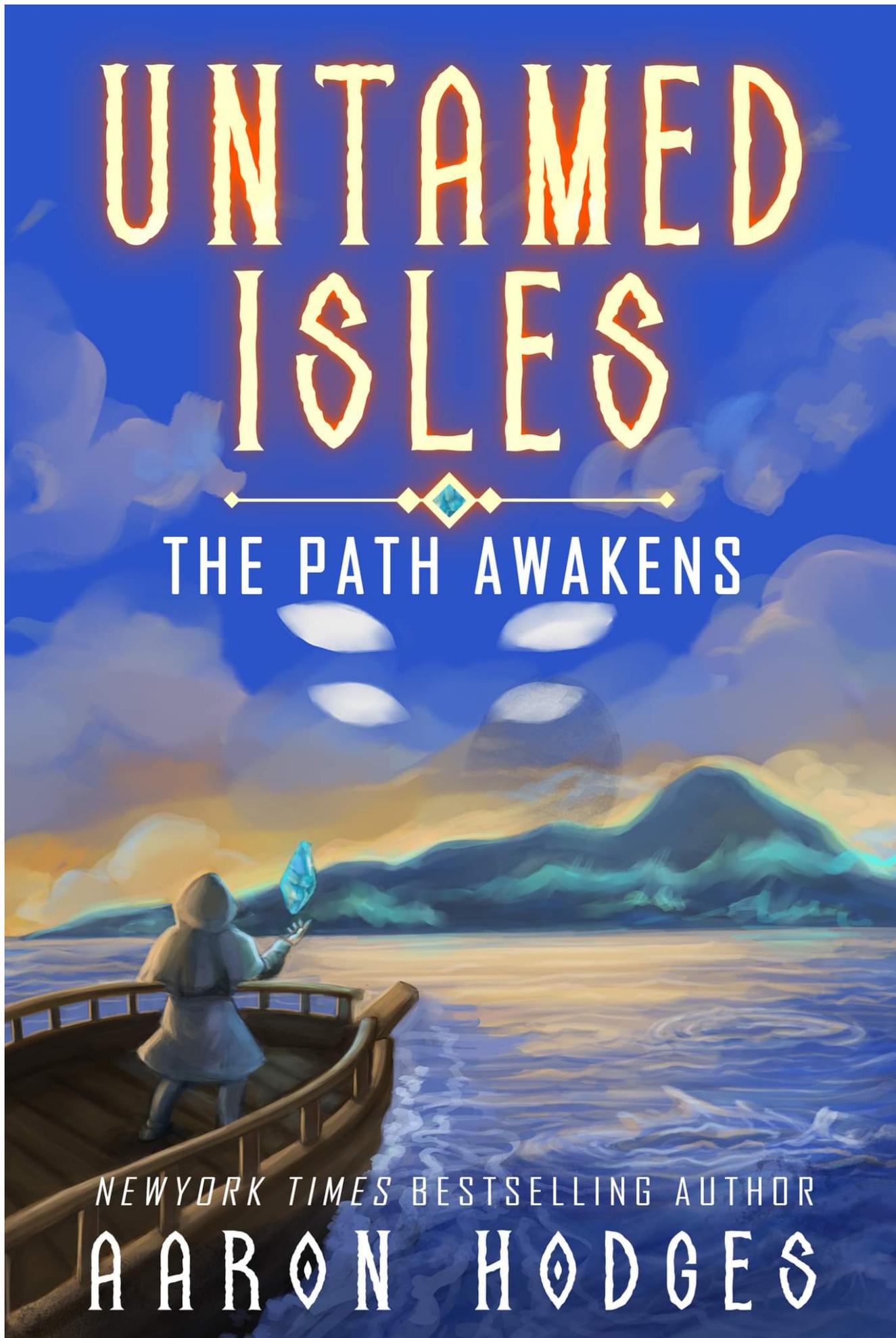


# UNTAMED ISLES

THE PATH AWAKENS



NEWYORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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## Prologue - Garret

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The ship rocked beneath Garret's feet as they rose on a swell, then plunged back down the other side. Water crashed over the stern as men screamed, helpless before the storm's wrath. Lightning flashed and Garret clung to the tiller as darkness momentarily gave way to light. Sailors stumbled in its glow, grasping at ropes and loose cargo, anything that might save them from an icy plunge.

Another surge swamped the hull and swept the deck, collecting broken rigging and men alike in its wake. Garret watched, helpless, as his people were dragged through the broken gunwales and into the waters of the Northern Sea.

The lightning faded, plunging them back into darkness, but the desperate faces remained stark in Garret's mind. The ocean roared and thunder boomed. And men screamed.

The storm had come upon them suddenly, appearing on the distant horizon and racing across the Northern Sea, turning calm waters to whitecapped waves before the crew of the *Blackbird* could flee. The rains had struck first, drenching every soul aboard the beleaguered ship. The winds had soon followed, tearing at their sails, slashing them to pieces. Last had come the waves, crashing upon the hull of the *Blackbird*, smashing oars from sailors' hands and hurling men from their feet.

Now, caught in the grips of the storm, there was nothing the crew could do but cling to their ropes and pray to the Old Gods of Riogachd for salvation.

Garret alone struggled on, hands locked to the tiller, desperate to see his crew to safety. Remnants of the sails still flapped from the mast, gifting the *Blackbird* just enough momentum for him to steer. Miles from shore, there would be no escaping to a shallow cove, no safe berth in which to shelter. Instead, Garret watched the darkness, seeking the next rolling behemoth.

Again and again, he directed their ship into the maw of those beasts, sending the *Blackbird* to scale the great mountains of water. His arms ached and the icy air burned his lungs, but still he fought to save those he could—even as he watched yet another loyal sailor washed to his doom.

He stumbled as the ship crashed down from the crest of the wave. Spray whipped across his face, stinging like a thousand tiny lead bullets. Garret gritted his teeth as the boom of lightning illuminated the next wave. It rolled towards them, white waters breaking at the peak, threatening to come crashing down upon the fragile vessel.

The *Blackbird* rocked as Garret threw himself against the tiller, and slowly, ponderously, the ship adjusted course. Holding steady, Garret closed his eyes, sucking in fresh lungfuls of air. This was it,

the end of his strength. The power of the storm had drained his energies, leaving him empty, listless, all but spent. How much longer must he hold on, pitting wit alone against the endless fury of the ocean?

Garret's eyes snapped open as another scream cut through the crashing of thunder. Water swirled, and another young sailor was gone, vanished into the icy depths. Desperately, Garrett sought out survivors. There were startlingly few—less than half of the fifty who had set out with him just a week before.

“Bastards!” Enraged, Garret hurled a curse at the capricious Old Gods.

In that moment, he cared nothing for their wrath. What more could the fickle Gods hurl at his tiny vessel, which had not already been unleashed?

*Boom!*

The world turned to white as lightning struck the *Blackbird's* bow, followed by the crackling of flames. Smoke swept across the deck and the stench of burning wood and iron filled the air, though the rain still poured down around them. Another *crack* followed. This time the lightning struck the ocean before the bow, sending a geyser of boiling water across the decks. The flames hissed as they were extinguished, even as another flash turned the world to white.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Garret clenched his eyes closed, but still the light seared them. His ears rang and he slumped against the rudder, bowed before the wrath of the Old Gods, his defiance seared away by the fury of salt and flame.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

The world rocked, caught in the grips of chaos. Eyes squeezed closed, Garret fell to his knees, no longer able to stand, to even think amidst the cacophony. Storm and ship and men, all were forgotten before the thundering, until all that remained was the burning, the ringing of thunder, the stars dancing before his closed eyes...

*Silence.*

The shift was so sudden, long seconds passed before Garrett realised that the world had changed. Even as he blinked his blinded eyes, he was convinced that the end had finally come, that as he'd crouched in terror, the storm had finally taken him and he had passed across the valley of death.

Finally though, his senses returned and he tasted the ash upon the air, felt the feathered touch of a breeze against his skin—and knew he had survived. An icy chill filled his lungs as he drew breath, the last of the stars fading from his vision. The remnants of his crew stood amongst the ruins of the rigging, between the shattered foremast and scattered rope. Each of them stared out into the darkness, at a world suddenly, impossibly becalmed.

Garret's fear turned to confusion as he stepped away from the tiller, looking to the sky. The storm had vanished as though it had never been, leaving the ship so still they might have been docked at the harbour back in Leith. Stars stretched across the sky, thousands upon thousands, the night clearer now than any he had witnessed in all his sixty years.

A half-moon had risen while the storm raged and now its light carved through the darkness. Heart still racing, Garret took another step and stumbled as the ship seemed to shift unnaturally beneath his feet. He found himself disorientated, as though he'd just stepped foot back on solid land after weeks at sea.

Frowning, Garrett lowered his eyes to the becalmed seas, seeking sign of survivors. Beyond the railings, he could see the brilliance of the moon and stars reflected in the still waters, except...those waters were too still, too quiet.

A shiver passed through Garret. Something had banished the storm, some power beyond mortal understanding. A boon, but one that could not be trusted. They needed to hoist what remained of their sails and limp back to harbour, before the storm's wrath—or something worse—appeared.

Leaving the tiller, he stumbled towards the nearest of his sailors. Blood ran from a gash across the man's forehead and he stared blankly into the distance as Garret approached. Claspings the man by the shoulder, Garret gave him a gentle shake.

"Mike, you okay?" he rasped, his voice rough from the salt spray.

Blinking, Mike turned to look at his captain. "What...?"

His eyes remained unfocused and Garret realised the stunned sailor would be no use to him for the moment. He turned to the next. One of the youths who'd joined for his first expedition crouched against the remaining Gunwale. Whispers carried through the night as the man rocked back and forth. Garret caught only snippets, but he knew before he reached the sailor that he would get no help there either.

His frustration building, Garret was about to turn to the rigging himself, when he glimpsed again the reflection of the stars upon the waters. He paused a moment, watching the way the moonlight played across the ocean.

*So calm*, he thought, even as he wondered...

Turning from the railing, he cast his eyes around the ship in search of a lantern, but all he could see lay broken amidst the debris. There was one he kept back at the stern, inside his cabin. It might have survived.

