a silent prayer to Odin, god of wisdom and magic to bring them all safely through the storm to deliver them to their journeys end.

On board the Lady, Jean had been joined at the wheel by Isobella and they

made a good team, each of them recognising with respect the others skill and understating of the sea.

The light was beginning to die and the sun suddenly shone through the storm sky to the west, with great bands of colour painting it`s surface as it dropped towards the horizon.

Jean knew that the storm was not as strong as they had feared and with luck it would blow itself out before the full darkness of night had fallen.

He hoped it was so, not for himself but for the people on this vessel and the other two vessel`s as well.

He had felt death at his left shoulder for some time now. They had carried on a conversation like old friends do, reliving the story of his life that had been woven into the warp and weft of the rug on the weavers frame.

But it was not the self he had known all his life which carried on this conversation now but something else, which he felt without body or mind, something which was beginning to float above the place where he stood, that was almost ready to join the colours of the setting sun in the west, as it dropped it`s head towards sleep and the storm started to die.

He knew that it was time for him to leave the wheel for the last time and join the sea.

"Thank you" he said when Dave had taken his place at the wheel.

" Thank you to both of you, to you Dave and to you Isobella. I think you know where it is that I must go, until the next time my friends" and he waved to them and to Gale and the children and went to stand in the bow of the ship and wait for his wave to come.

While he stood, waiting patiently for his wave to take him he could not feel the deck beneath his feet, or hear the wind around him anymore. Just the great sky above him, with it`s colours of the sun in the west and when the wave came, he opened his arms to embrace it and flew with it like a great seabird.

Terri wrote later in her journal; "One moment Jean was standing in the bow and then I saw him flying like a bird when the wave took him into the sea and he was gone".

"Flying like a bird" was what all that the crew said they saw when the wave took him towards the sun setting in the west and they ran to look where he had gone but they knew he could not and would not survive in those great waves and in their hearts they knew he did not want to.

Olivia was on the deck of the patrol boat on duty, trying hard not to be sick in front of the skipper and said she also saw Jean "fly like a bird".

She was not a sailor, shock and the sea sickness overcame her, so that she did not immediately react but looked across at the Lady and Isobella at her wheel.

The vessels were close she was clearly able to see Isobella shake her head, as if to say;" he is gone Olivia there is nothing to be done".

When the she told the skipper, he had to make a quick decision whether he would turn the patrol boat round in the heavy sea`s and make a search, endangering his own crew and those of the other two vessels or continue with a report of a man overboard to all shipping in the area.

He decided he could not risk trying to turn round to make a search in failing light in the still stormy conditions, so an alert was issued and the small fleet continued on it`s way.

The wind was starting to lessen and Isobella asked Gale to take the children down below into the warmth of the cabin to make sure that they were alright after what they had seen.

As evening came the storm had started to blow itself out and the clouds gave away to let sundown paint even more brilliant colours in the west.

Isobella and Byorn had contacted the skipper of the patrol boat to say that now the storm had died down they would like to hold a service for Jean.

Byorn had said he would fire his cannon as a mark of respect for the old sailor.

All three vessels slowed and the crews stood in silent respect for Jean, while Gale read a poem she had written for him, accompanied by Shashti on her accordion.

Old Sailor

Your name is Jean Valder

Born in a tiny village

Clinging to the broken mountains

Where the earth huddles in hollows

And hunting eagles search the sky

No more than a barefoot boy

You left but never said why

And found your sanctuary

In the vastness of the sea and sky

And they whispered their dreams to you

From horizon to horizon

You followed those dreams

To each new port

Jean Valder

Captain of the sea

And a King of the world

With your fine cigars

And shoes of Spanish leather

You danced

With the seductive maiden

Of the sea

And fell in love with her

She became your wife

And your resting place

When you flew like an eagle

Into the arms

Of your beloved sea

And setting sun

We salute you Jean Valder

Captain of the sea

A live well lived

May you dream your dreams

In peace old sailor

Then there were three cheers for Jean and a small boat made from a wooden box big with wine and food was placed over the side, for his final voyage.

Byorn fired his cannon and while the smoke drifted across the sea, the little fleet continued on it`s own journey.

Chapter 16

The Gathering

Across the sea to the north of Guinivre and Whitchford lies the territory of Runesholme.

As dark and craggy as they are green and soft, Runesholme`s coast is coast pierced by narrow inlets, towering cliffs and beaches which suddenly appear at the end of valleys leading inland towards the mountains.

As wild and vengeful as it is magical and reflective it`s landscape reflects the story of it`s history,

The coast is dotted with islands, chunks of land that the sea over time has managed to free from their motherland.

Runesholme and the islands are home to people who live a fiercely independent existence, which often seems to be outside the control of the central government.

That Runesholme still exists as it does, is due to the fragile sharing of power, which has led over the years to disputes and bloodshed.

The three craft were travelling to Feinstorm, the largest island off the coast of Runesholme where the gathering was to take place.

Feinstorm was home to the chief intuiter of the Far Shore, Inger Costa, matriarch of her powerful family clan.

They were a respected family clan who made their living from fishing, mining and farming and held a seat in the assembly, which governed the island as part of the territory of Runesholme.

The fleet was heading for the island`s main town of Goost, where the Wolfe sat idly ruminating on his life at the town`s port, not far from the ship on which he had arrived.

Yes, I am still the great jolly Wolfe he thought, always ready with a laugh and a story but it is hard when there is a lump in my throat and I feel more like crying than laughing.

He felt a tiredness that started somewhere behind his eyes to gradually work it`s way through his whole body until it had made it hard for him to leave his bunk in the morning.

That morning on he had seen Mark Trevelyan on his ship The Eagle and thought he

did not look to bright either, although he put on a good act just like the good old

Wolfe put on a good act these days.

Mark had told him that he had seen Isobella leave Gifford`s Bay in company with another vessel and tried to get them to hove too but they would not and then they had had problems with the Eagle and had to go into port for repairs.

He knew that Isobella would be arriving soon with Kat and Terri. Then he had to stop thinking about them and wipe his eyes on the sleeve of his shirt, which left a wet stain.

"I need a drink" he muttered to himself but it was still only early morning and he knew that today of all days he must be keep sober, because he had important people to meet.

He practised trying to make himself smile the smile that made everything ok but it felt like the skin of his face was made of stiff leather.

Then he laughed to himself, thinking he was just a fool and everything would be alright in the end and a women who was walking past looked at him before she quickly walked on.

From the deck of the Eagle, Curnow was watching the Wolfe slumped, rather than sitting on the wall muttering to himself.

He did not really know the Wolfe but he did not like what knew of him anyway.

He had seen him in conversation with Mark Trevelyan and they seemed to know each other pretty well, which was enough in itself to make him mistrust him.

I smell trouble he thought and hitched up his belt.

My grandmother always said I had the sight, canny she was, reading the cards, telling people their fortunes and such like.

I need to keep my wits about me that is for sure.

Not just for myself but also for Isobella`s sake too.

Most of Trevelyan`s ruffians had jumped ship at the port where they had gone for repairs leaving only two of them behind.

The last part of the voyage had been easy sailing as Trevelyan had become quiet, leaving the running of the ship to the skipper, Curnow, Jacobson and Clunes, who could all be trusted.

Still, he thought that he would keep his eye on the Wolfe and see what he could find out about the trouble he felt was brewing.

"And Isobella Carvaire, what is the news of her" it was Inger Costa speaking to her secretary Fredrick Rath. Even after all his years of service to her he could still feel the intensity of her eyes as she asked the question.

"We have heard from the captain of the patrol boat this morning and he expects to be arriving soon at the port" he replied.

"Well make sure you tell me as soon as he does. I want to see her as soon as she has docked. Put one of our driver`s on notice to wait at the port to pick her up Frederick".

Then she began reading the document in front of her and Frederick breathed a sigh of relief and left her office.

He had seen and heard many things since he had come to work for the Costa family but he had never felt the level of anxiety and uncertainty which he felt now.

Then he went to find the driver to wait at the docks for Isobella Carvaire to arrive.

As the driver started to drive to the dock to wait for Isobella to arrive, the fleet had already reached the coast of Feinstorm near Goost.

Dave had been at the wheel, when he saw the island`s coast in the first light of the day and thought it a wild, menacing sort of place at first sight but somehow beautiful as well.

Everybody had heard tales about the island of Feinstorm but he had met very few people who had been there.

He thought it was certainly not a place where you might expect to get a warm welcome and tasty food to eat like Guinivre.

As he sailed up the coast he saw a streak of smoke rising inland and thought it must be from a farm but as the light increased and he came closer to the coast, he realised it was the smoke from a volcano a long way inland that he was looking at.

A land of sharp peaks and troughs, volcanoes, molten lava and hot springs he mused to himself. Whatever next: elves, goblins and witches and there brew.

He thought The Viking and his crew might feel right at home here.

And the Viking did find the coast beautiful as he sailed The Fair Wind not far away from Dave.

He had been to Runesholme and Feinstorm before to visit his uncle as a young child, with his parents.

When he was still a teenager he had sailed a boat much smaller than The Fair Lady there single-handedly.

It had been his first real adventure when he had left home without his parents approval to live his own life.

As he watched the coast move by now he remembered seeing it for the first time with his father who he wished was with him now.

They had been father, son and friends once.

Although his father was not a man of words but doing, he had taught Byorn how to sail and navigate but most importantly of all how to read both the sea and weather.

It was something that he treasured. Remembering how his father would always tell him: "Always remember that the sea knows when you are being arrogant with it Byorn. It will slap you down in the blink of an eye. So just be mindful and learn to respect it".

Not for the first time he asked for his protection, thanking him for teaching him respect for the sea.

As they entered the port of Goost, the patrol boat left the other two vessel`s to moor at an area reserved for the Costa families vessel`s.

While Isobella moored at the main dock, where some vessel`s belonging to people from the Far Shore were already moored.

She had reached the destination of their voyage in one piece and felt safer here after their escape from danger in Guinivre.

She had made a vow to listen to her intuition to not take any more risks than she had to.

Then there was also the Wolfe to think about.

She wanted some time to think before she met him. Expecting that it would be a difficult meeting with him.

As soon as they were docked she called a meeting to discuss there stay in Goost for the gathering. Which she knew would be a very different kind of place to Whitchford, Gifford`s Bay or Guinivre.

As soon as everyone was seated Isobella did not immediately start talking but stood looking at everyone in front of her.

Her crew and Byorn and his crew, who had already supported her through a dangerous voyage but here they all were at their destination in Goost for the Gathering at last.

"This has not been a Tea Trip" she began and there was gentle laughter from everyone.

"We have faced danger but we have overcome it.

My thanks as skipper to all of you for all the support you have given me" and she stopped talking and smiled as she looked at all of them once again.

"I think Byorn, who has an uncle here on Feinstorm is the only one of us to have ever visited Feinstorm before.

We have all seen Feinstorm is a rugged sort of island on are journey up the coast this morning, which is both beautiful but forbidding in it`s own way.

Keep your eyes sharp at all times.

It is certainly not a place to be taken lightly, so treat it with respect.

Are friends on the patrol boat are moored not far away and we will be in contact with them but I am sure that there will be what Terri calls "badders" on Feinstorm, people who will do us harm if they can, so be careful who you talk to, what you say to strangers and watch your backs. I want to have a watch set throughout the day and night.

When the meeting had finished Isobella was going to take some time to think about her meeting with the Wolfe before the gathering started but before she could do this a stranger arrived at the vessel asking for her.

It was the Costa`s driver to tell her that she had been summoned by Inger Costa to meet her as soon as possible.

Isobella had no idea what the meeting was for but she knew that she could not refuse.

Inger Costa was the Chief Intuiter for Far Shore, who would be the chairperson for the gathering.

Chapter 17

The Castle

Isobella had only time to change out of her sea clothes before she sat in the car brushing out her long hair being driven to the Costa family property in the hills near Goost, while the driver pointed to vineyards and farms along the way, saying; "Costa, all is Costa" and Isobella wondered at the wealth of the family that owned it.

They arrived at a small river before crossing an old bridge to be confronted by massive wooden doors set in a high stone wall which stretched out of sight on either side.

When the doors were opened they drove into the grounds of the home up a steep drive, which twisted it`s way up the hillside to the most extraordinary.

It had grown over the years as each new piece was added, becoming a collection of many parts stitched together to make one impressive collection of high walls and turrets rising up into the sky.

The drive and the arrival through the hills to this castle had left Isobella feeling dizzy. When the driver opened the door of the car for her, she stepped out and shook herself, to make sure that she was really on firm ground and not still at sea.

Once inside the castle she found herself in an elegant world of fine old furniture and art.

She was met by a graceful man who introduced himself as Frederick Rath, secretary to Inger Costa, who guided her to the top of one of the castles turrets where he opened the door into a large room with French windows, looking out across the estate and over Goost to the ocean.

"It is quite a remarkable view Isobella is it not" Inger Costa said as she entered the room and took Isobella`s hand in the greeting of the Far Shore.

"Yes it is indeed Madam Costa" Isobella replied.

Not Madam Costa, please call me Inger.

We are sisters together in the Far Shore Isobella.

I may live in a strange old fairy-tale castle but I can assure you that I am a very down to earth person.

Come, sit down here by the window with me, would you like something to drink, some coffee or tea or perhaps"?

And they sat talking about the voyage and life on Feinstorm until the coffee arrived for Isobella, with herb tea made from herbs grown in the castle estates own garden for Inger.

"Thank you for coming. I know that you must have a lot to do and you have only just arrived after a long voyage that had a lot of adventures I hear but I wanted to talk to you before the gathering starts tomorrow" she said.

"Tomorrow, the gathering starts tomorrow madam, I mean Inger. Has everyone arrived"?

Inger put her cup down and looked directly at her before she answered.

"What I am going to tell may make you feel that you have been very lucky Isobella.

We have lost contact with two ships coming here for the meeting and some people who arrived by air to the capital of Runesholme, Svorngard, have disappeared.

We hope to make contact with them but we obviously hold fears for their safety.

We have people doing everything they can to locate them but it seems as though you and your crew may not be the only one`s put in danger coming here.

We have become a little too comfortable I think. Not as vigilant as we need to be.

The world is changing very quickly at the moment.

I need good people around me Isobella whom I can trust. That is why I wanted to talk to you.

There are people who do not want some of the changes in the world to happen. They want to exploit any uncertainty that is created for their own ends.

Some of our people, like myself are growing old, as well as some people who may not be as trustworthy as we thought that they were.

Then she stopped and drank more of her tea looking out of the window as though she was looking beyond the horizon before she started talking again.

"I want your help Isobella" she said looking at Isobella with her clear green eyes.

"I do not think you know how well respected you are.

I have talked with Truan who is helping to find our missing people.

She told me about what happened in Gifford`s Bay with the work that was done to your ship at Lester Paternosters boatyard.

Lester has been a great friend to us over the years. And they both speak very highly of you and what you achieved while you were in Gifford`s Bay.

I want to ask you if you will work with me as my assistant to learn the role of the chief intuiter, so when I finally retire you may be considered for taking over as Chief Intuiter"?

Isobella`s world had changed: The view from the window looked different, there seemed to be so much more to it than she had originally thought.

She thought of the weaver sitting at her loom smiling before she he went to find new colours for her rug.

The sea seemed limitless, as though it was expanding, until there was no horizon she could see.

They both sat then without speaking, until Isobella finally found her voice again and spoke.

"Yes" she said because that was the only word that she could say.

" Yes, Inger the answer is yes. I can think of no other answer but of course I have many questions I need to ask you first" and they shook hands as equals under the sky.

Then Frederick came into the room to join them to take notes, adding his comments to their conversation.

She had many so questions and so many things she needed to tell Inger, now that things had changed so much: There was the situation with Wolfe and her suspicion's about him but Inger was not surprised when she told her.

Truan had already told her about him and the people he had been seen in company with and her suspicion's were confirmed.

And again, she was surprised at just how much was known. At how far the network of the Far Sea reached

There was sadness too, knowing that her relationship with the Wolfe had ended.

And for the children too, who were fond of him. How would they feel?

Even though his absences on one of his trips to who knew where, were becoming longer, possibly in company with people who could be their enemies.

The time that Isobella spent with Inger was not long enough to ask every question she needed to or get every answer, as Inger had so much to do in such a little time:

"There is no time left, we must find solutions and confront the problems we are faced with now "as she told her when they parted.

When she arrived back at the quay Dave was waiting for her, looking worried.

"The Wolfe came to see you Isobella" he said as she got out of the car.

"He was not like the old Wolfie but was acting real strange, kept muttering to himself.

He started crying when he saw the kids.

Honestly I was really worried about him. Of course he upset Kat and Terri but Gale has settled them down now".

Isobella went to sit down on the deck with him to tell him her suspicions about the Wolfe, which had been confirmed at her meeting with Inger.

Dave sat staring away from her towards the open sea, shocked by what she told him,

before he spoke again.

"Smells like a stew of rotten fish and no doubt about it" he said finally.

"You know that you got Gale and me standing on either side of you Isobella. You are the skipper but you are, are friend too so don`t hold back, whatever us can do or whatever you want to talk about you just go right ahead, eh, just right ahead".

"You and Gale are my friends and wise ones at that. I think I may well use both of your shoulders to lean on before too long.

I need to see the Wolfe but not now, not today Dave. Now I need to talk to the children.

Then to share a meal with you all before I do some serious thinking.

As it often seems; it`s a famine or a feast.

A lot is happening all at once.

Then they both went down below deck; Isobella to talk to the children and Dave to talk to Gale.

And the weaver went to find some more colours for her weaving.

She found Terri and Kat in the main cabin with Trin and Gale involved in another complicated game they had devised, where her children immediately enveloped her, holding her so tightly that she felt like she might burst.

Gale took Trin with her to get the evening meal prepared leaving them to talk.

Both Kat and Terri starting to talk at the same time, telling her about the Wolfe`s visit. About how upset he was, crying and saying strange things.

They were not as upset as she had feared they would be but also relieved because they said he had started to change in a way they did not like.

Then she was able to tell them that she had been asked by Inger to be her assistant but not that she may one day take over as the Chief Intuiter, in charge of what the children still called; "the pirate people".

Inger had said the gathering would start on the day after tomorrow whether or not everyone had arrived; "We cannot keep waiting" she had said.

"We must agree on what are course of action is, otherwise circumstances will decide it for us. It could become far more dangerous for all of us".

She too had felt this sense of urgency growing since they had left Whitchford, realised that there enemies were gathering against them before Truan had confirmed it.

She had her relationship with Wolfe to deal with.

Inger had told her that there would be much stricter security in place at the gathering. The Wolfe would not be welcome to attend the gathering as an invitee, as he had been before.

When they had finished talking they all went to help Gale prepare the evening meal, which she decided would be one of her special feasts to celebrate their save arrival so she had invited Byorn, Shashti and Anders to eat with them.

"None will leave the table hungry" Gale said, repeating one of her favourite sayings as they sat down to the feast she had prepared for everyone.

There was a dish of a local fish called gilver, cooked with an unsalted peppered butter, served on a bed of rice with spices and liqueur from the monks of Skiel Island.

Accompanied by a fragrant cooked seaweed called saltere, with a salad of greens sautéed with almonds, carrot and ginger.

As well as a dish of local poultry, known for it`s tender flesh, served with several types of Feinstorm's vegetables.

And to finish the meal Gale`s own almond caramel gelato.

They celebrated their safe arrival in Goost for the Gathering and as promised; "none left the table hungry".

Isobella soon found out that there would be no rest for her in her role as Inger`s assistant.

At dawn the next day she was woken by Kat telling her that the driver was here to take her to a meeting with Inger.

"No rest for the wicked or the good" she muttered as she and Kat started to look for appropriate clothes that were also clean or cleanish and did not look like they had been stuffed in a small draw in her cabin for two weeks.

She thought she did very well to greet the driver in less than ten minutes carrying a cup of coffee which Gale had thrust into her hand as she climbed onto the quay.

She sat in the car massaging her stomach, which seemed to have grown larger overnight, which she could hear was making strange sounds that told her she had eaten too much last night. But she reasoned that Gale`s feast may help get her through what would be a long day.

The Wolfe had watched Isobella leave the dock in her chauffeured car but he made sure that she did not see him.

I have read the wind and it is not at my back he thought. She has made no attempt to see me. Our relationship is finished.

He had also learnt that he would not be able to go to the gathering as an invitee and

that there would be no meeting with "the important people" after all.

Then despite the oath he had made to himself he had got pretty ugly drunk.

Then to make it worse he had gone to visit everyone on The Wolf, to find it had been renamed The Lady Isobella.

He had cried, upsetting them all, especially young Kat and Terri.

Putting the cherry on top of a very bad tasting cake

Good old Dave had ended steering him onto the quay from the deck of the Lady Isobella like the drunken old sailor he had become singing: "What shall we do with the drunken sailor early in the morning".

He spent the night sleeping under a small skiff on the quay, clutching a bottle of rum to his bosom.

The pre dawn chill had crept into his bones as he struggled with stiff joints to crawl out from under the skiff, breaking the bottle of rum, putting a nasty gash in his hand. He knew he would need stitches at the hospital, as soon as he could get rid of the smell of the best part of a bottle of rum and the rat droppings he had slept in.

"This is it" he muttered to himself. "I am lower than a snakes belly I am, lower than a snakes belly" and he looked out along the quay where the lighthouse sat at the end of Goost`s breakwater.

His eyes would not quite focus properly but he knew it was a long way to walk to the lighthouse at the end of the breakwater, which was the only thing that kept him hiding where he was, behind some fishing gear.

"I should take a walk of the breakwater" he said out loud.

"It`s all I am good for really, all I am good for" and he struggled to stand but just made a more comfortable, tighter nest for himself.

Exhausted, he lost himself in dreams of self pity for all he had lost.

Which saved him from his walk of the end of the breakwater, where the sea carried on it`s own struggle.

Chapter 18

Past and Future

On her way to her meeting, Isobella asked her driver Thurn to stop at a shop selling books and stationery.

She had decided like Trin, that Terri`s journal was indeed a beautiful thing, with it`s fine leather cover and rich paper. Just what she needed now she was Inger`s assistant.

As she entered the shop she looked at herself in the window, which made her decide that she needed to buy some new clothes.

Money was a problem though: with the work they had had done to the ship, feeding a lot of people, as well as other costs and then provisioning themselves for the voyage finances were tight.

Inger had muttered something to Frederick at their meeting about her getting an allowance but she had not heard anything further.

When she entered the shop she imagined that she could have been in a store in any city throughout the world, stocked with every kind of stationary, books, magazines and art supplies.

A shop assistant showed her the section where they had what she called; "are finest note books and journals Madam" and Isobella, aware of the meeting with Inger quickly chose a large journal with a cover of what looked like fine purple suede.

She decided that it was exactly what she needed, until she found out the price and almost went to find something cheaper but decided against it.

The purple journal was the one she must have and she was soon sitting in the car again, poorer but much happier.

On her way again, feeling confident with the journal clasped in her lap just like her daughter.

The meeting was being held at The Grand Hotel, which was owned by the Costa family.

Which Thurn proudly told her was the finest hotel on the island of Feinstorm if not in the whole of Runesholme.

Built many years ago in the grand style, when Feinstorm was enjoying a mining boom, when the Costa family had started making their fortune, Isobella thought it lived up to it`s name.

The manager was waiting at the entrance to take her to the meeting room where two large men stood guard outside the doors.

They were a sharp reminder to Isobella that things had already changed.

She felt a sense of sadness when she thought of what she missed about the old, easy going ways of the Far Shore.

Once inside the meeting room she was introduced to three other people who had arrived for the gathering before she took her place at the table next to Inger.

She felt both a sense of excitement being seated at the head of the table next to her.

Indeed, how quickly things change she thought. I have arrived at the table where decisions are made, being served coffee in a fine china cup, with my expensive journal sitting on the polished meeting table in front of me.

It does not seem that long ago that I was regretting not having done more with my life than living in a quiet backwater like Whitchford.

Then the nerves and much of the excitement were gone as she listened to conversation going on around her, carefully making her first journal entry: Always remember where you come from, what matters most to you in life.

Your love of your children, your good friends and the sea more than anything in this world.

Never lose sight of the River Whitch and Skiel Island and the hills behind Whitchford where the wild horses and the wild people still live.

Fishing and sailing with the children on a fine summers day, when a picnic hamper is as good as any hotel called The Grand.

A plastic mug is as fine to drink from as any cup made of fine china.

Then she drank a silent toast to the promise she had made and concentrated on the conversation at the table.

Dave had watched Isobella leave in her chauffeured limousine, aware that she was destined for much greater things than just being the skipper of The Lady Isobella, mother to Katherine and Teresa and Dave and Gale`s best friend.

Not long after he had watched her leave he took an early morning stroll along the quayside towards the end of the breakwater. It was a clear fresh day with a chilly breeze, so Dave pulled his sea coat tighter around himself as he breathed in the morning air.

He had not walked far when he stopped to listen, when he heard a sound coming from a pile of fishing gear stacked against the wall

It was a strange sort of sound he thought, like a dog might make when it`s sleep is disturbed by a nightmare.

When he stood over the pile he saw a scruffy pair of shoes poking out at him.

"A human dog it is" he said, chuckling to himself, bending down to see just what curious sort of life might be buried beneath the fishing gear.

When he saw it was the Wolfe, he started to uncover the body.

"Well I`ll be" he said.

"You have definitely run yourself onto the rocks, no doubt about that Wolfie my old friend.

You always was a rascal but you was always a well turned out rascal".

He quickly made a decision , which he knew was unlikely to make him popular with Isobella and started looking about for something or someone who could help him get this sack of rags reeking of alcohol the Wolfe had become back to The Lady Isobella.

He did not have to look far before he found an old wheelbarrow lying on its side, which like the Wolfe had seen better days.

When he started to push the wheelbarrow he discovered that it wanted to go in any direction but straight.

When he had managed to get the wheelbarrow back to where the Wolfe lay, he prodded him with his foot, saying his name but there was no response, so he went back down the dock to The Fair Wind to bring the Byorn and Anders back with him to help.

Even with the three of them pulling, pushing and finally lifting, the Wolfe was a awkward dead weight, which took a lot effort for them to load him into the wheelbarrow.

With Dave at the wheelbarrows handles acting as skipper, Byorn with Anders help managing to keep it upright they somehow got the Wolfe down the quay to the Lady Isobella, where they manhandled him onto the deck.

Gale, who was on the deck when they arrived, told Dave to make sure that the children did not see the Wolfe in the state he was in.

"You cannot bring him below deck like that Dave" she shouted.

"We should hose him down properly Dave" Byorn said. "A good dose of cold seawater will sobber him up real quick".

And so it did.

As soon as the first jet of icy water hit the Wolfe he began to moan on the deck, until he was screaming for them to turn the water off.

It took sometime for him to understand just where he was, plus a lot of cajoling, pushing and laughter to get him below decks where they left him to have a hot shower while Gale gathered his discarded clothes for washing.

By then the children knew that the Wolfe was on board.

Gale had told them that he was not well but once he had had a shower he would be put in his bunk to rest and get better.

Once he was showered Dave guided him to his bunk where Gale administered plenty of strong coffee while she demanded that he ate some of the hot breakfast that she had brought for him as well.

After which, Dave sat with him, listening without comment as he apologised for everything; including being born, being drunk, being a terrible partner to Isobella and father to the children, being worthless, as well as many things that had absolutely nothing to do with him until he closed his eyes to sleep the deep sleep of alcoholic absolution.

While Dave had been rescuing the Wolfe, Isobella had begun her education as Inger`s assistant discovering what she thought she knew of the Far Shore were only the crumbs of the real knowledge, compared to what she would learn.

By the time the meeting had finished, when she sat with Inger to eat their lunch together, she had already made several pages of notes in her new journal and was beginning to get a headache.

She was quietly relieved when Inger left her, sitting alone in the hotel foyer, waiting for her car to take her back to the ship, saying she had some urgent business to attend to.

Maybe I am not cut out for this sort of life she thought. Perhaps living in a backwater like Whitchford is more my cup of tea or coffee, served in my favourite old chipped mug but not a fine china cup.

Then she was handed a note by the manager from Dave explaining that he had brought Wolfe on board the Lady Isobella, because he could not leave him where he had found him in the state he was in.

She read the note and was not angry, as Dave had thought she might be.

She knew that he had done the right thing. Dave was a good soul who could not have made any other decision.

Suddenly her dreams of sailing back to Whitchford to live her quiet life with the children had disappeared.

She would go back to the Lady Isobella to see the Wolfe and face her fears, while the weaver would weave more colours into her rug.

She would learn the real knowledge of the Far Shore and who knows perhaps one day she would take over as the chief intuiter to help bring it out of danger.

Then she stepped out of the hotel entrance into the fresh air and lifted her head;

"This is what I am made for" she whispered as the car arrived to take her to face her past to let her discover her future.

"Reality" she said as Thurn held the car door for her and when she laughed he laughed with her as though he knew exactly what she was thinking.

Chapter 19

The Gathering Begins While the Wolfe Sleeps

Isobella had spoken to Dave as soon as she had reached the ship, reassuring him that he had done the only thing he could have done after finding the Wolfe in the state he was in.

Then she had a long talk with the children about what she intended to do about the Wolfe and told them as much as she could of her new role with the Far Sea.

They said that they felt sad for the Wolfe but excited for her future and proud of her.

They all laughed when Kat told her that she would have to be careful not to spill her tea on the carpet now she was going to be important.

She promised them that there would be more Tea Trips, fishing on the river, with visits to Skiel Island in the future for all of them to enjoy together.

Later that night she went to sit by the bunk where the Wolfe slept, watching him

breathing his deep and gentle sighing breaths.

She thought he looked younger, at peace again.

More like the old Wolfe she had been in love with once, a weight lifted from his big shoulders.

Then she left him to go to her own bunk to sleep.

Tomorrow would be a long day, when she would fill a lot more pages in her journal.

Her day started before dawn with a message to say that the main sessions at the gathering would not be open to all attendees but only to group representatives with their advisors, given the nature of the issues to be discussed.

Inger had also agreed to invitation`s to the opening of the gathering for the crew of The Lady Isobella, the children, as well as Byorn and Shashti from The Fair Wind, while Anders could remain at the quay as watchman for both of the vessels.

Byorn would be allowed to attend the discussions that were to be held on environmental issues of the sea as an expert guest, while Gale would attend these sessions too plus some of the other sessions as well.

