

DORIAN VALE



SALT AFTER THE DEAD



A Smuggler Steals a Relic of the Sea Goddess.
She Can Save Her Brother Only If She Keeps the Goddess from Rising Again.

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FANTASY

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INTRO

The dead always left salt behind.

Not the ordinary kind, white and cheap, sold along the waterfront in canvas sacks. Salt after the dead was gray, heavy, and bitter as the blood from a bitten lip. It gathered on stone wherever the sea took a person and did not return them at once. Priests collected it with silver scoops, sealed it in clay vials, and repeated that it belonged to Maereth.

Sera Venn knew only that tonight, the salt after the dead was supposed to lead her to a relic worth more than every cargo she had smuggled through Varda Bay over the past six years.

And that if she failed, her brother would not live to see the next tide.

She lay flat against the wet roof of the temple warehouse, watching two guards pass below. It was not raining, but the air was so thick with moisture that her hair clung to the back of her neck. Fog hung over the harbor, and the lamps on the breakwater looked like blurred smears of amber. Beyond the temple wall, the sea had withdrawn farther than usual. The dead ebb came twice a year and lasted less than an hour.

Sera had twenty-three minutes.

When the guards disappeared around the corner, she slid her knife beneath the lead clasp on the window and pressed. The metal yielded without a crack. She knew this kind of lock. The temple bought them from the same guild her people sold stolen copper stripped from royal ships.

She slipped inside.

The room smelled of oil, wet wood, and incense. Shelves held barrels of resin, crates of candles, and canvas sacks marked with the sign of three waves. Sera passed them without interest. Tonight she had not come for anything that could be sold.

She had come for a miracle.

Or at least for something the old medic on Lin Street considered one.

Miran had been coughing up water for nine days.

Not saliva. Not blood. Water, cold and salty, though he had not been near the sea in a month. Every morning Sera changed the bedding, dried the mattress by the stove, and listened to her brother insist that he felt better. Every evening, his breathing grew shallower.

The medic could not cure him. The priests refused to touch him.

- He has been called - the oldest of them had said. - The sea is collecting a debt.

Sera had told him exactly where he could put that debt.

Tonight, she intended to steal the goddess's instrument for collecting it.

Beneath the warehouse was a passage leading to an old sanctuary, flooded by every normal tide. According to the plan she had bought from a drunken stonemason, the stairs began behind the third barrel from the north wall. The barrel was full of oil and heavier than she had expected. She shifted it half a handspan, then another, teeth clenched, until she saw an iron ring set into the floor.

Cold waited beneath the hatch.

Sera lit a small hooded lamp and descended.

The first gray salt appeared on the stone steps.

Don't touch it with bare skin, the medic had warned.

Not because it burns.

Because it remembers.

Sera gave a quiet snort at the memory. People gave memory to everything they feared. The sea. Stones. Corpses. Gods.

Even so, she pulled on her gloves.

The stairs ended in a narrow corridor whose walls gleamed with moisture. Water reached her ankles. Every step echoed, and salt crunched beneath her soles. Maereth's mark - an open eye cut through by a wave - appeared on the stone slabs every few paces.

Sera counted the turns.

One.

Two.

Three.

Beyond the third, the corridor opened into a circular chamber.

The relic was exactly where it was supposed to be.

It rested on a black pedestal in the center of the room, enclosed in a cage of white bone. It was smaller than Sera had imagined. A dark crystal no larger than the tip of her thumb, matte and apparently lifeless. From a distance it looked like a piece of glass picked up on a beach.

And yet the water around the pedestal did not move with the motion of her boots.

It flowed toward the crystal.

Sera stepped closer.

Someone had carved words into the rim of the pedestal in the old language of the harbor temples. She did not know it well, but three symbols were easy enough to recognize.

NAME.

BLOOD.

RETURN.

- Of course - she muttered. - It can never just say "do not touch."

She took a pair of tongs lined with sharkskin from her bag. The medic claimed the relic must not be gripped with bare metal. The stonemason claimed the cage could be opened by twisting two bone ribs at the same time. Sera trusted neither of them, but she had no better plan.

