

In the Beginning

In the year of our Lord, 2022, a great prophet came among us and his name was Wilbur. He rose out of the dust of the holocaust that near-took all life, walking out of the desert where none can survive. And he was filled with grace. And he told us truth of our unrepentance. How we had used our weapons of mass destruction upon each other, upon our home, this earth, and how we are become death, living like worms in the dark, under the ground, dying of the plagues and the dust of war-sickness. Our great cities, poisoned. Our centers of learning and healing, gone. The beasts and the birds and all living plants, the most precious gifts of the circle of life, gone. All is lost, for a time, he said, for a time and time again. But not forever. For the Great Prophet Wilbur also gave us hope and we record his words for you who live in our future and for those who look to the hope in your own future:

"A child will be born in exile. A child who will suffer much in great poverty, but never of the heart or mind. And the child will grow with integrity and grace until the appointed hour. And when the time is come, at the beginning of the great earth changes, the child will set in motion by the sheer nature of her being, freedom from tyranny. She will face many dangers in her quest for truth, finding a help-mate and healer to shield her along the way. If they shield her well, the child will live to point the way to a new land, where life flourishes in abundance, and many will be drawn to her, though not all with good intent. For the tyrants will plot against her and she will suffer great tribulation, facing even death over and over again, as will those who dare to share her journey. With courage and clarity of heart and mind she will unveil the mysteries of the ancients, taking only the good of the past to build on the future. She will see into the future and tell of things to come, possessing great wisdom in trying times. A remnant of what once was our own civilization will journey where she leads, across a great sea to the new land, where the remnant will go forth and multiply. And life will begin again. Let those who can hear, follow with their hearts where the child leads, and they will be blessed seven-fold for their trials. All blessings and peace be with you on your journey.

Wilbur of Nod

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Prologue

From the Outlander's Enclave to the Newzland, we made the journey as the prophet said, through many hardships and trials. Mika and Healer Sam and I were at the core and beginnin' of the rebellion in our wah-less Void. We escaped death plots and the slavery and tyranny of the Assembly, survivin' sudden great earth changes that seemed bent on tearin' our land apart. With the support of Stokes and his mate String, who were our Seconds, Charly--my best friend--and her mate, Mik the tracker, the giant Tower--former gatherer and now protector, six more wah-dwellin' Commanders and all the wah-vets from the dwellin's--over seven hundred, plus several hundred rescued penal colonists, includin' two chiles and Healer Sam's new mate, Tessa with her chile, Roy, and Sam's fellow outlanders, we bare-escaped an enemy intent on destroyin' us, on stoppin' our bid for freedom.

Followin' the ancients' clues, we uncovered four billows-travelin' wah-vessels hidden and sealed away for four hundred years in secret caverns by the new-discovered billowin'

sea. We used the knowledge left on ancient machines to learn navigation, farmin' and buildin', all the skills we'd need to start life over in the promised new land of plenty.

Bare escapin' just moments ahead of an all-out sneak attack by the Assembly, we launched our vessels and plotted our course for the Newzland. We numbered one thousand fifteen without a single life lost in the voyage, survivin' swell sickness, wah beasts and storms to final make it across the great sea of billows.

Just off the coast of the Newzland, we tumbled on a young bein' named Ablesterling, adrift on a floatin' raft. He allowed he was from the Newzland we sought, that they'd been waitin' for our arrival for over 400 years, then told us the same tale-spin as our prophecy, but from their side. He said he'd been set adrift on the billowin' sea to find us and bring us home, tellin' us his tale.

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"My name is Abelsterling and I was chosen as those before me have been chosen once every seven years for the past four hundred years, to journey out onto the sea in the season when the long white cloud comes over the waters in this month, in search of the child who is to lead us to freedom. In all that time, none have ever returned, thus all have failed. I alone will bring Small Woman back to my village and the prophecy will be fulfilled." Then he spoke of the prophecy.

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In the year of our Lord 2022, a great prophet came among us and his name was Wilbur. He rose out of the dust of the holocaust that near-took all life. And walking out of the desert, he journeyed across the sea where none can survive and carried the message to all who survived.

