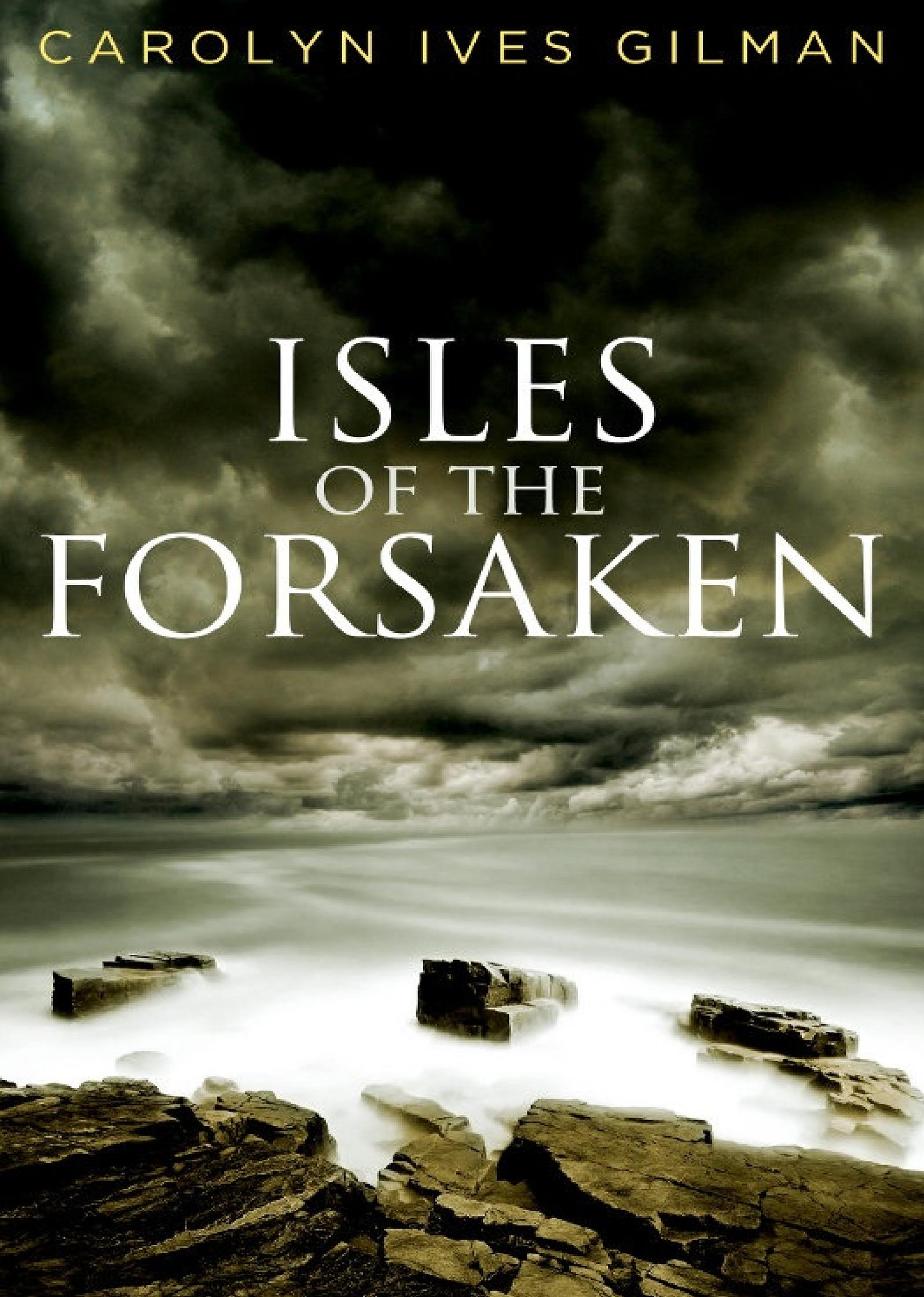


CAROLYN IVES GILMAN

ISLES
OF THE
FORSAKEN



Isles of the Forsaken

Carolyn Ives Gilman



ChiZine Publications

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Toronto, Canada

www.chizinepub.com

info@chizinepub.com

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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[1. Some Kind of Hero](#)

[2. The Sands of Yora](#)

[3. Prisoners of the Past](#)

[4. The Wind from the Sea](#)

[5. The Whispering Stones](#)

[6. Fugitives](#)

[7. Herbs and Poisons](#)

[8. True Shapes](#)

[9. The Battle of Thimish](#)

[10. Night of the Bonfire](#)

[11. A Personal War](#)

[12. Spiderwebs of Iron](#)

[13. City of Crooked Ways](#)

[14. Treason](#)

[15. The Heir of Gilgen](#)

[16. The Crack in the World](#)

[17. Strange Allies](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Chapter Excerpt](#)

1

Some Kind of Hero

At last, the war was over.

All day long the festive volleys of firecrackers had ricocheted off the tawny brick walls of Fluminos, until it sounded like a new attack was under way. Despite the March chill, the celebrations spilled out into the streets, and as sunset drew near, crowds carrying blankets and hampers of food headed down toward the harbour. Two of the great Inning warships that had conquered the Rothur navy were to be anchored in the river, and a fireworks re-enactment of the climactic battle would take place at sundown. When big, wet snowflakes began to fall, it did not cool the atmosphere at all; it simply seemed like the sky was throwing confetti to congratulate Inning on its great victory.

