

Crisis in the Deep

The Heart of the Ocean Saga, Book 1

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Prologue

Sweating was a cumbersome, undignified act that ought not afflict a person of Intero's age. One should grow out of it! In his opinion, anyway.

The old sorcerer's blue robes were boiling him as he swished through his circular living room toward the small desk and the window that was the source of his discomfort. Outside, Aralon's twin suns beamed their joint light upon the west side of Intero's tower, shining directly through the window glass. He dug deep into one of his coat's many outer pockets and extracted his desired components, clenching a red spice powder and a drying leaf in his palm. With a wide sweep of his hand that cast the components into the air and a deep-chested command that caused them to vanish, Intero created a magically sourced cross draft. It ruffled his long, white beard, bringing blissful relief to his shamefully sweaty gizzard.

He snatched a book from his desk and was just settling into his chair for a peaceful read when BOOM! He was thrown from his seat by a cataclysmic impact that shook the whole tower to its foundations. The window shattered, soot shook loose from the flue, the unlit firewood tumbled from the small hearth, and gray dust sprinkled down from the ceiling, coating his faded robes. Outside, he heard large thuds of debris striking the ground.

"Christopher!" Intero thundered. "What have you done?"

"It wasn't me, sir," said Christopher, his child-like feet making his entrance undetectable.

Intero whirled on his brownie Familiar and glared down his long nose at the three-foot humanoid, then flicked his eyes toward the settling ceiling as he shook dust from his beard.

"You're certain you didn't disturb anything volatile in my study?"

“From downstairs?” Christopher cocked a bushy brow. He was ringing his small, pointed red hat in his hands, staring at the ceiling with unease.

Intero blustered, making his beard quiver as he cleared his throat, and wiped dust from his robes. “Let us go inspect the damage then.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Something odd is afoot.”

“Undoubtedly, sir. The whole tower nearly came down.”

“Nonsense,” said Intero as he grabbed the lofty wooden staff standing by itself in the center of the room. “It’s built to last a hundred thousand more years. I should know. I built it myself.”

“Yes, I know, sir.”

“Hurry up, Christopher,” said Intero as he took the lead up the spiraling stone stairs, bounding two at a time, staff thumping a staccato. “Stretch those legs.”

“They’re quite a bit shorter than yours, sir,” puffed Christopher, racing behind him. Each step was more of a leap, but he kept right on Intero’s trailing robes.

They passed Intero’s modest bedroom, pausing long enough to determine the only damage here was a fallen coat hanger and a tipped pile of fresh laundry spilling from the closet.

On the next floor, however, Intero threw up his hands and bellowed, “My study!”

The sky had crashed through the circular room’s western side. A ten-foot hunk of jagged aquamarine crystal was speared into the floor, surrounded by the ruins of Intero’s most prized possessions. The right leg of his desk was splintered, making the entire workstation bow and spill its stacks of books and papers. Pieces of parchment flapped in the breeze, and those that weren’t caught beneath the destruction flew out the hole in a joyous, twirling bid for freedom. Stones from the crumbled fireplace had smashed jars of valuable spell components: rare air

dragon claws collected after a year-long quest, pink pearls from the caves of the Iris Sea, ogre's teeth, and dwarf hair that had taken all his persuasive power (and a fair bit of coin) to coax off the head of a female blacksmith a hundred years ago.

Tugging at his beard with both hands, Intero rushed this way and that, circling the shard. He harrumphed as he picked up bits of mess, cradled them, and then, with nowhere to put them, piled them together in one corner. Christopher bent on spindly legs to gather papers but kept his head upturned to the towering shard, contemplative.

“Sir, it looks just like—”

“I know! I know!” said Intero, waving a dismissive hand. He stopped his pacing in front of the crystal and stroked his beard with a scowl. Whirling on the brownie, he snapped,

“Christopher, where is my cloak?”

“The one you are wearing, sir?”

“No, not this one. My traveling cloak.”

“You burned your traveling cloak yesterday, sir.”

“Not that one either. The big one! The blue one!”