Sitting in the car being driven to the gathering in the main hall at Goost's old fort, Isobella thought there would be little of the socialising and comradery of past gatherings.

These had been great get togethers, where much of what needed to be discussed was done in comfortable surroundings with little ceremony.

She also thought of some difficult questions she had to put to the Wolfe about what he had become involved in.

The answers could be important ones, which she would need to talk over with Inger and Truan.

Arriving at the fort, she saw only a small and sombre crowd outside.

There were a few smiles in greetings from the few old faces she recognised but little conversation.

At the entrance where security guards were checking everyone's identification Olivia stood with the patrol boats skipper talking with two uniformed police.

She only had time to catch her eye and waver before she was following everyone inside the fort to the main hall.

At the doors to the hall, where security guards rechecked identification, she recognised as Mark Trevelyan.

He was standing with two other men she did not recognise arguing with a guard.

She did not understand how Trevelyan could have gained access to the fort or be attempting to enter the gathering as a guest, after what had happened to them after they had left Gifford`s Bay.

She whispered to Gale to go into the hall with the children to move to where Trevelyan was standing, getting close enough to listen to what was being said.

The guard told him his instructions were that he and the two men with him were not to be admitted as guests, which only made him more angry.

He told the guard in a loud voice that they were invited guests.

If he could only talk to someone-who`s name Isobella thought might have been Frederick`s-he would vouch for them or else the guard would find himself in very serious trouble.

Now she was close to Trevelyan she realised that he was only a small man.

When the guard did not react to his bullying, he moved closer to him, so he was forced to look up at the much taller guard.

Isobella decided that now she was Inger's assistant, it was time she intervened, moving closer until she was standing next to Trevelyan who stopped shouting at the guard to look directly at her.

They had never spoken to each other before, so Trevelyan seemed to have trouble recognising her, as though she-that woman Isobella, some kind of pirate who had escaped him outside Gifford`s Bay-simply could not be here at the gathering.

"It is alright Mr Trevelyan I am real, I am here and I am Inger Costa`s assistant now. Not just some woman you tried to intimidate and bully into running away back to my home because I dared to sail freely on the high sea`s outside Gifford`s Bay" and she saw the security guard smile for the first time.

"I do not know what you are talking about woman, I have no recollection of ever intimidating or bullying you at any time, are you crazy"?

And he tried to laugh, looking towards his friends for support but they remained impassive watching him.

"No I am not crazy" she replied. "I do not know how you managed to get inside this building but I will ask are guards, as well as the police if you so wish, to escort you from it at once if you do not leave immediately".

While Isobella had been talking to him, two other security guards had arrived with two police officers.

Trevelyan seemed to quickly decide that this was one argument that he was not going to win, before starting to leave with his friends, before turning on his heel to look back at Isobella.

"You will regret this pirate" he said before being escorted from the fort by the police.

Then the security guard escorted Isobella into the hall.

"You handled that very well madam, are you really a pirate"? he asked her.

"Thank you, I think that is a compliment but like all good pirates I would not tell you if I was" she replied and the security guard smiled for the second time that day.

Inside the hall the main delegates were seated in a series of semi circular rows in front of the feasting table as was the custom, where Isobella took her seat near to Inger.

The way people were seated immediately relaxed her after the confrontation with Trevelyan.

These were her people she thought. This was a gathering for all of them together.

Her anxiety over her relationship with The Wolfe, along with all the intrigue and danger of the voyage was altogether banished from her thought`s.

At the back of the hall, Kat and Terri were seated together with Trin, Byorn and Shashti.

Kat and Terri realised this was not a dream: they really were looking at their mother seated at the great feasting table in front of all these people.

Her mother`s own expensive new journal had been a topic of conversation between the children ever since she had taken it from her bag when she arrived back on the ship.

Terri desperately wanted to write something about this great occasion in her own journal but she hid it on her lap. Not really, totally sure that it was the right thing to do.

Kat was trying not to cry because she did not want to embarrass herself in front of everyone else, particularly not her mother, who was sitting at the great table with her beautiful, new purple suede journal.

Kat thought she was like some princess from a fairy tale, sitting at the high table in this old fort, deciding it was al just too beautiful and cried anyway.

Terri thought her mother looked beautiful too.

The new journal showed just how important she was, so had started planning how she could save enough money to buy such a fine journal herself.

She thought it would cost a lot of money, in fact so much money, that she could not really imagine it.

Trin thought that they were both just being stupid, wishing that there was an empty seat near his parents so that he could sit there and not here next to them, although he did like them both very much.

In fact he secretly thought of them as his real sisters but he put that thought away as quickly as he could because he had important spying work to do, using his new found powers of observation to watch everything that happened in the hall.

He had decided to call himself "Trin the Hawk", after he had found an old book on how you could train your powers of observation and concentration written by someone called Frank Woodrow Fitzgerald Snelling.

Trin had read in the book how you could gain the powers you needed like a hawk or wolf or various other animals and had chosen the Hawk as his secret spy name.

He had wanted to be like a wolf but he had seen the Wolfe, when his father had brought him on board the ship and thought that might not be such a good idea.

The adults had said the Wolfe was sick but Trin knew they were lying because he knew that he was really drunk and they were just embarrassed for him.

The gathering began with a welcoming speech by Inger, in which she talked about the important issues they faced. Particularly those of the environment, the destruction of sea life and it`s pollution.

After she had finished there were more speeches and then it was time for lunch.

Trin had gone to sleep and it was only when Terri and Kat started to make a lot of noise after the speeches had finished, that he woke up trying to pretend that he was in a deep, serious meditative state and not asleep.

He had dreamt that he was a hawk, with a nest high up in the mountains where all the other hawks lived. Some of them looked like Terri and Kat but also his parents too.

He was very hungry now following everyone to the dining hall thinking that perhaps he was not meant to be a spy after all, because learning about birds like the hawk and animals like the wolf made him feel happy.

At lunch Isobella went with Inger into a quiet corner of the dinning hall to talk, where Isobella told her about the confrontation with Trevelyan.

When she had finished Inger said she would ask Truan to find out how Trevelyan had managed to get himself and his associates into the fort.

"I should tell you Isobella that Truan is now looking after all are security. This is the first time that we have had to behave in such a way since we were under threat from the church and their fellow conspirators many years ago".

"I am glad that Truan is looking after all of are security, she is a shrewd judge of people I think".

"Yes she is indeed and we will all need to be shrewd to overcome what confronts us.

This afternoon we will start discussing what we face and how to deal with it. We only have two more full days, so there is no time to waste.

We should all be prepared for some long days, short nights with not enough sleep before we finish.

We are getting ready for battle Isobella thought as she sat down again at the great feasting table after lunch, in what now seemed like an almost empty hall, where the main spokespeople for the people of the Far Shore sat.

Some of the them came from the original home of the Far Sea and the countries surrounding it but some, like her were from many other places throughout the world, where people had settled many years ago.

Many had left for other gatherings being held around Goost, where they would be able to discuss particular issues, so it was only a small group who remained, plus their advisors and security personnel under Truan`s direction.

It did not surprise Isobella that Truan had been put in charge of security.

She had a legal background with a large network of people in many places throughout the world.

She was seated next to Inger, who introduced her at the beginning of the meeting to everyone present, explaining her position as her assistant.

Isobella was warmly welcomed and found she was blushing, wishing that both her parents had been alive to be there with her.

Her mother Aninia and father Alistair would have been so proud she thought.

The lineage of the Far Shore is a female one and her mother`s family were one of the founding families.

She was only a child when her father had died at sea. Her mother had brought her up teaching her their history, culture and core beliefs.

But there was no time for her to reflect, as Inger had started the meeting by outlining the threat which they faced.

She was impressed by the way that Inger was able to direct the flow of what was required, in an easy and confident way that respected everyone and put them at their ease.

Much of what she said she already knew but there was also some new information, which shocked her.

The fear that she had felt during the voyage began to return as a lump in the pit of her stomach and from the silence in the great hall after Inger had finished speaking, she thought the fear she felt seemed to be shared in some way by everyone present.

In the silence she could hear the people round breathing and what sounded like the furtive scurrying of rodents in the old great hall.

Then she cleared her voice and stood up in one spontaneous movement.

Her journal would not help her now. She had no prepared notes but she knew that this was her time, her moment and she felt her parents were standing with her telling her to talk the "truth child" as she had learnt from Sheba; "just you tell the truth child it will set you free, it be your self speaking, your expression".

"Madam Intuiter" she began and looked at Inger who was smiling at her as if she knew exactly what she was doing.

"Honoured representatives, advisers and all those assisting us, we all know why we are here and why we are unable to afford the luxury or perhaps fragility of what it is that we face by not taking action.

I know, the people of The Far Shore are often referred to as pirates or buccaneers but I also know that at heart we are a peace loving people, who believe in the freedom of the individual and the sanctity of life as being things most precious to us.

If we fail to act now we will loose what we most treasure and become corrupted" and Isobella stopped to look round the table and found there were some people who could not meet her eye.

"I see there are people here who are uncomfortable when I talk of corruption" she continued.

'"Well it is an uncomfortable subject and therefore one I think we need to look at squarely in the eye.

I would like to prepose that if anyone has any suspicions or information about corruption, then they should bring them out into the open" and she gestured to Truan who sat opposite to her and took her seat again.

Then Inger stood and looked round the meeting table at all the representatives, advisors and assistants seated there before she spoke.

"Well said Isobella. There is no need for anyone to hide anything, like the rodents in this old fort scurrying about their lives hiding in dark holes.

I think that this may be a goodtime for us all to take a break for some refreshment and some personal reflection before we continue".

There were people who raised objections to this, feeling that everyone was being accused of something but Inger raised her hand and asked for silence.

"Please everyone, none of you is being directly accused. The freedom we value so highly brings with it our own accountability, if you know something then share that information now, before we start discussing a plan of action. I know it is unpleasant for all of us but we must start on a clean page with trust in each other".

As everyone left the hall Isobella stayed sitting in her chair until Truan and Inger came to talk to her.

"You did the right thing" Inger said. "What you said needed saying so that we could clear the air and start on the real work of planning are action.

Feeling free to speak our minds is at the heart of what the gathering is to us. Some people will be upset and sadly some people will be like the rats and scurry in to their holes to hide their conscience`s but there is nothing we can do about that, apart from asking for people to speak up and share their suspicions and their information with Truan".

After the break Truan took the floor and started talking about the forces allied against them and Isobella's voyage: her stay in Gifford`s Bay for repairs after the storm, her escape from Mark Trevelyan and her children's close call in Guinivre, escaping kidnap by the man with the scarred face.

People were shocked by the story she told and congratulated Isobella on managing to arrive safely at the gathering after her dangerous voyage.

After Truan had finished the story of the voyage she paused before continuing.

"Now I want to tell you what I have discovered about the man called Mark Trevelyan, whom as many of you know now tried to gain entry to the gathering this morning, before Isobella had him and his friends removed.

He is a small part of a plan by a group of powerfully connected criminals to take over the Far Shore.

He is a manipulative bully who is hoping to grow rich from the game that is being played by hanging onto their coat tails but the real power lies with the Five Powers".

Then Truan had to stop, because everyone started talking at once and she had to ask for silence before she started talking again.

"The Five Powers are rumoured to be a group of powerful people, who work with criminal gangs in their business of smuggling goods, people and drugs amongst other operations but there involvement as a group has rarely been proven.

There real power is in their ability to corrupt powerful people: politicians, business people, community leaders and even the leaders of countries to become part of their criminal schemes.

We are aware of their activities and the damage it cause`s to the world`s sea`s and the damage to the whole environment, destroying wildlife and peoples livelihoods.

We merely represent an opportunity for expansion to the Five Powers, through corruption and subversion.

It was nothing more than rumours or gossip, which have now become a reality that we must face if we are to survive as anything more than a name in history and folklore.

The enemy we are facing is like a mutant octopus with tentacles which grow back as soon as you cut them off" Truan continued.

"Their connections cover the whole world. They are cunning, they are powerful and the head of this monster has never been revealed or injured and if we are to survive then we must strike at this head.

I do not apologise for painting a dark picture, because you must not be under any illusion that we are in a battle for our existence".

Then Truan took her seat in complete silence.

A silence that all those in the great hall felt as a living thing, far greater than it`s rumoured parts, it seemed to surround them, when not even the rats and mice dared to scurry and everyone present seemed to hold their breath, with the fear of the destruction of everything which they cared about and carried with them in their hearts.

Then there was a noise, a slight shuffle, perhaps of a rodent and then someone cleared there throat and spoke.

It was a soft but clear voice in the cavern of the hall.

"Madam Chief Intuiter if I could say a few words if you please".

It was Frederick, Inger`s long serving secretary who stood outside the circle of chairs at the table.

"Of course Frederick, please come to the table" Inger said beckoning him to join them.

A space was made for him at the table, where he stood placing his hands firmly on it`s highly polished surface, nodding and smiling at people as though he had just entered a restaurant to eat, acknowledging the people already seated there.

"I think you all know who I am" he said and smiled.

There was the nervous laughter of relief and the tension of stillness was broken.

"My family have been part of the Far Shore for a long time and I remember my grandmother telling me stories of it`s history as a child.

They were not always good stories. It is true that there were stories of victory but also of defeat.

They were stories of the survival of our ancestors. Stories of good people and of bad people, the days of plenty and days of hunger.

We, the people of the Far Shore, have survived because of are strength and trust in each other and what we believe to be worthwhile in life:

That life is precious.

That life is a gift to be treasured and lived with all your heart.

But we have grown soft and complacent over time, so that resilience and perseverance are just mere words, which have lost their real meaning to many of us.

Well, now I think is the time we all need to practice some resilience and perseverance and take back what is precious to us: life as a gift to be treasured and lived with all our hearts as one.

We, will, survive, this danger if we work together" and Frederick punctuated the words with the slap of his hands upon the table in front of him, his voice rising from it`s softness with passion, becoming louder and more insistent.

"We are not alone in this" he said and he slapped the table again.

"I know that we will have many allies who will join us if we reach out to them.

There are many people, who like us have much to gain by standing with us against the enemy we are faced with.

Thank you Madam Intuiter".

Then he moved away from the table into the shadows where he stood smiling,

dressed in his perfectly pressed suit and shirt, with his tie still perfectly straight.

But this was not the Frederick who had come to the table, clearing his voice and speaking softly but someone quite different, who seemed to be able to talk for the silent fear inside all of them.

Then Inger stood, clapping her hands together to be joined by everyone present, applauding Frederick who had spoken for all of them, standing in the shadows smiling.

Chapter 20

A Rough Road

Mark Trevelyan was in his cabin on The Eagle, anchored in a small cove not far from Goost, where the local farmers had agreed to keep quiet about his presence in return for a payment.

It was early in the morning and he was having his first drink of the day.

"Just a small one" he said to himself and sloshed a generous portion of fine malt whisky into an unwashed tumbler.

"Pirates" he sang, "jolly pirates we be, not people of the Far Shore are we but people of any sea we wish to be" and he drank the fine malt whisky in one joyful gulp and looked lovingly at the empty tumbler in his hand.

He wanted very much to fill it again to fill the empty place inside him but not today, for today he was in charge.

Because today, Mark Trevelyan Davis, son of a minister of The Church of The Chosen One`s was going to war.

Well, perhaps not to war but to crack a few heads together and Commander Trevelyan Davis, as he liked to think of himself now, needed to be sober and not drunk.

He was concerned about his own crew being too decent, apart from a couple of ruffians who had stuck with him after the debacle chasing that bitch Isobella.

When he thought of her he imagined her hanging upside down from the main mast of the Eagle screaming for his mercy.

Twice she had made him look like a fool and the confrontation at the gathering in Goost was just too much.

It had bothered him that his two ruffians he had with him had been as meek as lambs.

But he thought that the two other ships anchored in the cove with The Eagle had crews that you could call real ruffians but his own crew were just too nice but even worse than that was the fact that he had grown to like them.

He would be having a word with them before they kicked of today about it being time for them to step up like real men.

Then he looked in the mirror and patted his stomach, which seemed to have grown larger. He breathed in deeply and tried to take his belt in a notch but it was no good, he needed a bigger belt to do that.

"Less food and grog and more exercise my lad" he said and he thought of his father riding his pushbike behind him as he ran round the local sports oval at dawn, with a cane in his hand, which he used to beat the young Mark`s bare legs with whenever he started to slow down.

The song and the whisky were gone and he was that little boy again trying hard to please his father and seeming to constantly fail. He thought it might be a long day after all, not the good day he had hoped for as he poured himself another drink and curled up on his bunk.

The crew had heard Trevelyan singing and were waiting for him to burst onto the deck shouting orders but then things had become suddenly silent.

Clunes had gone quietly to stand outside his cabin to listen but he could hear nothing, until something, which sounded like a sob and then another one, before he was sure that what he heard was Trevelyan crying.

He had grown up on a northern island called Farness, which was a wild stormy sort of a place, with a few trees which were blown almost flat by the prevailing winds.

The islanders made there living from what they could catch from the seas and from their "scourings" or small farm holdings where they kept their sheep and cattle, which were famous for the quality of their meat, sheepskins and hides.

It was never an easy life but it was a good one, with farms being passed on from generation to generation.

He had grown up being taught to be a decent, god fearing sort of person, who would look after his family and neighbours.

Although he did not respect Trevelyan or even trust him he was both disturbed and upset to hear him crying.

He thought about this as he went back onto the deck, where the whole crew were at work or at least pretending to be at work waiting for Trevelyan, who had announced to them, in his drunken way the evening before that things were about to get a lot "rougher and tougher round here" although he did not say what "rougher and tougher" actually meant.

Cronan and Beasant, the two ruffians, certainly did not look like " rougher and tougher" was anything that they were looking forward to either.

As the voyage had gone on the crew had got to know each other.

Clunes had got talking to Cronan and Beasant and discovered that neither of them could read that well, so he had started to lend them books, helping them to improve their reading.

And now they to wanted to read as many books as they could, with Cronan reading Shakespeare's The Tempest and Beasant working his way through Tolkien's Lord of the Rings.

The mess where they ate their meals had turned into a reading room and each night after their meal books had become the major topic of conversation.

Trevelyan was not aware of the "reading mutiny" which had taken place on his ship but he was concerned that his two ruffians had lost a lot of their swagger lately.

But their was no swagger left in Trevelyan either when he finally appeared on deck and there were no shouted orders either.

"We will take the launch and land on the beach" he said in a quite voice addressing the skipper directly.

"You, Curnow, Clunes and Jackobson are to stay on board and keep an eye out for anyone that may attempt to board the Eagle. We may well be attracting some attention from the authorities today skipper.

If you have to, up anchor and move her out to sea, you understand".

"I understand Mr Trevelyan" the skipper replied.

Then they had all watched silently from the side of the ship as Trevelyan, Conran and Beasant set off to the beach, followed by boats from the other two vessels.

When the boats had landed their crews, they set out in the vehicles waiting for them on there secret mission, leaving one armed man to guard the boats they had left on the beach.

"Right lets get the anchor up and get out to sea. We are not staying couped up like sheep ready for the slaughter in this little cove" the skipper barked as soon as they were out of sight.

"They are not going ashore for a quite walk that's for sure. The man guarding the boats is armed and so is the raiding party.

I don`t intend for any of us to end up in jail here on Feinstorm. I will contact Trevelyan when we are well out to sea to say I have moved the ship out to sea to protect it".

They motored to the entrance of the cove where the skipper had Curnow take the wheel before he sent Clunes and Jackobson below deck to make some food for them all.

"Did you see what I saw Curnow" the skipper said once they were alone on the deck.

"I take it you mean no smoke coming out of the chimneys of any of the farms in the valley and no vehicles that I could see either".

"That's right and you know what else Curnow"?

"No skipper but I am sure you will tell me" Curnow responded with a chuckle in his voice.

"I may not be as young as I once was Curnow but my old sea eyes are still pretty good" and the skipper looked back at the cove.

"Before we go any further let me take the wheel and get you to look through the telescope at the port side of the cove where the biggest of the farms sits up in the hills.

I am sure I saw something glinting at me when the sun peeped out from behind the clouds and then a couple of figures moving around quickly, furtive like.

Get the telescope up to your eye and let me know if I am imagining it or not Curnow".

Once the skipper was at the wheel Curnow put his grandfather`s telescope up to his eye and found the farm the skipper was talking about up on the hill above the little cove.

He could see nothing moving in the eerily quiet valley, where no smoke rose from any of the farms chimney`s into the cold grey sky.

Then as he was about to lower the telescope from his eye and report back to the skipper something moved across one of the farmhouses windows.

"I think I just saw something skipper" he said.

"Keep watching Curnow, don`t you dare take that old telescope from your eye before you have something to report or your eye has fallen out of it`s socket".

And he tried to imagine what it would be like to have only one eye and wear a patch over his empty eye socket like a real pirate would, when a face appeared at the window.

It certainly did not look like a farmers face. Even at that distance he caught the glint of what looked like a rifle`s barrel and a uniform.

"Well, well I`ll be damned and sit with the devil at tea" he muttered "that's the law for sure".

"What is it Curnow, tell me man, tell me" the skipper yelled into his ear so that he was almost deafened, more excited than Curnow could ever have imagined him being.

"I think it is one of Feinstorm`s police in that farmhouse fully armed an all".

"I knew it, I knew this would happen sooner or later" the skipper yelled so loudly that old Jackobson who had just arrived on deck with Clunes carrying their breakfast spilt most of the coffee he was carrying in shock.

"Keep watching, keep watching, you will have to wait to get virtualized, do you understand, no food until you can give us all a full report, understood.

The cat is out of the bag well and truly now lads" and the usually reserved and thoughtful skipper began excitedly to describe what was happening and what they should be prepared for.

Curnow continued to look through the telescope trying to ignore the throbbing in his eye and the ache that was starting to creep it`s way though his arms and shoulders.

The man had not stayed long at the window but had been replaced by at least two others in succession and Curnow had also seen other movement in the room behind them in the dim light of the farmhouse.

He suspected that the farmers in the valley who had been paid to keep quiet may have decided to bolt for safety in the dark of the night with their families.

Deciding as good citizens of Feinstorm, that they should inform the authorities that their quiet little valley had been taken over by armed men, who were clearly up to no good.

Just as he was deciding to put the telescope down and damn what the skipper had ordered him to do there was movement from behind the farmhouse.

An armoured vehicle with police markings appeared moving along the track followed by a group of armed police who fanned out as they started to move down the hill towards the beach where the boats sat, where the guard had decided to take a nap under a tarpaulin.

He finally put the telescope down and breathed a long sigh of relief putting his fingers to the cheek around his eye, then took them away, as if checking to see if there was blood and he might need an eye patch after all.

His shipmates gathered around him giving him his food congratulating him, while the skipper loudly praised him as: "the bravest and finest fellow he had ever had the good fortune to sail with".

"Here you take the telescope skipper" he said "I never want to put it to my eye again as long as I live" and they all laughed as the skipper did as he was told and Curnow told them everything that he had seen and what he thought was about to happen between taking gulps of coffee.

"Well skipper, I think they are is on their way to Goost, which is where I think we should be headed too.

There is about to be an almighty ruckus unless Trevelyan and his thugs can be stopped, which could happen seeing as the police and authorities seem to have wind of what is happening now.

Goost is not far away by sea, with what pass for roads on this wild rocky island we should be there before Trevelyan".

"I agree Curnow, Clunes, get the motor going again as quick as you can.

And I owe both you and Jackobson an apology for keeping you in the dark about a lot of things but Curnow and myself we will tell you everything we know on the way down to Goost.

We might run into that police launch from Guinivre on the way too, before the day is done".

Then the skipper put the telescope to his eye just in time to see the man guarding the boats on the beach being woken by several police, before they started to push some of the beached boats into the water and make their way out to the two other vessels moored in the cove.

The noise alerted the men left behind to guard both vessels, who came on deck and immediately raised their hands in surrender when they saw the police.

'Cooks, the guards are cooks" the skipper said to Jackobson and Curnow standing beside him.

"One has still got has apron on and the other one is holding a soup ladle in his hand in surrender".

Then they all laughed together until they ran out of breath.

"Skipper" Curnow finally said when he had his breath back. "Skipper, I have never heard you laugh like that before".

"Well Curnow it feels good I can tell you. Now lets get going as quick as we can before the police take an interest and we will see what help we can be to your friend Isobella".

"Isobella" Curnow whispered "fly like an eagle" and he felt his hands tighten on the steering wheel with the ship beneath him, willing it forward.

Chapter 21

Escape

"I know we met late into the night and started early in this morning but we have achieved more than I ever thought we would in a short time, so I ask for your energy and commitment today" and Inger looked at the tired faces round the meeting hall.

"We must keep going and Frederick and his team have worked through the night to get the agreements ready which we are to sign this morning but before we do that I have some important news for you all.

You will see that Truan and her colleagues in charge of security are not with us this morning.

We have been advised by the police here in Goost that there are a group of people, no, not a group of people, that is far too good for them but a gang of dangerous thugs who are on their way to Goost as I speak.

To speak plainly I believe that they are coming to attack us. I see the shock on many of your faces but please remain seated so I can finish.

Truan is organising security to ensure the safety of any of your family members who have accompanied you here can be taken to the mainland of Runesholme.

The police and our security people will secure any vessel`s and there crews for those of you who arrived by sea. I am confident that we will be able to overcome this threat but before any of us can leave we must sign these documents " and Inger waved the documents in the air to emphasise the urgency.

" I repeat, we must sign these agreements and proceed as we have always done throughout are long history as a group of people who act together as one".

As they began reviewing and signing the agreements, Trevelyan and his "ruffians" and "pirates" were still on their way to Goost.

It had not been an easy journey. Their vehicles and drivers had been provided by local contacts who had managed to lose there way when they found that what should have been a shortcut was blocked by a rockfall.

Now they were stopped on another track for repairs to one of the vehicles whose radiator was leaking.

Trevelyan had merely nodded when he was told the news when they stopped and left the lead vehicle to find a quiet spot where he could sit and think.

They had stopped above a valley with a river flowing down to the sea, which Trevelyan thought was a beautiful place, with the sun poking it`s face out of the clouds.

"Demons not pirates. No treasure, just demons" and he thought of breaking down crying in his cabin.

He knew that someone had been listening to him crying outside the door but he did not care anymore.

"No going back" he said out loud; "no triumph, no hail Caesar, no wreath of leaves" and for the first time he felt something that he thought must be happiness, even peace.

"Stuff it all, I will do what I want to do as soon as I can get out of this mess, this debacle, I will take the Eagle, with the skipper and Curnow and the rest of them and sail somewhere just for the hell of it".

When he got back to the vehicles there were two men busily chewing gum before trying to plug the hole in the radiator with it and he started laughing.

Skipper of the Eagle, David Jones had got his wish and the patrol boat had stopped them outside Goost, where he and Curnow had been able to convince the captain and Olivia that they were not criminals, terrorists, "boocaneros" or even pirates and all they wanted to do was ensure Isobella, her crew and the crew of The Fair Wind were safe in Goost`s Harbour.

The captain of the patrol boat had agreed to take them into the harbour and let them moor near the other two vessel`s, on the understanding that they and their vessel would be kept under guard for the present.

At the gathering documents had been signed, with everyone leaving under the guard of Truan's security team and the local police and defence force`s.

Most of the remaining people were to travel to the mainland by plane or a special ferry, which was waiting at the harbour ready to depart, leaving only Isobella and the others who had travelled to Goost by sea to wait for the all clear before they could also leave.

As Isobella was driven to the ship she looked at the quiet streets, which were patrolled by police and packs of stray dogs who seemed to be enjoying their freedom to wander as they wished.

Her head was still spinning from everything that had happened since she had arrived on Goost.

She smiled to herself, thinking she would like to be back in slumbering, safe old Whitchford with her daughters and thought of the busy weaver at her work, when Thurn spoke as though he had read her thoughts.

"Do not worry madam" he said with a chuckle. "These people will soon be dealt with. They are just causing a nuisance, you see if I am not right. You just need to be careful, you and your people until they are dealt with".

"Thank you Thurn but what about your own family, are they in a safe place" Isobella asked him.

"Safe, they are as safe, as safe can be, believe me. My people live outside Goost on are own land. We have been there for many generations and the buildings are like small forts. They were built to withstand attack in the old times when Reinstorm and the whole of Runesholme were often under attack. We have the blood of the old people in our veins madam, we will not let them frighten us or you.

You and your people who are guests".

Then he continued to tell her the history of his family until they arrived at the quay.

"Wait here" Isobella said when they arrived, going quickly onto the Lady Isobella into her cabin where she found the bottle of Skiel Island monks liqueur, which she had been saving for a special occasion and decided that Thurn was that occasion.

"Here this is for you and your family Thurn. In thanks for what you have done for me putting my mind to rest this morning" and she gave Turn the bottle of liqueur and kissed his cheek.

"I bless you and all your people of the Far Shore, for in my heart I feel at one with you all" he said as he looked at both of the vessel`s with their crews on deck, making a sign with his left hand " May all the gods be with you for a safe journey home".

Isobella stood on the quay waving to him as he drove away, with her children and both crews gathered together around her.

"You look like you could do with a liqueur yourself skipper" Dave said holding his arm out to guide her onto the ship.

As Isobella stepped onto the deck she saw the Eagle moored close by with Curnow standing on it`s deck.

He was older, just as she was older but unmistakable all the same, with his long black hair, still tied back in a red bandana, streaked with grey but his eyes were as bright as they had been all those years ago but grown older, deeper and wiser she thought, as they looked at each other.

The old feelings she had found for him since he had come back into her life had been replaced by something else now, which she knew were memories, respect and the beauty of old love remembered, not rekindled.

"The past is gone, the future is not here yet and whatever it is which remains is the present" were the words she remembered.

Both of them smiled, nodding there heads in greeting before she was swept up by her children and their questions.

Chapter 22

Mark is my name now

The pain in Trevelyan's head was worse than any hangover he had ever known but

fists and feet had caused it, not whisky.

Conran was looking down at him with blood on his face where he lay in a ditch beside the road where they had stopped for repairs.

He could remember laughing at the men who were trying to plug the hole in the radiator with chewing gum, then going to look at the view in the valley, before everything had become suddenly become very painfully dark.

He thought it was Stefan, the leader of the group who had come to take them to Goost who had suddenly punched him, then kicked him as he lay on the ground.

Then he had sat on him, slapping his face, shouting that he had taken over now and if he was lucky he might let him live.

