

## CHAPTER ONE

# A DREAM OF LIGHT AND MOTION

**A**ramar Thorne turned away from the Light.

*It had called to him, and he had followed, sailing toward it across the sea—without benefit of ship, boat, or raft—until the surf and spray vanished from beneath his feet and he found himself ashore. And still the Light called to him. This strange Light came not from the sun nor the moons nor the stars, whose constellations his mother used to point out to him when he was six, after his father had vanished, and under which she had promised Greydon Thorne could be found. No, this was a new Light, a moving target with no fixed progression through the heavens—quite impossible to reliably track, let alone pin down. Still, without ever making a conscious decision to continue, Aram found himself walking toward it. He walked and walked through dusty desert, broken forest, swampy bog, and dense jungle, stopping only when*

*a great wall of a mountain seemed to rise up out of the ground to block his path. But the Voice of the Light still called his name, "Aram, Aram," all without ever making any actual sound that reached his ears. The Voice grabbed him like a fist around his heart and pulled him painfully into the air, and soon Aram Thorne was soaring, soaring through sunshine and cloud, through rain and thunder—until lightning struck so close, he could feel the hairs on his arm stand at attention and sing. But even this lightning paled before the bright, bright Light.*

*He had traveled so far to find it, find it so that the Light could save him, could return his father, bring Aram home to his mother, reunite him with Robb and Robertson and Selya and even Soot. Yet when finally he achieved it, the Light blinded, and Aramar Thorne turned away. It called to him: "Aram, Aram, it is you who must save me . . ." But he turned away. One last time, it called his name . . .*

"Aramar Thorne, get your sorry bones out of that bunk!"

Aram woke with a start, sitting up abruptly and smacking his forehead painfully against the underside of the upper berth, only eight or nine inches above where he laid his head. It had been six months aboard ship, and he figured he must have a permanent bruise, given the number of times he had done the exact same thing, never learning from the experience. The strange dream of motion and Light began to fade instantly, and he struggled to hold on to even a fragment of it, but *she* was of another mind.

Ship's second mate Makasa Flintwill had evolved beyond any amusement she once enjoyed from seeing Aram bash in his own skull. The fact that the kid never woke up on his own, and rarely without her shouting at him for two solid minutes, was yet more proof he didn't belong aboard the *Wavestrider*. She was sick of the sight of him, but the captain—without ever actually giving the order—had all but made Aram her responsibility. Still, there was never any suggestion she had to treat the young fool gently. Tired of yelling at him, she grabbed his bare right foot and yanked him bodily off his bunk.

Landing hard on his behind, Aram winced sharply and glared up at his nemesis. Makasa was seventeen, only five years older than he was, but had he been standing at attention she'd still tower over him by a good half a foot. Right now, she positively *loomed*. He blinked twice, trying to focus. Backlit by the open hatch behind her, Makasa's sable skin blended with the belowdeck shadows and gloom and his own hazy consciousness, rendering her as little more than a silhouette. But there was no denying her solidity, her presence. She was five foot ten, lean and muscular, with kinky hair, cut extremely short to match the shape of her skull. Flintwill was the irresistible force, and unfortunately for Aram, he was no immovable object. She grabbed the front of his tunic and dragged him to his feet.

"Landfall in five minutes," she growled. "Pull on your boots and meet me in the hold in two."

\* \* \*

He had to go up to go down. Having donned stockings and boots and splashed his face with water, Aram climbed into the open air. He glanced ashore—at the first land he'd seen in a week—then trotted across the deck to the hold, passing sailors about the business of making landfall, knowing that no matter how fast he moved, it would never be fast enough for *Wavestrider's* second mate.

Swinging his body into the hold, he grabbed the outside edges of the ladder and slid down it smoothly. He'd learned that trick at least. His boots hit bottom. There was minimal light here, too, and it smelled of mildew and fish.

Makasa, of course, was waiting. She had her back to him but began barking out orders before he had even touched down: "That barrel and those four crates are going ashore. Help me with the barrel, then come back for the crates. And make sure you send up the right ones."

