

Choice, Set Free
Book 7

The Tae'anaryn
& the
Voyage of
Imagination's Dawn

A decorative flourish consisting of black, swirling lines and small leaf-like motifs, positioned to the right of the title text.

by Dr Joseph Ireland, PhD. "Dr Joe"

The Tae'anaryn *and the Voyage of Imagination's Dawn*

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This is a work of fiction. All the names, characters, organisations, spell descriptions, and events portrayed in this book are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to any organisation, event or actual person (living or dead) is unintentional.

About the author

I like writing books, I really do. I like it much more than reading books, which I can barely stand. Which, I suppose, is a bit of a curious thing for a man 14 novels deep into his own storytelling, but that is me.

I'm currently training up as a Positive Behavioural Specialist, which is a bit of a surprise. I'm left wondering what to make of my now 'hobbies', of doing the occasional science show and lecturing in *Teaching Science* at the University - a total treat to be sure! All this does not help to answer the question, 'who am I?', but it does highlight the problem I have in answering that question just at this time. Maybe it's all just 'meant to be', because I find it all very wonderful and vastly more palatable than being a tyrannical monster of authority that my community, the parents, and the children themselves expect me to be when I'm being a ... *teacher*. <shudders>.

Hopefully those days are behind me now, which begs the question of why I'd even want to lecture, since adults can be the very worst of students. With kids, it's never personal until you make it. Adults will try to destroy you when you fail their expectations, and they will feel entirely justified in doing so, which is so, so very sad. Why do we wait till boiling point to mention something is upsetting to us, far beyond the point where something constructive could be done about it? Will we all one day learn to use reason, and perhaps some courage? But now I'm just whinging, and you did not come here for that.

I don't know why I write this story, but I MUST.

Sincerely,

Dr Joe.

Dedicated to:

Karlie, whose first picture of the 'boy' not only ensured this book be written, but whose last picture is the capstone of it.

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Characters

Kialessa's Immediate circle

Kialessa – the innocent child of an archdemon and a thief, she is trying to protect her King, whom she loves dearly, from a cruel assassin's knife.

Darrix – Her good friend, the prayerful warrior or 'paladin', and a full-blooded human. He wields the legendary blade Defender.

Posk – Another good friend, the half troll prince of exceptional physical strength and much-less-than-exceptional wisdom.

Piex – The part star dragon wizarding prodigy, a good friend who needs Kialessa's encouragement and wisdom often.

Allastassia – A not-so-good-but-always-there-for-you-friend, a talented and very ambitious part dryad enchantress.

Senior students also on the voyage

Aolith – Only daughter of a royal family; while not in line for the throne, Aolith is still a human princess. She trains hard and is known as an educated and honest judge.

Natasha – A cervitaur (half human, half deer), who is on exchange in order to learn the ways of the humans, from her people who live in the far north of Lenmer'el. She struggles with some cultural norms, such as wearing dresses, but is known as a kind and creative individual.

Marchan – A capable human wizarding student of Lenmer'el. Piex speaks poorly of him, but Marchan is known for his cunning, wit, and ability to wipe the floor over everyone else on trivia night.

Federach – A powerful dwarven priestess of the earth goddess Mya, she is known for being forthright and overly blunt at times. She is expected to head back to her nation by the end of next year.

Dale – The son of an aspiring noble human family, Dale makes a particular study of siege equipment and large weaponry. He is one of a few names on Kialessa's 'do not like: is a big bully' list.

Boats

Gap's Edge "The Edge"

The nation's only heavy military ocean going vessel. Staffed by fifty, she often brings another fifty soldiers of the fleet. Her armament includes thirty heavy crossbows, a flaming catapult set foremast, and a submerged aluminium ram. She is a three masted galley with a compliment of thirty oars for when there is no wind to sail by, or when great haste is needed.

Sea's Bounty "The Bounty"

A large four masted sailing ship, a hulk to be exact. She carries most of the trading materials and supplies, and one hundred sailors as well. She is broad and wide, with plenty of well stocked cargo space. She is well built, and young, commissioned in 301CY (3 years ago).

