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opening extract from

Gullstruck Island

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Prelude

It was a burnished, cloudless day with a tug-of-war wind, a fine day for flying. And so Raglan Skein left his body neatly laid out on his bed, its breath as slow as sea swell, and took to the sky.

He took only his sight and hearing with him. There was no point in bringing those senses that would make him feel the chill of the sapphire-bright upper air or the giddiness of his rapid rise.

Like all Lost, he had been born with his senses loosely tethered to his body, like a hook on a fishing line. He could let them out, then reel them in and remember all the places his mind had visited meanwhile. Most Lost could move their senses independently, like snails' eyes on stalks. Indeed, a gifted Lost might be feeling the grass under their knees, tasting the peach in your hand, overhearing a conversation in the next village and smelling cooking in the next town, all while watching barracudas dapple and brisk around a shipwreck ten miles out to sea.

Raglan Skein, however, was doing nothing so whimsical. He had to take his body on a difficult and possibly perilous journey the next day, and he was spying out the land. It was

a relief to see the world plummet away from him so that everything became smaller. More manageable. Less dangerous.

Scattered around the isolated island of Gullstruck dozens of other minds would be adrift. Lost minds, occupied with the business of the island, keeping it functioning. Scrying for bandits in the jungles, tracing missing children on the rises, spotting sharks in the deeps, reading important trade notices and messages long distance. In fact, there might even be other Lost minds floating near him now, indiscernible to him as he was to them.

He veered towards the mountain ridge that ran along the western coast, seeing the individual peaks emerge from the fleece of clouds. One such peak stood a little proud of the rest, its coloration paler. It was Sorrow, the white volcano, sweet, pure and treacherous as snow. Skein gave her a wide berth and instead veered towards her husband, the King of Fans, the tallest middlemost mountain of the ridge, his cratered head forever lost in clouds. For now the King was docile and hazy with the heat, but he too was a volcano and of uncertain temper. The shimmering air above his slopes was flecked with the circling forms of eagles large enough to carry a child off in each claw. Villages on this coast expected to lose a couple of their number to the eagles each year.

But these eagles would have no interest in the little towns that sprawled below. As far as the great birds were concerned, the towns were just more animals, too vast and sluggish for them to bother with, scaled with slate and furred with palm thatch. The muddy roads were the veins bronze bells in white towers told out their slow, cold heartbeats.

For a moment Skein wished that he did not know that every town was really a thriving hive of bitter, biting two-legged animals, full of schemes and resentment and hidden treachery. Yet again the fear of betrayal gnawed at his mind.

We will talk to these people, the Lost Council had announced. *We are too powerful for them to ignore us. Everything can be settled peacefully.* Skein did not believe it. Three days more, and he would know if his shadowy suspicions had flesh to them.

There lay the road he would travel over the next few days. He scried it carefully. Even though he had left for the coast quietly and with haste, there was always a chance that news of his arrival had outstripped him, and that enemies lay in wait.

And it was no mean task, spying out ambushes and surprises on this coast of all coasts. Everything about it reeked of trickery and concealment. There were reefs beneath the water of the bay, betrayed only by the foam fringes on the far waves. The cliff-face itself was a labyrinth. Over centuries the creamy limestone had been hollowed and winnowed until it was a maze of tapering spires, peepholes and snub ridges like sleeping lions. So it was all along the west coast of the island, and it was this that had given the Coast of the Lace its name.

The tribe who lived here nowadays was also known as 'the Lace', and they too were full of ins and outs and twists and turns and sleeping lions pretending to be rocks. You never knew where you were with the smilers of the Lace. They were all but outcast, distrusted by everyone, scratching out a living in outskirt shanty towns or dusty little fishing villages.

Villages like the one that now came into view, nestled between a cliff and a beach in a rocky, half-hidden cove.

Here it was, Skein's ultimate destination. The village of the Hollow Beasts.

It was a Lace village. Skein could see it at a glance, even though he was too high to make out the turbans on the grandmothers, the young men's shark-tooth anklets, the bright stones in everyone's teeth. He knew from it from the furtive location, the small pearl-fishing canoes cluttering the waterline.