The first rib shifted.

The second resisted.

Something rumbled above her.

Not the guards.

The sea.

Sera looked down at the water around her boots. The level had not changed, but the surface trembled like the skin of an animal sensing a knife.

She twisted harder.

The bone clicked.

The cage opened.

At that exact moment, her lamp went out.

The darkness was not complete. The relic began to glow with a faint greenish light, and Sera saw the gray salt across the floor arranging itself into thin lines that ran from the walls toward the pedestal. Hundreds of tiny streams.

Like veins.

Every one of them trembled.

Sera extended the tongs.

The crystal was freezing even through the leather lining. When she lifted it from its setting, the water in the chamber suddenly dropped by several fingers.

Then someone drew breath directly behind her.

Sera spun around, knife in hand.

A man stood against the wall.

He had not been there before.

He wore the ceremonial robes of a priest, heavy with water even though the flood reached only to his ankles. His skin was white and swollen. Gray salt spilled from his mouth.

Sera did not need more light to understand that she was looking at a corpse.

The man raised his head.

His eyes were open.

- Give it back - he said.

His voice sounded wet, as if every word had to pass through flooded lungs.

Sera took one step backward.

- No.

The dead priest tilted his head.

And then he spoke in Miran's voice.

- Sera.

Her knife nearly slipped from her hand.

It was impossible. Miran was lying in their rented room three streets from the harbor, too weak to walk to the table without help. Yet the corpse knew exactly how her brother said her name, with the same broken breath after the first syllable.

- Sera, don't take her.

The walls trembled.

This time there was no mistaking it.

The sea was coming back.

Sera tightened the tongs around the relic and slipped it into the lead box at her belt.

The dead priest smiled with a mouth full of salt.

- Now she knows your name.

Sera snapped the box shut.

Somewhere in the darkness, deep beneath the stone, something enormous opened its eyes.

Chapter 1 - The Sea's Debt

Sera returned to Lin Street before dawn, soaked to the knees and with someone else's voice lodged in her head.

She could not remember half the journey back from the temple. She remembered water rushing into the underground corridor faster than any person could run, remembered her hands slipping on wet steps, and the first alarm bell sounding as she jumped from the warehouse roof to the neighboring tenement. She remembered the priest too. Dead for so long that his face should already have belonged to the mud, yet standing upright and speaking in Miran's voice.

Now she knows your name.

She could not force those words out of her mind.

The lead box hanging from her belt seemed heavier with every street she crossed. Sera checked the fastening several times even though she had closed both hooks herself and wrapped a leather strap around it. The crystal remained hidden. Even so, she had the impression she could feel its cold through the metal.

Lin Street belonged to the part of Varda that the city watch remembered only when taxes had to be collected or someone needed blaming for something that had happened elsewhere. The tenements stood so close together that neighbors could pass cups between windows. Black water from the dye houses ran through the gutters. Lines of laundry, fishing nets, and drying fish hung between rooftops, while the smell of the harbor mixed with smoke, vinegar, and the damp of old walls.

Sera entered the building through the courtyard. She opened the back door with a piece of wire because the landlord changed the locks more often than he repaired the stairs. On the second floor, she stopped outside their room.

It was quiet inside.

Too quiet.

She opened the door.

Miran lay on his side, facing the wall. The blanket had slipped halfway down his body. On the floor stood the basin Sera had left empty.

Now it was full of water.

Not completely full. About two-thirds.

Roughly as much as Miran could have coughed up over several hours.

Sera closed the door, crossed to the bed, and pressed two fingers to her brother's neck. His pulse was fast but clear.

- Miran.

He stirred.

- You're back.

His voice was hoarse.

Only then did Sera let out the breath she had been holding.

- I told you not to die while I was gone.

- I tried.

He rolled over slowly. He was four years younger than she was, but during the past week he had aged more than in the previous nineteen years. His cheeks were hollow, dark

shadows lay beneath his eyes, and his lips were cracked. Dampness had pasted his shirt to his chest.

