



A Queen's Tide

Part 3

Georgia Gloria



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A short story by Georgia Gloria (@msgeorgiagloria)

Kendra led the expedition party northward, gripping the reins steadily and keeping her mare moving at pace. Walter rode the appropriate distance behind her, not wanting to impose on the message she was clearly sending to the councilmen.

After some hours, Arihi and her warriors pulled off the path. Not that Arihi would like to admit to it, but she and her warriors were unable to keep up with Kendra's pace. Preferring steeds made of wood and metal with white sails, their riding ability could not match that of their more land bound friends.

"Your Majesty, I believe our southern friends require a reprieve," said Walter, sidling up to Kendra and gesturing behind them.

"I see, we will need to move off again soon to make the most of the light," Kendra replied. Walter nodded though his mouth was a hard line, hesitating. "Is there something else, Walter?" Kendra asked while turning her mare around.

"No, Your Majesty – I admire the pace." Walter also turned his black gelding around and spurred it on to inform the others of his queen's demands.

Kendra rode over to the carriage, greeting Harry as she dismounted.

"How are you finding the adventure so far?" Harry asked her.

"Adventure?" Kendra asked.

"Crusade? Journey? Youthful rebellion?" Harry prodded.

"I see – this is none of those things, Harry. You saw the soldier and what those blizzards had done to him. We are not on an adventure nor a youthful rebellion, we are merely going north to see if there is anything we can do to stop them."

"I appreciate the clarification my queen, however, I do think to get the most out of this expedition then, you should at least try to recognise the slight rebellion you are exhibiting. That smile alone as you saw the councilmen stare in horror as you rode both legs astride warrants a little self-awareness." Harry leant against the side of the carriage, stretching his arms in front of him.

Kendra tried very hard to not let a smile come onto her face, resulting in a suppressed smirk that entertained and validated Harry.

Kendra changed the subject. "The Blue Lake Castle is a five-day ride away – granted I've only ever made the journey from within a carriage, but I'm aware that we rode well into the night all four nights. I was hoping we could ride hard during the day to allow us some rest in the evenings."

"Hmm that does seem a good plan, though our southern comrades may not be used to such a journey." Harry looked over at the violet-haired queen who was sitting in the meadow investigating the wildflowers around her.

"Well seeing as you are the smart one here, if you have any ideas or an amended plan, please feel free to share it," Kendra said and strode over to Arihi and offered the names of the flowers: daisies, dandelions, lilacs and bluebells. She held a lilac to Arihi's hair, both amused that the colours matched.

Arihi assured Kendra that they would be able to match her pace and get to the Blue Lake Castle in five days' time, though her warriors appeared to have less faith in that promise than she did, but she should not let them be the delaying factor. All remounting, two armoured soldiers rode ahead of Kendra at Walter's request.

The path they followed was winding and well worn, sprawling this way and that through the rolling hills and the meadows that made them. The wild flowers dotted across the bright green horizon and coloured their view as they moved away from the grey coast and its thin silver grass that surrounded the keep.

The first night of camp was a difficult one, though the food had been rationed, bedding provided and watches assigned, most did not sleep. The sore legs, racing minds and unfamiliar tent mates made for difficult dreaming. It became clear that the only decent arrangement would be for the three women to sleep in their own tent. Walter was not content with this arrangement seeing as Kendra would be outnumbered at her most vulnerable when sleeping. They concluded that the horses, their only mode of transport, would be watched by the steel-clad stone keep soldiers rather than the leather-clad southern Isle warriors. Kendra and Arihi had built trust between them, so neither had felt any unease with the arrangement until the possibility of mutiny was pointed out to them.

As the sun rose over the meadow, turning its rippling grass golden, Kendra lay eyes open. She watched as the shadows moved over the side of the tent until she heard her tent mates rustling, alerting her that they too were now awake.

Starting out that morning was difficult, all aware they would have similar starts for the foreseeable future. Walter and soldiers who had made this journey before tried to ease their discomfort, reassuring them that their muscles would relax and their bodies would sleep once they accepted this new routine.

Kendra had devised a schedule of riding at pace with frequent short stops to try and avoid any fatigue or locked limbs. Not wanting to use up their resources and saving the packed tea for when the leaves and berries would inevitably freeze as they worked their way north, Kendra collected leaves and berries when they stopped to create teas. To ease the judgement of the southerners, she would explain each berry, flower and leaf to assure them none were poisonous. Harry would also confirm her findings prior to them being added to the cauldron. Once they had tasted a sweet tea from dandelions petals and hawthorn berries they were quickly impressed and began pointing out plants as they rode past, with Kendra responding if they were edible or not. No one complained if they pointed out the same plant multiple times or if Kendra didn't know, as it took their minds off the riding and filled their second day's ride.

Again no one slept well, though they were quicker to their cots now all arrangements were understood. Unable to let herself rest, Kendra once more watched as the sun rose and the shadows changed, listening out for her tent mates to make movements. With the morning's clear air they began their journey for the



third day. While the meadows were beautiful they were repetitive and the change in landscape that appeared before them that day was a welcome relief and signified they were staying on pace and in the right direction. Where the meadows came to an end a lake spilled out before them with mountains looming either side of it. They would make it to the lake in time to set up camp for their third night, though with such a visible destination Kendra could not decide if it would help motivate or dismay the party and so did not disclose this until they were over halfway there. To her relief the downhill path towards the lake meant they made good ground and all seemed pleased with their progress and accepted gratefully that the lake would be their next camp spot.

“Is the Blue Lake Castle on the other end? Must be a big lake,” Arihi said to Walter, who was riding beside her with Kendra ahead of them.

“This isn’t Blue Lake, but Widows Lake,” Walter replied.

“Widows Lake? Cheery name,” Arihi scoffed.

“You’ll notice there are no boats or docks along the shore?”

“I hadn’t, it looks so still – would be perfect for fishing.”

“No one would dare fish there. There was a plague of some sort many generations ago. Every man who went out on the lake one morning never returned, and no bodies were ever found.”

