



TERRA INCOGNITA:
BOOK THREE

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KEVIN J. ANDERSON

THE KEY *to*
CREATION



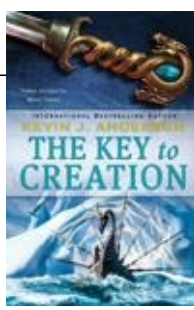


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To Shawn Gordon at ProgRock Records, who expanded the imaginary horizons in the Terra Incognita series by making possible the companion rock CDs, Beyond the Horizon and A Line in the Sand.

And thanks for being a cool friend, too.



The Story So Far

According to legend, ONDUN (the creator of all things) sent out His sons AIDEN and UREC in two Arkships to explore the world and also to find the mysterious Key to Creation, while His third son, JORON, remained in the Eden-like land of Terravita. Leaving the world in the care of His sons, Ondun departed, leaving His creation behind.

Today, the known world has two continents, Tierra and Uraba, connected by a thin isthmus, on which stands the sacred city of Ishalem. The “Aidenist” people of Tierra are the descendants of Aiden’s crew, while the “Urecari” people of Uraba believe that their ancestors originally sailed on Urec’s ship. For all of history, the wreck of one ancient Arkship dominated a hill in Ishalem, and the Tierrans and Urabans dispute whether the ship originally belonged to Aiden or Urec. Likewise, each people has legends of a wandering hermit, the TRAVELER, whom Aidenists believe to be immortal Aiden watching over them, while the Urecari believe him to be Urec.

Despite their underlying rivalries, the followers of Aiden and Urec managed an uneasy peace for centuries, punctuated by occasional skirmishes. After long negotiations, KING KORASTINE of Tierra and SOLDAN-SHAH IMIR of Uraba agreed to divide the world into two parts, so that each land could have peace. Korastine traveled with his daughter ANJINE, the future queen of Tierra, and her childhood friend MATEO BORNAN, the son of a guard captain. Sadly, during the city-wide celebrations after the signing of the Edict, an accidental fire started and holy Ishalem burned to the ground. Thus began decades of furious fighting between the followers of Aiden and Urec.

During the fire in Ishalem, a fanatical Aidenist, PRESTER HANNES, who had been living as a spy among the Urabans, tried to desecrate a Urecari church, but was seriously burned and barely escaped with his life. One of the soldan-shah’s wives rescued Hannes and nursed him back to health in the Uraban capital city of Olabar. However, sure that it was his sacred mission to wreak havoc on the hated Urecari, Hannes murdered the soldan-shah’s wife and escaped from the palace. He spent years wandering the foreign land and took every opportunity to harm Urabans, poisoning wells, burning churches, causing mayhem.

Meanwhile, in the Tierran capital of Calay, the young sailor CRISTON VORA signed aboard the exploratory ship *Luminara*, under the command of CAPTAIN ANDON SHAY. King Korastine had commissioned the ship to discover new lands and find the lost continent of Terravita, where Ondun’s third son, Joron, would be waiting for them. Before sailing away, Criston said goodbye to his wife ADREA, took a lock of her hair, and promised to write her letters and throw them overboard in bottles. As the *Luminara* sailed, Criston did not know that Adrea was pregnant.

Adrea returned to her village of Windcatch, where she lived with her lame brother CIARLO and Criston’s mother. They thought they were far from the war until a bloodthirsty Uraban raiding party struck, led by the soldan-shah’s son OMRA. Ciarlo hid as the raiders burned the Aidenist kirk. Omra and his followers murdered Criston’s mother and kidnapped Adrea, taking her off to Olabar.

During the amazing voyage of the *Luminara*, Criston grew close to Captain Shay and the ship's prester, who told stories about the Lighthouse at the End of the World. As storms approached and the waves grew rough, Criston took watch and saw a distant light on the horizon, perhaps the legendary lighthouse. But then the most horrific monster of the seas, the Leviathan, destroyed the *Luminara* and devoured Captain Shay. Floating among the wreckage, Criston made a crude raft and managed to catch a sea serpent with a grappling hook. The monster towed him to familiar waters, where he was eventually picked up by a fishing vessel. When he returned to Windcatch, however, he learned that his beloved Adrea had been taken away in a Urecari raid, and Ciarlo told him that she was pregnant at the time. Devastated, Criston turned his back on the sea and went to live alone in the high mountains....

Another group of people are the Saedrans—scientists, craftsmen, philosophers—who believe their ancestors left Terravita and settled on another continent, which sank beneath the waves. They have settled in both Uraba and Tierra but don't espouse either religion.

In Calay, one young Saedran, ALDO NA-CURIC, passed the rigorous tests to become a highly sought-after chartsman. In Aldo's youthful naïveté, he was duped by con man YAL DOLICAR, who told him a fanciful story and sold him a fake map. By the time Aldo learned he'd been tricked, the charlatan was gone. Nevertheless, Aldo established himself as a skilled navigator and served aboard several Tierran ships, until he was captured by Uraban pirates. The captive Aldo was taken to a Saedran woman in Olabar, SEN SHERUFA NA-OA; she was ordered to convince Aldo to serve Uraba as a chartsman. But Saedrans have their own priority—to complete the Map of All Things—and after Sherufa and Aldo shared their knowledge, she helped him escape and he made his way back home.

As the war continued, King Korastine and Soldan-Shah Imir expanded their armies. Anjine's dear friend Mateo began years of military training with DESTRAR BROECK in the frozen lands of Iboria, DESTRAR TAVISHEL in the islands of Soeland, DESTRAR UNSUL in the rangeland of Erietta, DESTRAR SIESCU in the high mountains and mines of Corag, and glory-hungry DESTRAR SHENR in the farmlands of Alamont.

Imir secretly established the Gremurr mines on the northern shore of the Middlesea, technically in Tierran territory but inaccessible due to the rugged mountains. From there, his miners (and Tierran slaves) extracted metals for swords and armor.

Both sides committed war atrocities. One of these acts included the slaughter of Aidenist settlers who came to rebuild the ruins of Ishalem.