His gaze settled on her clothes.

- Were you there?

- No.

- There's a temple warehouse mark on your sleeve.

Sera looked at the torn patch near her elbow. A streak of white paint from the window frame had indeed remained on the fabric.

- I happened to pass by very energetically.

Miran tried to smile, but immediately began to cough.

Sera grabbed the basin.

The first spasm was dry. So was the second. On the third, Miran bent forward sharply and water poured from his mouth. Not much. Perhaps half a cup. It struck the basin with a sound Sera hated more every day.

Miran rested his elbows on his knees.

- This is becoming increasingly disgusting.

- Which is why I always told you to find honest work.

- I work with ledgers.

- Exactly. Disgusting.

This time he managed to smile.

Sera set the basin on the floor, and only then noticed the surface of the water trembling.

Not from movement.

Miran was sitting still.

The basin was still too.

Yet delicate ripples spread across the water, all angled toward her hip.

Toward the lead box.

Sera froze.

- What? - Miran asked.

- Nothing.

- Sera.

She did not answer. She removed her coat, unbuckled the belt, and placed the box on the table.

The ripples in the basin changed direction.

Miran noticed immediately.

- What did you bring?

- Medicine.

- Medicine doesn't make water try to crawl toward it.

- It's more specialized medicine.

- You stole something.

- I'm offended by your surprise.

He would have gone to the table if he had possessed the strength. Sera could see it in the way he shifted his weight. She raised a hand.

- Stay there.

- What is it?

- I don't know yet.

Miran watched her for a long moment.

- And this is supposed to cure me?

- The man who told me where to find it says it might.

- "Might" doesn't sound worth breaking into a temple.

- When the alternative is watching my brother drown in his bed, "might" sounds good enough.

Miran lowered his eyes.

Sera regretted the sharpness of the words at once, but she did not take them back. For nine days they had been speaking around the truth, calling it a fever, an illness, a curse, or a problem. None of those words changed the fact that Miran was growing weaker.

There came three knocks at the door, a pause, then two more.

Sera drew her knife.

- It's me - said a familiar voice from the other side. - And if you plan to stab me, do it after the examination. I dislike dying before I've finished my work.

Sera opened the door.

Iven Rusk entered without waiting for an invitation. He was a short man in his fifties, the palm of his left hand permanently stained brown from herbs and reagents. He treated sailors, dockworkers, smugglers, and people who did not want to explain how a crossbow bolt had ended up in their side. He possessed no official healer's seal, which Sera considered his greatest advantage.

He took off his wet hat.

- Did you bring it?

Sera pointed to the table.

Iven saw the lead box and stopped.

- You were supposed to bring a fragment.

- There wasn't a fragment.

- You were supposed to find a shard of a relic.

- There was only one.
- Sera...
- And it was small.
- A small poison is still poison.
- Do you want to lecture me now or save Miran?

Iven clenched his jaw. He went to her brother and examined his eyes, tongue, pulse, and breathing. Then he dipped a thin strip of red paper into the water in the basin. The paper turned black in a second.

The medic swore.

- What? - Sera asked.
- Yesterday it took three breaths to change color.

Miran rested his head against the wall.

- Does that mean I'm dying faster?
- It means you shouldn't ask questions when you don't want the answer.
- So yes.

Iven turned to Sera.

- Open the box.
- You told me not to touch the relic without protection.
- You won't touch it.

He took a shallow dish of dark glass from his bag and scattered ordinary table salt across it. Then he instructed Sera to place the box in the center.

- Will this do anything?
- If it doesn't, at least we'll have seasoning for breakfast.

Sera opened the first hook.

The water in the basin trembled.

The second.

Miran suddenly drew in a breath.

- Cold.

Sera stopped.

- Where?

- Inside.

- Should I close it?

- No.

Iven looked at him sharply.

- You are not the best judge of anything at the moment.

- I said no.

Sera raised the lid.

The dark crystal lay on a piece of leather. The greenish glow she had seen in the sanctuary was gone. The relic was matte, almost black.