Imagination's Dawn "The Dawn"

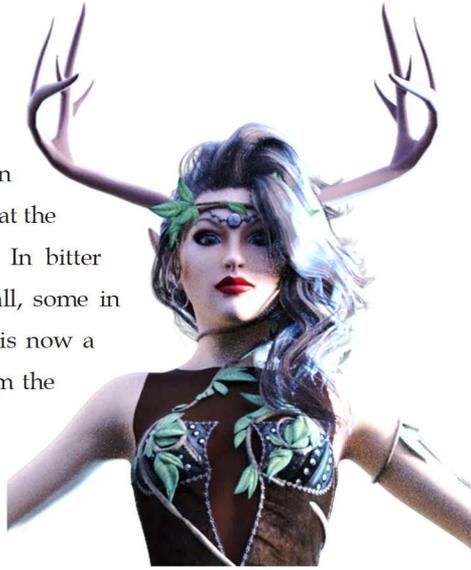
A carrack, with a large mainsail in the centre, a hind sail on the back next to the till, which is used for steering, and a foresail at the front. There is also a bowsprit, which is a small sail at the front used for steering that lies almost parallel to the sea.

She is the oldest, most magical boat in the nation, perhaps indeed in the entire great Kingdom. Three interchangeable interdimensional rooms in the same space host a spacious King's cabin (where at least one of his bodyguards is at all times), a storage room/wizard study, and a small chamber that includes the priestess shrine/general's quarters/steward's station. The mass of all three rooms adds to the ship's total mass and must always be accounted for. The three levels on the ship are the main deck, with all the rigging (ropes) and sails; the crew quarters below deck, where the servants and sailors relax and sleep in bunk beds; and the cargo hold, which is quite large, and has room for several extra beds and the large amount of cargo the small ship carries.

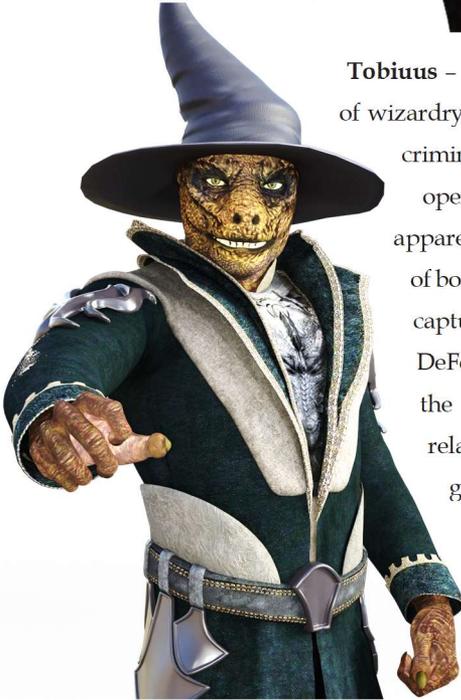
Adversaries

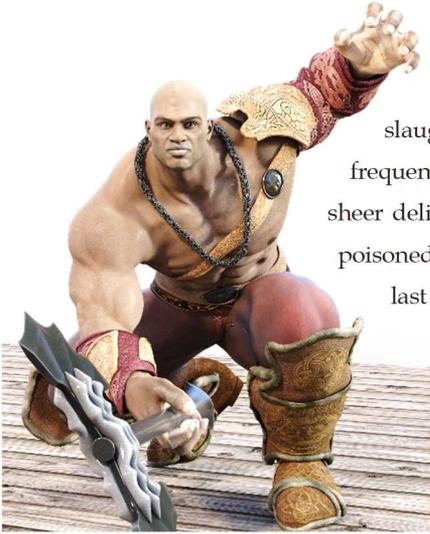
Truevine

A powerful elven archdruidess who suffered an unnamed tragedy years ago at the hands of her fellow elves. In bitter vengeance she slew them all, some in front of their families, and is now a wanted criminal hiding from the elf Queen's judgement.



