

Chapter 1: The Isle of Apples



“I don’t know, Philia...do you think we should chance it?”

Philia Pendragon made her way around the faded blue sofa and peered over her mother’s shoulder. Thick, dark thunderclouds gathered on the northwest horizon, hovering like angry watchmen over the Irish Sea. Even from this distance, she could see the whitecaps forming on the dark, threatening waters.

“It doesn’t look so good,” Philia conceded. Then she shrugged. “But what choice do we have? We go now, or wait ten years.”

It was almost a decade since Philia and her mother had fled the mythic shores of Avalon, and if they didn’t sail home tonight, it would be another decade before they could try again.

“It could be dangerous,” her mother paused. “Sailing west.”

Mum really wants to try...and so do I. Philia leaned towards the window – towards the west – and curled her fingers into her palm. Her heart had been set on sailing these

waters since the day they first fled the enchanted isle. Avalon was calling her, drawing her into its mysteries like a fisherman pulling codfish from the sea.

“Maybe it’s best for you to stay, my dove.” Lines of worry wrinkled her mother’s flawless complexion. “You’ve made friends here in Conwy. You’re the lead on the fencing team now, and at the top of your class in school. You could be happy here...safe.”

The word tantalized Philia. Her mother was offering her an easy way out. *You don’t have to go. You could stay right here in Wales.*

Her mother placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, but Philia shifted away from her touch. She wanted to be strong.

“How can I be happy when I know our people need me? If I stay, and they remain the tyrant’s slaves...their suffering will be on my hands.” She turned so her mother could see she was in earnest. “Tonight, we have a chance to return. How can I abandon them?”

When her mother said nothing, she added, “Please. I want to go.”

Philia knew she was making a perilous choice. Nothing confirmed that more than her mother’s lack of words.

“Mum, you’ve always told me it would be dangerous to go back. A death sentence, really, if things have gone badly in Avalon.” Philia held her mother’s gaze. “But...I want to take that risk with you. For the hope we could set things right for our people.”

After a long pause, her mother nodded. "And the hope of seeing your father again."

"And my father," Philia agreed. She leaned over the coffee table and picked up a copy of her mother's latest novel, *The King's White Rose*. "We have to see if your book is true."

Vivien Pendragon's deep brown eyes filled with tears. She was a rare, delicate beauty, the kind that made men walk into telephone poles or, back in Avalon, stumble into castle moats. Yet Philia's mother had never shown interest in any man except the one she'd lost in Avalon.

"Go on then," Vivien urged. She dabbed her tears away and smiled at her daughter. "Collect your things."

Philia grinned and ran to grab her knapsack, already packed and ready to go, from its place beside the old bookcase. She opened the sack to squeeze *The King's White Rose* between an extra pair of clothes and a set of watercolors. Of all the books her mother had written, this one was her favorite.

A story to give us hope.

The floorboards in their upstairs flat groaned as her mother moved about their tiny kitchen, banging cupboards in her search for last-minute provisions. Soon she emerged with a loaded backpack of her own. "Come on, Philly. We'd best get out there before the rain starts."

Philia slung her bag over her shoulder and headed to the front entrance, where her mother held the door open to their tiny Conwy flat. She waved her through the

entrance, locked the door, and started down the narrow stairs. Philia paused before following, taking a moment to admire her mother's calligraphy painted above the front door:

549 Castle Way – Home to the Ladies of the Lake

"Good-bye, little flat," she whispered, brushing her fingers against the familiar letters. "I hope."

Then she turned and slipped down the stairs after her mother.

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The waters of Conwy Bay were relatively calm, but as their old fisherman's boat entered the open water, the conditions grew increasingly treacherous. The whitecaps churned and roiled and rocked their boat until Philia's stomach started churning right along with it.

She took a deep breath and grasped the helm with both hands.

"Okay...now head north-northwest for a bit," her mother said.

Philia turned to starboard. The boat clipped into a wave, spraying Philia and the upper deck with freezing cold salt water. She wiped the stinging spray from her eyes as the old boat creaked beneath them.

They weren't more than a kilometer out of the bay when the rain started.

