By C.S.WOOD

Dedicated to Jill Wendy Wood

By C.S.Wood

SABRE

Part I

The Shattered Oath

Part II

The Rise of the Night Devil

Part III

The Mark of the Veleth

C.S.WOOD

SABRE©

PART I

THE SHATTERED OATH

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ARCAYA
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ARTAYA
EBONSHIRE
VIRIDIA
MULTA
CADBEY
ARCA
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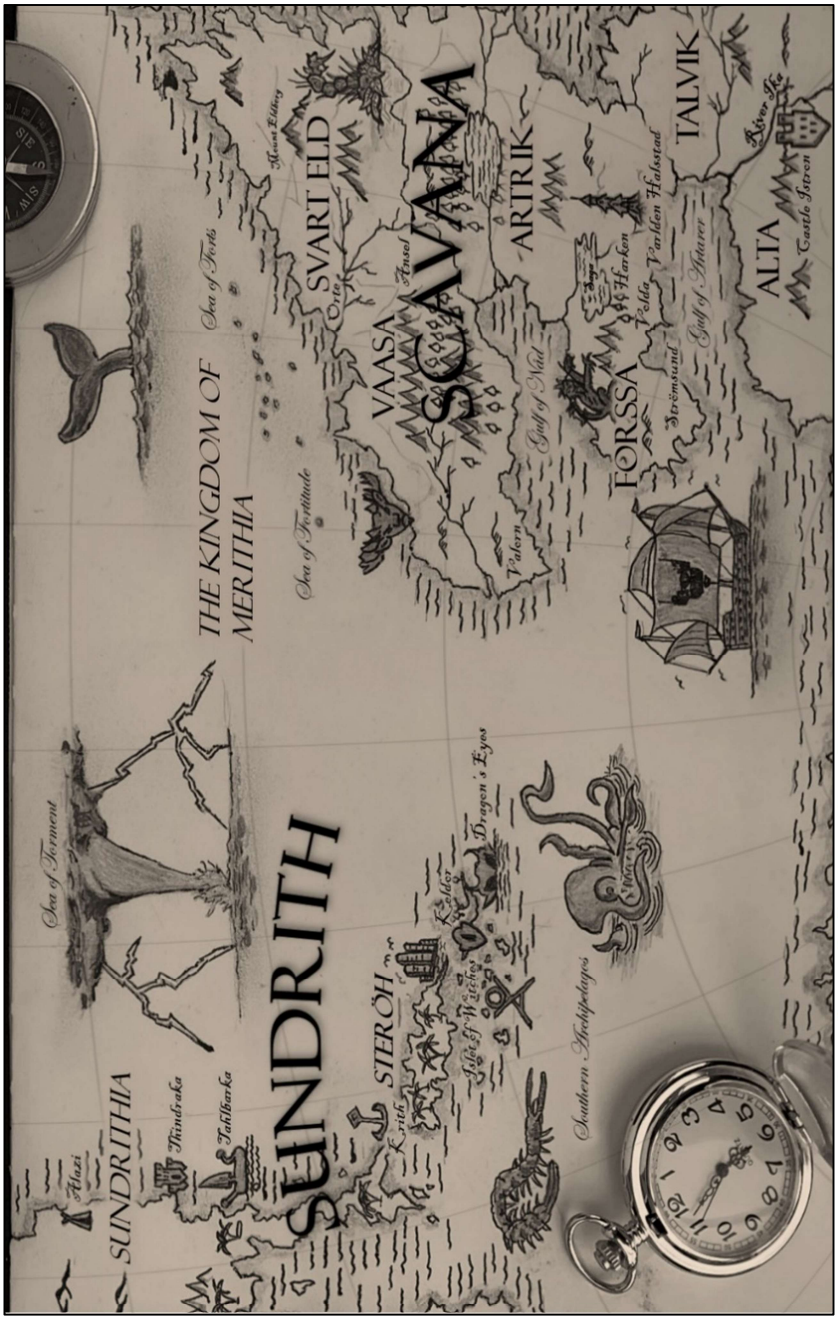
THE KINGDOM OF
CAPE CADBEY
AETERNUM OCEAN
The void
Halstra
Crystal Pass
Dead Man's Chasm
Red Rock Citadel
Sodden
Botten
Fort Dry Gate
Eatbost
Fort Cleeve
Trefilian
Bostla Manor
Verlon
Zora's Lighthouse
Cape Cadbey
Islet of Winsford
Sea of Eating
Sea of Ith



