

THE  
CURIOSITIES  
OF  
PERCIVILLE  
HARPER

SIMON BATSMAN

CRANTHORPE  
MILLNER  
PUBLISHERS

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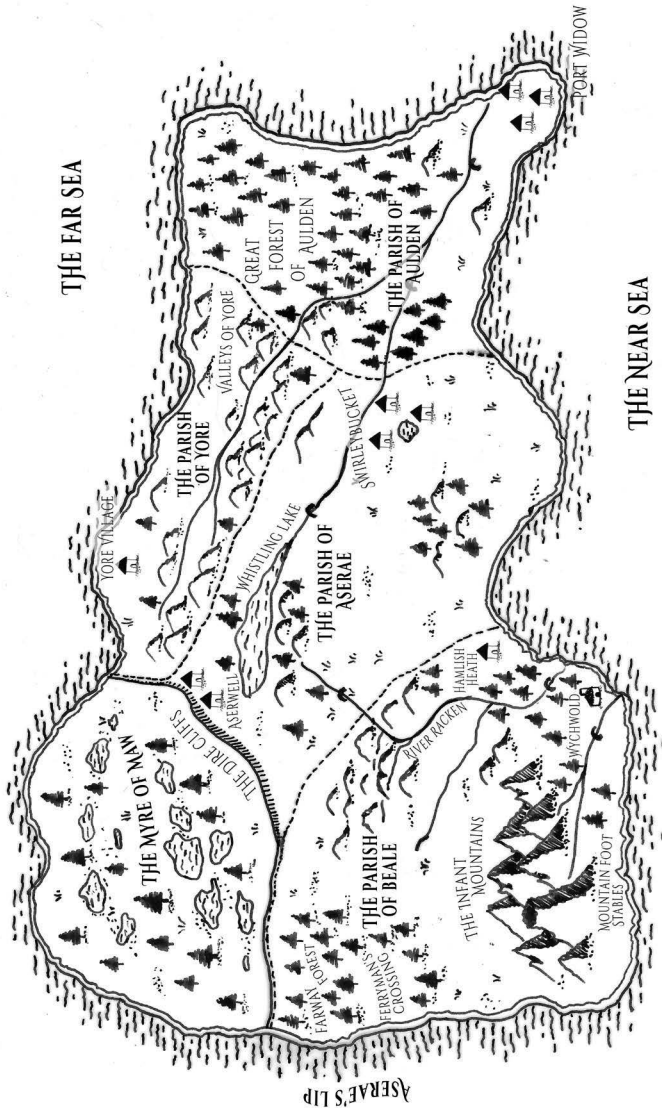


For Niamh.

Remember that trip to Barcelona I promised you  
for your birthday?

Well, anyway, I wrote you a book instead.

