

Inherited Danger

Book Two of The Dawning of Power trilogy

Brian Rathbone

Copyright © 2008 by Brian Rathbone.

White Wolf Press, LLC

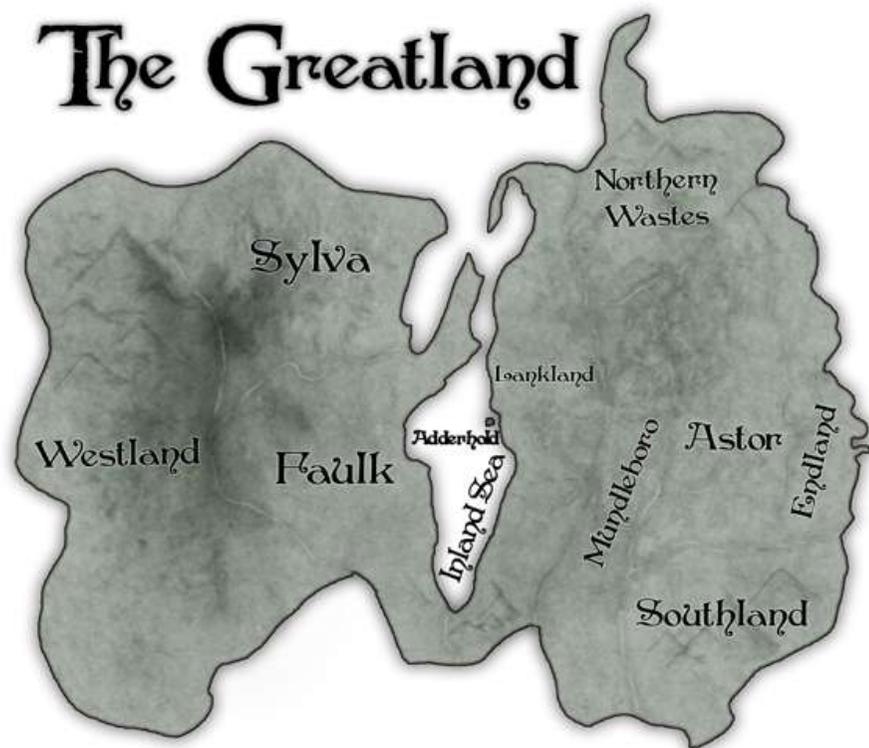
Rutherfordton, NC 28139

The World of Godsland
Fantasy Series

The Dawning of Power trilogy
Call of the Herald
Inherited Danger
Dragon Ore

The Balance of Power trilogy
Regent
Feral
Regal

The Greatland



Prologue

Impenetrable darkness shrouded the cold caves, and Wendel Volker shivered as the freezing dampness crept into his bones. His persistent cough rattled in his chest. Though he had gone to his bedroll hours ago, his mind refused to quiet. His troubles demanded attention, demanded he find some way to act, some way to set things right. He had thought of little else for days, but no answers were revealed to him, only feelings of guilt, anger, and despair.

Catrin was gone, and he would probably never see her again. For all his strength and devotion, he had failed to protect her, just as he had failed to protect Elsa, and now they were both lost to him. Like a coward, he'd hidden in the cold caves when Catrin had needed him most. He had relied on Benjin to stand in his place. He'd been a fool. Perhaps Elsa had been wrong all those years ago; perhaps she should have chosen Benjin instead.

Balling his hands into fists, Wendel tried to drive the thoughts from his mind, but memories of Catrin would not relent; they flooded him with guilt and remorse.

When he turned his thoughts to his present situation, there was no relief. Catrin had left behind a troubled land. Though he knew she had done the best she could and was immensely proud of her, her actions had not been enough. To achieve peace under these circumstances was more than any individual could accomplish, and Wendel wondered how the Godfist would ever overcome the turmoil threatening to consume them all. General Dempsy's men still held the harbor, and no one could know what they planned to do next. Headmaster Grodin was succumbing to age, and he ruled over those within the Masterhouse only in name. It was Master Edling and his followers who truly held sway, and their stubborn arrogance only exacerbated the problems. By refusing to grant amnesty to the Zjhon soldiers who defected, they had divided the citizens of the Godfist.

Though the tribes of Arghast had helped defend those in the cold caves, their presence had only served to confuse matters. Once it seemed the Zjhon no longer presented an immediate threat, they claimed to have fulfilled their oath to Catrin but left a force of thirty mounted men behind to guard the cold caves. It was difficult to believe they had come in the first place, especially since they claimed to be bound to Catrin.