He didn't answer, which suited both of them fine. In his first few weeks aboard ship, he had tried out, "Yes, Miss!" and "Yes, Ma'am!" and "Yes, Sir!" They all made her grimace. Later, "Yes, Second Mate!" and even "Yes, Flintwill!" and "Yes, Makasa!" But none of them seemed to suit. So he had stopped addressing her by name or title. He had tried very hard to stop addressing her at all.

They tilted the heavy barrel to roll it across the hold, and he could feel and hear its contents sloshing about within. The question came out of his mouth before he could censor it: "What's in this thing?"

“Hardboiled chicken eggs pickled in brine,” she said darkly, as if challenging him to deny it.

He screwed up his face in disgust. “Who would ever want hardboiled chicken eggs pickled in brine?!”

“Wait and see,” she said, smiling for the first time all morning. Maybe for the first time all month.

He shook his head, something he had taught himself to do, because rolling his eyes seemed to particularly aggravate Second Mate Flintwill, and he didn’t need to give her any more reasons to dislike him. They maneuvered the barrel onto the cargo net, which immediately formed a hammock around it, as the deckhands above used ropes and pulleys to raise it topside. Without another word, she climbed up the ladder, leaving him below.

He crossed back to the crates she had indicated. They weren’t sealed, and he wrenched off a lid to satisfy his curiosity. Inside were old, scarred axe blades affixed to splintered or shattered wooden hafts, broken knives and sword tips, even rusty nails. He glanced about the hold of his father’s ship. It was full of random stuff like this, useless junk that no sane man or woman could ever want. And yet it was exactly this useless junk that was Greydon Thorne’s stock-in-trade. *Wavestrider* traversed Azeroth, landing in both Alliance ports and Horde—and everything in between. Captain Thorne trafficked in the obscure. A small trade here, a small deal there. If there was profit in any of it, Aram could hardly see how. He shook his head again.

He made four trips across the hold, placing each crate in the net, watching each one get raised into the light. This reminded him of . . . something. But he couldn't summon up a notion of what that something might be. He shook the dormant memory off and followed the crates into the air.

Achieving the deck, he was rewarded by a massive slap on the back that took the wind out of his sails, followed by a hardy "Mornin', Greydon-son!"

"Please, don't call me that," Aram said, catching his breath. He turned, unsurprised to see the robust smile of *Wavestrider's* first mate, the burly red-bearded dwarf, Durgan One-God, who stood just a smidge over five feet tall and weighed easily thirteen stone. Just as Aram had rarely seen Makasa smile, it was even more rare to see One-God's expression form anything else.

"Aye, Aramar," One-God said with mock contrition. "Ye're yer own man, o' course. Bit of a puny man, but still . . ."

The five-foot-four Aram grinned down at the dwarf. Aram knew he was tall for his age, with every reason to believe he'd grow taller still. But it amused the first mate to call his young friend puny, and Aram didn't begrudge the dwarf his amusements—mostly because One-God was his favorite person on the ship, bar none. And that included Aram's own father, the ship's captain, Greydon Thorne.

"Ye got that little book o' yours?" One-God said cheerfully.

Aram patted the back pocket of his breeches. "Always," he said.



“Good. Might see somethin’ worthy of its pages today. We’ve weighed anchor. Yer old man said tae go ashore.”

For a split second, Aram felt *that urge*. The urge to throw his father’s orders right back into the high-and-mighty Captain Greydon Thorne’s teeth. Aram’s relationship with his father was, well . . . complicated. But truthfully, Aram was dying to put his feet on solid ground again, so there wasn’t much point in rebelling now. Besides, he could hear the voice of his mother, Ceya, in his head: “Don’t cut off your nose to spite your face, child.” He suffered through another friendly but painful whap on the back from One-God and headed for the gangway.

