

Copyright © 2019 by Iain Richmond

Ebook, paperback, hardcover published in 2019 by Rouge Planet Publishing.

Cover by Gerónimo Ribaya

Chapter artwork by Arial Light

Edited by Jim Spivey

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

ISBN 978-1-946807-11-3

Fiction / Science Fiction / Post-Apocalyptic Fiction / Dystopian Fiction

CIP data for this book is available from the Library of Congress 2019937292

Rouge Planet Publishing

20875 Jerusalem Grade

Lower Lake CA 95457

# Red, White & Blue

## Mediterranean Sea

### Malta

### Present

The residents of the ancient walled city of Mdina rose to a clear sky and gentle sun. Beyond the towering walls and rocky hillsides, the sea lay flat with the occasional ripple running from a lazy oar pulled by rugged men in colorful fishing boats.

Elias Spartan rowed his boat just far enough that he could easily see the red tile roof and balcony of his family's home. Locking the oars to the gunwale, he reached deep inside his wool coat and produced a two-handed flask filled with Bajtra. Not seeing the small form on the distant balcony, he took a heavy swig and savored the magical remnants of fermented prickly pear. If one hit the spot, Elias thought, two would finish the job, so he took another mouth filling slug. He glanced at his phone stuck with Velcro to the inside of the hull, 6:20 am. He had at least ten minutes before she would shuffle out rotate the telescope his way and wave. A tradition he shared with his father from the same spot and now one playing out each morning with his youngest daughter.

He glanced at the fishing nets on the deck and instead grabbed the coffee stained newspaper that was smaller, thinner and more expensive than it used to be. Printed words felt right on a fishing boat. Elias stretched out and for the first time read the front page headline, 'North Korean's Militarize Space Lab! USA, China and Russia Follow.' He scanned the paragraphs and a chill rolled over him. According to the Maltese National, the North Koreans smuggled a dozen nukes into their 'space lab' over the past decade. The USA and Russia quickly

amassed nukes onto their own space platforms.

“Always finding new ways to threaten the world,” he mumbled, “maybe we should talk more and terrorize less.” Weathered hands crumpled the pages into a ball and tossed them near the stern just as a small figure moved across the distant balcony, shuffling toward the telescope.

Elias rolled on the bench, found his binoculars, sat upright and focussed them. A curly black mop of hair appeared behind the telescope and Lela’s small hands rotated the copper cylinder towards the sea. A smile broke across his face and a small hand moved back and forth followed by a spastic throwing of more kisses than Elias could catch while still trying to hold his binoculars. The kisses stopped. Lela spun back toward the house and a woman ran out, scooped her up and ran back in.

The hull rattled and buzzed, the phone rocking back and forth while its screen flashed red and white with an EMERGENCY ALERT symbol followed by:

***BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO MALTA & SURROUNDING AREAS.***

***SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL.***

Surely, this is a mistake— His wife’s image appeared and Elias ripped the phone off the hull, staring up at his home. “What’s happening—”

“Row Elias! Row for your life—”

The line went dead and was replaced with the flashing ALERT.

He snatched the oars, dropped them into the locks, spun the boat around with one oar and ripped them through the placid surface. Small and large boats raced and rowed from all around him. Thunder boomed and echoed above from a clear sky. Elias pulled harder, shiny streaks

appeared from the west. Reddish, blurry dots leaving white trails raced from the east. “Oh God! No, no, no!” His arms were numb, the oars skipping, losing their rhythm. Directly overhead a field of white dots erupted from the blue sky.

A bright flash exploded to the north, followed by a towering fireball and the unmistakable shape of a mushroom cloud. Sicily, Elias thought, he had friends and family there. More clouds climbed high into the greying-sky from all directions, some close, some distant. Spain, the United Kingdom to the west and possibly Turkey or Syria to the east? The shapes kept appearing, growing into one another and reaching for the sky.

The sea pulled his fishing boat away from the approaching shoreline. His body spent, chest pounding and lungs burning, Elias dropped the oars. His fishing boat being dragged north. He flipped onto his back, chest heaving and spotted the outline of his wife and three children on the fading balcony. He tried to raise an arm, a final farewell, but he could not move.

A shadow covered his boat. The sky darkened and a rushing grew to a deafening roar. Elias Spartan’s fishing boat disappeared into a fifty-meter wave churning with bodies, boats, and buildings, heading toward Mdina’s walls.