He stumbled back through the ruin of the *Blackbird*, his heart beginning to race as panic returned. Suddenly he feared they had not been saved at all, but rather plunged into some fresh hell. Some of his men were finally beginning to rise, groaning as they tested injured limbs, but Garret ignored them now. He reached his cabin door and dragged it open, then fumbled blindly for the unlit lantern he kept alongside the door.

When he finally encountered the handle, he lifted it from the ring, out into the moonlight. The glass remained blessedly intact, the pilot light still burning cheerfully within. He twisted the knob, feeding fresh oil to the flame, and light blossomed.

Struggling to swallow a lump lodged in his throat, Garret stepped towards the gunwales. His eyes were wide, straining to pierce the murky darkness, to make sense of what lay below.

But there was no sense to be found.

The *Blackbird* had not come to rest on becalmed waters. Beyond the railings of the ship, there was no water at all. The moonlight reflecting from all around came not from the seas, but land. A land of jagged, broken slopes of shining crystal, stretching out in all directions.

They had somehow found themselves stranded upon an island, without a drop of water in sight, where before there had been only the raging Northern Sea.

In Garret's hand, the lantern began to gutter as the last of the oil was consumed. He stared out at the dark land in which they had been marooned, waiting for the night to return to darkness. When it did, silence fell across the ship.

Then somewhere out amidst the endless crystal, a beast howled.

### Three Months Later

Crouched atop the walls of the palace grounds, Zachary Sicario watched as the lanterns below flickered into life. His keen eyes tracked the path of the young servant as she scurried through the manicured gardens, passing from one lamp to the next with hardly a pause for breath. Bit by bit, the night was pressed back by the shimmering lights, until the palace formed a bubble of luminescence against the oppressive gloom of Leith under nightfall.

*“Palace” might be overstating things a little,* Zachary thought to himself as the servant retired, her task complete for the evening.

In typical aristocratic fashion, the noble owners had done their best to replicate the grandeur of the royal palace back in Londinium. But Zach had visited those grounds himself on a number of occasions, albeit in a less than official capacity. He knew a cheap knockoff when he saw one.

The fountains might fill these gardens with the same joyful whispers as in Londinium, but he could see where the paint had begun to flake from the “marble” statues that adorned their waters. Neither did he see the same careless displays of wealth typical of the capital. No golden inlays around the windows and doors, no bejeweled eyes on the sculptures for passing thieves to filch. Even the gardens lacked the same carefully manicured touch as those found at the royal palace.

But then, that wasn’t so surprising. Zach had tried his hand at gardening since retiring; he knew well the difficulty of finding good help this far north. The dark spots infecting several of the rosebushes should have been trimmed days ago.

Breathing in the sweet scent of the flowers, Zach stifled a sigh. He’d enjoyed the quiet of his garden, the homely feel of the cottage in the highlands, far from Leith and its dark underbelly. He had thought this world far behind him. But alas, fate had other plans.

*“Mansion” is probably more appropriate,* Zach thought at last, returning to the task at hand.

In addition to the palpable absence of *real* wealth, the grounds of the mansion lacked one other key feature. Security. Zach had spent the past few days staking out the noble’s property. There were just two guards patrolling the outer gardens—and on this cold winter night, both had already retreated to the burning hearth in the guard house. Tonight would be like stealing gold from, well, a noble.

Still, years had passed since Zach’s last job, and he lingered a while longer in the shadows, watching for something he might have missed. Even with these rich aristocratic sorts, one had to take care.

*Especially with these sorts*, he reminded himself. Not even Zach's reputation would survive being caught by the likes of Roy Whitfield.

Truth be told, he'd been surprised to find the man's name on his list, given so many of the others were less than exemplary citizens. But then, the aristocracy always had considered themselves above the rules. It made sense that at least one of their kind would be interested in the Anomaly.

Three months had passed since the storm had wreaked havoc throughout the island kingdom of Riogachd. Most of the fishing fleet had been lost, either destroyed at sea or sunk in harbours across the nation, inundated by the waves that had swept the coast. Not even those citizens further inland had been safe, as storm surges broke through seawalls and rivers flooded lowland villages.

The storm of the century, people had called it. Yet even as the battered communities of Riogachd struggled to rebuild, the King's Royal Navy had been deployed not to the clean-up, but to a blockade deep in the Northern Sea. It hadn't been long before the rumours began to circulate. Whispers had spread about strange lights and disappearing ships, though of course the King's Council refused to even acknowledge the Anomaly.

Which, of course, meant half the populace was convinced the Council were covering up a secret treasure to be had out in the Northern Sea. No one could quite decide on the nature of that treasure—some claimed it must be a sunken galley carrying gold from the bank of Londinium, others that the princess's ship had gone missing on the raging seas.

As the days turned to weeks, the rumours had grown in size, and now people spoke of portals to another world, of islands of gold risen from the depths, of magic and sorcery, of the power to fulfil a man's greatest desires.

The last had really caught Zach's attention.

Eventually, some had tried to slip past the naval blockade. Amateurs for the most part, those with access to a skiff or steamer that had survived the storm. Some had been caught and after a public trial, hanged. The rest had never been seen again.

Now three months had passed, and the amateurs had long since given up trying to uncover the secrets of the Anomaly.

It was time for the professionals to give it a try.

On the wall of the mansion, Zach drew in a calming breath. A cloud drifted across the half-moon, darkening the sky but doing little to dim the lanternlight in the grounds below. But it finally stirred Zachary into action. He made one last check of the knives hidden on his person. Maybe they weren't as effective as one of the modern revolvers carried by the upper echelons of society, but they were useful in a pinch. And quiet.

Finally satisfied he was ready, Zach stepped from the wall and dropped to the ground with a soft *thump*. He crossed the lawns quickly, slipping from shadow to shadow, keeping as far from the lanterns as he could. Only once did he stop, when a sudden sound came from overhead. A flash of

white feathers was all he glimpsed of the owl as it dove; a moment later it rose on languid wings, the dark body of a rat clutched in its talons.

Frozen in the shadow of a plum tree, Zachary held his breath, waiting to see whether the creature had drawn the attention of the guards. Seconds slipped by and he found his mind drifting back to those first whispers of the Anomaly. He'd always had a nose for a good mystery, and he'd needed the distraction, something to divert his mind from his...other problems.

Even in retirement, Zachary was more resourceful than most of those clinging to the underbelly of Leith. It hadn't been hard to find a soldier from the royal navy. Most of those in the blockade around the Anomaly spent their off-duty days in Leith. It had been even easier to convince the man to join him at the local tavern. Several rounds of mead later, he'd had the truth straight from the horse's mouth.

It wasn't just strange lights and fog that had appeared out in the Northern Sea. An island *had* apparently risen from the depths, though not of gold. Even so, its appearance had caused much consternation amongst those back in Londinium, for it spoke of great power, one outside the Council's control.

But when the armada had tried to investigate further, a great mist had risen around the island, and those ships that had drifted too close had been swallowed up, vanishing without a trace.

The soldier had seen the lights himself, great flashes of white and green and blue in the darkness, but his ship had thankfully escaped unscathed by whatever phenomenon surrounded the place.

The entire island was a mystery wrapped in impossibility.

Just the sort of false hope a dying man could cling to with his last days.

Satisfied the guards had taken no notice of the owl's late-night snack, Zach departed the shadow of the plum tree and darted the rest of the way across the lawn before slipping into the alcove of a servants' entrance. There he drew out a set of picks and went to work on the door's lock. Thankfully, like the gardeners, good locksmiths were rare commodities this far north, and the lock was of a simple design.

His mind drifted as he worked, lingering as it so often had these last months on the mysterious island in the Northern Sea. Its appearance had proven propitious for the master thief, but one thing was still missing. The means to reach the island itself.

His answer had come steaming into the harbour just a week past—one of the great ocean steamers from Londinium. It hadn't been long before the rumours began to circulate about ship and a secret voyage.

Unfortunately, when Zach had gone looking for passage, the ship had already reached capacity.

A minor inconvenience for the likes of Zach Sicario.

The lock to the servants' entrance *clicked*. Zachary caught the door to keep it from opening unexpectedly. Reaching into his rucksack, he drew out a can of oil and carefully applied a drop to each hinge. Anything servant related tended to be lacking in upkeep, and wasn't about to be given away by squeaky hinges.

Allowing the door to swing open, Zachary took his first step into the mansion of Roy Whitfield. His had certainly been the most prominent name on the list that Zach had recovered from the expedition's secretary. That in itself had been a simple task—every good smuggler knew to keep records. A few bribes later and he'd been knocking on the right door. A bit of casual intimidation had gotten the list from the woman, but not even a sharp knife had been enough to add his name. The passengers had each been given a token to verify their place on the expedition.

With the ship set to leave port again in a matter of days, there was no time to make a replicate. So Zach had finally been forced to resort to somewhat desperate measures. Thus he found himself slipping through the gilded hallways of the Whitfield Palace.

*Definitely not a palace*, he reminded himself as he spotted a poorly painted portrait of the master of the house.

His padded boots made no noise on the stone floor and only a single lantern burned in each corridor, casting long shadows from the antiquated suits of armour standing at each corner. The palaces in Londinium had long since replaced such displays with marble sculptures carved by the great artists of the time. Their aristocrats wouldn't be caught dead with such outdated decorations.

Zach had "borrowed" a plan of the manor from the local builders guild the same day he'd taken the list from the secretary. Now he made his way quickly through the long corridors, making for the personal chambers of Roy himself. The man had left earlier in the night—no doubt off for a last visit to one of his many mistresses before the expedition on the morrow. The wife would be in her own chambers if Zach's source was to be believed. And they usually were.

Drawing to a stop outside a door, Zach paused only long enough to check his mental image of the manor's floorplan before entering. There was no need to oil the hinges here—no noble worth his name would allow his private chambers to be so poorly maintained—and the door swung open without so much as a whisper.

Darkness greeted the midnight thief. Zach drew a device from his pocket that he'd picked up in one of the market stalls on the docks. Imported from the continent, the brass "lighter" crackled as he flicked the trigger. A tiny flame appeared, casting a faint light through the room. He found himself grinning at the invention. If he'd had something like this in his days before Margery...

