

# DEEPLIGHT

*Disclaimer*

The laws of physics were harmed  
during the making of this book.  
In fact, I tortured them into horrific  
new shapes while cackling.

*Also by Frances Hardinge*

Fly By Night

Verdigris Deep

Gullstruck Island

Twilight Robbery

A Face Like Glass

Cuckoo Song

The Lie Tree

A Skinful of Shadows



# DEEPLIGHT



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*To Ella and the other members of the  
Young People's Advisory Board of the National  
Deaf Children's Society*



## PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is also true.



## CHAPTER 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

great, scoop-shaped harbour below.

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

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

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

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

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

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

coming and going of the great ships, and the stealthy sale of almost everything. He loved its cunning and its hunger.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘There’s the governor’s boat!’ Hark pointed out the simple green-and-white flag on its single mast. ‘That’s where all the investors will be – all the rich folks who paid for the *Abysmal Child*

expedition.’ He could imagine them, brimful of expensive wine and hope, scanning the waters with the fervour of gamblers. ‘This day’ll make their fortunes – or ruin them,’ he added.

‘Ruin them?’ asked the merchant. ‘Does that happen often?’

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

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

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

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

These stories were true, or at least true enough for present purposes. Stories were currency, and Hark understood that better

than most. What did a few exaggerations matter? The merchant would be dining out on these tales for years, once he got home to the western continent.

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

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

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

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

Then the great submarine’s long, black back broke the surface. Foam poured off the short turret and blade-like fins, and the brass rims of portholes glinted in the sun. The pale, entreating eyes

painted on the prow were awash, as though weeping.

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

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

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

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

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

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

slender in a frothy mesh of fine netting . . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘No,’ said Hark. ‘I mean . . . yes. A piece of her. Two of her legs.’ Spider-crab legs the length of a schooner. It was a great find, but there was a tight, disappointed feeling in his chest. What had he been hoping for?

‘I thought she was meant to be one of the more human-looking ones?’ said the merchant.

‘She was,’ said Hark.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Do all sales *have* to go through the Appraisal?’ The merchant



hesitated, and cleared his throat. ‘Does your friend ever sell his little bits of godware . . . privately?’

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

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

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

*Got you.*

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

‘Hark!’

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

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

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

Hark turned and looked.

There was Jelt, standing below on the wharf. It was strange looking down on him like that. He was two years older than Hark, and had always been taller, but over the last three years life had

grabbed him by the ankles and head and stretched him. It had left him lean, raw, and angry about it. Even when he was motionless or calm, you could sense that anger snaking off him. As usual, his expression was distracted but intense, as if listening to the world whispering something that riled him. You always had the feeling that there was a problem, and maybe you weren't it, but you might become it if you didn't tread carefully.

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

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

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

Jelt shook his head.

'You need to come *right now*.'

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

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

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

'I had that continenter hooked!' protested Hark as the two of them hurried up the stone steps of a priest-track to one of the beacon cliffs. 'Why couldn't this wait until I'd reeled him in?'

Jelt gave a snort of mirth.

'You're just angry because I dragged you away from your girlfriend!' he said. It was an old joke of his that Hark had a crush

on the idea of the Hidden Lady. ‘Such a romantic. Oh, don’t sulk. I *told* you we were doing another job today!’

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

‘Staying out of someone’s way,’ Jelt answered curtly.

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

‘You lost them?’ he asked instead.

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

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

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

There were four figures waiting near the top of the hill, in the shelter of one of the lookout towers. Hark’s heart lurched as he recognized their leader, a woman in her late thirties, with a bitter, thoughtful mouth, and a thick mottling of freckles that covered her face and arms, and even the scalp beneath her close-cropped hair. Dotta Rigg’s reckless, cut-throat smuggling runs filled Lady’s

Cravers with both alarm and an odd pride. Her five children could get free drinks anywhere on the island, even the younger ones, and only partly due to fear.

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

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

He noticed the steel and scrimshaw ear-studs worn proudly by a couple of Rigg's companions, to indicate that they were 'sea-kissed'. A degree of hearing loss was common among those who spent a lot of time diving or trusting their lives to submarines. Sea-kissed deafness was the mark of a seasoned aquanaut, and therefore generally respected. *Sign?* he asked them quickly in Myriad sign language and received a nod. Many sea-kissed could lip-read or retained some of their hearing, so it was always polite to ask whether they preferred speech or sign language.