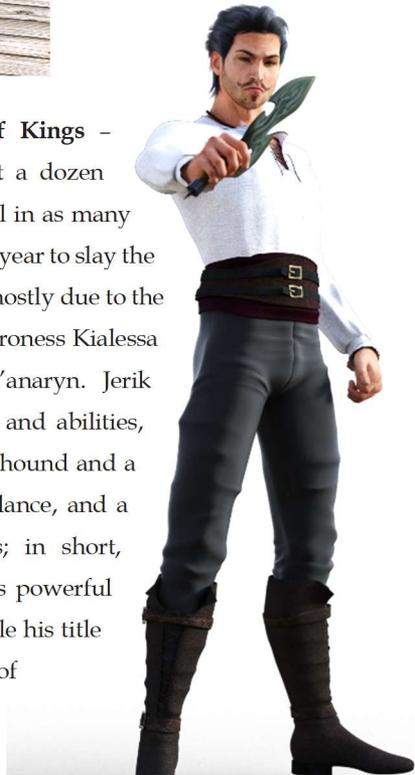
Tobius – An extremely capable master of wizardry, the archmage was a wanted criminal for many years due to his open use of necromancy, and apparent disregard for the sanctity of both life and the afterlife. He was captured by the sagemaster Coure DeFeur of Lenmer'el last year at the battle of the Far Keep. He is related to Piex as his grandfather's brother, though they usually refer to him as Uncle Tobius. He is a half star dragon, though far crueller.





Brandish "The Slayer" – A physically powerful half giant who revels in battle and slaughter. Once a paid mercenary, he frequently overstepped his quarry for the sheer delight of battle. He was eventually poisoned and captured, and has spent the last five years in prison at Emerel.

Jerik "The Dog", assassin of Kings – Rumoured to be linked to at least a dozen deaths amidst the nobility of Emerel in as many years, the Dog failed three times last year to slay the good King Dunnkan of Lenmer'el, mostly due to the imposition of the royal protector Baroness Kialessa Winterhaven of Lenmer'el, a tae'anaryn. Jerik displays a wide variety of powers and abilities, including shape shifting into a greyhound and a sand form, inhuman speed and balance, and a high resistance to magical effects; in short, almost nothing is known about this powerful and enigmatic, individual. And while his title may refer to him as an assassin of Kings, it is not known if he has ever actually succeeded at that quest.



Venues

Emerel – The capital city and name of the nation that rules over a loose confederacy of seventeen other countries known as the Great Kingdom, of which Lenmer'el is one. It is also the name of its first King, Emerel, crowned after the defeat of the troll hoards around three hundred years ago.

Lenmer'el – the youngest and smallest nation of the Great Kingdom, though one of the largest in terms of sheer land size. Most of the land is undeveloped wilderness lying with the Elven Wyldwolds to the north, Troll lands to the west and south, and the Bounteous Shallowsea to the east. Kialessa and her immediate friends are all from this region.

Treedawn – a small town to the north of the docks of Lenmer'el. It has good hunting grounds and is known for its excellent fishing. A regular migration of trees nearby makes further development inland unwise.

Cairnhold – a small settlement to the north of Treedawn, primarily the settlement of a single Baron Lord Cairn. The superb views and excellent fishing are mitigated by the difficulty in accessing the keep far up on a steep embankment, though locals swear they wouldn't have it any other way.

Dae Montol – the ruins of one of the satellite citadels of the ancients. The golden streets are long since plundered from well before the settlement of Lenmer'el.

New allies

Anaesu – the youngest son of the Merking and his second wife, the young Anaesu is known as a sweet and gentle soul with a tendency to let his curiosity get the better of him.



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Toni/Oum - The only known survivor of the most powerful race of humanoids the gods ever made. Known as 'the ancients', it is said they made a city of pure gold, and once brought peace to the warring primordial gods. Toni has an insatiable curiosity, coupled with unparalleled power, wisdom, and creativity. He also has four arms, four eyes, and two minds.



Wanderer - a unique fey dragon created by Oum, Wanderer can teleport and enter the dream world at will. She appears to form a bond with Kialessa when they visit the forest Oum created and has defended for the past three hundred years.

Darissius - the eldest son of the Merking and a captain in the King's army, he is expected to take the throne one day. He is a loyal son, and like most merkin, he loathes Karnissis.

Karnissis - the sworn and divinely appointed protector of the Merking. He is some form of octopus cervitaur, but most assume his condition is a curse caused by his evil and seditious nature. Nevertheless, he serves the Merking's interests with dark pragmatism and a loyal devotion to rival even the Merking's most ardent supporters.



