

Chapter One

'Land ho!'

Joseph jumped up and hurried to the prow. He was supposed to be swabbing the deck, but what did he care? Once he got his feet on dry land, he'd never see the crew of the *Dread Unicorn* ever again.

He strained his eyes, peering across the sparkling water to the horizon. Without a spyglass he could see nothing but the gulls, wheeling and screeching in the blue skies above, as the ship cut through the waves towards the great city of Azurmouth.

Azurmouth. The thought of it gave him a shiver of excitement. *You should be frightened*, he told himself. Every night the crew had delighted in telling him

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tales of what might happen to a half-goblin boy in Azurmouth. Tales of elves snatched from their beds in the dark of night. Tales of imps dragged from dockside taverns and never seen again. Tales of drunken white-coated butchers who prowled the streets, looking for any excuse to stop you, if you weren't a human . . .

Joseph swallowed hard. Maybe he *was* a little frightened. But it didn't matter. He had crossed the Ebony Ocean for a reason. He had to know the truth. And the truth was here, somewhere in Azurmouth.

There's no turning back now.

The breeze whipped him, and he narrowed his eyes to stop them from streaming. Soon it would all be spread out before him: marble statues and colonnades; wide avenues lined with tall trees, their green-laden branches swaying softly in the breeze; elegant spires that pierced the sky, serene and quiet but for the silver bells that pealed sweet music to mark a wedding, or a triumph, or Corin's Day. *The greatest city ever founded. A beacon of hope for all the people of the Old World*. Or at least, for all the humans of the Old World.

He shivered again.

The sky began to fill up with gulls, and the sea

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with ships. First a distant sail, stark against the horizon, then vessels dotting the ocean. There was a red-sailed caravel from the Flatland Duchies. A fat black cog from the north. League galleons, tall and proud, white flags fluttering.

Joseph drank it all in, his fingers drumming on the gunwale with impatience.

At last, the city itself came into view, looming larger as they approached. It took his breath away. A hazy sprawl across the coastline; countless ramshackle buildings, even more motley and crammed in than those of Port Fayt. Thousands of coloured banners flew from the ships in the harbour, and still more from the grubby warehouses that lined the docks.

No trees, after all. No statues. No elegant spires.

Azurmouth.

The last thing to hit him was the smell. A powerful aroma that mingled grog, smoke, sweat and blood – but at the same time was utterly itself, like nothing Joseph had ever smelled before. It smelled of terror. Of desperation. Of hope. He breathed in deep.

The truth, he reminded himself. *I'm going to find out the truth*.

A hand fell on his shoulder, and he looked up to see Captain Phineus Clagg grinning at him with yellowed teeth, his long dirty hair tossed by the

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breeze and his lazy eye fixed on Joseph, for once. The smuggler's smile said one thing: *I told you so*.

'Azurmouth, eh, matey?' said Clagg. 'I reckon yer goin' to regret this.'

The docks smelled even worse.

Joseph wrinkled his nose, and one of the smugglers, a broad-shouldered dwarf with silver hair in a ponytail, cackled at the sight.

'Get used to it,' he said cheerily. 'And gimme a hand with this barrel. Last one.'

They rolled it down the gangplank whilst Captain Clagg had words with a wiry officer in white – a revenue man, Joseph guessed. Fortunately the hold was empty of contraband for once, and the barrels were filled with nothing more than watered-down grog.

Joseph had thought the docks back in Port Fayt were busy, but he'd never seen anything like this before. Even in the late afternoon sailors and dockhands thronged the cobblestones as far as the eye could see, their chatter assaulting his ears. To his surprise, they weren't all humans: there were a few elves, dwarves, even trolls and the odd ogre too. Most of them looked shifty though, as if they weren't supposed to be here and knew it. The warehouses loomed above,

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filthy red-brick buildings so big they looked like they'd been built by giants, and threw the whole harbour into shadow.

There was a commotion, sailors scrambling to get out of the way as a column of white-coated soldiers came marching from a side street.

