



THE STONE OF THE STARS

THE DRAGON THRONE • BOOK I

ALISON BAIRD



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Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Part One: The Prophecy](#)

[Chapter 1: Ailia](#)

[Chapter 2: Damion](#)

[Chapter 3: The Angel and the Scroll](#)

[Chapter 4: The Eve of the Dead](#)

[Chapter 5: Visions and Apparitions](#)

[Chapter 6: The Doom of the Dance](#)

[Chapter 7: Star of Omen](#)

[Chapter 8: The Black Knight](#)

[Chapter 9: Jomar](#)

[Chapter 10: Mandrake](#)

[Part Two: The Stone of Heaven](#)

[Chapter 11: “To the World’s End”](#)

[Chapter 12: At the Back of the North Wind](#)

[Chapter 13: The Lost Land](#)

[Chapter 14: The Holy Mountain](#)

[Chapter 15: Here Be Dragons](#)

[Chapter 16: The Queen of Heaven](#)

[Chapter 17: The Day of Disaster](#)

Chapter 18: The Dragon King

Chapter 19: The Moon Gate

Chapter 20: The God-King

Chapter 21: The Palace

Chapter 22: East of the Sun, West of the Moon

Chapter 23: Darkness and Light

Chapter 24: The Princess of the Stars

Appendix

Pronunciation of Elensi Words

Glossary of Extra-Terrestrial Words

Glossary of Terrestrial Terms

About the Author

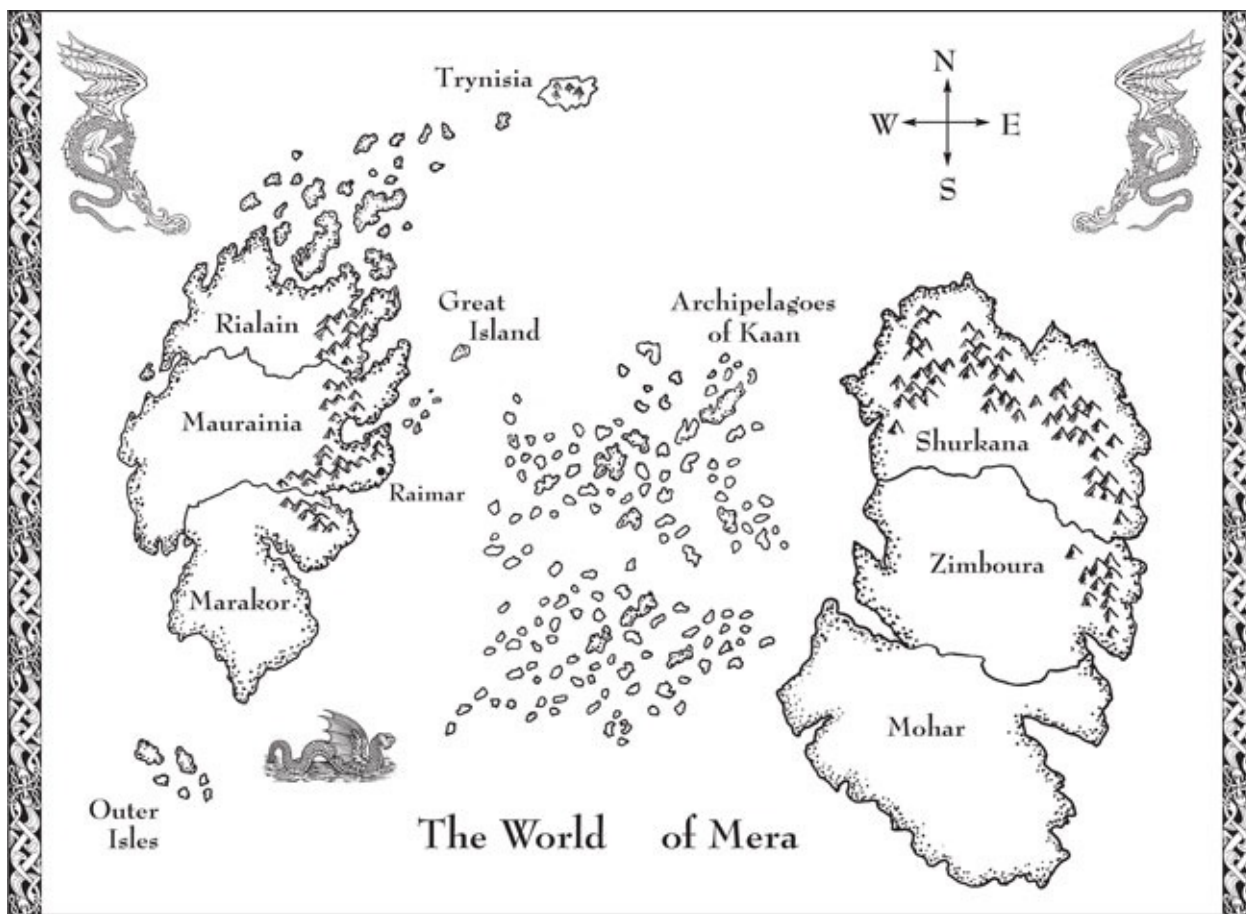
to Clan Baird

of Duck Cove, Pocologan, and St. Andrew's-by-the-Sea: remembering magical summers, and stories
told on the beach

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PROLOGUE

In the beginning were the El, whom the ancients call the gods: the first children of the Maker. They woke in the deep before Earth and Heaven were made, and they beheld the Creation. And when it was completed some of the El chose to dwell amid the stars of Heaven; and they became the Elyra, the high gods. Others of the El chose to dwell upon the Earth, and they became the Elaia, who have many other names: the genii, the faeries, the gods of land and sea. The Elaia delighted in the making of things, in shaping wood and stone and gems and ores: it was they who crafted the enchanted talismans that guided the heroes of old. But before that time, in the very dawning of the world, they fashioned a treasure for the Elyra. It had the likeness of a gemstone, clear as water and cut with many facets, small enough to hold in the hand. Though formed of the stuff of Earth, it shone as though all the stars of Heaven were contained within it, and so it was called the Meraalia, the Star Stone. The Elaia made it to show the high gods that things of the lowly Earth could be as beautiful as those of the sky. And Modrian, who was then chief of the Elyra, accepted the gem and set it in his crown.

