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Sea of Whispers

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Chapter 1

They told her she was a dreamer, that the pictures she saw were an illusion, that sea glass could not tell a story; but this was a different kind of story. Its thread had been snapped so long ago she had no memory of it, yet the effects had haunted her ever since; and now, fourteen years later, her life was to change again. She'd sensed it already in the whispers from the sea; and here was a new manifestation.

'You must be able to see it, Tam,' she said.

He didn't answer. He just sat there next to her on the cliff-top, staring at the sea glass in her hand. She turned her head and gazed about her: nothing moved on the rocky bluff and a heavy silence hung over the island. She thought of the others down in the bay and wondered why she couldn't hear them. She felt sure their voices should reach her in this windless calm. She turned back to Tam and saw him watching her face.

'You're meant to be looking at the sea glass,' she said.

'I can't see anything in it, Hetty.'

'I'll hold it higher.'

She raised the sea glass. It looked dull against the bleak October sky, especially now that the light was fading, but the image was still there: a dark shape floating in the glass, as though breathed there by the sea.

'Can you see it now?' she said.

But he was looking at her again.

‘Tam, it’s important.’

‘I won’t see anything,’ he said. ‘I never do.’

‘But the sea glass was blank a moment ago and now it’s got a picture inside it.’

He peered at it again, but she knew he was feigning interest. She lowered the sea glass and closed it inside her hand. He glanced round at her.

‘I haven’t finished looking.’

‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘You’re right. You’re never going to see anything. Nobody ever does.’ She frowned. ‘I’m the only crazy person on Mora.’

Tam pulled his knees into his chest.

‘So what’s the picture this time? Or are you going to keep it to yourself? You’ve got really funny about the sea glass lately. You used to tell me everything.’

She leaned closer to him.

‘I thought I saw the island in it.’

‘This island?’

‘Of course this island.’ She gave him an impatient look. ‘What other island would I be talking about?’

‘You might have meant one of the others.’

‘How could I recognize islands I’ve never been to?’

‘You know what they all look like. My father’s described them to you enough times.’

‘I meant this island,’ she said.

‘But how could you tell it was Mora in the sea glass?’

‘The top was shaped like North Point,’ she said, ‘and there were bits that looked like Scar Cliff and Holm Edge and High Crag and . . . ’

She stopped suddenly.

‘What’s wrong?’ said Tam.

‘I don’t want you to laugh at me over the sea glass.’

‘I’m not going to laugh at you.’

‘Other people do.’

'I'm not other people, Hetty. You know that.'

He had that expression on his face again: the one that had only started appearing since they turned fifteen. She still wasn't sure what to do about it. All she knew was that it made her feel awkward—and somehow guilty. She looked down at the ground.

'It's not Mora in the sea glass, Tam.'

'You just said you saw the island.'

'I said I thought I did. But I was wrong. The picture started out looking like Mora, but then it changed.'

'Into what?'

'Doesn't matter.' She flicked a small stone over the edge of the cliff, then thrust the sea glass into her pocket. 'Let's drop it.'

She turned her head and stared down from the cliff-top. The water below looked steely and still. She ran her eye over the rocky bar that stretched across the mouth of the bay as far as Eel Point. The giant boulders that guarded the anchorage had no work to do in this interminable calm: the sea was unruffled all the way to the horizon. She glanced at *The Pride of Mora*, sitting at her mooring. The island boat was bedecked with bunting but all the flags hung limp.

'Looks like most people have arrived,' said Tam, staring down too.

Hetty looked over the shingle beach. It was crawling with figures. She searched for the spot where she'd found the sea glass that morning and saw Mungo and Duffy splashing stones there with Nessa and Jinty just behind them. Tam's mother and father wandered past with Anna and Dolly and some of the families from the western cottages. A large crowd had already gathered near the top of the beach.

Tam started counting the figures aloud. Hetty pushed the sound of his voice away and squeezed the sea glass

in her pocket, her mind on the image within, and on the stillness of the water below; there was something about it that didn't feel right.