# **Batal & Danu**

**Mediterranean Sea**

**Skye Stone**

**400 years later**

A gentle knock sounded on the woven grass and hide door.

"Batal, are you awake?"

The thick stonewalls of the small room were holding the early morning heat at bay.

"Yes mother," Batal sat up, spun his lean, tanned legs over the straw mattress and yawned. "Ready in five minutes."

The shadow remained under his door.

"Blessed eighteenth birthday my son, you are an elder now. I'll leave so you can use the light." Steps echoed down the hallway, and the shadow disappeared.

Batal stood, stretched, dropped his shorts to the limestone floor, and opened his bedroom door. Natural light and growing heat poured in from the shaft that ran from the roof to the foundation at the center of the structure. Naked, Batal started with his feet, spreading the space between each toe.

"Check," he mumbled and ran his hands up each calf, thigh then moved to his man-parts. Relieved he angled his back, so its reflection was lit on the wall-mounted mirror. Fine, white lines started at his shoulders, serpentine downward and ended in a large mottled patch above his ass. "Scars look bright today," he squinted at a small dark spot sitting just under his left shoulder blade. "You may be new." He shuffled closer to the wall, "Shit. Almost made it to eighteen without a single one." He raised a hairless eyebrow, "Still a record."

Batal rotated in the light, looking down at his thin, but muscled chest and found a single hair. "Ha! How you like that!" He exclaimed, fluffing the lone follicle the best he could. Grabbing a small hand mirror and using it in concert with the wall mirror, he checked his smooth scalp, neck, and ears. Batal stared into his own golden eyes. Even your eyes weren't safe; radiation seeped into everything. "Check."

"Breakfast is ready!"

Batal caught the strain in his mother's voice. She's lifting something heavy. Bread! He thought, dense, beautiful and as important as clean air, Birthday Bread. "Coming!" He stretched toward the pile of clothes on the cold floor, smelled the favorites and was on the move, getting dressed as he hopped, stumbled and bounced toward the kitchen.

Reaching the tall arch leading to the open space with the cob oven in its center, Batal pushed his arm through the final sleeve and appeared out of the dark corridor. Batal stood wide awake, the scent of bread swirling up into the vaulted beams bracing the stone-slabbed ceiling; he stared at his mother, a broad shit-eating grin covering his face.

"Birthday Bread!" Batal hugged the small woman, his arms wrapping around her slight frame that disappeared within his broad embrace.

"Careful, Batal."

"Sorry, Mother." He released her, his gaze falling on the many lesions covering her arms, neck and smooth scalp. Her skin was much darker than his and hid the wounds from a distance. She was getting old, already in her early forties with a healthy chance to make it to sixty, which was rare these days, but not as rare as it was during the early generations.

No wife or children, Batal was already older than when most healthy fathers had their first child. He had the start of his first radiation lesion at eighteen when average men were

covered in them. His family, the Spartans, were the most successful breeders in all of Sky Stone. This also made Batal's pairing crucial to their future and that of the island fortress they called home. Sky Stone's vast walls kept the fire and waves at bay, but the radiation continued to flow, silent and deadly. Carried on the wind, pushed through the ocean currents and filtered by every living creature left on earth.

Batal sat heavy on one of the four small stools set around the wooden table. The grain ran smooth and tight; oil from generations of Spartan hands permeated its surface. The scent of fish, herbs, and blood emanating from the table hinted at the skill and trade that kept Batal Spartan and the ancestors before him in luxury. Fishers fed the community's survival and provided immense economic might to the island nation of Sky-Stone. But Spartan's were as much fisherman and warriors.

A mighty loaf of steaming bread thumped before him.

"You're somewhere in that head of yours, my son." His mother sat at the stool next to him, "The bread is cooling, let's eat it before the aroma fades, and the fish no longer swim at the surface." She reached under the table and rested a small earthen container with a shiny lid in front of Batal.

"How, mother?" His face lit up, "Is it?"

She laid a small, flat knife next to it, "Open it and see."

Batal's hands were on the container before she finished, "Butter! Fresh butter!" He tore off a chunk of bread, slathered butter on it, passed it to his mother, and repeated the action.

"Batal?" She leaned in and kissed his butter-covered cheek, "I love you. Your father would be so proud of who you have become."

His hands stopped, chunks of bread fell from his mouth, he ran his arm across his mouth

to clear a path. A shine covered his eyes, "I love you too... I miss him. I miss them all."

