

FENN HALFLIN
AND THE
SEABORN

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WALKER
BOOKS

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For my children, Charlie, Sam and Rosa
With all my love

He should never have escaped. No one ever escaped.

Chilstone sat alone at the helm, staring into the surf far below as the *Warspite's* bow split the iron-coloured waves like a cleaver. They had sailed clear of the remains of the Shanties six days before, but he could still see black splashes of tar bespattering the bow's stem, from when the *Warspite* had crashed through the burning sea-slum. Behind him stood the huge Scragnet, a new addition to the *Warspite*. A crane supported an arm and chain, from which hung an enormous magnet, bearing the Terra Firma logo of a black T and F against a scarlet background. Chilstone smiled at his latest improvement: the Scragnet was making the capture of the Seaborn's ships quicker and could also be fitted with a net to haul living Seaborn's from the water. In Chilstone's eyes, anything that helped sweep up sea-vermin was a good thing.

The passing of time never faded his hatred of them.

Chilstone had been on deck all night, scouring the horizon for any sign of the boat that the boy had escaped on, but as usual there had been nothing. Tiredness made the skin on his face hang in deep folds as if he was starting to melt, but beneath, his jaw was clenched tight. A stabbing sensation shot through his legs where iron pegs anchored muscle to bone, and he shifted position to ease the agony. He winced as the feeling slithered up through the fibres of his body. Pain had dozed a little in the night, but now it was sharply awake.

You let it happen again, it muttered.

"Who said that?" Chilstone shouted, quickly pulling himself up from the wooden block he'd been resting on and looking around wildly.

But no one was there; the rain-lashed deck was completely empty – apart from pooling water and a scrap of rope at Chilstone's feet. Chilstone nudged it with the tip of his steel cane and stooped to pick it up, catching his breath as the pain unfurled up his back. In his hand he held a sort of doll, twisted from a piece of cord, the strands untwined to make arms and legs and knotted at the top to make a head. It must have belonged to one of the children who'd been brought up on deck. He was distracted from the pain for a few seconds, wondering which child it had belonged

to, trying to remember their faces, but then the voice came closer, whispering in his ear.

If you don't catch him...

Chilstone tossed the little doll over the rail and clamped his hands over his ears, trying to block the voice out. Needing somewhere the voice wouldn't find him, he limped around the Scragnet, keeping a safe distance from its powerful magnet. Breathing hard, he got to the first gun turret, taking refuge in its shadow, hoping the voice hadn't followed. He stood in the shadows for several minutes and when he was sure he was alone, he tentatively lowered his hands, just for a second. That was the only chance the voice needed.

He's going to destroy...

"Shut up!" Chilstone shouted. "Shut up! I'll find him!"

He had been hunting the Demari child for over thirteen years now, ever since he had his parents killed, and he'd never got so close again. His spies reported the boy arriving on the Shanties, dumped by a ship called the *Panimengro*, one of the Gleaners that made the perilous treks between the scraps of remaining land. Chilstone couldn't be certain it was the same kid from East Marsh, but the description matched him well enough: dark-haired, tall, like his father, and the right age. The boy should have been scooped up in the Sweep, but instead he'd vanished into thin air, dissolving like the flecks of white surf below. It hadn't taken

Chilstone long to work out where that Gleaner had come from, or where it was going. Gleaners often crossed the Biscay Gulf, the enormous expanse of water between East Isle and West Isle, their holds stuffed with stinking flotsam one way, stinking Seaborns on their return. He knew exactly where the kid would go, what he'd do. He'd try to get to West Isle, where rumour had it Seaborns were welcomed. This was where the *Warspite* was now heading.

Dawn was breaking and the skies were purple-black like bruises. Chilstone limped back to the ship's rail and stared across the sea, explaining himself to the voice in his head. He and the voice often quarrelled with each other, but it helped Chilstone to talk things through with the one he could trust to always be by his side, his constant companion: the excruciating pain that time could not fade.

Standing there, arguing with himself, he didn't hear the real voices calling his name until too late. When he did, he stepped out from the gloom, quickly pulling his cowl up over his head to shield his face from scrutiny. He didn't like anyone looking at him.

Two Terras had brought a man up on deck. This prisoner was different; he'd begged to see Chilstone, had something to tell him. The man couldn't walk so the Terras had to drag him along between them, his feet sliding on the ground behind him like a mop, leaving a trail through the wet deck.

When they were still several feet away, Chilstone put his hand up and the three of them stopped abruptly. The older Terra – hardened by years at sea, his nose scabbed by harsh winds – pulled the man up sharply to a standing position, where he stood, swaying gently as if he was drunk. The Terra roughly shoved him in the ribs to pay attention to Chilstone, but the prisoner's head still lolled on his shoulders, so that a long shock of thin hair fell down in front of his eyes. Chilstone put out his cane and lifted the strands away so he could see the prisoner clearly.

