

"An accomplished fantasy of
maturity and depth." *Publishers Weekly*

Aramaya



JANE ROUTLEY

author of *Fire Angels*

Aramaya

JANE ROUTLEY



An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

EOS

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

10 East 53rd Street

New York, New York 10022-5299

Copyright © 1999 by B. J. Routley

Inside back cover author photo by Antoinette Birkenbeil

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 99-94757

ISBN: 0-380-79460-8

www.avonbooks.com/eos

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address Eos, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

First Eos mass market paperback printing: June 2000

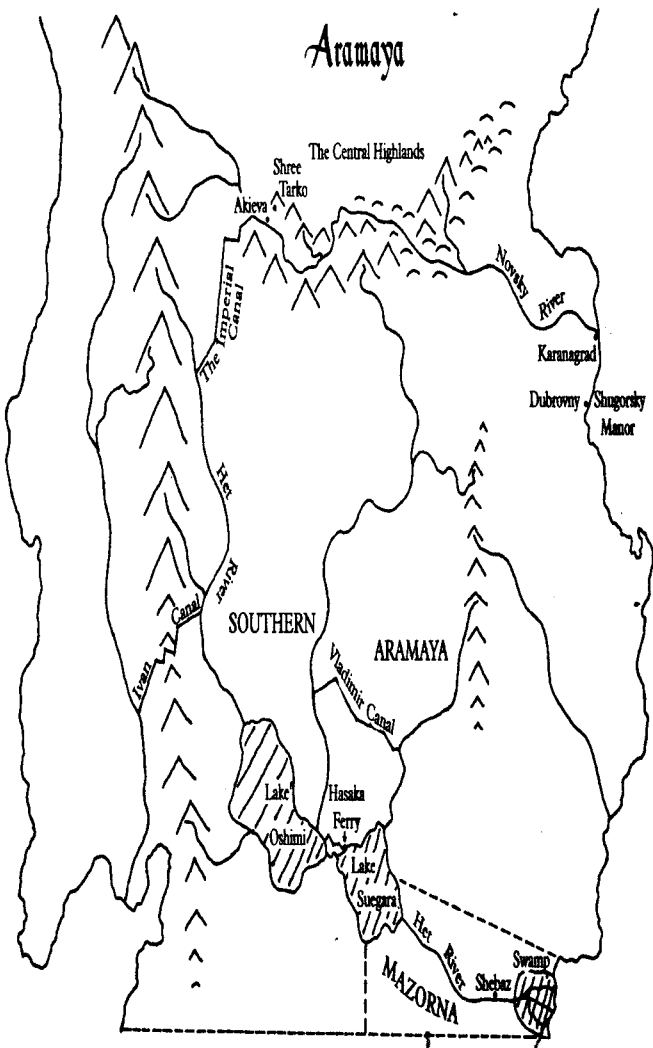
First Eos trade paperback printing: June 1999

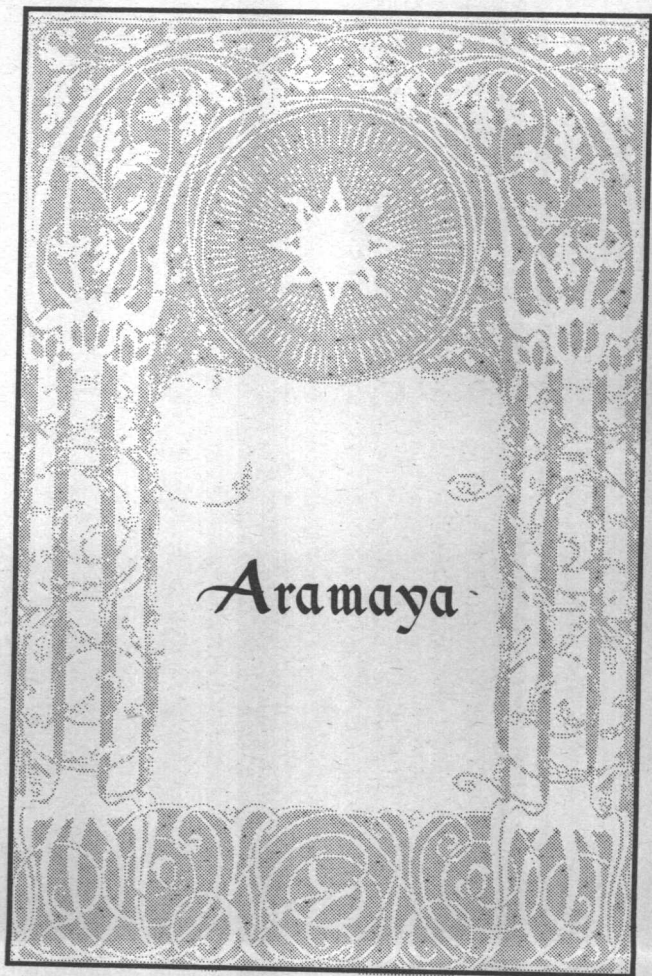
Eos Trademark Reg. U.S. Pat. Off. and in Other Countries, Marca Registrada, Hecho en U.S.A. HarperCollins® is a Trademark of HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