Perhaps he just couldn't accept it, Wendel thought. Even after witnessing some of the events in the harbor, he could not convince himself that Catrin was the Herald of Istra. It just seemed too surreal. She was his little girl, not a harbinger of doom. He made himself believe it was all a coincidence, that Catrin had nothing to do with the bizarre occurrences. Either way, it mattered little now. The Godfist was caught up in a three-sided war, and he doubted he would ever see his daughter again.

The thought of leading a revolution had no appeal for Wendel, yet he found himself caught in that position. His attempts to relinquish power had been fruitless; no one was willing to take his place. Even when he threatened to step down and leave them leaderless, no one volunteered.

Exhausted and ill prepared, he struggled to find a solution. If he surrendered to the will of the Masters, then the Zjhon defectors would be cast out with nowhere to go, and the bloodletting would begin again. Wendel could not accept that.

Jensen insisted they retake the farmlands and highlands, but Wendel was loath to leave the protection of the cold caves. Here, at least, they had the benefit of natural fortifications. If they retook the countryside, then they would be spread too thin to adequately defend themselves. It seemed a puzzle with no solution, and his thoughts ran in circles.

Their supplies were dwindling, and soon they would have no choice but to leave their shelter despite the danger. Sighing, he tried once again to put the problems from his mind. Hoping some revelation would come to him in the morning, he rolled onto his side and continued sweating despite the prevailing cold.

Shades of darkness shifted in his room, moving as if specters lurked in every corner. Chiding himself for letting the stress affect him in such a way, Wendel rolled to face the cave wall and squeezed his eyes shut.

When a foul smell reached his nose, it was already too late to escape. Even as he cried out, a cold blade parted his flesh.

Chapter 1

Hope can be foolish or in vain, but without it, all is lost.

--Ebron Rall, healer

* * *

The seas behind the *Slippery Eel* churned in her wake and left a visible wash of turbulent water. The ephemeral trail gradually dissipated in the distance, where, once again, the waves became nearly indistinguishable before another ship churned them anew. The *Stealthy Shark* remained within sight and kept pace with the *Slippery Eel*, but she did not close the gap. The two ships were evenly matched when in top condition, but the *Eel* was heavily damaged and wallowed sluggishly. She had been taking on water since before leaving the harbor, and the crew had been unable to stop all the leaks. The bilge pumps were the only things keeping them afloat.

The loss of men during their flight from the Godfist left Kenward severely shorthanded, but clear skies, fair winds, and calm seas were a boon to the crew and made their work a bit easier. Catrin, her hair cut short, stood alongside Kenward at the stern, both watching the ship that trailed them.

"I don't understand it," Kenward said. "The *Shark* is in much better condition than the *Eel*; she should've overtaken us long before now. Fasha and her crew are definitely not aboard. The *Shark* is being sailed by boilin' *amateurs*," he continued, knowing his sister and her crew were either dead or stranded on the Godfist.

"I'm sorry," Catrin said, touching his arm.

"Fasha's the most stubborn and tenacious person I've ever known," he said with fierce pride. "She'll swim her way back to the *Shark* if that's what it takes."

His obvious pride in her made Catrin smile, and she thought again, as she had so many times before, of what it would be like to have a brother or sister. Chase was the closest thing she had, and she shared Kenward's loss. That thought led to her wondering again how her father, Benjin, and the others had fared. Wanting desperately to see them or at least know they were well, Catrin despaired. That knowledge was beyond her reach, taunting her. She had no illusions about the journey

ahead of her, and she accepted the possibility that she might never see any of them again.

"There, you see?" Kenward said suddenly. "The rigging's all wrong. They're already blowing off course. If these fools catch us, it'll be no one's fault but mine." He walked away, a sour look on his face. Catrin matched his stride, following him to the helm.

"What can I do to help?"

"You've done enough already. Without your magic, I don't think any of us would've escaped the Godfist. Those of us who live owe our lives to you."

"And I owe my life to you and your crew. You risked yourselves to save us, and I'll always be grateful." His mention of magic sent a chill up her spine. She had never considered her powers to be *magic*, and the image disturbed her.

"Well, I hadn't thought of it in that way," Kenward said. "And we could certainly use you. Bryn has been promoted, since Jimini, the bosun, was lost in the storm. Jimini was a good man--the best, but Bryn is deserving of the post. Ask him to show you what you can do."