He descended until the freckling of two-legged specks on the beach became foreshortened human figures. His sight alighted on two young girls, one supporting by the other.

The taller of the girls was dressed in a white tunic, and he guessed instantly who she must be. Arilou.

Arilou was the only Hollow Beast whose name he knew, and it was the only name he needed to know. She was easily the most important person in the village, and arguably the only excuse for its existence. He contemplated her for a few seconds, before soaring again and preparing to return to his body.

As it happened, the girl supporting Arilou had a name too. It was designed to sound like the settling of dust, a name that was meant to go unnoticed. She was as anonymous as dust, and Skein gave her not the slightest thought.

Neither would you. In fact, you have already met her, or somebody very like her, and you cannot remember her at all.

1
Arilou

On the beach, a gull-storm erupted as rocks came bouncing down from the clifftop. Half a step behind the rocks scrambled Eiven, her face flushed from running.

No member of the village would take a shortcut straight down the cliff unless there was a matter of some urgency, not even bold, agile Eiven. Several people dropped their ropes or their nets, but not their smiles, never their smiles, for they were Lace.

'An Inspector!' Eiven called to them as she recovered her breath and balance. 'There is a Lost Inspector coming to see Arilou!'

Looks were exchanged, and the news ran off to this hut, that hut. Meanwhile Eiven sprinted across the beach along to the base of the cliff, her feet scooping ruts in the spongy sand. There she scrambled up a rope ladder and pushed through a curtain of woven reeds into the cave behind it.

According to Lace tradition and tale, the caves were sacred places, perilous mouths leading to the world of the dead, and the gods, and the white-hot, slow-pumping hearts of the mountains, mouths that might snap you up suddenly with stalactite teeth if you were judged unworthy. Eiven's family

was considered worthy to live in the caves, but only because of Arilou.

Moments later within the cave Eiven was in agitated conversation with her mother. It was a council of war, but you would never have known it from their smiles.

'So what is he planning to do to her?' Mother Govrie's eyes had a fierce and urgent brightness, but her mouth continued to beam, the lopsided swell in her lower lip speaking of stubbornness and warmth. 'How does the Inspector inspect?'

'They say he wants to grade her for their records. See how well she can control her powers.' Eiven had a knife-slash smile. Years of pearl-diving had left white coral scars trekking up her forehead like bird-prints. 'We need to tell the whole village. Everybody will want to know about this.'

Arilou was everybody's business, the village's pride and joy, their Lady Lost.

The Lost were born nowhere but Gullstruck, and even on the island they were far from common. They were scarce among the non-Lace, and much revered. Among the Lace, however, they were all but unknown. During the great purges two hundred years before, most of the 'Lace Lost' had been killed, and their numbers had never recovered. UntilBefore the birth of Arilou, none had been born to the people of the Lace for over fifty years.

Young Lost were notorious for becoming entranced with distant places and forgetting their own discarded bodies, or even failing to notice that their bodies existed. As a consequence, nobody ever lamented when a child seemed slow to learn or unaware of its surroundings, for this was often the

sign of a newborn Lost that had not yet learned to reel its mind back to its body.

The birth of a baby girl who showed every sign of being an untrained Lost had transformed the village's prospects overnight. Suddenly they were not dependent upon their dwindling harvest of pearls or on peddling shell jewellery. The nearest town grudgingly gave them food in winter, for it was accepted that when the town's own Lady Lost retired, Arilou would have to take her place. Furthermore, the stream of visitors who came to see Arilou paid well for their food and lodging, and for relics to remember their visit to the only Lace Lost. Arilou was a celebrated oddity, like a two-headed calf or a snow-white jaguar. And if any haggard doubts haunted the villagers' pride in Arilou, an outsider would never have known it from the seamless pleasure the Lace seemed to show in discussing her.

But now Arilou needed to be found and made ready for company. Her best clothes had to be prepared. Her hair had to be combed free of burrs. Her face would need to be dusted with stonedust and spices. There was no knowing how much time they had.

In the late afternoon two men stepped gingerly into the pulley-chair and let themselves be winched down the cliff by six young Lace men below.