Conran and Beasant tried to protect him, with Beasant fighting them all like a wild man, until they got him to the ground.

"It is alright Mr Trevelyan " Conran said "they left a long time ago, it is the afternoon now".

And for some reason he said; "You can call me Mark now Conran".

Conran helped him out of the ditch onto the road, where Beasant was lying dead, like a bloody, ragged scarecrow.

He tried not to look at his face again once he had seen it.

He did not want to be sick in front of Conran but decided that it did matter anyway so he was sick into the valley that he had found so beautiful earlier in the day.

Conran did not say anything but just continued to wash himself in a puddle of water, while he felt inside his mouth at the teeth that had been loosened.

"Mr Trevelyan, I mean Mark come here and wash the blood of you and the taste of vomit out of your mouth" and Mark went to the pool to wash's himself.

The cold rainwater helped him feel better but his body was beginning to ache in all sorts of places since he had stood up.

He felt inside his mouth with his finger and found that he had lost one of his front teeth, which upset him more than anything until looked at Beasant's body again and started to cry.

He had been sick in front of Conran. Now he was crying but he heard sobbing and realised that Conran was crying too.

"We grew up together" Conran said through his tears.

"Barry was his name Mr Mark but everyone called him B.B or Beano, they were his nickname`s like.

He was a right tough kid too, nobody wanted to get the wrong side of him but me and him were like brothers really".

Then Conran knelt down by the body of his friend to gently wrap his own coat round it, like it was a sleeping child`s body, not a grown man`s.

Mark joined him to say a prayer for Beasant, which his father the clergyman had taught him as a child.

They were still kneeling next to the body when they heard the sound of a tractor coming towards them.

The tractor towing a trailer, was driven by a big man with a rough, weathered face, who was wearing a hand knitted cap with big earflaps which fell almost down to his shoulders like a rabbit or hare`s ears.

He stopped the tractor in the road shaking his head, muttering something to himself.

Then after what seemed like a long time, he finally convinced himself that what he was looking at really were two badly beaten men praying over a dead body, not the work of some mischievous spirits playing tricks on him.

Then he got down from his tractor`s cab carrying a rifle.

"Do not be afraid either of you" the man said when he saw them looking at the rifle in his hand. "I think I know what might of happened here.

"The island of Reinstorm is not known as a tourist paradise" he sad laughing.

"There are bad people here, so places like my own, down there in the valley have guns for shooting at people as well as for shooting at animals".

Then the man came to stand next to them, where they were still kneeling by Beasant`s body.

When he slowly took of his cap the hair underneath it cascaded over his shoulders, as red as his beard.

He said a prayer over the body in the language of the island, his cap pressed against his heart, looking round the landscape as though he was talking to it.

When he finished his prayer he aimed the rifle into the air, shooting three times saying something different each time he shot.

When he finished all three of them were joined together in the silence of this charnel place, each under shadow of their own thoughts, until the man spoke.

"Come, get up both of you get up. I have said a prayer for your friend to our god`s. He will be welcomed into their halls as a brave man, who I think died defending you his friends, is that right"?

"Yes that is right" Mark replied.

"He was my friend" said Cronan as he stood. "Rest in piece Barry, I promise you I will see your mother to give her your things and tell her that you died a brave man".

"My name is Hellnor Mc Gregor" and they shook hands with the man with the flaming read hair whose hands were like bears paws.

"Please come with me to be my guests at my farm in the valley tonight.

You need your wounds tending to, a hot bath and some hot food to fill your stomachs I think".

After they had loaded Beasant`s body into the trailer in the chill of the late afternoon, Hellnor took them down into the valley where his farm stood near the river`s mouth.

Sitting in the trailer bouncing along a rough road, with the body sitting between them,

Mark felt grateful for their survival to Beasant but also relief, because he no longer had to be a part of the game he had been part of.

What had started out for him as an exciting business venture had ended up with him being used as the little guy who could take the blame and he thought again of his father chasing him on his pushbike.

Then he spoke out loud to the countryside around him, much as Hellnor had done when he recited his prayer over Beasant`s body;

"How did I come to this"? he said before he looked at Cronan.

"I, Mark Twevelyan Davis, son of a country clergyman, business entrepreneur, friend to celebrities and politicians, owner of that fine old ship The Eagle, my clothes torn and covered in blood, my body bruised and broken, currently travelling with the body of a brave man in a tractors trailer, being driven by a flame haired bear of a man called Hellnor McGregor to share his hospitality at his farm".

"True Mr Mark" Cronan said "and because of my friend`s courage and fighting spirit

we are still both alive.

As Shakespeare said: "We know what we are, but know not what we may be".

I swear that I am going to make sure I do not waste the rest of my life that I owe to my friend.

What's more I think you should do the same Mr Mark".

They shook hands on it over the body as they arrived at the flame haired man`s farm in the twilight of the day.

It was a large old rambling two storey building enclosed inside high walls, with bits added almost randomly to it over the year`s.

There was smoke rising from a great chimney, which shot up from the centre of the building like a rocket about to take off.

Two big dogs, with coats the colour of Hellborn`s hair came to silently give them a menacing welcome, standing at the back of the trailer looking up at them as though they were judging whether they could leap into the trailer from the ground to attack them.

"Alright you two, we are not too tasty at the moment" Cronan said standing to look down at the two animals as though he knew exactly what they were thinking, "but I might have something left for you to eat in my pockets".

And after rummaging around he produced a packet of sweet biscuits which had somehow survived the beating he had taken and the bumpy ride in the trailer.

"Here you are, a treat for you" he said, throwing what remained of the biscuits upwards and outwards into the air, so the dogs had to scrimmage for what was left of them away from the back of the trailer.

Hellnor stood at the back of the trailer watching the two dogs brawling over the biscuits, waiting to help them get down.

Both Mark and Cronan needed the big man`s help.

When Mark tried to stand, he found that he could not stand straight but hunched over like a buzzard looking down from a tree for it`s next meal.

Hellnor was able to lift him from the trailer to place him gently on the ground as though he were a child.

Then he and Cronan supported him to the doors of the old building where they were met by Hellnor`s family.

"This is my wife Eleanor" he said, introducing them to a tall woman with almost white blond hair and emerald eyes "and this is my mother Myra and her mother Sulven".

They were tall women too, with hair a lighter colour than Hellnor`s, steaked with grey.

"You are fortunate that it was me that found you gentlemen because Eleanor, Sulven and Myar are all skilled healers, known throughout Feinstorm, who will tend to you both.

And lastly these are my two children Silven and Brond" who stared at the two battered strangers in their torn clothes, who entered into their house.

Mark felt his legs start to give way, putting his hand on Cronan`s shoulder, who helped him into a chair near the fireplace with a fire of logs burning.

He felt the tears in his eyes and also saw them in Cronan`s.

"I think we have come to a very good place" Mark said to him.

"Yes Mark, I think that this may be heaven for us " Conran said in reply.

Chapter 23

The Wolfe and Isobella

Gale and Dave came to stand with Isobella where she stood on deck watching the Wolfe, where he sat out towards the breakwater.

"You know that you do not have to talk to him today if you do not want to" Gale said.

"If I have learnt one thing on this voyage Gale, it is to face up to what in front of you.

Today I saw Curnow for the first time in many years and that was a good thing.

Now I will talk to the Wolfe, which will not be such a good thing I think but there is no time but the present Gale".

"I can come with you" Dave said "if you want"?

"No, but thank you. I will do this alone or not at all" and then she left the deck and started to walk towards where the Wolfe sat smoking a cigarette.

She thought she had ignored the reality of her relationship with the Wolfe for too long. That this was a discussion a long time coming. A walk into the past to make a new future.

When she reached the Wolfe they looked at each other in silence before she was the first to speak.

"Twice in one day I have looked into the past Wolfe, to find the present facing me" she said. "I think you know as well as I do that we have both changed and the relationship we had is not the one which we have now.

Inger Costa has asked me to be her assistant and when she retires I may take over her role as the Intuiter".

He turned his head away as she finished speaking and sat looking towards the breakwater, where the sea threw itself against the lighthouse tower as though it had no right to be there.

She saw his thoughts working their way towards speech become blocked in his throat before he took a great sighing breath to clear it.

"I had heard Isobella" was all he said. She could see how much effort just these four words took for him to say.

Then he threw the stub of his cigarette out in to the sea where they both watched it disappear before he spoke again.

"Neither of us are the people we were or thought we were Isobella.

I have made some bad choices in the past but not anymore".

And she saw something of the old Wolfe in the smile that started to crease his face as he looked at her but he was no longer the man like a great bear she had once loved.

The bravado was gone, along with a lot of the muscle from his body but replaced by something more thoughtful which shone from his eyes.

"I got greedy is what I did Isobella. Involved with the wrong people, who want to do you harm " and he patted what had once been his belly "and now I can see them and myself for what we are.

The truth of it is I still love you and the children but we both know that we have moved on.

You will make a good intuiter. I wish you and the children al luck in the world."

"And you too Wolfe. I came to meet you today thinking that you would be like the Wolfe you were but you are not.

The truth is I had become frightened of you.

Dave told me about bringing you back to the ship in an old wheelbarrow to dry you out.

You always liked a drink but not like that. Not having Dave find you sleeping in a mess of fishing gear on the dock".

When he put his hand up to his face to stop her she could see the pain and the embarrassment that her words had caused him.

"I am sober now Isobella. I swear to god that I would never do anything to harm you or the children. I want nothing more to do with the people who are causing trouble.

I want to go back to Whitchford. Find a place to live so I can start afresh.

I have asked Byorn to let me travel with him when you all leave for home but only if you agree".

"Of course I will agree Wolfe. I believe you when you say you want to start afresh".

"Our ship, the old Sea Wolf or as you call her now The Lady Isobella" he said and they laughed together. "She is all yours now" and when Isobella started to say something he put his hands up.

"Please, please hear me out. Dave told me about what you did at Paternosters Boatyard in Gifford's Bay and she is a new ship now. You have looked after that ship like I have never done. I want no part of her, she is all yours now".

"Thank you, I thought when I was walking here that I was coming to have an ugly argument with you but you are still the generous soul I always thought you were at heart. I extend the hand of friendship to you in peace Wolfe".

They shook hands as a sign of peace before she invited him to come to the ship with her.

On the deck of the Lady Isobella sat looking at the people around her with a smile.

The invitation to Wolfe had soon turned into a gathering of all the crews.

She thought that the Wolfe seemed to get on well with Curnow but then she thought they had both been her lovers and smiled again.

"What are you smiling about" Dave said as and he came to sit next to her, chuckling as he looked at Curnow with the Wolfe sitting together.

"Strange old life sometimes isn't it. Here we are together, with two men who you have had relationships with".

"And Dave, they seem to have a lot in common. Does that mean I have good taste in men or not" she said.

"No comment is all I have to say" he said and they both chuckled.

"You are the skipper of this vessel after all. I do not think the Viking would have any room left for me on his vessel anyway now that I hear the Wolfe is going to be an extra crew member".

Before they could continue there conversation, they were interrupted by the arrival of the patrol boat.

"I have some important news for everyone" Olivia announced as she came on deck.

"We have had a report that gunfire has ben exchanged with the police on the outskirts of Goost.

We do not know if the people involved are part of a group that has come here with the intention of causing you trouble or another group altogether, as the island of Feinstorm has a history of such outbreaks of violence.

However it is more than likely that they have you as their target.

We intend to stay moored close by for your protection until the situation becomes clear.

Chapter 24

A healing place

It was in the morning after Conran and Mark had arrived at the farm.

They had slept the sleep of those who have almost died but survived.

Before they had slept the women had made them hot baths infused with sweet smelling herbs, fed them, treated their wounds and applied a lotion to their bruises.

It was Sulven the great grandmother who oversaw this, making sure that everything was done as it should be.

Conran had never been treated with this much care in his life before and found Sulven and the other women enchanting in the way they had treated him and Mark.

The children had soon lost their shyness as they received their treatment from the women, playing around them laughing with the two dogs, who had taken a liking to Conran.

He had experienced plenty of beatings before, starting with his father, progressing through what little schooling he had managed before his father had told him to go fend for himself when he was only fourteen.

That is where he learnt about dogs, living in a derelict building on the edge of town, which was also home to a pack of wild stray dogs.

They would snarl and menace him if he dared to come to close to them.

But he had studied them; observing their behaviour, listening to the sounds they made, gradually gaining their trust.

He had found work in a large bakery bringing them home the food that would have been thrown out at the days end to share with them.

After awhile he became their friend: There was the leader, whom he named Butch, his lieutenant whom he called Mr Eager and Conran`s favourite, the leader of the bitches called Daisy.

An old dog with a crooked hind leg who had had many puppies in her life.

She was like a mother to him, and he to her, like one of her puppies.

From the dogs he had learnt: patience, observation, listening and not to assume anything, which had helped him to survive through life.

His reading was poor, so he had started to go to the library, where he made a friend in the librarian Mr Dickens, who helped him to learn the magic of words, giving the life he shared with the dogs, the shape and form of cartoon character`s inside his mind.

"Conran and the Wild Dogs" is how he thought of himself and his nickname in the town where he lived became Wildog Conran.

Amongst all the horror of yesterday, Mr Mark had said the valley was beautiful and in the morning light, as he washed his face with cold water, he thought that it was indeed beautiful.

The women had put fresh, clean clothes out for him that were Hellborn`s.

Even though he was a tall man he had to roll up the sleeves of the shirt and the leg`s of the trousers to stop them dragging on the ground.

When he was dressed he went downstairs to the big dining table where Mark was already seated where the two dogs he had named Daisy and Butch, came to smell him and lick his hand.

After breakfast Conran and Mark went out into the yard where Conran helped Hellnor fix his truck.

When they had finished, Hellnor thanked Conran for his help.

"You are a good mechanic I think Conran" he had said. Who had replied quickly as if he was embarrassed by the compliment.

"Not so much, I learnt bits and pieces along the way but I am not a real mechanic Hellnor.

Anyway I think it us that should be thanking you and your family for everything that you have done for us. We could have frozen to death up in the hills last night if you had not picked us up"

"Yes Hellnor" Mark spoke up joining them at the vehicle. "I feel so much better today. I still have some aches and pains but nothing like the ones I had yesterday. The women worked their magic on me and on Conran, there is no other way to put it I think".

"You are right, it is magic that they work, real magic" Hellnor replied and stood looking at the two men as though this was not a manner of speaking but the truth.

"I need your help please Hellnor to find my ship" Mark said.

" He stood holding the damaged phone in his hand poking at the buttons as though some of the women's magic might make it work.

"Do not worry, I can give you a lift by sea not by road. See the schooner moored by the wooden dock down there" where he pointed to an old vessel moored by the rivers side.

"That is mine. We need supplies, so today is as good a day as any to take you into Goost with my family to pick them up".

"But my ship is up the coast not in Goost" Mark replied shaking his head.

"No Mark, it is not. News travels fast round here.

I talked with the fishermen this morning at dawn who told me they had seen your ship the Eagle sailing towards Goost yesterday.

So Goost is where you need to go my friend. A lot has been happening since you escaped the criminals you were with.

I was a soldier once. Not just any soldier either.

"He Who Dares". Special Services Operations.

Bloody war was what I was making gentlemen. Then when I finished being a soldier I became a mercenary to make more bloody war.

Then when my father died I came back to this farm.

He saved my life I think. Because when I came back here I have slowly managed to heal the scars that were inside my head.

With the help of my family and the people that live in this valley.

Now I can sleep again at night without waking up screaming from nightmares.

I think you can both shoot yes? I hope so because there is trouble around Goost from the people that you were with" and then he stood looking at them, waiting for them to speak.

It was Mark who spoke first; "I can say to you now that I did a stupid thing when I became involved with some bad people.

Even before yesterday`s events I knew that it was not the right thing for me".

"Me too" Conran said. "Seeing my best friend killed like that, us both being beaten, has made me do a lot of thinking about what I want to do, which is nothing like what my life was before".

"Then let us shake hands on that and say no more about it then" Hellnor said.

"I will speak for you both if the authorises come asking questions, ok" and they shook hands.

"Now we need to move everyone onto the schooner so we can down to Goost as quickly as possible we can because there is a storm coming" and he pointed far out towards the sea where black storm clouds were forming.

As they started to move back into the house Hellnor put his hand on Conrad's arm to stop him.

"I think you are a clever man who is strong too Conran.

If you want to work here with me I have plans for the farm.

You could be just the sort of person I need to help me,

I am serious, so please think about it".

Then they went into the farmhouse to get ready to sail the schooner to Goost.

At the dock in Goost the patrol boat had spent the night moored near the vessels before it left at first light to patrol outside the harbour.

There been news of armed men on the outskirts of Goost during the night from the patrol boat.

"What now Isobella" Inger had said when she rang her.

"What is their real plan? They are not only threatening us but everyone else on the island as well.

The police have impounded two vessels at a small cove on the coast, which was where the Eagle had been moored before her skipper brought her down here to Goost.

The only crew on board the other two vessel`s were the cooks.

There were also reports that a convoy of vehicles was involved in an exchange of fire with the police on the outskirts of Goost.

The islanders are fighters, a formidable foe when they are attacked, believe me I know, these are my people. We have faced down our enemies before".

Truan had also rung to share more information with Isobella:

"The intelligence I have been gathering is telling me that these people have been planting the roots of their network in the Far Shore for far longer than we thought.

I need to talk to Wolfe and to Curnow, as well as the rest of the crew of the Eagle as soon as I can, to see what information they may have for me

I fear many more of our people may have already been corrupted than we suspected".

But before Isobella was able to gather her thoughts together Dave came to tell her that the patrol boat had escorted a vessel into the harbour.

When she went up on deck there was an old schooner moored next to the Eagle, where Trevelyan was on the deck talking to Olivia.

Then Olivia left the vessel in company with Trevelyan and another man. Accompanied by two of the police from the patrol boat, who were carrying a stretcher with a body covered in a sheet.

When Trevelyan walked past Isobella she could see the obvious pain he was in as he walked down the quay behind the stretcher to a waiting police van.

"Well, well what about that" Dave said. "Those two look like they have been in the wars and no doubt about it Isobella.

I wonder what happened to them. Perhaps we should go and talk to that big red haired fellow on the schooner who seems to be the skipper, to see if he is prepared to tell us anything".

"Well, you do not have to go to see the big red haired fellow because I have come to see you" a deep voice said.

Dave looked up to see Hellnor, where was standing on the quayside with his family smiling.

"Permission to come aboard skipper" he said to Dave.

"I am not the skipper of this vessel" Dave and nodded at Isobella.

" My name is Isobella Carvier skipper of this vessel.

This is my first mate Dave Seaward, welcome aboard".

Once on board, they took Hellnor with his family down to the main cabin, where Gale made drinks for all of them.

"This is a fine ship you have" he said when they were all seated.

"On the voyage here Mark Trevelyan told me about you.

He thought that he and the man with him, Conran, would have to answer some questions when he saw the patrol boat come to intercept us.

He asked me if I would come to see you to tell you that he hopes to be able to meet himself if that is possible"?

"Yes I think that will be possible Hellborn. Can you tell us what happened " she asked.

"I was travelling home at the end of the day to my farm, when I came upon Trevelyan and the other man Conran, with the body of the dead man, called Beasant.

That is how I came to take them to my farm, where the women looked after them.

They had been badly beaten both of them.

I was a soldier and a mercenary once, so I know a lot about wounds and injuries" and when he said this Isobella saw his wife Eleanor take his hand in hers to hold it.

"I can tell you it was an ugly scene when I first saw them with the body but I will say no more with the children here".

And he turned to look to where the children were playing what seemed to be the latest version of the pirates versus the badders.

"It is a game my daughter Terri made up" Isobella said "but in many ways it has become reality for all of us" and then she told the story of their voyage until they arrived in Feinstorm.

"I would not have believed you, if you had told me what was going to happen when we left Whitchford. I thought we may get some bad weather, perhaps have to repair some gear but the rest of it, there is no way I would dreamed that any of it would have happened".

By the time Hellnor and his family left the vessel, the storm, which he had forecast in the morning had started to arrive in Goost, yelling at the sea to throw itself against the lighthouse.

When Hellnor said they would be staying overnight on the boat to sit out the storm Isobella invited them to come and share the evening meal with them.

"Good folk I think" Gale said as everyone waved goodbye, watching them walk along the quay into Goost.

"Can we stretch the larder a little further do you think? Invite the Byorn and crew to eat with us as well" she asked Isobella.

"Of course Gale, we could all do with some of your good food I think" and she silently thanked Frederick for her the first payment when the gathering had finished, otherwise the larder may have looked very bare indeed.

Chapter 25

Watching waiting game

It was twilight. Stefan was sitting alone in one of the empty cottages where they were hiding. He was angry but that was no surprise.

His mother had always said that he was born angry. The most painful birth of any of her four children.

"That boy was born to cause pain" she would whisper as she tried to comfort one of her other children whom he had hurt.

He had hidden in the cottages before, when the police were after him for one thing or another.

They were well hidden here in the foothills outside Goost.

The men knew well enough to keep any lights hidden and be awake when they were on watch or they would feel his wrath.

He was particularly angry because they should have been out causing mischief but two of the vehicles needed repairs.

He had sent men to steal the parts they needed or better still to steal better vehicles. Then they could really have some fun but they would need to be very careful.

They had both the police and the defence force militia to deal with.

Then there were these other people: well trained professionals, with a leader who was a women from the group they were supposed to be stirring up.

"Politics, stuff politics, it is for the weak not for me" and he slammed the bottle onto the table and poured himself another drink.

"I drink good white Feinstorm ravan, this is my politics" and he held the glass of pure white spirit up to the flame of the oil lamp he had lit.

"You are my best friend, my lover in a bottle, better than any politics' or any woman".

When he had emptied the glass he sat looking into the candle`s flame thinking about the man they had killed and the two they had beaten and left behind.

"Stupid little man mouse. True Helenian or whatever he was called but the man we killed was a real fighter.

I told my men no killing but that man made them mad fighting like a tiger.

Shame he had to die. I could do with a man like that to be my new lieutenant.

Victor is getting too old and soft. He should go to grow his grapes, make his wine or it is a bullet to the head if he makes trouble anymore trouble for me".

He took out his own gun.

Pointing it at his head he wanted to pull the trigger.

No more red mist of pain in his head. Everything finished, quiet like the mountains, with a little stream flowing down a valley to the sea but he put the gun down.

"If not me someone else, perhaps soon, from behind when I am not looking.

Perhaps these people who are paying me. They will be angry because my men killed that tiger man. Too much trouble for me now".

Truan with her own security force were trouble for Stefan because they were watching the old cottages from their hiding place in the forest.

They had no need to rush. It would be hard for Stefan to escape.

They could just wait for him to leave with his men to spring their trap if they wanted.

That is what she told Isobella when she interrupted her at dinner.

"So Isobella, here I am trying to keep warm out in the hills watching a gang of local thugs but you, thank you very much, are eating good food, drinking good wine in good company" and they had both laughed.

"Not to worry Truan, there will be time for us all to celebrate, when the police have put them in jail.

What else have you to tell me. Do you have any news on just who might be giving these people their orders".

" You are not going to like it. It may get a lot more ugly before we have finished Isobella, because there will likely be people involved who we both know".

When she had finished talking, Isobella`s breathing became louder down the phone but Truan could still hear the sounds coming from the dinner table; it sounded like Dave`s voice telling one of his stories.

She knew it was hard for her friend to hear the news they had been fearful of ever since they left Gifford`s Bay.

"Isobella please talk to me. I can hear you breathing" she finally said, unable to bare the silence.

"I am sorry Truan" she finally spoke softly, before she paused, as though she was trying to hide what she had to say even from herself.

"As you know I am not often lost for words but this is one of those not often times. My head is spinning with the names and faces of who it could be.

We have both been fearful that this would happen. We said as much to each other but now it has, well that is altogether different".

"Isobella I understand that this is a shock for you, one amongst many you have had to endure since you left Whitchford. Why don`t you go back and enjoy your food with friends".

"I will give myself a couple of minutes to let it all sink in but then I will go back. Keep yourself safe Truan".

When she had finished her call with Isobella she pulled her sleeping bag more tightly round herself and closed her eyes.

But her eyes were open again before long.

She thought about her conversation but glad she had not told her friend everything.

That was something that she should only do when they were with each other.

"Enough is enough" she sighed and wondered why she had given up her life as a successful lawyer to end up lying on the back seat of a truck in a sleeping bag on a cold night, on an island called Feinstorm, keeping watch on a crew of dangerous criminals.

Chapter 26

Punishment and truth

The storm had grown stronger overnight.

Now in the morning, even in the shelter of the harbour, the waves were beginning to reach onto the decks of the vessels moored there.

Curnow had come to pay Isobella a visit with his skipper and his crewmates in the main cabin, where Byorn had joined them.

His visit had been an opportunity for Kat to tell her mother about her meeting with him by the river Whitch.

Now she and Terri sat watching them both together listening to the news of what was happening with the "badders" and the police.

Terri had announced, "temporarily", that she would be giving up her journal writing for a "pictorial depiction of events", because it was all too confusing.

But really it was just an excuse to draw pictures of solid upstanding police arresting ugly, scarred and overweight "badders".

As she said to Kat and Trin; "I have decided to have some fun with all this serious stuff".

Trin was really not interested in any of this "serious stuff" anymore. His infatuation with being a spy had been short lived. The study of birds and animals was now the focus of his attention.

The storm frustrated him because he could not go outside to watch the local wildlife but it had given him an opportunity to draw his own wildlife pictures.

Kat was thinking about Whitchford and the friends that she missed there; Gilda and Jane and all the others who would be at high school now.

She thought they would be sailing back home as soon as the storm had finished but she felt she would like to be magically transported back to Whitchford immediately, so she could be there with everyone and not have to worry being chased by men with scarred faces carrying guns anymore.

Then she heard Byorn talking about Wolfie.

"The police came to take him away this morning to the station for some questioning. They are talking to everyone that may have any information".

"They talked to all of us on the Eagle" Curnow said.

"But we did not have much to tell them. They already have Trevelyan and Conran at the police station, so they might be of more use to them. Is there anything you can tell us Isobella"?

"I have to be very careful what I say. The police are not helping much really, certainly nothing like they were when we were on Guinivre.

As you are aware that it has often been the case. Like the time the church regarded us as some sort of fanatical, pirate group threatening their power, so we are quite used to not always having many friends.

The one`s we have are good friends though" she said looking round the group smiling.

"We also have many enemies though, so sometimes the lines can seem to get very blurred between the two" and she thought of what Truan had told her.

"I think this has been coming for a long time" Gale said, in her clear, soft voice drawing the group together to listen.

"We cannot expect to be able to hide from the sort of confrontation that we are experiencing now, when so much change is taking place around us. We are sitting sheltered from the storm today but sometimes you are forced to go out be part of it whether you wish to or not.

That is the reality which we all need to face if we are to survive.

But just for the moment, how about some fresh coffee or tea, this vessel is fuelled by it don`t you know"?

Outside the warm comfort of the main cabin the storm was coming again to rage at The Lady Isobella and the other vessel`s moored at the quay. Kept afloat by the skill of people like Lester Patternoster but ultimately only with the consent of the sea itself .

The storm raging on the coast was moving inland too. Driving the people who farmed the land or lived in the rural towns and villages indoors to shelter.

Stefan`s men had arrived back at their base before dawn with a stolen vehicle to replace one of the vehicles and spares to repair the other one.

The vehicle they had brought back was old. When Stefan tried to start it, it coughed like an old man trying to catch his breath.

"What rubbish have you brought me Victor" Stefan said to his lieutenant. His voice had become soft, almost like a whisper, with an angry menace in every word as he moved round the vehicle and Victor as a tiger moves round it`s prey.

Victor knew was unlikely to end well for him. He felt his bowels becoming loose, while his legs grew weak.

He should knew that he should keep quiet, then perhaps, the red mist inside Stefan would roll away.

But he could not. His nerves, like his legs were growing old. When he tried to speak to Stefan, he would not even look at him.

"It will be alright Stefan, we will" and then Stefan struck with a furious speed, grabbing his ear in his grip, to pull him face down into a puddle, where he placed his heavy boot onto Victor`s neck.

"It will not be alright Victor you old fool, do you understand it will not be alright, do you understand, it will not be alright because you are not alright. I will let you live only" and Stefan took his gun from it`s holster. "If you crawl away from this camp and I never see you again but if you try to get up I will shoot you like the mongrel you are, one bullet here" and he pushed the gun into Victor`s ass and laughed, "and one bullet there" he pushed the gun into Victors thigh.

"Then oh so slowly I will shoot you in many, many places, until you die, so crawl away old man.

Go grow those fucking grapes you are always talking about. Tell your dumb grand kids about what a great man you are".

None of the men who stood watching had moved. Not one word had been spoken by any of them. There eyes were fixed on the scene being played out in front of them as though they were watching two actors on television.

When Stefan took his boot from Victors neck one of the men, younger than most of them, whispered one word in his friends ear who stood next to him.

"Revenge".

They had both grown up in the same village not far from Victors vineyard. They both respected him, as did all of Stefan's men.

He was grasping for breath now, choking on the water he had swallowed from the puddle, where his bowels like his mouth had disobeyed him.

He could not have walked even if wanted to, not even sure that he could crawl but the hatred he felt for Stefan would help him to.

So he did crawl, stopping only to vomit up the foul water from the puddle, following the track down the hill away from the cottages to safety, with hatred and revenge providing the energy he needed to keep going.

Stefan would not have to put a gun to his own head now, someone would do that for him after what he had done to Victor.

Victor wanted it to be him.

In making this sacrifice to the tribe, as a warning to all of them, the dictator had taken one step too far.

There would be no lamppost for Stefan to hang from with his lover or poison for him to share with her.

His death would be as lonely as the life he had lived, with not even a sentence in history for him, just a hidden grave somewhere.

Somehow Victor had kept crawling further down the hill to where Truan was hidden with her team in the cover of the forest.

When she saw that two of them might move out from cover to help him, she put her hand up to stop them, pointing for them to follow him further down the hill under cover of the trees where they could help him without being seen.

She would not jeopardise the operation now that they were so close to success.

But she was worried that they had all missed something.

It seemed too easy to her. She needed to ask more questions.

Trevelyan was no gangster, just a greedy entrepreneur who had gone out to play with the big boys to make some money, with a story to tell his friends over a glass of good malt whisky at the club when it was all over.