Christopher cocked an eyebrow at Intero's almost entirely blue ensemble.

“The cloak with the other shard in it!”

“Oh, you mean the smelly one.”

The faint wrinkles around Intero's eyes deepened as he glared long and hard at Christopher.

“The only thing it smells of is rose petals,” he said, slow and clear.

“Yes, sir,” said Christopher, nodding. “I believe that you left it downstairs by the door.”

“By the door?! Why would I need it by the door? I have no need for doors. So many infernal stairs.”

“I will fetch it for you, sir.”

“Humph. Well ... thank you, Christopher.”

“You’re most welcome, sir.”

As Christopher vanished down the stairs, Intero set to work, mumbling his frustrations to himself as he gathered the necessary components from the mess. Holding an elm twig, a pinch of native dirt, a yellow powder, and a nugget of iron in his fist, he moved his staff in strong, sweeping gestures, speaking the spell in its original tongue. The shard lifted out of the tower and sank slowly to the grass below. The stones flew back into place, forming the wall and fireplace. The logs rolled back into the hearth, the busted jars sucked their components back inside their healing sides, and the books and papers stacked themselves on his desk in their designated messy heaps.

Weary from the effort, he struggled to open the window. The moment the pane slid up, a stack of papers zoomed inside and settled on his desk. He dropped into his chair with a huff and a satisfied smile, listening with curiosity to Christopher’s approaching footsteps. They sounded heavier than usual.

When Christopher immersed, he was swaying beneath the weight of Intero’s enormous coat, rolled into a ball he held over (and atop) his head.

“It looks ... wonderful, sir,” said Christopher, dragging a toe through the stone dust and appraising the chaotic clutter that Intero called a masterful system.

“It does,” said Intero as he took the cloak from his Familiar. From one of the top pouches, he extracted a miniature version of the shard that had disturbed his afternoon read. “Sisters. Torn from the same mother,” he said quietly.

“What does it mean, sir?”

Intero rose from his seat, answering as he brushed past Christopher toward the stairs. “It means I must go. Don’t know how long I’ll be gone. If I don’t do something, the rest of Aralon’s fools will ensure this planet joins her sister in the sky, twin rings of rubble circling in empty darkness.”

“I see.”

“Losing two planets is disastrous. I won’t allow it,” said Intero as he stalked into his bedroom to gather a few more components and his pointed blue hat.

“Certainly not, sir.”

“Where’s my staff?”

“Right here, sir,” said Christopher, dragging in the staff that Intero had left behind.

“Ah, thank you, Christopher.” He tugged his beard, assessing himself top to bottom. “My cloak, my staff, my components, what am I missing ...? Ah, right, the key!”

Intero rushed back up the stairs to the repaired study.

“Which key do you need, sir?” Christopher said as he followed.

“The important one. The one that will solve the problem.”

“Do we have that key, sir? I thought you were leaving to go look for it.”

“Are you saying that I walked up these stairs again for no purpose?”

“I believe so, sir.”

“All right,” said Intero with a sigh. “I should depart before the suns set.”

“May the suns light your path.”

“Keep a warm drink ready for me on my return. And don’t lose a sun while I am gone. I need both of them, you know, especially at a time like this.”

“Of course, sir.”

“The whole world is tumbling out of balance. The druids knew it. They warned me, you know.”

“Yes, sir.”

With a bang of his staff that reverberated like a thunderclap, Intero disappeared into the halls of magic.

Chapter 1

Scerinda Cahira peeled her auburn hair off her sweaty neck and slunk forward in an ape-like crouch. Her large, perfectly rounded brown eyes peered through the wide fronds of a squat plant as she searched for her brother, Alecks. The thick, humid jungle bordering the village was the perfect locale for “Cat and Mouse”—a game of their own invention. Scerinda was the cat, searching for her little mouse. She kept low, for though she was thin as a sapling branch, she towered over other eight-year-olds. Alecks would spot her if she walked upright, even among the heavy foliage that was slick with rainwater. She listened intently for any sound disturbing the babbling of the nearby rushing river.