"But we are still here and you, my son must carry on the Spartan name and improve upon the Spartan DNA. We only hope to find others that resist the radiation better than those lost to it, with bodies hardened to its effects, and its poison. Your father has given you a longer life and you must do the same for your children."

Batal stuffed more bread into his face, added more butter, and tore greater sized pieces from the shrinking loaf. "The aroma is fading." Another smile appeared and Batal handed his mother the last piece with extra butter. "First mother, I must pull the nets and deliver the catch to the market." He pushed the last piece into his mouth, "and then we can speak of finding a wife without lesions."

Cheeks filled, mouth covered in glistening grease, Batal stood, bent down and hugged her; wiping butter onto her shirt. "I adore you mother, and there's no better Birthday Bread than yours. I'll pull the nets, bring in the catch and we'll speak of this woman who would join me."

She looked to her son, "And how would you know I have someone in mind?"

"You are a baker. The best on the island and you trade with those from beyond the walls. You are also the most cunning of creatures and the smartest person I know." Batal opened the exterior door and turned back towards his mother, "And you always have a plan that begins long before the rest of us learn of its existence."

"You know your mother well," she tossed him a warm sack. "On your way, plenty to discuss later."

He smiled, slung the bag over his shoulder, closed the door and headed toward the outer wall and his fishing boat.

Batal looked skyward, the walls of Sky Stone were legendary long before missiles rained



from the sky and changed the earth forever. Twenty meters tall and twenty meters thick, the original protective barriers crafted of massive blocks of limestone withstood the first nuclear blasts over three centuries ago. That was only the beginning. *The Book* tells of winds made of fire turning the island inhabitants living above ground to ash and the waves that followed washed away the few living and endless dead. The ancient island formerly known as Malta was left for those poor souls that toiled in dank basements and cellars. These survivors rose by the hundreds and took control of what was left and called it Skye Stone.

Quickening his pace, Batal still could not fathom the image of the original walls at only twenty meters tall. Generation after generation used those walls as a foundation to build higher and higher until the outer wall now stood at over hundred meters tall. The entire city was in its shadow. A mirrored tower stood at one-hundred-twenty meters tall in the island's center and provided fresh air and extra light five hundred inhabitants.

Batal reached the reinforced Iron Gate and the armored guards that controlled it. Two Scottish Deerhounds sat at attention; their lean grey forms following Batal's every move. Curiosity filled their noble gaze and just enough ferocity to remind those that the Deerhounds had a purpose to their watch, one that would end badly for anyone that crossed their pack. After the fall, the deerhounds were the only dogs to survive in Skye Stone and adapted faster than their human companions to the new, and harsh environment.

Jenna, the biggest of the four guards leaned down until Batal could smell the homemade wine on her breath and see the patchy-stubble on her head, "Leaving late today, aren't we, Batal?"

"Birthday. You know what that means?" He unslung the sac over his shoulder and offered it to the four women that had become his good friends over the years.

"Birthday Bread!" They shouted in unison and tore the loaf into six pieces. The gate opened, Batal walked through, and it closed behind him to the ravenous sounds of those hungry but working on being hungry no more.

In the distance, white-topped waves broke on the stone jetty surrounding the deep, but small harbor facing the Mediterranean Sea. The sky was hazy but clearer than most days and the pinkish hue appeared a softer shade than usual. He glimpsed the towering pinnacle of rock in the distance. The lone remains of Sicily. Much of the European continent lay covered in water after the land split and fell during the quakes. A piece of Sicily rose to towering heights. When other survivors chose a new name for what became new lands, the proud few of Sicily kept its name. They numbered less than one hundred and were renowned for the finest sea salts.

Colorful wooden boats bobbed in the protective zone. Harvest yellow blazed over the gunwale, Skye Stone blue on the first plank, coral orange and sun yellow followed until the final blank of blue disappeared into the sea without showing where the boat stopped and the sea began. Each sail sat rolled at the bottom of a tall wooden mast. A commotion spilled out from around the curving outer-wall. A large, drunken man with his back to Batal was kicking at something substantial in the shadows. There's always one, Batal thought walking away from the brute and towards his fishing boat.

A guttural bark boomed from behind, and then a sickening yipe, followed by a sorrowful howl.

Batal froze, spun back toward the thug and before he realized it, had covered the twenty meters between them and was standing behind him as the bastard continued to kick the furry mass still snarling and snapping at his boot.