## CHAPTER TWO

# FOR WHOM THE BELL GNOLLS

**D**escending to within a few feet of the end of the gangway, Aram jumped sideways to land on the steep, sloping beach. This was no port, but a small natural harbor on the coast of Desolace that allowed the *Wavestrider* to sail virtually up to the shore. The barrel and crates were already on the sand, flanked by Makasa Flintwill and Aramar's father, Captain Greydon Thorne.

Greydon stood a hair short of six feet tall. He was slim but well muscled with thick dark hair and a thick dark beard, both just beginning to gray to match the tint of his light gray eyes. The bridge of his nose zigged and zagged from being broken multiple times. But the gray eyes smiled, and the corners of his mouth curved up in concert upon Greydon seeing his son come into view.



“You ready?” he asked Aram with a grin in his voice.

“For what?” Aram responded, scowling. As usual, the more his father smiled, the less inclined Aram was to reciprocate.

But for now the captain didn’t seem to notice. He smiled in earnest, turned his head, and nodded up at One-God, who was watching from aboard ship. The first mate rang the ship’s iron bell three times. Then all eyes but Aram’s turned to stare toward the forest trees that crept up to the very edge of the shore.

Aram’s own eyes flicked back and forth between his father and Makasa and the woods. Aram noted that Makasa was well armed. Her shield—an iron circle covered with layers of impact-absorbing rawhide—was strapped to her back; a length of iron chain crisscrossed over her chest; her cutlass was at her side, and a long iron harpoon was held loosely in her left hand, its blunt end at rest in the sand. In contrast, his father’s ubiquitous cutlass was conspicuously absent from his belt, but he leaned on a fairly impressive war club of star wood and iron that easily came up to his navel. Suddenly, Aram felt unprepared to the point of nakedness. Yes, he had his sketchbook, but he longed for his cutlass instead.

Just then, Aram felt—more than he heard—a stirring of the leaves. Something melted out of the forest onto the rocks that separated wood from sand. And not one something but many somethings. They looked like massive dogs, brown fur with yellow accents and black spots, standing not quite erect on two feet, wearing ragged clothing of rough wool accented with bits

of iron armor. And they were holding weapons. Lots and lots of weapons. Clubs and spears and axes and bolos and more clubs, all “decorated” with sharp iron spikes and barbs.

“What are you seeing?” Greydon asked.

“Gnolls,” Aram answered breathlessly. He normally hated being quizzed by his father, but in this instant Aram was too riveted to remember to be resentful. He’d heard rumors of the monsters since he was a child in Lakeshire, but Aram had never actually seen a gnoll before. These matched Greydon’s description of the species exactly—though the good captain had neglected to mention the kind of fear they’d inspire.

Greydon removed his worn leather coat and let it fall to the sand. He slipped the compass that hung on a gold chain around his neck down behind his white shirt. Then he took a step forward and with a lurch swung his own heavy club up onto his shoulder. In response, the gnolls . . . laughed. Or at least it sounded like laughter to Aram. It rose to a loud, chilling cackle, then reaching its crescendo, devolved into scattered chuckles and then into heavy panting, like the family dog, Soot, after a run along Lake Everstill back home.

The largest gnoll, a female, padded forward. Though in height she had only a few inches’ advantage over Aram, she was solid as an oak, with massive shoulders, a short snout, and a grin of sharp, spiky teeth. She had pointed ears, one pierced by a feather, the other with a small gold ring. And she had her own massive war club similar to Greydon’s—moontouched wood

reinforced with iron—though unlike the clubs of her fellow gnolls, hers was free of pointy metal protrusions.

“Cackle here is matriarch of the Grimtail clan,” Greydon whispered. “She and I have faced each other before.”

“And lived to tell about it?” Aram asked dubiously, catching Greydon’s sly smile and Makasa’s angry scowl.

Cackle circled to the left. Greydon stepped forward and circled to the right. Aram spotted Makasa lift her harpoon half an inch off the ground, but the captain spotted this, too, and shook his head slightly, causing Makasa to lower the barbed iron javelin back to its resting position.

