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PROLOGUE

They say you can sail a thousand miles along the island chain of the Myriad, from the frosty shores of the north, to the lush, sultry islands of the south. They say that the islanders are like the red crabs that race along the shores – hardy, unpredictable, and as happy in the water as out of it.

They say that the ocean around the Myriad has its own madness. Sailors tell of great whirlpools that swallow boats, and of reeking, ice-cold jets that bubble to the surface and stop the hearts of swimmers. Black clouds suddenly boil into existence amid flawless skies.

They say that there is a dark realm of nightmares that lies beneath the true sea. When the Undersea arches its back, the upper sea is stirred to frenzy.

They say that the Undersea was the dwelling place of the gods.

They say many things of the Myriad, and all of them are true.

The gods were as real as the coastlines and currents, and as merciless as the winds and whirlpools. The Glass Cardinal throttled galleons with translucent tendrils. The Red Forlorn floated like a cloud of blood in the water. Kalmaddoth howled with a razor lattice instead of a mouth. Dolor lurched through the water, kicking with dozens of human legs. The Hidden Lady waited in the silent deeps, shrouded by her own snaking hair. Now and then one would rise from the Undersea and appear in the pale light of day, devouring schooners, smashing ports to flinders, and etching their shapes into the nightmares of all. Some of them sang as they did so.

For centuries the gods ruled the Myriad through awe and

terror, each with its own cluster of islands as territory. Human sacrifices were hurled into the waters to appease them, and every boat was painted with pleading eyes to entreat their mercy. They were served, feared and adored.

Then, without warning, the gods turned on each other.

It took barely a week for them to tear one other apart – a week of tidal waves and devastation. Many hundreds of islanders lost their lives. By the end, no living gods remained, only vast corpses rolling in the deep. Even thirty years after this Cataclysm, nobody knows why it happened. The gods are still mysterious, though the fear of them is slowly waning.

They say that a coin-sized scrap of dead god can make your fortune, if the powers it possesses are strange and rare enough, and if you are brave enough to dive for them.

This is also true.

CHAPTER 1

'Are you sure this is safe?' asked the visiting merchant, struggling up the ladder that scaled the makeshift wooden tower. 'I thought you'd arranged me a place on one of those boats!'

'All the boats are full,' Hark told him glibly, as he clambered up behind him. 'The governor and his friends, and all the rich men who paid for the expedition, and their families, they took all the seats – no room left!' For all he knew, this might even be true. He hadn't actually checked. 'Besides, seats in those boats cost more than your eyes. This is a tenth of the price, and the view is better!'

By the time they reached the top, the merchant was out of breath, and patting his face with a handkerchief. The man who owned the rickety tower guided the merchant and Hark to two cramped and precarious seats, and took payment for both from the merchant. The cold wind blew, making the structure creak, and the merchant flinched, clutching his hat to his head. He didn't notice the tower-owner discreetly giving Hark a wink and his commission.

The ten-foot wooden towers were only wheeled out on festival days or markets. They were not in fact particularly safe, and Hark knew they would become even less so when more low-paying customers were hanging off the sides of them later. He didn't feel that this needed mentioning, though.

'It *is* a good view,' the merchant conceded grudgingly.

Aloft on the tower, the pair could easily see over the heads of the crowds that crammed every inch of the quays and jetties. The docks had been thronged since dawn, and even the clifftops and high towers were covered in figures. Everyone wanted a view

of the great, scoop-shaped harbour below.

For now, the harbour hardly seemed to merit so much attention. It was just another deep, placid mooring place perfect for submersibles, and cluttered with the usual underwater craft. Flattened iron 'turtles' with rear propellers skulked next to slim 'barracudas' with black iron fins. Diving bells glinted with steel and glass beside small, old-fashioned timber-and-leather 'skimmer' subs.

Today, however, all of these vessels were moored at the edges of the harbour. A far bigger submarine would be returning soon, and the way needed to be left clear for it. When it did, every eye would be fixed on it, to see what – and whom – it brought back.

'It looks like everyone on the island has turned out to watch!' exclaimed the merchant.

'The Hidden Lady was *our* god,' Hark pointed out. 'Lady's Crave is even named after her. You might say she's . . . coming home.'

Actually, the Hidden Lady had kept several islands in her thrall, not just one, but Hark allowed himself some poetic licence. What did it matter? She had lived long ago, before Hark was born. The gods belonged to the world of stories now, and you could tell stories any way you liked.