Zach shook himself. Now was not the time to get lost in old memories. The light revealed an empty poster bed in the corner. Breathing a sigh of relief, Zach slipped further into the room, stepping around a pair of satin upholstered armchairs and making for another doorway within the chamber. There his light revealed a second room, this one furnished with a mahogany desk and great crystal doors leading out to a personal balcony.

He went to work immediately, pulling each drawer carefully from the desk and checking them for hidden compartments before moving to the next. Most were filled with documents and other papers,

no doubt of great import to the running of a noble family. In a secret bottom of one drawer he found a small collection of gold crowns, but Zach knew a diversion when he saw one. It took another ten minutes to locate the true hiding place for the man's treasures.

Not the desk at all, but a hollow compartment in the leg of its matching chair. Within, he found a rolled-up scroll, but when he drew it out, a circular token made of brass slipped from the papers. At first glance it looked like a large coin, but in place of the king's image was a seven-pointed star. He grinned to himself and slipped the token into his pocket, then stood to leave.

Which was the exact moment Roy Whitfield chose to return to his chambers.

Zachary froze as he turned and found the middle-aged man standing in the entrance to the office. Roy Whitfield was not an impressive man, despite the satin waistcoat and breeches he wore. Not even the top hat perched on his balding head could give him the regal look that he so obviously desired.

The revolver he had pointed at Zach, however, was the real deal.

"What in the name of the Old Gods are you doing in my chambers?" the man asked, his tone surprisingly polite given the circumstances.

"Ahh, would you believe I'm with the local tax collector?"

"Tax collector..." the man repeated, his brain still obviously trying to process the discovery of a stranger in his house. His eyes drifted to the broken chair lying at Zach's feet and anger finally replaced his confusion. "Lying bastard, you're a thief!"

Zach flinched as the gun in the man's hand lifted an inch, but thankfully his finger did not slip. Carefully, Zachary raised his hands.

"Okay, okay, you got me," he said. "Easy, wouldn't want us to be having any accidents, would we?"

The scowl Roy wore suggested he wouldn't mind at all. He advanced into the room and jabbed the revolver in the direction of the chair.

"Where is it?" he snapped. "Hand it over now, or I'll put a bullet between your eyes."

Judging by his trembling hand, Zach doubted Roy could make that shot. But at this range, he would certainly hit *something*, and Zach wasn't ready to die just yet.

He had at least a few months more, if the physicians were to be believed.

"Do you think the rumours are true, Roy?" he asked suddenly, surprising even himself.

The question certainly surprised Roy Whitfield. "What are you talking about, man?" he snapped.

Arms still raised, Zach attempted a shrug. "About the magic," he replied. "So many rumours, some of 'em have to be true, don't you think? I know, I know, I'm clinging to straws, but the damned physicians don't exactly overflow with solutions, ya know?"

This time several long moments passed before the noble replied. “Are you mad?” he asked, before a sneer crossed his lips. “Only fools believe in magic. Still, I’ll have my token back, thank-you-very-much. Whatever *is* out there, the Council will pay me handsomely when I bring it to them.”

“I’m sure they would,” Zach replied, his hands dropping an inch, fingers bending towards the hidden knives in his sleeves.

“They will,” Roy replied, licking his lips. His eyes shone with excitement. Confident he had the situation under control, he was hardly paying attention to his unexpected guest now. “When I return, my exile will be reversed. I will finally be able to leave this hellhole.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Leith’s not so bad...” Zachary began, when a voice carried to them from the corridor.

“My lord, are you alright? I heard voices!”

Scowling, Roy glanced from Zach in the direction of the unseen hallway. It was all the distraction Zachary needed. Roy’s mouth was already open, but whatever he’d been about to call out never left his lips as a knife slammed hard into his chest. A surprised look crossed the noble’s face and he staggered slightly, his gaze falling to the hilt embedded in his waistcoat. Belatedly, he fumbled for the handle, before the last of the strength left him.

Zach darted forward and caught the body as it fell, lowering it gently to the floor instead. Rising, he quietly cleared his throat before adopting his best impersonation of the dead man’s voice.

“Yes, everything is fine in here,” he grunted. “Please, close the door and leave me be.”

A long moment passed as Zach held his breath. “Yes, my lord,” finally came the reply.

Somewhere in the adjoining room, a door clicked closed. Silence returned to the night. Breathing out a sigh of relief, Zach turned his attention to the body at his feet.

“Well that was sloppy,” he admonished himself. The infamous Zachary Sicario would have never let an old aristocrat sneak up on him like that.

At least the maid had chosen now to check after their lord. Zach was in no shape for a game of cat and mouse with the city watch. As it was, he doubted few would mourn the loss of Roy Whitfield. And he had what he’d come for.

*Yes, altogether not a bad outcome,* he thought to himself as he crossed to the balcony doors.

Whistling softly to himself, Zach slipped out into the night.

## Chapter 2 - Clayton

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Clayton Krueger was puffing hard by the time he arrived at the port. A flurry of sound greeted him as he stumbled to a stop. Sailors shouted from the docks below and wooden wagon wheels rumbled across the bricked streets, loud enough to drown out the thundering of his heart in his ears.

Bending in two, he struggled to recover his breath, and choked as the unpleasant combination of rotting fish and tar assailed his senses. Eyes watering from the stench and the morning chill, he forced himself to straighten. Where he stood in the shadows of an alleyway, the passersby had not noticed his distress, but Clayton's father had taught him to be better composed.

*A gentleman must always maintain his poise, the oft-repeated words were a mantra to him by now. Doubly so for those of us not blessed with the blood of our good aristocrats.*

The second part was usually spoken with scorn, but that did not detract from the lesson, and Clayton took the opportunity to straighten his woollen overcoat before stepping from the alley.

The tall buildings neighbouring the harbour cast long shadows across the street, the winter sun still hidden behind their bricked exteriors. Studying the wagons and occasional motorcoach parked along the docks, he finally spotted the one belonging to the Krueger family. As he watched, a man in an overcoat that fit far more comfortably than Clayton's own stepped from the vehicle.

Clayton ducked back into the alley as his brother's gaze swept the street. Had Damien noticed his pursuit? Surely not—Clayton hadn't even been following most of the way. He'd lost the motorcoach in the busy streets of Leith and been forced to cut through the back alleys to arrive here in time. Unless...

Reaching into his pocket, Clayton toyed with the brass token he'd taken from the packet of documents in Damien's desk. Had his brother noticed its absence? According to the papers that had accompanied the token, it would grant its owner passage on an expedition set to leave today. Unless Clayton was mistaken, that meant Damien would be turned away from the ship sitting at the docks below.

And Clayton would be able to board in his brother's stead.

His heart quickened at the thought. Damien would be angry at his subterfuge. But Clayton was tired of living in his brother's shadow. It was past time the elder of the Krueger brothers did his duty to their family, and let Clayton take his turn in the world. At twenty years of age, he should have had his chance long ago. Damien certainly hadn't lingered—on his eighteenth birthday, a pair of iron shackles couldn't have kept him from leaving Leith.

Clayton found himself smiling. Yes, it would do Damien good to take his turn working with their father. As for Clayton, well, he knew little of archaeology and treasure hunting—but then, nor had Damien when he'd snuck away on his first expedition.

Glancing out from the alley, he saw his brother leave the coach and head down the steps to the docks. A line had already formed beside the giant steamboat with '*The Rising Tide*' painted on its side, the other voyagers obviously eager to set off. Two muscled sailors stood beside the steamer, checking each passenger's token before waving them past; Damien would be in for a shock when he discovered his own was missing.

On the docks below, Damien joined the queue waiting alongside the ship and Clayton slipped from the shadows. Leaving the alley, he strode across the street, doing his best to blend with the crowd as he searched for a better vantage point.

Finding a dock that neighboured the steamer, Clayton settled on a half-sunken fishing ship. Like many of the vessels in port when the great storm struck, its hull was cracked open like an egg and half its deck was submerged in the waters of the harbour. Even three months later, the clean-up continued across much of the kingdom, and those vessels deemed irredeemable had been left to rot while efforts were focused on better prospects.

Clambering onto the section of boat still above the waterline, Clayton looked across at Damien's vessel. The steamer dwarfed the fishing ship, its twin smokestacks stretching to the height of the terraced townhouses lining the shore. Black smoke was already puffing from each chimney as the crew stoked the engines in preparation for the journey. The great wheels powered by those engines were still, but even these loomed over the other ships in port.

A shout carried across the waters, drawing Clayton's attention back to the passengers waiting to board the ocean liner. A woman stood before the pair of sailors, gesturing wildly in their faces. Clayton couldn't pick out her words on the wind, but the reaction of the guards was all the interpretation he needed. While one remained at his post, the second stepped forward, catching the woman around the waist and hoisting her onto his shoulder.

A high-pitched shriek echoed from the nearby buildings as the woman was sent flying, followed by a splash as her unexpected dunk disturbed the calm waters. There was a moment's silence as all eyes in the harbour turned to where the woman had disappeared beneath the surface, before she finally surfaced, coughing and spluttering.

"Guess she didn't have her ticket," Clayton murmured, a smile tugging at his lips as he saw Damien approaching the front of the line. He reached into his pocket and drew out the token, running it between his fingers in anticipation.

The line of passengers kept their eyes carefully averted from the woman as she dragged herself onto a neighbouring dock. Closer now to where Clayton hid, he could see this was not a woman of class. Far from the lavish gowns of the aristocracy—or even landed gentry such as himself—she wore a pair of men's pants and tunic, with a dagger on her hip.

Clayton frowned as she stalked past his hiding place. Those on the docks with his brother looked to be a rougher crowd as well, most carrying either a knife, sabre or pistol openly on their belts. Suddenly, Clayton found himself wondering what manner of expedition this was. He'd assumed it was another voyage into the highlands, where Damien had spent much of the last seven years.

*It must be*, Clayton reassured himself. Many of the clans still resisted crown rule, after all. The weapons must be a precaution, in case of attacks.

And yet Clayton couldn't suppress a shudder. He carried a simple rucksack with a few simple supplies, but no weapon—not even a steak knife. Standing in the shadows of the harbour, a stolen token in his pocket, Clayton was a long way out of his comfort zone.

