

Chapter Two

Ian's awareness returned with some reluctance, at first admitting only snippets of sight, sound and sensation, which was fine, since they all hurt. He could hear the splash and hiss of water, the creak and pop of stone under stress, and could feel a low, rolling vibration that seemed to tickle his bones. His head felt as though it were caught in a vintner's press. He could also see the red glow of daylight behind his eyelids, but they seemed to be temporarily fused shut.

Other sounds came to him as his senses quickened. The flap of canvas, muted shouts of instruction, and the smell of sea-salt set still distant mental alarms ringing. He forced his eyes open. Daylight exploded into his head, and he let out a moan of pain.

"Daddy, I think he's waking up."

Slowly, the brightness resolved itself into the now-familiar forms of Ariannah and Jared, and another man Ian did not recognize, gathered around the bunk in which he lay. As the pain in his head receded slightly, he saw that he was in a small, spartan cabin of gray stone flecked with silver. The light of mid-day streamed in through an open port-hole, casting a warm halo about Ariannah's hair, framing her beautiful face, and illuminating her smile of

sympathy. Ian's heart skipped a beat, entirely without his permission. A small table, upon which sat a pitcher and several tumblers in a wire rack, a straight-backed chair, and an upright wooden locker were the only other appointments. Beyond them was a closed door. He was tempted to shake his head to help clear out the fog, but he wasn't sure whether things were still attached in there, so held carefully still. He instead managed a low, whispered,

"Wh...where am I?"

"You're on your way to Myr-Isle." Ariannah piped.

"Myr...m...what?"

It hit him finally with an almost audible impact. This was a ship, undoubtedly Jared's, it was moving, and he was on it. The implications struck home in several successive, sickening waves. Another groan escaped him.

"Myr-Isle, silly. Where we live. Isn't that just so exciting? Oh, does your head still hurt?"

"Ariannah, dear, please," interrupted Jared with a smile, "Don't trouble the young man. Ian, we are in your debt twice in just a few hours. I can offer no thanks equal to your efforts. After the attack, we had to depart in haste. My daughter told me that she'd let slip my plan to ask you to accompany us home, and to retain your services as her personal Protector. She also informed me of your

intent to accept, so we took the liberty of bringing you on board. That and the fact that I couldn't very well leave you lying unconscious on the pier."

Ian tried to catch Ariannah's eye, but she had suddenly become fascinated with the stones in one of her rings.

"Well, that certainly was kind of her to relay that." He said, a little too much intensity leaking into his tone.

Jared frowned.

"You seem upset. I pray we have not been mis-informed." He said, turning to Ariannah. Her eyes widened, face innocent in the face of implied accusation. She made a little persecuted snort.

"Chh, Daddy, he DID say that. I wouldn't say he did when he didn't. Tell him, Ian." She looked at him confidently. Ian hesitated for a moment, but some instinct dictated that he play along.

"Of course, my lord. It's just that I...wanted to formally accept your offer in the appropriate manner. I'm disappointed, nothing more."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it." Jared said. "This is Cale, my personal physician. He assures me you will live. You'll have plenty of time to recover once we reach home. I'll leave you now to rest. Come along, Ariannah."

He turned toward the door, followed by Cale, a short, dark-haired skeleton with a kind face nevertheless. Ariannah leaned over and kissed his forehead, her lips warm on his skin. She giggled.

"Get well, my hero." And she followed her father out the cabin door.

Ian was left with his fear, pain, and irritation. The latter rapidly leeched away as the stone walls of his cabin began to press in on him, amplifying the muted roll of the ship. The fear pushed his blood faster, and the pounding in his head increased proportionately. He put his hand to his forehead, closed his eyes, and gave himself over to complete misery.

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The next few hours passed in a haze of fearful motion, broken dreams, and the interminably slow recession of aches and pains. Ian waited as long as possible, but nature insisted, nay, demanded, that he get up and make the necessary concessions. He weaved his way to the door, and pushed it open. The hall beyond was lit by charm-lamps, the blue-white globes set in small, wire braziers along the

stone walls between cabin doors. At the end were stone steps leading up to a darkwood hatchway. Ian grabbed the ironwood hand rail, and carefully made his way along, feeling the casual roll of the ship toy with his already-diminished sense of equilibrium. Near the end of the hall was a door pegged open. Ian looked within and saw that it contained the necessary plumbing. He staggered inside.

After attending to his most pressing need, he exited and continued down the hall to the steps. Gaining the door, he took a deep breath, and turned the latch.