The taller of the two visitors was unmistakably Lost. Whereas many Lost learned to base themselves in their own body, some discovered their physical form so late that they were never entirely comfortable in it. They found the

perspective disorientating, disliking the translucent peripheral view of their own nose, and the fact that they could not see all of their body to guide it. Such Lost often chose a hovering perspective instead, a little behind or to one side of their body, so as to keep themselves in view, monitor and adjust their own body language, and so forth. However, there was always something static about their posture then, and this man was no exception.

He wore his grey hair pushed back into a pigtail, the loose strands across his head pinned in place by his green three-cornered hat. His eyes were hazel, which was not unusual for one of his background. Most islanders were mixed race, for it had been over two centuries since the Cavalcaste settlers arrived on Gullstruck, easily long enough for them to intermingle with the local tribes. However, in the towns there was often more Cavalcaste blood poured into the mix, particularly among the better-heeled, and that was clearly true of this man. What *was* unusual about his eyes was that they were slightly swivelled to the left, and that he did not take the trouble to blink, or adjust the direction of his gaze. This, in short, was obviously the 'Lost Inspector'.

His shorter and younger companion seemed to be 'lost' in an utterly different sense. Compared to the Lost Inspector, he was a-twitch with involuntary movements, clutching at his hat one moment, the handrail the next, shifting his feet or his weight with every swing of the chair. Papers fluttered in the leather wallet he held under one arm. He had a rounded, pouting chin, a touch of Cavalcaste pallor and bright, brown eyes. For the moment these eyes were fixed upon the ground

reeling treacherously far below him and the mosaic of upturned faces.

He was smartly dressed and obviously a towner. Like many Gullstruck officials he was both well-heeled and bell-heeled, another result of the Cavalcaste invasion. Centuries before, back on their own homeland plains, respected members of the horse-riding Cavalcaste clans had shown their status through the size of their spurs. But nowadays the powerful were not horseback battle-leaders but lawmakers and bureaucrats. Instead of spurs, even lowly officials had taken to wearing little bells on the backs of their boots, 'honorary spurs', which jingled in just the same way but did not catch on carpets and ladies' hems.

His name was Minchard Prox, and not for the first time he was wondering if it was possible to find a secretarial post that was less prestigious than being aide to a Lost Inspector but less likely to involve trekking mountain paths in goat-drawn carts, being lowered down cliffs in glorified baskets or coming into contact with the Lace, who set his neck-hairs tingling as if at the touch of a knife.

Down there, three dozen faces, all smiling. *Just because they're smiling, it doesn't mean they like you*, he reminded himself. Smiles a-glitter, for most Lace had their teeth studded with tiny plaques of shell, metal or bright stone. Would those smiles melt away to leave implacable looks as soon as there were no strangers in the village? Perhaps it was even worse to think of the smiles clinging to every face even after they had no purpose, a whole village sitting and walking and sleeping and smiling and smiling and smiling . . .

In the old days, the Lace's smiles marked them out as a

people to respect. Prox know the Lace had acted as peacemakers and go-betweens for the other tribes, and had even carried messages to the volcanoes. So it was small wonder that when the Cavalcaste landed, the Lace had been the only tribe to approach them with smiles rather than spears.

The helpful Lace had given the settlers lots of advice on how to survive on Gullstruck. Most important of all, they warned them not to build their towns in the Wailing Way, the river valley between the King of Fans and his fellow volcano Spearhead, for the two volcanoes were rivals for the affection of Sorrow, and might some day rush together to continue their fight.

But the land around the river was rich and tempting, so the Cavalcaste had ignored their advice and built a great town in the Wailing Way. Shortly afterwards its citizens started to go missing, one at a time. Only when thirty or so had disappeared without trace did the settlers discover the truth. They were being kidnapped and murdered by the politely smiling Lace themselves.

The Lace had acted as they thought best. After all, the whole township was at risk of being trampled by angry mountains. To the Lace's minds the only way to keep the volcanoes sleepy and happy, and so prevent this disaster destroying the town altogether, was to quietly waylay solitary settlers, spirit them to the Lace mountain shrines and jungle temples . . . and sacrifice them. But when the truth came out the Lace's towns were burned by the enraged settlers, their temples destroyed and all of their seers and priests killed. Even the other tribes disowned them. They were pushed out

to the western most edge of the island – the Lace coast – and left there to forage for survival as best they could.