The bludgeoning boot reloaded for another go, Batal hooked it with his foot, grabbed the

back of the man's collar and pulled back as hard as he could. His lone boot lifted off the ground, his head flung back, and fell headfirst into the gravel. In dazed amazement, the brute was back on his feet and hammering wild punches in Batal's general direction.

Batal blocked the first few, but one got through and sent him sprawling to the ground. He kicked up hard when he saw the wild-eyed man lunging downward, Batal's foot sinking in the ample fat around his midsection. He was now on top of him, the stink of him was everywhere, the weight crushing the breath out of him. Batal kept his elbows up, hands shielding his face, but he was losing, and it was about to get much worse.

"AAAHHHHH, ya'fucken bastard!" He howled, the punches stopped, and the man reached back and seized the neck of the bloodied and matted Scottish deerhound biting his leg. The dog snarled, the man gripping its neck tighter, but the hound didn't let go. Instead, it clamped down harder. The man cried again and shifted his weight.

Batal seized the opportunity, thrust his hips up, throwing the man off to the side, rolled with him and was now on top unloading short, powerful punches. One after another, alternating his hands with the shift of his weight until the man was silent, alive, but unconscious. Batal pushed off the man's bouncing belly and staggered a few steps away and dropped to a knee. The deerhound shook its head a few more times and let go of the meaty calf it had shredded.

"It's OK, girl." Batal huffed, blood running from his nose and the corner of his mouth. The dog was tall, her matted silver fur formed twisted lumps, but her eyes were bright. Bloodied, but alive. "Aren't we a lovely pair? How have you survived without the protection of the wall?"

He stood, put his hands on his knees and looked again to the heap of shit that lay in a pool of blood and piss, snoring with frothy red bubbles simmering through broken teeth. Batal moved toward the dog which stood her ground even now and kneeled next to her. Keeping his

eyes down, Batal offered his hand for her to sniff.

The deerhound limped forward to Batal's extended hand and clamped her teeth down on it. Batal flinched but did not pull away even as her grip felt close to breaking skin.

“Fair enough, girl.” He looked into the hound’s eyes. Even up close the majesty of this ancient breed was humbling; her mistreatment infuriated Batal. “I’ll never lay a hand on you, and as long as I draw breath, you will have my protection.” He saw something else in her stare, strength and fearless loyalty, “and I will have yours?”

She released his hand and sat, panting, exhausted. Batal caught the hint of steel under her matted neck. He reached for the collar buried in matted fur. The hound showed her teeth but allowed him to uncover the small piece of scrap-metal shaped like a heart that hung from a threadbare material with a thin piece of wire.

"DANU."

Her ears perked up, back straightened. She was a magnificent creature, and Batal would not forget it. As soon as he pulled the nets, and if she allowed it, he’d clean her up and offer Danu a new home within the mighty walls of Sky Stone.

## Fire & Water

The Mediterranean Sea was calm today, waves rolled toward the rock foundation of Sky Stone, lapping at Batal's colorful fishing boat before making their way toward the island. Danu sat a hundred meters away on the long and narrow rocky spit that served as a fishing point for those who couldn't afford a boat or couldn't build their own. Red, yellow, and green dots bobbed in the distance. The fishing boats of brave men and women willing to leave Sky Stones protection in hopes of a bigger catch.

Batal tried to bribe the Scottish deerhound aboard his boat, but the bloodied and beaten dog watched her potential friend from a safe distance. Danu radiated strength even from here, Batal thought. He threw the hand-knotted net as far as his lean, muscled form would allow, his technique flawless. The net arced, spread into its full circumference and dropped into the water without a sound. Batal held the rope that allowed him to retrieve it.

Counting to ten, he followed the shadow cast by the mighty wall of Sky-Stone. A black form moving across the waters surface a few hundred meters away. The outer stone soared into the low-hanging clouds, the stone blasted smooth as far up as Batal could see. Hundred-meter waves broke against the fortress often and with little warning. Fire scorched the stone black in places and the waves did their best to erase the remnants of the nuclear blasts. The firestorms came and went when the dilapidated and malfunctioning space stations orbiting the earth discharged their aging missiles. Centuries of random warheads fired from uninhabited orbiting platforms that sooner or later would fall from their deteriorating orbit and unload their remaining

munitions on islands below. Until that day, Sky Stone and the remaining inhabited islands played the ultimate game of roulette.

