

The WORLD
ABOVE *the* SKY

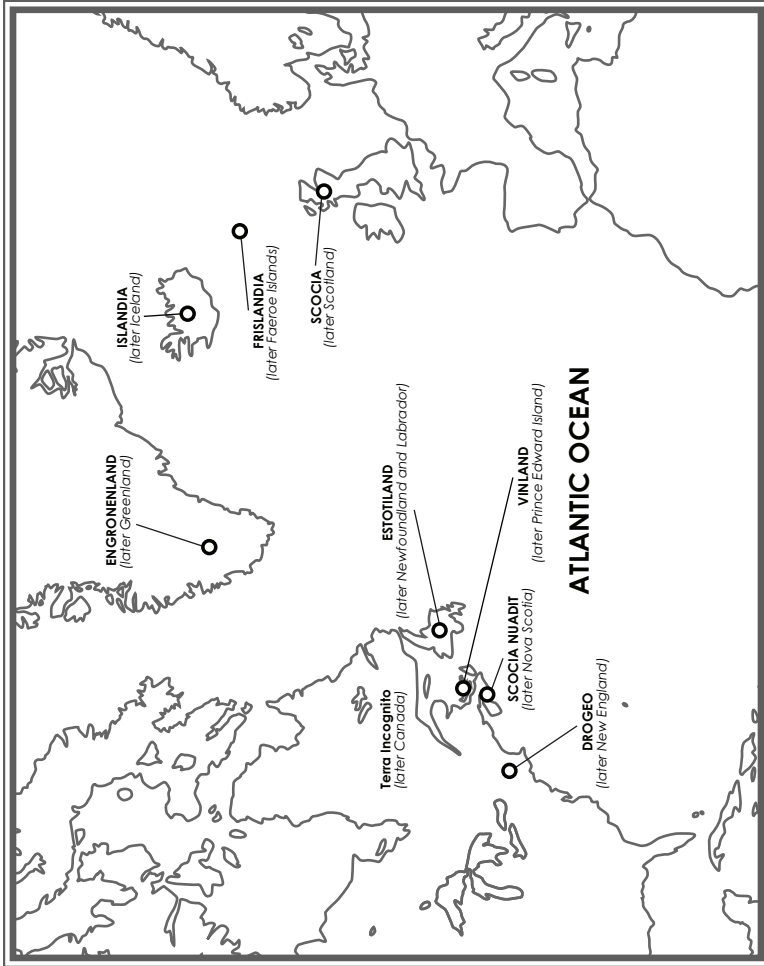


KENT STETSON

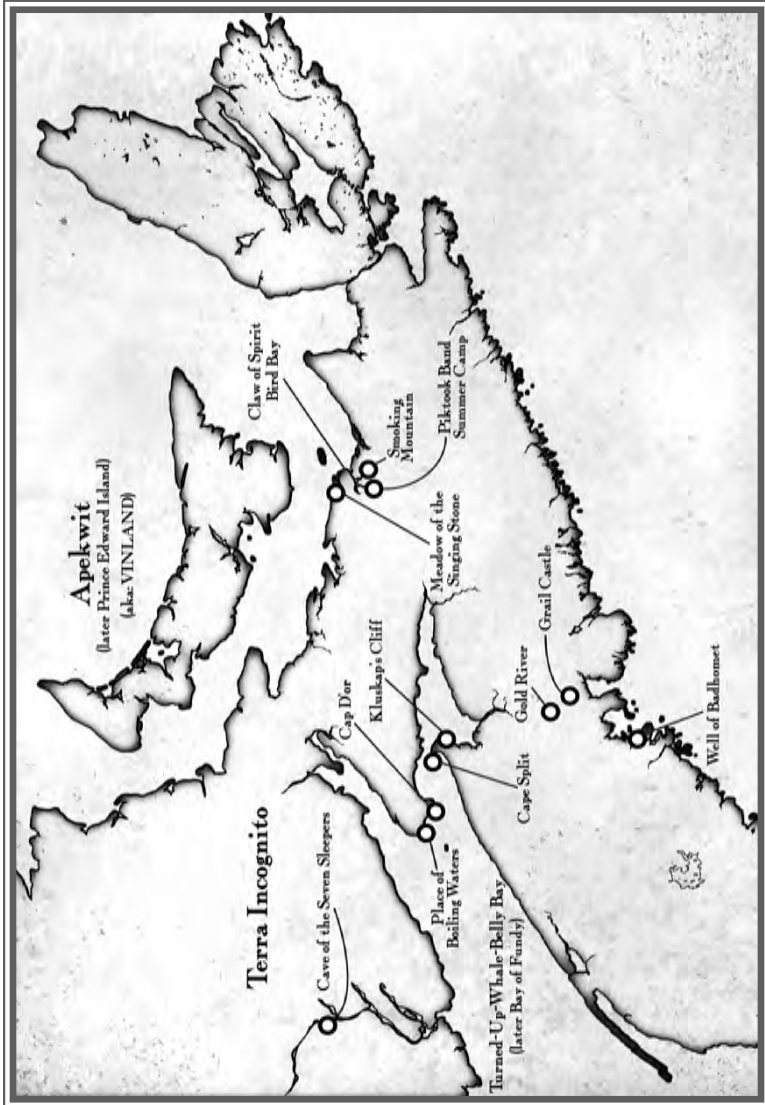


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NORTH ATLANTIC *c. 1398*



NEW ARCADIA



In the time of the Two Made One
The People still walked free.
The rocks of the earth still sang,
And the soul of the world was the sea.

A canoe made of fire and stars
And light from the Great Spirit's eye,
Filled with portents and prayers for peace fell
From The World Above the Sky.

PART ONE



THE WORLD BELOW THE SEA

Autumn 1397–Summer 1398

CHAPTER TWO



The wind in the gulf was kind enough at first. A slate-grey mass of cloud rolled in from the north masking the moon and stars. Henry could make no sense of the luminous haze rising through darkness from the surface of the sea. Mist became rain, resolved back to mist and then ceased. The wind remained light and held its quarter. The twelve ships of the fleet rode a moderate swell.

Dawn flushed the sky a sickly green. The unseen force behind rising wind seemed befuddled at first, then enraged. Winds driven directly down clashed with squalls hurled out of the north. Crosswinds erupted, confounding surface currents. Waves rose and broke mast-high from four points of the compass. The Viking ships with their gaping hulls were swept high into the air. Men at the portals flailed the wind with useless oars. The wave's crest and voyagers' hopes were blown to scudding foam.

The downward rush on the backside of the wave seemed endless. It seemed to Henry a great hole was torn in the bottom of the sea. A vast depression formed on the surface of the gulf. The longboats sank from sight as though they'd never existed. Seeds and sets, bolts of wool and canvas circled the walls of a deepening vortex. Lives fragile as froth dissolved in God's preposterous fury. The fat caravels—flightless ducks in a towering sinkhole—

