

A Four  
Treasures Novel

The  
STONE  
OF  
Destiny

CAROLINE  
LOGAN



**gob stopper**

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To Vixce

"You made the  
brightest days from  
the darkest nights."





Avaloqne

Sarobrook

Larofeld

Mopadh

New Hope

Isle of Faodail



Keaprahara

Forest of Frich

Isle of Caochap

Arpish

Lahipish

Jay

Durpich

Skeapvoe

Crait

Brochet

Eilamòr

Burhaid Beach

Kilvaic

Ipshmore

Dalbrae

Noro

Piaraoort

Storia

Est

Mizardelle

Nefivo

Albford

Sud

# The Isles of Ossianna



The Etivian Sea

isla de Pulpo





## Chapter 1

Ailsa tilted her head towards the sky and let the rain wash away the blood from her face and arms. The sun still had an hour before it would sink below the horizon. It had been a fortuitous day. Not only had she managed to get a fire started in the damp cave-mouth in less than two minutes, she had also stumbled upon a deer that had fallen to its doom over the cliff edge; its neck twisted. She had immediately set to work butchering it and stuffing the cut-offs into a clay pot. As she had worked, she couldn't resist cutting a few strands off the still steaming meat and eating them raw. Now all she needed was some fresh water and her tasks for the day would be done.

She sighed, inspecting the pieces of gore still stuck to the arms of her shirt. Maybe a wash would be useful too. Deciding to complete two jobs in one, she stepped back into the rock cave and tucked the pot of meat away into a natural alcove. Ailsa picked up an empty canteen and made her way to the beach, where a stream trickled into a waterfall just large enough to bathe in.

The steep cliffs led to creamy sand peppered with

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wicked looking boulders. The sea was as fickle as love; sometimes an azure blue, more often a choppy, cold grey. Across the water lay the islands of Jay and Crait, which were clearly visible on a sunny day. Ailsa's favourite view came when the sun shone above the jagged peaks of Jay while the beach was darkened by clouds.

Ailsa had been living here long enough to know how to use the land to her advantage. She had wandered from place to place for five years after she had left her village, chased away each time, before finding her home here: a little bay far enough away from the rest of humanity for them not to bother her. No one wanted a *changeling* anywhere near them anyway.

She had sat watching the sleek seabirds dive into the water and named the little cove *Buthaid Beach*—using the ancient Eilanmòrian word for 'puffin' and over the past couple of years, she had made it home. She trudged down the worn, grass path to the beach, trailing her hand through her small garden. She was not a gifted gardener, but the rain fell constantly, turning her stolen seeds into monster plants.

As she walked away from the headland, the rain died down and the wind picked up, tugging at her dark hair, sending it whipping over her face like seaweed in a wave. She sighed and pulled her cloak over her head; stopping the strands from misbehaving. With her hood up, she looked just like everyone else in Eilanmòr with



her ash brown hair, pale skin and silver-blue eyes—save for the mark. A mark from the faeries to show she was not human. Her fingers flew to the reddened, painful-looking flesh below her eye. It was her skin—her birthmark—that set her apart from others. Her skin that told her neighbours she was not to be trusted or tolerated. *Changeling* they had shouted after her. Her mother had always shielded her, kept her away from prying eyes, but that protection ended when her mother died. Ailsa grimaced and continued down the path.

She reached the running fountain of water, holding the canteen under the stream. *Maybe I'll heat some and have a wash back at the cave*, she thought absently. It was better to get most of the blood off first though. Bending to wash her hands in the ice-cold water, she rubbed them as quickly as possible. She was thinking of the tiny tin of lavender and pine soap back in her pack, stolen and saved for special occasions, when she heard the screaming.



The scream started as a gurgling, then broke into a wail, as a wave crashed on the large rocks further round the beach. For a moment, Ailsa was still; crouching over the narrow stream. If she stayed here and waited, she would not be seen by whatever it was that was making

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the noise. But the wailing turned to shouts. The words were foreign, but Ailsa knew they were a cry for help. Standing up, she shook her freezing fingers and licked her lip, tasting the salt in the wind. She took a hesitant step forward and felt for the axe she always kept at her side. Peering round a boulder, she surveyed the beach for the source of the shouting.

There, around twenty feet away from Ailsa's hiding place, was a young woman. Her scarlet hair was swept upwards by the wind, transformed into a crown of flames. Her eyes were wide with panic as she scanned the beach then back towards the ocean. She screamed again and it was unlike anything that Ailsa had heard before. Loud and piercing, it made her ears ache.