*You wanted to see us?* Hark signed to Rigg. Since there were so many sea-kissed across the Myriad, virtually all islanders knew some sign language, though the signs varied slightly from one island to the next. Hark could manage the basics of the Lady's Crave variant, but always felt a bit clumsy with it compared with the grace of those who used it more often.

*Yes, though I'm going off the idea,* Rigg signed sharply with a scowl. *We've been waiting nearly an hour! You better not be late tonight.* She beckoned Hark and Jelt closer, and the six of them reflexively formed a huddle, so that their signs could not easily be read from a distance.

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

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

Rigg jerked a thumb towards the beacon tower on the next headland.

*It's that beacon and the one beyond it*, she signed, fixing Hark and Jelt with an assessing glare. *You'll need to put both lights out an hour after the cannon. There's a route under the lip of the cliff to the one further away . . . You see that ledge under the red streak? One of you will have to climb along that. You can't use the clifftop path, or you'll be seen.*

Hark was catching up fast and wished he wasn't. He gave a silent, dry-mouthed nod. Hark was a good actor, but he knew that sea-kissed often had a sharp eye for body language. He could only hope that they hadn't noticed his rising panic. He wondered if Jelt had deliberately brought him in late, so he wouldn't be able to protest and back out. Four dangerous people had been kept waiting in the cold – he didn't have the nerve to tell them that they'd been wasting their time.

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

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

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

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

*No problem,* answered Jelt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Anyway,' added Jelt, 'that path's got an overhang. You're shorter than me, it won't slow you down as much. Also, the one hiding near that first beacon has to stay there, ready to break it, no matter what happens. What would you do if the governor's men

showed up there? Give them a smile? Tell them a nice story?’

‘What would *you* do, then?’ Hark retorted. ‘Chuck ’em all off the cliff?’

Jelt gave a bit of a shrug and a dangerous little smirk. *I might*, said the smirk, *if I feel like it*. He was always like that in the face of a potential fight. Bravado toothed with a hint of real threat. Joking but not joking. You couldn’t prove anything either way.

‘Why do they want the lights out, anyway?’ muttered Hark.

The beacon lights had once been a signal to the gods – a plea. *Please let our ships sail through. Do not rise in your terrible majesty. We will appease you. We will feed you . . .* Many of the Myriad’s islands had long since removed their beacon towers as symbols of a dead and regrettable era. The governor of Lady’s Crave, however, was eternally practical. He had kept the towers, modifying them and adding lenses, so that they cast a broad, dim beam on the coves the smugglers favoured for their night runs.

‘They’re doing something they don’t want anybody to see,’ Jelt said slowly and clearly, his tone impatiently patient. ‘Maybe we’ll find out what if we show what we’re worth.’

Hark hesitated for too many seconds, and Jelt’s short fuse burned out.

‘Oh, grow a spine, Hark! Before I start wishing I’d left you out of this. This is a *promotion*. You got some other career plans, have you? You want to spend your whole life snatching scraps and wheedling pennies on the docks like a little kid, till you’re too old and slow, and you starve?’

Hark chewed his cheek, hearing the truth in Jelt’s words. Hark had a stubborn seed of hope in his soul that kept pushing up and up, however deeply it was buried, and building bright, strange futures for him. Although he felt a profound, blood-level love for

Lady's Crave, many of his dreams involved leaving for Siren, or Malpease – some island that was bigger and brighter, with more hope. Every day he saw people who had probably once had dreams like his, but who had never left, and never come to anything. Old men and women in damp rags, gathering clams or squabbling over tiny bribes, their eyes weary pools of disappointment. Seeing them, he could feel his dreams shudder.

Hark *had* moved up in the world, hadn't he? He wasn't hanging around the kids' Shelter any more, begging for food or somewhere to sleep. He was sharing a shack behind the glue factory, above the flood line, and with warmth soaking through the wall from the glue furnaces beyond. His gaggle of housemates would probably kick him out sooner or later as their alliances shifted, but that was just what happened. Folks turned on you, so you looked for the next bunch of people to get you through. Nobody was permanent.

Nobody except Jelt.

