

SEVENTH SENSE

Initiation Island

Book One

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Albatros

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Discovering the Ring

The first rays of the new day flickered over the surface of the sea when an ear-piercing whistle shrieked over the massive fence of the building complex. Although the sign on the gate read Cozy House, the noises coming from it suggested that it was anything but. The curt commands of angry adults mixed with the screams and cries of children. The sound of feet running to and fro could be clearly heard.

Established from modest donations by the mayor, Cozy House provided a home to the local children whose parents had died or been sent to prison. If someone brought an orphan here and slipped enough money into the hands of one of the sisters, the child would be granted a place. If they could give the name of the parents and the child's date of birth, so much the better.

Hana folded up her blanket and slipped on the apron and warm vest that she rolled up and used as a pillow at night. Spring had barely started and it was still pretty cold. She gazed at her torn stockings—both of her big toes and one heel poked out—they didn't really keep her warm anymore. She ran to the yard and quickly lined up at her spot among the other wards of working age: roughly between six and fourteen years old. Directly in front of her stood nine-year-old Stu, who was small for his age and therefore in the first row. Following the rules, his hands were folded behind his back. Hana couldn't resist and tickled his palm. He tried to catch her fingers but couldn't. He didn't dare turn around, but Hana knew he was smiling. Stu almost always smiled. Even growing up here, he managed to view the world with joy. Hana couldn't understand how it was possible.

Skidding into her spot next to Hana, Paula narrowly avoided a blow from Warden Irma's cane. Those who came later weren't so lucky. Finally, they all stood at attention, waiting to see what she had planned for them.

"I bet it will be a beach trip today, just wait," Paula whispered almost silently. "It was windy last night."

"My guess is picking rocks in the field," Hana winked at her older friend.

"Shhh, be quiet," somebody hissed from the back.

With her feet apart, Warden Irma stood in front of the lines of children and nodded to two boys at the edge of the line who immediately began to count off the crowd. Hana imagined the boys were only pretending to count, since it was clear that all forty of them were present. Irma gave a nod and took a smudged piece of paper from her pocket. Everybody sprung to

attention. If she had to write something down, it must be important. Paper was used sparingly at Cozy House and children never got to touch it.

“Paula Two, Simona and Bertha, out. Come to me! Come on, hurry up! On the double!”

“Bye,” Paula whispered as she patted Hana’s elbow and ran to the warden.

Chills ran down Hana’s spine. It was Paula’s turn today. The warden had decided that she was old enough to move into the upper barracks. That meant she wouldn’t see her anymore. Hana couldn’t understand why it was forbidden to meet up with children from the upper barracks. What was wrong with talking to someone you had known for years. She knew that children had tried, but they hadn’t succeeded and were punished severely for their attempts. She so wanted to be with Paula... Tears welled up in her eyes, But Hana didn’t want to cry, at least not here and now. She clenched her teeth and dug her nails into her palms. Damn it, damn it, damn it, she repeated to herself, hoping the anger would win out over her grief.

“Fill in the lines!” came another order and Rafan moved from the back line to Paulina’s spot. Hana looked at him and turned away as soon as their eyes met. She didn’t know what to think about him. He would tease her, and box with her for fun, laughing at her. But he never hurt her and never actually hit her. Other boys were less gentle. Hana knew how to fight, though, and wouldn’t put up with anything; however, there were some boys she just couldn’t beat. Rafan was the toughest of all. He wasn’t bigger than the others, but he was lightning-quick and unpredictable. He would always win by surprise.

“Line up for breakfast!” the warden commanded and pointed to the end of the line, where the children started their march to the cafeteria. It was hard to walk slowly and orderly for food when their stomachs rumbled an endless serenade, but as they knew only too well, any misbehavior would be punished with starvation or imprisonment in the hole. That was something nobody wanted to risk. Hana glanced back at Paula and waved

inconspicuously to her when Irma looked away. Paula didn't dare answer.