Ailsa scrambled up the rock to get a better view. Now she could see a little more of the scene, her breath caught in her throat. In the woman's arms, there was the body of a seal, a red rip marring its side. Blood covered the woman's legs and upper body. She choked back a sob, looking wildly around the beach again. This time, though, she raised her head higher and found Ailsa's eyes. She stared right at her, pleading and shouting, now in the common tongue.

"Help! Please help me!"

Ailsa's stomach rolled but she leapt from the boulder and sprinted over the rocks towards the woman, her boots flicking sand out behind her as she ran. The closer

she got, the more gruesome the scene became. The seal looked close to death; the blood from its wound covering most of its body.

“Help him!” she cried when Ailsa got close enough. The woman’s emerald eyes darted from Ailsa’s face to the sea and back again like an animal expecting a predator to appear at any moment. Her breaths were coming in hiccupping gasps as she stroked the head of the seal, the only part of it that wasn’t covered in blood.

Unsure, but willing to do anything to stop the woman crying, Ailsa slid her fingers around the seal’s body. The woman resisted for a heartbeat before releasing the animal. It was still breathing and when she scooped it into her arms, it looked at her with glassy obsidian eyes.

“We have to get away from here,” said the redhead, panicking even more now. “Hide!”

Ailsa was about to ask why when she saw them. Rounding the bend of the headland, a group of wooden longships sailed into view. The nearest was close enough to make out colourful carvings on the boat’s side—and the men who were rowing fast towards them.

Her blood froze. Raiders.

“Run!” Ailsa shouted and, with the seal still in her arms, bolted back up the boulders. Its body weighed a ton, sending her off balance as she ran, slipping and sliding over the sand. She didn’t need to turn back to know the woman was following closely, her pace

hindered by her bare feet.

It was beginning to rain again as Ailsa reached a cluster of large rocks that marked the boundary between the beach and headland. She ducked behind the boulders, yanking the other woman down as quickly as she could. The heavy drops washed the seal's wound; it wasn't as bad as it had first appeared. Thankfully, the woman had finished with her damn screaming.

Their breathing came in thick pants as they stared at each other. From the beach, the sound of a boat landing hard on the sand reached their ears, accompanied by drums and urgent shouting. From what Ailsa could see, the group of boats had continued on, leaving only one vessel behind to inspect the beach.

Motioning to the other woman to stay quiet, Ailsa sank a little deeper into the hiding place.

Through the stones, they could see the boat and its inhabitants: three tall figures all wearing thick, oil-coated cloaks and carrying spears. One turned and looked in their direction. Ailsa's hair stood on end. Where she expected to see a face, there was just a skull: snow white against the tanned skin of the man's throat.

"What—" she whispered.

Her companion didn't seem surprised. Still staring at the raiders, Ailsa was shocked to see they each had a skull for a face.

"Masks," breathed the redhead beside her.

*Avalognians*, Ailsa realised.

The rain became heavier until it was thundering down from the skies. The warriors fanned out, sweeping the beach. It was clear they thought the woman had continued on somewhere else, because they sauntered around, swinging their spears at their sides. Two moved away heading for the other side of the beach but one stalked towards them. Ailsa gripped her axe in her hands and crouched down further, flexing the muscles in her shoulders.

She had heard stories about what Avalognian raiders did to their enemies. Not only did they travel from village to village, up and down the coast of Eilanmòr, burning houses, but if anyone survived the fire, they were either taken as slaves or slaughtered where they stood. Stories told of half-burned people, clawing their way out of their homes to freedom, only to be shoved back into the embers. More frightening still, sometimes they would be killed when they emerged, so their bodies could feed the hoard. Avalognians were cannibals, everyone knew.

A figure drew closer, stumbling over the shifting sand. He stopped, cocking his head and hesitating before pulling out a wicked-looking dart from a bag around his body. It was tipped on one side with a red feather, and poison, Ailsa guessed, on the other. Suddenly, he turned to look straight at their hiding place and Ailsa felt a chill as the skull's eye-holes seemed to settle on her. But

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behind the mask, she could faintly see two eyes.

Just a man.

With this realisation she blinked once. Twice.

*Don't think. Act.*

Then she stood and threw her axe straight at him. It spun, handle over blade, through the air before it embedded itself in his cranium.

From the moment the weapon left her hand, it moved in slow motion, as if in water. Ailsa watched, mesmerised as the body was thrown backwards, arching through the air. The handle of the axe shuddered from the impact, sticking out of his head like a horn. He didn't even have time to scream before he died.



