I remember the day the Aleut ship came to our island. At first it seemed like a small shell afloat on the sea. Then it grew larger and was a gull with folded wings. At last in the rising sun it became what it really was—a red ship with two red sails.

My brother and I had gone to the head of a canyon that winds down to a little harbor which is called Coral Cove. We had gone to gather roots that grow there in the spring.

My brother Ramo was only a little boy half my age, which was twelve. He was small for one who had lived so many suns and moons, but quick as a cricket. Also foolish as a cricket when he was excited. For this reason and because I wanted him to help me gather roots and not go running off, I said nothing about the shell I saw or the gull with folded wings.

I went on digging in the brush with my pointed stick as though nothing at all were happening on the sea. Even when I knew for sure that the gull was a ship with two red sails.
But Ramo's eyes missed little in the world. They were black like a lizard's and very large and, like the eyes of a lizard, could sometimes look sleepy. This was the time when they saw the most. This was the way they looked now. They were half-closed, like those of a lizard lying on a rock about to flick out its tongue to catch a fly.

"The sea is smooth," Ramo said. "It is a flat stone without any scratches."

My brother liked to pretend that one thing was another. "The sea is not a stone without scratches," I said. "It is water and no waves."

"To me it is a blue stone," he said. "And far away on the edge of it is a small cloud which sits on the stone."

"Clouds do not sit on stones. On blue ones or black ones or any kind of stones."

"This one does."

"Not on the sea," I said. "Dolphins sit there, and gulls, and cormorants, and otter, and whales too, but not clouds."

"It is a whale, maybe."

Ramo was standing on one foot and then the other, watching the ship coming, which he did not know was a ship because he had never seen one. I had never seen one either, but I knew how they looked because I had been told.

"While you gaze at the sea," I said, "I dig roots. And it is I who will eat them and you who will not."

Ramo began to punch at the earth with his stick, but as the ship came closer, its sails showing red through the morning mist, he kept watching it, acting all the time as if he were not.

"Have you ever seen a red whale?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, though I never had.

"Those I have seen are gray."

"You are very young and have not seen everything that swims in the world."

Ramo picked up a root and was about to drop it into the basket. Suddenly his mouth opened wide and then closed again.

"A canoe!" he cried. "A great one, bigger than all of our canoes together. And red!"

A canoe or a ship, it did not matter to Ramo. In the very next breath he tossed the root in the air and was gone, crashing through the brush, shouting as he went.

I kept on gathering roots, but my hands trembled as I dug in the earth, for I was more excited than my brother. I knew that it was a ship there on the sea and not a big canoe, and that a ship could mean many things. I wanted to drop the stick and run too, but I went on digging roots because they were needed in the village.

By the time I filled the basket, the Aleut ship had sailed around the wide kelp bed that encloses our island and be-
tween our two rocks that guard Coral Cove. Word of its coming had already reached the village of Ghalas-at. Carrying their weapons, our men sped along the trail which winds down to the shore. Our women were gathering at the edge of the mesa.

I made my way through the heavy brush and, moving swiftly, down the ravine until I came to the sea cliffs. There I crouched on my hands and knees. Below me lay the cove. The tide was out and the sun shone on the white sand of the beach. Half the men from our village stood at the water’s edge. The rest were concealed among the rocks at the foot of the trail, ready to attack the intruders should they prove unfriendly.

As I crouched there in the toyon bushes, trying not to fall over the cliff, trying to keep myself hidden and yet to see and hear what went on below me, a boat left the ship. Six men with long oars were rowing. Their faces were broad, and shining dark hair fell over their eyes. When they came closer I saw that they had bone ornaments thrust through their noses.

Behind them in the boat stood a tall man with a yellow beard. I had never seen a Russian before, but my father had told me about them, and I wondered, seeing the way he stood with his feet set apart and his fists on his hips and looked at the little harbor as though it already belonged to him, if he were one of those men from the north whom our people feared. I was certain of it when the boat slid in to the shore and he jumped out, shouting as he did so.

His voice echoed against the rock walls of the cove. The words were strange, unlike any I had ever heard. Slowly then he spoke in our tongue.

“I come in peace and wish to parley,” he said to the men on the shore.