It had just begun to snow when Nathaway Talley emerged from the ancient, arched door of the law school and paused on the steps, books slung under his arm, to survey the drunken troop of students making their way across the quad toward the college gate to carouse. He was a spindly, gawky figure, all arms and legs. A long knit scarf wound around his neck and dragged like a tether behind him; his untrimmed blond hair was topped with a moth-eaten cap, and he fumbled to push his spectacles up past the bump on his monumental beak of a nose. As he set off through the slippery streets toward the Talley family home, his stiff, stalking gait would have telegraphed disaffection to anyone watching. No one was. Everyone was in far too good a mood to spare him a glance.

In contrast to the rest of the city, Nathaway was gripped by a feeling of failure. Others could take vicarious pleasure in the nation's victories; for him, they only rubbed in how badly he had failed to measure up.

The family residence of the Talleys was a rambling brick townhouse at the very heartbeat centre of Fluminos, facing Holton Street, just around the corner from the opulent chambers where the High Court met. Its main floor was almost as public as the court itself, buzzing at all hours with the comings and goings of dealmakers, schemers, visionaries, and, lately, military attachés. Political quorums were apt to assemble in the library, and scientific experiments jostled with state dinners in the dining hall. The chaos was barely kept in control by the strong managerial hand of Nathaway's mother and her competent and tolerant staff.

When he got to the courthouse square, Nathaway found Holton Street nearly blocked by a crush of carriages delivering elegant visitors to the brightly lit doorway of his father's home. Dodging assorted footmen and a large ornamental dog on a leash, he thumped down the stone steps to the service entrance under the front stairs. The policeman stationed there nodded at him familiarly, so Nathaway reflexively pretended to recognize him.

Inside, the kitchen was a staging area as tightly organized, and nearly as noisy, as a military campaign. Liveried servitors manoeuvred down the steps with empty bottles

and trays, and up again with loads of food and drink for the guests. Nathaway strolled past the counters, helping himself to canapés until Betts, the cook, slapped his hand and snatched the cap from his head. “You look like some fishmonger that wandered in, in that filthy thing,” she said. Which was, of course, the point of wearing it—to look like anything but what he really was.

“Has Corbin come yet?” Nathaway asked.

“No, they’re all up there waiting to toast him,” Betts said. “If we don’t run out of wine before he comes.”

“Who *is* here?”

Betts ticked off Talleys on her fingers. “Tarbison, Fithian, Hollowell, and Mandregan. And your sister, of course.”

“A regular reunion,” Nathaway said morosely.

“Try not to let it spoil your day,” Betts said tartly. You had to be tart in this household, just to be heard.

“Where’s Rachel?”

“Upstairs somewhere. Go off now, make yourself look like a Talley.”

Nathaway gave a cynical snort and headed for the back stairs. Before he could escape, Mumford the housemaster saw where he was headed and broke off a conversation with three maids to impart a message. “Tell your brother Mr. Hollowell that he needs to clear his fossil bones off the banquet table, or we’ll have to do it for him,” Mumford said.

“All right,” said Nathaway.

He took the servants’ stairs two at a time, up past the muffled sound of conversation on the first floor, and to the second. He peered out into the hallway, and finding it empty, slipped out. It was clear Hollowell had returned from his tour with the fleet, because the hall was lined with shadowy crates of scientific instruments, specimen books, and an enormous kite. A creature that looked like a cross between a small dog and a lizard saw Nathaway approaching its cage and spread its ruff with a menacing hiss.

He peered over the balcony railing into the main floor below, and saw his father receiving guests in the lamp-lit foyer. Tennessen Talley radiated enjoyment of the moment. The judge knew everyone; he had a joke or observation for every occasion; his trademark laugh rang out at regular intervals, giving everyone in earshot the impression that they were surely at the most entertaining event on earth. He was not being Chief Justice tonight, for he was dressed in civilian clothes; but he couldn’t stop being the perfect politician, since that was no act. Tennessen dominated the room so instinctively that it was hard to remember he was not the guest of honour, only the hero’s proud father.

When Nathaway peered into the first door down the hallway, he found a cabal of Mandregan’s political friends intently debating something over wine. They broke off when he entered, and turned to see who it was; but since it was only Nathaway, they resumed their conversation.

“An army would be a threat to our liberties, and would have to be disbanded,” Mandregan was saying. “But a navy is a different matter. Each ship is its own fiefdom. A navy is more a confederation of little warlords than a single machine. It gives a necessary outlet to dangerous men who crave glory, but in the end it is easy to disunite

and defeat *in camera*.”

“It seems to me your brother the admiral is the living argument against you,” one of his co-conspirators said in a low tone. “The way things stand, he could walk into any office he chose, the nation is so entranced with him. Emperors are acclaimed, remember—it is the people who choose them, not the law.”

“Corbin will never be emperor,” Mandregan said with a secretive look that made the others draw closer, sure that he knew something they didn’t. He had a lean, vulpine face that always looked like he was hiding something. His deep-set eyes were like the ones in paintings that always watched you. “Do you think the court hasn’t been in a knot about that very question? What do you *do* with a man who has earned the adulation of the nation? It is a very risky situation.”

“What does your father feel?” one man whispered. “As Chief Justice, will he support the nation, or his son? Does he see a dynasty as his legacy?”

Nathaway knew that Mandregan could never answer the question, since answering it would deflate the drama of the moment. Stirring up suspicion and mistrust was Mander’s hobby. Sure enough, Mandregan turned to him. “Did you want something, Nat?”

“Have you seen Rachel?” Nathaway said.

“I think she’s down listening to Hal’s tall tales,” Mander said.

Having been put in his usual place of irritating little brother, Nathaway turned to leave. The conversation would not go on anyway, he knew. This convocation had achieved its purpose of bringing everyone to a shivering precipice of uncertainty about the future of the Inning lexocracy. To continue would be redundant.