Aram tried to swallow but his mouth was dry as dirt. He tried to breathe but felt like he had forgotten how. He didn’t much care for his father, but he didn’t want Greydon Thorne to die fighting this monster. The anticipation of the clash made his heart pump rapidly in his chest—and still he was unprepared when both combatants suddenly rushed each other, war clubs swinging.

The two clubs smashed together with bone-crushing force, the iron reinforcement of the weapons ringing out louder than *Wavestrider’s* bell. Greydon pivoted and swung again, but Cackle leapt, her powerful hind legs propelling her above the horizontal arc of his attack. She brought her club down with her descent, but Captain Thorne tucked and rolled forward, leaving her weapon to strike empty ground with enough force to send sand flying in all directions—including into Aram’s

slack-jawed mouth and staring eyes. The boy choked, coughed, and spat. His eyes watered, and as he squeezed them shut and wiped the back of his arm across his face, he briefly lost track of the fighting.

He blinked several times, listening for the dull sound of wood impacting flesh or for a sharp cry of anguish, but all he heard was another bell-like striking of club on club. Finally, his vision cleared, and he saw his father swing up with his war club, missing Cackle's jaw by fractions of an inch. She stumbled back a step but recovered quickly, sweeping her own club across in an attempt to cave in Greydon's chest before he could bring his club down and block. But Captain Thorne was too fast for the gnoll, and his falling club didn't simply check hers—it *shattered* the matriarch's weapon into splinters, and snapped itself in half.

The two warriors stood a few feet apart, still grasping the hafts of their broken and useless weapons, breathing hard and glaring at each other. Aram tried to whisper, "What now?" to Makasa, but his sand-dry mouth only managed to croak out something unintelligible.

Makasa, nevertheless, shushed him angrily.

Then Captain Greydon Thorne threw his head back and laughed. The laugh seemed to echo behind him, and Aram whipped his head around to see Durgan One-God guffawing from aboard ship. Aram whipped his head back to study Cackle. Her lips parted to emit a low growl . . . which quickly built into the high-pitched sound that had clearly given the matriarch her

name. Soon every gnoll on the beach was laughing and hooting along with Greydon and Cackle and the entire crew of the *Wavestrider*. In fact, only the stunned Aram and the grim Makasa seemed not to be in on the joke.

Cackle slapped Greydon on the back—hard but friendly and not at all unlike the slaps Aram had received from One-God—and pointed what remained of her club at Aram. Captain Thorne whispered something in her ear, and Cackle nodded while redoubling her hysterics. Aram felt the heat rise in his face, and seeing his boy's angry blush, Aramar Thorne's father swallowed what remained of his own laughter. His expression saddened for a moment, before he covered up a pain unknown to Aram and regained a mirthful mien. "Shall we trade?!" he called out boisterously.

"Yes, man!" answered the gnoll at full volume, between continued cackles and the occasional amused glance Aram's way. She waved toward her clan, who brought forth thick packets wrapped in giant gunnera leaves. A dangerous-looking male with multiple ear, eyelid, nostril, and lip piercings placed one of the packets atop the barrel and carefully unfolded the thick but supple leaf, revealing long strips of dried smoked meats.

"Boar jerky," said Cackle. "Finest the Grimtail make. Sixteen packets. And twelve of rockscale cod."

Captain Thorne stroked his beard, as Cackle rapped a paw-like fist against the barrel and listened to the sloshing of the brine within. Aram watched her mouth water, drool literally dripping into the sand. "This what I think?" she asked hungrily.

Greydon nodded. "It is." Then he pried open the top crate and picked up a battered axe blade. "And here are four crates filled with ready spurs."

Cackle smiled with all her teeth. "Thorns of Thorne," she said and laughed. But her eyes betrayed something else, a sudden nervousness that Aram noticed but failed to comprehend.

His father had a firmer grip on the situation. "So you see I bring much treasure to trade. But sixteen and twelve. You know that's not enough, Matriarch."

She growled again, and Aram saw Makasa adjust her grip on the harpoon. But Cackle's growl ended with a grunt and a wave, and soon more packets materialized from the jungle. "Twenty and twenty," Cackle barked. "No more. Final."

