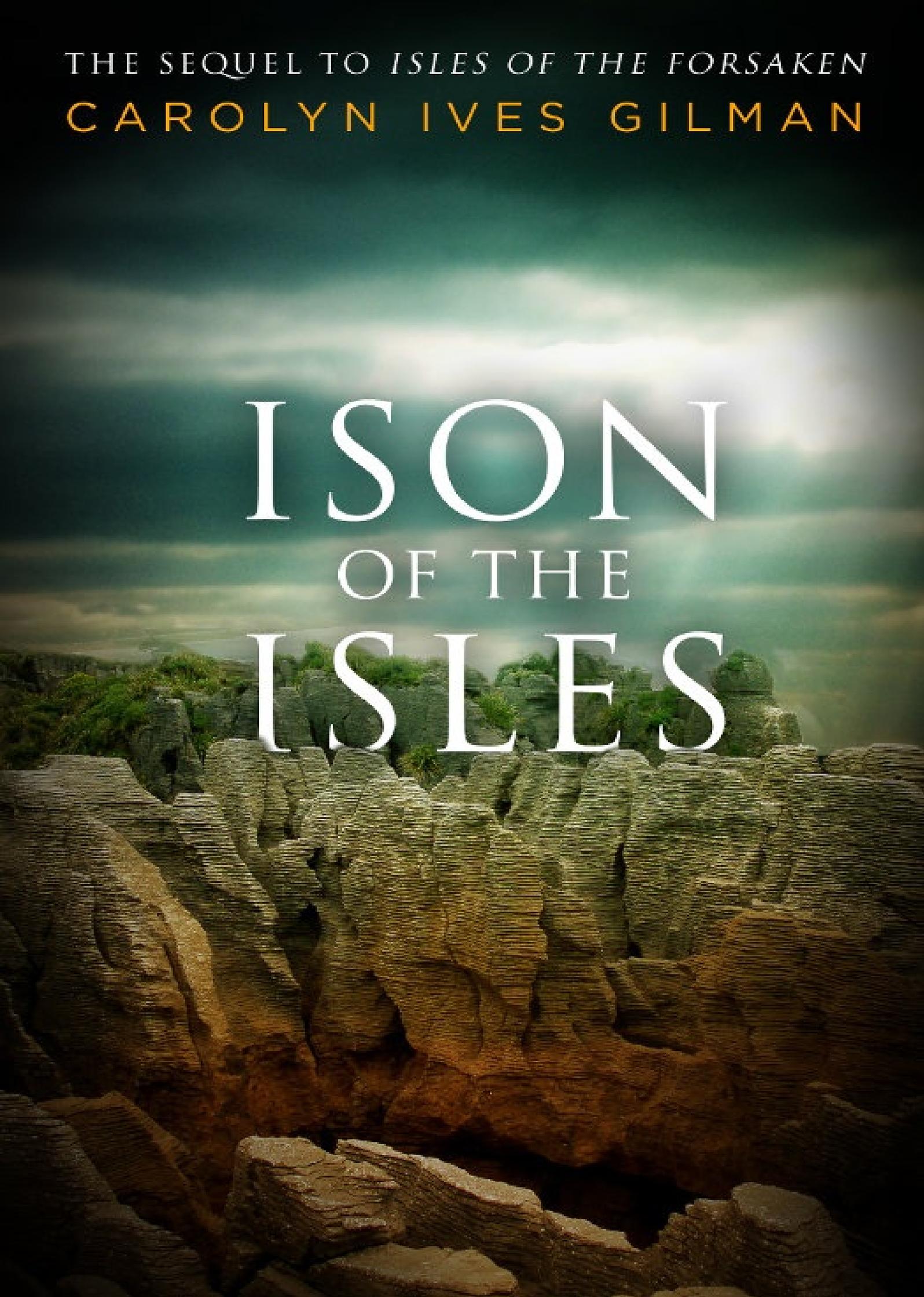


THE SEQUEL TO *ISLES OF THE FORSAKEN*
CAROLYN IVES GILMAN



ISON
OF THE
ISLES

Ison of the Isles

Carolyn Ives Gilman



ChiZine Publications

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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Previously, in *Isles of the Forsaken*](#)

[1. The Windward Passage](#)

[2. The Sleeping City](#)

[3. The Bells of Harbourdown](#)

[4. A Beautiful Way to Die](#)

[5. The Laws of War](#)

[6. Storm Over Vill](#)

[7. Mark of the Munda](#)

[8. The Summons of the Stone](#)

[9. The Boundaries of Forgiveness](#)

[10. Fire in the Mountain](#)

[11. Boxing with the Wind](#)

[12. The Strength of Surrender](#)

[13. The Lashnura Solution](#)

[14. The Last Defence](#)

[15. Justice](#)

[16. The Trial of Harg Ismol](#)

[17. The Victor and the Victim](#)

[About the Author](#)

Previously, in *Isles of the Forsaken*

The Forsaken Islands are scattered like the spray of a breaker off the western coast of the Inning continent. Inhabited by successive waves of peoples, the isolated archipelago is an intricate collage of ancient histories, races, and cultures. Inning is a young nation by comparison, but the Innings are on history's upswing. They have set out to build an empire around their system of government by rule of law, and their principles of reason and justice. *Isles of the Forsaken* begins the story of how Inning invades the Forsakens, setting off a war that tests the deepest beliefs of both nations.