Arihi laughed at Walter’s serious tone. “What about the women? They probably skipped town.”

“You forget that what a woman can do in this kingdom is different to yours,” Kendra cut in. “The woman eventually went out onto the lake to try and find their men but would often come back changed, accepting their husbands’ deaths. Rumours started to spread and no man wanted to risk it. The town grew superstitious and with there being a decent deer and bird population in these woods ahead they felt they could give up their fish.”

“Exactly, and so no one, not even women, go out onto the Lake in fear of what they might find. And out of respect for the dead they do not fish on its edge either,” Walter concluded.

“If this was so long ago, why then could we not fish on its edge?” Arihi asked, amazed that they could mourn men that she suspected ran away for so long.

“Because, Arihi, we must respect the dead, even if they are not our own,” Kane scolded. Arihi rolled her eyes at her uncle and he wished she hadn’t. It was moments like these that made her easy to undermine, especially in the presence of a queen as poised as Kendra.

“Well where is the town?” Arihi carried on instead.

“On the other side of the lake, but we will be taking the western route and will not pass through it.”

“We still have three days until we reach the Blue Lake,” Kendra said. “We best keep on to make sure we make it before the sun goes down.” With that, Kendra

spurred her mare on, as the party had all slowed down to listen to the story of Widows Lake.

Before the sun rose on their third morning Kendra heard someone leave her tent. The shadows had not yet appeared but there was some light in the sky. She followed the figure down to the lake and was not at all shocked when they removed their hood to show violet hair. Kendra couldn't help but be pleased by Arihi's rule breaking behaviour; by comparison her own rule breaking was positively tame.

"Could you not sleep either?" Kendra asked.

"Your tossing and turning didn't go unnoticed either," Arihi replied.

They walked along the shore until they came to a fallen tree, its trunk smooth from the wind and rain. Sitting together in silence for some time they were both surprised how comfortable they felt in each other's company. Widows Lake, though sombrelly named, was beautiful to behold. Large pine trees lined the right-hand side with oaks on the left. The far end of the lake snaked to the left and disappeared behind them. The distance from where they sat on their smooth log to the other pine lined side was expansive. The still, black water provided a perfect mirror image. The pine trees led up onto the mountain's side giving way to ragged cliffs further up. Those rocky peaks were white with snow - a friendly reminder of why they were journeying here.

Looking towards the oak tree forest they were to ride through, Arihi's legs throbbed at the thought. Her whole body was sore but her legs most of all.

"So what is the path through the forest like?" she ventured.

"It's actually quite pleasant, though it can be a little maddening as it all looks the same until you reach the other side."

"Maddening? I find it hard to picture you 'maddened'."

Kendra smiled. "I'm mad most of the time."

Arihi looked at Kendra and guessed at the pain and frustration she hid. "Well you're more than welcome to come and live in the Isles. No man would dare tell you how to ride a horse there."

Kendra could not help but laugh in response, before apologising for her outburst. "I'm sorry, I haven't laughed like that in a long time. When you get the chance, you should speak more with Harry – I think the two of you would get along."

"He does seem like an odd addition to this travel party, but I suppose it is important to have people you trust with you."

"Hmm, and you trust everyone in your party?"

"Of course, don't you?"

"I trust them to do what they think is right for their kingdom, but not necessarily what I want them to do."

"Aren't those meant to be the same thing?"

"Only if they agree with you."

"Ah, I see." Arihi stood and walked to the water's edge. "You know I've never met a body of water I didn't like – but I have to admit I do get a strange feeling from this



lake.” She looked around and saw the grass and wildflowers swaying gently in the breeze and turned back to the perfectly still lake. “How does it stay so still?”

“No idea, but I’m sure Walter has a theory or a folktale to tell you about it.”

“So”—Arihi turned back to face Kendra—“what is going on between you and mister serious?” Arihi wiggled her eyebrows.

“Mister serious? I’ll have to tell Harry you called Walter that.”

“They are the only two you call by their first names, and Walter seems to always be very close to you... can’t help but wonder.”

“What are you trying to insinuate?”

“Nothing... just that he seems very fond of you.”

“I’m his queen, and he was close with my parents.”

“Hmm, yes he is a bit older than you, but I’ve seen bigger age gaps.”

Kendra shifted in her seat and looked her friend in the eyes, her brows knitted together. “There is no age gap because there is nothing going on between us other than a loyal royalist and his queen.”

“Sure, we can go with that.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Like I said – sure.”

Arihi could not resist smirking at the red-haired queen as she fidgeted with her skirts and didn’t make eye contact but instead stared out at the water.

“We should get back before they think the lake has taken us,” Arihi said finally.

They walked back making small talk about the tea Kendra would make that morning and how some women would grind up the red berries and paint it on their lips, both laughing at the notion but noting it would probably look quite nice on some women.

When they returned to the camp the others had started to rise. Walter saw them walking back together and concern grew on his face – which Harry was only too happy to point out.

“Feeling left out?” he jibed.

“Left out of what?” Walter tore his gaze towards Harry.

“Replaced maybe then?” Harry offered.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Walter sniped. “I think it is smart of Her Majesty to be making allies with their queen, it will benefit our trade alliance.”

“You really do have an answer for everything,” Meera remarked as she joined them, sitting beside Harry.

“I told you – I’m not sure he even knows he’s doing it,” Harry said mockingly.

“Glad to see Queen Kendra is not the only one making friends.” Walter gestured to Harry and Meera. Both nodded to each other in acceptance of this remark. Sitting only a short distance from each other for several days in the carriage could only result in three outcomes: friendship, indifference or hatred.

"We share a mutual interest in knowledge and learning. Don't feel too bad, Walt, not everyone can be as interesting as I am."

"Interesting is one way of putting it," Walter retorted.

"What are you lot talking about?" Kane ambled over to them.

"Perhaps you and my late husband's brother would get along. Both are strategic thinkers and have a heavy hand on their respective queens?" mused Meera, looking from one to the other.