And he hadn't even left Leith yet.

On the other dock, Damien finally reached the front of the queue. Clayton watched, breath held, as the guards barred his brother's path while he searched the satchel hanging over his shoulder, presumably for his papers and token. Even from a dozen yards away, Clayton could read the confusion on his brother's face. Despite his earlier doubts, he found himself grinning again. Surely if he could outmanoeuvre his famed explorer brother, he could survive a little expedition in the north.

Finally, Damien looked up from the satchel and spread his hands. The guards exchanged a look before advancing on him. Damien didn't even try to avoid them. Instead, his voice rang out as they grabbed him.

“Dianna!”

Where the earlier woman's insults hadn't so much as ruffled the guards, the name froze them in place. Releasing Damien, they exchanged a glance, while the elder of the Krueger brothers folded his arms, one finger tapping his elbow.

*No, no, no...*

Clayton's heart was suddenly thundering. Surely Damien couldn't sweet-talk his way out of this one. Yet as he watched, a woman appeared at the railings of the steamship. Dressed in a woollen trench coat with a sabre on one hip, revolver on the other, she looked more the part of pirate than sailor. The tricorne hat holding her greying locks in place only served to enhance the image.

Her gaze lingered on Damien from the upper deck. He stared back, the hint of a smile tugging at his lips, before finally she waved a hand in a curt gesture. Immediately, the guards snapped to attention and stepped aside. Nodding his thanks, Damien strode up the ramp onto the steamship.

Clayton slumped to the wooden boards of the broken fishing ship, his own doubts forgotten in the face of his disappointment. So much for outsmarting his brother. Just as he always had, Damien was one step ahead. Dianna, was obviously the captain of the vessel; he must have arranged passage with her personally. Typical.

The token rang like a bell as it slipped from Clayton's fingers and struck the deck. He watched as it spun before settling against the wooden boards. He wanted to pick it up and hurl it into the harbour, but as he reached for it, Clayton hesitated. Glancing back at the ship, he watched as Damien disappeared down a stairwell beneath the deck.

*Maybe...*

The guards didn't appear to have a list of passengers, only the tokens. If Clayton boarded while his brother remained below, no one would be the wiser that he didn't belong. And if he avoided his brother's notice until they were out to sea...well, by then it would be too late to turn back.

Clayton's heart thrummed to the beat of the distant steam engine as he plucked the token back off the deck. Leaping back to the dock, he set off at a run. The passengers waiting on the opposite berth had dwindled to a trickle now, the last of them moving quickly to present their tokens and board. Pounding up the steps, Clayton darted along the street to reach the next set of stairs.

Only there did he slow, taking the chance to compose himself. Straightening his overcoat, he squared his shoulders and set his jaw. He would need to be convincing if he wanted to pull this off. Ahead, the twin chimneys of *The Rising Tide* puffed black smoke as the great paddle wheel began to turn.

*You can do this.*

He lifted a foot, only for a dark cloaked man to push past him.

"Sorry, kid," a voice called back to him as the stranger thumped down the wooden steps. "In a bit of a rush!"

Thrown off-balance, Clayton scowled after the man, before the sounding of a horn snapped him back to his more pressing concern. Men and women dressed in the tatty clothing of sailors raced about the steamship, readying ropes and raising the mainsail that would complement the power of the steam wheel.

It looked as though the ship would be departing any second. Cursing, Clayton abandoned all pretence of dignity and raced down the dock. Ahead, the dark-cloaked man produced his token with a flourish, then seemed to hesitate at the sound of Clayton's approach. One of the guards reached out to take the token, but the man stumbled, the token slipping from his fingers. Quick as a flash, his other hand snatched it from the air. Grinning, he held it back from the sailor.

"I believe the kid was ahead of me," he was saying as Clayton thumped up.

Unsure whether to deride or thank the man, Clayton settled for a nod as he stepped around the stranger and presented his token. The pair of guards looked none too pleased by the theatrics, but they took his token without a word and gestured for him to hurry.

Putting the stranger behind him, Clayton started up the ramp. Only as he felt the harsh vibrations of the steam engine beneath his feet did his earlier reservations come rushing back.

Suddenly his heart was racing. Needles prickled his scalp as doubts filled his mind. What was he doing, betraying his brother like this, abandoning his family? This wasn't him. He had no place on this expedition, not with dubious sailors who threw women into the harbour, nor the passengers and their knives and swords and guns.

"You moving, kid?"

It was the stranger behind him. Twice now he'd called Clayton a kid. The condescension rankled him, grating against his own doubts and reticence. That was how everyone viewed him, Damien, his parents, even this dark-cloaked stranger. As a child.

Clenching his fists, Clayton flashed a glare over his shoulder, then turned and strode the rest of the way up the ramp.

It was past time he found his own path.

## Chapter 3 - Zachary

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Zach hesitated at the foot of the ramp, watching as the young man disappeared behind the rusting gunwales. The pale tufts of facial hair on his chin suggested he wasn't long out of his teen years. His blond hair was cut short in the style popular amongst the gentry class, while the pricy but practical coat seemingly confirmed his rank. Not in itself a dark mark against the kid, but neither was it a glowing commendation. Coming from more humble origins, their parents having worked their way into the good graces of the nobility, children of gentry tended to be a mixed bag, fluctuating from wildly arrogant to surprisingly down to earth.

For himself, Zachary was surprised to find one so young on the expedition, but there was no time to linger on the strangeness of the encounter. *The Rising Tide* was already pulling away from the docks as Zachary topped the ramp and stepped aboard. Behind him, the two sailors removed the last ropes from their mooring and leapt the widening gap to re-join the rest of the crew.

Zach watched the port of Leith drifted away, satisfied with his night's work. Any number of eventualities might have thrown him off-schedule, not least of which was the body he'd left behind in the Whitfield manor. He'd half-expected the authorities to be waiting at the docks, but clearly no one else in the household had known about the missing documents that would have pointed them to *The Rising Tide*.

He moved to the stern and leaned against the gunwales for one last look at the city. Tall towers loomed at either end of the harbour, protection against the pirates that had once roamed the eastern seaboard, while the spires of castle hill rose in the distant sky. Terraced houses lined the shore, their slate rooves and narrow living quarters were more characteristic of the south than the thatched cottages of the highlands. Each stretched up three or four storeys to overlook the quiet waters. He and Margery had once considered renting one of those upper apartments, with their pristine views and morning sunshine, before they'd settled on the cottage in the countryside...

*Six months.*

The words of the physician cut through the cheerful memories. That had been three months ago now, a few days before the storm had struck the kingdom. He'd gone to the woman when he'd started coughing up blood, at Margery's insistence. How he regretted that now. Better not to know, to live his last few months in piece, rather than suffer the torture of waiting, of knowing.

Shivering, Zach gave his home city a final nod, then forced his thoughts to the path ahead. He had few misgivings about the likely fate of this expedition. The other passengers on *The Rising Tide* might believe they were setting off in search of treasure and riches, but that was the problem with relying on gossip and rumour. They had a habit of sending men to early graves.

But Zach's gravestone had already been inscribed, its date set just a few months hence. The physician had said he needed a miracle. Well, he would find it on this mystical island.

Or die trying.

The other passengers packed the main platform of the steamship, but there was a raised upper deck that looked to be quiet, so Zach made his way towards a nearby stairwell, eager to avoid the jostling. The numbers surprised him, given the uncertainty of their destination. He would like to meet whichever captain had convinced so many to part with their hard-earned gold on such a gamble. They were clearly a man after his own heart.

Climbing the stairs, Zach found there was yet a third level to the ship, though this was smaller, consisting only of the bridge from which the captain steered. Large glass windows looked out in all directions, and he glimpsed a shapely figure moving inside, hands on an enormous wheel.

*A woman, then*, he thought to himself, tucking that information away for later.

For now though, Zach took advantage of the quiet of the upper deck and moved to the front of the vessel. The hull lifted beneath him as the steamship rounded the rocky point that sheltered the harbour of Leith and made for open seas. Cries followed as the ship dropped into the first of the ocean swells, sending water splashing over the sides and drenching those standing nearest the gunwales.

Zach chuckled at the chaos. He recognised a few of the passengers from his days in the underground, but many other faces were new to him. He'd been out of the game too long. Studying the dark-cloaked rogues that would be his rivals, Zach couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy. Those below still carried the energy of youth, beards untouched by age, their lives stretching out far in front of them, while Zach...

With an effort of will, he forced his attention to the smaller cluster of men and women which had gathered near the stern. Dressed in expensive overcoats and furs, these were the landed gentry. He spotted the kid near the front; one of the few standing alone. Zach wondered what madness had drawn one so young to such an uncertain voyage, then forced the thought aside. There was enough to worry him without concerning himself with the rich offspring of some merchant.

The ship was chugging along at a decent pace now, the gentle thrumming of the engine radiating up through his boots. The whirr and clanking of the giant wheel drowned out the crashing of the waves as it propelled them forward. For a while, Zach allowed his mind to drift. Despite the clear morning, fog marred the eastern horizon, the heavy clouds hiding any hint of their destination.

*The impossible island*, Zachary thought to himself, then snorted.

It still seemed a fantasy. If not for the quality of his sources, he wouldn't have given the rumours a second thought. Even now he wasn't sure what to believe. Maybe they would slip beyond the lines of the naval blockade, only to find the entire thing a fiction, an invention by the King's Council to distract from the disaster of the storm.

*What a disappointment that would be*, Zach found himself thinking. *Then you'd have to go back.*

Back to Leith, back to those he'd abandoned, to his responsibilities.

Back a slow, protracted death.

Finding his jaw clenched, Zach reached for his pipe. No point lingering on what he couldn't change. Drawing out a small container of tobacco, he filled the pipe and lit it with the brass lighter before returning his gaze to his fellow passengers, but found his gaze drawn to the crew instead.

The men who moved about the deck of *The Rising Tide* were far from your typical sailors. They were well-muscled and scarred, the sort he'd come to recognise as ex-military. He suspected the captain had hired mercenaries as extra muscle for the expedition, in the eventuality that any passengers proved difficult. Zach couldn't blame her; having seen the manifest, he wouldn't have trusted most of the names aboard as far as he could throw them. Which was far shorter than guard had thrown the woman into the harbour.