But still Modrian cared nothing for the mortal world or for its creatures, and he used the latter as he pleased, for servants and for playthings. At this the gods became divided, some siding with and others against Modrian. But the greater number opposed him, and led by the bright god Athariel they waged war on him and his minions until the stars shook in the firmament. In the last great battle Athariel struck the crown of Modrian with his sword, and the sacred Stone broke loose from its setting. Down to Earth it fell, shining like a shooting star; and it came to rest in the north of the world on the summit of a mountain that ever since that time has been called Elendor, the Holymount. There the gem remained, long after Modrian was defeated and confined to the Pit of Perdition, which he himself had made for the imprisonment of others.

Now, the name of that land into which the Star Stone fell was Trynisia: it was a place of ice and bitter cold until the Elaia went to dwell there and by their arts made it green and fruitful. In those days many of the Elaia took mortal mates, and out of these unions came the Elei, the Fairfolk. Being a divine race, they could work many kinds of magic, and their time upon Earth was many times greater than that allotted to other mortals. The Elaia brought the Fairfolk to dwell with them in Trynisia, and instructed them in their arts, and made them wise.

Elarainia, goddess of the Morning Star, looked on the Fairfolk with special favor. Often she descended to the Earth and walked among them in the likeness of a woman, sharing her knowledge

with them. And the children of the gods loved her, and called her Queen of Heaven and Queen of Night, for her star shone more brightly than any other. Many of them she took to dwell with her, in her own land that lay beyond the world's end. And she bade those of the Fairfolk who remained in Trynisia to leave the Star Stone on the mountaintop and watch it well, lest those who still served Modrian should come and take it for their own dark purposes. For the powers of Earth and Heaven were bound together in the Stone, and it was said that it would one day defeat its former master when he returned in might to conquer the world.

So the Fairfolk built a fane upon the mountaintop, called the Temple of Heaven, over the place where the Star Stone lay. The years passed, and a great city was founded upon the summit, a holy city where priests and sibyls and astrologers dwelt: Liamar, City of the Star. Dragons guarded its gates, and gryphons guarded the temple, and in the city were many wonders made by the Elaia and their children: enchanted gems that commanded the weather and the waters, shining stones that gave light in place of lamps, and a magical crystal that revealed to Eliana, queen of the Fairfolk, all the doings of the world. But of all wonders the greatest was the Star Stone. Heavenly spirits attended it, and the temple was a place of awe. At times a bird of fire was seen to rise from the Stone and fly about the temple: the holy Elmir, the Bird of Heaven itself.

Many were the pilgrims who sought the holy city, for in time the Elei sent out sailing-vessels to all the ends of the Earth, befriending the peoples there: and so the Commonwealth was formed, to be the earthly counterpart of the Celestial Empire above, harmonizing Earth and Heaven. But even as the Star Stone was a source of awe and reverence, so did it become a source of strife among men. As the hearth of the Elei realm it was hateful to the Elei's foes, the cruel and warlike rulers who yet worshipped Modrian.

A day came when the sorceress-queen of the Fairfolk, Eliana the Wise, gathered her people together and spoke to them thus: "Although he cannot ever leave his prison in the Pit, the dark god has many servants still. Some of these are mortal, and some are mighty spirits, and both shall strike many blows against us. Wars shall rage on the land, and stars fall from their places on high; and darkness shall cover all the Earth for a time. And in the end this land of Trynisia will be but a memory, a tale told to children by the hearth. Then Modrian shall send forth a great warrior to ravage the world in his name. The dark god's power shall be in this man and shall rule him, limb and mind, so that it will be as if Modrian himself has come again in a new form. All shall flee the prince of the Dark and the dread hosts that follow after him."

The Elei were filled with fear and sorrow, and begged their queen for words of comfort. Then she spoke to them this prophecy: "Do not despair, for the forces of the light shall also have a champion. The Queen of Night shall bear and bring forth a maid-child, and she shall be called the Tryna Lia, Princess of the Stars. With her mother's authority she shall reign, throned upon the moon; and she shall summon out of the heavens a mighty host to challenge the enemy. And she shall seek for the sacred Stone of lost Trynisia: for it will give to her the power of Earth and Heaven that alone can defeat the power of Modrian. Whenever you behold the Star of Morning in the sky, remember this and know that there is hope."

In this way the Elei first learned of the Tryna Lia, the one who will descend to the Earth and make war against their foes. But the hour of her coming was not then revealed, nor does any mortal know when it shall be.

—apocryphal text, circa 1080 N.E.

Part One

THE
PROPHECY

1

Ailia

“. . . AND THE EVIL DAYS CAME that Queen Eliana had foreseen,” Ailia recited, spreading her arms in a wide sweeping gesture. “Modrian, still prisoned in the Pit, commanded his servants to assail the world on his behalf. The evil spirit Azarah obeyed, snatching stars from out of their places in the heavens, and casting them down upon the Earth below. Some lands were burned, and others drowned in the sea, and the moon’s face was marred and darkness fell over all the world. Even the blessed isle of Trynisi did not escape the day of destruction. Then those Elei who still lived fled the ruin of their realm: some went to dwell in Eldimia, the land of the goddess of the Morning Star, that lies beyond the world’s end; and others went to live in the mortal lands, where in time their race dwindled and died. And so the Elei have all vanished from the world. But their sorceress-queen promised them long ago that the triumph of their enemy would not last forever. The Fairfolk who fled to Eldimia shall return again, and their ancient Commonwealth be restored, when the Tryna Lia comes to rule the Earth.”

She and the village children were—or rather, should have been—gathering kindling in the thin belt of woodland that Ailia had named the Enchanted Forest. Most of Great Island’s timber had been felled in bygone ages for firewood and lumber, leaving behind only forlorn and isolated copses like this one. Its wind-worn trees bowed inland, and huddled together as if for shelter. Yet as Ailia told the story, the little wood was altered in the eyes of her listeners: its stunted trees seemed to grow taller, the green shade beneath them deeper. And Ailia too was transformed as she spoke, becoming in turn each character she described. Standing straight and regal before them, she seemed, in the dim otherworldly light that was half of her making, to become the Faerie Queen Eliana; and when she spoke of Modrian the Fiend her voice became a hissing whisper, and her audience grew pale and still.