A map showing the Kingdoms of Cape Cadbey and Merithia, and the eastern shores of Sundrithia. The desert expanses of Sundrith and the eastern reaches of Scavana are not shown. Certified 1803 by the R.B.S cartographer, Wilbert O'Hara.

Chapter 1
The Night Devil

Sweat slithered down the captain's nose and a heavy heart raged against his chest. A vault door stood before him and two royal marines. Its iron components looked impenetrable, but in thirty seconds time these locks would no longer exist. Their eyes remained fixed on a pocket watch. A successful raid would bring valour and honour, for this was a Skua raid led by its most lethal detachment, Sabre Squadron.

The Royal Skuas were an elite naval force, designed to intercept and eliminate enemy ships. They were guardians loyal to the Kingdom of Cape Cadbey; invasion fleet interceptors; Royal Boat Service marines; night devils. Devils go by many names…

"Ten seconds," the captain grunted to his two companions. Their black trench coats and ponchos had merged with the darkness. Bicorn hats extended before them like harrowing beaks; their frayed edges resembled wings. Bandannas masked their scowling faces; only their piercing eyes glinted in the gloom. "Stand by!" he said. Gloved hands clutched their revolvers.

"Five, F-" An almighty explosion spewed metal down the corridor! A billow of smoke consumed them.

"Premature as usual, Jared!" Robert coughed, whilst brushing debris from his poncho. He was the largest of the three marines and took most of the blast. Within seconds, alarm bells began ringing. The Skuas dashed inside the vault and began loading their sacks with gold.

"Two minutes and then we move on the dot," the captain ordered, for a regiment of guards would be on their way.

"Jared, you wanted a gift for Ness. See if she likes this," said Robert, before tossing him a broken hand mirror. Jared stated it had been damaged in the blast. Robert laughed and shouted, "Her face would've cracked it anyway!"

"I'll tell her you said that."

"Hurry, hurry now," their captain stressed.

"You're surrounded. Come out with your hands in the air!" came a stern voice from outside the vault.

The Skua captain remained calm, checked his watch, and said, "Absurd, two minutes hasn't passed yet. Jared, stick your 'ead around that door and tell 'em ta wait!" The captain threw Jared his pistol, which he clasped from the air. "Rob, keep filling those bags!" Jared took position beside the smouldering entry.

"We know who you are, vile night devils," the voice continued. "That gold belongs to the unified peoples of Sundrithia[1]. Lay down your weapons…" As commanded, Jared opened fire. Bullet casings leapt across the floor as brick work exploded into dust. Shots ricocheted off the iron door, whilst their captain examined the vault's furthest wall. Another minute passed.

"Captain!?" Robert bellowed, as he continued sacking gold. Gunfire resonated around them.

Then, when hope was fading, their captain shouted, "Seal those bags. Jared, say your goodbyes and close that door. Time to leave." Fretting, Jared abandoned his position and pushed the contraption shut. They were sealed in a tomb of riches, until their captain stepped back to reveal another bomb. The blast singed their coats.

"A warning would have been nice, captain," Robert spluttered through his sleeve. The three crusaders clambered into a crumbling sewer and sprinted through its stench, their

[1] Lands claimed by High Sheik Kabil on the eastern shores of Sundrith.

coats flailing behind them. Eventually, they reached an opening where the tunnel began to narrow. Cannons bellowed in the distance, as if the sea were a demon. The coast was being shelled.