Hark and Jelt had been orphaned by the same bitter winter, and this had somehow grafted them together. Sometimes Hark felt they were more than friends – or less than friends – their destinies conjoined against their wills. Unwanted children were not unusual, and Lady's Crave had shown them a certain rough charity in their earliest years. They had been given a home at the Shelter and one meal a day. Sailors had thrown them occasional scraps, or turned a blind eye when they slept in their rowing boats. Even the territorial shore-scavengers let the youngest children delve into their rock pools now and then for sea-urchins and shellfish. But when you turned seven or eight, your time was up. You were old enough to fend for yourself without help, and were chased off if you tried foraging in a territory claimed by a scavenger gang. In



Hark's case, this did not happen until he was nine: an early lesson in the advantages of looking young and harmless.

Appearing that way was dangerous too. It marked you out as a victim, a soft target. Hark had survived because word got round about his crazy friend, the one who stood his ground against full-grown men and tried to smash their teeth in with rocks.

Jelt had kept Hark alive. Jelt could drop his fear and self-control in a second. Jelt thought big, could even think *himself* bigger.

'We got to move up,' said Jelt, 'or we're going nowhere. You take the world by the throat, or you die.'

A few hours later, the pair of them were hiding on the hillside watching the dusk draw in. Jelt didn't get nerves when he was about night-business. Hark did, though he knew better than to admit it.

He dealt with it by telling himself a story. He watched himself as if he'd already done it, already survived, and was telling the tale of his adventure to an agog and adoring audience in a tavern afterwards. It calmed him down and slowed his pulse a little. He was the hero, and everything was going to be all right. It already *was* all right. The things happening right now weren't real peril, they were just drama.

*And we sat waiting under that overhang for two hours, he told his spellbound imaginary audience. We heard the evening cannon sound, then watched the sky get darker, and the storm streaks deepen above Rue and Hullbrake . . .*

The yellow had spread across the sky like a bruise, and across the sea the pale streamers of distant downpours descended to the humped backs of other islands. Already he could hear the patter

of rain outside the overhang, and see the rock speckling and darkening.

Their hiding place was halfway up the headland. Jelt was looking out to sea, with that bland, ecstatic look of calm he always had before they did something stupid and dangerous. Only his blunt fingers were restless. He was tranquil but alive, utterly awake, open to every passing moment, weighing it for ripeness.

‘Come on,’ he said suddenly. It was time. Jelt had an animal sense for these things.

Outside, Hark felt the icy sting of little raindrops on his face and hands – needle rain with a winter sting in it.

*We had to climb up to the headland from further down the cliff, you see, Hark explained to his invisible future admirers, so they wouldn't spot us. And it was tricky, with the rain coming down, right into our eyes, and the rocks getting slippery . . .*

The dark slope above was rugged with mottled grey-white rocks, which bulged, jutted and occasionally fell. Tiny trees twisted out between them like knuckly question marks, their needle-clusters quivering like fists in the wet wind. Grey sea-thistles starred the darkness. Soft puffballs looked like rocks but broke under your hand. Spindleweed held when you grabbed a fistful of it to pull yourself up, but scored your palms and fingers.

Hark climbed, his fingers numb already. His teeth chattered.

*And I was thinking, why was I doing this? But I couldn't leave Jelt in the lurch, could I? He'd be dead without me.*

You didn't grow up on Lady's Crave without knowing how to climb. You needed it to reach the nests of seabirds on the eastern cliffs. The headlands and slick rocks of the coves were where you proved yourself and carved out your place in the pecking order.

You jumped from Wailer's Rock and fell for a full second before the sea slapped the breath out of you. And you could stay ahead of danger, and trouble, and people who wanted their possessions back, as long as you could climb.

Glancing to one side, Hark could see Jelt was pulling ahead, scowling with concentration. Hark was the nimbler and lighter of the two, but Jelt was stronger and more reckless. So somehow Hark had spent his whole life trying to keep pace with Jelt.

*. . . and of course it's getting dark, and we can hardly see where we're putting our hands . . .*

They had chosen a route up a zigzag crevice, since it had more footholds and was deep enough for them to avoid being caught in the light of the beacon. Other nearby crags were illuminated, though. The oil of the beacons burned with a muddy violet light, so that shadows seemed to be a very dark, soupy orange.