Harg Ismol is a native of the Forsakens who spent seven years in the Inning Navy, rising to the rank of captain. But when he returns home to the island of Yora, he finds that his people, the Adaina, are still living under the thumbs of the enterprising Torna. The Torna are also natives of the Forsakens, but have collaborated with the Innings to gain power. There is even a Torna governor, Tiarch, ruling the isles for Inning. But change is coming; the Innings intend to occupy the isles and spread their system of law to its farthest edges.

Nathaway Talley, the youngest son of a powerful Inning political family, has come to Yora with idealistic intentions of uplifting the natives. He quickly runs afoul of their complex culture when he meets and decides to rescue Spaeth Dobrin, the island's dhotamar.

Spaeth is Lashnura, the oldest and oddest of the races inhabiting the Forsakens. Called the Grey Folk because of their grey skin and hair, the Lashnura play the role of cosmic balance-keepers. In their traditional belief system, the world is a battleground of natural forces called the Mundua and Ashwin. The Lashnura keep the balance between these forces through atonement, by taking on the sufferings of human beings through a curing rite called dhota. The dhotamar gives blood to establish a psychic bond that allows him or her to take on the diseases and injuries of others. But once they have given dhota, Grey Folk can never break the bond to the person who has been cured. Partners in dhota become bandhotai—deeply bound together, psychically, emotionally, and sexually. The Lashnura are saintly figures, but not through their own choice. They are compelled by biological necessity to sacrifice themselves for others.

Spaeth has never given dhota, but is under terrible pressure to do so. Created only seven years ago to be the sexual partner of Goth, the revered dhotamar and shaman of Yora, she has lived a sheltered existence. But Goth has disappeared from Yora, and the arrival of Harg and Nathaway propels Spaeth into the outside world, where she has to reconcile her heritage of compassion with her ardent desire for freedom.

Soon after arriving back, Harg runs afoul of the military occupiers of Yora, and is forced to flee along with Spaeth and their friend Tway. They go to the island of Thimish, where a group of local pirates form the nucleus of a brewing resistance to Inning rule. Harg is drawn into the insurgency, and leads an attack in which the natives capture a fort, three Inning warships, and a group of hostages. The most important hostage is Nathaway Talley.

Before the rebels can follow up on their victory, they learn that the Innings also

have an important hostage: the Heir of Gilgen, a Lashnura religious figure who plays an essential role in the leadership system of the isles. In times of crisis, a leader will arise and claim dhota-nur in order to become Ison of the Isles. Dhota-nur is a deep soul-cleansing performed by the Heir of Gilgen. It frees its subject of all the painful memories that cause a person to act out of balance. The captivity of the Heir of Gilgen will prevent an Ison from arising. But more pressing than that, the Heir is Goth, to whom Harg and Spaeth both have complicated emotional ties.

Spaeth's treacherous spirit familiar, Ridwit, manipulates her into leaving for the capital city of Tornabay to find the Heir of Gilgen. Harg follows, bringing Nathaway Talley as a bargaining chip to secure Goth's release. He knows by now that the Innings in Tornabay are commanded by Nathaway's brother, Admiral Corbin Talley, the cultivated but coldblooded head of the Inning Navy. What he does not know is that Talley is at odds with Tiarch, the cunning Torna politician who is the Innings' viceroy. Tiarch's agent, Joffrey, manipulates Harg into meeting with her; but before they can come to terms there is a coup, and Tiarch is ousted from power. She flees with a portion of the Navy that is still loyal to her, and Harg persuades her to join the rebellion against Inning.

Meanwhile, Nathaway escapes from the rebels, but his brother, the Admiral, treats him as a traitor because his letters home have been published and have created sympathy for the natives. Disillusioned, he also escapes from Inning control. Through a series of coincidences he meets Goth, and together they perform a dhota ritual to free Spaeth from the control of the Mundua who have taken over her mind. As a result, Nathaway and Spaeth become joined by a bandhota bond. Goth urges them to flee, and gives Nathaway a mysterious stone pendant that helps them escape. Nathaway makes the fateful decision to abandon his old life and follow Spaeth and the rebels.

1

The Windward Passage

When daylight filtered into the *Ripplewill's* forward cabin, Spaeth stretched out her naked limbs in luxurious comfort. Beside her in the berth, Nathaway Talley was still asleep. A stripe of sunlight lay across his bare shoulder, as if the day were caressing him, as infatuated as she. Gazing at him as he slept, she loved everything about him: the bony angles of his body; the texture of his exotic, pale skin against hers; the way his untrimmed blond bangs fell in his eyes. She loved his smell, she loved his private parts for giving her so much entertainment. With that in mind, she bent down to kiss them awake.

He gave a startled little noise and reached out as if to make sure it was really her being so personal. She straddled him then, and watched as his nearsighted blue eyes focused on her with that look of complete surrender that only one other person had ever given her.

If Spaeth had been a person given to reflection, it might have troubled her that his devotion, while sincere, was not entirely voluntary. She was now the beneficiary of the slavish dhota-bond she had sought so hard to avoid herself. Why Goth had paired them she had no idea, but she accepted it as a gift to her—a strange gift for a man to give his beloved, but one she was quite cheerful to enjoy.