"Flare!" Jared quickly fired a signal out the opening. The red light fizzed and twirled above a meringue of ocean. Then, a skimmer boat labelled HMS Sabre appeared in the open. The captain ordered everyone to jump aboard the revolutionary attack vessel, which was powered by steam and the wonders of hycinthium-lapis[2]. Rob, being the largest of the three, was the only sailor to hesitate. He eventually followed with a thud that rocked the vehicle.

"Nice of you to join us," the skipper hailed, as waves lapped the side of her ship. The Skuas recognised her as Spike. Night had consumed the confines of her cabin and cockpit.

"Captain, I should have known you'd have an ace up your sleeve," Jared huffed in relief, as he threw himself into a seat at the stern, beside a large gun emplacement. Their skimmer took off under the cover of nightfall, leaving the vaults of Fort Thindraka[3] behind it. The sailors began celebrating. Any feelings of anxiety had been eradicated by the gold that fell between their fingers. The smell of coin was intoxicating.

"Another successful raid, captain," said Rob. "Wait until the mothership hears about this! Did you know that sewer was there?" But then, in the distance, several gunshots echoed. Their captain dropped to his knees. All laughter ceased, as Robert broke his fall. Then, three cannons howled from the shoreline.

"INCOMING!" Jared screamed, as their ship banked to the left and then to the right! Cannon balls screeched from the sky, forcing the ocean to erupt around them. More shots fell in the distance, until they were clear of danger. Jared pleaded for

---

[2] A charged stone found amongst the treacherous chasms and infamous mines of Terra province.

[3] A citadel on the eastern shores of Sundrith.

their captain to 'say something', as Rob lay him down beside blood splattered sacks of gold.

"How the hell did they hit us?" Spike yelled from her cabin. Scarlet hands squirmed to stop the bleeding, but it was already too late.

"He's dead, Jared. Jared, he's dead. There's nothing we can do," said Rob in despair. Their captain had been shot through the chest. Pieces of his heart had plastered Jared's trench coat. All the gold in the world was not worth their loss.

"This does not happen… This is *not allowed* to happen!" Jared scrunched his bicorn hat and threw it at the floor. Their boat cut through the swell towards the silhouette of a galleon. Starlight, endangered by mist, revealed an array of daunting sails. Sabre Squadron feared what awaited them, now their captain was dead. Eventually, they were side by side with the mothership. Two large chains were lowered, which Jared hooked into place at the ends of their vessel, so it could be winched from the waves. Their ascent felt like an eternity.

"How many bags?" a loud, gruff voice asked, as their boat reached the top. They found themselves upon a crowded deck, surrounded by hissing crimson lamps. Impenetrable clouds prevented the moon from glistening.

"Commander Grenyard," said Jared. He disembarked and saluted. "We lost our captain-"

"I might be blind in one eye," Grenyard replied. "But I see all. How many bags of gold did Fort Thindraka produce?"

Grenyard resembled death. His deep scars harboured the darkness. The splinters in his bones made him a part of the ship. An eye patch hid further horrors, and night spared them the worst of his appearance. Grenyard was feared for his cruelty. He had been a fearless captain, and a ruthless commander, but in recent months his actions had become savage.

"Four bags… and five pouches, sir," said Robert who was heartbroken. A silent jury surrounded them. Despite their captain's death, this was not a usual gathering. Every Skua

seemed unified in dread. Another tragedy must have stricken the ship during the raid.

"I would have expected more, to account for the captain's failure," said Grenyard, causing Rob to gulp behind his bandanna. "Take his body down below. We sail north under my command!" Some cheered at the prospect of returning home. Many remained silent in remorse and disbelief. Questions had been raised regarding the legality and sanity of a raid on Fort Thindraka. It was as if Grenyard had intended for casualties to occur. Ness appeared from a dispersing crowd.

"Tell me it's not true," she whimpered.