It had been Ailia’s intention to ease the tedium of their task by telling stories. But as soon as she began the tale both she and the children completely forgot the kindling. They saw only the Fairfolk and their sacred gem, and the holy city on its mountaintop, and the fiery rain of falling stars. When at last she finished they all sat in silence for a while. The spell was lifted, and the children saw before them only a girl who looked slightly younger than her seventeen years, slender and of medium height. Her clothing was as plain as theirs, a white linen blouse under a tight-laced brown bodice and skirt, with a frayed old apron tied at her waist. Yet still there was something different about Ailia, something that was not quite like other people. Perhaps it was her eyes: they were so very large, with irises that in the shade seemed dark gray but in the sunlight showed a purplish cast, the color of the small pieces of amethyst the children sometimes found lying among the rocks. The hair that fell loose about her back and shoulders was oddly changeful too. Under the trees it was fawn-colored, and

seemed dark in contrast with the pallor of her face; but when she stepped out of the shadows, the sun, streaming through the nebulous outer layer of flyaway hairs, made it look almost like spun gold.

The youngest child in the group was the first to find her voice again. “Tell us another story, Ailia. Tell us about the time the Stone was stolen,” she begged, fastening doe-brown eyes on the storyteller.

Ailia raised her left arm and pointed to the southeast, where the slate-blue sea showed in narrow panels between the tree trunks. “Once upon a time, in the days when Trynisia still prospered, there was a king in far-off Zimboura whose name was Gurusha, and it was said that his father was an evil demon in mortal guise. He commanded the Zimbouran people to worship a god called Valdur, who demanded terrible sacrifices, and all the while he plotted the end of the Commonwealth. Every new-knighted Paladin in Maurainia had to make a sea voyage to Trynisia, to pray in the Temple of Heaven before the Star Stone; and so Gurusha dispatched a group of warriors to steal the holy gem away. They entered the temple by stealth, disguised as pilgrims, and seized the Stone and slew the knights who guarded it. Fleeing back to Zimboura, they presented the Star Stone to King Gurusha, who placed it on the forehead of the idol of Valdur.”

The children had heard this tale many times before. They knew of the holy war waged by the old Commonwealth against Zimboura, with its terrible battles fought far away beyond the sea. They knew the combined forces of Maurainia and Trynisia had won the final victory. Yet still they hung on Ailia’s every word.

“King Brannar Andarion of Maurainia went himself to the palace of Gurusha, and called the Demon King forth to do battle. And Gurusha answered his challenge. He was dreadful to look upon, and his immortal sire’s dark power was in him. But Andarion too was no common man, for his own father was of the faeries. The two kings met in single combat, and Gurusha mocked Andarion as they fought. Then the Maurainian king waxed wroth—”

“He waxed *what?*” interjected one of the older girls.

“He got very angry,” explained Ailia, “and pierced Gurusha to the heart with his sword.” She snatched up a stick from the ground and made a thrust with it. “Then the minions of Valdur were filled with dismay—”

“What’s a minion?” the girl asked again.

“Elen Seaman, would you *please* stop interrupting! It makes me lose my place in the story.”

The other children glared, and Elen subsided. “They laid down their arms,” Ailia went on, “and sued for peace. The Paladins went to the chief temple of Valdur, and destroyed it; and King Andarion declared that the god of the Zimbourans was in truth an evil fiend, none other than Modrian himself in another guise, and his worship was banned.” Ailia let fall her stick-sword. “And so the war was ended, and the Stone returned to its rightful place in Trynisia.”

“What a tale!” breathed Lynna, the youngest girl. “It makes you wonder, doesn’t it—where the Fairfolk came from, and whether there really was a Star Stone.”

“I’ll wager there wasn’t,” Elen Seaman scoffed. “Papa says—” her face took on a lofty and learned expression—“Papa says the Elei just made up those stories to impress our ancestors.”

“Where was Trynisia supposed to be?” asked Kevan, the carpenter’s son.

“It lay far away, to the north,” answered Ailia. As she spoke those words, she felt a little thrill and her heart yearned northward, for a far-off land of jeweled palaces and bright cities surrounded by ice and snow. “Far, far away,” she repeated. “No one is sure how far. And Eldimia, the land of the Morning Star, was farther still—beyond the world’s end.”

“The world hasn’t *got* an end,” Elen interrupted again. “It’s round like a ball, my papa says. There’s no edge you can go beyond, or fall off of. And my papa is a sailor, and he’s sailed all around

the world, so he should know! And all that rot about gods and goddesses, when you know there's really only one God, and One Faith. None of this is *true*.”

Ailia sighed. “It’s only a story, Elen.” She would never have confessed it to these children, but deep within she longed to believe in it all: not just the Elei and their ancient wars but the magic, and the flying dragons, and the precious Stone that fell out of Heaven.

“I wish there were knights nowadays,” remarked Kevan. “*They’d* stop King Khalazar and his armies! Ailia, are the Zimbourans going to go to war with us again? Some of the foreigners down by the harbor say so.”

Ailia looked again to the far-off horizon behind which Zimboura lay, unseen yet threatening, like the approach of night. She shivered: and for an instant the old stories no longer seemed so remote. “Of course not,” she said with an effort. “There hasn’t been a war in hundreds of years. Now, you had better get your kindling, you lot, and so had I.”

She went back to picking up fallen branches. What, she wondered, would she do without these children to tell stories to? Beyond the little copse the landscape was bleak: fields that grew nothing but hip-high grasses, great whalebacks of granite that thrust up through the thin soil. The little houses of Bayport village clustered together at the sea’s edge: with so little arable land available, most of the Islanders had to support themselves by fishing.

This is a terrible place, she thought with a shudder. *Why have I never noticed it before now?* But her childhood everything had been different. In those days Great Island was not Great Island at all, but the magic isle of Trynisia, or the faerie-land of Eldimia, or Maurainia in the golden age of Brannar Andarion’s reign: whatever she had imagined it to be. And Ailia, together with her cousins Jemma and Jaimon and the other barefoot village children, had lived a long idyll of make-believe: had been kings and queens, knights and wizards, had fought dragons and won wars. There were no myths or legends on the Island. The hardened and bitter exiles who first arrived on these windswept shores were preoccupied with survival, and in its sparse and stony soil romance never took root. At least, it did not until that day when, inspired by a collection of wonder-tales from the Old Country that she had found on her father’s bookshelf, Ailia took it upon herself to address the lack. She made up a local mythology in which every tree, knoll, and boulder had its origin in some fabulous feat of yore, and told the tales to her delighted playmates. The great submerged rock outside the harbor that daily endangered the fishing boats was a petrified sea monster, transformed by a hero with a magic talisman; a gnarled old crabapple tree with pure white blossoms had sprung from a magic apple brought from faerie-land; and so on. In her thoughts many features of the surrounding landscape still went by the names she had invented for them—the Mermaid’s Rock, the Ogre’s Cave, the Enchanted Forest.