# MARROW MYRE



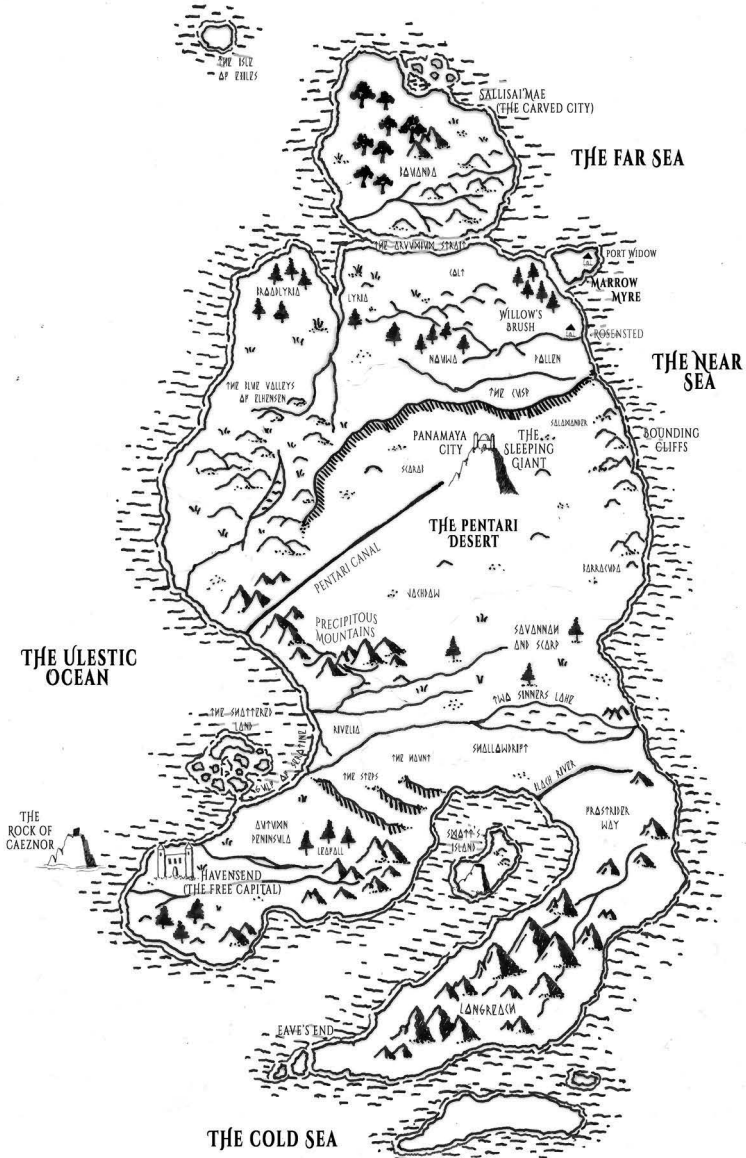
THE FAR SEA

THE NEAR SEA

ASRAE'S LIP

PORT WIDOW

# THE ARVUM





*To most, it is impossible to picture absolute nothingness in the mind's eye. Not pure darkness, nor empty light, but actual, literal nothingness. And yet...*





# PROLOGUE

## THE WOMAN AND THE CANDLESTICK

A voice of sorts, or perhaps rather a notion. Like a waning thought clinging to the underside of a single leaf being swept along in the wind.

Whatever it was, it said, “Imagine a light.”

Then, of all things, a tall white candlestick appeared, as though it had always been there. It stood unassumingly, issuing a modest flicker of light, a hopeful beacon into that very nothingness.

“More,” the thought said and, somehow, that lowly candlestick seemed to glow brighter, stretching out from its tender wick and spreading down its sides, to reveal an antique writing desk upon which it sat.

The flame bled into the pitch black surrounding it as if it were a stranger’s hand, groping the stagnant air and reaching for something to touch.

Its light lapped about the deathly silence, soundlessly spilling over the top of the writing desk and swelling down its legs to illuminate a stone floor beneath. It clawed its way behind, up through the emptiness until it pooled into a

decaying cuckoo clock, seemingly suspended in the air. The wood of the clock, once beautifully carved, was warped and rotten. Its hands, bent and twisted from a timeless neglect.

The light cast shadows across its broken façade as it climbed down the chain of a rust-mottled pendulum.

Then, across the floor, it festered between the cavities of the stones, eroding away the darkness where it settled in front of the writing desk.

Here, the last thing one might have expected, had they the misfortune of being present, was a young woman. She lay on her side, knees tucked up to her torso, cheek resting dreamlessly on her pale hands. The veritable sleeping position, in the most unlikely of places.

The woman, pretty in the face with a river of mousy brown hair flowing midway down her back, was clad in a simple white gown held tight by a tattered rope belt around her slender waist, and on her feet, she wore plain sandals that were fastened up to her ankles. She had long ears that were softly pointed at the tips, and her skin shimmered slightly as if she were cast of bronze.

The voice, or thought, spoke again. “Wake now.”

The first chime was deafening as it pierced the silence, the second clashed dissonantly. As the pendulum swung arrhythmically, the twisted hands spun furiously over the clock’s disfigured face.

From within the clock came a loud knocking as if somebody were trapped inside and wanted to break free. It knocked again, this time harder, competing with the ringing of the torturous chimes. Moments later, a miniature door sprung open, though

not a cuckoo emerged. Instead, a model of a figure in a black robe, its hood obscuring its face but for a gruesome smile and snarling eyes.