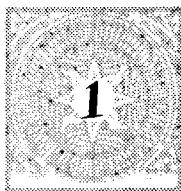
Printed in the U.S.A.

WCD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."







IN A COUPLE of days we would be in Aramaya. I leaned against the rail of the ship looking down into the dark grey sea. I should have been excited about seeing the center of the world, but instead my mood matched the color of the water.

"Thinking of Ruinac again?" asked Kitten, appearing at the rail by my side. She put her arm around my shoulders.

I smiled ruefully at her.

"For once no," I said. "I was thinking of my mother. She took the attitude that men were a temporary part of a woman's life. Once upon a time I thought she was mistaken. I really thought Shad and I would last forever."

My mother, my effortlessly fertile mother, would also have said it was children who were your lasting joy, but I was not going down that path yet again.

"Perhaps she was right, perhaps not," said Kitten squeezing me. "But even if men are temporary, friendship lasts. When we get home to Ishtak, perhaps you will come and live near me. We shall have a lot of fun together."

There was a shout from the foredeck.

"Come on. We need to get below," said Kitten pulling me away from the rail.

I looked up at the sky. A huge bank of black clouds was rolling over the horizon. That had come up quickly. No wonder the sea was so dark.

I groaned. By now I well and truly regretted pushing the others into shipping for Aramaya at this time of year. I had wanted to end my inactivity onshore but I had merely exchanged it for the inactivity of shipboard life with the "delightful" extra ingredient of seasickness.

"They don't call it Storm Season for nothing," said Kitten. "The captain wants us battened down below decks as usual. Come on."

THE TWO OF us shared a little dark cabin on the upper deck. It was small but luxurious compared with the cramped communal room the other ten passengers shared. A communal room is less than pleasant when everyone is seasick during a storm. After the first storm I, in my role as healer, had distributed little magic pills to cure seasickness, but my supply of these pills had run out several days ago due to the sheer number of storms we had gone through since we had left Ishtak.

Our ship, the *Eagle*, was the last ship to risk the thirty-day journey across the Western Ocean to Aramaya before the two-month-long Storm Season made the crossing impossible. Now I could see why. The captain told us that this was a particularly rough year, but he always saw plenty of early storms on this crossing.

So, while Kitten and I dreaded yet more nauseating, lurching hours spent below deck, we did not feel any special anxiety. We had learned early that it was pointless to leave a candle lit, so we lay on our bunks

in the dark talking—in Aramayan to give me practice—until the howling of the wind and the crashing of waves made it impossible to hear each other. Then we lay alone in the darkness with our thoughts.

I tried to think about Dally and what sort of actions I would take when I reached the coast of Aramaya, but as usual I thought of Shad. I remembered the last time I had seen him. We had been fighting as usual. I was furious at him about something. I can't remember what exactly. I think it was just everything. Anyway to punish him I had suddenly refused to go to the yearly Gathering in Ernundra.