Adrea worked as a household slave in Olabar. Because she refused to speak to anyone, many believed she was mute. She gave birth to Criston's son, SAAN, but when he reached the age of four, the sikaras (priestesses of the church of Urec) took him away. Over the years, the Urabans kidnapped Tierran children and, under the guidance of a sinister masked TEACHER, brainwashed them to become zealous saboteurs, called *ra'virs*. Saan was destined to become one of them.

Frantic, Adrea turned to an unlikely ally: Omra himself. By eavesdropping, Adrea uncovered a scheme by VILLIKI (one of the soldan-shah's ambitious wives) and the ur-sikara (the head of the church) to assassinate Omra and pin the blame on Omra's equally unlikable wife CLIAPARIA—so that Omra's half brother TUKAR would become the next soldan-shah. Adrea revealed the plot to Omra, on the condition that her son be returned to her; Omra exposed the treachery, and Villiki was disgraced and banished. Though Tukar was a devoted, bumbling man who had no idea of his mother's schemes, Soldan-Shah Imir had no choice but to send him away to manage the Gremurr mines.

Impressed with Adrea, Omra promised that he would raise Saan as his own and protect her if she agreed to be his wife. Seeing no other way to ensure safety for her child and herself, Adrea consented and took a Uraban name, ISTAR, believing that her true husband was long gone. Meanwhile, Criston

lived in isolation in the mountains. Once each year he made the trip to the seashore, where he cast another letter in a bottle into the sea, clinging to hope that somehow Adrea might receive one of them ...

Lonely and heartbroken by the war, King Korastine married the daughter of Destrar Broeck, ILRIDA, who gave birth to a son, TOMAS. Ilrida died when Tomas was young, and King Korastine was so paralyzed by grief that Anjine effectively became the ruler of Tierra. Korastine announced he would build another exploration ship to search for Terravita. Anjine questioned the wisdom of this expense in a time of war until he showed her an ancient magical relic, Aiden's Compass, which would reveal the location of the lost land.

At the southern boundary of Uraba, a strange man named ASADDAN staggered in from the edge of the Great Desert. His people, the Nunghals, lived on the other side of the dunes. Asaddan convinced Omra to sponsor an expedition to the other side of the desert, via a balloon-borne sand coracle to ride the winds.

Over the years, Omra had grown fond of Saan and raised him as a true son, despite the boy's Tierran heritage. Saan, now twelve, and the retired soldan-shah Imir accompanied Asaddan across the desert, along with a reluctant Sen Sherufa. Among the Nunghal clans, as guests of KHAN JIKARIS, they traveled to the coast of the southern ocean. From maps used by seafaring Nunghals, Sherufa suspected that the southern ocean connected with the coastline of Uraba, far to the north. Sherufa, Imir, and Saan returned home with their exciting news, and Sherufa hired a courier—the ubiquitous con man Yal Dolicar—to deliver the details to Sen Aldo in Calay.

Korastine's new Arkship was constructed, and Aldo na-Curic was chosen as the Saedran chartsmaster for the voyage. Before the Arkship could sail, though, *ra'vir* saboteurs burned the great ship, dashing the king's dreams.

Prester Hannes continued his depredations against the followers of Urec until he was captured and sent to work in the Gremurr mines. He escaped into the rugged mountains and endured great tribulations until—frostbitten, starving, and near death—he stumbled upon the hermit Criston Vora. Criston nursed him to health and took the prester back to Calay. While all of Calay reeled from the destruction of the Arkship, Criston presented himself to King Korastine and offered to create and captain a new ship.

After many years, Soldan-Shah Omra set off with his armies and recaptured Ishalem just as Istar gave birth to his son and heir, whom she named CRISTON. Omra's third wife, a sweet woman named NAORI, was also pregnant, while his other wife, Cliaparia, grew murderously jealous of Istar. The baby Criston only increased her ire, and as soon as Naori gave birth to a son, Cliaparia murdered Istar's baby by having a deadly sand spider placed in his crib. Mad with grief and shock at the death of her child, Istar stabbed Cliaparia to death in broad daylight and staggered away into the market, where she found a merchant selling strange artifacts, including a letter in a bottle—a message from her dear Criston.

Over the next several years, as Omra consolidated his hold on Ishalem, his engineer soldier KEL UNWAR constructed a gigantic wall across the isthmus to bar Aidenists from the sacred ground. While excavating the rubble of the Aidenist church in Ishalem, Omra's builders discovered an ancient map in a deep underground vault: Urec's Map, a relic that could lead them to the mysterious Key to Creation.

The Tierran army tried to retake Ishalem before the wall was finished. Mateo, now a military leader, vowed to do this for Anjine, whom he had loved for many years. They had grown up together,

and both had a very close connection that went beyond friendship, but they dared not show it. Now he was her adviser and went off with the armies to Ishalem. When the Tierrans prepared to attack, however, the masked Teacher appeared on the wall and issued a command. Suddenly, many young Aidenist soldiers revealed themselves to be *ra'virs*. They assassinated several army commanders, and Mateo barely escaped. The Tierran army stumbled home defeated.

In Olabar, Saan, now nineteen, fended off an assassination attempt; hating Saan and Istar because their Tierran heritage, the sikaras used every opportunity to harm him and discredit his mother. When Omra returned from Ishalem after defeating the Tierran army at the wall, he was enraged to hear about the threats and disrespect. In order to keep Saan safe, Omra commissioned a fine vessel, the *Al-Orizin*, and sent the young man on a quest to find the Key to Creation. Saan gathered his crew, including con man Yal Dolicar, a reef diver named GRIGOVAR, Sen Sherufa, and the Urecari priestess FYIRI, who possessed a magic journal through which she could write instantaneous messages back to the main church in Olabar. The *Al-Orizin* sailed east into the uncharted waters of the Middlesea.

In Calay, Criston Vora prepared his new ship, the *Dyscovera*, for the voyage to find Terravita. Among his crew were the Iborian shipwright KJELNAR, cabin boy JAVIAN, chartsman Aldo na-Curic, and the grim Prester Hannes. King Korastine saw the ship off with Anjine, Prince Tomas, and Destrar Broeck, Tomas's grandfather. Old Korastine longed to go on the voyage, but his failing health forced him to stay behind. Shortly after the ship sailed westward across the Oceansea, Korastine died in his sleep, leaving Anjine as queen of Tierra.