And this lot with their beaten up vehicles and old weapons were just a bunch of local thugs.

But Stefan their leader was dangerous; a snake, with his poison ready to strike, a killer if ever she had seen one.

I need to look at this like a lawyer, as if it were a case she thought.

All this is doing is taking everyone`s eye`s of what the main game, which is the head not the body, which presents itself as being a flabby ill organised opponent. Feinting a few soft jabs to the body, when the real punch will be delivered to the head.

That is there real target; Inger, Isobella, Frederick, the delegates themselves.

They want to make a real statement. So they can create the kind of fear that eats away at people`s spirits and souls

Exploiting their weakness and greed, making them open to corruption.

She turned to the guard who was standing next to her, the same man who had been with Isobella when she confronted Trevelyan at the gathering, which had had been another crude feint to take their eyes off the main game she now realised.

"I am in the wrong place Jacques. We need to be somewhere else not here. Get two of the best men and a vehicle ready.

Tell Daniel that I am leaving him in charge. His orders are to leave Stefan and his men alone, a watching brief only.

Anyway, they look in disarray to me but if they do start to move they are to be followed at a distance, we must not be seen, so he should place whatever men he can spare along the route out of here towards Goost in case they do make a move and they can be kept under surveillance.

Tell him to keep in contact with us at all times, ok"?

She would ring Inger, Isobella and the delegates who still remained on the island to warn them to increase there vigilance and make sure that they were protected at all times.

Then she would make contact with the police command in Goost and the captain and Olivia on the patrol boat to relay her suspicions to them too.

These are clever people she thought. They who would have been outraged when Stefan's men killed someone but it has worked in their favour in the end.

People started to expect that would be the way that they were going to go about things. Then the storm came and everyone started to take shelter.

The real game has not even started yet.

If anyone of are people or those close to us is playing a double game tells them what we are doing, then so be it.

Trust is always the first victim of those who seek to corrupt.

Attack is our best defence now".

Then she was climbed into her vehicle with Jacques to make sure that Inger really was as secure as she thought she was in her castle.

Or was it made of ivory after all?

Chapter 27

Together

The first thing Isobella did after she had finished talking with Truan was put on her wet weather gear before she asked Dave to get the crew of the Fair Lady to meet them on deck as soon as possible.

Then she went to talk to Gale.

"I want to ask your advice Gale" she said after she had told her what Truan had said.

"It is about Curnow and the crew of the Eagle. I need you to tell me if you think that we can trust them or not.

I am concerned that the relationship I had with Curnow might cloud my own judgement and I trust you implicitly to give me your own opinion".

"Yes I think you can trust them" Gale said immediately.

"We know that he and skipper, along with the other two crew have already helped us to avoid danger outside Gifford`s Bay.

I think that they would help us now if we asked them too".

"Thankyou that is what I was hoping you would say Gale.

Things are happening so fast now, with Truan on her way to see if Inger really is safe in her castle. I need to be sure that we have as many pairs of eyes watching are backs as we can muster.

I am going to see Curnow with rest of them now. I hope to bring them back here to meet with everyone else".

The storm seemed to have grown stronger to Isobella since she had last been outside before. It was hard to keep herself upright walking along the quay to the Eagle, leaving her breathless by the time she reached the ship.

She had seen only one police officer hunkered down in his vehicle on the quayside and someone on the bridge of the patrol boat on watch.

When she arrived at the Eagle the deck was empty as she went straight down into the main cabin.

"Anybody aboard, it`s Isobella, I need to talk to you" she shouted before the skipper came into the cabin, followed by Curnow, Clunes and Jackobson who all shook her hand.

Once she had taken of her wet weather coat the skipper invited her to sit at the table with them before he asked her what had brought her out into the storm to see them.

" To put it simply skipper I have come to ask for your support.

These are dangerous times as you know. We need all the help we can get.

I am afraid that the weather is not are friend at the moment either.

On the way down here I saw only one police officer on watch from the local police, sitting in his vehicle on the dockside asleep, plus one of the patrol boat`s crew on the bridge of the vessel.

We cannot underestimate are enemies. We think that everything that they have done so far has really been a feint, a game to take our attention away from what we believe is their real plan. That is to kill one or more of the people who are most important to us as a group.

From what I can tell this storm is only getting stronger. Darkness will come early

so our enemies are going to be even harder to identify.

With the storm the police and authorities are finding it difficult to cope already.

If you are prepared to help us I would like you to come back to my ship to meet with everyone else so that we can discuss how we can best protect ourselves.

If we an organise ourselves we can also reach out to any of the other people who may be sheltering on any of the vessel`s moored here".

"Well speaking as the skipper of this vessel I think myself and all the crew and will do whatever we can to help you" Davy Jones said as soon as she had finished.

Am I right everyone, does any one of you have anything to say about this before we get are gear on and follow Isobella to her ship"?

It was Curnow who spoke first; "Isobella when you say kill someone important that includes you too doesn't it"?

"You always did know how to ask the difficult questions first" she replied with a laugh. That is what I still love and respect about you she thought.

"Yes, to answer your question Curnow I am probably now, "officially" important

but if they do want to make a significant statement then I do not believe I am significant enough for them.

I think you know me and my people well enough to know that what is precious to us is: "All for one and one for all".

"So you mean the chief intuiter, is that right, Madame Inger would be there target"? it was Jackobson who had spoken.

She looked into his sparkling old eyes for the first time.

"Yes I am one of the people of the Far Shore too" he said "and I am happy to speak freely in the present company.

My families' connections go back a long way and I will lay my hand on the table to signify my agreement with you as is our way".

Then he laid his hand with it`s long fingers in the middle of the table and Isobella felt it`s warmth as she laid her hand on top of it, with Curnow`s hand next on top of hers as if it had always been there, to be followed by young Clunes hand and as was right the skipper`s hand was last.

In the short time she had been on the Eagle the storm had only grown worse. She was thankful for the protection the four men gave her on the walk back to her ship.

The main cabin was already filled when they entered it, with the crews from the Lady Isobella and the Fair Wind, who had been joined by Olivia from the patrol boat and Hellnor, who had brought his family with him as well as crews of three other vessels moored at the in the harbour.

Dave explained to her that he had gone to talk to Hellnor and then to the other skippers, who all wanted to be part of the meeting.

She took him aside to thank him and say how pleased she was to see all the people there and then she opened the meeting.

"Space is cramped. I do not want to keep you away from your own vessels any longer than I have to with this storm blowing.

So I will keep what I have to say short, so that we can get down to the business of organisation.

It means a lot to me to know that we are all going to look after each other to make sure that we are as secure as we can be.

You all know by now that we are under a significant threat from a group of what I can only describe as thugs.

We have often been called pirates and accused of criminal activity ourselves over the course of our history but we have and always will protect the right to our freedom and to our heritage.

The police here have provided some help but now, with this storm to contend with, they have told us that their resources are stretched, so we need to step up and look after each other as much as we can.

And she stopped to smile and nod towards where Dave stood next to Hellnor.

" I only hesitate, because I have not spoken to either of them before this meeting but I am going to asks Dave and Hellnor" and she nodded towards them again "to ask if they would be prepared to be the organisers".

The two men looked at each other, waiting for the other to speak first, before Dave with a smile on his face spoke first.

"That is a yes from me skipper" he said, while Hellnor looked towards his family before he spoke.

"And that is a yes from me" he said and the meeting applauded.

"Well we have got plenty to do" Dave said "so lets get started".

After Isobella had had a brief discussion with the skippers of all the vessel`s who would stay to discuss planning she thanked everyone for coming.

Hellnor`s wife Eleanor came to where Isobella stood.

"Please, can you tell me what would you have done if my husband had said no " she said.

"Well like many of the things that I have done in my life I was relying on my intuition Eleanor. Which is a way of saying that I might have had to suffer some embarrassment if I was wrong but my spontaneous feeling was that he would say yes, otherwise I might have asked someone else".

"And with your intuition, who would that have been do you think"? Eleanor asked.

"It would have been Curnow but we were together once when we were younger.

So I am careful not to let that effect my decisions now he is back in my life".

"Well Isobella that`s what my intuition told me too" and they both laughed together.

Chapter 28

Danger Madam Inger?

Truan felt as if she was being taken to see the queen as she was escorted to see Inger. Should I curtsy and smile she thought.

If Isobella were to become the chief intuiter, would she really be able to live the life she lives' now, tucked away in sleepy old Whitchford, or would she be able change anyway?

I don`t think so.

She doesn't need to live in a castle because she becomes the chief intuiter does she?

Questions, always questions and more questions.

She took a seat in one of the two grand, old chairs, in Inger`s office, which looked out over the view across the Costa`s property towards the coast.

She felt more like a queen herself now, being served coffee in a fine china cup.

I could get used to this she thought as she made herself comfortable.

It is seductive. Who knows, if I had continued to be a lawyer, perhaps this is the sort of life that would have been mine one day.

Is that why I gave it up for something, for something, something I don`t know and she thought of the words she had read as a student: "something I do not know, that one may come on randomly".

"Yes it is a beautiful view Truan " Inger said and she realised that she had been day dreaming.

"I am sorry Inger, yes it is a very beautiful view. I was in my own world.

I think it would be very easy to just sit here all day looking at this view if you were not careful".

"Indeed, sometimes I do just sit here Truan to look at the view but unfortunately not of late" and she smiled at the truth of her words.

"I have been thinking about what you told me. It is hard for me to even imagine who it could be amongst the people who are close to me, that would want to do me harm.

It is a horrible thought but that is what these people do is it not Truan. They spread their ugliness through everything that they touch, destroying it until they can rebuild it as they want in their own image.

Is that what they want from us?: To rebuild and control us as they want.

Why us Truan"?

"I think it is because we represent everything that they are not.

We can be like a trojan horse for them so that they can grow their roots deeper. Until no one is able to find them any longer".

I think it a great irony Truan, that we are people that came together because we refused to bow down to tyranny, to the bullies. Now tyranny is trying to make us bow down to it again.

When we took what we needed to survive from the people who wished to control us we were called pirates because we valued the right to live as free people.

Well if they want to keep calling us pirates let us be pirates for the age we live in and fight for are freedom again.

This is a wake up call for all of us Truan, to hold the truth more tightly to ourselves, looking after each other giving respect to all".

"I apologise to you Inger. I have taken us away from what we need to discuss today. The question of who is a danger to you".

And despite Inger`s obvious distress at times, Truan slowly guided her to the ugliest of truth`s; that someone close to her wanted to kill her.

It was after midday before they had finished their discussion and Truan still had many more questions than answers.

"I would like to put two more of my best people here in the castle with you to watch over you "she said as they finished.

She was surprised when Inger agreed, without any argument.

She thought she may feel that it showed a lack of trust in all of her people.

And because of that she had to ask the most important question of all.

"I have to ask you whether you have any particular suspicions about anyone"?

Inger did not answer straight away but kept looking at the view outside, playing with the ring she wore on her finger with it`s symbol of the Far Shore.

When she did answer her voice sounded distressed, as though it came from far away.

"You have asked me the hardest question of all Truan, the one I have been dreading but I respect you for that, it is what you should do.

The answer is yes and no: Yes, because I feel it so or rather my intuition tells me it so and I am the chief intuiter after all.

And no, because it is just my intuition but I have no real evidence to give to you to support it but put simply; I do not feel safe here in my own home Truan anymore.

It is the intuiter motto: Observe, listen, assume nothing, ask your inner voice for guidance.

Well I have been asking my inner voice for guidance when it has woken me in the night to keep me awake.

It tells me that there is a disturbance around me, like a cold draft of air entering a warm room without any reason but I cannot give you any hard evidence.

That is why I so readily agreed to your request to put people close to me, to watch over me: To observe, listen and assume nothing.

Before they could continue the conversation there was a knock at the door and Frederick entered carrying a tray of fruit and sandwiches' for their lunch.

"Frederick how kind" Inger exclaimed "I was expecting Marbella to bring the lunch for us".

"She was busy getting food ready for the extra guards Madam Truan has brought with her, so I am your waiter today" as he placed the tray on a small table between their two chairs.

Truan saw the watch on his wrist as he put the their food on the table next to her.

She had always wanted to buy this particular watch but had never felt that she could really afford it.

On the same hand she also noticed Frederick wore a ruby ring, with matching cufflinks.

She had been thinking about what Inger had been saying but dismissed it as just nerves and imagination.

Then she glanced at Fredericks face and felt as if a cold draft had entered the room.

"Ahh, plums and grapes my favourite fruit, are they from our farm Frederick"?

"No Madam they are from the farm of a friend of mine".

"Do we know him Frederick, what is his name".

"Victor. I come from the same part of the island as he does and we went to school together" Frederick told her.

No, not that Victor surely, it just can`t be she thought but the cold draft was there again.

Inger was about to reach out and take some of the fruit but before she could reach out Truan`s elbow pushed the tray of food and sent it crashing onto the floor.

"Oh how clumsy of me I am so sorry. Let me help clean it up".

She stood and began to replace the food on the tray before Frederick had a chance to help her.

"I am so sorry Frederick" she said as she held the tray of food, which had become a mess of fruit and sandwiches for him to take from her.

"That is quite alright madam, I will get the kitchen to make some more for you and bring it up straight away. There is no need to be upset, these things happen" but as she handed him the tray there eyes met and Truan saw the pure anger that was in them as clearly as the view through the window.

"Are you alright Truan" Inger asked her as Frederick closed the door behind him.

She had not moved from her chair when Truan had spilt the food. Still sitting very still, looking at her now.

"Sit down and tell me what just happened. I saw your elbow deliberately upset that tray onto the floor didn't I Truan.

Tell me what is going on"?

"I will but first I have to call Jacques".

She called him and told him to tell the guards not to let anyone leave the castle grounds before they had her permission. Then he was to come to where she was meeting with Inger as soon as he could.

"I felt something other than your just being upset for what you done.

It was Frederick wasn't it. He is the reason you deliberately spilt

the food".

Before she answered Inger, she reached down with a serviette under her chair to pick up the fruit she had pushed there with her foot when she was clearing up.

"You are the intuiter. You saw everything that happened perfectly and felt what was really happening as well.

Yes it was Frederick. When he was standing here putting the food on the table his sleeve came up to reveal the expensive watch and jewellery he was wearing.

I felt a cold shiver run up my spine like the one you were talking about Inger.

I told myself I was reading too much into everything. That it was just a case of nerves and imagination after everything you had told me.

But when I saw you reaching for the food I knew that I had to stop you, so I knocked the tray out of his hands.

Then after I picked up the food from the floor to hand the tray back to him, are eyes met. I saw the real anger and hatred that were there ".

Inger reached over to put her hand on Truan`s hand.

"That is what has been keeping me awake Truan, because I could not or would not read the signs I was seeing and feeling.

I thought I was assuming something, because to believe it would have been a truth that I could not face.

Frederick has been my loyal assistant, like part of my family for many years.

Why, you and all of us heard him make that speech at the gathering which drew us all together.

But when he delivered are food he said that he was our waiter today I knew I could not hide from the truth any longer, evidence or no evidence.

The Frederick I used to know would never of said that. There was venom, not humour in what he said.

You are our security adviser Truan, I heard you talking to your head guard, tell me what we should do now"?

"The very first thing we should do is talk to Frederick right away.

I do not know how much he suspects but he is a clever man.

I think after my clumsy effort with the tray he will be on his guard.

I am sure that he will be unlikely to tell me anything.

We will need to get the police to come to take him in for questioning but we still do not have any real proof.

If he is as clever as I think he is, they may have to release him because of lack of evidence.

The only thing I have is the fruit I hid under the chair. I think it may have been poisoned. I will give it to the police to test but even then Frederick can deny any guilt.

He can blame it on the staff in the kitchen who will have to be questioned as well".

"Oh Frederick, what have you done" Inger exclaimed and Truan looked at her, where she still sat in her chair staring at the view.

She thought she looked older, almost frail.

What a web we weave at such cost she thought.

Then Jacques knocked on the door and came into the room.

Truan told him to get one of the guards to come to look after Inger while they went to find Frederick.

They went straight to the kitchen where they found Marbella the cook looking distressed.

She said that Frederick had come and thrown the tray into the kitchen without saying a word and run away.

" I do not have time to explain now but stay here Marbella, we have to find Frederick,

I will send a guard to look after you."

Then started to search the house and grounds with Jacques and some of the other guards.

There was no report of anyone having seen Frederick after he had left the kitchen

He just seem to have disappeared.

At least now Truan she thought. I feel sure that mine and Inger`s suspicions were right.

When they had finished their sweep of the castle and grounds she stopped to talk with Jacques and some of the guards at a gazebo in the grounds, that had become a base for them out of the storm.

"No one was is to leave until you have checked with Jacques" she said.

"Do not forget to search all vehicles going out and coming in too.

I have been in contact with the police, who have said that they will try and send some of their people but because the storm has caused damage I am very doubtful that they will.

It will be a long day but we must find Frederick, the weather is not are friend.

There is hot food and coffee for you in the castle`s kitchen, so go and get something. Then carefully search the whole place again".

When the guards had gone she asked Jacques what the news was from their people watching Stefan and his men.

"Daniel had said that he did not have enough men to cover everything now the gang have started to leave the cottages.

He did not think that they could rely on the police but he did not think that Stefan was a real threat to them anymore.

He and his men were being used to create nuisance. But after what he had done to Victor he had lost control and they were breaking up.

They had rescued the man Stefan had beaten up, Victor his lieutenant, who was not in such bad shape as they thought he might be.

He was suffering more from shock and anger at the way he was treated, than any serious physical injuries.

He kept saying that he was going to kill Stefan, the way that you kill a mad dog.

"So Jacques tell Daniel not to stop any of them but just make sure that he gets any further information to the police.

Most of our people have left the island now, so are focus should be on finding Frederick and identifying any more security risks while we can.

Isobella and her people have formed there own group down at the quay to look after things, so tell Daniel to come here and help us.

He can leave a couple of people to keep an eye on things at the cottages to relay any information to us.

Why don`t you get yourself some hot food now. I am going to stay here and spend some time thinking things through while I have the chance".

Once Jacques had gone Truan made herself as comfortable as she could out of the wind and rain in the gazebo.

The more she studied the estate the more she realised the scope of the problem they were confronted with.

From where she sat she realised what a huge area the castle and grounds covered.

The old castle itself: with it`s many additions, the large grounds with there tree`s and rocky outcrops were like a maze.

There were all sorts of places where Frederick could have hidden using his intimate knowledge of the building and grounds.

"I need more eyes to help me. More local people to give me the information I need" she whispered to herself.

She would ask Inger if she could give her some of the staff that looked after the castle and the surrounding estate to help her.

"Excuse me madam" it was one of the gardeners standing in the rain outside the gazebo speaking to her.

"Please come in here out of the weather and take a seat" she said to the man.

And the man came into the gazebo shaking the water from his wet weather clothing and took the seat next to her.

"I think you are looking for the man Frederick, is that right madam"? he said without any pause or introduction, as though he knew the urgency of the situation only too well.

"That is right and you can call me Truan. What is your name".

"They call me Grevas. I am the husband of Marbella who looks after the kitchen and is the housekeeper for Madam Inger. She was very upset when I saw her. She said that you and all the guards were searching for him.

I will tell you the truth. I never liked that man Frederick.

He was always so good, all smooth and polished like a sleek rat.

But what do I know, eh. I am just a gardener" and they both he laughed together.

"Well Grevas you are right I think" she said.

She decided that she liked this man who said he was just a gardener but spoke the truth.

"I am glad you told me the truth Grevas because you have made me believe that there maybe some light ahead after all".

"Well you talk about light. I tell you where I saw Frederick earlier, after he had been to the kitchen frightening my wife. He was over there" and Grevas pointed across the wall which surrounded the castle`s grounds to a hill to the north, where an old building stood.

"That building used to be a church and many years ago when there was a lot of trouble on the island the owners of the castle built an escape tunnel from the castle to the church. That's how he escaped I think.

Not many people know about the tunnel but he did and he used it".

"Did you see which way he went Frederick when he left the old church"? Truan asked him.

"Yes he went away north towards the mountains where there is a track.

If he had someone waiting there with a vehicle he could go anywhere he wanted on the island.

And if he paid someone enough money he could get a boat or a plane to take him Runesholme or anywhere he wanted".

"I can`t thank you enough for your help Grevas.

Now why don`t we go inside to see your wife Marbella in her kitchen and get something hot to eat and drink".

Chapter 29

The Road North

Truan rang Isobella from the kitchen to ask her for help.

"The quay is like an armed camp now" Isobella said when Truan rang her from the warmth of the kitchen. "We are more in danger of being injured by walking into each other than we are by being attacked" she joked.

"Don`t worry about transport" Truan told her "my people who were watching the cottages can pick you up on their way here. Just make sure that everyone has enough wet weather gear, warm clothing, a sleeping bag as well as well as plenty of coffee of course but I know that will be the first thing that Gale will pack".

After she had spoken to Isobella she felt that there was some light at the end of the dark tunnel that Frederick had led them down.

Then they were joined by Jacques to look at the map of Feinstorm together with Grevas.

"Here, right here this is where he comes from" and Grevas`s thick finger stabbed at a valley in the northwest of the island.

"Springvaur it is called, there are hot springs there where people go for their health.

And here, is a good road running all the way up the coast " using his finger again he traced the line of the road on the map.

"There is a warm current just off the coast, so the weather is warmer than here.

They grow grapes there. The wine is good from Springvaur" he said licking his lips in appreciation.

"This is where we must look first I think Jacques" Truan said. "That is where Frederick was born and that is where his friend Victor comes from too.

I will call Isobella again straight away to let her know that she should prepare for a road trip to the north of the island.

You contact Daniel too to tell him that we have some driving to do.

Frederick has a good start on us but he is probably travelling by the inland roads if he is worried about the police. Because of the storm the earliest we might be able to get a plane to fly there is late tomorrow or even the next day. So driving is the only way we can get there without wasting more time".

"I will get some food for you take with you Madam Truan" Marbella said getting up from the table.

"And come you, lazy husband, you come and help me get food ready for are guests who are helping to look after are safety too, as well as looking for snaky Freddie" and she turned to look at Grevas who sat at the table like a statue.

When she turned back to her work he whispered to Truan and Jacques; "Thirty years and five children, I know she loves me" and sighing more loudly than he needed too, he roused himself to amble to his wife`s side to kiss her on the cheek making her laugh.

"I know you will both look after Inger as well as you look after each other" Truan said joining them in their laughter.

"You not worry about that Madam, we look after her with are lives if we have to. No harm will come to her while we are here" Marbella said.

As if to make her point she waved the knife she was holding in the air as though it was her sword.

At the quayside, Conran and Trevelyan, who had returned from the police station, stood dejectedly watching the loading of the vehicles for their trip to the north.

The police had only agreed to release them after their passports had been surrendered at the station.

Isobella had agreed to take full responsibility for them until a decision was made on whether any charges were to be laid against them.

"Poor buggers, I can`t but help but feel sorry for them" Dave said looking back to where the two men stood.

"They asked, well begged me to talk to you Isobella about taking them with us.

After they had seen Beasant killed, Trevelyan said he and Conran want to prove that they are not criminals".

"Dave be quiet for a moment" Isobella said grabbing hold of his arm.

"I know what you are doing. You are a good man with a big heart who wants to see the good in everyone else as well.

Remember Trevelyan was the one who tried to stop us from coming hereto send us scurrying back home when we left Gifford`s Bay.

And have you also conveniently forgotten about the scarred man with his mate who wanted to kidnap Terri in Guinivre"?

"Please keep your voice down" Dave said and prised her fingers from his arm "come over here where we can talk".

And he led away Isobella from the vehicles to some crates on the quayside where they could sit down.

"My god you got a grip on you like Odin`s dog" he said rubbing at his arm where she had been holding him.

"I am sorry Dave but as good hearted as you are you have to admit that it would be a risk to take them with us".

"So what about the Wolfe and Curnow, haven't you chosen not to see them as a risk"?

"Alright, that may have some truth to that but what is there to gain from us taking them with us anyway"?

As they sat on the crates debating the fate of Conran and Trevelyan they were unaware of the audience which they had attracted.

Activity getting ready for the journey had almost finished. The vehicles sat with their motors idling with most of their passengers already seated inside out of the weather.

Gale, who was to stay behind with Hellborn's family to look after the children, finally ran out of patience stepping forward to place her hands on both of their shoulders.

"Enough you two" she said. "Yes or no? You have a long journey ahead of you, so why don`t you get out of this damned wind and rain into a warm vehicle before you loose what little light you have left of the day and get going".

When Gale stopped talking both of them looked towards the vehicles where everyone waited to start there journey.

"You argued your case well Dave" Isobella finally said.

"You have convinced me that they may be useful but they can only come on the condition they travel with Olivia and Hellborn in their vehicle.

I think their presence alone will be enough to make sure they both behave.

Both Hellborn are armed, if you don`t count your grandfather`s matched pair of heirloom shotguns that is" digging him in the ribs as she said this, to let him know that there were no hard feelings.

"Just remember that I am ultimately responsible for them, as we both are for the Wolfe".

As soon as Dave had given Trevelyan and Conran the good news the convoy was able to start it`s journey driving through Goost`s near deserted streets to the castle where Truan waited with her team for them.

Inger had come to sit in the rocking chair in the warmth of the kitchen, where she could be fussed over by Marbella with the other staff.

Truan was sad to see the change that had taken place in her since Frederick had been exposed but she hoped that leaving her in the care of Marbella would help her to recover.

Inger had asked her to take Grevas with his brother Tomasas as their local guides.

They both stood next to her now where she sat, with their hunting rifles slung across their backs with bandolier`s of cartridges slung across their chests.

She thought they looked like two grizzled old revolutionaries from a black and white photograph, ready for one last tilt at the windmill.

She hoped she was not their Don Quixote.

Since the brother`s had appeared dressed for war the estates workforce had formed their own security force. She almost expected to see Marbella with her kitchen

staff wearing holsters at any moment.

When the convoy arrived their was little time for goodbye`s.

Isobella was only able to talk to briefly to Inger before they were driving out of the castle's gates, where many of the estate workers had come to wave goodbye to them in the wind and the rain.

"Well, the only thing that`s missing is a band and confetti" Dave said.

"Don`t get carried away Dave, just as long as no one is hurt so we all can come back in one piece" Isobella replied.

Chapter 30

Local hero

After leaving the hospital in Goost where he had his injuries treated, Victor was taken to the police headquarters.

On an island known for it`s history of lawlessness he was something of a local celebrity.

Younger police officer`s were brought by older officer`s to peer his cell door`s peep hole at him, where they would recite his criminal history as Victor waved, smiling as each new face peered in through the peep hole at him.

After a life of notoriety he thought of himself as a folk hero to the people of Feinstorm: Victor the lovable rogue who outwits the authorities once again.

But as soon as the peep hole closed Victor slumped back down onto his bunk again, like the old bear he was, scarred by many fights.

The wounds from the punishment Stefan had given him were just more tattoo`s on his flesh but the real wounds were the anger and humiliation he felt inside himself.

"It is time I settled down" he said, thinking of his farm with it`s precious vineyard.

"But I have one last thing to do before I become Victor the old bandit who makes the best wine in all of Feinstorm and Runesholme" he mused.

"I will show them". He imagined being awarded some prestigious medal for his wine at a foreign show when he became the famous winemaker from Feinstorm.

But first I have to get out of this place to kill Stefan, who I was a fool to get involved with in the first place.

He used me to bring a gang together for him, because he knew that people would not work with him anymore.

He has made promises of money which he never paid.

Had too many people beaten. Too many bodies thrown down old mine shafts or had them dropped over the sides of fishing trawlers far out to sea

"I will find him " he shouted and buried his head deeper into the pillow that smelt of other peoples pain, planning how he would once again walk away from the police a free man and a hero to the people of Feinstorm.

While Truan took the coastal road north to Sprangvaur, Stefan was travelling towards the same destination on the tracks that passed for roads in the interior of Feinstorm.

The same area where stupid old Victor grows his grapes he thought as he lay on the back seat of the stolen vehicle.

He could be dead somewhere in the forest, food for the wolves and foxes for all I care.

After what he done to Victor the gang had broken up. He had been forced to pay them more than he wanted to when they demanded their money.

Only two of the gang had stayed with him, just two boy`s really, who were taking him to there home territory near Springvaur to hide.

He would make his plans to leave the island there, before a fresh start in another country where he had contacts.

Feinstorm is too small for someone like me now. I need to play with the big boys.

I have powerful contacts and I will be fine.

Then he looked towards the two young men driving him to safety who he thought worshiped him.

They will be no trouble. I might not even have to pay them the money that I promised them if I am lucky.

Lucky Stefan, that`s what I will call myself when I am a successful business man in a new country.

"Feinstorm" he whispered spitting on the floor before he closed his eyes to sleep.

The two young men driving him, Nico and Jan, had heard what he had whispered as he spat on the floor.

Nico was riding in the passenger seat looked back to where he lay saw that he was already asleep.

Then he showed his gun to Jan but Jan motioned for him to put it away.

"Later, there is plenty of time" he whispered.

"Let`s wait and see what are friends at the police headquarters in Goost have to tell us what has happened to Victor first.

Then he might have the satisfaction of killing Stefan himself".

Victor was sitting in the office of the police commissioner in Goost, with whom he had had a long relationship, enjoying one of the chief`s cigarette`s with a cup of coffee.

The commissioner of police had told him that if he would sign the statement they had prepared for him about Stefan and the death of the foreigner, they would keep quiet about what he called his "little adventure".

Then he would be free to retire to his to vineyard as he wished to make his wine in peace.

"It would be in everyone`s interest`s, don`t you agree Victor" the police chief said leaning back in his chair.

"Both the police and powerful people I think you know Victor, are looking for Stefan right now. He will be dealt with one way or the other. You can be sure of that my friend.

"And if someone else" Victor began to say before the commissioner put his hand up to stop him.

"Listen to me Victor. I said one way or the other. You understand, one way or the other"?

Then Victor nodded his head and smiled at the commissioner.

"I understand commissioner. I understand very well what you mean" and then he leaned across the desk and shook hands the way old friends do.

Chapter 31

Springvaur

They had driven through the night.

Truan had made sure they had stopped to eat and stretch their legs more than once.

She wanted Frederick captured unharmed. Hellborn had agreed that he would be responsible for any critical situations where weapons might be used.