When I saw how much my refusal hurt him I felt horrible and guilty and this just made me more angry. How could he make me go? The Klementari were not my people but his and now every one of them would know that I was barren, because Edaine would have told them and they would all know my failure and they would look at me with humiliating pity.

How could he put me through that, I shouted. He was supposed to love me, but I hadn't seen much love lately.

"You know they won't care about that," he said trying to sound reasonable but not really succeeding. "Please Dion, won't you do it for me? You know how much it means to me."

"Well then go without me," I said, wanting him to beg, wanting him to suffer as I had suffered.

He was silent for a moment.

"If you would not mind it, I will," he said. His voice sounded tentative, nervous. Why? What was he nervous about? Was he guilty? He wanted to go without me, didn't he? I knew it! I had known it all along. He wanted to be rid of me. Who could blame him? Edaine would take him gladly. Maybe he

wanted me out of the way so he could go to her. She'd be able to give him children. My heart felt like it had turned to a stone fist.

"You do that," I said bitterly.

"You do mind, don't you?" he said.

"Why should I care? Do what you want. I don't give a damn."

"Dion, I really need to go. The Gathering gives me so much strength and it's been a hard year. For both of us, I know. Please. Stay home if you want, but don't ask me not to go."

He was planning to leave me. I could tell. I had known this would happen. I had known he would leave me from the moment I had lost his child. The inevitability was like a grim march to execution.

"Oh Dion," he said softly. He came up behind me and touched my shoulder. "Don't be like this. I'm sorry. I'm sorry we fight so much. Sometimes I wonder. . . . Maybe it's better I go alone. Time apart. It might cool things down between us."

He *was* going to leave me. Anger stormed into my head. A violent red mist clouded my eyes. How I hated him in that moment. I wanted to break him. I spun round and slapped him hard across the face.

"Get out," I screamed at him. "Get out. Go get yourself a nice new wife, damn you."

He staggered back clutching his cheek.

"I hate you," I shouted. "I never want to see you again. Go on. Go to your Gathering. And go to hell." I picked up a china jug and threw it at him.

His face set into bitter lines.

"Damn you," he shouted. "If that's what you want then I will go."

He stormed from the room, leaving me to kick the furniture and weep enraged tears. I did not stop till I heard his horse outside, trotting away down the

road. At that sound I was suddenly overwhelmed with terrible shame and sorrow. I knew I had treated him badly. I ran to the window and shouted his name once, twice. He didn't even slow. Probably he couldn't hear me. After two calls, my pride came back. Accursed pride. Damn him! Let him go! Let him do his worst! I didn't care anymore.

I dried my eyes, went back to my tasks and swallowed my disappointment, for I had wanted to go to the Gathering. The Klemantari in their green homeland were kind and wise and talking with my old friends and participating in the rituals of the Gathering brought me tremendous peace.

I missed Shad from the very first night but I began to see that he had been right. Time apart made me think of him more kindly than I had done for a long time. It was unreasonable for me to blame him for our childlessness. We did not know it was his fault. I knew I had acted badly to him. I had the uneasy feeling that I had gone too far this time and maybe really hurt him.

But I never, never expected him to actually leave me. I never expected that just a few days later, a messenger would come bearing his wedding ring—an act which constituted a request for divorce under Klementari law—and a short, terse letter confirming this.

That moment when I first read that letter. . . . Why must the mind grind over old wounds like that? Though I screwed up my eyes against the pain still the tears leaked out.

Suddenly the ship pitched violently sideways. I found myself, sprawled against the cabin wall clinging to the sloping bunk, all memory forgotten, trying to stop the mattress from falling on top of me. There was a thudding crump of water hitting the deck

above us. For a moment it seemed as if the ship was going to topple over and then it gave an almighty lurch the opposite way that threw me onto the other side of my bunk and had me scrabbling not to be thrown to the floor. There was another crashing thud of water on the roof and the ship lurched and pitched again. The timbers around us creaked and groaned with effort. There was water running down the side of the cabin. My God, when had the storm got this violent!