Joseph ducked down into the shadow behind a barrel. *Butchers*. The last time he'd seen men in League uniforms, they'd been spattered with the blood of Fayters. He took a deep breath to calm himself.

Come on, Joseph. It's too late to have second thoughts.

'They've gone now, matey,' said Phineus Clagg, taking Joseph's hand and hauling him to his feet. The smuggler knocked back a swig from a small metal flask of firewater. 'Well, I reckon this is it. Last chance. Yer can come with me, roam the seas and live like a prince of the waves. Or yer can stay here and get yerself killed, most likely. What'll it be?'

'I'm staying here. In Azurmouth.'

Clagg sighed. 'An' here was me thinkin' you were a smart one. This city's crawlin' with butchers, lad. Why in Thalin's name would yer come here?'

It wasn't the first time the smuggler had asked, but the fewer people who knew, the better. Joseph shook his head.

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'Well, don't say I didn't warn yer,' said Clagg. 'Just mind yer stay near the docks. The League put up with demonspawn here, see, so's they can trade an' grow rich off the profits. Can't be hurting their customers now, can they? Watch out for the Duke o' Garran's men, though. That cove ain't like the other lords. Reckon he'd stamp out every last trace of demonspawn in the city if he could, traders an' all.'

'Don't worry about me,' Joseph told him.

'Cap'n!' called the silver-haired dwarf. 'Comin' for a grog?'

'Aye, soon enough.'

Clagg knelt. Up close, Joseph noticed that the smuggler smelled even worse than Azurmouth itself. But it was a comforting, familiar smell.

'Here, take this.' He passed Joseph a small leather purse full of coins. 'Ain't much, but it's all the help I can give yer.' He hesitated a moment, then whipped off his coat. 'Come to think of it, best take this too. Turn the collar up. Don't let folk see yer face if yer can help it.'

'Are you sure?'

'Aye, yer'll need it more than me, lad. Trust me.' He helped Joseph into it, the long sleeves engulfing the half-goblin boy's arms, the tails trailing on the cobblestones. It was heavy and weather-beaten, stained with

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grog and worse, but with the collar pulled up it hid Joseph's mongrel skin well enough.

As Clagg stood, Joseph thought he saw something in the smuggler's eyes – a glint of moisture. 'Well, this is it. Fair winds and calm seas, eh, lad?'

Joseph shook Clagg's hand, his long grey-pink fingers engulfed in a calloused palm. 'Fair winds and calm seas. And thank you for . . . well, for everything.'

Clagg smiled. 'I'll be thinkin' o' you, matey. Maybe we'll meet again someday. I have to tell yer, though – knowin' Azurmouth, I ain't holdin' out much hope.' He turned and strode away with the dwarf, their boots thudding on the cobblestones.

Joseph watched them disappear into a tavern. Then he set out along the quayside, sticking to the water's edge, with one hand resting on the hilt of his cutlass. His skin tingled with fear, and with excitement. It was time to put his plan into action.

I'm going to find out the truth.

Either that, or he'd die trying.

He pulled Clagg's coat tight around him, keeping his head down and hiding his grey-pink face from any passing whitecoats. The noise of the docks filled his ears: the *thunk* of barrels dumped on cobblestones; the clatter of carriages that moved among the throng; and the coarse insults their drivers hurled at each other.

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Street vendors hovered here and there, shouting at the tops of their voices.

'Dragons' teeth! Twelve ducats a molar! Incisors fourteen apiece!'

'Fairy wings! Make a fine pair o' earrings for the missus!'

'Tired o' your hook? See my fine brass hands! You'll look ever so *hand*some and no mistake!'

There was something rotten in the air, and it wasn't just the smell. The people of Azurmouth were louder, busier and angrier than Fayters back home. They seemed tense, like they might snap at any moment.