"Are aim is to save lives" and gain information Truan said. "Not to have people injured or killed. We take are orders from the local police and whoever central command in Goost sends to assist us.

We are responsible for everyone`s safety. We do not know what support Frederick has in Sprangvaur so we will need to proceed with extreme caution" she said.

The day dawned with clear skies and mild temperatures by the time they arrived at their destination at a roadhouse service station a few miles outside the main town of Jaal, leaving the storm behind them.

The police chief was their to meet them, smilingly jovial, shaking hands but as he looked at the crowd of people as they got out of the vehicles, he shook his head.

"Well, I did not expect all these all these people" as the police officer with him did a quick count to confirm their number.

"They said nothing about this to me when I spoke with the chief commissioner`s office in Goost" he said seeming far more serious now.

"Let us talk about your plans over some breakfast" he said and led them into the dining area.

When they entered the building, the owner was busy getting extra staff out of their beds, who were beginning to arrive rubbing the sleep from their eyes.

Something is going on" Truan whispered in Isobella`s ear.

"The police in Goost knew exactly what we were doing. How many people and vehicles we would be bringing.

They said that they were stretched for people using the storm as an excuse but promised me that they would send people to help the local police but there is no one here.

Ever since we have arrived in Feinstorm, I felt the police were only doing as little as they had to. Now they seem to have left us to look after ourselves altogether. Thank god that we have are own security people as well as the own people with us".

When the coffee drinks started to arrive the police chief stood to talk clearing his voice.

"If I could just have your attention please" he said, waiting for complete quiet before he started speaking again.

"Welcome to the beautiful valley of Sprangvaur, the fruit bowl of Feinstorm`s north." he said with a broad smile on his face.

"I was not prepared for a such a large group but we will do are best to assist you.

We are only have a small police contingent here in the valley but I am pleased to be able to provide you with the assistance of officer Helg" who stood to acknowledge everyone before he continued again.

"I understand you are looking for someone you suspect may have been planning to attack Inger Costa, who is well known on the island".

Then he paused before he started talking again his manner no longer jovial.

"The man you seek, Frederick Rath, was born in this valley. He and his family are respected member`s of the community.

My orders from the commissioner of police in Goost are that only those of you who are licenced to carry weapon`s in Runesholme and Feinstorm will be aloud to carry them while you are here, apart from the police officer travelling with you from Guinivre.

We will coordinate your search for Frederick Rath. It is imperative that you keep constable Helg and myself updated on your activities at all times.

Now enjoy your coffee and breakfast when it arrives".

As he was about to sit down Truan stood to ask a question.

"Later, later on madam" he said waving for her to sit down again, once more his smiling and jovial self " let us eat are breakfast first".

"That leaves us with four people who can carry weapons Isobella" Truan said when she was seated again.

"We are being side-tracked. I can understand why they would be concerned about weapons but they have known about this since we came to Feinstorm.

But that does not worry me as much as the feeling I have that they do not want us to find Frederick.

Tell me what you think Isobella"?

"I think the Five Powers might be pulling the strings, making sure that we will continue to be frustrated, threatened and attacked until we give up.

Feinstorm is like some fiercely independent medieval world, where people stubbornly protect what they see as their right to do things in their own way.

We have to work with them. Be seen to be doing the right thing while we get on with what we need to do ourselves.

Even if we find Frederick we still have no absolute proof that he intended to murder Inger.

The police have the fruit I gave them for testing but now I have serious doubt that we can rely on them to get an honest test result.

After they had eaten breakfast, Borgan, the police chief , gave them details of what accommodation was available in Jaal.

He told them that there was no hotel or motel accommodation available anywhere in Jaal.

They would only have the option of staying at a caraven park or in people`s homes around town who provided accommodation.

Then he announced he had an important meeting to attend and left abruptly.

"Well at least he smiled when he lied to me. I think we should order some more coffee to keep us awake while we try to find out where everyone is going to stay" Truan said.

While they waited for the coffee to arrive, Truan and Isobella went outside to talk with Olivia.

"We know we can trust you and your commissioner implicitly" Isobella said "and we need your help Olivia, just as we did in Guinivre.

We do not think that we can trust the authorities here on Feinstorm.

We think that they are deliberately trying to frustrate us in are search for Frederick.

The truth is that they want to get us of the island as soon as they can.

Now the storm is passing the remaining boats will be able to leave. The people here plus the few we have left behind in Goost are all that is left of the gathering.

So our enemy has been successful in frustrating us so far. If it was not for your quick thinking Truan, Inger Costa could be dead by now. They would have achieved what they set out to do: break us apart to use the Far Shore as they want for their own ends".

Then she stopped talking. The three women stood silently, enjoying the feeling of the morning sun on their faces, until Olivia spoke.

"Of course I will help you. The police here on Feinstorm have a poor reputation or perhaps a bad reputation is more correct.

My commissioner has not always ben the commissioner of police on a small group of islands in the middle of the sea. He warned me before I left to be careful here. I think it would be a good idea for me to call him to tell him what is happening.

He has many contacts in many places. I think he will be able to help you".

As they were about to go back into the roadhouse the owner came out to talk to them.

"I believe that you are looking for accommodation" he said looking around the car park as though he was concerned that they were being watched or could be overheard.

"Well I think that I may have the answer for you. Please come this way".

He led them round the back of the roadhouse to a forested area, where a grand old building stood in overgrown grounds.

"This is mine" he said with some obvious pride.

"Two of my children live here at the moment but the rest of it is empty. Come, let us go inside and you can look for yourselves" and he led them up the steps to the entrance doors into the building.

"This used to be the best hotel in the north of the island. It was empty until I bought the existing service station here to expanded it into what you see today.

Then the people that owned this building had some financial problems, so I was able to purchase it for a good price.

I am sorry I should introduce myself to you. My name is Johaness Pearlman and as you can tell I am not from the island.

Feinstorm is a beautiful place. I came here to give my family a better life but you have to be careful not to upset the wrong people if you understand my meaning"? and Johaness stopped talking. Looking at each of them waiting for them to comment.

"I can tell Johaness that you do not like to waste time, so neither will I" Truan said. Then she told him as briefly as she could why they had come to Jaal and Springvaur.

"Well you have met are police chief, who`s brother just happens to be the governor of the whole north of Feinstorm.

Yes the governor, or as people call him behind his back the King in the North. One of his cousins is also a minister in the authority which oversees the whole of Feinstorm and so on and on" Johaness said holding a hand up as though he was counting on his fingers.

"Please let me tell you how things work here. There are several powerful families who run much of what happens on the whole island. They think of themselves as aristocrats, the nobles of Feinstorm.

Some of them are nobility, the original rulers of this island who fought amongst themselves but united to fight against outsiders, like the warlords of Runesholme. Now they pretend that they are law abiding citizens but if you dig down just a little bit the dirt only gets darker and your fingers only get dirtier.

They put up with me because I have brought a business here and they know I will bring more business here, that is the only reason.

So do not worry. they will not bother you if you come to stay here".

Then Johaness took them on a tour of the old hotel.

There were enough clean rooms to be able to accommodate all of their people in comfort.

Before they went back to the roadhouse Johaness showed them round the ground floor with it`s large dining room, kitchen, library, games room and ballroom.

"It was a grand establishment in it`s day" Johaness said stopping to look back at his building with pride.

"People used to travel here on their private yachts to enjoy the hot springs".

When they returned to the roadhouse Isobella announced to everyone that Johaness, had agreed to let them stay in the old hotel which was behind the roadhouse.

There were enough rooms for all them. They could eat their meals in the roadhouse. It would take a little time to get the rooms ready but Johaness had said that they should be able to occupy them by the early afternoon.

I think we owe Johaness are thanks" she said to loud applause.

"I know you are all pleased that we can be together in one place, not have to stay all over the valley

But before we do anything else Truan would like to go over the planning for the search we want to make.

Please remember to obey the directions of the law and local authorities, however frustrating they maybe.

Apart from Hellborn, Grevas and Thomas, this is not our country and we cannot do whatever we want, so please be patient".

When she had finished Johaness came to talk to her.

"I know Truan is busy but can I speak outside with you again" and Isobella went with him to sit at a bench under the shade of an oak tree next to the roadhouse.

"I was not sure how much I could tell you earlier when I had just met you but now I have seen you with your people working together I would like to ask you a question.

You are the people of the Far Shore, is that right"? he asked her.

"Johaness, I had not been expecting such a direct question from you but to deny it would be both insulting as well as downright stupid, so the answer is yes, myself and some of the people with me are from the Far Sea but many are not.

Now I would like to ask you a question; What business is it of yours's, why do you want to know"? she said, looking him in the eye.

"Please, I mean no disrespect to you Isobella, far from it in fact.

My father was in business who knew Madam Inger. When I decided to come here I talked to her. It was she who told me about this place.

The Costa family had thought of buying it themselves at one time but they decided not to go ahead in the end because of some financial issues.

Which is how I came to buy this place. I would be pleased to be able to help you and all your people. There is a lot more that I can tell you when I have more time but now I must organise getting the hotel ready for you.

When he had left Isobella continued to sit under the oak tree with it`s branches, which seemed to almost embrace her and closed her eyes.

She saw the weaver shaking her finger, smiling at her, as if to say; "More weaving to do for you, when are you going to stop long enough for me to catch up"?

Then Isobella rested her head on her outstretched arm where the sun had warmed wood of the table and went to sleep.

It was just a short nap but when Olivia woke her, she felt refreshed.

Chapter 32

Mirror mirror

Frederick was standing in front of a full length mirror in the villa where he was hiding near Jaal.

"Not bad Freddie" he said to his image, "not too bad at all". Then went to put on his bath robe lying on the bed.

He made sure that he tied the robe as tightly as he could round his slim waist before he went to stand in front of the mirror again to brush his hair.

He thought of the latest news that Borgan the police chief had brought to him like an excited puppy not long ago.

" Just who do these people they think they are"? he said to his image.

"A bunch of idealists is all they are, with outdated ideas about honour, honesty, integrity and equality.

The way Inger treated me like a servant, her trusted advisor, the old fool she is.

We will own them soon enough. They still have no idea who they are really dealing with".

In his rage he slammed his fist against the mirror, which exploded. Pieces piercing the flesh of his face and hand.

He was left looking at his own bloodied, broken image in the broken mirror, with loose shards of glass hanging from it`s frame.

He ran over shards of broken glass in his shock to reach the bathroom, cutting the soles of his feet, where he grabbed towels to stop the bleeding, before he collapsed onto the cool tiles of the floor.

"Help me" he screamed. "Help me someone, anyone please" but apart from him the house was empty.

Wealth buys privacy and this was the house of a very wealthy person.

His nearest neighbours were in the village some distance down the road.

He had managed to stop some of the bleeding but pulling the shards of glass from his feet just made them bleed more, until he was able to tie towel`s round them.

Then sick from the shock he started to pray to his childhood priest Father Joseph, with the face of a martyred saint just like the one he saw in the mirror before his world started to spin round him like a wheel.

"Perhaps I am a martyr now too" he whispered to himself before he passed out.

Chapter 32

No martyr

Johaness Pearlman came to see them to tell them he had received some important news for them, so they went to sit together in the shade of the oak tree again.

"Officer Helg, has given me some important in formation for you.

She said that she had received a call from an aunt of hers who lives in a village not far up the coast, who looks after some villas in the area for their wealthy owners.

She was asked to give access to one of the villa`s to a man who she described as tall and slim, dressed in an expensive suit, with only a small back pack for luggage".

"That sounds like it could be Frederick" Truan said to Isobella.

Then she asked Johaness if he was sure they could trust Helg.

"Yes I am sure that you can trust her Truan. She worked for me when she first came from the country to Jaal before she started her police training. She does not trust the police chief anymore more than I do. Or anymore than many of the people that live in the valley do for that matter.

He does not know of the relationship she worked for me. We have kept it quiet.

Then Johaness gave them directions to the villa and the phone number for Helg`s aunt.

When he had gone they decided it was a good time with lunch was being served,

while everyone was busy getting ready to move into the hotel to take two vehicles

to drive down to the villa.

It was decided Isobella, Truan, Jacques and Hellborn would travel in one vehicle, while the other vehicle would take Dave, Olivia, Byorn and Anders.

Which meant that two people would be armed in case Frederick had a weapon.

As they were about to leave Helg arrived in a police car.

"As I am your liaison I should come with you she said" as she got out of her car.

"The chief has gone to Goost on important business today but do not worry l will not interfere in your investigations unless I have to.

Uncle Johaness, as I call him, is a good man. He does not like a lot of what is happening on Feinstorm anymore than I do".

It was decided to leave the car park at intervals, so that they did not attract attention, with Helg leaving last in her police vehicle.

Helg arranged to meet her aunt at the entrance drive to the villa to get the key to the villa, where they could leave their vehicles out of sight.

At the drive to the villa after they had parked their vehicles Hellborn led the way up the driveway with Helg, while Olivia covered the rear.

The entrance road was steep, climbing to where the villa stood on top of a hill looking out towards the sea.

When they reached the villa Hellborn signalled for them to take cover while he with Olivia went to the rear of the house with the key Helg`s aunt had given them.

Leaving Helg to cover the front of the villa.

It was only a minute or two before Helg was opening the front door to beckon them to enter the house.

"Frederick is here but he is injured and has lost a lot of blood.

I have called an ambulance and police team to come from the station in Jaal" she said. Then led them into the house up to the second floor, where she stopped them before they entered the bedroom.

They could see the shattered mirror with blood on the carpet through the open doorway, with Hellborn`s body blocking the entrance to the bathroom.

"I do not know what happened" Helg said. "It could have been a fight but the house was locked so it may of been an accident. We will find out when the crime team get here. You can come in Truan but prepare yourself, it is not a pretty sight.

Keep away from the area round the mirror where all the blood is. Don`t touch anything".

Then Truan followed Helg through the bedroom to the bathroom door where Hellborn made way for her.

Frederick was lying on the tiled floor of the bathroom, with bloodied towels wrapped his wounds.

Truan put her hand over her mouth to stop herself being sick. It had brought back memories for her of being shown round an abattoir owned by an uncle as a child.

"It is ok Truan" Hellborn said. "You never get used to this, no matter how much you pretend to".

"Thank you Hellborn" she said then quickly turned to speak to Helg.

"Have you seen his bag or his clothes Helg" and Helg pointed to where they sat on a chair at the side of the bed.

"I should not let you look at them "she said checking her watch.

"You will have to be quick before the police team and ambulance arrive. Here put these on" and she held out a pair of gloves for Truan to put on.

Then Truan went to the chair to find Fredericks laptop and phone.

"Truan do you need a hand" Byorn asked from the doorway.

"Anders Mr Fixit here is a tech wizard if you would like him to help".

So she took the phone and laptop to Anders with another pair of gloves for him.

Then started using her own phone to take photos of anything she thought might be useful from Frederick`s pocketbook.

It was a frantic period for both of them as they copied as much of Fredericks information as they could before the ambulance and police team arrived from Jaal.

Byorn had been right about Anders being a tech wizard. His life on the streets as a homeless teenager, meant that he always carried his lap top with him in his back pack, allowing him to download everything before they heard the team arriving from Jaal.

"Crime can pay" Anders said smiling, as he handed Fredericks things back to Helg before they left the house to make way for the ambulance and police team.

"What do you think will happen now" Isobella asked Helg when they were outside in the sunshine.

"I do not know but there will be an investigation of course.

Frederick will have a lot of questions to answer when he has recovered.

I believe that a lot has been happening behind the scenes in the last few hours" she said looking at Olivia who smiled.

"I believe that the chief was looking very worried when he left for Goost. His secretary is a relative of mine too" and they all laughed.

"Yes, I know another relative. She told me that the minister for police in Runesholme, who has been in touch with our police minister here on Feinstorm is not happy.

It seems that Inger Costa, with her family are still a force to be reckoned with.

The chief in Goost and commissioner here will have to answer directly to both ministers. There was mention made the result of the tests of fruit for poison, which they want immediately.

Oh, there is also a certain police commissioner from another island, who just happens to know both ministers, who has been in touch with information which is of interest.

Anyway, we almost certainly saved a life today. My aunt told me that she had arranged to deliver food to Frederick this evening but by then he could have been dead".

And Truan thought, we would still have been no closer to finding out who are enemies really are.

"The information that we get from Frederick`s laptop, phone and pocket book might provide a lot of answers.

We will have a meeting with Inger to discuss what we have found as soon as Anders has finished examining everything".

Chapter 33

Secrets

On the drive back to Jaal, Isobella, Truan and Anders sat together going over the information they had got from Fredericks lap top, phone and pocketbook.

"This is going to take a little time Truan" Anders said.

"Frederick had a huge network of contacts throughout the world. It will take some time to look at everything but fortunately for us it looks like his security is not so good.

Once I can set myself up at the hotel, I will be able to get a better idea of exactly what we have got here soon enough".

"Byorn was right, you really are Mr Fixit the tech wizard aren't you Anders"?

"Well" Anders started to say before he started giggling like a child who had been caught raiding the fridge.

It was infectious. Releasing the tension they had all felt after finding Frederick covered in blood at the villa.

"This has brought back some of my memories of my time as a teenager.

Which I was lucky to have survived before I met Byorn and Shashti again.

But for all that I learnt a lot mixing with all sorts of people.

Not just criminals or junkies but people who had run their own software companies, psychologists, social workers, charity workers.

They all have stuff to teach you if you want to listen.

I think of it now as my university education: "the university of the streets".

"Well Professor Anders we are pleased that you can give us the benefit of your education" Isobella said laughing.

"And I promise you we will be rewarded for it in our search for the truth" she said.

Then she settled back into her seat to ring Inger.

"Hello Inger, what is all that noise"?

"I am working in the kitchen Isobella at the castle. Cook is making me work very hard indeed" she said and laughed.

"You sound happy, what are you doing"?

"I am making bread Isobella for the first time since I was young. I am kneading the dough. It is good exercise. I think I will have to do more of it, it is good for me.

After you all left I felt very despondent. I was sad thinking about what had happened with Frederick, not just for myself but for all of our people.

I just sat rocking to and thro in that old rocking chair in the corner of the kitchen.

I can tell you that I thought some very dark thoughts. I even wondered at one point if are enemies wouldn't get what they wanted after all.

Then Marbella brought me a cup of what we call forest tea, which is the tea made by the people here from the plants they collect from the forest.

She is a very wise woman.

She sat down to talk to me. I can tell you that she did not hold back telling me exactly what she thought either" she said laughing again.

"Then she took hold of my hands. Pulled me out of the rocking chair, gave me an apron and pointed to the sink; "There" she said, "see those pots, I need them cleaning so we can cook everyone their dinner tonight".

The she gave me a cloth and pot scourer before turned her back on me to go back to her cooking.

I stood there for quite a long time looking at the things she had given me in my hands.

Then I put on the apron to go to the sink to start working.

That was yesterday. I have spent most of my time since then helping Marbella in the kitchen. Now I feel much better then I have for a long time".

Isobella found a tear had escaped from it`s home in one of her eye`s.

She realised that Inger felt like the mother she had never really got to know.

"I am so happy that you are feeling better Inger" she said.

"If Marbella will let you stop kneading the bread for a few minutes I have a lot to tell you".

Then she told Inger everything that had happened since they had arrived in the valley.

"We can drive down to the castle tomorrow and have a meeting with you " she said when she had finished.

There was silence from Inger before she spoke.

"Well, I am glad that you found Johaness. It would be good to see him again.

We have known his family for a long time. They are trusted friends to the people. I would also very much like to know more about this police chief called Borgan.

I can tell you that I have heard of him, his brother and other members of their tribe before. None of it was good.

We may not need to worry much longer about the commissioner here in Goost if the information that I have been given is correct. Evidently he does not know it but he has been treading on thin ice for a long time, which may just be about to break under him.

Talking of the commissioner, I have some news for you to tell Truan.

He released the man called Victor, who is on his way back to his farm in the valley not so far from where you are.

Then it get`s really interesting because Stefan may be hiding in the same area.

What I am trying to say Isobella is that everything seems to be coming your way at the moment so I think it makes more sense if I come to you. '

There are some people I know up there who may be able to help us.

I think it is time for us to go on the attack. We have had enough treading softly, softly don`t you agree.

Good, so I will have my plane made ready for an early morning flight to Jaal tomorrow. We will let you know what time we are due to land so you can meet us at the airport, ok"?

"Of course I think I will sleep well tonight Inger".

"Me too Isobella".

"That was an interesting call by the sound of it" Truan said to her when she had put the phone back into her bag.

"Indeed it was. Inger will be flying to Jaal first thing in the morning. We will meet her at the airport.

She sounded like she has truly found her spirit once again.

She had some interesting information for me to tell you about on our way back to the roadhouse".

Helg had stayed with them when they arrived back at the roadhouse.

Truan wanted her to be there when she called a meeting to discuss tomorrow's plans.

Now they were staying in the hotel she decided to hold the meeting in the grand dining room, with it`s chandeliers and ornate fitting`s.

"Tomorrow we will all become tourists" she began to laughter.

"So you should as much like tourists as is possible. You will be given some spending money when I have split you into groups.

You will sit down together in your groups to discuss your cover stories; who you are, where you come from and all that sort of thing.

Now I am going to ask officer Helg to talk to you about the local area with Byorn, who has an uncle who lives on Feinstorm and has spent some time here".

As soon as she was finished she went to a corner of the dining room where Isobella waited for her with Grevas, his brother Tomasas, Hellborn, Wolfe, Curnow and Trevelyan.

"I want to thank you all for your help. I know you Hellborn have a farm to run and I hope to be able to put you on a plane back to Goost to join your family before you sail back to your farm".

"Thank you Truan but my family are already sailing home now that the storm has died down. I should soon be hearing from Eleanor to let me know they have arrived safely".

"Thank you Hellborn, your experience as a soldier could be very useful in what I am going to ask you and everyone else to do.

I think Isobella has told you the news we have received about two men, who were part of a gang, which was trying to disrupt are activities at the gathering in Goost.

There names are Victor Amrov and Stefan Snarl.

Stefan was the leader and Victor was his lieutenant but they fell out, which led to Stefan beating Victor. humiliating him by leaving him to crawl out of their camp at some old cottages near Goost, where we were watching them.

My people rescued Victor, took him to hospital and informed the police.

I think you, along with Grevas and Tomasas as locals might know them by reputation is that right"? and all three men nodded.

"Stefan is a vicious, crazy man. I think what you call a zycopath, is that right"? Grevas said.

"Psychopath" Truan responded "but please go on".

"People are frightened of him of course but he has so many enemies now that one day someone will, you know" he hesitated before making the motion of cutting his throat, "his day will come.

Victor he is different. Certainly he is a thief but to a lot of people he is also a hero who is generous. A big man with a big personality who likes people to like him you might say".

"Thank you Grevas, it could be that Stefan`s day has come as you say. Only two of his gang stayed with him, young men who come from the valley here who are friends of Victor`s sons, which Stefan does not know.

Victor is on his way back now. When he get`s home he will want to take revenge on Stefan.

We are hoping you Grevas and Thomasas, with your local knowledge, plus Mark and Conran working with Hellborn with his knowledge of the way these people operate, might be able to help us find where Stefan is hiding.

Three of you are allowed to carry weapons, which may come in useful if things become dangerous but only as a last resort.

I can provide you with money for your expenses.

We have two vehicle`s for transport, so you will not be travelling as one group, which may attract unwanted attention.

I am not sure about where you will stay but Johaness has given me some details for you of places in the area where you can find accommodation.

Please let me know, what do you think"?

Hellbjorn nodded to Truan in agreement before he looked at each of the other four men and spoke.

"The answer is a yes Truan".Mark looked as if he might be about to say something but Conran placed a firm hand on his arm.

"Thank you everyone. The vehicles are ready to go as soon as you are.

Chapter 34

The front foot

They met Inger at the airfield the next morning. The sad, old woman they had left sitting in her rocking chair in the corner of Marbella`s kitchen had been replaced by a refreshed and buoyant one who stepped from the aircraft.

"It is good to get away to see you all. I was finding the whole situation difficult to cope with even before the incident with Frederick.

When you left for Jaal I felt trapped in the castle, as though I really was under siege. Thank god for Marbella. She helped me to open my eyes to what was really happening to me.

Doubt and fear are what people like the 5 Powers want you to feel. Suffocating your energy and will. So that they can do what they want with you. In the end you become like a slave to them.

And they almost succeeded. It may sound dramatic but it is the truth".

"It was not just you that felt it Inger" Isobella said.

"I wanted to run back to Whitchford after we had been through in the storm.

The old Wolf needed a lot of repairs. I had no idea how I would be able to pay for them or even how I would organise it all. If I had not met Truan or Lester had not offered his help with all his people I might still be sitting there.

Then Trevelyan tried to stop us outside Gifford`s Bay. But again we had help from Curnow, with the skipper and two the crew of the Eagle that helped us escape.

Then just when it looked like we had some fresh wind at our back, those men tried to kidnap Terri in Guinivre. They would probably have succeeded if it had not been for the townspeople turning out to help us and Byorn firing his cannon to warn everyone.

"Well I have not even had my second cup of coffee yet" Truan said chuckling. "But I can tell you that there have been many times during in the last few weeks when I asked myself what I was doing. Someone who had been a successful lawyer, trying to organise security for a group of people who are still called pirates.

Although I did see the irony in it, given a lot of people probably think lawyers are pirates anyway".

After they had finished their breakfast discussion`s Inger got up to walk round the dining room.

"We should have bought this place" she said when she came to sit down again.

"With some redecoration it will be a grand hotel once again but Johaness with his family are the right people to run it.

I apologise for not putting you in touch with him before you came here but I was not thinking straight.

I hear the police chief tried to make things difficult for you.

Telling you that there was no space available in Jaal, so you would end up all over the place but he did not succeed did he.

He will be very lucky to keep his job. The chief commissioner has already been told to take leave, now that the ministers from Feinstorm and Runesholme are both involved.

He is being guarded at home for his own safety as they say but he is really a prisoner in his own house".

Then they started to discuss everything that had taken place since they came under attack.

At the end of the meeting Truan told Inger that Anders would have everything ready for them to discuss that afternoon.

"Thankyou for everything you have done. Now we need to let people get back to their own lives as soon as we can" Inger said as they finished the meeting.

"We have learnt a lot from what has happened. As we discussed, this has been a testing time for all of us. It has revealed both are weakness's and our strength`s.

I am sure there may be some more twists and turns before we can rest again.

But it is time we all looked to the future, now we can have some real confidence that the police and authorities will investigate things thoroughly.

I am staying overnight in Jaal with a friend before I fly home tomorrow. I am hoping I may have some more information for you soon too".

Things seemed suddenly seemed to have become very quiet as they watched Inger being driven away by Jacques

"Are we all going to be to rest again as Inger said. Do you really think we are safe now Truan"? Isobella said as they watched the vehicle disappear from sight.

"I think things will never be the way they were. This has been a big shock for all of us. Inger is right when she said that it has revealed both our weaknesses' and our strength`s.

I did not want to say it in front of her now she is recovering but my fear is that this may be a false dawn. I am sorry to tell you but I feel in many way`s that this is the most dangerous time for us all now.

The people we are up against will want to do as much damage as they can before they finish with us. That is the way they are.

They are like a plague Isobella. Just when you think it is finished it attacks you again.

I have people watching Inger, her plane and her flight crew until she leaves tomorrow. Then the police and are own people will take over again when she arrives back in Goost.

Do not worry about Gale and the children. They are being well guarded too. Hellborn`s family are be back on the farm now.

We just got woken up Isobella. You know the old saying: "The price of freedom is eternal vigilance". "Well that is the way it has always been for the Far Shore".

Chapter 35

A peaceful valley

Grevas and Tomasas were playing at being tourists, enjoying their lunch at a cafe in a village called Vali, while they kept an eye on Victor who was seated nearby.

They had had no problem finding him in the village close to his vineyard.

He had arrived with opera blaring from the speakers of a large black SUV, to be greeted by the local police officer who had shaken hands with him.

In fact it seemed that everyone wanted to shake the hand of the local hero Victor.

Who was now sitting at a table with Nico and Jan, who were now enjoying his hospitality as thanks for delivering Stefan to him.

They had slipped a sedative into Stefan`s drink before leaving him handcuffed to a bed in a cottage on a property next to Victors vineyard.

" A toast to keeping your friend`s close and your enemies even closer" he said as they laughed and raised there glasses.

"Do not worry you two, you will be well looked after, do not worry about that. I am not like Stefan. I am an honourable man, even if I am a thief.

There should be honour amongst thieves". Then he lowered his booming voice.

"He is not an honourable man. That is why he must pay for what he has done to me and others too" he almost whispered before they raised their glasses again to drink another toast.

When Grevas and Tomasas finished their lunch they went to meet with the others outside the village, where they would wait to follow Victor back to the cottage where Stefan was now being kept prisoner.

When they arrived back at the cottage Victor tried to wake Stefan by slapping him round the face but Stefan could not be woken.

"You must of given Stefan a lot of sedative boys " he said when he had failed to rouse him.

"Do not worry, I have some of my finest vintage in my vehicle. Let`s go to have a glass or two outside. We can discuss some business idea`s I would like you to be involved with me in the future" then they went outside.

When Stefan heard the door slam he opened his one good eye, as Victor`s slaps had made the other one hard for him to see out of properly.

He knew he did not have a lot of time but he also knew Victor loved the sound of his own voice. He would enjoy showing off to those two young idiots.

The bed he was on had an old metal bed head with vertical bars, which he knew became weakened with time.

When he had woken from the effect`s of the sedative he started to work on loosening the bar to which he had been handcuffed.

Jan had left his weapon behind in it`s holster hanging on a chair in the room. If he could free himself before they returned luck would be with him.

"Those sort of things can get you killed" he thought to himself as stared at the holster as he worked to loosen the bar.

He could hear the three of them outside, with Victor`s voice growing louder as they all became more drunk on the wine.

"Good" he muttered to himself, as the effort to free himself started to make the sweat drip from his head.

"How I despise your weakness. Go on, get drunk then I will escape".

When the bar snapped out of the bed`s frame he had to stop himself from shouting in triumph. He was free again.

It was Stefan`s own gun that Jan had left in the holster on the chair. His best friend as he liked to call it. He checked that the magazine was full.

His own bag had been thrown on the floor. It still had a spare magazine, plus his three passports, money and change of clothes inside it.