One of the *Dyscovera's* sailors turned out to be a young woman in disguise, MIA. Furious at the deception, Prester Hannes wanted her marooned at the next landfall, but Criston refused. Two sailors ENOCH DEY and SILAM HENNER, cooked up a scheme to rape the girl during a night watch, but Javian, who had taken a liking to Mia, and Hannes intervened. With no choice but to enforce the law of the sea, Criston sentenced Henner to twenty lashes, and Enoch Dey was cast overboard to his death. As they sailed onward, Aiden's ancient Compass awakened, and its needle pointed to Terravita.

Meanwhile, the Nunghal adventurer Asaddan convinced a clan captain to sail around the southern coast in search of a new sea route. After a long and arduous voyage, they arrived at Ishalem. Pleased to have found a new trade route, the Nunghals returned home, promising to bring back many ships.

After Kel Unwar completed the great wall, Omra gave him an even greater task: digging a canal across the isthmus to connect the Oceansea and the Middlesea. Using explosive firepowder—a chemical recipe given to them by the Nunghals—and the manpower of Tierran slaves, Unwar began excavations. In anticipation of the canal's completion, Omra visited his exiled brother Tukar at the Gremurr mines. He instructed Tukar to armor a group of warships; these invincible ironclads would sail through the new waterway to destroy the Aidenist navy.

Incensed that the enemy was operating mines on Aidenist land at Gremurr, Destrar Broeck, his nephew IAROS, and Destrar Siescu of Corag proposed creating a road through the mountain passes so that the Aidenist army could ride a force of woolly mammoths over the mountains to seize the mines. Siescu's trusted scout RAGA VAR plotted the route, and work began for a full-scale assault.

Grieving for her father, Anjine accepted a marriage offer from JENIROD, whom she had never met. Because her dearest friend Mateo was just a soldier and not an appropriate husband for a queen, she decided to marry for politics, not love. Learning of Anjine's betrothal, and hiding his own feelings, Mateo impulsively married a blacksmith's daughter, VICKA SONNEN. Vicka was a lovely, strong woman, whose only flaw was that she wasn't Anjine.

When the queen finally met Jenirod, she was not impressed with the self-centered, chauvinistic man who treated her like a wilting flower. Anjine made her dissatisfaction with her husband-to-be plain,

leaving the narrow-minded Jenirod baffled as to what he'd done wrong. In an attempt to impress her, Jenirod and Destrar Tavishel raided a Urecari shrine, Fashia's Fountain, and slaughtered the priestesses and pilgrims there. Although Tavishel's men called it a great victory, Jenirod was sickened at what they'd done.

After the desecration of Fashia's Fountain, the Urabans retaliated: Kel Unwar sent ships to intercept a royal cog carrying Prince Tomas. Urged on by the ominous masked Teacher (revealed to be Unwar's own sister ALISI, who was kidnapped and abused by Aidenist sailors when she was young), Unwar captured the boy, executed him, and sent the head back to Queen Anjine. To avenge her brother's death, Anjine ordered Mateo to decapitate one thousand Uraban prisoners of war and dump their heads before the Ishalem wall, in full view of the enemy. And the cycle of hatred escalated further....

In the village of Windcatch, Ciarlo had persistent dreams that his sister Adrea was still alive. Though he suffered from a lame leg, Ciarlo set off overland to make his way to Uraba to find her, and to preach the word of Aiden to the Urecari. More often than not, he received a cold welcome, but he persisted. One night at camp, an old wanderer joined him, and they exchanged stories. When Ciarlo awoke the next day, the man was gone, leaving behind a thick journal of his travels. When Ciarlo discovered that his lame leg was miraculously healed, he realized he had encountered the legendary Traveler himself!

In Olabar, Istar/Adrea thwarted an assassination plot instigated from within the Urecari church by the banished Villiki. With Omra gone in Ishalem, former soldan-shah Imir responded to the treachery by purging the church; Villiki fled to the Gremurr mines, where her son Tukar lived with his wife SHETIA and their son ULAN. Tukar had nearly finished armoring the warships, per Omra's wishes, and he was not happy to see his disgraced, scheming mother.

When Anjine found out that Jenirod was responsible for the desecration of Fashia's Fountain—and by extension, the murder of Tomas—she broke their engagement and sent him away in disgust. Shamed, Jenirod rode to Corag to join Destrar Broeck in the military campaign to cross the mountains and strike the Gremurr mines. Mateo, scarred by being forced to decapitate a thousand prisoners, refused to face his wife Vicka or Queen Anjine with so much blood on his hands. He also rode into the mountains to join the attack on Gremurr.

On the far side of the world, the *Dyscovera* came upon an undersea city and a race of people descended from the lost branch of Saedrans. Aldo na-Curic was delighted to be reunited with his people, and their king, SONHIR, promised to help the Tierran ship. Hannes, however, led a mutiny and tried to force King Sonhir and his people to convert to Aidenism—by force, if necessary. The incense-mer-Saedrans fought back, and in the battle, Kjelnar was pulled overboard into the waves before Criston managed to quell the violence. But the damage was done; the mer-Saedrans abandoned the *Dyscovera*, refusing to offer further aid. Criston ordered Prester Hannes tied to the mast, where he awaited his sentence.

The *Al-Orizin* found a lush, isolated island surrounded by reefs and wrecked ships. Going ashore, Saan and his crew found an old crone, IYOMELKA, and her beautiful daughter, YSTYA, alone on the island. Sikara Fyiri took offense when Iyomelka claimed to be the wife of Ondun Himself and that Ystyia was His daughter—the sister to Aiden, Urec, and Joron. The two women had lived on the island for countless centuries, and Ondun had drowned there in a magic spring that had now gone dry. If the spring could be restored, Iyomelka claimed, magic would return to the island, and she would regain her youth. She promised Saan any reward he wished if his crewmembers could repair the spring. Saan and Grigovar dove into the deep well and freed the blockage, making the waters flow. Underground, they discovered the preserved body of a mysterious old man, who rose to the surface in the resurgent

spring. When Iyomelka bathed in the waters, her body shed many apparent years.