She leaned forward to tickle Nathaway with her hair. “I love having a bandhota,” she said. He didn’t answer, just reached up to hold her by the arms. A fleeting sadness crossed his face, as if waking brought back the memory of some loss. It reminded her vividly of Goth. Even the green pendant resting against his chest was Goth’s. It was as if the Grey Man had created a replica of himself to console her. But Nathaway was much younger and more vigorous. She scooted down to tickle him in a more provocative place.

“Again?” he said, as if astonished at her. But he was joking.

“What do you mean?” she said. “It’s been forever.”

“At least six hours.”

For three days now they had been unable to get enough of each other. The others on the boat were tolerantly amused, but a little agog at the intensity of their libido. Spaeth knew it would fade in time—with her first, since the bond was less lasting on the recipient than on the giver of dhota. She wanted to explore every crevice of him while it was strong.

This time he did it slowly, in time to the rhythmic rocking of the boat, so that it seemed as if she were washed in an ocean of liquid love. She rode the waves as he flowed into her, waking every nerve of her body, making her throb with need.

When they came out on deck, the others cast knowing glances in their direction. It made Spaeth feel cheerful and lucky, but Nathaway wouldn’t meet their eyes. She couldn’t imagine what his problem was; they all knew he couldn’t control himself.

The *Ripplewill* was bounding over the waves like a frisking pony, sending spray

flying in rainbow sheets. Even the boat seemed to feel elation at being free of the city. Spaeth made her way to the foredeck, facing west. She was glad to be warmly wrapped in an old coat one of the crewmen had given her, for the northeast wind at her back was piercing.

Tornabay hung like a black haze in the back of Spaeth's memory. She was not proud of the way she had acted there, but self-blame was not a strong part of her nature. In her own mind, she had been lured there by the treachery of the Mundua, then cast into a labyrinth of evils through which she had barely managed to find her way. If it had not been for Goth . . . She tried to drive from her mind what might have happened.

But now she was free. There was a clear sea before her, a strong wind behind, and the Isles all around. She breathed in the mora, like healing oxygen to her starved system. Here there was no suffering to tug at her desires, nothing to own her against her will. She almost felt as if she could drive the *Ripplewill* forward with the wind in her heart.

She took her hands from her pockets and looked at them. They were strong now, the skin a healthy shade of grey. The nails were pearly, purified by the cleansing power of dhota. She clenched them, thinking of Goth. She could still feel his healing touch. Right now, he would be suffering under the brunt of the disease he had taken from her body. He would have to endure that illness alone, with no one to treat him kindly. The ignorant Innings wouldn't even know what ailed him.

Nathaway was making his way forward to join her. He walked stiff-legged, clutching every handhold he could find, constantly off-balance on the canting deck. He needed to relearn everything, she thought—even how to walk.

Soon he was standing precariously beside her. "Where are we?" he said.

Torr had taken them north from Embo to throw off pursuit, since everyone would expect them to go south. They had passed northwest up the strait between Esker and Fosk, called the Windward Passage. "It looks like we're close to the Widewater," she said. "That far island must be Bara. I don't think we need to worry about any Inning boats catching up with us now."

"Then where will we go?"

She frowned, not wanting to think about the future yet. She wanted to enjoy the day.

She stepped to the weather rail and stood looking down into the water. It was a deep green, shot with long sun-shafts. The shadow of her head scuffed across the waves, and the sunbeams all seemed to be radiating from it like a spiky crown. Down there, she thought, lay the realms of the Mundua.

Nathaway joined her. Now his shadow was crowned with light, too. "What do the Innings think lies below the sea?" she asked. "Just more sea?"

"No. The sea has a bottom."

"And what is under the bottom?"

"Rock."

"And under the rock?"

"There is nothing under the rock. That's all the world is, just a ball of rock."

How safe they must feel, she thought. Utterly in control. She looked up to where the thin blue shell of sky hid the realms of the Ashwin. Only the Isles lay in between

the ancient antagonists. Her lovely land, saved from unbeing only by the precarious balance of power between the forces, and the balance of suffering and joy that was the peculiar gift of humankind.

Nathaway was still talking. “It’s a ball of rock revolving around the sun, you see. As it spins, it turns away from the sun, making day and night. It’s tilted on its axis, so the days and nights are longer or shorter depending on which side is tipped toward the sun. That’s what creates seasons.” He stopped, watching her. “You don’t believe me,” he said.

Spaeth shrugged. “It’s probably true in your land. Not here.”

“If it’s true, it has to be true everywhere.”

To her, every permutation of every truth was possible. The universe was a layer cake of truths, all coexisting.

“Maybe the world *is* a ball of rock,” she conceded. “But the lands of the Mundua still lie under the sea.”

“Both things can’t be true. They contradict each other.”

“So do hope and despair, but they both exist.”

“That’s not the same,” he said. “They are things of the mind.”

“So are rocks and seasons, in the long run,” Spaeth said.

The wind was blowing his hair into his eyes. He brushed it away; it was instantly back. “I can’t believe Goth didn’t teach you—”

“What? To think like an Inning?”

He frowned. “To use your reason. You have a good mind, Spaeth.”

“He probably thought it wouldn’t make me happy. It hasn’t made you happy.” He looked startled at this, but it was true. Ever since she had met him, she had felt an unfulfilled longing in him, as if the world had not quite lived up to his expectations. It was as if he thought the universe ought to behave by certain rules, and he was always disappointed when he found out it didn’t. Yet he never revised his expectations—instead, he tried to revise the world to conform to them. It would never occur to an islander to demand that the universe behave.