She was wrapped in a trench coat and fighting a chill. A vile breeze fondled her long, blood-red hair, which caressed her bandanna. Her emerald eyes reflected a handheld lantern. Shaken, Jared nodded, before slowly embracing her. Then, he questioned why the crew were so agitated.

"You've not heard?" said Ness. "Vice admiral Leonard has vanished during the raid, or worse." The wind caused the sails to whisper, as Jared's stomach turned.

"Did he board one of the skimmers?" Rob asked. Several boats had attacked Fort Thindraka. Theirs had been the last to return following a successful breach. Ness shook her head. Confusion had plagued the ship. Worse yet, Commander Grenyard was now in charge.

An undertaker approached them, as their captain's corpse was hoisted aboard. Spike barged past in anger and disappeared down deck. The others knew she was inconsolable.

"Is that who I think it is?" the undertaker asked.

"Yes," Robert answered. "It's the body of Captain Thomas Witherow."

***

A boy jabbed his finger in the air and answered, “The year 1603!”

“Well done, Todd,” said Mr Sweeney in delight. His enthusiastic voice echoed off the walls of a cavernous classroom. Todd could spend hours engrossed in history. Stories painted heroic images of how the Royal Skuas had saved kings and queens from assassination. Brave men and women had sacrificed everything to protect the Kingdom of Cape Cadbey. Yet, most people were captivated by the art of invention; a trend fuelled by a revolution of machines. But Todd was not destined to be an inventor. Machines terrified him, their fumes upset him, and maths caused his mind to wander. He had tried dismembering contraptions with his father, but he could never put them back together again.

Mr Sweeney continued, “Exactly two hundred years ago, in 1603, on this very day, a Merithian invasion fleet set sale for Cape Cadbey.” Todd loved a good story about Merithia[4]: Cadbey’s historical nemesis. But he flinched when a paper ball struck the back of his head. He turned in his seat to see Walter Spindler smirking. The boy was a pig and a bigot in the making. Walter bullied Todd for many reasons: his shortness, freckles, and enthusiasm; for starters. Walter even disliked him for having fair, shoulder length hair. Unfortunately, Todd looked young for his age. His dad would say, ‘You’re yet ta sprout, lad,’ but Todd struggled to believe him. His hazel eyes beamed with innocence, and girls paid him no attention. Sweeney’s chalk-stick tap-danced across the black board.

“Major Winsford sailed out to sea alone and pitched camp on, what is now known as, the Islet of Winsford. There, he spotted the enemy armada, and took note of their formation.” Another projectile hit Todd, who jolted in frustration. This

[4] Merithia is a kingdom in the southern hemisphere spanning the continent of Scavana. It is ruled by Tsar Alva Olander of Artrik.

alerted the other children, who had been drugged with boredom.

"Is everything alright, Mr Witherow?" Sweeney asked. Todd gave a reluctant nod, as the other children sniggered.

"Very good," Sweeney concluded. The teacher was animated for his age. His hands conducted lessons like a symphony. Hyperactivity had kept him tall and thin. A prickly moustache matched his grey hair, and his tweed suit was always padded in chalk.

Sweeney continued, "Major Winsford was able to alert Cadbey by carrier pigeon. If the history books are to be believed, Winsford called for the deployment of his majesty's Royal Boat Service or R.B.S for short. However, scribbled at the bottom of his letter were the words: '*The Royal Skuas'*. Legend has it that Winsford, through his telescope, observed an enemy captain out on the ship's deck. He was preparing his breakfast, a boiled egg to be precise. Just as he was about to tuck in, a seabird swooped down and stole the egg!" Some children laughed. Others showed a lack of appreciation. "The seabird was a skua. So, if legend *is* to be believed, that is where the noble Skuas gained their nickname."