Saan claimed her daughter Ystyia as his reward. He had grown very fond of the lovely and innocent girl, and she desperately wanted to get away. Infuriated by the demand, Iyomelka refused to let her daughter go, but Saan sneaked back to the island at night and slipped away with Ystyia. The *Al-Orizin* set sail and fled. When Iyomelka discovered that she had been tricked, she resurrected a vessel from the sunken wrecks around the island and sailed in pursuit of Saan, carrying the preserved body of Ondun. Racing away, the *Al-Orizin* came upon an impassible barrier—the enormous sea serpent, BOURAS, that girdled the whole world, cursed by Ondun to bite its own tail for eternity. With Iyomelka closing in behind them, they had no way to get past Bouras.

With a great force of battle-armored mammoths, the Tierran army crossed the mountain pass to Gremurr. Reaching the Urecari mines, the shaggy beasts struck terror into the enemy soldiers. Tukar sent his wife and son to hide in the hills, while he tried to lead a defense but ultimately failed. Destrar Broeck declared a great Tierran victory, freed all of the Aidenist slaves, seized the nearly finished ironclad warships, and executed Tukar, sending the head back to Soldan-Shah Omra to show his hatred: after all, murdered Tomas had been Broeck's grandson.

Destrar Tavishel planned to get revenge for the killing of Prince Tomas in his own way. Without permission from the queen, Tavishel sailed to Ishalem, where he intended to launch kegs of burning oil into the holy city to destroy it again. However, a hundred Nunghal ships arrived, and the Nunghal cannons cut Tavishel's ships to ribbons. Furious at the unprovoked attack on Ishalem, Omra refused to rescue any survivors from the wrecked ships, letting the sharks feed instead. He didn't think his hatred for the Aidenists could grow worse...but he had not yet learned of the carnage at Gremurr.

To unlock the soul of mankind, one must hold the key to creation.
—Urec's Log



Part I

1 *Outskirts of Calay*

As he rode across Tierra, the constant pounding hoofbeats echoed the pounding of his heart. After days of hard travel, Jenirod no longer heard the sound. He fought hunger, thirst, and exhaustion, keeping himself awake only through sheer determination, and pressed on. He had already crossed half a continent, but he had to reach Calay.

Queen Anjine needed to know what had happened at the Gremurr mines. After two decades of war, the Aidenists had finally secured a major victory against the evil Urecari.

Jenirod had pushed two of his three warhorses nearly to death before turning them loose and riding on. The animals could take care of themselves until some other traveler found them. Son of the Eriettan destrar, he had grown up with horses, won countless trophies and ribbons in Landing Day cavalcades; he couldn't believe he was abandoning such fine mounts. In fact, mere months ago, Jenirod's proud and shuttered mind would never have imagined that any mission could be so all-consuming. Now he rode long past the point where common sense told him he should sleep and let the horses rest.

If the queen pulled all her forces together, the Tierran army could ensure the final defeat of the soldan-shah....

After the military triumph at Gremurr, fires had been extinguished, Uraban bodies dumped into the sea, and brave Aidenist fighters buried in graves marked by fishhook posts. But the queen needed to know of the victory as soon as possible, so she could plan for the next phase of the war. Jenirod had volunteered to make the long and crushing ride; no one was more qualified.

He had taken off as if demons were slashing at his horses' flanks, determined to go faster than anyone believed possible, needing to do something, anything, to blot out the stain of his foolish, immature actions. And after so many tragedies suffered, so many innocent Aidenists killed by the vengeful Urecari—including Prince Tomas—Jenirod longed to deliver unabashed *good* news for a change.

He had crossed the rugged new mountain path by which the Tierran military reached the undefended mines at Gremurr. At the Corag stronghold of Stoneholm, Jenirod paused for only a few hours to refill his waterskins and pack his saddlebags with food, then rode down through the foothills to the river and the well-traveled road that led to the Tierran capital.

All Tierra would celebrate the great Aidenist triumph, though cheers and applause no longer mattered to Jenirod. He would offer Queen Anjine whatever advice he could, but doubted she would accept it from *him*. Those scars would not heal soon...if ever.

These past few months had shown Jenirod that war bore little resemblance to the glorious depictions in pageantry, stories, and songs. During the interminable, exhausting ride across the land, he had time to ponder all the destruction that had flowed from his blind naiveté. How he regretted his earnest but juvenile suggestion to Destrar Tavishel that they attack a defenseless Urecari shrine, just to impress Anjine. Jenirod had never considered the consequences, never imagined what the Urecari retaliation might cost. Poor Tomas!

Now he felt shamed and soiled by what they had done. Jenirod had changed much in his heart, but the queen would never forgive him.

Still, his news would give hope to countless saddened families across Tierra. In the victory at Gremurr, the army had freed hundreds of slaves from the mines, innocent Aidenists who had been captured in raids or seized from fishing boats in the Oceansea. They were alive, and Jenirod carried a complete list rolled up in his saddlebags.

In the aftermath of the battle, Subcomdar Mateo Bornan had gathered the freed slaves and instructed scribes with paper and ink (confiscated from the Gremurr administrator's office) to take down all their information so their families could be notified. The scribes covered sheet after sheet with the names, homes, and occupations of the survivors. Those names would bring joy to so many in Calay. Their loved ones would be coming home as soon as possible. Subcomdar Bornan and the first group of freed prisoners would arrive within a few weeks.

But first, Jenirod had to see the queen.

It was sunset by the time his wobbly, weary horse reached the outskirts of the capital city. Jenirod didn't know what day it was. Ahead, rivers flowed into the harbor and buildings clustered around the waterfront, where long piers extended out past the tidal mud into deeper water. And, silhouetted by the low, blood-orange sun, he could discern the outline of Calay Castle in the distance.

Close...so close.

Half dead, he pulled his horse to a halt outside a warehouse at the harbor's edge and slid from his saddle as a curious merchant emerged, blinking at him. Jenirod knew he was filthy, wild-haired, and unshaven, but none of that mattered. He was intent on a thin bay mare tied to a fencepost. "A horse—need your horse, in the name of the queen."