"Agreed!" said the captain, and everyone—on both sides of the trade—cheered. Even Makasa cheered, and even Aram found himself caught up in the moment—belatedly. His cheer arrived a second or two after the rest, causing more embarrassment when Cackle pointed at him, laughed, and asked, "Your boy a little slow?"

Greydon looked at Aramar and said, "Not slow. Just new."

Aram crossed his arms over his chest and scowled, as his father said, "What? New's not bad."

His son resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the old man and shook his head instead.

The barrel was pried open, and the stench from the pickled eggs almost made Aram retch—and even had the stoic Makasa looking a little green. But Cackle and the Grimtail howled with



joy. The matriarch slapped away the paw of the large, pierced male and reached into the brine. Her talons emerged, gently clutching the first egg. She held it up as if it were a diamond to be admired. Then she dropped it whole into her maw. Her head rolled with joy at the taste. Aram forgot his nausea and stared in wonder.

“To the gnolls those eggs are quite the delicacy,” Greydon said. Aram flinched. He hadn’t noticed his father slip behind him. (For a big man, Greydon Thorne was surprisingly light on his feet.)

“So I can see,” Aram said, trying to make his voice sound cold and uninterested. But his desire to distance himself from his father was fighting a losing battle against the boy’s own curiosity. Aram watched the gnolls break open the four crates, watched them ooh and ahh over the broken blades and old horseshoe nails, and, before he could stop himself, was shooting Greydon a questioning look.

“The Grimtail have no ironworks,” Greydon said as he slid his arms into the sleeves of his leather coat, shrugging it up until the shoulders fell correctly. “No forges like your friend Glade.” Aram didn’t care for Greydon Thorne referring to Robb Glade as his “friend,” but he let it pass this once as his father continued: “But they can hammer a nail or an axe blade or a knife tip into a war club and triple the damage they can do to their enemies. To these gnolls, those bits of iron are worth their weight in gold.”

Aram raised an eyebrow. “So you’re cheating them. Tricking

them into taking worthless refuse in exchange for . . .” Here, he paused, confused. In exchange for what? For boar jerky? For codfish jerky? It seemed to Aram that those forty packets were hardly worth more than the barrel of disgusting eggs.

“No one’s cheating anyone,” Greydon said, with more patience than Aram probably deserved. Absently, *Wavestrider’s* captain pulled the compass and chain out from under his shirt and let it fall against his chest. He said, “This is what I’ve been trying to teach you. It’s *what* you trade to *whom*. One man’s junk is another gnoll’s treasure.”

“And one gnoll’s smoked meat?”

“Is treasure of a kind to the centaur, tauren, and quilboar of Flayers’ Point.”

“Quilboar eat boar jerky?”

“Some do, actually. But mostly they take the codfish.”

Aram shook his head with something like admiration. “You’ll make a fortune on these trades, won’t you?”

Admiration not being one of Aramar’s typical reactions to his father, Greydon grinned happily—soaking up every stingy morsel his son offered up. “A *small* fortune,” the captain said with a shrug.

“So if all of this was so friendly and honest, why did you and Cackle have to fight?”

“Gnolls don’t like humans. Probably because most humans don’t like gnolls. Cackle couldn’t trade with me in front of her clan until I demonstrated I was worthy of her respect.”

“Then . . . it was all for show?”

“Yes and no. You have to see folks for who they are, Aram, not for who the old men of Lakeshire have taught you to *think* they are. Gnolls are a warrior race. A cantankerous warrior race, at that. Even the pups know the difference between a pantomime and a real battle. So we went at it. For real. But you’ll notice there were no spurs, no barbs, no ‘thorns’ in either war club.”

“Yeah, but they were still war clubs! You still could’ve been killed!”

“Don’t tell me you care,” Greydon said, still smiling.

Aram merely looked annoyed. “I don’t want you dead, Greydon.” Aram knew his father hated it when his son called him Greydon. “I just wanna go home.”

Greydon sighed. “I know, son. But here is where you need to be right now.” He patted his boy gently on the shoulder and moved to join the cackling Cackle.