The hatchway opened out onto the mid-ships deck, where the mainmast rose into the azure sky. Late-afternoon sunshine glowed behind full canvas, casting muted shadows across the deck. Crew members moved purposely about, tending to their tasks, as a stiff breeze drove the great ship southward. Ariannah was standing at the port rail, staring out over the water, head bobbing slightly from side-to-side according to some inner rhythym. She turned after a few seconds, as Ian's eyes adjusted to the bright light. She pushed away from the rail, and a smile broke over her face, as she twirled across the deck towards him. He clutched the hand rail firmly, and hoped that his anxieties were not as evident on his face as they felt.

"Good afternoon! You're finally on your feet." She

greeted him, "That bump on the head must have been worse than it looked. You still don't look well." She grabbed his arm and tugged. "Come look at the water, and smell the air. It'll make you feel better." His hand refused to let go of the rail. Ariannah tugged harder, and broke his grip, pulling him along toward the railing. He struggled to keep his mind blank against the fear churning in his stomach.

"Yes, well, I'm sure I'll be fine once we arrive." He said through his teeth. And am standing on solid ground. Preferably in a tavern. A tavern at the very center of the island would be good, finished the voice in his head.

"I almost wish we'd never get home." She said as they reached the railing. Ian grasped it immediately, and struggled to look at the horizon, not at the open water sliding past. "I love being at sea. It's just so...."

"Exciting?" Said Ian, dryly.

"Exactly! Don't you just love it? Fresh air, sea mist, it's so invigorating, so freeing." She abruptly broke away from the railing and twirled about on her toes, her raven hair fluttering in the wind. Ian refused to watch her. Even the peripheral motion made him grind his teeth. "I could stay out here forever.", she finished.

"Have your father buy you a boat. Or give you this one." He said. Just let me off first, said the voice.

She stopped twirling, her expression turning instantly to a pout.

"He would, but I'm not allowed to leave the island very often. And I can never stay away for long." Then she as quickly brightened. "But maybe things will be different, now that I have you to protect me. I'm sure now Daddy will let me go wherever I want, as long as you're with me. Goodness, it's just so exciting."

"Sorry, I'm not much of a seaman. I was born in Quelan province, where you can see the bottom of every pond and stream."

"Nonsense. You'll absolutely love it in no time, I just know it. I know a lot about sailing, even though I don't get to do it very often. You see that line across the water out there? There, where it's lighter?" She pointed out toward the horizon. Ian's gaze focused on an area about a quarter-league out from the ship, the same spot he'd been pointing his head at all this time in an attempt not to recognize the existence of all this water. There was sort of a hazy demarcation, like a very localized disturbance in the water that seemed to jump and shift along a vast semi-circle encompassing the port side of the ship and the surrounding sea. The water beyond it to the horizon looked much rougher, much more active, than that within the arc.

Curiosity temporarily shouldered fear out of the way. Ian frowned.

"What is that?"

"That's where the Sweep goes under the ship." She indicated the Mage's platforms both fore and aft. Two figures stood, one on each, dressed in Guild robes that flapped loosely in the stiff wind. They both were facing the apex of the arc, hands grasping the rail in concentration. "They make like, ummm, like a bubble around the ship, where the water is calm to a certain depth, or whatever. Then the bubble passes along across the current, and they push the current underneath it, he called it "subsumed" or something like that, and so that's how we can cross the Sweep without being taken far out into the Calms, where we'd probably never get back from. I learned all this from Timon, he's the one up there, I know I'm not supposed to bother the Mages, but I just bugged him until he told me how it works. He wasn't very nice, and he used lots of words I've never heard, but I like to know things, so I made him explain it in, you know, real words. I know they're supposed to be really smart, but I can tell you, I wasn't particularly impressed. Did you know that the Sweep moves over fifteen leagues in an hour's time?" Ian turned his head to answer her, but she prattled on, barely pausing

for breath, tapping her fingers on the salt-stained handrail as the sea hissed by. "Anyway, that's why my family is so wealthy, and Myr-isle is so important. We are the only trade-lane between the Northern and Southern continents, and since we own the Guild, and since only a Guild mage is able to make it possible to cross the Upper and Lower Sweep, everyone pays us to get from here to there, and back again."

Ian opened his mouth during this slight pause to assert his awareness of these facts, but Ariannah let out a cry of excitement, bouncing up and down, and pointing.

"Look, Ian! There it is! Do you see?" She cried, pointing just off the bow. "We're home!"

In the distance, he could see Myr-isle, grey cliffs topped with a verdant green. Even from this distance he could see a huge, open cleft in the sheer island face, the mouth of what sailors called simply the Channel. You couldn't live in Southward and not be familiar with the stories of Myr-isle, its riches, beauty, and importance in this part of the world. But Ian was unprepared for the impact it had, even at first glimpse. He felt some deep, previously unknown and unrealized connection thrill through him. It was nevertheless familiar, and he felt his pulse accelerate. Part of him said it was only the all-too-

welcome sight of dry land and safety, but the spell it cast obscured not only Ariannah's excited proclamations, but the soft "Caawww.", and muted flapping of wings from the blackbird coming to light in the rigging above his head.