They marched slowly to a muddy area with wooden benches, one by one reaching to the counter for a measly slice of bread and a scrap of cheese, and, a treat today, an old shriveled apple. Hana tried to figure out how to get a tray with a bigger apple. Several children in front of her had the same idea though, which resulted in another warden coming to the counter and distributing the trays herself. As if out of spite, only a tiny apple, rotten at the bottom, remained for Hana. She went to sit down.

A moment later, Rafan set down next to her. His apple was red and much bigger.

Nudging her with his elbow he said, "Hey, I'll give you my apple for your cheese." It was as if he were reading her thoughts.

"All right," nodded Hana and swiftly made the exchange, in case he changed his mind. It was an excellent breakfast, actually. I wonder what Paula is having, she thought. People would gossip that the food was much better and the portions bigger in the upper barracks. But who knows. She didn't know anyone who could talk to those who had transferred. It may have just been a rumor to prevent any trouble during the transfer.

Before they could finish breakfast they heard a whistle. Sister Fanina stepped up on the platform by the food line. She read a list of five names, calling them up to help in the kitchen.

The next one to step onto the platform was Sister Agatha, who announced that the others would spend the morning picking shells and amber on the beach and the afternoon scavenging rocks from the field. Paula was right. Last night's storm must have washed up all kinds of things. The little shells were popular among local artists. The poorer ones would go picking themselves, but those with a bit of money would save their backs and buy the best ones for a pittance. Supposedly, the sisters would grind the remaining shells into fertilizer, which they would also sell.

Sister Agatha lined them up double file. She tied an orange bow around everybody's neck, like she always did when they would leave the grounds of Cozy House. Stu pushed himself next to Hana, giving her a radiant smile.

"I really don't know what you are grinning at..." Hana said, shaking her head.

"Well, it's nice today. It stopped raining, breakfast was delicious, we are going to the beach and I can talk to you the whole afternoon. Sister Agatha won't punish us for that, so what else could we wish for!"

"They took Paula..."

"I know. You were friends. I'm sorry. Maybe somebody will choose her soon and she'll be free."

"Free?"

"Aren't you looking forward to getting out of here one day?"

"I don't know. I can't imagine it... but I would love to work in the kitchen of some nice nobleman or to grow vegetables and fruit... Although, that might be your job one day. I mean to grow vegetables and flowers. Everything flourishes under your hands—how do you do it?"

"I don't know. I like working with plants. But I'm worried that the sisters will keep me here forever. That I won't get to see anything else. And I would love to see woods, mountains, meadows. You know, Hanka, I hope one day I'll live high up in the mountains, somewhere by a forest, with a beautiful view and wild meadows around."

"A beautiful dream. But it's a little unrealistic. You would have to have a magic ring and tons of money—maybe you'll find some treasure. How about that?"

"Hmmm, I've never thought about that. That would definitely help.

Let's start now. Look at all the things the ocean washed up. We just have to look carefully. I have a feeling that you'll be lucky today."

Sister Agatha gave each child a linen bag and set herself down on a flat rock above the beach to watch them. She didn't really have to watch them. Fresh in their memory was a boy who tried to escape two weeks ago. He was caught the next day. A week ago he finally died from his stay in the hole. Who would ever want such a fate for themselves? It would be next to impossible to escape from the beach unnoticed, unless you swam for hours in the freezing water. What's more, runaways had never been welcome anywhere. So Sister Agatha could relax and enjoy the peace by the ocean. It was still cold, but it might get warmer in the course of the morning.

Children spread across the beach, each of them trying to find the biggest shell or piece of amber. Success was rewarded with a second helping at lunch. Hana took off her sandals and stockings and searched in the surf line. The water was freezing, but nice. Wading through the water and sand brought her a sense of peace and freedom. Stu was following her at a safe distance on the shore, where the waves couldn't reach. If a bigger one did happen to come, he escaped by running to higher ground, laughing.

"Hanka, look, this one is gorgeous," shouted Stu suddenly, raising a large twisted shell victoriously over his head. Tonek, who was searching nearby came to take a look, frowning. Stu was going to put it into his sack but at that moment Tonek took two quick steps and knocked the shell out of his hand. Then he picked it up and grinned: "You're just a kid, you don't need any seconds at lunch. Find another one."