He felt elated at escaping but insulted and infuriated by finding they had left everything there for him in their stupid arrogance. Assuming that he was just any prisoner. Unworthy of their attention.

"You are just unprofessional trash all of you. Well you are going to regret that let me tell you, you will regret that" he said quietly before he went to through the curtains to look at where they sat drinking at a table under a tree in the shade.

Victor was just opening another bottle of wine, while Nico and Jan sat with their arms around each other`s shoulders singing.

I`ll make you sing boys he thought. I`ll make you sing for your mother. For your grandmother too by the time I`m finished with you. You will be calling me Sir Stefan. Begging me on your hands and knees for mercy; "mercy Stefan, mercy, dear god please".

Then Stefan placed a chair against the door handle to stop it being opened before he left by the back door, to where the vehicles were parked.

"Of course you did" he muttered to himself when he found that both vehicles still had their keys in the locks.

And he took both sets of keys with him to where he could watch them to savour what was to come.

Hellborn and the rest of the team had been watching from their hiding place too as the three men at the table became increasingly drunk.

Then Stefan had come from the rear door of the cottage to take the vehicle`s keys before going into hiding to watch.

"This is not going to end well" he had whispered to the other men as he watched him go into hiding.

"We watch and we wait. Tomasas go and cover the rear door of the cottage. Grevas work your way around to cover the group at the table. I will look after Stefan from here. Mind you move quietly both of you".

While Tomasas and Grevas took up their positions Victor had become increasingly annoyed by Nico and Jan's singing.

"Shut up you two and let a real man sing, you sound like a couple of whining cats". He stood beating his fists against his chest, like an angry, old grey gorilla.

From the first note it was obvious that he could sing. Opera performed in a rich, deep voice for Nico and Jan, as well as his secret audience.

Even Stefan thought that it was a shame that he would have to kill Victor.

His mother loved opera. It made her cry but so had his father, so that his mother, his father and opera had all become one performance in his own mind.

Because of Victor`s fine voice and his mother`s love of opera he thought he might spare him with along with the boy`s after all.

They call it mercy I think. I will try it to see what it feels like. Perhaps it is something that I can practice so people call me merciful. It will make them trust me more he thought.

Mercy will be my new magic trick. I am a magician after all.

It would only take one bullet between the eyes for Victor though.

I would not kill the two boys anyway but I think I will be merciful and not kill any of them, so they will never forget Stefan the Merciful.

They may even thank me later. The scars I give them will be like medals; "Stefan's medals", a reminder not to be so stupid, so sloppy to forget to keep your weapons and the keys to your vehicles safe with you when you have a prisoner like me.

We all have to learn he thought. I will be doing them a favour.

Nico and Jan had gone to sleep with their heads on the table amongst the empty bottles and the glasses, while Victor had stopped singing to take another drink of his own wine to saviour it.

Then bowing he put his glass down raising his hands up in the air as though to acknowledge the audience`s applause. Just as he had seen Pavarotti do, all those years ago in that beautiful old opera house.

Yes he thought he was like Pavarotti. He would be less serious now. Sing something from one of his favourite operetta`s; The Pirates of Penzance.

"And now ladies and gentlemen" he announced to a herd of sheep gracing near a rocky outcrop in the distance. "And your most regal majesties and honoured heads of state, I will sing something from The Pirates of Penzance, which I think will make you all smile".

And as he started to sing the first notes of "I am the Very Model of a Modern Major General", Hellborn saw the red laser light appear between his eyes.

"Sniper" he said to warn his team. Stefan must of heard him or seen the laser light too, realising that he was not the only member of the audience watching Victor`s performance.

In one fast motion he ran to Victor`s SUV, started it and drove down the track to safety in a cloud of dust that obscured everything.

Hellborn had turned round when he had seen the laser light to judge where the sniper might be hiding. Deciding that he was on the small rocky outcrop behind them where the sheep were grazing.

"Let Stefan go" he yelled, "Conran you come with me. The rest of you go to check on Victor and the other two as soon as you safely can".

Then he was running across the ground between their hiding place to the rocky outcrop with Conran. His long legs seeming to make him fly, taking almost graceful steps for such a tall man.

He heard the helicopter before he saw it rise up behind the rocky outcrop to land in front of it scattering Victors audience of sheep.

A man appeared from nowhere from the rocks as though by magic carrying his sniper rifle in a bag over his shoulder, dressed in camouflage clothing.

I might have known him Hellborn thought as he closed down the distance between himself and the helicopter. Or even served with him.

But then he stopped suddenly. Because the man had already climbed into the helicopter which was taking off.

I get one chance" he said to Conran as he got the rifle ready to fire.

The helicopter was rapidly climbing away by now.

He controlled his breathing just as he had been trained to do, aiming at the helicopter`s cockpit.

He shot at the cockpit, then the rotor but the helicopter continued to rise into the air.

"I missed Conran, I missed" he repeated dropping his rifle to the ground.

"Come on Conran, there is nothing we can do now, we need to get out of here before the police arrive" .

They started running back to where Victor had been shot.

His body was still slumped across the table with Nico and Jan, murmuring to themselves in their drunken dreams.

They all took their hats off, while Grevas said a short prayer over Victor`s dead body.

As soon as they turned onto the main road to Jaal, Hellborn made a call to Truan, who was still in her meeting with Anders and Isobella.

She answered him straight away. He told her what had happened and that they were on the road back to Jaal.

"I think it would be a good idea if you kept driving back to Goost today. Grevas and Tomasas can go back to the castle.

I will stop into the farm to see you when we leave Goost on the ship on the way back home. We can talk then ok"?

"Yes Truan, I think that is a good idea" was all he said before he finished the call.

In the rear vision mirror, he could see a dark cloud that looked like a great black bird or angel above the place where Victor had been killed.

I never want to use my old army rifle again he thought.

When I get back home I will put it back into the cabinet where I keep it and hope I never have to take it out again.

Then I will plant a tree near the farmhouse in memory of Victor the singer.

Chapter 36

First Light

"I was right Isobella. Now is the most dangerous time for us.

That was Hellbjorn calling to tell me Victor has been killed by a sniper.

He had been holding Stefan prisoner in a cottage on some land next to his vineyard. But Stefan managed to escape when the sniper killed him, using Victors own vehicle.

They will do as much damage as they can before they are finished with us

Victor`s death was them clearing up loose ends.

Stefan too. He will have an assassin`s price on his head now, as will anyone else they see as a problem.

I will call Helg to let her know about Victor. But first let us finish the meeting, Anders please carry on with what you were telling us".

"It was pretty easy really getting into Fredrick`s lap top and phone. Whoever set it up thought they were being smart but they were not".

And he rubbed at his tired eye`s.

"I have printed out everything I found and made copies for you both" and he slid them across the table where they sat in the hotel`s dining room.

"Frederick thought he was being clever by using a sort of code but it was no big deal. I have red flagged anything that I thought might be interesting to you".

"Thank you for everything you have done" Truan said. "We will make sure that you are looked after for all the time you spent on this".

"No need to worry about that, really it was no big deal".

"No I insist. I have already talked to Inger about you. We have agreed that it is only fair that all the people that have given us so much help will be looked after.

We will go through the information together as soon as we have time today. Why don`t you go and get some sleep now".

Then Truan rang Helg to give her the news about Victor`s death.

"Thank you, we have had no report of this yet. I will do my best to not involve you in this" Helg said when Truan had finished.

"I should let you know that Borgan has been placed on leave as part of the investigation that is being carried out throughout the whole of the island.

It looks like there is going to be a big shake up now the minister`s are both involved both here and Runesholme".

"Thank you for everything you have done for us Helg. I know you have a lot to do but before you go can you tell me the latest news on Frederick"?

"He is improving in hospital. A senior officer has arrived to interview him from Runesholme but so far he has refused to answer any questions about his injuries or the attempt that was made to poison Inger Costa".

"So it has become official now Helg, the attempt to murder Inger "?

"Yes, the fruit that you collected was sent to the main forensic lab in Runesholme. We received a positive report back today, so yes it is official".

"That`s good news Helg, I won`t keep you but does Frederick have a guard on his room at the hospital"?

"No, not yet but now we have the confirmation of the fruit being poisoned we will send someone their to keep guard as soon as we can".

"Thank you Helg I hope you can do that very soon" and they finished the call.

Truan had planned for everyone to drive back to Goost the next day but with Victor`s death, Stefan on the run and Frederick about to be interviewed by an officer from Runesholme, she made the decision with Isobella to drive back

straightaway.

It was a much smaller convoy of vehicles which left the roadhouse which made good time in the hours of daylight they had left to them.

While she watched Feinstorm's wild scenery pass by Isobella allowed herself the luxury of day dreaming.

What a strange place this is she thought. Cracked and scarred by narrow inlets and covered by the lumps and needles of hills and mountains.

On Feinstorm you needed to be on your guard. It is always ready to surprise you when you least expected it, like some hunched, old wizard ready to play a trick or cast a spell at any moment,

And she thought of what Helg had told Truan; that there was no guard on Frederick`s room but they would put one their as soon as they could.

"Soon" she whispered to herself. Soon Frederick could be disappear or be dead like Victor and Beasant from the Eagle.

"If this is a Tea Trip", she whispered into the window where her head rested, "then this is the old wizard`s cracked mug we have been drinking from without any handle. The one that surprises you by being too hot by burning your hand when you pick it up".

She remembered the afternoon they had been together in their house in Whitchford. When she had made the grand gesture with the mug of tea in her hand telling them about the trip they were about to take to the gathering and spilt the tea on the carpet.

Perhaps it was the wizard`s old mug that I was using that day she thought.

How naive I was. Excited with the children about setting out on a voyage to this place for the gathering.

"Thar they be dragons" she thought and smiled to herself as she fell asleep to the rhythm of the road.

Chapter 37

Homeward bound

It was late at night when the convoy from Jaal arrived back at the quayside in Goost and early morning when they were woken by the police asking Isobella and Dave asking them to come with Trevelyan and Conran to the central police station.

When they arrived at the station they were taken to see a senior officer who told them that no charges would be laid against either Trevelyan or Conran.

They had their passports returned to them and along with the rest of the crew of the Eagle, were free to leave Feinstorm.

When they arrived back at the Lady Isobella they found Inger waiting for them with Grevas and Tomasas and the crew of the Fair Wind.

"Why hello all of you, come aboard" Inger said greeting them with a smile as they stepped onto the deck.

"I thought it would be a good idea for me to come to say my goodbyes to you all here at the dock now that you will be leaving".

"I trust everything went well at the police station. I had a conversation with the acting commissioner from Runesholme who took over yesterday. We both agreed that it would be best for everyone if both of you Trevelyan and Conran be allowed to leave the island as soon as you are ready to sail.

The authorities here are keen to make a fresh start now that the old commissioner is being investigated for corruption.

So if I was you I would leave port as soon as you can if you understand me" and she nodded at Trevelyan again.

"Yes, yes of course madam" Trevelyan responded. " We both appreciate your assistance in this matter" he said acknowledging everyone on deck.

Then he cleared his throat, as though he was about to get up steam to make a speech but before he could start Conran placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Knowing the skipper, I am sure he will have ship ready to leave as soon as we can today".

"Thank you Conran" Inger said smiling." I am glad that we all understand each other then.

Now why don`t we enjoy the breakfast Gale has made for us".

Before Trevelyan could take one of the pastries Terri offered him, Conran had steered him skilfully onto the quayside.

"But what about breakfast Conran" Trevelyan could be heard complaining as they walked towards the Eagle.

"What if we do not have sufficient provisions on board for all of us on the voyage"?

"Don`t you worry about that Mark, I am sure that the skipper will have everything organised but us can always tighten are belts in if we have to, eh"? Conran replied.

"You are right Conran" said Trevelyan patting at his stomach. "Lets get going before someone changes their mind" following him onto the Eagle where the crew were already getting ready to leave.

"Bam, just like that" Grevas said talking to Truan as though he was aiming a rifle.

"Right here he shot Victor "he said pointing to the spot between his eyebrows.

"The sniper was a real professional. Hellborn shot at the helicopter but it was already too far away for him. Better he missed otherwise there would have been a big fuss for everyone.

While Truan talked to Grevas and Tomasas, Isobella had taken Inger down into the main cabin where Anders could show her Frederick`s secret file.

"I have made a list of some of the people who he was in contact with, some of the emails are in code" and he handed Inger a file of paper copies he had made for her.

"Then there are these" he said, laying out another pile of copies on the table they were sitting at.

"This is one to someone called the Judge.

Then there is this one to someone called the supplier, asking him to have the bird ready and waiting.

Frederick was obviously a key man in their organisation. He had a lot of communication with a lot of people close to the time of the gathering.

Inger did not say anything straight away but just sat reading some of information that Anders had given her, shaking her head now and again.

"There were a lot more of our people involved in this than any of us could have imagined you know.

They got close, very close Isobella " she said putting the copies back onto the table.

"We have survived but only just, due to good luck as well as everyone`s hard work.

Can you stay to help us identify everyone so that we can get to the heart of this" she said turning to Anders.

When he did not reply immediately she continued.

"I know you want to leave with Byorn and Shashti with everyone else when they go, perhaps as early as today but I promise you will be well paid.

We will organise transport for you to wherever your crewmates are when you have finished".

There were a lot more of our people involved in this than any of us could have imagined you know".

"You have a deal Madam Inger. I will stay to help you and Truan" and they shook hands.

"Good. We are getting somewhere after all, let`s find out where the chief rats are hiding".

Once Inger had left with Grevas and Tomasas the quayside came alive with activity.

Isobella and Byorn had gone to stand on the quayside where the Eagle was moored.

Deciding that now was the time to declare peace with Mark Trevelyan.

"Permission to come aboard skipper" Isobella shouted to attract his attention.

"Why of course Isobella" he shouted back. Then looked at Mark, who waved to them to come aboard.

Work stopped on deck with the crew coming to stand with Trevelyan and the skipper.

"Well Isobella who would ever have thought we would be standing together on the deck of the Eagle" Mark said and smiled.

"Yes, it does feel strange for me and Byorn to be standing here" she said returning his smile "but I think now is the time to put the past to rest".

Then there was silence on the deck until Mark spoke, in a quiet voice with none of the bombast of his old self.

"I would just like to say". Then he stopped to look at them both before he continued.

"I would just like to say to you Isobella, and to you Byorn that I am sorry for what happened outside Gifford`s Bay and the day, when I tried to get into the gathering" Then he looked at Conran before continuing.

"There were three of us on that mountain road on the way to Goost: myself, Conran and Barry Beasant but Barry is no longer with us.

He was beaten to death in front of us. I can tell you that I never want to see anything like that again as long as I live.

Even before he was killed on that lonely road by a bunch of thugs my heart was not in it.

I thought I would make some money play with the big boy`s but I had no idea what I was getting myself into".

"Thank you Mark, spoken like a true Viking" Byorn said.

"Isobella and I would like to invite you to travel with us, the three vessels together.

We don`t know what your plans are but now that autumn is almost here but we are going with Isobella to Whitchford for the winter.

The Fair Lady needs some work. We think after everything that has happened we might enjoy the peace and quiet of Whitchford".

"I think that would suit us fine too Byorn. I have some business issues to attend now as well. The old Eagle needs some care and attention too, don`t you agree skipper"?

"Well Mark, the river is as good a place as any I can think of to winter with the Eagle. There is a good boat yard or two there as well. What do you say, eh Curnow"?

"Well skipper, I think Whitchford would be the perfect spot. Just the place for us to lay up for the winter " and he smiled at Isobella who smiled back at him.

I have missed you she thought. You are a true friend.

"Just one thing while we are talking of who`s going where" Conran said.

"I have told Mark that Hellborn has offered me a job working on his farm. He has some big plans for the place; building cabins for people who want to enjoy the Feinstorm's wild countryside, hiking, fishing, that sort of thing.

I have never really stayed anywhere long. Now after what happened to Beano, I mean Barry Beasant. I would like to see what it is like to live somewhere for awhile I think".

"It is on are way Conran. We were going there anyway to see Hellborn. There is good deep anchorage for the three ships" Isobella said.

So it was agreed that they would take Conran to start his job with Hellborn at the farm before the three vessel`s travelled together to Whitchford.

Chapter 37

The host

After the meeting finished on the deck of the Eagle the crews of all three vessel`s finished preparing to leave Goost`s harbour.

Terri, Trin and Kat had decided that they would dress as pirates to sing a song as they left to celebrate starting on the trip home.

"We deserve it as much as anyone" Terri explained to Gale. Who was helping them make their costumes and brightly coloured pirate flags to fly when they left Goost.

"We have faced death on the high sea`s when we were attacked.

We have been saved from kidnap by a loathsome brigand with a scarred face, by the intervention of a fearless Viking warrior and his cannon.

We have been deprived of the company of are friends in the summer holidays.

And worst of all we might have had to eat hard, weevil infested biscuits, drink scum coloured water like real pirates do but fortunately you were here to cook beautiful food and make us laugh when we got sad".

And they all gave her three cheers.

They had not expected anyone to see them off but word had got around Goost that those strange people on the sailing ships were leaving. So by the time they left there was a crowd of people waiting on the quayside to say goodbye.

Marbella, Grevas and Tomasas and some of the other staff had come from the castle with their families, as well as the new commissioner of police with some of the police who had been on guard duty at the quayside.

Dave and Gale got into the spirit of the occasion by dressing up as pirates too.

Joining the children in singing the song that Terri had written for them with accompaniment from Shashti on her accordion.

Goodbye, Goodbye we are the pirate crew we are!

It`s been jolly like a roger to meet you all

But now we have to go adventuring

Upon the high and the looow seas!

Goodbye, Goodbye we are the pirate crew we are!

Goodbye, Goodbye, yes we are going

At last and fast we are going

Terri recorded leaving Goost in her journal as: "being nothing like Gifford`s Bay or Guinivre but nonetheless an enthusiastic, if modest crowd who clapped and waved until we passed the lighthouse at the end of the breakwater".

Once they left the shelter of the harbour the sail`s were raised with Gale, still dressed in her costume, taking over the wheel from Isobella.

"Perhaps we should wear costumes all the time Gale" Isobella told her and they both laughed at the idea.

"Being at sea is heaven Isobella after everything that has happened on Feinstorm".

"Yes it is Gale, just like heaven but I haven't even told you the latest news.

Helg rang me to tell me that by the time they sent a guard to the hospital Frederick had vanished from his room.

None of the staff say they saw anything but I have my suspicion`s".

And she thought back to the drive back from Jaal with the premonition that "soon" is never "soon enough" and Frederick might be murdered before a guard arrived but he had just vanished, not been murdered.

"I think he is far more important than we thought he was.

Helg also told me that they had found Victors body at the cottage.

The two men with him were still drunk. They did not know that he had been killed until the police came.

They think it was Stefan who killed Victor, not a sniper.

They are hunting for him now but Helg knows it is not him that killed Victor just as we do.

Hellborn and Grevas told us the truth but Stefan is a convenient suspect for the authorities to have.

The police just want to tidy the whole thing up as quickly as they can so they can start on a fresh".

"I think you are right but seeing the children entertaining everyone when we left Goost, made me think that it is time to leave it all behind us now Isobella to enjoy the voyage while we can, eh. This weather is perfect. We will be at Hellnor's farm soon enough".

And so it was, that the three ships left Goost harbour behind them to make the short voyage to Hellborn's farm.

"Welcome to Muspell Farm" Hellborn greeted them when they had moored the vessel's.

"The children have been waiting to see you since they woke up this morning".

When Isobella entered the farmhouse she thought what her own home in Whitchford meant to her.

"This is a lovely place you have" she said sitting down at the big dining table.

"It feels like home, such a beautiful, big old house".

"Yes" he said, sitting down at the table with her.

"It has been home to my family for several generations. It was originally one big hall or "host" as we call it on Feinstorm. Gradually each successive generation has made it into what you see today.

This is a beautiful part of the island. All the people of the valley think that it should be able to be enjoyed in peace and safety by everyone.

I think Conran will have told you of the plans we have for the place with the cabins we want to build here for people to stay in".

Then he started to tell her what had happened when Victor had been killed.

"We were in hiding watching him sing opera while the two other young men got drunk at a table outside the cottage.

Then we saw Stefan escape through the rear door of the cottage where they had been keeping him prisoner.

He had a gun with him, that he must of found in the cottage.

He went to where the vehicles that Victor and the other men were travelling in were parked.

He took the keys that had been left in them before he went to hide in a clump of trees to watch Victor and the other two get drunk.

Some distance behind the cottage there was a rocky outcrop which is where the sniper was hiding.

As soon as I saw the laser light on Victor`s forehead I told everyone to get down.

I did not shout but Stefan must have heard me or seen the light himself at the same moment, because he moved immediately to where the vehicles were close to him and escaped in Victor`s own vehicle.

Victor had been singing opera when he was shot. He had a really beautiful voice.

I remember thinking what a waste of life it was.

Then I ran with Conran across to where the sniper had been hiding. But while we were running a helicopter appeared from behind the outcrop to pick him up.

They were they were professionals whoever they were. The helicopter flew off too quickly for me stop it.

We may have been able to get some information from them if my shots had found their target if someone had survived but I am glad that I did not hit it Isobella.

I have seen enough death to last me for several lifetimes. This is where I want to be now with my family on this farm" and he opened his arms to embrace the old host where they were seated.

"Thank you for telling me everything Hellborn.

Helg rang to tell me she had gone to the cottage. Victor`s body was still lying at the table with the two other men who still in a drunken stupor next to him.

She said that the police think Stefan is the killer. I think that is just to make it conveniently easier for themselves. They do not want to go after the real killer to create more problems for themselves now on Feinstorm".

"So you think it was the 5 Powers who organised Victor`s killing Isobella".

She thought she saw the doubt in his eye`s as he looked at her.

"Yes of course who else"? Feeling the tension start to rise inside herself again.

"I have thought a lot about it since I left the cottage" Hellborn said still looking at her.

"But you know that sometimes it is best to let sleeping dog`s lie as they say. Nothing is going to bring back him back to life.

The police have already decided that Stefan is there suspect.

They will chase him but I am pretty sure that they will not capture him or even that they really want to: Stefan has contacts, he is cunning and he has money.

I would not be surprised if he has not already found himself a place where he is safe to make a new identity somewhere far away from here and Rheinsholme ".

Then he stopped talking to stroke one of the dog`s who had come to sit by him.

As she watched him stroke his dog she thought how would she deal with this if she were to become the chief intuiter of the Far Shore.

And she remembered the way Inger had reacted after the poisoned fruit had been brought to her by Frederick.

There were other things too: The police chief had arranged to meet them at the roadhouse. Which was owned by Johaness, who just happened to have brought the property from the Costa family, where they were conveniently able to stay together in the old hotel.

Then there was Helg who was so helpful. Frederick who was left without a guard just long enough for him to recover, then to vanish, without any of the hospital staff seeing him.

Are all of these things "perfectly reasonable" she thought to herself or are they "too reasonable, too probable or too improbable"?

Then she saw the weaver laughing pointing to the rug she was making: "My rugs are not perfect Isobella" she said.

"They would not be my rugs if they were perfect".

Then the weaver was gone and someone was talking to her.

"I was saying to you Isobella that we would be honoured to have everyone join us here tonight to dine with us but I think you were somewhere else".

And Isobella looked up to see the grandmother, Sulven, smiling at her, had come to sit next to her at the table.

"You have such beautiful eyes" Isobella said, as though she was still far away with the weaver talking to her.

Sulven put her head back laughing like she was a young woman again.

"That is very kind thing for you to say Isobella. I think you have beautiful eyes too, which are very thoughtful but a little bit anxious at the moment too I think" and she put her hand on top of Isobella`s hand on the table.

"We can find time to talk before the meal tonight if you think it might help you. And I have the cards ready if you think a reading would help"? and she took a small ivory box from the folds of her dress.

Inside the box were a pack of cards wrapped in a piece of fine silk, which Sulven laid in front of Isobella on the dining table.

"I think you know what these are" Sulven said as she started to shuffle the well worn cards.

"Yes Sulven, they are tarot cards. I remember a relative of a friend of mine reading them for me when I was still at school".

"And can you remember what she said"?

"It was a girl called Katya, who I knew at school. It was her grandmother who read the cards for me".

She remembered sitting at a table, just like the table she was sitting at now.

Then she thought of how much Sulven reminded her of Katya`s grand mother who`s name she could not remember now.

"It is a alright Isobella" Sulven said as though she were joining in her thought`s.

"Just leave it for now. It will come to you" and she placed the pack of tarot cards she had been shuffling in front of Isobella.

"There is no rush, we have time before we start preparing for the meal tonight" and Isobella picked up the cards, feeling their warm silkiness where they had been worn away by so many other hands.

"You know this is the original host or hall where we are sitting in" Sulven said.

"It has seen many, many large gatherings over the time since it was originally built. There always seems to be enough room for everyone.

Now close your eyes and let yourself think what it is that you want to ask the cards Isobella".

The when she had closed her eyes.

There is so much to think of. So much to be concerned about she thought.

Images came in and out of focus: memories of the voyage, searching for the children in Guinivre, the Wolfe`s sad eyes staring at her, Grevas and Tomasas dressed for battle in the kitchen at the castle, with frail Inger, rocking slowly backwards and forwards in the old rocking chair in the corner.

How will I find a question amongst all this she thought. Then she felt Sulven place her hand on top of her hand again.

She saw herself standing with her children, Gale, Dave and Trin on the headland on Skiel Island. Then she knew what the question was.

"Take ten cards for me please Isobella" Sulven said in her soft voice, as though she were standing there with her on the headland.

Sulven had been right when she said there would be more that enough room for everyone to eat at the table.

There was more than enough room for everyone when they sat down to eat delicious food prepared by the family with everyone`s help, from large platter`s of food, which were laid out along the whole length of the long dining table.

It was a loud, noisy feast, with much talk, good humour and laughter, as well as music from Shashti with singing from everyone.

When the feast finished as people started to leave the farmhouse to go to the vessel`s, Hellborn came to talk to Isobella and Dave.

"I have something to give you both in the morning before you leave" before he wished them goodnight.

Chapter 38

Three ships a sailing

In the morning Hellborn stood on the of the deck of the last ship to leave, The Lady Isobella, with Isobella and Dave.

"There is a time and place for everything. I told you last night that I have something to give you.

Here take it, my army rifle, it is my gift to you" he said taking it from his shoulder to hand it to them in it`s camouflage bag.

"It is my present to both of you.

I never dreamt that I would give it away but I think you might be needing it. I am concerned for your safety on your voyage home.

I will speak plainly to you both. I might have given you some cause for thought

after are conversation yesterday Isobella. About who your enemies really are and

exactly who it is that you can trust.

There are group of us who share information to assist each other.

When I say "us". I mean people like myself who have been soldiers, mercenaries and special operatives from all over the world.

My information is that there is a power struggle going on in the 5 Powers, which Frederick is involved in.

He has been flown off Feinstorm in the same helicopter that was used to take the sniper away from the cottage after he had killed Victor.

I think you are still in a lot of danger. So I have asked someone in the network to try to find out who the sniper might be.

It is not just you or the people on this ship who could be a target.

There is the Wolfe on board The Fair Wind and Mark Trevelyan on the Eagle too, who could be targets.

I also have information that there is also a different sort of power struggle going on within the Far Shore: one of direction, politics and idea`s, rather than absolute power but it is there none the less.

Tread carefully because danger may be far closer than you think".

As he turned to leave Isobella put her hand on his shoulder.

"Is ther anything more you have to tell us Hellborn" she said.

"I will let you know if I find out anything more while you are on your voyage home" Then he went to where his family stood with Conran on the shore to wave them goodbye.

When they had left the shelter of the river for the open sea The Lady Isobella, Dave handed the wheel to "the apprentice", as he now called Katherine to go to stand at the ship`s rail with Gale and Isobella.

"I have told Gale about our conversation with Hellborn. What do you think about it"? she said when he joined them.

"Well I think a lot about it Isobella but not a lot of it makes any sense to me.

It is like a ball of wool the cat got at; only good for frustration and swearing, as my grandad used to say.

He seemed to be really concerned for our safety though didn`t he?

He gave us his rifle, which meant so much to him and which I hope we never have to use".

"He has reason to be concerned I think Dave. Truan thinks that this is the most dangerous time.

With the gathering over, Victor dead, both Frederick and Stefan disappeared and us heading home.

What she called a "false dawn".

I am still trying to think what he meant by danger being far closer than you think?

"Well isn`t that what groups like the 5 Powers want us to do: to jump at every shadow and lose trust in people" Gale said.

We know that they use fear, threats, misdirection as their weapons just as much as

anything else".

"That is true Gale but sometimes you have to ask yourself the most difficult, uncomfortable questions about things which are close to you too don`t you?

We think of ourselves as good, honest folk but we know now that there are some of us who have already been corrupted.

If you believe what he was telling us, there are things going on in the Far Shore that we have reason to be worried about.

Some of the secret information that Anders has discovered is certainly concerning".

"Well you know what" Dave said turning to join Katherine at the wheel.

"I am taking a break from all of this for awhile to enjoy being back at sea again. I recommend that you do the same".

"Well in that case, Dr Dave, I will take a turn at the wheel if my eldest daughter will let me".

Dave and Gale went below deck, while Katherine stayed with her mother as they sailed down the coast of Feinstorm out into the open sea.

They had had little time in each other`s company since they had arrived on Feinstorm.

Now they were able to talk about anything but the problems they had faced. Until Kat asked Isobella about what Anders had found on Frederick`s lap top.

"What names" she asked when Isobella told her about the file Anders had found.

"Oh, code names, coded messages, you know like: "the waiter" or "the teacher" or "the judge" that sort of thing but I am sure that Ander`s and Truan will be able to make sense of it".

"Well I know someone who is a judge" Kat said "not that he would have anything to do with what we are talking about".

"You know someone who is a judge" she asked, feeling her hands begin to tighten on the spokes of the ships wheel.

"Yes, you know what I told you about. When I went with Terri to stay on the island at Gale and Dave`s place. We talked till it was really late at night.

Then when I got up in the morning I went to sit on my favourite rock, the old smooth one that you like so much too.

I was so tired, that I must have feinted. The monks found me and took me to the monastery.They were very kind to me.

I had breakfast there with Alex. Then we talked together.

He told me that he had been a judge until one day he decided that he could not do it anymore. That is when he came to Skiel Island to look after the monk`s and the monastery.