As the pulley-chair touched the ground at last, the front of the crowd gave a small, impatient shuffle forward.

'You want stick! You want stick!' There were about a dozen small children holding sharpened stakes twice their own height. 'For walking!'

'Hello, sir!' called one of the girls further back. 'You have lady wife? You have daughter? She likes jewellery! Buy jewellery for her!'

Now the tide was upon them, and Prox felt his face growing red as he sidled through a forest of hands proffering earrings made of shell, bead-studded boxes and pictures painted on palm leaves 'to burn for ancestors'. He was a dapper little man, but the tide of short, slightly built Lace made him feel fat and foolish. Furthermore, behind the jewelled smiles, the singsong calls and the hands slipped into his in greeting, he felt the crackle of desperation like dry weather sparks, and it made him desperate too.

The crowd quickly realized that the strangers were not to be slowed, and simultaneously decided to lead them to the heart of their village instead, to Arilou, their own prized Lost.

'This way! This way!' The human wave that had rushed them and nearly bowled them over backwards was now bearing them along with it.

The visitors were 'guided' by many companionable shoves in the back towards a cave where stalactites hung in pleats like draggled, dripping linen. Prox followed the Inspector up a rickety rope ladder to the cave entrance. A reed curtain twitched aside and strong arms reached down to pull them

into a darkness full of voices and – Prox could feel them – smiles.

Outside a girl lowered an arm decorated from wrist to shoulder in shell bracelets and laughed away her disappointment.

'Did you see them, the old thunderfaces?!' The laugh shapes hung around the women's mouths as they stared up at the reed curtain with hard, puzzled eyes. Outsiders never seemed to smile.

For a little while the family moved around so much that Prox could not keep track of them. The mother of the household brought straw mats, strips of dried fish and endless coconut shells full of rum.

'Madam Govrie,' the Inspector said at last in a low patient tone, 'I very much fear we cannot take further advantage of your hospitality if we are to return to Sweetweather town by nightfall.' As their hostess began to protest that they could stay there overnight, or in one of the houses in the village, Prox felt a restive distrust. Accommodation would turn out to have a fee attached, no doubt. Perhaps they had already arranged to delay their guests and take a cut from whoever ended up providing lodging for the night.

'Please, I must insist.' The Inspector's voice had no real intonation, and there was a rustle in his 's' as if he spoke with a sore tongue, further signs of one not at home in his own body.

'Very well, I'll call her in. Hathin!'

Prox was a little bewildered; he had thought the girl's

name was Arilou. A second later he realized that another member of the family must have been called to bring in the child, perhaps her nurse or older sister. And yes, now he could see two children, walking hand in hand from the darkness of a neighbouring cavern. Prox stared stupidly for a moment at the taller of the two girls, noting her face dusted ceremonial white with powdered chalk, her brows tinted gold with pollen and her hair waxed close to her head and studded with brilliant blue hummingbird feathers. This, he realized, was Arilou.

But she must be thirteen at least, thought Prox, looking at Arilou. *They told us to expect an untrained Lost, one not yet in control of her powers . . .*

She would have been a very pretty girl if there were not a certain *softness* in the motions of her face. Her tongue pushed her lower lip forward and glistened between her lips, and her cheeks puckered and bulged without purpose as though she was rolling invisible cherries about in her mouth.

As her smaller sister carefully guided her to sit on a straw mat, her mother ran a fingertip down Arilou's temple alongside one grey, unfocussed eye. 'Pirate eyes,' Mother Govrie said proudly. Prox never understood why the Lace seemed to regard a trace of pirate in their ancestry as a reason to boast.

The village's pride in this girl could be seen just by looking at her mouth. Nearly every tooth had been studded with a perfect little round of lazuli into which a spiral had been etched. In contrast the girl next to her had only a few of her front teeth studded in a cloudy quartz that was almost invisible against the enamel.