The salt scattered across the dish turned gray at once.

Iven stepped back so abruptly that his hip struck the chair.

- Close it.

- You haven't done anything yet.

- Close it.

- Iven.

- That is not a healing shard.

- What is it?

He did not answer.

Miran began coughing again.

This time no water came out.

Instead, several grains of gray salt spilled from his mouth.

Silence filled the room.

Sera felt her whole body tense in anticipation of something she still did not understand.

Miran ran his tongue over his lower lip, then looked at the fingers with which he had wiped the salt from his chin.

- Is that better than water?

Iven did not look as though he considered it an improvement.

- Where exactly did you find this?

- Beneath Maereth's temple.

- I know that. Where?

- In an old chamber under the warehouse. Inside a bone cage.

- Was the chamber flooded?

- Yes.

- And the cage?

- Above the water.

- Inscriptions?

Sera hesitated.

- Name. Blood. Return.

Iven closed his eyes.

- Excellent.

- Was that sarcasm?

- No, I'm delighted. I've always wanted to live long enough to see the day when someone brought one of the

things that used to get entire ports burned down into a rented room.

Miran looked at his sister.

- You said it was medicine.

- Iven said relics of Maereth could draw the Calling out of the blood.

- Not this one - the medic said.

- How do you know?

Iven pointed at the gray salt.

- Because this isn't a healing relic. It's an anchor.

Sera said nothing.

- An anchor for what?

- I don't know.

- You do.

- I know what texts I saw thirty years ago claimed. That isn't the same as knowing.

- Talk.

Iven sighed.

- The oldest cult of Maereth didn't believe the goddess died the way a human dies. They believed she was divided. Name, voice, blood, and body. Certain objects were supposed to keep those parts separate.

Miran looked at the crystal.

- So she stole a piece of a dead goddess?

- No. More likely she stole the lock from a door behind which some piece of her remains.

Cold settled in Sera's stomach.

- You said you didn't know.
- I don't know whether the stories are true.
- A corpse in the sanctuary spoke in Miran's voice.

Iven went still.

Miran stared at her.

- What?

Sera had not wanted to tell him. Not because she feared his reaction. She feared saying the words aloud again.

- There was a priest.
- Alive?
- No.
- How not alive?
- Enough.

Iven stepped closer.

- What did he say?

Sera stared at the relic.

- He told me to give it back. Then he said my name in Miran's voice.

- What else?
- That she knows my name now.

The medic went pale.

- Close the box.

This time Sera did not argue.

The moment the lid came down, Miran choked. He clutched his throat and folded forward.

Water burst from his mouth in a violent stream.

Sera lunged toward him.

- Open it! - he gasped.

- What?

- The box!

Iven shouted at her not to, but Sera was already at the table.

She opened the lid.

Miran's coughing stopped.

Not gradually.

Instantly.

He was breathing hard, but for the first time in days there was no wet gurgle in his lungs.

Sera and Iven looked at each other.

The medic no longer looked like a man who had answers.

- She can feel him - he said quietly.

- Who?

Iven did not answer.

A bell rang in the courtyard.

One long note.

Then another.

Sera went to the window.

At the far end of Lin Street, six figures in white cloaks appeared.

Priests of Maereth.

Four city guards accompanied them.

- Fast - she said.

Iven peered through a gap in the curtain.

- How quickly did they discover the theft?

- The alarm started before I left the temple district.
- I'm not asking about the alarm. I'm asking how they know where to look.

Sera glanced at the relic.

She knew.

Or at least she suspected.

They were not searching for her.

They were following something.

The crystal.

Miran.

Or perhaps the name the sea had heard.

Sera closed the box with only one hook.

- Miran, get dressed.

- I can barely stand.

- Then today you'll learn how to run while sitting down.

Iven caught her wrist.

- Where?

- Somewhere priests have no right to enter.

- There is no such place in Varda.

- There is.

- Sera...

- The Old Docks.

Iven grimaced.

- That isn't a place priests have no right to enter. It's a place sensible people don't want to enter.

- Even better.