Away to starboard, the sun rose slowly through the clouds as *The Rising Tide* steamed northward. They would continue all day along the eastern coast, before veering east towards their true destination under the cover of night.

Puffing on his pipe, Zach considered his fellow passengers. What could have drawn so many on such a voyage? The rumours of new lands to explore were tempting, it was true. For the young and eager of the gentry class, the chance to make a name for themselves was a strong motivation.

Zach's former associates though...members of Leith's underground were driven by baser needs. They could sniff out the opportunity for gain like a bloodhound to the fox. The fact the council had involved themselves, using a naval blockade to keep the people of Riogachd from the Anomaly, well, that would only have encouraged the men and women Zach had known in his younger days.

Clanging came from a nearby stairwell as another passenger climbed the iron steps. A woman appeared on the landing, hesitating as she saw Zach standing at the railing. Her ocean-blue eyes narrowed, watching him from beneath a fringe of scarlet hair. After several heartbeats, she finished her ascent and crossed to the opposite railing, her tall hessian boots clicking loudly on the metal floor. Like the other women Zach had seen so far aboard the ship, she wore men's trousers and a functional greatcoat. Unlike the other women—most of whom had come as part of larger groups—the parting of her coat revealed the hilt of a pistol worn on her belt.

The sight of the weapon made Zach's fingers twitch, but he offered her a polite nod rather than reaching for his knives. Given the unusual mix of classes onboard, tensions were already high. No need for misunderstandings before they even set sight on the island. The captain had already demonstrated her readiness to deal with unruly customers, and the swim would be much farther now than that of the last passenger to cause a scene.

"Fine morning, ma'am," Zach greeted the stranger instead, adopting his best imitation of a gentleman.

The woman flicked him a second glance but did not reply. Judging from the fiery hair and pale skin, she probably came from the highlands. Most clans spoke the national dialect nowadays, but those farther north still kept to themselves, holding to tradition and trading only occasionally with the south. He was just beginning to wonder whether the woman hailed from one such group when she finally spoke.

“It would be finer without the company,” she said with a gesture at those huddled below. Her accent, each word running together without pause, confirmed her highland origin.

Zach took a last puff from his pipe then emptied the bowl and tucked it back into his jacket. Below, some of the crowd had dispersed—presumably to their cramped quarters in the hull—but plenty of others lingered. They crowded the railings, eyes fixed to the east, as though the Anomaly might appear from the clouds at any moment. Zach chuckled as another surge of water splashed over the side, drenching the unwary.

“I’ll admit, our fellows don’t seem to be of the greatest renown,” he replied, allowing a touch of highland twang into his words. “Though I am sure what they lack in experience they more than make up for in their youthful enthusiasm.”

“Opportunistic thieves and treasure hunters.” The woman’s response was curt and to the point.

“The usual sort, in my experience,” Zach replied, then narrowed his eyes, casting another glance at the woman. “You, however, appear to be something of an anomaly. What brings an esteemed lady of the highlands into the presence of such rogues and scoundrels?”

The hint of a smile tugged at the woman’s lips. It slipped away as her gaze drifted to the east. “There are questions for which I need answers,” she said at last. Zach frowned, but the woman shook herself before he could press the point, her eyes returning to him. “And what of yourself, stranger?” she asked, stepping from the railing. “In general, I find southerners easy to read. But you... are not like the others.”

Zach’s pulse quickened under the woman’s scrutiny. There was a glimmer in her eyes, a hint of darkness, of understanding. He shivered, pasting a false grin on his lips.

“Oh you know, just another thief from Leith looking to make a name for himself,” he said, his voice taking on a commoner’s accent.

“I see.” The woman eyed him a moment longer. “And what is your name, lowlander?”

Zachary hesitated before giving the answer. “Zachary Sicario.”

“Willow,” the woman replied, then leaned her head to the side, as if curious. “Tell me, Zachary Sicario. What are you running from?”

A chill breeze blew across Zach’s neck. He froze in place, heart suddenly racing as he found those sapphire eyes watching him. A denial was already on his lips, but those eyes told him she already knew the truth—or at least a part of it. How had she seen through his façade?

“If I am running, it is from a fate I cannot escape,” he said softly, finally managing to shake himself. Though he could not regain the easy smile.

“No fate is set in stone, lowlander,” came the woman’s reply, “though perhaps you do better to throw yourself from this ship, than to face what waits for us within the storm. There are tales of our destination, amongst your people, and mine.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your legends speak of a war amongst the gods, of a great destruction amongst the lands of humanity.”

“I’m having vague flashbacks to some old priests and their sermons. This war, it was the reason they left the lands of Riogachd right? Went off to some other realm to continue their battle, if I recall correctly.” He snorted. “Don’t tell me you believe in that nonsense up north. I thought you highlanders were more sensible than that.”

“We do not accept your old gods, no,” Willow replied, “but our legends also speak of a war between our peoples, of a clan steeped in dark magics that were banished from our lands.”

Zachary shook his head. “What does this have to do with anything?”

“I do not know, lowlander,” she said in answer, her eyes turning to the eastern horizon. “Only that we are warned to watch for their return.”

She fell silent at that, and Zach found himself thinking of their own mythology. Did not the southland priests warn of the return of the Old Gods, and the wrath that would fall upon the unbelievers?

Abruptly, he shook himself. What was he doing? Magical islands were one thing, fearing the vengeance of mythical Gods was another thing entirely. A hush hung over the ship as it rose on the ocean swells, sea spray falling between them, but the woman said no more. Finally Zach shrugged.

“Then I shall leave you to your watch, ma’am,” he said, refining his accent and offering a nod.

He cast her words from his mind as he turned away. There was enough to worry him without concerning himself with the affairs of gods. He set his eyes instead on the stairs to the bridge.

It was time he met whoever was in charge of this mad expedition.

## Chapter 4 - Clayton

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Standing on the bow of *The Rising Tide*, fear and excitement warred in Clayton's heart.

A part of him could hardly believe he'd done this: sneaking away from his family, smuggling himself onto a ship, setting off on an adventure for lands unknown.

It was exhilarating.

It was also terrifying.

Watching the vast waters, Clayton found his knees trembling, blood pounding so loudly in his ears that he hardly heard the murmurs of his fellow passengers. Each *thump* of a wave upon the hull, every sudden lurch, even the harsh cawing of the gulls overhead had his heart clenched in a vice. Only the white-knuckled grip he maintained on the railings kept him from crumbling where he stood.

He'd kept his head low, boarding *The Rising Tide*, lest his brother discover him before they left the port. What a disappointment that would have been, being sent back to the family manor before the expedition had even begun.

Now it was all Clayton could manage to keep himself from running to his brother with his tail between his legs.

Another wave crashed over the bow. Clayton winced as icy droplets lashed his flesh, crouching lower against the meagre shelter offered by the gunwales. Unlike the paying passengers, he had no cabin to which he could retreat—not unless he truly wanted to announce himself to his brother. And whatever his fears, Clayton wasn't that desperate. At least, not yet.

Drawing his overcoat closer about himself, he huddled against the gunwale and tried to ignore the shivering that had begun in his extremities. The sun was dipping lower on the western horizon. Winter solstice was fast approaching and the days were unbearably short now, even when he'd had the warmth of the family solar to enjoy.

With each passing hour, the seawater slowly seeped its way through his thick coat. It would be long before what remained of his excitement turned to misery.

Teeth chattering, Clayton forced himself to concentrate on his fellow passengers. He'd placed himself near the fore of *The Rising Tide*, where other members of the landed gentry had gathered. In their colourful silk and cotton clothing, it hadn't been difficult to distinguish them from the ruffians who mingled around the rest of vessel. Though Clayton had to admit, many of their outfits seemed somewhat impractical for an expedition. The thin cloaks worn by many had not lasted long

in the harsh winds before their owners had been forced below deck. Clayton's woollen overcoat might not have been the latest fashion, but it was certainly practical in the chill climate.

The pair standing closest to Clayton seemed better equipped than most, with heavy felt cloaks and hoods lined with fur. Unlike most other passengers, these two had remained at the railings long past the point when Clayton's fingers had begun to lose their feeling. Wondering what madness could keep the two out in these conditions, he quietly edged his way closer to them.

A frown creased the woman's pale features as she stared towards the east, blonde locks fluttering beneath her hood. Clayton could read the signs of tension she carried about her, the way her delicate fingers tapped at the railing, the tightness to her lips. Every thump of the ship as it fell down a wave caused her to flinch and her eyes to flicker closed, before she bared her teeth and forced them open again. She was trying to hide her nerves, but her expression made it seem as though she expected at any moment for a kraken to rise from the depths and swallow them whole.

Her companion could not have been of starker contrast. He kept his hood down, revealing jet-black hair carefully styled into spikes. Clayton wondered if that was the reason he kept his hood off, though surely that would be madness in these conditions. As much as it screamed out his common blood, Clayton himself had long ago pulled the woollen cap from his knapsack to fend off the chill.

However, it was not the man's lack of sensibilities to the conditions that stood in contrast to the woman at his side, but the wild grin he wore. Showing none of the woman's fear, he looked to the east with a gleam of excitement in his eyes. More than that, there was...expectation in that look.

"I'm telling you, Amelia," the man's words carried on the wind. "This is it. This time we'll find it, I can *feel* it..."

Clayton stumbled as another wave rocked the ship, and missed whatever else the man had to say. When he finally righted himself and cast a furtive glance at the couple, he found they'd returned their gaze to the distant clouds. The woman's face was hidden now by her hood, but her hand had fallen to her side, where the hilt of a sword poked from beneath her cloak.

Clayton was about to interrupt their contemplations to ask what they were searching for, but at that moment, a voice spoke from behind him.

"So, brother, you made it after all."

The hairs on Clayton's neck stood on end as he turned and found his older brother settled at the railings alongside him. Damien was several inches taller Clayton's own five-foot-seven, and better built as well, his shoulders and arms well-muscled. Clayton, on the other hand, took after their mother's slim figure.