None of them answered, but my father, who was one of those hidden among the rocks, came forward down the sloping beach. He thrust his spear into the sand.

“I am the Chief of Ghalas-at,” he said. “My name is Chief Chowig.”

I was surprised that he gave his real name to a stranger. Everyone in our tribe had two names, the real one which was secret and was seldom used, and one which was common, for if people use your secret name it becomes worn out and loses its magic. Thus I was known as Won-a-pa-lei, which means The Girl with the Long Black Hair, though my secret name is Karana. My father’s secret name was Chowig. Why he gave it to a stranger I do not know.

The Russian smiled and held up his hand, calling himself Captain Orlov. My father also held up his hand. I could not see his face, but I doubted that he smiled in return.

“I have come with forty of my men,” said the Russian. “We come to hunt sea otter. We wish to camp on your island while we are hunting.”

My father said nothing. He was a tall man, though not so tall as Captain Orlov, and he stood with his bare shoulders
thrown back, thinking about what the Russian had said. He was in no hurry to reply because the Aleuts had come before to hunt otter. That was long in the past, but my father still remembered them.

“You remember another hunt,” Captain Orlov said when my father was silent. “I have heard of it, too. It was led by Captain Mitriff who was a fool and is now dead. The trouble arose because you and your tribe did all of the hunting.”

“We hunted,” said my father, “but the one you call a fool wished us to hunt from one moon to the next, never ceasing.”

“This time you will need to do nothing,” Captain Orlov said. “My men will hunt and we will divide the catch. One part for you, to be paid in goods, and two parts for us.”

“The parts must be equal,” my father said.

Captain Orlov gazed off toward the sea. “We can talk of that later when my supplies are safe ashore,” he replied.

This morning was fair with little wind, yet it was the season of the year when storms could be looked for, so I understood why the Russian wished to move onto our island.

“It is better to agree now,” said my father.

Captain Orlov took two long steps away from my father, then turned and faced him. “One part to you is fair since the work is ours and ours the risk.”

My father shook his head.

The Russian grasped his beard. “Since the sea is not yours, why do I have to give you any part?”

“The sea which surrounds the Island of the Blue Dolphins belongs to us,” answered my father.

He spoke softly as he did when he was angry.

“From here to the coast of Santa Barbara—twenty leagues away?”

“No, only that which touches the island and where the otter live.”

Captain Orlov made a sound in his throat. He looked at our men standing on the beach and toward those who had now come from behind the rocks. He looked at my father and shrugged his shoulders. Suddenly he smiled, showing his long teeth.

“The parts shall be equal,” he said.

He said more, but I did not hear it, for at that instant in my great excitement I moved a small rock, which clattered down the cliff and fell at his feet. Everyone on the beach looked up. Silently I left the toyon bushes and ran without stopping until I reached the mesa.
CHAPTER 2

Captain Orlov and his Aleut hunters moved to the island that morning, making many trips from their ship to the beach of Coral Cove. Since the beach was small and almost flooded when the tide was in, he asked if he could camp on higher ground. This my father agreed to.

Perhaps I should tell you about our island so you will know how it looks and where our village was and where the Aleuts camped for most of the summer.

Our island is two leagues long and one league wide, and if you were standing on one of the hills that rise in the middle of it, you would think that it looked like a fish. Like a dolphin lying on its side, with its tail pointing toward the sunrise, its nose pointing to the sunset, and its fins making reefs and the rocky ledges along the shore. Whether someone did stand there on the low hills in the days when the earth was new and, because of its shape, called it the Island of the Blue Dolphins, I do not know. Many dolphins live in our seas and it may be from them that the name came. But one way or another, this is what the island was called.

The first thing you would notice about our island, I think, is the wind. It blows almost every day, sometimes from the northwest and sometimes from the east, once in a long while out of the south. All the winds except the one from the south are strong, and because of them the hills are polished smooth and the trees are small and twisted, even in the canyon that runs down to Coral Cove.

The village of Ghalas-at lay east of the hills on a small mesa, near Coral Cove and a good spring. About a half league to the north is another spring and it was there that the Aleuts put up their tents which were made of skins and were so low to the earth that the men had to crawl into them on their stomachs. At dusk we could see the glow of their fires.