Harrowbar Minerson - Darrix's father, and a powerful merchant in Lenmer'el, even more so since recent events. He is a very motivated, practical human man, commonly in the company of the King; his wife (Darrix's mother) is rarely seen in public.

Anaxarides - prince royal of the King of the sharkmen, he has assumed the duties of the throne ever since his father's mysterious illness. He is admired for his cunning and ability to dish out revenge served cold. He is considered a just ruler, though his laws are often far harsher than his father's.

Leonidis - champion to the King of the sharkmen, he is usually seen in the service of the acting King, Anaxarides. Leonidis is known for his



brute force and direct tactics, but has shown a rather devastating cunning since coming to work with Anaxarides on a more regular basis.

Glossary

- Anemone - a squishy sort of sea creature
- Condescension - speaking in simpler terms to someone less informed
- Diatribes - a 'rant', an angry speech
- Dissipating - spreading out and getting thinner
- Elucidate - to clarify
- Errant - wrong, or slightly wrong
- Eructation - a loud, sudden sound, like a burp
- Erudite - clear and informative
- Fervid - intense desire, passionate
- Heinous - really, really terrible
- Indefatigable - undefeatable enthusiasm
- Inevitable - totally unavoidable, often predestined
- Maw - a mouth, usually round one with lots of teeth
- Miasma - a haze or cloud
- Monologue - a long speech or play, sometimes a very boring one
- Necrotise - to kill, usually due to disease or illness
- Obedience - a movement of respect or deference
- Simulacrum - an image or representation, usually of a person
- Titbit - a small piece of useful information
- Transcendent - above all others
- Theorems - a thought that can be proven logically correct if the underlying theories are taken to be true
- Unequivocally - in such a way as to leave no doubt
- Unperturbed - still, silent
- Zephyr - a light breeze

Every Day



Thank you, my friends. And remember; you don't only live once; you live every day. So choose life.

Toni, cited in *Recollections of the Tae'anaryl*.

Jerik, the Dog, 'assassin of Kings', crouched silently, his eyes upon the pool of still water at his feet. Images within the water swirled into being at his command: the docks, the sailors. The boats being loaded.

'How long you gonna be doing that for, man?' a gruff voice demanded. It was Brandish, the Slayer, recently escaped from prison at the capital of Emerel under very mysterious circumstances.

Jerik hushed him to silence. He stared carefully before replying. 'Three boats? I would have expected more. And only two hundred soldiers disguised as sailors? This all seems a little beneath you, doesn't it, King Dunnkan?'

'Perhaps he really does think so little of you,' a woman's voice teased. She was Truevine, an elven dark druidess wanted for a hundred counts of murder, yet still not brought to justice in as many years.

Jerik scoffed, his breath upsetting the waters and thus, upsetting him. There was no detail he wished to miss. 'More likely he underestimates the amount of danger we bring to him.'

Jerik looked at the images. It was not the sailing ships that had him worried, or the soldiers. It was not even the King's personal bodyguard, or the rod of his authority, which had called down the terrible curse that

itched and burned the left side of his face every waking hour. No, it was the dozen or so children the King had thought to bring with him. Jerik watched them closely, memorising their body movements, studying each of their faces in turn.

'Pathetic, using children as a human shield,' Truevine mocked. 'Does he really think Serros the Sun will guard his cause simply because he has brought some youth to die along with him?'

'More blood,' Brandish shrugged. 'Fine by me.'

Jerik scoffed. He knew all too well that their foe knew exactly what he was doing. He watched fervently, till at last his eyes caught on the one he sought: the little twelve-year-old child of prophecy. She had red skin, and horns. She had a prehensile tail, and eyes that glowed red when she was angry. And she was, by far, the most powerful, most dangerous, and most innocent obstacle in the way of his vital quest at this time.

'She really got you rattled,' Truevine continued her mockery.

Jerik snarled; he could not help it. He was a dog in form and in heart. But there would be no mercy this time. She had removed the only obstacle keeping her safe, and now she was the only real obstacle keeping her King safe. If he chose to hide behind her red skin and horns, she would have her only wish and die protecting him.