spun down in the widening eddy. Men, women and children, cattle, sheep and goats whirled silently to deep and quiet graves. They would plant no crops, build no shelter, know no issue.

Henry's last sight of *Speranza* gave no reason to hope. She rolled beneath the surge, sank from view then bobbed inverted to the surface, her rudder ripped from its housing. There were no masts. No house, fore or aft. All that remained was the stripped-down hull and naked deck. *Speranza* foundered again, resurfaced and hove out of sight, her fate at the mercy of wind and tide.

Constante did not reappear. Her last tortuous rise and the torque of the twist as she fell split her open like an axed barrel. Nicolo's still-living flesh and bones, until that moment securely sealed in the vessel he helped his brother Carlo perfect, spilled from the ship with all her provisions. He joined the host of lost Arcadians, their arms and legs spread wide, as if in flight. They wafted wide-eyed and lifeless down to the bottom of the sea.

Reclamation was wrung like a rag. Her seams strained as she corkscrewed end for end up then down one mountain of water after the next. Seasoned cross-members, her bones, dug deep within seeking strength, found their pith still green and aching with life. Henry's pride rose with *Reclamation* to another crest where she hovered. Down the far side of the mountain she plunged in a sickening, elliptic arc to the belly of the following trough. She groaned up another, hove to her keel, then plunged to what Henry felt must be the very depths of hell. Joints strained. Caulking sprung free. Frigid jets of cold saltwater stung raw flesh. Livestock bleated and bawled. No human voice was raised in fear. Or in prayer.