And he told us of a child who would be born in poverty and hardship but would be true and pure to her calling. She would lead those who would follow out of tyranny and oppression in a desert land across the great sea to teach those-of-us-who-wait. And those that journey through the hardships with Small-Woman will find the land they seek a paradise, abundant with clean food and water and a freedom they've not known. But for those-who-wait, and have waited these many years, it is only the beginning. The newcomers will bring those-who-wait ships from the ancients and knowledge of the seas, the seasons and the lands beyond their realm, and show those-who-wait how to become wayfarers once more. For it is the destiny of those-who-wait, in time and when they are ready, to voyage out across the seas and rediscover other lands. It is their destiny to become once more, adventurers and explorers. The end of a long journey for those who arrive and are welcome, and the beginning of a journey for those-who-wait, to bring the world together once more, in peace."

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And now begins the journey of The Stones of Fire

Chapter 1

"Lower the boats," Mika ordered. He stared at the strip of sand pokin' in and out of the mist frontin' the harbor, the fires settin' the mist aglow with a ruby haze, and his brow furrowed with fret. He squeezed my hand gentle, then turned back to the command cabin and spoke through the uni-com.

"All vessels, all coms up," then took a deep breath afore he began.

"We don't know these bein's or their customs or what we will be meetin' in this new land. It looks and sounds as if we're both 'spected and welcome. But to be certain for the safety of all, 'special since the mist is coverin' most of the land and limiting our visibility, we'll approach with full defense measures in a re-con. Commander's Niko and Hamed will accompany Healer Sam, Commander Skoshi, Stokes, Clayton, Lodin and Tower with me in the first two boats.

We'll be leavin' our com's on open channel that all might hear our first greetin's with these bein's. Once we've determined it's safe to off-load, and know what's 'spected of us, we'll send word for you to join us. I ask your patience once more at the end of a long journey. We are the newcomers here and we need show caution but a bit longer, till we determine what will be given us or allowed us to live in peace among these Newzlanders, without given' offense. I urge you all to take caution and go slow in your encounters with them. Take the time to learn their customs and language and record anythin' of import for sharin' with the rest of us. The last thing we'll be wantin' is to break one of their laws and start a rift. We've left that behind us with the Assembly and all of their ways. Remember your cube lessons from the Ancients--," he paused for emphasis, "And may this true-on be the beginnin' of freedom for all, for our good fortune and dreams."

After a moment of drop-dead silence a roar of approve went up from ship to ship and I saw all the bein's on the beach come to a quiet stand-still for a moment, then as one, start yellin' and callin' us in with their arms and voices.

Mika motioned to me, Tower and the vets, and we climbed down to the boat, lil' Ben tryin' hard to keep his lip from quiverin' at Tower's leavin', the female Nella holdin' on to him tight at the rail and I thought she and Tower would make a good match and a good gentle Mims for lil' Ben. From the boat, Tower waved to Ben, makin' a face at him to set him laughin' and bringin' a smile to us all. With each passin' day I was more glad-filled than the day afore that we'd had the fortune to rescue chiles.

Freedom's crew had ready-on loaded a carton of stores from the Enclave as gifts to the new bein's and I saw Sam's work in that. The savin' boats met 'tween the other vessels, joinin' up with Sam, Stokes and the Commanders, then headed in for a landin'. The spidys were leapin' overtime in my stomach at all the unknowns facin' us. Part joy, part fear, my thoughts swirled and scattered like the wisps of mist twirlin' round the boats.

As we neared, I could see Ablesterling fightin' to make his way through a mob of glad-handers pushin' forward to greet us, waitin' anxious to help pull the boats up onto the sand as we approached

Stokes and Tower cut the engines and we simple sat there for a moment, both sides sudden-gone quiet. We drifted slow in, takin' in the new bein's and the sight of so much green. The green stuff was overwhelmin', growin' to great heights, most-on to the shore and in such diversity it near-made the mob waitin' to welcome us look small by compare.

There were so many different smells comin' from every direction from the green stuff and other stuff as yet unidentifiable, it near-overwhelmed my senses. I tore my eyes away from the full-wonder sight of trees shootin' up straight and tall with their green leafs coverin' them like head hair and I let my vision wander down to the shorter, over-dense growth of other strange plant-forms, then tried to focus on the bein's slow-pressin' toward us and the boats.