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The island grew in size very quickly, giving Ian a perspective on how fast Jared's ship was traveling. The details of its implacable stone face became more apparent as they drew near, the pitted cliffs rising hundreds of feet from the frothing, angry sea. High above, the crest of deep green foliage pushed over the rim, as if the soil above could not contain it. The ship slid finally into a deep-water rift in the shoals stretching out from the cliff-base. Ian watched the Mage's "bubble" melt against the jagged rocks protruding from the water as they passed in, the current beyond sending geysers of foam into the sky as it pushed inexorably to the east. Ariannah prattled on about this and that, how she wished the journey wasn't over, and how she wished she could pilot the ship, and how everything was just so exciting. Ian nodded absently as he stared at the opening to the Channel itself.

The rift leading to the Channel was fairly narrow,

though two ships of their size could probably sail abreast through it. But the deep water widened to nearly twice that as it passed through the opening in the cliffs. The cliff heights remained undiminished, but the Channel was wide enough to admit light from above. Ian felt the wind shift as they passed into the mouth of the Channel, to push directly from behind, the cleft acting as a funnel to drive the ship deeper into the island.

Above them on either side were stone ramparts built into the cliff walls, a tiered series of crenallated openings that made it very clear that if those above doubted their intentions, then those entering could count on hitting the bottom in short order, even warships. The ramparts ran along the Channel's walls for as far as Ian could see, until it bent out of sight many hundreds of yards ahead, which meant that the defenders above could even toy with attacking ships if they wanted to, and still send them into the depths before they passed the first turn. Jared's now-familiar standard flew from pinions far above. Ian was drawn out of his reverie by something Ariannah had just said.

"What?"

"You haven't been listening to me, have you? I can tell." She said in a sulking tone, her lower lip pushing

out. Ian was disturbed to realize just how interesting her lips were when they did that. He refused to contemplate it.

"Yes, I have. You said something about the island protecting itself."

"As I said," she continued, "Even if ships somehow managed to get past the Entry, which they never would, our island would protect itself. At the first turning, there is a Ward."

"A what?"

"A Ward. It's like a gate, but you can't really see it. It's magic, and if it were up, and we hit it, even Daddy's ship would crumble like tinder-ash, like, pssshhhkk." She finished with the corresponding sound effect, collapsing the stiffened fingers of one hand against the palm of the other. She looked up at him with a coy smile, one deep blue eye hidden behind her bangs. "Don't worry, my hero, she knows us. We're in no danger."

"Who does?" He asked, irritated at her cryptic statement. She just continued to smile, and turned away.

"I'll be right back. I want to watch Master Arne make the first turning." She moved aft, toward the steps leading up to the pilot's station. He could see a large, bearded man behind the immense ship's wheel, watchcap pulled low. Next to him, Jared and Buchard stood, and another man who

looked to Ian to be the captain, all watching the progress of the ship through the Channel. Above them, two of Buchard's men were helping one of the Mages down from his platform, supporting the obviously exhausted man as they helped him below.

Ian caught himself watching Ariannah's retreating backside, distracting curves evident even through her heavy robe. He closed his eyes for a second, then turned his attention back to his surroundings. The thought of having to spend the next however long in the company of this spoiled, melodramatic child was not a welcome one, no matter how attractive she might be, so he concentrated instead on the fact that he was entering the wealthiest kingdom in the known world. Bloom where you're planted, and all that, said the voice in his head.

The ship fairly flew, leaving the Entry and its bastions behind, the stone cliffs showing no evidence of diminuation, unscalable and impervious. The ship made the first turn at speed, the wind pushing at the full canvas from behind as it coursed down the Channel's throat. Ian saw no sign of the Ward Ariannah had spoken of. The Channel angled to the southeast for a short while, then turned south again.

Once the second turn was made, Ian saw that the cliffs

at last began to fall toward the water. The tangled blur of green at their crest resolved into a lush tangle of exotic trees and plants, dotted here and there with huge cascades of brilliantly-colored blooms. The wind lessened as the Channel expanded, and they passed out of its confines finally into a vast harbor. The western edge continued essentially south, but the eastern side arced away toward a long series of piers jutting out at its apex, then gradually moved back toward the west until it once again closed with eastern side, paralleling it south to form what Ian seemed to remember was called the Lower Channel, which was the gateway to the Lower Sweep, and ultimately the vast, arid expanses of the Southern Continent.