At the memory Ailia both smiled and sighed. Those childhood friends had grown up, grown away from her. Jemma was a wife and mother now, Jaimon a sailor on a merchant ship traveling distant seas. Loneliness overwhelmed her suddenly, and with it a feeling akin to desperation. *I almost wish that there could be a war. At least it would be a change—*

Kevan Carpenter gave a sudden shout. “Sail—sail! The packet’s coming!” He jumped up on a tree stump and pointed.

Ailia swung around, the kindling spilling from her apron. Far away on the western sea a mass of white canvas scudded like a cloud. One of the sailing ships that brought Great Island its mail and goods and news of the world was approaching the bay.

With a little cry she darted forward, outrunning even the fleet-footed children in her haste to reach the wharf. Would there be any mail for her? A letter from Cousin Jaimon perhaps, telling of his

voyages on the high seas? Or perhaps even *the* letter—the one from the Royal Academy in Maurainia stamped with its official seal? Her heart pounded in time with her footsteps as she swept through the little village and on toward the harbor.

THE CROWD AT THE WHARF was a motley one, and as shrilly excited as the gulls that wheeled above it. With refugees pouring in from the Antipodes to seek haven here, Great Island at times was like the world made small. First had come the westerners, Maurainian and Marakite and Rialainish merchants and missionaries, returning in haste to the Continent. Then as summer ripened, native Antipodeans began to flow out of the southeast to Great Island's shores: Zimbourans with their sallow faces and coal-black hair, robed and turbaned Shurkas, even a few dark-skinned Mohara people out of the desert lands; they had all fled to this, the most far-flung of the Commonwealth's colonies, a stepping-stone to freedom. Many of the refugees could not afford to go on to the Continent, however, and had to stop here. They already filled the only inn to capacity.

To this inn Ailia came whenever she was able. Her parents would never permit her to enter its common-room full of rowdy sailors, but she liked to linger outside it on mild summer evenings. Perching on an empty keg or packing-crate, she listened eagerly to scraps of conversation that wafted out of the windows along with the reek of tobacco and the sour yeasty smell of stale beer. There were songs and tales of the sea and alien lands: stories of whales and pirate ships; of the strange pale lights—said to be ghosts of drowned men—that glimmered upon the rigging of ships in southern seas; of wrecks and buried treasure. With the arrival of the refugees, the tales had become more dramatic than ever before. There were harrowing accounts of the civil war in Zimboura, of the legions of the God-king storming cities and of the blasts of cannon fire that sent people screaming and running like panicked beasts. There were tales of perilous flights across the ocean in cramped and wallowing vessels, of tragic partings and families divided. She felt a pang of sympathy for these unlucky people driven so far from their homes; but she could not help feeling a certain fascination too. What must it be like to live through such times? And the fugitives brought with them an aura of foreignness: tantalizing hints of their exotic homelands were revealed in their faces, their clothing, their accented speech.

Ailia ran up to join the crowd on the wharf, squeezing between the tightly packed bodies as she gazed with hungry eyes at the packet. The ship was a fine new one, square-rigged, with a sea-green hull. The figurehead was a mermaid, wide-tailed and golden-haired, and the ship's name was proudly proclaimed in gilt letters at the bows: *Sea Maid*. Ailia gave a long sigh of blended envy and rapture. To think that this very vessel had sailed distant reaches of the ocean, visited far-off ports of call! How glorious to be a sailor and roam the world!

And then the sight of a sandy-haired young man striding along the ship's deck made her spring forward with a cry of incredulous delight.

"Jaim! *Jaim!*"

The young sailor turned at her call and waved to her. "Hello there, coz!"

She struggled past the people in front of her and bounded up the gangplank. "Jaim! We've not had a letter from you for so long! When did you sign on with this ship? Are you on shore leave now? Did you get to Maurainia, and the Academy? They hadn't any message for me there, had they?"

"One question at a time." He smiled, swinging his haversack onto his shoulder.

So that was that; had there been any news he would have given it to her right away. Swallowing

her disappointment, Ailia continued with her interrogation. “But the books, Jaim? Did you bring me some books? You promised, in your last letter—”

Jaimon grinned. “And here I thought it was myself you were so happy to see.” He lowered the sack again and rummaged in it. “Here you are—I couldn’t find the complete works of the Bard of Blyssion but here are his ballads anyway—and the *Annals of the Kings*—”

With a little squeal Ailia seized the two shabby old volumes, hugging them to her chest. “Oh, thank you, Jaim! You don’t know what this means to me. I’d give *anything* to be a scholar. I’d hoped to hear from the Academy by now, whether I was to be accepted or not.”

Jaimon looked troubled at that, and did not meet her eager eyes. “Well, Ailia—you know it’s hard to get accepted there, even for men,” he said. “And it’s fashionable right now among wealthy folk to have an educated daughter. Only the ones with money get in, as a rule.”

“But I applied for a scholarship,” Ailia replied. “Though lots of people apply for those too, I suppose. It isn’t fair, Jaim. I want so much to know all about history, and the poets, and philosophy. I’ve read all of Papa’s books ten times over, and no one else here has any that are worth reading. And reading is as close as I can come to seeing the world.” She was silent for a moment, feeling the ship’s deck rolling and swaying beneath her feet, moving with the sea’s own rhythm. “If only I were a boy, I’d stow away on the *Sea Maid*, and sail off with you.” She spoke in a light tone, but at her own words a fierce longing filled her.

“You wouldn’t want to be a boy,” said Jaimon, tweaking one of her straggling locks. “There’d be no hair-ribands for you then, no sighing over romantic ballads—”

“Yes—well,” Ailia amended as they descended the gangway together, “I just wish that girls could do all the things that boys do. Look at you, going off to be a cabin boy when you were only fifteen—sailing all over the world, when all I can do is stop here at home!” She glanced over her shoulder at the ship. “I’ve half a mind to do it. Stow away, I mean.”

Jaimon chuckled. “You wouldn’t like it. When they caught you they’d put you to work in the galley.”

She laughed with him. “Well then, I’ll disguise myself in male attire, and become a sailor.”

“Even worse! They’d have you swabbing the decks. Believe me, a life at sea is no life at all.”