Major Winsford had realised the dire need for a quick response unit. Twice, Merithia had blockaded Cadbey, threatening its existence, but Queen Isabella's forces had prevailed throughout the 16th century. Nevertheless, the kingdom would not withstand a third siege. So, in the late 1500s, Winsford devised a crew. These brave men and women would sail agile ships capable of intercepting the enemy. His elite unit were trained to be fearless, unhesitant, and unwavering. One marine could take on a hundred enemy sailors. However, Winsford lacked a symbol for his daring cutthroats. Skuas swarmed Cadbey's coastline. These predatory seabirds could be seen pursuing other gulls, to make them disgorge any fish they had captured. The R.B.S had adopted similar tactics once its ships had finally dominated the Aeternum Ocean. Resolute, its sailors would raid enemy

installations or ships for the greater good of the kingdom. The skua became their banner, but the unit had gained more sinister names.

"Sweeney!" A stern man had appeared in the doorway. It was headmaster, Johnathan Ackerley. His appearance was pristine in comparison to Sweeney's. A fine, oxblood vest jacket and tailcoat suited his authority. A white cravat portrayed his wealth. Lustrous black hair spiralled past his frown. Many thought Ackerley was too young for his profession, but he was well educated, confident and tenacious.

Professor Langley Stewart lingered behind him. He was not a teacher but a famous scientist, who had lifted Cadbey from the dark ages. His mind was responsible for every innovation powered by the wonders of hycinthium-lapis. A white periwig set him apart. Finned eyebrows arched towards his slender nose, which overhung his pursed lips and dimpled chin. His youthful face was cleanshaven and powdered.

"I thought we had discussed your drearings about fables and seabirds," Ackerley shouted. Tasselled boots carried him inside the classroom.

Sweeney clapped his hands and said, "Mr Ackerley, how nice of you to join us. I was making sure I had their full attention by adding a little humour to the equation."

"Humour, eh?" Ackerley examined the black board. "Tell me… will humour build the next engine… or aid us in the invention of the flying machine?"

"Not unless it's powered on laughs, sir," Mr Sweeney joked.

"Will it rid our streets of disease and poverty?" He made his way over to Todd, who looked worried. Their eyes met. Mr Ackerley recognised Todd as being the son of ex-vice admiral and knight of the realm, Sir Alan Witherow.

"No, sir," said Sweeney.

"And will humour, legends, myths or Skuas for that matter, see the kingdom through the interregnum ahead?" Ackerley was referring to his dream of a revolution; a movement that

would end the monarchy. Langley scoffed in amusement, as Ackerley awaited a response.

Sweeney paused and bit his lip before answering, “Well, they saw us through the last one.” Ackerley shouted Sweeney’s name in disapproval, which caused the children to jump. Todd gulped, as the headmaster discovered a paper ball at his feet. He unravelled it to reveal a picture of Todd being messed on by seabirds.

“Sweeney, you have one week to submit a new ninety-day lesson plan focused on inventions through time. I don’t want to hear another word about the bloody Skuas. Do I make myself clear?” Ackerley checked his pocket watch and left the room, as if he and Langley were late for an appointment. Mr Sweeney gave Todd a sombre look and apologised.

Seabirds screeched high above a bustling playground, where concrete mirrored a dismal sky. Autumn had bled into winter. Tumbling ashen clouds would disperse, but not until the children had been summoned back inside. Todd had found refuge in a history book beside the perimeter wall. A sea breeze fed his lungs and lifted his fringe.

“Look, it’s bird crap boy!” Walter shouted, before slapping the book from Todd’s hands. Walter had invited his henchman, Hugh, who was another cumbersome toad.

“You’re an idiot, Spindler. What does that even mean?” Todd shouted. His courage exceeded his stature.

“It means you love birds so much; you live in their mess!” Walter spat, which made his cheeks wobble, and his beady eyes squint.

His belly strained the buttons of his patched vest jacket. Walter’s suffering mother could not afford to properly dress her expanding son. Scarfs warmed their necks, and scuffed shoes and ripped shorts covered their lower halves.