Walter and Kane looked each other up and down and with no further discussion marched in the opposite direction of each other.

"May have been too much of a stretch," Harry said.

"They are very similar, though their approach and appearance could not be more opposite." Meera shrugged. Kane's broad frame, brown skin and hair walked in one direction while Walter's lean frame, jet black hair and pale skin walked in the other.

"I'm not sure their end goals are quite the same, or at least I hope not."

"What is Walter's goal? Is it not to be in power?" Meera asked.

"In a way yes, but Kendra's late parents were in talks with him on the subject of marriage," Harry explained. "There were no kingdoms we needed to ally with and he is a wealthy lord – not to mention the late king's close friend – and he wanted to be sure she would not be with anyone who would mistreat her."

"You say that as if that were kind of him? In the Isles we marry for love, not power. Does Queen Kendra know of their deal?" Meera asked disapprovingly.

"I'm not sure, if I'm honest. When her parents passed he was immediately at her side and his feelings for her are no secret – but whether she knows there is more to it is unclear."

"Should you not tell her? Would Walter make her keep such promises?"

"I've known Walt a long time, and the way he acts around her I can see there is real affection, no one can deny that, but he does also have a thirst for power and it was to be a beneficial marriage for him too. Becoming king is a big and uncommon step up for a lord." Harry watched as Walter walked towards Kendra and he saw Arihi wink at her and walk away, leaving her alone with Walter. "But, perhaps the feeling is mutual. She has not sent him away or rebuffed him in any way. Though she is still very young and may not be aware of what this kind of attention means."

"I wouldn't underestimate a young woman such as her so quickly. She is bright and may be more political than you think," Meera said. They watched Kendra lightly touch Walter's arm and manoeuvre him around so they were both looking at the lake and pointing to the mountain. "Perhaps it is her who is hungry for power and wants to keep it for herself. Ask yourself what you would do, would you rebuff him immediately and make an enemy? A powerful one that knew almost everyone in your world and could potentially harm you if he so desired? Or would you give him small encouragements to keep him on side but make no promises yourself until a better option came along?"



“Or she was scared and grabbed the arm of the first familiar person she could find?” Harry mused watching as Kendra continued to be very much in control of the interaction between herself and Walter.

“Or you are underestimating a woman who has grown up in a system that she knew she would need to outsmart?” Meera challenged.

“I do prefer your theory to mine. She is an admiral young queen, as you’ve seen.” Harry paused and turned to Meera. “I agree if she does not know about the promise of marriage, she should be told. But, if she does know and Walt were to find out...well we may find out why he was useful to the king and had no friends in court but very much had their respect. You asked if he would make her keep a promise her father had made, and I’m afraid I do not know.”

“You are right,” Meera said. Harry looked at her, surprised to hear this. “Kane’s goal is different. Though he may have liked to be king, he does not seek it now. He wants Arihi to take her role seriously and ensure that she makes the right choices, but they never did see eye to eye. Since she was little, she would rile him and they were almost always at odds. But there was always love there and they could put it aside when they needed to. Kane wants power for his family and by extension himself, he does not want it only for himself.”

“I think Walt would like to say his motives were the same, but I think we know he is after his own power and perhaps the affection of a lovely young queen,” Harry said. They both sat and watched as Walter and Kendra walked back to her tent, where he stood dutifully outside until she remerged ready for the day’s ride.

Harry and Meera walked to their carriage and Meera asked, “Why would the king promise his throne to someone who wasn’t a royal or of some influence? I’m sure he’s a wealthy lord, but no more than any other, I’m sure?”

“That is a bit of a story, but seeing as we have the time,” Harry sat in the plush interior of the carriage and looked out the window, watching as Walter helped Kendra onto her mare despite her waving him off. “When we were younger, the king, Walt and I found ourselves caught unawares by some travelling soldiers. Our late king was just a prince then and while most know him to be very structured and serious that was not his natural disposition but rather something beaten into him by his father and these soldiers. His father had sent a troop of his own soldiers to track him down and assault him as punishment for not travelling with an escort as his father had said,” Harry looked down remembering the attack. “We all fought as best we could but the soldiers drove us backwards and we fell into a hidden ravine, covered by the fresh snow. When I awoke, I found myself on a bank, Walt pulling the prince out of the water. He had saved both our lives, and how he didn’t freeze neither of us knew. After that he and the prince became inseparable, and the old king died not long after. The prince became a king, Walt his right-hand man. And I lost myself in the Scriptorium.

“I had barely spoken to either of them until Kendra walked into the Scriptorium. I used to sit beside the king during the council sessions, dutifully scribing, but we

never spoke, except the session after Kendra had been born. He told me he had promised her hand to Walt and that he knew I would understand why. Frankly I didn't, the king had given Walt a title, lands and a position in court. Why he also needed to give the hand of his only daughter was beyond me, other than he assumed he would eventually have a son."

Harry watched as Walter mounted his own horse and commanded the soldiers into formation around the rest of the party.

"Walt and I may not get along as we once did, but he would not be the worst king," Harry concluded and looked at Meera.

Meera shook her head. "A man after power should never have it, one that is thrust into it will always use it more wisely as he knows how dangerous it can be." Meera looked out at Kane and Arihi who were side by side on their steeds and for the first time in some time she found herself thinking of her husband. While she liked to think of him kindly, he was a man who wanted power and to conquer. She knew if he had led the fleet to that stone coastal keep, he would not have stopped until he was either victorious or dead. Stubborn, she used to call it, but there was pride there too and she saw that in Walter. Sighing with relief, she knew her daughter did not. She may be stubborn and have pride, but it wasn't driven in the same way.

The carriage lurched forward and they began their day's journey along the riverside forest path.