She whipped her head toward a rustling on her left and spied honey-blond hair disappearing behind a fat-trunked tree. She crawled toward the roots on all fours, poised like a feline ready to pounce. She even shimmied her shoulders as she moved around the tree.

Another rustle at her back. How had he moved so fast? She shifted direction.

A twig snapped to her right. Something scratched at the bark of the tree on her left.

Scerinda’s thin brows drew together over her orb-like eyes.

“Alecks?” she said, head cocked in confusion that threatened to give way to fear.

Her nose wrinkled in disgust as a thin breeze wafted the scent of rotting flesh. She shrank away from the stench, ready to turn and run, when a diminutive beast with large bat ears and pointed teeth burst from a fern. Scerinda’s scream was high and urgent as another of the greenish-brown creatures sprang from behind a tree and charged at her.

“Scerinda?” called Alecks. She could hear him crashing through the underbrush, the game forgotten, but he was too far.

She swung a fist at the beast as it lunged for her, connecting with its head. It took a step back, shook like a dog, and growled. As its companion crept closer with teeth bared, Scerinda’s brain scrambled to identify the creatures from the drawings in her parents’ many books. She was fairly certain they were goblins, and the thought brought little comfort.

Small arms encircled her throat and yanked her off her feet. Her cry was strangled.

“Scerinda!” Alecks Cahira barreled toward the sounds of struggle and burst through the shaking fronds.

He gaped in fright as a swarm of six goblins jumped on a thrashing Scerinda and grabbed her wrists, ankles, and hair in their spindly fingers. Alecks grabbed a fat stick from the jungle floor and raised it beside his chin, but his wide swing met empty air as the goblins took off, half-carrying, half-dragging Scerinda over the dark, leaf-strewn earth.

“MOM! DAD!” Alecks screamed, so loud his throat felt bloodied from the effort. He turned toward the village, where he could barely make out the thatched roofs of huts through the trees, and cupped his hands over his mouth. “HELP! THEY’VE GOT SCERINDA!”

He couldn’t linger, couldn’t wait for Mom and Dad. He took off, fat stick in hand, following the goblins’ chattering and Scerinda’s high screams. Soon, he had them in his sights, but already he was puffing with the effort of a full sprint. He couldn’t close the distance. Scerinda’s captors were now over a dozen strong, all pawing and punching in an effort to subdue her. Alecks looked at his stick with growing panic, heart pounding in his throat. It wouldn’t be enough. He wasn’t strong enough. But Scerinda screamed his name, and he threw all he had into his sprinting legs.

The jungle sprang to life where the goblins ran, the foliage shaking and snapping. Scerinda writhed, legs kicking and fists trying to pummel her attackers, but they held fast. Her blows yanked them left and right, but they kept a zigging, unsteady trajectory toward a cascading wall of vines that strangled a massive tree. The lead goblin disappeared, and as Alecks blinked, making certain he'd seen correctly, Scerinda's head vanished, too. Fearing he would lose them, he stooped to pick up a small stone as he ran. Taking aim, he threw with all his might. The stone plunked against the skull of the goblin holding Scerinda's right ankle, staggering it and forcing it to release her, but one of its fellows quickly took its place.

"Alecks! Alecks, it's a cave!" Scerinda's voice was distant and echoing as her knees disappeared behind the vines

Alecks' heart skipped a beat as the goblin he'd struck chattered like an angry squirrel and drew its sword. The short, slightly curved blade was crude, but it didn't have to be well-crafted to deal out death. He raised his stick and lunged forward a step, thinking it might be his last. The goblin jumped back and disappeared into the vines.