“*You* don’t seem to be suffering, Jaimon Seaman!” She thumped him on the shoulder with one of the books. “Oh well: I must go home now, I suppose. I’d invite you to supper, Jaim, only it’s my turn to make it and you know my cooking is awful. Mamma has tried her best to domesticate me but it’s been an uphill battle for her. Anyway, Aunt Bett will want you to sup with her, of course. But you and she might drop by afterwards—and Uncle, too, if he’s back from fishing. Will you, Jaim? It would be such fun—like old times. And I do so want to hear all your news.”

“Of course. Tell Aunt Nella to expect us. There’s something I must talk to you all about.”

“Really? What is it, Jaim?”

“I’ll tell you later.” He smiled again, but it seemed to her now that there was something not quite right about the smile—it seemed stiff and forced. He turned away, and reluctantly she left him. After a few paces she halted and turned back to ask him yet another question. But it never left her lips. Her cousin was standing motionless, staring out to sea: he was facing, she saw, south and east to where Zimboura lay.

AILIA’S HOME WAS A peculiar structure, assembled by her father out of the odds and ends of his

shipbuilding trade. Some of its windows were small round portholes, and its roof was made of an old ship's hull, the inverted keel serving for a ridgepole while the gunwales formed the eaves. Perched atop a gray granite outcropping not far from the shore, the house looked for all the world like a piece of sea wrack deposited by a high tide.

Ailia sat in her little bedroom, her mind filled with gloom as she gazed about her. The wooden bedstead, one chair, night table, and washstand all stood in the exact same places they had occupied since her earliest childhood. Her books were neatly lined up on the bookshelf that her father had made from planks propped up on stones: even with the two new additions they were so few in number that she was forced to fill up the empty space with other things. There were treasures gleaned from the tidepools: seashells, pebbles, crabs' carapaces, some hollow glass globes of the kind fishermen used to float their nets. Above the shelf was a round porthole-window, framing a view of meadow and sea. The latter's gentle heave-and-sigh had lulled her to sleep at night and filled her days until the sound seemed a very part of herself, like the pulse of blood in her ears. Any changes in the order of life on the Island were cyclical, not permanent: the turning of the tides and of the seasons, the transits of sun and moon.

She sighed and took up her comb. Her hair was inconstant in more than its hue: it changed its moods like the sea, on some days lying straight and smooth, on others rolling in waves. At the moment, however, its color was unmistakably mousy, and it had arranged itself in a mass of involved and intricate tangles that caught in the teeth of the comb. As she struggled to plait it she was aware of a growing frustration. *I always wanted hair like the princesses' in faerie tales, golden hair that was long enough to sit upon.* It was one more item in the long list of things life had denied her. Adventure was another. Why did she crave it so? Adventures, when they happened at all, happened to men and boys. For a girl there were but two possible destinies, housewifery and spinsterhood: and both meant life confined to the home.

Sighing at the injustice, she left the bedroom and went down the small narrow passage to the main room of the house. Its rustic simplicity was strangely adorned by her father's collection of exotic objects, gathered by him in foreign lands back when he was a sailor on a merchant ship. There was a sextant and a brass ship's clock; the polished shell of a sea turtle; the huge white egg of a moa on a carved wooden stand. From the west wall stared an ebony ceremonial mask from Mohara-land, curiously elongated and with narrow slits for the eyes, which Ailia had found rather frightening when she was small. There was a magnificent conch from the Archipelagoes of Kaan that made the mussel and scallop shells in her own collection seem shabby little things, and a great spire of ivory that looked exactly like the horn of the unicorn in *Bendulus's Bestiary*, though her father said it was really a whale's tusk. There were several framed sea charts and maps of exotic lands hanging on the walls, some that her father had been to, some that even he had never seen.

Her mother stood by the fieldstone hearth, stirring the pot that hung bubbling over the fire. She dipped out a mouthful and tasted it, grimacing slightly. "Is something wrong with the chowder, Mamma?" Ailia asked. "Did I forget the onions again? Or is the cod not cooked through?"

"It tastes well enough, but it's watery. You'll never get yourself a man if your cooking doesn't improve." Nella glanced at Ailia's neat braids. "And you really should be wearing your hair up now—that's proper for a grown woman. It's high time you started acting your age, miss."

"I hate being my age," Ailia answered, not angrily but with a quiet sadness. She looked away from her mother and ran her hand up and down the smooth polished ivory of the whale's tusk.

Nella's earth-colored eyes dwelt thoughtfully on her daughter. "Ailia, you know it's time," she said. "Time to be seeking a man, and a home and family of your own."

Ailia made no response to this statement, too often heard of late. The only men she knew really well were Jaimon and her father and uncle. She thought of the village fishermen and shipwrights, of their bellowing voices, the brutish strength of their backs and arms as they hauled on nets, or hefted loads of imported lumber from the dockyards, or hammered away on whale-ribbed skeletons of ships. She had dreams, fostered by faerie tales, of romances with handsome princes: but they were dreams only, and she preferred it so.

Nella turned to her husband in appeal. But Dannon Shipwright was as always imperturbable, his sea-gray eyes watching without expression as Ailia ladled chowder into his bowl. "There's young Kurth Fisher," Nella continued, taking her own seat at the table. "He's got a boat of his own now, and no sweetheart yet. And then there's Armyn Cartwright, widowed only last year: a better, kinder man you'll never find—"

The ladle halted in midair. "But—he's so much older than I am!" Ailia exclaimed. "As old as Pap—and I couldn't look after all those children of his!"

"Why, you like little ones—telling them tales—"

"That's different!"

"You must learn to care for children, Ailia, or how will you manage when you've infants of your own? Your cousin Jemma's only a couple of years older than you, and she's got two babes already."

Ailia sat down and stared into space. The figure of a woman floated before her like a ghost: a grim-faced graying fishwife with crying children tugging at her skirts. Ailia saw many such women in the village, but this one was different: her eyes held a hunger keener than a knife's edge, a hunger that had nothing to do with food. It filled Ailia with fear, for the woman was herself.

"I don't want to get married," she said quietly, "ever."

"And what do you plan to do then, miss? Enter a nunnery? You can't live with your father and me forever. You came to us rather late in life, you know, and I want to see you settled. It's of your own good I'm thinking."

Again Ailia made no reply: there was a peculiar lump in her throat that made both speaking and eating difficult. Her mother said no more. Three different silences—placid, affronted, and dismayed—blended over the tabletop with the steam from the chowder-bowls. As soon as the meal was over Ailia leaped up in haste to gather and wash the dishes.

