

CHAPTER 1

A Place on the Ship

Hana had packed for her first voyage three times. Each time, her mother had taken something out.

The second pair of sandals had gone first. Then the heavy cushion from her bed. Now Mariam was holding up the little clay bowl Hana had made when she was seven.

"We have bowls aboard," she said.

"That one is mine."

"I know. It has been yours through every meal you have refused to eat from it because it leaks."

"Only a little."

Mariam turned it over. A crooked line ran from the rim almost to the bottom.

Hana took the bowl and put it back on the shelf. Its proper place was beside a smooth white stone she had brought home from the shore. She moved the stone into the bowl, where it would fit without making the crack worse.

Her mother tucked a small cloth bundle into the space the bowl had left.

"Your grandmother's dates. Those will be useful."

"She said they were for everybody."

"Then we must try to get them as far as the ship."

Hana smiled. She had eaten two already.

Morning light came through the open window and fell across the mat where they were packing. Below, a donkey stood across



the narrow street while its owner argued with a man carrying baskets. The basket carrier could not get past. The donkey seemed quite content with the arrangement.

Ordinarily, Hana would have watched until somebody persuaded it to move. Today she kept looking beyond the houses, towards the masts at the harbour and the dark, bare hills behind the town. One of those ships was waiting for her.



She had been aboard before, while it lay at anchor. She knew how high the side looked from the little boat that carried people out to it. She had climbed onto the deck with her father's help, explored the space beneath the awning and asked where the sailors slept. But each visit had ended with a return to shore. This time, when the ship left, she would still be on it. Mariam folded the edges of the packing cloth over Hana's spare clothes.

"Have you put your board in?"

Hana slid it beside the bundle. Her father had smoothed the wood so that it would not catch the paper, and her mother had wrapped the sheets separately to keep them clean. The charcoal lay in its own scrap of cloth. Hana had learnt that lesson after leaving a black thumbprint on a piece of cream material Mariam was showing to a customer.

"I could wrap the bowl in my spare tunic," she suggested.

"You could. You would still be carrying a bowl that leaks."

"I was only thinking."

"Think about which end of this bundle you are going to carry."



Together they tied it. When Hana lifted it, the weight pulled her arm straight. She tried again with both hands and found she could hold it against her middle.

Mariam watched her take three steps.

"That is better. You need to be able to manage your things without dropping them on somebody's feet."

Hana looked at the cushion on the bed. She had to admit that it would have made everything harder.

Her grandmother arrived as they were finishing. She had come to stay in the house while the family was away, and already had opinions about which jars should be moved nearer the window. She kissed Hana's forehead, then tucked a loose strand of black hair behind her ear.

"Let me look at you."

Hana stood still, her long braid against her shoulder. Her coral tunic and indigo overlayer were clean, her sandals were tied and she had remembered her board. She hoped she looked like somebody ready to cross a sea.

"You have charcoal on your chin," her grandmother said.

Mariam fetched a damp cloth.

By the time Idris appeared at the doorway, Hana was ready again. He wore the blue robe and indigo headwrap she had seen so often disappearing down the street ahead of a voyage. Today he came in to take Mariam's bundle and stayed to speak with Grandmother about the house.



Hana waited beside the door. Then, when it really was time to leave, she went back and hugged her grandmother once more.

"I will draw Qalhat for you."

"Good. Put in something you have enjoyed, so you can tell me about it when you come home."

"I might enjoy all of it."

"Then you had better save some paper for India."

Outside, the donkey had finally moved. The street seemed wider without it.

They passed doorways Hana knew, a woman shaking out a mat and two men lifting a jar onto a cart. Someone called a greeting to her father. Someone else asked her mother whether a parcel had reached its buyer. Mariam stopped to answer, and Hana waited impatiently until she realised that these were some of the last familiar voices she would hear for a while.

At the shore, her father left them beside a stack of baskets while he spoke to the men loading the ship's boat. Hana stayed close to her mother as a porter passed with a heavy bundle balanced against his shoulder.

"Is all that ours?" she asked.

"No. Other merchants have goods aboard too. Your father is responsible for carrying their cargo safely, as well as ours."



Mariam pointed out the cloth bundles she had bought for the journey. Their outer wrappings were plain, with small stitched patches to help her recognise them.

"Eight," Hana said, counting as they were brought down.

"Eight bundles of cloth. Remember that. Bedding and food are a separate count."

Hana watched the last bundle settle into the boat. Until now, her mother's trading had meant people calling at the house and lengths of material spread across a mat. Seeing her goods beside the water made the work look different. Those eight bundles had to reach another town before Mariam could sell them.

Idris returned and offered his hand.

"Ready?"

She nodded at once. Then the little boat shifted beneath her first foot, and she gripped him much harder than she meant to.

"Take your time," he said. "Sit where your mother is. We will pass your things to you."

From her seat, Hana could see the larger ship beyond the smaller craft near the shore. Its timber side rose from the blue water. A sailor leaned down to receive a bundle, and another waited to help them aboard.

By the time Hana reached the deck, her hands were damp and she felt pleased with herself for having climbed onto a ship she had climbed onto before.

Idris introduced the sailor who had helped her.

"This is Yahya, my mate. He helps me run the ship. If I am busy and you need something, ask him or your mother."



Yahya had a broad face, a short beard and a pale cloth wrapped around his head. He shifted a coil of rope out of their way.

"Your father says you can carry your own bundle."

"I can."

"Then you have brought less than he did on his first voyage."

Idris laughed. "I see you have decided which stories to tell her."

"Only the useful ones."

Mariam led Hana to their sheltered place on deck. There was room to sit, bedding rolled out of the way and space for their

possessions. It was smaller than Hana had imagined when she was deciding what to pack.

She put her bundle down without dropping it on anyone.

For a while, leaving consisted of waiting. Men checked ropes, moved between the cargo and called to one another. Her father was needed in several places, and Hana discovered that a captain's daughter could not expect him to stop working whenever she thought of a question.

Then the sail began to rise.

She stayed beside Mariam while the crew hauled. The great pale cloth lifted above them, loosened, and filled with a sound that made her look up. The deck moved under her feet. Beyond



the rail, the small boats no longer seemed to be keeping pace with them.

They were going.

Hana watched the harbour. She tried to find their street, but the houses had already drawn together into a pale confusion.

Somewhere among them, Grandmother would be putting away the damp cloth and perhaps moving the jars.

Her father found her still looking towards land when his work allowed him a moment.

"I thought I would be happier," she admitted.

"You can want to leave and miss home already."

"Did you?"

"On my first voyage? I wanted to come back before we had finished loading."

"What did you do?"

"Helped load. By the time we sailed, I was too tired to worry quite so much."

Hana leaned against him. His robe smelled of sun-warmed cloth and the rope he had been handling.

"I'm glad you came," he said. "There will be plenty to show you when I have a little more time."

Behind them, her mother was trying to find the dates without unpacking everything else.

Hana knew where they were. She had watched them go in. She gave the harbour one more look, then went to help.