'The whole island's turned out,' said Tam eventually. 'Mother said they would. Come on. We'd better get down there.'

He jumped to his feet and reached a hand down to pull her up. She pretended not to see it and scrambled up by herself.

'Tam, listen,' she said, 'you go on ahead, all right?'

'What for?'

'I want to take my time going down.'

'You mean you want to be on your own.'

'I didn't say that.'

'Have I upset you over the sea glass?'

'No, of course not.' She glanced over at the darkening sea, then back at Tam. 'I just want a bit of time to think, all right?'

He shrugged.

'If you say so. But don't take too long or you'll miss Per's speech.'

'I was half-hoping I would.'

'You mustn't, Hetty. You know that. We both mustn't. My mother and father gave me a lecture about it. And you must have got one from Grandy.'

Hetty remembered her grandmother's words over breakfast.

'I don't want to hear the old buzzard's speech either, girl, but he's the oldest person on Mora and the only one to make it to a hundred, so we've both got to be at the party and that's that. And try not to look bored when the old boy pipes up. I know you don't like each other, but it's his big day and if you can't celebrate that, then think of *The Pride of Mora* and remember it's her birthday too.

And she really is something worth celebrating. Now go and tidy your room.'

'I'll see you down there,' said Tam, and he ran off down the path.

Hetty waited till he'd disappeared from view, then made her way down to the plateau of Broken Tooth Ridge. The bay below her was growing darker by the minute but lights were now moving over the beach, and at the top of the shingle, where the dinghies and small craft had been pulled beyond the tidemark, she could see a fire burning and figures packed around it. The smell of roasting meat wafted up to her.

She felt in her pocket for the sea glass again, thinking of the image swimming inside it, and of the other images, the ones that had never come, in spite of her years of searching; and she thought of the sea again, and the secrets it was keeping from her. The figures on the beach were more shadowy now, but the groupings were so familiar she could still see who was who.

Old Per was standing with Gregor, Harold, and his other codger friends, plus Lorna and some of the older women, though not Grandy, Anna, or Dolly; they were busy with the fire. Tam was larking about with Mungo, Duffy, and the girls, and some of the gang from North Point. She walked on down the path and didn't stop till she'd reached the little quay tucked into the edge of the bay.

The voices of the others were audible now and it was clear that the speeches had not yet started. She stared over at the figures by the fire, then on an impulse wandered down to the end of the landing stage, pulled out the sea glass, and searched again for the image she had seen inside it. She felt sure it would not be there: the pictures never stayed for long, and some vanished within seconds. Yet to her surprise, it was still visible, even in the darkness:

not a picture of Mora as she had first thought, but of a face peering back at her. She heard a whisper from the sea and looked up.

Nothing moved upon the water. She stared about her, shivering slightly. Over to the right, the shingle beach curved away into the shoulder of the cliff, the fire crackling halfway along it. To her left, all was still. No waves lapped against the base of Crab Rock at the eastern extremity of the land. Ahead of her, the mouth of the bay opened to the approaching night. A light swell passed through it and died on the boulders of Eel Point. *The Pride of Mora* did not stir. Hetty squeezed the sea glass again.

'It's starting,' she murmured.

Chapter 2

By the time the speeches were announced, darkness had tightened its grip upon the bay. Hetty stared up at the sky. It was a moonless, starless vault that seemed to mirror the blackness of the sea. All that illumined the beach was the fire blazing at the top where most of the people were gathered. Some, however, had wandered off down the shingle, and Gregor was now summoning them back in his high, peppery voice.

But there were other voices too, and Hetty listened to them all: chattery voices, raucous voices, nervous voices. Some were slurred and had a hint of defiance in them, and she knew that though the food had all been eaten, there would be a number of people who were in no hurry for the speeches to start while there was still brew to drink.

For her part, she just wished she could run home to Moon Cottage. She waited at the back and let others push forward to where Per was standing on the upturned hull of his dinghy, his face lit by the glow of the fire. Lorna, Harold and Per's other old friends stood nearby, apart from Gregor who was still hobbling about the beach trying to muster the truants.