Swallowing his surprise, Clayton forced himself to look into his brother's blue eyes, expecting anger. Instead, Damien wore an easy smile on his handsome face. His finely chiselled features and long black hair had won him plenty of female admirers in his teen years. That, at least, Damien had gotten

from their mother—their father might have dragged himself up by the breeches from poverty, but he was a long stretch from good-looking.

“Wh...what?” Clayton managed at last, before finally registering what his brother had said. “What do you mean, ‘made it’?”

Damien laughed at that, the sound full of mirth. “I wasn’t sure whether you had the nerve. I know how Mother and Father coddle you.” His grin spread as he slapped Clayton on the back. “But look at you, ready to leave the nest after all!”

His words left Clayton in a stunned silence. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, incapable of completing a sentence. What was Damien saying? He’d acted of his own accord...hadn’t he?

“I took your token,” he managed finally, his wits lying in shredded fragments. “You didn’t...couldn’t...*how?*” he finished at last, the word bursting from him in a shout that was all but lost in the rumblings of the engine.

“I hoped the dropped hints and sneaking about might pique your interest,” Damien replied easily. Leaning against the railing, he gestured to the waters ahead. “So tell me, brother, how are you enjoying your first adventure?”

Damien’s words finally pierced the fog of Clayton’s shock. Understanding dawned. Damien had known Clayton would search his belongings. He had wanted him to find the token. That was why he’d been able to board *The Rising Tide* without the precious boarding pass—he’d been expecting it.

Inexplicably, Clayton felt a wave of anger towards his brother. This was meant to be his first step into the world, an escape from the shadow of his parents and the life they had planned out for him.

Instead, he’d stepped from their web, into a new one of Damien’s creation.

“I...I...*that* was why you came back?” Clayton said finally. “I thought you wanted to reconnect after all these years.” His volume rose with each word. His fingers tightened around the railings until it hurt. “After you abandoned *me*,” he finished, his voice dropping to a whisper with those last words.

He knew his anger was irrational. That he *had* wanted to escape. But he couldn’t help but feel manipulated. Drawing in a breath, he forced himself to face his brother again, expecting Damien to brush away his anger with a wave of his hand.

But Damien had lost his familiar smile. He frowned as he contemplated Clayton. The silence stretched out between them, until Damien finally returned his gaze to the ocean. Clayton belatedly realised that the sun had begun to set as they spoke, its light staining horizon behind them red.

“I’m sorry, brother,” Damien said, the words surprising Clayton. He straightened, eyes still on the dark waters. “It’s strange; I was never at ease in Leith. All my life, I felt as a stranger in my own city, working with Father. It wasn’t until my first expedition that I found myself. It was like coming home, I imagine, for most.” He sighed. “I do want to reconnect, brother. I should not have stayed away so

long. But all this, I only wanted to share my world with you. The excitement of the unknown, the thrill of discovery.”

Clayton hesitated as his brother fell silent. “Oh.” He frowned. “The few times I’ve seen you the past few years, you’ve never talked about them. Your expeditions, I mean.”

Damien shrugged, tucking his hands into the pockets of his overcoat. “My first expedition, the college in Leith had organised a dig in the highlands. On an island in one of the lochs up there.” He offered a hesitant smile. “They were long days, and longer nights. Many times I wished I’d never snuck out on Mother and Father. But it made me the man I am today.”

Shivering, Clayton drew his coat tighter as the winter winds howled through the chimney above them. Clayton could remember that time too. At twelve years of age, he had been confused to find his brother gone. His parents had been out of their minds with worry, too occupied by the disappearance of their eldest son to worry about their younger’s fears. But seeing the raw excitement in his brother’s eyes today, the sheer life he carried about him, it was easy to forget those old fears.

“So where are we going now?” he asked at last.

The smile fell from Damien’s face and he looked away—though not before Clayton caught the glint in his eyes.

“That first expedition changed my life in more ways than one, little brother,” he replied, the softness gone from his tone. “I met friends, colleagues, and...others. But there was one mystery I uncovered in that place that I never shared with anyone. One I could never solve.”

With the words, Damien drew his hands from his pockets, lifting something up to the light of a nearby lantern. Squinting, Clayton leaned closer, struggling to make out what his brother held. It was a piece of crystal—maybe quartz—its clouded surface flickering in the firelight.

“What is it?” Clayton asked, his curiosity piqued. He leaned closer, trying to get a closer look at the crystal.

Damien grinned. “That’s just it, isn’t it? No one knows. Long ago, there was an ancient people who lived on the highland lakes. They built houses on stilts over the waters, single chambers large enough to home entire families. But a thousand years ago, all trace of their presence vanished. Without the people to maintain them, their houses collapsed back into the lakes, forming tiny islands—and tombs in which their secrets remain hidden to this day. I uncovered this on my first expedition, in the ruins of one such island.”

Clayton looked from the stone to his brother. “Then shouldn’t it be in a museum somewhere?”

“Probably,” Damien replied with a shrug, the smile still fixed to his face. “It’s quartz, but of a sort unlike any found in the highlands. It seems to have been shaped and polished by human hands, so its owner obviously held it in some value. But there is a flaw in the crystal, something within that caught my attention.” He passed it to Clayton.

He hesitated before taking the artefact from his brother's hands. It was cool to the touch, and he immediately wanted to tuck his hands back into his pockets where they'd been safely hidden from the wind. Instead he braced himself against the cold and held it up to the light. Only then did he see what his brother meant, the shadow within the crystal facets. More than a shadow—there was a shape inside, something with form.

"It's a fossil," he realised at last, looking at his brother for confirmation.

"Yes," Damien replied.

"That's not possible, is it?"

He'd found a fossil once himself, on one of their rare vacations to the southern coast of Riogachd. In the sandstone cliffs which lined the beaches there, he'd noticed the strange pattern and investigated, finding the remains of an ancient sea creature, the spirals of its shell barely discernible amidst the layers of stone.

But as far as he was aware, fossils formed in stone, not crystal.

"I would agree with you," Damien replied, "if not for the artefact in your hands. I have never been able to determine what manner of creature was preserved within."

At his brother's words, Clayton raised the crystal to his eye again. The last light of day had faded now, and the ship surged its way on through the dark seas, steam engine thumping in the night. Light flickered from a nearby lantern, but its glow was dim, not enough to light the railings before them, let alone the murky depths of the crystal.

Even so, Clayton noticed something he had not before. The light that shone from the crystal facets...it seemed too bright to come from the lantern.

"Is it..."

"Glowing?" Damien nodded. "That...started more recently."

Clayton lowered the stone, his heart beginning to race. What was he holding in his hands? "How recently?"

The easy smile slipped from Damien's lips. "After all these years, I'd given up uncovering its importance. I was using it as a paperweight on my desk in Londinium," he admitted. "One night I was working late on my research, when it suddenly lit up like the sun. Only for a few seconds, but when it died, well, that glow remained. That was a few months ago now."

A lump lodged in Clayton's throat at his brother's words. He followed Damien's gaze, out over the dark waters.

"The storm?" he whispered.

Damien nodded.

Finally, Clayton realised what he'd missed earlier: the sun had set behind them. As it had fallen and their conversation had stretched into the night, the ship had changed course. They were no longer heading north into the highlands, but east—towards the clouds.

Towards what had been dubbed the Anomaly on the streets of Leith.

Towards the naval blockade that had barred all ships from exploring the mysterious mists that had swallowed up the Northern Sea.

“What does it mean?” Clayton asked, eyes on the darkness, struggling to pierce the black.

Damien laughed and clapped him on the back again. “That’s what we’re going to find out, little brother.”

## Chapter 5 - Zachary

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Zachary paused at the entrance to the bridge, the Willow's words still lingering in his ears.

*What are you running from?*

How he hated it when people saw through him—even when that someone was a madwoman obsessed with ancient myths. Still, there was no point lingering on the encounter. He wanted a better understanding of who was organising this expedition, preferably before they reached the Anomaly. That way he could plan his next steps for when they arrived on the island.

Steeling himself, he pushed open the door to the bridge—and a cloud of tobacco smoke billowed out to greet him. He swallowed a mouthful, and before he stop it, the coughing fit was upon him. A fiery pain wrapped around his chest as he hacked up what felt like half his lungs and the iron taste of blood filled his mouth. Gasping, he struggled to draw breath between wheezes, before finally the bout left him.

Drawing a handkerchief from his pocket, he surreptitiously wiped the blood from his lips, aware of the pair of steel-grey eyes watching him.

The captain of *The Rising Tide* looked to be a woman in her early fifties, her hair streaked as much by grey as the black of her youth. The parting in her trench coat revealed both a revolver and sabre on her hip, and just now her hand was resting on the hilt of the first. Despite the smoke inside the bridge, she held no pipe, though the ends of a cigar lay in a tray beside the tiller.

“I’d apologise for the smoke,” she said, narrow eyebrows lifting to crease the wrinkles of her brow, “but passengers aren’t meant to be in here. Do I need to call one of my boys to show you to your cabin?”

Offering a sheepish smile, Zach spread his hands. “I come in peace.” With a flourish, he drew his pipe from his coat. “And bearing gifts, if you’ll share a little warmth.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed, but ignoring their steely glint, Zach crossed to the brazier burning in the corner and stretched his hands towards the heat. Despite the clear sky overhead, the winds outside still carried the chill of winter.

“Not as young as I once was,” he explained, “the ice seems to get into my bones nowadays.” He flashed a grin over his shoulder. “But I’m sure a young lass like yourself isn’t bothered by the frailties of us old men.”

The captain chuckled. “Still the platitudes, Mr. Sicario. There are at least as many silver in my curls as your own.”

Zachary froze. Their gazes locked from across the room and he felt the weight of the woman's appraisal, even as he inspected her in return.

"I am afraid you have me at a disadvantage, ma'am," he said finally. "You know my name, but I do not know yours?"

The woman raised her eyebrow. "Are you telling me the famed Zachary Sicario does not even know whose ship he has smuggled himself onto?"

Zach's heart, which was already pounding at her earlier words, truly began to race now. Even so, he kept his voice cool as he met her gaze.

"I'm afraid time was rather short to book passage. I did not uncover much about who had organised the expedition," he replied, even as his hand dropped to the knife he kept at his belt, the largest of his collection. "Now I'll ask again: how do you know my name?"