He sighed. The man's eyes were as puffy and shiny as damson plums. Hadn't he expressly told the Terras not to beat them on the face? It was hard to tell if someone was lying when you couldn't see their eyes, and it was just as effective to beat hands or feet when you wanted answers. But even if the prisoner was a mess, it was still clear to Chilstone that this was no ordinary Shanties dweller; he was plumper than the usual bags of bones the Terras had hauled up on deck over the past few days.

"You have something to tell me?" Chilstone enquired.

The man tried to speak, but only managed to slur inaudibly.

"Speak up!" Chilstone demanded. The old Terra jabbed the man in the stomach again and this time he straightened up, mumbling. Chilstone gestured to the blood gluing the man's lips together.

The other Terra, new to his post, took a cloth from his pocket, soaked it in the pooling water on the deck and gingerly rubbed it over the prisoner's mouth, trying not to hurt him. Not every Terra was the same. The prisoner cautiously parted and stretched his lips, as if testing the efficiency of his damaged mouth.

"My name..." he croaked.

"Your name is unimportant—" Chilstone began but then the man did something no one had ever done to Chilstone. He interrupted him.

"Leach," he said. "Nile Leach. I know who you're looking for."

From the shadow of his cowl, Chilstone drew a low, hissing breath, trying to repress any sign that he cared about what Nile said.

They all say that, warned the voice in his head, but Chilstone couldn't resist his excitement.

"Who?"

Careful! the voice scolded.

"A boy ... the Demari boy," Nile continued, peering into the deep shadows to find Chilstone's eyes; to see his reaction, to catch a sense of his feelings. But Chilstone was listening to the voice again and his eyes were lifeless once more. He cocked his head to one side, trying to catch Nile's words. It was hard for him to hear what people said with

the voice constantly muttering in his ear.

"...a Gleaner ship dumped him; the *Panimengro*," Nile finished.

Nothing new here. You know all this already, the voice continued. *Another rumour-monger. Another time-waster.*

Chilstone gave up; the voice was right. It was always right. He nodded to the nearest Terra, who took hold of Nile's arm and tugged him over towards the bow. The Terra was tall and thickset, easily strong enough to deal with prisoners, even ones who struggled hard.

The *Warspite* had circled the Shanties like a shark until Chilstone was certain all the inhabitants were either drowned or in the *Warspite's* hold. The Scragnet had netted six hundred and fifteen survivors, hoisting them up the *Warspite's* side before emptying the human haul out on deck, like a catch of fish. Obviously a few always drowned in the net – that couldn't be helped – but at roll call the day before, only five hundred and ninety were counted.

Chilstone personally oversaw twenty or so interrogations, trying to find out what had become of the Demari boy. All the prisoners had tried to improve their circumstances by claiming to have information about the last Demari. Men had attempted to bargain their way on to one of the Labour-Ships where they hoped to escape to freedom, and women had pleaded for their children to be allowed

to work as servants on one of the Isles.

But none told Chilstone anything he didn't already know; nothing that wasn't woven into the fabric of the myth he was determined to destroy. Not one of them verified a unique piece of evidence that could convince him that Maya's child had definitely survived all those years ago. Not even as they braced themselves for the hundred-foot drop off the *Warspite's* bow, weeping and making stuff up to save their skins. None of it led Chilstone any nearer to his prey. The only surprise for Chilstone was that Seaborns should have such affection for their miserable lives, and would go to such lengths to keep hold of them.

The older Terra shoved Nile towards the block where Chilstone had been sitting. It was only when Nile saw the bolt on the deck rail and the other Terra pulling it back that he realised what was about to happen.

"Wait!" Nile yelled, struggling to break loose. "Fenn!" he shouted. "Fenn!"

The voice stopped muttering in Chilstone's ear, suddenly expectant. *A name?* it hissed hopefully.

Chilstone looked at Nile with sharp interest and clicked his fingers, motioning the Terras to stop. Nile collapsed on the spot.

"Thank you, thank you!" he whispered. His voice was fragile, whittled thin by fear.

“Continue,” Chilstone ordered.

“I never liked him,” Nile began, trying to curry favour. “I took him in and he stole from me!” he complained. Chilstone’s eyes narrowed in disapproval.

The son of the Demaris? A petty thief? the voice asked.

“Yes! Yes, he did!” Nile nodded sincerely, almost as if he could hear the murmurings in Chilstone’s head too. He could tell Chilstone was a man of business like himself; he’d understand. “Gave him a home and he tricked me. Stole four of my employees. Two girls, two boys.”

But Chilstone wasn’t listening again – Nile could see that he’d lost him. Chilstone needed hard facts. Nile scoured his mind for what those might be.