Only then did Aram notice that Makasa was nearby, had seen—and probably heard—the whole exchange. Aram met her glare. Then she turned away, but just for a second, Aramar thought she almost looked sad.

They remained on the beach, celebrating with the gnolls all through the night. One-God and the rest of the crew descended with a keg of Thunder Ale and joined the party. Captain Thorne allowed one packet of boar jerky to be opened and shared with

the crew and the gnolls—though with a curt nod to Mose Canton, the ship’s quartermaster, Greydon made sure the other thirty-nine packets were safely stowed aboard ship.

Curious now to try this “treasure,” Aram tracked the progress of Jonas Cobb, the ship’s cook, who walked among the crew and gnolls, passing out samples. Old Cobb was certainly taking his time—and an oddly circuitous route among the crowd—offering up strips of jerky to the gnolls lurking at the treeline. Then Aram watched Cobb disappear into the forest. He was gone for a minute or three—while the party at large was focused on One-God’s fairly rollicking distribution of ale—and Aram was just rising to express concern for the ancient cook, when Cobb’s white head reappeared a dozen yards from where he had entered the woods. He continued his distributions, eventually reaching Aram.

Aram tried a strip of the jerky. It was so tough he thought he’d rip his jaw out trying to bite off a chunk. But once it was in his mouth, he had to admit it was spicy and flavorful, and the smallest bite—no matter how determinedly he chewed—lasted in his mouth for nearly half an hour. He could see its value now. Or taste and understand it, anyway.

While he chewed, he took out his sketchbook—a small leather-bound volume of formerly blank pages of parchment, which he kept wrapped in oilskin cloth in his back pocket. It had been a gift from his stepfather, Robb Glade, and it had cost the blacksmith a pretty penny. Easily two days’ work, if not a

full week's. It was Aram's most prized possession, in part because he loved drawing, loved it more than almost anything. But also because the gift was tangible proof that Robb believed in his stepson's talent. Sure, both his mother and stepfather had insisted Aram learn the blacksmith trade. A man needed to earn a living, after all. But Robb also saw the value in Aram having a way to express himself, and no one was more delighted than the smith when Aram filled the first page of the book with his sketch of the burly, smiling Master of the Forge.

Aram flipped through the pages. The early ones were all of Lakeshire, his home. There were a few sketches of the town, a few landscapes of the shores of Lake Everstill, and one of Robb's forge. There were a handful of pictures of animals, but animals were less inclined to sit still. Nevertheless, there were a couple horses, a mule, and a one-eyed tomcat, whose picture was, from necessity, finished from memory. And, of course, two or three sketches of Soot. But mostly the book was filled with people. His family featured heavily. In addition to his stepfather, there were three sketches of his mother and two each of his younger half-siblings, Robertson and Selya—plus a sketch of all of them together. There was even a self-portrait of Aram, done with the aid of a looking glass and hours of obsessive sketching and rubbing out and resketching until the parchment of that page was thinner than an eyelash—and even so, it was Aram's least favorite sketch in the book. To everyone who saw it, it was a mighty good likeness. But Aram *never* felt he caught his own true self.





CEYA, Robb, ROBERTSON, SEJYA, AND SOOT





About a third of the way through the book, the subjects of the sketches shifted from Lakeshire to the *Wavestrider*, starting with one lengthwise portrait of the ship itself. She was a fine, solid trading vessel, a converted small frigate, old but yare—and meticulously maintained. Patched, yes, in multiple places, but the work was excellently done. She was a hundred feet long, had three masts, a crew of thirty, and *no cannon*—for, according to her captain, his trading partners must always feel assured that Greydon Thorne and his ship came in peace.