After searching much of the ship, Catrin located Bryn, who was high above her head, methodically examining every part of the rigging. He checked line, pulley, and sail for damage. Glancing down for a moment, he noticed her, and she waved.

"Can we talk when you have a free moment?" she called up to him.

"No more free moments for me. I'm 'fraid," he shouted in response. "I'm comin' down." His movements were slow and methodical compared to his previous acrobatics. "M'head still hurts; my balance is off. I feel like a bumbling fool."

"It'll pass, and then you'll be back to yourself. I know you're busy and short of hands. What can I do to help?"

He looked dubious for a moment then winked as she put her hands on her hips. "The first thing you must learn is how to tie knots. All of them."

"Is that all?"

Bryn chuckled and retrieved a small canvas and a length of supple line. He handed them to her. "Come back when you have them all mastered," he said, and Catrin accepted his challenge.

Spreading the canvas out on the deck, she held it in place with a couple of spare pulleys. Painted with fine illustrations, depicting each knot and its name, the canvas was intimidating. She hadn't known so many different types of knots existed. This was indeed a test.

Determined, she began with an easy knot. It was a simple pattern, but the line twisted in her hands and seemed to resist forming even the simple bowline loop. Still she persisted and was proudly admiring her first knot when Nat approached.

"I think we should talk."

"I suppose we should," Catrin replied, not liking the look in his eyes or his tone.

"I'm sure Benjin planned to tell you certain things," he said. "I hope he has already discussed this with you. Do you remember your mother?"

Catrin turned sharply and stared at him. She had not expected such a personal question, and in response, she nodded sadly. Memories of her mother were faded, more like gauzy images, but when Catrin thought of her, she felt warm and safe and often smelled roses. Her mother had loved roses.

"Did your father ever tell you about your mother's family?"

"No. He doesn't like to talk about it, and I never wanted to make him unhappy, so I never asked," Catrin replied.

"Did Benjin tell you about his relationship with her?" he asked, looking somewhat disgusted.

"Benjin and I have never discussed my mother for the same reasons," she answered.

Nat sighed. "They should've told you, but since they did not, I will. I'm sorry. It would be better if this came from Benjin or your father."

Catrin grew anxious, uncertain she wanted to hear what he had to say. "I think . . . I don't . . . I don't think I want to know," she said, but her imagination was already conjuring frightening images that continually grew worse.

"I'm sorry, Catrin, but your destination is the Greatland, and your life may depend on this information," he said firmly, and she nodded. "You've probably heard that my father was deranged, and people say I inherited his disease. My father had visions. He saw things that urged him to take one course of action over another. They were not always specific things. They were more like overpowering intuition." He watched for her reaction.

She had heard the rumors, but she judged Nat for herself. After all, he had given her information that had been instrumental in her escape from the Godfist. Without his help, she might never have gotten away. She owed him her life. Thinking of what Kenward had said, she realized they all owed their lives to each other. None of them could have survived alone.

"How did you know what to write in your letter?" she asked suddenly. "Where did those words come from, the part about land and water? How could you see the future?"

It was Nat's turn to be dumbstruck. "See the future? I can't see the future. Those words just occurred to me as I wrote. Now that I think about it, I'm not even sure what they mean." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Were they somehow prophetic?"

His words had seemed strange when she read them because they had made no sense. Yet when she needed inspiration, they rang in her mind.

Water shapes the land.

His strange poetry had changed the course of history. As she recounted what happened on the plateau, his eyes grew wider with every detail.

When she finished, he sat, staring at his hands. "My letter changed the face of the Godfist and killed hundreds of men."

"I'm not proud of it," Catrin said a bit defensively.

"A thousand apologies. I know you did your best. I was just taken aback by the effect of my spontaneous words. You were protecting your homeland, and you are a true hero."

Catrin didn't consider herself a hero. She was a scared little girl, unprepared to face the challenges ahead. Kenward and Bryn, who'd been watching the *Stealthy Shark* wander farther off course, approached before she had a chance to sort out her feelings.

"I don't think they have the skill to catch us, sir," Bryn said. "They've made up no time during our repairs, and now that we can make more speed, we could lose 'em."

"We need food, and now's the time to fish," Kenward said. "If we fill our hold, we'll not starve crossing the barren seas, but it'll slow us down. If those fools ever figure out what they're doing, they could catch us."

"We could jettison the fish if'n they catch a miracle wind, and I, for one, would rather not starve," Bryn said.