So far, the day was clear, but the distant islands on the horizon were already softening and dimming in a haze that promised rain. Hark smelt roasting crab from the braziers on the waterfront, and suddenly felt drunk with love for his own island. All of his fourteen years had been spent on the ragged shores of Lady's Crave, but its lessons were all he needed. After all, everyone and everything came to his island sooner or later. Often they turned up broken or lost, but that didn't matter. He

loved the island's jumble of accents, the coming and going of the great ships, and the stealthy sale of almost everything. He loved its cunning and its hunger.

Jelt should be here to see this. The thought ambushed him, and a host of worries hurried in behind him. *Where the scourge* is *Jelt?*

Jelt had asked Hark to meet him by the bellows house earlier that morning to discuss a 'job' someone wanted doing. Hark had waited there for him for two hours before giving up. That was typical of Jelt. He was there for you when it mattered, but the rest of the time he came and went like a cat, without explanation or apology.

Hark knew that Jelt had probably just got distracted. Nonetheless a queasy little tapeworm of anxiety gnawed at Hark's stomach as each hour passed without word from his best friend. Jelt had enemies, and the sort of past that sometimes came back to bite.

'How will we recognize the *Abysmal Child*?' The merchant was squinting through a spyglass at the harbour.

'Oh, you'll know her!' Like most Lady's Cravers, Hark felt a vicarious pride in the *Abysmal Child*. 'She's as long as a schooner – a real Undersea delver. Thirty oars, hull of black withersteel, ten grabs and three rear propellers. The best and biggest salvage submarine yet. The crowd will go mad as soon as they see her.'

Usually no boats were permitted in the submersible harbour except a few customs vessels, diver dinghies and cargo-haulers. Today, however, three luxurious-looking barges were moored by the wharf, allowing an elite few a better view of the *Abysmal Child*'s return.

'There's the governor's boat!' Hark pointed out the simple

green and white flag on its single mast. 'That's where all the investors will be – all the rich folks who paid for the *Abysmal Child* expedition.' He could imagine them, brimful of expensive wine and hope, scanning the waters with the fervour of gamblers. 'This day'll make their fortunes – or ruin them,' he added.

'Ruin them?' asked the merchant. 'Does that happen often?'

'Sometimes.' Hark sensed ghoulish curiosity, and hastened to feed it. 'One great submarine called the *Wish For Naught* got attacked by a giant squid in the deeps, and limped back to port with nothing. As it came up, and everybody saw its empty nets, half the investors jumped straight into the water in despair. The governor's guards pulled out most of them, but a few were wearing heavy chains of office, and metal armour under their clothes.' Hark mimed a downward plunge with one hand, and shook his head in mock mourning.

The merchant perked up at the thought. It is always a consolation to imagine outrageously rich people miserable and drowning. Of course, from Hark's point of view, the merchant himself was very rich. Thus it was hard to feel too guilty about the prospect of making him somewhat less rich. Hark was hoping to do exactly that before the day was out.

'Giant squid?' asked the merchant in tones of hushed fascination. 'So there are still sea monsters in these waters?'

'Oh, there are all kinds of perils down there!' Hark added enthusiastically. 'Razor-toothed fish with white eyes, and bullwhip tails with yellow lights on them! Cold surges and whirlpools! Suck-currents that pull you down to the Undersea! Jagged towers of black rock, and great cracks full of redjaws! Sea-urchin spikes as long as your arm! Tides full of yellow jellyfish so

poisonous a single touch would kill a whale!'

These stories were true, or at least true enough for present purposes. Stories were currency, and Hark understood that better than most. What did a few exaggerations matter? The merchant would be dining out on these tales for years, once he got home to the western continent.

The merchant shuddered. He probably thought everything underwater was alien and mysterious. Folks from the continents were weird like that. They seemed to think that the land stopped when you reached the shoreline, as if the islands were just rafts floating on the grey, temperamental sea. Locals like Hark had spent enough time underwater to understand that the islands were just the very tips of submerged mountains. Beneath the surface, the contours of the land descended and continued, in brutal ridges, deep ravines, cliff-drops and secret plateaus. Each had its own inhabitants, landmarks, treasures and surprises.

'There she is!' called Hark. Out by the harbour mouth he had spotted a bald, troubled patch of water, where the waves were invisibly broken on some long submerged bulk. The gulls that had been sitting on the surface at the harbour mouth took off, and rose into great, strident clouds, dipping and daring each other. 'There! See that little white wake? Her periscope's up!'