"Tonek, you idiot, give it back to him, now," Hana yelled from the surf and started wading to shore.

"Whoever has it is the owner! And I have it now, don't I? Want to fight? Want to get thrown into the hole?"

Hana was too furious to care. She threw Tonek down onto the sand and started hitting him. But Tonek was just too big. He grabbed her, pushed her

away and twisted her arms until she let out a scream.

“You better ask me nicely to let you go,” he ordered.

“Don’t fight, Hanka, he can have the shell. I really don’t need a bigger lunch. And you, let her go before a warden notices and we all go hungry. Please, Tonek, let her go, she won’t fight anymore,” Stu said, trying to salvage the situation. Hana, however, was still writhing in his grasp—she certainly didn’t look like she was about to stop fighting.

“Let her go—now!”

Rafan’s authoritative tone cooled the tempers of both fighters. Tonek didn’t look like he would let the girl go, so Rafan came up and pushed Tonek away. Freed, Hana started towards Tonek again, but Rafan grabbed her: “Let it go. Do you want to get us all in trouble?”

For an instant she stared into his eyes still furious, but she began to settle down as common sense began to set in.

“Tell him to give it back right away!”

“How about you, Stu, do you want the shell back?” asked Rafan as he let go of Hana’s arm.

“No, I don’t. I’m sure Tonek is hungrier than me, he can keep it. We should split up, the warden is watching,” Stu nodded towards the shore, and set off for a walk along the coast. Tonek turned back grinning victoriously, then started to head off in the opposite direction.

“It’s not fair,” Hana was upset, trying to brush off the sand of her apron and vest.

“Life isn’t fair. You should know that by now. You shouldn’t have gotten in too close with Tonek. He’s slow. If you had kicked him and moved out of range or pushed him and snatched the shell, you probably would have

won. Think a little next time before you attack somebody. Everybody has weaknesses you can use to your advantage. Anger can be power if you know how to use it.”

“When did you grow a brain? You better start picking before Sister Agatha comes down here. Stu says he doesn’t want the shell anymore! Damn it, doesn’t he have any pride? He constantly compromises with everybody; he never gets angry, just smiles all the time. Sometimes it really gets on my nerves! Next time I’ll just turn the other way and he can figure it out on his own.”

“No, you won’t. Just admit it, you care about him like he cares about you. Actually, he’s in love with you, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Who? Stu? That’s ridiculous.”

“Yeah, Saint Stu. Look, he’s talented but he’ll never get to study at Cozy House. He should get to the Island of Choice. He could definitely win a scholarship. But the sisters won’t allow it. He should escape and go. He might be able to swim there...”

“Are you hallucinating? Didn’t you see Brandy when they pulled him out of the Hole? Escapes end with death here.”

“If Stu gets to study, he’ll become a great wizard one day. Don’t you see? He touches a wilting flower and it blooms.”

“Yeah, I know. But I don’t know how to help him.”

“He needs to escape. Children go to the Island of Choice after they turn nine. He should get there as soon as he can. Rich people go there during the spring, but the last week of summer the Island is open for poor people too. They only have to pay for their spot on the boat. Really talented children are accepted to the Academy of Magic for free.”

“Who told you all this?”

“I used to have a book that talked about it. It was called the *Gate To Knowledge*.”

“You can read?”

“Why are you surprised? You can too. I’ve seen you teaching Stu.”

“Can I see the book?”

“I’m sorry. It burned down with the pile of wood I hid it in. I didn’t have time to take it to a safer place.”

“That was dumb.”

“Yeah, I know.”

All of a sudden they came upon a spot covered with little shells. They kneeled and started to pick them up. Hana found two small drops of amber; Rafan one big one.

“Nice! Lunch might get better after all,” he said. “Don’t you want to fight over it with me?”

“Knock it off,” Hana pushed him away, and kept on digging through the sand, picking out shells. Suddenly her fingers hit something strange. She fished it out and laid it on her palm. Rafan leaned towards her to see what she was looking at.