Out in the hall again, he paused at the side table where a chess game was set out in progress. It was black’s turn, since the salt cellar was sitting on that side of the board. Nathaway studied it for a minute, then made the next logical move, and set the salt on the other side for the next passer-by.

A peal of infectious laughter from down the hall told him where Hallowell was holding forth to his scientific friends. As Nathaway approached the door, he heard his brother’s commanding baritone saying, “. . .these tiny organisms, far too small for the naked eye to resolve, will sometimes bloom in such abundance that the whole surface of the sea turns red. The natives regard it with the utmost superstition, imagining that the sea has turned to blood. . . .”

As Nathaway appeared in the doorway, Hal saw him and rose to his feet. “Nathaway, upon my word!” He picked his way through the chairs to throw his arms around his younger brother. Hal was the one that most took after their father, both physically and in temperament. He would have been a natural in politics, but that had never interested him. Natural history was the realm Hal had set out to conquer.

“Upon my word,” he repeated, holding Nathaway at arm’s length. “You’ve grown like a *Leguminosae*. You’re three feet taller than when I saw you last.”

Nathaway shrugged self-consciously and said, “Mumford wants you to shift your bones.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your fossil bones. The staff will have to give them to the dogs if you don’t move them.”

“Ah.” With his arm still around Nathaway’s shoulders, Hal turned to the others in

the room. They were an assortment of university professors, a publisher, a well-heeled collector, and an officer of the learned society that had funded Hallowell's research. So in fact, Hal was not as oblivious of politics as he made out. The one woman in the room was Nathaway's sister Rachel.

"My friends, we had better take the chance to view the *mastronomicon* before some ignorant chap throws it in the dustbin. If you will follow me . . ."

They all rose on cue and crowded after Hallowell out the door. Nathaway let them pass and waited till Rachel came close. "I've got to talk to you," he said quietly.

Together they crossed the hall and made for the back stairs again. They had to go single file up the twisting flight to the third floor, where the family bedrooms lay. It was a much more spartan place up here. A well-worn carpet runner covered the board floor in the hall, and the walls were simple plaster. The line of doors made it look like a dormitory—which, when they were all growing up, it had been.

Nathaway headed for his own room on the side that overlooked the harbour. The window was nearly dark, so he lit the oil lamp, then turned to Rachel, who had settled down cross-legged on his bed. "Well?" she said.

The famous Talley family resemblance that gave the seven brothers their distinctive looks had had an unfortunate effect in Rachel's case. The pronounced nose that looked noble on the men simply looked horsey on her face; the blonde hair had no life nor curl to lend her beauty, so she wore it in a limp braid. The brothers all grew up tall and recognizable; Rachel was just lanky and homely. But she was Nathaway's confidante and ally.

He closed the door and turned to tell her. "I did it," he said. "I quit law school."

"Oh no," she breathed. Her face gave him a preview of the horror that would ripple through the Talley household at the news.

"I was going to flunk contracts and legislative theory anyway," he said. "So better to save everyone the embarrassment." They had all grown up knowing that everything they did reflected on the others. Their father had always said it didn't matter what they chose to do in life, so long as they were better than anyone else at it. It had seemed like a fair enough rule till Nathaway had had trouble figuring out what, if anything, he was any good at.

"How are you going to tell the judge?" Rachel said, meaning their father.

"Wait, you haven't heard it all." He drew a deep breath. "I'm leaving Fluminos."

"What? Where?"

"They're recruiting law students to go to the Forsaken Islands," he said.

"The Forsakens!" she protested. "There's nothing there but pine trees and savages."

"That's the whole point. The Court's going to be expanding our presence in the Forsakens, developing some of the poor and primitive areas. They need observers to make sure it's all going according to the law. We're to be like Justices of the Peace, adjudicating disputes and so forth. They have no courts or judiciary there, no advocates or trial by jury. It's barbaric, and unscrupulous people could take advantage."

"But can you do that without a degree?"

He shrugged. "They took me." Of course, like everything else, he could not know whether it was because of himself or his name. "I'm to leave in two weeks."

"Oh, Nat," she said. "This is . . . it's crazy."

He looked out the window, where the snow was falling in earnest now, big fat flakes gathering on the sill. "I'm sick of this city," he said, his voice low and intense. "I'm sick of being the last Talley in line, the only one who's not some kind of hero. It's all so false, like theatre. I don't want to play a part; I want to do some actual good in the world."

"You will," Rachel said. "You'll be a hero, Nat. Just give yourself time."

He sat on the bed facing her, crossing his long legs underneath him, his bony knees sticking up. "You should have heard the recruiter talk about the Forsakens," he said. "We've supposedly ruled them for years, but we've done nothing to help them, just left them in a state of poverty and ignorance. They have no schools, no doctors. We've let the most horrible superstitions persist. Did you know they still practice a kind of human sacrifice?"

"No!"

"Yes. There's a race of islanders that are like their chattel, kept in bondage because of a belief that their blood can cure disease. So whenever the islanders grow ill they bleed these slaves, sometimes to death. The administration has tried to put a stop to it, but the practice is too ancient. And as long as they have no alternatives, what are they supposed to do but keep their traditional cures? I've thought that I could pick up some medical books before I leave, and show them there are better ways."

His dry description did not do justice to the thrill of horror he had felt at the recruiter's much more lurid account. He did not mention the overtones of sexual slavery. It was his outrage at the needless suffering, his pity for the victims, his disgust at the ignorance, that had told him this was what he had to do. Never had he felt so strongly that he was called upon to act. All his life had been an aimless, pampered game up to now. Something had sent this message to him, to fetch him to the place where he was needed.