Each time the figure shot out of the door, it dangled freely at the end of its cord like a broken limb. In and out, it sprung to the cacophony of chimes whose tempo was desperately chasing its volume. Louder and louder it chimed, enough to make one's ears bleed.

Louder and louder into that small but enormous nothingness.

Louder and louder until, in a fraction of a moment, the chimes stopped, the hands ceased, the figure disappeared, and the young woman's eyes shot open.

Nothingness and silence.

# CHAPTER 1

## WYCHWOLD

It was often remarked that the people of Marrow Myre were a strange and ancient race. That their blood was the most closely related to that of people from an age long past and, to most, long forgotten. A time of chaos and confusion, of greed and war, but a time also of great art, music, science and romance. Long before the world became too marred, too complicated, and people yearned for a simpler way of life.

Though if one were to broach the subject to a Myrish local, they would most likely regale a more traditional narrative of mighty gods, weaving together their unintelligible charms in order to create the most perfect and peaceful land in all of the Arvum.

Then, perhaps, one might ask, “But what about the rest of the Arvum? Why not make the whole world perfect and peaceful?” and most likely they’d be presented with a dismissive shrug, a coy smile, and another pint of Swirleybucket ale plonked on the table in front of them.

The Myrish were a kind and hospitable people, devoted to their land and forever opening their doors. They gladly

welcomed travellers of all kinds, elves and such, from across the continent to visit this large but humble island, to sample the local ales, the cheeses made from the thick milk of the Beale goat, and smoked salmon from the shimmering waters of the Whistling Lake.

Perhaps the Myrish people were too devoted to this land, one might suggest, for though they may have frequently crossed the parish boundaries or ventured into the Infant Mountains, it was most unusual that they should ever cross the sea into the wider world. Not for a long time had the inhabitants of Marrow Myre left this remarkable, though sometimes lonely, island.

Remarkable and sometimes lonely was a fitting description for Fjona Sarsen. She lay dreamlessly on a cotton mattress, wrapped up tightly in a goose feather duvet with one pale arm hanging over the edge of the bed, her knuckles nearly brushing against the floorboards. Her face was hidden beneath a veil of deep brown hair, though it almost appeared maroon under the soft rays of sunlight that crept between the gaps of the window shutters. Her hair was cut short, only as far as her shoulders, and was lusciously thick and curly, somehow the gold standard of a tidy mess.

Although old enough to live alone, Fjona occupied the loft of her parent's house. Their home was a roundhouse with a near-conic thatched roof, except for where the straw had been parted to accommodate the timber loft. It was situated on the top of a hillock in the shade of a mighty oak tree, itself a city of wallowbird nests.

Already the wallowbirds, a native species to Marrow Myre,

were whistling harmonically to signal morning. Their call had begun as a subtle tweet here, a trill or two over. Then, as more and more of these illustrious purple and green birds picked up the call, their song became more uniform. Every day, they would synchronise a different tune and, every day, wallowbirds across the island would raise the sleepy Myrish people from their beds.

Mostly, except for Fjona who required a firm knock at the door from her mother, Dharla. In a whirlwind of velvety chestnut hair, Dharla welcomed herself into Fjona's room, carrying a long evergreen dress over one arm. She herself was wearing a handsomely fitted blue dress with a swirling pattern of red vines interweaving upwards from hem to collar, and upon her head she wore a cream-coloured sunhat with an overly wide brim.

Had it not been for a slight stoop, Dharla would have needed to duck beneath the roof truss as she strode across the floor with the grace of a deer.

"Morning greets you," she said sweetly, as she draped the dress over the back of a chair before walking past the bed to open the window shutters. A warm light spilled into the bedroom, reflecting off dust motes that floated in the air. Then, with a slight edge to her voice, she added, "I was embarrassed by the same old tattered rags that you normally wear so I fished this out of the wardrobe for you." Dharla proceeded to swat a net of cobwebs away from the beams with her hat. "Your father is already outside helping the villagers set up for breakfast. He's still very grateful for you herding all the goats back in last night." She continued as if they were having a conversation.

“Mind you, it was your fault that they escaped in the first place.” She furrowed her thick brow and retreated to the door. “Come now,” she said decisively as she left the room and made her way downstairs, welcomingly replaced by the fragrance of freshly baked bread.