Along the path, Kendra looked upward, the trees standing tall around them created an archway of branches, twigs and leaves. How proud she was to be able to see it properly from a horseback rather than straining her neck to see it outside the carriage window. The last time she was on this path she had not wished to look out the window at all. Dressed in black and heading into an unknown future. She had not meant to become a queen without a king, but her parents' early passing made her just that. While she wished her parents could still be here, she couldn't help but appreciate how it allowed her freedoms such as watching the sun shift through the branches of the tree archway.

Arihi made it look natural, normal and expected that she would be a ruling queen. Kendra did not feel the same. It was expected for her to become a queen, but her role was to be seen and not heard, a symbol of purity and beauty for the people of their kingdom. She had been incredibly grateful to her mother, whose free spirit allowed her some respite. Her mother had also given her time. Keeping suitors and offers of marriage at bay, persuading the king to wait until Kendra reached the age of nineteen to wed. Little did her parents know the power that would give her. If they could see her now, one would be appalled and the other cheering. How they made their marriage work she had no idea.

A soldier asked the name of the tall trees and Kendra was pulled back into reality. She turned her body around to answer and saw Walter, Harry and Meera all staring



at her. She smiled and answered the soldier. They continued their naming game until the sun began to drop below the mountains across the lake.

"These mountains are shortening our days," Kane grumbled as they set up camp for the night in a grove just off the path.

"Is it just me or is there more snow on those peaks than this morning?" Arihi asked. Everyone turned to look through the trees at the mountain tops. She was right.

"We should have a fire prepared in the queens' tent," Walter instructed.

"A fire in a tent? How does that work?" Arihi queried.

"Feel free to follow the men and they can show you," Walter said. If you had only heard his voice you might have thought him genuine, but his tensed jaw gave him away.

"I'll see it later," Arihi brushed it off and walked towards the lake instead, Kane following her.

"Everything okay?" Kendra asked Walter as she watched them walk away.

"Sorry, Your Majesty, the lack of sleep must be getting to me," Walter apologised.

"I understand. To be truthful I am not getting as much rest as I would like either."

"Is there anything I can get you that will help?"

"I think I will make everyone tea; that should help us all. I spotted lavender just a ways back."

"Allow me to collect it for you."

"That won't be necessary."

"I insist – it would be nice to have a few moments to myself, in truth."

"Of course, then I would be most grateful."

Walter gave her a short bow as he always did and turned on his heel, striding back along the path.

Staring up at the snow-covered peaks Arihi felt a chill travel down her spine. Very rarely was there snow in the Isles. It had snowed three days after she was born but not again since. As if reading her mind Kane placed a blanket around her shoulders.

"You know, we could never decide whether to call you Poli'ahu for bringing the snowfall or Pele because it never came again." Kane smiled at the memory.

"I think that's the first time I've seen you smile since we landed on that grey pebbly shore" Arihi smirked.

"It takes something significant for me to smile, it's true."

"So, which did you think I was?"

"Pele of course, full of fire."

"Chaotic and destructive, oh you flatter me, Uncle."

"All of the Gods have their place and need in our world, no one is better than any other."

"Are you trying to compliment me?"

"I wouldn't dare – your head is big enough." They both laughed. Arihi was surprised by her uncle's ease. Though she had noticed that since they left the stone keep he had seemed quieter.

"You haven't insulted me for days, I was starting to miss it," Arihi gently pried. He sighed and looked up at the mountain tops.

"I have found that when we become quiet it allows others to talk – this whole nonsense about the blizzards doesn't sit right with me."

"You think they are making it up? You saw that young soldier and his frozen limbs."

"I don't think they are making it up, I saw their queen's reaction – the doctor said a blizzard took her parents as well."

"Oh, that's awful."

"What doesn't sit right is why so few people came with us and why it took the young queen to defy her lords to do something about it. If you were the leaders of a land wouldn't you want to know what was going on?"

"Maybe they don't believe it themselves?"

"It took the lives of their king and queen, would that not be proof enough?"

"From what it looked like, if it was Queen Kendra's idea then they have to disagree on principle. The look her guards gave her when she and I spoke that first week in the keep, they were ashamed of it but they knew she was right. Besides they are much too large to ride horses at speed anyway." Arihi shifted from one foot to the other. Looking out across the lake she could make out the wooden town houses on the other side, a small glimpse of humanity amongst the vast wilderness around them.

"Hmm, well we should take it seriously and I'm glad they asked us to accompany them."

"I think she felt she had to, to show us the trade alliance would be fine and so none of those fat lords got any ideas about picking up knives in the night."

"As if any of those fat lords could swing a knife."

"I heard Queen Kendra swung a sword at them," Arihi said with a sly smile and raised eyebrows, her grey eyes teasing.

"That is hard to imagine." Kane glanced at Arihi, his expression curious.

"Why? She's taller than me and I bet she's stronger than those dresses make her look."

"True, those dresses make their women look like they might tip over at any point."

"The men do look at her differently because of it though." Arihi glanced back at the campsite through the trees behind them.

"Perhaps, though I hope they would look respectfully at any queen, dress wearing or not."

"Sometimes I can't tell which they prefer or respect more."

"Your warriors respect you, especially after you went on the battlefield with them."



“It’s not our warriors I worry about.” Arihi looked down at the pebbles at her feet. She had always been the child queen, inexperienced and careless. She had worked hard at changing that and was unafraid of conflict, so leading her warriors into battle felt like the easiest way to persuade them of her ability to rule. Since being in this new strange land she had started to wonder if her ability was enough. Arihi opted to change the subject. “How long do you think we will be at the Blue Lake Castle for?”

“I’m not sure, but I think it’s best if we keep quiet and see what they churn up,” Kane said warningly. “I’m telling you, something odd is going on and I doubt it’s Poli’ahu who is bringing this snow.”

“You think the snow is unnatural or how they are handling it?”

“Both,” Kane answered, his mouth a hard line.

“Well seeing as you were named after our creator I guess I better take your word for it,” Arihi joked, but her uncle’s expression stayed the same. “I’ll be quiet – might be a struggle for me of course, but I’ll do my best.”