"This is real, Rachel," he said. "There are people who need us, right now. We're sitting around drinking wine and shooting off firecrackers while people are suffering, people we're responsible for. How can we call ourselves civilized if we let this kind of thing go on?"

She saw his passion, and her expression changed. She was taking him seriously now; but if anything, her concern had only deepened. "What kind of conditions will you have to live in?"

"I don't care," he said. "I can survive." In fact, he longed for the challenge of hardship. He wanted to test himself, and learn his limits. "It has to be a sacrifice. I can't do this in comfort and have it mean anything."

"Oh, Nat." She took his hand and squeezed it.

"You think I'm not ready for this."

"No, I think you're noble and brave. But—"

"Nobody can be noble and brave just by talking. You've got to *do* something."

To his surprise, her reply was bitter. "You Talley men are all so damned stubborn."

"Excuse me," he said defensively, "it's not just the men."

"Yes, but you can be stubborn in spectacular, self-destructive ways Mother and I can't."

They were interrupted by a loud explosion from the harbour, the first volley of fireworks. The echo bounced off the tall buildings, redoubling the sound. They both

knelt on the bed and peered out the window to see if they could catch sight of the rockets.

Watching the next shell arc into the sky and detonate, consuming itself in an ecstasy of fire, it felt to Nathaway like a moment of pending transformation. He didn't aspire to fireworks to mark his deeds. He wanted something more intangible: to explore himself, and find out who he was apart from his family. He didn't want to conquer other nations like his brother; he wanted to conquer his own self.

The thought of wilderness filled him with a peace and space he had never known in crowded, artificial Fluminos. There would be elemental powers of sea and sky to test him, the true judge and jury of mankind. He would surrender himself to them—to scour him clean of civilization's taint and refine his being into essences. Only then would he be pure enough to give away his life to serve others. The thought of a life devoted to sacrifice filled him with an exaltation whose white-hot light burned all ambition to cinders.

*

The snow was just beginning to fall when Harg Ismol, soon to be former captain of the Native Navy, peered out the window of Holly's Hole, a waterfront tavern favoured by islanders. Behind him, the smoky room was packed with loudly celebrating men, newly paid off and released from the service. In one corner, several of them were holding a competition to see who could drink a pitcher of beer in one breath; but their shouts were almost drowned out by the roaring of another group watching two men pantomime what looked like an act of sexual congress with a cannon.

Harg was the only one in the room still in uniform, since his appointment to pick up his pay and papers was still an hour away. He had come to the window ostensibly to check the weather, but really to check his watch. It was a mark of his strange position that he couldn't make a simple gesture like taking out his watch without subterfuge. Among the men down here, the fact that he could afford a watch would make it seem like he was putting on airs; the fact that he needed one would not excuse him, only set him apart. Time belonged to the Inning world; men who simply took orders didn't need to worry about it.

Pocketing the incriminating instrument, he glanced up the wooden stairs at his left. He knew the chamber above was a sea of grey and blue uniforms like his own, since that was where the officers were celebrating. But it wasn't just rank that separated the men below and the men above; it was race as well, the omnipresent factor among islanders. Above, they were all Torna; here, the crowd, like himself, was Adaina. He had already been upstairs for a while, and knew they had no problem with him—the rank and reputation he had earned outweighed old prejudices. But he had drifted downstairs to find more relaxing company, only to discover that his fellow Adainas rather bored him. Only two things had kept him downstairs: the sweet knowledge that it looked, for the first time in his life, like he was snubbing the Tornas; and the delirious pride of his fellow Adainas that he would do so.

There was time for a last carouse before he had to leave for his parting interview.

But where should he go—back to his table with the boatswains, pilots, and gunners, or upstairs to mend fences with the officers? The men with whom he had joined the navy, or the men with whom he left it? He felt like he was walking along a wharf with one foot on the dock and the other on the deck of a shifting, unmoored boat. One of these days he was going to tip into the drink.

And so he took the third alternative: he slipped out the door into the snow without a goodbye to either group. Let them try and interpret that.

It was cold outside, so he buttoned his broadcloth uniform coat and put on his hat. The street was full of revellers, vendors, aimless men, and shameless women—most of them immigrants from the various dependencies of the far-flung Inning empire. Presumably some Innings lived in Fluminos—probably somewhere in the tall brick buildings on the hill above the harbour—but so far Harg had seen little evidence of them. Everything here seemed to be run by conquered peoples.

The route to the Navy Office took him past the hospital, and his steps slowed as he came abreast of the gate, knowing he had time to go in, wanting above all to avoid it. But the thought of walking by, in all the enjoyment of his success, would leave him feeling soiled, so he turned in.

The people on duty in the hospital recognized him by now, and didn't need to ask where he was going. Outside the door to the second-floor ward where Jory was, Harg met an orderly he had paid to give his friend some extra comforts. "How is he?" Harg asked.

The man shrugged. "Bad day, Captain. He was raving earlier, and we had to restrain him. Sorry."

Harg grasped the man's shoulder to show there was no ill feeling; he knew how violent Jory got in his fits. He slipped a coin into the man's pocket. "Thanks, Captain," the orderly said, nodding in deference.

The ward was a long room lined with a double row of wooden beds. Looking down it, Harg had the bitter thought that the revellers setting off the fireworks tonight would turn silent in shock and shame if they knew what it had really taken to win the war. His boots sounded loud on the plank floor as he walked down the line of beds. Jory was sitting up, his shaved head drooping, his wrists and ankles tied to the bed frame with strong strips of cloth. When Harg came to a halt at the foot of the bed Jory looked up, and for a moment his face was a mask of paranoia and hostility. Quickly, Harg removed his hat to make himself more recognizable.