Nile was cunning. In his time he’d been a con artist and a smuggler of goods and children. Before the Shanties he’d been imprisoned on a Hellhulk prison ship, in the days when they were only for criminals the Terras didn’t want taking up room on land, and before they were packed with Seaborns to move from Isle to Isle. When the building started on the Walls that would protect the land from the rising waters, all criminals were sent to guard the Seaborn workforce.

Nile hadn’t fancied that, so had jumped to freedom, been rescued by a Gleaner and feigned sickness to avoid work before being dumped at the Shanties. On the first night he’d

befriended the previous owner of the precious fort – one of the few places you could go to sleep at the Shanties and be sure to wake up again. On the second night he'd murdered his new friend as he slept and took the fort for his own. You didn't do all that without having a nose for survival.

Nile had immediately recognised the hungry look in Chilstone's eyes when he heard Fenn's name. Chilstone obviously wanted more details.

"There was definitely something odd about him," Nile said tantalisingly. Chilstone seemed to take the bait as he leant in to hear. "His eyes were different colours," Nile continued.

A shiver ran up Chilstone's spine; the proof he'd been waiting for. He'd never been certain the child had inherited his mother's rare eye condition. But now there was another problem. How many Seaborns must the boy have met at the Shanties? If it were no longer a secret that the Demari boy was alive, there was no point in trying to pretend the Demari boy was just a myth any more. He'd need to give the Terras a clear description, so in the next Sweep they knew exactly who they were looking for. It was now a race to get to him first; if there was any Resistance left, they would want him as a figurehead. Chilstone needed to catch and kill him and put an end to the Resistance once and for all.

But can you be sure it's really him? whispered the voice in Chilstone's head.

“Was there anything else about him?” Chilstone asked. If the boy had the famous Demari key, he would have to get it. The symbol of the Resistance actually in his grasp? That would send out a powerful message to any more rebellious Seaborns out there.

“The kid kept on about his grandfather. Works the Punchlock on East Point. A man called Halflin.”

Halflin! The old forger, working off his crimes against the Terra Firma by destroying Seaborns’ boats in the Punchlock – a cruel punishment designed to break either the old man’s heart or spirit. Chilstone stared back across the steely skies towards the rising sun. So Halflin had said he was his grandfather, had he? He should have dug deeper when he first questioned the old man thirteen years before about whether he’d found a child aboard the barge he’d sunk.

Chilstone remembered it well: Halflin staring into the fire, sweating and slurring his answers, an empty bottle in his fist. Chilstone smiled ruefully; so he’d been tricked? Halflin hadn’t been drinking at all. He must have worked up that sweat by running; he must have hidden the baby on the marsh before racing back to set himself up to look like a drunk who’d been broken by the loss of his family and the daily horror of scuttling the Seaborns’ boats. Chilstone had always suspected the old boat-breaker was craftier than he

looked; an ignoramus who could scarcely spell his own name, yet forged papers so well his best Terras didn't spot them. But if Chilstone had underestimated Halflin, Halflin had underestimated Chilstone too. He must have thought Chilstone would forget eventually – a fatal mistake. Chilstone would never forget. In some ways it was a pity Halflin had died. He would have been more useful alive; they could have used him to lure the boy in.

"So your ship's going in the wrong direction," Nile finished as he battled to keep Chilstone's attention. Chilstone stared at Nile as he stood up, brushed himself down and stroked his hair back across his bald patch. "Fenn was heading back to East Marsh."

We've got all we need, muttered the voice impatiently. Chilstone smiled and turned to Nile.

"You've been helpful," he said as he nodded at the Terras again.

Immediately the older Terra wrenched Nile's arms behind his back, and thrust them roughly upwards so Nile staggered forwards. The other knocked back the bolt holding the rail in place and made an opening from the bow of the *Warspite* into the foaming waves below.

"But I told you everything!" Nile screamed in anguish. "Please, sir! I can help you find him. I know him! I know what he looks like!"

“Precisely,” Chilstone said. “So I can’t have you back down in the hold telling everyone what you know.”

“I won’t breathe a word!” Nile pleaded. “I promise! You can trust me. I’m Landborn. I’m like you!” he whimpered, clutching weakly at the guard’s uniform. “I’ll do anything! Let me work for you!” The guard gripped Nile’s wrists, then yanked him towards the deck rail.

With a violent wriggle, Nile slipped out of his grasp and seized the rail, looping his arm through the bars and bunching his legs under his chin, like a child taking a go on a rope swing; anything to make it harder for the Terras to get hold of him. But he was weak and they prised him away easily.

Chilstone didn’t even bother to watch as the Terras pushed Nile overboard and bolted back the rail. He never thought it would, but the novelty of watching them fall had worn off very quickly.

“Turn the ship,” he commanded as Nile’s screams faded.