Fjona, like many young adults, had the exceptional ability to both be listening and not listening at the same time. She rubbed away the sleep from her eyes and kicked off the duvet before stretching her entire body out on the bed like a spider anticipating a hug. Groggily, she slid off the mattress and stood embracing the crisp breeze, now circumventing the room from the wide-open window. She found herself staring forlornly at a wallowbird, which was treading carefully along a narrow branch of the oak tree and whistling along to the morning’s melody as if it hadn’t a single care in the world. Moments later, another wallowbird landed beside it in a plume of colourful feathers. They started to sing together until flapping their wings and disappearing, somewhere over the village.

Fjona released a long, heavy sigh then, coming around to the idea of being awake, looked disdainfully at the hideous green dress. Hideous, at least in Fjona’s eyes, for she had never held a particular affinity for garments that were designed to be free of crinkles and free of dirt. At least the evergreen matched her eyes, she reasoned.

Reluctantly she put it on. Even if she’d had a mirror in her bedroom, she would not have bothered to check herself before making her way downstairs. Not that she would have needed to. Fjona was just one of those people who could wake up looking herself; even if that did mean unbrushed hair, bags

beneath her eyes, and a smudge of dirt across her cheek.

As she spiralled down the staircase, Fjona could hear her mother opening drawers and banging cupboards, the murmuring of water boiling on the kitchen stove, and the sizzling of eggs in a pan as Dharla frantically prepared platters of food and hot drinks. Enough to feed a village. After all, breakfast was regarded as a very important meal across Marrow Myre. It wasn't just about fuelling the body before a day of tilling the fields, tending to livestock or constructing new barns. It was about community. A social gathering that took place each and every morning, no matter the weather. In the villages and towns that made up the island, the Myrish people would be sure to don a nice frock or coat and catch up with their neighbours over a vast spread of fruits, cheeses, breads, cured fish and cold meats. Then at the end of the meal, they would tidy everything away, change into clothing more suitable for their work, and start their day with a fresh bout of energy that often follows a good conversation.

“Morning greets you, Mother,” Fjona said as she stepped down into the wide-open hub of the roundhouse.

Still feeling groggy, she almost had to squint as the sunshine poured in through large oval windows, casting a crisp, golden hue over the furnishings.

Blinking her eyes into focus, Fjona felt Dharla thrust a platter of food into her arms and plant a soft, loving kiss on her cheek.

“You look beautiful, my *derine*. Now please take these fruits down to your father. I will be with you all in a few moments,” Dharla told her daughter, swiftly returning to the kitchen area.



Fjona sucked in the sweet smell of cinnamon that hung beneath the rafters, then proceeded for the door, though not without pinching a square of white cheese from the table.

Outside, she was welcomed by a bustle of neighbours from the village, the hubbub of chatter, clattering of crockery. She breathed a heavy sigh, preparing herself for the monotony of yet another day in pleasant little Wychwold.

Fjona found herself leaning on a fence, looking down the scarp to the village green where several long tables were being laid with cutlery and plates. Beside it, on the opposite side of a fishpond, were Carlé Doe, the village bard, and her grandfather Meris, who had played his pan flute at breakfast for nearly a century.

Fjona could hear the same jolly performance that they seemed to play every morning. Along with a flock of wallowbirds, who had subsequently picked up this tune, were several children from the village who were kicking up their heels and spinning around animatedly to the music. They knew this one well. The music started to increase in tempo, gently at first though it very quickly picked up the pace. The children were swirling around, clapping their hands in chaotic fashion. They received a few disgruntled looks from the adults of the group, though most were grinning with anticipation and many were clapping their hands in time with the music too.

Just as it was getting faster, it was getting louder. Both Carlé and Meris had a relaxed but definite look of concentration, furrowed brows and straight face. Faster and faster. Louder and louder in a swelling crescendo, and then, perfectly on cue, the music peaked. It stopped on a single powerful but short

note, at which point the children all collapsed onto the grass, giggling and throwing themselves around, while the adults applauded with a smattering of laughter.

Fjona was distracted by the scuffling of little shoes on gravel and turned to see a small boy, well dressed in a smart coat but dappled with dirt.