"Oh, Harg," Jory said, his words slightly slurred. "You didn't look like yourself, dressed that way."

Jory didn't look like himself, either. There was a caved-in place on his skull where the shell fragment had penetrated the brain. No one had thought he would live, but here he was. The wound was almost healed on the outside now, but the havoc on the inside would never go away.

Harg sat on the side of the bed and said, "How are you doing?"

"I don't like these," Jory said, pulling the restraints tight.

"Well, you shouldn't attack people then," Harg said matter-of-factly.

"I know." Jory shook his head in angry frustration. "It's like I've turned into you, isn't it?"

Jory was never violent when Harg was around; the hospital staff had commented

on the difference in his behaviour. But Harg had seen enough evidence to know that what he saw was the remnant of the old Jory, not the new one.

They had grown up together, best friends, though Jory's mother had disapproved of Harg's influence on her son. But it was Jory who had come up with the crazy scheme to run away and join the navy seven long years ago, and Harg who had followed unthinkingly. They had had to steal away at night and hide in the hold of the recruiter's boat to escape the sure pursuit of Jory's family. No doubt the whole village had blamed Harg, since Jory was such a good boy.

And he had been—good-natured, pliable, like clay in the hands of the navy trainers, while Harg had struck sparks, like flint, against everyone he touched. Jory had accepted rules and strove to please; Harg had rebelled and suffered the harsh consequences. It had looked like they were headed in opposite directions—Jory to honourable service, Harg to the brig or even the gibbet—until the day when it had occurred to Harg that he could outwit this system, and beat the Torna officers at their own game. After that, it had all changed.

Outside on the street, someone set off a string of firecrackers. Jory tensed, eyes wide and panicky, thinking they were under attack.

“Don't worry, you're safe,” Harg said. Then, to distract him, “Think you'll be ready to leave soon?”

“Leave? For where?”

“Home. Remember, I'm taking you back to Yora.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Well, I mean it. I'm on my way to get my discharge right now. Then, whenever you're well enough, I'll book passage for us both, back to the islands.”

Jory had little reaction. “I thought you would stay in the navy. You're so good at it.”

This was an understatement; Harg was brilliant. Three years ago, he had taken command of the frigate *Wolverine* when its captain and lieutenant had both died of the fever, and he had not brought it back till he had obliterated a Rothur cruiser. After that, unrestrained by age-old precepts about how to conduct war at sea, he and a core of other islanders had used pirate tactics, seamanship, subterfuge, and insanely vicious attacks to more than equalize the size difference between the Native Navy's sloops and the Rothur warships. It was an open secret that the Native Navy, not the lumbering and hidebound Inning Navy, had turned the course of the war.

And now he was giving it all up, the only thing he had ever been successful at. He gave a slight, cynical laugh. “I'm tired of all this *civilization*.” He gave the word a flick of contempt. “It's all false, like theatre—an Adaina playing a Torna playing an Inning. It's best to get back to the South Chain, where things are genuine.”

“What will you do there?”

This was an excellent question; Jory sometimes surprised Harg with simple insights. “I don't know,” he laughed. Mine peat? Fish? What did aimless war heroes do?

He checked his watch again; he was late now. Well, what could they do, discharge him? But out of long habit he rose and said, “I've got to get going. I'll be back tomorrow.”

“Take care, Harg,” Jory said, his face wan.

Harg always felt guilty leaving, and slunk out faster than he had come in. But when he came to the gate he felt a burden lifted; he had met his obligation for the day.

The Navy Office building was bustling when he arrived, though it was nearly evening and all the clerks were working by lamplight. To the young Torna adjutant who looked up from his desk when Harg entered Commodore Buckrush's antechamber, he said, "Don't you ever get to leave?"

"As long as the Admiral's in the building, so is everyone else," the adjutant said dourly. It should have seemed odd for Admiral Talley, the hero of the hour, to be still at work with all the celebrations pending in his honour, but the man had the reputation of a fearsome taskmaster. He had burned through any number of subordinates by failing to understand that real humans required more than three hours of sleep at night. Harg had never seen him; officers of the Native Navy had little to do with the Inning hierarchy not assigned to them.

Commodore Buckrush was in charge of the Native Navy. He was a grizzled veteran on the verge of retirement who had been given the undesirable appointment to oversee what was supposed to be a second-class squadron for guarding the coasts and escorting merchant vessels. And yet, under him the Native Navy had metamorphosed into a lethal striking force that had done the ungentlemanly work of actually beating the enemy. It was to this Inning that Harg owed his promotion; and yet, he had never been able to bring himself to like the man. There was something too old-school and patronizing about him. Harg had never been able to square the rule-breaking creativity of his orders with his bluff, conventional demeanour.

When the adjutant showed Harg into the inner office, the Commodore was trying to button the bright scarlet and blue coat of his dress uniform over his ample paunch, doubtless in preparation for some party. "Ah, Ismol," he said. "At last."

Harg saluted with a shade less than the usual precision. "Sir."

Buckrush went to his desk, where Harg's papers were lying, but he seemed reluctant to hand them over. "Well, you've come a long way, haven't you, Ismol? Frankly, I think it's a miracle you survived the first two years."

He didn't know the half of it. It was several miracles piled on top of each other. But it seemed ungracious to bring it up now.

The Commodore went on, "I daresay there aren't too many captains in the navy who have been flogged for insubordination. Three times."