Reaching ten, Batal pulled the line until he reached the net. Looping the edge on a long spindle fastened at the stern of his boat, he turned the wheel fixed to the deck and cranked in the net. The first few meters coiled around the spindle without a single fish. Batal strained and leaned into the wheel. Water vibrated and a mass of floundering anchovies broke the surface.

Danu barked and spun in circles on the spit. Batal cranked the final few meters of net filled with twisting silvery shapes.. How in the hell can she see the net from there? Batal cranked the catch into the center of the deck and quickly sorted the fish. “Three eyes,” He called and threw it over the gunwale and back into the sea. “Too many lesions,” back into the sea, “healthy, happy and two eyes,” into the container fitted at the bow. On and on, Batal sorted the fish into those showing the effects of the poison and those that had not.

Just like me, Batal pondered. Trying to give the next generation a few more months of life and a healthier existence. An existence bent on the ability to live with radiation and build an immunity to its effects from a three century old war that continued to this day. But now the missiles had no targets, no enemy, they fell from the sky without warning.

“Danu?” Batal remained fixed to the deerhound still turning in circles and howling. The net was clean, Batal pulled it up at the center, bunched it and moved to the stern. Danu’s barking grew more chaotic and reached a frenetic pace. Batal turned spun and released the net at the perfect moment. It soared, spread out—she’s looking up. He followed the angle of Danu’s muzzle into the sky.

“Oh, no.” Batal let go of the line and it shot out into the sea. Behind a thinning layer of clouds, a red ember released a grey streak. West, Batal thought,

towards the Dead Zone. The line of exhaust stopped and the fluffy streak was already dissipating. Somewhere within the low hanging cloud cover, high atop the wall of Sky Stone, a bell sounded, another joined in until a chorus of clanging copper found a rhythm.

“God no, it's too close.” The words slipped out of his mouth and the red missile dove towards the horizon. “Danu! Come! Swim girl, swim!”

The Deerhound stopped its circles, her bark fell silent and without hesitation, jumped into the sea and smoothly powered her way toward Batal's boat. She's too far out, he thought, she won't make it.

“Swim Danu, swim!” he bellowed. He threw anything not fastened down into the water. Within seconds the boat was empty, the anchovy gone, spare nets, weights, seats, all floating off the starboard side. Batal kept a single line, thick and heavy with a lead weight stitched into the end. He pulled the mast out of its base, dropped it on the deck, grabbed a dark pair of goggles and slid them over his scalp and began swinging the line in expanding circles.

A bright light bloomed along the horizon line and a mushroom cloud climbed high into the distant sky. The sea remained calm, no wind, just eerily quiet, the only sound was the swinging of the line and Batal's own heaving breathes.

Muscles burning, Batal released the line. It shot out across the sea, the lead weight barely missing a floundering, exhausted Danu who was within twenty meters of his boat. The deerhound bit down hard on the line and Batal pulled with everything he had. Claws scratched at the hull planks and Batal reached down and lifted her into the boat. He moved to the mast, released the mainsail and tossed it overboard, lifted the mast and dropped it into its base.

“Hold on Danu,” he commanded, and she wedged herself under the stern bench. Batal held the release line for the emergency sail. It was three times the size of the mainsail and could

pull a thirty foot fishing boat at a sickening pace under heavy wind. The sail could just as easily flip the boat. The expanding mushroom cloud eclipsed the horizon. Batal kept his eyes on the water, waiting to release the sail, waiting for the pull or the push.

If the current pushed, he thought, we may make it back to Sky Stone before the deadly winds hit. If the sea pulled away from Sky Stone and toward the horizon, a wave was building and if he was lucky, a powerful wind would charge in front of it. Either way, they had wait.

Batal's eyes remained locked onto the small, limp embroidered flag attached at the top of the mast. The drooping end stitched in bright blue thread fluttered and fell. Batal pulled the line taught and waited. A cool gust hit the bow of his boat, almost knocking him off balance and into the sea. Batal widened his stance, leaned toward the bow and into the wind, the flag at the top of his mast blew perpendicular to the wooden post.

He turned his head, found Danu's gaze fixed on him. "It's OK, girl." Like hell it was, but as long as he had the sail, they had a chance. The small boats in the distance had raised their emergency sails early and were being drug toward the horizon and toward their doom.

"Roof, Roof!" Danu echoed from under the tiller.