But he did not have a chance to reply before the wizard cut him off. 'Oh, don't worry about the child. She has no idea of the suffering she has secured for herself, and her King,' Tobius, the archmage, informed them with cold murder in his eyes. 'For the Destiny's Maw awaits them both ...'

Setting Out



You are amazing, you are wonderful!

You can do things no one else can do!

Wherever you are, the world is much better!

Wherever you're not, we're missing one you!

Humdug, dwarf scholar, in a private letter to his uncle's son.

Bright bells sung out, startling the seabirds from their late winter rookeries. The dock was alive with activity, heavy set sailors swearing as they tussled to and fro, bearing the stock and rope they loaded into the enormous sailing ships. The burning face of Serros lit the sky, warming away the frosty morning chill. If she'd had the courage, Kialessa would have squealed with delight.

Darrix, one of her best friends in the world, walked up beside her. He had been starting some sort of adolescent growth spurt, and was now as tall and broad as almost any human adult, though the bad teenage acne gave away his true age. 'They're nearly done.'

'Is that why you're not helping out anymore?' she teased him.

He grinned; it was hard to offend the paladin's squire. 'The sailors aren't keen on having me below deck during the packing, and I really don't know what these here above deck need. The King wants us hauling anchor before mid-morning, so they don't have time for my ignorance of sailing ships.'

'Haven't you been on several before?' she asked. His father was a rich gem merchant, and while the older man took another boat, he was coming

on this voyage as well. Surely Darrix had been sailing before.

'Two, actually. Short voyages to the city Cairnhold and Treedawn up north. I was eight; I wasn't allowed to touch anything.'

'But now you're fourteen you have to act like a man!' Allastassia chided him from over her shoulder. She was helping several strong sailors haul up some ornate luggage, covered in twisting vine runes and locked with interwoven liana – probably nothing more than her personal makeup kit. The sailors struggled under the load, and though she didn't lift a finger to help, she spoke encouraging words. Kialessa had come to recognise the magic in the enchantress's words. She was helping them find strength and competence in her own magical way.

'You'll be grateful for the interdimensional spaces on this magical boat,' Darrix replied, looking like he really would have liked to help if there was any possible way on the small gang plank.

Allastassia huffed. Her family was not coming on this trip; they were staying to help the Queen run the Kingdom in the absence of its King. Allastassia was used to having a room to herself, with two servants and a closet of dresses larger than most people's houses. Now she would be sharing with all the other student girls on this voyage. The sailing ship was huge, but Allastassia would still need some kind of personal space on this voyage. They all would. People scurried to get out of their way, and as if that wasn't enough, one of the ship's cats ran past and almost tripped her up. 'Oops! Bah, not enough room to swing a cat,' she muttered.

Another voice spoke up: 'While your enchantments often defy logical explanation, I cannot understand why you would want to harm a feline and rotate it in a circular motion.'

It was Piex, the number one apprentice to the greatest wizard in the land. Piex was a wizarding prodigy, with a near perfect memory and intense love of books. But he could sometimes miss the subtle things; like whether or not people were being mean to him, or making up jokes about

cats, apparently.

'I'm pretty sure it's just a figure of speech,' Kialessa informed him.

Piex look surprised, but nodded.

'So, you ready for your first sea voyage?' she asked him.

Piex breathed in heavily, and patted the boat with as much courage as his eleven-year-old hands had. 'I have researched everything we require regarding this voyage. The Bounteous Shallowsea will be a nine-week journey if all goes well. We're going the long way - it is quite a wonder we don't teleport there.'

He glanced at her. Everyone knew there was a very important and very dangerous reason why they were taking the 'long' way. A deadly assassin was trying to kill their King and ruin their Kingdom, and she was the reason that assassin had failed at it last year, at least once. Even so, he'd come very close to succeeding, and so the King had decided this was their chance to draw out their enemy, and deal with the problem once and for all.

'It will be worth it,' she grinned. The King was here, with his four most powerful bodyguards. They held the rod of the King, with the promise of everyone in their nation to protect him. It might seem they were vulnerable, riding out away from his castle and onto the sea, away toward the council of Kings to which he was called, taking with him the best students at his college and best treasures of his Kingdom to impress the council at Emerel. But Kialessa knew it was just a feint. They were going to win this one, and she would never have to look that strange and dangerous dog/man/assassin in his hateful eyes ever again.