“I respect the Skuas and so should you!” Todd pointed at a shield emblem above the school’s entrance. It depicted the silhouette of a Skua: a large seabird swooping in for the steal. Three jagged waves formed its base, and three vertical pikes

formed its backdrop, which glinted in the autumn sun. The words 'Royal Boat Service' were in a banner below the logo. Top centre was a royal crown, which featured another banner stating intercipere, propulso, prōvidēre or intercept, eliminate, provide. Its features were proud and robust.

"My dad said the Skuas are a bunch of pirates and rapist thieves," Walter argued.

"Your brother included," said Hugh in a sly manner. Todd missed his brother dearly, despite envying his role as a Skua captain. The duo had crossed the line.

"Leave my family out of this!" Todd screamed, before booting Hugh in the crotch. The bully staggered to the floor in excruciating pain. Walter attempted his signature move, a bear hug, but his target was too fast. Todd ducked out of reach, reclaimed his book, and sprinted through the crowd.

Hugh and Walter would report him. Helpless, Todd had no choice but to run. He rushed down a back alley, past a group of smokers and through a gap in the fence. Then, he dashed downhill leaving the school behind him.

The Kingdom of Cape Cadbey lay before him. A colossal cape extended south into a glistening ocean. Many had likened it to the shape of a dagger. At its tip stood a beautiful cathedral bathed in a thin mist. Four towers, boasting spires as white as marble, pierced the heavens. They formed the corners of a rooftop courtyard, outlined with steeples. An apex roof, a grand rose window, and gigantic arched doors formed its front. High walls and four turrets shielded its magnificence. Cannons peered from their nests, as seabirds powered a looming vortex of cloud. In the comfort of its shadow lay the market district. This vibrant hub sold produce from all over Cadbey's eight provinces, which spanned the continent of Arcaya[5]. Many lopsided houses had been crammed into this busy area, where merchants filled the streets. Cadbey's

[5]An arched shaped continent covering the northern hemisphere. Arcaya means arch of the world.

residents enjoyed being close to God, trade, honest work, and they no longer feared the prospect of a seaborne invasion. Slate roofs reflected a timid sun. Chimneys puffed smoke into a veil of smog, whilst gothic architecture and sculptures sustained the citadel's beauty. Pulsing paths connected the cathedral to the palace - the heart of Cadbey - where King Oborus III resided. The palace overlooked Isabella's Square and a less chaotic business district, in the centre of the cape. Here, lords, entrepreneurs and inventors were investing their fortunes. Buildings in this sector were orderly, better spaced, and similar in design. Few could afford to live in the business district, but grand, town houses awaited those who could. Todd continued his rapid descent through piles of leaves. He would have to breach the citadel's walls if he were to reach his home in the market district. Towering stone faces and turrets, perpetual in their duty, observed the bay and the Aeternum Ocean.

A little further inland was the churn of the industrial sector, which had spread beyond the walls. Hexagonal chimneys and mills, built from red brick, exhaled smoke. A network of brass pipes and valves sweated. Todd's school was on the outskirts of this zone. It had been built on a hill to the east, to avoid being suffocated by pollution. Terraced houses stood on the same mound, where rows of washing had been hung out to dry, as checkpoints for Todd's excursion.

Waves twinkled in a large harbour, which dominated the bay. Strangely, a large galleon was approaching, but Todd could not stop to study its origin. 'Could it be a Skua warship?' he thought. Fishing boats were forced to avoid the ship's presence, where factories and jagged warehouses formed busy shipyards. They were home to a battalion of seabirds, who sought the stench of trawl. The bay was protected by a large concrete wall. This stone arm cut through the sea as if it had always been there. It was a defensive masterpiece that connected the cape to the east of the cove. A large gate, known as the King's Mouth, kept invaders out.

Slumbering cannons and guards had been angled towards the equator. Treacherous peaks protected the eastern bay, where Zora's[6] lighthouse loomed over the harbour, like a temple of fire. Her flame beacons roared, so sailors could find their way home. Further guns lined its verdant edges; a reminder that visitors were not welcome.