"Too soon, Danu! We must wait!" Batal yelled over the rushing wind hammering his chest and face. The mast flag drooped, and silence consumed them. Batal's heart thumped in his chest and ears. The water under his boat pulled, ripping at her sleek wooden hull and dragging her toward the growing wave and away from Sky Stone.

"ROOF!"

A second later Batal felt it. The warm breeze at his back. The strengthening wind pushing from the stern and towards Sky Stone, and against the current of the receding sea. He tied off the line, strapped himself onto the stern bench, and grabbed the tiller. Batal looked to his feet and smiled



at the fury face looking up at him, swallowed hard and released the emergency sail.

A massive, red expanse of waxed canvas caught the blasting wind. The bow of the fishing boat lifted out of the churning sea and the sail drove them toward the island fortress. Batal clung to the tiller, desperately steering the boat toward the harbor and the lone gate he had left only hours before.

Batal glanced over his right shoulder. A dark mountain loomed behind them, growing taller, consuming the sea. Colorful dots twirled on its face, trapped in its power. He spun back and the rocks around Skye Stone were bigger, no the sea was leaving the island to its fate. The harbor rushed toward them. The iron gate beyond was open. A large guard stood next to it, smashing the hilt of her sword into the swinging bell attached to the stone.

“Jenna! Hold the gate!” Batal bellowed and his fishing boat flew towards the stone jetty that now seemed like a fortress of its own, rising from the dropping sea level.

A gust hit the sail, Batal yelled as he fought with the tiller. His hands were numb, but he held fast, aimed at the harbors opening, the rocks rushing toward them. A shadow raced beyond his boat and up the stone wall. Batal stole a glance behind them. A wave like he had never seen before blocked out the sky with only the red heat of the rising mushroom cloud above it. Bodies pinned to the decks of spinning fishing boats colored its dark surface.

Rocks gashed the port side, Danu and Batal flew forward, his back smashing into the mast, Danu crushing his chest. The fishing boat shot across the harbor, skidded onto the beach and rolled to its side, dumping them onto the sand.

Everything was black, a roaring sound filling his ears. Water dripped down Batal’s face, something was biting his neck, he was spinning in darkness... something growling, the great hunting mountain was upon him, smashing his body into the sand.

“Batal! Get the fuck up!” The voiced boomed in his aching head. Growling replaced the roaring noise.

His eyes flashed open. Danu was pulling him toward the iron gate, Jenna racing toward them, armored, shouting as each leather-soled boot hit the sand. The guard reached down, ripped Batal to his feet, “Run or we die!”

With Danu leading the way, Batal and Jenna scrambled toward the iron gate, now only partially opened. The other guards stood inside, hands gripping the locking mechanisms, ready to close it the second they entered. Batal felt the pull of the coming tsunami at his back, the guards at the door were screaming.

Danu shot through the opening, Jenna threw Batal the last few meters. He crashed into a guard, both falling to the floor. Jenna squeezed through and before she slammed the iron gate shut and spun the locking mechanism, Batal watched a mountain of black moving through the clouds with colorful pinwheels spinning on its surface.

It was beautiful. It was terrifying, and without the waves, Skye Stone could not exist.

Jenna spun the locking mechanism, dropped to her knees exhausted. They all sat, backs pressed against the outer wall, Danu laying across Batal’s lap with the other two deerhounds leaning against the guards. Jenna reached out to Batal and he quickly took her hand.

“The sea brings life. Each wave a gift. The wall is strong. Each stone placed by an ancestor, each ancestor a stone.” They whispered in unison, repeating the prayer as they had many times before and all fell under a growing shadow.

## She Gives & She Takes

Shovels scrapped across stone on every pathway and rooftop. The fertile soil fell from the tops of every building, even the guardians shoveled the thick layer off the stone wall. Lines of carts made of reeds, hides and old fishing nets rolled effortlessly up the narrow lanes in a well-practiced dance. Some pulled by a team of deerhounds, some a group of goats, and others by the human residents of Sky Stone, but the joyful harvest continued. Every capable soul stopped what they were doing and joined in.

Carts began their journey empty and by the time they reached the farms on the northern end of the island, they were overflowing with the churned sediment of the ocean floor. Each wave that crested the wall brought rich soil for the farms, clay for pottery and water filters, wood for buildings and weapons and death for those who could not shelter from its power. Skye Stone celebrated life at every opportunity as death was guaranteed.