Thanks for mentioning it, Harg wanted to say, but instead stayed silent.

"I've got your papers here," Buckrush said, fingering them. "But I'd prefer not to have to give them to you. Sure you won't re-enlist? You could have a fine career in the navy. We need men like you."

"No thanks, Commodore," Harg said. "I've made other plans."

Buckrush picked up the papers, but still didn't hand them over. "In that case, there's someone else who wants to talk to you. Come with me."

He walked past Harg and out the office door. Mystified, Harg followed him down the hall and up a staircase to the second floor of the building, where Harg had never set foot. They passed under a brass chandelier and across a carpet to a set of painted wooden doors at the front of the building. This was the realm of the Inning Navy, the separate elite branch where natives like himself served only as seamen.

Buckrush knocked, then opened the door and entered, leaving Harg to follow after.

Inside was another antechamber with a grim-looking Inning in civilian clothes, sitting at a secretary's desk. It took Harg a moment to realize the man really was the secretary. Buckrush handed him Harg's papers, and he scanned them. Harg watched longingly, wondering if he would ever get a chance to touch his own discharge. But the secretary rose and took the papers into the inner office.

"Well, this is it, then," Buckrush said, turning to Harg. "We probably won't meet again; I'm retiring after this. Good luck to you, Ismol." He actually held out a hand for Harg to shake as if they were old friends. Then he went out by the door they had come in, leaving Harg alone in the antechamber.

The secretary returned from the inner office without the papers. In a monotone he said, "Admiral Talley will see you now."

Harg didn't move at first. He couldn't help the reflexive thought that he must have done something truly heinous this time. But try as he might, he could not think of a single reason why the legendary head of the Inning Navy should want to see him. The secretary had to say, "You may go in, Captain," before Harg could shake off his paralysis.

The office he entered was simply furnished—a functional, orderly place devoid of ostentation. Despite the snow falling outside, no fire burned in the fireplace. Harg came to a halt just inside the door and saluted as precisely as he ever had. A fleeting gratitude that he had bothered to shave passed through his head, and disappeared.

If he had ever pictured Admiral Corbin Talley, Harg had imagined something imposing, along Commodore Buckrush's lines; but the reality was completely different. The man who stood behind the desk scanning Harg's papers was slightly built, with close-cropped, greying blond hair and wire-rimmed spectacles. Had he not been dressed in a splendid, gold-trimmed uniform, he would have looked like a botanist or watchmaker. But any impression of myopic intellectuality disappeared the instant he looked up to study Harg. He had startling blue eyes as probing as lancets. Harg felt that every cell of his body was being inspected separately. He kept his face impassive.

"Captain Ismol," said Admiral Talley, "I am glad to finally meet you."

He made it sound like he had actually heard Harg's name before this very instant. "Likewise, sir," said Harg.

"Did Commodore Buckrush go over these with you?" Talley asked, referring to the papers.

"No, sir."

Talley picked up a small wooden box from the desk and came around to Harg's side. He handed the papers to Harg, clearly assuming that Harg could do more than puzzle out a few simple words. Embarrassed, Harg studied the top paper as if he could make sense of it. It didn't look like the other discharge papers he had seen; it was embossed with fancy gold lettering. The next thing Talley did, explained it. He opened the box and held it out to Harg. In it lay the epaulette and cockade of a squadron commander. Harg stared at them, unable to move.

"Go ahead, take it," Talley said. "You earned it."

Harg took the box, but still couldn't touch the insignia in it. It was not that he had been promoted to Commodore; that would have been explainable. It was the colour of the epaulette. Instead of the silver of the Native Navy, this one was the gold of the

Inning Navy.

“This . . . this is a mistake,” he said.

“No it’s not,” Talley said calmly. “We’re abolishing the Native Navy as a separate institution. The segregation is divisive and inefficient. From now on the Native Navy will simply be a branch of the regular navy, on the same standing as the other branches.”

Such a sweeping reform would send seismic shocks through the whole organization. It was no wonder Buckrush was retiring; probably a good many other Inning officers would as well, out of protest. Harg looked up at the man who had ordered the overthrow of such ancient and accepted institutions, and spoke as if it were merely a bit of housekeeping. Harg found it impossible to imagine having such power.

“A great victory gives one some opportunities that might not otherwise arise,” Talley said with a slight smile. “I felt the Native Navy deserved some recompense for its part in that victory.”

Harg looked down again at the epaulette, and this time dared to touch it.

“Of course,” said Talley, “if you decide to take your discharge now, this rank will be merely ceremonial, with the thanks of your grateful nation. However, if you decide to stay . . . Would you like hear more?”

All of Harg’s plans were whirling around his head, scattered by this revelation. “Yes, sir,” he said.

“Have a seat, Commodore,” the Admiral said urbanely. “Would you like some coffee?” Without waiting for an answer, he knocked on the door of his secretary’s office, apparently a well-known signal. The door opened and the long-faced secretary appeared with a samovar which he placed on a low table flanked by wing chairs. Talley sat in one and poured two cups. “I daresay I am going to need this,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “I have several obligations tonight.”

The coffee was a smooth, pungent ambrosia unlike any Harg had tasted before. He was disarmed by the whole setting, and the unexpected civility of the man before him. Most Innings affected a rough simplicity when dealing with islanders, but the Admiral made no such concessions. Harg wondered why people were so terrified of Corbin Talley.

He had figured out that the rank he had been offered was the same as that which Buckrush was vacating, but he still didn’t know if he were being offered Buckrush’s job, and couldn’t think how to ask. So he said, “How will it be organized?”