They numbered close to eight or nine hundred if my count was on, near the same as ours, and were a mix of olders to young, from light to dark on the hair, skin and eyes, the percents most even-on distributed like in our mob, though none dark as Mik. They wore the same rough tunic that Ablesterling had ported, but most with no leggin's, their skin showin' sun-burnt and glistenin', as if oiled. And they were stouter, thicker through the bot and shorter than us, with no one showin' a head taller than our average, certain none big as Stokes or Tower, and none small as me. But the big disappoint was I didn't see any chiles, not one.

I could feel Mika finish with his assess 'bout the same time, though I calc'd he and the others had been seekin' out weapons or somethin' that didn't fit. As the boats touched the first bars of sand and willin' hands pulled us up higher onto the beach, Mika stood and raised a hand in greetin' usin' the formal-speak of a citizen from the Brights.

"Thank you for sending your envoy, Ablesterling, to greet us and lead us in. We are in your debt. I am Commander Mika and we seek an audience with your leaders."

A thin-everywhere older with grey hair, brown eyes and long brown tunic near-reachin' to the sand stepped slowly out of the mob, his open hand raised in greetin', tryin' to match Mika's, but his voice soundin' frail and thin as his bot.

"I'm the village oldie We are as a box of budgies with your landin' and safe arrival! My name's Jonpickens and we-who-wait extend welcome and all that we have to those who've brought us the ships, who've come to show us the way south and the ways of the sea. But time's runnin' short and Taranaki's makin' it dodgy to stay much longer, so let's have a yack and a cuppa before we've done cheerio to this place, our home. We're good as gold for leavin', just like the prophet said, all loaded up and ready to pack it out at your say-so."

Chapter 2

I could see, like the rest of us, that Mika was strugglin' not to frown over the strange words, special on the need to even-on leave afore we'd arrived--to make sense of it, but he kept up his part, sayin',

"Jonpickens we are honored with your welcome." He shot me and Sam a skewed look, then motioned for us all to offload.

My feet touched the sand though I knew it was solid, it still felt like the swayin' of the boat. I reached out to the rim Sam called a gun-whale to steady myself, then looked quick-round and touched that everyone was havin' trouble stayin' upright, wonderin' what kind of new land this was that moved like the billows.

"It's right, Skoshi," Sam said loud enough for the others to hear. "We've been on the billows long enough to adjust to the swells." It's our 'sea-legs' that are troublin' our balance. Our 'land legs' will get used to standin' solid again in a day or so."

Thank the way, I thought, not takin' to the idea of land that moved constant.

Ablesterling quick-passed Sam's skinny on to his mob in 'their-speak' and there was murmur of wonder about the words vessels, swells, billows and different kinds of legs.

Mika motioned Sam and me to his side, introducin' us to the older, their mob continuin' to assess us, special whisperin' at the size of Stokes and Tower, and I was thinkin' how smart Mika'd been to bring them in on the first landin'.

"These are two of our Commanders, Niko and Hamad, my mate, Commander Skoshi, our lead healer, Sam, two of our first mates, Stokes and Tower, and Commander Skoshi's seconds, Clayton and Lodin."

Their mob hard-frowned over too many new words and unfamiliar names, as the one called Jonpickens voiced their amaze.

"Able was dead right, your speech is overall familiar, yet strange. I 'spect it will take us both some bit of time to learn the changes-of-separation occurin' over yonks of four hundred years."

He stopped, puzzlin', takin' Mika's words and introductions in and slow-pullin' them apart.

"You've but one name each?"

Mika looked s'prised at such a simple question when we were burstin' with important ones, 'bout survival and green growin' stuff.

"Would that mean that your's is two, Jon---Pickens?" he asked, pausin' 'tween the two sounds, "And that Ablesterling is Abel---Sterling?"

The older nodded as our mob took that in, glancin' at each other, wonderin' together why any bein' would need two names.

But Mika answered the older, tryin' to keep the flow goin'.

