



TRAVELER

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To my second-grade teacher, Sandy Voyne, who started all
this with a handful of spelling words . . .



PART ONE:

ABOARD
WAVESTRIDER

CHAPTER ONE

A DREAM OF LIGHT
AND MOTION

Aramar Thorne turned away from the Light.

It had called to him, and he had followed, sailing toward it across the sea—without benefit of ship, boat, or raft—until the surf and spray vanished from beneath his feet and he found himself ashore. And still the Light called to him. This strange Light came not from the sun nor the moons nor the stars, whose constellations his mother used to point out to him when he was six, after his father had vanished, and under which she had promised Greydon Thorne could be found. No, this was a new Light, a moving target with no fixed progression through the heavens—quite impossible to reliably track, let alone pin down. Still, without ever making a conscious decision to continue, Aram found himself walking toward it. He walked and walked through dusty desert, broken forest, swampy bog, and dense jungle, stopping only when

a great wall of a mountain seemed to rise up out of the ground to block his path. But the Voice of the Light still called his name, "Aram, Aram," all without ever making any actual sound that reached his ears. The Voice grabbed him like a fist around his heart and pulled him painfully into the air, and soon Aram Thorne was soaring, soaring through sunshine and cloud, through rain and thunder—until lightning struck so close, he could feel the hairs on his arm stand at attention and sing. But even this lightning paled before the bright, bright Light.

He had traveled so far to find it, find it so that the Light could save him, could return his father, bring Aram home to his mother, reunite him with Robb and Robertson and Selya and even Soot. Yet when finally he achieved it, the Light blinded, and Aramar Thorne turned away. It called to him: "Aram, Aram, it is you who must save me . . ." But he turned away. One last time, it called his name . . .

"Aramar Thorne, get your sorry bones out of that bunk!"

Aram woke with a start, sitting up abruptly and smacking his forehead painfully against the underside of the upper berth, only eight or nine inches above where he laid his head. It had been six months aboard ship, and he figured he must have a permanent bruise, given the number of times he had done the exact same thing, never learning from the experience. The strange dream of motion and Light began to fade instantly, and he struggled to hold on to even a fragment of it, but *she* was of another mind.

Ship's second mate Makasa Flintwill had evolved beyond any amusement she once enjoyed from seeing Aram bash in his own skull. The fact that the kid never woke up on his own, and rarely without her shouting at him for two solid minutes, was yet more proof he didn't belong aboard the *Wavestrider*. She was sick of the sight of him, but the captain—without ever actually giving the order—had all but made Aram her responsibility. Still, there was never any suggestion she had to treat the young fool gently. Tired of yelling at him, she grabbed his bare right foot and yanked him bodily off his bunk.

Landing hard on his behind, Aram winced sharply and glared up at his nemesis. Makasa was seventeen, only five years older than he was, but had he been standing at attention she'd still tower over him by a good half a foot. Right now, she positively *loomed*. He blinked twice, trying to focus. Backlit by the open hatch behind her, Makasa's sable skin blended with the belowdeck shadows and gloom and his own hazy consciousness, rendering her as little more than a silhouette. But there was no denying her solidity, her presence. She was five foot ten, lean and muscular, with kinky hair, cut extremely short to match the shape of her skull. Flintwill was the irresistible force, and unfortunately for Aram, he was no immovable object. She grabbed the front of his tunic and dragged him to his feet.

"Landfall in five minutes," she growled. "Pull on your boots and meet me in the hold in two."

* * *

He had to go up to go down. Having donned stockings and boots and splashed his face with water, Aram climbed into the open air. He glanced ashore—at the first land he'd seen in a week—then trotted across the deck to the hold, passing sailors about the business of making landfall, knowing that no matter how fast he moved, it would never be fast enough for *Wavestrider's* second mate.

Swinging his body into the hold, he grabbed the outside edges of the ladder and slid down it smoothly. He'd learned that trick at least. His boots hit bottom. There was minimal light here, too, and it smelled of mildew and fish.