“A ring? You won’t get seconds for that—it’s all dull and grey, nothing special. Besides, it’s so big it would even fall of Agatha’s fat fingers. Maybe if you polished it...”

Hana scrubbed the ring with sand and polished it with the corner of her vest, but nothing changed: it remained dull and grey. Hana shrugged and slipped the ring onto her middle finger. Instantly she felt nauseous and dizzy; she couldn’t catch her breath. Trying to inhale she groped around with

her hands.

Rafan grabbed her shoulders and shook her: “Hanka, what’s wrong, what happened?”

“I don’t know, Raf. I couldn’t breathe... I’m o.k. now.”

“Hold on,” she said as she looked at her hand. She was startled to find the ring had tightened around her middle finger and now shone silver. Hana tried to take it off, but she couldn’t. The ring held fast as if it were glued to her finger. She desperately raised her eyes to Rafan. He stared back at her in shock.

“I think I know what it is,” he whispered.

“I can’t get it off. Damn it! What am I supposed to do now? Warden Irma is going to kill me. Come on, help!”

“Hanka, don’t panic,” Rafan said, trying to calm her down. He grabbed her hand to get a closer look the strange, gleaming ring. It wouldn’t budge. “I’m worried it won’t come off. My book said, there are barrels full of rings on the Island of Choice. Applicants try them on. If the ring adjusts to their finger, they can enter the labyrinth. If the ring doesn’t fit, that means the applicant doesn’t have the seventh sense. Since he doesn’t possess any magic, the labyrinth won’t let him in. But the book never said anything about it changing color. So I don’t know, maybe should ask one of the sisters—but which one?”

“No. If Agatha sees this, she’ll take me to Warden Irma right away.” Shaking desperately, Hana tried to remove the ring with her teeth. When that didn’t work, she tried to pry it off with a sharp shell, but she only cut the flesh around. The ring clung to her finger as if it were nailed there.

“Let’s ask Nurse Cornelia, she can be nice. When she slaps you, it’s more like a pat. But, Hanka, wait, we have to do something so Agatha won’t notice the ring.”

Rafan tore a thin strip from the bottom of his shirt, dipped it in the blood from Hanka's scraped up finger, and covered the ring with the bloody rag.

“That should do it for now, and it gives you a reason to visit Cornelia. When you're there, ask her what to do. And stop crying, it doesn't suit you.”

Hana sobbed one last time and wiped her eyes. Her fear, however, only grew. She dreaded the idea of returning to Cozy House. She wanted to run away, to hide, anything to avoid dealing with this situation.

“Come on, we have to pick some more,” Rafan said, handing her bag back as he began to fill his own.

Hana picked, but her hands worked automatically, her mind unaware of what she was doing. She thought about what Rafan had told her, but she couldn't make any sense of it. What was normal? Could magic be normal? Why had they never told them anything about it at Cozy House? Did Irma use magic when she sent delinquents into the hole? If somebody knows something better than the others, is that magic? Is there magic inside of everyone? Perhaps not, if the rings only responded to some people and not others. She had never heard of anybody who had left to study. Kids only left for the army or to labor away on a farm or in some other form of servitude. Too bad Paula wasn't there—she could have asked her. Paula knew all sorts of things that the sisters had never told them. And she had vague memories of her childhood on the outside. Her mother was sent to a prison years ago and she had been at Cozy House since she was eight. When they first met, Paula was crying uncontrollably. It took a long time until she could laugh like other children. There were not many things to laugh about at Cozy House, but everybody has to laugh sometimes. If you can laugh at your problems, they become a bit more bearable.

But Hana couldn't laugh now. This trouble seemed more serious than anything before. She had barely collected half a bag of shells and she knew the wardens wouldn't be pleased. But that was the least of her problems. She was scared to even look at her bandaged finger lest she attract attention.

When Agatha lined them up to return to Cozy House, Hana still felt like she was dreaming. Within a moment they were already in the yard; Hana barely remembered the trip. Sister Bertha was collecting their ribbons and their finds. Looking into Hana's bag, she frowned: "That's it? What were you even doing on the beach today, sweetheart, that you ended up with so little?"