"Hello in there!" came a shout at the door, to Ailia's vast relief. Jaimon stood in the open doorway, the mead-mellow light of early evening spilling in around him, and behind him were Aunt Betta and cousin Jemma with her two little sons. As they entered in a babble of conversation Ailia felt her mood lighten. Her father and Jaimon now dominated the conversation, with their tales of ocean voyages. As she scrubbed the chowder-pot she listened to the men's talk, journeying with them to faraway places: to bath-warm seas where the fish were bright as butterflies and the Archipelagoes lay in long necklaces of emerald; to the coast of Mohara-land, where crocodiles sunned themselves on the mud flats of the deltas and dark women stooped to fill clay pots with river-water. Even the stars were different here, and the moon hung upside down. The men's talk moved northward along the Antipodean coast, and she followed them to Zimboura. Ships of the Commonwealth had once put into the ports of that heathen land to load the wares of the desert caravans, silk and incense and ivory; but even the sea-weary sailors never cared to linger in its teeming, violent cities. Farther to the north lay rocky and rugged Shurkana, where the elephants and rhinoceri grew woolly pelts, and the fierce proud Shurka people dwelt in their mountain fortresses.

The conversation crossed the ocean then, traveling to the great western Continent: moving along the sunny southern coasts of Marakor with its vineyards and fragrant orange groves, then north again

to the storied forests and mountains of Maurainia. There crumbling ruins—towers, temples, aqueducts—bore mute testimony to the ancient reign of the Elei.

“The Elei claimed to be descended from their own gods,” Jaimon explained to her mother. “The gods came down to Earth from the skies, they said, and took human wives and husbands, and taught them how to read and write and build and farm.”

“Imagine!” said Nella. “They were as heathen as the Zimbourans, then.”

“They had a great civilization, though, Aunt Nell,” her nephew told her. “Its art, its buildings—we’ve nothing to match it, nowadays. And they had it when our forefathers were dressing in skins and hunting with spears.”

“The stories say the Elei came from the island of Trynisia,” put in Ailia, all pretense at dishwashing abandoned, “way up north. It was full of beautiful palaces and gardens.” Again she felt a little thrill of delight at her own words.

“Trynisia’s only a story, Ailia,” said Jaimon. “No one has ever found it. It was just an imaginary country.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Of course. Remember, the stories say that Trynisia lay in the far north, but they describe it as a warm country! And all that rot about dragons, and faeries, and buildings covered in gold and jewels! The king’s sent expeditions into the north sea, and they’ve found nothing up there but ice.”

Nella waved her hand impatiently, as though at a bothersome fly. “Never mind all that nonsense. What is the news these days? Has the king’s daughter wed yet? And what of this new tyrant in Zimboura?”

“Khalazar.” All the animation dropped from Jaimon’s face. “He’s overthrown King Jandar of Shurkana, so he rules all the Antipodes now. The sailors from the merchant service say he’ll make his way westward next, to the Southern Archipelago.”

“He’s got his own people believing he’s some sort of god, hasn’t he?” Dannor commented.

“So I hear. Power-mad, that’s what he is. He wants to rule the whole world.” Jaimon shook his head.

“The world!” Jemma tightened her arms around baby Dani and looked with anxious eyes at her little boy Lem, who was sailing a toy boat across the worn planks of the floor.

“Now, don’t you fret, my dear,” Aunt Betta soothed. “You know those heathens have been fighting each other since time began. It’s nothing to do with us.”

There was a short silence broken only by the chimes of the old ship’s clock, ringing out the watches of a vanished vessel. Then Jaimon spoke again.

“Things have changed, mam. The Shurkanese capital fell to the Zimbouran army in only *three days*. It’s these new cannons, they say: they’re a hundred times stronger than catapults or battering rams. Walls just crumple before them. You’re wrong if you think it doesn’t really affect us. Now that he’s got all of Shurkana’s lumber and pastureland, King Khalazar can afford to build a bigger fleet and feed his armies. Next he’ll take the Archipelagoes of Kaan, to harbor his Armada. And then he will be within sailing distance of our island.”

He paused at this point to let his words sink in, but the faces turned toward him were blank. None of them could imagine anyone wanting Great Island. After a moment Dannor said as much.

Jaimon raised his eyebrows. “No? It would make another fine base for his ships—one not so very far from the Continent.”

“Oh, do you really think it will come to that?” cried Jemma in alarm. “Attacking the Continent?” The baby woke and began to mewl.

Jaimon gave a slight shrug of his shoulders. “We’ll see. If he takes the Archipelagoes it will be a sign that he’s preparing for war against the Commonwealth. We can only hope our king will send warships to defend us.”

“He will, if it comes to that,” opined Dannor in his slow, considered manner. “The Commonwealth protects its own. And I say this tyrant won’t dare touch a Commonwealth colony.”

“Anyway, the fishing boats are coming in now, by the sound of it,” said Aunt Betta, turning toward the door. “I’m off to help with the catch, tyrant or no tyrant. Jemma, you just stay here and mind your little ones.”

Nella looked over at Ailia. “Why don’t *you* help your aunt, Ailia? I’m sure she could use a hand. Leave the dishes to me.” She and Betta exchanged an odd, conspiratorial glance. It made Ailia feel uneasy.

She followed her aunt down the well-worn dirt track that led to the harbor. The sun had gone in behind the hills, taking the golden light with it; in the west the sky was rimmed with rose, and to the east the line between sky and sea was already lost in shadow. Halfway to the wharves Ailia stopped short and gave an exclamation. “It’s much cooler down here by the water, isn’t it, Aunt Bett? I had better go back and get my shawl.”

Before her aunt could say anything Ailia sprinted back along the path. Betta called after her, but she pretended not to hear.

When she arrived at the house she slowed to a walk. Stealing up to the front door, she stood listening to the conversation within. The baby was now crying lustily and she had to strain to hear the adults’ voices. She felt guilty to be eavesdropping like this, and struggled to justify it to herself. She had to know what they were talking about in there. She was quite certain, from the looks she had seen her mother and aunt exchange, that it was not about wars or tyrant kings. It was about her.

Finally she heard her name spoken. “Ah, this is foolishness, Nell,” said her father. “Tell Ailia. She’s got a right to know.”

“Tell her what, Dann? That she won’t be going after all? Let her apply for the scholarship, you said. Give her something to hope for. I told you at the time I didn’t approve of giving her false hopes.”

“I thought,” answered her husband after a pause, “that if she were to apply to the Royal Academy and be rejected, she’d resign herself to life here, instead of always thinking she’d have had a chance if only we’d let her try.”