Philia hastily flung up the hood of her jacket and snapped the top button of her collar. Curly wisps of chocolate-brown hair swung out of her hood as she turned toward the stern of their boat, where her mother huddled beneath a plastic poncho. Philia could see the blue glow of her mother's iPhone from her position at the helm.

The two Pendragons sought to discover the elusive Way by the Sea – a water path that led to Avalon in early August, during the harvest feast of Lammastide.

Vivien was using the SkyView constellation finder to navigate via the stars, just as King Arthur's shipmen did many years ago, without the fancy app.

Tonight Mum sees the stars as Arthur would have seen them, when he was sailing to Avalon after the last battle. The thought made Philia's rain-touched skin tingle with excitement.

"Start sailing due west," her mother shouted into the growing wind.

Philia brought her gaze forward so that she could check the ship's instruments and slightly adjust their course.

Due west, she thought, squinting into the falling rain. Lightning snapped across the sky. Right into the thick of it.

"Are you okay, dearest?" her mother called.

Philia's stomach lurched with each increasing wave, and her wet garments clung to her skin. *We could meet our deaths out here, long before we reach Avalon's shores.* The cowardly, comfortable part of herself wanted to tell her mother they should head back. The storm was just too much.

No way, the braver part of her scolded. Remember your people, Philia. You always knew this wouldn't be easy.

"I'm fine," she shouted back. "You just keep giving me directions."

The water calmed down a bit as they turned north-northwest again.

"I think we're getting close, Mum."

Close to Avalon, Isle of Apples. Philia thought, and the Way by the Sea.

"I'm so proud of you, Philia," her mother said, a smile in her voice. "Your father would be, too. Maybe..." Her words trailed off, so Philia finished her thought for her.

"Maybe we'll be with Father soon, and he can tell me himself." She wanted to believe it. She knew her mother wanted – no, *needed* – to believe it still more.

Philia glanced upward. The storm looked uglier than ever, but the waters around their boat had grown eerily still, as if the sea was holding its breath.

"Philia, watch out!"

She jerked her head around, saw the massive wave, as tall as their little boat or even taller, bearing toward them from the west. She tried to cut into it, but her shaking hands slipped on the wet spokes of the helm.

The boat tilted horribly as the mountain of water slipped beneath them like a child's hand beneath a blanket. The helm spun, and she scrambled to stop it. The wind cut off her mother's cry – and then the wave rose up and swallowed them whole.

The sea surged up her nose, inside her slicker. The giant wave lifted Philia off the deck, crushed her against the railing. She shrieked, clutching at empty air and water as the wave drove her out of the boat and into the open sea.

Down, down, down. So quiet and peaceful. But then: sharks, whales, sea dragons. Darkness blotted out the surface.

Her years of swimming and boating lessons kicked in. She pushed off her Converses, flung out her arms, and fought her way up to the surface. When she reached the top, she could see the boat to her left. It was closer than she'd expected.

“Philia!” Her mother’s cry laced with panic and fear.

“Here,” she gasped. “Here, Mum!”

She went under again as another wave surged. When she came up, her mother had pulled out an orange life preserver and was hovering by the railing.

“Grab on, Philly!” Her mother flung it out.

Philia forced her cold limbs towards the boat. Her eyes stung. The water choked her, so she could barely breathe. She swam, on and on, treading a frozen sea.

One more wave.

“Come on, Philly! I know how strong you are!”

With three swift strokes, Philia brought the lifesaver in range. She squeezed herself inside the ring as her mother frantically pulled her close to the side of the boat. Philia held out her arm to keep from being dashed against the shifting hull.

“Pull, Mum!” she cried, pushing her bare feet against the boat’s side.

With surprising strength, her mother yanked the life preserver up so that Philia was dangling just above the water.

A brilliant burst of lightning illuminated the scene: her mother’s pale face, determined and grim; their boat tilting ominously to port; and a final great wave rolling in from the west.

Philia’s trembling hands reached her mother’s just as the fourth wave hit.

“Don’t let go,” her mother ordered, fire burning in her clear brown eyes.

“Never,” Philia yelled in return.

Then the side of the boat met their bodies with a sickening thud, and all went dark.

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End of Chapter 1