## Chapter 2

*Dead. Dead. Dead.* The word echoed through her mind, but she swatted it away like a fly before it could find purchase. She would need to wait until they were out of danger before she could pick apart what she'd done.

Ailsa moved from her hiding place to the body. The axe had cracked the mask, revealing a heavy brow beneath the blood. Black eyes looked blankly back up at her. She bent down and extracted the axe from his head, pulling it out of the wound with a sickening pop.

“Look out!” the woman from behind her suddenly shouted. Ailsa wrenched her gaze from the corpse to look back. She was pointing to the other end of the beach where the dead man's comrades were now racing towards them.

*Dead. Dead. Dead.* The word swirled round in her brain again, like a warning.

Ailsa steeled herself and strode forward, her weapon heavy in her right hand. A swift throw of the axe brought another Avalognian down with a glancing blow to his neck. It hadn't been a clean shot like the last one, but it

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was enough to send him tumbling to his knees, clutching at the wound as his lifeblood gushed down his body.

The third man was running for her with his spear. Ailsa dodged his throw, but landed hard on her backside when he launched himself at her, taking her down.

Dark eyes stared out from the mask's sockets; he was so close that she could see his teeth were sharpened into points. A fist connected with her jaw.

For a moment there was silence as the force of the impact vibrated around her head. Stars burst in her vision, colliding together, before she was picked up and tossed to the side, the crash of the ground enough to clear her senses. She landed face first in the sand, the shingle scraping a path along her chin. Her assailant marched over to her, his body heaving with the effort of the fight.

*Get up. Get up. Get up.*

Desperation wound a hand around her neck and she wheezed as she pushed herself up. Scrambling, she found a rock at her side. With a roar, she rose and swung the rock round. It connected with the side of the man's head, with a sickening crunch. He whimpered before he crumpled to the ground, unmoving.

Ailsa exhaled and rubbed a hand over her face, willing her heart to slow again.

"Is that one dead too?" asked the woman, once again holding the seal to her chest, her voice wavering as she spoke.



“No. Just unconscious,” gulped Ailsa. She used the toe of her boot to tilt the man’s face and flick the mask away. To her surprise, it wasn’t a man, but a woman. She rubbed her jaw while watching the warrior’s chest rise and fall.

With a groan, she moved around the body to the feet and dragged the woman towards the boat. When she passed the man with the neck wound, she dropped the woman’s feet and pulled out a knife, intending to deliver a cleaner death—but he was already gone. She sheathed the weapon in her boot and picked up her axe lying at his side. She hung it on her belt before continuing to the longboat, heaving the Avalognian behind her.

The woman she had saved followed her at a safe distance. When she saw Ailsa’s intention, she carefully placed the seal down on the sand. It made a little bark of protest. Together, they lifted the raider and dropped her into the boat. Then, pushing the hull, they managed to cast it off into the sea. The strong waves rocked it violently before sucking it out into the surf like a thirsty beast.

Ailsa and the other woman both stood in the rain watching the craft bob on the open water for a few moments before turning away.

“Were they looking for you?” Ailsa asked. If she was going to have more Avalognians on her doorstep, it would be better to find out now.

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The woman nodded. Ailsa thought she saw a hint of apology in her eyes.

For a second, she considered leaving the strange woman here on the beach. Why should she have anything more to do with her?

*Because it's the right thing to do.*

Ailsa groaned. It seemed like, for now, she would have to play hero.

“We had better go,” she said, “Follow me.”

Ailsa headed up the beach towards her cave. The woman picked up the seal with care and trailed after her. Ailsa fought to force the grimace from her face as she walked. When she reached the grass, she wiped both sides of the axe blade on the ground, cleaning off most of the mess. She did the same with her hands, watching as the dewy grass became coated with blood. Her heart gave an uncomfortable twitch in her chest, but Ailsa shoved the feeling down, focussing instead on the other woman. Ailsa led her up the path and into the shelter.

The fire was lower than before, but it still churned out a welcome bit of heat. The red-headed woman cradled the seal and sank down onto the cave floor, making a grateful sound in her throat. Ailsa gestured for the woman to move closer to the heat before throwing her a rag, the unease threatening to creep back up again as the stranger wiped her hands and forearms. Without taking her eyes away, Ailsa plonked herself on the floor

in front of the embers. For a brief moment, her hands had moved to throw her axe to the side like she always did when arriving home, but something told her to keep her weapon close.