The letter! Ailia thought in dismay. *Jaim brought it—why didn’t he tell me? Perhaps he couldn’t bear to break the bad news—*

“Well, this is a pretty kettle of fish!” Nella continued. “Just listen to this: ‘The essay was exceptionally well-written . . . a scholarship available as of this autumn . . .’ And ‘payment for your sea-passage and for the return trip of your chaperon.’”

“The payment for the berths is here in this purse,” said Jaimon’s voice. “In money, of course—they don’t barter over there.”

There was a rustle, a clinking sound, then silence. At last her mother spoke in a hushed voice. “I’ve never seen real coin. Is that silver? It’s so bright, so beautiful—and there’s so much of it!”

Jaimon laughed. “Too much. Those Academy folks must think our island’s on the other side of the world. We could send the whole village to the Continent with that!”

“Well, it must be sent back to them,” Nella said. “What a fix! Bless us all if the girl didn’t go and get herself *accepted* at the Academy, and what’s to be done when she finds she can’t go is beyond me. She’ll be even more miserable than she was before. Jaimon, this is all your doing. *You’re* the one who egged her on.”

“Why can’t she go?” said Jaimon’s voice.

~~There was a moment’s stunned silence. The heart of the eavesdropper leaped.~~

“What’ll she do here?” continued Jaimon. “Marry some fisherman? Spend her life mending nets and gutting fish? She couldn’t bear to live like that, and you know it!”

“Only because her head’s been filled up with foolishness out of books,” said Nella. “We should never have let her have them: they’ve given her wild ideas. As for marriage, you and Ailia used to go along so well, I’d thought you and she might make a match of it one day. Cousins do marry sometimes. But you up and went off to sea, and left her here all alone.”

“Look here,” Jaimon said, “Ailia and I are good friends, always have been. But she doesn’t want to marry me, and why should she? Why marry at all, if she doesn’t want to? With what she learned over there she could be a teacher, or something.”

“It’s out of the question,” Nella replied. “No Island woman’s ever gone away to be educated.”

“You make it sound like something shocking, Aunt.”

“She is our only child, Jaimon. And—if she goes she might never come back.”

Her mother’s voice had changed—there was a hint of a quaver in it, and Ailia stood aghast, her heart wrung now as well as her conscience. As she began to back quietly away she heard Jaimon say, “I couldn’t wait to go to sea, but since I left there hasn’t been a day when I haven’t thought of this place and the folks at home. Ailia might love the Island more if she went away from it for a while.”

But Nella had recovered herself. “I’ll not have her making an ocean voyage with the world in such a state. I’m amazed your parents will let you go to sea again—and you’re a man, not a slip of a girl. Ailia is not going anywhere alone, and that’s final.”

There was no comment from Dannor, which could only mean that he agreed with his wife. Ailia turned away and headed down the path, feeling dazed. She had never really believed she would be accepted at the Royal Academy, she realized now: it had just been a daydream, a faint hope that had nonetheless raised her spirits and made life endurable for a time. She had not allowed herself to think of what she would do when the rejection finally came. And, incredibly, it had not come after all: she had been *accepted* at the Academy—and she had not really thought what that would mean, either.

My head was in the clouds, as usual. Me, travel across the sea—go live in another country all by myself! No, I wasn’t thinking. Of course they would never have let me.

“Where’s your shawl then?” Aunt Bett demanded when Ailia joined her at the wharf.

“Oh,” Ailia murmured. “I—I don’t really need it after all.”

Some of the fishermen’s boats were docked, others were just coming in to shore. She had once loved to see them glide in out of the deepening dusk, the lamps at their bows and mastheads glowing, returning to the safety of the harbor and leaving the dark and dangerous sea behind. Now she yearned to take a boat herself and sail away—far across the sea, to the distant horizon, to the End of the World. She watched dull-eyed as her Uncle Nedman brought his boat in and secured it to the wharf, and he and his son-in-law Arran Fisher hefted the nets to spill out their catch of herring in a large glistening pile. Ailia joined the fishermen and their families as they gathered by the boats in little knots, pulling fish from the piles, slitting them open with the long gutting knives and tossing the offal into the harbor, where a few lingering gulls fought over it in a flurry of wings and jabbing bills. The birds’ indignant screams drowned out the few murmured scraps of conversation; most of the men and women worked in a wordless day’s-end silence, seldom raising their eyes from their beslimed and bloodied hands. Beyond the docks the sea lipped the shingled shore and then fell back with deep sighs as though it too were weary.

In the absence of talk, Ailia was once more left to her troubling thoughts, and she looked about her

for some distraction as she worked. The sky above the tossing forest of masts was now candled with stars, flickering as if a breath might blow them out: but though they wavered they shone undimmed, for the moon had not yet risen. In the north was a dance of light, shifting and shimmering like sun-ripples on a boat's hull: the aurora borealis. Ailia remembered what an old fishwife had told her about it long ago: "'Tis the lights of the Fairfolk's cities reflecting in the sky. They hold high revels in their kingdom tonight." Perhaps Jaimon was wrong and Trynisia was real after all, and some Elei were still living there, and she would go look for them one day . . . Or perhaps she would sail west, follow the wheeling motion of sun and moon and stars to the Continent, and Maurainia . . . But these were only idle fancies and at last she knew it. She looked at the *Sea Maid*, swaying at anchor with sails furled, and she felt a stab of longing sharp as any physical pain. If only she had been born a man, like Jaim! Or *anything* but a woman! Birds could migrate each year to the southern isles, and perch in the carved eaves of heathen temples, seeing with their little ink-drop eyes wonders that she would never know. *This island is the only place I will ever see. Only this, until I die.*

Averting her eyes from the scene before her, Ailia fixed her eyes on the stars instead and let her mind wander among them, far from the stench and slimy feel of the dead fish in her hands. Dannor had long ago taught her the names of the major stars and constellations—as a sailor, of course, he knew the night sky by heart. Her own name meant “Lodestar” in the old Elei tongue—an appropriate name for the daughter of a sailor, though she thought it quite romantic too. “Faranda—Berilion—Anatarva,” she murmured the star-names below her breath while she worked, as though incanting a spell. Two planets were visible tonight: yellow Iantha, high in the zenith like a spark flown out of a fire; and low in the west a great welling droplet of water-blue brilliance, brighter than anything else in the sky. That was Arainia, which old poems called the Morning Star, though sometimes it shone in the evening as now. Down on the point, in the squat stone tower where the sea-beacon burned, a statue of the goddess Elarainia still stood in a tall niche. She was carved of gray stone, one hand raised in a protective gesture as she gazed out to sea. Her face was worn away by storm and flying spray, but one could still make out the shape of a starry diadem above it. To sailors in olden times Elarainia was a guardian spirit: Almailia, Star of the Sea. The Patriarchs of the True Faith, however, disapproved of polytheism in general and female divinities in particular: her name had not been invoked on the Island for hundreds of years.