"Alex, Brother Alex you mean, was a judge, are you sure that is what he told you"?

"Yes I am sure that is what he told me.

He told me that one day in court he realised that he could not be a judge any more, that is what he told me".

Isobella thought about what Dave had said about how good it would be for all of them to enjoy being at sea again.

She decided that Kat`s story about Alex was a coincidence and they talked about other things.

That night, as she was about to go to sleep, she saw herself standing again on the headland on Skiel Island, with Gale, Dave and the children.

She thought of what her question had been for the cards and what Hellborn had said about: "danger being closer then you think".

"Coincidences, just so many coincidences" she whispered b efore she went to sleep.

Chapter 39

The Island of Hope

The three ships had left the shelter of Feinstorm`s coast for open seas with a strong breeze blowing.

The Fair Wind had taken up her position as lead vessel, followed by the Lady Isobella and then the Eagle.

Now that the Eagle had less crew, Mark had joined them in working the ship.

His hands, as well as most of his body was sore but he decided that he was enjoying being part of the crew, being called Mark Mr Trevelyan.

The skipper`s chuckled comment that they were; "showing him the ropes" had brought up some embarrassing memories of his failed attempt to take command of the Eagle when they were chasing the Lady Isobella and Fair Wind outside Gifford`s Bay.

But what the hell he thought. I am still alive. Which is more than can be said of poor old Beasant, bringing back the memory of that day on the mountain road to haunt him once again.

"Brave fellow, brave fellow" he muttered to himself as he worked.

"What did you say Mark" Curnow said who was standing next to him.

"Oh nothing Curnow, just thinking about something that I remembered, that`s all".

"I hope it was a good memory. The bad one`s can hang around like the smell of last weeks fish if you don`t throw them out with the rest of the rubbish". Then he winked at Mark and walked away.

He thought he was right about that as he watched the Lady Isobella and Fair Wind under full sail.

Time I did some housekeeping myself to threw out some of the rubbish.

Then he set his sore hands to work again.

Before they left Goost on the voyage to Feinstorm, the crew`s of the Lady Isobella and the Eagle had agreed to join Byorn in collecting whatever rubbish they could from the sea.

The information about the rubbish they gathered would be put onto Byorn`s own web site by Trin.

But now a keen amateur ornithologist, Trin was using the dining table on The Lady Isobella as his operating table, to take a hook with it`s fishing line, from a bird`s mouth.

So far the bird had remained still. But now he was about to remove the hook from it`s mouth, the team, with Terri and Kat acting as his assistants, were discussing how they could stop it hurting itself by struggling.

They did not have any anaesthetic, so it was finally agreed that Terri and Kat would help keep the bird still by singing what Terri called a bird lullaby, while they stroked it.

They had been joined by Gale who had replaced the towel they had wrapped the bird in for a warm one, which she thought might also help to relax the bird.

Trin had never done any thing like this before but he had watched a television show about a country vet who had taken a piece of rusty old barbed wire out of the mouth of a blackbird. He tried to remember as much of what the vet had done as he could.

With Kat and Terri singing while they stroked the bird, Gale kept it`s mouth openmouth and Trin started the operation.

He was so nervous he had started to sweat, with Gale wiping away the sweat from his forehead.

Just way he had seen a nurse do it on another television show, where the surgeon was operating in a tent in a war zone, under the heat of the sun.

The warm towel, the bird lullaby along with the stroking seemed to be helping to keep the bird still.

So still, that Trin worried that it may already have died from shock, in the way that people do some times in surgery but when the hook came out the bird wiggled it`s beak around as though it was thanking everyone.

Then he felt as if he was going to be sick but also very happy too.

They all took the bird up on deck to the bow where Trin released it but it only flew a little way before it came back again. So they fed it and left it sitting on the bow of the Lady Isobella, as Terri said; "like a mascot" which she named Martha.

And she made Rule 56 and one quarter as Martha's rule: "A bird lullaby, a warm towel and stroking may or may not help to keep a bird still while operating on it but it will certainly help the people operating on it to relax".

The operation was reported to Byorn on the Fair Lady for his web site and Trin was nicknamed The Sea Vet.

It was dawn on the fourth day of the voyage, when Olivia at the wheel of the Lady Isobella saw the helicopter come out of the clouds flying towards them start to descend.

She had joined everyone on the Lady Isoella for the voyage to Guinivre when the patrol boat had left before she arrived back back in Goost from Jaal.

She knew what had happened when the man Victor had been killed so she immediately sounded the ship`s bell to wake everyone.

The helicopter was close enough now for her to see into the cockpit and the man sitting beside the pilot holding a rifle.

She was still sounding the bell when the helicopter flew over the Lady Isobella and the Fair wind towards the Eagle, which was travelling furthest out to sea.

Still ringing the bell she had started shouting when Dave appeared on deck still putting on his clothes followed by Isobella.

"What's going on Olivia"he shouted

"It`s a helicopter flying low over us and the Fair Lady. Now it is headed for the Eagle".

Then they saw it fly over the Eagle barely missing the ship.

"I am going to get the rifle" Dave said disappearing below deck.

"Me too, here Isobella take the wheel" and she followed Dave below deck to fetch her own weapon.

Isobella felt like part of her was still lying in her bunk. She told herself to focus, slapping at her cheeks and rubbing her eyes to try and dislodge the sleep that still seemed to be there.

The helicopter began it`s turn back towards the Eagle, which had started to move closer to the other two ships.

This is what Hellborn warned us about she thought.

They were waiting for us to get close enough to the Isles of Grief , where they would have had a helicopter already to make their attack.

Then she studied the islands coastline deciding that they needed to move as close as they could.

She knew that they were not far from Guinivre now. When Dave and Olivia came back on deck checking their weapons she told Olivia to contact the police to alert them to the what was happening as quickly as she could.

Byorn had moved the Fair Lady closer to the Lady Isobella.

She let Dave take the wheel while she shouted to Byorn to move towards the island with her.

The Eagle had also closed with them. Following them on their course towards the island.

The helicopter had started it`s run back towards the Eagle so Isobella took the wheel again while Dave took up a firing position at the ships side.

She could also see Curnow climbing up the main mast of the Eagle with a rifle slung across his back.

The helicopter was flying so low that it looked to Isobella as though it might crash into the Eagles masts but just as it came close to the ship the pilot changed course.

"Shooter, shooter" Olivia shouted from where she now stood in the bow with her weapon at the ready before there was the sound of shots coming from the helicopter hitting the deck of the Eagle.

It was when the helicopter started to bank away from the vessel`s that Curnow fired his weapon hitting the helicopter`s fuselage.

There was cheering from the crew of The Eagle when the helicopter started flying back towards the coast.

Olivia had talked to the police commissioner to give him their current position.

He had told her that he would get the police helicopter airborne as soon possible.

"I think they are checking to see if there is any real damage.If there is not they may decide to take another run at us Isobella" Olivia said.

"These people are professionals. They won`t want to return to land until they have done the job that they are being paid for".

"Alright Olivia lets plan for that. We will move as close to the land as we safely can to prepare for another attack" and the message was given to both the other ships.

When Byorn the Viking received the message to move in closer to the coast he was looking at his cannon where it sat secured on the deck.

"Shashti take the wheel. Wolfie I will need you to help me get the cannon ready".

"The cannon" Wolfie exclaimed.

The Viking smiled to see the big man`s eye`s sparkling.

"That`s the happiest I have seen you look since you came on board Wolfie.

What do you say to us causing some trouble for are friends on the helicopter.

The last thing they are going to be expect is a cannon being fired across the bow`s of their bird".

"Pretty tricky shot don`t you think" the Wolfie said scratching at his beard.

"You don`t want to sink you own vessel or one of the other`s do you"

"No, but if I can get it set correctly I think you might be surprised at what this little cannon can do. Lots of black smoke with pieces of metal flying through the air is enough to frighten any helicopter pilot. We will load it with plenty of bit`s and piece`s" he said patting the cannon.

"Mad, both of you are mad" Shashti shouted from where she stood at the wheel and they laughed.

On the Eagle, Curnow had his telescope focused on the helicopter landing on the coast.

"What`s happening" Mark asked him. "What are they doing"?

"I think they are checking to see what damage I might have done to the helicopter, that it is what I think they are doing Mark.

You are pretty relaxed for someone who has just been a snipers target practice if you don`t mind me saying".

" Well I guess you are right on both counts Curnow, about being a target and being relaxed. Yes you are right, it is me they are after I think.

I was expecting something but not being shot at by a sniper from a helicopter while I was at sea. Perhaps something like a poison needle in my thigh in the street.

Good shooting by the way Curnow, where did you learn to shoot like that"?

"With a poachers shotgun Mark, is where I learnt to shoot. Rabbits, wood pigeon`s and sometimes even a pheasant or two from the estate of some wealthy businessman".

"Well Curnow I have never liked pheasants so it would not have been my estate you were poaching on" Mark replied with a chuckle.

"I am glad to hear that Mark. I need a clear conscience to get to sleep at night".

There was no sign of the sniper`s helicopter or the police helicopter either.

The three ships were now travelling as close to the coast as was safe.

The Viking was beginning to wonder if they had not wasted their time getting the cannon ready, when they saw the helicopter coming towards them again.

For a moment he thought that it maybe the police helicopter from Guinivre but then he recognised the markings on the fuselage as those of the sniper`s helicopter.

"It`s them, they are back" he said to the Wolfe and Shashti.

"I ought to feel sorry about that I suppose but I am not. It`s in my blood after all, you can blame Thor for that".

"Don`t blame poor old Thor. The truth is you are just plain crazy" Shashti yelled at him as they got ready to fire the cannon.

On the Eagle, Curnow had climbed back into his position on the mast after Mark had sent everyone else below decks to shelter.

"It`s only right" he said to the skipper and Curnow. "It`s me they are after so I will be the bait. You can be the poacher Curnow. We might be able to bring the bird down".

Bugger, battle stations everyone" Dave said at the wheel when he saw the helicopter come into sight again.

"We will be seeing the entrance to the harbour at Guinivre very soon but it is Curnow who should get all of our thanks for slowing them down.

They will only have one more chance before they have to make a run for it, otherwise they will have the police to contend with".

Mark watched the helicopter flew out to sea then turn to take a path directly towards the stern of the ship.

His plan was to wait until the helicopter was close. Then secure the ship`s wheel before taking cover, allowing Curnow to get in a shot with Trevelyan`s own rifle.

The same one he was going to use to frighten Isobella into turning round to go home when she left Gifford`s Bay.

"What was I thinking" he muttered to himself, looking at her standing at the wheel of her vessel, with her hair flowing out behind where it had escaped from her sea cap.

The helicopter was closing on them now. He secured the wheel and dived for his hiding place.

"Almost, just a little higher Wolfie" the Viking said as he sighted the little cannon on the helicopter, "that's it, now we are ready to fire" .

Then the Viking gave three blasts on the vessel`s clackston horn before they all shouted together as they had rehearsed; "Firing, firing, firing" and the cannon roared like it should. The smoke was so thick that for a moment no one could see anything.

When it cleared the helicopter was still in the air but it was flying towards the coast with smoke trailing from it`s motor.

And the battle of the three ships with the helicopter outside Guinivre was over.

On the Eagle, Curnow had almost fallen from his place on the mast from shock when the cannon roared.

Several people reported temporary deafness but the children never really forgave Gale with the other the adults for making them stay safely below decks to miss what they called; "all the fun".

The cannon had been heard in Guinivre. As well on several farms close by alarming both animals and people.

Olivia gave the Viking a warning for firing the cannon as they moored the vessel`s at the quay in Guinivre where there was a lage crowd to greet them.

Thor`s Hammer, as the cannon had become known, was taken by the police to the station where it was given it`s own cell, until the ships were ready to sail again, when it would be returned to the Viking.

Chapter 40

Guinivre

When the ships docked at Guinivre the police were waiting to take Olivia and Isobella to meet with the commissioner.

They were driven to a café in a quiet street near the police station, where the commissioner was waiting outside on the pavement with a woman.

When they were seated inside he introduced her as Madame Bestland.

"I am relieved that no one was hurt this morning in the attack. As you know we are talking to everyone from the three vessell`s at the dock but I wanted both of you to meet Madame Bestland here for security reasons.

I think I should let her explain things to you herself".

"Isobella and Olivia my name is Marie Bestland. I work in gathering information on organisations such as the one that you have recently been targeted by.

We are a group of experienced operators who work independently for much of the time in secret, to protect the interest's of various countries and organisations from people such as the 5 Powers.

When I say we operate in secret, I mean we do not have a headquarters anywhere or even a name as such.

I have known the commissioner for many years and he is part of a network of contacts I have.

If what I am saying sounds far fetched, then so be it, because the sort of people we are interested in are everywhere and involved in everything: politics, criminal gangs, the environment, entertainment, business. You name it, they are involved in it in some way.

As you have seen this morning by the attack on you and now the commissioner`s choice of a meeting place, even the forces of the law are not secure.

You represent just one of many groups whom they are actively trying to filtrate to corrupt for their own ends.

I am pleased to say that so far you have been very lucky to have survived" she said smiling.

"I think you are fortunate to have the support you have from people everywhere round the world, who support you for your ideals, beliefs, way of life, love of the sea, the environment and of course freedom itself " then she paused to take a drink of her coffee.

This is a powerful woman who has come to talk to me Isobella thought.

"Madame Bestland" she started to say before Madam Bestland interrupted her; "Please. Call me Marie".

" Marie excuse me. I know that you have not finished yet but I just want to ask you a question,: why have you come to talk to me then?

I am not an important person. I live in a small community on a river near the coast, who does love the sea, the environment, my children and my friends.

You say people support us. But many people still think of us as pirates or sea nomads living in many places around the world, who are not to be trusted, so why come to talk to me"?

Marie Be3stland put her coffee cup back slowly onto it`s saucer.

"All those things you have said are exactly why I want to talk to you. You and all your people are important to us because it seems you are important enough to have attracted the attention of the 5 Powers.

But first I think I should stop talking to let the commissioner tell you some news he has for you".

"Anders has been in touch with me Isobella. He tells me he stayed behind on Feinstorm when you left to help examine some information, which was taken from the lap top of a man called Frederick, the one time assistant to your leader Inger Costa. Is that right"?

"Why yes, it is right commissioner. You seem to know an awful lot about what is happening".

"As you know I was not always the commissioner of police here and I still have many contacts around the world Isobella, including Marie of course.

Anders contacted me because he felt that I was a more secure contact at the moment.

He told me he believes that Inger Costa could have organised to have Frederick vanish from the hospital in Jaal".

"I don`t understand commissioner, that can`t be right surely" she said thinking of her musing`s at Hellborn`s farm about what was: "perfectly reasonable" or "too reasonable" or "too probable or too improbable".

"Isobella, I know Anders is a very clever young man. I also know quite a lot about his past life when he was a teenager.

He told me that he does not feel safe on Feinstorm and wants to leave as soon as he can to re-join you.

There could be a double game being played here. I do not think Inger or even the Far Shore are everything you think they are.

"I know it is not easy to listen to what the commissioner has told you Isobella" Marie said

" Even know who it is that you can and cannot trust.

I think it would be a good idea if you could stay here for a day or two for your and everyone else`s safety.

Anders is trying to finish up his work on Feinstorm as soon as he can. The commissioner will make sure that he and Truan are brought here safely as soon as they are finished".

"I might not agree with everything that you and the commissioner have said but I think we might manage a couple more days here.

Of course these suspicions about Inger come as a shock to me. I will not act on what could be assumption`s until I have talked with Anders and Truan.

I just want to make it clear to both you and the commissioner that as Inger`s assistant I have the greatest respect for her. My first responsibility is to her and the people we represent.

I will continue to work with you commissioner to share information that can help us all.

"Thank you Isobella. I will make sure that you are well protected while you are here.

Olivia can remain as your contact officer, as soon as she has seen her mother that is".

"Thank you commissioner. One of her meals at home and a night`s sleep in my own bed would be much appreciated".

When they finished their meeting Isobella went with everyone to the police station to give a statement on the attack by the helicopter.

When she had finished she told the commissioner she would walk back to the harbour.

"Then I must insist that you wait at the station until I find an officer to accompany you" he said.

As she waited at the station, she thought about the conversation with Marie.

About what being important was like and how she had come to be involved in a world of dangerous criminal organisations, esponiage,power, greed and corruption. Facing the fact that she might not be able to trust Inger, a woman she both admired and respected.

Well so be it.This is not a simple world I have become involved in. There is so much that I do not know to learn but in many way`s my life up until now has prepared me for this.

So I will just do what I have often done in life:I will make it up as I go along.

She was so involved in her thoughts that she did not see Olivia come to stand near next to her.

"I thought you were going to go home to spend some time with your mother and aunt" she said in surprise when Olivia said hello to her.

"Well I am what people call an overachiever, just like you I think.When I heard they were looking for someone to accompany you back to the harbour I put my hand up. Just like I did at school. I was always the kid who went to get more chalk or the one who took another kid to the sick room or delivered an important message to the principal".

"Well I am really glad you were that kid at school. We can both enjoy the walk together to talk about overachievement and everything that has happened since we firstmet ".

There was so much to talk about, that they decided to stop for more coffee with some Guinivre ice cream at a cafe in sight of the dock.

She arrived back at the ship with a carton of ice cream large enough to feed the children, as well as Gale and Dave, feeling happier than she had for some time.

She was thinking of how lucky she had been to have met Olivia and her family when the children came running down the quay to meet her.

"There`s ice cream to eat" she said when they came walking down the quay to meet her.

"I think we should get some time to really be tourists tomorrow. Like we could not be when we were last here, what do you say to that"?

"Ok, if you have to stay for a couple of day`s that is alright mother" Terri replied.

"How did you know that I needed to stay for a couple days" she exclaimed.

"Because Kat and I are your daughters. We talked about it while you were away"!

Chapter 41

Tourists at last

On their second day in Guinivre they hired a small bus. Becoming the tourists that they had wanted to be on their first visit to the island, which Dave drove to explore the island.

Dave, who had been the enthusiastic tour guide on their first visit, had been replaced by a more relaxed Dave: "I know that I speak for everyone" he announced as they set out "when I say that I am just glad that we are all here, in one piece, so lets get going and just enjoy ourselves".

And they did enjoy themselves. Until the afternoon when Isobella received a message saying Anders and Truan had arrived in Guinivre, asking her to meet them at the commissioner`s office.

When Dave dropped her at the police station Anders and Truan were already waiting, seated round a small table with the commissioner and Marie Bestland in his office.

It would be a comfortable place to sit together for an afternoon chat but as soon as they were all seated the commissioner got down to the business of the meeting.

"We understand that you all want to continue your voyage as soon as possible. I also understand that you want to protect the information that you have gathered in the interest`s of your own people.

I believe that if we all work together, we can achieve the best outcome for all of us for what is a complex situation".

It was Truan who spoke first when he finished.

"I think both myself and Isobella would agree with what you have said commissioner.

This is a situation, which neither myself or Isobella could ever have imagined that we would be involved in.

You are right when you say it is a complex situation commissioner but the information we have collected from Fredericks laptop will be invaluable in shining some light onthe 5 Power`s operations.

We know that the 5 Power`s have a powerful network operating.

We are travelling as just a small fleet of sailing vessell`s but I think that we can work with you to help identify some of their operations.

There are risks for us of course. We have two people with us who were involved with them previously, Mark Trevelyan and the Wolfe, who now want to help us, who have proved to be most trustworthy so far.

Then there are the concerns that you have raised Anders about the 5 Powers network operating along the coast, then across the sea to Feinstorm and Runesholme, if you can give us some more detail.

"As you know I was a hacker as a teenager. Once a hacker, always a hacker" he said nervously and laughed.

"When Inger asked me look at Frederick`s lap top I discovered the network along the coast" and he opened his laptop on the coffee table in front of him, with a map on the screen.

"This map covers the area between Feinstorm and Guinivre where we are today.Then down the coast to Gifford`s Bay, Skiel Island and onto Whitchford where are journey will end.

Inger has also been communicating with people in all these places, which I have marked on the map" and Anders moved the cursor to identify them.

"It seems significant because the 5 Powers are active in these areas that are marked. I think this is a major route for their traffic to pass through, because it is not well patrolled by the authorities".

" We are well aware of the weaknesses Anders" the commissioner said "and we know that they are experts at exploiting such weakness` to move their traffic with the criminal gangs, whatever it is: people smuggling, drugs, counterfeit prescription medicines, stolen goods, vehicles and vehicle parts, oil, gold, antiquities and cash are just some of them.That is why Marie and all of us are here today.

But with their success they have become arrogant. They made a big mistake when they decided to move in on you and your people Truan and Isobella.

They thought you were just a group of old fashioned idealists. Part of myth and legend but for all that or perhaps because of it you have proved yourself to be a difficult adversary through a combination of good luck, peoples support, stubbornness, courage, cunning, determination and sheer good fortune, you have made it far more difficult for them than they thought and now it has opened up their operation to us.

Marie`s latest information is that they have decided that it is not worth their effort anymore. They are moving on to other things but we are following their trail now that they have exposed themselves to the light as you say Truan".

"So Anders, you don`t know exactly what Inger has been doing, is that right" Isobella asked.

"No, it is only a suspicion I have Isobella. It may be an internal situation within your organisation or it may be something altogether different, I am not sure".

"But you and your "pirate" fleet are on your way back to Skiel Island and Whitchford may be able to frighten some of the rats from their holes, is that it" Marie asked.

"Well Marie, you can call us pirates if you like. You and the commissioner have are full support. Rest assured that whatever we do we certainly won`t be timid about it".

"Isobella" Anders broke into the conversation holding up his laptop with map on the screen.

"Right here and here" and he pointed to Skiel Island and then further out to sea to a small group of Islands called the Skelinors.

And then he pointed to Whitchford and the town called Longby on the coast where her children went to school.

Everyone was quiet before Isobella spoke again; "Well it has come as close to home as it can Anders" she said with a sigh.

"What about the other information: the names people were using, codes do you have more on those".

Anders took a sheet of paper from his bag "You can have this, keep it somewhere safe" he said handing it to her.

As the meeting was finishing, the commissioner told them that he would like to have Olivia stay with them until they reached Whitchford and that he was in touch with the local police there.

"Thank you commissioner, we would be happy to have Olivia continue to travel with us until we reach Whitchford.

As far as the local police go I am not sure that we can expect much help from them though.

Not all police are as trustworthy to us as you and your people are. Or as well connected or aware of what is happening in the world as you are.

But I thank you once more for your efforts on our behalf, we will never forget what you have done for us".

Instead of being driven back to the harbour they all decided to walk back to the ships.

"Well what did you think of the meeting" Anders said as they left the station.

"That we have learnt a lot I think" Truan said".

That we are still in danger Anders.There is a lot that we do not know:

That the 5 Powers may have decided that we are too much trouble for too little rerward. That they maybe moving on to bigger things. That they will not forget the trouble we have caused them quickly.

Look at what they did by attacking the Eagle. It was Byorn the Viking with his cannon that we have to thank for saving the day again.

We cannot always rely on luck and good fortune Anders".

"Well the mysterious Marie Bestland thinks we are a pirate fleet Truan. So lets be like a pirate fleet. We will fly the flags that Gale made with the children when we left Feinstorm.

Anyone that wants to should dress as a pirate when we leave in the morning.

When we get back to the harbour I will call a meeting with everyone to discuss things openly.

I have had enough of espionage, plots, plans, secrecy lies, spies and double agents.

What next, a scratched black and white film with people dressed in trench coats, with hats pulled over their eyes smoking smelly cigarettes and drinking cognac from a hip flask, while Shashti plays a haunting melody on her accordion"?

And they stopped in the street laughing at Isobella`s description of the world that they had found themselves in.

"I am glad you said that Isobella" Truan said.

"I think we need to talk to Inger about the suspicions Anders has raised, as she is someone we both respect and trust".

"I agree Truan but not before we get to Skiel Island. Then Anders will have had more time to do his work. Talk to his pals in the hacker world or whatever you call it Anders, if that works for you"?

"Yes it works for me Isobella. I am glad to hear both of you talk like this.

If you don`t call out the bad guys for what they are, you will never overcome the fear they breed".

"I am glad you said that Anders. There have been many times on this voyage I have lost sight of what it is that I think we are.

Sometimes I think we are just a group of outdated idealists who`s time has passed over, being circled by sharks looking for their next easy meal.

And sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between the idealists and the sharks!

Now lets go back to the vessels and look forward to some fair weather for the voyage home".

Chapter 42

Closer

Isobella`s promised meeting to get things out into the open had worked.

It was not a timid little fleet which left Guinivre in the morning but one proud to

fly their colourful pirate flags in a spirit of defiance and joy in the voyage home.

If the 5 Powers wanted to find the vessell`s of the The Fleet of the Far Shore they would certainly have no trouble finding them.

The skipper of the Eagle David Jones, had made a tricorn hat for himself from newspaper, which he had painted black with a red pirate skull and bones.

For an eye patch made he had used the lens from a broken pair of sunglasses.On his shoulder sat a live pigeon.

Olivia, Gale, Truan and Isobella were dressed in an assortment of pieces of colourful clothing, with a range of moustaches, beards and scars they had drawn on each others faces.

The police launch, with the commissioner and Marie Bestland on board led the pirate fleet out into the open sea, flying one of Gales flags.

"Are they coming to say goodbye or just make sure we leave and don`t come back again"? Dave asked.

And the children led the adults in singing Terri`s goodbye song, to a decent sized crowd for the time of the day.

"I am going to miss being a celebrity when we get back home" she remarked to Dave once they had left the harbour.

To which he replied; "Somehow young Teresa I don`t think that will ever happen".

On this, the last leg of their voyage it would have been easy to forget the many other events that had happened amongst all the danger they had faced:

The vessel`s joining Byorn in collecting rubbish. Keeping a record of anything they thought could be useful to help him compile his Environmental Log.

While Trin had collected information on bird and sea life, Terri wrote up what she called "My journal of my journal". Interviewing everyone on their own memories of the voyage.

And Kat, or Katherine as she liked to be called now she was starting to feel more like an adult, spent a lot of the time when she wasn't working dreaming of the adventure she had been on.

She had also forgiven her mother for taking her away from Whitchford, for keeping secrets from her and for not seeing her friends.

She thought that she would be the odd one out when she got back.

There will be a whole lot of people that I won`t know at high school but

I am not likely to find it too hard, surely?

I am sure it will be alright for someone who has been chased round a foreign town by an ugly old man with a scarred face, who is trying to kidnap my sister.

And face wild storms. Or be attacked at sea by a helicopter with a man firing at us.

On the fifth day of the voyage Skiel Island when came into sight Dave and Gale went to stand in the bows to watch it grow closer.

"Home" Gale said with tears in her eyes.

"Would you have come on this voyage Dave, if you had known what we were in for before we left"?

The emotion he felt was so strong that he could not answer immediately.

He put his arm round her before he cleared his voice to speak.

"No I would not but now it has happened I would not have missed a second of it.

I was concerned for you and Trin all the time. I do not know what I would of done if either of you had been hurt or worse still" and he stopped speaking, unable to continue.

Gale reached her hand up to stroke his face.

"I love you Dave Seaward. I am so proud of you and everything you have done".

"You too Gale. Looking after the children when Isobella and me were busy.

For being the best damn ship`s cook ever, deck hand, safe hand at the wheel that I have ever known" and Gale as they laughed together.

Isobella was standing next to Olivia at the wheel.

"Love eh" Olivia said, nodding to where Dave and Gale stood in the bows.

"Yes, love Olivia" she replied thinking of Curnow. Then put the thought out of her head.

"What about you Olivia" she asked.

"Well Isobella there is someone but you know my focus is on my work. I know that I am lucky to be where I am with the support of the commissioner, so that is where I put my energy at the moment".

But she did not say anything about the man called Anders whom she knew she should would miss when she went back home.

It was already the late afternoon by the time the vessel`s had moored in Skiel Island`s small harbour.

Terri and Katherine cried when Gale, Dave and Trin left the ship to stand on their home island again.

"Don`t forget how close we are" Dave said.

"You can alleyways walk across the old causeway when the tide is right out you know" before they left.

When they were gone Isobella went to look at the sea by herself because she had tears in her eyes too.

How strange it is to think of everything we have been through on this voyage.

When I would lay awake at night worrying about the children,wanting to turn round and go the safety of our own home.

Now I know how much I am going to miss everyone. That these few weeks on the voyage were the most extraordinary time I have ever had in my life. All of it, the good and the bad.

Then later, as soon as she could she left the ship and started walking towards the old monastery.

When she reached the monastery she stood to listen outside to the sound of the old monks singing in the chill of the evening air.

She was only aware of the beautiful sound of the voices when brother Alex appeared out of the shadows like a ghost giving her a shock.

"I am so sorry" he said. "I did not mean to frighten you. I was just enjoying the cool evening air now autumn is here".

"That's it" he said tapping at the side of his head " it`s Isobella Carvier isn`t it.

I met your daughter Katherine when she had feinted sitting on a rock by the shore early one morning.

The two monks who had discovered her brought her back to the monastery, where we shared breakfast together".

"Yes,you are right Brother Alex, I am Isobella Carvier.

Thankyou for looking after my daughter Katherine. She told me that you were very kind and that the breakfast was delicious".

"It was a pleasure. It was good to talk to her.

By the way I am not a brother. I came here when I was looking for somewhere where I could find some peace during a very difficult period in my life.

I ended up staying to help look after the brother`s and the monastery ".

"Yes, Katherine told me that you had been a judge, is that right"?

"Yes I was a judge until one day just like that" and he snapped his fingers" I decided that there was more to life than being a judge, which is how I ended up here.

Of course I am not the only judge or ex judge who lives on Skiel Island you know.

"What do you mean Alex" Isobella said. Seeing in her mind the weaver preparing her loom.

"Over there at the old castle" he said pointing towards the headland where the castle stood.

"The Lord D`Artagne is, well was, a very well respected judge who still practices law. The family are of course very wealthy. Involved in business, finance, shipping all over the world".

"And are they here on the island at the moment"?

"No they are rarely here now, they have a caretaker who looks after the place for them who lives in a cottage on the grounds.

Oh and of course there is there place on Skelnor Island" and he pointed again, this time out to sea where Isobella could just see an outline of the Skelnor islands in what was left of the light.

Then he as he stood studying her she saw a different Alex, one that she was glad she had never had to meet in a court of law.