Kenward smiled. "Drop the lines, men. Let's fish."

Large trawl tubs were prepared with multiple lines, hooks, and bait. Catrin gasped as an emerald green carpet began to cover the waters around the ship except for the trail of dark water in her wake.

"It's from the storm," Kenward said. "We call it a storm oasis. The force of the storm dredges up nutrients from the seafloor, and large amounts of plankton flourish in the normally barren waters. The plankton fields lure fish, and they draw more fish and birds." He pointed

off the starboard side, and Catrin strained to see. An enormous creature suddenly rose up to the surface, and she jumped back in fear.

"Whales. There'll be more. Keep your eyes to the seas, and you'll see things you've never imagined."

Catrin watched the whales, afraid they would attack the ship. Kenward assured her they posed no threat, but she was still anxious around such massive creatures. Porpoises played in the ship's wake. They chattered at Catrin and the crew, entertaining with their antics. Some jumped high into the air, while others walked across the water on their tails, and the natural beauty took Catrin's mind from all that was troubling her.

Later, when the crew hauled in the first of the trawl tubs, they were energized as they strained to work the windlass, and they let out a cheer when three massive tuna were pulled onto the deck.

Large coffers of salt and pine boxes were brought from the hold. Cleaned fish were placed in the boxes and packed with dried sea salt. The salt would draw the moisture from the fish and prevent spoilage. Catrin and Nat helped as much as they could. After seeing Nat filet fish with efficient and skillful strokes, the crew seemed to look at him with newfound respect. Soon they were laughing with him and patting him on the back while exchanging tales and techniques.

Catrin had no skill for gutting fish and little desire to learn, so she settled for packing salt around the fish. The salt supply dwindled rapidly, but the crew was already boiling off large pots of seawater in an effort to replenish their supply. It was a slow and tedious process.

Kenward watched intently as Catrin and the others worked alongside his crew. "I'd like to welcome the new members of the crew. They may not yet know bow from stern, but they work as if their lives depend on it," he said, smiling broadly, and Catrin thought it an odd compliment, but the crew hooted and stomped their feet. Catrin flushed but was glad to have earned their respect. She was also thrilled to see Nat working as part of the crew. Never before had he seemed so happy.

The seas yielded a bounty, and at the end of the day, nearly half the hold was filled with salted tuna, round eye, and shark. Grubb, the ship's cook, prepared a feast of fresh fish for the evening meal, and the aroma from the cookhouse had mouths watering.

Catrin felt good for her efforts. Hard work had always helped keep her from worrying over things she couldn't change.

After stowing the rope and canvas in her cabin, she sought out Nat. Their conversation was unfinished, and she needed to know what else he

planned to tell her. His cabin door was closed, but she could hear him moving within. She knocked lightly and waited.

Nat opened the door and sighed when he saw her. "Come in. I suppose you want to hear the rest," he said while pulling himself into his hammock. He stared at the ceiling as he spoke.

"When your father, Benjin, and I were about your age, my father had a vision. He was convinced the Zjhon would attack the Godfist. I did not believe him then. As far as I knew, our people hadn't encountered any others in hundreds, if not thousands, of years. I'd begun to see truth in what others said about him. I thought he was stricken by madness.

"He tried to convince me to go to the Greatland to search for information. I refused. I wanted only to court Julet and convince her to marry me. He said terrible things would happen if I did not go, but I was young, stubborn, and foolish," he said, his voice overlaid by the waves of anxiety that poured from him like a wellspring.

"He gave up on me and approached your father. Wendel was proud and brash and would do just about anything to prove his bravery. When my father challenged him, your father took the bait, hook and line. There was nothing anyone could do to dissuade him, not that many knew of the situation." He drew a deep breath before continuing. "Benjin thought the quest was a delusion, and he argued with your father, but somehow Wendel convinced him to go."

Nat's tone had gradually changed until he seemed to be talking to himself, having forgotten she was there, consumed as he was in his own memories. "Father made the arrangements. Benjin and Wendel boarded a small pirate ship along the southern shores of the Godfist. They were supposed to travel to the Falcon Isles but somehow managed to travel all the way to the Greatland aboard that small vessel. It's a wonder they did not perish." Nat grew quiet, his hands balled into fists, and Catrin thought she heard a growl escape his throat. He started to speak several times but had to stop to regain his composure.