Little legs carried Todd home, whilst his stomach boiled a broth of exhilaration and regret. Eventually, he had no choice but to stop for breath.

"Calm down boy, you'll give yourself a heart attack!" a beggar joked from beside a fountain.

The old man resembled a piece of coral cast from the waves. His frayed beard had fused with a sheepskin blanket. A woollen tea-cosy warmed his head, but his crooked nose beat sore with cold. Warts had formed on his leathery skin beside sunspots, deep creases, and further blemishes earnt at sea. The beggar was known to Todd. He had often seen him drift past his window, as if the wanderer was drawn to his abode. The vagrant saw all and knew all. Todd kindly presented the beggar with his dinner money, but the man wagged his finger.

"I won't be needing it," Todd panted. The old man thought for a second, before gesturing the boy closer. Then, he thrust his blanket aside, to reveal a row of medals. "You were a Skua!?" Todd exclaimed. The old man shushed him quiet.

"Aye but keep it to yourself, lad. Should the Merithians come for me in me sleep!" An amusing wink was rejected by confusion. Todd did not understand. These medals were meant to be worn with pride, yet the Royal Skua was destitute and hiding in his own kingdom.

"They don't look after us the way they used to… That and these 'ere medals are all I have. Wouldn't want anyone nicking 'em now would I. Now, run along fella!" said the man.

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[6] Zora is the brightest star in the northern hemisphere, named after the prophet Allód's mother.

Todd paused in thought. “That’s an order, lad!” Todd nodded and took off into the distance.

He cut down an alleyway, plastered in circus and theatre posters, where he hurdled several connecting pipes. Then, the boy came to an abrupt stop, as a carrier drone scuttled across his path.

The arachnid machine was powered by the wonders of hycinthium-lapis; a charged stone recently discovered in the chasms of Terra[7] province. Carrier drones were restricted to the industrial sector, so Todd was surprised to see the metallic entity in his district. Four pointed feet clinked along the cobbles. Its pyramid head featured a human face on each side, meant to make drones more acceptable, yet their ghastly expressions haunted Todd’s dreams. Each drone had been finetuned to navigate Cadbey’s streets; but they were insentient, meaning they would often collide with houses, horses, and pedestrians. The world was not ready for many of Langley’s inventions, nor was it ready for the power of Hycinthium-lapis. The drone scurried away, so Todd continued his journey.

Finally, he was home: a terraced house, along the centre of a narrow street, in the shadow of Hadley’s Turret. He could see a soaring fortress wall and the turret his street was named after. On a clear day, Todd would climb the tower, so he could see his house from up high, and look out across the sea. A shiny black door, numbered twenty-two, invited him inside. Todd had not decided what he would tell his father if he was home. So, his stomach somersaulted when he realised his father was present. Stern voices rebounded down the narrow hallway. A grandfather clock chimed opposite the stairs, beside the kitchen door, allowing Todd to enter without being detected. A large painting, of a galleon at sea, covered the wall opposite the banister.

[7] An arctic province located in Arcaya.

"They have no business in the Sundrith[8] archipelagos. Those lands have never, ever, posed a threat to Cadbey. Skirmishes undertaken there should be illegal," said Todd's father, Alan Witherow. He was a well-respected veteran who had kept himself affiliated with the king's council.

"Why do you so ardently fight a band you served? They are your family. Your eldest son is out there right now flying the banner! Such words do not favour a man when they're aimed at his own kin," Arthur Shilling argued. "You should leave the nitty gritty to me."

Arthur was a powerful family friend, who held the position of minister for economics. He was also Todd's godfather. The boy cowered when he realised his kitchen had become an arena for politics. Shadows danced across the plaster as he listened in, without making the floorboards creek.

Alan said, "You have a brother. If your brother had been an accessory ta robbery n' murder, would ya not have him put before a judge for his crimes?"