A wave made the deck of the *Ripplewill* lurch, and Nathaway was flung against her. She caught hold of him to keep him from toppling overside.

“We can’t become like you,” Spaeth said softly, her arms still strong around him. “We have to find our own way. With mora.”

“Magic?” he said sceptically, as if this solved nothing.

“Mora isn’t just magic. It’s the force that holds everything together. This land is thick with mora. Can’t you feel it? Look out there, how the sea is sparkling, winking at us like it knows a joke. *That’s* mora.”

He didn’t answer, just stood looking out at the sea, as if seeing it her way were a challenge to his personal boundaries. As if he couldn’t acknowledge the world’s personality without questioning his own.

Having an Inning for a lover was going to be hard work, she thought. And then she wondered: had Goth given him to her, or her to him?

*

At sunset they gathered in the cramped main cabin to settle on their route. Tway was uncharacteristically moody. Before anyone else had a chance to speak she said, "I think we should circle round and go back. We've left three friends stranded in Tornabay with a pack of vengeful Innings on their heels."

Nathaway stirred restlessly, and she turned on him. "Well, it's true."

"If they're in custody already, there is nothing we can do," he said.

"We still have you to dicker with," she said darkly, making Spaeth clutch his arm possessively.

Torr interrupted, "We don't know the Innings have them, or even if they're still in Tornabay. They could all be leagues away by now, heading for the South Chain, and we'd only get ourselves captured going back for them. Harg wouldn't thank us for that. I say we should head to Harbourdown to rendezvous. That's where they'll go."

Glancing at Spaeth, Nathaway said cautiously, "I've got another idea."

They all looked at him, silent with surprise. He went on, "I've been asking myself what we could do that would be really effective. I think we should go to Fluminos."

For a few moments there was silence. Then Tway said, "The Inning capital? What good would that do?"

"It might do a lot of good," Nathaway said. "What's happening here in the Forsaken Islands isn't being controlled from Tornabay. The Navy obeys orders from Fluminos. That's where the occupation is being planned, and where we need to go to stop it. You have to understand how our system works; it's all in the laws and courts. What we need to do is bring suit in the High Court to challenge the occupation."

Spaeth tried to imagine entering another city. The very thought made her mind revolt. No Lashnura was made for it. They were too vulnerable.

Tway was scowling suspiciously at the Inning. "Why are *you* thinking of ways to stop the occupation?" she asked.

For a moment Nathaway looked flustered. He suddenly discovered something interesting in his hands, to avoid meeting any of their eyes. "I . . . I've come to think it's being handled wrong. We're violating our own principles, subverting our own system. We need to pull back, not just for your sake, but for our own. Otherwise, nothing we do here will be really just."

He was admitting he had been wrong. Feeling as doting as if she had created him, Spaeth squeezed his hand. "How many people live in Fluminos?" she asked softly.

"Tens of thousands," he said. "Maybe hundreds, I don't know."

"And how many dhotamars do they have?"

"None."

All those people with no one to love or cure them, lashing out in their pain. The very land would ache under them. No wonder they came here to escape. "I couldn't go there," she said faintly. "I couldn't cure them all."

He was looking at her anxiously. "No one would want you to. You might even like it, Spaeth. I would make sure you were treated well. You could meet my family. You would like my sister."

"I would die," she said.

There was a silence. They could hear the wind outside. Cory, the sailor on watch, was playing his tin whistle out on deck. It made a plaintive, reedy sound. Spaeth shook her head to clear it of thoughts. All of this talk was useless. Nathaway knew as well as

she did where they had to go. “Anyway, we must go to Lashnish,” she said.

Tway and Torr had heard nothing of this, and they looked as if she were raving. “It’s a hundred years since Lashnish was capital of the Isles,” Tway said. “Why go there?”

“Because Goth told us to. I don’t know why.” She looked at Nathaway for corroboration. “He said to go to Lashnish, and find the Isonstone.” She looked around at the others. Their faces were lit at odd angles by the lantern that swayed from one of the beams, and the glow from the small cast-iron stove.

“He said that?” Tway asked intently. “To find the Isonstone?”

“Yes.”

“Why? What does it mean?” Nathaway interrupted.

There was a short silence. Then, in a low voice, Tway said, “When the Isles are in danger, and the balances need to be set right again, a great leader will arise. He or she must go to Lashnish and strike the Isonstone as a public pledge. If the candidate is fit, then the Heir of Gilgen will answer the summons before the next full moon. There, in sight of all, the Heir of Gilgen performs dhota-nur. The candidate’s body and mind are both stripped clean before the people he would lead, so that they can see his soul. An Ison must be freed of all pain, so that nothing controls him.”

“That’s barbarous,” Nathaway said.

“It is our custom,” Tway said, “and the only way there can be an Ison.” She turned to Spaeth, who shrank back before the stern look in her eyes. “If Goth told you to find the Isonstone, he must have intended to send you in his stead, knowing he could not answer the summons himself. He was passing on his power, and his responsibility as Heir of Gilgen.”

“To me?” Spaeth said, quaking.

“You are the closest thing he has to a daughter.”

Nathaway caught her hand and held it protectively.