"I tried to forget about them and my father's warnings. I pretended none of it was real, telling myself they were all mad, but then sweet Julet died." He sucked in an unsteady breath before he went on. "She was bitten by a glass viper, which are extremely venomous and usually only found in the desert. How it came to be in her bedding is still a mystery, but it cost me everything. All my hopes and dreams died with Julet, may her soul be free."

No words could adequately express Catrin's condolences, and she could think of nothing to say that wouldn't sound trite. Instead, she chose

to put her hand on his and give it a gentle squeeze. She gave him a few moments to grieve. When he had composed himself, he continued.

"My father blamed me," he said haltingly. "He said I had affronted fate, and fate had treated me in kind. In a desperate attempt to convince fate to return my Julet, I tried to set things right. I knew it would never work, but that didn't stop me from trying. I could no longer stand the sight of my homeland. Everything reminded me of my failure, of how my actions had killed Julet," he said, smashing his fists against his thighs. "I left the Godfist in a small fishing boat, hoping to find Wendel and Benjin. It was a terrible journey, and it took me over a year to find them. When I did, I met your mother.

"It was a difficult time," he said, looking her in the eye for the first time since he had begun speaking. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this," he said, and he paused as if he were unsure he should continue.

"Your mother captured both Wendel's and Benjin's hearts. She seemed truly unaware of their feelings, and the tension grew. Wendel and Benjin became bitter toward each other and were both miserable. One day they told Elsa she would have to choose between them, but she cared for them both and refused. Eventually the tension was too great, and Benjin challenged Wendel. They argued at first, but it escalated, and they fought like madmen, nearly killing each other. Elsa and I pulled them apart, and we were both injured in the process. They fought us blindly and did not thank us for our interference.

"After the fight, Elsa tended Wendel's wounds. I'm not sure if it was the loss of his friend or Elsa's silent choice that drove him, but Benjin left without a word. Your father was saddened by his departure but did not go after him."

Catrin could feel her heart breaking as she listened, unable to bear the thought of her father and Benjin fighting. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I'm telling you because there are many in the Greatland who will remember your parents and the events surrounding their departure from the Greatland. You see, your mother was the daughter of a very wealthy noble, a prominent member of society." He paused a moment to look at Catrin. "And you are her mirror image."

Tears blurring her vision, Catrin could bear no more and fled the cabin.

* * *

Nat wasn't proud of himself, but he'd begun to do what was right. Still, he dreaded what would come next and doubted any words would make Catrin understand. With a deep sigh, he tried to sleep. It would not come. A haunting but familiar sensation grew steadily, and he braced himself. The taste of blood filled his mouth as his muscles clenched and the vision overwhelmed his senses.

The land shivered under the weight of an ill, green light. A foul demon with eyes of ice sundered the air, and the skies caught fire. In the demon's path, Catrin stood, abandoned and alone, her arms cast wide and power flowing around her. Roaring as it came, the demon engulfed her in its flames, and she disappeared into the conflagration.

Nat sucked a deep breath as the seizure released him, and he felt himself being ripped apart, torn among the visions, duty, and the wrath of men long dead.

Chapter 2

The past is indelible, but our every action weaves the fabric of the future.
--Enoch Giest, the First One

* * *

Catrin avoided Nat for the next few days and kept herself busy practicing knots. Mastering all of them gave her great pride, and she sought out Bryn. He watched her demonstrate.

"Not bad," he said, "but on a ship, you have to be able to tie them without thinking or even watching what you are doing. Come back when you can do them all with your eyes closed."

Disappointment was overwhelmed by the need for success. Refusing to fail, Catrin squatted on the deck. Her eyes closed, she found her other senses heightened. Things that normally complemented her visual image were now her only source of awareness. When Nat walked across the deck, she knew him from the rhythmic click of his staff against the deck. The sound grew closer and stopped, and she was not surprised when he spoke.

"I'm sorry, Catrin. I didn't want to hurt you."

"Then why did you? You could have simply told me I looked like my mother and people might recognize me!" she said, realizing even as the words left her mouth that she was being unreasonable. Nat was not to blame for the pain his message stirred within her.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"No. I'm the one who owes you an apology. I reacted poorly and have been acting like a child. Please sit with me," she said, motioning to the spot next to her. Nat eased himself slowly to the deck, grunting as he settled himself.

"I'm gettin' old."

"I've been meaning to ask you something," Catrin said. "How did you manage to swim and hold on to your staff at the same time?" She remembered her own terrifying plunge into the sea.