Arthur sighed and replied, "The Skuas still act to serve the best interests of the kingdom. It will take more than accusations to drive reform."

"Nonsense…There's no smoke without fire," said Alan. "The Skuas are only acting to serve themselves. In the days of old we were driven by respect and valour. Now we have the seas, they're only driven by greed." Suddenly, their living room radiator began to kick. The contraption would often faulter, causing Alan to beat it. Todd hurried into the room, skidded onto his knees, and flicked its switch, before his father could react. A snaking element glowed, just beyond its grill. Todd sighed in relief. He preferred their fireplace, which stood opposite a bay window. Decorative carvings, and tiles showing painted goddesses, lined its sides. Nowadays, only webs floated above its forgotten ashes. Todd flinched, as a

[8] A continent of arid deserts. The Sundrith archipelagos and its jungles are located to the south.

drinking globe, Alan's oxblood armchair, and several bookshelves flickered from view. A hycinthium-lapis lamp buzzed uncontrollably, before failing completely.

"Protests will not bring your son home, Alan. If anything, they will put him at risk. Where will the men focus their frustration when they're missing the white cliffs of Cadbey?" said Arthur, as Alan exhaled in concern. "You may have a seat at the king's table, but you're not the vice admiral anymore. You must let go. I'll do the heavy lifting."

Alan had awarded his position to vice admiral Oswald Leonard. Oswald was a spirited, well-respected man of great cunning. He was eccentric and relentless. He had always been three steps ahead of friend and foe. But Alan had not heard from him in months.

"Aye, I suppose you're right," said Alan. "But I can't forget what they did… I will never forgive them for that."

Agitated, Todd burst into the kitchen, where Arthur and Alan were seated at a dining table.

His father was an elderly gentleman who reeked of tobacco. The smell was imbedded in his flesh. The brass buttons, of a beige vest-jacket, glinted in the sunlight cast from a window. Sun beams exposed how thin his white, slicked-back hair had become, but his handlebar moustache remained lustrous. Alan had rolled his sleeves up; a habit that preceded any debate. Both arms resembled manuscripts of scars. Weathered tattoos had become relics on his skin, ruined by warfare. Even his large hands were caked in calluses, and his muscles had solidified making him strong with age. His grey eyes harboured nightmares, his face was a map of the world, and every etching harnessed a story.

Arthur's appearance was the opposite, despite them being of a similar age. He was tall, slim, and clean shaven. His body had not been weathered because his life had been soaked in luxury. Only time had faded the colour of his shoulder length hair. A velvet tailcoat lined his figure. Jewelled fingers held a

matching top hat. Despite their differences in wealth, Alan and Arthur had remained friends since primary school.

"Why do you hate the Skuas!?" Todd blurted. Only Arthur jumped from his skin as the minion appeared.

"Why're ya not at school?" Alan replied. Todd was staggered by his father's calmness. He stopped to think.

"Mr Lilly is sick, so our maths class was cancelled." Arthur raised an eyebrow in suspicion, but Alan was too proud to accuse his son of truancy in front of a friend.

"Well, there's nothin' ya can learn in school that ya can't learn from king's council. You'll have ta accompany me and Arthur ta the palace. You're not stayin' here, Witherow junior." Todd gasped as they rose to their feet like titans; chairs scraping along the tiled floor.

"I don't think the king's table is any place for a child," Arthur muttered, placing his hat on his head.

"Nonsense… consider it work experience for the lad." Alan grabbed a long, double breasted, naval coat from a peg beside the grandfather clock. Its buttons and medals had been polished to perfection. Each one brandished the Skua emblem. Excited, Todd made for the front door, when his dad's hand clasped his shoulder. Alan's palm dwarfed his frame.

"Todd, accuse me of hating the Skuas again… and I'll have you guttin' fish for a week in the trawl yards. Is that clear?" said Alan. His son gulped and nodded before they departed.