Other people were pointing and calling out now. A few seconds later a small cannon fired, the retort echoing back and forth across the harbour. A white plume of smoke climbed into the sky and then drifted.

The crowd became exultant, deafening. There was always a festival feel when a sub brought a god home. As a little kid Hark had lived for such moments, eyes wide to store every detail. Just for a moment he felt a twinge of the old excitement and awe.

Then the great submarine's long, black back broke the surface. Foam poured off the short turret and blade-like fins, and the brass rims of portholes glinted in the sun. The pale, entreating eyes painted on the prow were awash, as though weeping.

'She's lost oars,' Hark muttered, his words drowned by the roar of the crowd. Eight of the oars now ended in fractured stumps. As the *Abysmal Child* rose higher, he could see that it had lost more than that. One propeller was gone, and a rear panel hung loose, seawater hissing out of the mangled aperture. The tone of the hubbub changed as others noticed the same thing. The front compartment was presumably still watertight, since someone was alive to pilot the sub, but anyone who had been in the rear would be very, very dead.

The merchant was leaning forward now, spyglass jammed to his eye. Since all of this was a story to tell his friends later, a tragedy was as good as a triumph. Better, perhaps. Stories were ruthless creatures, and sometimes fattened themselves on bloody happenings.

'Where's her cargo?' he asked. 'Why are people running around on the wharf? What's going on down there?'

'The turret's open!' Hark provided a commentary. 'Someone's come up through it . . . There's a conversation going on . . . Looks like the governor's ordered diver boats to go in. There must be something strapped under the sub!'

The governor's guards along the waterfront readied their harpoon guns and wind-guns, to make sure that only the permitted diver boats approached. Any unauthorized swimmers, divers or subs seen heading for the *Abysmal Child* could expect a spiky and fatal reprimand.

The sun gleaming on their diving helmets, the divers lowered themselves into the water and disappeared beneath the surface. After five minutes, a disturbance was visible in the waters. Something was rising beside the great sub, something long and slender in a frothy mesh of fine netting . . .

'It's huge!' exclaimed the merchant. 'I've never seen anything like it!'

The thing in the net – no, there were *two* things – were as long as the *Abysmal Child*, but no wider than a man's torso. They were bent in a couple of places near the middle of their length, and for a moment Hark thought they must have snapped during the journey. As the foam settled, however, he could see that the spindly lengths were jointed. Beneath the floating net, he glimpsed the mottled red and white of their shell, draped with black weed and studded with limpets. One tapering grey claw poked out through the mesh.

As he watched, the impossibly long legs stirred and slowly flexed.

His heart gave an unexpected flutter of fear and awe. Just for a second he was a little kid again. He could almost imagine that the Hidden Lady might rear up out of the water, shake off the net, and scream the cliffs into dust as her writhing hair darkened the sky . . .

The moment passed. Common sense returned. He knew that the uncanny motion had been caused by the waves, manhandling from the divers, and nothing more.

'Is that her?' asked the merchant, tugging at Hark's sleeve. 'Is that the Hidden Lady?'

'No,' said Hark. 'I mean . . . yes. A piece of her. Two of her legs.' Spider-crab legs the length of a schooner. It was a great

find, but there was a tight, disappointed feeling in his chest. What had he been hoping for?

'I thought she was one of the more human-looking ones?' asked the merchant.

'She was,' said Hark.

Now she was godware, and godware meant opportunities. The investors would have their cargo jealously guarded as it was hauled up by cranes and dragged to the waiting warehouse. They wouldn't relax until every last ounce had been carved up, weighed, scraped, sold, or boiled for glue. In the meanwhile, hundreds of other eyes were watching for chances. A shard of shell, a smear of ichor, a spoonful of pulp could sell for more than a month's wages. When he was younger, Hark might have been one of those squeezed among the crowds, hoping to snatch at some tiny dropped fragment . . .

Now he was older and wiser, he knew that there were ways to make money from the Hidden Lady without braving the harpoons. He threw a brief, assessing glance at the merchant, who was still watching through his spyglass, entranced.

'The menders are lucky folks,' he lied conversationally. 'The ones who clean out and fix the big nets afterwards. It's a difficult job, because of the thick cables, but one of my friends does it. He says he *always* finds a bit of godware or two caught in the net. He's allowed to keep them as payment.'

'Really?' The merchant lowered his spyglass and stared at Hark. He looked incredulous, but not incredulous enough. Hark had chosen well.