"I, I'm sorry. I was trying to scrape off the amber and cut myself. It really hurts and won't stop bleeding."

A look at the nice piece of amber calmed Bertha down a little, but she yanked her head away from Hana's bandaged finger. She hated the sight of blood and had no interest in examining what was underneath the bandages. Thank God Warden Irma isn't here, Hana thought as she waited for Sister Bertha to make a decision and wiped away her tears, which were not just for show.

"Go have Sister Cornelia take a look at it during your lunch break. I hope you'll be more careful next time, and don't think that somebody will save lunch for you or that you'll get out of your afternoon chores. Later I will ask Agatha about your work, so don't even think of slacking off. Is that clear?!"

"Crystal—and thank you, Sister Bertha," Hana answered and darted out to the nurse's office on the second floor of the building. So far it had gone pretty smoothly. But what would she tell Sister Cornelia? The truth? What else?

The door to the nurse's office was closed, so Hana knocked.

"What is it?" Cornelia said grumpily as she peeked out and smoothed down her wrinkled skirt. She looked like she had just woken up, Hana thought.

"Good morning, Sister. I need your help. It's my finger. Sister Bertha sent me."

“O.k., come in.” The nurse nodded and let her in. The room was freshly painted, but, other than that, not much else had changed since the time Hana came with a broken arm. A crumpled blanket lay on the patient’s bench. Cornelia pointed at the chair and Hana obediently sat down.

“Take that rag off your finger,” she ordered and reached out to the shelf for a bottle of green antiseptic that always seemed to hurt as much as it helped. Hana submissively took the rag off and stretched out her dirty hand with the incongruously bright silver ring. Cornelia froze like a pillar of salt. Then she carefully put the disinfectant on the table and pulled an armchair in front of Hana. She sat down and took her hand into her palms and tugged at the ring. It didn’t budge.

“It’s not my fault,” Hana sobbed. “I found it in the sand and I just wanted to try it on, but it... caught me. It shrank and I can’t get it off now. Please help. I swear I would have turned it in if this hadn’t happened. I tried to take it off...”

“You unlucky thing, what have you done? Do you know what kind of a ring this is?”

Hana shut her eyes and shook her head.

“What have you gotten yourself into? Go to the sink and soap up your finger, it might come off.”

The girl did what she was told and Cornelia just sulked as she watched her trying all kinds of tricks to get it off. Finally Hana turned back and shrugged her shoulders in despair.

“We will have to amputate the finger—there’s no other way. I’m sorry, girl, I just can’t see any other solution.”

“You want to cut my finger off?” Hana panicked. “No, please, you can’t!!! I’ll smudge it, make it dull, make it invisible, so nobody notices. Or maybe I can still get it off. You can’t cut my finger off because of this stupid

ring, please!”

“I want to help you, and if there were any other way, I would do it, but there isn’t. I should discuss this with Sister Bach.”

“No, please don’t, I’ll keep trying to take it off. There must be a way. You won’t cut my finger off, will you?” The poor girl whimpered and sobbed until Cornelia finally shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

“O.k. I’ll give you until tonight. Come back this evening and decide whether you want to report it to the Headmistress tomorrow or if you want your finger cut off. You’re in a tough spot, sweetheart, and that’s the only way I can help. So, I want to see you tonight and you better not do anything stupid, like try to escape. You have to realize, that losing your finger is better than losing your life. Understand?”

Cornelia wrapped gauze around Hana’s hand, hiding the finger. Then she handed her one of the gloves she would usually give out to kids with minor injuries, so they could still work without getting an infection.

“Tonight,” the nurse reminded her as she pushed her out the door. Hana stumbled out to the yard, pale and crying. Her group was just lining up to go to a ploughed field. Rafan pulled her into the line and looked curiously at her hand in the glove: So how did it go?”

She just shook her head silently, her tears streaming down her dirty face. Stu turned back to her, puzzled. But there was no time for an explanation, since Agatha quickly ordered them to leave, shoving the stragglers and latecomers.”