Her most unique feature, which merited a sketch of its own, was the strange mahogany figurehead affixed to the bow: a winged creature of unknown origin—neither male nor female—carved and polished into smooth, dark facets, depicting few curves, mostly angles. To be honest, Aram thought the figurehead ungainly and crude when compared to some of the beautifully honed elves and human women he had seen on other ships in Stormwind Harbor. *Wavestrider*'s figurehead was not original to the boat and had been carved four years ago by ship's carpenter Anselm Yewtree, who once told Aram it had been made to Captain Thorne's extremely precise specifications. But if any member of the crew knew the figurehead's significance, none admitted to it. And Aram refused to ask his father, at times convinced it would give the man too much satisfaction, and, at other times, fearing he would deny his son an answer.

Aram's book also contained multiple sketches of One-God and more than a few of Duan Phen and at least one of nearly



ALAM



every other member of the crew. Even an unfinished sketch of the captain himself, which Aram had been feeling pretty good about until his father noticed his son drawing him and offered to hold still and pose. Aramar Thorne had slapped the book shut immediately and stuffed it back in his pocket.

The only person aboard ship Aram hadn't sketched was—no surprise—ship's second mate Makasa Flintwill. Even now, as she saw him slip the coal pencil from his shirt pocket, she growled at him once again. "You better not be putting me in that blasted book."

He repeated what he always told her, every time she made this same implied threat. "I promise I won't sketch you unless you ask me to." This satisfied them both, as both knew she'd never ask, and Aram had no more interest in preserving the bane of his onboard existence for posterity than she had in being preserved.

Besides, Aram was much more interested in sketching the matriarch. And then the pierced male, whom the other gnolls called a brute. And then a small gnoll pup. For the young artist, sketching them meant understanding them. Getting inside their skin, experiencing their musculature, feeling the structure of their bones in his mind's eye, in his hand, and on the page. On first impression, Aram had thought Cackle a monster. But now, he knew she was just another animal. Like Soot or the one-eyed tomcat. Like Durgan One-God. Like Aramar Thorne.

Cackle noticed him sketching the pup. She approached and leaned in over the sketchbook. He was distracted by the dank





Matriarch Cackfe



musty scent of her fur—until she barked out a laugh and barked out at Greydon, “Your boy so useless!” Aram started to color—though whether with anger or embarrassment, he wasn’t quite sure.

But still snickering, Cackle was soon drawn back to the page. She stared at the upside-down picture of the pup in Aram’s book. She stared at the actual pup crouching at their feet. She stared at the sketch again.

Then she grunted once and came around behind Aram, leaning so far over the boy’s shoulder, he could feel her hot breath on his cheek and smell each and every one of the twenty-eight eggs she had consumed from the barrel. Her sharp, sharp teeth could easily and at any second tear his ear off—at the very least—but he didn’t flinch. He knew her better now. He held still, and she stared again at the drawing of the pup. The matriarch’s breathing slowed noticeably. “Flip leaf,” she whispered hoarsely.

Aram turned the page, revealing a pristine piece of parchment. But Cackle growled at him. “No, not new leaf. *Old* leaf.” Aram nodded and turned the pages back.

Makasa watched all this with one hand on her cutlass. One-God started to make a joke, but Greydon—recognizing that something special was happening—put a hand on his first mate’s shoulder, and the dwarf fell silent, though he was still smiling. Greydon nodded in much the same way Aram just had. Even the giggling gnolls had fallen silent, focused on the matriarch and the boy.



Aram turned to the sketch of the brute. She glanced up at the actual brute briefly but then coughed out a laugh that seemed to say *the gnoll* was a poor copy of Aram's picture. "Flip leaf," she said again. "Old leaf."

Aram turned the page back, and Cackle saw herself in charcoal. She sucked in air and held her breath for a silent minute.

Then she exhaled and straightened. She looked up at Aram's father.

"Good magic," was all she said to him, and Greydon nodded once more.

Again she leaned back over Aram's shoulder, and again she said, "Flip leaf."

Aram turned back a page to the unfinished picture of Greydon. Cackle's brow furrowed. "You not finish."

"No," he said.

"You finish. You finish your father."

"I—"

"No. You finish, boy." She moved away, shaking her head and muttering. "Boy must finish. Boy must finish. Or else bad magic."

GREYDON THORNE