Overhead the Merendalia, the Starry Way, laid its luminous track across the night, and to either side of it were arrayed the constellations of late summer: the Sphinx, the Centaur, the Dragon with his starry coils. As Ailia looked up at them her heart filled, as always, with a poignant yearning. To the ancients the constellations were not mere guides for navigators, but the dwelling places of their gods: stellar states within a Celestial Empire. And long ago the Elei (so the old tales said) had journeyed to this sky-country, the homeland of their divine ancestors, riding upon winged dragons or in magical flying ships.

“What in the world?” exclaimed Aunt Betta, setting down her knife.

Ailia, in the act of passing a fish to her aunt, turned to look at her in puzzlement. Aunt Bett was staring and pointing seaward, as were all of the other villagers. And now Ailia saw the lights shining out there on the darkened sea, dozens and dozens of them. More fishing boats approaching shore? But all the boats were in: and anyway Bayport's entire fishing fleet wasn't half so large. These lights might have belonged to a lamplight town adrift upon the waves. And they were drawing closer as she watched.

The herring slipped through her fingers to the ground. *Could it be King Khalazar?* she wondered, and felt her heart lurch beneath her ribs as she sprang up. *Was Jaim right—is the Armada coming*

here?

As the fisher folk stood gesturing and exclaiming to one another she turned and fled back up the path toward her home.

THE VILLAGE WAS IN AN UPROAR. People streamed down to the harbor, lanterns in hand, and somewhere a man's voice was shouting—the town crier, probably. Staring out through one of the kitchen windows, Ailia could see the lights swarming around the wharf, and imposed upon them the transparent reflection of her mother's figure as Nella rushed to and fro, flinging clothes and pots and loaves of bread into an old sea chest of Dannor's.

"What are you doing, Aunt?" Jaimon demanded, coming in the front door with Betta and Dannor.

"We must go," Nella babbled, "away from the sea. We'll go inland, to the barrens—"

"Be easy, Nell," her husband interrupted. "The ships are not Zimbouran after all. They're Kaanish."

"Kaans!" Ailia cried. "But why have they come *here*, Papa? Does this mean the Archipelagoes are ___"

"The southern islands are taken," Jaimon told her. "They say Khalazar has annexed them, and the Northern Archipelago will be next. It's just as I said: the Armada is on the move."

Ailia darted past him out the open door and stood at the top of the path, staring down at the harbor and the alien vessels there. There was one large ship, but most were not much larger than the fishing boats of the Islanders. All looked weather-beaten, some lying low in the water as though they had sprung leaks, with waves lapping at the staring eyes painted on their prows. Their ribbed sails were tattered, and their decks crowded with people.

She hastened back inside again. Jaimon was arguing with her mother. "Aunt Nell, if the Zimbourans come here they will take the whole island. Coast and barrens and all. It's no use hiding out in the wilds. They'll hunt you down and kill you."

Nella made no reply, only put her hand to her heart. Jaimon swept a grim gaze about the room. "The Kaans are only stopping here to get a few supplies, and mend their ships if they can. But even if they can't, they're still sailing on—as soon as possible. They would rather risk drowning at sea in those rotting tubs than wait here for the Armada. Now do you understand?"

"But what can we do, Jaimon?" wailed Aunt Betta. "We can't leave the Island."

"No," Jaimon admitted. "Not right away, at any rate. You should go to the Continent, to Maurainia; but fishing boats will never cross the ocean, and the Kaans' boats are overcrowded as it is. That leaves only the *Sea Maid*, and my captain says he doesn't believe in the danger. He has a cargo to pick up in the Northern Archipelago, and he'll not change his course—not unless he's paid in money. The fool!"

"But we have money!" Ailia cried, leaping forward. "We've got all that silver coin from the Academy."

Her mother stared. "How did you know—"

"I overheard," Ailia interrupted, and turned to Jaimon. "There was enough to send the whole village, you said."

He looked a little taken aback. "I was only joking. The silver's meant to buy passage for two."

"But on a proper passenger ship, Jaim, with cabins and everything. Wouldn't a cargo ship cost less? Your captain might take more of us for the same amount." Ailia faced her father. "Please, Papa"

I'm sure the Academy people won't mind us using it, in an emergency like this. We needn't stay in Maurainia forever: ~~only until the danger is over, and we've earned enough money to come back again.~~ And the Kaans must come with us too—they will never make the crossing in those leaky boats of theirs. If we haven't enough money for all of them couldn't we pay the captain the silver we've got, and promise him the rest on arrival? We can earn it when we get there. And anyway someone *must* get a message to the king. Once we're on the Continent we can tell him what's happening, and ask him to send some more ships to pick up the other Islanders. Or even some warships, to defend the Island. We must take the *Sea Maid* to Maurainia—" Ailia was obliged to stop at this point, as she had run out of breath, but her eyes remained fastened on her father's.

"I'm not leaving," said Dannor, his face set in obstinate lines. "The Island's my home. I told you, Khalazar won't dare touch it."

"You don't know that, Papa!" exclaimed Ailia. She felt a sharp, cramping sensation somewhere in the region of her stomach and suddenly thought, *This is what real fear feels like.* It was not in the least romantic. "You heard what Jaim said—King Khalazar wants a base for his ships, so they can attack the Continent!"

Jaimon stepped forward. "Uncle," he said, "Ailia is right. There may not be enough silver to buy passage for the whole village and the Kaans. But we could at least send away our women and children and theirs too, until this threat has passed. You needn't go if you don't want to. I will be on board, and I can leave the ship when we get to Maurainia and look after Ailia and the others—until we're certain it's safe for them to return."

Ailia watched her father with a strange blend of fear and elation. *Please let him agree, please . . .* Dannor ruminated, stroking his bristly chin, and as always the many lines and furrows in his weathered face made his expression impossible to read.

Then he looked up at his nephew and gave a slight, almost imperceptible nod. "Very well, then," he said.

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