Danger was still nearby, whether from this woman or from raiders returning to find their murdered comrades.

They sat in silence, for which Ailsa was grateful. The persistent voice drummed louder in her head in the quiet of the cave.

*Dead. Dead. Dead.*

It never got easier, killing people. Ailsa had only done so twice before now, once when she had first moved to the area and a man had forced himself on her. He had stunk of sour alcohol and his eyes were glazed as if he wasn't entirely present. When his intentions became clear, Ailsa had pulled the small knife from her boot and thrust it into his gut.

The second time was when she had come across an older woman lying at the bottom of the cliffs further up the coast. Her body was broken and she was in so much pain that she begged Ailsa to put her out of her misery. Ailsa had hoped, as she thrust her knife into the woman's temple, that someone would do the same for her, if she ever found herself in similar circumstances.

She was pulled from her reverie when the woman placed a hand on her elbow. "Thank you. I was sure they were going to catch us," she said.

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Anger bubbled up inside her. She had just killed people for this person. *What on earth was she doing on her deserted patch of land to begin with?*

Stranger still was the presence of the seal in her arms. Was it a pet or had the girl been trying to rescue wild animals? There was something about the way the woman stared at it, holding it almost like a child. *What was her story?*

“Your thanks aren’t necessary,” Ailsa ground out, backing up to the opposite wall. “But what is necessary is that you explain why I just risked my life to save a seal?”

Sad eyes met her own. The stranger cleared her throat and sat up a little straighter. *Was she a lady?* Ailsa had never really been around many females, but by the way she held herself, Ailsa guessed that the redhead came from a good family. Her clothes were all wrong though. She was wearing a loose, grey dress, more suited to a commoner. Although her red hair was wild, and her eyes were wide with youth, she had a certain poise that made Ailsa think she was older than she looked. Aside from the woman’s curls, her most striking feature was the numerous freckles that speckled her face, neck and hands.

“My name is Iona.” Her voice was still wavering in the aftermath of her crying. She gestured down at the seal. “This is Harris, my brother.” She placed her hands in front of her and looked expectantly at Ailsa.

Ailsa's heart sunk at the word 'brother' as she tried to make sense of what the woman—Iona—had just said.

"Ailsa MacAra," she croaked out in response, offering a hand for the woman to shake. Iona's palm was soft, lending more credit to Ailsa's theory about her background. Ailsa wondered numbly if she should shake the seal's flipper too.

The girl just nodded and went back to stroking the animal's muzzle.

*I've saved a crazy woman.* She gave an exasperated grunt and set about building the fire back up again. She didn't think she wanted to ask about the seal until she was at least a little warmer.

Ridding herself of blood as best she could, Ailsa stared into the flames, thinking about what has just happened on the beach. The wooden longships were clearly searching for something. It was odd for the Avalognians to be so far south, though. There were no villages for miles; exactly how Ailsa liked it. *Why were they here?* She got the feeling that it definitely had something to do with this girl and her 'brother'.

She turned to ask Iona her questions but the words died on her lips. The woman still sat huddled near the fire but instead of a seal in her arms, there was a man. Or rather, the man's head, as he was quite a bit larger than the seal had been.



## Chapter 3

The man's head, like the woman's, was covered in a mass of flaming red hair. He was completely naked but, thankfully, the fire's light did not reach his more intimate areas. He clutched his side where his skin was sliced, yet his cut was somewhat smaller than the seal's had been.

It was Ailsa's turn to scream, but the sound struggled to escape her throat.

"What the hell is this?" she cursed, holding her neck as she stared at the sight in front of her.

"I'm sorry," said Iona sympathetically, "*This* is my brother—"

Again, there was a twinge in Ailsa's heart, but she did her best to smother the feeling.

"—he didn't have the energy before," Iona continued, "But now that he's healed a bit, this is his human form. He's much easier to transport as a seal, so it was rather good luck," she laughed, gazing at the man in her arms and ruffled his curly hair.

"But I am much better looking as a man," he smirked, speaking for the first time. His voice had a mocking edge

and his eyes danced with laughter, despite the pain that he must still be in from his wound.

When Ailsa looked at his side again, it resembled a weathered scar more than a slash. “You’re *selkies*?” she breathed.

“Yes, dear,” Iona said slowly, as if trying to soften the news.