'Hetty,' said a voice.

She looked round and saw her grandmother watching her.

'Thought so,' said Grandy.

'What did you think?'

'That you'd be hanging round here at the back of the crowd.'

'I turned up, though, Grandy, didn't I?'

'You did, girl. Well done.'

Mackie lumbered over, looking anxious.

'Something wrong, big man?' said Grandy.

'Isla says Tam's disappeared.'

'Don't tell me you've lost your son again.'

'It's no joke, Grandy,' said Mackie. 'We're really worried about him. He's been acting so strange this last year. He's a good lad but we never know what's going on in his head these days. And he's getting reckless too.'

'You were reckless when you were his age.'

Mackie took no notice of this and turned to Hetty.

'Have you seen him, girl? He's usually with you. Or looking for you.'

'We were up on the cliff-top,' said Hetty, 'but he came down ahead of me. I saw him on the beach on my way down, but I don't know where he is now.'

'I'm here,' said Tam from behind them.

He squeezed quickly between her and Mackie.

'Where the hell have you been?' said Mackie. 'I told you to be here for the speeches.'

'And I am,' said Tam. 'They haven't started yet.'

'They're about to.'

Tam glanced at the crowd gathering around Per, then back at Mackie.

'Sorry, Father,' he said.

'So where were you?'

'With Mungo. He was trying to climb Crab Rock.'

'What!'

'And he fell off. But he was only about a quarter of the way up, so he hasn't hurt himself. He's over there with Duffy and the others.'

Mackie shook his head.

'That's stupid even by Mungo's standards. Crab Rock's far too dangerous for climbing. I don't know what's got into you and your crowd. You turn fifteen and it's like you all lose your brains.'

'You climbed Crab Rock when you were fifteen,' said Grandy quietly.

Mackie glowered at her.

'You did,' she said.

He grunted.

'I'm almost wanting the speeches to start, Grandy,' he muttered, 'if that's what it takes to shut you up.'

And they both chuckled. But the speeches were at last starting. Gregor was now standing next to Per on the upturned dinghy and the crowd appeared to be settling down. Hetty scanned the figures in front of her. Mungo, Duffy, Nessa, and Jinty were down to the right, sniggering over some private joke, but they broke apart as she watched and slipped away to join their families in the crowd. Mungo caught her eye and gave a goofy smile.

'Let's get closer, girl,' said Grandy.

'I can see from here.'

'Well, I can't,' said Grandy, 'and I can't hear as good as you either.'

They edged into the back of the crowd, Grandy holding her by the arm. She felt Tam move with her, a little closer than she wanted, but she said nothing. Isla joined them, exchanged a few words with Mackie, then cuffed Tam round the head. Gregor cleared his throat.

'Well, now,' he said, 'it's not often we get the whole island together like this, not often enough, in my view, and I'm sorry it's me you got to listen to first. God knows I ain't no speaker—'

'I'll second that!' someone shouted.

A burst of laughter rippled round the group. Gregor managed a smile.

'But it's fallen to me,' he went on, 'to start things off, seeing as I'm the second most ancient person on Mora.' He glanced at Per, standing rigidly beside him, then at Lorna. 'And seeing as the third most ancient person says she don't want to do no talking tonight.'

'She ain't been that quiet in ninety years,' put in Harold.

'And I don't suppose it'll last,' said Gregor, 'but we live in hope.'

'Get on with it,' muttered Lorna.

More laughter greeted this exchange, and some light-hearted heckling. Per remained silent, immobile. Hetty studied the old man's face in the fluctuating light from the fire. Even in the darkness and with so many others in front of her, she was convinced that his eyes were seeking hers. She thought of their quarrels down the years and squeezed the sea glass in her pocket; and as she did so, her mind moved back to the image within it, and to the sea whispering behind her.

'Like I say,' Gregor continued, 'we don't often get together like this, but we got two good reasons tonight, don't we? To celebrate two great servants of our community. So let's start off with *The Pride of Mora*.'