"Yes, most-on, we are given one name, thought the lil' bit here," he said, squeezin' my shoulder with a smile, "has earned several in our journey."

"The Lil' Bit," the older smiled at me tender, as if I were a chile, and a ripple of acknowledge ran through his mob. "Yeah, that's crackers. It fits. She's certain-teed The Small Woman from our prophecy, and if the ships weren't enough, you both carry the ruby jewel as proof."

The murmur from their mob swelled again to a low hum and I fretted under their direct looks, thinkin' Mika had skewed it for me again, then 'membered that I was ready-on in their prophecy and it was best to get this over and done. So I stood a bit straighter and met their stares full-on with a friend-like smile of my own, noddin' my head slight.

Jon Pickens himself stood straighter, noddin' back, then threw out more of his s'prise.

"Now, all-in-all, I know she'll be right, but we've left leavin' to the last bit of time, waitin' for you to arrive. We've set up a meetin' place on the sand to quick-share some of our histories and welcome you before we pack it south."

He nodded at the webbers ported by Stokes, Tower and the vets. "If those be weapons, we're glad of them," then added mysterious, "and though you'll not be needin' 'em against us, strewth, we may be findin' a common need for them against others."

I frowned at the skinny that not all in this Newzland might be friend-like, and a hundred questions started poppin' into my mind, but I'd learned to hold my tongue and wait, so I put them aside for the moment. As the mob parted to let us pass, I saw they'd set out padded sitters of a sort, though with no backs, 'neath a canopy of woven dead green stuff supported by tree legs that'd been hewn thin.

Sam, Mika, Niko Hamed and I took the places offered, facin' in a semi-circle toward a larger sitter occupied by the older. Tower, Stokes and the vets opted to remain standin', guardin' our backs, facin' out toward the mob, much to Jon Pickens' delight.

"This is something we'll be needs learnin' from you too," he said grinning. "the proper way to defend ourselves."

Somethin' was definite skewed, and I could fair-feel my mind wrinkle. If there were others who would attack them--and us--why didn't they have defense measures ready-on? and why--

Mika squeezed my knee slight as if the noise in my head was botherin' him. I forced my mind to stillness, subtle turnin' on the cube recorder in my sak so I could go back over these revelations later.

The older raised a hand slight, and two females with dark brown hair and slender bots brought up some white liquid stuff in brown-haired, round, cup-like things on trays made of tree, offerin' us one each, for which we offered thanks.

I looked quick-over at Sam, catchin' his bare-nod of approve, but sniffin' at it tentative all the same. It smelled full-wonder. Darin' to taste, I couldn't hide my s'prise. It was full-wonder with a flavor that tickled the tongue, thicker than wah, some sweet, but not over and went easy-down. I could see Mika and the others touched the same, and Sam winked at me, but signed me to drink but a small amount. Smart, I thought. If it was goin' to make us sick, better just a bit of the heaves, and I nodded solemn back to him, bringin' on a smile.

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As we set our cups down, Jon Pickin's began without preamble, recitin' a message, but with coo-stranger words than had Able Sterling.

"As it was told by the prophet, Wilbur, back yonks, we've buggered all time and effort, keepin' to and honorin' his words year in and out, just so we-who-wait in the shadow of the Long White Cloud could say, giddyay, to the pakeah--"

He went on for a few more minutes, nothin' startlin', but as he was windin' down, I caught a mountin' tension in his voice.

"We've been near struck down many times, and time again, awaitin' you through the centuries. Especial on a hundred fifty years yonk when a great fever came."

Sam's brows went up at word of sickness, and he sat a bit straighter, 'long with Mika and me.

The older nodded at our interest, continuin', "Yes, we were many who survived the nuclear, it not affectin' us overmuch at first, as the winds didn't carry this way. Least for a while. But just ass we were emergin' from the caves of protection in that first century, the poison dust came. We'd no resistance to it. More than half fell from it and most of the plants and other livin' creatures, right on. We returned to the caves twice after that, till, final-last, it looked like the dust was movin' out for good. Just as we were emergin' for the third time and bringin' the land back to life with grow-sees we'd protected and kept with us, the fever came upon us, on the wind, some say, and it took well into ninety percent of us."