As the crevice grew too narrow for them to climb side by side, Jelt pulled ahead. They hadn't counted on the rain when they'd picked their route. The crevice was a water channel, and already Hark could feel an insistent trickle of water running over his cold knuckles, and could hear the *click* and *schlack* of small pebbles loosening their hold in dampening soil.

Then Jelt shifted a little to one side, to brace himself in the crack, and purple light flooded down into Hark's eyes. They were near the top, he realized with a shock. He shielded his eyes to protect his night sight. The flash of light left swirls on his retinas, swimming like orange fish through a dark sea.

This was where Jelt would hide. Jelt nudged Hark and pointed along the side of the hill. Peering through the rain, Hark could see his route – the great overhang, and below it the little ledge. Jelt gave Hark a quick clap on the shoulder, a silent gesture of camaraderie.

Now Hark was continuing alone along the rain-slicked path, with spoilt night sight, to reach the other tower. From a distance he hadn't realized quite how low the overhang was, or how narrow the ledge, but there was no turning back now.

*. . . So imagine me, flat against this wet rock, edging along this ledge the breadth of three fingers. And sometimes I'm bent over double because the overhang dips down in places. And there's a sheer drop on my left . . .*

'Stupid scabbing plan,' he whispered, his eyes full of muddy rainwater, feeling the moist ledge shift and squish under his feet.

After what seemed like an age, he passed a bold white streak in the rock and realized he was only a third of the way along the ledge. He was going too slowly, he knew with queasy horror. The longer he took, the greater the chance that Jelt would be spotted. Fighting every instinct, Hark started to move faster, no longer pausing to check every foothold. He could do this, he *would* do this. He –

He could not tell what betrayed him. A loose rock, a wet sole. Suddenly he lost his footing. The ledge scraped up the side of his leg and hip, and bruised his hands as he vainly snatched at it. And then his wet fingers found a grip on a twist of young tree, and his other hand in a little crevice, while his feet flailed and slid against sheer, wet rock.

The tree was too weak to hold him. He could see it buckling, its bark splitting, its white fibres stretching.

It would give and drop him. He was seconds away from a different story, one that he would never get to tell.

*You know that kid Hark?*

*No. Which one is he?*

*Skinny. Runty. Lies a lot. Well, he fell off a cliff last night.*

*Smashed his head in. They only found him after the fish had had him for a day.*

And someone would tut, or grunt, or give a short snort of mirth. And that would be it. End of story.

*No!* he thought, something stubborn and desperate rising in him. *No! I'm the hero! I'm the scabbing hero!*

He took his hand away from its feeble grip on the crevice and fumbled for the sling at his belt. All his weight was on the other hand now. He could hear the crackle of the tree tearing and could feel his grip slipping.

With a desperate lunge, he threw out the length of the sling so that it tangled in a sturdier tree a little further up. Chancing everything, he let go of the tree and snatched at the trailing end of the sling. He caught it – held it – pulled himself up until he could get one arm over the trunk of the tree, then slowly, painfully hauled himself back on to the ledge.

He lost valuable seconds sitting with his grazed cheek against the wet rock, shuddering and trying not to be sick.

'Hero,' he whispered defiantly, his eyes stinging. It was only when he gingerly stood up again that he realized his sling was nowhere to be found. He had no time to search for it, and it had almost certainly fallen down to the rocks far below. Hark scrambled onwards hastily, with bruised hands and knees that now shook.

When at last the overhang yielded to stars, he scarcely dared believe it. He clambered up the little chute, and found himself blinking on a dimly lit headland, purple as a dead man's vein. There was the beacon tower itself, a stone column with a cage-like metal structure raised above it. At its crest was fixed the metal housing of the lantern, with its great round lens. To his relief, there was nobody in sight.

Hark sprinted over, feet slithering on the wet undergrowth. He snatched up a rock and threw it up towards the top of the tower. It arced in the right direction, but fell short and clattered down the tower. His second attempt was no better. Without his sling, he couldn't hit the lantern.

He glanced across to the other headland. If Hark didn't extinguish this light, Jelt would stay in his hiding place near the other tower. Sooner or later, a patrol would come by, and something would happen . . . to Jelt, or to somebody else.

*So, he told his imaginary audience, I realized there was only one thing I could do . . .*

Exhausted and shaky, Hark ran over to the tower and started to climb.