Then as if he knew what she was thinking he chuckled to himself. Becming the Alex that had looked after her daughter.

"I may not be a judge anymore Isobella" he said, talking more softly and slowly, as though he did not want to be overheard "but I still know when someone is looking for something, trying to find something out, which is what you are doing now. Is that not right Isobella" and nodding he looked at her again.

"Yes Alex I am looking for something" she said.

"Well I may live on this island in a monastery, with a group of old monks to look after but I still have my laptop.

There is quite a network of people I communicate with. I believe you met one of them the other day"?

"Called Marie Bestland by any chance "? Isobella replied.

"Yes Marie Bestland, that’s right. She told me what a strong, canny person you were, who could not be underestimated. I think she was right.

Obviously I don`t just live here because it is good for my health, which it is Isobella. Why don`t we talk about this somewhere where it is warmer out of the night air"?

"Come to my ship then. You can meet Truan who looks after security for us pirates, as Marie Bestland called us" and they both laughed.

"We can all talk together there."

As they walked together to the ship Isobella saw the weaver at her loom smiling at her: "So can you rely on luck, good fortune and the help of others Isobella or not"? the weaver said.

Chapter 43

Justice it is

Alex sat talking when they had finished their meal seated round the table in the main cabin, looking down at his plate, moving the remains of his meal with his fork, like a sheep dog herding it`s flock of sheep.

" You should know that I stopped being a judged because I could no longer ignore living each day with the duplicity and corruption that I confronted.

I had never wanted to anything else but to be a judge since I studied law at university.

I did not just think of it as a profession but as a calling. Like the monks here are called to become monks. I felt I was called to be a judge to dispense justice for the good of all the community, just as a doctor dispenses medicine for the good of the community.

"It was very hard at first when I decided that I no longer wanted to be a judge.

My wife, my colleagues and my friends did everything they could to change my mind.

I talked to my doctor, to a priest, saw a psychiatrist but nothing made any difference.

I lost most of my friends. My wife divorced me.

People thought that I had gone mad but somehow I knew that what I was doing was right.

I was living alone feeling depressed, full of self pity, when Marie Bestland, who was a friend from university, got in touch with me.

She convinced me that we should meet, because she wanted to help me.

When we did meet we talked for a long time. She told me about a group of people she worked with,what there aims were.

Then she asked me if I would come to work with them.

What really convinced me to take up her offer in the end was the fact that she mentioned she was looking into the operations of a group called the 5 Powers.

They were at the source of the reason I gave up being a judge you see.

I had been involved in a case where there name had come up.

It became obvious to me that they were using their power and influence to get the outcome that they wanted. Yet I, the judge, seemed to be able to do nothing about it.

So when Marie asked me to work with her. With the chance to live somewhere as quiet, remote and beautiful as Skiel Island, to look after some ageing monks in their even more ancient monastery, I did not have to think long before I said yes.

I had to assume another identity of course. Grow my hair longer. Grow a beard, wear the glasses that I don`t really need. Now here I am having a meal with you all telling you about it several moths later.

The strange thing is Isobella. I have told no one about having been a judge, except your daughter that day we had breakfast, until you and I talked outside the monastery tonight.

I have done my research about the Far Shore of course.

Marie Bestland has also filled me in on what happened with you on your voyage in the last few weeks.

Lastly, we are ready to arrest the former judge, D`Artagne, Lord of Skiel Island, now a leading member of the 5 Powers, will you help us"?

"It would be hard not to say yes" Isobella said. "What do you say Truan"?

"Certainly it would be hard not to. I am glad it is not you Alex, as you call yourself, who is being arrested, as you seem to me like an honest man who has been through some hard times for what he believes in".

"Olivia you must be part of this of course" Truan said.

To which Olivia put her head in her hands and moaned.

"It is alright Olivia" Alex said putting up his hand. "I think I should speak on your behalf.

Her boss, the commissioner, has been involved with us in this matter for some time, working with Marie.Of course Olivia was sworn to secrecy. She could not say anything" and Isobella put her arms round Olivia`s shoulders.

"That is alright Olivia we understand" she said. " Truan and myself thought that the commissioner would be expecting you to do just that. You have become like one of the crew to us.

Now you can stop smoking those smelly cigarettes. Wearing an old trench coat with a hat that hides your face".

Then she explained what she was talking about to a perplexed looking Alex who burst out laughing.

"Oh and there is one other very important thing I have to tell you" he said once he had finished laughing.

"We have also been talking to Inger Costa. She has instructed me to convey her apologies to you both, for having had to keep it a secret from you.

She was unable to say anything to you herself but she will be talking to you once this is all over to explain everything".

"Thank you Alex that is a relief to both of us" Truan said. "Yes I am sure it is. We owe all of you a huge debt of gratitude. You brought the 5 Powers out into the open but we are not quite ready to make arrests yet.

I know you want to get back home after your voyage but it would be better if you were to remain here for a few more days, while we finish our planning.

We would like you to talk to the the crew`s of the Fair Sky and Eagle about being part of this. If you can get their agreement, they can be standby with you here on Skiel too.

We know we have to strike quickly but we cannot afford to leave anything to chance otherwise we will lose the best chance we have ever had to seriously damage their organisation".

"I think I can talk for Isobella and Olivia" Truan said and say yes.

But Isobella has two daughters to look after, while Olivia has to return to Guinivre at some point.

We will discuss this amongst ourselves, as well as with the other crews to give you are a final answer tomorrow Alex".

Chapter 44

Many a slip

The next day Truan went to talk to the crews of the Eagle and Fair Wind, while Isobella went to explore the island with Olivia and the children.

Isobella was missing her home in Whitchford just as much as they were.

It would be a good time to talk to them about walking across the causeway to go home to Whitchford. Then she could return by herself when Alex was ready.

The headland where the castle stood, had a commanding view across the water to the mouth of the river Whitch at Wreck Beach on the mainland.

She thought of the picture she had seen in her mind of her Dave and Gale standing with the children on this very spot on the headland when Sulven had read the cards for her at the farmhouse.

The first card she had drawn was Strength.

Sulven had said that it signified a momentous period with great change in her life. Standing as close as she was to home now, she felt the change was still happening.

The voyage of adventure was not yet finished.

There were several cottages near the castle standing round a two storey farmhouse,

which was the caretakers home.

It seemed like an idyllic spot to sit to eat the picnic they had brought with them.

While they ate Isobella talked to the children about her plan to cross the causeway home then to return to the island later by herself.

They were so excited that they wanted to leave straight away until Isobella pointed out to them that they would need to wait for low tide before they could walk across the causeway.

While they were discussing the journey home a woman came out from the caretaker`s house carrying a tray with glasses and a jug.

"My name is Elga" she said. "I saw you sitting here enjoying your picnic and thought you might like some juice. It is made with lemon, cinnamon, honey and other things too.Very refresing.

I look after the castle with my partner but he is often away. We do not get many people coming here at the this time of the year".

When Isobella had thanked her she asked where she got the recipe for the juice from, because it reminded her of the ingredients in the juice she had drunk in Guinivre.

The woman said she did not know where it came from and started to fill the glasses for them.

Isobella thought the juice was just like the one she had drunk in Guinivre but with an added taste, which she could not name.

The woman was still standing watching them. Isobella saw that her hands were shaking as she held the tray but when she started to invite her to sit down the words did not come out as she wanted them to. Then Olivia put her hand on her shoulder.

She was trying to say something but her words were slurred too, as though she was drunk.

Elga dropped the tray to cover her face with her hands before Isobella felt herself falling into the sanctuary of the sweet smelling grass.

She heard a mans voice.There was a face looking down at her that looked like Frederick`s.Then there was just darkness.

Truan had finished her meeting with the crew`s of the Eagle and The Fair Wind who had agreed to join in Alex`s plans. They would wait in the harbour at Skiel for a few more days before they left for Whitchford for the winter.

When she got back to the ship there was a message waiting for her from Isobella.

She said she had gone to explore the island with Olivia and the children. She would be coming back to the ship after lunch.

It was the first time she had been alone for a long time. She realised that she felt sad, because the adventure of the voyage was almost at an end.

After she had read the message she went to sit on the deck of the deserted ship wrapped in an old sea blanket to keep herself warm against the chill wind.

She thought of everything that had happened since the day she had met Isobella in the Gifford`s Inn, when they had gone to sit on the rock on the beach together.

What will I do now she thought. I am no longer young but I am not old either.

There will be work to do with Inger but after everything I have seen in these last few weeks I think I will talk to Alex, Marie Bestland and the commissioner, about where I go in the future.

Then she pulled the blanket round herself like a cocoon.

She thought she would just sit for awhile but her eyes soon closed and she became lost in dreams until Shashti woke her.

"Hey Truan, don`t just sit there being lonely come join us for lunch" she said gently patting her awake.

"Shashti thank you I must have gone to sleep" and felt thenkful for all the friends she had made on the voyage.

Lunch on board The Fair Wind lifted Truan`s spirits. It was later in the afternoon before she arrived back on board The Lady Isobella expecting to find everyone back from their excursion but she instead she found the ship was still deserted.

After she had made a search she went to stand on deck. She reasoned there was no reason to worry. Everyone would be back soon but as she stood looking towards the path inland from the wharf where they were moored, worry was exactly what she did.

She tried Olivia and Isobella`s phones but got no answer.

She could not imagine why they had not already returned to the shelter of the ship.

The wind was already blowing hard, with the waves were starting to crash into the shore.

It was not panic she felt but her own intuition told her there was every reason to worry. She had better get moving quickly.

She went to see Curnow on the deck of the Eagle.

"Curnow, I am worried about Isobella with the children and Olivia who went out exploring and are not back yet". Then she the panic rising as she spoke.

"Hey, come sit here and get your breath" Curnow said.

"Tell me where you think they may have gone. We can organise a search party to go to look for them".

Truan told him that she thought that they had the headland and the castle but she also remembered that Isobella had mentioned she was thinking of taking the children home to Whitchford across the causeway.

"Curnow, what if she decided to go across the causeway on the spur of the moment, then got got caught by the tide and no one saw them get into trouble. You know how quickly the tide can come in here sometimes to surprise people crossing the causeway".

"It can, that is true but let`s keep calm. You have reason to be concerned. I am concerned also.

We are close to Whitchford now. We have all started to relax after the voyage we have had. This is just the time when you let your guard down that something could happen. So let`s get everyone organised to go out on a search, eh".

And so Curnow, began to organise the search of Skiel Island with the crews of the Eagle and The Fair Wind.

He sent Clunes to ask Dave and Gale to get the islanders help in the search, while Anders went to alert Alex and the monks.

It was starting to rain with the wind growing stronger but people were soon out searching the island clad in their wet weather clothing, as boats searched the waters round the causeway.

Curnow and Truan had decided to contact the closest police on the mainland at Longby if they had not been found within the next hour.

"I think there is a proper big blow coming Truan" Curnow said as they walked towards the headland in the wind and rain.

"There is a police launch and a rescue helicopter based on the mainland at Longby

but if it does really blow then they might not be able to get to the island, so we may have to keep searching by ourselves".

Chapter 45

Strength

Isobella woke staring at the intricate design on the rug she was lying on.

She thought of the weaver but she could see no image of her at work at the loom in her mind.

She tried to move but there was something tied round her feet and hands.

She remembered the woman Elga bringing them the juice, standing to watch them drink it like an obedient servant.

Then her hands holding the tray started shaking before she dropped it to put them over her face to hide.

"Oh no" Isobella whispered into the rug, remembering the warning she had received but had ignored standing on the headland.

I should have taken everyone back to the ship then. We would be safe now but I wanted to believe that we were already safe so close to home.

Then she managed to find the energy to twist, turning herself onto her back, like she was a piece of dough being kneaded by a baker.

She could see that she was lying in a large room with an ornate ceiling with full length windows which opened onto a balcony*.*

She realised that she must have been in the room for quite a long time. It was starting to grow dark outside. The trees she could see through the window were dancing in the force of the wind.

There was no answer when she started to shout for Olivia and the children but she continued to shout for help until she became exhausted.

She felt more angry than she could ever remember having been with the fear and anxiety she had been storing up inside herself on the voyage, spilling out of her mouth in a stream of abuse.

Somehow the power of the anger managed to move her so she was no longer lying on the floor but sitting; her back against a sofa, both crying and laughing until she was able to get her breathe back.

I have had enough. I need to get my hands and feet free. Then I pity any man or woman who gets in my way. I am going to war.

During her struggle to sit against the sofa, the rope tied round her feet had loosened. She continued to work it loose until she was able to free first one foot, then the other.

The sweat had soaked through her clothes. She wanted to shout her triumph in the freedom she felt in freeing her feet.

"Not yet Isobella" she said "plenty of time for that when you have found Olivia with the children and are safely back on the ship".

Then she went to find something sharp enough to cut whatever it was that was tied round her wrists.

There was a desk in front of the windows where she managed to disturb whatever was on it`s surface, using her tied hands in a sweeping motion until she found an old letter opener shaped like a miniature eastern dagger.

She knew that it was probably blunt but it was all she had.

The binding round her wrists had loosened enough for her to manoeuvre the blade in her hands in a sawing motion to cut away at the binding.

The exhaustion she felt made part of her want to give up. But she concentrated every part of herself on the rhythm of the sawing with her plans for escape.

The only way out of the room was over the balcony but she did not know how high that was. If it was not too high she decided she would use the old curtains from the windows as her escape rope.

Otherwise she would just have to wait in hiding for someone to open the door to hit them with something heavy, which was unlikely to lead to anything other than a beating or her own death.

Come on Isobella think for heavens sake think. It is growing darker outside now. That is the best cover to rescue the children and Olivia.

The heat on her wrists from sawing the rope was beginning to become unbearable. Her energy exhausted, when she felt the cord round her wrists give way and loosen.

She desperately wanted to stop to rest but knew that she could not, so she staggered to the windows and opened one of them onto the balcony.

There was a gale blowing outside. When she opened the window it smashed back against the wall breaking some of it`s glass.

Then she stood feeling the cool rain on her feverish exhausted body, praying that she was not too far above ground.

In the poor light she judged that to drop down to what looked like flat ground was too dangerous, so she pulled one of the old curtains down and tied it to the balconies railing.

"Here I go" she yelled. Remembering the joy she had felt when she was a child beating the boys at climbing trees.

The old curtain, soaked from the rain, started to rip apart as she reached the ground,

to wrap itself round her, softening her landing.

She landed, wrapped in soaking curtain, laughing.

She would like to have lain safely cocooned in the curtain, with the rain cooling her aching body, washing away the sweat.

But she struggled to free herself from the curtains cocoon of safety to get to her feet staggering into the darkness to look for the children and Olivia.

Chapter 46

We who Dare Win

Dave and Gale had wanted to leave Trin with a friend while they went out to search but Trin would not stay behind.

He said that Kat and Terri were like his sisters. Isobella and Olivia his friends, so they could not deny him.

They walked to the towards the castle, because they thought that might be where Isobella had gone.

They could see the lights of the two boats searching the sea.

Dave tried not to think of Isobella, the children and Olivia trying to cross the causeway being caught in a sudden surge of water as had happened to people before.

Curnow said he would meet them near the caretakers house. He told them he had contacted the police, who would try to get their launch to the island from Longby if they could but the weather was too bad for the helicopter to fly at the moment.

As they got near to the castle they could see a light on in the caretakers house but not in any of the cottages or the castle itself.

They stopped to shelter in a small wood under an oak tree out of the wind, where the ground was still dry to wait for Curnow and the others to arrive.

It was not long before they saw the light of torches approaching from the direction of the harbour and signalled to them.

"The storm is starting to die down" Curnow said as soon they were all standing together under the shelter of the trees.

"But before we talk about the search I have some important information for everyone".

I met Alex on the way here with two of the monks. He warned us all to be very careful. He has been in contact with the police special security force, who said they will be here tomorrow as soon as the storm has died down.

He said some arrests had already been made in various places. They are expecting to make a lot more.

Evidently several high level people in the organisation are willing to talk if the authorities agree to give them protection.

From what he said the rats might be starting to leave a sinking ship.

They want to get their hands on as many of the head people as they can.

Some of them maybe hiding at the castle, including D`Artagne so we all need to be very, very careful".

"Curnow, I see you have your rifle. I brought my old shotgun" Dave said "and I see some of us are carrying clubs and bats. I know that we can rely on the islanders but lets try to make sure that no one does anything silly, ok".

Then they split up into groups to search the area round the castle trying to stop anyone leaving the island before the police arrived.

It was decided that Gale and Trin would wait at the oak tree with Jackobson from the Eagle, until Dave knew it was safe for them to join them.

Then Curnow and Dave went to the caretakers house at the castle.

The rain and wind had died down since Dave had gone to shelter but the ground they walked over to reach the caretakers house was treacherous, covered in .

The light was still on in the ground floor of the house whpools of water.

When they arrived at the caretakers house Dave went into the shadows by the door with his shotgun at the ready, while Curnow went to knock on the door with his rifle still slung over his shoulder.

As he got ready to knock on the door he thought of Isobella, the children and Olivia, feeling his heart beating inside his chest.

I still love Isobella. God willing this ends well. Then we can all return to the safety of Whitchford he thought.

He knocked on the door twice but no one answered. So he knocked again with more force but there was still no answer so he motioned to Dave to come to stand with him He turned the door handle and the door opened.

There was a single light bulb on in the room hanging from the ceiling with no shade.

The room was in mess, with things thrown onto the floor.

At a table a woman was sitting bound to a chair with her eyes closed.

There was blood on her face.

Curnow put his rifle on the table, motioning to Dave to check the rest of the house.

When he put his fingers on the woman's neck he found a weak pulse.

"Let me know if you can hear me" he said.

The woman's lips moved but no sound came out. So he went to the sink to fill a glass with water, which he gently lifted to her mouth to wet her dry lips.

By the time Dave arrived back to let him know the house was empty the woman had drunk the water and Curnow had refilled the glass for her.

He had freed her hands, cleaned the blood from her face and she was holding a wet cloth to her forehead.

"I think she will be alright Dave. She is still groggy.In shock so call Gale to ask her to come here with Trin and Jackobson. Ask her to call Alex. Have him to bring the monk called Thomas here, who is a doctor".

The woman lifted her hands to her hair, brushing it back from her face to look at Curnow and Dave.

"You are safe now. We will look after you. What is your name"? Dave said.

She did not ask immediately but sat looking down at her hands rubbing her wrists where she had been tied.

"My name is Elga Costa" she said clearly "thank you for rescuing me. I thought I was going to die here".

Then she started crying softly into her hands where she held them in her lap.

Dave looked at Curnow whispering the name Costa to him. Curnow nodded to say he understood.

After they had given her more water she stopped crying. Dave asked her if she had seen two women with two children.

"Yes earlier before the storm, they were here having a picnic.

The men forced me to take some juice to them. I am sorry but I did not know it was drugged so they would become unconscious when they drank it. Then the men took them to the castle".

Curnow asked her who the men were. She said the name Frederick, then started shivering so Dave put a blanket round her shoulders.

She told them that Frederick had taken her hostage to get power over her mother Inger Costa.

When she tried to escape after they had taken everyone to they castle they had caught her. They had given her something that put her to sleep.

She asked them if they were from the Far Shore.

When they said that they were, she told them she had heard Frederick talking about taking the women and children to a place on the mainland near Whitchford.

" I will call everyone know what is happening. Now the storm is dying down the police may be able to get their launch and helicopter here.

What about the causeway Dave, when could they Frederick use that".

"That depends on the weather and the tide Curnow" he said checking his watch " but let`s say in about an two hours at the very earliest. That would be risky in the dark even for a local in".

It was not long before Gale arrived with Alex with Thomas the doctor.

While he started to check Helga, Gale searched the kitchen for food.

"Food, we need food you lot, we can`t fight are enemies' without food" and with Trin`s help she started to prepare a pot of soup.

Isobella had found her way back into the castle through an old door that was falling from it`s rotten frame.

She had to feel her way forward in the dark, along a corridor using part of the door frame towards what she thought must be a set of stairs.

The castle was eerily quiet, smelling of damp but she did not care about smells or ghosts. Only about finding her children alive with Olivia.

Whatever fear she had, seemed to have disappeared to replaced by a single mindedness bred by an exhausted anger.

Finding a set of stairs she guide herself carefully up their bare wooden steps, holding onto the banister.

She remembered films she had seen where stairs like this always had a step that squeaked loudly to alert the bad guys.

But she managed to reach the next floor without making any noise to find a much wider corridor, that unlike the stairs was carpeted.

She stood listening for some sound or chink of light that might help her make a decision whether to go right or left.

There was none; Just a deep, mournful silence with almost no light.

Realising that she had not eaten since the picnic, she sat on the top stair to rest, feeling the nausea in her stomach rising.

Her only drink since the drugged juice had been rainwater. Which she thought was better than the most expensive champagne.

If there were any ghosts, she hoped they would be kind enough to find her something to eat and drink.

Because she wanted very much to close here eyes she had to make herself stand. Knowing that if she did not she would go to sleep.

She started to walk to the right because she thought that might lead her back towards the room she had escaped from, and the children might be somewhere close by too.

It was not a big castle as castles go but it felt to Isobella as though she was walking though some sort of musty old labyrinth. Where pieces had been lost to have other ones added over the years.

Well at least I can`t get lost she thought. Because I don`t know where I am anyway.

She wanted to laugh so much that she had to stop to put her hand over her mouth but when she took it away she vomited whatever was left in her stomach onto the carpet.

She used the sleeve of her jacket to wipe away what was left of the vomit and silently told herself to get a grip girl.

When she started walking again she came to a landing area where stairs came down from the upper floor before another set of stairs continued downwards, where she stopped to rest again.

Their was light from an almost full moon coming through large windows at the landing. So for the first time since she entered the house she could really see where she was going.

The rain had stopped, the storm clouds were moving away.

More than anything I want to lay on the floor and sleep she said to herself.

My legs are starting to shake but however exhausted I feel I have to keep keep going to find the children and Olivia.

She heard voices coming down the stairs she crawled out of sight, where she could rest to control her breathing and wait.

The voices were coming closer now. Isobella thought she heard Olivia arguing with someone. She held the stick she was carrying more tightly to herself before Olivia appeared with the children coming down stairs.

Then they turned on the landing to walk down the next set of stairs, with the man walking behind them, distracted by the argument he was having with Olivia.

She struck at his head with the stick then kept hitting. Hitting until Olivia came and pushed her away.

"That`s enough Isobella" she said before her and the children gathered round to hug her.

"Isobella you need to get our hands untied quickly. Then we need to get out of this place" and Isobella took a great breath of air and started to untie the cord from round Olivia`s wrists.

Once her wrists they both untied girls wrists before they dragged the unconscious mans body out of sight, to tie and gag him.

Then they followed the way Isobella had come back to the broken door and outside into the chill of the fresh night air. Where they walked towards the place, where a few hours ago they had eaten their picnic.

They could see the lights of the caretakers house when Olivia signalled for them to stop.

She went ahead holding the gun she had taken from their guard until she saw the figures of three men walking towards her.

She laid herself flat on the ground ready to fire before she recognised Alex`s voice.

Chapter 47

Justice

Frederick kicked the side of the vehicle he was standing next to.

"Damn that bitch Isobella.We have no time to look for them now we need to get of this cursed island before the police arrive".

When one of the men with him started to say something about it still being too dangerous to cross the causeway, Frederick grabbed hold of him.

"We go now because I say we go now, understand? Your opinion means nothing to me" and pushed the man away so hard he fell onto the ground.

"Does anyone else have anything more to say"? he said pointimg his gun at the man on the ground.

"I thought so. So lets go" and they climbed back into the vehicles to drive to the causeway.

Gale made sure that everyone got some of her hot soup, when they were united at the caretakers house.

There were to many people to hold a meeting in the house, so Truan took everyone outside but before she could start news arrived that two black SUV`s had driven away from the castle towards the causeway and the police launch and helicopter were on their way.

A group was organised with Brother Thomas the doctor to examin the man Isobella had knocked unconscious and search the property.

Then everyone who was left got into vehicles to drive to the causeway.

"Be careful. These people are armed and dangerous" Truan warned.

One of the fishermen waved his ancient shotgun above his head shoutinged; "so are we",bringing laughter and cheers from the crowd.

"And that`s what I was afraid of" Truan said before they left for the causeway in pursuit of Frederick.

From the beginning of the causeway Frederick could see it quickly disappear in the moonlight towards the mainland.

The storm had moved on but every now and then a larger wave would roll in.

Cursing under his breath he knew that the man who had spoken against making the crossing had been right.

Then he heard the feint sound of a motor out to sea.

"Listen all of you I have a better plan.

We will take a couple of the fisherman's boats. Then we can land anywhere we want down the coast.

The one`s of you who are seamen come with me. The rest of you can stay here until we come to pick you up".

He pointed to the man who had spoken out against crossing the causeway; "You are in charge here. You report back to me, ok ".

Then he left with the seamen.

As soon as they had gone the man he had put in charge spoke.

" We are in a right mess. He has lost his nerve. I could hear it in his voice" he said, pointing at the vehicle`s disappearing down the track.

"It is true that we are sitting ducks but only if we wait for them to get back with the boats to get of this cursed island as he calls it.

I can guarantee you that we will be in the cells before it is light. Can you hear that" and everyone listened could hear the sound of a boats motor in the distance.

"Anybody want to make me a bet that that isn't the police launch coming from Longby? And if the police launch is coming the helicopter will be following.

I have changed my mind too. I don`t think the causeway is as risky as I thought it was with a clear sky after the storm and a moon like this to navigate by. We can be well away from here on the mainland in a few minutes before the law get here, so are you with me"? and no one disagreed with him.

With the man driving they were soon on the causeway, proving what he had said was true; the causeway was not as risky as he had thought it was.

They survived the crossing to the mainland to drive across the beach without getting stuck in the sand.

As soon as they were on the hard road heading inland from the beach the man stopped the vehicle and turned the lights off.

When they got out of the vehicle they could hear the sound of the launch clearly now.

They could also see the lights from a helicopter in the distance.

" We won`t press our luck. Come on lets go find some breakfast" he said before they drove away with the vehicles lights still turned off under the pale moonlight.

When Truan saw the lights from Frederick`s vehicle coming towards them she told the driver to turn of his lights immediately and stop.

"I bet that`s Fredrick vehicle up ahead, what do you say we give him a surprise.

Curnow you get the other vehicles of the road with there lights of.

Make sure that everyone gets under cover of the trees as quickly as possible.

Tell everyone no heroics. No one is to shoot unless they shoot at us first.

If we can get Fredrick out of the vehicle we have got him, ok" and she told the driver of the lead vehicle she was in to open the hood as if it was broken down.

While Byorn and Anders went into the trees with two of the islanders armed with shotguns, she told Dave what she wanted him to do.

As soon as Frederick`s vehicle reached the truck he leapt out of the vehicle shouting at the fisherman to move it or they would move it for him.

But the fisherman stayed where he was playing his part, telling him it was broken down.

Then Dave came out of hiding fron the trees to put his grandfather's shotgun to Frederick`s head.

"Don`t do anything stupid, there are armed people all around you" he said as Byorn and Anders came out of the woods with the other men, armed with shotguns who surrounded Frederick`s vehicle.

"You men in the vehicle get out nice and slowly, put your weapons on the ground and your hands behind your heads. Don`t do anything silly otherwise a lot of people are going to get hurt, ok".

And the men did as they were told. Standing with their hands behind their heads.

"You are under arrest my old mucker" Dave said to Frederick.

"You will soon be nice and cosy in your own cell. What's wrong, you have gone very quiet, has someone borrowed your tongue or are you really just the scared rat I think you are" and Frederick started to cry.

Chapter 48

Tall stories

On Skiel Island celebrations were taking place at The Last and Only Tavern, where the islands small community had all become heroes'. The fisherman's stories of the part they had played in the drama increasing with each glass they drank.

They were only rivalled in imagination by the the one`s they told of the fish they had caught: "it were this big it were, took the four of us to get it onto the deck " and "that catch I made were so big the sea were coming over the deck on the way back to harbour with the weight of the fish we had in the hold".

But the crews of the fleet of three ships were quiet.

In the days following Frederick`s arrest more arrests had been made of members of the 5 Powers, including Lord D`Artagne who had been found in hiding at the castle.

Maria Bestland had had told Isobella that the organisation had been badly damaged.

Now Isobella, with Katherine and Teresa, were just enjoying being close to each other, wanting nothing more than to be home together in Whitchford.

Truan with Olivia would come with them to sail the last miles of the Tea Trip back to Whitchford, as would Gale, Dave and Trin.

In the few weeks they had been together she had come to think of them all as not only friends but family.

It was home and rest that she and the children needed now most of all.

She thought her escape from the castle and search for Olivia and the children had taken the last of her energy.

Both Truan and her had spoken to Inger, who said she would resign as chief intuiter but they had convinced her to stay until they could arrange a Gathering and Brother Alex had offered them the monastery as the gathering place. Isobella-who could not consider going far from her home for awhile-thought it would be a good place for a small gathering but the irony of meeting at a monastery was not lost on her given the history of the Far Shore.

She had dreamt of the weaver`s words; "Not an end but a beginning Isobella. My hands have more work to do for you" and she had laughed.

Then there was Sulven`s soft and gentle voice when she read the last card for her at the farm; "The World is the last card in all ways and as the world turns so another cycle of revelation begins". Then she seen Inger handing her the intuiter`s belt but now she needed rest,to be with her children more than any dreams.

The fleet set out together for the last time with the people of Skiel Island wishing them farewell. Gales flags flying from their masts on the short voyage to Whitchford.

Everyone was on deck when they crossed the narrow channel to enter the river Whitch. But if they had imagined they would be able to sail quietly to Whitchford to moor their vessels for the winter without attracting any attention, they wrong.

They were joined on the path that ran along the river`s bank by Katherine`s friends Gilda and Jane, with their families riding their ponies.

Then at the wharf in Whitchford they saw the crowd waiting for them.

Terri had wanted to wait to finish her journal of The Tea Trip in the comfort of her home but she knew now that it could not wait.

So she sat down with the journal on her lap, stroking the cover. Which was no longer so soft or free of stains, the way it had been when she had first been given it by the kind teacher at Gifford`s Bay.

There were only two pages left but she thought that was just the way it should be. Because she had learnt on the voyage that all thing`s must come to an end.

Then she looked at her mother at the ship`s wheel; her hair blowing out from under her old sea cap and decided that was unlikely to happen.