Ninety percent, I thought. Falling Wah! Was this all that survived?

Jon Pickens continued, mirrorin' my thoughts. "We were so few, so weak and some thought all was lost. And it was dodgy for a bit, but things final-started turnin' our way, more birthin's, oldies livin' longer, and with the return of the rains, the land began comin' back to life, everything turnin' green and strong. Then some seventy five years yonk, the northerners came out of nowhere, makin' raids on our villages and stealin' our women and lil' ones. We fought back for a bit, but the losses came too often and too hard, and though we searched, we never recovered any of our own, not a one. But one who was taken managed an escape, makin' it back at near-death with news that the Northerners were

comin' to wipe us out, to stop us from welcomin' The Small Woman. The-one-who-returned relayed that in the Northerner's tellin' of the prophecy, they'd all be destroyed, that they'd cark it because of Small Woman."

I sat up rod straight at that bit of skewed skinny, my heart sinkin' in a blue ruin as everyone's eyes turned on me, like I was an ancient sickness from one of the Brights, and I felt the color risin' in my face, hot and red.

Mika and Sam, one on either side of me, patted my knees most in unison, knowin' the skinny would have frettin'. And they were too-right. I didn't keen to the idea of bein' responsible for death, special from a four hundred year old prophecy that kept goin' right on down the track without my say. For the first time since we'd left the Void and the Assembly behind, I could feel a slow-burnin' anger comin' on.

Sam spoke up, posin' the question on everyone's mind. "And did the-one-who-returned say how the Small Woman would destroy them?"

"Oh, yes. She'll be leadin' them into a lake of fire," the older said simple, as if it was the most natural thing.

"What," was all I could manage to squeak out, and heard Tower's rumblin' growl of anger direct behind me at the skinny.

"No worries," Jon Pickens hurried on to assure, his eyes growin' wide at sight of Tower's clenched fists. Tower and Stokes backed a step closer to me in protect, and I heard their mob's murmur of approve, as Jon Pickens finished, "The prophecy says you survive just fine, and help us start over in the southlands."

I looked desperate at Mika for help, but could see he was havin' as hard a time with this new skinny as me.

Jon Pickens started in where he'd left off as if nothin' scary had been said.

"So, leavin' and losin' most everythin, includin' our cubes and libraries, our knowin' and history, we made quick an escape under cover of dark that very night, south and west to here, when I was but a little at my nana's knee, followin' the words of the prophecy to this place, to wait for you in the shadow of Taranaki. We've survived here in the bush this long time to welcome you as our own rellies, long lost. We'd hoped to give you a feast and rest, but with Taranaki on the march and our outposts sightin' a band of Norhterners just this past week, the first we've seen in near seventy years, it's leavin' we're lookin' at."

Mika interrupted, a curious frown furrowin' his brow. "And how do you know they were these Northerners if it's been that long? Are they so different from you?"

The older's eyes lit up a bit. "Ah, yes. They are. Different. Some. Larger. Fairer of skin and hair," he frowned, strugglin' with the 'splainin'. "They are not US," he final-on said, and I thought I was beginnin' to understand. These Northerners were like the difference 'tween citizens of the brights and the wah drones, with more in common than not, least at first look, but different to the bone, if even-on simple due to the separation of hundreds of years.

Jon Pickens finished up as if all was settled, "We're believin' that we can be of great help each one to the other with our shared knowledge, and hit it off stronger together than apart, and are lookin' forward to makin' the journey south with you."

He paused a bit, as if waitin' for a response, then said, "And now for you and yours, the words of the prophet said you'd have had lifetimes of hard yakka and a heap-a troubles?"

I could feel the tense in Mika subside a bit, most-on like a billows swell dyin' on the sand in an early-mornin' calm, afore it retreated and picked up again.

"Yes," Mikad said, and as he spoke, I could hear Abel Sterling whisperin' in the background, translatin' for the mob.