'It's not quite as good as it sounds.' Hark shrugged ruefully. 'He has to sell it at the Appraisal auction, which means the governor's taxman gets a big cut.'

He looked away, as if losing interest in the subject. He had left a baited hook trailing in the merchant's mind. *Oh, come on and bite, you fat fish . . .*

'Do all sales *have* to go through the Appraisal?' The merchant hesitated, and cleared his throat. 'Does your friend ever sell his little bits of godware . . . privately?'

Hark let himself look surprised, then thoughtful. He gave a furtive glance around, then leaned towards the merchant.

'Well, the law says all sales *should* go through the Appraisal. If anybody ever found out about a "private sale" there would be trouble . . . but . . . do you want me to talk to my friend?'

'If you wouldn't mind,' said the merchant, his eyes bright.

Got you.

Hark knew people who could make him what he needed. A piece of lobster shell, coated in glass to make it look special, with some blackened limpets glued on. The merchant would probably be three islands further along his journey before he suspected his souvenir wasn't godware. And would he want to believe it even then? Why not hold the faith, so that he could tell his friends: *You see this? It's part of the Hidden Lady. I was there when they dragged it up from the deep.* Why give up a perfectly good story?

'Hark!'

The call came from the base of the tower, and made Hark jump. It was the voice he knew best in the world, and it filled him relief. Jelt was alive and well. Of course he was.

A moment later the wave of relief receded, and a weight settled on his heart. He felt an odd temptation to pretend not to hear, just for a few moments more.

'Oi, Hark!' The tower shook as somebody below slammed his fist into it twice.

Hark turned and looked.

There was Jelt, standing below on the wharf. It was strange looking down on him like that. He was older than Hark, and had always been taller, but over the last three years life had grabbed him by the ankles and head and stretched him. It had left him lean, raw, and angry about it. Even when he was motionless or calm, you could sense that anger snaking off him. As usual, his expression was distracted but intense, as if listening to the world whisper something that riled him. You always had the feeling that there was a problem, and maybe you weren't it, but you might become it if you didn't tread carefully.

Jelt raised his hand, and gave a quick, fierce beckon.

Hark hesitated a moment, conflicted, then gave the merchant an uneasy smile, and waved at Jelt.

'Good to see you!' he called down to his friend. 'I'll talk to you later, all right?' He gave a brief, meaningful glance in the direction of the merchant. *Not now, Jelt. I've got a prospect here*.

Jelt shook his head.

'You need to come *right now*.'

'You're *joking*!' hissed Hark.

'Come *on*!' Jelt slammed his hand into the wood of the tower again. 'We need to hurry!'

There were protests from the other people perched on the tower. Hark gritted his teeth, and apologized to the merchant, promising to find him later, then scrambled down the ladder. A moment later, he was shoving his way through the crowd, in his friend's wake. Somehow Hark always found himself neck deep in Jelt's latest plan. It was as though he'd signed up for it in his sleep.

'I had that continenter hooked!' protested Hark as the two of

them hurried up the stone steps of a priest-track up to one of the beacon cliffs. 'Why couldn't this wait until I'd reeled him in?'

Jelt gave a snort of mirth.

'You're just angry because I dragged you away from your girlfriend!' he said. It was an old joke of his that Hark had a crush on the idea of the Hidden Lady. 'Such a romantic. Oh, don't sulk. I *told* you we were doing another job today!'

'Where were you this morning, then?' demanded Hark. 'I waited for hours!'

'Staying out of someone's way,' Jelt answered curtly.

Jelt was much in demand these days. Cold-eyed people came looking for him – and not to shake his hand. Sometimes it was the governor's men, sometimes other people who didn't give their names. It had been happening ever since that night on the mudflats, the night Hark and Jelt never talked about. Hark sensed that Jelt was almost daring him to ask about it now. He did not take the bait.

'You lost them?' he asked instead.

'Yeah,' said Jelt, no longer in a humorous mood. 'Hurry it up, will you?'

Events had a current, and Hark didn't believe in fighting currents. Using them, playing with them, letting them push you slantwise to somewhere that might serve your turn, yes. Fighting them flat out, no. The current that was Jelt pulled him along more than any other. Somehow Hark couldn't slip or slide or shoot off sideways and still pretend he was doing what Jelt wanted, the way he could with anybody else.

I don't want to anyway, he told himself firmly. *Jelt is family.* He knew better than to trust anything he told himself, though.