That night my father warned everyone in the village of Ghalas-at against visiting the camp.

"The Aleuts come from a country far to the north," he said. "Their ways are not ours nor is their language. They have come to take otter and to give us our share in many goods which they have and which we can use. In this way shall we profit. But we shall not profit if we try to befriend them. They are people who do not understand friendship.
They are not those who were here before, but they are people of the same tribe that caused trouble many years ago."

My father's words were obeyed. We did not go to the Aleut camp and they did not come to our village. But this is not to say that we did not know what they did—what they are and in what way they cooked it, how many otter were killed each day, and other things as well—for someone was always watching from the cliffs while they were hunting, or from the ravine when they were in camp.

Ramo, for instance, brought news about Captain Orlov.

"In the morning when he crawls out of his tent he sits on a rock and combs until the beard shines like a cormorant's wing," Ramo said.

My sister Ulape, who was two years older than I, gathered the most curious news of all. She swore that there was an Aleut girl among the hunters.

"She is dressed in skins just like the men," Ulape said. "But she wears a fur cap and under the cap she has thick hair that falls to her waist."

No one believed Ulape. Everyone laughed at the idea that hunters would bother to bring their wives with them.

The Aleuts also watched our village, otherwise they would not have known about the good fortune which befell us soon after they came.

It happened in this way. Early spring is a poor season for fishing. The heavy seas and winds of winter drive the fish into deep water where they stay until the weather is settled and where they are hard to catch. During this time the village eats sparingly, mostly from stores of seeds harvested in autumn.

Word of our good fortune came on a stormy afternoon, brought by Ulape, who was never idle. She had gone to a ledge on the eastern part of the island hoping to gather shellfish. She was climbing a cliff on the way home when she heard a loud noise behind her.

At first she did not see what had caused the noise. She thought that it was the wind echoing through one of the caves and was about to leave when she noticed silvery shapes on the floor of the cove. The shapes moved and she saw that it was a school of large white bass, each one as big as she was. Pursued by killer whales, which prey upon them when seals are not to be found, the bass had tried to escape by swimming toward shore. But in their terror they had mistaken the depth of the water and had been tossed onto the rocky ledge.

Ulape dropped her basket of shellfish and set out for the village, arriving there so out of breath that she could only point in the direction of the shore. The women were cooking supper but all of them stopped and gathered around her, waiting for her to speak.
“A school of white bass,” she finally said.
“On the rocks. A dozen of them. Perhaps more than a dozen.”

Before Ulape had finished speaking, we were running toward the shore, hoping that we would get there in time, that the fish had not flopped back into the sea, or that a chance wave had not washed them away.

We came to the cliff and looked down. The school of white bass was still on the ledge, glistening in the sun. But since the tide was high and the biggest waves were already lapping at the fish, there was no time to lose. One by one we hauled them out of reach of the tide. Then, two women carrying a single fish, for they were all of about the same size and heavy, we lifted them up the cliff and brought them home.

There were enough for everyone in our tribe for supper that night and the next, but in the morning two Aleuts came to the village and asked to speak to my father.

“You have fish,” one of them said.
“Enough only for my people,” my father answered.
“You have fourteen fish,” the Aleut said.
“Seven now because we ate seven.”
“From seven you can spare two.”
“There are forty in your camp,” my father replied, “and more than that of us. Besides, you have your own fish, the dried ones that you brought.”

“We tire of that kind,” the Aleut said.

He was a short man who only came to my father’s shoulders, and he had small eyes like black pebbles and a mouth like the edge of a stone knife. The other Aleut looked very much like him.

“You are hunters,” my father said. “Go and hunt your own fish if you are tired of what you are now eating. I have my people to think of.”

“Captain Orlov will hear that you refuse to share the fish.”
“Yes, tell him,” my father said. “But also why we refuse.”

The Aleut grunted to his companion and the two of them stalked off on their short legs across the sand dunes that lay between the village and their camp.

We ate the rest of the white bass that night and there was much rejoicing. But little did we know, as we ate and sang and the older men told stories about the fire, that our good fortune would soon bring trouble to Ghalas-at.