Piex nodded, never much one for words unless raw information was involved - in which case he might speak for hours. He cleared his throat. 'I have a small supply of wormwood and ginger, and have written several prayers to Waaglah, goddess of the oceans. While most creatures are afflicted with nausea from the constant motion of the boat, I do not think it

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will affect me. My mind has too many important things to consider.'

'Like how to burn up a small army?' she teased. He'd been trying to master *mage's fiery conflagration* for several weeks now, with no success.

He nodded, and would have said more, but the rumbling sound of someone climbing up the boat from the outside reached their ears.

It was Posk, the irrepressible half-blood troll prince, gifted with inhuman strength, rapid healing, a mystical power of being able to heal other people's bones, and a pair of steel gauntlets that helped him smash things. He clambered up the side of the ship like an enormous ape, effortlessly leaping right over the balustrade. 'Someone say Piex is ready to burn up an army yet!' he grinned.

Darrix spoke. 'We didn't say, "Yet".'

Posk pouted. 'I'm ready to see a giant sky ball of fire! Do it, do it now Piex! We can wave the people goodbye with your sky fire!'

Piex looked like he was ready to try, but then shook his head nervously. 'The ... people are too close, and I am not ready.'

'Move aside!' Allastassia demanded, making sure her sailors had access to the hold. 'You smell, Posk,' she added.

'Like this,' he replied, breathing in through his nostrils. 'See, good smelling. Ooh, smells like sea!'

Allastassia didn't even bother arguing with that, and Posk laughed like he'd won a point or something.

'Kialessa,' Allastassia said, pointing to a lock of her errant burgundy hair that had gotten in front of her eyes. It had been harder to keep it tied back since her sister had set her unburnable hair on fire, but that was all a story for last year. Now the wind was having its own way with her fringe.

Kialessa tutted, and put her hair in place. She needed to look her best; this was a voyage for the King, the most important in the past four years, perhaps the most important in her entire life. Not only would they have the chance to trade magic and information with the sixteen other Kingdoms in

the Great Kingdom, but they might also have a chance to free themselves from the threat of fear. This was worth living for. This was worth fighting for.

Posk scuttled over, imposing himself between herself and Piex so they had to move away, or hug him. He was often like that.

'At least you're not late this time,' Allastassia finally shouted back at him.

Posk tapped the magical headband he'd 'borrowed' from Piex ever since last year. 'Hey, I always knew what day it was before Piex gave me this thing and made me normal smart!'

Allastassia's reply was lost as she disappeared into the hold, bossing around sailors.

Posk turned back, openly admiring the crane they were using to help load the back of the boat. 'Epic,' he muttered.

'Levered counterweight,' Piex explained. 'The load arm is four times the length of the effort arm, so the latter must be four times as heavy.'

'Eeeeeepiiiiic,' Posk agreed, sounding like he'd actually understood what the wizard was saying. He watched some more, then tapped the banister with his steel covered fists. He fell silent, looking concerned.

Kialessa looked at her friend. 'Is something the matter?'

Posk was quiet for a moment more, and when he spoke, it was softly. 'She's old, this traveller on water. Very old.'

Darrix nodded. 'Yes. A new coat of paint doesn't hide the fact that she's almost a hundred years old.'

Posk glanced at them, looking more worried than Kialessa wanted anyone to be on this hunting and trading trip.

'But she's a magical sailing ship, Posk,' Kialessa said to encourage him. 'You'll see. Magical. Some say she can move forwards even when there is no wind!'

Posk looked around, unsure. It seemed he had other misgivings, but

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was not able to put them in words just yet. He struggled with that sort of thing a lot.

Darrix helped out. 'She was built in our King's grandfather's day, Posk. So, yes, she's over eighty years old, already more than most boats can achieve. But this is elven lightwood, blessed by a priestess of the goddess of the water. It will carry us sure; it can do nothing else.'

Posk didn't seem convinced, 'Yes, but don't those priestesses curse things as well?'

A moment later, Allastassia arrived, wiping her spotless hands on her magical hanky that never got dirty. She walked over to join them. 'Let us hope it does not come to that,' she replied, watching the seabirds with great interest.