Dim light from the one surviving lantern gave form to Henry's fears. Stowed supplies securely lashed had broken free.

Sacks of oats, flour, dried peas and barley had tumbled and split. Barrels rolled, collided, their contents burst from sprung hoops and split staves. Honey, vinegar, sweet water, and the gallons of precious olive oil amassed from lands bordering the great Mediterranean Sea sloshed forward and back. Buckets filled with gastric spew, and worse, slopped over crusted rims or spilled entirely, their contents mixed with the spilt provisions. *Reclamation* groaned, twisted, plunged, was raised again, fell, then settled. Henry braced for the next sickening rise.

It did not come. God's wrath had fallen upon them without warning; without decrease it ceased. There was no jubilant shout, no prayer of thanksgiving. Deliverance smelled of vomit and tasted of fear.

Henry assessed the carnage and slop, the foul mockery of soup sloshing back and forth hip-deep in the hull. Hell surely exists, he thought. And hell is likely very much like this. He looked forward. His heart softened. Heaven might be very like the vision sheltered in the secure if ill-formed grotto tucked in the upper reaches of the bow. Eugainia was lost in fretful sleep. Sir Athol Gunn, with all his great strength, secured the pallet on which she lay, held tight to the breast of her guardian. Morgase sang quietly, stroking her Lady's temple. Henry caught Morgase's eye: she couldn't reassure. Henry waded to his Lady through the thickening sludge.

"Instead of increasing in strength and frequency, her contractions weaken," Morgase told Henry. "If she isn't delivered of this child soon, the Sacred Cauldron of the Five Trees will putrefy," Morgase continued. "Both Our Lady and the Holy Child will die."

Athol Gunn footed a ladder and opened the hatch. Sunlight pierced the hold. Sweet air flooded in.

"Both fore- and aft-castles have sustained severe damage, but

are in tact,” he reported. “The aft-mast stands. The main mast has been snapped in two.”

The news below decks was better than that from above. Amid the ruined provisions, rasped skin and broken bone, Henry saw that none of his Knights of the New Temple had perished. *Reclamation’s* entire company, including her most precious cargo were shaken but alive. Their strength had been tested, Henry thought. They had been judged and found worthy. The smithies, wheelwrights, ship’s carpenters, glaziers, masons—all the unmarried, childless artisans chosen for their skill and, more importantly, their monklike loyalty to both Henry and Eugainia—had survived to build Her New Arcadia.

In her delirium, Eugainia walked a forest path, her skin indistinguishable from the scented air. She turned at the sound of the voice, a man’s voice calling her name. No man stood behind her. Where her feet had fallen, moss expired and decayed. No birds sang. Leaves fell green to the ground where they shrivelled and died. Eugainia turned and ran. The ground fell from beneath her. She willed her shadow to rise. She tumbled end for end into a fiery pit from which, she knew, there was no hope of escape. A devil’s child, scorched and twisted, caught her eye and beckoned.

“I’d rather die than follow you,” she whispered.

Morgase bent close.

“Eugainia?”

Reclamation keeled to starboard as the tide fell and nested in the mud. Sunlight bounced from the surface of the slop, shot up at an angle, brightening the makeshift grotto in the peak of the bow. Eugainia woke to the feel of light on her face. Fresh air filled her nostrils.

“Take me from this stinking hole,” she begged.

Morgase ordered her pallet carried toward the hatch.

Henry joined Sir Athol on the listing deck. The wide, pleasant bay in which the ship had come to ground was still. The morning sun sat well established halfway to the zenith. In the near distance, a plume of smoke rose from the highest elevation in a range of moderate hills. The smoke, curious though it was, rising as it did from the earth with no visible flame, didn't hold Henry's interest for long. Neither he nor his kinsman Sir Athol Gunn could fathom what drew near.