“That’s necessarily a little fluid now,” Talley said. “It will be designed as best suits the accomplishment of its new mission. You see, the Court has honoured the navy with a new assignment.”

“Already?” Harg said, surprised. They had barely gotten home from the last war.

Admiral Talley seemed to get some hidden amusement from Harg’s reaction. Drily, he said, “I’m glad to see I am not the only one . . . shall we say, impressed by the Court’s alacrity. But yes, they have handed us our next orders, and the Native Navy, or whatever it is to be called, will have to play a crucial role. You see, we have been instructed to turn our attention to the Forsaken Islands.”

Even over his wince at the condescending Inning name for his homeland, Harg felt a dull throb of alarm at this news. “What does Inning want with the isles?” he said.

“It seems the Forsakens are rich in resources that our merchants are eager to

develop.”

“What resources?” Harg had never noticed any but peat and sand.

“Timber. Lead. Iron. Hemp. Cheap labour.”

Timber for building ships, Harg thought. Lead for bullets, iron for cannons. Hemp for ropes. It sounded like Inning’s imperial ambitions had not been stilled by the victory over Rothur.

“And of course, the fisheries are phenomenal,” Talley added.

“Of course.”

“As you know, Inning has claimed the Forsakens for years, but we have never tried to administer them. We have left control entirely in the hands of the native civilian governors, but even they have never been able to extend the law to the outer archipelagos. While our attention was diverted in Rothur, the unadministered territories have become a nest of pirates and brigands who are preying on the coastal shipping almost as far south as Fluminos. The present administration in Tornabay seems unable to cope with the situation, and has come under criticism for corruption and autocracy. Altogether, some sort of police action is warranted. The regular navy is the wrong tool for the job; the Native Navy has a far better chance of success.”

The explanation, so reasonable-sounding, left Harg with terrible misgivings. “We’d be fighting against our own people,” he said.

“No, you’d be fighting *for* your own people. To free them of tyranny, corruption, and lawlessness. To create a new nation that cuts across all the old divisions of race and religion. To unite your people behind the ideas of rational self-government and justice for all.”

For a moment Harg imagined himself returning home with a liberating army to topple Governor Tiarch and her despised Torna cabal from power, to restore the ancient greatness of his land. It was an intoxicating thought for a young man who had been no more than a sullen troublemaker when he left. But he couldn’t quite believe it. “What do you want me for?” he said.

Talley answered, “I want you to do Buckrush’s job, only do it right. With some understanding of the people under you, and some initiative. You’ve proven you can handle islanders, command them when others can’t. The Native Navy has tremendous potential; by the time we have to go to war again, it could be the most valuable weapon in our arsenal.”

So the Innings saw it as a sort of training exercise. Merely a prelude to the real geopolitical mission, whatever that would be. Harg thought of all the things that were wrong with the Native Navy, and of having the power to set them right. But there was one huge obstacle.

“I’m Adaina,” he said. “The officer corps is almost all Torna. They wouldn’t accept me.”

“They would if I told them to,” Talley said, coolly setting down his coffee cup.

How could he explain this to an Inning? “No, you see, there are racial divides in the isles, old prejudices that run deep. . . .”

“Do tell. I never would have known,” Talley said with ice-smooth sarcasm.

Harg realized he had just patronized the head of the Inning Navy. “Sorry, sir,” he said. “Not many Innings pay much attention to us.”

“Please assume that I have been paying attention,” Talley said in a voice that could

have cut glass.

Looking into those cold blue eyes, Harg felt a revelation strike him with physical force. It was not Buckrush who had engineered the transformation of the Native Navy, as everyone had assumed. It was this man—this ruthless, razor-like mind. Buckrush had been merely a puppet, a cloak for the machinations of his commander. Talley had needed a weapon more versatile and nasty than the gentleman's club of a navy he had inherited, so he had created one.

"It's me that hasn't been paying attention," Harg said, as much to himself as to Talley. But how could he have known? He had been a tool as well, manipulated without knowing it. He remembered how cool Buckrush had always seemed about his promotion to captain. Now he guessed why: Buckrush had had no choice about it. Talley had been micromanaging the Native Navy all the time.

Clearly, all Harg's assumptions had to change. With this man, absolutely everything was intentional. He had to assume no gaps in knowledge, no mistakes.

"You *want* an Adaina in charge," he said, eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Talley smiled at the change in tone, but he was still assessing Harg, testing. "I fancy you can see my reasoning."

"If it were me," Harg said slowly, "I'd want an Adaina because the great majority of the population is Adaina, especially in the Outer Chains—the parts beyond Inning control. If a Torna navy showed up in those islands to impose the law, they would explode into rebellion. But having Adaina officers might just give the navy some credibility. It couldn't be just one officer. You would have to promote a whole cadre of Adainas."

"That would be your first priority," Talley said. "But tell me, how much of a threat could the Adaina truly be?"

"Look at your pirates. Are they a threat? They wouldn't fight you like a navy would, head-on. They would strike invisibly, pick off targets of opportunity, and then melt back into the population. If they had local support, you could be fighting them for decades. I don't think you want that."

"No indeed. So what do you recommend?"

"First of all, avoid sending in the Northern Squadron, Tiarch's navy. You can't imagine how they're hated in the outlands. The Southern Squadron has no history there; it wouldn't be seen as a provocation. Then, long-term, you have to think like the Adaina. There are ancient traditions of leadership in the outlands, things people would respond to and respect, if you got it right."

"Yes. What traditions?"

There was a tap on the door, and it opened a crack so that the secretary's nose was visible. "Excuse me sir," he said, "the Chief Justice has sent a carriage to fetch you to the reception."