Makasa, of course, was waiting. She had her back to him but began barking out orders before he had even touched down: “That barrel and those four crates are going ashore. Help me with the barrel, then come back for the crates. And make sure you send up the right ones.”

He didn't answer, which suited both of them fine. In his first few weeks aboard ship, he had tried out, “Yes, Miss!” and “Yes, Ma'am!” and “Yes, Sir!” They all made her grimace. Later, “Yes, Second Mate!” and even “Yes, Flintwill!” and “Yes, Makasa!” But none of them seemed to suit. So he had stopped addressing her by name or title. He had tried very hard to stop addressing her at all.

They tilted the heavy barrel to roll it across the hold, and he could feel and hear its contents sloshing about within. The question came out of his mouth before he could censor it: “What's in this thing?”

“Hardboiled chicken eggs pickled in brine,” she said darkly, as if challenging him to deny it.

He screwed up his face in disgust. “Who would ever want hardboiled chicken eggs pickled in brine?!”

“Wait and see,” she said, smiling for the first time all morning. Maybe for the first time all month.

He shook his head, something he had taught himself to do, because rolling his eyes seemed to particularly aggravate Second Mate Flintwill, and he didn’t need to give her any more reasons to dislike him. They maneuvered the barrel onto the cargo net, which immediately formed a hammock around it, as the deckhands above used ropes and pulleys to raise it topside. Without another word, she climbed up the ladder, leaving him below.

He crossed back to the crates she had indicated. They weren’t sealed, and he wrenched off a lid to satisfy his curiosity. Inside were old, scarred axe blades affixed to splintered or shattered wooden hafts, broken knives and sword tips, even rusty nails. He glanced about the hold of his father’s ship. It was full of random stuff like this, useless junk that no sane man or woman could ever want. And yet it was exactly this useless junk that was Greydon Thorne’s stock-in-trade. *Wavestrider* traversed Azeroth, landing in both Alliance ports and Horde—and everything in between. Captain Thorne trafficked in the obscure. A small trade here, a small deal there. If there was profit in any of it, Aram could hardly see how. He shook his head again.

He made four trips across the hold, placing each crate in the net, watching each one get raised into the light. This reminded him of . . . something. But he couldn't summon up a notion of what that something might be. He shook the dormant memory off and followed the crates into the air.

Achieving the deck, he was rewarded by a massive slap on the back that took the wind out of his sails, followed by a hardy "Mornin', Greydon-son!"

"Please, don't call me that," Aram said, catching his breath. He turned, unsurprised to see the robust smile of *Wavestrider's* first mate, the burly red-bearded dwarf, Durgan One-God, who stood just a smidge over five feet tall and weighed easily thirteen stone. Just as Aram had rarely seen Makasa smile, it was even more rare to see One-God's expression form anything else.

"Aye, Aramar," One-God said with mock contrition. "Ye're yer own man, o' course. Bit of a puny man, but still . . ."

The five-foot-four Aram grinned down at the dwarf. Aram knew he was tall for his age, with every reason to believe he'd grow taller still. But it amused the first mate to call his young friend puny, and Aram didn't begrudge the dwarf his amusements—mostly because One-God was his favorite person on the ship, bar none. And that included Aram's own father, the ship's captain, Greydon Thorne.

"Ye got that little book o' yours?" One-God said cheerfully.

Aram patted the back pocket of his breeches. "Always," he said.

“Good. Might see somethin’ worthy of its pages today. We’ve weighed anchor. Yer old man said tae go ashore.”

For a split second, Aram felt *that urge*. The urge to throw his father’s orders right back into the high-and-mighty Captain Greydon Thorne’s teeth. Aram’s relationship with his father was, well . . . complicated. But truthfully, Aram was dying to put his feet on solid ground again, so there wasn’t much point in rebelling now. Besides, he could hear the voice of his mother, Ceya, in his head: “Don’t cut off your nose to spite your face, child.” He suffered through another friendly but painful whap on the back from One-God and headed for the gangway.