The stone part was easy enough. The mortar was weathered and cracked, so there were toeholds between the stones. But when he reached the metal, everything got harder. He had to twist his arms and legs around the wet metal poles and shimmy up slowly, using the rusty places for grip. The governor's men used ladders to light the lanterns, then took them away with them to stop anybody else climbing the tower.

When Hark reached the very top, he scrabbled open the metal housing, yanked out the lantern, and let it fall. It plummeted, smashing thirty feet below. The liquid within splashed over the stone base, little mauve ghost-flames dancing over them before going out. Ten seconds later, the beacon on the other headland flared and then went dark. Jelt's sling had done its work.

*So he must still be alive. Now he can run away, and so can I . . .*

Hark was scrambling back down the tower when he saw a cluster of orange lights jogging their way towards him.

The governor's men reached the base of the tower and

surrounded it while he was still on the metal frame, arms and legs wrapped around a crossbar. He hung there, catching his breath, feeling the cold in every cut and bruise.

He would be telling a story after all, it seemed. Not in a tavern among friends, but right here and now, in the rain, with lantern-light in his eyes.

It would have to be a really good story. And above all, it would need to be one in which Jelt did not appear.

## CHAPTER 2

It was a popular night for getting arrested, as it happened. When Hark was hauled back into town, it turned out that the governor's dungeon was already full. Instead, Hark was dropped into one of the 'overflow' cells, a square-edged pit with heavy wooden bars criss-crossing above. Half of it was covered by a canvas, which kept out some of the rain, but the earth floor had already dissolved into slick mud.

Hark spent a cold and miserable night in this hole, wondering whether Jelt had been caught or killed. An hour after dawn, the bars were lifted away, and he was hauled out of the hole. A lot of the governor's men were around, looking armed and bored, so Hark didn't develop any fanciful notions about running for it and trying to scale the courtyard wall.

Instead, he tried to put a brave face on it as he was washed down with bucketfuls of cold water, and handed some drab, dry clothes to put on.

'Why the luxury treatment?' he asked through chattering teeth. 'Am I getting adopted by nobility?'

'Better than that,' said a guard wryly. 'You got your big moment at the Appraisal this morning.'

Hark felt his heart flip over. Of course there would be an Appraisal this morning. Rigg had guessed as much. The remains of the Lady would be auctioned off quickly, before there were more attempts to steal them. But godware was not the only thing sold at the Appraisal. Things were moving much faster than Hark had expected, and he was not ready for it.



He had known that he wouldn't have a trial, of course. On Lady's Crave, a criminal case was handed to one of the governor's Justices, who listened to the guards and decided on the spot whether they'd been right to arrest you. You only got a trial if the Justice thought the guards had messed up, or if a powerful person was willing to vouch for you.

However, he *had* thought that he might be interrogated. When you were face to face with your questioner, you could get a sense of what made them tick, tell them the story they wanted to hear, maybe cut some sort of deal . . .

. . . but apparently that wasn't going to happen. The cells were full, so the governor had decided to clear them out and earn what he could from them. The prisoners would be Appraised and sold.

Hark was hurried through the marketplace and up the hill with a dozen other prisoners. At least none of them were Jelt, and he didn't recognise any of Rigg's people either, so they had probably all escaped. He wasn't dead yet either. He had to keep his brain sharp. Despair was a numbing poison. The moment you decided the worst was inevitable, it was.

A casually thrown stone hit him in the ear. He flinched but didn't look round – no point in letting the next hit him straight in the eye socket. He swore, but didn't take it personally. He had thrown stones at captured criminals now and then, not through malice, but just because he could.

It had never really occurred to him not to just because some day the person in chains might be him. In fact, he had always known deep down that some day it *would* be him, and that stones *would* be thrown at him, so it had seemed natural to make the most of it while he could be the thrower instead of the thrown-at.

It hurt, though. He was glad he didn't know who had thrown

it. If it had been someone he knew, that would have hurt more.

Hark's mouth grew dry as the parade of prisoners drew nearer to the Auction House at the top of the hill. It had loomed on the skyline over Hark's entire life, but he had only been inside a few times.

The large, old building was deliberately misshapen, its roofline bulging and deformed, its windows ragged crevices like rips in the stonework. This was as it should be, because it had been sacred in its time. In its great hall, the island's priests had lived, passed their decrees and chosen their sacrifices. How else should it look? Even so long after the death of the gods, everyone still knew that the sacred was twisted. There was a beauty that belonged only to the gods, and it was a knot in your eye, your gut, your mind . . .