This brought forth a cheer and a turning of heads to survey the island boat.

'Our beautiful little ship,' said Gregor, 'and sweeter than ever now Mackie and his crew have made her a new set of sails. I still can't believe she's fifty years old. But that ain't nothing compared to our other great servant.'

And he turned towards Per, still standing impassively beside him.

‘Hundred years old today,’ said Gregor, ‘and I can’t believe that neither, old friend. And I don’t doubt no one else can. But we all salute you.’

He turned back to the group.

‘Let’s hear it for old Per!’

And he started a handclap. Per’s friends joined in at once, then others, and gradually the applause spread round the whole group, only to stop with a strange abruptness, leaving an edgy silence. Gregor stepped off the dinghy and Hetty waited, aware of the whispering sea again, and the tension in the listeners. Per looked them over for some time, apparently in no hurry to speak.

‘Well, well,’ he said eventually, ‘it’s kind of you all to come and celebrate my birthday.’ He took a slow breath. ‘Even if it’s only out of duty for most of you.’

Hetty felt the tension deepen. Again Per watched them in silence for a while, then he gave a chuckle and turned towards *The Pride of Mora.*

‘Only it don’t seem fair I got to share a birthday with her,’ he said. ‘I’m only going to come off worse. She’s half my age and twice as good looking.’

No one laughed. Not even Gregor.

‘But there you go,’ said Per. ‘No one said life was just.’

The old man’s eyes flickered over his audience again.

‘Gregor’s right, though,’ he went on. ‘*The Pride*’s a beautiful little ship. I remember building her all them years ago, shaping her keel and her ribs and her masts, making her first set of wings. Labour of love for me, that was.’

‘Only it wasn’t just you, Per,’ called Mackie. ‘Wasn’t just you built *The Pride.*’

‘No, Mackie, it wasn’t,’ Per retorted. ‘Gregor and Harold and my other old friends done their part too.’

‘And my father,’ shouted Mackie, ‘and Rory’s father and Karl’s father and Hal’s father, and others no longer with us, God rest ’em.’

‘I never said they done nothing,’ Per spluttered, ‘but those of us what was there at the time know who done the lion’s share and who didn’t. And you can’t gainsay that, Mackie, because you wasn’t even born!’

A buzz of talk ran round the group.

‘Stop that now!’ Per thundered. ‘You’re getting worked up over the wrong thing. I ain’t here to argue about the past. I’m here to warn you about the future. Because we got something far more important to worry about right now.’

‘Change your tune, old man,’ called Rory.

‘That’s right,’ shouted Karl. ‘Sing a different song.’

‘I only got one song,’ Per snapped, ‘and it’s called the Truth.’

He spat onto the shingle.

‘You got to listen to me, all of you, because this ain’t a time for drinking or partying or using up precious food when we’re already short and we got winter coming on. Have I got to spell it out to you? I shouldn’t have to.’

He glared at them.

‘We’re ninety-seven people scratching an existence on a piece of rock at the back end of an archipelago. That’s who we are. Get it into your bony heads. And get this too—nobody gives a damn about us. We’re so far from the other islands they’ve practically stopped trading with us and the mainland might as well be in outer space. So we got to look out for ourselves like we always done, like our ancestors always done. Only now it’s going to be more difficult than ever.’

‘Why?’ said Mungo from the front of the crowd.

‘I’ll tell you why, young man,’ said Per.

He looked Mungo over, then peered once more into the group; and this time Hetty knew he was looking at her.

'I've had the same dream three nights in a row,' said Per, 'and this is the first time I've talked about it. But I got to tell you about it now because it's serious and it's true. There's evil coming to Mora—and it's already on its way.'

Hetty felt Tam lean close.

'Is that what you saw in your sea glass?' he whispered. 'Evil coming to Mora?'

She thought of the picture again and said nothing. Tam touched her on the arm.

'He's looking at you, Hetty.'

'I know, Tam,' she said.

And she turned and ran away down the beach.