From the wide mouth of a bay a hundred canoes, each carrying two adults, many with several children, approached at speed. The flotilla swept around and past *Reclamation*. On board the ravaged ship, not a hand reached for sword or lance, axe or bow. Even burley Athol Gunn's arms hung loose. A feeling akin to joy tugged at the corners of his battered spirit. There was no need for alarm. The revellers in the sleek canoes laughed and chatted among themselves, shouting what Henry assumed to be good-natured jibes aimed at laggard and braggart alike.

Was this a dream? If so, it came as a welcome relief from the nightmare they'd survived. The travellers' smiles were friendly and open. Blue black hair glistened in the sun. White teeth flashed as they directed the briefest of smiles up to the dishevelled creatures lining the sides of the enormous, stinking apparition that had appeared overnight in the Bay of the Smoking Mountain, also known to The People, the Europeans would come to learn, as Claw of Spirit Bird Bay.

The travellers seemed to Henry to be drawn across the surface as if by a magnet, so inevitable was their motion, so silent their paddles in the calm waters of the bay. Their bark-and-hide canoes rode low, laden with sleeping robes of luxurious fur, tightly woven baskets, perfectly square birchbark boxes and intricately decorated clay pots, many open to the air, all empty. Their destination was a low stretch of land on the northwest horizon. From their great

good cheer, Henry assumed the green and red shores in the near distance must be a pleasant place indeed.

Canoes continued to stream past *Reclamation*. The ship posed no apparent threat, roused only passing curiosity. Perhaps this was a longhouse experimenting with Whale form. Perhaps the reverse. Such things were well known to L'nuk, The People, in story and in legend. In the Six Worlds, nothing remained static. At any given moment, the spirit of one object might transfer itself into the being of another. Its journey or destination was no one's business but that of the questing entity. The great wooden creature towering above them with its personlike spirits who smelled like the dead would make its purpose known in time.

Morgase steadied Her Lady at the rail. Eugainia's battered spirit rose to the flood of joy streaming round the battered vessel.

A young man, his brown skin artfully tattooed in vivid reds, yellows and blues, paddled with even, powerful strokes. The woman behind him, lithe and strong, not young, not old, held her own, matching him stroke for stroke. Unlike the others, theirs was a wary curiosity. They glanced up frequently, their expressions neutral.

Mimkitawo'qu'sk found Eugainia. And she him. She pulled herself up to her full height, lifted her hand in greeting. Mimkitawo'qu'sk wavered in his dig, thrust and lift motion, not fully registering what stood above and before him. He fell one then two then three strokes out of rhythm.

Mimkitawo'qu'sk and Eugainia couldn't look away, one from the other. He saw an exhausted young woman, pale, worn, pregnant, her blonde hair a tangled mat, her fair skin ashen grey. He felt what the morning sun, low on the horizon behind Eugainia, wished him to feel. He felt a golden arc around her. It came not from the sun, but from within.

Eugainia felt rather than observed Mimkitawo'qu'sk. A wave

of uncertainty washed up the length of her body. She felt she was being held upright, not by Morgase, whose stout arm circled her waist, but by this strange young man's lustrous eyes. For the first time since fleeing Scotland, Eugainia felt safe.

Mimkitawo'qu'sk wrested his regard from Eugainia. He found his rhythm.

Keswalqw knelt behind Mimkitawo'qu'sk in the canoe's stern. Keswalqw's open face rested simply in kind repose. Her doeskin dress clothed a tight and supple body. Her black hair shone, shot through with blue and gold reflected from the sky. Keswalqw's glance slipped from Eugainia to Henry, where it lingered.

Henry inclined his head in a greeting. Keswalqw returned the nod, then looked away.

Athol Gunn made no sense to Keswalqw. Was this a bear or a man? She couldn't catch his individual scent, such was the stink from the vessel. Nor—with sun above and behind him—could she make “the meeting of the eyes” to assess his spirit. Perhaps his was bear clan. Perhaps he was a moose-clan man.

Keswalqw returned Morgase's smile. Morgase experienced a tremor of recognition. I'm in the presence of someone ancient, Morgase thought. More ancient even than me.

The canoe slipped away. In that briefest of moments, as the sleek craft slid silently past the battered galley, five persons' fates were sealed.