"For centuries we've lived underground in large dwellin's called city-brights, covered and surrounded by a vast sand-filled wasteland called the Void, to avoid the radiation storms and the fallout from the nuclear. In the Void, no wah, uh, no rain fell. Our source of survivin' was from harvestin' seasonal travelin' mists like your 'twinks', but heavier, which we collected to provide the city-brights with wah--ter. All food was grown in the undergrounds, in raised green-farms, as next to nothin' grew topside, and as with you, many survived--but none of us free.

Prisoners we've been prey to a controllin' Assembly that had the say over life or death overall, and at their whim. Many innocents died at their hands and 'cause of their lies, 'bout there bein' a shortage of wah'ter over the past four hundred years. They covered over and buried all knowledge of the ancients, of the nuclear, even-on of the billows-sea. Any who defied or questioned were condemned either to life as a wah-drone, an outcast, or worse, bein' thrown on the nets as food to giant mutant spidys, with no hope of survivin'."

I heard gasps of disbelief, fear, anger and regret at our misfortune quick-circulatin' through their mob at the tellin', then an all-stops quiet, as Mika went on.

"The prophecy of Wilbur was near-lost and destroyed many times, with not but fragments and rumors survivin' through the ages. Most all who survived to make the voyage here were outcasts, livin' away from the brights in underground dwellin's, double prisoners for the mere fault of bein' alive, and none knew of the prophecy till just a bit ago, and even-on then not but our part in it, none of yours, that bein' lost to the ages of time. But thanks to our Healer Sam, and the Lil' Bit here, we found the remnants of the knowin' that was lost and followed it to where the vessels-uh-ships were stored, waitin' for us. We bare-made our escape in them onto the billows afore the Assembly guards caught up with us, and not afore great quakes had begun changin' and destroyin' the land. We've no knowin' if any left behind survived those quakes or the hars of the Assembly, or if we're all that's left, but our Enclave entire has endured much danger and peril to make this journey 'cross the billows-sea. We are in need of rest and quiet, but most-on we need to feel the land beneath us, to learn about the growin' of food in season and the workin' of the soil, to breathe the air and feel the sun on our faces, free, for the first time ever-on. As to the ves--ships, we'll be glad to share our knowin' of them and their workin's, of navigation and travelin' on the open billowin' sea."

The older studied on Mika's words for a long while, obvious puzzlin' their meanin', then struggled with some battle he was wagin' inside. Final-on, he nodded.

"We're powerful sorry to hear of your losses and the fate of your rellies and extend our condolences. Your words match what our prophecy said you would endure to arrive safe in our harbor, and I can see the need for touchin' to the land after your long journey. We welcome you and yours to our homes for a quick look-see, afore we head south," he said, motionin' to some in his mob to be off and runnin', which over half of them did, their chatter swellin', then ebbin' as they were swallowed up by a narrow path leadin' off into the green.

Mika raised an eyebrow at Stokes, givin' him the nod to be on the 'lert at the sudden activity as Jon Pickens wound down.

"My apology for givin' you but the one afternoon in our village, but we'll be after leavin' before sunset at the latest for the southlands, before Taranaki or the Northerners catch us out. For now, we'll be settin' up a quick-feast for you in the village, if you want to be bringin' your mob in. Then we'll have an open meetin' , that all may hear our exchange of yakkin', our histories, and future intent, to avoid mistrust or misunderstandin', our speech bein' so different."

Mika nodded, but held up a hand to stay the older a bit longer. "MY apology, Jon Pickens, but first well be needin' to now, for the protect of yours and of our own, who is this Taranaki, is there any current sickness among you, and where lies the danger that's forcin' you to pack it out so sudden. Is it with these invaders from the North, or somethin' else?"

Jon Pickens cocked his head, then slow-nodded, ponderin', his brows goin' up and down as if seein' the sense and order of Mika's questions, as though they'd even-on just occurred to him.

"The prophecy was right, we'll be learnin' heaps from you, even to the protectin' of our own. First, Taranaki looks to be a mountain, ringed with clouds, not visible now due to the twink and the Long White Cloud. But what it is, is more than a wee-cracker of a volcano, built up red hot and wobbly, ready to blow at any moment, which you'll see tonight if the twink lift enough."