The merchant eyed Jenirod and his mount, noting the flecks of foam at the horse's mouth and flanks and seeing how it trembled just standing there, but he recognized fine horseflesh. "Have mine. It's a more than fair exchange."

Jenirod took the saddlebags, patted his mount on the neck. His legs could barely hold him up. "Take care of this horse. He's served me well." Jenirod didn't even ask for water or food. So close now. He staggered over to the spindly bay mare, climbed onto the horse's back—no time for a saddle—clutched the mane, and rode off into the city.

In less than an hour, he reached the castle gate and shouted in a ragged voice, "Guards, bring me to the queen! I must see the queen!"

Jenirod looked like a wild man, and the royal guardsmen were skeptical, but Guard-Marshal Vorannen recognized him immediately. "Jenirod? By the Fishhook, what's happened to you?"

"A great battle at Gremurr...we defeated the Curlies! Please, I have to tell Queen Anjine!" Guards helped him down from the mare, and Jenirod heaved, then reeled, nearly collapsing, but two men held him up. "All right...I think I'll take some water first." He didn't see who handed a cup to him.

"We've sent word to the queen," Vorannen said. "Maybe you'd like to change your clothes, wash up, rest?"

Jenirod realized that he stank of horse, sweat, and horse sweat, but he knew his priority. He shook his head, and Vorannen saw the unexpected ferocity in his eyes. "Follow me."

Jenirod knew that seeing him would remind Anjine of the Uraban emissary tossing her brother's severed head onto the throne room floor. When he stood before her, Jenirod swallowed hard and sketched a hurried bow. He had practiced his speech to the rhythm of thumping hoofbeats, and the words that had been running through his head during the endless ride now spilled out of him. "My Queen, your armies conquered Gremurr! We slew many followers of Urec and kept others alive to work the mines and foundries. It is the most crushing defeat of the enemy so far in this war."

As her eyes widened, he talked faster. "And we freed the Tierran prisoners who were forced to labor

in the mines. Hundreds are alive and able to return home.” He handed her the rolls of names. “Here is a list.”

Astonished, Anjine unrolled the papers, scanned the names. A flush had come to her cheeks. “I didn’t know you or Mateo had gone to Gremurr.” She sat straight, entirely a queen now. “Give me a full report.”

Wasting no words, Jenirod described the surprise attack led by armored mammoths from Iboria, how the Tierran army had captured the mines and foundries, as well as seven armored Uraban warships. “Destrar Broeck is eager to take those ironclads and strike undefended enemy cities on the Middlesea shore, but he sent me here so you can plan our final Tierran victory.”

“And what of Mateo...Subcomdar Bornan? Is he well?”

“He was healthy and uninjured when I left him. Subcomdar Bornan will lead back as many of the prisoners as are able to make the trek. Ondun surely has smiled on us, my Queen.”

Anjine sat back in her chair in silence. Waiting for her reaction, Jenirod began to feel even more weary, more hungry, more filthy. Finally, she gave him a cool, formal nod. “I will have this list copied and distributed as widely as possible. The people need to know.” She looked down at the names, as if unable to comprehend so many. “This news has been a long time coming, Jenirod.”

2 *Olabar Palace*

Soldan-Shah Omra sailed back to his capital city, eager to tell his people of the great Uraban victory in Ishalem. The remarkable cannons of his new Nunghal allies had utterly destroyed a Tierran fleet that had come to burn down the holy city. Every one of their Fishhook ships had been sunk, and Omra had left the mangled foreigners for the sharks to devour. His satisfaction was as clean and sharp as a fine steel blade: the followers of Aiden had gotten exactly what they deserved.

When the soldan-shah arrived in Olabar, however, he found his land being torn apart from within. The Urecari church was in an uproar, the ur-sikara dead, the palace reeling from an assassination plot against his First Wife Istar. Hearing the report from his palace guard captain, Kel Rovik, Omra felt blood pounding in his temples. “Is she safe?”

“Your family is unharmed, Soldan-Shah.”

“Call for them! I need to see my wives and daughters, now. Let me look into their eyes and assure myself.” He had fought in Ishalem to preserve his faith and his land, only to find that corrupt sikaras posed their own danger, right here in his capital. He had been at odds with the self-centered priestess for some time. “Chain the doors of the main church until an investigation is completed. Question all the sikaras!”

Rovik gave a quick formal nod. The man had always been competent and reliable. “Your father issued exactly those orders, Soldan-Shah. We have already uncovered many participants in the plot.”

Omra exhaled, barely containing his fury. Years ago, his father had resigned as soldan-shah because of the treachery of Villiki and the previous ur-sikara. When Imir had unshouldered those burdens, Omra accepted the challenge, vowing to be different...but apparently nothing had changed. “Where is my father? I need to speak with him.”

When Rovik’s face went ashen, Omra felt a deep chill. “He has sequestered himself, Soldan-Shah, in his grief.”

“His...grief? What else happened?”

“A disaster at the Gremurr mines. A large Aidenist army crossed over the mountains on giant, shaggy monsters and struck Gremurr from the rear. They seized the mines and our ironclad warships, murdered our troops, enslaved others to work the mines.”

Omra had to sit on a cushion to hide his sudden feeling of weakness. Across the open balcony, the curtains waved in the breeze. In the afternoon light, the red silk hangings gave an eerie crimson cast to his private rooms. Gremurr...lost! Those mines supplied metals, ships, armor, and swords for all of Uraba.

Rovik looked like a statue as he forced himself to stand straight, keep his voice flat, and deliver the rest of his report. “And there is more, Soldan-Shah.”

Omra suddenly knew why his father was in mourning. “Tukar?”

Kel Rovik lowered his dark gaze. “The ’Hooks sent his head back as a message. That was a week ago.”

Each breath chilled him like an icy wind in his chest. He knew exactly what sort of message the Tierrans intended to send. Queen Anjine had received a similar horrific gift after Kel Unwar impetuously executed her young brother. Just an innocent boy...

But Tukar was innocent too! He'd been exiled to the Gremurr mines through no fault of his own—result of his mother Villiki's treachery—but he had served his soldan-shah faithfully.