“Why didn’t you want to join in, Peter?” Fjona asked, gesturing to the children by the green with a nod of the head.

Peter climbed up on the fence and scoffed. “I’m much too old for silly games!”

It was enough to make Fjona smile from ear to ear. “You sound exactly like your brother.”

Peter returned her a contemplative look.

“Which brother?” he asked curiously.

“Why Todie, of course,” she replied, to which Peter just rolled his eyes and theatrically buried his head in his hands. “Where is Todie, anyway?”

“He’s with my dad and Rodmear,” Peter replied glumly, “and my grandma.” His face turned as sour as an underripe blackberry.

“And you didn’t want to join him?”

Peter just shook his head, then wiped his runny nose on the back of his sleeve.

“Hey!” Fjona encouraged, her eyes wide with excitement, “How about a race down the hill?”

Suddenly Peter was attentive. He looked up, a beaming smile across his sullied face.

“First one to the bottom gets the biggest fig,” Fjona added, tipping the fruit platter towards him, in the middle of which

was a succulent purple fig the size of Peter's fist.

Fjona had barely finished speaking before, in a scuffle of dirt and gravel, Peter raced off along the path that gently curved down the edge of the hillock.

With Peter helping himself to a head start, Fjona had little choice but to clamber over the fence and take a shortcut down the steep scarp. Clutching the fruit platter closely to her chest, she skidded down the dewy grass and weaved between the bare rock, all the while keeping her balance. At the bottom of the first slope, she hopped over a fence into the Wiskins' vegetable patch, carefully planting her feet between the rows of parsnips. On the far side, she came back onto the path just as Peter was running past. He shot Fjona a bemused look, nearly tripping up on the cobbles as he did, but determinedly continued along to the next slope.

Fjona didn't waste a second. She crossed the path, hopped another fence and carefully descended the second slope. As she climbed down through a blanket of wildflowers, butterflies and bees flurried about her but Fjona remained unperturbed. The bottom was in sight and she could see Peter only just now coming back around the bend. When she glanced up briefly, several villagers were looking at her disapprovingly, owl-like heads crooked to one side, arms crossed.

Then, as her feet landed on level ground, Fjona had too much momentum to stop. She leaped over yet another fence, this time passing through Iser's stables, and plummeted her face into a big, broad shoulder.

Dazed and with a ringing in her ears, she could hear Peter calling, "You cheated, you cheated," and another voice saying,

“Fjona? What in the Arvum are you doing?”

When she peeled back away from the shoulder, Fjona looked up to see a kind face smiling back at her, his wispy auburn hair waving in the breeze like tall autumnal grass in a meadow.

“Todie! Fjona cheated!” Peter complained, his face bright red with fury.

Todie looked first at Peter, then to Fjona with an enquiring expression. “Is my brother speaking truthfully?”

“Hey, I never said you had to stick to the path,” Fjona teased, “but you’re right, I shouldn’t have taken the shortcut.” She plucked the fat fig from the top of the platter and dropped it into Peter’s cupped hands.

Todie ruffled his brother’s floppy hair, and without so much as a thank you the young boy raced off towards the village green with his prized possession.

“You know you needn’t keep entertaining him like that,” Todie said as he removed a stray leaf from Fjona’s scraggly hair.

“He’s having a hard time,” she replied.

“I know.”

“It seems to help him.”

“I know,” Todie repeated with a sigh.

“How are you?”

“A little nervous, but otherwise not too bad.”

“Did you speak to Lasmee?”

Todie forced a smile. “I did, but she was never much of a listener *before*.”

Together they headed through a thicket of twisting pine trees whose boughs shivered in the breeze and followed a brook

that led down to the village green.

Once there, Todie said, "Find us a good seat. Need to check if my mother could use a hand." He wandered off towards a two-tiered roundhouse opposite the pond, where his mother stood unsteadily carrying a towering tray of bowls.

Meanwhile Fjona headed over to her father, Ascerat, who was busy polishing cutlery at one of the tables. He was bent forward, thick-rimmed spectacles perched precariously at the end of his long, pointed nose as if they may tumble off onto the table at any moment.

In spite of the sunshine, he was wrapped up in a winter coat, so thick that even the moderate wind couldn't ruffle it.