"Let them wait!" Talley shot the words like bullets at the secretary's head, and the door quickly closed. As if nothing had happened, the Admiral said, "Please go on."

But Harg had realized that he was giving an Inning a blueprint for conquering his homeland. Once again he had been manipulated, lured to the edge of betrayal. He said, "I think perhaps the Chief Justice might be more important than me right now, sir."

There was a short silence. Harg was thinking that if he took this man's bait he would still be an Inning tool. Still obeying them, doing their dirty work. He would

become what the Innings had made him forever.

“Well, thank you for your insights,” Admiral Talley said lightly. “It is seldom enough that an islander will speak to an Inning as an equal.”

Harg stared, disarmed again. But that wasn’t what had been happening. He had been talking to Talley as if they were both Inning.

“You don’t need to give me your answer today,” Talley said pleasantly. “Think of the offer, sleep on it. I’ll be here tomorrow.”

“No,” Harg said, standing. “I can give you my answer now, sir. I appreciate your offer, but I’ll take the discharge.”

For the first time since Harg had walked in the door, Talley looked like something had not gone precisely as he had expected. A slight, ominous line appeared between his brows. “You understand, if you refuse, the offer must go to someone else.”

“I understand that. I don’t want it. Sir.”

Talley saw that he was in earnest, and his pleasant mood vanished. “Very well,” he said. He took the gilded commission off the top of the pile of papers, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it with furious force into the fireplace. He handed Harg the discharge and pay slip, then went back to his desk and began writing as if he were alone in the room. Harg stood for a second, then assumed he had been dismissed, and went to the door.

“Ismol,” Talley said as Harg’s hand touched the knob. “You forgot your epaulette.” He had left the wooden box sitting on the coffee table. “I thought—”

“It’s yours, you earned it,” Talley said.

Harg went back and took the box.

“Perhaps we’ll see each other in the Forsakens,” Talley said neutrally, signing a document and placing it deliberately on a pile.

“You’re going there?” Harg said, astonished. “I thought—”

Talley looked at him across the desk, his face unreadable. “Oh, yes, I’m going there. I go where my nation sends me. And right now it seems my nation wishes me to be very, very far away from Fluminos.”

This statement made no sense. From what Harg had seen, the Inning nation adored this man, and Fluminos desperately wanted him close. As if to prove it, the first explosion of the fireworks rang out across the harbour.

Then Harg realized that when Talley said “my nation,” he didn’t mean what everyone else did. He didn’t mean all those people eager to write him poems and lift up their children to see him. He meant some group invisible to everyone else, who had the power to work even him like a puppet. Harg could hardly imagine who they might be.

“Thank you, sir,” Harg said, glancing at the box.

“You’re entirely welcome,” Talley said, and turned back to his writing.

Out on the street, Harg had to step around the carriage waiting to whisk the Admiral away to wherever his nation waited. Looking back at the window of the office he had just left, Harg saw the light still burning. He felt cautious respect, perhaps even admiration, but no warmth. In fact, deep down where it mattered, Corbin Talley terrified him.

2

The Sands of Yora

Spaeth Dobrin woke, as she always did, to the sheer, sensual joy of being alive. The relaxation of her naked limbs, the texture of the bed linens—every sensation pleased her, since that was how she had been created, for enjoyment and delight. It was a cool morning, but the bed was warm, and still smelled a little of Goth. She rolled over to his side and buried her face in the pillow, trying to capture his scent, as if it could conjure up the man. Just the thought of his touch made little thrills scamper across the surface of her skin.

But his scent did not summon him, and the bed now seemed empty and abandoned, as it had for over two weeks. Feeling the restless hunger his absence left in her, she got up. Almost at once the cool air distracted her by nipping at her nakedness. She raced to the back door of the cottage and out into the morning, bare feet slapping on the stone doorstep. The sun fell lightly on her skin, making it shine the pearly grey of an oyster shell; the warm wind ruffled the tarnished silver of her hair. The Yorans called her Grey Girl. Outwardly, she looked like a mature woman just out of her teens, but she had been created only seven years before.

Spaeth was a creature of impulse, and now the impulse struck her to climb the hill above Yorabay and lie in the sun on the boulders there. She was halfway to the main path when she remembered that she needed to wear some clothes. The village women had been harping at her about it, especially since the Tornas had arrived and begun building their dock, busy as burrowing rodents. “They don’t respect you like we do,” Tway had said. “They have baser impulses.”

Spaeth had been curious to know what a base impulse was, but Tway had seemed so convinced no good could come of it, that she had promised to be careful. Now she backtracked to the weather-beaten, moss-grown timber cottage and rummaged in a drawer till she found a sleeveless undershirt and a cloth to wrap around her hips. Thus clad in a bare minimum of decency, she returned barefoot to the path, turning uphill toward the early sun.

The dome of Yorabay Hill rose like a man’s bald head above the fringe of woodland along the shore. As Spaeth climbed, the dewy grass clutched playfully at her legs, and alongside her, carefree little gusts of wind played porpoise. When she reached the top and climbed onto one of the great grizzled boulders that ringed the crest of the hill, she could see the entire world spread out like a rumpled cloth fringed in white where it met the sea. Off to the north, a single sail dotted the azure expanse of the Pont Sea. This was the extent of Spaeth’s universe, all she had known since her creation.

A distant boom sounded, as a charge of explosives went off at the work site near The Jetties, and Spaeth turned that way, frowning. The Tornas had been at it for a week, digging and building. She could feel the island’s hurt in an aching spot under her breastbone, a new and unwelcome sensation. What had Yora ever done to the