Though Omra understood intellectually the pain Queen Anjine was trying to assuage with this barbaric retaliation, he shoved those thoughts from his mind, leaving no room for even the idea of sympathy. She had killed *Tukar*! Tukar...

Omra's hatred for Aidenists blazed like a bonfire built from bone-dry tinder. He tallied the appalling atrocities the 'Hooks had committed over the years. What pain and misery they had inflicted on his poor people. Omra's vision blurred, and he breathed faster and faster. There had to be a reckoning!

Istar's arrival at his doorway startled him. "My Lord, I am happy to see you back. I've missed you." Her tone carried clear relief.

But when Omra looked up at his wife of more than twenty years, he recoiled from the sight of her blond hair and blue eyes, her pale skin, her narrow features. Though she was the mother of his daughters, the mother of Saan, he momentarily saw only a *Tierran* woman. He loathed all *Tierrans* and everything to do with their hateful culture and religion. He covered his eyes. "Go away!" He drew another breath and calmed himself. "Please...just go away, Istar." He loved her, but he couldn't stand any more right now.

Whispering to her, Kel Rovik led Istar away, leaving Omra alone with swirling hatred. He clenched and unclenched his hands, squeezing the rings on his fingers. When Naori came with his two young sons, and then his three daughters arrived, he embraced them, but found his thoughts churning like a stormy sea.

Though he had come back to Olabar with hopes of winning this war, the soldan-shah now reached a harsh conclusion: total genocide of the Aidenists was the only acceptable victory. He was certain of that.

Trapped in the whirlwind of anger, Omra reached out for a moment of calm, thinking of Saan, who had sailed away aboard the *Al-Orizin* many months ago on a quest to find the mysterious Key to Creation. Such exciting adventure for a young man—to uncharted waters and new lands. Saan's ocean voyage must be peaceful, so far away from politics....

3 *The Al-Orizin*

Iyomelka's resurrected ship chased after them, borne on storms and vengeance. From his own deck, Saan watched the island witch through the spyglass. He and his crew were in terrible danger, yet he did not regret his decision to rescue the intriguing and beautiful Ystyia from her exile.

"I'm sorry I caused this, Saan. I wanted to be free, but Mother won't let me go."

Saan smiled at her. "I don't intend to let her have you back."

The young woman had delicate features so perfect that sculptors in Olabar would have lined up for the chance to reproduce her face in marble. Her hair was the color of ivory with a hint of honey, her green eyes shone with an innocent hunger to see and learn. Now Ystyia looked pale and dizzy, but when she took Saan's arm she straightened like a wilting blossom given water. "I just wanted to see the world for myself."

"And that's what I promised you. I don't go back on my promises." He tried to look brave and confident, not only for her, but for his entire crew. The sailors looked to their captain for answers, so he must have some kind of plan to save them. He would have to figure something out.

Iyomelka summoned ripples of sorcery and flung them at the ship. The *Al-Orizin* fled before the wind—away from the island witch's wrath and headlong toward another formidable obstacle: ahead, growing ever closer, towered the scaly body of Bouras, a sea serpent so huge that it was said to girdle the entire world, condemned to bite its own tail until Ondun's curse was lifted. The *Al-Orizin* had no way to get past it.

"I would feel better if I knew how we're going to get out of this, Captain," Yal Dolicar said. "Just a hint, perhaps?"

Ystyia turned to stare at the racing, endless body of the Father of All Serpents, which blocked the sea from horizon to horizon. "My mother is no match for Bouras." The increasing howl of the winds snatched at the girl's quiet voice. "But she will not stop."

"Neither will we." Saan tried not to show how his mind was racing. "Don't you worry."

Dolicar, a man thoroughly familiar with half-truths and exaggerations, saw through the captain's cocky façade and turned pale.

Through the spyglass, Saan looked aft to study Iyomelka's jagged gray ship. Long ago, that old vessel had sunk in the reefs around her island, but the woman had used her sorcerous powers to raise it from the depths. Strands of seaweed held the tattered sails together, and the hull was encrusted with barnacles and starfish. A sharp, twisted extension of antler coral protruded from the prow. Iyomelka stood on deck beside a crystal coffin that held the preserved body of her husband. The witch's hair and garments whipped in the gale that she herself had summoned.

In front of them, the barrier of the gigantic sea serpent's body looked insurmountable, but at least the Father of All Serpents had no quarrel with them, as far as Saan knew.

Neither choice seemed particularly pleasant.

One of the *Al-Orizin*'s silken sails came loose and flapped wildly. The painted Eye of Urec folded, then stretched tight again, as if winking. The reef diver Grigovar grabbed the rope, using all his weight to pull it taut, then wrapped it around a stanchion until riggers could connect it properly.

From the bow of her ship, Iyomelka hurled black thunderclouds toward the *Al-Orizin* like missiles

from an unseen catapult. Next, she summoned two waterspouts, whirling columns of water and air that marched across the waves.

The Saedran Sen Sherufa, her brown-and-gray hair whipping loose around her, shouted into the noise of the gale, “Captain, how will we get past the sea serpent?”

“I’m working on that.”

They sailed ever closer to the enormous reptilian body of Bouras. The titanic thing reeled past with such speed that the armor scales—each the size of a mainsail—were a blur. The spray and ripple of Bouras’s passage tossed the *Al-Orizin* about like one of the toy boats Saan’s little brother played with. In minutes, their ship would ram into the reptile. “Turn south! Hard starboard!”

Grigovar used his considerable strength to turn the rudder hard over. The riggers set the sails to catch the wind, and the *Al-Orizin* heeled about until it cruised alongside the serpent, riding the swift currents drawn along in the wake of Bouras’s unending circuit of the world.

Ystyia stared hard at the infinite serpent. “My mother told me stories of great titans like this, and how only my father was powerful enough to impose order on them. He protected the seas by containing Bouras.”

The wind increased as Iyomelka closed in, and Saan had to shout, “But he’s in our way!”

Although the *Al-Orizin* sailed along at top speed, Iyomelka still closed the distance. Her sorcerous waterspouts swept closer, only to be caught in the turbulence that paralleled Bouras. They struck and rode over the serpent’s body, then dissipated.