“Keep your gods in mind, Arihi, I know you aren’t the biggest believer, but keep them close – you never know when you will need them.” Kane’s serious tone stayed with Arihi, as she left the lake’s side. That night she dreamt of rivers of lava and snow melting as it landed in them.

Kendra couldn’t tell if it was her lavender tea or the fact it was the last night in the tents, but the energy of the camp the next morning was palpable. It made her excited, and relieved that her actions and purpose had so far gone quite smoothly. Not that anyone would say anything else, but this excursion had been at her insistence and if it had ended badly it would be her responsibility.

While Arihi could easily blame her weariness on the day-long rides she knew it wasn’t that which tired her. The conversations and eeriness at Widows Lake left her feeling relieved as they rode away from its edge towards the Blue Lake. Arihi preferred sleeping in the tents to the stone keep, but she also had to admit she was looking forward to a warmer sleeping environment that night.

The troop rode along the forest path until the tree archway gave way to a valley between two mountains. The excitement of the morning fell from their faces like snow off a roof. The mountain on the left was covered in green pine trees, the craggy rock jutting upwards a deep grey arrow towards the sky. The mountain on the right, however, was almost completely white. A few strides off the path would have you stepping into snow covered grass at the base of the mountain.

“Gods,” Kane sighed.

“Gods,” Arihi and the Isle warriors echoed.

“Let’s stop here for our midday break,” Kendra said swiftly, urging her mare onto the green grass to the left. She knew she needed to keep calm, but her heart was racing. It was clear to all now – this snow and the reports of sudden blizzards, was not normal.

Their midday break was the quietest one yet. No one even asked Kendra what flowers she had used in the tea that was handed around. When Harry had stepped out of the carriage and seen the mountains, he said nothing. Kendra watched him as he quietly drank his tea and ate his meal, studying him as if his concerned face would somehow give her answers. She wasn't the only one. Kane knew he was the brains of the operation and he knew this silence was unlike the small man's usual disposition. The only person who was brave enough to go and investigate the snow had been Arihi.

Walking over to it, unable to sit among the silent troops any longer, Arihi knelt down on the green grass at the snow's edge. Moving her head this way and that, given her very limited experience with snow, she had no idea what she was looking for or how this snow might differ from that in the Isles, but it was better than continuing to sit with everyone else in silence.

"Have you seen snow before?" Walter asked, having also walked over to the snow.

"No." Arihi stood up, he must not have enjoyed sitting in silence either.

"I've seen a lot of snow in my life, and while I've never seen it on a landscape like this it does appear to be normal snow." Walter bent down and scooped it up in his hand and then dusted it off. "Just frozen water, yet it causes so much chaos."

Arihi thought about the stories of Poli'ahu and how snow was not considered chaotic but peaceful, calming in opposition to Pele's fiery demeanour. "What would bring the snow this far down? Could it just be strong winds pulling it down the mountain?"

Walter gestured to the clean line between green grass and snow. "Wind would leave it scattered; it would not be so separate."

"Perhaps someone drew a cart over it to make it so straight?"

"Perhaps." Walter nodded, though Arihi knew she was grasping at straws.

Hearing the camp starting to pack up, they both returned to the silent troop. The only talk that accompanied them on their journey that day was the riders comforting their horses as even they seemed unnerved walking along the valley path.

The relief and energy the troop had started the day with returned when they came to the end of the valley. The two mountains gave way, heading in opposite directions creating a mountainous horizon all around them. In the middle of the vast landscape was a bright blue lake and a stone castle on its far edge. The snow had also receded to the mountain peaks where it belonged, creating a beautiful border of the vastness. The green plains around the lake and castle waved with a light breeze, the water on the lake rippled as the breeze reached its surface.

Kendra smiled; this was her home. Though she had been moved around from keep to keep her whole life, this had always been her favourite and where she had asked to be for her studies. Rarely going beyond its mountainous horizon since she was twelve, she had loved it. She didn't mind her tutors or the lessons, though dull. It



was a peaceful routine existence and her favourite moments had been when she could walk along the lakes edge or ride her mare through the fields towards the mountains. She had always wondered what would happen if she kept walking or riding beyond the safe edges of those mountains.

Never had she imagined it would have happened as it did, leaving dressed in black. The grey grit of the coastal stone keep had matched her disposition when she first arrived. She had hated it there. Looking at the Blue Lake and its castle, she knew this visit would be nothing like her time here before.

She rode ahead of the troop, her mare galloping along the lake. Kendra's bright red hair pulled behind her, tears streaming from her eyes not having time to land on her cheek but fly past her. The green grass to her left and the blue lake to her right, she looked like a fiery arrow having been shot from a bow across the expanse.

The troop came to a stop. Walter, Kane and Arihi halted at the sight of her tearing along the lake.

"This is where Queen Kendra lived, and where she last saw her parents ," Walter explained.

"I didn't realise she could ride like that," Kane said.

"How restricted she must feel having not ridden like that since she was last here," Arihi murmured.

"Quite," Walter said just as quietly.

Once Kendra was almost at the castle the troop moved on, making its way at a crawling speed by comparison.

Before Kendra reached the castle she pulled up and dismounted by the lake. She knelt down and cupped its cool water in her hands and drank a large gulp. Patting her tear-stained face with her cool, damp hands she felt like a weight had lifted off her shoulders. She had made it home, she had safely brought her troop here, a place where she was already considered in charge. There were no lords or foreign queens here. The people living and working here had always respected her and when she had been named queen upon her parents being brought back down from the north they had knelt before her. No one in this troop had seen her then, not even Walter, who had been at the coastal keep taking part in the council. She remounted her mare and rode through the castle's iron gates.

"Your Majesty!" exclaimed a maid. Kendra recognised her instantly.

"Sara!" Kendra dismounted and wasted no time hugging her childhood friend.

"I'm so glad you've returned – we could hardly believe it when we received your letter."

"I'm glad it got here before us; I am afraid I drove our troop at some pace."

"You are only shortly behind it, Your Majesty."