Someone struck the building's downstairs door with a fist.

Once.

Then again.

Sera helped Miran put on his boots.

- What are we taking? - he asked.

She looked around the room that had been the closest thing to a home for four years. The clothes chest. Her tools. Miran's three books. Their mother's cracked cup. Two silver coins hidden beneath a floorboard. The net their father had once repaired.

Another blow against the downstairs door.

They could not take their life with them.

Only what might keep them alive for the next few hours.

Sera took the coins, her knife, Iven's bag, and the lead box.

- Nothing else.

Miran looked at his books.

He did not protest.

They went out through the window.

Chapter 2 - The City Without an Ebb Tide

The safest route to the Old Docks ran through the sewer channels.

The most sensible route did not go there at all.

Sera chose the first.

Miran was not pleased.

- When I recover - he said, leaning on her shoulder - I'm going to find myself a sister with a less interesting profession.

- Good luck. I hear bakers pay well for siblings.

- A baker wouldn't drag me through a channel full of other people's shit.

- A baker wouldn't survive a day with you.

Iven followed behind them, holding the lamp as high as possible. The tunnel was low, lined with brick, and older than most of the buildings above their heads. Dirty water reached halfway up Sera's calves. In places, the current quickened where the contents of morning gutters emptied from side channels.

Miran moved more slowly with every turn.

Sera could feel his weight against her.

The relic sat inside the bag slung across her chest. The lead box remained partly open. A narrow crack was enough. Whenever she closed it completely, Miran began coughing within a dozen breaths. Whenever she opened the lid again, the symptoms eased.

She did not like the dependence forming between her brother and the object.

She liked Iven's prolonged silence even less.

- What are you hiding from me? she asked.

- At this exact moment? Mostly the fact that I think I stepped in something I don't wish to identify.

- About the relic.

- I don't know enough.

- That has never stopped you talking before.

Miran snorted.

Iven stopped.

- Fine. You want to know? There are several versions of the story of Maereth's death. The one the priests teach now says the goddess gave her life to calm the First Storm and grant humanity the coast. Beautiful story. Good for children and pilgrims.

- And the uglier one? Sera asked.

- The uglier one says she gave up nothing. She was killed.

Miran lifted his head.

- Can a god be killed?

- If not, then we have an extraordinary number of temples dedicated to something that has chosen not to speak for nine hundred years.

- Something spoke in the sanctuary - Sera said.

Iven nodded.

- Which is exactly why I preferred the version where stories were only stories.

They continued on.

- Who killed her? Miran asked.

- According to the oldest records? Her own priests.

Sera looked over her shoulder.

- Why?

- Because gods worshiped by people do not always return the courtesy.

Iven was speaking more quietly than usual, as though even here he did not want certain words said too loudly.

- Maereth was the goddess of the sea, but to the old people the sea did not mean only fish, trade, and sailing. The sea took. Every storm, every tide, every death in the water belonged to her. As the coast grew, as the ports expanded and ships sailed farther, the number of victims grew with them. The priests tried to appease her. Then they tried to limit her. In the end, if the texts are to be believed, they decided to divide her.

- Name, blood, voice, and body - Sera said.

- Yes.

- And this? - She touched the bag.

- It may be one of the objects that keeps the division in place.

- Which one?

- I don't know.

- Guess.

- No.

- Iven.

- I will not guess about something that might wake a dead goddess.

- This is an unusually late moment to become cautious.

Miran coughed.

No water came.

Something else did.

A voice.

Not a word. More a sound that emerged from his throat with the cough. A low, drawn-out note entirely unlike any human voice.

Sera stopped.

- Miran?

Her brother covered his mouth with one hand.

- That wasn't me.

The tunnel answered with an echo.

Except the repetition came from the wrong direction.

Not from behind them.

From ahead.

The same low note sounded somewhere in the darkness.

Iven extinguished the lamp.

Sera drew her knife at once.

For several seconds, all they could hear was water.

Then came a splash.

Slow.

Regular.

Someone was walking toward them through the tunnel.