She wanted to escape, to flee, even to Fluminos if that was what it took. What good had it done her to escape the traps of Tornabay, and the grim compulsion of the Black Mask, only to be forced into another sort of slavery? If what Tway said was true, then Spaeth was not free, as she had thought. Somewhere out there was the bandhota she would still be given to. The balances themselves would link her forever to the Ison they chose. Her freedom was like an autumn day, doomed by the imminence of winter. This might be the last choice she would ever make.

She looked at Nathaway, wanting him to take this duty away from her, and knowing he would do it if he could. But that was impossible; both of them were caught in a shadowy current they could not resist.

*

That night, Spaeth was wakened by the feeling that something was wrong with Nathaway. When she reached out for him, he wasn’t beside her in the berth. The boat was moving with a strange, arrhythmic pitching. She sat up, and in the light filtering under the door to the main cabin, dimly made out the glimmer of his pale body,

hunched over a pail. He looked marvellously ill.

"It's nothing," he managed to say when she touched him. "Go back to sleep."

But she couldn't lie there with his seasickness permeating her consciousness, so she pulled on some clothes and left to get away. It made her impatient that such a trivial ailment in him could have such a hold on her.

The lantern in the main cabin was swinging at a crazy angle. Tway sat beside the stove, mending a sail. Spaeth went over to warm her hands; the cracks around the stove door gave off a dull yellow glow.

"Where are we?" Spaeth asked.

Tway bit off the end of a thread. "We came out of the lee of Fosk half an hour ago," she said. "The wind's been picking up since then. Torr says it's going to be a regular nor'easter."

Heavy footsteps sounded on the deck above, and the hatch was jerked open. A black roar of wind and spray came in as Torr lowered himself into the relative quiet of the hold.

"We need some help above," he said. Tway rose at once, but Spaeth put a hand on her arm. "Let me go," she said. "I need some fresh air."

"Well, that we can give you," Torr said.

When she emerged onto the open deck, a lashing of cold spray met her. She groped for a handhold in the wind; the canvas smock she had put on pressed against her like a sail. Slowly she made her way back along the lantern-lit deck to the cockpit, where Torr stood at the helm. His eyes were scanning the black sea warily. "We're going to have to take a second reef in the mainsail if you can handle the tiller," he said.

"This is a nasty storm," she said. She meant it literally; it had a malicious mood.

Torr shrugged. "It's a treacherous part of the Widewater, here."

"How far are we from the end of Esker?"

Torr gestured into the blackness. "You tell me."

As the skipper went forward, leaving her alone in the cockpit, Spaeth wondered if they had just escaped the firesnakes of Embo to fall prey to the horned panther. It was Ridwit who ruled the storms, or so the stories said. Would an old friendship have any weight against the wrath of a betrayed god? Spaeth clutched the tiller hard.

Keeping the boat on course proved to be hard work, for the waves and wind were tugging hard. One moment Spaeth would brace herself against the cockpit wall and push with all her strength to keep the tiller straight; the next, the trickster waves would loosen their grip or fling the rudder the opposite way. In the dim lantern light she could see that Torr and the sailors had made their way forward to where the mainsail strained, the boom nearly skidding in the foam to the lee of the leaning boat. Torr waved back at Spaeth. She heaved the tiller over, and the *Ripplewill* veered into the wind. As soon as the sail began to flap loose, Cory lowered the halyard; Torr strained to pull in the swollen, slippery main sheet and bring the boom back over the boat. The sail cracked like a whip in the wind.

It should have been a routine task; they had all done it a thousand times. But just as Galber was leaning out to catch hold of the sail, Spaeth felt the impact of an invisible wave against the hull, and the tiller was wrenched from her hands. The mainsail puffed out with wind; the boom swung violently to starboard, knocking Galber sprawling on the narrow deck. The *Ripplewill* rolled madly and Galber slipped to the edge. Torr

lunged after him, one hand still on the main sheet. Then a wave broke clear over the bow and came rushing aft, a furious river of foam. It picked up Torr and Galber like sticks of driftwood and threw them against the low gunwale rail. Spaeth cried out, expecting to see them washed over into the churning sea the next moment. Then a sheet of spray doused the mid-ship lantern and plunged the scene into darkness.

There was nothing she could do. She could not leave the tiller; *Ripplewill's* nose had to be kept into the shifting wind. Cursing, she leaned into her task. A gust threw back her canvas hood. Alert for its mood and strategy, she realized the wind's treachery with the sail had been no accident. Something out there had found them.

A solid shape lurched into the light of the cockpit lantern. It was Torr, supporting Galber. He lowered the seaman onto the floor of the cockpit, looped a rope around his waist, and secured it to a cleat. He turned briefly to Spaeth, thumping her on the back and roaring, "You're doing well," then disappeared forward again.

She realized at once that Galber was badly hurt. At first he smiled back bravely at her, as if to say the sea would have to try harder to get *him*. But gradually the colour left his face. His lips turned grey, and he began to tremble.

Spaeth's instincts were screaming. She fought to keep her thoughts from bending toward him, attracted by the magnetism of his pain. Grimly she gripped the tiller; if she took her hand from it, she would put all their lives in jeopardy. *Concentrate on the wind*, she repeated. *Keep the bow into the wind. Don't look at him. Don't think about him.*

Her self-control was frayed to a thread when Cory appeared, coming aft. He called, "Bear off to larboard, as close to the wind as you can!"