When the governor had taken over the island, by the simple, honest method of having lots of armed men and declaring that he'd done so, he'd been too canny to take the great building at the top of the steps for his residence. Instead, he'd had a clean, white house of brick built not far from the docks, with a protective surrounding wall. He'd understood that the old priests' hall was a link to a sick past. It was beneath him.

Therefore, he'd had it converted into an auction house. There were petty auctions every week, selling off salvage, ordinary cargoes and confiscated goods. An Appraisal day was a grand auction, a chance to buy ships and submarines, the finest luxuries, prime godware . . . and criminals. Lady's Cravers were fiercely adaptable. Nowadays, the only thing they could boast more of than other islands was crime, but they had found a way to make money out of even that.

Today Hark would be put up for sale. That was bad enough. But if there were no decent bidders, he was doomed.

In theory, slavery was forbidden within the Myriad. However, if you were judged guilty of a crime, as Hark had been judged, you could be sold as an 'indentured servant'. All the islands of the Myriad respected the indentures. If they did not, how could they buy criminals for the jobs nobody wanted? The worse your crime, the longer the time you had to serve. If you tried to run away, you could be caught and dragged back to your 'owner', who might punish you or sell you to someone worse.

There was always someone worse.

The great hall was designed to make people feel like ants. You knew it as soon as you walked in. It was too open, too vast, its vaulted ceiling too high, the windows too narrow and lofty, the shafts of light from them too meagre. Even the two dozen rows of benches put out for auction buyers filled only half the hall. Human crowds were lost in it. Voices rebounded oddly, the echoes sounding higher and more startled than the original voice. Hark imagined them floating, aghast, up into shadows.

The governor had done what he could. The walls of the hall were now covered in white plaster, but here and there the damp had caused some to fall away, showing glimpses of the old red-and-black frescoes underneath. A dozen looming iron candelabras now cast light at the human level, but could do little about the cavernous murk above.

The room bore too many scars of its past. In the middle of the floor, there had once been a large, oval hole full of seawater, in which priests and sacrifices had been ritually cleansed. The governor had arranged for it to be filled with cement, but you still knew it was there, the new russet tiles obvious against the surrounding grey stone flags. Just as obvious was the series of

slight, worn depressions that led up to it from the door, and then passed on beyond it to a distant arch. Centuries of sacrifices had been made to follow in the exact footsteps of their predecessors, until the pressure of all those bare feet had worn away stone.

Hark felt as doomed as any sacrifice, but of course he was not led along those fateful indentations. Instead he and the rest of the chain gang were taken round the side of the hall, so as not to interrupt the auction of some boat called the *Kindwind*. They were made to stand in a gaggle, not far from the auctioneer's pulpit and the great abacus used to show the current bid.

As the auctioneer droned on, Hark tried to get a feel for the audience. His spirits sank even further.

It was a sluggish, early morning crowd. Most people there were napping, chatting or reading. The first few rows of benches were crammed, but he guessed that many sitting on them had probably just come early so that they'd have a good seat for the *Abysmal Child* sales later in the day. They wanted a piece of the Hidden Lady, or at least a glimpse of her.

He caught himself looking for familiar or friendly faces among them, even though he knew that there probably wouldn't be any. There was no sign of Jelt, of course. He was probably lying low somewhere with Rigg's gang. Hark didn't blame his friend, although Jelt's absence did make him feel lonelier.

As Hark watched, bidding for the *Kindwind* came to an end. One last reluctant raise of the hand from the audience. One last bead rattled along the abacus to show the new bid. The auctioneer made a lacklustre appeal for more interest, then declared the boat sold.

'Next, an auction of indentured criminals,' called the

auctioneer from his perch in the old pulpit. It was carved so as to look eerily molten, stone dribbles seeming to creep upward, as if obeying an inverted gravity.

The chained gaggle was brought forward. For a mad moment, Hark wondered what would happen if all the criminals bolted for the door as one. He felt sure he knew the answer, though. Up in the lofty gallery he could see some of the governor's men, the round copper bottles of compressed air gleaming on their wind-guns. They were lounging and yawning, but they would probably become a lot more alert if the goods on sale decided to make a break for it.