Sera knew the channels well enough to remember a maintenance alcove a dozen paces farther on. She took Miran by the arm and led him into the darkness.

Iven followed.

They squeezed between the wall and an old sluice mechanism. Sera covered her brother's mouth with her hand. His breath was hot against her palm.

The splashing grew closer.

A figure emerged from the darkness.

First Sera saw the outline of a head.

Then shoulders.

The man was barefoot. He wore the torn shirt of a dockworker. One arm hung at an unnatural angle.

When he came within a few steps, Sera smelled him.

Rot.

Miran went rigid.

The man stopped.

Slowly, he turned his head toward the alcove.

Half his face was missing.

Sera recognized him.

She did not know his name, but she had seen the body three days earlier. They had pulled it from the harbor basin near the dyers' quay. A fall from a mast. Dead before he entered the water.

Now he was standing in the sewer.

Gray salt spilled from his mouth.

Sera tightened her grip on the knife.

The corpse opened its mouth.

- Sera Venn.

Hearing her full name from a dead man's throat was worse than the first time.

Not because it was more frightening.

Because it confirmed the rule.

Something truly knew her.

The dead man stepped toward the alcove.

Iven scooped a handful of filthy water from the channel and threw it in the opposite direction. The splash struck the wall.

The corpse turned its head.

Sera used the second.

She stepped out of hiding and struck him in the temple with the hilt of her knife.

A blow that would have dropped a living man merely tilted the corpse's head. The man turned toward her and seized her wrist.

His hand was cold.

Not cool.

Ice-cold.

Sera drove a knee into his stomach. No reaction. She tried to tear her arm free. His fingers tightened.

- The relic! Iven shouted.

- What about it?

- Close it!

- Miran will choke!

- Close it!

With her free hand, Sera reached the bag and snapped the lead box shut.

The corpse released her at once.

It staggered.

Miran dropped to his knees and began coughing.

The dead dockworker opened his mouth.

Gray salt spilled into the water.

- Open it - he said.

Not in Miran's voice.

In a woman's.

Calm.

Beautiful.

Sera felt the hair on the back of her neck rise beneath her damp collar.

The corpse came toward her again.

This time Sera did not try to knock it down. She backed toward the sluice gate. The mechanism had not served any purpose in years beyond blocking the side channel, but an iron lever still sat in its guide.

She pulled.

It did not move.

The corpse was three steps away.

Sera braced one foot against the wall and hauled with all her weight.

The rust broke.

The gate rose by several fingers.

Water burst from the side tunnel and struck the dead man's legs. He staggered. Sera pulled again.

The opening widened.

The water shot through with enough force to knock the corpse down and carry him several yards along the channel.

- Run! she shouted.

Iven lifted Miran.

Sera followed.

Behind her, she could hear fingernails scraping against brick.

She did not look back.

Only after they had put two turns between themselves and the corpse did she open the box again.

Miran drew in air immediately.

- Next time - he said between coughs - warn me.

- Next time, fight the corpse yourself.

- Deal.

Iven looked like a man who had just received an answer to a question and regretted asking.

- What? Sera asked.

- He stopped seeing you when you closed the relic.

- He didn't stop. He attacked me.

- Before you closed it, he was moving straight toward it. Afterward, he reacted to you.

Sera looked at the bag.

- So it can be sensed.

- Yes.

- By the dead?

- Apparently.

- And by the priests?

Iven grimaced.

- If they retained even part of the old knowledge, probably.

That explained the people on Lin Street.

They had not been tracking Sera.

They had not needed tracks.

The relic was a beacon.

And she had carried it halfway across the city.

The Old Docks began where the channel widened beneath the ruins of the southern wall. Varda's first harbor had once stood there. Later the port had shifted north, stone basins and lighthouses had been built, and the old warehouses had been left to unlicensed fishermen, traders in forbidden goods, and people who preferred the city watch not to remember their names.

Sera climbed out of the sewer through an iron grate hidden beneath a pier.

The outside air should have tasted better.

It did not.

The sea smelled wrong.