Volcano? A chill of dread ran down my spine and I quick-glanced at Sam 's face blanchin' white to see that he touched the same. I'd read about volcanoes in the box machines of the ancients, but couldn't 'member all the details. Somethin' scary, I thought, somethin about liquid fire and 'splosions. I quick-pulled out my light cube to freshen my mind, then heard the loud-whisperin's of excite behind me at sight of the cube, and I wondered if this was the first they'd ever-on seen.

Jon Pickens' eyes went wider still as he saw images and words poppin' up on the ucbe, but he cleared his throat and pressed on to the finish.

"Our prophecy says Taranaki will drive us from the land within two days of the comin' of the Small Woman, far to the southlands, then he will save us. We've no knowin' what the last means, or how he will save us. Second, other than the dreaded lurgy, we've had no major sickness since the Great Fever, and;,"

"What is this dreaded lurgy?" Sam interrupted, "And do any have it now?"

Jon Pickens shook his head, "It's a seasonal sickness. It comes on with chill-banes and fever, sometimes the heaves, with aches and pains that last a day or two. Normal times, nought but the weakest oldies and the smallest littlies are susceptible to dyin' from it and none are crook from it now. The season is over goin' on two months now," Jon Pickens said, makin the most sense with his words since we'd made land-fall.

"And third," he sighed, "I'd hoped to leave before the Northerners came a threat, but our outposts sighted them into last week, sayin' they've crossed the great river, that they're quick-on the move, seekin' us out, and are not but three days run from here.

I touched Mika's arm to show him the light cube, raisin' the alarm.

"Mika, Sam, Commanders. The cube says this volcano thing is a giant hill filled with liquid rock and fire that s'plodes, spewin' out of somethin' called a caldera, 'long with poison gases and some kind of 'fire-cloud' called a pyroclastic, once the pressure

builds too high to contain it, and that it flows out and over everythin', destroyin' anything' in it's path. It's true-on a danger to us, and Jon Pickens is right to fret about leavin' soon as possible if it's true-on goin' to let go."

Jon Pickens' brows raised at the skinny and I could see he was full curious to have a go at the cube, so I stood and walked it to him, showin' him how to access it.

His eyes misted over as he pressed for images and words, the approve of his mob comin' 'cross strong in the drop-all quiet.

"This is a great gift you bring us, Small Woman, and we're chock a block with gratitude. We'll be glad to be studyin' more on it once we've reached the southlands," he said quiet, handin' it back reluctant. "As for Taranaki, the biggest danger comes if it cuts off our route south with lava flow, and that's not likely unless we put off leavin' for a few more days."

Mika stood, the lines of his face drawn stern.

"Sam, Skoshi, what are you sensin', about off-loadin'? Can we risk a few hours of freedom?"

Once more, the burden of command was on Mika, seein' that no one in this Newzland seemed to have knowin' of defense measures, and my heart ached to see him frettin' over makin' the right decision, of not bein' able to give the Enclave immediate freedom, of this not bein' the true landin' place.

I shook my head at Sam and Shrugged, no sensin' imminent danger. Sam was in agree, getiin' the go-on from the rest of our mob, then said for all of us. "You spoke well, Mika. Those aboard need to touch the land, if but for an hour or two. Once they've found it's certain-on true and real, maybe some will want the choice of travelin' with the village, the rest stayin' on board for safety, rotatin' out whenever we find good harbor for the exchange, special those that never found their sea-legs. Agreed?"

He looked 'round, and to a one, we nodded.

"And," he said, turnin' a stern eye on the older, "we'll need more knowin' of these lands to the south, Jon Pickens, what they hold, what the promises are."

"Yes," the older said, mysterious, "after a bit, I will tell you all."

Seein' no more skinny was forthcomin', Mika got to the heart of it, quick-on, turnin' to the vets.

"Niko, Hamed, would you take the boats back and organize an off-loadin' with the other Commanders, just bein's for now, no stores. We'll need volunteer crews among the vets to stay aboard for securin' the vessels, at least ten per vessel, rotatin' every hour. No weapons on land, other than the four ready-on here. Agreed?" askin' us all.

To a one, we nodded again, seein' the need in securin' the vessels till we'd had the open meetin' and saw what this Newzland was about.