"Now, now, Mr. Sicario, there's no need for threats," the captain murmured, even as she stepped around him and shifted the tiller a degree towards the east.

Through the windows of the bridge, the sun had reached its winter zenith and now crept ever closer towards the western horizon. As the ship moved, Zachary glimpsed a shadow beneath the door—one of her men, or perhaps several, were waiting outside.

Completing her adjustment, the captain leaned against the wheel. "I thought you were offering an old lady a smoke?"

Zach hesitated, his mind racing over her words, trying to decipher their meaning. This woman knew who he was. If she'd wanted him disposed of, he would already be resting at the bottom of the ocean. Of that he had no doubt.

That left only one conclusion—she wanted something from him.

Outwardly, he kept the easy smile on his lips. Greed he could handle. "Apologies, Captain, I seem to have forgotten my manners."

With another flourish, he added a measured finger of leaf into the bowl of his pipe, then drew the beloved lighter from his pocket and offered it to the captain. "Would you do the honours...?" He left the question dangling, hoping to finally get a name from the secretive captain.

"Dianna," she answered, "Captain Dianna, to ruffraff like yourself," she added as she took the offered lighter and pipe. Igniting the tobacco, she raised the pipe to her lips and inhaled. "Now," she continued, exhaling a smoke ring, "what are you doing on my ship, Mr. Sicario?"

Zach leaned back against one of the windows, contemplating the question. Now that he knew her title, he could put together a few of the missing pieces. The infamous Captain Dianna had a few exploits of her own to her name, not the least of which was smuggling a shipment of supplies to the king's forces during the last civil war—then doing the same for the rebellion.

Recovering his pipe from the captain, he drew in a lungful of the pungent smoke, still appraising the woman at the tiller. It burned his throat, but prepared for its acrid taste, he resisted another bout of coughing.

Dianna was a smuggler who played both sides—that suggested she didn't intend any outright treachery. She would simply be looking to maximise her return from this expedition, wherever the wild winds of the Northern Sea brought them.

“Hoping to pass unnoticed, for starters. I guess that's out the window.”

Dianna chuckled. “Well, when you go around threatening a woman's secretary, that tends to attract some attention.”

Zachary snorted. “I barely touched her.”

“She said you held a knife to her throat.”

“Yes, well, I left her a gold crown for the trouble.”

“Oh?” Dianna raised her eyebrows. “The little tramp didn't mention that.”

“Ah...” Zachary hadn't meant to report on the poor woman. “Anyway, I never told the woman my name.”

“No, but the description was enough to pique my interest. And when word reached me of the...events at the Whitfield Palace, well, the deeds matched your reputation.”

“It was really more of a manor...” Zach muttered, then shook his head and levered himself up from the wall. “An unfortunate incident, I'll admit. Though honestly, I was surprised to find a noble in your manifest.”

“His kind tend to have the gold to compensate a captain for their passage,” Dianna replied, “unlike certain stowaways. Tell me, Mr. Sicario, how *do* you intend to pay for your place on my ship?”

“I thought I already had,” Zach replied with a lopsided grin. “Having a man like Roy Whitfield onboard would have cost you far more in trouble than his fare was worth.” He hesitated. “Which, regardless, I believe you collected in advance.”

Silence fell between them. The two eyed each other as the engine thrummed beneath their feet, the light outside slowly fading as the short winter's day came to an end. Then abruptly, the captain burst out in laughter.

“Oh, I like your style, Sicario,” she said at last, wiping a tear of mirth from her eye. “Tell me, would you like to know why you're still standing here, rather than at the bottom of the ocean?”

“I'd like to think it's because of my winning personality,” Zach replied.

As quickly it had appeared, all hint of humour drained from the woman's face. Jaw hardening, she took a step towards him, hand dropping to the pistol on her belt, one finger tap-tapped at its hilt.

“Let me phrase that another way, Mr. Sicario,” she said, an edge creeping into her voice. “Why should I not call my men in here right now and have you thrown overboard?”

Zach swallowed. Despite her earlier cheerfulness, the glint in Dianna’s eyes told him she was deadly serious. Exhaling slowly, he looked out the window, towards the clouded eastern horizon. He hadn’t come on this voyage to make enemies.

“Information,” he said at last, turning from the hidden visage to answer the captain. “That’s what I can offer you, Dianna.”

The captain said nothing, only raised an eyebrow, waiting for Zach to continue.

Zachary obliged. “You still don’t know what it is we’re looking for out here, do you?” He watched her as he spoke, registering the slightest crease that wrinkled her forehead. “You know it’s got to be important, with the King’s Council protecting it. You wanted in, so you organised this expedition, right?”

The hint of a smile tugged at Dianna’s lips. “Just go on, Mr. Sicario. I’m waiting to see whether you have a point to all this, before I see the weights attached to your ankles.”

Zach was thrown off by her reaction. Was he wrong? Did she already know what the council was protecting? It hadn’t been *that* difficult, getting the truth from the soldier, but then, such were the rumours spreading through town, it was difficult to sift fact from the fictions.

“Whatever your reasons for putting this expedition together, I wouldn’t take you as a woman who settles for crumbs when a feast is on the offering. If even a fraction of the rumours are true, the Anomaly could be the key to untold wealth. You must want a part of that treasure.”

A chuckle rasped from the back of Dianna’s throat. “And I suppose you’d be willing to share?”

“Share?” Zach smirked. “What makes you think I’m interested in the treasure at all, captain?”

“You expect me to believe you’ve become a philanthropist in your old age, Mr. Sicario?”

“Let us say that in my advanced years, I no longer care for worldly riches.”

Dianna’s eyebrow, which was already arcing high enough to wrinkle her forehead, rose until it all but disappeared into her greying locks.

“You and I are of a similar age, Mr. Sicario....” The captain trailed off, her eyes narrowing as the import of Zach’s words sank in. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Island, did you say?”

Zachary allowed his grin to spread as his gaze returned to the cloud bank far to the east. Now that the light was fading from the day, he thought he caught flashes of light amongst the grey.

“Surely you did not set out on such a venture without first learning the truth about your destination, captain?”

The floor scuffed beneath Dianna's boots as she joined him at the window. "If your information is correct, your resources are greater than my own. Too many rumours on the streets to know which are true. An island of gold, the edge of the world, gateway to another realm, all of them seem fanciful. Not even the aristocrats have managed to drag that secret out of the council."

"It is an island," Zach confirmed, then hesitated, thinking of the other story the soldier had told, of the disappearing ship.

He looked at the captain from the corner of his eye, still trying to judge what manner of woman she was. Clearly not one afraid of a little danger. Still, an entire naval galley had simply vanished into the mist. That was enough to give even a bold woman second thoughts.

"More than that, not even my source knew the details," he said at last.

Silence answered his words. Zach forced himself to keep his eyes ahead, fixed on the distant clouds, lest his indecision give him away. If she sensed he was holding something back, that the danger posed by the Anomaly was greater than anyone suspected...well, this little adventure might end before it ever began.

"Very well, Mr. Sicario," Dianna said at last, "you have earned a reprieve—at least for now."

Grasping the wheel, she turned it clockwise, the mechanisms within clacking as it spun. Zach stumbled as the ship rocked, surging over a wave as turned sharply eastward. Shadows flickered on the decks below, the lanterns set around the ship rocking wildly with the movement. The cloudbank loomed ahead as they straightened out.

Most of the passengers had already disappeared into their quarters. Only a few remained, silhouettes against the dying light of the sun. As the shadows lengthened and the night's mists crept their way over the bow, Zach found he could no longer distinguish from the thieves and the gentry. Perhaps that was for the best.

"And if I require more than a simple reprieve?" he asked suddenly.

Her lips thinned at his words, though she said nothing for a while, eyes dancing in the light of the brazier. Beyond the panes of glass, the night was pitch-black...except, were those lights out in the darkness? The council's blockade? At his side, Dianna remained quiet, though he noticed now her crew moving about the deck, extinguishing lanterns.

Zach let out a long breath. He could keep quiet, land on the island alone and without allies. He still had his knives, and his wits. They had been enough for him in the past. And yet, Zachary had no desire to spend his last days battling for his life. And if there was a magic on the island that could save him...well, he would need allies to uncover that secret.

Outside, the ship was dark; only a single lantern remained to light the way, shuttered to direct its light on the waters ahead. Beyond the silent ship, there was no mistaking the lights of the naval now, their lanterns burning in the dark. Zach shivered, imagining the eyes of the soldiers that must search for them, the ears that listened. In the quiet of the bridge, the thrumming of the engines seemed

incredibly loud, but beyond their cocoon of warmth, the crashing of waves drowned out all other noise.

“I would like your protection,” he said as Dianna rotated the wheel a degree. There was no trace of hesitation in the woman’s eyes as she navigated the blockade—this was her life, her livelihood. “Whatever of value I find on the island is yours to keep. I want only to go about my way on the island unbothered once we arrive.”

Silence answered his request. The captain still watched the ocean, but her eyebrows had knitted into a frown as she contemplated his words. He could see the suspicion in her eyes, the doubt, and finally she shook her head.

“I don’t get it, Zachary,” she said, dropping the formalities, “what’s your angle? Why are you here, if not for power or riches? What do you get out of all this?”

Those words rang within him, echoing the strange woman’s earlier enquiries.

*What are you running from?*

Somehow, he kept the smile plastered to his face. “They say only the boring grow old, Dianna,” he said in answer.

*I’m here to save myself.*

But that too was a lie, wasn’t it?

“I’ve lived a good life. Now I’d like to meet my end on my own terms—preferably on some rousing adventure.”

*I’m running away.*

“One has a reputation to uphold, after all.”

*Running from the pain in their eyes.*

Swallowing the memories, Zach offered the captain of *The Rising Tide* a final nod, then turned and stepped back into the cold embrace of night.

He made it only a few steps down the stairs before the strangeness of the night brought him to a halt. Frozen on the stairs, he looked around, trying to determine the source of his unease. A stillness hung over *The Rising Tide*. Though the ship still rocked beneath him, there was something missing now to its rhythm, as though something had vanished. A voice rose behind him, muffled by the bridge, but he recognised Dianna’s cursing...