Piex offered his support. 'Of the three boats in this company, I am the most secure upon this one,' he said. 'See that four masted sailing ship over there? That carries most of the trading materials and supplies, and one hundred sailors as well. She is well built, and but young. "Sea's Bounty" they name her, though I think it unfortunate.'

'Why's that?' Posk inquired.

'I think I'd rather keep the bounty all to ourselves.' Piex grinned at his pun.

Darrix chuckled. 'And what of "Gap's Edge", the three masted galley over there?'

Piex replied, 'The nation's only heavy military ocean going vessel, the Edge has survived two gales, outrun a leviathan, and driven off an attack by a colossal squid that was preying on fishing ships. Staffed by fifty, she brings another fifty soldiers to our company. Her armament includes thirty heavy crossbows, a flaming ballista set foremast, and a submerged alumium ram that has never been used.'

'Best boat in the fleet?' Posk inquired.

Piex shook his head. 'This boat, "Imagination's Dawn", bears the King.

It is the oldest, most magical boat in this nation, perhaps indeed in the entire great Kingdom. It has born the King's father, and his father's father. Never, not once, in its entire unnaturally long life has the staff been lowered at this boat.'

'The who been what-ed?' Posk asked.

Allastassia tutted, always first to educate the half troll. 'The staff *lowered*. It's a ritual of the priestesses of the sea goddess, Waaglah. Whenever a boat is launched, a priest or priestess of the sea goddess may be seen at the cliffs. If they hold their staff upright, the boat will return to harbour safe. If they lower their staff to the waves, the trip is cursed. Most boats will return straight to harbour if the priestess lowers their staff.'

'Sounds wise,' Posk admitted. 'Who's the priestess?' he said, looking out.

'A curiosity I have already noticed. We don't appear to have one today,' Piex said.

'All the better,' Allastassia replied. 'We already know we're sailing into death and danger. No need to spook the crew further.'

'Gonna catch the Dog?' Posk asked.

'We'll do much more than that, if we can!' Kialessa celebrated grimly. For a moment no one spoke.

'I never thought I'd die on the water,' Allastassia suddenly confessed.

'No one's going to hurt you,' Posk disagreed, a little too quickly, and moved to cling to the banister Allastassia was calmly sitting on. Kialessa grinner to herself – he had a huge crush on Allastassia, who hated him.

'They harm our King, they harm our Kingdom,' Darrix told them. 'His life is bound up in the nation, and it may crumble if he is slain. This is a very brave thing the King is doing. Very brave.'

'Good we get to help,' Posk nodded, looking positively indefatigable.

They agreed. Sailors began to remove all but one of the gang planks, lining it with red carpet in preparation for the arrival of their King.

'I'm not yet ready to die,' Kialessa responded to Allastassia's worries. 'That is good,' she agreed. 'You have something to live for.'



1 The boat

'Live,' Posk agreed. 'I like living.'

Trumpets sounded as a bright sleigh, pulled by four furry posks, arrived over the muddy snow that remained of the edge of winter. A moment later, King Dunnkan stepped out, golden sword in his hilt. Four individuals flanked him on each quarter. Lord Grudon, the part fey steward to the King, and holder of the Rod of Lenmer'el, watched the crowd with his shrewd, purple eyes. Beside him, High Captain Bon Sure'e

stalked, wearing at least a dozen axes. He returned his soldiers' smart salutes with a lazy gesture or two of his own. Behind him, shuffling with librarian grace, Piex's tutor the elven sagemaster hurried along. He seemed an unassuming old elf in a grey cloak, but none in all the land dared challenge his arcane prowess. And to his right, the dwarven high priestess Lady Jacinthia Stonehall walked at a steady, dependable pace. Her faith alone had stopped a plague many years ago; Kialessa thought it a great encouragement to have her along on this voyage.

The crowd cheered as the King took to the plank, and made his way onto the ship they stood on. He turned to wave, his red cloak billowing around him in the morning air. He nodded to the steward, who, raising the glowing rod, commanded the entire city to silence. When the King spoke, his voice sounded across the entire scene; it was likely to be heard across the entire country.