“I looked at her but saw a tree, a pine tree, in silhouette, on a hill, in a landscape I don't recall but long to know,” Mimkitawo'qu'sk said quietly to Keswalqw.

“I saw a tall, slender larch in spring, tufted with rosy plumelets, in the full beauty of her youth,” Keswalqw replied. “Though at present she is ragged and unwell.”

A light southeasterly carried a call-and-response chant—the

call spoken, the response sung—back to the Arcadians. Soon the flotilla was indistinguishable from the low red shores across the strait into which the wide bay opened.

Reclamation groaned as she sank deeper in the mud. She settled in spreading silence.

A curragh was lowered at *Reclamation*'s port rail. When their Lady was secure, the oars manned, Morgase, Henry and Sir Athol set out for shore. Athol noticed a single canoe break from the distant fleet, swing northwest and make for shore. He caught Henry's attention. Henry nodded.

From the deck on the seaward side of the stranded vessel, a great roll of canvas, two corners secured to the rail by clamps, was thrown over the side. Men in waiting curraghs unrolled the tarpaulin over the surface, allowing it to sink as their distance from *Reclamation* increased. The canvas made a natural swimming pool.

Whoops of laughter distracted Morgase. She turned back to *Reclamation*. Stripped to their filthy skins, the men hurled their foul clothes and then themselves from the ship into their makeshift saltwater tub.

A crouched figure hidden in low scrub watched Mimkitawo'qu'sk step from the canoe into knee-deep water. Keswalqw stepped ashore with practised ease. Mimkitawo'qu'sk drew her attention to an oddity up the beach. Two barrels, lashed together with a length of rope were lifted from the sand by the rising tide.

Mimkitawo'qu'sk moved toward the barrels. Some sea creature, its breathing unsuccessfully muffled, didn't wish to be seen. Mimkitawo'qu'sk secured the canoe. He caught Keswalqw's warning glance. They climbed the low bank and slipped quietly into thick woods, where they watched as the creature, still soaked

and dripping, picked his way from his hiding place, gingerly lifting and setting his unshod feet among jagged stones.

Hatless, shoeless, and without his cape, clad in black hose, and black velvet jacket shot through with threads of gold, Antonio Zeno felt naked. He poked at the contents of the canoe. Empty containers. Heavy fur robes. Nothing of interest to an empty belly on a hot day. He made his way along the rocky shore toward the beached curragh.

Mimkitawo'qu'sk and Keswalqw exchanged bemused glances, at once entertained and befuddled by his peculiar, tenderfooted, toe-stepping dance among the stones. Each knew what the other thought; this was not a man, but another shape-shifter, a creature perhaps human, perhaps not—likely, because of the black jacket, a crow or raven on a spirit quest. In the waking world, beaked creatures were selfish and unpredictable. No less so in the spirit world. They'd give this one a wide berth.

"Perhaps, Aunt," Mimkitawo'qu'sk said, as Antonio high-stepped it out of earshot, "it fell off the great wooden whale too."

Keswalqw looked back to *Reclamation*. Its back was no longer covered with basking seal persons experimenting with human form. They were all naked now, clearly in man form, leaping off the wooden whale into the sea. They'd climb back up the whale's side only to leap again, happy as otters. As if by prearranged signal, they climbed back aboard, covered themselves in their wet clothing. From the stump of a great tree that protruded from the whale's back, the seal or otter persons suspended the great blanket, presumably to dry in the breeze. It was a very human thing to do. Very unlike a seal or an otter.

"Why seals would assume such pale, unhealthy forms, then cover themselves in that hot clothing?" Keswalqw wondered.

"I wonder what brought them here, of all places?"

THE WORLD ABOVE THE SKY

“What their spirit quest might be is their business, not ours,” Keswalqw replied.

“Apparently they have lice. Several of the older bulls seem preoccupied with scratching themselves.”

“Yes. I noticed.”

“And the terrible stink...”

Keswalqw and Mimkitawo’qu’sk slipped into the brush. They cut a line directly southeast through thickening forest.

Antonio had no idea he’d been so closely observed. He was grateful the stone patch finally resolved into a long stretch of sandy beach. He abandoned his tiptoe terpsichore and made headway.