Quickly I brought a magelight to mind. Dazzling white light filled the cabin. The floor was covered in inky black water, a miniature sea with waves that splashed around to the violent lurching of the ship.

In that moment as I began to use my power, I was suddenly horribly aware of another power all around us, the power of the sea smashing at the tiny ship—a monstrous power, cold, dark, and very, very deep. Frightened, I pressed my hand against the wall of the cabin and pushed a spell of binding into it and down into the timbers of the ship.

"I'd best see if I can go and help," I cried, sliding gingerly off my bunk and into that inky water. It was ankle deep. When I'd signed on for the journey, I'd signed on using my old name, Dion Michaeline, healer. I did not want to travel as Dion Holyhands, Lady of Ruinac. It was too much baggage for what I hoped would be a discreet journey. Had the ship's crew known who I really was, they might well have already asked me to help them. I knew nothing about the sea and ships, but I knew all about the use of magic as a brute force. I had fought demons.

Kitten shouted something back at me as she jumped down beside me. Together we heaved open the door.

Captain Simonetti, Kitten's servant, was out in the

corridor of the ship, hanging onto swaying walls as he came splashing and slipping down the corridor toward us. His wife Suza clutched the frame of their cabin door looking uncharacteristically anxious. In the brief lull between the crashing waves I could hear others in the communal cabins, crying, praying, and being sick. The last made me glad I was a mage and could at least keep my dinner down. Suddenly it seemed stupid for a mage to be walking in water like this. I waved my hand and spoke the words and the water streamed out from under the cabin doorways, back up the corridor and out through the cracks in the hatchway. Kitten turned and gave me a sign of approval.

Just then the ship rolled and dumped all three of us on the floor. There was a roar and a thump and water gushed through the gaps in the hatchway again, soaking us as we struggled to our feet.

Suza Simonetti helped Kitten and me get up and together the four of us staggered to the hatchway. The force of the waves had cracked it. Drenched by the streams of water that flowed through the crack, the four of us pushed the heavy cover open. In a moment Kitten and I were out on the lurching, bucking deck.

The deck was covered in torn rigging and broken spars. The sky above was black with thunderous clouds. It was almost as dark as night. Sheets of rain swept into our eyes, driven by the savage wind. Huge waves rose above us. It was as if the ship was flinging itself over mountains. I clung to a nearby rail while Kitten leaned unsteadily over the hatchway, shouting at the Simonettis to stay below. Using magic I pushed the hatch cover shut over them.

Suddenly, a huge black mass of water rose up and up over the side of the boat. Screaming, I snatched Kitten round the waist and flung the two of us

against the mast, binding us to it in a panic of strong magic. There was an awful moment as we stared up at the huge wave and then the force of the water came crashing down on us like a blow. Water, water, endless rushing water. I clung to Kitten and the mast and still there was a heavy blanket of rushing water pushing the air out of my lungs. Even through the calming power of magic it was like being buried alive. The mast was shuddering under me. My lungs were bursting. I fought upward through the tons of water.

Then suddenly it was gone and there was air. Gasping I let go of the magical binding and simply clung to the mast like a bit of discarded seaweed. I must get Kitten below where it was safe. But Kitten was already away gripping the ship's rail, slipping and staggering down the heaving, watery deck with surprising speed. I set off after her as fast as I could, leaning into the roaring wind and stumbling over the rubbish on the deck, but by the time I reached her, we were already at the stairs that led up to the bridge.

"Get below!" I shouted, gesturing as best I could without releasing the rail. She either couldn't or wouldn't make out what I was saying and even as we shouted hopelessly at one another in the inferno of roaring wind, another wave broke over the deck covering us waist deep in powerfully dragging black water.

I contented myself with hanging onto Kitten and keeping her magically warm. Together we crawled up the stairs.

THE WHEEL OF the *Eagle* was on the open deck, but wardings surrounded it, designed to protect the helmsman from the fury of such storms. The force of

the waves must have been too strong for them this time, for there was the nerve-jangling feeling of broken magic everywhere. Two sailors and the cabin boy were streaming with water as they struggled with the wheel. A fourth was tied by his waist to the mast behind, drooping with unconsciousness or death, blood running down his face. I staggered over to him, letting magic hold me to the deck. It was the captain, unconscious from a blow to the head. He was terribly cold. I stopped the bleeding in his head and set a spell to warm him.