"Speaking of – is everything arranged for the troop?" Kendra asked.

"Yes, and Cook has been preparing food for your stay as well as rations for when you return to the coastal keep." Kendra grimaced at the idea of leaving again so soon. "Though we all hope you may decide to stay here instead?" Sara ventured.

"I am afraid I'm not sure what this stay will bring or where we will go," Kendra said. She knew there would be many questions to follow on how long they would be staying and what the next step was. But, for now, they could concentrate on being here and making use of the facilities and the extensive library.

"Your Majesty!" A group of maids and stable boys had arrived in the courtyard; their beaming faces at the sight of Kendra warmed her. She greeted them one by one as they bowed and curtsied. Word of her arrival spread fast throughout the castle and before too long all the staff were in the courtyard bowing or curtsying to their queen. This was the scene the troop were confronted with when they arrived passing through the courtyard's iron gates. They entered and dismounted; the castle staff paid them no mind until Kendra had greeted them all and instructed them to look after the troop and they listened to her every word before they acted.

"Hmm, I think they are quite fond of their queen," Harry remarked as the stable boys took the horses and led them away.

"She looks much more comfortable here," Meera added. Both watched patiently as Kendra gave instructions to the staff.

Walter stood next to Sara as the staff began to disperse, taking the horses or troop members with them. Kendra nodded as Arihi walked by, following a maid to the eastern part of the castle with Kane, Meera and their warriors following. Arihi winked at Kendra, who couldn't help but smile. Arihi was pleased to see Kendra like this, it reminded her of the woman who had sat opposite her in the council hall. Kendra always stood tall but there was a difference in her stance that wasn't present at the coastal keep. Pride perhaps, Arihi wondered as she followed a maid up the stairs to her new stone-lined room.

While the Blue Lake Castle was still colder than the huts and ships she preferred, she recognised this stone keep was much nicer than the first. There were wall hangings, paintings, flowers in vases and rugs throughout. When she was presented with her room she was happy to see it was also much smaller than the one she had slept in at the coastal keep. It was the size you would expect a room to be, it fit a large enough bed, a fireplace and two chairs. She walked over to the window and looked out over the Blue Lake back towards the way they had come. She could understand why Kendra would prefer it here, and the people seemed to prefer Kendra here too. No fat lords looking down on her. Arihi couldn't help laughing at the thought of one of those lords trying to ride as Kendra had along the lake's edge; their horse would have thrown them for sure.

Back in the courtyard, Harry and Walter stood an arm's length away from each other, everyone else having been escorted to their rooms. Harry puffed out his cheeks and let a deep breath fall out.

"Have you been to the Blue Lake recently?" Harry asked.

"Not since you were last here," Walter replied, tight-lipped.

"Hmm," Harry replied, looking around.



“Excuse me,” Walter said and started towards Kendra.

“That must be the fastest I’ve offended you,” Harry said to Walter’s back. Walter had heard him but kept walking towards Kendra. Standing the appropriate distance away from her, he waited until she was ready to address him. When she turned and saw him standing there her face fell ever so briefly. She placed a dutiful smile on and asked if he was well. He asked if there was anything he could help with, but a maid interrupted them claiming the cook needed Her Majesty’s attention.

“Perhaps you could show Harry where the library is, if you know it?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll see you at dinner,” she placated him as he was unable to hide his displeasure at the request.

“Of course,” he said, turning on his heel back towards Harry who looked too smug for his own good.

“She does seem busy here,” Harry jibed.

“Do you know where the library is?”

“Sure I do.”

“Great – walk yourself there, would you,” Walter said sharply. He instructed a nearby stable boy to fetch his horse.

“Something the matter, Walt?”

“Of course not,” Walter muttered.

Harry nodded and along with the help of two maids and three stable boys took his books to the library. If Kendra had looked like a fiery arrow, then Walter looked like a black bullet parting the green grass as he rode away from the castle and its blue lake.

Up one set of stairs next to the dining hall, Harry opened the doors to the library. It had been far too long since he had been here. Moving his hand over the carved wooden door, he breathed in that familiar scent of dust and parchment. While he enjoyed his work in the Scriptorium, it had nothing on this library. A two-storeyed room bordered by shelves filled to the brim with scrolls, leather bound books and curious knick-knacks. Next to the stairs to the second floor was a large farmhouse table with ink and parchment placed neatly upon it, waiting for him.

Thanking the maids and stable boys for carrying in the books, he asked for a candle, matches and some tea. They dutifully nodded and closed the door behind them, leaving him in the centre of the room. Harry turned around slowly, drinking it in, and he wished for a moment that he was just visiting. Here to enjoy the Blue Lake, the castle’s hospitality and the marvellous collection of books and scrolls. Allowing himself a moment to wish, Harry ran his hand along the leather spines and paused on one. Coming back to the reality of why he was there, he noticed the title engraved on its spine, *Northern Rivers Region Crop Reserve*. He placed the heavy volume on the table, pulled up a chair and opened its cover.

Walter reached the edge of the grass plain and dismounted his horse, patting its sweating neck. He dropped the reins and let the horse rest and graze. Walking into the tree line, he ran his hand through his thick black hair. A sore point for him growing up, with his father and siblings all having golden locks and he the lone child who inherited his mother's dark hair. He also had her blue eyes, and while his other siblings did too, his seems brighter framed by dark lashes. The youngest boy, he was an easy target for his brothers' taunts. His father was always suspicious of him and disdained the way his mother coddled him.

Planting himself at the base of a large pine tree, he looked back through the trees towards the castle. He knew his frustration was getting the better of him; his impatience had been palpable to everyone around him. To everyone else he looked like a pestering child always pulling at Kendra's skirts. While he did want to pull at her skirts he had hoped it would be in a different way and that she would want him to. Sighing and letting his hair fall over his eyes, he knew he needed to collect himself. He knew he was not a pestering child but a man who wanted what was promised to him. How inconvenient her parents' passing had been. Still, he was grateful he could be by her side and help her through the process of becoming queen.