Nat's back stiffened and his face grew stony. "I had to choose," he said. "I had to choose between my life and my father's last wishes. I knew I couldn't swim with the staff in my hands, at least not very well. But to drop the staff would have been to betray my father. I would not allow the consequences, not again--I couldn't." The venom that poured

from him, as if she had lanced a festering wound, surprised Catrin. "They said I was crazy to hold on to the staff, that only a madman would try and swim with an iron-shod stick," he said with an angry, hurt look toward the crew.

"I see," Catrin said, looking him in the eye.

It was Nat's turn to feel foolish; he seemed to realize the crew could not have known how that would hurt him. He shook his head. "I must have seemed crazy to them, risking my life to save a piece of wood and metal. There was no way they could have understood. I would have died without their help."

He sighed. He looked down at the deck, breaking eye contact with Catrin. "It pains me to trouble you more, but I must. You left before I could tell you the rest. I cannot go with you to the Greatland," he blurted.

Catrin sat back so quickly that she smacked her head on the deckhouse. Unable to formulate a response, she just stared at him in shock.

"It's not that I don't want to go. Please understand. I know I swore to protect you, and I will for as long as I can. But I cannot go to the Greatland. It was forbidden to me. I have known this time would come and have dreaded it, but now it has arrived and I shall do my duty to my father," he said.

Catrin was not sure how much more she could take.

"On his deathbed, he made me swear I would never again set foot on the Greatland. He said that if I did, something far more dreadful than Julet's death would occur, and I cannot allow that to happen."

He looked directly at Catrin. "It seems I've taken too many vows, and now I must choose, for I cannot obey them all. Will you, Catrin Volker, Herald of Istra and my dear friend, please release me from my vow?" he asked, kneeling and placing his forehead on the deck before her.

"I cannot," she said forcefully, and his head jerked up from the deck. He could not contain his utter dismay, and his face went slack. He looked into Catrin's face and was confused when she smiled back. "You can keep *both* vows. There is no need to choose. I am flexible, you see. You don't need to come with me to protect me and my interests; I'll need someone to look after things on the Godfist."

Nat smiled when he realized she had cleverly solved his dilemma, allowing him to keep his word *and* his pride. Catrin, though, had an icy feeling in her stomach. She would go to the Greatland with only Vertook to guide her, and she was not yet certain how Vertook felt about the journey. She might have to face the Zjhon alone.

"Your passage from the Falcon Isles has been paid, and I have gold for you. Members of the Vestrana should be available to help you on your quest once you reach the Greatland."

"Thank you," Catrin said, nodding, but things had changed between them. Knowing he would not accompany her, their relationship felt thin and strained. Nat sat for a while in uncomfortable silence then excused himself. It was a strange parting, and Catrin was saddened by the tension. She tried to wish Nat well, but she kept seeing herself alone in a strange land where everyone wanted her dead.

A sudden wind threatened to blow away the canvas and line. Catrin quickly gathered them up and ran to her cabin. When she stepped inside, she heard muffled shouts from the deck and the sound of men running. Throwing the line and canvas aside, she rushed back to the deck. Several crewmen ran by her on their way to the stern. When Catrin arrived, most of the crew was already gathered there, trying to get a good view.

She could see nothing at first, but Bryn saw her dilemma and hoisted her onto his shoulders. Finally able to see above the other men, Catrin saw the *Stealthy Shark* on the horizon, listing badly and riding too low in the water.

"They're gonna sink her."

"It's a trick."

Kenward watched in tortured silence. Unable to stand still, he paced back and forth. The *Shark* listed sharply, driven by the growing wind. Part of her rigging struck the water and snapped off, and it became clear this was no ruse; the *Stealthy Shark* was foundering and beginning to sink.

"Turn this ship around!" Kenward shouted. "Set a course for the *Shark*. I'll not let her sink this day."

The crew sprung into action, arming themselves as they prepared the ship to come about. They all seemed to know that Kenward was doing this for his sister. He might not be able to save her, but he could save her ship. The *Eel* turned slowly, and Catrin urged it forward, as if her desire might somehow propel the ship. The *Stealthy Shark* had fallen far behind and looked as if it might sink before they arrived.

As the *Stealthy Shark* gradually grew larger on the horizon, her crew became visible. One man waved his arms frantically, and the others struggled to move about the deck, clinging to the rails. The ship was out of control, and the men seemed barely able to hang on. Catrin's knees buckled when they grew close enough to see the men's faces. It was Strom who waved.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