"Cory!" she screamed. Hearing the agony in her voice, he came closer. "Galber's hurt."

Cory glanced at Galber. "Hold on, I'll get help," he said, then disappeared again.

Spaeth nearly screamed in frustration. Galber was fading now, chilled and in shock. Vividly she could feel his mind still fluttering with life, his pain like a sweet bath she could drown in.

Someone was taking the tiller from her hand. She lunged toward Galber, blind now to all but his need.

Tway pulled her back. "We've got to get him below!" she said.

Yes. Spaeth summoned a vestige of control. Galber groaned as Cory and Tway helped him up. It sent a stab of aching pity through her. "It's his shoulder! Be careful of it," she said. They manoeuvred him precariously forward to the main hatch, down the ladder, and at last onto the berth by the stove.

Instantly Spaeth was at his side. "Get me a knife!" she ordered.

Tway's hand on her arm was firm. "Spaeth, no!" she said. "You can't give him dhota."

She was right, of course. Spaeth swallowed back a wild, wordless cry of frustration. If she cured him, she would be bound to him forever, imprisoned in a blissful cage of love. His injury had all the marks of a scheme to turn her from her goal, to divert her so she would never reach Lashnish. She had to be cruel now, and leave him to his suffering. She backed away, the compulsion sharp and piercing in her.

Nathaway was bending over Galber. "You say it's his shoulder?" he asked.

"Yes, the right side," Spaeth said.

“Get me a knife,” he said.

They all stared at him, motionless. “To cut away his shirt, damn it!” he said.

Cory handed him a knife. Spaeth groaned at sight of it.

“Get her out of here,” Nathaway said sharply. “I can take care of this.”

Tway pushed her up the companion ladder, out into the wind.

The slap of cold against her face was calming. With Tway behind, she made her way aft to the cockpit, where Torr stood at the helm. He eyed them curiously.

Gradually, as the sharpness of Galber’s suffering faded, Spaeth began to realize how close she had come to giving in. And then there could have been no Ison for the Isles.

That had been the purpose, of course. Spaeth stared out into the blackness where the Mundua dwelt. They had thought she was their tool, but now she had slipped in their hands, and was threatening to cut them.

Spaeth looked at Tway through the rain. “They are trying to stop me,” she said.

Tway bent close, frowning. “Who?”

“The Mundua. They don’t want me to reach Lashnish.”

“Then why hurt Galber?”

“To lure me into giving dhota. They’re cruel, Tway; they don’t care who they hurt, or how badly. You’re all in danger.”

Ripplewill had steadied under Torr’s hand. She was not so far heeled over now, and met the waves head on instead of floundering at their mercy. But the wind was still building, and in the dim light of the stern lantern Spaeth could see whitecaps peppering the sea. Between the patches of foam and spindrift the black water had an ominous, polished look, like metal.

When Cory returned from the cabin, he brought a flask of hot nog to warm them all. But there was chilling news. “The Inning says Galber’s got a broken collarbone,” he said.

“Then we’ve all got to pitch in,” Torr said, his voice as flat as his understatement.

Cory had brought rope for lifelines. Each of them tied a length around their waist and made the other end fast to a cleat with about ten feet of slack to allow them to move about. Then they settled down to wait.

The cold water seeped into their boots, and the taste of salt crusted the insides of their mouths. In the lulls of wind Spaeth could hear Torr talking softly to his boat.

“That’s it, *Ripplewill*, into the wave; no, don’t jerk that way; it’ll swamp you for sure. That’s it—stop heeling—there. Brave girl!”

Spaeth rose to stand beside the skipper, hugging herself for warmth. “Can’t we turn south and search for a harbour?”

Torr reached under his rain gear and took out a gold Inning watch. He held it in the binnacle to keep the rain off. “An hour past midnight,” he said. “I expect we can.”

Some spray hit Spaeth’s body like a handful of pebbles flung hard. She would feel bruised in the morning, she thought. It seemed eons away.

Cory spoke up. “I think we should stop fighting the storm.”

“What do you mean?” Spaeth said.

“Take down the sails and lie ahull. There’s nothing downwind of us now but the Widewater, unless we’re blown all the way across to the Outer Chain. Open sea’s our safest course. We can just hold tight till the Panther’s tired herself out.”

He didn’t know Ridwit. Spaeth felt a gnawing unease at thought of surrendering,

letting the wind blow them far from the sheltering isles, where humanity's only anchor lay, into the open wastes. But Torr finally said, "You're right. An island coast is more danger to us now than the sea."

So that decided it. Again Spaeth took the tiller, and the others went forward to strike the mainsail, with Tway taking Galber's place. In order to maintain some control over the craft, Torr had them set a close-reefed mizzen and a tiny forestaysail. Even with these small rags of sail, the *Ripplewill* picked up an alarming speed as she began to run before the wind.

The waves grew with every mile they made into the Widewater. The sea was no longer the familiar plain of day; they had entered a rugged, unknown countryside. Climbing each wave, the *Ripplewill* would slow down; but when she crested the hill of water and the wind caught her, she plunged forward with sickening impetuosity, down the gaping valley, the entire hull shivering with speed. Torr struggled to steer diagonally down the slopes to prevent the boat's speed from burying the bow in the next wave. The crew all peered into the night, keeping watch for rogue waves that might catch the boat abeam and flip her over sideways. Once, they shot up over a crest with more than usual speed; when the wave fell out from underneath, *Ripplewill* plummeted through air before striking the surface again with a jolt that made the bulkheads groan.

