THE LORE OF THE SEA

THE HAVEN SERIES



S. J. HOWLAND

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for Josh, Henry, and Freddie—my greatest adventures of all,

with my love and gratitude.

Thank you for inspiring me every day.

"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

CHAPTER ONE

The trouble with secret superpowers, Xander reflected, was that they complicated *everything*. Refraining from using them wasn't even the greatest challenge, difficult though it was to resist the temptation sometimes. The real issue was the awkward excuses, the half-truths about how he was spending his time, and the constant need to pretend he was normal, just like everyone else. The first time he had travelled to Haven, the mysterious parallel world which bordered his own, he had inadvertently left behind a shadowself, the echo of himself which belonged in this reality, which had lasted long enough to cover his initial absence, Lately, however, this technique had proved rather hit and miss, leaving him juggling flimsy evasions. No-one had told him how to deal with people misunderstanding – or worse, *noticing*. Will had noticed. Not his new abilities, of course – Xander was too careful for that – but that he had changed. 'You're different,' his friend had said, staring at him with narrowed eyes. 'It feels like I don't even know you. You're never around anymore, and even when you're here, it's like you're not paying attention. What's with you?'

Xander's fingers tightened on the strap of his schoolbag, annoyance burning in his stomach and quickening his pace as he headed home on the last day of term. He had been doing his best to juggle his dual lives, but it wasn't as if he could talk about it. How could Will possibly understand? He would never experience Haven, or know what it was like to have the responsibility of Traveller powers. The gap between their worlds was unbridgeable, and trying to explain would only make it worse.

Will had been pushing him again today about the new 'friends' he had been spending time with and had not been satisfied with Xander's vague responses. In the end, Xander had been forced to lean surreptitiously into his orb, giving a folding table in the classroom a sharp nudge to tip it over and send the books on it crashing to the floor. It had been sufficient to divert Will's attention but not to appease him, and he had left without a word when classes ended.

'Don't know why I bothered to help him in that last football match,' Xander muttered under his breath. 'That ball would've never gone in if I hadn't supplied a little extra help with those powers he wouldn't understand.' He shook his head as he turned onto his own road and marched down it. 'Oh, what's the point? I've got enough to do.'

On reaching his own house, Xander opened the front door and promptly tripped over a large untidy pile of bags, files, and folders. Catching his balance with a muffled exclamation, he picked his way past them as his mother's rumpled head appeared around the doorframe of the living room, her face flushed and a streak of something on her cheek. She looked like she had been wrestling trolls rather than simply packing for a trip, and he smothered a smile.

'How was your end of term?' she asked, trying to shove her glasses up her nose with her wrist, her hands full of papers.

'Good,' said Xander firmly, resolving to put the argument with Will out of his mind. He eyed the small mountain of belongings. 'You're not planning on taking all that, are you? I don't think they'll let you on the plane.'

Mrs King glanced vaguely at the pile, as if wondering how it had all got there. 'Probably not,' she conceded. She turned back to him, hesitating a moment. 'Are you sure you're still all right with me going? You'll be okay spending the holidays with those friends of yours?'

A huge grin spread across Xander's face before he caught it, seeing her genuine concern.

'It's fine, Mum. I *am* fifteen now, you know.' The mention of his friends reminded him that one of them would be arriving soon to pick him up, and he was far from ready. 'I ought to go get packed myself. Jasper will be here any minute.'

'*Oh*.' Mrs King's flush deepened and her hand fluttered up to her hair, trying to smooth it down. It had no noticeable effect. 'I didn't realise *Jasper* was collecting you. How kind of him.'

Xander barely refrained from rolling his eyes. Her all too obvious interest in Jasper Stanton was an ongoing embarrassment to him, and he silently cursed himself for mentioning his name. Not long after his return home from his first visit to Haven, Mrs Stanton had dispatched Jasper to introduce himself, wanting to ease the way for future visits and provide reassurance about Xander's new friends. However, from the minute she had opened the door, Xander had been mortified by his mother's reaction to the handsome Traveller. Flustered, Mrs King had invited Jasper in and he had been too polite to mention it when she handed him a cup of milky water, having forgotten to use a tea bag. He had explained that Xander had become a great friend of his daughter and nephew, Len and Ollie, while leaving carefully vague the circumstances under which that friendship had formed. The only upside Xander could see was that at least his mother appeared too mesmerised by Jasper to ask any awkward questions, either then or on subsequent occasions. With a noncommittal noise, he walked into the kitchen before she could say anything further.

'Hi, Mrs Mac. How's it going?'

Mrs MacLeod, their cleaner for many years, looked up from the cord she was twining around the iron to give him a beaming smile. A large pile of neatly stacked clothes took up most of the kitchen table, while the rest of the room was a tidy contrast to the chaos in the hallway.

'All done, ready to pack for your wee holiday.' She walked over and picked up the top-most jumper, holding out the sleeve to him. 'Beautiful work, that. I didn't know people even knew *how* to darn these days.'

Xander stared at the almost invisible repair to the previously gaping hole in the elbow, his mind racing for a plausible explanation that did not in any way involve brownies. 'Um, my friend's grandmother did it for me,' he stumbled out, avoiding looking at her.