He scanned the audience with desperate eyes. Most of them didn't even look up. Some glanced at him, but then their gaze slid towards the older, stronger-looking criminals instead. To their eyes, Hark probably looked like a scrawny scrap that could be of no use to them – nothing but a waste of food and lodgings, and perhaps an untrustworthy one at that.

Most people in the front row were watching the criminals and the auctioneer with careful attention, but that was to be expected. By unspoken consent, the front bench was left for the sea-kissed so that they could lip-read more easily and see the under-clerk responsible for announcing lots in sign language. Continenters who obliviously flouted this hidden rule could never work out why everyone then made a point of treading heavily on their feet as they passed, or leaning forward to breathe cheroot smoke into their faces. At the moment, no foot-stamping seemed to be happening, so presumably everyone at the front was sea-kissed.

After a moment, Hark noticed that one of them was staring straight at him.

It was a girl of about Hark's own age, or perhaps a little

younger. She was short, dark-haired and skinny, with large eyes and an uncomfortably intense gaze. What caught Hark's attention, however, was the dappling of freckles that covered her face, arms and neck. Only one family was that freckled.

*That must be one of Rigg's daughters. What's she doing here? Why is she staring at me?*

For a wildly optimistic moment, Hark wondered if she was there to bid for him on behalf of Rigg's gang. It was an empty hope, however. The governor had been known to arrest people he suspected of buying the indentures of their accomplices, so nobody did that any more.

*No, she's here so that I know that Rigg's people are watching me. If I squeal on them now, they'll know. This girl is a warning.*

With a sinking heart, Hark recognized a couple of scarred faces a few rows further back, observing him with a speculative eye. They were dealers in the auction dregs, waiting to pick up the unwanted criminals for a song and sell them on as galley minions. Anyone they bought would spend the whole of their indenture in the murky belly of some boat or submarine, chained to their oar. Many did not survive, and those that did came out with crooked limbs, weak eyes and broken minds.

Next to them was a tall man with a fashionably square beard and a good coat. One of the other criminals recognized him and muttered that he was the owner of a mine on Malpease, who sometimes bought young criminals who could fit through perilously narrow gaps. This didn't sound much better than the galleys.

'First lot!' called the auctioneer. 'Hark, no other name. The crime, breaking two of the beacon lanterns last night. Three years.'

'Three years?' exploded Hark, involuntarily. The shrill echo

of his voice spiralled up and up until the shadows ate it. He had feared that it might be one year, but *three* . . .

*I'll be broken by then*, he thought desperately. *I won't survive in the galleys that long*. He was to be made an example of. The governor must have taken the vandalism as a personal slight.

*Don't give up*, he told himself sharply, amid the rise of panic. *You're not dead yet*. As he was detached from the chain gang and pulled forward, he tried to keep his breathing under control. *There's got to be someone else!*

'Does anybody have any questions for the prisoner before the bidding?' asked the auctioneer, with the blunt air of someone who had a busy schedule ahead. Most of the buyers had already turned their attention back at their catalogues. 'No? Then—'

'Can I give my defence first?' Hark interrupted desperately.

'You're not on trial, boy!' called the auctioneer, and there was a ripple of laughter.

'But they don't really know what I did!' Hark's heart was banging. 'They don't know why I did it! They don't know how!'

*Oh please, come on! Somebody take the bait!* Hark's gaze darted over the assembly, looking for hints of interest.

A husband and wife at the back, frowning in his direction and whispering. Were they interested, or just disapproving?

A middle-aged woman in a good-quality jacket of brown wool, fiddling with what looked like a monocle on a chain. She was watching the proceedings with half-closed eyes, like a theatregoer waiting for the play to start. Or was she just half asleep?

Two men in sealskin coats from the Northern Myriad, laughing together quietly, and glancing his way. Even if Hark was a joke to them, could he use that to win them round?

*If I play to the whole crowd, I won't hook any of them. I need to*

*pick a target, and play to them. And I need to pick right.*

Hark made his choice. Made eye contact. Held it. Raised his eyebrows in appeal.

*Yes. You. Please.*

The woman with the brown coat and monocle stared back for a moment, then smiled.

‘All right,’ she called back. ‘I’ll bite. Tell us, boy.’