"If we're not leaking now," Torr said through his teeth, "then this little lady is built better than I knew." Cory went below to check.

To Spaeth, the entire world seemed animate with anger. A cold anger this time, not the flaming rage of Embo. She could feel it in the black, muscled hills of water around her, in the wind that whipped the spume from their crests. The *Ripplewill* seemed tiny as a chip of wood.

She looked at Torr standing at the helm, his eyebrows bristling with droplets. "Torr, have you ridden out a storm like this before?"

"Don't worry," he said. "We can make it, as long as we only have wind and sea to outwit."

"What else is there?"

For a while he didn't answer. At last he said, "Pariah storms, my uncle used to call them. When the chains on the Mundua and Ashwin start slipping, the winds that blow can make the circles themselves flap like a rotten sail. He always said it was such a storm that ended Alta, long ago, when the wind tore a great rip in reality. He thought a pariah storm would end the Isles, some day. Gloomy fellow, he was."

Like a trickle of chill water down her back, the thought came to Spaeth: Goth's hand was slipping. It had been for months. Something had gone terribly wrong.

Spaeth untied her liferope from its cleat and wrapped the end around her waist. "I'm going forward," she said.

"Why?" Torr demanded.

"I have to be alone. Don't anyone follow me."

He scowled at her, but "Mind your step," was all he said.

She held onto the gunwale rail as she went forward, now climbing a steep slope, now slipping forward down one. She passed the mizzen and the mainmast, and came to the foredeck, washed in spray. Here the motion of the boat seemed even greater, her speed dizzying, for there was nothing between her and the sea.

She clutched the rail hard. “Ridwit!” she shouted. The wind ripped the voice from her mouth. “Ridwit!” she called again.

The moon broke out from the scudding clouds, and for a few moments the churning landscape was lit plain to see. In every direction hunched the black shoulders of monster waves, their tops flaring with spray. Where two waves collided the sea boiled with foam, and spray flurried west before the wind. As the *Ripplewill* plunged into a trough, the great lurching shape of an oncoming wave towered above her, until it seemed the small craft would be buried under the mountain of water.

The wave had eyes, Spaeth was sure of it. “What do you want?” she screamed at it.

The *Ripplewill* rose on the wave’s flank, and the giant lumbered on underneath. The wind hissed in Spaeth’s ears; she could almost hear words. “You coward!” she shouted. “Does it make you feel big to hurt a few humans who can’t even fight you?”

The moon plunged under again, and the world turned black. Spaeth sensed rather than saw the sinuous black shape dashing across the waves beside the boat, keeping even.

“You have grown very keen, my little ally,” the wind snarled in her ear.

“I’ve learned to see through you, traitor! All you’ve ever done is trick me. You warned me that someone was in alliance with you, and all the time it was me!”

“It was funny, wasn’t it?” Ridwit said. “It would have been even more funny if you had killed the Heir of Gilgen.”

Spaeth’s rage was black as the night. It was the night. Its power dwarfed her, mighty enough to shatter worlds. “See?” Ridwit hissed. “You are still better off with me.”

“No!” Spaeth cried. She had to resist this time. She had to struggle—for what? For powerlessness? To become a mite raging at the mountains?

She felt her own mouth stretching open as Ridwit laughed. *I must pull free*, Spaeth thought in panic. *I must become who I am*.

“Together, we have the power,” Ridwit said. “Let’s smash this little boat.”

It would crunch in her hand, its puny planks disintegrate to kindling. And all the heartbeats aboard would grow cold and die. The thought wrenched Spaeth’s mind off its course.

“Leave us alone!” she screamed. “These humans never did you any harm!”

The water laughed coldly against the hull. “What a weakling they make you. You are just like all the other Grey People: a dotting fool for them. You will never have control while you let them enslave you. Give them up.”

Spaeth thought of Galber, bearing his pain because she couldn’t; of Tway’s loyalty, Torr’s trustworthiness. And Nathaway, who loved her with such abandon.

Tears filled her eyes as she felt the power drain away, leaving her helpless. She was on her knees now, still clutching the rail, a river of water washing around her legs.

Our only power is pity, she felt Goth say. Spaeth had never felt more helpless. There was cruel laughter on the wind.

“Do you really think you can be the Heir of Gilgen now?” Ridwit said. “After you allied yourself with me? You proved yourself unfit.”

“Leave me alone!” Spaeth’s voice was drowned in the wind.

Step by step she made her way aft, to join the others huddled there. When she came close, Tway reached out to help her down into the cockpit, and put a warm arm around

her.

“Torr! Larboard beam!” Cory shouted. The skipper glanced around and threw his weight against the tiller to bring the boat about. Spaeth turned to see the looming shape of a huge wave bearing down on them.

Torr’s manoeuvre came too late. The wave lifted the *Ripplewill* up; a breaker arched above like a gaping mouth edged with teeth of spray. Torr’s mouth formed the words, “Hold tight!” and the wave broke. A furious force of water buried them all. Spaeth had grasped a line, and now the deluge tore at her body, knocking the air out of her, pulling until her grip began to slip. All her will was in her hands, forcing them to keep clenched to safety. There was no up or down any more, no air, nothing but the elemental force of water.