Joseph reached inside the smuggler's coat and thrust a hand into his own left pocket, his fingers closing tightly round the silver pocket watch that lay inside. It was crudely made and poorly inscribed, and it was the most precious thing he'd ever owned.

His other hand patted his right pocket, checking that the second object he'd brought with him was safe inside. It had stayed there all the time they'd been on the sea – he couldn't afford to take the risk of a smuggler seeing it. Besides, he still hardly dared touch it.

He'd have to soon, though. The plan depended on it.

Joseph strode on, faster now. There were countless

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ships bobbing in the harbour, a forest of masts rising high against the darkening sky. But at last he spotted a cluster of hobgoblin vessels in the distance. They were sticking together, as though their captains were nervous of mingling with the human ships that surrounded them.

With any luck it would be there – the ship he had followed here to Azurmouth. A hobgoblin junk, with battered sails and a hull coated in shiny black lacquer. A ship he had sailed on once before.

Finding it was the first part of the plan.

The crowds swelled and Joseph stumbled along, carried by the tide of people on the harbour front. Someone stood on his coat tails. He caught a knee in his ribs, and his foot sank into something soft, wet and smelly. He winced and smeared it off on the cobblestones, trying not to see it as a bad omen. *Marble statues*, *green trees*, *silver bells* . . . The stories of Azurmouth had never said anything about horse dung.

A couple of burly humans stopped to stare at him – the funny-looking child in a coat that was far too big for him. Joseph tugged the collar higher to hide his blotchy skin and his pointed ears, and hurried onwards.

Gradually the wavecutters and galleons in the harbour gave way to vessels from further a-seas.

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Sampans, barques and, at last, the hobgoblin junks that Joseph had seen from further off.

His fingers found the bulge of the object in his right-hand pocket. He'd never used it before, and the mere thought of doing so gave him a thrill of fear. Hal had told him how to use it, though the magician probably wouldn't have been so obliging if he'd known that Joseph was going to steal it – *no, borrow it* – from under his pillow while he slept, just before running off with Captain Clagg.

By now, the magician must have told the other watchmen what Joseph had done. *The tavern boy's taken it. He's taken the wooden spoon.*

The wooden spoon that was so much more than just a wooden spoon.

What would Captain Newton say when he found out? Joseph didn't like to think.

There! At the end of a jetty a black junk was riding the waves, its sails furled. The lacquered hull had scrapes along its side, the marks of a battle. No doubt about it – this was the ship he was looking for. Two bored-looking sailors sat on the gunwale beside the gangplank, swinging their legs above the water and chewing tobacco. They'd probably been left to guard the vessel while the rest of the crew went ashore.

Joseph hovered, trying to look inconspicuous.

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So far so good. But what next? It was all very well finding the ship, but now he had to get on board without being caught.

Before he could figure out how, a terrible sound split the air.

'*Yeeeeeeeargghhh!*'

Joseph almost jumped out of his skin. The howl seemed to have come from the cabin at the ship's stern. He felt his goblin ears prick up as he heard a calm, murmuring voice follow it, speaking in a reassuring tone.

'I don't give a stuffed lobster!' came the screeched reply. 'You ain't cutting my bleedin' foot off!'

Come on, Joseph. Now or never. He strode forward, stepping onto the gangplank before fear made him question whether it was going to get him killed or not.

'Oi!' said one of the sailors. 'What are you—?'

'Surgeon's boy,' mumbled Joseph. 'Supplies.' He dug in his pocket and brought out the silver pocket watch to show them. It didn't look much like a medical instrument, but then, the sailors didn't look like geniuses either.

'Oh, right,' said the other sailor doubtfully, as Joseph boarded the junk and strode across the deck, coat tails trailing behind him.

The last time he'd been on this ship . . . well, the

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memory was a painful one, and he didn't have time to dwell on it. He made for the cabin.

'Wait! You can't go in there without—'

Too late. Joseph hesitated for just a moment.

I'm going to find out the truth.

The truth about my father.

Then he drew his cutlass and barged through the door.