'Please,' said the Inspector, speaking over Govrie's enthusiasm. 'If you will let us talk to the girl in private.'

At last the Inspector and Prox were left alone with Arilou. Alone, that is, except for the younger child, who seemed to be Arilou's designated attendant. When asked to leave she stared at them unmoving, her smile baffled but intact, and eventually they relented and let her stay.

'Miss Arilou.' The Inspector settled himself to kneel in front of Arilou. A warm and wandering breeze crept into the cave so that the feathers in her hair trembled. She gave no other motion, nor acknowledgement of his presence. 'My name is Raglan Skein. My body is sitting before yours at the moment. Where are you?'

Unbidden, the younger girl took Arilou's long, golden hand in her smaller darker one and whispered into her ear. There was a small pause, and then Arilou's lids drooped a little, darkening her grey eyes like a sudden cloud shadowing the land. She hesitated, as though in contemplation, and then her jaw fell open and she began to speak.

But these were not words! Prox listened dumbstruck to the sounds falling from Arilou's drooping mouth. It was as if some words had been washed out to sea and rounded smooth and meaningless by the waves. And then he was just as startled to hear the stream of noise give way to ordinary speech, clearly spoken in a young girl's voice.

'I am running an errand for the village, Master Skein. At the moment I am storm-spotting many miles further up the coast. It would take me hours to get back.'

It was a moment or two before Prox realized that it was not Arilou who had spoken. It was her little attendant, and now

he realized why she had not left the room. However nimble her mind, it seemed that Arilou did not yet have full mastery of her tongue, a not uncommon complaint among the Lost. Her attendant was probably a younger sister, able to understand and translate Arilou's ill-formed sounds through long practice. Though the words had been spoken with such a clear, cold authority, Prox wondered for a moment if Arilou's true voice was forcing its way out through her meek little interpreter, her personality overwhelming the other like a silver river's torrent rushing down a meagre stream bed.

'Then we will not call you back immediately.' Skein had responded to the confidence in Arilou's voice, and now his tone was that of one addressing an adult rather than a child. 'Do you see a storm? Where are you?'

'I am watching from the Pericold Heights, and I can see storm clouds tangled in Mother Tooth's hair,' came the response. 'I must watch longer to be sure, but I believe that it will reach us tomorrow night.'

Pericold Heights was a promontory some fifty miles up the coast from which one could look out to sea and see a great column of steam, and at its base the outline of Mother Tooth's island like a trodden pie. Mother Tooth was the most belligerent of the volcanoes, and nobody but the birds lived in her reeking, juddering jungles. Storm clouds seemed to form around and above her, as if drawn by her ill temper.

So much for testing the girl quickly and getting out of here, thought Prox despondently. The cliff walks that had brought them to this part of the coast were treacherous enough in the dry. In wet weather the red rock melted like chocolate, and slewed and slithered off the precipices. It was starting to

sound like they might find themselves stranded in this backwater.

'You understand that I have come here to test your use of your powers and all that you have learned from the Lost School?' Skein asked. 'I must have you ready tomorrow.'

'I understand. I shall be ready.' A big velvety-black butterfly flickered through the dim cave, and with a perverse impudence settled upon Arilou's powdered cheek. She did not flinch, and it spread its wings below her eye, displaying bars the same lazuli electric blue as the feathers in her hair. Prox found himself in the grip of an awe he could not express. What could it symbolize, a marble-faced girl with a butterfly cheek? He had seen other Lost of course, but there was something mythic about this child, sitting serene as an oracle in her ocean cave.

It was as though some divine hand had picked the very best out of the village's mess of bloodlines for this one child – just enough strange blood for a Lost, just enough pirate blood for those grey eyes, rich tawny skin, high elegant cheekbones, just enough Lace blood to give her an eerie sense of otherness . . . you might keep her and throw away the rest of the village.

'Then we shall return a little after dawn. May good fortune attend you, and spare you from mist. We shall leave you alone.' Skein stood, and Prox did likewise. While the dust was being brushed from his knees with a long-handled switch, Prox allowed himself one more look at the Lady Lost, still staring out before her as if she held the very sea and sky, rumbling and roiling, within the compass of her gaze.