There were four figures waiting near the top of the hill, in

the shelter of one of the lookout towers. Hark's heart lurched as he recognized their leader, a woman in her late thirties, with a bitter, thoughtful mouth, and a thick mottling of freckles that covered her face and arms, and even the scalp beneath her close-cropped hair. Dotta Rigg's reckless, cut-throat smuggling runs filled Lady's Cravers with both fear and an odd pride. Her five children could get free drinks anywhere on the island, even the younger ones, and only partly due to fear.

Hark had heard older hands talking of Rigg with trepidation and contempt, combined by bafflement at her success. *She's heading for a fall. Too chancy, doesn't listen to anyone. Who the abyss wants to be a* famous *smuggler?*

'Captain Rigg,' said Hark, hoping to sound confident but respectful. Whatever madness Jelt had got them into, he had better act as if he could handle it.

He noticed the steel and scrimshaw ear-studs worn proudly by a couple of Rigg's companions, and realized that they were probably 'sea-kissed'. People who spent a lot of their time diving, or trusting their lives to submarines often ended up losing some or all of their hearing. It was the mark of a seasoned aquanaut, and generally respected.

You wanted to see us? Hark switched to Myriad sign language. Many sea-kissed could lip-read to some degree, but signing seemed a more courteous option. Since there were so many sea-kissed across the Myriad, virtually all islanders knew some sign language, though the signs varied slightly from one island to the next. Hark could manage the basics of the Lady's Crave variant, but always felt a bit clumsy with it.

Yes, though I'm going off the idea, Rigg signed sharply. *We've been waiting nearly an hour! You better not be late tonight.* She

beckoned Hark and Jelt closer, and the six of them reflexively formed a huddle, so that their signs could not easily be read from a distance.

Tonight? Things were moving even faster than Hark had feared.

We won't, signed Jelt. No excuses, no apology, just a sky-blue stare.

Rigg pointed out towards the other headlands.

'That one,' she muttered aloud, indicating the nearest beacon tower, 'and the one beyond. You'll need to put both lights out an hour after the cannon. There's a route under the lip of the cliff to the one further away . . . You see that ledge under the red streak? One of you will have to climb along that. You can't use the clifftop path or you'll be seen.'

Hark was catching up fast, and wished he wasn't. He gave a silent, dry-mouthed nod, keeping his face as calm as possible. He wondered if Jelt had deliberately brought him in late, so he wouldn't be able to protest and back out. Four dangerous people had been kept waiting in the cold – he didn't have the nerve to tell them that they'd been wasting their time.

It has to be done tonight? Hark asked, thinking wistfully of his gullible, abandoned merchant.

Of course, Rigg signed. *The governor's men will be busy, won't they?*

She was right, Hark realized. Most of the governor's guards would probably be on the docks, guarding the *Abysmal Child*, watching the warehouse with the new cargo, and stopping people diving in the harbour for fallen scraps of the Hidden Lady. There would be fewer men patrolling the cliffs and the coves.

They'll hold an Appraisal tomorrow to sell off the Abysmal Child*'s godware, I guarantee it*, continued Rigg. *After that, patrols will be back at full strength. It has to be tonight.*

No problem, answered Jelt.

'You didn't ask,' Hark said bitterly, as twilight settled on the island like a sour mood. 'You never ask, Jelt.'

'Wasn't time, was there? You got to grab these chances when they come. And we were only late because I spent hours finding you in that crowd!'

'You *did* have time to tell me!' Hark began, but already he knew it was pointless to argue. If Hark stuck to his guns, really stuck to them, that would lead nowhere good.

'Look,' continued Jelt, 'here's how we do this. We hide on the hillside till it's time, then I climb up near to the first lantern, and you take the ledge path to the second. You knock out your lantern as soon as you can, and I'll kill mine when yours goes dark.'

'I still don't see why *I* have to do the climb along that ledge,' muttered Hark.

'Are you joking?' Jelt halted in his tracks and stared at Hark with wide, angry eyes. 'I'm trying to show Rigg what you can do, Hark! You think I couldn't have got somebody else for this? I brought you in because we're friends! You're a decent climber, and after tonight, Rigg's whole gang will know it.'

In spite of his annoyance, Hark couldn't help feeling a little mollified by the compliment.

'Anyway,' added Jelt, 'that path's got an overhang. You're shorter than me, it won't slow you down as much. Also, the one hiding near that first beacon has to stay there, ready to break it,