Then there was a surface again, a place where water ended and air began. Spaeth gasped in. The wave was receding before them. Torr and Tway had been knocked to the other side of the cockpit, and Cory was nowhere to be seen.

Tway lunged for the tiller; Spaeth crawled through a wash of water to the spot where Cory’s liferope was fastened. It was taut; she heaved, but couldn’t budge it. “Torr, here!” she shouted. He came to her side, a dripping bear of a man. With slow, powerful movements he began to pull the rope in. Cory’s head bobbed above the water a little way to starboard. Hand over hand, against the force of the waves, Torr hauled his crewman in.

When Cory was near enough, Torr cleated the line and leaned over the gunwale to give him a hand. Their fingers almost touched; then the boat lifted up on a wave, carrying them apart. Spaeth could tell Cory was weakening from being dragged behind the boat in the wintry water. Again Torr leaned overside. This time the boat tilted into the sea, and the two men’s hands clasped. With a heave of superhuman strength Torr hefted Cory up and over the gunwale. Cory collapsed, gasping and dripping, on the floor of the cockpit.

Nathaway appeared out of the night. “What happened?” he shouted.

“Wave knocked her over,” Torr roared. “I mean over flat. The mast was in the sea. But she righted herself, by the horns! She came up again like a top. My little beauty!” He seemed about to throw himself down and kiss the deck. Instead he thumped Tway on the shoulder till her clothing squished. “It’s that keel of Yorans lead!”

“We Yorans usually know which way is up,” Tway said.

Torr turned to the Inning. “How is the hold?”

“Wet,” Nathaway said.

“You two get down there and help him,” Torr said to Cory and Spaeth. Cory tried to protest that he was fit, but Spaeth could tell he was bruised and bone-chilled. “That’s an order, Cory,” Torr said ominously.

The hold was a dark and swimming chaos. Everything that had not been fastened down had been pitched to the floor, and now floated in a foot of sloshing water. All lights had been extinguished, and the tinder was drenched or lost. Somewhere in the darkness, Galber was groaning in pain.

“Where’s the pump, Cory?” Spaeth demanded to distract herself from the sound of Galber’s voice.

“Over here.” They groped their way aft and set to work, dragging the pump into the centre of the cabin and running a hose out the hatchway. Then each of them took one

side of the seesaw pump handle. It remained to be seen whether they could pump faster than the water was leaking in.

Survival became a matter of grim persistence. It was forcing burning muscles to bend yet again and again, until Spaeth lost all track of time and all memory of anything but the fragile shell of wood that kept out the hostile sea.

She was still working in a stupor when Nathaway put his hand on her arm and said, "I'll handle it now. You rest." Spaeth realized with surprise that she could see his face; and what was more, she could see the hold around her—no longer aswim in water, but cluttered by jetsam as if left by a receding tide.

When she emerged onto the open deck, the morning was dawning dull over a pewter sea. The *Ripplewill* still scudded west before an angry gale. When lifted high on the back of a wave, Spaeth could see miles of grey combers surrounding them under a lowering sky. But the light rushed to her head like a strong liquor. They had survived the night. Not by magic, not by power—by sheer stubborn unwillingness to let each other die.

Torr was still at the helm. His face wore an absorbed expression as he scanned the sea, attuned to every nuance of water and wind. From time to time the bow would disappear in a wall of foam, but it always rose again. They could no longer doubt their boat; every movement she made was like part of their own bodies.

The wind shifted north during the day, and turned cold. All their efforts at starting the stove again proved futile. Everything in the boat was drenched, and all they could do was bear the chill and hope for land and shelter ahead.

It was a worn and weary crew that finally raised a cheer when Torr sighted a line of hills on the western horizon. They gathered in the cockpit, peering ahead as the coast rose before them. "It has to be some island of the Outer Chain," Torr said. "We've been blown clear across the Widewater."

The shore was a line of jagged, rocky cliffs, their tops swathed in waterlogged clouds. The sea churned at their bases, spray leaping high against black rock. Even at a distance the booming of the breakers sounded.

They turned south along the coast. At last they spied the roofs of some stone cottages dotting the hill beyond a headland that surely hid a sheltering bay. The cheering sight of smoke rose from chimneys into the rain-soaked sky.

"I am going to sit down in the first fire I see," Tway declared. "I think you could turn me on a spit for an hour, and I'd scarcely thaw."

"I think I'll have to peel these clothes off like an orange rind," Cory said.

Torr said, "Well, I'm going to sleep for two days, and nothing on earth is going to wake me."

They were skirting the headland before they saw what lay in the harbour. Torr jerked the tiller round, making the *Ripplewill* heel sharply in confusion. There, behind the arm of land, rose the tall masts and square rigging of a frigate guarding the bay.

Nathaway looked deadly weary. "The rest of you might slip past an inspection, but they'll notice me," he said. "If they're suspicious, they might detain us. There could easily be a warrant out for my arrest."

Spaeth looked at Torr, then slowly shook her head.

"It's a far piece back to Lashnish," Torr said. But he pushed the tiller over and sent the *Ripplewill* shooting out to sea again. "Let's raise the mainsail, Cory," he said. "If

we're going to defy the Panther, we might as well do it like we mean it." He patted the *Ripplewill's* transom. "Hold tight a little while longer, darling. You can't rest yet."