Music filled the five boroughs within the walled island, but outside the fishermen paid homage to their fallen in silence. The sea lay flat, but the water clouded with a hint of the destruction it carried only hours before. The stone wall stood proud without a trace left on its limestone surface of the biggest wave to break across Sky Stone since the records began in year 105.

Batal looked across the glassy expanse toward Sicily and all he could picture was a mountain of churning water reaching into the sky with colorful fishing boats twirling on its surface. Each boat carried a friend, and each friend lay in pieces on the beach. Twenty-five inhabitants of Skye Stone dead, most fishermen caught on the open sea and a few crushed by

logs and debris inside the wall. Survival came first and grieving was short because life was short.

Danu sat and leaned against his leg. Batal looked down at the deerhound, her fur brushed, wounds mended and dressed, she had saved his life. If she got into his boat instead of remaining on the spit, they would have pushed out beyond the shadow of the wall. Out where the fish clustered around the patches of thick algae and seaweed. Instead, Danu had spurned his coaxing, waiting for Batal to prove himself worthy of her loyalty and friendship. She limped out to the end of the rocky spit and watched. I could not leave you far behind, Batal thought, kept you in sight and stayed close to the safety of the wall. He scratched Danu's ears, bent down and kissed her muzzle. "Thank you."

Those gathered outside, continued collecting colorful pieces of wood along the beach and placing them inside a fishing boat beached on the sand. Each piece a splintered fragment of the beautiful boats taken from distant fishing grounds and smashed against the wall that protected those inside. Another group of fishermen carefully collected the dead or pieces of the dead and wrapped them in finely embroidered cloth and placed them in the center of a reed mat laying near the shoreline.

Seeing nothing left on the sand, the fishermen lifted the reed mat and tenderly placed it into the boat, folding the extra material over its contents. Pushing the boat back into the receding tide, the fishermen, now waist deep in water, surrounded the boat. A fat clay-fired jug passed between hands. After every swig, they spoke a name to the sea and then to the sky and passed it to the next waiting hands.

"Kennan..., Amal..., Curra..., Tara..., Fatima..., Lia..., " on and on the jug moved until the twenty-fifth and final name found its peace in the sea and on the wind, "Tassos." Batal lingered on the last name, Tassos he thought, you are not the last. There were twenty-six who

died, his eyes looked to where he'd left the brute. The beast hurting Danu, the man he left bleeding on the ground. But instead of guilt, his eyes moved to where Danu sat a few meters behind them, he had served justice.

The jug found the rough hands of the eldest fishermen. Holding the jug over the folded reed mat, she poured its contents and spoke to the sea. "To the sea, we are born, to the sea, we toil, to the sea, our ashes return and our souls are free."

The others repeated each word and pushed the boat towards the center of the small harbor. Bells sounded from the top of the wall only partially hidden amongst the clouds. Most of Sky-Stone looked down from above. Harvesting the gifts from the sea ceased, it was time to pay tribute to what the sea had taken.

The bells fell silent, one after the other, hundreds of flaming arrows flew into the cloud. Dropping with precision, they formed a single glowing trail from the clouds to the fishing boat. Not a single bolt hit the water, creating a growing melodic hum from flaming shafts with stone tips piercing spruce, again and again. The fishing boat erupted into flames.

Hours passed, and the citizens left the wall, returning to the harvest. Batal and Danu stood in silence. The boat and its contents turned to ash and carried on the running tide. The sun hung low in the sky, tired and worn like everything else in this world, Batal thought. His eyes locked onto the northern horizon, the setting sun illuminating a shape on the water. He turned toward the Wall and the iron gate. "Jenna!" He yelled over the distance and pointed.

"What is it, Batal?" She took a few paces in his direction, stopped and ran back. Pulling her sword, Jenna spun the blade and hammered the hilt on the bell.

Far above, shouting echoed from the top of Skye Stone's wall. Bells rang and guardians massed on the north and western sections, shouting orders.

For the second time in less than a day, another force was rising. Not a mountain of water, but worse, the northern horde was coming. Following the tsunami and hoping it caused a breach or weaknesses in the stone. The shadow split into a fleet of strange looking vessels hugging the sea. Batal had never seen boats of this shape. This was something new.

Jenna sounded from the gate and Batal and Danu ran towards Skye Stone. “You are no longer a fisherman, Batal! Grab your bow, sharpen your sword and don your armor! You didn’t think we all trained for nothing? Did you? Hurry!”