'The future is unknown to all of us, though we like to guess our journey. We might all wish for strong sails and calm winds, only to find our journey surrounded by storm and savage sea. But a life lived in fear is no life at all! I take this journey, *we* take this journey, on behalf of you all! To represent our proud and honest nation to the best of the world! To live despite threat of storm or sea or cruel assassin's hand!' He glanced at Kialessa then, but turned to the crowd as they shouted their encouragement. He held up his hands for silence, and they gently obliged him. 'For what is the purpose of life, but to serve those we love?'

The people seemed profoundly touched by his words; some even shed tears. He was deeply loved, and despite the very public threat on his own life, he risked it openly to protect them all.

But those words stuck in Kialessa's heart. What was the purpose of life? Did it have a purpose at all? It was something she'd never considered. She'd wondered what her life was for, but what about life in general? Was it not, 'To serve the gods'? But then what did that mean, when each and

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every god had a very different interpretation of what that meant?

'What *is* the purpose of life?' she wondered aloud, and all her four best friends turned to stare at her. But if they had answers, it was soon drowned out by the peeling of the harbour bells and cheering of the crowd as they prepared to leave.

Then a sailor started to sing. He was a huge, dark-skinned man with a distinct Sanmarellian accent.

*Attend the sails, oh windlass true,
We're heading o'er the sea!
Come sing a song for me and you,
Though wild the tempest be!*

Then, without any signal, the entire crew joined in what must have been to them a well-known chorus. They timed it to their tasks, hauling rope and unfurling sails along with the beat. King Dunnkan just stood there, beaming.

*Hey, Ho, away we go!
We're heading o'er the sea!
Come hail or sun, till we be done,
May the goddess hear our plea!*

Again, the song leader sang in his powerful bass voice,

*Sing hai, hun, till the rising sun,
And a dawn on Emerel's shore!
Though cruel assassin's blade we wait,
We'll pay him back twice more!*

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People cheered and again the chorus sung, only this time there were some high tenor parts that really sung out above the regular melody. It almost seemed to Kialessa that singing was an unspoken requirement of being a sailor on this ship, but as she watched not everyone sang. Some held to the rhythm or beat out the meter by stomping with their boots.

Then it appeared it was Allastassia's turn to improvise a verse. No one told her to sing, but they all knew when it was her turn:

*Though gale and storm, past safer shore,
We risk it to be free!
For no fear holds our noble King,
And it has no hold on me!*

Another chorus, then the song leader pointed at her. Kialessa shook her head, fiercely. She had no music for this!

Thankfully Darrix stepped in and saved her. She wasn't sure what she was more grateful for: the chance to not have to sing, or the chance to hear him. She really was fond of his singing voice.

*Though dark leviathan's rank breath,
Might darken brighter days,
We'll cut it up and make some soup,
And welcome morning's rays!*

People cheered, and none louder than she. The chorus rang out again, and then the chorus master sung,

*Our precious cargo be a King,
Against which fate must leer,
But the cargo of our greatest love,*

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Are the hearts we each hold dear!

The chorus rang out, and the song master pointed at Posk.

Posk looked around, beaming. He was loving the music and clearly desperately wanted to be a part of it. With a grin he thumped the deck in time to the song, but when it was his turn to lead he simply chanted, 'Music, music, music, MUSIC!'

Everyone roared with laughter, and the song was done. Complex improvised lyrics were never Posk's strong suit. But Kialessa had to grin as they tried to work his lyrics into a new verse. She knew they'd be singing it for weeks.

She laughed as the winds filled the mainsail and the boat took speed, but a moment later a strange movement caught her eye. She looked up, finding her gaze drawn towards the cliffs at the edge of the harbour. A single tall human stood, silhouetted against the morning sky and wearing weathered brown sailor's clothes. In her hand she held a long rod, hooked, for fishing. It was similar to the staffs the priests of Waaglah, goddess of the oceans would use.

Actually, if Kialessa didn't know any better, it looked *exactly* like a staff of the goddess. There was something deeply unsettling about her presence to Kialessa, and she found she could smile no longer.

And then, without a word or sound, the individual slowly lowered her staff until it lay horizontal to the silent, calm waters of the sheltered bay.