Then it struck him.

*Silence.*

The constant thumping of the engine, of the furnaces as they burnt their coal, the great wheel as it propelled them onwards, all of it had gone, leaving only the quiet of the night.

And the pounding of waves upon the hull.

Zachary cried out as the ship pitched violently beneath his feet. Caught without power, *The Rising Tide* became a leaf before the power of the ocean, and before Zachary could brace himself, he found himself hurled off-balance. Throwing out a hand, he reached desperately for the railing, but his fingers closed only on empty air.

Then he was falling, blind in the darkness.

A cry tore from Zach's lips as icy water enveloped him.

## Chapter 6 - Clayton

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Clayton cried out as the ship pitched wildly beneath his feet. He had just a moment to see the excitement on his brother's face turn to shock before the deck lurched again—and suddenly the railing Clayton had been holding was torn from his grasp,

Suddenly he was airborne. The darkness spun, and raising his arms, Clayton braced for impact—only to find cold waters swallowing him up. A second scream turned to bubbles billowing around his face. Saltwater rushed to fill his mouth and stars burst across Clayton's eyes as his lungs screamed. He thrashed in the icy waters, boots slipping against the currents, knapsack threatening to drag him back down.

The sea swirled around him, pushing, twisting, spinning him until Clayton could no longer tell up from down. All was darkness. Weakness seeped through his limbs as he struggled, eyes burning as he struggled to pierce the murky depths, to find—

*There!*

A light flashed in the dark, golden, brilliant, and he kicked out, fingers clawing at the waters, feet thrashing...

Clayton gasped as he burst through the surface. Lungs aflame, he sucked down desperate lungfuls of air. Red filled his vision and his stomach churned, oblivion threatening. Teeth chattering, he forced himself to breathe, clinging to the fine thread of consciousness.

Waves swirled as he trod water, the heavy currents still threatening. The stars faded and his mind cleared, though that only brought home the significance of his peril. Something had happened to *The Rising Tide*. He had been thrown overboard by the sudden rocking of the ship...and so had his brother.

"*Damien!*" he screamed, struggling to lift his voice above a croak as he turned this way and that, searching the seas around him.

There was no sign of Damien, but to his surprise Clayton found there was a source of light. It came from his hand, where he still held the stone Damien had passed him. He stared at the crystal, unable to comprehend how he'd managed to keep hold of it in the depths. Its light had grown now, casting enough of a glow that he could see a few feet.

Fear clawed its way up Clayton's throat. There was no sign of *The Rising Tide* or Damien. He was alone in the dark sea, a hundred miles from land, from any sort of aid. Mists hung over the waters, aglow with the light of his stone and the halfmoon beyond. Already he could feel the cold seeping into his bones, draining away his strength.

Another gasp of breath turned to a half-sob. Terror rose, threatening to drown him as surely as the ocean in which he floated. His heart hammered painfully in his chest. Part of him wanted to scream and scream until he could scream no more, until his brother found him, until his parents came and rescued him from his own foolish stupidity.

But he had no energy to spare. Screaming would not save him. His brother would not hear him over the crashing waters. He was truly on his own now.

Drawing in another breath, Clayton finally managed to slow the racing of his heart. He couldn't afford to panic. The waters were cold, but...not as cold as he might have expected for the depths of winter. And he was a strong swimmer. He and his brother had often snuck away to the local swimming hole as children. Even in summer, the stream had been colder than the water now. If not for his imminent danger, Clayton might have wondered more at that. As it was, he would count his blessings.

Sweeping out his hands to keep him afloat, he flinched as his fingers encountered something in the water. A moment later, he struck another object. Lifting his light, he saw that all around him, debris bobbed in the darkness, wooden boards and broken beams and pieces of cork capped in steel.

*The wreckage of a ship.*

It couldn't be *The Rising Tide*?

Grasping one of the boards to use as a flotation device, Clayton struggled to think of some other explanation. The ship had been rocking perilously on the waves, but surely the steamer was capable of navigating such conditions. There had been no rocks that he'd glimpsed, not out here in the middle of the Northern Sea.

His heart was beginning to race again. Clayton drew another calming breath. He could do nothing about the fate of *The Rising Tide*. He couldn't even help his brother. All he could do was try to survive long enough for rescuers to find him. If the rescuers were even coming...

Teeth clenched, Clayton chose a random direction started kicking—anything to keep himself distracted from his likely fate. Now that he had the wooden board, the weight of his clothing and knapsack no longer bothered him. He might have discarded the pack, but the oilskin lining had hopefully kept its contents dry. If he somehow reached land, a change of clothing might very well save his life in the chill of winter. There was also flint to light a fire. He shivered, imagining the heat of a flame, the comfort of a warm fireplace—

A wave broke over Clayton's head, driving him back into the depths. He came up spluttering, clinging desperately to the crystal with one hand, the wooden board in the other. He'd almost drifted off, almost slipped off into the realm of dream, to a place of warmth and comfort...

Clayton frowned. He could see the waters ahead clearly now, the rolling waves as they emerged from the mists, their surfaces flickering, reflecting a light from ahead. The breath caught in Clayton's throat and he lifted his gaze from the dark currents.

A heavy mist loomed, swallowing up the seas, but in those mists, lights danced, flickering here and there. At first he thought they must be the lanterns of the naval blockade, but...these lights were far too stable for flames. They reminded him of the crystal in his hand, though surely they must be far brighter, to pierce the heavy fog.

The hope from the lights was short lived. Pain wormed its way slowly through Clayton's body. Each stroke, each kick of his feet seemed to have less effect. Despite the unnaturally warm currents, the waters were still draining his energy, bit by bit. His head pounded, an ache that drilled its way deep into his skull.

The lights loomed closer, but Clayton no longer paid them any attention. They were a figment, surely, of his fevered mind. What else could they be? There was nothing out here but the naval ships, and their glow had been far off when he'd stood on the bow of *The Rising Tide*, their captain steering expertly between their ranks.

His eyes slid closed as weariness settled like a lead cloak around his shoulders, promising to drag him forever into the unknown depths. Exhausted, trembling, unable to even open his eyes, Clayton clung to his piece of board, fingernails digging into the wood.

Darkness swirled, the lights piercing his eyelids, so that it seemed the stars themselves danced before his eyes. Lying half-stretched over the plank, Clayton watched those shimmering lights, wishing them to become magical creatures that would save him from his watery fate...

*Lights spun, and Clayton's pain fled as he found himself adrift in a void. The mists remained, swirling, but gone were the waters, the cold, the night. He felt a tug at his core, something within responding to the conjuration, a distant pull.*

*Trembling, he reached for the pinpricks of light, yearning for the promise held in their fiery glow.*

*Another appeared in the light, a ghost in the mists. It held no form, but a part of his soul recognised the kindred spirit, the shimmer that was his brother's consciousness. Damien's gaze was distant as he took shape, as though about to set off on another of his adventures, and Clayton called out in desperation.*

*"Damien!" he yelled, even as he felt again the pain of his physical body, the pull of reality.*

*Through the mists, he saw Damien glance back. Their eyes met across some unknown distance—then a smile touched the other man's lips.*

*"You're alive, brother." His gaze flickered, as though searching for something else in the mists. They quickly returned to Clayton. "Thank the gods, whatever they might be."*

*Clayton frowned at his brother's words, even as that strange realm began to fade, and the call of his body grew stronger.*

*"Damien, where are you?" he cried out, panicking as his brother flickered, becoming again the formless ghost.*

*“On the island, brother,” the reply came from the mists. “Use the crystal. Find me...”*

Gasping, Clayton tore himself from the dream, back to reality. Blood pounded in his ears, driving an ache deep into the base of his skull. His mouth was parched with the tang of salt, but somehow, he was no longer adrift. He could feel the cold stones pressed against his face, the solid earth beneath him.

He coughed and struggled to his hands and knees. Spots danced across his vision, all but blinding him, but at least they were not those strange lights of his dream. Shuddering, he clutched at the stones, grasping a handful between his fingers, still trying to convince himself they were real.

When his vision finally cleared, he found it was still night. The sky was dark and there was no sign of the lights he’d glimpsed in his fading state. But the clouds had vanished and now a thousand stars stretched overhead, the brilliant glow of the halfmoon shimmering in their midst—though it was fading towards the horizon as day drew near.

A look around found Clayton on a rocky beach. Debris lay strewn across the stones, sheets of metal and twisted beams of wood lying dotted between spires of dark rock. Nearby, cliffs stretched up towards the grey sky.

The crashing of waves drew his attention towards the ocean, where white waters churned off the shore. How had he come through those currents without being dragged under, or dashed to pieces on the jagged reefs he spied, their dark stone glimmering in the moonlight?

Surely only luck had saved him.

But where exactly had his luck brought him?

*On the island, brother.*

A shiver unrelated to his soaked clothes passed through Clayton as he recalled the dream. It had been so vivid, so real—yet it was already fading, the images sinking back into his subconscious.

Stifling a moan from his aching body, Clayton sat back on his haunches. He should be dead, frozen by the icy waters, sunk to the bottom of the ocean. Instead he sat on a beach that should not exist. There was no way he could have drifted back to the mainland in the space of a few hours, not after *The Rising Tide* had gone steaming out into the Northern Sea. He had heard the rumours back in Leith about the Anomaly—everyone had, but...

Now he was forced to confront reality. The debris left no doubt—their ship was gone. It had probably struck unseen rocks and been torn to pieces in the surging currents. Clayton, Damien, and everyone else aboard had been plunged into the sea. In the winter waters, it was a miracle he had survived...

*Crunch.*

Clayton’s head jerked up as the sound of footsteps on loose stones came from nearby. Something moved in the shadows of the cliff. Pushing himself into a sitting position, his eyes strained to pierce

the gloom, his heart inexplicably racing. He opened his mouth to call out to whoever was there, but found the words would not come.

*Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.*

Step by step, the shadow drew closer, until finally the emerged into the moonlight.

Clayton swallowed a scream. The shadow was not one of his fellow passengers.

It wasn't even human.

It was darkness itself.

*Beware, Outsider, you trespass on sacred crystal.*