Behind me Kitten was shouting furiously at one of the struggling sailors who was obviously refusing something, probably our help. I could help them despite themselves. There was no way I could replace the wardings under these conditions, but clinging to the mast I muttered the spells to build a warm bubble of protection around us. Suddenly it was almost as if we were in an invisible cabin. Rain and wind battered against empty air as if it was a roof and the noise of the storm was shut out.

"... the Demonslayer of Gallia, you stupid man," Kitten shouted in the sudden quiet.

He wasn't listening.

"Look out!" he screamed, pulling Kitten against him. A huge wall of tumbling white foam was charging down the ship toward us. It smashed itself like a rock into the protection spell. The spell held, but I felt the waves' force like a winding blow to the chest—felt too the weight of the water on the ship's deck pushing it down.

"Away! Away!" I cried to the wild waters. Using all the force I could I threw myself on the deck and pushed my being into the ship's straining, creaking, almost breaking timbers, willing the ship to lift its head, willing it to pull itself over the next wave. Up

and up. I was the ship, feeling the poetry of its beautifully crafted timbers—feeling those timbers screaming and cracking under the pounding water. I made myself light—felt myself rising and suddenly I was at the top of the wave in the screaming wind and below was a huge glassy sided black drop. I felt the ship begin to topple. I turned us, righted us, and held us back as we went sliding down that incredible watery slope, the sound of sailors' voices screaming in our ears.

And then another monstrous mound of water loomed above us cutting out all light and leaning over to fall down upon us again.

Oh, the power of the sea! It was too mighty for even the remotest chance of stilling the storm. I had never felt anything as powerful, not even when I had fought Bedazzer the demon back when I was seventeen. The sea wasn't hungry or even angry. It was just raw, mindless power thundering out of control, smashing and smashing. The ship and I were a tiny wooden cocoon that struggled on and on, dragging ourselves up through each terrifying wave and sliding down each vertiginous drop, teeth clenched, muscles and timbers straining in the pound, pound, pounding of the waves. Magic is power singing in your veins, but here it was merely a whimper trying to keep the ship and me from foundering under the weight of the mighty waters. Through that endless weary time we managed to ride the waves, but sometimes that was impossible and then with a teeth clenching effort of will we managed to stay afloat in an act akin to swimming.

THE WORLD HAD changed from black to grey.

"Dion! Dion!" Kitten was kneeling beside me shak-

ing me. As I looked up, startled to see her, she cried "Praise Aumaz!" and hugged me.

What was I doing here lying on the wheel deck? My arms and legs were buried in the wood. They were wood. I had become one with the ship and fought the waves with it. For how long?

Slowly I pulled myself out of the deck. Coming back hurt. The numbness in my limbs changed unpleasantly to pins and needles. I was sopping wet. I ached all over as if it was I who had been battered by the waves. As in fact I had been. I rubbed my eyes and looked around. Little squalls of rain were still splattering against the protection barrier, but the sky had lightened from thunderous black to heavy grey. Though the waves were still big they no longer threatened to swamp the ship. Through my changing hands I could feel that the ship no longer needed holding together. Somehow even though I had been wood I had retained enough of my own mind to know that it was time to change back to my original form.

It could be dangerous to change shape thoughtlessly. Once I had lost consciousness in the shape of a stone and if it had not been for the voice of someone I loved calling me back, I might still be a stone.

It had been Shad's voice that had called me back then. God and Angels, all my thoughts still led back to him.

"My lady," said the cabin boy. He was offering me a steaming cup. I took it and put my cold hands gratefully around it. It was water and rum. The water was brackish and the rum was rough medicinal stuff, but it was blessedly hot. I felt as cold and damp as waterlogged wood.

"Thank you my lady," said the boy, blushing and bobbing. He scurried away quickly.