'Ah,' she said, nodding. 'That would explain it. Folk knew how to fix things in the old days, none of this just throwing them away.'

Handing him the jumper, Mrs MacLeod went to put the iron back in the cupboard, then began rooting in it, mumbling under her breath about things constantly going missing these days. Finally, she straightened up, looking exasperated.

'Where's that dustpan brush gone? I must be going mad – I could've sworn I put it back in here.'

Xander glanced over and then froze. Just out of Mrs MacLeod's eyeline, peeking in at the door at knee height, was a small face topped with wild curly hair. It was Brolly. His eyes widened in panic as he met the brownie's guilty gaze, before the little figure whisked back out of sight. but luckily Mrs MacLeod appeared not to have noticed anything, turning to resume her search. Xander took a cautious step towards the door but, as he did so, a small hand carefully reached around the doorframe, clutching a dustpan brush. It gently nudged the brush behind the kitchen bin before vanishing once more.

'Here it is, Mrs Mac,' Xander said, trying to keep his voice nonchalant. As she turned to him, he bent and lifted the brush from its hiding place before handing it to her.

'Now, how in the world did it end up there?' She shook her head. 'Must be the wee folk, that's what.'

Once again, Xander's breath caught in shocked surprise. *'What?'*

Seemingly unaware of his reaction to her words, Mrs MacLeod continued to tidy up her cleaning implements. 'Oh, nothing, laddie – just a funny old superstition from the Highlands. My granny always used to blame them when things went missing.' She laughed, and Xander felt the tension drain out of him.

'Right,' he said, nodding. 'Well, I'd better get packed or I won't be ready in time.'

Mrs MacLeod beamed at him, then peered more closely at his face.

'You may want to have a shave before you're off.' She shook her head. 'I don't know where the years go. It seems like yesterday that you were only a bairn, and now look at you, getting all grown up.'

Xander smiled awkwardly, backing away. 'I'll … go do that then.'

With a nod, he made his escape, waiting until he was in the hallway to run his hand over his jaw. Mrs MacLeod had developed a tendency to lapse into reminiscing about him as a child, and he definitely did not have time for that. He grimaced as a quick inspection confirmed that she had been right about the need for a shave and hurried his pace. Up in his bedroom, he found Brolly lurking behind his bed, digging a toe into the carpet with a contrite expression. Xander closed the door behind him and then turned to eye the errant brownie.

'That was *not* being subtle,' he said with a severe look.

Brolly nodded meekly, his penitent air rather undermined by the irrepressible sparkle in his eyes. Xander maintained his stern expression for a moment, before relenting with a little smile and dumping his armful of clothes onto the bed. He crouched down to root under it for his bag, as the brownie watched with great interest.

'You two need to be more careful,' he threw over his shoulder as he hauled the bag out and began shoving clothes into it, with very little regard to Mrs MacLeod's careful ironing. 'I get that it's not always easy, y'know,' he added, with a grimace, 'but ordinary people just wouldn't understand. We've got to protect them from things they can't comprehend or accept – it's sad, but that's the reality.'

He threw open the cupboard door to find a few more things, only to discover Spike lurking inside. The brownie gave him a hopeful look and held up a pair of boots, obviously trying to be especially helpful after the near-miss downstairs. Xander tried to suppress his laughter at the sight, but failed, and the brownie smiled

brightly at him. He reached down to take the boots with a quick 'thanks' and shoved them on top of his clothes, while Brolly came over to peer into the bag.

'We is fixing them for you,' he said, giving the boots a nudge with his finger. 'A good sole is carrying you far.'

Xander nodded, not really paying attention as he pulled out a folder from his desk drawer.

'I saw – very shiny,' he said, frowning as he glanced through the contents.

Since spotting Gage in the news report about Infinity Inc, he had done some research into the corporation itself and its CEO, Dominic Bayle, but found very little of interest. There had been no mention or pictures of Gage in any of the reports or news articles he had skimmed through, and absolutely nothing to indicate anything out of the ordinary about the company. With a shrug, he shoved the folder away.

'You remember I'll be in Haven for a couple of weeks, so you should stay away from here until I'm back. If you need me, I'll be at Whittlewood most of the time, although right now I'm heading to a different lodge for the Choosing tomorrow.' He looked over at the two brownies, and added, 'It's a sort of ceremony and a pretty important day for a Traveller. We get assigned to our mentors and really start to move forward with our training.' He grinned, his excitement rising once more.

Spike gave a solemn nod, while Brolly clasped his hands together, his eyes bright.

'Will be at Stantons' house too?'

'I should think so,' he agreed, his mind still occupied with thoughts of what was to come. His anticipation had been building for weeks, and he felt another flash of irritation about Will's behaviour almost spoiling it for him, but made a determined effort to put it behind him. He glanced at his watch and frowned. 'I'd better get a move on, or Jasper'll be here before I'm even ready.' Thoughts of the awkwardness that would likely ensue if his mother was allowed more time than absolutely necessary to interact with