"Morning greets you, Papa," Fjona said cheerfully, to which there was no reply but for a quiet muttering.

As Fjona put down the fruit platter, she noticed Ascerat's veinous hands trembling as he attempted to polish a sharp knife, and she grabbed him by the wrist to prevent him from accidentally severing himself.

"Papa!" Fjona exclaimed, startling her father. The knife clattered to the table; a loud ringing echoed from the rim of a plate. Not that anybody else could have heard it over the music and their own conversations.

Ascerat turned to Fjona. In the morning sunlight, and just for a moment, his eyes appeared almost yellow as he pushed his spectacles up to the bridge of his nose.

"Sorry, my dear, I was utterly lost in my thoughts. A silly old fool, I am!" he said. "Not that I can even remember what it was I daydreaming about," he added, frowning deeply with his gums pursed together like a doll. "Anyhow, what was it you

were saying?”

Any concern Fjona had harboured in that moment for her father was immediately extinguished when he smiled fondly.

“I just came over to say morning greets you,” Fjona repeated.

“Ahh, morning greets you too, my *derine*.” He kissed his daughter on the cheek.

It was only once Ascerat’s cold lips met her skin that Fjona realised how hot her skin had become from running down the scarp.

“May I assist you at all, Papa?” Fjona asked feigning politeness while she surreptitiously pilfered a plump red grape from a nearby bowl.

“I do believe we are quite ready,” Ascerat replied as a crowd of rosy-cheeked villagers flocked towards the table.

With them they carried plates and platters, stacked high with freshly prepared food. To an onlooker who hadn’t seen such an event, they would likely have perceived the procession of food-bearers as manic and disorganised. How a rubble of people, seeming to be constantly getting in one another’s way, could possibly lay a table in such a manner was near impossible. Yet, like a murmuration of starlings, the well-rehearsed choreography of plate-laying was successful and, minutes later, the table was set.

“Please...” Ascerat gestured to Fjona to take a seat next to him, as he struggled to pull his own chair out from beneath the table. Receiving a curious look from Fjona he added, “Leg must have got caught in a tuft.” Then he plonked himself down.

Fjona just shrugged, then waved Todie over to join her.

By now, Carlé and Meris had put their instruments away and the whole village was seated. There was much excited chatter as the Myrish people of Wychwold tucked into a breakfast banquet. Cold ham dripping in a thick lather of golden honey, smoked salmon on a bed of bright lettuce leaves and covered with a zealous sprinkling of dill, and rich cheeses in all tangs and tastes. There were bowls brimming with ripe, juicy plums, and hazelnuts collected by the children from the nearby woods, which had been toasted and seasoned with salt and sweet peppercorns. Pots of tea and strong coffee were spread evenly across the table, though not for Mrs Wiskins who, at nearly ninety years old, was partial to a half pint of stout with her breakfast.

As the meal wore on, Fjona contentedly slathered butter over a thick slice of crusty bread while engaged in a heated debate with Todie about the best way to spear a fish.

“Miss Sarsen, how wrong you are! The best way to spear a salmon is to wade out into the river as far as you can, let the waters roll in quietly around you, take a deep breath, and...” he paused “... there!” Todie stabbed his knife into a tantalising piece of salmon. “Speared! That’s how you—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Fjona had slipped her own knife horizontally through the thick slice of salmon and whisked it towards her own plate.

“Lose a perfectly good bit of fish,” she concluded casually, and stuffed the whole piece into her mouth.

Todie considered her in equal part admiration and disgust. “Well played, Miss Sarsen. Next time we go up to the Racken, we’ll use your technique,” he conceded.

Fjona smiled a great, *salmony* smile, prompting Todie to pretend to faint. That made them both fall apart with laughter.

Although their table manners were clearly lacking, everybody was too wrapped up in their own meals and conversations to notice.

All in all, it was a very pleasant morning in Wychwold. Very pleasant indeed. Though perhaps not for Dharla Sarsen, for had someone taken the time to look away from their bountiful plates of food or paused for a breath from their intimate conversation, they may have looked up to see her staring intensely at her husband, a deeply troubled and pained look of consternation frozen across her sullen, ashen face.