Ailsa gripped her axe tighter. In the back of her mind, a little part of her was screaming. She should have known better than to help a strange, wailing woman clutching a bloody seal! From what she had heard about selkies, they would change from their seal forms into lovely creatures in order to lure humans to watery deaths, before feasting on them with their sharp, little teeth. But the two people sitting in front of her just looked sad and cold. *That could be a trick*, she told herself, edging away from the fire. Ailsa did her best to look like she was shifting for comfort, bringing her feet underneath her so she could jump up at a moment’s notice.

“Are you going to drag me to the ocean and drown me?” she asked.

She wasn’t prepared for the bark of laughter that the man, Harris, let out as he surveyed her.

“Calm down, lass. I believe you were the one dragging us away from the ocean,” he chuckled. His side—miraculously—was now completely healed.

The screaming in Ailsa’s ears went up an octave.

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“I promise you we don’t want to harm you,” soothed Iona. She held her hands out in pacification. “You saved our lives and we are very grateful to you.”

“Also,” laughed Harris. “I don’t know what stories you’ve heard, but I detest the taste of humans—too fatty and smelly, like sour milk.” His mirthful eyes left hers to travel over her body. “Though you do look tastier than average,” He wiggled his eyebrows at Ailsa. “Maybe I’ll break my rule?”

“Behave yourself,” Iona said, cuffing her brother on the ear.

Ailsa was too stunned to react. She still held her axe close to her body as she studied them.

“I’m confused and, honestly, I’m considering whether to fight you or run.”

Iona smiled. “I’m sure that you could overpower us in no time. Please just allow us to stay the night. We won’t hurt you.”

At first, Ailsa had felt the need to protect this woman; she had thought her weak and in danger. Now she felt the roles had been reversed. Still, Iona seemed genuine and kind.

Ailsa looked at Harris, who pouted at her, eyes wide in mock pleading.

*The brother on the other hand, she thought, could do with a smack.*

“Fine,” she drew in a deep breath and then fixed



Harris with the best glare she could muster under the circumstances. “But for all that’s holy, will you please cover yourself up?” She chucked a blanket in his direction. He caught it, wrapping it around himself while he chuckled. Iona grinned gratefully at her and edged closer to the fire.

“Here, I have another,” said Ailsa, throwing another blanket in the seal-woman’s direction. Ailsa rubbed her hands together, in an effort to get some warmth into them. “You might want to change your clothes too, since they’re wet from the rain and a bit manky from all the blood,” she said, trying not to wrinkle her nose.

“Are your clothes wet?” Iona tilted her head and looked at her with large eyes. When Ailsa nodded, she chuckled. “I can fix that.”

Ailsa wasn’t sure what to expect when Iona lifted her hands. The water soaking her shirt and trousers sluggishly beaded on the surface of the fabric. Then, like rain in reverse, each drop of water rose into the air and hung suspended above her head. Iona did the same for her own clothes, taking most of the mess off with the liquid. Then with a twist of her hand, she hurled the water out of the cave.

“How did you—” Ailsa started.

Iona looked pleased by her awe. “Selkie magic. We can control water; well, the females can.”

Ailsa turned to Harris, who didn’t seem too put out.

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“It’s okay, I have other talents. Great looks. Good instincts. Nice hair. I can lick my elbow. Want to see?” He grabbed his right arm in his left hand and contorted his body.

“No, it’s fine,” Ailsa cut him off. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say ‘*your loss*.’”

Once all the water had left her clothes, Ailsa felt warmer. The fire’s heat enveloped her skin, almost too hot. At exactly the same time, both women wrapped their blankets around their own shoulders. The selkie smiled at her and, after a moment, Ailsa returned the gesture.

It was beginning to get dark outside. Ailsa was suddenly exhausted, the adrenaline from the fight leaving her system. Her eyelids felt like they were being pulled down by heavy bags. She subtly grabbed her axe and pack, scooting to the side, so that she was a more comfortable distance from these strange creatures.

“If I go to sleep, will you murder me?”

“No, dear,” whispered Iona, “I promise that you will wake feeling rested and with all of your body parts,” Iona giggled. “I suppose that is the least we can do for you.”

When Ailsa looked at her sceptically, she held her hands up in front of her.

“A selkie’s promise can’t be broken.”

“I won’t even have a taste until you are wide awake again,” joked Harris.

Ailsa gave him a dirty look and sank into her nest of blankets. The siblings lay down side by side and fell asleep quickly. She stayed awake for some time, watching their bodies, waiting for them to attack her. Eventually, the gentle rise and fall of Harris's chest made her feel safe enough to risk closing her eyes. Still hugging her axe, Ailsa's body relaxed bit by bit and she drifted into deep oblivion.