She had picked up on his intentions of course; he didn't hide them. He knew he was quite a few years her senior, similar in age to her father and the lords of the council. But he didn't look like them and he knew it. While only thirty-seven, he had fallen into the category of middle-aged men who had surrounded her father. The king, what a man he had turned out to be. When they first met, they were stupid teenagers, the king several years older, but Walter had been taller and caught the king's interest when he had been riding much like he did just now. Requesting they ride together, and Walter showed him all the best places near his hometown, the king promptly asked him to accompany him back to the coastal keep as his squire.

Delighted at the prospect, Walter left with the soon-to-be king without ever looking back. He had never returned to his hometown since. If they journeyed a few days further north, they would reach it and his irritability grew as they neared it. He could just hear his father's voice in his head. *Errand boy to the queen, how disappointing you are.* Envisioning his mother and what she must look like after so long, he let a single tear creep down his cheek and drop off his jaw.

The problem remained, did Kendra know about her father's promise to him or did she just think him interested? He had planned on proposing after her first council session, but those heathens and their brightly coloured hair and ships had spoiled that. He knew she would say 'not now' if he broached the subject while she was on this crusade and he needed to calm himself down so they could return to the coastal keep and things could move on, the two of them together, without the rest of them with their scrolls and witty remarks, their spears and leather armour.

He rose to his feet and an icy wind blew his hair off his face. Clenching and releasing his jaw, he unfurled his fists and fetched his grazing horse. Riding back to



the castle, the icy wind swirled around him, the coolness on his face reviving him. He would remain calm. He would come out victorious. He would let Kendra have this adventure and assist as best he could, and then when they returned to the coastal keep he would have her as his bride.

Sara and Kendra had climbed the stairs to their favourite part of the castle. A little turret that overlooked the lake. There was only one way up or down which meant they couldn't be snuck up on and it was too far for anyone to hear them talk.

"So, I'm happy you're here, but I am curious as to why," Sara said.

"Has there been any unexpected snow here lately?" Kendra asked.

"Snow? Not really, just the dusting on the mountains, but that's normally there."

"We've had reports of more blizzards."

"Like the one that..." Sara hesitated. "The one that your parents came across?"

"Exactly like that."

"Oh." Sara wasn't sure what to say next. She had been there when Kendra waved goodbye to her parents as they ventured north and again when they were brought back to her. It was unusual for the dead to be covered together, but they had been frozen together and no-one could bring themselves to separate them. They were buried like that, arm in arm, in the churchyard.

"I've taken flowers to them every day for you," Sara decided to say.

"Thank you." Kendra hugged her friend and they stayed like that for some time, shifting only once they saw the black bullet returning to the castle.

"You know – he's quite handsome." Sara caught on to Kendra's shifting.

"He's almost the same age as my father."

"He's younger than him and besides, your father was young when he had you."

"So?"

"So, it's not an accurate comparison."

"Accurate comparison? Have you suddenly had more experience with men than last time I saw you?"

"Well, actually there have been quite a few men passing down this way."

"Oh well, my mistake, you must be an expert."

"There was quite a cute one, he had the blondest hair and he wasn't much different in age then your Lord Walter." Sara made kissing noises and Kendra poked out her tongue.

"Honestly, I have no idea what I am doing," Kendra confided.

"Well don't wait too long, the good ones don't stay single forever."

"And you are so sure Walter is a good one?"

"Oh, I meant the blonde." Sara laughed and together they giggled and discussed the blonde stranger and his time at the Blue Lake Castle. Once Sara was satisfied and allowed Kendra to return to the rest of the castle, she headed to the library.

The stack of books and scrolls Harry had taken off the shelves had grown, and piles laid around him when Kendra entered the library. She had always loved it there. While her lessons may have at times been boring, she did love the environment she was in and had spent too many hours looking over the spines of the books.

"You look right at home," Kendra said.

Harry turned in his chair to face her. "As do you."

"Found anything interesting?"

"Interesting – yes. Helpful – no."

"Sara said there hasn't been any unusual snow here, but there have been more village people than usual coming down from the north." Kendra pulled up a chair and sat at the table.

"The crop ledges match the ones we went through in the Scriptorium, so at least we know they aren't holding out on us."

"I had not realised that was a possibility."

"Believing the best in people is a good quality for a princess, but a queen may need to be more sceptical," Harry said candidly. Kendra was slightly taken aback, but not at his candour but the seriousness with which he said it.

"I will keep that in mind." Kendra opened the ledger next to her.

"Forgive me, being in this castle just reminds me of some difficulties from my youth," Harry said by way of explanation.

"Me too."

"You are still in your youth, not like old men like me."

"You are not old, Harry."

"No? Oh well if Your Majesty declares it, it must be true."

"If only I could declare there would be no more snowstorms."

"Ah, now that would be handy." Harry chuckled, waving his hands around.

"Snowstorms will now stop."

They both smiled and sighed. Kendra was grateful to have Harry and his uncanny ability to make her feel at ease. Though she suspected that came from his own sense of unease, like he wanted to make sure everyone else felt better than he.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Kendra asked, looking around at the volumes and scrolls sprawled around.

"I thought perhaps if we could look at previous ledgers, there could be a pattern, like this happens every forty years and it is actually normal but everyone has just either died or forgotten."

"Okay, would you like me to read some ledgers?"

"Perhaps you could try to find some of the older ledgers and go through those? I believe they are up there." Harry pointed to the second floor above the door.

"Of course." Kendra stood, grateful to feel like she hadn't brought the troop here for nothing. If she could find a weather pattern in these ledgers then that would justify the journey and help to reassure everyone of what these blizzards are – just routine weather.



As Kendra searched the ledgers on the shelf, the library door swung open with force.

"Found your place then?" Walter asked as he strode into the room.

"Work out all your frustration?" Harry asked.

"What frustration would that be?" Walter counted, leaning against the table.

"My mistake, you look completely *unfrustrated*," Harry replied.