Normally the Old Docks reeked of seaweed, tar, and fish. Now wet stone dominated the air, though it had not rained for hours.

Sera looked at the water.

She frowned.

- Iven.

The medic was staring too.

Miran leaned against a pier post.

- What happened?
- The tide - Sera said.
- What about it?
- It should be higher.

The water was almost a yard below its usual level. The pilings stood exposed, wet black surfaces crusted with shells. Small boats rested on the bottom near shore.

The dead ebb should have ended long ago.

But the sea had not returned.

- Is it because of her? Miran pointed at the bag.

- No - Iven said.

Too quickly.

Sera looked at him.

- How do you know?

- I don't.

- Exactly.

They moved along the pier.

At the far end stood a large warehouse with red doors. It had once stored ship's rope. Now it belonged to Yara Pell, who introduced herself as a spice merchant even though most of her spices had a peculiar habit of arriving without customs papers.

Sera knocked four times.

A man with a crossbow opened the door.

- We don't trade before noon.

- Tell Yara the Current is back.

The man looked at Miran, Iven, and the soaked clothes of all three.

- The Current looks like shit.
- Tell her exactly that.

The door closed.

A moment later, it opened again.

Yara Pell sat at a table covered by a coastal map. She was a few years older than Sera, wore her hair cut short at the nape, and never removed the two copper rings from her right thumb. Years ago she had taught Sera how to smuggle cargo from ship to ship without using the docks. Later, she had also taught her that gratitude did not mean free service.

Yara looked at Miran.

Then at Sera.

- Who did you kill?
- No one.
- Worse.
- I need a boat.
- No.
- I didn't say where I'm going.
- You didn't have to.

Yara pushed the map aside.

- Every exit from the harbor was closed before dawn. The temple declared a sacred ban on sailing.

Sera felt her stomach tighten.

- When?
- An hour ago.

- Reason?

- Theft of an object belonging to Maereth.

Miran glanced at the bag.

Yara noticed.

Her expression hardened.

- Get out.

- Yara.

- I don't care what you stole. Correction: I'm beginning to care now that the temple has guards posted on every breakwater. If you have it with you, get out now.

Sera placed five silver coins on the table.

Everything they had.

Yara did not even look at them.

- No.

- Six times I moved your goods through the Western Gate.

- For money.

- Once I got your helmsman out of a cell.

- For money.

- I pulled you out of a burning boat off Rhess.

Yara went silent.

- For nothing - Sera added.

- That was a long time ago.

- Eighteen months.

- At my age, that's a long time.

Sera leaned over the table.

- My brother is going to die.

Yara looked at Miran.

She did not look away quickly. Sera respected that about her. Most people, when faced with illness, suddenly became deeply interested in the floor.

- What's wrong with him?

- The sea - Miran said.

- Precise diagnosis.

Iven stepped closer.

- He has the Calling.

Yara looked at him.

- There is no such thing.

- As of today, I have revised a great many opinions.

A shout came from outside.

Then another.

Everyone in the warehouse went still.

One of Yara's people ran out onto the pier.

He returned moments later.

- The sea is retreating.

- It's already low - Yara said.

- Farther.

They went outside.

The water was draining from the bay.

Not like any normal ebb tide.

Sera had never seen anything like it.

The level was dropping almost visibly. Boats listed and settled into black mud. Fish thrashed in shallow pools. Far

out near the harbor entrance, rocks that usually lay several yards below the surface emerged into the light.

The people on the piers fell silent.

No one knew what to say.

Miran grabbed Sera's arm.

- She's doing something.

- Who?

Her brother stared at the exposed floor of the bay.

- Maereth.

Sera wanted to tell him Maereth was dead.

She did not get the chance.

A hand rose from the mud between two stranded fishing boats.

Then another.

A man pulled himself out of the harbor floor as though wading from shallow water.

Another rose behind him.

Then another.

All along the Old Docks, the exposed sea began returning its dead.

Some were fresh.

Others so old that only bones remained, tangled in scraps of clothing.

They stood in the mud and turned their faces in a single direction.

Toward Sera.