As increasing storms buffeted them, the island witch’s voice boomed out, carried on the thunder, magnified by the gale. “You stole my daughter! Return her to me!”

A tall wave crashed against the *Al-Orizin*’s side, sloshing water across the deck and throwing Yal Dolicar and Sen Sherufa to their knees. A terrified Sikara Fyiri, pretending to be a bastion of strength, emerged from her cabin with a heavy unfurling-fern staff; she wobbled as she attempted to stand firm. “Captain Saan, you have no choice—give the girl back. Surrender the demon’s daughter and save us all!”

Saan held Ystyia’s arm. “I will do no such thing.”

As the crew muttered in fearful agreement, Yal Dolicar yelled out, “Don’t be foolish, men—the only reason the witch hasn’t sunk us yet is because she wants Ystyia alive. That girl is our only bargaining chip!”

Ystyia, no quaking flower, raised her chin. “We can’t outrun my mother, Saan—she has powers you cannot imagine—so we have to find some other way.”

“If we don’t have weapons or powers to match Iyomelka’s, then we’ll just have to outsmart her.” Saan held on as another wave rocked the ship from side to side. “I’d appreciate any suggestions.”

Up in the lookout nest, a sailor had lashed himself to the mast to keep himself from being thrown overboard into the violent waters. “Captain, look at the serpent! Something big is coming our way!”

The crewmembers crowded to the side of the ship as lightning crackled around them. Bouras’s scaly body seemed to be tapering off, until it abruptly changed to a huge angular shape with ridges, scales, flared horns, and a pair of golden, glaring eyes. Biting its own tail, the serpent’s mountain-sized head split the waves and threw off sheets of water twice as tall as the *Al-Orizin*. As it plowed toward the ship, the reptilian eyes spotted them, and the pupil slits widened to drink in this unexpected sight. Scaled lips curled back to expose ivory fangs as long as mainmasts piercing the flesh of its tail.

Bouras came toward them like a battering ram.

4 *The Discovera*

It was a trial for mutiny. As captain of the *Dyscovera*, Criston Vora could not forgive what Prester Hannes and his followers had done.

Unresolved tensions weighed down the ship more heavily than any anchor. Criston was responsible for the lives of every sailor aboard, and had to ensure that their mission succeeded against all enemies...even those among his crew. The *Dyscovera* had sailed farther than any explorer had ever gone, well beyond the reach of Tierran courts or justice. The captain could rely on no one but himself, even for spiritual guidance.

Prester Hannes was the worst offender of all.

During the senseless uprising against the mer-Saedrans, their Captain's Compass had been smashed, so the *Dyscovera* could not find the way back to Calay. Fortunately, the ancient Aiden's Compass pointed the way to Terravitae. For the first time during their long voyage, the sailors were confident they would reach their holy destination—if they could survive the journey....

In a hazy dawn, Criston summoned the crew to the foredeck for his pronouncement. His ship's boy Javian stood next to the young woman Mia; their support had been invaluable during the fight, helping to free the mer-king's daughters from the mutineers. The Saedran chartsman Sen Aldo na-Curic looked shaken and saddened.

The prester wore his dark Aidenist robe and stood straight, his gaze fiery, his expression unrepentant. He clasped his Fishhook pendant between his palms; Criston had agreed to that small concession when the sailors had bound Hannes's wrists with cords.

Everyone waited for the captain to speak. Criston felt a wave of disgust and disappointment as he faced the haggard mutineers. Some of the men were bruised and battered from the fight. Many looked cowed; only a few remained defiant. The prester looked up at him, unflinching and without anger.

Criston had meant to shout a thundering pronouncement. Instead, his voice dropped low. "I thought you were my friend, Hannes. I trusted you."

"That changed when you betrayed me and betrayed Aiden, Captain."

The crewmembers grumbled at the mutineers, Javian the loudest. Now Criston did shout. "I am the *Dyscovera's* captain. I lead this ship! And you"—he jabbed a finger toward Hannes—"you cost me Kjelnar, our shipwright and first mate, a good man! You cost us our alliance with the mer-Saedrans, who could have been our allies against Uraba."

"Allies are not worth the price of our damnation, Captain," Hannes said, cold and calm. "Those people did not believe in Aiden and refused to hear the truth. You were too blind to see the dangerous course you were setting."

Sen Aldo added the edge of his voice to the captain's. "For centuries the mer-Saedrans studied the seas, the coastlines, the islands. They could have added to our knowledge of the Map of All Things. They could have taken us to Terravitae, but you turned them against us."

"I have all the knowledge I need," Hannes snapped back. "My loyalty is not to the Saedrans or to your map."

"Your loyalty should be to *Tierra*," Criston said.

The prester chuckled. "No, my loyalty is to Ondun and to Aiden. That has always been the case."

“Our enemies are the followers of Urec—not everyone who seems strange to you.” Hannes did not appear to see the difference.

The morning sun beat down on them all, and the *Dyscovera* sailed onward in calm waters. Javian looked nervous and restless. He reached out to squeeze Mia’s hands, and she did not pull away. The cabin boy cleared his throat, making a nervous suggestion. “Captain, if these men give us their word that they’ll follow only your orders, maybe you should give them another chance. They are our shipmates...” Several of the bound mutineers nodded, promising to do just that.

Even Aldo lowered his head. “I’ve had had many philosophical disagreements with the prester, Captain, but I never wanted the man’s death. The pull on Aiden’s Compass is so strong that we must be near Terravita. Perhaps it would be best if we let Holy Joron decide their fates?”

Hannes straightened. “In this matter, Joron is one of the only arbiters I would accept.”

Criston was not in a forgiving mood. “The choice is not up to you, Prester.” Though his heart was torn, he had to be strong. “You yourself advised me, Hannes: when Enoch Dey and Silam Henner tried to rape Mia, *you* were the one who insisted that a captain can show no mercy, that justice is absolute. *You* told me that for the sake of my command, I had to set a harsh example.” Dey had been thrown overboard to his death, while Henner suffered the lash....Even the lash had been a mercy, and now Henner was among those who had turned against the captain. Criston narrowed his eyes. “Surely the crime of mutiny deserves an equally harsh example. By your own advice, I cannot spare you.”