Alecks ripped aside the curtain of greenery and saw the base of the tree was hollowed out, leading down into a tunnel. He dove inside, sliding a short distance on his belly, and came out in a cavern far bigger than he'd expected. He heard Scerinda's muffled cries and shot down a short passage to the right, his lungs threatening to burst. His body screamed for him to stop, but the thought of his adoptive sister urged him onward. Though they were the same age, he was technically older by three months. He'd always viewed her as his little sister and had charged himself with protecting her. But he was failing. Anger propelled him into another, smaller chamber with a steep drop on the far side. Alecks arrived in time to witness the sword-toting

goblin leap from the edge of the drop-off. Alecks rushed over and saw the goblin land like a cat at the bottom, using its sword like a cane to brace itself when it stumbled.

Alecks feared taking the same leap of faith, knowing instinctively that his legs would crumple beneath him rather than land in a graceful crouch. He scooted to the edge and slid down the treacherous incline on his butt. He hit a rock and fell sideways, rolling the rest of the way. Horribly dizzy when he at last came to a stop, he held his head as he jumped to his feet and staggered. He picked up another rock, bigger this time, and took chase, still tilting to the left.

He could see Scerinda still thrashing with all her might as the goblins carried her deeper into the tunnel system. "Let go of me! Let go! I'm warning you, ugly! My brother will beat you up!" she shrieked, her enormous eyes bulging further as she fought to keep Alecks in sight.

Light streamed from a few holes in the stone roof here, but the tunnel dipped downward and turned pitch black a few feet ahead. The goblins, with their lamp-like eyes, could see fine, but soon Alecks wouldn't be able to see his hand in front of his face. Desperate, he threw the rock, hitting the same goblin at the back of the group. It growled, flashing its tiny piranha teeth as it brandished its sword. It spoke in a clicking, guttural language, and another goblin broke off from the group and drew its own stout, bone-handled dagger. Scerinda's captives paused, watching to see if their pursuer would be vanquished.

Both goblins slunk closer with blades tilted up at Alecks' slender chest. He held his stick out in similar fashion, recalling the few lessons with a short sword he'd had with his father. His mind scrambled to remember how to block. Nervous sweat dripped into his eye, and as he instinctively moved to wipe it away, the foremost goblin lunged, sword jabbing toward his heart.

An arrow struck the blade at the hilt, the tip slicing through the goblin's finger. It dropped the sword, howling in pain, and a second arrow silenced the wretched creature forever. The other

goblin turned to run but was cut down by a third arrow that ruffled Alecks' hair as it whizzed past. Alecks turned to see his mother, Ahtonya Cahira, standing at the edge of the drop-off, her face fraught with concern as she reached behind her head to pull another arrow from her quiver. His father, Cainan, stood at her back, a short sword in each hand, battling a swarm of goblins that had flanked them. Alecks could only see the tops of the little creatures' ears from his vantage point, and each time his father swung or thrust his blades, another pair disappeared.

"Momma!" Scerinda screamed as her captives took flight, newfound fear spurring them on faster than before.

"Alecks, don't lose sight of her!" said Cainan.

"Be careful, Alecks! We're coming, Scerinda!" Ahtonya called.

Ahtonya watched Alecks run down the wide, sloped tunnel toward the darkness, while she fired arrows from the cliff's edge.

When his last foe lay dying on the ground, Cainan cried, "Clear! Switch!" and like a well-oiled machine, Ahtonya tossed him the bow as he tossed her both swords.

"Anchor there!" said Ahtonya, pointing at a thick stalagmite protruding upward near the cliff's edge.

Shouldering the bow, and without missing a step in his dash for the stalagmite, Cainan tossed her one end of a rope and said, "Go!"

She leapt into the air, rope braced around her hands, and before she landed, Cainan had secured the other end of the rope around the boulder, his foot braced against it for leverage. Ahtonya's feet hit the side of the cliff and she ran down, her husband letting out length as she needed. When she reached the bottom, she dropped the safety line and ran for Alecks while

Cainan loosed two arrows past their heads and into the backs of the goblins holding Scerinda's legs just before they vanished into the darker recess of the tunnel.

Ahead, Alecks slowed, squinting in the blackness. He felt Ahtonya brush past him, her long, braided hair tickling his face as it flew behind her. Emboldened by her presence, Alecks picked up his pace, and a faint glimmer of light appeared ahead. Alecks blinked, his eyes adjusting, and saw the last of the goblins rush out of the tunnel into the light.