Ships of varying sizes dotted the harbor, the heaviest concentration arranged at the stone quays, which even from this distance was obviously bustling with activity. Along the northeastern arc, the island's greenery met the water along black sand beaches, tall frond-trees pushing thin trunks into the sky above the undergrowth. The southeastern curve of the bay rose slowly along its length from shoreline again to cliffs, the grey stone pushing to its former height where it met the portal to the Lower Channel. The pilot set course directly for the breakwater that bounded the piers, and the city beyond. As the ship turned,

Ariannah appeared once again at his side, entwining her arm in his, with a whispered, "Wasn't that amazing? I never tire of watching how he does that. You should see him when we are departing. It's even more thrilling when we are leaving the island."

Ian nodded, too interested in what lay before him to add any clever commentary. Like Southward, it too rose from the water along a curved slope, albeit a much more gentle rise, but any similarities ended there. Southward's architecture seemed like so many child's blocks lined up along the inside curve of a cup, an angular, blocky representation of man's achievement, where Myr-island's port city was like the sculptures that Ian had seen when his uncle Tori had taken him to the Quelan capital, Asturi, when he was very young, and had shown him the fine arts depository at Hosti College. Ariannah seemed to understand his enthrall, and in a declatory whisper named it, as if its name was not known throughout the rest of the world.

"Myr-Istia."

It swelled up the soft slope in concurrent waves of arches and spires, roads ascending in radiative lines from the hub of the waterfront. It had an gossamer, webbed quality, as if all points spun from the center. At the top of the center road, high in the foothills, at the foot of a

mountain whose summit looked as if it broke the plane of heaven, lay what could only be the Palace of the Queen, known throughout the world as the measure of architectural beauty. Ian was mesmerized by the twin spires rising from the famed center court. They stretched up against the green of the island like elegant fingers pointing toward the mountain peak, with an adjoining skybridge just below the opposing cupolas.

Ariannah jabbed him in the ribs.

"Do you see the palace? That's where I live." As if it was not patently obviously where the cream rose to the top. Ian grunted in absent assent. He remembered how he'd felt, standing in the dark, cloistered halls of fine arts building, holding Tori's bulky hand, staring at the sinuous twists and convolutions of the various sculptures. That there were things outside his present world, waiting to be seen, waiting to catch the center of him in this way.

A second jab broke the spell.

"Well, say something."

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.", was all he could come up with. It seemed that his natural talent for glib articulation had been knocked out of him in his fall from the roof, and, for all he knew, was still lying in that alley. Ariannah smiled and squeezed his arm

against herself.

"Yes, I agree. Although I expect you to be saying that about me before long.", she said with an accompanying giggle.

The ship made quick time across the harbor, moving among dozens of ships anchored outside the wide ring of the jagged, stone breakwater, all obviously waiting their turn to enter the port proper. The center lane was currently clear of traffic, no doubt all ships told to hold position the moment the monarch's vessel entered the bay. Flagmen stood atop two stone bunkers flanking the wide gap in the breakwater's teeth, directing those out in the harbor when and where to go. They gestured deferentially as Jared's ship passed between them. Ariannah waved to the one on their side.

They crossed the inner harbor and slid slowly into a large berth near the foot of the center road that rose to eventually end at the gates of the Palace. Ian seemed to remember that this was called the Queen's Way, but couldn't be sure. The crew bustled this way and that, securing the rigging and making the huge ship fast to the stone quay, Ariannah and Ian standing still at the rail, out of their paths. Ian could not help but stare out at the city rising up before him, drawn by the strange beauty of it.

They were joined by Jared and Buchard, descended at last from the pilot's station. The captain of the ship was still with the pilot, overseeing the securing of the great wheel. Jared greeted Ian with a generous smile.

"Ah, my young Ian. How do you feel? You look much improved."

"Yes, thank-you, Sire. I will survive, as predicted."

Jared chuckled, but Buchard's visage remained set.

"That is fortunate. Do you approve of our fair city?" he asked, gesturing in a panoramic arc.

"Beyond even the stories, Sire."

"Yes, well, we like it. I have many things to attend to, now that my staff will have direct access to me. The bittersweet joys of coming home. I will be occupied for the rest of the day and evening, so I regret I'll not be able visit with you until tomorrow at the earliest. But, I'm sure Ariannah will be more than happy to see to all of your arrangements until then." Ian thought he could see a twinkle of humor in Jared's eyes, but the king turned his gaze upon his daughter. "Won't you?"

Ariannah rolled her eyes.

"Of course, Daddy. As if I wouldn't. Come along, Ian. I simply insist that you accompany me in my carraige. Better for your head if you don't have to ride." And with

that she tugged him into motion. He heard Buchard speak to Jared as Ariannah pulled him toward the closest gangway.

"Sire, shouldn't--."

"I'll not discuss this again." Jared's response was preemptive, but without irritation.

"Of course, Sire."