“Here.” Rafan slipped her a half-slice of bread with some tasteless spread. She gratefully took a bite and quickly hid her hand because the sister walked by. Although Agatha wasn’t mean and she probably wouldn’t snatch the morsel away, it wasn’t worth the risk. Hana was slowly calming down, trying to get used to the idea of having just four fingers on her left hand. No, I have to focus on something else, she thought. But it wasn’t so easy. Her

thoughts buzzed around her mind like flies, constantly reminding her of the impossible situation.

In the field Sister Agatha pulled Rafan out of line and assigned him and some of the stronger boys to haul away sacks of rocks. The others brought the rocks and piled them up, while the weakest ones put the stones in the sacks. Finally, Stu pushed his way through to Hana and demanded to know what had happened; he had seen her crying. It couldn't have been Paula's leaving—of course that would make her sad, but not like this. He kneeled in the dirt next to her, started helping her, and then noticed the glove.

“Hanka, what happened?”

She shook her head silently. She didn't want to talk about it. She didn't want to cry again, especially not in front of Stu. Why would she burden him with her own troubles? She threw the rocks angrily into the sack just to avoid eye contact with him.

“Your hand is hurt,” Stu crouched right next to her, “what happened? Why aren't you talking to me? Maybe I could help.”

“No, you can't,” she snapped. She walked to the other side of the sack and started picking there.

“Hanka, I love you. One day I'm going to marry you. Trust me—if it's in my power, I'll help you.”

“You're sweet, Stu.” In spite of the situation Hana smiled. “But trust me, it's not in your power, and I don't want to talk about it.”

“I'm not leaving you alone until you tell me.” He ran over to her with a new sack. He could feel that she was already starting to give in a bit. When they got to the edge of the field, Hana took off the glove and the gauze.

“So, take a look at my problem.”

“It’s gorgeous,” he blurted out. “I always knew you’d be a great witch one day.”

“You’re crazy, they’re going to cut my finger off tonight because of it. I can’t get it off.” Hana tried to hold back the tears, but she couldn’t.

Stu took her hand and touched the ring.

“Interesting... You know what, we’ll try it together.”

“It’s hopeless, it doesn’t work. I’ve tried absolutely everything.”

“Physically—but what about mentally?”

“What?”

“Close your eyes and imagine that it’s a tiny silver snake and you don’t want it on your hand because you hate snakes. Tell it to get off your finger and to stop touching you.”

He spoke with such authority that, without thinking twice, Hana did what he said. She could feel Stu’s hand grabbing her, then something wet touched her fingers. She opened her eyes to see her finger in Stu’s mouth.

“What are you doing?” she yelled. “Stop it, now! You can’t do that. And my hand is dirty.”

But Stu’s eyes flashed up with a smile and he spit the grey ring out of his mouth. Now its color was the same as when she found it on the beach; its size, however, still fit her finger perfectly.

“Wow,” she gasped with surprise and relief. “You did it.”

“No, you did it. I just helped a little. But don’t throw it away, you’ll need it one day.”

“I have to turn the ring in...”

“Do what you want. But you really will need it one day. It’s yours and only yours, no one else can wear it. It might be possible to destroy it, but only you can use it.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do. I feel it. As if there were a message inside of me and I know it’s true and important. As soon as I touched the ring, I knew that you would take it to the Island of Choice. You haven’t talked to Paula about this stuff?”

“How is it that everybody here knows all this stuff that I haven’t even heard about?”

“Ask Rafan,” Stu said, “he knows more about this than anyone. We talk about it sometimes.”

“Wait, back up! Rafan talks to you?”

“He’s been looking out for me.”

“Looking out for you? Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know, ask him. He told the boys that if any of them touches me, they’ll have to answer to him. He was pretty intimidating.”

“You were there when he said that?”

“I was, but nobody could see me. I was hiding in the bushes.”

“He’s kind of nice to me too, except for when he’s making fun of me.”

“Watch out, Sister Agatha noticed something’s up. She’s coming over.”

They both turned around again and started picking up rocks as quickly as they could. Hana hid the ring deep inside her work glove.