Hannes did not beg for mercy. His face was reddened from exposure to the sun and elements, though the burn scars on his cheek remained pale. He clenched the Fishhook in his hands, praying. He seemed to be daring Criston to make the decision.

Before Criston could pronounce the dreaded sentence, though, an excited shout rang from the lookout nest. “Land ho, Captain—coastline dead ahead!”

5 *Middlesea Coast, Near Sioara*

Holding his Book of Aiden, Ciarlo walked into the Uraban harbor town. He wore a calm smile; he whispered prayers. Despite the previous rejections, he kept believing these people would listen to a stranger.

Larger than a typical fishing village, this town boasted several long docks where Middlesea trading ships could tie up and unload. As he walked along the streets, Ciarlo passed crowded mud-brick homes, a small marketplace, a craftworkers' district, and three Urecari churches built of wood and stone.

He didn't know the name of the town; in fact, he'd never even seen a map of Uraba. Making his way down the coast, he merely followed the roads that took him in the general direction of Olabar, where he hoped to find clues about his sister Adrea. During his travels, he had another calling: when he saw those poor, misguided followers of Urec, he had to preach to them.

Ciarlo went through the village, responding with a benevolent nod to anyone who glanced at him. His faith was a barricade against the resistance and hostility he had encountered so far. Very few of the stubborn Urecari were receptive to his message—in fact, they didn't want to hear him at all—yet he continued nevertheless. Now that he had met the fabled Traveler in person, he was more certain than ever.

The mysterious wandering hermit had appeared in camp one evening, told him stories, and left behind a new volume of handwritten tales. The Traveler had also healed Ciarlo's lame leg—a true miracle. Now Ciarlo felt he had to repay Aiden by preaching his word.

As the Uraban villagers stared at the stranger's pale skin and odd clothing, he raised his hand in blessing. When he showed his Fishhook, they recoiled as if a monster had just appeared in their midst. Women rushed children into their homes and closed the doors.

"I am glad to see you," he said in pidgin Uraban. He understood the language now and could communicate well enough, though his accent marked him as a foreigner. He held up his Tales of the Traveler, knowing these were safer stories, and even Urecari were more likely to listen (though these people erroneously believed that the Traveler was *Urec* rather than Aiden). "I have good news! Let me tell you about Aiden's voyage and his encounter with the Leviathan. Let me tell you—"

A woodworker stepped away from the bench he was building, still holding a hammer. "We don't want to hear it. Go away."

A potter came out of his shop and nudged his young apprentice down the dirt street. "Bring the sikara—now! Tell the mayor, too."

Ciarlo spread his open hand. "There is no need to be frightened. Ondun loved both of His sons. You should not cover your ears against the words of Aiden. We can learn much from the examples of his life." He lifted his book. "Aiden sent me a dream that led me here."

Someone threw a rock, which struck his shoulder with a stinging blow. Startled, he turned to them, his face plaintive. "Why are you afraid?"

Another rock grazed his cheek, though he raised the Traveler's tome to fend it off. More craftsmen emerged from their shops and began shouting, finding bravery in numbers.

Several guards marched down the streets, escorting a pompous-looking man who wore the maroon

olba of a mayor. The official yelled such a rapid stream of Uraban that Ciarlo had difficulty understanding the words.

Ciarlo greeted him, offering explanations even before the man could ask. "I've come here to tell you of wonders."

The man's face flushed. He straightened the maroon olba on his head, tightened the silken sash that held his shirt closed over his potbelly. "You are not welcome here. Why do you come to this town?"

"Because Aiden guides me."

A woman in the red robe of a sikara strode down an intersecting street and said in a loud voice, "Cover your ears against his lies!"

In his travels, Ciarlo had received varied receptions from the sikaras; if not tolerant, at least they had not called for his death or imprisonment. Not yet. This one, though, looked very angry.

The woman's arrival gave the official all the impetus he needed, and he ordered the guards to grab Ciarlo. When he clung to his two books, the mayor yanked the volumes out of his hands. Squinting down at the pages, the mayor saw Tierran writing and looked as if he had swallowed a large insect.

"What is this?"

"The Book of Aiden," Ciarlo said proudly. "I can read it to you. I will teach you, and all of your people."

The mayor threw the books to the dirt. "Gag him and bind his arms. Make him watch while we burn this blasphemy."

At first Ciarlo did not resist, but when the official tore pages from the books to make a pile for burning, he struggled to break free. A rag stuffed into his mouth by one of the guards prevented him from crying out. Without being asked, a lampmaker doused the torn pages with scented oil and set them ablaze. Ciarlo felt great sadness to see the Book of Aiden perish, but far more grievous was the loss of the unique Tales of the Traveler, each sentence in Aiden's own handwriting. Those stories were irreplaceable.

In only moments, the fire consumed the paper. Curls of ash drifted along the streets like funeral veils.

Ciarlo's shoulders sagged. He wanted to weep, but he was not weak, and he would not give up. He tried to convince himself this was merely another trial that Aiden had given him. The roads, and his beliefs, had brought him to this place, and he was here for a reason.

"Throw him down a well!" a shrill woman yelled.

"Why not stone him right here?"

"Or chain him out in the sun until he repents and accepts the word of Urec."

The sikara offered a hard smile. "I *could* instruct him. We have many implements to assist us."

Ciarlo struggled, more frightened by the thought of indoctrination than torture.

"No." The official turned to his guards with a flourish of one hand toward the sea. "The *Moray* came to port last night."

Some of the townspeople chuckled; quite a few seemed disappointed. The guards dragged Ciarlo along the street toward the docks. He tried to speak of Aiden on the way, but the gag muffled his words.

They approached a long galley tied up to the longest dock. Its silken sails were furled. Striding out onto the pier, the mayor whistled toward the ship. "Captain Belluc, are you still in the market for workers? You go through men quickly."

A bronzed man with a single earring came out on deck to greet them. He sized up Ciarlo. "I can always use new men at the oars."

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