As Ahtonya dashed outside, close on their heels, Cainan's booming voice called out, "Alecks! Come back and get the rope."

Alecks hesitated, wanting to go after Scerinda, too, but he obeyed, running for the cliff with what little energy he had left.

"Tie it to yourself," said Cainan from the ledge as he secured his end of the rope around his own waist, "and get ready to hand it to Mom."

Alecks tied the rope in a fishing knot his father had taught him. When he looked up from his handiwork, he saw his mother emerging from the tunnel with Scerinda on her shoulders. She ran full tilt, her swords nowhere in sight and a swarm of goblins at her heels. Cainan rained arrows down on the snarling green beasts, skewering two with one feathered shaft as they swung their blades at Ahtonya's calves.

"Hold on, honey," Ahtonya called to Alecks as she sprang like a cat over his head, Scerinda now latched to her back like a monkey, and grabbed the rope with both hands. Her feet dangled centimeters from Alecks' head until she began to shimmy upward.

Alecks gripped the rope with both hands, checking the knot at his waist as he glanced nervously over his shoulder at the advancing goblins. He cringed, tucking his head into his shoulder, as one of them leapt at his face, fangs bared, but an arrow knocked it from the air.

Alecks pressed his feet to the rock and started pulling himself up. Eyes skyward, he saw his mother using her knees and arms to haul herself and Scerinda up the side without any support from the rock wall. She was nearly to the top, but Cainan sped the climb by backing along the cliff's edge, shortening Alecks' end of the rope as it slid around the stalagmite, pulling Ahtonya over the lip. Ahtonya deposited Scerinda to safety and turned to heave Alecks up. He was sweating and panting, his knees wobbly, when he crested the top. He lay on his side, smiling up at his parents, his hand reaching for Scerinda. She entwined her fingers with his, nursing a cut on her cheek with her other hand.

"No time to rest, darlings," said Ahtonya.

"Maybe just a little," said Cainan with an easy grin.

As the goblins chattered below, their claws making screeching sounds against the rock, Cainan wrapped his arms around his wife as though they were standing in their living room. She looked up at him with color high in her cheeks. He planted a deep kiss on her lips and drew her two short swords from concealed sheaths at her back.

"Switch," he said playfully, and she returned his smile with a glint in her eye. He dashed for the cavern entrance, tossing the bow up in a move so swift that neither Alecks nor Scerinda saw him do it.

Ahtonya snatched it, quick as a viper.

"Run," she said, hauling the children to their feet.

She strung two arrows at once and fired them down at the goblins scrambling up the embankment with their sharp, black claws. Alecks and Scerinda ran after their father, Scerinda's hand at Alecks' back, urging him on when his legs threatened to revolt.

The entrance was blocked by yet another group of goblins, and Cainan laid into them with both swords swinging in a blur of steel. Ahtonya's arrows zoomed under his arms, taking down the pack's forerunners. Cainan punted the last of the goblins, sending it screaming into the wall, where it crunched like a spider under a boot.

The family crawled through the tunnel under the tree and burst forth into the leaf-filtered sunlight. Ahtonya shouldered her bow and emptied a bag of black liquid into the tunnel, never bothering to look back.

When the children were clear of the tree, she struck a flint, and the tinder in her fingers blazed. She dropped it onto the black fuel and followed them, leaving flames in her wake.

"That was close," said Cainan, grinning back at the kids.

"Too close," said Ahtonya, catching up. She wrapped her arm through his and said in a low voice, "This was no random act. They came for Scerinda."

Cainan glanced back at the children. Scerinda was chatting with her brother as if nothing more than a rough game of tag had taken place.

"You conked that one goblin twice!" she said with a laugh that Alecks returned.

"He was pretty mad, huh?" said Alecks.

Cainan's face grew grave, the tight skin around the deep, pink scar on his left cheek puckering as he frowned.

"We need to get farther from the ocean," Ahtonya whispered.