"So, do you need any help with your books or should I go be useless somewhere else?"

"Useless somewhere else I think, I already have help." Harry gestured to where Kendra was standing, ledger in hand above the door Walter had walked through. Walter shot up off the table and bowed towards Kendra. She bit her lip and smiled at him before shifting uncomfortably under his gaze. He turned to face Harry.

"Well then as you have all the help one could want, I will check on things in the dining hall." Walter shook his head at Harry and walked off.

"Have fun!" Harry called after him and then looked up at a very disapproving queen.

"Harry, why do you do things like that to him?" Kendra asked.

"What else am I meant to do when the two of you act as you do?"

Kendra said nothing in response, her expression changed from one of finger-wagging to a composed look of indifference.

"Never mind – my mistake again it would seem." Harry put his head down to read his ledger, but his snide smile was visible even from behind, emanating from across the room. Kendra sighed and went back to looking at the ledgers on the shelf.

A maid knocked on Arihi's room, informing her that the evening's meal was ready in the dining hall. Meera had joined her daughter and they both followed the maid to the dining hall. It was a grand room but retained the warmth of the rest of the castle. Comfortable grandeur. Antlers lined the wood panelled walls; pathways of carpet marked the way around the long dining table. Steaming plates of meat, crusty brown bread, vegetables piled high and cups filled with mead awaited them at their seats. Walter was ordering the staff around to ensure everything was as it should be and offered his apologies to Meera and Arihi if it was not.

Being the first ones in the room, Arihi took the seat at the opposite end of the table to where Walter was fussing, assuming that would be the head where his queen would sit. Meera sat beside her and soon after Kane, Harry, Kendra and Walter were all seated at the long table. Kendra and Arihi smiled awkwardly at each other from across the wooden expanse between them.

"Do we need to sit so far away from them?" Kendra asked Walter.

"Queen Arihi sat herself, Your Majesty."

"Perhaps, as it is just three on either side, we could each sit on one side in the middle?" Kendra asked.

"If you wish." Walter rose from his seat and instructed the staff to move the seats so there were three opposite each other in the middle, before walking down to stand beside Kane and inform them of the new arrangement.

"Great idea," Arihi said, rising from her seat immediately.

Once both parties were seated, Arihi and Kendra's smiles were genuine. Kendra raised her glass and made a toast to unexpected friends and the trade alliance. Arihi and Kendra clinked cups, as did Meera and Harry, while Walter and Kane raised their glasses into the air. Meera and Harry chatted easily across the table, discussing the multi-god and singular-god religions of their kingdoms. Kendra and Arihi listened intently, not even realising they had different religions. Kane was also engaged and explained the origin of his name in their deity and creator known simply as 'Man' or Kane. He also told the story of Poli'ahu and Pele and their great war over the mountain top. He resisted implying something was amiss with the gods in this kingdom if the snow was going unchecked, Harry however did not.

"Where is our Pele, I wonder," Harry laughed.

"Perhaps with your queen made of fire she will extinguish it with her tresses of lava," Arihi joked, gesturing at Kendra's vibrant locks. Walter had been leaning back in his seat, not partaking in the conversation but burning holes in the side of Kendra's head with his eyes. With this notion his eyes moved down her back, taking in her waist-long tresses of lava.

"Don't worry, I'm sure they don't actually burn, even if one is a little icy," Arihi continued, looking at Walter. Kendra sighed and gave Arihi a pleading look. *There had been a snide comment from Sara, Harry and now Arihi, could they not mind their own business?*

"What causes your god to go to war?" Meera asked Harry promptly.

"Pretty much everything." Harry laughed and explained how his god liked to smite, or at least threaten it through the church. Arihi and Kane re-joined the conversation, but Kendra and Walter were frozen in place for the remainder of the meal. Each guest excused themselves from the table to retire for the night until it was just Kendra and Walter remaining.

"You've barely eaten, is the food not satisfactory?" Walter asked, noting her full plate and breaking the silence.

"The food is lovely," Kendra replied, taking a bite of the brown bread. "You have not eaten much either,"

"I'm not hungry," Walter replied, still leaning back in his seat. As Kendra placed the bread back on her plate, a lock of hair fell across her face. Without hesitating, Walter lifted his hand to it, smoothing it back in place. Kendra's breath caught and her eyes darted around the room. All the staff had left; it was just them alone in this great hall. Her stomach flipped. Dropping his hand, he sighed and rose to his feet.

"Would you like me to escort you to your room, or should I fetch your maid?" Walter asked, back to formalities.

"No, I will be fine on my own," she said and rose.



Standing upright, Kendra was taller than most, even men, but Walter was taller still. Standing forehead to lips, Kendra tilted her head back to look up into his blue eyes, expecting him to move away from her to that appropriate distance he loved so much. To her surprise he didn't and stared back into hers. That same lock of red hair came free and he swept it aside, holding it in place with his fingers grazing her cheek. Her breath caught again and she closed her eyes.

He kissed her softly on the cheek and then moved to her lips. He was surprised when she kissed him back, though this joy was short-lived as she reached up and pulled herself away from him.

"I want to stay queen," she whispered, her eyes still closed.

"You will always be queen," he replied, lifting her face up towards his.

She gently pulled away from his grip. "I cannot go back to how I was."

"I would not want you to," he promised.

"I can't be owned or ruled again," she said, louder now. He understood her meaning. She would not give up being a ruling queen, she would not marry or be a wife as to be property of her husband.

"I cannot imagine anyone would dare try to." Once more he kissed her on the cheek and then, dropping his hand, he turned on his heel and vanished out of the room.

Kendra opened her eyes to the almost burnt-out candles and messy plates. Leaning against the table she took a few deep breaths before she left the dining hall. Walking along the balconied hall overlooking the courtyard, Kendra stopped and felt an icy wind brush over her. Finding the coolness a reprieve from the heat in her cheeks, she lent on the railing and looked up at the black sky. Swirling down around her, a snowflake landed on her cheek.